

Champions 391

Chapter 391: Hello Roy Part 2

That was not a novelty. Since he began coaching the team, Twain had been using this rewards-and-penalties training model to train his players to be competitive. Even if it was a training game, no one was willing to lose. That was why his team was able to persist to the end of a tough game and beat their opponents.

The players were excited when they heard that they were going to play in the games. Their behavior attracted Keane's attention. He paused in his training and stood on the sidelines to rest while he observed the other side of the field.

Manchester United also had such competitions, and he believed that Arsenal must have them too. He was not interested in the training itself. He was interested in the players' performances during training.

Twain assigned the players for each team aloud. The grouping was not divided according to the main force or substitutes but distributed randomly among the main force and substitutes.

Because there were only twenty-three players, it was impossible to average eight players per team. One team would only have seven players, so one player needed to play for two teams.

This required a lot more stamina. Naturally, only one player could do it.

"George!" Twain waved the notebook in his hand. "You're on two teams."

Wood nodded.

When he saw George Wood, Keane quickly focused on him.

The media had dubbed the kid as "the second Keane." It was impossible for him not to notice. After the first match between the two teams, he exchanged jerseys with Wood.

But in his opinion, George Wood was still too young to be the second version of him. He still had a long way to go. At best, George Wood was a good midfield soldier. I, Roy Keane, am not just a foot soldier who can only kick the ball out of bounds with force; not before, and definitely not now.

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When the other team, watching the game on the sidelines, saw that Anelka did not intend to pass the ball to someone else as he faced Wood and instead wanted to rely on his speed to force a breakthrough, they started to hoot.

"Bypass him! Shake him off!"

"Don't let him through, George! Stop him!"

Anelka zigzagged left and right, changing his speed and shifting constantly. George still firmly stuck to him. The French striker could not fully make use of his speed advantage in the small field, which frustrated him. When he wanted to forcibly break through, George Wood tackled his ball.

However, the ball that Wood had tackled did not fall under his foot. Instead, Sun Jihai received the ball as he plugged in from behind. The Chinese fullback passed the ball and Viduka headed the ball into the goal. Wood's team was eliminated, but he had to stay on the field because he was on the next team.

Twain realized someone was next to him. He turned his head and looked. It was Roy Keane.

"What do you think? Do you want to go out there and play for a bit?"

Keane looked at him and then regarded George Wood. He nodded. "Good idea."

Twain grinned and immediately waved his hand towards the field. "George! You're off!"

Kerslake handed Keane a blue vest. Seeing Keane put on the vest, the other people burst into an excited catcall.

Wood came off the field and Twain patted him on the shoulder. "Stand here and watch."

Then he turned to Keane and said, "Are you ready?"

Keane bent his knees for a moment and nodded.

"Go ahead then."

Clad in the blue vest, Keane ran onto the field and the game started.

Perhaps because of Keane's influence, the blue team mostly passed the ball to Keane, who organized the offense and controlled the pace of the game. Keane also did a great job, just as well as he did at Manchester United.

Whether it was his defense, the counterattack after intercepting the ball, or that he continued to press on after the opponent's attack, Roy Keane performed very well. Even as a newcomer, he automatically took command of the team as soon as he played. Everyone obeyed his every command. No one questioned him.

Kerslake watched the scene from the sidelines and shook his head as he sighed. "Too bad he refused to come to the Forest team. He may be thirty-four years old, but he can still be the main force in any team."

Twain smiled and stole a glance at George Wood beside him. He found that he was staring steadily at the field. Twain did not know who he was looking at, but he could guess that he was most likely watching Keane.

Why did he invite Keane to the Forest team to train and maintain his condition? It was all for Wood.

You have to understand my good intentions, George. You have to learn from him within this limited period of a dozen or so days.

Led by Keane, the blue team was in a deadlock with the Albertini-led yellow team on the field for ten minutes. Neither side scored a goal. The game extended into a penalty shootout.

In the end, Keane scored a goal but Wes Morgan missed his shot, so the blue team was eliminated.

"It's your turn to play, George," Twain said Wood.

Keane walked towards Twain after he left the field.

“How are you feeling, Roy?” asked Twain.

“Well...” Keane looked back at Wood as he ran past, turned back and said, “Ten minutes is too short.”

Twain chuckled and then asked, “What do you think of George Wood?”

“Apart from defense, he still has a lot to learn.”

“I think so too. He’ll learn.”

Both men stopped talking and intently watched the game on the field.

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The news that Roy Keane was training at the Nottingham Forest training base soon became known to the media and then the whole of England through the media. Many people speculated that it was a sign that Keane wanted to sign a contract with Nottingham Forest.

After all, Nottingham Forest was the starting point in Keane’s career. After he terminated his contract with his previous club, Manchester United, returning to Nottingham Forest could be an option.

However, the Forest club soon came forward to clarify. “Keane did not sign any transfer agreement with the team. He is just using Wilford for his personal training, as agreed on with Manager Tony Twain.”

Soon after, Keane’s agent released the news that a number of domestic and foreign clubs were interested in Roy Keane and hoped to get the currently free midfielder.

“We’ve already turned down the invitations of Premier League football clubs such as Everton and Bolton Wanderers. Roy Keane would like to extend his thanks to those teams for their invitations, but he doesn’t want to be Manchester United’s rival on the field. So, he has rejected all invitations from teams in the English Premier League.”

Michael Kennedy made that statement on Keane’s behalf.

With the task of contacting the new teams handed over to his agent, Keane still arrived at Wilford training base every day to train. Occasionally, he would play small group games with the Forest players. But most of the time, he would carry out the Manchester United training regime on his own.

Other than that, he appeared to be no different from a member of the Forest team. They used the same locker room and eat in the same cafeteria. Twain did not avoid this outsider when he laid out the team’s tactics. Keane did not grimly turn away anyone who came and talked to him. Everyone could feel the air of natural-born leadership emanating from him. However, everyone realized that, except for Twain, Keane seldom actively talked to people first. He still deliberately maintained his distance from the team. Even if he was swept out of Manchester United, he did not forget that he was from Manchester United. Perhaps he thought it would be a kind of betrayal if he took the initiative to chat to the Forest players because the Forest team was a direct competitor of Manchester United.

Even though the Forest team was his starting point in England's top league, the twelve years of his career with the Red Devils had been deeply rooted in his heart. Nothing could replace that position, not even the Irish national team.

Just after Keane's personal training at Nottingham Forest's training base was exposed by the media, Twain received a call from Manchester. He was familiar with the caller, Alex Ferguson.

Ferguson asked about Keane's individual training over the phone. Apparently, he was still worried about the currently "homeless" Irishman, who had left the club.

Then Ferguson expressed his gratitude to Twain for his generosity.

Twain very much wanted to ask Ferguson what had transpired between Keane and Manchester United. He wanted to know what happened with him and Keane that would cause the Red Devils captain to suddenly end his contract with the club. However, he refrained from asking in the end. He knew that Ferguson must have had his reasons which could not be divulged. It was uncertain who was right and who was wrong with regards to Keane's departure.

Some said that Ferguson no longer valued Keane, and that his search for a defensive midfielder was proof. Others said Ferguson preferred the Liverpool midfielder, Steven Gerrard, over Keane. But now Twain knew they were all talking nonsense.

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On December 20th, Roy Keane left the Wilford training base. Accompanied by his agent, Michael Kennedy, they flew to Madrid, Spain. They were going to the Real Madrid club for a negotiation. Under the recommendation of his former teammate, David Beckham, Real Madrid had extended an invitation to Roy Keane.

Chapter 392: Keane, The Man Part 1

When Roy Keane appeared again in the Nottingham Forest training base in Wilford to train alone, the newspapers reported that he had missed his appointment with Real Madrid.

The reports said that he had even passed his medical examinations and that when both parties were ready to sign the contract, Roy Keane had suddenly chosen to reject the transfer and leave Madrid.

No one knew why he had left. Some people speculated that it was due to the contract period. There were also some who speculated that Roy Keane felt tired of the many factions in the Real Madrid locker room. Some people also thought it was for familial reasons.

