

Champions 441

Chapter 441: Come Have A Drink with Me

“Congratulations to Nottingham Forest, they now qualify for the 05-06 season UEFA Champions League final! This is a remarkable achievement and an inspiring result for a team that was still in the EFL Championship a year and a half ago. Congratulations to them!”

A fireworks display began in the night sky, and even the players celebrating in the stadium could not help but look up and admire the beautiful scene.

The game was over, but the fans did not leave the stadium. They were still in the stands, celebrating the victory of their team.

On the other side, the Arsenal players looked desolate. They stared distractedly at the over-the-moon Forest players.

They had tried their best in this game and managed to equalize the total score in an unfavorable situation. Then they had threatened the Forest team’s goal several times before finally entering the penalty shootout. They had already used all their means and methods. Luck was just not on their side this time.

Wenger walked onto the field to comfort his men one by one. Not far from him was Tony Twain, who celebrated this victory with his arms held high.

That man, who had talked to him in the rain at that time, drenched and pathetic like a drowned rat, was now the victor in this battle against him.

Twain reveled in the joy of victory. He was surrounded by many excited and smiling faces. Eastwood, Anelka, Ribéry, Ashley Young, and the rest. Wait a minute, everybody was laughing and shouting. Twain laughed with them too, until he saw George Wood and the smile on his face froze.

The team had won and gotten a ticket to the final. But one man was turned away at the door, and that man was the one who had worked the hardest and contributed the most to their victory.

Gareth Bale, who had missed the penalty kick, still had shiny tears on his face. But he laughed in the end; he did not become a sinner because the team had managed to advance to the final.

In front of him, George Wood’s smile was somewhat forced. It was apparent that he had tried hard to squeeze one out.

Twain put down his raised arms. Suddenly, he was not in the mood to celebrate.

Just as he was about to go over and comfort Wood, Albertini trotted out from the side. Twain saw Albertini put his arm around Wood’s shoulder and then reach out to stroke his head.

The other teammates were still celebrating, singing, and jumping around the field.

Only that corner had a sense of loss.

Twain turned and walked off the field. When he saw Wenger, he took the initiative to walk over and shake hands.

However, he did not know what to say.

“This was... a great game, wasn't it?”

Wenger smiled reluctantly. “Yes.”

Twain intended to console the other man. “You could have won if Wood had not fouled.”

“He can't take part in the final, can he?”

Twain shook his head.

“That's a shame. Your opponent must be glad to hear that news. Well, I wish you all the best. You all really could use some good luck.”

“Thank you.” Twain smiled.

“I have to go comfort my men.” Wenger pointed to the disappointed Arsenal players.

“Goodbye, then.” Twain waved goodbye to him, then turned to walk towards the tunnel.

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During the post-match press conference, a reporter mentioned the matter about George Wood's third yellow card and absence in the final. He asked if Wood's absence would be a heavy blow to the Forest team.

Twain admitted that Wood's absence would affect the team, but he did not admit that it was a heavy blow. He stated that regardless of who the Forest team's opponent was, he would not give up the game because of Wood's absence. Without Wood, they also had Albertini and ten other teammates who had performed well. The Forest team was a whole, not an individual's team.

Despite the fact that what Twain said was reasonable and Nottingham Forest's image to the outside world had been of a united team, looking at the expression on his face at that moment, the reporters sitting below thought he was reluctant to admit it and concede.

Whether it was Barcelona or AC Milan, the opponents were strong in offense. If there was no George Wood aggressively sprinting, intercepting, tackling, and fouling in the midfield, it would be difficult for the Forest team to stop the opponent's attacks.

It was not a heavy blow, but a deadly strike.

The Forest team had advanced to the final but paid a heavy price. The person who was the team's on-field captain, defensive core, and in a sense, the source of their strength would not be able to compete. Not only was Twain not used to it, but his players would also find it tough.

As the revelers outside gradually calmed down from the excitement and delight, it was believed that many people would feel shivers down their spines at the thought of Wood being unable to play in the finals.

Wood consequently became the focal point of the press conference. Although he was not there, almost all of the questions thrown at Twain were about Wood, and there was little mention of the Forest team's final call.

Twain felt sorry about Wood. However, if everyone only asked about Wood and did not care about the team's results or anyone else, including him, then he would be very angry.

"If you want to know anything about Wood, you can ask him on your own, or I can hold a special press conference to be attended by Wood for you to ask questions. However, I cannot guarantee if he will be willing to answer those questions. Right now, it's about the Forest team going to the final. I will acknowledge that George Wood has contributed a great deal of strength and made a great sacrifice. But don't tell me that our being able to be able to get to the final has nothing to do with the other ten players. George Wood chose to get a card to send the team to the final, but all you care about is the impact of his absence in the finals. Are you going to criticize George Wood in tomorrow's articles? That he was hot-headed and only cared about himself and not the team?" Twain asked the noisy reporters with a dark expression, "Are you here to take part in this post-match press conference, or are you specifically here to create trouble? I repeat, I will refuse to answer any more questions about George Wood's absence in the final!"

Twain played the big shot card once again, which was something he did well. He was not afraid to offend the media because he knew he was not one to beg the media to interview him, but the other way around. He was the most impressive figure now, so he was not afraid to offend anyone.

The press conference became awkward for a while. It was Pierce Brosnan who came to the rescue. He stood up and asked a few questions about the evaluation of this game, and Twain eventually spoke again.

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While Twain lost his temper over the endless questions about Wood at the press conference, the Nottingham Forest players had returned to the locker room from the field.

And this time, after everyone gradually calmed down, they realized the problem.

"George, the yellow card you received during overtime was your third one, right?" Once Ribéry asked, the lively locker room suddenly quieted down. Everyone turned their heads to look at Wood.

"Yes." Wood nodded.

"Then... the final..."

This question hardly needed a reply. Everyone knew what it meant to get three yellow cards in the Champions League.

Silence quickly spread through the entire locker room.

Albertini gave a clap to break up the embarrassing atmosphere. "Why are you looking so dejected? Didn't we make it to the final? George paid the price. Do you think he did that just so that he can see you all looking like this? What do we usually look like after we win?"

In the past, after the Forest team won, the locker room would be rowdy, as if there was a small party with nonstop music. Everyone would be naked and play around from the shower to the locker room. They would only stop when they had enough, or when Manager Twain reminded them aloud.

“Today we did not just win an ordinary game. It’s the Champions League semi-final! Do you know how important this is? How amazing this is? We’re going to the Champions League final. Countless people want to go but can’t! And look at you now. You all looked like you don’t want to go. Don’t waste George’s efforts. Don’t let George have gotten a yellow card for nothing!”

Ribéry stood up with his arms held high. He had started this topic, so it was up to him to finish it. “OK, it’s a shame that George can’t compete, but I don’t think that means that we don’t have a chance in the final. I don’t care who our opponent is, Barcelona or AC Milan. I want to show them what I’m capable of! I want to surprise them until they don’t know what hit—”

Ashley Young whistled, “Be careful not to let them surprise you till you don’t know what hit you.”

Ribéry glared. “How can that be? I’m the French national team’s—”

Without waiting for him to finish, Eastwood mimicked Twain’s voice at the side and interrupted, “Substitute player.”

When he heard Twain’s voice, Ribéry was startled, “Chief! You’re back so soon?” With his back facing the door, he could not see clearly. He did not hear Twain’s reply, but loud laughter rang out in the locker room.

“Freddy!” Ribéry flew into a rage out of humiliation and pounced on Eastwood. “I knew it was you. You bastard!”

Once again the atmosphere livened up because of those two men.

Albertini turned his head to look at Wood. The kid was acting cool, with an expressionless face.

Just as those two men were messing around, the locker room door was pushed open and Twain appeared at the door with a grim expression.

“Ribéry, what are you doing?” Twain asked when he saw the Frenchman chasing Eastwood, jumping up and down.

“Don’t you dare try to fool me, Romani!” Ribéry did not turn his head back. There was another burst of laughter in the locker room, and Gareth Bale doubled over with laughter.

“What are you shouting about?” Twain frowned.

At this point, standing in front of Ribéry, Eastwood shrugged at him and made a gesture to shut him up. That was when he realized that it was not Eastwood who had just spoken, but the real Tony Twain.

“Chief...” He stopped and turned his head around to look with an awkward expression at Twain who was standing at the door.

“I thought the one-hundred-and-twenty-minute game was enough to wear you down. I didn’t think you would have any energy left. Would you like to run back to the hotel from here?” Twain sneered.

“Uh, no. No need to.” Ribéry sheepishly went back to his seat. Ribéry only had respect for the manager, who had personally dug him up from a low-level league in France and groomed him into a member of the French national team.

“Guys, we’re in the final, which is amazing, and I want to congratulate you all on your performance. Have fun tonight, but don’t be out too late. We return to training tomorrow afternoon. The season is not over. Now is not the time to celebrate. Remember, we still have two league games and one Champions League final! This is not the time to relax!”

Although what Twain said was very reasonable, in the eyes of the other people in the locker room, they felt that there was something wrong with their boss.

What could be wrong? Perhaps it was because of that yellow card?

“All right let’s get out. I bet you don’t want to spend this meaningful night in the locker room, do you?”

The players left the locker room in succession and walked towards the bus parked outside the stadium. They could still hear the fans singing nearby. To the Forest players and fans, the wonderful evening had just started.

When Wood walked past Twain, Twain stopped him.

“Come have a drink with me.”

Wood was taken aback for a moment. He had not expected Twain to make such a request. “Professional players aren’t allowed to drink...”

“You’ll drink juice, and I’ll have a proper drink. That settles it. After we get back to the hotel, you’ll come with me.”

Wood did not object.

On the bus, on the way back to the hotel, Twain announced a jubilant piece of news to his players. “You have free time tonight to do whatever you want to do. If you want to go back to the hotel, you can. But come tomorrow’s training in the afternoon, I want to see every one of you present in Wilford. Don’t be late!”

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Back at the hotel, the players put their stuff back in their respective rooms and dispersed in groups of three or four. Ribéry wanted Wood to go out with him and relax his mood but was rejected by Wood.

Then, when Ribéry saw Wood and Twain walk out of the hotel together, he whistled.

“I thought you had a date with a pretty girl and I was going to follow you. I didn’t expect your date was with the boss. That’s no fun.”

Wood had thought they were going to just drink in the hotel bar downstairs. He had not expected Twain to pull him straight into a cab.

“Where to, Tony?” Landy James, the driver in the front, asked without turning his head.

“The usual bar.”

“Got it.”

“Can’t we just drink anywhere?” Wood thought it was strange.

“I’m not used to drinking in unfamiliar places.” Twain glanced at him.

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Kenny Burns’ Forest Bar was brightly lit inside and out. The Forest team emblem on the exterior wall was especially striking that night and could be seen from afar. The game was long over, but more and more people had come. The door opened and closed repeatedly, and people came streaming in from outside.

Those people came to the pub to have a drink and chat with their friends after watching the game at home. The game that had just ended was so exciting that if they did not come out for a few drinks and a chat, they might not fall asleep that night.

Burns was busy behind the bar and had to help out because his waiters had their hands full. But he was happily busy. Just now, after he had watched the Forest team eliminate Arsenal with the penalty kicks on the television, he was so excited that he shouted and toasted the others.

Luckily, he did not impulsively say, “Drinks on me tonight!” Or else, he would lose a lot of money.

“It’s so crowded!” Fat John wriggled his body to squeeze to the front of the bar and reached out to Burns for more beer. “Unbelievable!”

“Just came from the stadium?” asked Burns as he poured him the beer.

“Mhm. I rushed back with Bill as soon as the game was over. I didn’t expect it to still be so crowded here. Hey, Kenny, did you hit a new record for the number of people in your bar tonight?”

“Who has time to count?” Burns poured the beer and handed it to John. “But... It’s really bustling. Thanks to Tony, business is good today.”

“In that case, you can let me drink for free!” Twain’s loud voice could be heard close by.

Burns and John were both surprised.

Twain stood in the crowd, and George Wood was behind him. Next to them, the fans patted Twain on the shoulder to congratulate or thanked him. Twain was used to their familiarity. He smiled and greeted the people around him.

“Tony!” John was somewhat surprised. “You haven’t been here in a long time!”

“Been busy, but it finally paid off.” Twain pulled Wood and came over. He did not need to squeeze like John did. The crowd immediately parted to create a path everywhere he went.

“Look, it’s George Wood!”

“Hi, George, nice to see you! What you did tonight was awesome!”

“Welcome, Captain!”

Wood reacted somewhat uncomfortably to the voices of the surrounding fans, who were flushed and whose breaths smelt of alcohol. He looked as if he was hiding from those people as he followed closely behind Twain.

Burns saw the embarrassed-looking kid behind Twain and guffawed, “Guys, why are you doing this? Don’t scare our hero!” Then he smiled at Wood, “Relax a little, George. Would you like a drink?”

Wood shook his head. “Players don’t drink.”

Twain interrupted him. “Give him juice. And give me a glass of whiskey with ice.”

Seeing John next to him, Twain gave him a punch in the stomach. “Did you watch the game in the stadium?”

John rubbed his stomach and chuckled, “Of course, it’s more interesting to watch that kind of game live!”

Twain smiled and said to Burns, “A round of drinks for everyone here, my treat.”

As soon as he said it, everyone in the bar cheered.

Twain twisted around and raised his glass to all of those people. “A toast.”

John raised his glass high, and at the same time he raised his hands and roared, “For the Champions League final, for Tony, for our new captain! For Nottingham Forest! Cheers!!”

“Cheers!!”

Holding his juice, Wood looked at the fervent fans, who were crazier here than they were in the stadium stands.

Chapter 442: A Favor Owed

Tang En held onto his drink as he and Wood squeezed into his reserved seat and sat down.

Everyone could tell that he had dragged Wood here to have a discussion, so no one approached, not wanting to disrupt them. They drank the beer Tang En had treated them to and chatted leisurely. Of course, the main topic was still the match that had just ended.

“You’ve never come here before?” Tang En asked Wood after sitting.

Wood nodded. “Mum doesn’t let me drink.”

“Your mother is right.” Saying so, Tang En started drinking, ignoring Wood.

Wood felt a bit awkward. As he sat there, he started to pay attention to the people around him. Those who met eyes with him would raise their mugs in a toast.

Tang En raised his eyes to see Wood gazing about. Then he asked, “Why don’t you ask me why I brought you here?”

“Why?” Wood was very obedient, immediately asking the question. “Why should I ask?”

“You’re really... What happened to the wisdom you showed during the match?”

“Are you still thinking about that?” Wood was referring to the yellow card.

Tang En nodded. “I thought about it even more after the match ended. If we had lost, it’d be easy; it wouldn’t matter even if you’d gotten 10 red cards. Now that we have won, our opponents in the finals, whether they’re Barcelona or AC Milan, will be a strong team. When I think about how we’ve lost one of our barriers in the midfield, my head hurts.” Tang En said this while massaging his temple.

Wood looked at his manager continually massaging his temple. His mouth trembled for a while before he finally said, “I didn’t want to. But there was no choice.”

“Even if you didn’t foul then, they might not have scored, right?” Tang En looked up at him.

“I don’t believe in ‘might not have.’” Wood’s reply came resolutely.

Seeing Wood’s determined expression, Tang En sighed. He leaned back on the chair and lifted both his hands, saying, “Alright. I’ll admit that I’m too greedy. Not only do I want the team to advance to the finals, I even want it to be the entire team, with no one having any injuries or cards, so we can use our strongest formation to deal with our opponents.”

Wood quietly listened as he imagined an impossibility.

“George, do you want to play in the finals?” Tang En suddenly asked, abruptly changing the topic.

Wood was momentarily stunned but still nodded.

“Very much?”

Wood continued nodding.

“Why? In the past, I remember you didn’t even know or care about who Riquelme was. You didn’t used to have such a passion for football.”

“It’s because mum hoped to see me playing in the finals.”

The mug Tang En had lifted to his mouth was set down again. He raised his head to look at Wood somewhat disbelievingly.

“She told me today, before the match.”

“You... Damn...” Tang En cursed lowly.

Kenny Burns walked over carrying bottles of beers. He placed them on the table and sat down. “Tony, looks like you’re finishing up your beer.”

“Thanks.” Tang En picked up a bottle and filled his mug. As he was mid-way through it, he suddenly remembered. Pointing at Burns, he said to Wood, “I don’t think I’ve introduced him to you yet. Kenny Burns, Nottingham Forest’s core player during their two championship runs in the UEFA Champions League, and winner of the Matthews Award.”

Burns smiled at Wood.

Wood turned to look at him and nodded. "Hello, Sir."

"Don't be so reserved, lad. I heard Tony mention you before when you were still in the Youth Team. He told us he had picked up a boy from the streets who can't play soccer. That time, we were all making jokes of him. I can't believe that in the three years since then, that boy who didn't know how to play soccer became Forest's captain."

Wood glanced at Tang En, who was drinking on his own.

"George, I've heard you found an agent?" Burns was the one chatting with Wood now.

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"Good. Very serious..."

"I mean... did he help you to contact other teams?"

Wood shook his head. "No. he's only managing my business contracts currently."

Burns took a glimpse at Tang En and laughed, saying, "Tony is very worried about losing you."

Tang En coughed.

"We're also worried about losing you. Allow me to say a few words of truth. I'm a little worried about that agent of yours. I heard he didn't start as a football agent, so his understanding of the field is very limited. In certain aspects, he would only consider matters from a benefit perspective. I just hope you can make your own decisions."

Wood naturally understood the meaning behind what Burns was saying. "I like it here. Mum likes it too. I don't intend to go anywhere."

