

Football 531

Chapter 531 Cough

"Arg fuck that hurts," Rakim could be heard exclaiming as the club medical team unwrapped the ice boot. With the ice on, the pain had been reduced to a throbbing pain, but the moment they removed it, his brain seemed to remember the pain.

"It's all good, kid, we'll take good care of you," Dr. Muller said from the side as the rest of his medical team continued working with practised efficiency.

"No offence, doc, but I never wanted to see the inside of this room." Rakim hissed through clenched teeth, his jaw trembling as the chilled air touched the angry, ballooned flesh of his ankle. His sock had been shredded with medical scissors and now lay next to his burst boot.

Due to his complexion, the marks around his foot appeared dark purple, showing clearly where Wijnaldum's studs had made contact. The only saving grace was the fact that he hadn't hit his ankle head-on, mostly clipping the area above the ankle and his foot. Despite this fact, the swelling was creeping up fast around the joint like poison ivy.

One of the assistants applied an antiseptic spray. It fizzed and burned, causing Rakim's fists to curl in pain. Closing his eyes, he used one of his arms to cover his face as he leaned back on the medical table. His mind kept replaying the lead-up to the tackle, wondering whether he could have avoided the tackle.

He concluded that the moment he chose to shoot, it was impossible, even if he had clocked the tackle. Thinking back, he realised he had seen Wijnaldum approaching him in his peripheral vision, but it just didn't occur to him that he would come in from behind like that. In the end, he could only blame himself for letting his guard down, as he was now suffering the consequences.

[Ding: It is detected that the host is injured. Assessment in progress...]

'You just now realised that?' he sarcastically asked the system in his head, trying to vent some of the frustration he was feeling.

{Rakim's injuries are part of the game, you just need to learn from this experience and adapt so a similar situation won't occur,} Eva commented, her voice sounding soothing in his head, calming some of his anger. {I know it's no consolation, but you scored upping your UCL tally to 7 this season.}

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{I guess not, however, this is simply another part of the journey, plus if you were going to get an injury, now is as good a time as any,} Eva commented, causing Rakim's face to scrunch up in confusion, barely feeling his now numbed foot.

'What are you talking about? I think you might need the doctor more than I,' he retorted after failing to realise what point she was trying to make, as no matter how he thought about it, nothing came to mind.

(hatchu,) Rakim's upper body shot up from the gurney so quickly that he almost felt the air resistance. What followed was a sense of vertigo, but he didn't care as he looked gazes with one of the medics who was wiping his nose with a handkerchief.

Both didn't move for a second as the latter seemed like a deer in headlights under his clear green eyes. "Gesundheit," Was all Rakim said as he lay back down, realising if he was going to be infected, it would have already happened when the man helped to treat him.

'How could I forget that the date of my death is coming up,' he thought to himself as memories that had long been suppressed or forgotten re-emerged like bad side-chick. Now that he remembered everything clearly, he had been deployed in Ethiopia under General Mosi, known as the blood warlord of the West.

'Hey Eva, how come I'm only remembering this now?' He asked her, his inner voice filled with fear and uncertainty as he continued to digest the memories.

{The memories were suppressed to give you a somewhat normal childhood, but it was only a band-aid, which you yourself removed.} She simply responded in a matter-of-fact tone.

'When did—Oh shit,' Rakim inwardly exclaimed only for the figure of his biological father to flash in his mind. 'Fuck so what do I do now?'

{Hmm, it's a moot point really, but it would be a good chance to make peace with your past, given the fact that your knowledge of the future also ends in August.} Eva commented, causing Rakim to realise another issue he had subconsciously been ignoring.

He had never really worried about the fact that he'd one day be just a regular person since he genuinely loved his current life. However, now with his current emotions in turmoil, he couldn't focus on any of his thoughts for too long. 'Let's just deal with this first.'

Dr. Muller's voice cut through the haze of spiralling thoughts. "Alright, Rakim, we're starting the full medical assessment now. I need you to stay with us, yeah?"

Rakim blinked a few times and gave a half-nod. "Yeah... yeah, I'm here."

"Good. Let's start with the basic evaluation before we move to imaging," Dr. Simon added, stepping forward with gloved hands and a small flashlight.

He began by checking Rakim's capillary refill, pressing on the toenails of the injured foot to gauge blood flow. "Colour returns fast. No signs of vascular disruption."

He then palpated key areas along the ankle—medial malleolus, lateral malleolus, and the base of the fifth metatarsal—carefully applying pressure.

"Let me know the moment it spikes beyond a seven," he warned.

Rakim gritted his teeth, fists clenched. "That last one—eight. Easily."

"Over the ATFL," Simon confirmed. "We'll move on to mobility testing. Doc?"

Dr Muller took over and began the anterior drawer test

, anchoring Rakim's shin and gently tugging his heel forward. There was some laxity, but not excessive.

"Minimal movement," Muller muttered. "No full tear. Now the talar tilt."

He rotated the foot outward, slowly—Rakim winced and let out a strained breath. "That one's worse."

"Expected. That's ligament damage," Muller confirmed. "Now for the squeeze test—we'll check syndesmosis integrity."

Simon placed both hands around Rakim's lower calf and gently compressed. Rakim shook his head, face pale. "Tolerable. Five, maybe."

"Alright, doesn't appear to be high ankle. We're ruling out fractures now. Let's prep the ultrasound," Muller ordered.

The assistant rolled over the portable diagnostic scanner, applying a thick layer of gel to Rakim's ankle. The cold hit his skin like a slap, but he didn't flinch.

Simon moved the transducer slowly, eyes scanning the screen. "Slight Torn fibres on the anterior talofibular ligament. Minor fraying on the calcaneofibular ligament. No rupture. Bone surfaces are clean. Just swelling and some fluid around the joint."

[15 minutes later]

"Micro-tears. Grade 2 sprain, no high-ankle involvement, no bone fractures," Muller summarised.
"Could've been worse."

"Kid, are you wearing any jewellery? We're gonna perform an MRI scan just to be sure," Dr. Muller said, breaking him out of his thoughts, to which he promptly shook his head. "Good because you don't want to know what happens if you do."

Moments later, both his boots and socks were removed, and he found himself wheeled to a room separated by a glass wall. In the centre of the room stood a white device resembling a miniature Death Star in technology. It was circular in appearance, like a doughnut with a retractable bed/platform pulled ready for him.

"Alright, Rakim," Dr. Simon said, adjusting the settings on the control panel from behind the glass. His voice crackled through the intercom. "We're going to scan from just above the knee to the bottom of your foot. It'll take about ten minutes. Try not to move at all. Even a twitch can blur the images."

The table hissed softly as it eased him into the magnetic core of the MRI machine. The lighting inside was sterile and tight—he could barely move his arms without brushing the walls. The noise started low: a hum, then a rhythmic pounding like distant construction. His heartbeat seemed to sync with it, and he quickly fell asleep as the dose of dopamine he had been riding left his system.

[Ding Injury assessment complete]

Grade: 2 sprains around the ankle, Slight tear on inner ligaments, possibility of worsening 35%

Ding: Silver Ankle Brace's (Passive) has been Triggered.

- Lowers the likelihood of getting your ankle broken by 25% due to a harsh tackle and increases the likelihood of a full recovery by 5%

Recommendation: Initiating Recovery Protocol

→ Mandatory:

Immobilisation for 72 hours: Avoid all weight-bearing activity. Crutches are to be used at all times.

Elevation and Cryo-Compression Therapy (3x per day): Each session lasting 15 minutes minimum using clinical-grade cryo sleeves.

Neuromuscular Electrical Stimulation (NMES): Begin twice daily from Day 1 to reduce muscle atrophy and stimulate blood flow.

Laser Therapy: Apply low-level laser therapy once daily to accelerate cellular repair and reduce inflammation.

Anti-inflammatory Nutritional Regimen: Enforce omega-3-rich meals, turmeric extract, and vitamin D3 supplementation.

→ Conditional:

Hydrotherapy (from Day 4): If swelling subsides and mobility test scores improve, initiate hydrotherapy in an anti-gravity treadmill or aquatic resistance tank.

Physiotherapy Start Date: Earliest Day 5 — focus on passive range-of-motion drills and soft tissue massage.

Estimated Time to Jogging: 8–10 days.

Estimated Time to Full Return-to-Training: 14–17 days.

Estimated Time to peak physical prowess: 40 days.

Risk of Re-injury within 30 Days: 18% (Base), reduced to 13% with passive skill bonus active.

'Well, that's new'

Chapter 532 Egyptian King

Dr. Muller stood beside Rakim, now awake from his brief MRI-induced nap, holding the tablet containing the scan results and updated treatment protocol. "Alright, Kid, you're officially on Recovery Protocol 1-A, which means no weight-bearing at all for the next 72 hours. You move with crutches. You sleep with your leg elevated. No exceptions."

"We will be handing you over to the recovery team, who will oversee your recovery. We recommend rotating you through cryotherapy sessions and laser therapy treatments, but the team will curate a more detailed plan for you." Dr Muller stated as he handed the tablet over to Simon.

