

Champions 131

Chapter 131: Merry Christmas, Tony Part 2

Tang En thought about it for a long time. There were plenty of good strikers and front field players, but good center backs were pitifully few. The defenders he was familiar with could not be bought with the Forest team's current league rankings, prestige, and financial resources.

He could only dig from the Forest team's opponents in the English Football League Championship. Tang En sighed. He somewhat missed the scouting tool in FM. After all, the manpower was limited and not as convenient and fast like the computer system. Thinking about it, Tang En suddenly had a flash of inspiration in his head. Why not imitate the Football Manager and Championship Manager games and build a scouting data system? The information of the players visited by the club scouts could be entered into the computer system. It could be as detailed as the player's name, age, place of birth, position, all the clubs he had played for, his technical characteristics, game videos, related media reports... all of the information. It would be updated once a year. When a manager required a player in a certain position, he could find one directly in the computer database system. Wouldn't that be a lot easier? It could also save a lot of manpower and resources.

With this in mind, Tang En decided to mention this plan to Doughty some other time and spend money to commission a programming company to develop a database like this and apply for a patent. If the result was good, they might also be able to promote this to the other clubs. It was always a bonus to make some money.

Walker and the coaching team were fully in charge of the training. Besides having a meeting with the coaching team every morning, Tang En would review the training program and schedule for the day and basically that was the extent of him interfering with the team's training.

At first, those players who had just joined the team that season were still a little uncomfortable with it. How could the team manager not care about the training? But soon those old players who had been in the Forest team since last season told them: "The chief is such a manager, as long as he can win the game, does it matter whether he's personally overseeing the drills during the training time, or just impeccably dressed in a suit, watching from the sidelines?"

Yes, there were many types of managers. Some managers did not like to personally drill the team. They usually systematically developed the training plan, and then handed it over to the assistant manager to execute, like the former Barcelona manager, the Dutchman van Gaal. And some managers had no training programs and liked to participate in the training. They might adjust their training ideas at any time, such as the former Barcelona manager, now Newcastle manager, Sir Bobby Robson.

Tang En was clearly somewhere between them, but as his experience grew, his approach to the training gradually became closer to Louis van Gaal, even though he did not quite like this Dutch manager.

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The days when the sun could be seen in the sky were gradually becoming a lot less. The weather was now usually damp with continuous rain, and the wetlands were wetter. Visible white mist could be seen

coming out of one's mouth when breathing and talking. The temperature was dropping every day, and the sense of the year's end was becoming stronger.

Christmas was coming. This was the most important festival in the Western culture, equivalent to the Lunar New Year in China. Nottingham City was brimming with the thick festive atmosphere and had lights and decorations everywhere. A more than 10-meter-high Christmas tree was erected in front of the Victoria Center in the city center. With lights hanging high, the brilliant lights on the Christmas tree could be seen from afar when the lights were on at night. The city lights almost lighted up half the sky. Such a scene would only appear in the ancient city of Nottingham during Christmas.

A small Christmas tree was also placed at the club's training ground, and the base of the tree was filled with the small gifts that the club had prepared for the players. Tang En did not know whether the Forest club had such a tradition before, but from the players' expressions of pleasant surprise, he guessed it was part of what Allan Adams said about "public relations with the team."

Every present had a player's name on the gift packaging. Everyone from the First Team to the youth team had a gift. And all the coaches' gifts were sent directly to their offices and placed on their desks.

In the first building lobby of the training ground, the players were happily rummaging around the Christmas tree to look for their gifts. Whenever someone found his, he would lift it up and let out a cheer. And he could not wait to open it. There were not many variety of gifts. It was basically a small gadget attached with a greeting card, and not too expensive. But the club's kind intentions still made a lot of people feel warmth in their hearts.

Tang En looked at these players who were "celebrating the Chinese New Year" and chuckled while he stood at the main entrance. He did not hurry them to the training ground. No matter how much their weekly salaries were, most of them were still kids, and sometimes they should loosen up when it was time to unwind.

Today was December 24th, Christmas Eve, the last day before Christmas. The team would only train in the morning and the afternoon would be a half-day holiday. The team would be on leave until the day after Christmas when the players returned to gather in the afternoon. They would then get ready to play against Norwich City in an away game, which was the match in the 25th round of the English Football League Championship.

Tang En saw the figure of George Wood on the outer edge of the crowd. Ever since his return to the First Team, he had not had time to go back to the youth team to take a look. But he felt very gratified when he saw Wood was much more mature in every aspect. Kerslake valued Wood as much as he did. Under his care, he would not worry about the boy not playing in games.

George Wood did not squeeze with the players, instead he waited outside while he gazed around like he was looking for someone.

Tang En felt he must be looking for him, and sure enough, Wood walked straight to Tony when he saw him.

"Hi, Merry Christmas, George." Tang En waved his hand first to greet him.

“Merry Christmas.” Wood wore the club’s standard issued winter sports jacket, which was thick when worn on him, but without the puffiness. On the contrary, he looked Herculean with his 1.86-meter height and after a year of professional training, he no longer merely “resembled” a professional player. “Do you have anything going on this evening?”

Tang En spread opened his hands. “No. I’m by myself, I have nothing on.”

“... My mother invites you to our house for dinner tonight.” Wood hesitated for a moment before he told Twain his purpose of finding him.

Sophia? Upon hearing this, Tang En’s first thought was to think of the night when he was alone with Sophia. He immediately smiled and said, “Okay, tell your mother I’ll be there this evening.”

But Wood did not walk away at once, instead he stood before Twain and continued to look at him.

“Is there anything else, George?” Tang En asked him.

Wood then turned to the Christmas tree, where there were a few people now. He found his gift easily. Then he took his Christmas present, turned around to leave, and went back to the youth training ground.

Tang En looked at his back, shrugged his shoulders, and walked toward his office.

After he pushed the door open, he was startled by what he saw. His desk was piled with all kinds of gifts, big boxes and small boxes... There was even a potted Christmas tree tied with a ribbon!

Seeing this scene, the truth was that Tang En was very touched. For a manager, besides the scores, what else would give him a sense of accomplishment, make him feel that everything he had done was worthwhile and feel gratified? It was recognition and acknowledgement from the players, fans and club: you shoulder all our hopes, you are the manager of Nottingham Forest, and not some nobody who came from nowhere!

Looking at the table full of presents, Tang En knew that as the “new” coach who had led the team to play two matches, he had already gained the trust and support of the team. Was this simply because the team had won two consecutive victories? No, it was because of the incident in the London subway when he had stood in front of the team and faced the drunk Millwall fans. Tang En had not known how the players had regarded him when they were behind him.

It was a common occurrence in the brutal world of professional football to abandon the players for one’s own future. The managers were used to sacrificing the players for their own benefit. However, Tang En chose to bravely stand up to protect his players when faced with a potential life-threatening situation. Maybe he did it because of Gavin’s death, but in the players’ eyes, this man was a manager who deserved everything that they could do to help him gain victories and win success and recognition. If he said, “Guys, I need you to win this game.” Then no matter how powerful the opponents were, they would fight with confidence and resolution.

This pile of gifts came from the players, coaches, team doctors, the club chairman, and the marketing manager who had not officially started yet but had already started working. Most of them were just greeting cards, but Tang En still opened and looked at each one of them. He was as happy as if he had received a valentine card from a girl he liked when he was still at school.

Serhiy Rebrov: Thank you, sir, for helping me regain my confidence. I once regretted coming here and thought that I was just wasting my time. But now I'm very glad I'm playing under your guidance. Merry Christmas, I wish you happiness every day.

Des Walker: Merry Christmas, Tony! Although I'm leaving the team at the end of this season, working together with you during this period has been an invaluable experience, and I've learned a lot from you. Hopefully someday, we'll still have an opportunity to work together again. Remember, we're the best partners!

Edward Doughty: Tony, don't forget our plan! Victory! Victory! We will become the best chairman and manager of the club. Also, Merry Christmas!

Allan Adams: Merry Christmas, Tony. I hope this time next year we will be spending it in the Premier League. By the way, your proposal to build a player database system is so exciting to Edward and me—it is such a great Christmas present. I'll fly back to America after Christmas to handle it.

Tang En's eyes misted over when he looked at these cards. He rubbed his eyes and continued reading. On this cold winter morning, the office door was opened, and the cold draft poured in from the corridor, but Tang En felt that the room was like a warm spring day.

Chapter 132: Christmas Present Part 1

In England, Christmas is the most important holiday of the year. As such, regardless of how thrifty everyone usually is, during this time of the year everyone will rush into the malls with their families and splurge. A Christmas tree is something that every family has to buy, and they also have to prepare Christmas gifts for their children and friends. During this season, there will always be a wide array of discounted items for sale in the shops, causing one to be spoiled for choice. Although England's shops start to enter their peak sales season one month before Christmas, the real peak is always right before Christmas Eve.

The afternoon sky gradually darkened, and it had even begun to drizzle. Although the weather forecast had reported that the temperature from the afternoon onwards would only be eight degrees Celsius, it was unable to stop everyone's passion for buying things. The various shops in the Nottingham shopping district were all brightly lit up, and all the shops had advertisements for their store's discounts in order to draw in more customers. Tang En was strolling through the streets, and he could often see people who were content with their purchases walk past him. Seeing those people hugging and lugging around bags which were almost half the size of a person, Tang En felt worried for them. He walked from one store to another and hopped from mall to mall, thoroughly enjoying the festive mood. This was his first Christmas spent in England! Moreover, seeing this kind of festive mood, Tang En could not help but be reminded of the Spring Festival in China.

The laughter of small groups of strangers sounded beside Tang En as they walked past him, and their faces were filled with excited smiles as they carried shopping bags of all sizes. Regardless of how much sadness the past year had held, all of that was in the past.

One hour passed unnoticed, but Tang En's hands remained empty. That was because he simply did not know what kinds of gifts he should get for Sophia and Wood.

Tang En had never been good at buying gifts for other people. If given the choice, he would rather just give them money.

All of Wood's soccer equipment was provided by the club, so there was no need for Tang En to buy him a pair of soccer shoes. As for Sophia... Thinking of her name, Tang En was not even sure what kind of feelings he had for that woman. The pity that he had for the weak, which he had used to feel towards her, had slowly faded. Instead, another feeling was slowly blooming within his heart.

In the end, Tang En picked a red wool scarf for Sophia, and decided not buy anything for Wood because he already knew what present he should give him.

When the golden star on top of the Christmas tree downtown lit up at six o'clock in the evening, Landy James's black rental car was parked outside of Wood's house. The song "We Wish You A Merry Christmas" was playing in the car. Amidst the children's joyous singing voices, Tang En pulled out three nicely wrapped gifts and gave them to Landy, who had accompanied him for the past year.

"Merry Christmas, Landy. Thank you for driving me around for the past year. You can return the car now and go be with your family. These presents are for you and your family." After watching Landy receive the presents, Tang En opened the car door, ready to leave.

"Wait, Tony." Landy stopped him and said, "I've also prepared a... Erm, you're a manager, so you definitely make more than me. I didn't know what I should give you, so I just wrote a greeting card for you." He pulled out an envelope with the card inside and passed it to Tang En. "Merry Christmas, Tony. I hope you have a great evening. When you're going home, remember to give me a call." He made a phoning gesture before restarting the car engine.

After Tang En watched Landy leave, he lowered his head and opened the folded card. As expected, there was something written on it.

"Tony, thank you for choosing not to leave Nottingham Forest during the summer. I know that you were in a difficult situation at that time, and that there were also many other teams which were inviting you over. Actually, I was very worried that you would leave, but out of consideration for your own well-being, I could not say anything at the time. But everything turned out well. You stayed on and returned. Two consecutive wins! Bring us more victories, Tony! We love you! Merry Christmas!"