Twain, perhaps currently the closest person to Keane, did not ask him the reason. It was a relatively private matter which was inconvenient for him to inquire about. He was not an intrusive reporter.

The players were also surprised at Keane's return. However, all of them restrained their inner curiosity. No one asked about the story behind his missed appointment with Real Madrid.

Michael Kennedy had been gone for days. He became busier after his return from Madrid. He flew to places all the time, searching for the right team for Keane. With such an agent, it was no wonder that he

could accompany Keane on his journey to become a world-class superstar from being a nobody. His actions had changed some of Twain's prejudices towards agents.

During this period, Twain did not become idle just to focus on Keane. His team played three rounds in the league tournament. On the 11th, they challenged Manchester United in an away game and the teams tied at 1:1 for the match. When the two managers had a drink together after the game, Ferguson specially thanked Twain for providing his training base at no cost for Keane to use.

On the 14th, the Forest team went away to play a make-up match in the third round of the league tournament. Their opponent was West Ham United. The outcome of the game was that Twain's team defeated "The Hammers" by 3:1.

On the 17th, Nottingham Forest scored a massive victory of 4:0 over Charlton at home. After seventeen rounds of competition, they had accumulated thirty-nine points and ranked second in the league. They had a four-point gap from Chelsea, who was in first place.

And Wigan Athletic, the biggest dark horse for the first half of the season, seemed to shed the image of a dark horse. They encountered a succession of strong teams before Christmas and lost repeatedly. They slipped from third to sixth place in the league. Manchester United and Liverpool were catching up with thirty-seven points and thirty-one points, being in third and fourth place respectively. Arsenal was not doing very well. Being one game short, they only had twenty-six points and were ranked eighth.

Keane was present when Twain laid out specific tactics a few days before the games, excluding the match against Manchester United. He deliberately avoided the pre-match tactical training for the game with Manchester United. On that day, he gave himself a day off and went shopping in the city center.

A draw was the best outcome for Roy Keane, who was training at the Forest team's Wilford training base.

Two days after his return from Madrid, Twain returned to his office to pack up and prepare to go home at the end of a day's training.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in."

Twain was not surprised to see Keane enter through the door.

"I've come to say goodbye to you."

"Are you going home for Christmas?"

"Yes, in a way. But I'm not coming back after."

Twain was somewhat surprised. He looked up at the Irishman.

"The Celtics are very interested in me and they sent me an offer."

"The team from the Scottish Premiership?"

Keane nodded his head. "That's the team I've loved since I was a kid. I want to spend the last days of my career there."

Hearing Keane say that, Twain was quiet for a while. Perhaps it was because he had still kept a tiny bit of hope in his heart that Keane would decide to stay after spending some time with him. He was a little disappointed.

“Well, I wish you all the best, Roy.”

Keane cleared his throat. “I know it’s no use talking about it now, but I want to tell you this before I leave: I was going to approach you first to discuss a contract with Forest if the Celtic team hadn’t intervened.”

Twain looked at Keane.

“I admit that I became fond of this team from our interactions over these past few days. I’ve told you this. I actually didn’t have any feelings for the Forest team. Nottingham Forest was only special for me because of Manager Clough.”

“When I came here, Clough’s team was already in decline. I could feel the end coming. The locker room was filled with complaints. Everyone wanted to leave the club and find another way. I was the same. I thought that I could attract the notice of bigger clubs with my performance on the Forest team. It turned out that I was right. I went to Manchester United later.”

“After Clough left Forest, Nottingham Forest was no different to me from the hundreds of other professional teams in England. Well... now I’ve changed my mind. I like the current Nottingham Forest team. It’s completely different from what I had in mind. Totally different.”

Keane shook his head.

“I heard a lot of comments about you in Nottingham. It’s really a pity that I didn’t hear anything bad.” The Irishman laughed and said, “Michael and I had a serious discussion. We talked about what would happen if I played for you. Our conclusion was so good that I almost chose you. Unfortunately, the Celtics came in at the last second. When the team that I’ve loved and supported since I was young wanted me to play for them, I couldn’t refuse. It has nothing to do with money or honor. I just like the team. I want to be able to put on that jersey before the end of my career. Only then will I feel that my career as a footballer is complete and have no regrets.”

At that point, Twain sighed. “I understand. What else can I say? I can only say, I wish you all the best, Roy.”

Keane saw Twain’s expression and smiled. “Well, thank you, Mr. Twain. Before, I said I wanted to be a manager after I hung up my boots because I was influenced by two managers. Now I’m going to change that. I’ve been influenced by three managers. But I’m not going to say the name of the third person, I don’t want him to be too pleased with himself.”

Twain came up and extended his hand. “Hopefully someday, we’ll meet on the sidelines of a game again. Better be careful. I won’t show any mercy.”

Keane also put his hand out. “I’ve never been kind to my rivals.”

The two men tightly clasped hands.

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Michael Kennedy, Roy Keane's agent, waited for Keane to come out of the building in the parking lot.

"We'll fly to Glasgow tomorrow and talk to them..."

Keane vetoed the plan. "We'll wait another day before we tell them."

Kennedy was a little puzzled. "Is there anything else left to do here?"

Keane looked back at the training ground in the twilight, "I forgot one thing. I'll have to come again tomorrow." Then he opened the car door and went in.

"Let's go, Michael."

Chapter 393: Keane, The Man Part 2

When he got home, Twain could only vent all his disappointment to Dunn. This was not the first or second time that Dunn had acted as his audience. He ate his meal while he listened to Twain grumble.

"...Damn the Celtics! Dammit! If it weren't for them, Roy Keane would be my man now! Our midfield would have a player who all our opponents would be afraid of, a fierce player and a commander! He could have helped me get all the championship titles. He can still play three more years of high-level football, not just run to Glasgow to prepare for his retirement! And that's not even a good place to retire; it's much worse than Qatar," Twain eventually mumbled to himself.

When Dunn finished eating, he cleared the dishes and glanced the still somewhat agitated Twain. "In that case, the media will say that Nottingham Forest is a retirement home now."

"I don't give a damn what the media says." Twain furiously took a bite of the beef.

"We still Wood in the midfield."

"George? He's still young and has a lot to learn. Roy Keane is a good teacher, but the time was too short. I don't know what he has or hasn't learned."

"If you're not sure now, you'll know during the game."

Twain sighed. "Dunn, I originally had a good plan, for Albertini to teach George how to be a qualified midfielder and professional player. That turned out pretty well. George is much better than he was when he originally joined the First Team. And his and Keane's temperaments are very similar. I want George to be the kind of player who has the ability to lead a team. Why is Manchester United successful? Because they have Roy Keane. I think you understand that even better than I do."

Dunn nodded. In the 97-98 season, Wenger's Arsenal team had scored a double. That season, Roy Keane had only played nine games for Manchester United due to his knee injury. After that season, Ferguson acknowledged that Manchester United was unable to fight Arsenal without Keane.

Roy Keane's role in Manchester United was not as simple as just a team captain. To a larger extent, he represented the spirit of Manchester United. It was almost impossible to link the name "Roy Keane" to any other teams. When Keane was mentioned, it would invariably remind people of Manchester United. When Manchester United was mentioned, it was not Beckham or Gary Neville that came to mind. It was

only Roy Keane. He was even considered by many Manchester United fans to be the greatest and most successful captain in Manchester United's history, surpassing "The King," Eric Cantona, the legendary captain.

There was a word in football that vividly illustrated such a player: a linchpin.

Paolo Maldini was the linchpin of AC Milan, Raúl González was Real Madrid's linchpin, Alessandro Del Piero was the linchpin of Juventus, Oliver Kahn was the linchpin of Bayern Munich, and Roy Keane was Manchester United's.

Twain hoped that George Wood could become the linchpin of Nottingham Forest someday. He had wanted Keane to give Wood more help and guidance and bring him closer to becoming a linchpin.

But now...

"But now my plans are all over," said Twain as he leaned back in the chair with his hands spread wide open.

"I remember you said to me once that football can't be planned."

"Oh..."

