

Football 521

Chapter 521 521 Vs Borussia Dortmund (2)

[Time 19:30 | BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 1 Borussia Dortmund]

[46]

Bosz kept the faith in his starting XI to begin the second period, but Lucien Favre made one tweak straight out of the interval: Thorgan Hazard replaced Achraf Hakimi, sliding Sancho to the right and Hazard to the left in a bid to pin back Daley Sinkgraven.

The substitution had immediate effects as Hazard got his first touches of the ball in the 48th minute. He immediately got to work confidently, dragging the ball along the line with a smooth Cruyff turn that left Bellarabi briefly off-balance before whipping a cross into the box. Haaland rose highest to meet it, but Hrádecký pre-empted him, jumping up to punch the ball out of his box.

The punch only carried as far as Witsel, who cushioned the ball on his chest at the edge of the "D". With the crowd holding its collective breath, he unleashed a volley, but expectations seemed to have been too high as the ball harmlessly sailed into the stands. "That is one he'll want to quickly forget."

"One could argue that Bender was closing him down, but a bit of composure is expected from a player of calibre," Robson commented as play continued to unfold below.

[52]

Leverkusen responded with venom. Diaby picked up the ball on the left touchline, his electric pace immediately putting Akanji on the back foot. The French winger drove forward, cutting inside onto his stronger right foot as the Swiss defender scrambled to keep up. Diaby's feint sent Akanji sliding past him courtesy of the now-damp turf.

With Hummels rushing across to cover, Diaby had a split second to make his decision. He chose to pass whipping in a wicked curling cross, bending away from Bürki's desperate dive. Volland, arriving like a man possessed, threw himself at the ball with a diving header that thundered off the underside of the crossbar. The entire BayArena erupted in anguish as the ball bounced down onto the goal line, kissing the turf by mere millimetres before being smothered by Burki.

"Oh, my word! How did that stay out?" The commentator's voice cracked with disbelief. "Volland was certain he'd scored there!"

The striker lay sprawled on the turf, head in his hands, as Bürki remained on top of the ball, his yellow jersey drenched in sweat and relief. The Swiss keeper knew he'd been beaten, but he thanked his lucky stars that the post managed to save him.

[54]

Dortmund wasn't rattled by the almost goal, as a matter of fact, they were invigorated to attack more. For the next few moments, the battle for possession intensified with both sides launching quick attacks. It was in one of these attacks that they managed to create a goal-scoring opportunity, catching the home side off guard.

They built from the back with surgical precision, Hummels switching play to Guerreiro, who pushed forward with space. A quick one-two with Can bypassed Bellarabi, and suddenly the Portuguese full-

back was racing toward the final third. He slid the ball to Hazard, whose sharp movement inside drew two defenders like moths to flame.

Hazard didn't hesitate. With a deft flick of his boot, he laid it off for Haaland at the edge of the box. The Norwegian didn't hold onto it but merely flicked it onto Sancho at the left edge of the box. The Englishman's first touch was a thing of beauty, controlling the ball as he skipped across Dragovic.

Sinkgraven, who had been chasing him, tried to tug his jersey, but his momentum was too strong. With the shooting angle now open, he fired a low shot toward the far post across Hardeckey's body, who was rapidly shuffling across to cover the near post. Hrádecký reacted at blitzing pace, diving full-stretch to his left—but he couldn't reach it.

The ball agonizingly curved around his reach, piercing his goal for a second time in this match. The net rippled, and Sancho sprinted to the corner flag with a maddened expression, joy overflowing. Arriving at the corner flag, he spread his arms wide in celebration as the away section detonated in a frenzy of black and yellow.

"He's done it again! Jadon Sancho with a finish of pure class!" Derek Rae shouted over the noise.

"Pinpoint precision," Steward Robson added. "You give him half a yard and it's curtains. This 19-year-old might just be the real deal."

[Score: 2–2 | 55th Minute: Jordan Sancho 7]

Off the restart, Leverkusen looked to answer instantly, but the match quickly entered a quagmire. Both teams pressed furiously, causing the lines between defenders and midfielders to blur as bodies collided in the middle third. It quickly became a game of inches, with Bender and Can trading crunching tackles, as they killed attacks from their opponents before they could get dangerous.

However, this situation did not last long, as in the 62nd minute, the dam burst again. Can received the ball just inside Dortmund's half after a turnover. Brushing off an attempted shoulder barge from Amiri with a shrug that sent the Leverkusen midfielder stumbling.

The former Liverpool man drove forward, his low centre of gravity and powerful strides giving him momentum that was hard to stop. Witsel ran parallel to his right, Sancho hugged the touchline on the far side, and Haaland ghosted between Tah and Bender, lightly tussling with them, just waiting to pounce.

Can delayed just long enough for Leverkusen's backline to step up—then slipped a through ball between the lines with surgical precision. Haaland darted onto it, beating the offside trap by a whisker. The stadium gasped as Haaland stretched out his left foot to touch it down.

He angled his body in the next moment as he used his arms to hold off Tah on his right. Dragovic came sliding across, but too late the Norwegian unleashed a thunderous left-footed strike from just inside the box. (Boom) The shot cannoned into the roof of the net with such force it seemed to lift the frame. Hrádecký stood frozen, arms out, eyes wide. He hadn't even managed to twitch, let alone move.

"HAALAND!" Rae screamed. "Absolute carnage! Dortmund leads for the first time tonight!"

"Just lethal. That's what you're dealing with," Robson said. "He only needs one look."

As the Dortmund players mobbed their new wonderkid, the Leverkusen crowd quieted to a stunned murmur—except for the small section of black and yellow supporters, now a blur of limbs and roaring voices.

[Score: 2–3 | 62nd Minute: Erling Haaland 17]

[67]

Peter Bosz finally made his move. With urgency written across his face, he turned toward the bench. "Rakim, Leon, Edmond —up," he barked. His shout prompted the 3 who had been warming up for a while to jog over, ready to take the field. Rakim jogged over to the bench, taking off his tracksuit, he adjusted his shorts as he jogged over to the coach to listen to final instructions.

Moments later, the fourth official raised his board, causing a ripple of anticipation to stir among the home fans. The number 22 flashed in neon green—Rakim Rex was coming on. Off went Karim Bellarabi, who offered a weary high-five before collapsing onto the bench, chest heaving after having just chased Sancho back for 60 meters.

Seconds later, Leon Bailey adjusted his shin pads as he came on for Diaby, and Edmond Tapsoba stripped off his bib, Dragovic. The crowd roared in fresh anticipation as the substitutions were confirmed. "Well, here we go," Derek Rae remarked, voice tinged with excitement. "Three bold changes from Bosz: Tapsoba for Dragovic to freshen the backline, Bailey replacing the tireless Diaby, and the young starlet Rakim Rex entering the fray on the right wing."

"Bosz isn't sitting back," Robson added. "He knows Dortmund has momentum now, and he's bringing on pace, power, and unpredictability."

Chapter 522 522 Vs Borussia Dortmund (4)

[Time 19:59 | BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 3 Borussia Dortmund]

[69]

Following their entry into the match, Leverkusen began actively attacking the flanks. Though Dortmund did not make things easy for them, especially now that they held the lead. The tempo of the game only continued to increase as Leverkusen entered full-on pursuit mode.

Rakim wasted no time demanding the ball along the right flank to test the waters of the defenders around him. Tapsoba accepted his call, sending a weighted pass up the flank just as Rakim backtracked from the halfway line. He held off Sancho, who was chasing him and let the ball roll across his body as he turned sideways, getting in Sancho's way.

Before the opposing winger could react, he sprinted after it, quickly crossing the halfway line as he picked up speed. Witsel immediately left his marking of Bender, looking to close him down before he could pick up more speed. Rakim didn't take him on, though, as he sent a nimble side pass to the now-free Bender as he sped by Witsel.

The return pass came crisp, connecting with Rakim's boot just as he entered the final third. Guerreiro stepped up to face him, body low, eyes locked in, trying to force Rakim to the outside. But the youngster didn't flinch. He slowed, feinted with his right, then flicked the ball inward with the outside of his left, pulling off a La Croqueta so smooth it left Guerreiro's legs tangled like puppet strings.

"Rakim Rex... with absolute disrespect!" Robson howled as the crowd came alive. The BayArena rose to its feet when he burst inside just as Hummels side-stepped across to face him.

He wasn't fazed as he performed two quick stepovers as the distance closed, baiting the defender to lung in. Hummels remained composed, though, but it didn't matter as Rakim suddenly performed a rebound pass into the box just as the defender stepped back. The ball spun across the damp surface, bypassing the defender's right foot, homing in on the run of Volland.

Volland arrived in stride, beating Zagadou by a half-step, and let the ball roll across his body before snapping a low shot on his weaker left foot. The strike was instinctive but far from clean, as he hit more turf than the actual ball, sending a wild shot towards the direction of the ball. Bürki in between the sticks, hurried to move across, only to stop himself from leaping as the ball impacted the LED billboard, causing a light crack.

A collective groan surged through the stands like a crashing wave. Volland buried his head in his hands before kicking the turf in annoyance at wasting yet another opportunity. He apologetically looked at Rakim, but the latter merely shrugged his shoulders before backtracking to his position.

