

## Football 591

### Chapter 591 Tango

[85]

At the whistle, Rakim ran over it and peeled left; Demirbay went direct instead, fizzing a dipping strike toward Neuer's near upper right corner. The strike carried venom as it beat the wall, taking the shortest distance to the goal. Neue clocked it, though, as he shuffled along his line, with a quick set of side steps before springing into the air.

His right hand punched the dipping ball up and over, the leather kissing his knuckles before skimming the roof of the net. The slap of his landing echoed in the empty bowl. Derek Rae rose with it. "Manuel Neuer rescues Bayern again! Demirbay caught that flush."

Robson joined in with equal excitement. "There's a reason why Neuer is among the conversation of the greatest keepers in the world. The home side is doing everything right as they continue to ask the right question, but when you have a Manuel Neuer guarding your goal, you have three lives."

Demirbay jogged across for the corner, wiping sweat with the underside of his sleeve. He opted for a pacy cross to the near post, where Bender attacked it, managing to glance it with the side of his head. The ball flashed through a thicket of legs and might have fallen for Wirtz, but Javi Martínez stiffened his neck and headed clear.

Aránguiz recycled the loose ball and lofted it back to the penalty spot, where Tapsoba tried to bring it down with his chest. Kimich was there, though, and nicked it on the bounce, allowing Bayern to escape the siege with two simple passes. Kimmich to Gnabry, Gnabry laid it back to Davies, who overlapped, sprinting the ball into the safety of the middle third.

[87]

The match grew frantic as the final minutes neared, with both sides constantly attacking each other. In one instant, Rakim received a cross-field pass from Bailey after the Jamaican escaped the pressure of Kimich and Perisic. He chested the ball down a couple of yards past the halfway line, bringing it under control before Davis could close him down.

Not letting the Canadian settle, he feinted forward but laid the ball off to Wirtz, who sped forward in the middle channel. The midfielder held onto it, drifting further inward with a quick set of footwork that saw him glide past two defenders. Before Kimmich could get close, he released the ball towards the steady feet of Volland, who held off Hernandez.

The striker flicked it wide, sending the ball skimming along the ground into the run of Diaby, who blew past Pavard. The Frenchman latched onto the ball, cutting into the side of the box at pace. His eyes locked onto the far post, and with Pavard stumbling behind him, the winger powered a left-footed strike across the face of the goal.

The shot screamed low and hard toward the bottom far corner. Neuer, who had been guarding the area at the near post, was caught momentarily wrong-footed. Lady Luck smiled upon him, though, as the loud clang of the post resounded a second later, sending the ball flying towards the other side of the box.

It was a moment of agony for Leverkusen as Diaby fell to his knees in disbelief. Rakim, who had been running in from the other side of the box, stretched his leg out trying to grasp the ball. Davis was quicker, managing to deflect the ball, sending it spilling out of the box into the path of Demirbay and Martínez.

The Spaniard tried to force the German out of the way, but Demirbay stayed steadfast, shielding the incoming ball. He braced himself as Martínez leaned in with full weight, trying to muscle him off the ball. The challenge was clumsy, arms entangled, boots scraping against each other's ankles.

Demirbay managed to pivot, shielding the ball with his back as Martínez lunged one step too far—clipping Demirbay's standing foot just as he tried to push the ball forward. The whistle shrieked immediately as the German midfielder came crashing to the ground. The referee stormed over, his hand already moving to his pocket. Martínez threw up both arms, protesting vehemently, but the yellow card was brandished all the same.

"A reckless one," Derek Rae stated. "Martínez just lost his head there—right in front of the referee, no question about it."

"Demirbay did brilliantly to hold him off, and now Leverkusen have yet another dead-ball opportunity." Robson's tone was graver. "This could very well be their very last chance to level this game in these dying minutes."

The ball was placed just outside the D, to the right of centre—prime territory for a direct kick. This time, Rakim stood over it again with Demirbay, but the look in the teenager's eyes said it all. He wanted this one, and from the looks of it, he might have won the argument between the two.

The four-man wall took its time to assemble because the Munich side wasn't interested in letting them take it quickly. A lot of shoving and pulling in the box occurred between players, causing a few interruptions where the referee had to intervene. After a few stern warnings and even two yellow cards, the situation finally calmed down as the referee had had enough.

Moments later, Rakim stood a couple of strides behind the ball, feet planted, eyes fixed on Neuer beyond the wall. The Bayern captain had been barking orders, organising the wall, signalling exactly where he wanted his defenders to shift. But that soon ceased as he was satisfied with his walls set up, as he now stood centrally closer to the near post.

Demirbay jogged a couple of steps away from the wall, standing perpendicular to it along the flanks, drawing Kimich to follow him. Rakim, behind the ball, took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling as he waited for the go signal. (Fweeet) A second later, the referee brought the whistle to his lips, causing a shrill whistle to resound, deepening the silence.

"It is the moment of truth. Can he convert this opportunity?" Raes' voice resounded as they watched Rakim size up the wall. "We know he can take it with boot feet, and he certainly has options within the box."

"The burden is heavy on this young man's shoulders, but we have seen him do much harder things." Robson chimed in as Rakim began his run-up, side-stepping to his right as he took a curved approach. "And he was always going to go for it, was there ever any doubt?"

The sound of Rakim's boots against the turf was rhythmic as he sped up towards the ball. A step away from the ball, his right foot planted a few inches from it as he angled his body. He twisted his wrist with a pace that would put a tango dancer to shame, generating quite a bit of torque as his left foot whipped around.

(boom) A resounding boom resounded as his green boot connected cleanly with the ball, wrapping it around the jumping wall by mere inches. The power and curl behind the strike was so violent that the players barely blinked, and the ball was at the top, far left corner. Time didn't even slow for a moment, as Neuer remained glued to his spot as the shrill sound of the ball hitting the crossbar resounded.

For a heartbeat, no one moved as the woodwork hummed violently, as the spinning ball harmlessly bounced off the ball cather behind the goal. The camera zoomed in on the ball behind the goal, capturing the moment a half-torn ball was left after the air rapidly escaped its shell. The silence that followed was deafening—then came the gasps, the disbelief from the benches, and the anguished shout from Rakim himself.

Neuer, frozen for a full second, only reacted after the bar had rung—his eyes wide, hands still in the air. Derek Rae's voice dropped into disbelief: "He caught it perfectly... perfectly... but the crossbar denies him glory!"

Robson exhaled through clenched teeth. "You will not strike a free-kick cleaner than that. Neuer had no chance—that's an inch from immortality, Derek and I feel for the kid."

Chapter 592 The Curtains Drop

[90+3]

Leverkusen's bench was a picture of torment—Peter Bosz stood with hands locked atop his head, pacing the technical area like a man watching fate slip through his fingers. Rakim had collapsed to his knees, both fists pressed against the grass as if willing the earth to take back the moment. Wirtz jogged over and pulled him up, whispering something only the two of them heard.

Picking up his friend from the ground, they jogged back to their positions. Bayern, meanwhile, had wasted no time letting their opponents process things, as Neuer had already kicked a replacement ball back into play after the flattened one was retrieved. Kimmich collected it near the centre circle, shouting instructions as he moved it wide to Gnabry to calm the tempo and manage the clock.

They had one foot on the trophy, and they weren't about to lift it off. The ball was now Bayern's to keep, and they did so with cynical, calculated possession—Thiago and Kimmich stroking passes to one

another with cruel patience. When Leverkusen pressed, they pivoted and dumped it backwards. When a red-and-black shirt lunged, they played around him. Lucas Hernández drifted forward from the back and found Perišić in space once again.

But this time, the Croatian didn't try to drive past Bailey. Instead, he simply waited for contact, felt the nudge, and tumbled near the touchline. The referee blew the whistle and gave Bayern a free-kick. Wasting more time as tension drains from the home side.

[90+5]

Wasting more time, Neuer, now playing quarterback, ran up to take the set-piece from the halfway line. He lofted it toward the corner flag where Lewandowski and Tapsoba tangled one final time. The ball bounced out of bounds for a throw-in, but the damage was done—Leverkusen had to go the full length of the pitch with seconds remaining.

Rakim sprinted to collect the ball and launched a long throw-in toward Volland, who chested it down for Demirbay. The midfielder flicked it wide to Diaby, whose legs were still willing, even as his lungs gave in. He dribbled furiously along the flank, cutting inside past Pavard, ghosting past Kimmich—but just as he looked to deliver the final cross, Thiago slid in with a well-timed tackle, poking the ball out of play. Throw-in, but the referee glanced at his watch.

[90+6]

Bailey rushed to take the throw. He hurled it long into the box. Volland flicked it on. It pinballed around—Wirtz got a toe on it—but before Rakim could react to the loose ball near the edge of the box, Javi Martínez stepped in, clearing it high into the night sky. The whistle followed.

