

## Football 541

Chapter 541 - 541 Kop Stand Silenced

[Date: 11/03/2020, Anfield, Liverpool, Attendance: 55,000]

[UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–3 Leverkusen]

The floodlights of Anfield cut through the Merseyside drizzle like divine beacons, casting a glow on the heaving crowd of 55,000 brimming with anticipation. Red scarves fluttered like banners of war, and "You'll Never Walk Alone" rolled across the stadium in a deafening, almost sacred, chorus.

They had been singing for half an hour, trying to intimidate the visitors and boost their team's morale. The entire Kop swayed in unison, a red wall of defiance daring Leverkusen to survive the night.

"Peter, I don't think I've ever seen a European night like this," Clive Tyldesley began as the camera zoomed in on the players in the tunnel. "There's an edge in the air, and it's not just down to the scoreline. There's been talk all week... will this be the last game we see in front of fans for some time?"

"Clive, it's surreal," Peter Drury responded, his voice tinged with unease. "The spectacle, the noise, the colour—it's classic Anfield. And yet, the safety concerns about whether the match should even be played remain a big debate. COVID-19, as it has been dubbed, has already suspended Serie A. Spain's La Liga is considering following suit. Who's to say UEFA doesn't press pause next?"

Clive nodded in agreement with a light sigh. "It's hard to imagine football without the crowd, Peter. But tonight... tonight we play."

Their words were quickly swallowed by the roar of the crowd as the Champions League anthem rang out across the stadium. The players emerged from the tunnel to a wave of camera flashes and chants. Songs were sung, hands were shaken, flags were exchanged, and a coin was tossed.

Liverpool would attack from left to right, shooting towards the goal in front of the Kop stand. Jordan Henderson knew exactly what he was doing when he chose to forgo the kickoff when he won the coin toss. In the home coaching area, Jurgen Klopp could be seen animatedly clapping his hands as he gave final instructions.

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Liverpool XI: 4-3-3

13 GK: Adrian

66 RB T. Alexander-Arnold

12 CB J. Gomez

4 CB V. van Dijk

26 LB A. Robertson

15 CM A. Oxlade-Chamberlain

14 CM J Henderson

5 CM G. Wijnaldum

11 LW M. Salah

9 ST R. Firmino

10 RW S. Mane

Vs

Leverkusen XI: 4-2-3-1

GK: 1 Lukas Hardekey

RB: L. Bender

CB: 4 Tah

CB: 12 Tapsoba

LB: 33 D. Sinkgraven

CDM: 15 Baumgartlinger

CDM: 25 E. Palacios

RM: 10 K. Demirbay

CM: 29 Havertz

LM: 19 M. Diaby

ST: 31 K. Volland

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[20:00]

[1]

At 8 pm sharp, referee Danny Makkellie punctually blew his whistle, signalling the start of the match as Volland knocked the ball back. He knocked the ball back to Exequiel Palacios, and the tie was underway. The Anfield roar hadn't softened a decibel, even as the ball zipped across the slick surface.

From the first pass, it was clear Liverpool had no intentions of easing into the game. "Leverkusen have the advantage, but they won't be naïve enough to think they can play passively," Peter Drury remarked as Henderson introduced himself to Palacios with a powerful shoulder tackle that sent the latter skidding to the ground, drawing a whistle from Makkellie within thirty seconds.

"Jurgen Klopp's men are champions of Europe, Peter. You give them half a window, and they'll blow the house down," Clive Tyldesley replied

[3]

Despite the early warning, Liverpool pressed like a pack of wolves. Firmino led the charge, flanked by Salah and Mane, forcing Leverkusen's defenders to skip the build-up and send the ball long. The crowd responded with each pass and tackle, each roar synchronised with their team's aggression.

"Intensity... that's the word, Peter. This is Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool at their best," Clive Tyldesley observed. "No need for fancy tactics, strict formations when you give your opponents no time to breathe."

"Controlled chaos is what I would best describe his philosophy as," Peter Drury echoed, "and Leverkusen have to show tonight they can hold onto their lead against the defending champions."

[5]

In the 5th minute, Diaby tried to find some space along the left flank, but just as he knocked the ball past Trent, looking to speed past, he was met with a firm, but fair shoulder barge, cutting out his momentum. Having neutralised the threat, he collected the ball and played a quick ball back to Adrian in the box.

The keeper kept it moving, sending the ball to the opposite flank to the feet of the retreating Robertson. Spinning away from Havertz's charge, the left back launched a weighted through ball that hugged the touch line like an obsessed lover. Mane latched onto it with ease, his acceleration taking him past the German right-back.

Lars spun on his toes, giving chase, but the Liverpool winger had reached the edge of the box in a matter of moments. Cutting across the chasing Defender, he nudged the ball inwards, clipping a dangerous curler to the top right corner before Tah could close him down. Lukas Hradecky reacted instinctively—launching himself to his left, arms fully outstretched.

His fingertips grazed the ball just enough to redirect it onto the outside of the post. (CLANG) The crowd gasped, then groaned, as the ball deflected out for a corner.

"Exceptional save! That was heading in, Clive!" Peter Drury's voice rang with disbelief. "Mane with a sumptuous effort, but Lukas Hradecky rises to the moment."

"Leverkusen are under siege," Clive added, the camera panning to Peter Bosz, already on the edge of his technical area, barking defensive instructions.

[7]

Alexander-Arnold's corner came in hot, homing in on Virgil's head, who rose above the masses in the box. The Dutchman met it cleanly, but his header thumped directly into Tapsoba's back, who knew little about it. The ball ricocheted straight to Firmino, who instinctively shot low. Lars Bender slid low, bringing a foot in front of the ball, deflecting it out of the box.

Diaby picked up the loose ball and immediately charged up the field, trying to dodge a cluster of red. With his low centre of gravity, he surged past one challenge, then another, as he broke through to the left flank. By then, he managed to gain some space as he crossed the halfway line, finally glancing up to look for options.

With a quick head check, Diaby spotted Volland making a central run, dragging Gomez along as they crossed the final third. Instead of sending it his way, he sent a quick pass backwards just as Trent had caught up. The defender turned to see where the ball went, only to see Palacios launch a lofted through ball over his head.

Diaby had immediately accelerated, kicking up another gear, and with Volland dragging the final line back, he remained on side. "Oh my days, he's through," Peter exclaimed as Diaby chested the ball down at the edge of the box.

Adrian, in between the sticks, seemed to be debating whether to close him down or hold his ground. Diaby wouldn't give him enough time to come up with an answer as he brought the ball under control within the box and sent a diagonal ball towards the area in front of the back post. Gomez, who had been tracking back with Volland, slid forward in a desperate attempt to intercept the ball but missed it by inches.

"Kai Havertz!" Tyldesley declared as the German midfielder ghosted into that area a second later, putting his foot through the leather of the ball. "And the lions have drawn blood at Anfield,"

The net rippled emphatically, followed by the sight of Kai Havertz sprinting toward the away corner flag since the away supporters were on the other end. His arms stretched wide, and he roared in triumph as his teammates flooded forward, a tide of black and red embracing him amidst stunned silence from the Kop stand.

"What a devastating counterattack from Bayer Leverkusen!" Peter Drury boomed, voice filled with admiration. "The young German maestro Havertz arrives at the perfect moment and delivers a dagger right into the heart of Anfield."

Clive Tyldesley leaned closer to his microphone, echoing the moment of disbelief. "Liverpool had Leverkusen pinned back, battering their defences—but football, Peter, it can turn in a heartbeat!"

[9' GOAL! - Kai Havertz | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–4 Leverkusen]

Chapter 542 - 542 Mo Salah

[Date: 11/03/2020, Anfield, Liverpool, Attendance: 55,000][UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–4 Leverkusen]

[11]

The Anfield crowd, shell-shocked by Havertz's clinical finish, began to stir back to life. The famous You'll Never Walk Alone echoed around the stadium, but it carried a desperate edge now—Liverpool needed three goals to progress.

Jürgen Klopp prowled the touchline, his cap pulled low, gesturing frantically at his players. The German knew his side's European dream hung by the thinnest of threads.

"Liverpool restart, and they simply must throw caution to the wind now," Drury observed as Henderson rolled the ball back to Van Dijk. "Three goals needed, and Peter Bosz's Leverkusen side is looking supremely organised."

[14]

Following the restart, the Reds pushed forward with renewed urgency, the ball shifting swiftly across the wet grass. Mané dropped deep, collecting possession from Robertson's throw-in. The Senegalese winger's first touch was sublime, cushioning the ball before spinning past Diaby in one fluid motion.

The crowd sensed something building as Mané drove forward, his pace carrying him into the space beside the box as Sinkgraven moved to block his path inward. He faked a cut backwards with a drop of the shoulder, and he broke through to the byline. Tapsoba tried to interfere by closing down the angle, but Mane simply switched the ball to his left foot, sending the latter sliding.

Before the defender could react, he sent a sharp pass arcing back towards the penalty spot. "Firmino arriving—!" Clive Tyldesley's voice rose in anticipation.

The Brazilian forward darted forward, sensing an opportunity, but Tah was already lunging across the soaked turf, his sliding tackle meeting the ball just a fraction of a second before Firmino's boot connected. The ball looped upwards, spinning high above the box, hanging momentarily like a raindrop in the floodlit sky.

