

## Champions 61

### Chapter 61: The Football Hooligans Part 2

Like Burns' bar, red was also the color scheme of the bar. But it was brighter, more like blood-red. The Victorian building stood tall on the open corner of the street, with the Forest team flag hanging at the door to let people know from afar which fans were gathered there. Standing outside the door, he could hear the talking and laughter coming from inside. The shadows of the people flickering against the orange light which penetrated through the windows and the door looked like flames.

"Robin Hood Pub." That was the name Bill had given Twain. He read the name on the neon signboard and sneered, "Do they bloody think they are outlaws?"

He stepped forward and flung the door open.

Bang! The slamming glass door made a sharp sound.

The lively pub immediately quieted down. The alcoholics turned their heads in surprise to look at the intruder.

As soon as Tang En entered, he glimpsed from the corner of his eyes a Forest flag hanging at the side of the door, and there was a line of words in gold: Honor is my life.

He gave a grimace as he used his strength to tear it down. This move provoked everyone in the pub. The men shouted at and rushed toward Twain. "What the hell are you doing!"

"Don't make a move, boys." A voice stopped them. "Let's welcome the Forest team manager, Tony Twain!" With an excited voice, Mark Hodge stepped out from behind the crowd. He opened his arms to make a welcome gesture.

The people around him were still stunned, but very soon they also recognized the person who was standing before them, so they shouted with their glasses raised one by one.

"Forest! Forest! Nottingham Forest!"

The atmosphere in the pub seemed to have reached a climax, but Tang En remained indifferent amidst the excited men. He noticed that most of them had injuries on their faces and did not clean the bloodstains or treat their bruises. He stood at the door, expressionless, coldly watching it all.

This group of drunk people chanted for about a minute, and Tang En remained still with the same look as when he first came in. He said nothing. Some people started to sense that something was wrong, so the chanting gradually weakened, and returned to calm in the end. It was a strange scene. A group of men and one man were looking at each other, but they did not understand why they were doing this.

Hodge did not understand either. He had been a little excited when Twain showed up at the pub. But looking at the other man now, he did not appear to come here to have a drink with him.

"Having a nice beer?" Tang En finally spoke. "Did you have a good fight?"

The experienced pub owner only had to hear these words, and he knew to ask the foreign student who was working in his pub, "Have the glasses been changed?"

The young worker nodded. "They have been changed, Boss."

Every match day, the pub would replace the thick and solid glasses with poor-quality, but largely functional glasses. The boss took a loss when the good glasses were broken. If these poor-quality glasses broke, they broke. And there was no danger of killing someone if they took a hit to the head with one. With those two benefits, switching out the glasses had become a pub tradition.

"Very good. When the fight starts, you'd better take care to protect yourself." The boss patted the lad on the shoulder and motioned for him to hide under the bar counter.

"Boss, what about you?"

"Don't worry about that. Just squat down!" The boss picked up a glass and held it in his hand, then pushed the young worker down.

Tang En had not finished speaking on the other side.

"Did you win or lose the battle with Millwall?"

Everyone looked at each other, wondering why Twain asked about this.

"I heard that you were utterly defeated, and quite pathetically, too."

Based on the tone of his words, it was already obvious that this was not a friendly visit. The men who had just shouted "Forest! Forest!" were nervous again.

Hodge stood opposite Twain and said with a frown, "Twain, you had said that you wouldn't interfere with what we do."

"Yes, I did say that! But I also told you not to involve anyone who has nothing to do with this." Tang En sharply interrupted Hodge's words, gritted his teeth, and said, "Now I regret that I did not call the police on you to arrest all you sons of b\*tches! While my team was playing against the opponents on the field and fighting for victory, you guys were bloody fighting with other people outside. Don't you f\*cking mention honor in front of me! You're not worthy!" He saw that someone was about to open his mouth to refute, so he directly took the other person's words.

"Break your opponents' nose bridges to make their faces bloody; break their arms and legs and let them howl in pain on the ground; knock over an innocent child, and then trample him while running away. Is that what you call honor? This is your f\*cking honor?" Tang En's hands shook while he gripped the flag and his knuckles turned white.

"You think you're amazing? You think you're the heroes of this team? You guys..."

Tang En thought of the first time he met little Bernard that afternoon in the dazzling sunshine. He would never forget for the rest of his life his look of excitement when he had gotten Wood's autograph. He was George's first fan.

He felt ashamed and guilty that he had ever defended this group of people in front of him. He felt remorse and anger for not being able to stop their actions in time.

“...You b\*stards!” He tore the red flag with the painted Forest team emblem and the “Honor is my name” in half. With a hiss, the people around him were outraged.

Under the influence of alcohol, those who drank too much, clamored to rush up and teach the ungrateful Twain a lesson. But Hodge reached out with his hands to stop them.

“You’d better give me an explanation, or else! I don’t give a damn about who you are!” Hodge gritted his teeth. “This isn’t Burns’ turf!”

“Stop talking rubbish with him, Mark! Let’s beat him up! That b\*stard tore our flag!”

“I will send you straight to heaven! Just like you tore up our flag, I’ll shred you to pieces!”

“How dare you insult our honor! When we cheered for the Forest team, you were still in your dad’s nut sacks, you a\*\*hole!”

“Son of a b\*tch. You’re a f\*cking bastard!”

His men roared and shook their fists, as if they were beasts about to be let loose from the cage. They looked fierce and abhorrent.

### **Chapter 62: The Football Hooligans Part 3**

Tang En was not afraid to face these impetuous drunks. The man standing closest to him could have just swung his fist forward and hit his nose, but Tang En did not step down when faced with other men’s fury.

He flung the torn flag toward Hodge. “Michael’s son is dead, and you’re all his murderers!”

The pub, which had just been noisy like a coliseum, suddenly fell silent. Everyone looked at Twain in shock and let the flag that they had considered as life, fall to the ground.

Hodge was also shocked, and he asked, “What are you talking about?”

The door behind Tang En was pushed open once again, and a sweaty Kenny Burns appeared in front of the crowd. “What Tony said is right. Your men knocked down Gavin while you were running away, and you and the Millwall b\*stards trampled all over him.”

Hodge’s eyes widened. He could not believe what he just heard. He had not drunk much, and his mind was sober.

Tang En stepped forward and glared at Mark Hodge. The “Honor is my life” lost its golden glow when he stepped on it.

“Football hooligans?” He sneered as he turned to leave the deathly still pub. “Go to hell!”

Everyone watched him leave in silence. Hodge’s eyes had widened in shock, and he could not believe it. Burns looked at the stunned Hodge and his men, turned away, and followed Twain to leave.

“Kenny... You know, when I heard Gavin was... I really wanted to kill those b\*stards,” said Tang En when they had walked out of the pub.

Burns nodded. “I understand.”

“But when I saw them, I suddenly felt they were pathetic. I couldn’t figure out why, I suddenly felt sorry for them... This feels strange. I should have rushed up to punch Hodge. How did it turn out like this?” murmured Tang En as he stood on the street with his head down.

“Tony, even if you had put all of them in the hospital for half a year, Gavin’s not coming back.” Burns patted his shoulder to console him.

Tang En looked up at Burns and nodded. “I know, I know... That’s why I feel so angry. It’s like, like when I watched the team lose, and there was nothing I could do about it... the failure, the pain... F\*ck!”

Suddenly, he punched the phone booth next to him. Crash! The glass was shattered.

“I had a chance to prevent all this! I could have kept Gavin’s death from happening! I upbraided Hodge and told them that they were murderers, but I know I am one too! I’m a f\*cking murderer!” Tang En held his head as he crouched down, and blood was dripping down his wrists to the ground.

Burns did not stop him, he just stood quietly at the side as he watched him vent.

The passers-by cautiously circled away from them and looked at them with fear and pity, thinking they were part of the gang inside the Robin Hood Pub.

One by one, cars drove past and splashed them with the water pooled at the side of the road. The two of them did not try to avoid nor dodge it. They just let the dirty water splatter them.

The next day, the Nottingham Evening Post first reported on the clash between the Nottingham fans and Millwall fans in the final round of the League Championship. It was followed by corresponding reports from the other major media outlets. Even the national newspaper, The Times, had followed the incident with interest.

Brawling fans were not unusual in the United Kingdom. The media and the public had long been immune to it. The only reason so much media focus was on a post-match fan brawl in the League Championship was because someone had died.

“...During yesterday’s last round of the English Football League Championship, after the match between Nottingham Forest and Millwall, fans from both sides’ gangs had gathered in an alley for a brawl. During the clash, an innocent 12-year-old boy was unfortunately involved and died after failure to revive.”