The latter immediately began syncing it with the recovery room terminal. "We've already notified them," Simon added. "By tomorrow morning at the latest, they will have a specialised plan for you."

"For now, we will put you in an orthopaedic boot so you can get around without too many problems." Dr Muller, said as he strapped the grey boot onto Rakim's injured right foot that had been professionally wrapped in medical bandages.

"Thanks, doc, btw, does anyone know the score?" he responded before asking his question to anyone in the room.

The way the medical bay was set up made it impossible for anyone to focus on anything other than the person being treated. It was done so by design, allowing the players who were forced to exit the match to focus solely on improving, rather than on what was happening with their team. "Let me check," one of the assistants stated before quickly exiting the room.

"The score is 2:2," he returned shortly, announcing a score that, while shocking, didn't distress them too much.

"Cheers," Rakim responded before tentatively standing up, utilising a pair of crutches he had received from the good doctor.

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The match clock had just struck the 75th minute, and Liverpool had won a free kick from outside the home team's box. The home crowd in attendance was less than pleased by the referee's decision, and they let their dissatisfaction be known. Each time a Liverpool player touched the ball, they were drowned out by boos. Every time the referee made a decision, he was drowned in curses, no matter if it was a decision in their favour.

Led by the ultras who felt like they were slighted, no one was safe, least of all the away fans who tried to sing their marching song. "You never walk...Shut up, you cheating bastards, how much did you pay the referee off?" It wasn't only Rakim's tackle that set the fans off, but a string of questionable decisions by the official that pushed the fans over the edge.

After Rakim had scored in the 43rd minute, the first half had ended with a score of 1:0. The second half started off rather hectic with Liverpool charging forward like madmen, but a well-conducted counter in the 52nd minute and Diaby took flight. Mane had cut inwards, at the edge of the box, skipping past Wendell, he was just about to take aim when Tah came sliding in with clinical efficiency.

The tackle was clean, hitting nothing but the leather off the ball despite sending Mane sprawling to the ground. Amidst the hearty cheers of the home fans, Tah jumped up and sent a laser of a pass through the middle. The ball cut through traffic, bypassing the feet of Henderson, slipping under Havert's legs and even bypassing Wijnaldum's desperate lunge.

The ball connected with Lucas Alario just past centre, and the striker, with his back to goal, leaned against Van Dijk as he swept his right foot across the incoming ball. The ball took an arced loop over the head of Gomez, dropping in the area just behind Robertson. The left-back turned on the swivel, trying his best to reach the ball first, but it was already too late.

Given Liverpool's pressing style, requiring the creation of situational number bombardment, it also led to a naturally high defensive line. Usually, one of the central defenders would hang back in such a situation, acting as a libero ready to react to sudden counters. While that would normally work, they underestimated Diaby's pace and pushed too far forward, leaving yards of clear green grass behind them.

That's why just as Robertson turned ready to take control of the ball, he was surprised as a red blur blitzed past him. The French winger did not take the ball down but instead headed the ball forward forcefully and raced after it. The crowd erupted, the stadium buzzing like an agitated hornet's nest that had been triggered.

Diaby didn't care as he continued to widen the distance between himself and the defenders chasing after him. "Diaby's off to the races and he's got daylight ahead of him!" roared Derek Rae on commentary, his voice rising with the roar of the crowd.

Taylor Twellman chimed in with disbelief, "They gave him \*too\* much room. You cannot give a guy like Diaby that kind of runway—not unless you want to get burned."

Diaby closed in on the ball that had bounced twice just outside the box with predator-like precision. He delicately angled his body as if he was going to square the ball around the outrushing Alisson, only to sweep it to his right, sneaking past the lunging keeper. A collective gasp swept through BayArena as he skipped past the keeper's legs.

Keeping his cool, he calmly slotted the ball into the empty net and continued his run towards the corner flag. "GOAL!" BayArena erupted in ecstasy, their sour mood washed away for a moment.

"GOOOOAAAL DIABY! What a counter! What a finish!" Derek Rae shouted, nearly toppling out of his seat.

"From Tah's tackle to Diaby's final touch clinical. Ruthless. That's football played on instinct and pace. Textbook transition football, but they make it look so natural," Twellman added, even clapping as he spoke.

[54' Moussa Diaby – Leverkusen 2:0 Liverpool]

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That, however, was where the good mood of the home fans ended as Klopp soon made two substitutions in the 57th minute. Keïta came on for Wijnaldum, who had become far too cautious following his tackle at the end of the first half. That on its own wasn't the problem, but the home team seemed to target him going into tackles extra hard whenever he received the ball.

Baumgartlinger especially pushed the needle of what he could get away with after receiving a yellow following an elbow to the head during an aerial duel. The psychological pressure the player received from the home fans also played a role in his diminishing performance. Takumi Minamino also came on to replace the winded Fabinho, ready to inject some energy into that Liverpool offence.

He did just that, as moments after he joined the match, he strung a sequence of passes together and managed to light up Salah in the 60th minute. The forward launched a first-time shot from the right rib of the box. His strike was silky clean, sending a curving bouncing shot around Hardeckey's dive into the bottom left corner.

[60' Mohamed Salah – Leverkusen 2:1 Liverpool]

The away section sprang to life like a spark on dry hay. Chants of "Mo Salah, Mo Salah!" rang out as the Egyptian King jogged back toward the halfway line, one arm raised, with the other grasping the ball.

"That's a statement from Liverpool," Derek Rae commented, his voice now a shade sharper. "Salah with a clinical finish. And just like that, we have a game again!"

Taylor Twellman nodded. "They were never going to take that second goal lying down. It's Liverpool. You poke the bear, and it wakes up hungry."

Leverkusen fans booed, but the anxiety was creeping back into their roars. The goal gave Liverpool oxygen and belief, and it showed almost instantly. Their pressing returned with renewed hunger, and the crispness of their passes tightened like coiled wire.

Liverpool started closing the space faster, shrinking the field, and forcing Leverkusen players to make decisions quicker than they wanted. By the 64th minute, Liverpool had nearly equalised again. A quick switch of play from Robertson to Alexander-Arnold found Minamino on the edge of the box. With one deft touch, he dropped the ball to Henderson, who rifled a curling shot from 22 yards.

Chapter 533 FROM WAY DOWNTOWN!

Hrádecký was forced into a diving save, punching the ball wide with his fingertips. The fans who had been counting their ducks gasped in disbelief, with some already on their feet. Now they could only politely sit back down and await another opportunity to shout to their heart's content.

"Liverpool are knocking now," Taylor muttered. "And they've set up camp in Leverkusen's third."

With the pressure mounting, Peter Bosz finally gave the signal for a change in the 65th minute. "Tell Sven and Paulinho to get ready," he barked to his assistant.

Tapsoba, whose legs had begun to tire after a ferocious work rate, made way for the more seasoned Sven Bender. Meanwhile, Paulinho was introduced for Amiri, shifting Wirtz from the left wing centrally and the Brazilian out wide. Leverkusen's formation shifted to 4-3-3 with Baumgartlinger acting as a holding midfielder.

Instead of having a positive impact, his changes had a disastrous start as Firmino fell to the ground clutching his head just inside the box. It was after the failed corner kick that Tah had sent a mighty header out of his box, giving the home team some breathing room. Gomez, who had stayed back to defend a counter with Robertson, easily outmuscled Alario, nodding the ball towards Keïta.

The midfielder calmly played out the situation with a couple of passes around the middle of the field with a couple of his retreating teammates. Using this chance to settle the situation, he suddenly turned forward after a return pass from Henderson, deftly skipping past Wirtz. Without hesitation, he sent a defence-splitting pass forward into the feet of Firmino.

Spinning off Sven's marking, he turned forward into the box only to come crashing down the next second. Sven Bender, seeing this, raised his arms in disbelief, not understanding how the striker had fallen after a light touch. The referee's whistle pierced the stadium air a second later as he came jogging over with his hand pointed at the spot.

"Penalty!" Derek Rae exclaimed, almost hesitantly, unsure if what they had just seen was enough for such a drastic call. "And now the cauldron is boiling over! The Leverkusen players are absolutely livid!"

Sven Bender was the first to charge at the referee, eyes wide with shock. "I barely touched him!" he protested in German, hands raised as if to ward off divine punishment. Firmino, still on the ground, peeked out from under his arm just enough to see the chaos he'd caused.

The crowd erupted in outrage as the referee reached into his pocket, pulling out a yellow card and showing it to Sven Bender. "You can't be serious, man, he's obviously faking." He told the man, who only pursed his lips and dismissively shook his head.

Lucky for him, before things could escalate, his brother Lars came pulling him away as he tried to reason with the official. He failed to do so, though, and the referee stuck to his decision on the penalty kick. Boos rained down like a thunderstorm, shaking the very scaffolding of the BayArena.

Plastic beer cups flew onto the pitch. Peter Bosz stormed down the touchline, waving his arms furiously, shouting at the fourth official. But he kept himself in check, not letting his rage get the better of him. "VAR's gotta look at this," Taylor Twellman said, nearly breathless. "That contact was minimal. If anything, Firmino sold it like a Broadway actor."