[FULL-TIME: Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 3 Bayern Munich]

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Final Score: Bayer Leverkusen 2 – 4 Bayern MunichScorers:

Leverkusen: Rakim Rex (70'), Alario (64')

Bayern: Lewandowski (45+1', 79', 83')

Yellow Cards:

Baumgartlinger (37')

Aránguiz (78')

Davies (85')

Martínez (89')

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"Well, there you have it, folks, after a riveting 95 minutes, Bayern walks away with a crucial three points, widening their lead to five." Derek Rae analysed as the home players sank to their knees in frustration. A commendable performance from both sides. Leverkusen threw everything they had into this. Rakim, Demirbay, Diaby—they carved Bayern open at times. But when it mattered, Bayern's clinical edge proved the difference."

"Derek, they will be gutted not getting away with at least a point after all their effort this season." Robson analysed in a melancholic tone. "Their hopes for the Bundesliga title race might officially be over as I don't see a team of Bayern dropping six points in the last four matches of the season."

"Indeed, my friend, I could well see them go uneaten for the rest of the season." Rae analysed after checking the remaining opponents that the German champions have to play. "However, if things align, they could well meet each other again in two more finals, one being the DFB Pokal and the other, of course, the Champions League."

As the two commentators continued discussing the end-of-season prospects for the two teams, the players below trotted off the pitch. Rakim had found one of his hoods and draped it over his head, covering most of his facial expression. However, from his and everyone else's body language, the disappointment was clear.

He briskly walked past the press area, not giving the attendant a chance to even ask for an interview. He was never happier with the fact that the stadium was minimally staffed with reporters, not even on the premises. Wirtz caught up to him at the locker room doors but said nothing as they entered and took their seats in silence.



Inside the dressing room, the silence hit like a punch to the gut. No clang of studs on tile, no loud music, no post-match banter. Just the sound of deep breathing, water bottles being unscrewed, and the occasional rustle of tape being torn from ankles. Trainers and physios silently went from player to player, checking on them to make sure no one was seriously hurt.

Demirbay sat hunched forward on the bench, elbows on knees, staring down at his socks like they'd betrayed him. Diaby leaned against the cubby wall, still panting, sweat glistening on his brow as if his body hadn't realised the match was over. Volland stormed into the room, walking straight to the shower area as he let loose a loud scream.

"Argggggg, f8\*k." Startled by his actions, no one moved to intervene and went on with what they were doing. Rakim peeled off his soaked jersey and tossed it aside. The shirt slapped the floor with a dull splat, its red fabric darkened with sweat and grass stains.

Peter Bosz finally entered the dressing room, his usually composed demeanour cracked like weathered stone. He surveyed his players—warriors who had given everything, now sitting in the aftermath of dreams deferred. The manager's eyes landed on Rakim for a second, who sat with his back to the bench, wearing the performance vest and his hood still covering his face.

"Listen," Bosz began, his voice hoarse from shouting instructions that the wind had carried away. "What happened out there... that's football. Cruel, beautiful, heartbreaking football." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "You played like champions tonight. The scoreline doesn't reflect that, but I know it, you know it, and anyone who understands this game knows it."

Bailey looked up from unlacing his boots, his face streaked with mud and frustration. "We had them, boss. We actually had them."

"We did," Bosz nodded. "And that's what hurts. But it's also what should give you pride." He moved to the centre of the room, his presence commanding attention even in defeat. "We fought like a pride of lions this season, in what will go down as the most peculiar season in the history of the sport. We showed heart today, and all I ask from you is to process this and come back stronger. We still have silverware to play for this season. "

"I know most of you don't want to hear this, but you did play well; this is just the nature of the game." He paused for a moment, looking into the still disheartened faces of his players. "I'll be heading to the interviews; feel free to disperse from here since there are no fans. Oh, and for those who played, take the day off tomorrow, but make sure to attend to your recovery properly. For those who didn't attend the afternoon start, we have a semifinal to play in three days." With those words, the manager turned for the exit, and the players vaguely heard him cursing the schedule under his breath.

Chapter 593 Something To Think About

[Press Room]

Bosz took a seat behind the podium facing the row of cameras that were prearranged. The room was quiet, save for the occasional clicking of equipment and the faint buzz of fluorescent lighting above. With most of the media still barred from attending in person due to league restrictions, only the official broadcast crew and a few permitted journalists remained—each spaced apart, masked, and weary-eyed.

A moderator from the Bundesliga media team nodded his way.

"Coach, we're live in 3... 2... 1..." The red light blinked on. The first question came from a screen to his left—a remote Zoom feed patched into the interview suite. The voice belonged to a German reporter from *\*Kicker\**.

\*\*\*"Peter, commiserations. A valiant performance, but ultimately a bitter loss. What are your thoughts on how the match unfolded, especially in the second half?"\*\*

Bosz leaned forward slightly, his eyes shadowed by the downlighting, but his tone was clear. "It's difficult to speak right now. The emotions are still raw—not just for me, but for the players. I think anyone watching saw a game that was very even until the final stages. We responded well after going behind, took the lead, and at that moment, I genuinely believed we had turned it. But credit to Bayern—they're not top of the table by accident. They punished us in the final 15 minutes. That's what the best teams do."

Another voice chimed in—this time in English, from *\*The Athletic\**. **\*\***"Peter, Rakim Rex played a key role in the comeback. Can you talk about his impact tonight, and what his mentality was like after the final whistle?"**\*\***

Bosz paused, then gave a faint smile—one more tired than amused. > "Rakim is a young man with an old soul, that's how I would best describe him. You see his flair on the ball, the way he opens spaces and forces defenders into mistakes—but what people don't always see is how much pressure is on him to deliver. He was devastated after the match, absolutely gutted. But he also understands this is part of growing as a footballer. I'm proud of him. We all are."

A third question followed, from the local press again. **\*\***"There were some who criticised your substitutions late on—specifically bringing off Alario for more control. Do you regret that decision now?"**\*\***

Bosz didn't flinch at the pointed. > "No. Not at all. You make choices based on what the game needs at that moment. Lucas gave everything and was showing signs of fatigue. We felt Demirbay could help slow the tempo and retain possession. It didn't work in the end, but hindsight makes every coach look like a gambler. That's the job."

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[Date: 06/06/2020 | Time: 17:00 PM | Location: Rakim's Villa – Hahnwald, Cologne]

Arriving home under the soft hum of his i8, Rakim wasted no time heading inside, barely remembering to fish out his duffel bag from the trunk. May greeted him in the kitchen with a deep hug, but he still felt numb, his mind replaying the free kick. He was on autopilot, barely remembering how he ended up in the cold tub that may have been prepared for him.

'Hey Eva, are you there?' he subconsciously asked after the hundredth time thinking of what he could have done differently. "Oh yeah, I forgot you're no longer here," he muttered out loud this time, making his frustration audible.

"This would have been the perfect time for a co-pilot to help me analyse my game and improve, you know," he commented, splashing some of the ice water onto his face, sending a jolt through his nervous system. "Alright, Rakim, stop whining, so you missed a free kick in an important match, it happens to the best of them."

\*Not me, I never miss when it matters. Playing for Brazil, perfection is the standard for a forward, anything less and you might as well be cavarni\*

\*To me, missing is a foreign language. How do you think I've scored up to nearly 740 goals this season?\*

\*When your team needs you, there is no option to miss; you score. Pressure? I guess that having a whole nation put their hopes on you to lead them to a World Cup title and become the next El Pibe de Oro since the age of ten can be considered pressure?\*

\*Missing is for regular players when a Lion hunts, he goes for the kill, the results are all that matter, the rest is 'how you say it?' "Smantics", exactly nobody cares unless you produce results.\*

"Alright, you guys are not helpful whatsoever," Rakim muttered to himself, flicking away the imaginary bobble head figures of the greatest players of his era. In a puff of smoke, they disappeared, leaving him to his thoughts as he leaned back in the metal tub.

Looking up through the glass roof of the conservatory fitness room with the soft scent of candles wafting into his nostrils, he let his mind wander. The night sky was emerging on the horizon, devouring the last of the afternoon sky that already looked like summer. He saw a plane pass high in the sky, drawing with it a trail of smoke as he listened to the soft sound of Kenny G playing from the speakers.

He had got into the habit of listening to softer music at the end of the day. Not quite full-on classical, but more in the style of Kenny G, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Miles Davis. It helped calm his mind after a long day of hard work, and he for sure needed it after today's bitter defeat.

A few minutes passed like that—just him, the candles, the cold water, and the smooth saxophone tones swirling through the room. The burning sting in his legs had dulled into a background hum as fatigue left his body. "I guess it's back to the drawing board," he muttered, taking a deep breath before submerging his head under the cold water.

He held his breath for a good minute, only coming up for air after hearing the knocking on the metal tub. Taking a deep breath, his eyes met the green iris of May, who was crouched next to the tub. She was dressed in a velvet grey coloured 2-piece Spaghetti Strap PJs set, her shoulders slightly reddened from the cold air in the room.