[73]

Leverkusen refused to let up. The next sequence came quickly off a Dortmund goal-kick, but it was poorly struck by Bürki and intercepted by Amiri near the centre circle. The midfielder calmly nodded the ball to Lars Bender, who swept it first-time out wide to Bailey on the left. The Jamaican had barely been on the pitch five minutes, but he shifted into gear immediately, taking on Akanji with a burst of acceleration that brought the crowd to its feet.

Akanji kept pace well initially, but Bailey chopped the ball back with his left, then hit a blistering stepover before cutting inside. He surged forward into the half-space, dragging defenders with him

before slipping a disguised through ball into the box where Amiri had continued his run. Amiri reached it just before it ran out of play, toeing it across the face of the goal.

"Someone's got to be there!" Rae exclaimed as the ball trickled tantalizingly past the six-yard box.

And someone was Rakim Ghosting in from the right flank, beat the opposing defenders and Volland to the race and launched himself forward in a feet-first slide. It was a tight angle, but the 16-year-old managed to toe-poke it between Bürki and the post. The contact was clean enough, but Bürki reacted brilliantly, sticking out a boot just in time to deflect it out for a corner.

"Outstanding from Bürki!" Robson praised. "That was nearly a storybook moment for the youngster."

Rakim slapped the turf in frustration but quickly clapped his hands, apologising to the home crowd and his teammates. He was met with roaring approval as they began singing the "UFFTA UFFTA TÄTÄRÄ" song.

[75]

The BayArena was roaring now. The missed chance only heightened the tension, each fan willing the next attack into the back of the net. From the ensuing corner, Amiri jogged over to take it, signalling a rehearsed routine. He raised one arm, then whipped it in flat to the near post.

Tapsoba rose highest, towering over Zagadou and flicking it on. The ball skipped dangerously through the crowded six-yard box—Bailey nearly got a toe to it—but it pinged off Hummels' thigh and fell to Sancho, who booted it upfield in panic.

The attack wasn't over, though, as Sven Bender arrived at the ball's landing point at the edge of the centre circle on BVB's side. He didn't even think of taking it down as he swung his foot, meeting it on the volley, and launching it back into the final third. Amiri chested it down along the left flank where he backtracked from the corner flag to stay onside.

[76]

Amiri let the ball roll a step ahead before nudging it forward with the outside of his boot. Hazard raced to close him down, but Amiri merely feinted a breakthrough to the touchline, prompting the winger to lunge to cover it. Dribbling past him, he scanned the chaos in the box looking for a way through until his attention caught a figure circling back out to the edge of the D.

Rakim, who had been at the back post for the corner kick, stopped just as he was about to backtrack. Seeing Bender launch the ball back up the field, he drifted wide, pulling his defender with him before suddenly accelerating to the edge of the D. Lars Bender, who was a few paces from the D with his marker, was surprised to see the ball speeding his way.

Scrambling to react, he held his man back, readying himself to shield the ball. "Leave it," He heard someone shout, and before he could react, a red figure appeared before him, his left foot already swinging to meet the ball that was racing towards him.

The crowd drew in a sharp breath as Rakim stretched out his left hand for balance, planted his right foot, sliding slightly on the turf, but his balance was good enough not to let it affect him. His left foot sliced through the ball, sending it spinning like a razor-edged blade through the floodlit air.

The strike was a thing of beauty, sending in a wickedly curving shot. The ball curled viciously in mid-air, swerving away from Bürki's dive and kissing the inside of the far post before nestling into the side netting with a satisfying thump. For a moment, time seemed to stop. Then came the explosion.

The BayArena erupted as hands flew into the air, fans leapt from their seats, and the ultras behind the goal lit flares, quickly sending plumes of red and black smoke. Rakim sprinted toward the corner flag, doing his signature Griddy celebration the moment he exited the box. His teammates descended on him, a second later exclaiming in joy as they engulfed the teenager in tight hugs.

"Oh, my days! Take a picture, frame it, hang it in a museum—what a strike from Rakim Rex!" Derek Rae's voice soared.

"Are you kidding me? No sixteen-year-old should be pulling that out of his bag of tricks." Robson gasped. "At this point, nothing he does surprises me anymore."

"If it helps, he turns 17 this July," Rae commented in slight amusement.

"-_- " For a moment the commentary booth was silent before Robson decided to do his job. "Look at that vision from Amiri..."

As the stadium trembled under the noise, the cameras panned to Peter Bosz on the sideline, fist clenched, and mouth stretched in a rare smile. He couldn't hide the joy of levelling the match that almost slipped from their grasp.

[Score: 3–3 | 77th Minute: Rakim Rex 22]

[80]

Dortmund tried to slow the tempo after the equaliser as a light drizzle descended from the heavens, quickly soaking the players. Hummels and Witsel exchanged controlled passes across the backline, attempting to draw the wind out of Leverkusen's sails. But the home side refused to settle for a draw with the amount of momentum they had gathered.

Seeing his team struggle to contain the home side, Favre called for his bench, looking to bring on Mario and Giovanni. He got his chance in the 81st minute after Guerreiro wrestled the ball free from Rakim's feet for a Leverkusen throw-in.

Chapter 523 523 Vs Borussia Dortmund (4)

[Time 20:11 | BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen 3 – 3 Borussia Dortmund]

[81]

"Yo," Giovanni heard Rakim say as he jogged up to cover him for the ensuing throw-in, surprising him slightly.

"Eh yeah hi," he said, positioning himself slightly behind him, blocking the winger's path into the box if he were to receive the ball. The reason for his surprise was the fact that they hadn't talked with Rakim since their match in Poland, and even that was just polite conversation.

"Congrats on the call-up," Rakim said yet again, unprompted from the American midfielder, "Weird how we played against each other as kids and now we get to do it on the big stage."

Sinkgraven made the throw-in to his feet, and Rakim reacted immediately by pushing off Giovanni's chest and calmly tapping down the ball. Skipping to his left, he dodged a lunge by Witsel, stopping the ball just at the touchline. Retna quickly recovered, stepping up to close him down, but Rakim merely poked the ball through his legs, sending a pass into the feet of Amiri.

[82]

Amiri barely needed a touch. The ball zipped to his feet, and with a delicate caress, he guided it to the other side of the box. Bailey was already darting across the edge of the box, and with one sweeping motion, Amiri sent the ball curling into his path.

Bailey let the ball glide ahead of him with a feather-light touch, cutting inside on his favoured left. Akanji was already anticipating the move, shifting his weight and preparing to pounce. But Bailey had him second-guessing with a sudden hesitation that forced the defender to delay his tackle.

Hummels on the side did not hesitate as he came sliding in to take the ball cleanly and sent Bailey sprawling to the ground. The defender did not bother looking back as he jumped up from the ground and sent a pass out wide to Thorgan Hazard.

"What a stop by Hummels," Rae exclaimed as the away fans cheered in joy at their long-serving defender. "Though I'm not surprised since we have seen him do similar things week in week out."

"Indeed, Hummels is one of the best defenders in the world for a reason." Robson chimed in, "Given the turnover rate in the squad, having a reliable rock to build your defence on is a must for any coach stepping into that role."

[83]

Hazard controlled the ball near the right touchline and immediately started drilling up the field. He shrugged off Sinkgraven's attempt to body-check him early, using his momentum to burst ahead. A shoulder-to-shoulder race erupted between them as they crossed the halfway line.

As they reached the final third, Sinkgraven attempted a sliding tackle from the side. Hazard anticipated it, though as he came to a sudden stop, performing an L drag back to manoeuvre around the sliding defender. "Silky bit of footwork from the Belgium," Rae exclaimed as the winger cut inward just as Götze made a run across the box to the right side, opening up the middle.

Bender came in from the middle, but Hazard nudged the ball further ahead as he slipped past the shoulder check. His balance was exquisite as he kept his legs pumping, storming toward the top of the box. Götze's decoy run continued to pull Tah wide, briefly exposing the space between Leverkusen's centre-backs.

The Belgian chopped the ball sharply back inside on his right foot, just as Sven Bender stepped up to meet him. Catching the defender off flat-footed, he drove into the opening. Just as Tapsoba came across to intercept, Hazard took his chances from there, firing a shot to the bottom right corner.

The ball skipped along the ground, kicking up a stream of water as it zipped toward goal at blistering pace. Hrádecký dropped low and flung himself toward the corner, fingertips grazing the slick surface as he desperately tried to get across. (Thwack!) The sound of leather striking the post rang out like a bell through the BayArena.

"Luck strikes again for this Leverkusen side," Rae exclaimed as the camera panned over the disbelieving expression of the Belgium winger. "This Dortmund side must be asking themselves what more do they need to do to put this game to bed."

"Indeed, Derek, they have been doing their best, but sometimes it's just not enough," Robson commented, much to the annoyance of the away fans who began cursing his family line. "When two teams at their level face each other, the margin for error is slim, and that is what we are witnessing. Oh, it looks like it's the home side's turn to launch a counter."

[86]

The ball ricocheted across the face of the goal, skipping past the outstretched legs of Götze and Tapsob. Amiri raced back, beating Sancho to the ball just as it left the box on the other side. He steadied himself with a quick touch, then knocked the ball down the line to Rakim, who had tracked back.

Not holding onto it, he knocked it inwards into Havertz's run, who came sprinting up the middle channel. His first touch was sublime, cushioning the ball with the outside of his boot as he held off Can's pressing from his side. The young German's head was already on a swivel, scanning the field as he felt the Dortmund midfielder's presence closing in.

