

Champions 461

Chapter 461: Ferguson's Decision

This was neither the world's most famous Epsom Derby nor the world's most luxurious Royal Ascot. In fact, it was not even any of the five British Classics events in the UK.

Despite being a small-scale horse race, the day of the event still drew nearly 10 thousand spectators. This was enough to see the influence of horse racing within the UK's society.

Ferguson's horse was not participating in the horse races this time. He had come purely for leisurely purposes, and to relax. So, he did not choose to book a luxury box. Rather, he watched the races from the stands.

Before its start, he made a small bet on a horse; it was not a lot of money. As he said to Tang En, "Gambling is for relaxation; money is secondary."

In the end, the horse he bet on became the champion. He earned a small sum of prize money.

"Do you like horse racing, Mr. Twain?" Ferguson led Tang En through the bustling venue to retrieve his prize money.

"I know nothing about it." Tang En shook his head honestly.

"What a pity. I've coached for 32 years, and it's a tiring job. Horse racing is my only opportunity to relax." Ferguson shrugged. "What do you do for relaxation?"

"Drink."

"Drinking is pretty good too." Ferguson nodded. "But, only if it's red wine."

Ferguson looked delighted as he received his earnings from the bet.

With his status and identity, this bit of money should not matter to him. But he still glowed with happiness as he showed his spoils of victory to Tang En.

It is true that Ferguson was nicknamed "the hairdryer" in the confines of the locker room, and that he was cold and merciless in matches as if he was some wild and ferocious Tyrannosaurus rex. But outside the field, he was really a passionate old man with a good affinity with people. While his good relationships in the managerial circle of the English football scene were in part due to the outstanding results of Manchester United, a larger part could be attributed to his personal charm.

When Tang En had first met Ferguson at the reception by the League Managers Association, he was surrounded by a group of people from the same industry, listening to him speak. At that time, Tang En thought they were just people in the field trying to ingratiate themselves with the successful ones; he had felt great disdain for it. But now, he realized it was perhaps due to Ferguson's passionate character.

"400 pounds. It's not a lot of money. That horse was a favored winner. I would rarely bet money on an unpopular horse. It's hard to win unexpectedly," Ferguson said as he looked at Tang En meaningfully.

"Let's go have a drink." He pointed to a small bar not far ahead of them.

There were many people in the bar, all of whom were discussing the horse races that had just ended. In the UK, football is the most popular sport among the public, with horse racing being in second.

“How does it feel? Are you seeing a world completely apart from football?” Taking a sip of red wine from his glass, Ferguson’s excited face made him seem as if he was already slightly inebriated.

Tang En scrutinized the people around him and nodded.

“I have a question, Tony. Why did you suddenly think to ask me out for a drink?” Ferguson put down his wine glass and looked at Tang En. “I know you’re not prone to hospitality.”

“It was a whim.” Tang En lied without batting an eyelid.

“Then, why didn’t you invite Wenger? Hasn’t he known you since you were still a manager at the Youth Team?”

Ferguson and Wenger did not get along with each other. Everyone knew that. Tang En was worried that repeatedly mentioning him would make Ferguson’s good mood fade, so he waved his hand and said, “This isn’t the time for English Premier League talk...”

Ferguson laughed. “So, this must be a big coincidence. I just turned down Nottingham Forest’s offer for Ruud van Nistelrooy, and you’ve immediately called me out for a drink... is there really no correlation?”

Since his intentions were already exposed, there was no point in continuing to put on an act. Tang En shrugged helplessly. “You’re not wrong. It is related. And it’s extremely important. I really hope that you can sell van Nistelrooy to Nottingham Forest.”

Ferguson looked at Tang En with a serious expression. “You’re strange, Tony. For a player, you would treat an opposing manager to a drink. You might be the first person ever to do this. Do you know about Manchester United’s tradition?”

“Of course. But I don’t think we have such an adversarial relationship,” Tang En said with a smile.

“That’s just not true, Tony. Last season, whose team was it that caused Manchester United to not get into the top two of the EPL for the second time in 18 years?” Ferguson asked, staring at Tang En. His question sounded like an interrogation.

“But Chelsea was the champion for the previous season.”

“If I sell Ruud van Nistelrooy to you, the champion for the next season might be you,” Ferguson said with a shake of his head. “I insist that Nottingham Forest is gradually becoming a strong competitor that can pose a threat to Manchester United. The Red Devils don’t make a habit of selling players to their main competitors.”

It should have been a good thing for Tang En to receive the acknowledgment and praise of his opponent. But at this moment, he earnestly wished for Ferguson to look down on him instead.

“That’s totally uncertain...” Tang En found this old man to be surprisingly stubborn. He did not have any reason that could use to persuade the man before him to agree to van Nistelrooy’s transfer. Furthermore, he did not wish to make himself look overly weak in front of his opponent.

Since it could not be done, he could only give up on Ruud van Nistelrooy and pursue other forwards.

Berbatov had already been signed on by Tottenham Hotspur in a step ahead of them. At that time, Tang En was still embroiled in the despair of having lost the Champions League's finals to Barcelona and was in no mood to care about the transfer market. Before the issue with Anelka, Tang En thought that the capabilities of Forest's forward line were already sufficient and had no need of any new players. However, in order to put pressure on Anelka for him to understand his own situation, Tang En decided to make a bid in the transfer market.

Ruud van Nistelrooy was the most suitable candidate. It was a pity to just give up like this...

But what other way was there?

As Tang En drank mouthful after mouthful of wine from his glass, his brain continuously worked to think up a solution.

It was only when he was wakened by Ferguson that he realized he was pouring an empty glass into his mouth.

"You seem troubled," Ferguson said knowingly.

Tang En felt somewhat awkward, thinking, it's because of you!

Seeing Tang En's expression, Ferguson laughed. He made no effort to cover up his own delight. "Other than the Dutchman, do you have any other choice of forwards?"

Tang En shook his head. "Not at the moment."

"Does that mean I've successfully disrupted the pre-season battle plans of my main competitor?"

"You could say that." Tang En shrugged. He had already given up on the idea of convincing Ferguson. This stubborn old man was not someone he could easily convince. He would treat this as really having invited him out for a drink.

"Alright, I give up." He raised his hands in surrender. "I admit we're your main competitor, a strong foe. We're very likely to threaten Manchester United's position in the English Premier League. Not just that, I think that Forest might also pose a threat to the position of several Premier League teams in the European competitions. My aim next season remains the Champions League. I understand your thoughts about wanting to maintain your own dominance. I can understand it very well. But... even if we are opponents on the field, it's no big deal to have a drink off the field, right?"

"Of course." Ferguson nodded.

Tang En poured himself more wine and raised his glass. "Then, let's not talk about Manchester United or Nottingham Forest today. No discussions on football. Tell me about this horse racing you're so fond of..."

The two really did not have any further discussion of football that day. They did not seem like two managers in opposition with each other in the League, instead looking more like old friends who had not met for years. Ferguson chatted to his heart's content, while Tang En drank with similar enthusiasm.

Both were even somewhat reluctant when it came time to part ways. They agreed to come out together for a drink and watch horse races whenever they had time in the future.

When the two returned to their respective teams, however, this friendship would immediately be put to the side. They had their own masters to serve.

Dunn was the first person to see Tang En.

“Failure?” Dunn knew when he saw Tang En’s despondent expression.

“Yeah.” Tang En threw himself onto the couch and pinched at his temples, the smell of alcohol dispersing around the room as he did so.

“Are you drunk?”

“No, I’m not drunk.”

Hearing Tang En’s answer, Dunn curled his lips in doubt. He could not even talk clearly, and he wanted to insist on not being drunk?

“Don’t... don’t judge me on how I- I’m slurring, but my- my brain- brain... is still clear!”

No one would believe his mind was still clear.

“Tomorrow, tomorrow... tomorrow, give Manchester United a fax... and raise- raise the offer to 15 million... million...” Tang En’s voice diminished until there were only snores left.

Upon hearing his final words, Dunn turned to look at Tang En, fast asleep on the sofa.

This was being clear-headed?

He sighed and shook his head.

When Tang En woke up the next day, he found himself already in his bedroom. He squinted as he watched the bright sunlight spilling into the room through the windows.

Another hangover...

Washing up and getting dressed, he had breakfast, with Dunn and rushed to the club to start a brand-new day at work.

The first thing Tang En did was indeed make another offer to Manchester United. His target was Ruud van Nistelrooy.

This time, Dunn was truly taken aback. He had thought that Tang En was only spouting nonsense yesterday when he was drunk. He did not expect him to remember it.

Meanwhile, Kerslake thought Tang En had already come to an agreement with Ferguson yesterday, expressing no doubts.

15 million pounds. That was the new price Nottingham Forest was offering to Manchester United. It was raised five million from their first offer. Tang En was truly persistent in getting Ruud van Nistelrooy.

“Again?” Queiroz was rather surprised upon receiving the fax. Ferguson had told him about what had happened yesterday, and it did not seem as if the two had made any deal or come to any tacit agreement.

Ferguson held onto the second offer from Forest, looking at it in a daze.

Hadn't Tony Twain already given up?

“Turn it down?” Queiroz asked.

Ferguson waved his hands and said nothing. He only continued staring at the item in his hands, as if he could tell Tang En's true thoughts from this piece of paper.

Back then, when Manchester United had brought in the Dutchman, they had spent 19 million pounds, creating a new record of transfer fees in England.

It had been five years since then. Ruud van Nistelrooy had given the most beautiful and glorious days in his professional career to the Red Devils, Manchester United. Here, he had truly grown into a world-class forward.

Originally, this beautiful cooperation between them could continue... But the relationship between the two had eventually fallen apart.

These sorts of matters have been seen all too often by Ferguson. He had stayed with this rich and powerful club for almost 20 years now. In that time, he had welcomed and sent away countless people, whether they were rookies he had personally nurtured or football stars he advocated to purchase; Whiteside, Paul Ince, Stam, Beckham, Roy Keane, and now Ruud van Nistelrooy.

In the great Red Devils, Manchester United, there was only one superstar, one person they could not do without. That was their main manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. Any player who wished to challenge his authority here had only one ending: being driven out of Carrington. He did not feel any sorrow for Ruud van Nistelrooy's departure. Now, Manchester had a group of outstanding young players; the future belonged to them. Even if van Nistelrooy did not have any differences with him, he would still have been gradually phased out.

Tony Twain...

Ferguson thought of the name again.

Three years ago, no one heard of him. He was completely without any impression of the man. It was like he fell suddenly from the sky, abruptly taking charge of Nottingham Forest and rushing into their field of vision.

Ferguson scoured his memory for everything related to that name.

And he finally recalled it.

At a League Managers Association's reception one time in the summer three years ago, Nottingham Forest's main manager, Brian Clough, suddenly agreed to attend the special reception organized for Ferguson's being named as the Manager of the Decade. Prior to it, Clough's health conditions were

poor. He had had a liver operation done, and it was then a long period since he had appeared in the public eye. He stayed shut in all day at his own home in Derby County.

Bobby Robson tried inviting Clough; after all, Ferguson's achievements were enough to have the seniors come to give their congratulations. Back then, Ferguson did not think Clough would come down; that characteristic old man showed no restraint commenting on his mistakes in front of the media in the past.

Unexpectedly, Clough not only came, he even brought someone else along. Then, he did not introduce the young man beside him holding his clothes to anyone there. Ferguson also chanced that single meeting with him, only giving him a glimpse before paying no further heed.

He now realized that the young man who looked like Clough's private doctor was the English general currently in the limelight, Tony Twain.

In a span of three years, he had grown into a famed general who led a team to leap three grades in three years, fight their way into the Champions League's finals, and force Barcelona into a sorry state; all this from one who used to be unknown.

Ferguson suddenly realized that even if he did not sell van Nistelrooy to Nottingham Forest, Tang En would still threaten his own position. And that boy was right. He was not only threatening Manchester United's position; he was a threat to the position of Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, and all the other strong teams in Europe.

The lad was shrouded with a layer of mystery. Even now, no one could clearly explain how Tony had originally found Franck Ribéry in the lower-tiered French Leagues, a player who was now a core player in the French National Team. They also could not understand how he saw the potential for football in George Wood, who was then working as a mover. Nor did they know what gave him his firm belief in the enormous potential in Gareth Bale when he was only an insignificant player who had trained in Southampton for a day. When Pepe was in FC Porto and was unable to play matches, Tang En activated the exceptional talent clause only available once a season to help Pepe get a work permit despite having no proof of his abilities in a high-level League match. Also, Piqué and Bendtner were hot prospects for the future that Ferguson and Wenger had been observing and following for many years. And then, it was as if Tony, who had only just risen to the English Premier League, knew about the two even earlier than them. He had signed on the two as quick as lightning. It had to be known that before this, he was still in the First Division, or was only involved with the Youth Team... Was his foresight truly that far-seeing? At that time, did he already know that he was going to become the main manager of the team, and that he was going to lead them to rush into the English Premier League, into battling in the UEFA Champions League?

Ferguson himself eventually had to retire... At that time, what would Manchester United do? Queiroz was not someone they could pin too much hope on. He could only be an assistant manager. After searching throughout England, he felt that the only man who could take over his legacy was Tony Twain. This was a youth with a tradition of victories who had an unquenchable thirst for championships.

Perhaps, he should sell him a favor.

“Agree to their offer. Allow them to discuss with the Dutchman’s agent. At the same time, also accept Bayern Munich’s price.”

Queiroz was shocked.

“But, Sir, didn’t you say...”

Ferguson knew what Queiroz wanted to say, so he interrupted him and very seriously answered the doubts in his assistant manager’s heart. “Carlos, my eight championships in the EPL, five in the English FA Cup, and one in each of the Champions League, Cup Winners’ Cup, Super Cup, and Intercontinental Cup, were not attained simply by refusing to sell players to our opponents.”

Chapter 462: The King of the Goal Area

“The latest news tells us that the Dutch veteran Ruud van Nistelrooy has a new pursuer. Manchester United has announced Nottingham Forest Football Club’s interest in the Dutch striker. And they have accepted the Forest team’s offer. Neither Nottingham Forest nor Manchester United have released the specific figure for the offer...”

“The media responded pretty quickly,” muttered Twain as he looked at the situation outside the training ground’s wire mesh wall.

Just after the news was announced, the outside of Nottingham Forest’s training base was surrounded by journalists from across England. In fact, the media knew about Nottingham Forest’s first offer and the outcome of it. The British media and Ferguson’s assistant manager thought the same thing. Nottingham Forest was Manchester United’s archrival in the league. With Ferguson’s temper, he was unlikely to sell a player on his team to a competitor in the same league, even if that person was a player he no longer needed.

Therefore, after the Forest team’s first offer was rejected by Manchester United, it did not attract much attention from the British media as this was an expected outcome. At the same time, the Bundesliga team, Bayern Munich’s bid also attracted the attention of the media. In their view, that was more newsworthy.

They did not expect Manchester United to agree to the Forest team’s bid out of the blue after Nottingham Forest’s second offer. At that instance, all the media’s eyes were turned to Nottingham.

“There must be a lot of questions on their minds that they want to ask,” said David Kerslake as he looked at the fully equipped reporters.

Twain shrugged.

The Forest team had resumed team training yesterday. At this stage, the team did mainly stamina training. The various coaches’ work was not demanding, so Kerslake had time to chat with Twain. But Dunn was very dedicated and watched over the team on the training ground, even though he was not a physical fitness coach.

Kerslake said correctly that those reporters had a lot of questions to ask Twain. For example, what was the exact figure of the second offer, how did Ferguson agree to the Forest team's offer this time, was there some unknown insider story behind the acceptance of the offer, such as behind-the-scenes deals?

"Tell everyone that until the deal is confirmed and completed, we are not accepting any media related interviews and will not hold any press conferences," Twain instructed his assistant.

Kerslake nodded to show that he understood and then asked another question. "What's the news from the Dutchman?"

"Their agent told me that Ruud had already received the news. But because we still have other competitors, he needs to think carefully about which offer to accept."

"I see."

"All right, let's get back." Twain glanced at the reporters and turned to walk back to the training ground.

As the team's two assistant managers, Dunn and Kerslake had already assumed the full responsibility for the team's training. The whistles of the two coaches rang out repeatedly on the training ground. Amidst the bustle, no one noticed that the Tony Twain had snuck out of the side gate and left. He took a detour through the youth team training base, got into Landy James' cab in front of the gate, and drove away from Wilford.

