

Champions 991

Chapter 991: Are You Coming Back, Tony?

“...Freddy Eastwood, formerly the legendary forward of Nottingham Forest, is now an acting head coach. Currently, he’s trying to prove the media’s predictions through practical actions — the first match played by the team Coach Eastwood led has lost. Nottingham Forest has now lost four matches in a row... The whole team is in a panic and it’s rumored that Balotelli wishes to leave and has already officially submitted his transfer request to the club. And as for the rumors regarding George Wood’s retirement, the man in question has yet to step up and clarify—”

Kenny Burns’s Forest Bar had been unusually crowded and busy the moment night fell. Fans of Nottingham Forest who had been nearby always gathered in the bar after a day of hard work to discuss the recent happenings of their favorite team. If the team had achieved good results, the bar would be filled with cheers; everyone would chug pint after pint of beer with their eyebrows raised. Truly, they would leave the bar as they entered — exhilarated beyond belief. On the other hand, if the team had lost, then the bar would be filled with grief. Everyone would be sighing or complaining that their luck was bad, or they would resent some of the players for their sub-par performance during the match. It was either that or they would turn into armchair coaches and lament that the team’s tactics were wrong.

But one thing was sure — whether or not the team lost, the bar would be abuzz with energy.

However, things were different tonight.

It was so quiet that everyone could hear every single sound coming from the television.

The fans’ only reaction to the news being broadcasted on the television was a deep sigh.

What else could they do?

Wood was in a bad condition because he was worried over his mother’s critical condition, were they to curse the man out or something? Eastwood was the legendary forward of the team but he lacked experience as a coach, so the burden should not be his alone to bear. It seemed like the chairman of the club was the only person they could really rag on but they had been ragging on the man for so long that it has since lost its novelty. No matter how harshly they criticized Evan Doughty from here in the bar, there was no way they would be able to have him removed from his position. What else would they achieve other than wasting their saliva?

At the thought of this scenario, no one else was in the mood to talk. There were twenty or so men sitting there in the bar and all they could do was down glass after glass or beer and hope to drown their sorrows.

“Is there really no way for us to save our team?!” A young man stood up as he shouted, unable to bear this oppressive atmosphere any longer.

His friends who were sat beside him tilted their heads up to glance at him, then continued drinking their beer with their heads down. They were probably better off staring at the television screen and zoning out.

This was a question that had been asked repeatedly throughout the four years, and what was the result?

But today, this young man seemed to have come prepared. He stood up and realized that no one was answering him, so he cast his gaze to the other side of the bar. He then held up his glass and pushed aside his friend who was in his way to stumble over.

Twain had been drinking fruit juice at the bar and chatting idly with Kenny Burns. Shania and Teresa were still in America as of today and he did not want to stay in that enormous villa all on his own. All his time was spent in the bar if he was not already in the hospital.

Since he was no longer the head coach for the team, he intentionally kept his distance from John and the rest instead of mixing in their circle. Even if he came to the bar, he would only be there to chat with Kenny. If John or Bill were looking for him, they would come to him alone instead of pulling him to their circle.

Everyone tried their best to avoid one topic in their conversation — the head coach of Nottingham Forest.

But today, there was a young man drunk off his beer who charged towards Twain. He stopped in front of Twain and slammed his glass down heavily. He then turned his head to stare at Twain. “T-ony!”

Twain turned to stare at the unwelcomed guest.

“Come back!” The young man shouted at the top of his lungs. “Come back!”

John stood up hurriedly to restrain the impulsive young man who had had too much to drink. “Joseph, you—”

“Come back to Nottingham Forest, please! The young man was so agitated that his eyes were brimming with tears. “Please come back, and bring us—” Before he could finish his sentence, he stumbled and slipped, falling from the barstool. He had fallen.

Fat John finally made it to Twain’s side at this moment and he helped the young man up. “Joseph talks too much when he’s had too much to drink!” He explained to Twain, then forcefully dragged Joseph back to where he had been sitting.

“He didn’t say ‘Joseph talks a load of crap when he’s had too much to drink’,” Kenny Burns commented from beside him.

Twain did not express any hint of displeasure at this gesture of Burns’. He looked at the John and the young man as they walked away. The pair had returned to the center of where the fans were gathered and it seemed like not a lot of them were chiding Joseph’s impulsive actions. On the contrary, a few of them were sneaking glances at Twain to observe his reaction.

Twain felt that they could not tell anything from his face since there was no expression at all.

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Eastwood did not expect to have to welcome a guest this late into the night. He had his wife, Sabina, bring the kids up to sleep and leave the living room for him to entertain this late-night guest.

"I thought over it for a long time. Although I've already retired, I still keep tabs on soccer and on Nottingham Forest. I think that I can maybe help you a little, Freddy," Twain, who had been sitting across from Eastwood, said as he stared at the man.

Eastwood said as he chuckled bitterly, "You coming back to coach the team is the greatest help you can possibly offer me... Alright, I know this is an unrealistic request. To be honest, I don't think I suit the role of head coach... You know, head, I actually forgot to give the team the starting roster before their first match. If not for Jimmy reminding me, I might have made a fool out of myself. Thinking back, I really do suck..."

Eastwood seemed a little upset. To mess up this bad in front of his team when he was their head coach had caused him a great deal of grief in the past few days.

Twain chuckled. "That's no big deal, Freddy. The first time I led a first-string team to a competition, my own player bumped into me so hard that I fainted. The crowd was staring down at me as I left for home. After the competition, I became the laughing stock of the whole of England. Even when I was in the bar drowning my sorrows, someone would bring up the incident to laugh at me. Don't take something so trivial to heart. The role of a head coach is actually rather simple. Even if you forget to give your team the starting roster, that can become part of your legend as long as you lead them to victory."

"Here's the thing, boss. I don't know how I'm supposed to lead them to victory. You know, when I'm looking down at them playing on the field, the urge to go help them score a goal and win is so strong. But as a head coach, I don't know what I should do..." Eastwood was extremely upset, a rare sight for the Romani who was extremely optimistic.

"That's because you lack experience. Also—" Twain suddenly thought of an issue. "There's no one beside you who's good enough to help you." He had been a rookie back then, too, but he had Old Ian and Walker. The two of them had plenty of experience from their time as players and had spent quite some years as the coaches for the team. They then continued to flourish under several head coaches, before Twain sat at the table they had set for him. But things were different in the Nottingham Forest of today. The team was a mess; all the good coaches were leaving one after the other and being poached by other clubs. An outstanding coach like Kerslake was only fired because his results were unsatisfactory and Evan did not even let him stay on the team.

Although Eastwood had also been coaching for four years, but the difference between a manager and a coach in England was just too big.

Eastwood did not want to talk about himself any longer. He suddenly asked, "You coming to visit me this late at night tells me one thing, boss."

"And what is that?"

"You can't let go of Nottingham Forest."

Twain glanced at Eastwood. "Of course I can't, I'm a hardcore Nottingham Forest fan. I buy tickets every season."

“Come back if you can’t let go,” Eastwood stared into Twain’s eyes as he spoke.

“I’ve retired, Freddy—”

“No one said that retirees can’t come back.”

“I have to spend time with my daughter—”

“Aren’t you in England now? And isn’t your daughter in America right now?”

Twain shook his head. “Let’s not talk about this anymore. If there’s something you don’t understand when you’re coaching, you can come to me for help and I will tell you everything I have learned from my experience—”

But it seemed like Eastwood was set on going against Twain today. He threw him another hard-to-answer question, “George is the heart of this team. If his condition never gets better, then the team’s results will never stabilize. Do you have any solutions for this, boss?”

Twain was at a loss for words. He knew why Wood was in a bad condition, but this was an issue that he could not solve. As long as Sophia was still ill, Wood would still be in a bad condition.

This was not something he could solve with tactics. It was not even something a head coach could resolve.

Twain would think about what Wood had said to him in the yard of the hospital every time someone brought up the latter. “Come back if you don’t want me to retire.”

Were the two of them in cahoots? Why was it that either of them persuaded Twain to go back every time they met him?

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Actually, not many people came up to him to tell him this when he had still been the head coach of England. But now that he had retired and was lazing about in his house, this was no longer the case. He could say he was retired as many times as he wanted but other people might not be this understanding.

For example, he received a call from Tang Jing the next day, a call that was like lightning on a clear day.

The China Football Association had reached out to him through Tang Jing and were actually asking for him to coach the Chinese national team.

“I’m just the messenger, Mr Twain.”

“You can reject them directly and say you couldn’t reach me,” Twain did not want to have anything to do with the China Football Association since their reputation was a little...

“I’m also Chinese, after all, and I honestly think it’d be rather interesting if you head over to coach the Chinese team—” It was obvious that Tang Jing was laughing on the other side of the line.

“I would not. I don’t want to mess up my reputation this late in my life,” Twain rejected very curtly. Tang Jing might find this interesting as an outsider, but Twain was directly involved in this issue and he did not find this the least bit amusing.

Tang Jing was, as she said, just a messenger. She did not try to persuade Twain to change his mind after he rejected her and cheerfully promised to relay the message to the association. As for the reason, it was because Twain had not had enough rest yet and did not want to leave retirement to teach.

The thing was, the Chinese media found out through Tang Jing that the China Football Association had reached out to Twain to have him coach the national team and had rather mercilessly mocked the association for punching above their weight. They had basically called the association shameless and immoral, just not in those exact words, but what they had said more or less meant the same thing. Unfortunately, the China Football Association was probably the only government organization they could curse out as much as they wanted without having to bear any responsibility for their words. Although the FIFA had made it a rule for the football association in every country to be non-governmental organization, China was a special case and its football association was a government organization.

The issue of the China Football Association seeking Twain out to coach their team was over on Twain's end, but he did not expect to have caused such a stir over in China. The people there were focused on whether the association should have looked for Twain to coach and whether Twain should be coaching in China, et cetera. Whether it was mass media or online forums, the discussions were unceasing and heated. Some people thought that they should be inviting top-grade coaches like Twain to coach the team or China's football would never improve, while others thought that the association should not be inviting Twain over with that reputation of theirs since the man could run the risk of damaging his reputation if he really did end up coaching the team. There were also people saying that the association had lost its mind, thinking they could control Tony Twain even if they did manage to get him on board. The association delegating their authority to Twain was completely out of the question, unless their men's national team ended up clinching the World Cup.....But this would just be an endless loop. Long story short, it was a meaningless and futile effort.

Actually, it was Tang Jing who leaked the news intentionally in hopes of disgracing the association yet again. China's football had not made any progress over the years despite the numerous changes in leadership since every new leader was more concerned with keeping their post than they were with football as a sport. It was inevitable that China's football had come to a standstill — regressing, even. Tang Jing had long since left the media industry and left to start a family in England where she could focus on her husband and children, but any mention of China's football would make her blood boil in an instant. She was not a bigwig and her words did not carry much weight, so there was little she could do to vent her anger aside from such methods.

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Twain had little concern for the chaos he caused in China with his rejection of the association's offer. His mind was on Nottingham Forest.

Eastwood had mentioned that the greatest help Twain could possibly offer was to return to coach the team with the former returning to his role as a trainer, but this was obviously not possible, so Twain offered his help in another way. He analysed the problems that Nottingham Forest was encountering together with Eastwood so they could try to find a solution.

Twain told Eastwood that he should just bite the bullet and remove Wood and Balotelli from the starting lineup if both of them were unreliable, swapping them out for members from the youth team or second-string members. It was obvious that these players had much more fighting spirit than the first-string players. Nottingham Forest's problem now lay not in their tactics — or, at the very least, this was not the biggest issue — but in their fighting spirit and mental state.

He was completely invested in helping Eastwood that he did not notice the look the latter threw at him. There was also something else he did not think about, which was whether or not it was appropriate for a retiree like him to be so heavily involved in someone else's job. All he hoped for was for Nottingham Forest to perform better so a soccer fan like him would not be this worried.

After Eastwood did as Twain said and switched out half of the first-string members from the lineup, he managed to stop the downward spiral in the second match. During this away match, they relied on a tenacious defence and overall attack through the match and tied at no goals with the powerful Manchester United. Although it was a messy match with no goals to speak of, they ultimately managed to stop losing. On top of that, it was the mighty Manchester United they were going against, which made the result all the more precious. As such, much of the media was shocked at the results when it was released. Before the match, they had predicted that Nottingham Forest would be humiliated by Manchester United in Old Trafford, just like Liverpool.

Neither Wood nor Balotelli were in the starting lineup for that match and the former had only been substituted in during the last ten minutes. This was fodder for the media to bring up old debts. They dug up past incidents where Wood and Eastwood had been at odds with each other to spark some discourse. In their analyses, they said that Eastwood had been aggressively suppressing Wood every since he stepped up. On top of the previous rumors of Wood's retirement, it seemed like what used to be rumors would very soon become fact...

Of course, all of this was just mindless drivel. Eastwood was not the kind to mix his personal affairs with business. Besides, whatever tension had been between the two of them no longer existed, and it was Twain's idea to remove Wood from the starting lineup. In fact, Twain did not even want to let Wood step out on the field for even a minute. He wanted to let the man cool down completely, but it was Eastwood who felt that it was better for Wood to go out there so he could maintain his state.

But the media was really running their mouth this time...

The team returned from Manchester United to Nottingham after preventing a fourth consecutive loss, their hearts heavy with doubt. Just then, Wood had been moving with the team when he received a call from the hospital.

His mother was in critical condition.

Chapter 992: Please Come Back, Tony

The press might have used the words 'critically ill' to describe Sophia's condition all this while, but that was simply because they have always been careless in their choice of words. The hospital has never once told Wood that his mother was 'critically ill'. Not until today.

When Wood rushed to the hospital, his mother had already been wheeled into the emergency room, and the only people he saw standing outside were Twain, Woox, and the nurse Vivian Miller.

“How’s my mother?” The first thing that Wood asked about after seeing both Woox and Vivian was his mother’s condition.

Woox shook his head and said nothing, whereas Vivian stood quietly by the side and hung her head. Vivian was just a nurse who took care of Sophia, but she looked as though she was responsible for causing this crisis.

Since neither of them spoke, the only person who could answer Wood’s question at the scene was Twain. Twain’s voice was low as he spoke, “She’s not in a good condition, George. You’d better be mentally prepared...”

All three of them conveyed a single message to Wood through either their gestures or words – his mother might really leave his side this time around.

Wood did not know what to think all of a sudden. He did not know what he should do or say, either. He simply stood rooted at the spot and panted heavily.

Twain was surprised by Wood’s lack of reaction. He had expected Wood to fly into a rage and yell words like, “I don’t believe you” or “you all must be lying to me”.

To Twain, it was normal for a person to have an outburst when they heard that their loved one might pass away soon, and he expected Wood to have an even bigger and more aggressive one than others might. He had braced himself for a fit from Wood all this while, but it never came.

Twain’s surprise quickly turned into worry as Wood continued in silence. He also appeared to be dazed as he stood rooted to the ground. Twain was worried that Wood was in a state of shock because he could not cope with the news that his mother might leave him. As a manager who was good at handling his players’ psychological state, Twain knew very well just how troublesome psychological issues were.

A while later, Woox left to deal with the reporters who had crowded outside the hospital after hearing word that Wood’s mother was in a dire condition. Likewise, Vivian also left because she still had work to do. The only people who remained outside the emergency room were Twain, who had nothing to do, and Wood. Twain looked at Wood and sighed after seeing how the latter had continued to stand rooted to the ground, seemingly oblivious to the departure of both Woox and Vivian.

Twain wanted to go up to Wood and comfort him, but he did not know what he should say. He knew very well that Sophia did not have much time left even if she managed to pull through this time around. Twain’s impression of Sophia ever since their first meeting was that she was a feeble woman who could die and leave Wood all alone at any time. None of the doctors expected her to be able to live until this day. It was hard to imagine the kind of willpower she must have had to be able to persevere for such a long time.

Wood had experienced the pain of Gavin’s death years ago, and now it looked like he was going to experience the tragedy of losing a loved one once again. Everyone knew that death is inevitable, but this fact might be hard to accept for Wood. Twain was extremely worried about how Wood would react to his mother’s passing when it happened. To Sophia, Wood was her sole pillar of support. Likewise, she

too was the only source of support for Wood. Sophia could not lose Wood, and similarly, he could not bear to lose her either. Wood has lived with his mother ever since he was born, and they have both become an integral part of each other's lives. Unfortunately, the pair would have to experience the greatest pain in this world soon. They have to endure the pain that was brought about by death and separation. Will Wood be able to deal with his mother's death?

Twain would not be this worried if it had been any other person who was about to lose his mother. Wood was probably the only one who could make him feel this way. He was just like a child who has not grown up. His affection for his mother was far deeper than anyone could imagine, and he would not be just losing a loved one when he lost his mother.

Wood finally seemed to have gotten tired after standing for so long, and he walked aside and sat down soon after. However, his eyes never left the doors to the emergency room the entire time.

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A while later, Evan Doughty arrived at the hotel to visit Wood and his mother. Twain could tell that Doughty had something on his mind, and whatever it was had nothing to do with Wood.

Wood was absent-minded, and so was Doughty. The two exchanged a few quick words while being preoccupied with their own thoughts. Thereafter, Wood continued in his seat and stared at the emergency room's doors. Evan Doughty, on the other hand, did not seem to be in a hurry to leave, and he stood in the hallway and looked about. His eyes fell on Twain numerous times and it seemed like he wanted to say something, but he never did.