With a deft shoulder drop to the left, he created separation from the Turkish German. The fans in the stands sat forward in anticipation as their golden boy surged forward, his long strides eating up the ground between the halfway line and Dortmund's final third. Hummels had already begun his retreat, reading the danger as Havertz approached at pace.

However, the veteran defender found himself caught in no man's land - too far from his own goal to drop back, yet unable to commit to a tackle that might leave his team exposed. Zagadou rushed across to provide cover, but Havertz had already spotted the movement. With a subtle shift of his hips, he directed the ball toward the left channel where Lean was making his run.

The Jamaican pace was electric as he latched onto the through ball, a second before Akanji's desperate lunge. Hastily manoeuvring around the defender while he still had the chance, he dribbled into the area between the box and the touchline. Akanji turned swiftly, trying to shepherd Bailey toward the byline, but the winger's hips were as quick as silver.

With a whip-crack chop of his left boot, he reversed course with the swiftness of a Brazilian magister, he cut inside so abruptly that Akanji's studs skidded across the slick grass. Bailey now had the box yawning before him. Zagadou lunged to close him down, yet the Jamaican slid a tantalising pass square to Havertz just inside the "D."

[87]

Havertz took the ball on the half-turn, letting the weight of Can's challenge glance off his shoulder. One stride, two strides—then, anticipating Hummels' stepping out, he popped a deft reverse pass behind the veteran's blind side. Lars Bender, of all people, had charged into the box for the first time in the game and arrived like a runaway train.

He struck the ball first time, sending it skipping towards goal, but luck wasn't on his side as Zagadou's heel managed to clip it after his desperate lunge, spinning out for a corner. The BayArena groaned, half in anguish, half in exasperation at missing yet another chance to take the lead.

"A roller coaster ride here at the BayArena, we promised you drama, we promised you goals, but we did not promise you peace of mind," Rae bellowed as the players trudged into the Dortmund box for the corner kick. "At this point, they may have to settle for a draw, what do you think, Steward?"

Robson took a moment to gather his words before saying something that caught his partner off guard. "In the words of the legendary Sepp, 'The ball is round, the game lasts ninety minutes, and everything else is just theory.' It's not over until that whistle rings, and I don't believe that any of the 22 players is willing to rest until it does."

The Camera flashed to the figure of Rakim close to the edge of the box marked by Giovanni. "If there were a man the fans would bet on to step up in these crucial moments, it would be him. A heavy burden for such a young man, but he carries it with swagger."

[88]

Amiri placed the ball at the quadrant, wiping rain from his lashes while the BayArena hummed with nervous electricity. He raised two fingers to signal for Tah to target the back post and for Bender the middle. In the next moment, players began to shuffle in the box, prompting their opponents to react accordingly.

A hole quickly appeared between the goal and the edge of the box, with Tah being the only player standing on the penalty spot marked by Hummels. Amiri took a deep breath before clenching his right fist, prompting Volland, who had been in the mix of the chaos at the edge of the box, to get into motion. Before anyone could react, he arced a wicked in-swinger toward the near post.

Volland found himself alone as he raced to the area around the front post, lunging forward as the ball closed in. "Oh, my days, he is completely unmarked."

Chapter 524 524 Marquess is my Sperm Donor

[Time 20:19 | BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen 3 – 3 Borussia Dortmund]

[89]

Time seemed to dilate as Amiri's delivery curved viciously toward the front stick. Volland craned his neck as he jumped forward at the edge of the 6-yard box, meeting the ball with the hardest part of his brow. (Thump!) It skimmed off his forehead as he redirected it downwards and towards the goal. Bürki, who was standing closer to the back post given the opponents' set-up, scrambled across his line before diving towards the front post.

For an eye-wateringly long heartbeat, the stadium froze as the keeper seemed to get closer to the falling ball. Volland's header hit the line a second before the keeper's fingers could reach it, and in the next moment, the net bulged for a fourth time. The BayArena erupted like a volcanic explosion. Twenty-two thousand voices merged into one primal roar that seemed to lift the very roof off the stadium.

Volland raced off to the corner flag in wild celebration as adrenaline took over his joy. "GOOOOOOOOAL! KEVIN VOLLAND HAS DONE IT!" Rae's voice cracked with emotion as he bellowed into his microphone. "Four-three to Bayer Leverkusen! What a header! What a moment! The BayArena has gone absolutely mental!"

Behind the goal, the Leverkusen ultras unleashed a pyrotechnic display that painted the night sky in brilliant reds and blacks. Smoke billowed across the terraces as scarves whirled overhead like helicopter blades. The drum section hammered out a thunderous rhythm that seemed to make the very foundations of the stadium pulse with life.

Volland was swamped by his teammates in seconds as they joined in on his celebration. "You talk about it during film sessions, you practice it in training, and they translate that into the game. A well-deserved

goal for the home side," Robson commented as the replay appeared on the screen once again. The sheer amount of space and time the striker had was now glaringly visible to the viewers.

[90+1]

Was order restored after the bedlam of the restart? Not a chance. Borussia Dortmund kicked off as if jolted by a live wire. Hummels barked orders, practically herding his side into a daring 3-2-5 shape, Witsel dropping between Zagadou and Akanji while Hazard and Sancho pinned the touchlines. Haaland, snorting like a racehorse, hovered on Tah's shoulder.

Leverkusen responded in random moving into a 5-4-1 shape, with Rakim playing as right back for the first time in his entire life. His metal was quickly tested as Dortmund's impromptu front five surged like a tidal wave. Sancho, hugging the right chalk, fizzed a low cross after skipping past Skingraven. Haaland flung himself at it, studs skimming the slick grass, but the Norwegian couldn't wrap his foot enough to trouble the keeper.

[90+3]

A free kick from inside the final third, but too far to go for goal, was executed by Can. The midfielder took it quickly, delivering an out-swinging cross into the box, aiming for Haaland. The striker lost the aerial duel to Tah, though, who headed it out of his box with authority. Leon picked up the second ball, launching it up the field without a second thought.

[90 + 5]

Favre, seeing the referee glance at his watch, gestured for one last lump into the mixer. Bürki sprinted the length of the pitch, rain flicking from his gloves, to make it eleven yellow shirts in the box. Can's throw arced high—an ungainly, desperate parabola. Time seemed to wobble as bodies collided beneath it. Haaland rose, Tah clattered, and the ball ballooned straight up like a weather balloon into the night sky.

Hrádecký called, fists clenched and punched through the crowd. The clearance spun toward halfway, where Rakim chased it down with pace, beating Guerreiro to it. Bürki—caught in no-man's land—hurried back, but Rakim simply dribbled toward the empty half, glanced at the referee, and dribbled some more. With half the BayArena screaming "Shoot!"

He obliged, drawing his leg back at the halfway line, but that's when the whistle shrieked just as he smacked the ball. (Wheet, Wheet Wheeeet) The referee's whistle resounded as the ball travelled across the empty half. "Oh," the fans exclaimed as it hit the right post before bouncing back into the box and coming to a stop.

"Well, folks, that is the final act! Referee Dr. Marco Fritz blows for full-time, and the BayArena finally exhales." Rae called out, his voice barely audible above the home fans' cheers.

[FT — Bayer Leverkusen 4 – 3 Borussia Dortmund]

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[Ding: Post-match review available]

>Goals scored: (1) = 10Sp

>Assists: (0) = 20Sp

>Cards: 0 = 0Sp

>Final Match score: 4:3 Win: 30Sp

>Match Rating: 7.0

[Ding: It is detected that the last of your physical skills has reached the A grade. (Strength: B+ -> A)]

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"Well, it's about time, given how hard I've been working since Poland, especially this month and a half," Rakim muttered to himself as he stepped under the shower after having just finished a session in the cryotherapy chamber.

{Indeed, but I reckon it was just a matter of time, given your bodily potential and the hard work you have been putting in. I would recommend hiring a coach to provide targeted training for you if you want

to step into that realm.} Eva commented in a chipper tone, quickly outlining the benefits of having a personal team rather than having to rely on his mother over the phone.

"Sigh, I guess I can't put it off anymore, then again, this house is far too quiet for just me," he commented as he let the slightly warmer water hit his bonnet and shoulders. "Just help me make a list of the people I would need, and I'll try and hire them for the next season."

{Sure, but if you're feeling lonely, you could just give her a call.} She commented, causing Rakim to scowl slightly.

"We've talked about this, Eva. We both need space to focus on ourselves outside of being together. Heck, we have seen each other almost every day since I was six, but more importantly, I don't have the bandwidth to focus on anything other than football." He responded, sounding rather firm despite his clearly conflicted emotions, which Eva could sense. "I didn't exactly plan on finding my sperm donor in this life; a little warning would have been nice."

{I figured it was for the best to do nothing and let fate play out. Plus, it wouldn't really have changed anything if I had told you beforehand,} she commented in a matter-of-fact tone, but the warmth in her tone was clearly discernible.

"Sigh, let's just stop having this conversation, it won't change the outcome, and you know my boy Einstein thinks about signs of insanity," he commented as he stepped out of the shower, quickly wrapping a towel around his waist. "I just hate how it affects my family, they don't show it, but they are clearly on eggshells, seemingly waiting for me to Kamikaze."