"That's reassuring." Seeing Wood's serious expression, Burns smiled. But... Who could guarantee future matters? He was someone who had been in the professional football scene for a few decades. Even if he retired, he could still open a bar here and continue paying attention to the big and small matters happening within the circle. But how many of those who speak of "loyalty" now could really walk all the way to the end like that? Some would do it willingly, but some would not. Regardless, the movement of people only abided by one truth: benefits.

Even though his mind was filled with all those messy things, Burns was not about to destroy a young man's ideals.

The chat between Burns and Wood ended. He patted Wood's shoulder and stood, walking away. There were still many customers he had to entertain. Forest Bar was packed to the brim tonight.

After Burns went off, Tang En put down his mug.

"George, I don't care how you see it... but, I owe you one."

Wood did not understand, and Tang En did not plan on explaining. That's right. He really owed Wood one. Wood had sacrificed himself for Tang En's success. On May 17, when he lead the team into Stade de France in Paris, he would become the youngest ever manager since its establishment to appear in the finals of the UEFA Champions League. Regardless of whether Forest would eventually become champions, his name, Tony Twain, would already be carved into history.

And the greatest contributor behind that? At that moment, he could only sit on the spectator's stands.

"I will give you an opportunity to make up for it."

Wood shook his head. "The semi-finals have already ended."

"That's right. It's already ended. But what's ended is only this season. Next season, the season after the next, and ones that come after, we still have those chances. This absolutely..." Tang En shook his index finger in front of Wood, "absolutely will not be our only chance. Look at them..." he pointed at the joyous fans. "They are treating tonight as one of their best memories. And in the future, we will bring to them even more such nights. George, you know about how Demi will be retiring after the end of the next season, right?"

Wood nodded.

"He originally said he wanted to retire after this season ends."

Hearing Tang En say that, Wood was a little shocked. Clearly, he did not know what had trespassed between them.

"He didn't tell you? Oh... I can understand. I persuaded him to stay, but I didn't have any suitable reason. His condition isn't very good. You also saw how his appearances in the field became so few in the latter half of the season. Then, I brought you up. I told him that I hoped for him to stay for another year and train you to be a well-rounded talent in the midfield. No matter in offense or defense, to be as outstanding a midfielder as Demi is. He agreed."

Tang En put out his index finger again. "You only have a year's time, George. A year from now, I don't want to have to search all around the world to find a midfield core for Forest. Your mum says she hopes to see you appear in the finals of the Champions League. I hope so too."

Wood quietly listened but said nothing.

After saying that, Tang En raised his hand to look at his watch. "Go on back."

Wood stood.

"Not to the hotel. Go home. Go accompany your mum." Tang En waved his hand. "You can get your stuff tomorrow from the locker room during afternoon training."

"Alright. Aren't you heading back too?"

"Me? My nightlife is just beginning!" Tang En winked at him.

Wood picked up his glass of fruit juice and finished it. "Goodbye, Boss."

"That's right, George. Did I tell you that your performance in the match was simply too perfect?"

Wood shook his head. "I thought you would criticize me."

"That was just to scare you." Tang En made a face at him. "Perfect. I give your performance 10 points. I can't expect you to do any better. Go back and tell your mum that though you won't appear in the finals of the Champions League, you're the hero of the team. She'll be proud of you."

"Yes." Wood nodded. Then, he turned to squeeze his way out of the crowd.

Seeing Wood was about to leave, the fans in the bar all started shouting, "Bye George!"

"I'll ask you for a signature when I go to the training ground tomorrow... damn. I didn't know you would be here today..."

"George! Keep going! Keep going!"

The door opened and closed. Wood departed from the noisy bar. The place soon recovered its usual atmosphere; everyone was excitedly discussing the match that just ended or chatting about other unrelated topics.

Burns returned to sit next to Tang En. "I didn't expect you to bring the team's captain to the bar. How many main managers would do that?"

"Hmm... it just came to me."

"Because of George's yellow card?"

"I'm still brooding about it... but well, after a few shots of alcohol, I won't have any troubles. So what if we don't have Wood? Regardless of if our opponents are AC Milan or Barcelona, we must still play. Maybe our opponents even think that Nottingham Forest couldn't last a blow without Wood. I'd hope for them to think that way."

"You've already done well enough, Tony. Whether or not we're able to end up as champions, you've already done enough."

Tang En pointed at Burns and said, "Are you consoling me?"

"No," Burns said, shaking his head. "I understood it as a compliment."

The two exchanged glances with a smile.

"It's been three years, Tony. You did a good job. You're still young. If you want to, you can stay on in this field for 30 years. Don't be in a rush. Take your time."

Tang En looked at the ceiling. 30 years... That's a long time. He had never thought so far about the future. To him, the future was tomorrow. Next year was already too far.

"Yes..." he nodded. "You're right, Kenny. Compared to those old men, the likes of Ferguson and Wenger, I'm still young."

Yes. In this line of work as managers, the 37-year-old Tony Twain was indeed still very young.

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The next day, all major media groups reported about the match in the limelight. Nottingham Forest appeared on the headlines of all sports media publications. Their experience of having returned to the Champions League's finals again after 26 years, as well as how quickly they soared and rocketed through each stage year after year, made everyone even more interested. It enveloped the young manager, Tony, even more so with a legendary hue.

When the team resumed their training in the afternoon, the outer grounds of Wilford were surrounded by countless reporters. And they were mostly non-local reporters. The team had already attracted the attention of the whole of Europe.

Naturally, what most of the media paid attention to was George Wood's yellow card, as well as the impact his absence would have on the team. Any sort of question regarding this was dodged or faced with Tang En's refusal to discuss it. He did not want to overly play up Wood's function within the team, even if Wood truly had such a crucial role.

There was also another portion of the media who cleverly set on another path. Since stirring up the topic about Wood's absence would get them refused during interviews, they decided they might as well shift their focus onto the final penalty shoot-out.

In truth, prior to this, Edwin van der Sar did not make his name as a goalie by being good at stopping penalty kicks. The reasons contributing to his name as a world-class goalkeeper were his height of 1.97m, outstanding reflexes, nimble skills, as well as the ability to go up against solo face-offs against players. All of these were performed in active battles. Conversely, in competitions such as penalty shoot-outs, he had no lack of painful memories:

In the finals of the 95-96 Champions League, Ajax failed to defeat Juventus, scoring 2:4 in the penalty shoot-out. That was his first taste of the penalty shoot-out nightmare. Following that was the 97 European Championship; the Netherlands National Football Team, who had entered the top eight with much difficulty, was eliminated by the French in a penalty shoot-out. Year '98 World Cup semi-finals, the Netherlands National Team once again stumbled because of a penalty shoot-out; that time, Brazilian goalkeeper Taffarel, who excelled at defending against penalty kicks, shone. Of course, his most painful memory came from the 2000 European Championship. In a match that was organized right at their doorstep, Team Netherlands lost to Italy. The reason for their loss still came down to penalty kicks. Toldo shot to fame in that battle while Edwin van der Sar only felt despondence. With those experiences, it was not hard to understand why everyone felt surprised seeing Edwin van der Sar's successful defense against Gilberto Silva's penalty kick at such a crucial point.

Based on the photos last taken by press photographers, people noticed that Edwin van der Sar would rustle through his socks each time before defending against the penalty kick. He would take out a small piece of paper and glance through it before stuffing it back in.

Some media outlets pointed out that to be the secret of Forest's eventual victory. And, their guesses were quickly ascertained. After training ended, Edwin van der Sar accepted the reporters' interview. At that time, he revealed the contents on the paper. That resulted in much surprise among numerous media outlets; they had not expected Nottingham Forest to put in such comprehensive effort for the semi-finals.

Of course, it was also natural for Wenger, who intended to research on Tang En, to notice that news. Upon seeing Edwin van der Sar say it was Tang En's idea, what else could Wenger do but shake his head with a bitter smile?

The mysterious slip of paper thereon became famous. Later, in the finals of the World Cup, Germany's National Team would use the method to deal with Argentinian penalty shooters. After the match, Germany's main goalkeeper, Lehmann, admitted that he himself had been inspired by this match. Of course, that all only happened after.

The UEFA Champions League finals were set to be on the evening of May 17, while the last round of the English Premier League was on May 7. This way, Forest Team would have 10 days to prepare. They did not need to be distracted by the Premier League or any other domestic league. They would be able to devote all their focus to preparing for it. To Tang En's team, that was probably good news.

A day after, Forest's opponents in the final round emerged fresh from the oven: Barcelona, on their home ground, had drawn 0:0 with AC Milan. Based on the goal they had gotten in the first round during their away match, their overall score was 1:0. They eliminated AC Milan and advanced into the finals.

Nothing was different from Tang En's recollection of it. Barcelona entered the finals. In the current soccer scene, this team, also known as the "Dream Team II," was the hottest and strongest proponents of offensive-style football. They receive cheers from fans everywhere they went because they represent the most entertaining form of artistic football.

But Tang En cared nothing for artistry or the lack thereof. To him, how entertaining the match was could not compare with becoming the champions. He intended on making the prideful Barcelona suffer in Paris!

Chapter 443: Go Watch the Game Live

For Nottingham Forest's final two rounds of the league tournament, Twain used an approach of making the lineup an equal mix of the main force and substitutes to cope. On the one hand, that could keep the players' conditions in a competitive state; on the other hand, they needed to be careful not to have any injuries. Meanwhile, they also must win the games.

In the game against Middlesbrough, Twain switched to Sun Jihai, Lennon, Commons, and the others for the rotation. George Wood did not have to play in the Champions League final, so he did not need a break. At the same time, due to the Champions League final, Twain let Albertini make an appearance in the final minutes of the game so that he could familiarize himself with the pace of the game and get back the feel of his body.

Twain was very satisfied with the score. The team won 2:1 against Middlesbrough.

Even though Manchester United had also won their game, the two teams were still one point apart. This one point seemed as impenetrable as a moat.

Next, in the final round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest went north to challenge Sunderland.

Everything went as Twain had anticipated. Sunderland did not pose a threat to the high-spirited Forest team. They were taken down by 0:3.

Twain treated the game as a warm-up for the Champions League final to assess the players' conditions and try out a new lineup. George Wood was not in the starting lineup. Twain sent out the combination of Albertini and Arteta in the midfield. Albertini leaned slightly towards defense and was often positioned in the backfield. He relied only on his long passes and diverting the balls to participate in offense. Arteta, on the other hand, was responsible for the specific organization of offense.

Twain wanted to see the effect of that midfield pairing.

As Sunderland was too weak, they were unable to put any pressure on those two men at all. Led by the two midfielders, the Forest team's offensive rushed forward, ending Sunderland's embarrassing Premier League journey with three goals.

In the last fifteen minutes of the game, Twain brought on George Wood to replace Albertini. He also replaced Chimbonda with Sun Jihai and Anelka with Eastwood. That was not a tactical adjustment. It was just another way to keep more players in shape.

At the end of the game, the 05-06 season's English Premier League also came to an end.

And all the dust settled.

Chelsea defended their league title with their absolute advantage. Mourinho's team was almost invincible this season. Their condition was excellent in every way, with the exception of one regret from the UEFA Champions League.

Nottingham Forest continued its excellent play from last season and took it to the next level to win second place in the league. After the end of the season, when the various experts reviewed the season, they had to mention them. Even when they recalled this season a few years later, no one could ignore the presence of Nottingham Forest. The re-emergence of the team had broken the inherent structure of the Premier League, with the traditionally top four teams turning into the top five. The topic that people were currently concerned with was, in the Premier League, would Nottingham Forest's meteoric rise disappear without a trace like a meteor streaking across the sky, or would it continue to shine like a star and influence the future direction of the league?

No one knew the answer, not even Twain himself.

Naturally, few of his competitors would want to see the Forest team perform so well all the time.

The league's third place was won by Ferguson's Manchester United, whose condition had fluctuated so much these past two seasons. The team was at a pivotal moment in which the old guard was replaced with the new. The only consolation for Ferguson was the maturity of Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo. It was believed that as long as they continued to perform, the new Manchester United, represented by them, would return to the top in the future.

The Premier League's fourth place belonged to Arsenal, who did not do well in the first half of the season and only began to work hard later. Wenger had hoped for a breakthrough in the Champions League, but unfortunately, they had lost to Nottingham Forest in the semi-final penalty shootout. They were eventually left empty-handed in both the Premier League and Champions League.

Liverpool was perhaps the biggest victim as a result of Nottingham Forest's re-emergence. The original Premier League's top four teams were Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool, and Chelsea. Those four teams basically monopolized the qualification to compete in the Champions League every season. However, with the Forest team's emergence, the last Champions League winner, Liverpool, was squeezed out of the top four. They could only participate in the UEFA Europa Cup next season. Benítez's life was going to be tough.

Coincidentally, it seemed that as the Forest team rose, Liverpool would be certain to suffer for it. In Brian Clough's era, Nottingham Forest's most brilliant period, they had beaten Liverpool thrice in a year. In the Premier League, the EFL Cup, and the European Champion Clubs' Cup, Liverpool became the Forest team's stepping stone to success. It was the Forest team that interrupted the Reds' dream to dominate in the domestic leagues and European Champion Clubs' Cup.

But at the same time, the decline of the Forest team was bound to be linked to Liverpool as well. The Forest team broke Liverpool's monopoly on the championships, and then Liverpool also pulled the Forest team down from the pedestal before they had time to sit comfortably. Their forty-two round unbeaten record in the league was ended by Liverpool.

The Liverpool team's feelings for Nottingham Forest changed from their initial liking to fear and abhorrence later. The earliest Liverpool fans loved the Forest team because both teams had red jerseys and at that time, the Forest team's playing style was somewhat similar to Liverpool's. Then, Liverpool's feelings towards the Forest team changed after the Forest team beat Liverpool and robbed them of their titles in the Premier League and European Champion Clubs' Cup.

That was how the two teams got entangled together. In many cases, they could not be separated. Even a disaster like the Hillsborough Tragedy took place in a game between Liverpool and Forest.

With the origin of the Forest team and Liverpool temporarily put aside, the focus returned to the upcoming UEFA Champions League.

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As soon as the league tournament was over, the Forest team shifted all of its work to focus on the Champions League final. That was the most important thing for the Forest team this season. Nothing could surpass the Champions League final's place in people's minds.

Evan Doughty had been very busy recently because many media outlets wanted to interview him, but he still took time out to get to the training ground and announce the bonus plan. As the Forest team advanced to the Champions League final, they had reaped a lot just from the television broadcast fee alone. Evan decided to take some of it to reward the squad.

As long as the team could win the Champions League, everyone would have a minimum bonus of ten thousand pounds. The main players would have thirty-thousand pounds. In addition, even if they did not get the Champions League title, everyone would still receive a five-to-ten thousand pound reward.

For the Forest team, which was not backed by a Russian oligarch, that award was considered quite generous. After all, the team was not wealthy yet.

After the plan was announced, it brought a big boost to the morale of the team. Who would not want to make more money?

The award certainly could not be compared with football clubs such as Chelsea and Real Madrid. But it was also a token of the club's goodwill to show the club's appreciation for the team.

For his part, Twain devoted all his energy to the training of the new tactics. Due to George Wood's absence, the team must adjust the tactics which they had played for more than a season to allow for the partnership of Albertini and Arteta. In fact, that would allow a more aggressive style of play. In the final round of the league tournament, Twain had already experimented with Sunderland, but Sunderland was too weak to pose a threat to the Forest team's defensive line. Therefore, Twain had no idea whether the new set of tactics could withstand Barcelona's offense.

George Wood did not have to play in the final, but he still trained with the team, working just as hard and conscientiously as always. It could be said that he worked harder and more seriously than ever before.

The media thought that this was Wood venting his frustration with not being able to play in the final. Only Twain knew that it must have been what he had said to Wood that night at the pub taking effect.

You've only got a year, George.

But for Tony Twain now, he only had ten days.

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Obviously, Twain currently could not put all his energy into preparing the team for battle. He had to busy himself with some other matters. For example, he had to send tickets to some old friends. Des Walker was the first important person in his coaching career to genuinely bring him into this circle and give him plenty of assistance. Once misunderstood by him, Ian Bowyer was an old man who turned out to faithfully support him.

He also could not forget Michael Bernard, who had already gone to America. He was his first friend here and the closest friend as well. Twain did not know how Michael had fared in his life in America, whether he was able to free himself from the grief and bereavement of the loss of his son in his middle-aged years, or whether he had changed his "never watch or get close to football again" vow. But he still had to mail him the ticket. This was his promise to Michael whether he came to watch it or not. He wanted Michael to know that he had never forgotten and had made it happen.

In addition, he went before Gavin's grave and burned the tickets for him. He burnt two, one for him to go watch and the other one for him to keep as a memento.

There was one more important person: Shania.

"Shania, where are you going to be on May 17th?" Twain asked the young girl during their regular weekly call.

Shania moved her eyes and did not answer immediately. Instead, she asked, "What's the matter, Uncle Tony?"

"Well, I would like you to go and watch my game."

“I’ll be in Paris,” Shania said with a smile.

Her answer gave Twain a surprise. “Is that true? That’s fantastic! The final will be held in Paris. This is awesome! You will go, won’t you, Shania?”

Shania deliberately dragged her words, “Well, it depends on my schedule.”

Twain was a little disappointed to hear Shania’s remark.

“I lied! Of course, I will be there. I can push back my work to a later date. Uncle Tony, your Champions League final only happens once!”

Twain cleared his throat, “Hey, there will be more in the future!”

Shania’s giggle came from the other end of the line.

“Well, it’s a date then. We’ll see you in Paris, Shania.”

