

Champions 541

Chapter 541: Twain's Revenge

If we don't win, I'll jump into the sea!

This phrase became a headline in almost all of England's media in the sports edition in the days that followed, and even made front page headlines in certain media outlets. Such feverish hype of this topic in the English media was actually a backlash against the Italian media's previous provocations.

At first when the photograph was published in the Italian media, Dunn did tell the truth in an interview, which was not as the Italians had perceived. However, the Italians opted to turn a deaf ear to it. They chose to make an issue out of this photograph to deliberately make things difficult for Nottingham Forest.

It was a psychological warfare before the big game, but as the parties involved in the warfare, Nottingham Forest and Twain were both very annoyed by this behavior.

The one thing that Twain hated the most in his life was to be insulted by the other people in this way.

As a retaliation, he made a phone call to Pierce Brosnan the day after the photograph was published in the newspapers and told him to print the remark.

As expected, after the one-sentence "interview" came out, it caused an uproar in England and Italy. The other countries joined in to watch a good show and in turn spread this topic around.

The matter was not over yet.

When they first saw the article, some Italians said that it was just the loud-mouthed Twain bragging again. Everyone was used to him making vain promises.

A day later, the BBC television broadcast station announced that they had just signed an agreement with Tony Twain.

According to what Twain had stated before, if his team lost in the Champions League final to AC Milan and the Champions League title, he would jump into the sea. This agreement was based on that situation. The television rights of this exclusive live coverage of his jump was sold to the BBC television station. This agreement would come into effect automatically after the final game and once the Forest team was confirmed as the loser. If the Forest team won, then BBC would receive exclusive rights to broadcast the grand celebration in Nottingham city.

At the same time, exactly the same as the agreement, Twain sold the rights for the live webcast of his jump to the famous online video streaming site, YouTube. The right to report on printed medium was sold to three parties, Nottingham's local media, Nottingham Evening Post, and the supermarket tabloid, The Sun, which had a wide influence in the UK, across Europe and around the world. The third party was China's Titan Sports, for which Tang Jing had used tremendous effort to wrangle it from the other Chinese media.

After the news of these various signings was revealed at the same time, it was undoubtedly a series of bombardments thrown at the Italians. The Italians, who had previously mocked Twain's bragging, were all silent.

As the first football manager to promise to jump into the sea upon his defeat and sell the rights to the entire process of his jump, Tony Twain became famous around the world.

"He [Tony Twain] must be crazy..." After a brief collective loss of voice, Italy's *Corriere dello Sport – Stadio* was the first in Italy to speak against this matter.

"We are watching a comedy production from Hollywood, and the Italians did not think that Tony Twain would go to such extremes. After news broke that he sold the broadcast rights of his jump, we saw the entire Italian media collectively lose their voices..." BBC's *Sunday Match of the Day* said.

"This is very much in line with Twain's personality. He is always doing something to shock us. We really do not ever know what he's thinking. He always comes up with so many strange things to attract attention. It's a shame he's not in the entertainment industry. He's better at showbiz than those entertainment stars." This passage came from the blog of a famous football pundit on a famous Chinese website.

For a moment, the entire world was talking about it. Not everyone was concerned with football itself, the league tournament, or even the Champions League final. The Times had even published a special commentary on this matter, which was very representative:

"Compared to the suspense around the finals and the winner itself, everyone is more concerned about whether Tony Twain will jump or not and how he will make that jump. I think there's going to be even a lot of people who want to see Tony Twain leap into the Aegean Sea and will bet on the Forest team's defeat with the bookmakers. Of course, I'll admit that I'm one of those people..."

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The man most hated by Twain sat in front of him with his legs crossed and held a glass of red wine as he squinted at him.

Several documents were scattered on the coffee table between the two men, all of which were the contracts with the media outlets.

"I have no problem with the others. Why did you look for *The Sun*?" Twain stared at Billy Wox, sitting across from him.

"They gave the highest offer and are the best at this kind of thing. Didn't you say you wanted to maximize the impact? I can't think of any other print medium that is better suited to this kind of thing than *The Sun*." Wox sipped his wine and spoke slowly to Twain.

"Of course I know that. I'm fine with anyone but *The Sun*." said Twain with a stiff face.

Wox shrugged. "I don't think you should take that tone with someone who comes to help, Mr. Twain."

"I didn't ask you to help..."

Twain had spoken halfway when he saw Woox pointed behind him. "I certainly can't refuse the lovely Shania's request. But are you going to complain that Shania shouldn't have come to me?"

Shania's sullen voice came from behind Twain. "You asked me to go to Mr. Fasal, but he's so busy recently that I went to Mr. Woox. I'm sorry to have found someone you don't like, Uncle Tony."

The words were an apology, but he could not hear the apologetic tone. Twain hurriedly got up and waved his hands at Shania, who was making him coffee. "Ah, that's not what I meant..."

This was a real headache. Why did Woox and Shania have that kind of relationship?

The two of them coordinated with each other, so he could only concede to his bad luck. He softened his tone. "All right, how should I thank you, Mr. Woox?"

Billy Woox put his hand over his heart and acted like he was overwhelmed by the sudden favor, "Ah! It is rare to hear Mr. Twain speak to me in such a gentle manner. Am I dreaming?"

Twain cleared his throat awkwardly before the other man finally gave it a rest.

"Why don't we talk about George's contract, Mr. Twain?" Woox said with a giggle.

"I would rather tear up these contracts." replied Twain, with a straight face.

"Gee, I'm just kidding. Why so serious?" Woox shrugged and was helpless at Twain's insensitivity. "Just take it that you owe me a favor, Mr. Twain. I'll find a way for you to repay it in the future when needed."

"As long as it's not George's contract, I'd be happy to."

Twain did not say the words just for show. When the photograph came out, he was so furious that he tore all the newspapers to shreds in his own home. Then he plotted in his mind how to deal the Italians the most effective counterattack. After much deliberation, he thought of what he said to Pierce Brosnan the day he called — If we don't win, I'll jump into the Aegean Sea!

A thought popped in his head and everyone saw what happened next. It was his idea to contact the media, but he had just wanted to tell the media that he would jump into the sea if he lost and to invite them to be the witnesses.

As a result, Shania said it was a good opportunity and that they should make better use of it when she heard. She proposed to take apart the coverage from the various media platforms and sell them separately. They could make money and the publicity would also be more sensational and effective than simply an announcement to the media. It would be a better way to retaliate against the Italian media.

Twain accepted the suggestion. However, he was not good at contacting and negotiating with the media, so Shania volunteered her own agent, Fasal. Who knew Fasal would be busy? Therefore, Shania had to go to Woox. She was aware of the feud between Twain and Woox, but perhaps because she had a lot of respect for Mr. Woox, she had hoped that Uncle Tony could dispel his former enmity against Woox. So, she had asked Woox help.

She had thought that Woox would refuse at first and had prepared a lot of arguments for it. She did not expect Woox to listen intently and nod his assent without hesitation. It went so smoothly that Shania was very surprised.

With Woox's connections and power, the matter was carried out impeccably. Woox even made a very detailed arrangement for the release timing of the signings. As a result, when the news was released by the media one after another, Twain saw what he most wanted to see — the Italian media was so gobsmacked that they collectively lost their voice.

This relieved his anger, but if he wanted to vent even more, he needed to work harder.

If he could not defeat AC Milan in finals, he would have to jump in the sea. This was not something to be taken lightly. He would be reduced to a laughingstock and would be mentioned for years to come.

And if he could defeated AC Milan, he could return the fury he received a hundredfold. At that time, no one would dare to defy no matter how much he humiliated the Italian media. Because the victor always had the right to speak.

Woox put the glass down and stood up. He was going to leave.

He held out his hand to Twain. "I did everything I could. Mr. Twain, I don't want the club that my own player plays for to be a joke in whole of Europe. So, it's up to you now. If you can't win, everything you've asked me to do these last few days will be the grave you dug for yourself."

Woox rarely spoke to him in such a serious tone. Out of gratitude for his help, Twain reached out to clasp his hand with Woox. "I have to correct you a little, Mr. Woox. I never dig my own grave. I only dig the ones that my enemies order. I don't do anything in vain."

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Nottingham Forest got the entry to the Champions League final and was just one step away from Twain's goal for the season. Everyone was excited, but Twain had to get his men to calm down for a while.

The 37th round of the league tournament was on May 5th.

Three games were scheduled for the same day. Manchester United and Manchester City's "Manchester derby" was the first to be unveiled. After that was Chelsea's "London derby" with Arsenal. Then Nottingham Forest's away challenge against Aston Villa would kick off as that game drew to a close.

Many said that the outcomes of the three games would have a direct impact on the ownership of the league title for the season.

However, Twain did not place much importance to this round of the league tournament. He had already made up his mind to have a big rotation in this away game against Aston Villa — most of the players from the lineup in the Champions League semi-final game would not be in the game's starting lineup again.

Since he did not intend to compete for the illusory league title, and their third place was in a secure position, Twain would not allow his players to risk injury and play in the game. He would just take the opportunity to let the other players to practice.

With five hours to go until the game, Twain released his starting lineup list, which he rarely did. This time, it looked like he really relaxed for this game.

The goalkeeper of the Forest team remained as Edwin van der Sar, who was the immovable mainstay. Twain was actually keen to rotate, but Akinfeev, who had been bought before the season, was on loan back to CSKA Moscow and could not be recalled. Paul Gerrard's recovery after his surgery was far from ideal. The experts had told Twain that Paul was likely to end his career early as a result.

This was not good news, but Twain had not given up yet. As he said, when he went to Athens, no one would be left behind in the Forest team. He was still waiting for Paul to return even though there was not much time.

The center-back was Wes Morgan and Ayala's partner. The left-back was changed to Gareth Bale and the right-back was Sun Jihai. George Wood would still start in this game. In any case, Twain was still a little cautious. He had allowed rotation, but it was not the same as conceding.

Arteta and van der Vaart did not appear on the starting list. Instead it was Albertini, who had not appeared in the team's starting lineup in a long time and was only three games away before retiring. Twain wanted the Italian veteran to regain his competition form because he had said he was going to give Albertini the best farewell game, meaning Albertini would definitely play in the Champions League final. If he was being brought off due to bad form, it would not be good for anyone.

In the two flanks, Petrov replaced Ribéry on the left flank and Lennon continued to be in the starting lineup on the right flank due to Ashley Young's injury. The strikers were Bendtner and Anelka.

In the final stages of the season, Anelka had been given frequent opportunities to play, which some people could not understand. In fact, it was very simple. Because the Forest team wanted to sell him, they needed let him to perform more. This way, the Forest team would have more clout to ask for more money from the other clubs in the transfer market.

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On May 5th, Manchester United challenged its nemesis, Manchester City in same city in a closely watched away game. Twain and Mourinho definitely watched the entire game. Mourinho was keen for Manchester United to lose. Unfortunately, the final result let him down.

Manchester United obtained three points in the away game after much difficulty. The score of 1:0 could clear up a lot of issues, but regardless of how bad the situation was, the three points that were obtained were real. At the press conference after the game, Ferguson laughed until his face was redder than usual.

The recent frustration and pain of being eliminated from the Champions League had been washed away with this game. There was nothing more enjoyable than wiping out a nemesis in the same city within the season. With regard to 'a derby in the same city', there was a common and interesting phenomenon in European football which was that the fans could accept losing the heavyweight titles such as the league title and Champions League title and even forgive if they did not accomplish anything in a season, as long as the team they supported could defeat the same city's nemesis in the same city derby.

It was not just a win over Manchester City that made Ferguson so happy. It was normal for him to defeat Manchester City, so he did not need to be so happy as it would give the wrong impression that it was not easy for Manchester United to beat Manchester City, so Ferguson was so excited.

Another important reason was that he had scored a key victory at a crucial time in his league title battle against Chelsea and continued to maintain a two-point lead over Chelsea. That way, he had put pressure on Chelsea again. If Chelsea was crushed by the pressure in the next game and uncharacteristically lost the game, there was only a fine line between Manchester United and the league title.

Later, in London, Chelsea's key battle with Arsenal was officially launched.

The game was quite intense and both sides had their own reasons to strive in the fight.

Wenger certainly did not drive the team to go all out for a meaningless reason of helping Manchester United block Chelsea. He was vying with Liverpool for the fourth seat in the league and Liverpool was only one point ahead of Arsenal. Liverpool's game kicked off an hour earlier than Arsenal's. When Wenger's team set foot on the field, the score was still 0:0. If the score remained until halftime, Arsenal would overtake Liverpool to become the fourth in the league as long as they beat Chelsea, thus winning a spot to the Champions League

And not to mention on Chelsea's side that if they could not win the game, they would trail further behind Manchester United's home stretch. That was not what Mourinho wanted to see.

It was just ten minutes into the game on this side when news came from Fulham, south west of London — Fulham had scored!

Fulham had led 1:0 at home against Liverpool!

This news gave Arsenal a shot in the arm and they put more pressure on Chelsea.

Thirty-three minutes later, the goal guarded by Čech was finally lost after they were unable to withstand Arsenal's waves of attacks. Gilberto Silva scored a goal for Arsenal and Arsenal led 1:0!

While Arsenal was leading, Nottingham Forest warmed up at Aston Villa's Villa Park stadium. When Twain heard the news in the locker room, the first thing he said when the players came back was —

"I've changed my mind, guys. We must win this game!"

He still remembered Mourinho mocking him for not even having a chance to "almost win the league tournament." Now that they were in a good situation, he did not mind returning the phrase to Mourinho and his Chelsea team.

When all three games were over and the dust had settled, everyone saw that the league table had changed into this:

After winning the same city derby, Manchester United remained at the top of the rankings with a score of eighty-five points.

The second and third places had changed.

Chelsea fiercely fought back in the second half of the game to score an equalizer, but unfortunately they could not change the final score. Chelsea's equalizer was not considered a good result. Arsenal could be screwed this season if they lost to Chelsea again. Wenger and everyone at Arsenal worked together to desperately fend off Chelsea's attacks while actively seeking chances to fight back. The game came to a

conclusion during such entanglement between both teams, and the end result was 1:1. No one had defeated anyone, but no one had won either — neither teams got the results they'd hoped for.

It could be seen from the expressions of the two managers, Wenger and Mourinho once the game ended. They were in a bad mood. Unaware of the outcome of the Nottingham Forest game, Mourinho's face was like "cloudy and light drizzle." But when he found out about the results of the Nottingham Forest match, it became a "thunderstorm accompanied by a spell of strong winds."

The reason Mourinho was so angry was because he knew that the league table would have a change he did not want to see.

Nottingham Forest won 1:0 against Aston Villa in the away game with a lineup of substitutions and got three points. As a result, Nottingham Forest took the second place in the league with eighty-two points. Whereas, Chelsea, who tied with Arsenal, had a score of eighty-one points and came in third.

Although there was no difference between second and third places since neither would win the league title, and both would be able to play in the Champions League next season, Mourinho could not tolerate someone like Tony Twain pressing down on him — it made him angrier than losing the league title.

Chapter 542: The League Tournament Ends

May 24th was the final game of the UEFA Champions League. Before that, there was a final round left in the Premier League. Twain no longer thought about the dreary matter of getting a "Double" with the league and Champions League titles. Manchester United was ahead of them by three points and had only a 0.1% likelihood of losing the league tournament at the last minute.

The final round of the league tournament was held on May 13th. With eleven days to go until the Champions league final, this was good news for Twain as it meant that he did not have to make way for the Champions League final by considering a rotation. He could use the strongest lineup to have a showdown with Liverpool in the final round.

Even though losing to Liverpool would not affect the Forest team's Champions League qualification for the next season, Twain wanted to keep Chelsea down right up to the last minute. He did not want Chelsea to snatch back the second place in the league tournament.

Obviously, this depended one more than the Forest team's results. Chelsea currently had one fewer game than the Forest team. If they wanted to continue to suppress Chelsea, they had to watch the results of the make-up game, which was Chelsea's home match against Manchester United.

This match would take place on May 10th.

This make-up game was also the time to uncover the suspense around the owner of the league title.

Eventually, on that day, at the Stamford Bridge Stadium, tens of thousands of Chelsea fans saw the scene they least wanted to see, serving as a background to their opponent's celebrations at their own stadium.

Manchester United tied Chelsea at 0:0. Chelsea's points became eighty-two which was the same as the Forest team and temporarily came in second. But they were four points away from Manchester United,

the league's number one. With one last round in the league tournament, Chelsea would not be able to overtake Manchester United to reverse the title.

The result of this match proclaimed that Manchester United had won the 06-07 season's English Premier League title ahead of time.

The Red Devils, Manchester United, welcomed their ninth Premier League title amidst the boos at Stamford Bridge. This was also the 16th English Premier League title in the club's history.

Ferguson looked happy and spirited when he shook hands with Mourinho. He had fought with Mourinho for the entire season and finally got the last laugh.

A few days later, the English media were all news about Manchester United's ninth league title. Ferguson made headlines and were in the limelight for a while.

As for Mourinho and Chelsea's defeat, most of the media gloated about it. Although four years had passed since Abramovich took ownership of Chelsea, many people still despised the Russian oligarch upstart.

Although the phenomenon was very common, after all, everyone had the mentality to hate the rich, this kind of thinking was not necessarily correct.

Chelsea had fallen heavily into debt before and could have declared bankruptcy at any time. Bates was unable to repay the mounting debts. Abramovich's arrival not only saved him, but also rescued the Chelsea Football Club, and indirectly rescued the fans who loved Chelsea. However, the fans were ungrateful. At that time, London's Evening Standard said, half-jokingly and half-sarcastically:

"Besides spending money to purchase the players, Abramovich is also preparing to buy the fashion guru, Armani to design jerseys for Chelsea, acquire the media king, Murdoch to publish Chelsea's "guide," hire Campbell, Prime Minister Blair's think-tank as Chelsea's public relations consultant, and purchase the F1 ace driver Schumacher as the driver of the Chelsea team bus..."

At the time, there were also media outlets that said that if Abramovich's assets were all converted into cash and spread under a mattress, then when he accidentally fell out of bed during his sleep, he would not fall to his death, but starved to death.

Chelsea had been hugely successful over the last two years with the money of the Russian oligarch, but was unable to win over the masses. All of English football had refused to acknowledge Chelsea's achievements, especially when comparing Chelsea and Arsenal. That was one reason why Mourinho hated Wenger so much — no one liked to be the negative archetype of others.

Abramovich was aware that the best way to block people's mouths was to win titles. The league title was not enough. Only the Champions league title would do.

He brought in the Championship league level manager, Mourinho, who could win the Champions League title even with a team like Porto. Unexpectedly, fortune made fools of people. After Mourinho came, they could not even get into the Champions League finals for three years in a row.