Salah charged to the ball's landing spot from the other side of the box, eyes locked on the descending ball. He adjusted his body, his standing foot digging into the turf as he drew his right foot back. He unleashed a thunderous volley goalward as the ball rocketed off his boot, slicing through the rain as it bounced off the turf.

Time seemed suspended as Hradecky desperately shuffled to his right, eyes wide with fear and anticipation. The entire Kop Stand leaned forward collectively, their hearts frozen mid-beat. "MO SALAH!" roared Peter Drury, voice cracking with excitement.

Hardeckey slid across his line on his knees, arms outstretched, only to pull them back at the last moment. The ball hit the side of the net harmlessly, flying out for a goal kick, sending a ripple of disappointment up the Kop stand. Lukas Hradecky exhaled visibly, wiping the rain from his brow as he picked up the ball for a goal kick.

The Liverpool players retreated quickly, without much fuss, and put little pressure on, barely missing the chance. The Kop raised their voices again, urging their team forward, refusing to relent.

Hradecky's kick arced through the air, finding Palacios in the middle of the field, who immediately nodded it forward into Havertz's path. The young German calmly touched it down, spinning away from Henderson's press, before spreading the play wide to Demirbay, who found space on the right flank. Quickly surging into the final third, he engaged in a physical battle with Robertson as he fought to retain control of the ball.

The battle ended with a Leverkusen throw-in when van Dijk came sliding in just as Demirbay had knocked the ball forward, looking to pick up speed. That tackle was clean, with the Dutch defender hitting nothing but the ball. Bender jogged forward to take the throw-in, briefly wiping the slick ball against his jersey before quickly tossing it into Baumgartlinger, who calmly chested it down.

[22']

As the match continued, Leverkusen's defensive discipline remained intact as they looked to retain the lead. But cracks were beginning to show under the Reds' relentless pressure. Diaby found himself isolated on the left wing, Liverpool's high press forcing him into hurried clearances.

The home side easily retained possession of the ball with a calm header from Gomez. Robertson knocked it into the middle for the retreating Oxlade-Chamberlain. The tall English midfielder turned with agility that belied his physique, easily brushing Kai to the side. A short passing sequence between the midfield trio saw them rebuild control as they easily crossed the halfway line.

"You can see the pressure mounting on Leverkusen," Drury noted as Demirbay's pass sailed harmlessly out for a Liverpool throw-in. "They're holding their shape, but for how long?"

"Indeed, this Liverpool under Klopp is simply too good to keep down for too long." Clive Tyldesley calmly intoned only to break out in a shout the next second. "Henderson with a through ball finds Mo Salah, and he finishes it."

The Kop erupted into a delirious frenzy as Salah raced towards the corner flag, his arms wide as he tapped his ear, soaking in the rain-drenched euphoria. The Egyptian King had arrived when Liverpool needed him most, and the fans let him feel their love. Sitting on the guardrail, he celebrated with the fans as the rest of his teammates joined in the celebration.

"We wondered whether he'd show up today, and he did so in classic Mo Salah fashion," Drury exclaimed as the replay was shown on screen.

It seemed like a routine passing sequence in the middle of the pitch as the home side's midfielder kept their opponents honest. However, just as the Leverkusen Central 3 were content with letting them retain possession with zonal marking, Henderson did something unexpected.

Just as Leverkusen's midfielders sagged back into shape, expecting Liverpool to recycle possession harmlessly, Jordan Henderson spotted the sliver of a gap behind Bender's left shoulder. With a quick glance and barely a backlift, the Liverpool captain threaded a perfectly weighted through ball along the slick grass—a rapier thrust into the heart of the German backline. The pass zipped past Palacios, curling ever so slightly into the space between Tapsoba and Sinkgraven's.

"Look at that vision from Henderson!" Clive Tyldesley cried.

Salah, timing his run to perfection, burst from the outside, slipping past Sinkgraven, who had turned his head in response to the approaching ball. The confusion between the two defenders allowed him to

connect with the ball with a feather-soft touch. He barely needed a second touch as he opened his body and curled a low, venomous shot into the far corner beyond Hradecky's outstretched glove.

"The touch! The composure! The finish!" Peter Drury shouted, swept up in the storm of emotion. "It's Mo Salah, and the comeback is on!"

[GOAL – 23' Mo Salah | Liverpool 1–1 Bayer Leverkusen | Aggregate: 3–4]

The Anfield crowd erupted like thunder ripping through the mist. Red flares flared, scarves were tossed into the air, and the chant of Salah's name merged with thousands of voices singing in pure, unrelenting belief. Klopp turned and pumped his fists toward the crowd, yelling encouragement in a flurry of German and English.

[25']

Liverpool, energized by the goal, swarmed Leverkusen straight from the restart. Firmino dropped deeper into midfield to collect and link, creating space for the wingers to invert their runs. Mané cut inside from the left, playing a one-two with Wijnaldum before laying the ball off to Oxlade-Chamberlain, who let fly from distance.

The ball screamed off his boot as it took flight and dipped violently, arcing towards the goal. Hradecky was alert, though, and with the distance he had time to step across his goal and comfortably palm the incoming ball. Jumping into the air a second later, he caught the ball, whose momentum had been killed.

"Not troubled at all by the long-range attempt, Hradecky made that look easy," Peter Drury commented as the keeper sprang to the edge of the box, letting loose a cannon of a throw up the left flank aimed at Diaby.

Diaby had barely glanced over his shoulder before the ball was already on him—Hradecky's throw fizzing low and flat like a quarterback pass. He took it on the run, his first touch immaculate, cushioning it with the outside of his left boot and immediately bursting forward. His stride lengthened, eating up turf as he dashed down the left touchline, dancing between Alexander-Arnold and the retreating Wijnaldum.

Chapter 543 543 You'll Never Walk Alone

[Date: 11/03/2020, Anfield, Liverpool, Attendance: 55,000][UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 3–4 Leverkusen]

[26']

"Diaby... flying again!" Clive Tyldesley's voice spiked as the winger danced into Liverpool territory. He took a heavy final touch to pull the ball into space and then ghosted past Wijnaldum with a subtle shift of weight. Alexander-Arnold tried to match him stride for stride, but Diaby, like a bullet dipped in oil, was already past him after knocking the ball forward a couple of strides, leaving the right-back scrambling to recover.

From the sidelines, Peter Bosz shouted, "Warte! Warte!"—wait—hoping Diaby would hold it up. But the Frenchman had already spotted Havertz making a darting run through the centre. But the Winger couldn't hear him and did what he found best at the moment.

Reaching the byline with a lot of space to manoeuvre, he chopped the ball back with his trailing foot, sending Alexander-Arnold sliding past like a runaway train. The move drew gasps from the crowd, and in a blink, Diaby had reset his footing, his eyes scanning the box. Havertz's run had pulled van Dijk slightly toward the near post while Volland spun away to the back post with Gomez on his trail.

Without further consideration, he sent a well-placed cross towards the backpost. The ball whipped through the air, drawing a rainbow-like arc, missing the chaos at the front and middle of the box. Kevin Volland read it perfectly, adjusting his body without coming to a stop and rose into the air.

Striking the ball cleanly with his forehead, he drilled it downward into the empty goal. "VOLLAND," Clive Tyldesley burst out. Adrián tried to lunge their way symbolically, but it had little effect as the ball pierced the back of the net.

[GOAL – 27' Kevin Volland | Liverpool 1–2 Leverkusen | Aggregate: 3–5]

Anfield, which had been hopeful moments ago, now turned terribly silent, with the loudest voices coming from the 15,000 away fans who celebrated as if they had just hit the jackpot. "And the Germans strike again! Two away goals at Anfield and Liverpool are in deep, deep trouble now!" Peter Drury exclaimed as the Leverkusen players mobbed Volland near the away corner flag.

Kai Havertz arrived second, lifting his teammate in a bear hug, shouting over the roar of the away supporters behind the goal. Tyldesley added grimly for Liverpool fans, "That away goal means Liverpool now needs three more... just to force extra time."

[29']

The restart was sluggish, almost funeral-like in its pace. Liverpool's players looked shell-shocked, their heads dropped as the magnitude of the task hit them. The crowd, so vocal just minutes before, had been reduced to anxious murmurs and the occasional shout of encouragement that sounded more desperate than confident.

Klopp was animated on the touchline, his arms windmilling as he tried to galvanise his team to remain composed. "Ruhe! Calm!" he shouted, urging them to stick to their game plan. But you could see the doubt creeping into his players' movements; they now seemed out of sync, almost as if they were on different pages.

Some wanted to continue attacking, while others, wary of the opponent's counter, wanted to settle the momentum first. "You can see the psychological damage that second goal has done," Drury observed as Henderson's pass rolled harmlessly out of play. Liverpool looks like a team that's been punched in the gut. They need inspiration from somewhere."

[32]

The visitors from mainland Europe weren't going to waste this chance and immediately started moving up their formation. Their pressing game became tighter, not giving their opponents the time to think. This is where the Leverkusen double pivot came into play, as Baumgartlinger and Palacios began to suffocate Liverpool's midfield.

