

Champions 551

Chapter 551: Like A Fallen Leaf to The Ground

"I thought with such an important final game, both teams would stabilize and hold. The opening ten minutes or so should have been a phase of mutual probing. After all, this is the first time both teams have played against each other in history. But I was wrong. AC Milan might have wanted to stabilize, but Tony Twain didn't give them that chance. Nottingham Forest's offense since the kick-off was not a bluff. They managed to crack open the gates of AC Milan in the first eight minutes! They did not sound them out at all... it looks like they're extremely familiar with the AC Milan team!" the commentator stated excitedly.

The truth of the matter was that Twain and Albertini were familiar with AC Milan. What would they need to feel out the team first?

When he had been a fan, Twain had not understood why some team managers said "I don't know this team" when they discussed their opponents. It happened all the time, especially with the managers of big clubs. Was it because the opponent was weak and therefore they felt it beneath them to understand? But when a heavyweight matchup came up, it still happened.

Hence, after he became the official manager of Nottingham Forest, he placed great importance to gather intelligence on his opponents. At first, the club did not have that capability, so he paid for the temporary workers himself to help him gather intelligence. Later, when the team's performance improved, the club was able to completely fulfill his requirements in this regard. Today's Nottingham Forest had a complete system of intelligence-gathering. Dunn had once said to Tang Jing that they did not care who the opponent was because they had all the intelligence they needed on the top sixteen teams. They would simply pull the information on the team they drew. It was the result of their work on the intelligence-gathering system.

Twain held a deep belief of the ancient Chinese wisdom of "know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated." No matter how strong his team was, they could not neglect the work of gathering intelligence on their opponents. Even if it was not used in the game, they would not know when it would be needed.

From the first day he assumed the official position as the Nottingham Forest manager, he took on the intelligence gathering of all the European powerhouse clubs as a long-term project. At the time, his team was still in League One — later known as English Football League Championship. He paid for someone to do the job out of his own pocket and did not trouble the club. It was only after the team had successfully been promoted to the Premier League that he took out the information he had collected and asked the club to take on the project.

The intelligence gathering on AC Milan began during that time. He did not know that he would encounter AC Milan in the final game of the 06-07 Champions League. He had just thought that if Nottingham Forest wanted to grow and embark on the road to becoming a powerhouse club, then the big clubs were bound to become his opponents and enemies in the near future. Therefore, he had to

gather intelligence as soon as possible and continued systematically. Otherwise, there would be no reference and research value in them at all.

Now, they had cracked open AC Milan's defense in the opening eight minutes. In addition to the players' outstanding play, as well as the appropriate tactical formulation, the long-term intelligence-gathering work had to be credited, too.

Twain hugged everyone around him in celebration. The first goal came so quickly that everyone felt that the trophy was getting closer to them.

On the other side, Ancelotti did not rush to the sidelines like some managers to remind the players what to do after he vented his anger on awning of the technical area. He just sat in his seat.

AC Milan was a traditionally strong team and had experienced countless tests like this one. Each one of the players was the elite among the elite. They were experienced and knew how to manage themselves. It was only a goal concede, which was not enough to scare the entire team, especially given that it was only eight minutes into the game. For AC Milan, they still had eighty-two minutes left to equalize and overtake Forest.

Sure enough, Maldini assumed his role as the team captain on the field. He comforted his teammates and loudly encouraged them. The teammates who were slightly shocked by the premature goal concede quickly calmed down and their morale recovered. The impact of the goal concede slowly faded.

Twain took in the scene. He snorted. He did not expect one goal to crush a team like AC Milan, otherwise it would be too easy to take down this world.

It was going to be a tough final that would not be easy for either side...

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The game restarted. After the kick-off, AC Milan gave up their intention to continue sounding out and launched a fierce offensive against the Forest team in their inner area. However, the results were minimal up against the Forest team's Wall Defense...

Pirlo realized that when the Nottingham Forest team contracted their defense, the gap between the midfield and the backfield disappeared and he could no longer exploit that area to attack. He could only slowly contend with the Forest team on the outside.

The Forest team sent Albertini to mark him and gave Kaka to the tireless George Wood.

The Forest team used relentless running and frequent fouls, as well as rough moves, to stop AC Milan's attacks. This trick appeared to be effective.

Pirlo could not easily send the football to where it needed to go. Even if he managed to send it out, Kaka might not be able to secure it under Wood's close marking and tackles. Even if Kaka received it, Inzaghi would not be able to come out and pick up the shot in the crowd. In the end, Kaka or Seedorf could only end the attack with a long shot.

It left them with very little choice.

Nottingham Forest unreasonably used aggressive running and high pressing to disrupt AC Milan's defense.

The tactic obtained a very good outcome within twenty minutes after the start of the game.

AC Milan had intended to look for opportunities at their own pace, using ball control and passes and cuts. However, they did not obtain the results they wanted during the twenty-minute game time, because their ball possession and passing became a mess under the Forest team's forced interceptions.

Restricted by Wood, Kaka rarely played. Under Albertini's defense, the most Pirlo did were straight passes, but not return passes or cross passes.

As time passed, the score still remained at 1:0 with Nottingham Forest in the lead.

Ancelotti stood up from his seat and walked to the sidelines but just quietly observed the situation on the field. Standing up gave him a much better view, and he could clearly see the situation.

Only twenty-five minutes had passed, and he was not worried. Despite a goal concede, he believed that the final victory would belong to his AC Milan team. Why would he be so confident? He had figured out Twain's tactics, and he knew what Nottingham Forest was going to do.

Running around such a large area was a physically draining job. George Wood was marking Kaka so closely, he was almost his shadow. Kaka found it difficult to even turn around, never mind trying to attack. As for the others, Seedorf, Pirlo, Inzaghi, They were all faced with the "meticulous" close marking from their opponents. The front of the Forest team's goal was so overcrowded that it could be the city. It was too difficult to launch an attack. Ancelotti was not in a hurry.

He knew that the Forest team could not last ninety minutes with such exhausting runs and defense. There were not many teams in the world that could hold such a high-intensity rhythm for ninety minutes. Perhaps the South Koreans would be able to...

Ancelotti did not believe the Forest team could hold on to such tight defense for ninety minutes. He believed that as game time went on, the Forest team's seemingly impenetrable defense was bound to reveal holes, and the experienced AC Milan would be certain to seize the opportunity to reverse the game in an instant.

The most important thing now was not to let the opponent's defense and interceptions disrupt their game rhythm. AC Milan still had to stick to their style of football. Ancelotti was aware that Twain wanted to drag the unhurried AC Milan into a fast pace like in the Premier League and use speed and chaos to win. He could not let the other man get what he wanted.

He observed for a while on the sidelines, and then shouted Pirlo's name. He made a hand gesture of pressing down to him.

Pirlo nodded to show his understanding.

He had the same idea as his manager. If he were to blindly do a straight pass, he would only fall into the opponent's trap. Constant mistakes would impact the confidence and morale of his teammates while giving the opponent too many chances to fight back.

The current focus of the game for AC Milan was not to equalize, but to get more control of the football, stabilize the situation, and slowly contend with the opponent.

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“Ancelotti is an old fox. I don’t like him, but I have to admit that he does have skill,” Twain muttered to himself in the coaches’ seat.

Ancelotti had read his intentions, and he had figured out Ancelotti’s ideas as well. This kind of final game was the best stage for the managers’ match of wits. His opponent was not an idiot who could be easily beaten, but a manager who had won the Champions League title once. With that title alone, the other party had a lot more experience than Twain.

The fat Ancelotti wanted to drag the game out until Forest ran out of strength, and then use AC Milan’s experience and methods to determine the outcome.

Twain did not deny that his team could not hold on to their defensive tactics for all ninety minutes, but he was also not going to give Ancelotti the chance to reverse the tables. The only way was to score more goals before his team ran out of stamina and establish the victory early and completely crush AC Milan’s remaining hope of a reversal.

You want to reverse the tables? I’ll score a few more goals and then see how you can overtake!

Don’t say you’re going to turn everything on its head?

Twain did not think his team was like AC Milan in 2005. Likewise, he would also never admit that the current AC Milan was Liverpool in 2005. He was arrogant enough to think that he was the heavens above his head.

“Do we need to step up offense, Tony?” Kerslake asked from next to him.

Twain turned his head to look at the silent Dunn.

Staring at the field, Dunn noticed the glances from the two men beside him and turned his head. He shook his head. “No. I think we’re good for now. Our defense is solid, and we have opportunities for counterattacks. Now it’s up to Ribéry and the others to grab them.”

Twain nodded in agreement. “I’m of the same opinion. To step up our offense requires putting in more players. We are defending now and can’t pull too many people. And David, you need to know AC Milan is very cunning... If we take the risk to press on, it will allow Pirlo and Kaka to seize the opportunity. Our current state is good, so nothing has to change.”

Tony is really conservative Kerslake could not help but think, even though he had made it many times... If it had been him, maybe before the game, he would get the team to fight it out with AC Milan win to their hearts’ content! He did not like to be conservative, but he expressed understanding and respect for Twain’s decision. After all, this was the final game of a major competition. Any manager would be afraid to take risks in a game like this and trifle with their own coaching careers.

Just thinking back to the dreary final at Old Trafford Stadium in Manchester in 2003, where two Italian teams tied their civil battle at 0:0 after 120 minutes and finally relied on a penalty shootout to decide the outcome. Kerslake had watched the game in on the television, and his disdain for Italian football

originated from it. He thought that the penalty shootout had been planned by both managers before the final, and that little sense of accomplishment could be had from how the championship title was won.

Little did he know that Tony Twain would study that final game countless times. For the vast majority of fans, that game had viewing pleasure, but for the managers, it was a valuable teaching and research material.

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Ancelotti instructed Pirlo on the sidelines to reassure the team and to enter their own rhythm, before he walked back to sit down again in the coaches' seat and didn't get up again.

The year after they crushed Barcelona 4:0: that kind of final was memorable, but had only appeared once in all these years. If all the finals were prepared with that kind of final as the standard, the manager would collapse after conceding a goal.

Ancelotti did not think the second UEFA Champions League title of his coaching career would be easy to take. He was prepared for the worst and ready to do his best to fight with his opponent.

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In the 37th minute of the first half, with more than eight minutes from the end of the first half, the score still had not changed. On the big screen, the 1:0 score somewhat quieted the AC Milan fans. For a period, only the Forest fans' singing could be heard in the Olympic Stadium of Athens.

They sang the old team song, again and again.

The Forest fans' hearts were as sweet as if they had drunk honey. They were also particularly fired up in singing the old song.

Michael Bernard and his buddies sang and shouted at the top of their lungs despite their hoarse voices. The Forest fans became protagonists in the stands of the stadium, venting the emotions they had accumulated over twenty-seven years and staying unconcerned about how their opponents felt.

"We are the strongest team in the world!"

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In the 40th minute, AC Milan began to change their tempo and retreated slightly after their successive sieges on the Forest team goal were not effective. The first half was almost over, and AC Milan had to maintain their strength.

Nottingham Forest launched an offensive. This time, it was threatening even though it was not a fast attack. The Forest team was not a team that only knew how to launch a swift attack. Twain had lined up a formation with a single striker. He placed five players in the midfield using a 4-4-1-1 formation against AC Milan's 4-4-1-1. Van Nistelrooy was the single spearhead, and van der Vaart was in charge of organizing the team's offense behind him. The Dutchman was put in the starting lineup because when Twain considered the need to play the positional play, he wanted him to organize the attack, while he shared the pressure on Albertini. After all, Demetrio still needed to strengthen his defense against Pirlo, and he did not really have many chances to organize attacks.

The football was passed to van Nistelrooy's feet, but as he was closely marked and could not turn around, he could only pass the football back to van der Vaart coming from the midfield.

As soon as van der Vaart took the ball, Gattuso leaned in.

Ancelotti knew van der Vaart acted as a midfield commander for Nottingham Forest. Twain letting him start was certainly to get him to organize the attacks. Therefore, as long as they restricted van der Vaart, the Forest team's offense would have no option other than to play defensive counterattacks.

Since George Wood tries to contain Kaka and Albertini tries to entangle with Pirlo, why can't our Gattuso restrict their van der Vaart? Furthermore, Ancelotti had always believed that Gattuso was the best defensive midfielder in the world.

George Wood? He was just a star player made up by the English media that liked to brag...

Ancelotti had really thought so before the game.

Now, he had to revise his assessment of Wood. A defensive midfielder who could render the world's best attacking midfielder, Kaka, useless for nearly forty minutes could not be made up.

Kaka went back to participate in the defense, and Wood followed him. He was no longer the rookie that had nothing to do with offense. After three years of training under Albertini, he had learned how to be involved with the team's offense.

He saw that van der Vaart needed backup as Gattuso's defense made things extremely hard for the Dutchman. If no one came up to assist, the Forest team's attack could only have two results — one, van der Vaart hurriedly passed the football and lost it. Two, van der Vaart's ball would be directly intercepted by Gattuso.

Either way, it was not good for the Forest team.

Albertini was older. This required someone to sprint back and forth, which better suited for the young and strong Wood.

George ran up. He did not shout loudly as he believed van der Vaart knew he was coming up.

Sure enough, van der Vaart passed the football on to Wood under the constant harassment from Gattuso.

Wood did not linger after he received the ball. He immediately diverted the ball to Ribéry, who plugged into the middle.

When he no longer had the ball, the pressure on van der Vaart lessened and he shook off Gattuso to run to the left flank. Twain asked him and Ribéry to regularly switch positions in the game because the two players had the ability to play in the left flank and the middle. The switch of positions could effectively enhance the Forest team's offensive routine and disrupt the opponent's defense.

Ambrosini followed Ribéry to the middle and Gattuso decided to follow van der Vaart after some hesitation. Who knew if Ribéry would pass the football back? Van der Vaart's performance on the left flank could not be ignored.

Ribéry found that cracks did not appear in the opposing defense just because of his change in position with van der Vaart. Ambrosini followed him closely, so he passed the football back to Wood.

Wood's position was further back, and for the moment, no AC Milan players had come up to tackle.

After a careful study of Nottingham Forest's two games against Chelsea, Ancelotti acknowledged Wood's attacking prowess but knew that he did not have fluent command of it. The threat that he posed would decrease as long as he was kept as far away from the goal as possible.

Therefore, in this game, the defensive strategy for Wood was not to let him near the box and for him to pass the ball outside if he had to.

Ribéry passed the football to Wood, wanting to do a wall pass with Wood. In fact, Wood thought the same. He saw Ribéry turn suddenly and rush directly into the box, so he launched a straight pass.

Unfortunately, Ambrosini saw through the Forest team's simple tactical coordination. Just when Ribéry turned around, he immediately tackled him to the ground to stop the attack.

The referee's whistle sounded. Ambrosini had fouled. Nottingham Forest was awarded a free kick about thirty meters from the goal.

The exact distance was displayed on the television screen as twenty-eight meters.

Originally in the backfield, Albertini started to run forward when he saw the Forest team got a free kick in the front. The Forest players seemed to be waiting for him. Before he ran up, no one went to place the football. They just let the football rest at the spot of the foul.

"Albertini is running up, and it looks like he's going to take the free kick!" The English and Italian commentators got excited at the same time.

"Make a human wall with five players!" Maldini shouted in the penalty area after it was determined that Albertini would take the free kick.

He was completely aware of his old friend's free kick standard.

In the 2000 Champions League game, with AC Milan versus Barcelona and Albertini up against Rivaldo, the face-off between the two world-class free kick masters started with an equal score of 2:2. The final score of the game was 3:3. If Albertini had not been there, it would have been a different result.

Now that he was older, people were bound to think that his set piece skills had degenerated, right? It would appear so. Gareth Bale was the main player for free kicks, and the second was Eastwood. But that was because Albertini did not play very often.

In January of that year, at the farewell match that AC Milan prepared for him, the older man still used a long-distance free kick to blow Barcelona's goal wide open.

Woe be to anyone who dared to underestimate his free kicks!

Maldini dared not take it lightly. He even went up to direct his teammates to make the wall.

Albertini ran over, picked up the football, and placed it carefully on the turf.

When he raised his head and straightened up, AC Milan's human wall had not yet been lined up. Dida was directing the human wall as well as Maldini was also in command. The scene looked a little chaotic. He did not know whether AC Milan was deliberately engaging in psychological tactics or not.

Albertini remained unmoved. He retreated and quietly waited for the opponent to form a good wall.

AC Milan's human wall lined up longer than usual, but the Forest players were not impatient because they had their own things to do.

Ribéry suddenly came up to high-five Albertini standing in front of the ball. "All the vest, Captain!" Then he turned and walked away.

The Frenchman might have done it on a whim, but since he took the lead, the rest of the Forest team felt that this looked so cool that they ran up one by one. The second player to high-five him was van der Vaart, and the third was van Nistelrooy. The Dutch striker asked him with a laugh, "do you want me to do the shot instead?"

A number of Forest players came up to high-five their captain as they stood in line. This had never been seen in previous games.

Both the televised broadcast and the commentators noticed the scene happening on the field. No one paid attention to when AC Milan would be able to line up their human wall.

"Let's see what's happening on the field... Ah, all the Forest players have gathered around Albertini to high-five and say something to him..."

In fact, AC Milan's human wall was already formed, but the Forest team was not done on their side. Now it was their turn to wait.

If the referee had not forcibly intervened, perhaps even the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, would have gone up to high-five Albertini. If AC Milan's slow-going human wall was really a psychological tactic against Nottingham Forest, in that case they were now being countered by the Forest team...

Kerslake turned to look at Twain. He thought it must have been Twain's idea. Twain shrugged and spread his hands to protest his innocence. "I did not do this! I never thought there would be such a scene... Don't blame all their antics on me, okay?"

Kerslake laughed happily. "Who made you this person who's always getting into all kinds of jigs?"

Wood finally high-fived Albertini. When everyone started high-fiving him in the beginning, Albertini was surprised. Later, he calmly accepted this special treatment with a smile. It was only when he saw Wood that the expression on his face changed.

He had always wanted to teach Wood how to kick a free kick, but this boy's talent in this area was nil. It was not easy to bring the range of his shots within the goal posts. But to demand that he be able to bypass the wall and the goalkeeper, would it not be near impossible?

After Wood and Albertini high-fived each other, they wanted to open their mouths to say something, but were interrupted by the referee's whistle.

The two men turned their heads to look at the displeased-looking German referee, Fandel. Albertini smiled as he gently pushed Wood. "Go away, George, don't get in the way of my goal."

Wood did not move. "I'm here to cover for you."

Albertini laughed even more happily. "The whole world knows you don't know how to kick a free kick."

"Then I'll watch at your side." Wood insisted on staying, and Albertini could not do anything about him.

Regarding this scene after the human wall, Maldini really did not know how he felt. It looked like Demetrio had met a lot of new friends in England and was happy in the final years of his career. He should be happy about that, so why did he feel little jealous and disgruntled about his opponent showing such a close comradery?

"All right, George, up to you. If you want to learn something, go right ahead... I don't have many chances to teach you anymore." Albertini turned. "You won't be able to master the free kicks, but I will teach you... The most important thing is your mind. Right here, you must..." he jabbed himself in the heart, "make sure you're calm. The more critical the moment is, the more you must remain calm."

With that, Albertini turned around and looked across at the human wall and AC Milan's goal. He no longer paid any attention to George Wood and the smile on his face was gone.

The figures of his teammates were no longer on this field. The human wall? The opponent? They all vanished. In Albertini's eyes, the only things on the field were an empty goal, himself, and the football under his feet.

On the opposite side of him was his former mother team, AC Milan, which he had loved the most in his life. Such thoughts did not appear in Albertini's mind. He only had one thought right now, and that was to score a goal.

That is my path.

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There was no sound in more than half of the pubs in Nottingham city. If the bright lights could not be seen clearly from the outside, an unwitting person would certainly think that the pubs were closed.

Kenny Burns did not go to watch the game live. He wanted to stay in his pub to help out. That night, his business was exceptionally good. The fans who could not travel to Athens had chosen to come to the most familiar pub to order a large pint of beer and watch the televised broadcast. They would cheer for their favorite team in England.

The Forest fans in the stands sang and so did the fans in the pubs. When their mouths were dry and voices hoarse, they just took big gulps of cold beer, cried out at the chill and then continue to sing with joyous abandonment.

The bar was full of people with flushed faces, but no one made a peep. Everyone had the same pose — glasses in their hands as they stretched their necks to watch the television hanging from the ceiling. Even the waiters and the boss were still.

If a stranger were to charge in, he would think that he was in the world of Harry Potter — had all these people been petrified by magic?

A close-up shot of Albertini appeared on the screen. He looked ahead with a firmness in his eyes and a serious expression on his face.

The commentator did not speak, and there was no other sound from the television speakers other than the noise from the fans in the stadium. For a moment, it gave rise to the illusion that the transmission signal was broken.

“Oh lord...” Someone sighed when they finally could not stand the oppressive silence.

“Beep—” The whistle rang.

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Albertini ran up, raised his leg and kicked.

The football went straight over the human wall and straight into the sky. It looked like it was going to fly out of the field and into the stands where the AC Milan fans gathered.

However, that was just an illusion.

The football spun in the air with its angle adjusted as it began to fall towards the goal.

Dida used all his strength to jump. His height of 1.96 meters, combined with a pair of long arms, were enough to block the area above the goal.

He did not manage to touch the football...

The football skimmed past his fingertips.

Was it going out of bounds?

No, this was a free kick from Demetrio Albertini. It was the free kick known as “Albertini’s banana kick.”

After it skimmed past Dida’s fingertips, the football suddenly changed direction and plummeted!

It happened in an instant, and people only felt the slight change in the trajectory of the football.

The ball brushed against the crossbar as it fell into the net.

Like a fallen leaf to the ground...

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When Albertini first debuted, he already showed an amazing talent for football. Gullit once pointed at his young teammate and said to Sacchi, “he’s a tough one.” To which, Sacchi replied, “yes, he has the playing rhythm in his body.”

The AC Milan manager discovered his talent for long shots and free kicks, so he told him to learn the “banana kick” that only South American players could make. He succeeded and the “banana kick” became his trademark move. He had used the stunt countless times to besiege others’ goals and repeatedly brought results for AC Milan.

Banana kick = Albertini = AC Milan.

For thirteen years, this was a given. The three factors made up an indestructible triangle.

When Albertini still wore the red and black striped jersey to set foot in San Siro stadium, he never thought he would become AC Milan's enemy one day. He wanted to play there until he retired.

When Galliani decided to inform Albertini that "AC Milan no longer needs you. We have the young players like Pirlo and Kaka," the manager, known for his shrewdness in the football world, did not think that one day his team would encounter Albertini in the Champions League final, and the player he did not need would give him the hardest stab.

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"Long live!" The Nottingham city, which had been quiet a moment ago, erupted into a huge roar, ringing through the night sky.