Chelsea had even lost the league title this season.

After a simple handshake between Mourinho and Ferguson, he left the stadium with a grim face and was out of sight. A few days later, the media could not locate him when they wanted to interview him.

Rumors were suddenly rife that Chelsea was going to change their manager next season, and Abramovich could not tolerate the embarrassment of putting in hundreds of millions of pounds for three consecutive seasons and not win the Champions League trophy. There was also another rumour that Abramovich had an irreconcilable difference with Mourinho over his use of Shevchenko, whom Abramovich had insisted that the team put in the starting position. Even if he could not score a goal and that Mourinho believe that the players who did not perform well and were in a bad shape, should go to the bench and leave the opportunity to the others.

Twain did not know if Mourinho would leave Chelsea in the end. At the very least not before he crossed. When he was a fan, he felt that Chelsea and Mourinho were inseparable. When he thought of Chelsea, he would think of Mourinho, and when he thought of Mourinho, he would think of Chelsea.

He could not imagine what Chelsea would be like without Mourinho. Although the two of them were usually arch rivals, he still did not want Mourinho to leave Chelsea. Because then he would have a lot less fun...

He liked to be a manager. In addition to the opportunity to win all kinds of trophies and instruct world-class star players, he was able to compete with famous managers he had only seen on televisions and newspapers before. Professional football was not a game played by one person. Without a good opponent, the fun of the sport would be halved.

With the spread of the rumors becoming more widespread, they also became more outrageous. Soon Abramovich and Mourinho appeared before the media in succession to refute the rumors. Abramovich said he appreciated Mourinho's work in Chelsea for the last three seasons and promised that Mourinho had a bright future in the team. Mourinho, for his part, said he enjoyed his job at Chelsea and had no intention of going to other teams to pursue other development.

Neither of the men mentioned that they had lost two titles during season, leaving many people still unconvinced of Mourinho's possible departure of Chelsea next season. More pundits analyzed that they came out at that time to dispel the rumors because they did not want to affect the morale of the team and wanted them to play the last game of the league well in the season. When this season was over, it was then time for the reckoning.

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In the final round of the league, all the competitions started at the same time.

Some people said that for them to come out and dispel the rumors before the final round of the league was to not affect the morale and fighting spirit of the entire Chelsea team. They did not want to affect their last league game. But locking the stable door after the horse had bolted did not contain the horse.

Chelsea's morale and fighting spirit had already been affected. In the final round of the league tournament, Chelsea was forced to tie with Moyes' Everton at 1:1 at home.

Manchester United, who had already won the league title, lost distractedly to West Ham United at home, which saved the team from relegation. The score was 0:1.

The game between Nottingham Forest and Liverpool had many twists and turns, with Liverpool taking the lead at the start of the game.

Because Liverpool had lost in the away game to Fulham in the crucial 37th round of the league, while Arsenal tied with Chelsea at home, the two teams, which would have been one point apart at one point, now had the same points. Liverpool and Arsenal both wanted to get the final spot to the Champions League. Although Liverpool had also advanced to the final of the UEFA Europa League this season and their opponent was Sevilla, they still wanted to play in the Champions League.

Therefore, at the start of the opening, Liverpool launched a siege on the Forest team's goal and was aggressive throughout the away game.

This game was also a nationally broadcasted match for BBC 5.

Liverpool became even more aggressive after the goal, and they continued to besiege Nottingham Forest. Benítez had gone all out for the sake of the Champions League qualification. But he forgot what kind of team Nottingham Forest was and what they were best at.

From the looks of it, the home team, the Forest team was in a mess. Under the stormy attacks, the goal might have been penetrated again at any time. But the Forest fans were not worried or scared. They were familiar with the scene.

In the 27th minute, thirteen minutes after Liverpool had scored, the Forest team equalized the score. They made use of the void when Liverpool pressed forward to launch a quick counterattack and cracked open the goal guarded by the Spanish national goalkeeper, Reyna.

Another ten minutes later, the news came from Portsmouth, where Arsenal scored in the away game.

This was no doubt a bolt from the blue for the Liverpool people. If the scores for both games were maintained till the end, Liverpool would lose their eligibility to enter the Champions League for the second year in a row.

They stepped up their offense and tried to breach Nottingham Forest's goal again. But the score did not change until the end of the first half of the game.

They switched sides in the second half and fought again. While Nottingham Forest and Liverpool were still in a deadlock, another piece of news came from the other stadium and it was in Liverpool's favor.

Just five minutes into the second half, Portsmouth scored, and the score was tied at 1:1.

Watching the live game at the City Ground stadium while listening to the radio to keep an eye on their opponent, the half-hearted Liverpool fans erupted in loud cheer and nearly made the other people think that their team had scored.

This news has greatly stimulated the fighting spirit of the Liverpool players, who launched a frenzy of attacks on the Forest team's goal and further stepped up the pressure. In the first nineteen minutes of the second half, the Forest team conceded its goal again.

Gerrard's long shot directly pierced through Edwin van der Sar's ten fingers. The Forest team was not angered by this goal concede because it was so beautiful, just like the long shot that Wood had fired into the Chelsea's goal. What else could they say about a shot like that?

The Liverpool fans began to burst into loud singing in the stands at the City Ground stadium to celebrate their lead. They angered the Forest team fans, and soon the singing of the Liverpool fans was quickly drowned out by the songs from the Forest team fans.

Meanwhile, Liverpool's renewed lead also aggravated Twain and his team.

Albertini started the game in place of Wood. It was his last warm-up game before the Champions League final. After Liverpool's lead, the commentator complained ceaselessly about Twain's rotation decision. In his view, the older Albertini had become unfit to start in a fierce game. His running ability had greatly declined and could not pose any threat to Gerrard defensively. As for the offense... the Forest team was trampled in half of the field and struggled. What offense could there be to speak of?

In short, the commentator raised many questions about Albertini's ability and argued that there was no justification for Twain's rotation. George Wood was not injured and in a stable form. He had strong stamina and it was foolish to use Albertini instead of him.

Just as the commentator was jabbering on about how Albertini had been eliminated by the times, Albertini scored a goal.

It was a typical "Albertini-style" banana shot. Reyna could not save in time and could only watch the football fly past his hands to fall into the net.

Nottingham Forest equalized the score at 2:2.

The Liverpool fans were not too frustrated, because there was no further news of a goal from Portsmouth. Even if both games were draws, Liverpool would still rank in the fourth place with its goal difference advantage and suppress Arsenal.

The result was good news for Liverpool, but Twain would not accept a draw, which was dangerous without knowing the outcome of the Chelsea game.

The game went on till the injury stoppage time, and neither side scored again. The same went for Portsmouth, where neither Arsenal nor Portsmouth scored.

It looked like Liverpool was going to qualify for next season's Champions League as they'd hoped, and Arsenal would only be able to play in the UEFA Europa League.

The Liverpool fans had begun to celebrate ahead of time and some Liverpool fans had even given thumbs up to the Forest fans to thank them. In the eyes of the Liverpool fans, this result was a happy outcome.

The people of the Forest team did not see it that way.

The injury stoppage time was four minutes with the first three minutes uneventful. Liverpool did not plan to score again, and the Forest team did not seem to be in the mind to continue the game. But at the last minute, the situation suddenly changed on the field.

Led by Albertini, Nottingham Forest organized a very effective attack. Four Nottingham Forest players were involved in the attack. After three passes of the football, it flew to the front of Liverpool's goal. Bendtner jumped high and used a header to shoot the football at a very close distance into the Liverpool goal.

The Liverpool fans in the City Ground stadium became silent. Only the cheers of Nottingham Forest fans could be heard. Obviously they did not appreciate the friendliness shown by the Liverpool fans before. Like the team they support, they thirsted for victory and would not accept any results other than victory.

When the game was over, the results of the other stadium also came. Arsenal and Portsmouth tied and overpowered Liverpool by one point to reach the fourth place in the league tournament. Thus, they won the spot for next season's Champions League qualifying tournament.

With tears flashing in their eyes, the Liverpool fans stood dejected in the stadium and stared blankly at the Nottingham Forest players celebrating their victory. They thought that for the Forest team, the victory of this game was insignificant because they would not lose their Champions League qualification if they lost this game. They did not understand why the Forest players still wanted to score at the last minute to win.

Benítez shook Twain's hand with a sullen face and had nothing to say about losing at the last minute — his team had slacked off and had not marked Bendtner.

Twain did not comfort Benítez, nor did he know how to. He could not console with "never mind, at least you can still play in the UEFA Europa League again" which was no consolation. It was like putting salt on the other party's wound. He had no personal grudge with Benítez, so he did not need to act this way.

After he shook hands with Benítez, Twain turned his head and saw the heartbroken Liverpool fans in the stands. He was aware that he had another enemy in the league. The Liverpool fans would not forget today's game for quite some time and would remember who pushed them out of the Champions League.

During Brian Clough's time, the ambitious Liverpool was beaten by Nottingham Forest and lost the league title and Champions League title. At that time, the Liverpool fans had little affection for Nottingham Forest. Later, with the decline of Nottingham Forest, this hatred quickly dissipated in the river of time.

Today, Twain was like a demon making them to relive the nightmare from twenty-eight years ago, which had a profound effect.

"Wenger must thank Twain. How could Arsenal qualify for the Champions League qualifying tournament had it not been for the Forest team so desperate to win in the last insignificant game? I'm afraid only Tony Twain would do such a thing and not care if they wiped out Liverpool at the last minute..." The commentator muttered.

How would he know that Twain was not trying to help Wenger, or being ruthless, but that he just did not want to Chelsea to be ahead of him?

"Tony!" Kerslake's excited voice came behind him.

Twain looked back at his assistant manager, Kerslake with the headphones in his hand and full of smiles.

"Good news, Chelsea and Everton tied!"

Twain did a fist pump.

"We are second in the league!" Kerslake cried aloud, and everyone heard it.

They were the runner-up in the league for two consecutive years which was a remarkable achievement. The crowd burst into cheers.

Twain looked at their celebration with a smile on his face, when Dunn stood beside him at this time.

“You don’t look very excited, do you?” Twain glanced at him and Dunn looked calm.

“The competition season is not over yet,” Dunn replied simply.

This was a reminder to Twain that there was still another final game. It was not the time to celebrate.

“Ah, thank you, Dunn.” Twain finished clapping and walked toward the coaches who were still celebrating.

“Don’t be too happy too soon, guys. We still have one last game.”

“Athens!” A chorus of shouts from everyone answered him.

“Very good, it looks that you have not forgotten.”

The league tournament had ended, and Twain did not have to worry about how to rotate, keep the players in shape and avoid injuries, and make sure they didn’t lose their sense of the competition. Today was May 13th, eleven days before the final game on May 24th.

Within these eleven days, he still had time to solve some of the problems and then lead the team to Athens without any concerns.

A glittering trophy was waiting for him to pick it up over there. This time, no one would be allowed to meddle!

Chapter 543: A Supporting Character

The 06-07 season’s English Premier League had ended and every team in England was disbanded for the holidays except two teams. This had been a good year for the European players because without an international competition, they could finally get a complete break after working hard for a season.

Although the players of those two teams could not rest so early, it was believed that many would envy them because they advanced to their respective championship finals.

Liverpool, who had just lost the qualification for the next season’s Champions League, would only be able to continue to fight in the UEFA Europa League next season. The good news was that they ended up in the final against Spain’s Sevilla Football Club for this season’s UEFA Europa League.

The UEFA Europa League final would be held on May 17th, just four days after the end of the league tournament.

The media was covering the UEFA Europa League final, and Liverpool had become the team with the highest coverage. For Benítez, his first season at Liverpool had been stunning, helping the Reds retake the UEFA Champions League title after so many years. But after that, whether it was in the league

tournament or the championship, Liverpool seemed to be caught up in some kind of bottleneck and was unable to achieve anything.

After two consecutive seasons of being kept out of next season's Champions League games, he desperately needed to prove his ability with an important championship. The UEFA Europa League became his last hope. If he still came up empty-handed, it was hard to say whether Benítez would still be there the next season.

While everyone was watching Liverpool, Twain led his team in a closed-door training at the Wilford training base in Nottingham.

Most media in England hated Twain and it had something to do with his closed-door training. Before him, few managers in English football would have such frequent closed-door training. It might have had something to do with him being a Chinese fan before. He was all too familiar with it.

Closed-door training had its pros and cons. Currently for him, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. At the very least, his team could avoid harassment from the nasty media.

It was getting closer to the day of the final game and there was a lot more he needed to deal with...

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Pepe had made a full recovery. Although he did not play, his performance in the team's internal competitions had convinced everyone that the Pepe that would appear in Athens would be healthy and in top form. The problems that had plagued the Forest team's defensive line for a long time had been resolved.

Ashley Young also returned to the team once he recovered from his injury and had no problem making the trip with the team to Athens.

Before such an important tournament, the Forest team solved its injury problems. By all accounts, Twain should have been happy. However, his brows were always knitted these days. The players did not understand what was going on and some of them were nervous.

In fact, even a few members of the coaching unit did not know what it was about because, except for Twain, only the two assistant managers, Kerslake and Dunn, and the team doctors knew the whole story.

According to the practice in English football, the team doctor only needed to first update the condition of a player's injury to the team's manager and not the injured player himself. Then the manager would decide how to convey to the player. If the team doctor directly bypassed the manager and informed the injured player about his condition, then this team doctor would most likely not be able to continue in the football circle — no club wanted a team doctor who was in close contact with the players behind the manager's back.

However, Fleming's current problem was not that he bypassed Tony Twain and told the player about the state of his injury. Instead, the player took the initiative to come to him.

Generally, when the player looked for the team doctor first, it was nothing more than to inquire about his own injury situation. At such a time, the team doctor simply had to be careful with his words and

used ambiguous words such as “your recovery is going well” at most to dismiss him. If he honestly disclosed the player’s condition, he might be kicked out by the club.

The current Nottingham Forest club was controlled by an American boss. Those traditions and practices were decreasing, and Twain was not a manager who would split hairs over the bit of authority. But no matter what, Fleming was also an old team doctor who had worked in the club for decades. That tradition had been etched in his bones and had become a professional habit.

Two days ago, the man who took the initiative to look for the team doctor, Fleming was the team’s substitute goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard.

He had already recovered from his operation and started recuperative training a month ago. Initially it was only a simple physical rehabilitation program that did not involve specific goalkeeper training.

Twenty-five days later, he began to start his specific goalkeeper training and the problem came.

Paul Gerrard found that the speed of his reaction and judgment had been affected, as well as his line of sight. He could not properly determine the distance between the position of the football and himself, and occasionally, he would briefly suffer from astigmatism in his eyes. This was a fatal problem for a professional goalkeeper.

Deeply worried, he went to the team doctor, Fleming, hoping he would give him another full physical examination, especially in his brain. He suspected these were the sequelae of that head injury. But he did not tell the truth about himself. He only said he wanted to have a full understanding of his body after recovering from the injury.

This request alerted Fleming. As a team doctor for decades, how could he not have guessed what the players had in mind?

The request had to be approved by the manager before he could proceed. Fleming told Gerrard he had to go speak to the boss before he could answer him.

Fleming went to Twain. Twain, Dunn and Kerlake were present, so they became the only four people who knew about the matter.

Twain frowned and listened to Fleming’s retelling of the incident and had a bad feeling about it.

As far as he knew, in his previous world, after Čech was struck by the Reading player, he had suffered from a fractured skull and fell unconscious on the spot. At one point, his life was in jeopardy. Unexpectedly in just three months, he was back on the field, wearing a “tank helmet” to protect his head as he guarded the goal for Chelsea and was still in the world’s top three most outstanding goalkeepers.

This matter made Twain maintain a certain degree of optimism about what happened to Paul Gerrard. He believed that since Čech could recover in three months, then there would not be a problem if they conservatively gave Gerrard eight months to recover?

He was not a professional doctor and did not have any medical knowledge about the head area. He just took the reference of Čech’s actual experience and thought Gerrard would be all right too.

“I’m not a cranial expert either,” Fleming said to Twain. “But I don’t think a full physical examination is necessary. What we need to check is Paul Gerrard’s head. And it’s not just about a fracture, it’s the nerves in his head, I suspect...”

Twain, who had been silent while he listened to Fleming, interrupted him. He had made up his mind. “You’ll take Paul to the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University tomorrow. Professor Constantine and I will be there, waiting for you both.”

Renowned throughout the British medical community, Constantine was a neurological expert. Fleming was also aware of that as a doctor. Since Professor Constantine was personally in charge, he has nothing to worry about.

He nodded.

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The next day, Paul Gerrard went to the hospital with Fleming and met Manager Tony Twain and Professor Constantine there.

When he saw the two men, Gerrard had a bad feeling and felt that things were not simple. Otherwise why would the boss be here? Wasn’t he supposed to be at the training ground leading the team in training? The Champions League final was looming, and he had no reason or time to be there, especially for a substitute goalkeeper’s medical checkup.

When Twain saw Gerrard, he smiled and held out his hand to him, “Good morning, Paul. You look well.” Next he introduced Gerrard to the old man next to him.

“This is Professor Constantine, the most famous neuro expert in the country.”

Constantine smiled at Gerrard and shook his hand, “Hello, Paul. Tony has told me all about you, and I would like to run a few simple tests on you.”

After hearing the introduction, Gerrard’s bad feelings became a reality.

He hesitantly shook hands with Professor Constantine and forced a smile.

Twain did not speak at the side and observed everything.

Constantine also noticed Paul Gerrard’s uneasiness, so he smiled and patted Gerrard on the shoulder, “Don’t worry, lad, it’s just a simple checkup.” He winked at Gerrard and led him to a neuro examination.

Fleming and Twain did not follow. They feared that it placed a greater psychological burden on Gerrard if a group of people tagged along.

Gerrard, who followed Constantine, was like a helpless child, terrified of the unfathomable future.

He looked back at Twain and Fleming. Twain smiled at him until he walked far enough away for him to stop.

“If I had known, I wouldn’t have put Akinfeev back on loan... it caused us to rely on van der Sar alone for a season.” Sitting on a bench in the hallway of the hospital, Twain pulled out his cigarette and lighter, intending to light a cigarette for himself.

“Who knew that this would happen?” Fleming pointed to the no smoking sign on the wall.

When Twain looked up and saw it, he put the cigarette and the lighter away.

The empty hallway plunged into a silence, and no one spoke until Constantine led Paul Gerrard back to them.

“Okay, it is done.” Professor Constantine nodded to Twain. Then he turned to Gerrard. “The test results won’t come out till tomorrow. We’ll call the club directly when it does.”

