

Champions 51

Chapter 51: Premier League Part 1

The second day after their visit with Clough, Tang En's team won with a score of 4:0 against Norwich City at their home ground. The match went perfectly, both in the process and the result. Forest owned total control of the match from the start, and it was one of the few matches in which they had the advantage in both the player statistics and the scoring under Tang En's leadership. Even the scrupulous English media could not find any flaws with the Forest Team's playing. During this match, what showed Tang En's good command was not his allocation of players, but his decision to field a center back that he had transferred from the youth team. The 19-year-old Wes Morgan scored his first goal of his football career. Though the goal came at the 82nd minute and did not make a big difference in the result, it was very meaningful for Morgan. Morgan chose to celebrate with Twain after his goal and rushed from the opponent's goalmouth toward Twain and hugged him tightly. "Thank you so much, Sir! Thank you!" he shouted in Twain's ears. Although he had never doubted his ability, Twain was the one who gave him the chance to prove it. Going from a youth player to a professional one, and then becoming a star player... How long would the road be, and how many managers would be needed along the way? The manager who brought him through the first stage was of paramount importance, and Morgan felt very lucky and glad to have met such a leader who had good insight and made good choices. After Morgan calmed down, Tang En pushed him out and laughed, "Kid, have you practiced how to sign your name?" Morgan opened his mouth wide, but it seemed that the only thing he could do was giggle. "Go back and continue with the match, kid. And remember to call me boss next time." Morgan nodded hard and went back to the match. Walker, who saw all of this, turned and realized Bowyer was wiping his eyes. "What happened to you?" he asked loudly as the cheering thundered around them. "Nothing happened, Des. I am just...just thinking about a question from the start of this match." "What question?" "I am very glad that I played under our man Clough, and not just because I got two European Championships and one league championship. I have learned many things from our boss that have been useful throughout my life. What about you?" Bowyer asked. Walker nodded, "Same for me. And I believe many that were under Clough feel the same way as you. Just like Pearce, O'Neal, and many more..." "You're right. Now I feel it's the same for Wes Morgan and Michael Dawson. They're lucky to be playing under Twain." Walker stared at Bowyer for a few seconds without a word. "Are you comparing Twain to our man?" Bowyer shook his head. "No, not me. I just have a feeling that maybe after many years, the whole of England will compare him to Mr. Clough." Walker turned to look at Twain after he heard what Bowyer had said. Under the loud jubilation at the City Ground Stadium, he encouraged every player around him and then sent them back to the field one by one. Despite Forest's four goals ahead of Norwich, he still reminded them loudly that the match was not over yet. "Ian, from my understanding of Tony, I think he would not agree with your opinion." "Why?" "Because he's probably hoping people will compare others to him." It was true that he did not want to be anyone's successor and did not want to follow anyone, even if that person was Brian Clough. This man chose to show his back, and let others catch up with him. Clough must have also realized this, and so, though he found Tony Twain to be a lot like him at a young age, he had not said anything like, "You are going to be my successor," when he met Twain the day before. Often, the noble and great men with high achievements like to search for their successors when they get older to sing their praises to the public and the media. Pelé was one, and Maradona was no exception, either. Walker believed that his boss would like to be able to say, "so-and-so is going to be

my successor”, “so-and-so is as handsome as me in my younger time”, and “I like so-and-so’s coaching style as it makes me think of my time” during interviews. Walker could guarantee that that “so-and-so” would never be Tony Twain. Clough was special. So was Tony. “...After five successive victories followed by a failure, it’s been another three victories straight. Tony Twain used this performance to show that he is a real genius. Now Forest has stabilized their rankings in the top six. It looks like we will be able to cheer for our favorite team at the next season of the Premier League.” “...Nothing could stop Forest from standing out, as they were reborn at the second half of the season. Paul Hart’s disciple has accomplished something that even he, himself, was unable to do—lead Forest to a place in the Premier League.” “Marlon Harewood just needs four more goals to be awarded the Golden Boot. This golden boot forward at the second half of the season mentioned that he wanted to thank his substitute manager, Twain, the most during his interview. It was Twain that ignited his eagerness for victory, and he believes that other players from the team feel the same.” “There are six more rounds until the end of the league and Nottingham Forest is ranked 6th, though they still have one more round to go. The other five competitors have felt that Forest just might catch up with their steps anytime. No one dares to make a mistake. The competing over the placing for the Premier League next season has raged on and has reached the heat of the battle. In the next seven league matches, Forest has four matches against the teams who are currently ranked in the top six and one more with 7th place Ipswich. Out of the seven teams, there are five tough ones. For Twain and his Forest Team, they have definitely not reached the end of this long battle yet. Before the season ends, anything could happen.” Yes, anything was possible.

Chapter 52: Premier League Part 2

“The match is reaching the last 10 minutes. Nottingham Forest, who is not on their home ground, is tied 3:3 with their opponent. Both teams have played frantically today with five goals being scored in the first half of the match alone! At the 66th minute, Ipswich changed the score to a draw.” “Bad news just in for Forest from Rotherham United. A goal by the Wolverhampton Wanderers F.C. in their away match against Rotherham United, and that boring match has finally shown some signs of life. However, this is devastating news for Forest. If this score holds until the end of the match, there will be five points difference between Forest and Wolverhampton.” “...But back to what’s happening here...oh yeah! The ball goes in! Marlon Harewood! This is his first goal today and his 21st goal for this season! This goal must be a relief for Tony Twain! At the 79th minute, his team is once again ahead of Ipswich!” “The match is over! Nottingham Forest has gotten their fourth continuous victory in away matches! Tony and his team are definitely walking a bright path!” On April 5th, at the 41st round of league matches, Tang En led his team through the difficulty of the away match, beating their closest competitor, Ipswich, with a score of 4:3. Harewood’s last goal brought the precious three points for the team. On April 9th, at the rescheduled 40th match, Nottingham Forest lost to second-ranked Leicester by one goal. The loss was not a complete failure. Tang En had reserved his firepower and was satisfied that the team only lost one goal. Because Leicester had 80 points and was ahead of the third place Sheffield United by 11 points, he treated only giving up one goal as a win. As there were only five more league matches left, Leicester and Portsmouth, who had 83 points were locked in for promotions to the Premier League. The remaining teams could only compete through the playoffs for third—the last position to be advanced to the Premier League. As Ipswich, who was ranked seventh, had been losing all the while and was quite far from sixth, Tang En was not worried that they would catch up. As a result, he decided to reserve Forest’s energy for the upcoming competitor, which would be the Wolverhampton Wanderers. This match was