Their defensive efficiency shone as they switched between zonal and man marking, allowing them to break the Reds' momentum before it could gather steam easily. On one occasion in the 35th minute, Henderson skipped past Havertz after a messy duel that involved hands and shirt-tugging from both sides. He barely got free when the towering Austrian midfielder swept the ball away with a clinical slide tackle.

Moments later, after the Reds managed to break a Diaby counter down the left flank, a chipped clearance from Van Dijk saw Palacios Deftly dodging Wijnaldum's jump, causing the latter to misjudge the leap. Calmly chesting the ball down, he redistributed it outward to Demirbay without a fuss.

[36]

Demirbay wasted no time. He glanced once, saw Alexander-Arnold out of position high up the pitch to mark Diaby, and pinged a diagonal switch to the left. Sinkgraven took flight, overlapping with the French winger racing towards the ball's landing point. He needed two touches to bring it under control, but he did so swiftly, arriving at the side of the box.

He immediately punched a low pass into Havertz's run at the top of the box. Kai's first touch was sublime, keeping it out of Henderson's reach, leaving the latter flat-footed. A quick Zidane roulette allowed him to swivel past Joe Gomez. He immediately took aim and let loose a grounded shot that skimmed across the slick surface like a skipping stone, curling low toward the far post.

Adrián, already shuffling his weight to the right, dove with cat-like agility, palming the ball just wide of the post, out for a corner. The away fans roared in appreciation as Kai Havertz clapped in acknowledgement of the service Sinkgraven had provided, nearly doubling his tally.

"You can't give Kai even a moment of space to operate; he is simply too dangerous once he gets going." Peter Drury said as the replay was shown on this screen. "He only needed three movements and locked in on goal."

"Indeed, he has been a joy to watch over the years." Clive Tyldesley commented, "The evolution of his playing style and its versatility is any coach's joy."

[40]

Moments later, the wind picked up slightly as Sinkgraven raised one hand to signal a cross. His delivery skipped along the ground, curving toward the edge of the six-yard box. Demirbay, who had been at the edge of the D, came racing in, sliding feet first, doing his best to redirect the incoming ball goalward.

Adrian slid along his knees. He managed to do just enough to smother the incoming ball in between his legs as his gloves strangled it. The Spanish keeper clutched the ball to his chest, breathing heavily as he looked up at the swirling grey clouds above Anfield.

"Another vital save from Adrian," Drury noted, his voice carrying the weight of Liverpool's predicament. "He's been the busier of the two keepers, but he's kept his side in this tie, just about."

The crowd tried to rally behind their team, a few scattered voices resounding from around the stadium. "When you walk through a storm

Hold your head up high," It started from just a few fans who, despite the bleak situation, tried to do everything in their power to motivate their team.

"And don't be afraid of the dark, at the end of the storm..." Like an infection, it spread from one fan to another, their voices quickly growing louder. "Walk on, walk on, With hope in your heart"

By the time Adrian placed the ball down to escape the time-wasting rule in order to restart from the back, the sound in the arena had become deafening. A sports photographer from a reputable outlet managed to snap a picture of the moment. The keeper dressed in his Green goalie kit with the ball at his feet as a wall of red with scraves raised up high sang their team's war cry.

"And you'll never walk alone, You'll never walk alone" resounded throughout the stadium as, for a moment, the visiting dance team was silent as they felt the oppressive atmosphere. Not just them, but the players on the field also felt this atmosphere pressuring the visiting side and lifting the spirit of the home side.

"Well, Peter, this is what I would call one of the seven wonders of modern football, you can't buy this kind of passion," Clive commented as, for a second, no one seemed to want to break this moment with even the light drizzle coming to a sudden stop.

Chapter 544 - 544 RESPONSE OF CHAMPIONS!

[42']

The spell was broken when Adrián finally rolled the ball out to van Dijk, but the energy within the home side had shifted as that moment lingered like electricity in the air. The Dutch defender, normally so composed, seemed to stand a little taller, his shoulders squaring as he felt the weight of thousands of voices behind him.

"You can see the effect that's had on both sets of players," Drury observed as Liverpool began to string passes together, building up play from the back. "The home side looks rejuvenated, while Leverkusen... well, they have just felt the full force of what makes Anfield so special."

Wijnaldum collected the ball in the centre circle, his touch crisp with a sense of urgency as he turned, looking to create something. Faking a pass inwards to Henderson, he sent Havertz lunging the wrong way before proceeding to feed Mane with a weighted ball up the left flank. The Senegalese winger took it on the turn, his movements momentarily bamboozling Bender, who had expected him to charge forward.

Instead, he spun to the sidelines, performing a deft Cruyff turn that had Bender struggling to stay upright. "Oh, he's through," Peter Drury exclaimed as Mané charged into the box at an angle, inviting Tah to challenge him.

The German centre-back committed himself, sliding in with his studs showing as he desperately tried to prevent Mané from getting his shot away. But the Senegalese had already seen him coming. With a delicate touch, he lifted the ball over the incoming challenge, the sphere floating tantalizingly in the air as both players collided in a tangle of limbs.

"Penalty!" The crowd roared as one, 55,000 voices united in their demand for justice. Referee Björn Kuipers hesitated for a moment, his hand moving toward his whistle, but then he waved play on. The protests were immediate and deafening.

The German centre-back had no choice but to commit, sliding across the penalty area with his studs showing. Mané, reading the challenge perfectly, dragged the ball back with the sole of his boot, sending Tah skidding past him like a freight train on ice. The crowd held its breath as the Senegalese winger steadied himself, now with only Hrádecký to beat.

"Mané! He's done Tah completely rotten!" Tyldesley's voice cracked with anticipation.

Time seemed to slow as Mané drew back his right foot as Lukas Hardecky rushed out of his line. It was too late, though, as the winger's foot had wrapped around the ball and unleashed a curling shot toward the far corner.

[43']

The ball arced just past Hrádecký's outstretched glove, whispering past the inside of the far post, and kissed the net.

[GOAL – 43' Sadio Mané | Liverpool 2–2 Leverkusen (Aggregate: 4–5)]

Anfield exploded like a tsunami as Red smoke flared behind the home team's goal. Scarves were thrown in the air as they sang to the rhythm of a drum beat. "SADIO MANÉ WITH A RESPONSE OF CHAMPIONS!" Peter Drury bellowed, barely heard over the thunder of Anfield. "And just like that, they are back in this match."

Clive Tyldesley added, breathless, "It had to be something special to beat Hrádecký tonight—and that was exactly that." Mané slid to his knees in front of the away corner; arms stretched wide as teammates piled on.

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That proved to be the last significant action of the first half as Leverkusen focused on possession and defence following the restart. Despite the home side wanting to pile on the momentum, the Germans were a well-oiled machine. So when they put their minds to running out the clock, they did just that, forcing referee Danny Makkelie to blow his whistle after two added minutes.

In the Leverkusen dressing room, the atmosphere that should have been joyous was now filled with tension. The feeling of having given away the lead weighed on everyone after they had already felt like they had set foot in the quarterfinals. So, to have their lead reduced so abruptly in the dying minutes of the first half was a major blow to them.

The door banged shut behind the last player, and for a heartbeat, nobody spoke. Rainwater dripped off jerseys, ticking against the tile like a clock they suddenly heard too clearly. Some of the trainers handed out warm towels to the players and provided them with paper cups of electrolyte water.

Rakim, along with the rest of the bench players, hit the field to get in a small training session. They did so to give the players who had been playing breathing room to decompress and focus on the coach's instructions. However, they all really wanted to get a feel for the field and use the chance to get warm just in case they were called upon for action.

Peter Bosz strode to the centre of the room, his leather trainers squeaking on the tiled floor. He looked around the room, making eye contact with a few of the players as he took a deep, calming breath. "Sit. Breathe." Benches creaked as they took their designated spots.

Bosz raised a hand to gather their attention. "We knew Anfield would give them fifteen crazy minutes. We've had it. It's over." He tapped his temple. "Now we play our game again."

He pointed at the whiteboard, where the 4-2-3-1 magnets were displayed. He moved the midfield trio closer to the double pivot as he circled Robertson and Alexander-Arnold. "We will hold our ground for the first 10 minutes, and when they get desperate, they will take greater risks. That's when I want you, Demirbay and Diaby to be ready to pounce on the counter."

He jabbed a finger at the attacking quartet. "When it breaks, finish. No pretty passes— there are no extra points for style, just finish. One goal and their mountain doubles."

He continued to give them instructions on which areas of the field he wanted them to target for the next 5 minutes. Making sure they were all on the same page, he didn't put too much pressure on them and let them relax for the last few minutes. Moments later, a knock from one of the officials signalled them

to get ready for the start, and they did just that with a few players getting the last wiggles and niggles treated by the physio.

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[UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–2 Leverkusen (Aggregate: 4–5) | 20:57]

"And we're back here at Anfield for what is hopefully another wonderful half of Champions League football." Peter Drury's voice resonated through the live broadcast as an aerial shot of the field was shown, with players from both sides jogging onto the field. "We have seen some exciting glimpses from both sides already, and most importantly, a palette of goals. Clive, what can we expect from both teams in the second half?"

"Well, Peter, Liverpool simply have to go for it," Tyldesley replied, his voice carrying the weight of the situation. "They need a goal to force extra time, two to win it outright. But Leverkusen... they'll be thinking one goal kills this tie dead in the water. It's a fascinating tactical battle but also a battle of wills ahead."

