

Champions 301

Chapter 301: As Expected Part 1

In the end, George Wood chose not to go to Eastwood's room. He left the flowers at the counter on the ground floor, asking the nurse to pass it on to him before leaving.

Tang En noticed that he had written only "Good luck" on the card, and asked, "You're not signing it?"

Wood shook his head. "No."

Tang En knew how he felt and smiled. "But it doesn't matter. Within the team, only your handwriting is that unique. Even if you don't write your name down, he'll know who it is. You're the only one with such terrible handwriting that even your name is hardly legible."

Wood paid no attention to Tang En's joke. He placed the card among the flowers and gave them to the youthful and pretty nurse.

The nurse had long ago recognized the man who stood before her. After receiving the flowers, she put them aside. She then picked up a piece of paper and presented it to Wood, asking somewhat nervously, "I... I'm a fan of yours, George. You- You... Could you sign for me?"

Wood hesitated briefly, perhaps thinking it was not a suitable time for him to be giving out signatures.

However, Tang En coughed behind him, reminding Wood not to disappoint his fans. Wood obediently picked up his pen again and wrote his name on the piece of paper. Slanting awkwardly, the signature showed no bearing of a star at all. But the girl liked it very much and carefully put it away.

Tang En and Wood walked out of the building. Tang En looked up towards the fourth floor and asked Wood, "You're really not going up?"

Wood shook his head. "No."

"That's a shame..." Tang En retrieved his gaze. "This was a pretty good chance. You... why can't you just be a little more honest? Where did the courage you used to tackle Rochemback go?"

Wood stayed silent. There were some things that he truly did not know how to say.

He rarely said "I'm sorry" to anyone. Even if he knew that something was his fault, he did not know how to bring himself to say it.

"Never mind. I'm not going to force you. From watching you tackle Rochemback and his departure from the field with an injury, I'm sure Freddy already understands." Tang En shrugged. Some things were better left unsaid; let them just keep it in their hearts.

"Do you have anything urgent to attend to right now?"

"No."

"Very well; walk with me."

“Where to?”

“Anywhere.” Tang En pointed towards the small path before the hospital gates. “Let’s just walk along this path. We can go anywhere. A stroll.”

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“George... By tomorrow at the latest, I believe the notification for your punishment will be out. Do you have any thoughts on it?”

Strolling on the small, quiet path, Tang En and Wood began chatting casually.

“Thoughts?”

“It’s been almost a full day since what happened. Do you regret it? I mean... do you regret receiving a red card for taking revenge on Rochemback?”

“No. It’s already done.”

Hearing such a response, Tang En could not help but burst out laughing.

“If you met with that situation again, would you still choose to tackle him?”

Without any hesitation, Wood nodded.

“Hm...” Tang En rubbed his chin. “You can ask for some guidance from the older members on our team. About how you could... you know... without getting fouled out. I’m sure you understand what I’m talking about, right?”

Wood looked at Tang En and indicated his understanding. “I get it.”

Tang En sighed again. “But I know that this is a little difficult for you... you’re always so direct. It wouldn’t really be you if you were to use such underhanded tricks.”

Wood finally broke and asked a burning question on his mind. “So... how is his injury?”

“Not too great.” Tang En glanced at Wood. “To receive such a serious injury twice around the same area... It would be the greatest victory if he could return to the field at all. I can’t ask for more than that...”

Wood bowed his head as he listened to what Tang En said. He obviously knew who the culprit was behind the first of his injuries. If it wasn’t for the first, the second injury would perhaps not have been as severe.

“Will he... retire?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to look at how the surgery goes, and his post-surgery recovery.” Tang En told him the truth. Who could know anything for certain about the future?

Looking at the somber expression George Wood had, Tang En gave him a smile.

“Don’t mind that. As a football athlete, it’s common to get injured. This has nothing to do with you.”

Even with Tang En saying that, George Wood's expression remained unchanged. Eastwood's situation today had originated from the foul that he had committed when he was on the Youth Team. There was no way he could just forget it.

Seeing him that way, Tang En did not try to further persuade him and let him be. Perhaps it would be good for him to have some pressure. But there was still something that needed to be said.

"George, do your best. Now, you're not just playing for yourself alone. Freddy may not be able to participate in any matches for half a year. Let's work harder together on his behalf."

Wood nodded vigorously at his words.

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The next day, UEFA sent a punishment notification regarding George Wood. Based on the recording of Wood's tackling of Rochemback, there was no conclusive evidence to show his act was malicious or to purposefully seek revenge. When Rochemback had received the ball, it originally lay between him and Wood. Wood's foot must have been going for the ball. Unexpectedly, in an attempt to lure Wood to commit a foul, Rochemback pushed the ball aside and allowed his own ankle to directly receive Wood's tackle, thereby causing his injury.

In conclusion, Wood's punishment was a four-match ban from the European tournaments. That punishment was not considered harsh. Usually, a red card would result in a two-match ban. Wood was only barred for two additional matches. In comparison to previous guesses from the others of something like a half-year ban, this was much better. Such an extreme contrast made it seem as if Wood had not received any punishment at all.

Following that, the UEFA evaluated the referee of the match and found nothing unusual. They also had no doubts about the yellow card awarded to Rochemback.

It could basically be viewed as a move against Tony.

As expected, after the explanation the UEFA warned Nottingham Forest's manager, Tony Twain, not to cast doubts on the referee's judgment. The referees in the UEFA were chosen through strict selection criteria.

The UEFA Referees Committee was extremely displeased with Tang En's words. They felt that Tang En was disrupting the referee's work and had made attempts to influence the refereeing world. He was perceived as trying to use his perspective to influence the judgments made by the referees. Tang En, however, cared nothing for their anger. In his viewpoint, since it was all a kind of work, the referee's job should also be open to criticisms from other people. Getting it wrong meant getting it wrong. There was no need to cover up the matter.

Before he could relate that to them, Evan Doughty approached him. Evan hoped he would not go against the UEFA at such a crucial point. Tang En understood that Evan was saying that for his own good, so he could only swallow his unhappiness with the UEFA Referees Committee and suppress it in his heart. He would wait for another opportunity to vent.

Nottingham Forest Football Club accepted the result of the punishment. What else could they do if they did not? Nottingham Forest's era of great reputation within the European Football scene had been over

for a long time. Currently, their words carried little weight. UEFA was already considerably lenient for not barring Wood for half a year.

With the loss of two core players, Forest's journey against Sporting CP was not looked well upon.

Despite having various options and combinations for their forward line, Tang En found himself at a loss when it came to the position of the defending midfielder. After a search, Tang En found that there was truly only one George Wood, and there was no suitable substitute for him. The home match against Sporting CP already showed that Gunnarsson was unable to effectively replace George Wood. If the same arrangements were made for the away match, Tang En reckoned that his team would perish even more horribly.

As the team's main manager, Tang En was already considering selling Gunnarsson after the season ends and finding a suitable substitute for Wood.

