

Football 611

Chapter 611 Sturdy

[04/07/2020 | Time: 22:35 PM | DFB-Pokal Final - Post Match | Location: Olympiastadion Berlin]

The makeshift stage at centre field gleamed under the floodlights, draped in the black, red, and gold of the German Football Association. Officials busied themselves arranging the podium as the trophy sat majestically on its pedestal—the iconic DFB-Pokal, its golden surface reflecting the stadium lights like a beacon of achievement it represented. Whichever team won this trophy became the kings of Germany, and all its professional leagues crowned themselves victorious.

Derek Rae's voice carried a magnetic charm as the ceremony preparations began to wrap up. "And now comes the moment every footballer dreams of - or dreads, depending on which side of the result you find yourself. The presentation of their well-deserved spoils."

Stewart Robson's tone matched the gravity of the moment. "This is always the hardest part for the losing team, Derek. Having to watch your opponents celebrate what you came so close to achieving yourself. 'The saying second place is the first to lose fits perfectly with what these players must be feeling.' But it's part of the game, part of what makes these moments so special for the winners."

Following one of the official's prompts, the Munich players began their slow procession first, each step heavier than the last as they made their way toward the stage. Their heads hung low; their jerseys were soaked with sweat and disappointment. Neuer led the way, his captain's armband stained with dirt and grass.

The Leverkusen players formed a guard of honour on either side of the pathway, creating a corridor of respect for their fallen opponents. Despite their own jubilation just moments before, they stood with professional dignity, applauding the Bayern players as they passed. It was but a small gesture of mutual respect between competitors, but something that had become part of trophy ceremonies.

Lewandowski trudged past, wearing a hollow look as he went forward like a soldier. Müller followed, clapping his hands together in acknowledgement, and he followed the procession, walking up the three steps of the stage. One by one, the Bayern players climbed the steps to receive their silver medals.

Each player shook hands with the officials, their smiles forced but respectful as they left the stage as soon as possible. None of them took off their medals just yet as they formed a line, standing in solitude, awaiting their opponents to receive their reward. "You have to feel for Bayern Munich," Derek Rae observed as the cameras captured the dejected expressions. "To lose a match like this, having led twice in extra time, is heartbreaking. But they are showing tremendous class in defeat."

As the last Bayern player received their runner-up medal and descended the stage, the atmosphere shifted dramatically. The Leverkusen players at the base of the stage began to buzz with anticipation, the reality of their achievement finally starting to sink in. "Ladies and gentlemen," the stadium announcer's voice boomed across the empty arena, "please welcome your 2020 DFB-Pokal champions - Bayer 04 Leverkusen!"

The eruption was instant and thunderous. Every Leverkusen player on the field threw their arms into the air as the announcement echoed around the Olympiastadion. "Here they come!" Derek Rae's voice lifted with infectious enthusiasm. "The heroes of Leverkusen, twenty-seven years in the making!"

The players made their way up the stage, Wendell leading the line as they received their gold medals one by one. From players to substitutes, everyone walked up with a bright smile, eagerly accepting the piece of bling they worked hard to win. Rakim also eagerly accepted his medal, brushing the golden cup before joining the rest of his teammates on the waiting platform.

Slinging an arm around Kai and Wirtz, he watched the rest of his teammates get their well-deserved rewards. Lewandowski ended up winning the Golden Boot for his nine goals in the tournament,

narrowly beating out Kevin Volland, who had seven. Golden glove went to Hardeky for his stellar performance in between the sticks, despite the score sheet not reflecting his actual contributions.

The Man of the Match award went to Haverts, who had scored three goals, assisted one, and generally had a stellar performance in the match. The player of the tournament award went to Thomas Müller for his stellar performances throughout the competition. No one cared for the personal accolades long, though, as Bender was given the go-ahead, promptly stepping forward as he walked towards the gleaming cup.

For a moment, the decade-long Leverkusen captain stood over the gleaming trophy that somebody had been polishing for this exact moment. His weathered hands were trembling slightly as he reached forward to his first senior trophy and maybe his last he would achieve in his career. The veteran captain, who had endured years of near misses and heartbreak with Leverkusen, now had the moment he had dreamed of since joining the club.

The weight of carrying ten years of that twenty-seven-year wait seemed to lift from his shoulders as his fingers wrapped around the neck of the DFB-Pokal. "This is Lars Bender's moment," Derek Rae's voice was thick with emotion. "The warrior, the leader, the man who has bled for this club through thick and thin. At thirty-one years old, he finally gets to lift silverware for Bayer Leverkusen."

Stewart Robson's commentary was equally moving. "You can see what this means to him, Derek. Look at the pure emotions on his face. This is a player who could have left for trophies elsewhere, but stayed loyal to Leverkusen through all the disappointments."

Bender kept the trophy low as he turned to face his teammates, imitating the actions of other teams' captains he had watched all his career. A low drumroll of (ohhhh) resounded from his teammates and the team staff as he approached, keeping the trophy low. When things reached a fever pitch, he powerfully raised the trophy into the air, setting off another wave of jubilation.

~~~

The floodlights glistened off the golden surface as Lars Bender hoisted the DFB-Pokal aloft, his roar of triumph blending with that of his teammates, piercing the Berlin night. His teammates surged forward as if pulled by gravity, surrounding him in a flurry of red-and-black shirts, hands reaching for the trophy, each one desperate to touch it, as if that would make it real. The echoes of their shouts and chants bounced around the vast, empty stands as the Bayern players took off their silver medals and headed for the exit, having fulfilled their sportsmanship.

They jumped and sang for a few good minutes, basking in the moment before finally calming down somewhat. One of the organisers beckoned them to calm down for a moment so they could take the official victor's picture. A couple of camera shutters later, with the players taking varying poses, all displaying their joy before the celebrations continued anew.

Stepping off the stage, they began passing the trophy around, each celebrating in their own way as they took pictures. Rakim clapped above his head before taking his turn with the cup, kissing it once before raising it for the cameras. Wendell grabbed it next, shimmying his hips, prompting his teammates to laugh and join in. The party soon moved inside, where champagne bottles prepared beforehand popped almost instantly, spraying across the cramped space.

Hradecky was the first to shake one up, blasting the foam across a screaming Diaby, who was in the midst of his dancing over a French rapper. The rest joined in rhythm, clapping and stomping the floor as Wendell took centre stage, twisting his waist and pointing to the ceiling in true Brazilian style. The players followed the dance moves from the outside, filled with pure joy, before another player stepped in to showcase another move.

The music blared from a portable speaker, the bass rattling the benches. Videos were recorded on phones, with Instagram Lives filling up as tens of thousands of fans watched from home. Rakim jumped into the midst of the celebration when a Pop Smoke song came on, getting sturdy to the beat, prompting the rest of his teammates to do the same.

## Chapter 612 Dancehall

[04/07/2020 | Time: 01:00 AM | DFB-Pokal Final – Post Match | Location: Hotel, Berlin]

The celebrations had spilt from the stadium locker rooms to the team hotel, where the party atmosphere reached fever pitch. The dining room, which was meant for their celebratory dinner, which the team had prepared, had been transformed into an impromptu dance floor. The players, dressed in their winners' T-shirts that the team had prepared for each final they had ever reached, finally got a use.

Despite the players having quick showers in the locker rooms, they were still soaked, either from sweat or various liquids. The trophy sat proudly on desk one, which had to be passed by on their way to the buffet table, surrounded by champagne bottles and gold confetti that seemed to stick to everything. Hotel staff, initially concerned about noise complaints, quickly realised they barely had any customers.

The building was largely empty due to COVID restrictions anyway, housing only the essential football personnel and a handful of stranded travellers who had been forced to extend their stays. Rather than complaints, these unexpected guests found themselves drawn into the celebration, with several accepting invitations to join the impromptu party.

[1:30]

By half past one in the morning, music thundered through the hotel corridors as the Leverkusen squad commandeered the entire ground floor. What had started as a quiet celebratory dinner had evolved into something resembling a music festival. The dining room tables had been pushed against the walls, creating a makeshift dance floor where Wendell continued his Brazilian carnival display, now joined by half the squad as they attempted to match his rhythm.

Diaby had connected his phone to the hotel's sound system, cycling through French rap, German hip-hop, and Afrobeats. Each genre change brought out different players - when a Nigerian song came on, the entire squad watched in amazement as one of the staff members, who happened to be from Lagos, took centre stage with moves that had them questioning why he wasn't a professional dancer.

The hotel manager, a middle-aged German woman named Greta, found herself wearing a Leverkusen winners' shirt and attempting to learn dance moves from Bailey. The Jamaican had somehow convinced the poor woman that she could do the Dancehall. "This is madness!" she laughed, throwing her hands in the air as the bass dropped on another track.

[2:15]

By two in the morning, someone had discovered that the hotel's small conference room had a karaoke machine. What followed was a parade of slightly inebriated footballers murdering various songs in multiple languages. Tapsoba, still shirtless and with his gold medal around his neck, was attempting what appeared to be a Burkinabé folk song, while his teammates provided backing vocals despite not knowing a single word.

Havertz and Wirtz had tackled a German pop song with enthusiasm that far exceeded their vocal abilities. The younger Wirtz was particularly animated, practically screaming into the microphone and sliding across the polished floor on his knees. The few stranded hotel guests had now fully integrated into the celebration.

An elderly couple from Stuttgart, initially disturbed by the noise, were now sitting at a table with Lars Bender, sharing stories and raising glasses of champagne. A man who had been travelling on business from France regaled some players with his own escapades in bagging ladies. The man fancied himself quite the lover boy, and players who had a hard time in the romance department, despite being footballers, listened intently to his words.

[03:00 AM]

The party reached its peak when Palinho produced a suitcase filled with coloured powder, the type used in Holi celebrations. Within seconds, the dining room resembled a rainbow explosion. Players and guests hurled handfuls of powder at each other, transforming white winners' shirts into Jackson Pollock paintings.

Rakim found himself dragged into the middle of a powder fight between Diaby and Bailey, both of whom seemed determined to turn him into a living artwork. Despite dodging most of the initial assault, he ended up covered in streaks of blue, yellow, and red powder that stuck to his champagne-dampened shirt.

