

Football 621

Chapter 621 Quarterfinal (3)

[13/08/2020 | Half-Time | Sky Sports Champions League Studio | Lisbon]

The Sky Sports studio lights dimmed as the half-time graphic faded into view, the Champions League logo pulsing behind Jamie Redknapp, Rio Ferdinand, Steven Gerrard, and Alex Scott. The scoreboard beneath their desk read in clean white letters:

[RB Leipzig 0 – 1 Bayer Leverkusen.]

Redknapp leaned forward, tapping his pen against his notes. "Well, if you thought this would be cagey, think again. Leipzig came out flying, but Leverkusen grew into it, and right before the break—boom—Volland finishes off a move that's straight from the training ground. Rio, give us your take."

Rio Ferdinand folded his arms, a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You know, Jamie, this is exactly what we were talking about before the match. Leverkusen just needed to weather that early chaos. Leipzig threw everything at them for the first 20 minutes—pressing like madmen—but once Leverkusen started using the ball properly, they looked the more mature side."

Gerrard nodded. "Spot on. The big difference for me is Havertz. He's dictating tempo without needing to touch the ball all the time. He's just drifting into clever areas, pulling Kampl out of position and opening lanes for Rakim and Wirtz. It's calm, composed football. And look, that goal sums up their evolution."

The screen behind them showed a freeze-frame of Rakim driving down the left flank before the goal. Alex Scott gestured toward it with her pen. "Look at this, though. The maturity in Rakim's decision-

making is evident; instead of rushing to take on Upamecano, he waits, lets the defender commit, and then hits the trivela. Slightly cheeky, but it got the job done fairly easily."

Rio tilted his head, impressed. "He's special, Alex. What I love is his bravery. Rakim? He's demanding the ball under pressure; I dare say he thrives in those situations. That's confidence born from preparation and repetition, doing that game in and out, no matter the opponent."

"Still," Alex countered, "you can't ignore how open he leaves that left side when Wendell pushes forward. Leipzig nearly punished them twice with Nkunku's runs. Against a better finisher, they'd be level."

Redknapp jumped in, steering the conversation toward the broader tactical chess match. "Let's talk systems. We said pre-match this would be Nagelsmann's 3-4-3 against Bosz's 4-2-3-1, and that duel's really showing now. Leipzig's wing-backs have been pinned deeper than usual. Gerrard, how do they fix that?"

"Honestly," Gerrard replied, leaning back thoughtfully, "it's risky, but they've got to commit one of the midfielders—probably Sabitzer—higher up. Right now, they're hesitating between pressing Demirbay or covering space. That's allowing Leverkusen to turn and break too easily. Either go all-in or drop off. Half-measures are killing them."

Rio nodded in agreement. "And Nagelsmann's not the type to sit on his hands. I guarantee we'll see Forsberg or Schick early in the second half. Leipzig needs presence. Poulsen's working hard, but he's on an island."

Scott smirked. "And maybe tell Upamecano to stop dribbling into midfield like he's Zidane. That nearly cost them twice."

Laughter rippled through the panel. Redknapp smiled, using the moment to pivot. "Let's talk about the bigger picture. These are two clubs built very differently from the traditional giants. Leipzig and Leverkusen both run on development, smart scouting, and efficiency. No Galácticos here. But look what they're doing—quarter-final of the Champions League, playing bold football."

Rio leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "Yeah, and that's what modern football looks like, Jamie. These clubs can't afford to spend \$200 million on a rebuild, so they invest in players like Rakim, Havertz, and Wirtz. And it's working. Even during COVID, while others are tightening belts, Leverkusen's showing that identity and structure can outperform spending."

Gerrard added, "Exactly. It's the sustainability model, isn't it? We're watching what the future might look like. You've got two young managers, two squads built under 25, both playing progressive football. This might be an evolution of Germany's old rigid systems to a more fluid, fearless football."

Redknapp gestured toward the highlight reel looping behind them—Hradecky's reflex save, Nkunku's strike off the bar, and Volland's clinical finish. "So, second half predictions then. Can Leverkusen hold this?"

"Depends on how long they can keep their heads," Alex said. "Leipzig will throw everything at them for the next twenty minutes. If Leverkusen survive that wave, they'll have chances to kill it off."

"Agreed," Rio said. "But if Leipzig gets one back early, the momentum swings hard. You can't underestimate how relentless they are once they smell blood."

Gerrard smiled knowingly. "I'm backing Bosz—that dressing room's calm. Havertz looks like a captain tonight. And his bench has the deeper depth in quality."

Redknapp closed the segment with a nod toward the camera. "Well said, Stevie. The second half promises fireworks in Lisbon. Leipzig is chasing history, Leverkusen is chasing destiny. Don't go anywhere — we'll be right back after the break."

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The whistle sliced through the humid Lisbon air once again as Volloand kicked off the match for Leverkusen. Immediately, their opponents flooded forward, looking to win possession quickly, but Haavertz didn't panic, knocking the ball back to Demirbay. The holding midfielder deftly received the ball, skipping past the charging Poulsen into the space ahead of Olmo.

Before the Attacking midfielder could trouble him, he knuckled the ball to the side, finding Aranguiz in a bit of space. The Chilean dribbled forward, forcing the nearby defenders to swarm him lest he become a danger. But before anyone could get close, he lifted the ball over the approaching Laimer to find Wirtz, in the final third, who had drifted inwards.

The seventeen-year-old chested it down under the pressure of Klostermann, knocking the ball back into the run of Haverts, who spun off. Kai sent a piercing through-ball past Klostermann into Wirtz's run, and he exploded forward quickly, reaching the edge of the box. Halstenberg guided him wide, but a quick stop and go allowed him to explode past him, creating enough room to manoeuvre.

Finding an opportunity, he powered towards the near post, letting rip a shot across the face of the goal before Gulácsi could close him down. The keeper managed to lunge after the ball; his outstretched glove caught just enough of it to deflect it past the far post out for a corner.

"Wirtz with his real chance of the game, but Gulácsi was equal to it." Peter Drury exclaimed as the German wunderkind clutched his head in disappointment.

"He'll be disappointed, but he's on the right track, asking the right questions." Jim Beglin noted.

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Demirbay jogged across to take the resulting corner, brushing the sweat from his brow as the humidity thickened under the lights. Leverkusen packed the six-yard box, Tah and Sven Bender muscling for position against Upamecano and Halstenberg. The delivery came whipping in with venom, curling toward the penalty spot.

Havertz lost his man, rising into the air to flick it backwards with the faintest of touches.

The deflection caused chaos as the ball ricocheted off Klostermann's thigh, spinning dangerously toward the far post before Gulácsi punched it clear under pressure. Volland, who had thrown himself into the rebound, colliding with the keeper mid-air as the referee's whistle sounded for a foul.

"That's brave goalkeeping again from Gulácsi," Drury observed. "He's kept Leipzig alive single-handedly tonight."

"Yeah, Peter, but look at the body language," Beglin replied. "Leverkusen smell blood. They've come out in the second half sharper, more aggressive — this is exactly what Leipzig didn't want."

Chapter 622 Strike

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Leipzig tried to respond immediately, finally showing the urgency their situation demanded. Nagelsmann was animated on the touchline, gesturing frantically for his wing-backs to push higher. Sabitzer collected the ball in midfield and played it wide to Nkunku, who had dropped deeper to receive.

The Frenchman turned quickly, nutmegging Wendell with an audacious flick, and suddenly, Leipzig had numbers forward. Nkunku drove into space, his pace causing Leverkusen's defence to backpedal frantically. Before Bender could close him down, he looked up and slid a pass through to Poulsen, who had peeled off Tah's shoulder.

The Danish striker took one touch to set himself at the edge of the box, but Hradecky was already rushing out, making himself big. Poulsen tried to dink it over him, but the Finnish goalkeeper, who had been low sprung up like the wind and got a hand to it, tipping it over the bar.

"Another crucial intervention from Hradecky!" Drury exclaimed. "That's three times now he's denied Leipzig clear chances. This could quickly become a trend once he gets hot."

"Peter, if Leverkusen go through, Hradecky deserves a statue," Beglin added with genuine admiration. "He's keeping them in this game almost single-handedly."

During the corner-kick preparations, Drury shifted the topic. "Jim, we were talking before about the transfer market. One player who's generated enormous interest this summer is Kai Havertz. Chelsea are reportedly willing to pay upwards of seventy million pounds for him."

"And you can see why," Beglin replied as Leipzig's corner was cleared. "He's got everything—technical ability, tactical intelligence, composure under pressure. At twenty-one, he's already one of the most complete attacking midfielders/ Forwards in Europe. If Chelsea gets him, they're building something special alongside Werner and Ziyech."

"But that's the challenge for clubs like Leverkusen," Drury continued. "They develop these incredible talents, but eventually, the bigger clubs come calling. How do you build sustained success when your best players keep leaving?"

"It's the eternal problem," Beglin agreed. "But look at what they've done—they've got Wirtz coming through, who looks equally special. The system works, even if individual players move on."