Gerrard did not raise any objections. Twain stood up and patted him on the shoulder, “Go back and have a good rest, Paul. You don’t need to train today.”

After he sent off Paul Gerrard and Fleming from the hospital, Twain turned back.

“I know you have something else to say to me.” Constantine was not surprised by Twain’s sudden prod.

“I want to know the results of the examination.” Twain asked straight to the point.

“When the results come out, I’ll call you tomorrow...”

“Come on, professor, don’t treat me like Gerrard.” Twain walked over and sat down, “I won’t go until you tell me the truth.”

Constantine shook his head with a wry smile. He was powerless against such a rascal.

“In truth, the results of the examination have really not come out.” Constantine got up from his seat and went up to Twain to hand him a glass of water. “But I can talk about my personal thoughts. His area here,” he pointed to his head as he spoke, “is not looking too good.”

“Is the eight-month recovery period still not enough?” Twain muttered.

“No, it has nothing to do with the amount of time, Tony.” Constantine corrected. “I think even if you give him two years of recovery time, it would still not be enough.”

Twain raised his head to look at Constantine, shocked. “You mean...”

“I don’t think he’s fit to be a professional goalkeeper anymore.”

It was as if a thunderbolt had struck Twain. He froze for a moment and then shook his head, “What are you talking about, Professor?”

“He suffered a severe impact in his head. Although he has recovered from his surgery and I think there is no problem for him to live out an ordinary life, he’s no longer suited for fierce professional football.” Constantine explained more in more detail.

“Not everyone can resume their careers after such a serious injury,” Constantine said with an apologetic expression.

Twain suddenly stood up from his seat, which startled him.

He looked at Constantine with an expression that made the professor uncomfortable. However, he soon lowered his head and looked up again without the unnerving expression in his eyes. "But Professor, the test results have not come out yet, have they?"

Stunned for a moment, Constantine nodded. "Yes, the results are not out yet. What I had just said was based on my personal judgment and experience. Perhaps the situation is not so bad?" He shrugged his shoulders and tried to smile with ease.

Twain smiled at him, too. This man was a resounding figure in the country's medical world and had been engaged in clinical research for many years. His experience was a source of wealth itself. When he said his diagnosis was based on his personal experience, he would be right most of the time.

"In that case, I'll wait for your call tomorrow, Professor." Twain waved his hand as he left Constantine's office.

In the car back to the training base, Twain sat in the back without talking. Driving in the front seat, Landy did not feel right to ask. He knew that Tony must have encountered a problem. This man always looked fearless but in fact, he had a lot of worries inside. The other people would not know, but as someone who could almost be considered as "a private driver" to Twain, he was well aware of it.

Twain was thinking of a football fantasy novel he had read before he transferred. It was a novel that was quite well known on the Internet. After the protagonist suffered from an injury that could potentially destroy his entire career, he had been miraculously cured by an unknown Chinese physician, and his ability went up another level as if he had not had an injury, but had taken a tonic. It was an online fantasy novel, so the appearance of the plotline was normal. But in his view, it was because it happened to the protagonist. If it had been another character, the author might have arranged for the character to be a tragic character — like the example of the protagonist's poor high school classmate.

At the time, he regarded everything that happened to the protagonist as a fantasy plot of the novel. Now the cruel reality had appeared, blood-drenched, in front of him.

How big a blow would it be to a professional footballer like Paul Gerrard if he could no longer continue his career?

Indeed, Twain admitted that Paul was not capable enough to be the main goalkeeper. His character was ordinary, not very appealing, and the media was not concerned with him. It was as if he was born as a supporting character. But in Twain's eyes, he was one of his players. In his world, there was no difference between the leading and supporting characters. They were all the same, played for him and received his training.

You're not the leading character, Paul Gerrard... If you want the lead role, fate will show you the light of miracles and bring you back to your feet from the dark abyss of hell. No matter how preposterous and unthinkable this fate may seem, as long as you are the central character.

He sighed softly.

When Eastwood was injured and wanted to give up, he ran to the hospital and said to him that fate was like a net with different paths entangled and intertwined together. It was up to him to choose. Eastwood, the optimistic Romani, chose to move forward. He could not even say that to Paul Gerrard

because fate did not even give him a chance to choose. Maybe for Paul Gerrard, fate was a straight line up and down without a fork in the road like a sheep's intestines. It never gave him a moment of glory. Having met the right manager after much difficulty and had the hope to touch the championship trophy, he had to face the problem of whether he would face retirement or die on the field one day due to this damned serious injury.

Was this considered a choice?

G*ddamnit!

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The next day, Professor Constantine directly called Twain's cell phone. He was training the team, and Paul Gerrard was on the training ground doing a separate training with the goalkeeper coach.

"Not good news." Constantine did not openly say "bad news." He probably took Twain's feelings into account. He knew the man cared a lot about his players, looked after them well, and treated them as if they were his own family.

Twain was in a better mood than Constantine thought. Perhaps because he figured some things out on his way back to the training base yesterday. When he heard Constantine, he did not show that his heart had sunk. Instead, he silently waited for the professor to finish speaking.

"As a doctor, I recommend letting him retire."

His eyes watched Paul Gerrard behind his sunglasses, but the owner of the eyes still did not talk.

Both men were quiet for a moment at both ends of the line.

"Is there no other way?" asked Twain.

"I don't joke about other people's lives, Tony." Constantine's tone was exceptionally serious. It was only at that point that Twain was able to reconcile him as a doctor who worked on research. "He's lucky that he did not die from that injury. I'm not trying to frighten you with my alarmist talk. In 1931, the 22-year-old Celtic goalkeeper, John Thomson saved the shot by the Rangers striker, Sam English at the famous Glasgow derby but also sustained a fractured skull from the collision. He lost his life in the hospital five hours later. The good thing is that Paul survived. But if he returns to the field again, his brain injury could lead to life-threatening injuries. He will face what is medically known as 'second impact syndrome.' Once the injured area suffers another impact, it could be fatal even if the collision was not fierce. And..."

He paused for a moment before he continued. "I asked him some questions yesterday if there were any other problems besides the vision blurriness, headaches, and slow response. He told me that he has had intermittent amnesia recently. So I want to correct what I said to you yesterday about his daily life not being affected. He has already been affected. His symptoms are mild for now. If treatment is maintained, the symptoms can be managed, but once he takes part in a fierce professional competition... God only knows what's going to happen. English football, as you know, is an intense league tournament."

Twain knew this. Injuries were all too common for people who played in the English league, but a collision to the head was definitely not as commonplace.

“So... retirement is the only way?” Twain asked.

“Yes, Tony.”

Constantine answered simply and without hesitation. He announced the death penalty for a professional athlete just like that.

“Thank you, Professor. I owe you another favor.”

“Don’t say that, Tony. I’m also a fan of the Forest team and I don’t want any of the Forest players to leave. But at the same time, I’m a doctor and I have to be responsible for my patients.”

“I know, I understand. Goodbye, Professor. Now I’m going to worry about how to break it to Paul...”

After he hung up the phone, Twain watched the training for a while on the sidelines. He found that Paul Gerrard quickly finished his training and walked off the field.

The goalkeeper coach noticed that Twain had looked that way. He pointed to his temples, and then shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands.

Paul had to stop practice early because of an attack of headaches. It looked like things had gotten worse.

Some players noticed that Gerrard left the training ground early, and they whispered to each other. Everyone was happy when Paul had announced his return, because the boss had said that he did not want anyone to be left behind when they went to Athens. He wanted everyone to be present. With the most serious injury, Paul was able to return to the team, so everyone felt they were ready for the final game, and the championship title had to be theirs.

Now it appeared as if the problem was not as simple as they had thought.

Kerslake whistled loudly to remind everyone that they were still in training and that it was time to take a break.

Twain stood on the sidelines for a while, waiting for Paul’s figure to disappear completely. He was likely to go shower and change in the locker room before he quietly left the training ground.

He wanted to go to the locker room and talk to Paul. Even though it was cruel, he was going to lay the cards out. It was better than risking Paul’s life.

Football was just football after all. It could not and should be more important than life.

He ran into Paul Gerrard outside the locker room entrance. The latter had just taken a shower and changed his clothes.

“Are you going back, Paul?” Twain asked, startling the other man.

“Why are you here, boss?” After he clearly saw who it was, Paul was a little embarrassed.

“Why can’t I be here?” said Twain with a grin, trying not to let the other man guess his intentions from his face. “Are you going home, Paul?” He asked again.

Paul Gerrard did not immediately answer. He kept quiet for a while before he tentatively opened his mouth to speak. "No, I was going to look for you, boss."

"Look for me?" Twain did not need to fake the surprise on his face.

"Yes." Gerrard nodded. "I have thought for a long time, and asked my wife for advice... She disapproved of continuing to play football."

Gerrard said it easily, or deliberately made his tone sound relaxed, but Twain's heart was not at ease at all. What he had wanted to say to Gerrard was spoken by the other man first...

Should he be relieved, or feel worse?

"What are your thoughts?"

"I think I should listen to my wife." Gerrard smiled at Twain. "I'm afraid of death, too, and I'm scared that I don't know when I'm going to die on the field. Although I have always been a substitute goalkeeper and there are not many opportunities to play, there will be times when I have to play."

Looking at his smile, Twain felt a little sad. He wanted to smile and comfort the other man but could not smile.

"So... I decided to retire at the end of the season."

Twain had many words inside but did not know where to start. He could only look at Gerrard.

With that, Gerrard breathed a sigh of relief and clapped his hands. "You see, boss. A lot of people say it's hard to make a retirement decision, but I have said it now. In fact, it's nothing other than my body just doesn't want me to keep playing, so I will retire. It's as simple as that."

Twain smiled. "Yes, it's that simple." He did not know what else to say.

Gerrard looked more at ease after he said what he had to say. He smiled and asked, "boss, do you see any work at the club that I can do? Even turf maintenance will do."

Twain's brain fired up. He winked at Gerrard. "Seriously, I want you to stay on the team and be a goalkeeper coach."

Gerrard froze for a moment. He did not think Twain was joking.

"I need someone to help me and you're the person for it, Paul. What do you think?"

"I... I have to go back and ask my wife." Gerrard said hesitatingly.

Twain laughed. "What a henpecked man!"

His mood greatly improved.

Retirement was nothing but the end of a journey, and the beginning of another journey. Even though he could not be a player, he could still be a coach. If he loved football so much, it did not matter what he did. Retirement? That was just a conventional statement.

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After he said goodbye to Gerrard, Twain returned to the training ground and found the players on a break. The coaches also gathered and chatted together during the water break.

When he saw him come back, Dunn quietly walked over.

“All settled?”

Twain nodded.

“What did you say to him?”

“I didn’t say much. He did all the talking... He brought up his hope of a retirement to me and he seemed to have already decided.” Twain’s eyes wandered as he spoke. He looked around, and not many people noticed his conversation with Dunn. He did not want the news to leak out before the Champions League final. “I did not persuade him, nor did I know how to persuade him. But I suggested that he can be the team’s goalkeeper coach after retiring, whether it’s in the youth team or the adults’ team. What do you think?”

Dunn nodded. “It’s a good idea.”

“Poor man...” Twain sighed. “Tell Andy, have him to do simple training these few days. I’m worried about what can go wrong during training.”

“Do you still plan on taking him to Athens?” asked Dunn.

Twain turned to glance at him. “If not, what will happen? He’s the substitute goalkeeper for Edwin van der Sar, and our second goalkeeper. Previously it was because of his injury, and now that he’s back from his recovery, why can’t we take him to Athens?”

“I didn’t mean like that.” Dunn shook his head.

Twain turned around to look at Dunn. “Dunn, I know he’s just a substitute goalkeeper. Even if his retirement does not affect our strength, even though he’s not the leading character, not the core player, not the kind of great man that makes the earth go around, he’s still a Nottingham Forest player and my player. I don’t fancy that everyone follows me wholeheartedly. There are no moments of glory in his career, so I hope to give him one last glory before he retires... At the very least, I want him to hold the trophy wearing his jersey instead of sitting in the stands wearing a suit.”

Chapter 544: A Friend from Afar

Twain ordered a tight seal on the news about Paul Gerrard’s retirement. Other than him, Dunn, Kerslake, the team doctor, Fleming, and Professor Constantine, it was not to be revealed to anyone else, even the players and the other staff members on the team. Twain also reminded Paul Gerrard not to announce his retirement until after the Champions League final.

Gerrard understood. It was a critical moment for the team and his personal matters should not affect the team’s preparation.

The team would leave for Athens in three days. This time, everyone was present. No one was missing from the entire team of twenty-two players.

The two other players, Kris Commons on loan to Watford and the goalkeeper, Igor Akinfeev, who returned to CSKA Moscow on a loan, both received a red envelope from the Nottingham Forest Football Club containing a ticket to the UEFA Champions League final after they finished their respective seasons.

Twain did not know if the other clubs would send tickets to the players who had been on loan and had not contributed to the team after they reached the Champions League final or a similar major tournament final. He did not refer to the other teams before. He had just thought he should let those players also feel the glory of the team, which was conducive to developing their cohesiveness as a team and was also a means to win them over.

Sure enough, Kris Commons was very happy when he received the ticket. Akinfeev, who was preparing for his vacation in Russia, also called to inform that he would be going to watch the final.

Distributing tickets everywhere before the final seemed to have become customary for Twain.

In addition to having the club send tickets to the two players overseas, Twain personally had a bunch of tickets waiting to be sent as well.

Clarice Gloria in the United States called Twain to thank him for the ticket to the final game. She even said that she would definitely make it no matter how busy she was, for it was important to support friends.

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Michael Bernard had just returned home after he finished his day's work when he heard the doorbell ringing before he could change his shoes.

"Michael," His wife, Fiona shouted from inside the kitchen. "Go and get the door."

"I'm right at the door," Michael replied as he turned to open the door.

A young man wearing a cap with a "FedEx" logo on it stood in front of him and asked, "Mr. Michael Bernard?"

"That's me." Michael nodded.

"Your package." The young man took an envelope out of the bag. "Please sign for it."

Michael took the receipt and pulled out his pen to sign his name before he gave it back. The young man handed the envelope to Michael and left.

Michael opened the outer packaging, and a red envelope appeared before his eyes. It looked familiar because he had gotten the item two years in a row.

Even though it looked familiar, it did not mean that it was not a surprise. Michael was surprised when he opened the envelope and saw a Champions League final ticket fall out. He thought the time had turned back, and today was a year ago.

He bent over to pick up the ticket and checked the date. Indeed, it was for 2007. This means...

That kid has led the team to advance to the Champions League final for two years in a row?

Michael looked up at the ceiling.

The scene that emerged in front of his eyes was the Forest team making it to the Champions League final twenty-seven years ago. Having been away from England for three years, he did not know what the current situation was, nor could he imagine it.

Football...

He had not cared about these things for a long time, and now everything related to football was relegated to his previous memories. He did not watch the games or read news reports about football. He did not even know Nottingham Forest's current ranking in the Premier League. When his old friends from Nottingham made occasional calls, they never spoke of anything related to football or Nottingham Forest.

He was no longer a fanatical fan, but a white-collar worker who worked at an energy company from nine to five daily and lived a simple life of shuttling between home and work.

It had been three years and he was used to it. He did not feel anything bad. Having lost his son, he now wanted to spend time with his wife and make up for his previous mistakes.

He had no other hopes. This was life and living.

Although he thought this way, he still picked up the ticket and looked at it carefully.

The ticket had the striking Champions League familiar five-star logo. It was the same twenty-seven years ago, and it was still the case twenty-seven years later.

People said that the winning teams engraved their names on the glittering championship trophy. He had carved his youth on it.

Shaking the envelope, he found nothing else but this ticket. There was no written note of greetings nor had there ever been a phone call. The relationship between him and Tony Twain seemed to be only left with this one ticket. If the Forest team did not reach the Champions League final in another season, perhaps they would not even have this ticket.

Friends needed to be sustained with care. Close friendships could slowly fade when there had not been any contact for a long time. Michael had no doubt that if the tickets were not sent to him, he would have completely forgotten the manager he had once knew in Nottingham.

Now, the ticket in hand was the witness and maintenance of their entire friendship. It was really fragile...

Michael did not resent that Twain had never called him and said nothing except to send tickets, because he had betrayed the friendship of two people. What was he supposed to do when he was a father who had lost his son?

"Mike, who is it?" Fiona could not help but ask in the kitchen when she did not hear a peep for a long while.

“Ah, just a boring salesman, chattering away. I managed to get rid of him.” Michael put the ticket back into the red envelope and put it in his briefcase.

A lousy salesman who did not mind taking great pains to sell him a dream.

— Do you have a dream, Michael?

— We certainly like victory. We’d also want the team to return to the Premier League after this season, we also love to be the damn champion of the league next season and be king of Europe next season!

His hand paused for a moment on the briefcase when he put the envelope with the ticket back in.

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It was the last day before they would leave for Athens, Greece. The team only had a simple training. The training time was not long and not as intense. The players, who tensely prepared for the game, were given a rare break. They were put on a half day of leave by Twain and went back to relax with their families and partners.

Twain believed in a traditional Chinese wisdom, which could play a huge role when it came to coaching a European professional football team.

Tension alternating with relaxation.

Besides, without half a day off, he would not be able to deal with his own affairs.

Another year had passed, and he had made some new friends. He did not have to worry about the many tickets in his hands as he did a year ago. Shania, Fasal, Mr. Armani... These people had received tickets for the Champions League final sent to them by Twain the past few days.

After he put Michael Bernard’s ticket in the mail, he only had one left on hand. Thinking back to a year ago, when his Forest team first broke into the Champions League qualifying tournament, he had six tickets in his hand and had no one to give them to, so he took them to Gavin’s grave in the end and burnt them all.

This time, he had wanted to give Gavin a few more tickets to keep as a memento but it was not possible.

With his last ticket, he got on the tram heading for the suburbs. On the afternoon before he left for Athens, he came to deliver the last ticket.

Twain bought a bunch of fresh flowers outside the church and wrote “To Dear Gavin” before he came to the small cemetery behind the church with the flowers.

It was always quiet there. He had been here a few times, and there was no one else but himself. However, this time, he saw a man.

With his back to him, that man stood in front of a tombstone.

Twain only glanced at him in the beginning, thinking that perhaps the stranger had come to mourn a loved one, so he did not pay him any mind. But as he walked closer, he realized that the man was standing right where he was going — in front of Gavin Bernard’s tombstone.