After training had ended, the reporters standing guard at the gate of the training base did not see Twain. Charged with dealing with the reporters, Kerslake simply answered some things that everyone already knew but declined to speak about the Forest team's second offer to Manchester United or other related matters. For example, when a reporter asked about the progress of the individual negotiation with van Nistelrooy, he simply pushed the question onto Twain.

This answer was considered a softer "no." Everyone knew Twain's temper and Kerslake must have been instructed by Twain to say it. Not to mention that the reporters were unable to locate Twain. Even if they were to locate him, he would not answer any questions. If there was really a fool who found Twain, he would have the door slammed in his face.

It was right to say that the reporters loved and hated Twain. Sometimes his unbridled brash behavior was fodder for the media to hype about. However, there were times when he always was at odds with the media, giving them endless headaches. Twain's career was currently in an ascent. Even if the media was dissatisfied with his pompous behavior, they could only sigh helplessly and do nothing. They could not be like the media in China where they could shut out at the slightest pretext.

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As the media gathered outside the Nottingham Forest's Wilford training base, a number of journalists also gathered outside Manchester United's Carrington training base. But they did not gather there to focus on the conflict between van Nistelrooy and Ferguson. That was not worth paying too much attention to. Before the World Cup, everyone knew that they had clashed with each other and that there was no possibility of reconciliation. Ferguson's position in Manchester United was indestructible and van Nistelrooy's was inevitable. What interested the reporters even more was the feud between Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney.

There, two players seemed to have a deep-seated hatred of each other during the World Cup. The reporters hoped to see a replay of the scene at the Carrington training base, with the teams' two established star players glaring at each other with obvious mutual dislike showing, openly and covertly retaliating during training, and all that tit-for-tat stuff.

However,...under Ferguson's guidance, the two men showed up together, laughing and chatting amiably.

It was extremely disappointing for the major media outlets that waited outside the training ground with their cameras and long lenses.

When everyone paid attention to that pair of foes, they had already forgotten that van Nistelrooy was recently at the heart of a transfer rumor.

After training, van Nistelrooy came out of the locker room after a change of his clothes. He put on his sunglasses and headed straight to the parking lot. He did not receive any media interviews. He just drove away.

After training, the media was focused on the two young players and Ferguson. Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo stated in the interview that their relationship with each other was not affected. As to whether they had really buried their hatchet, no one knew for certain.

Ferguson was interviewed on the sidelines of the training ground. Most of the questions were directed at the relationship between those two players. His reply was the same as those from the two kids. Nothing had happened between them. He reiterated that Cristiano Ronaldo would stay in Manchester United. Then a Nottingham reporter finally asked the question about van Nistelrooy. Ferguson admitted the player might have already left Old Trafford, although he did not say why he had accepted the second transfer offer rejecting Nottingham Forest's first offer.

That question was only asked by a news outlet from Nottingham. After the answer, the media's questions returned to Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney.

Pierce Brosnan, who represented the Nottingham news outlet, shrugged as he looked at the reporters who had squeezed him out of the crowd again.

He was not interested in the feud between Manchester United's two headline star players. For the people of Nottingham, there was only one thing of interest: whether the world-class striker, van Nistelrooy, would come or not.

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Van Nistelrooy did not drive straight home; he had received a call from his agent when he changed his clothes in the locker room after training. The agent told him over the phone that the Nottingham Forest people had arrived and wanted to talk with him face-to-face.

He did not reject the suggestion.

He parked his car at the entrance of a restaurant he regularly patronized. His own agent and the people from the Nottingham Forest Football Club waited inside.

The Dutchman saw a middle-aged man with curly hair and baby face inside the private room.

“Hello, Ruud. I’m Allan Adams, the marketing manager at Nottingham Forest Football Club. You can call me Allan.” The man, who looked younger than his actual age, held out his hand.

Van Nistelrooy put his backpack on the chair and shook hands with him.

“How are you, Allan.”

When the other party had seated, Allan Adams smiled. “We’re very happy that Manchester United has agreed to our transfer offer so that we can finally sit down and have a face-to-face. Nottingham Forest has been interested in you for a very long time, Ruud.”

Van Nistelrooy nodded.

“But before we get down to the specifics, we still have to wait for one more person to come. He’s more familiar with these things than me; I’m just the marketing manager.”

When he heard Allan say that, van Nistelrooy glanced at his agent, Roger Linse. He nodded to him to indicate that there was indeed another person.

In that case, who was this person?

Van Nistelrooy’s misgivings had not dissipated before the door was opened by the waiter. Then the three men sitting inside saw a man rush in, covered in sweat.

“I’m so sorry. The damn traffic jam!” He grumbled as he wiped the sweat on his bowed head.

“Tony, we have guests.” Allan Adams awkwardly reminded him.

“Oh...” Twain looked up and saw van Nistelrooy and his agent sitting across from him, and was a little embarrassed. “I’m really sorry, it was a slip of the tongue.”

With that, he went over and held out his hand towards van Nistelrooy, “There’s a traffic jam on the road. I should have arrived first. How do you do, Ruud, I’m-”

“Tony Twain. We all know each other, there’s no need for introduction.” Van Nistelrooy smiled and shook Twain’s hand. He was still a little surprised that the Nottingham Forest manager would come all the way here himself. Under such circumstances, he would actually only need to make a phone call.

Twain shook hands with Linse before he sat down.

“Where were we just now?”

“You came in at the right time, Tony. We got up to where you need to come in and explain.” Allan said to Twain.

Upon hearing that, Twain nodded and took a thick stack of papers from his briefcase. He handed them to van Nistelrooy and said, “We’ve been watching you since early on, Ruud. Last season, before and during the World Cup... these are the relevant reports given to me by my scouts and assistant coaches.”

Van Nistelrooy briefly looked through them, and sure enough, it was all about him. Every aspect of him was in there, his condition and performance in games... it was all there. It looked like when the Forest team talked about their interest in him, it was definitely not just words.

“I’m not good at telling those lies, using exaggeration and giving empty talks. Let’s get straight to the subject, Ruud. I believe you’ve also seen the results of the Forest team last season. But my goal and that of the team is not only like last season. To be the runners-up for the English Premier League and Champions League was definitely not a success for me, but a failure. I need to boost the team’s results to the next level in the new season. So, we need to strengthen our team, and our three lines need to be reloaded. First of all, starting from the front line, we need a dominant center forward in the penalty area, especially within the goal area. Ruud, I think you are the best fit for this position in the entire football world. Real Madrid’s new manager, Capello, has said the best center forward he has in mind is Trezeguet. But you are the best center forward in the world in my mind.”

Twain spoke sincerely and locked his eyes with Van Nistelrooy as he spoke, making him believe every word he said.

“We know there are others competing for you. But I think the English Premier League is the best place for you. You’ve been in it for five years, you’re used to the pace of the game here and the way you play. Everything. Is there any reason to start again in a new league? Furthermore...” Twain looked van Nistelrooy in the eye and said, “I think by staying in England, you’ll have a chance to prove to Manchester United that it was a big mistake to give up on you.”

After he listened to Twain’s remarks, Ruud van Nistelrooy turned his head to look at his agent, Roger Linse. The two men exchanged a look. Then, he turned his head to Twain and said with a smile, “You’ve covered everything. What else can I add?”

Thereafter, Roger Linse said to Twain and Allan, “We thank the Forest club for the careful analysis of Ruud. It reflects your sense of responsibility and sincerity. We also did some research of our own on the Forest team. Ruud was touched by the sincerity of Nottingham Forest among the clubs that came knocking at his door. Ruud had intended to return to PSV Eindhoven in the Netherlands. But after listening to Manager Twain’s expectations for the future, he has the renewed idea of staying in the world’s top league again. He has entrusted me to discuss the specific terms of his contract with your club.”

The meaning of his remark could not have been clearer.

When they heard Linse, Twain and Allan looked at each other and saw joy in each other’s eyes.

“Ah, you can discuss the matter of the contract with Allan.” Twain referred to Allan Adams sitting next to him. He had successfully completed his mission.

He stood up to shake hands with Linse, and then shook hands with van Nistelrooy, “I’m glad you’re able to choose Nottingham Forest, Ruud. You will certainly not regret your choice.”

“I remember Mr. Twain saying just now how you wouldn’t say pretty words.”

“Ah... Of course, these are pretty words, but they are also absolutely true. Don’t believe it? After you’ve officially joined, you can ask your new teammates. They will be happy to tell you stories about me.”

“There are a lot of stories about you in the media. Don’t tell me there are other inside stories?”

Twain glanced at Allan and Linse, who were in a discussion over the details of the contract, and then winked at van Nistelrooy with feigned mystery. “Of course, there are lots.”

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A day later, Manchester United's website announced van Nistelrooy's official transfer to Nottingham Forest, with a transfer price tag of fifteen million pounds. The article stated that the Manchester United Football Club thanked van Nistelrooy for all his contributions to the team over the past five years and wished him all the best at the new club. Ferguson did not make any statement regarding van Nistelrooy's departure and transfer.

No one expressed any surprise at the announcement. Van Nistelrooy's departure was decided before the World Cup, and it was not surprising that Nottingham Forest had beat the other rivals to win the Dutch striker's trust. After all, it was much better to continue playing in the English Premier League he was familiar with than to go to a brand-new league.

On the same day, the Nottingham Forest Football Club held a press conference to welcome van Nistelrooy's joining. At the press conference, Tony Twain, van Nistelrooy, and Evan Doughty appeared in front of numerous reporters with a Forest team red jersey emblazoned with van Nistelrooy's name and number.

The three men were full of smiles on their faces, but each for different reasons.

Evan Doughty was delighted that the team had finally ushered in a truly world-class player in his peak years. Twain was happy because a player he had always appreciated had joined the team and the team had been strengthened. And as for van Nistelrooy? His smile contained many meanings. Perhaps because he had found a new strong owner, or he had received generous terms and remuneration, or perhaps because he still had a chance to prove his ability to Ferguson.

"We are delighted that Nottingham Forest has welcomed such an outstanding player, the world's top center forward and the former Manchester United striker, Ruud van Nistelrooy." Twain purposely used the words "former Manchester United." "It's going to be a four-year contract. The team and Ruud have a lot of confidence in each other. I believe that Ruud's golden years are just beginning!"

Chapter 463: New and Old Players

"Nottingham Forest spends 15 million to bring in former Manchester United forward Ruud van Nistelrooy. This deal has succeeded against all expectations..."

"Tony Twain spends big in one go! Ruud van Nistelrooy has signed a four-year-contract with Forest. This isn't good news for the teams in the English Premier League..."

"When interviewed, Nottingham Forest's fans expressed joy at seeing the main manager bring a world-class forward to the team."

"Even though our forward line is far from weak, who wouldn't want to see it become even stronger? We welcome Ruud van Nistelrooy's arrival with open arms."

"According to a market survey, Ruud van Nistelrooy's arrival has incited an enormous spike in the jersey sales for the club. 720 jerseys bearing the Dutchman's name and number were sold in the span of a day! That's an astonishing number..."

“... I think that Ruud van Nistelrooy’s arrival only marks the first step in Tony Twain’s ambitious plans. Nottingham isn’t willing to concede with their “double runner-up” results from last season. They’re hoping for a breakthrough this season. Just like all the teams who performed well last season, Forest has increased their investments in the new season. The club’s boss would, of course, hope to receive some returns from the money invested, but I’ve seen too many teams swiftly become lost after increasing their stakes in it. I hope Tony and his team won’t be similarly mediocre...”

“This is one of the most noteworthy transfers of this year. Ruud van Nistelrooy did not choose to leave England. He has chosen to stay in the EPL. We believe there will be much to see in the matches between Nottingham and Manchester United in the new season...”

“Following Chelsea’s purchase of Shevchenko and Newcastle’s purchase of Martins, Forest bought Ruud van Nistelrooy from Manchester United. This season’s English Premier League is going to be exciting...”

The news of Ruud van Nistelrooy’s transfer to Nottingham Forest dropped a heavy bomb on the year’s summer transfer market.

The reaction it caused was due to Nottingham Forest’s results in the previous season; it made everyone’s imagination go wild. Such a massive deal was surely because of big dreams. Nottingham Forest was expanding their capabilities. Could their opponents possibly not feel terror and suspicion?

The World Soccer magazine had only just written in their new season’s column proposal that Forest was a strong team when Tang En immediately used concrete actions to prove them right.

In the past two seasons, Forest’s purchases, while all involving people of rather strong ability, were still of those who were slightly lacking in the fame factor. Anelka was likely the most renowned among them, but even he could not be considered at the top level in the football scene. Ruud van Nistelrooy, however, was different. Before he turned 30, he had already attained immeasurable glory both individually and as a group; Eredivisie top goal scorer, Premier League Golden Boot, UEFA Club Forward of the Year, Premier League Player of the Season, Dutch Footballer of the Year... Those individual glories surrounded the Dutchman like a beautiful shroud around him. They were something Anelka could not compare with.

The greatest evaluation Anelka got was how talented he was. While Ruud van Nistelrooy was not seen as a genius player who was brimming with talent, he had a firm and true grasp of those glories in his hands.

Brazil’s famous forward, Romário, had a nickname: “King of the Penalty Zone.” So, Ruud van Nistelrooy, who also excelled at scoring goals, received a similar nickname: “King of the Six-Yard Box.” This nickname painted a clear image of Ruud van Nistelrooy’s specialty. He was the type of pure forward whose threat became greater and greater the closer he got to the goal.

But in comparison, Tang En liked calling him a natural-born goal-scoring machine better.

He liked a killer as cold and merciless as a machine.

Tang En was elated to see the transfer of Ruud van Nistelrooy eliciting such a big reaction from the media. It was not just Nottingham Forest’s media reporting the matter. English, European, and international sporting media were all to some extent reporting about this transfer.

His first aim was achieved. Why did he insist on spending 15 million pounds to bring in Ruud van Nistelrooy instead of finding a younger, less renowned, and less expensive player with more potential? If it was the latter, the transfer would not be able to create the same effect. The media's reactions were what Tang En valued.

He needed someone to pressure Anelka. If that person did not have enough weight behind his punch, it would not pose any threat to Anelka at all.

Now it was different.

He himself had, on numerous occasions, mentioned that Ruud van Nistelrooy was his favorite and most admired forward. Adding to that his level of fame, it was enough to unsettle Anelka.

It had been three days since the team had resumed their training. Anelka was not late for the initial regathering of the team, and he was also punctual for daily training. However, Tang En did not take the initiative to approach him, and he did not have any intention of approaching Tang En for a discussion either. Every day, there was nothing except quietly training and then returning to his residence.

On the team, Anelka had always been such a quiet person. So, the way he acted was seen as rather normal in everyone else's view. Tang En, on the other hand, was taking it all into consideration.

The next day after the press conference, Ruud van Nistelrooy appeared on Nottingham Forest's training grounds, Wilford.

Tang En personally escorted him over, clearly showing how much he valued the new player.

"Let me introduce a new friend to everyone..." Tang En pointed to Ruud van Nistelrooy standing by his side. "Actually, there's not much to introduce. Everyone's familiar with him. He's been our opponent for two seasons."

Saying so, Tang En coughed twice. "I should say, everyone, take your revenge where it's due!"

A look of surprise emerged on Ruud van Nistelrooy's face while the team rang out with raucous laughter.

David Kerslake patted his shoulders. "Don't mind it. He just can't act serious for the life of him."

Realizing that it was just a joke, Ruud van Nistelrooy started laughing too. Using such a method to introduce himself to his new teammates did manage to get rid of any awkwardness. After all, they had been opponents for two seasons. It was inevitably difficult for everyone to step out of their roles from the past. Tang En used the method of cracking a joke to bring that relationship to the surface, managing to relieve everyone's hearts of that burden.

"Hi, everyone. We'll be playing together for the next four years." Ruud van Nistelrooy greeted them naturally, receiving enthusiastic responses from his teammates.

It was the same as what he had heard, but also somewhat different from other rumors.

If a person merely relied on media sources to understand Nottingham Forest, he would surely be very troubled. What kind of team were they exactly?

Some media reports advertised Forest as a team that was united as one both internally and externally, while others made them out to be a pan of scattered sand with numerous conflicts.

Some reported the team's main manager, Tony Twain, to be a charismatic, young prodigious manager who had the talent of leadership, and others believed Tony Twain to be an arrogant, supercilious manager who was inferior to the point of conceit, had a terrible temper and often hit and scolded his players while intervening with press freedom. A scoundrel who committed many misdeeds.

All of those directly contradicting and extreme evaluations could not help Ruud van Nistelrooy figure out exactly what kind of person Tony Twain was, or what kind of team Nottingham Forest was. For one person and team, the evaluations were too markedly different.