going to be a direct battle between fifth place and sixth place. If Tang En won, Forest's ranking points would be the same as Wolverhampton's, and then they could overtake them with their goal differences. However, if Tang En lost to them, the gap between them would widen. The third- to sixth-ranked teams for the League Matches all participated in the playoffs. However, according to the English FA Cup, the competition system employs the two-round knock-out method. The semi-finals would employ the away goal rule and the finals would be determined in just one round at the stadium. The opposing teams would be between third and sixth places, and fourth and fifth places. Therefore, the higher the ranking, the weaker the opponent would be. This was the reason Tang En so desperately wanted to win over the Wolverhampton Wanderers and take fifth place. Because it was a playoff match, the manager of Wolverhampton probably thought similarly to Tang En and planned his tactics accordingly. It would be a fair and direct battle. The match was nine minutes in when Wolverhampton striker Nathan Blake scored a goal. At the 26th minute, the Wanderers' midfielder, Colin Cameron, added more salt to Forest's wound and scored a second goal, making the score 2:0. The Forest fans sunk into a deathly silence. David Johnson brought back hope with a goal at the 40th minute. The Forest fans revived. In the second half of the match, both managers treated the field like a chessboard and played an intense game of chess. Finally, at the 73rd minute, Tang En's "give it all" tactic worked. Michael Dawson got a goal after being pushed by Tang En to the forward line. City Ground suddenly sounded as if a bomb had been detonated. The cheering from the viewing platform was so loud that Tang En couldn't hear his own clapping. For the remainder of match, though Tang En tried his best and the Forest players ran until their legs cramped, they still were not able to bring victory for the fans. They could not do anything but shake hands with the Wolverhampton Wanderers on their home ground. The draw did not change the ranking board, as the top six remained the same, and even the order was unchanged. Tang En's bad mood was completely gone the next morning when he woke up. This was because he had a lesson with Yang Yan that night. He now felt that there were two things in his life to look forward to. One was the victory after every match, and the other was having Chinese lessons with Yang Yan. Every time Yang Yan saw Tang En, she would marvel at him, as he was the only foreigner she knew that could learn the Chinese language and culture so quickly. Tang En always nodded and showed he agreed every time Yang Yan complimented him seriously and added, "I'm not trying to butter you up." Of course, his success was because he could already speak and write Chinese. He was a Chinese man who has grown up and lived in China for 26 years. The Chinese lesson was just an excuse for Tang En to get close to Yang Yan. He hoped to hear Yang Yan's voice, watch her smile, be in the same room with her, breathe the same air, and talk about whatever subject she liked. Usually the first half of the lesson consisted of Yang Yan teaching Tang En, while the second half always turned out to be Tang En talking about football to Yang Yan. Neither of them felt there was anything wrong with that. Yang Yan had gradually become a fan of Forest, while Tang En's Chinese had improved very quickly, and that made Yang Yan very proud. Seeing his old schoolmate look so proud, Tang En was amused. However, he could not express himself and give away his true identity. He realized there was no way for him to go back to his original life. He had already fallen in love of being a manager. Even though he was just a substitute, he did not want to return his new body. As for Yang Yan... she was his only link to his past. Tang En's past life had nothing for him to cherish, except for this girl, which occasionally made him think about studying in a Chinese school and meeting new people. Yang Yan was his first crush. However, first crushes did not usually turn into anything. Tang En had no plans to say these things out loud and pushed them way down inside in order to preserve his current life. I did not know you then and you did not know me, either. Now we know each other, but nothing will ever happen. The excitement that Tang En had experienced when he

first saw Yang Yan was just because of the sharp contrast he felt between his past and current lives, as well as the effect that fantasy has on reality. Now, that effect has slowly faded away, and he could treat Yang Yan calmly and normally. Let the past stay in the past...

Chapter 53: Premier League Part 3

Although Tang En had five wins and one loss in March's league matches, he still lost to Harry Redknapp who was the manager of Portsmouth F.C. and had won the best coach award six times. Losing to him did not affect Tang En's mood at all, as Harry Redknapp was a famous figure in English football.

In order to celebrate the commendable achievements by Forest during that period, Burns threw a casual get together at his bar. He invited all who wanted to come, but, of course, the players could not come. Even if they wanted to come and drink, they still needed Tang En's permission. Tang En was a classic drinker, but he did not allow his players to drink. They could drink as much as they wanted after the season, but not during it.

Michael brought his son, and the smart Bernard soon became the center of attention. Tang En approached little Bernard with a glass filled with beer, and the glass was almost bigger than the kid's head.

"Come, uncle feed you to drink..." Tang En's tongue felt bigger when he talked. No one knew how much alcohol he had drank.

Just as he handed the glass over to Bernard, Michael snatched it away and immediately drank it down in one shot.

Tang En saw Michael's throat moving and heard the sound of the beer going into his stomach. The entire glass of beer was in someone else's stomach! Tang En looked him straight in the eyes and yelled, "That was mine!"

"I know." Michael wiped away the foam on his mouth, burped, and then said with satisfaction, "Thanks for the treat."

"You are such a..." Tang En opened his mouth and was about to let him have it, but was stopped by Michael's warning.

"B*stard! Don't you use bad language in front of my son!"

Tang En was completely speechless.

There was loud laughter all around. Out of all the rough and husky voices of the old men, little Bernard's crisp voice rang out especially clear, "Boss, give Mr. Twain a cup of fresh juice on me!"

Everyone exploded into laughter again.

Tang En raised his arms up to show he surrendered.

Big John held his glass up and shouted happily, "Who beat Tony?"

Walker stretched his voice just like the sound-system at the stadium and shouted, "Gaaaaaavin!"

The rest immediately added on as if they were watching matches in the stadium, "Bernard!"

The atmosphere in the bar reached a climax, and people were holding their glasses and chatting energetically. Michael brought his son to sit at Tang En's table, and everyone sitting at the table welcomed little Bernard and ignored his father.

"The son is way cuter than the father," Tang En judged.

"You're not cute, either," Michael tried to rebuke.

Tang En giggled, "This means we have something in common."