Tang En was not worried about Wood's physical condition developing problems. However, the red card set off blaring alarms for him. Wood was not a nice guy with a good temper. The battles within the English Premier League were fierce, and such clashes were inevitable. Wood's collection of foul cards in the future would certainly be more than just a few. And when Wood got barred from matches because of an accumulation of yellow cards, or from receiving a red card, there needed to be a substitute that Tang En could have confidence in. He did not have to perform as well as Wood, but he could not perform too poorly either.

In truth, it was often more difficult to choose a substitute than a core player. While a core player needed only the ability to perform. A substitute not only needed ability but also the mental toughness to sit on the bench. They had to be able to withstand the loneliness. Being a substitute for someone like Wood it was even tougher; Wood was the kind of player who rarely got injured.

What player would willingly sit on the substitutes' bench for a majority of the time? Almost none. Yet, the team could not function without an able set of reserve line-ups. Though rotation may be a feasible method, it was only a possibility. The stability of the formation and a rotation system ran directly counter to each other.

Furthermore, to do a rotation on the position of a defensive midfielder already sounded ridiculous. The most essential requirement of a defensive midfielder was stability. With changing here and there, it would not only be the rotating players who felt uncomfortable; the entire team would be at a loss.

In Tang En's heart, if Forest team in the future truly became strong enough to require a rotation system for competing in multiple leagues, there were two positions that he would not implement rotation on: one was the goalkeeper, and the other was George Wood.

Chapter 302: As Expected Part 2

The thoughts of such unrealistic matters were much too far-off from now. With Wood unable to participate, Tang En decided to give up focusing on defense in the away match. He partnered Albertini with Arteta in the center of the midfield as starters.

Since they had already had lost two goals to their opponent in the home match, there was no point in trying to maintain their current single goal lead in the away match. They might as well just go on the attack and try to score more than two goals in the away match. That way, they could nullify the goals that Sporting CP had scored in their away match.

For that reason, Forest trained to go on the attack throughout the week. With Arteta as the attacking core, he took command of their offense. Tang En also felt that he could take this opportunity to realize the ideas he had had in his heart, allowing Arteta to utilize the chance to gradually solidify his position as the playmaker of the team.

From Arteta's recent performance during substitutions, Tang En could be certain that the Arteta he knew was no different from the previous one. His abilities and talent were present, which would be sufficient for him to fulfill his potential as a playmaker.

Before this, Tang En had been worried that his appearance here would cause a change in the abilities of the players. But looking at it now, it seemed that most of them still remained at the standard they should be at.

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After undergoing three days of training at Nottingham, Forest flew to the capital of Portugal, Lisbon. Over there, they carried out two days of training to familiarize themselves, getting used to the grounds, holding the press conference, and so on.

From their first step off the plane and onto the grounds of Lisbon, Tang En could feel the enmity pouring out from all over Sporting CP's home grounds. After all, they had taken out their main defensive midfielder in the previous match and had even mercilessly ridiculed Peseiro in the press conference afterward.

As such, they now had to bear an enormous amount of pressure in the beginnings of their away match journey. U.pdated b.y boxnovel.com

In the two days before the match, Forest's training was constantly disrupted by Sporting CP's fans gathered at the sidelines. It resulted in Kerslake having no option but to request that their Portuguese counterparts close off their training grounds.

The situation got even worse when it came to the day of the actual match.

Estádio José Alvalade was devoid of any empty seats. From the point of entry of Forest's players, grating sounds of jeering constantly rang out. In truth, most of them were aimed at Twain.

But the Tony of today was not the same man as the football manager who had insufficient ability or was starting out mid-career. It was not his first experience getting jeered at by an entire stadium of fans. The only difference was the number of people. Nothing else. He had already learned to ignore it. His entire focus now was on the match itself.

Right from the beginning of the match, the tactics used by the teams in the match were glaringly obvious.

Due to the two away goals in Sporting CP's pocket, along with being only behind by a single goal, they played patiently. On their home grounds, they chose the strategy of defensive counterattacking, something that surprised even the commentator.

On the other hand, Nottingham Forest also unexpectedly formed an attacking formation.

It was as if the two teams had switched their roles of away and home team.

From the first second of the match, Forest team used the fact that they kicked-off to launch a ferocious attack at the heart of Sporting CP.

With the loss of Rochemback, the defensive responsibilities of Sporting CP seemingly fell to the entire team; everyone had to participate in defense. Their priority was to prevent any loss of goals on their home ground and to only take the chance to counterattack when there was one.

George Wood's red card was a domino effect. Peseiro was clear about that. Currently, Forest did not have the guts to merely defend their single goal advantage in the away match. If that was the case, they would be finished as long as Sporting CP scored a goal. So, in this match, Forest would certainly be trying to score as many goals as possible.

Peseiro wanted precisely to capture this mentality of the opponent. First, they would defend stably. After dragging it out long enough for Forest to become impatient, they would initiate a sudden attack. They just need one goal to beat down Forest.

The offense Tony Twain trained a week for, and the defense José Peseiro trained a week for; it was a head-on clash this time.

At the end of the first half, despite having put all their effort into it, Forest remained unable to break through the gates of the home team. Instead, Sporting CP, on their home grounds amid their cheering fans, were gaining momentum with each successive defense. Their frequent sneak attacks sent Forest's defensive line into a mess of jitters, and Edwin van der Sar into a tailspin.

After the halftime break, Forest continued going on the offense in the second half. However, they had also gradually moved to focus more on their defense. Tang En intended on using their offense to curb the attacks of the opponent, replicating the effect of defense itself.

Their points remained at a stalemate. The tidal wave of attacks from Forest forced Sporting CP to put more of their attention into defending. Time ticked down. Just as everyone assumed Forest team would take a spot among the final eight in this way, Sporting CP scored a goal four minutes before entering injury stoppage time.

It was not due to a defensive counterattack from Sporting CP. Instead, it came from a corner kick.

In a moment of sloppiness in the final minutes of Forest's defense, Matthew Upson failed to follow his mark. A fleeting moment of carelessness led to an irreparable result.

Sporting CP led against Nottingham by 1:0!

If that score persisted until the end of the match, Sporting CP, who had a higher number of away goals, would eliminate Nottingham Forest.

Forest was obviously unwilling for that to happen. In the last moments, Tang En used up all three of his substitution quota. He substituted center back Upson for a forward, Bendtner.

Including the three minutes of injury stoppage time, there were only seven minutes left in the match. In those seven minutes, Forest only had a single fullback left on the field: Hierro. Both Leighton Baines and Chimbonda had received Tang En's instructions to go full out on offense and ignore defending.

The formation of the Forest team abruptly became an astonishing 1333 – one fullback and two rear defenders moving forward to join Albertini in a row as part of the midfield.

Tang En's way of battling to the death was to entirely disregard their defense. Even so, Forest team did not manage to get the result they yearned for in Estádio José Alvalade.

