

Champions 521

Chapter 521: Romance of The Three Heroes

“Before this round of the tournament, Manchester United takes the top spot in the league with seventy-eight points, followed closely by Chelsea with seventy-three points and Nottingham Forest in the third with sixty-seven points, eleven points away from top-ranked Manchester United. Their hopes of winning the title seem very slim...”

“Based on expert analysis, Nottingham Forest, who is fully preparing for the Champions League semi-final, should give up the league tournament. It would be unwise to give it their all to challenge Manchester United in this away game.”

“If Ferguson’s side can beat Nottingham Forest at home, then the Red Devils are close to another English Premier League title. Of course, the situation is not necessarily so forthright. In the last round of the league tournament, Manchester United unexpectedly lost 1:2 to Portsmouth in an away upset, which allowed Chelsea to narrow the points gap between the two teams to just five points. With six rounds left in the league tournament, this difference is not secure enough for Manchester United...”

“Therefore, we think for the Manchester United’s home game against Nottingham Forest, the highlight of this round will likely determine the team that will win the Premier League. Nottingham Forest already has no hope of winning the league, but I think, given Tony Twain’s character, he will certainly join in on the fun.”

Before the 33rd round of the Premier League, all sorts of information, news and rumors about the important highlight circulated. It was the topic of conversation in everywhere.

Who was going to get the title? Manchester United or Chelsea? What role would Nottingham Forest play in all of it?

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33rd round of the tournament was two days away, and Mourinho had just arrived at Chelsea’s training base when he received a call from his immediate superior and the big boss, Abramovich. Over the phone, the Russian oligarch warmly invited him to a dinner party that evening and made it very clear that it was not the kind of big banquet with many social celebrities, but a private dinner between the Chelsea club president and manager.

Mourinho knew that Abramovich had to have a purpose to invite him to dinner. It had to do with this year’s championship title goal. He had long known the kind of ambitions his boss had.

They had taken the titles for the Premier League, the EFL Cup and the FA Cup. However, the current nouveau riche Chelsea still had the label of “upstart” over its head. In order to be recognized and known as a real powerhouse team, and to give the Chelsea club chairman more recognition in the upper echelons of London society, Mourinho needed to bring in a new title for his boss, something that the Chelsea team had never come close to in its 102-year history — the UEFA Champions League title.

How could Mourinho refuse a dinner invitation from Abramovich? He ever even think to do so.

Although he and Abramovich were defiant figures, they also had something in common now. They were both ambitious, knew what they were going to do, which was to be champions.

At the end of the call, Abramovich asked with concern about the team's preparations for the Champions League. With the 33rd round of the league tournament just around the corner, he did not seem to care. He only had the Champions League in his mind. It looked like the Russian could not wait any longer.

Mourinho naturally replied that everything was going well, and the morale of the team was high because their opponent was Nottingham Forest and did not even need him to rally the troops.

Mourinho tightened his grip on his cell phone at the idea that his semi-final opponent was Tony Twain from Nottingham Forest.

Of course, we're going to beat Nottingham Forest and advance to the Champions League final. Then no matter who our opponent is in front of us at that time, whether it's AC Milan or Manchester United, the title will be Chelsea's. Of course, boss, this trophy isn't won just for you...

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Meanwhile, at the Carrington training base in Manchester, the atmosphere on the training ground was somber to the point of feeling oppressive. The leader of the Red Devils, Sir Alex Ferguson's face was as gloomy as the weather above his head at the moment. The usual laughter and chatter during the training was also gone.

Would anyone dare to be all smiles and silly in front of a boss in a bad mood?

Usually lively and fond of showing off, Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo simply did their own training programs today and dared not slack off the slightest bit.

After the last round of the league tournament, Ferguson locked all the players in the visitors' locker room and completely ignored the press conference he needed to deal with. Inside the room, he berated the entire team and even the international star footballers who were worth hundreds of millions of pounds put together dared not take a breath in front of an angry Ferguson. They were afraid that they would become the receiving end of his furious vent.

The media did not cover this part after the game because they did not know what happened either. This was destined to only be revealed as "a confidential story" in the autobiography of a Manchester United player in the future.

Ferguson fully conveyed his anger to the big shot players to make them understand that in the Manchester United kingdom, his command was supreme and inviolable.

Ferguson wore the expression for the entire week.

Like Chelsea, Manchester United was at a critical juncture. After experiencing a low for three seasons, Manchester United rallied under Ferguson and made a comeback. They did not expect to have a chance to win the league title and Championships League title in the first year and be able to achieve the Double. How could they let go of this great opportunity?

However, now Chelsea was catching up quickly in the league tournament and they had to contend with a strong opponent like AC Milan in the Champions League semi-finals. Both teams were tough opponents that they had to deal with.

If Manchester United had easily beaten the underdog Portsmouth in the last away round, why would they be so nervous these days? Chelsea was only five points away from catching up and could overtake at any time.

While watching the players bow their heads on their training on the field, he forcefully roared, "put more energy into it, you bastards! This is to pay back for your carelessness in the last game!"

After two days, he would welcome an old friend in Old Trafford, "the Theatre of Dreams," but this old friend would not be dispatched so easily.

Nowadays, the outside comments and analysis about this game flew over all. He was also keen to know Tony Twain's thoughts on the game. Would he use all his might or give up the game in order to prepare for the Champions League?

You don't have a chance to win the league tournament, Tony. Are you going to meddle?

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For almost the entire season, Nottingham Forest had played a supporting role. Now, overnight, they had become a central character. Therefore, at the present moment, what was the man, who was going to decide whom the league title would belong to and might even decide the winner of the Champions League, doing?

He was at the lush training base in Wilford where he had a relaxing chat with Albertini.

"The season is almost over, Demetrio. It's almost time to say goodbye. If you can't bear it, do not force yourself. You can still stay continue to play. I can get someone to draw up a new contract in ten minutes."

When he heard Twain speak, Albertini laughed. "Don't make fun of me, chief. There's nothing that I'm reluctant to part with. I've already played eighteen years of high-level professional football. It's time to retire."

"Is that so? What a shame... Although I knew that this day would arrive, I still can't treat it like it's a normal matter." Twain shrugged and asked, "are you going back to Italy after you retire?"

"If I miss you, I'll come back to Nottingham to visit you, chief."

"In that case, when I miss you, I'll go to Milan. My team is always traveling all over the world anyway. Haha!" Speaking of Milan, Twain soon stopped laughing. "Demetrio, you said you would like to be a coach the most, and your favorite video game is the Championship Manager... So can you tell me now from a coach's point of view, for the game the day after tomorrow, what choice should we make? You saw all those analysis reviews out there, didn't you?" he asked.

Albertini was used to Twain asking questions on a whim, so he just nodded and said, "if I were the manager, I think I would choose to give up the game against Manchester United, rotate to let more of

the main players rest, let the substitute players get the chance to practice, conserve our strength and avoid injuries. I'd be satisfied with a point."

As he spoke, Twain nodded. When he had finished, Twain nodded again and said, "You're right, absolutely right. Generally speaking, that's what we should do. I'll ask you this again. Between AC Milan and Manchester United in semi-finals, which team do you think will reach the final?"

Albertini pondered this question for a long time and said hesitantly, "I'm not sure... I think the two teams are evenly matched. Both have a chance to reach the final, and it even makes sense for one of them to take the championship trophy."

Twain smiled, "Then I'll ask in a different way. Which team do you wish to see in the final?"

This time, Albertini answered as soon as Twain threw the question out. "AC Milan."

"You and I think alike, Demetrio."

Albertini found it strange. "I remember, chief, you're not an AC Milan fan."

"Yes, of course I'm not. But I prefer to them to be in the final, and not Manchester United."

"You and Ferguson have a good personal relationship..."

"This has nothing to do with personal relationships. I think it's better for us if AC Milan reaches the final. Demetrio, remember when I promised to give you a really wonderful and truly unforgettable farewell game at the end of your career?" Twain turned to look at Albertini, smiling, and the expression he saw on Albertini's face was what he wanted to see.

"AC Milan must enter the final, they have to go to the final. Demetrio, that's the farewell game I want to give to you. I hope you like it." With that, he looked down at his watch and then said to Albertini, "breaktime is over; let's go back to training."

Twain patted Albertini, who was still in a daze, on the back and turned around to walk toward his coaching staff.

"Guys, the situation in the league tournament is good for us right now." Walking up to the coaching staff, he opened his arms and said, "both Chelsea and Manchester United have a chance at winning the league tournament, as well as breaking into the Champions League final. With more effort, they may even be able to win the legendary Double. How many people will refuse such a temptation?"

In the eyes of the coaches, Twain smiled like he was the devil with a pair of black wings extended behind him, blocking out the sunlight before them.

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A day later, the Nottingham Forest team bus arrived at the hotel where they would be staying in Manchester. At the hotel entrance, Twain, who was surrounded by the reporters, reiterated that the Forest team's goal this season was the European arena. As for their ranking in the league tournament, as long as they were guaranteed a spot in the top four to qualify for next season's Champions League, he would be very satisfied.

“I won’t be so polite if I meet Mr. Ferguson in the Champions League finals again.”

His last remark made the reporters’ imagination run wild. Firstly, he had implied that he would not do his best in this game; secondly, he had completely disregarded his semi-final opponent, Mourinho’s Chelsea; thirdly, he had a strong confidence in winning the Champions League.

“Should I believe what he said?” Queiroz asked his boss, Ferguson, as he looked at Twain in the photo. “On the whole, it is reasonable and almost certain to give up an insignificant game before a more important game...”

“But that’s just generally speaking...” Ferguson, sitting in his chair, rubbed his chin and murmured.

In fact, he was uncertain. The young chap, Twain, made him feel complicated. Sometimes he would think he was sincere and eager to open up. Sometimes he made people think that he was full of lies and that his words were not credible.

Queiroz wanted to persuade his boss to accept his ideas. “I think no matter what the analysis is, Twain will temporarily discard a tiny slice he has in his hands when there is a bigger pie before him. Because, based on his ability, he will be able to eat the slice and the large pie at the same time.”

“What you said made a lot of sense, Carlos.” Ferguson nodded, “But I have a concern...”

“Sir, you’re worried about AC Milan, right? They are really a tough enemy to deal with, especially this season, since Kaka is in a very good shape.”

What about AC Milan?

At the thought of the team, Ferguson felt that the situation was really complicated. Ferguson did not want to lose the league title, especially to Mourinho. At the same time, he was keen to get his second Champions League trophy in his coaching career, making him incomparable in the history of Manchester United Football Club. No — he could become a significant figure comparable to those legends in the history of English football.

Sir Matt Busby, Bill Shankly, Brian Clough, Bob Paisley... all those brilliant names, to be able to be put together with them and to be brought up again and again in the future; Ferguson would have no regrets in his coaching career.

Ferguson snapped out of his contemplation, and looked at Queiroz to say, “of course we can’t lose the league title, and I want the Champions League title, too. Let’s put AC Milan aside and not think about what kind of opponent they are. I think Nottingham Forest is definitely not an opponent we can beat easily, even if they only deploy half of their main force. We’ll make an all-out effort.”

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Inside the Old Trafford home team’s locker room before the game, Ferguson had already changed into his jersey and growled at the Manchester United players who were ready to play as they paced back and forth, making them nervous. “Think of your shitty performance in the last round of the league game against Portsmouth! If any of you are proud of this, you can still do so this in this game. If you feel that losing to Portsmouth is a disgrace, then give it your all in this game to beat this opponent in front of us!”

Half an hour ago, he had already gotten a list of Nottingham Forest appearances. It turned out that his caution was a good call. Tony Twain had sent out his strongest lineup that he could currently send to play the game that he could call “insignificant.”

As expected, this was “an old friend” that was going to be tough to deal with.

“Crush Nottingham Forest and have a good vent before the Champions League semi-final. Otherwise every one of you will suffer! Rip them to pieces and smash them!”

And inside the visitors’ locker room, unlike Ferguson’s vehemence, Twain was grinning and looked relaxed.

“Guys, if any one among you is wondering why I’m asking you to go all out for victory in this game, you can now raise your hand and ask questions.”

Obviously, no one raised their hands. Twain was pleased with this. The players must have had questions in mind, but they chose to trust their manager.

“To be honest, we already had little chance of competing for the league title this season, unlike last season. We’re putting more energy into the Champions League game this season and that’s the price. Now we’re going to watch the other teams fight to the last for the title. For me, I’m used to being the protagonist, so this is just too brutal to watch...”

Looking at their manager’s pretentious manner, some people in the locker room laughed. Of course, those who dared to laugh and were not afraid were Ribéry and Eastwood.

“But are we going to be the stepping stone and corpse that the victors step on before they ascend the throne and put on the crown? The path that they take on their way up, that red carpet was dyed with the blood of their opponents! I don’t want my blood to be on that. Do you want that?”

“No, chief!”

“No one wants that!”

“No f**king way!”

They roared, as if they had been waiting for the manager to ask.

“Very good! We’re not like the losers who have fallen to the ground with their blood drained dry and bodies cold! We still have a goal that we are pursuing that’s bigger than this little throne, and we can’t perish here. We’re the damn Mysterion! Come and go without a trace. We will take down anyone who is in our way from behind!” Twain smacked his palm and said, “a certain someone thinks he’s going to win? Let’s tell them how naïve that idea is! If we can’t get it, then other people will not get their hands on it easily either!”

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Ninety minutes later, inside the hustle and bustle of the entire game at Old Trafford, “the Theatre of Dreams,” the spectators had not yet left, but the show had ended.

“Ah, the Theatre of Dreams. The Theatre of Dreams is definitely a place to direct a good show.” Twain clapped his hands on the sidelines and said to Dunn, who stood beside him, “It’s said this is the stage for the players, and I think this is the stage for the director.”

A huge electronic screen above the stands clearly displayed the score: 0:2

According to the international practice, the home team’s score was to the left and the visitors’ score was on the right.

“Unbelievable! Nottingham Forest beat Manchester United by 2:0 in this away game! Even though the game didn’t look as easy as the score, in the end, it was Tony Twain who took the last laugh ninety minutes, and not Sir Alex Ferguson! Now, with Chelsea having not played its game yet, the two sides are only five points apart!” The television commentator was giving his thoughts on the game. “Both sides did their best, but Manchester United’s luck was just a little worse. They had a chance to reverse the situation on the field...”

What was the use of saying that now?

The game was over.

After he applauded and lauded the players on the field, Twain turned to walk toward the Manchester United’s technical area.

At the same time, Ferguson was coming toward him and the two men met in the middle.

Ferguson looked terrible, and Twain thought that the poor Manchester United players would suffer for this when they returned. Losing two games in a row at this critical juncture was a big problem. If it was not handled well, Manchester United’s bid for the season’s league title that they had devoted their efforts to the entire season could be gone and end up in Mourinho’s hands.

The two men shook hands. Twain did not want to look too smug and infuriate Ferguson. Twain would not do anything that taunted others and was damaging to himself.

Ferguson spoke first. “I gave you a pistol and a bullet and you thought it was not enough, so I gave you another one. I didn’t expect you to use them all to shoot me.”

Twain smiled a little. “I told my players that their manager is someone who doesn’t give up at any time. It’s the same for this game. I can’t let them see me give up.”

“Give up? Even if you win this game, what have you won? There’s no change in the rankings and there is no guarantee that you will win against Chelsea in the Champions League semi-final.”

“In the first half of the season, your team beat my team on my home ground. Now, I won it back. Consider us even.”

Ferguson was a little surprised by this answer. “You’re such a vindictive man, Mr. Twain.”

“The media sometimes gets it right.”

Ferguson wanted to leave, so he let go of Twain’s hand and said, “one last word. If I see you at the Champions League final, I won’t hold back.”

Twain waved and watched Ferguson leave before he whispered, “we’re not going to meet, Sir Alex. A secure championship title, or an uncertain championship title, which one do you want?”

Twain, who returned to the locker room, shouted to the elated players, “You guys did a great job! Now we can go to Athens without a worry!”

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The next night after Manchester United’s loss to Nottingham Forest, Mourinho’s Chelsea team had a big win over West Ham United in their away game with a 4:1 score. As a result, Manchester United remained the same with seventy-eight points and Chelsea rose to seventy-six points. They were now only two points away from the top spot of the league. One game could turn the entire landscape of the Premier League upside down.

It was like a big chunk of meat dripping with oil hanging in front of everyone. Who could resist this temptation?

A League title and Champions League trophy... The Double!

Shaking off the upstart label to become a real powerhouse team could remake Chelsea.

An hour after the game, Mourinho received a congratulatory call from his immediate boss, Mr. Abramovich. He congratulated the team on winning the game and catching up with Manchester United on the league table. At the same time, he invited Mourinho to have lunch on his private yacht at noon the next day and some afternoon tea if there was time left.

Before this call was over, the Russian billionaire casually asked the likelihood of Chelsea winning the Double this season.

Chapter 522: The Countdown Begins

Chelsea’s close gap in points with Manchester United appeared on various media pages the day after Chelsea’s game. Mourinho smugly told the media that he was going to seize all the championship titles this season. Next to the printed words of what he had said in the interview was a photograph of Ferguson’s livid face while he attended the post-match press conference.

The English media were skilled in dealing with this kind of story. The readers could see the relationship between the two sides and the hidden story behind them at a glance.

Twain, who directed all of it, kept cover at the Forest team’s training base in Wilford at this time in preparation for the first leg of the Champions League semi-final game and to make the home stretch.

For him, the messier the contest between Chelsea and Manchester United got, the easier for him to prevail over his opponents in the melee.

With four days to go until the Champions League semi-finals, Twain announced that the team would held closed-door training and all training would be closed to the media. Even people with good relations with the team, like Pierce Brosnan, were unable to get permission to enter Wilford for an interview.

Naturally, not everyone would abide by Twain's wishes, otherwise the world would be a lot easier for Twain.

For example, recently, Twain discovered that Tang Jing and Dunn had gotten a little closer, which was something that made him think.

During a break in the training, the players sat on the sidelines to rest and chat about things they were interested in. The coaching staff were the same. Everyone mostly talked about the imminent Champions League semi-final.

Even if they were Nottingham Forest people, to be able to advance to the semi-finals for two consecutive seasons was still a bit unexpected. It looked like there was a mysterious aura around their manager.

Twain ignored how others looked at him. He went straight to Dunn's side and leaned over to grab a bottle of water. After he twisted it open and gulped down a mouthful, he looked at the players on the field and asked, "what did that woman want from you?" Twain was referring to Tang Jing, and he knew Dunn was clear about it too.