{Well, can you blame them after your blow-up at the New Year's Eve party?} Eva questioned in a slightly amused tone, much to the displeasure of her host. {Though I guess it's a totally natural reaction, you definitely lost millions of Aura points.}

"What did he expect after telling me that he is my biological father and the Marquesses of Alderwick?" He annoyedly retorted as he entered his closet, quickly picking out a Kimono-style PJ set in Akatsuki theme. "Before meeting him, I just figured my father was dead, which seemed like the logical assumption. I had considered that he simply didn't know or couldn't find me after my relative sold me off, but..."

{But you think that Benedict, with all his power could have easily found you and rescued you, but simply didn't...,} Eva stopped mid-sentence as she spotted the stream of tears leaving his eyes as she laid bare what he hadn't been willing to voice since his world had been shattered.

"(sniff) Are you happy now, you made my eyes sweat," He complained as he used the sleeves of his black Kimono to wipe his tears. "It dragged everything back up. You know, living with Dad made me forget the nights when I first arrived at the camp. As you can guess, an emaciated 4-year-old wouldn't exactly have an easy time at a human trafficker's orphanage."

He took a deep breath, his hands clenched into a tight fist, causing the veins along his arms to lightly pop. "The first few days, I would go to bed hungry, praying that my very own father would come to rescue me. After all, everyone gets at least one no matter how bad they are, but he never came, and I had to figure shit out. So no, I don't feel like thinking of things from his perspective or trying to understand the circumstances."

Chapter 525 525 Prepearion For The Red's

[FOOTBALL SINGULARITY SYSTEM]

USER: Rakim Rex

AGE: 16 yrs

TALENT ASSESSMENT: Grade - S

Singularity Points:  $2400 + 3,000 = 5400$

Position: Winger

(Evaluation: A wunderkind in the truest sense, who has proven his ability to the world throw a boulder into a still pond)

[ USER STATS: Under 23 Grade]

>Physical Fitness: A

Balance and Coordination: S

Speed: A- -> A+

Agility: A++

Strength: B- -> A-

Stamina: B- -> A+

>Football Technique: S

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental Ability: S+

>Singularity Traits:

MR ShowTime: Grade -A, Mamba Mentality (Garde Unique),

>Skills

\*Silver Grade: Eagle King's Goal Sense (Passive)

\*Silver Level Comeback Kid (Passive)

\*Bronze Ankle Brace's (Passive)

\*Bronze Heavy artillery (Active)

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"Coach, what is up with this schedule if I didn't know better, I would think that my enemies have succeeded in plotting against me," Rakim complained after glancing at his status screen as he continued to roll on his thigh on the foam roller. "It feels like they plotted to make us face all our biggest opps back-to-back,"

"My guy, shut up in what world is Union Berlin an opp?" Diaby exclaimed from a couple of meters away on his own foam roller, resisting the urge to throw his gloves. "As a matter of fact, what opps do you have?"

"Old man, right now you're my biggest opp," Rakim retorted, lightly spraying his water bottle in his direction, but the Frenchman was quick enough to dodge, letting it harmlessly land on the 5G grass. "But you know your boy handsome half the human race be plotting against me,"

"You handsome? I've seen better-looking bulldogs, my guy," he retorted, gaining a few bouts of chuckles from those listening to another session of unprompted roast session between the two wingers.

"Wait, wait, hold up, y'all smell that?" Rakim suddenly asked, sitting up on the turf, prompting the thousands laughing to stop and look his way in confusion.

After moments of confused glances with occasional sniffing, trying to locate a smell, Kereem finally spoke up. "What?" voicing the confusion of the almost 12 players listening in and some trainers on the side.

"(sniff) I smell a man who gets no b—" A sharp blast of the coach's whistle sliced through the banter.

"All right, comedians," Assistant Manager Fredrick Bauer exclaimed just as a few players spat out the water in their mouths. "As for opps, is that even a word? Never mind, the only enemies we've got right now are fatigue and our own ego. Treat them like Madrid and we shall conquer. Now get back to work."

"Yes, sir," The players exclaimed with more seriousness as they now actively paid attention to the trainer's instructions.

[45 minutes later]

All their training kits were now soaked in sweat, with their muscles warm and slightly aching. The aching was the good kind that unlocked muscles that had begun to set following yesterday's match. They had only done Yoga and Pilates, but their breathing was heavy as if they had just played for a full 90 minutes.

"Alright, get up and get cleaned up, you all are starting to smell for real. Pick up a snack on your way to the film room will host a 60-minute session, and then you're free to go." Coach Mattias Wagner, the Strength and conditioning coach, exclaimed, clapping his hands as he urged the players to get a move on.

No one lingered lest they be forced to go through a round of yoga exercises that the eccentric coach had picked up from one of his seminars. He was a man who loved his job with a passion, and this often or not turned the players into Ginni pigs after he reached new exercises. He was like a Sunday league coach who happened to watch a clip of Barcelona training and decided to implement it at the next training session.

The squad filed toward the doors of their indoor pitch, boots squeaking on the stone tiles. They quickly made their way towards the changing rooms with no one bothering to start conversations. They were all busy trying to recover the tiniest amounts of energy they had expended, as despite it being a recovery session, it still took a lot out of them.

[15 minutes]

Rakim had finished his shower and changed into a fresh pair of the team's tracksuit with his name and number embroidered. One of the perks of being a professional player is the free gear you get from the club. It was to the point that they put American colleges to shame when it came to wanting you to rep the club logo for free.

Picking up a blueberry muffin, a banana protein shake, and a hazelnut cookie, he made his way to the film room, doing his best not to trip with his sliders. Picking up a blueberry muffin, a banana protein shake, and a hazelnut cookie, he made his way to the film room, doing his best not to trip with his sliders. The room was quite spacious, resembling a mix between a private cinema and a university lecture hall.

He slipped into one of the middle rows at a slightly elevated angle, taking a seat close to the middle. The lights were still up, so the low hum of teammate chatter bounced around the room as they settled in. Diaby flopped into the seat beside him, shoving two granola bars into Rakim's cup holder. "Dr. Clara wants us loaded on carbs," he said, cracking one open with his teeth.

"Say less, I prefer the muffins, though Olie's talents are wasted on us," Rakim responded as he raised his half-eaten blueberry muffin. "Though when I first met him, I thought he was one of the strength and conditioning coaches."

"Sounds about right, from what I heard, he was Polish special forces before picking up baking," Diaby retorted with a light chuckle, "What do you think of Liverpool though? Should be your first Premier League team, right?"

"Well, they are the defending champions, plus from what I have seen, they are on fire this season as well," Rakim replied as he pulled up his iPad, pulling up links the club's research department had sent them the moment their opponents were confirmed. "It's weird getting to play against one of the best coaches of our time, though."

"Kloops is more like a cult leader than a coach." Diaby muttered, half-serious, half in awe. "Trust me, man's got grown strikers running a marathon just to win a throw-in."

"Yeah, Kind of scary how they gave a genius of his calibre a team with actual money to invest," he stated with a light smile as he played one of the clips where Trent chased down Hazard in a footrace to reclaim the ball.

Diaby grinned, wiping stray crumbs from his chin. "Look on the bright side—beat Liverpool at Anfield and your Insta will explode."

"Bro, my DMs are already a warzone, mum's even considered hiring the FIB to act as cybersecurity." Rakim chuckled, but the nerves underneath felt real since they were playing in the greatest club competition of their time.

"Bro, how do you even have time to play GTA with how much you train?" Diaby asked instantly, catching the reference, but before Rakim could respond, the door at the front hissed open. Video analyst Sören Pfeiffer strode in, carrying an iPad, followed by Assistant Manager Bauer with a laser pointer already clicked on.

Pfeiffer plugged his tablet into the projector, and a still frame of Liverpool's Red Sea froze on the screen. Anfield under the lights—terrifying and beautiful in equal measure. "Gentlemen," Bauer began, sweeping the laser across the crest in the corner, "9 days from now, this is the noise you'll be wading through at our home pitch. We beat Union Berlin in five days, but we need to start thinking about Liverpool."

Bauer's pointer circled the crest, then flicked to a freeze-frame of Liverpool's 3-2-5 build-up shape. The fullbacks were so high they looked like extra wingers.

"First concept— rest-defence." He double-tapped the screen; the image zoomed and came alive. The Reds lost the ball and, in the space of three seconds, swarmed the carrier like locusts. "They've conceded the fewest transition goals in Europe because, when they lose it, the nearest four sprint downhill as if their mortgage depends on it. If you dawdle, they'll eat you."

Chapter 526 Le Bernardin

[Date: 14 February 2020 | Time: 19:05 EST | Location: Le Bernardin, Midtown Manhattan]

Candlelight shimmered across pearl-white tablecloths, the soft clink of crystal stemware mingling with low jazz from an unseen quartet. Le Bernardin—New York's only Michelin three-star temple of seafood—felt more like a hushed cathedral this Valentine's evening, with red-rose centrepieces

punctuating every table. For Victor Parker, romance was the last thing on the menu; he had even ignored his wife's urging to spend the day with her to be here.

He nervously adjusted his cufflinks, white gold tridents, and smaller twins of the pin on his lapel as he scanned the room, waiting for his date. Well, not exactly a romantic date, but the nerves were not too dissimilar from when he went on his first date, feeling like his life would end if he got stood up.