When the German referee sounded the final whistle to signal the end of the match, the cheers that erupted from within the grounds of Estádio José Alvalade shook the skies with its ferocity. The players of Sporting CP hugged one another in celebration of their hard-earned victory.

On the other end, Nottingham Forest's players were collapsed on the ground breathing heavily, reluctantly watching the joy of their opponents.

Conversely, Tang En was neither dissatisfied nor dejected. At the point when Eastwood was sent to the hospital for his severe injury and George Wood was fouled out with a red card because he took revenge, this result had already been foreseen by Tang En.

Watching the celebratory scene of their opponent's victory and listening to the wave of cheers, each louder than the last, drifting in from the spectators' stands, Tang En turned to face David Kerslake beside him. He said, "I think... you're right, David. I made a big mistake. A very, very big mistake. and now I've failed."

Chapter 303: Time to Hurtle Part 1

When the Nottingham Forest team flew back to London from Lisbon, the players did not smile. It had been a defeat in the away game, which was quite different from the away game loss to Villarreal CF. No matter what, they had known that losing to Villarreal would not stop the team from breaking out of the group stage. Therefore, after one night, the players had quickly recovered from their anger and chatted and laughed on the plane.

It was different this time.

Losing to Sporting Lisbon meant that they had completely lost the UEFA Europa League that season. There was no hope for a championship. As a result, no one could laugh on the plane.

There were currently many young players on the Forest team. Some of them had just participated in a top league and a European tournament for the first time. There was an advantage to such a team: they would be deeply struck by their failure. They would not take it lightly. Such a failure would continue to affect them for a long time.

Twain still had a straight face. He was different from the players. It was not because he had lost a game or a UEFA Europa League, but because he felt stupid. A little success made him complacent and lose his

head. He had wanted to claim the title of the UEFA Europa League, but he had not considered his and the team's current abilities. Now that he thought about it, he realized how ridiculous he had been when he had bragged to Dunn. He wondered if Dunn had thought the same thing.

In his view, it was not that the players did not do a good job, but that as a manager, he had sought the wrong objective. He had been blinded by his hubris.

Twain was in a bad mood, so no one was willing to deal with him. Next to him, Kerslake glanced at him several times but did not know what to say. Eventually, he just sighed and said nothing.

The team flew back to England and returned to Nottingham in silence.

Their European games of this season were all over.

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When the team arrived in Nottingham, Twain announced that the team would be dismissed on the spot for a half-day break. They would resume their training the next morning. Despite a league game three days later, Twain was not in a hurry gather the team for their training immediately. After a big game, he wanted the players to rest for a while and regain their strength.

Of course, that was only one of the reasons. The other reason was that Twain needed to think about what the Forest team was going to do for the rest of the season.

When Twain had previously contemplated such things, he would go to the bar to think and drink. Later, after Dunn came, Twain had been more willing to discuss things with Dunn at home.

This was no exception.

Dunn quietly listened to Twain's doubts and then asked, "How many points does the Forest team have now?"

"Forty-seven, and Liverpool has forty-four." Twain remembered those figures very clearly. "But they are short a game."

Dunn nodded. He talked more now, compared to when he had first arrived in England. Twain was happy that he could change a person, even just a little. "And Everton?" Dunn asked.

"Fifty-one points; a four-point difference. Third in the league is Arsenal with sixty-one points. It's a gap of ten points with Everton."

"The top four in the league are eligible to participate in the UEFA Champions League," Dunn said. "A four-point gap shouldn't be too much for you, right?"

Twain thought for a moment with his head bowed and nodded. "I understand. The next nine rounds will be a battle of us versus Liverpool and Everton."

"Don't forget Charlton and Middlesbrough," Dunn cautioned.

Twain waved his hand. "I don't place much importance on them."

Dunn chuckled a little.

Twain stared at him strangely, "What are you laughing about?"

"Nothing." Dunn shook his head. The smile was gone from his face. But Twain did not let it go. He continued to stare at him. Finally, Dunn put up his hand in surrender. "It's just... you just lost an important game and now you're so confident."

Twain scratched his head, "I thought about it for a long time on the plane. No, actually, I've been thinking about it in my hotel bed for a long time since we lost the game. You were right, Dunn. But you stopped trying to persuade me. You wanted me to learn the hard way on my own?"

Dunn's lips twitched a little, but he still did not say anything.

"Now come to think of it, I was very foolish at that time. But fortunately, we lost early. If we had lost in the semi-finals, I would have ended up empty-handed for the season." Twain sat at the dining table and looked the cutlery in his hands. The silver metal gleamed a little under the light. He then looked up and found that Dunn had been looking at him. He laughed self-deprecatingly. "What's the saying? Better late than never."

Dunn nodded to show that he understood. Then he shook his head again. "There's something you are right about. Football can't be planned."

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Twain tried his best to seem confident. However, in the 30th round of the league tournament, the weary Forest team was completely out of shape. They lost 0:2 to Tottenham Hotspur. He had lost a great opportunity to gain more points.

During that round, Tony Twain's two rivals had a direct match. It was the start of the Merseyside derby at Anfield Stadium.

Regardless of the results and ranking of the two teams in the league, those things had no reference value for the Merseyside derby.

After 90 minutes of fierce fighting, Rafael Benítez's Reds defeated Moyes' Everton.

After selling Gravesen, Everton had not made up for it in the winter transfer. They were not Liverpool's opponents in that away game. They were beaten in the first half by 0:2. In the second half, Everton launched a frenzied counterattack. Perhaps they would not care if the match was so fierce that it affected the entire season. For the Derby opponents, this game was more important than a season's league.

Red and blue were the two most traditional colors in English football. The two colors could almost be regarded as arch rivals in any city, such as the red Manchester United and the blue Manchester City, the red Arsenal and the blue Chelsea, the red Liverpool and the blue Everton.

Despite the brilliant success of the Liverpool Football Club, Everton had a much earlier history in the city of Liverpool than the Liverpool club did. Unsurprisingly, Everton was unwilling to lose to Liverpool. Even in an away game, they would not be willing.

In the second half, Everton started a fierce counterattack that made Liverpool feel like they could not withstand it. They scored a goal halfway through. But they were slightly less lucky. The ball bounced out after another shot hit the goal beam at the last moment.

When the referee blew the final whistle, the score on the electronic screen was set at 2:1, and Liverpool won on their home ground.

As a result, the gap between the Forest team and Everton had not changed, but Liverpool caught up with the Forest team with 47 points. They then relied on a weak goal difference advantage over the Forest team to rank fifth. The Forest team fell to the sixth place.

The seventh-ranked Charlton had 43 points, which was four points away from Forest.

It was really a situation in which three teams grappled for the spot in the UEFA Champions League.