“See you then, Uncle Tony!”

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Everything was on track. In the final few days, Twain requested for Wilford to be sealed off and not to receive any media. The team needed a quiet environment for their big effort. That decision naturally led to the media’s dissatisfaction, which Twain did not care about. The media was not the boss of him, and he was not obligated to serve them.

The day before the team left for Paris, the training still progressed as usual. Twain received a phone call from the gatekeeper, Ian MacDonald, at the sidelines of the training ground. “Tony, someone’s here to see you.”

“Ian, didn’t I say it before? Wilford is sealed for training. No one can come in. And I won’t receive any visitors!” Twain was a little nervous before the approaching battle, and the tone of his voice was inadvertently a little high.

“But...” The old gatekeeper hesitated a little.

“What’s the matter?” Following that, Twain heard a fuzzy voice coming from the other end of the line. Very soon, a distinct female voice spoke. “Mr. Twain, you’re not going to come see a friend?”

This voice sounded familiar, and Twain froze for a moment. “You?”

He knew who the visitor was.

Five minutes later, Twain hurried to the gate from the training ground and met this friend Clarice Gloria.

This fashionably-dressed and modern-looking lady looked completely different from her professional image when Twain had met her for the first time. She wore an attractive strappy top with a low neckline and a miniskirt with a pair of large sunglasses. She leaned against a red BMW sports car. Standing at the side near the entrance, the old gatekeeper Ian MacDonald looked a little awkward.

“Hello, Mr. Twain.” Gloria waved hello first.

“How are you? Miss Gloria, I didn’t expect to meet you for the third time in such a short period.” Twain walked up. “Are you here again for filming or something?” He looked at Gloria, who was almost unrecognizable, and was a little amazed.

“No, I came alone.” Gloria removed her sunglasses and spread her hands. “And I’m now an independent producer. I don’t work for UEFA.”

“Let’s go in and talk.” He signaled to MacDonald to open the gate.

He had not expected Gloria to shake her head and reject his invitation. “No, I just came by to give you something. I’ll go soon.”

Twain looked surprised.

“Aren’t you supposed to be busy right now? How can you be free to accompany me for tea and chat?” Gloria said, smiling as she looked down to take out a compact disc from her handbag. “The filming of that interview... It’s not the same as what you saw on TV. This is another version that hasn’t been aired. I’m leaving it to you as a memento. I hope you’ll like it.”

Twain took the disc and said politely, “Thank you for the gift, but you don’t have to be in such a hurry. There is always time for a short chat.”

“Can’t bear to let me go?” Gloria grinned and winked at Twain.

Twain did not know how to respond to such an open-minded and bold woman. He said somewhat awkwardly, “What can I say?”

Gloria laughed happily. “Oh, by the way, the trouble that you had the last time... Did you work it out? Did you see her?”

She was referring to that time in Italy.

“Yes, it worked out. She went to the stadium to watch the Forest team’s game against Inter Milan in the end.”

“Do you mind if I ask you who she is?”

Twain hesitated for a moment and nodded. “I don’t know if you know. She’s a model. Judy Shania Jordana.”

When Twain stated the name, Gloria was surprised. “Her!”

“You know her?”

“Don’t most of the media know her? She’s one of the most popular models this year. Everyone’s confident of her future in the runway.” After the brief introduction, Gloria looked at Twain with interest, “And to think you have such a good relationship with her... I really can’t figure you out, Mr. Twain.”

“Well, that’s a long story.” Twain did not feel comfortable enough to tell her that story.

Gloria nodded and smiled to show that she understood. She looked down at her watch and said, "It's almost time, I've got to go. I'm sorry I can't go to the stadium to watch your game, but I'd like to wish you good luck."

"Thank you. Where are you going? You look like you're in a hurry...."

"The United States."

That answer was a real surprise to Twain.

When she saw Twain looking puzzled, Gloria simply explained. "Los Angeles, Hollywood. I'm heading there to discuss a film collaboration."

"Aren't you a television host?"

"I'm actually an independent producer. Hosting a tv show is just my hobby," Gloria said with a proud smile as she put her sunglasses back on.

"Goodbye, Mr. Twain. Hopefully, the next time we meet, you'll have become a European champion." She opened her car door, got in, and then leaned out to wave to Twain.

"Thank you, and goodbye, Miss Gloria." Twain stood at the gate and watched the red sports car leave.

When he turned around and saw the funny expression on MacDonald's face, Twain realized that there was a third person there.

"Ian, she and I are not what you think we are."

The old man had a good laugh. "I know, Tony. She's just a friend."

Twain knew the old man would not buy it, but he did not want to explain. It would only make matters worse.

He felt his coat pocket.

"Initially, I wanted to surprise you when the training was over. But now's as good a time as any. Ian, you're retiring after the Champions League final, aren't you?"

Not knowing exactly what Twain was going to say, MacDonald just nodded. "Yes."

"Look, I don't have any present for you. Except this." He took out an envelope from his pocket and handed it to MacDonald. "Both Chairman Doughty and I would like to thank you for your loyal service to the club for the last fourteen years."

MacDonald took the envelope and opened it to discover that there were three round-trip tickets from London to Paris on May 17th, as well as three tickets to the UEFA Champions League final.

"When we get to Paris, the accommodations and food are covered by the club."

The hand that held the envelope trembled a little, and MacDonald said to Twain with a trembling voice, "You don't have to do that. I'm happy enough that the team is able to play in the final again."

Twain smiled, "Since you joined the club, it's always been dark days for the team... an endless cycle of relegation to promotion and then promotion to relegation. I hope that you can at least see what you have always wanted to see before you leave. Thank you, Ian. Thank you for all that you've done for the team and the club for fourteen years."

MacDonald looked down at tickets with the UEFA logo and said, "It's me who should thank you, Tony. I'm just a gatekeeper."

Twain patted him on the shoulder to show that he did not have to say any more. "You haven't watched a game live at the stadium in a long time, right? Take your family and children with you and go watch the game live."

Old Ian nodded firmly.

Chapter 444: Relax

Forest arrived in Paris two days before the Champions League's finals.

"Paris, the city of fashion. Anelka, how does it feel to come home?" Ribéry asked his comrade.

Anelka looked at the scenery outside the car windows and blandly said, "It's not too bad."

Anelka was not born in Paris, but his first professional football club was Paris Saint-Germain; he had stayed long enough in Paris. Even now, he still owned a flat here.

"Hey, hey. Don't chat in French. We don't understand what you guys are talking about," Ashley Young said beside them, feeling gloomy.

"There are a lot of beautiful women in France..." Eastwood whistled at a fashionable beauty walking by on the streets outside with someone.

"Freddy. You're a father with two kids. You'd better watch your image." Tang En said jokingly from the front, prompting laughter in the car.

Everyone in the team looked very relaxed, except for one person.

As Tang En turned back to talk to Eastwood, he took the chance to glance at George Wood sitting in the back row. He was looking out of the windows in a daze, staring at the scenery of Paris' streets and was seemingly unaware of what had just taken place in the car.

Tang En sighed internally.

Originally, as George Wood was unable to participate in the match, he did not have to come along with the team. But, Tang En insisted on bringing him along, hoping to use this to show George that he was still an important member of the team. This might seem like a form of consolation, but some consolation is better than having none. Wood must feel like an outsider; everyone could look forward to the Champions League's finals, but he alone could not.

And most importantly, Tang En was unable to comfort Wood at this point. He could not, in plain sight of everyone, walk to Wood's side and pat his shoulders, saying, "It's okay, George. Even if you can't be there, you're still a member of the team."

In that way, everyone's focus would be placed on Wood, and that was precisely what Wood did not want.

There was nothing Tang En could do other than look at Wood from afar and sigh.

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When the team coach reached the hotel they were residing at, there were already several media groups waiting there.

The finals had long been regarded by the media as "the finals between artistic football and utilitarian football." Naturally, Barcelona represented the side of artistic football. Meanwhile, due to Nottingham Forest's insistence on playing defensive counterattacks and a tendency to play soccer that looked terrible but had beautiful results, they were regarded as the representative of utilitarianism.

Tang En was extremely unhappy with that. He did not deny that his team was somewhat utilitarian. However, what he hated was how simply and brutally the media pitted the two teams against each other; they placed Barcelona on an altar and worshipped them while making Nottingham Forest a target of their condemnation both in speech and writing.

So what if they played in an ugly manner? Playing ugly got them a win. What could they get from playing artistically? Ignore how Barcelona was all glorious now; no one knew who the glorious one would be in a few years.

The first to get off the coach bus was Tang En. The moment his feet landed on the ground, countless microphones extended from both sides of the corridor to his mouth. The questions came at him one after another; there was nothing fresh about them, with the majority related to Wood's absence from the match. As the match got closer, the topic of Wood's absence in the finals only became hotter. Everyone wanted to see how Forest, who had depended primarily on defense to get this far, would deal with Barcelona after having lost the most important defensive player on their team.

"How we're dealing with them? Won't you know when the match starts?" Tang En curtly answered such questions as he squeezed his way forward.

"Mr. Twain, as everyone well knows, your team has only reached the finals by depending on defense. Wouldn't Wood's absence make you more active in going on the offense?" Someone from the crowd asked this at the top of his voice.

Tang En heard the question and paused in his steps, casting his gaze toward the direction of the voice. This question poked at his sore spot and lent an opportunity for him to verbally vent his feelings of annoyance in the recent few days.

"Who asked that question?"

A bald man stood forward. "I'm a reporter from Mundo Deportivo..."

He had intended on introducing himself but was interrupted by Tang En. "Catalonia's media? No wonder. What, you despise defense? Do you think our reaching the finals by depending on defense is disgraceful? Barcelona is artistic, very offensive. If they're so good, why don't you suggest for Rijkaard not to put in any fullbacks or goalkeeper? They could go on the offensive all the way, be artistic all the way, right? How many years have you been reporting about football? Do you understand football? Where are you from?"

Tang En was a breath away from following up with "Who the f**k is your mother?" but managed to suppress his anger in that crucial moment, stopping himself from swearing.

"Do you know what defense actually is? Do you understand the role of defense in modern football? You aren't happy that we "only" reached the finals because of our defense? Are you saying that because you feel that the team you support will have a hard time facing our defense?"

Tang En was on a streak. He might as well stay put. Placing his luggage on the floor, he pointed a finger at the Barcelona reporter and schooled him. "Look at what the media has been writing: the finals between artistic football and utilitarian football! We're utilitarian? Let me calculate it for you. Since the beginning of round 16 to the end of the semi-finals, how many goals did Barcelona score? Six! How many did Nottingham Forest score? In just the eighth-final alone, we've already scored five!" He opened his palm in the poor reporter's face. "Up until the end of the semi-finals, we've scored nine! Don't you all like to judge a team's attacking strength based on their goal count? We've scored nine, and Barcelona scored six. Who's utilitarian? Who's offensive?"

Someone amid the crowd whistled; the sound of someone gloating over another person's misfortune while watching the fun. Everyone liked watching Tang En do something like this; it meant they would soon have some sensational news to report.

"My team isn't a circus to provide entertainment. I don't have any obligation to fulfill the hobbies you guys have. I only care about the evaluation of our supporters and our board of directors. The Champions League is my aim. Whether it's entertaining or not, I don't care. Artistic football? I'm not Picasso. I'm not Vincent van Gogh. Goodbye, sir."

After venting all his grievances, Tang En lifted his suitcase and turned to leave the bustling hotel entrance.

"Wow. The Boss is cool..." Lennon watched, starry-eyed.

"I can already predict the headlines tomorrow..." Albertini said, somewhat helplessly, beside him.

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The finals had yet to take place, but Nottingham Forest had already become a point of focus for the media. Or, more specifically, it was their main manager, Tony Twain, who had become everyone's focal point. Due to Tang En's words the day before at the front of the hotel, the Spanish media retaliated furiously, stating his lack of basic respect, his arrogance, and how he was full of nonsense.

On the other hand, Nottingham's and even England's media supported Tang En, putting in an effort to make him out to be a very characteristic manager, spreading the news that he said what he did because of his straightforward personality.

As for other neutral media parties, they maintained a gleeful attitude of watching the fun and fighting to report it. Some of the article titles were tastefully named, The war between Tony Twain and Barcelona.

Readers could read this as Tony alone challenging team Barcelona, or Tony going against the city of Barcelona like Don Quixote, as well as the challenge to Catalonia represented behind it.

Anyhow, due to Tang En's moment of rashness, the limelight and the firepower of the opponent's media became entirely concentrated on him.

David Kerslake found this quite incomprehensible. He knew that Tang En could sometimes be extremely short-tempered with the media. He also knew that his recent mood had not been good. Perhaps it was because of the big battle coming his way, that it made him nervous to the point of being a little oversensitive. But at that point, the question from the reporter was not nakedly bashing how reserved Forest's strategies were. It was, in fact, much politer than the commentary from other media outlets. So, Kerslake did not understand why it had caused Tang En to flare up so badly.

The next day, Tang En especially called up an attendant and tipped him, asking him to buy all available sports publications. Then, he took the papers and flipped them to the page with his photograph and the report on him. He arranged them neatly on the bed.

Sunlight streamed in from the windows and shone on the bed. He understood neither French nor Spanish, but it did not prevent him from admiring his own pictures.

Just like how he would admire an art piece, he stood by the bed with his head cocked, looking at the newspapers emitting the scent of ink.

After David Kerslake knocked on the door and entered, he was completely mystified coming upon this scene.

"Tony, what are you doing?"

"As you can tell, I'm reading the newspaper." Without moving his head, Tang En continued looking at the newspaper on the bed.

"Reading it like that?" Kerslake walked over and imitated how Tang En had his head cocked. Other than those striking photos, he could not read anything else.

"Can you understand this?" he asked.

"There's no need to understand it. I can guess what they're writing. Without a doubt, it'll be the same old things... Do you want me to regurgitate it to you?"

Kerslake shook his head. "I'm here to ask you about this, Tony. There's something odd about you losing your temper at the hotel front yesterday. I can't figure it out. It's very strange. Or really... I felt that your temper came too suddenly."

"Venting one's emotions isn't like playing a match. There's no need to warm-up beforehand..." Tang En walked over and pointed at the newspapers on the bed, saying, "Look at this. They're all pictures of me and my name. They're all discussing me. Whether they're supporting me or cursing my mother, all their focus is on me."

“You’re famous, Tony. But you don’t really need this kind of fame...”

“You think I did it for fame? Then I might as well climb up Eiffel Tower, take off all my clothes, and go bungee-jumping.” Tang En gathered up the newspapers and threw them off of bed before jumping onto it himself. He looked at Kerslake, who still stood by the side, and asked, “How are the players feeling?”

“They’re all pretty good.”

“Are they getting nervous?”

“Some of them are, but not all.”

“Is everything normal?”

Kerslake nodded. “I think so.”

“And those reporters?”

“They’re all thinking up ways to get an interview with you.”

Hearing the assistant manager say that, Tang En chuckled. “Let them try.”

“Hey, Tony. You haven’t answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Why did you suddenly lose your temper?”

“No reason really... I only wanted the media to move their focus onto me and give the team some space. Looking at this now, I think I did a pretty good job. At least, there won’t be anyone asking about the damned strategy or Wood’s absence from the match.” Tang En turned over on the bed and sat up. “Let’s go, David. It’s lunchtime.”

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During lunch, the team was discussing among themselves about Tang En’s flare-up with the reporter the day before. Tang En also announced another piece of news. During their free time in the afternoon, the players could go out shopping or do whatever else they chose. In short, they should not be cooping themselves up in the hotel rooms. Then, they had to return to the hotel by five-thirty and gather at Stade de France to conduct training for adapting to the field. Due to broadcasting factors, the finals had to take place at night. To allow the team to get accustomed to playing in the night, Tang En set training at the same time.

That decision was welcomed with cheers from the players.

Coming to the City of Fashion, Paris, where beautiful women were plentiful, no one wanted to coop themselves in their hotel room. All of the young people hoped to go out and enjoy themselves to the fullest.

Only Kerslake quietly reminded Tang En, “Tony, the match is on the day after...”

“I know. It’s exactly because of that we should let them relax. Being all anxious will not be something beneficial for the match. Now, it’s no longer the era of having a bland life with only three stops: hotel, training grounds, stadium. They all have their own ways of entertainment. We have to respect that.”

After lunch and a short afternoon break, Forest’s players found their respective partners to go out touring with.

Wood accompanied his mother to go shopping. Those with girlfriends or wives naturally went out with their own loved ones while the single bachelors got together in groups to go look for women.

Tang En was busy as well. He went out to meet Shania; they had prearranged it before coming to Paris.

Shania dressed like a normal girl. With her make-up removed, she was entirely apart from the icy beauty who walked on runways. The only thing she used to conceal her face and identity was a huge pair of sunglasses.

The two agreed to meet at the square in front of the Eiffel Tower. Today was a clear and bright day. It was very suitable for an outdoor meeting.

“It’s the Eiffel Tower again... Almost everyone who visits Paris comes here. You’re so basic, Uncle Tony.” Shania sighed as she observed the crowded Champ de Mars. The location was decided on by Tang En. When they were on the phone, he suggested Eiffel Tower without hesitation. It was the most famous structure in France. It had already become a sort of symbol for France and Paris internationally. However, because of the sheer number of people visiting the area, it could not be at all connected with the idea of “French romance”. While it may appear somewhat acceptable from afar, the mass of people, noise, and bustle became obvious once a person got closer.

“What of it? I’m a commoner,” Tang En answered, all the while snapping photos continuously with a digital camera.

Shania glanced at Tang En.

“Do you have to take so many photos of a single tower?”