"Who would have anything in common with someone like you?" Michael put his glass up and shook it in front of Tang En. Tang En knew what he meant and put his cup up as well. They cheered.

"Tony."

"Yes?"

"Will our team be in the Premier League at next season?"

"Is there any point to asking such a question?"

"Great. If you don't make it, I will sit behind your seat and heckle you at every home match."

"Daydreaming! I will not give you any chance to do that!"

The two men finished their beers, and then looked at each other and started laughing.

The heavy door of the bar was pushed open, and a man who wore a cap came in. Though he tried to keep a low profile, there were still people who recognized him.

The noisy bar soon turned completely silent.

Even Tang En and Michael, who sat the farthest in, felt the vibe change.

Michael, curious, turned around and saw the visitor who stood beside the door searching for someone.

After that, Tang En noticed the smile on Michael's face had disappeared. He stood up and looked at the middle-aged man in the cap.

Michael and the party-crasher met eyes at the same time.

"Michael," he said and wanted to go on, but Michael stopped him.

"I know what you want to do. I do not care about them, and you should not come and look for me anymore. I have already made it clear that I want no association with you! The same goes for John."

Michael had just finished what he wanted to say, when John, nearer to the door, stood in front of the guy in the cap and glared at him from unfriendly eyes and an unwelcoming stance.

"John, listen to me..."

Big John spoke indifferently. "I do not know you."

While he said this, others surrounded them.

The uninvited guest looked at all the people and was exasperated. He pointed to John and Michael and scolded, "You are renegades who betrayed your brothers!"

This caught Tang En's interest. Betrayed? Brothers? Renegades? Were they in an action movie? He tiptoed up behind big John and hoped to catch a glimpse of the guy's face to see if it had any scars.

"The b*stards of Millwall want to challenge us! This is about our honor! And yet you guys are here drinking and enjoying yourselves as if there was nothing going on."

Burns' cold voice came from the staircase, "I remember I said we do not welcome people like you here."

The man seemed to be scared of Burns, and his anger was suddenly gone. Tang En wondered why this man changed his manner so quickly. It seemed like something strange was going on.

"Kenny..."

"Leave the place!"

Burns abruptly asked him to leave, and everyone in the bar stared at him with hate in their eyes for ruining the party. The uninvited guest stared at John who blocked his way angrily and then walked away.

As the door of the bar closed, the people inside began to drink and chat again as if nothing had happened. The vibe was soon back to what it had previously been.

However, Michael seemed to be in a bad mood, and he suddenly drank all his beer in one shot. Then he murmured something. Despite the noisy surroundings, Tang En still heard it.

"What f*cking honor..."

After drinking the rest of his beer, Michael stood up and said to Twain and Walker, "I have to go home now, as Gavin is about to fall asleep."

Walker nodded to show that he understood. Michael looked at Tang En who was still confused.

"Remember what you promised, Tony. If Forest is still trapped inside League One, I will do something about it!"

After that, he took his son out of the crowd.

From the moment of the uninvited guest's arrival, to when Michael left the bar, Tang En was completely out of the loop. What was all that about? Turning back and seeing Walker drinking alone, Tang En felt that he had to know what had just happened. "Des, do you know who that guy in the cap was. It seemed everybody knew him, but why did they talk to each other that way?"

Walker glanced at Tang En. "It was Mark Hodge, the leader of Naughty Forty."

"What is that?"

This time Walker downed his beer, waited a minute, and then answered Tony. He sounded the words out syllable by syllable, "Foot-ball Hoo-li-gans!"

Chapter 54: Hodge's Honor Part 1

England's football hooligans were well known even to those who never watched football matches. London fog, English pubs, and the football hooligans are national symbols of England. Tang En's understanding of football hooligans was no more than an ordinary person's. In China, there had been no chance for him to have contact with any real football hooligans. People there thought football hooligans were cool, and that they just threw around bad language, showed their fists, and shouted things like "cut his legs off!" They had no clue what a true football hooligan was.

So how did a true football hooligan behave?

Tang En wasn't in the mood to think about these boring questions. After spending a great night at Burns' bar and waking up the next morning, his mind was focused on the remaining five matches in the league, and what he had to do to progress in the rankings to secure the most advantageous position in the playoffs.

He circled the remaining five matches in red on his calendar to remind him that there would be five more decisive battles.

He was sure that the team and he had prepared well in order to tackle the last four matches, and then give their all in the playoffs. After three playoff matches, they would be a newly promoted team in the Premier League next season. After that, Tang En would spend his holiday back in China to secretly visit his parents and to see how the life of the Tang En in China was going.

Those were all the plans that Tang En had for the future.

Tang En's plans did not get off to a good start. At the 32nd round rescheduled match on April 16th, an away match, Forest lost to the Sheffield United who was ranked third. They only lost by one goal, but losing was losing, and they lost three points. This also decreased Forest's chances of surpassing the Wolverhampton Wanderers, as they had one match less than them and were only behind by two points.

Although Tang En was extremely angry about the score during the match, by post match in the changing room he had accepted the failure. What could he do even if he did not accept it? Considering it was an away match, and we only lost by one goal to a team that is ranked third, the outcome is not so bad after all. Tang En tried to convince himself from another angle. And if we end up in sixth place at the end of the season, and we have to play Sheffield United again, this match will have helped us size up and test ourselves against a future opponent.

However, the players would have no holiday to enjoy. In the changing room, Twain announced the cancellation of the one-day holiday after the match, and everyone went back to Nottingham and started training for their next match with Reading F.C., the team that was ranked fourth.

Despite having lost the match, Tang En's team went back to Nottingham and found that they still had lots of support from the fans.

The next day, there were many fans around the training ground. Besides the usual faces, Tang En also saw a group of people that was singing the team song loudly and encouraging the players in their training. They made a lot of noise, which caught Tang En's attention. It seemed as if the fans had separated into two distinct groups.

The group with the most people was like a gang of people that knew each other well, and had an obvious leader. Tang En could easily identify the leader.

He wore a red pullover, and the red Forest scarf on his neck proved his identity. The fans around him all wore different colors and different kinds of clothing, but they all had the Nottingham Forest red scarf around their necks.

The weather was not good at all. With the light rain, Tang En thought there would be fewer fans watching the team train from the side. He certainly did not expect there would be so many of the crazy fans present. The crazy fans soon attracted the Wilford training ground's security, which came with some degree of alarm to see what the commotion was.