Seemingly not caring about the drop in temperature in the room, she softly spoke, as her dainty hand reached out to push a wet strand of his locs from his face. "You okay? I've heated up some soup." Smiling sweetly at his stunned expression, she patiently waited for an answer.

"E'eh yeah, thank you, I'll be out in a sec. Go back before you catch a cold, we have been sick enough for the rest of 2020 and maybe even the next year." He said, moving his wet hand to nudge her shoulder, urging her to go back through the door that led to the warmth of their home.

She didn't budge, though, only lightly swaying for balance in her crouched position. "You played well, you know. I know how much you wanted this, but I know you will come back stronger next year." Before he could reply, she leaned forward, causing a stray strand from her messy bun to dip into the water.

Rakim wasn't paying attention to that, though, as his eyes remained on her elegant neckline as her rosy lips pecked his forehead. "But you know you didn't smile once during the game, not even when you guys were leading." Her words caused his thoughts to pause in consideration, but before he could respond, she had gotten up. "Just something to think about, now hurry up before you catch hyperthermia."

'Maybe I have been putting too much pressure on myself to be perfect ever since Eva and the system functions left,' he found himself thinking as her figure disappeared behind the shutting door.

Chapter 594 The Long Game

[Date: Fri 12/06/2020 | Time: 20:00 PM | Location: Muller Gymnasium – Hahnwald, Cologne]

(Ting, thud, thud, thud, ting swoosh, thud, thud, thud...)

The sky over North Rhine-Westphalia was shrouded in a light drizzle as the night had swallowed most of the day's light. Most families under the new lockdown regulations had already eaten their dinner. They

were now tucked comfortably in front of their TVs, awaiting the quarter past eight special showing of Asterix at the Olympic Games.

However, under the floodlights of the Muller High School football field, two figures can be seen. One held a yellow umbrella over her head, remaining relatively dry as she would occasionally toss a ball from the large basket next to her. The figure of Rakim could be seen setting up for free kicks from five different angles.

Around the edge of the box, walls made up of rows of five yellow human-shaped figures were strategically placed. Two at both edges of the box and one at the centre, followed by another at longer distances from the two edges, around 28 yards. He had got permission to use the field from the principal, only needing to record a video to encourage the students who were stuck at home.

He had gone beyond that after hearing the modest requirement of donating a hundred thousand euros to redevelop the school's library and its wing. Another 50k went towards upgrading the school's performance centre, which entailed the upgrade of gym equipment, cleaning of the swimming pool and other areas in need of care. With the school being a dual-academic and sports-based high school, the donations were well-received.

The principal even commented that the lockdown had the upside of allowing them to perform the maintenance sooner. The regulations eased for some industries under strict health protocols. The developments the school wanted to implement were made possible, albeit at a slower pace than usual.

None of that mattered to Rakim, though, as he had completed his obligations and had been making full use of the field. Every day after the team and his own daily training, he would come here to work on one thing: set pieces. The fact that he had failed to come through when it was crucial made him feel antsy, and he needed to work toward calming his mind.

He worked on not only free kicks but also pass placement, which involved marking small boxes around the pitch with cones and small gates where he placed yellowmen. He would dribble past a couple of obstacles on both flanks, making it a game-like situation before pinging the pass. Missing a gate was met with a punishment; if the ball rolled out of the 100-centimetre circle, a punishment followed; if his free kick hit the bar, a punishment would follow; if the ball went in, but not in the intended spot, a punishment would follow.

Repetitions had become the name of the game for him as he progressed from basic short passes to longer and trickier ones. His team had played against Saarbrücken on the 9th at the latter's home stadium, winning crisply as they stamped their ticket to the DFB-Pokal final. Rakim hadn't been included in the squad as the manager had decided to rotate the squad.

They would face Bayern again this time in the finals, who had slugged out a 2:1 victory against Frankfurt. Excited at the prospects of redeeming himself, he had put more emphasis on his training, adding a more refined nature to his playing style. He wanted his basics to be at a level that matched his creativity and his natural talent.

Thus, he started actively studying the likes of Ozil, Michael Carrick, and KDB. He studied their movement styles before and after receiving a ball, how they picked out passes, and the technique applied. He concluded that Ozil was the best player for his needs due to his dynamic capabilities.

However, he found things he could learn from all players, so he didn't just focus on Ozil. "Ok, that's enough, one last shot, and we're leaving. I can't believe you have your beautiful girlfriend freezing her tushy off when we could be cuddled up underneath a warm Duvet with a cup of tea." May, dressed in a stylish raincoat, complained as she blew onto her hand, trying to warm herself.

Rakim didn't respond right away as he made his run-up, catching the stationary ball just right with the top of his boot. The ball catapulted off his boot from 30 yards out, sending it looping over the wall in a rainbow arc that descended just past the six-yard box. It rebounded off the turf with a thud, flying forward into the empty net inches from the left post.



"Whoo, that's 55. Can we leave now? The Duchess needs her tea." She exclaimed with a surprisingly chipper expression despite her complaints.

"Yeah, let's go, and I told you you don't have to come with me every day. I know you're also busy with your finals." Rakim commented as he walked up to her, his 6'2 frame easily towering over her 5'10 stature. "Though I won't act like I don't appreciate your support, what would my cute, beautiful, and thoughtful girlfriend like as a reward?"

Wrapping his arms over her shoulder, he looked down into her deep emerald eyes, his warm breath visible, tickling her nose. May squinted up at him with mock shock, knowing that he rarely said no to one of her requests. Sometimes he even anticipates her wants and needs before she could voice them during her monthly cycle.

"A reward, huh? Hmm..." She lifted her eyebrow as her long eyelashes fluttered, thinking far too theatrically. "How about... You give me full control of the Netflix queue this weekend. No complaints. No vetoes. No 'but baby, I don't feel like watching Bridgerton'."

Rakim groaned as he tried to gauge how serious she was about her request, but quickly realised that the platform was already dead. He would watch the shows he liked within two weeks, but the library kept getting robbed by other platforms. New seasons of good shows were getting shorter and took longer to produce, which only added to the annoyance.

"Fine, but I am not watching Bridgerton, I can sit through Girl's Gilmor, River Virgin, and Once Upon a Time." He responded with a contemplative smile. "Reign will forever be the greatest period drama ever, despite the drop in quality and stupidity toward the end."

"Sure, sure, just hurry up and clean up so I can get out of this cold." She retorted with an eyeroll as she moved her hand to push him backwards. "Oh, and I bet I look much cuter in an Elizabethan dress than Adelaide," she shouted, but Rakim merely shook his head in a light chuckle as he moved to collect the balls around the goal.

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[Date: Fri 12/06/2020 | Time: 14:30 PM | Location: Rose Isle FI]

[Elsewhere]

The golden afternoon light filtered through the vast windows of the Parker family's estate, highlighting every corner of its opulence. A black marble chessboard sat untouched on the veranda table, where Victor Parker had been lounging just hours earlier, sipping imported espresso and leafing through investment reports that had become increasingly bleak.

Inside, the air conditioning hummed softly. Evelyn Parker stood in the foyer, speaking with her half-sister on speakerphone about how hard it was to prepare her son for the University of Texas at Austin under these COVID conditions. Reece was upstairs, gaming with his friends through the headset in what had quickly become routine for the boys following the orders to stay home.

Victor, now in his office, frowned as he gazed with his eyes glued to where more red flashed across his portfolio. He had long since resigned himself to the fact that his days were numbered when the WeWork deal fell through. He had been blinded by the company's vision and inflated potential, failing to see its fatal flaw and holding on too long.

By the time he had decided to offload, it was already too late, and fate played a cruel joke on him with the pandemic. After those fateful two weeks holed up in his hotel room, thoughts of suicide had plagued him, but ironically, it was the disregard of his partner Enzo that gave him a mission. So he spent the past few weeks getting his affairs in order, making sure that should anything happen to him, his family would be taken care of by intercepting company funds meant to bribe certain people and laundering them to a place that is virtually untraceable for the American government.

Just as he turned off the monitor, placing his computer's external hard drive into one of the many paper file boxes stacked in his office, a loud boom resounded in the villa. (Boom) "FBI, IRS, and SEC were executing an arrest and search warrant for Victor Parker."

Listening to the agents shout from downstairs, Victor calmly picked up the lit cigar from his ashtray and walked to the door. "I guess it's time to play the long game."

Chapter 595 Cornered

[Date: Fri 12/06/2020 | Time: 14:35 PM | Location: Rose Isle, Florida – Parker Villa]

POV: Special Agent Greg Stones, FBI White Collar Division

Following a hefty blow of the battering ram, the villa doors blew open like they were paper under a storm. "FBI! IRS! SEC! This is a joint federal operation—hands where we can see them!"

The loud shattering sound of a crystal bowl resounded in the house as the shocked expression of a Black haired woman greeted him. She looked shell-shocked on the open walkway leading from the living room to the kitchen. She was pretty for sure, but that had become a matter of course for these types of houses for me, so I had become desensitised to it.