There were only two lines of information about Gavin Bernard in the report. Besides his age, there was nothing else—no name, no character description. People would never know how smart and adorable this innocent dead child was, how likable he was... How he never should have died.

The cold and impersonal report was so objective and fair that Tang En was disgusted. But later, when the media dug deeper into the boy’s death, Tang En did not want to read the papers anymore. Because looking the pictures of Gavin that the reporters had dug up from his school, and reading how they had described Gavin’s death, Tang En felt as if he was going through everything from that night again.

He was furious, but he had nowhere to vent.

Because he was the head of the fans, Michael had a very good relationship with many of the players on the Forest team, such as Michael Dawson, Andy Reid, Marlon Harewood, Eoin Jess and so on... Everybody knew he had a smart and cute boy, Gavin Bernard.

So, when they learned from the media that little Gavin had died during the fans' clash, almost everyone was not in the state of mind to do their training. The coaches did not yell at them on the training ground, and Tang En, too, did not ask them to concentrate. The entire club was immersed in sorrow.

Because of the pain of Gavin's mother being unable to accept her child's death, Michael decided to hold his burial at an earlier date. The date of the funeral was chosen to be on May 9th. Tang En informed the players of the funeral at the end of the training on the 8th and hoped that everyone would be able to send the poor child off.

No one objected to Twain's decision. The coaches, the team doctors, the assistant managers, and even Mr. Chairman Doughty had agreed to this decision. Everyone, including Tang En himself, might have forgotten that the day after the next, they were going to have a home match with a strong opponent. It was an important match for them.

On May 10th, Nottingham Forest would be playing against Sheffield United in the first round of the English Football League Championship semi-final playoff.

### **Chapter 63: Is Football More Important Than Life And Death? Part 1**

While the outside world was abuzz with the news of the revival of the football hooligans and the death of an innocent boy, George Wood was still doing the repetitive and boring basic training, day after day, on the second field at the youth team training ground. It was as if he and the rest of the world existed on two different planes. He was unconcerned with and uninterested in any news from the outside world. He had only one thought in his mind: to reach the goal set by his manager, to play in the matches, and to earn money for his mother's medical treatment.

Twain, dressed in all black, appeared on the sidelines and called out to Wood's coach. The two men spoke a few words to each other in low voices. Then the coach left, and Twain walked out toward him. Although Twain wore black clothes all the time—black trousers, black leather shoes, even sunglasses on cloudy days—he seemed different to Wood today. His black suit was newer, stiffer.

"George," he spoke to Wood in a low voice. "Tomorrow you don't need to train."

Wood did not say anything. He knew that Twain must have something to add.

"Do you have a black suit?" Tang En pointed to him and asked.

Wood shook his head.

Looking down at his watch, Tang En beckoned to Wood. "You don't have to train now. Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Wood did not move.

“To buy you a suit, a shirt, and a tie.”

“I don’t like to wear those things.” Wood did not want to go. He did not want to waste his time on dressing up.

“Do you think I’m trying to dress you up to take you to a party? Do you remember that time you signed an autograph for that little kid over there?” Tang En pointed to the wire netting fence in the distance.

Wood nodded. That was the first time he had signed an autograph for a fan. It was a scene he would never forget.

“Do you know his name?”

Wood shook his head. He had not asked, and nobody had told him.

“Gavin, Gavin Bernard. Remember this name. We’ll attend his funeral tomorrow morning.”

George Wood was shocked.

Gavin’s grandmother stood on one side while being supported by her arms. She wore a black hat with a dropped veil covering her face which could not be seen. She would go up to speak later, and Tang En was worried whether the elderly lady could withstand that kind of anguish.

Michael’s wife was paralyzed in his arms, and her eyes stared blankly at Gavin’s aunt who was standing up front and sobbing. It was almost a week since his death, and the pain that was left to this family had not diminished.

On the left side of the church, were Gavin’s relatives, schoolmates, and teachers. Michael’s friends and the Forest team coaches and players were on the right.

Wood sat beside Tang En and was dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and tie that he bought for him yesterday. With his lips pursed, he sat without saying a word. He was not visibly sad like the rest of the people around him. There was no expression on his face.

Tang En thought maybe he could understand this kid, because maybe they were similar.

George Wood’s one and only fan so far, his admirer, was now lying in the cold black coffin. He would never look for him to sign an autograph and never be on the sidelines to see him train again.

Because everyone was so sad, the relatives on the stage quickly ended their speeches, and the priest said the final prayer. Then the coffin was lifted, and the crowd headed toward the cemetery behind the church.

There was no funeral music at the funeral. For Gavin, Michael chose “Tears in Heaven” written by Eric Clapton for his beloved son who had died young. The gloomy guitar accompanied Clapton’s raspy singing. Everyone’s heart was broken.

Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?

Would it be the same if I saw you in heaven?

The black wooden coffin was carefully lowered down, and Tang En noticed that there was a small-sized Forest jersey on the lid. There was a large bloodstain on the chest and neckline, with Wood's name still prominent through the bloodstain. He gently put the white lily in his hand on the coffin over the Forest emblem.

Behind him, Wood knelt on one knee and carefully put the flower in his hand on his own name on the jersey before he got up and left with Twain.

Standing on the side, Tang En watched as one by one players from the crowd stepped forward to lay the flowers in tribute. They consciously went to his side after they had laid the flowers in tribute, so more and more people gathered around him. He did a count, and everyone from the First Team had come. David Kerslake, the youth team manager, also came. Michael Dawson might have been the saddest person on the team. Among this group of players, he and Michael Bernard knew each other the longest, and their relationship was the best. It could be said that Michael had watched Dawson go from an unknown kid step by step to a professional star player. Michael lost his son, and Dawson had lost a brother.

Tang En patted Dawson on the shoulder but did not know how to comfort him.

In the end he sighed, "Let's all go back and have a good rest. We have a match tomorrow."

Watching the crowd gradually disperse, Tang En found that Wood was still by his side. He seemed a little strange. "You should go back, too. There's no training today. Spend some time with your mother."

Wood nodded and turned to leave, but Tang En stopped him again. "George, make sure you become a big star!"

George pursed his lips and nodded vigorously.

"Go back." Tang En waved, and Wood turned and walked away from the depressing place.

When Wood left, Tang En looked at Michael, who was still comforting his wife, and felt that it was better not to disturb them at this time, even if it was just to say goodbye.

He decided to go to Burns' bar for a drink and get drunk. And after a night's sleep, he should be okay after waking up.

When he came to the cemetery gate, he saw Pierce Brosnan, the reporter from the Nottingham Evening Post, gasping for air while running toward him. Because of Gavin, Tang En honestly disliked the media more and more. It colored his view of anyone who worked in the media industry.

## **Chapter 64: Is Football More Important Than Life And Death? Part 2**

"I remember Michael saying he didn't want his son to be disturbed by the media." Tang En frowned as he stood in front of Pierce Brosnan.

"Twain. Mr. Twain, you, you misunderstand." Brosnan bent over to catch his breath as he stood in front of Twain. He was so exhausted he could not speak properly. "I did not come here to interview."

He spread his hands to show that he did not bring a camera, and that he also did not bring a recorder pen used for interviews.

“Even my cell phone is out of battery. I just, I just want to lay a flower as a tribute.”

“But you didn’t know each other.” Tang En did not intend to give way.

“Gavin was a Forest fan. So am I.”

The two men looked at each other. Tang En thought about it and asked, “Did any reports of the fan riots on the Evening Post come from you?”

Brosnan did not expect Twain would suddenly ask this question. He was stumped for a moment and then he shook his head. “No, I was sent to Newcastle for an interview. I only heard about it when I came back.”

Tang En stepped aside and said to him, “Go ahead. The funeral is almost over.”

Brosnan thanked Twain and then turned to run inside. Tang En looked at the young journalist who had just turned full time, and he thought, There are good people in the media, too.

Because Tang En lived alone and was not fussy about food, he often settled the issue at Burns’ bar. Today, however, he did not ask Burns to provide him with a meal. Instead he was drinking one drink after another in a bar that was not open for business yet.

Burns did not discourage him. On one hand, he knew that Twain was a good drinker. On the other hand, how could he discourage him at this time? He just let him vent.

Just as Tang En was getting tipsy, Michael came in.

“Ah, Michael! There you are... Tomorrow’s match, you, you will come and watch, right... Right?” Tang En smiled, and he was slurring.

Michael Bernard looked at Twain, but he did not speak.

The smile on Tang En’s face was gone. He stared at Michael and said, “Michael, you... you have something to say?”