"Long Live Demetrio! Long live Nottingham Forest!"

"He scored! He has scored! Demetrio Albertini! Abandoned by AC Milan, with his iconic 'banana kick.' Nottingham Forest extended its lead to two goals!" The British commentator was a little incoherent with excitement.

"The player that we didn't want has given us a fatal blow... This is just too cruel, too dramatic..." the Italian commentator said feebly. Should he cheer that Albertini was old but still vigorous? Perhaps at the end of this game, they could still say in a self-deprecating manner, "at least the outcome was determined by a player groomed by AC Milan..."

In the VIP seats, a polite smile did not even exist on Berlusconi's face. Sitting next to him, Galliani leaned on the back of the chair, looking very powerless indeed.

Not far away, the chairman of Nottingham Forest Football Club, Evan Doughty and his good friend the club's marketing manager, Allan Adams jumped and hugged in celebration. After their embrace, Evan waved his fists excitedly at the field.

"Terrific job! Well done!" There was no other sound from his mouth other than that. He did not care about the feelings of the AC Milan Football Club's top echelon. After being together with Twain for a long time, he was more or less afflicted with some of his bad habits. When it was time to be proud, it should be the time to celebrate wildly and enjoy to the fullest. Why should he pay attention to the others' mood?

As his role model, Twain was crazier than he was. After Albertini's goal, he held his arms high and rushed straight onto the field. He was offensively conspicuous and stood out as he dashed all the way in his suit. If it had been usual, he might have been knocked to the ground by the stadium security guard like a naked streaker. However, the field was complete chaos. The ground seemed to be shaking, and the security guards had not reacted as they looked at Twain, allowing him to rush up the field. Twain did not rush onto the field to wave his fists before he finished. He ran straight to Albertini and pushed the veteran to the ground to pile on him.

“F**k! Demetrio, you did it!” These were the last words Albertini heard before he was crushed underneath the bodies of his teammates.

Twain’s passionate celebration also ignited the mood of the Forest fans in the stands. Together, they sang the first team song when the Forest team won their two Champions League titles —“We got the whole world in our hands.”

Michael, John and Bill sang with their hoarse voices... They were not so much singing as they were yelling the song, as if they were going to rip their vocal chords apart, as if the failure to do so would not show how excited they were.

“We got the whole world in our hands! We got the whole world in our hands! This damn world is in our hands! We’re the strongest in the world!”

“The singing voices of the Nottingham Forest fans... and the song of Nottingham Forest fans is once again ringing through the European arena! We seem to be instantly transported back to The Olympiastadion in Munich, Germany in 1979. That was when Brian Clough’s Nottingham Forest appeared in the Champions League finals for the first time and shocked Europe as soon as they appeared. No one thought anything of them, but they ended up winning! Twenty-eight years later, Tony Twain has taken over the mantle of the veteran Manager Clough and led a brand-new Nottingham Forest to appear on the Champions League finals. This time, he vowed not to let the championship title to be sidelined! 2:0! The red color is back!”

Yes, baby! We’re back, and ready to take back the lost glory of our yesteryears!

Chapter 552: A Battle of Wits and Valour

Ancelotti was not a someone that could keep a cool head during a crisis and calmly observe changes from the technical area. Now that they were two goals behind, people would suspect that he was a little abnormal if he could still appear to be calm.

What did it mean to concede two goals first in such an important final? If it were another team, they might think about raising their hands in surrender.

Although Ancelotti stood up from his seat with a grim face, he did not intend to make any adjustments as the first half was soon coming to an end. He wanted to use the method to tell the players that he was angry.

Even if the opponent’s defense is very tight, George Wood has real talent and our offense is under a lot of pressure, it is not an excuse for our rear defensive line to concede two goals in a row.

Defense is defense, offense is offense.

Ancelotti knew that AC Milan had a defensive problem. These days, there were few strong teams that had no problems in their defense. AC Milan’s problem was that the rear defensive line was aging and had frequent injuries. Ancelotti put Maldini as the center back because he knew Paulo was older, so he arranged for Nesta to protect him on the side.

However, he did not expect the Forest team to take advantage of a quick counterattack and set piece to rip AC Milan's defensive line apart so easily. The Forest team had a total of four offensive opportunities in the first half and scored two goals. This efficiency... everyone in England stated that Tony Twain was a manager who attached great importance in efficient football and his team was an efficient killer team. Ancelotti did not quite believe it at the time, but now he had to believe it even if he did not want to.

Therefore, he just stood on the sidelines and looked at the field with a cold expression. At the same time, his brain rapidly analyzed the current situation to figure out what kind of targeted adjustments should be made during the halftime interval.

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The frenzied celebration was forcibly terminated by the referee. When he pulled up the Forest players stacked on top of each other in a pile, he saw Tony Twain in a suit lying on top of Albertini, between laughter and tears.

"Mr. Twain, you shouldn't be here," he said to Twain with a cool expression.

After he was pulled up, Twain tidied his suit before he said with a grin, "I was too excited. Hope you understand, Mr. Referee."

"If you don't go back, I'm going to put you in the stands." Fandel made to look like he was going to pull a card out, and Twain hurriedly waved his hands as he walked out.

"I'm on my way out. I'm leaving now..."

He did not forget to give his players a thumbs up along the way. Then he kept waving his arms to make the Forest fans in the stands sing louder.

Every time he waved, the singing volume in the stands went up a notch. He was like an orchestra conductor conducting the Forest fans at the Olympic Stadium of Athens to follow his signals to cheer the team on.

"This kind of thing is generally done by the players during a dead ball, but in the Forest team, it's what their manager does. Tony Twain is really an unusual manager. Leading with two goals, his coaching level is just as unusual!"

As Twain walked back to the technical area, the entire stadium was filled with the singing and shouts of the Nottingham Forest fans. The AC Milan fans had thought about countermeasures and were just about open their mouths when they were pushed back by the singing of the English people.

The moment belonged to the Nottingham Forest fans, who did not allow others to disturb their celebratory blowout.

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Albertini finally got out from under his teammates' impassioned celebration. Because Twain had suddenly charged over, he was still at the front of the opponent's penalty area.

He stood up and saw Maldini, not far ahead of him.

The joyous smile was wiped from his face as the two men met gazes for a moment, until Maldini averted his eyes and Albertini turned to walk away.

No matter how deep their friendship usually was in private, they now met as enemies. There was nothing much to say as enemies. The result would show for itself on the field.

If the Forest team won, he would hug Maldini at the end of the game. But for now, he could not even spare a smile to the other man.

As the game resumed, Ancelotti did not return to his seat. He stood on the sidelines with a cool expression like an ancient Italian sculpture. He put pressure on his players in this way.

Whereas Tony Twain had already returned to calm and sat down again to observe the game. With nearly fifty minutes more to go, this was not the time to take things lightly.

The rampant singing in the stands finally stopped, and everyone could hear the voices of the AC Milan fans again. But the Nottingham Forest fans did not cease for a second. They were just brewing another way to cheer their team on, which was to strike a blow to their opponents.

Moments later, as the game entered its 43rd minute, a song came from the stands of the Nottingham Forest fans.

This time, the Forest fans used Joe Dolce's classic pseudo-Italian song Shaddap You Face to provoke Ancelotti standing on the sidelines. They believed that Ancelotti would understand the meaning of the lyrics.

"What's-a matter you? Why you look-a so sad?"

Tens of thousands of Forest fans sang the chorus together, which was spectacular.

Only the fans from England had such skills in provoking people with endless new means. A battle did not just include the profanities and middle fingers.

This song lasted until the end of the first half before it turned into a spell of laughter. The Forest fans were happy to see their team end the first half with a two-goal lead.

The Forest players continuously waved to rouse the Forest fans in the stands. Throughout the first half, they felt that the fans fought alongside them and that they were never alone. For the Forest players, they had become accustomed to such a game. No matter what, the fans were always firmly behind them to cheer them on and do everything possible to strike the opponent.

"The halftime whistle has rung! The first half of the game belonged entirely to Nottingham Forest! During these forty-five minutes, even though AC Milan had the upper hand in ball control and possession time, it was Nottingham Forest that created opportunities to score and seized them. AC Milan had nothing other than the possession of the ball, and they did not create any attacking opportunities that could threaten Edwin van der Sar. Pirlo and Kaka were frozen by the close marking of Albertini and George Wood, respectively, while the rest were caught up in the Forest team's impenetrable defense. Tony Twain's tactics suppressed Ancelotti. Twain is temporarily in the lead in this matchup between the two managers."

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With a dark expression and a bowed head, Ancelotti walked quickly into the tunnel. Twain deliberately let him walk in front and stayed outside, patting the shoulders of the Forest players as they left the field one by one before he followed his own people. Before going in, he did not forget to applaud the fans in the stands.

By the time Twain entered the locker room, everyone had gone in before him. Everyone was thrilled about the first half of the game. Who would have thought that they could lead Milan by two goals?

The team they were ahead of was not some average team but the powerhouse team, AC Milan, who had won the Champions League six times!

Twain did not stop these players from their excitement. He could not think of any reason to keep them from getting excited.

After a while, he cleared his throat to indicate that he had something to say, and the locker room was immediately quiet.

“I’m proud of your performance!” Twain’s first words made everyone in the locker room applaud and whistle.

“2:0!” He extended two fingers, which looked like they represented the victory sign. “I can’t find fault with anything at all. I believe that our opponents in front of the televisions and in the stands with their binoculars can’t either! Keep up your performance in the second half. If we end up winning the game, no one will dare to say we won the title by luck. Maybe before this game, people would think that AC Milan deserved to win this game because they had won a total of six championships in history, and we only had two. But you gave them a slap in the face in the first half!”

When the players finished cheering, Twain pressed his hands down and reminded, “But don’t be happy too soon. Our opponent is not an unruly team after all. Be careful. They may bite back in the second half. In the next half, we will still stick to the defensive counterattack and high-pressing tactics. Counter-press if we lose the ball and intercept immediately to stop their attacks. Don’t blindly waste our opportunities. Any team that wastes opportunities is bound to suffer for it. I don’t think a two-goal lead is enough. Don’t let go of any chances to score in the second half and play as if we currently have a tie game. Score a few more goals until our opponent is in total despair!”

Everybody said Tony Twain was a conservative guy whose football was so passive and ugly that it was unenjoyable. But he always told his team that “1:0” was the least secure score in the world. He always wanted his team to score the more goals in every game.

In fact, Twain was not conservative. It was just that everyone misconstrued the meaning of defensive counterattack. Twain believed that the basis of any offense was defense, just like repairing a house and building a high-rise building. The more levels a building had, the more secure the foundation had to be. He did not believe there was such a thing as a castle in the air in the world. He was realistic. An attack without a solid defense could not stand up to a real test, just like a building with an unstable foundation would collapse like a house of cards when blown by a gust of wind, not to mention a disaster such as an earthquake.

The reason Barcelona failed in the league tournament was because their offense was so gorgeous that they forgot they still needed to defend. Barcelona’s midfield often did not have a defensive type of

midfielder. Once their attack was blocked in front and unable to break through in a long time, the problems with their defense would gradually be exposed, and finally a blowout would form, which would completely break them down.

Such offensive football was not what Twain wanted.

What he wanted was stability, which overrode everything else. As long as their defense was not fortified, he was determined not to attack. He would fight with all his might unless the situation was critical to the point of necessity.

Now that the Forest team was ahead AC Milan by two goals, he could imagine the kind of pressure his team would face in the second half. AC Milan would go crazy to launch a counterattack. His team's defensive pressure would further increase. They had to stabilize their defense even more. And then...playing by the same rulebook, they would look for the opportunity for any sneak attack.

As long as they held their ground in the beginning of the second half, their opponents were bound to become more and more agitated as time passed. With the goal difference of two balls weighed down on their heads like a boulder, they would not sit still. When their opponents were busy fighting on the front line, more and more holes would appear behind them and catching the holes was what the Forest team was best at.

"So, the key to the second half of the game is not to concede any goal in the opening fifteen minutes. Even one goal will make them go as crazy, like a frenzy of sharks that smelled blood. In other words, a solid defense..." Twain raised his index finger, "is the most important requirement and our first aim. During that time, we can sacrifice the offense. Once these fifteen minutes are over, we will wait for the opportunity to sneak an attack."

"Finally, keep in mind!" Twain raised his volume. "Victory must belong to us!"

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Unlike the high-spirited atmosphere in the Forest team locker room, the atmosphere in AC Milan's locker room was a bit subdued.

Most people chose to spend those precious fifteen minutes in silence.

How many people could have imagined the first half of the Champions League final would turn out like that? They, the illustrious AC Milan, conceded two goals to Nottingham Forest in forty-five minutes. What was even more humiliating than this was they were so stunned that they could not find their way and did not have a single threatening attack. They were as powerless as if they were trapped in a quagmire.

What was going on? Almost all of the AC Milan fans asked in the stands, which was why they had not fought back to the Forest fans.

At the same time, similar questions also hovered in the minds of the AC Milan players.

Something is wrong with our offense and we couldn't find a specific direction. As soon as Pirlo and Kaka were closely marked, our team's offense became a ship lost at sea without the guidance of a lighthouse. This wasn't a one-time thing... But in the face of our opponent's tight defense, what can we do?

With a sullen face, Ancelotti finally spoke.

“Does anyone think that this current situation is familiar?” When he asked, everyone raised their heads, trying to search their memories. The professional players went through so many games in their lifetimes. How would they know which game situation was similar to the game they were playing?

In the end, Ancelotti gave them the answer. “Our game against Liverpool in the 2005 Champions League final. Do you remember that? We were three goals ahead of them in the first half and as a result?”

He did not need to finish the rest. Many of the current AC Milan people knew the case. In that game, with an opening goal from Maldini, AC Milan had an amazing first half, similar to Nottingham Forest in the current game. During the halftime interval, with their three-goal lead, the AC Milan players could not wait to start their winning celebration in the locker room. The sound of which could not be blocked out by the brick walls and the AC Milan’s wild celebration was heard by the Liverpool people which inspired their fighting spirit and fury within.

As a result, in the game with the initial victory within their grasp, AC Milan were overtaken by their opponents with three consecutive goals in the second half. Their confidence and morale were hit hard and completely collapsed during the penalty shootout. In the end, they lost to Liverpool and ceded the victory in their hands.

For AC Milan, that game was a huge disgrace and gave Liverpool the reputation for being the first to reverse in the Champions League final in its fifty-year history.

“We’re just two goals behind now. What’s there to worry about? The opponent who trailed three goals behind us could defeat us. So why can’t we?”

When he said that, everyone’s eyes lit up again.

Indeed, if we can be overtaken, why can’t it happen to others?

Do we lack the faith and strength to win? Have we lost interest in the championship title? Don’t we even want to win this trophy in front of us?

No, that’s not it. If that’s the case, why can’t we overtake Nottingham Forest?

Ancelotti was delighted to see his players immediately regain their confidence. He believed in AC Milan’s strength. Whether the immediate opponent was Nottingham Forest, Manchester United, Real Madrid or Barcelona, he was confident in defeating them all. The key was whether the players still had the confidence to win. As long as they had the confidence to win, then it would not be a problem.

In the match against Liverpool, it was because the opponent caught up with three consecutive goals in a short period of time that caused the players’ confidence to be hit hard, and following which even their star player could not score... Just imagine Shevchenko, a world-class striker, who never would have believed he could face a situation where he could not score a goal in the face of an almost empty goal? But that was what happened.

It was because of that lesson that Ancelotti was convinced that what was important at halftime was not to tell the players the tactics they would play in the second half. Nine out of ten players would not listen.

The most important thing now was to restore the confidence of the players and let them know that even trailing by two goals was not the end of the world.

“We will continue to step up our offense in the second half.” It was only when the players were convinced there was hope in the second half that Ancelotti began to lay out the specific tactics. “We have no other way other than to attack, but we must also watch out behind us. Don’t give the Forest team a chance to counterattack. If you lost the ball in front, counter-press immediately. Foul if you can’t tackle it! Pirlo.”

Pirlo looked up at the manager.

“Albertini is older, and his stamina can’t keep up with yours. You have to keep running and not stay in one place. Accelerate to get rid of him! Also, since the opponent can use set pieces to attack our goal, why can’t we also use set pieces? We were given four free kicks in the first half in the front field and you didn’t even make use of one.”

Pirlo kept quiet in the face of Ancelotti’s criticism.

“We will step up our offense in the second half and increase the pressure on their defense. We will also get more set pieces in the front. Stop wasting them. Seize the chance and score!”

In addition to the high pressing, the Forest team’s pullback was also very fast. In the face of the overloaded thirty-meter zone, Kaka’s breakthrough and speed did not even have the room to play. They could only rely on Pirlo’s dispatches and place kicks.

Ancelotti decided to do this for the time being and make adjustments based on changes in the situation for the second half.

What else could they do since they were the ones trailing and not the front-runner?

However, things were not as bad as some people thought.

In a marathon, the one with the biggest pressure was often the front-runner who took the lead. The experienced long-distance runners would choose to follow the front-runner at all times and only power up to sprint at the last minute. They would ditch the exhausted front-runner, and hold up their arms as they dashed across the finish line.

For a football game, the ninety minutes was no doubt a marathon. Nottingham Forest became the inexperienced and seemingly impressive front-runner. But could they hold on to the end? Who could guarantee that they would not be crushed by the pressure of being in the lead? Ancelotti decided to be the shadow lurking behind the front-runner, waiting for the right opportunity, always biting at the heels of the front-runner, not allowing him the slightest chance of relaxation, so that the pressure in his heart mounted and accumulated until he could no longer bear it any longer...

It would be time for AC Milan to become the champions.

I know Tony Twain always liked to say: a one-goal lead is the least secure.

Mr. Twain, do you still think it’s safe to lead with two goals?

Chapter 553: The Bodyguard

Ancelotti told his players about his “front-runner theory” so that they did not have to worry about the two-goal gap. As long as we keep putting pressure on them, those two goals will become a burden on our opponent instead. Everyone thought the manager made a lot of sense. Being in the lead was not necessarily a good thing, especially for a rookie team like Nottingham Forest with no experience of winning a major tournament. If they could not secure their two-goal lead, it could incumber them at the last minute.

After the second half began, AC Milan saw that Nottingham Forest did not intend to play offense with them, so they besieged the Forest team’s penalty area and bombarded them.

The Forest players were well acquainted with this sort of situation. They knew how to deal with the enemy’s attacks.

In addition to pulling back the defensive line and not giving Inzaghi any opportunities, they relied on their players in the two lines in the mid and front lines who tirelessly ran to contain AC Milan’s midfield organized offense.

Twain’s defensive counterattack was a proactive type of defensive countermeasure, which was completely different from the defensive counterattack in most people’s minds. Even Ancelotti did not expect the Forest team’s defensive counterattack tactics to be so varied before the game.

Did they just completely use high-pressing tactics? But their rear defensive line held fast to their positions and remained motionless. Did they withdraw their defense? And yet, they counter-pressed so hard in the middle and front that the AC Milan players were in a panicked scramble.

Ancelotti really suspected if Twain had Italian blood in him.

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Twain had instructed his men that the opening fifteen minutes at the start of the second half were the most dangerous. It was easy to be caught by the opponents during that period because they had not entered the competition state yet which their opponents could grab hold of the change to counterattack. He asked his players to focus at the start of the game until the end of the game.

As he had expected, AC Milan launched a fierce offensive against the Forest team goal, which was more intense than in the first half.

The two-goal difference was not a useless display just for show.

Pirlo ran ceaselessly and Albertini followed him close at his heels. Once the right opportunity was spotted, he would tackle without hesitation! From his movements, one could not tell that he was a veteran who was almost thirty-six years old and would retire after playing this game.

There were too few opportunities to get rid of the other party, so Pirlo decided not to organize the offense for the time being. He gave the football more to Seedorf and Kaka, while he took Albertini around in circles himself.

His relationship with Albertini... was somewhat complicated. He was a mentor and a friend, and now he was also a competitor at the same time. Because they held the same position on the field and had

similar technical skills, Albertini's advantage lay in his experience, and Pirlo's advantage was his youth. Eventually when Pirlo had developed under the careful tutelage of Albertini and was able to fully replace Demetrio, Galliani had told Demetrio that there was no place for him on the team.

It could be said that Pirlo indirectly led to Albertini's departure.

This was the normal cycle of any team. It just happened to occur in the AC Milan team, which was proud of the value placed in relationships and loyalty. It stunned a lot of people.

Pirlo did not have time to think of his own complicated connection with Albertini. He was the brains of the team and his special feature was that he was calmer than anyone else. These matters were not enough to bother him. Since the start of this game, the only time he was distracted was when Albertini scored a free kick. But that feeling was fleeting. As a player who was once from Inter Milan and now in AC Milan, Pirlo was well aware of the harsh reality of professional football. Today's professional football no longer believed in loyalty.

Pirlo's task for the short period of time was to drag Albertini along with him as he ran so as to exhaust him. He acted more like a transit point for the football and was not really responsible for organizing the offense. The football came to his feet and was quickly passed. Albertini obviously knew what Pirlo was doing, but he did not dare not to follow him. If he did not follow, who knew when Pirlo would take advantage of the opportunity to change in an instance and become the commander on the pitch again?

Even though he knew that the other party was draining his energy, Albertini had to grit his teeth and follow.

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Kaka received more passes. Everyone believed in his and Pirlo's abilities. Pirlo decided to avoid being the spearhead for the time being and the team's offensive responsibility fell on Kaka's shoulders.

To be honest, Kaka had a hard time playing in the game. He was the kind of player who needed space to break through and accelerate. He was not a player like Pirlo who could organize the passing. He was not even a playmaker like Zidane. He was more modern than Zidane. He was a typical representative of modern football's development to this day — with his excellent stamina, fast speed, good dribbling skills, strong ability to score in his plug-ins and also his ability to help with the defense.

Such an attacking midfielder was rarely seen more than a decade ago.

The football was passed to Kaka's feet. He had to find a way to help the team score, whether it was to assist his teammates or to score on his own.

This time, he chose to do it himself.

Kaka tried his best to guard the football while he let Wood constantly crash into him from behind as he poked the football forward. He made to look like he was about to break through which attracted Piqué to move his body and expose a small gap.

Wood saw Kaka swing his leg and he knew he was going to shoot, so he hurriedly shoveled at his feet, hoping to shovel the football out a step earlier.

He was still too late, as Kaka swung his leg faster than he thought.

“Boom!”

The football drilled through the gap Piqué had made!

Wood only shoveled the scattered grass fragments.

If I can't break through, I can still make a long shot! A long shot is a good way to break a dense defense.

The football whizzed toward the goal. The riveted Edwin van der Sar leapt and pounced. He slammed the football out with a single palm, which startled the stands and made everyone gasp.

“So close! Kaka's shot was thrown out by Edwin van der Sar. This was AC Milan's most threatening attack in the second half!”