This was strange. Normally, few people would visit Gavin's rest place. Even if anyone was here, Twain would know that person at a glance. With his head tilted to the side, he scrutinized the man standing there with his back toward him for a long time and was unable to identify him. John was a fat man, and Bill was much thinner than this man. There was also George Wood, but Twain was so familiar with the kid's build that he would never mistake him. Who was this man?

Twain deliberately made his footsteps louder so that the man would turn his head when he heard the sounds.

Twain was stunned in the moment the two men met gazes.

He seemed to be struck by a thunderbolt as he stood in place without reacting for a long time.

Who did he see? Although he was a little changed, it was indeed that person.

He thought he had hallucinated him.

The man standing opposite him looked a little embarrassed and surprised.

The two old friends who had not seen each other for three years were reunited again in a place like this. It was bound to be awkward.

"I'm... not seeing things, right, Michael?" Twain asked when he regained his composure.

Michael Bernard turned around and walked over. "I'm really surprised to see you here, Tony."

"I should be the one saying that. I come here every year, but I'm... seeing you here for the first time." Twain's tone was a little unfriendly as he still brooded over the matter of Michael dumping them and running away.

Michael certainly discerned the implied meaning in Twain's tone, and he smiled bitterly, offering no explanation.

Twain looked at his old friend in front of him, whose face was paler than before. His former beard on his chin was shaved smooth and his hair was meticulously combed close to the scalp using hair gel with not a hair out of place. He wore a pair of black-framed glasses on the bridge of his nose and a stylish black suit, looking like a gentleman.

Twain snorted. "I could hardly recognize you. Are you Michael Bernard, that foul-mouthed fan who used to drink all day in a bar? Congratulations, it looks like your new life in the United States has been good."

"Your acrimonious way of speaking has not changed at all, Tony." Michael smiled wryly again. He seemed to have no other expression other than a wry smile when he saw his old friend.

This remark flummoxed Twain. In truth, he did not want to speak to Michael in this way. But when he saw him like this, he did not know why he could not control himself and spoke meanly the moment he opened his mouth as if he had intended to do so right from the beginning, like he would be very uncomfortable if he did not vent his feelings.

"Consider yourself lucky that I didn't punch you in the face, Michael." When Twain finished, he went around Michael Bernard and put the bouquet in his hand in front of Gavin's tombstone.

Bernard turned and saw him pull out another piece of paper from his pocket — a ticket.

Twain took out the lighter in his other hand and lit the ticket in front of the tombstone.

The two men stayed quiet, staring at the flame, until the flame was about to lick Twain's fingers and he threw the ticket down. The ticket burnt to ashes before it reached the ground. Then a gust of wind blew from the forest and scattered the ashes into the air.

"Every time you receive a ticket, I'll come here and send Gavin one. I burn it — that's how I give it to him." Twain said with his back toward Michael. "How many times have you received it?"

"Three times."

"I have burnt it three times. Six tickets the first time, two for the second time, and the third time... was this one ticket. You see, you've got a whole new life, and I've made a lot of new friends I can send the tickets to. We've all changed." He spread his hands. "But I will certainly leave this one ticket to Gavin."

"Thank you."

The tension between the two men gradually eased.

Twain turned to look at Michael and asked, "Why did you come back this time? Just to see your son?"

"Business trip." Michael replied.

Twain whistled. "What a busy man. Travelling to Nottingham for work?"

"No." Michael shook his head. "I'm going on a business trip to Athens."

Twain froze for a moment and saw Michael reach into his pocket and pull out a red envelope. He recognized the envelope because it was the club envelope with the ticket that he had sent to Michael himself.

Michael pulled the ticket out of the envelope.

"I have resigned from work just to watch the game."

"You're out of your mind!" Twain cried, "What about your wife? Did she agree to this?"

"Fiona certainly won't agree, but she'll agree to my business trip."

"Did you lie to her?" Twain held his head. "You're screwed, your new life is over."

"That's strange, I thought you'd be happy that I came back to watch the game." Michael said without an expression on his face.

"Don't get me wrong, Michael. I want you to come and watch the game but not if you lose your job and deceive your wife. Do you know why I didn't say anything except to send a ticket? I don't even call to persuade you to come watch the game? I was afraid something like that would happen." He pointed to Michael. "It's just a game."

"Just a game?" asked Michael. "I think it's you who got it wrong, Tony. This is the UEFA Champions League final!" He raised his volume, "The last time I saw the Forest team break into the Champions

League final was in May 1980. It's now 2007! It's a game that's only come around once in twenty-seven years for me. I can always look for another job. I'm afraid I'll have to wait another twenty-seven years again if I let such an opportunity go... How many more twenty-seven years will I have, Tony?"

Looking at Michael's white hair on top of his head, Twain was silent.

"I'll explain to Fiona. Of course, I'm not giving up on my family, so you don't have to worry about it. Why are you always concerned about someone's wife, Tony?"

Twain punched Michael in the chest. "You ungrateful idiot!"

Then he hugged him. "Should I say welcome back, Michael?"

"Up to you. I'm just back to watch the game and I have to go back to America when the game is over."

"Of course, I don't expect you to stay here. You have your life, Michael. That's good, I hope you don't give up on football, and I don't want you to give up your life. You know that, right?"

Michael Bernard nodded. "I'm not a fanatical fan anymore. I know this a lot more than you do, Tony."

"That's good, that's good..." murmured Twain.

"By the way, I ran into George when I came here," Michael Bernard said, pointing to his feet.

"George Wood?"

"Yes, he was giving Gavin flowers."

As he listened to Michael, Twain noticed that there were three bunches of flowers on Gavin's tombstone and not two.

"Did you guys talk?" He asked.

"No, I nodded to him, and he nodded to me. After he saw that I came, he just turned and left."

Twain thought this was quite in line with George's personality.

"He's a big star player now," Twain said simply.

Michael nodded, "I know. When I arrived, I bought some newspapers and magazines, and the local media wrote about him. He became the captain of the Forest team, was selected for the England team, and even played in the World Cup... I can't believe it."

The two men glanced back at Gavin's tombstone at the same time.

He was George's first fan, and he predicted exactly that George would be a big star player one day but was not able to wait for that day himself.

"I'm grateful that he still remembers Gavin." Michael spoke in a low voice.

"No one ever forgets Gavin." Twain patted this old man on the shoulder and asked, "Since you've been back, have you gone to the Forest bar?"

"No."

“Let’s go and have a few drinks together. The old gang will be happy to see you back, even if you’re here to just watch the game and go.”

With that, Twain pulled Michael along and out of the hushed cemetery.

Three bouquets of flowers swayed gently in the breeze. There were some black spots on the petals from the ashes from the burnt ticket.

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Kenny Burns and everyone were taken aback by Michael Bernard’s return. They could hardly recognize Michael, who wore glasses and had changed his outfit. Fat John was the first to rush up and hug him before everyone was convinced that the man standing in front of them was indeed their former leader and brother, Michael Bernard.

“Welcome back, Michael!” Burns handed him a pint.

“Every time Tony sends you a ticket, I say to him ‘Don’t get your hopes up, that guy’s not coming back.’ I guess I was wrong, but I’m glad I’m wrong.” Fat John said movingly as he hugged Michael. “Michael, we can sing together in the stands again!”

“And show those bastards who despise us!” Skinny Bill added.

Twain stood, smiling, as he observed the reunion of friends. He was no longer angry with Michael. Just like he said, football was football and life was life. Everyone had their path and not everyone could live by football alone.

“I’m so sorry, John, Bill. But I can only come back to watch this game,” Michael said apologetically.

“That’s okay, that’s okay.” John shook his head. “One game is fine; it is enough. This is the Champions League final! It’s been twenty-seven years and we can watch the Champions League final again together!”

There were not many people in the pub in the afternoon. Most of them were Michael’s old friends. Everyone gathered together to hold up their glasses and drink to Michael’s return.

When everyone settled down, they then noticed Twain standing next to them.

John turned his head and looked at Twain with a smile on his face, “Hello, Tony. I want you to promise me.”

Twain raised his eyebrows.

“Michael had returned after much difficulty. This is the first time all of us are getting together again after twenty-seven years to watch the Champions League final. Do you have the heart to make him come here for nothing?” John looked around, and everyone shouted in succession.

“That’s right! If we lose again, we won’t let you get away with it, Tony!”

“I don’t care what bullshit reason you can have this time. Just don’t lose!”

“You must win! Tony, you have said before that a manager who can’t lead the team to win the championship title, and secure the victory is f**king rotten! If you lose again, I promise you’ll hear shouts of ‘rotten’ every time you play at home!”

“Champion! We don’t accept any results other than the championship trophy!”

“We’ve f**king waited for twenty-seven years. We’re impatient and don’t want to wait any longer!”

For a moment, there were all sorts of growls in the pub, and no other sound could be heard.

In the face of these fanatical fans, Twain was not in a hurry to speak. He just smiled until everyone calmed down before he spread out his hands. “Is there anyone here who doubts my desire for victory and the championship title? You’ve all watched how I went from a rookie to now.”

Everyone laughed when he said he was a rookie. It was true that when he first entered the pub for a drink, he was ridiculed by Michael and his men. How would everyone know that there would be a day like that?

“Besides, I have made a bet with the whole of Italy that if I lose, I’m going to jump into the sea. Do you think I’m the kind of coward who can tolerate disgracing myself in front of the enemy?”

Michael suddenly interjected loudly, “Hey, Tony! I am conflicted here. Of course, we want Nottingham Forest to win the Champions League, but we also want to see you jump into the sea. What to do?”

The crowd roared and laughed.

“Stop dreaming, Michael! You can only choose one!” Twain brandished his fists at him.

“Without a doubt, it will be the championship title.” Michael shrugged.

“I am like all of you. I do not accept any results other than the championship title. Not before, not now and not later!” Twain waved his fists hard and assumed the stance like how he rallied the players in the locker room. “I’ll tell you this. No one can rob what belongs to us!”

Everyone whistled excitedly.

Twain raised the glass in his hand and cried, “don’t just drink. Come and have a toast, guys.”

Michael raised his glass high, turned to the people in the pub and shouted, “For the championship title—”

John also followed suit to raise his glass and cheered, “For another championship title after twenty-seven years—”

Bill shouted till he was hoarse, “For the king of Europe—”

“Cheers!”

Chapter 545: The Gatecrashers

Michael came back to watch the game, which improved Twain's lousy mood caused by Paul Gerrard's retirement. What could be more delightful than the return of a former friend?

Although Michael was only back to watch the game, it was enough.

A day later, he left Nottingham with the entire team. Sent off happily by the fans, they left the UK and flew to Athens.

With two days until the final game, they would have a simple training in Athens, and then everyone would have a half-day break. It had become Twain's habit to give the team half a day off to forget the game and relax before each major final game.

On the same day, Serie A powerhouse AC Milan arrived in Athens. They were warmly welcomed at the airport, as a large number of Italian fans had come due to the proximity. The last time in Istanbul, Turkey, the hardcore AC Milan fans had experienced a night of heartbreak. And now AC Milan was facing a team from England again, and they hoped their support would allow the team to beat Nottingham Forest and pick up the championship trophy.

There were more AC Milan fans welcoming the team at the airport than fans welcoming Nottingham Forest. They held up the banners and waved AC Milan's flags and scarves which made the terminal look like it was filled with their people.

After all, the AC Milan team was the first to arrive according to flight times. It was understandable that they were so active. The Nottingham Forest fans who arrived at the airport early temporarily retreated as they coolly watched their opponents at the side. Only a handful of fans wearing Forest jerseys went up to the AC Milan fans to express their amicability. The scene was soon captured by the media, promoting that fans across the world were a family.

According to the time on the schedule, the flight from Milan would arrive on time at 10:30 A.M.. However, it was eleven o'clock, and there had been no sight of the plane yet. The arrival information of the flight on the monitor had changed to "delayed."

The lively AC Milan fans gradually quieted down and put down the fluttering flags. Some people sat on the floor so as to preserve their energy for the big push.

Others called to inquire, and soon a message began to spread among them — due to the weather in Milan, the plane took off an hour later than scheduled and was now on its way. If there were no more surprises, they would arrive in Greece at 11:30 A.M..

Someone looked up at the large information monitor, where the flight information for all international flights was being constantly refreshed.

The flight information for the flight from Milan was still delayed.

Just below that line, the flight information for the plane from London was refreshed — 11:30 arrival time.

In the corner, the Forest fans cheered when they saw the news. Some of them also stood up, waved their flags and began to clap and sing.

The numerous media outlets, waiting for the flights at the airport, could not help but laugh when they saw the latest information.

They knew that the flight from Milan would be an hour late and arrive at the airport at 11:30, and the flight from London carrying Nottingham Forest would also arrive at 11:30. This was fantastic. The reporters got excited as the realization that they had a chance to watch a good show.

Everyone knew that Tony Twain was not on good terms with AC Milan. Last summer, both sides had launched a verbal war in the media over the offer price for Anelka. Twain publicly mocked AC Milan for being calculative and not having the bearing of a powerhouse club at all. They acted like they were a landlord shooing away a beggar when they made the offer to purchase Anelka from the Forest team. AC Milan had always attached great importance to the image of their club and did not tolerate Twain undisguised slander. Because of this, both sides had been at loggerheads ever since.

This was well-known throughout the whole of Europe. Now that the two arch rivals were about to arrive at the same time, how could there not be a good show based on Twain's character?

The reporters, who had planned to take a break due to the delayed flight from Milan, sprang into action. The cameras and recording equipment were pointed at the exit, even though there was still half an hour before 11:30.

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It was not a charter flight. Not all the passengers in the large Boeing plane were players and coaches from Nottingham Forest. There were also the other passengers going to Greece, and a large proportion of the passengers were media people.

The entire team was in the first-class cabin, separated from the back, while the media could only sit in the economy class. Only one reporter sat in first class with the team, and that was Pierce Brosnan, the reporter from Nottingham Evening Post.

There were some people in the sports journalists circle who joked that Nottingham Evening Post was quickly becoming Nottingham Forest Newsletter and Pierce Brosnan was the special correspondent for the Forest team.

But looking at the reporters sitting in the economy class, who could deny that the statement was borne of jealousy?

"This is really unfair. We're all journalists. Why is it that a certain someone can talk and laugh in the first class with the interviewees, and we can only sit here and do nothing?" a reporter complained.

His companion next to him consoled him. "Come on, it's already nice that we're allowed to take the same flight as them. The guy from The Sun did not even have the right to board the same flight."

"This is not fair. It's not their charter flight, they don't have the power to do that."

"Sure, it's not their charter. But Twain said that if he were to be on the same flight as The Sun reporter, then he would change to another flight."

"Such self-important airs..." the first man grumbled.

“What can we do since he’s doing well now?”

“That’s strange. Why haven’t I seen the news reports on this? With The Sun’s usual way of working, it would have been blown wide open, wouldn’t it?”

The man next to him smiled. “The Sun has already filed the entire story on this matter, but now is not the time to push it out. Do you know? They have the exclusive right to cover Twain’s jump into the sea once he loses. They are just waiting to see Nottingham Forest lose, and then they will publish all the dirty details when they cover his jump into the sea, so that it will be sensational. They’ll say ‘look, this is the reason why Tony Twain is always losing!’ And then, there will be a barrage of criticism and bashing... anyway, it will be a good show.”

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Pierce Brosnan did not simply sit in his seat. After the plane stabilized, he unbuckled his seat belt and scuttled back and forth between the seats. Time was precious, and once he reached Athens, he would not be in such close proximity to the Forest players. He wanted to take the opportunity to complete his first interview.

Twain looked back at him. “Mr. Reporter, don’t disturb my guys’ rest.”

“I know, I’m only looking for those people who look more spirited than I am.” Brosnan turned around to reply and changed his target again.

Dunn and Twain turned around at the same time and saw that very few players were resting. Most of them looked more energetic than Brosnan.

“Everyone is very excited,” Dunn said.

“I hope they don’t get too excited.” Twain muttered. He looked at Dunn next to him and suddenly remembered something.

“Oddly, there’s no annoying female Chinese reporter on this flight.”

“You mean Tang Jing?”

“Who else would it be? The list of media that hoped to be on the same flight submitted to us did not have her name, nor did it have the name of the company she represents.” Twain looked at Dunn. “Did she say anything to you about it?”

Dunn smiled. “Why? Got used to seeing her around?”

Twain grunted. “Don’t change the subject.”

“She went to Athens early. It’s as simple as that.”

“So boring. I thought she suddenly grew a conscience and decided not to pester us anymore.” Twain smirked.

“You’re disappointed. Looks like you’re not used to not having her around.” Dunn said.

Twain rolled his eyes and found a hole to poke at. "You even know her itinerary. To what extent has your relationship developed?"

Dunn's face flushed, and he did not speak. Twain burst into laughter to show he won.

They were not afraid of being overheard as they used Mandarin to chat with each other.

The plane gave a jolt before the flight attendant's gentle voice heard on the intercom. "Dear passengers, we have arrived over Athens and the plane is starting its descent. All passengers please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts."

Brosnan quickly returned to his seat. His interview was over.

When Twain heard the flight attendant, he raised his hand to look at his watch. It was 11.20 A.M..

He out the window at the roofs of the buildings.

Athens, here we come.

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The hall of the Airport Terminal 1 building was buzzing. Both AC Milan and Nottingham Forest fans all stood up and flocked toward the arrival point.

The monitor on the side displayed the latest flight arrival information:

The flight from Milan had landed.

The flight from London had landed.

The first song to be heard was Nottingham Forest's, since the English fans were best at expressing their feelings with songs.

They attracted the attention of the media, and the cameras and recording equipment pointed at them.

Across from them, AC Milan fans were not willing to allow attention to be taken away by the English, so they also burst into song. More than half the media diverted toward AC Milan's side.

The game had not yet begun, and the fans were already competing.

Well aware that the two teams would arrive on the same day, the airport was prepared with security. After all, the football hooligans from Italy and England were famous far and wide. When they saw fans of both teams excitedly burst into song, the Greek police tensed up as well. They stared intently at the fans like danger lurked in every corner.

"They're just singing, sir." The unit responsible for monitoring the Italian and English fans reported to the officer in charge of the security.

"No obscenities or glares at each other. They are only singing toward the pick-up point, sir!"

"They are not drunk. They are not doing anything other than singing. They did not even wave their fists, sir!"

The updates came in succession, which allowed the officer in charge of the security heave a sigh of relief.

The security for the football tournament was the biggest headache for him. With so many people, every aspect had to be taken care of. There could be serious consequences if an area was neglected, especially when both sides of the competition hailed from England and Italy.

The most famous stadium tragedy in European football happened between these teams in both countries — the Heysel Stadium disaster, in which the competition was between Liverpool and Juventus.