Le Bernardin in New York wasn't well known for their food; that was just the minimum for its existence. No, it was known as a meeting place for the wealthy elites of New York. Anyone who was anyone could be seen here dining for the status symbol it brought, or to simply network with people of similar status.

That inevitably led to desperate men and women who were on the verge of falling from the ranks of the elites coming here to beg for a saviour. They were easily identifiable by the desperate scent they gave off and how eager they were to please anyone and everyone who could save them. The wealthy elite who gathered in this sharkpond could smell desperation on you from a mile with the kind ones choosing to ignore you.

Victor never thought he would find himself in such a position, especially after years of looking down on the fools who let things spiral out of control. Sighing in what felt like the hundredth time in the last hour, he adjusted his tie in an attempt to steady his racing heart. Just as he felt like checking his watch again, A maître d' glided toward Victor's table and bent at the waist. "Mr Parker, your party has arrived."

He let out a relieved exhale, gathering his thoughts, he once again wore his confident mask, letting a small smile rest on his face. In a smooth, elegant motion, he rose from his chair, sweeping his right hand through his luscious hair, which already showed signs of thinning. Across the dining room, Masayoshi Son emerged from the corridor that led to the private salons, flanked by two aides in charcoal suits.

Despite the minimalistic attire, the room's chatter dipped as the wealthy hyenas smelled the money the man emanated. Billionaires, despite not being rare in their circles, were still seen as swans amongst well-fed ducklings. "Parker-san," Son greeted, extending a hand, bowing slightly following his country's gesture of respect despite being in the country of liberals.

Victor, of course, mirrored the gesture of respect as he firmly shook hands with the older man. "Masayoshi-san, thank you for taking the time, especially on a holiday evening."

Son's eyes twinkled. "My wife insisted Paris is more romantic. She granted me a rain check for the night, but if I'm even a second late tomorrow, I will never hear the end of it." The quip eased Victor's pulse, if only slightly.

Son's comment bought Victor a heartbeat of levity, but as the maître d' escorted them through the curtained corridor into Le Bernardin's Hermès-leather-clad private salon, the gravity returned. A single round table waited beneath a halo of Murano glass; beside it, a low console displayed a magnum of 1996 Krug and two slim leather folios.

Victor motioned to the chairs. "Please—after you, Masayoshi-san." He could feel his pulse in his ears.

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The first course soon arrived, consisting of a delicately carved plate of Amuse-bouche kampachi with fennel pollen, a swirl of lobster bisque, and sea-urchin custard in an eggshell. Son wasted no time sampling each like a foodie trying to see whether a foreign dish was as good as the ones he tried at home. "The taste is exquisite. Maybe we can hire the chef for my daughter's graduation party?"

"I'll see it done, Masayoshi-san, shall we go with gift number five?" One of his aids said before Victor could even voice a response. Receiving a nod from his boss, he promptly exited the room to search for the person in charge.

"Now, shall we get down to business?" Son said before folding his napkin. "You want SoftBank to honour the rescue package," he said, his gaze steady. "Tell me why today's market carnage shouldn't scare us off."

Victor slid one of the leather folios across the linen. Inside, there were only four sheets, but it looked more like a poor man's playbook. Watching Masayoshi open the folder, Victor struck while the iron was hot. "Simple because panic misprices real value," he began, easing his voice into the measured timbre he used when courting other people's money. "WeWork's unit economics are bruised, yes, but not bankrupt. In the last thirty days, we've renegotiated forty-three prime leases, trimmed burn by \$68 million a quarter, and secured a marquee enterprise contract you haven't seen."

Son's brow rose. "Which enterprise?"

Victor flipped to page two: a signed term sheet stamped CONFIDENTIAL — SIEMENS AG. "Five-year, \$140 million total value—contingent on SoftBank going through with the acquisition," he said. "Announce that Monday and every bearish analyst rewriting WeWork's obituary will need a fresh draft."

Victor watched Masayoshi Son's eyes skim the Siemens logo, then lifted in quiet surprise. "Siemens," Son murmured, letting the name linger like a rare spice. "That's a sturdy anchor."

"And it's ready to drop to anchor WeWork," Victor said, "if you stay on deck with us."

Son pushed aside the remaining pages, which consisted of Figures, ratios, and break-even dates, things he had seen hundreds of times in his company's acquisition team. He let them rest beneath his palm, his fingers rhythmically tapping as his black eyes locked onto the man across from him. Tonight wasn't the time for spreadsheets; he had people to do that for him, he was here to see whether this venture was worth a shot.

Just as he was about to delve deeper into his wandering thoughts, Victor spoke up again, his deep green eyes practically glowing. "Do you know how my dad kept his fishing boat alive?" Victor asked, causing Son's eyebrows to climb, wondering if he had misheard something, given that talking about a "Fishing boat" had no place during a billion-dollar acquisition talk.

"Yeah. It was a rust bucket the colour of hot sauce," Victor chuckled. "Whenever a plank warped, he'd rip it out, nail a new one, slap on a coat of paint, and keep sailing. Twenty years later, the hull was new from bow to stern, but it was still Dad's boat—just stronger."

Victor leaned forward, voice soft. "WeWork is in the same boat. The paint's flaking, and a few boards are rotten, but the idea—flexible space for fast-moving people—is sound. You're not investing in building a new vessel. You just need fresh timber and someone brave enough to keep her afloat while we hammer the foundation in place."

Son glanced at the untouched langoustine, then back at Victor. A small smile tugged at his lips. "Brave enough," he echoed. "Some would say foolish."

"Maybe." Victor nonchalantly shrugged as if his heart wasn't beating in rhythm with a herd of galloping wild horses. "But fortunes are never made by safe men at safe tables."

Before the conversation could continue, a neatly dressed waiter reappeared, presenting a shimmering dome of dark chocolate mousse sprinkled with edible gold leaf. Son didn't break eye contact with Victor as the plate was set down.

"I will need proof that your team can swing that kind of hammer," he said.

Hearing his words, a bright smile appeared on Victor's face. "Tomorrow morning, the world hears Diane Kusumoto is joining WeWork," Victor replied. "Her résumé could sink a yacht. She's the hammer."

"And the nails?" was all Son said, seemingly unimpressed by the mention of the woman.

"Seventy-five million more from Atlantis if the refit drags, plus a promise that WeWork shows a heartbeat, by next Christmas." Son's fingers drummed the table once, twice, three times as he mused over Victor's words.

Then he picked up his spoon, cracked the chocolate shell, and took the first bite. "Reduce the debt by 15% by the 1st of July and accomplish your promises, you have yourself a partner, Parker-san," he said, savouring the mousse like a man who appreciated sweet endings. "Publish our pact at dawn to stabilise the situation, but our acquisition is contingent on you fulfilling your promises. Ken, you've been taking notes right, give Mr Parker a copy of his promises."

Chapter 527 Viewing Party?

[Date: 15 February 2020 | Time: 15:29 EST | Location: Rakim's Crib, Hahnwald, Cologne]

The late-winter dusk had already settled over Hahnwald, yet Rakim's living room lights were dimmed to a gentle amber glow. Zeus lay without a care on a section of the white Velvet couch, letting his winter

pelt soak the place in its fur. Rakim sat next to him, his hand kneading the top of his head as his gaze remained locked on his 140-inch smart TV.

He was dressed in light grey TitnaFit Jogger bottoms and a tank top after having just completed a workout. Rakim angled the remote to unmute the pre-match commentary just as the Stadion An der Alten Försterei, home of Union Berlin, finished the pre-match proceedings. Zeus's ears flicked at the sudden noise, but the German shepherd didn't budge from his throne of cushions.

"Tell me again why the two have to watch the match in my house?" Rakim asked for what felt like the 20th time as he looked at the two intruders who had made themselves comfortable on his couch.

Diaby, dressed in a pair of ripped designer jeans and a black T with SZA on the front, merely waved his hand as if he were shooing a fly. "Sush, the start whistle just blew," Was all the Frenchman said as he pulled out a second phone from his cross bag.

Rakim opened his mouth for a comeback, but the whistle from referee Daniel Schlager rang through the surround system speakers in the living room as Volland locked the ball back in the TV. The chant of "Eisern Union!" rumbled so loudly that all people in the living room felt as if they were in attendance.

"Anyway, he has maxed out his ignorance stat. What's your excuse, as far as I know, your family are die-hard Leverkusen fans. Shouldn't you be spending time with them instead of disturbing my peace?" Rakim suddenly asked as he eyed his blonde-haired, blue-eyed friend, who had helped himself to his snack cupboard.

Wirtz—still munching on a fist-sized handful of salt pretzels shot Rakim an innocent look, the kind puppies give their master after shitting the bed. "Because," he said between crunches, "Mum can't handle my commentary. She says I'm too dramatic." He wiggled three fingers in mock jazz hands. "You, on the other hand, claim to be Florida strong. Figured I'd test the theory."

Rakim huffed. "Just shut up and watch the crumbs. The cleaning lady gives me the most disappointed look when she finds something dirty." Zeus punctuated the exchange with a deep yawn, head settling on Rakim's thigh like a sandbag.

The opening minutes tick by with cautious probing, with Leverkusen mostly holding possession. Union Berlin was content to sit back in their 3-4-2-1 shape, waiting for a chance to counterattack. Their team kept things calm with short passes, trying to get into the rhythm early.