Tang En lightly shook his head, smiling. British people had a habit of bashfully expressing their inner feelings, regardless of whether they were of joy or of sorrow. It was therefore no wonder that they were so passionate about soccer; the stadium was the only place where they could express their inner emotions to their heart's content. Landy was an example of that kind of typical Englishman.

Tang En raised his head and surveyed the surrounding streets, and discovered the greatest difference from when he had first come here: there were "Merry Christmas" signs displayed in the windows of each and every household. In addition, there were even some houses which had hung a series of colored lights on their walls or had inflatable snowmen displayed in front of their doors. Regardless of how tough and difficult their lives usually were, they could not afford to be stingy during festive seasons. Although this was the slums of Nottingham, the festive mood here was in no way inferior to the bustling shopping district downtown.

Tang En raised his head and looked at the Wood family's windows. The curtains had been drawn, allowing the orange-yellow light inside the house to escape outside. Tang En thought about Sophia and Wood who lived there, and even though it was a dark and drizzling night, it was still enough to make his heart feel warm and fuzzy.

Knocking and pushing open the door, Tang En saw George Wood with his sleeves rolled up. Evidently, he was in the midst of helping his mother.

"Ah, I came at the right time. Do you need help?" Tang En asked.

Wood nodded his head and replied, "Yes."

Sophia, who had heard their conversation from the second floor, shouted, "No! Mr. Twain, you just sit down and rest!" Hearing her panting voice, Tang En smiled and replied in the same loud voice, "Don't put on a front, Madam! I'll make some Chinese cuisine for you guys. It's something that I've just learned," he said, laughing.

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After much bustling, the three of them weren't able to sit around the dining room table to enjoy their Christmas Eve dinner until after 8pm.

There was a small Christmas tree in the corner of the combined living and dining room, and it was decorated with colored lights and greeting cards. There were also colored ribbons strung from one corner of the ceiling to the other, and an old-fashioned candlestick placed in the center of the dining room table. On top of the candlestick was a brightly-lit white candle. Seeing the sumptuous spread of food on the table, Tang En felt that it was very similar to the Chinese reunion dinner, where the entire family would gather together and make merry. The only difference was that he and Wood were not family.

Before they started eating, Sophia returned to her bedroom and changed into her best-looking winter clothes. At the same time, she also touched up her makeup, which had partially come off while she was roasting the turkey. Her hair was no longer tied up, and instead was fully let down. Under the lights, her hair gave off a black luster and looked like a waterfall. Tang En felt that this lady had taken on an entirely new look. Compared to when they first met, the current Sophia was like a completely different person. Even the sickness in her body had been chased out.

When Tang En saw Sophia's eyes, full of tender affection under the candlelight, and her smile, which carried a tinge of shyness, he felt that he already knew the reason for her drastic change.

Feeling that fiery gaze from Sophia, Tang En looked away somewhat abashedly. He noticed the presents which he had left under the Christmas tree when he first entered, and decided that he might as well take that opportunity to go and get the gifts.

"Merry Christmas, Madam. This is for you." Tang En passed the nicely wrapped scarf to Sophia.

"It's really beautiful... How did you know that I like red, Mr. Twain?" Sophia said with shock, as she unwrapped the gift and took out the red scarf from within.

That can't be right? What a coincidence! Tang En was slightly dumbfounded. "Err... Sometimes, a man's intuition can be pretty spot on." That was the only way he could explain it.

Sophia happily wrapped the scarf around her neck before running back into her room and looking into the mirror.

During this short interval, Tang En looked at Wood who was seated opposite him. Wood was also looking at him, but neither of them said anything, which caused a slightly awkward atmosphere between the two of them. After a while, Wood finally opened his mouth, lowered his voice, and said, "My mom also has a present for you. If you don't want it, I'll kill you." It was apparent that he did not want his mother, who was in the room, to hear.

Tang En smiled. "Of course I won't reject it. Why would I do that?"

Hearing this, a sliver of a smile appeared on Wood's face as well.

"George, looks like you're doing great on the youth team." Tang En took the opportunity to say with concern. "How much time does Coach Kerlake give you for every match now?"

"I just got to play throughout an entire match," Wood replied.

"How do you feel about your performance?"

"Very good." It did not sound fake in any way, and there were no fluctuations in Wood's voice when he said it. The casual way in which he had said it implied that that kind of performance was a given.

Tang En nodded his head and did not say anything else. At that moment, Sophia emerged from her bedroom with a box in her hands. The scarf around her neck was already nowhere to be seen, evidence that she had carefully stowed it away.

"This present is for you, Mr. Twain. Merry Christmas to you too!"

"Thank you, Madam." Upon receiving the box, Tang En opened it up. To his surprise, it was also a scarf! But this one was white.

"I noticed that you didn't seem to have a scarf, so I knitted one myself. Because I didn't know what size would fit, I used George as a model," Sophia said as she turned her head and smiled at her son. "At first, he thought that I was making it for him, and refused it profusely."

Tang En gently stroked the purely hand-knitted scarf, which did not have a store label. Just from putting his hands on it, he was able to feel its warmth. In reality, it was not that he didn't have a scarf, it was just that he wasn't in the habit of wearing one in the winter. But perhaps from that day on, he would get into the habit.

Seeing the slightly distressed Wood, Tang En smiled. "George, so sorry. I didn't bring your present today. Wait till I return from Norwich, and find me in my office."

Wood nodded his head, but did not ask why. This disappointed Tang En slightly. He had originally expected Wood to ask "why", so that he could unravel the mystery.

“Erm... After the winter break, the team will have two EFL Cup semi-finals matches, and we just happen to be lacking a defensive midfielder. I intend to move you over to the first team, and if you perform well, you will stay and sign an entirely different contract... This time, it will be a professional contract for the first team.”

Before Wood’s face could have any expression, Sophia, who was at his side, shouted with surprise. “Is that true, Mr. Twain?”

Tang En nodded his head and said, “Your son will soon become a real, professional soccer player, Madam.”

At that moment, Wood was finally struck by the realization of what had happened. He looked at the smiling man in shock. Tang En liked that expression on Wood, so he said with a smile, “Merry Christmas, George.”

Chapter 133: Christmas Present Part 2

After the Christmas Eve dinner, Tang En left for home. At first, he had thought that he would have to spend this Christmas “all alone.” However, not only had he managed to eat a sumptuous “reunion dinner” at Wood’s house, he had even received a present. With the white scarf around his neck, Tang En was no longer afraid of the cold.

The next morning, Tang En discovered that the streets were extremely quiet. The bustling sight of families going out to play, which he had expected to see, did not appear. This caused him to think that he had woken up too early. As a result, he went back to sleep and woke up several times, until he felt something was amiss. He then checked his watch, only to discover that it was already 10am.

As part of his daily routine, Tang En went to the mailbox outside his door to collect the newspaper, and discovered that there were two other letters that had dropped out of the mailbox alongside the newspaper.

Tang En did not remember having friends outside of the club who would mail letters to his house.

Tang En picked up the letters and opened them. The first one had been sent by Yang Yan from Liverpool. Aside from the festive greetings, there were also details written in the letter, saying that she was still interning there and would stay there for at least half a year. She apologized for not being able to continue conducting lessons for Tang En, and tactfully proposed her intention of cancelling the Chinese classes. After all, Tang En’s current command of Chinese language was already very good; he was adept at listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Tang En could only shrug his shoulders at this. For the past half a year, the Chinese classes had basically been on a hiatus. On one hand, this was because of the fact that Yang Yan was always very busy during her last semester; on the other hand, aside from preparing the team to compete in matches, Tang En had been secretly learning how to train the team from Kerslake. In addition, he had also been looking through and analyzing the original Tony Twain’s soccer books, lesson plans, and notes that had been left in the house. The failure of the previous season made him realize that he still had many shortcomings. Someone like him, who already had a coaching license, could not possibly undertake lessons in a

coaching school. At the same time, he did not want anyone to find out that he actually knew nothing at all and was a fraud. In addition, he could only try to learn alone at home, not daring to tell anyone for fear of raising suspicions and giving himself away.

Therefore, canceling those time-wasting and meaningless Chinese lessons was probably a good thing.

The second letter was an airmail, and on top of the postmark was a word that Tang En was very familiar with: "Brazil"!

This discovery agitated Tang En. It had already been half a year, and he had almost forgotten about that person's existence. He had assumed that the other party must have also forgotten about that experience in the summer. To think that...

He tore open the envelope, and it was indeed a Christmas card. A yellow colored paper fell out from in between the folds. Tang En bent over to pick it up and carefully dusted off the dirt on top of it before opening it.

"Dear Uncle Tony, you haven't forgotten about me, have you? Guess who I am... You must be frowning, unable to guess my identity, right?"

The beautiful handwriting was filled with that playful tone.

"Forget it, let me reveal the answer myself! If you want to know who I am, please look at the signature!"

After reading this far, Tang En could no longer hold in his laughter. There's no need for that, I already know who you are...

"After returning to Brazil, I returned to my model training again, which I hate... but in the end, I still promised mommy that I will work hard towards becoming a supermodel. You want to know why? I won't tell you, you have to guess! This time, even if you read to the end, you won't find the answer."

Tang En shifted his sight downwards, and discovered that there really were no answers written there.

"It is currently bright and sunny in Brazil. It must be raining there in England, right? When I'm with Auntie Ryan, there always seems to be only one conversation topic: she is always complaining to us about how terrible England's weather is, and how she envies the sunlight of Brazil. I find that pretty weird; if she hates the wetness of England so much, why doesn't she move to Brazil? Still, I think it's better for her to not move. Otherwise, I won't have an excuse the next time I want to run away from home. That reminds me—speaking of running away from home, I still haven't apologized for that incident from last time. My daddy and mommy are very strict with me, and they both hope that I can become a model. They even say that I am very gifted in that respect. But why can't I see it? I don't like them, because they are always forcing me to practice this and that. Of course, an uncle like you whose head is filled with soccer is really boring as well. But I still feel like you are better than my daddy and mommy."

Hey, brat!

"So, if I ever run away and find you again, you are not allowed to chase me away, and you're not allowed to collect rent from me. Therefore, you have to keep my Totoro safe on my behalf. Hey, Uncle Tony, you haven't thrown it away right?! I know that all grownups like you hate soft, furry toys..."

How could that be possible? That toy is still placed safely in my bedroom. Even if I don't like it, that doesn't mean that I would just throw it away. After all, it doesn't take up much space...

"...Actually, I only wanted to write 'Merry Christmas, Uncle Tony' at first, and mail it out like that. But I suddenly had so many things I wanted to say to you, so I just wrote them on this piece of letter paper. Daddy and mommy never hear me out about these things, so I can only talk about them to you. I hope you don't find me annoying. A soccer manager shouldn't be all that busy right?"

If I receive your letter, then I of course won't be busy at all, brat.

"I also think you shouldn't be busy, seeing as you are so carefree every day, as though you were unemployed. Alright, alright, that's all I have to say. Lastly, wishing you a merry Christmas, Uncle Tony!"

The sign-off was written as "Missing you, Jor", and had a smiley face drawn beside it.

This was perhaps the greeting card that made Tang En happiest upon receiving it. He had originally thought that she was just a passerby in his life, but instead their paths had intersected once again. Recalling that young girl's playful smile and her accent, as well as that crisp-sounding "Uncle Tony" made Tang En feel that this darned overcast was no different from the sunlight shining over the Brazilian beaches. How adorable!

This really is a perfect Christmas! Tang En, still wearing his pajamas, stood in front of the door and laughed foolishly, completely forgetting to go back inside.

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In the afternoon, the team resumed normal training. Tang En went to the training grounds with the eye-catching white scarf around his neck. By the time he reached them, the players were already waiting for him on the field.