“Who said I was taking pictures of the tower?”

“Eh?”

“Despite the beauty of the tower, it can’t be as beautiful as a person...”

Shania rolled her eyes. This square was so amassed with tourists, it had no lack of fashionable or rustic beauties walking past them.

“Shania, take off your sunglasses.”

“What for? The sun is glaring...” Although Shania complained, she still took them off. She squinted immediately after removing them, and then suddenly realized Tang En’s camera lenses were pointing towards her.

“Yes, yes. You look better without sunglasses on. Do you know what you look like when you have them on, Shania?”

“What?”

“A toad.”

“Uncle Tony!” Shania glared and tried making an angry face at him. Seeing the shutter in Tang En’s hands click even more quickly, she laughed instead. “Alright. I don’t like wearing sunglasses anyway... But who asked me...”

“Who asked you to become famous? Look at me, I don’t wear sunglasses out.”

“That’s because you wear them on the training grounds,” Shania retorted.

Tang En lowered his camera and shut it off. Then, he asked Shania, “Do you want to get ice-cream?”

There was a store selling ice-cream beneath the Eiffel Tower.

Shania hesitated and pouted as she shook her head. “I think not... I’m afraid I’ll get fat. Models always have to take care of their figures...”

Tang En suddenly shoved the camera into Shania’s hands. “Eating a tub of ice-cream won’t make you fat right away. I don’t want you to be like those models, dieting until they starve to death on the runway. Health is more important than anything. Wait here. I’ll go buy the ice-cream.”

Saying so, Tang En turned and strode wide steps towards the crowded ice-cream store.

Shania lowered her head and switched the digital camera on. Then, she flipped through the pictures just taken by Tang En. Unexpectedly, she did not see pictures of numerous unfamiliar beauties in the memory card. All the pictures had only one main lead: her, Judy Shania Jordana.

Pictures of when she was looking around with sunglasses on, speaking with furrowed brows, or those of small actions, such as when she pouted, tossed her hair, smiled, rolled her eyes, or when she was staring angrily. Where was the Eiffel Tower? She could not find any. There was not a single photograph that had even the shadow of the tall and beautiful “iron lady.”

As Shania looked through them, a smile grew on her face.

And then she lifted the camera and looked in the direction of the ice-cream store. Through the screen, she saw Uncle Tony holding up an ice-cream cone in each hand, struggling to squeeze out from amongst the crowd of people.

He did not look anything like the man who stood on the sidelines of the field to lead his team bravely into battle, or the one who engaged in fearsome verbal battles with the media out of the field; the daring and energetic, Europe’s youngest and hottest manager Mr. Tony Twain.

Shania focused the lenses on Tang En amid the crowd, zoomed in, and then pressed the shutter.

Chapter 445: Providence

Even though they had met underneath the Eiffel Tower, the two did not pay for the elevator to go up for a bird’s eye view of Paris. They also did not go to the other famous tourist attractions. After they had

taken a photograph at Champ de Mars and eaten ice cream, Twain and Shania walked along the banks of the Seine. They chatted as they strolled along, occasionally taking a few photographs. Twain knew nothing about fashion and had little interest in shopping, and since Shania had access to the latest fashion and cosmetics due to her work, she had no need to go shopping. The two people walked around aimlessly and as they wished.

Twain would ask her about her recent developments but would not criticize her for her little mistakes at work or reprimand her with a serious expression like her parents. Shania loved times like this and felt completely stress-free.

Twain loved it too. Being with Shania made him forget for a while about the upcoming Champions League final. He did not have to worry about the tactical arrangements of his opponent or his own team. He need not worry about this or that, consider his players' tasks, or make an explosive scene with the reporters. He did not have to do anything. He could just be free to stroll along the streets in the lazy sunny afternoon in Paris.

If Shania was the type of girl who would hit the high-end shops the moment they were on the streets and go home with shopping bags, Twain and she might not have the same rapport as they did now.

He was not a person who knew how to deal with women. He would sometimes appear to be to at a loss for what to do in the face of Sophia's warmth. When faced with Clarice's direct boldness, he would feel embarrassed; even when he would be alone with Yang Yan, he would be reserved most of the time. Only when he was together with Shania would he not be pretentious, awkward, or formal. He would mentally and physically relaxed.

He could not read minds and did not know what Shania thought about what it was like to be with him. Looking at the smile on Shania's face right now, he hoped that she would feel the same as him.

Time flew by that afternoon. Even though the sun was still shining, Twain and Shania had to leave. To avoid being harassed by the media, Twain did not send Shania back to her hotel. Shania also did not accompany Twain back. The pair waved goodbye on the streets of Paris.

Twain returned to the hotel after an afternoon of good moods and warm sunshine. His players had already returned in droves. When they had assembled, the team took the bus to the Stade de France to prepare for the final game.

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Until now, Tang En still had an inexplicable feeling; He had watched this Champions League final on television. In the pouring rain, ten Arsenal players had challenged and led against Barcelona for less than twenty minutes before they were defeated in the final moments.

Therefore, now that he was in an historical event and became one of the lead characters, the feeling of his transmigration became more and more obvious.

Arsenal, which was originally supposed to be in the Champions League final, was knocked out by his team; before that, the Spanish team, The Yellow Submarine, Villarreal, which was supposed to be in the Champions League this season, was eliminated by Nottingham Forest, which replaced Villarreal's

position in the Champions League. If things had developed according to the trajectory that Tang En knew, the Forest team should have been knocked out by Arsenal in the semi-finals.

Everything had been turned upside down and what had changed all that was him, the bug which had transmigrated through time and space.

Because he was the bug, Nottingham Forest, which he led, also rightly became a bug. Would this bug of his change the future, or would the established Barcelona, highly-regarded by the UEFA, bring history back to normal?

Twain stood in front of his hotel room's window.

He remembered the heavy rain in Paris during the Champions League final.

And now... The gurgling sound of the water could be heard clearly even if the window was closed. The silvery lines of rain poured down in torrents from the sky. The Eiffel Tower could still be seen clearly from here yesterday. Today he could only see a dark, blurry shadow.

He gazed outside at the hazy world, lost in thought.

"Tony." The sound of the door being opened came from behind him, and Kerlake walked in. "It's time to go."

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"Such heavy rain..." Eastwood stood at the entrance of the hotel lobby, looking at the bus parked outside. Unlike Twain in the room with closed windows, the rain sounded more pronounced and clearer from here.

The Forest players had already gathered at the lobby and were ready to set off for the stadium. Playing in a game in the rain was familiar to them. After all, the one thing that Britain did not lack was rain all year round.

However, for the UEFA Champions League final, which everyone attached great importance to, it was still very frustrating and disappointing for it not to be carried out in appropriate weather.

"Will the game be postponed because of the heavy rain?" At the side, the young player Aaron Lennon asked curiously.

Albertini shook his head, "No, the underground drainage system at the Stade de France is well developed. There won't be much water on the ground. And..." He glanced at the reporters, clad in raincoats and filming in the heavy rain, "Such finals are broadcasted live to the world and sponsored by countless advertisers. A postponement will affect the interests of TV broadcasters. They wouldn't agree to a deferment."

"But it feels terrible to play football in such a pouring rain. It's uncomfortable to play dripping wet." Lennon frowned.

"Don't worry, maybe the rain will be less when we get to the stadium."

Lennon nodded as he looked outside, but his knitted brows still did not relax.

George Wood could only watch the game with his mother in the stands. Although he was still with the team at this time, he would go to his mother in the stands' VIP box when he reached the stadium. Hence, Albertini would put the captain's armband back on. In Wood's absence, he was the only person these young players could rely on. In fact, he was the team's captain first. It was only because of his long absence and disruptions due to his injuries that people remembered Wood as the captain.

In the current Forest team, only three players had playing experience in the Champions League finals. One was the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, who had participated twice the Champions League finals while he was in Ajax. The first time, he had won the championship trophy on behalf of Ajax and the second time, he had lost to Juventus' Angelo Peruzzi guarding the goal in the penalty shootout.

The second player to have played in the Champions League final was Nicolas Anelka. However, his situation was quite embarrassing. It was reckoned that he would be unwilling to recall his Champions League final experience. It was his goal in the semi-finals that helped Real Madrid eliminate the Bundesliga titan, Bayern Munich, and advance to the final. It was his first time in the final and he made his first goal. But afterward, when people recalled that Champions League season, they would only remember Raúl's long-range attack that was nearly seventy meters long and Redondo's stunning pivot bypass in the game against Manchester United. They would remember Morientes, Hierro, and many others. But no one would think of him, Anelka. For Real Madrid fans, to score two goals in nineteen games for one season in Real Madrid, Anelka was considered a loser and still was until now.

The last player who had participated in a Champions League final was the team captain, Albertini. Like Edwin van der Sar, he had the glory of winning a Champions League title in the 93-94 season, which was in the twilight of the AC Milan dynasty. It was the final radiance of its glory. After that, AC Milan fell to its lowest ebb.

Anelka was taciturn. It was too difficult for the young players to count on him to impart his experience. Edwin van der Sar was very helpful, but with Albertini around, he still had to be more low-key. After all, Albertini was the captain, but he did not have any rank.

Twain and Kerslake walked out of the elevator and went to the middle of the assembled players.

"Let's go, guys." He clapped his hands and the players got up.

"Chief, the rain is really heavy," someone complained to Twain.

Twain shrugged. "No use complaining to me. I'm not God. But come to think of it, you should be glad."

When they heard him say so, the people around him were very surprised. Why should they be glad about such heavy rain? What was there to be glad about?

Seeing the surprised looks of the players around him, Twain smirked. "When you're playing on the field and you feel something cold falling on your heads, you'll know it's just rain, not just a flock of birds that ate something bad."

Everyone roared with laughter and the gloominess that had arisen due to the bad weather dissipated.

"All right, seriously, the rain is good for us. Those old guys at Barcelona are used to the bright and beautiful beaches, and must not like this weather. So, let's go!" He beckoned, and the players boarded the bus with smiles.

No matter how worried Twain was about the heavy rain that had followed the history in his memory, he still made casual jokes in front of the players so that no one could perceive the faint unease in his heart.

“It was sunny yesterday, and it’s raining heavily today. This weather change came too quickly and suddenly, didn’t it?” As Ribéry walked past him, he muttered.

“The weather in summer is weird,” Chimbonda explained seriously behind him.

Hearing the conversation between the two men, Twain looked up at the sky. Yes, the weather was very good yesterday and the day before. He and Shania even ate ice cream at Champ de Mars under the brilliant sun. And today’s temperature dropped by a lot.

Could this be providence?

Bah! Twain spat in his heart. If this was really heaven’s will, that’s bulls**t. I’m going to defy it today! Twain continued to curse and swear in his mind.

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The heavy rain did not dampen the enthusiasm of both teams’ fans. Stade de France, which could accommodate eighty thousand people, was a full house. The UFO-like edge of the stadium’s roof completely sheltered the stands so that the fans did not have to sit in the rain to watch the game and seemed to be one of the reasons that the spectators’ attendance was not affected.

Nottingham Forest fans turned out in full force, which made the tiny city of Nottingham almost empty. Barcelona had a higher population than Nottingham and the number of the Barcelona fans were more than the Nottingham Forest fans. In the stadium stands, their red and blue colors surpassed the Forest team’s dark red, covering more than half of the stadium.

But when it came to singing, the Barcelona fans were no match for the English fans. In terms of the creation of the atmosphere in the stadium, the English fans were well-deserved experts. They did not borrow any modern means, such as a stadium broadcast, but used their voices to create songs to scare their opponents. This was the tradition of English football and something that the English fans were proud of.

The fans’ chorus was always the most electrifying sound in the world.

At that moment, the Forest fans, fewer in numbers, used their singing voices to fight against the Barcelona fans in the stands.

As one of the competitors was an English team, there were bound to be a lot of English fans. Therefore, the Parisian police deployed a lot more police and the entire city was on the edge. No one wanted to recreate the tragic scene in which the German football hooligans beat a member of the National Gendarmerie, Daniel Nivel, into a vegetative state during the World Cup. The good thing thus far was that there had been no reports or records of the Forest fans being involved in drunken fights. Gavin Bernard’s death caused the Forest fans’ rioting to cease all at once, and they became the group of English fans with the cleanest record. However, this price came at a heavy cost.

When the players came out to warm up, the Forest fans loudly sang the songs they had created for the players. These people even had the ability to make up songs on the spot and then used the tune of the

latest popular songs to belt it out. By comparison, the methods employed by the Barcelona fans, who were not at the Camp Nou, were more monotonous.

George Wood was not part of the warm-up. He had already left the team to go find his mother in the grandstand box.

As this was the final, the entire team took the game very seriously. Instead of staying in the locker room, Twain went to the sidelines with the team and braved the rain to inspect the field.

He walked up two paces and then frowned.

“The drainage system is quite good, but the field is slippery.” Next to him, Kerslake gave his conclusion.

Twain nodded in agreement.

“Go back and let them ready the boots with the long cleats. It doesn’t affect us too much, but for Barcelona...” He turned his head to look at the opponents who were warming up in the other section of the stadium. Frank Rijkaard also appeared on the sidelines at the same time and seemed to be inspecting the accumulated water and turf conditions on the field. He could not see his expression clearly, but seeing how the Dutchman continued to look down, he could tell what mood the opponent’s manager was in at the moment.

Barcelona was representative of artistic football. They were used to controlling the football at their feet. The football rolled on the ground ninety percent of the time. Ronaldinho, Messi, Eto’o, Deco, Xavi... Those players represented technical football. They were more dependent on the venue and weather than the Forest team. Precise control of the ball, dribbling, and passing required the right conditions on the field. Slippery conditions would greatly limit and affect their play.

Therefore, this bad weather appeared to be better for Twain.

At most, my Nottingham Forest will play traditional English football with all of you. Let the ball fly back and forth endlessly in the air, and then we will rely on our bodies and crude fouls to disrupt the pace of Barcelona’s offense. We’ll drag you into the rhythm which we are most accustomed to.

If this sudden downpour is a godsend, I don’t know who it is for.

Twain did not stay long on the sidelines. He turned back to the locker room after he ascertained the exact conditions of the field. He wiped the rainwater off of his hair and face with a dry towel, hung his damp coat on the hook, and waited quietly for the players to come back.

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The warm-up soon ended and the players continued to return to the locker room. The coaches handed out dry towels to the players and the dry jerseys were already hung on the hangers in locker room cabinets for them to change.

Compared to when they were on the bus, the players were now visibly nervous and quieter. Most chose to be silent.

Twain observed everything.

“Are you nervous, guys?”

No one answered him, but everyone paused for a moment.

“I’m nervous too.” When Twain admitted this, those people who took a pause laughed for a bit and continued to busy themselves.

“Get nervous now and forget the word when you get to the game.” The players carried on changing their clothes and drying their hair. Twain continued speaking to himself. “This rain came at the right time. The Barcelona players are more nervous about this weather than we are. Did anyone see Rijkaard’s face just now?”

He chuckled hoarsely.

When everyone was done with their businesses, they sat down and faced their boss. Twain went on to say, “Play as we usually do.”

Chapter 446: The Cycle

What was the most commonly used strategy for Nottingham Forest?

Asking ten people, a hundred, or a thousand would still only render one answer.

An unsightly scene, ugly defense, and one or two counterattacks depending on ridiculous luck. The match ends, and Forest wins.

Other than Ribéry’s breakthroughs in the flanks, Forest’s matches had nothing else going for them.

Majority of neutral fans would stand on Barcelona’s side. They hoped to see the representative of artistic football, the team that brought them delight and enjoyment, win. They hoped to use Barcelona’s victory to prove that there was still a place where beautiful football lived on within modern football. Or, in other words, hoped that beautiful football could still be restored.

Originally, Tang En had intended on going head-on with Barcelona here. Due to Wood’s absence, Forest may not win even if they continued playing reservedly. They might even be cursed at for the ugliness. If they clashed head-on with them, they might have a sliver of hope. However, after the media’s stirring up of the “finals between artistic football and utilitarian football,” Tang En suddenly changed his mind. Now, he wanted to use the defense that Forest Team was most proficient in to go up against Barcelona. The heavy rain today made him even more certain of his resolution – the field was not suitable for playing with techniques. With their physical advantage, Forest need not try something they were less familiar with and avoid their own advantages.

Even though not having Wood would impact the team’s defense, Forest did not get to where it was today solely based on Wood’s performance. Pepe and Piqué both revealed their respective talents and abilities. In addition, there was the diligent and honest Leighton Baines, Chimbonda, as well as world-class goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar. With a formation like that, they could not be considered weak no matter where they were.

Of course, this did not mean that Tang En would be asking the team to maintain a completely defensive stance throughout the match. He knew that if they only stuck to defending, they would certainly not get the result he hoped for. A true, high-level defense was built upon the foundations of one's offense. Just as the offense needed to be built upon a sturdy foundation of defense, a stable defense required the side of offense to share the burden and contain the opponent's forces.

Therefore, right from the beginning from the match, Nottingham Forest, who excelled at defense, unexpectedly launched ferocious attacks on Barcelona, changing the reserved image they had had in the past.

Evidently, Barcelona did not expect Forest to take the initiative to attack. After the match began, they seemed somewhat at a loss. Adding to that was the slippery ground. Everything was making them lose their footing somewhat.

In comparison to Barcelona, who incorporated finer techniques in their play, Forest was more suitable to battle under such weather conditions; their offensive strategy was very simple and quick. There was no complicated permeation through the middle or dazzling give-and-go combinations. Instead, they dribbled the ball individually and, in two or three passes, sent the ball into the danger zone. After that, it was the goal shot. Thanks to Viduka, Forest could utilize more air passes by making use of his height and headers to ferry the ball. Alternatively, they could attack the goal directly. Forest's play style lowered, to the greatest extent, the impact of a field that had terrible conditions.