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The match against Tottenham Hotspur was held a little bit earlier than the Merseyside derby. When the result of the Merseyside derby came out, Twain was very depressed. He knew he had lost an excellent opportunity. If the Forest team had beaten Tottenham Hotspur at home, then they would only be one point away from Everton now, and would still maintain a three-point advantage over Liverpool. Even if Liverpool won in its make-up match, they would still have the same points. This could be crucial for the last few rounds of the hurdle phase.

It was too late to say anything now. Another chance had been missed. Besides, the team's condition was really not good. There was no way to fight against Tottenham Hotspur, who took advantage of their exhaustion.

The loss of the game caused the media to resume their speculation on the subject of "The end of the young manager." Sports media might be the most ruthless and effective of all the media in the world. Because the sports competition itself determined the hero through the outcome of victory or defeat. When one performed well, one received everyone's praise. No matter how fulsome the flattery was, they would pile it on. But if one lost, no matter how good one's performance was before, there would be many people who blamed and reduce them to nothing.

This world was so cruel; a victory would always be a victory and a defeat would always be considered a defeat. A draw was the most unremarkable result and the most meaningless.

Twain had seen such matters in the media two years ago. The winner would dominate and the loser would be powerless. When he became a manager and experienced those things first hand, he had not felt indignant about it. Instead, he could make use of the media to achieve some of his goals.

Just like this time.

The Forest team was eliminated from the UEFA Europa League, suffered two defeats, and did not win for three rounds in the Premier League. In the reporters' gifted writing, these results were described as the end of the road for the Forest team.

Surprisingly, Twain did not return fire in his own column to counter those remarks.

There was a twelve-day period until the next round of the league tournament. The competition for the national teams was being held during that time. For those big football clubs, this was the time when the FIFA virus spread. However, for such a small club like Nottingham Forest, it was a good time to recuperate and regroup.

Compared to Liverpool and even Everton, the national footballers in the Forest team were pitifully few. Edwin van der Sar remained the main goalkeeper for the Netherlands national team. He would play with the Netherlands team in the qualifier for next year's World Cup. Of the four main defenders, Hierro had long retired from the national team and Matthew Upson and Leighton Baines had not been selected for the English national team. Not to mention Pascal Chimbonda; the French national team did not have a position for him yet.

Chapter 304: Time to Hurtle Part 2

In the midfield, Albertini had retired from the Italian national team a while ago. George Wood was not selected for Eriksson's English team. Although Ribéry had performed well in the Premier League this season, he did not receive the French manager Domenech's attention. Ashley Young and Aaron Lennon had only played for the England national youth team. Mikel Arteta, who had played overseas for a long time, had never been selected for the Spanish national team.

For the strikers, Viduka was still the Australian national team's main striker. However, Australia basically had no real opponents. Rather than saying he was going back to compete, it was more like he was going back for a vacation. Nicklas Bendtner was recruited by Denmark's national football team. But it was hard to say if he would have a chance to appear. Perhaps he would just be on the substitutes' bench for two games. Peter Crouch was noticed by Eriksson, and the media reported it. But he did not appear on the national team's big list for this game.

In this way, Edwin van der Sar and Mark Viduka were the only ones who would really leave the Wilford training base. The Forest team's lineup remained quite intact, sufficient enough for Twain to practice formation tactics and make targeted arrangements. Compared with their two rivals, the Forest team suffered the least shortfall.

When the Premier League tournament started again on April 3, the Forest team would face its direct rival, Everton, at its home ground. It was not going to be an easy game.

In Eastwood's absence due to his injury, Twain deployed a whole new front line. Unfortunately, with one striker injured and the departure of two forwards in their four-forward front line, only Crouch remained. Twain could not fully conduct training for the coordination within those twelve days. He could only rely on the rapport that they had built during the usual training. Bendtner was delighted to be selected for Denmark's national team at such a young age and was eager to play for Denmark. When he left, Twain also encouraged Bendtner and hoped that he would perform well. But in reality, Twain was keen for Bendtner to remain on the substitutes' bench for the entire two games so that he could get back a healthy Bendtner when the national team games were over. With only three forwards left on Forest's front line, they could not afford any more injuries.

For the challenge against Everton, Twain would put the healthy Bendtner and Crouch in the starting lineup. Viduka would be on the substitutes' bench. He would watch and decide if he needed to play depending on the situation.

In Twain's view, Bendtner could completely replace Viduka and play the role of a powerful center forward. And what about Crouch? He was the tallest, but he was not the type to play as a strong center forward. He had good footwork, which was especially important for a six-and-a-half-foot striker.

The two midfielder candidates for the flanks remained unchanged in the midfield. They were the team's main forces, Franck Ribéry and Ashley Young. In the middle of the midfield, Twain made a change which originated from the UEFA Europa League: Albertini, who had played continuously in a series of games, would be rotated out because George Wood, who had been suspended for more than half a month for the UEFA Europa League, was back in the starting lineup. His partner was Mikel Arteta, who made his debut in the last UEFA Europa League game.

Tang En decided to have a little fun for this arrangement. He used the Everton core midfielder in his own memory to deal with Everton. He thought that it would be very interesting. But Tang En did not know if Moyes would find it amusing.

Wood's mission was simple. Previously when Albertini was playing, he was in charge of watching the team captain's back. This time, he was replaced by Mikel Arteta. Wood's mission remained unchanged. He would still be watching Arteta's back and support Arteta when necessary.

On the defensive line, Hierro was rotated out. The two fullback partners, Matthew Upson and Piqué, remained unchanged.

During those twelve days, the Forest team would use those formations to perform repeated drills. And it was not just to deal with the game against Everton. More importantly, for the next eight rounds of the season, the Forest team would use this lineup most of the time to finish the season and only do some fine-tuning in a few small areas.

Twain and the Forest coaching team used all available time and means in these last twelve days. Earlier on the day after losing the game, Twain held a simple meeting with the coaches in the hotel room before going to the airport. At the meeting, he openly acknowledged his strategic mistakes. After giving up the league tournament, he did not even achieve any good results that he had hoped for at the UEFA Europa League in the end. For Twain himself, the UEFA Europa League runner-up and top 16 were just levels. If he did not win the championship title, it was not considered a good result.

Soon after, Twain told the coaching team that the team's goals had changed and that their focus was back on the Premier League. The team was still based on the Premier League. It must be said that even though the ability of the Nottingham Forest coaching team might be in the middle level of the league, everyone was very nice. No one mocked Twain for reaping what he had sowed. No one complained that they had done a big circle around the UEFA Europa League. For them, the team's collective performance was far more important than individual honor. As long as it was good for the Forest team, they would do the right thing.

Twain knew what kind of people these coaches were. But regrettably, now was not the time to say thank you. After all, their goal had not been achieved.

During the day at the team's training base, Twain and the entire coaching staff led the team in training. They studied tactical arrangements, ensured that the players were in good condition, and paid attention to their physical condition. The countless small details were all taken care of by specific people. Twain only needed to create an overall plan. However, after losing a few games recently, his role as a manager might not be reflected in the team's specific training, but in psychological adjustment.