While coaching Forest for about half of the season, this was the first time Tang En saw this kind of scene.

Even an idiot could guess who these crazy fans were that gathered and cheered outside the training ground.

Seeing these people sing and cheer for Forest nonstop under the rain, Tang En had a hard time associating them with the unreasonable, often violent behavior of football hooligans.

They did not look any different than ordinary fans.

It was indeed hard to imagine that they were the notorious football hooligans. Something was not quite right.

They cheered forcefully at the side of the training ground, and the players did not seem to appreciate them at all. Some glared at them in disgust. Even the good Mr. Walker treated them like nothing.

After the training, the players purposely left from the side that was farthest from the fences, and no one went to sign autographs for the fans. When the usual fans realized this, they were quite disappointed. No one in the new group had come for autographs. They only seemed to be there to support the team.

The team's reaction shocked Tang En, and it seemed that he was the only one who had no knowledge about the football hooligans.

Giving a few glances to the group of people that sang songs to say goodbye to the team, he then followed the team off the training ground.

Although he had transmigrated to this country almost half a year, he found that he still did not know so many things. It wasn't a good feeling.

Chapter 55: Hodge's Honor Part 2

The 43rd round of league matches was on April 19th. Nottingham Forest played against the fourth-place team, Reading, in an away match.

"What a struggle this match has been! Nottingham Forest has had to deal with the constant resistance of the home team at the Madejski!"

“John, can this be right... why would an away team have to deal with constant resistance from the home team? Are you suggesting that Nottingham Forest has made this their home ground?”

“Stephen, you are right. Yes, Twain’s team has made this their home ground!”

Listening to the commentators on the radio, James Landy hit the horn in his cab. “Good job, Tony!”

The frowning passenger in back complained, “Stop pressing that thing. I can’t hear the match!”

“Oh, sorry, Sir. Are you a Forest fan, too?” The road ahead was wide with very little traffic. Landy casually talked over his shoulder to his passenger about the match.

“Of course, since I was very young.” The passenger did not talk much, obviously preferring to listen to the radio. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Don’t worry, sir. There’s not many cars on the road. Most people are watching the match at home or in a pub. And you can trust my driving skills. I’ve been driving for 27 years.” Just as Landy finished, Motson’s voice suddenly boomed out of the radio.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Eoin Jess! A beautiful direct free kick! Like an arrow piercing Reading through the heart! This is a major goal! At the 74th minute, Nottingham Forest takes the lead in an away match with the score of 1:0!”

James Landy from the front seat, and the passenger in the back raised their arms high and shouted, “Forest! Forest!”

While the two were shouting and banging their hands on the ceiling, the cab suddenly swerved. Landy grabbed the wheel and came to a screeching halt.

“You idiot b*astard! You’re still driving!” The passenger was visibly shaken.

Landy was exhilarated. “Sir, I told you that you could trust my skills! Haha! Forest is the best!”

Inside Madejski Stadium, the Forest fans went nuts as they cheered loudly to celebrate their team’s victory.

The final whistle was blown. Tang En and his soldiers had won a battle that influenced their fate and future. The highest commander’s soldiers surrounded him to celebrate their victory. They had successfully gotten the three points and had found stable footing on their way to future ranking battles.

“Forest has won the match! It was a boring match, although I don’t think Twain would agree. Those three points are precious to Forest! Thank god they won! Too bad for Reading...”

When the team left the locker room to board the bus, some of the players signed autographs for fans and took pictures with them.

Like the players, Tang En was also treated like a star. As a manager, he was happy to have fans asking for his signature.

“Hey, Tony! We’re going to the Premier League, right?” There was always someone asking him about this when he walked over to the fence and signed autographs.

Twain grinned and nodded. "Yes, we will be in the Premier League!"

Then Tang En would lower his head and sign as many autographs as he could. Since the team had won the match, everyone one was in a good mood, and he was more than willing to fulfill all the fans' wishes.

Then he stopped in front of a person that didn't have a notebook, Forest postcards, a Forest Jersey, a scarf, or a hat... he just stood in front of Twain without anything in his hands for him to sign.

Curious, Tang En raised his head and was shocked to see the leader of the group that had cheered and sang so loudly at the training ground the other day.

He was an older man with grey eyes, white hair, and wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes. He seemed polite, friendly, without any of the ugly scars or crazy accessories that Tang En's imagination made the leader of such a group out to have.

The two men stared at each other.

"Mark Hodge." The leader introduced himself first and offered his hand to Twain.

Since he showed friendliness first, Tang En could not reject him, so he shook hands with him. "Tony Twain."

Hodge grinned at him. "There is no need for you to introduce yourself. Everyone knows your name. Forest owes its success to you! Great job!"

"Thanks," Tang En smiled, but couldn't really enjoy Hodge's compliments. His mind was all messy now, wondering how this polite-looking, middle-aged man could really be a leader of football hooligans. He couldn't imagine him throwing bricks at other people's heads.

"I have a question for Mr. Twain," Hodge stared at Tang En and said.

"Please, go ahead."

"The last match of league, our match with Millwall... What is your confidence level on winning that match?"

Tang En was surprised that he didn't ask if they would be in the Premier League next season, but asked about the last match instead. According to Forest's recent performance, the last league match might not be important anymore.

"It depends on the situation of the team by then. If eligibility for the playoffs is determined before that, or we get promoted directly, I would not put too much energy into the last match," Tang En answered him honestly. If reporters had asked him the same question, he would have answered differently, of course.

Hodge shook his head in disappointment. "This is not the way, Mr. Twain. I think no matter the situation going into that match, winning against Millwall is the way to go."

"Has something gone wrong with them in the past?"

Hodge ignored his question.

“Don’t you think that ending the season with a victory would be best?”

Tang En thought about it, and what Hodge said made sense. He also knew that he would not like to lose to Millwall on their home ground. So, he nodded. “All right, I think it will end in victory like today.”

Hodge was happy to hear Twain say this. “We all like victory, don’t we?”

“That’s right,” Tang En agreed.

Hodge put up the hood of his pullover, said bye to Twain, and turned to leave the crowd. Tang En did not see his brothers, just him alone, which meant that he had only come for that question.

Other fans were calling him, and Tang En walked over to them.

Hodge’s response was too adamant, but Tang En did not have the energy to care about why he wanted Forest to win so desperately over Millwall.