"Merry Christmas, lads! How was your Christmas?" Tang En waved and said loudly in front of the players.

"Very good, Chief."

"Not bad, Boss."

The players replied at the same time. Tang En noticed that Dawson was not in a very good mood, and knew that it must have been because he only had two matches left with the team before he had to leave them.

"Hey, Michael, were you kicked out of bed by your girlfriend again?" Tang En suddenly asked. "Why are you so listless?"

"Huh? No! No! She wouldn't dare to..." Dawson was in the midst of replying, before he discovered that he had been tricked. The teammates around him burst into laughter. "Chief, you tricked me again," he said, somewhat indignantly.

"Alright, alright." Tang En waved his hands, gesturing for the rest to stop laughing. "Lads, we will be playing two consecutive matches on the 27th and 28th. It will be an away match followed by a home match, and that's gonna be really demanding. I hope that all of you have already finished recharging

your energy over Christmas! Not playing for ten days has made my body itch all over, what about you guys?" Tang En raised his voice and asked.

"Same, Chief!" The players replied to him in a loud voice.

"Very good. We should not be ranked fourth from the bottom. Take down all of our opponents, and we'll be going to the Premier League next season!" Tang En clenched his fists.

Two days later, on the 27th of December, Nottingham Forest, under the leadership of Tang En, put up a tenacious defense and launched a one-time sneak attack, allowing them to defeat the current top-ranked team with a score of 1:0 on their home turf, in Norwich City's Carrow Road Stadium. With this, their rank increased by one, moving them to fifth from the bottom. It was obvious that Norwich City had underestimated their opponents. Faced against Nottingham Forest's seamless defense, their players became increasingly impatient after being unable to break the stalemate after seventy-nine minutes. In the end, their fullback made a mistake, and Tang En naturally accepted this present happily. The circumstances did not seem to favour Nottingham Forest, but they won anyway. To Nottingham Forest, this match was not as simple as obtaining three points. What was more important than points and rankings was the return of the team's confidence. Tang En used the victory to convince the players that they could beat any team. Regardless of whether they were ranked first or last, they would be able to win. This would have a crucial impact on future matches.

Nottingham Forest, who had won a match in Norwich, got onto a bus and rushed back to Nottingham the same night. The next day, they would be welcoming Westham United, which had been relegated from the Premier League, at City Ground Stadium.

To Tang En, this opponent held a very special meaning. On January 4th, in the third round of the English FA Cup, he had faced off against Westham United in the same stadium. It had been his first time leading a team, and it was also then when he had confirmed the direction which he was moving in: natural manager. Now, almost one year has passed, and he had experienced a lot in that one year. Leaving and returning, failing to get the team promoted to the Premier League, and Westham United being relegated to League One just as he had "cursed" them during the press conference. Facing off against this team in City Ground Stadium again made him feel as though he was back at his starting point.

The opponent, venue, and goal were all the same as well: to be promoted to the Premier League by the end of the season.

This time, I, Tang En, will definitely not fail!

On the 28th of December, at Nottingham's City Ground Stadium, Nottingham Forest defeated Westham United, who was ranked eighth in the league, with a score of 2:0.

Nottingham Forest, who had obtained four consecutive wins in the league, had also risen from being ranked twentieth to eighteenth. It was just as Pearce Bruce had written in the newspaper:

"Tony Twain's team is currently on an expressway, speeding and rapidly heading in the right direction!"

Chapter 134: The Rookie Reports Part 1

January 1, 2004, was New Year's Day for the others, the start of a new year. But for Tang En, there was another layer of excitement for him—the winter transfer window was finally open. For the first time, he could experience that feeling of being a manager, running around, brandishing the checkbook everywhere, and signing the players he admired.

Of course, it was inevitable that as he welcomed new players, he also had to send some players off.

Michael Dawson and Andy Reid were leaving for London on that day. With a value of £8,000,000, they were joining the Premier League elite squad, Tottenham Hotspur. There was a small press conference to welcome them.

And 33-year-old Eoin Jess also told Twain that although he was delighted to see Twain back on the Forest Team, he wished to leave the club at the end of this season and return to the team where he first made his debut, Aberdeen, to retire.

Tang En did not try to persuade him to stay, because he and Jess knew that the chances of Jess playing this season were getting slimmer. Even if the team succeeded in their promotion to the Premier League, there would not be a position for him. No matter how many goals and the number of assists he had contributed to the team, it was useless. The current Forest team was still not qualified to be a retirement home.

This was also a cruel aspect of professional football. The old men would naturally be replaced by younger people. With the constant injection of new blood, a team would always retain its vitality.

The other player who would be leaving the team was the striker, Craig Westcarr. The 19-year-old had not played much after he entered the First Team, and furthermore, his ability fell too short of Tang En's requirements. It just so happened that there were two clubs who had submitted a purchase application for him. Even though the money was not much, only £150,000, Tang En agreed. The remaining thing was for Westcarr himself to negotiate the contract with the two teams.

The old scout Storey-Moore came back from Leeds and did not bring Tang En the results he wanted. The Lennon family was even more loyal than he had imagined. Even if Moore had offered a signing fee of £100,000, it could not shake their belief that they would remain at Leeds to sign a career contract.

Tang En shrugged his shoulders to this and did not blame Moore. He did his best. But he knew that if there were no surprises, Leeds would be relegated at the end of this season and was certain to be bankrupt. By that time, there was no reason he would not be able to buy Lennon if he made an offer. As for Lennon himself... Would he prefer to play in League One or go to the Premier League? It was too easy to make a choice to this question.

The only pity was that it would take a lot more money than £100,000 to purchase Lennon, the 17-year-old genius. Hotspur had spent one £1,000,000 in the 05-06 season to buy Lennon from Leeds. Tang En believed that to purchase during the 04-05 season would not be more than one million, but it was unlikely to be much less.

Rebuilding the team during the winter break was risky, and Tang En could only do minor revamps. The main team would remain unchanged. He could fully tap into their potential and rely on them to play and advance into the Premier League. Then he could reconsider the reconstruction plan. In fact, in all fairness, the players that Collymore bought basically still had strong abilities. But he did not train these

players well, did not create a cohesive team to form a strong enough fighting power. A divided team, even one like the powerful Real Madrid could end up with an embarrassing situation of coming up empty-handed for three consecutive championship seasons, not to mention Nottingham Forest.

As for the center back, Moore had recommended a player for Twain. After only watching several of his game videos, Tang En decided to buy him.

Clint Hill was an example of a good bargain for a full back in the CM era. He was supposed to play for Stoke City this season and it would become more difficult to buy him. But with the arrival of Tang En, the ripple effect of the influence on this world proliferated, it had also changed Hill's career trajectory. The Stoke City team did not managed to agree on a transfer fee with Hill's Oldham Athletic before the transfer window was closed. Hill could only remain in the League Two team, Oldham Athletic. And Tang En took advantage of the situation at this time.

Hill, who was not so tall, was only 1.83 meters, but his physical fitness was excellent and his abilities for headers, tackling, and marking were outstanding. The only problem was that he lacked defensive and positional awareness. His strengths and weaknesses were clearly detailed in Moore's scout report. However, for Tang En, having such a full back as the main force in League One was not an issue. Even when they were in the Premier League, it would not be a problem. The substitute position for the main force would at least be guaranteed.

Therefore, Tang En instructed the club to contact Oldham Athletic to propose the acquisition of Clint Hill. Although Hill was now the main center back in Oldham Athletic, Tang En knew that neither the club nor the player himself could refuse his request.

Moore also did not return empty-handed from Leeds. When he could not get Lennon, and Twain did not further request, he judged that the team lack players on the wings based on his own experience. So, he brought back a young player's training video from Leeds United for Twain.

"Stephen McPhail. The 24-year-old Republic of Ireland national footballer was capped seven times and scored one goal. He can play two positions in the left wing of the midfield and middle of the midfield. He's a very creative player with outstanding passing and crosses. I think if Taylor is the main striker, then he'll come in handy." Moore pointed to the Leeds United player on the television screen who was dribbling to break through.

Tang En nodded in agreement with Moore's point of view. This little guy's personal skill was indeed good, even better than Reid who had just left the team. Although he did not get Lennon, the left wing in the midfield should be fine if he was added in.

"But ... his value must not be low?" This was what Tang En was most concerned about. He only had £8,000,000 to spend this season. He had to use it sparingly.

Moore nodded, then shook his head again. "4.4 million pounds. But I suggest you loan him. Leeds and he want to get more chances to play through being on loan. The only problem is Leeds expects us to pay 90% of his salary."

Tang En frowned. Was Leeds United so poor to the point that they could hardly afford to pay their players? "How much is that?"

“His weekly salary is £9,000.”

Tang En turned to look at Moore, with his eyes widened. “Leeds should just simply go rob a bank. Only Rebrov is drawing a weekly salary of over £10,000 on the Forest Team. He’s only a short-term loan, and I have to dig out 9,000 per week... Forget it. I don’t want him. It’s not as if I do not have other candidates for the left midfield.”

When he heard Twain said this, Moore was also interested. He found that the manager’s knowledge of many players seemed to be no less than his. For example, Eastwood was discovered by Twain. So, he asked, “Who have you taken a liking to again?”

Tang En took his notepad and pen which were always with him, wrote a name on it, and handed it to Moore, “Mr. Moore, you help me pay a visit to Stoke City to see how this man is doing.”

“Kris Commons?” Moore stared at this name and then gave a firm nod, “I know who he is. You have taken a fancy to him?”

“Well, his team played against us last season. He was brought on at the last minute, but he caused a lot of trouble for my team. His team eventually lost six goals to us in that game, but he was the only Stoke City player who I remembered.” Tang En nodded and said, “His breakthrough, crosses, long shots, powerful free kicks... he is not a bad left midfielder. And I don’t think his price will be too high, so we don’t have to have that £9,000-weekly-salary guy.”

On the television screen, McPhail beautifully went up against two opposing players on the wing alone. Then he deployed a very imaginative way to send the football through the middle of the two players, and he increased his speed to bypass around them. At this time, his opponents were still rooted to the ground and did not know where the football had gone. It was immediately followed by a beautiful cross, which he assisted his teammate to score.

Watching this scene, Tang En coughed a few times. “Well, actually, it’s not bad to loan him. After all, I do not know whether Commons can persist and appear in every game without any injury or illness. All right, it looks like we need to have a good talk with Leeds.”

Next to him, a hint of a smile appeared on Moore’s face again.

It was at this point that the cell phone in Tang En’s pocket rang. It was a call from the entrance guard, Ian MacDonald.

“Tony, I have a guy here who wants to see you. He says he’s a newly signed player for the Forest Team, but I think he looks like a liar.”

There was a quick-talking and sharp voice on the other end of the call. “I’m not a liar! I am a professional footballer! Shall I give you the original agreement? Damn it! Sabina, quickly help me find that agreement!” It was followed by the sound of a baby crying.

When he heard these, Tang En smiled and asked MacDonald, “Ian, the ‘liar’ you referred to, did he drive a yellow wagon to come here?”

“That’s right, Tony. It almost blocked the front gate! I’ve never seen a ‘professional player’ who has a home in a wagon. What do you mean he’s not a liar? And...”

“I said it before, I’m not a liar! I have proof!” The sharp voice rang out again. Even Moore could hear it.

Tang En and Moore glanced at each other in tacit understanding and laughed.

“Ian, you did well. I’ll be right over.”

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When Tang En and Moore hurried to the front gate of the training ground, Eastwood was still in an argument with Ian MacDonald. The old guard dutifully listened to Twain’s instructions and refused to let the Romanichal Gypsy who did not look like a professional footballer enter the training ground. And Eastwood was waving his arms at MacDonald in frustration because he and his wife could not find the agreement. His wife, Sabina, was calming her child on the side as the little baby was apparently frightened by his father’s sharp quarreling sound. He was crying nonstop in his mother’s arm and struggled with all his strength.