"Nothing. We just talked about stuff in China." Dunn was acting more and more like a Chinese. Before it was just his appearance, but now he was very Chinese from the inside out. "Like Chinese football."

Twain almost choked on the water.

"You two are so boring!" He coughed between words.

Looking at Twain's sorry manner, Dunn remained expressionless.

"Talk about Chinese football ... Hey, it looks like I'm going to have to talk to you about Chinese football too one of these days, and see what your thoughts are as a foreigner ..."

"There's nothing to it. I didn't understand it before, and now I understand it." Dunn also found this topic boring and was unwilling to go any further.

"She didn't try to pry into our plans for the Champions League semi-finals, or anything like that?" Twain cocked his head and narrowed his eyes at Dunn.

"She did pry." Dunn nodded.

"Oh? How did you deal with that?"

"I just said no comment to all her questions."

Twain raised his head and thought about Dunn, with his straight face against Tang Jing at her wit's end... It did seem appropriate.

"Very good, women will ruin things, especially an overly inquisitive woman." Twain nodded. "I don't want things to go awry."

"Tony, I don't understand this matter at all. We know Chelsea very well and Chelsea also knows us very well. There doesn't seem to be a need for closed-door training ..." Dunn raised the question in his mind.

“A closed-door training is not entirely about keeping information confidential.” Twain pointed to the players and said, “it also allows the players to put all their focus into this game and let them understand what kind of game this is from their bodies to their minds. This is... a semi-final game that we can’t afford to lose.”

Dunn looked at Twain from behind and was silent for a moment. He opened his mouth but hesitated before he spoke up again, “Won’t the pressure be too much?”

“What?”

“To give the best farewell game for Demetrio, give George another final and maintain an unbeaten record against Mourinho ... You take on these things even though no one has asked you to do those things. Aren’t you afraid of breaking under too much pressure?”

When he heard Dunn said that, Twain smiled and pointed to his heart, “I did this on purpose. I’m afraid that once I relax here, it will be hard for me to be firm again.”

In the face of Twain’s smiling face, Dunn had nothing to add.

Tossing aside the half-finished water, Twain walked up to Kerslake and patted him on the shoulder. “Blow the whistle. Let’s continue the training.”

With that, he put on his sunglasses again and stood in the shade.

It was four days away from the semi-final on the 26th.

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April 25th was the first day of the Champions League semi-finals and the day Manchester United invited AC Milan for a home game. The next day would be the day when the Forest team played against Chelsea.

This year’s top four of the Champions League had three English teams ranked among them. To the English media, this was a massive happy occasion that required lots of publicity. Once the “the world’s number one league”, Serie A was in decline and La Liga also became weaker after years of strength. It was the world of the English Premier League now!

English media outlets were all so optimistic. The three teams formed a siege around AC Milan, and it was highly likely that the English teams would end up with the champion and runner-up titles.

Bundesliga had already fallen, and France Ligue 1 had long been kicked out of the “five big leagues” circle. Serie A had gradually declined, and La Liga fluctuated. It appeared as if only the English Premier League was able to consistently maintain a high standard for ten years. With this kind of mentality, the English media began to report optimistically on the Champions League semi-finals. They bragged about Manchester United, Chelsea and Nottingham Forest, but completely forgot AC Milan.

In the eyes of those proud English media, AC Milan would not be able to stop Manchester United’s Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo. After all, “they only have one Kaka, and we have a Rooney and a Ronaldo!”

“AC Milan has already flown to Manchester, where they will challenge their host, Manchester United, in the first leg of the Champions League semi-finals. When Kaka was interviewed at the airport, he talked about the opponents of this game. He thought Ronaldo and Rooney are very good players and that Manchester United is a strong team, but he is confident to advance into the final ...”

The televisions showed the earlier sports news. AC Milan had arrived in Manchester and in two days, they would be in a crucial contest at this stadium.

As the team’s top star player and the core of the midfield, Kaka attracted everyone’s attention. Countless microphones, flashes and cameras surrounded him, making it difficult for him to take even one step forward.

“Kaka...” murmured Twain in front of the television. He had been a Kaka fan before he joined the soccer world. He had focused on the brilliant kid since before he landed in Europe, when he was just a nobody on the Brazil national team’s substitutes team and had a few appearances. He liked this kid’s character, his technical style and his handsome appearance. He liked his press forward breakthrough speed and his powerful long shots. He did not think he’d get a chance to be his opponent one day.

“Hey, Dunn. How good it would be if Kaka could come to the Forest team... That is, we have Kaka to press ahead in the front of our midfield, and George guarding the back, Ashley Young, Beckham and Aaron Lennon on the right flank, Ribéry and Petrov on the left flank... we would be invincible!” He said excitedly as he watched the television.

“Stop dreaming. AC Milan will not let go of him.” Dunn was not at all interested in such unrealistic fantasy, but Twain was imagining that if he had started a few years earlier, then it would not have been a dream...

It was a pity that it still looked like a dream now.

“Oh, that’s right, speaking of Kaka.” Twain pulled out a ticket from his pocket and handed it to Dunn. “The tickets to the 25th match in Old Trafford. You’ll go with me.”

Dunn did not say anything and just took the ticket to put it away.

Twain turned his head back to continue watching the television. The news had shifted to Manchester United and began to report on Manchester United’s preparations.

Ferguson looked somber on screen. The sky was cloudy over the Carrington training base and the team was under pressure.

Semi-finals were only three days away.

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Twain encountered Tang Jing again at the entrance of Wilford training base in the morning just as he and Dunn were about to enter the door. The security guard at the door looked miserably at the woman standing in front of him, which turned out to be Tang Jing.

It was clear that Tang Jing wanted to go in, but the security guard could not let her do what she wanted. As a result, she was held back here by the security guard.

“Good morning, Reporter Tang.” Twain waved to her in greeting.

“Good morning, Manager Twain.” When Tang Jing saw Twain and Dunn approaching, she ditched the poor security guard and made a beeline for the two men.

“It’s illegal to trespass on restricted area, Reporter Tang.” Twain teased the female reporter in front of him while Dunn stood behind him in silence.

“Do you have a warning sign here that says all trespassers will be killed on sight?”

“If it’s okay with Reporter Tang, I can immediately get the security guard to set it up and even write it in Mandarin.”

Tang Jing fumed at Twain. She glanced at Dunn next to Twain for help.

Dunn hesitated for a moment before he said, “I think it’s better to use both Mandarin and English.”

Tang Jing rolled her eyes.

Twain laughed. “Don’t bother wasting your time with schemes, Reporter Tang. I’m not going to let the media get any information on our preparation for the semi-finals.”

“When did Mr. Twain, who likes to be in the limelight, start to keep a low profile? Currently, all the media reports and news are about the four teams’ preparations for the Champions League except for your Nottingham Forest team.”

“So what? I’m not a clown to satisfy the audience’s whims and tastes.” Twain shrugged. “Anything that has to do with all you reporters will turn out to be bad. I’m sorry I have to proceed with caution before an important big game.”

Seeing that method of attacking his ego and reverse psychology was ineffective, Tang Jing changed her strategy, “You see, Mr. Twain. I’m just a reporter working for the Chinese media from thousands of miles away. Even if I know your training details, it will only be read by the Chinese readers and fans. You don’t have to worry about leaks at all ...”

“Don’t kid with me, Reporter Tang. We’re in the age of internet. The world’s news is all available everywhere. I won’t fall for it. Furthermore there’s nothing good to interview. The training content is the same as what you have seen before. Chelsea and our team are very familiar with each other. Heheh.” Twain smiled slyly.

Tang Jing, who felt played, was a little angry. “So why did you close the training?”

“Just to give my ears some peace and quiet. At such a time, I wish I have more hours in a day. Where will I be able to find the time to deal with the news media?”

As he looked at Tang Jing’s look of reluctance, Twain was initially ready to turn away, but he stopped again and said, “don’t wander around here. It will be bright when the sun comes out later. A beautiful lady’s skin will not be as pretty if her skin becomes too tanned. Just go back. There will be a press conference before the game as usual. You can ask any questions at that time, Reporter Tang.”

He did not expect Tang Jing to shake her head all of a sudden and say, “I do not have any questions. Can I have a word with Mr. Dunn alone?”

Twain looked at her and cocked his head at Dunn. “Why are you asking me? He’s his own person and I am mine. I cannot limit his personal freedom. If he wants to talk to you, then you can have a chat.”

With that, he turned and walked away.

Dunn did not expect Twain to simply walk away. He had wanted to refuse Tang Jing — the two of them really had nothing to talk about together — but now that Twain was gone, it was hard for him to do that.

Tang Jing said with a grin next to him, “Mr. Dunn can we talk?”

The helpless Dunn could only turn around to face her and asked, “What do you want to talk about? If it’s about the Forest team... then I can’t tell you anything.”

“Of course, I understand, Mr. Dunn. It’s a headache to work with that eccentric person, isn’t it?”

Dunn shook his head and said, “No, we work well together.”

Tang Jing had a look of disbelief, but Dunn could not be bothered to explain the excellent rapport they had between them. Even if he had explained, Tang Jing would not believe. Would anyone believe if someone had told him about such a thing like swapping body with another person?

“Then let’s talk about something else. Something unrelated to football...” Tang Jing smiled sweetly at Dunn, while she gently swept a strand back of hair that was stuck on her forehead.

Kerslake saw that the players had arrived at the training ground one by one but did not see Dunn. It was time for the coaching staff to come together for do some preparation for a new day of training. When he remembered that Twain always come together with Dunn, he hurried to Twain’s office to find him.

However, he only found Twain in the office.

“Eh? Where’s Dunn?”

Without looking up, Twain said, “He must be in a love haze, right?”

“Love haze? What’s that?”

“Devil knows.”

“Uh...”

“David, today’s training program is focused on set pieces, right?” asked Twain, looking up.

Kerslake nodded.

“Okay, let’s go with that. Just leave Dunn alone for the time being. Let’s go to the training ground. It’s time for the players to assemble.” With that, Twain went to the door to walk out with the confused Kerslake and went straight to the training ground.

At the entrance of the training base, the players who came to train, curiously watched their Chinese assistant coach chatting to a Chinese woman, who looked exuberant and the assistant manager looked a little distracted.

“The weather is really nice today, Mr. Dunn.”

“...”

“How many years have you been in Nottingham? Are you used to living in England? In the beginning, I hated the weather in this country...”

“...”

“Speaking of which, do you miss home since you left home for work on your own at such a young age?”

“...”

“I was going to write a detailed story about your past, but eventually, I found out that you were a lackluster person with very little to write about before you became a coach in Nottingham Forest... Ah, I’m so sorry I used this description. In short, really boring. You actually have not have a relationship between grade school and college... By the way, do you have a girlfriend now? Long distance relationship? Or a foreign affair here? Is she pretty?”

“...”

The semi-finals were two days away.

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The team did not train in the morning, so the players could have a good night’s sleep at home before they gathered in Wilford in the afternoon. Then they would take the club’s red bus to London, where they would stay at the hotel and prepare for the semi-final game the next day.

Twain and Dunn did not go to London with the team. After they said goodbye to the team at the training base, they drove to Manchester by themselves.

There was still some time before that night’s game, and the entrance to the Old Trafford stadium were already full of people. The difference between the fans clad in the red Manchester United jerseys and red and black AC Milan jerseys were distinct and separated by the police. The reputation of both Italian and English fans was not good. With the performances of the players from both teams still unknown, the police in Manchester were on guard for all possible dangers.

Dunn came fully equipped with a digital video, digital camera, mini laptop, traditional handwritten notebooks, binoculars. He was mainly in charge of bringing first-hand intelligence about the enemy to the team.

On the other hand, Twain was like a tourist with his hands in his pockets and wearing his sunglasses.

The two men were caught in the crowd of AC Milan fans, slowly squeezing their way towards the entrance.

The surrounding AC Milan fans kept shouting all kinds of chants, which Twain could not understand. The only word he could catch was "Kaka." Due to AC Milan's lackluster performance this season, all hopes for the league title were lost. The Champions League title was the only trophy they could hope for. Kaka's powerful breakout this season was the guarantee that filled these people with confidence.

With Shevchenko walking away from England, Alberto Gilardino's state unstable, Filippo Inzaghi's frequent injuries, and Oliveira showing his true sub-standards, the entire AC Milan front line suffered from a dearth of goals. It was Kaka who stepped forward to take on most of the goal scoring responsibility. It was almost down to him alone that AC Milan was in the Champions League semi-finals.

No matter how close he was to Real Madrid at one point according to the pre-season rumors, he had become AC Milan fans' ace core in their hearts by this time. He was the hope of all those people.

AC Milan's flags with Kaka's portrait on them fluttered in front of Twain's eyes as he muttered the name.

Old Trafford, the Theater of Dreams to Manchester United, was the best football field. In this stadium during the Champions League this season, Manchester United had annihilated A.S. Roma by 7:1 and shocked the football world. Now, facing another Italian team, what would happen?

Ninety minutes later, it was clear it was indeed a fantastic and exciting game, purely from the standpoint of a neutral fan. Twain enjoyed himself immensely as he watched in the stands. Dunn had a harder time because he was in charge of the recording.

The score happened exactly the same as Twain's memory, with Manchester United narrowly winning against AC Milan by 3:2 at home and scoring a valuable home win. But the game was not quite the same as what Twain remembered. The course of the game and the score did not satisfy the Manchester United fans. Instead, it was the visiting team, AC Milan, that left perfectly satisfied.

Manchester United quickly scored a two-goal lead and it looked like the situation was in their favor. The Manchester United fans had even begun to envision the final in Athens.

However, at that moment, Kaka, who was thought of as AC Milan's biggest threat by the media and experts before the game, stepped up with two beautiful attacks which resulted in two beautiful goals. It suddenly cooled down the feverish atmosphere in the Theater of Dreams. After Kaka received the long pass from the backfield, he shook off Fletcher, Evra, Heinze in a row. A single player had bypassed their entire line of defense. And when he shot the football into the goal, Ferguson finally rushed from his seat, unable to suppress the anger inside him.

The performance of the defensive line was terrible. Although Rio Ferdinand and Vidic were sidelined by injuries for a period, there was no excuse for their own defense line to perform so badly.

He suddenly thought of the last round of the league tournament. Rio Ferdinand had suffered a minor injury in that game. To be safe, he replaced him, and it was because of that, the line of defense was thrown into disarray by the Forest team's offense. In turn, van Nistelrooy and Ribéry each scored a goal. Later on, during the training, it was discovered that Rio Ferdinand's injury was not looking good and he would sit out the rest of the game.

Damn it! Ferguson cursed internally.

Twain laughed in delight in the stands when he saw Manchester United lose two goals.

During the second half of the game, AC Milan deliberately compacted its defensive line. With two goals, a draw was enough for Ancelotti. However, it was undoubtedly a failure for Manchester United. Hence, Manchester United attacked AC Milan's goal in a frenzy until the injury stoppage time, when Rooney scored another goal and locked in their victory.

Though AC Milan had lost, they could be said to be winners in such a game. The one who had the last laugh was Ancelotti and Manchester United with its smooth start.

"On this night of the Theater of Dreams, both teams have brought us a terrific game. The score of 3:2 left us with an infinite reverie. The second leg of the game between both sides will have a lot of highlights to watch. Kaka and Rooney both scored twice in this game. Between these two young and outstanding players, who will be the key to determine the fate of their own teams?"

Twain stretched his back in the stands but did not stand up. He was waiting for the other fans to leave.

"How's the intelligence gathering?"

Dunn was just transferring the video file from the digital video to the mini laptop. "Kaka is the key player."

"That's nonsense."

"I think there are too many dangerous characters. AC Milan is a thorny opponent. Pirlo, Seedorf, Inzaghi... But their defenses are just as big a problem, just like Manchester United." As soon as he talked about football, Dunn became chattier. "The repercussions of aging, slower turns and being overly reliant on their veterans, all emerged. Dida's form is shaky and is a ticking time bomb on the defensive line. As long as we put enough pressure on their defenses, we can find more holes. So..." Dunn looked up at Twain. "I disapprove of playing defensive counterattack against AC Milan."

Twain did not respond to his suggestion. He mumbled as if he had not heard it, "All the powerhouse clubs in the world are having headaches about their defensive problems... Let's go, Dunn."

Once he got up, Twain looked back at the field and said, "what a wonderful opening act game. The lead is going to take the stage."

Semi-finals were less than a day away.

Chapter 523: Kill Them

While everyone was still discussing the thrilling game last night with exhilaration, the Nottingham Forest players were already doing their adaptive training at Stamford Bridge.

Twain did not let the team do closed-door training this time. Reporters gathered at Stamford Bridge, hoping to see what the Forest team had been up to these few days behind closed doors.

The result disappointed them. Twain did not carry out any tactical drills in such a public setting. Other than basic shooting drills, he just made the players run laps.

Obviously, the reporters would not completely lose hope. After the training, there was a pre-match press conference to be attended by the two managers at the same time. At the meeting, both Twain and Mourinho would answer questions from the reporters. At that time, they could ask any questions they had and let the two arrogant and standoffish managers answer.

Unlike the last time they came to Chelsea to play in the league tournament, the Forest players looked serious. They all knew what an important game it was for their coaches, the team they played for, and themselves.

George Wood was always the most serious player during training. Even if it was just running laps, he ran at the front, which captured everyone's attention. At first, there were people who thought he deliberately wanted to steal the limelight. Later, they discovered that he behaved like this in every instance and got used to it.

Even watching him run so hard, no one suggested for him to take a break. The game was the same night, but everyone had a lot of confidence in Wood's stamina.

The reporters who took the photographs on the sidelines quickly tired of the monotonous drill. They did not come to see people running.

A few bolder reporters came up with the intention to interview Twain on site. This was permitted, but because Twain always gave off an unapproachable vibe, the reporters were unsure whether Twain would accept their interview.

It was only after Twain realized that there were a few more people next to him that he shifted his eyes from the field to his side.

It turned out to be the reporters, which included two of his old acquaintances — Pierce Brosnan and Tang Jing.

Casting an unfriendly glance at them, Twain turned his head back.

"Isn't it just fifteen minutes of public time?" He muttered.

"There are still five minutes left." Next to him, Dunn replied with a laugh, as he knew what he meant.

"Hmm..." Twain stroked his chin and said, "let the boys run for another five minutes."

As the fitness coach led the team to run past in front of the coaching staff and was about to hand over the team to Twain, he saw Dunn gesture to him to continue. He was a little surprised, but did it anyway.

Someone in the team made a sound of lament that they had fallen victim to the confrontation between the boss and the media. Only George Wood looked the same as usual and led the run.