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No matter how unwilling Twain was to let Keane go, there was no way to change things now. The only gratifying thing was that through this matter, he and Keane had become friends. Maybe that would be a good thing in the future. After all, as an outsider, it was better to have one more friend in the football world than to have one more enemy.

During training the next day, Roy Keane appeared on time in the other half of the field. Twain went over to say hello to him, and then he returned to continue the training. Everyone was accustomed to the scene and did not stare like they had on the first day.

Perhaps they did not even know that this was Keane's last appearance at the Wilford training ground.

After he had returned home yesterday, Twain had checked all of the major media outlets and found no news about Keane's transfer to Celtic. Keane could not have lied to him, so there was only one possibility: the news had not been disclosed yet, and he, Tony Twain, might have been the first to know of the matter other than the parties involved. From that perspective, Keane really saw Twain as a friend.

Every player who was on the starting list for the away game tomorrow had to prepare to play with Aston Villa, so there was only a half-day of training in the morning. After the training was over, George Wood would arrange additional practice for himself as always.

The coaching unit and the entire team were aware that that had already become Wood's habit. A half-day training was too easy for him. Whenever there was a half-day, he would practice for another forty minutes after training ended.

When the players on the training ground went back to the locker room one by one, Roy Keane was still on the training ground beside George Wood.

It was the first time in almost two weeks that he had given himself additional practice.

Wood was practicing his passing, and Keane was practicing his shooting.

Twenty-five minutes later, Keane left the training ground first and returned to the locker room, covered in sweat. He took off his clothes to wash up in the next room. He did not stand under the shower but soaked inside the pool.

Fifteen minutes later, Keane heard the door in the locker room. He looked at his watch. It was exactly forty minutes after the end of the training, not a minute more or less.

This kid...

After the rustling sound of clothes being taken off, George Wood walked naked into the foggy bathroom, turned on the faucet, reached out to test the water temperature, and fully stepped under the nozzle to let the hot water rain on him from head to toe.

While he closed his eyes to enjoy a moment of relaxation after training, a voice made him reflexively tense up.

“Hey, kid.”

It was Roy Keane’s voice.

“What are you tense about?”

Wood relaxed his body and continued to stand under the shower. He did nothing except let the gush of water flow down from his head.

“You should know who I am. We even exchanged jerseys before.”

“Roy Keane.” Wood finally spoke.

Keane gave a bark of laughter. “It seems you haven’t forgotten me. Do you still remember what I said to you when we exchanged jerseys? ‘We’re going to compete often; don’t let me down, kid.’ It’s a shame that we’re not going to have many opportunities to do that. I’m going to Glasgow tomorrow. Do you know where that is? It’s the capital of Scotland. I’m going there to sign with a team... When we met, I never thought I’d leave Manchester United one day.” Keane changed his position in the pool and put his head on the side of the pool. He put his arms up on the edge and looked up at the ceiling.

“Even though we may not have many chances to compete with each other, I’ll keep my eye on you. You want to know why I care about you, kid?”

Wood moved a little to turn and look at the figure in the pool. “Um...”

“Because you have similarities with the younger me. Well, just some. Your talent is nowhere close to mine. Hey, I heard that Real Madrid was interested in you a while ago. Why did you reject them? It’s a much bigger football club than Nottingham Forest. While your team was still fighting to qualify for the Champions League, they considered about not winning the championship a failure. If you go there, you’ll soon become an internationally-renowned star. Honor, glory, and money would be yours. Why didn’t you go?”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Huh. Glory and money hold little attraction for you? Why did I transfer from the Forest team to Manchester United? Why did I insist on the condition that ‘if the Forest team relegates, I will leave the team,’ when I renewed my contract with Nottingham Forest? Because I knew that Nottingham Forest was only a small team that couldn’t hold me back. I had higher goals and bigger ambitions. I wanted to win a lot of things. Have you thought about that? What are you playing for, kid?”

Two people had asked George Wood that question, what are you playing for? In the past two weeks. The first was his manager, Tony Twain.

In the past, Wood had wanted to play because professional players were paid a lot. He could support himself and his mother, and his mother could receive treatment for her illness. Later, the Forest club paid for them to move out of the slums and get surgery for his mother. He had already achieved his goal for playing. So, what was he still playing for?

Wood contemplated for a long while before he bowed his head and said, “I don’t know.”

Keane did not mean to discomfit Wood on the issue. He changed the topic and said, “By the way, I heard you’re the team’s vice-captain now. How does it feel to wear the captain’s armband?”

“Very... It’s very complicated.”

“Do you ever feel proud of it?” Keane asked.

Wood nodded.

“And then do you feel stressed?”

Wood continued to nod.

At that moment, Keane laughed. “And here I thought you were a hard-hearted monster. Kid, what do you think the captain does?”

Wood recalled the words that Twain and Albertini had said to him. “Help his teammates disentangle from trouble and lead the team to victory.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“It’s not that simple, kid. When I played on the Nottingham Forest team, I met a very, very good team captain whom I still thank today. Stuart Pearce. Have you heard that name before?”

Wood nodded. He was aware that he was the Forest team’s best team captain.

“I was a young and inexperienced kid then, and he opened my eyes. He showed me what a professional player was, what an outstanding professional player was, and... He showed how a captain should act. Consequently, when I wore the Manchester United’s captain’s armband at twenty-six, I seemed like I could do the job well and with ease.”

“Let me tell you... A captain is first and foremost a man. Do you know what it means to be a man, kid?”

Wood did not know how to answer Keane's question. A man... Isn't it just biological? He lowered his head.

Chapter 394: Keane, The Man Part 3

"I know what you're thinking," Keane snickered. "It doesn't make someone a 'man' just because of that something extra. There are countless sissies and cowards with two balls in the world but that does not make them a man. What's a real man? It's someone who always demands the most of himself. He's brave, strong, optimistic, cheerful, confident, and knows humility. He can inspire people around him and be their role model. He can make countless young kids aspire to become like him. In my opinion, Pearce is a man. He's so perfect that I cannot find any fault in him. A proud person like me was willing to obey him, listen to him, and try to be like him."

Keane's words echoed in the bathroom.

"So, a captain must first be a man himself. If not, he must at least strive to become a man and let himself become an example to all. It's not enough to merely help others out of trouble. Anyone can compete against the opponents on the field." Keane clenched his fist. "But it's not a competitive and hard player who can become a captain. Do you think I became the Manchester United captain because I dared to fight others? Being a role model is not the same as being a backer of your team. The latter will only let your men be dependent on you. Cowards will still be cowards, nothing will have changed. The former can make them want to be you and let those cowards and sissies want to strive to be a man. It's useless if you're the only one who is a man. A flock of sheep led by a tiger cannot defeat an ambush of tigers led by a tiger. Do you understand what that means?"

Wood nodded.

"You're very lucky, kid, luckier than I was at your age. You do not have to transfer to a big club to get glory or money now. You have a terrific manager and a group of very good teammates. That Italian, Albertini, is a very good captain, but he will get old one day, retire, and leave you and the team. That's when you need to become the captain who will lead your players. At that point, dozens of pairs of eyes will look at you... No, tens of thousands of pairs of eyes will look at you, because you are the captain of Nottingham Forest. You will represent this team and shoulder all their expectations and responsibilities. You have to be their role model in order to be able to lead them to victory. Pressure? The person who cannot withstand that kind of pressure is not a man, nor does he deserve to be captain. For a coward, the captain's armband will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. For a real man, that's exactly what he should do."

Due to the unique environment of the bathroom, Keane's every spoken sentence was amplified several times. It surged in Wood's eardrums and pounded in his heart.

"You don't have a goal to play football? You feel lost? You're worried you can't be a good captain? Are you tired of facing what you have to face after becoming the captain? Do you think that as long as you practice hard in your usual training to be able to tackle your opponents, that makes you a good captain? Kid..." Keane snorted. "You're still not a man."

With the sound of splashing water, Keane stood up from the pool.

“First, don’t think about being a captain or your goal for playing. Strive to be a man first.” He stepped out of the pool and walked past Wood towards the door.