[70]

Moments later, Salah stood over the ball inside the restricted zone as he awaited the referee's go-ahead to take the set piece. (Pweeew) He got it a second later and wasted no time making a curved run-up to the stationary ball. The ball struck the netting with a ruthless snap, low and firm into the bottom right corner, not giving Lukas the slightest chance to react.

Salah stood cool and unbothered, raising a single finger to the sky before jogging calmly to the corner flag to celebrate with the rest of his teammates. The Liverpool fans in the away end exploded into euphoria, celebrating their team's equaliser, which could very well turn into a full-blown comeback.

[71' Mohamed Salah Leverkusen 2:2 Liverpool]

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In one of the VIP boxes, Rakim, now dressed in the team's tracksuits, could be seen seated in a plush leather chair, dozing off with a pair of crutches grasped in his arms. "Can I sit here?" A gentle voice spoke up from behind him, her laboured breathing clearly audible, startling him awake.

Turning to face the direction of the voice, there she stood in her full glory. Black hair, dark green eyes with beads of sweat on her temple, and a hesitant smile met him. "May? What are you doing here?" He asked before he even realised what he was saying. However, if he was being honest, he didn't care about the answer and was just glad she was.

"Emm, can I?" she asked once again, pointing to the chair next to him, to which she received a subconscious nod. "You've seen better days," she softly said, her hand reaching out to grasp his cheek.



She looked different in his eyes, almost foreign, giving him a feeling of Déjà vu. She looked much more mature if he had to guess what had changed, though her frame also appeared thinner. Her hair had been dyed a Jet-black shade with cool blue undertones, almost making her seem like a different person.

If not for her deep green eyes, which he had spent countless hours getting lost in, he might have been fooled. Still, despite the outward changes in her appearance, the warmth and the excitement he felt in her presence remained the same. "Y'know I meant to call but..." He started, but his words trailed off in the end as he realised that no excuse would sound believable.

"I know, me too, but... well, you know," She responded, letting her head rest on his forehead as, instead of sitting down, she lightly crouched in front of him, bringing their faces level. "Let's leave this for later. How are you feeling? Is the injury bad? I almost had a panic attack when I saw the tackle,"

Rakim shook his head gently rubbing against her temple, not even realising that at some point his arms had reached out to hold her waist. It seemed like part of him wanted to make sure he wasn't having a fever-induced hallucination despite all the evidence in front of him. "It's not broken," he whispered, lightly closing his eyes, "But I won't be on the pitch for a month or maybe two."

May exhaled deeply, relief washing across her features even as her brows knit in concern. "They said you were screaming in the tunnel. So, I couldn't help but think the worst, well that teaches me to trust the words of drunk college students."

"It felt worse in the moment," Rakim admitted. "However, part of me was just angry at the fact I didn't clock his approach before it was too late."

(slap) A soft but firm slap hit his left cheek as May pulled back, now looking angrier. "I know you think you're Superman or whatnot, but it's ok to just be angry at the situation and the person responsible without trying to find faults in yourself."

"Ok, calm down," he said, raising his hands in mock surrender, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. "You show up after weeks, hit me with wisdom and physical violence,"

May rolled her eyes but didn't hide the faint smile that bloomed before she could respond, the entire arena exploded in cheers. "OH, MY WORD! KAI HAVERTZ FROM WAY DOWNTOWN! THAT'S OUTRAGEOUS!" Derek Rae's booming voice resounded through the box's speakers, barely audible over the throng.

Looking at the monitor showcasing the replay, the figure of Havertz appeared just past the centre circle. He spotted Witz battling to keep control of the ball from Keïta on the left side of the field. He ran into space just at the edge of the final third, and Witz didn't disappoint, finding him just in time.

Instead of stopping the ball, he flicked it past himself, Minamino behind him, quickly slipping his marking. Henderson tried to steal the loose ball, but the German playmaker merely nudged it past him, and he was gone. With space ahead of him, everyone expected him to continue charging ahead, but instead, he took aim.

Alisson was standing around the penalty spot, and for Kai, this was enough space for him to pull the trigger from 30+ yards out. The ball left his foot like a heat-seeking missile, slicing through the air on a wicked, dipping arc. Alisson backpedalled frantically, eyes wide as he realised—too late—that he was too far off his line. The ball curved viciously, its trajectory heading for the left side of the goal, and it struck true.

(THUMP.) The top left corner rippled violently as the ball struck just beneath the bar and sank into the net like a stone into still water. Taylor Twellman's voice came in hot on his heels. "THAT. IS. A. SCREAMER! We might be watching goal of the tournament in the final moments of the game."

[89' Kai Havertz – Leverkusen 3:2 Liverpool]

Chapter 534 534 A Chat

[Date: 18/02/2020, Time: 21:55, Hahnwald Estate]

The low hum of the silver Lamborghini Sián FKP 37 purred through the tree-lined private road like a jungle cat stalking prey. May's fingers wrapped a little too tightly around the steering wheel, her gaze focused and unreadable as the streetlights flickered on either side. Next to her, Rakim sat reclined, his right foot propped awkwardly against the dash, wrapped in a reinforced compression brace.

His eyes flicked from the road ahead to her profile, lingering a second too long before looking away. "I still can't believe your dad got you this spaceship," she muttered.

He cracked the faintest smile. "Don't tell Jane, but she's my new favourite love."

"No way you're cheating on good old Jane, she's been taking you everywhere for more than a year now," she replied, her voice lighter than she intended, trying to ease the awkwardness that hung in the car like mist. A teasing smirk curved her lips, but her grip on the wheel didn't loosen.

Rakim let out a breathy chuckle, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "She's in the shop getting her heart rebuilt. Carbon ceramic brakes snapped again."

May gave him a side-eye glance. "Maybe if you didn't drive like a maniac every time you hear an engine rev; she'd last more than six months without blowing a valve."

"Where's the fun in that?" he retorted with a tiered half smile. "Though it's not like I ever go too far over the speed limit."

The silence returned with neither speaking as May simply followed the onboard computer's navigation. Since Christmas, there hadn't been any calls, let alone texts, between them, so the tension was definitely present. "Y'know, I've been meaning to ask you, but how did you get to me so quickly?"

"Oh, like I said, I was in the flat with a couple of friends from my study group when it happened." She flatly replied, brushing a strand of her now raven-dyed hair. "My Uber driver did the most getting me there, though I was lucky one of the guards recognised me and let me through to see you."

Rakim nodded slowly, eyes narrowing in thought. "To be honest, I thought I was dreaming for a second when I came to."

May's hands shifted slightly on the steering wheel, her voice sounding softer, almost drowned out by the sound of the tyres gliding over the wet road. "But you scared the bejesus out of me."

Hearing her tone brought a light smile to his face as he had missed her a lot during their time apart. "You know I really missed you,"

May didn't answer right away as she turned the wheel, pulling into his driveway. The security system recognised the car and Rakim in it, and the metal gate opened a second later. The white stone path, flanked by arching bamboo trees, appeared before them, and May didn't hesitate in flooring the gas pedal.

"I missed you, too," she finally said, "but I'll be honest, for a while I didn't know if I should."

The words settled, causing the mood to go heavy again and with the car barely travelling at 20 mph, the silence was particularly loud. "It felt like we were actually thriving apart, you with football and me with my Uni classes. I don't know how to put it, but it felt like we were both growing as people, though when Emma told me about the marques, I felt like shit for even thinking that way."

May eased the Sián to a halt under the cantilevered port-cochère in front of the garage. Rain pattered on the carbon-glass roof, tiny needles of sound filling the hollow between them. "You don't have to apologise for that," he said, eyes fixed on the garage door opening on its own as the LED lights in the interior flicked on.

"Not gonna lie, I was angry at first after we fell out, but after a couple of weeks of binge-watching Grey's Anatomy and Castle, I got over it," Rakim stated as May slowly eased the car into the garage under its designated spot. "How about we just have dinner and leave unpacking our baggage tomorrow."

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[Date: 19/02/2020, Time: 8:30, Hahnwald Estate]

On the master bed, the figure of Rakim could be seen fluttering lightly as he stirred from his REM sleep. Sunlight, thin and winter-pale, angled through the slatted blinds and painted faint zebra stripes across the duvet. A soft gust from the climate control rustled the gauzy curtains and tickled Rakim's nose. He blinked once, twice—then let his eyes adjust to the muted gold of the room.

He opened his eyes, and the first thing that caught his eye was a head of raven barely peeking out of the duvet. Almost immediately, memories of last night's happenings rushed to his brain. Despite deciding to talk later, they ended up talking all night after they had cooked dinner.

Well, it was more like May cooked dinner, and he did his best to step out of the way as he was more of a burden in the kitchen than an asset with his crutches. She had cooked a balanced rice dish with broccoli and mushroom sauce, which Rakim somehow found tasty. From his memory, her cooking was barely edible, but from what she had told him, her grandmother made her help in the kitchen, not letting her mope around for even a second.