He needed to convince everyone that these failures were just minor setbacks. Provided that they put in a little more effort and soldiered on, they could do it. And for Twain, this was probably the job he was best at.

Twain continued to be busy at night. He did not go to the bar at all during that period. After going home, from dinner onwards he and Dunn would study each opponent of the remaining eight rounds. No detail was spared. Dunn did not have a heavy responsibility in the youth team training. After all, the youth team and the First Team were still very different. Therefore, he would help Twain gather a lot of the competitor's video material. After dinner, the two men would sit in front of the television and watch the game videos of those teams over and over again.

Although Dunn was not a First Team manager, he was doing a job that any member of the First Team's coaching team would do.

After losing the UEFA Europa League, if they did not want to end up with nothing this season, then everyone had to gather his strength and try his hardest to fight. Now there was no way back.

The time to hurtle was here.

Chapter 305: Against Everton Part 1

April 3, Rain showers.

Nottingham, outside City Ground.

Despite the lack of cooperation from the Heavens, such weather in England was all too common; it was unable to deter Forest fans from watching the match live. Various shades of umbrellas gathered at the gates of the stadium, forming a long, snaking line. As the mob of umbrellas moved along with the flow and got to the spectators' stands, it all vanished into thin air in an instant. What was left were people welcoming the wind and rain with loud songs and their wide open arms; every person, every group.

This was the 31st round of the English Premier League, with Nottingham Forest on home ground against Everton. To other football fans, this may not be a particularly special match; it was not a must to watch it. But for the fans of the participating teams, this was a crucial match with no less importance than the city's derby games.

Everyone had put forth their best effort in preparation for this game. No one would be willing to be the loser at the end of the 90 minutes.

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The locker room of the home team was quiet. The players who had just returned from their warm-up on the field were drenched in sweat and hastily changing into their clean jerseys. Tang En stood at the door

of the locker room and watched his players methodically accomplish all of that. David Kerslake seemed a little anxious. He stood at the side and from time to time, raised his wrist to look at the watch.

Tang En cleared his throat and raised his hands. "You guys can go on, I'll just say a few words."

All the players paused in their motions and looked back at him. With a wave of his hand, Tang En signaled for them to continue doing their own things. As he watched the players go back to changing, Tang En scratched his head and said, "Um, half a month ago, we lost the UEFA Europa League. Although I had rather excitedly declared that we were to become the Europa League champions, the result turned out to be a joke. I've lost."

The players on the scene were taken aback by how easily Tang En voiced the statement, "I have lost." Their manager was thought to be someone who would not admit to losing at any cost; and even if he did, he was the kind who would at least want to win a verbal battle. Why was he being so strange today?

Tang En looked at the players' expressions and understood what they were thinking. He cracked a grin and asked, "Has everyone changed into clean clothes?"

The players nodded.

"Very good. Settle down and keep listening to me. We're a newly promoted team, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we are." Some players responded.

"Usually, a newly promoted team would aim to avoid relegation, right?"

"Right." This time, there were more respondents.

"But..." Tang En suddenly switched the focus of the conversation, "The League matches are already in their 31st round. Look at our current results. We are number six in the league! What newly promoted team has such good results? If we surpass just two more teams, we'll be able to participate in next season's UEFA Champions League! To discard the Europa League for the Champions League, I think it's worth it. There are still eight rounds left in the league. To achieve that goal, we need to start sprinting from now on. A sprint... full-speed ahead! Everton is our direct competition. While we're running forward, so are they!"

Tang En walked into the center of the room from the door. He stood among the crowd of people and looked around the room.

"Recently, our luck hasn't been good. We've lost goals, the Europa League, and two Premier League matches in a row. The media outside is making a big hoo-ha out of it. They make it sound like it's the end of the world for us. They've prematurely announced a death sentence for us when there are still eight more rounds to go in the league! They've declared that it's the end of us this season, that we're doomed!"

Tang En jabbed his finger towards the door and cursed. "Those bastards! What do you guys think? Do you think it's the end of us for this season? Are we already finished?"

If anyone at that point answered, "Yes, I think we're finished," then they were obviously seeking out death. All of Forest's players yelled, "No!"

Tang En was immensely gratified by their response.

“I’ll tell you this. I’ll guarantee it; Liverpool will fall behind! Liverpool will definitely fall behind! Don’t look at how they’re ahead of us right now. We’ll surpass them! So, in fact, our main opponent is only Everton. And the decisive match with them is today! So long as we can close the gap between us to a single point, the ones who won’t be able to withstand it and collapse under that pressure will be our opponents!”

Tang En curled his fist and smashed it downwards. Even though he hit nothing, everyone around could hear the bang as if he had.

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“Ranked sixth in the Premier League, and in the final 16 of the UEFA Europa... For a newly-promoted team and a manager who’s only 36 years old, I think this is already outstanding enough.”

The match had not begun, but the work of the commentators had already started. Martin Taylor and Andy Gray were analyzing for their audience some relevant information to the match.

Gray laughed. “Martin, I don’t think Manager Twain would agree with you.”

“Hm?”

“He’ll think this isn’t enough because it has yet to reach his aim. So long as it doesn’t reach his aim, it can’t be outstanding. We’ll surely be able to tell a little more from this match. I’ll bet you that Forest will go all out for this match against Everton. It’s impossible for this to end in a draw. At this point, getting a draw would be the same as failing for a man like Tony Twain.”

“Andy, when did you get to know him so well?”

The two men who were seated in front of their microphones began chuckling.

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When players from both teams got on the field, Moyes noticed Mikel Arteta among the 11 players of Forest’s starting line-up. A surge of inexplicable feelings momentarily engulfed him.

This was a player who should originally have received training under him; a player who should be wearing the blue jersey of Everton to fight in the Premier League. Instead, he was in Nottingham Forest and had become his opponent.

He turned his gaze towards the manager’s seat.

Tony Twain appeared dignified and serious. Moyes could hardly make the connection between him and the down-hearted, frustrated man he had known two years ago. In a span of not even two years, there was such a big change...

No, we have become opponents now.

This is not the time for mutual appreciation.

Moyes retrieved his gaze and sat waiting at the manager’s seat for the match to begin.

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Even after the match started, the rain continued. It was not heavy, but its pitter patter was rather annoying. Without any flooding on the field, the ground became even more slippery.

Before, Tang En had used to hate playing matches on rainy days. It would cause the team to be unable to perform up to even two-thirds of their usual standard. But after staying in the UK for more than two years, he could do nothing except surrender to nature's might. After all, he could not possibly change the UK's weather, right? If he could, he might as well quit being a manager, wear his underwear on the outside, and become Superman.

In the current Wilford training grounds, since the time of the match against Arsenal's Youth Team, there was a designated field that would always be filled with large amounts of water whenever the weather turned nasty. It simulated the match conditions on a rainy day and allowed the team to undergo adaptability training. After several repeats of such focused training, the team's deterioration in ability during rainy day matches had already been greatly reduced.