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The match was opening up now, both teams sensing that the next goal would likely be decisive. Leipzig committed more bodies forward, leaving gaps at the back that Leverkusen tried to exploit on the counter. In the fifty-eighth minute, one such opportunity nearly resulted in a second goal.

Aránguiz intercepted a loose pass from Kampl and immediately looked up. Rakim had already started his run, timing it perfectly to stay onside. The Chilean's pass was weighted beautifully, splitting Leipzig's defensive line and finding Rakim in stride.

The seventeen-year-old was through, with some space to carry the ball forward before the defence could catch up. He dribbled well into the final third, reaching the side of the 18-yard box before Tasende caught up with him. He stopped slightly, his right foot flashing over the ball, faking a cutback before sending his marker skidding.

Exploding to the side of the box, he scanned inside, finding a few of his teammates charging in with their markers in tow. Picking out Wirtz on the other end, he dinked across the mess around the penalty spot, dropping it into his teammate's stride. The German Wunderkind trapped the ball, sweeping it along with his momentum as he kept Klostermann at bay.

"Florian Wirtz is ready to open up the scoring," Drury exclaimed as he hit the ball with his left foot, fully leaning on his marker, as he swept it toward the far corner. "Gulacsi, jumps he reaches, is it enough though... Oh, saved by the post."

Gulacsi, who had been charging out of his goal, managed to react fast enough to get a palm to the ball. "What a save from the Leipzig number 1. He really went and put it all on the line there." Beglin noted as the ball sprang out of the pitch for a corner kick.

Wirtz swung in the resulting corner with speed, hitting it low and hard toward the edge of the box. Aranguiz managed to lose Laimer, hitting the ball first time, catapulting it goalward. His volley flew forward at speed, arrowing through a forest of legs, like a heatseeker missile.

Gulácsi glued to his line saw it late but reacted with feline reflexes, dropping low to his right, managing to parry it away with a strong wrist. The rebound fell awkwardly to the other side of the box, where Demirebay tried to adjust his body and strike again, but Sabitzer came flying in with a lunging block. The ball ricocheted shin high into the air and was finally hoofed clear by Upamecano.

"Leipzig hanging on by their fingernails here!" Drury shouted over the rising noise in the stadium. "Leverkusen could easily be up by two, maybe three ahead by now."

Beglin added with his usual cool tone, "They're gonna have to respond and soon otherwise this could very well turn into an exhibition of Leverkusen attacking prowess."

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Nagelsmann made his first change, signalling for Emil Forsberg to warm up. The Swedish midfielder had been warming up for a while now, but it looked like he would finally get his chance. In the sixty-third minute, Forsberg replaced Kampl, who trudged off exhausted and frustrated.

"Interesting substitution from Nagelsmann," Drury noted. "Forsberg brings more attacking threat than Kampl, but it leaves Leipzig a bit more exposed in midfield."

"At some point you have to go all in, and if that means going all out on attack, then I'm all for it," Beglin said. "They're a goal down with less than thirty minutes to play. Sometimes you have to take risks."

The substitution changed the Leipzig midfield as Forsberg's first involvement was a clever flick that released Sabitzer down the left. The Austrian drove forward, cut inside, and unleashed a fierce drive from twenty-five yards that Hradecky had to push over the bar.

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The corner came to nothing, as Sven Bender headed it out of the box, but Leipzig kept pouring forward. The match had taken on a frantic quality now, with both teams committing numbers in attack and leaving gaps at the back. In the sixty-seventh minute, that nearly cost Leverkusen dearly.

Forsberg collected the ball in midfield and played a brilliant reverse pass into Nkunku's run. The Frenchman was through blasting by Wendell with a drop of the shoulder, racing toward the goal with only Hradecky to beat. The Finnish keeper rushed out, trying to close the angle, with Tah closing in from the middle, but before either could get close, Nkunku took it early, striking with his right foot.

The shot was curved toward the bottom near the corner, slipping past the keeper's outstretched leg. But he couldn't bend it enough, and it slammed into the side netting, flying out for a goal kick. "Oh my days saved by mere inches, they almost had the equaliser." Drury bellowed, mirroring the rollercoaster of emotion the RB fans were feeling.

"That was surely a goal, hell be gutted not being able to squeeze that one in," Beglin said, his voice full of disappointment. The Leipzig bench had their hands over their heads again after yet another goal was denied, and the frustration was evident in every player's body language.

None of that mattered to Bosz, though, as he quickly made a series of substitutions. Aranguiz came off for Baumgartlinger, and Wirtz left the stage for Diaby, injecting some needed energy into the Leverkusen side. The substitutes changed their playing style, as they sat much higher up the field.

Baumgartlinger acted as the sole pivot, pushing Demirebay to join Havertz further up the field in the creative role. Their chemistry allowed them to ping together a string of passes that gave the German playmaker room to create something. Skipping past Laimer's tackle, he sent a through ball up the right flank for Diaby to chase, and the Frenchman exploded forward.

Chapter 623 623 Level Again

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Diaby was too quick, and as Tasende tried to stay with him, the Frenchman was already gone, eating up the ground in long strides. He latched onto the ball and cut it back to the penalty spot, where Havertz had found space between Upamecano and Klostermann after reaching the byline.

Havertz's first touch was featherlight, cushioning the ball before turning in one movement, keeping Laimer at bay. He took another touch, dragging the ball across his body, trying to find a shooting angle past the Halstenberg. "Havertz has lined it up... he shoots!" Drury's voice lifted.

He struck it cleanly with his left from the edge of the box, curling toward the far post. Gulácsi couldn't reach it in time and could only watch as it sailed toward the goal. For a moment, it looked in, but it clipped the outside of the post and bounced clear.

"The woodwork again!" Beglin said. "How many times is that tonight, Peter, third, fourth? How long can their luck hold?"

Havertz clutched his head in frustration, evident in his body language, as he apologised to Diaby for wasting the chance. They didn't linger long on the wasted opportunity; they quickly regrouped. RB, seemingly woken from their slumber, began an onslaught of attacks, and for the next ten minutes, they had the upper hand.

Nagelsman swapped out the attacking quartet, leaving only Poulsen up top as Sabitzer, Olmo, and Nkunku left the stage. On the right flank, Nordi Mukiele replaced Sabitzer, and Haidara replaced Nkunku on the left, as Patrick Schick replaced Olmo as the creative brain. The three arrived with a plan, which immediately caused problems for their opponents.

Using their fresh legs to bully their opponent, both wingers indiscriminately launched crosses into the box. Whenever Wendell and Lars Bender would step up to meet them, they would either cut inwards, creating overlapping situations with their wingback. Unable to watch for the overlap, either as the wingers would use the chance to launch long-range bombardments or through balls into the box, the Leverkusen defence struggled for the first time in the match-up.

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In the 74th minute, Schick picked up the ball from the halfway line, using a one-two with Forsberg to escape the coverage of Baumgartlinger. The Czech forward drove into space, his fresh legs allowing him to glide past Demirbay's half-hearted challenge. He looked up and threaded a perfectly weighted pass into the channel for Klosterman, who had made an overlapping run down the left.

Mukiele had cleverly drawn Wendell forward and more central, leaving him late to react as the RB full-back latched onto the ball. The wing-back cut inside as Tah left Poulsen to Bender, retreating into the box, trying to cut him off. Poulsen used this chance, where Tah's back was turned, to make a run to the near-post as Haidara arrived late at the back post with Mukiele peeling to the edge of the box.

Klosterman was spoiled for choice, and he didn't take long to make his choice as he whipped in a dangerous cross. The ball sailed over Poulsen's head but dropped perfectly for Haidara, who had ghosted in ahead of Lars. The midfielder met it with a first-time volley from eight yards out, striking it cleanly toward the bottom corner.

Hradecky, who had been positioned for the near-post threat, adjusted his body mid-dive, throwing himself across the goal with desperate urgency. The ball bounced ahead of him, exploding upwards, but he reacted quickly, his arm shooting out to slap the ball away.

The rebound spun back into play, falling kindly for Haidara, who tried to follow up for a second try, but Lars was there to poke it out for a corner. "UNBELIEVABLE!" Drury's voice was hoarse with emotion. "Hradecky has done it again! That's surely the sixth or seventh world-class save tonight! And then Benders is there to clear the plate!"

"This is getting ridiculous now, Peter," Beglin said, his tone mixing admiration with disbelief. "At what point do you start believing in fate? Everything Leipzig tries, there's a body in the way or Hradecky pulling off another miracle."

The corner was swung in with pace by Forsberg, curling toward the penalty spot where bodies rose in a mass of white and red. Upamecano, who had pushed up for the set piece, rose highest, towering above everyone, powering a header goalward from six yards out. The ball arrowed towards the left corner, smacking the crossbar before sending the net bulging.

"Oh, he has finally scored RB, and it comes from a defender," Drury exclaimed as pandemonium ensued with the Leipzig players racing after Upamecano, who wildly celebrated the goal. "When everything else fails, you sometimes have to use force, and he did that just there. We're back on level terms at the Estádio José Alvalade."