This was indeed a boisterous scene!

Chapter 135: The Rookie Reports Part 2

This stalemate was finally broken by Tang En’s and Moore’s loud laughter. Whether it was MacDonald or Eastwood, it was a relief to see Tony Twain in front of them—the person who could prove they were right was there.

“Tony, you’re finally here...”

“Mr. Manager, you have to quickly tell him that I am not a liar, I’m a professional footballer!”

At the moment, Tang En could not speak as he was snickering pretty hard while he looked at the two men who were flushed with anger from arguing with each other. Next to him, Moore helped him explain, “I think... this is a misunderstanding between the two of you.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Tang En’s laughter slowly died down. “Ian, thank you for your due diligence. But the person who drove the caravan here in front of you is really a player I signed.”

MacDonald’s mouth opened wide in disbelief. He pointed to the parked yellow caravan that nearly blocked the entire gate and asked, “A professional player who lives in a caravan like this?”

Tang En nodded and did not speak. Eastwood interjected impatiently, “This is our Romanichal tradition!”

Still adamant, MacDonald pointed to the back of the caravan, and there was a trailer attached to the caravan. Tang En stretched his neck to look over and was startled.

“Is a gypsy tradition to bring a horse to the training ground?” The old guard asked.

Eastwood exclaimed, “Yes! When the automobile industry had not emerged yet...ahem, we Romani gypsies have travelled the world with horse-drawn wagons! Horses and dogs are the gypsies’ most faithful companions, they’re just like family...”

He had not finished speaking when he was contradicted by his wife. "Don't be funny, Freddy. I told you to leave it at your father's house, but you wouldn't do it. You see, Mr. Manager's brows are creased."

Tang En was indeed in a somewhat awkward spot. It was still acceptable to park the caravan here, but a horse was another matter. This was a training ground for a professional football team, not a zoo.

"But that's my secret to guarantee that I'm able to maintain my condition!" Eastwood was still reluctant to admit his mistake.

"I've told you a long time ago that your habit of warming up with horseback riding on the morning of every game day should be changed!"

While this young couple argued, a long line was forming outside the blocked gate. The players, coaches, and the other staff members of the club had arrived to start the day's work. But now their cars were stuck outside by Eastwood's caravan and could not get in. A lot of curious players just surrounded the trailer and watched the horse eating the hay with its head down in the trailer and in animated discussion among themselves.

Tang En also found Doughty in the crowd!

Crap, Eastwood, you're so bullheaded! The first day on the team and you already caused this sensation. It's a pity the media is not here, or you would be famous, red-hot popular!

Doughty saw a noisy young man and woman at the gate and moved the crowd aside to walk over. He looked at Twain strangely, "Tony, what's going on?"

Tang En was a bit embarrassed. He scratched his head. "Oh... it's a new player, the first one that I have signed. That's Eastwood. I told you about him." He pointed to the still quarreling Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood. Strangely enough, the child who was just crying non-stop, was now quietly lying in his mother's arms and watching his father and mother quarrel endlessly with his big bright eyes wide open. And he even smiled!

What kind of family was this?

Instead of getting angry, Doughty just smiled. "This is funny. But you'd better advise them to drive in, otherwise we all can't get in."

Tang En nodded and then interrupted the quarrel between Eastwood and his wife. "Excuse me, Eastwood... Well, you can drive the caravan in first. Drive to..." He wanted to say the parking lot, but when he thought about it, with such a big car in the parking lot, it would basically occupy one third of the space. Where would the other cars park? He turned his head and saw an open space at the entrance of Building One, pointed to it, and said, "Drive your caravan there, and we'll further discuss the matter about your horse in detail."

"Very well, I'll listen to you, Mr. Manager." Eastwood gave his young wife a glare, then returned to the car section and started the caravan.

Upon hearing the roar of the engine, the horse in the trailer finally stopped eating and looked up curiously at the players around it.

From the rearview mirror, Eastwood saw the men around his caravan. He waved his hand and shouted, "Guys! Let's make way, I'm going to reverse the caravan!!"

When they heard this, those people hurriedly retreated. The cars that were parked behind the trailer quickly reversed to give way to and make space for this two-in-one colossus.

Tang En and Edward stood at the building entrance and watched Eastwood skillfully reverse, shift the gears, turn the steering wheel, and then smoothly make a turn through the gate to park the car by the entrance. They both exclaimed in admiration.

The entrance way to the gate was cleared, and the others were able to drive in. When they passed by the entrance, they did not forget to greet the manager and Mr. Chairman who stood at the door.

After greeting them, Walker asked, "Tony, did the zoo send a horse?"

Upon hearing this question, Doughty suddenly burst into laughter. Twain looked at Walker in dismay. "Des, why would you think that?"

"Uh... Then who are they?" He pointed to Eastwood and his wife who had come over.

Twain smiled and said to him, "He's the first player I signed during the winter transfer, the future striker of our team, the cheerful and optimistic Romani, Freddy Eastwood, and his wife and child."

Eastwood walked over and spoke at a rapid-fire speed. "Okay, Mr. Manager, I've parked the car there as you requested!"

Completely unprepared, Doughty and Walker could not understand clearly his machine gun-like words. Only Tang En and Moore understood. Tang En nodded. "Very well, Freddy. Let me introduce you." He pointed to Doughty wearing a beige jacket and said.

"Mr. Edward Doughty, the chairman of the club."

Doughty and Eastwood shook hands. "Welcome, lad."

"Hello, Mr. Chairman!"

Tang En pointed to Walker as well and said, "This is the assistant manager of the team."

The two men also shook hands with each other.

After the introduction, Twain said to Eastwood, "Well, there is something you need to know. The club will not hold a special press conference just for you but will let you enter the field before the game to meet the fans at the FA Cup. But whether you're going to be playing in that game depends on the state of your training."

Eastwood nodded. "No problem. It doesn't matter to me that there are no reporters. I do not like press conferences anyways. As long as I can play. Shall we go to the training, Mr. Manager?" He leaned over and asked Twain.

Seeing how he was itching to get on with it, everyone around him laughed.

“Don’t worry, there’s no hurry. Freddy, we still have some things to talk about. Like your horse.” Tang En pointed to a trailer in the distance that was still surrounded by people watching.

“Ah, the horse ...” Eastwood was about to explain when he heard a cough from his wife behind him.

“Well, the horse... All right, you can handle it in whichever way you think.”

When he saw Eastwood become down, Tang En smiled instead, “Don’t treat it like it’s such a serious problem, Freddy. You can place the horse in the care of the zoo.”

Walker coughed beside him, “Tony, Nottingham doesn’t have a zoo.”

“Oh...” Tang En scratched his head awkwardly. “I didn’t expect that a city surrounded by forests has no zoo. Okay... You can still place it in the care of those pet shops. A horse is also considered a pet, right?”

No objections were raised.

“Ok, we’ll place it in the care of a pet store, sign a contract, and let them to take care of it for you. If they don’t take good care of it, they will have to compensate you. Then on every home game morning, you can take out your horse and ride it around the streets to complete your top-secret warm-up.” Tang En clapped his hands. “Don’t you think this is quite good? And if after you perform well, score a lot of goals, and make a lot of money, you can buy a small estate outside Nottingham. That way, you can keep your horse in the garden, and you can ride it whenever you want.”

Eastwood thought about it, then nodded and agreed. “Well, if I find that those pet stores don’t take good care of my horse, I’ll send it back to my father.”

“Very good, now let us solve the second problem... Freddy, do you have to live in the caravan? The era of caravans has passed. And as far as I know, many gypsies are now living in brick houses. Those fixed dwellings have garages.”

Both Eastwood’s and his wife’s opinions were of the same on this point. “I’m sorry, Mr. Manager. We are accustomed to living in a car. Besides, Sam is the son of a gypsy, so he must to live in the caravan first,” said Sabina. The young wife looked at her son in her arms.

He never expected this young couple to be so traditional. Tang En gave up the intention of persuading them and shrugged, “Very well, Freddy. Anyway I just want you to score for me, so I don’t care where you live. It just so happens that there are lots of unused open spaces in the training ground. You can just find a suitable place to park your caravan and set up home. But I have a piece of advice for you. Don’t park too close to the field and be careful of balls flying out of the field and smashing the glass in your home. Go on, pick a good place, park your car there, and you don’t have to worry that the congressman here will come looking to give you trouble. This is our Forest Team’s turf.” Tang En spread his arms and said, “Park your car well and go to the number one training field. We’ll start training shortly.”

Looking at Eastwood running to the distance, Doughty said happily, “Tony, why do you always find the interesting guys?”

Next to them, Walker frowned. “But honestly... Tony, have you seen him play?” Obviously, he did not feel very reassured with this unknown player.

“At an amateur game. That should be considered as having seen him play.” Tang En told the truth. He could not lie about this because Walker’s coaching team had to know every player’s real situation so that they could plan everyone’s training program.

Edward suddenly exclaimed, “Tony, I think I have heard you say this guy’s leg was kicked and broken by one of our players?”

“Yes, by George Wood.”

Walker sighed, “Tony, do you really believe he’s the one we need?”

The yellow caravan was just passing by them, and Eastwood leaned out of the driver’s seat window and shouted at Twain, “Mr. Manager! Which one is the first training ground field?”

Tang En waved his hand to the opposite side of the road, “Look to your right! The one with people on it!”

Eastwood twisted his head to take a look, and then turned back, “I see it! Thank you, Mr. Manager!”

The modern caravan continued to drive forward, then turned a corner in the front and was concealed within the forest.

Then Tang En turned his head back to look at Walker, nodded, and answered his question in an affirmative tone. “I’m certain, Des. He’ll surprise us all.”

Chapter 136: This Is Eastwood! Part 1

This was the day that Eastwood and George Wood first met on the training field. As the rest of the team all watched their new teammate’s style at the gates, they did not appear to be that unfamiliar with Eastwood. Some jokers even cracked jokes to Eastwood about the horse. A very likeable smile remained hanging on the the Gypsy’s face, and he did not seem to take the jokes to heart at all.

Only when he saw George Wood did the smile on his face disappear. He did not greet Wood, shake his hand, or make any other gestures to signify his goodwill. Wood did the same. But this did not mean that Wood bore a grudge like Eastwood did. That was simply the expression he usually wore when meeting strangers. He had long forgotten the name and face of the player whose leg he had once broken due to a reckless foul tackle.

Tang En witnessed the scene from the side. Out of “goodwill,” he did not remind George that he had once broken his new teammate’s leg. Personal grudges between players had to be resolved at a suitable time.

For now... Let’s just leave it alone.

Eastwood was an extrovert and an optimist by nature. This was evident from his continuous smile, and from the fact that he had continued playing football even after he had broken his leg. Tang En was not the least bit worried about him being able to adapt to the team.

But would the Football Association let him on the field?

Nottingham Forest's opponent in the third round of the FA Cup was West Bromwich, which was in League One. Currently, West Bromwich's ranking in the League was not bad at all; they were in second place, with a total of forty-six points after twenty-six rounds of matches. They were only five points beneath Norwich City, first in the league. However, it was very close to the teams ranked beneath it; there was only a five-point difference between the second place and sixth place teams in the League. A piece of information that was advantageous to Tang En's goal of being promoted to the Premier League by the end of the season, was that the fourteenth ranked team was only two points away from the eighteenth ranked team, and three points away from the twelfth ranked team. On top of that, there was also only another three-points difference between the twelfth ranked team and the ninth ranked team. The teams in the middle were very close in terms of points, with three teams having thirty-three points, two teams having thirty-five points, and two other teams having thirty-six points.