“Tony, I’m not going to watch the match tomorrow.”

Tang En nodded. “I understand, you just...”

“I will never go again.”

“What?” Tang En thought he had heard wrong.

“Thank you.” Michael took a glass from Burns, and then turned his head to look at Twain and asked, “Do you want to hear a story, Tony?”

When Brian Clough’s Forest team swept across England and the European football world, Michael Bernard had just turned 20. Like most of the other young people his age, he was filled with the energy of a young stallion, and he had a strong fighting spirit. He liked to use his fists to flaunt his manhood.



He and John established a gang, "Naughty Forty", and only fanatical Forest fans were accepted. Before Mark Hodge, he was the gang's leader. John and Bill were his right-hand men. The three of them always charged to the front for every fight. They were unafraid of the bricks hurled by their opponents and the wooden sticks that they brandished. They experienced the team's most glorious years by fighting on all fronts.

If the opponents' fans dared to insult the Forest team, they would have swarmed around and battered them. Even on the away matches, they would fight back. They were proud of their contribution to the honor of the team. They were also proud to have brothers like themselves.

Were they football hooligans? No, they would never admit it. They considered themselves to be the most loyal Forest fans who loved their team the most.

Michael was not happy outside of the matches. He had changed a lot of jobs, but he found it hard to last in these jobs because of his violent temper and impulsive character. But he did not care about that. He only cared about the honor of his gang, the achievements of the team he supported, and animated discussions on the private lives of the leader, Clough, and the players.

He continued to live like that for 10 years. During those 10 years, they had gathered to keep on fighting for the Forest team. And they believed that the fight would last until the day they could no longer brandish their fists.

But this sort of life changed completely on the afternoon of April 15th, 1989.

"That year, we stormed our way easily into the semi-finals of the FA Cup, and our opponent was Liverpool which was powerful at the time. But nobody thought we would lose to them before the match. On the contrary, the Liverpool guys feared us. You must think that's strange, right? Why? Because we had Clough! The Liverpool people would quake in their boots when they heard this name." As Michael spoke, he seemed to have gone back to 14 years ago.

Tang En did not speak. He just listened quietly to Michael telling the story. He did not care that his glass was empty.

"Before the match, we were in high fighting spirits, and everyone wanted to wipe out Liverpool, storm into the finals, and then carry the gleaming trophy home. Do you know... We hadn't won the FA Cup in 30 years. Clough had taken all the championships he could get in the world except for the FA Cup. You know how much we yearned for it." Michael stared at Twain and watched him nod before he continued.

"I still remember that day. It was a sunny day. John and I, we had set off three hours ahead with the others from Nottingham to Sheffield, to get everything ready and wait for the match to start." Michael began to speak more slowly. This memory was too painful for him. For the longest time, it had haunted him like a nightmare.

"We were in the second section of the stands, and the third section next to us was where the Liverpool fans were. At the time, I thought it was a really good opportunity for us to taunt them throughout the match." When he reached this point, Michael paused for a long time. But Tang En had already guessed what had happened next.

**Chapter 65: Is Football More Important Than Life And Death? Part 3**

That was the English soccer scene's darkest period. It was countless Liverpool fans' most unforgettable moment to date. The effects of what happened that day, would continue to influence and affect the team until then, and even in the future. The once almighty Liverpool would fall into decline from then on, lingering around the boundaries of pain and confusion, unable to find its way back home.

As a result of this incident, all of the stadiums in England were changed from safe standing stadia to all seated stadia, and the fences which were used to prevent the football hooligans from stirring trouble had been removed. In addition, they improved various security aspects of the soccer stadiums as well. Now, when the fans sit down on the plastic seats and watch the matches in the refurbished stadiums, they know deep down in their hearts that all of those seats came at the cost of 96 lives.

Time froze in 1989, April 15th, 3:05 p.m. The time at which the Hillsborough Tragedy took place.

"...There was an increasing number of people rushing in from the gates, more and more. We saw the Liverpool fans at the adjacent viewing platforms being pushed and squeezed, but more people still continued to rush in. Their platform was right next to me, and a small child squashed against the fence was crying out to me for help. But I... I was scared stiff. I'd never seen such a horrible sight." Michael's voice started trembling. "I didn't know how to help him. His face had turned red from being squashed, and blood started flowing out of his nostrils."

Michael could not bear to continue, as he hugged his head while he rested it on the table. His loud and heavy breaths resounded throughout the empty bar.

It was only after quite some time that Michael's voice was heard again. "I've never been so close to death. Countless people fell in front of me, wailing, crying, and moaning. And I just stood there dumbfounded. The young boy who was pleading for me to save him had stopped crying, stopped making any noise. It was only after the whole incident that I found out that that child was only 10 years old, and he came to watch the match with his neighbor."

"That incident made me realize how foolishly I'd been living for the past 10 years. I, as well as John and the rest of the guys, had always thought that we were strong and fierce. Getting injured and shedding blood was a form of reward for us. Whenever we got into fights, we would shout loudly, 'Only one of us can live.' But when true death appeared right in front of us, all of us were stunned, so scared that our bodies were trembling in fear. After that, as we were helping each other out of the stadium, I saw a man who was about my current age, being dragged away by two policemen. He was struggling for his life, shouting at the top of his lungs, 'Let me go, my two daughters are still inside! I'm not a football hooligan.' At that moment, I felt thoroughly ashamed at myself for my past doings. Tony, do you know what was the sole cause of everything that happened?"

Tang En asked in an inquisitive tone, "Too many people?"

"No, it was us. The us in the past were the ones who caused that tragedy," Michael said as he pounded his chest. "All along, we would never admit that we were 'football hooligans', even though we knew we were. During that period, any and all soccer teams had fan clubs like ours. The media called us 'football hooligans', and the rest of the public referred to us as 'football hooligans' as well. In order to prevent people like us from rushing onto the soccer field and causing trouble, almost all of the stadiums at that

time had those eight-foot-tall wire meshes installed at the viewing platforms. If Hillsborough stadium had not had those fences, those fans could have easily escaped onto the soccer field. Although this would have caused the match to be terminated halfway through, what was one match compared to the lives of 96 people? In fact, there were even fans who tried to escape from the commotion by climbing over the fence, but they were instead regarded by the nervous police as football hooligans and chased back into the extremely packed viewing platform!”

“After that match, I, John, Bill, and the rest of the guys left the gang. Mark Hodge desperately tried to convince me to stay, but I’d made up my mind. Hodge felt that we betrayed them and cut off all ties with us. However, I didn’t care at all. Hodge thought that we were cowards, and only people like him were considered brave warriors, the most ardent and loyal fans of the team. But those were merely his thoughts. I only wished to stop living that kind of life, where I might be beaten to death at any moment. After that, I got married, and one year later, I had Gavin. I would go to City Ground Stadium and watch the matches whenever a home match was held, and come here to drink and chat whenever I had some free time. I really liked this kind of life.”

“Then why don’t you carry on with it?” Tang En persuaded.

“Because this kind of life left me long ago. I loved soccer. I really loved it. But what did my love for soccer ultimately bring me? I lost my most beloved son!” Michael gripped the cup tightly, and the contact between his palm and the glass cup gave a creaking sound. “Fiona had always been disapproving of me going to watch matches at the stadium, and she was even more against me bringing Gavin along. However, I was very stubborn, and even got into a quarrel with her over this several times. Tony, I loved soccer, supported soccer, but it made me lose my only child. If I continue to be obstinate about this, I will lose my wife, my family...”

Looking at the grief-stricken man, Tang En no longer had any reason to persuade him to return back to the stadium’s viewing platforms.

The creator of Liverpool’s dynasty, the most impressive manager throughout the club’s history, Bill Shankly once said this:

“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”

However, at that moment, could it still be said that “soccer is much more important than life and death”? After the Hillsborough tragedy took place, the Scousers began to doubt this famous quote and soccer philosophy by Bill Shankly. Now, Tang En was also contemplating it.

Michael stood up, and said to Tang En, “Therefore, I’m terribly sorry, Tony. I can no longer come and watch your matches. Now you don’t have to worry about me punching you if you don’t make it to the English Premier League. Goodbye. I should leave. I wish you good luck, Tony.”

Tang En did not try to persuade him to stay. Watching Michael disappear beyond the door of the bar, Tang En mumbled to himself, “I’m worried that you’ll punch me? What a joke, you can’t even beat me in a fight, Michael. But I really wish you would hit me once. I promise I won’t retaliate.”