If there was any weakness of Barcelona, it was their defense against air balls. Perhaps it was because their footwork was too outstanding, making them disdainful about putting in more effort into high balls.

It happened that their opponent for this match was Nottingham Forest, a team from England.

"Ashley Young! He is so quick!" On the right flank, Ashley Young dribbled the ball forward rapidly. The slippery ground appeared to have almost no effect on him. Faced with the Dutch defender, Giovanni van Bronckhorst, he suddenly launched the ball more than 10 meters ahead and picked up speed. By the time Giovanni van Bronckhorst wanted to turn, it was already too late. His speed was no match against the fifth-quickest wing assaulter in the English Premier League; his 100-meter sprint result was 10.97 seconds. By the time the Dutchman turned, he only saw his back.

After breaking free from Giovanni van Bronckhorst, Ashley Young did not cut inward. Instead, he lifted his foot and passed center, a high ball!

This was what Tang En had specifically instructed. Forest's players were to play more high balls on the field and use their air advantage to pressurize Barcelona.

Viduka leaped up from amongst the crowd. Before Puyol and Márquez could get to it, he managed to head the ball in an attack towards the goal!

"V́ctor Valdés! A beautiful save!"

Spain's number two goalkeeper bumped Viduka's header out over the crossbar even as it shocked Barcelona's fans into a cold sweat.

“Since the start of the match, Forest Team did not choose to defend. Instead, they made use of their kick-off to launch wave after wave of attacks against Barcelona. This time, they were close to scoring a head start!”

After the launch of the corner kick, both Pepe and Piqué rushed in. The area in front of Barcelona’s goal became a mess again. The chaotic situation only ended after much difficulty, when Puyol managed to clear the ball from the area.

“Barcelona’s defense against headers is a mess... it looks like manager Twain has found a way to deal with Barcelona.”

The TV broadcast did a close-up on Tang En. He was sitting on the manager’s seat. The short roof was a poor shelter against the rain falling from the sky. Tang En’s pants had already gotten completely wet and his shirt was halfway there. In that moment, his gaze was still glued to the field, entirely in a state of focus.

Next to him, Rijkaard stood up from his seat. He was a little worried about the series of threats in front of the goal earlier. His brows were furrowed as he blew twice on his whistle, reminding his players to take note of defense in the flanks.

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Rijkaard’s reminder had no effect. Five minutes passed. Barcelona, who made its name in the world by their offense, had not shown a single decent shot. They were completely suppressed by Forest’s overbearing attacks and the terrible conditions on the field, failing to perform up to their usual standards.

Tang En’s thoughts were simple. Taking the chance in this duration when Barcelona had yet to adapt to the field, Forest would score a goal and transform their advantage into greater odds of winning. Of course, it was even better if they could score more goals. By letting his team gain the psychological advantage, they could gradually lure Barcelona, step-by-step, into a mire of anxiety and mistakes.

This was the pre-match plan. Everyone was certain about it.

If the match proceeded according to plan, it would be much more relaxed for them.

Tang En was not fond of planning beforehand to solve any and all problems. He also did not believe that the opponents would obediently listen to his arrangements. As a result, he valued snap adjustments during the match more.

Ashley Young’s performance in the right wing was outstanding. Franck Ribéry also did not lose out to him. On the left, he chose to cut inwards when he encountered Oleguer, taking the ball sideways. After widening the angle, he abruptly drew his foot back and took his shot! Víctor Valdés was focused, his body leaping to one side to block it out. It was another corner ball!

Nottingham Forest’s fans on the spectator’s stand, with their disadvantaged numbers, erupted with resounding cheers. Under Forest’s frenzied attacks, Barcelona’s fans were somewhat quiet.

The corner ball launched. While Barcelona's defenders were focusing on Pepe and Piqué in the penalty area, Forest made a change. Albertini did not directly drive the football into the penalty area, instead passing it to Arteta, who came by to receive it. It was a short corner!

Upon seeing Arteta take over the ball, Barcelona's fullbacks rushed out together, hoping to create an offside offense. In this instance, the Spaniard passed center. It was not a high ball, just one of medium height.

Everyone started running outside, including Forest's players who were afraid of becoming offsides. Midway through the sprint, Anelka suddenly turned back and cut forward. Arteta's pass had arrived exactly then! The French forward lifted his feet and kicked the ball forward, barely scraping past Barcelona's fullback, Márquez.

The commentator started yelling. The football fans at the live scene also began screaming at the top of their lungs.

"Anelka! A one-on-one!"

Víctor Valdés stepped up courageously. In the situation where the distance was already perilously close, he dropped to the ground to save the ball. After barely grazing past Márquez, Anelka had restricted space to make any moves. He could only use his arch to shoot the ball off. Landing on Víctor Valdés' thighs, it rolled away from the goal line.

A multitude of sighs sounded simultaneously.

"What a pity! Up to this point, this has been Forest's best opportunity! Barcelona is being suppressed to the point of breathlessness!"

Anelka hugged his head with his hands, tremendously regretful about his failure to kick the ball in.

Tang En felt just as regretful as Anelka. Upon seeing Anelka break through Márquez, he had stood up from the manager's seat, prepared to raise his hands in celebration for the goal. He did not expect Víctor Valdés to work miracles as if he were on drugs. The goalkeeper had been on a streak, successfully defending against several goals from Forest which had had high chances of getting in. This time was no exception as he put an end to Anelka's shot.

"This is godd**n ridiculous. He ought to go for a urine test after the match!" Tang En plopped down onto the seat, venting the annoyance in his heart.

Kerslake, beside him, shook his head. "No hurry, Tony. It's looking good for us."

"Before we score any goals, I'm not going to believe anything." Tang En said with gritted teeth as he stared into the field.

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"We need to go on the attack!" Barcelona's field captain, Puyol, was trying to drum up their morale. "We can't let them go on like this. Ronaldinho!"

The Brazilian's face was grim. "I know."

“Think of something. We have to push back!”

Ronaldinho looked up at the time on the gigantic screen above. The match had been ongoing for 14 minutes. Barcelona had not executed any decent attacks yet. As the team’s attacking core, he naturally had the duty to change the awkward situation.

Quickly, after dribbling past Arteta in the midfield with his technique, Ronaldinho set up Barcelona’s first effective attack since the beginning of the match. While Forest’s fullbacks were focused on Eto’o, Ronaldinho passed the ball to Giuly in the wings instead.

Giuly used his speed and broke through Leighton Baines. After that, he directly drew back his foot and shot at the gate from a tight angle!

Edwin van der Sar was similarly focused. Blocking at the angle the shot came from, his hands cushioned the overwhelmingly powerful shot before hugging it firmly.

“This is Barcelona’s first shot at the goal since the match’s beginning, in the 15th minute of the match... poor things. The mighty Barcelona is looking rather uncomfortable facing off against a crazed Nottingham Forest.”

“Beyond that, there’s something else they’re unused to: the field and weather. It’s obvious that the field is very slippery. Before his shot, Giuly’s foot slipped a little. In fact, players from both teams all had sudden slips. But there’s greater impact on Barcelona, who plays with more technique and ground combinations. Meanwhile, Nottingham Forest is persisting with the strategy of playing high balls, thus reducing to its greatest extent, the impact of the field on them.”

The commentator’s analysis was right on the money. But this could not help Barcelona change the awkward situation on the field. They were not proficient with the English football strategy of playing high balls; ball control on the ground was their tradition. Furthermore, it’s something that had already seeped into their blood. It was impossible to change it in such a short period.

“I’ve suddenly remembered. Prior to the match, there was some media source that thought this match to be the finals between artistic football, represented by Barcelona, and utilitarian football, represented by Nottingham Forest. After watching 15 minutes of this match, I just can’t make the connection between the team suppressing Barcelona with their attacks and ‘utilitarianism.’”

The commentators laughed.

As spectators, their laughter was especially relaxed.

As the teams battled, they could not afford to ease up at all. This was the first time Tang En’s team was going up against Barcelona. Before now, their understanding of the team came only from Piqué, a teammate who had emerged from Barcelona’s Youth Camp.

Just when Forest’s players began feeling that Barcelona was only this capable, Giuly executed a sharp breakthrough and goal shot to warn them that Barcelona was no average team.

George Wood sat in the luxury box along with his mother and the club’s chairman, watching the match together. Up to this point, the impact from his absence could not be seen yet.

What Tang En had said before the match seemed reasonable. Forest was not a one-man team. One missing player was not enough to be fatalistic.

It seemed that way...

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In the 18th minute, as Nottingham Forest continued its suppression of Barcelona, Barcelona suddenly executed a fast break after stealing the ball in the backfield.

The moment after Puyol passed the ball to Edmílson, six players from Barcelona rushed forward. They were so fast that Forest, who had gotten used to slow reactions from their opponents, were completely taken aback.

At this point, if they had had George Wood, he would certainly have, in the first instance, started pressing Ronaldinho. But while Forest's midfield was at a loss for how to react, Edmílson had already passed the ball to Ronaldinho.

"Ronaldinho takes possession, and there isn't a single Forest player around him!"

The impact of George Wood's absence from the team became obvious in an instant.

As Forest did not have a midfield player who specialized in defense, there was an enormous void in front of the center back. The defensive line did not have a choice but to move upwards to the midfield position to defend. In that way, there would naturally be large swathes of space behind them.

Without anyone defending closely against him, Ronaldinho did not choose to pass the ball. Instead, he continued dribbling forward, attracting Albertini and Pepe forward to defend. After pulling the focus of Forest's entire defensive line onto himself, he abruptly came to a halt and passed.

Eto'o dashed out suddenly from the diagonal. With everyone looking at Ronaldinho, fearing what magic he might be coming up with, no one had noticed Eto'o. This time, Ronaldinho was only the bait.

Eto'o rushed out from behind Pepe. Ronaldinho had just dodged Arteta's tackle from the back and shot out a direct pass.

"A one-to-one! A direct pass from Ronaldinho pierces through Forest's defensive line! It's not offside!"

Watching this scene from the manager's seat, Tang En's eyes suddenly widened, his pupils shrinking as his bottom launched off the seat.

It was too familiar.

Dammit!

Eto'o's beautiful forward cut successfully reversed the offside. When he received the ball, there were no Nottingham Forest defenders by his side.

Allowing Eto'o to go one-on-one against the goalkeeper and at the same time having a large space for acceleration, there could only be one result.

“Edwin van der Sar attacks!” In truth, after seeing Eto’o cut forward from the back, the Netherlandish goalkeeper had already predicted the situation that would follow. So, before Eto’o even received the ball, he had already rushed forward to the edge of the penalty area.

The two met on the boundaries of the penalty area. Edwin van der Sar tried dropping to the ground to block his path, but Eto’o made use of his own speed advantage and bumped the ball to his right. By that time, Edwin van der Sar had already lost his balance. Would he helplessly watch as the opponent passed him and scored?

He stretched his hand out to Eto’o, who had jumped up, catching hold of his opponent’s ankle before quickly releasing it.

But it was too late. Eto’o fell over in the penalty area.

By the side, Giuly watched as the football rolled to his own foot. He kicked the ball into the emptied goal. The spectator’s stands rang with the cheers of Barcelona’s supporters.

But...

“Foul!”

The whistle of the main referee sounded. He ran towards the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, while the other players of Forest ran at him. They surrounded the referee, pleading for mercy.

It was doubtlessly a foul. But, what judgment would the referee pass?

Without realizing, Tang En had already stood up from his seat.

The scene he was so familiar with appeared once more, gradually overlapping with everything now happening on the field before his very eyes; Ronaldinho’s pass and Eto’o’s run into position, even Xavi’s shot after the rebound did not change. And just like Arsenal, Forest wore the yellow away jersey in this match. The only difference was that Edwin van der Sar had replaced Lehmann.

“The goal has been rendered null... it looks like the referee is about to give Edwin van der Sar a card... a red card! Oh lord, it’s just been 18 minutes into the match, and Edwin van der Sar gets a red card! He’s out! Pulling down Eto’o with his hands outside the penalty area... the referee shows no mercy!”

In truth, Edwin van der Sar knew that would be the result. When he stretched his hands out to pull Eto’o, he had already realized the price for that foul. But, in that instant, his mind was only filled with the thought of not wanting to lose a goal.

At that moment, he covered his face with both hands, standing apart from the group of people. Meanwhile, his teammates somewhat furiously surrounded the referee, believing the penalization to be overly severe. There were also Barcelona players surrounding the referee, wanting to demand a reason for the negated goal; they were very unhappy about it. Barcelona’s people felt that the best result was for the goal to be in effect and at the same time have Edwin van der Sar be penalized by the red card.

In a fit of rage, Tang En kicked the side of the shelter beside the manager’s seat, instantly shattering the windshield...

“That bastard referee! Does he even know the art of enforcement?! How are we going to keep playing?”

While he was raging, Kerslake had gone to ask substitute goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard, to warm-up.

No matter how enraged Tang En was, he could not change this result even if he took off the roof of the technical area.

Edwin van der Sar walked down from the field dejectedly. His third Champions League finals had ended just like that.

Forest needed to change in a substitute goalkeeper and, at the same time, switch out a player on the field.

Tang En chose to substitute in Paul Gerrard, changing out forward Anelka.

When the Fourth Official raised the substitution sign, Anelka, who was on the field, was somewhat in disbelief about being changed out. After ascertaining that it was no mistake, his face momentarily darkened to be even more overcast than Paris' night sky.

Albertini ran up to console him as well as hurry him off the field, but Anelka dragged his feet as he walked down. Without slapping palms with Paul Gerrard, shaking hands with manager Tony, or making any kind of greeting, he just walked directly back to the locker room.

When Anelka brushed past him, Tang En did not have the leisure time to care about Anelka's bad mood. He was staring hard at the main referee on the field who was directing the human wall to move back.

It was the same as his recollection. Was history going to repeat itself?

Without his realizing, the rain was beginning to let up.

Chapter 447: Unexpected

Perhaps after the game had ended, Twain would remember to explain to Anelka why he was the one replaced, and not Viduka or anyone else.

As the Forest team insisted on playing high balls on the field, Viduka was needed for his excellent headers. Being a sturdy and powerful center forward, Anelka was not suited for this task. Eighteen minutes into the game, most of Viduka's job was to support Anelka and wait for his opportunity to assist in the shooting.

Maybe in other competitions, Viduka's image was that he was there to assist Anelka, just like the relationship between a flower and leaves. Anelka was the flower and Viduka was the leaves. But in this game, when it was necessary to break open the Barcelona goal with high-altitude bombardment, Viduka became the flower and Anelka had inevitably become the green leaves.

Twain certainly would not replace Viduka, the main attack point, nor would he casually substitute any players on the defensive line. The four midfielders were well-balanced and needed to contend against Barcelona's powerful midfield. One less player would break that balance. After much consideration, he could only switch Anelka.

And the problem lay with that.

It was a paradox.

Only Anelka could be changed.

But Anelka did not want to be brought off. He considered himself to be the core and entirely worthy to be No. 1. Eastwood's nine-month of absence due to his injury had given him the chance to become the core of the team's offense. He firmly seized it and proved his worth and strength with one goal after another. The manager trusted him. Even when Eastwood, the manager's favorite player, returned from his recovery, he could not shake Anelka's absolute hold on the main position. He, too, used his goals to repay the manager's trust.

It looked wonderful, working wholeheartedly with the manager and the team throwing itself into competitions. Together, they created a series of legends: Second place in the Premier League and Champions League final...

Anelka was awarded the second place in the Premier League's top strikers. He also ranked fourth as one of the top strikers in the Champions League. If the Forest team could defeat Barcelona in an "upset" for this game, he would reap his second Champions League trophy. This time, he would no longer be forgotten. He was the core of the team and deserved credit for the victory. He would usher in the revival of his career, which would be another pinnacle for him...

What a wonderful future.

But all of this, the wonderful prospects were shattered by his sudden substitution.

In such an important game, on the home ground of the team he had played for, in front of the Parisians who had once mocked him, after the game had only been going for eighteen minutes, he was replaced by the manager.

This was what he comprehended from Twain's substitution: he was not an important player in the manager's heart and could be sacrificed or replaced at any time.

With his eccentric temperament, Anelka would not consider the factors behind the switch. He only knew that he had been replaced and cast aside at an important juncture.

He walked past Twain with a darkened face. He did not shake hands with his manager. He did not communicate or even nod his head in acknowledgment. Just like that, he brushed past the manager whom he had once said he "admired the most" in an interview, walked straight into the player's tunnel, and disappeared beyond the clamor.

When he returned to the locker room, Anelka took out his phone from his locker and called his agent instead of taking a shower and changing his clothes.

There was no television camera to record what happened at that moment, and after the game, Anelka would not bring it up to anyone, including Twain.

Holding his phone, Anelka turned to his brothers for help. "I want to leave."

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Ten minutes later, when Anelka changed his clothes and returned to the sidelines, Twain remembered to look at him and then quickly turned his eyes back to the field. He was not in the mood to think about Anelka's reaction and feelings about this substitution.

The Forest team was short one player and he had to change his strategy. He had to move the shooting position further back and strive to steady the defense. He had to persist with playing defense in this game, to hold until they reached overtime and the penalty shootout.

Nottingham Forest started a stormy offensive in the game as Edwin van der Sar being sent off became a thing of the past. Paul Gerrard, who just came on, was not a reassuring player.

The British commentator gasped in surprise when he was introduced. Beneath the Forest team's strong exterior hid such a fatal weakness: their substitutes on the bench were too weak.