Rakim eased an arm out from beneath the covers and brushed a strand of May's hair off her cheek. The movement stirred her; she made a small, sleepy sound and burrowed deeper into the duvet as his hoodie she had commandeered, became visible. He smiled at the light scrunching of her nose as he took in her appearance.

He eased himself onto one elbow, pulling himself up to lean his back against the headboard, careful not to jostle his brace. The mattress dipped toward him, and May's eyelids fluttered open. For a moment, she only blinked—still half-dreaming—until her gaze focused on his face. A slow smile ghosted across her features.

"Morning," she whispered, voice husky with sleep.

"Morning." He brushed his thumb over the faint pillow crease on her cheek. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." She yawned, then glanced down at the oversized hoodie that swallowed her frame. "I've been up for the past hour, just didn't want to wake you."

May shrugged lightly, letting the duvet slide from her shoulder. "Your bed is criminally comfortable. I nearly went back under for another dream loop."

Rakim tipped his head back against the headboard, amusement lighting in his eyes. "Must be the memory foam mattress and the 3,000 Egyptian thread count. Julia gave me this complimentary for renting the house."

She laughed under her breath. "In that case, I'll steal it once you're healed."

"Steal my bed, steal my hoodie—yeah, this isn't gonna work out, I move, we get a divorce?" He swiftly replied.

"...partial custody of the espresso machine," May shot back without missing a beat, scooting upright so she could face him. A lock of her raven-black hair fell forward; she tucked it behind one ear. "Non-negotiable."

"Hmm, no deal, I love that machine too much, guess we're stuck together," He replied with a light teasing smile.

May's smirk softened into something almost shy. "Stuck together, huh? I can think of worse fates."

Rakim's reply was interrupted by the faint trill of his phone on the nightstand. He shot her an apologetic glance, reached awkwardly across the duvet and angled the screen toward him. "Coach," he muttered.

"Take it. I'll—uh—start coffee," she said as she slipped out of bed, revealing a pair of black joggers under the hoodie she had snatched from his closet.

He watched her leave for a moment before pressing the answer button on his phone screen. "Morning, Coach."

"Morning, kid." Cocha Bosz's voice resounded from the phone speakers as the sound of traffic resounded in the background. "I didn't get to chat with you after the game, so I wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

"Cheers, coach, my girl picked me up, so we decided to leave early before the vultures could find us." Rakim quickly replied before the two delved into a conversation about his recovery. "Yeah, the good doctor said as much, but it looks like I'll be out for 6 weeks at least."

"Just keep your head on straight and don't go rushing to get back on the field. You have a bright future ahead of you, and this is just a burden for you to overcome." He said, trying to comfort him over the phone, something he appreciated given that he knew just how busy his coach was. "If you need anything, don't shy away from contacting the club or me personally. Alright, I will let you get to it, try and enjoy your day."

Chapter 535 535 Mum's Arival

[Date: 19/02/2020, Time: 09:15, Rakim's Crib – Kitchen]

May stood in a pair of house slippers at the marble island, slicing strawberries into neat fans while the espresso machine hissed behind her. Steam curled in the sunlight that spilled through the clerestory windows, gilding everything in a soft, winter glow. Rakim eased himself onto a barstool, bracing his crutches against the counter.

The reinforced brace on his ankle peeked beneath the cuff of his joggers, giving the feeling that he was wearing a ball and chain. For someone who has worked hard to improve his agility and balance, adjusting to this new feeling was unsettling. He imagined that this was how soldiers felt after a gunshot wound that left them either crippled or with a long stint in recovery.

Not that he likened himself to a career soldier, but he would bet that anyone who trains his body to peak condition would find it hard to adjust to a sudden injury. "You sure you don't want bacon?" she asked from the other side of the kitchen island as she lifted the portafilter to tamp the grounds.

He raised both hands in mock surrender. "Doctor's orders: lean protein, whole grains, minimal grease. I'm being a model patient today."

May snorted. "Since when does a Lamborghini pilot follow speed limits or doctor's orders?"

"Since the Lamborghini pilot can't actually press the accelerator," he countered, grin crooked. He watched her arrange Greek yoghurt, berries, and granola into two bowls, the practised motions oddly domestic. "Besides, I have to face the club physios in three hours. Can't show up smelling like a fry-up. Those doctors are like bloodhounds when it comes to players not following the team diet."

She slid a bowl toward him as he nodded in thanks and perched on the opposite stool. For a moment, they ate in companionable silence with neither breaking the moment. They could faintly hear the

rhythmic sound of the Japanese Shishi Odoshi in the garden and Zeus, who was roaming about in the house.

"So," she started, chasing a berry around her bowl, "Tell me the part you skipped last night. You said you have a younger sister and a brother your age?"

Rakim dabbed a berry stain from his lip, as his movements came to a halt, almost as if his brain was short-circuiting. "Well, technically half-siblings, but in reality, just strangers. I didn't meet them at the New Year's party but later found out that he has two other kids."

"So, you haven't reached out or vice versa?" She hesitantly asked again, inwardly debating whether to open this particular can of worms.

"No, not really been up for chatting with them or even entertaining the thought," he said, rolling a blueberry along the rim of the bowl before flicking it into his mouth. "It's... complicated."

May arched a brow, pausing mid-slice. "Complicated, huh? I guess that's my cue to stop asking questions," she said, but the worry in her eyes told him she wanted to ask more.

They ate in each other's company as they continued to catch up with each other. May told him about her marketing communications exams she has coming up at the end of March. The clock on the wall slid from 09:30 to 10:25 unnoticed, as the morning light brightened to a silvery glare on the marble.

When May rose to rinse the bowls, Rakim wrestled himself off the stool and hobbled to the fridge. "Protein shake?" he offered, pulling out a bottle of almond milk concoction that the nutritionist had prepared a case for him.

"Pass," she said, shutting off the tap. "I still have nightmares about that stuff. Remember that stuff the hotel staff gave you during pre-season?"

He laughed. "How could I forget? Half the squad sprinted to the toilets."

May leaned against the counter, drying her hands on a dish towel. "Class starts at eleven-thirty. I'll need to head out in about forty minutes." She eyed his brace. "You good to shower and dress without re-spraining something?"

"I'll manage. Might paint the ceiling with water, but I'll manage." He glanced at the time—10:35. "Thanks again for being here, by the way."

"Nowhere else I'd rather be." She crossed to him, stood lightly on her tippy toes and placed a soft kiss on the corner of his right cheek. "Just don't give me another heart attack." He debated half-turning his head to capture her lips properly when (DING-DONG).

The doorbell chimed and quickly reverberated throughout the entire house's open-plan space. They exchanged surprised looks; Rakim wasn't expecting deliveries. Zeus's head shot up, ears perked, but quickly lost interest as he munched on his bone.

"I'll get it," May said, already moving toward the foyer as Rakim's burning gaze watched her leave towards the door. As May reached the frosted glass front door, the handle turned from the outside. Before she could react, the door eased inward, revealing a slender woman in a camel-coloured coat, rolling a graphite suitcase that looked heavier than she did.

There she stood in all her glory, the sun hitting her golden hair at just the right angle. "Oh, this is a surprise. Good morning, sweetheart!" Lisa Rex exclaimed as she stepped into the villa, pulling May into her embrace for a hug. "We've missed seeing you,"

"I've missed you guys, too," She responded, trying her best to breathe through the hug. "How was your flight? Rakim didn't say you were coming."

Lisa released May and rolled the suitcase over the threshold, her boots clicking on the polished concrete. "Flight was smooth despite it being the red eye, but I'm dying for a proper coffee."

May's smile warmed. "You're in luck, Rakim got a brand new commercial-grade espresso machine."

"Commercial grade?" Lisa's eyebrows lifted as she shrugged out of her coat, revealing a crisp white blouse beneath. "That's very unlike my son. He usually survives on whatever caffeine he can grab between training sessions."

May laughed as she led her inside and gestured toward the kitchen, where the gleaming machine dominated one corner of the marble countertop. "Good morning, mum," Rakim called out from the kitchen as he hobbled on his crutches towards her.

"Oh, how are you, honey? You can't believe how scared I was when I got the news of your assault," She exclaimed as she dropped her bag and skipped the last steps towards him. "The one time I don't watch your match live, and this happens."

She proceeded to check his body up and down, looking for any injuries except the obvious one on his leg. "I had your team send me the preliminary medical assessment, but are you hurt anywhere else?"

Rakim steadied himself on his crutches, letting his mother's familiar fussing wash over him. "I'm fine, Mum. Just the ankle. The rest is bruising that's already healing." He caught her hands gently, stilling her inspection. "Really. I'm okay."

Lisa's eyes searched his face, maternal instinct warring with the need to believe him. "Maybe it looked far worse on the footage I saw, though it didn't help that the commentators made baseless comments." She proceeded to force him to sit down on the couch and proceeded to remove his boot to check it for herself.

Rakim could only let her do as she pleased, as May excused herself to get ready for her class. "From the looks of it, some of the swelling went down, but I'm not a fan of the discolouration." Lisa's brow knotted as she turned his foot, studying the mottled skin above the brace. "Well, the physiotherapists will fuss, but mothers get first dibs."