Doughty averted his gaze towards Wood and realized that the latter still had his eyes fixed on the doors to the emergency room. He then decided to walk towards Twain.

"Can we speak privately for a moment, Tony?" Doughty said quietly as he stood before Twain.

Twain lifted his head to look at Doughty as he was still in his seat. Doughty was alone and Allan Adams did not accompany him this time around.

Twain could not find a reason to reject the request, so he nodded in response.

The two walked past Wood and down the stairs before heading towards the back of the hospital. They then had their conversation as they strolled by the side of the lake.

"To be honest, I was quite surprised to see you on the big screen during the opening match of the season, Tony," Evan Doughty said.

"I'm a Forest fan." Twain was speaking the truth. He could not bring himself to support another football team, especially a Premier League team, after managing Forest for 11 years. Every other football team was an opponent that he had to fight against in the past, after all...

"Have you seen Forest's recent matches?" The conversation topic was shifted onto Forest's recent performance naturally.

"Of course." Twain was a little wary.

"What do you think about Forest's current situation, Tony? As a professional football manager..."

“I’m not a manager anymore, Evan.” Twain refused to answer.

Doughty did not expect Twain to cut him off. It looked like Twain had no intention of being compliant now that he was not working under him... Then again, when has Tony ever been compliant? Doughty was rendered speechless by Twain’s comments and did not know how to continue the conversation.

The pair walked side by side in silence for quite a distance. Twain tried his best to direct his attention to his surroundings to keep himself from feeling awkward. He noticed that there was a small island covered with trees in the distance, but there were not any bridges that led to it. He looked around trying to find a boat of some sorts but did not see any either.

Evan Doughty remained silent, and his eyes were fixed on the road before them. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind on whether he should say something.

“Uh, I’ll be honest, Tony. I came to find you today because I hope you’d be able to... to manage Nottingham Forest once again.”

Twain’s vague bad feeling had materialized!

He could not pretend that he did not hear Doughty’s words no matter how hard he tried.

Twain stopped in his tracks and directed his gaze away from the small island in the distance. His eyes then fell on Evan Doughty, who was next to him.

“I’m no longer a manager, Evan,” Twain repeated the words that he said earlier. He hoped that Evan Doughty would back off and leave him be. However, it seemed like he had underestimated Doughty’s determination.

“I know you have retired, but you are only fifty years old, Tony... You’re still considered young for a manager. The Forest team needs you. Wood needs you... and I need you too!”

Twain led out a smile. What an improvement Doughty has made. He would definitely not say such words to him in the past.

Doughty could discern the sarcasm behind Twain’s smile, but he paid it no mind. Or rather, he could not do anything about it even if he wanted to. Twain was not the one begging him for a job now. He was the one begging Twain to return to the club.

“I know you are upset with me, Tony. I have to admit that I... Uh... Made a mistake back then...”

Twain kept quiet and simply watched as Doughty admitted to making a mistake four years ago. He remembered the scenes of that night in the Madrid hotel room when he fell out with the club’s board after leading his team to achieve a historic treble. All the glory that he had earned with Forest became a distant memory in just one night.

The scene before him now was a stark contrast to that very scene from four years ago...

Evan Doughty would probably not have to beg Twain to return to the club if his behavior back then had been at all similar to what it was now.

After all, Forest was a team that Twain had built from scratch, and he was reluctant to just leave it behind.

“... Look at me now. I’ve already been sufficiently punished for my decision back then.” Doughty threw his hands before him in a helpless gesture.

“Did you really mean what you said, Evan?” Twain asked as he cast a sideways glance at him. He did not believe Evan Doughty’s words. “The reason why you have come to find me today is that the team’s poor results have made it difficult for you to get a good selling price for the club with the Bin Zayed Group, right?”

Doughty opened his mouth, but no words came out because Twain had hit the nail on the head.

Doughty was still hoping that the Bin Zayed Group would offer him a good price for Forest. When that happened, he would be free from all the mess that Forest found itself in. Forest’s results, Wood’s retirement, and all these other issues would have nothing to do with him from then on.

“Evan, I’ll repeat this again. I don’t care about how you treated me in the past. All you need to know is that I’ve retired now.”

Twain turned around and walked back to the hospital. The conversation with Evan Doughty was over.

Evan Doughty did not say anything to stop Twain from leaving. All he did was stare at Twain’s back and frown.

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Sophia had already been wheeled back to her ward by the time Twain returned to the hospital. When he got to Sophia’s ward, he noticed Wood leaving and saw Vivian tending to Sophia at the side of the bed.

Twain scrutinized the expression that Wood had on his face. It did not seem to have gotten better, but it did not seem to have gotten worse either. It was hard for him to guess what Sophia’s condition was based on Wood’s expression alone.

However, there was no need for him to guess. The moment Wood saw Twain, he said, “My mum wants to see you.”

After he said this, Wood walked to a nearby sofa to rest.

Twain glanced at Wood before walking into the ward. The first thing he did after entering was to greet Vivian, whom he was getting increasingly familiar with. He then took a seat next to Sophia’s bed.

Sophia’s appearance had changed over the past ten days. She looked different from when Twain first saw her after he returned to Nottingham. She had gotten even thinner and weaker than before, and it would not be an exaggeration to describe her as being ‘skin and bones’. Her once beautiful face had been ravaged by sickness. Her cheeks were sullen and her cheekbones protruded. She was hollow-eyed and her once lustrous hair had become thinner after long periods of treatment. Her lower body, covered by the blanket, was skeleton-like.

The sight of a debilitated Sophia caused Twain agony. The once beautiful woman has become almost unrecognizable now. Twain could not bear to take a second look at her and directed his gaze elsewhere.

Sophia seemed to share his thoughts. She did not want Twain to see her in her current state either.

She did not pull on Twain's hand and say many words like before. All she said after Twain sat down was, "Mr. Twain, I know you have always cared for George. He's a 32-year-old man this year, but he still acts like a kid who knows nothing. I'm really sorry that you had to fly back from Los Angeles for this..."

Twain had a bad feeling once again...

"... I hope you will continue to look after him in the future."

Twain's heart skipped a beat, and he immediately held Sophia's bony hand. "George has you to take care of him. You are his mother."

Sophia did not say anything in response. She only closed her eyes. Twain understood from her gesture that she wanted to rest, and he took his leave.

Twain noticed Wood sitting on the sofa after he left the ward. Wood raised his head after hearing Twain walk out of the room, and their eyes met. However, Twain could not bear to look at Wood, and he averted his gaze quickly.

Twain wondered what Sophia had said to her son earlier. Did she tell Wood the same thing that she said to him? What would Wood think about her words if she did?

Could Wood accept that the day when his mother would leave his side might very well be coming soon?

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Twain received a call from Pierce Brosnan shortly after he had reached the lobby of the hospital. The man who has not called him in ages sounded frantic as he asked, "Tony, I heard that you might return to manage Forest?"

"Who told you that?" Twain asked back.

"There are rumors going all around that you will go back and do it! I ran into numerous Forest fans recently, and they've all told me that you'd come back to rescue the team! Is this true, Tony?"

Twain was not in the mood to discuss those rumors with him. He cut Brosnan off curtly. "I'm sorry, Pierce. I'm not in the mood to give you an interview."

"I'm not trying to interview you, Tony. I'm just seeking confirmation from you as an ordinary fan..."

"That's just a rumor, Mr. Reporter." Twain addressing Brosnan as 'Mr. Reporter' was a sign that he was in a bad mood.

The call ended soon after that. He was not willing to say anything else on the matter. He was not in the mood to speak at all now.

Twain decided to leave from the front entrance instead of the side entrance that day. Before he could even reach the doors, however, he heard noises coming from outside. Countless reporters had crowded in front of the hospital's front entrance, and they were all trying to seek confirmation from the hospital staff about whether Wood's mother was truly critically ill. Woxx, who had left earlier to deal with these

reporters, was nowhere to be seen by then. The security guards saw Twain appear, and they immediately knew that the situation was going to get worse.

Sure enough, the reporters behind them acted as though they were on meth when they saw Twain. They started shoving about wildly in their attempt to get to the front and threw all their microphones and questions at Twain at the same time. They were all hoping that they would be able to get some valuable information from Twain.

Of course, there were also some reporters in the mix who did not care about Wood and his mother's condition. They yelled at the top of their lungs, "Tony! Hey, Tony! Is it true that you'll be coming out of retirement?"

"Mr. Twain, there are rumors that you will manage Nottingham Forest once again. Is this true?"

Twain acted as though he did not see the crowd of reporters before him, and he pretended not to hear any of the questions that were thrown at him. He stopped in his tracks at the entrance and fished out a pair of sunglasses from his shirt pocket before putting it on. He then descended a flight of stairs and squeezed his way through the crowd under the protection of the police officers and security guards at the scene.

He soon left all the clamor behind him.

Chapter 993: Hey George

Three days later, Nottingham Forest met Charlton on its home ground. George Wood returned to the starting lineup, and his performance was solid and powerful. He had swept away his previous indifferent state, both defensively and in the organization of the attack, causing his supporters to chant, "Saint George is back!"

Ultimately, thanks to his excellent play, the Forest team defeated the visiting team, Charlton, at 2:00 to enjoy their first victory in two months. After the game, the media speculated whether Wood's mother's condition was better to give him the motivation to play so well.

In fact, when Wood assisted Mitchell to score the first goal at the Crimson Stadium, his mother was in a deep coma in the hospital and had been unconscious for a whole day.

Twain had once thought that if Sophia were unconscious again, Wood would definitely miss the game. However, Wood surprised him by announcing that he was going to play in the game and was ready for it.

Before his appearance, Wood and Twain had a conversation between them, and the conversation clarified some things for them both.

"I'm still the captain of the Forest team, and the team needs me."

The team's previous poor performance had also affected Wood. Fortunately, he remembered that he was still the captain of the team.

Just when Twain thought Wood had finally figured it out and was going to change his mind, he added, “I will stick to my post until I retire. But I will make an announcement as soon as possible.”

Twain knew that Sophia did not have much time. She had been in a coma a lot lately and was unconscious for long periods. The doctors and nurses stood guard by her hospital bed 24 hours a day and were ready to perform emergency care on her at any time. He did not want to lose Wood too once he lost Sophia. Although Wood would not kill himself, what was the difference between a non-playing Wood and a dead one? For someone like Wood, if he did not play football, he would simply have no sense of existence. Twain really could not imagine how Wood would live if he no longer played football.

But then again, even if Wood suddenly decided to follow in his mother’s footsteps, Twain would not be surprised...

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Twain stood at the door of the patient ward, unaware that he had blocked many people’s way. The doctors and nurses coming in and out continuously knocked against him, one after another, but he stood there as if he was unaware of it. He just remained rooted to the spot, looking at the empty bed in front of him.

It was two days after the Forest team’s victory. Sophia had been in a coma the whole time and only woke up once briefly. It happened late at night, and Wood was outside, resting. Twain was not at the hospital. Only Vivian was with her.

Twain did not know what Sophia said to Vivian when she woke up. He did not know what the woman had in her mind when she was awake either.

Did she long for her life, which was filled with long periods of pain and brief moments of happiness? Or did she have a big awakening, realizing that death was actually a form of relief? Could she have hated to part with her own child, George? There were very few people in the world whom she was worried about...

Standing in front of a thick glass window, Wood looked quietly at the busy doctors and nurses in the ward as they took apart the equipment and removed the items his mother had used. A bouquet of flowers in a vase on the bedside table had already withered. A nurse took away the flowers along with the vase.

It seemed she was going to dispose of it like regular trash, but Vivian reached out and stopped her.

Vivian took out the bouquet from the vase and found a card stuck inside. She pulled it out. The following words were written on it: “Your son is a real professional player. Wake up and praise him. He’ll be very happy, Sophia.”

The bouquet was sent by Twain yesterday. From this message, it seemed Twain found that Wood’s mood had not improved after winning the game. He had hoped to make Wood a little happier through his mother’s praise. It was just that Sophia did not notice the bouquet of flowers when she woke up briefly. Wood also missed the last chance to hear his mother’s encouragement. His mother would never smile and stroke her son’s head while she said, “My George is the best in the world.”

Vivian looked down at her left wrist, which was still a little red. It was the spot where Wood's mother had gripped her. Late that night, Sophia suddenly woke up, and Vivian was right next to her at the time.

It was an exceptionally brief moment of consciousness. Sophia did not even see who was in front of her. She just grabbed Vivian's hand and whispered, "I don't want to die..."

The fresh flowers withered as quickly as the poor lady's life.

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Shania received a call from Twain asking her to bring Theresa back to Nottingham for Sophia's funeral.

Evan Doughty was preparing a report for the English Football Association to apply for a minute's silence for Wood's mother at the start of the Forest team's next league game. All the Forest players would be wearing black armbands on the sleeves of their jerseys at that time. The Forest team's opponent, Sunderland, had already agreed to the suggestion.

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Wood gazed at himself in front of the bathroom mirror. He had not taken care of his appearance for days. His hair had been messy and his beard scraggly. Now, however, it was a fresh and clean-looking George Wood in the mirror. He had carefully groomed his short hair and his chin was clean-shaven.

His appearance was impeccable, but his eyes were bloodshot, indicating that the person in the mirror was actually very tired.

"George!"

His agent, Woox, called his name outside.

Wood pushed the door open and found Woox holding a black suit in his hand as he said to him, "Change your clothes, it's time for us to set off."

Woox, the old gentleman, had always paid attention to his own appearance. He used to be a big shot in the entertainment agency industry, so his usual dressing was classy and fashionable. However, today he discarded any unnecessary embellishments, only wearing a very ordinary black suit.

Wood took the suit and put it on. He went out of the door together with Woox.

Once outside and looking at the wet streets, Wood paused for a moment.

It was raining.

"Umbrella..." Woox thought Wood was worried about the weather when he stopped.

"No, I don't need it." Wood stepped out into the rain.

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Twain was not worried at all that his daughter would do something out of place at the funeral. The sensible Theresa was serious after she saw both her parents looking somber.

It was a private and intimate funeral. Sophia herself had no relatives or friends in the United Kingdom. Her family had long broken ties and contact with her, even though Wood had made a name for himself in the football world. There was no news of family members from Jamaica reaching out either. But with Wood's temper, even if the people from there came to pay their respects, Wood would probably kick them out...

Woox only invited Twain and his family, as well as the doctors at the Royal Hospital of Nottingham University. They had taken excellent care of Sophia during her stay in the hospital and were meticulous in her treatment. Although they were ultimately unable to save Sophia's life, they did their best. In addition, he also invited a representative from the Nottingham Forest Football Club and good friends of Wood from the team.

The representative from the club was the chairman, Evan Doughty himself. However, Twain thought that Evan had an ulterior motive. His real purpose was probably not as straightforward as attending Sophia's funeral.

Wood's team was represented by his two friends, Gareth Bale and Aaron Mitchell. While he was popular in the team, not many people could be counted as really good friends.

The priest concluded the eulogy at Sophia's gravesite. "She was a good person, may she rest in peace..."

Twain thought to himself that it was customary for the pastors to say this at any funeral. However, this time, the pastor was right. Sophia was such a good person, but unfortunately, her life was too short. During this time, when Twain was alone and had nothing to do, he would let his imagination run wild. What was the purpose of Sophia's difficult life in this world? Before Wood met her, her life was basically miserable. She fell in love with someone but was abandoned. She brought up her child alone and would do anything for his sake, even if it meant selling her own body. When she finally saw her child succeed after much difficulty and did not have to worry about their livelihood anymore, her health quickly deteriorated. She did not enjoy any of the good fortune George met with. As for familial affections, she did not have any before giving birth to Wood. She did not have any romantic connections after Wood was born either. Such a life must have been dreary for an average person, but Wood became her whole world.

Maybe she came to the world just to be George Wood's mother.

Wood stood by the grave, acknowledging those who had come to the funeral. The people lined up to toss flowers onto the grave. Then they went to hug Wood, say a few words, and leave. Twain's family of three was also in the line. Twain saw Miss Vivian Miller's figure among the representatives from the hospital. She was wearing a long black dress today. The hem of her dress was drenched from the rain, but she was unaware of that. After gently placing the flowers in her hand on the grave mound, she walked up to Wood.

From where Twain was, he could not hear what Vivian and Wood said. However, he could guess what it was about. It was nothing but some words of condolences and so on. Most people would turn and walk away after they said those words. Vivian, however, went to stand behind Wood and did not leave.

In fact, the people who stood there had a close relationship with Wood, such as Bale and Mitchell, who were also standing behind Wood to accompany him. However, the relationship between Vivian and Wood was not that close.

Twain looked at Vivian again. The girl's expression was very natural and she did not appear too awkward standing among the three men.

Evan Doughty also completed the necessary etiquette. After comforting Wood, he was not in a hurry to leave but instead went to have a private exchange with Woot. Presumably, they were discussing Wood's retirement. With Sophia's departure, the last person able to control Wood was gone. He obviously wanted to get back to the same issue again. Evan Doughty looked concerned. He was not grieving over Sophia's death but was worried about the future of his team.

After Shania had dropped the flowers in her hand, she walked up to Wood. She had traces of tears on her face as she had just cried. Of those people who came to the funeral, except for Wood and Twain, perhaps she had the closest relationship with Sophia. Although she was somewhat aware that Sophia once loved Twain, it was a thing of the past. She was genuinely saddened by Sophia's death and worried about how Wood was going to cope with his life in the future – she knew what kind of person Wood was.