When he was playing in Manchester United, Nottingham Forest was his opponent. As opponents, they were often made out to be hateful-looking demons. Then, he had leaned towards the negative evaluations. However, as he had just witnessed, Tony Twain was not an eccentric manager who was tough to get along with. Neither was Nottingham Forest a team filled with people split into factions plotting against each other.

After being a witness to it, he was in even greater disbelief of the media's evaluations.

He felt that the team's atmosphere was great. He would be happy to work for four years here.

Every individual was faced with choices at any given moment of their life. Ruud van Nistelrooy believed that he would not regret today's choice in four years' time.

Tang En gave Ruud van Nistelrooy a pat on the back that startled him. "Go on. It's time to prepare for training."

He walked towards the team. The person who came forward to welcome him was the team captain, Albertini.

"What I want to say comes from everyone. Welcome, Ruud, our ex-opponent."

Amid the enthusiastic, welcoming atmosphere, Tang En did not continue gazing at Ruud van Nistelrooy. Instead, he looked towards Anelka.

Anelka was unaware of Tang En watching him. All of his focus was on his new teammate.

He was not a fool. Of course, he knew the intent behind the team buying a world-class forward.

During the period when his brothers were meeting with Benítez, he had kept his cellphone switched off on purpose. He had known that Tang En would surely try to call him, so he had switched it off. He had thought that Tang En would later approach him to discuss the matter when the team's training started again. Anelka did not expect Tang En to completely ignore him, instead directly buying a strong and capable competitor, Ruud van Nistelrooy.

It seemed like Ruud van Nistelrooy was more easily welcomed by his teammates than when he had first entered the team.

He moved his gaze away from the new player and looked towards Tony Twain. He saw Twain saying something to his two assistant managers in laughter. Were they feeling joy because of the new player?

“Tony, Anelka’s looking at you,” Dunn suddenly said while they were chatting.

Tang En nodded but did not turn his gaze to look at Anelka. “I know.”

“That’s right. I’ve wanted to ask you, Tony.” Kerslake took a glimpse at the French forward, swiftly sweeping his gaze across his face without any pause. “You’ve bought Ruud van Nistelrooy, so how do you plan on dealing with Anelka?”

“Put him on ice for a while. Are there any clubs making offers for Anelka?”

Kerslake shook his head. “No. Liverpool seems really uninterested. I don’t know how his brothers discussed things with Benítez.”

Tang En chuckled. “Anelka and his brothers are infamous. It’s not that easy to find a buyer who isn’t inferior to us.”

If Forest had not gained the sort of results they had in the previous season, then Anelka might have easily found a new master. However, getting runner-up in both the Premier League and Champions League had set a benchmark in Anelka’s heart that was far from low. If he were to transfer again, he certainly would not accept club invitations from those whose results were not on par with Forest’s. But who, among the rich and powerful clubs comparable to Forest in team strength, would want to bring in such an unstable time bomb?

Anelka had once played in Liverpool for a short period, half a season. He was a loaned player. At Liverpool, his performance was commendable. But even though everyone had thought that Houllier would choose to sign a transfer contract with Anelka at the season’s end, he abandoned the untamable forward and instead found another French comrade of his, Cissé.

Why? No one knew what had trespassed behind doors, but Tang En believed it surely had to do with Anelka’s unsociable character and his greedy brothers.

Anelka succeeded in the Forest Team. Suddenly, he became more attractive in the eyes of the other teams. But this was a dual-edged sword. At the same time, this made him significantly increase the demands of his personal treatment. In the past, he could still accept the reality of playing in Man City. Now, other than the top five in the EPL, no other teams were even in his sights.

Regarding the foreign leagues, both teams in the Spanish Leagues and Bundesliga showed little interest in the forward. Perhaps only the France Ligue 1 still had expectations for this world-class shooter coming from France. Of course, Fenerbahçe S.K. Club from the Turkish Leagues must be dying of regret by now. But it was practically an impossible mission to bring Anelka back to Turkey once more.

In Serie A, Inter Milan had benefited the most after Juventus was penalized with a relegation. Not only did they get their hands on the long-absent Coppa Campioni d’Italia, but they also took in numerous players from Juventus, one of which was young prodigy forward, Ibrahimović. Adding to that an Argentine forward, Hernán Crespo, who was loaned from Chelsea, and their original forwards Cruz, Adriano, etc., and Inter Milan had no lack of forwards. In fact, to shed weight for their bloated forward line, they sold Martins to Newcastle.

A.S. Roma was keen but could not afford Anelka.

AC Milan, however...

This was still the same as Tang En's memories. Shevchenko had already transferred to Chelsea. This way, AC Milan had no choice but to look for another forward. In truth, they had already begun searching all over the world. When the time came, would they be looking for Oliveira, who was not in the least suited for Serie A, or Anelka? That remained unknown.

It was just that Tang En had recently heard some news from the grapevine. Someone had told him that Anelka's brothers had appeared in Milan. As to whether they were there for touring and shopping or to meet with particular people, Tang En could not be certain.

"Alright, lads!" Kerslake shouted as he walked onto the field, blowing on the whistle. "Chatting time is over. Training is starting!"

Under the leadership of the two assistant managers and their managerial team, the players returned to the training grounds to begin a new day of practice.

Tang En alone stood on the sidelines, donning dark sunglasses to block out the somewhat piercing glare from the sunlight. No one knew who he was looking at with his eyes hiding behind those sunglasses.

Chapter 464: Whatever Can Happen Will Happen

The situation with Anelka progressed quickly.

His brothers really put in a lot of effort this time, busily running around for their younger brother's future.

Three days later, a transfer offer was placed on Twain's desk.

"Is Anelka only worth fifteen million pounds? This is a joke!" Twain shook the paper, which made a rattling noise. "Adriano Galliani, that old chap, what does he take us for? A beggar?"

"Do we reject it, Tony?" Kerslake asked superfluously.

"Of course! Wait a minute..." Twain considered for a moment. "Inform the department for the official website to put out the news and make it stand out. Especially put their party's bid in bold. Immediately followed by the news that we have refused. Put the two releases together."

Kerslake nodded and got up to deliver the news.

"AC Milan really looks down on others." Twain gnashed his teeth.

Only he and Dunn were left in the office.

"Everyone wants to pay the least amount of money to buy the best players," Dunn said evenly.

Twain looked at Dunn, then looked out of the window, and said, "You're right. But for this kind of insult, I can't just let it go as if nothing has happened."

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Nottingham Forest's official website moved quickly with the updates. Twain had received AC Milan's offer in the morning and the official website had posted the news that the Forest team had rejected the offer in the afternoon.

Then, after the training ended in the afternoon, Twain made a point to speak to the media on the sidelines of the training ground. When the offer was mentioned, he responded to AC Milan in this way:

"We're not going to sell Anelka. He ranked second on the striker chart in the Premier League last season. He's an important part of the team and occupies an important position in our plans for the new season." Long used to facing the media, Twain was completely able to spin his words without missing a beat or changing his expression. "I don't want to answer this question repeatedly. Anelka's not going anywhere."

The media naturally did not believe his words. If Twain had said that before he bought van Nistelrooy, then a lot of people would have fallen for it. However, now, only a fool would believe him.

"Of course..." Twain knew that no one believed him. What he had said earlier was just for show. To put it bluntly, it was all nonsense. The important part was at the back. "If AC Milan is willing to trade Kaka, then we can just about accept the offer of fifteen million pounds."

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Twain knew what kind of repercussions his remark would cause. He would almost certainly offend AC Milan.

And that proved to be the case.

AC Milan's reaction was fierce after they received his response. In addition to Galliani's claim that AC Milan's Kaka was not for sale, he also criticized Twain's disrespectful comments. In his view, AC Milan was a world-renowned powerhouse team, and an insignificant Nottingham Forest was not yet qualified to challenge them.

Twain did not care what Galliani thought of him and his team. His purpose was accomplished. AC Milan immediately gave up their follow-up offer, and the purchase of Anelka was not mentioned again.

After that, AC Milan quickly reached an agreement with the La Liga team, Real Betis, to purchase Ricardo Oliveira with the terms of fifteen million Euros plus the Switzerland national football team captain, Johann Vogel.

This transfer was unexpected to analysts. Previously, AC Milan's pursuit of Anelka was a normal transfer move. After all, despite Anelka's peculiar temperament, his power was undeniable. He had proved himself in last season's English Premier League and Champions League. The analysts previously thought that after being rejected by Nottingham Forest, AC Milan would consider other strikers, such as Ronaldo, who was not happy in Real Madrid, and it would be some time before the true candidate was revealed.

They did not think that AC Milan would unexpectedly sign Oliveira in a flash, leaving their own fans a little stupefied.

Players who had done well in La Liga tended to fare worse in Italy. Therefore, this transfer was even harder to fathom. No one knew why AC Milan wanted to buy Oliveira. There were plenty of strikers at a higher standard than he was. Why did they choose Oliveira, who had been seriously injured?

Twain was not surprised in the least. It happened exactly as what he had known. He could not figure out before why AC Milan would look for Oliveira as a replacement for Andriy Shevchenko. He still did not understand to this day. However, he did not have the time to worry about whether AC Milan's transfer investment would be wasted.

He had his own troubles to deal with.

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After AC Milan signed Oliveira in a flash, Anelka knew that his likeliest chance of leaving Nottingham Forest had vanished.

The other clubs were just all words and little action. They repeatedly said that they admired Anelka's ability very much, but there was no real action. For example, Benítez, that old fox, professed a great desire for him and then stood him up.

He realized that he should take the initiative to do something.

Therefore, after today's training, he did not take a quick shower alone and leave. Instead, he went straight into the manager's office.

When Anelka pushed open the door and walked in, Twain was discussing plans for tomorrow's friendly match with Dunn and Kerslake.

The two assistant managers looked at each other when they saw Anelka come in. They found an excuse to leave. Only Twain and Anelka were left in the office.

"Have a seat." Twain pointed to the couch.

Anelka did not. He stood in front of Twain.

"Anything you want to talk to me about?" Twain asked.

"I want the club to let me transfer." Anelka got right to the point.

Twain pretended to look surprised, "Why are you saying this? Haven't we been working well together?"

"That was the case before the Champions League final. But I've changed my mind."

Twain circled around the desk and walked up to Anelka. He looked at the other man in the eye and said, "Is it because I replaced you?"

Anelka did not nod or shake his head, but he silently conceded.

"Alright." Twain sighed. "I should apologize to you. If I had explained it to you earlier, perhaps you might not have wanted to leave."

"But I don't want to hear any explanation right now." Anelka was adamant.

Faced with that attitude, Twain stuffed back all the things he wanted to say. He froze for a moment with his mouth open and then turned to walk back. With his back facing Anelka, he looked out of the window at the twilight sky without a sound.

The air in the room seemed to solidify, and no one spoke.

After a long while, Twain turned back to Anelka and said, "Very well, I respect everyone's pursuit of his own future. I won't force anyone to do anything he doesn't want to do." He spread his hands open and said, "If a team can offer over twenty-five million pounds, then you can leave."

Seeing how Anelka was going to open his mouth to refute that the price was too high, Twain immediately said, "Let's not talk about the price tag of fifteen million pounds. You think I rejected AC Milan's offer because I didn't want to let you go? Or do you think an important player who was the Number Two striker in the English Premier League and helped the team advance to the Champions League final last season is worth only fifteen million? That offer is not an insult to me, but to you!" He suddenly raised his voice and brandished his fist as he said to Anelka, "To you, Anelka! They wanted to take my first striker for fifteen million? Galliani must have been dropped on his head! He thought that Nottingham Forest had never seen money. He thought that I, Tony Twain, was a hillbilly who would forget my name when I got some money? If AC Milan had offered twenty-five million, I would let you go without another word! But do they dare? They don't dare! They would rather use fifteen million and Vogel to buy a striker like Oliveira than pay another ten million for you. Do you think you can be the core if you went to that kind of team? You can't even do it at Nottingham Forest, do you think you can at AC Milan?"

"Besides Nottingham Forest, what other team is suitable for a player like you? I gave you trust, I indulged you, I gave you everything you wanted. Just because of a tactical adjustment, you're going to f**king betray me! Where were you when your brothers were secretly meeting Benítez in Liverpool? Why did you turn off your phone? Do you still remember what I said to you in the beginning? 'If you want to leave, please remember to let me be the first to know.' You forgot, didn't you? You've forgotten all the things we discussed, haven't you? Now you tell me you want to leave. Where the hell were you a week ago?"

Twain erupted like a volcano and bellowed at Anelka.

Anelka stood there, expressionless and motionless. He allowed Twain's spittle to spray on his face. In his impression, this was the first time the manager had blown such a big temper with him.

In fact, when he calmly thought about it, this individualistic manager really indulged him during his time in Nottingham Forest this season. However, things had gotten to this point. Did he have any recourse?

Once the cracks had appeared, things between them would not be as smooth as before.

With a slight sigh, Twain slowed down his speech and continued. "I'm disappointed in you, Nicolas. Very, very damn disappointed. When the club wanted to buy you, I was the first to object, because I knew you wouldn't have any attachment to this team. We paid good money to buy you, and in the end, you would still leave for some reason, which was not in line with my standards for building the team. I want my players to have feelings for this team and feelings for their teammates. Players who can be like brothers. We are united and worked together for championship titles, bonuses, glory. Whatever it is, we strive

together. We're a single unit, not scattered sand. But you came, and you wore the red jersey from Nottingham Forest, so you became one of us, and I became responsible for you. I accepted you and I let you play as the f**king main force, as the damn core! For you, I even gave up Eastwood, who I like so much. I never hide my fondness for that kid. The entire team knows it. Is this what I get in return? Huh? Well, that's just great."

Twain spread his hands and shrugged. His tone was full of sarcasm and disdain.

"If you want to leave, I'm not going to stop you as long as a team can afford that price. That's not meant to deliberately make things hard for you. That's just my respect for you. You're worth that price. I'll let you go. Of course, if you change your mind and don't want to leave, I also welcome you to stay. But no matter what you decide, I hope you won't regret it." Twain waved his hands. "I have other things to be busy with."

He was showing him the door and Anelka turned to leave.

Not long after Anelka had left, Kerslake and Dunn dashed in.

"How did it go, Tony?"

"How do you think? If he wants to go, he'll still go. If he had wanted to stay, I wouldn't need to make such a great effort to persuade him." Twain sat behind his desk and rested his chin on both hands.

Dunn said thoughtfully in Mandarin, "Whatever can happen will happen."

"What did Dunn say?" Kerslake did not comprehend him.

"Same meaning as what I said just now." Twain translated on his behalf.

"So, you're just going to let the kid go?"

"Do you think it's going to be so easy? If no club offers twenty-five million pounds, Anelka is still our man until his contract expires. I don't care if he's willing to or not. I just want him to understand one thing: I'm the boss here." Twain pointed to himself.

Kerslake nodded. "Looks like his brothers are going to be busy again."

"It's better than having them buzzing around our ears with nothing better to do all day," Twain grunted. "We'll just settle the matter with the Frenchman as it is first. I've said everything that needs to be said. Now there's nothing more we can do about it. Oh, that's right. Reject Bayern's offer for Ribéry. Tell them that Ribéry is not for sale."

Kerslake nodded.

"As for the substitute goalkeeper, I'll ask Pearce tomorrow to see how much the transfer for Peter Schmeichel might be. Gunnarsson's transfer application is approved. He can go anywhere he wants. And then there's... damn it, what were we talking about before Anelka came in?"

"The friendly games." Dunn reminded him.

"Ah! The Amsterdam Tournament!" Twain recalled. "Yes, we can confirm our participation. As for the Premier League Asia Trophy... Forget about that one, there's no point. Flying so far out there wastes our

time and energy and the opponent is still one from the league. The players will not be motivated to play. You're in charge of contacting the other friendlies, David."

Kerslake accepted the task.

Dunn took down Twain's words in a small notebook. This would be the working arrangement of the team in the future.

"In addition, the site for the summer training... Since we're taking part in the Amsterdam Tournament, let's put it in the Netherlands. That's it for the time being."

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On their way home, Dunn and Twain discussed Anelka again.

"I've said before that I hope you don't let him go."

"Yes." Twain nodded.

"I've changed my mind now. I think it's better for you to sell him sooner."

"Are you worried that he'll affect the unity of the team?"

Dunn nodded in acknowledgment.

"He has always been antisocial, so it won't affect it in any way." Twain was not worried about that.

"Even though I predicted that there would be such a day, I'm still very disappointed. Ah, Dunn. A season of hard work has not been able to stay his heart. This damn Anelka, he's never going to accomplish anything big! Does a genius overflowing with talent have to have such a terrible character? That's bulls**t."