## **Chapter 66: Fight With One’s Back To The River Part 1**

Was there anyone who remembered the match that took place on May 10th? That week, everyone was in a fog. The players, managers, team doctors, and even the gatekeeper, Ian McDonald. Were they clear about the opponents they were about to face, and what kind of match it was?

Tang En sat in the home team manager's seat and looked blankly at the match happening on the field. His mind was completely muddled, and the ability to direct the team on the spot, which he was previously so proud of, had disappeared into some random nook or cranny, nowhere to be found.

The team was currently at a disadvantage, and was being utterly destroyed by the guest team, Sheffield United. They were completely unable to make any effective defensive or offensive advances.

The match can't go on like this, a voice from the depths of his mind said to Tang En. However, the voice appeared to be reverberating from a faraway place and was extremely illusory.

For the past week, the team had only done a few of the regular systematic training exercises and did not undergo any niche-targeting practices.

As the manager, Tang En also did not carefully analyze his opponents for the playoffs. In fact, he was even unable to tell the players how they should deal with the current team they were facing.

Gavin's death was like a nightmare that haunted them. Everyone was out of form, and the match appeared to be a real ordeal for them.

The viewing platforms of City Ground were almost 90 percent full, but the score was unable to satisfy them. The score at halftime was 0:1 with Nottingham Forest trailing behind.

"Tony, we should do something to salvage the situation!" Walker anxiously reminded Tang En, being one of the few people who had recovered.

"Yes, you're right, Des. We should do something." Although that was what he said, Tang En remained seated in his seat, not moving at all. He was merely repeating Des' words mechanically.

Seeing the current state that Tang En was in, Walker sighed helplessly.

Edward Doughty, who was seated inside the VIP lounge, swept a look across the stadium, before turning to his father and saying, "Do you really hold high hopes for him?"

Nigel Doughty nodded his head. "The people who Hart thought highly of have never disappointed me before."

Edward shook his head in response. "I don't think he is as good as you make him out to be. Perhaps his performance during the regular season was very outstanding. However, what's the point of being able to win 100 unimportant matches, when he loses the most crucial ones?"

"Edward," the old man's tone became slightly more serious, "be mindful of your choice of words. There is no such thing as 'regular season' here. Don't bring your basketball terms back to England. You are someone who will become the leader of a club in the future. Saying these kinds of things will allow the media to mock us."

“Oh, I’m sorry, dad.”

“You don’t like Twain?”

“Erm... How do I put it?” Edward looked at the television set, which happened to be showing Tang En’s close-up. He was sitting expressionlessly in the manager’s seat without budging, as if he were a dead person. Regarding the team’s current predicament, Tang En could not come up with a better solution for it. “I’ve gone to London with Tony in private before, and I find him to be a very interesting person. However, I feel that he is not steady enough. I can’t seem to get a grasp on his temper, character, and what he likes. I don’t understand him. Sometimes he’s very good, but sometimes he’s very terrible, like right now.”

Nigel was slightly shocked at the clear and logical explanation of his son. Turning his head around and looking at him, Nigel said, “Did you put in a lot of effort after returning to America?”

Edward shrugged his shoulders. “Your son is still a talented student who studied at Harvard, after all. On top of that, Allan came up with a very detailed plan. In his plan, he also feels that we should reconsider the manager for the team.”

“Allan? Allan Adams? Why are you still with him?”

“Dad, he’s my financial advisor.” Edward sounded slightly annoyed. “To date, Allan’s help has been vital to the success of my company.”

“Whatever.” Nigel slightly shrugged his shoulders and said, “In any case, I don’t like that sweet-talking American.” As if he suddenly recalled something, Nigel asked, “Is Carrie still against the idea?”

Edward nodded his head. “She doesn’t like England’s weather or food, and, therefore, will be staying with Ben in America. But don’t worry, I’ll visit them regularly.

Nigel mumbled to himself, “You, your wife, your son... you’ve all become Americans through and through.”

Although Nottingham Forest was able to score a goal in the second half, Sheffield United also managed to score another goal before the match ended. The match ultimately ended with a score of 1:2, with Nottingham Forest defeated on their home ground. Upon seeing Sheffield United’s smug smiles when they left City Ground Stadium, all of the Forest fans had their eyebrows knitted together tightly.

If the home-field advantage had already been reduced to virtually nothing, then what kind of fate awaited them six days later on May 16th, at Sheffield United’s home ground, Bramall Lane Stadium?

During the press conference, Nottingham Forest’s sudden low morale had been the focal point of the reporters, but Tang En declined to express any opinion or explanation regarding the matter. Regardless of how the reporters bombarded him, Tang En would give them the same reply, “no comment.” As for the blame of losing the match, Tang En credited all of the responsibility to himself.

Pierce Brosnan originally did not want to stack another boulder on top of this pitiful manager, but he realized that there was a question which nobody asked. Everyone else was too focused on the reason behind Nottingham Forest’s sudden low morale, an extremely boring and trivial matter. His

professionalism as a journalist ultimately prompted him to toss this extremely difficult question to Tang En.

“Manager Twain, after losing this home match, has the possibility of us remaining in League One at the end of this season, crossed your mind?”

Tang En stared at Brosnan for quite some time, but the young man stared back at him without flinching. In this quiet exchange, neither side was able to get an edge over the other.

In the end, Tang En only left a sentence behind, before he walked out of the press conference.

“I won’t let such a thing happen.”

“...although Manager Tony Twain claimed during the press conference that his team would ultimately emerge victorious and successfully advance to the English Premier League. However, truth to be told, I don’t have much hope for his team. Seeing that they have conceded two goals to Sheffield United on their home ground, and considering the current states of the two teams, it is really difficult to guarantee that they will be able to beat Sheffield United during their away match.”

The television was broadcasting the BBC’s Match of the Day segment, which was slightly similar to Total Soccer, which Tang En never missed back when he was still in China. However, Match of the Day resembled more of a talk show, and it had the highest ratings among England’s soccer-related television programs. The current host for the program was the once famous “Green Gentleman” Gary Lineker, and his co-hosts were the ex-Liverpool strongest midfielder duo—Alan Hansen and Mark Lawrenson.

The person who said that was the person who rarely showed his face on the program, Mark Lawrenson. He had a pair of grey-colored eyes and an big iconic beard.

Hansen, however, did not agree with Lawrenson. Hansen felt that Tony Twain was a trustworthy person, and that if he said he could, then he definitely could do it.

Lawrenson felt that Hansen’s view was completely unsupported and too idealistic, and hence remained unconvinced.

After that, the two of them began their routine argument, with neither side able to convince the other. At that moment, Lineker, who was laughing at them and watching from the side, jumped out and attempted to be the mediator. He proposed a suggestion.

“Since neither of you are unable to convince the other person, how about the two of you make a bet?”

“Good idea, Gary.” The two of them expressed their consent toward his suggestion.

Lineker looked at Lawrenson and gave him a sinister smile. “Mark, since you started this topic, you have to take responsibility for it.”

Lawrenson touched his lips before he made up his mind. “Alright! If Twain’s team is promoted to the English Premier League after this season’s playoffs, I’ll shave off my beard!”

Lineker and Hansen whistled, and Hansen even clapped excitedly. “Mark, don’t even think about going back on your words. This is a live broadcast, and all of the English audience are witnesses to what you have just said.”

Lawrenson said with his eyes bulging, "I never go back on my word." Whenever he said something loudly, the beard above his lips slightly flutter. It really had the feeling of "blowing his beard and staring with his eyes."

From the side, Lineker suddenly said, "Very well, Mark. Actually, I've always found that beard of yours to be an eyesore."

Looking at Lawrenson's surprised face, Hansen burst into laughter on the set.

The laughter passed through the television set and resounded throughout Burns' bar. Everyone raised their heads to look at the television set, except for Tang En who was seated in the corner, eating. He was not interested in the conversation of those commentators, but continued to use his spoon to scrape the sauce-covered rice grains off his plate.

Upon finishing his meal, Tang En left money on the table, and directly exited the bar, ignoring the people who greeted him.

Burns shook his head lightly, as he watched Tang En leave.

## **Chapter 67: Fight With One's Back To The River Part 2**

Tang En, who had just walked out of the bar, did not know where else to go. He did not want to go back to that dark and cold "home" of his. He decided to walk around aimlessly, and aid his digestion while he was at it.

The wind, which blew from the direction of the Sherwood Forest, blew through Tang En's hair and clothes, carrying away the entire day's worth of heat.

He stood at the entrance of a bar which he had been to before. Looking at the brightly lit streets, and hearing the sounds of good times and laughter coming from within the bar, Tang En curled his lips. He had actually walked back to Robin Hood Bar unknowingly.