Twain was talking and laughing with people around him when he got off the plane, but as they headed for the exit, he suddenly felt something was off.

He could hear that it was noisy outside. In fact, it was extremely noisy. Furthermore, when he pricked his ears to listen carefully, he realized that in addition to English, there was another language he could not understand.

It made him wonder.

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The AC Milan players had already appeared at the pick-up area. Their captain, Maldini, was the first to step out and the AC Milan fans' singing completely drowned out the voices of Nottingham Forest fans all of a sudden. The media began to get into work, and momentarily, there were flashes everywhere. The pick-up area exploded in a shining bright light.

The emerging star players were used to such spectacles and hardly mind it. They smiled and waved at their supporters.

When they saw that the AC Milan team was the first to come out, the Nottingham Forest fans, not interested in singing for them, consciously shut their mouths one by one.

The AC Milan people were in the spotlight.

The AC Milan star players emerged from the exit aisle one by one and received the cheers and applause from the fans. But when Kaka appeared in front of the crowd, the cheers reached a climax.

"Kaka!!"

Countless female screams, mingled with the song and whistles, could be clearly identified.

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Twain, who was walking along the hallway toward the exit, also heard the screams. He glanced at Dunn. "I think AC Milan has arrived. That's odd. Weren't they supposed to be an hour ahead of us?"

"Maybe their flight was late," Dunn said.

"We really have a connection with AC Milan." Twain chuckled. "Listen to the voices outside, I can imagine what a grand and warm welcome AC Milan has received." He looked up at the sign with a right-turn arrow ten meters ahead of them to indicate the exit.

With that, he stopped in his tracks and looked back at the players who were strolling in the back.

“Guys, look alive. Are you soft in the legs from just a couple of hours on the plane?”

Everyone stopped and looked confused.

“It’s a coincidence that AC Milan is out there now, receiving a warm welcome. I don’t want them and their supporters to see us listless and I think we’re scared of them. Are you tired from your journey?”

Everyone immediately straightened their backs to show they were not tired at all.

Twain grinned. It was a special smile reserved for a prank about to be played.

“Very well, let’s go gatecrash now!”

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Kaka received a frenzied welcome from the female fans at the exit. They swarmed around him and blocked the small exit. The people directly behind could not come out for a while.

Kaka turned around to apologize to his teammates, who made fun of him.

“You’re still so popular even though you’re married. I’m jealous, Kaka!”

The crowd laughed.

At the back, Carlo Ancelotti chatted with his assistant. He was used to seeing such scenes. AC Milan was a powerhouse club with all kinds of star players. It was normal to be popular. After he satisfied a few autograph and photo requests from fans, there would be security guards to clear the way for them.

It was at that moment that he heard a concentration of footsteps coming from the passage behind him. His face changed when he glanced behind.

Guess who he saw?

Tony Twain walked over with his large team in high spirits. Seeing Ancelotti, he happily waved. “Why, hello, Mr. Ancelotti! What a coincidence, we seem to bump into each other everywhere we go. There is a Chinese word means ‘predestined affinity.’ We really have an affinity!”

Not caring whether the other person could understand the English words or not, he prattled on.

Carlo Ancelotti certainly did not understand Twain’s English with his Nottingham country accent, but he knew it was not nice.

He did not plan to respond to Twain. He was aware that the more he reacted, the more outrageous he would be.

He turned his head and pretended not to see Twain.

Twain did not expect Ancelotti to come up and talk to him. They could not communicate at all when one spoke English and the other spoke Italian.

He passed Ancelotti with a smirk and squeezed into a spot with most people.

“Give way!” He raised his hands and shouted, and suddenly attracted everyone’s attention.

The female fans, who were asking Kaka for autographs and photos, discovered a stranger next to Kaka. They looked up, disgruntled, at the gatecrasher.

Most people gradually quieted down on the spot, confused. On the other side, the fans from Nottingham were very excited when they saw Twain. Some people got ready to shout but were stopped by their companions. They held up the “shh” signal but looked excited.

“Sir, there’s a situation.” A subordinate’s voice came through the headset.

“Have they started fighting?” The police officer sat straight up and was ready to run out to send the car.

“No, both teams have arrived and it’s a little chaotic here. And... the manager of Nottingham Forest is here.”

How could the man who was going to provide the convoy for this game not know who the managers of these two teams were? The police officer was relieved instead when he thought about it. “Just pay attention and be careful, it’s nothing. With him there, the Nottingham Forest fans will not make a fuss.”

He had done some research and knew a little bit about Twain. This manager was said to have a high prestige among the fan base in Nottingham Forest. If he was there on the scene, then the situation was not bad.

“I fully understand your desire to chase the stars!” Twain cleared his throat and spoke loudly, not caring whether people could understand his non-London English.

“But you should not block someone else’s way out, should you? We have been on the plane for a few hours from England to Greece and now we have to rush to the hotel to rest. You can’t just have everyone in the back wait because of one person.” He waved his hand toward the players from both sides behind him.

Ancelotti looked on from the back and a coach who knew English translated for him. He was surprised at Twain’s behavior. He had originally thought he was here to pick a fight. He did not expect him to become the person to maintain order.

Having said that, Twain turned his head and smiled at the Brazilian player, Kaka, to show his friendliness. Kaka looked at him in surprise. The media always described this man as the devil, or said he was neurotic. He did not expect him to appear refined in his manners within such close contact.

Twain finished and waited for the female fans in front of him to step aside, but no one moved.

He frowned and muttered, “don’t blame me for being inappropriate.” He reached out with his hand to open a narrow winding path. He took the lead, and Dunn followed behind with a smile as he apologized to the women who had been suddenly pushed aside. They were closely followed by the Forest players filing out, and the narrow path gradually became a boulevard.

Security guards came up in droves to separate the fanatical star chasers, and the exit finally cleared.

The Forest fans came to life the moment they saw Twain come out, like they had gotten a signal, but they did not sing.

There were about seventy or eighty fans. When they saw Twain walk over, they started shouting, "Hey, Tony!"

"Tony! Tony!"

They were no less vocal than the group of female fans chasing Kaka.

Eastwood watched the whole scene from the back and laughed hard. "The chief is not kindly helping us clear the way. I think he's jealous of Kaka being more popular than he is. Haha!"

Whether Twain was jealous or not, he did enjoy the shouts of his fans. He smiled and waved to them.

"Oh, oh, oh!" The fans yelled even louder. "Give us a championship title, Tony!"

"You said before. You will jump into the sea if you don't win the title!"

Initially, it had been AC Milan that had the upper hand in the terminal, but the leading character was immediately changed. Many reporters flocked around Twain and the group of fans opposite him, their flashbulbs going off endlessly.

Amidst the flashes, Twain gestured to make everyone calm down, and the group of fans dutifully quieted down. They looked at the team's manager with a feverish glint in their eyes.

The policemen next to them could not help but marvel at it. Their officer was right. The English fans were not a problem with the arrival of this man.

During this brief silence, Twain raised his hands. "I guarantee and promise you that the championship title is ours! It's ours, and no one's going to take it away!"

He issued his own declaration to win the championship and completely disregarded AC Milan.

Anelotti's remaining trace of good opinion for this man vanished.

There was a huge burst of cheers in the Nottingham Forest fan base. They cheered as they sent Twain and his team off from the airport.

A crowd of people strutted out and left the Italians at the airport. Soon, the Forest fans also dispersed to follow their team.

The reporters who followed the Forest team on the flight witnessed the entire proceeding and everyone looked excitedly at each other. They knew that they had something to write for the next day's articles, and that the news would be interesting.

The reporters who had complained about not being able to interview the players on the plane before, now laughed. The previous "unfair treatment" was nothing since they got to watch a good show!

There would also be meat for their stories as long as they followed Tony Twain.

Chapter 546: A Confident Answer

Twain's antics at the airport made him a front-page figure again. The Italian media reproved the man's lack of basic politeness, showboating, and thirst for fame. What caused them to be so angry was because Twain completely disregarded AC Milan and the Italian media at the airport which irked some people.

On the other hand, the English media excitedly described Twain's "pluck" at the airport in detail over and over again with pictures of Twain standing in front of the fan groups appearing frequently in the newspapers.

It was not them standing up for Twain; it was a contest between the English and Italian media.

Twain certainly did not do it to provide the media with fodder for a war of words. His peevish antics were actually aimed at the AC Milan team. It was also part of the psychological battle before the game.

As expected, there were people in Milan who had expressed their annoyance at Twain's arrogant and conceited behavior.

In a subsequent interview, AC Milan's manager, Ancelotti, said he could not understand Twain's thinking. He seemed impolite toward everyone. He went on to talk about the final game. "We've already got six UEFA Champions League titles and a lot of experience winning this title. I've personally led the team to win the Champions League title once, so I'm confident. But I really can't understand where Mr. Twain's confidence comes from when he declares that he will win the title."

Later, the AC Milan players were also interviewed about this incident.

"Nottingham Forest? Didn't they say the same thing last season? That they would definitely win the championship title? And what happened?" Gattuso did not hold back at all, but it fit with his tough style on the field. He continued, "I think this is meaningless. No matter how loud he shouts, the real champion will always be decided in the game. If he can't beat us, it's no use for him to say any more. If the number of times someone said the word champion guaranteed victory, then I'd say it a hundred times a day." Gattuso laughed, and so did the reporters.

AC Milan was a very image-conscious club and generally did not allow the players to express any views at will, especially for sensitive issues. Only Gattuso said what he thought and expressed his real opinions in front of the reporters. The others were vague in the interview and just glossed over it.

Kaka was asked the most questions because he was also in the limelight at the airport. Although his limelight was overshadowed by Twain, the reporters wanted to hear Kaka's assessment of the manager.

"I don't know what to say. I don't know him. I haven't played under him. You want me to evaluate him, and all I can say is I don't know.... That incident? He just wanted to leave early. It's normal. Is there anything wrong?"

Kaka was the same as AC Milan in that he was very image-conscious. He would never said "never," and he would never offend anyone. Therefore, his reply was a great disappointment to the media.

"So how would you feel about someone like that as your manager?" a bold reporter asked.

The question caught Kaka off guard, and he froze for a moment. No one knew if he was in a daze, or if he was thinking seriously about an answer to the question. Then he shook his head. "I don't know."

Perhaps seeing the disappointment in the eyes of the reporters, he added, "I've never worked with a manager like that, so I don't know how that would feel like."

He ended the brief interview with his signature bright smile.

The reporters expressed disappointment as they looked at his departing figure.

"Compared to them, I like to interview the Forest team more..." an English reporter complained. "At least they dare to say anything."

"Dare to say anything? What if there's trouble for the team and the club because of they can't hold their tongues?" An Italian reporter expressed his doubts and disdain for the English reporter's statement.

A group of Englishmen laughed. "What are you afraid of? Tony Twain will clean up their messes! That's what all the Nottingham Forest players think."

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Just like trying to validate the claims of these English reporters, shortly after AC Milan left the Olympic Stadium of Athens, the Nottingham Forest bus with the entire team slowly approached. It was their turn to adapt to the field.

Once the bus came to a complete halt, reporters surrounded the bus door, ready to interview the people who got off.

The first to jump off was not the team's manager, but the assistant manager, Dunn.

With regard to the Chinese, the English reporters knew he was reticent, so no one went up to interview him. Twain looked up at the reporters around him with a cool gaze. He saw that Tang Jing had waved to him from a distance.

"I won't disturb you but remember your promise! You must give me an exclusive interview in time!" Tang Jing shouted in Mandarin, and Dunn nodded as he squeezed out among the reporters.

Then the Forest players came out.

In packs of twos and threes with their arms around each other's shoulders, they looked like they were going to a restaurant instead of coming to adapt to the field.

A reporter stopped them to hear their views on the final.

"Do you have to ask? The Championship title! We will definitely be the champions!" The Romani, Eastwood yelled while he raised his hand to make a "victory" sign. Ribéry stuck his tongue out and made funny faces.

This group of people walked out amidst the sounds of laughter.

The English reporters were not surprised at their behavior. The Italian media just shook their heads, thinking that these nobodies acted recklessly and that the player from the Wales national team dared to come out with such conceited claptrap. They were delighted when they saw van Nistelrooy get down from the bus. This man should be able to answer their questions properly, right?

An Italian journalist asked van Nistelrooy with halting English, "Ruud, what do you think of tomorrow's final?"

The answer prepared in advance in many people's minds was "AC Milan is a strong team, and we will go all out for the victory." It was conventional answer. Most importantly, it did not aggravate either side, fully expressing respect for the opponent, but also reflecting the confidence in their own strength. It was a good answer.

"The championship title, thank you." The Dutch striker smiled and put up two fingers at the Italian reporters before he left under the other party's stunned gazes.

Well, the Italian reporters thought. Ruud van Nistelrooy's football club career was short of a UEFA Champions League title, so it was understandable that he thirsted for the title...

Demetrio Albertini jumped down from the bus and the Italian reporters were all excited when they saw him. Their old acquaintance was here. This man had a good relationship with both the Italian footballers' circle and the media. He was the best person to ask any questions.

A group of people crowded forward and thrust out microphones, cell phones and recording pens.

"Demetrio! Demetrio!" They shouted in Italian, "Answer a few questions, we won't take up too much of your time!"

Albertini heard the familiar language of his country and he stopped to stand in front of the reporters.

"Oh, it's you guys." There were a few familiar faces among the reporters.

"First of all, congratulations on getting into the Champions League final again! Two years in a row for the final, it's amazing!" Some of the Italian reporters gave a thumbs up.

"Are you praising our manager? Getting to the final is not due to me alone." Albertini said with a grin, but it embarrassed the reporters a little. He was right. Getting to the final was definitely not solely dependent on Demetrio's ability. If credit were to be given, Twain should receive the first-class merit. They had wanted to please Albertini but did not expect that they'd be praising Tony Twain instead. How could they not be embarrassed?

"Let's talk about the final. You're retiring when this game is over..." A reporter cleared his throat and asked, breaking the awkwardness.

Albertini nodded. "Yes, I had originally decided to retire at the end of last season, but Twain urged me to stay and play for another year. I was undecided at the time. Now it looks like I was right to stay on so that I can play in the Champions League final again. It's an experience that not every professional player can enjoy." While Albertini was in AC Milan, he had helped the team break into the Champions League final three times in five years and picked up two trophies. Everyone knew the story that happened later on. He was mercilessly abandoned by AC Milan and had left for the United Kingdom. Unexpectedly, he ended in Nottingham Forest where his career had a second revival. He had advanced to the Champions League final two years in a row. Including his three times with AC Milan, he had reached the final five times as a player, which was a remarkable achievement. Among active players, only the Dutchman, Seedorf, could be compared with him. And coincidentally, Seedorf was currently on the AC Milan team.

“But the opponent of this final is AC Milan, Demetrio.” One reporter from the La Gazzetta dello Sport asked the question that made everyone uncomfortable. Everyone had tried to avoid mentioning it, but how could one turn a blind eye to such an amusing and newsworthy topic?

Every topic about AC Milan was difficult for Albertini to face. On the one hand, it was his mother team and had groomed him and made him successful. On the other hand, it was also the team that had mercilessly ditched him at the end of his career.

Should he feel love or hate?

In the early days of his abandonment, he always adhered to one belief: no matter what, he was going back to San Siro, back to AC Milan.

As time went by, the belief slowly turned into a bubble. The moment he decided to go to Nottingham Forest, he waved goodbye to that belief. He knew he would retire there, no matter what else he could achieve.

After the leaves turned yellow and fell from the branches to the ground, they slowly rotted and decomposed in the soil to nourish the tree. They sacrificed themselves to repay the tree’s nurturing grace.

A leaf like Demetrio Albertini, who specialized in banana shots, could only be blown to an unfamiliar place by the wind, slowly rotting and gradually forgotten. He did not have a chance to be Baresi or Paulo Maldini, “loyal subjects” that the clubs focused on promoting.

The boss said that everyone had their own unique path. For Albertini, becoming a drifting cloud was his path. So was it his destiny to face his former teammates and the team that groomed him in a very important games in the final moments of his career?

Perhaps if he had decided to retire a year ago, there would not have been such an encounter today.

“Is this game going to be your revenge on AC Milan?” The reporter from La Gazzetta dello Sport added what everyone cared about the most.

Albertini looked up at the other man without a smile on his face.

Twain appeared at the bus door. He saw Albertini surrounded by reporters, and heard the Italian reporter ask a question in Italian, which made Albertini change a little.

He just stood at the door and did not come down. He did not want to be the leading character.

Albertini shook his head and looked serious. “It will be my tribute to AC Milan to win the championship.”

With that, he pushed the crowd aside and walked out with his head bowed.

The reporters had no idea that they were going to hear that answer from Albertini, who had always been cultured and refined. The Italian reporters looked at each other.

Even Albertini was this certain...

“Everyone is adamant that they’re going to win the championship title,” someone murmured. “What magic did Tony Twain perform on them?”

They truly had not anticipated the situation. They had also asked AC Milan those questions during the interview. Other than a small number of people who were convinced that they would win the championship title, most of them did not say insist.

Now they could understand why this English team would be so aggravating and reprimanded as “arrogant.”

Arrogance combined with true strength would make them kings but arrogance without ability would only reduce them to clowns.

Which one was Nottingham Forest?

Twain got down from the bus and his footsteps roused the Italian reporters.

Seeing his relaxed look, everyone seemed to see the answer.

Why were these people so adamant that they would win?

Because there was a person behind them.

“Mr. Twain, can we talk about this final...” There were others who still relentlessly sought answers.

“Didn’t you all hear it? No matter how many times you ask, the answer is the same — we are the champions.” He raised both his hands and made the sign for “victory.”

At the same time, flashbulbs went going off and the English media outside coordinated well with him.

Twain was about to go once the photo taking was done, but some Italian reporters were still reluctant to give up and continued to ask, “confidence is certainly a good thing! But, Mr. Twain, aren’t you afraid of any surprises when you speak so confidently? You must know that a football is round, anything can happen in the game...”

Twain looked back at the reporter and enunciated every word. “Surprise? I won’t allow that to happen. Also, in this game, the football is triangular, my dear Mr. Journalist.”

Chapter 547: The Night Before

On the last night before the game, Twain met his old friends, the Beckham couple, as well as Shania, whom they brought here, at the hotel the team was staying in.

It was a private meeting, and both sides made a lot of effort to avoid the media. It was only in the end when Shania took the Beckham couple in disguise into Twain’s room that they were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

The Beckham couple were personally invited by the club and Twain to watch the final live. Twain’s thinking was simple. In addition to using this approach to show Beckham friendship, he also wanted Beckham to strengthen some of his anticipation and sense of belonging with this team.