Dunn also knew that whether Anelka left or not, he was no longer in the manager's plan for the new season. The honeymoon period for the two men had only lasted one season before the end was announced. In fact, it was not surprising at all for this to occur between two highly individualistic people.

After a moment's silence, Twain sighed and mumbled, "What a pity, it's really such a shame."

Chapter 465: Lofty Aspirations

After Tang En agreed for Anelka to leave, his brothers began busying themselves again. Although the condition of 25 million pounds sounded somewhat high, Anelka's brothers believed that they would surely find a club willing to pay this sum based on their brother's outstanding performance in the previous season.

Tang En also stopped caring about their matters and focused on the team's summer training and other transfers.

First, he gave Man City's main manager, Stuart Pearce, a call. He asked about the possibility of a transfer for Kasper Schmeichel. Man City Club was indeed keen on giving the favored young goalkeeper a chance to train himself. However, it was not very realistic to let him be the core player in Man City's First Team

or even play as the first goalkeeper substitute. Stuart leaned more towards loaning out Schmeichel Jr. to train for a season. After all, the renowned son of Peter Schmeichel was not even 20 years old; he had a limitless future ahead of him.

No matter how good their relations were, Stuart was unwilling to benefit Tang En for nothing.

Tang En would not want to do something like loan a goalkeeper to be a substitute. Forest was no longer some processing factory helping others to train up football stars.

He still hoped for Stuart to consider it for a while and sell Schmeichel Jr. to Forest. This time, Stuart was resolute. After selling Sun Jihai to Nottingham Forest, he did not want to lose a future core goalkeeper for the team. He was, however, agreeable to loaning out Schmeichel Jr. to Forest for one or two seasons. But Tang En was unwilling.

Just like that, the search for a candidate as the substitute goalkeeper entered a stalemate.

Originally, Tang En was in favor of Kasper Schmeichel. But it was not just him who valued this young goalkeeper. He understood that it was a tactful refusal this time; Stuart was not going to give in.

Just as he was feeling vexed from the unsuccessful deal, Dunn recommended another player to him. He had once been very familiar with his name, but it had since faded from his memory. If not for Dunn's mention of it, he would probably have been unable to recall it at all.

Igor Akinfeev. The Russian Premier League team CSKA Moscow's main goalkeeper. He was an important contributor to the team's championship run in the last season of the League.

Tang En's mind suddenly turned optimistic. He was indeed a brilliant goalkeeper who could shoulder Forest's future.

Since they were without any objection from the main manager, Nottingham Forest immediately sent out a purchase request of Akinfeev to Russia's CSKA Moscow.

As a football team from Russia, they were clear about one fact: the outstanding players they had nurtured were certain to take their leave to head towards a stage that was even more vast.

In truth, Nottingham Forest was not the first European club to become interested in this young goalkeeper. Numerous powerhouses, including Manchester United, Arsenal, and AC Milan, all had rumors of interest in purchasing him. But the first club to make a clear transfer request for the young goalie was Nottingham Forest.

The other teams mostly remained spectators. Ferguson even directly dismissed people's hopes of Manchester United bringing Akinfeev in; he claimed that the Russian goalkeeper was not included in his plans.

In the FM07 Tang En had used to play, the goalkeeper known as "AK" was a famous special character. But goalkeeping was a position in which age and experience became highly valued. Young goalkeepers often needed to be observed over a greater length of time. No powerhouse would dare to bet it all on a goalkeeper who had just turned 20. They still hoped to keep observing.

Tang En was aiming for that time difference. In the eyes of the others, he had an image of being a bold gambler in his transfer transactions. This was no exception. While the other clubs were still observing or

hesitating, Forest had already put in a transfer request to CSKA Moscow. Their offer was five million pounds.

The response came quickly. CSKA Moscow was not surprised to hear about Akinfeev's departure, but they were unable to accept the price. They raised it to 7.5 million pounds, approximating 10 million euros.

10 million euros to buy a goalkeeper who was only 20 years old!

In the eyes of several people, it was madness. Even though Buffon's transfer from Parma Calcio 1913 to Juventus was valued at 20 million euros, setting a world record for the value for goalkeepers, Buffon then had already proven his capabilities in the domestic league and the matches representing the national team. Furthermore, another differing point from Akinfeev was that Buffon had come from Italy, a world-renowned strong team. The standards of their league and national team were on an entirely different level compared with Russia.

"If the Russians are trying to use this price to scare us off, they're barking up the wrong tree. We're no longer the same Nottingham Forest as two years ago." Tang En's reply was to raise the first offer to six million pounds. At the same time, he added another condition of allowing Akinfeev to be loaned back to CSKA Moscow for free for a season.

In other words, Nottingham Forest would be paying Akinfeev a year's salary, and at the same time gifting him to CSKA Moscow to use for free for a season. CSKA Moscow would also net six million pounds as profit.

That condition was rather good. CSKA Moscow did not turn them down, agreeing to let Forest and Akinfeev proceed with the negotiations of his contract.

A year before, Forest Team might not have had the capability. However, now, Forest could be said to be extremely attractive to Igor Akinfeev. After all, they were the runner-up to both the English Premier League and the Champions League; their capabilities were, without a doubt, being largely acknowledged by the public.

The additional joining of world-class forward Ruud van Nistelrooy boosted the team's attractiveness even more.

Akinfeev knew that the Russian Premier League was not the stage he wanted to stand on, that Europe's top-level English Premier League was his future. Although there had been a number of rumors of interest in him from big teams, none of them were realized. Now that the opportunity was here, he did not want to miss out on it.

The negotiations between the two proceeded smoothly.

Akinfeev signed a five-year transfer contract with Nottingham Forest. After taxes, his annual salary was 1.5 million pounds. In his first season, he would be loaned back to CSKA Moscow, the team who had nurtured him.

When both parties separately announced the news, Tang En was beaming to the reporters. He could already see the future of the team becoming clearer and clearer day by day.

Naturally, there were all sorts of interpretations of the transaction by the media. Some praised Forest for buying complete insurance for their future goal doors, while others claimed that recklessly (the transaction period was very short, with everything settled in a total of four days) buying a young goalkeeper who might not be able to adapt to the English Premier League was hardly a wise action. They even suspected there were some unspeakable secret dealings going on behind the transfer.

Tang En could care less about nonsense from the media. First of all, he himself would not deny having any secret dealings; to let the transfer progress more smoothly, Nottingham Forest gave Akinfeev's agent a small sum of money. However, it was true that Tang En personally did not acquire any gain from it. In terms of economic gain, Tang En was content. He did not miss this small sum of money and was unwilling to use such methods to amass wealth underhandedly. Brian Clough's prior example was still clear in his mind.

"Alright, the goalkeeper for Forest's next decade has been dealt with. This is worthy of celebration." Tang En said to his subordinates in his office after completing the transaction. "But... I've realized that we've gone a whole round without having resolved the initial problem: where is our substitute goalkeeper?"

Kerslake and Tang En both looked at the goalkeeping coach present, Andy Beasley, hoping for him to answer the question.

"Uh, actually... I think that having Paul as the substitute goalkeeper is sufficient." That was Beasley's answer. Tang En frowned. It clearly did not satisfy him.

At this point, someone spoke up for him.

"I believe Paul Gerrard is qualified to be our substitute goalkeeper," Dunn said. The Chinese assistant manager spoke fluent English.

Tang En looked at him. "Reason?"

"He has a good attitude and doesn't demand to play as a core player. Additionally, I've looked over the recordings for the Champions League's finals. For suddenly being fielded in that sort of situation, his performance was already extraordinary." Dunn finished reporting his reasons and lapsed back into silence.

Tang En pinched at his chin as he contemplated it deeply.

He was recalling the match, seriously recalling every little detail from it. That match had left him with a deep impression, and it had only been two months since then; he would not forget it.

"If not for Paul's excellent performance, our score would have already been equalized by Barcelona in the first half. I know his abilities aren't qualified to be a core goalkeeper. Paul himself knows that. So, I think he's the best candidate to be our number-one substitute goalie," Goalkeeping coach Beasley said from the side in agreement.

Tang En drew himself away from his memories and shrugged. "Andy, you're the goalkeeping coach. In that area, you've got more authority than me. If you think he has the ability to be a qualified substitute, we won't need to put in the effort to look for another one. To be honest, that position is as difficult to fill as Wood's substitute."

Everyone laughed. Tang En was exactly right. Goalkeeping was a peculiarity among the positions. It demanded stability, so it was not one that would be easily changed and was certain to be excluded from the rotations. The substitute goalkeeper needed to have enough patience and a calm mindset to face with an endless life of being on the bench. Yet at the same time, they had to be prepared for an opportunity to be fielded at any point in time.

Wood's substitute was another peculiarity; it was not that a defensive midfielder could not be rotated, it was only that Wood was simply too stable. He never got injured and did not fluctuate in his condition. His stamina was even less of a problem. What reason would the manager have to rotate such a player? In that way, his substitute would have even fewer chances to get on the field. Think about poor Gunnarsson last season; Tang En originally retained him, just in case of contingencies. Unexpectedly, the season did not have any such contingencies at all.

Now, Gunnarsson had left the team, transferring to Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club.

As the laughter abated, Dunn suddenly said, "I think we needn't look for Wood's substitute on purpose. It would be somewhat of a waste if his sub was a specialized defensive midfielder while Sun is a well-rounded backfield player."

Tang En nodded in understanding.

Rather than especially searching for a defensive midfielder to be a substitute for Wood, they might as well look for a backfield utility player. Not only could he be Wood's substitute, but he could even sub in for the others, such as the center backs, fullbacks, and defensive midfielders. Anyone. For example, Pepe and Piqué both had experience in playing as a defensive midfielder. Sun Jihai, even more so. This way, George Wood's substitute problem could be considered resolved.

They had only changed their angle of consideration, and the issue that had been bugging the team's managerial team for more than a year was smoothly resolved. The colleagues in the managerial team gained a greater understanding of the Chinese man who was directly promoted from Youth Team assistant manager to First Team assistant manager. He truly had the ability. He did not get the position solely because he had good personal relations with the main manager.

Thanks to the failure of Bayern Munich's purchase of Ruud van Nistelrooy, they shifted their sights to Franck Ribéry, who had shone brilliantly during the World Cup. But Nottingham Forest labeled Ribéry as "non-saleable." They did not only turn down Bayern Munich's offer, but also all other buyers interested in Ribéry.

If Forest wanted to create even more outstanding results, if Tang En hoped for the team to become an important force that could not be ignored within the European soccer scene, now was not the time to sell off players.

Not just Ribéry; Ashley Young and Aaron Lennon, Arteta, George Wood, Piqué, Pepe, Baines, Bale, Chimbonda, and so on; the core line-up for Forest last season had already been almost exhausted by the buyers. Tang En flatly refused them all.

The most crucial thing for a team with lofty aspirations for the future was the stability of their formation. These players had been playing together for one to two seasons, and their tacit

understanding of each other were already completely built up. If the group was torn apart just for a bit of money, then Tang En would truly be the greatest fool in the world.

“Nottingham Forest does not survive on selling our football stars for money. We are not such a team. We are not some football star processing factory for any rich or powerful club. Even if someone really took out two trillion pounds, I would not sell any one of my players.”

This was the promise written down by Tang En in his personal column.

After that, Lineker commented on Tang En’s words in his personal column as well: “...He is a manager with lofty aspirations. Note that I’m saying, ‘lofty aspirations.’ They’re not aspiring to anything like preventing relegation or making sure the team gets into next year’s European scene. These aspirations are about becoming champions. With such a main manager, it is not difficult to understand why Nottingham Forest underwent such an earth-shattering transformation under his leadership, jumping three grades in three years, and are still continually broadening their own capabilities. It is because this team is just like their main manager. They both have lofty aspirations.”

Tang En’s rejection of the requested offers that his office table was swimming in was equivalent to stabilizing the team’s morale. Now, Forest’s players understood it well. So long as they follow their Boss forward, they would have a rich future. No one wished to leave this team and choose a new adventure. Tang En’s overtness with those words was also for that intention. By steadying the team’s morale before the match season, the whole team at all levels would be on the same page, ready to put in their all. In this way, the new season would have a good sign going for it.

Following that, he continued taking actions on the transfer market.

As Tang En said to Dunn, “Allan’s job is about how to let the club earn more money, and mine is about how to spend the money Allan earns.”

Despite Mikel Arteta’s commendable performance in the last season, Tang En was still annoyed by the fact that the team had no true offensive midfielder. Furthermore, their grouping in the midfield would surely be thoroughly researched by their opponents. Trying to dominate the scene in the new season by reusing the same strategies would be no different from speaking nonsense.

He needed to bring in more new blood in the midfield. Not only would it bring about more versatility in their strategies, but it would also maintain a sense of crisis among the group of boys and make them realize that there wasn’t a core position in the world they could sit permanently on.

After comparing numerous candidates this time, his eyes looked towards Holland.

He was delighted to see a different development to that of his own memories, because over there was the perfect candidate in his heart.

Chapter 466: Rafael van der Vaart

Even though the day for the team’s training in the Netherlands was not here yet, Tony Twain had traveled to the nation of tulips first with Dunn.

This was not a vacation. If it was for a vacation, Twain would not go there with Dunn. Over there was a place brimming with all kinds of fancies.

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While Van der Vaart was in bed with his wife, Sylvie, he received a call from his agent, Søren Lerby.

The ringtone coming from his cell phone was van der Vaart's favorite music, but sounded especially raucous at this inappropriate time.

Sylvie, who was lying down, rolled her eyes. She could clearly feel the change in her husband's body. This was probably not what he had hoped would happen.

"Um..." Van der Vaart was a little embarrassed and looked apologetically at his wife. He rolled away from her and took the phone on the bedside table.

"Søren, do you know what time it is?" He answered the phone harshly and glanced up at the small alarm clock on the bedside table.

It was 11:30 at night.

"I'm really sorry, Rafael. But I think I should tell you this news." His agent, Søren Lerby, who understood him well, certainly knew what he had interrupted, but sex was something that he could do every night if he wanted to. Now, what he was going to tell van der Vaart did not happen every day.

After he discovered that it was about his future, van der Vaart did not get angry. He bowed his head to give Sylvie a kiss, and then he got up and left the bed. He walked naked into the living room.

"All right. Tell me, Søren."

"I got a call from the Nottingham Forest manager thirty minutes ago."

"Nottingham Forest?" van der Vaart said aloud this somewhat awkward-sounding name. "The team that was runner-up in the UEFA Champions League?"

"Yes, they asked me some things about you. I could see that they are interested in you, Rafael."

Van der Vaart fell into a silence.

At this time, his wife had put on some clothes and came out of the bedroom in a robe.

Van der Vaart glanced back at his wife and took hold of her hand.

"Rafael, a season ago, you promised Danny Blind that you would stay in Ajax for another year, and you have fulfilled that promise now. There are a lot of clubs out there that want you to join, and Nottingham Forest is one of them."

"Yes, I know about all those offers, but I don't like some of them."

"I understand that. I was on the phone with the Nottingham Forest manager for thirty minutes before I decided to call you. If it's those clubs that don't meet your requirements, we filter them out here."

"Thirty minutes?" Van der Vaart was suddenly interested in the Nottingham Forest manager.

Søren Lerby was a well-known Dutch agent and was usually very busy. It was rare for him to be able to talk to a manager whom he was in touch with for the first time for thirty minutes over the phone.

“Yes, we talked about a lot of things, and they were all about you. We asked and replied to each other’s questions. Based on my instincts, I think he’s rather sincere.”

“So, what do you think I should do?”

“He hopes he can meet you in Amsterdam and have a good chat.”

“All right, I’ll do it.”

After he ended the call with his agent, Sylvie moved closer. “Which club is it this time?”

“Nottingham Forest from England. They were the runner-up in the UEFA Champions League last season and lost to Barcelona in the final.” Van der Vaart explained to his wife.

“Are you going to meet their manager?”

“Yes.”

“What will happen?” Sylvie rested her head on van der Vaart’s shoulder.

“I’m not sure.” Van der Vaart turned his face to his wife. “Another round?”

Sylvie leaped away from van der Vaart, “You’re ready again!”

Laughing, van der Vaart picked up his wife and went into the bedroom.

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While van der Vaart was getting cozy with his wife, Søren Lerby dialed Tony Twain’s number.

“He’s agreed, Mr. Twain. We can meet and have a talk.”

“That’s great news.” Twain laughed and breathed a sigh of relief. At first, he was worried that van der Vaart would not meet with him so easily.