He turned around and looked at the red color signal of the pedestrian crossing across the street, while waiting to cross the road.

At that moment, his phone rang. It was a call from Yang Yan.

"Mr. Twain, are you not at home?"

Tang En looked around him and said, "No, I'm not. Is anything the matter?"

"Sir... Don't you remember, we have a class."

"Ah, I remember. But..." The signal across the street had turned green, but Tang En remained on his side. "But I don't feel like learning today. Can you chat with me for a while instead?"

"Where? Over the phone?"

Tang En pondered for a while and asked, "Where are you?"

Yang Yan raised her head and looked at Tang En's house door, before she replied, "In school. I was just about to leave."

"Then let's do it over the phone. I don't feel like moving either. Let's talk about anything, your interests or your peeves... anything will do." Tang En leaned his back against the traffic lamp, and raised his head to look at the skies. "For instance, did you meet any interesting classmates during your junior high school days."

It was already summertime in England, and six o'clock on a May evening. Hence, the sky had not yet turned dark. The Eastern and Western skies revealed two completely different scenes. The night scene, embellished with starlight, and the gossamer sunset, which resembled chiffon, intersected right in the middle of the sky as if it was a fantasy world, leaving Tang En in a trance.

The soft voice of Yang Yan beside his ear was so comfortable, it was as though he were getting an ear massage. Just like that, Tang En sat down on the street and chatted with Yang Yan who was sitting outside his house. His heart, which had sunk so low it had almost stopped beating, was revived once again.

The next morning, a group of birds residing in the forest next to the Nottingham Forest Wilford training ground was alarmed.

Tang En's hoarse and loud voice resounded, "All of you, get a grip on yourselves! Take a good look at your wimpy appearances! Time for training!"

"Michael! You're the captain. If you continue to look so listless, I'll remove you from your position!"

Although Tang En did not know much about the minute details of the training exercises and could only watch from the side of the field, this did not prevent him from making some suggestions, or occasionally shouting something to raise their morale.

Michael Dawson shrugged his shoulders toward Manager Walker, and Walker smiled when he turned around and saw Tang En making threatening gestures.

After that, he turned around and said to Dawson, "Tony is right. If you don't get serious, you will no longer be the captain, Michael."

"Understood! Guys, all of you better get your spirits up!"

Looking at the reinvigorated team, Tang En tightly pursed his lips.

Are you joking? Us, unable to make it to the Premier League?

Going to Premier League was my promise to Michael and Gavin. I won't let such a thing happen.

Due to the fact that Lawrenson mentioned the match prior to the day of the match, and on top of that, even wagered his beloved beard against Nottingham Forest, the League One playoff match, which usually would not garner much attention, became the focus of the media.

John Motson was in charge of commentating, and the other commentator seated beside him just happened to be Mark Lawrenson. The match had not begun, and the players on both teams had just



completed their warm-ups and gone to the locker rooms. At that moment, they would be making their final adjustments for the match.

Seeing that they still had some time before their work started, Motson cracked a joke with his colleague from the BBC, Lawrenson. To Lawrenson, Motson was indisputably considered his senior. When Lawrenson was still playing for Liverpool, Motson had already begun commentating Lawrenson's matches.

"Mark, you know it..." John Motson looked at Mark Lawrenson and said laughingly, "I also agree with Gary's opinion that you look much nicer without that beard."

Lawrenson touched his big beard and asked, "John, are you also in favor of Twain?"

Motson shook his head and replied, "I simply feel that you look much better with your beard shaved. Ah, I'm just joking. As for Tony Twain... I don't know whether I'm in favor of him or not. Don't you think he is very weird? Sometimes he is very miraculous, but sometimes he seems very low-class. I feel that there is perhaps only one person who will always be in favor of him."

"Who?"

"Tony Twain."

"Himself?"

Motson nodded his head. "He has so much confidence in himself, that even I find it unbelievable. No matter what the occasion, he will always display that confidence of his, even though I don't know where he gets it from. I've specifically examined him and discovered that his past and current personalities are worlds apart. The University of Nottingham Hospital concluded that it was caused by the injury sustained to his head that time his own player took him out. If that was really the case, I have to say, God cracked a very big joke with us."

Lawrenson touched the beard on top of his lips out of habit, while he thought about what Motson said.

Motson smiled. "What's the matter, starting to worry about not being able to keep that beard of yours?"

"That's not it." Lawrenson once again "blew his beard and stared with his eyes".

While these two were chatting in their seats, Tony was looking at the quiet players in the changing room.

None of the players, managerial staff, or team doctors uttered a single word. Even Tang En, was no exception. The loud cheers for Sheffield United could be heard clearly, which added to the heavy atmosphere in the changing room.

Everyone was looking at Tang En. Tang En had established his trustworthiness through his actions over the second half of the season. This was an extremely crucial match, and at that moment, everyone chose to believe in their manager, their head, their "Boss."

Tang En finally spoke. His voice was not loud, but it was able to suppress the home team fans' cheering noises coming from outside.

“We’ve matched against Sheffield United four times in this season, and the past three times have all ended in our defeat. In the 17th round, we even lost 0:3 on our home ground. The first round of the playoffs, we lost to them 1:2 on our home ground. Not only did we lose three points, we also gave two goals away. From the looks of it, the current match is not in our favor, either. People have been saying that the third team to be promoted to the English Premier League will be Sheffield United, but I know that they are wrong. And I know that all of you know that, too.”

“Yes!” Someone shouted in response, unable to hold back.

Tang En looked at the person who shouted. It was Andy Reid. The young chap’s eyes glimmered as he looked at Tang En. Tang En continued, “I admit that Sheffield United is stronger than us in terms of overall strength. However, the individual strengths of the two teams is not the sole deciding factor of a match’s outcome. There are still other factors. Do you all want to hear a story?”

Nobody knew why Tang En wanted to tell a story right before such an important match, or what kind of story it was. However, they knew that Tang En must have had his reasons for doing so. Therefore, they all nodded.

“It was said that a long, long time ago, during an extremely distant era, two countries waged war against each other. This war lasted for a very long time. It was finally the time for the final battle, and one side’s army left for the battlefield. However, the leader of the army made the soldiers set up their tents on a beach, with their backs facing the flowing river. His advisors strongly advised him against it, and they said to the general, ‘General, there are turbulent waves behind us. If we set up our camp here, we will have no means of retreating! In the case that we are caught in a disadvantageous situation, we won’t have any means of escaping!’” Tang En said as if he were acting out a drama, imitating Han Xin’s advisors. Tang En slightly tweaked the story which was widely known throughout the whole of China, and narrated it to the group of Englishmen. They listened intently to the story, enjoying it thoroughly.

“The general told his subordinates, ‘This is the final battle. If we are to engage the enemy, our soldiers will flee for their lives the moment the situation appears to be at our slightest disadvantage. Do you expect our fleeing and disorganized soldiers to be able to win the war? The reason I asked them to set up our base at the beach, with our backs to the great river, was in hopes of telling all of the soldiers that they no longer have any means of retreating! If they don’t wish to die, then defeat the enemies and win the war!’ Do you all know what the end result was?” Tang En raised a finger and said, “The morale of that general’s army was raised to its peak. Holding on to a ‘do or die’ resolve, they managed to defeat enemies who were several times larger and stronger than them.”

“Don’t all of you think that this is very similar to our current situation? Our current situation is so bad that it can’t get any worse. It is even worse than when I was knocked over by David at the sidelines, and landed on the back of my head!” Tang En said as he pointed to Johnson, causing everyone in the room to laugh. As a result, the tense atmosphere in the changing room eased slightly.

After pausing for a moment, Tang En waited for the players to finish laughing and look back at him in anticipation, before he continued with a serious look on his face. “An extremely strong opponent, disadvantageous away match, Gavin’s death... We are faced with a heap of internal and external problems, and placed in a tough situation that is several hundreds of times harder than what we have ever dealt with! But I firmly believe that we can win, because today, we are the strongest that we have

ever been! We may not have any means of escaping, but in actual fact, there's no need for us to escape. Finish off Sheffield United, and enter the finals! And then...." Tang En paused and took a deep breath. "And then we participate in the next season's English Premier League!"

"Why have we practiced various tactics over and over again for the past week? Let me tell all of you, today, we have our backs to the river. It's either they die, or we die! Those who don't wish to die, get out there and kill them!" Tang En strode to the door and pulled it open.

The singing and shouting sounds of Bramall Lane Stadium's viewing platform surged in like tidal waves, instantly enveloping the tiny changing room.