“Oh, that’s right. I heard that you have a bad temper. Have you ever thought about changing that terrible impulsive temper of yours?”

Wood was startled for a moment and then shook his head.

Keane smiled. “That’s good. Don’t change it. If you change yourself, you’re not you anymore. But if you always get penalty cards because of your impulsive temper, your manager will still get frustrated. I want to give you a piece of advice. Care to listen?”

Wood nodded.

“I used to be a bad-tempered person. I still am. But before, I used to reflect on my mistakes after I hit someone, and now I will consider before I start.”

Keane got dressed and left the locker room. George Wood was still standing under the shower, letting the water flow over him.

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Michael Kennedy waited in the parking lot for Keane as usual.

“Can we go to Glasgow now?”

“Yes, I’m done here.”

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The next day, various media outlets published this message:

The former Manchester United captain, the Irish midfielder Roy Keane, had signed an eighteen-month contract with the Scottish Premiership team, the Celtic Football Club. For the 34-year-old Keane, this would be his last contract as a player in his career. To be able to end his career in this favorite club of his childhood, Keane had lowered his salary requirements. His weekly salary of 90 thousand pounds in Manchester United had dropped to 45 thousand.

At the same time, the invitations that Keane had rejected included those from Nottingham Forest, Everton, Bolton Wanderers, and other Premier League clubs, as well as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Juventus, and many other European powerhouse clubs.

On the same day, a public thank-you letter from Roy Keane appeared in the English media, which contained a vague explanation of his departure from Manchester United: his disagreement with the assistant manager, Carlos Queiroz. Certainly, it was mainly to show appreciation. Keane thanked Noel McCabe, the old Nottingham Forest football scout for discovering him at the beginning of his career and his former Nottingham Forest manager, Brian Clough. He expressed his gratitude to the first excellent team captain, Stuart Pearce, whom he had met during his career. He gave thanks to his old Manchester United teammates whom he had fought alongside with but had now retired, the teammates who were still currently in Manchester United and those who had left Manchester United but were still playing on other teams. He expressed thanks to Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjær, who had helped

Manchester United win the 1999 Champions League, and David Beckham, who made the world adore Manchester United. He thanked the football club managers who had sent him warm invitations and offered him contracts with sky-high prices after he ended his contract with Manchester United. He was grateful to the Nottingham Forest Football Club for providing the use of its training base to keep him in shape and maintain his condition. He also thanked his agent, Michael Kennedy, his parents, his wife, and his children. Finally, he thanked Sir Alex Ferguson, the manager who had had the deepest influence on him and had helped him the most during his career.

“Without you, there would be no Roy.”

There was no mention of the name Tony Twain in the entire thank-you letter.

Twain thought of what Keane had said:

But I’m not going to say his name. I don’t want him to be too pleased with himself.

“This heartless bastard...” Looking at the photograph of the man holding the Celtic jersey in the newspaper, Twain shook his head and smiled. “I wish you all the best, Roy.”

Chapter 395: Santa Claus Part 1

Keane left. In the end, he did not choose to join Nottingham Forest. He and Tony Twain had just brushed each other by. Twain guessed that they would not have a chance to work together in the future. After the opportunity to cooperate was lost, it was almost impossible to work together again. He knew that Roy Keane would not want to be his assistant manager, just like he would not want to be another person’s assistant.

Therefore, even if Keane retired in eighteen months and chose to be a coach, Twain could not extend the proud Irishman an invitation to serve as his assistant manager.

They could not be partners, but it was also good to be rivals.

If all the capable men were on his side, what was the point of competing in the games?

Twain did not want to lose interest in the game too soon.

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Another Christmas approached. For Western countries, Christmas was equivalent to the Spring Festival in China.

Tang En had spent two Christmases in England. Because Sophia was around, he did not feel the loneliness of a foreign visitor.

He and Dunn would spend this Christmas with Sophia’s family as usual.

Unfortunately, Shania could not come to Nottingham to accompany her this year. Last Christmas, she had said that “It’s going to be like this every year.” But she could not realize her words. She had broken her promise.

But this breaking of her promise was a good thing for her personal career.

After a year of hard work in England, Shania gradually became known in the modeling world. As a result, she was now no longer an ordinary unknown young girl who could casually wander in the streets and go to school every day.

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Tony..." Shania apologized to Twain over the phone, but she sounded more like a child complaining.

"Why are you apologizing? I think it's a good thing for you." Twain held the latest issue of a fashion magazine. If he did not look carefully, he would not think that the person on the cover was the fifteen-year-old Judy Shania Jordana.

Her name was written next to the cover girl image, and below was a headline: "The future of the runway."

That was a special edition of this issue, which featured some of the most notable new stars in the modeling world.

It was just like a football magazine, which would introduce the world's up and coming star footballers.

Shania's exceptional physical assets, as well as her qualities from her early professional training, got her on the list of top ten most promising models.

Although Shania always complained that she did not like modeling, there was no denying that she had the making of a supermodel. Twain once thought that Shania did not like to be a model because she was subject to the constant rigorous modeling training that caused her to resist. But in fact, she was most suited to be a model.

"But I want to spend Christmas with you," Shania whined on the phone.

"This is your job too, Shania." Twain cleared his throat. "Just like it's my job to coach the team. Last Christmas, didn't you see that I had to constantly lead the team through the training and competitions? I thought you didn't want me to regard you as a child. Now that you're busy with work during the holidays, it shows that you are an adult, Shania."

Shania was quiet for a moment and said, "But now I want you to see me as a child!"

Twain rolled his eyes.

Without waiting for him to come up with new words of consolation, Shania sighed. "Okay, I know I'm being a little unreasonable. You must be in a difficult position, Uncle Tony. Are you thinking, 'How can this child be so difficult!'"

Twain gave a hard cough. "Don't you dare think that, Jordana!" His tone became severe.

Shania immediately became pliant, "I was just joking! Even if we can't spend Christmas together, I still want a Christmas present! A new Totoro toy! It has to be different from the previous one. You can't give me the same one again!"

Twain nodded and agreed. "No problem at all. You can have as many as you want."

“No, I just want one! If I can’t spend Christmas with you every year in the future, you will have to buy me a different Totoro soft toy each time!”

Twain smiled wryly. This girl is already realizing that she is becoming an international supermodel. Why else would she say that? We probably won’t spend too many Christmases together.

Even though he thought that, he still said, “That won’t happen. We’ll spend Christmas together the next year.”

What could he do if he was the manager of an English Premier League team? Few tournaments in the world had intensive competition schedules during Christmas. The Premier League committee had hoped that the Premier League would bring joy to people who had been busy all year during the Christmas season. Going to the stadium as a family to watch the game or watch live television broadcast at home became their most important event during the Christmas Season. However, who was going to give a holiday to the players and coaches who had been busy for half a season and would continue to be busy?

A player or a coach was able to command a higher salary than the average person. But the pressure that they bore was not what ordinary people could imagine. Coaches might have one of the most stressful occupations in the world. One had to endure unimaginably immense pressure long-term and received very little vacation time. Many coaches liked to drink. Why was that? Because it was the only way they could relieve the stress and forget their troubles.

The former Liverpool boss Houllier had a heart attack due to excessive stress. Twain did not wish to be on the operating table someday for heart surgery. What was the point of earning more money if he could not live to spend it?

Shania might not agree with what Twain had claimed, but she accepted his comfort. “Yes, maybe we’ll be together again next year. I wish you a Merry Christmas in advance, Uncle Tony. The makeup artist is calling me.”

“Merry Christmas, Shania.”

After he hung up the phone, Twain looked at the glamorous Shania on the cover. Would readers and onlookers care about the price that the models had to pay behind the glamor?

He curled his lip and put the magazine aside. He got up and put on his coat as he walked downstairs.

“Where are you going?” Dunn casually asked as he saw Twain get dressed while he walked downstairs.

“I’m heading out to buy something.”

“Are you buying a gift for Shania?”

Twain nodded as he opened the door to go out.

