

Champions 451

Chapter 451: Do as He Likes

“Eto’o—Eto’o! Shot! The ball went in! Unbelievable! They scored two goals within five minutes and equalized the score! They moved like lightning....Nottingham Forest could not respond at all!”

“The game has reversed in an instant! Nottingham Forest’s advantage was completely obliterated! Tony Twain’s team held their ground for fifty minutes and did not manage to hold on to their one-goal lead. They played too conservatively!”

“Had it not been for the send-off by the Norwegian referee, this game shouldn’t have been like this. Nottingham Forest’s performance before this equalizer was strong and they almost became victors. This is really too bad.”

The various commentators from different countries expressed their views on the goal. Those inclined towards Barcelona naturally applauded it, and those leaning towards Nottingham Forest lamented on behalf of Twain.

At the top level of Stade de France in the VIP box seats, when he saw Eto’o score the equalizer, Evan Doughty did not care that there were other people around and just smacked his thigh. Sitting next to him, Allan lightly shook his head. Their favorable situation had just slipped right out of their sight.

Sophia obviously knew what had happened on the field. She turned her head to look at George, sitting next to her.

Her son stared at the field expressionlessly. She did not know what was on his mind.

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“Nottingham Forest has asked for a substitution. The number 9, Nicklas Bendtner will replace Chimbonda, who has muscle cramps. This is Manager Tony Twain’s last substitution, which is still an adjustment on the front line. This situation is ironic, seeing how everyone says that the Forest team is a symbol of conservative play and utilitarianism. But in this game, Manager Twain’s two substitutions have been to use the offensive players to replace the defensive players...If they did not have a player sent off, perhaps the Forest team wouldn’t have fared that much worse than Barcelona.”

Nicklas Bendtner sprinted onto the field. There were still nine minutes before the game entered the injury-stoppage time.

Could he actually be the hero who saved the team at the last minute?

No one knew.

Having equalized the score, Barcelona began to retreat and defend while Nottingham Forest stepped up its offense. Twain’s substitution told his men that they should stop defending and start attacking in the final moments.

Albertini gnashed his teeth to persevere. He could not run any longer, but he still charged up for a long shot. This long shot was quite powerful. It brushed against the crossbar and flew out. Valdés was startled and broke out in a cold sweat.

“Nicholas Bendtner! A header!”

This time, the Danish kid’s close shot was too direct and ended up being embraced by Valdés.

Rijkaard could not sit still. He walked out of his seat, folded his arms across his chest, and stood on the sidelines, staring nervously at the field.

Those two goals were not so much due to the substitutions he had made, but his luck. Before the goal, even though Barcelona appeared to be pressing on the Forest team hard, the number of times their shots threatened the goal was less than that of the Forest team. They had few real opportunities to do so.

Twain could not sit still either. He stood on the sidelines, waving and growling to get the team to press on again and again.

“Stop f**king defending! Attack!”

Arteta dribbled the ball in the middle to force a breakthrough and fell to the ground after he broke into the penalty area. Shouts broke out in the stands.

“Penalty kick!” Twain jumped up.

But the referee whistled and gave Arteta a yellow card to indicate that he had just dived!

“Damn the blind referee to hell!” Twain did not care about the penalty. He just cursed and swore. When he saw his players go up to the referee to reason with him, he yelled at them, “Stop arguing! It’s a waste of time!”

In last few minutes of the game, Barcelona, which represented artistic and beautiful football, was overwhelmed in its own penalty area by Nottingham Forest, which symbolized utilitarianism. They were in an extremely thorny situation.

“This time it’s Eastwood... passing... Why is he still passing?! It’s not enough, he played too timidly!”

“Pepe dribbles the ball forward and bypasses Ronaldinho! Eto’o runs after him... Foul! It looks like the Cameroonian is going to get a yellow card.”

“This is Nottingham Forest’s free kick in the front field....Paul Gerrard rushed up! That’s really insane...”

“Gerrard did not grab the ball. The football is still at the foot of the Forest players. He did not run back to his own goal but continued to stay in the front field. The entire Forest team is going crazy!”

If the rules had allowed, Twain even wanted to rush up himself to shoot.

When the Barcelona players saw Paul Gerrard did not return to defend, they all wanted to grab the ball and directly shoot at the goal from a long distance. If one of them had scored such a goal in the Champions League final, his name would forever be written in history.

Eto'o captured the ball again from the Forest players with his aggressive tackle. When he looked up and saw Paul Gerrard desperately dashing back to defend, he wanted to get ready to shoot.

Just at that time, Albertini rushed out from the side and fiercely tackled him, causing him to fly out with the ball!

"Albertini! A timely foul!"

"He should get a red card for that foul!"

As the game was nearing the end, the commentators from the two different countries also became distinct. The English commentators supported the Forest team, while the Catalanian and Spanish commentators were on the side of Barcelona.

Perhaps because the game was in the final moments, the referee finally softened his stance and showed Albertini a yellow card, which made the Barcelona players a little disgruntled. They surrounded the referee for a reason and actually wanted to take the opportunity to waste the time in the game.

Albertini got up and made a gesture to the referee to alert him of the Barcelona players' trick.

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The final moments of the game were very chaotic, with one team trying to waste the time in the game and the other going all out to try to equalize the score. Both teams were cantankerous. A conflict was almost certain to happen. Almost every foul would draw a confrontation between the players of both sides.

Twain felt helpless as he looked at the out-of-control situation on the field.

He could already anticipate that outcome.

History had corrected its path at its most critical moment. No matter what method he used, it was still that outcome in the end. It was the same as how people never cared about the process, they only cared about the outcome. No matter how much a "bug" like the Forest team had changed the process, as long as the outcome had not changed, then people would think that history had not changed.

Twain looked up at the sky and could not see anything with the brilliant lights lighting up the entire stadium. The night sky was suffused with light. He just gazed at the sky until he heard the three whistles coming from the field and the cheers that exploded afterward.

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"The game's over! Barcelona is the new European champion! Congratulations to them! They defeated Nottingham Forest. This was a bitter fight! But no matter, they are now the victors, the king of Europe!"

"Congratulations to Barcelona! This Barcelona team looks like an invincible fleet!"

"The European champion, Barcelona! They proved that the optimistic predictions about them before the game were right. They were superb and deserved to win!"

Cheers rang out through the Parisian night sky.

Twain withdrew his gaze and stood up from his seat. Beside him, the substitutes' bench and the coaching staff were silent. The Nottingham Forest people seemed unable to accept this defeat.

They had played spectacularly and were unstoppable for a season, with powerful opponents bowing down to them, and now they were finally defeated.

No, have we lost?

At least Twain did not admit it.

"Don't keep quiet. Come with me to console the players." Twain said to Kerlake, who sat next to him and covered his face with his hands.

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The young Arteta crouched on the ground, supported by his hands so that he did not fall. He had just cried, and his face was obviously streaked with tears.

Albertini was already doing what Twain and Kerlake were going to do before they came onto the field.

As the captain and weathered veteran of the team, defeats, and victories had dominated equally in his career. He already knew how to face such a loss.

Now he was comforting his teammates one by one on the field. He comforted Arteta, Leighton Baines, Paul Gerrard, Nicklas Bendtner... One by one as he went along. Twain and Kerlake appeared to be superfluous as they walked up.

Twain wanted to say something, but he could not say anything when he opened his mouth as he watched the players lying on the ground.

He could only walk up, pat them on the shoulder one by one, and rub their heads.

It was no use to say any more at this time. He should leave the comforting and encouraging words until they had calmed down.

After the brief comforting of everyone, Twain turned and walked to the tunnel, where the reporters gathered.

"Mr. Twain, please say a few words for the interview!" He was stopped by countless reporters over there.

"There's nothing to say. We won against Barcelona but lost to the referee. It's as simple as that." Twain was a little impatient and wanted to leave, but was held back again.

"With all due respect, Mr. Twain, on the question about the referee. Van der Sar's foul indeed warranted a red card according to the rules."

"That's right. According to the rules, it's should have been a red card." Twain nodded. "But if all the penalties have to be so rigid, why do we let people be referees? Why don't we just use a robot, or put hundreds of cameras around the field and watch the slow-motion replay to enforce a game? I don't want to criticize the standards of this referee, but unfortunately, the referee enforcing this Champions League final has no idea what the art of enforcement is!

“We were already short one player eighteen minutes into the game and we were still ahead of Barcelona until the seventy-sixth minute under those circumstances. I am proud of and satisfied with the performance of my team. Is Barcelona strong? Perhaps to everyone else. For me, they’re far inferior to my team. I don’t think that a team is strong when they barely win at the last minute with so many world-class star players. I proclaim that the Champions League title belongs to Nottingham Forest. No matter what you all think, we are the real champions.”

Facing countless microphones, recording pens and cell phones, Twain said with his arms held high, “This is Nottingham Forest Football Club’s third championship trophy in history. Thank you!”

With that, he turned away and left the mixed zone, ignoring the shouts and urges to stay from the reporters.

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In the box, Evan Doughty shook hands with the Barcelona club president, Laporta. The latter had a dazzling smile on his face and shook Evan’s hand vigorously.

While Evan Doughty could barely squeeze out a smile, he tried his best to be polite and gracious in front of his opponent. He dealt with his opponent’s consoling words. But his gaze flicked towards Sophia, who stood alone at the door of the box. Her son had already left the box, which was full of hypocritical shows of friendliness and flattery.

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Twain encountered Wood at the entrance of the locker room.

“Why did you not stay with your mother?”

“I wanted to come down and have a look.”

“What do you think of this game?”

“Luck was not on our side.”

Twain snorted, “Luck? Well, maybe.” He pointed behind him. “They’re still crying on the field. Go on.”

Wood nodded and walked past Twain.

Twain pushed open the locker room door and saw Edwin van der Sar, sitting alone inside. Because he was sent off with a red card, he could not even go to the substitutes’ bench. He could only sit in the locker room and watch the game broadcasted on the television.

When he saw Twain walk in, Edwin van der Sar rose from his seat. “I’m so sorry...”

Twain waved to stop his apology.

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for. You’ve done a great job. We probably wouldn’t even have gotten into the final without you. Go out there and be with the team. Don’t just sit here alone.”

Edwin van der Sar went out and only Twain was left in the locker room. He sat down and leaned against the wall. To unload the heavy burdened feeling, he let out a long sigh.

Although he took the opportunity of the interview to give vent to his feelings just now, the sense of loss had not been alleviated at all.

He needed to play a variety of roles in front of people, always wearing different faces. Now that there was no one else in the locker room but him, he could finally reveal a tiny bit of frustration.

He rubbed his hair. His carefully-combed hair before the game was ruffled into a mess.

By all accounts, as a half-baked manager who had led his team to participate in the Champions League for the first time, it was considered a great success to be able to reach the final. Anyone would have been happy with that. Being the runner-ups in the English Premier League and Champions League were really good results for a team like Nottingham Forest.

However, Twain was unwilling to accept it. He did not stand a chance to the league champion because Chelsea was too strong and the point difference between them was too great. He pinned all his hopes on the Champions League and the Forest team overcame all the difficulties to go all the way to the final. They were only one step short of success. No, it was only half a step. One half-step. For a while, he felt like his hand had already grabbed hold of the handle of the Champions League trophy. He just needed less than twenty minutes before he could take the home.

If he was going to fail, would it not be better for him to be eliminated in the Champions League group stage? Why was he played like that?

Godd**n you... Sonofab**ch God...

Twain felt like throwing things, but he did not want the players to come back later and find the locker room in a state, so he just sat in his chair and sulked.

It was a long while before he heard the locker room door being pushed open.

David Kerslake appeared in front of him. "Tony? Tony?"

"Yes?"

"Time to go out and receive the award."

"Receive the award? What award?" Twain asked in a very unpleasant tone.

"Uh... The silver medal." Kerslake was alarmed by Twain's tone.

"I'm not going!"

"Tony..."

"What's the point of it? To mark the disgrace of a loser? A bulls**t silver medal? There's only one champion. What's the point of giving out a silver medal? It's redundant! Go out and smile like a contrast to the victors? To make their champion look brilliant? I refuse to go! Isn't Barcelona good? Let them play on their own!" Twain growled at Kerslake inside the empty locker room. His angry voice echoed in Kerslake's ears.

"Tony, that won't look good." Kerslake was startled. He did not know what else to do, except to try and persuade him.

“Why not? It’s good for them! This big and glorious arena belongs to the champion team, how nice it is for them! Why should we butt in as losers?”

Twain sat down and stopped talking. There was only the sound of his heavy breathing in the locker room. Kerslake stood before him, at a loss as to what to do.

It was at this time that Evan Doughty came in.

“What’s wrong?”

Kerslake looked at the chairman as if he had seen the Savior, “Mr. Chairman...Tony, he refused to receive the award....”

Evan looked at Twain, who sat in a chair and sulked. Then he said to Kerslake, “You go out first. He’ll be out soon.”

Kerslake nodded and turned to leave.

When he closed the locker room door, Evan said to Twain, “Tony, it’s inappropriate for you to do this. You’re making it hard for your assistant.”

“I know. I just wanted to vent for a bit, but he came at the wrong time.” Twain’s tone was not as agitated as it had been earlier. “I’m sorry.”

“You should say those words to David yourself. It’s not easy being your assistant. In addition to helping you with your work, he has to put up with your venting...”

Twain scratched his head.

“I can understand your anger. I’m just as upset about this damn game as you are. But... don’t give people a handle to attack you. Don’t antagonize people too much, Tony. Listen to me. Go out and receive the award. The players are looking to you.”

His last remark coaxed Twain. Yes, no matter how upset and angry he was about the game, he could vent his displeasure in this locker room, but he could not let his players, who had fought for ninety minutes, bear his fury. As a manager, it was unseemly to shut himself inside here and leave his men behind.

He got up from his chair and said, “All right, I’ll go. But it’s not because I’m giving the UEFA face. I’m giving—”

Evan patted him on the shoulder and interrupted, “I know. You’re doing this for your team. Let’s go.”

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The UEFA bigwigs waited until Twain finally walked out of the tunnel. When Twain came out, he suddenly became the focus of media attention. It seemed that since he was late, everyone was fully aware of his dissatisfaction with the game.

The Barcelona players and coaches were still celebrating their victory. They did not care about the feelings of a loser or that Twain was late.

Twain glanced at those men without the slightest smile on his face.

He was resolved not to give face to the UEFA.

The Forest players came on stage one by one to accept their silver medals. They were listless and only politely replied in single sentences when the UEFA officials offered words of consolation.

Twain was the last to go up. As the youngest manager previously given special publicity by the UEFA, he did not act appreciative at all. He walked up with a grim expression, as if someone close to him had died, and shook hands with the UEFA president, Lennart Johansson, who was in charge of giving out the awards. Instead of bowing his head and letting the other person put the medal on him, he took it straight and clenched it in his hand as he turned around and walked down.

He could not recall what Johansson had said to him as he basically did not listen at all.

Evan Doughty saw this scene from below and could only shake his head helplessly. He knew Twain's temperament well. He had relented by being willing to come out and accept the award.

However, the matter was not over yet. Just as everyone was looking forward to the winners coming to the stage, the cameras focused their lens on that idiosyncratic manager.

As Twain walked down, he saw the Barcelona people holding their arms high and cheering, as well as the four on-duty referees standing on the edge of the platform preparing to take the stage to receive their awards. He then made a move that came as a surprise to everyone and was faithfully recorded in the live television footage.

He turned around and saw a ball boy standing on the sidelines, holding a digital camera, a notebook, and a marker. He was waiting there, ready to take a photo with his idol and ask for an autograph. It was nothing out of the ordinary; Twain had seen quite a few such people. He went straight over to the boy and hung the silver medal around his neck. He then turned around and walked away without hesitation under the surprised gaze of the young ball boy.

The television commentator saw this scene on the screen and simply did not know what to say.

The UEFA officials over there had just given him the silver medal, and he just gave it away casually. That was not giving the UEFA face, was it?

After Twain disappeared into the tunnel, the broadcast immediately cut to the award officials, and sure enough, an awkward smile hung on each of their faces.

No one had expected Tony Twain to do that in front of so many people, had they?

Evan Doughty covered his face.

Tony, you bastard.

Chapter 452: A New Beginning

As the losers, there was nothing else to say about the situation after the match. Evan Doughty took a trip to the hotel the team was residing in after the match. He honored his promise about the prize money at the scene, managing to at least bring some smiles to the disappointed players.