"Thank you for the analysis, Clive, and here comes the second half!" Peter Drury announced as the players took their positions. "Liverpool kick us off, and they know time is running out on their European dream."

The rain had stopped, but the pitch remained slick under the floodlights. Steam rose from the turf like morning mist, creating an almost ethereal atmosphere as Danny Makkelie performed the mandatory checks and promptly blew his whistle, signalling the restart at 21:00.

Chapter 545 - 545 Super-Sub

[UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–2 Leverkusen (Aggregate: 4–5)| 21:00]

[46]

Drury: "Liverpool straight onto the front foot—Henderson exchanges passes with Oxlade-Chamberlain, and the tempo is already a notch higher than anything we saw before the break."

Henderson slides it wide to Alexander-Arnold, whose first-time cross arced toward the penalty spot. Firmino mistimed his run but still tried to recover by shaping for an improvised bicycle kick, but Tapsoba read the cross perfectly, rising early and powering a clearing header into the night air.

Tyldesley: "Excellent from Tapsoba again. The partnership of the 20-year-old Burkinabè and Jonathan Tah has bent at times, Peter, but it still hasn't broken."

The pressure continued to mount as the German side absorbed the pressure from the home side. Almost like a constricting boa, their more compact midfield positioning made it impossible for the opposing midfield trio to get to work. This forced the Reds to build up play from the back, utilising their wingers and full-backs more.

[51]

Drury: "Liverpool has camped inside the Leverkusen half these last five minutes, but still, the German wall holds firm."

Henderson swept a diagonal pass back to Robertson on the left. The full-back took it on the chest, and his first touch was immaculate as he brought the ball under control. Without hesitation, he drove forward, his pace carrying him towards Bender as Mane cut inwards. Robertson tried to use the winger's run as a diversion by sneaking past on the outside, but Bender remained unfazed.

He lunged forward, his boot cleanly connecting with the ball, stopping it dead in its tracks and sending Robertson tripping to the ground. "That's textbook from Lars Bender—timed to the millisecond," Tyldesley commented as the ball trickled up the line.

Bender took a second to jump up from the ground and pounced on the loose ball before it could go out of bounds. Without rushing, he calmly dribbled up the line as his head turned rapidly, scanning for passing options. Before Wijnaldum could get close, he picked out the retreating Volland at the centre line.

The German footballer didn't bother taking a touch to control the ball under Van Dijk's pressure and laid it off to the approaching Havertz. The German midfielder wanted to look forward to creating something but ended up being forced to turn away from a Henderson slide tackle. Keeping the ball glued to his feet, he played a quick one-two with Baumgartlinger to escape from a Liverpool encirclement.

Things didn't get easier, though, as he quickly realised that any passing option forward was firmly locked down. The home side's defensive pressure seemed to intensify, closing in much faster than in the first half. Reacting quickly, he pirouetted away from Oxlade-Chamberlain's lunge and recycled possession back to Palacios.

Despite receiving a bout of applause from his team's fans for his calmness under pressure, there wasn't a hint of a smile on his face. He could feel how dangerous their opponents' defence had gotten, and it was only a matter of time before they succeeded. The Argentine pivot tried to calm things down but soon found himself in a physical duel with Henderson.

Turning away from the Liverpool defender, the figure of Firmino suddenly appeared from his blindside after having dropped back. He stealthily poked the ball free before the defensive midfielder could react. He got his response a moment later, though, as he had barely travelled a couple of steps when Palacios came charging back with a hard tackle.

The crunch of Palacios's tackle echoed to the Main Stand as the Brazilian was sent crashing to the ground. Referee Danny Makkelie's whistle pierced the drizzle, and he jogged straight over, right arm aloft. "Free-kick no buts or if about it. Palacios entered the referee's books and now walks a tightrope."

[57]

The wall, assembled twenty-eight metres from the goal, stood tall as Alexander-Arnold and Fabinho stood behind the ball just 10 yards in front of them. They both discussed what to do, ignoring the stares they received from the four players on the wall. They seemed to come to an understanding moments later and got into position, each taking their run-up. Chapter provided via

"Two specialists over the ball here. Alexander-Arnold with his wicked delivery, Fabinho with that thunderous left foot. Hrádecký is adjusting his wall, trying to cover all angles." Peter commented as the finish keeper can be seen gesturing frantically to his defenders, fine-tuning their positioning.

Baumgartlinger and Palacios anchored the wall while Demirbay and Volland covered the sides. Diaby solely stood near the halfway line, ready to pounce on the counter. Hrádecký bounced on his toes, eyes darting between the two Liverpool players and the chaotic players battling for position at the side.

"You can feel the nervousness in their ranks," Tyldesley commented as the Referee finally blew his whistle.

Alexander-Arnold began his run first, his approach drawing the wall's attention. But at the last second, he stepped two steps in front of the ball, and Fabinho came a second later, unleashing a venomous strike with his left foot. The ball flew like a cannonball, dipping and swerving as it approached the wall.

"FABINHO!" Drury's voice exploded as the ball cleared the wall by inches.

Hrádecký, initially wrong-footed by the deception, scrambled across his goal line. The ball was heading for the top corner, but the keeper's reflexes were superhuman despite the wet surface. He somehow managed to generate enough momentum to take off and throw himself through the air, fingertips just grazing the ball just enough to deflect it over the crossbar.

"WHAT A SAVE!" Tyldesley's voice cracked with disbelief. "Hrádecký has somehow kept that out! That was destined for the top corner!"

The Finnish goalkeeper lay sprawled on the turf, rainwater glistening on his kit as he slowly picked himself up. His teammates rushed over, patting him on the back, knowing the keeper had just saved them again. The away fans erupted in appreciation, their voices cutting through the stunned silence that had momentarily gripped the home crowd.

[60]

From the resulting corner, pandemonium erupted in the Leverkusen box. Alexander-Arnold's delivery was whipped in with pace and precision, finding the towering figure of van Dijk at the back post. The

Dutch defender rose like a salmon, battling with Tah in the air. Both their heads connected with the ball almost simultaneously, sending it flying into the air.

"Van Dijk! Blocked by Tah!" Drury shouted as the ball came back down, only to be punched clear by Hardeckey a moment later.

The ball spilt out to the edge of the box where Mane pounced, darting forward with a burst of pace. He looked up, searching for an opening as Volland and Bender closed in. Mane cut inside, shifting the ball onto his right foot, curling a shot that glanced off the boot of Bender and spun agonizingly wide of the far post.

"That was a moment of magic just denied by the smallest of margins. Liverpool are pushing every sinew now—there's a real sense of urgency." Tyldesley commented as the players once again regrouped for a corner.

[67]

Leverkusen regrouped quickly, following the second corner, choosing to play out of the back calmly. Peter Bosz, on the sidelines, started prompting his bench into movement as he watched the game develop. He could see how the home side has been neutralising Kai and the defensive pivot with the intensity of their pressing.

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem since Diaby and Demirbay could get to work on the flanks, absorbing some of the pressure. However, they were simply not getting the chance to do that, and when they did, their markers neutralised them almost immediately. It wasn't Bosz who made the first substitution, but Klopp who brought on Wijnaldum, signalling for the Belgian midfielder to warm up along the sideline.

The home crowd immediately sensed a shift coming; Origi's reputation as a super-sub who could change games on a whim was well-known. Klopp made his move in the 69th minute as he signalled for the striker to come over. James Milner was also called over, and he began giving the two instructions on what he wanted them to do.

Moments later, after a failed long-range attempt by Demirbay after failing to connect with any nearby teammates, the change was permitted. The fourth official held up the board: 14 Henderson OFF, 7 Milner ON; 9 Firmino OFF, 27 Origi ON. The captain, Henderson, trudged off, frustration etched on his face, while Firmino gave a brief nod to his teammates before settling on the bench.

"Klopp is going all in now, Clive. Milner's work-rate and Origi's knack for important goals in Europe could be just what Liverpool need." Drury commented as Milner immediately slotted into midfield alongside Wijnaldum and Fabinho, adding grit and steel to the midfield line. Liverpool shifted their shape subtly, with Mané and Salah tucking in tighter to further squeeze their opponents.

[73]

The tempo surged as Liverpool launched into a series of probing attacks. Alexander-Arnold found space on the right, whipping in low crosses. Sadly, Tah remained alert, getting ahead of Origi's path to boot the ball up the field.

Milner's tireless runs made life hard for the tired double pivot of the Leverkusen squad. He showed no signs of fear, jumping into one tackle after another, to the point he spent more time on the ground rather than playing football. Klopp, on the sidelines, could be seen animatedly cheering at every tackle he won.

Chapter 546 - 546 My Goodness Gracious

[UEFA Champions League, Round of 16 – 2nd leg | Aggregate: Liverpool 2–2 Leverkusen (Aggregate: 4–5)]

[75]

Salah snaked past Palacios and Sinkgraven, cutting in from the right flank, and he came to a sudden stop, forcing Tah to halt his charge. Using the moment of hesitation, he nudged the ball forward and rifled a curving shot towards the bottom left corner. Like a seal, the ball glided along the slick surface, curving past Tah's outstretched foot.