He knew it was not easy for Beckham, who was from Manchester United, to face Manchester United again in the Premier League, even though Beckham himself had said he would play against Manchester United and even go to Old Trafford as a visiting team.

But Twain had considered more fully that if the Forest team could win this European title, the joy of the title would somewhat dilute some of his guilt over Manchester United.

At the same time, it was a great opportunity to show the strength of the team to the new players who were joining the team next season. Beckham was naturally included among the new players.

“First of all, congratulations on getting the league title.” That was the first thing that Twain said in the meeting.

He had transmigrated before the end of the La Liga season and did not know if Real Madrid had won the title in the end. However, at the time he transmigrated, Real Madrid had already launched a massive counterattack against Barcelona. He had seen it again in La Liga this season.

Everything was the same as he had described. Capello first decided to dump Beckham but as the season progressed, he realized that they could not do without him and that Beckham had been diligent in training. He did not complain about being displaced, which had led Capello to change his prejudice against Beckham. He decided to use the former England captain again. In Beckham’s first comeback game, he helped the team beat their opponent with a direct free kick. Following that, he gradually changed the prejudice against him across the Spanish media with his performance in every game and regained the hearts of Real Madrid fans.

Calderon discovered that letting Beckham go was the worst decision he had ever made.

As the end of the season approached, there would be banners asking to keep Beckham at Bernabéu at every Real Madrid home game.

This English star player, who had never been understood by the world, had finally used his actions to exchange for understanding and respect from the world. No one would say that he was a star player who relied on his pretty boy face and commercial worth to play ball. No one would think he came to Real Madrid to help Real Madrid sell jerseys anymore.

Beckham said at a news conference ahead of Real Madrid’s final game that he never regretted his four years at Real Madrid and that he was not thinking of Nottingham Forest, but only wanted to help Real Madrid get their first championship trophy in four years, as well as his first league title trophy since he joined Real Madrid.

After a thrilling and tumultuous ninety-minute game, he got what he wanted.

Countless people were moved by him as he led his three children, all wearing the St. George’s flag of England, to say goodbye to the Real Madrid fans at the victory celebration ceremony at the Bernabéu. He knelt on the field, kissed Bernabéu’s turf affectionately, and thanked those people for their final support.

Twain, who saw the scene on television, did not feel unhappy about it at all. On the contrary, he was gratified. Beckham was a person who understood gratitude. With such a person about to become a

member of the Forest team, he would certainly dedicate all his strength wholeheartedly to the Forest team.

“Secondly, welcome to Nottingham Forest.”

The two men embraced each other with open arms.

“It’s a pity that if you had joined a season earlier, you would have won the second UEFA Champions League trophy of your career,” Twain said jokingly.

Everyone in the room laughed.

“To be honest, I didn’t expect Nottingham Forest to make it to the final.” Beckham shook his head with a smile.

“We are the Miraculous Forest,” Twain said proudly. “You’ll know next season when you join.” He winked at Beckham.

Victoria did not support Beckham’s return to England to play. She wanted her husband to listen to her and go to the United States to develop his career. However, in the end Beckham football. This was something that certainly did not make Victoria happy, even though she had agreed to her husband’s choice.

Twain glanced at her and found Victoria was having a pleasant chat with Shania and did not want to participate in the men’s conversation. She would not reveal her inner feelings in front of outsiders. Was it because she wanted to give face to her husband or had they reached some sort of agreement in private?

Twain did not know, but he knew he had to be careful with this woman in the next few years. Perhaps everyone’s relationships currently appeared to be harmonious due to Shania, but once a fundamental conflict of interest emerged, she would turn her back and become hostile.

At present, Shania was the buffer between him and the other party that avoided letting the contradiction come to the surface and intensify.

Sometimes when he thought about it, he really owed the young girl quite a lot. She clearly did not like football, but she introduced him to the Beckham couple. Was it really so simple as to introduce them as friends? If Twain had not been a football manager, why would she have introduced a footballer to him?

She always preferred him to spend more time with her, but his mind was always on football. Even when he accompanied her back to Brazil, he still went to the beach to watch people play football.

Beckham noticed that Twain was lost in thought, and he followed the direction of Twain’s gaze to Shania, who was having a nice chat with his wife. He smiled knowingly.

“Tony?”

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry.” Twain came to attention.

“Do you have any plans for next season? I heard you announced before this season that the Forest team would aim for the Champions League title this season and now you really did get into the final.”

Twain replied without thinking. "The Premier League."

"Champion?"

"Of course." Twain smiled brightly, "We've been the runner-up for two years in a row. Now people out there had started calling us 'the double runner-up' which is not a nice title. Hey, David, do you like to be a champion?"

The question was abrupt, and Beckham stared blankly for a moment before answering. "Does anyone dislike being a champion?"

Twain smiled again. "Yes, you will be very happy on the Forest team, David. We don't accept any outcome except victory. Next season, our target is the league title. I'm going to let the people who gossip about us see how outrageously wrong they are."

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After they left the hotel, Victoria asked her husband what he thought of the new manager.

Beckham thought for a long time before he said, "he's not the same as any manager I've ever been in contact with before, so I can't be certain about him. Maybe after working with him I will find out exactly how he is? But..." He looked at his wife. "I can more or less tell from the players on the Forest team that he is good at getting along with his players. He's different from Capello. And he wants to win titles which is something we have in common."

"Haven't you won enough?" Victoria sounded somewhat frustrated.

"Winning a title is just one way for me to prove myself," Beckham explained with a smile.

"You've already proven it. Who else do you want to prove to?"

Beckham did not reply.

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After they sent off Beckham couple, Shania did not leave as well. She came back and stayed alone with Twain for a while.

"Where are we going on a trip this summer?" Shania sat on the couch and asked as she leaned on Twain's shoulder.

"I haven't thought about it yet..." After Victoria left, Twain opened the window to let some air in, and the fragrant perfume finally disappeared. Now with Shania sat next to him, he could smell the fragrance in her hair again. "Where do you want to go?"

Shania shook her head. "I don't know, it seems like I've been everywhere..." Her job required her to fly around the world, and there were not many places she had not been to.

"Or... we could go to Brazil?" Twain cautiously offered.

Shania perked up. She left Twain's shoulder and looked up at him to say, "do you want to go to look for a gifted prodigy?"

“That’s not true!” Twain raised his hands . “Have you been back to Brazil these last couple of years?”

Shania nodded. “I’ve been back twice to do shows.”

“Did you go home?”

Shania shook her head. “No, I didn’t... Too busy, I’m always flying around...”

Twain smiled. “So, let’s go home and have a look.”

Shania stared at him for a long while before she nodded in agreement. She noticed Twain’s words. “Let’s go home” instead of “let us go back to your home.”

She smiled.

“Well, I kinda miss my dad and mom, too. Although I used to hate them... now I miss them since I don’t see them for a long time.”

When he heard Shania, Twain remembered that no matter how mature she looked physically, how famous she was and how glamorous she looked on the runway, she was still a child.

“Hey, little girl. Do you feel lonely sometimes?”

“When?” Shania looked up at Twain.

“Anytime, at work, when you’re flying out of town, in any hotel in a city...” Twain spread out his hands and gave examples.

Shania put her fair legs on the couch and curled up her body. “Since you put it that way... then it’s quite a lot of times. But not now!” She said to Twain with a grin.

Twain raised his eyebrows. “Because I’m with you?”

“Yes! I’m not lonely when I’m with you, Uncle Tony!”

“You’re really easily satisfied... Do you have any friends? Any friends in the modeling circle?”

“I have a few.”

“Are they all women?”

Shania glanced at Twain. “Yes, they’re all women. Not too many... Apart from work, I’m basically not in touch with the people in that circle.”

“Why?” Dunn was a little surprised. Was this not the most playful age? A favorite time to make new friends and when friendships still felt novel and beautiful?

“Work is work, my private life is my private life. I don’t want to mix the two.” Shania shrugged her shoulders and answered Twain’s question in a very adult manner.

Twain smiled. “No wonder you feel lonely. It’s nice to make friends.”

Shania wanted to say something, but she just in the end she just curled her lips and said nothing.

Looking at her watch, Shania got up from the couch. "It's getting late, I have to go back. Uncle Tony, rest early. You'd better not lose tomorrow's game!"

Twain stood up to send her off. "Rest assured, I'll not lose tomorrow. That's not going to happen without my permission."

"Ahem, the king of big talk." Shania pulled a face at him. "You're not God."

"Hee hee, I'm not God himself, but I have a good relationship with God," Twain said with a grin. He was not entirely joking. For a thing like transmigration to happen to him, God might really have something to do with it!

After he saw Shania off, Twain returned to the room and realized that while he was alone with Shania, he had not thought about the next day's final. He did not feel nervous at all or think about pointless thing like they would not become the champion. He even completely forgot about football. When he proposed to go to Brazil for a trip, he also did not consider how many prodigies there were and how he could benefit from the trip.

Simply put, he could forget a lot of work troubles when he was with Shania. Just like what he young girl said: Work is work, my private life is my private life.

When he and Shania were together, that was their private life.

Twain stood in front of the hotel's twenty-fourth-story window sill, looking at the night view in Greece. What if one day he got tired of his job in professional football, what would happen?

Who could stay with him, let him forget his troubles, and enjoy his own private life?

This question currently was too uninteresting for Twain. He shook his head and stretched his back before he walked back to the room to get ready for bed.

There was still a tough battle tomorrow.

I still haven't won an important championship title yet I'm thinking about losing interest. It's really unlucky to think about such things...

How can I lose interest in this job when I haven't won?

Chapter 548: Are You Ready?

On the night before the final, Twain did not sleep well, and he had a dream.

Everything in the dream was vague. He only knew that there were a lot of people around him and their faces were mostly blurred. He could not hear the voices clearly as it was noisy all around him. Everyone was talking, but he could not hear specifically what was being said.

The scene was a little chaotic with flickering white lights that flashed intermittently.

Although he could not see the faces of those people nor hear their voices, he knew that they were laughing and looking at him with smiles. They talked and laughed loudly. There were a lot of people looking at him.

In the dream, Twain was a little confused. He wanted to open his mouth to ask but found that he could not make any sound.

— What’s going on here? Who are you people? Where am I?

These were the questions he wanted to ask.

Without waiting for him to figure it out, he found himself flying and then falling into a darkness. His body felt cold and was completely drenched.

He was startled awake.

He got up to find that his back had broken out in a cold sweat. No wonder he felt wet and cold.

The central air conditioner in the room made a buzzing low sound which proved it to be working. Twain grabbed his watch from the bedside table, which read 6:30 A.M.. He wanted to lie down and continue sleeping, but when he thought of the perspiration on his body, he was not sleepy anymore.

His pajamas were damp, and it was uncomfortable to lie down. Twain got up to take a shower.

He was still thinking about the dream in the shower. The dream was indistinct, and he had no deep impression of it after he woke up. He only remembered things like there were a lot of people and the cold and wet feeling.

He suddenly shivered under the hot water.

That scene could not be him getting ready to jump into the sea in front of the media after his defeat, could it?

What an unlucky dream! He opened the bathroom door and spat outside three times.

After the shower, Twain’s body felt dry and refreshed, and he did want to go back to sleep anymore.

He sat on the couch by the window and began to review his tactical notes.

This thick notebook recorded a variety of tactics from the Forest team and the opponents, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these tactics and the information on how they should be dealt with... and so on. This was what Dunn brought for him, and he learned to use it for his own sake.

The latest page recorded the various tactics that AC Milan had used in the league tournament and in this Champions League. Even though he knew them so well that he could recite them backwards, Twain still took it out to read and pass the time.

He did not read it for long until he had put it down again. He was a little bothered by the dream.

In regards to dreams, Twain heard the saying “what you think about during the day, you will dream of it at night” when he was very young. That was to say a dream was usually a graphic response to something

that one cared about during the day. However, he had not dwelled on the matter of jumping into the sea these few days. He almost forgot it and might not have recalled it if it had not been for the dream.

After he grew up, he had also heard that dreams prophesied certain things in the future. Some people often felt certain situations seemed familiar as if they had gone through it before, perhaps they had encountered it in a dream.

Could the dream be a harbinger that he would fail in the final?

Twain put down the notebook and looked up at the brightening sky outside the window.

He believed in fate but did not believe in dream prophecies.

After he figured out what the dream was about, Twain put the matter aside and looked at the tactical notes again.

He had already thought of a solution.

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Because there was no training the morning of the final game, most players started their day later. Twain had already finished his breakfast before he saw them coming out of the elevator.

Someone even yawned as he greeted Twain.

“Good morning... Ah—”

Twain looked refreshed, and Kerslake yelled, “haven’t you guys woken up yet? Look, you guys are not even as energized as the manager! You can’t play in the final like this. Buck up!”

Twain sniggered.

After everyone went in for their breakfast, Twain turned to Kerslake and Dunn. “Looks like they’re all quite relaxed, which is a good thing.”

“Just don’t relax too much,” Kerslake said with a frown.

This was not the first time he had advanced into the Champions League final with the team, but he looked more nervous than Dunn, a first-timer.

Perhaps last season’s defeat was so unforgettable that it had affected his psyche?

No one knew.

Twain chuckled. “I see you’re a little too nervous, David. Relax a little. Do you have any plans for the morning?”

The jump between the two topics was too fast, and Kerslake did not react at first. He stared blankly for a moment before he shook his head. “No plans.”

“How about the three of us go shopping?”

“I’m not a woman. What’s there to shop for?” Kerslake turned down the suggestion.

After breakfast, it was free activity time, and most players chose to stay in the hotel to play billiards and table tennis. They used this form of entertainment to kill time as they waited for the lunch and dinner breaks. After the afternoon break and a simple dinner, they would leave for the final's venue to prepare for the upcoming showdown.

In order to calm the nervous Kerslake, Twain sat with him in the hotel café and asked for two cups of coffee, while they watched the players played billiards at the side and chatted casually.

Dunn did not show up, and Twain did not know where he went. He did not care about Dunn's private life.

Twain chatted a lot with Kerslake, starting from the time they worked together in the youth team to the failure of the Forest team's promotion and their promotion to the English Premier League a year later when they were underestimated by people. Some things felt like good memories when they talked about it.

Twain was thankful for the chat with Kerslake, which helped him sort through the memories of the last few years and made him recall some of the things he had forgotten.

It played a big part in his resolve to win the Champions League title.

For those who had nothing to do, the time before the final game was slow, but for those who wanted to play early, this period could pass by as quickly as running water.

After lunch, the lively café and recreation room quieted down again. There were fewer reporters hovering inside and outside the lobby. It was now the afternoon break, and the Nottingham Forest players all took a nap. Once Kerslake and Twain confirmed that everyone had returned to their rooms, they also returned to their own rooms.

They had to preserve their energy for the evening's big game.

At the same time, it was the same situation in AC Milan's hotel. The media could not rest as they had to prepare for the game. They had to prepare two sets of post-match layouts: Plan A was for the victory and Plan B was for the defeat.

Pierce Brosnan frowned as he faced a blank document on his open laptop. It would be easy to write if they won the game because the article would be filled with praise. It would cover everyone in the Forest team, focus on the contributors to the victory and arrange for the live interviews. Then as a Forest fan himself, he would flesh it out with the emotional strokes on the feeling after the victory of the game. Brosnan was best at that sort of article. It would only take him fifteen minutes to write it in one go after the end of the game.

What if they lost?

In fact, he still had things to write about the defeat, such as Tony Twain's highly-anticipated jump into the sea. But the Nottingham Evening Post did not manage to obtain the rights to cover this event, which made the Evening Post's boss unhappy — he had thought that with the newspaper's many years of partnership with Twain, they would not be sidelined in the printed media's right to the exclusive coverage. He did not expect Twain to hand over this matter to Billy Woot to manage. Woot naturally

would choose their business partners based on the highest offer and not friendships. That way, The Sun, which paid the most, became the exclusive print media.

The Evening Post would not be able to cover the sensational event. If they lost, they would fall into an awkward situation — after Twain promised to jump into the sea if they lost, the usual reports about losing would not attract anyone's attention other than perhaps the Nottingham Forest fans, since people from all of Europe and the world were keen to see the brash, young manager make a fool of himself.

There was nothing better than to see a big talker be dumbfounded.

Brosnan deliberated for a long time but did not know how to prepare the Plan B for the defeat. He leaned back in the chair, looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

Most of the other... No, all the media are furiously getting ready for Plan B, huh?

"The Drowned Rat Tony Twain," "Will the Gentleman Please Jump into The Sea?" "Lost the Game and Lost at Sea," "To Jump or Not to Jump? That Is the Question," "The Sea Is Cold and So Is Twain," "Look at His Wet Look!"

With a little brainstorming, Brosnan came up with a bunch of headlines. There was a great deal of interest over Twain making a fool of himself. Perhaps hitting someone while they were down was the most common base human behavior?

He was a staunch Nottingham Forest fan, even before he decided to become a sports journalist. He was born and raised in Nottingham. Besides Nottingham Forest, there was no other team he would support.

He certainly did not want to see the Forest team lose. If he was just a fan, he would not even entertain the idea of losing, but he was a reporter.

It was customary to prepare two options before the final, which he had to abide by.

After thinking about it for a long time, Brosnan still did not know how to begin. At last he thought of the idea that Twain had told him over the phone.

It sounded more like Twain's angry words, but now, after Brosnan carefully chewed over his remarks, Brosnan suddenly realized that for it to become the unique version among the sprawling headlines of "Twain's jump," it might be the best.

He typed out a line of words on the document:

Nottingham Forest lost again, and we have nothing to say!!

After he finished typing, he increased the size of the words and then pressed send to the editor-in-chief.

Fifteen minutes later, he got a call from the editor-in-chief.

"F**k you, Brosnan!" The editor-in-chief growled angrily over the phone. Brosnan had to move his phone away from his ear. Even so, his voice was still clear and audible.

“This is what you’ve been agonizing for days? I left the entire section for you because I trust you so much and you’re giving me this damn thing? What is this? What did your teacher at journalism school teach you?!”

Brosnan put the phone on the table and put it on speaker.

When the editor-in-chief finished venting, he picked it up. “Well, I didn’t tell you in detail what I was trying to do. My mistake. But I’m definitely not skimping on my work. It’s the best plan I’ve come up with after much thought.”

“What the hell is this your best plan? A fully blank section, except for this sodding headline!” The editor-in-chief continued to fume.

Brosnan’s phone went back on speaker.

Once again, he waited for the editor-in-chief to finish venting, and Brosnan continued, “remember our headline after the Forest team broke into the final? That was the best selling issue.”