Wood was older than she was by a few years, and she always saw him as her good friend.

Walking up to Wood, Shania did not just say a few meaningless words of "my deepest condolences to you" like everyone else. She hugged Wood and sobbed as she whispered in his ear. Wood kept his lips tightly pursed, trying to control his emotions, but his eyes gradually reddened as Shania whispered.

The hug was a long one. When Shania bowed her head and let go of Wood, it was Twain's turn.

Since his own wife had embraced Wood, there was no need for Twain to hug him. He stood in front of Wood, awkwardly noticing his reddened eyes, and attempted to say something.

"Hey, George..."

Unexpectedly, Wood interrupted his words and asked instead with a hoarse voice, "Are you going to comfort me?"

Twain felt somewhat uncomfortable, knowing George had seen him through. He touched his nose and did not know how to go on.

"I've heard too many comforting words these few days. If you really want to help me, then take some action for my good."

Take some action? Should he hug him like Shania did? Twain thought.

"I've already lost my mother. I don't want to lose you too!" Wood's voice choked with emotion. It was rare for him to lose self-control in front of everyone. However, the content of his words was even more surprising. "Once the funeral is over, you're going back to America, right?"

Twain really did not expect Wood to say such things in this kind of situation. He looked at the three people behind Wood. Aaron Mitchell and Gareth Bale obviously did not imagine Wood would say these words. However, looking at their faces, he realized they were very interested in Wood's words because

they knew what that meant. Miss Vivian Miller was curious about the relationship between Twain and Wood too.

“You should start a new life of your own, George...”

Twain could only say that to avoid Wood’s question.

Wood did not want to say too much either. He shut his mouth and stopped talking.

Twain sensed that the atmosphere was a little awkward, and he could not say anything. He just patted Wood on the shoulder and turned to walk away.

A man at the back came up and said to Wood a low voice, “My deepest condolences to you...”

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Twain asked Shania to take their daughter to the car first. He wanted one last moment with Sophia. Walking to the tombstone, he gazed at the words inscribed on it: “My true love.” People who were unaware might think it was George Wood’s wife who was laid to rest here...

Ah, Sophia, I really don’t know how to face your son. Can you help me out a little? So Twain thought.

The fine drizzle struck Twain’s umbrella and made a light drumming sound. The image of Sophia on the gravestone smiled and just looked at him.

Twain was silent when suddenly, he felt a person standing next to him. He looked down at the tips of the person’s shoes, which had some mud and grass bits stuck to it.

“I’m sorry. I did not mean to disturb you, Tony.” It was Evan Doughty’s voice.

“What’s the matter?” Actually, Twain could guess what it was about.

“I heard Mr. Woos say that if you come back, George won’t mention the matter of his retirement again. Is that right?”

Twain turned to look at Evan, who was standing next to him. The other man was looking at him intently, anticipating an answer.

“Yes, that was George’s suggestion.” Twain did not lie. It would not feel good to lie in front of Sophia.

“Can I extend the invitation to you again, Tony? Please come back to coach Nottingham Forest. If you’re still angry about the things I did to you four years ago, I’d like to sincerely apologize to you. I will agree to all your demands, as long as you return.”

Twain snorted. “So that you can sell the team at a good price?”

Evan shook his head and said, “I’ve decided not to sell the club.”

“Was this prompted by a sudden impulse?”

“No, I thought about it for a long time after I came to you that day. I can’t be the chairman of the club all my life. I’m turning sixty this year, Tony. You always say you’re an old man, but I’m ten years older than you. My eldest son is an avid football fan. He’s not like me. He has loved football since he was young and

has always been interested in running a football club. When I just wanted to sell the Forest team for a good price, I never thought about him. I plan to leave the club for him to manage. He loves football and maybe he can do better than I. Not right away, of course. I want to stay a few more years and at least make up for the years I've wasted. Then I'll retire with peace of mind. When the time comes, we can retire together. How about it?"

Twain looked into Evan's eyes. Evan did not flinch, letting Twain look straight at him.

"I don't want to lie in front of this remarkable mother. Tony, I'm tired of the topics unrelated to football at the chairman's podium. I'm tired of people who just want to take advantage of me and leave. I'm tired of losing one game after another and I'm tired of the banners that hang in the stands, attacking me... When you were around, those things never happened. To be honest, I'm weary of these past four years. I implore you again, come back to coach Nottingham Forest. I can't really get the team back on track on my own."

The club chairman spoke humbly and bared his feelings in front of Twain. He no longer had the bossy and domineering demeanor he had when he broke off relations with Twain. In the pitter-patter of the drizzle, Evan Doughty, whose pant legs and shoes had been drenched by the rain, became pathetic and downhearted in front of him.

He noticed that on this day, Allan Adams was no longer by Evan Doughty's side. It seemed that the friendship between the two of them was over.

"Let me think about it. It is no small matter," Twain began to speak.

When Evan heard such an answer, his face betrayed a look of surprise. Twain had outright turned him down twice before.

"Don't get too excited yet, Evan. If my wife doesn't agree, I won't go against her wishes."

"Yes, I understand." Evan hurriedly nodded for fear of making Twain unhappy.

Looking at the club chairman, who was no longer so impressive, Twain shook his head and turned to walk away.

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After getting into the car, Twain did not start the engine immediately. He turned his head around and looked back at his daughter, Theresa, who was wearing a seat belt in the back seat, and again at Shania, who sat in the front passenger seat.

"You must be very tired when I'm not in L.A., having to work and take care of Theresa."

"It's okay. Theresa is very sensible. If I'm busy, she'll play by herself. I took her to the film set and runway shows. She was very curious about everything there."

Shania also looked back at the well-behaved Theresa.

"What did Evan Doughty talk to you about?" Shania, sitting in the car, also noticed Twain and Evan talking in front of the gravestone just now.

“He wants me to go back and coach Nottingham Forest again.” As Twain spoke, he also looked out for any change in his wife’s expression.

“Did you refuse?” Nothing could be discerned from Shania’s beautiful face.

“No... But I did not say yes either,” Twain admitted.

The corners of Shania’s lips suddenly curled upwards. Her smile had a teasing quality to it, which Twain was most familiar with. “I remember what George said to you just now,” she said. “There are so many people who want you to return.”

Hearing her somewhat jealous tone, Twain hurriedly said, “If you do not agree, I will turn them down. Then we’ll go back to America.”

“In that case, Sophia would be sad, wouldn’t she? Didn’t she entrust you with Wood?”

As her husband, Twain told his wife everything that happened during his time with Sophia. Therefore, Shania was aware of what Sophia said to Twain the last time.

Twain hesitated and said, “But I don’t want to upset you...”

Shania yawned and said, “I’m suddenly tired of Grandpa Tony who has nothing to do but take care of his kid at home. If you want to, just say yes. We’re going home now. I’ve got to get some sleep. I haven’t adjusted to the jet lag since flying back from America.”

Instead of obediently starting the car, Twain turned back and said to Theresa, “Theresa, will you close your eyes?”

Theresa was not sure why, but she closed her eyes obediently.

Shania was equally confused. Then Twain suddenly pulled her into an embrace and gave her a deep kiss.

“Wow – oh...”

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Even when Bale and Mitchell said goodbye to Wood, Vivian remained standing behind him.

“Aren’t you heading back, Miss Miller?”

“I’m a little worried about you, Mr. Wood...” Vivian said softly. “You’re not in a good state of mind...”

“We’re not in the hospital,” Wood said unceremoniously. He was a little impatient. The nurse was right, however. He really was not in a good state of mind.

“This is not about work. I can sense that you’ve been struggling emotionally these days, and I’m worried about you...”

“I’m not a child anymore!” Wood roared.

“Even though you are older than me, Mr. Wood, you are completely immature in my eyes. You’re a child who has not grown up!” Vivian also raised her voice a little bit and retorted, undeterred.

Wood turned to look at the young woman, who tilted her chin and glared at him. It was like when he was going to break in at the door of the ward that day, and she had refused to back down.

“You need a rest, Mr. Wood!” Vivian did not budge at all.

“I did not ask you to be my nurse.”

“I speak just out of... concern as a friend.”

“Are we friends?” Wood asked in return.

“I think so,” Vivian stood straighter and spoke with courage.

In the face of the nurse who had diligently cared for his mother, no matter how difficult it was, how tired she had been and how many sleepless nights she endured without a word of complaint, George Wood was really unable to speak viciously or make a move to drive her away. He knew how to be grateful. Otherwise, he would not have followed Twain all this time.

Helplessly, Wood just sighed and turned around to stand in place, looking at his mother’s picture on the gravestone. He did not speak further.

Behind him, Vivian was equally stubborn and stood with him. The two were engaged in a wordless battle of endurance and determination.

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“Want to know what I said in George’s ear when I hugged him?” said Shania, who leaned against the front passenger’s seat in the car on their way home.

“What did you say?” Twain was really interested because she had actually made Wood’s eyes redden with a few words. Twain himself did not have that kind of power.

“I just sang a few phrases of a song and said a few words,” Shania hummed gently.

“Hey, George, don’t make it bad... And anytime you feel the pain. Hey, George, refrain. Don’t carry the world upon your shoulders. For well you know that it’s a fool who plays it cool. Life will always have its downs... Hey, George, don’t make me sad. If you find someone you love, now go and love her... Hey, George, time really flies, don’t delay any longer. Don’t always expect to rely on others, you know? You can do it... do it your own way... Hey, George, don’t be so sad. Take a sad song and make it better. Remember to love her forever and start a new life... To be better, to be happier...”

It was Beatles’ “Hey Jude”, where Shania replaced “Jude” with “George”. The meaning it conveyed was, in her eyes, a perfect fit for the occasion.

After she finished humming, Shania gently swept aside a strand of hair that covered her forehead. “Then I said to him, ‘This is what your mother would want you to hear, and she wants your future to be better and happier. Don’t let her down, George.’”

Chapter 994: He Is Back

Twain flipped through his phone book at home. There were very few numbers written in it because he did not have many friends. He did, however, have many foes who wanted him dead.

He has yet to give Evan Doughty a reply, but that was something he could do later. After all, it was not like Evan Doughty could ever refuse his return to the club.

There were other things he needed to do before that. For example, he needed to find an assistant he could work with. Twain has always worked with a talented assistant for the past 15 years of his managerial career, and it has become a norm for him. A good assistant could save him a lot of time and energy. Twain was never the kind of manager who would do everything by himself. There were numerous times when he would step back from the players' training, and this is where his assistant would come in.

Des Walker won the World Cup with Twain during his stint as his assistant manager in the England national football team. As a result, his net worth as a manager skyrocketed. Walker also chose to leave the England team after Twain left, but unlike Twain, he did not retire. Instead, he was appointed as the manager of Leeds United, who were intent on making their way back to the top.

Dunn was still working as the manager of Notts County. His team has made remarkable progress as a whole after playing in the Championship for two seasons. They barely survived relegation in their first season, but they were now one of the top 10 teams in their second season. However, Twain could not possibly get Dunn as his assistant manager once again. It would be a waste of talent.

Twain focused his attention on the name 'David Kerslake'.

Kerslake has not been able to achieve any notable results after he left Forest. He was appointed as the manager of Bolton Wanderers for half a season before being sacked due to poor results. Thereafter, he worked for numerous Championship teams and even coached a team overseas. However, he was never able to replicate the results that he achieved at Forest. Not every manager would be able to achieve the results that he had at his previous club after switching to a different one. Adaptability was an important skill for football managers. Evidently, Kerslake was not as good as Des Walker and Dunn when it came to adapting to a different environment and team.

According to Twain's knowledge, Kerslake would be unemployed and spending most of his time at home now. Twain remembered the wonderful days when the two of them worked together. It would be a complete waste for someone as talented as Kerslake to be idling about at home. Hence, he dialed Kerslake's number and hoped that the latter has not changed it in the past four years.

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Kerslake felt like he was caught in an awkward situation. He was never able to achieve good results as a manager again, and his most prominent result to date came during his stint as the caretaker manager of Forest. He did not feel happy working as a manager, but he could not bring himself to become an assistant manager either. Kerslake still believed that he would be able to achieve some kind of notable result as a manager someday. All he needed was one good opportunity. Wouldn't it be humiliating if he took on the role of an assistant manager once again? Who would be willing to eat McDonald's and Kentucky when they have gotten used to French cuisine?

Now he spent most of his time idling about at home with his wife and kids. Fortunately for him, he had saved quite a bit of money working as a manager. He also managed to earn quite a hefty amount of prize money by working under Twain. However, his savings have become depleted over the years, and there was not a lot of money left. It was becoming increasingly difficult to support a family of four, and he was considering getting a job once again. A few clubs had offered him work. Three of them wished to appoint him as their manager, but they were all teams in lower division leagues, and their offers were not very attractive. He also received an invitation from a Premier League club to work as an assistant manager. It seemed like most people in the football world knew that he has achieved much better results as an assistant manager than a manager...

Kerslake was not like Twain. He might be 54 years old this year, but he had no thoughts of retirement.

Just as Kerslake was pondering about which club's offer he should accept, he received a call from Twain.

"Great! You didn't change your number, David!" Twain's voice sounded very happy over the phone.

"Tony?" Kerslake was a little surprised – why would Twain call him?

"Are you still in Nottingham? Can I meet you for a cup of coffee or something?" Twain asked.

"Uh, no. I'm in London now."

"You moved?" Twain was a little taken aback.

"Of course. I moved after I left Forest."

"That's not good..." Twain mumbled.

"Why did you call me, Tony?"

"Okay, it's like this." Twain thought about what he should say for a moment. "Are you interested in becoming an assistant manager once again, David?"

"Assistant manager?" Kerslake thought that Twain was acting as a go-between and that he had only called on behalf of someone else. He guessed that Nottingham Forest could be that 'someone else' because he heard that Freddy was struggling at Forest and was in desperate need of an assistant. However, becoming the assistant manager to Freddy was a little..."No, Tony. I don't want to be an assistant manager anymore."

"That's a shame..." Twain was disappointed with Kerslake's response, and he muttered to himself, "Looks like I have to find someone else to be my partner..."

Those last few words from Twain were very soft. It was clear that he was mumbling to himself. Twain must have forgotten to hang up the phone before complaining about the situation.

Kerslake was astonished after hearing what Twain had uttered.

A moment later, he heard Twain say in a disappointed voice, "Really sorry to have bothered you, David. I know you have turned me down, but I still hope we can have a drink together when I head over to London."

Kerslake snapped out of his reverie right as Twain was about to hang up. He frantically shouted, "Wait! Wait, Tony! Wait..."

"Hmm? Is there something else that you want to talk about, David?"

Twain's focus was no longer on Kerslake. He could understand why the latter had rejected his invitation. Kerslake has gotten used to working as a manager, and it would not be easy for him to go back to being an assistant manager now. Take Carlos Queiroz for example. He failed as the manager of Real Madrid, but he would not be willing to become an assistant manager of Manchester United again unless he was working under a legendary manager such as Alex Ferguson. Twain did not bear a grudge against Kerslake for turning him down. After all, men should always strive to achieve greater heights...

Twain was flipping through his phone book at the moment. He hoped to find another suitable candidate to become his assistant manager.

"Who do you want me to work with as the assistant manager?" asked Kerslake. He thought he already knew, but he just wanted to make sure.

"Who else? Me, of course!" Twain replied.

"Didn't you retire? Wait..." Kerslake's mind suddenly snapped into action. "There's a rumor going around that you would take over at Nottingham Forest once more?"

"It's not a rumor anymore, David," Twain laughed.

Kerslake jumped from his chair. "Are you really going to take charge at Nottingham Forest once again?"

"Today's not April Fools', David."

"So you are asking me to be your assistant manager?"

"Yes. You already asked that earlier."

"I'll do it!" Kerslake did not hesitate in giving his response this time around, and his sudden change in attitude surprised Twain.

"Didn't you say you didn't want to be an assistant manager just now, David?"

"I choose who I want to work under. Ha!" Kerslake felt a lot better suddenly. All the worries that he had regarding his future just a while ago were all gone. "I would never refuse to be your assistant manager! You might think I'm exaggerating when I say this, but no other manager is good enough to have me as his assistant manager!"

Twain felt embarrassed after hearing Kerslake's praise, and he rubbed his nose in response. That had to be one of the biggest compliments he had ever gotten in his life...

"When do we start work? Thank goodness that my house in Nottingham has not been sold yet. I can just get it back from my real estate agent..." Kerslake was thrilled at the thought that he was going to work with Twain at Nottingham Forest once again.

However, Twain rained on his parade. "Hey, David. Don't get too fired up just yet. I don't intend to work at Forest for long."

“Huh?”

“As you know, Forest is in a very bad state currently. Freddy lacks experience and prestige as a manager, and he would not be able to lead Forest out of their predicament. Thus, Evan Doughty contacted me, and he hopes that I would be able to lead the team out of this mess. I definitely do not want Forest to become the laughingstock of others, but you know how my health is. I definitely would not be able to stay at the helm for long. I’m only thinking of managing the team till the end of the season...”

“So you’d only manage the team for half a season?” Kerslake was a little surprised.

“Yeah. I’m just there to salvage the situation. I’m not there to create another dynasty or something.”

“Is that so?” Kerslake found it to be a shame. However, what Twain said was true. His health was not what it once was. The fact that he was willing to come out of retirement to salvage the situation showed his deep affection for the club.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m still going to be your assistant manager, and I’ll work till you retire.” Kerslake was determined to work for Twain. The most glorious days of his managerial career were during those ten years when he worked as Twain’s assistant manager. He was content with managing Forest alongside Twain once again, and he was not going to think about anything that would happen in the future for now.