I moved forward, my boots pounding the marble with methodical control as his team fanned out across the grand foyer. A careless agent knocked over a glass sculpture, which shattered as the first wave of agents cleared the entrance, guns sweeping each opening, securing corners. "Ma'am, we are executing an arrest and search warrant for Victor Parker." I calmly stated as I walked towards her, documents already in hand.

She subconsciously grasped them, and he simply turned, ready to signal my men to head upstairs and secure the target. That's when something unexpected happened: the sound of shoes hitting the marble floor, and the centre of an expensive cigar hit them. Descending with steady steps, dressed in a loose light grey polo, beige khakis, and a pair of matching oxfords was Victor, their target.

He took in puffs of his cigar with every two steps, his left hand bearing an old silver Rolex in his pants pocket. He looked the furthest from a man being arrested, but more like royalty descending to greet dignitaries. "Mr. Parker," my partner Lilly Becket began, gun still raised at the man who continued his descent, not the least fidgeted.

"You are under arrest for federal securities fraud, wire fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and obstruction of justice." Victor exhaled, clipped the cigar back into the bannister, on the two-meter balcony at the halfway point of the stairs.

He glanced past us toward his wife, who followed the usual script for a worried wife who knew their life had just been majorly railroaded. "Victor, what's—"

"Shhh." He gently voiced. "Just breathe. Go upstairs. Take care of the kids and Bridget, you know how she can be. Oh, and let May know when you get a chance. Even though she is mad at me, I know she'll be worried if she sees this on the news."

Glancing at the woman a few paces from me, who had been on the verge of a breakdown, recovery brought a frown to her face. Something wasn't right, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Deciding I'd tackle this later, I turned to the matter at hand. "I guess we should go back to you guys arresting, right?" Victor asked, looking defeated, but from my eyes I could tell he had been expecting, no, had been waiting for this moment.

As he threw his hands up, he descended the rest of the stairs, letting the aiting against cuff him without resistance. "Quite the turnout, Agennn't Becket. What do you guys get a medal or a pat on the back if this ticks?"

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[Time: 16:50 PM | Location: FBI Temporary Holding – Jacksonville Field Office]

I'd done a lot of interviews in my career—bankers, CEOs, cartel-connected accountants, even a psychic once—so I had Victor Parker figured out within the first thirty minutes of observing through the glass. Like most men who had achieved high-ranking positions, he gave off a presence as if he owned the room.

Unlike them, though, he didn't have the slightest hint of panic of someone who had been caught with his pants down. Usually, when CEOs get brought in for these kinds of charges, they know we have evidence; otherwise, we'd send in the police for a fishing expedition. So most would be racking their brains trying to weasel their way out, but Victor hadn't even asked for his phone call yet.

According to state law, he had three hours to make it, and we had informed him of such, but he had yet to budge. "Danm, this is the mother load, can't believe he had all this stuff just sitting in his office." Mike Santos, the lead IRS agent, exclaimed as he and his team were going through one of the 20 boxes that they had secured.

"No shit, we practically don't even need to interrogate him with this, we should just ask for a confession." James Parker, the SEC investigator, stated as he and his team went over a financial file. "I know you guys want to pin this guy down for a Rico case and lord knows what other angle, but we can easily wrap things up with this."

"Partner, don't you get a strange feeling from all this?" Becket asked from my side, now standing next to me as we gazed at the calm figure behind the glass. "From our investigations, this guy is meticulous when it comes to covering his trail, so us finding so much..."

She didn't finish her words, but I knew what she was getting at. This entire situation felt too coordinated, almost scripted, in the way it unfolded. "Yeah, this might be tricky, Beck. Looks like Carter's assessment of his personality was way off. This guy is a deep thinker, and as far as I'm concerned, he orchestrated this entire meeting with an agenda."

"Don't you think that's a little far-fetched? Since when do con men hand themselves in? This isn't Hollywood." She retorted, not believing my deduction.

"Honestly, that wouldn't surprise me." I retorted with a half smile, feeling my inquisitive side being piqued. "The only question is why he wanted to be arrested in here and not in New York."

"Whatever, it's been over two hours," she muttered without looking away from the glass. "You'd think he'd want to call his wife or a fixer."

"That's what bothers me," I said. "He's waiting for something... or someone."

Just then, the door creaked open, and Mike Santos waltzed in, holding an open manila folder stuffed with some of the preliminary logs. The IRS agent was burly, loud, and about as subtle as a jackhammer. "Found another LLC that looped back to Atlas Fund Cayman," he said, eyes flicking toward the holding room. "Guess who signed off on it?"

"Victor," I replied without hesitation.

He nodded. "Bingo. The laundering borders on artistry, involving multiple channels that ultimately lead back to the fund. My guys say if we didn't have the road map, we wouldn't even be able to connect the dots, let alone find our way from A to B."

Before I could respond, James Parker barged in, following a quick set of knocks. "A suit named Harold McIntyre, from Jackson, Peter, & McIntyre legal counsel on behalf of Atlas Fund LP, is here asking to see his client."

"Alright, let's give them a couple of minutes before we get this party on the road. We will handle the first round of questioning since you both have your teams having a field day with the files." I stated as one of the officers opened the door for the lawyer to enter the interrogation room, finally eliciting a reaction from Victor.

"Mr McIntyre can't say I was expecting you, though I'm not surprised." He stated in a cold tone as he turned to face the man.

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[Time: 17:07 PM | Location: Interrogation Room A – FBI Jacksonville Field Office]

"Alright, Mr Parker, now that you have legal representation, we can finally begin with our questioning," Becket said, placing a stack of files on the metal table as she looked at the man opposite her.

"Sure, sure, before that, I have a few questions for my dear lawyer here," Victor interjected, stopping Lilly before she could get into full swing; however, his words caused his McIntyre to turn his head in surprise.

The man was refined-looking, every bit the sophisticated man his stature ought to look like. "Whom do you represent?" Victor asked with an almost bored expression.

Chapter 596 Lincoln Lawyer

[Time: 17:17 PM | Location: Interrogation Room A – FBI Jacksonville Field Office]

McIntyre blinked as his pupils dilated, caught off guard by the sudden line of questioning. 'Looks like they aren't on the same side, interesting.' "Mr. Parker," he began, his hand moving to adjust his cufflinks either because of nerves or a subconscious tick to calm himself. "I'm here at the behest of your investors—primarily Atlas Fund LP—to ensure your rights are protected during this process."

Victor leaned back in his chair, expression unchanged as he folded his hands. He glanced at me briefly, leaving me confused about his intentions, but he didn't linger long and turned back to McIntyre. "That's not what I asked. I asked who you're representing. Not what you're here to do."

A dull silence followed as neither I nor Lilly bothered to interfere with content to let things play out.



McIntyre gave a lawyer's smile as he responded in what could only be rehearsed after years of practice. "I'm here to represent the interests of Atlas and its connected entities—"

"Their interests, not mine, right?" Victor repeated flatly. "Since you're not my lawyer, I guess we don't have any lawyer-client confidentiality then."

I leaned forward a little, studying McIntyre's poker face and how easily Victor had cornered him. "Victor, we're here to ensure—"

"—Agent Greg, I'd like to make my call now, you wouldn't want your investigation tainted because I wasn't provided proper legal representation." He calmly stated as he glanced down at his watch, knowing perfectly well that it was still within his legal right. "Oh, and you might want to ask him to leave, as far as I know, a civilian tampering with an active investigation isn't such a good thing."

McIntyre looked like he'd just swallowed a thumbtack, his lips pressed into a thin, artificial line. "Victor—"

"I said I'll be making my phone call now."

I glanced at Becket, who gave the faintest nod. Then I turned to the monitoring officer outside the glass. "Take Mr. McIntyre out of the room. Mr. Parker is requesting personal representation and his phone call." Following my words, two agents entered the room, forcibly escorting the suit out, much to the latter's displeasure.

"On record," Becket added, sliding the interrogation file closed and flipping off the recorder. "This session is over pending new counsel."

Without waiting for us to speak, Victor stood from the chair without prompting, walked to the mounted phone on the wall. Without wasting time, he dialled a number from memory; the call rang three times before finally connecting.

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[Time: 17:30 PM | Location: Orlado, Florida | Inside a 1963 Lincoln Continental Convertible]

Inside a Charcoal Black Lincoln, driving down the almost empty streets of Orlando, a man dressed in a neat black suit can be seen behind the steering wheel. He had one hand on the steering wheel, while in his other hand was a half-eaten taco roll. It was the end of his shift after a hard day of litigation meetings, a case that he had been working on for the past month.

All he wanted now was to get home, open up a bottle of scotch, and put his feet up. However, just as he arrived at a red light, his phone, resting on the passenger seat, rang. Putting down his food, he reached over to pick it up, eliciting a frown at the unknown number.

He didn't hesitate long, though, as most of his clients would call from unknown numbers when they found themselves in a bind. Sighing, he pressed the answer button, bringing the phone to his ears, "Michael, this is Victor. I know it's been a minute, but I need a favour."