As long as Nottingham Forest won the few upcoming crucial matches and did not make any serious mistakes, it would be able to steadily improve its ranking and return to the first group of the League. Once its ranking entered the top ten, Tang En would be able to launch into a sprint towards qualifying for the playoffs.

Nottingham Forest was currently ranked eighteenth in the League with a total of thirty-one points. But it was precisely because the teams' points were so close that Tang En dared to "boast" about his team returning to Premier League by the end of the season. This was not an unfathomable miracle. It was simply born of a lack of understanding and analysis on the part of those who felt that way.

To Tang En, January and February would be the most crucial period for the team. If the team messed up during that period, then they would really have to hope for a miracle if they were going to catch up.

The two matches at the end of January were matches which Tang En had to win.

Following this train of thought, Tang En eventually decided to give up on the FA cup. He hoped that West Bromwich would advance as far as they could in the FA Cup, and, if possible, he hoped that they would advance straight into the finals. That way, their attention and efforts would be split on both ends, allowing Nottingham Forest to overtake them.... I hope that West Bromwich, who has advanced into the finals of the FA Cup, will proceed to make an "impressive record" of qualifying for the UEFA Europa League as a team in the second tier football league! Tang En thought to himself. As for the English Premier League qualification, Nottingham Forest will just have to "bite the bullet" and take their place!

Tang En, who had devised this plan, told the coaching staff to plan their training sessions to target Nottingham's next opponents — Sunderland. That would be an away match, and Sunderland was currently ranked fourth in the league.

To Tang En, this match belonged in the category of, "We have to win at all costs, no matter what methods we use." This category included all of the matches against teams which were currently ranked higher in the league than Nottingham Forest.

Since it was an away match, Tang En continued to insist on adopting tactics which prioritized defense. Sunderland's past records on their home grounds were relatively good, with seven wins, five draws, and one loss. This record was good enough for them to be regarded as the kings of their home turf. Challenging an opponent like this would definitely not be easy. The only thing that Tang En could use to his advantage was that Sunderland's back defensive line was awful. They had conceded thirty-eight

goals, the most among the top six teams. Even Bradford, which was ranked second from the bottom, had only conceded thirty-nine.

Hence, the coaching team used this to devise a training plan. Rebrov would be stationed in the middle of the field, and Gareth Taylor would be at the forefront. These two people were the team's greatest investments of the season, so none of the coaching staff would dare to not use them. Tang En moving Gareth to the reserve team for two matches was already a testament to his character. If he was a "good-guy" manager like Ranieri and did not dare to offend anyone, then the team would be an absolute mess. It was precisely because of this that Chelsea's new boss Abramovich was already unable to stand its performance this season anymore.

But that was beside the point.

The person to whom Tang En paid special attention during training was the team's newcomer, Freddy Eastwood. After two days of trainings, all of the coaching staff was completely at ease regarding this player who had once broken his leg. In terms of ability, he did not have any problems.

Even Walker could not help but be impressed once again by Tang En's insight. He really did not know how Tang En had discovered a person like him; someone who had never taken part in any first team's matches, and had gone to play in the Amateur League after sustaining a leg injury and being abandoned by his previous team.

Of course, Tang could not tell him that he had seen footage of Eastwood playing three years later in 2007, and had previously used him in a version of Football Manager. Hence, he simply offered no explanation at all, and let his colleagues continue to look at him with veneration. This actually worked out in his favour, and was helpful for the continued fortification of his position and authority.

One should never show all the cards in their hands to others, even their best friends or colleagues. Especially as a manager, a job which required personal charisma, Tang En needed a mysteriousness which made others, like Brian Clough, unable to comprehend him at times. Peter Shilton, English National Football team goalkeeper and core player in Nottingham Forest's attaining of two consecutive UEFA Champions League championships, once said, "Shankly, Ramsey and Ernst, all these managers are impressive. They have an aura and charm, but Clough also has the mysterious X genes."

In the end, reality proved better than anything else that maintaining a suitable amount of mystery and a sense of unapproachability in front of other people was beneficial in improving one's reputation and credibility on a team.

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On the 3rd of January at City Ground Stadium, Nottingham Forest faced off against West Bromwich in the third round of the FA Cup. Before the match, Tang En made Eastwood don Nottingham Forest's jersey and appear in the middle of the football field to meet the fans. The fans' reactions towards the unfamiliar man were slightly cold, and whereas the fans' cheers shook City Ground Stadium, this time there was no welcoming scene.

The meet-and-greet session was very simple: Eastwood stood by the side of the field and waved at the fans while holding a Nottingham scarf in his hand and letting the reporters take a few pictures. It lasted for less than five minutes before Eastwood got off the field. After that, he took off his jersey and,

dressed in his neat attire, watched the match from the lounge located by the stands. He did not even make it into the reserves for the match.

The match ended with Nottingham Forest losing to West Bromwich with a score of 1:2, and Nottingham Forest's disqualification from the FA Cup. The fans were slightly disappointed, but they still clapped for the team when the match ended. After all, the team had at least entered the semi-finals of the FA Cup, and they should not be too greedy.

Instead, Eastwood, who had made his debut before the match, soon became the center of the media's attention. The reason was simple. The media discovered that Eastwood had just broken his leg and had been playing for an amateur team, without any match experience with a professional team.

Although this transaction only cost the club a hundred thousand pounds, the media, which liked to make a mountain out of a molehill, still sensationalized the matter. Quite a few media outlets questioned Tang En's judgement and, at the same time, questioned Eastwood's abilities.

Although it was unclear how they managed to find out, there were even some in the media who reported about the dramatic scene that had unfolded when Eastwood had first arrived at Nottingham Forest. They exaggerated the events of that day, and tried their best to mock Eastwood. In the end, they finished with assertions like, "Eastwood is a gypsy who lives inside of a large caravan and brought a horse to the training grounds to report on his first day as though he lived a primitive life. Someone who helps his father sell second-hand cars, broke his leg, and could only play for amateur teams.... This is Tony Twain's frontline lance? Nottingham Forest's hope? The world must have gone crazy!"

In reality, Bruce was also somewhat worried about this newcomer's abilities. However, out of trust for Tang En, he did not publish any articles that were unfavorable towards Eastwood. When he expressed his pessimism towards Eastwood's prospects, he was always very careful with his choice of words. But the rest of the media did not care as much. They were still unhappy with the fact that the war between Nottingham Forest and Millwall had not been started. With such a good opportunity in their hands, how could they let it go so easily?

"...I've seen a varnisher become a professional football player, I've seen a plumber become a professional football player, and I've even seen someone doing odd jobs at a restaurant become a professional football player. But I've never seen a vagrant whose entire family lives inside a caravan become a professional football player!"

"As we understand it, when Freddy Eastwood was playing for the Westham United youth team, he once received a serious foul from a Nottingham Forest player during a youth league match. Could it be that Mr. Tony Twain wants to make amends to him, and that's why he signed a player who completely hasn't proven his worth? Hey, Mr. Twain, are you planning on changing careers and becoming a philanthropist?"

"Freddy Eastwood almost entered Charlton FC. At that time, Eastwood hoped to be able to try out for the South London team's trials. But after the club found out that he had once broken his leg, they rejected him without hesitation."

Of course, not all of the reports cast doubts on Eastwood. There was still someone who stood out and spoke for Tang En and Eastwood, even though it was only one person — Mr. Stimson, the manager of

Grays Athletic, who Eastwood had previously played for. Mr. Stimson was furious at the media for mocking Eastwood, and he even felt that this player, whom he himself had convinced to return to the field, would definitely shock everyone with his performance.

“When he was on my team, he usually scored five to six goals in a single match!”

But who would pay any attention the comments of the manager of an amateur team? Indeed, his words were soon turned into a new excuse for the media to mock Eastwood.

“For a player who had received professional training from an official youth team, the ability to score five or six goals in amateur matches is nothing to brag about!”

Chapter 137: This Is Eastwood! Part 2

In reality, the main reason for the media’s big fuss over such an unknown player being hired was the “gag order” which Tang En had announced after the incident with Millwall. He forbade all players and staff from accepting any interviews from the media. At the same time, the team’s training had changed from being open to being closed off. Not even their fans, let alone reporters, were able to get their favorite player’s autograph by the field.

The fans were more understanding; they knew that it was for the sake of the team’s performance. But the media was different. Not letting them interview the team took away their ability to create news, which in turn prevented them from making money. The English media industry was very competitive, and any reporters who were unable to churn out articles would most likely lose their jobs. The media therefore hoped that the other football clubs would be more cooperative.

But Tang En understood less than anyone the minute details of all of this. He only felt that the team needed a quiet atmosphere to readjust in preparation for the series of important upcoming matches. Therefore, he directly announced the team’s enclosed training, not realizing that in doing so, he was offending the media that had once liked him so much. Even his newest player, Freddy Eastwood, was not spared from it. His personal life had become an excuse to question his abilities.

Tang En had seen all of the news articles. Such doubts were enough to destroy a young player like Eastwood; he had not even done anything yet, and he was already being completely written off. If his emotional stamina were any lower, he could have been completely drowned in the media storm.

But Tang En wasn’t worried. Eastwood showed no signs of being affected by it during training. Either he never read sports-related newspapers, or he was just confident in his own abilities. Tang En was more inclined to believe the latter, based on the understanding of Gypsy that he had gained over the past few days.

As such, he put the Gypsy onto the team’s name list for the next match. If the opportunity arose, he would consider letting Eastwood onto the field. There was no better way to rebut the ignorance of the media than by proving them wrong through his own actions.

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It was January sixth, the morning before the day of the match. Rarely seen sunlight appeared in the skies over Nottingham, putting Tang En, who had arrived at the field early, in a good mood as he waited for the players.

Because the next day's game was an away match, the team had to assemble that morning and take a coach bus to Sunderland together. In the afternoon, they would familiarize themselves with Stadium of Light in preparation for the next day's match.

Tang En saw the familiar blue tow car parked silently inside the gates. Tang En's eyes drifted along the small path outside of the training field, and in the distance he saw a man on a horse cantering towards him. The crisp, clear clattering sound hoofs broke the morning silence of the training grounds.

"Good morning, Freddy." Tang En waited for the gypsy to approach before raising his hand and greeting him.

"Good morning, Sir." Freddy jumped off the horse, gripping the reins tightly in his hand. He appeared to be in a fairly good mood.

"Are you getting used to life here?"

"More or less. It's very quiet here, not many disturbances. Sabina and I both like it."

Tang En nodded. "That's great. If you have any difficulties, just bring them up to the club. Anything can be resolved... you know, aside from building a stable."

Eastwood laughed. He patted the black horse's neck and tidied up its glossy mane. "It's doing fine at the pet shop. Sabina and I went to lots of places before we finally found one that was willing to take it in. No other shops had a big enough space."

"Well, if you'd said that you were a Nottingham Forest player, I think they would have been more willing."

"Yes, Sir, I mentioned it. If I hadn't, that shop's owner wouldn't have agreed to it."

Tang En chuckled. "Freddy, once you score goals during the matches, I think that that owner would be eager to sign a pet-feeding contract with you."

The conversation topic then shifted naturally toward the matches.

"Have you seen the media's comments about you?" Tang En asked.

Eastwood nodded. "I've seen them all. Nothing new. It's all the same old stuff." He shrugged his shoulders and said in disdain, "There's no proof that I'm not a good player. Will I be playing in this match, Sir?"

Tang En shook his head. "I don't know," he said truthfully. "Depends on the situation. If we're unable to break the deadlock after too long, I might consider switching you in. You're the only striker that I've brought along as a reserve, so if I have to make any adjustments to the forward line, you're the only person I can switch in."