Tang En did not receive his prize money, shutting himself in his room.

To the others, perhaps it seemed as if he was still angry about losing the match and was still furious over the referee issue. In truth, that was only the impression he gave others. He was, in fact, blaming himself for his own mistakes.

Often, he felt he was practically invincible, having knowledge of the future. He thought he could depend on it to make a mark for himself, carving out a fabulous life. It was his little secret, a secret that no one would ever know, no matter how close to him they were. He used his knowledge to unearth future superstar footballers in advance, smoothing the path for his own rise.

He had believed everything would be a bed of roses.

He had not expected himself to become bound by the pre-transmigration memories in the finals of the Champions League, causing him to be filled with misgivings. His whole mind was clouded with what that match was originally like; it was filled with the match that occurred altogether in another dimension, the match that had nothing to do with the one today!

He could see it as having been made a fool of, but who exactly was making a fool of him? Was it Fate? No, it was himself.

So, Tang En shut himself in his room, switching off his cell phone to make sure no one could disturb him. In this sealed-off space, he began to reflect on everything he had done in the past.

He had transmigrated from April 2007. The memories he had ahead of this timeline were going to expire in a year. What was he going to do then?

Would he be unable to move forward without his pre-transmigration memories? If so, did that mean that the results of his two-plus seasons of management were from living off his past gains?

Didn't he usually also do thorough research on the coaching notes Dunn left behind in the house? Or read countless theory books, analyze match recordings, and secretly learn from the managerial team whenever possible? He had never thought that he would have been able to survive in this cruel world of fame and wealth only depending on his four and a half years of pre-transmigration memories.

This was not a game like Championship Manager or FM, a game published by their club in cooperation with SI. Life would not give him any chances to load a past save if he made a mistake or lost a game. He also could not use shameless methods like adding more managers to gain the results he hoped for.

Losing the Champions League's finals to Barcelona was a catalyst for Tang En.

He needed to completely leave behind the memories of his past and throw off the ropes that bound him. He wanted to see if he was still able to carry on in this position without his pre-transmigration memories—his cheat code and editing tool.

Back when he was interviewed after making his name in the EFL Championship, he had told Professor Constantine that he himself was a "born manager." Now, he wanted to prove the accuracy of his

statement. Did he really deserve to sit in that position? Did he get to his position because of his luck, when he had transmigrated into an unlucky someone who happened to already be an interim manager? Or did he walk, step-by-step, to where he was today because of genuine talent and ability?

After the finals, he hoped he would be able to find the answer.

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After losing the match, no one felt good. Even though manager Tony did not announce a time for them to be lights-out by, most of Forest's players returned to their rooms and closed their doors.

After Evan Doughty and Allan Adams finished giving out the prize money, they came to Tang En's door.

"He's still inside?" Allan asked Kerslake.

Kerslake nodded. "Yes. Since getting off the bus, he's been locked in there."

"Did he say anything to you?" Allan said.

"No, he didn't say a word. He had a gloomy expression the whole time, so I didn't dare to ask."

Allan recalled the scene during the award ceremony.

"This Tony... he's just like a kid." He could only shake his head helplessly.

"Do you need me to call an attendant to open the door?" Kerslake asked.

Evan Doughty raised his hand, dismissing the notion. "No, let him have a good rest. Don't disturb him. The pressure he bears is greater than any of us. It's not totally unreasonable for him to need to vent a little and throw a tantrum. Let's go. You should rest earlier too, David."

"I will. Goodnight."

The two bid their goodbyes to the team's assistant manager and walked towards the lift.

"Evan, there are times when I think you indulge him a bit too much." Evidently, Allan still harbored a grudge over the occurrence at the award ceremony today. Why did he harbor a grudge? Of course, it was because Tang En's moment of rashness had destroyed Allan's hard work in building up good relations and a good image with the UEFA... did anyone really think the UEFA would pay so much attention to Forest Team, even getting people to film a documentary, only because of their outstanding results? Without Allan working in the background, how was all that possible?

The two stood, waiting for the elevator. Evan Doughty smiled. "Of course, I know."

"And you still..."

"As a manager, Allan, I need to apply management styles based on the unique qualities of my subordinates. I know what kind of person Tony is, so I treat him differently than I treat the others. He needs absolute trust and support given to him. He will then reward you very, very richly. He is not the kind where a little investment turns up good profits; a trade in which a tiny investment reaps bountiful rewards." At that moment, Evan Doughty did not look like how he described himself: someone with good luck who only achieved as much as he had through the help of others.

“You’ve seen the results with him leading the team. I don’t think we can find anyone more suited to be Forest’s main manager. He has brought us many victories and glory... As such, in exchange, we have to bear with his terrible temper and sometimes even clean up after him.”

Evan turned to smile at his old partner. Allan looked back at him. The two stared at each other in that manner until they heard the ringing bell from the elevator.

“I know... I will try to restore our relations with the UEFA,” Allan sighed.

“I knew I could trust you, Allan.”

“You can stop licking my boots!” Allan said, glaring at Evan Doughty.

“Evan, I have to remind you. Tony is a violent-tempered horse; he runs fast, has a lot of potential, and can spur the team to charge into the enemy lines with him and bring us a lot of profit and glory. But you’d best find a tough enough rope to tether him with. If one day, you feel that he has stepped past what you can bear, pull on it.”

As he was making the motion of pulling back, he found Evan Doughty missing from beside him. Evan was already standing in the elevator. He reminded him, “It’s going to close if you don’t come in, Allan.”

Allan was momentarily stunned, but hastily slipped in upon seeing the closing doors.

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Tang En did not know how he fell asleep. He remembered having returned to the hotel and locking himself in his room to reflect after the loss of the match. He did not even take a shower or remove his clothes before laying on his bed to reflect. As he was thinking and thinking, having had such a busy day and with such enormous psychological stress on him, he gradually fell asleep.

By the time he woke up again, it was already the next day. The day had yet to lighten up. Everything was pitch black outside and he could not see a thing.

The team would be leaving Paris on a flight today to return to Nottingham. Then, they would announce the team’s dismissal over there. The new period of vacation was to begin today.

After sleeping, his mood was much better than yesterday. The pressure was gone too. The only thing left was the despair from having lost the match; that had not been reduced in any way. Humans were always pining after things they had lost, filled with yearning for the things they could not get. Tang En still felt disappointment and regret when he thought about how they had been so close to becoming the European champions.

But what was lost was lost. Further regret, regretting until his death, would be useless. What was lost would not come back. He had to look forward instead.

Tang En hopped off the bed. He did not move to wash up, instead directly walking to the window and drawing the curtains. He looked out at the darkened night outside. It was so dark that he could not see any starlight.

Was this the legendary darkness before dawn?

After a brief period of standing in front of the windows in a stupor, Tang En walked back. Remembering that his cell phone was still switched off, he picked it up from his pillow side.

He had only just switched it on when more than 10 messages rapidly came in.

Most of it was comforting words or encouragements.

Of course, there were also some exceptions.

Clarice Gloria was exceptionally interested in Tang En's shocking actions during the award ceremony. Her message expressed her surprise about it.

Looking at the message, Tang En then recalled what he had done at the scene yesterday. Now that he had calmed down, he realized, on hindsight, how inappropriate his actions were. In front of the 80-thousand strong live audience and countless television audience, he had given away the silver medal just presented to him by the UEFA... Although that medal was already his and he had the right to do anything he wanted with it, his actions in that situation, time, and context would easily be interpreted as a mockery and provocation of UEFA; in fairness, that was exactly what he had meant.

He knew that he had stirred up some trouble for the club again. He did not care about being fined; it was worth it if he lost some money in exchange for venting his frustrations at such a huge event. He was worried that he would be banned from matches by the UEFA. If that happened, it would be extremely disadvantageous to the team's journey in next season's Champions League.

Perhaps he should ask Gloria for a favor, and ask her to use her connections and influence in the circle to intercede in his case?

Tang En placed his finger on the reply button but did not press it in the end.

He could not bear to beg.

Dunn's message was very simple. He did not express any consolation or regret. He just told him that the entire match had been recorded and was waiting for a thorough analysis after he got home.

Why else would he say the two of them were in tandem? While Tang En on this side was still reflecting on his mistakes in the match, Dunn, on the other end, had already recorded the whole match. He was just waiting for Tang En to get home so they could analyze and reflect on it together. Having a helper with such great chemistry with him in the next season gave Tang En even more confidence that he could rebuild and make a comeback.

In truth, the 10 or more messages were not representative of an equal number of people sending them. This cell phone number was private, so there were only a few who knew it.

Other than a handful of people, the rest of the messages were all sent by one person: Shania.

Evidently, Shania was extremely worried about him switching off his cell phone. From the short intermissions between each of her sent messages, Tang En could clearly see the fluctuation in Shania's emotions; from consolation to encouragement, then doubt, anxiety, and fear...

"It's no big deal. There are always wins and losses in football, Uncle Tony."

“You’ll still have opportunities in the future. This is definitely not going to be your only experience in the finals of the Champions League!”

“You’ve switched off your phone? Why?”

“Switch it back on, Uncle Tony!”

“Hey, what are you doing? This is just a match! Is it worth this? Reply to me!”

“Uncle Jerk, I’m not going to care about you anymore if you don’t reply!”

“Alright, I surrender! I’m still going to care about you. Now, you’ll switch your phone back on, right?”

All those messages only expressed one thing: worry.

As Tang En read them, the depressive mood he was in gradually lightened.

He originally intended on directly giving Shania a call to apologize, but upon realizing the time, was afraid he would wake the girl up. He could only type a message and send it over instead.

“I’m alright, I’m good. Everything is OK. Thank you for your concern, and I’m sorry to worry you.”

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When Nottingham Forest’s players awoke one after another and came down for breakfast after washing up, they were surprised to find their boss already sitting in the seat nearest to the windows. He was using the bright sunlight of the early morning to read the paper.

“Boss...” Ribéry greeted.

Hearing someone call out to him, Tang En raised his head.

“Oh, Franck. Perfect timing. Come here and give me a hand with the newspaper. I can’t understand French,” Tang En said, pointing to the newspaper in his hands.

Ribéry was tempted to roll his eyes. To think you looked so focused earlier with the papers... You can’t understand a single word...

He walked over and took over the paper. Glancing through it quickly, his face immediately changed.

“What?” Tang En asked, sitting on the chair and looking up at him.

“Uh... nothing. It’s just about the brief interlude during yesterday’s award ceremony...”

Tang En nodded. “Oh, oh. That I know. I want to hear about their commentary.”

“They... they say you’re arrogant, eccentric, rash, easy to anger, have a bad temper, and have no style... Anyhow, it’s not anything good, Boss.”

Tang En laughed. “What do you think about yesterday?”

“At the time, I thought it was pretty cathartic...”

“Haha, that’s good then. Go eat.” Tang En took back the newspapers, indicating his consent for Ribéry to leave.

The Frenchman did not leave immediately. He stood there and asked, "Boss, this isn't our final time participating in the Champions League's finals, is it?"

Tang En shook his head.

At this, Ribéry was satisfied, turning around to head over to the restaurant for breakfast.

The players came down one after another, greeting Tang En and then getting shooed by him to the restaurant. It was only when David Kerslake walked out of the elevator that Tang En took the initiative to greet him.

"Here, David." He waved his hand to get Kerslake over.

"You're up, Tony."

"Yes. I slept very early. About what happened in the locker room yesterday, I have to apologize," Tang En said sincerely. "I'm really sorry about blowing up at you. You know, I wasn't really aiming it at you."

"Of course, I know that. Kerslake raised his hand, asking Tang En not to go on. "The pressure on your shoulders is greater than any one of us. It's nothing to let you vent some steam. I know how terrible it felt to lose the match. It's good if you've vented it out. It's not good to bury it."

Tang En looked at his understanding assistant and lightly nodded. "Thank you, David."

"We're partners. We still need to work hard for the next season. Forest's future depends on you now, Tony! This time, we didn't manage to become the champions, but we'll come again the next time!"

The two clasped their hands tightly together.

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The next afternoon, the flight Forest Team was on landed in London's Heathrow Airport. When the players disembarked from the plane with lowered heads and faces painted with tiredness and dismay, they were surprised to see many people welcoming them.

Among the crowd of people welcoming them was a giant banner that was particularly eye-catching:

You are our hero! Thank you!

Tang En stood on the stairs and waved at the crowd below.

This was a new beginning.

Chapter 453: A New Future

"In an interview with the media this morning, UEFA news spokesman William Gaillard expressed that Nottingham Forest's manager Tony Twain's actions after receiving the award were extremely unsuitable and inappropriate in context. Prior to this, Tony Twain had expressed an understanding of his own actions through the media on the day after the match. He believes that the award is his personal belonging since it was given to him. Consequently, what he decides to do with it is a personal act unrelated to UEFA. Mr. Gaillard expresses regret regarding this as he believes the medal is

representative of a kind of glory, and that it was inappropriate to be thoughtlessly given away to someone else. He hopes for manager Twain to be a positive role model for his team's players..."

"Bulls**t role model!" Tang En cursed angrily as he switched off the television. "I'd rather hope for them to be a positive role model to the entire European soccer scene!"

Evan Doughty, who was sitting behind the boss' table, waved a piece of paper in his hands. "This is a fax from the UEFA. It's a fine for your "inappropriate evaluation of the main referee on duty" after the match. 80 thousand pounds. Tony, you might be the most frequently fined manager..."

Tang En paced up and down in the room, appearing somewhat restless. "You can't blame me... I just spoke the truth. And the truth is usually jarring to hear."

"What about proof? You didn't have any proof. Mourinho could say that his men saw the Barcelona official walking into the resting room for referees... but what did you see?" Evan pointed out calmly.

Tony kept quiet. It was true that he did not have any evidence. His words seemed more like a loser's grievance and unwillingness to concede.

"Tony. I can understand your actions. If I were you, I may have done the same... But only maybe. You can't just always be thinking about venting for your sake. Your actions put Allan in a very difficult position." Evan glanced at Allan Adams, sitting on the other side of the chairman's office.

Tang En stopped pacing and looked at the club's marketing manager sitting silently on the sofa.

Because of what happened, Tang En knew that Allan must have some opinions about him. After all, Allan's work had to do with protecting and molding Forest's new image. Tang En's actions during the award ceremony of the Champions League's finals destroyed the image Allan had worked so hard to protect... If something like that had happened to Tang En, he would likely be very unhappy as well.

But this was not the time to be at odds with each other. Furthermore, they were on the same side. There was no need for him to lose his temper with his own people; it was the UEFA he was angry at, not the people at Nottingham Forest.

"Uh... I'm very sorry, Allan. I didn't think about those things then." He scratched his head. "You know, I'm a bit impulsive... I've been trying very hard to hold back, but there are times that I still can't control myself. I'm sorry."

Allan stood up and shook his head with a smile. "Don't be so nervous, Tony. You did bring me a bit of trouble, but... My job is to deal with these troubles. Without them, I might not even know what to do. I don't mind it." He walked over and patted Tang En on his shoulders. "The next time you get into the finals..."

Tang En continued his sentence. "I won't give away the gold medal that easily."

Allan was stunned at first, before bursting into loud laughter, realizing what Tang En meant.

"You can give it to me." He winked at Tang En.

"Dream on."

“Tony, this bill... It’s the same old rule; the club will pay it on your behalf. Remember, think before you speak rashly next time.” Evan Doughty raised the bill he was holding and pointed at his own brain.

Tang En raised both hands in surrender. “I know... I’ve already reflected deeply on myself.”

“In the hotel room?” Evan asked, looking at Tang En.

“I’ll guarantee you this, Evan.” Tang En gazed past Evan Doughty in front of the window, looking towards the azure blue sky. “We will have a new beginning.”

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The next day after the UEFA announced their punishment for Tony, Nottingham Forest also officially called for a press conference and formally announced their contract renewal with the team’s meritorious manager, Tony Twain.

As a media personality, Tang En’s press conference for his contract renewal was packed to the brim with numerous reporters from various places.

The press conference had some degree of showiness to it; both parties would be present and signing the contract on the scene before the many reporters. It was not merely an announcement of the news with the contract signed prior.

Some media groups perceived Forest’s choice of announcing the contract at this time a sort of protest of UEFA’s punishment of Tony. However, this wronged Nottingham Forest. After all, Tang En’s initial contract with the club was for a period of three years. It would be expiring at the end of the year, so it was very normal for the club to reconsider its renewal at this point. UEFA’s punishment and Nottingham Forest Club’s apparent support? That could only be said to be a coincidence.