Perhaps it was just because everyone hoped to witness victory, instead of failure.

Chapter 56: Hodge’s Honor Part 3

After Tang En left the fans and returned to the bus, Walker came over and said, “I saw you and Mark Hodge together just now. What did you talk about?”

Seeing Walker’s concern, Tang En shrugged his shoulder. “Nothing much. It was just a normal conversation between a manager and a fan. He wants Forest to win the last match, that’s all.”

Hearing this, Walker did not say anything.

“And, Des, I think you’re worrying for no reason. Though you all hate him, I do not think he is as you described. I mean, he doesn’t seem like a bad person...”

Walker interrupted Twain, “A bad person does not always look like one. Some people are gentleman, good husbands, and nice people when their minds are clear. But if they are drunk, god only knows what they will do!” Walker waved his hand in exaggeration. “Hodge is that kind of person exactly. You think he looks okay? That is just because he is not drunk yet.”

As Tang En was about to say something, Walker added on, “And with Mark Hodge, the time when he is drunk is way more than when he is sober.”

On the first training day after returning from their away match, there were not as many fans as last time. Probably because Hodge and his gang did not come.

Tang En thought about it.

He had never seen Hodge and his group at the training ground before, but they showed up to cheer and encourage the team after they lost an important match. Because of this, Tang En found it difficult to associate them with the football hooligans who fought with others and ruined teams’ images.

Although they were not polite and well-mannered men, they did contribute to the team, didn’t they?

In his 26 years, Tang En had not had any experience with fake football hooligans, let alone real ones. He lacked some awareness about them and did not understand why the people around him treated them so harshly, when they were not bad, just more enthusiastic about the team. They said that the presence of football hooligans would cause bloody fights, but so far he had not seen Hodge and his group display any radical actions.

Michael brought little Gavin to watch the team train. They had just come over from watching George Wood. When the team finished their training and was resting at the side, Tang En walked over to talk to Michael and tease the adorable Gavin.

That's when he noticed someone beside Michael. It was Mark Hodge. The two of them seemed to be talking over something, but soon both of them became excited. He had only seen Michael become that angry at the match with West Ham United. Both of the men were cursing at each other and making big gestures.

Though he knew that it probably wasn't any of his business, Tang En decided to find out what was going on. He was still very curious as to why Mark Hodge came looking for Michael at the Forest Bar that night.

"Michael! You think this is okay? The association has gone down hill ever since you left. We need you to come back and lead us..."

"Hodge, I want nothing to do with you. Naughty Forty is yours, not mine." Michael yelled. "John, Bill, and me have been gone for 14 years. We have no connection. This is for the best, and we will not have any any more contact! Goodbye, Hodge." After Michael said this, he was about to take Gavin's hand and leave.

"Wait... Michael! Are you really willing to abandon us and abandon the association?!" Hodge shouted.

"Why would I leave all this behind? For me, Gavin and Fiona are my everything." After he said this, Michael was done with Hodge and started to leave the training ground.

"Millwall's sons of b*tches are coming strong this time! We cannot lose to them! Don't you miss the times you and your partners fought together? Don't you care about our association's image and reputation? Hey!" No matter how hoarsely Hodge screamed, Michael never stopped and looked back.

"B*stard!" Hodge hollered at Michael's back. "You are such a betrayal, you b*stard!"

"This is why you are so concerned with Forest winning over Millwall?" Hodge was shocked when he suddenly heard this voice come from off to the side.

"Mr. Twain..."

Standing inside the fence, Tang En looked at him quietly.

"Eh... you do not understand, Mr. Twain. It is very complicated." Hodge lost his train of thought. He had not expected the manager to appear beside him suddenly. "Millwall's one of the associations that provokes us. They laugh at our team and our association."

"So what? My team will beat their team, and they'll look like idiots."

“That’s right, Mr. Twain. You can beat them in the match, but what about me?” Hodge pointed to himself and said, “I have to beat them outside the match. Actually, we are doing the same thing after all. You fight for the honor of your team, and we do the same! Our love for Forest is undisputed, and I would even say that there is no one else who could support Forest more than us! And love Forest more than us! We have cheered for Forest ever since Brian Clough’s generation, and it has been 24 years! We fought with Forest!” Hodge became more and more excited the more he said. He opened his arms as if he controlled the whole world, reflecting a fanatical light from his eyes.

But Tang En was not moved by these words and simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Maybe this is true. Twenty-four year ago... I have forgotten what was I even doing back then. Hodge, I do not care what you plan to do. That’s your business. However, I am here to tell you to stop badgering Michael. Maybe he had some connection with you before, but that was in the past. Michael loves his son and his family very much now.” As he said the words, he thought it was a lousy speech.

Hodge nodded, “I know, of course. I know that he loves his son. But...”

“Everyone has their right to choose, do they not?” Tang En grinned. “Respect others’ choices.”

After hearing what Tang En said, Hodge was quiet. He lowered his head and fell into deep thought.

“I have to go back, now. Goodbye, Mr. Hodge. I will win the last match, but not for your honor. For mine.” Tang En waved and turned back to the team.

Watching Tang En leave, Hodge muttered, “No, it is for our honor, Mr. Twain.”

Chapter 57: The Visiting Team, Millwall Part 1

On April 21st, at their 44th match of the League Championship, the Nottingham Forest team played in a home match against the Burnley team.

“There are three rounds left in the League Championship, and the top six rankings in the league points table have changed since the last match. After the fourth-ranked Reading lost a home match to the Forest team, they had been overtaken by the Wolfhampton Wanderers and dropped to the fifth spot. The accumulated points of the fourth to sixth rankings are 71, 70 and 69 respectively. Look at these points! There’s a lot of anticipation for the remaining three rounds of the League Championship! After two consecutive away matches, Tony Twain and his team return to City Ground. What will be the score on the electronic scoreboard after 90 minutes?”

Ninety minutes later, Tang En, who was in high spirits and with a bright smile on his face, stood on the sidelines with the visiting team manager to exchange a courtesy handshake. The electronic scoreboard above the stand to his side, displayed the final score that had been fixed at 2:0 since the first half of the match.

The Nottingham Forest team had secured their second consecutive victory. Even though the top two ranking teams had won matches and the league points table had not changed, it did not dampen Tang En’s good mood. Because his team had already locked in for the playoffs two matches ago.