"What a way to achieve an equaliser goes to show you everyone can become a hero in this beautiful game," Beglin added with a bright smile. "How Leverkusen responds will decide how this match ends. They have done everything right so far; it would be heartbreaking if they lost it now."

[RB Leipzig 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen - Upamecano 76']

The Leipzig bench exploded with relief and celebration, Nagelsmann pumping his fists furiously as his substitutes mobbed each other. On the opposite touchline, Bosz stood with his hands on his hips, processing what had just happened. His team had dominated for long stretches, created countless chances, and now they were level.

"Game on," Drury said simply as the celebrations died down. "Twenty-four minutes of normal time remaining, and suddenly everything is to play for again."

Leverkusen restarted quickly, Volland rolling it back to Havertz, who immediately looked to settle his team's nerves. But Leipzig were energised now, pressing with renewed vigour, forcing Leverkusen into hurried passes. This saw Rakim gain possession on the left flank, close to the halfway line, only to find himself instantly surrounded by three defenders.

His feet immediately got to dancing a stepover with the right as he feinted back, only to flick the ball to his left foot. Stepping inwards towards Laimer, who had been sitting back ready to cover the other two, he forced the midfielder forward. Just as he reached a one-meter range, he feinted right, baiting the midfielder, only to drag the ball back with his right.

Half turning, the outside of his left foot flicked the ball up slightly to the sideline just in time to escape the foot of Mukiele. A stretch of his long legs, and he brought the ball back under control before it could go out. Klosemann, who was the only one left, committed with a lunge, but nimble La Croqueta, from the winger, saw him drag the ball across his body and accelerate past the defender's outstretched leg.

Feeling his breath go ragged from the manoeuvre, he knocked the ball forward and grit his teeth to chase after it as Forsberg closed in from the middle. His long strides ate up ground as he looked up, scanning for someone to give the ball to. He could see black jerseys making moves, but before one could get free, Upamecano stepped up to meet him at the edge of the box.

A puff of breath saw him opening up his body as if to make a pass, only to deftly flick the ball through the towering defender's open leg. Rakim accelerated around the other side. "Oh, that's magnificent from Rakim Rex!" Drury exclaimed. "He's just skinned three Leipzig players in the space of ten yards!"

Charging into the box, he raced toward the ball as Gulacsi charged off his line. Knowing he couldn't reach the ball in time, he slid forward, his foot swiping at the ball, scaring it across the box before the two collided.

The collision sent both Rakim and Gulácsi sprawling across the penalty area, bodies tangled as the ball spun loose across the six-yard box. For a split second, time seemed to freeze—the ball rolling tantalizingly toward the far post, with Kevin Volland charging in from the right side.

Halstenberg threw himself across desperately, sliding with everything he had...

Chapter 624 Subbed Out

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Halstenberg threw himself across desperately, sliding with everything he had, but Volland arrived a fraction earlier. The striker didn't even need to adjust his stride—he simply redirected the rolling ball with the inside of his right boot, guiding it into the empty net.

"GOOOAAAAAL!" Drury's voice exploded. "KEVIN VOLLAND! Leverkusen lead again! What a sequence! What display of skill from Rakim Rex and Volland is there to finish making his effort worth it!"

The Leverkusen bench, which had moments ago been on tenterhooks, erupted, players leaping off their seats as Volland sprinted toward the corner flag, sliding on his knees with his arms outstretched. His teammates mobbed him instantly, with Diaby the first to reach him, screaming in celebration.

"That is absolutely sensational football," Beglin said, his voice full of admiration. "Rakim Rex has just produced one of the great individual runs in Champions League history. Four defenders beaten, and even when Gulácsi takes him out, Volland is there to capitalise. Simply phenomenal from the youngster."

The referee consulted briefly with his assistant before pointing emphatically to the centre circle—goal! No foul on Gulácsi's challenge; Rakim had simply got there first. The Leipzig players protested, but the decision stood.

[RB Leipzig 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen - Volland 78']

Rakim, meanwhile, was being helped to his feet by the physio, wincing slightly as he tested his right ankle where Gulácsi had caught him. After a few stretches and some spray, he gave the thumbs up and jogged back into position, receiving applause from his teammates.

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Now in the lead, Bosz made his final substitution, bringing on Amiri for the exhausted Rakim, who received warm applause from his teammates as he jogged off. "It looks like the physical toll of all the games he's played all year long is finally getting to him. But I wouldn't be disappointed with his performance here today." Drury commented as the fourth official announced the change.

"Indeed, he's had multiple runs that looked dangerous, one leading to the creation of the first goal, and moments ago to give his team back the lead." Beglin said, "The biggest beneficiary of this is Volland, who has netted a brace, bringing his Champions League goal tally to 11."

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With Amiri now on the pitch, Leverkusen shifted their shape slightly, the Iranian playmaker slotting into the left side of midfield, playing more centrally to support Havertz. The shift was clear, aiming to defend smartly and maintain the threat of a counter-attack.

Leipzig, knowing they were running out of time, threw everything into attacking the Leverkusen goal. Nagelsmann was screaming instructions from the touchline, urging his team to calm down. But the players were too desperate to remain as disciplined as they were for most of the game. Every pass in their ranks moved with more urgency, looking for the most direct path to the goal.

Nordi Mukiele on the RB right flank picked up the ball just past the halfway line. Flicking the ball inwards, he turned past Amiri, chasing the return pass from Schick. Exploding forward at pace, he looked inwards for a moment before sending a lofted through ball into the box.

Poulsen, holding off Tah, leapt into the air, stretching his neck, trying to guide it onto Haidara, but Hradecky appeared, punching the ball out. "Keeper's ball!" Beglin barked. "Hradecky clears it himself."

Leverkusen tried to breathe, but Leipzig were relentless. Forsberg sought space in midfield, demanding possession every time they recycled. In the 88th minute, he wriggled free, slipped Haidara into the left channel, and the cut-back found Schick twenty yards out. The attacking midfielder struck through it, low and nasty, but Tah flew across feet first, deflecting the ball out, spinning behind for a corner.

Forsberg's delivery teased the six-yard line. Upamecano bullied a path and thumped a header that looked in until Hradecky's palm lifted it over. Drury could only laugh. "Upamecano could not beat Lukas Hradecky for a second time!"

Leverkusen finally broke the press in the 89th minute as Amiri pinched a pass off Laimer and immediately stabbed forward to Havertz. He turned with the ball, dodging a defender and released Diaby over the top into acres on the right. The Frenchman burned clear of Halstenberg, creating enough space to attempt the shot, and he did.

The ball flew straight, heading straight to the far corner, forcing Gulacsi to shuffle across his line. He leapt into the air fully outstretched, but he knew he couldn't reach it. But lady luck smiled upon him as the ball kissed the outside of the upright, skipping wide.

"Oh, that would've finished it," Beglin sighed. "Leipzig are still alive."

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The fourth official's board went up: four minutes of added time. Leipzig had four minutes to save their Champions League dream, or they were going home. "Four minutes for Leipzig," Drury announced. "Four minutes to find a way past this magnificent Leverkusen side."

Leverkusen tried to take the sting out of the game, keeping possession near the corner flag as Amiri shielded the ball from three Leipzig players. But Forsberg finally won it back with a well-timed tackle, and suddenly, Leipzig were streaming forward one more time.

The Swedish midfielder played it quickly to Schick, who flicked it into the path of Poulsen. The Danish striker drove toward the box, but Baumgartlinger came across to make a crucial sliding tackle, winning the ball cleanly and sending it out for a throw-in.

[90+1']

In the first minute of stoppage time, Leipzig won a free kick in a dangerous position, twenty-five yards from goal and slightly left of centre. Every Leipzig player except Gulácsi pushed into the Leverkusen box, unwilling to play it safe any longer.

"This could be Leipzig's last chance," Drury said, his voice tense. "Everything rides on making this set piece count."

Forsberg stood over the ball, taking deep breaths as he surveyed his options. The Leverkusen wall consisted of five players, arms linked, with Hradecky organising his defence behind them. The Finnish goalkeeper was taking no chances, positioning his players with military precision.

The Swedish midfielder's run-up was measured, striking the ball cleanly with the inside of his right foot. The ball rose over the wall with vicious dip and curl, heading for the top right corner. Hradecky was rooted to his spot, having anticipated another angle, completely beaten. But the ball struck the underside of the crossbar with a sickening metallic clang and bounced down onto the goal line before spinning out.

"THE WOODWORK!" Drury bellowed. "The crossbar has saved Leverkusen! How many times tonight has Leipzig been denied by the frame of the goal?"

Chaos erupted as the ball bounced clear. Poulsen threw himself at the rebound, but Tah got there first, heading it desperately away from danger. The clearance didn't go far, falling to Upamecano on the edge of the box. The French defender struck it first-time, a powerful volley, but it didn't get far, hitting Havertz on the chest.