The reporters fell quiet when the two main leads, Evan Doughty and Tony Twain, appeared on the scene.

“This is a contract that we’ve had prepared for a long time, with all aspects being greatly satisfactory for manager Twain.” Evan Doughty went straight to the point, directly broaching the main topic. “Before the finals of the Champions League, we had already decided to give manager Tony a new contract, regardless of the match results.” His saying so was equivalent to answering the current doubts of the media regarding the club’s timing to announce their renewal of Tony’s contract; it was unrelated to the punishment imposed by UEFA and was something that had been decided for a long time.

“The club is extremely delighted by manager Tony’s acceptance of this contract. After all, from the normal workers on the field to myself personally, everyone feels that manager Tony Twain is the most suitable candidate to lead this team. He has given new life to this ancient team, allowing them to be restored to glory. He is the pride of this city.”

Tang En sat by the side, quietly listening to Evan shower him with praise. He did not show even a hint of embarrassment on his face.

“Just as I’ve said, there will not be anyone more suitable than him to lead Nottingham Forest. So, the club has provided him with an eight-year-contract.”

His statement incited a wave of commotion on the scene. No one had expected Nottingham Forest to provide a contract on such an extended period. Eight years; by the time it expired it would already be 2014! Even if the position of manager was known to be a profession with a long span—managing the same team for 20 over years was nothing uncommon within the English football scene—there were hastening movements of talent in the current scene. With benefits being prioritized, loyalty had long become a joke. An eight-year-contract. Did Nottingham Forest Club truly have that much confidence in Twain?

Amidst the noise, Tang En stood up. Everyone consciously fell silent and waited for him to say something.

“I want to first thank the club chairman’s trust of me. I love this team and this club. I can’t think of anywhere else I could go to if I left this place. If it’s possible, I hope I can sign on with Mr. Chairman for another eight years in eight years’ time, and eight years after that, another eight years. All the way until I become too old to work. That’s what I hope for.”

In such a press conference, for a renewal of contracts, Tang En also held back from using the usual provocative tone and nonchalant expression. He appeared very stern, wearing a black suit matched with a red tie symbolizing Forest. It was rare that Tang En would dress so formally.

“I am very honored to be able to dedicate the entire span of my managing career to this great football team.”

The reporters present did not usually hear Tang En say such things; faced with the reporters, Tang En normally got uncomfortable if he did not mock them even a little. Seeing him dressed so formally and saying such moving words, the reporters all felt somewhat awkward,

After saying that, Tang En sat down with Evan Doughty under the lights. They flipped open the contract and lowered their heads as they signed it.

Later, famous reporter and biography writer Pierce Brosnan wrote this in his autobiography: “... Back then, I had written in the newspapers that this scene, in the future, would become a moment looked back upon in Forest’s history. When people talked about this historic day, they will say that the day Nottingham Forest and Tony Twain renewed their eight-year-contract was just like Liverpool’s signing with Bill Shankly; it was a great renewal. During that period, I was ridiculed by people who said I showed my lack of common sense by comparing a man of greatness with a clown... Time proved that I was right.”

After signing their names, both men stood up and shook hands with each other before the media.

“A piece of news that has upset many EPL team managers is that Tony Twain has renewed his contract with Nottingham Forest Club for eight years. He will be battling together with his team for another eight years.” This was how the contract renewal was reported by the evening sports news at BBC5 station.

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“England’s National Team manager, Sven-Göran Eriksson, submitted their team list to FIFA this morning. There is something special on this list, a surprising yet unsurprising candidate who has been selected for the National Team. Nottingham Forest’s captain, George Wood, has been included in the team list by

Eriksson and will be brought to Germany. Prior to this, George Wood never had the experience of being selected by the National Team. Although his club performance is good, he has never played a single minute of football representing the National Team.”

“Two players from Nottingham Forest have been selected for England’s National Team. They are right-wing assist, Ashley Young, and defending midfielder, George Wood. Originally, Freddy Eastwood could have also appeared on this list, but he has turned down the summons by the English Football Association. He has chosen to play for Wales because his grandfather was born there.”

There was no longer any news about Tang En on television. Everyone’s focus had shifted to the World Cup. The Three Lions were once again setting off on their journey, carrying the hopes of countless English people. Naturally, the media declared Eriksson’s team to be the strongest English Team in 30 years. Of course, they had said the same thing four years ago during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, Korea/Japan.

Wood was watching this news at home when he received a congratulatory call from Tony Twain.

“Kid, congratulations. You’re now officially a member of England’s National Team!”

“Thank you.” Wood’s answer surprised Tang En a little. His tone seemed very calm, without any happiness or excitement.

“You don’t seem elated. Why? This is something you didn’t even think of when you first decided you were going to play football.”

“Should I be happy?” Wood asked in return.

“Uh... logically... yes. Those selected for their first time to be in the National Team would treat this day as the most important day of their lives. At the very least, they say so in their autobiography.”

“Will I be a core player?”

“You’ll have to ask Eriksson.” Tang En shrugged. “What I say won’t matter. He’s the manager of the National Team. But... do you want to hear my suggestion, George?”

“Yes.”

“Regardless of if you’re a core player, this isn’t the problem you should be worrying about. You only need to train hard, that’s all. If you have an opportunity to be fielded, don’t think about anything but performing well. Remember, don’t keep thinking about whether you’re a core player or not. Do you still remember the situation when you first represented Forest’s First Team in an official match?”

“I remember.”

“Just like that.”

Wood fell silent for a while.

Tang En suddenly recalled another reason that could explain Wood’s lack of happiness. “Hey, you wouldn’t still be brooding over the Champions League finals, would you?”

Wood’s silence indicated his soundless agreement.

“Football matches are like that. There isn’t a general who will always win, and there will be times of failure... Do you still remember what I said to you in the locker room when you made a mess of the Youth Team match and wanted to back out?”

Wood thought for a bit and nodded. “I still remember.”

“What you’ve lost here, you can win it back over there. What you’ve lost in this match, you can win it back in the next match. If you don’t want to concede, then work hard in the future to win it back.”

“I know.”

“And a final piece of advice: no matter when it is, remember that you come from Nottingham Forest; don’t embarrass me.”

After ending his call with Tang En, Wood’s mother walked into his room.

“Tony called?”

Wood nodded and placed his cellphone back on the table.

“I never thought...” Sophia stood at the doors, scrutinizing her own son with a cocked head, “that my George would one day become a player on England’s National Team.”

Wood turned his head sideways to look out the windows, somewhat abashed by his mother’s statement.

He felt a pair of hands gently wrapping around his waist, his mother’s forehead resting on his back.

“Your back has gotten so broad... George has grown up and knows how to be shy now.”

“Mum...”

“No matter where you are, George, you have to keep working hard.”

“Yes.”

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“Hey, Dunn. We need to change our travel plans.” After finishing up his call with Wood, Tang En went downstairs to look for Dunn.

“Are we heading back to China first?”

Tang En nodded. “We’ll be getting busy after the World Cup ends. I didn’t think about that before. We can return to China first, and then travel directly to Germany from there.”

“When do we leave?”

“Probably in a few days. Let me finish dealing with matters on my side.”

Dunn nodded in agreement.

Tang En’s “matters on my side” was also related to the World Cup.

Originally, as was the usual practice, he was required to write the football commentary for the Nottingham Evening Post during the World Cup.

However, because he had successfully “predicted” such a major event of the Greek team’s victory in the UEFA European Championship, he got eyed by an even bigger media group for the period of the World Cup.

BBC hoped to sign a short-term contract with Tang En for him to take on the role of a guest commentator on the matches they would be broadcasting during the World Cup. Tang En liked the job very much. In the past, when he was watching football, he often scolded the commentators for being full of bulls**t and illogical nonsense. They knew nothing beyond repeating the crap everyone else already knew or matching players with “inner monologues” on their own accord. If he went up, he believed he could do a better job than the supposed professionals. Now, he finally had a way to experience the kick of being a guest commentator.

Since he was employed, it naturally came with payment. But, Tang En cared little for that bit of money. After his contract renewal with the club, his yearly salary had been increased to 2.7 million pounds. Even though that numerical value could not even be ranked in the top five salaries of EPL managers, it was a considerable amount to him, having transmigrated to England from China. Not to mention the Chinese, many English people would not even earn close to Tang En’s annual salary in their lifetime.

Initially, he intended to take on this job even if the BBC was unwilling to pay a cent. However, he found himself facing Shania’s criticisms after mentioning that to her.

Shania’s views were that he should raise the bar with the BBC instead of just taking the money. Her reasoning was related to Tang En’s current status as a rather well-known manager. While he could say that he did not care about the money, the salary was directly related to his status and position. If the pay was low, it meant that the other party did not value you. The higher the pay, the higher his position. This followed the same reasoning as models working a show. The fee for hiring international supermodels must be much higher than hiring rookie models who had just joined the industry.

Tang En accepted Shania’s views. No matter what, he was now a manager who had led his team into the finals of the Champions League. He was not someone that could be easily dismissed anymore.

As a result, his primary job in these few days would be discussing details of the contract with the BBC’s personnel.

Out of her kindness, Shania offered to let her agent help Tang En with the discussions. However, it was declined with thanks. He did not wish to find himself an agent, not even a temporary one.

Due to the matter with George Wood, he was not too fond of agents. Despite not having any opinions against Shania’s agent, he did not wish to get involved with an agent.

The final negotiations proceeded smoothly. The BBC expressed sufficient sincerity and Tang En did not make things difficult for them. Both parties quickly signed the contract. Following that, the BBC announced the appearance of famed manager Tony Twain on the live commentary during the World Cup as a special guest.

Although Tang En had suffered a setback in the Champions League finals, it looked as if he had gained even more things... A new contract with the club signifying trust and encouragement, a contract with the TV station indicating a significant rise in fame, and George Wood, a boy he had discovered and nurtured, becoming one of the 23 in England's National Team. From another angle, it proved his eye for judgment and coaching standards.

The pain and despair of failure had become the past and was gradually drifting further. Now, he must face a whole new future. And he was filled with confidence.

Chapter 454: Going Home

Twain pulled a face as he stood outside the departure hall at Shuangliu International Airport and looked at the huge billboards outside.

It was currently overcast in Chengdu, but he still took his sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on.

There was a special lane for the cabs outside Shuangliu International Airport as they waited for the passengers lined up one after another. With no need to flag down a cab, Twain pulled his suitcase straight to an empty car.

"Hello!" The cab driver greeted Twain enthusiastically.

When he heard the driver speak English with a Sichuan accent, Twain wanted to laugh, but he held a straight face.

Dunn followed suit and pulled his luggage over. The driver eagerly helped them put their luggage in the car.

After they got into the cab, the driver started the car and asked, "Where to?"

"Uh..." Twain realized he did not know where to go first when he opened his mouth to speak, so he turned to Dunn and asked in the Sichuanese dialect, "Where are we going first?"

The driver, sitting in front, twitched. He was taken aback.

Seeing the driver's reaction, Twain could not ask Dunn because he was laughing.

Dunn gave him a hopeless glance, turned to the driver and said, "Go to Liangjia Alley."

"We're not gonna stay in Chengdu for two days and have some fun?" Twain made up his mind to speak the Sichuan dialect. He spoke English all the time in England. It would be very pretentious of him if he were to speak English when he was back in China.

"No, I called my parents before my return, and they've asked me to return right away."

Twain listened and nodded. Dunn had gone to Nottingham from Sichuan two years ago. He had no connection with his parents other than making regular phone calls. Now, after not seeing their son for two years, his parents naturally were eager to see him.

He understood their longing for their son's speedy return.

He was actually anxious too.

The two men did not even eat lunch. They just left Chengdu at noon in a long-distance coach ride.

This trip was different from his previous return. Twain did not yearn to go to the city. Without Shania to accompany him on this trip, he also did not have to consider eating, drinking, or being merry.

The purpose of his return this time was clear; that was to visit his parents, whom he had not seen in three years.

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The journey from Chengdu to Dunn's, or more specifically Tang En's, hometown, was a three-hour drive. It would take nearly another hour to get home with public transportation and it only took half an hour from the coach station if they were to take a cab.

They screened "Infernal Affairs" on the coach, and the passengers enjoyed watching it. Neither Twain nor Dunn was interested. They both had something on their mind.

Twain did not know if Dunn would feel awkward. His current parents had used to be Twain's parents, and now he was going to meet them with their real son. Psychologically, would he be able to accept the difference in their identities?

While they were in England, they only needed to care about their own identities, which was easy to resolve as they were both young and open to ideas. They could calmly think and accept this reality. They did not have to think about their relationship with their parents and face this awkward scene.

Twain knew why he had suddenly said he wanted to accompany Dunn on this trip home to visit his parents. Dunn also must know what was on Twain's mind. After all, they were Tang En's biological parents who had raised him. This feeling could not be discarded just because of a change in body and identity.

Tang En now looked like a white man, but he would always be Chinese inside. That could never change. Those people and things like China, Sichuan, his parents... They had left an indelible impact during his twenty-six years of life that he could not erase.

Why would he be so excited to run into Yang Yan in Nottingham in the first place? In addition to her being the object of his first secret crush, perhaps there was a kind of familiarity. Yang Yan was a projection of his past, and she made Twain unable to forget his original identity. As soon as he saw her, he would recall his past, whether good or bad. Now that he had lost it, it felt particularly precious to him.

When he and Shania had come here two years ago, he had made an excuse to bring Shania to China for a visit. At that time, he had not known what identity he should use to meet with his parents. So, he just stole a look at them from afar and left. This time, he and Dunn planned to stay at home for a while and would interact with his former parents daily. Would it be awkward?

He glanced sideways at Dunn, who stared out of the window in a daze. What was he thinking?

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For Dunn, this road outside the window had been foreign to him three years ago. This country was also unfamiliar. He'd never thought he would come to China.

But now, this was one of the highways he was most familiar with, more familiar than the M1 highway from Nottingham to London.

There was only one reason for him to feel like he identified with this land: his current parents. A lack of fatherly and motherly love in his life had made the appearance of his current parents like a gift from God. And because they were Chinese, he acknowledged his new identity as Chinese.

He could easily abandon his former identity because of this.

He did not miss his "home" in England at all.

Before he met Twain, he had had no qualms about enjoying this happiness.

When he agreed to go back to England for his career, he knew in his heart that he had to face the other him and his parents' real son.

He was certainly afraid of losing his present life, but as a person who occupied someone else's body and family, he felt a little guilty about Twain. Twain would not know about his former life, but he was clear that there was nothing to be nostalgic for in his previous life. If this were a business, it was like he had reaped a huge profit with very little capital. No, it was more like he had had a windfall.

Because of thoughts like these, he always felt that he had taken advantage of it. If he had not met Twain, he could have gone on like this. However, once he met him, that guilt slowly emerged and occupied his thoughts. He felt that perhaps he should go to England to meet him face to face and make everything clear, and then figure it out.

Therefore he went, and found Twain easier to get along with than he had anticipated. He was an outgoing and cheerful man, and had felt a little guilty as well. Why? He felt like he had done Dunn a disservice because he was a manager now who had achieved some success.

Dunn thought it was funny to think of such things. Some people treated their careers as more important than anything else, while others felt no matter how great their careers were, the ultimate goal of having a happy family was better. After his experience in the change of his body, Dunn was the latter kind of person and had found his goal.

Dunn was not an ambitious man. In the past, his greatest wish was to be the head coach of the Forest youth team. It was his ambition to train the young players. He and Twain were essentially different. Twain longed for victory, championship titles, glory, money, fame. He desired things which represented success. Dunn felt that these things did not matter, and Twain needed his help, so he helped him.

Therefore, when Twain said he wanted to come back to see his parents together, he agreed. He knew Twain would not rob him of his present life. He had nothing to worry about.

As for the awkwardness of his parents seeing their real son, he did not feel any discomfiture about being the "third party." There was nothing to be embarrassed about.

As for Twain's true identity, who would know as long as he and Twain kept it to themselves? It would be fine if they kept it a secret forever.

He did not know if there was anyone else in the world like him, who had switched bodies with someone else. Even if there were, they would not tell the truth. Compared with society, he was an isolated case in a very small minority.

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Three and a half hours after they set out from Chengdu, Twain and Dunn finally arrived in a small town in Southern Sichuan. Once they got out of the station, they did not take a cab; with a foreigner, it was easy to be ripped off by cheating drivers. Although neither of them cared about that small amount of money, Twain found it intolerable to be treated like a fool.