Kaka held his head in both hands with frustration.

Wood got up from the ground and stared at his opponent's back. Kaka seemed like a different person in the second half, with a marked increase in pressure on Wood. As a defensive midfielder, Wood had a lot of interaction with many attacking midfielders, including many of the world-class attacking midfielders such as Ronaldinho and Riquelme. However, this opponent was not the same as all the other attacking midfielders that had come before. Kaka had the physical makings of a defensive midfielder. The typical collisions were basically unable to pose a threat to him, unless it was a foul...

However, Twain would not let him give his opponent too many direct free kicks in front of the box. If it could not be a foul, then it would have to be this: letting him shoot the ball.

Having watched the videos of Kaka's games, Wood had some knowledge of the Brazilian. He knew Kaka was fast and had an outstanding scoring ability using long shots.

He had to tighten his nerves at all times.

A corner kick was precious to AC Milan, who had not been able to break through the situation. But at the same time, they had to guard against the Forest team's sneak counterattacks.

Maldini and Nesta both went up to compete for the header. The four players, Oddo, Jankulovski, Gattuso, and Ambrosini stayed behind to defend.

Ancelotti had specifically instructed this at halftime interval.

The corner kick was launched but did not pose any threat to Edwin van der Sar's goal. Neither Maldini and Nesta managed to top the ball. Before they could get to it, Pepe had already used his powerful aerial control ability to send the football out with a header.

As Ancelotti had expected, Nottingham Forest took advantage to launch a quick counterattack.

Fortunately, he had arranged four defenders to stand guard in the backfield, otherwise he might have conceded another goal.

Van der Vaart's dribble was halted by Gattuso. He wanted to pass it on to Ribéry, but AC Milan saw through the trick. Ambrosini followed Ribéry like a shadow and Ashley Young was marked by Jankulovski on the other side. As he hesitated, van der Vaart lost the ball under his feet.

AC Milan immediately turned from defense to offense.

Gattuso passed the football to Pirlo who decided to make good use of the opportunity by passing it only to Kaka.

He clearly identified the empty section in the middle of the Forest team, and George Wood's defense zone. He did not believe that Kaka could not deal with the young kid.

Kaka did not believe it either. He initially received the ball with his back toward the attacking direction. Wood firmly blocked his position at the back and did not let Kaka turn. However, he did not expect Kaka to use the arch of his foot to skirt the football past their sides when he received the ball. At the same time, Kaka quickly turned his body around, as if a motorcycle had done a turn, and used his hand to complete the turn in the place within the square.

Wood did not expect Kaka to be able to do this with such a close marking. Amidst his astonishment, Kaka had already finished his turn to go after the ball.

Wood dare not neglect so he also quickly turned around and relied on his speed to catch up with Kaka. Then while the opponent had not fully controlled the football, he rushed to tackle and shoveled the football out of Kaka's control range. He and Kaka collided together, and the two men awkwardly fell to the ground.

The AC Milan fans exploded in loud hisses. They thought it was a foul, but the referee indicated nothing. Another attack by AC Milan was over.

Wood's jersey was drenched with perspiration over his chest. The red color there was darker than the red color in the other areas. Kaka's jersey was no better. Such a high-speed sprint and forced interruption were a great test of his stamina.

They lay on the ground and panted for a while before being pulled up by their respective teammates.

Albertini patted Wood on the shoulder and praised him for his performance.

Pirlo also pulled Kaka up and asked if his pass was fitting or if he should have made it wider to help him get rid of Wood.

Kaka waved his hand to indicate that pass was fine.

Then he took a look at Wood. That confrontation was not good for anyone.

He had heard that the man had a Brazilian lineage. Who was more powerful, him or Gattuso?

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"Kaka is a lot more active now than he was in the first half," Kerslake said in the technical area.

Dunn nodded in agreement next to him.

"It's quite normal. For AC Milan to be able to get here, it should have been Kaka's credit alone. He has ability. The first half was a fluke for him. He didn't expect our defense to be so tight. Once he adapts, it will be our turn to be nervous," Twain said. He was not surprised by this. He was well aware of Kaka's strength. He would be shocked if Kaka did not perform at all in the entire game.

Wood would feel a lot of pressure when he had to defend against Kaka, but this kind of pressure was good for him. In order to continue to grow, pressure was essential.

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“Continue to give the ball to me,” Kaka said to Pirlo after his breathing evened out. “I think I have a way to deal with that number 13. I kicked the ball a little too far away. He won’t have that chance the next time.”

Pirlo nodded, “I’d pass it to you even if you didn’t ask me to. I was entangled with Demetrio and you were the only one who could break through their defenses.”

The pair quickly separated as Pirlo returned to the back while Kaka stood in the front field.

Soon, the football was sent by Pirlo to Kaka’s feet again.

This time Kaka did not receive the ball with his back turned. He received Pirlo’s straight pass while he ran forward. When he saw the football roll over, Kaka suddenly accelerated. He and Pirlo were on the same page. Pirlo knew what kind of pass he wanted — the speed of the pass had to be as fast as possible and as strong as possible to make it easier for him to kick as he sped up in his sprint.

Once Kaka sped up, there were not many players in the world who could stop him without a foul.

Wood realized that next to him, Kaka suddenly sped up and knew that he was going to catch the ball, so he accelerated as well. He wanted to force Kaka into a dead corner. Piqué was up ahead. With Piqué and himself converging on an attack from the front and back, they did not have to worry that the football could not be intercepted.

Kaka seemed to be forced into a corner. Piqué was near, and Wood was close at his back.

He got the football, but Piqué was close within reach.

Just as everyone thought Piqué and Wood had blocked Kaka, the Brazilian’s left ankle gave a light shake, and the football bored through Piqué’s legs!

At the same time, Kaka stopped and changed directions. He skirted round the still stunned Piqué’s side and beautifully knocked the ball past him!

Wood did not expect Kaka to break through his and Piqué’s encirclement so easily. Although he was surprised, he did not slow down.

Piqué was like a wooden block. Kaka broke through his right side, while Wood dashed past his left side.

Kaka was only five meters away from the penalty area. His speed obviously increased. If he did not foul, he was going to break into the box. Although the boss said he could not give AC Milan a free kick in the danger zone. But was it better to give a free kick, or was it better to let the other person just burst into the box to shoot or divert the ball? Which was more dangerous?

Wood did not hesitate anymore. He twisted his body from the side to shovel toward the football. Although it was a tackle, his leg was raised high, almost to the height of Kaka’s knee. Sure enough, Kaka quickly poked the football away, but knocked right into him.

This time, it was unmistakably a foul. The referee blew his whistle and was almost ignored by the players amid the AC Milan fans' loud boos.

After Kaka was thrown, he knelt on the ground and helplessly shrugged his shoulders. When the kid slid on the ground for the tackle, he did not plan to tackle the ball. Looking at the height of his raised leg, it was obvious that he went for his legs.

The referee gave Wood a yellow card, but Wood did not mind.

Twain rose from his seat in the technical area. He walked to the sideline, frowning slightly. Wood might not mind the yellow card, but he had to care. As a core defensive player and a trump card to mark the opponent, who could guarantee that he would not get another yellow card when there were thirty minutes left in the game?

"George!" He waved his hand vigorously to make Wood run over, and he wanted to directly give him instructions.

Wood saw Twain waved at him, so he left the referee to run over.

"You did a good job, but the next time you're going to foul, do it when he's just about to take a step," Twain said as he shook his head.

Wood had a different opinion, "I saw Piqué in front and did not want to foul. I didn't think..."

"Yes, yes, I know." Twain nodded vigorously. "Now you have a yellow card on you, so you have to be careful. Be smart about the location and timing when you choose to foul. And also, once you've made a foul, make a friendly gesture right away so that you can gain some brownie points with the referee... Don't make a face like the entire world owes you five million. You mustn't be penalized anymore! Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Wood answered simply, but Twain still did not feel reassured. After all, the situation on the football field changed rapidly. Who could tell what would happen in the next minute?

After Wood returned to the field, Twain did not immediately turn back to the technical area. He stood on the sidelines to watching the free kick from AC Milan.

Pirlo's free kick bypassed the Forest team's human wall and flew toward the goal. This time, van der Sar saved the team again. He leapt out and took down the football with both his hands, without even giving the corner kick to AC Milan.

Although the attack was unsuccessful, the AC Milan people saw hope in it because Kaka was buzzing.

As long as Kaka was energetic, AC Milan's offense was in play.

With such situations happening countless times during this season in the early summer, when the AC Milan striker could not score, Kaka would step forward to act as the top scorer; when AC Milan was not in form and were going to lose, Kaka stepped forward bravely to save a desperate situation.

For AC Milan to have reached the final after they stumbled through the season, it was all thanks to Kaka alone.

Everyone had long relied on the young Brazilian man — as long as Kaka is there, we won't lose!

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Five minutes later, ten minutes of Twain's "fifteen-minute of threat theory" had passed, and the score was still 2:0 with Nottingham Forest in the lead.

The Forest fans in the stands sang tirelessly and extolled the Forest team, praising the goalscorer, Ribéry, the team captain, Albertini and the ferocious defender, George Wood. They even sang the praises of Tony Twain.

Twain walked back to the technical area when he felt a little more at ease.

Seventy minutes had passed which left AC Milan with only twenty minutes. They had to score two goals in twenty minutes before they could drag the game into extra time. To settle the fight in ninety minutes, they had to score three goals... Twain did not believe that the rear defensive line that he had painstakingly built would be beaten so easily that three goals could be conceded to his opponent in twenty minutes.

His team had never conceded three consecutive goals in such a short period of time.

When AC Milan saw that their offense was not effective, they began to withdraw to conserve their stamina. The game had reached a tipping point where both sides were close to physical exhaustion.

The Nottingham Forest players remembered what Twain said at halftime: score a few more goals, don't throw away any chance to score, make the opponents utterly hopeless.

When they saw AC Milan retreat, the Forest team began to press out to try to attack.

In such a frontline battle, van der Vaart displayed his ability to manage and direct. He repeatedly sent out passes that threatened the AC Milan rear defensive line. Twain knew that in the AC Milan's center back partnership, one player was older and the other had been in a shaky condition of constant injury during the season. The defense that had originally been AC Milan's proudest was now their biggest hole.

Therefore, Twain instructed the team to make more straight passes during the attack, especially in the flank area between the center-back and full-back, which was the best place for a straight pass.

Van der Vaart once again sent a straight pass there. This time, Maldini saw through it early and intercepted the ball.

After he intercepted the ball, Maldini did not pass the football to Pirlo. He directly kicked the football straight to the front and his target was AC Milan's number 22, the Brazilian, Kaka!

When the Forest team pressed up for the attack, the players who stayed at the back were George Wood, in addition to the four defenders.

Albertini was there. Most of the time, Wood was not involved in the offensive. Another reason was that Kaka had been hovering near the center line since the beginning which Wood was very concerned about. The entire AC Milan team had basically retreated except Inzaghi and Kaka, who stayed in the front.

His instincts were quickly verified, and it was not useless for Kaka to stay in front. He received a precise long pass from Maldini!

Wood began to move toward Kaka. He intended to intercept the ball before Kaka sped up, or to completely end AC Milan's attack with a foul.

Kaka jabbed the football out and cut across in front of Wood. Having just sped up, Wood had no choice but to slow down. Now that they were both in the center circle, he still had a chance to intercept the ball.

Twain had said that if he wanted to foul, he'd better do it early. However, Wood did not want to foul. He thought that Kaka was a powerful player, but if he could only rely on foul play to stop him, then it meant that he was not as good as Kaka. He wanted a decent win over Kaka for once using his own defensive skills and without the use of foul play.

Kaka started to dribble the football and he could feel that George Wood had been following at his side, like a leopard running with its prey and waiting for the opportunity to strike.

Kaka did not mind the other party running with him because he was not going to give his opponent any chance.

Now the Forest team only had one rear defensive line with four defenders and George Wood. There was a large expanse of empty space for him to sprint. When his speed increased, Kaka had confidence that the rear defensive line would not be able to hold back his breakthrough.

Wood watched Kaka dribble the ball during the high-speed run, and he looked forward to the other side to go a little wider so that he could tackle the football with his precise shovel, or he could forcibly overtake to separate the football from Kaka.

But... Kaka's dribbling pace was steady. During the high-speed run, the football was always neither close to nor far from his legs, so that Wood could not find the right time to make his move. Every time he wanted to intercept the ball, his speed would slow down, and then Kaka would take the opportunity to pull away from him. Then he would have to pick up his speed to catch up, and then seek another chance to prepare for the next interception, and slow down and pull away again...

During such repetition, the two men got closer to the Forest team's penalty area.

"Wood is chasing Kaka, but he doesn't have a chance to intercept the ball. Both men's speeds are very fast. Kaka is skillful in his dribble! Wood has to run along...and now they're in the thirty-meter zone!"

This time, Piqué stayed in the back and it became Pepe to come up and defend against Kaka. Pepe's speed was considered fast among the center backs, and he was the right person to block Kaka.

Kaka always looked up when he dribbled the ball, so he saw Pepe's intentions early on. He did not give Pepe a chance for a face-off. When they were about to face each other, he suddenly poked the football across. Following which, he sped up and bypassed Pepe.

Pepe's speed was not slow either, but he was still not as strong as he wished in the face of Kaka's full-speed running... By the time he turned around, Kaka was already up ahead by two bodies' length and had burst into the penalty area!

“Kaka! Kaka!” The Italian commentator roared excitedly. The AC Milan fans in the stands were just like him. They were silent for most of the game, and finally found a break in the catharsis. The cheers of the AC Milan fans resounded through the skies and completely crushed the boos from the Forest team fans.

Twain got up from his seat when Kaka sped up. “Put him down! Put him down!” He hoped Wood would be smart enough to choose insignificant tweaks to stop Kaka from breaking through.

However, he did not manage to see that. Instead, he saw Kaka break through Pepe and enter the penalty area. He could not help but utter a curse word.

“Damn it! Doesn’t he know how fast Kaka can be when he dribbles the ball? Did he watch all those videos for nothing? This idiot! What an idiot!”

Once in the box, Wood could not resort to foul play even if he wanted to.

Piqué came up to help with the defense, which was the Forest team’s last line of defense Edwin van der Sar.

Wood had been following Kaka at the side but was unable to find the right opportunity. The only chance now was the moment Kaka kicked the shot. Even if he could not foul, he had to stop Kaka from shooting, even if it was just a distraction.

Kaka did not give Piqué a chance to come up and slow him down. He suddenly swung his leg to shoot.

Wood suddenly used his foot to shovel the football in front of Kaka’s body. It was down to who would be faster!

He would shovel the ball, or the would football hit him in the leg.

Kaka’s shot out football hit Wood’s leg and bounced upward which made Edwin van der Sar’s action to save look comical.

The football bounced up, crossed van der Sar’s head, and then fell into the net amid the AC Milan fans’ deafening cheers...

“2:1! We have recovered a goal! The magnificent Kaka! The invincible Kaka! It’s still up to Kaka! The long-distance raids in the final and a classic goal! He alone beat the entire Nottingham Forest team! Kaka! Kaka!” The Italian commentator yelled until he was hoarse, and almost cried. “Don’t give him any chance, Englishmen, now that you’ve seen it! We still have a chance to flip the tables. Don’t give up, AC Milan!”

Chapter 554: Trump Card Against Trump Card (Part 1)

Kaka opened his arms with both hands pointed to the sky as he ran toward the corner flag. This was his signature celebratory move. Even in such a fierce final game, he first thanked his God for scoring the goal. He thanked his God, and his teammates thanked him. The AC Milan players cheered as they rushed toward him.

In the stands, the AC Milan fans set off the long-prepared fireworks and started singing “Milan! Milan!” again.

Although it was just a goal, it gave them a glimmer of hope to equalize the score. A fifty-meter-long lone breakthrough greatly boosted their morale!

“Is George Wood really that good? He even can’t stop our Kaka! During that fifty meters wild sprint, he could only follow behind as he ran! He serves the backdrop to Kaka’s brilliance, a little star dimmed by the radiance of the superstar!”

Wood sat on the ground supported by his hands and remained in a tackle position — one leg stretched outward and one leg pressed under his buttocks.

He could not hear the agitated gibberish of the Italian commentator, but he knew he had lost to Kaka. He had completely lost in terms of speed, skills or experience.

The defenders were not like the offense players. They did not have the right to lose because their loss likely meant that the entire team had lost as well.

The Forest players looked a little demoralized and were left speechless by Kaka’s goal. Even if they did not want to concede, they had no other choice — George Wood, the best defensive player on the team, did not manage to tackle the ball after he followed Kaka and ran for fifty meters. Pepe, who could easily rank within the top ten center-backs in the Premier League, was shook off by Kaka’s directional change and did not even get a chance to fight back.

What else was there to say about a goal like this?

It was a heavy blow.

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The players were speechless, but Twain had a lot to say. He did not want to admit how good Kaka’s goal was, because if he were Wood, the attack would have disappeared right at the beginning.

He was furious off the field and brandished his hands as he growled at the field. “George! You bastard, get over here!”

Amidst the AC Milan fans’ thunderous cheers, Wood still heard Twain’s roar.

He got up and immediately ran over.

Twain pulled him toward his side and spoke in a low voice through gritted teeth. “You need to take full responsibility for this goal concede. You hear me?!”

Wood nodded. He was very well behaved.

“I know what you’re thinking, but you have to keep the occasion in mind. This is the Champions League final, not some f**king medieval duel between two knights throwing down the gauntlet! In order to win, you have to do whatever it takes and use whatever means!” Twain growled in Wood’s ear. Wood lowered his head in silence as he accepted the manager’s fury without question.

“What do I usually teach you? Defense is not a sleek job. It’s the most tiring and dirty job. Those fans...” He pointed to the AC Milan fans in the stands. “What they want to see is what you’re going to destroy. Whatever they like, you have to oppose. You have to be against them at all times, confront them! Do you understand?”

“I understand, boss.”

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Albertini sensed a hint of danger. He turned his head and looked at the celebrating AC Milan players and fans in the stands.

This goal was so beautiful that it affected the mood of his teammates. It was too dangerous to ignore. He was the captain of the team, and the captain’s armband was not meant to look good. He had to do something.

He yelled loudly for his teammates to focus on him. He had something to say.

Everyone obediently gathered around except for Wood, who was called to the sidelines by the manager for his rebuke. Looking at the boss’s expression and gestures, and the way his lips seemed to spit out the words, those were definitely not nice words.

Time was precious, so Albertini did not care about the ranks. He ran over to interrupt Twain’s lecture to Wood.

“I’m sorry, chief. Do you mind if I call everyone together and say something?” He asked as he pulled Wood away.

Twain did not mind. In fact, he’d love for Albertini do so. What was the captain’s job? It could be said that the captain was the team’s on-field manager and could help the manager accomplish a lot of things that could not be done from the coaches’ seats on the sidelines.

While the AC Milan players were celebrating, Albertini gathered his teammates together.

“It’s just a goal, guys. You don’t have to be so downcast, we’re still one goal ahead of them.” He glanced at the AC Milan players celebrating and continued, “this is the Champions League final. No championship title can be so easily obtained without experiencing repeated obstruction by the opponent. And, look...” He pointed at the AC Milan players.

“They only scored a goal and haven’t equalized the score and yet they are so excited. They are the AC Milan team, the leading powerhouse club in Italy. But now they’re celebrating as if they won the championship. What does that mean? It shows that they are afraid of us. Only one goal and they’re already behaving like that. They feel secure, but in fact they are still trailing behind us. I used to be an AC Milan player, I know the team. They’re not as strong and invincible as you think they are. They also have a lot of weaknesses. For example, they’re not really good at kicking in the headwinds. Think about that night in Istanbul in 2005 when Liverpool scored three goals in a short period of time and they just panicked.”

Some of Albertini's words were not true, because to be honest, no team could guarantee to be calm in the face of losing three goals in ten minutes. He had said it only to try and restore the confidence of the Forest players and calm their state of mind.

"So, we still have a chance to maintain our lead over them now. I'm not the boss, but I also play the football manager games. I know about the mindset of some managers. If I were the boss, I would bring on the offense players and step up the offense instead of continuing to hold fast to defense. Do you know why?" Without waiting for the guys to answer, he went on to answer, "because if we don't widen the gap again, it will always give the opponent the hope of levelling the score or even to overtake. This kind of hope is behind their enthusiastic motivation. They will tirelessly launch waves of offensive against our goal and the pressure on our defense will only increase. It will absolutely not decrease. There's only one way to solve this situation now and that is to score more goals. If we can score another goal, they will be finished!"

Albertini clenched his fists as he spoke. It was as if he had forgotten that he was once an AC Milan player.

He glanced at his opponent again and discovered that the AC Milan people were done celebrating, so he clapped his hands. "Remember what the boss said before the game? No matter what situation you face, don't give up. It's not the worst yet. Chin up. When they think they can beat us, we'll show them how wrong they are!" Indefinably, Albertini had a trace of Tony Twain's shadow on him. Working with Twain for three years had affected him.

Everyone clapped their hands and spread out. Albertini stopped Wood again as he had something to say to his midfield partner alone.

"George, are you still thinking about the goal concede?"

Wood first shook his head and nodded.

Albertini smiled. "Don't think about it. As a defensive midfielder, there will be many moments like that. If you think about every goal, you don't play the game. You heard that, didn't you? Although the boss has not made an adjustment, we need to attack now. We can't win this game on the defense alone."

Wood continued to nod in agreement.

"But I can't run." Albertini spread his hands and smile somewhat helplessly as he said, "Pirlo keeps running non-stop. I exerted too much, led by my nose as he ran. If the offense needs me to rush up, I'm afraid I won't be able to return."

Wood noticed that Albertini's gasps were greater than before the goal was conceded. His jersey was almost soaked in sweat. He would turn thirty-six in August, and high-intensity games like the Champions League final were really not easy for him.

"So, I need you to help me. Let's adjust our positions a little. You lean forward slightly, and I'll be behind you. You'll go up when the team needs to attack, and I'll be in the back to protect you. You're young and have good stamina. Since you are fast, you can come back when you go up. I can't think of a more suitable candidate than you."

Wood did not nod immediately, nor did he shake his head.

Albertini saw his hesitation and smiled. "I know what you're thinking. There's nothing to hesitate about. You're still doubting your ability to attack? This final is the last game I will play in my career before I retire and return to my home in Italy. You can't always depend on someone like me to be around. You need to solve problems on your own a lot of times. When you need to move forward, go right ahead and don't worry. I've got your back." He stopped speaking and nudged Wood away before he ran off.

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Albertini was correct in what he said. After scoring a goal, AC Milan's morale was boosted, and they were in high spirits. They launched a more ferocious attack on the Forest team's hinterland than before. With only one goal difference, AC Milan was fired up like a shark that smelled blood in the sea and chased Nottingham Forest relentlessly.