"What did this kid eat while he was growing up..." Ribéry looked at Wood's back and frowned.

"Monster!"

Within the five minutes, a reporter finally asked Twain some questions about the evening's semi-final game: how the Forest team planned to deal with Chelsea, would the Forest team still insist on playing defensive counterattack, who was on the Forest team's starting list and so on.

Twain's answers were perfunctory with regards to this.

"Tonight's game? You will find out when you get to this evening. Is it necessary to ask that now?"

The answer left the reporters frustrated.

"Mr. Twain, it's true that we will know when the game comes. But our readers also need some news to keep them excited for tonight's game..." The BBC reporter took the lead. All the other reporters nodded and agreed.

Twain did not want to fall out with the media. After all, he still had a lot of uses for them in the future. He glanced at the training ground. The players were still running laps, which was unplanned physical training.

"Ah, I see. To be honest, there is nothing to talk about. We are an old opponent of Chelsea. I am as familiar with Mr. Mourinho as I would be with my wife... Of course, that is if I had a wife." His remark amused the reporters present. "Similarly, I believe Mr. Mourinho knows me as well as he knows his wife. This is a game without any secrets to speak of. Both sides compete with real strength and not some other complicated things... do you understand now that I've put it this way?"

The reporters nodded.

"Therefore, you see, our training is no different than usual. Speaking of which, I'd like to switch with Mr. Ferguson. We played Arsenal in the semi-finals last season and this season we play against Chelsea. We had been going around in circles within the country. It really does not feel like we're playing in the UEFA Champions League. I would also like to take this opportunity to travel abroad."

There was another burst of laughter. The atmosphere looked pretty good.

Just as the reporters felt there was more questions to be asked, Twain raised his arm and pointed to the watch on his wrist. "I'm sorry, the open interview time is over, my friends."

It was as if everyone woke up from a dream. Twain was here beating around the bush only to talk nonsense the entire time just so that he could use up the time.

When the annoying reporters were directed by security guards and had reluctantly left the grounds, Twain stopped the team from running laps and then sat them down to rest as he stood in the middle to speak to everyone.

"Five minutes doesn't squeeze you dry, is it?" Twain pointed to the panting Ribéry and said, "if you still want to pretend, you'll be on the bench, Franck."

Ribéry's breathing immediately evened out. Next to him, someone laughed.

The starting lineup had been announced, and Ribéry, who was in a good shape, was on it.

"I don't have to say much. You all know what tonight's game is. If anyone else thinks it's just a regular league tournament, you can raise your hand now. We still have time to wake you up. Answer me out loud. What damn game are we're playing tonight?"

"Championship League!"

Everyone roared in unison.

“Very good! This is a knockout game. We’ve worked hard the entire season. But once we lose, it will be for f**king nothing! No one will sympathize with us. I believe you have fully realized the cruelty in this world. The flowers, applause, and glory belong only to the victors, and the losers get nothing! I do this job not because I want to serve as a background for someone else, and you’re not playing football to be a stepping stone to the winner! Nottingham Forest’s football is the winning kind. The kind of football that you don’t win is nothing! Nothing!” Twain stomped hard at the turf beneath his feet, as if he could trample and sink Stamford Bridge. “We’ve never lost to Chelsea and it should be Chelsea who is feeling scared, not us. Let’s show them our best tonight!”

With the inspiring speech over, Twain asked Dunn to come forward and explain the specific tactics to the players. Dunn, who was more professional in this job, was clearly more suitable than himself.

Dunn stepped forward and held the tactical board to explain to each of the players around him the tactics for this game and their individual tasks, even including the substitutes. This sort of meticulous work was more suitable for people like Dunn to do.

In fact, the explanation of tactics was a thankless job. Before Dunn came along, it was Kerslake who did it. After Dunn came, he could not wait to dump the work on Dunn, the newbie.

Because the players had their own ideas and would want to play those on the field. However, the tactics were unlikely to cover of everyone’s preferences, and someone was bound to resent the arrangements, and that dissatisfaction would be vented at the coach who came forward to set the tactics for them. If Twain needed Anelka to defend and when Dunn went to Anelka, the French striker would certainly give Dunn attitude.

If a bad-tempered coach were to do it, the likelihood of a quarrel between the two sides would be higher. Dunn’s character was slightly softer, so he was the most appropriate person to execute this. He only did this as a job. No matter how the players treated him, those faces simply could get into his eyes and head.

Obviously, the managers could do these tasks themselves. But Twain’s idea was this: since I’ve got an assistant manager I’m paying, I will get them to do everything that I can hand over. Able people do more work...

After Dunn spent half an hour telling all the players the specific tactics and details, the team continued to train. This time, Twain carried out the tactical drill in the absence of media presence. They specifically practiced all the tactics that had just been laid out for them to see how much they had grasped.

After the training, the players showered in the locker room led by the assistant managers, and Twain went straight to the press conference venue, where the reporters and his opponent were waiting for him.

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The two rivals bumped into each other at the entrance to the press conference, and it looked like a chance encounter.

“Are you so scared that you have to have a closed-door training, Mr. Twain?” Mourinho raised the first question. “Are there still any secrets left between us?”

Twain snorted. “A team that has never lost to Chelsea will be never be afraid of Chelsea. Thank you for the joke, Mr. Mourinho, even though it’s a little corny.”

Not being able to beat Twain grated on Mourinho. Twain hoped to anger his opponent, but apparently Mourinho was also an expert in psychological warfare and was unmoved. He just shrugged and said, “it’s not a joke. You’ll know when the game is played.”

“You’re right, since you’ll know too when you play. Why are we talking nonsense here? Let’s just go out for a drink together.” Twain pointed to the exit and turned to leave.

“I don’t think the reporters in there will agree.” Mourinho pointed to the entrance of the press conference instead.

“Well, you have a point, too.” Twain turned spun back around. He made a gesture and said, “after you, Mr. Mourinho.”

Mourinho simply accepted it and pushed the door open to enter. Twain followed close behind.

Because the two leading characters had arrived, the press conference quickly quieted down. After the two men were seated, everyone eagerly raised their hands.

Twain and Mourinho met gazes at the same time. Such animated media made them feel a little confused about what to do.

During a press conference at the sensitive time before a game, Twain always insisted on one principle: Taichi. Whatever he could push away, he would push and whatever he could skirt around, he would. He would ramble incoherently and not touch on the main point. It was only for a while, and things were okay when it was over and done with.

He sat down and leisurely looked at the host gather the forces to assign the tasks.

Overall, the questions were evenly distributed to the two managers. No one would feel that they had been snubbed, and no one would be tired of answering too many questions.

Most of the questions Twain and Mourinho needed to answer were about which star players would appear on the evening’s starting list, how a player’s condition had been recently, or how recent injuries would affect performance, or other normal questions.

Twain was not surprised because he knew that they had not arrived at the real core portion yet. According to usual practice, the media always asked the questions about the information required for the general layout first to ensure that the next day’s newspaper would not be left with a large blank in the pages. They would only ask the few pointed questions at the end to put the managers on the spot.

He was somewhat distracted in dealing with the routine questions that had been thrown at him while he calculated in his head how long it would take before he could leave. Until Tang Jing stood up when she was finally selected after she held her hand up for a long time.

“Hello, I am Tang Jing, a reporter for China’s Titan Sports. I have three questions.” Tang Jing stood up and said in English, “first of all, Nottingham Forest has not lost to Chelsea since Manager Twain started coaching the team. This is the third contest between both sides this season. Is Manager Twain confident in continuing his unbeaten record? Second, if I remember correctly, Manager Twain had said before this season that the Forest team’s goal is the Champions League title this season. I would love to ask Manager Twain where you got your confidence from at that time. Thirdly, there have been rumors that you and Mr. Mourinho are at odds. Do you intend to admit this?”

All of a sudden, all eyes were on the Chinese reporter.

He did not think that Tang Jing would ask these three questions. Twain viewed her with some surprise, while Mourinho directed his gaze at Twain beside him.

“Please answer, Mr. Twain.” When she saw that Twain did not speak, Tang Jing smiled as she reminded him.

“Tsk. Firstly, I don’t think that it’s a good thing to lose to Chelsea. If I could maintain the unbeaten record against this team, it would obviously be good. I think you’re asking an obvious question. No manager would say ‘I think we might lose’ when he answered such a question. Secondly, I can tell you that my confidence was from a dream. Can you believe it, Miss Chinese Reporter? I woke up one day and felt someone whispered in my ear — you are certain to get the UEFA Champions League title this season. Can you believe it or not?”

A reporter could not help but laugh.

Tang Jing turned around and glared at the direction of the laughter.

“You ask me where my confidence comes from, and I’ll tell you it comes from my team. Are you satisfied with this answer? We were supposed to be the European champion last season. My players have that ability. I’m their manager so I’m well aware of this. I’m clearer on this than anyone else here.”

“As for the third question ...” Twain turned his head to look at Mourinho and found Mourinho looking at him as well, so he turned his head back immediately.

“How my personal relationship with Mr. Mourinho has nothing to do with this game. so I refuse to answer.” He stared at Tang Jing as he spoke each word.

“How can it be unrelated? If this game were to be another opponent, how much do you want to win? What are the odds of success?” Tang Jing was not willing to let go so she continued to ask questions.

“You’ve used up your three questions, Miss Tang.” said Twain with a cold expression. He did not intend to continue his entanglement with Tang Jing.

In the end, Mourinho stepped up to mediate between the two of them and said, “I think this lady... missed the point of the issue. The point is not who our opponent is, but what kind of game it is. For Chelsea, no matter who the opponent is, as long as this is a crucial game, we will never be allowed to fail.”

Twain sat next to him without talking, but he agreed tacitly with Mourinho’s assertion in his mind. It was rare for him to find common ground with Mourinho.

Tang Jing glanced at the silent Twain and accepted Mourinho's answer. She sat back down and did not raise her hand to ask questions again.

She had intended to use the three questions for Mourinho again, but there was no longer a need to.

The host was keenly aware that the atmosphere of the press conference was in an irregular plight, so he wisely ended it.

After he came down from the stage, Twain specifically walked towards Mourinho and said, "I can't believe we have something in common. I completely agree with your answer for that woman. Well, how about it? Since we have something in common, would you like to go for a drink together?"

He was not sincere about inviting Mourinho to a drink. He just did it to look like he was gracious. At the same time, he was using psychological warfare before the crucial game.

Mourinho also knew Twain's mind. If he answered "okay," it would certainly embarrass Twain, but he would not do such a thing. It was not that he did not want to embarrass Twain. He just did not want to drink with Twain at all. It was the same case as anyone not wanting to date someone they disliked.

"Even though I'd love for you to buy me a drink, I think if we do sit down and have a drink together one day... Mr. Twain, can you guess when that will be?" said Mourinho.

"When?" asked Twain.

"After you and I both retire." Mourinho walked away.

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"After days of waiting... the game is finally about to start!" Kerslake muttered excitedly in the bus.

Through the window on his side was the Stamford Bridge stadium, which had fallen into a frenzy.

The blue colors of the Chelsea fans and the red colors of the Nottingham Forest fans streamed in from all directions and congregated in the stadium. They surged forward and then spread out before they accumulated their strength and rushed towards each other again, their fervor swept across the space as far as the eye could see.

That was the charm of the world's first movement. No matter the identity of these fans in their daily lives — the head of the company, the vulgar City of Xiao Min, a professor in an institution of higher learning, or a quiet teenager — after stepping into the stadium, they turned into the same creature — fans who were dominated by primitive emotions.

They had lost all rationality. Only by defeating their opponents could they calm down.

Alcohol was the best catalyst for such a mood. Countless people held up their beer cups and shouted their teams' slogans, wanting to make their opponents retreat at all costs.

"Chelsea! Chelsea! We're champions! We're destined to be the European champions!"

"You'll have to go through us first, you shits!"

"The Double belongs to the blue Chelsea! The reds can go to hell!"

“We’re the strongest team! Nottingham-Forest Forest!”

“You only used to be, Nottingham bumpkins!”

“Sodding upstarts from London, you’ve never been!”

“We’re f**king rich! Richer than you poor bastards!”

These verbal provocations and clashes took place in every corner of the stadium. The police were on guard for every possible danger and made a desperate bid to maintain order on the scene.

“I like this clamor.” Twain, who got out of the bus, looked around at the chaotic square and nodded as he exclaimed, “clear and audible foul language, sweat and spit, and the smell of alcohol... Awesome!” He raised his fists to the Nottingham Forest fans who were waiting. The action drew cheers from the Forest fans. These people liked to see Twain strut around on his opponent’s territory.

Naturally, when he received the approval of his own people, he would also be at the receiving end of his opponent’s vitriol. On the other side, there was a lot of swearing and booing at Twain from the Chelsea fans’ camp.

Nottingham Forest was the most unique out of the twenty teams in the English Premier League. When the other teams went to play on their archrivals’ territories, the players would bear the brunt of being booed and abused by the opposing fans. Only on this team, the players were all right, and the one who received the most ferocious abuse was their manager, Tony Twain.

Some fans had even come up with a number of offensive songs to target at Twain.

Hearing the Chelsea fans’ swearing and hissing, the Nottingham Forest fans immediately reacted. They started shouting loudly at Twain. Even though it appeared as if they were saying it to Twain, they made sure the entire stadium could hear them clearly.

“Hey, Tony! Go ahead and bring us another damn victory!”

“You’re not afraid of that guy, Mourinho, right?!”

“Tony, if you can take down Chelsea, I’ll buy you a drink when we return! You can drink as much as you want!”

Twain walked with the players between both sides of fans and the Nottingham Forest fans kept trying to break through the police blockade to pat Twain on the shoulder as if they wanted to pin their hopes on the man.

On the other side, it was like a forest of middle fingers and gaping mouths ready to emit the word “f**k.”

It was truly a clash of fire and ice.

Twain walked in the middle of the flames and the ocean with a smile on his face, all the way to the visitors’ locker room.

Although he seemed calm in appearance, he in fact felt explosive on the inside. Like a volcanic eruption waiting for a suitable moment to spew out fiery red lava to turn the cold sea water into steam.

“The boss is so cool...” Gareth Bale could not help exclaiming as he looked at Twain’s back from the back of the line.

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The players got dressed, warmed up, and returned.

Their preparations were all done and Twain stood before the eleven fully prepped players, with the substitute players, coaches, and team doctors behind him.

“Coach Dunn has given you the detailed arrangement of the specific tactics and we have already decided how we are going to play in this game during training a week ago. Everyone is in good form and all okay with your stamina. There’s also no major injuries. We’ve been preparing for so long that all the preparations have been done.” Twain clapped and continued, “what else is lacking? Just the ninety-minute game, and... a victory.”

Then he motioned to everyone — the starting eleven players in front of him and the substitutes and coaches behind him — to surround him, arms around shoulders and heads bowed. Standing in the middle, he looked at the men and said to them, “remember, do not think about how Chelsea leads us in the league tournament, don’t care about whether they have any hope of winning the league now, and disregard how strong they are. They are definitely not our ultimate rivals. This is the semi-finals, guys. Our goal is not just the insignificant Stamford Bridge. Athens is where we’re going. Don’t you dare stop until you set foot on the Olympic Stadium of Athens! You’re not allowed to stop until you pick up the UEFA Champions League trophy! You’re not permitted to stop until I say ‘okay!’ Any opponent that dares to stand in our way, whether it be Barcelona, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Real Madrid, or Chelsea — kill them all!” He swung his hand down as if he were holding a sword.

“Kill them!”

A wild roar erupted in the visitors’ locker room.

Chapter 524: Contrary to Expectations

The atmosphere at Stamford Bridge had been ignited. The red and blue colors formed into two distinctive squares in the stands. Though they were not equal in numbers, they seemed to be on a par in terms of their momentum. The smaller number of Forest fans showed no weakness in the face of the dominant Blues fans. They frenziedly hit back at the opponent’s various provocations. They did everything except jump straight into fights and throw beer glasses.

Twain liked these kind of fans. He had something in common with Roy Keane on this point — they both disliked the so-called fans who sat in luxury boxes, impeccably attired and refined in manner. If fans came to the stadium and did not throw themselves into the crazy atmosphere, it was better to simply stay at home and watch the televised broadcast.

It was because of the support of such a group of fans that he had the confidence to lead Nottingham Forest to head south and annihilate their opponents.

Before he entered the stadium today and saw those Forest fans feverishly cheer his name and clash with the Chelsea fans, the sense of accomplishment in Twain's heart could no longer be expressed in words.

Besides winning this game and taking the Champions League title, was there anything else he could do to repay these lovely fans?

Therefore, he told his players not to stop until they had reached their goal.

How could they stop when they had been hurtling on the right highway?

"Both teams have had little association with each other for the past one hundred years and were on different paths. The arrival of Tony Twain and José Mourinho changed all that. The two men with their unique temperaments and extreme conceit are unwilling to lose to each other. The two teams had co-existed in peace over the past one hundred years, but it does not mean that they will be able to interact amicably from now on. The classic English clash between red and blue has another pair of enemies... And we all like to watch games like this because it's thrilling. I didn't say brilliant because this game may be played a little conservatively due to the importance of the outcome. But there will be a lot of intense footage from this game, even if you want it to be less so."

The television commentator conjectured on the tactics of both sides based his experience. Because it was a Champions League semi-final, the result was more important than anything else, so the odds of wanting to watch a brilliant and wonderful contest were low, not to mention Mourinho and Tony Twain were both famously conservative managers.

What the spectators could only expect the highest intensity to be red and yellow cards, fouls, loud collisions, flying spittle, glares, and both managers' passionate performances on the sidelines.

Twain stood on the sidelines and waited for the game to begin. Mourinho was also standing on the edge of the technical area. The two managers could not sit still in the ten or so seconds before the start of the game.

Van Nistelrooy and Eastwood stood in the center circle, waiting for the kickoff.

The referee checked on the time with the fourth official through his headset. The Stamford Bridge stadium, which had been rumbling noisily, gradually calmed down.

The referee looked down at his watch and then gave a thumbs up to the fourth official on the sidelines. Everything was okay so they could kick off.

He blew the whistle.

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The commentator presented what a conservative manager Tony Twain was in his impression and how his style of football was so boring that the spectators simply could not cheer and clap. No one else could support him save for the Nottingham Forest fans. This man had offended a number of people in English football circle. And after he found England to be too small, he became a scourge in continental Europe. Look at what he had done to the poor Frank Rijkaard... If he ended up taking the Champions League title, the entire UEFA would lose its mind.

As he chattered, the Forest team kicked the football out. After a simple return pass, the football came to Wood's feet.