“You know, Mr. Twain, As Rafael’s agent, I hope to safeguard his future. There are still a lot of football clubs wooing him, including big clubs like Real Madrid and Bayern Munich.”

“I understand. If he has any doubts, he can call Edwin van der Sar, his teammate from the Netherlands national team, and hear what he says about my team.” Twain was confident on that.

He wanted to buy van der Vaart not because he wanted to act like those titans. He had his own judgment and ideas. Before he came here, he and Dunn had already made a tactical plan for the team for if van der Vaart successfully joined the team.

When he purchased a player, he did not care about the player’s price, nationality, character, private life, or other factors unrelated to the game. The first thing he had his eye on was whether the player was what the team needed. As long as the team needed him, then he would buy him regardless of the price. If the team did not require him, then he would not want him no matter how cheap he was.

This had something to do with his notion of personal consumption. He was that kind of person in life, whether it was before or after his transmigration. A dollar was too expensive for something he did not like. But for his favorite things, he was willing to pay any amount of money.

"I hope it's as you say, Mr. Twain. We'll be in touch tomorrow. It's getting late, and you've just arrived in the Netherlands."

"Aha, isn't the Dutch nightlife just starting now?" Twain asked.

Lerby laughed on the other end of the line. "The red-light district is not as beautiful as it's reputed to be. If you want to go, Mr. Twain, be a bit more careful."

"Oh...I'm just asking casually." Twain also knew that this was not the time to enjoy a scenic tour.

The red-light district in Amsterdam was the world's famous gathering ground for the sex trade. But at the same time, a lot of crime flourished behind those "window girls." It was a grey area secretly controlled by the forces of organized crime syndicates. The drug trade and human trafficking were rampant, and petty thefts and so on were even more commonplace.

After he hung up the phone, Twain clapped his hands and said to Dunn, "Good news, van der Vaart has agreed to meet us."

"The bad news is you're not able to go to the red-light district that you've admired for such a long time?" Dunn said.

Twain cleared his throat. "I'm not interested in putting on a sex show on the street."

"Not going to happen, there's a curtain for shelter."

"You seemed to know a lot." Twain glared at Dunn.

He did not expect him to shrug his shoulders. "Google's a very powerful tool. But seriously, since you have arranged for the training to be here, better watch out for those hot-blooded lads on the team."

It turned out that he had been considering things from this point of view and had therefore gone online to search for information about Amsterdam's red-light district. His detail-oriented mind was the main reason why Twain valued him.

Twain pondered for a moment, and then said, "Well, I will introduce the relevant rules for it. But let's think about the matter regarding van der Vaart. Come, let's sort out the strategy for persuasion when we meet him."

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"Would you like me to brief you about the team you're going to meet soon?" On the way from the training ground to the place where Twain was staying, the agent sat in the front passenger's seat and spoke to van der Vaart, who drove.

"I know they advanced to the Champions League final this season, which was kind of unexpected. Do they have other stories?"

The Forest team, which once reverberated throughout the European football world, was now unknown to a lot of people. For Van der Vaart, who did not previously care about the course of English football, it was normal for him not to know Nottingham Forest's history.

"Well, yes, and it's a brilliant past that will surprise you." Lerby looked down at the information placed on his lap. "Their pinnacle was when they were the winners of the UEFA Champions League twice in a row."

Van der Vaart turned his head to look at his agent. This was indeed a bit of a surprise.

"In the two consecutive seasons of 78-79 and 79-80. Other than Arsenal in 2004, they were the record-holder of the longest unbeaten record in England's domestic top league, which was also created in those two seasons: forty-two games."

"But I've never heard that name..."

"That's normal. After the start of the English Premier League, they rapidly declined and then were relegated into England's second-tier league. Until their comeback in the last four years. After that, as a newly promoted team, they were ranked fourth in the 04-05 season of the English Premier League and obtained a spot in the qualifier for the 05-06 season Champions League tournament, and then... As you can see, they advanced into last season's Champions League final and nearly defeated Barcelona." Lerby skimmed through the information. "I think it's no use talking about that. It's already in the past. No one knows what's going to happen in the future. I'd better introduce you to this young manager who is almost a clone of the greatest manager in their club's history, the legendary Brian Clough."

Van der Vaart quickly searched his mind, and soon an image popped out. "The manager who gave the silver medal he had just received to the ball boy on the sidelines at the trophy ceremony?"

Upon hearing that description, Lerby laughed. "That's right. It looks like that image of him left a very deep impression."

"I was deeply impressed that he was the first person I had ever seen do that."

"What do you think of his actions?"

"It's hard to say..." Van der Vaart was quiet for a moment. "I don't know what to make of him."

"He's that kind of man." Lerby continued. "Some people like him and some detest him. It's quite extreme. He was known in England as a manager who can be on an equal footing with Mourinho. Of course, I mean their tempers." Speaking of which, Lerby picked up a thick pile of information from his lap and flipped through.

"Listen, it's so thick that the sound is muffled."

"What's this?" Van der Vaart threw a quick glance while he drove the car.

"Just some information regarding this temperamental manager... His character, his comments, his coaching results, his tactical style, his personal preferences, and some interesting gossip and tabloids. Thanks to the established media in the UK, this is just what I collected easily. I think it's more difficult to describe him to you on the way. I'll just pick out some of the key points. Firstly, most people believe that this manager is extremely good at regulating the mood in the locker room and good at blending with his

own players. Under his management, there are no confirmed scandals coming from Nottingham Forest's locker room. Secondly, most people think that Tony Twain is a manager who values defense more."

When he heard that, van der Vaart frowned.

Lerby saw it and said, "I'm just stating what people think. It doesn't represent me or you. You need to observe for yourself what kind of man and manager he really is. We're here." He pointed to the street corner ahead, where there was a small hotel.

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The meeting between the two sides was not held in any restaurant, café or bar, but in the hotel where Twain was staying. Before the matter was settled, Twain wanted to keep a low profile. After all, there were plenty of football clubs across Europe that wanted this midfielder.

Lerby served as a translator during the exchange.

When van der Vaart saw Dunn standing next to Twain, he was a little surprised to see an East Asian face.

Twain obviously knew what the other person was surprised about, so he kindly introduced them to each other, "This is Dunn, my assistant manager from China. He's a very good coach."

Regardless of whether Dunn was really as good as Twain said, there would probably not be a second example of a Chinese man being employed as an assistant manager in Europe. They had not yet begun a formal conversation, and van der Vaart had already deeply realized the manager's unusual areas.

In order not to let the mood of the meeting become heavy, the agent, Søren Lerby, began with a joke, "Mr. Twain, did you go to the red-light district in the canals yesterday?"

Twain mischievously laughed in his hoarse voice, "I followed your advice, Mr. Lerby. Dunn and I were well-behaved and stayed in the hotel yesterday. And... Rafael is the purpose of our visit to the Netherlands. He's more important than anything else." The conversation shifted naturally to the proper topic.

Twain was grateful to this agent, who was the highest rated among the many types of agents he had been in contact with.

Accordingly, everyone looked at van der Vaart.

"I've also listened to Søren's introduction. He said that you are a very sincere person, so I decided to meet you."

"Ah, that's what he said. What do you think of me?"

"Well...you're very young. You look younger than the one in the Champions League final."

"That's all in the past, let's not mention anything else about it." Twain winked at van der Vaart and said, "Since you mentioned the Champions League, that's our goal for the new season."

"To advance to the final again?" Van der Vaart asked with interest.

“No, we’re going to take the championship trophy this time,” Twain replied with considerable confidence.

Van der Vaart looked into his eyes. His gaze was firm and did not look like he was joking at all.

“It’s an amazing goal.” For a moment, he did not know what to say in the face of such a confident manager.

“Nottingham Forest will not be satisfied with just participating in the Champions League every season. I’m not bragging. I have no doubt about that my players have the ability to do so. Edwin van der Sar and you are teammates of the same national team. Didn’t you hear him talk about us during the World Cup?”

During the World Cup, there were teammates who were interested in Edwin van der Sar being able to play in the Champions League final again, so he was asked some things about that team. However, the people who inquired about them were not van der Vaart. He was not paying attention at that point. He did not think that he would have a connection with this team now.

The discussion fell into a brief silence, and Twain signaled to Dunn. The latter pulled out a stack of papers from the briefcase and handed them to the two men.

“I’ve studied more about your professional experience and style of play, Rafael. This is a tactic I’ve worked out about you in conjunction with the current state of the team. I don’t like to lie, make empty promises or give clichés. Being honest and realistic is what matters fundamentally. I admire your ability, and I very much hope that you can join us. But I believe that I am not the only one who says these things to you. So, I want you to understand our sincerity.” He pointed to the stack of papers.

Van der Vaart picked them up and found that the words were in Dutch. This was a small detail, but it explained some things. He looked up at the smiling Twain and lowered his head to continue reading.

It was indeed a very detailed tactical manual, which was aimed at van der Vaart’s personal characteristics and preferences in combination with the deployment of the Nottingham Forest players. It listed a variety of tactical combinations for him. In Twain’s overall plan, van der Vaart was a player in the midfield, but his position was closer to the penalty area. It was different from his usual position in the 4-4-2 formation. His role here was between the defensive midfielder and the shadow striker.

Twain gave van der Vaart full freedom among the tactics. He could either organize the attack in the midfield or make a long pass to score after his plug-in ahead. And at the same time, it was unlike Ronald Koeman’s, which required van der Vaart to put his energies on the defense.

“Most of my players are multifaceted, so our tactics are nimbler. I’m sure you’ve heard some comments about me, and one of them is bound to mention that I’m a coach that places emphasis on defense.” As van der Vaart looked down, Twain continued. “I admit it. I care a lot about defense because that’s the basis of all victories. However, you’re not required to do the job of defense. We have the best defensive midfielder in Europe. With him around, the offensive players can attack and score without any compunctions.”

Twain was talking about George Wood. He was confident about this. Wood was the best, presently and in the future.

To be honest, there were two points in the detailed tactical manual that touched van der Vaart. The first point was about the shadow striker. Van der Vaart had been a striker when he had first played. Later, depending on the team's requirements, his position gradually retreated. At one point, he was even put in the position of a defensive midfielder to take charge of the defense by his manager, Koeman. These were not what van der Vaart liked. Even though he was now basically set in the midfield, he still liked the feeling of shooting and scoring. He had very good long shot ability. His place kicks were good too. He did not want to waste such talent.

The other point was that he did not need to think about defense, which allowed him to put his heart and soul into the offense. He liked that point very much. Most talented offensive players did not like their managers making them play defense. They would think that they were being used in an insignificant position, or in other words, completely misused. How could they step forward when the team needed them to attack after having wasted all their strength on defense? If there was someone to play defense full-time, they could attack without the slightest scruple. This was indeed a tempting prospect.

Seeing how van der Vaart was lost in his thought as he stared at the document in his hands, Søren Lerby asked in Dutch, "Is there a problem, Rafael?"

"Well... This is the first time I've seen such a detailed tactical commitment during a face-to-face meeting with me. I kind of don't believe it."

When he saw the two men chatting in Dutch, Twain knew they must be discussing this and stopped talking. Dunn got up to take away the two glasses of cold water in front of Lerby and van der Vaart and replaced them with two cups of hot water.

"I didn't think they were so well prepared. No, I should have anticipated it after him talking to me for thirty minutes. You see, I was right, this manager is very unusual."

Van der Vaart nodded. "He is indeed unusual. His team has just been promoted to the English Premier League for two seasons and he wants to win the Champions League this season. Søren, do you think he's making an empty promise or has delusions of grandeur?"

Lerby shook his head. "I can't say for sure. At least they advanced to the Champions League final last season. That wasn't fake."

"Nottingham Forest..." Van der Vaart murmured this slightly hard-to-pronounce name, "This is the most substantial offer I've ever seen. He's right, it is indeed realistic. However, I feel I still need to think about it."

"Of course. It's a decision about your future. I don't want you to make a hasty decision."

The two men agreed and told Twain what they had decided. Nottingham Forest was very sincere, and the terms were very tempting. But van der Vaart still needed to seriously consider the matter, so he was unable to give Twain a reply yet.

Twain said he understood. He just had to be patient. He had not thought that van der Vaart would immediately agree. After all, there were other club's offers waiting for this Ajax captain.

Anyway, he had expressed enough sincerity and issued all the terms. He had done his best; the rest was up to fate. He had done everything he could, and now the only thing he could do was patiently wait for the answer.

The ball was in van der Vaart's court.

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On the way back, Søren Lerby told van der Vaart that in July, the Forest team would be in the Netherlands on invitation for the Amsterdam Tournament. Perhaps he could take a closer look at the team then.

Van der Vaart's answer was, "If I'm leaving Ajax and going to a new team, it's a little late to make a decision then."

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Upstairs in the hotel, van der Vaart's car could be seen leaving through the room window. Twain tilted his head and said, "We did everything we could. There's nothing left to do. I hope I didn't make a trip for nothing."

"The good news is," Dunn held the manual in his hand, "Bayern Munich's offer is bound to be rejected because they once looked down on van der Vaart, which is something the Dutchman kept in mind. Juventus is now going to Serie B, which holds no appeal for van der Vaart. Real Madrid's real target is Kaka, and their supposed interest in van der Vaart was hyped by the Spanish media. Arsenal already bought Tomáš Rosický and will not buy van der Vaart again. Another suitor, Hamburger SV, I believe is less competitive than we are."

After listening to Dunn's analysis, Twain stood at the window as he looked at the car that had disappeared around the corner and remained quiet.

Chapter 467: Poor Hamburger...

Dunn's analysis was on point. The powerhouses rumored to be interested in Rafael van der Vaart were all currently in some sort of difficulty themselves. They were unable to extricate themselves from their situations to care about him. Before Nottingham Forest joined the pursuit, Germany's Hamburger SV was closest to Rafael van der Vaart.

In truth, Hamburger SV was already very keen on bringing in the Ajax captain who was in a tough situation even before the last season.

At that time, if Koeman had continued to be Ajax's main manager, van der Vaart would surely have chosen to go to Hamburger SV. However, Blind's arrival changed all that Tang En was familiar with. He persuaded Ajax's pillar of support to stay behind and help him for one season. During that time, a large half of Ajax's youth talents had just left, and the results of the team were unstable. They had needed an experienced veteran to take the lead. Without a doubt, van der Vaart was their best candidate.

As thanks for van der Vaart's decision to stay behind, the club would not stop him from leaving the team a season later. So long as he came to an agreement with the other team, he would be able to depart from the team at an inexpensive price.

Van der Vaart agreed to this condition and chose to stay behind in exchange for departing a season later. Blind also gave him the captain's armband.

As a result, van der Vaart had turned down Hamburger SV a season ago.

The German club had had their hearts set on him. A season later, they again extended an invitation to van der Vaart. The man had very good feelings towards the German football team that valued him so highly and which had promised to let him play his favorite position of shadow striker. If not for Tony Twain abruptly intervening, he would have begun contract discussions with Hamburger SV.

Nottingham Forest's joining changed everything.

A team which had so much ambition and which was constantly striving to strengthen their capabilities was hoping for van der Vaart to join them. Their aim was to become the season's champions of the Champions League.

Van der Vaart admitted that this attracted him a lot more than simply letting him play as a shadow striker.

As a professional footballer, which player would not want to attain the highest glory in the football scene? The highest glories for the National teams were the UEFA European Championship and World Cup championship, while a club's highest glory was, of course, becoming champions of the UEFA Champions League.

In the previous season, Nottingham Forest had fought all the way into the finals in one breath. And during the finals, the story of their pitiable loss to Barcelona had left him with a deep impression. Even van der Vaart, who was without any prior understanding of Forest Team, was left with an indelible memory of it.

After a face-to-face discussion with Tang En, he himself had felt the great aspirations of the manager. In truth, the scales in van der Vaart's heart were shaken when they had met. His manager, Søren Lerby, was a person who attended to details. Following the meeting, he especially gave van der Vaart a few DVD recordings of Forest's matches.

Since waiting to observe at their camp training in the Netherlands would be too late, they might as well begin their observations through the match recordings now.

Søren Lerby hoped that van der Vaart could understand what kind of team Forest was through the recordings and then consider which club he should go to.

Of course, how could UEFA's documentary of Nottingham Forest be missing from those DVDs?

Tony Twain and the team was presented clearly before van der Vaart.

This was a youthful team filled with vigor. At the same time, they were not lacking in experience. The feeling they gave was very much like Ajax.