Twain made his first substitution in the game three minutes after the goal concede. He deployed Gareth Bale, the full-back better at offense to replace Leighton Baines.

This signal could not be more obvious — Twain wanted the team to attack.

The Forest players could not help but look at the team captain, Albertini. He was absolutely right. The boss wanted to attack.

Five minutes later, Twain made a second substitution. This time, he brought on the striker, Freddy Eastwood to replace van der Vaart.

Everyone understood the first change, but they were puzzled by the second change — they originally thought Eastwood would replace the physically weaker Albertini. They did not expect van der Vaart, who performed well, to be replaced.

Ancelotti secretly smiled at the substitution. He felt that Twain valued Albertini too much and chose to believe in the veteran's experience. However, Albertini obviously could no longer run, and his experience was useless. Pirlo had already shaken him off twice in a row and sent out threatening passes. Had it not been for Wood closely marking Kaka, the score would definitely not remain at 1:2.

If Twain was so confident in Albertini's experience, then Ancelotti did not mind letting Twain fall head first on that trust.

He walked to the sidelines and motioned for Pirlo to be back as the core of the team's offensive organization and for whoever on the team with the ball to try and hand it over to Pirlo so as to completely topple Albertini.

Van der Vaart thought he did not perform well and did not make any outstanding contribution to the team's attack when he came off the field. Hence, the boss brought him off. He did not expect Twain to take the initiative to hug him and ask him to wait to go on the field to celebrate the win with a grin.

Eastwood charged up the field. With little time for him to perform, he had to treasure every second.

He did not blame the boss for making him a substitute for two consecutive Champions League finals. The boss had to think like a boss and a player only needed to listen to the commands. If he was not allowed to play, he would watch the game carefully and find something useful for himself. Once he was allowed to play, it would be the moment for these things play a role.

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“There are always people who say Twain is a conservative manager. But while they are in the lead, instead of bringing on more defenders to strengthen the defense, he brings on the attacking players to continue offense. Can this still be considered conservative?” The English commentator of England started to protest on behalf of Twain when he saw these two replacements.

Twain did not care what other people thought of him.

He and Albertini thought alike. Strengthening the defense did not necessarily have to be achieved by increasing the number of defensive players. From another point of view, stepping up the offense could also help to reduce the pressure on the defense instead. He did not believe AC Milan would not retreat to defend in the face of the Forest team’s offensive. Naturally, if AC Milan really wanted to continue to attack, it would be exactly what Twain wanted. In that case, it meant that there would be a lot of empty space behind them. Providing they seized the opportunity, once would be enough to kill them!

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Pirlo could see that Albertini was out of strength. He did not actually have to look at him. He could discern just by listening — every time Albertini defended against him, he felt like he had a large bellow around him.

He suppressed his opponent and passed the football to Kaka.

Kaka had just managed to break through Wood’s defense and crack open the goal to score. His morale was high, and he was in the right shape. There was no reason not to pass the ball to him.

Just as he turned to get ready to break through Wood’s defense, Woods managed to block Kaka outside the goal. At the time of the one-on-one breakout, the football that Kaka kicked out was struck by Wood’s heel and changed direction. The two players pounced in the wrong direction, but the next second, the two players kicked at the football at the same time.

Wood kicked the football out first before Kaka, and Kaka only kicked Wood’s calf.

Kaka was startled as he was afraid that Wood would fall and then the referee would give him a yellow card. It could be seen that the blow was not light from his action...

Wood eventually climbed up from the ground and turned around to throw himself into another bout of defense for the Forest team.

The football reached Kaka’s feet again. This time, Kaka did not choose to break through directly. He sent the football back to Pirlo, who came up.

Pirlo was going to do a two-over-one pass with Kaka. Before he could receive the ball, Albertini had skirted around him and intercepted the football. The Forest team escalated to launch a counterattack.

Pirlo had to turn around and retreat to defend.

Only this time, Albertini’s long pass lost some precision and the drop point was robbed by Gattuso. The Forest team’s fast attack did not happen.

Gattuso gave the football to Pirlo. Having started an attack, Albertini did not immediately enter his defensive position. Pirlo spotted the opportunity for a sharp and straight pass.

Kaka suddenly set in motion, intending to use his speed to break through Wood's defense.

Wood had already learnt his lesson from that goal concede. The defensive player had no right to make a mistake. One mistake was enough. Wood did not want a second time. This time he waited for Kaka just as he was about to speed up and had not controlled the football to decisively shovel with his foot. He was ahead of Kaka and intercepted the football. Kaka could not stop in time and crashed into him. He fell to the ground, but the referee did not whistle for the foul.

The AC Milan fans naturally booed, while the Forest fans cheered loudly and applauded Wood's defense.

AC Milan's offense was not finished. If Kaka could not do it, Pirlo would.

They saw that Albertini was physically weak and handed the football over to Pirlo.

Pirlo once again took the ball and shook off Albertini. He looked up to observe the situation on the field. He was not as desperate as he had been ten minutes ago. The "big bellow" behind him was still far away from him.

Now he could calmly observe the situation on the field and decide how and where to pass the ball.

Out of habit, he first looked to Kaka.

There was no one around Kaka!

Where was the Forest team's number 13, who was always inseparable from the Brazilian?

A soundless breeze appeared beside him. When Pirlo sensed the danger, he got ready to pass the football to Kaka, but he kicked the air instead...

George Wood had stabbed Pirlo's ball and handed it to Albertini, who ran back.

Wood did not know how much he could achieve in offense for the future, and he did not know if he could really become good at both defense and offense like the "Metronomo," Demetrio Albertini. But he had to admit one thing whether he wanted to or not — Albertini was leaving the team when the game was over.

Demetrio had said to him: I can't run anymore. I am afraid I won't be able to return once I go up, so you have to go up, George.

Wood had replied: you don't have to come back. Just go up and wait in front. I'll intercept the ball for you, and I'll pass it to you. You'll just be in charge of organizing the attack. Van der Vaart was already brought off. Our offense can only be organized by you.

The Forest team's attack was blocked again. Maldini did a long pass to the front. Wood fought for the header against both Kaka and Seedorf and had the upper hand. He pressed the two opponents down and headed the football to Albertini.

When Albertini first came to the Forest team, Twain told Wood that he was his midfield partner and his teacher. He wanted him to learn everything from Albertini.

Wood's mission on the field was to be Albertini's bodyguard and to allow the metronome from Italy to attack without worries. Since when was Albertini needed to be a bodyguard for Wood?

Chapter 555: Trump Card Against Trump Card (Part 2)

The football bounced up in front of Kaka. It was a long pass from the backfield. Kaka got ready to top the football with a header when the ball was at an appropriate height, and then used speed to break through George Wood.

As soon as he was about to poke his head out, he felt a gust of wind sweep past his forehead.

Wood, who ran past from the side, leapt and swung his leg to kick the football into the air.

The two men collided into each other and the referee whistled to signal that Wood had lifted his leg too high, which was considered a threatening action. He awarded AC Milan a free kick in the front field.

Wood felt wronged. It was true that the average person would not lift his leg to that height, but the football was at that height. What could he do? He could not do nothing and watch Kaka use his head to top the football off, right? That way, if he wanted to successfully stop him, he could only tackle the ball.

Besides, he did not hurt Kaka, and Kaka's head was a long way from his foot.

Wood wanted to go up and argue but was held back by Albertini.

"Don't mess with the referee. Be careful of the yellow card on you." The captain kept Wood behind him and stepped forward to negotiate with the referee himself.

He deliberately dragged out the game time and took advantage of all the opportunities available to him, including talking with the referee to dispute each penalty that could be contested.

In the stands, the AC Milan fans booed. They were not fed up with Wood's foul action, but rather that the referee would not give a yellow card for Wood's foul.

Everyone was aware that Wood had a yellow card on him. With just one more card, he could be sent off. Everyone was clear what it would mean for the Forest team.

Albertini was out of strength and the Forest team only had one defensive midfielder like Wood. If Wood was sent off, AC Milan's offense would be able to drive straight in and directly attack.

Therefore, Kaka's chances of taking the ball had increased significantly.

AC Milan's free-kick was ineffective because the penalty spot was too far from the Forest team's goal. After the indirect free kick was sent out, it was topped by Pepe, and Maldini and Nesta rushed back to defend again. The Forest team immediately returned with a quick counterattack to the other side.

Van Nistelrooy's shot ended up in Dida's arms.

The game went on for seventy-five minutes. After AC Milan scored a goal, they had wanted to take advantage of the momentum, but they did not expect Nottingham Forest's defense to be even more tenacious. George Wood completely ignored the fact that he already had a yellow card on him and showed no sign of stopping in his defense against Kaka. He fouled when it was needed, and never hesitated when he dared to tackle. It seemed that number 13 would stick to Kaka's side unless they could find a way to get him sent off.

However, AC Milan did not give up. The one-goal gap motivated them and told them that as long as they strove to get another goal, the situation on the field could be reversed. This was what propped AC Milan up. No one thought about things like the championship trophy. While they played, the only thing to consider was how to win the game. As to the benefit of winning the game, they would have to wait until they won the game before they would think about it.

The football was passed to Kaka again. This time, the entire AC Milan team pressed ahead and pushed the Forest team's defense to the vicinity of the penalty area. The downside for Kaka was that he had little room to accelerate and break through. As long as Wood held his position, Kaka's options were a lot fewer.

He did not think that Kaka was not a threat even if he could not break through. Wood dared not let his guard down. He followed close on Kaka's heels. The football was being stepped on by his feet.

Pirlo and Seedorf were both plugged into the box. After Kaka stepped on the football and pulled back, Wood thought he was going to pass the ball with his heel to Pirlo and Seedorf, so he leaned his body to the side.

Pirlo ran past Kaka from behind, but the football did not reach his feet.

Kaka pulled the football back again and picked it up with his toes. He jumped on the spot with the football and directly volleyed!

The football drilled through the gap from where Wood had just moved!

"Kaka shoots!"

This was the second time he broke through Wood's defense, even though it was just the ball.

Just as everyone cheered for Kaka's shot, a man chose to say no to the wonderful goal.

Edwin van der Sar pounced over. His hands firmly grasped the football in the air, and he quickly curled around it to safeguard the football in front of his chest. In order to get the football to bypass Wood Kaka's shooting strength and speed were much decreased.

"Where's our offense?" Edwin van der Sar got up from the ground and held the football as he yelled and waved his fists at his teammates.

In such an important game, he did not want to be a regular in the televised feature.

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Albertini patted Wood on the shoulder. The sound of his breathing sounded like a wind tunnel.

“George, I don’t even have the strength to run now. Don’t pass the ball to me again. Let’s change positions...” He pointed to the front. “You go up during the attack, I’ll pass the ball to you from behind.”

As he looked at the captain, who supported his hands on his knees and leaned over to speak to him, he did not refuse this time. He nodded. “Okay.”

“Just plug ahead when you get the chance. Don’t worry that you won’t get the ball. Even though I can’t run, I still have the strength to pass. Pirlo and Gattuso have been marking me all this time. They won’t be able to adapt once we have a change of position. But it can only be for a short time. With the abilities of the AC Milan players, even if the manager does not instruct them, they will adjust themselves. You’re not an attacking midfielder who can accomplish anything when multiple players mark you. So, you have to seize this vacuum in their defense during this time. Can you do that, George?”

Albertini looked up at Wood.

Wood nodded again. “Yes.”

“Very good.” Albertini smiled.

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As the game went on, AC Milan still did not give up the chance to score goals. They had no other way to win except to try to score goals.

Ancelotti replaced Jankulovski with Kaladze in the 77th minute. AC Milan switched to three defenders and Oddo was pushed into the midfield to take part in the offense.

Two minutes later, Ancelotti brought on Gilardino to replace Inzaghi, who had run until he was almost in an energetic overdrive.

This game was really frustrating for Inzaghi. Since Nottingham Forest had executed Twain’s requirements to not create offside, their withdrawal was compact. When AC Milan attacked, the Forest team’s penalty area was full of players. Pepe skillfully followed him at every step, and it was extremely difficult for him to seek a chance to shoot. He could only keep running, nonstop, in hopes that he would find a hole in the Forest team’s defense.

As a result, he did not find a decent chance until he was brought off.

When he came off the field, a caption on the television screen displayed the distance that he had run in the game — 11,134 meters. He had run eleven kilometers and did not score a goal. How could he not be frustrated?

Inzaghi took big gulps of air as he reluctantly left the field. He high-fived Gilardino on the sidelines, and then lowered his head as he walked back to the bench. He sat there with a towel on his head and did not speak.

He knew he only had a few years left in his career. In 2003, he had represented AC Milan and got the Champions League title. In 2005, he broke into the final but got nothing for his efforts. 2007 was supposed to be the year he had a great opportunity to make up for it. But now the score was 1:2 and AC Milan was behind. He himself had been brought off due to his lack of contribution and physical exhaustion. He could only be a spectator now. His heart was willing, but his body was weak...

He wanted to win the Champions League again, more than anyone else. As a striker, he could only pray that his teammates worked hard to create a miracle now. This was such a humiliation!

Twain heaved a sigh of relief when Inzaghi was brought off. In his view, Gilardino and Inzaghi were not strikers on the same par at all. Even if Inzaghi did not score, his own rear defensive line dared not move an inch with him running back and forth on the field — he was afraid to give Inzaghi a chance to shoot from a non-offside position. Ferguson once said that Inzaghi was a striker born on the offside line, and Twain agreed.

It used to be said that Brazil's Ronaldo was the kind of striker who could change the outcome of a game in one second. But in fact, Twain thought this statement was more appropriate for Inzaghi. He truly was a striker who only needed a second and a grab point to change the outcome of a game. He did not need to dribble too much and required no fancy skills. He just had to be in the most suitable place when needed. Then once he extended his leg to complete the shot, the football would fly into the goal.

Seeing Inzaghi being brought off, Twain got up from his seat and walked to the sidelines. He made a hand gesture there to inform his players that a massive offense could be considered.

He did not want to drag the game into overtime. He never even considered doing that. They had to end the battle in ninety minutes and actual results to tell the world who the worthy king of Europe was. AC Milan wants to defy the natural order of things? No way!

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Wood's deliberately plugged ahead. He was not as overwhelmed as he was a season ago. Now he was clear about his purpose, how to run, what to do after he went up and how to do it. These were all thanks to Albertini's careful guidance over the past year.

He received a pass from Albertini, which surprised Gattuso. He did not expect George Wood, and not Albertini, to come up.

Wood eyed the situation up ahead and sent the football to Ashley Young. He did not choose to break through with the ball. He was aware that it was not his specialty. It was better to leave it to the experts to do it...

After he passed the ball, Wood did not run back, but drew Gattuso to run forward with him.

Since AC Milan had changed to three defenders, there was more room for the Forest team's two flanks. Ashley Young was determined to break through with a cross from the byline after he received the football. His pass was topped by Nesta out of the end line and the Forest team received a corner kick.

Gattuso looked around him and Wood was gone. He did not pay it any mind. During the previous corner kicks, Wood would run back to defend. It would be no different this time.

Albertini did not come up for the corner kick. Instead, the player who ran over was Gareth Bale.

The football was sent out and it was chaos inside the box. The player who leapt high among the crowd to head the ball toward the goal was not van der Vaart, Pepe or Piqué, but...

"George Wood!"

The number 13 on the red back was prominent in the air. He did not jump on the spot. He rushed in from outside the box and took off for the jump. He leapt higher than anyone else. When the football came toward him, he gave a powerful toss of his head!

Dida was unresponsive, but the football hit the crossbar!

“Whoop—” The AC Milan fans exclaimed loudly.

“Why would he be there?!” Off the field, Ancelotti could not help but ask. The Forest team had previously won several corner kicks in the game, and every time Wood was in the back, ready to guard against the other side’s counterattack. Not only this game, but in the previous Forest team’s games as well, the center-back and full-backs would all go up and the player in charge of the defense in the backfield was George Wood.

There was no suggestion in any intelligence about Wood’s involvement in the corner offense. Nobody knew how useful his headers and jumps were in an attack. They saw it this time.

Watching the football smashed into the crossbar and pop out of the end line, Wood did not grab his hair in chagrin in front of the opposing goal. He turned around and sprinted back to the defense zone.

The AC Milan’s goal ball was quickly sent out. Just as the football bounced out, the ball boy threw the spare football in and Dida positioned the football. Once he saw everyone move out of the box, he sent a long ball to the front.

If Wood was still upset about not scoring, the Forest team might have conceded the ball again. He was not a striker. After he missed the opportunity, he could still use the action to try to save face on television.

Dida’s long ball was topped by Albertini and handed to Pepe.

Pepe made a feint for a long pass and swung past Gilardino. Then he chose to dribble the ball for a direct breakthrough.

His intention was to dribble the ball was detected by Kaka, who cut off Pepe’s ball in advance. The center-back losing the ball was the first blow to the Forest team’s defenses, as well as a great opportunity for AC Milan. The AC Milan fans in the stands gave a huge cheer.

This sound had not dissipated before Kaka lost the ball.

The mantis stalked the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind.

Kaka intercepted Pepe’s ball, but his ball was stabbed away by Wood, who returned to defend.

When Kaka got ready to speed up, he found the ball under his feet was gone. His first reaction was to turn around and give chase. After eighty minutes of entanglement, he already knew that if he had lost the ball, it had to have been Wood’s doing.

Kaka turned to pursue Wood, who did not plan to pass the ball out.

On the one hand, his teammates were too far away from him. On the other hand, there were not many defensive players in front of him. Gattuso and Ambrosini did not rush up at the first instance, which gave him a chance to breakthrough.

There was another reason why he wanted to break through — Kaka was after him.

How did that ball from AC Milan go in? Was it not because Kaka started to dash all the way from the center circle, and he could not even intercept it even if he wanted to?

He found a chance to retaliate.

Come try and intercept my ball, Kaka!

As Kaka chased, he did want to intercept the ball. But when he wanted to extend his leg to tackle the ball, he had to slow down, which gave Wood a chance to pull away.

Kaka suddenly realized how Wood felt.

Wood's basic dribbling skills were very good. He was very precise and fast his dribbling. This was thanks to the basic training he had stuck to daily since he joined the Forest team training base.

He had known he switched to a job he was not trained for and was not a player who had been professionally trained since he was young. Twain knew that. Therefore, the two were rigid with his basic training.

With Wood's conscientiousness and Twain's strict supervision, Wood had practiced until he had the ability to dribble the ball so that Kaka was unable to get to his foot.

Kaka wanted to rely on his speed to overtake and leave plenty of time for the shovel, but he found that Wood was as fast as he was. He had no other way except to run behind.

"George Wood's dribbling! It's a rare sight. Wood has personally dribbled the ball to charge toward the front field, and Kaka follows him to intercept the ball..."

Kaka looked ahead. Gattuso and Ambrosini had noticed Wood's intention and planned to come over to surround him.

It appeared Wood could not escape.

"Watch out for his pass!" Maldini roared in the back, which gave pause to Gattuso and Ambrosini at the same time.

How could they forget? How would Wood have dribble the ball to directly attack? It had to be a pass!

Wood also saw the situation ahead of him. He was close to the two defensive midfielders.

He could not understand what Maldini shouted, but he did not plan to pass the ball. It was not that he had a lot of confidence in his breakthrough, but because he had no energy to think about where his teammates ran to...

When he glimpsed a tiny crack as the two players closed in, Wood did not hesitate to kick the football forward!

The football rolled in between the two men, Gattuso and Ambrosini, while Wood suddenly sped up and rushed over while the encirclement had not yet closed!

“Oh my god! A beautiful breakthrough! One over two! George Wood’s speed is formidable! Is he really just a defensive midfielder?”

Kaka knew the situation was bad when he saw Gattuso and Ambrosini pause. He was not worried that Wood would pass the ball as he had an idea in his head that the boy would break through and would surely break through!

It turned out to be true.

Kaka was not surprised at all that Wood relied on his speed to force his way out of the encirclement by Gattuso and Ambrosini. He bypassed his two teammates and accelerated to give chase.

He followed Wood from the beginning and did not believe he could not find the right chance to cut off the ball. Other than that, if it became really dangerous, he did not mind fouling right away and risk getting a card to stop the Forest team’s attack.

Gattuso and Ambrosini did not expect to be broken through. Maldini and Nesta both froze for a moment.

It seemed they had all underestimated Wood’s speed and determination to break forward...

We can’t let him push ahead anymore!

This was Nesta’s only thought after he reacted, and he rushed up.

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Twain got up from his seat the moment Wood began to dribble the ball forward and break through. When he saw Wood break through Gattuso and Ambrosini with speed, he could not help but follow and run along the sidelines in the direction toward AC Milan’s goal, as if it would help Wood make a smoother breakthrough past AC Milan’s blockade.

While running, he muttered under his breath, “Come on, George...”

His voice grew louder as Wood ran faster, as if it were a drumbeat in response to Wood’s footsteps.

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Nesta was determined not to let Wood break through him. He had to do it!

Because he wanted to break through Gattuso and Ambrosini, Wood kicked the football out and away from his body. Now he had to speed up to give chase since he had not control the ball. In such cases, the rule stipulated that the attacking side and the defending side each have half the opportunity. If a physical collision were to occur, a foul would not be attributed to the defending side.

This was the opportunity that Nesta was going to take advantage of. He acted as a wall to get Wood to bump into him.

Kaka saw that Wood and Nesta were about to meet, and he believed that Nesta's defense would surely force Wood to slow down, or even stop completely. It would be his chance.

He was already ready to intercept the ball.

However, he found that Wood still had no intention of slowing down!

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"Come on! George!" Twain roared.

Rushing at a full speed, Wood and Nesta unsurprisingly crashed into each other.

"Oh my god," the commentator wailed.

Kaka wanted to go pick up the intercepted ball. But where was the football? He did not see it. It was not around Nesta and Wood. The football's gone?

There was a sudden burst of resounding cheers from the Nottingham Forest fans in the stands. If he listened carefully, he would hear that they were shouting a person's name.

"... Wood... Wood... Eastwood! Eastwood!"

Wood made the reasonable use of the default rule before he collided with Nesta that both sides had an equal chance, and the physical collision would not convict either party of foul play. Before Nesta fell to the ground, he shoveled and sent the football to the front.

It was too late for him to observe his teammates' situation in that moment. But when he looked up, he saw the Romani, Eastwood. Was he surrounded by AC Milan's defensive players? Was he offside? Wood did not have time to think about the circumstances. He only cared that he passed the football to the only teammate within his view, which would complete his task.

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While the Forest fans cheered, the AC Milan team captain, Maldini stood on the penalty area line and held up his right hand to motion that Eastwood was offside when he received the football. This would render the attack ineffective!

Just as Wood was about to collide with Nesta, experience told Maldini that he should move forward and let the distant Eastwood fall into the offside trap.