Instead of continuing to return the pass, Wood kicked the football to van der Vaart, the Dutch midfielder in front of himself to the side. He would hand the ball over to Van der Vaart to specifically organize the attacks.

Van der Vaart also did not dribble the ball. He just passed the football as per Twain's instruction. Chelsea's midfield defensive ability was world class. It would be easy for one player to dribble too much and get enmeshed with Essien and Makelele and Ballack's defense.

Twain wanted to get the team through the midfield quickly without giving the opponent too much time to dentangle them. In a situation like this, passing the ball was clearly a more effective way than dribbling the ball.

He always told his players that no matter how fast a person could run, even if it were the world's best hundred-meter sprinter, it was impossible to run at the speed of a flying football. Hence, if they wanted a quick attack, passing was their best option.

Van der Vaart passed the football to Ribéry, who immediately moved the football with a long shot to Ashley Young on the right flank after he attracted Chelsea's defensive attention on the left flank.

The Forest team's offensive passing was quick and decisive. The overall positional play and assists were deft, fully demonstrating their rapport.

"As if it had been calculated, the Forest team shifted the football from left to right with a few deliveries of kicks."

"Watch out for his pass!" the Chelsea goalkeeper Čech roared loudly. As an opponent in the English Premier League, he knew Ashley Young's techniques well. The assist king of last season's Premier League had a remarkable talent and passing ability.

The Forest Team's center forward was van Nistelrooy, known as the "king of the penalty box," so Ashley Young's passing came in handy.

Čech did not dare to be careless and cautioned everyone be vigilant.

Ashley Young did pass the ball, but he did not pass it on to van Nistelrooy and Eastwood in the middle. He kicked the football back and passed it to Chimbona, who came up to assist.

"Confine their offense on the flank!" The Chelsea players rushed up intending to hem them in and prevent Chimbona and Ashley Young from coordinating offense together on the flank.

Chelsea's left back Ashley Cole closely marked Ashley Young, not giving him a chance to slip past him, while Essien came to guard against Chimbona and not allow him to easily pass the football to Ashley Young.

"The Forest team's attack quickly came to an impasse. Chelsea's defense is very solid."

More players were needed to support Chimbona, but van der Vaart did not go. He only looked on from afar in the middle. Could it be that this matter had nothing to do with him?

No, it was just that there was a better candidate.

George Wood ran over from his defensive position and Chimbonda spied him through the cracks among the crowd of players. He immediately passed the football to his captain, who came up to receive.

Wood did not adjust or even observe after he received the football. He directly kicked the football to van der Vaart, who was waiting in the middle.

Ballack had initially wanted to come up and force Wood to pass the ball back while he had it stopped. He did not think that Wood would not even observe before he passed it again, and the pass was quite accurate.

After van der Vaart stopped the football, he could not turn around with Makelele stuck to him so closely, so he moved the football to the left flank where Ribéry plugged in once again and passed.

Van Nistelrooy had a head-on confrontation with Terry in front of the goal, and Terry eventually headed the football out of the end line with his disruptions.

“A beautiful attack, but pity there was no goal. Terry’s defense sets your mind at ease!” The commentator praised the Blue captain, John Terry.

Twain and his coaching staff met gazes and smiled. The men saw what they wanted to see.

Where was the key to this attack, or the transit point? It was not van der Vaart but George Wood plugging in to receive and pass before he pulled the football out of the quagmire and then brought it into the open zone.

This was the ability that Twain had always wanted Wood to have: to help with the team’s offense, to accomplish the seemingly unremarkable, but very critical tasks in seemingly unremarkable areas. Apparently, before he ran up in response to Chimbonda, he had already ascertained van der Vaart’s position and knew what he should do. That was why he could send the football to where it was supposed to go after he received Chimbonda’s pass.

The attacking midfielder was positioned far too forward. His field of vision was limited and easily marked by the opponent’s defensive midfielder. The defensive midfielder could also be the same. His position was more unrestricted and there was no inseparable defensive player around. There was ample space and freedom to move.

The position was a waste if it was just limited to defense.

“Even though there was no goal, we had a good start.” Twain shook hands with the coaches to celebrate. Then he walked up to Albertini.

“He did a good job.”

Albertini nodded and looked proud. “Of course, he’s my student.”

Twain chuckled, “I hope he can be the next Metronome.”

When Albertini played, he had the nickname that meant that when he was on the field, he was like a metronome in control of the team’s pace and in control of the momentum of the game. Twain was not

satisfied with him being just a defensive midfielder who could participate in the offense. When Wood could become the double core from the spirit to the tactics, he would develop specialized tactics around the kid, and at that time, the Forest team would become an incredibly powerful with a large number of good players surrounding Wood.

“In that case, he still had a long way to go. He not only requires the training but also the experience.”

“Anyway, he’s still young.” Looking at Wood running on the field, Twain added, “I’m still young, too.”

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After the Forest team’s corner came out, Piqué’s header shot was directly taken down by Čech and Chelsea immediately launched a swift counterattack.

Čech threw the ball, and Ballack passed it to Essien after he received it. Essien then passed it to Lampard.

Similarly, through a fast breakthrough in the midfield, Mourinho also did not want to directly confront Nottingham Forest’s midfielders here. Although the Forest team did not have a world-class lineup like Ballack, Essien and Makelele, one George Wood was enough to give him a headache.

Lampard chose to shoot directly after he took the ball. He swung his leg for a long shot twenty-eight meters away from the goal. He had wanted to catch Edwin van der Sar off guard but did not expect to stray away from the goal.

A brief lament at Stamford Bridge was immediately replaced by an applause.

“Both teams had a beautiful attack each after the start of the game... Maybe this game will present us with a completely different Nottingham Forest and Chelsea?” This was the commentator’s beautiful wish.

His desire was shattered by the ruthless reality that came next next.

The Forest team quickly opted to use defensive tactics, and Chelsea was powerless against the Forest team’s die-hard tactics. The UEFA Champions League semi-final was bogged down five minutes after it started.

“Defense,” “errors,” and “interceptions” were the entire range of keywords in the game for more than ten minutes. After each side gave a shot, their attacks were suddenly flummoxed.

Ten minutes later, there was the first yellow card. Makelele shoveled van der Vaart during his defense. Because his action was too big, he was warned by the referee with a yellow card.

Both managers wanted to get the football from their respective sides to break through the midfield quickly, and at the same time did not want to the other side to quickly pass through their midfield quickly as well. Therefore, the midfield became the area with the most intense firestorm and the strategic location where both sides refused to give in an inch.

Most of the time, football was rolling around the midfield. It would appear at the foot of the Forest team for a while, and then in a flash, it would go over to Chelsea’s side.

Because everyone was focused on the midfield, the offense's low efficiency was pathetic. The number of threatening shots added from both teams could be counted with five fingers.

The situation was something Twain was happy to see, so he turned his head and sat back on in his coach's seat. On the other side, Mourinho came out of the technical area.

In the away game, Twain's bottom line was a draw and an away goal, so he could still remain calm in his seat while the game was in a deadlock. Whereas Mourinho, playing as the home team, was under more pressure. He had to win.

Clad in a pale blue shirt, Mourinho rolled his sleeves up past his elbows and waved his arms vigorously to direct the team to continue to press forward while he constantly bellowed toward the field.

The team's offense was in a deadlock. He could not sit still. He paced back and forth between his coach's seat and the technical area.

Twain looked askance at him and wondered somewhat unkindly if Mourinho was going to take a shower and get dressed too during the halftime interval. His pale blue shirt had already become dark blue from sweat.

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"The game has been going for twenty minutes and the ball possession rate is out. In terms of statistics, Chelsea has the upper hand, with a huge gap of 69% possession against Nottingham Forest's 31%. But the Chelsea players are not having an easy time. Chelsea's biggest problem right now is that they have the ball possession, but it does not result in any goals. As for Nottingham Forest... Supposing, I mean, if the Forest team wins in the end, then this is a classic Tony Twain's game — gaining the victory for the most important game with the ugliest playing. But that would be a disaster for our fans..."

Twain simply cocked a leg up to deliberately provoke someone.

If that busy person did not see it, it did not matter now. Twain believed that the perceptive televised broadcast was bound to capture it on film. The effect would be the same after the game.

Chaos, the messier the better, so chaotic 'till Chelsea cannot find the offensive route, so messy 'till they are unable to check the holes in their defensive line... That will be great!

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Mourinho paced back and forth along the sidelines for a while before he took a seat. After he saw Twain's relaxed pose, he suddenly lost his anxiety.

"George Wood is not a god, he can't cover the entire defense on his own..." He muttered to his aides as he sat in the coaches' area.

The Forest team continued to disrupt Chelsea's attacking pace with fouls and fierce defense. If Chelsea still followed the tactics developed before the game, it would become more and more chaotic. A quick pass through the midfield was no longer feasible. It would only actively increase their team's rate of errors.

“Let them do more horizontal passes. Maneuver the Forest team’s defenses and look for holes,” he instructed his aides around him.

Chelsea quickly made adjustments based on these instructions.

George Wood found himself struggling to defend on his own as Chelsea’s offense evaded him. They always executed horizontal passing to wear him down.

Because of their full trust in Wood’s ability, the Forest team only had him as the dedicated defensive player in the midfield.

Chelsea did this with the intention to bypass him to directly attack the weak areas of the Forest’s defensive line. Without the protection of their defensive midfielder, the Forest team’s defensive line lost valuable strategic depth. One penetrating straight pass or cross from the opponent could easily rip apart the defensive line in front of Edwin van der Sar. The Chelsea midfielders absolutely had that ability.

Essien passed the ball to Robben. When George Wood came up to defend, Robben did not get greedy this time. He passed the ball to Lampard in the middle when he saw Wood came up.

When Lampard received the ball, George Wood was still at the flank. Even if he was any better, he could not immediately rush over to help.

“Lampard takes the ball, and he has no Nottingham Forest defenders around him for the time being. This is an opportunity for Chelsea. Is he going to take another long shot?”

The commentator thought so, and Edwin van der Sar thought so too. His stance clearly showed that he was defending against Lampard’s powerful long shot.

Chelsea’s number 8 player liked long shots, for which he was famous. With no one marking him now, he had no reason not to shoot.

Piqué abandoned his defensive area and rushed up to cover George Wood’s position. Just as he started forward, Lampard swung his leg and passed the ball.

The football rolled past Piqué. He had wanted to extend his leg to block, but he swayed and fell. He completely lost his position.

“What a great opportunity!”

The stands of Stamford Bridge suddenly surged in monstrous waves. The sea of blue pressed from all directions against the red magma.

“Drogba received the ball and there’s no one around him... This opportunity is simply sent from heaven!”

Seeing this, Mourinho left his seat, leaned forward, and got ready to spring out to celebrate.

Drogba simply turned around after he received the ball, and Edwin van der Sar thought he was going in, so he got ready to strike and cut the ball off.

However, as Drogba turned around, he also raised his leg to shoot at the same time. At such a close distance, Edwin van der Sar could not react in time. He watched the football fly past his face in slow motion.

“What a GOOOOAL!”

This was contrary to Twain’s expectations.

The voices that the Chelsea fans wanted to hear the most finally rang over Stamford Bridge.

Chapter 525: George Wood’s Football Philosophy

When Drogba received the football, there were no Forest defenders around him. Chelsea’s persistent maneuvering of the Forest team finally played a role in helping Drogba shake off the annoying defense at the most critical moment. The highly difficult action of turn and shoot was as natural to him as eating, and “the Beast” Drogba was best at shooting with this unconventional move.

It was too close in distance and Edwin van der Sar could not save it in time. He could only watch as the football entered the net.

At that moment, Stamford Bridge rocked and erupted in tremendous cheers. The blue sea set off an upsurge of waves that temporarily drowned the red rolling lava.

“Chelsea! Chelsea! Chelsea!” the fans dressed in blue jerseys chanted. At this moment, only these voices could be heard.

When he saw Drogba scored the goal, Mourinho rushed out of the coaches’ area and slid to the ground with his arms raised, celebrating with the people around him.

The Chelsea coaches and substitutes cheered thunderously.

“Chelsea’s offense has finally paid off! A beautiful offensive set piece that ripped the Forest team’s defensive line apart! 1:0! They finally made a good start at home!”

As the team that conceded the goal, there was a dead silence on Nottingham Forest’s side.

Twain sat in position, still with his legs crossed. Nothing changed before they conceded the goal, but the look on his face was no longer relaxed.

No one wanted to lose the ball, whether it was within or outside of the plan.

He must admit that Mourinho’s change of strategy was timely and outstanding. He did not keep up with this change, so he conceded the goal.

“Chelsea showed the Forest team, trailing in this away game, who’s fighting at home now!”

Twain got up from his seat and curtly whistled twice toward the field. This was his code to communicate with Wood.

George Wood heard Twain’s whistle and turned around to run over.

“Don’t defend both flanks for now. They want to rip you out of the middle. Can you tell?”

Wood nodded and said, “I saw that.”

“Just stay in the middle. If they want to stay on the flanks, let them get tossed on the flanks. Your job is to defend the middle.”

“All right, I get it.” Wood continued to nod.

“Go back and rearrange the defensive line. Their passes are maneuvering our defensive line to look for holes. Don’t be fooled and stay in formation.”

Wood accepted the commands and left.

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The game started again, and Chelsea’s morale was greatly boosted after they scored a goal. They hoped to score another goal, taking advantage of the favorable situation and then score many goals to directly lock in their victory. Although the Forest team conceded the goal, they did not lose their confidence and fighting spirit. Their defensive organization was very tight and the game fell back into a sticky situation.

Five minutes passed and then another ten minutes passed. Chelsea’s successive offense did not result in a goal and their pace slowed.

Now it was the Forest team’s turn to seek an attack opportunity.

The Forest team’s attack was mainly based on defensive counterattack. They did not pursue quantity but quality. If they did not have the required certainty, then they would rather give up the attack than give Chelsea another chance to score a goal. Twain was cautious when playing an away game.

It could not be said that there was no good opportunities at all. By the end of the first half, the Forest team had been given a couple chances to score.

First, Piqué intercepted Drogba’s dribbling and passed the ball to van der Vaart. Then van der Vaart dribbled the ball to attack. Eastwood picked the ball up when he crossed over positions with van der Vaart. Outside the penalty area, Eastwood did not continue to dribble the ball forward or pass it to the others. Instead, he swung his leg to directly shoot outside the penalty box. This was a tricky shot which bypassed Čech’s hands in an obvious arc without circumventing the goalpost.

The football hit the goalpost hard and made a clanging sound.

The Chelsea fans were still in panic when Nottingham Forest’s van Nistelrooy grabbed a second point. The King of the Penalty Box had a keen sense in front of the goal. He appeared the ball landed at the first instance and swung his leg to shoot.

Čech had already fallen to the ground and struggled to get up, but it looked like he was too late. He reached his hands out, but he was still too far away from the football.

Team Captain Terry raced to cover and threw himself in front Čech’s body.

“Van Nistelrooy!”

“It struck Terry on the body!”

“Is that a handball? It doesn’t seem to be! The referee did not make any indication and Terry managed to hold on to the goal. The Forest team’s best chance so far in the first half... What a shame!”

Terry fended off van Nistelrooy’s shot with his chest. If the angle was not right, it looked as if Terry had turned his body to block the football with his arm. Eastwood raised his hand to signal to the referee about Terry’s handball. The referee ignored him but whistled for a corner kick to the Forest team.

Van Nistelrooy, who made the shot, did not dwell on the matter with the referee. He scratched his head with some vexation. It was a pity that this ball did not go in. He had monitored first before he made the shot and did not see another Chelsea player other than Čech lying on the ground.

When van Nistelrooy shot at the goal, Twain also lifted his butt off the seat with his hands reached forward, ready to cheer for the goal. But when he saw that Terry amazingly blocked the football, he slammed his palms on the ground.

“Damn luck! Our luck is so damn bad!” The frustrated Twain kept muttering.

“Chelsea had a narrow escape and Mourinho breathed a sigh of relief in his seat. It is now three minutes before the end of the first half and if all goes well, Chelsea will go into halftime with one goal.”

The Forest team made a little tweak in the corner kick. Before this, the Forest team was awarded three corner kicks which were all directly shot at the goal. The results were not effective. This time they switched to a short corner.

Van der Vaart passed the football to the incoming Ashley Young who did not rush to pass, but instead passed the football again to George Wood. The Forest team intended to make the most of the last three minutes. They patiently passed the ball in search of a defensive loophole in Chelsea.

On the other hand, Chelsea fully retreated to defend and intended to hold until the end of the first half.

The Forest team continuously passed the ball on the outside, from left to right, and from right to left again. Chelsea was not fooled. Their defensive formation remained tight and did not give the Forest team a chance to hit the danger zone with a straight pass.

Van der Vaart was the Forest team’s organization core. The football was passed to his feet several times, but he did not have a chance to send the football where it needed to go. Now he was more like an ordinary ball passer who repeatedly received the ball only to pass it again. The football always moved laterally.

What the Forest team needed now was not a crosswise pass, but a penetrating straight pass. Cross passing was what Chelsea wanted to see the most.

There was little time left in the first half and the Forest team was at a loss in the face of Chelsea’s tough defense.

George Wood was getting anxious in the back. If he could not equalize the score in the first half, it would be a big blow to his team’s morale.

He looked around him. Other than the two center backs, everyone had gone up. But it did not mean that it would be effective for everyone to go up. Now the front field was crowded with players. Our passing back and forth has constricted our routes and space instead.

For George Wood, attacks were meant to move forward. There was no offense without forward movement. If everyone was passing the ball around, then even they controlled the ball throughout the ninety-minute game, it would be impossible to enter the goal.

Could it be said that Wood had a good way to pass the ball? It was not the case either.

Van der Vaart, who was more experienced and skilled at organizing offense than he was, was also out of ideas in face of Chelsea's tight defensive formation. How could George Wood pass the football in?

But George Wood had his own philosophy and method of playing football.

He ran up and beckoned to van der Vaart whose back was to the goal and facing him, to signal to him to pass the football over.

Meanwhile, the fourth official held up the signboard to indicate a one-minute injury stoppage time on the sidelines for the first half. The game time had reached forty-five minutes.

Van der Vaart hesitated slightly. He also wanted to look for a passing route that could cause a deadly blow and directly penetrated the opposing line.

The closer Wood ran, the more Chelsea players noticed him.

"Watch out for that kid!" Terry yelled loudly in the back. Essien moved forward a little and got ready to tackle Wood.

"Give me the ball!" Wood could not help shouting.