Twain wanted to shout, “What a great friend you are!” after hearing Kerslake’s words, but he decided against it. All he said, in the end, was, “Thank you, David. I don’t have anything to fret about if I have you as my assistant manager.”

“Heh heh. Of course. We work flawlessly together!” Kerslake was in a good mood and began joking with Twain.

Kerslake remained sitting in his chair after ending his phone call with Twain. Memories of the time he spent working with Twain welled up in his mind, and they filled him with anticipation. He could not help but look forward to the remaining half of the season.

Tony is back! I can’t wait to see how our rivals react to that!

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A change in personnel in the Nottingham Forest’s board occurred during the period of time when Twain had yet to give Evan a call to tell him about his decision, and it caught the attention of numerous outsiders.

The club’s marketing manager, Allan Adams, who was also the person responsible for negotiating with the Bin Zayed Group regarding the takeover of Nottingham Forest, turned in his letter of resignation, and his request to resign was approved by the Chairman, Evan Doughty.

That was how the media had reported it, but everyone close to Nottingham Forest knew that Allan Adams had not resigned on his own accord. Evan Doughty had fired him. Doughty’s action surprised many. They did not think that Doughty would fire the very person who has been working on the sale of the club all this while, especially given how Doughty was dead set on selling Nottingham Forest. The Bin

Zayed Group had renewed its interest in purchasing the club two days ago after going quiet for two weeks, but now the man who has been negotiating with them regarding the sale of the club was gone...

Everyone found Evan Doughty's action to be odd. No one knew what was on his mind.

The only person who could know was Twain. Doughty knew that he did not get along with Allan Adams, and he had fired Allan as a way of telling Twain that no one in the club would get in his way when he returned...

It was something like a proof of allegiance from Doughty. However, Twain did not care if Allan was still at Forest or not.

"I'd only be managing Forest till the end of this season, Evan," Twain told Evan Doughty over the phone.

There was silence on the other end. Doughty had clearly not expected Twain to only come out of retirement for such a brief period.

"I've never thought of managing Forest for the rest of my life, just like you've never thought of being the Chairman of Forest for the rest of your life. The reason why I've decided to come back and manage Forest is not because of you, Evan. I just don't want the team that I've managed for so many years to become a laughingstock for others. Did you see the comments in the tabloids regarding Forest? We have become a joke to them." Twain then went on to explain his plan to Doughty, "I'd manage the team for the rest of the season, then I'd help to find a suitable successor for you. After that, I'd retire once again and continue to spend time with my wife and kid at home. What do you think? I think this is a pretty good plan."

How could Doughty possibly say 'I don't think this plan is good'? He was the one who begged Twain to come back, not the other way round. Twain made use of this advantage and listed all his conditions to Doughty. If Doughty accepted his conditions, they would work together for the second time in their lives. If he rejected, then they would part ways. However, Twain was not in the least worried that Doughty would reject his terms...

Just as Twain had expected, Doughty agreed to Twain's stipulations. He figured that there were still six months till the end of the season, and there was a chance that Twain would change his mind in that period of time. Perhaps Twain would regain his passion for managing a football team after returning to the club, and he would then refuse to leave when the time was up! In any case, there was still time for Doughty to think about his next course of action. He was confident that he would be able to persuade Twain to stay at the club after the season ended.

Twain did not care about what was on Doughty's mind. He was an obstinate person just like George Wood. No one would be able to persuade him otherwise once he has made up his mind. He was the only one who could change his own mind.

Now that Twain has decided to return to Forest, the next question would be: when?

Doughty hoped that Twain would return as soon as possible, but Twain was in no hurry because there were still several issues that he needed to settle before that. He has to deal with those issues now that he had time on his hands. He would definitely be too busy to settle them once he became the manager.

It was not a problem to delay Twain's return for a while since Eastwood should still be able to manage the team for a while longer. The results that Forest would achieve before Twain's return did not matter to Evan Doughty. All he cared about was the fact that Twain was coming back.

However, Doughty had a request. He wanted to release news of Twain's return to the public as soon as possible to instill confidence in the fans and the sponsors. Twain did not object to Doughty's request.

The next day, on November 12, the Nottingham Forest's official website changed its homepage design. Every single netizen who frequented the website would find a huge advertisement poster when they landed on the homepage.

The poster's background featured a large photo of Twain, and the following words were written on it:

'That's right, the king has returned!'

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A few hours after the poster was put up on Nottingham Forest's website, the news channels also began reporting the interesting piece of news. "...I have a piece of bad news to share with the managers of the other 19 Premier League teams," the announcer said with a smile that seemed a little teasing to some. "Tony Twain is back!"

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The news of Twain's return to Nottingham Forest sent shock waves throughout the whole of England's footballing scene. However, the man who had set it all off was no longer in England by then. He was on a journey to Spain alone.

Chapter 995: Mr. Xia

"Is it true? Has the boss really decided to come back?"

Before the start of training, the players gathered in groups of three or four to chat while they waited for the manager on the training ground. The topic was naturally the news that had just been announced yesterday – Tony Twain would return to coach Nottingham Forest.

Joe Mattock looked at Bale eagerly, hoping to get confirmation straight from his mouth.

"Isn't it all written clearly on the official website? It was even reported on the news," Bale said with a shrug, but he could not suppress the smile on his face. "This time it's true!"

"Ha! I knew the boss wouldn't stand by and do nothing! Now that the team's results are so poor, who can turn things around? Only Tony Twain!" Mattock danced and gesticulated with joy.

"Shh! Lower your voice!" The defender Nkoulou hurriedly put his index finger to his lips and signaled for them to tone it down. "Don't let Freddy hear it!"

“Don’t worry. I think Freddy will be the happiest, knowing that the boss is coming back,” Mattock said, shaking his head.

As his teammates were discussing this intensely, Mitchell put his hand on Wood’s shoulder and said to him with a smile, “Are you relieved, George? The boss is finally back.”

“There’s little over half a season left,” Wood replied expressionlessly.

“Don’t be too demanding, George. I’m content that he is able to return for however long. Look at the guys! I think even if we meet Manchester United again in the next game, we can win, even if it is an away game.”

While many people were happy with Twain’s return, some people took exception to it, like the Italian player, Balotelli. Now he could not be bothered to focus his attention on the return of a former manager. His agent told him that a transfer in the winter was not a good move. If he could put it off until the summer, he would be able to fight for more in terms of the package. Now Balotelli’s mind was full of thoughts on the transfer away from the Forest team. He did not care what the team’s next results would be. He was already 28 years old and did not have enough prime years to spend on such a team.

With the news of Twain’s imminent return announced, the team was clearly divided into two factions. One of which was naturally Twain’s original players, waiting with joy for his return. The other group was those players who had nothing to do with Twain. They had come to the Forest team one by one in the last few seasons. They did not know how the new manager would treat them. Would they still be able to guarantee their current main positions and continue as the main players in the future? Would the fate of the formerly fringe players in the team change? These questions lingered in their minds and caused them to feel ill at ease. Some people even informed their agents in advance that if the new manager did not cooperate with them, they should leave without delay.

Before Twain had officially become the Forest team’s manager, there was already an undercurrent of turbulence within the team. Without knowing all these things, had Twain, who was far away in Spain, considered it?

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The sun shone much brighter in Spain than in Britain. The damp salty sea breeze felt soothing on the face as it blew. Twain sat in an open-air cafe with a cup of coffee in front of him. A view of the beach stretched into the horizon. Although today was not a weekend or a holiday, plenty of visitors could still be seen on the beach. The wind made the waves roll, and the crashing sounds drowned out the playful beach activities.

However, he was not in a relaxed frame of mind that would allow him to play in the water. He was not here in Barcelona, Spain, on vacation this time. At present, he was waiting for someone.

The terms ‘flush with success’ and ‘smug’ were just about right to describe the football agent, Xia Yang, of today. Four years ago, he was just a moderately well-known agent in China, making a living by introducing young players to Eastern European and South American clubs. He might seem to know the European clubs very well as portrayed in the Chinese media, but in fact, those relationships were only obtained through his groveling and shameless pestering. The big shot agents could directly make calls to the clubs’ managers and chairmen. Whereas he had to make an appointment in advance to meet with

an Eerste Divisie team's manager to see if the other party had the time, or whether they were in the mood ... If he had not been thick-skinned, he could hardly make it in this line of work.

However, things were different now. Although he was not a big shot like Mendes in Europe, he did not need to beg, borrow, and steal to promote his own players either. He would receive many calls from European clubs every year, hoping that he could recommend cheap and good quality East Asian players, or help pull strings and establish connections to build cooperation with China. He had also become a well-known top-notch agent. He no longer limited his scope to introducing young Chinese players to the moneyless Eastern Europe and South America clubs. He even started a sports industry development company, introducing some foreign clubs interested in the Chinese market to play commercial games in China, from which he took a cut and made a lot of money.

All these changes should be credited to the young man he took an interest in at the time.

When Chen Jian was recalled to England for the second time by the Forest team and given a place in the youth team, there was no media coverage of the matter in China. However, Xia Yang used the channels he had from his long-term connections in European football to hear about the news. The professional agent's keen perception made him think that this might be an opportunity – in fact, he was not interested in Chen Jian's future at the time, but in establishing a relationship with Europe's then most powerful club, Nottingham Forest, through Chen Jian. Long-term cooperation in the future would not be an extravagant hope. It was like Mendes gave Pepe to Twain for cheap.

During Chen Jian's years at the Forest team, his relationship with the team did not progress as well as he had imagined. Although the Chinese media hype made him a little famous due to his connection with Chen Jian and the Forest team, Chen Jian's prospects and his own aspirations all came to nothing when Tony Twain spectacularly announced his resignation after winning the Treble. Without a choice, he accepted Chen Jian's suggestion and did not talk to Nottingham Forest about renewing his contract. Instead, he let the Forest team put him on loan once again, while they slowly looked for the right team to take over. As the player under him and, moreover, the player who once brought him some fame, Xia Yang had really hoped that Chen Jian could have a good team to belong to. In the end, the Forest team found him a team in Eredivisie and loaned him out again.

No one thought that Chen Jian, whom no one was optimistic about, would actually forge a path in Eredivisie. At the end of the first season, Xia Yang received numerous transfer offers from clubs in different national leagues. This included a fax from RCD Espanyol in Spain's La Liga.

Through making contacts and communication, Xia Yang was even more surprised to find that RCD Espanyol's intention to buy Chen Jian was definitely not a whim. When Chen Jian was still playing for FC Volendam, their football scouts had already noticed him. After watching him for three seasons, they finally decided to make a move. At that time, Chen Jian contract with Nottingham Forest had also expired. The Forest team did not intend to continue to provide a contract for the worthless Chinese player. If they were to transfer Chen Jian at this time, they would not have to spend a single cent on the transfer fee, which was a very attractive condition. Xia Yang also took the opportunity to play up the cheap deal and said that Chen Jian was a "bargain" and an investment with lots of upsides and absolutely no risk.

At that time, the Eredivisie team, which had loaned Chen Jian, also wanted to sign him. However, after Xia Yang and Chen Jian discussed this, they felt it was time to go to a bigger stage. In this way, Chen Jian joined RCD Espanyol, which ranked mid-stream in La Liga then.

García González, RCD Espanyol's football director at the time, described Chen Jian as "a younger George Wood." He believed that Chen Jian's dogged fighting spirit and clear-mindedness shown in the midfield were exactly what the team needed.

For a Chinese player to make his mark in European football, it was far from enough to rely on his own strength. He also needed luck and opportunities. Chen Jian had pretty good chances. Nottingham Forest was first interested in him and then the RCD Espanyol football director thought highly of him. Without those opportunities, even if he had the ability, perhaps he would have continued to play in the lower-level leagues.

Chen Jian has gradually shown his ability in RCD Espanyol after going through about half a season of adaptation. He managed the defense and offense in the midfield in a smooth and orderly manner. He gradually established himself in the main starting position in the La Liga team.

For a Chinese player, to be able to play in a team in one of the four big leagues was a remarkable achievement. Even those players who only occasionally played as substitutes in the lower level leagues would receive lengthy coverage and sustained interest from the Chinese media. This was doubly so for Chen Jian, who was trusted and liked by his teammates, coaches, and fans based on his own strength, rather than playing in a mid-stream team in La Liga sponsored by Chinese companies.

In fact, the Chinese fans were very self-aware. They did not expect Chen Jian to become a world-class star player. It was enough as long as he could secure a main position in a team.

During the weekly broadcast of La Liga games, RCD Espanyol received more attention than the traditional La Liga powerhouse teams such as Barcelona and Real Madrid.

Although he initially wanted to start his professional football career at Nottingham Forest, Chen Jian did not expect to fulfill his dream with RCD Espanyol in the end.

Now, his five-year contract would expire in a season and a half. However, Xia Yang was in no hurry to negotiate another contract with RCD Espanyol.

These four seasons had not only enhanced Chen Jian's reputation and strength but also expanded Xia Yang's horizons. In any case, RCD Espanyol could not even guarantee to participate in the UEFA Europa League (formerly the UEFA Cup) every season. Xia Yang currently deemed the team's level to be not high enough. Chen Jian was 28 years old this year, which was the golden age of a professional footballer. He did not want his ace player to spend his last playing years in such a team. If there were better options, why should he not leave?

Therefore, starting a season ago, Xia Yang has asked for sky-high prices in the negotiations with RCD Espanyol. He not only asked for Chen Jian to get the highest level of wages in the team but also demanded a huge signing fee. RCD Espanyol was only a small team and could not meet Xia Yang's demands, so the two sides were in a deadlock. It dragged on until this summer and still remained unresolved. RCD Espanyol now seemed to have figured out that the Chinese player obviously wanted to play in a higher-level team. Originally, selling players that other clubs were interested in to make money

was the way for clubs like RCD Espanyol to survive. Even though Chen Jian was the core of the team's midfield, if there was a club that could offer the right price, he was definitely not an indispensable player.

RCD Espanyol simply did not continue the negotiations with Xia Yang about renewing the contract. They just waited for other clubs to make an offer. Of course, outwardly, they were still going to announce that "we're trying our best to keep Chen", "Chen Jian certainly wants to stay with RCD Espanyol, but he needs a contract that corresponds with his contributions" and so on...

Xia Yang was not worried about wasting efforts and having all his hopes and plans come to nothing. Chen Jian's performance in RCD Espanyol's three seasons spoke for itself. Many European teams had privately contacted him before, so he was aware that Chen Jian still had a lot of potential to unearth.

Seeing that the winter transfer window was about to open, he had recently received calls from several clubs. Among them were teams from the Premier League, but also from Serie A. Of course, most were from La Liga teams. After all, they had to play against RCD Espanyol twice a season and were most familiar with Chen Jian's level. Now Xia Yang simply looked down on those low-level league teams, expressing interest. He basically would not consider any teams other than those in the three major leagues. Even if they were France Ligue 1 and Bundesliga teams, he was not interested.

Just as Xia Yang was waiting for a good offer on Chen Jian, he and Chen Jian received a phone call from a long-lost person.

The call was made to Chen Jian, and when he heard the greeting in Mandarin spoken with a British country accent on the phone, Chen Jian immediately knew who the caller was.

Tony Twain called him as the Nottingham Forest manager and Chen Jian suddenly recalled the four years that had lain dormant in his mind. With the departure of Twain, he had originally thought that he would never have a chance to cross paths with that red team again in his life. Unexpectedly, fate declared otherwise. Tony Twain was actually back in his old position!

Hence, the meeting between Xia Yang and Twain took place...

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"I'm really sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Twain. There was a traffic jam on the road..." Xia Yang, dressed in an Armani casual suit, shrugged apologetically in front of Twain. In fact, he was deliberately late. There was no traffic jam. Today was not the weekend and the appointed time was not during rush hour. He drove on the highway like a snail, just so that he would be late to let Twain wait. In the beginning, it was tough for him to get to meet with this man, as the other party simply did not care for him. He had to grovel for it to happen. Now things were not the same. I'm not the one begging you now, he thought. You have come to beg me, Mr. Twain! How can I get back my lost self-respect without putting on some airs? I'm sure you won't mind, will you?

Sure enough, Twain just smiled and shook his head as he said, "It doesn't matter. The scenery here is beautiful. I was enjoying it."

"I haven't seen you for so many years. I did not expect Mr. Twain to still speak Mandarin so fluently, ha!" Xia Yang's tone made people think that he and Twain must be old friends. Xia Yang deliberately

affected it. In any case, Twain was also a well-known European manager who just led the England team to win the grand slam of the national teams. If he were friends with him, would his status not be elevated as well?

Twain did not mind the Chinese agent's deliberate friendliness.

"Let's get straight to the point, Mr. Xia. How did Chen Jian react to the Forest team's invitation?" Twain directly asked.

"Well..." When it came to the main topic, Xia Yang hesitated. "You know, Mr. Twain. Chen Jian is currently happy with RCD Espanyol. He's the core player and has a good relationship with his teammates and coaches. The fans also adore him and want him to continue playing for RCD Espanyol... You know, just this summer, we even turned down Kaiserslautern's invitation..."