Therefore, he moved forward. When he last glanced at the other party, he saw that Nottingham Forest's number 11 was still standing in place and did not move. He felt that his tactics had succeeded, so he raised his hand and motioned to the referee.

However, he did not hear any whistle. What about the assistant referee?

When Maldini turned his head to seek the assistant referee, he saw that there was another man before him and the assistant referee. The man wore the AC Milan white jersey and stood in a position that was... further back than Nottingham Forest's number 11!

There was no offside!

Eastwood received the football that Wood shoveled over, and turned around. He also looked up specifically at the assistant referee and found that the assistant referee had not raised the flag because AC Milan's third defender, Kaladze was at the back!

Dida had also thought Eastwood was offside and stood in front of the goal line as he raised his hand to signal. In the next second, he realized that something was wrong and struck in a hurry.

Unmarked by anyone, Eastwood swung his right leg and made to look like he was about to do a powerful volley. After he deceived Dida to lose his balance, he nimbly did a lob shot!

"A Panenka!" The Italian commentator exclaimed.

The football flew over the top of Dida's head and easily fell into the empty goal!

"YES! 3:1! In the 83rd minute, this is the goal that almost locks in the victory!" The English commentator stood up from his seat and waved his fists hard.

"George Wood's sudden insertion and forced breakthrough messed up AC Milan's defenses! Kaka could only run along and follow!" The English commentator was separated from the Italian commentator by a wall. He could finally vent. "He was completely helpless, the poor man..."

"Nottingham Forest has once again achieved a two-goal lead! Is this going to be the straw that breaks the camel's back?"

Because he had caused the failure of Maldini's offside by being at the back, Kaladze stood in a daze. He only focused on Wood and Nesta. He had no idea that Wood would be able to send football to Eastwood's feet under such circumstances.

"You have Kaka, we have Wood!" The Forest fans in the stands sang "Wood's Praises." "We still have Eastwood! We have a vast Forest, and you'll get lost when you come in! Do you want to go out? Do you want to go out? Then leave the Championship trophy behind!"

Maldini looked up at the night sky. For a moment, he was at a loss. He had gone through countless games in his career. He had experienced victories, defeats, and all sorts of feelings. A familiar bad feeling emerged from within.

He felt he might lose the title again.

However, the thought only flashed for a second in his mind before he shook his head to toss it aside. No, there's seven minutes left, and I refuse to admit defeat!

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After the goal, Eastwood turned his head again to the referee to confirm. He saw the assistant referee running towards the center line, and the referee whistled as he pointed into the center circle — the goal was valid.

The goal was valid!

Eastwood turned and sprinted towards the Forest Team technical area.

He opened his arms as he shouted. All the Forest players on the field were behind him. If they caught up to him, it would be another human pyramid.

In front of him were the cheering Forest team substitutes' bench and the coaches' seats. His target was Tony Twain.

It was the man who told him that he was going to be a legendary striker in the future, the one who came to him and asked him if he wanted to play in professional football when he could only play amateur football, the man who told him that destiny was a series of choices and his destiny was something he chose while he was in hospital with another serious injury and about to give up.

I listened to him, and I went to play professional football. I listened to him, and I chose not to give up. It's because I listened to him that I have today's Freddy Eastwood...

I want to thank you, chief!

Twain waited with open arms to embrace Eastwood but was slammed directly to the ground by the Romani, who did not stop. A group of people seemed to have planned ahead and piled on top of them.

A full human pyramid was indeed spectacular.

"The team rules don't allow... Ah!"

Twain's screams were drowned out by the thunderous cheers.

"Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!"

"Champion! Champion! We're the champions!"

Chapter 556: The Arrival of The King

"Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!"

"Champion! Champion! We're the champions!"

"Are you trying to overtake us? Come on, you Italian bastards! Come on, try to overtake!"

Amid the sweeping cheers, the Italian commentator still cheered AC Milan on. After all, it was the team that represented Italian football.

"Seven minutes to go, and at least ten minutes when the injury stoppage time is included. Don't give up, AC Milan! Don't give up!"

The English commentator had begun to prepare a message for the Forest team's third win.

"AC Milan wants to overtake. That's more difficult than turning everything on its head! They're not dealing with just any team, they're dealing with Nottingham Forest! It's Tony Twain's Nottingham Forest! This is a team that will never give up and will never give the opponent a chance to make a comeback!"

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The Forest team's wild human pyramid celebrations on the sidelines was only stopped with the referee's intervention.

This time, Fandel pulled up the Forest team's players one by one and saw Tony Twain being pressed underneath again. His suit was crumpled, his tie was lost somewhere and two of the buttons on his shirt had popped. His hair was disheveled, and his face flushed... He looked as if he had been violated.

The poker-faced Fandel could not help laughing. He had enforced countless games and had never seen a manager be messed with so hard by his players.

"F**k!" Twain spat out a curse word as he got up from the ground. He tidied up his suit and found out that it was still wrinkled no matter how he tried to straighten it, so he ignored it.

The people next to him laughed with an expression that said that they were glad to see Tony like that.

When fans in Nottingham city saw Twain on the television, they had a good laugh.

Sometimes they did not feel like Twain was the manager of a team, but an ordinary person and their friend who would go to the same pub to have a drink and chat with them, make a dirty joke, and laugh crudely.

They liked Twain as if he were a friend.

"Hey Tony! Come back and we'll buy you a drink! Top shelf stuff!"

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The players had all returned to the field. The AC Milan people waited until they were impatient. They even thought that this was the Forest team's deliberate tactic to waste game time. Ancelotti unhappily brought it up to the fourth official. The fourth official could only ask the referee to order the crazy Nottingham Forest players to get up from Twain's body.

This indirectly saved Twain's life.

Twain gasped to Kerslake, who was still laughing. "Next time, why don't you try being down there?"

Kerslake hurriedly waved his hands. "That's not going to work. The players pushing you down means you're popular, Tony."

Twain glared at him, looked at the field, and then said to Dunn on his other side, "go and get Arteta back."

This was his last substitution spot.

"AC Milan has to score two more goals and not allow the Forest team to continue to score within ten minutes in order to be able to drag the game into overtime. This sounds like an impossible task... But they have to try before the outcome is known."

The game resumed and AC Milan took advantage of their kick-off to launch a bombardment of the Forest goal.

They had no choice at this point. Even if they knew that to press on the attack like that would cause their rear to be empty, which was a very dangerous thing, they could only force themselves to press on.

This was not about conceding a goal or two. This was a matter of life and death.

Not wanting to surrender the title, AC Milan launched the final charge.

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In charge of organizing AC Milan's offense, Pirlo was keen to get the ball straight to the front of the Forest team. However, Gilardino was not a strong center-forward who was good at headers. He had done little since he came on. Now, from the looks of it, it would have been better to leave Inzaghi on the field, even if he had over-exerted himself physically. He was still more powerful than Gilardino even if he could only stay in the opposing penalty area to wait for an opportunity.

Pirlo suppressed the idea of sending the football directly to the front of the Forest team's goal and organized the offense as he looked for any loopholes within the Forest team. He was well aware that he needed to remain calm all the more at this juncture. The other side was now excited. Perhaps a flaw would be exposed. If he had missed an opportunity because he did not operate well, he would really become a sinner.

He patiently looked for an opportunity, while his teammates desperately wove to create opportunities for him.

Just when he had found the gap, he was knocked down.

Demetrio Albertini had fouled.

The former AC Milan player did not hold back for old times' sake. When he saw Pirlo temporarily shift his attention away from the football under his feet, he rushed up and knocked Pirlo down to stop AC Milan's attack.

Unlike Wood's foul, the AC Milan fans did not hiss loudly at Albertini's foul, but remained silent.

The scene made them feel terrible. On one hand, it was their favorite team, but on the other had, it was the vice-captain who was publicly recognized as having received unfair treatment from the club. It did no good to hiss at anyone.

The referee gave Albertini a verbal warning to pay attention to his defensive action. Albertini nodded to accept with a good attitude.

He ran over to pull Pirlo up and pat him on the head as a sign of friendliness.

Seeing this scene, the Italian commentator did not know what to say. When Albertini still played in Italy, he was very popular in Italian football and had good relationships with the players, coaches, commentators, and journalists. Even as the opponent of AC Milan and the one who dashed AC Milan's hopes of winning the title in this final, the Italian commentator still could not criticize him.

"This is really sad." He sighed after a long while.

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The atmosphere in the stadium intensified. Nottingham Forest fans sang nonstop and set off a Mexican wave as if the victory had been secured.

The AC Milan fans were unwilling to give up. They sang the team's song to cheer for AC Milan while they prayed to God for a miracle to appear at the last minute.

"It's only a difference of two goals! We still have time, and we still have a chance! Keep your cool!" Maldini clapped to encourage his teammates and then rushed up from the rear defensive line himself.

It was now the time for a full offense. Their opponent, Nottingham Forest had withdrawn van Nistelrooy and Eastwood. It appeared that they did not want to fight back. Maldini was not afraid to go up to assist which could lead to gaps in the rear defense. In the face of the surge of offense from Milan, wave after wave of attacks, Nottingham Forest still wants to fight back? We'll prevent your long balls from crossing the centerline!

Pirlo rushed up from the left side and did a feint before he passed the football to Maldini.

A huge cheer sounded in the stands as AC Milan's captain caught the ball. Everyone felt their hearts settle down as if they saw hope.

"Paulo Maldini. This is his eighth time in the UEFA Champions League final. He tied the record of the former Real Madrid superstar, Francisco Gento. At thirty-eight years old and 331 days, he is also the oldest player in the Champions League finals other than the goalkeeper in history. This is the third time he has played in the Champions League final as a captain which breaks the 1961 record of the Barcelona goalkeeper, Antoni Ramallets, thirty-six years old, of the oldest captain in Champions League history. He has been awarded countless glories in his career, he is a man who has experienced big spectacles and now... AC Milan's hope for a miracle is at his feet. He used to be remarkable young fullback in defense and assists, and now he is rarely in the front field..."

The commentator gave a detailed account of Maldini's honors, in order to set the Italian fans' minds at ease and tell them: what an amazing figure the AC Milan captain is. Don't give up, believe in him, and we will surely be given a miracle!

Maldini adjusted the football under his feet and decided to break through by dribbling the ball himself. The Forest team's rear defensive line prevented his cross pass. Not a single player had rushed up yet. If he did not break through now, then what was he waiting for?

He had just started when a red figure suddenly struck. It was definitely a fierce shove.

"Demetrio Albertini!"

The unprepared Maldini was shoved out of the line along with the ball by Albertini. It was the end of AC Milan's attack.

The referee's whistle rang.

For a moment, Maldini felt like he had been hit by a heavy truck. His ribs hurt a little as he lay on the ground. In the instance that the two men collided, he saw the man who had hit him.

That was a face that was once very familiar to him.

When he was his teammate, he always smiled humbly, which made everyone like him at first sight. All the young guys who joined AC Milan would receive all the help he could give. There were times when he was more like the team captain than himself.

It was hard to reconcile this man who always had a nice smile with the defensive midfielder on the football field now. He had changed Italian football and from then on, the Italy national team had its own midfield commander.

I once asked him what his greatest wish was. His answer was not to win the World Cup or The UEFA European Football Championship, but to play for AC Milan until he retired.

I said, "it's simple, as you will be able to retire here and say goodbye in San Siro. You're our vice-captain. AC Milan will not treat its loyal players badly."

The result is that he is now he's wearing the opponent's jersey and knocked me to the ground.

Should I get up and grab him by the collar, and angrily question him about this despicable foul?

Maldini lay on the ground and stared blankly at the night sky.

A hand appeared in his sight.

"Don't give up, Paulo. You've got five minutes left." Albertini said to Maldini in Italian.

Maldini flipped over and sat up. He took the outstretched hand and asked, "why are you suddenly encouraging your enemy?"

Albertini pointed to the sidelines. "I'm going to leave the field. I have finished my journey. So, now I can wish you good luck."

Maldini looked over to where his hand pointed to. The fourth official stood on the sidelines and held up the electronic signboard that displayed the substitution and not the injury stoppage time.

Number 4 was coming off and number 14 would be brought on.

A man in a red jersey stood next to the fourth official and looked eager to get started.

With a strong tug of his hand, Albertini pulled Maldini up.

"Hey, you knocked me down and robbed me of my championship title. Now you want to leave so easily? Demetrio!" Maldini asked in a low voice.

Albertini opened and closed his mouth. Without saying a word, he turned around and left his former teammate.

"Come back! You said there's still five minutes left. Stay and play until the end! Do you hear me? Demetrio!" Maldini cried.

But Albertini did not seem to hear him. He quickened his steps without another word and did not look back.

“I was going to retire after the end of this season. I’m almost thirty-nine years old. But I’ve changed my mind now! I still want to take the championship! You’re only thirty-five years old. Why do you want to leave first?! You can still play. Look at your performance in this game!”

Maldini’s urging for him to stay did not shake Albertini’s will. He trotted up to Wood before he reached out to remove the golden yellow captain’s armband from his arm.

“Demetrio...” Wood looked at his partner, his teacher, and his captain.

“I’m done, George.” Albertini smiled and put the captain’s armband on Wood’s arm.

Wood flinched, and Albertini shouted with his head lowered, “don’t move!”

So, he stayed frozen, allowing Albertini to complete the captain’s handover ceremony.

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“Demetrio Albertini... The 35-year-old veteran. This is the last game of his career and he is being brought off at the 86th minute.” The Italian commentator gave a long sigh. “Nottingham Forest, who he now represents, is leading by 3:1 over AC Milan, the team he had played for for twelve years. His love for AC Milan is indisputable, but his professionalism is equally irrefutable. What else can we say? What else can we ask for with an indirect assist and a direct goal in the final? This is your best performance in a final, and you deserve this title! Good luck, Demetrio! Thank you!”

The English commentator was equally emotional. “It is often said that it is unlikely for Italian players to succeed in the English football league. I don’t want to give them Gianfranco Zola’s example. I just want them to look at this man in front of our eyes. The legendary Demetrio Albertini, who came to Nottingham Forest in the final phase of his career, created a legend of his own. Thanks to Tony Twain, as he was the one who asked Demetrio to stay and play this season. The Nottingham Forest fans want to thank you, Demetrio, and I want to thank you, too.”

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Once he finally put the captain’s armband on Wood, Albertini raised his head to bid farewell. “Goodbye, George.

Wood looked at the man in front of him with a smile and turned around to walk to the field.

He suddenly remembered what Roy Keane had said to him in the bathroom at the Wilford training base:

“That Italian, Albertini, is a very good captain, but one day he will age, retire, and leave you and the team...”

Demetrio is really leaving. He’s going and will not come back. Wood had gone from an acting captain on the field to really becoming the actual captain.

He stood in place and stared blankly at Albertini’s back as he watched him leave.

He saw Albertini walk toward the sidelines. Along the sidelines, whether they were the Forest players or AC Milan players, they all came up to shake his hand and hug him.

Albertini lifted his hands high and applauded the grandstand.

Nottingham Forest fans and AC Milan fans all stood up and clapped as they sent their captain off.

Off the field, Twain and all the members of the Forest team's coaching staff, as well as the players on the bench, stood on the sidelines, clapping with the fans. The same was true of AC Milan's substitutes' bench.

During this short period of time, everyone forgot the fierce fight on the field and settled their hearts down to temporarily put aside the feud to send off their mutual friend.

"Thank you..." He could not make any noise with his trembling lips, but everyone saw what he wanted to say. "Goodbye."

Albertini finally walked off the field and came up to Twain. He wanted to shake hands with the manager who gave him his second youth. He did not expect Twain to hug him.

"I don't know how to thank you, Demetrio. Let me hold you for a second... You're leaving..." He was surprised to hear the boss's voice choked with emotion.

He did not know that when Twain decided to replace him early, his heart was overwhelmed and he had felt terrible.

At that moment, he was not a manager. He was just an ordinary fan. He was an ordinary Chinese fan who had watched Albertini when he appeared on behalf of AC Milan for the first time in Serie A, and then through all his ups and downs. He shared his joy and sorrows numerous times when he suffered the pain of loss over the World Cup title, the UEFA European Football Championship, his beloved AC Milan, being forced to leave and wander, the desolate choice to retire.

He really wanted to say to Albertini, "I grew up watching you play football, Demetrio."

Albertini thought it was just the boss's expression as a friend. He patted Twain on the back. "You can still go to Milan to find me if you miss me, boss."

Twain let go of him and laughed. "You're right, mate. Go say goodbye to them..." He pointed to the people behind him.

Albertini stepped forward to say goodbye to his teammates and coaches one by one. Then he ran to AC Milan's technical area to say goodbye to the players.

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The game continued.

AC Milan still did not give up and launched a siege against the Forest team's goal in the last few minutes.

Maldini hardly returned to defend. He was right in front, waiting to participate in the offense.

Arteta's task was not to organize the offense, but to assist the defense and help Wood to strengthen the defensive line in front of the full backs and make it impregnable.

Wood stood out, wearing the golden yellow captain's armband. His figure could be seen almost everywhere. He gave a beautiful shovel, contested his opponent for a header, blocked a vigorous shot from the opponent with his body, and relied on a foul to delay AC Milan's attack... He worked harder

and was more energetic than before, as if it was not the last few minutes of the game, but the first few minutes after the start of the game.

He ran like crazy to defend, sprint, and fight for the header... It was as if AC Milan was not the one trailing but Nottingham Forest.

His thinking was simple: AC Milan would not stand to fail, and they would launch an attack at the last minute. If he took it lightly, the opponent might just succeed. Demetrio gave me the captain's armband, and this championship title belongs to Nottingham Forest. I can't let him down.

The Forest team withdrew across the board. The three lines maintained a compact team formation. Everyone gathered in the thirty-meter zone in front of the goal. It was the ultimate defensive formation that they were most proud of — Wall defense.

The AC Milan players launched a desperate offensive against this "wailing wall."

The fourth official held up the injury-stoppage sign on the sidelines — four minutes.

Maldini's header was too straight on and the football was confiscated by Edwin van der Sar. The Forest team drove the football forward with a long ball and AC Milan went on the offensive after they intercepted the ball.

There were only three minutes left.

Pepe used his body to block Seedorf's long shot. The AC Milan players raised their hands to signal that Pepe used a handball. The referee ignored them, and Gattuso angrily questioned the referee which resulted in a yellow card for him. The AC Milan fans in the stands hissed with displeasure.

There were only two minutes left.

Kaka tried to force a breakthrough and was put down on the penalty line by Arteta. The AC Milan people thought it should have been a penalty kick, but the referee awarded a free kick instead. Meanwhile, the players from both sides clashed at the spot of the foul. The Nottingham Forest players wanted to escalate the conflict, but Maldini saw through their trick to waste game time. He struggled to pull his teammates away and reminded them that the most important thing was not to fight with the other side, but to stay calm and seize the time to score goals.

Arteta and Ambrosini each got a yellow card after the conflict.

There was only one last minute left.

The Nottingham Forest fans in the stands had started setting off red fireworks and the AC Milan fans, on the other hand, gradually fell silent. In the television close-up, the AC Milan fans were silent and tearful. They clenched the scarves in their hands as they helplessly stared at the field. In the face of the Forest team's strict adherence to defend to the end, there was nothing the AC Milan players on the field could do.

Ancelotti kept growling on the sidelines and waving his arms. The probability of entering two goals in the last minute was roughly the same as a person being struck by lightning twice in a row. But he was unwilling to give up, or more likely, he was unwilling to concede defeat, because his opponent was Tony Twain whom he hated the most.

All the substitutes and coaches at Nottingham Forest stood shoulder to shoulder and arm in arm. They cheered as they waited for the moment the referee whistled to end the game to rush up to celebrate.

The English commentator was no longer commenting on the game. He began to talk nonstop about twenty-right years ago, the first time the Forest team won the UEFA Champions League. At that time, he was still young. Now, he was over fifty.

Van der Sar raised his arms again and again, wondering if he was preparing for the save or starting to celebrate early.

Wood was still running to carry out his defensive duties.

Maldini fully became a striker in the final minute and he stayed in the Forest team's box.

Twain clenched his fists, and he felt a burst of tension in the heart, He did not even dare to gasp for fear that his heart would jump out of his mouth. His legs trembled. It was not nerves. It was due to his excitement and feeling that a huge amount of happiness was about to emerge. It was indescribable.

The game would be the first quality championship title in his coaching career. This was more exhilarating than winning a title like the EFL Cup.

Because this is the European champion and our opponent is AC Milan, the six-time winner of the Champions League.

Is there anything more convincing than winning by 3:1?

Who dares to underestimate us? Who dares to think we're not qualified to stand here? Who dares to laugh at us now! Who!

Want to see me jump into the sea? Want to see me make a fool of myself? I'm sorry to disappoint you all again!

There were thirty seconds left.

"Almost all of the Italian media had vowed before the final that Twain would definitely jump into the sea and that Twain must do the jump, because Nottingham Forest's opponent was AC Milan, a powerhouse club with countless wins. No matter how they analyzed it, they couldn't think of reasons AC Milan would lose. There was even an Italian travel agency that organized a tour route to Athens to watch the game and then watch Twain jump into the sea after the game... Now, I really want to see the expressions of those Italians! It must be wonderful!" The English commentator got up from his seat and held his arms high as he waited for that fateful whistle to blow.

Inside Nottingham city, all the pubs had begun their crazy celebrations early. They did not believe that AC Milan would be able to enter two goals in the last ten or so seconds. Even if God were to arrive, it would not have been possible!

The customers in the Forest bar toasted the pub owner, Kenny Burns in turns, "Kenny, we thought we'd never see this day again!" These people were the old guys who could not go to Athens to watch the game.

"Thank you God, thank you God..."

“Hey, old fellas! You have to thank Tony!” A younger voice cried out.

“Ahem... It’s all the same, it’s all the same...” The old man coughed, “Tony is God, and God is Tony...”

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The Italian commentator no longer made a sound. The AC Milan players also stopped running.

The football was at the foot of a Forest player. Ribéry passed the football to Wood, who in turn passed it to Ashley Young. Then Young transferred the ball to Arteta. The Forest team continued to pass the ball so as not to give the AC Milan players a chance to come close and tackle.

“The game is coming to an end!” the Forest fans in the stands shouted. “We are the champions! We’re the f**king champions!!”

The referee looked at his watch.

The Forest players outside the field all held their arms high, ready to dash.

Anelotti sat in his chair, surrounded by people blocking his view. He did not care as it made no difference whether he could see the field or not. He had lost.

The great clamor filled every corner of the stadium. But in such a noisy environment, that three whistles were still clear.

Eastwood, who paced the ball back and forth, heard the referee’s first whistle. He eagerly drove the football into the air with a hard kick.

Immediately thereafter, the second and third whistles ensued.

That was the whistle for the end of the game!

The people around Twain disappeared in an instant — they all rushed up and hugged each other with open arms.

“The game is over! The title belongs to Nottingham Forest!”