No matter how many eager drivers outside the station offered them rides and followed them with questions about where they were headed, the two men remained silent and dragged their luggage straight to the bus stop.

“Do you still remember which line to take?” Dunn asked as he watched Twain standing in front of the bus information board and searched carefully.

Twain looked back at him and then pointed to the second row on the bus information board, “Of course, Bus Number 75. Eleven stops.”

“You remember that very well.”

“I can’t help it. Twenty-six years, I couldn’t forget it even if I wanted to.” Twain lightly shook his head. “I went to the high school in the city and had to travel back and forth every week. This bus went near our school,” said Twain, pointing to one of the stops.

After getting on the bus, the two men sat in the crowded compartment in silence. After all, a foreigner speaking the Sichuanese dialect would be too conspicuous. Twain did not want to create unnecessary issues.

After more than an hour of jolting, the two of them stood at the gateway of the town at six o’clock in the afternoon. It was a small town, and the national highway ran through the middle of the town, splitting it in half. The humble bus stop was at the entrance of a grocery store, with a metal sign erected at the side of the dusty gravel road.

Twain stood under the metal sign and viewed the sight in front of him.

The enormous sunset hung at the end of the road, to the west of the town. They were facing right in that direction and had to squint their eyes to see clearly ahead. The bus drove down the road as if it gradually integrated with the red sun, its shadow becoming longer and longer.

The students dismissed for the day from school swarmed past him, escorted by their teacher. The curious children were excited to see the appearance of a foreigner here. They chattered about him, speaking in the familiar local accents.

It was dinner time now and the cooking smells wafted from the nearby shops on the street.

Dunn stood in front and turned to look at Twain, who had not moved, “Are you nervous?”

He was answered by a rumbling noise coming from Twain’s stomach.

“No, I’m hungry.”

Dunn smiled wordlessly and then turned to go, “Then let’s go, I’ve told them we’re going to have dinner at home.”

“Hey, you told mom and dad about me, haven’t you?” Twain pulled his luggage to catch up.

“Yes, over the phone.”

“Oh...what was their reaction?”

“They’re glad that I’m bringing a friend home.”

Twain looked up at the darkening skies in the twilight and said, “Is it because I used to have very few friends coming to my house?”

“I don’t know, that’s your business.”

Twain looked at the people of the town. With the small town and its tiny population, he used to constantly keep his head down and avoid people even if he saw them daily. Since Dunn was back, he did not meet anyone on the road whom he could stop and exchange pleasantries with. His former self really had poor relationships with people.

Walking ahead, Dunn did not hear the sound of footsteps and the friction of the rolling luggage wheels, so he curiously turned back and found that Twain had stopped again.

“Hey, aren’t you hungry?”

“Oh, coming.”

Seeing the somewhat distracted Twain, Dunn said, “I know those stories that happened after you replaced me were not quite like you. After I became you, I worked very hard to follow your lifestyle because I was worried about being discovered. But apart from being aloof, there was nothing else to learn.”

“That’s good. I don’t like to be in the limelight.” Twain muttered as he put his collar up.

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The two people turned a corner from the street to go up a flight of stairs. The zigzag flight of stairs traversed among the low gray-tiled houses. Southern Sichuan was hilly and Tang En’s house in his hometown was built on a hillside. The road was built in the valley of the hills and every household lived on the hillsides on either side.

Twain was familiar with this road. He had often jumped up and down these steps as a child and would not trip and fall even with his eyes closed. On the back of the hillside were the paddy fields, as well as an embankment to thresh the grains, hold town meetings, and screen movies. And of course, it was where he used to play football.

When he and Shania came here two years ago, they had only passed by in a car from the road below. He only hurriedly looked.

Today, standing on these limestone steps and surveying the eaves of the surrounding houses which only reached up to his chest, a complex feeling of both familiarity and strangeness sprang up in him.

He used to think these houses were tall.

“Here we are.” Dunn, who was walking ahead, suddenly quickened his pace, taking two to three steps up the stairs.

Twain stood in the back and looked at the familiar limestone bricks and the black tiles, as well as the two old people standing at the door with their familiar faces. They smiled when they saw Dunn. His father, who was wearing an apron, turned back to the house and kept busy, while his mother held the arm of her son whom she had not seen for two years and enquired solicitously about his well-being.

Twain stood below and stared blankly at the long-awaited scene. Whenever he had come home for the Spring Festival from college, his parents also waited for him at the doorstep, when it was the wintry twelfth lunar month and not a summer day like it was now.

Dunn, who was chatting with his mother, realized that Twain had not followed. So, he turned back and pointed at Twain as he said a few words to his mother. Twain found that the two people were looking at him, so he walked up but did not know what to call the woman in front of him.

Auntie?

Mom?

Dunn knew what was on Twain’s mind, but he should still remind Twain not to blow his cover, so he cried out, “Tony?”

This voice called Twain back from being lost in his thoughts.

“Oh, hello. I’m Dunn’s friend, my name is Tony Twain.”

“Hello, hello. My son has spoken of you, he said you could speak the Sichuanese dialect. At first, I didn’t believe it. Now I do. Come on, please come in!”

Twain carried the luggage into the house and greeted his elderly father, who had taken the time to come out of the kitchen. Then he took out the gift he had brought from England. Even though his parents declined, they finally accepted it.

They came back just in time. Dinner was ready. The soup just needed to be reheated and they could have dinner. Twain was famished. For someone who ate fish and chips in England all the time, he was immensely happy to be able to eat the truly authentic homemade dishes.

Dunn’s parents were alarmed at the amount of food this foreign friend could pack away. They looked inquiringly at their son, while Dunn looked at Twain who was busily stuffing himself, and gave an embarrassed smile at his parents, “He likes Sichuan food very much.”

It suddenly dawned on them, “Oh. take your time to eat, slowly, no rush, there’s plenty still.”

When Twain heard the remark, he quickly stuffed himself with more food.

He dared not look up for fear that his red-rimmed eyes would alarm his parents sitting across him.

Chapter 455: Finding what was Lost

It was already late at night. At this hour, everyone was asleep in their beds. Other than occasional passing cars on the roads beneath them, there were no sounds.

The fans whirred noisily in the house; there was no air-conditioner. It wasn't that they could not afford it. It was just that summer here was not too hot, especially when they slept with open windows at night. It was even cooling if there were gentle evening winds blowing.

Despite the soft cooling winds, Tang En, who lay on the sleeping mats, was not asleep yet. He turned over. The mat was placed right beneath the windows and he could clearly see the starry sky outside.

This was his home, or had used to be his home. Right now, however, he lay on the guest bed. It had felt strange the whole day.

"Tony?" Dunn, on the other bed, suddenly called out to him.

"Yeah?"

"I knew you haven't fallen asleep yet."

"Can't sleep."

Shuffling noises could be heard from his back. Dunn sat up on his bed.

"If you can't sleep, let's go out to get some air."

Tang En took a backward glimpse at Dunn, who stood in front of his bed, and then sat up as well.

The two put on their jackets and left the house quietly.

"Where to?" Tang En asked.

"Anywhere." Dunn walked in front, leading. The two walked over a small hilltop and saw paddy fields and a dam behind the slopes.

Where they reached was a city still brightly lit in the late of night. There were no neon lights or street lamps. Surrounding them were short houses painting a slab of darkness. A full moon shone above their heads, casting moonlight as pure as snow across the ground, lighting it up brightly. They did not have to worry about tripping on their path.

"I've almost forgotten that natural light can be this luminous." Tang En raised his head to look at the round moon hanging in the sky. "I still remember when I was very young... At that time, we didn't have our own bathrooms, and everyone had to go to the public ones, the kinds like pit latrines. At night around this time, I had needed to go to the toilet. But I didn't dare to go to the public toilet on my own. It was pitch dark there, and I was afraid there would be ghosts. So, I peed standing in front of my own house. The sky was clear then. The full moon was shining. I was only semi-conscious, having been asleep. I saw the ground covered in white, shining brightly, and thought it was snowing. In the end, there was nothing at all when I woke up the next day. Before going to college, I had never seen snow with my own eyes. The moonlight made it seem as if the grounds were covered in a layer of snow."

He pointed to the dam not far away. "When I was younger, it felt like the dam was very, very big. We could even play football and watch movies there. Now it seems... tiny."

"The water paddy on that side..." he pointed to a point even further, "in primary school, we didn't have classes on Tuesday afternoons. Our teacher would organize for us to come over here to fish for lobsters. We would place the ones we caught into a small bucket and roast them on the spot after we were finished. There wasn't any seasoning, but the group of us ate so happily..."

"The mountaintop even further back is rumored to be unmarked graves. People were buried there. On spring outings, we would go there as well. Young children had little courage, but can still be bold sometimes. Playing on top of the grave mounds without any respect for the dead... I still remember a classmate who was very fashionable. He danced something of Michael Jackson's for us and was popular with the girls then. Now that I think about it, it was just a segment of moonwalking... At such a young age, he already knew how to get girls. Meanwhile, I was just sitting in a daze at a corner. In the memories of the others, I was probably forgotten."

Dunn stood beside him without saying a word. He quietly listened to Tang En talk about his own past.

"I had thought I can't possibly remember such little, mundane things, and I did forget them later. But, with the trip back this time, seeing the familiar scenery, it's all come back. Our memory is such an amazing thing."

He fell silent. Standing on the small village road, he looked far away towards the dam and water paddy lit under the moonlight. The sounds of crickets gradually became louder.

"I don't think I've said sorry to you?" Dunn suddenly said as he stood next to him.

Tang En looked back at him oddly.

"You're the real Dunn, who was born and raised here. I know you really want to call them mum and dad. I was the one who robbed you of things that belonged to you."

Tang En laughed. "We can't really say it's a robbery. We just exchanged bodies. If you must say you robbed mine, then I've also robbed you."

"There's nothing good about what I have. It doesn't matter even if you rob me of them. You saw it too, in Eastwood's graveyard... If you're referring to your current success, that has nothing to do with me." Dunn shrugged. "So, I'm the one who owes you more... I wished very much to have a warm home. And I'm very sorry I have taken yours."

Seeing Dunn's sincere face, Tang En quieted briefly before saying, "To tell the truth... before this, I wasn't someone who would miss home. 'Home' had never been such a strong feeling as I feel now. Maybe it's because I got it so easily in the past, so I didn't know how to cherish it. Now that it's gone, I feel differently. Without this, without you, I might have continued without knowing how to cherish it. Everything has a price. Now that I've learned to cherish it, the price is that I no longer have a home. But where on earth would you be able to find something so perfect? A successful career with no financial worries, a lovely wife with obedient kids at home, healthy and happy parents in their late years, a harmonious family. I would be a successful manager, successful son, successful husband, and a

successful father... a person admired by the world... How is it possible for us to have anything and everything we want? I can't possibly monopolize all the good things, can I?"

Tang En said this to Dunn with a smile.

"You're right. There isn't anything in the world that's completely perfect. When you gain something, you'll necessarily lose something else... but Tony, your problem, in fact, can be easily solved."

"Hmm?"

"I can't give you a successful career, or a lovely wife and good children. But I think I can return you a home."

"Ah?"

"Would you be willing to be my godbrother? To be my parent's godson?" Tang En was stunned. Dunn continued. "To begin with, they're your parents. Only, after establishing this relationship, you won't have to call your own mum auntie. And... we're so much in sync, don't you think it feels like we're brothers? We share each other's memories. You'll always be there in my life and I'm always in yours. We don't have any secrets from each other, just like true brothers who grew up together since youth."

Dunn finished saying this and looked at Tang En.

Tang En also looked back, staring at him for a long while before he slowly replied. "When I had found myself transmigrating from China suddenly into an Englishman's body, I cursed God and Fate, believing that they were playing a huge joke on me. I felt I was the world's unluckiest person. And now, I feel that perhaps we should have been linked together to begin with. This wasn't some draw in a random lottery. This is something that has long been decided upon... Do you believe there is another pair of hands acting behind Fate? I didn't used to believe it. But now I do. Why was it you swapping with me and not someone else? Like the world's richest man, the head of a nation, a movie superstar... Why you, and why me? It appears coincidental, but it's in fact inevitable. Everything has a cause and effect; an effect must have a cause... Are you feeling dizzy yet?"

Dunn shook his head.

"Anyway, this is what it means: we're destined to be together. Otherwise, how else would I be able to meet you amongst the throngs of people on a trip back to Chengdu? Chengdu has more than 10 million people. Why did I meet with you of all people? So... hey, is there any ceremony needed to recognize them as my godparents?"

Dunn shook his head with a smile. "We don't need anything."

Hearing Dunn say so, Tang En nodded vigorously. "I don't want to pretend to be strong anymore. I'm not going to put up a front. I'll do it."

He yawned as he finished his words. "Let's go back to sleep, I'm tired."

"Because the timezone switched over?"

"It's been switched over for a long time; since Beijing!"

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Tang En only woke up nearing to noon time. By the time he got up from bed, Dunn had already returned from helping his parents.

“You’re up? How did you sleep? Are you comfortable?” His mother asked when she saw him.

Tang En nodded furiously. “Yes, I slept very well. And I feel extremely comfortable!”

Of course, he was comfortable. This was a place he had stayed in for 20 years...

Dunn threw him a look, signaling that he had already made preparations.

Over lunch, Tang En talked about his own life experiences and expressed his wish for them to accept him as their godson. The two elders were not at all surprised. It seemed like Dunn had really mentioned this to them beforehand.

They were very happy to have a foreigner as their son, readily agreeing to it.

Very simply, in that manner, Tang En once again became his parents’ son. Only this time, he had to add a “god” before the title. However, he did not care about those little details in the name. He was overjoyed he could finally call his mother “mother,” and his father “father” without worry.

Initially, he only hoped to have a more reasonable excuse to get closer to his parents when he followed Dunn back here. In that way, he would already be satisfied. He did not expect himself to get more than that; he had gotten back his parents and found what he had lost.

He could wish for nothing else. This had been a perfect vacation.

In the following few days, Tang En was finally able to throw off the burden in his heart and live in his own home in a relaxed and joyful state. He could go out to climb the mountains and search for those times in his youth. He still attracted a lot of curious gazes scrutinizing him wherever he went, but he did not care.

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After staying at home for half a month, when they had to leave, Dunn decided to come clean with his parents. He told them what he was really doing in England.

“A manager?” His father was not someone who knew nothing. Of course, he knew what a professional football manager did. He only asked this because he was so surprised. He did not expect his own son to be working as a manager overseas, in the highest level of the league.

Dunn nodded. “Tony asked me to help him out, so I did.”

His mother sat to one side without saying anything.

“My son...” His father turned to look at Tang En. “Can he really be a manager?”

Tang En nodded firmly to prove he was not lying. “He’s very talented. Within two years, he rose from an ordinary manager in the Youth Team to become their assistant manager. In the latter half of the year, I plan to transfer him to the First Team to be my helper.”

Hearing Tang En's words, his father turned to look at Dunn again. "I only knew that you liked football very much when you were young... I didn't think you would be able to find work in it now. Then, your work in Chengdu..."

"I quit before I left... I'm sorry I kept that from you."

Tang En sat next to them quietly. This was a matter between Dunn and his father. Even with Tang En's understanding of his own father, he did not know what answer he would give. Would he agree or disagree? What if he disagreed? Should he try to persuade him? After all, Dunn was truly the best candidate to be his assistant manager. Tang En would certainly be unwilling to lose such a capable helper... Should he use the fact that a manager could earn a lot of money annually to persuade his own father?

His father fell silent for a period, and said slowly, "Anyway, work is work, regardless of where you are. There isn't any difference working as a manager or running sales. Of course, it's even better if you like the job."

"Thank you, Dad!"

"Anyway, just keep this in mind. No matter what work you're doing, you have to do your best."

"Yes, Dad. I will remember that."

And then he turned to look at Tang En. "You're older than him and more familiar with what's over there. I'll have to trouble you to take care of him."

Tang En smiled. "No need to worry, Dad."

"You have to take care of yourself over there..." Dunn's mother finally voiced out, having stayed quiet the whole time. A reluctance lingered in her voice.

"Mum. There are vacation periods every year. I will come back to see you both. Or, I can even bring you over to reside in England."

"It's fine to enjoy a trip overseas, but staying there? Never mind that, I think..." His father waved his hands. "I still like it here."

The two elders did not see being a football manager as any great career. They did not even ask questions such as how much money he could earn in a year. In their hearts, there was no difference between being a manager or working a sales job in Chengdu... This relieved Tang En.