"Mum, they'll do the same poking in about ninety minutes," he said, half-laughing, half-pleading. "And unlike you, they bring ice buckets, go grab a coffee or cappuccino, you've probably been travelling all night."

"Fine," she sighed, settling the boot back in place with practised gentleness as her worries seemed to have been relieved. "But you are keeping that foot elevated until we leave." She rose and folded her coat over the arm of the long sofa. "Now—coffee."

Chapter 536 536 Next Day Chekup

[Date: 19/02/2020 | Time: 12:27 | Location: Bayer 04 Leverkusen HQ Medical Wing]

A sleek black top-of-the-line BMW X1 with rental plates pulled into the restricted parking area reserved for players and staff. A gust of crisp February air swept in as the car doors opened, Lisa stepping out first in her beige knee-high boots. She moved swiftly to the passenger side, already reaching to help her son out before he even asked.

"I've got it," Rakim muttered, managing to balance himself with his crutches with a bit of effort. She grabbed her purse and locked the car before falling into step beside him, not at all minding the slower pace.

The sliding glass doors parted with a quiet hiss, and a wave of sterile, climate-controlled air swept over them as Rakim and Lisa entered. The scent of antiseptic and fresh upholstery lingered faintly in the corridor, clean and clinical.

"Welcome back, Herr Rex," greeted the receptionist, a young man in a red polo embroidered with the club crest. "You're just in time. Doctor Muller and the team are expecting you. Room seven."

"Thank you, Michael," Rakim responded, as he gave a small nod to the 21-year-old, gripping his crutches tightly as they moved past. Surprised that the boy remembered his name despite their last meeting being his arrival at the club when he did his medicals, Michael dumbly nodded.

The medical wing at Leverkusen was state-of-the-art despite being rather small, looking more like a fancy rehab centre. Light wood flooring, frosted glass doors, and subtle LED panels that matched the club's colours aesthetically, without being too in your face. "You can really tell how much they have invested in the team's foundation over the past decade."

Nodding at his mother's comment, Rakim couldn't help but agree as he considered how successful the club had become in the latter part of the 2010s. "Haha, the board will be happy to know I'm not wasting

their money," Simon Rolfes, Leverkusen's Current Managing Director, voice resounded from a couple of steps away, prompting them to notice his approach.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle," he said as he spotted their shocked expression, but quickly brushed it off and stretched out his hand for a handshake. "How are you feeling after that tackle? I got that report, but it's not the same as hearing from the horse's mouth, as they say."

"I guess I'm the horse then, huh?" Rakim retorted with a questioning gaze that seemed to scream, 'Is this N1\$\$\$a serious?'.

"Well, if the horseshoe fits," Simon said with a pleased expression, seemingly trying his best to hold back a full-blown laughing fit.

"Sigh, you must annoy your kids a lot," Rakim retorted, exasperation audible in his tone.

"Yes, how did you know?"

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"(Ahem) I guess my injury could've been worse," he replied, tone even. "Just shi (cough) annoying that it happened now, just as I was getting into full swing for the second half of the season."

Lisa chuckled softly, her smile behind him appearing amiable, but it sent a shiver up both men's spines. "Let's," Rolfes said, offering a polite smile, trying to break the awkward atmosphere. "I won't keep you. Just wanted to check in personally since I wasn't in attendance yesterday. Keep your chin up and don't hesitate to notify the club if you need anything during your recovery."

Rakim grinned faintly. "Appreciate it, thank you."

"Yes, thank you for the attention and care you've given my son, we really do appreciate the extra mile. Sure, made it easier letting him live here full time with minimal supervision." Lisa said from the said shaking hands with Simon one more time in appreciation.

"No need for that, it's our philosophy to treat everyone like family from top to bottom," he quickly responded before taking his leave, much to the relief of his assistant, who had been looking at his watch quite a few times during their short conversation.

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"It looks like yesterday's assessment was spot on. We've confirmed the Grade: 2 sprains around the ankle; however, we did find a slight tear on one of the inner ligaments that we missed." Dr Muller stated as he walked over to Rakim, who was sitting at the examination table, as he browsed through his phone.

He had seemingly given up on trying to keep up with his mother, who hadn't stopped asking an avalanche of questions to the doctors and neurologist regarding his recovery. Since she had done her degree in sports science and nutritional health and has worked in the industry for years, she understood all the jargon. Rakim figured that he would follow her plan regardless, given that she had been his first coach, laying the foundation for his athletic career.



"Given the tear, his recovery time should be adjusted, right?" Lisa instantly asked, immediately picking up on the important facts.

"Yes, we've tentatively estimated his return to training around 2 weeks, but just to be safe, we have a 3-week plan before we reevaluate." He explained, as he pulled up the recovery chart, his team had prepared on his laptop for Lisa to look at. "This is the plan we have prepared to make sure Rakim comes back faster and stronger."

"Hmm, about his recovery, would it be possible for him to undergo it at home in Orlando? I've got all of these facilities at my gym's headquarters, and I will personally oversee his recovery with daily updates and regular checkups from my friends at the Miami Dolphins medical centre." Lis asked the man after ten minutes of reading through the plan and discussing some points with the good doctor.

Dr. Muller didn't answer right away. He folded his arms and cast a thoughtful glance toward Assistant Doctor Simon, who was entering data into the medical system at the adjacent station. "That's not a bad proposition," he finally said, tone measured. "And considering your background in the field and the facilities you have access to... It's not outside the realm of possibility."

Simon glanced up, brows slightly raised. "We'd have to ensure continuity of care and remote reporting. He'd need to log daily vitals, therapy feedback, and video check-ins every 48 hours minimum."

"I can organise that," Lisa replied promptly. "We've got the infrastructure for remote athlete monitoring from the different private clients we've worked with for recovery programs and targeted improvement. Plus, last year we just expanded to offering an in-house spa with all the needed facilities."

Dr. Muller nodded slowly, clearly weighing institutional protocol against practical efficiency. "Normally, we'd keep a player under club supervision, especially post-UCL injury. But with your qualifications and

his unique living situation, this option may be for the best." He trailed off and turned to Simon again. "Let's bring in Dr. Clara and Head Rehab. They'll want to review the load management curve."

"Already paged," Simon said without looking up, typing briskly.

Within moments, the door opened and in walked two figures—Dr. Clara, a composed woman in her fifties with an iPad already open, and a younger man with a tightly clipped beard and a muscular build—Head of Rehabilitation, Coach Darnell Wiese.

"Mrs. Rex," Dr. Clara greeted warmly. "I'm Clara, head Nutritionist around here. I'm a big fan of your work on Rakim. He is at the top of the 1 percentile on all the tests we have conducted, and his discipline in following a dietary plan is impeccable. He tells me I have you to thank for this."

"Haha, you flatter me too much. Following a diet has never been a problem for Rakim; it's getting him to stop and relax that is the problem." Lisa responded as she shook both doctors' hands. "It doesn't help that he idolises Cristiano and Kobe Bryant when it comes to training philosophy."

"Hahah, that's usually the type of athlete I love to work with, but keep in mind that in your case, slow and steady is the game plan." Coach Darnell Wiese stated, looking directly at Rakim towards the end of his words. "I know you want to get back to playing form as quickly as possible, but I need you to trust the process and those around you, and we will get you there as fast as possible."

"No problem, coach, just give me my marching orders," He responded with a mock two-finger salute.

Chapter 537 Wrong Server

[Four days later, Date: 23/02/2020, Time: 10:12 AM – TitanFit Performance Pool, Orlando, FL]

The water shimmered like polished glass, broken by the ripples trailing Rakim's submerged limbs. He stood waist-deep in the centre lane of the anti-gravity pool, neoprene compression shorts clinging to his frame, arms outstretched to the foam balance bars. "Focus on your gait—heel to toe, one clean transfer at a time," the instructor reminded, walking alongside the pool's edge with a digital tablet in hand.

Rakim nodded, exhaling slowly as he raised his right leg through the resistance of the water. His ankle, still wrapped in a waterproof stabiliser, throbbed faintly but held firm. The sensation was strange, not painful, just heavy, reminding him of the system's Green Slime Potion.

He spotted his mother on the second floor, watching from behind the glass partition that overlooked the swimming pools. He waved at her to which he received a smile before continuing with his exercises. The focus was on mobility: 10 slow, deliberate strides forward, 10 back, then side to side.

In theory, it wasn't so hard, but the water jets would kick in beneath him, creating calibrated turbulence. Still, he gritted his teeth and followed the trainer's instructions to a T, not willing to give his body a reason to slow his recovery. It took him 30 minutes to complete 3 sets of these simple exercises, which wouldn't have been much trouble 7 days ago.

However, now he found himself struggling to breathe through the pain and sweating like an Eskimo in the Sahara desert. By 10:45, they had moved on to the next set of exercises, which was lateral resistance walking. As Rakim slid his right foot outward, the jets fired again—this time from the side—nudging against his stabilised ankle like a tide trying to tip him off balance.