The ball cannoned off the German midfielder and spun away toward the touchline, where Lars Bender was. The full back wasted no time booting the long, up the right flank, relieving the pressure. "Bodies on the line!" Beglin shouted. "Leverkusen are defending like their lives depend on it!"

[90+3']

Diaby chased the ball down near the touchline, but before he could work the ball across the halfway line, he was immediately fouled by a desperate Laimer, who hauled him down. The referee showed the Austrian a yellow card, his second of the match, sending him off.

"Laimer's night is over," Drury announced. "A second yellow card, and Leipzig will finish this match with ten men. Not that it matters much now, they're all or nothing anyway."

Demirbay prepared to take the free kick, taking an age-long time to place the ball, retied his laces, adjusted his socks, anything to waste precious seconds. When he finally took it, he had received a yellow for time wasting, but he didn't mind as he launched it long toward the Leipzig box, where bodies contested in the air.

The ball broke loose to Amiri, who had found space on the left wing. The Iranian midfielder looked up and saw Diaby making a run through the middle. His pass was weighted perfectly, splitting the exhausted Leipzig defence. "Diaby's through!" Drury's voice rose with excitement. "This could be it!"

The Frenchman was one-on-one with Gulácsi, who rushed out desperately. Diaby barely got to take a touch before the keeper was upon him, but he managed to slot it past him as he vaulted over him. Calmly slotting it into the empty net, he continued his run all the way to the corner flag as the ball nestled into the back of the net.

"GOOOAAAAL!" Drury roared. "MOUSSA DIABY HAS SEALED IT! Leverkusen are going to the semi-finals of the Champions League!"

[RB Leipzig 1-3 Bayer Leverkusen - Diaby 90+4']

Diaby sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched, screaming with pure joy. His teammates mobbed him, a mass of red and black jerseys jumping and celebrating. On the bench, Bosz allowed himself a smile, pumping his fist as his staff embraced around him.

"That is surely the final nail in the coffin," Beglin said. "Leipzig have fought valiantly, created chance after chance, but tonight belongs to Bayer Leverkusen and their magnificent goalkeeper Lukas Hradecky."

On the Leipzig side, the devastation was palpable as players could be seen sitting on the turf, their shirts pulled over their faces. Some clutched their knees, exhausted, their bodies soaked in sweat. "Heartbreaking for Leipzig," Drury said, his tone now sombre. "They've done everything but score enough goals. Hit the woodwork multiple times, forced incredible saves, created countless chances—and yet they're going home."

The final whistle came less than thirty seconds later. Leipzig barely even attempted to restart, simply kicking the ball forward before the referee brought proceedings to a close.

[Full Time: RB Leipzig 1-3 Bayer Leverkusen]

Chapter 625 Semi-Final Ball

[18/08/2020 | Time: 14:00 PM | Hotel Tivoli Avenida Liberdade, Lisbon]

Cinderella, for five entire days, the Leverkusen side felt like they were in a fairy tale. They could all feel it in the air, or maybe it was in the water at the hotel, but every member of the team was brimming with

the belief that they could go all the way. Five days was also all the time they had between making history against Leipzig and facing Paris Saint-Germain in the semi-finals.

Five days to recover, prepare, and somehow find a way to beat one of Europe's most expensively assembled squads, and they did just that. The Leverkusen players sat in the team meeting room, the euphoria of their quarter-final victory now replaced by focused tension. On the screen at the front, footage of PSG played on a loop, showcasing the Mbappé, Neymar, and Di María trio.

The attacking line-up was arguably the best in the world and, for sure, one of the most dynamic, with each player bringing a different kind of playstyle. They were the definition of Moneyball, with players on their bench that any mid-table team would salivate over. All that was held together by the rock-solid presence of Thiago Silva, who marshalled the defence.

"They're beatable," Peter Bosz said, though his voice carried less conviction than usual. "But we need to be at our best. No mistakes, no lapses in concentration. One moment against these guys, and they'll punish you."

Rakim watched the footage intently, studying how PSG's full-backs pushed high in response to the attacking players' movements. They were frighteningly good, and everyone in the room knew it. Fans joked about how much money the club wasted each year but couldn't manage to win a major trophy. But the fact remains that they have some of the best currently playing players.

Peter Bosz continued to break down their opponent as he went more in-depth into their game plan. The squad had already been announced, and this was just about getting them ready to perform on the night.

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[18/08/2020 | Time: 20:45 PM | Estádio José Alvalade, Lisbon]

The Estádio José Alvalade hummed with artificial crowd noise piped through speakers, a surreal attempt to recreate atmosphere in the empty stadium. PSG, in their iconic navy and red, looked every bit the European powerhouse. Leverkusen, in their red and black, looked determined, ready to conquer another giant on their path to glory.

Peter Drury's voice carried its usual gravitas: "Good evening from Lisbon, where two different footballing philosophies are set to clash. Bayer Leverkusen conquered Leipzig on their way here, and Paris Saint-Germain, a team built to win this very competition, beat the likes of Dortmund and Atlanta. Can the German underdogs produce another miracle?"

Jim Beglin added, "It's a fascinating contrast, Peter. PSG's squad cost over half a billion euros to assemble. Leverkusen's? Probably a tenth of that. But we've seen a couple of times that money doesn't always guarantee success."

The two continued to entertain the viewers as the opening ceremony commenced. Everything went by promptly, and before the viewers knew it, they were lined up on both sides with PSG set to kick off.

[1']

The whistle blew, and PSG immediately stamped their authority on the match. Their passing was crisp and measured as they quickly settled into the match. Verratti collected the ball deep, played it wide to Bernat, who found Di María with a delicate chip. The Argentine's first touch was sublime, and within thirty seconds, Leverkusen were facing an attack.

"Early pressure from PSG," Drury observed. "They're not giving Leverkusen a second to breathe."

The Argentine forward stormed down the right flank, dribbling past Wendell with a nifty piece of footwork. Instead of trying to cross the ball to Neymar, who was playing the striker role, he cut the ball inwards to Marquinhos. At the top of the box, the Brazilian nudged the ball beyond Demirbay and let loose a shot from range. The strike was explosive, flying past Tah's outstretched leg as it sped towards the bottom left corner.

Hradecky, between the sticks, scrambled to move across his line and over to meet it, managing to get a hand to the ball, deflecting out for a corner. "Marquinhos from range sends a warning shot," Beglin commented as the Finnish keeper sprang up to give his team an earful.

[12']

Things calmed down following the first strike as the German side played compact, working on absorbing pressure and launching quick counters. Diaby on the left flank and Wirtz on the right became the outlets, putting pressure on Kehrer and Bernat. Despite creating a couple of threatening chances, they were unable to threaten Rico in the PSG goal much.

PSG wouldn't let them figure it out either, as a shift in Neymar's position disrupted their entire formation. The Brazilian dropped deep to collect possession, turned Baumgartlinger inside out with a casual elastico, and threaded a pass through to Mbappé. The French striker's pace was electric, Lars had him covered one moment, and then he was gone.

Inside the box, Tah moved to close down the angle, but a nifty hesitation and feint toward the near post threw him off. Hardecky was also caught off guard, moving too close to the near post. Before he could



react, the young Frenchman simply dinked it over his reach to the far side of the goal, sending the ball floating into the net.

"MBAPPÉ!" Drury's voice rose. "And PSG lead! One chance, one goal and now they celebrate." The celebrations from the PSG side were professional as they expected this much. Just like the Galactico, they were built to win this trophy, still they were happy to stamp their authority early.

[PSG 1-0 Leverkusen - Mbappé 12']

[23']

Leverkusen tried to respond, but PSG's press was suffocating, with Verratti and Herrera working in tandem to cut off passing lanes. Every time Havertz dropped deep to collect, he found himself surrounded by navy shirts. Their usual build-up play wasn't working as well, forcing them to play faster.

In the 23rd minute, Wirtz finally found space on the right, receiving from Lars Bender. He drove forward, but Bernat showed him outside. The young German tried to cut back, but Marquinhos read it perfectly, sliding in to win the ball cleanly. Before Leverkusen could reset, PSG were countering.

Neymar collected near the halfway line, his first touch taking him away from Baumgartlinger. He glided forward, drawing defenders, before sliding a perfectly weighted pass into Di María's run. The Argentine was through on the right side of the box, but Hradecky rushed out bravely, making himself big and forcing the shot wide.

"Hradecky to the rescue again," Drury said. "But Leverkusen are being carved open here. This isn't the same team we saw against Leipzig."

"They look nervous, Peter," Beglin observed. "The occasion might be getting to them. PSG are playing with such confidence, such swagger. It's men against boys at the moment."

[34]

Failing to find an answer for Neymar, the forward received the ball thirty yards from goal, with Baumgartlinger closing him down. The Brazilian simply dropped his shoulder, executed a perfect roulette spin, and glided past him as if he weren't there. Approaching the box, Bender stepped up to block his path but Neymar shifted the ball with a toe-poke and drew the foul right on the D.