Seeing that Eastwood was had gone silent and was petting his beloved horse, Tang En asked, "Can you tell me why you like to warm up by riding your horse before every match?"

"I'm not sure why... I've always liked horses, so perhaps riding a horse just helps me get peace of mind and calms my nerves. It actually is like that; I've never felt nervous about an upcoming match," Eastwood answered. Tang En believed that this was the secret behind his ability to score so many goals: a calm mind.

He did not care that reporters were fixated on him, and did not care about the media's doubting of his abilities. He did not care how much he earned every week, and did not care about whether his life in a caravan was primitive or not. He did not care what looks people gave him, whether they be of anticipation or disappointment. He never thought about anything that did not concern him.

There were so many people who spent their lives thinking about how much they gained. In the end, they ended up losing even more because of it. Eastwood, the pure gypsy, only wanted to play soccer, and got his first professional contract because of it.

Thinking about this, Tang En said to him, "Freddy, you must have heard the rumors about me, right?" Tang En was referring to the rumors that "Nottingham Forest's manager has the ability to see into the future," which were mostly spread from Burns's Bar.

"Are you referring to the rumors that you're a sorcerer, Sir?"

"That's right, looks like you already know! I have the ability to see into the future!"

"More accurately than us Gypsies?" Eastwood returned with a smile.

"Of course! Freddy, you will score many, many goals in the future, and obtain so many trophies and medals that you won't be able to hold them in both hands. And you will earn lots of money," Tang En said, trying to sound mysterious. "When that time comes, you can buy a plot of land, build a small manor and a stable, and ride your horse around every day to your heart's content!"

Eastwood laughed loudly and said, "Thank you for your suggestion, sir. If I really end up earning that much money, I'll consider it."

"No, no, it's not a suggestion. It's a prophecy. You will become successful. I've never been wrong about anyone!" Upon finishing, Tang En looked at his watch. "Go back and have your breakfast. It's almost time for the team to assemble."

Eastwood bid farewell to Tang En and hopped onto the horse, leaving amidst the sounds of neighing.

Behind Tang En, the red Nottingham Forest coach bus was already stopped in front of the training ground entrance.

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Sunderland, Stadium of Light. There was a large screen located in between the two blocks of fully-seated stands. It clearly displayed which teams were participating in the match, the time passed in the match, and the current score:

Sunderland versus Nottingham Forest, seventy-seven minutes, 0:0.

The stadium was filled with a hubbub of voices, despite the fact that the home team was unable to break the stalemate so late into the match. Despite this, Sunderland's fans continued to cheer and sing loudly to root for the team. Tang En often witnessed similar scenes in City Ground Stadium as well, and he had stopped saying things like "English soccer fans have a lot of sportsmanship" a long time ago.

At that moment, Freddy Eastwood, who was wearing the number 23 jersey, was standing at the side of the field, waiting for a dead ball.

He would be replacing the defensive midfielder Eugen Bopp, and becoming part of a double-arrowhead along with Gareth Taylor. This time, Tang En had decided to deal a fatal blow.

Freddy Eastwood, despite being only twenty years-old, had experienced a great deal of ups and downs in the past year. Due to a bone fracture, Eastwood, who had been raised in Westham United's youth team, had had his future completely ruined. Idling at "home," the only thing he could do was help his father sell used cars. It appeared that he would continue like this for the rest of his life, have a few more children with his wife, and continue staying in the caravan, living the traditional Gypsy life. But still he returned to the field, even though he could only play in amateur matches, which did not have viewing stands and were not broadcast on television. He hoped to prove that he could still play soccer, even though his dream of becoming a professional soccer player appeared to have all but vanished.

That is, until a certain day about one month ago, when a man suddenly came knocking on his door looking for him, and asked him, "Freddy, do you still want to play professional soccer?" The flames of his dreams within his heart had been ignited once again.

This man was the only person who still believed that he could play soccer professionally, so Eastwood joined his team. Now, his first time playing for that team had finally come, even though there were less than fifteen minutes left in the match.

Just one minute ago, that man had called Eastwood over. He asked Eastwood to take off his warm-up vest and prepare to get on the field. The man did not say anything superfluous, and only told Eastwood this: "Fundamentally speaking, professional matches are not much different from amateur matches. So once you get the ball, just shoot, regardless of whether you are outside of the penalty area or inside the goalpost area."

Eastwood continued to chew his gum, his expression relaxed. The cheering sounds of the Sunderland fans could not scare him, and the fourth ranked team in the league could not scare him either. Because, fundamentally speaking, amateur matches were no different from professional matches. They were carried out in the same manner. The goalpost for an amateur match would not be any larger, and a ball used in a professional match would not be any heavier.

"Nottingham Forest is making some adjustments to their team lineup. They are switching out the defensive midfielder Eugen Bopp for the new striker Freddy Eastwood, who has just joined their team from the amateur league." John Motson reported this substitution of players very systematically, and did not think that this switch would make any difference. "Manager Twain hopes to strengthen their offenses, and doesn't want to return to Nottingham empty-handed. But this player substitution is nothing to have high hopes over; a striker who has broken his leg and plays for the amateur league... I don't think that Manager Twain is some philanthropist, but this young lad really does not inspire hope," Motson said, shaking his head.

Finally, Nottingham Forest got an out-of-bounds ball at the front. The fourth official raised the signboard to signal the player substitution.

Bopp ran off the field, panting heavily, and clapped Eastwood's hand before returning to the substitutes' bench.

A male voice was currently reporting the player substitution in a live broadcast. A wave of jeers suddenly came from the home team's stands. Not every player on a guest team would have received this kind of treatment. It was apparent that the 0:0 score not only made the Sunderland players on the field impatient, but also put the fans of the Black Cats in an extremely bad mood.

"Scram back to that village caravan of yours, Gypsy!"

"We'll break your leg all over again!"

"Amateur league brat, you should never have come here!"

Eastwood appeared not to hear any of this as he ran towards the sideline.

The Nottingham player who was supposed to start the ball purposely dragged the match time, aggravating the Sunderland fans. The jeering in the stadium was taken to the next level. It was under these circumstances, where the jeering noises were deafening enough to cause a heart attack, that Freddy Eastwood received the pass from his teammates.

He calmly received the ball, and, after turning around to have a look, discovered that nobody was marking him. Of course; who would care about an amateur player like him, who had once broken his leg and was playing his first professional match? He brought the ball down the middle, and still no one was coming to steal the ball from him.

Tang En's words once again rang in his ears. "...Once you get the ball, just shoot, regardless of whether you are outside of the penalty area or inside the goalpost area."

So he lightly tapped the ball forward, with his left leg bent back slightly, supporting his entire body. Afterwards, he pulled back his right leg, the leg which had once been broken. His body was like a taught bow. After releasing it, a great force was unleashed.

Long — shot!

The soccer ball shot towards the goal posts like a cannonball. The Sunderland goalkeeper sprung high into the air, attempting to stop the ball. But he only managed to intercept the wind. The ball had already grazed past. Behind him, the net was rippling violently.

"EASTWOOOOOOOOD!" Motson shouted at the top of his lungs. "What a genius shot! What a beautiful goal! A thirty meter-long shot!"

The jeering in the Stadium of Light vanished completely in an instant. Everyone was dumbfounded. The mouths of the people who had been spouting vulgarities hung wide open as though they had forgotten how to close their mouths.

Eastwood rushed towards the side of the field, sliding on his knees. Behind him, his Nottingham Forest teammates were running towards him.

Walker, who gaped at Eastwood as he was being buried underneath the rest his team, excitedly shouted beside Tang En, “Tony! You were right! You shocked everyone! He shocked everyone in Sunderland!”

Tang En, however, was not as overwhelmed as Walker. He only stood in front of the manager’s seat and clapped. After all, he had known for a long time that Eastwood could do it. He could score goals, and he would score even more goals.

The television was replaying Eastwood’s thirty meter long shot, and Motson’s excited voice was still speaking. “This is his first goal, seven seconds after entering the field! Seven seconds for one goal! Seven seconds ago, nobody knew him. Now, allow me to introduce him once again — Ladies and gentlemen, this is Freddy Eastwood!”

Chapter 138: The Winter Transfer Part 1

Even though they were lagging behind, Sunderland was unwilling to accept defeat on their home ground. They mounted a large-scale counterattack in the final ten minutes of the game, hoping to even out the score. Tang En called off Rebrov, who was clearly exhausted, and brought on the Australian midfielder, Jacob Burns. This substitution was not intended to defend the midfield, but rather to launch a targeted offense on the midfield to replace an all-out attack on the opponent’s entire field. Instead, after their lead, Tang En changed from being passively pressured by the home team, as they had in the first seventy-seven minutes, to using offense such that Sunderland dared not press on them too heavily. Jacob Burns’ passing coordination was better than Rebrov’s, and with him on the field, the Forest team had more control in the midfield.

As time passed, Sunderland was getting more and more impatient, and the empty spaces in their backfield were fast becoming as barren as moon craters. Tang En knew that, as soon as they scored another goal, he would win.

Very soon, his wish was fulfilled.

Taking advantage of their opponents’ desperate counterattack, the Forest team successfully intercepted the ball just in front of the penalty area and quickly counterattacked. Burns send out a clever pass in the midfield, and Eastwood came up from the wing. After receiving the ball, he faced the opposing goalkeeper one-on-one. Then, in a calm, collected manner, he shot the football into the lower right corner.

At this point, the time shown on the big screen was fixed at ninety minutes. The Stadium of Light was extremely still, and completely silent.

Tang En turned to Walker with a smile. “Des, we’ve won again.”

Walker pumped his fists at the field and said, “Yes! I can’t wait to see what the media are going to say tomorrow!”

“Freddy Eastwood! He’s the star of this match!” Motson was shouting excitedly in the press box. It was truly amazing to see such an ordinary, mediocre player become triumphant and successful with one’s own eyes.

This goal completely destroyed Sunderland's confidence to counterattack. They were defeated by an amateur player who was playing professionally for the first time and had once broken a leg.

The final score for the match was 2:0. Thanks to the outstanding performance of Eastwood, Nottingham Forest defeated the fourth-ranked Sunderland, and gained the valuable three points.

That night, when the last match was over, the league's newest rankings were released.

Because they lost to Nottingham Forest, Sunderland only managed to accumulate forty-four points. But "The Black Cats" fans were worried that the gap between themselves and the teams behind them was getting narrower. As Preston North End had won a match, their points increased from forty to forty-three and their ranking also rose to the fifth in the league.

Because both teams which were ranked sixth and seventh in the league had matches, the score difference between the teams ranked from fourth to seventh in the league was only one point. Three teams had forty-three points and one team had forty-four points.

Such close scores were the kinds of results that Tang En liked to see the most, in addition to his team winning.

Due to their game victory, Nottingham Forest's score changed from thirty-one to thirty-four, and their ranking rose from eighteenth place to fifteenth. They were only one point behind Walsall, who was ranked fourteenth. In ascending order, the teams above the Forest team had thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, and thirty-eight points.

Of course, the Forest team's own position was far from secure. After all, below their thirty-four points, there were three other teams with thirty-three points and another team with thirty-two.

With such a close rankings, tremendous change could come out of only a single round of matches.

Seven days later, in the 28th round of the League Championship on their home ground, Tang En's team would be playing Reading F.C., who was ranked tenth with thirty-nine points—another team in the "must win" category.

Five days later, on January 22nd, Nottingham Forest would play on their home ground again. This time, it would be a fierce battle – it was the first leg of the EFL Cup semi-final, and they were playing against the Premier League team Bolton Wanderers, who had just narrowly won a 4:3 victory over Blackburn Rovers in the previous round of Premier League.