"Lukas Hardecky with a heart stopper!" Peter Drury's voice crackled from the commentary booth as the finish keeper slid low, firmly wading onto the ball after palming it to stop. "That's the seventh shot in the past 5 minutes. If the German side doesn't respond soon, I wouldn't be surprised if that net bulges."

The Kopp stand on the other end of the pitch shared the commentators' thoughts as they jumped up and down in anticipation. "Looks like Peter Bosz shares your thoughts as he finally signals a change, and from the looks of it, he's making 3 at once."

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The fourth official's board lit up:

↺ #19 Diaby ← □ #22 Rakim Rex

↻ #10 Demirbay ← □ #11 Nadiem Amiri

↻ #31 Volland ← □ #9 Leon Bailey

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Peter Drury spoke with rising curiosity. "Triple substitution from Bosz—he's throwing in his young guns. Rakim Rex, the 16-year-old wonderkid who turned the first leg upside down, is on for Diaby. Amiri brings fresh legs and vision, while Bailey's pace will test Liverpool's tiring backline."

Clive Tyldesley added, "he's been off due to the injury he caught in their first leg clash, so to see him make his return in this game is rather surprising. Especially since the culprit for his injury, Wijnaldum is still on the field."

"We can only guess what the coaches are thinking, but I'm looking forward to how he will handle facing him on the pitch," Drury commented with a light smile as Rakim dabbed up Diaby, pulling the latter into a short hug.

They exchanged a couple of words before Rakim jogged onto the field in his black and pink Ace11s. Clapping at his team's fans, who cheered upon his entry, he jogged across the field, taking his position. Bouncing lightly, as the rest of the substitutions were, he tested the range of motion of his right foot.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, feeling the familiar air of a football stadium. One might argue he was crazy, but he knew that the feeling he got every time he stepped onto a football pitch was different. It sent electricity coursing through his body, sending adrenaline pumping through his veins.

"We meet again; I wasn't sure you'd make it for this game," Trent's voice sounded from beside him the moment he opened his side, almost scaring the Ba-Jesus out of him. "We thought for sure we wouldn't have to deal with you this game."

"Well, you know what they say, when God has a plan, seas part and mountains move." He told the Englishman with a light smile. "Plus, I had to get my get back for that cheap shot somehow."

(Fweet) Almost immediately, the referee blew the whistle, signalling the restart of the match. Rakim didn't hesitate in jogging back from the halfway line at 3/4 pace to present an option. Trent didn't dare move that far forward and get drawn out of position, but he didn't have to, as Wijnaldum moved to cover him almost immediately.

He seemed to want to assert his dominance on the younger wunderkind early as he spotted Hardeckey send a ground pass his way following a pass back from Tah. Wijnaldum was on him like a shadow, stretching a hand out on his back as Rakim stepped forward to receive the incoming ball. Remembering a trick he had picked up from an academy player in Scotland that reminded him to use the ball's momentum to flick it up and loop it backwards.

However, Wijnaldum stuck too close to him for him to get away, and since his body's engine wasn't as hot as his, he had a different idea. Instead, he received it with his right foot, his touch a little shaky as it rolled, not as instinctive as it usually was. Before Wijnaldum could react, though, he pushed off the ground, kicking the ball up with his momentum, just as his marker's foot, seeing from the side, tried to hit the ball and his leg in the process.

Now, in the air, his left foot that had just flicked the ball up caught it in the air, flicking it up and back, performing a smooth sombrero. He landed a second later and immediately turned, spinning past lunging Wijnaldum. "Oh, my goodness gracious—he's only just stepped onto the pitch!" Peter Drury exclaimed as Rakim smoothly brought the ball down, with Trent, Milner, and Salah moving around him.

He didn't charge forward, though, as he deftly flicked the ball that he had just brought back under control back through Wijnaldum's open legs. The midfielder, who had just turned ready to pounce once again, could do nothing but accept fate. Even his attempt to grab onto Rakim was met with a Mr Han-inspired arm flick as he side-stepped the tumbling defender, letting him become intimate with the ground.

He latched onto the loose ball and stopped for a moment, gazing at the downed midfielder with a look of disdain. The moment seemed to last for years as he gazed up at the sixteen-year-old whose career he had almost ended a couple of weeks back. In reality, it was no more than two seconds before Rakim kissed his teeth in disinterest before calmly passing the ball back to Sinkgraven.

"That right there was cold, cold-blooded, and that stare, Clive, I never want to be on the receiving end of that," Drury commented with excitement as the fans in the stands, whether home or away, lost their shit.

They had just witnessed a teenager effortlessly humiliate a fully grown man poetically. "We wondered whether he'd take the high road and keep things professional or hold a grudge. Well, we got our answer right there, Rakim Rex, as my nephew would say, has that Dog in him." Clive Tyldesley commented with excitement at what he had just witnessed.

While the two commentators and viewers lost their grip on reality, the match continued down below, with the German side retaining possession. Leverkusen began to string passes together around their back line, sending the ball up the flank for their wingers whenever the home side rushed in too deep. This kept them honest, given the pace both flanks and forward now possessed, which had threatened quite a few times.

In the 78th minute, after they had managed to corner Bender at the side of his box, the fullback lifted the ball up the flank. Leon Bailey, who had drifted wide, swapped positions with Amiri, chased after the descending ball. The Jamaican battled it out with Robertson, trying to win the aerial duel, and he managed to use his body to manoeuvre the defender out of the way.

Bailey's shoulder nudged just enough into Robertson's ribs to throw the Scot off balance without drawing a foul. The ball bounced twice before Bailey tapped it forward and darted down the line, his studs carving streaks into the slick grass. "Bailey breaking through with brute... and he's away", Peter Drury exclaimed as the Jamaican chased after the ball.

He zipped past the halfway line, but rather than charging toward the box, he lifted his chin and curled a short pass into the middle channel. Kai, who had managed to slip his marker, latched onto the ball a second later, doing his best to hold off Milner. He felt Milner clawing at his back, but the German playmaker used his frame well—backing into the veteran and cushioning the ball with his right foot.

With one touch, he rolled it sideways into space using his arm to push the latter away before pivoting into a reverse angle. He glanced once over his shoulder and spotted Rakim darting into the left inside channel behind Trent, who had stepped up a beat too late. Your support on M|V|L8EMPYR keeps this series going.

He whipped a curling through ball forward with the inside of his right foot into Rakim's path. The winger, who had been in full sprint, looking to pick up the ball at the edge of the box, suddenly jumped into the air, vaulting over a sliding figure.

Chapter 547 Adrian Again

"Oh, it's a late slide from Alexander-Arnold—but Rakim's just managed to leap over it at the last moment," Peter Drury commented as the young winger landed in a stagger, using his hand to keep himself upright. "He may have hit the ball, but Rakim looks less than pleased by the challenge."

True to his words, he could be seen with his arms raised in a questioning manner at the referee. "Danny Makkellie doesn't seem to think that challenge warrants a free kick and merely motions for them to take the throw-in. However, you can understand the players' frustration after having suffered an injury against this very team in the first leg." Clive Tyldesley commented as the young star shook his head in disbelief before going to pick up the ball for the throw-in.

Rakim took a deep breath, rolling his neck once before wiping the slick ball against his shirt. The jeers from the Anfield crowd rolled over him in waves, showing their displeasure at what they perceived as him trying to get one of their players booked. He didn't care, though, as he used one of his hands to gesture at Leon and Kai, only to hear someone yell, "What the BLEEP are you doing? Drop the ball?"

Looking over to where the voice was coming from, Peter Bosz's annoyed glare met him. Throwing a sheepish thumbs-up to the coach, he rolled the ball to Sinkgraven, who awkwardly jogged up to take the throw-in. That was just a small episode in the dying minutes of the match, which suddenly intensified in momentum.

Unlike before, where the Germans were content with defending their lead, they now actively countered. Sinkgraven's throw found its way to Havertz, who cushioned it with his chest before spinning away from Henderson's pressing. The midfielder's touch was sublime, setting himself up perfectly for a through ball into the box.

"Brilliant play from Havertz there. Can Leon reach it, though?" Drury observed, his voice rising as the spectators rose to their feet. "Virgil van Dijk!"

The defender managed to slide forward, his boot connecting with the ball, doing just enough to deflect the ball towards Adrian. The keeper wasted no time booting the ball out of his penalty area.

The clearance sailed high into the night air, arcing over the halfway line where James Milner rose to meet it at the halfway line. With a solid tilt of the head, he nudged it forward to the stationary Origi who was holding off Tah. Instead of stopping the ball on the bounce, he flicked it behind into the area behind Bender.

[85]

Mane, anticipating the pass, managed to beat Bender to the punch, but the fullback quickly caught up, doing his best to hold him off. He drove toward the edge of the box, his strides quick and deceptive, but Bender refused to back off. Shoulder to shoulder, they went—one trying to cut inside, the other denying every sliver of space.

As Mane attempted to feint left, Bender lunged with a well-timed hook of the leg. He got a clean boot to the ball, the tackle's momentum sending both players tumbling over the slick grass. "Lars Bender, with a captain's challenge!" Tyldesley said. "It had to be perfect—and it was."

A quick glance from the referee confirmed no foul, and the crowd's groans turned into groans of frustration. Before either side could reorganise, Tapsoba swooped in, picking up the loose ball. Looking up the flank, he spotted Amiri, who had just crossed the halfway line with his marker in tow.