Sigh, Rakim fished out his phone and decided to check his social media, something he hadn't done in a while. Something he hadn't done in a while and quickly remembered why. He sometimes felt like the apps would put topics in their feeds that evoked a response. In my case, it was a mixture of things, but worst of all was Twitter as despite it being regulated people just didn't give a fuck.

His thumb flicked through his feed for a few restless seconds, trying to ignore Trump's latest Twitter debacle. The man had made it his mission to create his own media exposure since the American media had been coming for his head like the BBC. Before I could lose myself in Dululu land, a ripple of shouts from the living room snapped him back to the match.

Leon Bailey had picked up the ball on the left flank, darted inside, and curled a teasing cross toward Kai Havertz at the near post—only for Subotić to stick out a boot and divert it away. "Bro, that was filthy—Bailey' had that man doing the stanky leg," Diaby laughed, barely looking up from his phone before tossing it onto the cushion beside him.

"I would have gone for the shot, though," Rakim quipped from the side as he nuzzled Zeus's ear. "You couldn't pay me enough money to be a traditional winger, especially after he had his marker doing the YOU!"

Wirtz glanced up from his phone with a smoking smile. "That's because your ego is the size of Texas."

"Boy, what do you know about Texas?" Rakim quickly shot back, not denying his friend's word in the slightest. "Football is a game of goals. If you can score a lot, if you're better at creating them, then master that, and if all else fails, make a living stopping the first two guys."

"MY BOY SHUT UP," Diaby suddenly said from the side before Wirtz could even figure out how to respond. "It's not that deep, just let us watch the match in peace without you turning into one of the corner shop uncles."

Union Berlin broke! A quick turnover in midfield from Trimmel sent Bülter racing down the flank. He cut inside and slipped the ball through to Anthony Ujah—no, Anderson—who'd ghosted in behind Tah. The striker remained composed, his first touch feather-soft as he pierced into the box.

Hrádecký had no chance to react as the striker sent a sharp shot past the keeper's outstretched leg at the near post. "Gah! How did he sneak past (S) Bender?" Wirtz yelled, almost spilling pretzels across the carpet.

"Midfield is still sleeping, they aren't tracking runners, man," Diaby observed, leaning forward. "And Berlin, that's all they know how to do,"

Rakim exhaled and sat up. "I knew it was bad luck to have you guys watching the game here."

Leverkusen, now chasing the game, pushed men forward using the flanks to the fullest. Despite the flanks not being the speediest set-up, it worked to their advantage against a team that liked to sit back. Both Kain and Leon were good at static play, able to explode into motion at a moment's notice.

Rakim and Diaby could do the same, but both preferred to take opponents on when they were in motion. It was simply easier to bait an opponent into mistakes they couldn't quickly recover from. Like most problems in the world, it was an energy problem; they simply couldn't be bothered to expend that much energy.

Kai was different, though, since he is one of the most balanced players to come out of Germany since Thomas Muller. Able to excel in every attacking position, doing exactly what the team required of them. 35th minute, it was in such a moment at the edge of the final that the German international demanded the ball from Amiri.

He let the pass sit at his feet for a heartbeat, and then he shifted onto his right, nimbly slipping past Lenz. Exploding a couple of steps, he looked and let fly, sending an arcing cross into the box. The strike was low and wicked, whipping across the face of the goal just in behind the line of defence.

Gikiewicz, expecting more height as he charged from his line, hesitated to lunge in headfirst. That hesitation allowed Volland, who had lunged in feet-first to connect with the ball, redirecting it past him. The leather thumped against the inside of the post and trickled over the line.

"YES!" Wirtz whooped, jerking a fist in the air as a new roar filled the living room. "That was a thing of beauty!" The roar from the TV still reverberated through the room as Volland raced away in celebration. Zeus lifted his head and cocked an ear, momentarily drawn from his nap, before settling back down.

Chapter 528 Liverpool

[Time 20:49 | BayArena: 30,210 | Bayer Leverkusen 0 – 0 Liverpool]

Leverkusen Line-up: 4-1-4-1

GK: 1 Lukas Hardekey

RB: L. Bender

CB: 4 Tah

CB: 12 Tapsoba

LB: 18 Wendell

CDM: 15 Baumgartlinger

RM: 19 Diaby

CM: 29 Havertz

CM: 11 Amiri

LM: 22 Rakim Rex

ST: 13 Lucas Alario

Coach: Peter Bosz

SUB:

28 Ramazan Ozcan

23 Mitchell Weiser

12 S Bender

27 Wirtz

10 Demirbay

7 Paulinho

38 Ballarebi

VS

Liverpool Line-up: 4-3-3

GK: 1 Alisson Becker

LB: 26 Robertson

CB: 4 Van Dijk

CB: 12 Gomez

RB: 66 Alexander-Arnold

CM: 14 C Henderson

CM: 3 Fabinho

CM: 5 Wijnaldum

RW:11 Salah

ST: 9 Firmino

LW: 10 Mané

Coach: Jürgen Klopp

SUB:

13 Adrián (GK)

7 Milner

8 Keïta

15 Oxlade-Chamberlain

18 Minamino

27 Origi

32 Matip

"The atmosphere is hot at the BayArena and from what I'm being told, we are at capacity in this round of 16 Champions League clash." Taylor Twellman's voice resounded as the camera panned over the two sides exiting the tunnel. "Leverkusen walks out in Red and the boys from Liverpool don their white away kit. Derek, I know we've talked about what we can expect from the two sides, but how do you see them approaching this match?"

"Klopp's Liverpool will look to assert themselves early, pressing high and trying to disrupt Leverkusen's rhythm," Derek Rae replied, his voice cutting through the roar. "But Peter Bosz's side have been formidable at home this season—compact in midfield, quick on the break, and they'll be keen to exploit space behind Liverpool's full-backs."

Taylor nodded, sweeping the camera over the red-clad supporters. "All eyes are on Kai Havertz today, who has been in sensational form this season. But Rakim Rex has quietly become Bosz's go-to creator on the left is he the best signing made last summer when looking at his stats? 24 goals and counting in his debut Bundesliga season, and that's not to mention his ability to carry the ball at pace and his uncanny ability to unlock defensive lines."

Derek smiled at the analysis. "Indeed, the youngster has been phenomenal this season, fully earning the 24.5 million price tag," he responded, pausing for a second before continuing with the analysis. "And at the back, Edmond Tapsoba and Jonathan Tah must be on high alert facing this Liverpool offence. Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mané will look to combine early, replicating last year's UCL partnership, which has troubled every defence in Europe. It'll be fascinating to see how Wendell and Lars Bender shield the flanks."

Taylor glanced down at his notes one last time as the stadium lights flared to life, casting long shadows across the pristine turf. "We're just minutes away from kick-off," he said, his voice tinged with anticipation. "Both managers have had polished training sessions this week, but how they translate that work onto the pitch tonight will decide who takes control of this tie."

Derek leaned forward, gesturing toward the jubilant home crowd. "Bosz has set his side up to be aggressive in possession—he'll want to dominate the ball against Liverpool's high press. Expect Baumgartlinger to sit deep initially, breaking up play, allowing Havertz and Amiri to push forward. But don't underestimate Fabinho's role for Liverpool; he'll look to intercept passes through the middle and spring Salah and Mané in transition."

The camera cut to a sweeping shot of Bayer Leverkusen's dugout, where Bosz, clipboard in hand, was giving last-minute instructions to Lars Bender on the sidelines. "Notice how the full-backs, Wendell and Bender, are noticeably in a narrower formation," Taylor pointed out. "That'll force Alexander-Arnold and Robertson to work hard to find space. If Leverkusen can prevent those overlapping runs, they'll cut off one of Liverpool's greatest strengths."

Derek nodded, swivelling toward the Liverpool bench. Klopp stood much more composed, arms folded, as he surveyed his troops. He could be seen deep in conversation with his assistant coach Pepijn Lijnders as they hammered out last-minute plans. The stadium announcer's voice rose above the din as both teams took their positions, photos were taken, hymns were sung, and hands were shaken.

"Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready?" he thundered, and the baying crowd responded with a deafening roar that seemed to shake the floodlights overhead. For a moment, the Reds, who numbered around 10,000, stood in silence as the home fans, led by the ultras, let their voices be heard.

Taylor let out a low whistle. "You can feel the tension—this is what the Champions League is all about. Leverkusen haven't reached the quarterfinals since 2002, and with this being their first UCL knockout tie in over a decade, they'll be eager to make their mark. Liverpool, however, have been here many times—they know exactly how to handle the pressure."

Derek glanced at the giant scoreboard as the referee checked his watch. "The next 90 minutes—or hopefully 120 will be a tactical battle. Will Liverpool's front three tear Leverkusen apart, or can Bosz's midfield diamond suffocate their creativity? It's truly 50-50 in my book."

With that, the referee's whistle pierced the charged atmosphere, and Firmino kicked things off for the away side.

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[Rakim's Pov]

[1]

The first few moments were tense, I would like to say like any other match, but no, it was definitely more charged. (Fweeet) The moment the whistle blew, I exploded forward, not chasing after the ball to cover the area between Salah and Alexander-Arnold. Chasing down Fabinho's pass back, I quickly arrived in front of Alexander-Arnold just a second after he received the ball.