~~~

[04/07/2020 | Time: 10:30 AM | Hotel Room, Berlin]

Rakim's eyes cracked open to the assault of morning sunlight streaming through inadequately closed curtains. His head felt like it had been used as a football for the entire match, and every muscle in his body ached from hours of dancing, celebrating, and general mayhem. The taste in his mouth was an unfortunate cocktail of champagne residue and whatever that yellow powder had been made of.

It took him a moment to regain consciousness as his body struggled between dreamland and the real world. Rolling over in his bed, he surveyed the carnage of their hotel room. His body was a canvas of colored powder, streaks of blue across his chest, yellow handprints on his shoulders, and what appeared to be someone's signature in red powder across his back. The smell of champagne clung to everything, despite his lazy attempts to shower before collapsing into bed.

Looking around the room, he found Wirtz Lay sprawled on the floor between the two beds, still wearing his winners' shirt but now sporting what looked like a full-face mask of purple powder. His mouth was slightly open, and he was snoring softly, one hand still clutching his gold medal. Diaby was curled up in the fetal position, on the ground at the feet of the bed, his usually perfect hair looking like he'd been electrocuted.

Struggling to get up, he navigated past the chaos of the room, stepping over the figure of a passed-out Tapsoba. He somehow made it toward the bathroom doors only to find a passed-out Bailey who somehow ended up sleeping in the bathtub, his long legs stretched over the top. He heard the Jamaican mumble something incomprehensible and shift slightly, causing a headache to appear in his mind, and he was unwilling to deal with the situation.

Still, he needed a shower, so he walked over to the bathtub and turned on the shower, causing the showerhead above his head to churn. A moment later, streams of cold water rained down on the Jamaican's naked upper body, causing the latter to squeal like a schoolgirl caught peeping at her crush.

Bailey shot upright in the tub, flailing his arms like he had been electrocuted, water cascading off his dreadlocks as he yelped. "Bruh! What the hell, fam?!" he barked, his Jamaican accent thick and unfiltered from grogginess. Rakim just leaned against the sink, smirking through his own exhaustion, shaking his head.

"Why, you're sleeping in my bathroom when you have your own room?" Rakim muttered, his voice raspy, throat still raw from shouting all night. "I needed the shower. Simple."

Bailey blinked, wiping water from his eyes, before bursting into laughter that echoed through the tiled bathroom. "Nah, nah... you're mad disrespectful, bro," he said between cackles.

"Fam, have you seen me play? The only person more disrespectful than me is Neymar, and that is only because he's played longer." Rakim retorted, feeling a headache from all the noise. "Plus, we'd better get cleaned up before the gaffer remembers he's supposed to be the boss."

"Still..." Bailey tried to retort but was promptly pulled out of the tub by Rakim. "Yeah, yeah, I'm a bad, bad man, just ask your girl. Just go complain to the other homeless guys in my room. I'll buy you breakfast later."

Before the Jamaican could protest further, he was pushed out of the bathroom, and the door was locked in his face. Soon, the sound of running water resounded amid the ruckus caused by Bailey outside quickly woke the others. "Keep it down, my head's exploding," the Wirtz mumbled, pulling a pillow over his face, in annoyance.

Chapter 613 Great Highs

[05/07/2020 | Time: 10:30 AM | Location: Cologne]

Rakim had underestimated the significance of the victory to Leverkusen and, by extension, Cologne. He still remembered the bus ride back to the club from the stadium. Fans exited their houses, hopped on their balconies, and some even climbed onto the roofs of their houses as they cheered in jubilation.

For the people of Leverkusen and the greater Cologne area, it felt vindication, a release of their pent-up frustration. Twenty-seven years of being almost good enough had ended in a golden night, and the city responded like it had just won a war. He remembered leaning against the bus window, forehead pressed to the cool glass as flares lit the morning sky in red and black.

Children waved hand-painted signs from their houses as their grandparents, who had seen Ballack's heartbreak in 2002, wept openly. The bus driver had slowed down in the empty street, almost as if they were going through a parade. Strangers sang his name, making it feel oddly different from what it felt in a packed stadium.

It was an overwhelming feeling despite having grown up with attention from the football world all his life. Their emotions were too raw, and their feelings of joy were genuine, even though they couldn't fully act on their happiness. Trumpets that would usually sound when the national team went on campaigns in international competition resounded.

The city rejoiced wherever the bus passed through, and even all through the night, they sounded. The BayArena stood like a fortress of pride, banners draped across its glass façade, catching the mid-morning sun. The words 'Leverkusen Kings of Germany 2020,' hung in bold Golden letters above the main entrance, flanked by the club crest on either side.

The bus rolled slowly into the car park, horns blaring, as staff members who were allowed to come to work despite regulations lined the path, clapping furiously. That didn't mute the atmosphere as one of the media staff could be seen with a camera broadcasting the events to the staff on a video call. As the doors hissed open, Lars Bender was the first to step out, trophy still clutched under his arm.

The captain raised it above his head one more time, greeted by a thunderous cheer from the staff and youth academy players who had been given a break from their academy training. Flower petals rained down, and sparklers fizzed along the walkway.

Managing Director Simon Rolfes was front and centre with the biggest smile he had ever seen on the man, warmly greeting each player and staff member as they were led inside. Inside the stadium lobby, a reception had been prepared with bottles of non-alcoholic sparkling grape juice, cakes shaped like the DFB-Pokal, and a massive hand-drawn Painting based on this year's team photo "Champions" printed across it for the players to sign.

The staff clapped them through like conquering heroes, each player stopping to shake hands or receive hugs. For many of these behind-the-scenes workers, like cooks, trainers, physios, drivers, and cleaners, this victory was as much theirs as it was the players'.

Bosz gathered the group briefly by the painting to share a quick word with his players. "Enjoy this. You've earned it. You've given this club something it will never forget." His words were short, but they were sweet.