With no other way, van der Vaart passed the football to Wood.

The football rolled towards him and Essien pounced on him along with the football.

George Wood had his own very simple football philosophy — if a complex method was ineffective, then it was time to use the straightforward method.

He did not want to move the football gracefully to a defensive dead corner. He did not think about it at all.

Essien initially thought Wood would pass the ball after he received it, just like the other Forest players involved in the offense had done, but soon he realized that the situation was not right. Wood's running speed and steps did not look like he planned to stop the ball ... He was obviously sprinting and adjusting his pace. He was going to...

Shoot!

In response, Essien sped up and pounced sideways, intending to block Wood's shot with his body.

Wood looked past Essien's body and straight to the goal. He did not see a passing path among the crowd, but he saw a thoroughfare to shoot for the goal.

A moment was all it took.

With his left foot firmly planted on the ground and his arms raised, he twisted his body and swung his right leg to powerfully kick the football rolling toward him upwards!

“Boom!”

“George WOOOOOOOOOD... GOOOOOOOAL!! What a great GOAL! A terrific goal!”

The football streaked over Stamford Bridge like a comet and plunged into the net, sparking a magnificent brilliance.

Čech had not even changed his position. His line of sight was obscured by the crowd at the front of the penalty box. The ball seemed to rip through the horizon and rushed out of the roiling clouds before it instantly appeared in front of his eyes and by the time he saw the football emerge, it was too late for him to act. The football had already whizzed past his ear,

It was too fast, and power was too great.

This was George Wood’s philosophy and approach to football, simple and straightforward, and also the most effective.

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“George Wood! This is his first goal for the Forest team in the Champions League! As a defensive midfielder, his shooting level is not praiseworthy, but this shot is a shockwave that will ripple through the world!”

All the pubs within the Nottingham city center erupted in cheers at the same time.

“You’re the best, George!”

“Take them down, Captain!”

At the same time at Stamford Bridge, the Chelsea fans were temporarily silenced. The Forest fans were ignited with fervor by the goal.

“George!” The fan leader, Fat John roared in the stands.

His comrades followed loudly with, “—WOOOOOOD!”

It was a volcanic-like eruption. As the temperature rose, the sea began to boil. The entire Stamford Bridge stadium was like a pot of boiling water, bubbling incessantly.

“The goal was so beautiful! It’s hard to imagine it came from George Wood... The speed, strength and angle were excellent... If he were to do it again, would he be able to score again? No matter what, Nottingham Forest relied on George Wood’s amazing shot to equalize the score. On the verge of the end of the first half, both sides are right back on the same starting line!”

This time, Twain did not waste his expression and pose on the sidelines. Once the football rushed into the net, he jumped up and turned in the air. He could not wait to hug everyone around him after he landed.

“Terrific job!” he cried. “What a f**king beautiful job!”

“But I’m really surprised that George could shoot like this...” said Kerslake, next to him.

“Even if it’s just luck, it’s okay as long as the ball is in!”

George Wood did not stop on the field to celebrate with his teammates. After he realized that he had scored the goal, he immediately turned to run to the substitutes’ bench first. He ran all the way to give Albertini a fierce hug.

Demetrio was going to leave soon. He had taught him for three seasons, on defense and offense, from how to be a professional player to how to be a captain. He had a bigger impact on himself than those coaches.

This is for you, Captain... Thank you!

Nottingham Forest’s new and old captains hugged each other tightly.

“George Wood dedicated this goal to Demetrio Albertini. In his career, this Italian man is one of the most important influences on him. Albertini will retire at the end of this season. If the Forest team can finally make it to the final, it will be the best parting gift for him! George Wood’s goal for the Forest team brings the hope of advancement. An away goal at the critical moment is often invaluable!”

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Mourinho had nothing to say about the conceded goal. His players performed well enough and did not give the Forest team any chances to pass the football at all. But he did not expect Wood, who had always been terrible at shooting, to manage to penetrate Čech’s ten fingers with such a remarkable shot.

That... had nothing to do with their performance!

He had a mini notebook computer in his hand with real-time data on the game, allowing him to observe the game and understand the movements in the game. The statistics on George Wood’s shot were typed out and displayed on the screen.

One hundred and forty.

That was the speed of that shot.

Mourinho tossed his laptop to his assistant and shook his head. “What else can we say? That bastard is so lucky. Even a player like George Wood can get that amazing shot.”

The Chelsea coaches were all silent. Just as Mourinho said, they did not know what else to say. The goal was entirely unforeseen.

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Without even giving Chelsea a chance to kick off again, the referee blew the whistle right away to signal the end of the first half. The players from both sides went to the tunnel. Wood was favored by the televised broadcast, and the camera footage followed him the whole time, giving him many close-ups,

which were interspersed with the repetitive replay of his shot. It was a thrilling long shot that made people jump up from their seats.

Dunn and Twain stood on the sidelines and watched the players file out.

“Now you can feel better about Demetrio’s retirement, right?”

“An old friend is leaving; how can I feel normal about it?” Twain grimaced. “George is George, Demetrio is Demetrio. But I’m glad to see George’s progress, and Demetrio is happy too.”

As the two men watched, Albertini, who waited at the opening of the tunnel for George to come off the field, pulled him aside and patted him on the head. It felt as if it were a father praising his son for his outstanding performance.

“It was an important decision in my coaching career to travel specifically to Italy and take Demetrio from Atalanta. I wanted Demetrio to help me lead this young team and pass on his experience to the young players. He did such a great job, and now it’s my turn to fulfill my promise.”

Chapter 526: Halftime Interval

In Nottingham Forest’s locker room, everyone discussed George Wood’s goal during that last moment.

Not only because it was Wood’s goal, but also because of the difficulty and brilliant extent of entering the goal. With a distance of twenty-eight meters from the goal and receiving his teammate’s return pass, he was able to volley the shot without stopping the ball. To be able to press the football under the crossbar was a feat, not to mention to be able to shoot through the crowd.

Nonetheless, Wood did it. Regardless of whether he took a wild shot or showed his skill, the ball went in. He helped the team to equalize the score and struck a blow to Chelsea’s arrogance. This was all that mattered. Such a result in professional football was more valuable than the process itself.

After entering the locker room, Twain also directly praised Wood’s last-minute goal. It was the key that saved the team’s fighting spirit and ensured that they had greater confidence and hope to continue to rise against Chelsea in the second half.

“Well done, George.” Twain nodded to Wood. “It looks like you’re in good form today. I should just let everyone pass the ball to you. Do you want to shoot?”

His teammates burst into laughter.

Amidst the laughter, Twain turned serious and began to critique the defensive line’s performance. “Don’t let me see George Wood defending on his own again. You guys better step up. There are idiotic media outlets out there that say Nottingham Forest’s defense is George Wood’s one-man defense. As long as he’s not there, there’s nothing to worry about the Forest team’s defense. Are you willing to accept such an assessment?”

The players on the defensive line stopped laughing. The evaluation hurt their self-esteem.

In fact, Twain was a little harsh. Since Pepe's injury, the Forest team's defensive line in the Champions League was one of the youngest. Piqué had the experience of playing for the Forest team for a full Champions League season, whereas Kompany had none. The center back was the core position in the defensive line, the crux of the crucial point. As it happened, the Forest team's two center backs were so young. Their experience and abilities were still not enough, and their condition was not stable enough.

Due to this, the idea of an entire team's defense was so important. If they only relied on their rear defensive line, it would not work if more powerful defensive players were to play against them. George Wood was only one player, not a god. It was hard enough that he was the only player in the midfield to establish a defensive line, but he also had to support the rear defensive line. A player could only do so much.

"Our defense has always been good, but today we were cracked wide open by the opponent with several passes! I can't accept conceding a goal just like that. If we concede a goal like the one George scored, I have nothing to say and will console you, but I'm angry about this conceded goal." Twain's face changed quickly. The atmosphere in the locker room was suddenly stern. "This is the Champions League semi-final and you know what it means to make mistakes in this kind of game. This is the kind of game where the team that makes fewer mistakes wins! In the second half, I don't want to see similar mistakes again."

Twain paused to let the locker room's atmosphere slowly warm up and not be as quiet.

In fact, on the whole, he was still fairly satisfied with this first half. The main reason was obviously due to the equalizer at the end. If there had been no equalizer, he would have been in a bad mood.

"All right, guys. Don't look like we've lost the game. We got an away goal and that's important. The last thing Chelsea wants to see, other than our victory, is probably a goal from us. I'm happy to do everything that makes our opponent uncomfortable. Continue playing like that in the second half. There's nothing to adjust."

Indeed, Chelsea and the Forest team were very familiar with each other as both sides were old rivals in the same league tournament. This kind of fierce contest was often not a victory with surprise tactics, but simply dependent on the strength of both sides: the teams' overall strength, and the players' individual skills.

Tricks would not work on either of the managers.

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Twain criticized the team's rear defense performance in the locker room and said that if they conceded a goal like George's, he would not blame the rear defense and would only encourage them.

In the home team locker room, that was exactly what Mourinho did.

His team was frustrated and annoyed at the goal concede in the final moment.

Mourinho paced back and forth among the dejected players. He looked around at his players and did not speak for a long while.

Nobody could grasp what the manager had on his mind. They did not dare to open their mouths, for fear of provoking his anger and fury. After all, they were equalized by the other side at the last minute of the first half and gave away the advantage they had.

“I say...” Mourinho, who had been pacing back and forth for a long time, finally opened his mouth and stopped to look at the players around him. “Why do you look like that? I’m not going to blame you for the goal concede. In fact, that goal concede was not that we made a mistake, but that the other side got lucky. What are you doing with your heads down?”

Mourinho raised his voice slightly and the players hurriedly looked up at their boss.

“Chelsea players are not going to be like this because of one goal concede. Conceding a goal will only motivate us more! If Chelsea is beaten down by this goal, then you will only be carried out of the game in forty-five minutes.”

Gullit and Vialli brought the technique of “sexy football” to the once-unknown Chelsea team, helping them win the UEFA Cup Winners’ Cup and the FA Cup. Even though that Chelsea team played well and was very popular, it had always lost the crucial league tournament title. So much so that at the time, Chelsea was called “the remarkable spoiler” and “the bridesmaid but never the bride” by the media. They were never the “strong contender for the title.” Was it because the players were not strong enough? Or was the team’s overall tactics ineffective?

It was none of those things; it was the lack of a spirit.

An unyielding attitude that never gave up, dared to say “no” to a strong enemy, had the guts to challenge all powerful teams, and despised everything. To put it bluntly, they lacked “the heart of a champion.”

The arrival of the UEFA Champions League manager, Mourinho, changed everything. The new Chelsea team was deeply imprinted with his personal mark — tough, tenacious, unyielding and domineering.

The Blues finally had “the heart of a champion,” so they could win the league title for two years in a row and suddenly become an important force that would not be overlooked in European football.

Chelsea’s “heart” was Mourinho. As long as he was there, that spirit would live in Chelsea.

“You did well in the first half. The Forest team didn’t have a lot of chances. Even when they did have any chances, they were within the normal range. We were still dominant in the game.” Mourinho started to praise the team’s performance, “Continue to put pressure on them and don’t let them have too many chances to consider how to find our defensive holes. If we let them get too comfortable, we will be the ones to suffer in the end.”

“In addition, watch out for George Wood’s performance in the offense. He’s very different from his first season. Although that shot was one hundred percent a wild shot, his series of positional plays and observations were the real deal. Don’t underestimate him. If he’s going to come up... Claude,” Mourinho turned his head to look at Makelele and said, “you are responsible for pinning him down.”

Makelele hesitated a little. The task given to him before the game was van der Vaart. “But boss, what about the Dutchman...”

“Let Essien take care of him.”

The players could not fully understand. When it came to offense, the dedicated offensive player, van der Vaart was more powerful than the half-baked George Wood. Why would he want Makelele, the best in the team’s midfield defense drop van der Vaart to mark George Wood?

Mourinho could see everyone was in doubt, so he had to explain to the players. “Van der Vaart has always been the core of the Forest team’s organization. His ability and features were thoroughly researched by the Forest team’s opponents. Van der Vaart is bound to have faced a lot of defensive pressure during games. This is generally the case.” He extended his index finger and said, “Didn’t we do the same in the first half? Van der Vaart was rendered useless by Claude’s defense. George Wood was active in offense in the first half and the Forest team would consider passing more balls to Wood to let him try... Do you understand what I’m saying?”

It suddenly dawned on everyone.

Twain thought that no one was marking Wood, so he asked the Forest team to shift the focus of the attack to George Wood. He would not think that Mourinho had already instructed Makelele to wait there.

It was tit for tat.

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Seeing that the halftime interval was coming to an end, Twain had been thinking about an issue during this time. Van der Vaart was largely immobilized by the midfield defensive line led by Makelele in the first half. The connection between him and the frontline was largely cut off. Makelele was a world-class defensive midfielder. Along with the help of Essien, it was unlikely that anyone could pass easily through such a midfield iron gate.

The Forest team’s offense in the first-half was largely ineffective. It was only due to George Wood that they managed to equalize the score with a lucky goal. He could not treat this matter as if nothing had happened just because they had equalized the score. The factors behind it were the most important.

It was clear that Chelsea had made careful defensive arrangements against the Forest team’s offensive group to be able to contain the Forest team’s attack so effectively in the first half.

There had to be some change in the second half. Otherwise their offense could not break through situation and it was only a matter of time before they conceded another goal. They would have hope in this game only by threatening the opponent’s rear defensive.

In that case, what should they do?

Twain scanned and searched among the players. He did not want to change players at the start of the second half. He did not consider the substitute players.

Ribéry? No matter what, he was still a shock worker and not an organizer. He could do the work like passing, organization and sorting out the midfield. He might not be better than van der Vaart, not to mention Ashley Young...

Should he let Eastwood pull back?

The Romani Gypsy was a player who used his brains to play. But if he withdrew, the front line would only be left with van Nistelrooy alone. The pressure in the opponent's rear was smaller, not to mention once they had fewer points to receive the ball in the front of the goal, who could they even pass the ball to if their midfield could pass the ball? Van Nistelrooy, who was closely marked?

Finally, Twain fixed his eyes on George Wood's poker face.

Although the process of that goal shot had a lot to do with luck, George's previous performance before that was definitely not luck. He was keenly aware of the team's situation at the time, and made the right judgment call to decisively plug ahead in and aided his teammates ... Why would he not let him try again?

"George." Twain opened his mouth, "In the second half, if our offense is unable to break through, you have go up and provide support."

Wood did not express any doubt. He just nodded.

When everyone heard Twain say that, they turned their heads and looked at Wood.

"Shoot or pass, you choose. Try to send the ball to a place where the opponent's defensive power is weak." With that, Twain looked at his watch. Time was up.

"Very well, you have enough rest. Get ready to play!" Kerslake stood up and clapped while he shouted for the players to follow him out of the locker room.

Albertini pulled Wood aside at the back so that they could walk together outside. He wanted to make use of the time to impart him his experience and knowledge in taking control of the midfield.

"If the opposing defensive formation is well organized, don't rush forward. That will only hasten us to concede the goal and give the opponent a chance to directly fight back."

"OK."

"An appropriate return pass is not an escape. It's just to lure the other side to come out and create holes. Cross passing and return passes are all means of organizing attack, and the ultimate aim is to move forward. You have to be the brain of the team. Don't let the opponent's pace lead you by your nose. You have to lead them instead. Once there is an opportunity, find the opportunity. If you don't have the opportunity, create the opportunity. Observe everyone's positions on the field while you wait to catch the ball and keep them in mind. The other side won't give you a chance to stop the ball and look up to observe again ... Maybe you see people doing this a lot, but you must never ask yourself to do that. Got it? You have to do better than all of them."

"Got it, Demetrio."

"Finally, if they want to tackle the ball from under your feet, be a little tougher! If you accidentally lose the ball, snatch it back on the spot. If you can't grab it, then just do a foul! You cannot go soft on the enemy!"

"All right."

As the two men talked, they were about to reach the exit. Albertini stopped to look at George Wood and said, "George, I have nothing more to add about your defense, but you still have a long way to go for your offense. All I can tell you is you need experience. It doesn't mean that you have to do it as it is. You are still young and there are many more games to play, but you also have to face all kinds of opponents. Find the most suitable path for you in the games and keep going!"

He gave Wood a hard pat on his shoulder and pushed him out of the tunnel.

Demetrio Albertini's road has already come to an end, but you, George Wood, your road is just beginning...

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After a fifteen-minute break, Stamford Bridge stadium became noisy once again. The players came out in succession and the vacated seats were filled again. The atmosphere of the game came rushing forth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second half of the Champions League semi-final game where Chelsea receives Nottingham Forest at home. Both sides had an equal score of 1:1 in the first half. The game was not that exciting, but there was a fantastic goal. George Wood's equalizer for Nottingham Forest could basically be selected for the ten best goals of the Champions League. Mourinho must be brooding over this goal concede. Tony Twain is not the kind of man who is going to rest of his laurels just because he got one away goal. We still have a game that we can look forward to in the second half."

As they headed to their respective coaches' seats, the two managers met briefly, but they did not exchange any words. Twain did not take the initiative to go up to pick a quarrel. The two men each walked away as if they did not see each other.

It was meaningless for both sides to have a war of words at this time. The outcome would be revealed after forty-five minutes.

Once they won against each other, they naturally could abuse their opponent to their heart's content after the game. If they did not win... to the team that lost the game, their defeat would not only be just about the score. It would also be the unknown future.

Chapter 527: The Charge of The War Chariot

After the second half began, Chelsea took advantage of their kickoff to launch a fierce offensive against the Forest team. Mourinho's intention was clear — to not relax the pressure against the Forest team's rear defensive line, not to give the Forest team a decent chance to counterattack, and to keep the pace of the game firmly in their own hands.

If he had been allowed to do so, the Forest team would have suffered greatly. Twain had never doubted that if they played under pressure from Chelsea, they would concede another goal.

In order not to let Chelsea attack them recklessly, they had to bring some trouble to their rear defensive line as well.

They had to counterattack.

That was the Forest team's direction and thinking for the second half. No matter how bad the situation was, they had to find a way to fight back.

Their offensive was based on their defense, and their defense was not just about trying not to concede the goal. It also had a bigger role to play.

Piqué won the fight for mid-air contest against Drogba. He headed out the Chelsea pass and the football landed in the open space in front of the penalty box. Chelsea and the Forest team both had a chance to get this ball.

Lampard rushed up, and so did George Wood.

In the end, Lampard got there first and volleyed the football. However, George Wood used his body to block the robust volley that was close at hand.