Shania was participating in a party for a fashion brand in Milan during Christmas. Obviously, she was not invited to attend as a VIP guest, but as a brand endorsement model walking in the show to showcase the new products. She was not the only model who was busy working during Christmas. There were also a lot of young girls like her, dressed in glamorous clothes and walking the runway under everyone’s envious gaze. Some of them worked hard for their dream of becoming an international supermodel,

while some people worked hard to just survive. The former did not want to be easily replaced and for the latter, modeling was just a job.

Chapter 396: Santa Claus Part 2

Although they were missing one person, the Christmas dinner at Sophia's place was still very festive. Everyone had a wonderful evening with Sophia's meticulous planning.

Shania also received a large Totoro soft toy in Milan, Italy, sent to her via FedEx; a soft toy as tall as a person. Shania tore open the package in front of the other models, which got her exclamations of envy. That greatly satisfied the young girl's vanity. Although she ate fast food backstage during Christmas, to be able to receive such a Christmas present was enough to make her the happiest of all the girls.

However, she had a little trouble answering the girls' questions about the person who sent the gift.

Her parents and relatives?

Definitely not.

Friends?

In the end, she could only say, "It's from a very, very good friend."

How close are you guys?

We're just very, very close.

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After Christmas dinner, Twain led the team to their away game against Aston Villa on December 26th, which began their hellish competition schedule of two away games and one home game, a total of three matches in six days during the Christmas season.

On this day in Milan, the girls who roomed together went out to go sightseeing in this fashion capital, with most of the holiday spent on shopping. Shania declined her roommates' invitation and chose to stay in the hotel room alone. She turned on the television and searched for a television channel on which she could watch the English Premier League game.

By the time she finally found a channel that broadcasted Nottingham Forest's away game against Aston Villa, the second half of the game had already begun.

The television broadcast just so happened to show a close-up shot of the Forest team manager. Shania's anxious and restless heart suddenly settled down after she saw Twain.

Aston Villa had just equalized the score, and the television broadcast wanted to show the expression on Twain's face. But Shania did not care about the score. As long as she could see the person she wanted to see, she was content.

On the television screen, Twain could be seen staring intently at the field, unaware that the camera had locked onto him. He was also unaware that he was watched by another pair of eyes in Milan, Italy.

Sitting next to him, David Kerslake talked to him and Twain occasionally nodded as he listened. Then he stood up and walked to the sideline of the field.

He did not do anything. He just walked to the sideline and stood there with his arms across his chest. Nonetheless, his players seemed to receive some kind of motivation and the visiting team, Nottingham Forest, suddenly began to exert their force. Shania seemed to be in a trance as she watched. Although she liked Uncle Tony to joke around with her with his face full of smiles, she also liked this serious-looking Uncle Tony. Different looks had their different appeal.

When the television footage moved to the battle between the teams on the field, Shania rolled her eyes and curled her lip. She was not interested in the game at all.

The match commentary was not in Italian or English. It sounded like one of the languages from Scandinavia, perhaps Danish or Norwegian. But Shania did not care. It did not matter to her if she did not understand the commentary.

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The Villa Park stadium was full of hubbub and the home fans worked hard to cheer Aston Villa on, hoping that they could give their supporters a victory on this Christmas night as a present.

But Nottingham Forest was not willing to hand over the three points. Both sides were in a stalemate.

Twain certainly did not think that tying the away game with Aston Villa was an acceptable outcome. The Aston Villa manager said before the game that he wanted to beat the league's second-ranked team at their home ground to bring some comfort and confidence to the Villa fans who were in despair over the team's current poor record.

It was good to have a winning conviction, but it also depended on where it was to be used.

Tony Twain was not Santa Claus for the Villa fans. He also had a reason that he must win.

With fifteen minutes left in the game, they entered injury stoppage time. Twain replaced the physically exhausted Albertini with Arteta to strengthen the organization of the midfield offense.

Twain noticed a detail.

When Albertini saw that he was going to be brought off, he turned to look for George Wood as he took off the captain's armband from his arm. In the past, the Italian would have run over first to put it on George Wood. However, this time, it was George Wood who ran over first and took the captain's armband from the Italian to put it on his left arm. Next, he waved his left hand with the captain's armband on to let his teammates press up. He would defend the rear.

Since Keane's departure, George Wood had seemed more active. He would often use body language to express his ideas.

Twain knew that Roy had talked to Wood before he left, but he did not know what was said. He did not ask Keane or Wood. He thought this should be a secret between both of them. He was glad to see that Wood was actively making some changes, and that was enough.

Aston Villa really wanted to win the game. They did not give up on the offense, even in the last ten minutes. Although the Forest team pressed hard, they did everything possible to seize the opportunity to fight back. The game suddenly intensified in the last ten minutes.

George Wood's performance as the defensive midfielder made everyone feel reassured. Even though Keane's training with the Forest team was short, George Wood had learned some things.

Aston Villa counterattacked after they intercepted Ashley Young's dribble. But they did not expect the ball to be cut by George Wood rushing up just when they passed over the center circle. His tackle was very fierce, but it was not a foul. The boos at Villa Park were not enough to stop Nottingham Forest's attack.

It was a very simple pass. Wood passed to Arteta, who in turn passed it again to Anelka. Finally, the French striker used a sudden change in speed to create a space for him to shoot. He kicked the shot without hesitation. The football brushed against the goal post and rolled into Aston Villa's goal!

The jeering was gone. In its place was the Nottingham Forest fans' cheering and the "Merry Christmas" song.

Amidst the "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" song, the goalscorer, Anelka, ran all the way to the substitutes' bench and took the red Santa Claus hat from his teammate's hand. Just when the television audience thought he would put it on himself, he suddenly turned towards Tony Twain, who was celebrating the goal with Kerlake, and put the hat on his head!

Then, before Twain could react, Kerlake pulled out a fake white beard from his chest and stuck it on Twain's chin.

"Ah... You planned this!"

With a red hat and a white beard on his chin, Twain looked like a Santa Claus in front of the television camera.

"Merry Christmas, chief!"

"How's this for a Christmas present, Tony?"

Everyone around Twain burst into laughter.

"You rascals..." Twain tried to scare them with a straight face, but he laughed as he looked at all the laughing faces.

Looking at the comical Uncle Tony in front of the television, Shania collapsed and rolled on the bed as she laughed, holding the Totoro soft toy.

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"This was a surprise that the players gave Tony Twain. It looks like it's a success! He was stunned!" The commentator, John Motson, laughed happily.

"Poor Aston Villa, their Christmas is destined to be associated with failure. Tony Twain makes a great Santa Claus, but he only serves the supporters of Nottingham Forest!"

“Merry Christmas, Manager Twain!”

Chapter 397: “A New Player” Part 1

On December 26, Nottingham Forest triumphed by 2:1 over Aston Villa in an away game.

And then, on December 29, the Forest team returned to their home ground. Their opponents were “The Black Cats,” the Sunderland team. The two teams, who had competed against each other in the EFL Championship before, were now in the Premier League. The difference lay in the situations of both teams. Nottingham Forest had now accumulated forty-two points with a high ranking of second place, whereas Sunderland was at the bottom after eighteen rounds in the league tournament, with only six points from their single win, three draws, and fourteen defeats.

As they were facing such a weak opponent and it was their home ground, Twain carried out a large-scale rotation once again. Other than van der Sar, George Wood, and Anelka, all other players were changed.

Amidst the cheers of twenty-seven thousand Forest fans in City Ground stadium, Nottingham Forest easily won by 3:1.

Chelsea won, the Forest team won, and Manchester United also won. The three teams were in a tight race. The gap between Chelsea and the Forest team was four points, and the gap between the Forest team and Manchester United was two points. As for the league’s fourth-ranked Liverpool, the gap was too wide to pose a threat to the three teams for the time being.

“We can’t say Nottingham Forest is an outstanding disruptor anymore this season. Look at their lineup and current ranking; we should change to calling them ‘a strong contender for the league title.’” In that day’s segment of Match of the Day, Gary Lineker expressed his optimistic outlook for Twain’s team.

“As usual, I have a different take on this, Gary.” Mark Lawrenson appeared on the television screen with a serious expression.