As the players dispersed into smaller groups, Rakim lingered at the mural wall. He uncapped a thick black marker and scrawled his signature in bold strokes across under his figure. Next to him, Wirtz doodled a small crown above his signature, grinning. "History, bro," he said with a sleepy croak, clearly still feeling the effects of last night's partying.

~~~

[07/07/2020 | Time: 10:30 AM | Location: Cologne]

The happy atmosphere did not last long for Rakim, though, as two days later, he and May were greeted with unsettling news. They were woken up by notifications blowing up May's phone, which was a welcome change from the past few days. However, the news was nothing short of shocking to the two, as it pertained to her father, Victor.

Streamer May Parker's father, Victor Parker, Orlando con artist: Wall Street-based Atlantis fund partner arrested for mismanagement of client funds and suspected embezzlement charges, Tax evasion... by the SEC, FBI, and IRS.

Similar news article greeted the two as news from local media across the pond finally reached Mays' algorithm. Some news articles mentioned Rakim because they were publicly dating, which boosted the algorithm, as the German press was still discussing the historic moment Leverkusen had achieved.

"Raki... you need to see this," she whispered, voice flat with disbelief. She turned the phone toward him, the bold headline glaring back like a punch to the chest.

Rakim blinked hard, his sleepiness evaporating in an instant after noticing her panicked expression. He rubbed his face, trying to make sense of the words, the grainy mugshot of Victor Parker staring back at him. The article was relentless: embezzlement, mismanagement of client funds, tax evasion, suspected fraud reaching into Billions.

"Lord..." Rakim muttered, running a hand down his face. "They've got him on everything under the sun."

May's lips parted, but no words came as her finger subconsciously scrolled further. There were plenty of outlets, but each was uglier than the last, with some even getting creative, depicting Victor as a character straight out of Money Heist. It seemed like every American news outlet with a financial focus was covering the story, along with its regular coverage of bankruptcies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One media outlet even featured a thumbnail of him and May on a date, accompanied by an image of Victor in a jumpsuit. The Headline read, 'The German Cup hero dating the daughter of a conman across the Atlantic.' The only saving grace was that European media hadn't picked up the story yet, and the few that did focused on the culprit.

"Of course they'd drag you into this," May said bitterly, tossing the phone onto the sheets. "But I didn't realise it's this bad, they are saying he lost almost 3 billion Rakim."

He had no words for her, as he was also quite surprised by the amount stated, but didn't actually believe the amount; however, it must be in that ballpark. She seemed to have picked up on his hesitation, as the Tears that had been welling up in her eyes now fully streamed from her face. Rakim sat up fully now, the duvet sliding down his torso, his muscles stiff from training resuming the previous day.

Pulling her into his embrace, he threw away her phone, not minding that it crashed against the bedside lamp. Feeling his arms wrap around her, she no longer held back and fully wept. Seeing someone he loved in pain and not having a solution, he held her tighter, resting his chin on the crown of her head as sobs wracked her body.

The muffled sound of her crying filled the bedroom, suffocating both their emotions. His mind scrambled, trying to find the right words, but none seemed good enough. "It's not on you," he whispered at last, his voice steady despite the ache in his chest. "This isn't your fault. What he did, if he did it... That's on him, May."

She shook her head against his chest, hair sticking damp against his skin. "But everyone will look at me like I knew. Like I'm part of it. Like..." her voice cracked, "...like I'm tainted too."

He pulled back slightly, enough to cup her face and force her teary eyes to meet his. "Listen to me, you dummy. You're not him. This is unfortunate, and you are not to blame, regardless of what anyone says. We should call your family to understand what's going on; the news is as reliable as the weather."

Chapter 614 Even Greater Lows

[07/07/2020 | Time: 12:00 AM | Location: Hahnwald Estate, Cologne]

The following five days blurred together, a strange mix of chaos and routine for Rakim and May. The first day after the news broke had been nothing but calls—long, exhausting hours spent glued to their phones. Rakim had gotten in touch with his parents, but they were none the wiser as they had been staying with his mother's side of the family at Uncle Williams' vineyard in Montana. Additionally, they

had been busy dealing with their own business, which had taken a significant hit due to the pandemic, as their adjustments in the online market barely generated a slight profit beyond the breakeven point.

May finally managed to reach her stepmother, Evelyn, who was staying at her father's ranch in Texas with her brother, Reece. To May's pointed questions, as she felt both blindsided and angry for being kept in the dark, her mother's exhausted voice had been both placating and matter-of-fact.

"Your father and his lawyer are handling it," Evelyn said firmly over the phone. "He told me not to involve you, not to stress you. Plus, why didn't you tell me it was this bad? For months, I was struggling to figure out the reason you and your dad had a falling out, but now I finally understand."

What followed between the two women was a less-than-pleasant conversation that arose from Victor's betrayal, but left them to deal with the outcome. Both became defensive, adamant about their points, as May figured she had a right to be angry after discovering that her father had drained the inheritance left behind by her mother. Evelyn, on the other hand, felt like the father and daughter pair had kept something so monumental that affected her family, hidden from her.

In the end, Rakim had to drag the phone out of May's hands before both women could say something that they couldn't take back, but he was a step too late. The words "You're not my mother" had come out of May's mouth, and Evelyn had snapped back with something about this affecting her son's future before the line went dead.

~~~

[08/07/2020 | Time: 06:30 AM | Location: Hahnwald Estate, Cologne]

The second day brought a different kind of chaos. Rakim woke to the distant sound of car engines and muffled voices beyond his estate's gates. He couldn't see them after peering through his bedroom windows, as the estate's garden was far too big and with all the trees visually planted, no one could look in. He wasn't slow and could already figure out what or who it was that decided to break their peace this early in the morning.

Connecting his phone to the security system, the vultures quickly appeared on a video feed at the gate. Those who served the Fourth Estate appeared before him, holding microphones as they set up cameras as if they were gearing up for a battle. "What's going on?" May, who was tucked in the bed, groggily asked, her eyes dark as she had barely gotten a few hours of sleep.

"Don't worry, it's just a couple of bums gathering outside," he responded as he flicked on the security app, calling the community's security team, only having to wait for three rings to get an answer. "How can we assist you, Mr Rex?" a tiered but clear voice spoke clearly, having been sleeping on the job.

He took a moment to compose himself before speaking. "Well, Daniel, could you call the police? A couple of homeless people have gathered outside my place." He told the man, hearing rustling on the other end, before receiving a response. "Don't worry, we will deal with the 'Penners' right away."

Within minutes, two community guards in dark jackets appeared on the cameras at the gates, gesturing at the reporters to move along. The reporters refused to leave, stating that it was their right to be there, but the security guards were having none of it. Less than ten minutes later, five police vehicles pulled up as a group of officers surrounded the reporters, promptly writing them up for trespassing into a private community.

Despite the morning's disruption, Rakim still had training to attend. The Champions League committee had made their decision that the remaining matches would be played as a one-off elimination tournament starting next month in Lisbon, and Leverkusen needed to prepare. The cup victory had given them confidence, for the competition as they geared up to face RB In the quarter finals.

As his Lamborghini pulled up to the training ground gates, the same circus that had woken him up at his estate had relocated here. Cameras flashed through his tinted windows, and microphones were thrust toward his car like weapons. Security guards struggled to keep the growing crowd of reporters at bay as they shouted questions in multiple languages.

Not caring for whatever they had to say, he revved the car, causing the V12 engine to roar in displeasure, scaring the reporters enough to make way to the gate. With a slight nod of thanks to the security guards, he found his parking spot and got on with his day. Some teammates were curious about what was going on, but most kept to themselves as they went on with training.

~~~

[09/07/2020 | Time: 11:30 AM | Location: Hahnwald Estate, Cologne]

On the third day, when Rakim was at training, May was at home, trying to finish her online university coursework. The villa felt too big and too empty for her, despite Zeus's company. The German Shepherd had been restless for the past few days, almost as if feeling his owners' distress.

She'd given up trying to concentrate on her Marketing paper and was instead mindlessly scrolling through social media. For some reason, her entire feed seemed to be out to get her, as she either saw negative comments under her posts or stories about her father. Most of it was just the same old stories, as people seemingly recycled facts and added their own opinions, treating them as news.

What hurt her most was the fact that the friends in her streamer community started keeping their distance. Some even posted videos to clarify that they did not know of their associate's involvement in such an incident. Sighing at seeing people she had considered friends betray her, she got up and walked to the kitchen island for a glass of water.



Filling up a crystal glass with chilled water at the island, she took a sip only to receive the fright of her life. A man dressed in a black trench coat crouched in her backyard, camera raised toward the kitchen window where she stood. The telephoto lens was pointed directly at her, capturing her private moment in what should have been the sanctuary of her own home. For a split second, neither moved, the intruder frozen mid-shot, May paralysed with shock, the glass trembling in her hand.

It slipped from her grasp, crashing onto the marble floor, shattering into a million pieces, causing time to resume. The man fell backwards in shock, his camera clattering to the ground, hitting the stone pathway leading to the koi pond. Zeus immediately locked onto him and exploded from his resting platform, which was in the form of a boulder, at the corner of the living room.

The 95-pound German Shepherd moved like a missile through the sliding glass door that they kept open so he could exit into the garden whenever he wanted. Zeus's powerful haunches propelled him across the manicured lawn in three massive bounds, his teeth bared and a deep, guttural snarl emanating from his throat. The intruder, who had been scrambling to retrieve his expensive camera equipment, looked up just in time to see a furious canine bearing down on him.

Before May could react the man's terrified shriek resounded as the dog's jaws clamped down on his outstretched forearm. The telephoto lens cracked against the stone pathway as the photographer went down hard, Zeus's weight driving him backwards into the ornamental hedge that bordered the koi pond.

The man's black coat tore as he thrashed, trying to protect his face while Zeus maintained his grip on the intruder's arm. Blood seeped through the fabric as the dog's training to subdue kicked in but his protective instincts were in full control. The photographer's panicked kicks only seemed to anger the Shepherd further, who adjusted his grip and clamped down on the man's thigh.

"Help! Somebody help me!" the man screamed in accented English, as he desperately tried to fend off the attack. May finally snapped out of her shock, slippers crunching over broken glass as she rushed toward the chaos in her backyard.

"Zeus! Platz! Platz!" she commanded, using the German commands Rakim had taught her. The dog's ears twitched at the familiar word, but his grip remained firm.

Chapter 615 Got That Dog

[09/07/2020 | Time: 11:50 AM | Location: Hahnwald Estate, Cologne]

"Zeus! Platz! Platz!" she commanded, using the German commands Rakim had taught her. The dog's ears twitched at the familiar word, but his grip remained firm. Still, in the end, he let go as May neared, moving to stand next to her as he growled at the whimpering man.

The man immediately scrambled backwards, clutching his torn arm against his chest, blood dripping steadily onto the pristine lawn. His face was pale with shock and pain as he continued to cry out in agony. "You're insane!" he gasped in heavily accented English, German mixed with what sounded like Dutch. "That beast needs to be put down; it could have killed me!"

(Woof) Zeus loudly barked, seemingly taking his aggressive words as a threat, stepping in front of May. "What kind of idiot breaks into a house with a dog, just shut up while I call the police. Zeus Schau (Look)." She commanded before walking back to the house as Zeus lay down in front of the man.

"Hey, you can't just leave me here!" He shouted in anger, attempting to get up, but that prompted Zeus to get up from his sleeping position. This immediately froze the man, who then behaved and sat back down as the dog resumed its resting position.