He widened his stance instinctively, engaging his glutes and core to hold form. "Good," said the instructor, tapping the screen. "Try to exaggerate the movement now. That ankle's going to need to relearn range and control at the same time."

Rakim nodded, his breath steady. "One more set." He reset to a neutral stance, side-stepped, returned and again and again. It quickly became representative, but he didn't mind and pushed himself to the limit. Above, the sound of his mother's voice filtered through the intercom. "You're tilting slightly to your left hip on the recovery step; no need to build bad habits during recovery."

He simply threw up an Ok sign and slowed his pace, lightly putting much more emphasis on his posture and execution. By 11:20, Rakim was kneeling on the underwater recovery bench, letting the jets massage his calves and thighs. The water was now calmer, its surface broken only by the soft whirlpooling around him.

The pain had dulled, no longer a sharp stab but a distant throb as he calmed his mind. "Alright," the instructor said, setting down the tablet. "You've earned a cool-down set. Ten minutes of gentle cycle—no jets. You can float if needed."

Rakim didn't argue and immediately leaned back against the submerged headrest. The ceiling lights refracted on the pool tiles below, and for a moment, he closed his eyes. In his mind, the system's voice chimed.

[Ding: Hydrotherapy (Stage I) – Completed. Mobility Score: 62%][Projected Recovery Trajectory: On Schedule]

'Hmm, looks like all that pain is being channelled correctly,' He thought to himself as he remembered what he had gone through after arriving here. His days started off with Cryo-Compression Therapy at 08:00 before going through a light yoga session with his mother and father.

Following his mother to her gym, he would undergo Neuromuscular Electrical Stimulation (NMES) sessions for short. What followed was that day's physical therapy menu he would have to go through

before lunch. Laser therapy from one of the trainers, part of the recovery and wellness section, to make the most of that day's work, followed. It was only after lunch that he was free to enjoy the day, which consisted of him terrorising servers on 2KBall, CTD, GranTreasonAuto, Madden, EA Football and Fortnite on both Xbox and PlayStation.

Sigh, he continued to float with his arms outstretched along the surface, listening to the calming lull of the water. He wasn't the only one in the water, but they had reserved this section for his session so it was somewhat calm. The instructor, a lean man with dark locs tied neatly behind his head and a stopwatch dangling from a lanyard knelt at the poolside and clapped his hands to get his attention.

"That's your ten, champ," he said. "Dry off, hydrate, get some electrolytes, then we move to post-session recovery."

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[15:35, Rose Isle, Orlando, FL, Rex household,]

Rakim leaned back in the racing-blue gaming chair, his booted foot propped on a velvet ottoman. Zeus—half asleep—had his massive head on his other calf, only the dog's ears flicking whenever the sub-woofer rumbled. He didn't care, though, as his gaze remained focused on the ultrawide monitor. Tilted Towers was half-crumbled, ringed by the storm's violet crackle.

The player count read 10 remaining as his fingers flashed on his PS4 controller. The HUD pinged, and through the speakers on his chair and his headset, the sound of footsteps resounded. Rakim twirled his gold-trim combat SG and slid behind a brick wall he'd quick-edited seconds earlier.

Building a quick set of stairs, he vaulted over a fence, tossed a grenade back and then hopped into a window. An annoying voice resounded from behind him as a player in the backpack kid's skin was chasing after him. "Bro, you literally suck!" he whined in a high-pitched nasal voice dripping with annoyance, clearly that of a kid high on sugar. "I'm gonna crank nineties on all you bots!"

(Boom) A short explosion resounded below as the backpack kid was thrown backwards. Rakim didn't care though as he quick-edited a slit in the brick and peek-pumped the Backpack Kid skin. Chips of masonry burst outward; the pellet spread slapped for 118 white.

"Yo, that's wack! You're literally cheating!" the kid squealed through proximity, voice cracking louder than a dog whose tail had been stepped on. He panic-cranked a shaky 1x1, layers of mismatched wood and metal blooming like a crooked flower.

Rakim rolled his thumb: reset, replace, cone, wall. A single ramp phased through the kid's structure and dumped him onto street level. Another shotgun blast—elimination. [You eliminated SweatySkittle91] splashed across the kill-feed.

[9 left. Storm closes in 0:45.]

High above, on the broken hotel roof, a ghillie-wrapped GrandpaGaming72 exhaled into his push-to-talk. Through his scope, he locked onto the figure of JohnWick with the Rex22 gamertag, quick looting the player he had just killed, "Wind's clean, 400 meters. Respect the drop." The muted clap of a Heavy Sniper followed; its round whistled past Rakim's ear and cored the taco shop wall behind him.

Rakim immediately sprinted behind a wall, scadadaling out of the situation after the missed shot. Grandpa had other problems, though, as the sound of footsteps resounded behind him. "Nice shot, grandpa," a player named TrueFort exclaimed as his Default remastered character quick-edited tunnelled along the second-floor windows. "But you just burned your one-bullet mag."

Grandpa immediately switched to his secondary in response as a gunfight ensued. Pumps and Hand Cannon got to sparking, and bullets got to dumping as they tried to simultaneously dodge and attack. TrueFort, with the element of surprise, had the upper hand, but Grandpagamer was no slouch either. However, just as both their health trickled past the halfway mark, a third party entered.

Sparkplug with the Gamertag CloutKingTV exclaimed as he fired off a round of rocket fire from a nearby roof. "My viewers paid for this dub—get outta my montage, peasants!"

Chapter 538 538 Orlando Smash!

Tilted's skyline jolted with the whump-whump-whump of [CloutKingTV's] quad-launcher. One rocket arced straight into the sniper nest. [CloutKingTV's] voice resounded through the proximity chat, "Hold this L for the vlog, boooooooooom!" A second later, the rooftop went up in a fireball. [GrandpaGaming72's] ghillie suit rag-dolled over the ledge, but before he hit street level, he quick-swapped to a launch pad, slapped it down mid-air and BLINK! —bounce-glided out of the flames at 12 HP.

A crimson-trimmed 80s-mullet skin flashing the [2XChamp_Doc Tag] kicked in the door, Grandpa had just ducked into. "Violence, speed, momentum — and one dusty boomer," Doc growled, switching to his Gold Pump. (BLAM).

[You eliminated GrandpaGaming72, 9 players left. Storm closes in 0:20.]

Across the street, [TrueFort] vaulted over a crumbling balcony and saw the explosion marker. "Free third party!" he laughed, rifling a purple MK-Seven into Doc's build from above. Wood splinters flew...but a grappling glove's thwip cut the gunfire short.

A New player entered the fray, appearing in a blue skin with even lighter blue hair. [Shinobi] swung in from the clock tower like a baby-blue comet, double-SMG spraying mid-air. "Yo Doc, respect the Ninja!" Shinobi yelled as he fired tracer rounds at the fleeing Doc.

Doc boxed, edit-peeked, and started a counter-pump, but in his fury, he didn't notice that TrueFort stole the wall and reset. Things quickly turned into a 3-way battle between them as they put their skill to the test. Doc's mullet skin flicked-edited a right-hand wall the moment he noticed the intruder at such rapid speed that he barely got grazed by the former's shotgun.

A builder battle ensued between the two as they tried to gain the upper hand over their opponents. [Shinobi] quickly joined the fray, showcasing his building and editing talent, and soon shots resounded, followed by edits. "Can't hide from the Nin—Shinobi, baby!" [Shinobi] shouted as he took over one of Doc's walls and sprayed him with bullets.

Both quickly entered a gun battle in their little box, almost forgetting the third party who didn't let go of this chance. "Bro, I'm renting this box—eviction notice!" [TrueFort] announced as he edited a wall, creating a small window and threw a boogie bomb in before resetting the wall immediately.

The boogie bomb popped with a disco-bass whomp, neon notes rippling across the cramped wood box. [Shinobi] and [2XChamp_Doc] were yanked into forced emotes—Shinobi's Pon-Pon flailing beside Doc's stiff-armed Disco Fever. "Yo, who still carries these in Chapter 2, bro?!" Shinobi groaned in Schadenfreude.

"Cheap toys for tiny Tim, kid." Doc bellowed out through gritted teeth as TrueFort opened up a window, letting his pump sing. -20, -40, -33, -14. [TrueFort] "♪ Dance monkeys, dance—free clips for me! ♪"

In a spec of colours, their health plummeted to zero, and their bodies exploded in a sea of old weapons and items. [You eliminated 2XChamp_Doc], [You eliminated Shinobi, 7 Players left. Storm closes in 0:8.]

"G-g-g-get spectated, Suckers!" TrueFort crackled through the chat and immediately got to looting.

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[Elsewhere – northeast rooftop, Tilted Towers, Phase 5 circle, 6 players left]

A single slate-grey roof at the edge of Tilted barley inside the new storm area. Perched there, the Kuno-skin of [LovelyLo] bobbed behind a freshly placed brick half-wall, shadowboxing for her face-cam.