He also discovered something. His decision to follow Dunn back to his old home was absolutely the correct choice. It allowed him to notice some things he had unintentionally neglected in the past.

To him, this trip was not a vacation in China. This was coming home.

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After saying goodbye to their parents, Tang En and Dunn began their new journey, leaving the small town filled with countless memories from when he was a child, and which had nourished and birthed him.

A flight from Chengdu to Beijing, and then from there directly to Germany.

That was their plan. They were not going to stay and take a leisure trip in either Chengdu or Beijing. Neither Dunn nor Tang En were interested in such things; they weren't fond of shopping, and they found it unnecessary to tour around. Only when they were back in their hometown did Tang En go out shopping for local specialty products for Shania and Sophia. It was the only time he shopped since his return to China.

When they had arrived, both Tang En and Dunn only brought a suitcase each. In it were changing clothes, toiletries, and presents for their parents; they could be considered lightly packed. When they left, other than the two suitcases they brought with them, they had another two huge luggage bags filled with local specialty goods from their hometown.

After they got their plane tickets and checked-in their luggage, the two, now lightly packed, casually strolled along the waiting area.

With the World Cup looming, they could see several tour groups in the airport waving the 'Visit Germany and watch the World Cup' flag. Even within the Beijing Capital International Airport, there was a thick atmosphere of football in the air.

"The world's number one sport..." Tang En shrugged. "The fans going to Germany are going there to cheer for another country. This is a situation that happens maybe only in China. Hey, Dunn. You've been in China these few years. You know what China's soccer is like, right?"

Dunn nodded.

"They got eliminated even before entering the top 10... what a pity... having played in Jia-A and Jia-B domestically for several years. They ended up walking out into the world to find that their best skills were still below par in comparison to people in Western Asia... it's tragic. How pitiful Chinese football is..."

Dunn silently listened to Tang En grouse. In terms of knowledge on China's football, he certainly could not measure up to Tang En. Their feelings towards it, as well, was not something he could compare with the "foreigner" before him.

"Never mind. Let's stop talking about something that spoils my appetite. When we get to Germany, we won't be moving around together anymore. I'll be working on the commentary for the live match broadcast by BBC. Your main objective is to take note of which players we could bring in during the summer."

Dunn nodded. "Yes."

"Let's go. I think we should be boarding the plane."

The two walked to the boarding gate to wait.

At this point, Tang En suddenly heard someone calling his name.

"Tony Twain?"

He turned back on reflex, finding himself looking at a rather familiar face.

It was the female reporter who had come to interview him when he had wanted to buy Chinese player Sun Jihai, and even got dissed by him. He had met her a few times after that again in various sorts of interviews. It was Tang Jing.

Chapter 456: A Chance Encounter in The Air

“Tony Twain?”

Twain seemed to hear someone calling him. He turned his head and saw a somewhat familiar face.

Standing in front of him was a woman. She turned out to be the person who had gone to Wilford to interview him because the Forest team had wanted to buy the Chinese player, Sun Jihai. Having been chided by him once and met several times in various interviews since then, she was the reporter, Tang Jing.

“It’s really Tony Twain.” After she verified the identity of the man in front of her, Tang Jing laughed. “Why am I seeing the Nottingham Forest manager from England at the Beijing Capital International Airport?”

Twain shrugged, “It’s just a holiday. Why would I see you here?”

“This is Beijing, the capital of China, and I’m Chinese. It would be normal for me to appear here, wouldn’t it?” Tang Jing was not to be outdone.

Since their initial meeting—or to be exact, their second time meeting—the two of them had found each other disagreeable. The two had met a few times later in some interviews where Tang Jing had also asked him a few questions, so she was not considered a stranger. However, since that meeting where Twain had started to dislike this ignorant groupie, he had always been uninterested in her even though she could be considered a beautiful woman.

Twain glimpsed at a Bank of China ATM not far away and said, “If Tang suddenly appeared in the Bank of China underground vault, would be that be considered normal too?”

“You really know China well.”

“Wasn’t that already determined in your interview?”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll write down the nasty way you spoke to a reporter in the airport and expose it in the newspaper?”

Twain chortled. “Why should I be afraid? My manager position is not dependent on the preferences of your Chinese media and Chinese readers. Even if you make me out to be Satan in your paper, even if your readers hate me, what does it have to do with me? Miss Tang, don’t you even know how to make a threat?”

His remark confounded Tang Jing’s retort, leaving her at a loss for words.

Dunn had stood at the side wordlessly as he watched Twain and Tang Jing pitted against each other.

When Twain saw that the other party had nothing to say, he turned and walked with Dunn towards the gate. The airport announcement was already reminding the passengers on the flight to be ready to board the plane.

Tang Jing gritted her teeth as she glared at Twain's back. As the daughter of the company president, she had always been excellent in her studies and had smoothly advanced through her education and employment. No one had ever dared not to give her face. But in front of this man, she had repeatedly lost arguments, which was humiliating for her.

She did not believe that she could not equalize the score.

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"Hey, Tony."

"Yes?"

"Weren't you being mean to that reporter?"

"Why? Are you feeling sorry for her?"

"Ahem."

"Ha! I don't know why myself. Every time I saw her, I just wanted to say something to provoke and infuriate her....Maybe I don't like her haughtiness. I dislike pompous people."

The pair chatted in English while standing in line to board. After they got on the plane, they put their personal belongings in the overhead compartment and continued chatting as they sat down. This time their conversation shifted to the World Cup in Germany, mainly about what they could reap in Germany this summer.

This was a row of three seats with Twain sitting in the middle and Dunn in the window seat. The aisle seat was empty. They did not pay attention to it.

As the pair were engrossed in their discussion about the summer transfers, a person came straight from the cabin and walked towards their seats.

Twain was listening to Dunn, but his eyes fell upon this person. And as she advanced, he gradually shifted all his attention to this uninvited guest.

"Dammit." He swore under his breath.

Tang Jing was a little surprised to see the man next to her seat. However, when she saw the surprise and annoyance on Twain's face, she suddenly laughed and smiled brightly. She made no secret of her glee and slowly walked towards Twain with a smile.

"I didn't think we'd see each other again so soon, Mr. Twain." Tang Jing put her bag on the overhead compartment and then gracefully sat down to greet him.

"Ah yes, I didn't expect it either." Twain was a little dejected. He did not like being with this woman. He had not expected such a coincidence as being on the same flight as this woman, let alone being seated together with her.

“This is quite nice. I won’t be lonely for my journey.”

“This is terrible. My journey is going to be a torment.” Twain mumbled.

“What did you say, Mr. Twain?”

“Nothing.”

“Really?”

“Just speak Mandarin! I can understand.” Twain was displeased when he heard Tang Jing use an English word. You’re Chinese. Why are you peppering your speech with English?

Looking at Twain forgetting his manners, Tang Jing smiled even more happily.

Next to him, Dunn looked at Twain with some pity and was still silent.

Tang Jing noticed him. When she had come over just now, Twain was talking to this man. They were together before boarding, and it was apparent that he was a travel companion.

“Who’s this?”

“My assistant.” Twain tersely introduced Dunn. But he immediately caught himself. Why should I introduce him to her?

“Hello, I’m Tang Jing, a special correspondent for Titan Sports in London.” Tang Jing took the initiative to shoot her hand towards Dunn.

“Hello, I’m Dunn.” Compared with Tang Jing’s self-introduction, Dunn’s version was unpolished. The two just shook hands with Twain in the middle. Twain rolled his eyes and ignored them.

“You’re Manager Twain’s assistant? You’re from China?” Tang Jing was clearly interested in Dunn’s identity. As far as she knew, no Chinese coach had ever held any position on a team in any of the five major leagues in Europe. If Dunn was truly Twain’s assistant coach, it could be sensational news.

Dunn nodded. “Yes.” He did not explain, but simply answered Tang Jing’s question. He just answered Tang Jing accordingly and succinctly. He had used to “chat” to Twain like this before becoming familiar with Twain. It drove Twain up the wall. Now it was Tang Jing’s turn to experience it.

Tang Jing did not expect Dunn’s answer to be so concise. She was a little surprised that he did not take the initiative to continue their conversation.

Twain leaned against the back of the seat with a straight face. But he was laughing inside. You tried to worm your way in and ran into a wall instead, didn’t you?

Tang Jing also realized that Dunn did not seem to good at interaction with outsiders, so she turned to Twain and said, “Manager Twain....”

“What?”

“I understand why you’re here in Beijing and China. But why do you want to find a Chinese man to be your assistant?”

Here comes the interview.

“Why not? French, British, Brazilian, Argentine, German, and Spanish men can be coaches. Why can’t the Chinese? Do you discriminate based on region and despise your own countrymen?” Twain asked in return.

“Mr. Twain... Let’s put aside our personal feud, shall we?” Tang Jing took the lead to show some goodwill. She did not want to waste her chance during a long flight with Twain.

“Do we have a personal feud? I’ve barely spoken more than a hundred words to you before today. I chose Dunn because he is capable; it’s as simple as that. When it comes to a coach or a player, I never look at their nationalities. I only recognize their abilities. Do you understand?”

“But how do you know he’s capable?”

“Interaction, conversation, and observation. He and I met online, and we got along well, that’s it.” Twain found an excuse. Even though it sounded a little unbelievable, it was more plausible than saying “we swapped our bodies and souls.” Extraordinary men did extraordinary things. If Dunn could prove his ability, then “online chats” would become a nice anecdote and conversely, it would become a joke. It had nothing to do with the rationality of the matter. It was only about the outcome.

Tang Jing was really taken aback by Twain’s online chats. She stared at Twain, and at Dunn as well.

“I like Chinese culture, so I wanted to search for some Chinese netizens through the network and practice my Mandarin. Then I met him. Before I met him in person, we were already good friends. That’s the way it is.”

Twain’s reason was still rather realistic. Tang Jing evened out the surprise on her face and cleared her throat, but she did not know how to continue her inquiry.

“Do you have any more questions, Miss Tang?” Twain looked at the Tang Jing.

“Uh... Well...”

“If you don’t, I have a question for you: Why are you on this flight?”

“The World Cup in Germany. I’m a reporter. Isn’t that normal?”

“Ah...” Twain tapped his forehead and said, “I forgot you’re a reporter.”

Tang Jing heard his sarcasm while he beat about the bush. She pouted but did not fiercely fight back as Twain had expected.

Twain puzzled about that. He stole a glance at the quiet Tang Jing. Her haughtiness was gone. What was left was an ordinary woman.

Tang Jing suddenly went quiet and Twain did not wish to say anything. Dunn was more reticent. The three people fell into a spell of silence. Despite this inexplicable silence, the three of them were happy to accept reality.

The gentle voice of the flight attendant on the announcement reminded the passengers to fasten their seatbelts and switch off all communications on their cellular phones, and that the plane was about to take off.

After they fastened their seatbelts, the fuselage of plane vibrated and the silvery behemoth skated slowly into the runway.

The roar of the engine came from outside and the sweep of the wind became louder. Sitting in the seat, Twain could clearly feel a huge thrust firmly press him to the back of the chair. He knew that the plane was accelerating for take-off. When those noises suddenly became lighter, the tight feeling in his chest and shortness of breath disappeared. The plane soared and rose toward the blue sky.

“Mr. Twain.” At that moment, Tang Jing suddenly spoke up.

“What can I do for you, Miss Tang?”

“Are you going to Germany to assess the players?”

“You can put it that way. But I have another job. I was hired by the BBC 5 Station to be their special guest pundit for their World Cup broadcast.” Twain threw a piece of gum into his mouth and the ringing in his ears was finally relieved.

“I see. Don’t you think we were destined to meet here?”

Twain turned his head to look at her.

“Can I be so bold as to venture a request?”

“Please, speak your mind.”

“There are few foreign coaches who can speak fluent Mandarin and know so much about the situation in China. You are a successful coach from a country that is fully developed in football. Can I ask you to be the football critic to write articles for our newspaper during the World Cup? The fees can be discussed.”

Twain had not expected Tang Jing to make such a request after such a long silence. His eyes widened.

“I know this request is a little abrupt, but I think introducing some advanced materials for our readers is a very good idea.”

Watching this woman put her conceit aside and adopt a humbled stance, Twain really found it hard to refuse. Besides, why would he reject it? He could simply write a few hundred words to express his thoughts and feelings after the games and be paid for it, plus he would also open up his influence in China. So, why not?

Of course, he might think so in his heart, but he still had to put on an act.

“Oh... I have to be the BBC’s guest pundit during the World Cup and I still have to write my review for the Nottingham Evening Post...” When he saw Tang Jing’s worried expression, Twain was tickled inside and decided not to tease anymore. The way the woman became quiet just now made an impression in Twain’s heart. “But it’s no problem writing one more article.”

“Do you agree? That’s great!”

“Are you this happy about that?” Twain was puzzled.

“That doesn’t matter....Let’s talk about the specifics in detail, shall we?”

“There’s nothing to talk about, is there? I’ll just give you a manuscript every match day. How is the fee calculated?”

Tang Jing covered her mouth and laughed when she saw that Twain was so concerned about his income.

“You led your team to advance into the Champions League final. Unfortunately, you lost to the Barcelona manager in the end. And you’re still so concerned about this tiny fee?”

“What’s the difference between that and this? Besides, even though a mosquito is small, it is still protein. Any amount of money I earn from my labor is equally important to me.”

“Sometimes I really don’t think you’re British, Mr. Twain. You’re simply Chinese to the core.” Tang Jing murmured.

Twain broke out in a cold sweat A woman’s instincts are really terrifying.

“Mr. Twain, do you mind if I ask you some things about the Champions League final?”

“Are you asking on behalf of the Chinese readers?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, you may. Your opinions don’t affect me anyway. What do you want to ask?”

“If it’s possible, can we start with that silver medal?”

“Isn’t that subject being hyped up by the media?”

“That’s the Western media. What we know was through them. It’s inevitable that we would lose some information during the correspondence.”

“You’re very dedicated to your work.”

During the long journey from Beijing to Munich, the two people slowly chatted. Dunn sat by the window and turned his head to look out at the sky outside. He pulled his eye mask down against the glare of the sun and leaned against the back of his seat to go to sleep.

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After ten hours of flight time, the Lufthansa flight landed at the Munich Airport. The atmosphere of the World Cup was already thick. When Twain and the others got off the plane and walked out of the terminal, the atmosphere fully hit them in the face. There were various football shops selling mascots and souvenirs, large World Cup advertisements, German flags hanging high everywhere and visitors wearing various national team jerseys.

These made Twain fully feel that he had arrived in Germany and reached the venue of the World Cup.

“Modern technology is really advanced. We were still in China this morning and we’re in Munich this evening! Let’s go, Dunn!” Twain gave his back a good stretch.

“Where’s that reporter?” Dunn turned his head and did not find Tang Jing.

“Let’s go. She said goodbye the moment she got off the plane. Her colleague is here at the airport to pick her up.”

“Oh... It looked like you had a very productive conversation. Didn’t you dislike her before?”

“What I detested was that she was arrogant.” Twain thought of Tang Jing, who suddenly became quiet when the plane took off. She was quite charming when viewed from the side.

“Isn’t that what being a successful career woman is like?”

“Why does she have to pretend to be a strong career woman? Gloria is a very successful woman, but she doesn’t make me dislike her at all. Being strong is to have self-confidence. Pompous people in fact often have little confidence. They are just putting up a front. There’s a saying that’s so apt, Dunn. Do not pretend to be strong, or else you will be struck down. All right, forget about her. We have a lot of star players waiting for us to buy them! Although we’re not the champions, we’re still the Champions League runner-up. That title is still rather attractive.” Twain turned to look at Dunn and grinned, revealing his signature smile. “We’re a strong team now, Dunn.”

Chapter 457: Special Guest Commentator

Half a week after Tang En and Dunn arrived in Germany the German World Cup, watched by tens of thousands of people, finally kicked off.

Other than staying in rooms in the same hotel, the two mostly did things on their own. Whether it was having meals or moving on the outside, they took separate paths. Tang En followed the personnel from BBC television station around, while Dunn proceeded alone. The focus of their work was different.

Due to contractual obligations, Tang En had to tag alongside the personnel from BBC5 to battle in numerous cities. He was mainly required to be a guest commentator for the matches played by England’s National Team. Other than his old acquaintance, commentator John Motson, there was also the former captain of the English team, famed for being the best forward in the English Premier League in the last decade, Alan Shearer.