Twain sneered in his heart. Who did not know that Xia Yang wanted Chen Jian to leave RCD Espanyol, which did not have much of a future? What was the reason that caused the renewal negotiations not to go well? Wasn't it due to the man in front of him asking for a sky-high price? RCD Espanyol simply could not satisfy the conditions put forth by him. He basically did not want to let Chen Jian stay here. However, he still said, "Chen Jian is currently happy with RCD Espanyol" ... This kind of bullsh*t could fool maybe a three-year-old child, but not Tony Twain.

"Kaiserslautern is only a team that had just returned to the Bundesliga last season and could barely manage to keep its place. It's understandable that you are not interested in them," Twain mocked Xia Yang without batting an eyelid to remind him that he was not an idiot and would not be imposed on.

How could Xia Yang not understand the meaning behind Twain's words? He felt a little embarrassed at the moment, but fortunately, he was thick-skinned, and a smile immediately showed on his face. "Of course, of course. As Chen Jian's agent, I also hope he can have a better stage... He's only 28 years old, it is time to accomplish great things... I want him to go to a team that can steadily play in European tournaments every year, whether it's the UEFA Champions League, the Europa League or whatever... Chen Jian himself also feels this way."

The agent became well versed through years of struggle and hardships. If Twain mocked him, he would mock Nottingham Forest's current situation, for they might not even be able to play in next season's Europa League...

Twain re-examined the agent in front of him. His manners had undergone a huge transformation as compared to four years ago. The most important thing was that he was more confident. He found that Mr. Xia was more difficult to deal with than formerly... The agent of four years ago would simply have no courage to speak in front of him. Now he stood his ground.

Nottingham Forest was currently in the 16th spot in the league tournament, one step away from the relegation zone. It would indeed be difficult for them to participate in any European tournament next season.

Obviously, the agent had thrown out one of the conditions that were most attractive to them – to qualify for next season's European championships. If you want Chen Jian to join Nottingham Forest, then you have to lead the team back to Europe, Mr. Twain!

Chapter 996: I'm Going to the Forest

"... You should know that now he is only 28 years old, which is a very promising age... I hope he can join a team that allows him to participate in UEFA matches continuously every year, whether it is the Champions League or the Europa League... Chen Jian himself also thinks like this."

Xia Yang, as Chen Jian's agent, told Dunn a message through these words: If he wants Chen Jian transferred to the Nottingham Forest F.C., please get the qualification to participate in European matches.

What he had in his mind was to let Chen Jian transfer and leave in summer, as then they would have ample time and there would be more teams on the transfer market which were interested in Chen Jian. It would give him more leeway in seeking the best interests for both himself and Chen Jian.

Certainly, he didn't know the fact that Dunn would only serve Nottingham Forest F.C. for a half-season. After the end of this season, he would leave the position as the team's manager. It would be useless to introduce Chen Jian then. New talents and fresh blood were now needed for this team. Chen Jian was an eligible and reliable midfielder who could partner with Wood, and he was also a utility player in the midfield and backfield. He could handle different situations, and such a player was rare.

Dunn would not wait until the summer transfer window to talk to the RCD Espanyol about Chen Jian's transfer. He wanted to get Chen Jian in this winter.

"I want to see Chen Jian wearing the red jersey of Nottingham Forest F.C. this season, Mr. Xia."

"This season?" Xia Yang was greatly surprised. He really didn't expect it, and then he began to think... Since Nottingham Forest F.C. is in such a hurry, can I take the opportunity to fleece it? For example, playing for time, forcing the club to pay a higher commission...

It seemed that Dunn had seen through Xia Yang's wishful thinking at this time. "Cut to the chase, Mr. Xia. Chen Jian is the player I need. If you can assist me in putting pressure on the RCD Espanyol and cut the transfer fee, I will be willing to give you the money from the cut as your commission. "

Dunn didn't mind letting the agent earn some more. After all, he wasn't the one who paid for Chen Jian's purchase or the commission. Wouldn't it be a pleasure for him to be generous and give a present for which he didn't pay?

Xia Yang did not expect Dunn to speak out his mind and met his eye with a little smile of embarrassment.

Since the other party had made such a big promise, what else could he haggle over? Naturally, he meant to agree. However, Xia Yang was very cunning. It wasn't like he would accept immediately. Who could know whether there would be a bigger fish than Nottingham Forest F.C. in the future?

He only said was that he could never make a decision as important as this alone, and he still needed to go back to ask about Chen Jian's opinion and discuss it with him before he could reply to Dunn.

It was fair enough, and Dunn had no objections.

“I’ll stay in this place for a few days more, Mr. Xia Yang. I hope we can talk again before I leave Spain.”

Dunn shook hands with Xia Yang to bid farewell before leaving and reminded Xia Yang that he shouldn’t play for time.

Xia Yang, after getting into the car, looked down at his right hand, which Dunn had just shaken. Like before, that old man was a bit haughty, but anyhow he got the chance to shake hands with him. The famous world-class would actually one day come to beg at his door! Ah-ha-ha! Xia Yang, Xia Yang, you are someone now! Hmm... Should I be on my high horse and play for time? So the agent thought.

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While Xia Yang was scheming against Dunn in an outdoor cafe at the seaside, Chen Jian was in the training camp of RCD Espanyol. In order to prepare for the Barcelona Derby in the next round, the team had put all other matters aside.

For a team like RCD Espanyol, winning the championships of La Liga and the Copa del Rey was basically hopeless. The goal of this team was to go on a rampage at the very beginning of a season. If it was in good shape and got lucky, they would start to yearn for UEFA matches. However, no matter which season and regardless of their strengths and luck, one thing would not change: the hatred of Barcelona, their enemy from the same city.

As long as they were still in La Liga, the two most important matches of each season must be the Barcelona Derby.

Chen Jian had served this team for more than three seasons and spent three years in this city. He had gotten used to this derby atmosphere long ago. He was sort of expecting such games. Playing in RCD Espanyol, honestly speaking, gave him very few chances to participate in high-level games, so the Barcelona Derby of twice a year was regarded as a Champions League Final.

Chen Jian didn’t hate Barcelona, but as a player of RCD Espanyol, he was obliged to dislike the Barcelona team when facing it. Thanks to his fierce action against Messi during the derby, which put the latter on the ground, and the following tit-for-tat against Dani Alves who took up the cudgels for Messi, he won the fondness of RCD Espanyol fans. He and Alves locked horns like bulls and kept on trash-talking, which almost resulted in a fight. That was when the RCD Espanyol fans really accepted him.

Actually, Chen Jian was not that violent, but in such a frenetic air, this brutal act was understandable, as the professional player stepped aside and a man’s passion inside was ignited...

Chen Jian was the lead in the training ground today, for some of the Chinese media was shooting from the sideline. It was a production unit from China Central Television, a team dedicated to producing a feature of Chen Jian in the derby. The club gave the green light, allowing them to take some pictures of the training from the sideline. It was a golden opportunity for this club to promote itself and project a powerful image to distant Chinese fans. How could they reject it?

Other players were allowed to go to the locker room to take a shower and change clothes, but not Chen Jian. He had to accept a few interviews from the Chinese media on the sideline to talk about his training for the Barcelona Derby this weekend.

Meanwhile, many fans came to him for autographs.

Off interviewing, the TV reporter joked with him: “Good for you, you have many fans.”

A reserved smile appeared on his face, and he continued to give out his autographs to RCD Espanyol fans. He carefully signed the Chinese characters of “Chen Jian” on star player posters and postcards of him and handed them to fans. Some of the fans wanted to take pictures with him after they got the autographs, and he agreed in every instance.

It looked like he was a sort of a celebrity now.

Such a scene could never be fathomable when he just joined the Youth Team of Nottingham Forest F.C.

Chen Jian went back to the locker room after the interview, but almost all his teammates were gone. He took a shower, changed his clothes, and then headed for the parking lot, where his white Audi was waiting for him.

Today he lived in an independent condo and had a prestigious car, which was totally different from when he was in the low division league.

Who gave all this to him?

Was it the agent, Mr. Xia Yang?

Upon this thought, the cellphone in the pocket rang with an incoming call from his agent.

“Chen Jian, have you done with training?” Xia Yang asked.

“Yes, it’s over, Uncle Xia.”

“Have those journalists left too?”

“They have.”

“Well... I’ve met Dunn. We can’t discuss it on the phone, we should talk about it when we meet. ”

“OK, I’ll go home and wait for you.”

After they hung up, Chen Jian got into the car and fastened his seat belt to get ready to leave.

He skillfully backed his car out of the parking lot with the wheel in his hands, then headed to the gate of training camp. Back to the question again: Who brought all this to him?

In Chen Jian’s mind, it was the English man whom he had known for a long time.

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“... That’s exactly what it is.” Mr. Xia repeated every detail of what he had talked about with Dunn during their meeting to Chen Jian. After he finished, he expressed his own idea: “It’s so weird. He was the one who totally ignored you at the beginning and didn’t give you any chances when you were at Nottingham Forest F.C., but now he wants you back. Now Nottingham Forest F.C. is having bad days, and it may not even avoid relegation. Hear me, Chen Jian. If I were you, I would stay in RCD Espanyol rather than go to Nottingham Forest F.C. At least you don’t have to worry about the possibility of playing for Segunda División next season.”

After Chen Jian heard Xia Yang's words, he was silent for a while, and then he said, "It wasn't that he didn't give me chances; I just couldn't accept his conditions..."

He was referring to how Dunn asked him to renounce his Chinese nationality and apply for British citizenship so that he could represent Nottingham Forest F.C. Of course, he couldn't agree to that request. He never considered giving up being Chinese for playing football.

Chen Jian still remembered the call from Dunn at the airport, in which the man told him: since you want to be a professional player, why bother worrying about where you play?

This sentence changed his future. That was why Chen Jian, the No.10 in RCD Espanyol now, was doing very well.

"He wants to get you this winter transfer window, but I don't think it's the right time. The schedule is too tight and I can't get you more advantages from it. Moreover, the future of Nottingham Forest F.C. is still much of an uncertainty. I suggest you wait until this season ends, then make your decision based on the performance of Nottingham Forest. In addition, more clubs will be interested in you at that time..."

However, Chen Jian shook his head.

Xia Yang knew he had made his decision then.

"Uncle Xia, after the call from Mr. Dunn, I actually made up my mind..." He looked at the agent in front of him. "I'm going to Nottingham Forest F.C., and going this winter."

"You're out of your mind!" Xia Yang jumped off the sofa.

"I'm not out of my mind."

"If it were 4-5 years ago, I'd try my very best to join Nottingham Forest F.C. Now things are different. The world has changed drastically! Nottingham Forest F.C. is actually worse off than RCD Espanyol! You are 28 years old, Chen Jian. It won't be very long before you are past your prime years as a professional player. I hope you can take this opportunity to join a better team, to get a better stage and better performance. Basically, this is your last chance. When you're over 30, it will be difficult for you to find favor in the eyes of the major teams!"

Xia Yang got more and more emotional as he continued to speak. He stood in front of Chen Jian, bent slightly, and made threatening gestures toward Chen Jian with saliva spraying all over. How could he avoid getting emotional like this? It wasn't easy for him to gain some chips for bargaining with other European clubs, chips that came from Chen Jian's rising fame. How could he let Dunn steal the fruits of his labor so easily?

No! Absolutely not!

When the agitated Xia Yang finished speaking, Chen Jian said in a very calm tone: "I won't go to any club except Nottingham Forest, Uncle Xia."

Xia Yang felt discouraged. He said all the right words, yet the boy didn't hear any of them!

He stared at Chen Jian for a while, and Chen Jian looked at him as well.

Then, Xia Yang sat down on the sofa again and asked, "Why?"

"Remember my first aspiration, Uncle Xia?" Chen Jian asked in reply without answering directly.

Xia Yang kept silent for a while, pondering this question. Then he recollected it. "To actually play professional football. You have achieved it already."

"Yeah, I did. But," Chen Jian laughed, "The full edition should be playing real professional football in Nottingham Forest F.C."

"Damn it..." Xia Yang clutched his head. "Any other hidden agendas?"

"None." Chen Jian shrugged. "I am going to realize my aspiration. Go back to Nottingham Forest F.C. to play."

"I don't understand." As an agent, Xia Yang could not understand why Chen Jian made such a decision.

"Because Nottingham Forest F.C. gave me the chance to come to Europe."

"So this is gratitude?"

"No, it's affection... I have a sense of belonging, belonging to Nottingham Forest F.C. Anyway, I was trained in Nottingham Forest Youth Training Camp, Uncle Xia." Chen Jian slightly raised his head and looked at the ceiling, lapsing into memories.

Those years in the Nottingham Forest Youth Training Camp; Manager Tang's care and the strict requirements from Manager Greenwood; Manager Tony Twain, who was seemingly cold but personally approached him to ask if he wanted to bet his future on Nottingham Forest F.C.

Nottingham Forest was not simply another European team for him.

"Uncle Xia, do you know which team I support when I am just a fan?"

"Nottingham Forest?" Xia Yang joked even though he knew it wasn't the answer.

"No, Barcelona."

"Huh!" Xia Yang couldn't resist laughing. He thought of the derby that would be held on this weekend and Chen Jian's dazzling performance in the previous one...

"But my love for Barcelona is pure admiration. It's different from my affection for Nottingham Forest. I want to play for it, I want to be part of the team. I got this in my mind when I was just the 3rd pick of the business draft for the trial training."

Xia Yang pouted, indifferent to such feelings of Chen Jian. A professional player's affection? Fewer and fewer people believed it nowadays.

"And one more reason, Uncle Xia."

"What?"

"There used to be an ambition that I didn't realize, but now I've got the chance to. I want to play soccer under Manager Twain or Manager Dunn."

Tony Twain!

Xia Yang thought of that man.

“Are you sure? I think the reason why you want to play soccer under him is that at present there is a certain distance between you and him, and distance increases desirability. Once you become his player, things may no longer seem so attractive.”

Chen Jian smiled without saying anything.

“I think you should think twice, Chen Jian...” Xia Yang was still trying.

“No need for that, Uncle Xia.” Chen Jian smiled and added, “Derby will start this weekend, and I don’t have the energy to think about it. So now I make the decision to transfer to Nottingham Forest in the winter fallow. I should talk to the club.”

Xia Yang was unhappy, among other reasons because he felt a little bit jealous. He had been with Chen Jian for many years and could be deemed as his most intimate confidante other than his parents. He didn’t expect that he was much less important than Tony Twain in Chen Jian’s mind, even though the latter had only seen Twain a few times.

However, what could he do? If the agent met a feeble player without his own views, he could control the player very tightly. Chen Jian was not the kind of person who was feeble and without his own views.

If he was infuriated, he could change his agent and it wouldn’t be a big deal... The fact was that there were many agents from both home and abroad who would love to replace him.

In the end, facing the cooperation between Dunn and Chen Jian, Xia Yan could only bow and concede. “Fine, Chen Jian... I hope you won’t regret the decision you’ve made today!”

Seeing he was a little reluctant, Chen Jian added, “After I achieve success, I’ll give you my share of the signing fee, Uncle Xia.”

Xia Yang didn’t expect such a resolve from Chen Jian. He was dumbfounded and shook his head hopelessly. “You are really ready to do it at any cost.”

“It’s my first aspiration. How can money be compared to it?”

Xia Yang went speechless after Chen Jian’s rhetorical question.

Chapter 997: The Barcelona Derby

Twain might have acted confident before Xia Yang earlier, but the truth was that he was on tenterhooks. Chen Jian did express his desire to play for Forest in the past, but it has been four years since then. Why would he return to Forest when he has been performing so well in Espanyol?

Twain had given Chen Jian a call previously, but it was hard to tell what Chen Jian really thought from his voice alone. What if he did not fancy a return to Nottingham Forest? What if he found Nottingham Forest to be not good enough for him? It was not impossible for him to think that way. After all, the current Nottingham Forest team was truly in a bad state.

Most people in England believed that Nottingham Forest's goal for the season was to avoid relegation, but even that might be a challenge for them now. Something needed to change at the club soon, or else relegation might very well be in the cards. The possibility of George Wood's retirement also loomed ominously above the club like a dark cloud, and many people at the club were left feeling restless as a result.

Not only that, very few players who have transferred to Forest over the past few seasons have performed well. In contrast, there were several players who went on to perform very well at other clubs after leaving Forest, and this has led many people to view Forest as a 'black hole' for footballers. How could a player be willing to go towards this black hole when everyone else was running away from it?

Another issue in this whole situation lay with Chen Jian's calculating agent. Twain might have promised to offer him a higher bonus if Chen Jian signed for Forest, but he did not seem to intend to cooperate with Twain just yet. He was still trying to make sure that he got the most money out of the deal.

All these various conditions made it difficult for Twain to sign Chen Jian...

Any player with a brain would most likely not sign for Forest. However, Twain still decided to make a trip over to Spain because he wanted to try his luck. After all, he was a world-renowned manager. Perhaps his fame and influence could affect the final outcome?

Weren't there many players who craved to play under Wenger? If that was the case, why couldn't there also be players who craved to play under Twain?

And it was this thought that prompted Twain to travel to Spain alone.

A while later, he received a call from Xia Yang.

"Congratulations, Mr. Twain." The voice on the other end did not sound reluctant. It seemed like this was a decision that Xia Yang concurred with from the bottom of his heart. "I have discussed the matter with Chen Jian, and we both think that joining Nottingham Forest would be a good idea. Chen Jian has always wanted to play for Forest, and I respect his decision. I'd definitely work to help both Forest and Espanyol reach an agreement over this deal."