“Hurray! Hurray!” A unified shout sounded in the stands.

“Tony Twain and his team took four years to go from England’s second-level league to becoming the European champions. It was as if we can see Brian Clough’s shadow behind him... That glorious team once again emerged in our view... This was not an accident. This is a red storm! Nottingham Forest, a team that had once won the UEFA Champions League for two consecutive years, is the king of Europe for the third time!”

Twain found that everyone around him was gone before he reacted and rushed up the field with open arms.

This is my path, paved by the championship trophy and countless glories that extends all the way to the horizon. I can’t see its end, but I know that it will continue.

People have said that winning the championship is the end and success.

Success? I've only just begun!

How can one championship be enough!

Chapter 557: A True Champion

When the three whistles rang out, in large and small pubs across Nottingham city, beer splashed in the air. The cars in the streets honked thunderously. When they stopped, the drivers and passengers leaned out of the car windows to yell.

"Champion! Champion! We're the champions!"

The celebration in Nottingham joined in the celebration at the Olympic Stadium of Athens.

The Forest players on the field raced, cheered, and gave incoherent interviews. The media seemed to surround the Forest players like flies around a cake, as they stuck out cameras, video cameras, and microphones.

As the team's manager and the biggest architect in creating this victory miracle, Twain was surrounded the largest number of media.

Twain ignored them. He ran straight onto the field to celebrate with his own players and embrace everyone. He was speechless. He was so excited that he did not mind the media filming and surrounding him, so much so that he forgot the first thing he had to do after the game was to shake hands with the other manager.

When he came to and remembered, Ancelotti had already left.

"Manager Twain! Manager Twain! Can you give a simple interview?"

"How does it feel to win, Mr. Twain?"

"Damn bloody fantastic!" Twain burst out laughing. He felt like the happiest person in the world. The incessant flashes of light made him dizzy.

Is it true? I'm the manager who picks up the UEFA Champions League trophy?

I'm not dreaming, am I? I'm this half-baked manager and I have become the king of Europe?

Are you sure this isn't FM 2007? I'm not playing a video game? A scene that I used to only see on a TV screen, and now I've experienced it firsthand...

My team really became a European champion?!

He ran aimlessly back and forth on the field. Wherever he ran, he was followed by a large group of reporters.

He saw Eastwood kneeling on the ground, sobbing, so he ran over.

"Hey, what are you crying about, kid! You should be happy, we're the champions!" He laughed loudly.

"I'm just really happy, chief!" Eastwood turned his head and saw the chief standing next to him, and saw the large group of reporters behind the chief, with cameras and video cameras in their hands facing them... The Romani hurriedly wiped his tears and stood up from the ground. "Chief, you're like a giant turd surrounded by such a large swarm of flies everywhere you go!"

"Hey! Freddy, you're a legendary striker now. You have to take care of your image in front of the media! You did a terrific job with your goal that locked in the victory in the Champions League final!" When Twain finished, he clasped Eastwood in his arms with a bear hug.

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Maldini looked at the man in front of him, and the other man looked at him as well.

"Hey, are you going to apologize to me?" he asked.

The other man shook his head.

"I want to swap jerseys with you."

Maldini was a little surprised as he did not expect Demetrio Albertini would make such a request.

"Aren't you going to give me a retirement present?" Albertini took off his jersey and handed it to Maldini.

"You already took away the championship title and you still asked me for a present..." Maldini muttered as he took off his jersey and gave it to Albertini.

"Did you really decide to retire just like that?" Maldini asked after he swapped the jerseys.

Albertini nodded. "I'm tired and content. I can't think of any reason to keep playing."

Looking at his old friend, Maldini could not get angry even if he wanted to.

He himself had already played in AC Milan until he was thirty-eight years old and enjoyed all kinds of accolades. For Demetrio, who was faithful and loyal to AC Milan like himself, but could only wander elsewhere... this championship trophy might perhaps be AC Milan's best compensation for him, right?

Maldini looked up at the podium. He even wondered if the Forest team could still break into the final and win the game if Demetrio was not in the Forest team?

Unfortunately, there were such things as ifs on the football field.

Albertini turned his head to look behind him. The Forest team members had gathered hand in hand as they got ready to thank the Forest fans in the stands.

He said goodbye to Maldini. "I've got to go... Eh..."

"Call me when you're back in Milan." Maldini waved.

Albertini nodded. "I'm sorry, Paulo..." He said in a low voice as he turned around to run off.

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The Forest players waited for Albertini to run over before they held their hands together to rush toward the Forest fans in the stands.

As they ran toward the front of the goal, everyone dived en masse to slide on the ground.

Thunderous cheers rang out in the stands.

The players stood up and clapped to show their thanks.

Twain was surrounded by the reporters in the middle of the field for an interview. His mind had calmed down and he was convinced that he was not dreaming, and that he was indeed a champion manager.

Dunn was pulled aside by Tang Jing alone in a secluded corner for an exclusive interview. As an assistant manager who had won the Champions League title for the first time, Dunn had many areas which she could hype up for the coverage. The other Chinese media surrounded Sun Jihai. Although the Chinese player did not play for a minute and only sat on the bench for ninety minutes, it was enough for the Chinese media to be excited for several days.

This was the first Champions League won by a Chinese player!

Twain found the Italian photojournalist who had secretly snapped his hand gesture among the press. He was the culprit who had caused everything to blow up. If he had not snapped that picture and printed it in a deliberate misrepresentation, how could he have promised to jump into the sea if he did not to win?

Meeting his again as a victor, Twain would not give any face to this man.

“Hey, isn’t this that Italian photojournalist? What about it? Are you here today to raise your hands in surrender to me? Alas, it is a shame. If we were in a battle, I would execute you immediately as a prisoner of war, lest I should waste any food on you. Our army takes no prisoners.”

His words caused that Italian photojournalist’s face to turn pale and then red and not know what to do with his hands.

Twain swept his gaze across the crowd in front of him, where he saw a number of Italian reporters. At the thought of the behavior of the Italian media before the game, he could not suppress his disgust within.

“I’d be happy to answer your questions. But I also have my terms before that — I don’t accept questions from any Italian media or Italian reporters. I don’t understand your lousy English.” He shrugged his shoulders and opened his hands.

The Italian reporters initially thought that Twain would be receptive due to his good mood after he had won the championship title. They did not expect him to be so unforgiving. For a moment, they looked at each other and did not know what to do.

“You have no right to do so!” An Italian reporter shouted in proper English.

“I do too!” Twain roared in reply. “I’m the champion now! You’re the ones who begged for an interview, not me! If you don’t like it and don’t want to interview me, I’d be happy to go back to rest!”

With that, Twain departed.

“I’ve never seen a manager as ungracious as you, Mr. Tony Twain!” The Italian reporter cried in annoyance at his back.

Twain stopped in his tracks and turned around to face him, “You’re right, Mr. Reporter. I don’t have manners, and I don’t care what you Italians think of me. I don’t mind you describing me as Mussolini in the papers. You can slam me for refusing to accept your interview in the newspapers published tomorrow, and you can say that I despise the whole of Italy. Do you want to add a photo of me sticking my middle finger up at you as a postscript to capture more readers? See how considerate I am to you. I even provided you with such a great topic to hype. Why do you still want to interview me? You’re not going to get nice words from me. Why don’t you go to comfort the losers instead of hanging around me?”

With that, Twain turned around again and hurried away, and a group of people hurriedly surrounded him.

“Mr. Twain, Mr. Twain, we are not the Italian reporters!”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Spanish. I have nothing to do with Italy!”

“I’m an English reporter myself...”

Twain answered the media’s questions as he walked along. He fully enjoyed the privilege of being a champion.

The group of Italian reporters who were ditched were mind boggled. They had never seen such an ungracious champion... Who the hell was he? What was he thinking? How could he be so vindictive? What gave him the right? Was he not afraid of the media slamming him? Did not he care about his personal image and reputation?

They thought right. Twain indeed did not care what the Italian media thought of him or would slam him for. He did not care at all about his image and reputation among this group. He only felt responsible to the Nottingham Forest fans. As long as the Nottingham Forest fans liked and loved him, it was enough. He did not give a hoot about the English media in England. The Italian reporters’ English counterparts had a deep awareness of this point.

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The interview on the field did not last long, and all the Forest players returned to the locker room to change into the t-shirts that the club had specially prepared for the victory. They were red with a golden number “3.” There were lines of gold letters above and below the number:

“CHAMPION

NOTTINGHAM FOREST”

The podium was probably being set up outside, so the players did not have to rush out. They continued to celebrate wildly in the locker room.

Armed with bottles of champagne, the players fired corks at each other.

Twain had just finished the interview, pushed the door to enter and was drenched from head to toe by several sprays of champagne. The photojournalists, who followed behind Twain and intended to photograph some footage inside the team's locker room, were also hit. There were liquid marks on the camera lens.

Everyone burst into laughter when they saw clearly that it was the boss who came in.

"Welcome, our champion manager — Tony Twain!"

Everyone lifted up the bottles in their hands and moved closer to Twain as if they were going to pour down his head. Twain, who was caught off guard, hurriedly asked Kerslake for help. "Help me, David!"

In spirit of brotherhood, Kerslake stepped forward and on the chair, which made him taller than everyone else. He raised his hands to signal for the crowd to first calm down. "Listen up. Listen up, guys!"

Everyone put down the bottles in their hands for the time being and looked at their assistant manager.

"You've all listened to the manager's instructions more than once, haven't you?" he said to the crowd as he stood on the chair and pointed to Twain.

"That's right!" The players nodded.

"It was him who had instilled spirit and faith in you!" Kerslake raised his volume and swung his arms wider.

"Yes!" Someone shouted in reply.

"Let's make a toast to him together. Follow me and say: Damn Tony!"

"Damn Tony!" the players roared loudly.

"We need your damn motivation!"

"We need your damn motivation!"

"We're a bunch of mad dogs which bravely charge forward, frothing at the mouths as we... utterly defeat our opponents!"

The players roared as if they were really mad dogs.

"Defense is what we live for!"

The defensive players cried in succession, "Wipe out our opponents! Shovel and overturn them!"

"Attack is what we do!" Kerslake waved his arms and shouted rhythmically.

"Score! Score! Score!"

"I say, guys! What do we live and die for!!" Kerslake raised his arms and asked aloud as he looked up.

The players, whose emotions were completely stirred, stood on their chairs and brandished their fists as they looked up and roared, "victory! Champion! Victory! Champion!"

Twain looked on at the side with a grin. When he saw Kerslake suddenly turn his hand and pointed at him as he growled, "Now, let's thank the man who gave us the championship title!"

With that, he took a bottle from someone else, twisted it open, and poured it over Twain.

More players rushed up and poured the champagne onto Twain.

"Drink to your fill in celebration!"

"F**k!" Twain wiped the champagne from his face before he was finally able to see the people in front of him.

After the players pranked their manager, they went on to prank on each other.

Twain pulled Kerslake and had to wipe his face with his suit. "Damn it, David. Your words were so stirring just now! If I had a bottle in my hand, I'd pour it on your head too!"

"I learnt that from you, Tony!" Kerslake belly laughed.

Watching the group of shirtless players running around in the locker room, Twain remembered something. He clapped his hands and cried loudly, "all right, all right, guys! Change your clothes, go out and receive the prize. We've made AC Milan wait twice!"

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Indeed, the podium had been set up a while ago. Since the winners had not arrived, the award ceremony could not be carried out.

The frustrated and dejected AC Milan players had to wait amidst the cheers of the Forest fans until their opponents appeared in the tunnel.

Twain came out with a group of radiant and extremely excited players. When the victors emerged, the atmosphere in the stadium climbed another level.

"Tony! Tony! You did just as you said you would!"

"Champion! We're the champions! Nottingham Forest is the champion!"

Shouts erupted in the stands as all the Forest players stepped onto the podium in these sounds.

The first of the proceedings was the runner-up award, and the Forest players did not care about this part of the process. They continued their unbridled revelry on the field and indulged in the celebration.

This was when Twain finally found a chance to shake Ancelotti's hand.

The two men said nothing as there was nothing to be said. Silence was the best policy. They parted after a simple and brief handshake.

Then Twain stood aside and quietly watched as the runners-up came on the stage to accept the silver medals. He knew that the AC Milan players would not be able to accept them in their hearts, just like him last year. He had been so angry that he tossed the silver medal he had just received to a young ball boy. These people obviously would not do anything as shocking as he did, because the AC Milan players were well-behaved and all typical professional players who fit in with their chairman's standards.

So what if you're unwilling now that you are the losers? Just like we were last year. There can only be one champion and one winner in the world of football. History is written by the victors, just like football.

Gattuso went up to accept the silver medal with a dark expression. As soon as he came down, he tucked the silver medal into his pants. Only the lanyard swung outside.

You're in a bad mood, aren't you?

In fact, the matter is simple. Want to improve your mood? Try to defeat us next year!

The last one to take to the stage to accept the award was Ancelotti. When he accepted the silver medal, he even chatted with the UEFA president, Johansson. It could be seen that he was not in a good mood. Then he went off with the silver medal.

Once AC Milan had accepted their medals, the stadium, which was quieter, suddenly rang out with singing.

It was the Forest team's turn.

The Forest players, who were still bouncing and singing, calmed down for a while and lined up under the podium as they got ready to go up to accept the gold medals.

Everyone went up one by one, accepted the gold medals from Platini, shook hands, and then stood on one side as they waited for the final moment to arrive.

Twain was the second last person to go up and receive the award. Platini was the one to give him the prize and not Johansson. Twain did not want to have anything to do with these officials. He had just wanted to take the gold medal and stepped aside. After all, everyone was waiting for the highlight at the end.

However, Platini stopped him. "Tony." He spoke in English. "You embarrassed us last year."

Twain knew what Platini referred to. He laughed drily. He did not intend to apologize for that.

"But you've surprised us all this year. No one, including me, thought that you guys could break into the final, and beat AC Milan to win the championship. None of your opponents were weak..."

"Did you all arrange it?" Twain asked in return

Platini did not say anything. He just smiled.

Twain also knew he could not have said "Yes, these were all arranged by us." He turned around and walked to his players.

Albertini stepped on the stage. Even the AC Milan fans who stayed behind gave him a standing ovation.

The Forest teammates who waited on the stage also applauded him and whistled.

Albertini walked up to Platini, and the Frenchman patted him on the shoulder and said in Italian, "any compliment to you is unnecessary, Demetrio. You've done what a lot of people can only dream of. Congratulations, Demetrio!" He hung the gold medal around Albertini's neck.

Then he turned around and picked up the glittering silver UEFA Champions League trophy.

“Now, it belongs to you!”

Albertini took the trophy from Platini. He took a deep breath as he lowered the trophy slightly before he held it high.

Countless red ribbons floated down from above the roof of the stadium, while gold ribbons shot out from the rear of the podium. The night sky was lit up in red by fireworks.

“Congratulations to Nottingham Forest! Congratulations, Nottingham Forest! They are the champion of the 06-07 Champions League! A truly worthy champion!”

Meanwhile, the Queen’s classic *We Are the Champions* broadcasted over the Olympic Stadium of Athens.

As the song played “We are the champions, we are the champions of the world,” the other players swarmed to lift Albertini, still holding the trophy, high up and carry him on their shoulders.

Twain raised his head. Under the red fireworks and colorful ribbons, the glittering silver trophy was beautiful.

This is not a video game. This is reality!

He clenched his fists.

Chapter 558: A Victorious Return

“I’m sorry that the spectators did not get to see the spectacle of me jumping into the sea. Maybe next time I should say, ‘If I win, I’ll jump into the sea.’ Would it be better?”

LCD televisions everywhere in the airport lounge screened Twain’s interview with the BBC.

The Forest team’s charter plane was about to arrive at London Heathrow.

During the exclusive interview in the morning, Twain promised to hand over the broadcast right to BBC for the Forest team’s party to celebrate the team’s victory this evening, as a compensation.

As for the rest of the media... he did not care.

It was clearly stated in the contract that the agreement would only come into effect on the premise that the Forest team had lost the game, so he did not have to be held liable for it. Twain gave the right to BBC for the live broadcast of the celebration only because he had collaborated with BBC at the World Cup in Germany and the relationship between both sides was good.

“Well, I now have some regrets about selling the rights for the live coverage to the media in England.” Twain was well-dressed, radiant and smiling on the television screen. “Maybe it would have been better if I had sold it to the Italian media? That way, I could have watch them sell all the ads, vowing to broadcast my jump live on air... Ha! I’ll learn for next time.”

There was a burst of laughter among the crowd watching the television.

Almost all of them were fans who had rushed from Nottingham. They came to the airport early to welcome the Forest team and even set up the red banners that read: “Welcome home, our European Champion — Nottingham Forest!”

Not only did they have a banner, all of them held a newspaper in their hands. It was a special issue from Nottingham Evening Post for the Champions League final, which the editorial department and print production rushed out overnight after the game.

The front page was printed in color. Other than their masthead, the entire page was in red with a golden number “3” on it. The top and bottom of it were a row of golden letters “The Champion — Nottingham Forest.” It was the Forest team’s commemorative t-shirt which was worn for the award ceremony after they took the title.

There was no other word on the front page besides that. As the newspapers were only sold in the Nottingham region, their readers were all from Nottingham and did not need much explanation. The Nottingham Forest fans knew what it meant.

Pierce Brosnan sent it to the editorial office as an idea for the front page and was approved immediately.

The Forest fans who came to meet the plane even held the newspapers as a fitting sign and mark of their identities. They raised the newspaper whenever they saw other people, and then everyone would smile at each other — all of them were Forest fans!

There were about twenty odd media outlets surrounding the group as they waited with them for the plane to arrive.

A season ago, when Twain and his team flew back from France only the hardcore fans and a few reporters from Nottingham and The Sun, who waited to ridicule Twain, were there. People lacked interest in a loser. No one wanted to be a loser, and no one cared if the loser wanted to be a loser.

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Through the window, Twain could already see the mouth of the River Thames under the clouds, the shimmering water reflecting the sun’s rays. He turned his head and looked at the Champions League trophy next to him, which also glowed in the dazzling silver light.

“It’s gorgeous...” He murmured as he reached out to touch the curved outline of the trophy as if he were caressing his wife’s naked body — of course, if he had a wife...

After a night of wild revelry, the players were exhausted and had been sleeping since they boarded the plane. Only a few were still awake.

Twain and Dunn were the few. Dunn did not sit with Twain. He went to the economy class and said to have accepted an exclusive interview with Tang Jing. Twain snorted. What kind of interview continued from the night before to the following afternoon?

There was a jolt, and the voice of the flight attendant came on the intercom. “Dear passengers, we are experiencing a little bumpiness as our plane is starting its descent. Will all passengers please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts.”

Some of the players woke up and looked around blankly before they realized they had reached the British airspace.

Twain, who did not listen to the flight attendant's instructions, stood up with the trophy and roared out in the loud voice he used to direct games, "get up, lazybones!"

There was a rustling sound in the cabin, and everyone poked their heads out of their respective seats in a few moments. Most of them still looked sleepy and blank.

"Should I really give you guys a mirror each to look at yourselves — is this what the European champions look like?" Twain made a sleepy appearance. His strange appearance made the players laugh and chased away their drowsiness.

"The plane is going to land. Wake up. There are a lot of fans and reporters out there waiting. Don't let them see your appearances now." With that, Twain turned around and sat down.

After a while, Dunn also came back from the back, and sat next to Twain.

"The exclusive interview is over?"

"Yes."

"I'm suddenly looking forward to the exceptionally long interview." Twain whistled.

Dunn did not speak. He knew he was not as glib as Twain. If they continued the topic, he would soon lose.

A noise came from behind him, and Dunn turned his head to take a look. Then he tapped Twain. "Mr. Chairman."

When Twain heard this, he stood up hurriedly. Sure enough, he saw Evan Doughty and Allan Adams walk toward him while they greeted the players.

"Looks like they're here for you." Dunn said and sat down in the empty seat across the aisle.

"Boys! You have done a great job, and I'm proud of your performance! The championship bonus will be honored when you return to Nottingham!" Evan smiled. He made a monetary promise, which was what the players wanted to hear most. Everyone whistled, applauded, and cheered.

Twain sat by the window in a three-seat row, with the championship trophy in the middle seat, and an empty seat next to the aisle. Dunn was about to move to another seat, but Evan lifted his hand to stop him

He reached out to Twain and asked, "can I hold that?" He pointed to the Champions League trophy.

"Of course." Twain handed the championship trophy to him.

Evan held it in his hand and caressed it lightly. Then he sat down in the middle seat with the trophy in his arms.

Allan Adams sat in the aisle seat.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Evan asked as he gazed upon the trophy in his arms.

“Just like a voluptuous beauty,” Twain replied.

Both of them laughed.

“Well done, Tony.” Allan reached his hand across to Twain.

Twain shook his hand. “Allan, thank you. We couldn’t have gotten to this point without your financial support.”

Evan was happy to see his two main men getting along with each other, which suggested that there were no cracks inside the club, and he could still look forward to a better future and many more of such moments.

“Tony. You have brought such a big honor to the team and the club should do something.” Evan put down the trophy and gave it to Allan. “What would you like to have?”

Twain thought. “I want to get the club to invest more in the development of the youth team.”

When Evan heard him, he glanced at Allan next to him, and held out his hand. “Ten pounds.”

“Oh, hell...” Allan complained as he took out ten pounds from his pocket and put it in Evan Doughty’s palm.

“You guys...”

“Allan and I had a bet. He bet that you would ask for a raise or something like that, and I said you’d consider the development of the team building. Thank you, Tony. You helped me win ten pounds from him.” Evan chuckled happily.

“Hey...”

Evan did not let Twain continue. He put his hand on Twain’s shoulder. “Isn’t our youth always at the top of England’s ranking?”

“That was before, and we’re no longer so.” Twain wanted to shrug his shoulders but realized Evan’s hand was on it. He shook his head instead. “Chelsea’s new owner have invested a lot of money in the team’s youth training. They scouted for players everywhere, and we have people being poached. You see, all of the big clubs in the league have a good youth team. Arsenal, Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool... except us. Our youth training system is provincial compared to theirs. There’s a reality that frustrates me. After Bale and Wood, I don’t have my eye on anyone in our youth team ever since...”

“Maybe you have a high standard, Tony. Everyone in the adult team is a big star player now. So, it’s normal for you not to keen on anyone from the youth team...” Evan soothed.

Twain shook his head. “Maybe. But in the contest against those teams for those young talents, we are already at a disadvantage. That’s the truth.”

Evan nodded in agreement and continued, “But, Tony... I have something to say to you.”

The cabin gradually became livelier as more and more players woke, so Evan lowered his head and spoke in a low voice. Obviously, he did not want others to hear what he had to say next.

“It may be difficult for us to do what you just asked...”

“What?”