There was no sound on the other end of the line. Apparently the editor-in-chief was also considering the connection between the two matters.

“Sometimes, I think it’s best not to say too much. We can put down everything, but it’s not necessarily what the readers want to see. If... I mean, if the Forest team does lose, I think there are some things we don’t need to tell the readers. If someone jabbars on, it’s only going to annoy them. So, I think it’s best to use that headline and not say anything. They will vent their emotions themselves... And, there will be criticism and outcry everywhere. We won’t get much traction. Being unconventional will get us more readers...”

After his speech, he waited for a while before laughter sounded over the phone.

“I still recall the wet-behind-the-ears, serious kid who had just come here to work and was all about news coverage. I still remember the ‘conscientious editor’ who deleted all obscenities in the article after he got an exclusive from Twain. Heh, I got to say, Pierce, what happened to your former self? And now you know how to spout about attracting readers in front of me?”

Brosnan flushed. It was certainly not his intention, but to survive in this world, he had to do a lot of things that might not be what he wanted.

“But your idea is not bad. I’ll use it! If it doesn’t work, I won’t spare you!”

Brosnan retorted, “do you want the Forest team to lose?”

“Ah... well. We all pray that your damned wonderful idea will never appear on tomorrow’s frontpage.”

After he hung up the phone, Brosnan heaved a sigh of relief and felt a sense of ease at getting the job done. He also hoped that such a great idea would never become a reality, not just about appearing on tomorrow’s frontpage.

But if they really did lose the game, they could be blamed if the headline and content became vicious.

If you really lose the game, even I won’t forgive you, Tony.

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After a light meal in the afternoon, the players were rushed to the bus. They would leave for the stadium to start their warm-up before the game. They had already started their schedule for the game.

On the bus, everyone's expression gradually became serious as they knew that the time for the final had come. Not many people were in the mood to joke around and laugh.

This was the end of their relaxation.

The team's hotel was close to the stadium and the road between the two places had regulated traffic control, so they did not encounter any obstacles along the way. They arrived on time at the final venue — the Olympic Stadium of Athens.

Countless fans from both sides had already gathered here. While they waited to enter, they also cheered and applauded the incoming team buses — of course, the AC Milan fans presented boos and their middle fingers to the Forest team bus.

"It's really buzzing." Twain commented casually. "Impressive scene..." He thought of the huge advertisement that was set up in Houston when Yao Ming joined the Houston Rockets.

Let's make a scene!

This advertising phrase was really apt and excited him.

Let's make a scene indeed!

He saw the sea of people outside, but he did not feel nervous at all. Compared to Kerslake's manner that morning, even Twain could not say why he remained so calm and why he was able to joke with people in light of such an important game.

Perhaps this was destined. He was born for such impressive spectacles.

He liked to be noticed and in the limelight. The more people the better, the bigger the waves, the better.

He liked to get hyped up in front of an audience.

The bus was about to drive into the designated parking lot, and Twain stood up and turned around to the players sitting in the back. Everyone knew he had something to say again. They took off their headphones, stopped chatting, turned their gazes from their phone screens and looked at their manager.

Twain was pleased with the reactions from the players, and smilingly said with his head cocked to the side, "see what's out there?"

Everyone nodded.

"This is a big scene. Are you ready?"

Chapter 549: Don't Let the Trophy Wait Too Long

Despite closing the locker room door, the singing outside was still a little deafening. The stadium soundproofing was not bad, the fans from both sides were too passionate and enthusiastic for the final game.

Twain listened attentively and heard the Nottingham Forest song. He also heard the once familiar AC Milan song. He had not gone out to take a look at the current stadium stands, but he believed it had to be a sea of red.

Although AC Milan had drawn the lot as the visitors' team and could only wear white jerseys for this game, AC Milan fans only wore the red and black striped jerseys when they came to Greece.

The stadium vibrated slightly from the singing, boos, applause, and stomping feet.

Twain looked at the ceiling and turned his gaze back to the locker room.

The jerseys that the players were going to wear for the game had been hung in their lockers with neatly cleaned boots and shin guards placed on their seats.

Unlike before, these tasks were done by specialized personnel. The players needed to put all their energy into the game.

The manager also did not have to be the only person to take care of everything. He only needed to take care of his own matters, leaving the other things to the assistant managers, coaches, fitness coaches, goalkeeper coaches, team doctors, and staff to complete.

Twain thought that if he had transmigrated to thirty years earlier, he probably would not be able to do the manager position himself.

The tactical board was still blank. There was no need to fill it with too many complex tactics. The things that needed to be accounted for only required verbal instructions.

Twain waited for his men to warm up and return.

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Michael Bernard and his old buddies stood in the stands of the Olympic Stadium and looked down at the grassy pitch where the players from both teams warmed up.

He had not spoken since entering the stadium. He just glanced around. Although it was the first time he had been to the Olympic Stadium of Athens, everything felt familiar. It was not the specific stadium, but the atmosphere of the scene.

The fans from both sides sang, clapped and shouted all sorts of chants to cheer on the players on the field and to demonstrate to the opposing camp of fans. The intoxicating smell of perspiration mingled with alcohol in the air.

He liked the smell. After three years away, he was still enraptured by it.

This is... the Champions League Final!

He did not think he would see it again in his lifetime or appear on the grounds of the Champions League final. When Nottingham Forest was relegated from the Premier League to League One, he used to think

it was nothing more than a fluke and that glory was bound to return. But when the team was promoted only to be relegated again a year later and become an “elevator” team a few years later, he no longer held any illusions. He felt it was enough to be a loyal Forest fan and did not care whether the team could still appear in the Champions League finals. His goal was only to see the team to return to the Premier League.

When his son died under the feet of football hooligans because he come to watch the game, he thought he would never return to the stadium stands for the rest of his life because he could not forgive himself for taking his son to the game. If he could choose, he would have preferred he was the one who died and that his son’s life was intact.

But now he was back in the stands to cheer on his favorite team.

Is it because I don’t love Gavin anymore? Is it because I have forgotten the pain of losing my son?

No.

I brought Gavin here to watch the game. Gavin is right next to me. There are so many people here, so I have to hold his hand tight...

From a young age, Gavin was the one I brought to watch every Forest team’s home game before he would become a staunch Forest fan. Now that the Forest team has returned to the pinnacle of its glory, how can I not bring him? He was so keen to see the Forest team get the Champions League title and become the heroic team that his father spoke of again.

If I had had the chance, I could have brought my son to the stadium to watch the Forest team’s game a few decades later. I would point to the players in the red jerseys and proudly tell my son, “look, son! Your daddy had seen the Forest team pick up the Champions League trophy! This is an amazing team! You’re going to love them too!”

Michael bowed his head, fearing that John and Bill would see the tears in his eyes. He had been a tough guy in front of his old buddies. It was impossible for him to shed tears in front of them... even in day his son had died.

After he regained his composure, Michael raised his head and began to follow the people around him to wave his arms and sing. Time had turned back, and he returned to youth madness.

“Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!”

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The door of the locker room whooshed open and the players returned from their warm-up. They looked flushed and were only panting slightly. It appeared that they were in excellent form.

Dunn was the last to enter. He nodded to Twain after he came in the locker room and closed the door.

The noise was reduced all of a sudden and everyone could hear clearly when Twain spoke.

Twain was not in a hurry to make a speech. He waited for everyone to change their clothes and finish their tasks. Once everyone looked up at him, hoping that he would say something, he just stood up and cleared his throat.

“Everyone knows how to play, so I will not say much about the technical and tactical aspects of things. Just only a few reminders for you.” Twain extended his right index finger. “One, do not let AC Milan play at the pace they are used to. Their rhythm is slower than ours, and we have to find ways to pull them into our rhythm. Use our Premier League rhythm to deal with the Serie A rhythm. As to the exact details, you already know from your training, so I will not state more nonsense.”

“Two, be careful of AC Milan’s set pieces. Try not to give them free kicks near our penalty area. George, fouls should be farther away from the danger zone.”

Wood nodded.

“Three, do not create offside. The rear defensive line will compact the defense and pay attention to Inzaghi’s position.”

“Four, we are playing defensive counterattack, so we must be patient. We have to be more patient than our opponent. Wait patiently for the opportunity to appear and then seize it!” He clenched his fist. “No matter what situation we face, whether they score first or score three goals within a short time, it’s okay... keep your cool, don’t panic, and don’t be discouraged. Of course, this is the worst-case scenario. To be honest, I don’t think we’re going to encounter it.”

“Five.” Twain looked at the serious-looking players and clapped his hands with a smile. “There’s no five. After ninety minutes, let’s pick up the championship trophy together!”

Laughter erupted in the locker room.

When everyone’s laughter subsided, Twain continued, “well, we have covered the field. Now let’s talk about things off the field. Can everybody hear? It’s really noisy in the stands outside.”

The players nodded. They had felt the fans’ enthusiasm during their warm-up.

“A lot of people have come this time, even though Greece is a long way from the UK. But every single one of our hardcore fans have all come. They occupy half of the stadium. They did not make the effort to come all the way here to see us fail. Last year, we lost the final in Paris. Do we want to lose again this year?”

“No!” Someone shouted, but no one laughed at him, because everyone wanted to do the same.

“It’s remarkable to be in the Champions League final for two consecutive seasons. But if we can only get the runner-up title for two consecutive seasons, you and I...” He pointed to the players and himself. “will be reduced to the laughing stock of whole of Europe! Wherever we go in the future, they will only gloat and mock, ‘Look! Nottingham Forest, the perennial number two! Can you accept such an insult? I can’t!’”

“No one’s going to take it!” A few more people shouted out this time.

Twain smiled. “That’s good. We really are one as a team and think alike. Many people want to see us fail but we won’t give them that chance. Never!” He brandished his fist. “Remember, no one can defeat us except ourselves! Now I want you to close your eyes and think carefully about how we got here over the last two seasons, and the opponents we met along the way...”

Twain closed his eyes as well as he slowly listed the names of their opponents. “Lille, Benfica, Real Madrid, Glasgow Rangers, Inter Milan, Arsenal, Barcelona, Eindhoven, Bordeaux, Galatasaray, Chelsea...” He opened his eyes again and looked at the players.

“Listen to the names of these teams, each one of them has an illustrious reputation. Some of them have won countless trophies and some of them are the traditionally strong teams in their respective national leagues. But no matter how famous or powerful these teams are, they all ended up in the same position when they encountered us — defeat! These brilliant names are the spoils of our ascension, and they hang on our wall one by one...” Twain waved his hand, as if he was really standing in a palace to show his subjects the spoils of his hunting trip, “to become the jewels in our crown. All we lack now is still the biggest, brightest and most dazzling one.”

He pointed to the door. “AC Milan is waiting for us, and I think they are already a little impatient.”

Dunn looked at his watch. They were late due to Twain’s speech. According to the normal circumstances, the two teams should line up in the tunnel waiting to appear. He thought Twain had forgotten the time and did not expect that he was fully aware of it... It appeared he made AC Milan wait on purpose.

The players burst into laughter. They liked to see such a high-spirited boss, because it steadied them on the inside, as if he was mentally suggesting to them constantly: “We will win, we will win, we will never lose!”

To be honest, if Twain suddenly lost his mettle and became dispirited, he would lose half of his control over the team. Because the men’s will would fall apart, and then the team would not be easy to lead...

He had said what needed to be said, and the players were fired up. It was time to sum up his remarks.

Twain raised his hands. “I don’t say words like ‘enjoy playing’ or that I want you to enjoy the bliss of victory after the final. Guys, I’ll be with you no matter what. During the kick-off, forty-five minutes, at the halftime interval, ninety minutes... I’m there with you, and I’m looking forward to having celebratory champagne with you!” He paused for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Let’s conquer the whole of Europe — make our opponents feel the terror!”

“Let’s conquer Europe — make our opponents feel the terror!” The players and the members of the coaching unit all yelled with him in the locker room.

The excited lads slammed the locker room door wide open and rushed out.

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The AC Milan players were indeed impatient from waiting.

They walked out of the locker room according to usual timing and lined up in the tunnel.

They waited until the referee and the two assistant referees came over, but their opponent, Nottingham Forest, still did not appear.

Unable to wait any longer, the AC Milan officials discussed with the fourth official to have him go check out what was going on with Nottingham Forest. The fourth official knocked on the door of the Forest

team's locker room, but Twain was giving a passionate speech, so his knock on the door was completely unheeded.

The locker room was a hallowed place. Even the fourth official had no authority to go in. He could only return to appease the somewhat agitated AC Milan team, hoping that they would wait patiently for a little while longer.

A member of the coaching staff next to Ancelotti muttered after they learnt of the news, "Nottingham Forest is so cocky that we have to wait for them..."

The AC Milan manager turned to look at the heated person, but did not speak.

Other than grumbling, AC Milan could only wait.

Just as the patience of the AC Milan people was about to run out, the Nottingham Forest players stormed out looking ferocious. If the referee had not stopped them, they might have rushed straight onto the field...

When the team finished lining up in the tunnel, Twain slowly came from behind. He saw the anger and agitation on the AC Milan players' faces and was secretly happy.

As if to add fuel to the fire, he acted immensely proud of himself in front of the opponent and swaggered in front of the AC Milan players for a long time before sauntering out of the tunnel and towards the technical area.

As soon as he left the tunnel, he was welcomed by the Nottingham Forest fans gathered in the stands on the right side of the tunnel. Frenzied cries swept through the section of the stands whether they were from Nottingham Forest or AC Milan.

They chanted loudly and extended their arms toward Twain. "Tony, we want the title! We won't accept anything but the championship title!"

On the opposite side, the AC Milan fans could not do such a blatant thing. They felt it was beneath their dignities and unnecessary to do so. In the past few years, they had taken all kinds of championship trophies and were not as hungry as the Nottingham Forest fans for the championship title.

However, it could not be said that the AC Milan team had no desire to be the champion.

They faced an English team, which gave them more motivation to win the title. Two years ago, there was a night in Istanbul that was painful for the AC Milan players. They lost to Liverpool, even though they had the advantage of a three-goal lead. Now that Liverpool was not in the final, it was replaced by another English team, Nottingham Forest.

No matter which team it was, as long as it was an English team, AC Milan would be very motivated to fight. They wanted revenge. After that final, they had celebrated early in the locker room during the halftime interval and were overtaken by their opponent in the end. They became a worldwide laughingstock and this humiliation had to be repaid doubly. Even if the opponent was not Liverpool, as long as the team was from England and wore red jerseys, they would treat the team as Liverpool.

Looking at the arrogant opponent next to them, all the AC Milan players' eyes burned with revenge.

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“This is truly an explosive matchup! Nottingham Forest has won everyone’s affirmation with their excellent and steady performance since their return to the Premier League. Their two consecutive advancements to the Champions League finals are the best proof! Let’s hope they are not like Valencia when they reached the final twice in a row and lost twice in a row. The AC Milan team is also a regular in the Champions League finals. Before this, they had reached the finals ten times and won six titles! Impressive results! Compared to them, Nottingham Forest is as insignificant as a young brother... But! If the Forest team had been able to beat Barcelona last season, they would be the only team to reach the final three times and win three championships... What a pity.”

The commentator excitedly introduced the two competing teams to the television audience. Judging from the historical record, AC Milan clearly had the upper hand. Since the establishment of the team, they had occupied the center and highest level of European football most of the time. This kind of powerhouse club experience and manner was an immense wealth and was likely to play a decisive role at the crucial moment of determining the winner and loser.

Compared to AC Milan, Nottingham Forest had no advantage other than being a young team.

However, in such a major final game, almost everyone would rather believe in age and experience. Being young meant having no experience, which implied that the possibility of failure.

A more direct observation could be derived from the bookmakers’ data.

80% of the punters unanimously bet on AC Milan to win. The odds from a number of world-renowned gambling companies also placed Nottingham Forest in a disadvantageous position.

Twain knew this information before the game, and he was delighted that his team’s odds were so unpopular, because he secretly placed a bet of ten pounds before the game on his team to win. He did not care how much money he could win. What he bought was confidence.

“The game is about to begin! Let’s look forward to the final together!”

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Albertini stood on the left side of the center line, next to the three referees. Across the center line, opposite him was his old friend from AC Milan, the team captain, Paulo Maldini.

Maldini still wore the AC Milan jersey and carried the AC Milan flag in his hands, whereas Albertini now wore a red Nottingham Forest jersey and held the Nottingham Forest team flag.

It was awkward to meet like this.

It was not the first time they met in this way as he had competed against AC Milan him when he played for Lazio. But how could an ordinary league tournament compare to an important Champions League final?

Maldini’s blue eyes reflected his old friend’s image.

He did not expect to meet Demetrio like this. He was actually relieved when he found out that Demetrio chose to play in the UK, because the twice a year regular run-ins in the league were just too awkward.

He did not think of that even after going around in such a big circle, from Italy to England, and from England to Greece, they would still run into each other.

“Didn’t think we would meet like this again, did we?” Albertini was the first to break the silence, but it did not lessen the awkwardness.

“Demetrio...”

“I didn’t expect it either. If I had decided to retire a year ago, there would not have been today. But I’m now very happy to be able to meet the starting point of my career in the last game of my career, like the circle of life. It’s like Twain said, this really is the best farewell game. It couldn’t be any better...”

Maldini listened quietly to Albertini chattering on. The three referees next to them also saw that the game held a special meaning for the two men in front of them, so they did not make a noise to disturb them.

“I have to thank him. If he hadn’t run to Italy to look for me and persuade me to go to Nottingham Forest, I’m afraid I would have been long retired and sitting at home to watch this game now, wouldn’t I? If that was the case, then I would have unreservedly cheered for AC Milan and hoped you guys picked up the Champions League trophy for the seventh time. Pity.” He tugged at the Nottingham Forest emblem on his chest. “I’m now wearing the Nottingham Forest jersey as I stand across from you, Paulo.”

“Did you know about the interview I gave before the game?”

Maldini nodded. “I saw it. It was all over television and the papers.”

“I wasn’t joking or glossing over that question. I’m serious about it,” Albertini said with a serious expression. “I’m serious about wanting to defeat AC Milan and help the Forest team pick up the third Champions League trophy. I’ll stop you guys from winning the seventh time. I’m serious about going all out to beat you. Do you get it, Paulo?”

Maldini nodded again. “I understand, Demetrio. I’m not going to hold back either.”

Albertini smiled. “You’d better not. This is my farewell game. I do not want to see a nauseating show of hypocrisy. Bring it on, Paulo.”

“It’s like what I said to you before when you first appeared on behalf of AC Milan, Demetrio.” Maldini held out his hand to him. “Enjoy this game...”