~~~

[13:00]

Rakim was sitting in the relaxation lounge with some of his teammates, sipping on a Carrot, clementine & pineapple juice. Following the players' request, the club added a professional Juice Bar that worked in tandem with their team nutritionist. The players had just finished going through the recovery routine following today's training session.

"Man, I'm telling you, we're practically the kings of Cologne now," Diaby commented with a bright smile as he sipped his ginger orange recovery juice. "So I took my girl to Dario's Pizzeria, and let me tell you, the food chefs kiss that three-star Michelin is well deserved..."

"Wait, you got a girl to go out with you?" Leon teased, causing a bout of laughter from the nearby player. "Wait, you actually got a seat at Darios? That place is booked solid for months."

"Yeah, I got a girl we've been dating for months, I'm actually handsome, unlike you ugly bastards," the French man retorted with a smug grin only to be met with angry retorts. "Being angry won't change facts, anyway. We enjoyed the food, then came the bill, and oh boy, was it long."

The look of terror on his face made all the players gulp in understanding, having faced similar situations in the past. "Being the Casanova that I am, I couldn't be a bitch, so I fished for my card, ready to pay, but then came the head chef Dario." He took a pause, letting the tension build. "The man asked for a picture with the champ and forgave the bill."

"That lucky bastard," Bailey muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "Free food at Dario's? Man, I've been trying to get a reservation there for months."

"Being cup winners has its perks," Diaby grinned, taking another sip of his juice. "Though I'm not sure how long this honeymoon period will last. Once the season starts again, we'll just be another team trying to—"

Rakim's phone buzzed aggressively in his pocket, cutting through the conversation. The caller ID was unfamiliar, because it wasn't every day that the police called him. "Hello, this is Officer Müller. Is this Rakim Rex?" A commanding but polite voice resounded over the speakers, instantly causing him to freeze up.

"Yes, that's me. Is something wrong, Officer?" he asked, already feeling a knot in his stomach.

"Ah, sorry to inform you, but someone broke into your property. Ah, don't worry, your companion is fine. Your dog took a good chunk out of him, subduing him. He's now in the hospital. I'm calling to let you know so you can press charges." There was a long silence following the officer's voice, during which neither of them spoke, but Rakim's entire demeanour had turned cold.

"Of course, we were pressing charges against all the mr officers." He quickly responded after gathering his thoughts. "We will cooperate fully if you need anything. I'll be at my home as soon as possible."

"I have to go," Rakim announced abruptly, standing up from the lounge chair so fast that his juice cup nearly toppled over. The casual atmosphere among his teammates shifted instantly as they registered the tension in his voice and the rigid set of his shoulders.

"Whoa, what's wrong?" Bailey asked, setting down his own drink, concern clearly evident in his voice as he studied Rakim's face.

"Someone broke into my house," Rakim said curtly, already pulling his training bag from under his chair. "May's fine, but Zeus attacked the intruder..." He paused, running a hand through his hair. "Police are involved now, so I need to go handle it. Can one of you let the Gaffer know?"

The group fell silent except for the hum of the air conditioning. Diaby was the first to speak. "Bro, that's insane. Was it one of those reporters?"

"Has to be," Leon muttered, shaking his head. "They've been camping outside the training ground for days. I knew this would escalate."

Rakim's jaw clenched as he shouldered his bag. "I need to get home. May's dealing with this alone, and I should have been there."

"Hey," Diaby said, standing up and placing a firm hand on Rakim's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself, man. The important thing is May's safe."

"And Zeus did what he's supposed to do," Bailey added. "Protected his family. He's really got that dog in him, you should get him a medal or one of those bison legs you get him for special occasions."

~~~

[13:45 PM]

Rakim's Lamborghini roared up the driveway, tyres gliding over the block pavement as he parked hastily near the front entrance. Two police cars sat in his circular driveway, leading to the front door, their presence making the situation feel more real. He said hello to the officer before rushing into the house, where he found May sitting at the marble island in the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket despite the warm July afternoon.

A female police officer sat across from her, notebook in hand, while a paramedic finished bandaging a small cut on May's foot from the broken glass. "Are you okay?" Rakim asked immediately, crossing to her side and wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

May leaned into him, and he felt some of the tension leave her body. "I'm fine. Just shaken up. Zeus..." She gestured toward the living room where the German Shepherd lay on his platform, lying back down after realising that the person who had barged into the room was his master. "He did exactly what he was trained to do."

Officer Müller, a stocky man in his fifties with greying temples, approached them. "Mr Rex? I'm the one who called you. Your dog quite literally caught our intruder red-handed - or should I say red-armed." His little joke fell flat, as some of the officers felt a sense of second-hand embarrassment at their superior, looking away to avoid eye contact.

He didn't mind, though, as a hint of approval appeared on his face. "The man is at Cologne General Hospital receiving stitches. Puncture wounds on his forearm and thigh, nothing life-threatening, but enough to make him think twice about trespassing again."

"What exactly happened?" Rakim asked, though he could already piece together most of it from the scene.

The female officer, Inspector Weber, flipped through her notes. "The suspect, one Henrik Vandenburg from Amsterdam, was found crouched in your backyard with professional camera equipment. He claims he's a photographer working for a British tabloid, The Son, though he couldn't produce proper press credentials."

"We double checked with the security cameras and found that he hopped over the wall on the east side." The officer continued with a serious expression. "We're still not sure why the alarm wasn't triggered, but luckily, your dog was there to take him down before it could get dangerous."

Chapter 616

[15/07/2020 | Time: 08:00 AM | News Report - German Sports Network]

The morning news cycle sifted to a lighter story, shifted from serious coverage of the BLM riots to tabloid legal troubles. Anchor Maria Schneider's voice carried the gravity of the situation as she addressed viewers across Germany.

"In a developing story that has captured national football attention, Bayer Leverkusen wunderkind Rakim Rex and his legal team have filed comprehensive lawsuits against both photographer Henrik Vandenburg and the British tabloid publication The Son that employed him. The lawsuits, filed yesterday in a German civil court, seek damages exceeding two million euros and include charges of criminal trespass, invasion of privacy, and conspiracy to violate residential security laws."

The screen cut to footage of Rakim's personal attorney, Mike Spectre, a junior Partner at his uncle's law firm. The man handled all of his contracts, from ensuring there were no hidden clauses to ensuring his interests were legally protected. "My client has been subjected to systematic harassment that culminated in a criminal breach of his home security," Mr Spectre stated firmly to the assembled press. "This was not journalism - this was a coordinated attack on a private citizen's fundamental right to safety and privacy. The perpetrator planned this intrusion, disabled security systems, and invaded

private property with the express purpose of capturing unauthorised photographs. We will pursue this matter to the fullest extent of German and International law."

The news report continued with analysis from legal experts and TV personalities. They had differing views, with the minor celebrities being of the opinion that it comes with the territory and was being blown out of proportion. The legal experts held differing opinions, arguing that, regardless of the grey areas in news gathering, knowingly breaking the law was inexcusable. The fact that Vandenburg had tampered with security equipment transformed what might have been a simple trespassing case into something far more serious.

~~~

[15/07/2020 | Time: 9:30 AM | Leverkusen Training Ground]

At the BayArena training facility, the lawsuit had become the talk of the locker room. Rakim arrived to find several teammates discussing the news coverage they had caught in the morning. "Bro, two million euros?" Diaby whistled low. "You're not playing around."

"Honestly, half of that is probably going to be lawyer fees and taxes; my team just doesn't want other eager reporters getting any bright ideas." He responded, dropping his training bag into his locker. "Anyway, we've got bigger fish to focus on right now, Champions League."

"Honestly, it feels weird to still be playing this late; my body is already in holiday mode," Bailey responded, bringing a hand to his mouth, doing his best to resist a yawn.

"I know, I had plans to take my family to America in the summer, but right now I'd rather we stay home. It's still crazy over there," Volland commented with a light sigh, bringing the mood down as all knew what he was mentioning. They had just somewhat recovered from the pandemic, but the world was as tense as ever.

(Clap clap clap) "C'camon lads, let's just focus on today. If you're ready, head out. The trainers are ready." Lars Bender exclaimed, breaking the tension and prompting some of the players who were lingering to get moving.

Training proceeded with increased intensity as the Champions League quarter finals loomed. Bosz had the squad working through tactical drills explicitly designed for the knockout format they'd face in Lisbon. The single-elimination structure meant there was no room for error, no second leg to correct mistakes.