Bender was warned but did not receive an outright booking as the referee awarded a free kick. The wall was quickly formed with Di María and Neymar standing over the ball. Following the whistle a short run-up from the Argentine saw the ball whipped over the wall, dipping toward the near top corner.

Hradecky read it, shuffled, across his line and clawed it away with his right hand. The rebound dropped at Herrera's feet but Tah wedged himself between him and the ball and cleared it out for a Corner. Di María fizzed it flat to the penalty spot. Marquinhos attacked it, with a glancing header toward the back post but it was wide by inches.

"Leverkusen hanging on," Drury said. "They need a spell of control."

[38']

Leverkusen finally stitched a string of threatening passes together creating a real attacking opportunity. Demirbay dropped between centre-backs, slid Wendell down the line. One-twos with Diaby opened a gap allowing them to find Havertz's in the middle of the field; he cushioned it, rolled it past Kehrer, and snapped a shot through Thiago Silva's legs.

Chapter 626 Cinderella

[38']

Leverkusen finally stitched together a string of threatening passes, creating a real attacking opportunity. Demirbay dropped between centre-backs and slid Wendell down the line. One-twos with Diaby opened a gap allowing them to find Havertz in the middle of the field; he cushioned it, rolled it past Kehrer, and snapped a shot through Thiago Silva's legs.

Rico saw it late, kicked out a strong right boot and diverted it wide. "Big save," Drury called. "Leverkusen finally punch a hole."

From the corner, Demirbay went short to Diaby, got it back, and fizzed a waist-high cross toward the near stick. Volland darted across Silva and glanced it goalward. Rico's hands were firm again, parrying into traffic before Bernat hacked it clear. PSG tried to counter, but Aránguiz read the release to Mbappé and slid in cleanly, drawing a roar from the Leverkusen bench.

[41']

Leverkusen created another attacking opportunity in the 41st minute as Lars Bender zipped a pass into Havertz at the centre of midfield. He flicked it onto Aránguiz with his first touch, who sent it up the flank to Diaby. The French winger cut across his man with an explosion of speed and let loose a low shot from the edge of the box.

Silva missed the ball by mere inches as it looped toward the far post, where Rico jumped across his line. He couldn't reach it, but the dull clang of the ball hitting the post resounded a second later. The ball rebounded, springing back out where Volland tried to reach it, but Kimpembe hooked it clear.

"Better. Much better," Drury said. "Bosz will be looking to encourage this in the second half."

"Finally, some life in this match from Leverkusen," Beglin said. "But they need more of that if they're going to get back into this match."

The match entered a lull after their attack, with neither side threatening the goal again. It didn't take long for the final minutes to elapse, and the half-time whistle came with Leverkusen trailing 1-0. As the players trudged toward the tunnel, Bosz's expression was grim. PSG, meanwhile, looked comfortable, almost relaxed, as if this was exactly according to plan.

[Half-Time: PSG 1-0 Leverkusen]

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[46']

Whatever confidence Bosz had tried to instil evaporated within minutes of the restart. PSG came out with renewed intensity, and Leverkusen simply couldn't cope. Verratti collected the ball deep, turned, and played it forward to Neymar in one smooth motion.

The Brazilian's movement was sublime, drifting into the space between Leverkusen's midfield and defence where neither Demirbay nor Aránguiz could reach him. His first touch killed the ball dead; his second was a disguised through pass that split the defence like a knife through butter. Mbappé was already moving, his acceleration leaving both Tah and Sven Bender for dead.

The French striker was through on goal, one-on-one with Hradecky. The Finnish goalkeeper rushed out, trying to make himself big, but Mbappé had already decided. With the coolest of finishes, he slotted the ball beyond the keeper's reach with the outside of his boot, the ball curling away from Hradecky's desperate dive and nestling into the far corner.

"MBAPPÉ AGAIN!" Drury's voice carried a tone of inevitability. "And PSG have doubled their lead. Two-nil, and Leverkusen's Cinderella story is slipping away."

"This honestly has me wondering whether they are waiting for an invitation to start participating in this much." Beglin criticised. "Far too easy is this Leverkusen defence being dismantled"

[PSG 2-0 Leverkusen - Mbappé 49']

The goal stung Leverkusen back to life. Trailing 2-0, they finally began to show the spirit that had carried them this far. From the restart, Havertz drove forward, playing a sharp one-two with Volland before threading a pass into Diaby's path. The Frenchman took one touch and unleashed a fierce drive from twenty-five yards that forced Rico into a diving save, tipping it over the bar.

"That's more like it!" Drury exclaimed. "Leverkusen showing they're not done yet!"

[52']

The resulting corner caused chaos in PSG's box. Demirbay's delivery was perfect, curling toward the penalty spot where Tah rose above Marquinhos. His powerful header was goal-bound until it deflected off Thiago Silva's shoulder, the ball cannoning off toward the goal line.

Rico scrambled, clawing the ball away just before it crossed, but the rebound fell to Aránguiz at the edge of the box. The Chilean struck it first-time, but his volley flew narrowly over the crossbar with Rico beaten. "So close!" Beglin shouted. "Leverkusen are finding their rhythm now. PSG need to weather this storm."

The match became more balanced, with both teams trading blows. Dimaria collected the ball on the right and danced past Diaby and Aránguiz with an audacious elastico. He drove toward the box before Wendell got close, but Tah stood firm, refusing to dive in.

When he tried to slip it past him, the German defender timed his tackle perfectly, winning the ball cleanly and immediately launching a counter-attack. "Brilliant defending from Tah," Drury noted. "That's what Leverkusen needed."

[61]

Leverkusen's best chance came in the fifty-ninth minute. Wendell overlapped down the left, receiving a flick from Diaby before whipping in a dangerous low cross. Volland peeled off Kimpembe at the near post, stretching to meet the ball with his right foot. The connection was clean, the shot heading for the bottom corner, but Rico somehow got down to push it wide.

"WHAT A SAVE!" Drury bellowed. "Sergio Rico denies Volland when it looked easier to score! That could be the moment that defines this match!" The PSG keeper lay on the ground for a moment, breathing heavily, before being congratulated by his defenders. On the Leverkusen bench, heads were in hands. Another golden opportunity spurned.

[65]

PSG responded immediately. A quick free-kick from Verratti caught Leverkusen pushing up, and suddenly Mbappé was racing through on goal again. This time, Hradecky stood tall, rushing out to narrow the angle as the French striker tried to round him. Mbappé's touch was slightly heavy, and Hradecky pounced, smothering the ball before the striker could recover.

"Crucial intervention from Hradecky!" Beglin said. "He's kept Leverkusen in this contest with that save."

The match was opening up, end-to-end now. In the 68th minute, Havertz picked up the ball thirty yards out, and suddenly he saw an opportunity as he spotted Rico off his line. He nudged the ball forward, causing the nearby Paredes and Marquinhos to realise what he was about to do.

They desperately sprinted forward, looking to interfere with the Leverkusen forward, but it was too late. He had taken aim, and he fired a cannonball, sending the ball flying goalward a second before they could interfere. The ball cut through the humid Lisbon air like a missile, wobbling violently in its flight.

Rico backpedalled, eyes wide, scrambling backwards to read its trajectory. He managed to get a fingertip on it, but there was too much power, and it pierced the back of the net with a resounding thud. "KAI HAVERTZ!" Peter Drury's voice thundered through the broadcast. "A moment of magic! Out of absolutely nothing, the Leverkusen captain has given them a lifeline!"

"Oh, that is special," Jim Beglin replied, almost laughing in disbelief. "He's seen Rico off his line and punished him from thirty yards. No hesitation, no second thought — pure instinct and quality. That goal has cracked this semi-final wide open."

Havertz didn't celebrate wildly. He just turned, fist clenched, barking at his teammates to get back in shape. "Come on! One more!" he yelled, his voice cutting through the artificial ambience.

[PSG 2 – 1 Leverkusen – Havertz 68']

[70']

PSG tried to reassert itself, with Mbappe dropping deep to collect the ball and driving forward, but Demirbay was onto him immediately. The German midfielder timed his tackle perfectly, winning the ball and immediately springing forward. He found Wirtz on the right, who drove at speed.

The winger cut inside onto his left foot and unleashed a curling effort toward the far corner. Rico stretched, fingertips grazing the ball just enough to divert it onto the post. The rebound fell to Volland, but his instinctive shot was blocked by Marquinhos, who threw his body in the way.

"Leverkusen are all over them now!" Drury shouted. "PSG can't get out of their own half!"

The fourth official raised his board: number 19 coming off, number 22 coming on. Rakim could be seen at the edge of the field bouncing on his heels as he waited to enter the battlefield. As Diaby jogged off,

exhausted but satisfied with his performance, he clasped hands with Rakim. "Keep pushing them." He nodded, testing his ankle one final time before sprinting onto the pitch.

Chapter 627 627 Hope

[70]

"Rakim Rex enters the fray," Drury announced, his voice carrying renewed interest. "The seventeen-year-old superstar from the States is ready to make his mark, coming on with Leverkusen trailing by just one goal now. They have come to expect big things from him, and now he has twenty minutes to find an equaliser and keep this fairy tale alive."