“Days with nothing to do are so boring.” In their hotel room, Dunn was focused on his research of every one of their opponents in the new season, while Tang En was leaning by the windows, watching the pedestrians pass by beneath and playing with the cell phone in his hands.

Two days had passed. Van der Vaart had yet to give them a reply, and even his agent, Søren Lerby, seemed to have gone missing without any attempt to initiate contact with them.

Tang En believed that his words and tactical strategies had already moved the other party. No, he did not just believe it; he was sure of it. What was strange was that the other party had not replied to him the next day. Being on tenterhooks in this manner was truly discomfoting.

“You could go exploring on your own, see the world-famous window prostitution,” Dunn replied without looking up.

Tang En glared at him. “Sometimes, I really miss the old Dunn who wouldn’t even let out a fart in a span of three days.’

“Or, you could start seriously considering how you can make sure the players don’t get into trouble while training here.”

That question was a serious one, causing Tang En to settle into silence. Back then, when he had chosen Amsterdam, he did not consider that aspect. The Netherlands could be considered to be the world’s most open country. Over here, drugs, prostitution, gambling, and euthanasia were all legal. Things that would have severe legal repercussions in other nations were all openly existent under the sun in this low-lying land.

If Tang En was accompanied by a hospitable friend from the Netherlands who was familiar with Amsterdam, he would not at all mind visiting a brothel to have some fun. If he himself was that way, what of the younger players who were full of vigor?

The western world was unlike the Chinese world; it was no big deal to publicly talk about sex. Matters such as visiting prostitutes were up to the freedom of an individual, their private life. Others could not interfere with it.

Tang En was not some kind of moralist. He felt that it was a normal biological need for men to look for women. In a situation where they did not have a girlfriend or wife, they could not possibly always be alone. So, prostitutes naturally became a reasonable option. In his days in the UK, he had had several experiences like that. But to him, those sorts of matters were not anything worthwhile to publicly advertise about.

During summer vacation, Tang En could care less about what the players were doing. It was none of Tang En’s business, small matters like finding women for relaxation.

But what was to come next was the team’s training camp. They needed to begin preparation for the new season. For players, this duration was considered working hours; Was there ever a boss that allowed workers to call for girls during working hours?

Having situated the training in Amsterdam, they naturally had to face this sort of troublesome issue. He could not possibly request that all his players stay in the hotel at night and disallow them from going anywhere. This was pre-season training, not a Nazi concentration camp.

“Yes...” Tang En said as he pondered. “Perhaps, I should adjust the plans for the next camp training.”

“Giving up on the Netherlands?”

“We don’t have to. We’re the number two football team in Europe. Getting scared off by a bunch of call girls... Wouldn’t that be shameful if it got out? But I’ll have to give up on Amsterdam. This city isn’t a suitable place for training.”

“You have a new place in mind?”

Tang En smiled. “I just remembered a place. It might work.”

“Where?”

“A small town north-east of Amsterdam, Volendam.”

Dunn was stunned on hearing the name.

“It’s bright and beautiful, with a network of rivers. The place is a little secluded, but it is quiet. The locals there are simple and honest, so our people won’t be disturbed much. I think that it’s a good location for focusing on training.” Tang En winked. Of course, he was not going to reveal that he himself had found the name from an online web novel about soccer and retained a deep impression of it.

“It is a good place.” Dunn could say nothing else.

At this point, the phone that Tang En had been fiddling with vibrated. It alarmed him so much he almost hurled it out of the window.

The phone jumped between his hands several times before he finally caught hold of it.

“Hello! Mr. Lerby!” Tang En’s voice rose. He stood up from beside the windows.

Seeing him stand, Dunn fell quiet.

After half a minute or so, a smile emerged on Tang En’s face. “That’s great! Thank you, Mr. Lerby. We will contact Ajax immediately. At the same time, I think we can begin our discussion of the personal contract terms tomorrow.”

Putting down the phone, Tang En threw up his arms and jumped. “Great news! Van der Vaart has joined!”

“Don’t celebrate too early. Ajax hasn’t confirmed they will release him.”

“There’s no problem on the club’s side,” Tang En said with a wave of his hand. “This is a good sign. A good sign for the new season. Dunn, I feel like I’ve gotten new epic-level equipment! We’re getting stronger!”

“This isn’t an online game... What did the agent say?”

“Rafael is pleased to be able to accept Nottingham Forest’s invitation and has entrusted me all rights in the discussion of his terms and contract,” Tang En said, imitating Søren Lerby’s way of speaking.

“Ruud van Nistelrooy, van der Vaart... and more. I’m going to throw Europe’s soccer scene into chaos this season!” Tang En’s eyes shone brightly with a wide toothy grin on his face.

The negotiations went smoothly, with all the terms and conditions settled in just one afternoon. Van der Vaart’s salary placement within the team belonged to the first category. Forest, who had earned a lot of money from the television broadcast in the last season, was also generous, writing a large check.

Van der Vaart was extremely satisfied with his personal terms of contract. Other than his salary, there were also additional prizes for scoring goals and assists. Furthermore, the length of four years for the contract was reasonable. There were no problems he could pick on.

Regarding the negotiations between the clubs, it was as expected. As promised, van der Vaart stayed behind to help his team get through a tough season, and now it was the club’s turn to go through on their end of the bargain. Ajax did not make things difficult with van der Vaart’s direction of choice, and the two clubs very quickly came to an agreement.

At last, Nottingham Forest successfully brought in Netherlander midfield football star, Rafael van der Vaart, at a low price of 4.5 million pounds.

When Tang En returned to England, he brought back an outstanding midfield attacker for the team and greater versatility in their strategies.

This time, the history once described by the “Godfather of Barcelona,” Cruyff, as “I don’t know what to say or what van der Vaart would do in Hamburger SV,” had finally been crushed in its infancy. Europe’s golden boy, known as the “new Cruyff” and who had gradually become a fallen player, was now a member of the Red Forest. In this team, he would continue bearing his favorite jersey number, 24. In the press conference to welcome him, Tang En said this to the reporters doubting van der Vaart’s level and conditions:

“... I know about the situation during his last moments in Ajax. We’ve had a very honest conversation. I firmly believe in my choice. Rafael is a player worthy of my trust and is also a player that Forest needs. My players do not need to be responsible for the doubts of the media; he only needs to be responsible to me and my team.”

Tang En’s future, Nottingham Forest’s future, the English Premier League’s future, and the future of various powers within the European soccer scene... They were all greatly anticipated.

After taking down the former number 10 player from the Netherland’s National Team, Tang En’s actions in the transfer market did not halt there.

Three days after, Nottingham Forest’s official site updated the transfer news again, having just updated it three days prior. They placed it in an eye-catching spot.

Since Tang En’s arrival, Nottingham Forest’s official site had developed a habit. Before a final success in transfer negotiations with the players, they would surely not divulge any news on their own website, even if the outside world was already rife with rumors, or if papers like The Sun were talking such a transaction going on. The news they announced was always successful transfers, whether it be the departure of a player or an arrival. So, Forest’s fans and media on the lookout for news on Forest Team

understood that they only had to wait on the official website to know and ascertain the success or failure of a certain transfer.

This time, the picture appearing on the homepage of the website was an Eastern European player.

“... We are delighted to announce that the club has reached an agreement with Atlético Madrid from the La Liga, to purchase Bulgaria’s national player, left winger Martin Petrov, at a price of 5 million pounds. The player famed for his speed and assists is happy to join the team. During an interview with him, he claimed it was the main manager’s name, Tony Twain, that had influenced him to make this decision. In this transfer, we defeated North London’s football team, Tottenham Hotspur.”

That last line of the news was also unique to the official website since Tang En’s arrival. The method of publicly announcing having defeated whoever it was gained the ire of opposing clubs. But Forest found a tireless joy in it and did not have the intention of changing their habits.

Such an arrogant show was very true to the impression Tony Twain gave to people.

After bringing in large numbers of offensive players, Tang En finally thought of adding in some competitiveness to the defensive line.

A day later, the homepage of the official site added news of another confirmed transfer.

“Nottingham Forest has reached a consensus regarding the transfer of Belgium R.S.C. Anderlecht’s young center back, Vincent Kompany. Manager Twain has called Kompany, valued at four million pounds, the future of the team. He would be competing for the core position of center back with Piqué and Pepe in the new season. Kompany is delighted to join Nottingham Forest, and for that, has turned down Hamburger SV’s invitation.

At the same time, manager Tony Twain has agreed upon Matthew Upson’s transfer to West Ham United. The negotiations of the terms of contract between the two clubs as well as West Ham United and the player have concluded. On manager Tony’s successful purchase of Kompany, he has also finally agreed to release Upson. We are grateful for Upson’s contributions to the team in these two seasons and wish him the best of luck.”

Matthew Upson’s departure brought in an income of 4.2 million pounds for Forest. The successful sale of the team’s reserve center back at this price was attributed not only to English Premier’s usual tendency to hype prices up, but also significantly to the double act performance by Allan Adams and Tony Twain.

On one hand, Allan contended with their opponents on the negotiation tables. On the other, Tang En was dead set on not letting go. His insistent claims about not selling anyone also gave West Ham United no small pressure. In the end, the center back who was never in Tang En’s plans managed to be sold for 4.2 million pounds, canceling out the cost of Kompany’s transfer and even getting two hundred thousand pounds as net profit.

After a series of transfer movements, Forest’s formation for the new season was more or less complete. Now, if there was still a source of worry in both Tang En and Allan’s hearts, it was likely to be the uncertain factor of Anelka.

However, Tang En could care less about Anelka today. It did not matter if he was willing to stay or leave the team. He did not have the energy to care about it. With so many new players on the team, he needed to mesh them all together before the season began and deal with the relations on the team. He also had to guide the new players to adapt to the team and their life in England as soon as possible.

“On my team, there isn’t a difference between core players and reserves. Only a difference between those in good condition and with good attitudes, or those in lousy conditions with lousy attitudes. If you want to play in more matches, work hard to convince me with your performance in training and in matches!” Tang En said to the 25 players on the First Team during their first training session.

It was the official beginning of Nottingham Forest’s all-around battle in the new season.

Chapter 468: Welcome to Amsterdam

Twain’s work went very well with the coaching staff and Dunn’s efforts. Several of the new players had been hand-picked by Twain himself and persuaded to join, so he had his own plans and arrangements for these players in his mind. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with all the parts put into place save for a few empty areas. Now, he was putting these missing pieces in the right places so a complete picture would appear before everyone’s eyes.

These new players had also become acquainted with the manager whom they were going to work with for the next four years beforehand. They were familiar with each other, so matters were made easier.

The coaching unit’s job was to build the team’s new tactics and train the team to adapt to them.

The addition of Van der Vaart and Van Nistelrooy had provided new changes to the Forest team’s tactics. In the past, Nottingham Forest’s tactics had been dominated by rapid counterattacks. The arrival of the two Dutch players allowed the Forest team to strengthen its shortcomings through its positions.

Van Nistelrooy was a center forward who was very much in line with Twain’s requirements. He not only had excellent scoring ability, but was also good at sprinting and could hold the ball to pass to his teammates. He could also use his sprints to rip apart the opponent’s defense and create offensive opportunities for his teammates from behind. His sense of responsibility even made him willing to pull back for the defense—this was one of his traits that Twain liked the most. This professional player put the interests of the team ahead of his own personal interests.

Van der Vaart was given a lot of freedom in the front part of the midfield. Twain was right that most of the time, he didn’t need to think about defense at all. When he partnered with his new teammate, George Wood, in the midfield, it became apparent. Wood’s fierce tackles and excellent stamina could completely assume the heavy responsibility of defense in the midfield so that Van der Vaart could attack without restraints in the front of the midfield.

Having just joined the team, in order to integrate more quickly, Van der Vaart took on more responsibility to organize the midfield during training and warm-up. Twain was happy to see him take the initiative to do this sort of thing. The team did indeed require an organizer closer to the opponent’s goal. Arteta was still a midfielder, not an attacking midfielder, after all.

Wood's task remained the same no matter whom he partnered with. His first job was always to protect his partner and make certain that their backs were covered.

Naturally, Albertini asked Wood to participate more actively in offense, both in training and in games. He couldn't just be a bystander and not care once he intercepted the ball in the back and passed it on to his teammates in front of him. Even if there was no ball to tackle, he had to run up to provide support.

Albertini asked Wood to learn from his midfield partner at all times, as they were his closest "teachers." Wood had partnered with different types of midfielders—Albertini, Arteta... Now, it was Van der Vaart's turn. Albertini hoped Wood could learn something useful from these different styles of teammates. He didn't doubt Wood's learning ability at all, otherwise he couldn't have made so much progress.

As for Petrov, his position was set on the left. His speed and acceleration were perfect for the English Premier League. Twain had always felt that this Bulgarian hadn't been fully played to his true strengths on side offense while he had been in Bundesliga and La Liga. The English Premier League was a fast-paced league with swift offense and quick defense. Speed was the number one essential factor. Petrov also found this was to his liking.

Originally, there had only been Franck Ribéry on the left, struggling to do it on his own. Thankfully, for the past two seasons, he'd had no injuries or fluctuations in his condition. However, Twain couldn't guarantee that nothing would happen in the future. Petrov's arrival greatly reduced the pressure on Ribéry while making the Forest team's left side more terrifying.

After the addition of positional play experts such as Van Nistelrooy and Van der Vaart, the Forest team's biggest feature—its speed—was not weakened. Instead, it had been enhanced. It was believed that this wasn't good news for the other Premier League team managers.

Perhaps some might have been worried that the Forest team would lose its speed in its counterattacks after Anelka was left out in the cold, but Twain had already made plans for it a while before.

Without Anelka, despite the overall decline in the frontline's speed, Nottingham Forest's counterattacks were known for their speed before the arrival of Anelka. The striker didn't spearhead the counterattacks. The real weapon were the two sides. Therefore, even though there was no Anelka, the effect on the team's speed of counterattacking was minimal.

Nottingham Forest's wingers had outstanding individual abilities. They were fast, good at breaking through, and able to score their own shots. While Ashley Young was "obsessive-compulsive disorder in assists," everyone else could be the spearhead of the counterattacks.

Hence, Twain placed emphasis on the wingers to practice their shooting during regular training. He wanted them to maintain their feel for shooting so that they wouldn't disappoint the team and fans when they were required to shoot and score in games.

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While Nottingham Forest held their training in England, they played two friendlies against teams from the EFL Championship. The Forest team won one game and tied the other. As always, Twain didn't place any importance on the results of such insignificant games. What he cared about was the process.

The team carried out extensive substitutions for both games in the first and second halves, so the outcomes of the games were completely worthless.

For the first friendly, Twain mainly observed and concluded that the players' stamina and recovery states were mixed after the holiday period. There were some players whose conditions were as stable and excellent as ever, like the monster George Wood, whereas some people fared worse, like Ashley Young. The result of this game was a draw, and the team and the Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club tied at 2:2.

After another week of grinding and sharpening, the players' forms returned in the second game, and the new players' cooperation with the team gradually took shape. This time, the Forest team defeated Sunderland, the team that was recently relegated to the EFL Championship, with a score of 3:1. Twain was happy to see Van Nistelrooy score a goal in the game.

As the team's organizational core, Van der Vaart needed to work with the entire team, so his performance was average for these two friendlies.

Petrov showed terrific adaptability. Just as Twain had thought, his style simply complemented the style of the English Premier League. It was only here that he could play well. Even Ribéry had to play second fiddle to his breakthrough on the side, because he and Ribéry were different. Ribéry's dribbling skill was better. Speed was just one method, and Petrov relied on it. He was so fast that no one could defend against him. Although aggressive and forceful breakthroughs were the simplest, they were the most effective way to deal with the Premier League full backs who just ran along the sides.

In the Bundesliga, the press once assessed Petrov. "If the full backs are half a body's distance from Martin Petrov, that means they have already been passed by."

It vividly illustrated this Bulgarian's characteristic—his incredible speed.

Twain also didn't ask Petrov to learn from the other players to do such techniques like scissors, Marseille Turns, or flips... What he asked of Petrov was very simple: he must press on once he took control of the ball. If there was an obstacle in front of him, he must rely on his speed to forge ahead!

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Time passed extremely quickly. It was getting closer to the Amsterdam Tournament, and the team had to get ready to leave for the training grounds in Volendam, a small town in the northeastern part of the Netherlands.

Anelka's transfer prospects were unknown. His two elder brothers were working hard to help him find a club that met his requirements, but the situation was not easy.

There were a lot of teams that wanted Anelka, but Anelka either looked down on the teams like the Bolton Wanderers... or the clubs couldn't afford thirty million dollars. The clubs that could afford thirty million dollars were unwilling to pay so much for a striker with such a peculiar temperament.