Despite defending not being my strong suit, I had picked up the basics, and at this level, it was mostly a duel of momentum. I leaned into the challenge, feeling my cleats grip the turf as I hoped lightly instead of coming to a sliding stop instantly, shadowing Alexander-Arnold's next move. All I could hear was my own heartbeat and the electric whoosh of the ball cutting through the cold air as the fans' roar faded.

Trent feinted inside, and I was there mirroring him, but I did not get into his personal space and instead kept him at the edge of my zone. Since defending wasn't my strong suit, I aimed for the moment he decided to break through or let the ball slip beyond his grasp. I did not have to wait long as the moment he realised I cut him off; he turned back to the touchline, unwilling to risk a pass inwards.

The separation following his nudge wasn't big, but it was enough for me to risk lunging forward for the ball. Angling my body so my back would hit his chest, our boots briefly clashed, needing in my victory as I managed to scoop the ball back. The roar from the nearby crowd sent a dose of dopamine through me as I performed a quick stop-and-go on the loose ball, manoeuvring it past the back-tracking Mane.

Knocking the ball back into the feet of Wendell, I continued forward, drifting into space at the edge of the final third. My teammates spent a couple of moments passing the ball around the back line and central midfield, trying to stretch the Liverpool frontcourt. Havertz and Amiri seemed to take full control despite Liverpool's frantic pressing.

Salah closed down Bender, but the right-back merely knocked the ball up the line into the feet of Diaby. His first touch knocked the ball inward to the feet of Kai, and the German international turned with the momentum, nimbly dodging Wijnaldum's tackle. I watched Kai twist away from and perform a one-two pass combination with Amiri, and he broke past the halfway line.

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Seeing the opening, I burst into motion, forcing Trent to track me or at least notice. Behind us, Kai drove on, punching our front three forward as we surged into attack. He slipped past Henderson's sliding tackle with a sharp feint, and the instant he was clear, I cut back from the edge of the box and sprinted to the top of the D.

"Pass," I called for the ball, and he didn't disappoint in sending it my way, turning my head left and right before it arrived, the figure of Trent appeared in my peripheral vision. It seems he had chased after me the moment I chose to break away and would be upon me the moment I took control of the ball.

Thinking fast, I stepped toward the ball, my left foot clipping it lightly as I stepped to plant it. Before it could fly out of control, my right foot snaked in front of it and in one fluid motion scooped it behind me and into the air.

Chapter 529 Liverpool (2)

[7]

From their perch high above the touchline, Derek Rae and Taylor Twellman narrated with unflinching clarity as Bayer Leverkusen surged forward. The two commentators maintained a speech-to-word ratio faster than a Gatling gun.

Taylor's tone carried a note of wonder as he described Rakim Rex's deft flick. "Rex, drifting in from the left, Trent's upon him, and he sees him. Oh my, what is he doing?" The commentator exclaimed as they watched Rakim expertly shift his centre of gravity. In one fluid motion, he managed to drag the ball behind him and flick it over the central defenders.

The ball looked spellbound as it floated delicately above the rising head of the Dutch giant Van Dijk. The defender was forced to react fast to the sudden pass, thus unable to gain enough height in his jump, allowing Lucas Alario room to manoeuvre. The Argentine striker twisted his body, cushioning the dropping ball on his chest while fending off Joe Gomez at its landing point.

In the same motion, he tried to hook a right-footed volley, but Alisson Becker, alert to the danger, was already springing from his line. The keeper spread his body wide, managing to get his knee to the shot, deflecting the ball up into the night sky. Van Dijk, having recovered from his earlier blunder, rose highest heading the ball clear with authority.

Derek's voice rose above the BayArena din. "Leverkusen's first real opening, and it's taken a world-class intervention from Alisson to keep it scoreless!"

Taylor replied on the beat. "And look how quickly Liverpool turn defence into offence—Mané is away on the left!"

[12]

The counter was fast and deadly as in a sequence of passes, Sadio Mané was already in full flight, cheeks puffed, legs gliding over the turf. Lars Bender gave chase but never looked likely to close the gap. A

stepover, then another, sent the German full-back sprawling; Mané cut inside and drove a low pass into the feet of Firmino at the penalty spot.

Firmino's trademark no-look flick set Mohamed Salah clear of Wendell, at the edge of the box, but the Egyptian's first-time shot skimmed wide of the far post, nicking the advertising hoarding with a hollow thud. "OH, my goodness, what did we just witness?" Taylor exclaimed as the Reds from Liverpool groaned in disappointment.

"A wake-up call for the Leverkusen backline like no other," Dereck stated as the camera panned over to Peter Bosz, angrily glaring at his backline. Lars, who was closest, seemed to get the message and quickly started relaying instructions to his backline.

[17]

Liverpool's early warning shot rattled Leverkusen into a spell of disciplined possession. The focus for Amiri and Havertz was on controlling the rhythm and helping their backline adapt. They dropped deeper, almost creating a 4-3-2-1 formation to create triangles with Baumgartlinger, drawing Fabinho out of his protective pocket.

The BayArena crowd rumbled appreciatively each time the midfield three weaved beyond the halfway line, but the final ball kept crashing against the brick-wall pairing of Van Dijk and Gomez. The Reds responded in kind the moment they won the ball, utilising quick transitions, trying to overload certain locations in the home side's backline. Wendell and Bender quickly found themselves on the receiving end as Salah and Mané both got to work.

[23]

Salah, drifting inside from the right, played a slick one-two with Henderson. The captain's return ball had just the right weight for Salah to ghost past Wendell, drawing Tapsoba wide. That subtle dislocation of shape was all Firmino needed to slip between the lines.

"Danger here," Derek muttered tensely. "Tapsoba's been pulled too far... and look at Firmino's positioning!"

But Baumgartlinger, reading the danger, slid in with impeccable timing just as the Brazilian wound up for a shot. The stadium roared as the CDM cleared with a decisive toe-poke, sending the ball out for a throw. "Firmino was seeing headlines, but Baumgartlinger had other ideas."

The throw-in was taken quickly by Alexander-Arnold, fizzed back into play and immediately worked across to Wijnaldum. The Dutchman, with his back to goal, used his body to shield the ball and laid it off to Robertson, who had crept forward unnoticed. A one-touch cross was sent screaming into the six-yard box—low, fast, and begging for a finish.

Lukas Hradecky, who had already sneaked off his line, dived low, punching the ball away with both fists just as Mané lunged in. The collision was inevitable, and both men hit the turf, the crowd gasping—but the referee waved it off. "No foul," Derek affirmed. "That's brave goalkeeping from Hradecky."

Taylor chimed in. "And he did—absolutely no hesitation. Liverpool are beginning to show their teeth now, though. The pressure is mounting."

Leverkusen tried to reset, keeping possession along the back line, but the tempo Liverpool imposed was relentless. The press came in waves—Salah, Firmino, Mané, all moving like predators in sync. Hradecky was forced into a rushed clearance, and though it found Rakim on the left flank, he quickly found himself out-muscled by Trent.

He barely managed to poke the ball towards Amiri in the centre of the field. He did well to recover the ball under pressure, twisting away from Fabinho's first lunge before nudging it to Havertz. The German playmaker looked up, eyes scanning for options, but Wijnaldum was tight to his hip. A quick shoulder feint bought him half a yard, enough to slide a pass down the line for Diaby.

Diaby exploded at lightning speed, forcing Robertson to shuffle back as he dribbled down the line. Before the defender could decide to stop him, he chopped inside so quickly that the left-back couldn't even react. The ball now on his stronger left foot, Diaby fired a vicious curler towards the far-left corner.

"Diaby! It's curling Alisson's scrambling backwards!" Derek's voice reached a crescendo.

The shot whistled past Van Dijk's head, dipping wickedly just under the crossbar, but Alisson threw himself backwards, throwing a hand up. His outstretched fingertips kissed the ball just enough to divert it off-course. It clipped the top of the bar and spiralled out for a corner, causing the home fans to groan in disappointment.

[32]

The resulting corner saw Havertz whip in an outswinger from the left, the delivery crisp and curling with menace. Tapsoba rose above Van Dijk for a split second, his forehead connecting with the ball (smack!), but it was always rising, sailing just a few inches over the bar and thudding against the digital advertising boards.

"Another half-chance for Leverkusen," Taylor noted. "You get the feeling that if they don't capitalise soon, they might regret it."

[35]

Liverpool responded by slowing the tempo. Alisson rolled it short to Van Dijk, who calmly directed traffic with sweeping gestures. Gomez and Robertson began to push higher, spreading the field wide, pulling Leverkusen's midfield out of shape bit by bit.

In the 36th minute, a crisp exchange between Fabinho, Wijnaldum, and Alexander-Arnold down the right saw Liverpool progress upfield. With a snap change of pace, Salah accelerated past Wendell, drawing a panicked reaction from the crowd. He squared the ball across the top of the box, Firmino dummied, letting it run for Mané. Mané took one touch, nudging it past the lunging Bender and drilling it low (CLANG!).

The shot cannoned off the near post, kissing the inside before bouncing out of play. "OH, my days, Liverpool almost had it," Taylor exclaimed as the away fans who had jumped up in anticipation now listlessly sat back down.