“I meant to say, we may not be able to put too much money into the development of the youth team in the near future. At least I can't be as generous as Abramovich. Because... Well, Allan and I are planning to build a new high-capacity stadium for the team.”

Twain opened his mouth and looked at Evan with surprise.

He really did not think he would hear such news.

While he played the Football Manager game, a football manager could make various requests to the club's board as the manager, such as improving the training facilities, upgrading the development of the youth training system, finding the satellite clubs, giving a higher salary cap and transfer fee budget, as well as expanding or even building a new stadium.

The last item was most difficult. When Twain played the game, he had proposed more than once for the club to expand or build a new stadium, and the answer was “no.” He even threatened to resign, and the result was the same — his appointment had led the team to win all the world's championship titles, and he would be the top-ranking manager with the most achievements in the world and yet he would be dumped during the board meeting when it came to the choice of “a new stadium or a new manager.”

Just because the stadium did not have enough seats, he could be dismissed without hesitation by those damned club board meetings.

Due to his deep impression over this ridiculous matter, Twain did not even think to propose to the team to expand or build a new stadium even though he also felt that the City Ground stadium, which could accommodate up to 30,000 people, was ridiculously small and disproportionate to the status of the Forest team...

Evan looked at Twain's expression and thought he was angry over the club's plan to build a new stadium construction instead of giving money to improve the development of the youth team. He had wanted to explain. However, he did not want to create a fuss with his manager the day after they won the Champions League.

“Uh, Tony... Actually, what happened was...”

Twain lifted his hand to interrupt him. “Do you really have plans for a new stadium?” He looked at Evan and then at Allan.

In the end, it was Allan who nodded his head and explained, “Yes, Tony. We started planning during the semifinals. Evan and I both felt that the current City Ground stadium can't hold too many fans, which is incompatible with our team's current results in Europe and in the domestic league. As you know, a new stadium requires a lot of money. Just look at Arsenal's predicament over those few years and you'll get the idea. So once the plan is put into action, we really don't have much money for your youth team, and I'm afraid there's not much money for you to operate in the transfer market as well...”

Evan was always reluctant to play the bad guy so it could only be up to Allan to step forward.

Twain was not a fool. He looked at Evan who had his head bowed in silence. He looked at Allan's expression and laughed, "Wait, you think I'm angry?"

When he heard him, Evan looked up at him.

"I've had the same idea as you. I also think that the City Ground stadium is too small... I'm very much in favor of the new stadium plan."

The other two men were visibly relieved.

Evan did not want to hear any dissonant voices within the club.

"But..." Twain changed his tack. "we can still slowly develop the youth team. I hope to have at least a plan on how much money to invest each year, not much, but to maintain a continued investment. As for the transfer fees... I'm used to saving money for the club in the transfer negotiations over the last few years anyways. It's okay if there's less money. We have a strong lineup now and don't need a massive transfer fee to replace the entire team. We just need to beef up in a few positions."

Hearing Twain, Evan and Allan looked at each other and felt completely relieved.

"There's no problem with the development of the youth team. I know that any big club must have a youth training base that matches their status. Besides, Tony, we have more players joining than leaving in our transfer situation in the past few years..."

Twain knew what he meant.

"When the transfer market reopens, there's one player who will definitely leave."

Evan and Allan did not have to ask him who that man was, because everyone knew.

"However," Twain changed the direction in their discussion, "we may not make that much money from that person. He's not as popular as he was last year."

"Who told you to keep him out in the cold for a season?" Evan laughed.

"I'm not going to let anyone who opposes me leave the Forest team so easily." Dunn shrugged. "He needed to suffer a little. Now I'm sure he has suffered enough..."

Allan interrupted him, "What if this championship title suddenly changes his mind and he wants to stay in Nottingham Forest?"

Twain answered Allan's question without hesitation, as if he had long thought of the answer. "The result will be the same. He will leave. Allan, you know what? This is a great opportunity to let the players know who the boss of this team is so I'm not going to let it go."

During the discussion, the plane jerked, and they landed.

"I'm on your side, Tony." Evan nodded along with the jolt. "You have the final say in this team."

Having said that, Evan and Allan left without waiting for the plane to stop.

Twain got up and called out to Albertini, sitting in the back, "Demetrio, come here!"

“What’s the matter, boss?” Although his retirement had been announced, Albertini still followed the team’s custom to call Twain “boss.”

“In a minute, you’ll come with me and walk in the front.” Twain pointed to the championship trophy in his hand. “The two of us will carry it off the plane.”

Albertini was hesitant, “I’m already retired, boss. You should get George instead...”

“Bollocks!” Twain swore under his breath, “Did I announce that the team was dissolved? This season is not over yet! If George wants to enjoy his share of the glory, he can wait for the next round! This time, it’s just you and me walking at the front. Not only here, but also on the way back to Nottingham, and finally at our celebration party... Until that time, you’re still the captain of this team.”

Albertini smiled haplessly, “OK, I’ll listen to you, boss.”

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After the plane came off the runway and stopped on the tarmac, the reporters and the group of welcoming fans rushed forward, and the police in charge of maintaining the order struggled to hold the people behind the safety line. The situation was messy and noisy.

It was not until they saw the cabin door open that they suddenly calmed down.

The police officers felt the pressure around them suddenly relax and raised their heads as well.

The cabin door opened slowly, and the first one to come out was Tony Twain. He raised his hand to wave to the welcoming crowd below, while his other hand remained inside the plane. As he stepped out, the championship trophy appeared along with Albertini in front of everyone.

Instead of rushing down, the two men stood at the door and raised the trophy high.

The climax had arrived.

The fans below cheered in unison, and a firework of flashbulbs went off.

“Ladies and gentlemen... This is the UEFA Champions League trophy!” The live broadcast gave a big close-up of the trophy in the hands of Twain and Albertini. “The hands that had clasped this trophy used to wear the jerseys of Real Madrid, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Liverpool, Manchester United, Barcelona, Bayern Munich... and now it’s Nottingham Forest’s turn!”

A female presenter spoke movingly in front of the camera. Her words were heard by the fans next to her. As they yelled, there was so much pride in their words. “This is not the first time, not the first time! This is the third time we’ve held her! Nottingham Forest is the team that has won the UEFA Champions League three times!”

That female presenter was startled by the sudden shout and did not make a sound for a while.

Twain and Albertini held the trophy up high as they walked down the ramp. The flashbulbs had not yet stopped flashing.

Behind them, the Forest players filed out in a line. They had changed out of their jerseys and dressed in stylishly-cut dark red suits. This was the uniform that the Forest club gave to the players and coaches to attend formal occasions.

It made them look energized and completely without the confused look of having just woken up. Twain looked back at his players and was pleased with the boys' performance.

As Twain and Albertini walked down the ramp with the trophy, the police officers on both sides felt the great pressure coming from behind again. People desperately pushed forward as they tried to get close to the trophy that glittered in the sun.

Some of the police officers' hats were squeezed till they were skewed. The situation was chaotic.

Twain stopped and motioned for Albertini to join him in holding up the trophy again. Then he raised his hand and signaled to the fans to calm down, for he had something to say.

It was an effective move. The fans who did not listen to the police officers listened to the manager.

A young policeman looked at Twain, who had a smile on his face, and asked his partner next to him while desperately trying to maintain order, "is he helping us to stabilize the fans?"

The older policeman muttered with gritted teeth, "Devil knows... It's nice that he does not make it worse!" The older policeman was unhappy to be assigned with the task of being in charge of safekeeping and maintaining the order in the airport. On one hand, it was because he was a Chelsea fan and did not like to see his opponent do so well. On the other hand, there was bound to be trouble wherever Twain was.

"Hey guys!" Twain raised his volume and roared like he was directing the game loudly on the sidelines, "Does anyone still remember what she looked like before I took over this team?"

"Yes, we remember." Hundreds of fans present responded loudly.

"Now Manager Tony Twain is going to give an impromptu speech live..." The female presenter spoke in a low voice into the microphone for fear of interrupting Twain's speech.

"Does anyone recall what was the Forest team like at its peak twenty-three years ago?!"

"We remember!!" The answer this time was much louder because it was the most glorious period in the history of the Nottingham Forest Club, when they broke out from Second Division to become the First Division champions, won the Champions League two years in a row and set the longest unbeaten record of forty-two games in England's top league before Wenger's Arsenal. Liverpool, who dominated Europe, were beaten twice in a year: in the league tournament and Champions Cup. For a period, the red Nottingham Forest was unrivalled.

The names of Brian Clough and his men were engraved in the annals of the Champions League.

"Excellent!" Twain nodded and took the other handle of the trophy from Albertini. He raised the trophy high and roared loudly, "counting from that year to the present moment... twenty-seven years later! We're back! Let the whole of Europe tremble! Let our opponents be afraid! Let those who despise us go to hell! There are more championship titles waiting ahead for us to embrace!"

Hundreds of fans followed their manager and roared toward the skies. It was just as the older policeman put it: The situation became messier...

Amid the frenzied shouts, that female presenter also had to raise her voice, "Manager Tony Twain gave an impromptu speech to his supporters at the airport, and he told these people that this is just the beginning! The is BBC, reporting live to you on the scene."

When the female presenter finished her work, she turned her head to look at Twain, who held the trophy high among the crowd as he walked out. He smiled so brilliantly...

Chapter 559: An Ending and A Beginning

The open-top double-decker bus, used for the celebration parade, was parked outside the airport terminal. Surrounded by a large number of fans and reporters, the Forest team walked out of the airport terminal and boarded the bus.

Waiting with the bus were the four police cars that had come from Nottingham to escort them. They were the pride of the city of Nottingham, and the mobilization of the police force was not too much to ask.

A convoy of four police cars and an open-top double-decker bus slowly hit the road amid the cheers and they would cruise back to Nottingham from there.

After they turned onto the M1 motorway from the airport, the players soon found that the bus was followed by a special fleet of cars. The fleet did not have a unified type of vehicle. They were made of various large and small vehicles in a variety of brands and models. The Forest team's red team flags hung on the bodies of all the cars. Although the cars were driven on the motorway, a number of fans still leaned out of the car windows and waved their arms. Because the Forest team bus was not going very fast, the speed of the cars at the back was not fast either, so there was no fear of any traffic accidents... They turned out to be the fans who had just welcomed the team at the airport. They were escorting the team back to Nottingham.

It was not the first time that Twain had experienced this. After he and the team won the EFL Cup in Cardiff, they were also escorted to Nottingham in such a manner.

It was just that there were not so many people. After all, the EFL Cup and the UEFA Champions League were not on the same level at all in terms of glory.

The players happily waved hello to the fans below. The fans kept honking their horns.

The convoy slowed down on the motorway and drove slowly on the side so that the other passing vehicles had to overtake.

A steady stream of people went to the upper deck of the bus to catch the breeze, wave to the fans, and receive their accolades and cheers. Likewise, a constant stream of people also came back down after they had their fill.

Twain remained at the lower deck. He had been busy since yesterday and for the better half of today. He would continue to be busy this evening, so he planned to take advantage of this time to have a good rest.

He closed his eyes.

Everything was like a dream. He was a little confused as to whether the dream was a reality, or reality was a dream.

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After the game, from the locker room to the press conference and back to the hotel, the entire Forest team was extremely excited. It was the first time for many of them to win this rare honor — a European championship.

Even those who had won the Champions League before did not expect to be able to pick up the trophy again at the end of their careers.

Edwin van der Sar started in Ajax. He participated in the UEFA Champions League final when he played for Ajax in 1995. Coincidentally, their opponent then was AC Milan, and there was also a former AC Milan player on the Ajax team — Rijkaard. Even more coincidentally, Rijkaard assisted Kluivert, who scored seven minutes before the end of the game to beat the then indomitable AC Milan and unexpectedly picked up the Champions League title.

Edwin van der Sar had never forgotten that day for the most glorious moment of his career belonged to that day. Later, he had not been able to obtain such honor, with Ajax, Juventus or the Netherlands national team.

Edwin van der Sar was thrilled to win the Champions League title for the second time. He was thirty-six years old and only had a few years left in his career. His career had a good start with the Champions League title, and he hoped the end of his career would also draw to a happy conclusion with the Champions League.

He picked up the Champions League trophy and rubbed his face against it. The cool sensation reminded him that everything was real and not a dream.

Edwin van der Sar was just a representative of some people, as it was the case with many veterans. Even a world-class striker like van Nistelrooy had never won a Champions League title in his career. When he was dumped by Manchester United, he chose Nottingham Forest just to retaliate against Manchester United and prove to Ferguson what a big mistake it was for Manchester United to abandon him. He did not think... He never thought that his unfulfilled wish at Manchester United would be fulfilled at Nottingham Forest.

He did not know what to say as he held the trophy. He was the highest goalscorer in the fifty-two-year history of the Champions League (if the figure included the Champions League qualifiers, the player with the highest number of Champions League goals scored would be Real Madrid's Raúl González), but he had never won a championship trophy, which was somewhat unspeakable.

Now van Nistelrooy could finally get rid of this embarrassment.

Whether they were retiring, just starting, or entering the golden phase of their careers, the Forest players now had a glorious record in their careers — the 06-07 Champions League title.

Just the sound of it was amazing.

But in fact, they were more remarkable than this honor. One had to know that the struggles in the English Football League Championship (which was known as the Football League First Division at the time), a financial crisis, and the danger of being relegated had plagued everyone on the team four years ago.

Nottingham Forest was a team with a tradition of creating miracles, whether it was during Brian Clough era or with Tony Twain currently at the helm, they all did things that no one else could even dare dream of.

Twain did not restrain his men that night. He did not command them to go to their rooms to rest at eleven o'clock and did not forbid them from drinking to their hearts' content.

Because he himself was made to drink by his colleagues in the hotel bar till he passed out.

The group of English drunks even poured beer into the Champions League trophy before they drank from it in turns. In reality, not much of the alcohol went into their stomachs. More of it was poured down their necks and drenched their bodies instead.

Twain did not know how much he had drunk. There was no way to keep track anyway. His glass was filled up repeatedly. Finally, they drank directly from the bottles. Twain thought that "when hopes are won, drink your fill in high delight. And never leave your wine-cup empty in moonlight!" was the truth for the ages. He could not think of a more appropriate way to celebrate other than to drink. One should drink during happy times and it was the best way to let go of one's feelings. Alcohol was the greatest invention in the history of human civilization. Without alcohol, his life would be boring. Alcohol was his favorite other than football.

Now he finally had a chance to drink to his fill and booze without constraints. How could he let go of it? He drank and threw up repeatedly. He did not know how much alcohol he had in his system, but he clearly remembered his mood at the time — he was very happy and blissful.

Beer, champagne, whisky, wine, brandy, vodka... they had all the alcohol for sale in the hotel bar.

By the next day, the manager of the hotel received a report from their bar which stated that the people from Nottingham Forest had drunk up the entire contents of the bar.

The Greeks finally witnessed the English's capacity for drinking.

This was also why the team flew to London only in the afternoon and not in the morning — because most of the people were still passed out from the alcohol that morning.

George Wood was not among the crazy crowd. He accompanied his mother to do some shopping and buy souvenirs. He had little interest in the booze and was not interested in the party. He only wished to accompany his mother when he did not play football and would go with her wherever she wanted to go and to pay for whatever she wanted to buy.

Wood had always felt that he owed much to his mother. Now that he made a lot of money, he wanted to make it up to her.

Twain knew this too, so he did not ask Wood to attend the party. He just reminded him and his mother to be careful while out shopping.

Everyone else in the team was aware how much Wood loved his mother, so no one forced him to join in the binge drinking.

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When Twain opened his eyes again, it was because he was woken by a loud noise.

He drowsily opened his sleepy eyes in a daze and turned his head to look out of the window at the familiar buildings. The bus had finally arrived in Nottingham. As he looked further down, he was startled and jerked up in his seat, suddenly wide awake.

All he saw was a sprawling sea of red from one end of the street to the other end.

Clad in the red Forest jerseys and the red Forest team's commemorative t-shirts for their third championship win, the fans huddled on both sides of the street and waved their arms and flags as they cheered and applauded the players in the bus.

Despite the police cars making way, the bus seemed to crawl up the crowded street.

The players went up to the upper deck to accept the cheers from the fans along the route.

"Wow, the entire city turned up." Twain whistled.

It was extremely noisy. He could not hear himself at all. The voices of the fans here were the only voices that could be clearly heard.

They were calling the names of every Forest player. Those who were called stood up from their seats, waved in response, and then received louder cheers before they sat back down contentedly.

It was like a military parade. However, it was not the people on the in the bus who inspected the streets. It was the fans on the streets who inspected the "soldiers" on the bus.

Twain turned over and saw Kerslake came thumping down from above. When he saw that Twain was awake, he happily waved to him and shouted, "Come up! Come on up!"

Twain had not yet reacted as the fans' voices were too loud for him to hear exactly what Kerslake was shouting about.

That was when he heard the fans shouting his name. "Tony! Tony! Tony Twain! Tony! Tony! Tony Twain!!"

He looked at Kerslake's excited smiling face and understood right away.

Twain appeared on the upper deck. The fans cheered with excitement when they saw him emerge.

Twain leaned over the railing and waved to the crowd below. This position was higher than where he had been. He could see more clearly. Not only was the street covered in red, front and back, even as far as he could see... it was red everywhere.

The ancient city of Nottingham seemed to have been dyed in red overnight.

“Look!” Kerslake excitedly pointed below. “The grandest occasion in twenty-seven years!”

Twain smiled and said, “don’t worry, David, there will be more to come in the future. You can see it as many times as you want.”

“Heh heh, I know you have the ability, Tony.” Kerslake punched Twain lightly.

Twain stepped forward and took the trophy from Wood before he raised it high up. His action led to more screams from below the bus.

Someone handed Twain a microphone, which was connected to the bus speakers. He could give a speech from the bus. His voice had turned hoarse in the past few days. He had already strained himself giving that speech at the airport... He had to use the microphone connected to the speakers if he wanted to speak.

He coughed into the microphone. This sound was amplified by the speakers in front of the bus and could be heard from afar. The fans in this section became quiet when they saw that Twain had something to say.

“I, Tony Twain, am very grateful to all of you for your support. To be honest, I’m really touched to see this scene. It looks endless.” He waved his hand. “Did half of Nottingham turn up?”

He continued after a pause, “When I was the acting manager of Nottingham Forest, I used to say to a couple of good friends in the pub that I don’t care if the game is entertaining to watch, I don’t care if I win with offense or defense, I don’t care how the Forest team used to play, my goal is simple. And that is to win. I said a team that can’t win is worthless, the manager who can’t lead the team to win is f**king terrible!” He raised his voice with every word.

His speech was soon received enthusiastically by the people below.

“I had also told my players and said... What kind of football is considered Nottingham Forest’s football? It’s the kind that keeps winning! I’m very happy that I can use such a trophy today to prove everything that I had said before was not bragging.” He raised the trophy with one hand and looked fondly at the it. “It has been twenty-seven years and she’s back in our hands. But here and now, in the presence of so many people, I promise you — this won’t be the last celebration!”

He handed the trophy back to Wood. He raised both of his hands and shook his head.

“As long as I’m still in this position, we will keep repeating it. Now, let’s go to the City Ground Stadium tonight and celebrate!”

With that, he put the microphone down, waved his fists again, and went down.

His throat was sore, and he was afraid to continue talking.

His throat could not bear it any longer with these few days of incessant roaring, non-stop talking, plus the smoking and drinking.

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The bus progressed slowly, but finally arrived at the city square at five o'clock in the afternoon. The entire team waited to enter the municipal building opposite the square, to celebrate with the gathered fans. This scene brought tears to many of the old Nottingham Forest fans' eyes because when the Forest team won the Champions League for the second time twenty-seven years ago, they had also celebrated with the fans here.

Later, on the day to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the UEFA Champions League, the Forest team organized a replication of the original parade. Although there had been a lot of people, the Forest team's future in the Football League First Division had been uncertain. There was not much excitement for the people who had come to commemorate.

Because whenever people thought of the past glory, they would find that the current reality was too cruel — once the European champion who had won twice in a row, could now only play in the second level league.

This time it was not the same. The people who came here might remember the past, but more often than not, they just cheered for the Forest team in front of them.

The silver trophy they held in their hands now was not a replica, but the real championship trophy, the real McCoy.

From the terrace of the municipal building, the entire Forest team had changed into suits again this time. They were going to have a formal dinner with the mayor. The players all put away their mischievous smiles and seriously sat down to dinner with the mayor and other senior government officials.

Evan Doughty was at ease with this kind of setting. But Twain and the players were uncomfortable. Such a solemn affair was a torment for them.

The city mayor praised the team's outstanding contribution to the city of Nottingham. When he made the toast, he said with emotion, "it used to be Robin Hood who let the whole world know our Nottingham city. And now you, all the players of Nottingham Forest have made the world reacquainted with us again!"

Everyone raised their glasses and thanked the mayor for his praise. The atmosphere was harmonious.

The dinner did not take long because the Forest team had to go to the City Ground stadium to prepare for the evening's celebration party.

Twain led the team away and Evan Doughty stayed behind with Allan Adams. They wanted to talk to the mayor in private about the location of the new stadium. If the government's support and some preferential policies could be obtained with regards to the purchase of the land, then the club could save a large sum of money in the construction plan for the new stadium.

Now that the Forest team had just won the Champions League and became the king of Europe, it was clearly the best time to make this request. Another reason that was particularly beneficial to the Forest team was that the current mayor was a big fan of Nottingham Forest, and that four generations of his family had grown up watching the Forest team play football. From an emotional standpoint, he should also support the Forest team's plans to build a new stadium.

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The news of the Forest team's evening celebration party was known to all in Nottingham, and at the same time, everyone knew it was an opportunity to say goodbye to a few people.

Albertini was going to retire, and Paul Gerrard had also announced his retirement. It was the best time to go to the City Ground stadium to see them off.

The City Ground stadium was brightly lit as the night came on. Just like during a home game, the crowd swarmed towards the stadium. The Trent River reflected the dazzling lights on the main entrance of the City Ground stadium. With the undulating ripples, the City Ground stadium in the water looked like an illusory palace. The 109-year-old stadium that exuded a modern glow in the night.

The police officers kept order around the stadium, but the police force was less than in a regular game. Because this time there were no visiting fans who could cause riots. Other than the real Forest fans, no one could buy tickets.

A police car parked at the head of the Trent Bridge. A young officer stood alone outside the car and smiled at the Forest fans who walked past him.

The car radio in the police car was covering the ongoing celebration at the City Ground stadium for its listeners. It was said that it was soon to be full house.

The young policeman looked at the fans who had walked past him and thought — would his former partner be in it now as well?

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The Forest team invited some celebrities and stars to attend the celebration party, but none of them were the highlight. They were just Forest fans whose identities were a little more unique.

Tonight's leading characters were still the team, players and coaches.