### **Chapter 68: Manager Vs. Manager Part 1**

During the English League One playoffs semifinals, the second match between Sheffield United and Nottingham Forest had been going on for more than 10 minutes, and there were no changes to the score. Although Nottingham Forest displayed commendable fighting spirit, Sheffield United's manager, Neil Warnock, had obviously made preparations in advance. While Tang En was analyzing his team, he was also analyzing Tang En's.

Marlon Harewood had received the tender 'care' of the defenders from Sheffield United. Manager Warnock had intentionally moved Phil Jagielka, who had originally played defensive center, to the position of center back for this match. There was only one reason for this—to shut down the Silver Shoe striker of League One.

Despite being only 20 years old, Jagielka had already participated in an entire season of League One matches. In addition, he had also become one of the core players of the team's midfield defense. The well-rounded Jagielka was able to play any position on the back defensive line. Although Tang En had rarely paid much attention to the weaker teams' matches when he watched the Premier League, he had, back in China, tried to watch most of the matches of the stronger teams. In the last round of 2006's English Premier League, Arsenal led by Wenger had once lost 0:1 to then English Premier League Team, Sheffield United. In the last 31 minutes of the match, the person who defended the goalpost was none other than Phil Jagielka. That was probably the longest duration that a non-goalkeeper player had substituted in as the goalkeeper. As a result, Tang En also remembered this difficult-to-pronounce name.

Now that Tang En saw him actively running about as a center midfielder, blocking Harewood's offence time and again, what else could he say, besides curse his own luck for meeting such a tough opponent?

Another player that Tang En had a headache over was one of Sheffield United's core players, Michael Tonge. This person who was still a member of the Manchester United youth team three years ago, had already grown to become Sheffield United's core midfielder. All of the offense was centered around him. He passed the ball, slide-tackled, organized offenses, and even personally gave the fatal deciding blow. In this season, he had been 44 times, and scored six goals. However, his specialty was his dribbling.

Jagielka and he were both members of the England Under Twenty-One national team.

Both of them were also the greatest contributors to Sheffield United's ability to enter the playoffs.

Of course, the person who Tang En felt was hardest to deal with was not on the field. Instead, it was the person seated in the manager's seat, Sheffield United's manager, Neil Warnock.

The 54-year-old old man was a local of Sheffield City, with a head full of white hair and had an abundance of experience. Warnock was straightforward and honestly expressed his feelings. His coaching style was somewhat similar to Tang En's. He liked to direct the match from the sidelines and would occasionally return to the manager's seat. Throughout the 90-minute match, the vulgarities he shouted could be heard, despite the singing of the 30,000 football fans on the viewing platform of Bramall Lane Stadium.

Looking at Sheffield United's highly appropriate tactics, Tang En knew that he had met an extremely formidable opponent. It was no accident that the team had lost to Sheffield United three times alone in that season. Tang En had even lost to him twice.

A big part of the reason for Nottingham Forest's exceptional performance in the second half of the season was their core striker, Marlon Harewood. Tang En saw that Harewood's condition was quite good, and therefore decided to arrange it so that he was the core of the offense. Harewood's techniques were exquisite, and his stature was exceptional as well. With him at the core, enemy defenders would usually have a tough time and be unable to stop him from repeatedly scoring. After being paired with the extremely fast David Johnson, this duo had become the sharpest and most successful striker combination. They had scored a total of 46 goals, and it had to be noted that Nottingham Forest had only scored 83 goals for the entire season. Portsmouth was the season's sharpest offensive team, with a total of 97 goals, while Nottingham Forest came in second.

However, faced against Sheffield United's defenders, this extremely lethal striker combination had lost their direction, completely lost their power.

Although the enemy was impressive, Tang En, who had been battle-trained for half a season, was also no pushover. He had always thought of himself as a "natural manager." If he had done any other job, he would have made a terrible mess out of it. However, as a manager, he was very talented. Who said that only players needed to be talented?

As mentioned before, Sheffield United's entire team revolved around their core, the midfielder, Michael Tonge. He initiated almost 60 percent of the team's offenses. In this match, Tang En did not send out the veteran player combination, Eoin Jess and Gareth Williams, which had been used as the starting lineup for most of the matches this season. Instead, he chose to utilize the younger midfielder combination.

The four midfielders were positioned in a line. From left to right, were Andy Reid, Riccardo Scimeca, Eugen Bopp, and Brian Cash. Tang En did not have any offensive midfielder in the middle. Instead, he positioned two defensive midfielders to defend the middle region of the field. His intentions could not have been any clearer—to make use of Eugen Bopp and Riccardo Scimeca's defensive abilities to restrict Sheffield's activities in the midfield, especially to block their midfielder core, Michael Tonge, and not give him any openings.

The tactics arranged by the two managers were well directed. As a result, even after 15 minutes into the match, neither side was able to get into a good scoring position, and they spent most of the time

snatching for possession of the ball in the midfield. Bopp and Scimeca's defense completely shut down any effective offensive advances attempted by Tonge and Michael Brown.

Motson commented, "I admit that Manager Twain's decision to arrange two rarely fielded young men during the season to be part of today's starting lineup was extremely unexpected, and extremely effective as well. However, the price to pay is Nottingham Forest's offense, as the two strikers have been completely shut down by the opponent's five defenders. In addition, there is no one in the center who can organize offenses. If it carries on like this... Truth to be told, I don't understand."

Shaking his head in agreement, Mark Lawrenson proceeded to share his take on Nottingham Forest's performance in the first 15 minutes. "The formation arranged by Sheffield United's manager, Warnock, for this match is 5-4-1, with three midfielders. He chose to use the most reliable and safe tactic. Of course, he has his reasons for doing so. After all, he has already claimed a beautiful three points from his away match. As long as he gets a tie for this match, it will be considered a victory regardless the score. But Manager Twain cannot think in the same manner. At this time, he should not be defending, but be on the offense instead. From the current looks of it... he must be out of his mind!"

"Mark, I'm also confused," Motson agreed with his partner, yet added, "but I feel that Manager Twain must have his reasons for such an arrangement. I've commentated most of the matches for half the season, and he's the kind of manager that can make my eyes light up."

Lawrenson laughed. "These words are meant for describing players, John."

"There are no rules stating that they can't be used to describe managers. Twain's performance has surprised me time and again. I hope that this match is able to surprise me once again."

Right when Motson finished speaking, Nottingham Forest's right wing back, Brian Cash, managed to break past the sides, forcing Sheffield United's left back, Steve Yates, to commit a foul against him, giving Nottingham Forest a free kick from the opposing half's right wing.

Seeing this, Tang En stood up from the manager's seat and walked to the side of the field. He merely stood there, not doing nor shouting anything. However, the Forest players on the field all knew what it meant. The set piece play which they had been training for the past week was finally going to be put into play!

Michael Dawson ran into the opponent's penalty area, and Harewood also left the backfield. The entire back defensive line of Nottingham Forest rushed up, and the players farthest back were the two midfielders who were guarding the midfield, Scimeca and Bopp.

All the players who could perform headers were all in front of Sheffield United's goalpost.

Tang En's intentions could not get any more obvious. He was not afraid of Warnock seeing through his plan, because even if he had seen through it, he was unable to make any effective adjustments in time. Never in his wildest dreams could that old man have thought that Tang En had completely given up on orthodox offensive methods, and instead decided to use a set piece play to settle the battle.

Since you can't anticipate it, then I'll catch you off guard with it!

Tang En shot a glance at Warnock, who was frantically waving his hands and shouting, and gave a smirk.

Old man, are you thinking of letting your defenders mark Dawson and Hjelde, these two tall guys? Very well, I couldn't have asked for it any other way!

As Eoin Jess was not on the field, the free kick was handed over to Reid. He carefully placed the ball and looked at the penalty area. As anticipated by the manager, Sheffield United's defenders had focused all their attention on Dawson, Hjelede, and Harewood. Nobody paid any attention to the relatively short David Johnson. He was really too short, which made him difficult to be seen in the penalty area, amidst all the tall people. After spending quite some effort, Reid finally managed to spot his teammate's shadow in the small gaps between the players.

The players, 1.9-meter Michael Dawson, 1.88-meter Hjelde, and 1.86-meter Harewood were the best covers.

Reid kicked the ball into the penalty area, but he gave a shock to all of the Sheffield United players. He did not give a high ball toward Dawson and the rest's heads, but instead gave a chest-high ball, flat and fast!

Amidst everyone's shocked looks, David Johnson suddenly emerged from the crowd, running toward the front! At the moment when the ball came into contact with David Johnson, he headed the ball toward the corner of the goalpost!