Since they had a long prep time, the training was a mix of intense and light-hearted games. Players had more opportunities to work on individual drills in addition to the team ones. However, the mornings were spent on intense drills, as they tried to refine their strategy going into the match against RB.

Before they knew it, days rolled by. On one hand, Rakim's life at home was calmer than it had been since the chaos first broke. The National coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement gradually overshadowed the coverage of May's father in the United States. Newsrooms that had tried to divert attention from it were forced to go back to it as the issue continued to escalate.

For May, it was a breath of air she needed, which she was thankful for, as the spotlight was no longer directly on her. She spent more time in the garden with Zeus, reading or sketching, taking a break from social media. She had finished her last exams and was awaiting the results.

~~~

[07/08/2020 | Time: 12:00 PM | Location: BayArena, Leverkusen]

The calendar flipped to August, and the German press had finally shifted back to football. Reporters sent by the UEFA committee arrived at training, where they interviewed players and coaches. Questions at press conferences now revolved around tactics, on Leverkusen's path to the quarter finals.

Rakim outright refused to answer any tabloid questions, keeping things to football only. The German press was nonetheless excited, as three German teams had made it to the last eight. Although it would be a clash of compatriots in the quarter finals, the chance of bringing the trophy home was still fifty per cent.

Belief in Bayern Munich coming out victorious was the rule, even against Barcelona. Their opponents were underperforming compared to the standard they are used to, failing to win a single trophy this year. This was despite the fact that Ronaldo left the league at the end of last season, removing one of their major stumbling blocks.

~~~

[15/08/2020 | Time: 10:45 AM | Location: BayAren, Bus Terminal]

The hum of the bus engine was the only consistent sound in the air as players began to arrive in staggered waves. Security personnel kept the gate clear while Leverkusen staff loaded luggage into the undercarriage of the sleek, jet-black team coach wrapped in their club branding. It felt more real that the season was finally narrowing toward its dramatic conclusion.

The roar of Rakim's mint green i8 resounded as he pulled into the parking lot, quickly finding his spot. Moments later, he stepped out of the car, looking clean and wearing the compulsory black suit for the trip. His hair had grown quite full in the past few months and had been cut into a low taper with blond tips that had faded, dyed back to his natural colour, or snipped.

Earbuds, he stepped out of the car with a duffel bag in hand, containing his personal belongings that he would need on a day-to-day basis. The other stuff had already been packed and left for the club to sort for the trip to Lisbon. Greeting a few staff members, he alighted the bus, joining the rest of his teammates.

"You ready?" Wirtz asked him as he took the seat next to him, not even bothering with a hello. "My folks woke me up at six, telling me that no matter what, we couldn't lose to RB."

Rakim chuckled, settling into the seat and pulling out one earbud. "Your parents sound like mine. My mom called me last night, saying she'd already bought a Sky Sports membership to watch us play in the finals."

"Yeah, kinda weird how everyone seems to believe in us more after we defeated Bayern in the finals," Wirtz said with glee as he best knew the difference, having come up in the Leverkusen system since he was young. "RB are good, but we got all the momentum now, I don't see us giving that up."

Around them, the bus filled with familiar faces as players and staff continued to arrive, taking their seats. Some were still tired and used this chance to catch up on z's after customary greetings. It was the younger players, such as Bailey and Wendell, who were naturally energetic, that brought up the mood. Hradecky was the last to board, earning a round of applause from his teammates. The Finnish keeper had been receiving praise all year for only ever being late when they had to travel somewhere.

"I had to stop and help a grandma carry her groceries home and wait for a kindergarten class to cross the road..." He sheepishly explained, earning another bout of cheers and applause.

"Alright, just pay you a five-pound fine and listen up!" Peter Bosz stepped onto the bus at the front, patting him on the shoulder. The chatter died down immediately. "We've got a two-hour flight to Lisbon, then straight to the hotel. Training session tomorrow morning at the Estádio da Luz to get familiar with the pitch. I want everyone to be focused and professional. This is the Champions League quarter finals - we're eight teams away from being champions of Europe."

"Seven teams, boss," someone called out from the back. "We're one of the eight."

Bosz allowed himself a small smile. "Seven teams then. The point stands. This is our chance to show the world that Leverkusen isn't just a cup winner - we're a European force. Now let's move out."

With that, the bus rumbled to life, pulling away from the BayArena training complex. As they passed through Leverkusen's streets, a few early fans waved and held up scarves despite the lack of any formal announcement about their departure time. Word had spread through social media, as it always did.

Chapter 617 Lisbon

[11/08/2020 | Time: 14:30 PM | Humberto Delgado Airport, Lisbon]

The Lufthansa charter touched down with a slight bounce, tyres squealing against Portuguese tarmac. Through the oval windows, Lisbon stretched out in shimmering afternoon heat—terracotta rooftops, the Tagus River glinting like hammered bronze, and in the distance, the distinctive outline of the Estádio da Luz rising like a colosseum.

"Welcome to Lisbon," the pilot announced in accented English. "Local time is 14:30, temperature is 32 degrees Celsius. On behalf of the crew, good luck in the Champions League."

The cabin erupted in applause and cheers. Rakim unbuckled his seatbelt and stretched, feeling the stiffness from the two-hour flight settle into his lower back. Around him, teammates were already pulling bags from overhead compartments, the nervous energy palpable.

"Feels different, doesn't it?" Havertz said from across the aisle, slinging his backpack over one shoulder. "Landing always makes it feel real. No going back, it's game time."

"I know what you mean," Rakim replied. "I'm tired of waiting, though, would play tomorrow if I could."

The descent down the airstairs was met with a wall of heat that hit like the opening of an oven door. Portuguese officials in high-visibility vests directed them toward a cordoned-off section of the tarmac where three coaches waited, their engines already running for air conditioning. Once everyone had boarded, they were whisked away to the designated border control.

UEFA banners hung from portable barriers, and medical staff in full PPE stood ready with temperature scanners. "Right, lads, single file!" Peter Bosz took charge immediately, calling out. "Temperature checks first, then straight to the buses. No wandering off."

The COVID protocols went by promptly as the staff members methodically did their job. Each player had their temperature taken via a forehead scanner, filled out health questionnaires on tablets, and received colour-coded wristbands indicating their bubble status. Green meant they were cleared for all activities, Yellow meant they required monitoring, and Red meant they needed isolation.

The verdict for the Leverkusen contingent when everything was over was that Everyone got green. "Efficient," Wirtz muttered as they finally boarded their bus out of the Airport. "Feels like we just went through a military base."

"Might as well be," Diaby said, dropping into a seat near the front. "They're not taking any chances. One positive test and your whole tournament could collapse."

~~~

[15:45 PM]

The drive into central Lisbon took forty minutes through traffic that was unconcerned with Champions League football. Scooters weaved between lanes, trams rattled down narrow streets, and pedestrians spilt off pavements keeping larger distances, everyone still tense from the recent pandemic.

Rakim watched it all through his tinted window, taking in the faded grandeur of the architecture, the washing lines strung between balconies, and the graffiti, which mixed political slogans with football club crests. Lisbon felt lived-in, as one could easily get a hint of the city's history with just a glance.

"There," Bailey pointed as they rounded a corner. A massive UEFA Champions League banner hung from a government building, featuring stylised football players mid-action. Beneath it, in multiple languages: "Lisboa 2020 - The Final Eight."

"Still can't believe they're doing the whole tournament in one city," Volland said. "Single elimination, neutral venue. It's basically a World Cup format."

"Makes it better," Rakim said. "Kinda feels like a youth tournament back when we were young."

"It's been a while since I've thought about one of those tournaments. I miss them." The German striker lamented, seemingly lost in a memory. "I was a beast back in Marktoberdorf, they called me the..."

The team hotel was the Tivoli Avenida Liberdade, a five-star property that had been converted into a UEFA bubble facility. The entire building had been reserved for Champions League teams, with different floors allocated to each club. Security barriers blocked the main entrance, and private security personnel checked credentials before allowing anyone through.

"They sure are burning a lot of money on useless things, it almost feels like a peacock in a d\*&k measuring contest." Diaby had muttered as they observed the whole shabang that were solely there to flex.

Inside the lobby, the atmosphere was surreal, with UEFA branding covering every surface. Banners, floor decals, and even the carpets had been replaced with custom designs featuring the Champions League. Staff wore masks and gloves, and plexiglass barriers separated the check-in desks.

"Welcome to Bayer Leverkusen," a UEFA official greeted them with a clipboard. "You're on floors seven and eight. Room assignments are alphabetical by surname. Masks must be worn in all common areas. Meals are served in your designated dining room at scheduled times only. Any questions?"

"Can we leave the hotel?" someone asked.

"Only for official UEFA activities—training, matches, press conferences. Everything else is within the bubble. There's a gym, pool, and recreation room on your floors."

"Basically house arrest," Diaby muttered.

"Basically, focus on winning a game of football," Bosz corrected him sharply. "Focus on that."

[16:30 PM]

Rakim's room was on the seventh floor, overlooking Avenida da Liberdade. It was spacious enough, featuring a king-sized bed, a work desk, and a small sitting area—but clearly designed for luxury over function. The windows didn't open more than a crack, probably to prevent anyone from breaking bubble protocols.

His roommate situation had been resolved before departure: single rooms for all players to minimise transmission risk. It was the first time in his professional career he'd had genuine privacy on an away trip. After unpacking his essentials and taking a quick shower to wash off the flight, Rakim stood at the window and watched Lisbon move below.

Trams crawled up the avenue, tourists (the few that remained) took photos, and somewhere in the distance, another Champions League team was probably checking into their own bubble. His phone buzzed. A text from May: Safe landing? Miss you already.

He replied quickly: Made it. The hotel's nice, but it feels like a fancy prison. How's Zeus?



May: He's sulking. Keeps checking our bedroom door. I showed him your jersey, and he looked as though he was betrayed.