After a muffled sound, the football bounced high and flew forward.

Ribéry ran from the flank to the middle to stop the football before Makelele got there. He did not turn around to dribble the ball. Instead, he diverted the football to Ashley Young, who was running on the flank.

"Nottingham Forest's counterattack is indeed fast!"

Ashley Young's speed was certainly fast, but Ashley Cole was no dawdler. He competed with Young in speed. Without a ball, he was still evenly matched with Young, who had the ball.

The two men's bodies entangled during the run and neither wanted to give up. Cole gauged the space of the football that was kicked by Young and suddenly shoveled with his foot. He did not expect Young's footwork was faster than his, and for him to manage to poke the football away before he reached. Cole's foot stomped squarely on the side of Ashley Young's leg.

Ashley Young tumbled and fell to the ground like a wild horse that lost its center of gravity.

The referee's sharp whistle immediately rang out.

"Foul! Oh my god, it was a severe kick!"

The powerful energy from the collision pushed Young out of the field. He rolled and tumbled over to the billboards at the sidelines. Ashley Cole, who had committed the foul, jumped up at the first instance and waved his arms at the referee, running over, to signal that this was an accident.

"Red card!" Twain jumped out of his coach's seat and brandished his fist toward the referee when he saw that Ashley Young was thrown off the field.

The referee only pulled out a yellow card from his pocket.

"F**K!" Twain swore.

Dunn glanced at him.

The team doctor, Fleming had already run over with the first aid box. Ashley Young fell outside the field, so they did not need to wait for the referee's permission to go over for the treatment.

When he left, Fleming specifically said to Twain, “you’d better go and get Lennon to warm up now, Tony.”

This remark worsened Twain’s mood.

Fleming was an experienced team doctor. Since he had said so, it had to be that Young’s injury was not light. It was expected since how could he be fine after being kicked in the side of the foot during that kind of high-speed run,?

Dunn had already gone to instruct Aaron Lennon to go warm up.

There was chaos on the field. The Forest players swarmed around the referee and Ashley Cole, seeking redress. The Chelsea players stood between them as both sides shoved.

“The referee showed Cole a yellow card, which led to the Forest players’ anger. Maybe they want Ashley Cole to be sent off with a red card?”

“Just change your question into a definitive sentence. This foul really looked severe judging by the looks of it. If the referee directly sent Cole off with a red card, it would not be a problem... Of course, it was also not an issue to give the yellow card. The judgment lies with the referee. Maybe he doesn’t want to lose too much viewing pleasure from this game?”

The other commentator laughed. “There’s not much viewing pleasure in this game to begin with. Sending a player off to break the balance might be better for this game.”

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“Listen to me, man. I didn’t mean to, hey, I really didn’t mean to... I was heading for the ball...” Ashley Cole explained what had happened to his national team teammate and the Forest team’s captain, George Wood. He pointed to Young, who was lying on the ground, and mimed the shape of a ball.

Wood looked at him with a cold expression and was silent. Cole did not know if he accepted his explanation, so he ran to placate Young, still lying on the ground, to show some goodwill.

To be honest, when he shoved Ashley Young in the first place, he got really nervous for a second because he was afraid that the referee would give him a red card. Since he had gotten off lightly, he naturally had to show some decency.

“This was clearly a foul that could have been given a red card straight away!” Some of the other Forest players who surrounded the referee protested loudly. “We have a man down, but he only just received a yellow card warning?”

It was at that moment that people remembered to check on Ashley Young’s specific injuries and several people surrounded him.

“Fleming, how’s Young?”

Fleming looked up at those anxious players and said nothing. He just shook his head.

When van Nistelrooy saw the scene, he hurriedly squeezed out of the crowd and made a hand signal for a replacement to the technical area.

Ashley Young held his ankle as he laid on the ground in pain. He had been hurt during such a crucial game. Although the results of the checkup had not been announced, Young could miss the next semi-final game against Chelsea if he was unlucky and might even miss the finals — if the Forest team could reach the final.

Everyone could imagine how painful it had be for these professional players to be absent at such important games.

George Wood had missed last season's final. He had used the energy bottled up from that for an entire season and trained hard. He seemed to vent the regret of not being able to participate in the final on the training ground.

No one had the energy to dispute it with the Chelsea players. Ashley Young was already injured. A fight would not make him jump back up again and continu the game.

Twain saw the gesture made by van Nistelrooy. He swore and then called Lennon back from his warm-up.

"Lennon, when you go up, strike Ashley Cole hard. He's got a yellow card on him. Don't be afraid of him. Plow into him. If you step back, you'll just be giving him what he wants. The harder you rush him, the less he will know what to do. He's afraid of being sent off..."

Lennon nodded to indicate that he knew.

"Another thing. Tell Chimbonda to also actively participate in the attack, as well as Ribéry. Tell him to run towards your side. The entire team's offensive focus is transferred to your flank."

"All right, chief."

"Go on!"

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Fleming gave Ashley Young a simple treatment on the sidelines before he was supported by the team doctor as he limped back to the bench.

Twain shook his hand and said, "It's a real shame, Young. You almost broke through that kid. It would be wide open once you broke through."

Ashley Young forced a smile but said nothing.

"Go back to the locker room and change your clothes." Twain waved his hand and sent him off.

Calm had been restored on the field. After the fourth official checked the cleats on Lennon's boots, he allowed him to play. He ran onto the field and told everyone about Twain's tactical tweaks, allowing the team to focus its offense on Ashley Cole.

"Heheh." Ribéry snickered, "The chief made a very good decision. Since the referee didn't take the boy down, we'll do it ourselves!"

His words were favored by all.

“Wait, what if they shift their defensive focus over there too?” Leighton Baines raised a question.

Van der Vaart glanced at him and thought his question was stupid, “Then we’ll get the ball to the other side. There’s always one side that’s weaker.”

“But if you also go to the right, the who’s on the left...” asked Baines again, who soon realized that everyone was looking at him. “Uh, me?”

“Is there anyone else more appropriate?” Van der Vaart asked in return.

“But didn’t the boss say we have to stabilize our defense first?”

“The boss also said to fight back aggressively.”

Baines still did not relax his knitted brow. “If Chimbonda goes up and I also go up, once the opponent intercepts the ball and counterattacks, we only have two center backs and George... I feel like it is too risky.”

What he said was not unreasonable. If they pressed on too much, the opponent could intercept the ball and counterattack, which would be disastrous.

Wood, who had been silent, stepped forward and said, “I’ll do it.”

Nobody did understand what he meant, so no one reacted for a moment.

“Baines cannot go up. During our offensive, I’ll go to the left flank if there’s a need to. If I lose the ball, I will retreat right away to defend. If necessary, it is okay if the front line fouls.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Does anyone have a problem?” Wood asked when he saw that no one replied.

Ribéry hurriedly shook his head. “No!”

“I don’t either.”

“No, no.”

“Then it’s set. Let’s get ready to kick the ball.”

Everyone dispersed.

The Forest team’s free kick in the front field did not directly enter the penalty box via a crosswise long pass. Ribéry passed the football to van der Vaart and the Forest team intended to organize a positional play.

After they moved the football sideways to the left flank, the Forest team suddenly kicked the football back to the right flank with a long pass. Lennon caught the ball beautifully and faced Ashley Cole.

Cole noticed van der Vaart was right next to him. While he paid attention to Lennon, he was also careful to guard against any coordination between van der Vaart and Lennon.

Lennon raised his right foot and appeared to want to pass the ball.

Was it two-over-one pass?

Just as Cole's center of gravity shifted, Lennon suddenly pushed the football in a straight line as he accelerated — a breakthrough!

Cole did not expect this kid to forcefully break through and accelerate without hesitation. By the time he reacted, Lennon had flew past him like the wind, he was going to break through...

“What a beautiful breakthrough! Nottingham Forest's speed on the flanks is perhaps the fastest in the English Premier League. Franck Ribéry, Petrov, Ashley Young and Aaron Lennon, every one of their specialty skills is speed.”

After the breakthrough, Lennon passed the football and van Nistelrooy grabbed the ball to shoot!

Unfortunately, the angle was too straight and was easily caught under the well-positioned Čech's body.

After Čech grabbed the football, he jumped up from the ground and yelled at Ashley Cole to focus. He was unhappy that his full-back was so easily broken through by the other side.

Cole waved away his annoyance. He had underestimated this kid in front of him. Compared to the “EPL king of assist” Ashley Young, Lennon could only be considered as a hopeful star. English football which was fond of self-promotion; hopeful stars like him were common.

Come on, kid, I'm not going to let you go this time! Ashley Cole thought darkly to himself as he looked at Lennon.

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The Forest team made a comeback, but the player who laid into Ashley Cole wanted to meet with the sharper and more sophisticated Ribéry.

Cole managed to force Ribéry to the flank as he prepared for him to go out of the end line, but he did not expect Ribéry to hook under his feet and poke the soon-to-be out-of-bounds football out from between Cole's legs!

Before Cole could turn around, Ribéry suddenly picked up his speed to get away from Cole and bypassed him. It was another breakthrough!

After he broke past Cole, Ribéry did not choose to pass. He was still charging inwards, intending to directly launch an offensive.

Carvalho swore and was forced to come up and cover. The void behind him was handed over to his other teammates.

Ribéry still wanted to break through, but there was too little room for him to play in the penalty area. Carvalho calmly acted accordingly and drove the football out of the end line.

The Forest team got a corner kick.

“The Forest team has repeatedly launched attacks from their right flank, and they have managed to break through Ashley Cole twice in a row!”

Mourinho got up from his seat. He certainly saw that Twain wanted to focus his offense on Cole's side and he had no intention of replacing Cole yet. It was not certain that bringing on another player could help them withstand this continuous battering. His way of making up for this deficiency was to rely on the defensive support of the entire team.

"Terry!" He yelled from the sidelines. When Terry looked over, he pointed at Cole and said, "Go help over there!"

He did not need to state what he wanted any more clearly for the team captain, Terry, to know what to do. He directed the rear defensive line on the field to lean toward the left as a whole. The Forest team wanted to rush Ashley Cole with a yellow card on him. They must not let them succeed.

After Chelsea's defensive focus centered on Cole's side, the Forest team's offensive was thwarted. They were unable to penetrate several times and could only wander outside.

After van der Vaart took the ball again, he still faced Chelsea's heavily guarded left flank. He scanned the other flank which was empty.

Eh?

The Dutchman frowned. That guy, Leighton Baines was afraid of leaving the rear unguarded, so he stayed behind. But what about George? Did he not say that he would go to the left flank to assist if he needed to attack? Where was he now? There was no one to be seen!

While he distracted, Essien jabbed the football away from van der Vaart's feet!

Crap!

Van der Vaart wanted to turn around to snatch it back, but he was too late. Even so, he turned around and desperately gave chase.

He had only run two steps before he stopped, because Essien's ball was intercepted by George Wood. The two men competed with quick moves and the final winner was the physically stronger Wood. Essien pounced but Wood still managed to keep the football.

Van der Vaart came back to assist Wood who passed the ball to him.

"Where were you just now?" Van der Vaart asked him when he received the ball, "I was looking for you when I was cut off..."

"I was getting ready to run over." Wood replied succinctly. With that, he ran to the left flank.

Watching his back, van der Vaart shrugged helplessly and felt a little ill at ease.

Once again in the face of that crowded right flank, van der Vaart spied the middle, which looked risky. He could only pass it to the left flank, and he transferred the football over with a long pass.

In the moment of passing, there was still no sight of Wood in his line of vision.

Was he really going to show up there? After he sent the football out, van der Vaart thought with some regret.

“A long-range transfer, but there are no Forest players over there ... Ah, wait a second!”

A red figure flashed past the front of the television camera.

It was George Wood

He showed up precisely at the landing point of the football, but it was rather difficult to stop the football during this high-speed run. Not to mention that at that time the football was already close at hand and was still rather high.

Van der Vaart’s shot was a little wide. Should he let it go out of bounds?

There was no “abort” in Wood’s dictionary.

He leaped high during his sprint and stopped the football with his chest on the sidelines.

“He stopped the ball beautifully but...”

Makelele appeared in front of Wood.

A lot of people had not anticipated this encounter, including van der Vaart who passed the ball to Wood. He had thought that there was an open space. As long as Wood stopped the ball, it would not be a problem for him to adjust, pass, or dribble the ball however he liked. Anyway, no one would follow up for a while.

He did not think that Makelele was already waiting.

Mourinho leaned his body against the back of his chair. Twain’s adjustment was as what he anticipated. Now they’d see who was stronger, Makelele, who was an expert in defense or the half-baked offensive player.

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The football was stopped rather high. Makelele waited at the sidelines for it to fall down a little before he robbed the ball. Anyway, in order to stop the ball, Wood’s body had jumped outside, so he was not afraid.

Damn it, why is this football so high... Makelele looked up at the falling football. As van der Vaart kicked the ball too hard and in order not to let the ball go out of bounds, Wood also did not care if he employed the technique of using his chest to stop the ball. The ball was stopped, and it went straight up and down. The height was indeed a little outrageous.

The height was appropriate for...

Makelele was ready to jump up and head the ball out, but someone jumped one step ahead of him. A dark figure blocked out most of the sky above Makelele’s head.

He saw the face clearly ...

George Wood

This bastard, when did this kid come ... Makelele changed his mind at the last minute. He did not compete with Wood on the jump. He would box him out!

A twist of his body and he kept Wood out of bounds. He knew Wood wanted to head the football into the field. As long as he was stuck in the position, once he headed the football in, it would still belong to Chelsea. He was not worried about losing the control of the ball.

Wood jumped in the air and headed the football into the field. Makelele saw the ball fly in and let go of Wood to go after it. If he was still there blocking, then it would be a blocking foul ...

Trying to compete against Wood on speed, Twain smiled when he saw this scene off the field.

Robben would have been a better competitor!

Wood used a lot of power when he headed the ball. He knew Makelele was waiting for him down there. If his header was too light, he just had to take two steps before he would get the ball. Therefore, he headed it far enough but not enough for it to fall at the feet of those Chelsea players at the back and Makelele would not easily get to it too.

After he landed, Makelele had already run three paces away which was about three meters away.

George Wood seemed to be like a cheetah ready to strike behind his prey. With a low roar, his muscles exploded with power and shot out like an arrow.

Without turning his head back, Makelele instinctively felt the danger that was rapidly approaching behind him. He certainly knew that he would not get the upper hand if he competed on speed against Wood, but he could take advantage of his experience to box him out. As long as you're boxed out, you must slow down no matter how fast you are.

The football was still bouncing in front of the two men, attracting the two men to fight for its ownership.

Makelele moved sideways and blocked Wood's way forward. But before he could plant his feet, he felt a huge impact on his back, and he staggered after he was struck...

Wood knew from Makelele's running posture knew that he was going to block his position. If he was really boxed out, he had no other option other than to foul. He relied on his strong physical fitness and forced a change to the left to evade this route. He did not reduce his speed and continued to rush towards the football.

Despite that, his forward drive still approached Makelele.

In the football world, France's Makelele was different. He was not good in offense and was not strong. He was only 1.7 meters tall, but his ability to defend in the midfield could be ranked in the world's top three. His vast experience, excellent defensive skills, and accurate judgment were unique skills that made him unparalleled in the football world. With him in the midfield, there was an impenetrable iron gate that made the rear defensive line and goalkeeper feel at ease.

Chelsea being able to win two consecutive seasons in the Premier League had much to do with Makelele's relentless interceptions in the midfield. His presence greatly minimized the threat to Chelsea's rear defensive line.

But this time, this iron gate was cracked open.

Makelele's stumbling footsteps could no longer guarantee his balance. As he watched Wood overtake him, he threw his body to the side, intending to hinder Wood's forward footsteps.

As a result, everyone saw a strange scene. Makelele desperately held on to Wood's waist, but Wood did not stop. He dragged Makelele along as he continued to run forward, even though his speed was affected.

The referee put the whistle in his mouth as he hesitated about whether to blow or not. Was this situation considered an advantage?

Wood finally got the ball again and he did not care that he was still dragging Makelele along. He just swung his leg to directly shoot as he ran!

"Here we go again! George Wood — did the ball... did the ball go in?"

From the broadcaster's seat, the commentator saw the football thunder like an artillery shell toward Chelsea's goal. Čech threw his body to save it, but the net behind him still moved. He almost yelled "the ball went in again!" Luckily, his calmness at the critical moment did not make a fool out of him.

Čech laid on the ground and looked up at the net that had been set off by the football, which had fallen in front of the billboards. He felt like he had just narrowly escaped death.

The football did not enter the goal. Wood had missed the shot by about forty-five degrees. It startled the Chelsea people into a cold sweat.

When he saw the football hit the side of the net, Wood waved his hands in frustration. He turned to see Makelele lying on the ground, and the other man was also looking at him.

Is this kid a monster? Makelele glared at Wood, as if he was trying to see through him and penetrate his physical structure to see if the creature standing in front of him was human or something else.

Stamford Bridge was shocked by what had just taken place and was plunged into a brief silence. Nobody knew what to make of the attack. Were they supposed to boo or applaud?

Wood looked at Makelele but did not go up to pull the man up. He just turned and ran away.

Had it not been for that nuisance, he would have had an easier choice. Dragging the man caused him to choose to shoot in a hurry. He had wanted to pass the ball to his teammates as he knew his limitations in his shooting skills.

It was a failed attack because he did not score.

But who knew what kind of attack it would have appeared to be to the fans in the stands, on the pitch, and in front of the televisions??

Lost in thought, Dunn was suddenly roused by a pop. Next to him, Twain slapped his thighs and bared his teeth in a grin. "We can win!"

Chapter 528: We Can Win

Since George Wood started his career in professional football, he had given people the impression that he was excellent in defense and worthless when it came to offense. Before when everyone played against Nottingham Forest, they would not think about defending against George Wood. He almost never went up and crossed to the other half to participate in the offense. There had even been a football pundit who joked that Nottingham Forest “has twelve players in defense and only ten players when it comes to offense” to illustrate how little Wood contributed to the team’s offense.

However, three and a half seasons later, everyone discovered that the other half of the talent that resided within the body of the “genius in defense and rubbish at offense” was slowly awakening. His defensive performance in the game was more average, but the few times he participated in the offensive had been impressive.

How much more potential could be uncovered from this kid.

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“George Wood’s shot! It was a pity that there was no goal, but this attack embarrassed Makelele. We rarely see Makelele like this. He was completely at a disadvantage when he used his body to compete.”