Paul Gerrard had not played more than four times in one season. Edwin van der Sar's steady performance which resulted in the Forest team current state also prevented the replacement goalkeeper from developing. At this point, Twain had no choice except to let the competitively inexperienced Paul Gerrard, who had no Champions League experience at all, become the Forest team's goalkeeper to block Barcelona's shots.

"Paul Gerrard, this is his first appearance in the UEFA Champions League this season." Having said that, the British commentator sighed. "I don't think he can create miracles and become famous in one game. His career has been lackluster. I think no matter what the outcome of this game will be, Manager Twain has to seriously consider the issue of his replacement goalkeeper. As the runner-up in the Premier League, they have the world-class goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, but it's unacceptable that the replacement goalkeeper is only at the EFL Championship level."

Barcelona took advantage of that opportunity to launch a fierce offensive against the Forest team's penalty area. Within ten minutes, the performances and situations of the two teams completely reversed compared to ten minutes ago. Barcelona made seven staggering shots at the goal, while Nottingham Forest did not have a single shot.

The Spanish aggressor showed everyone what a true Barcelona team should look like. And the Catalan commentator poked fun at the Forest team. "They're showing us what real English football looks like... Ha!"

Viduka returned to serve as a center back who used headers to help lift a siege. How could they expect the Forest team to have any offense? The ten players huddled in the penalty area to ward off Barcelona's indiscriminate attacks. The rain drenched their entire bodies and their yellow away jerseys were stained brown and green by the dirt and turf. With those three intermingling colors, they looked pathetic.

"The Barcelona players have gradually adapted to the venue. Their wonderful coordination and dribbling are breathtaking to watch. This is the Barcelona that we're familiar with!" cried the commentator excitedly.

Just then, Ronaldinho broke through in the front of the penalty area and agitated the Forest team's defensive line into a complete mess. It was a tough situation. Unfortunately, his shot ricocheted off the goal post at the last minute. Despite that, Barcelona's performance still won the praise of the vast

majority of fans. They were not as fretful as they had been before. After all, they had one more player than the Forest team and the Forest team's replacement goalkeeper was not strong. The game still had more than fifty minutes left. They had enough time to score, lead, and win.

Therefore, after ten minutes of indiscriminate shooting, they saw that the entire Forest team was forced to fall back. Now their goal area was ironclad and impenetrable. The experienced Barcelona slowed down their pace of attack. Instead of continuing to press on the Forest team, they slightly pulled back in order to draw out the Forest players and look for loopholes again.

The Barcelona players appeared confident. They calmly played with the style of technical football which they were accustomed to. They used constant back-and-forth passing of the football and breathtaking cut-and-pass positioning to lure the Forest team players.

The Forest fans felt pained as they watched Ronaldinho show off his skills in front of Arteta to his heart's content. Arteta was unable to even touch the ball. At this point, everyone missed the man who sat in the stadium box seat.

If he were there when Ronaldinho dared to flaunt his footwork in front of him, it would have been the gleaming cleats of the boots that greeted the Brazilian.

Unknowingly, everyone was used to George Wood being on the field.

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For Demetrio Albertini, this game was destined to be an unforgettable Champions League final for life.

In fact, before their opponent for the final was known and after the Forest had successfully advanced to the Champions League final, Albertini had wished that the Forest team's opponent in the final was AC Milan. He had wanted Adriano Galliani and Carlo Ancelotti to see the standard he still could show in a high-level competition.

Perhaps, he had hoped to pay tribute in that way to the team which he had played on for fourteen years and show his best during Wood's absence in the final.

However, Barcelona had eliminated AC Milan.

Before this game, Albertini had fully anticipated how difficult the final would be. He knew what kind of team Barcelona was. They were in the same powerhouse club as AC Milan. There was no reason to underestimate them. And, with Wood's absence, he needed to share Wood's job with Arteta in the midfield. But when Edwin van der Sar was sent off, the difficulty of the game went beyond Albertini's expectations.

He was used to having George around him and playing with him in a game. When Wood was not on the field, it was already a struggle with him and the Arteta sharing his workload, not to mention that Wood had done this work alone before. What kind of fiend was he? Even Albertini, who normally had the most contact with Wood, was baffled.

But now was not the time to lament those matters. Wood would not appear in this game. No matter for what reason and what difficulty the team was in, he would not be able to drop from the sky to save his teammates. He sat in the brightly lit VIP box seat, watching the game in silence.

This game did not belong to Wood. If his mind was still filled with thoughts about Wood, it would be disrespectful to the other ten teammates.

This is my fight and my game. It belongs to me, Demetrio Albertini.

“Barcelona continues to pass the ball. They are not in a hurry to move forward. Nottingham Forest has a very close defensive formation and they don’t have a lot of chances. Deco takes the ball and makes a feint to break through but passes the football to Ronaldinho instead!”

As the commentator’s voice went an octave higher, so did the cheers in the stadium.

This buck-toothed Brazilian was Barcelona’s new star and leader. Everyone was happy to see the football at his feet and could not take their eyes off him as they looked forward to the brilliant moment that could appear at any time to amaze them.

Ronaldinho leaned sideways against Arteta and used the outside of his foot to step on the football, which was one of Ronaldinho’s signature moves. The advantage was that he could easily make various combinations of movements. Whether it was passing or dribbling, he could move the football far away from his opponent’s legs.

Arteta strove to intercept this ball but was obstructed by Ronaldinho’s pushback.

Just as everyone waited to see Ronaldinho flaunt his superb technical skills again and as Ronaldinho looked up to observe his teammates’ positioning, Albertini suddenly charged out from his blind spot and jabbed the ball from under his foot in a flash.

Ronaldinho jerked his head and saw the back of Nottingham Forest’s number 4.

“Albertini cuts off the ball from Ronaldinho’s foot and the Forest team fights back!...He did not pass the ball, he’s dribbling it and continues to move the ball forward...”

Although Ribéry and Ashley Young had run ahead and Viduka was ready to receive the ball, Albertini did not pass the ball. He chose to dribble the ball forward to break through.

In the face of Edmílson, Albertini simply pushed the football towards the flank. The other man quickly came close and stuck to Albertini so as not to let him easily dribble the football and get past. He had been forced into a dead corner, but he still dribbled the ball forward.

Ashley Young saw his captain run in front of himself, hesitated for a moment, and turned to the middle to support and cover for his captain.

As expected, the Barcelona defenders, who had initially prepared to swarm the flank to intercept Albertini’s ball, saw Ashley Young running up and both Márquez and Puyol chose to stay in the middle, leaving only Edmílson and van Bronckhorst to defend against Albertini.

No matter how the opponent tried to hinder behind his back, Albertini tenaciously dribbled the football alone to the left side of the Barcelona penalty area, guarded by van Bronckhorst. Once he was surrounded by the two men, Albertini slowed down, guarded the football, and waited for others to come up to support him.

Barcelona would not give him such a chance. Van Bronckhorst deftly tackled Albertini to the ground.

The referee naturally blew his whistle for the foul.

Van Bronckhorst shrugged his shoulders and retreated. Albertini got up from the ground and beckoned his teammates to come up. This was an opportunity for the Forest team to attack. They had practiced the set pieces repeatedly before the game which were especially used as one of the most powerful weapons to deal with Barcelona.

“In the 38th minute, a free kick from outside of the penalty area. This is a chance for Nottingham Forest and Albertini, who had dribbled the ball for more than 40 meters. Let’s take a look at how it’s going to unfold.”

The commentator quieted down and the players from both sides gathered inside the penalty area on the field. The Barcelona players were busy defending and the Forest players mingled inside the penalty area, waiting for an opportunity to score a goal.

Arteta had wanted to take this free kick, but Albertini refused. He wanted to grasp this opportunity he personally created.

The Forest players, Viduka, Pepe, and Piqué, who were best at headers, rushed to the front of the goal. Feeling like he suddenly stood out, Barcelona’s tallest player, Márquez, was caught between them like a poor hot dog.

This was a common foul, and the Barcelona players did not think that the battered Forest team, which was short of player, could achieve anything. The defense in the penalty area seemed a bit relaxed, and the two-man wall in front of the goal was not very tight.

Albertini carefully observed the situation inside the penalty area and then moved back to prepare for the free kick.

He did not move backward to do the run-up. Instead, he swung his leg on the spot and the football bypassed the useless two-man wall to fly towards the Barcelona goal.

When the football flew upwards, the Barcelona defensive players did not even run much. They only saw a yellow figure streak across to the front of the Barcelona’s goal!

“Pepe! Ahh—Oh my God! GOOOOAL! GOOOOOAL!! GOOOOOOAL!!”

In the face of the sudden header attack from the tall center back who had charged up from the back, Valdés did not react in time. He just jumped a little and then turned his head to watch the football fly into the goal.

Puyol was deceived by Albertini’s curveball. He had thought the football would fly in, so he rushed in the direction of the goal. He did not expect the football to curve halfway and fly outwards to the defensive area where Puyol was in charge. When he saw Pepe charge up from the back and leap to head the ball towards the goal, he turned and jumped back to block, but it was too late. He was shorter than Pepe by a head!

“Pepe! The Brazilian center back whom Tony Twain used the exceptional talent clause this season to obtain a work permit from the FA for. Twain finally reaped the generous reward for it. Pepe has proved that he’s entirely worthy of being the exceptional talent.”

“With only ten players, Nottingham Forest scored first and took the lead with the first goal! This is unbelievable!”

“Oleguer should be responsible for dropping the ball! He completely didn’t notice Pepe plugging in from behind at all, and it was unwise for Puyol to compete for the header.”

“Aha! This is what Tony Twain’s team is all about. They never give up! When no one has any hope for them, they’re able to explode with shocking energy instead! Our English team is ahead of Barcelona by 1:0! And there are only ten of them!”

The commentators from various countries were all enlivened. They had waited thirty-eight minutes for the first goal in this final. They did not expect it to come from the embattled Nottingham Forest, who was one player short and fully at a disadvantage.

Chapter 448: After Taking The Lead

“At the 38th minute of the match, the first to take the lead is, unbelievably, Nottingham Forest! This is quite surprising! Look at the faces of Barcelona’s players. They can’t believe it!”

Puyol covered his face with both hands. It was exactly his own misjudgment that had given his opponents the chance for the goal.

As Barcelona’s players were despairing, Forest’s players were hugging each other in the rain. Having gotten the lead in such a disadvantageous situation had greatly boosted the morale of the team. Their original thoughts of losing the match because they were a player down were thrown cleanly out of their minds.

Tony Twain’s football team feared no opponent, whether it was Barcelona or Real Madrid. They also did not care if they had 11 players or 10 battling, what the weather was like, or which side the media was leaning toward prior to the match.

Seeing Pepe head the ball into Barcelona’s goal, Forest’s substitutes’ bench and manager’s seat erupted suddenly with loud cheers. Kerlake took the lead in rushing out.

Tang En also jumped up, throwing his arms out in celebration.

But very quickly, his hands dropped again. The smile on his face gradually stiffened. No matter how excited the people were beside him, it became impossible for him to muster up a smile.

He had watched the finals of the Champions League. Although he could not remember the details of it, he would not forget a moment as significant as a scored goal.

In the 18th minute, Lehmann was penalized with a red card because of Eto’o. Wenger substituted in reserve goalkeeper Almunia and took out Pirès.

In the 38th minute, the 10-man Arsenal got a lead on Barcelona thanks to Campbell’s header.

Then... in the second half...

Tang En did not dare to continue down that train of thought.

Once was a coincidence; twice was also a coincidence... thrice... It was no longer so simple.

He looked up at the sky. He could not help but feel that this was an extremely strange matter. It was as strange as how he had transmigrated here from 2007 to become a football manager.

It was as if there was a pair of unseen hands toying with them.

“Tony! Tony! Have you gone silly? We’re leading!” David Kerslake excitedly smacked Tang En, who was in a daze, waking him up.

“Ah, that’s right. We’re leading... leading!” Tang En nodded in response. “But the match hasn’t ended. It isn’t time to rejoice yet. Barcelona’s offense is very strong. We’ll have to deal with it carefully.”

“Now that we’ve taken the lead, we can return to the strategy we’re best at, and what we’re used to,” Kerslake said with a laugh. “Defending. We have to let those bastards looking down on us see our prowess!”

The assistant manager was in a much better mood than the main manager.

“You’re right, David. We do need to start defending.”

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The singing of Nottingham Forest’s fans drifted in from the spectator’s stands. It became louder and louder. Even the noisy splashes of the rain could not cover it up. The same went for the jeers coming from Barcelona’s fans.

At that moment, happiness belonged to the supporters of Nottingham Forest.

“In England, there has always been this saying. Despite Manager Tony’s lack of admittance to it, he is, in fact, considered to be the successor to the legendary manager, Brian Clough. Just a simple example: Brian Clough led Nottingham Forest to complete a three-grade jump in three years. From League Two to the First Division champions, and again to the champions of the Champions League. And Manager Tony Twain has perfectly replicated that scene with the current Forest Team. Just two seasons before, they were only a participating team of the EFL Championship. At that time, it wasn’t called that, it was called the Football League First Division. A year ago, they were promoted to the English Premier League and attained the qualification to participate in the Champions League. And today, they have fought their way into the finals of the UEFA Champions League! They are leading with a score of 1:0; even the score is the same! Tonight, can his football team successfully defeat Barcelona and replicate that miraculous era in its entirety?”

Wishes were beautiful things, but it was not so easy to realize them.

After all, Clough’s Forest Team had not been penalized with one player less during their finals.

After the match restarted, Forest returned to defending. Only Viduka was left in front. Players in the backfield mostly launched powerful long passes in search of Viduka’s head when they got the ball. Playing in that way made the match extremely unentertaining. But it was very useful at exactly this time and this sort of situation. Tang En did not care how the others would look at it. He only wanted the resulting victory.

Since Forest had retreated to defend, Barcelona, naturally, did not stand on ceremony. They pressed forward heavily in the hopes of equalizing the score as quickly as possible. Getting behind in the score when they had a player more was unbearable for the proud and arrogant Barcelona players.

“Barcelona has begun surrounding Nottingham Forest in the attack. The match has returned to the same situation as before Forest scored the goal. Now, the ball is in Ronaldinho’s possession.”

Albertini dashed in front of the Brazilian. Earlier, when they celebrated the goal, he and Arteta had communicated shortly, changing to have the more experienced Albertini guard against the opponent’s core.

Ronaldinho looked at Albertini in front of him. His positioning was excellent; it made him think twice about attempting a breakthrough.

However, as the midfield core, he was not limited to only knowing how to break through. Other than his incredible skills in dribbling, another reason Ronaldinho was able to become the world’s number one midfielder after Zidane was his ability in passing.

With a twist of his behind, he faked a movement and made Albertini focus on preventing his breakthrough. And then, he instead passed the ball to Eto’o in front of the penalty area.

Eto’o leaned against Piqué, who was defending against him. He did not kill the ball. Rather, he directly nudged the ball towards his own left, swiftly spinning around at the same time.

The explosive power of the African cheetah was shocking; in a blink of an eye, he had left Piqué behind.

Breaking through in a turn, he was faced with Paul Gerrard and shot at the goal.

Piqué’s tackle appeared as a ceremonial sort of interruption; it had no real effect at all. At this point, Paul Gerrard became the savior of the team. He timely intervened, blocking the angle of Eto’o’s shot. And then, at the brink of danger, he stretched out his hand and managed to hit the ball.

The football changed direction and hit the goalpost, bouncing out!

Loud sighs rang through the stadium.

But it was not over!

The ball had bounced back. Eto’o was on the ground and could not get a rebound shot in time. Suddenly, Ronaldinho, who had been outside the penalty area, appeared inside. Faced with the rebounding football, he drew back his leg, intending to do a direct volley.

At that moment, the slippery ground lent a hand to Forest’s fate. Just as Ronaldinho drew his right foot back, his supporting leg slipped and caused him to completely lose his balance. His body fell to the left and the drawn right foot did not manage to contact the soccer ball, brushing right past it!

Albertini, who had been chasing after him, hastily cleared the ball from the area.

Sighs sounded once again.

“Ronaldinho... what a pity! Eto’o’s shot got intervened by Paul Gerrard at the most crucial point, changing its direction. It hit the goalpost, and Ronaldinho’s rebound shot failed to get in contact with the ball.”

“That bastard, he’s too fast...” Piqué was still grumbling as he climbed up from the ground. He had thought boxing out his opponent would give him no opportunity; unexpectedly, Eto’o had used the most direct method to break through. With just a turn, he was able to threaten the goal.

After getting up, Piqué saw the anxiety on Gerrard’s face. His taut face looked like his strung-out nerves. As the regulations dictated that a goalkeeper must be in the list of reserves, his appearance in the team list was quite possibly to make up for the numbers. He himself did not expect any opportunity to be fielded. For such an important match, Edwin van der Sar was surely the starter. And goalkeeping was the most secure position. It was extremely rare for there to be injury or sickness... He knew his own capabilities. It was impossible for him to play in this match, absolutely impossible.

Paul Gerrard’s heart was racing. When he saw the football fly towards him earlier, his heart had leaped into his throat. He only felt his knees weaken, dropping his knees onto the ground. Of course, he knew that he had managed to touch the ball, but touching the ball was not the same as saving it. Those were two entirely different things.

The ball eventually hit the goalpost and did not bounce in. He had managed to save Eto’o’s shot. Even so, his racing heart did not settle.