On April 26th, at their 45th match of the League Championship, which was the penultimate match, Nottingham Forest challenged Rotherham United in an away match.

Like Burnley, the Forest team's previous opponent, Rotherham United was ranked in the middle with no worry of a relegation and no hope of a promotion. They lacked the will to fight in their last few matches in the League Championship. Perhaps these players were now preoccupied with where to go for their vacations, or how to take advantage of the summer transfer period to join a team with better benefits. With such a team as Nottingham Forest's opponent, it was like playing against a pizza delivery boy.

The hungry Forest team played a beautiful 2:0 away match against Rotherham United. The team's top striker, Marlon Harewood, raised his number of goals in the League Championship for the season to 24, and his forward partner, David Johnson, scored his 20th personal goal.

The final stage of the League Championship was perfect for Tang En, and there was only one opponent left now...

He looked at the calendar. Below the red circle around May 4th, which was eight days later, there was a line of small print, and it was their opponent's name: Millwall.

On May 4th, 2:57 p.m., at City Ground, a fan was waving the flag of a lifelike roaring lion with his front paws raised high, looking as if it would leap out from the blue flag at any time and tear its prey apart.

About a hundred visiting fans had gathered outside the stadium and were slowly making their way toward City Ground. Most ordinary Forest fans would consciously detour around this blue phalanx when they saw it. Therefore, they created no hindrance along the way.

Of course, they were not afraid. On both sides of the Millwall fans, there were also about 100 Forest fans wearing red jerseys, shouting, cursing, and making many rude gestures at the Millwall fans. The Millwall fans in the phalanx also fought back with words and gestures. But neither side charged at each other to fight.

That was because there were many British policemen wearing bright yellow vests in between these two groups of fans. They were fully armed and stared vigilantly at the fans on both sides.

For the City of Nottingham, today was the time of the year where their police patrol force was its weakest and most stressed. Because the Millwall fans had arrived.

A Football Club like Millwall might be one of the few clubs in the world where its fans were more famous than the club itself. As a small team in the south of London, they did not have many achievements and honors to show off, and they did not have any big-name stars. But they had the most fearless group of fans in the U.K., and even in the world.

Millwall had the most notorious football hooligans in the U.K.

At an intersection, this legion of Lions stopped and the police surrounded them. They needed to wait here for the Forest bus to pass through. Even though they had stopped, they were still on the outside periphery of the abusive and frenzied Forest fans.

A horn blared three times in the front of them, and a red bus slowly moved into the view of these people.

Suddenly the blue Millwall fans ignored the Forest fans on the outside periphery and aimed their barbs at the Forest players sitting in the bus. There were even excited fans who wanted to bend down and look for bricks to smash the bus. The two rows of policemen surrounding them played their part, pushing back those fans who wanted to cross the line.

Even though the bus's tightly-closed windows had excellent soundproofing, Tang En could still hear the voices of the Millwall fans outside. With their puckered lips, he could make out the "F" words like "f*ck" this and "f*ck" that. They looked vicious and kept putting up their middle fingers. Having led his team for half of the season's matches, this was the first time Tang En had seen such ferocious fans. He felt that they were not here to see the match, but to pick a fight.

To fight against the Millwall fans, the Forest fans who had gathered together also began to hit back loudly with foul language, which caught Tang En's attention. He easily found a familiar face in the crowd, Mark Hodge.

This usually polite, middle-aged man had become red in neck due to the rush of blood. He looked fierce and was snarling at the other side like an angry bulldog.

"Football hooligans," Tang En whispered the words that Walker had told him that night at the bar.

Sitting beside him, Walker saw that Twain had noticed the situation outside. He lifted his head and looked. Apparently, he was accustomed to it. "Tony, this is kids' stuff. When we reach the field, just wait till the match begins. I guarantee it's going to be an eye-opener for you."

Tang En looked at him.

"At that time, we will need to yell to communicate in this way." Walker smiled, using his hands to compare the distance between the two of them. "And we will be yelling close into each other's ears."

During their conversation, the bus had left that intersection with all the pent-up turmoil and turned into the team's exclusive parking lot. Tang En looked back and only saw a few waving flags and blurred figures of red and blue. The Forest fans' singing had stopped, and Tang En knew that these groups of people must be abusing each other again.

Tang En felt that after his brief contact with Mark Hodge, he could now, more or less understand the beliefs of these football hooligans: to abuse the opponents for their favorite team, to fight against the opposing fans for their favorite team. They would even die... for their favorite team.

Chapter 58: The Visiting Team, Millwall Part 2

When the match began, Tang En fully realized that what Walker had said was true about the situation from the technical area. Just because their opponent was Millwall, the atmosphere of the stadium had completely changed. The visiting team's fans were singing excitedly in their stands, constantly changing the lyrics to mock the Forest players during the match. Although they were smaller in number, they had the upper hand in volume.

Unable to withstand the humiliation, the die-hard Forest fans immediately launched a counterattack with filthy words under Mark Hodge's leadership. Of course, just like there was always roast turkey for Christmas dinner, what was a battle of filthy words without the embellishment of middle fingers?

If someone had heard these lively noises outside the stadium, they would have thought the stadium was full. Tang En had originally thought so, too. But in fact, the attendance for that day's match was lower than any of the previous matches. Large swathes of the stands were empty. Other than the policemen in bright yellow vests, there was no one else.

It wasn't that the match wasn't exciting enough to attract spectators. But for this highly-sensitive match, the field management and the police deliberately deducted a portion of the tickets to free up some space in the stands and use that as a buffer between the opposing groups of fans to ensure safety.

The match itself was not even as exciting as the two sides' fans in the stands. Millwall tried very hard, but it was of no use. In the face of Nottingham Forest's ambition to be the Premier League, they were beaten without the power to fight back. When Harewood scored his 25th goal of the season, which was also the third goal of this match, the visiting team, Millwall, lost their fighting spirit, and the match ended prematurely.

At this time, the Millwall fans in the stands were once again in the spotlight. They constantly abused the Forest players on the field and the Forest fans on both sides of the stands. There were even clashes between the fans and police officers in charge of the security work. Of course, the conflicts quickly subsided. It was not only the Millwall team which was fighting in their away match, but also the Millwall fans. They didn't seem to realize that some hollering and a few curse words were honestly the best way to vent.