Sheffield United's goalkeeper, Paddy Kenny, was completely unable to respond at all to such a sudden shot. The ball hit the bar of the goalpost and flew in!

Tang En, who was standing at the side of the field, raised both of his hands high to celebrate the goal. He did not forget to look opposite him. However, Warnock did not appear too saddened, and he merely returned back to the manager's seat. Tang En was slightly disappointed—the offense, which he had planned out meticulously, had actually not incited any form of emotions from the opponent.

## **Chapter 69: Manager Vs. Manager Part 2**

"GOAL! GOAL! GOAL!" John Motson repeatedly shouted the word three times, each time louder than the previous. "What a beautiful set piece play combination! Who would have thought that Reid would send the ball into the penalty area in this manner, and who would have thought that the person to score this goal would be David Johnson! God, he is only 1.68 meters! Scoring with a place kick! Beautifully done!" On the last two sentences Motson looked at Lawrenson sitting beside him.

Lawrenson could only helplessly smile. "Indeed very beautiful. I've overlooked this point. In terms of place kick, Twain has spent a lot of effort. However, the match has not ended yet. John, the beard is still on my face."

Motson laughed. "Don't speak too soon, Mark. Forest's offense won't end here!"

The excited shouts of the fans resounded throughout Forest Bar. "That's right! Our offense hasn't ended! Scoundrels from Sheffield United, be prepared for a world of pain!"

Burns looked at the excited fans and smiled at the big guy, John, beside him. Then, the two of them clinked their glasses together.

Motson was right. Forest's offense had not ended. Seven minutes after the first goal, at the 24th minute, Nottingham Forest once again made use of a place kick score. This time, the goal was scored by the team captain, Michael Dawson. For the corner kick, Andy Reid kicked the ball straight toward the front of the goalpost. Even though there were still two Sheffield United defenders beside him, Dawson was still heads above them, smashing the ball into the goalpost.

"2:0! 2:0! Michael Dawson! He possesses all the necessary qualities to become an exceptional player, and he is the team captain of Nottingham Forest! He is Robin Hood!" Motson could not stop praising the young Dawson. "This small forest is bound to be unable to contain him. He will definitely become an important player on a prestigious football team. He is a very important player! Hey Mark, your beard..."

Lawrenson was no longer in the mood to banter with Motson. He kept touching his big beard as he stared at Tang En. Tang En first knelt on the ground and waved his fists, before rushing over to the players who were still celebrating. Even though the person who scored was undoubtedly Michael Dawson, Tang En the manager appeared to be much more excited than Dawson.

Perhaps Motson was right. Tony Twain was unpredictable... really unpredictable!

Bramall Lane Stadium slowly quieted down, and only the Forest fans were singing nonstop on the viewing platform. Nobody could have expected that Nottingham Forest would actually be able to take the lead in the away match, leading Sheffield United with a score of 2:0.

Tang En was currently in an extremely good mood, although it was only halfway through the first half of the match, and there was still a huge bulk of match time remaining. After that they still had the grand finals to play. However, it was as though he had already seen the doors to the English Premier League slowly opening. Behind those doors, was an even more flourishing and broad world.

Compared to the excited Tang En, Sheffield United's manager was silent. He walked back to the manager's seat from the side of the field, before sitting down to observe the match without making any adjustments in response to the 2:0 score. From Tang En's perspective, he was displaying obvious signs that he was losing.

For the rest of the first half of the match, after taking the lead with two goals, Nottingham Forest deliberately intended to slow down the tempo. Therefore, the match returned to the same state as the first 15 minutes of the match. Both sides began their tug-of-war in the center of the field.

Until the referee blew the whistle that signaled the end of the first half, Warnock did not stand up from his seat. After the whistle sounded, he stood up and headed straight for the changing room, without any expression on his face.

On the other side, after Tang En heard the sound of the whistle, he immediately stood up and did a high-five with Walker, before he happily walked to the changing room. His tactics had all been realized, despite being in such an unfavorable situation as the away team. As such, he could not have asked for anything more from the team.

Tang En had originally wanted to tell everyone that Ian Bowyer was going to leave the team after the playoffs. However, after much thought about, he had decided not to disrupt their battle-focused hearts. In case the finals match did not go smoothly, it would then be brought up to raise their morale.

Turning off the microphone, Motson pointed toward Lawrenson's beard and laughed. "Mark, do you like electronic or manual razors?"

During halftime, regardless of whether they were in Bramall Lane Stadium's changing room or Nottingham's, which were about 30 miles apart, both Nottingham Forest's players and fans were extremely relaxed. To be able to get a score of 2:0 by halftime in their away match... this kind of score was more than enough to make them heave a sigh of relief.

During halftime, there were even people who already started discussing Nottingham Forest's opponents for the finals, as well as their potential opponents after they got promoted to the Premier League.

Tang En was all smiles as he looked at his subordinates, but he did not utter a single word to stop their celebrating. However, this was all on the surface. In actuality, he was in the midst of thinking about potential situations that could happen in the second half. He did not think that Warnock was the type of opponent that would give up at halftime. Warnock would definitely make some changes, and Tang En had to have contingency plans in response to them.

It was almost a given for Warnock to strengthen his offense, and if he did that, the tactics employed by Tang En would be effective. The midfield would be used completely for defense, and the means of offense would only be via long balls. It would be simple and fast, and it did not matter whether or not it succeeded, as long as there were endless attempts to go on the offense. With two goals already in their hands, they had the capital to defend the last 45 minutes, even if they did not manage to score even once. As long as they could hold, they would be Nottingham's heroes.

The League One playoff matches were different from the other two rounds of home-away elimination matches. There was only one deciding factor for the outcome of the match—the score. The team that scored more goals would win, regardless of whether they were scored on away grounds or not. Even if a team had drawn a match at 5:5 with their opponents during their away match, it was useless. As long as their opponents manage to draw at 1:1 in the second match, both teams still had to play overtime and penalty shootout.

The 15-minute halftime passed very quickly, and the players for both teams once again stood on the field, waiting for the second half to begin.

When Tang En was walking toward the away team manager's seat, he happened to cross paths with the opposing team's manager, Warnock. The two of them looked at each other, and, therefore, they could not avoid greeting each other. However, Tang En really did not know what to say at that moment. He was used to shaking hands and engaging in some small talk with the opposing team's manager after the match, because at that moment, the results of the match were already known. He knew what sort of feelings he should have when he faced them, and what he should say. However, it was currently right after halftime, so what should he say?

Should he say something like, "We are currently in the lead, and it's highly possible we're going to win?" Or something like, "Even though we are in the lead, there's still a chance for you to make a comeback?" These words did not fit Tang En's character.

So, he lowered his head and pretended that he did not see Warnock as he hurried away. Unexpectedly, he was called out by Warnock.



“Manager Twain, why do you run away at the sight of me?”

Tang En rolled his eyes with his back toward Warnock, before turning around with a face full of smiles. “Ah, I’m so sorry. Actually, I was thinking, and did not see you, Mr. Warnock. Is anything the matter?”

Warnock extended his hand to Tang En. “Nothing much. I only wanted to congratulate you. From the season’s ranked 14th at the start of the year, to ranked sixth by the end of the season, you’ve performed remarkably. Truth to be told, I didn’t think that our final opponents would be you guys.”

Tang En also extended his hand. Since Warnock expressed his friendliness, Tang En did not have any reason to not reciprocate.

The two of them shook hands.

“Regardless of the final result of the match, I must say, that this is an extremely splendid match,” Warnock said.

Tang En smiled as he nodded to express his agreement. However, once both of them parted, Tang En turned around and frowned.

That darned old man doesn’t have the slightest worry that his team will lose! He’s extremely confident, and from the looks of it, he is confident of securing the win. But... Where did his confidence come from? The one who is two goals down is him, not me!

With slight apprehension, Tang En returned to the manager’s seat. The match had already started. Walker asked concernedly, “Where did you go?”

“I met Warnock and casually chatted with him for a while,” Tang En replied. After that, he focused all of his attention on the match. He hoped to be able to see through Warnock’s ploy and to stop it in time.

After watching the match for less than five minutes, he immediately stood up from his seat and frightened Walker, who was beside him, causing Walker to look at him in bewilderment.

Tang En paid no heed to Walker, while he stared at Neil Warnock who had his hands in his pockets, and scolded, “That old b\*stard!”

## **Chapter 70: The Footsteps Of English Premier League Part 1**

Sheffield United had changed their lineup during halftime. They removed their core offensive player, Michael Tonge, and switched in a striker, 21-year-old Steve Kabba. Tang En had limited knowledge on this player and only knew some statistical information regarding him. Such as his recent transfer over to Sheffield United this season from Grimsby Town. He had been fielded 25 times and scored seven goals. It was a result that could not be considered good nor bad. From the statistics, Tang En was completely unable to tell anything else about him, such as his specialty techniques or habits.