Rakim took up his position on the left wing, exchanging a quick word with Havertz, sharing Bosz's instructions. The momentum had shifted after Havertz's earlier goal, and you could feel it in how PSG moved the ball in their ranks. They tried to regain control by keeping possession, but Leverkusen's press was relentless now.

The front quartet did not stop running in their pursuit of the ball, quickly pressuring the Paris backfield. Havertz managed to win the loose ball from Kehrer after he was pressured by Rakim's charge. The German turned brilliantly, shrugging off Marquinhos before threading a pass to Rakim, who made a run down the left channel.

Kehrer latched onto their shoulders, clashing as they raced to the side of the box. Rakim got there first, his long legs giving him the edge. He controlled the ball with his left foot, immediately shifting it inside as Kehrer lunged in.

The defender's challenge was heavy, clipping Rakim's shin as he tried to escape, and both players went down in a tangle of limbs. The referee's whistle pierced the air, awarding a Free kick to Leverkusen, and Kehrer received a stern talking-to. The PSG right-back protested his innocence, but the official was having none of it, seeing it as a clear tactical foul to stop a dangerous counter.

"That's smart from Kehrer; he knew what he was doing," Drury observed. "He knew if Rakim got past him there, Leverkusen had numbers forward."

Rakim picked himself up, testing his ankle gingerly, and luckily, there wasn't any pain. The physio came on briefly but waved him back after a quick assessment. The free kick was in an awkward position, just past the left edge of the box, good for a cross, hard to go at the goal directly

Demirbay stood over the ball, but Havertz jogged over to discuss options. After a brief conversation, Havertz took a few steps back, scanning the chaotic box. The delivery was whipped in with pace, curling toward the penalty spot where Tah had made a run.

The German centre-back rose above Silva, getting solid contact with his header. The ball arrowed toward the bottom corner, but Bernat, watching the post, reacted quickly, booting the ball out. "Bernat to the rescue on the line!" Beglin exclaimed. "Tah's header was exceptional, but just couldn't beat Bernat."

[78]

A corner from Rakim saw Wirtz peel away to take it short. He played it back to Rakim, who overlapped, skipping past Wirtz and Kehrer with a quick one-two. A burst to the edge of the box, and he whipped in a curling effort toward the far right corner of the goal. Rico sprang, straining his finger tips to reach it and managed to graze it onto the crossbar, but it wasn't enough as it ricocheted into the back of the net.

"GOAL! GOAL! GOALLL!" Peter Drury exclaimed, jumping up from his seat as Rakim sprinted to the corner flag, pulling Wirtz into his celebration. "Well, my friend, they brought him on to look for an equaliser and he has delivered eight minutes later."

"And what a beauty of a goal it is, he placed it exactly where the keeper could only hope for a miracle," Beglin responded. "PSG look shocked and rightly so, they were up by two just moments ago and now they are levelled again."

[PSG 2–2 Leverkusen – Rakim 78']

[85]

PSG immediately moved to reassert themselves from the kickoff, attacking on the flanks. They moved the ball swiftly as the midfielder linked up with Dimaria and Mbappe to break down the Leverkusen defence. But that proved harder than they imagined, as they seemed to have hunkered down, unwilling to let anyone pass.

In the 85th minute, Di María went on a tangent, cutting inside from the right wing with a drop of the shoulder. He skipped past Wendell's challenge with a quick feint, then drove toward the edge of the box. Baumgartlinger stepped up to meet him, but the Argentine was in full flow now, executing a beautiful roulette spin that left the German midfielder and the chasing defender grasping at air.

"Di María dancing through!" Drury's voice rose. "This is dangerous!"

With space opening up, Di María shaped to shoot, drawing Tah toward him. At the last second, he slipped a disguised pass through to Neymar, who had peeled away from Sven Bender's shoulder. The Brazilian was through, just him and Hradecky, ten yards out.

Neymar took one touch to set himself, then moved to strike with his right foot, but Sven caught up, sliding in to deflect the shot. "Sven Bender to the rescue!" Beglin roared. "What a recovery, Neymar, though he was through, but the Leverkusen defender had other plans."

The corner was whipped in by Di María, curling toward the near post. Marquinhos rose highest, but his header was too close to Hradecky, who caught it comfortably. The goalkeeper immediately launched it long, looking for the counter.

[87']

The ball sailed toward Rakim, who had dropped deeper to receive it with his chest, holding off Kehrer. Before the ball even dropped, he whipped his right foot at it, sending it inwards to Kai, who was moving back up the field. The German playmaker tapped it down with his knee, continuing his run as Herrera latched onto him.

Shaking him off just as they crossed the halfway line, he smacked the ball with the outside of his right boot. The trivella pass sent the ball curving along the ground, curving up the ground as it slid between Kimpembe and Bernat. Wirtz got on his bike, beating Barnat on the initial reaction as he chased after the ball.

He managed to catch it before it could leave the pitch on the cusp of the final third, continuing his run. Cutting inwards before his marker could catch up, he cut inwards, drawing Kimpembetoward him. Before the French defender could get close, he slipped the ball behind him, sending Volland into the box.

"He's one on one with the keeper, surely he'll bury this one," Drury exclaimed as the German striker shaped to shoot just ahead of the penalty spot. "Rico dives

but he can't reach this one GOAL! Leverkusen."

Slotting the ball around the Keeper, Volland took off to the corner flag, emotions running high. (Fweeet) "Oh, wait a minute, the referee is calling that one back for an offside." Beglin analysed amid the bewildered glances of Leverkusen players who had been mid-celebrating the robbery they had just pulled off.

Hands to ears, the referee waited. "VAR check," Drury confirmed. "Was Volland behind the last man when Wirtz released it?"

The replay rolled showcasing Kimpembe stepping up to block Wirtz's with Silva mirroring his actions, moving the offside line up. A freeze-frame showed that Everything but the right boot was caught beyond the last line when the pass was played.

"Well, Drury, I don't know whether to praise Silva's defensive brain or ask the German striker why he was so far in no man's land." Beglin sarcastically questioned as the replay showed that the striker had been watching Wirtz instead of his man. "The Germans will be kicking themselves and the Parisians will be thanking their stars after surviving that."

The referee returned to the pitch from the replay booth and blew his whistle loudly. (FWEET) raised an arm to signal no goal and awarded a free kick, giving no heed to the complaints of the Germans.

[90]

The fourth official raised his board, signalling four added minutes of regular time. Leverkusen won a throw-in deep in PSG's half. Wendell took it quickly to Rakim, who controlled it with his chest before turning away from Kehrer's challenge. He played it inside to Havertz, who immediately returned it with a clever backheel.

Rakim was now driving into the box from the left, forcing Silva to come to close him down, but a quick stepover and change of direction left the Brazilian wrong-footed as he cut back outwards. With space opening up, Rakim pulled the trigger, striking it low and hard toward the near post.

Chapter 628 Clock Strike's Midnight

[90]

Rakim was now driving into the box from the left, forcing Silva to come to close him down, but a quick stepover and change of direction left the Brazilian wrong-footed as he cut back outwards. With space opening up, Rakim pulled the trigger, striking it low and hard toward the near post.

Rico got down brilliantly, palming it away, but only as far as Volland on the six-yard box. The German struck it first-time on the volley, but the angle was too awkward, not allowing him to wrap his foot around it. Kimpembes' challenge didn't help matters either, as he sent the ball flying high into the stands behind the goal.

"Volland!" Drury bellowed. "Oh no, that's one he'll want back!"

[90+4']

At the end of the added minute, PSG was awarded a free kick following a harsh tackle from Baumgartlinger on Neymar. The spot was slightly to the left, just outside the D of the Leverkusen box, and the Barazzilian talisman stood behind it. Neymar placed the ball with meticulous care, his hands smoothing the turf around it.

The entire stadium seemed to hold its breath. Twenty-five yards out, slightly left of centre, perfect territory for a dead-ball specialist of Neymar's calibre. The Leverkusen wall formed quickly, five players standing shoulder to shoulder: Tah, Sven Bender, Havertz, Demirbay, and Wirtz. Hradecky organised them frantically, positioning them to cover the near post while he guarded the far corner. His voice carried across the penalty area, barking instructions, adjusting positions by inches.

"This is it," Drury said, his voice barely above a whisper. "One kick. One moment. One opportunity, and this could decide who goes to the final."

With everything ready, Neymar took four deliberate steps back, his eyes never leaving the target. Di María and Mbappé stood nearby, creating uncertainty about who would take it, but everyone knew. Despite the club having a battle of egos when it came to the two star wingers, this was Neymar's moment.

PSG had paid two hundred million euros for a reason; he came with certain expectations to deliver in big moments. Following the final checks, the referee raised his whistle to his lips and blew. He took a deep breath as Di Maria began his run-up up moving as if he would float the ball into the chaotic throng.