It did not matter if the agent truly meant what he said. His words had lifted a weight off Twain, and he finally heaved a sigh of relief. The next step would be for both clubs to negotiate a deal. Allan Adams had been fired, but there would definitely be other people at the club who would be able to work on transfers. In addition, Evan Doughty would definitely step in and help to close the deal when necessary. After all, he was the person begging Twain to come back now. He would definitely satisfy Twain's every demand, and Twain was going to take full advantage of that.

Now that Chen Jian's issue has been settled, Twain could finally sit back and enjoy the Barcelona derby.

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The day before the match, Chen Jian received a call from his manager, Xia Yang, who told him that he had already reached an agreement with Twain with regards to the transfer and that all that was left to do was to speak with Espanyol after the Barcelona derby was over.

Chen Jian heaved a long sigh of relief after hearing his agent's words. He could finally focus all his attention on the upcoming match now.

"Hey, Chen. You'd definitely be tightly marked by the Barcelona's midfield in the match tomorrow. Our attack and defense would both be in jeopardy if you were kept out of the match since you are the core of our team. What do you intend to do about it?" Chen Jian's teammate, Gavrilovič, asked him about his plans for the upcoming match during their idle chat before the team's tactical meeting.

The Serbian center-back's question piqued the interest of the other Espanyol players in the room, and they all crowded around to hear what Chen Jian had to say. In truth, this was actually a kind of game for the Espanyol players. They all knew that Chen Jian was a player with a clear mind, and he also seemed to possess a naturally keen insight into matters related to football. The Espanyol players enjoyed getting Chen Jian to speak about what he would do if a particular situation arose in a match. They would then keep his comments in mind and compare them with the manager's tactics or how the match actually unfolded to see if he was correct.

Of course, they would also place small bets among themselves as to whether Chen Jian was right or not, and the loser had to pay a bit of money or treat the others to a meal.

Chen Jian won the bets most of the time, and it was to be expected. After all, how could a Chinese player like him ever become the core of a Spanish football team if he did not have the brains? It went without saying that he had only earned his position in the team by winning over his teammates and the manager with his performance. Talent was everything here. One would be respected if he had talent. Chen Jian's intelligence was what helped him gain the trust of his teammates.

"If they mark me tightly, I'd just retreat backward," Chen Jian smiled. "I'd move from a midfielder's position to a defensive midfielder's position. Barcelona's defensive midfielder can't possibly rush all the way to the front of our penalty box just to mark me, right?"

"But they can just get someone else to mark you, right? Maybe their forward or their attacking midfielder." The person who asked this question was another of Chen Jian's teammates. He was an Israeli defender by the name of Jofo Fogelman.

Chen Jian thought about his question for a moment. "The possibility of that happening is very small. Barcelona's forwards are all quite lazy... But it's not impossible. If that really happened, I'd make my passes quickly and pass the ball to all of you more. I need you to be careful, Jofo. I don't want you to miss out on my back pass."

He pointed at Fogelman who had asked him the question.

His teammates around him all burst out laughing.

Chen Jian was well-liked by his teammates. He had a good temper and rarely blew his top. Not only that, he would always smile at his teammates whenever he interacted with them as well, and they found that part of his personality to be very endearing. No one liked to play with someone who always had a long face after all.

During the tactical meeting, Espanyol's manager, Gregorio Manzano, told Chen Jian to shift backward and move from his midfielder's position to a defensive midfielder's position in the event that he was tightly marked by the Barcelona players. It was just as Chen Jian had said.

After hearing the manager's words, several of his teammates could not help but cry out internally, "There goes our money!"

Chen Jian smiled happily. However, it soon dawned on him that he would be leaving this team and his teammates in the coming winter, and his smile vanished from his face instantly. He had no choice but to forsake everything that he has gained so far to achieve his dream. However, would his sacrifices be worth it in the end?

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The Barcelona derby that was due to take place in a day's time would become the highlight of La Liga for the week. Espanyol has consistently been ranked in the middle of the table for the past three seasons, and they were no longer a team that had to fight to survive relegation. The current Espanyol team definitely had what it took to create problems for the Barcelona side, and it would not be an easy match for Barcelona. The results that Barcelona has managed to achieve at Espanyol's home ground for the past three seasons were two draws and one loss.

Conversely, they were yet to lose against Espanyol at home. The results that they have achieved at the Camp Nou stadium were two wins and one draw.

Today's derby match would be played at the Camp Nou stadium.

Twain was invited by Xia Yang to watch the match with him at the stands. Since it has been decided that Chen Jian would be transferring to Nottingham Forest in the upcoming transfer window, both Xia Yang and Twain could be regarded as being on the same team now, and it was not awkward for the two to sit together.

Just as many had predicted, Barcelona marked Chen Jian tightly in the match. Chen Jian was wearing the number 10 shirt, and this spoke of his importance and status in the team. Espanyol was a small team. They did not have many outstanding players, and they did not have depth in the team either. This inevitably made their tactics one-dimensional, and the task of organizing the team's midfield has always fallen on the shoulders of Chen Jian for the past few seasons. Chen Jian was the core of the team's tactics, and the team's performance as a whole would be negatively affected if he were kept out of the game.

Chen Jian could not be regarded to be a world-class superstar player just yet, and he probably could not be considered a first-class player in the whole of Europe either. If he were truly on the same level as the other first-class players in Europe, then surely Espanyol would not just be a mid-table club now. However, the players' individual abilities did not matter in a derby match. No one really knew how a derby match would play out or what the results would be until the very last minute. Both Barcelona and Espanyol were on the same starting line at the start of the match. How many football stars Barcelona had on its team, how powerful they were as a team, how many trophies they have lifted over the years, or how well they have performed recently... None of these mattered before the start of the match.

Ability would not decide who won the match in the end. The two factors that would decide the match would be the players' fight and spirit.

The players from both teams went at each other the moment the match kicked off. They kept intercepting and tackling the ball away from one another's feet.

It was the first time that Twain witnessed such a fiery side of Chen Jian.

Chen Jian received the ball in the midfield five minutes into the match, and he was quickly tripped over by Barcelona's defensive midfielder, Sergio Busquets. A minute later, Chen Jian found his chance to exact revenge on Busquets. Busquets had intended to run forward and make his way past Espanyol's defenders after receiving the ball from his teammates, but Chen Jian stretched a leg out and clipped his heel from behind, which caused Busquets to lose his balance and fall onto the pitch.

Busquets was furious with Chen Jian's action, and he picked a fight with the latter after climbing back to his feet. Chen Jian did not take Busquets' behavior lying down, and he went up to Busquets and butted heads with him at once. Chen Jian might be shorter than Busquets, but the expression on his face was extremely fierce, and it made him seem much taller and more imposing than he really was.

Twain broke into a laugh at the stands. "Dear me! This lad's starting to resemble George a little now... No wonder the press describes him as a small-sized George Wood."

"Jian is usually not like that." Xia Yang did not appear to like such a fierce Chen Jian. "The image that he gives others is one that is sunny and positive, and he's very popular with the sponsors as a result."

No wonder he looks so displeased, Twain thought to himself and smiled. He did not say anything else and simply continued watching the match.

Barcelona was the stronger team between the two in terms of abilities, but they were the ones who were forced to defend for the majority of the first half. The Espanyol players did not seem to care about conserving their energy for the second half. They went all out in the match since the start, and they chased after and intercepted the ball from the Barcelona players relentlessly. They also went on the attack numerous times after intercepting the ball in Barcelona's half of the pitch. The Barcelona players had to deal with their constant interceptions and attacks, and they were left extremely worn out.

Espanyol's tactics for the match were spot on. The momentum of the match would have definitely shifted in their favor if they had one or two strikers who could find the back of the net when given the chance. Sadly, they were just a small football club and did not have such talented strikers on their team...

As the saying went, 'one cannot make bricks without straw'. It did not matter how good a tactic the manager came up with, or capable he was. Even the best manager in the world would need a team that was capable of executing his tactics in order for them to work.

Twain might not have met Manzano before today, but that did not stop him from being impressed with the latter. He thought that it was a remarkable achievement for Manzano to have managed to keep Espanyol as a mid-table team for the past few seasons. Not only that, Chen Jian was only able to perform as a player because he gave him the chance to. It would not be wrong to describe Manzano as both his and Chen Jian's benefactor.

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Just as everyone had predicted, the team who scored first in the match was the team who has showed more fight and determination thus far – Espanyol. On the 31st minute of the match, the Espanyol players wore out the Barcelona defenders with a series of furious attacks. Just as Barcelona's defense tried to regroup itself, Chen Jian, who received the ball near the center circle, suddenly performed a long driven pass to the front of the pitch. The ball made its way past three of Barcelona's players before landing at the feet of his teammate Emilio, who was running towards the penalty box from the flank with pinpoint accuracy. Emilio then proceeded to make his way into Barcelona's penalty box with the ball, and he performed a lob after seeing that the Barcelona's goalkeeper, Roberto, had run out to intercept him.

The ball flew into the back of the net, and the Camp Nou stadium that had been like a pot of boiling water just a second ago instantly quietened down. The only people who made noise amidst the silence were a group of Espanyol fans. They flailed their arms about in the air wildly and shouted the name of the goal scorer, Emilio, at the top of their lungs.

Twain stood to his feet and applauded Espanyol's goal. However, his applause was not meant for Emilio. Rather, he was applauding the number 10 player who made the 35-meter driven pass to Emilio that led to the goal.

Chen Jian has really matured a lot in these four years...

The pass that he just made was incredibly difficult to achieve. Not only did he need to find the right moment and trajectory to make the pass, but he also needed to determine whether his teammate would be able to run towards the space that he intended to pass to. His pass had to be timed to perfection. If he were too fast, his teammate would not be able to receive his pass. If he were too slow, his teammate would be deemed offside by the time he received the pass. In addition, it was a shot that required a superb technique as well. There was only one route that the ball could take to reach Emilio, and its width was not more than three meters. Chen Jian had to ensure that the ball was able to travel in that narrow space and he also needed to make sure that his pass would not be intercepted or blocked by the opponent along the way. All in all, the pass that Chen Jian made was definitely one that required a combination of technique, power and precision, and it was not something that any player would easily be able to achieve.

The only thing that the good-for-nothing Xia Yang did after Espanyol's goal was to praise Chen Jian's performance. His voice was extremely loud and he seemed to be hoping that Twain would hear his praises and thereby increase Chen Jian's salary in the contract. Twain did not care what his intentions were. He was able to understand a myriad of things from Chen Jian's pass, and it made him all the more certain that he had to bring Chen Jian over to Nottingham Forest.

There was no need to worry about whether Wood and Chen Jian's roles would overlap in a match since they were players with very different styles. In fact, it would be more advantageous to play both of them at the same time as it would help to prevent the opposition from marking either one of them out of the game, and this would prevent the team from being immobilized during the offense. Both Wood and Chen Jian were good at offense and defense. It did not matter which one of them went forward to attack and which stayed back to defend. Both would do an equally great job either way. Wood was

physically stronger and he was a threat down the middle when the team attacked. In contrast, Chen Jian was a player who relied on passes more during offense. The two players could complement each other and make the team's attacks much stronger than they were now.

Twain spent the next few minutes envisaging how Forest would offend and defend with those two players on the pitch.

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A while later, Barcelona showed everyone what it meant to be a powerhouse team.

The Espanyol players looked visibly worn out in the second half and they could not keep up with Barcelona's tempo. Barcelona capitalized on that weakness and scored two goals against them in 10 minutes.

Chen Jian was one of the few Espanyol players who still had quite a bit of stamina left in him in the second half because he did not need to run about the pitch as much as his teammates did. Unlike the wingers who constantly had to make runs forward, Chen Jian only had to make a few sprints from time to time. His teammates began passing the ball over to him a lot more after noticing that he still had the energy left in him to run forward. However, Barcelona saw through their plan soon, and they focused on marking Chen Jian every time Espanyol tried to go on the attack. The fact that it was a derby match caused the players from both sides to be more fired up than usual, and the Barcelona players certainly did not go easy on Chen Jian when they defended against him. Chen Jian was fouled three times in the second half, and a Barcelona player picked up a yellow card for fouling him.

Twain was quite worried that Chen Jian would pick up an injury in the match and he hoped that Manzano would take him off the pitch soon. However, Manzano did not share Twain's worries. He continued to let Chen Jian play in the match, and his only instruction to him was to shift his position forward. He wanted him to play in the attacking midfielder's position instead of his current defensive midfielder's position.

Thereafter, Manzano made a substitution for his team. He substituted the exhausted goal scorer Emilio for a defensive midfielder by the name of Benjamin. It was clearly a substitution that aimed to strengthen the team's defense.

The way in which the match unfolded following the substitution left Twain feeling extremely impressed with Manzano and his tactics. The only issue he had with them was that they felt a little... desperate.

As the core of the team, Chen Jian could not help but be shoved and kicked at a lot more than his teammates. It was not rare to see him fall to the ground during the match either. The fact that it was a derby match made the referee blow his whistle much more than he might otherwise. He was worried that he might commit a mistake that would lead to a brawl between the players from both teams, and thus he chose to blow his whistle at every foul.

As a result, Espanyol was awarded numerous free kicks at the front of the pitch.

The substitute Benjamin appeared to be a player who was evidently good at taking free kicks because he took over that role for the team the moment he stepped onto the pitch.

It did not take long for Twain to figure out what Manzano's plan was.

On the 77th minute of the match, Espanyol earned yet another free-kick from a foul on Chen Jian in a position that was about 25 meters to the front of the fans behind Barcelona's goalpost. Benjamin took the free-kick without hesitation. The ball went past the row of Barcelona players who stood before him and ended up at the back of the net.

The Camp Nou Stadium went silent for the second time of the day.

Twain, on the other hand, laughed and clapped as he stood up. Manzano's plan had worked!

The derby match ultimately ended in a 2:2 draw. Barcelona might not have lost, but as the home side for the match, not winning was tantamount to losing for them. Similarly, Espanyol felt infuriated that they were not able to defeat Barcelona.

There was bound to be much discussion and squabble after a football match, but Twain did not care about any of that.

The moment the match ended, Twain asked Xia Yang to send Chen Jian a message and tell him that he wanted to meet with him.

Chapter 998: A Bigger Stage

Having just finished a fierce derby, the head coach was not as strict with the players as he used to be. Everyone needed to relax, whether a player or a coach. So Chen Jian could dress neatly to go meet Twain, enjoy the night with him, and experience Spain's colorful nightlife.

"Is it time for me to congratulate you on the draw at the mighty Barcelona, or regret that you didn't finally win the game?" Twain said to Chen Jian with a smile.

"Regret," Chen Jian replied.

Looking at the man before him, who had more gray hair than before, Chen Jian could not help but feel how time flies.

When he first met Twain, he was in high spirits. He was in his peak and it seemed like he could never tire, but now, Twain was almost like an old man.

Xia Yang became obsolete. Tonight was a conversation between Twain and Chen Jian.

"Well, I didn't think I'd ever ask you to return again when you got out of Nottingham Forest."

"I didn't expect to become who I am now after leaving Nottingham Forest."

Both of them were lamenting the impermanence of the world.

Today, Chen Jian was not only the core of the RCD Espanyol but also the main player in the Chinese national team. That's why Twain was looking for him, because there was nothing wrong with applying for a labor certificate. As for the national team rankings, the England Football Association has canceled that thing.

China was still second rate in Asian football, and Chen Jian was one of the few shining stars on the team.

The most insignificant person in the draft was clothed in the national team's robes to fight for the country, and those who had done better than he had now had no idea where they might look for jobs.

"I feel like I should thank you for my achievement today, Mr. Twain. The moment I received your call, I decided to transfer to Nottingham Forest."

Twain smiled. To tell the truth, when he picked up the phone and asked Chen Jian aloud whether he would dare to give up everything to come to Nottingham and start over again, he was just encouraging him. He didn't really think Chen Jian's future would be much better. Chen Jian's achievements now exceeded his original expectations, and he was also very gratified. At least he has given a person's destiny a better direction.

"Even if the mountain stops turning, the river shall still keep flowing. And so we come back together again. Chinese people believe in fate. Chen Jian, you and Nottingham Forest are bound by fate."

Xia Yang, who was listening silently to this dialogue, secretly rolled his eyes. What fate? It was still unknown whether Chen Jian's choice was good or bad. He was able to play so well for the RCD Espanyol because RCD Espanyol's head coach, Manzano, put a Chinese player at the core. Would Nottingham Forest do this too? Their core was George Wood, whose technical features were similar in style to those of Chen Jian! Chen Jian would only have a supporting role, a foil, and his play could hardly be as good as in the RCD Espanyol. The reputation he assembled with great effort before might be lost after he went to Nottingham Forest.

The agent, Mr. Xia, was only distracted for a few seconds, but the two men at the table have already talked about the issues of going to the Forest team.

"I've seen the derby. You're at the core of the RCD Espanyol. I'll give you a showdown here, you can't be the core in Nottingham Forest. There's George Wood..." Twain spread out his hands.

Chen Jian did not say anything like "just let me get to Forest, I'll be willing to go even as a substitute." He just said, "I think that if Mr. Twain is seeking me out personally, it's not to get me sitting on a bench?"

Having fought for more than three seasons in La Liga, Chen has matured a lot and this experience made him more confident.

Twain looked at the Chinese player in front of him with a deep liking. Although some Spanish media would call Chen Jian a "smaller-sized George Wood", in Twain's view, this man was probably more of a "Wise General". He may be better than George when it came to intelligence and strategy. After all, there were many people along the way to help George and teach him. Without himself, without Dunn, without the help of Albertini and other people, George would not amount to much, while Chen Jian was basically on his own.