Because the situation of the match was already set, Tang En simply watched the show, starring at the fans from the sidelines. He wanted to find Mark Hodge in the stands and was curious as to what he was doing at that moment. But there were so many people in the stands, it was too difficult to find someone who was wearing the same red jersey as the other 20,000 fans.

When the match went into injury stoppage time, Tang En heard a familiar shout from Michael Bernard behind him.

"Tony! Will there be any changes in this match?"

"What do you think will change? We're in the lead with three goals!"

"That's good. I have to take my son out of here. Remember what you said. You will get the team in the Premier League next season!"

Little Bernard stood beside his father and wore the red Forest jersey with George Wood's maiden signature. Tang En wanted to laugh every time he saw that crooked and slanted handwriting, which was not as good as an elementary school student's.

"The match is not over yet. It's unbecoming behavior for a loyal fan to leave early." Tang En was making fun of Michael.

"I don't want to get involved in a big chaotic fight after the match. Damn it! Tony, if I don't see Nottingham Forest on the Premier League list in half a month's time, I don't mind showing you what a

loyal fan's becoming behavior is." Michael shook his fist at Twain, but Tang En smiled even more happily.

"You won't have to. Of course, don't think that I can't beat you..." Tang En suddenly remembered the child next to Michael. It was inappropriate to talk like that in front of him. So, he waved to little Bernard. "Good-bye, Gavin. I hope you will not be led astray by your violent dad."

Little Bernard made a face at Twain, "I will not, Uncle Violence!"

Amid Michael's laughter, Tang En shrugged with a smile as he watched the father and son leaving. It was an interesting family. Looking at that bright and clever child, he was looking forward to what kind of young man he would become when he grew up.

When Tang En turned his attention back to the match, he heard three sharp whistles and the loud cheers that followed.

Walker stood up, took off the headset over his his ears, and smiled at Twain. "It's over. Our next opponent is Sheffield United."

"Excellent! Ever since that day we lost to them, I've been looking forward to it." Tang En gritted his teeth as he spoke. "After we defeat them, we will go to the Premier League!" Then, Twain and Walker shook on it.

Next to them, Bowyer also put his hand in.

"Though I can't go to the Premier League with you, I really want to see the day when the Forest Team returns to the Premier League."

Tang En turned to look at the old chap. When he had just become a manager, Bowyer had ridiculed him, stood by irritably, and did nothing to help. He had even wanted to replace him. At that time, he did not think that the three of them would ever put their hands together to work hard for the same goal.

"Thank you, Ian." These words were sincere.

"If the Forest team really returns to the Premier League in 12 days, I will be the one thanking you, Tony."

Tang En was in a good mood and did not want to be too formal. So, he smiled and suggested, "When the press conference is over, the three of us will have a few good drinks at Kenny's bar."

"That's a great idea." The other two men nodded and agreed.

Chapter 59: The Visiting Team, Millwall Part 3

After the three men separated, the coaches and team doctors in the technical area all came to congratulate Twain. It was Twain's first season as the First Team manager, and he had performed much better than many people had expected. From his team being in the middle rankings when he first took over mid-season to now being qualified for the playoffs, it could definitely be said that Twain had played a large part in it.

The manager was the true soul of the team. A good manager could give a bright future to the team, and a bad manager would only lead them into a dark hell. Tang En obviously belonged to the former. Now everyone on the team was won over by the guy who had been knocked on the head. The disdainful sneers that he had had to endure when he first took over the team, had long since been gone.

The rules of professional football were simple: if you were able to win, you would get the respect from others. Everything else was nonsense. Where did one's fame come from? What was one's status? How did one make contacts? They all depended on victories and scores. It was not possible for a through and through loser to have any of these things.

Seeing how people around him had changed their attitudes, and then listening to the thunderous cheers from the stands, Tang En firmly believed that the path he had chosen was correct and that his belief was right.

I belong to this field, and I belong to victory.

The two managers were very relaxed at the post-match press conference because the result of this match was reasonably fair for both teams. The team that needed to play in the playoffs received three morale-boosting points, and the other team was without any ambition. For them, there was no difference between three points and zero points.

Only Pierce Brosnan, who sat in the reporters' seats and watched the others scrambling to ask questions, found the scene ironic.

On the platform, the two opponents were making jokes and laughing together, flattering each other, and taking turns speaking. Their relationship was so good that it was as if they were old friends who have known each other for many years.

And in some corner unseen by them, the fans from both sides must be waging a blood-boiling war of punching each other out for the glory of their respective teams...

Brosnan did not think that the Millwall fans who had too much to drink, would leave Nottingham empty-handed. He was afraid that even if they had wanted to leave, the equally drunk Forest fans would make them stay, too.

The football hooligans did not dare to fight near the stadium because City Ground's surroundings were covered with surveillance cameras. But cameras could be anywhere in the City of Nottingham.

A team's pursuit of victory was for glory, and the fans also gave their best for their team to pursue the same glory. A group of football hooligans fighting with another group of football hooligans was also pursuing glory. Why would the same word have such different meanings and cause such vastly different behaviors?

Even Pierce Brosnan, a true Englishman, could not understand this phenomenon.

Kenny Burns' Forest bar was as lively as always, even livelier than previous post-matches because the official matches were over for the season. On these occasions, many people liked to have a few drinks in their regular bars and discuss the season that just ended with their friends. And if their team had achieved good results, the bar owners would have to grin from ear to ear.

Even though it was not the first time Tang En and the others had come to the bar, the neighborhood fans knew that Burns' bar was the favorite place for several Forest coaches. But today was not quite the same. From the moment they appeared in the bar, they had become the focus of everyone's attention. Everyone was talking about Twain's magical half season as the acting manager, and everyone who saw him would raise his glass high in his hand and give a toast to him.

Tang En's pride was greatly satisfied, and he liked the feeling of being the center of attention and the topic of conversations.

When he excitedly announced that he was buying drinks for everyone that evening, the atmosphere in the bar reached its climax. Everyone was praising Twain's generosity and talking about his achievements. People who had a few too many drinks in them were comparing him to Brian Clough.

That was the lively environment when the door was suddenly slammed open and in came a discordant sound that clashed with the joyous atmosphere. The intruders who rushed in naturally became everyone's focus.

Was it Mark Hodge again? Tang En was thinking that it was a pity that Michael was not here. Then he looked up, and all he could see was a pudgy belly.