Despite knowing who would most likely take it, Wirtz, at the far right of the wall, couldn't help but move. As expected, the Argentine hopped over the ball, sprinting past the wall, forcing Wirtz to follow.

Neymar followed up a second later, not giving the wall time to react, but his run-up wasn't hurried, looking almost deceptively casual.

But as his left foot planted and his right foot swung through the ball, the explosive power was evident. The strike lifted the ball over the wall with power, taking a vicious dip and swerve, bending around the jumping bodies. Hradecky read it instantly and launched himself to his right, arms fully extended, fingers stretching desperately.

For a split second, it looked like he might reach it with his fingertips, inching ever closer to the incoming ball. However, he only barely managed to graze it with his fingertips, but it wasn't enough. The ball dipped at the last moment, kissing the inside of the post before nestling into the top right corner.

The net bulged violently, and time stopped for all those watching. "NEYMAR DA SILVA SANTOS JUNIOR!" Drury's voice exploded with emotion. "HE'S DONE IT! He has sent PSG to the promised land!"

The Brazilian tore away toward the corner flag, his shirt pulled over his head, screaming into the empty stadium. His teammates mobbed him, a mass of navy and red jerseys jumping and celebrating. Di María grabbed his face and kissed his forehead. The PSG bench emptied, substitutes and staff flooding onto the pitch, joining the celebrations.

"What a way to win it!" Beglin added, his voice mixing admiration with sympathy. "That is world-class. Absolutely world-class. Hradecky got a touch, but when a free-kick is struck that perfectly, there's simply nothing you can do."

[PSG 3-2 Leverkusen - Neymar 90+4']

On the other side of the spectrum, Leverkusen players collapsed where they stood. Tah fell to his knees, hands covering his face. Sven Bender sat on the turf, staring blankly ahead. Baumgartlinger, the man who had conceded the foul, buried his face in his shirt, his body shaking.

Rakim stood frozen near the edge of the box where his man had been moments ago, trying to process what had just happened. Twenty minutes ago, he'd done what he always did: score to level the match, to give his team hope. Now, that hope had been ripped away in the cruellest fashion imaginable.

Wirtz walked over to him, tears welling up in his eyes, and his head leaning forward, stopping at his chest as his tears freely dropped. Raising an arm to cover his own eyes, he quickly felt himself sweating from his eyes. The two stayed like that for a moment as the PSG grew more turbulent around them.

(FWEEET!) The referee's whistle, signalling them to restart, drew them back in. In a daze, they somehow managed to regroup for the kick-off, and Volland rolled it back to Havertz, who immediately launched it long toward PSG's half. But Marquinhos headed it clear with ease, and before Leverkusen could even organise another attack, the referee raised the whistle to his lips one final time.

(FWEEEEEEET!) The sound echoed three times around the Estádio José Alvalade, signalling.

[Full Time: PSG 3-2 Bayer Leverkusen]

"There you have it folks, the clock has struck midnight and the Cinderella story ends here," Peter Drury said, his voice heavy with emotion. "Bayer Leverkusen have given everything, played with courage and quality, but tonight, Neymar and PSG have broken the Germans' hearts. What a cruel, cruel way for this journey to end."

Jim Beglin added quietly, "They can hold their heads high, Peter. From the group stages to knocking out teams like Liverpool and Leipzig, to pushing PSG to the brink, this young team has been magnificent. But sometimes in football, one moment of genius is all it takes."

Without wasting time, the German side walked toward the side of the pitch, shaking hands with their opponents. They felt bitter, congratulating their opponents on the victory, but they still embraced their opponents, wishing them well. "Você jogou bem. Boa sorte na final. (You played well. Good luck in the finals." Rakim said, embracing Neymar at the sidelines.

"Saudações, vocês também tocaram bem (Cheers, you guys also played well)" The Brazilian responded with a light smile. "We said we'd exchange shirts when we play against each other on the big stage, right?"

"Yeah, but I really wanted to beat you when we did this," Rakim replied, taking his shirt off, revealing his black Under Armour. "Don't worry, I'll beat you next time we meet."

"Hahah, maybe next time, kid, try playing a full game then." He responded, flashing his perky whites as he handed over his own jersey. "I'll be waiting for that day." Neymar's grin lingered for a moment before he turned back toward his celebrating teammates, the cameras following him like gravity itself demanded it. PSG had finally done it; they were going to the Champions League final.

In the mixed zone, the energy was vastly different, with reporters bustling to get the players' attention. An ESPN Sports microphone hovered near him. "Rakim," the reporter said softly, "that was heartbreak at the end. How are you feeling right now?"

He drew in a slow breath, his voice low and steady despite the crack in it. "We left everything on that pitch. You dream of nights like this as a kid, the Champions League in general, fighting against the best in the world. But... football doesn't always give you a happy ending."

Another reporter raised his mike. "You changed the game when you came on. That goal... it gave your side hope again. Can you take pride in that despite the loss?"

Rakim shook his head. "Doesn't feel like pride right now. You don't think about your goal when you lose; you think about what more you could have done."

Chapter 629 Contract Talks

[10/09/2020, 10:30, Leverkusen HQ]

The conference room on the third floor of the BayArena administrative building was modest by football standards, no ostentatious displays of wealth, just clean lines, functional furniture, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the training pitches below. A large oval table dominated the space, its polished surface reflecting the September morning light that streamed through the glass.

Lisa Rex sat on one side of the table, her posture relaxed but her eyes sharp. She'd dressed professionally for the occasion, a tailored navy blazer, crisp white blouse, and minimal jewellery. Her leather portfolio sat closed in front of her, a recording device visible at its edge.

Something she'd learned to use when negotiating deals for her son, everything needed to be documented. People in these circles were unhinged, wanting to attach themselves to the image or even use it in other ways. But the moment they knew the meeting was being recorded, they behaved like church mice.

Across from her sat Simon Rolfes, Leverkusen's Managing Director and former club captain. At forty, he still carried himself with the athletic bearing of his playing days, though the sharp suits had replaced the kit. Next to him was Dr Ferdinand Keller, the club's contract lawyer, a friendly man in his late fifties who

ran his own law firm, but due to being a huge fan, he handled most of the club's contract needs personally. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a meticulous navy suit, as evidenced by how he'd arranged his documents in perfect parallel lines.

"Mrs Rex, thank you for coming in today," Rolfes began, his German accent still present despite his excellent English. "Can we get you anything? Coffee? Water?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Lisa replied with a polite smile. "Shall we get started?"

Rolfes nodded, glancing at Dr Keller, who opened the folder in front of him. "As you know," Rolfes continued, "Rakim's current contract expires at the end of the 2020/21 season. That puts us in a delicate position. We could allow him to enter the final year and risk losing him on a free transfer, or we could look at options that benefit both parties."

Lisa said nothing, simply listening. This had been a concern for both parties as neither wanted to leave for free or be transferred in the middle of the season. Dr Keller slid a document across the table. "What we're proposing is a one-year extension that would take Rakim's contract through to June 2022. This gives us two potential transfer windows, January 2021 and summer 2021, where we can negotiate a proper fee rather than losing him for nothing."

"And in return?" Lisa asked, picking up the document but not opening it yet. "Despite her son wanting to see the next season through to the end, she wouldn't readily agree without getting the needed assurances and, of course, benefits."

"In return," Rolfes said, leaning forward slightly, "we're prepared to make Rakim one of the highest-paid players at this club. We are also going to focus more on him both on and off the field, making him the absolute core of the team next season, as it would be equally beneficial to both of us."

Lisa opened the document now and quickly scanned the numbers. Her expression remained neutral, but internally, she was calculating. The base salary offered was €65,000 per week, substantial for a player who'd just turned seventeen in his sophomore year on the professional stage.

"Charles Aránguiz earns €72,692 per week," Lisa said calmly, looking up from the document. "This offer shows €65,000. That's not the second-highest earner. That's not even close considering I'm hearing that Bellarabi is set to earn over 90,000 a week following his contract extension."

Dr Keller cleared his throat. "The €65,000 is the base salary. With performance bonuses—goals, assists, appearances, team achievements—the package can reach €72,000 per week, matching Aránguiz."

"Can reach," Lisa emphasised. "Meaning it's conditional. Meaning if Rakim replicates or exceeds his performance from last season, he might earn what you're calling second-highest. But if he gets injured, or if the team underperforms, he earns significantly less."

Rolfes shifted slightly in his seat. "Mrs Rex, we believe this is a fair offer considering Rakim's age and—"

"Let me stop you there," Lisa interrupted gently but firmly. "We're not here to discuss whether Rakim deserves to be compensated appropriately. Last season, at sixteen years old, he scored twenty-seven goals and provided eighteen assists across all competitions. He was instrumental in your DFB-Pokal victory and your Champions League run. Those aren't projections or potential—those are facts."

She slid the document back across the table. "So let's be clear about what we're actually discussing. You want Rakim to sign a one-year extension so you can sell him for a proper fee rather than lose him on a free transfer. That's a business decision that benefits Leverkusen more than Rakim, so make it make sense to me. If we're going to agree to that, the compensation needs to reflect the value we're providing you."