Of course, Piqué could understand how Paul must be feeling. As a reserve goalkeeper who did not often get the opportunity to be fielded, the pressure he felt having to substitute Edwin van der Sar in guarding their goal for the Champions League’s finals must be no mere trifle. No matter his abilities, fate had made him Forest’s goalkeeper in this match. They must trust him and encourage him, allowing him to perform to his best standards...

“Good job, Paul...” Piqué patted Gerrard’s shoulder and pulled him up. “You saved me.” He was right. If Eto’o had gotten the ball in, Gerrard did not have to be responsible for anything. Rather, Piqué would have to be held responsible for his failed defense.

Albertini ran back as well and patted Paul Gerrard. “Well done.”

The encouragement from his teammates finally managed to ease Gerrard’s anxiety.

“I’m insisting on my opinion. Paul Gerrard is not a player who can create miracles. However, at the very least, he is doing well at this moment. He managed to defend against the most threatening attack from Barcelona in the first half of the match.”

That was indeed the most threatening attack from Barcelona in the first half; not long after, the main referee blew the ending whistle for the first half.

After getting off the field, Albertini found the main referee and inquired about Edwin van der Sar’s penalty for the foul. He felt that the referee’s sentence was overly harsh. While Edwin van der Sar should have received a red card in accordance with the rules, the match had only been going for 18 minutes. Fouling out the primary goalkeeper of Forest Team like that... Albertini felt that the sentence should have been reconsidered.

The main referee politely responded to Albertini with a few sentences but did not wish to continue going back and forth about a past penalty. Albertini, as well, sensibly shook hands with the referee and left.

Only Tang En continued glaring in annoyance at the main referee, who walked off the field with his two assistant referees. Edwin van der Sar's foul out was certain to be the turning point in this match. If they lost the match, Tang En would be holding a grudge against that referee for life.

"The first half of the match has ended. Barcelona, who has the upper hand, is now behind Nottingham Forest, who has a player less. They tried all means but failed to score an equalizer. Rijkaard should do some adjustments during halftime. As for Nottingham Forest, despite playing such reserved football—the kind we hate watching—I still must applaud the courage of this team. In the disadvantaged situation of having a player down, they instead managed to take the lead against Barcelona. This is rather remarkable for manager Tony Twain's first time leading a team into the Champions League's finals."

The commentator's evaluation was fair and objective.

Tang En turned furiously and walked towards the corridors. He did not notice that the rain was slowly letting up.

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In the locker room, Forest's players were all panting for air. After taking off their wet shirts and throwing them on the ground, they immediately plopped down and sat to rest.

Having a man down, playing in the rain, having tremendously strong opponents, and facing continuous frenzied attacks; the psychological stress expended large amounts of their stamina.

Edwin van der Sar was still blaming himself for the foul. Perhaps if he had just let Eto'o pass him at that moment and allowed Barcelona that single goal, they might still have the opportunity to equalize the score or even overtake it with an intact team. He sat in front of his locker in silence.

Tang En pushed the door open and entered. He looked at the audience. Other than panting, there were no other sounds in the locker room. No one said anything. Everyone was quiet.

Their mental state was not too good.

"Hey, what is this? Are we behind?" Tang En asked. "Why do you all look dispirited? Aren't we leading Barcelona by a goal? It's Barcelona! The Barcelona who has been praised to the skies before the match, who triumphs in every battle and wins every fight, who is the world's number one; Barcelona, the epitome of perfection! La Liga champions who beat up Real Madrid until they couldn't tell where North was, and who swept through Continental Europe and set off the crazed trend for attacking football, who has the world's best midfielder superstar, Ronaldinho, and who has one player more godd**n than us... We're leaning against a pretty damn invincible team! What do you all have to be unhappy about? So many media outlets were stirring up the matter of George Wood's absence before the match as if Nottingham Forest became nothing without George! In the end? Do you know what I want to do most now? I want to slap that group of bastards! You all did very well, every one of you did well. What is there to be silent about?"

At that point, a creak sounded from behind Tang En. George Wood opened the door and walked in.

Tang En turned to look at Wood while the latter stood at the door looking back. The two stared at each other.

Thinking back on what Tang En had just been saying, the locker room went still for about two seconds before suddenly erupting with peals of laughter.

“Weren’t you watching the match from above with your mother?” Tang En asked, feeling odd.

Wood nodded. “I wanted to come down to take a look...”

Looking at the expression on Wood’s face, Tang En laughed. “You aren’t too used to sitting in the luxury box to watch the match, right? Come on in.” He waved Wood in.

Wood entered and sat in a corner.

Albertini stood up. “Boss... I think everyone is so quiet because they’re tired.” After saying so, he turned around and looked at his teammates, hoping they would stand out to agree with him.

So, a group of them immediately nodded furiously. “That’s right, that’s right. We’re too tired... after all, we are down a person, Boss.”

“Alright. I accept that explanation. I only hope for everyone to understand that no matter what terrible situation we are facing, I don’t want to see that despairing look.” He tapped the tactical board. “Let’s talk about what we should do in the second half.”

“Because they are now behind, Barcelona will strengthen their offense in the second half.” Tang En carefully searched his mind for the two goals scored by Barcelona in the second half. “We must watch out for Eto’o. We’re doing very well in the defense for the center. They haven’t got many chances, so in the second half, we have to be wary of attacks coming in from the opponent’s wings.”

“And if Barcelona keeps on failing to make progress in their situation, they may end up substituting in Larsson, a tremendously experienced forward. Be careful of his ability to set up plays.”

The two goals Barcelona scored off Arsenal were all related to Larsson. That was his most glorious moment in that season. Tang En believed that so long as they suppressed Larsson’s performance, they would be able to successfully change the results.

“Everyone, we are already beating Barcelona. Those who didn’t look well upon us before the match can go to hell! I’d tell you, it’s not the most popular team who will become champions! It’s also not the one with the greatest support from the media who will be the strongest!” In the depths of Tang En’s heart, perhaps he was still somewhat worried about the future of a match that was turning out remarkably like the past. However, in front of his players, Tang En did not show his worry at all. He waved his fists around to cheer for the ten-man team that was to set off into battle. Using his own words, he encouraged the players to create miracles in the match.

“A football competition is a competition for results. In the end, whoever wins is the strongest! Now that we are beating Barcelona, we are stronger than them!”

Chapter 449: Looks Like Victory

When Twain returned to the field, he felt that something was off, but he could not pinpoint why at that moment.

It was not until he saw Rijkaard walking out of the tunnel and looking up at the sky that he finally realized.

He looked up at the night sky too.

The rain had stopped.

He widened his eyes and reached out his hands. There was not a single raindrop on his cheeks or palms.

It was windy over the field and he could even see the dark clouds in the night sky rolling away.

The quagmire that Barcelona was bound by was gone. Luck had changed.

“Dammit... Dammit...” Twain muttered as he looked up.

The weather condition that was most conducive for them had become beneficial to their opponent.

Without the heavy rain and with the drainage capability of the Stade de France, the field would soon not be as slippery as it was in the first half. By that time...

He did not dare to think about it any further.

“Tony, what’s going on?” Walking up from behind him, David Kerslake went past Twain and found him still standing where he was.

“It’s nothing. Let’s go, David.” Twain did not want anyone to know his inner concerns.

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“Ladies and gentlemen. Join us live at the final game of the 05-06 season UEFA Champions League! The contending teams are England’s Nottingham Forest and Spain’s Barcelona. It’s now the second half of the game the score stands at 1:0 with Nottingham Forest in the lead for now.”

After the game began, Rijkaard used “The Pale Knight,” Iniesta, to replace the defensive midfielder Edmilson. This replacement clearly meant that they would continue to strengthen their offense and gain complete control of the midfield. Rijkaard believed that the Forest team would stick to defense in the second half. In that case, it would be a waste to place their defensive midfielder in the midfield. Bringing on the technically skilled Iniesta could continue to create pressure on the Forest team’s defensive line.

Barcelona besieged Nottingham Forest as they had in the first half while the Forest team huddled in the penalty area to defend. Perhaps such a game was entertaining to watch for the viewers who liked Barcelona, as they could watch the performances of star players such as Ronaldinho, see Barcelona press on their opponents, and did not even need to worry about Barcelona’s defensive line. The Forest team simply did not have the capacity to attack within the thirty-meter zone of Barcelona.

Barcelona fully dominated the game. The situation of Nottingham Forest whereby they were so hammered that they could only ward off the attacks but were unable to fight back had made many Forest supporters break out in a cold sweat. But Twain was not worried about that at all.

Although the Forest team was on the defensive, only the experts could see that they held their own very well with their three lines still tight and not ripped apart by Barcelona's attacks. As long as the Forest team held its ground, Barcelona would not stand a chance. Despite their onslaught, it was actually more bark than bite.

Nottingham Forest had used this tactic to play for two seasons. And now they were in their element in the Champions League final.

"It looks like Manager Twain is determined to hold until the end of the game, which is the situation he's best at dealing with, even though the second half is only just beginning..." There was a hint of mockery in the commentator's tone.

Barcelona also did not seem to have a better way to deal with the Forest team's tight defensive formation. Ronaldinho found it almost an impossible task when he had wanted to break through the Forest team's three-tier line of defense with his individual technique. Under such tight defense, there was no room for Eto'o to accelerate faster to shake them off.

Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes went by. Barcelona was getting increasingly irritable.

They had one more player than their opponent. Still, they were behind and unable to break through. It would be peculiar if they did not become impatient when faced with that situation.

Tremendous pressure hung over the heads of the Barcelona players. If they could not win this game in the end, they would be the laughing stock of all of Europe. They were stronger than their opponent, they had more players than their opponent, and they had the upper hand in the game but had let the Forest team's one sneak attack win them the game.

Being everyone's favorite to win the title was an honor and validation, but a form of pressure at the same time.

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Twain saw that Barcelona's players had begun to get impatient, and the tension in his face finally relaxed. This was a good sign.

As the game progressed, as long as the Forest team continued to keep it that way, Barcelona would be on the edge even more. At that time, the hotheaded Eto'o could be counted on to act rashly.

It would be fantastic if he acted rashly! Twain liked his opponents to be reckless, especially the opposing strikers.

He was not the slightest bit afraid of opponents who relied on brute force to play football.

The Forest team intercepted the ball successfully and launched an offensive. Albertini's long pass sought out Viduka, this lighthouse in the front field. Viduka competed for the header against Márquez and lobbed the football to Arteta who quickly plugged in. The Forest team switched from defense to offense.

They were not blindly focused on defense. They must fight back to continue to harass their opponents so that Barcelona would not dare not to mount full pressure on them. This was already a cliché. Even if Twain did not speak, the Forest players knew what to do.

Arteta did not stop the ball well, allowing Puyol to intercept it, which was immediately followed by a counterattack from Barcelona. At this time, due to the offense switch on the right flank, the Forest team's defense in the rear was not tight and had a lot of empty space to be exploited.

Puyol did not hesitate to drive the ball directly forward immediately, and the football rolled to Iniesta's foot.

As the Forest players focused their attention on Eto'o and Ronaldinho, Iniesta charged ahead. After he received the football, he simply turned around and shook off Albertini. Then, when he faced Piqué's tackle and attempt to snatch, he astutely poked the football out and jumped to evade. Only Pepe and the goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard, were in front of him at this time.

"Barcelona has a chance! Iniesta... Iniesta! He bypasses two players!"

Pepe was situated in an acceptable position and had a lot of confidence with this one-on-one. Iniesta saw that Pepe cautiously followed him at the back to guard against his surprise attack, so he did not choose to force a breakthrough. Instead, he suddenly swung his leg to shoot just outside the penalty area!

The football brushed along the turf and rolled towards the goal. The highly focused Paul Gerrard dropped to the ground and took the ball in his arms.

"Paul Gerrard pounced on Iniesta's shot! This could have been a great opportunity for Barcelona, but Iniesta's shot was too delicate!"

Pepe yelled at the back, "Don't give them that chance again!"

But what was the use? The Forest team could not retreat into the penalty area and stay there for forty-five minutes. They had to fight their way out and press on.

Iniesta's breakthrough just now should have been terminated by Albertini; If it were George Wood in that position, he would certainly not hesitate to foul.

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"Tony, we need to fight back," Kerslake cautioned after that gripping scene on the field.

"Of course... If we have the spare energy." Twain still insisted on solid defense first.

"A single goal lead cannot secure anything."

"It's not easy to get even a single goal lead on Barcelona, David." With that, Twain got up from his seat and headed for the substitutes' bench. "Freddy, go warm up."

Eastwood jumped out of his seat, tossed his jacket, and ran out.

After his instruction, Twain returned to his seat in the coaches' area.

Kerslake smiled. "Ready for a replacement?"

“No, it’s just in case. I don’t expect Viduka to score in front. His job isn’t to score goals. He’s supposed to be a nail fixed in Barcelona’s defensive line so that they don’t act lightly. But if I want to make a change, he’s the only one I can change.”

Kerslake nodded to show that he understood Twain’s thinking.

The Forest team could hardly move in the middle of the backfield because the current defensive system set up was well organized. To simply change players would likely to reveal loopholes for Barcelona to seize.

Therefore, if he wanted to seek change and shift the current passive situation to be more aggressive, the only position he could move was the forward line.

Thinking of it, he turned his head to look at Anelka, sitting on the bench. The French striker had been reticent since he was replaced and did not have any interaction with the others during the halftime interval. He just sat alone in the corner, looking extremely gloomy.

Anelka was actually a good player for counterattacks. If he was not in the starting lineup, then he would be Twain’s first candidate for consideration at this point. It was unfortunate that Edwin van der Sar’s red card had changed the fate of several people.

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Freddy Eastwood was on the sidelines doing his warm-up and staring intently at the field. He focused all of his attention on the game.

When he played at the West Ham United youth team, his biggest dream was to play in a real, professional tournament and become a professional footballer. Later, after his leg was broken by a kick in the game against Nottingham Forest youth team, his only wish was to be able to play again during the half a year after that, which he went to an amateur team for.

He had never thought that all of this would happen.

Twain had come knocking at his door, and he’d become a real professional player. Appearing in a game against Sunderland in the English Football League Championship, he had played in a real professional game. In that game, he had succeeded twice and scored the first two goals of his professional career. Six months later, the team not only managed to be promoted to the English Premier League but also defeated Middlesbrough in the EFL Cup, where he held up the first championship trophy of his career as a main player.

And now he was warming up at the side of Stade de France. Would this high-profile game be another first in his life?

The team was in trouble. Viduka only had one tactical role in the front: to curb the opposing forces. He could not pose a real threat to Barcelona’s goal. Why did the manager ask him to warm up? He would certainly bring him on to play. And why would he bring him onto the field? If he wanted him to still hold back the opposing forces, Eastwood believed the strong Viduka could do a better job.

Obviously, if he were to play, it must be that the manager was unhappy with the situation and demanded more goals. He wanted to bring him on to score goals and really threaten Barcelona’s goal.

What would he do at that point?

While warming up, Eastwood thought about how to change the situation on the field.

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Even though Iniesta's shot did not score, it brought confidence to the Barcelona players. Soon after, they launched a more violent offensive against the Forest team's goal.

Deco dribbled the football along the edge of the front of the penalty area, swung his left leg at an angle, and volleyed a shot. Paul Gerrard was barely able to press the football to the ground. Viduka tackled van Bommel after he lost the ball in the midfield and was shown a yellow card by the referee. Twain was equally dissatisfied with that decision. Ever since van der Sar was sent off with a red card, Twain would yell on the sidelines for a while every time the referee made a decision against the Forest team. This time the slow motion showed that Twain's anger made sense because Viduka shoveled the ball first.

Next, Iniesta made a direct pass in the middle and Ronaldinho was tripped to the ground by Pepe. Barcelona was awarded another free kick at the penalty arc. The free kick by his right foot hit Arteta in the human wall and bounced back. Arteta held his stomach and fell to the ground. Ronaldinho did not mean to kick the football out. He volleyed the shot when he received the ball and this time the football ricocheted off the goal.

Ronaldinho then fooled Chimbonda, who defended against him, with a beautiful feint on the left side of the penalty area. That action won him a loud applause from the stands. After he broke past Chimbonda, he made his shot. This time, the goalkeeper Paul Gerrard made a crucial save again. He unconsciously raised his hands and struck the football, which then deviated from its predetermined trajectory. Eto'o threw himself into nothing in the middle.

"Paul Gerrard—Ahh! Saved by his fingertips!"

Barcelona's offensive was not over yet. Following that, van Bronckhorst's cross pass from the sidelines was headed out by Pepe and Deco's long shot was steadily saved by Paul Gerrard.

The rain had stopped in Paris but the storm in front of Nottingham Forest's goal became stronger.

"We can't go on like this," Twain muttered.

Kerslake knew what Twain was going to do. He ran straight to the area where the players warmed up and called Eastwood back. There was no time for delay.

Twain turned his head and froze when he saw Eastwood already standing by his side.

Until the Romani Gypsy asked him first, "Chief, is it my turn to play?"

"Ah... Well, yes. Freddy. You'll replace Viduka as the only striker. But your mission is different from Viduka's. I want you to go up and try your best to score." Twain pointed with his index finger. "One goal, just one more and Barcelona will collapse."

Eastwood nodded with a smile. This was exactly as he had anticipated.

"I will, chief."

“Let’s go out there!” Twain slapped him on the back and pushed him out.

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“Nottingham Forest makes an adjustment. Manager Twain uses Freddy Eastwood to replace Mark Viduka. This is a change in the offense! Looks like Tony Twain is not willing to lead with just one goal. He wants to get more goals and a higher score! This is a bold move, considering how hard-pressed their defense is. They still want to make a change in their offense under these circumstances?”