Without much thought, he sent a weighted through ball along the line that curved back into the field as Amiri and Robertson chased after it. Amiri reached it first, just before the ball could roll across his body, and having to slow down to control the ball gave Robertson just enough time to catch up with him. Not

minding the defender who tried to get in front of him, he chopped it back inside with his right foot, wrong-footing Robertson and darting away down the wing.

The German midfielder didn't have Bailey's raw pace, but his tight control was one of the best in the team. His effectiveness was evident, as he controlled the ball with ease despite the wet surface. Breaking past Robertson, he entered in full stride as Gomez chased after him from his left.

He kept his composure under the pressure from Gomez, his head turned left and right to scan for options. Spotting Palacios, who had wandered up the field, he sent a backheel pass and angled his run back towards the corner flag.

Palacios adjusted with a deft first touch, checking his shoulder as Wijnaldum came sliding in. Calmly, he nudged the ball forward and sent a looping diagonal pass toward the opposing side of the box, where Rakim had ghosted in front of Trent. He feinted a shot as the ball descended, forcing Trent to move, but he merely tapped it down.

Before the Liverpool right-back could regroup, Rakim sent a rabona pass towards the corner flag. Sinkgraven surged past them a second later, whipping a first-time cross into the box. The ball curled wickedly through the rain-slick air, skimming just over the back-tracking Milner's head at the near post. It bent into the six-yard box, where Leon Bailey and Van Dijk flung themselves at it.

"Leon Bailey arriving!" Peter Drury exclaimed as his diving header caught the ball flush, sending it bulleting toward the bottom-left corner. Adrian reacted late, but Lady Luck was on his side as it clipped the inside of the post!

"It's off the woodwork! It's chaos in there!" Tyldesley exclaimed as the ball ricocheted out into a scramble of legs. Many a foot poked at sending it bouncing until it eventually trickled out to Amiri on the right edge of the box.

He faked a shot and moved out of the way of Robertson's slide tackle attempt. Managing to take aim despite the mass of bodies rushing out, he swung his weaker left foot, going more for precision rather than power. The shot bent low through the crowd—a skimming drive that kissed the greasy grass and looked destined for the far corner.

"Amiri with a curler—" Drury exclaimed as Adrian, despite seeing the ball late, launched himself low and right, fingertips brushing the ball just enough to alter its course. It clipped the base of the post again and cannoned off out for a corner.

[90]

The corner flag flapped wildly in the wind as Rakim jogged over, wiping his forearm across his brow. The Anfield crowd was at full volume now—whistles, boos, and the hum of anxiety coiled together. Time was running out, and the away side made no effort to speed up their play.

The fourth official's board lifted, showcasing three added minutes, much to the displeasure of both teams for entirely different reasons. The home side wanted more minutes, and for the away side, three minutes were three too many. "Three minutes. Three long, agonising minutes left for Liverpool... and three short, golden ones for Leverkusen to hold."

Rakim placed the ball precisely, making sure to wipe away stray strands of grass before finally stepping back to angle for the setpiece. He wasted another good ten seconds before whipping in a dangerous cross aimed at the back post into the box. The cross took a wicked arc, angling just beyond the reach of Adrian and into the mass of bodies.

Tapsoba climbed highest, beating Van Dijk to the ball with a crunching leap, but only managed to graze it with the back of his head. The flick sent the ball pinballing dangerously across the six-yard box. Bailey lunged in, trying to toe-poke it home, but a lunge from Gomez deflected outwards.

It awkwardly bounced Palacios' way, and the midfielder tried to get a foot on it, but the angle was too tight, and he only ended up getting a shin to it. His makeshift shot ricocheted off Milner's thigh before trickling out to Havertz at the edge of the box. As the ball rolled toward him, he shaped his body, drawing his leg back, looking to take the shot the first time.

With defenders rushing out, he had milliseconds to decide where he wanted to place it. Picking out an angle, he didn't hesitate to blast it forward with all his strength. The shot blazed low and hard, threading through a forest of legs—only for Adrian to dive brilliantly to his left, parrying it with an open palm!

"Adrian again! The Spaniard refuses to go quietly!"

Chapter 548 Cancelled

"Adrian again! The Spaniard refuses to go quietly!" Drury exclaimed as Trent pounced on the rebound, bodying Rakim out of the way, and launched the ball out of the box. It flew up the tight flank quickly, exciting the field for a throw-in.

[92]

Sinkgraven jogged over to take the throw-in, taking his time while the Liverpool fans were urging him to hurry up. He didn't care, though, as he took his time, milking every precious second as the referee glanced at his watch. His throw was aimed toward Rakim, who controlled it under pressure from Trent, immediately looking to shield the ball. He held it up well, using his body to keep the defenders at bay as he spun toward the byline.

Moving the ball between his legs, he kept his balance despite the slippery surface and flicked it through Trent's legs with a cheeky nutmeg. The Anfield crowd roared in frustration as he darted past, the right-back reaching the ball before charging Van Dijk.

Not daring to take the beats of a man's head on, he swiped his foot towards the ball, causing the latter to jump back in reaction. He held the defender off with a couple of step-overs only to jump out of the way a second later as Wijnaldum came sliding in trying to win the ball. He barely cleared Wijnaldum's challenge, his studs scraping across the wet turf as he stumbled but stayed on his feet.

"How has he stayed up?!" Tyldesley shouted, half in disbelief, half in admiration. "Rakim Rex is playing as if his ankle was never injured—just look at the footwork!"

Rakim's run continued, pushing down the flank without a hint of looking to break inwards. Van Dijk tried to apply pressure on him, but he didn't bother fighting with him and merely kept him at bay. He eventually lost possession of the ball, but he had wasted enough time.

[93]

Liverpool immediately launched what would likely be their final attack. Van Dijk launched a weighted pass inwards, finding Milner just outside the centre circle. With a quick one-two touch to settle it, Milner turned and chipped a diagonal pass out wide toward Mohamed Salah, who had held his position near the right touchline.

Salah brought it down expertly on the half-turn, darting inside Sinkgraven with a snap of pace. Tapsoba stepped up, forcing the Egyptian to release the ball early. He fizzed a low pass into Oxlade-Chamberlain, who had drifted centrally just beyond the D.

Oxlade-Chamberlain flicked it on instinctively to Origi, stationed just outside the penalty arc. With his back to goal, the Belgian forward spun on a dime and unleashed a left-footed drive. A blue boot deflected it a second later, though, as Tah got in its way, flung himself in front of the shot, the ball thudding off his boot.

Tapsoba pounced on the loose ball, but Wijnaldum barged in with a crunching challenge, recovering the ball. He spotted Salah charging into the box from the opposite side and clipped a desperate through ball into the box. The pass was heavy as both the striker and keeper closed in on it.

"That might be it...!" Clive exclaimed as Hardecky came sliding out on his knees, arms spread out wide, ready to pounce.

His timing was flawless as, despite Salah reaching the ball first, the finish keeper smothered the ball at his feet a second later before the forward could do anything. The Egyptian's momentum carried him forward, colliding with the keeper, but Hradecky held on, his gloved hands cradling the ball like treasure.

(FWEEET! FWEEET!! FWEEEEET!!!) The shrill final whistle pierced the din of Anfield a moment later. And that is it! The final act in a dramatic night of football—Leverkusen hold on! Against all odds, in the cathedral of chaos that is Anfield, they have done it!" Peter Drury said as the moment settled in on the German side.

Players quickly rushed the field to celebrate their victory, sharing their joy with their teammates. "Liverpool threw everything at them, but Bosz's men stood tall. What a performance that at times seemed shaky." Clive also commented that down below, the celebrations were in full swing, they had just beaten last year's champions, and that was all the confidence they needed.

Players dropped to their knees across the pitch—some in exhaustion, others in devastation. Salah leaned back, arms on his hips, staring at the night sky in frustration and disappointment. "Full-time here at Anfield. Liverpool 2, Leverkusen 2 on the night—but 4–5 on aggregate. And the German side are through to the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals!" Drury stated in finality, ending the match broadcast.

[FULL TIME: LIVERPOOL 2-2 BAYER LEVERKUSEN (Aggregate: 4–5)]

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[Date: 18/02/2020 | Time: 23:35 | Location: Liverpool John Lennon Airport – Business Class Lounge]

The atmosphere in the Leverkusen squad's corner of the lounge was warm and relaxed, the tension they'd just escaped long from their memory. Laughter and muted banter bounced between plush armchairs, their voices low out of respect for other travellers, but rich with the energy of triumph.

"Yo, kid, you're going viral for what you did to Wijnaldum, they are saying you made him look like an under-13," Diaby commented from one end of the couch before showing them the video on his screen from a fan's angle, which had the Dutch midfielder looking goofy.

"Bro, he was looking up to god asking why me?" Sinkgraven commented, retelling the story from his perspective, as he was the closest to the action on the pitch.

Rakim chuckled, nonchalantly waving them off as if he didn't care before proceeding to click the link on the team chat and posting a green check emoji in the comment section. From this angle, it did look bad,

not career-ending bad, but nonetheless, it would haunt the layer for a few days. Wijnaldum got caught looking into the sky after his sombrero, only to skid out a second later while he nutmegged him.