Of course, Tang En was well-aware of this legendary character in the English football scene. But all he saw then was his cutting figure on the field. Having him sit with Tang En in the broadcast room to commentate together on a match still gave Tang En a special feeling.

Dunn moved independently. He did not follow along with the TV broadcasting plans. He mainly went to the matches that were not receiving much attention in England, especially those of the weaker teams. From there, he hoped to be able to unearth some pearls and raw minerals Tang En might need. He still did not know what Forest’s transfer fee budget would be for the new season, so he could only begin searching from the candidates with the best value.

Tang En had complete trust in Dunn’s eye for ability. After all, based on his own standards, he himself had truly only nurtured George Wood. Meanwhile, those players who had stood above their peers back then, like Michael Dawson and Andy Reid, were all personally nurtured by Dunn.

Tang En believed that the platform that allowed him to show off his own true potential was not being a scout, assistant manager, or Youth Team manager; it was not to discover and nurture new players. Rather, it was to lead a team to battle for the Champions League throne. He and Dunn could complement each other greatly. Dunn's stringency in nit-picking details would make him a fantastic assistant. When the time came, he would be in charge of the operational specifics during the daily training of the team, while Tang En would only oversee their overall direction and path. The two of them cooperating would allow them to perform at the optimal levels in the areas they are most familiar with.

The reason behind BBC5 station's inviting of Tang En to be a special commentator in this World Cup period might have been his current level of fame. Due to having been the target of news stirred up by the media, football manager Tony Twain could be said to have shot to stardom this season. His superstar status reached its peak after the Champions League finals. The public criticisms he made of the main referee on match duty as foolish and brainless, as well as his actions during the award ceremony that embarrassed UEFA, put the leading powers of the European football scene on the spot.

Ever since BBC5 announced their invitation of Tang En to be a special guest commentator, they immediately attracted the attention of other major media groups. Tang En had not begun his work yet but had already helped his temporary master grab a fair bit of attention.

Everyone was in anticipation of the kind of sparks that would emerge in the process of Tang En's first attempt at TV commentaries, between England's local characteristic manager and John Motson, who was famed for his passionate commentary.

"I didn't expect us to work together this way." At the scene of the Germany World Cup, Motson took the initiative to put out his hand after seeing Tang En.

Tang En knew the commentator before him. He also knew that Motson was his supporter. Although there were times when Motson was equally harsh when it came to the commentary on Tang En, Tang En himself was a harsh person as well, so the two felt as if they had common interests.

"I think Eriksson is going to be down on his luck." Tang En laughed as he returned the gesture.

Motson laughed as well. "I was thinking you would be nervous, and I wanted to give you some guidance. That you should commentate just like you usually deal with the reporters. But it seems like I don't have to."

Tang En began chuckling in delight along with him.

Meanwhile, Alan Shearer stuck out somewhat like a sore thumb standing beside them, being the straight-laced person he was.

This was a small interlude in the backstage before the live broadcast of the match. Tang En looked forward to his first time working as a television commentator. He also had seriously done his homework. He especially went to further understand the current situation of Paraguay, England's opponents for the match; he did his analysis as if he was the main manager of the English Team.

This was a classic and reasonable arrangement from Station BBC5. John Motson was an old hand among England's sports commentators. His sharp words and passionate commentary style made those who liked him extremely fond of him, and those who hated him immensely hateful of him. He was to be the

connecting factor and overseer of the match commentary, something comparable to a host of a variety show. Alan Shearer was an active member of Newcastle, as well as a former core forward and captain on the English team; he would be commentating from the players' perspectives in the match. Tony Twain, a manager himself, was naturally analyzing the match from the view of strategic adjustments of both managers.

In this way, the audience would be able to understand the match from various angles.

England's group stage match with Paraguay was the third match of the current World Cup.

Tang En was no longer willing to think about the results of the match progressing concurrently in another dimension; it had no meaning for the match here and now. Would knowing the score for this match in a different dimension be of any help to England's performance in this one? Could it assure that England would not repeat their same old problems?

Tang En did not at all look favorably upon Team England's prospects in the World Cup. This had nothing to do with what he knew about England's performance in the current World Cup. The problem with England's football was chronic; it had been passed down generation after generation. Even before he had transmigrated, he had never thought well of England's prospects in the international competition.

This was a team which, after being overly publicized by the advanced media in the nation, ended up fooling others as well as themselves.

Beyond attaining a World Cup trophy on their own doorsteps in 1966 and becoming the earliest ancestors of modern football, what other praiseworthy achievements had England's National Team accomplished? Nothing.

The prosperity of the English Premier League made people feel as if the abilities of England's National Team should also be very strong. While Tang En agreed that the league was the foundation of a nation's football levels, he disagreed with directly equating them. That was a moronic way of doing things. Additionally, a large part of English Premier's prosperity was merely blown up by the media.

Why were football stars from England usually more expensive than ones at the same level from Continental Europe or other countries? Why were there numerous young geniuses in England, but so few that ended up managing to succeed?

It was all thanks to their advanced media.

With extensive hype and a matured series of publicity systems, it was even easier for England's footballers to be sculpted as great "football stars" in the hearts of their audience. This has something to do with England's culture and originated from their previously glorious history as the empire on which the sun never set.

Their own was always the best.

Those were the true thoughts in Tang En's heart. He believed the dip in England's football standards—something thought as temporary in the hearts of the English—had nothing to do with the level of the manager, the true abilities of the players, the food cooked by the chefs, or their alcoholic natures. This was purely a cultural issue, something unsolvable. Perhaps they could perform exceedingly well at some

point in a big competition. With some luck, they could even become champions. But this would raise their overall standards of play by exactly zero.

Of course, this sounded somewhat like China's football. However, no matter the low period of the English, it was still better than the true "zero" of China's football.

But Tang En would not reveal his thoughts during the match commentary. The English would not allow anyone to readily make negative remarks of themselves, especially when it pointed towards a sensitive topic such as something culture-related. Tang En did not wish to become a public enemy in the nation.

Motson hoped for him to commentate on the match from a manager's perspective, so Tang En aimed his criticisms at Eriksson during the match broadcast.

His criticisms against Eriksson were mainly focused on his use of the "Lampard-Gerrard Duo."

Lampard and Gerrard were respectively the midfield cores of their own teams, and their club performances were excellent. In theory, using both as core players in the National Team at the same time should be a good idea. However, there were problems appearing. Lampard and Gerrard both performed spectacularly in Chelsea and Liverpool. But when it came to Team England, appearing together on the field would have either of them, or both, performing in a lackluster manner.

Even a fool could tell that the position and style of the two individuals on the field overlapped with each other. Being fielded at the same time was not a simple matter of wastage; rather, it was something along the lines of magnets repelling each other. The two disrupted each other, causing neither to perform well in the end.

Why did Eriksson still insist on letting the two players be starters? Could he not see the problem? Of course, Tang En would not criticize Eriksson as foolish. What he criticized was the Swede's overindulgence of hot-shot football stars under his command.

This was a direct clash of two management ideals. Tang En belonged to the type in which the whole was greater than anything else. On his football team, there was only one authority and superstar: him, the main manager. All players had to listen to him. He would not sacrifice his own tactical strategy to accommodate certain football stars.

Eriksson, on the other hand, belonged to the type that was more indulgent of football stars, depending on hot-shot players to decide the match; it was somewhat biased to celebrities. This way, he was able to maintain good relations with the players. In their hearts, he was not lowly placed. In the repeated occurrences of the FA's vote of no confidence in him, the players always stood on his side. From a certain understanding, this could also be considered a type of loving protection. But the price of having a fantastic relationship with his players was the sacrifice of England's competitiveness in the World Cup.

Same with the match against Paraguay, under the hot sun of Frankfurt's afternoon, Eriksson's team played drowsily without a single bright spot.

"... I see no hope for England to win this match. In fact, I don't even know if Eriksson wants to win. Of course, he wants to. But if he doesn't prove it, I'll think he doesn't want to. Owen has just returned from recovery; he's not in the best condition, but why make him play as a starter with Rooney? In this kind of match, Crouch is the most suitable candidate. I've coached the man himself, so I understand his abilities.

Look, aren't I right? Eriksson is changing players. Crouch in, and Owen out. Simple and brutish, without any technique to speak of... I'm sorry, I think I'll sleep for a bit. Wake me up when there's a goal..."

The match went on drowsily; neither Paraguay nor England launched any threatening attacks. Both parties seemed reluctant to take a more active method to score a goal. Under the hot sun, they carried on like that. The audience also watched sleepily with a lack of interest.

So, when Beckham utilized his trademark free-kick to send the ball flying into the goalpost via a transiting header from Paraguay's captain, Gamarra, Tang En finally awoke amid Motson's shouting.

"Oh, it's a goal? And it's an own goal! Fabulous! Eriksson can breathe a sigh of relief now."

Through their opponent's own goal, Team England managed to gain a victory in this match after much difficulty.

After the match, Tang En used up much of his word limit in the after-match commentary articles for Nottingham Evening Post and China's Titan Sports to describe an interesting matter he had discovered midway through the match. On an occasion when England's goalkeeper, Paul Robinson, was clearing the ball, he had kicked it towards the gigantic television screen hanging at the top, in the middle of the stadium; the ball was almost unable to come back down...

This matter made Tang En laugh for a long while during his commentary. During the halftime break, he even repeatedly related it to his two partners. When he was commentating, Tang En joked that it was a pity the football dropped back down in the end. He had hoped to see the football stay stuck up there. Perhaps that way, the match would not be as boring.

George Wood, who was participating in the World Cup and was selected to represent Team England for the first time, continually moved back and forth between the substitutes' bench and the warm-up area in the match. He did not get even a minute of time on the field. This was quite the norm. After all, England's midfield was currently saturated with too many football stars. Both Gerrard and Lampard had to be on the field at the same time, and added to that were Captain Beckham, Joe Cole, Hargreaves... There was no space left for a new recruit like Wood to enter.

The problem with the match did not lie in midfield defense, but in organizing the attacks. Changing Wood in would not be helpful to the team. Tang En did not attack Eriksson for this decision of his. This showed that he was not a person who would slander someone else without care.

After the end of the live broadcast of the match, BBC5 received many feedback calls from the audience. Most of them were calling in to criticize Tang En's commentary style. They felt that Tang En was utterly unsuitable to be a guest commentator, as his words were filled with too much aggression and that he evidently harbored personal feelings. There were even those who suspected Tang En was making use of this job opportunity to vent his personal grudges.

Tang En's response to those was a simple shrug of his shoulders. He did not wish to explain too much. He was a guest commentator, not an interpreter who had to maintain an objective middle ground. Wasn't he invited here precisely to express his personal viewpoints? Some people may be afraid of offending others, but Tony Twain was not.

Of course, there was also some truth in him using the opportunity to discharge a personal vendetta. He had never quite liked Eriksson. He felt that Eriksson was too weak. This was a clash in personalities; something that could not be easily changed.

BBC stood behind him as well. They knew that however many people hated Tang En's commentary, their viewership ratings would surely be raised in the next match; those people still wanted to see what kind of fresh comments Tang En would be tossing out this time, for their ease of continuing to call in to nit-pick and complain.

Those who liked him would continue supporting him, staying in front of the television to watch his varied expressions. Those who hated him would also pay attention to him, collecting the proof of his sins in preparation to usurp him.

Regardless, whether it was fondness or hatred, this was a person who could not be ignored.

BBC5 had signed an extremely worthwhile contract.

Chapter 458: A New Job Possibility

From the start of England's first game until they were ultimately eliminated by Portugal, Twain had sat on the commentator's seat and attacked Eriksson nonstop.

And as the World Cup progressed along with the increase in England's games, more and more people started to feel that Twain's attacks made a lot of sense. Eriksson's English team had not played a single convincing and watchable game in this World Cup. It was a fluke if they won any games.

Their 1:0 victory over Paraguay was due to their opponent's gift of an own goal.

The process of defeating Trinidad And Tobago by 2:0 also was not as smooth and easy as the score.

England played well in the first half of the game with Sweden, which resulted in a 2:2 draw, and even the loss of Owen.

The 1:0 elimination of Ecuador was even more tiresome for the English people. Had it not been for Beckham's direct free kick and twice helping to defend the goalpost, the English should have gone home after the eighth final.

"This is the most powerful English team in thirty years?" Twain evaluated during the game. "It's so arduous for them to play against a small South American country. How are they strong? All I see is Beckham playing alone. Lampard? I'm sorry, he's in a terrible state. If there's a statistic for the number of shots that missed the goals, his score must be the highest. Of course, I don't think it's the player's problem. They can't always guarantee they're at their best condition. Even at their best, they need a manager who knows how to use it to get them to play to their full potential. This is obviously the manager's issue."

After all that, Twain had come back to the main point and pointed the finger at Eriksson.

He believed that Eriksson also knew that, regardless of the final outcome of this World Cup, he would certainly be dismissed in the end.

According to the English Football Association's tradition, they would eventually look for the person in charge for the defeat of the English national team, and then the media would hype it up so that the public would be convinced of it. In short, they were particularly good at giving excuses for their failures.

Like Beckham in 1998, who unfortunately became a leading character in this misfortune. The English always said that if Beckham had not been sent off at that time, they would have been able to beat Argentina. Twain had scoffed at the claim right from the start. If the Argentines were so easy to beat, they could not have been considered a strong team internationally. The English team only said that there was a chance to beat Argentina in ninety minutes, but it was not certain that they would win. Beckham's red card was a fact, and England's defeat became a fact too. With these two facts linked together, Beckham had become a sinner in many people's eyes. They always needed a scapegoat and would not let go once they grabbed hold of one, no matter who they were.

Until 2002, in the game against Greece before the World Cup, Beckham eliminated Greece with a beautiful direct free kick to and sent England to the World Cup finals. Only then was he finally forgiven and respected by the people of all of England and became a god again.

Since there was a precedent, it was unsurprising that Twain ended up getting more support after he slammed Eriksson.

In their last game against Portugal, Eriksson replaced the injured Beckham early and the English captain limped off to the sidelines and returned to the bench, where he sat down beside Wood. Then, Wood saw the popular idol, who was admired by thousands of people, actually cry next to him!

Seeing this, Twain muttered in front of the microphone, "It's over. Eriksson is starting to bring on new players to allow them to accumulate their competition experience and get the feel of the game."

Beckham was replaced by the Forest team's right midfielder, Ashley Young. He played well when he got on the field and did not have stage fright. Twain was deeply gratified. The players who came from Nottingham Forest must be different from everyone else, and that was because their manager was an extraordinary person.

Ashley Young was fortunate that he had played in the World Cup on behalf of England after all, even though he did not play long. As for George Wood, who was also from Nottingham Forest and his team captain, he was not so lucky. He was selected to be in the English national team but did not play even for a minute. Other than playing for twenty-one minutes on behalf of England in the warm-up match before the World Cup, he did not appear in any games.

At this moment, England was engaged in a bitter battle on the field. Wood focused his attention on Beckham next to him. This captain of the national team with thousands of fans and an idol adored or envied by many, cried helplessly. He covered his face with his hands and his tears slipped out of the cracks between his fingers.

The televised footage cut to Beckham several times, and as a teammate sitting next to him, George Wood was caught on film too.

Wood's attention was focused on Beckham. He had known of this man before he got into the national team. David Beckham was the only star footballer he could name before he had started playing football.

He always felt that this man was a symbol of success with his accomplished career, a beautiful wife, and beloved sons. He did not expect that he would have such an awful side.

Watching Beckham cry so heedlessly in front of the public, he suddenly recalled that Champions League final in Paris. He did not cry at that time, but he could understand how Beckham felt at that moment.

He hesitated for a moment before he put his hand on Beckham's shoulder.

The taste of failure was really hard to bear.

Beckham felt a warm hand on his shoulder and he turned to look at the serious-looking George Wood, sitting behind him.

He wiped away his tears and got up from the ground to sit on the chair. He said nothing as he watched Wood squeeze out a tiny smile.

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In the end, Portugal knocked out England in the game through the penalty shootout. Rooney was even sent off with a red card by the referee because he trampled the crotch area of the Portuguese player, Carvalho. This was the last straw that crushed England. Wayne Rooney's Manchester United teammate, Cristiano Ronaldo, stood up for his Portuguese team at that sensitive moment, which was viewed as a betrayal by the English. It infuriated them. Of course, during the game commentary, Twain unexpectedly did not comment on this sudden incident. He had not spoken for some time.