Looking at things, his decision to let Bendtner and Crouch be starters was perfectly suited to the weather conditions. With the two towering players, the majority of their attacks could now avoid the slippery surface and go to the air instead.

Unlike Wenger, he did not think it a must for the team to play beautifully. Tony Twain was a pragmatist. If he could win through ugliness, he did not in the least mind letting the match seem completely unentertaining. Of course, Arteta, who possessed exquisite technique and imagination in passing, could also make Forest's offensive strategies much more complex. Tang En was not afraid of having too many attacking patterns. He could not be happier for more; to have so many more that it would throw his opponents into confusion and put them at a loss about how they should defend.

After Everton's midfield lost Gravesen, their abilities significantly weakened. In Tang En's recollection, even though Gravesen's time in Real Madrid turned out to be a terrible failure, he fully deserved his core position when he was in Everton. Not only was he able to defend, but his ability to pass also allowed him to take up the responsibility of organizing attacks. It was only after his departure to Real Madrid, where there were too many strong players, that he became unable to show off his true potential; there was simply no space for that. Furthermore, a team like Real Madrid was unsuitable for Gravesen. Not every core player from a small to mid-tier football team could become a main player in such rich and powerful clubs. Later, following Capello's entry into Real Madrid, the pressure bore down on the Denmark "Hulk," and he was eventually purged by Capello due to a fight with Robinho.

Everton today was without Gravesen and the Arteta that Tang En was familiar with. Moyes could only choose to groom another player to become Everton's midfield core: the Australian Tim Cahill.

This man was not unfamiliar to Tang En. Whether it was in his memory or his own experience as a manager, Cahill had left him with a deep impression. The former Millwall player was now wearing Everton's blue jersey and standing against Tang En once again.

However, Tang En now was not the same Tang En from a year ago. Nottingham Forest as well was no longer a team stuck struggling, futureless, in the position of a vice-monitor in a second-level league.

As the core of the midfield, Cahill was still much too immature.

Moyes was expecting something beyond what Cahill could be. Against such a midfield core, George Wood alone would be plenty in managing even two of them.

Moyes himself also knew that Everton's midfield could not contend with Forest's midfield. So, despite all appearances of being an offensive midfielder, Cahill was, in fact, a forward.

Everton's starting forward was Duncan Ferguson and James Beattie, the "Saint," who had transferred this season from Southampton. Their greatest use was perhaps to assist Cahill in diverting the defensive capabilities of the Forest Team.

The true final strike would be accomplished by this Australian lad.

And in the midfield, Tang En's most familiar player, Li Tie, did not even manage to get into the player list. He was injured and currently in recovery.

Chapter 306: Against Everton Part 2

On the defensive line, there was another familiar face in Tang En's recollections: Joseph Yobo. Back then, he was the one who had supplanted Li Weifeng. Within the Premier League, Joseph Yobo was regarded as a considerably capable fullback. However, he had never gotten famous.

Overall, in comparison to Forest, Everton was a team that was lacking star players. However, their team was strong when considered in its entirety. Just this point alone was enough to show the management level of Moyes. To be able to make seemingly average players into a "strong team" with hopes of participating in next season's Champions League; there was no other reason other than having enough skill as a manager.

From time to time, Tang En would still be in admiration of Moyes. After all, Moyes did not possess the same pre-transmigration memory and knowledge as he did. Purely through his own capabilities, he took step after step to get to this point. But, it was a pity. While he admired him, Tang En did not have such a good character as to fulfill another's wishes. If he allowed Moyes to achieve success, he himself would lose everything.

Originally, this season should be the time for Moyes to shine brilliantly. But it's a pity I am here...

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Yobo was entrusted the mission to guard Bendtner. Although the rain made defending more difficult, the Nigerian stubbornly followed Bendtner, not allowing the Denmarkian boy to comfortably receive any passes.

Moyes could tell that Tang En wanted to play long balls, so he got Yobo whose skills in heading was the best among the center backs, to guard against Forest's best header in their offensive line-up – Bendtner. Immediately, Forest swapped the focus of their long passes to Crouch, relying on his height to make up for his weakness in heading.

Both sides countered each other, going back and forth for several rounds with neither side getting the advantage.

The match lapsed into a stalemate, and the score was firmly stuck at 0:0 for half an hour without change.

Tang En gently shook his head and said to Kerslake, "Long balls aren't going to work. Our opponents are also a team from England... a formation change!"

Kerslake understood what Tang En meant. He rose and walked to the sidelines, signaling the change of formation. Swiftly, the Forest team assembled themselves into a diamond formation of 442. Same as before, George Wood remained at the back as the sole defensive midfielder in charge of midfield defense. Arteta, on the other hand, attained a higher level of freedom. While he was moved closer to the front of the field, it did not mean he could only stay there. He could also run in any area within the midfield, appearing in any spot.

In the 12 days of their closed-off training sessions, Forest had repeatedly rehearsed this strategy. This was also the first time Forest was using the 442 diamond position in the English Premier League. Tang En believed it would completely throw Moyes for a loop. Before this, everyone assumed the 442 flat four was the only formation Forest was good at. This was in fact also a common problem with most of England's football teams; they had played forty years of 442 flat four positioning and never changed. This was because England considered themselves the "ancestors of modern football." They were always concerned about protecting their laughable "traditions" and had never considered making a change.

But the truth proved otherwise. Those who were willing to embrace change, willing to take a new step forward; those teams usually received a favorable result. A classic example of this was Arsène Wenger from Arsenal.

Moyes did not expect Forest team to suddenly change their formation in the first half of the match with five minutes before entering injury stoppage time. They pushed Arteta forward to become an offensive midfielder, while George Wood alone played as a single defensive midfielder. Such an adjustment allowed Forest's attacking line to be much closer to Everton's goal, becoming a greater threat and gaining more opportunities.

Faced with such ferocity from Forest Team, Everton could not adjust their defensive deployment in time. Using the same strategy for long balls against Nottingham Forest's ground offense, how could there not be any problem?

Arteta was in possession of the ball in Everton's half of the field. Lee Carsley, Everton's defensive midfielder, was currently guarding him with much difficulty. The footwork of the Spaniard was so incredible, just preventing him from advancing was already quite challenging. Interception? It was better not to think about it for the moment unless Carsley was willing to commit a foul. But to foul in such a sensitive area... it would still be his failure if he allowed this person to score from a direct free kick.

He might as well delay their attack and call for his teammates to help him. Two Everton players rushed over. It seemed like Forest's offense would meet its end here. Arteta had no choice but to continue protecting the ball by turning his back on their direction of attack.

And then, under the pincer defense of the two, Arteta finally lost possession of the ball. Everton grabbed hold of the opportunity to rapidly counterattack, scoring a fatal goal.