After watching for five minutes, Tang En could only tell that he was extremely fast. However, apart from that, there was nothing else special about him.

Tang En began to consider seriously how he should react to Warnock.

The core of Nottingham Forest's tactics was to restrain the opponent's midfield offense centered around Tonge. Now that Tonge was swapped out, what should he do? Sheffield United was currently playing a 5-3-2 formation, and so Nottingham Forest's two defensive midfielders were currently being wasted. This caused Nottingham Forest to not have any means of retaliation, and they could only get beaten up.

Tang En felt that in order to strengthen their offense, he should swap out either Scimeca or Bopp, and switch Jess in. Jess's passes and place kick were extremely threatening. However, Tang En could not make up his mind, as he did not know whether that was the change which Warnock wanted to see.

Tang En's handshake with Warnock in the passageway had made him extremely unsettled. He always felt that there was a hidden agenda behind each and every word spoken by the old man.

Should he make the necessary changes?

Tang En stared at the field and remained silent.

Another five minutes passed, and it seemed like Kabba did not pose much of a threat, and the defensive line led by Dawson was able to cope with much ease. Tang En decided to make the changes...

It was at this moment, the mild situation on the field was met with sudden, drastic changes!

Kabba, who had been fielded in the second half, made use of his speed to forcibly break past Forest's left back, Davy Oyen. After that, he made an action which seemed like he was passing or shooting, creating chaos in front of the Nottingham Forest goalpost.

That's when Tang En saw their striker, Paul Peschisolido, raise both of his arms high up in the air while he jumped around in joy.

The ball went in?

Tang En opened his eyes wide, hoping to confirm. However, it was apparent that the fan's eyes were much sharper than his, as a loud cheering noise erupted from the viewing platform.

"Goal! Sheffield United chases back with a goal! The greatest contributor for this goal was the newly switched in Steve Kabba! Let us look at the replay. The person who scored the goal was Peschisolido! Forest's goalkeeper, Darren Ward, managed to block the first shot, but it happened to rebound into Peschisolido's feet. Going with the flow, he kicked the ball in... open goal! What a lucky guy!" Although Motson wished to see Lawrenson shave off his beard after the match, he was still extremely on point when it came to commentating the match.

"Darn it!" Tang En yelled. Now that the lead had been reduced from two goals to one, the situation was very precarious. He had to immediately make changes, but the adjustment this time would not be to strengthen the defense. Tang En's principle was that he would try to think of ways to increase the advantage when his team was leading by one goal, and would only think about defense after having a lead of at least two goals.

Tang En called to Eoin Jess, who was doing his warm-ups. He stood beside the manager's seat and listened to Tang En brief him, while he took off his vest.

“Jess.” Tang En looked at this veteran player, who was older than the original Tang En by seven years. He had come over to Nottingham Forest from Bradford City by means of free transfer. As Nottingham Forest was in the midst of a financial crisis, it could not offer him a good contract. He had come over because of Paul Hart, but he did not expect that after half a season, Hart would resign on his own accord. However, he continued to play his best for the team, and his place kick was a scoring means that had completely gained Tang En’s trust. “Do you still remember that FA Cup match against West Ham United?”

Jess nodded his head.

Tang En continued, “Do you still remember the match with Wimbledon? The words I said to you when I switched you out?”

Jess nodded his head once again. “I remember, Boss. You said that we definitely could win and wanted to make a wager with me.”

“That’s right. Today, let’s make another bet. I bet that we will definitely win this match.”

The Scottish man shook his head. “There’s no need to make a bet, Boss. I believe you, and I won’t let you down. What do you want me to do?”

Tang En smiled. “You will go and replace Bopp and free Reid from his spot. Organize offenses and pass the balls over to Harewood and Johnson. If there is a place kick in the front field, it’s all yours regardless of which side it is!”

Jess blinked his eyes and said, “Just like that match with West Ham United?”

“That’s right, the same!”

Patting Jess’s back, Tang En switched him in.

This switch of players immediately bore fruit. Jess’s appearance on the field revitalized Nottingham Forest’s midfield, and his passes brought quite a bit of trouble to Sheffield United’s backline defense. In addition, he was specialized in place kicks, causing Sheffield United’s defenders to be extra careful whenever they tried to defend.

However, this kind of carefulness was unable to last for long. The defensive style of English football was something that everyone knew about. How was it possible to not have any body contact or fouls?

Eoin Jess managed to create a chance for a place kick in front of the penalty area, and he was the one who was going to carry it out. As Tang En watched Jess place the ball on the arc of the penalty area, he put both of his hands to his mouth and prayed.

Tang En did not believe in God, but this did not prevent him from calling for help when he needed it.

Sheffield United had just scored a goal, and their morale was at its peak. If they continued to let such a situation develop without any interference, then the situation would spiral out of Tang En’s control. They had to kill off the opponent’s counterattack when it was still in its infant stages, and it was also extremely important to suppress their arrogance. Suppress it with what? Goals!

Didn’t you just reduce the deficit to one goal? Very well then, I’ll just have to widen the gap once again.

Therefore Jess, you better not let me down.

On the television screen, Eoin Jess lowered his head as he looked at the ball, quietly waiting for the head referee to blow the whistle. The audiences could not see his expression, but this did not prevent the fans in Forest Bar from rooting for him.

“Score it, you can do it!”

“Blast their human wall to smithereens!”

“Even if you don’t score, at least take a few of them down!”

Burns raised his head and looked at the television. Although he did not say anything, in his heart, he, too, hoped to see what the people shouted.

As a former professional football player, Burns knew how delicate Tang En’s current situation was. One goal could break the original balance, and another goal could return the original balance.

“Eoin Jess, Nottingham Forest’s place kicking expert, Twain’s most trusted player for place kicking. He has been fielded 32 times and scored three goals—all from direct free kicks.” John Motson’s voice could be heard from the speakers of the television. The rowdiness within the bar gradually disappeared, as everyone stared intently at the television screen.

At the split second before Jess kicked the ball, the bar, which was filled with people, became extremely quiet. Almost everyone had the same posture—heads raised toward the television, with big mugs of beer resting still in their hands.

The display on the screen had been switched from a close-up to a far shot, signaling that the penalty kick was about to begin. For a split second, not a single sound could be heard inside the bar, even breathing sounds.

Amidst the silence, Motson’s voice reached everyone’s ears distinctly.

“Jess, he is about to raise his leg...”

Clank! It was the sound of the ball hitting the pillar of the goalpost.

“What a pity... Oh! GOOOOOAL—! Rebounded into the net! What a beautiful free kick! Jess did not disappoint!”

“He never disappoints! Forest! Forest!” The people in the bar clinked the mugs in their hands at that moment and shouted, “Cheers!”

Burns slammed his tightly clenched right fist onto the bar counter.

“3:1! Nine minutes after Sheffield United scores, Nottingham Forest once again deals a heavy blow to Sheffield United! They regain their two-goal lead, and the situation favors them greatly! Mark, let me ask you once again: do you like electric or manual razors? Haha!” Motson laughed loudly. Back at the BBC headquarters building, Lineker, who was watching the match through the monitors, laughed, as well. There were people beside him who clapped for him, celebrating the fact that he had finally “calculated” and gotten rid of Lawrenson’s big beard.

Lawrenson sighed helplessly. Sheffield United is too much of a let-down. Looks like I'm unable to keep this beard.

Tang En cheered from the side of the field with both of his hands raised in the air, but he was quickly hugged by the extremely excited Walker.

"Tony! I can see the English Premier League waving to us!"

"I can see it, too! I can even hear its footsteps as it walks toward us!" Tang En excitedly pounded Walker's back. "Listen to its booming sound!"

"What a powerful-sounding footstep!" Walker began coughing from Tang En's pounding.

Sending Walker back to the manager's seat, Tang En deliberately glanced at the opposite manager's seat. He discovered that Neil Warnock remained standing by the side of the field with his arms folded, without any expression. His team was once again down by two goals. Was he not anxious? Was he not angry? Was he not agitated?

This manager was one that was extremely direct with his feelings and often liked to scold nonstop. In the two times that Tang En had faced him, he had not rested his mouth for a single moment throughout the full 90 minutes. Yet why was it that he had changed so much in this match?

What exactly was this old man plotting?!

Tang En began to frown again, and the good mood from before was momentarily reduced to nothing.