"Alright, chat, 7 left in this influencer rumble. she cooed, her voice-changer pitching her words into a butter-smooth alto. A neon overlay flickered on her HUD: LIVE – 23 444 watching – #RoadTo3MSubs. \*

Footsteps clacked across the adjacent roof. The turquoise Sparkplug of [CloutKingTV] sprinted into view. He was about to raise his gold SCAR dangling from his shoulder to take her down when her voice came through, saying the magic words he couldn't resist. "Wait, answer some questions for the stream."

Sliding to a halt as if considering for a second, he built a quick bridge joining her on the same roof. The two locked aim but hesitated—both mics hot, audience counts spiking. LovelyLo tilted her head playfully.

[LovelyLo]: "CloutKingTV, What's your biggest red flag in a woman?"

[CloutKingTV]: "I got a lot of red flags,"

[LovelyLo]: "What's your number one red flag, just so I know?"

[CloutKingTV]: "It's real specific. You sure you wanna hear it?"

[LovelyLo]: "Yeah"

[CloutKingTV]: "Okay, you asked for it," He cleared his throat theatrically, turning to face his own camera.

[CloutKingTV]: "My number one red flag is when a woman plays Fortnite—username lovelylo, five-four, built like a dork, shorty got no cake, no knockers, and no face. Which is wild 'cause how do you miss all 3 stats'—then tries to cover up all that midness with some goofy ass purple glasses and all she really ends up looking like is the mom from inside out,"

He paced closer, AR still lowered. [CloutKingTV]: "And to make it even worse, which I didn't even know was possible. She takes all that garbage and puts it in front of a camera for people to see. That's wild. You know somebody like that?" Gasps spammed LovelyLo's chat—??? scrolling. Her avatar froze for half a beat. Then the Kuno skin twirled her pickaxe, blue flames crackling.

"Boom!" The sound of a sniper rifle resounded from afar, and [CloutKingTV's] character burst into colour as his gear exploded into the air. Before [LovelyLo] could react, John Wick was gliding her way, unleashing a wave of tracer rounds from a gold scar.

Reacting quickly, she placed a wall and a set of stairs behind it and fired back at Rex22, who was about to land and managed to chip off a chunk of his shield. Sliding upon landing, he cruised past the wall as he switched to an epic tactical Shotgun.

(Bang Bang Bang), (Dudududu) They both unleashed a volley of shots, each taking damage before building upwards, trying to gain the upper hand. Pellets rattled brick, and both builders shot sky-high, snapping new ramps faster than drywall in a hurricane.

[LovelyLo] [Kuno]: "Chat, Wick's hard-pushing—this is the content you wanted, right?!"

[Rex22] [John Wick]: "Stop with all the yapping and get to stepping to the spectator's section!" (BLAM-BLAM!) Buckshot sparked as both players switched between building shooting, chipping away at each other's health and child.

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[Street level below]

[PeelyAssassin47] crouch-walked in between a row of vehicles, Heavy Sniper scoped up. He drew a bead on a Fishstick skin controlled by [BenjGod] locked in battle with another player controlling Midas. (BOOOOM!) The 50-cal rang out, hitting [BenjGod] right in the head just as he built a wall to block his opponent. [PeelyAssassin47] "🍌 banana business."

[You eliminated BenjGod, 5 players left. Storm closes in 0:00]

The storm wall crackled electric-purple as it began its final squeeze. [PeelyAssassin47]'s banana skin ducked behind a demolished food truck, reloading his Heavy Sniper with surgical precision. Above, the build-fight between [LovelyLo] and [Rex22] had turned into a skyscraper of panic-edited walls and ramps.

At some point, TrueFort joined the mayhem after finding it hard to lock in on them from long range. Despite the storm closing, none of the 3 players had the luxury of escaping to the safe zone as the storm passed over them. Down below, [PeelyAssassin47] battled it out with [BlackMaddersucker69] on the streets as they moved towards the safe corner of the town.

[Rex22]: "It's been fun and all, but I'm out this b." Rakim shouted into the mic as he quickly built upward as the two engaged in battle. A short ramp and a platform, and he launched himself up into the air with a launchpad.

Equipping his Quad launcher, he shot a volley at the tower's wooden base, sending the powder keg into the air. "Orlando Smash!" (KABOOM! KABOOM! KABOOM! KABOOM!) Four rockets screamed into the wooden foundation. The entire tower went up in smoke as the structure started to dissolve, sending [LovelyLo] and [TrueFort] crashing to the ground.

[You eliminated LovelyLo, 4 players left. Storm closes in 0:00]

[You eliminated TrueFort, 3 players left. Storm closes in 0:00]

The smoking rubble settled as John Wick glided down to the half-building that was still part of the safe area. His health was down to 10% now, so he quickly got to popping mini health perks. He managed to get his health up to 50% and 25 shields just in time as the ground battle ended. Without even looking, he threw his last grenade down before crouching to the ledge to take a peek.

Before he could even react, he was dead. [You have been eliminated by PeelyAssassin47]. Flashed across his screen as the skin of a banana appeared on his screen with #1Victory Royale above it. "Right foot creep, ooh, I'm walking with that heater," sounded through his speakers as [PeelyAssassin47] did the griddy celebration.

Chapter 539 539 Hand In Your Jersey

[7th day, Date: 26/02/2020, Time: 10:12 AM – Rose Church, Orlando, FL]

[What a powerful name it is, the name of Jesus, what a powerful name it is, The name of Jesus]

"Whooo, have a blessed Sunday," Pastor Elijah exclaimed as he took the stage, thanking the worship members. "Thank you all for your attendance. I always find it heartwarming to see how far our congregation has come."

"Remember—Friday night prayer kicks off our new series on reconciliation, and our ranger teams raised \$50,000 towards the California wildfire efforts. I'd love to see you back here at seven sharp." He announced giving the congregation news on what the church has planned for the upcoming months.

He stepped down from the stage a couple of minutes later after giving them the last of the announcements, dismissing the congregation. Rakim and his parents joined the crowd heading out of the hall, though he was moving more slowly with the stabilising boot strapped to his foot. His recovery had been progressing well, allowing him to get around without needing crutches now.

Slipping on a pair of gloves, he followed after them, greeting a few familiar people on the way. Most wished him a good and speedy recovery before engaging him in short conversations. Just as he reached

the coffee hall, a firm voice with a slight southern accent said from behind, prompting him to turn to face the person.

"How are you doing, son? I hope the injury hasn't been too hard on your spirit." Pastor Elijah, a man dressed in suit bottoms and a navy cardigan, stood before him with a warm smile.

"It was a shock at the moment, but I have a great support system around me who made sure I was okay, pastor Elijah." He responded to the older man with a warm smile, thankfully as he was one of the first to come check on him once he arrived home. "It's also been good to be back home, so I'm not too annoyed at the situation.

Pastor Elijah nodded, his kind eyes resting on Rakim's boot. "It's often the forced pauses that let the Lord get a word in edgewise," he said with a quiet chuckle. "Anything you need, just say so. In the meantime, we'd love to have you help with Friday's breakout night — I know the younger kids would prefer to hear from you young ones than us oldies."

"That might be a good idea," Rakim began, shifting his weight off the injured foot. "By then, I should have the boot off and can comfortably move around. I should be able to wrangle a small group of kids."

"That's all we'd ask," Pastor Elijah assured him. "We've split the kids into service teams. Yours would prep care packages for firefighters and write thank-you cards."

"Sounds perfect. Count me in," he told the man as they continued talking about a few other topics before the man of God was called away by someone else.

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[16:00]

Hours after returning from church, Ben Michael Rex can be seen sitting at the dining room table, working on his laptop. His entire focus was on answering the emails he had received from his company staff. Unlike most businesses, they opted for minimal staff on Sundays unless it was a major sporting event like the World Cup, Olympics, Euros, NBA Playoffs and so on.

He was content making steady growth each year, and putting competent people in the right position allowed him to do that. His philosophy has naturally led to a workplace culture that is top-tier in the industry. Anyone within the organisation could bring forth ideas for review, which, after evaluations, could be adopted.

Other than store clerks, most permanent employees were allowed a free schedule, which they could swap with other staff in their system. Ben made an effort to hire locally when opening branches, from management down to part-time staff. He specifically made it a priority to hire high school or college students while offering competitive wages. This was for the sole reason of giving kids in those communities a great opportunity to earn money doing something people of their demographic are already interested in.

Encouraging those locally to participate in the store design process has allowed him to create quite a few unique stores. One example being the stores in Boston, which had a more Irish vibe with hits of sophistication. While the ones along the West Coast, especially in Los Angeles, had each store looking distinctly different from the other.

Smiling as he looked at the mock-up of the next TitanFit line set to release at the start of summer, he was interrupted by a ring on the doorbell. Not minding the interruption, he glanced at the indifferent Zeus, who couldn't care less and made his way to the door. "Hello, does Rakim Rex live here?" The UPS delivery driver asked almost immediately after he opened the door.

"Yes, he does, he's my son," Ben responded, assuming his son had ordered something.