“This manager has become the focus of attention at home in England with his wildly unpredictable manner. He has shown that side of himself again in the Champions League final.”

Viduka took big gulps of air as he high-fived Eastwood, came off, and shook hands with Twain. For his part, Eastwood ran onto the field and conveyed specific information about the adjustment to the midfielders. Judging by his gestures, it seemed to be about getting the midfielders to do short and direct passes as much as possible.

Eastwood’s advantage was that he was a technical all-rounder and flexible. He was evenly spread out in different areas. He was quick, his shooting was superb, he had remarkable awareness and a menacing long shot. It was employing his talent to the fullest by getting him to shoot as the lone striker.

Eastwood had played for less than two minutes when he snatched a chance right in the front.

This was really a “snatch.”

The Forest team charged forward as Márquez headed the football back to Oleguer at the front of their own penalty area. Oleguer faced Márquez as he went to receive the ball, but the gap between him and the ball was a little wide when he stopped it.

The agile Eastwood ran towards Oleguer when he saw Márquez jump up to prepare for the header. Oleguer’s position was the closest to Márquez and also the most convenient direction for him to head the ball. There was, of course, Puyol on the other side, but Arteta was not far from him and Márquez’s back faced Puyol. It was too risky to head the ball behind.

Eastwood judged correctly. Oleguer received the ball, but because he did not know what was going on behind him, his stopping of the ball was a little sloppy. The ball stopped a little farther from his body.

When Márquez saw Eastwood charge up, it was too late to remind his teammate aloud. Oleguer only felt a hand on his body and then saw a yellow figure running past him.

The ball was intercepted!

“Nottingham Forest intercepted the ball in the front field! Eastwood has just come on and he has already grabbed Oleguer’s ball. His stopping was clumsy!”

“Eastwood! A chance for Nottingham Forest—”

The Barcelona fans booed in the stands. Those noises were interwoven with cheers from the Nottingham Forest fans.

Márquez wanted to extend his leg to block, but Eastwood drove the ball and bypassed him. He had already entered the penalty area! Puyol dashed from behind to press towards Eastwood. Márquez was unwilling to be bypassed just like that. He turned around and gave chase.

The goalkeeper, Valdés, quickly closed in on the corner to block the angle of Eastwood's shot.

Eastwood was strangely calm, sandwiched between his opponents front and back. He did not give the Barcelona players the chance to completely encircle him. He suddenly swung his leg to shoot at a narrow angle.

"And he shoots!"

The Barcelona goalkeeper, Valdés, quickly reacted. He jumped up and slammed Eastwood's shot narrowly out of the crossbar with a single palm!

"Valdés saves the team!"

When he saw Eastwood's shot being thrown out by Valdés, Twain grabbed his head with both hands and nearly struck the coach's seat. It was a great opportunity which no one had expected to come so easily. But it was a shame not to grab hold of it!

"That's too bad! Nottingham Forest did not increase their score and Barcelona managed to escape this one. But this gave them a wake-up call; while they tried to press on to equalize the score, Nottingham Forest did not give up the hunt for another goal. They were lying in wait! Tony Twain wanted more goals to lock in the victory."

Chapter 450: Five Minutes

Seeing Valdés save the goal from his shot, Eastwood could care less about dodging Puyol's slide tackle from behind. He went flying out after the opponent slammed into him. When he got up, his head was in his hands. It was a real pity, a true regret.

Tang En and all the rest of the players from Nottingham Forest were feeling the same regret. Almost everyone was doing the same thing: arching backward with their heads in their hands.

An opportunity such as this, to counterattack after directly intercepting a ball in the opponent's penalty area, was tremendously rare. If they had grasped hold of the chance, they would basically have had a 90 percent chance of scoring a goal. And if it had gone in, it would be the equivalent of giving Nottingham Forest, who had only been passively defending, a shot of reassurance.

But Fate had to toy with Forest at this crucial moment. Valdés' actions appeared to be a conditioned reflex rather than ones made from his own judgment.

"Valdés' condition in this match is excellent. As the number two goalkeeper in Spain's National Team, he is performing at a level that will cause his enemies to despair!"

Tang En knew that the greatest weakness hidden in Barcelona's defensive line was Oleguer. Through Eastwood's own observations, he could tell the same thing. So, he chose to press Oleguer for the ball and succeeded. What he did not expect was how outstanding Valdés' performance today would be.

Eastwood's shot had frightened Barcelona into a cold sweat. Even up until Forest Team's coming forward to launch the corner kick, their hearts were still racing frantically.

This time, Barcelona had meticulously prepared their defense against high balls. Forest's corner kick did not form up to be a threatening attack.

However, if Barcelona was intending to relax, thinking that Forest Team was only lucky, they would certainly be making a mistake.

Immediately after, Forest initiated another attack. In the midfield, Arteta and Albertini executed a wall pass combination and followed up with a direct pass to the front. In the speed contest between Eastwood and Puyol, Eastwood depended on his abundant stamina to win out. At the same time, he let the ball pass him before accelerating suddenly into the penalty area! Seeing Eastwood enter the penalty area, Puyol was left with no choice. His initial turn had been slightly slow and caused him to be stuck behind his opponent. Now, he could only try to disrupt him as much as possible from his back. A sudden tackle at him may only end up awarding them with a penalty kick. That would not be worth it.

"Eastwood! He is full of energy. This is Nottingham Forest's chance... his one-on-one! Shoot!"

It was a pity. The shot could not be taken from a good angle due to Puyol's intense harassment and disruption. It was caught by Valdés' when he dropped to the ground for the save.

"Valdés! His performance allows Barcelona to hold onto some hope!"

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"Ah, f**k! dammit!"

Off the field, Tang En almost jumped as he watched the scene. As the remaining time in the match trickled away, he also began getting agitated.

The only disadvantage about having a single forward was that once that leading figure received the ball, he lacked the support around him and could only depend on his own abilities to dribble and attack the goal. He would not be getting any better opportunities the moment he started to be pressured by his opponent.

Getting to the root of the cause, it was still because Forest was down a player. If it were a full team of 11 players, one of the two opportunities Eastwood had gotten, at the very least, would have scored.

During the last one-on-one, there was hardly anyone on Barcelona's defensive line thanks to their anxiousness to equalize the score. It allowed Eastwood to easily enter the penalty area. At that time, if there was one more Forest player who could follow up from the middle of the penalty area, Eastwood would have much more room to perform, regardless of whether it was a shot at the goal or a pass to the center. He would not have to make a forced shot after being pressed into a limited angle by Puyol.

Both Arteta and Albertini were already unable to run. At this point, requesting for them to dash forward and follow up would be too unrealistic.

Tang En bit his lip. Edwin van der Sar being called out was the turning point of this match. It created a deep impact on the minutes that came after. With the passing of time, this impact was currently developing towards being more and more advantageous for Barcelona.

Tang En had originally wanted a fair duel with his opponent. He did not expect himself to be forced into a disadvantage from the start.

This was the point that enraged him. He could accept the referee making the call of Giuly's goal being in effect and giving Edwin van der Sar a yellow card as a warning. This would have a disciplinary effect, and at the same time, guarantee the smooth proceeding of the match and still maintain its entertainment value. Now, Forest Team, with one player less, found it difficult to even save themselves, not to mention play out a beautiful match with Barcelona.

Tang En did not think it was his own goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, who had ruined the match finals. It was that Norwegian main referee, Hauge.

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Having been unable to break the stalemate, Barcelona was also beginning to get anxious.

After a glimpse at the match time on the big screen, Rijkaard decided to take a gamble. In the 71st minute, the Fourth Official signaled for a substitution by Barcelona.

Seeing this, Tang En cast a concerned gaze towards the substitutes' bench on Barcelona's side. He saw number two Belletti and number seven Larsson stand up and make their way to the Fourth Official.

Even their choices of substitutions were the same!

Kerslake was also watching. He felt great admiration for Tony for being able to make an accurate guess of the substitutes they would be putting in. However, he was not aware that Tang En was feeling a completely different emotion.

"Barcelona makes a substitution. Rijkaard finishes up all three of his substitutions. He is going all in for this! This is entirely a substitution for the attack. Larsson substitutes defending midfielder Mark van Bommel, while Belletti substitutes in for fullback Oleguer Presas, who has been performing terribly."

These would perhaps be the final two straws that broke the camel's back.

Tang En stood up from his seat and hurriedly strode to the sidelines. Taking the chance when Barcelona was proceeding with the substitutions, he blew on his whistle into the field, signaling Forest's players to look at him.

"Mark down Eto'o and Larsson! Take note of Belletti's forward cut from behind, and defend in our wings! Don't give them an opportunity!"

In his recollection, it was precisely the two players that Rijkaard substituted in during the final minutes of the second half that had changed the results of the match. Larsson had assisted Eto'o in scoring the equalizer. And later, a combination from Belletti and Larsson would allow them to cut into the penalty area from the side. Belletti would then receive Larsson's pass and shoot a tightly angled shot, passing through the crotch of Arsenal's goalkeeper, Almunia, and scoring the goal that overtook their opponents.

Tang En believed that so long as they marked these three key players down, Barcelona's attack would end there. Forest would then doubtless attain victory. He would become the youngest and most

successful manager. Forest Team and his name would be carved into UEFA Champions League's history, as well as the history of European football.

Ultimately, ideals are beautiful things.

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As per Tang En's instructions, Forest very quickly adjusted their defensive strategy. They fortified their control of the two corridors in the wings and the defense against Eto'o and Larsson.

Just as Tang En had predicted, Eto'o took the initiative to switch to the wings after being unable to find a path through the middle. He hoped to make use of his speed to create an opportunity in the flanks.

He was helpless. It was as if Forest knew what he was going to do. He had only just switched to the wings when he saw Forest's defensive focus following him over. In the middle, he often had to go up against two on his own; and now, it was the same in the flanks.

Five minutes passed. Up until this point, there were no visible effects of Barcelona's substitution of the two. Conversely, Forest's defense was right in position. Larsson had basically been pinned down by Pepe; he could hardly make a turn, not to mention lifting a foot to kick at the goal.

Eto'o was also squeezed out of the penalty area by the compact defense, having no choice but to move around in the wings instead.

Belletti? While he managed to cut forward, he could only pass the ball around in the outer area.

Iniesta passed the ball to Larsson. Larsson, who was back facing the goal, was unable to shoot. The only thing he could do was pass the ball out again. Seeing Larsson in possession, Eto'o began to cut inwards from the wings, planning on a combination with Larsson. Upon seeing this, Forest's fullback, Chimbonda, gritted his teeth and followed in a run after Eto'o, pressing close to him and refusing to let him easily receive the ball.

In a moment, everyone's gaze became focused on Eto'o.

But Larsson did not follow the script in Tang En's heart, in which he passed the ball to Eto'o who was cutting forward. He made a show of doing so, but instead, passed the ball to Ronaldinho in front of him!

Did anyone take notice of the Brazilian?

No.

Albertini had run off into the wings to assist in defending against Eto'o, while Arteta was keeping an eye on Larsson. Pepe was also in close engagement with Larsson. At the same time, Piqué was guarding Giuly. Not a single person had noticed Ronaldinho, who had quietly retreated.

The Brazilian did not wait to see Forest's players react. He received the ball and volleyed!

Paul Gerrard tried his best to save the shot, but Ronaldinho had shot all too suddenly. He had no time to prepare at all. Jumping from where he was would not get him close enough to the ball...

"GOOOOAL! GOOOOOAL!!" The Catalan commentator rose from his seat. They had been waiting much too long for this moment.

“Barcelona equalizes the score! Ronaldinho has become the hero of his team!”

“Nottingham Forest’s hard work has completely gone down the drain!”

The passionate shouts of the various nations at the commentators’ area merged into a wave of noise.

Barcelona’s fans within Stade de France were all effervescent. They loudly cheered on Ronaldinho’s name, their hero.

Meanwhile, Nottingham Forest’s players were standing on the field in a daze, looking in disbelief at the football sitting within the net.

Nearing 40 minutes of hard work, and it had all just vaporized.

After sprinting on a dead run after Eto’o, even someone like Chimbona had to lie on the ground, stretching out his legs as much as possible. They were cramping.

Barcelona’s technical area and substitutions’ bench were full of joyous cheers. Nottingham Forest’s side, however, was devoid of spirit.

Tang En leaned back on his chair, not even able to muster up a curse.

Barcelona had equalized the score as “planned.” But the scorer was not Eto’o. It was Ronaldinho instead! A candidate he had not thought of. He had put all his focus on the person in his recollection and ended up neglecting one who was extremely dangerous to begin with.

This was his mistake. He was in no position to curse it.

In the beginning, the situation was oddly similar. It made him think that this match would turn out to follow the script within his recollection. In fact, he had even thought that it might not be a bad idea. His advantage over the others lay in the fact that he had his pre-transmigration memories. He knew what would be happening in the later parts of the match, so he could implement strategies to counter it beforehand. That was why he had made the team defend so tightly against Eto’o and Larsson whilst keeping a close eye on the wings; the two goals from Barcelona were both initiated and completed from the wings.

But his cleverness had turned around and bit him instead. His success came from transmigrating, and so did his failure... The things he knew beforehand limited his own scope of thinking, and he was unable to surpass it. In the end, he was led by the nose by his own memories.

He leaned back in the chair and looked up at the sky. He suddenly remembered. In his memory, the final match did not start off with rain. In its first half, there was not a single raindrop. The heavy rain only began in the second half...

He felt a headache and reached out to press on his temples.

How did it turn out this way?

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In the 71st minute, Rijkaard had made a final substitution, deciding to take a gamble. Five minutes later, in the 76th minute, Ronaldinho received Larsson's pass and took a long shot that helped his team equalize the score.

After that, Forest's momentum disappeared in an instant. In the face of such a severe blow, Forest, formed of mostly young players, was somewhat unable to recover from it.

Albertini had gone through enormous waves and tides in the span of his professional career. But at this point, there was nothing he could do beyond using his words to drum up everyone's morale; he was too tired and could no longer run. With a player down, Forest Team had already needed the 10 remaining players to run more to compensate for the numerical disadvantage. A sense of responsibility made Albertini run even more than the others. Chimbonda had already fallen to the ground, his legs cramping, while Albertini had also on several occasions skirted close to getting a cramp.

In this kind of situation, loudly shouting for his teammates not to give up was a futile effort. Everyone's stamina had already reached its limit. Anybody could shout a few slogans, but it would not be able to spur everyone's fighting spirit.

If George Wood was present, he never would shout any slogan. But he could use his own crazed running to spur the madness hiding within the depths of the hearts of his teammates. Many a time, actions were much more powerful than words; doing" was always better than saying.

It was a pity. At this moment, the person who could make his entire team go on a frenzy with him was sitting within the VIP room high up on the spectators' stands. He was with his mother and the club's chairman, a fly on the wall watching.

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Logically, even with Barcelona's equalizer, the Forest Team was not yet certain to lose. They could still drag the match time until it went into extension and a penalty shoot-out. In that manner, even though there may be more people falling to the ground due to cramps, it was still better than losing the match within 90 minutes. But the loss of the goal was an enormous psychological blow to the young members of Forest.

All their hard work fighting without any regard for their own bodies, going all out... What was it for? Wasn't it precisely so they could maintain the one-goal lead on Barcelona?

Now that this single advantage was gone, no one noticed that they still had the opportunity of playing into match extension, of entering the penalty shoot-out. They carried on the match, distracted and out of sorts as if they had lost their souls.

Other than mechanically defending, they were at a loss about what else they could do; they had no ability to attack and no stamina left. What else could they do except defend?

Tang En did not hope for Barcelona to drag it out until the match extension. Based on his team's current physical status, a match extension was only 30 minutes of time before their certain death.

He needed to enhance their attack. Defending at this point was not the least bit helpful.

He called up Bendtner from the substitutes' bench.

He was going to continue using his final card to adjust the forward line. Tang En intended on going all out. He was not going to care anymore about inane things such as what the match looked like in his recollection, or what it would become. He only knew that if the match went into extension, Forest would be finished.

He needed a goal.

“Nicklas. No need to warm-up. You’re going in now, we’re running out of time. Remember, when you’re up there you must score. Try all means and get a goal! I don’t care what method you use, so long as you can get a goal in! If you want to use your hand to hit the ball in, just don’t let that bastard of a referee catch you! If you want to do a flop to earn a penalty kick, then make it look real!”

Just as Tang En grabbed Nicklas Bendtner to make the final arrangements, Barcelona again launched a successful assault. Ronaldinho and Deco pulled off a wall pass at the front of the penalty area. Just as everyone thought Ronaldinho would use his own technique to invade the penalty area, he abruptly threw out a diagonal pass. This time, his target was Eto’o, who had cut into the middle from the flanks.

“Eto’o- Eto’o! It’s a goal! It’s a goal—Oh lord, they’ve gotten a streak of two goals within five minutes, overtaking the score!”

The spectators’ stands suddenly exploded with a tsunami of cheers, making Tang En jump on the sidelines.

Assistant manager David Kerlake, who was beside him, furiously threw out the tactical board he held.

Tang En looked back with wide eyes. He saw Barcelona’s players in frenzied celebration of their goal. They piled up one on top of another, squashing Eto’o right at the bottom. Meanwhile, Forest’s players were standing woodenly on the field.

“F**k... This is ridiculous!”

The players behind on the substitutes’ bench covered their faces and held their heads, unwilling to look at their joyful opponents.

Bendtner stood beside Tang En and hesitated, asking, “Boss... do you still... do you still need me to go in?”

Tang En twisted around to look at the field and gritted his teeth. “Yes!”

He then turned back to look at Bendtner. “Do you still remember what I just told you?”

Bendtner nodded.