~~~

[18:00 PM]

Dinner was served in a private dining room on the eighth floor, with the long tables arranged to provide careful spacing between seats. The meal was carefully calibrated by the team nutritionist, featuring grilled fish, steamed vegetables, and complex carbohydrates, prioritising fuel over pleasure.

"Anyone else feel like we're in a costly boarding school?" Wirtz asked, pushing quinoa around his plate.

"Boarding schools don't have this," Bellarabi said, gesturing toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered panoramic views of Lisbon at sunset. The city glowed amber and gold, the Tagus River reflecting the dying light like molten metal.

Bosz stood at the head of the room, tapping a glass to get everyone's attention. "Listen up. Tomorrow morning, 9 AM sharp, we're at the Estádio da Luz for our first training session. UEFA allows each team one familiarisation session before match day. We're going to use every minute of it."

He clicked a remote, and a projector screen descended behind him, showing the stadium's specifications: dimensions, surface type, and altitude. "The pitch plays fast. The grass is cut short, and

the ball moves quickly. Our passing game will be sharper, but theirs will be too. Positioning and movement will be crucial."

The tactical breakdown continued for twenty minutes, RB Leipzig's likely formation, their pressing triggers, and vulnerable zones. Rakim absorbed it all while mechanically eating his meal, his mind already playing out scenarios. Understanding these tactical breakdowns had become second nature for players, much like F1 drivers naturally absorbing telemetry data.

[21:30 PM]

Unable to sleep, Rakim found himself on the hotel's rooftop terrace. It was technically off-limits to guests, but a sympathetic staff member had let him through after seeing his restlessness. The Lisbon skyline stretched out before him, a constellation of lights flood-lit the Cristo Rei statue across the river.

"Thought I'd find you up here." Rakim turned to see Wirtz emerging from the stairwell, hands in his pockets. "Can't sleep either?"

"Nah. Too weird." The young Leverkusen prodigy replied as he joined him at the railing, both staring out at the city. "Keeps hitting me in waves, you know? Like, we're actually here. Champions League quarter finals. A year ago, I was in the youth team."

"A year ago, I was still at Celtic," Rakim said. "Feels like a lifetime now."

"Kinda weird how we are living the same dream but took different journeys to get here," Wirtz said, his eyes shining from the light's reflection. "That's football for you, I guess."

Chapter 618 Lisbon (2)

[12/08/2020 | Time: 08:45 AM | Team Bus to Estádio da Luz]

The morning air was already thick with heat as the team bus wound its way through Lisbon's streets toward the stadium. Players were quieter than usual, most with headphones in, mentally preparing for the upcoming training session. Rakim watched the city pass by, noting the increased security presence, police motorcycles escorting their convoy.

Despite the fact that fans wouldn't be at the stadium they those in the city had gathered on the streets in hopes of seeing one of the teams. To them, it was an odd situation as well, having a major tournament in their city and not being able to attend. "First time seeing it in person?" Lars Bender asked from the seat behind him.

"The Estádio da Luz? Yeah." Rakim responded with a light smile on his face. "Though I think the Bay looks better."

"That's true, but it must be mad having sixty-five thousand fans watch you when it's full. Too bad we won't get to experience it." Volland, sitting next to Lars, lamented as they rounded the final corner, the stadium coming into view.

A massive oval structure with a distinctive red and white exterior, the UEFA Champions League banners draped across its facade, fluttering in the breeze. "There she is," Bailey whispered. "The Cathedral of Football."

[09:15 AM | Estádio da Luz - Training Session]

The moment the Leverkusen players stepped off the team bus and through the tunnel into the Estádio da Luz, they promptly went through their tour. They found their designated changing room and immediately got set for their training session. The moment the players dressed in their training kits stepped out past the tunnel, the open expanse of the stadium hit them like a wave.

Even empty, the ground emitted an energy begging to be played upon. Maybe it was the deep red seats rising in layers around them, or perhaps just the knowledge that in less than 36 hours, this pitch would host one of the most important matches of their careers. Rakim jogged onto the turf with the rest of the squad, his boots biting into the manicured grass.

It felt fast beneath his soles, exactly as Bosz had described the night before. The lines on the pitch had been freshly painted, glowing in the morning sun. All around the perimeter, UEFA staff and cameramen were scattered, testing broadcast angles and equipment, while masked journalists perched in the upper tiers, sketching out their pre-match headlines.

"Five-a-side warm-up!" the assistant coach called. "Yellow bibs, red bibs — let's go Tempo tempo!"

Training started with a light rondo to loosen up, but it didn't take long for the intensity to ratchet up. Rakim found himself in a triangle with Wirtz and Demirbay, exchanging sharp passes while dodging Lars Bender's flying lunges. The ball zipped along the grass with a satisfying hiss, like a blade through silk.

"Over here," Rakim called out, and Wirtz fed him a disguised backheel, which he latched onto on the move.

"Over here," Amiri called out from the edge of the square, prompting Rakim to skip an Ozil-style bounce pass past Wendell.

The training continued in full swing as they went through their training menu. The best way to get a feel for the field was to play on it, and the coaches had the players do just that, from small rondos to possession games to simply passing and shooting exercises. They did everything except work on their formation and tactics, as they had been doing that for the past month.

~~~

[10:00 AM | Sky Sports Champions League Studio]

While the players were acclimating themselves to the pitch, the Champions League talk show was in full swing. All week, they had been building up the audience for this unusual final stretch of the tournament. Now that they were so close to actual games, they decided to push hard for the final stretch.

The Sky Sports studio was bathed in blue light, the Champions League logo spinning slowly on the massive LED wall behind the panel. Jamie Redknapp sat at the centre of the curved desk, flanked by Rio Ferdinand and Steven Gerrard, with Alex Scott rounding out the quartet.

"Welcome back to our Champions League coverage," Redknapp began, shuffling his notes. "We're just two days away from the quarter finals, and let's start with tomorrow's opening fixture, RB Leipzig versus Bayer Leverkusen. Rio, you've been watching Leverkusen closely. What are your thoughts?"

Rio Ferdinand leaned forward, his expression thoughtful. "Look, I'll be honest, when the draw was made, I thought Leipzig would cruise through this. But after watching that DFB-Pokal final? I'm not so sure anymore. Leverkusen showed serious character coming back twice against Bayern. That's not luck, that's mentality."

"But this is different, though, isn't it?" Alex Scott interjected. "Leipzig is built for this high-intensity, one-off format. Nagelsmann's system is designed to overwhelm teams early. Can Leverkusen handle that press for ninety minutes?"

Steven Gerrard nodded slowly. "That's the question. Leipzig will come out flying, trying to force mistakes in the first twenty minutes. If Leverkusen can weather that storm, if they can stay compact and not panic under pressure, then they've got the quality to hurt Leipzig on the counter."

"Let's talk about individuals," Redknapp said, clicking a remote. The screen behind them switched to highlight footage. "Rakim Rex. The recently turned seventeen-year-old will want to put on a show for his first game back."

"He's a special player for sure," Rio said immediately. "We have seen him do some incredible things for any player, regardless of age, but he'll be hoping that with maturity, his game continues to evolve."

"He's raw, though," Scott countered. "Still makes mistakes. Against Leipzig's press, if he takes one heavy touch in the wrong area, they'll punish him."

"Let's be honest, when is the last time you've seen him take a heavy touch?" Gerrard argued. "He has an uncanny ability to draw the game in creating room for his teammates, and lest not forget his ability to punish any little mistakes." He made an explosive gesture with his hands.

The screen switched to tactical diagrams—Leipzig's 3-4-3 press versus Leverkusen's 4-2-3-1 build-up.

"Tactically, this is fascinating," Redknapp said, pointing to the graphics. "Leipzig's wing-backs will push high, trying to pin Leverkusen's fullbacks. But that leaves space in behind. If Leverkusen can find their wingers in those channels with one pass, they're in business."

"True, I could very well see the game unfolding in that manner." Rio agreed. "Nagelsmann versus Bosz. High risk, high reward on both sides. But I'll tell you what, if Leverkusen get an early goal, this could get very interesting."