He actually thought both sides were right. It was understandable for Cristiano Ronaldo, who currently wore the Portuguese jersey, to ask the referee to give Wayne Rooney a red card. But the outraged English did not care about this, and Twain did not want to waste his breath on such a pointless thing.

He just thought both were similarly sent off with a red card except that Beckham was unluckier than Wayne Rooney in that year.

Wayne Rooney would certainly not be heavily censured by the media. The player that Ferguson needed to carefully protect was not this "purest English kid", but the traitor, Cristiano Ronaldo.

Certainly, if it did not turn out to be what Twain knew, that Ferguson suddenly lost his mind and wanted to give up Cristiano Ronaldo to save Wayne Rooney, then Nottingham Forest would not mind accepting the public enemy of the entire England.

He could treat it as if he was helping to resolve the difficult predicament Sir Alex Ferguson was in.

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No one felt good that the English team was eliminated. The live broadcast studio fell into silence. Motson and Alan Shearer quietly packed up and finished the broadcast of today's game.

Twain's stuff was simple to handle. The information he prepared was in his own head.

He took off his headphones, looked around at the silent and busy crew, and looked at John Motson.

"Is my work done here?" His question broke the silence in the workroom.

Motson looked up at him. "No, Tony. The World Cup isn't over yet."

"But I don't think anyone will be interested in the rest of the tournament anymore, will they?"

"Of course, maybe. But we paid for the broadcast rights to those games and sold the ads. The advertisers will eat us alive if we stop the broadcast."

Twain nodded.

Alan Shearer suddenly injected between the two of them. "Tony, I think it's odd. How could a man like you remain silent and say nothing when there was a conflict on the field?" He referred to the incident between Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Twain shook his head. "Because my opinion was not quite the same as yours, so I think it was better not to speak."

Motson knew what Twain meant, and said he understood. "Well, with your big mouth, you still know when to speak what and when not to. I really thought you were a fearless fool."

With a very harsh tone, Motson had decried Cristiano Ronaldo as a "liar," a "traitor," and "despicable villain" in his commentary. Twain had no intention of going head to head against that.

"I really don't want to go up against all of England, John. That doesn't make me any more money."

"You're so crass with all your talk about money." Motson laughed.

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The English team came home early, and English fans were extremely disappointed. After the game, the attack on Cristiano Ronaldo began to raise a tremendous stink. The English media unanimously denounced the young player who had betrayed his teammates. Looking at their attitudes, they seemed intent on driving Ronaldo out of Manchester United and England. Even the media in other countries joined in. Some of the Chinese media adopted the same tone as England and declared that young Ronaldo had "sold out his friends for glory," "betrayed his club," "displayed a betrayal of sportsmanship," "let down his family name," and so on.

Twain was reluctant to discuss those things in front of the English media because his identity was that of an English man and some words should not be voiced out loud. But he did not have to worry about such things in the Chinese media. In his own article, he rebuked the Chinese media, which followed suit in their criticism of Ronaldo. He thought that those criticisms were just trumping up the charges.

"Young Ronaldo was a player on the Portuguese national team at that time, so he naturally represented the interests of the Portuguese national team on the field. How would that be betraying his club? How did reminding the referee to issue a card to the offending player violate the sportsmanship? That will mean there are more players in the world who violated this sportsmanship than those who haven't. In the Champions League final, did the Barcelona players who asked the referee to give Edwin van der Sar a red card violate sportsmanship in the eyes of some people? Even though I'd love to hear them say so, I call bulls**t. As for those people who said he let down the family name of 'Ronaldo,' they are even more ridiculous. Are you his parents? Are you not embarrassed when you say such corny things?"

His article directly aimed his attack at the Chinese sports media. It set off a huge controversy in the country, but Twain did not care about the consequences when he sent off the article. Its subsequent impact had nothing to do with him. He did not have the free time to write a blog in the Chinese online portals to have a war of words with those tedious people because those words could not become money. It would be equivalent to him helping do free publicity for others.

The dispute within China was almost preposterous. However, what happened in England was not like a farce. Looking at the intentions of the English media and fans, they really wanted to kick Cristiano Ronaldo out of England altogether.

Especially after the media reported that Wayne Rooney abused his Manchester United teammate as scum in the locker room after the match, the matter was coming to a head.

I can never play with him again. I'm going to f**king sort him out.

I will never play football with that kind of scum again.

Those were Wayne Rooney's words. The "scum" he referred to definitely was Cristiano Ronaldo. He threw aside his foolish actions and pushed the blame for England's loss to his Manchester United teammate. The effect was clear. The English media glossed over Wayne Rooney's mistake and relentlessly battered Cristiano Ronaldo on the other hand.

Under such circumstances, when several reporters mentioned this issue to Twain, he finally failed to restrain himself and publicly said that if Manchester United intended to sell the talented player, then Nottingham Forest would be willing to accept him.

"I certainly understand his situation. However, it has nothing to do with my team because Wayne Rooney is not a Forest player. His opinion will not be in my consideration. All I know is that Ronaldo is a talented player and my team definitely needs someone like that. Of course, I'm not trying to poach him. What I mean is if Mr. Ferguson thinks it's harder for the relationship between Wayne Rooney and Ronaldo to be in the same locker room, I'm willing to be the first to share that pain with him. What? Real Madrid is equally interested in him? Then I want to remind him not to go to Real Madrid. It is not suitable for him there. The best place for him is the English Premier League."

Twain had not finished speaking and Ferguson had already jumped out to declare that the club had just renewed its contract with Ronaldo before the World Cup and that he would not go anywhere except Manchester United. Sir Alex risked going up against all of England to back Ronaldo. It was like after the 1998 World Cup, he insisted on re-employing Beckham in the face of immense pressure. He always protected the players that he valued at all costs and gave them room to grow up. Just on this point alone, Twain had a lot of respect for this veteran manager. But whenever the two teams crossed each other's path, this respect would have to be cast aside first.

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With the English team eliminated, the rest of the World Cup held little interest for the English. Only one question was worth it for them to keep an eye on, and that was the titleholder of the World Cup.

Eventually, at the Olympiastadion Berlin, Italy defeated France in the penalty shootout and, for the fourth time, they picked up the World Cup, which symbolized the highest honor in the football world.

That final happened similarly to what Twain knew. Zidane gave France the lead with a Panenka penalty kick. It was followed with a corner kick, headed by Materazzi from the Italian team that equalized the score. During overtime, the grand master of his generation, Zidane bid farewell to the FIFA World Cup and his career as a professional player in a way that no one expected. He head-butted Materazzi and was sent off with a red card. With one player down, the French team was powerless to reverse the situation and was dragged into a penalty shootout by Italy. They ultimately failed.

Twain was relieved by this result. It was not because it happened the same as how he remembered. He no longer cared about those things. He was happy that Italy had used defense to win the title, which was something he liked to see, and it made his Forest team less on their own in this.

Barcelona won the Champions League title, which made people feel that artistic football ruled the world for a time and that defensive football was ugly and impossible to win titles. Now Italy had used their win to slap those people in the face, telling them that defense was still the most important tactic in an important game.

As for Zidane's fate, Twain could only sigh.

The legendary figure used the most legendary defense method to bid farewell to his legendary career.

Twain had no comment about Materazzi....

And that was how this World Cup ended.

Twain finished his first job as a television pundit perfectly. Afterwards, Motson gave him high praises and thought it was enjoyable to work with him on the game commentary. He even asked him if he was interested in furthering his career in BBC after he quit his position as the manager later. This, of course, was declined by Twain with a smile. He still liked to be a manager. In terms of the sense of accomplishment, how could critiquing others in the stands compare to personally leading the charge to break through enemy lines?

However, Motson's words did not open a door for Twain, but cracked open a window instead. He was aware that with his talent in this area, he could still be a television commentator when he did step down from his manager position in the future. In other words, he was no longer afraid of losing his job as a manager because he would not starve to death if he lost the game and his job.

Of course, that did not change his quest for victory. Because now the victory that he pursued was not to keep his job, but to declare war and give a slap to the faces of those who looked down on him and gleefully waited to see what would happen to him after he had angered the UEFA.

After the FIFA World Cup had ended, the players took the opportunity to have their vacation since they did not have much time. As one of Europe's five major leagues to start the earliest, the English Premier League would start the tournament in mid-August. The team's training time was earlier than the other countries.

This time, in the special topic layout of the British World Soccer magazine's new season, their review of Nottingham Forest was, this was a strong team.

Chapter 459: A New Potential Change in the Players

During the duration of the World Cup, Dunn observed numerous players. His sights were mainly focused on players who were of little renown and inexpensive. But he was only in charge of providing such a name list. The final decision maker was still Tang En.

Based on the last two seasons, Tang En clearly understood the weakness of the team and which positions they needed to add more players to or sell some for.

For example, in the fight for the Champions League against Barcelona, he deeply felt a lack of capable substitutes on his own team.

First, an analysis of the team's starting line-up.

In most situations, Forest's starting formation would be 442, the two forwards being Viduka and Anelka. Between the two, Anelka was doubtless of a world-class standard. Meanwhile, Viduka was already gradually unable to catch up with the steps of Nottingham Forest's development. In any mid-tier English Premier Team, the Australian forward was certainly able to play as a core player and the attacking core. However, when they were up against even stronger opponents, he would reveal a lack in his individual capabilities. For the bench line-up, he would be above par compared to the others. However, as a core player in the formation... Tang En felt that it still required consideration.

The majority of the time, Forest's midfield stood in a flat back four. George Wood and Arteta were in the center, with one leaning towards a defensive focus and the other leaning towards the offensive. Franck Ribéry and Ashley Young were positioned on the two sides, left and right. Their remarkable speed and assists were Forest's main attacking strategy.

In Germany's World Cup, Ribéry played as France's core player. He was a key player in helping the team successfully advance from the group stage. His abilities needed no further elaboration.

While Ashley Young was a substitute, it should be taken into consideration that the right-hand position of the side midfielder was taken by England's captain, Beckham. So, Young's abilities should not be doubted either.

The set of players for the core line-up would certainly rank in the top five in the Premier League.

Now, a look at the rear defenders and goalkeeper:

Nottingham Forest's defensive line was very young. The oldest of them was the 26-year-old Chimbonda. Piqué and Pepe were both young but outstanding players. At times, however, they still lacked experience, often the most crucial aspect of a defensive line.

Leighton Baines and Chimbonda were the left and right fullbacks of the team. Their performances in their respective positions were extremely assiduous.

The goalkeeper was the main goalkeeper in Netherland's National Team that everyone was familiar with, Edwin van der Sar. As the number one guardian god on the Forest Team, his performance has been spectacular, so much that his substitute goalie, Paul Gerrard, had no opportunity to play in matches to maintain his condition.

This core player line-up was certainly in the top five of the EPL.

So, becoming the runners-up in the League last season was a true reflection of their abilities.

Getting runner-up in the Champions League in itself was already an incredible result, one worthy of pride. But therein lay the question: why were they only the League's runners-up, but not the League's champions?

In comparison with the pompously rich Chelsea, or Manchester United and Arsenal with their deep foundations and many years of nurturing, Forest's performance in these two years make them seem like Nouveau riche. They depended on their opponent's lack of understanding of them, underestimation, as well as their own drive and enterprising spirit to rush up to their high position in a single breath.

If Tang En was already satisfied, such a line-up would allow him to survive in the EPL. Preventing relegation would not be a problem, and if they played a little better in each season, they could even take part in the European competitions.

But was that what Tang En wanted?

It was not.

He wanted to get number one, to become the champions and become a champion manager. He did not want to only get by in the nation with his familiar face as a famed general.

What was he going to do if he hoped for the team's results to rise even a level higher? Other than adjusting the formation of the core team, what was more important was to stockpile the bench with substitutes of stronger capabilities.

The experience of the countless people ahead of them proved an indisputable truth – any team which suddenly erupted into success was certain to have an admirable core line-up formation. However, when the Nouveau riche sailed across the sky of the international football scene like a shooting star, what made their rapid success and downfall was their strong core formation, and the tragic reserve line-up buried beneath.

Earlier, it was mentioned that Nottingham Forest's current core formation was enough to rank in the top five of the EPL. That said, in comparison with such a glorious core formation of immense strength, their reserves were unjustifiable.

Of the three lines, the ability of the reserves for the forward line was likely to be the strongest. Denmark's youth prodigy Nicklas Bendtner's talent was without doubt. However, he was still much too tender currently. Meanwhile, due to Eastwood's severe injury in the season before the last, he had not been fielded very much in the previous season. Even after recovery from his injury, he appeared on the field mostly as a substitute.

The capabilities of the two were without question. They only lacked a method of proof.

The reserves' abilities for the midfield showed the beginning of a downtrend.

George Wood never had a suitable substitute. The number of times Iceland player, Gunnarsson was fielded in a season could be counted on one hand. Pinning hopes on him to strengthen the team's capabilities was an impossible task. The two most secure positions in Nottingham Forest were the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, and their defensive midfielder, George Wood.

Regarding the other midfielder, Arteta, he and Albertini's situation were unique. Originally, Albertini was not supposed to be a substitute. However, it could not be helped that the one injury he sustained before the season triggered a massive activation of all the chronic problems that he had accumulated in his professional career. With his body declining day by day, he was unable to finish an entire season in such a highly challenging and highly compact league. As a result, the Spaniard who had only been in the team for half a season, Mikel Arteta, was pushed up by Tang En at the last minute, becoming Wood's most frequent midfield partner in the Premier League.

In this manner, even with Albertini's recovery and return to the team, it was unavoidable for him to play as a substitute because it was impossible for Tang En to split the new midfield partners who were beginning to have a better tacit understanding of each other and who worked well together.

The two, Albertini and Eastwood, were proof of Tang En's rule about "not personal preferences, but only player conditions and performances" when it came to the deployment.

Albertini was an outstanding and qualified substitute. His experience and technique were immensely helpful to the team. The man, depending on his brain in playing football, was able to comprehensively complete the missions given to him by the manager in a limited time. It was a great loss for Tony Twain that such a brilliant player could only represent Forest in battle for another season. He could always spend more money to get good players, but experience was priceless.

Strictly speaking, Ribéry's substitute was Kris Commons. However, his abilities, despite his passionate love for Forest Team, were at best mid to bottom tier of the English Premier League. Despite this, Tang En did not intend to get rid of him. The team needed such loyal people. The fans also approved of Commons with his hardworking and uncomplaining attitude, as well as his devoted loyalty to the team. However, letting him be Ribéry's substitute was not very reassuring.

Other than searching for a substitute for Ribéry on the transfer market to solve this, another simple solution would be to change Gareth Bale into a left midfielder instead of a fullback on the left wing. Bale was still young; it would aid him in gaining experience if he played a few more years as a substitute.

Ashley Young's substitute was the young champion, Aaron Lennon. In the limited chances he got to be in the field in the last season, Lennon had shown his talent, delighting Tang En. His situation was different from the other midfield substitutes. What Tang En fretted over was not a lack of ability from Lennon. Instead, it was how he could satisfy Lennon's hopes of getting to play in more matches, how he could strike a balance in the relationship between two outstanding players. Tang En believed that with Forest going all out in the new season, it would be no problem for Lennon to gain more opportunities to be fielded.

For the substitutes on the defensive line, both the right and left fullbacks were extremely capable. Although Sun Jihai's appearances on the field in the previous season were not as frequent as Chimbonda's, he was not someone the team could simply dispense with. His ability to take on diverse roles made him an excellent utility player whenever Tang En was faced with an urgent lack of players.

Gareth Bale, who was earlier mentioned regarding midfield substitutions, could play as a fullback on the left or as a left midfielder. If he was changed into playing as a left midfielder, there would then be no substitution left for the left fullback... Tang En's initial conceptualization was to make Bale a well-rounded talent on the entire corridor of the left wing; to be able to play both midfield and fullback. In

that way, no matter which position it was that needed to be filled, he could do the job. They could use one person as two. This might even gain him more opportunities to be fielded.

The reserves for center back were Matthew Upson and Wes Morgan. Both belonged to the category of players lacking ability. The difference between the two was that Matthew Upson was a purchase after the team's rush into the English Premier League, whereas Wes Morgan was a player nurtured from the team's own Youth Training Camp. The latter's situation was similar to that of Commons. Even if Morgan's abilities made it certain that he would never be able to play as a core player within the team, and even playing as a substitute might render assaults from critics, Tang En would not consider selling him away unless he himself asked for a transfer. Even then, Tang En would do his best to convince him to stay.