"It's too much luxury to bring you on as a substitute, ha!" Twain smiled happily. "According to my plan, you're going to play together with Wood, and you two will be Forest's double core."

"Double core?" Chen Jian lowered his head and thought about how he would fit in with Wood. He was no longer the kid who would be excited just about stepping on the Football Field, playing the game.

He inadvertently played the game of guessing the coach's intentions. However, this time he couldn't figure out how he was going to fit in with George Wood, who resembled him in technique and style.

Therefore, he looked up at Twain.

“You both have good long passes, but you’re better at short passes than Wood, and Wood’s long-range shooting technique is better than yours.” Twain didn’t tell everything, he just pointed out the difference between the two men. “It would be too difficult for an opponent to keep an eye on both of you.”

Chen Jian’s mind already had a vague picture of him fighting side by side with Wood. It was then that he began to get excited – from his childhood ambition to the time he became a professional player, the goal has always been George Wood, No.13 of Nottingham Forest. When he was in the youth team he continued to hone himself with Wood’s training schedule. Wood became his idol. Now he would finally have the possibility to play side by side with his hero!

The meeting with Chen Jian was mainly about promising him his place in the team face-to-face – certainly not on the bench and, for now, in the main force. People in Spain were good at living at night, and Chen Jian, who has been here for more than three years, was more or less used to it, but the 50-year-old Twain was not Spanish. After only four days in Spain, he was not accustomed to it yet. Barcelona’s club derby as a major game in this round of the league, of course, was scheduled for the last game of the day. When the game was over, it was almost midnight, and now it was nearly one in the morning. Twain was tired. He had said everything he could say already. There was no need to stay. They would have plenty of time, with lots of opportunities to contact.

Twain and Chen Jian said goodbye. As they were leaving, Twain reminded Xia Yang to step up his efforts to put pressure on the RCD Espanyol Club and Chen Jian promised a showdown with the club to express his wishes of going to Nottingham Forest.

Early the next morning, Twain flew back to England, thus concluding his trip to Spain.

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It wasn’t long before news came from Barcelona that a number of local clubs were attracted to Chen Jian, hoping to take him away from the RCD Espanyol during the winter break.

With such news, Twain knew that Xia Yang had already begun to act.

He didn’t care that much. Let the professionals do the job.

David Kerslake has entered the team’s coaching staff in advance as an assistant coach, to carry out the preliminary work. He was responsible for summarizing the team’s situation, submitting it to Twain, and then letting him analyze the decision.

Now, a week after Kerslake entered the team, the team’s internal report has basically taken shape.

In the two weeks since his absence, Nottingham Forest has narrowly stayed in the 16th with one win, one loss.

That was a pretty low starting point. Nottingham Forest has been at its lowest since returning to the English Premier League. No wonder a bunch of people was pessimistic about Forest’s prospects for this season. They believed that if Nottingham did not pay attention, even a relegation eventually wouldn’t surprise them.

In addition to Kerslake's report, which showed the Forest team's lack of effectiveness was a cause for concern, there was a growing feeling of insecurity and tension. In addition, the bench thickness was not enough. Together with all the other shortcomings, all let Twain feel the pressure on his shoulders.

This comeback was certainly not an easy getaway...

Before that, there was one more thing Twain needed to do. Once he became Forest's head coach, it wouldn't be very convenient.

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At the end of November, winter came. The weather was the same in Nottingham as in the whole of England, with more cloudy and rainy days, less blue skies and less sunshine.

On a rare good day, and after four consecutive days of rain, the skies over Nottingham finally cleared up. Everyone who went to work in the morning could see the golden sun rising in the east, the brilliant shining sunlight on the sky and the earth, the leaves still shimmering with last night's raindrops, shining in the sun. From a distance, the forest seemed to be hung with strings of gold beads.

Surrounded by these picturesque woods was the training ground for the Notts County club, which was half as small as the Nottingham Forest Wilford training ground. The training facilities were somewhat old-fashioned. As the oldest modern professional football club in the world, there was a taste of history from inside to outside. Cynics would say it smelled of rot. Fans would call it a scent of the glory of long-gone history.

Although the training facilities were old, the players on the training ground were young. There was nothing in their faces that showed the pressures and burdens of a long history.

It was just a warm-up exercise, but everybody was serious. A man in his thirties, wearing a hooded training shirt like an assistant coach, ran ahead with a whistle in his mouth. The man with black hair and an oriental face was the Chinese Dunn, who had left Nottingham Forest more than seven years ago.

Now he was the head coach of the English Football League Championship team, Notts County.

Outside the barbed-wire fence at the training ground, some fans were assembled, although the number was small and there were few media outlets, with two of them being Nottingham natives and one from the port city of Portsmouth – Notts County's opponent in the next round of the English Football League Championship.

On this cold morning, the whistle in the training ground was so clear and sharp that it even startled some birds in the woods. The distant woods were shrouded by a rising white haze of water vapor that began to evaporate under the sun and spread out, wrapping almost the entire training ground in a gentle mist.

Twain, who was wrapped in a thick coat, took a deep breath. The air in the woods was much better than in the city center.

The so-called one more thing that couldn't be done after he began coaching the Forest team was to meet Dunn here. Although his relationship with Tang Zhijian offered him many opportunities to engage in private, once he became Forest's head coach, he was bound to be a key target of the paparazzi, and

his meeting with Dunn was a secret that he didn't want to become the headlines of tomorrow's newspaper.

Watching Dunn leading the team's warm-up, Twain had a smile on his face. It was completely different from his own style. Dunn was doing a good job here. Although he didn't know much about Notts County, from only seeing the players, Twain believed that it was a team that worked well with Dunn and that his goal was achieved when he left Forest.

However, such a team could not go any further. A small team in Notts County lacked funding. Dunn's success in bringing it to the English Football League Championship has already surprised a lot of people. However, it would end there. If they wanted to go to the Premier League, without strong financial support it would be absolutely impossible. Even if they were lucky enough to make the Premier League, in a huge advantage over their opponents, the only way left to them would be to return to the English Football League Championship.

In 2004, when Notts County was on the verge of bankruptcy, its fans made voluntary donations in the hopes of saving their beloved team. However, in the end, it was the unrelated team, Chelsea, who became the savior. It was because Notts County had drawn Chelsea in the Football Association Cup that they received a lot of ticket revenue. When the Chelsea club agreed to give all the ticket income they received at Stamford Bridge to the Notts County club to help them get through, the share of television broadcast fees and ticket revenue saved the team, preventing the demise of the world's oldest modern professional football club.

This told enough about the situation of Notts County. The cost of filming a game and the revenue of tickets were not worth mentioning in the eyes of the Premier League teams, but it was enough to save Notts County. How pitiful the budget of this team was!

Dunn's success in recent years was inseparable from his insistence on the youth team construction from the beginning of his term. Without the youth training camp to provide him with enough good players, the poor budget for every season in Notts County would not be enough to buy all eleven starters in the transfer market alone.

Despite having a good youth camp, he also faced the same grievance as a number of small club managers – he couldn't afford to keep the most prominent young players from going out of Notts County in pursuit of a higher stage. For a club like Notts County, the only way to survive was by selling some of its promising young players. Dunn was just a head coach, he couldn't interfere with the team's business strategy, and he was in no position to interfere – the team wouldn't be able to survive, so why keep the talented players? The level of these players was not the type of world superstar who could lead a team to the Premier League alone. They were exchanges for a good price while they were still worthy. Then he would reorganize the first team out of the youth camp to train them from the starting point.

Thus it moved in circles.

Twain shook his head. That was the tragedy of the little club. Didn't the same thing happen to the Forest team before he took over? Michael Dawson, Andy Reid, and Jenas were all sold to other teams in times of financial distress for the Forest. It was just that Nottingham Forest, compared with Notts County, was, after all, well-established, and with better funding, it was not too difficult to rise again.

For Notts County, it was really difficult to rebuild with almost nothing.

Twain finished all the morning training and then met Dunn at noon.

On the phone last night, Twain told Dunn he was coming to him today, so Dunn wasn't surprised at all to see Twain in front of him.

"You certainly didn't come to invite me to dinner, Tony," At a Chinese restaurant, Dunn spoke to Twain, who was sitting opposite from him.

"Of course. And the Chinese restaurant is too unauthentic," Twain commented on the most famous Chinese restaurant in Nottingham as if there was no one else around them, ignoring a Chinese waiter standing beside him. It made this Chinese overseas student – judging by his look, he was here for a part-time job – stare at the old man wearing sunglasses.

After the waiter had gone, Dunn began to laugh. "What you say about the restaurant is too offensive."

Twain shrugged and didn't go on with the topic. "I came to you to ask you a question, Dunn." He leaned forward and lowered his voice so that only Dunn could hear.

"Do you want a bigger stage?"

Chapter 999: The Past and Present Twain

"Would you like to stand on a bigger stage?"

Tang Jing had also asked him a similar question in the past, but it was even blunter. She asked him if he wanted to spend the rest of his life managing a small club like Notts County.

Dunn had thought about that question before. If Notts County could somehow get their hands on a large sum of money and also have the ambition to get promoted to the Premier League, he did not see any issue with remaining in the club. After all, he has grown attached to the club after spending seven years here as the manager.

However, if things stayed the way they were now and Notts County continued to be content with a place in the Championship... Then what should he do next? Should he continue to stay in the club whatever happened?

Did he have ambition?

There would definitely be a few people who would reply, "No, Dunn is a man who is happy with the status quo" to that question. However, Dunn knew very well how deep his passion for football ran and how much he craved a challenge. In a nutshell, he was just like Tony Twain who sat across from him.

"Are you trying to get me to become your assistant manager, Tony?" Dunn asked with a smile.

"No. It'd be a waste of talent to get you to become my assistant manager after seeing what you have achieved at Notts County over the past seven years. There is no need to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut." Twain shook his head.

“Then why...” Dunn was confused. Frankly, he had assumed that Twain wanted to persuade him to become his assistant manager ever since he received the call from him the previous night. He mulled over the issue for the whole night, and he eventually came to the conclusion that he would not be able to go back to being an assistant manager anymore, even if it meant that he could work under the illustrious Twain once again. He was going to refuse Twain’s invitation at all costs if the latter truly invited him to be his assistant manager.

He did not expect that Twain had something else in mind.

Twain looked around him. The waiters were all positioned several meters away from him at the moment, and none of them seemed inclined to attend to him. Their attitudes spoke of their dislike for him, given how he had publicly criticized the restaurant’s dishes as being unauthentic in the past. However, that was exactly what Twain wanted. After making sure that no waiters were near him, Twain leaned forward and told Dunn in a low voice, “This is something that I’ve not told anyone else yet. Actually, I’m only managing Forest for half a season.”

Dunn nodded his head. He already knew about that, and it was not just him. Everyone else knew about it as well, as it had been reported all over the news.

“Think about it, what’s going to happen to Forest after I leave? It can’t possibly revert to being how it is currently, right? I can’t keep coming out of retirement to rescue the team either.”

Dunn could tell what Twain was going to say next, but he believed that there was another solution to the issue. “You can just continue at the club, Tony.”

Twain shook his head. “I’m going, to be honest with you. I know my body the best. I’ve been very busy for the past few days. I flew to Spain to find Chen Jian, and then I came over to find you. When I have some free time, I will need to read up about those reports that David gave me regarding the team and... Guess what happened!”

Dunn looked at him quizzically.

“I fell asleep twice while reading the reports! My body is not like it used to be anymore. This might have something to do with me resting for four months prior to this... All this while I’ve always had a drive in me. I want to go against the world. However, that drive has vanished since the day I lifted the World Cup trophy and the thought of retirement surfaced in my mind. It’s impossible for me to regain that same level of drive that I used to have in the past.”

Twain clenched his fists tightly before releasing them.

“I came to the conclusion that I can only work for half a season after thinking things through. I’d try my best to help Forest stay in the Premier League during this period of time, and after that, I’d retire once and for all...”

Dunn smiled after hearing Twain’s words. “I still think that’s impossible, Tony.”

“That’s true, it might have been impossible before our talk. But things are different now.” Twain nodded. Surprisingly, he did not refute Dunn’s words. “I hope that you can take over my role as the manager of Nottingham Forest from next season onward, and I hope you can stay as the manager for a long time into the future.”

Dunn did not show much surprise. He had more or less guessed that Twain was going to say those words.

“Neither Freddy nor David are suited to work as managers. But you are different. You have seven years of experience. You can definitely take on the role as the manager of Forest now.”

Dunn frowned and mulled over Twain’s words before voicing his concern. “We are very different, Tony. I’m not like you. I can’t motivate the players like you. I’m not a madman either. I can’t divert the attention of the press away from them...”

“But you managed to lead a team of youth players all the way to the Championship.”

“Notts County and Nottingham Forest are two completely different teams. They play different styles of football and the managers who lead them have to be different as well.”

“I don’t expect you to lead Forest to glory the moment you take over. The club would most likely give you a few years to get used to your role and to the team. Make use of that time to assemble the team that suits you the most, and slowly get that team used to playing your style of football. By the time you are familiar with the team, the players who are used to my playing style would have retired, and you’d be able to start building a team that belongs to you, just like you did at Notts County.”

Dunn did not respond to Twain. He lowered his head and remained silent.

The two only changed the conversation topic when the dishes were served. They then began to talk about their respective lives as they ate.

Twain was the one who spoke most of the time, and Dunn merely listened. Dunn was never the talkative type. He had always played the role of a listener when he worked with Twain as well, and he did a very good job at it.

Twain talked about how Teresa was a good girl, how her English had improved tremendously, how she would definitely be a beauty when she grew up, and how her deep interest in movies and acting worried him. He was worried about what he should do as her father if she went on to work in the entertainment industry when she grew up.

Over two-thirds of their conversation revolved around Twain’s daughter Teresa.

The corner of Dunn’s lips went up as he listened to Twain speak of his daughter. Twain looked just like any blissful father in this world.

Dunn suddenly understood what Twain meant when he said that he was unwilling to work as a manager for long. Twain had a beautiful wife who loved him deeply, and he had an adorable, sweet and intelligent daughter. His life was wonderful and he was living in bliss, but all this has gradually worn away the ambition that he had in the past.

He recalled how Twain was like 15 years ago. Back then, he was a man who did not know what fatigue was, and he would burn the midnight oil just to analyze his opponents and their tactics through match videos. His mind was imbued with thoughts about how he was going to go against the world, and how he wanted to get his hands on every single football trophy possible. He would always make sure he got himself pumped up before he gave a passionate speech to the players in the locker room. After all, how

could he possibly expect the players to be excited if he himself wasn't? A football match was just like a deathmatch for him in the past. There could only be one survivor at the end, and it was either him or his opponent. He had more fight than everyone else did because he was so keen on surviving in the footballing world. He wanted to defeat all the rivals who looked down on him, and he wanted those ignorant spectators to eat their own words. For those reasons, he transformed himself into a demon and a bastard.

Which Tony Twain did he prefer?

His memories of the past and present Tony Twain overlapped in his mind and became blurry.

I guess they both have their pros and cons, Dunn thought to himself.

The Tony Twain of the past was happy because he was working hard to achieve his dreams. The Tony Twain of the present was also happy because he was beginning a brand new life.

The two finished their meal soon after. Dunn's plan following the meal was to return home and rest for a short while before preparing for his second training session that was due to take place at 5 p.m. Twain was also planning to return home and begin his preparation work to take over as the manager of Forest.

"I hope you would seriously consider my invitation, Dunn," Twain told Dunn as they bid each other farewell at the entrance to the restaurant.

He did not expect Dunn to shake his head and say, "I accept your proposition, Tony."

Twain was taken aback by how fast Dunn had reached a decision. He never thought of Dunn to be a decisive person. Dunn has always been someone who took a lot of time to think things through before making a decision. Did his personality change over the past seven years?

"You've already decided? You aren't going to discuss this matter with Tang Jing first?"

"My opinion is all that matters when it comes to work," Dunn sounded manly when he said those words.

Twain looked at Dunn and laughed. His eyes were narrowed into a thin line.

"Nottingham Forest is the place where things began for me. I also want to... Prove myself once more there." He still could not forget the failure that he experienced after he took over as the manager of Nottingham Forest for a short period in the past...

Twain was certain that Dunn had accepted his invitation because of hearing those words from him.

He heaved a long sigh of relief. He had settled the very last thing that he had to do before taking over as Forest's manager. He could finally focus on managing Nottingham Forest without any worries now.

"Good luck, Tony. Nottingham Forest now is nothing like the Nottingham Forest under you back then." Dunn did not forget to give Twain his blessings before he left.

Twain was in the midst of opening his car door when he heard Dunn's words. He turned around and told Dunn in a serious tone, "They'll quickly realize that the Tony Twain now is still like the Tony Twain from the past."

In that split second, Dunn thought he saw the old Tony Twain before him.

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“Tony Twain is coming out of retirement? Ha!” Carl Spicer discussed Twain’s return to Forest with a face of disdain in his show. “I think he should just continue to enjoy his new life in America. The Nottingham Forest now is nothing like the Nottingham Forest in the past, and it’s not like he’s Superman either. Does he think he can become the club’s savior? He’s a 50-year-old man! His mind should have become clearer by now! I can’t believe that I’m wrong about him once again...”