Through these events, Anelka was left hanging in the air with nowhere to go.

His two agent-brothers once thought that Twain had bluffed about the thirty million dollar base. They persuaded a team to offer twenty million to buy Anelka from the Forest team and were directly rebuffed by Twain without another word.

Later, his two older brothers started to let Anelka come in late or leave early during training as a form of passive-aggression and publicized the conflict between the two men in the press. And the result? Twain basically ignored all their petty maneuvers.

Anelka, if you want to come in late or leave early, I'll just deduct the fine from your salary. Twain wasn't afraid of the publicity or the press. He knew how to deal with the media, and he was eager for the media to continue to hype up the matter, the bigger, the better. That way, there would be more teams asking for prices. Maybe there would be a fool who could afford to pay for him... He even wanted to encourage Anelka's two agent-brothers to double their efforts.

The two former golden partners had now become estranged foes.

It was rather sad, but Twain was the boss of the team who kept his word, and he was the only godfather here. Now that Anelka had openly challenged Twain's authority, Twain wouldn't give in, given his character. It wasn't surprising that the two would clash with each other...

Despite their falling-out, Twain firmly believed that as long as someone still had some value to be made use of, then it was necessary to make full use of them. Therefore, on the list of names given in the Netherlands, the press saw Nicolas Anelka's name.

After a month of disturbance, Anelka also seemed to realize he had hit a wall this time. With the entire club firmly behind Twain, it was too difficult to create any waves on his own. If the manager didn't let him go, then he couldn't leave.

The current Anelka was no longer the young and frivolous Anelka from Real Madrid. He knew when to back down. In his view, the fact that Twain didn't rule him out of the big list was because he had given him a demotion. The smartest thing to do was take the opportunity to ease the tension in his relationship with the manager.

Tony Twain was now in the spotlight, and the odds of successfully opposing him were too slim.

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The Amsterdam Tournament was traditionally a pre-season friendly for European teams that was held in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, in early August every year. Ajax would rally three teams from around the world to compete.

Obviously, even though this competition was a friendly match, not just any team could participate. The teams that were invited by Ajax were bound to be strong teams with a certain influence in the soccer world, such as Manchester United, Arsenal, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Barcelona, and other powerhouse clubs. They all had records of being invited before. From another perspective, for a team to be able to receive an invitation to the Amsterdam Tournament was in itself a recognition of its strength and status.

At the start of the season, Nottingham Forest, as the most prominent team in European soccer the season before, was invited by Ajax. They would compete with the Primeira Liga champion, FC Porto, as well as the Series A champion, Inter Milan and the host, Ajax, for the ultimate title.

Twain didn't care about the championship trophy. He was interested in the quality of this friendly match up, comprising two league champions and two league runners-up, which was equivalent to a Champions League-level tournament. And the participating teams would attach great importance to this competition. No efforts would be spared. The team and players could get plenty of training from playing against such strong opponents.

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"Amsterdam..." Ashley Young murmured in the bus as he looked out of the window at the city, "Ah, paradise..."

Sitting next to him, Eastwood and Ribéry laughed loudly at the same time.

The other teammates, who heard the laughter, looked at the back row of the bus as one asked curiously, "What's up? What's going on?"

Bendtner, sitting in front of Ashley Young, turned back and said seriously to Ashley Young, "Hey, Young, I think it would have worked better if you had trilled the last word."

Then Eastwood stood up and mimicked Ashley Young's expression and tone, coupled with a wealth of body movements, then said with vibrato in his voice, "Amsterdam, ah, paradise...."

The entire bus exploded in laughter.

Ashley Young was a little annoyed by the laughter. He stood up and explained earnestly, "Don't you guys think so? This is a great city!"

Van der Vaart, who had lived in Amsterdam for more than ten years, asked him with a smile, "The Amsterdam that you referred to, is it just the district from the old train station to the canals?" This area was home to the famous Amsterdam red-light district.

The Dutchmen, who were familiar with the Netherlands and Amsterdam, laughed one by one.

"Ah, so that's where we are..."

Young's sudden look of realization made everyone laugh even more happily.

With so much commotion, it was impossible for the coaching staff sitting in the front row not to hear it.

When he heard the conversation between the players, Dunn looked at Twain. Twain shrugged at him. "Since we're not letting them have fun, we can't stop them from talking about it. It's better to let them have fun talking about it than actually do it..."

Ashley Young had started something with this conversation opener. The dull atmosphere in the bus due to everyone's tiredness from the journey had suddenly switched as the players launched a heated discussion. The topic was, of course, about the city surrounding them and its red-light district.

Van der Vaart, who had only just left the city, became everyone's guide. He pointed to the blocks that the bus passed and introduced them. Perhaps no one else in the team was more familiar with Amsterdam than he was.

As the bus passed by the canals, he pointed to a row of two-story buildings across the river and said, "That's Young's paradise."

Everyone laughed again.

"But there's nothing much to see during the day. It only becomes lively at night." He explained to everyone in English, which he was not good at, mixed with Dutch, "It's best to go to a place like that with someone, not alone."

"We even have to look for girls together?" Wes Morgan whistled.

Van der Vaart smiled, "It's a little bit of a hassle to go there alone."

Van Nistelrooy suddenly wanted to tease his national teammate, "Hey, Rafael, it sounds like you're quite familiar with it. Do you go often?"

"Ruud, everyone who lives in Amsterdam is familiar. I don't need to go there to know." Van der Vaart shrugged.

Seeing how everyone was talking more directly now, Twain rose from his seat.

The players shut their mouths when they saw the manager suddenly stand up.

"Well, I'm glad to see you guys still have so much energy after your trip," he said. "Amsterdam is a nice city, ah, paradise..."

There was a burst of laughter on the bus.

Twain smiled at Ashley Young. "However, I would like to remind you that we're not here for a vacation, but to train and compete, so I don't want to see you appear in that kind of place in droves at night. And you know what kind of places I'm talking about, don't you?" Twain said this with a smile on his face, but no one dared to take his remark as a joke.

Everyone on the bus calmed down again, and Twain sat down in his seat.

The bus turned onto a bridge to the north and left the area, which would be buzzing that night. They left "Europe's capital of sex," Amsterdam, and headed to Volendam, the town where their training base was.

Chapter 469: The Darkening Night

"It's livelier than I had imagined." This was Tang En's first statement upon reaching Volendam.

Indeed. He had thought this would be a quiet little fishing village without many people, where barking dogs or crowing chickens could be commonly heard.

He was not wrong about it being a small fishing village. But it was one that had become a tourist spot. Usually, the place was filled with numerous tourists visiting from all around the world. Those touring Amsterdam would also choose to come and look around the small town, which was a mere 30-minute

ride from the Netherland's capital; after all, it was a scenery spot in Europe famed for taking wedding pictures at.

Hearing Tang En's words, Kerslake thought he was displeased about it, but he followed it up unexpectedly, saying, "This isn't bad. With a lively little town, the lads needn't run to Amsterdam for fun at night."

The players in the coach were curious about the unfamiliar town with many cars parked outside it.

When they were driving around on the outside, they already saw several wedding cars belonging to new couples preparing to shoot wedding photos.

"What a romantic town." Ribéry whistled.

Of course, Forest was not going to reside in the town of Volendam itself. Their destination was a professional football team here, FC Volendam.

Although FC Volendam was currently still struggling in the Eerste Divisie, they had comprehensive training facilities. Forest would not have problems with training.

By the time the team was able to see the shimmering waters of IJsselmeer in the distance, they had already gotten close to the gates of FC Volendam's training grounds.

The coach drove straight, passing by lush rows of trees. Behind the forest were hidden red bungalows where they would be staying.

"We've arrived." Albertini stood up and called for his teammates to prepare to get off the coach.

When the coach stopped, Tang En, Dunn and Kerslake got off first. Outside, there were already officials from FC Volendam waiting for them.

After a simple welcome and exchange of greetings, FC Volendam's personnel led the team to their residence. Their luggage would be transported by someone else, so they only needed to bring the small bags they carried around with them.

The weather in the Netherlands today was quite pleasant with a bright sun. Following that, Tang En's mood was good. He joked with the other party, "Has your club ever had two Chinese players playing for you?"

They seemed stumped at the question, not understanding what Tang En referred to.

Tang En was not hoping to get an answer from them. He laughed aloud. "I'm joking. The conditions here... are pretty good." He scanned his gaze across the training grounds. His words were slightly exaggerated. In truth, it was not at the level of being "pretty good." They were not a renowned club and their financial status was not at its the best.

The person in charge of discussing the rental of the training grounds was Allan Adams. Using their poor financial situation to their advantage, he helped Forest gain the maximum possible benefit, using minimal funds to accomplish his goals.

In this aspect, Tang En had to admit that he was truly not cut out for business. It was easy for him to be overly emotional about things. For example, Volendam. If it were up to him to negotiate with them, he might have ended up without any bargaining because of the affection developed from reading the name in a certain web novel.

While Tang En was in a jovial conversation with the host, Kerlake was acting out the role of a jerk in front of the players' dorm.

"Speed it up! You have half an hour to rest and pack before training. The training will end before dinner time!" His loud voice resounded through the air of the unfamiliar training grounds.

Tagging along with Forest, of course, was the media especially charged with writing about Forest, one of Nottingham Evening Post's reporters, Pierce Brosnan's follow-up team. There were only two of them. One was in charge of the interviews, and the other took photographs.

The other media groups from England had all settled into town. Unlike Nottingham's "official external media group," Nottingham Evening Post, the paparazzi had no right to travel alongside Forest. Following the massive number of reporters arriving to report on Nottingham Forest's summer training, this small, unknown club in the European football scene for the last decade and more was also about to liven up.

"I'd thought they would be resting today after this, or participating in some kind of socialization... aren't they tired?" Press photographer Mark Wiser, in charge of taking photographs, groused as he set up his camera.

"How tired can they be, flying from England to the Netherlands?" Brosnan stood beside him with crossed arms, observing everything that was taking place here.

This was one of the reasons for Forest's abrupt rise within such a short time. He was a witness to Tony Twain's transformation from a no-name person into a famed manager in Europe; he was already impervious to such oddities.

Half an hour later, the team appeared on the training grounds after changing into their training jerseys in the locker room. The big coach had also departed, along with FC Volendam's personnel. The ones still left here were all Nottingham Forest's members.

Tang En stood beneath the afternoon sun with his dark sunglasses on. The whistles and shouting from assistant manager Kerlake could be heard as members of the coaching team proceeded with their individual work. The players ran around on the field, dripping with sweat under the sun. Everything was just like it was in Nottingham's Wilford Training Grounds; it was no different.

Their time training in the small town was very peaceful. Although the middle of Volendam town was a tremendously lively tourist attraction, the hustle and bustle was unable to affect the training area in the eastern area of the town.

The training grounds, surrounded by lush forests and IJsselmeer, were like a utopia. Of course, it was not quite accurate to say that; there would not be as many reporters in a utopia.

As the runner-up for the Champions League and the Premier League in the previous season, they encapsulated qualities that were extremely attractive to numerous media groups. This was one reason.

Another reason was their main manager, Tony Twain. The consensus of the media was that he was a character with the potential of becoming the prime focus wherever he went.

Everyone knew there was no lack of news so long as they kept following Tony.

But this time, he disappointed them.

Nottingham Forest's training in Volendam was like that of any other team. Other than their daily training, paying attention to the conditions and sickness of certain footballers, as well as the two warm-up matches with FC Volendam, their Eastern host, there was nothing else to report on. This sort of news was evidently not the kind hoped for by the majority of the media who had followed them here.

Naturally, Tang En understood that clearly.

"There are so many media groups here. You really think they are here to get up close observing Rafael van der Vaart, Edwin van der Sar, Martin Petrov and the conditions of the other newly joined players? Or to report on Forest Team's preparatory situation at the first instance?" To his assistant manager Dunn, he said in Chinese, "F**king hell. Imperialism's desire for my death is not yet dead."

"David!" he shouted. When the man in question looked at him, he waved at the external area of the training grounds. "Tell those reporters their time for filming is up!"

Kerslake nodded his head and put on a face before striding over to the barbed wire wall in huge steps.

"There's so much attention from the media. It's just pre-season training..." Lennon looked at the media groups that had the training grounds tightly surrounded. He was familiar with most of them; they were from England.

Gareth Bale nodded in agreement from beside him. In his memories, they would not see this many reporters even in Wilford, Nottingham. Of course, what he was unaware of was that Tang En was a king in Wilford. So, several media groups he did not like were directly blocked outside the gates and had no chance of getting close to the training grounds. Over here, it was not the same. He did not have control over many things.

"We're a strong team now, a big football star. Naturally, we'll get more attention from the media." Ashley Young shrugged with the expression of someone who was more experienced. Having entered the team half a year earlier than Lennon and consistently playing as a core player since his entry, he was qualified to be an old man in front of Lennon.

Ashley Young stretched. "Training, matches, and then going back to the dorms to play games... these days are so boring..."

"But this is what the Boss wants us to do," Bale retorted.

Ashley Young looked at Bale and his naive face and chuckled. "Kid, you're still small. There are some things you don't understand... Do you want to take a look around heaven?"

Lennon patted Bale's shoulders and said to Ashley Young, "Don't treat Gareth like a three-year-old. You want to go to the red-light district, don't you?"

Having his intentions revealed, Ashley Young scratched his head somewhat embarrassedly. "Well, since we're already here, it's such a pity if we don't take a look." He looked at Tony and then wiggled over with a laugh, saying, "Anyway, Boss won't know about it. Every evening, he analyzes recordings with the assistant manager in their room... It's so boring!"

"But this..." Bale still wanted to bring Tang En up, but Ashley Young directly covered his mouth up.

"We're just looking. It's no big deal. We've already been in this godforsaken place for 11 days. In another two days, it'll be the Amsterdam Tournament. After finishing that, we'll return to England. In the end, what will we have done in the Netherlands? After you get back, and friends ask, 'Hey, Aaron, Gareth, is there anything fun to do in Amsterdam?' Are you guys just going to say, 'No, we stayed 10 days in a prehistoric Forest?'"

"I went out last night and bought a lot of clogs... ouch!"

This time, Ashley Young, who could not bear the lack of progress from Bale, gave him a knock on his head.

"That's something everyone buys when they come to the Netherlands. Even England sells them... Though they're, of course, fakes. Alright. If we want to go, we have to go look at the things that are truly unique. Other than in Amsterdam, Netherland, is there any other place that has that?"

Lennon thought about it. "I don't think so. Leeds has it too. But it won't be as overt as it is here..."

"That's it. This is unique! It's the culture of a country. Culture, do you guys know it?" Ashley Young said, guiding his two teammates on. "Netherland's culture of openness is admirable! We aren't really going there to do anything, only to tour around. It's just a look. The Amsterdam Tournament is about to begin; would I dare to do anything?"

"Relax..." Seeing that Bale was still hesitant and had furrowed brows, he continued saying, "We won't let the Boss know about this. We promise we'll be back by 11. It's so close to Amsterdam from here. It's only a 30-minute ride by public transport. We'll just say we're going to town for some fun and no one will care. How about it? How about it? We'll go right after dinner!"

Ashley Young had originally wanted to go and do such a thing on his own. But, van der Vaart's words reminded him. It was hard to know what sort of thing might happen in that place when night came. It was better to take two more people with him; it's easier to take care of each other when moving together. But they could not divulge this to the others. Who knows if anyone would tattle on them to the Boss?

In truth, Lennon and Bale were filled with curiosity. As young men who were at the same time looking forward to the idea of sex, it would be a lie to say that they were not at all interested in Amsterdam's red-light district. Now that there was someone taking the lead and encouraging them, they were tempted.

Anyhow, they knew that if they really returned before 11, the Boss would certainly be kept in the dark. He had never asked during the few evenings everyone went visiting the town for fun. Just like Ashley Young had said, they were only going there to look. It wasn't as if they really wanted to do anything. There shouldn't be a problem, right?

“Alright, I’ll go!” Lennon decided and then looked at Bale.

Bale and Lennon had become good friends since their time in the Youth Team. Later, when the two had taken turns in getting transferred into the First Team, their friendship had carried over from the Youth Team into the adult team. If Lennon was going, Bale was not going to say no, even if he was still a little afraid of Tang En.

Subject to Lennon and Ashley Young’s focused gaze, Bale finally nodded.

Ashley Young smiled. “Listen, this is a little secret between the three of us. No one can say anything about it. If they ask, just say we’re going to town for fun. Got it?”