~~~

[15:35 AM | Tivoli Avenida Liberdade - Tactical Walkthrough]

Back at the hotel, the team had lunch and then proceeded to have a light gym session in the afternoon. Following the break, they gathered in the conference room for the final item on their agenda. Munching on their snacks, the players settled into their seats, waiting for the tactical meeting to begin.

They didn't have to wait long as Peter Bosz walked in with his assistant manager, Fredrick Bauer, files in hand. "Alright, gentlemen," Bosz began, his voice cutting through the casual chatter as he moved to stand beside the projector screen. "Tomorrow at 21:00, we step onto that pitch for real. No second chances, no second legs. Win or go home."

The room fell silent as the players who'd been scrolling their phones pocketed them immediately. "RB Leipzig," Bosz continued, clicking to bring up their formation diagram. "We expect them to show up in their best lineup in the 3-4-3 formation. Upamecano, Konaté, and Klostermann at the back. Angeliño and Mukiele as wing-backs. Sabitzer and Kampl in the double pivot. Nkunku, Poulsen, and Olmo up front."

He let that sink in before continuing. "Nagelsmann is predictable in the best possible way. He'll press us high, force us into mistakes in our own third, then punish us on the transition. Their statistics speak for themselves—they've won possession in the final third more than any other team in the competition."

Lars Bender raised his hand. "How aggressive are the wing-backs?"

"Very," Fredrick Bauer interjected, stepping forward with a laser pointer. "Watch this." He clicked through several video clips showing Angeliño bombing forward, leaving huge gaps in his wake. "They commit numbers forward, but it leaves them exposed in the channels. Especially here,"—he circled the space between centre-back and wing-back— "and here."

"So our strategy," Bosz said, "is simple in theory, difficult in execution. We absorb their initial press—stay calm, don't force passes, don't panic. When we win the ball, we go directly. One or two passes maximum into those channels we just showed you."

He clicked to a new slide showing Leverkusen's counter-attacking patterns. "Rakim, Moussa—you're our primary outlets. When we win possession, you need to be already moving into those spaces. Not waiting, moving. Kai, you're the link. You drop, you receive, you turn and release them immediately."

Chapter 619 Quarterfinal

[13/08/2020 | Time: 20:45 PM | Estádio da Luz, Lisbon]

The Estádio da Luz sat under a darkening Portuguese sky, its red seats glowing under the stadium lights like embers. Despite the empty stands, the atmosphere crackled with tension. This was the Champions League, and history would be written tonight regardless of who watched.

In the commentary box high above the pitch, Peter Drury settled into his seat, shuffling his notes one final time. Beside him, Jim Beglin adjusted his headset, both men preparing for what promised to be a fascinating tactical battle.

"Good evening and welcome to the Estádio da Luz here in Lisbon," Drury began, his voice carrying the gravitas that had become the soundtrack of so many memorable nights. "We are moments away from the first quarter-final of this unique Champions League tournament. RB Leipzig versus Bayer Leverkusen—two German sides, but only one will advance to face either Paris Saint-Germain or Atalanta in the semi-finals."

"It's a fascinating matchup, Peter," Beglin added. "Two clubs built on very different philosophies, but both playing aggressive, front-foot football. This should be an absolute cracker."

The camera panned across the pitch, where players from both sides stood lined up in the tunnel waiting for the go signal. The giant screens at either end of the stadium displayed the team sheets.

"Let's have a look at the lineups then," Drury continued. "RB Leipzig, under Julian Nagelsmann, line up in what looks like a 4-2-3-1, though we know it will be fluid. In goal, Péter Gulácsi. The back four: Lukas Klostermann at left-back, the powerhouse pairing of Dayot Upamecano and Marcel Halstenberg in the centre, and José Tasende on the right. A young defence, but they've been excellent this season."

"The midfield double pivot," Beglin picked up, "Konrad Laimer and Kevin Kampl, two tireless workers who will be key to Leipzig's high press. Then the attacking three: Marcel Sabitzer on the left, Dani Olmo in the middle as the ten, and Christopher Nkunku on the right. Leading the line, Yussuf Poulsen."

"No, Timo Werner, of course," Drury noted. "He's already made his move to Chelsea. But this Leipzig side has shown they can cope without him."

The camera shifted to the Leverkusen side, moving down the line, briefly stopping at all players who either ignored it or interacted. "And for Bayer Leverkusen," Drury continued, "Peter Bosz has named a strong side. Lukas Hradecky is in goal. The defence: Wendell at left-back, Sven Bender and Jonathan Tah as the centre-back pairing, and captain Lars Bender on the right. Two brothers in that back line, Jim."

"Absolutely, and what a story that is," Beglin said. "In midfield, Kerem Demirbay and Charles Aránguiz are sitting deep, both excellent on the ball. Then the attacking trio, and here's where it gets interesting, Peter. On the left wing, seventeen-year-old Rakim Rex. In the middle, 21-year-old Kai Havertz. And on the right, Seventeen-year-old Florian Wirtz. That is a frightening amount of young talent."

"Leading the line is Kevin Volland," Drury added. "Not the flashiest name, perhaps, but a player who knows where the goal is. And behind him, that trio of Rex, Havertz, and Wirtz—a combined age of just fifty-five years old. Remarkable."

"The question is whether they can handle the occasion," Beglin said. "Leipzig will press them high, try to force mistakes. If those young players can stay calm and pick their moments, Leverkusen have the quality to hurt anyone. But if they panic..."

"Then Leipzig will punish them," Drury finished. "Both teams are coming into this match with confidence. Leipzig topped their Champions League group, while Leverkusen won the DFB-Pokal just last month with a stunning 5-4 victory over Bayern Munich."

The players began making their way out of the tunnel, the iconic Champions League music greeting them like gladiators entering their arena of battle. The Anthem surprisingly sounded more surreal in the sparsely populated stands as only UEFA staff sat in some seats.

The two lines emerged from the tunnel side by side, stepping onto the immaculate turf of the Estádio da Luz. The stadium lights were blinding, the grass perfect, the goalposts gleaming. Cameras tracked their every movement as they lined up for the pre-match formalities.

Handshakes were exchanged quickly, professional pictures were taken, and a coin was tossed. The decision was made in Leipzig's favour, as the players dispersed to their positions, and Rakim jogged to the left wing, feeling the grass beneath his boots and testing the surface one final time. The ball sat at the centre spot, where Poulsen and Olmo waited for the referee's whistle.

Peter Drury's voice rose in the commentary box: "Here we go then. RB Leipzig in their white kits with red trim. Bayer Leverkusen in their traditional red and black. The referee checks his watch..."