The stare down a second later was just him being petty, but if you asked him, he'd claim that the midfielder got off easy. "Man, don't do him like that," Kai laughed from behind his hoodie, shaking his head. "He's got a family."

"Not after that clip. He'll have to start a new one under a new name," Leon exclaimed, trying his best to channel the Jamaican side in his bloodline. The squad laughed in response, finding different topics to joke about, all of which ended in laughter, even if they weren't particularly articulate or funny.

Most had already changed into their travel gear, showcasing their fashion sense as the club only required them to travel in suits to the game. Thus, most brought a second set of clothing that clearly showcased their personalities and fashion sense. Rakim wore a set of black Amari joggers with yellow highlights, a black T-shirt featuring 2Pac, topped off with a gold chain hanging from his neck. Bringing the look together was a pair of beige and white colourway Jordan ones.

"Bro, you need to go talk to your stylist because she got you looking like a rapper, they're up on you," Wirtz exclaimed from the side, sliding into the empty stool next to the empty one beside him. "Fr, pick a lane and stick to it." Diaby added, looking up from his phone as he felt the need to get his lick in.

"Tsk, what would you lot know, this my ninja turtle looking friends is what we call high fashion," Rakim retorted with an indignant expression, jumping off his stool to let them appreciate the fit.

"Nah, you just look like someone laid out clothes for you, but you decided to rummage through the closet instead." Diaby mercilessly commented, shaking his head like a disappointed older brother.

"Well, at least I don't dress like a French roadman," Rakim retorted, setting off another of their arguments that the team were already used to. Wirtz, the instigator of this scene, silently slipped away to the buffet table like nothing ever happened.

[10 minutes later]

[BEEP-BEEP]

The terminal's PA system crackled above their heads. It sounded routine at first, but the moment it spoke, a quiet hush fell over the lounge. "Attention all passengers: Due to ongoing concerns related to the novel coronavirus, select outbound flights have been suspended pending further instructions. This includes all flights bound for Asia, as well as some European destinations. For further information, please consult your airline representative or refer to the updated departure board. We apologise for the inconvenience."

The clink of coffee cups, the shuffling of boots, even the rustle of paperbacks and snack wrappers died into complete silence. Rakim slowly turned in his seat, his brows furrowed. "Did they just say—Europe?" he asked, his thoughts racing, deliberating whether this pandemic is worse in this life than it was in his last life.

Despite dying from it, he also knew that most people who got treated early with a few basic preventive measures survived. However, he never considered how frightening the initial outbreak of the virus would have been for people unaware of it. Now that he thought about it, the herd mentality behind the Toilet paper buying spree made sense.

"It says right there, flight DB-2584 to Dusseldorf (Cancelled)," One of the players asked, setting off a chain of events with players rushing to the info screen to get a better look.

## Chapter 549 Stranded in Liverpool

[Date: 12/03/2020 | Time: 01:15 AM | Location: Holiday Inn, Liverpool]

The team bus pulled into the small parking lot behind the modest Holiday Inn. The usual post-match chatter had faded during the ride, replaced by yawns, sighs, and a sense of confusion. No one had prepared for this. Not even the meticulous logistics team, who were now on the phone with three airlines at once.

To their luck, due to their "fame", the airport higher-ups organised a booking at a nearby hotel, so they didn't have to sleep in the airport like many others. Peter Bosz was already off the bus before it came to a complete stop. He paced along the covered entrance, phone pressed tightly to his ear on yet another phone call.

Their not getting on the flight raised alarms back home in various departments. Most were confused and were asking for clarification, especially since they had an aeroplane crash scare earlier in the year. "Yes, Simon, I'm looking at the place now. No, it's not a proper hotel, but the best available at this hour... Ja... they've booked the entire top floor; at least they can do if you asked me."

"Just hang in there; we're working overtime to get an answer and figure out a solution to get you home," Simon responded, already standing in the club's HR office that had now turned into a situation room. "Sir, we managed to get through to Chairman Wenning, though he is less than pleased to be woken from his sleep."

"Give me 10 minutes; inform him of what we know so far," He responded to the staff member before going back to his call with Bosz.

"I need you to handle the rest now. Because if this is as bad as I'm hearing, us staying here is not an option; you know how emotionally unstable footballers are." The Dutch manager said with a light frown as he waved the last of his staff into the lobby.

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[Inside – Holiday Inn Executive Floor | Room 412]

Rakim dropped his duffel bag by the side of the bed, exhaling through his nose as he looked around the room. The room was plain: beige walls, twin beds, and a distant view of the terminal's glowing lights. He took out his phone, unlocked the "Rex Family 🌀" group chat, and thumb-typed a quick message:

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Rakim: Reached the Hotel, so no dusty airport benches for your boy.

May: You good, tho? Like... really?

Rakim: Yeah, I'm fine, more tired than anything, really; despite barely playing 15+ minutes, it feels like I played the whole game.

Dad: You did go all out from the first second. We couldn't believe you did that to a grown man. ???

Mom: That's no way a Christian should act.

Dad: I saw you repost the video on all your social media, and even your girls' night out group chat wasn't spared.

Mom: 🙄👉👈🏠

Emma: If you're stuck in England, you can come down to Scotland and stay with Jenna, and we're planning on driving down to their farm to join the rest of the McKinnon clan.

Rakim: I should be okay; the club won't let us rot here. I can check if you can tag along on the flight, and then you can join me and May in Cologne.

Emma: No, I will be fine staying with Jenna; it beats being cooped up in the city. I hear they are talking about lockdowns.

Rakim: Fair enough, but I wouldn't really call where we live as being cooped up. Mom, & Dad, will you two be okay alone in Orlando?

Mom: Don't worry about us, sweetie; we're staying busy diversifying our business into remote working.

Emma: How do you work out at the gym remotely?

Mom: I'm paying my personal trainers by letting them post workout videos on our app so that people can do them from home or in their garden. They also get to host live classes once a week, earning a portion of the commissions. Still, I've been working on a meal ingredient delivery service that your Dad is helping with, so in a way, I'm busier than before the lockdown.

Dad: I just switched from customer service to B2B, and people will eventually get bored, so we shifted to marketing goods that can be used at home, think board games, darts, etc.

Emma: Okay, we get it; you two are too busy to miss us (sniff).

Rakim: It's Okay, Emma; we will always have the memories of the good days.

Mom: Sigh, how neither of you chose to become an actor baffles me?

Dad: Let's try again.

Rakim: -\_-

Emma: -\_-

May: -\_-

Mom: I will set out the couch for you.

Dad: But we have a free guest room

Mom: -\_-

Mom: The couch it is.

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Rakim slid open the stiff glass door and stepped out onto the balcony in his YEEZY slides, which he carried in his duffel bag for every game. The air was sharp with the late-winter chill, or what British citizens might call a regular Thursday. Below, the empty car park shimmered under the pale orange hue of the floodlights. A few other players had lights on in their rooms, but the building had mostly quieted.

A faint click followed behind him. "Figured you'd be out here," Wirtz murmured, pulling the door closed behind him as he joined Rakim, dressed in a hoodie and joggers. "Kinda surreal, huh?"

Rakim didn't answer at first. He just stared off at the glow from the airport in the distance, thankful he wasn't stuck there. "Yeah," he said finally. "It's crazy how slow the governments are to react. Florida went into lockdown at the start of the month. Yet, the president is still denying the existence of the pandemic."

Wirtz leaned against the balcony rail. "(Sigh) You think they'll cancel the league?" he asked, clearly not willing to talk about the failure of the governments.

"I think..." Rakim hesitated, tapping his fingers against the railing. "I think if this virus spreads to the point they are cancelling flights, no one will care about grown men chasing a ball around the pitch. You should probably stock up on toilet paper."

Wirtz blinked. "Wait—what does toilet paper have to do with the pandemic?"

Rakim glanced over at him, one brow raised like it should've been obvious. "Nothing, well, you could call it a master stroke of fear marketing. People are lining up to pay \$5 for a set of 3 rolls of toilet paper just because some genius started a rumour and idiots picked it up; now it's like war zones. #No2 and #WeNeedAShit are trending on Twitter next to drinking bleach can cure the virus."

Wirtz shook his head in disbelief, letting out a soft chuckle. "Man, we're living in a simulation."

Rakim smirked. "Nah, if this were a simulation, I wouldn't be stuck in a Holiday Inn with you. I'd be on a beach in Bora Bora with May feeding me grapes."

"That's oddly specific," Wirtz noted, then squinted out into the car park. "You think this is gonna mess with our season? Like—really mess with it?"

There was a pause with neither of them speaking. Both already knew the answer to that question, and despite understanding it, neither liked it. They were on the way to winning major silverware this season with a team whose chemistry clicked like ten thousand dominos set up.

"They might let us continue the season after lockdown, though I doubt our form will be the same," Rakim responded after pondering the interest involved by the teams currently doing well. "It will be a messed-up schedule with the 2020 Euros set to be played later in a couple of months. Basically, we're f\$@£ed,"

Wirtz inhaled sharply through his nose, then leaned forward, elbows braced on the railing. "I was just starting to get minutes, man. Like real minutes. I feel like everything's just beginning—and now..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but Rakim nodded in understanding. "Don't worry, I don't say this a lot and mean it, but you, my friend, are the real deal. Just use the lockdown as a chance to improve further, ready to steal a starting spot when the old men in the squad feel the fatigue."