Then, on January 28th, the Forest team would play an away match in the Reebok Stadium. This was the second leg of the EFL Cup semi-final game.

The competition schedule was not considered intense; it was essentially one game per week. But these three games were going to be tough battles. Tang En had no intention of his team continuing to play in League One next season. At the same time, he had personally promised that they would be in the UEFA Cup.

Such questions plagued him for two consecutive days—did they have to give up a match in the League Championship, let their rivals overtake them again, and then go all out for the EFL Cup, where they had the highest chance?

Because the EFL Cup's latest schedule was out, the League Championship's schedule was also adjusted accordingly. Despite originally being scheduled for January 31st, the 29th round of the League Championship, where Nottingham Forest was playing in an away match against the Cardiff City team, was postponed to April 7th.

Tang En considered this good news, because he could make up for the League Championship after doing his best for the EFL Cup. Even if his points temporarily lagged behind the other teams, it was only because he was one game short. It was as if he had postponed the victory and three points to the future, it would no different as long as he obtained them when the time came.

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Tang En, who returned victorious from Sunderland with three points, heard good news from the transfer market. The Forest team had bought Clint Hill, the main center back for the League Two team Oldham Athletic, for three hundred thousand pounds. But Tang En still could not set his mind at ease about the defensive line. After the departure of Dawson, the team really only had one center back: Wes Morgan. His current partner, Chris Doig, was not purely a center back. Relying on Morgan and the newly-joined Hill for the center back positions clearly would not be enough. Tang En might be able to put up with this for other positions, but he would not be careless when it came to their defense.

This time he focused on Chelsea.

With the entry of their Russian boss and the injection of money into Chelsea, the club would inevitably develop the temperament of the newly rich. Ranieri was also not an assertive, individualistic manager. Chelsea had bought nine new players that summer on a spending spree. There was the veteran Marcel Desailly in charge of the center back position, the young player John Terry, who was maturing with time, and William Gallas, who could play any position on the defensive line. Even Glen Johnson had been put in the center back position by Ranieri and had played a few matches. And then there was Geremi and Mario Melchiot, who were able to play in matches due to their jack-of-all-trades abilities. With Claudio Ranieri, often called the tinkerman, at the helm, a player had to be ready to play any position.

Because it was such a competitive environment, the 18 year old German player, Robert Huth, only played on the club's reserve team. Tang En wanted to purchase him directly, and it was possible that it could be settled for more than two million pounds. But Chelsea held Huth in high regard, and thought he would be the center back in the future and would partner with Terry to become the main force of the club. They would not let him go. So, Tang En had to relent and request the second option—a loan.

Ranieri thought it was a good idea to put Huth out on loan for training. The rich and imposing Chelsea did not require the Forest team to pay his salary like Leeds would have done. And this time, Tang En could get the future main center back substitute of the Germany national football team without spending a single penny.

After the consecutive acquisitions of Clint Hill and Robert Huth, the center back vacancy left by Michael Dawson was finally filled.

Tang En's request to Evan was that the tasks to supplement the team must be completed before the EFL Cup semi-final began; that way, he could have a complete team to create a complete strategy, and the entire team could work together to achieve it.

And so the Forest team accelerated its work in the transfer market. After acquiring Clint Hill, Moore brought some good news to Twain. Kris Commons' skills were completely in line with the Forest team's requirements, and he was happy to join the team. Although he had been cultivated as a player in Stoke City, his favorite team was Nottingham Forest. He was willing, and the Forest team had expressed more than enough sincerity in its offer. The deal was eventually sealed at a price of three hundred thousand pounds. For a young player who had only played in the First Team, the Forest team's offer was quite generous.

The team paid three hundred thousand pounds for Commons but, in turn, became rather stingy with the loan of Stephen McPhail. Leeds insisted that the Forest team pay 90% of his weekly salary. Whether it was Tang En, Evan, or the cheapest among them, Allan Adams, not everyone agreed to their terms.

At this time, the benefits of the team purchasing Commons first became clear. Tang En began to spread information to the press claiming that he was satisfied with Commons joining the team. "Although Reid left the team," he would say, "we have Commons. And the fans can look forward to Commons' performance just as much as they did Eastwood's." Now that the team had won a few matches in succession, Tang En also lifted the media ban. With the easing of tension with the media, Commons' performance in the training field would spread through the media easily.

At five and a half feet, Commons had a fairly typical height for the football field. Even though speed was not his specialty, his outstanding skill made up for his physical deficiencies. Whether it was his passing or his shooting, he had proven that the Forest team's offer of three hundred thousand pounds was well-worth the money.

Allen, who was in charge of the players' transfer negotiations, talked to Leeds at the negotiating table. "Do you see?" he said. "Our newly-signed left midfielder is also excellent, so we aren't as desperate for your player. The Forest will only be responsible for 50% of McPhail's salary. This is our last offer. If your club doesn't agree, that'll be it. Either way, we've got Kris Commons."

Leeds, who was mired in a financial crisis, could not stand its ground. They agreed to lower the weekly wage standard to 60%, hoping the Forest team would understand their difficulties. Allan knew to quit while he was ahead and agreed to a 6,000-pound weekly salary. He brought back Stephen McPhail just as Twain wanted. And McPhail, who could not play in matches at Leeds, was happy to be on loan to the Forest team, if only to stay in shape.

Chapter 139: The Winter Transfer Part 2

With their two consecutive acquisitions of midfielders, the Forest team's left wing was set. Now it was the right wing that gave Tang En headaches. He originally envisioned that he would be able to persuade Lennon to transfer to Nottingham Forest, which would solve the problem of their right wing. He had not even considered that the plan might fail. Plus, the performance of Brian Cash was disappointing; the kid seemed immersed with himself and his own dribbling, and had no regard for the team's overall tactics. After a full year, he had made no progress. Tang En deleted his name from his future plans.

Therefore, after leading the team for a month, he still had not found Nottingham Forest the right player for their right wing.

The team's offense was now seriously leaning to the left. That was a big disadvantage. A team like that might as well be walking with a limp.

At that time, the old scout, Moore, helped him out again. He recommended a young player to Twain. Even though he had played in one match on the First Team, as soon as he heard his name, Tang En decided to buy him no matter the cost.

Moore's recommendation to Twain was an eighteen-year-old midfielder who had just been moved to the First Team by the Watford club: Ashley Young.

The young man was a strong player in the making in FM, and was not bad in reality either. In the 06-07 season, Aston Villa spent eight million pounds to take him away from Watford. He could play both left and right wings of the midfield, his passing and dribbling were outstanding, and he had a beautiful free kick and goal shot.

Any player who could be spotted by Moore, the Forest team's chief scout, would surely be highly valued by the other team as well. If he did not pay the right price, Tang En would not be able to bring the young player to the City Ground. But Tang En believed the other club's stance would not be a problem. Purchasing Clint Hill had cost three hundred thousand pounds, and Kris Commons had cost another three hundred thousand, adding up to six hundred thousand. Meanwhile, the transfer fund that Tang En had at his disposal was eight million pounds. There was still a balance of seven million, four hundred thousand pounds remaining. This money was a huge sum for a League One club. Tang En was sure that Watford would be unable to resist such an onslaught of money. The only uncertainty was the attitude of the Young himself. If Ashley Young was another Lennon, then no amount of money would be enough. Tang En knew how to spend his money, provided that the player's feelings were clear.

Naturally, it would violate FIFA's regulations to circumvent the club and contact players privately. But as long as one was not so blatant and obvious that everyone knew, it was permissible.

If Ashley Young could be convinced, the Forest team's right wing problems might be solved.

In addition to the continuous good news coming from the transfer market, there was another thing that kept Tang En's spirits high.

Because he had scored two goals in the Sunderland match and become the number one contributor to the team's victory, Eastwood could receive a goal bonus according to the contract. Plus, the media's opinion on him had changed overnight.

Even the harshest media outlets, when faced with two goals and that beautiful long shot, had no choice but to restrain their discriminatory views and acknowledge that Eastwood's performance had been a great surprise.

Of course, two goals were considered insignificant in the grand scheme of a long season, and there was no guarantee that Eastwood would continue to score in future games. But this at least gave him a good start on the Forest team and lead the Forest fans to immediately accept the new player. For a striker, there was nothing more pleasing to the fans than a goal.

As Eastwood became famous, his treasured colt was also became a star before long. The pet store which it was placed in the care of not only decided to help Eastwood raise his horse free of charge, but also advertised it in the newspaper. The full text of the advertisement was as follows:

“The House of Pets” offers the best service to Freddy Eastwood’s darling horse!

At these words, the shop became incredibly busy. There was a steady stream of people who came every day to see Eastwood’s horse. So, naturally, the store launched a “photo with the star player’s darling horse” promotion. It only cost a pound to stand outside the railing and take a photo with the horse.

It was common to take a photograph with a star player; but suddenly, taking a photo with a star player’s horse had attracted the interest of countless fans.

Eastwood was not jealous of his horse, but he did make an agreement with “The House of Pets” that they needed to ensure the horse’s health. The stipulated working hours stated that it could only “receive customers” for five hours a day at most, and that they needed to use a minimum of 30% of the revenue to improve the horse’s daily treatment. He believed in his horse’s “professional ethics,” and was confident would be no incidents of biting or kicking its fans. After all, he often rode it along the shoulder of the A127 highway with cars coming and going; what couldn’t it handle?

It was fairly accurate to describe the horse as steady and calm, experienced and knowledgeable.

Unsurprisingly, when this matter appeared in the newspapers, it became a new joke among the team about the Romani.

Everyone on the team liked Eastwood very much. Even though the two goals accounted for a large part of the reason, that was not all. Eastwood’s character was great. He was warm and cheerful, and got along well with everyone. Coupled with his low-key personality, even Gareth Taylor, whose main position was threatened by him, could find no reason to dislike the man.

Nevertheless, Eastwood, despite his popularity, had one exception in his attitude towards his teammates.

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George Wood, like Eastwood, was one of the players that Tang En paid the most attention to during training. Since he was transferred to the First Team after Christmas and had only been in training for half a month, he had not had a chance to represent the First Team by playing yet. His contract was still the one he had signed for the youth team.

But Tang En did not let Wood stop playing. In the past few weeks, he had allowed Wood to train with the First Team, familiarize himself with his teammates, and play in the reserve game to stay in shape. He would attend and watch every game to personally inspect Wood’s condition. To his relief, the boy was still making progress.

However, he still often appeared inexperienced, rough, and unable to calmly judge the situation on the field. He had more than enough drive, but he could not remain calm.

Tang En did not ask too much of young men. Compared to other people around the same age as him, he was remarkable enough.

Tang En had decided to give up the game against Reading in the 28th round of the League Championship and to just train young players and reserve players for it. After competing for half a season, the main lineup of the First Team would need a break to lessen the chances of injuries and prepare for the EFL Cup.

On January 16th, after the last day of training before the League Championship, Tang En announced the list of players for the next day's game on the training ground as usual. For the starting lineup, he generally waited until before the start of the game and announced it in the locker room.

At such times, the competition that was usually hidden behind friendly smiles would emerge. Except for a few players who were almost certain to be included in the list because of their outstanding and steady performances or special positions, the players would tensely wait for the moment Twain read his name. There was only one exception.

George Wood, who stood in the last row of the team, did not care what Twain said. He was thinking about how to play well in the reserves game the next day. His mother was very happy that he had been transferred to the First Team. Although he was still only playing in the reserves games, it was enough to make her proud. In her mind, the reserves team counted as the Second Team. It was certainly of a higher level than the youth team was, which meant that her son was more powerful than before. He did not want to disappoint his mother, so he would never allow himself to make mistakes.

His mother's expectations and money were the only two reasons for him to continue on this path.