Rakim took a deep breath, scanning the positions of his teammates, saying a light prayer as he cleared his mind. "This is it," he whispered to himself. The referee raised his whistle to his lips (FEEEEeeettt).

~~~

[13/08/2020 | Time: 20:45 PM | Estádio da Luz, Lisbon]

[1']

(FWEEEEET)

The whistle pierced the Lisbon night, and the ball was rolled back from Poulsen to Olmo. Leipzig immediately pushed forward, their white shirts flooding into Leverkusen's half like a tide. Kampl received and spread it wide to Nkunku, who took one touch before firing it back inside to Sabitzer.

"And we're underway in Lisbon," Drury announced. "Leipzig immediately on the front foot, as we expected."

The opening minutes were frantic, with Leipzig pressing high and Leverkusen struggling to find their rhythm. Every pass was contested, every touch pressured. Hradecky was forced to go long twice in the first three minutes, bypassing the midfield entirely.

"This is exactly what Nagelsmann wanted," Beglin observed. "Leverkusen can't get out of their own half. The question is, can Leipzig maintain this intensity for ninety minutes?"

[8']

The first real chance came in the eighth minute. Laimer won possession in midfield with a crunching tackle on Demirbay, immediately feeding Nkunku on the right. The Frenchman drove at Wendell, cut inside onto his left foot, and curled a shot toward the far corner.

Hradecky was equal to it, diving to his left body fully outstretched to push it wide. "Lovely technique from Nkunku," Drury said. "But Hradecky comes to the rescue."

As Leipzig prepared to take the corner, Beglin shifted topics. "You know, Peter, there's been a lot of talk about how this extended season is affecting players. Normally at this point in August, they'd be on

beaches somewhere, recovering. Instead, they're playing in one of the most intense tournaments in football."

"Absolutely," Drury replied as the corner was cleared. "And clubs are worried about injuries, about burnout. We've already seen several high-profile players pick up knocks. The financial pressure from COVID means they can't afford to lose key assets before the transfer window."

[14']

Leverkusen finally found some possession around the quarter-hour mark. Aránguiz dropped deep to collect from Tah, turned, and played a lovely ball over the top for Rakim, who had drifted inside. The young winger controlled the ball on his chest, but Upamecano was there instantly, his long legs stretching to poke the ball away.

"Good awareness from Upamecano," Beglin noted. "He's been linked with several big clubs this summer, Bayern, United, Chelsea, all reportedly interested. Performances like this in the Champions League only increase his value."

"Indeed," Drury agreed. "And speaking of transfers, Kai Havertz is the subject of intense speculation. Chelsea is said to be preparing a bid north of seventy million pounds. You wonder if nights like this are his audition."

Havertz, as if hearing the commentary, dropped deep to collect the ball, spun away from Kampl with a delightful touch, and threaded a pass into Wirtz's feet. The young German took one touch before releasing Volland, but Halstenberg blocked the striker's shot.

"This pandemic has really shaken up the transfer market," Beglin said during a lull in play. "Clubs that were spending hundreds of millions are now being far more cautious. Barcelona are struggling financially, we've seen it reported. Same with Real Madrid. Even the Premier League clubs are being more measured."

"Which creates opportunities for the clubs that can spend," Drury added. "Chelsea has already brought in Timo Werner from Leipzig and Hakim Ziyech from Ajax. They're not stopping there by the looks of it."

On the pitch, Leipzig continued to dominate possession but without creating clear chances. Leverkusen had settled into a compact defensive shape, forcing Leipzig to play around them rather than through them.

[28']

The match's first yellow card came in the twenty-eighth minute when Laimer clattered through the back of Rakim near the touchline. The Leverkusen winger had received a pass from Wendell and was turning to attack when the Austrian caught him high on the ankle.

"That's a clear booking," Beglin said as the referee reached for his pocket. "Laimer knew what he was doing, hit him early to send a warning shot, stop the counter before it starts." Rakim took a moment to shake off the tackle, receiving treatment from the physio before the free kick.

Chapter 620 Quarterfinal (2)

[13/08/2020 | Time: 21:30 PM | Estádio da Luz, Lisbon]

The free kick came to nothing, as Upamecano's towering header cleared Demirbay's delivery. But the foul seemed to awaken something in Leverkusen as they began pressing higher. Matching Leipzig's intensity rather than absorbing it, tension continued to mount as each side sought a decider.

"Leverkusen are growing into this now," Drury observed. "They can get dangerous once they settle into their own game. Now they're starting to ask questions."

His words came true moments later, after Aránguiz won the ball back in midfield, immediately looking for Havertz. The German collected it on the half-turn, his first touch taking him away from Kampl, his second releasing Rakim down the left channel. The seventeen-year-old took off like a sprinter from the blocks, Tasende backpedalling desperately.

Rakim used both feet to push the ball ahead easily, utilising his pace to gain separation and fighting past his markers' outstretched arms. As he approached the penalty area, he slowed down slightly, giving his marker time to catch up before feinting a cut inwards with his right.

This forced Tasende to adjust his body position, trying to block the path inwards. That split-second hesitation was all Rakim needed. He slid past him on the outside and whipped in a low cross toward the near post. Volland had timed his run perfectly, arriving just ahead of Halstenberg, but Gulácsi came charging off his line, sweeping the ball off the striker's feet.

"Brave goalkeeping," Beglin said. "But that's the kind of movement that will give Leipzig nightmares. One step slower from Gulácsi and that's 1-0."

[35']

As the match approached the forty-minute mark, the pace remained relentless. Neither side was willing to cede control, resulting in a fascinating tactical battle in midfield where every inch of space was contested.

During a brief stoppage for Poulsen to receive treatment after a collision with Tah, Drury picked up a previous thread. "You mentioned earlier about the financial strain on clubs, Jim. It's not just the big names struggling. We're hearing reports that several mid-tier clubs across Europe are in serious difficulty."

"Absolutely, Peter," Beglin replied. "No matchday revenue for months, sponsorship deals being renegotiated downward, broadcast money delayed. Some clubs in Spain and Italy are reportedly weeks away from serious problems. The gap between the super-rich clubs and everyone else is widening even further."

"Which makes what Leverkusen and Leipzig have built even more impressive," Drury added. "Both clubs are operating with sustainable models, developing young talent rather than spending wildly. Tonight's match is almost an advertisement for sensible football management."

The referee waved play on, and Leipzig immediately launched an attack. Sabitzer collected the ball on the left, cutting inside past Lars Bender's challenge. He shaped to shoot from twenty-five yards, and Hradecky set himself, but the Austrian instead slipped a clever pass through to Nkunku.

[37']

The French winger was through on goal, one-on-one with Hradecky, who was charging out at pace. Nkunku opened his body to place it into the bottom corner, but Hradecky read it perfectly. The Finnish



goalkeeper made himself big, forcing Nkunku to rush his finish. The shot struck Hradecky's outstretched leg and spun wide.

"HOW HAS THAT STAYED OUT?" Drury's voice rose in disbelief. "Nkunku had the goal at his mercy, and somehow Hradecky has denied him! What a save!"

"That's world-class goalkeeping," Beglin added, his tone equally amazed. "Look at his positioning, he doesn't commit early, stays on his feet as long as possible, makes himself massive. Nkunku couldn't have asked for a better chance, but Hradecky has kept Leverkusen level."

The Leipzig bench had their hands on their heads in disbelief. Nagelsmann was animated on the touchline, gesturing for his team to maintain the pressure. On the opposite side, Bosz clapped his hands together, shouting encouragement to his defence.

Leipzig continued to press for the opener, clearly rattled by missing such a golden opportunity. The intensity was beginning to tell on both sides—tackles were flying in, and tempers were starting to fray slightly. Kampl fouled Havertz with a poorly timed challenge near the halfway line, earning a lecture from the referee but escaping a booking.

"One player who might be watching this match with particular interest is Timo Werner. He left Leipzig for Chelsea this summer, and you have to wonder if he regrets missing out on this Champions League run." Beglin, brought up as the German playmaker, was taken to treatment.

"It's a dilemma every player faces," Drury said. "Do you stay with a project that's building toward something special, or do you take the guaranteed big move when it comes? Werner chose Chelsea and the Premier League. Can't fault him for that, but you're right—watching his former teammates potentially reach a Champions League semi-final must sting a bit."

On the pitch, the free kick was taken quickly, Demirbay finding Wendell on the left. The Brazilian drove forward, sensing space. Rakim had already started his run, anticipating the overlap. Wendell's pass was perfectly weighted, arriving just as Rakim accelerated past Tasende.

[44']

In the 44th minute, Rakim was in full flight now, the ball glued to his feet as he surged into the attacking third. Upamecano moved across to cover, but the young winger had options. Havertz had drifted to the edge of the box, Wirtz was making a late run from the right, and Volland was pinned between the two centre-backs.

"This is dangerous," Drury said, his voice lifting. "Rakim Rex, onside, driving forward..."

Rakim shifted the ball onto his right foot as Upamecano closed in, the defender's imposing frame trying to shepherd him away from goal. But instead of continuing his run, Rakim executed a perfect trivela pass with the outside of his right boot, the ball snaking around Upamecano and dropping perfectly into Havertz's path.

Havertz's first touch was sublime, cushioning the ball with his right foot while rotating his body away from Halstenberg's challenge. In one fluid motion, he opened up his body and slid a pass across the face of the goal toward Volland.

The striker stretched his leg out, making contact just six yards from goal, smashing it goalward. The Hungarian keeper threw himself to his right, getting a strong hand to the shot, diverting it onto the post. That wasn't enough to save him, though, as the ball bounced into the net, rattling it.

"Kevin Volland draws first blood!" Drury bellowed. "Péter Gulácsi with stunning reflexes, but it wasn't enough!"

"They are celebrating and rightly so, a well-worked team goal," Beglin said. "Just goes to show how dangerous that attacking quartet can be once they get going." The Leverkusen bench erupted, arms raised and fists clenched, as Peter Bosz could be seen pumping his fist in the coaching box.

[RB Leipzig 0:1 Bayer Leverkusen 'K. Volland 44]

[45+1]

Leipzig, stunned, quickly reset for kick-off, Sabitzer dragging his teammates together, barking orders, trying to regain control. Their urgency was compounded by the fact that the official only added a minute to the extra time. But Leipzig were already pushing forward again, furious and desperate to pull level before the final whistle.

Upamecano charged upfield, breaking past Volland and Kai, carrying the ball out of defence and past the centre circle. He laid it off to Laimer, who found Olmo with a sharp sequence of passes. Olmo danced forward, pivoting between Demirbay and Lars Bender, before threading a ball through to Poulsen, who had peeled off Tah's shoulder.

"Poulsen's in!" Drury cried. But the angle was tight, and before his shot came off, Tah came sliding in, sweeping him and the ball away. The referee's whistle stayed down, indicating the tackle was clean, and before anyone could react, Hradecky rushed out and pounced on the loose ball.

"A vital stop from Tah!" Beglin said, as Hradecky remained down, milking as much time as possible. "Poulsen thought he had beaten him, but Tah is there to remind him to pay his taxes if he wants to get by him. The keeper barely booted the ball out of his box when the referee finally blew his whistle, as both teams immediately jogged toward the tunnel.