Spicer fiercely derided the news of Twain’s return in his show. To others, it would seem like he was against Twain’s return to Forest, but in reality, it was the opposite. He desperately longed for Twain to return. He felt like he had been forgotten by the masses in the four months since Twain went into retirement. The viewership for his show has been on the decline over the past few months as well.

Spicer was one of several critics who heavily censured Twain when he experienced disrepute during his time as the manager of the England national football team. His show came under the spotlight consequentially, and Spicer was at the pinnacle of his career at that time. However, ever since Twain announced his retirement at the end of the World Cup in July, his show had lost its focus and he did not know what kind of content he should create any longer.

The news of Twain reaching an agreement with Nottingham Forest Football Club to take over as their manager was music to his ears. Spicer seemed like a completely different man ever since he heard the news. He was all smiles every single day as he made preparations for this week’s episode.

The topic of this week’s discussion was: is Twain’s return to Forest a mistake or the right move? He had invited three guests for the episode, but they were all nothing more than props. It did not matter what sort of views they might have. Carl Spicer was the focal point of the show. All the viewers of his show admired his eloquence and enjoyed watching him deride various issues and people related to football. Of course, Tony Twain was a man who was frequently dissected in the show.

“It has pretty much been confirmed that Tony Twain would return to Forest and take over as the manager, and I can say this with absolute certainty: he is bound to fail miserably at the job that he is the most familiar with. Nottingham Forest is the team that he is the proudest of, but he will suffer crushing defeat as its manager. The reputation that he has built up over the years would be gone by the end of the season!”

Spicer ended his show with the aforementioned words.

At the same time, BBC’s ‘Match of the Day’ show also discussed Twain’s return to Forest after they did their post-match analysis of a Premier League match.

“You never know what’s going to happen in life. I truly did not expect Twain to come out of retirement and return to Forest as their manager. I felt like this is not a decision that he would make...” Alan Shearer, who was a guest on the show, expressed his thoughts on the matter.

“It just shows his love for Forest,” Mark Lawrenson said.

Gary Lineker pressed a hand to his chin and laughed. “I think it’s great that Twain is coming out of retirement. I have something to look forward to in the Premier League now!”

“...I am so excited about how things would unfold in the Premier League from here on out. We can see the madman, Tony Twain, go wild once again. Honestly, the past four months following his retirement have been the most grueling months for me as a sports reporter... I spend my days not knowing what I should do next. Now, I no longer need to beat my brains and mull over what I should write for this week’s article. There would definitely be many things for us to write about with Tony Twain around. Tony Twain’s return has constantly made the headlines for the past two weeks, and there is so much discussion surrounding his return even though he has yet to start managing the team and had only announced that he would return to Forest as the manager.” Mark Heskey, who wrote sports articles for The Sun, was over the moon at the news of Twain’s return to Forest.

“The year might not be over yet, but Tony Twain is definitely England’s newsmaker of the year. I don’t think there’d be anyone else who’d be able to steal the limelight from him. He’s just coming out of retirement to manage Forest once again, but the news of his return has sent countless media outlets into a frenzy. It would be very hard for the world to see another man like him who attracts so much attention everywhere he goes. I think Tony Twain’s return is not just a football issue. It’s also a social issue that we should delve deeper into...” The Times published an editorial just to discuss Twain’s return.

“The Premier League feels lifeless without Tony Twain. The sponsors would definitely not wish to see the Premier League in such a state. However, which is great news for them, Tony Twain’s back and he’s attracting a lot of attention to the league. The newspaper sales and viewership for television shows have all increased substantially following news of his return. There are even people who make a living off abusing Twain, which I find to be miraculous. Now, the man behind the miracle is back, and those people will get to enjoy it once more.” Sky TV also published an article on its website about Twain taking over as Forest’s manager once again.

“Bringing Twain back to the club is undoubtedly the best decision that Evan Doughty has made over the past few years. Look at the amount of attention that this struggling club is receiving worldwide. Doughty has already won. It does not matter what Forest’s results are like at the end of the season. At the very least, Forest will be at the center of attention once again...”

The press only looked forward to Twain’s return because they were looking forward to the various benefits that came with it: an increase in sales, viewership, and sponsors...

However, none of them spoke about how Twain would transform the current Nottingham Forest as its manager. Evidently, no one thought that Twain would be capable of bringing about any change to the team. Forest was in a terrible state just then, and not even Tony Twain would be able to change it for the better...

Chapter 1000: The Legend

“It seems that the media’s area of interest is in your style and popularity.” Said David Kerslake, Twain’s assistant manager as he flipped through the newspapers. Recently he liked to read these newspaper articles about Twain, because the reporters’ biting articles filled with their forte of sarcasm always made him laugh and put him in a happy mood for the day.

“No one has ever mentioned the matter of results when you’re mentioned.” After reading all the papers, Kerslake stacked them up and put them aside. He looked Twain opposite.

Tony Twain was having another look at the desk in front of him.

It was exactly the same as when he first came to this club 15 years ago. The style of the dark red solid wood desk completely looked like it was from last century inside out.

He placed his hands on the table, gently caressed it back and forth, feeling every tiny bump and scratch on the table.

The table was currently empty. There was nothing on it except for LCD computer monitor. Freddy Eastwood had already taken all his personal belongings away. Reports and information were neatly stacked on the bookcase at the side.

“Isn’t that good? That way, we won’t have too much pressure.” Twain ran his hands over the table with his head lowered as he answered.

“I thought you were going to fly into a rage because you were being looked down upon by the media.”

“I’m not an idiot, David. With these kinds of doubts about the results, talking won’t do any good. You must use actual results to beat them.” After he finally touched every inch of the table, Twain sat down in his chair.

“It’s good that they love to hype my personal style. I’m eager for no one to care about what happens to the team Nottingham Forest right now. Let’s talk about the team, David.”

Hearing Twain say so, Kerslake also put away the smile on his face and opened up a thick notebook on his lap.

“Currently, there are 26 players in the First Team. The goalkeepers are Vincenzo Fiorillo, Mark Howard and Chris Kelly. The defenders are Thiago Silva, Mamadou Sakho, Ryan Shawcross, Mathias Jørgensen, Jan Vertonghen, Joe Mattock, Nicolas Nkoulou, Jack Cork, Nedum Onuoha and Carl Dickinson. In the midfield, we have George Wood, Jake Livermore, Fernando Gago, Stephen Ireland, Chris Cohen, Alex Teixeira, Georginio Wijnaldum and Kieran Gibbs. The forwards are Aaron Mitchell, Gabriel Agbonlahor, Mario Balotelli, Matt Derbyshire and Steven Fletcher.”

As Kerslake read the name list, Twain’s eyebrows were constantly knitted together. Although he knew all these names and was able to put the names to their faces, these names currently gave him a sense of unfamiliarity. This sense of unfamiliarity was due to the fact that he did not know much about these players.

Twain’s so-called understanding was definitely not as simple as knowing what their names were, what positions they were playing and how well they had been playing recently. His understanding was comprehensive, even to the extent of knowing what the players liked to eat and what they liked to do before a game...

“In fact, most of these players are very good...” Kerslake added after he finished reading the list. He said, “The goalkeeper, Fiorillo is the Italian national team’s substitute goalkeeper and was known as ‘Little Buffon’ when he first made his debut. Nkoulou is Cameroon’s main defender and Sakho is France’s main

center back. Jørgensen is also a regular with the Danish national team. Vertonghen is Belgium's main player and can play multiple positions in the midfield to backfield. Onuoha has also played for the national team led by you. Gibbs is a great player trained by Arsenal and you had once selected him for the England team. Ireland is the main midfielder in the Irish national team. While Teixeira has not been selected for the Brazilian national team, his ability speaks for itself. Wijnaldum is a key player for the Netherlands national team. Derbyshire also played for you before and Fletcher is Scotland's leading striker... But yet they play so terribly when put together."

Twain laughed and said, "A football tournament is not won by putting eleven Maradonas together. Some of these players' style may not be suitable for Nottingham Forest while some people lack the fighting spirit. Then there are some people who just want to leave, and the others are getting older with frequent injuries. You tell me, how can such a team achieve good results?"

Hearing Twain say so, Kerslake also felt the team had no prospects.

"Continue with the summary of your observations, David."

"Well... I don't think there's any problem in Freddy's main lineup. It's the strongest lineup the Forest team can deploy, and I don't think the reason for the team's poor performance lies with the players. But in terms of techniques and tactics..."

After listening patiently to Kerslake's analysis, Twain muttered for a moment before shaking his head as he said, "The techniques and tactics are couple of the reasons. But the root of the problem lies squarely with the players. No matter how good the tactical arrangements are, if the players don't execute them, there is no other way. But the problem is not urgent... Let's talk about the tactics. McAllister's attempt to get Wood to play as the attacking midfielder is not worth keeping. It is no use having the two sides lean towards the middle either. To be honest, I think the team has already forgotten what the Forest tradition is."

Twain spoke boldly as if he had not just taken over the team but had been coaching the team for a long time.

The Forest team had changed managers frequently over the years and had changed seven managers within four and a half seasons. The immediate consequence of this was that the tactical thinking was chaotic. The players did not know which way to follow and eventually might as well not follow any to simply play according to their own habits and style in the games. It was the reason that caused the team's performance to increasingly worsen.

Twain certainly was aware of it. It was absolutely impossible to get the team back to the top of the league table with more than half a season left to go. Now that he had decided to let Dunn succeed him in his career, all he had to do now was to make a transition. He could not set the course of Nottingham Forest's development for the next decade. It was not what he should be doing. His job was very simple – to use whichever means it took to restore the team's fighting spirit in a short period of time, so that they could stay in the Premier League for the next season. It was just as he told Dunn, "A bigger stage."

And that was exactly the job Twain did best.

Isn't it to just lead the team to win? I have been doing this for fifteen years.

“No need for an attacking midfielder; restore the offense from the sidelines; the two strikers can’t be positioned in parallel, one forward and one back, staggered them. The second striker must actively withdraw to establish links with the midfield; stabilize the defense ... Our immediate work has to start with the defense, to stop the trending decline of the team’s performance and boost the low morale. The key factor is to not concede the goal and not lose the game.”

Kerslake nodded in agreement with Twain. After consecutive losses, what they should consider was not whether the attacking power was strong or not, but whether their own defensive line was solid. Defense was the basis of victory and defense was also the source of offense. To not fix the defense and ask the team to step up the offense was akin to putting the cart before the horse.

“Then in terms of the arrangement of the players...” He asked a crucial question. Would Twain still be interested in the players who previously played as the main force in the team? If the starting lineup required adjustments, it would certainly stir up some people’s interests. So, in that case, how could the atmosphere in the team’s locker room be guaranteed?

“Look at their condition during training.” Twain replied simply. Then he realized that Kerslake was actually worried about the locker room, so he asked, “Isn’t George the leader in the locker room?”

“The local players all obey him. As for the foreign players... In fact, the locker room is mainly divided into several factions.” Speaking of which, Kerslake became a little embarrassed. The forming of such cliques and factions had never happened before when Twain coached the team and would be absolutely impossible to appear.

“Local cliques and foreign factions?” Twain was not surprised by this. He did not feel awkward talking about it – anyway it did not occur under his command.

Kerslake nodded and did not want to say more.

Twain grinned, and it was not known whether he was smiling or expressing helplessness.

“Interesting.” He pinched his chin and muttered.

Then he sat in the chair for a while without saying a word. After about ten minutes like this, when Kerslake was a little bored waiting, he turned his wrist over to look at his watch and got up.

“Let’s go, David. I think the players should all be here, right?”

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“The boss is coming back!” In the locker room, Joe Mattock excitedly announced the news, which was definitely not news. “I can’t believe I’m able to wait for the arrival of such a day!”

But not many people were interested in the topic of his conversation. On the one hand, the news that Twain was coming back was more than two weeks ago, and the upsurge of such a discussion was long over. On the other hand, it was natural that the players in the locker room each had something on their minds.

What Kerslake said was true. In the current locker room, invisible factions did exist. The English players were in a league, while the other non-England players each formed small groups. At the same time, the

Forest team's long-serving players had harmonious relations, while there was a chasm between those players who only joined after Twain had left and those old players.

The 33-years-old Brazilian center-back, Thiago Silva was a leading figure in the foreign legion because of his age and seniority. He joined the team that summer when Twain had just left the Forest team. He once represented the Forest team and played against the England team that Twain led in a friendly match. He had always been unimpressed by the legendary manager. On the one hand, he was influenced by the media. On the other hand, ... He could not understand why those old players would still keep a manager who had abandoned his team constantly in mind. He felt that it was foolish.

Another person who was not interested in the news of Twain's return was more solitary. He did not belong to any cliques or factions. He was alone against the entire team. He was Mario Balotelli, the "Super Mario" who made noise about leaving every summer but never walked away, and the more noise he made, the higher his wages went.

His character and temper left him with few friends in the team. As a fellow Italian, the goalkeeper, Fiorillo was not accustomed to seeing Balotelli's proud and aloof temperament and conduct. He thought that he should be the real core of the team, and not George Wood. But the coaches did not get a clear picture of this fact, so the team's performance was so poor. If Tony Twain still could not recognize his role and value, it was believed that his return was just another tragedy.

The leader of the English and old players' clique was naturally George Wood. But Wood would not do the kind of thing that would split his own locker room, so he was actually just a figurative leader, like a totem erected by others. The players unhappy with Silva and Balotelli gathered spontaneously around the totem to confront them in Wood's name.

This was the current state of the Forest team's locker room. When there was such a fractured locker room, how could there be fighting strength? David Kerslake said the team's problems were tactical, and not on the players. However, Twain was right. The root cause laid squarely with the players ...

"Don't shout." Wood appeared behind the excited Mattock and said, "You'll be late if you don't change your clothes quickly. The boss doesn't like anyone to be late."

He had said these words to Joe Mattock, but his eyes were on everyone in the locker room.

Thiago Silva and Balotelli, with their backs toward him, gave no indication.

Mattock quickly looked down and went to change into his training clothes.

People were still talking in the locker room, but they did not stop what they were doing. Both the old and English natives knew Twain a stickler for time – he used to hold a stopwatch on the training ground as he waited for the players. The way he would require the latecomer to run one lap for every ten seconds he was late was spread through word of mouth by the players and had long been well known.

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"Do you want to prepare a stopwatch?" Kerslake asked on the training ground. There was not one single player on the training ground yet at this time, but it was too early for the set training time to begin.

"Do you have it in your hand now?" Twain asked.

Kerslake took his hand out of his pocket and showed Twain what he had in his hand. It was indeed a black stopwatch.

Twain cracked open a smile and said, "You really know me well. Let's start the time."

The other coaches also came to the training ground and greeted Twain and Kerslake. Some of them were the same people who had helped Twain when he was still coaching here. A few of them were poached from other clubs and had a good relationship with Kerslake. They were new to Twain.

When Twain saw Freddy Eastwood, who went back to be an assistant manager among the coaches, he went up to say hello to him, "Do you feel free now, Freddy?"

"Of course, I feel good now, Chief!" Eastwood smiled and said to Twain, "I don't have to think about matters like what tactics the team should use to beat Manchester United when I get up in the morning anymore."

Twain smiled. People like Eastwood were fit to be assistant managers and did not have much ambition. It was good this way. He could feel comfortable as an assistant manager to Twain. Eastwood was familiar with the team and popular with the players and fans. He would be a good assistant manager ...

The coaches also saw the new manager come so early and came to the training ground earlier. So, a scene was formed where the coaches had all gathered and waited for the players on the pitch.

When Mattock first ran from the locker room to the pitch, he quickly muttered to himself what a close call it was when he saw such a situation. If he had dawdled and came later, then he would be in trouble ... Joe Mattock was clear about the boss' temper. He might usually have a good relationship with him, but if he violated one of his rules, then he would still get into trouble despite the good relationship.

Since he was not late, then there was no need to be afraid of his boss. Mattock smiled and said hello to Twain, "Good morning, boss."

"Good morning, lad. Where are the others?" Twain asked.

"They are all in the back and will come out soon..." Mattock turned his head back to look toward the direction of the locker room. He was not certain if his teammates would actually follow and quickly come out. But he hoped that Silva and Balotelli would be five or six minutes late...

He did not get what he wanted. All the players appeared on the training ground, neatly dressed before the stipulated time to gather.

Twain looked his soldiers, his men, and felt sorry. "You're so lucky, guys." He shook his head and said, "How I wish you could delay in the locker room until 10:15, from 9:30 to 10:15, 45 minutes, one lap every ten seconds. My math is not very good, so you can calculate how many laps you have to run. Maybe the whole morning's training session would have to be spent on running, but I don't care. Nonetheless it's a shame..." He sighed heavily.

"You lucky bastards. But don't be in such a hurry to breathe a sigh of relief." He pointed to the players who were just getting ready to let out a long breath. He said, "From now on, until the end of the season, we'll have six months' time of interaction. I'll have a chance to catch you."

With that, Twain paused for a moment. He swept his gaze across all the players. He could see a lot of things in the eyes of those people. Some people looked at him excitedly and were full of anticipation for the future; some people bowed their heads and he did not know what was on their minds; there were also other people who averted their eyes in the moment he met gazes with them, unwilling to make further contact; of course, some people looked him unfalteringly as if to deliberately remind Twain of their own existence.

After sweeping his eyes over everyone, Twain spoke again, "I'm a retired man. Look at the white hair on my head." He said, pointing to both sides of his temples, "But if any of you think I'm old, I say to you, bring it on!"

The eyes of some people among the players lit up.