[37]

The near miss sent fresh waves of anxiety through the BayArena. Peter Bosz was already yelling instructions from the technical area, his arms windmilling in frustration. "Drop deeper! Compress the line!" he barked as if trying to will his players to respond before Liverpool's gears fully meshed.

Leverkusen restarted with a short goal-kick to Tapsoba, who passed calmly to Tah. But the moment Tah tried to step forward, he was greeted by Firmino's hunting run. The ball was played square to Baumgartlinger, who tried to pivot but was instantly pressed by Henderson.

The Liverpool captain poked it loose—Wijnaldum latched onto it. "High turnover! Liverpool in again!" Derek's voice rode the sudden tension.

Wijnaldum wasted no time, skipping a desperate Havertz tackle and slipping the ball into the channel where Salah had peeled off Wendell's shoulder. The Egyptian cut inside with elegance, using one touch to shift the ball onto his left foot. "Trouble here!" Taylor snapped.

He curled it low, along the turf, aiming inside the far post—but Hradecky read it like a book. The Finnish keeper dove early, his right glove managing to clamp down on the incoming ball. He managed to firmly get a hold of the ball, deftly pulling it into his body to protect it. "Massive save!" Derek exclaimed. "That could have been curtains!" A chorus of relieved whistles and thunderous claps erupted from the Leverkusen faithful.

Chapter 530 530 UFC or UCL

[40]

Despite the mounting pressure, Leverkusen didn't crumble. Instead, they recalibrated as Amiri, and Baumgartlinger swapped positions briefly to help transition through the lines more efficiently. It worked in breaking the efficacy of their opponents' press, giving Kai room to manoeuvre. He skipped past Henderson, keeping the ball glued to his feet as he scanned for an open man.

Mane and Wijnaldum did not give him time to look for options, forcing him to perform a quick L drag, changing direction in one motion. Moving behind Wijnaldum, he spotted Rakim on the far side, just a couple of steps from the half-line. Not hesitating, he put the top of his boot through the ball, sending a grounded missile of a pass to the winger.

Rakim's head rapidly twisted left and right as he squared his body to receive the pass. Due to its momentum, he didn't have to step forward to get it; instead, he actually jumped back as the ball neared. Sensing Trent's rapid footsteps nearing, Salah's retreating footsteps ready to close him down and watching Fabinho rushing at him from the front, he knew he had to make his move.

He did so in the next second after spotting Alario making a diagonal run towards his wing from his central position. Not receiving the ball, he merely performed a Ronaldo chop, redirecting it down the line, missing Trent's boots by inches. Not bothering to check if the ball would reach its intended target, he took off diagonally, charging towards the middle channel.

[41]

The crowd rose to their feet as the ball zipped across the flank, and Alario, still in full sprint, hooked his boot around it before it went out of play. His first touch wasn't perfect—slightly heavy—but it was just enough to keep the momentum going. He did just enough to keep Van Dijk honest as he charged down the side of the goal.

He nudged the defender's shoulder lightly but quickly gave up in the duel of strength. The Argentine striker feinted inwards, then a quick stop, creating just enough room to send a grounded cross into the box. The ball was out of reach from the grasp of the outstretched Alisson as it flew past the penalty spot.

Gomez tried to lunge in trying to intercept the cross but missed by mere inches. Diaby, on the other end of the box, managed to beat Robertson to the ball, but the left-back quickly caught up, standing in front of him, locking down the shooting lanes. The Frenchman did not force it, choosing instead to pass the ball to the top of the box in the path of the on-rushing Rakim.

Rakim reached the ball at full stride, his first touch cushioning it with his instep while his body leaned slightly to the right, inviting Fabinho in. The Brazilian midfielder bit on the feint, stepping to close the space. But Rakim snapped the ball back with a swift Cruyff turn, opening his body toward the left channel. His boot laced through the ball with a crisp thump, only to feel a seething pain shoot up his right foot, which he was using for balance.

His world quickly flipped on its head as he tumbled to the ground, barely hearing the burst of cheers from the bay arena a second later. It sounded like a volcano had erupted on the 3 sides of the arena as the home fans went apeshit in celebration. "Nummer 22 Rakim REX!" The whole arena exclaimed following the announcer's prompt.

Finn, who had been celebrating like a madman the moment the ball curled past Alisson after being dominated by the away side for a spell of time. However, he came shocked stop as his gaze travelled to the figure clutching his leg in pain at the edge of the D. "Hey, Ben, isn't that Rakim on the ground?"

Ben, who had been busy jumping in joy, with his arm draped around the man next to him, whom he didn't even know, came to a sudden halt. "What the fuck are you talking about, our boy is over there celebrating," He said pointing at the corner where Rakim would usually race towards after scoring a goal only to find it with a few other players who had habitually raced to the corner but where now also realising that something was wrong.

(Fweet) The referee quickly blew his whistle as the camera swiftly cut from the celebrating crowd to the pitch where Rakim lay curled on his side, one hand gripping his right ankle, his face twisted in agony. The replay flashed on the big screen overhead. His turn had been perfect, the shot had been inch-perfect too, curling with venom toward the top corner.

However, the moment the ball left his boot, a vicious tackle from his blind spot arrived in the form of Wijnaldum. The player had missed the ball completely, only managing to hit his right boot, tearing the boot's material with its studs. "Stop acting, you've already got the goal," He shouted at Rakim on the ground before the referee could arrive, standing over him, stretching to use his hand to remove the latter's arm over his face.

"What is the Fu\*\$er doing!" Ben in the stands exclaimed as the silence in the stands following the silence that had started you build in the stands instantly erupted in outrage. Diaby arrived a second later, shoving Wijnaldum back causing all shit to the fan.

Wijnaldum stumbled back from Diaby's shove, arms flailing as the French winger roared at him in a fury rarely seen. "You fouled him, you coward!" Diaby barked, his forehead nearly colliding with Wijnaldum's. Players from both teams swarmed the scene, tempers flaring.

Fabinho and Henderson rushed in to defend their teammate, while Havertz and Amiri pushed between the groups, trying to de-escalate. Funnily enough, no one confronted Tah and Van Dijk as the two defenders tried to de-escalate the situation. The referee, whistling furiously, gestured for players to step back, his hand already reaching for his pocket.

The camera zoomed in on Rakim, still on the turf, his body now trembling from the pain. Lars knelt by his side, gently removing the boot to reveal a swelling ankle underneath his socks. Rakim clenched his jaw but couldn't stifle the grunt of pain as the cold air touched raw skin.

"Taylor, that's a horror tackle—late, reckless, and completely off the ball," Derek said grimly. "There's no justification for Wijnaldum's actions. He could've seriously ended the young man's night—or worse, his season."

"And it came after the shot," Taylor added, his voice sharp with indignation. "The ball had already left his boot; that kind of desperation is inexplicable this early in the first leg."

The two defenders and captains managed to calm things down between both teams with the help of the referee. However, on the sidelines, Peter Bosz was fully engaged, giving the 4th official a piece of his mind. Klopp barely managed to get a word in before he caught a few strays regarding his players' discipline and sportsmanship.

"Please calm down, Mr Marciniak will handle the situation fairly," the fourth official tried to console, but Peter was already in full attack mode and needed to find an outlet for his pent-up rage.

"What is there to handle? Send that hooligan off, this is football, not the UFC jumping in from behind like that, is this the discipline of last year's UCL winners?" He questioned in anger, glaring at Klopp, "I know that England is known for their rugby, like football, but you coached here for years, your players should have some class."

Before things could escalate further, Fredrick Bauer, Bosz, assistant coach, grasped the latter's arm and pulled him back to the heart of their technical area. "Excuse us, emotions are running high, and we're not used to this kind of underhanded actions." He apologised with a disarming smile as they retreated.

The referee, Szymon Marciniak, stepped away from the mass of jostling players, hand raised. The stadium held its breath as he slowly turned, then reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a yellow card, holding it high in front of Wijnaldum, who stoically accepted it without complaint.

The BayArena, on the other hand, wasn't so accepting and boos rained down like a summer monsoon. If not for the love of their club, their club, and the fact that it was no longer the 80s, the ultras might have rushed the pitch to hold a friendly conversation with the referee. The Liverpool midfielder raised his hands as if to plead innocence, but it only enraged the crowd more.

Derek Rae spoke the crowd's thoughts aloud. "That's not going to be enough to satisfy the home supporters here at the BayArena. That challenge could have done serious damage. The VAR check must be underway." And indeed, Marciniak raised a finger to his earpiece, pacing slowly toward the sideline.

Peter Bosz, jaw clenched tight, stared daggers into the back of the referee's head. But a moment later, the check was complete, and the LED screen flashed with the Decision: Yellow stands. This caused the stadium to erupt again as head doctor Thomas Muller and assistant doctor Simon rushed onto the pitch.

[45+3]

On the pitch, the stretcher arrived, and the physio crouched low, stabilising the joint. Moments later, his right foot was wrapped in an ice boot as he was placed on the stretcher. He kept his left arm covering his face, only lifting a thumbs-up to the home crowd as he was carried off the field.

"That's brave from the young man," Taylor noted, his voice thick with emotion. "He knows the cameras are on him, but all he's thinking about is how bad the damage is. It's a cruel blow—especially after such a world-class finish."

[# 22 OFF — Rakim Rex

# 27 ON — Florian Wirtz]