This person was their own. England's teams strongly valued their own. No matter how their abilities were, so long as they were their own, they would be able to attain preferential treatment and the fans' favor.

Ending the discussion on the defensive line and moving on to the goalkeepers, the number one reserve was naturally Paul Gerrard, who had substituted in during the finals of the Champions League. Reserve number two for the goalkeeping position was Barry Roche.

This position was both crucial and awkward at the same time.

The position of a goalkeeper was unique. After determining the main goalkeeper, it would not be easily changed unless he got injured or was suspended from matches.

A core goalkeeper only needed to have the ability and maintenance of a stable condition to be able to stand in front of the goal gates for many seasons in a row. It was always the core goalkeepers who people remembered from successful teams. How many people know of Schmeichel's substitute goalkeeper in Manchester United? About Casillas' sub in Real Madrid? Or the name of Buffon's substitute in Juventus?

Choosing a substitute goalkeeper was as difficult as searching for a sub for George Wood. On one hand, they needed to have the ability, so they could not be too weak. On the other, they had to be able to withstand the loneliness and be willing to be a substitute. Where would they find such a player? Who was willing to only be a reserve? Who did not desire to be a core player? If one had the ability to be a core goalkeeper on another team, why would they choose to come here to be a substitute instead?

After the finals of the Champions League, Tang En began considering the candidates for a substitute goalkeeper. In the end, after having taken a trip to China and with the World Cup ended, there was still no suitable candidate that he had in mind.

A name flashed across in his mind once, "Wang Dalei". But he immediately dismissed it. It was not that he was afraid to buy Chinese players. Furthermore, Wang Dalei at this point was someone with much potential and talent; no matter how, he was evaluated by FIFA to be among the "five most anticipated new stars." The crucial issue was not Wang Dalei's abilities, but that he simply did not have the qualifications to play in the English Premier; he had never managed to get a 75% representation for China's National Team in any senior international matches. Even if Forest really bought him, they would

not be able to get a work permit for him. And going to the lengths of especially activating the “Exceptional Talent Clause” was much too wasteful for a substitute goalkeeper.

This was the current situation of Nottingham Forest’s main and reserves formation.

Nottingham Forest’s root in getting a foothold within the English Premier League was based on defense and counterattacking. According to reason, Forest’s defense should already be extremely comprehensive with no need for further improvements. However, Tang En still chose to begin his work from the defense this time; to improve on the abilities of the defense substitutes and raise the internal competitiveness within the team.

He did not want the group of boys to think that their holds over the core positions were stable.

So, in summer, the team would be bringing in support beginning from the defensive line, but he would not comment more on the goalkeeping position. The center back position also required reinforcing. Both Pepe and Piqué were still young, so Tang En was leaning towards finding a capable fullback who was a bit older and more experienced on the transfer market to make up for their lack of experience.

And then he had to figure out a way to get a substitute for Wood. Otherwise, it might become a breaking point in a crucial match when Wood got suspended from matches because of accumulated yellow cards or a red card. Just think about the Champions League’s finals... If George Wood were there, Tang En would not feel that his team had had one player fewer than Barcelona even if Edwin van der Sar were to be fouled out.

If they had had a qualified substitute, Tang En could change them out with Wood during the end stages of the match with Arsenal, minimizing his risks.

Tang En’s plan was commendable, but he had not managed to implement it in time.

Just as he was about to begin adjusting the team, beginning from the defensive line, a fact was set before him, telling him that he needed to change his plans and adjust beginning from the forward line instead.

“Our reporters have gotten pictures of Anelka’s brothers walking out of a hotel with Benítez... This Spanish restaurant is Benítez’s favorite place to eat at in Liverpool. The question is, what were Anelka’s agents doing there?”

If not for Tang En’s decision on a whim to switch on the television to watch the sporting competitions, he might not have seen that news report at all. He would have been left in the dark until the other party revealed their cards.

So, it was not hard to imagine what he had felt when he saw the news.

He felt that he had been deceived.

He still remembered what he had once told Anelka: “When you want to leave, be certain to let me know.”

But now?

If he had not watched the sporting news, he would not have even realized that the two damned brothers of Anelka secretly communicating with Liverpool!

Chapter 460: An Invitation from Ferguson

“No one knew what it meant for Anelka’s brothers to show up next to Benítez...”

Twain stared intently at the news still playing on the television.

“Tony?” Dunn asked next to him.

“What the hell does that mean? Isn’t it clear enough?” Twain muttered as he turned to walk up the stairs, not hearing Dunn’s words.

Twain went upstairs and searched for Anelka’s phone number. He stood at the window and dialed the number.

He certainly knew what it meant.

What else can it mean? Anelka’s brothers are up to something again. No, maybe the two of them have received Anelka’s instructions this time.

He had replaced Anelka in the Champions League final. At the time, Twain’s mind was full of the game alone, and he did not think too much about it. Later, after the game had ended, he calmly thought about it and supposed that the replacement might have upset Anelka. However, as he was held back by all sorts of matters, he did not look for the Frenchman to explain his reasons for this substitution.

Ah, I didn’t think... I really didn’t think Anelka would make a move so quickly by allowing his brothers contact other clubs.

An unanswered beep came from the phone.

Twain slammed his phone onto the bed.

He could now finally understand how Wenger felt when he had called Anelka.

Are you playing this card again?

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Dunn looked strangely at Twain coming down the stairs.

“He didn’t answer?” he asked.

Twain nodded, went to the couch, and sat down in a huff.

“Is he leaving, then?”

“Do you think I can still make him change his mind?”

“I’d advise against letting him go. We’re short a fast striker.”

“We can go to the transfer market and find...”

“From a tactical point of view, he is best suited to the current team.”

When Twain heard Dunn say so, he shook his head helplessly. "I admit that. He was great, taking a season to get used to the team. Wait a minute." He suddenly sat up, "I'm not letting him go. It's not going to be that easy. But this can't be ignored either. I think that we should continue to strengthen our front line."

Dunn was a little surprised to hear that, "You still want to buy a striker?"

"Bingo." Twain nodded firmly.

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The Calciopoli happened as scheduled. That had not changed at all. It was exactly the same implicated clubs and people.

Juventus was stripped of its Serie A title and its relegation to Serie B was almost certain to be on the cards. Now, everyone was focused on what would happen to another powerhouse team; whether AC Milan would be relegated or penalized with point deduction.

Real Madrid was frantically courting AC Milan's midfield core, Kaka. As long as AC Milan was eventually sentenced to relegation, then Kaka would be almost certain to leave the team.

The slight inconsistency with what Twain knew of the "Phone Gate" incident was the players who ran away after the Juventus supermarket was opened.

Capello took three of his players and hurried to Real Madrid when he took over.

Yes, there were three players.

They were the captain of the Italian national team and this FIFA World Cup's Golden Ball winner, the center back, Fabio Cannavaro, the Brazilian midfielder, Emerson, and the most important person, the one very much valued by Capello, the French striker, David Trezeguet.

Trezeguet joined Real Madrid and was the best center forward in Capello's mind.

As a result, the future of another player who should have joined Real Madrid would become unknown.

"The Bundesliga team Bayern Munich has officially asked Manchester United about the price for Ruud van Nistelrooy. The relationship between the Dutch striker and Ferguson was completely damaged before the World Cup. He was also not trusted by Marco van Basten at the World Cup. It looks like the Dutchman needs a different place to start over."

Twain switched off the satellite television at Evan Doughty's office and played with the remote control in his hand.

"That's your target, Tony?" asked Doughty.

Twain nodded, "That's right. We need a player who can absolutely dominate in the penalty area and I can't think of anyone better than him."

Sitting across him, Allan also nodded lightly. "From a commercial standpoint, if van Nistelrooy could come, it will greatly stimulate our jersey sales. He's a real world-class football star." The two men were in complete agreement this time.

After he listened to the two men, Evan Doughty was silent for a moment, and then he looked up at Twain, "For such a world-class player, you know what kind of remuneration he would ask for, right?"

"Of course; we might need to come up with a salary that is higher than the team's current maximum wage to attract him. But we have one advantage that we can make use of." Twain put up his index finger.

"Oh?" Evan Doughty and Allan Adams were piqued when Twain said the word, "advantage."

"Van Nistelrooy is turning thirty soon. He did not have a good time at Manchester United last season and did not have an important position at the World Cup. Almost everyone believed that his career has come to an end, that he should consider his retirement, that it's no longer possible for him to recreate the brilliance of his 'king of the goal area' years... Under such circumstances, no one would give him a higher salary than what he receives at Manchester United. It's impossible for even our rival, Bayern Munich. So, if he's going to come, it must be the highest salary on the team. But I think it's within the reach of the club."

After listening to Twain's analysis, Evan Doughty glanced at Allan. He wanted to hear the opinions of the marketing manager and financial advisor.

Allan ruminated for a moment and said, "Our performance as the Champions League runner-up has given us a lot of television broadcast fees, plus the winning bonuses after each game. The club has plenty of funds available for Tony to use in the transfer market this summer."

When he heard that answer, Twain smiled. That was what he had hoped to hear.

"Furthermore, based on van Nistelrooy's influence and foreseeable returns, it's worth the investment. I agree with that transfer plan."

Since Allan had agreed, Evan would not have any objections. "In that case, Tony, just go ahead with what you've laid out. We can contact Manchester United now."

"I'll get busy." Twain stood up, intending to leave.

However, Evan stopped him. "Tony, did you hear about Anelka?"

Twain looked back at Allan, sitting on the couch, and nodded. "I've heard."

"Well, is there anything you can do about it?"

"I called, but no one answered." Twain shook his head. "The players are still on holiday and I can't get in touch with him. We can only wait until training starts again."

Evan thought about it and waved his hand. "I see. I'll let you go and get busy."

Twain turned and left.

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Carrington. The Manchester United training ground in Manchester.

“What?” Manager Alex Ferguson looked at the fax in his hand and found it a bit inconceivable.
“Nottingham Forest wants to buy the Dutchman? Is there something wrong with Twain’s brain?”

Sitting opposite him, his assistant, Queiroz, shrugged.

“Doesn’t he know what Manchester United’s tradition is? We’re not like those idiots in Arsenal, Chelsea, and Liverpool who give our players away to our competitors.”

Ferguson was right. Manchester United rarely sold their players to their main competitors in the league in the transfer market. To give a simple example, there had been no deals in players between them and Liverpool in forty-two years. Both teams were bigwigs in English football.

“Are you saying that Nottingham Forest is our main competitor, Sir?”

“You tell me.” Ferguson looked at Queiroz. “Who squashed us last season?”

Queiroz disagreed. “Unquestionably, they ranked ahead of us last season. But, Sir, I don’t think the Forest team is capable of posing a long-term threat to us. They’ve behaved more like upstarts these past two seasons. They’re just lucky, that’s all. Just look at last season. They put in all their effort only to fall apart at the end. It’s obvious. They don’t possess real power. Our main competitors are still Arsenal and Chelsea.”

After he listened to his assistant’s analysis, Ferguson stared at him for a moment and then said, “Do you know why you didn’t make it after you went to Real Madrid, Queiroz?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve got nothing further to add. Just reject Nottingham Forest’s offer.”

Ferguson waved his hand and closed the matter.

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“F**king hell!” Twain swore. He had just received a response from the Manchester United Football Club. They had rejected the Forest team’s ten million-pound offer for Van Nistelrooy. “They turned us down!”

“That’s expected.” Kerslake sat with his legs crossed on the couch in the office and said, “Everyone knows what Ferguson’s like. He would never sell his players to a major competitor, even if the player himself has to.”

Dunn, a new member of the coaching staff, nodded in agreement.

Twain fretfully paced back and forth in the office. “Is there no other way?”

“What else can be done? I’ve disapproved of you buying van Nistelrooy from the beginning, Tony.” Kerslake shrugged and spread his hands. “There hasn’t been a deal for a player between Manchester United and Liverpool in forty-two years.”

“But we’re not Liverpool.” Twain stopped pacing. “Liverpool and Manchester United are the most influential powerhouses in England and it is normal for them to hate each other. Everyone wants to dominate England. And us? We’re just a small fry.” He extended his pinkie.

He made another turn, returned to his desk, and said, "Help me get in touch with van Nistelrooy's agent. I need to talk to him and see what he himself thinks. And then... I have to meet with Ferguson."

When they heard him say that, Dunn and Kerslake nearly got up from their seats. They stared at Twain with widened eyes.

"Are you out of your mind, Tony?" Kerslake cried out.

"Don't make a fuss." Twain glared at him. "It's not as if I haven't met him before, and we have a friendly relationship. What's wrong with meeting as friends? I'm just inviting him for drinks."

"I don't think Ferguson will accept your invitation."

"Don't think of him like he's an eccentric earl in an ancient magic castle. If Wenger had invited him to get drinks, he might not have accepted it. But everyone else is fine. You help me get in touch with Van Nistelrooy's agent. As for Ferguson, I'll deal with him myself."

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After he had settled the matters, Twain called Pierce Brosnan over. He had promised to accept a short interview from him. When they touched on the recent events around Anelka, Twain claimed he did not know. As for Anelka's brothers and Benítez appearing in the same restaurant, it could just be a coincidence. If that Spanish restaurant really had delicious food and wonderful technique, then it was normal to attract customers and that it was understandable to meet Benítez there by chance.

In short, he did not criticize Anelka for secretly contacting Liverpool. Instead, he insisted that he trusted his player.

"We all know of Anelka's past. But he's currently doing well at Nottingham Forest. He has a rapport with his teammates, and we even broke into the Champions League final together. I don't think he can have any issues. We can still work together for a long time."

Twain had just announced his trust in Anelka; on the other end, the Liverpool manager, Rafael Benítez, had also come out to deny the rumors. He claimed he absolutely did not bypass the Nottingham Forest Football Club and privately reach out to the player's agents. It was as Twain had stated. It was a coincidence that they had shown up at that restaurant at the same time. He also stated that Liverpool was not interested in Anelka. He would not ask his team to bring in Anelka.

Apparently, Benítez had been a lot more cautious since the precedent had been set with the example of Chelsea privately contacting Ashley Cole, which in turn caused Arsenal to kick up a fuss and bring it to FIFA's attention.

That kind of speech was a common occurrence in football. The public did not seem to care about credibility. They only valued results. Just like how Florentino, the president of the Real Madrid club, had insisted at that time that Real Madrid was not interested in Beckham. And what had happened in the end?

Therefore, no one would believe words like "we're not going to sell" or "we're not going to buy." Those words were not said for the benefit of the general public or fans.

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Contacting van Nistelrooy's agent and inviting Ferguson did not happen at the same time. Twain first contacted van Nistelrooy's agent and asked him about his inclination towards leaving Manchester United for the Forest team. The agent said this proposition deserved serious consideration.

After all, the Forest team was the Champions League runner-up. Its stature and influence were completely different from a season ago.

However, the agent did not immediately give an answer to Twain. Instead, he told him that Ruud was currently on vacation and could not be disturbed. He would speak to him in detail when he returned and inform Twain once he had the answer.

Twain expressed his understanding and respect for the decision.

Although he did not receive an exact answer, the other party at least did not directly rebuff him. That meant that there was still room for discussion.

Once he had taken care of matters with the agent, Twain made a phone call to Ferguson.

Ferguson was a little surprised to receive a call from Twain. But he laughed when he heard Twain's pretext.

"You have quite a bit of free time on your hands, Mr. Twain."

"We're rivals on the football field. Surely we can still be friends outside of the field, right?" replied Twain.

"Of course; I'm not as narrow-minded as some." Ferguson was vaguely sarcastic about Wenger.

Twain had no intention of being involved in the feud between the two veteran managers.

"But I don't like beer or whiskey."

"Of course, you like red wine." Twain had done a bit of homework to get to know Ferguson so that he could suit his fancy and make the conversation go smoother later.

"So, Mr. Twain, have you prepared any good red wine?"

Twain was a little caught off guard by Ferguson's sudden question. He was going to prepare after he had set things up with Ferguson. Otherwise, he would have wasted his money if he had paid for something and Ferguson had rejected his invitation in the end.

Hearing Twain falter over the phone, Ferguson laughed complacently and said, "Mr. Twain, I'm going to a horse race the day after tomorrow. Why don't you join me?"

Twain paused for a moment and said, "Didn't I say it's my treat?"

"Of course, it's your treat. I'm asking you to a horse race and you can cover all the expenses."

"That's a good idea."