Terry ran over to help, but he did not manage to make it in time. He was only on time to help Makelele up. “Do you need any help?” He had asked out of kindness but only made Makelele feel despised. He shook his head hard and said, “it won’t be like this next time, I promise.”

He had to admit that he underestimated Wood when he defended against him because his previous impression of the man had made him think that Wood would not be much of a threat.

He looked at Wood’s back and clenched his fists.

I’ll make sure to repay this humiliation by double!

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George Wood’s shot from the left flank did not make Chelsea adjust their defensive strategy. They still placed their heavy forces on Ashley Cole’s side. It seem they were deliberately permissive of George Wood.

The commentator tried to make a case for the arrangement, which, of course, were only the reasons he thought of. Some commentators liked to rely on their own understanding to form judgements on the game and use their own brains to replace the two managers. It seemed to be more professional than the managers in command of the games, which was quite able to deceive a part of the audience to support their views. If they guessed right, it was just luck. If they guessed wrong, then they made jokes to divert from the topic.

“Chelsea did not make any defensive adjustments on this side of Wood. That’s actually normal. Although Wood actively performed in the offense during the game, he is not a professional attacking player after all. His offensive is less threatening than Ribéry, Lennon, and the others. Chelsea can’t rush to adjust its defensive focus just because of his brief breakout performance. Ashley Cole’s side is obviously under more pressure...”

In fact, it had nothing to do with which side had the bigger threat. Chelsea did not adjust due to its trust in the veteran player, Makelele.

Makelele had faced a variety of offensive players in his career and many of them were world-class experts. He had a lot of experience and had weathered all sorts of challenges. He could handle George Wood.

Once van der Vaart had an inkling of the idea, he did not hesitate to transfer the football to the left flank this time. Compared with the last time, this time his passing, whether in terms of strength, speed, and accuracy, was just right. George Wood could stop the ball effortlessly.

Wood stopped it, but Makelele also came up.

Everyone expected Wood to make another relentless breakthrough but did not realize that Wood was in a precarious situation on the field.

The football was stopped at his feet, and Makelele stood less than three meters opposite him, standing in wait. He did not rush up to grab the ball, so he did not know what to do.

Similarly, as a defensive player, Wood could feel the oppressive power emitted by Makelele; the kind of oppression that came with the confidence he could stop him no matter which side he decided to break through.

From a professional standpoint, Makelele's position blocked very well. Furthermore, Wood was not good at thinking of his next move once he stopped the football.

He was better suited to the kind of work that kept the football moving, such as the successful breakthrough just now where he made his next move in an unconventional situation. He did not have to think too much and just followed his body's instinctive reaction.

Once he let his body stop and gave his brain a chance to think, his mind would jam.

What should he do?

Makelele quietly looked at this man in front of him and the ball at his feet. He did not try to poke the ball. He waited for Wood to make his move. Don't know what to do? Just as I thought, this boy has too little experience in offense. His stunning performance was just purely instinctive. I just need to box him out and he will not know what to do.

When van der Vaart did not see the appearance of another beautiful attack, he looked over at Wood in puzzlement.

There was clearly a void in the back. As long as he could break through, he could create another threat. Wood decided to force a breakthrough. In the last confrontation, he knew that his physical advantage was very obvious. Since he could do it the last time, he should be able to again this time.

Wood suddenly kicked the football forward and got ready to start. At the same time, Makelele quickly turned around and separated him from the football. Wood had not accelerated yet and just started before he knocked into Makelele's back. He tried to knock the Frenchman away, but instead of pushing him aside to clear the path, he pushed Makelele toward the football ahead.

Makelele took advantage of the momentum to catch up with the football and intercepted it.

The opposing defense had succeeded.

Wood was stunned for only a moment before he quickly counter-pressed. He pounced on Makelele.

Essien came up to get Makelele out of the bind, otherwise the ball that he just intercepted from Wood was likely to be robbed back by Wood. That would be more humiliating.

After the football was passed to Essien, Wood changed his target and turned around to pounce on Essien.

Makelele looked at his opponent's back and shook his head gently. Interesting guy, he switches roles so quickly after being tackled. He doesn't seem to be affected by the loss of the ball at all... Or is he ready to lose the ball at any time? Makelele suddenly wanted to laugh. It did look like the mind of a defensive player.

Although he was the enemy, Makelele liked the taciturn lad. Maybe it was because there were currently fewer players who specialized in defense and met standards.

On the pitch, they did not receive any attention but were indispensable players on every team. It was very paradoxical.

But boy, I know you're physically strong and fast. Defense is not a job that solely relies on the body to dominate.

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"The contest between Makelele and Wood..." murmured Twain off the field. "It must have been that bastard Mourinho's idea." He turned to look at the Chelsea technical area. Mourinho was staring intently at the field.

Mourinho was actually willing to use Makelele to mark George Wood. Twain did not anticipate that. He thought Makelele would follow van der Vaart all the time.

Now van der Vaart was followed by Essien, and George Wood was entangled with Makelele. The flank where he wanted to attack Ashley Cole was heavily guarded by Chelsea.

The game went into a deadlock again. The Forest team's offense did not pick up for a long time.

Twain quickly scanned the big screen with the game time on it. It was now the 68th minute of the game.

He decided to make a substitution.

There was no one on the substitutes' bench. The players were out warming up. Every once in a while, they were summoned by the assistant manager, Kerslake to warm up to make sure that they could play at any time when needed.

"Go get the little monkey," Twain ordered Dunn.

Soon, Gareth Bale ran back looking excited. When he saw Twain, he asked, "Chief, is it time for me to play?"

Twain nodded and took the tactical board from Dunn's hand. He pulled Bale to the sidelines.

"You go up there and support the offense. Do you see where Wood is now?" He asked, pointing to the field. Wood just taken the ball on the flank and Makelele had rushed up. This time, Wood did not choose to force a breakthrough but passed the ball to van der Vaart. This move was a bit desperate, as it was van der Vaart who had passed the football on him.

"I see." Bale nodded.

"Our offense on the right flank is blocked, and now Wood lacks support on the left flank. If you cover and run alongside from behind, Makelele will suffer."

Leighton Baines was stronger in defense than Bale, but what Twain needed now was offense and not defense. He wanted to take down Chelsea in this away game, and not just to be contented with a draw.

"If you must be firm when you run alongside to the back, you cannot hesitate. Otherwise Makelele won't be diverted. You just sprint ahead and don't think too much about defense during the attack. Don't think about what will happen if you lose the ball. Just remember, when you rush up, there's George Wood behind you."

When Twain said that, Bale laughed even more happily.

"All right. Get ready to play. Go and take this vest off."

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"Nottingham Forest makes a substitution; number 2 Gareth Bale replaces number 22 Leighton Baines."

The stadium broadcast announced the latest tweak that Nottingham Forest made.

Mourinho looked at Bale running onto the field. The figure evoked unpleasant memories for him. The play that made the kid famous was him scoring a winning free kick in the final moments of that game against his team.

Gareth Bale was a full-back who was stronger in offense than defense. The reason that Twain brought him on was obvious — to step up the offense.

Mourinho was not afraid of Twain stepping up the offense. On the contrary, he was afraid of Twain strengthening his defensive force and hunkering down, but as long as Twain planned to come out attacking, Chelsea would have a chance to score.

With twenty minutes left in the game, let's see who will score first!

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After Bale came on, the Forest team's left flank offense was boosted. Makelele immediately felt the pressure of two against one.

When he guarded Wood, Bale always rushed up from behind. Was he supposed to drop Wood or ignore Bale?

It was a dilemma.

When he decided to keep an eye on Wood, Wood passed the ball to Bale who plugged in from behind. Bale easily broke through after the pass. If it were not for Terry, van Nistelrooy would have headed the ball again.

Twain broke the initial balance on the field with this move. And if Chelsea did not adjust their defensive strategy, their right flank would be thrown into disarray.

Mourinho had to give up the idea of a heavy-handed defense on the left flank and restored the defensive line to its normal state. Now the best defense was not to put more efforts in the rear defensive line but to seize the time to launch more attacks. They had to use a strong offensive to push the Forest team formation back so as to play down the threats from the Forest team.

Just as Mourinho had previously thought, it was not about whose defense was more robust but whose offense was sharper in the final moments of the game.

“After Gareth Bale came on, he effectively strengthened the Forest team’s offense on the left flank. But there are disadvantages too. As a result, their defensive power is weaker. Wood needs to juggle between offense and defense and the two full-backs also have to frequently assist. I think the opportunity that Chelsea is waiting for has finally come.”

That was what the Chelsea players thought, too.

They stepped up their offense. Drogba, Shevchenko and Robben all got the chances to shoot. It was different from the first half. There was a lot of empty space in the Forest team’s defensive line that could be exploited. The defense around them was not as tight as it used to be.

Edwin van der Sar threw out the opponent’s threatening shots twice in a row and shouted anxiously to the teammates that pressed ahead. “Pay some attention to the defense! You must come back after you go up. If you can’t come back, then don’t press up!”

Twain certainly saw the situation. Chelsea’s offensive strategy was fierce in response to the Forest team’s adjustment.

He got up from the coaches’ area and walked to the sidelines to yell towards the field. “Chimbonda, go back to defend!” After Bale went up, it was risky to have just two full backs in defense. He wanted Chimbonda, who was stronger in defense, to run back and strengthen the defense to contain Chelsea’s attack.

“Wood! Go back to the middle!”

Now the formation of both sides had returned to normal. It was pointless to let Wood go to the left flank again since it would hinder the movements and areas of activity for Bale and Ribéry. It was a good choice to let him go back to stabilize the defense.

The Forest team’s difficulties were eased after the return of both Wood and Chimbonda to the defensive line. Chelsea was still constantly seeking an attacking opportunity and did not retreat just because the Forest team had stepped up its defensive power.

There was little game time left, and they were more anxious than Nottingham Forest. If they ended up with a score of 1:1 at home, it would be a big blow to their confidence for the second leg of the away game.

They had to win, even if it was just a score of 2:1.

George Wood's brief performance in the offense was over and he was back in the defense work that he did the best, which was to build a wall in front of the penalty box and in the middle of the field for his teammates in the rear.

The Chelsea offensive intensified, and the Forest formation was slowly pushed back. Soon the situation became like how the game had started: the Forest team playing their most handy defensive counterattack.

Twain did not yell on the sidelines. He just let them defend and counterattack. This was purely the players' decision which they made according to the situation on the field. It was like second nature. When the other side's attack was ferocious, they would unconsciously withdraw to lure the other side out. Then they would suddenly hit their opponent's back and settled the fight decisively.

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Mourinho brought off Ballack and brought on Joe Cole to boost their possession rate in the midfield. He could tell that everyone was currently in a hurry to attack and was playing with agitation. Impatient for results, they were not very effective. The midfield made too many mistakes, which only wasted time and opportunities.

Joe Cole could slow down the pace by taking more balls after he went up and his skills could also help Chelsea ease the way in the midfield again.

Hopefully, that was the case.

Joe Cole's first pass took the football straight out of the sidelines. The commentator defended him by stating that he had just been brought on, so he had not warmed up yet and was not quite comfortable with the atmosphere of the game. After all, the game had now entered the white-hot stage.

Everyone believed it. A minute later, Joe Cole took the ball but because he held on to it for too long and was tentative, he was knocked to the ground by George Wood. While he earned a free kick in the front field for Chelsea, he squandered a better chance.

"Joe Cole hasn't quite got into the game yet." The explanation was feeble.

Chelsea's free-kick was not good either. The pass was capped by Piqué after it got in. Wood managed to grab a header again in a scramble with Makelele, and he headed the football forward.

As the defensive set piece was at the back, there were not many Forest players in front at this time. There was only one player.

Van Nistelrooy came back to form the human wall because he was tall, and Eastwood received Wood's header.

“This is Nottingham Forest’s chance to fight back! But Eastwood lacks support without any teammates around him. He’s cutting across as he dribbles... Carvalho is close at his heels.”

Wood saw the situation and only hesitated a little before he ran forward.

After only taking two steps, he was overtaken.

Franck Ribéry and Gareth Bale seemed to be in a hundred-meter race. Both men frantically charged forward, tearing past Wood.

Wood looked at the two men’s backs and slowed down. But it was only for a moment. He changed his mind again and accelerated again to run after the two men.

“Four against three!”

Not counting the goalkeeper, Chelsea’s backfield had only three defenders. Nottingham Forest managed to put four players to attack in the shortest possible time. The situation was very bad for Chelsea.

Mourinho nervously stood up from his seat.

Carvalho did not know what was going on behind him. He just knew that he could not allow Eastwood to dribble. He continued to press on to push him into the corner flag area. This way, his attack would be considered unsuccessful.

“Watch for Wood!” Terry roared loudly.

George Wood’s active performance in the offense for this game had managed to attract a lot of attention to him. The Chelsea players wondered what kind of terrifying shot this monster was going to launch again.

When Eastwood dribbled the ball near the end line, he did a breakthrough feint. He swayed to open up a gap and he did not hesitate to pass!

It was not an easily seen aerial ball. Instead, it was a fast rolling ground ball!

Terry was getting ready to defend against George Wood. Everyone almost focused their attention on this eye-catching guy. Ribéry charged in from the side and scared all the Chelsea people out of their wits.

“Franck Ribéry... did not get it!” Ribéry swung his foot towards the football but did not manage to kick the football during his sprint, and the football escaped through his legs.

The commentator wanted to say that it was an amateur blunder, but he did not have the time to make such a lament before he saw a red figure appear on the path of the football behind the crowd at the back corner of the goal.

Čech had already fell to the ground because of Ribéry’s first shot. He had made a move to save, but the football had not come. Instead, the goal behind him was wide open.

It was Gareth Bale’s chance.

Bale kicked and the football hit the inside of his foot. It changed direction and easily flew into the goal in front of him.

This was his first Champions League goal.

“Nottingham Forest’s counterattack has finally paid off! Gareth Bale! Nottingham Forest now leads Chelsea by 2:1 in their away game!”

Twain took the lead and rushed out of the technical area with his arms raised in celebration. This was the crucial goal that could determine which team would make it to the Champions League final.

Chapter 529: Take Down the First Bout

The paramount state of defensive counterattack was to play for eighty-nine minutes and fifty seconds under pressure from the opponent, to be totally battered during this period, constantly facing danger, looked like the goal would be conceded at any time and completely at an overall disadvantage whether in terms of the situation or technical statistics. But...

The “but” was the essence of the defensive counterattack.

But one would not concede the goal. Then one would fight back in the last ten seconds and launch a sneak attack to set the score at 1:0. Victory was secured.

Therefore, the defensive counterattack was always linked with the “doctrine of 1:0” and “conservative play” and was considered to be the representative of ugly football. It was the main target of the fans’ hatred and critics’ disdain.

But Twain liked it. Because it could bring victory to him.

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“Gareth Bale! This was his first goal in the Champions League! And it came by so easily. He was not marked by anyone. He just had to set it up a little... and he did it!”

The little monkey, Gareth Bale had dreamt of the scenario countless times before he scored the goal: what would it be like for him to score a goal in an important game like the Champions League? He had also conceived his celebratory move after he scored the goal. He tried so many that he could not remember them all.

But after he scored the goal, he forgot the move he had prepared. He just knelt with open arms and looked up at the sky. The brilliant floodlights cast on him, surrounded by the night sky. There was only uproar and applause. At that moment, he was the main character on the stage.

A figure appeared in Bale’s vision while he looked up at the night sky. It was his teammate, Eastwood, who leaped high into the air and crushed him under his body without waiting for Bale to react.

“Wow.”

Soon after, more Forest players swarmed them and piled on top of the pair with them at the bottom. It was their favorite way to celebrate, whether it was to squash their teammates or coaches.

George Wood did not join in the fun. He stood outside the pile of people, clenched and pumped his fists.

The Forest team's substitutes' bench became a sea of joy, with everyone hugging each other. This score was indeed uplifting with the score of two away goals and leading Chelsea. The Forest team was in a good situation.

Contrary to the joyous atmosphere on this side of the Forest team, the Chelsea substitutes' bench and the coaches' area were silent. Mourinho bit his lower lip and closely watched the big screen, which was replaying the entire process of that goal from the Forest team.

George Wood's sudden insertion messed up Chelsea's defensive plans. Terry did not dare to ignore the man who had been active in this game, only to overlook another person.

Gareth Bale!

Mourinho furiously etched the name in his heart. He was truly the bane of his existence. The first goal of his career was scored against his team and his first goal in the Champions League was again entered in his team's goal... Damn it, Twain must have brought on this guy on purpose!

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"Nottingham Forest's young players are developing. The talent who were brought from all over to the youth team and then promoted from the youth team to the First Team by Tony Twain are now currently key forces in a game. George Wood, Gareth Bale, Piqué... We can expect even more from them in the future."

Little time was left for the game, and the commentator began to make concluding remarks. On the field, Chelsea launched a frenzied counterattack. The Forest team stayed parked in their endzone. With eleven players compacted within the thirty-meter area, they closed all the holes to block Chelsea's long shot.

The Nottingham Forest people off the field all stood and stood shoulder to shoulder on the sidelines to begin the countdown for the game.

Twain was squeezed in between Dunn and Kerslake. He glanced next door at Mourinho, who sat motionless on the bench. He could not see his face clearly, and had no way of knowing what his expression was... it had to be great?

Next to him, Kerslake had already eagerly raised his arms to celebrate their victory. Around him, a few people also acted the same as him.

Although the Forest team looked battered on the field, people were not worried because they had seen many such scenes.

The referee blew the whistle at full-time conclusively after Shevchenko missed his shot.

At this moment, the Stamford Bridge stadium were filled with the cheers of the visitor fans, but soon the cheers were drowned out by the boos from the Chelsea fans, who would not tolerate their opponent celebrating their victory on their territory.

They won and yet wanted to twist the knife? No way!

“Nottingham Forest won the first bout and it was a precious away victory! Although it’s quite normal for either team to win, as both are a similar strength, it is still amazing to see the Forest team take down Chelsea in this away game. Mourinho continues his embarrassing record of being unable to defeat. In the contest between the two managers, Twain wins one round, but whether he can win in the end depends on the second leg at Nottingham’s City Grounds stadium.”

The people around him ran up to celebrate, and Twain turned around to walk toward the Chelsea technical area.

The handshake after a game was custom. And he wanted to get a closer look at Mourinho’s expression.

Mourinho knew that Twain was not being gracious by walking over. He knew exactly what the other party wanted to do, and he would not give Twain this chance.

Twain grinned at Mourinho as he walked towards him. Halfway through, he discovered that Mourinho had turned around to head straight to the players’ tunnel.

The smile froze on his face.