“Yes!” the two nodded repeatedly. Even without Ashley Young’s reminders, they knew that such a thing was not to be divulged. It would be the end of them if they did.

While the Boss could usually joke with everyone without caring about age differences, he immediately turned into a terrifying person whenever he got angry.

Kerslake walked out again and blew his whistle. “Rest time is over, lads!”

Ashley Young winked at Lennon and Bale, turning to run back to the training grounds.

After the day’s training ended, Tang En called Dunn and Kerslake out for a walk at Ijsselmeer, also to discuss the numerous plans they had for the new season. Before taking his leave, he did not forget to remind the players, who were ready to go out to play after dinner, not to be out too late.

Once the managers were gone, Ashley Young called on Lennon and Bale, and they left through the gates of the training grounds. In the sunset, they ran towards heaven.

45 minutes later, the three young men in casual wear appeared on the streets of the red-light district.

The sky was darkening, and the sides of the canal glowed brightly. Bodies emerged one after another from the windows under the neon lights, dazzling the eyes of the three young men.

“Handsome, come in and take a look!”

The half-naked prostitutes played with their hair flirtatiously and giggled at the people who walked past their doors, trying to solicit business. There were also no lack of females in the stream of tourists.

“It was cold and quiet when we came during the day. Now it’s so lively,” Ashley Young sighed.

“This... Really...” Bale looked at the prostitutes openly soliciting customers and the policemen patrolling the streets and was truly at a loss for words. He had completely lost his ability to think and speak.

Lennon, on the other hand, said nothing as his eyes raked over the half-naked ladies in the windows.

“One euro for two minutes!” The signboard outside a store attracted the gaze of the three. The people who walked out of the store all had, to some degree, a satisfied look on their faces.

“What is that?” Bale asked, his curiosity piqued.

Lennon shook his head.

“Oh, go on, let’s take a look first! It’s only one Euro, that’s really cheap!” Ashley Young pulled them in.

It was a single level of an average-sized hall. Right in the middle of it was a cylindrical pillar. Around the pillar were many little doors which could contain, at best, someone who was not fat. By the side of the doors were coin slots that all looked the same. It suddenly dawned on Ashley Young. “It’s a fun show; do you want to watch?”

“Yes!” The two young men firmly nodded.

Two minutes later...

Ashley Young looked at his two satisfied teammates and pursed his lips. “What a disappointment. Raising her thighs took more than 10 seconds, and setting a posture took 30. The rotating stage was as slow as a snail too... I was watching her back three-quarters of the time! Let’s go somewhere else!”

He dragged the two from the erotic show shop that still had a never-ending flow of people entering.

“Why are there so many people queuing here?” Bale asked, pointing at one of the shops in front.

There was a long queue there, with men of a variety of ages and looks waiting anxiously.

Ashley Young took a glimpse at the window with drawn curtains.

“Oh. The girl in there is entertaining a customer now. With so many people queueing, it means that she’s beautiful and does the job well. That’s why there’s such good business!”

Lennon and Bale suddenly looked at him with admiring eyes because he knew everything.

Ashley Young looked at the two and then at the stores in front with varying queues. He suddenly held his stomach. “Argh, my stomach hurts. I’ve got to go.” He pointed to the WC sign at the corner of the street. “You guys wait for me here. Don’t move!”

The two boys nodded honestly. “Okay, we’ll wait for you.”

Ashley Young held his stomach as he ran far away, disappearing into the corner of the street.

Bale leaned on Lennon somewhat nervously. He could feel the awkwardness in the latter’s body. He turned and saw Lennon’s gaze fixed on a skimpily dressed girl behind one of the windows ahead of them. He was watching her with relish.

More neon lights began lighting up. Opposite the banks of the canal, it was just as brightly lit. Amsterdam’s night had just started darkening...

Chapter 470: Did You Do It or Not?

When the sun rose from the east on a new day, Bale opened his eyes and woke from his sleep. After he saw clearly where he was, he finally breathed a sigh of relief.

This was the team’s dormitory, not the inside of some cheap brothel in Amsterdam’s red-light district.

He'd had the same dream the entire night that the boss knew he had walked around in Amsterdam's red-light district. The boss hadn't lost his temper, but seeing his disappointed expression was nothing short of a nightmare for Bale.

He had dreamt that he had been kicked out of the training base in Volendam. That he had to pack his bags and take a flight alone back to the United Kingdom. Then he was surrounded at the airport by endless media, hostile and gleefully raising a variety of embarrassing questions as they laughed at him.

He was surrounded by mocking laughter, unable to move or breathe... until he woke up.

Bale turned over and sat up, his back drenched with sweat. The sound of the toilet flushing came from the bathroom. Lennon was already up.

He rubbed his face with his hands and tried to clear his head a little more.

Lennon walked out of the bathroom and said, "Go wash your face, little monkey."

"Aaron." Bale turned his head and looked at his good friend, "We... Nothing's going to happen, right?"

Lennon froze for a moment, then smiled and shrugged, "What can happen? Didn't we get back on time yesterday? No one saw us there. Everything was perfect!" He made a peace sign and said, "Go wash up and then have breakfast. If you're late, then there'll be a problem."

Hearing this, Bale got up from his bed and dashed to the bathroom.

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Twain stretched his back on the bed before he got up. The weather in the Netherlands was much better than in England. It was a wonder to be able to listen to the birds and wake up smelling the scent of flowers.

Sleep was the most important activity in one's life. Only adequate sleep could guarantee one had enough energy for a day's work and study.

The manager had the privilege of not having to share a room with anyone, as Twain had stayed alone in a dorm room.

Just as he had finished washing up and came out of the bathroom, the doorbell rang.

"Come in."

Twain was a little surprised to see the person who opened the door and came in. He had thought it would be Dunn or Kerslake, but he hadn't expected it to be the reporter, Pierce Brosnan, who was also staying at the training base.

"Good morning, Mr. Reporter. Are you going to start an interview so early? I'm not dressed yet." Twain spread out his hands. He was only wearing his boxers and was bare-chested.

Brosnan didn't look well. He shook his head, "Tony, I think there's something I have to tell you..." Then he handed the several newspapers in his hand to Twain.

“I received a call from my friend this morning telling me what happened last night. Although I’m not surprised by this, the terrible thing is that the rest of the media are...”

Twain looked down at the Dutch and English newspapers in his hand. The common feature was the four photographs placed on the front page of the sports edition. The images featured three familiar faces— Ashley Young, Aaron Lennon, and Gareth Bale.

The shot was not clear, somewhat blurry. The angle wasn’t too good, either. It was obvious that these had been secretly taken. And the background behind these three faces was... the lively streets under the neon lights.

“It’s just a stroll down the street together. What’s the fuss?” He wanted to return the newspapers in bafflement. “I allow them free time every night. Don’t the players go to town and unwind these days?”

Brosnan didn’t answer, but pointed to the image in the newspapers and said, “These photos were not taken in Volendam, but in Amsterdam.”

Twain was a little taken aback to hear this name. He looked down at the picture carefully, trying to discern any clues from it.

“Taken in Amsterdam’s red-light district,” Brosnan continued, “Several English reporters who went there to have fun came across these three on the street...”

Twain looked up at Brosnan, who was still explaining to him, and couldn’t seem to believe what he had just heard.

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The Forest team’s three daily meals were the responsibility of the nutritionist and chef they had brought. The entire team, from the coaches to the players, all ate together without exception.

During breakfast, everyone got together and chatted while eating. Ashley Young, Bale, and Lennon sat together in an inconspicuous corner and discussed the previous night’s thrilling experience in low voices.

Bale seemed distracted and looked around.

“Hey, little monkey, what are you looking at?” Ashley Young reached out and waved in front of Bale’s eyes, but he couldn’t get his attention.

“The boss isn’t here,” Bale said as he looked around. “His assistants, Dunn and Kerlake, aren’t here either...” His voice dropped at the end, sounding a little frightened.

Upon hearing Bale say so, Lennon and Ashley Young hurriedly looked up and searched the crowd. Sure enough, they didn’t see the three coaches.

The manager and assistant coaches were normally there when everyone ate together. Why were they not there this morning?

The three people glanced at each other and saw a hint of panic in each other’s faces.

“Hey, is everything going to be okay?” Lennon looked at Ashley Young.

Ashley Young didn't know how to answer him. He mumbled instead, as if to reassure Lennon, and convince himself, "Maybe they have something else going on..."

Just as the trio were feeling apprehensive, Twain finally appeared at the cafeteria entrance along with the two assistant coaches.

Twain first stood at the door and swept his gaze across the team before he and the other two men found an empty table to sit down and eat their meal.

He ran his eyes across at the whole room without saying anything, no expression on his face. No one could tell what was on his mind.

Ashley Young and the others put their heads down and quickly finished their meals, hoping to leave this place that was making them uncomfortable.

Just as they had wolfed down their food and were about get up and leave, Twain spoke.

"Young, Lennon, Bale."

The three people froze with fear.

"Be in my room in thirty minutes. I have something I'd like to discuss with you," Twain said casually with his head lowered. He moved his ham to and fro on his plate with his fork at the same time, then he cut it with the knife, making a crisp sound as the metal struck the china plate.

When Bale heard the sound, he jerked his neck, as if he could see his dream gradually becoming a reality...

The other players thought it was odd that the boss had suddenly called these three people to his room. They looked on in bewilderment at their three teammates standing in the middle of the cafeteria, wondering what had happened.

"You can go now." Twain waved his hands with the knife still in his hand. It glinted in the morning sun.

As soon as the three had left, the sounds of discussion quickly broke out in the cafeteria. Everyone was speculating what mistake the three men had made, because the boss's voice sounded like he wasn't in a good mood.

Twain ignored the voices of speculation. He wordlessly tackled the ham and fried eggs on the plate. It was only when he chewed that his movements became a little bit bigger...

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Thirty minutes later, the three teammates appeared in Twain's room with sullen faces.

At the time, Twain was watching television—his eyes were fixed on the switched-on television screen, except Dutch was coming out of the speaker, which he couldn't understand at all, and an extremely dull paid programming was playing.

When he heard the three men push open the door, Twain stood by the bed for a moment as he waited for them before he turned his head to look at them.

“What’s with the look on your faces? Didn’t you have a terrific time last night?” He played with the remote control in his hands.

When the three of them heard his remark, like a bolt out of the blue, they realized that last night’s incident had been exposed. Before they had come here, they had still intended to lie and hide the past. Now, it looked like the statements they had prepared were completely useless.

“You must be wondering how I knew that, right?” Twain tossed the papers over, “They came knocking at the door when you didn’t pay after you had your fun last night.”

He was, of course, mocking them. The three men looked down and saw pictures of themselves having fun in the red-light district in the newspapers. They immediately understood everything... They must have been secretly caught on camera by the reporters.

They had been caught red-handed. Any refutation was useless.

The three of them were completely silent. Bale was quiet due to fear, and Ashley Young and Lennon were quiet because they didn’t know what to say.

“Why aren’t you talking, guys? Oh, should I congratulate you first on becoming men last night? You’ve transitioned from your adolescence to maturity, from maturity to becoming even more mature... till you’re almost f*cking ripe!” He burst into a string of obscenities without warning and the three bowed their heads and trembled. The calm before the storm had finally passed, and now the storm was crashing down.

“No, I didn’t...” Bale falteringly opened his mouth to defend himself.

“What did you not do? Gareth Bale, you’re amazing, aren’t you? How does a woman’s body feel? And you, Aaron Lennon!” Twain looked at Bale’s roommate, “I hope you’re not as fast with a woman as you are on the field!”

Bale didn’t dare to open his mouth again after being admonished. He could only silently endure it with his head lowered.

The look on Lennon’s face was also uncomfortable.

After he reprimanded the two younger ones, Twain turned his eyes towards Ashley Young, but his tone softened, “Young, I know... Those two young lads, they wouldn’t have thought to go to that place in the first place, right?”

Ashley Young knew what the boss meant when he said this. He nodded his head, “It was my idea, chief. It has nothing to do with them. I dragged them along.”

Twain composed his face and looked closely at Ashley Young.

“You’re a pretty stand up guy...” He withdrew his gaze and turned to the other two lads. “Don’t think about using this to score any points from me. You three... I’m not against you looking for girls to relieve your boredom, but not now! Do you know why I’m so angry? I’m not angry because those sonab*tch reporters caught you. I’m not f*cking afraid of them. If they want to blow this up or speculate, let them!”

He brandished his hands as if he really didn't care.

"Do you remember what I said to you guys when we came here? What did I say? I told you not to go there, right? Do you recall? Or did you forget? Did you completely disregard my words as a manager?"

None of the questions were impossible to answer.

"W-We didn't forget, chief, nor... nor did we disregard..." Ashley Young stammered, "It's just that..."

"It's just that your libidos overcame your rationality, right?"

"Right, right..." Ashley Young nodded in a hurry.

"In other words, you guys really did it?"

Ashley Young suddenly realized he had been duped. He hurriedly shook his head. "No! We just went there to take a look. We took a spin and came back! We definitely didn't do that... No!" It was a joke. If he had really said he did it, he didn't know how scary the boss's expression would be. "We were just curious. We'd never seen a place that openly displays the goods... So we wanted to take a look... Look, that was it, chief."

Twain listened quietly to Ashley Young's explanation, and then looked at Bale and Lennon. "Did you guys do it?"

The two men shook their heads, "No..."

Twain stared at Bale for half a beat before he turned and walked back to the couch. He sat right down and cocked a leg.

"You guys really didn't do it?"

This time the three of them replied in unison, "We really didn't do it!"

After a moment's silence, Twain sighed, "I'm disappointed in you guys... You're professional players. You rely on this to make money and earn a living. Your body is the only thing you can rely on and trust, but you don't know how to cherish it. I don't want to give you examples of how many talented players in this world have been destroyed by their reckless personal lifestyles since the arrival of modern soccer. You should be more aware of this than I am, because the body is yours! If you lose your condition one day and are crushed by others, it's no loss for me. I'll just find another bunch of good players. And you? Move to a lower level league and reminisce your former... f*cking glory years!? I'll say this—what do you think you're playing for? Because I asked you to? For the club and the team? For the fans? You're f*cking playing for yourself, for your future! This is your work, and you have to take it seriously. This is not some damn street game!"

Twain took a breath and looked at the three, who bowed their heads in silence.

"This is no longer a question about whether you've done it or not. This is an issue about your attitude towards professional soccer. Professional soccer is fair. It won't shortchange any player who gives his all to play seriously, nor will it give preferential treatment to any b*stard who seizes every opportunity to cut corners and resort to tricks! I want you to remember this and think about it seriously... What kind of path do you want to take?"

“In your professional career, the first few years are limitless and grand, filled with money, glory, and beautiful women. There are no worries about anything, and anything is possible when you’re admired by millions. And then you quickly decline to the point where you have to go to the lower leagues to seek opportunities. Is that the way you want to go?”

The three people shook their heads at the same time.

“You’re still young and have a long way to go. I want you to shape up.” Twain waved to indicate that they could go. “Okay, you can go back to regular training. After training, reflect on yourselves in front of the entire team and admit your mistakes. I won’t fine you, but you can’t take part in the tournament.”

The three of them nodded and left the room. This punishment was considered merciful by the three of them. At least Twain hadn’t sent them away in a rage to the bench to reflect on themselves.

Twain rubbed his temples when he saw that the door was closed.

Dunn’s biggest concern had still become reality. However, Dunn was worried about the overall impact of the incident on the club and team. Twain was worried about the impact of this kind of thing on the future of these three. He didn’t want his players to be the next Norman Whiteside or George Best. After the invasion of full commercialization in soccer, countless talented players were destroyed by their decaying private lives.

Gareth Bale, Aaron Lennon, and Ashley Young were excellent young players whom he had personally picked. He had hoped that they would be healthy enough to play a high level of soccer for the team for more than ten years, rather than being sold by him prematurely. He had watched these young players grow up step by step. In a way, it was like he had personally raised them with his own hands. Who would want to sell their own children?

Didn’t Ferguson feel heartache when he sold Whiteside and Paul McGrath?

How did Wenger feel when he decided to give up Jermaine Pennant?

“Tony.” Not knowing when, Dunn had opened the door and come in.

“Huh?” Twain snapped out of his thoughts and looked up at his assistant manager standing in front of him.

“There are a lot of reporters around the training ground... More than usual.”

Twain grunted, “The sharks smelled the blood and are finally here?”

“What do you...”

“Tell them that after training, the club will hold a special last-minute press conference, and they can ask any questions at that time. For now, no interviews will be accepted!”