The room fell silent for a moment. Dr Keller made a note on his legal pad. Rolfes studied Lisa carefully, reassessing. "What are you proposing?" he asked finally.

Lisa opened her portfolio and pulled out her own document—she'd come prepared. "Base salary of €75,000 per week guaranteed," she said, sliding it across the table. "That's genuinely the second-highest at the club and reflects Rakim's actual value to the team. Performance bonuses on top of that, €5,000 per goal, €3,000 per assist, €10,000 per win in European competition. A release clause of €100 million that activates after the winter transfer window in 2021."

Dr Keller's pen stopped mid-note. Rolfes sat back in his chair, arms crossed, processing what he'd just heard. The release clause was the kicker for them; €100 million was astronomical for a player who hadn't even turned eighteen yet.

"That's... ambitious," Rolfes said carefully, choosing his words. "Mrs Rex, I understand you're advocating for your son, but a release clause of that magnitude—"

"Isn't that exactly what you guys wanted, right?" Lisa finished. "But if you prefer to stick with the original €70 million agreed upon in the previous agreement, we are more than open to accepting that."

Rolfes leaned forward again, his brain running through various scenarios. "What if we counter with €70,000 base salary and a €120 million release clause that only activates in summer 2021? That gives us the full season with him and maintains our negotiating position if multiple clubs come calling."

Lisa shook her head. "You're still trying to have your cake and eat it too, Simon. Let me be direct: Rakim has already had approaches from clubs. All of them are prepared to wait until next summer, when his

contract expires and sign him on a free transfer. They'll pay him massive wages and signing bonuses because they won't have paid a transfer fee."

She let that sink in before continuing. "By signing this extension, we are actually doing you a favour. He's allowing you to receive a transfer fee when he leaves. So the question isn't whether €75,000 per week is too much, the question is whether you want to receive €80-100 million next summer or receive nothing and watch him leave for free."

The room fell silent again. Dr Keller adjusted his glasses and looked at Rolfes, who was staring out the window at the training pitches below, where the youth squads were in the middle of their summer camps. "Can we have a moment?" Rolfes asked finally.

"Of course," Lisa replied, standing. "I'll be just outside."

She picked up her portfolio and recording device, stepping out into the corridor. The door clicked shut behind her, and she took a deep breath. Negotiating for her son was always stressful, even when she maintained her calm exterior. She pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Rakim: In a break. Going as expected.

Chapter 630 Transfer Saga

[10/09/2020, 11:30, Leverkusen HQ, Inside the Conference Room]

Rolfes turned to Dr Keller the moment the door closed. "Your honest assessment?"

The lawyer removed his glasses and cleaned them with his pocket square, a habit when he was thinking. "Legally, we have no leverage here. Rakim's contract expires in ten months. If he refuses to sign an

extension, we either sell him in January for whatever we can get or we let him play out his contract and leave for nothing in June. Neither option is ideal."

"So she's right," Rolfes said. "We need him more than he needs us."

"Correct," Dr Keller confirmed. "And she knows it. That's why she's negotiating from strength. The question is: can the club afford what she's asking?"

Rolfes pulled up a financial spreadsheet on his tablet, scrolling through projected revenues and expenses. "€75,000 per week is €3.9 million per year. With performance bonuses, call it €4.5 million annually. For a one-year extension, that's €4.5 million total additional expenditure."

He tapped the screen, running calculations. "If we sell him next summer for €80 million, which is conservative given his age and ability, we net €75.5 million after wages. If we lose him on a free, we net negative €4.5 million."

"And the release clause?" Dr Keller asked.

"100 million pounds is approximately €110 million at current rates," Rolfes said. "Honestly? I don't hate it. If a club is willing to pay that much, we're getting fair value. But I believe we could get more if we could encourage a bidding war when he improves upon his form from last season."

Dr Keller nodded slowly. "Wait, you're not thinking of..."

"Yes, let's scratch the release clause altogether and set goal and assist targets on top of the regular bonus to encourage performance," Rolfes stated, rubbing his stubble with a contemplative look. "Havertz is leaving, and if we want to play for more this season, we are gonna need him as a creative outlet."

"Your series aren't you, (Sigh)," Dr Keller nodded slowly. "Then the only question is whether we can justify making a seventeen-year-old the second-highest-paid player. The optics within the squad..."

"Well, we need a focal point before Wirtz grows into the team, plus I believe his value could well rise above 100 million," Rolfes said bluntly. "I just want to field a more competitive squad this year. I really think we could go all the way."

"Then we might actually need to meet Bosz's demand for a forward, especially if we want to play on three fronts." Dr Keller noted after realising that Rolfes had already made up his mind.

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[14/09/2020, 11:30, Leverkusen, Rakims home]

"United secures firepower up front with an absolute steal of a deal with Edinson Cavani, who joins them on a free," Carragher announced with a light smile. "The squad has been through a tumultuous few years, but this move could be a sign of better things to come; it certainly excites the fans to no end."

Rakim sat slouched on the living room couch, the remote rested beside him as he devoured his protein meal. His new personal trainer had him on a new nutrition plan that had smaller portions but more

frequent meals. Watching the Sky Sports roll through the morning's transfer window recap, he quickly got bored as it was more of the same all month.

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[May: How's your morning, babe? It's beautiful here in Australia, I wish you had come.

Me: Same wish I was there, but I couldn't deal with all those snakes, spiders, crocodiles, sharks, kangaroos, and ostriches.

Me: Dang, every animal either wants to kill you or is simply an asshole. Honestly surprised you managed to enjoy your vacation.

May: Fuck don't even get me started, we woke up to the biggest spider in our room, it was madness...]

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"Breaking news, we have just confirmed that Leverkusen's 17-year-old wunderkind Rakim Rex has put pen to paper on a one-year extension." Jamie Carragher stated, halting the discussion between Micha and Henry, and getting Rakim's attention. "Following yesterday's stellar performance in the DFB cup against Eintracht Norderstedt, where he scored four and provided two assists, they have finally pushed the deal through."

Micah Richards shook his head with a wide grin. "The boy is different. Four goals and two assists against any team on the professional stage is crazy."

Thierry Henry, who had been quietly observing, spoke up. "What's interesting about this extension is the timing. His contract was expiring next summer, which meant he could have walked away for free. By signing for one more year, he's doing Leverkusen and himself a massive favour, essentially sending a message that he is here for the entire season."

"Smart business from both sides," Carragher agreed. "Leverkusen get to settle the locker room for the season and demand a proper transfer fee, and Rakim gets what I'm hearing is a substantial wage increase. Reports suggest he's now earning upwards of €70,000 per week, making him one of the highest-paid players at the club."

Richards whistled. "Seventy thousand a week for a seventeen-year-old? That's serious money, Jamie."

"And worth every penny," Henry interjected. "Last season, he had twenty-seven goals and eighteen assists across all competitions. At sixteen years old. He danced around some of the best defenders in the world against Bayern, Atletico, and of course, Leipzig."

Carragher nodded. "And there's also talk of the release clause that was previously at €70 million being scratched, though neither the club nor his representatives have confirmed that. But if true, that's a statement of intent. Leverkusen are basically saying, 'If you want him, you're going to pay premium money.'"

"Which clubs will," Richards said immediately. "Chelsea has already signed Havertz from Leverkusen for big money. You know they'll be looking at Rakim, too. Manchester United need all the attacking reinforcements it can get. Man City, Liverpool are always in the market for young talent. Barcelona, despite their financial troubles, won't want to miss out on a player of this calibre."

Henry leaned back, his expression thoughtful. "Before we give the Leverkusen fans panic attacks, let's see what the young man will do this season."

"Onto another story, the saga between Jordan Sancho and Manchester United continues..." Carragher stated moving on to another story that would excite the viewers who made it their living to predict the transfer windows.

"Rakim, you ready well do some aquatic exercises to boost your recovery from yesterday's match?" A rugged voice resounded as a dark-skinned man walked into the living room dressed in sports shorts and a tank top showcasing his muscular physique. "If we want to meet the goals we set out this year, we'll have to stick to the plan."

"Say less, Simba, what you got me doing today?" Rakim responded, springing up from the sofa quickly, clearing the plate that had his finished meal. "I know it's barely been a month, but I'm definitely feeling the difference, though these meals you have me on are even more brutal than the club nutritionist."

"You're the one who insisted on being strict, so no complaining now," Simba replied, rubbing his bald head as Rakim rinsed the plate and cooking utensils to wash later. "You know you have plenty of time, why put so much pressure on yourself?"

"Last season was good, but I couldn't go the distance." He responded with a light smile, clutching his fist tightly. "Towards the end, I couldn't perform the way I wanted to, but more importantly, I hate losing; being second best is one of the worst feelings in the world."

"Alright, let's strive to get better every day, then," Simbad responded with a bright grin, leading the way to the indoor pool. "Still starting your season with four goals is insane, bro. Now you just need to replicate that in every competition."

"No problem, all in a day's work."