When Lineker looked at the smooth skin on his chin and above his lips, he laughed. “Are you going to bet on your hair this time, Mark?”

Next to them, Alan Hansen laughed happily.

“No, I’m not betting this time.” Out of habit, Lawrenson touched his lips, even though there was nothing above them. “I’ll admit that Twain’s team is doing very well now. But I think the real test for him isn’t here yet.”

“This intensive competition schedule has not stopped Nottingham Forest from winning. What do you mean by ‘a real test?’” asked Lineker.

“February 22.”

Lineker raised his brows. “You mean, once the Champions League tournament starts again?”

Lawrenson gave a nod. “If Twain’s team can pass the third round in the FA Cup, then they’ll find themselves up against three tournaments. I think that’s the real test for Twain.”

Lineker was silent for a moment. During his silence, Alan Hansen spoke up and disagreed with Mark Lawrenson's opinion. He cited the example that the Forest team had not fallen behind in their performance during last season's double competition in the UEFA Europa League and EFL Championship.

"Alan, you have to understand that the Champions League and the Europa League are not on the same level. Competing for the league title is not as difficult as qualifying for the Champions League." Lawrenson's words sounded true and reasonable.

"Nottingham Forest currently only has three strikers. Anelka is stable and trustworthy after his return to the English Premier League, but this is still their greatest hidden danger. If one of the three strikers is injured again, it's almost impossible to rely on just two strikers to combat three tournaments."

"But Eastwood is going to be discharged from the hospital soon."

"There's still a big difference between being discharged from the hospital and playing on behalf of the team. What's more, whether the Romani can return to his former state after two operations... I'm not optimistic about it at all." Lawrenson shrugged, determined to stand on the opposite side of the Nottingham Forest fans.

Lineker knew that if the subject went any further, he and Alan Hansen would not be able to refute Lawrenson because what Lawrenson had said was reasonable. So, he laughed. "Okay, moving on, let's turn our focus to Chelsea. Otherwise, we're going to have our viewers complaining that we've become the Forest television station."

The three men laughed and moved on from the Forest team's issue.

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As if to demonstrate against Mark Lawrenson's remarks, on December 31, as the league tournament entered its second half, the Forest team beat this season's "dark horse," Wigan Athletic, in an away game. And then, on January 2, the Forest team had a 3:1 away victory over Charlton.

Since December 11, after a 1:1 tied game with Manchester United in the 16th round of the league tournament, Tony Twain's team had had a five-game winning streak during the most intensive period of the competition schedule.

The mighty Chelsea was still winning. After 21 rounds in the league tournament, Mourinho's Ruble corps was still progressing at a high speed. They had achieved 18 victories, one draw, and two losses. They were at the top with 55 points.

Following closely with fifty-one points, the second-ranked Nottingham Forest had 16 wins, three draws, and two defeats.

Manchester United had a run-in with their arch rival, Arsenal, in the 21st round. The visiting Manchester United tied at 0:0 with Arsène Wenger's team. Now they were ranked third with forty-seven points. Their gap with Nottingham Forest had widened to four points.

However, no one dared to underestimate Manchester United. Ferguson's team gained one point at Highbury, which brought them closer to three points. There was always hope when there was no loss, which all of Manchester United's fans were probably thinking.

Twain did not dare rest on his laurels. He knew there was a pack of wolves relentlessly in pursuit. Even though he was also one of those wolves, if he even slightly slackened, he would be torn to pieces by those who caught up from behind.

After ending a physically-draining and nerve-wracking Christmas competition schedule, the various football clubs were given a chance to take a break. The next round of the league tournament would not start until January 14th; there was nothing else on other than an FA Cup match during those two weeks.

In the FA Cup game, Twain employed player rotations in such tournaments as usual. Their opponent was the EFL Championship team, Sheffield Wednesday, which Nottingham Forest easily beat at home and advanced to the next round.

Mark Lawrenson's prediction seemed to be set in motion.

After a succession of victories, the Forest team stormed into the three competitions in a frenzy. While enjoying the thrill of victory, the danger of being toppled accompanied them at the same time.

But no matter how many crises lurked in their future, the victory before their eyes was considered good news for everyone on the Forest team. Who would not like to win?

Chapter 398: "A New Player" Part 2

As the Chinese saying went, "Good things come in pairs." For Twain, the happy event was not only their succession of victories. There was something that made him happier than all the victories.

Just two days after the team had just eliminated the Sheffield Wednesday team in the FA Cup and advanced to the fourth round, Freddy Eastwood reappeared at the Wilford training base.

While the players were still training on the training ground and knew nothing about it, Twain had already seen Eastwood in his office.

The Romani Gypsy had cut off his hair that had been left to grow long during his hospital stay and was back to his former crew cut. He had also shaved off his beard and looked completely different from the Eastwood whom Twain had seen in the hospital.

"Welcome back, Freddy!" Twain came forward and gave Eastwood a strong hug.

With his teeth clenched, Eastwood put his chin on Twain's shoulder and muttered, "I'm back, chief."

Letting go of him, Twain took a step back and looked carefully at the discharged Romani Gypsy. Eastwood just stood in front of him and smiled.

"How are you feeling?"

"I can move freely." Eastwood moved his legs up and down.

Twain hurriedly reached out to stop him from doing it, "Don't, don't... Stop hurting yourself, you've just recovered."

Eastwood listened to him and stopped moving his legs. He straightened up, looked at Twain again, and laughed.

“What are you laughing about?” Twain laughed too.

“Nothing...” said the Romani Gypsy as he laughed again. “I’m just happy. Finally, I don’t have to go back to the hospital ward. You know, I feel like puking whenever I see the color white!”

Twain threw his head back and laughed till his sides ached and he had to wipe the tears from the corner of his eyes.

David Kerslake, who came in from the outside, heard Twain’s laughter before he had even walked through the door. He was a little puzzled as to what had made Twain laugh so loudly. “Tony? What are you so happy about? Ah!”

Eastwood immediately turned around and saw the assistant manager standing at the door with his mouth agape.

“Freddy!”

“Coach.”

Twain’s laughter subsided as he turned around and looked at the two men. He first pointed to Eastwood and explained, “He has recovered and been discharged.” Then he asked Kerslake, “What can I do for you, David?”

“Well, the team has started training. When I didn’t see you there, I came over to take a look. I can see it’s because of him,” Kerslake said as he looked at Eastwood.

Twain nodded. “I deliberately did not inform you guys. I wanted to give you all a surprise.”

Kerslake came in to glance outside the window at the training ground and laughed. “You did it, Tony. They don’t know.”

Eastwood also came over. That green training ground was a little unfamiliar to him. Spending nine months in the hospital was too long for a professional footballer.

Seeing the glint radiating from the Romani Gypsy’s eyes, Twain clapped his hands. “You want me to go to the training ground, David?”

Kerslake nodded. “Yes.”

“Then let’s go, Freddy. Come on!”

Twain stood at the door and waved to Eastwood standing at the window. The Romani Gypsy took another glance at the sunny training ground outside the window and followed.

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“It’s such a nice day...”

The manager and assistant manager were not here, so the players snuck in a little break during training. If the two coaches were on the sidelines, no matter how much guts they had, they only dared to rest when the chief yelled for a break.

Ribéry looked up at the blue sky and white clouds. In England, such weather was rare during the winter.

“Is it because we have won repeatedly, and this is a special reward from God?”

“Is God a Forest fan?”

“Who knows?”

A group of players took time out to gather for a chat.

George Wood did not join in. He was listening to Albertini’s instructions. The Italian was just telling him how to turn an opponent’s chance into their own opportunity in a flash on the field. The defense in the midfield was the key. But there was a lot more to the specifics of executing it.

A whistle sounded; it came from David Kerslake.

The chattering men were startled. Albertini and George Wood stopped their exchange and turned their heads to look at the sidelines.

The assistant manager, David Kerslake, had a whistle in his mouth. He looked seriously at those players, who were lazing. Wearing a black coat and sunglasses, Twain simply stood next to him, just like any other day. And Freddy Eastwood stood next to them with a smile brighter than the sun.