"Hey! John!" Tang En stood up with his glass raised and loudly mocked the fat man. "Look at you, all sweaty and pathetic-looking! Are you being hunted down?"

His words amused the other people in the bar.

"Where's Michael? You two are always together." Tang En looked at the door, but no one else came in. "If he didn't have cute little Gavin, I really would have to wonder if there wasn't something going on between you two."

Taking big gulps of air, John, who was panting, gradually recovered. He leaned his big body on the bar counter, lowered his head, and weakly interrupted Twain, "Tony, Gavin had an accident ..."

"April 1st is over, John." said Tang En with a grin.

John did not answer him, but just kept gasping with his head down. Even in the noisy bar, his breathing was very loud. Tang En stood before him, with a drink in his hand, and his smile slowly faded.

Because of what he heard. It was not a gasping sound. It was the sound of crying.

Chapter 60: The Football Hooligans Part 1

Tang En had never imagined such a scene in his mind.

Bright little Gavin lay quietly on a cold cart in the hospital morgue, covered with a single white cloth. Other than the light from the corridor through the doorway, the rest of the room was dark. This environment and the image of Gavin did not tally. That child should be bright and lively. Sometimes he would deliberately pretend to look mature and wrinkle his brows, but would reveal his age again when he spoke.

Michael had said he had good grades in school and was smart. Tang En had thought he would have a bright future, too. In the future, he might have been a banker, a barrister... the British Prime Minister.

But Gavin had said that if he really became rich in the future, he would buy the Forest team. He would then sign a lifelong contract with Twain, and the breach of contract damages on both sides would be as high as ten trillion pounds. No matter what kind of player Twain wanted, he would provide the money to purchase them without hesitation and never bargain with the other clubs. But Twain must successfully lead the Forest team to become the best team in the world, win all the championships, surpass Manchester United and Liverpool to become Britain's most successful club, and surpass Real Madrid to become the most successful club in the world. As a thank-you, he would ask Twain to drink at Uncle Burns' bar for seven days and seven nights in a row.

When Tang En heard the strange ideas of this little child, he burst into laughter and was delighted. Consequently, Michael yelled at him, "Don't mock my son's dreams!"

Tang En took a step forward when he thought of these past events. He wanted to see Gavin one last time. But just when his hand was on the white cloth, a hoarse tired voice suddenly came from a corner in the room. "Don't look, his face was crushed..."

He was startled by this sudden voice, and then he paused and withdrew his hand. Tang En looked over and saw Michael sitting on the ground in the dim corner with his back against the corner wall.

There were chairs for people to rest on in the room, and yet he sat on the ground with his back against the wall. His hair was messy and plastered to his head. His sweat had been blown dried by the hospital air-conditioning, but his face was still dirty. Tang En could not see clearly, but he could guess what was on his face. He seemed to be have aged 20 years overnight, and he looked at the doorway listlessly.

It was shocking to see the messy white coats stained with large swaths of blood.

In Tang En's 26 years of life, it was not the first time he had to face such a thing. A life closely related to himself had suddenly vanished like a magician's trick, and, with a bang, the dove was transformed into nothing.

But he still did not know how to comfort the loved ones who had suffered the loss.

When he stood in front of this man in agony, he tried to say something, but no words came out. So he stayed silent.

On the way to the hospital, John gave him a rough account of what happened. Because he was not there himself at that time, his details were vague.

Mark Hodge's gang and the Millwall's hooligan gang, the Bushwackers, launched a fierce "Battle of Honor" at an agreed place. The fans of the winning Forest team loudly jeered at Millwall and the Millwall fans fought back with their fists. As a result, Hodge's firm could not withstand the Millwall football hooligans' fierce offensive and began to disperse. It was followed by a small-scale urban battle chase.

While Mark Hodge's men were running away, they crashed into Gavin Bernard on the street, waiting for his father to buy a magazine, and he was knocked to the ground. Amidst those Forest fans' bid to

escape, and the clamoring Millwall football hooligans in pursuit, no one noticed the thin figure lying on the ground. The crowd trampled his body as they passed and continued shouting as they ran away.

Tang En did not want to recall the specific details. It was too brutal.

The room was quiet again with only a slight hum from the air conditioner. Tang En suddenly felt stifled in the room, as if little Bernard's soul was wrapping him, not letting him breathe.

He looked again at Michael who sat in the corner as if his soul had been taken away from him. Tang En quietly left.

The hallway was empty, and the pale white light could not shine into the morgue. Tang En felt a fire burning in his chest and surging upwards. That stifling feeling of oppression did not lessen, instead it tightened even more.

He decided to leave that place.

As he walked near the hospital gate, he saw a taxi parked on the roadside. A panicked woman ran out of the car and stumbled into the hospital building. Then Walker came out of the car and quickly followed.

Tang En hid himself in the shadows. He did not want anyone to see him. Just as the taxi was about to leave, he hurried up and stopped it with his hand.

The usually bustling Forest bar was very quiet that evening. There were not many customers. Those people who were still there drank with their heads down and talked in low voices. It did not look like a bar where fans gathered. The owner of the bar, Kenny Burns, sat behind the bar and wiped a glass repeatedly. But it was clear that his mind was not on the glass. He was looking toward the door, but he looked like he was in a daze.

The door opened, and the expression in his eyes changed. But it was not Tony Twain or Des Walker who came in. It was Bill who was always with Michael and John.

Upon entry, Bill looked around the bar strangely. The Forest team had finished the regular match season today. Everyone would have come to the bar to drink, chat, and celebrate. How could it be so quiet? He looked up at Burns and found that Burns was watching him. So he raised his hand and said hello.

"Hey, Kenny. Do you know what happened? Where's everyone?"

Burns replied, "They didn't tell you?"

"No. I just came here after dinner... Oh, that's right. I saw Tony on my way here."

Burns stared at Bill.

"He asked me where Mark Hodge and the others usually gather. I don't think he looked very well... Uh, Kenny, what's going on?" Bill was half-finished speaking when he found that the customers in the bar had stood up from their seats. The way they stared at him made him shudder.

Burns got up, leaned across the bar and grabbed Bill's clothes. "Was he alone?"

Bill nodded, and he was scared. What happened today? Everyone was acting all weird.

“B*stard!” Burns whispered. “Bill, if anything happens to Tony... Damn it! We must bring him back! Goddamn it!”

He ran out as he finished his words.

Bill looked at the strange scene, utterly confused.