Wirtz gave a slight nod, his breath visible in the cold. "Yeah. No pressure, huh?" he muttered with a dry smile. "Just become the best version of myself while the world burns outside."

Rakim snorted. "That's the best time to level up."

A beat of silence passed between them, with both of them enjoying the comfortable silence. The rumble of a plane engine far off in the night, marooned between sky and earth, as it descended onto the landing tarmac. Then their phones buzzed against the metal railing, causing both of them to snatch them up instinctively.

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[Simon Rolfes: Group Email to All Leverkusen Players & Staff | Sent: 01:39 AM]

Subject: Situation Update – Return to Germany

Dear Team,

Firstly, let me start by congratulating all of you on a magnificent performance tonight. Your effort, discipline, and unity made everyone at Bayer 04 Leverkusen proud—thank you.

Now, regarding the situation we currently face:

As you are aware, your scheduled return flight was cancelled due to increased travel restrictions and safety measures related to COVID-19. While this is an evolving situation beyond our control, rest assured, we are actively working on a resolution.

Our club, in coordination with Bayer AG's executive network, has escalated the matter to the relevant diplomatic channels. This includes ongoing communication with German health and border authorities, the Foreign Office, and relevant stakeholders in the UK government.

In the meantime, you have all been accommodated at the Holiday Inn – Executive Floor. Please remain in your rooms and avoid contact with non-club personnel unless authorised. We understand this is frustrating, but your cooperation is essential for your safety and the Team's.

Further updates will be sent via email and team group chat. If you feel unwell at any point, report it immediately to our medical staff.

Stay calm. Rest. And know that everything possible is being done to bring you home swiftly and safely.

With respect and appreciation,

Simon Rolfes

Managing Director of Bayer 04 Leverkusen

Chapter 550 Video Call

[Date: 19/02/2020 | Time: 01:00 AM | Location: Bayer AG Headquarters – Cologne, Germany]

[Earlier]

Entering one of the private offices, Simon wasted no time accepting the laptop on which his assistant had been briefing Chairman Wenning. "Gute Morgen," He greeted the older man across the screen who was in his pyjamas, clearly having been woken from his sleep. For a man in his position who barely got 5 hours of sleep each day, waking him from his dreams wasn't something one would recommend.

"Don't give me that Sandra is glaring daggers at me for waking her up at this ungodly hour." Wenning's voice was gruff, though not without a hint of humour. He took a sip from what looked like a scotch glass, seemingly needing the extra kick to deal with these late-night shenanigans.

"You know I wouldn't have called unless I really needed your help, sir," Simon replied crisply, his tone was light, not at all showing the fear other employees showed the chairman. Most of it had to do with the fact that he worked for a completely different business that ran independently, and another being that the chairman was a big football fan, and he had been exceeding all the goals set out this year.

"As you know, our team is stranded in Liverpool. The UK just arbitrarily suspended outbound flights to several destinations due to the virus, including ours. With no timeline for reversal." Simon replied in slight annoyance after receiving hundreds of bureaucratic hurdles when trying to find a solution. "In response, most of the airports around Europe have followed suit, especially flights from the UK, following Brexit, which has now become our headache."

Wenning exhaled deeply, rubbing his forehead before setting the glass aside. "Let me guess. You've already tried the German consulate in London?"

"First thing we did. They're swamped with calls, but when we did get through, they gave us the run around like I wasn't talking about a team worth half a billion Euros," Simon sighed in exasperation, remembering the call with the Karen who acted like he had offended her bloodline for asking her to do her job.

"What is it with his team and planes? We might just have to go through with the proposal of a team plane." Wenning off-handedly commented, casually talking about spending millions. "Don't worry, we will get our lobbyist involved tomorrow by the latest, we will have a plane with our people in the air."

"Danke," Simon replied, allowing a touch of genuine gratitude to surface. "If we can cut through the red tape early enough, we might still get them back by late tomorrow night—before the media catches wind of it. They're young, bored, and social-media-savvy... the last thing we need is one of them to hop on TikTok livestream from the Holiday Inn bar."

Wenning chuckled dryly. "Tell two young ones to keep their phones holstered. We don't need them going off on another rant because of this."

Simon smirked. "Too late, Rakim already posted on his story about being stranded in Liverpool. Luckily, it's wholesome, well for us, not so much Liverpool as he insinuates this is a get-back for their loss. Good thing it's late and hasn't caught traction."

Wenning raised a brow. "At least he's got a head for PR just tell him to keep it calm. Keep them grounded, Simon. On both feet."

Simon nodded. "Always."

The Bayer chairman exhaled again and stood slowly from his desk chair, cracking his neck as the screen shook slightly. "I'll expect a status update before 07:30. My assistant will loop you in once we get a commitment from Merkel's team."

Simon blinked once, then twice, before nodding in acceptance at the fact that the man was talking about mobilising the head of state. "Understood, sir. I'll stay in the building overnight."

Wenning paused, then added quietly, "Good work, Simon, we really do appreciate what you're doing with the team and are genuinely proud of the culture you're building. Not every MD thinks this quickly—or cares this much beyond results."

Simon offered a respectful nod. "They're not just assets on a balance sheet. I made you a promise when I took office, and I plan on meeting every last part of it." The call disconnected with a soft click, the screen fading to black. Simon closed the laptop and sat back, eyes fixed on the darkened skyline of Cologne through the office window. For a brief moment, he felt a sense of peace now that someone else was dealing with the storm.

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[Date: 19/02/2020 | Time: 03:20 AM CET | Location: Berlin – Bundeskanzleramt | London – 10 Downing Street | Video Conference: Secure Diplomatic Line]

A faint double chime echoed as the encrypted call connected. The screen was divided into two feeds—on the left, Chancellor Angela Merkel appeared, in a pale blazer, with her hands clasped neatly on her desk. The dark circles under her eyes betrayed how little sleep she'd had. On the right, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, still slightly rumpled in a navy jumper, looked more like a professor in the midst of marking his class thesis papers than a national leader navigating a potential global pandemic.

"Guten Morgen, Herr Premierminister," Merkel greeted, her tone measured and calm, fingers steepled in front of her.

"Angela! Ah—good heavens, yes, morning indeed!" Boris replied, voice booming a little too loudly before he fiddled with his AirPods. "Das ist... frightfully early, isn't it?"

"It is. But not as early as the backlash that will land on both our desks if this isn't handled diplomatically," she said, tone clipped but not unkind.

Boris leaned back, nodding vigorously. "Quite right, quite right. Your man Wenning's been on the line with half my Cabinet. Something about his football team being unable to leave Liverpool, honestly, I don't quite understand what all the fuss is about, planes will fly."

Merkel didn't flinch. "They were meant to fly eight hours ago. Instead, your Foreign Office issued a blanket freeze on all non-essential outbound flights, including medically cleared ones. Now I have thirty-two German nationals—two of them minors—stuck in a foreign country, with no one having a clue on how they will get home."

Boris scratched his head theatrically, seemingly trying to summon the answer out of thin air. "Yes, well. You see, Angela, the trouble is we've got a bit of a... muddle here. SAGE, NHS, Cabinet Office—everyone's got a bloody different graph. One says it's fine, another says the end is nigh, what am I supposed to do? And then there's Gove telling people we're already on fire, which, you know, doesn't help with morale."

Merkel's gaze didn't waver. "I understand your problems since we are dealing with the same issues here, but those are your internal problems. Mine is that if something happens to those players while under your jurisdiction, it becomes a bilateral incident." She stated taking a moment to sip on her cup of tea before continuing. "The Bayer AG group is demanding that your government be ready to take responsibility for their half a billion euro club if anything were to happen to them. "

The latter part of her comment seemed to get the Prime Minister's attention. He blinked, visibly sobered at the mention of "half a billion euros."

"Right. Yes. That's... well, that's rather a big number, isn't it?" he muttered, adjusting his collar like it had suddenly grown tighter, probably resisting the urge to curse a 'bloody shit'. "I mean, crikey, I thought they were just some sprightly young lads kicking a ball, you know I myself am a rugby man. Didn't realise they were carrying the GDP of a small country on their backs."

Merkel merely looked at him with an unamused glance, wanting him to feel some of the pressure she was getting from the pharmaceutical group. People in her country cared a lot about football, especially with a team that was representing them on the European stage. The fact that she was a massive football fan meant she couldn't just ignore it behind diplomatic red tape, even if she wanted to.

Normally, in such cases, the consulate would simply work in tandem with the host country to organise accommodation for their citizens. However, when it came to football teams based in other countries, things became more complicated without even considering the media storm it could kick up. It's for the simple fact that teams would insure their squad when they travel abroad, and them being bogged down here left them at risk.

Boris understood this too, as he would likely have to make a similar call if one of his country's sports teams or artists got stuck in a different country. "Alright. Alright. Look—I'll ring up Grant. Get him to sort a clearance. A Chartered jet, at a private airport near Liverpool and they will be out of my hair."

"With a signed diplomatic exemption," Merkel pressed.

"Sure, why not? We're already rolling out the red carpet, why not go all the way?" He quickly stated not willing to let her make any more demands, already thanking his stars that this unlucky incident was caught early and kept as quiet as possible.