“I was just absent for a little while and you’re already relaxing?” Tony Twain spoke first with an icy tone. “Or are you only pretending to train hard during the usual training just to put on a show for me?”

Everyone immediately behaved.

“But...” Twain looked up at the sky. He was afraid of the glare from the sun with his sunglasses on. “It is nice weather.”

The teammates around Ribéry heard Twain’s remark and suddenly laughed. The stern atmosphere vanished all of a sudden.

“I’m in a good mood today, so I won’t punish you as long as you win the next game to make up for it.” Twain turned back his gaze and said with a straight face, “See, I’m very kind hearted.”

The team jeered.

Twain laughed as well, and then he waved it aside. “Freddy, come on!”

Eastwood stood up with a smile still on his face.

“This is our first deal in the winter transfer period.” Twain’s introduction made many people feel surprised. Was he leaving? Was this a farewell ceremony? Was he here to say goodbye? Some people’s smiles began to freeze on their faces.

“Freddy Eastwood has just transferred from the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University. To pay back the expenses for his nine months of medical treatment at the hospital which we had paid, he will be

joining our team in this season's winter break as our professional striker, wearing the number 11 jersey."

Seeing Twain introducing the "new teammate" in all seriousness, the others were overjoyed.

Standing behind him, David Kerslake gave Twain a punch in the back. Twain's opening remarks had almost given him a scare, even though he was privy to the details.

At the end of his speech, Twain was also happy. He looked back to Kerslake and winked like a kid who had successfully pulled off a prank.

Eastwood's return made him happier than the succession of victories or the good weather.

After everyone's laughter had subsided, Twain cleared his throat and his expression was serious again. "But today, Freddy..." He said to Eastwood, who was eager to give it a try, "You can't train with the team, at least not for some time. You have to train separately to focus mainly on rehabilitation. I want to make sure that your knees are really okay before I will allow you to practice with the team. As for playing in the games... You don't even have to think about it for one month. Do you understand, Freddy?"

Even though Eastwood was disappointed, he knew that the manager had said it for his own good and wanted to be responsible for his health. If it were another manager who did not care about him at all, he would be expected to just train with the team.

He nodded and said, "I hear you, chief."

Twain looked at him and smiled. Then he waved to the team doctor, Fleming, standing at the side. When Fleming ran over, he hooked his arm around Fleming's neck and with their backs to the team, he whispered to him, "Bring him in for the most detailed physical examination, then give me the analysis report. I don't want to hear just good news. I want the truth. Tell me exactly how he's recovering and the condition of his knee injury. I want to know how long we have before he's able to get back on the training ground and into games. Don't be afraid that he's going to take long. Just put it down honestly in your report... I'm counting on you!"

Fleming listened carefully and gave a firm nod.

He understood how much this man cared for his players. He was not surprised by what he had said.

After he finished instructing Fleming, Twain turned to Eastwood and said, "Follow him for a physical examination."

Eastwood nodded.

Twain put his hand on the Romani Gypsy's shoulder and gently patted it. He opened his mouth and closed it again before he said, "Go ahead."

Looking at the back view of Eastwood following behind Fleming,, Twain said in his heart, Don't worry, kid. Your competition season is still long.

Chapter 399: If They Want War, We'll Give Them War Part 1

After a careful examination, the small unit of the team doctors handed Twain the conclusion that Eastwood's knee was in good condition after the two surgeries. He could begin his physical training. He could undergo a month of training according to plan and then he would be able to meet the initial requirements to compete in the games.

Twain was very pleased with this and made thank-you calls to Professor Constantine and the main surgeon, Dr. Stephen Albert.

And then, just to be on the safe side, Twain asked the team doctors to set Eastwood's return to the field to be at the end of February.

After all, they had already waited nine months. One and a half more month was not so bad.

Consequently, Eastwood would appear on the training ground on time every day, just like everyone else on the team. As the team trained together, he would undergo rehabilitation training under a dedicated coach, starting with the simplest running laps. The places where he went most often would be the strength training and physiotherapy rooms.

Occasionally he would feel the urge to play, so he would also kick a few balls with his instep to relieve the itch. But he would soon be stopped by the coach in charge of his physical recovery training.

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The tournament schedule in January was not very intense. All the teams were busy recruiting to reinforce their strength for the next half of the season. The Nottingham Forest team, which had been striking everywhere in the transfer market for the past few seasons, seemed quiet during this month.

Because they lost to Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest in the scramble for the goalkeeper, Manchester United had been plagued by a defensive line problem for half of the season. Ferguson finally found a replacement for Edwin van der Sar this season: the young goalkeeper who played for Stoke City, Ben Forster.

Next, in the left back position, Manchester United introduced Patrice Evra, a young main force player from AS Monaco in France.

Currently, Manchester United was eight points behind the top-ranked Chelsea. Ferguson was not willing to give up the season. He had successfully overtaken Arsenal when he was more than twelve points behind, not to mention eight points.

Dunn had reminded Twain to watch out for Manchester United's comeback for the next half of the season, and Twain had not taken it seriously. Now all his energies were focused on the Champions League round 16 competition, which was due to restart a month later.

After the group stage, the sixteen participating teams were already determined for the next stage of the competition. Next, the sixteen teams would be mixed up again for new pairings which would be decided with another ballot.

When Twain went to participate in the drawing ceremony again, he was no longer the nobody whom no one was interested in. He became the target that a lot of managers actively sought out to strike up

conversations with. The reporters also directed the cameras towards this young and promising Champions League manager.

The UEFA Champions League Magazine had even set a time for an interview with him ——after the Champions League started again.

There were fewer people at this draw ceremony compared to the last time. It was slightly desolate. Among those who did not come that Twain was familiar with was Alex Ferguson. Manchester United was really unlucky the first half of the season. Keane dissolved his contract with the team and they were eliminated in the Champions League group stage. The Manchester United dynasty Ferguson had built seemed to have reached the end of the road.

Those certainly were other people's affairs which Twain did not care about.

His concern was the outcome of the draw.

He was satisfied with the result of the draw this time because the Forest team drew a good ticket.

In the round 16 matches, Nottingham Forest would play an away game first and then a home game. Their opponent was the Rangers Football Club, a Scottish Premiership team.

Many of the managers cast envious or jealous glances toward Twain. Jumping for joy on the inside, Twain kept a frown on his face as if he had drawn a very strong team.

The draw results for the teams were as follows:

Bayern Munich versus AC Milan.

Real Betis versus Liverpool.

Real Madrid versus Arsenal.

PSV Eindhoven versus Lyon.

Chelsea versus Barcelona.

Rangers versus Nottingham Forest.

Ajax versus Inter Milan.

Werder Bremen versus Juventus.

As expected, Chelsea and Barcelona were paired by UEFA again.

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After he returned to England from the draw, Twain's team was encouraged by this good news, winning two league matches in succession. They won 2:0 in an away game against Portsmouth and defeated West Ham United by 3:2 in a home game. Twain demanded that the team was to obtain as many points as possible before the start of the Champions League so as to lay a solid foundation for their future double league tournaments.

As for the FA Cup... Twain used it to train new players as always. He would not say that he had given it up, but rather he would say that it was to give the players more opportunities to play and train. So, those who rarely had the opportunity to play would try their hardest to perform. As a result, they played better and better until he could not give it up even if he wanted to.

On January 28th, during the fourth round of the FA Cup, Nottingham Forest had a modest victory of 1:0 over Bolton Wanderers at home, and successfully advanced to the next round of the FA Cup.

This was Manager Tony Twain's best record in the FA Cup in his coaching career. He had lost to Manchester United in the fourth round last season. He did not know how far the team could go this season. He was only certain that each time the team advanced, a new "best record" was created.

Then, February arrived. Because Nottingham Forest maintained a winning record in all competitions in January, Tony Twain became the target of media attention once again. He was named the best manager in the English Premier League for the month of January. His team was rated as the best team, while his man Anelka was awarded the best player of the month with his constant scoring.