Michle didn't answer at first as he instantly recognised the voice at the other end. For a few seconds, the only sound was the rhythmic click of his thumb against the steering wheel and the low hum of the

Lincoln's idling engine. The last time he heard Victor's voice was when he left New York for rehab following his helicopter accident.

"Tell me where." He asked with a resigned smile, knowing he wouldn't be getting any sleep. Receiving his answer, he stepped on the gas just as the lights changed to green, performing a swift U-turn as he charged down the road at speed.

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[Date: Fri 14/06/2020 | Time: 18:00 PM | Location: VELTINS-Arena Gelsenkirchen,]

The players lined up in the tunnel, socially distanced but still carrying that familiar pre-match tension. Young Alexander Nübel, making what many suspected could be one of his final appearances before his move to Bayern Munich, bounced on his toes, his gloves already damp with perspiration despite the cool evening air. Beside him, Kai Havertz cut an elegant figure, his blonde hair perfectly styled, calmly carrying the weight of expectation on his shoulders despite rumours of a summer move to Chelsea swirling around him.

Moments later, the players emerge from the tunnel into the silence of the Veltins-Arena, causing the squeak of boots on turf. Giant banners hung by the home club decorated the terraces, Schalke's royal blue emblazoned on one end, while Leverkusen's red and black crest hung from the other. They had tried to make it seem like a normal match as much as possible, going as far as to hang the opposing teams' banners.

"Well, a very warm welcome to Gelsenkirchen. We are back for another Bundesliga match in the bubble atmosphere." Derek Rae's voice cut across the live broadcast, sounding rich, filled with excitement. "Schalke, desperate for points after a torrid run, hosts a Leverkusen side hoping to cement

their Champions League spot after dropping out of the title race during match week 30. And Stewart, when you look at these line-ups, you sense this could be a very intriguing clash of styles."

Stewart Robson followed a second later, giving a calm, precise reply: "It certainly is, Derek. Schalke are setting up in a flat 4-4-2. They'll rely on the energy of McKennie in midfield and the industry of young Kutucu and Boujellab up front."

He paused for a second, looking at his files, before continuing. "But look at Leverkusen—Bosz has gone 4-2-3-1 with Rakim back in the familiar wide left, Amiri on the right, and Havertz floating centrally. That gives them fluidity, and with Alario leading the line, they've got a proper focal point. Schalke's defence will need to be extremely disciplined."

"And what's fascinating here, Stewart, is the absence of that usual Schalke cauldron," Derek continued, his voice carrying a note of melancholy as the camera panned across the eerily quiet stands. "This is a club that feeds off its supporters' energy, the famous Nordkurve that can lift the roof off this place. Tonight, David Wagner's men will have to find that inspiration from within."

[1]

With no roaring crowd to drown out the opening whistle, the echo of the referee's sharp blast pierced the chilled air, bouncing off the vast, empty stands. The meticulously mowed pitch shining under the evening floodlights looked almost surreal, resembling an empty coliseum awaiting drama.

Wearing their classic royal blue, Schalke passed the ball backwards, establishing an early rhythm as Ozan Kabak shaped up to clip a pass wide to Miranda on the left. Leverkusen, dressed in deep red with black trim, rushed up sharply, looking to pressure their opponents from the first whistle.

[3]

Schalke tried to settle into a pattern early, but it wasn't long before Leverkusen's intentions became clear. Aránguiz and Demirbay operated like twin snipers in midfield, stepping up just past the halfway line to compress the field and choke the space between Schalke's midfield and defence. Every pass Schalke played sideways seemed immediately met by a crimson blur rushing in to force the next one.

On the far side, Wendell stood tall against Caligiuri, who was attempting to find joy down the right flank. The Brazilian fullback read the angle like a hawk. He waited patiently for Caligiuri to overcommit, then struck low and clean with a slide tackle to dispossess him near the touchline.

Leverkusen's Tapsoba recovered the loose ball and played it out to Sven Bender, who drifted up a couple of yards. The Defender Spun away from Boujellab's pressing before calmly playing the ball out to Weiser. The Reds calmly played out from the back with a sequence of short, concise passes, slowly moving up the field.

Havertz dropped back just past the centre circle, receiving a crisp pass from Aranguiz. The German playmaker deftly received the ball, delicately spinning away Schopf.

"Lovely work by Havertz to glide out of trouble," Derek Rae purred. "He has an uncanny ability to make time for himself."

Now with space to operate, Havertz surged forward before feeding a sharp diagonal ball to Amiri on the right, who was already peeling into the space between Bastian Oczipka and Juan Miranda. Amiri received the ball on the run, dropped a shoulder, faked the drive inside, then slipped the ball laterally to Demirbay, who was catching up from midfield untracked.

With one sweeping switch, Demirbay picked out Rakim on the far left corner of the box. The young winger brought it down with an immaculate first touch to set himself up for a shot as he faced Jonjoe Kenny.

Chapter 597 Schalke 04

[4]

Rakim shaped to shoot with his right, Rakim shaped to shoot with his left, but it was all a feint as he chopped the ball across to his left. The ball bounced up slightly, and he knocked it down toward the corner flag, nimbly dodging the foot of Caligiuri, who had tracked back. Fighting past the two defenders, he chased after the ball, swiftly turning inward the moment he reached it.

Picking out Amiri, he made a run from the other side of the box and looped a cross his way. The ball was nearly perfect, not too high-timed, just right to slip past the jumping head of the retreating McKennie. The opposing winger held off Miranda with his arm as he chested the ball into his path.

Amiri let the ball drop to his right boot and took it on the bounce with a half-volley that curled toward the near post, taking a venomous curve outward, looking to hug the post on its way in. But Alexander Nübel was alert and sprang to his left, gloved hand extended at full stretch, doing enough to tip the ball around the post for a corner.

"That's world-class from Nübel!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "Strong wrists and a sharp reaction. That was heading in, Stewart."

"Absolutely, Derek," Robson agreed. "But you've got to admire the build-up as well. Leverkusen look crisp and dangerous. Rakim's delivery, Amiri's control—it's sharp football, and if I'm Bosz I want to see more of that."

[5]

Demirbay raised a hand before he swung in a dangerous inswinger aimed for the front post. The ball whipped in with pace toward the designated spot, where chaos ensued. Bodies collided, arms flailing in the melee, and Bender took advantage of the mismatched Kutucu's who had marked him, rising like a salmon.

Twisting his head in the air, he guided the ball goalward, deflecting it off Kabak's shoulder before spinning wickedly toward goal. Nübel, caught in no-man's land, could only watch as the ball struck the crossbar with a thunderous clang that echoed around the empty Veltins-Arena. "Off the woodwork!" Derek Rae's voice cracked with excitement. "Leverkusen inches away from the opener!" The rebound fell kindly to Schöpf, who hoofed it clear with the desperation of a man defusing a bomb.

[12]

The home side's first real venture forward came through the industrious McKennie, who had been quietly organising passes in the midfield. In one such instance, he picked up possession 30 yards from goal, the American's head was up immediately, scanning for options.

Boujellab had peeled away from Tapsoba's attention, drifting into the channel between centre-back and full-back. McKennie's noticed him sending an inch-perfect pass, splitting the defence like a hot knife through butter. "Lovely vision from McKennie," Rae exclaimed as Boujellab controlled it with his first touch and shaped to shoot with his second.

He connected with the ball beautifully and sent a grounded shot across the goal. But Hradecky was equal to it, doing a split as he dove to his right, his stretched-out foot managing to deflect it. "What a save from the Finnish." Derek Rae exclaimed as Bender picked up the loose ball, sending it wide to Wendell.

"Sloppy defending from the visiting side, they owe this man massive thanks for keeping them scoreless." Robson analysed as the Leverkusen side played out of the back, maintaining possession as they reorganised.

[18]

The game's first booking came as no surprise to those who knew Caligiuri's reputation. The veteran winger, never one to shy away from the dark arts, lost his cool after being sent on another chase by the Leverkusen backline. Diving into the tackle, he caught Wendell with a late challenge just as the Brazilian was about to release the ball down the left flank.

Referee Daniel Siebert didn't hesitate, brandishing the yellow card with a theatrical flourish. Despite the lack of fans to pressure him, he seemed eager to show the keyboard warriors, who had grown brazen during the lockdown, that he was righteous.

"Caligiuri's has walked the tightrope his entire career," Robson chuckled. "He knows exactly what he's doing there—disrupting Leverkusen's rhythm, trying to get a rise out of them as he gets under their skin."

Wendell limped gingerly for a few steps before shaking it off, happy he wasn't hurt too badly. "Luckily, he seems to be fine, though I can't fault him for being angry after a wild tackle like that," Derek stated after watching the heated exchange of words between the Brazilian and Caligiuri.