The players from Everton must have hoped for matters to develop that way. But...

“Arteta passes the ball to the wings, Ribéry follows up... an amazing breakthrough! This French lad is like a razor, slicing through Everton’s defensive line! And he passes center!! It’s – GOOOOAL!! Peter Crouch! England’s tallest player is using his actions to tell Eriksson how unfair it is for him to remain uninvited to the national team!”

Obviously, these were only the made-up thoughts of commentator Andy Gray. Crouch had no intention of showing off his abilities to the national team manager, even though Eriksson at this point was indeed sitting in the private room above the spectators’ stands.

After scoring, Crouch ran towards the cameras situated at the corner flag with his arms splayed open and waved at his teammates to follow him. Then he lifted his jersey. The white singlet under it had a line written on it:

Freddy, we are waiting for you!

The other Forest players also pointed to the words on Crouch’s chest, signaling to the TV camera to focus on the words and not on them.

At the same time, a banner also rolled out from the spectators’ stand in City Ground:

Eastwood, we are with you!

All of Crouch’s teammates rushed before the cameras and clustered around him, the scorer. Instead of rushing at him and pushing him down, all of them only surrounded him and made space for the camera to clearly capture the words displayed on Crouch’s chest.

In that scenario, George Wood stood outside the circle, uncertain about whether he should join them or escape from them. He raised his hand and then dropped it to scratch at his own head instead. After that, he hid away in a corner that would not be seen by the camera.

The people who were celebrating paid no attention to that single oddity. The stands of City Grounds, as well as its field, were filled with cheers that rose one after another. Nottingham Forest had finally, after failing to achieve a single victory from a series of three league matches, gotten off to a good start for the spurt ahead of them.

Even though the rain was still coming down on them, the fans of Forest felt as if it had already stopped.

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Off the field, Tang En and Kerslake exchanged astonished looks. “I did not ask him to do that. I had no idea they were planning it...”

Tang En nodded but was rendered speechless looking at this scene. He only slapped his thigh hard and said, “I got it... this bunch of boys! Good, very good!”

Kerslake smiled.

Chapter 307: Fallen Behind Part 1

During the halftime interval, Twain praised the entire team and gave special praise to Crouch. However, he did not praise Crouch for lifting his jersey to dedicate the goal to Eastwood. Instead, he praised Peter Crouch's keen senses. As for the players' affection for Eastwood, it was enough that Twain knew it in his heart. Twain felt that it would be a little affected if he made too much of it.

He did not know if Eastwood was watching the game. He would leave it to him to thank Crouch and his teammates when he returned.

The Forest team's ground attack tactics surprised Everton and the team had scored a goal at the end of the first half. Twain affirmed this tactical play and praised Mikel Arteta. He knew very well that the Spaniard was now urgently in need of praise, so he was generous with it. Arteta did a good job. So why not say what he wanted to hear?

In the second half, Twain asked the whole team to continue sticking to this style of play. He was intimidating Everton with Mikel Arteta, whom the Forest team had and not them.

After the game began, the Forest team continued to suppress the midfield. Arteta used offense to press on, and George Wood completely froze Everton's most threatening player, Tim Cahill. He would not let him do what he was best at, which was to rush up from behind to shoot the ball towards the goal. With Wood around, Arteta could make full use of his offensive talent and neatly sort out the middle of the Forest team's front field.

Everton did not have Arteta, so their offense was messy. They knew that they could not afford to lose this game, but they did not have a good solution. Cahill often could only choose to shoot long range shots when he had possession of the ball. It was obvious that such offensive efficiency would be low.

And what about Nottingham Forest? They continued at their own pace, which was not too fast and not too slow. Everything was under Arteta's control.

The past twelve days were not a waste of time. During those twelve days, Twain clearly told the players, Arteta is the core of the team; all tactics we carry out will revolve around him. It's the same for the game. You have to listen to him and follow his pace. Arteta's pace is Nottingham Forest's pace.

And now, the result of the twelve-day training was properly validated on the field in this game.

Although the score had remained unchanged at 1:0, Everton was unable to gain even the slightest advantage on the field. They were kept frantically busy by the Forest team. Looking at this, Twain was confident about the Forest team's performance for next season.

"Take a look at this Spaniard. Manager Tony Twain has a pretty amazing judgment of players. Mikel Arteta, whose performance in Real Sociedad was terrible to watch, only had two clubs interested in him during the winter transfer period, and now they are both here on the field. Moyes hesitated at the time, hoping to review Arteta's ability through the loan. But Tony Twain made a direct offer to Real Sociedad to take away the player. Now, Arteta returns the trust of his manager. His performance is phenomenal!"

Andy Gray briefly introduced Mikel Arteta's relationship with both teams. He could bet that Moyes had never regretted it as much as he did now.

Gray guessed right. Arteta's performance gratified Tony Twain, and made David Moyes, in the next wall, felt like he was on pins and needles.

As time passed in the second half, Everton's situation did not improve. Moyes sat in the technical area, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and coolly watched the field. No one knew what was on his mind.

Perhaps now he knew that the board of directors' indecision had not only cost him a good player but much more.

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In the latter part of the second half, Nottingham Forest, continually spurred on by Arteta, repeatedly launched attacks on Everton's goal. Finally, in the 77th minute of the game, Ribéry received Arteta's clever pass and scored again.

Even worse than the 2:0 score, Everton had no way to regain control of the game. They had two defensive midfielders on the field, but no one had a clear idea on how to attack. Everyone wanted to equalize the score as soon as possible. However, some of them wanted to shoot a long ball from the backfield to break through so that it would be quicker and more direct. The others thought they should advance steadily, layer by layer, and strike hard. They thought that they should have the possession of the ball at their feet before they could attack.

They were not unified in their thinking. It would have been a wonder if they could play the game well.

On the contrary, led by Arteta, the Forest team played more and more at ease. They fully mastered the situation on the field.

Cheered on by the Forest fans, the game finally came to an end. Everton lost 0:2 in the away game against Nottingham.

When the final whistle blew, Moyes looked up and sighed. It had stopped raining. He strode to the home team's technical area and was the first to extend his hand towards Twain.

"Just one-point difference, Tony. I'm not going to let you get what you want."

"Then you should be more careful!" Twain, who had won, was in a good mood and answered with a smile.

The two men shook hands. Moyes turned to leave the stadium and Twain continued to stand on the sidelines, quietly watching the players thank the fans for their support. Having won this crucial battle, Twain did not feel unburdened. The season was not over yet. In the next seven rounds of the league, the Forest team needed to do their best to ensure that they would not fall behind any one of their opponents.

Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester United. They would face all four strong teams in the final seven rounds of the league.

If he thought that, after beating Everton, they could breathe a sigh of relief, lie down, and take a break, then the Forest team's achievements would end here.

Moyes was not too disheartened when he shook hands with Twain because he had considered that. Based on the schedule, Everton, who had one more point than the Forest team, had an advantage. Their final seven-round opponents were not as difficult to deal with as the Forest team.