After everyone had entered the stadium, the outside of the stadium slowly calmed down, and the lights inside the City Ground stadium were all switched off, leaving only a few lights to create an arena atmosphere.

After a simple theatrical performance, the live presenter — John Motson began to introduce to the guests the Forest players about to make their appearances.

The Forest players had changed into their commemorative t-shirts and stood at the mouth of the tunnel. The guys looked at each other and saw the excited smiles on each other's faces.

These two days had really been unforgettable for them.

The first name to be called was George Wood. As the excellent player who graduated from the Forest youth team, and the next team captain, he was the first to come on.

He ran out and received loud applause and cheers from the Forest fans.

The spotlight from the roof shone down, and the beam of light enveloped Wood, accompanying him all the way from the tunnel to the center circle in the field.

The Forest players were called out one by one, and everyone received a warm welcome as they ran out. This was not the same as the celebration in Athens. This night entirely belonged to Nottingham Forest. No one would consider their opponent, and no one would worry about how their unbridled celebrations would let the opponent feel that they were not sportsmanlike enough.

This was Nottingham Forest people's show and they could use all the ways they could think to celebrate this championship title. They could celebrate without any restraints and brashly without fear of gossip.

Twain and the members of the coaching unit waited in the tunnel. There were fewer people around him. Everyone gave Twain a hug before they ran out after their names were called.

The sounds of the live broadcast and the fans' thunderous roars could be clearly heard in the tunnel.

Twain was full of smiles on his face and did not even show a moment of tiredness.

When Anelka's name was called, the fans' cheers remained enthusiastic but Anelka's smile was a little awkward. He did not hug or even shake hands with Twain and just ran straight out.

Twain did not care either. He did not even pay it any mind. He was just chatting with Dunn. It was Dunn who alerted him to it. He shrugged his shoulders as he looked at Anelka's back. "It's best that he acted like this."

And then Paul Gerrard was called.

The fans were a little louder this time than before. Although Paul was only a substitute goalkeeper, everyone remembered how he almost lost his life in the Champions League final last season. He was not blamed for the two conceded goals. He had done a good enough job.

Paul Gerrard turned around to embrace Twain. "Thank you, chief. To be able to win a championship title in my career... I'd never thought there would be such a wonderful thing!"

Twain smiled and said nothing. He just patted him on the shoulder. He did not know what to say as well.

Gerrard turned and ran onto the field.

Now, the only player left next to him was Albertini.

Twain turned his head and looked at the Italian player.

He was someone who had seen Demetrio retired once, but he still had an indescribable feeling.

He wanted to open his mouth to say something, but he heard the announcement crying out his name outside.

“Next... Let’s welcome —” Motson dragged his voice out and seemed to deliberately keep everyone in suspense. In fact, he was just giving the fans in the stadium time to get ready.

Sure enough, the fans in the stands began to chant the last two names that had not yet appeared:

“Tony! Tony!”

“Demetrio! Demetrio!”

“Demetrio, it’s time for us to take the field.” Twain lifted the trophy on the ground and handed the other handle to Albertini.

Albertini took it and nodded.

Afterward together with the trophy, the two men stepped onto the field amid a flood of cries.

“Tony and Demetrio!”

Motson had used the full names without exception when he called on those players before. However, this time he used the first names of those two delegates. He knew as well as the Forest fans that Nottingham Forest only had one “Tony” and “Demetrio.”

As the cheers grew louder, they ultimately synthesized with the applause to form a powerful current which engulfed them. As Twain and Albertini walked, they held up the trophy in their hands, and it dazzled under the lights.

As they walked toward the rest of the team, the players waiting on the sidelines swarmed around and lifted the two men up high together with the trophy. The atmosphere in the stadium reached fever pitch.

“Let’s cheer for our champions!” Motson hollered at the microphone.

He was not the commentator at the Champions League final. He was the BBC commentator and was not qualified to provide the commentary at the Champions League game. But this also gave him the benefit of being able to watch the television at home and drink beer while he cheered for the Forest team without having to consider the issue of a commentator’s inclination.

After a while, the players finally put the two men down. Twain placed the trophy on the table and then took the microphone.

“I need to thank a lot of people. However, today, I would like to thank one person.” His voice could be clearly heard throughout the stadium.

He walked up to Albertini.

“Do you know? When I decided to put Demetrio in the starting lineup before the final, people had asked me: ‘Are you crazy? That old guy can no longer play. How can you let him start in such an important final?!’ And other people had said to me: ‘We understand your sentiments for Demetrio, but this is the final and you can’t joke about the fate of the entire team because of personal feelings!’ And the result?” Twain shrugged and pointed to the championship trophy behind him. “I want to say that if we didn’t have Demetrio, we wouldn’t have been able to get this trophy back!”

“About six months ago, I said to Demetrio: ‘I’ll give you a real farewell game.’ The Champions League final... was not my handout to Demetrio, it never was. I think Demetrio’s form and level were enough to cope with that final, so I let him start. I’m very happy because it was an important decision in my coaching career, and it brought us the silver Champions League trophy!”

The people in the stands used their applause to show their agreement.

“I always thought that Demetrio retired too early at the age of thirty-five. You could play for at least two more years. But I can’t dissuade you. I’m able to leave the reporters dumbfounded at the press conference, but I can’t convince you.” Twain looked at Albertini and Albertini just smiled. “There’s not a single person here who wants you to go.” He gestured at the players around him. “But we respect your decision. The only thing that makes me happy is that I can finally give you a Champions League trophy as a commemorative gift.”

With that, he gave the microphone to Albertini. He knew he had to have some things to say.

Albertini took over the microphone, and said to his teammates, “Thank you.”

Then he turned to look up at the stands around the stadium.

“I would also like to thank you all, the Forest fans. I don’t want to lie. Other than the AC Milan fans, you are the most adorable group of fans I’ve ever met. When the boss went to Italy three years ago to find me, I never thought I would lift another Champions League trophy in the last game of my career... I’m no longer a child who likes to dream for a long time. But, I really had a beautiful dream — I’ll never forget my three years here. In the last three years of my career, I’ve met a fantastic manager, a bunch of terrific teammates, a remarkable team, and you...” He pointed to the stands and added, “a large group of brilliant fans.”

A huge round of applause came from the stands and poured in from all directions, as if a pair of invisible arms had tightly embraced their captain, Demetrio Albertini.

The applause made Albertini unable to continue. In truth, his voice sounded a little choked up toward the end. His teammates around him came up and hugged him one by one, and the younger ones, like Bale, even cried.

When George Wood and Albertini hugged, he felt that Demetrio had used more strength. “I’m leaving, George. It’s up to you.” Albertini whispered into his ear.

Wood nodded.

He still did not know how to say the parting words. Eastwood’s glib tongue made Albertini laugh, which was something he did not know how to do.

For the last three years, Albertini had been with him, teaching him how to be a qualified professional player, a good defensive midfielder and a competent team captain. He was used to having Albertini around in training and life. That feeling and emotion were inexplicable. If he had to describe it, it was like a good friend who had been with him for many years suddenly had to travel far away, he wanted to his friend to stay, but he could not deny his friend of his freedom.

Or should I say, “Demetrio, I wish you all the best?” But I don’t even want to say that at all...

He let go of Albertini and retreated to one side. He kept his head bowed and did not make a sound as he made way for his other teammates.

Not only the players, but also the coaches all went up to embrace the Italian player to thank him for all his contributions to the team and extended their deepest respects with regards to his retirement.

The last person to go up and embrace Albertini was Twain.

"I would like to give you a parting phrase, Demetrio." Then Twain read a poem in Mandarin, "Do not think that you are without friends in the road ahead for you are known in the world."

"What does it mean?" Albertini did not understand Mandarin.

"It means...Uh..." Twain wanted to translate this sentence into poetic English, but he found that he was unable to. "In short, it means... that you are the best player in the world. Maybe some people may disagree with me but we can ignore them for I think you are so you have to be! Forget the words of those ignorant people. I am the champion now, so I have the final say!"

It was clear that Twain could not explain this meaning and wanted to use this way bluff through it.

Albertini, who had long been accustomed to Twain's ruse, saw through it instantly. He then smiled at the embarrassed Twain.

His smile rescued Twain. The two men looked at each other and laughed. They laughed until tears came.

After their laughter subsided, Twain wiped the corners of his eyes, and saw that Albertini's eyes were red.

"Demetrio."

"Yes?"

"It's time to say goodbye..."

"Yes."

Meanwhile, music was played over the stadium's broadcast. It was the song Time to Say Goodbye sung by the famous soprano, Sarah Brightman and Italy's famous blind male singer, Andrea Bocelli.

The Italian song sung was melodious but carried the moving sadness of a farewell. An indescribable emotion welled up in everyone's chest in the stadium and began to spread. It was truly a perfect song to give the Italian veteran, Demetrio Albertini his farewell. Twain marveled at Motson for picking the song.

Albertini also did not expect that he would actually hear an Italian song, particularly this one. He froze for a moment, listened attentively and then pressed his lips together as his eyes welled with tears.

In the song, he seemed to replay his career again. He had a wonderful start... he had wanted to go on like and play for AC Milan until he retired. He did not expect to guess the beginning right but not anticipate the ending. When he was kicked out later in his career, he went to Atlético Madrid, Lazio, and then Nottingham Forest... These teams were just relay stations for him to stay for a while. If he had not attained the second spring of his career in Nottingham Forest and unexpectedly won the Champions League title, how many people would have remembered him if he had chosen to retire then?

Vowed to be loyal to AC Milan and yet he was kicked out, what could be crueller than that? If he had a choice, he would rather trade this Champions League trophy for a chance to be a loyal player again.

Was that possible? Of course not.

Having been noisy the entire night, the City Ground stadium was quiet the moment the song played. Everyone set their sights on the man in the spotlight.

In the poignant song, Albertini slowly raised his hands. With reddened eyes, he pressed his lips together as he said goodbye to his eighteen years of drifting in his career.

Along with everyone, Twain clapped and paid tribute to him as they watched. When he did all these, he hid among the players and did not draw attention to himself so that no one could see the tears glistening in his eyes.

Goodbye, Demetrio.

Your story has ended, and my story is just beginning...

Chapter 560: Michael's Farewell

Twain stood on his doorstep after being away for ten days. It was drizzling, but he did not open an umbrella, not because he pretended to look cool, but because he did not have an umbrella — Who would take an umbrella along when one went to Brazil?

He had spent ten days in Brazil and only just returned.

Ten days flew by. Good times always felt short. He and Shania had a pleasant holiday in Brazil, during which they met Shania's parents again. Shania's mother was happy and satisfied with her daughter's current achievements. Even though she still treated her as a child, she was no longer as strict with discipline as she was before. Shania's father was still mostly quiet but would chat with Twain in private to thank him for taking care of Shania and asked him to continue to do so — As her parents, they knew that Shania had moved out of her aunt's house in Newcastle and into Twain's place.

However, they did not raise any objections.

When Twain went to meet them, he felt a little uneasy, for fear that they would suspect that he had behaved inappropriately towards their daughter. From the looks of it, he did not know if Brazilians were open-minded about life, or whether they were very reassured by Twain...

Later when the two of them sunbathed by the sea, Twain jokingly asked Shania, "do I look so harmless to everyone?"

Shania smiled innocently. "Because my dad and mom know that Uncle Tony is a good man."

Twain felt frustrated. But soon he was relieved.

Brazil's scenery was beautiful, and its people were even more beautiful. His eyes were busy wandering around. The beach was full of Brazilian beauties in bikinis. He believed Shania's parents were so reassured that it had to have been because Brazilians were open-minded in nature.

Other than hanging out with Shania in Brazil for the last ten days, Twain also took the time to get to know the talented players in Brazilian football, and he found a genius — Pato. Unfortunately, when he tried to get in touch with Pato's agent, the other party had told him that Pato had been booked by several big European powerhouse clubs. Although Nottingham Forest had just won the UEFA Champions League, it was not easy for them to be involved.

Furthermore, the agent also told Twain that among the several big clubs, AC Milan's pursuit of Pato was the strongest, and Pato himself also wanted to play in Milan.

Twain could only helplessly watch his Champions League final opponent regained one goal in the transfer market.

Twain took care of this matter regarding Pato behind Shania's back. He previously promised Shania that he absolutely would not look for players when they came to Brazil. However, he was not able to hold back when he got here, so he had to hide it from Shania and took action in secret.

Since no results had been achieved, Twain stopped thinking about this and just spend time with Shania in peace.

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Ten days had passed in a blink of an eye. Shania stayed in Brazil to spend time with her parents, while Twain returned to England to prepare various plans for the new season.

The house next door was shut tight. Dunn was not in England either, as he was visiting his parents in China.

Twain found that Dunn's love for that home came from his heart. If it were not for his particular job, he would go home every day in a heartbeat. How could Dunn be back early when it was not easy for him to have a vacation once a year?

The players also relaxed and went on holidays in various well-known holiday locations. Twain was the only one who came back early on his own. As a manager, he had to take on as many responsibilities as the praise and glory he had received in front of people. He could not rest when the others could.

Once he put the luggage back in the house, Twain took out an umbrella. He was going to head to Burns' pub to pick up the kitten which was placed in care there.

He did not like the small animal, but Shania loved it to death, so he could only do as she wished.

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Burns was chatting with the customers in the pub. He had just opened for business, and there were not many people.

The glass door was pushed open and Twain stood at the door to close the umbrella.

"Hi, Tony, how's Brazil?" Burns saw him and lifted his hand to greet him. His voice also made the other customers in the pub looked over at the entrance.

"The weather was much better than here." Twain shook off the beads of water on his umbrella.

“Who asked you about the weather? I mean, did the beautiful women there dazzle your eyes?” As soon as Burns spoke, the group of people in the pub to laugh.

Twain smiled, too. “You’ve got kids and you’re still thinking about the gorgeous babes, Kenny?”

“I’m concerned for your love life.” Not to be outdone, Burns said, “You’re almost forty. Don’t keep turning to hookers to take care of your physical needs.”

The two men’s bickering filled the pub with joyous laughter.

Twain went straight to the bar and waved to Burns. “It will come naturally when it’s time. Give me a whiskey on the rocks.”

When Burns went to pour the liquor, Twain turned around to the drunks who had just laughed at him and retorted, “I think you all have lots of free time on your hands.”

One of the drunks stood up with a grin. “You’re right, Tony. The league tournament has not started yet and we are feeling really antsy. Other than drinking, I can’t think of anything else to interest me.”

Twain nodded, as he quite agreed with this remark. He had been a fan before and knew how hard it was every summer, when the European League was over and there was no World Cup.

“But you can watch Copa América...or AFC Asian Cup?”

Everyone cracked up, “Stop kidding, Tony! The last season was so damn wonderful, and now I’m not interested in any other game other than to wait for the Forest team to start its new season!”

“Ah, how does it feel like to be the champion?” Twain asked happily.

“It feels so damn great!” Someone mimicked Twain’s emphasized words in an interview after the game.

Burns smiled at the back and watched them mess around. He put the glass in Twain’s hand, along with an envelope.

“Michael sent this to you,” He said.

When he heard him, Twain stopped messing with the drunks, and turned around to open the envelope.

It was a short letter.

In the letter, Michael Bernard thanked Twain for realizing his dream of twenty-seven years, leaving him without any regrets.

“I was thankful that I had decided to go to Greece to watch the game and I put it into action, even if I had gotten into trouble with my wife for it. Because I saw the game and the scene I most wanted to see, my son and my beloved team became the European champion. Was there anything more perfect than this?”

My twenty-seven years of unfulfilled wishes have been fulfilled, and I have nothing more to ask for... I’m no longer that easily excitable and hot-blooded young man. Tony, I know you still have a long way to go, and no manager will quit after only four years. But this is the end of my story, which is perfect. The

beginning and the end were perfect, and of course, with some twists and turns in the middle... But what story is not winding?

I love my wife very much. Perhaps you do not believe me when I say this because I have made her sad again and again, but I speak from the heart. After the loss of my son and fulfillment of my last wish in football, Fiona is now my only concern. The next goal of my life is to give her a good life and make her happy.

Forgive me for not being able to drink and watch the games with you guys again. I hope you understand, Tony.

There are some things in life that are more important than football.

Finally, I wish you and the Forest team good luck, and I will continue to watch out for you guys. John and Bill are crazier hardcore fans than I am. Don't let them down.

Your dearest friend, Michael Bernard

June 1, 2007."

Twain folded the letter and put it back into the envelope. He took a sip of his drink, and then asked, "did you read the letter, Kenny?"

Burns shook his head. "It's addressed to you, Tony."

"Yes..."

"But I can roughly guess what's written on it."

"Well?"

"After the final, Michael did not go straight back to the United States. He followed John, Bill and the others back to Nottingham and watched the live broadcast of the celebration here at my place. He left the next day. We talked about a lot of things... I've known him longer than you and I've known you for a long time, Tony."

Twain nodded.

"He must have said to you that there are more important things in life than football, right?"

"Yes, he did."

"That was what he said to me."

Twain did not say anything, and Burns did not go on.

Twain downed his drink and took the cat from Burns' hands. He held it under his arm as if it were a book. He waved to the regulars and reopened his umbrella to walk out into the rain.

He understood Michael even if he did not write the letter.

Truthfully, after he read the letter, he thought, if Gavin had not passed away, Michael would not say “there are some things more important in life than football.” Because he would not know what was more important. To Michael, his son was more important than football, and so was his wife.

People always had to wait until they lost something to understand that it was the most important.

Twain hoped that Michael would not understand “what was more important than football” for the rest of his life, because that meant he did not lose the most important thing. If Gavin had not died, he would not be forced to go to the faraway United States, let alone talked silly things like give up football...

But... Twain moved his umbrella away and let the rain fall on his face.

I can travel through time and space, but I cannot change time itself. The past can only be the past.

Concentrating on these questions, Twain did not realize that he had used too much strength to hold the cat under his arm. The cat under his arm screeched in pain.

This sound interrupted Twain’s thoughts. “Don’t shriek!”

A cat could not understand a human, so it continued to cry out.

“Stop it! Stop it or I’ll eat you!” Twain tightened his grip to hold it.

This cat screeched even louder...

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Days without Shania, Dunn, game videos, tactical research, daily training, home games were boring for Twain. He had become accustomed to keeping himself busy. He was not used to not having anything to do.

Only the horrid cat was scurrying and jumping around the house. It would appear at the top of the refrigerator for a while, jump behind the television in the next instance and sneak onto the bed to curl up for a nap next.

Twain kicked the lazy cat off his bed before he sat down naked.

It was dawn outside.

It was a new day and the team had not yet returned to its normal schedule. Most people were still on vacation. He took time yesterday afternoon to go to the training base and found that there was no one else except the security guard at the gate. Twain took a bunch of videotapes and research folders from his office and went home.

After he washed up, he ate a simple breakfast. Twain returned to the room, threw down the cat that had been lying on the keyboard and turned on the computer. He was going to look online for the latest news on the summer transfer.

The information in the newspaper was limited. Online information was the fastest and most comprehensive.

He did not know how the other managers handled it. As a fan who spent a lot of time online, he still relied heavily on the internet for his various inquiries even if his identity had changed.

Twain had a rough estimate in his mind on the Forest team's adjustments for the next season. During the period when the team had just won the Champions League title, there was no need for him to make any massive adjustments to the team. Such a thing would only happen to a team facing a difficult situation, such as Real Madrid a year ago.

Therefore, the Forest team would not make any major moves this year in the transfer market. Beckham's joining was enough to get media hype for a while. Twain did not want to make it easy for the media and give them any topic to speculate about.

Anelka was certain to leave. There was no doubt about that, even if there had been no team that bid for Anelka. No matter how much money was involved, Twain had to get rid of the striker who dared to go against him. Feelings and sensibilities? I only take that into account with the players I like.

Once Anelka was gone, there would be a need for a quick and skillful striker on the front line. With regard to that position, Twain already had the right person in mind.

Although Albertini had said goodbye, Twain also did not intend to make any big adjustments. He might go back to the youth team to see if there were any good seedlings he could transfer over to cultivate and train. Perhaps he could also find some cheap and suitable replacements from the middle and lower level teams. Wood's already in charge of a section and not to mention we still have our utility player, Sun Jihai.

Both flanks were fortified with many strong players and completely did not need to supplement any new players. What he needed to consider was not buying a new player, but how to reasonably arrange their chances for appearances.

Beckham's arrival was bound to exacerbate the competition on the right flank and midfield.

The rear defensive line and right-back position required strengthening. Chimbonda was no longer able to cope with the entire season on his own. The center-back lineup was perfect and did not require any tweaks. As for the left-back position... he would watch and observe in the transfer market.

Twain contemplated as he browsed the news online.

The news online was that the Argentinian left-back, Heinze had a falling out with Manchester United and would leave Manchester United for Liverpool even if the case was brought to FIFA. But Ferguson firmly refused. Twain could guess the reason with his eyes closed. "We don't have a tradition of selling players to our arch rivals."

He had wanted to call Ferguson and ask him how much he would sell Heinze for. But he picked up his phone and put it down again, because he remembered that the Forest team was now considered a direct competitor to Manchester United. Although they had not won the league tournament this past season, who could believe that Tony Don, a man eager for victory and championship titles, would not shatter Manchester United's dream of defending its title next season?

He'd better not try... Twain put the phone down. Having sold van Nistelrooy to him, it was probable that Sir Alex now regretted it. If he still went to him for a player, would Manchester United not become a logistics base for the Forest team?

Honestly, Twain thought that Leighton Baines could not keep up with the challenges the team now faced. He could still play in the domestic league but was still a little tender to the European arena. Twain wanted to add an experienced veteran for the left back position. He still highly valued Gareth Bale, but his lack of experience was not something that could be resolved overnight.

A man's name suddenly popped up in his mind as he browsed the British and Chinese sports websites aimlessly on the internet.

Why don't I buy him?

"The great Italian left back," Fabio Grosso.

He heard that he was not doing well in Inter Milan. Twain's memory of Grosso's performance at the World Cup remained fresh. Putting aside Huang Jianxiang's demented commentary, the left-back did have skills. Twain decided to contact the Inter Milan club.

He wrote down all the players he planned to buy on paper, jotted them down and then typed them on the computer to send an email to Dunn in China. He told him his planned list of candidates and asked for his advice. They kept in touch using this quickest and cheapest way. Twain had wanted to directly use QQ to leave a message, but Dunn said it was too informal to discuss the work on it. "Have you seen any managers that use QQ chat as a tool to work with?" Twain pursed his lips. Just because no one used it, he could not use it? What kind of logic was that?

Although he said that, Twain still respected Dunn's request and emailed him instead.

Having done all this, Twain leaned back against the chair and stretched his back.

A mournful cry from the cat greeted him from behind. He felt a furry thing between his waist and the back of the chair, struggling desperately.

Twain used force again and scolded, "Serves you right! A lazy cat that just falls asleep everywhere!"