[23]

The visitors were beginning to assert their technical superiority, with Havertz dropping deeper to collect possession and spray passes with the nonchalance of a master pianist. His every touch drew defenders, allowing him to get his teammates involved in the buildup. This allowed him to release them into dangerous areas with crisp through balls.

Rakim was the beneficiary of one such pass, the ball finding him in acres of space down the right. Kenny, Schalke's on-loan Everton full-back, stepped up to meet him the moment the winger received the ball. Rakim didn't even bother with any skill moves and merely knocked the ball past the defender and turned on the jets.

The Everton man was caught flat-footed as the winger accelerated past him with frightening pace. The cross that followed was wicked—low, hard, and begging for a connection. Alario threw himself at it, but Oczipka's sliding block deflected the ball into the side-netting.

"That's defending of the highest order from Oczipka," Rae proclaimed. "He read that danger brilliantly."

[31]

The opening goal came from the most unlikely of sources—and in the most chaotic of circumstances. Aranguiz's free-kick from 25 yards was more hopeful than threatening, as the midfielder had intended to float it into the box. But football, as Stewart Robson was fond of saying, is a game of fine margins.

The ball struck Kenny's shoulder as he turned away from the wall, changing its angle, as it was deflected in such a way that it wrong-footed everyone, including the goalkeeper. Nübel, who had shuffled to the near post, could only watch in horror as the ball looped over his despairing dive and nestled into the far corner.

"Oh my word!" Derek Rae's voice climbed several octaves. "What a bizarre way to break the deadlock! Aranguiz will claim that all day long, but Kenny will be hoping that doesn't go down as an own goal!"

The Chilean midfielder raced away in celebration, arms aloft, while Kenny stood rooted to the spot, hands on his head in disbelief. Even Aranguiz wasn't even the slightest bit embarrassed by his good fortune, as he celebrated the goal as if he had scored a world beater. His teammates soon mobbed him, keeping contact to a minimum as they shared in their joy.

[Shalke 0:1 Leverkusen: Aranguiz '31]

[35]

Credit to Schalke as they didn't let their heads drop. Within minutes of falling behind, they were level through a moment of brilliance that showcased their fighting spirit. Caligiuri's corner from the right was a thing of beauty, perfectly hanging in the air just long enough for Kabak to time his run to perfection.

The Turkish defender, all six feet three inches of him, rose majestically above a crowd of players, his header finding the bottom corner with power and accuracy. Hradecky got a hand to it but couldn't keep it out; the power and placement were too much for even his considerable reach. "What a header!" Robson roared. "Kabak showing why he's rated so highly! That's a centre-half's dream goal!"

The young Turk pumped his fists as his teammates engulfed him, the Schalke bench erupting in celebration. In the empty stands, you could almost hear the ghosts of 62,000 voices roaring their approval. The boys in blue celebrated the equilliser as if there had been a crowd to share in the joy.

[35' Kabak: Shalke 1:1 Leverkusen]

[42]

The final minutes of the first half descended into a series of niggling fouls and heated exchanges. Demirbay was the first to see yellow for a cynical trip on McKennie as the American looked to launch a counter-attack, the German's frustration evident as he kicked at the turf. Two minutes later, Weiser joined him in the referee's notebook, the right-back's late challenge on Boujellab earning Sibert's disapproval and the youngster's theatrical writhing on the turf.

"The game's getting a bit tasty now," Rae observed as players from both sides squared up. "You can sense the tension building—both teams know how crucial this result could be."

As the whistle blew for half-time with the score locked at 1-1, both sets of players trudged toward the tunnel. In the commentary box, Derek Rae and Stewart Robson prepared for what promised to be a thrilling second half as they sped through their outro.

"Millions of viewers across Germany are in for a treat," Rae smiled into his microphone. "This one's far from over."

[Shalke 1:1 Leverkusen]

## Chapter 598 Schalke (2)

The teams emerged from the tunnel with renewed energy after receiving their respective team talks. Despite both teams being levelled, the expectations were entirely different for both sides. Bosz expected his side to win, believing that with the form they have shown this year, winning wasn't a possibility but had become an expectation.

Schalke, on the other hand, was having another year of struggle, seemingly unable to find their form from 2017 when they placed second. Last year, they ended the season with a disappointing 14th finish, barely 5 points over the relegation zone. This year has been another rollercoaster caused by the pandemic and unstable performances.

Relegation was no longer a possibility, but a top 10 finish was out of the question, so they had to show their fans some hope for the next season. This season could be forgiven due to circumstances around the world, but they needed to show they still had the glory of the past. The club needed hope for the future, but the paint was already written on the wall, and the players were desperately trying to write the hope.

[46]

With that in mind, the home team kicked off the second half with a sense of urgency, pushing up from the beginning. McKennie immediately looked to impose himself, his first touch a raking cross-field pass that found Caligiuri in space down the right. The veteran's touch was heavy, allowing Wendell to close the gap, and the Barzalian came sliding in with a ruthless swiftness, showing no hint of regard for the German winger.

The challenge was agricultural at best—Wendell's studs connecting with Caligiuri's shin rather than the ball. The German went down theatrically, clutching his leg as if he'd been shot by a sniper in the upper tier.

"That's a reducer if I've ever seen one!" Stewart Robson exclaimed, his voice carrying a hint of admiration for the Brazilian's no-nonsense approach. "Wendell's letting everyone know he's ready to stand on business in this second half."

"Not sure what Bosz told him in the locker room, but even he looks baffled at his fullback's actions," Rae commented as the camera panned over to the coach, who was massaging his bald head in bewilderment. "If asked, he will deny any involvement in that action, but he will be satisfied that his defenders set the tone early."

While the two were talking, Referee Siebert had already reached for his pocket, showing the Brazilian the yellow card. Wendell accepted his booking with a shrug, jogging back into position as if it were a matter of course.

[48]

Caligiuri dusted himself off and stepped up to take the resulting free-kick, some 35 yards from goal. The angle was acute, but the German liked his chances from the dead-ball as he adjusted the ball position on the turf. He took three measured steps back, eyeing up the crowded penalty area where bodies jostled for position.

Moments later, he was given the go-ahead by the referee after sorting out the tussle in the box. His delivery was whipped in with venom, curling away from Hradecky's goal before dipping dangerously toward the far post. Kabak, buoyed by his first-half header, made another commanding leap, but this time Tapsoba was ready for him.

The Burkina Faso international wrapped his arms around the Turk, both players tumbling to the turf in a heap of tangled limbs. "Penalty!" half the Schalke players screamed in unison, hands raised toward the heavens.

Referee Siebert was having none of it, waving away their appeals with dismissive authority. In the commentary box, Robson was already shaking his head. "Both players had their hands all over each other. Siebert's right to let that one go—if he gives penalties for that sort of wrestling, we'd be here until midnight."

[50]

Right around the 50th minute mark, Rakim collected the ball from Wendell just past the fairway line. Bozdogan Schalkes, right winger, was immediately on him, trying to pressure Rakim into making a mistake. However, the sudden closeness caused Rakim, who had been turning inward, to lay off a pass to change his mind.

Instead of finding Havertz, who was running into space, dragging a man with him, he hooked the ball past the wing. Passing him on the other side, they fought with their arms, but with his core strength and his flexibility, he managed to wiggle past him. "Oh, oh, Steward, this might turn into a problem as he sees daylight ahead of him," Rae exclaimed as the winger seemed to activate all the fast-twitch muscles in his body to speed away from the Schalke winger.

He quickly gained speed with the ball flicking between both his feet as he charged into the final third. McKennie was first to close him down, coming in from the middle channel. He lunged in with a slide tackle, but Rakim saw it coming, flicking the ball from his right to his left, sidestepping the midfielder as he hugged the touch line.

"He's flying now!" Robson shouted as Rakim surged past McKennie. "Just look at that footwork—this lad's dancing through tackles like they're made of smoke!"

With space now opening in front of him, Rakim tore down the left channel, his boots practically skimming the grass, shoulders rolling rhythmically as he entered the final third. The Leverkusen bench was on their feet, voices rising with each yard he gained. Kenny, Schalke's right-back, was next to try his luck, stepping up looking to guide the winger to the corner flag.

However, just as they were about two meters apart, Rakim's left foot stepped over the ball, looking as if he would charge across the full back who was facing him side on. Kenny had no choice but to open up his body to turn just in case the cut across was real. Rakim utilised the opening to cut back to the touch line as his trailing right foot flicked the ball forward for his left foot to latch onto as he charged past the right back.

Just as he cut inwards looking to break into the box, Kabak came steaming across to provide cover. As the distance nears, Rakim performs a step-over, confusing the defender. Still, he decided to throw himself in a last-ditch effort to stop him, but the winger performed a crisp Revers elsatico, escaping to the byline by a hair's breadth.

Now, inside the box, he scanned for an option but found all his teammates tightly marked. Deciding to go all the way, he cut back onto his right foot, looking to curl one into the far corner past the outrushing Nubel. He nudged the ball lightly to his right and took aim, but before his foot could wrap around the ball, Kenny came sliding in from behind with a desperate lunge, his outstretched leg catching Rakim's ankle just as the winger was about to pull the trigger.