He had once given other people attitude. He did not expect to be treated the same by other people.

His outstretched hand awkwardly scratched his head and Twain shrugged before he turned back to the field.

“Little Monkey, you did a good job!” He said loudly at the incoming Bale with a smile. His mood lightened up again.

Suit yourself if you don’t want to shake hands. By all means, don’t let me see your expression. I’ve won!

Bale heard Twain’s shout and stopped to smile at Twain. He did not know what to say.

Twain noticed that his stomach looked big. “What is this?” He asked as he pointed to Bale’s rounded belly.

“Heheh... the football, chief.” Bale carefully pulled the football out of his jersey and said, “the ball that I shot in. I grabbed it; I want to keep it. This was my first goal in the Champions League. I just saw the referee looking for it... Don’t tell them, chief!”

Twain nodded. “Very well, I won’t say a thing. Just bring it to the locker room and hide it quickly!”

Bale ran past Twain to the tunnel but was surrounded halfway by a swarm of reporters who had to interview him. Looking at Bale’s self-conscious expression, Twain laughed.

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Although he lost the game, Makelele still approached George Wood, hoping to swap jerseys with him.

“I’ve heard some things about you. Heard that you never accept the suggestion of swapping jerseys after you’ve lost the game.” Makelele stood in front of Wood as he spoke in clumsy English.

Wood nodded.

Makelele took off his jersey and handed it to Wood. "You won today and may not necessarily win the next time."

Wood also took off his jersey and exchanged jerseys with Makelele.

He thought that was the end of it, but when he got ready to turn and go, he was stopped by Makelele, who said something in French to Wood, who did not understand.

Wood blankly watched Makelele turn and leave until Ribéry suddenly appeared beside him.

"He said that defense isn't just dependent on the body," Ribéry translated for Wood. When he saw Wood frown, Ribéry patted him on the shoulder to reassure him. "He must be frustrated that he lost to you in the physical confrontation and that's why he said that, George. Come on, let's celebrate the victory with everyone!"

Wood was dragged to the middle of the crowd by Ribéry.

Makelele had walked to the mixed zone, with Wood's number 13 red jersey over his bare shoulders. It stood out in the crowd.

"Well, this is that guy's jersey." Makelele nodded when he was asked by a reporter and added, "he's very good but still inexperienced."

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Instead of celebrating the victory on the field like everyone else, Twain went straight to the press conference venue. It was empty, and he sat on the platform, waiting for the reporters in the mixed zone to finish the interviews.

Because there was no one, Twain put his feet up on the table and leaned against the back of the chair. He tilted the chair back, the full weight of his body only supported by two thin legs of the chair. There was no one there so he could relax.

A rattle came from the side entrance. He turned his head to look and found that Mourinho pushing the door open.

Mourinho looked up and saw him and the two of them met gazes.

Crash!

The two slender chair legs finally could not support Twain's full weight. Tilted to a side, the unprepared Twain was thrown out of his chair, and his head hit a sponsor's sign behind him.

When he saw this comical scene, Mourinho could not help but laugh.

Twain grimaced in pain and climbed up from the ground. He was a little mortified when he saw Mourinho still laughing.

"You're in a good mood, Mr. Mourinho," Twain said with some embarrassment as he picked up the fallen chair, only to find that the legs of the chair had buckled. He could not tell if it was completely broken or not.

After trying unsuccessfully to straighten the legs of the chair, Twain stood up and scanned the room. The reporters' seats were the same as the coaches' seats. They were identical blue chairs with backs.

Looking at this chair with the crooked legs in his hands, Twain stepped down from the platform and simply pulled out an intact chair from the press gallery and switched them.

He carefully put down the damaged chair in a row of seats and took a few steps to scrutinize it. When he saw that the flaw could not be discerned, he was satisfied and walked back to the platform

When he first saw Twain, Mourinho was going to turn around and leave, but now he stood on the side and watched Twain with interest.

After Twain had finished, he realized that Mourinho was still there. He was a little surprised and asked, "you didn't leave?"

"Why should I go? Is this your house?" Mourinho came over and sat in his own seat.

The two men sat side by side, waiting for the reporters to arrive.

"Didn't you run away when you saw me just now? I was going to shake your hand after the game, Mr. Mourinho. Leaving the field without shaking hands after the game was a very ungracious thing to do," Twain said, looking at the empty seats in front of him.

"It's more gracious than giving a silver medal to someone else after the final." Mourinho did back down and spoke as he looked ahead as well.

The two men were clearly engaged in a dialogue, but deliberately chose not to look at each other.

"I'm sorry to beat you at your home ground, Mr. Mourinho." Twain sprinkled salt in Mourinho's wound.

Mourinho did not even crease his brow and said, "No need for apologies, Mr. Twain. It will be my turn to beat you at your home ground in the next round."

"Don't say it with such confidence, Mr. Mourinho. Otherwise, it will be so hard to watch when it doesn't happen. You see, I never said we will be able to advance to the final, although it is the case."

Mourinho grunted. He did not want to talk to the thick-skinned fellow.

While the two men bickered, the reporters arrived at the press conference from the mixed zone in succession. The two men stopped talking and observed which unlucky bastard would end up sitting on the special chair in the middle.

Strangely, many reporters walked past the front of that chair, and someone even hesitated, intending to sit down. But in the end, no one stepped into the trap. It was a bit disappointing for Twain.

When the host saw that most people had arrived, he announced the start of the press conference. That was when the door was pushed open again and a fat reporter barged in, covered in perspiration. Twain glanced at his media pass, which had a striking "The Sun" on it.

He's from The Sun. That's awesome.

When they saw him barge in, Mourinho and Twain both turned their eyes toward the empty seat in the middle.

"I'm sorry," the reporter apologized as he laboriously squeezed through the crowd to the empty seat. Everyone who had been seated had to get up again to make way for him, otherwise he would not be able to squeeze through. He was too fat.

Mourinho raised his eyebrows, and Twain pretended to look serious.

Finally, after some difficulty, the reporter finally squeezed in. He wiped the sweat on his forehead, and then sat down right down.

Mourinho narrowed his eyes, and Twain whistled.

Crash!

The fat man looked up guiltily at everyone. He became everyone's focus.

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"Hahahaha!"

On the bus back to Nottingham, Twain recounted this scene at the press conference to the players and everyone laughed heartily.

They had good reason to be so relaxed. The away win over their old rival, Chelsea, had convinced this group of people that the team which would eventually advance to the final this season must be them and no one else.

"Have a good rest, guys. Once you alight from the bus, you won't have time to relax." Twain stood at the front of the bus. "There are still five rounds left in this season. We have little hope for the league title, but we must make sure that we qualify for the next season's Champions League. We cannot relax until this is confirmed. Then there is the Champions League. We're now at the most critical juncture. The away win over Chelsea does not mean that we will definitely go to Athens, but our hopes are greater than theirs. I don't want to see a conceited Forest team that underestimates its enemy in one week. Do you remember what I said? We don't have the right to relax until we have won the Champions League title. The closer we get to the end, the more we have to brace ourselves. When we get closest to the victory, the tragedy should happen to our opponent, and definitely not us!"

"Yes!!" Everyone replied loudly in the bus compartment.

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At London's Heathrow Airport, a slightly plump and gray-haired middle-aged man waited to board the flight in the departure hall. He was on the phone.

"Yes, I just watched the game. I can't say for sure. This was only the first leg. Just put together the information on both teams. No matter which team it's going to be, it will us who wins in the end. Istanbul will not happen again."

Ending the call, this man leaned back on his chair and closed his eyes. His mind was occupied with the semi-final game that had just ended.

He had initially been optimistic about Chelsea, who had played at home. However, oddly enough, Nottingham Forest was the most impressive one when he closed his eyes now.

Defensive counterattack?

That would be fantastic. AC Milan had enough experience to deal with a team that defended to the end. Playing defense in front of the Italians? Tony Twain, if you're lucky enough to make it to the finals, AC Milan will show what real defense is.

Chapter 530: Pepe's Worry

After they beat Chelsea, Tony Twain and his team were once again on the front page. They received such treatment after every win, which Twain was already used to.

Reporters gathered outside the Wilford training base in hopes of interviewing a certain player, or Twain himself. This time, Twain did not issue a media blackout for his players but it was not easy for reporters to interview him in person. Except for the regular press conference, he would not speak a word in front of the media.

By all accounts, he should be in a very good mood after he won against Chelsea. However, Twain seemed to give off a feeling of being in a bad mood.

Why?

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"An injury now disrupts our game." In his office, Twain smacked the report given to him by the team's medical unit. "It has been confirmed that Ashley Young will need to take a break from playing for at least two weeks and is definitely going to miss the second leg of the game against Chelsea. I had initially thought that Pepe could make it to the most crucial game. Now the team doctor informed me that they can't guarantee Pepe's health... The condition of the Brazilian's injuries is complicated."

Ashley Young's injury was confirmed a day after the game and the doctors carried out a detailed checkup of his injured leg. The good news was that his injury was not serious and did not require him completely leave the season. The bad news was that he could not make it to the second round against Chelsea.

On the other hand, Pepe, who was injured in January, had since recovered and returned to training. His operation went well, but he could only do basic strength exercises alone in the gym for now. It was impossible for him to practice with the entire team without permission from the team doctor.

There were a lot of hidden dangers in constant reliance on the two players, Kompany and Piqué to prop up the middle defensive line. The goal concede to Chelsea was due to this reason. Twain did not believe luck would always take care of him. If a fatal error happened in the final, it would be too late for any regrets.

“But didn’t Fleming say that it is fine for him to play...” Kerslake said.

“That’s going to risk him getting hurt again soon. It will become a chronic injury and a ticking time bomb every season. I don’t want to gamble Pepe’s future.” Twain shook his head.

“But we’re in a good shape this season and I also think it’s our best chance to win the title...If it’s caused by a problem in the rear defensive line...” Kerslake did not continue as he realized that it sounded a bit ominous to state it out loud.

Twain kept quiet. He felt conflicted on the inside.

Pepe’s injury tended to be rigid and his physical condition was not at his best. If he was allowed to play in the second leg against Chelsea, no one could guarantee that he would be well enough to be able to play for ninety minutes. If he got hurt again, the Forest team would not just lose a player.

On the other hand, this season was a great opportunity for the Forest team. With the exception of the middling EFL Cup title, Twain had not yet won a heavyweight trophy despite being a manager for four years. Although a successful manager was always in the minority and not every manager could get a championship trophy, Twain did not want to be a failure. He did not want to be part of the masses. He was unique.

If Pepe could play, it would add enough stability to the Forest team’s rear defensive line. Twain was still not very confident in Kompany for a crucial match. He was still too young.

As he lowered his head to look at the report in his hand, Twain knitted his brows.

The joy of the win over Chelsea soon dissipated and worries came.

“Continue to observe and we’ll talk again later.” He sighed.

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The empty gym had only the sound of collisions from the equipment. Pepe was building strength in his leg muscle. He lifted and lowered his legs as he stared out the window at the training ground.

Training appeared to be over, since his teammates were making their way to the locker room one after the other.

He felt that his body had no problems, but the team doctor did not allow him to play and train on the field. He did his tedious rehabilitation training in this gym day after day, instead.

He had not been allowed to touch a football since he had been injured in the game against Reading in January. The surgery and postoperative recovery took almost five months and he still did not know when he could return to the field. He had had enough.

He once went to the team doctor, Fleming, and asked him when he could train and play on the field again, only to have Fleming tell him that Manager Tony Twain had to give his assent before he could be cleared.

All questions were directed to Twain, which made things simple.

After everyone had left the training ground, Pepe finally stopped his mechanical movements. He decided to go look for the boss and have a good talk about his injury.

Everyone worked hard on the idea of a Champions League title, and he did not want to be a spectator at a time like that.

If the team did win the Champions League in the end, would he take the stage in a suit to accept the gold medal? In that case, he might learn from the boss and throw the gold medal directly to the fans.

Pepe had just gotten up when he saw the door of the gym being pushed open.

Wood walked in bare-chested.

Wood was a little surprised to see Pepe.

“Your training time shouldn’t be so long.”

Pepe interrupted him. “You can practice extra. Why can’t I?”

“But you’re hurt...”

“I’ve been fine for a long time!” Pepe got a little agitated. “Look.” He sat down again and continued to repeat the mechanical movements he had been doing. His knees bore a huge weight, driving his calves to move up and down.

Wood watched quietly until Pepe stopped.

When he saw that Pepe was taking big gulps of air in the chair, Wood walked over and sat on the equipment next to him.

“I went to Fleming and he said the boss has the final say in whether I’ll be able to train and compete. There are only a few games left this season. When I was first injured, I agreed to the operation because I heard them say that I could make it to the final showdown. Now, after the operation was successful, they still will not allow me train and play. How can this happen?” Pepe muttered.

Wood set the weight before he began his own strength-building practice.

For a while, the gym only rang with banging sounds from the equipment. Pepe sat there, gasping, and Wood did not speak.

After a while, Wood stopped his exercise and looked at Pepe. “Are you going to find the boss?”

Pepe nodded.

“If you don’t go now, he’ll go home.” Wood reminded.

Pepe hurriedly got up. Just as he was about to run out, Wood stopped him again and asked, “can you catch the finals?”

Pepe stared blankly for a moment and then realized that he meant the Champions League final. He shook his head and said, “it’s up to the boss.”

“Do you want to?”

“No one wants to miss the final.” Pepe said firmly.

Wood nodded. “Go on then. Catch him before it’s too late.”

Pepe ran past Wood and out the door as the sound of a continuous clatter came behind him.

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Wood’s reminder was timely. Twain and Dunn had just exited the office when they saw the breathless Pepe came running.

“Haven’t you gone back yet, Pepe?” Twain was a little surprised.

“Can I have a word with you, boss?” Pepe looked at Twain.

Twain turned his head to look at Dunn.

“I’ll head back first.” Dunn tactfully took leave of them.

When Dunn left, Twain reopened the door of the office and invited Pepe in.

“I think I can guess what you’re here for.” After he asked Pepe to sit down on the couch, Twain sat on the edge of the table. He looked at his player and said, “coincidentally, we had a discussion about your matter this morning too. I know you want to play, and I’d love you to play soon. But the situation is not so simple. The team doctor told me that your body is not quite ready.”

“But I feel completely fine, boss.” Pepe reasoned. “How can I not know about my own body?”

Twain smiled. “That may not be the case, Pepe. The last thing that humans know the best is their own bodies. Please believe that I feel the same way as you do. We all want you to play as soon as possible. After all, this is a critical moment for us. We need your ability to defend and attack.”

Pepe regarded Twain, who also looked back at Pepe. Pepe wanted to see the honesty in Twain’s eyes, which he saw.

Twain told the truth. He indeed wanted Pepe to recover sooner than anyone else. It was just that he could not express the slightest bit of his thinking in public. Otherwise it would make Kompany feel like he was not getting the respect he deserved.

“I went to ask Fleming and he said I need to come to you. And that we have to listen to you whether or not I can train and play, boss.”

Twain nodded in admission to this point. “That’s right. I have the final say here whether a player can play or not. The team doctors can only provide the advice for reference. But I want you to know, Pepe, that I don’t want to ruin your career with haste because we want instant results. You’re at a vital moment now, and we can’t rush.”

“But I don’t want to miss the Champions League finals due to my injury, boss.” Pepe’s attitude was also firm.

“No one wants to, Pepe. I don’t want what happened to Wood to happen to any of you again. So, I can’t make light of the decision to let you play just to be on the safe side. What if you play without careful consideration and get hurt again?”

“But the semi-finals game is also key...”

Twain smiled. “You’re worried. There’s nothing to worry about. It has to be us, Nottingham Forest and not Chelsea, that goes to Athens. Did you watch the first leg of the game?”

Pepe nodded. “I watched it at home.”

“With everyone performing so well, how can it be us that will be eliminated in the end? I told them not to stop until we have the Champions League title. And now I have to add another thing—we’re not going to stop until everyone’s here. Whether it’s you, Ashley Young, or Paul Gerrard, we’re not going to stop until everyone returns to the team. Nottingham Forest is a complete unit and a team. Of course, we have to go to Athens as a complete team to pick up the championship trophy. Everyone in the entire team certainly has to reach their hands out and not one person missing. So, don’t think about this matter and rest assured that your surgery and four months of postoperative recovery treatment will not be in vain.”

What else could Pepe say?

“From tomorrow on, you can train with the team.” Twain added. This was what Pepe wanted to hear the most. He had long been tired of being alone in the gym.

Pepe finally smiled.

“But I want to remind you, don’t hurt yourself during the training.”

Pepe nodded. “I know, boss.”

“Go back. Take care and rest up.”

“Bye, boss.”

With the good news, Pepe left happily. Twain locked up his office and slowly made his way out.

At the gate, he ran into George Wood, who had just walked after he showered and changed.

Twain was used to Wood’s habit of doing extra practice after the training. He used to be worried that Wood’s body would not be able to endure it and forbade him from the additional practice. Later he found that the kid was a monster from outer space. Extra practice had no adverse effects on his body, so he let him be.

“Hey, George, let’s go home together.” Twain beckoned to Wood as he stood at the gate waiting for him.

Wood came up and asked, “Did he find you?”

“Yes, he wants to play very badly, but I told him he still can’t right now.”

When he heard Twain said that, Wood was silent for a moment, and then asked, "When can he play then?"

"The finals." Twain smiled.

The two men walked side by side, and Twain suddenly remembered one thing. He turned his head and asked, "George, how many yellow cards do you have on you?"

"Two cards away from automatic suspension." said Wood.

Twain thought about it. He's two cards away with one game left. If Wood gets another yellow card in the second leg, it doesn't affect too much. But if he gets two... then it doesn't matter how many he had before. It will definitely be a red card.

"Well... Be more careful." Twain could not help but lament in his heart at how nice it would be if Wood had a qualified replacement.

"I know, I'll pay attention."

The two men walked out of Wilford Lane in silence. Wood would walk north and Twain to the south, so they would part ways there.

"George, how's your mother doing?" Twain asked suddenly.

Wood nodded. "Very good."

"I haven't seen her in a while..."

"She knows you're very busy, so she didn't ask me to call you."

Twain rubbed his nose. He was not so busy that he did not even have time to visit. "Once this season ends, I'll take Shania with me to see her."

Wood opened his mouth and eventually nodded instead. "I'll tell her."

"Goodbye, George. Go rest."

"Bye, chief."

After he waved to Wood, Twain stood alone at Wilford Lane in the sunset, looking up towards the west to admire the orange clouds of the setting sun as it turned to dusk. Then he slowly walked home.