The Jamaican-looking driver nodded then proceeded to eye him as if he had just told him the sky be purple, rubbing his dreads in thought. "Ja man, you sign here," He finally said, handing out his work pad, prompting Ben to sign with his finger. "Ben'son this be the right house? Help me unload the shipment, I beg,"

"No problem, man," Another voice resounded from inside the truck and before Ben could even process the two men, one Jamaican and the other of Puerto Rican descent, started carrying boxes into his house. One, two...12 5x5x5 boxes were stacked inside his foyer as if someone was building the Great Wall.

Acting like he knew what was going on, he nodded at the two men in thanks. "Thank you, have a blessed day," he told the two as he handed them 20% discount tokens for one of his stores and \$20 each as a thank you. He had heard of some delivery drivers who would leave the deliveries in the driveway simply because they couldn't be bothered to help carry stuff inside.

Five minutes later, he was standing at the doorway of his children's game room, watching with incredulity as the culprit was engaged in a shouting match within as he was locked in a game of 2K. "Bro, you need to hand in your jersey, because you're a disgrace to the game," Rakim exclaimed in a mocking tone as his My Player hit his opponent with a post-dunk to end the game 21:5.

"(Cough) Son, is there something you want to tell me?" Ben fake coughed just loud enough to get his son's attention.



"Hmm, not particularly, well, I did scam my way into an influencer Fortnite match the other day," Rakim responded with a tilt of his head, looking as if he was genuinely considering what his father could mean. "That's all that I can think of. How did Zeus get into Mum's closet again and get into one of her bags?"

"Don't even mention that your mother only cares to spend money on her shoes and bags. Despite the last bag Zeus destroyed being a common one from Walmart, she sulked for days before as if she had lost her precious." Ben responded in dismay, remembering how his wife refused to talk to him after he had left the closet door open. "That's not it, why are there enough boxes to stock a store in my foyer. If the delivery drivers didn't look legit, I would have thought someone was trying to prank me."

Hearing his father's words brought a sense of realisation to Rakim as he spun his chair around. Directly turning off his PS4, he jumped up, already used to balancing with his new ankle accessory. "Oh, there, here, let's go and check it out." He responded as he led his father down the stairs, quickly spotting the blocks of packages.

Opening one up, what greeted them were 500 packets of masks, each containing 50. Stupefied Ben opened the next box, and he was yet again greeted with another box of masks. Only on the third box did something different appear, a case of 100ml hand sanitisers in various fragrances. Three boxes of hand sanitisers with roughly 5,000 individual bottles greeted the two.

Opening the rest of the boxes, Ben was greeted by more bizarre items that could only be seen in a hospital or a campground. "Alright, son, you better explain before your mother gets home and you have to face the music alone."

"Too late for that," Lisa's unamused voice was heard from the side door, which connected the Garage with the house.

It was arguably the most guarded door in the house, consisting of two doors separated by a short corridor. Just to get in, one requires two different keys and thumbprint authentication; it would be much easier to just blow the front door open if one felt inclined to a robbery. "Ehm, it's for the pandemic."

"Wife, I think he might be going crazy after being sidelined,"

Chapter 540 Pandemic

[7th day, Date: 26/02/2020, Time: 16:22 PM – Rose Church, Orlando, FL]

"So you're saying that a pandemic is coming based on China going into a lockdown?" Dad asked for the umpteenth time, seemingly not believing what I was saying, even after I showed him proof.

"Yeah, one of my fans told me that the entire Wuhan county and surrounding cities have been in lockdown since the 23rd," I explained as I showed them some of the screenshots from chat rooms that I had prepared. "I didn't believe it at first, but I noticed that people were getting sicker, exhibiting the same cold-like symptoms."

Dad blew out a slow breath, "Let's assume you're right for a moment and didn't watch too much of The Walking Dead, why order so many supplies?"

"It was cheaper to buy in bulk, plus I figured if it gets bad, we can donate some to the church and make up care packages for our neighbours," I responded, unwilling to admit that I had gotten carried away when remembering the fear the pandemic had first caused.

As someone who had died from the diseases in my past life, I know firsthand how bad it can get if left untreated at the beginning. "(Sigh) Well, do our research before deciding on what to do," Mum finally said after seemingly internalising my words.

I wasn't worried, though, since the evidence was clear as day for anyone looking to see. "That's fair, even if I'm wrong, we'll have enough health supplies for the next few years."

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[14th Date: 05/03/2020, Time: 16:22 PM day]

That was just a small interlude in our lives, as I soon left for Leverkusen the very next day. Since my medical boot came off, the club required me to come back to complete the rest of my rehab there. I, of course, splurged to charter a PJ unwilling to risk flying in an Airbus carrying over a hundred people.

My scans following the removal of my boot were clean, allowing me to begin more complex mobility drills and jog once again. I can still remember Dad's face when he realised I wasn't going down a rabbit hole. He looked like a man who was told that $1+1=3$ only to find out that's true.

However, it only took him about an hour to go into full-on crisis management mode for both our family and his company. Mum was the hardest hit after realising that her gym would probably be shut for quite a while if we really did go into a lockdown. Rolling with the punches, they focused on informing their friends and family, making sure they had all the information needed to prepare.

Their worst fear came true on the first of March when the state of Florida went into full-blown lockdown. Germany and the rest of the world took a more laid-back approach to the cold taking a wait-

and-see approach. On my side, I was busy going through the recovery drills the trainers had prepared for me, trying to get back on the pitch as soon as possible.

I still made sure to wear a mask whenever possible, and long sleeves during training. May moved back in with me after figuring that it would be safer with just us two in the house than a student flat. It was weird living together again, taking us a few days to get used to each other's new habits again.

However we enjoyed each other's presence again, and in no time, we got into a new routine. It feels like we both now make more effort to do the little things, emptying the dishwasher first, or leaving little notes for the other when one leaves early or comes back late. I reluctantly learned to share my speakers with her new Tennessee-inspired playlist in the mornings. While she shared her specially ordered Schwarzbrot—something I'd once had to plan a heist to obtain.

None of that matters, though, as today is the day when I return to full training, and I am currently only waiting for Dr Muller's go-ahead. He had insisted I come in early so they could do another scan just to be sure, despite my beating my recovery goals with flying colours. It almost felt like the club staff was more worried than I, that I would reinjure myself.

"Alright, son, the results are in, and I have good news and bad news, which one do you want to hear first?" The good doctor asked as he walked in with an iPad in hand, which I assumed had my results on it.

I sank a little deeper into the exam table paper, fighting the urge to drum my fingers against my thigh. "Bad news first," I said, trying for bravado. "Rip the plaster off."

Dr Müller hooked a rolling stool with his foot and sat. "Fair enough. Sour grapes first. This will be the last day you will see me in a while. You've made a full recovery and barring any unforeseen circumstances, you should be cleared to play in a week's time."

I looked at him for a second, trying to figure out how or why he thought making such a joke was appropriate at this moment. "If that's the bad news, what's the good?"

"Oh, that I've been invited to give a symposium at my alma mater to you aspiring orthopaedic doctors." He responded with the brightest smile he had seen the old man sprout all week. Getting a smile out of this man was almost impossible, so seeing him so excited left me little room to be annoyed.

"(Ahem) Congrats, I think?" Those were the only words I managed to form. "So I'm good to train with the team tonight, right?"

"Yes, you can train, but take it easy; not rushing is the best thing you can do for your body right now." He said as his smile turned serious in an instant. "You know your body best, so trust it to let you know how much you can push it too."

"Cheers and I promise to take it easy," I thanked the man before immediately heading for the door, unwilling to hear another of his lengthy life stories.

Arriving at the training field, ten minutes later, I was met by Haverts who had arrived early for some extra training. He was going through cone drills at the side of the field with his personal trainer keeping watch. He was probably the only person in the team who trained almost as much as I do and the fact that he has a personal team probably helps a lot.

Waving in greeting, I pulled a set of ladders and small hurdles, setting up a simple mobility drill. I squared the last hurdle before taking off in a jog around the grounds to loosen up. The turf felt springy under my studs, which was a good sign, but it still felt like weights were strapped to my ankles. When I

circled back, Kai Havertz was already drifting toward me, his training kit already soaked as he chugged down the contents of his water bottle.

"Der Amerikaner zurück aus dem Lazarett," he teased, a grin slicing the early-spring chill. "The physios kept bragging you'd hack their schedule in half."

"Didn't I tell you that we built different down in Florida? You gotta be a different breed to turn Gator country into a party destination." I shot back. "Nice of you to warm the grass for me, though."

He chuckled and tipped his head toward my ladders. "Mind if I jump in? Jannik will kill me with one of his training methods if he sees me take a rest."

"Be my guest." And for the next fifteen minutes, we moved in sync—two beats quick-feet through the rungs, one-stride hops over the hurdles, decelerate, cut, back-pedal. My ankle hummed quickly, warming up, but it felt stiff, quite an unnatural feeling for me. Kai set a ruthless tempo, and I didn't bother trying to match him; after all, he was at peak fitness, and I was just returning from an injury.

"Clap, clap, gather around, lads,"