The contact sent the Leverkusen man tumbling to the turf, rolling on the ground as he protectively tucked his body. "PENALTY!" Derek Rae's voice boomed across the empty stadium. "He's caught him! Kenny caught him red-handed!"

The referee didn't hesitate. Felix Siebert's whistle pierced the air as he pointed decisively to the spot, his arm outstretched like a Roman emperor delivering judgment. The Schalke players immediately surrounded him, their protests growing more animated by the second, but Siebert's mind was made up. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a yellow card as he beckoned Kenny over.

"That's a clear penalty," Stewart Robson confirmed, his voice pulling from his experience of a thousand fouls in his playing days. "Kenny had no choice but to bring him down, but when you're beaten that comprehensively, you have to accept the consequences."

The camera caught Peter Bosz on the touchline, arms raised in anger, barely held back by his assistant manager. He had been ready to storm over to the fourth official, but Siebert had been decisive to act.

[52]

Rakim dusted himself off after the medical staff had left the pitch. They had quickly checked over him, concluding that, aside from a light knock, he was fine. Doing a couple of stretches, he felt his ankles quickly regaining sensation as he walked toward the spot. The team's penalty taker was Havertz, but a few players took their own penalties, and he was one of them.

Adjusting the ball on the spot, he calmly took five measured steps backwards until the back of his heels touched the edge of the box. Nübel bounced on his line like a caged tiger, trying every psychological trick in the goalkeeper's handbook. He spread his arms wide, making himself appear larger, then crouched low, slapping his gloves together, trying to unnerve.

"This is pressure," Rae murmured into his microphone as silence descended, only waiting for the referee's whistle. "Not how he had imagined it going, but he still has a chance to put your team ahead."



Siebert's whistle cut through the tension a second later, and Rakim began his run-up. Taking three steps to his left, he performed a curved run-up, starting slow. His gaze remained locked on the keeper, and with three steps to go, he suddenly sped up, doing a sudden stutter step at the end.

#### Chapter 599 Victory

As Rakim reached the ball, the stutter step froze Nübel for just a beat. The keeper twitched low to his right, but that was all the invitation Rakim needed. He opened his body and swept the ball to the opposite corner with the inside of his right foot—a smooth, ice-cold finish that kissed the side netting.

"Cool as you like!" Derek Rae roared, his voice rising with the moment. "A finish dripping with confidence from the teenager!"

"Absolutely ice in his veins, Derek," Robson agreed. "After a run like that to earn the penalty, it takes real composure to slot it home. That lad's got something special about him."

Rakim didn't celebrate wildly. Instead, he jogged toward the camera at the corner, clapping his hands in the air. Smiling at scoring his 28th Bundesliga goal of the season, he still preferred free kicks and solo goals.

[Schalke 1–2 Leverkusen: Rakim Rex 52']

Schalke tried to respond quickly, kicking off with urgency, their front line suddenly bursting with renewed energy. David Wagner gestured wildly from the touchline, instructing McKennie and Bozdogan to push higher, encouraging the wide players to be more direct. Turning up the pressure before Leverkusen could settle back into their rhythm was the plan.

The Royal Blues surged forward, with Kutucu dropping deep to receive a pass and neatly spinning away from Aránguiz. He slid a pass into Caligiuri on the left, who squared up Weiser and attempted a low cross into the box—but it was Bender who read it early, cutting it out with a well-timed block.

"Schalke looking more direct here," Robson commented. "But they need to be if they want to get back into this game."

[59']

Rakim, who had spent the last few minutes lurking on the left touchline, got on the end of a long switch from Demirbay. He controlled it with his chest, then immediately played a one-two with Havertz that left Kenny chasing after him. Rakim took on Kabak next—flicking the ball to his right, teasing the defender before dropping his shoulder and darting past on the left. But just as he opened his hips to shape a shot, Oczipka lunged across to block the strike, sending the ball deflecting wide for a corner.

[61]

Demirbay jogged across to take the set piece from the right, signalling with a quick flick of his hand before sending in a whipped ball toward the near post. "Plenty of movement in the box here," Derek Rae narrated. "Watch Tapsoba..."

And it was indeed Tapsoba who met the cross with a glancing header. But it didn't quite have the angle. The ball flicked on across the face of the goal before Nubel managed to smother it amid a forest of legs. "And it was almost three, he'll be wondering how none of his teammates managed to slot that one in."

[65]

Schalke's frustrations began to bubble as they began playing a more physical style of football. Tackles became more ruthless and decisive, not giving their opponents a chance to display their superior techniques. In one such tackle, McKennie, having already been warned earlier in the match for a questionable tackle, lunged in late on Demirbay near the halfway line after losing possession.

This time the ref didn't hesitate and out came the yellow without a hint of mercy. "Not smart from McKennie," Robson observed. "He's walking a tightrope now." It was Schalke's third yellow of the night, following cautions to Caligiuri [34'] and Oczipka [43'], both for rash challenges on Amiri. Leverkusen, meanwhile, had also picked up two yellows—Rakim himself earning one earlier for dissent after a no-call, and Aránguiz booked for a tactical foul to break up a counter.

[70']

With twenty minutes left on the clock, Peter Bosz decided it was time for fresh legs. The fourth official raised the board:

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↻ Leverkusen substitutions:

OFF: Rakim Rex, Kai Havertz, Nadiem Amiri

ON: Moussa Diaby, Kevin Volland, Paulinho

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"Three high-quality subs, Stewart?" Derek asked with a hint of interest. "Diaby's pace, Volland's strength, and Paulinho's trickery should do well to keep their opponents honest, limiting how far forward they wander."

"Indeed, it's a smart change," Robson added. "All three starters had worked tirelessly, and now Bosz can stretch the game again in the final phase."

As Rakim trotted off, he exchanged an elbow tap with Diaby and received a pat on the back from Bosz. It hadn't been his most electric performance, but the solo run and penalty conversion had been game-changing. Overall, he had done enough to leave a noticeable impact in the game, and he was satisfied.

[73']

Schalke responded with a double substitution of their own:

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↻ Schalke substitutions:

OFF: Kutucu, Boujellab

ON: Michael Gregoritsch, Levent Mercan

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The changes added more energy to Schalke's attack, and within minutes, the Austrian Gregoritsch made an impact, latching onto a through ball from Schöpf. He fired off a low shot to the bottom right corner that stung Hradecky's palms. "Great stop from the Leverkusen keeper!" Derek called. "Matondo almost made himself an instant hero."

[79']

Schalke's best chance came from a corner earned after Weiser deflected a Bozdogan cross. Bozdogan himself stepped up to take it, and he whipped the corner in with venom, aiming just beyond the penalty spot. It was a teasing delivery that drew Hradecky out slightly—but it was Gregoritsch who rose highest, beating Bender in the air. The Austrian met it with a thumping header that screamed toward the far corner.

But just as the Schalke bench began to rise in expectation, Lukas Hradecky flung himself across his goal in a full stretch and palmed it wide with a stunning reflex save. "Outstanding goalkeeping!" Derek Rae shouted, voice rising with disbelief. "That's a world-class stop from Hradecky—absolutely denied Gregoritsch!"

"Top, top save," Stewart Robson echoed, shaking his head slightly. "He's not had much to do in this second half, but when called upon, he's reminded us exactly why he's one of the league's best."

[82']

The save seemed to suck the wind out of Schalke's sails. Leverkusen, sensing their opponents' fatigue and growing desperation, began to control the ball with greater ease. Volland dropped deep to link up play, using his frame to shield the ball from the tiring McKennie, while Paulinho and Diaby continued to attack the flanks.

Diaby, on one occasion, picked up the ball just inside the halfway line, burst down the left wing, leaving Kenny trailing. Having got used to Rakim's attacking style, he failed to adjust to the change quickly enough, allowing Diaby to cut in behind him. He delivered a curving low cross across the six-yard box, but it missed everyone by inches—Paulinho just a second too late to tap it in.

[85']

Another yellow card was issued, this time to Schalke's Schöpf, who cynically pulled back Demirbay during a promising break. The referee had seen enough leniency and immediately brandished the caution. It was the home side's fourth booking of the match—discipline clearly starting to unravel under pressure.

"They've just been a step behind all second half," Robson noted. "The legs are going, and so is the tactical discipline."

[88']

With the match entering its final moments, Leverkusen reverted to a more conservative shape. Aránguiz tucked in just ahead of the centre-backs, and Bender took charge of organising the line. Demirbay, still full of running, continued to snap into challenges and launch quick releases for the counter.

In the 88th minute, Schalke made one last push—Caligiuri lofted a cross from deep into the box, hoping for a knockdown. But Tapsoba, a tower of calm all evening, rose tallest and powered a clearing header out to Diaby, who had peeled wide for the out ball.