He suddenly heard someone calling his name and saw all the teammates at the front turning their heads to look back at him. He looked up in confusion and, through the gaps of the crowd, saw Twain, standing in front and looking at him.

"Wood, you stay behind. The rest of you are dismissed!"

The players dispersed and went to the locker room, each with his own thoughts. The main player list had been released; some people were happy, and some were concerned.

Wood stood motionless on the spot, and most of his teammates turned to look at him as they left. He did not understand why.

When everyone else was gone and there were only the two of them left on the training ground, Tang En walked over and pulled out a ticket to the game from his pocket and handed it to Wood. "Go back and give it to your mother."

Wood did not take it. He did not understand what had happened.

Seeing his bafflement, Tang En asked, "Were you in a daze just now? Didn't you hear me calling your name?"

Wood nodded.

"Well... This is a ticket for the VIP box in the City Ground. Go back and give it to your mother so that she can go to the stadium tomorrow to watch the game. The club will have someone to receive her then, so you don't have to worry about anything."

Wood still did not understand.

Tang En smiled. "George, go home and tell your mother to take this ticket to the City Ground tomorrow afternoon to watch you play in the game. Remember, it's tomorrow afternoon, not morning. You're going to start in the League Championship game." After he spoke, he stuffed the ticket into Wood's hand, then turned and waved as he returned to his office.

"Bye, George. Have a good night's rest. Be here at nine o'clock in the morning, sharp."

Wood clutched the ticket tightly as he stood on the training ground, staring blankly at Twain's back.

Chapter 140: Wood's Debut Part 1

Even though Tang En did not spell it out, the media, the fans, and even the players themselves knew that he had given up on this match. The only reason that he didn't spell it out was because no manager would say to his players right before a match, "Lads, I've given up on today's match. You guys just do as you see fit." On the contrary, he hoped that those players chosen for today's match would know that, as long as they performed well, there would be more chances for them to play in the future. This would be a match for them to fight for their own benefit.

So, the players who rarely played, along with those who had just entered the team, were about to step into the spotlight.

The starting goalkeeper was the twenty-one year old Irishman Barry Roche, who usually did not get many chances to play. The center backs were also an entirely new combination: Clint Hill and Robert Huth. Both of them had either been recently transferred or loaned, and had not even undergone one week of combined practice with the team. Tang En's choice to deploy that back combination was more than enough to reveal his intentions for the match.

In addition to using a new combination of center backs, Tang En also made some adjustments to the two full backs. Chris Doig, who had played as the center back in the previous match, was made to play as a left back this time. As for the right back, John Thompson was benched, and Matthieu Louis-Jean took his place.

The midfield still got two defensive midfielders, with Brynjar Gunnarsson remaining in the starting lineup, and Eugen Bopp being replaced by George Wood. By arranging things that way, Tang En's was preparing for the first round of the EFL Cup semi-finals. That was because by then, Forest's two midfielders would be Gunnarsson and Wood. Eugen Bopp would be unable to participate because of his suspension.

Tang En chose to let Chris Commons play on the left wing, and let Stephen McPhail play on the right for the first time. He instructed Commons to pass more to the center, and told McPhail to go down the middle and shoot. As for Ashley Young, Moore had just made contact, so there were no results yet. He would have to make do with this. Tang En had also completely given up on Brian Cash. If any team offered a reasonable price, Tang En would release him without hesitation.

The frontline deployed by Tang En was David Johnson and Freddy Eastwood. Johnson was unable to play in matches yet, but he was a passable substitute. As for Eastwood, Tang En hoped to make use of this match to help improve his condition, so that he could reel in goals during the EFL Cup.

The players on the substitutes' bench were goalkeeper Darren Ward, full backs Wes Morgan and John Thompson, midfielder Serhiy Rebrov, and forward Gareth Taylor.

Seeing that formation, it was no wonder that even Nottingham's fans would accept a loss for the match. After all, there were more important EFL Cup semi-finals after it.

Reading's manager, Steve Coppell, was someone Tony Twain knew very well. When he had still been the manager of Brighton the previous season, he had done a pretty poor job. Tang En had managed to beat him on Brighton's home grounds. Brighton was relegated after that season, but their manager, "good guy" Coppell, managed to find an even better job: being the manager of Reading.

Currently, Reading was ranked fourth in the league, and seemed to be in good shape. Mr. Coppell's career as a manager also seemed to be on the right track.

Coppell had a rather unpleasant impression of Twain. This was because when (two full days after that previous season's match) he had finally understood why Tang En had referred to him as a "good guy" during the post-match press conference, the conclusion he had come to had made him furious. He realized that had been taken for a ride by a young manager who was less qualified than him.

When the two teams had clashed in the first half of the season, his team had won a crushing victory over Nottingham Forest on their home ground, with a score of 3:0. Coppell's only regret was that the Nottingham Forest at that time wasn't being run by Tony Twain. This made the victory he had obtained feel rather tasteless.

This time, the match would be held at City Ground Stadium instead. Coppell hoped that his revenge against Twain could be completed with a victory. Of course, he also believed in Reading's abilities. Faced against a Nottingham Forest which was comprised mostly of substitutes and new players, victory should not be difficult.

He was wrong.

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The time that these Nottingham Forest players had spent training together was no more than one week. So, even after twenty minutes of gameplay, Nottingham Forest still could not pose a threat to Reading's goalpost. But Reading also soon discovered that they could not easily score on Nottingham Forest's goalpost either.

It was predicted before the match that the two center backs who were pairing up for the first time would leave lots of gaps in Nottingham Forest's defensive line. And although that was not too far from reality, what Coppell did not expect was for Tang En to deploy a turtling tactic on their home ground.

Apart from Eastwood, the Nottingham Forest players had to return to the penalty area and play defense whenever it was time to go on the defensive. Therefore, David Johnson frequently stayed inside the penalty area for extended periods of time.

Tang En did not care that the team was being suppressed on its home grounds, or that the team appeared to be in a precarious and tight spot. It was true that Tang En was not planning on winning this game. But still, in the words of Argentina's famous football manager Carlos Bianchi, "Even if you can't win a match, don't lose it either." Tang En did not have high hopes for the team's ability to beat

Reading, but this did not mean that he would allow them to lose on their home ground. In order to stop the other competitors from widening the gap in the scores, they must not lose this match.

Since the two center backs were pairing up with each other for the first time, holes in their defenses were inevitable. Therefore, the role of the defensive midfielders became all the more important. Not only did they make up the first line of defense outside the penalty area, but they also had to run back into the penalty area and act as center backs, and at times even became the sweepers. There was no need for Tang En to worry about Gunnarsson; his experience ensured that he was capable enough for the role. As for Wood...

Absentmindedly, Tang En turned around and glanced at the top floor of the stands behind him.

There was a row of VIP suites, and George Wood's mother, Sophia, was currently sitting inside of it with Evan, watching her son play.

With her around, surely nothing could happen to Wood, right?

A sharp and hurried whistle sounded, regaining Tang En's attention. He saw a player from Reading lying on the ground. It was Reading's top shooter, the Bermudian Shaun Goater. Last season, he had still been in Manchester City as Sun Ji Hai's teammate. He had scored a total of eighty-six goals over seven seasons of playing for Manchester City, and was one of Manchester City's fans' favorite players.

Goater, who had once helped Manchester City return to the Premier League by scoring twenty-eight goals during the 01-02 season, and had scored nine goals for Reading in the first half of this season, was currently lying on the floor and hugging his leg in pain as he raised his hand and requested a stretcher.

And the person standing calmly beside him was none other than George Wood. Even when the referee issued him a yellow card, his expression did not seem to change.

Walker looked at Tang En, who thought very highly of Wood. Tang En only scratched his head. Wow, he thought. Don't tell me he got overexcited.

After the stretcher carried Goater off the field, Tang En saw a mixed-race man being called over by Coppell. As he listened to his manager's instructions, he took off the jacket he was wearing, revealing the number and name written on the back of his jersey: 22, Tyson.

"Nathan Tyson, forward." Walker said beside Tang En. Tang En nodded his head. He did not expect that Wood's yellow card would be able to switch out the opponent team's core forward. Therefore, that foul wasn't for nothing. It had become slightly easier for Nottingham Forest to end this match in a draw. Goater's entrance into Reading FC had played a big role in the team's ability to achieve the fourth position rank in the league. Coppell's tactics were almost entirely built around him.

It was hard to tell how serious Goater's injuries were, but judging by the way he was covering his face on the stretcher, Tang En could tell that the injury was pretty serious, and not one that would be healed by just a week or two of rest.

Wood, you brat! You really are the midfield mincer, the ace killer.

Tang En did not know what Sophia was feeling when she saw her son receive a yellow card, but he himself was thrilled. This was because Wood had succeeded in the task that Tang En had given him

before the match. For a defensive player, fouls were normal. The number of fouls and the number of cards issued to a defensive midfielder was a very important statistic that was required to assess his abilities.

Not only did modern football require defensive midfielders to wrestle the ball from the opponent's feet, but it also had to be done in a clean, sportsmanlike manner. If a defensive midfielder did not get a single yellow card throughout his entire career, then that person was like a god.

Goater's injury gave a warning to the Reading players who had launched a joint attack against Nottingham Forest: "Listen up, you Reading lads," it said. "Whoever dares to get carried away in front of George Wood will end up just like that old man!"

Subsequently, the Reading offenses, which had once been as fierce as raging tides, started to gradually subside. Both parties became engaged in a stalemate in the middle of the field. As a result, Wood and Gunnarsson became the two busiest and the most featured players on camera.

Tang En's allocation of tasks for these two defensive midfielders was as such: since Wood had good stamina, fast speed, and a tendency to aggressively snatch for possession of the ball, Tang En positioned him slightly forward in order to give him the first opportunity to get the ball. Gunnarsson, on the other hand, had a wealth of experience, and was calm and collected. So, Tang En made him defend behind Wood. If an opponent broke past Wood, Gunnarsson would then immediately intercept him to buy Wood time to return to his position.

From the thirty minutes of the match that had passed, the two player's coordination was fairly good; it did not seem like they had only trained together for two weeks. Gunnarsson also liked the feeling of coordinating with Wood. It was as though they had been born with chemistry between them.

"George Wood, a young eighteen year-old player, entered Nottingham Forest's youth team to undergo training when he was only seventeen. We don't have any information about his football career prior to this. I don't know if that's because he didn't stand out and I could not find his relevant information, or because he doesn't even have any at all." Motson looked at the detailed information sheet in his hands regarding the Nottingham Forest players. All the other players had, at the very least, a few hundred words of introduction and details. Meanwhile, George Wood's data prior to 2003 was completely blank. "This is the first match that he is playing for Nottingham Forest's first team. Based on these first thirty minutes, he seems to be pretty good! With him and Gunnarsson running tirelessly and tackling fiercely in front of the center backs, an insurmountable wall has been formed. Even though he is representing the team for the first time, we can't see even a hint nerves on his face. Nottingham Forest's youth training camp has very high standards. Even with Michael Dawson and Andy Reid's departure from the team, it seems like we won't have to worry too much about not having successors for them."

Perhaps Motson himself had not realized, but he had unknowingly become a supporter of Nottingham Forest. This was why he was commentating on so many of Nottingham Forest's matches. He enjoyed seeing Tony Twain's unrestrained display of beautiful, ready command at the side of the field. He also liked to see teams filled with such passion for victory, while looking forward to those unpredictably funny accidents which would make him burst out laughing.

Even though this match did not look interesting from the stands, he was still able to quickly find aspects of Nottingham Forest to compliment. In the past, he would have shaken his head and sighed, while criticizing the match for its lack of intensity.

There was indeed a mysterious aura surrounding Tony Twain which attracted people to him, and John Motson, the English pundit, was merely one of them.