“Enjoy the victory.” Albertini held out his hand at the same time.

The two veterans clasped their hands tightly together.

“There’s also a major highlight to watch in this game. Nottingham Forest’s team captain, Demetrio Albertini used to be AC Milan’s vice-captain. He played for AC Milan for twelve years. He undoubtedly still holds feelings for AC Milan. AC Milan also currently has his good friends, including Paulo Maldini, who had fought alongside him for eleven years, Pirlo whom he guided as a junior, and Kaka... How will he face such an opponent in the final? It’s well worth our anticipation.”

How would he face it?

He would use his best form and make every effort to burn up the last of his professional life to win the title, to say goodbye to his career, and to pay homage to his favorite team... and not to leave a hint of regret as he ended his own era.

After the coin toss to determine the side, Albertini turned to walk back to the half of the field that belonged to Nottingham Forest. He wore the golden yellow captain's armband on his arm. He walked calmly with powerful footsteps and his eyes looked serene and determined. In front of him, waiting for him to return, were the ten teammates in the starting lineup of Nottingham Forest.

This is my path and here lies Demetrio Albertini's way.

I'm going to walk it 'till the end.

When everyone saw the team captain coming back, he opened his arms and smiled. "Get ready, guys. The championship trophy is waiting for us. Don't let it wait too long!"

The group hooted.

Chapter 550: Albertini's Pass

"This is AC Milan's first time playing against Nottingham Forest in history and also their first time against Nottingham Forest in the Champions League final. For them, the Forest team is an unfamiliar opponent, even though they come from England like Liverpool. AC Milan wears white jerseys for this game and will attack from the right side of the field toward the left. White jerseys always seem to bring them good luck. AC Milan wore white jerseys when they won the Champions League finals in 1963, 1989, 1990 and 2003. And this stadium also brings good memories for AC Milan and even for the current Forest team captain Albertini. In 1994, AC Milan had a big win of 4:0 over Barcelona here and dealt a heavy blow to the Barcelona dream team that Cruyff coached." After the start of the game, the commentator took some time to introduce some background knowledge to the television viewers, coming from an angle to analyze which of the two teams was more likely to win the championship.

"The referee for this game is the German, Herbert Fandel. He has not refereed a game played by Nottingham Forest before, but he has refereed AC Milan's games, and AC Milan won all five of them! Could these circumstances illustrate that AC Milan's odds of winning are higher for this game?"

"I have a different opinion, Steve. Analyzing from a historical angle, Nottingham Forest has reached the finals three times and won the title twice. Their winning success rate is better than AC Milan. I don't think the historical data can explain these issues. The winner of this game is not based on historical data, but the level of their play in this game. If AC Milan thinks that they will win for certain, they may suffer a setback... Similar situations have appeared many times in the Champions League tournament. Of course, it did not happen to AC Milan. I think the managers on both sides have a deep understanding of this."

Maldini won against Albertini during the coin toss, so the Forest team got the right to kick off.

Before the game, everyone thought the Forest team would continue to stick to the defensive counterattack they were best at for such an important game. However, judging from the opening minutes, the Forest team was very proactive — shortly after the kick-off, they launched a siege on AC Milan's goal.

They made two shots in five minutes, all within the goal post range. It showed countless people that the Forest team was just as capable of playing a threatening offense.

Could it be that the Forest team was going to play offensive football in this game against AC Milan?

It would be a rarity. How could Tony Twain, who enjoyed a reputation of conservative play in the European football circle, give up defense in such an important final game in favor of a risky offense?

Ancelotti decided to bide his time. Just judging by five minutes of the Forest team's performance, he could not figure out what was on Twain's mind. Did this five-minute offense indicate that the Forest team really planned to attack, or was it just a normal offensive because the ball was mostly controlled by Forest players?

He needed to continue to observe.

What he had anticipated was that the Forest team would play defensive counterattack in such an important game, just as they had along the way. They had relied on solid defense and excellent counterattacks to beat their opponents. It had caused him to wrack his brains.

AC Milan was not afraid of the teams that pressed in and attacked. They were only powerless against the teams that defended their penalty areas to death.

If the Forest team really wanted to press in and attack, it would be exactly what Ancelotti wanted. The opponents would only accelerate their failure. If the Forest team still insisted on playing defensive counterattack, Ancelotti had also made arrangements. What AC Milan had done for the last week was practice how to break their opponent's compact defense.

Before the game, Ancelotti warned his men that no matter what tactics their opponents used, they just needed to stick to their football rhythm and patiently play with their opponents to find a chance to strike a fatal blow and the victory would be in their hands.

It was very similar to what Twain said to his team. Was it a case of great minds thinking alike?

Five minutes later, AC Milan had control of the ball. Ancelotti saw that the speed of the Forest team's withdrawal was not as fast as he thought.

More often than not, Nottingham Forest stayed in the front field and tried to counter-press. If the strikers were unsuccessful at intercepting, they did not just wait there for their teammates to intercept the ball and pass it to them. Instead, they immediately turned and ran back to participate in the defense. In addition to the counter-pressing in the front field, the midfielders were also very aggressive in their tackles. George Wood ran at the expense of his strength, from one end to the other. The number 13 could be seen in almost every corner of the midfield. Albertini provided support at his side.

"High pressing?" Ancelotti frowned He was still unsure.

Judging by the few Forest team games he had studied, the Forest team seemed more accustomed to retreat to the penalty zone. Then they would confine themselves within the thirty-meter zone to allow the opponents to pass the ball back and forth outside. No wonder Twain was criticized by the media for having conservative play and being ugly to watch. Even though such a defense could bring victory, it was disdained by many people.

Ancelotti looked at the back of the Forest team again. Despite the busy front and midfield, the players on the rear defensive line had no intention of coming up to help. They stood in formation at the back, waiting quietly for AC Milan's potential offensive.

It appears to be a little disjointed? Ancelotti thought. The midfield and front field were inseparably close with the wide distance between the back field and midfield. Were they not afraid the big space would be exploited?

The AC Milan manager carefully recalled the performance of every line of the Forest team within the opening five minutes. The front and midfield were very active in the offense, making people think they were going to play offensive football. But the rear defensive line had never pressed over the midline and the two full backs also did not attack forward... Twain's choice in the left back position was Leighton Baines who was better at defense and not his preferred, Gareth Bale.

Looks like defense is the main theme?

As Ancelotti observed, AC Milan's field commander, brain and midfield leader, Pirlo was also watching. He also found that there appeared to be a fault zone between Nottingham Forest's midfield and rear defensive line, which could be used...

Pirlo readjusted the football under his feet and shot a meaningful glance at Kaka who looked back at him.

Kaka got the message and plugged in.

Meanwhile, the football flew from Pirlo's feet and rolled quickly on the turf toward Kaka. Ribéry shoveled midway but came up empty.

Kaka turned around and saw the football roll toward him, but at the same time he saw another thing — a man.

The Nottingham Forest red jersey stood out on the field. George Wood rushed toward Kaka along with the football.

The ball was bound to be received, but it seemed difficult to avoid the person. Kaka decided to protect the football and used his body to block.

He received the ball and used his skill to get the football over to protect it in front of his body, and then... Then he was thrown forward by Wood...

"Beep!" The referee's whistle sounded with the boos of the AC Milan fans.

"George Wood has fouled! Looks like Wood's closely marking Kaka for this game!"

Kaka helplessly laid on the ground as he waited for his teammate, Inzaghi to pull him up. Although it was not as obvious from the outside, the other man was stronger than he thought.

Pirlo ran over for the free kick. He had no regrets about the interruption of the attack. At the very least, he got a free kick in the front field. He also seemed to understand why the other manager dared to set aside such a gap between the rear defensive line and the midfield...

Because of that strong and tireless runner, number 13.

With him around, the empty section was not a void.

After he figured it out, Pirlo wondered about another question: There was really no need for Tony Twain to give Wood such a big responsibility. He just needed to draw the entire team back and that would do. Why did he arrange for the front field to press in but not let the rear defensive line come up to coordinate with the defense?

Pirlo decided to continue looking for the answer during the game.

He would first do this free kick and then figure it out.

Wood's foul was timely. If he had waited for Kaka to dribble the ball forward and then fouled, it would be too close to the goal and he might also have had to use his back to tackle the ball to stop the swift Brazilian. It would not have been as simple as a free kick.

Twain told him to foul a little further away from the danger zone, which Wood kept in mind.

The television screen displayed the distance of the free kick — thirty-four meters from the goal.

If he shot the ball directly, the success rate would not be high, so Pirlo decided to pass.

Maldini appeared in the Forest team's penalty area. When AC Milan encountered Liverpool in the last final, the first goal in the opening game was Maldini's shot, which was also a set piece.

This was Maldini's eighth appearance in the Champions League finals and he wanted to make the experience more legendary with one more goal.

Both tall players, Maldini and Nesta were in the crowd in the Forest team's box, waiting for the chance for a header.

The Forest Team's center forward, van Nistelrooy also came back to the box to defend and it looked like it was a full-on defense. But while everyone's focus was elsewhere, Ribéry lay quietly in wait near the center line.

Twain turned his head to smile at Dunn sitting beside him and said nothing. Dunn understood what he meant and said nothing as well.

Led by Albertini, he, Ashley Young, and van der Vaart formed a human wall of three players to block the ball. Everyone else went back to the box to defend, especially George Wood who closely followed Kaka.

Kaka had often encountered such treatment, so he did not take it seriously and led Wood in circles within the box. He was not the end point of the attack. The head area was the key point.

After Pirlo placed the football, he stepped back and found that the Forest team's human wall was too close, so he waved for the referee.

Fandel saw it, too. He ran over to warn Albertini, asking them to move the wall back by a couple of steps.

Albertini took his time to follow the order, but when Fandel turned and walked away, he and his two teammates slowly shuffled back in tiny steps — this is due to experience... I'm not going to listen properly and give you enough distance. The best thing is to get your free kick to end here with me!

As he had said before the game, when the game began, he would forget that he was once an AC Milan player. He would consider every detail and angle only for the Forest team.

Pirlo had also seen a lot of lip paid to the referee's demands. Anyway, he did not plan to shoot directly. If the free kick was moved forward, then so be it. He would kick the ball a little higher and it would be fine. It was not worth wasting time arguing over.

The referee signaled with a whistle that Pirlo could start the free kick.

Pirlo was going to twist the football around to bypass the human wall, but he clearly underestimated Albertini's game acumen. The moment he kicked, Albertini led Ashley Young and van der Vaart in a collective sprint before they jumped and waited for the football to fly out. The ten yard distance had been shortened to eight yards. Pirlo's shot was still on the upswing and did not reach its highest point. It could not avoid the sudden forward thrust of the human wall, and the football hit van der Vaart's head before it shot straight up. Originally the football was going to fly into the box, but it had become a straight up and down shot.

Pirlo held up his arm in protest to the referee about the action of the opponent's human wall.

It was a sticky situation for the referee. Unless the slow motion was replayed on the camera, it was really hard to say whether the wall moved before Pirlo kicked or after he had already kicked... The referee chose to remain silent, as he thought it was after Pirlo had kicked the football...

Pirlo saw that his protest was ineffective, so he wanted to rush up to grab the ball and launch an attack.

This time he was blocked by Albertini. The drop point no longer belonged to him.

Albertini suppressed Pirlo and turned his head to observe the situation. Then he looked up at the football falling down. He could tell from the feel of his body that Pirlo would not let it go. He was trying his best to squeeze in to snatch the drop point. Albertini would not give him such a chance, so he opened his arms to cover his position.

When he was still AC Milan, Pirlo had been seen as his successor because the two of them had a similar role in the midfield and characteristics in their playing were similar. During usual training, Albertini was always happy to pass on his skills to the other man. He was also proud and gratified to be able to groom another midfield commander for the team.

He never thought that his student would become a fierce enemy on the field and that there would be such a violent clash.

He also did not expect to teach another person, who could master the pace of the game, how to be a midfield commander...

When the ball fell, both Albertini and Pirlo jumped at the same time.

Pirlo already knew he was not destined to get the ball, but he could still interfere with Albertini getting the ball and not let him comfortably control the ball before launching another counterattack. Any fool

could see that it was the chance for the Forest team to fight back. The team captain, Maldini, Nesta, and his teammates were coming back to defend. He was going to buy them time.

As a former teammate, he certainly knew the strengths of the man in front of him. If he was in a good shape, he definitely could not give him the opportunity to easily possess the football and let him control the football, which meant he would take control of the pace of the game.

Albertini felt the collision from behind and tried to maintain his balance. Otherwise he would lose the landing ball... It was a bit difficult for his current physical condition, so he could only make up for it with his skill.

Pirlo was trying to force Albertini get the football with a header in mid-air. That way, his teammates would have a chance to intercept the ball, and the players heading back to defend would also have time.

However, Albertini chose to use his chest to stop the ball. He still managed to stop the football with his chest under Pirlo's close marking. His skills and experience played an important role.

But his body was not as good as before. Under Pirlo's constant impact, he felt that he had to give his best just to protect the ball, not to mention to possess the ball and then to pass it...

He needed someone to help share the burden.

Just as he was about to give way, he saw George Wood.

Without hesitation, he passed the football on to his second student.

Pirlo suddenly felt that the pressure in front of him was gone. Albertini had turned to run away, and the football was not at his feet! So where was the football?

Number 13!

George Wood dribbled the ball and charged up. Pirlo did not even have time to think and just reacted on instinct — and pounced on Wood.

When Wood saw Pirlo rush up, he sent the football out. His target was Albertini, who managed to shake off the defense.

The Forest team had to attack fast. Dribbling and adjusting the ball were not allowed, because it would give the opponent the time needed to return to defend.

After a clean pass, the football was back at Albertini's feet. Only then was Pirlo free to think about the problem in his head — he realized something was afoot.

No one's marking Albertini!

"Guard him!" He cried to the back. When he saw Gattuso rush towards the target, he was relieved.

The Forest team has George Wood, we have Gattuso!

Albertini was familiar with everyone in AC Milan, whether it was Pirlo or Gattuso. When he saw Gattuso rush up, he suddenly swung his leg for a long pass!

The football passed over Gattuso's head and flew toward the flank.

Franck Ribéry, who had been lying in wait, received the football.

It was as if it had been planned long ago. The Forest team only took a short time to turn the defense into an offense with the completion of three passes. It perfectly displayed Twain's pursuit of highly effective football. The AC Milan defenders had just run past the center circle — neither Maldini or Nesta was a defender with fast speed.

Ribéry received the ball but did not entangle with the opposing full-back, Oddo, on the flank or wait for his teammates to plug in to assist. He immediately sped up to break through the moment he stopped the ball and shook off Oddo.

"What a sharp breakthrough from Franck Ribéry!" There was no need to make a fuss in the announcement that Ribéry had managed to break through Oddo. The Frenchman had long ago proved that he was a world-class player with his last few seasons, as well as his performance at the World Cup.

Breaking through Oddo? Wasn't that a normal thing to do?

Ribéry did not break through along the flank. After he accelerated, he cut across to the middle. This made it more challenging for Oddo to catch up. If he had broken through on the flank, he could squeeze Ribéry out of bounds, and the space that Ribéry could use would narrow. Now that he was in the middle, it was not up to Oddo to stop Ribéry.

As it was a hasty retreat to defend, there were not many AC Milan players in defensive positions. Hence, there was plenty of running space, and it was wide open in front of Ribéry.

Nesta and Maldini had already returned to in front of the penalty box. They saw that Ribéry was a lone player and were not afraid that the other side would be in the offside. One of them stayed a little behind to defend and the other pressed forward to tackle. It was the most appropriate way to form enough depth in the strategic defense to deal with the striker who relied on speed to break through.

As he entered the thirty-meter zone, an alarm sounded over AC Milan's defensive zone.

Maldini was delayed at the back, and Nesta pressed ahead.

How could Ribéry not tell what they had in mind? Nottingham Forest itself was an outsider in the Premier League, where the manager took pleasure in studying a wide variety of defensive tactics. So, how could they not understand defense as players?

Ribéry did not give Nesta the time to press up. He suddenly swung his leg to shoot at twenty-five meters away from the goal!

He did not prepare the shot before. The momentum from the high-speed dribble became his running power, and the football flew past Nesta like a bullet.

Whoosh!

The football bypassed Nesta and Maldini, who were building strategic depth in the back. It drew a clearly recognizable arc in the air, then skirted around the fingertips of the Brazilian goalkeeper, Dida, to hit the inside of the inner post, and then...

Everyone saw as the football bounced back into the net.

“Bang!” The Olympic Stadium of Athens was like a volcano filled with TNT dynamites as it exploded in an instant.

“Eight minutes into the game! Just eight minutes! And Nottingham Forest has taken the lead! Who would have thought AC Milan’s defensive line was so fragile? A long shot of twenty-six meters away from the goal actually penetrated Dida’s hands... Oh my God! Nottingham Forest has shown their confidence in winning with their actions! Franck Ribéry is a hero in the minds of Nottingham Forest fans!”

When he saw the football enter the goal, Ancelotti turned to punch the plastic back of his coach’s seat. At the same time, Tony Twain did the same thing on the other side.

The former was because of his fury and frustration over the goal concede, while the latter was because of his excitement and exhilaration.

“1:0! The game has only been eight minutes and we’re ahead!” The commentator from England had become a Nottingham Forest fan. “The great Franck Ribéry is the second Zidane!”

“0:1, just eight minutes and AC Milan is already trailing. Such bad luck... Although Ribéry’s long shot was terrific, I would like to say that Demetrio’s passing was the highlight of this attack!” The Italian commentator sounded annoyed, but still praised the performance of Albertini, who had come from their country. Perhaps this would make him feel a little better?

Maldini did not have the time to be annoyed at conceding the goal. He had experienced many situations like it. He just stared at Demetrio Albertini, who celebrated with the Forest players.

He was equally familiar with Demetrio’s pass to Ribéry. During their time together at AC Milan, he had seen many of such passes every season. Some of them became goals in the end and some of them, unfortunately, did not. Among the men who had received his passes were Basten, Marcelo, Bierhoff, Shevchenko, Roberto Baggio, and so on. Now it was Ribéry.

The player who had once only passed this kind of ball to those wearing the AC Milan and Italy national team jerseys, now passed to what had become an enemy of AC Milan.

— I’m serious about wanting to beat AC Milan and go all out to defeat you to help the Forest team become the champion. That’s the farewell game I want. Do you understand, Paulo?

Of course, I get it, Demetrio...

All right, I’ll give you the farewell game you want!

Paulo Maldini picked up the fallen captain’s armband and turned to walk back toward the goal. He had to prepare for the kick-off in the center circle.