With three honors in a row, Twain's career was in a wonderful upswing.

Needless to say, there would be detractors, saying that whoever was the best of last month would lose in the first game of this month.

And Twain again proved to be a magical manager who specialized in breaking all kinds of jinxes.

In the 24th round of the league tournament on February 1st, Nottingham Forest defeated Fulham by 2:0 at home. Those who waited to ridicule him were rendered speechless. He also settled the score for their previous defeat to their opponents for the first half of the season.

Chapter 400: If They Want War, We'll Give Them War Part 2

Nevertheless, Gary Lineker hit the nail on the head with an evaluation of Nottingham Forest he had made a long time ago:

This is a young team, dynamic and energetic. So, they are not afraid of any opponents and display a strength beyond any of our expectations when they play against strong opponents. But because they are young, their performance is very unstable. Therefore, when you want to have high hopes for Manager Twain's team, they are likely to disappoint you. And when you no longer have any hope for them, they can surprise you. So... don't believe any bookmaker's analysis of the team before the game. That's all nonsense.

After winning their first game of February, everyone agreed that Twain's team should continue to close the gap on Chelsea and that it was time to put pressure on them. Instead, they lost to Arsenal in the 25th round on the February 4 home game.

In the previous round, the difference between both teams was only three points because Chelsea had tied with Aston Villa in their away game. However, in this round, Chelsea beat the strong team, Liverpool, by 2:0 at their home ground, whereas the Forest team lost to Arsenal at home.

The three-point gap between the two teams had widened to six.

At this juncture, Twain's team did not have the ability to press on Chelsea. When the Champions League began again, they would be powerless to try and catch up to Chelsea in the league.

The focus of the team was not constant; it could change at any time. Now, they were focused on the league. In time, the Champions League would obviously be more important than the league tournament.

Wenger turned the tables on Twain in their match. His team beat Nottingham Forest with their eight-game winning streak in the City Ground stadium and ended Nottingham Forest's eleven consecutive unbeaten rounds after they had lost to Newcastle United in the away game last November 19th. Simultaneously, this victory also allowed Arsenal's ranking to return to the top five in the league. They were only one point away from the league's fourth-ranked Liverpool.

Therefore, when Twain shook hands with Wenger with a worried frown after the game, Wenger teased him. "This isn't too bad. Ferguson's team is still twelve points behind your team!"

"They haven't played the game in this round yet," said Twain as he shook his head.

He was not worried about Manchester United. He was just upset that he had failed to seize the opportunity to catch up with Chelsea time after time.

Manchester United's game was over the next day. With their bad luck last year continuing in this year, Manchester United finally won their home game by 4:2, defeating Fulham. They narrowed the gap between them and the league's second-ranked Nottingham Forest by nine points. This might be good news for Manchester United, as it let them see some hope. However, for Nottingham Forest, it was a wake-up call.

Unfortunately, Tony Twain did not see it. The nine points were still within the safety zone for him. He focused all his energy on the preparations for the Champions League round 16.

On February 11th, in the league's 26th round, with their winning streak recently ended, the Forest team regained another victory. They defeated Blackburn Rovers at home with a score of 3:1. But the game was not as easy as the score. The Forest team only ensured their victory at the last minute of the game. After the score reached 2:1, they were constantly in the position of having to deal with Blackburn Rovers' counterattacks.

The Nottingham Forest supporters definitely would say it was because Twain had deployed nearly half of the substitutes to preserve their strength for the Champions League round 16. However, it was true that the young Nottingham Forest already showed signs of fatigue from competing on three fronts simultaneously.

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On the evening of February 22nd, visiting Glasgow, the capital city of Scotland, Nottingham Forest ushered in the first round of their Champions League round 16.

Football in the city of Glasgow was always linked to religion and politics, which was related to their particular environment. Every year, the "Old Firm"—represented by the Protestant Rangers Football Club and the Catholic Celtic F.C.—waged battle in their city with a highly regarded derby.

Although the Scottish Premiership could only rank as second-rate in Europe, the Rangers and Celtic teams were still strong teams, not to be underestimated.

Twain had made very detailed arrangements for the game before he set out.

Fortunately, this game was just an ordinary Champions League round 16, and not the derby between the “Old Firm”, Celtic and the Rangers. Twain’s team did not represent any religious groups or interests, so he did not have to worry about being stabbed from behind by the fanatical Rangers fans after he got off the bus.

Certainly, if his team eventually defeated the Rangers team, he and his players might have to consider that point. After all, this was a city that was crazy about football.

During their warm-up in the stadium, the Forest players could hear the hissing and verbal abuse from everywhere in the stands. They tried every means to disrupt their opponents as the home fans.

Having to play in this environment so far from Nottingham really made the Forest fans break into a cold sweat for the team they supported.

“Don’t believe in that nonsense!” Twain told his players in the locker room before the game, “We’re not the Celtics. This is not their f**king ‘Old Firm’ game! It’s just an ordinary Champions League round 16 match that does not represent anything. We’re going to play today how we normally play.”

Before the game, the Scottish media announced that they were going to show England the Scots’ passion for football. The pro-Rangers media also started to feed the city’s frenzy, even citing some sensationalized data. In 1984, for example, the world was shocked by the Heysel Stadium disaster; but not many people knew that during the “Old Firm” derby that year, there were two attempted murders, two slashing cases, one hatchet wounding incident, nine stabbing injuries and thirty-five group brawls.

There were even people shouting a murderous slogan: “Football matches are modern warfare.”

They want Nottingham Forest to cower before the fight.

But Twain did not buy it.

“But I’m telling you these things, so people don’t think we’re afraid of them.” Twain raised his right arm and clenched his fist in front of everyone, “If they want war, we’ll give them war!”

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The competition was very intense. The showdown between the two competing teams could not compare with those of the powerhouse clubs such as Chelsea and Barcelona, Real Madrid and Arsenal, or Bayern Munich and AC Milan, but this still might be the most entertaining game out of the four Round 16 games held tonight in the terms of viewership.

Neither side played conservatively. They mainly played offense. In the first half, both teams had already scored three goals; the home team, Rangers, led by 2:1.

During the halftime interval, Twain grumbled in the locker room. Getting one away goal did not mean victory for him. He wanted a complete victory, from the goal count to the overall points.

“It’s disgraceful that there are those who think that we should be happy with one away goal! This is other teams’ pathetic thinking, not Nottingham Forest’s! If the Scots think we’re satisfied with this score and that they can relax in the second half, they’ll be making a big mistake!”

“George! Destroy their offense at every point and every line to give us enough protection for our offense!”

In the second half, George Wood unceasingly darted around and appeared in every corner of the field to halt the opponent’s attacks. The statistics after the game proved his efforts: his individual fouls totaled thirteen in the game. He was fouled against seven times and presented with one yellow card. He ran a distance of up to thirteen thousand kilometers and passed the ball sixty times with a success rate of thirty-nine times. He successfully tackled seventeen times out of twenty-one. His headers succeeded ten of eleven times and he made eighteen errors. He became the target of constant jeers at Hampden Park. But the more he was hated by his opponents, the more he proved his success.

The ESPN commentator was amazed at Wood’s stamina. In this fast-paced and highly confrontational competition, he was still sprinting with his full strength until the last minute of the game, showing no signs of physical exhaustion. The closer he got to the end of the game, the more desperate his opponents felt about his sprinting.

The Rangers were finally worn down by Wood’s extreme stamina, and they could not organize their offense as the ferocious George Wood could appear in any corner. He could suddenly show his cleats, do a “reasonable collision”, or harass. When the attacking players faced him, they had to expend more physical energy than usual and brace themselves to break through the defense. It was simply too draining! Nottingham Forest’s offense suddenly attacked in the last ten minutes of the game. While the opponent’s physical strength was flagging, they scored two goals consecutively within seven minutes and turned the tides.

The boos in Hampden Park reverberated in Glasgow’s night sky. Tony Twain’s bright smiling face was magnified under the spotlight.

“... 3:2! Three away goals and one victory. Tony Twain’s team is well on its way to entering the top eight of the Champions League!”