[90']

Diaby brought the ball under control and galloped into the Schalke half, dragging Kenny and McKennie with him. He slowed and neatly held it in the corner, earning valuable seconds and drawing another foul. From the ensuing free-kick, Demirbay swung it deep toward the back post. Volland attacked it, and though his header sailed just over the bar, it ate up valuable minutes.

[90+3']

The fourth official raised the board: 4 minutes of added time.

Schalke threw everything forward now. Even Nübel stood near the halfway line, watching anxiously as Oczipka heaved a long throw into the box. It was chaotic—bodies clashing, shirts tugged—but once again, it was Tapsoba who rose above it all and cleared with authority.

Leverkusen countered again through Paulinho, who drove into open space and calmly held off his pursuers. When they finally managed to stop him, it was too late. The referee blew his whistle for the final time, ending the match.

[FULL TIME: Schalke 1 – 2 Leverkusen]

Chapter 600 DFB Final Sprint

[04/07/2020 | Time: 18:00 PM | DFB-Pokal Final | Location: Olympiastadion Berlin]

[2 hours to Kick-Off]

The Leverkusen team bus pulled to a stop at the Olympiastadion, its doors opening with a hiss. The players dressed in their team tracksuits promptly alighted from the coach amid camera flashes from the spare reporters. No fans were there to greet them, making this final somewhat bittersweet, almost unreal without the fans' atmosphere.

For the past two weeks, they had been preparing for this match using the three league matches as a fine-tuning opportunity. They had achieved two wins and one loss, formally clinching their second-place finish. Now they looked to win their first trophy of the year, which they surely deserved after having their best season in years.



Without much fuss, they all headed to their assigned locker room, sparing the reporters little attention. They were assigned as the home side in this match, so the players were given the larger locker room. The team's staff had already prepared the players' gear, hanging their game kits in numerical order, along with their boots and other gear.

Rakim immediately settled at his designated spot, his hands briefly brushing against his black away kit. For some reason, despite being the home team, they were wearing their away kit. Taking a seat, he kicked off his trainers and pulled out his training boots from under his seat.

The people at Apex continued to provide him with new boots every month, going above and beyond to make sure he could play to the best of his ability. He slipped on his red-and-black warm-up shirt over his head and adjusted the snug fit, tying the cords of his training shorts. Across from him, Havertz stretched his long frame, headphones still draped around his neck, while Aránguiz had a trainer tape his wrists as if he were about to fight a boxing match.

Moments later, following a Stafs prompt, the squad filed out toward the pitch for their pre-match warm-up, greeted by the sterile silence of the empty stands. The Olympiastadion's vastness made the absence of fans more glaring; their thoughts quite literally echoed as they jogged onto the pitch. Every shout, carried into the rafters, reminding them of the occasional training sessions at the BayArena.

They didn't linger on the sensation, though, as they had grown accustomed to it over the past month. If asked, the players definitely preferred playing in front of a packed crowd. They had all grown up watching one idol or another on TV become legends in front of packed arenas.

So playing what could be one of their most crucial career games in an empty stadium felt bittersweet. On the far end, Bayern Munich were already out, stretching in a large ring, as Hansi Flick gave instructions from the middle.

Leverkusen's warm-up began in orderly fashion, doing sprint drills, rondos, and possession drills. It was a slow-paced warm-up compared to a usual match as they had spent the last few days preparing for the next 90 minutes. They had a morning session, and the whole day was spent just keeping their peak.

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[18:30]

Near the halfway line, a makeshift DFB advertisement board had been set up—a white panel filled with logos of sponsors, from Deutsche Telekom to Volkswagen and other notable sponsors. Occasionally, players were called over for a short pre-match interview.

Kai Havertz went first, offering his calm, diplomatic answers about "team spirit" and "executing the coach's plan." Then came Sven Bender, who spoke with grit about experience and leadership.

Following Levandowski's interview, Rakim was called over by a staff member who noted that the people in the studio wanted to have a chat. The teenager jogged over, adjusting his training top, a light smile on his face, framed by his hair that was styled into box braids. A masked media officer handed him the earpiece, and seconds later, the voice of the studio pundit carried through.

"Rakim, can you hear us?" Kate Abdo's voice chimed through the earpiece, warm and professional, even from the distance of the studio.

"Yes, I can hear you," Rakim replied, his breath slightly elevated from the warm-up. He folded his arms lightly, gazing at the camera set up in front of him.

"Great. Well, thank you for joining us before what is arguably the biggest game of your young career. You're facing Bayern Munich again, this time in the DFB-Pokal final. What's the mood like in the Leverkusen camp heading into tonight?" She asked with her charisma clearly audible.

Rakim gave a half-smile as he took a second to think of his answer. "The mood is good. We know what's at stake, and we've been preparing to win a trophy since '93; belief is not something we lack. Obviously, Bayern are Bayern—they've just won the league, they've had an incredible last stretch since the restart. But we believe in our style, and if we play our football, we can make history for Leverkusen today."

"Playing your game against a team like Bayern is key." Lothar Matthäus stated in the studio, his eyebrows arching. "A team that is unable to exert its playing style in a final will find it hard sneaking away a win."

Kate pressed further: "And personally, Rakim, you scored in the league match against them recently, hit the bar with a free kick. Do you come into this final thinking about revenge?"

Rakim shook his head lightly, a wry grin forming. "Revenge? No, not really. It's football. Sometimes the crossbar saves them, sometimes it saves us. Tonight's a new match. My focus is just on doing my part, helping my team. Whether that's a goal, an assist, or just running hard for 90 minutes—it doesn't matter, as long as we win."

"Those sound like practised answers; someone has clearly been media trained." Owen Hargreaves interjected admiringly, before Kate wrapped up. "Thank you, Rakim. Best of luck tonight." With that, the teenager returned the earpiece, gave a polite nod to the masked staffer, and jogged back to join his teammates for the final passing drills.

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[18:40 | Studio – Live Broadcast]

The cameras cut back to the sleek, glass-panelled studio where Kate Abdo sat poised at the centre of the desk, flanked by Lothar Matthäus on her left and Owen Hargreaves on her right. The Olympiastadion could be seen in the background, illuminated under Berlin's summer dusk, its empty tiers casting a strange, hollow aura around the occasion.

Kate's eyes gleamed with intent as she linked from Rakim's interview: "Well, thoughtful words from the 16-year-old winger. Calm, composed, and professional, as we have come to know him. But Lothar, let's start with you. Leverkusen have been here before—in finals, in big moments—and often fallen short. Does tonight feel any different?"

Matthäus leaned forward, fingers laced, his German accent sounding through with authority. "Look, Kate, Leverkusen have had one of their best Bundesliga seasons in years. They've finished second, they've shown consistency, and with young talents like Havertz, Diaby, and Rakim, they've got danger in every attack. But the question is not just about quality—it's about mentality. Bayern, they live for finals. It's in their DNA. Leverkusen have not shown me that they have that killer instinct to drag themselves across that finish line."

Kate Abdo nodded, letting his words hang for a moment before turning to Owen Hargreaves. "Owen, your thoughts? Do you agree with Lothar? Or do you think Leverkusen's got more of a chance than he's giving them?"

Owen leaned back in his chair, half-smiling, his tone more measured. "Kate, I think Lothar's being a little harsh there. Yes, Bayern have the pedigree, the experience, but football is about more than that. This Leverkusen team presses high, moves the ball quickly, and boasts a potent lineup, including a variety of playmakers. Look, Bayern are favourites, no question, but dismissing Leverkusen in a one-off final? Dangerous."

Matthäus cut in with a dismissive shake of his head. "Dangerous for who, Owen? Bayern have dealt with all of these so-called dangerous players before. Leverkusen had them, what, three weeks ago? And they couldn't finish the job. Finals aren't about playing pretty football—they're about knowing how to win ugly, how to grind it out. Bayern always find a way."

"Always?" Owen fired back, voice lifting slightly. "What about the Pokal semi two years ago when Eintracht Frankfurt shocked them? Or Dortmund in 2017? Bayern can lose if you hit them fast and hard. And this Leverkusen side has an uncanny ability to open up attacking opportunities on the flanks."

Kate raised her hand lightly, reigning them in before the exchange could spiral. Her voice was steady, almost soothing in contrast. "Alright, gentlemen, I think our viewers can see the picture. It's a classic David and Goliath clash at the DFB Final." She paused, turning slightly to the camera. "Bayern will be looking to defend the trophy as Leverkusen aims to end a 26-year-long trophy drought."

On-screen, the broadcast rolled to highlights of both teams' journeys through the Pokal—Leverkusen's ruthless semi-final win, Bayern's hard-fought triumph over Frankfurt. A graphic clock ticked down: "Kick-Off in 30:00."

Kate's voice closed the segment. "Plenty more to come, but for now we'll take a quick break. Stay with us—when we return, we'll have live shots from both dressing rooms, and we'll hear final thoughts from our pundits as we edge closer to kick-off here in Berlin as we get a look at the starting line-ups."