Even though Everton currently ranked higher than the Forest team, their strategy was no longer trying their best to shake off their opponents. Instead, they focused on playing well and waiting quietly for the Forest team to make a mistake.

Moyes did not believe that Twain's team could avoid a mistake. These four opponents are too powerful. Twain will certainly make a mistake! He will! He will not be able to withstand the pressure, and he'll collapse. At that point, he would not need to exert any force and could easily pull far ahead of Nottingham Forest.

Now, not only was Tang En unable to breathe a sigh of relief, but he could feel tightening around his chest. But he could not let the players detect the slightest hint of it. The guys had performed beautifully in this game. He should praise and encourage them instead of telling them with a tense expression that the hard times were just starting.

Tang En did not know what the other managers in the world did. He had not actually received any formal training. His experience of how he became a manager also seemed somewhat mythical. The so-called "mythical" actually meant that his path was completely unorthodox. Therefore sometimes, when he considered some problems, his usual thinking was not from the perspective of a professional football manager, but from other angles.

Tang En was used to putting all the pressure on his shoulders because he was the manager of the team, which meant that he was the boss of the team. What's the role of a boss? It doesn't mean that I alone get all the credit and glory. It means that I'll take on all the blame for my men and clean up the messes. If other people bully my people, I must be the boss and stand in front of the guys. Even if my men have done something wrong, it's not for outsiders to censure. It's completely up to me to teach and reprimand them behind the closed doors of the locker room.

This might sound like the big bosses in those Hong Kong gangster movies. But that was how Tang En felt. He interchanged the football team with a gang, and manager and boss meant the same thing. Due to the fact that his interaction with the team was shorter than the other managers', he used his own ideas to manage the team. What was the actual result? It was quite good. So far, Nottingham Forest did not have any conclusive evidence of a scandal. There were no conflicts in the locker room. Why? Because the team has such a gangster boss.

His way of managing the team was rarely seen in English football circles. He could joke with any player off the training field. No matter what kind of jokes—vulgar, dirty, tacky—he could make them. The players could also joke with him. He did not keep them at arm's length with a serious expression because he was the manager. Even if the players had difficulties which had nothing to do with the game and football, he would certainly try to solve them, rather than pretended not to know how. When the media condemned his players, it was like they had attacked him instead. He would readily step up and give the media the fiercest comebacks he could.

Mourinho was similar to Twain in this respect, but it was still not the same. Mourinho always had some sense of superiority. But Twain did not. He had no sense of superiority.

The Forest players finally finished thanking the fans. One by one, they walked off the field. When they passed by Twain, he smiled and patted them on the shoulders. "Terrific job. Hurry back to the shower and change your clothes. Don't catch a cold."

He said the same to everyone who walked by. When Crouch walked over to him, Twain looked up at the tall guy and smiled. "Peter, how are you feeling? Eriksson was up there watching, and you scored a goal." He pointed to the box suite behind the main stand.

Chapter 308: Fallen Behind Part 2

Crouch lowered his head with a smile and replied, "Very good, chief."

Twain nodded. "You've seized this opportunity. I hope it will be the same for you in the future. Go on back, don't catch a cold."

Wood was the last Forest player to appear in front of Twain. Twain looked at the quiet kid and cleared his throat. "Peter Crouch lifted his jersey to celebrate the goal. Did you guys know about that before the game?"

Wood nodded his head.

"Whose idea was it?"

"His own."

"Why didn't you tell me in advance?"

"Crouch said... He didn't know if he could score a goal. He was afraid...if he told you and didn't score a goal, it would be for nothing."

Twain smiled. "Why didn't you celebrate with them?"

Twain could see clearly what the camera did not capture.

Wood hesitated for a moment and said, "I couldn't squeeze in."

Twain suddenly threw his head back and laughed. He was not faking it. He was really amused by Wood and laughed until tears came. Wood was not annoyed by his amusement. He stood there, waiting for him to finish laughing.

There were not many people on the field at the time. The reporters all flocked into the mixed zone to interview the players. Twain and Wood stood on the sidelines without attracting much attention.

The laughter finally stopped and Twain wiped his eyes, smiled, and said, "Oh, George. What am I going to do with you? Can you find a more probable excuse next time, please?"

Wood grimaced.

"I know what you're thinking." Twain stepped forward and held Wood's shoulder, "Don't worry. I won't force you to do things you don't want to do or say what you don't want to say. I just want you to understand."

Wood shut his lips tightly and nodded.

“Okay, go on, get back to the locker room and change your clothes. Look at you. You’re wet, sticky and uncomfortable. Go on, let’s go.”

Twain turned Wood’s body around to directly face the players’ tunnel and gave him a push forward.

Watching Wood disappear into the glare of the tunnel, Twain gently shook his head and turned to walk in another direction. There was a door that led directly to the site of the press conference.

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The 31st round of the league was over. Both the Forest team and Liverpool won. After Everton lost to the Forest team, there was no change in the rankings, but the gap between Everton and its two pursuers was now only one point.

Over the next three days, Liverpool would finally make up for the one game that they had missed. For this game, Twain sat in front of the television to watch the entire match. When he saw Liverpool equalize with Newcastle before the end of the game, he was so delighted that he jumped off the couch.

“I said they would fall behind! Definitely will fall behind! One hundred percent chance! Only a fool would give up the UEFA Champions League and compete with us for the league rankings. Go and win the UEFA Champions League. The distant championship cup is calling, hurry up and make a miracle, Liverpool boys! You belong to the European arena! This season, you will definitely win the Champions League! Just leave the qualification for next season’s Champions League to us. Thank you!” He stood in the middle of the room as if he was alone and howled in Mandarin. He was not acting like a professional team manager at all. He was as happy as a little boy.

Dunn sat on the couch and watched the animated Twain. He turned his head and smiled.

He was aware that Twain had been under a lot of pressure lately because they lived together under one roof. Although Twain had not told him, he could see it. As a coach, his observation skills were quite sharp.

This sort of pressure could not be told to others, and Dunn never asked.

But it was not good to bottle it up. It was great that he could vent through such lighthearted means.

After howling, Twain turned to look Dunn with his head lowered and pumped his fist. “I love Souness! I love Newcastle! I’ll go easy on him at the press conference next time!”

Dunn raised his head and tried to hide his amusement. “You’re that happy?”

“Of course! The sooner Liverpool quits, the less pressure Forest will have.” Twain said seriously, “I was worried that I would be crushed under the pressure before they reached the end. Now that Liverpool is out, I think that this will be a big boost to the players’ confidence. You can’t always tell them how hard or dark the road ahead is. We have to give them hope from time to time. Now there’s a ready-made one.” Twain pointed to the television.

On the screen, the Liverpool players listlessly exchanged jerseys with the Newcastle players. Gerrard was topless, with an unknown player’s Newcastle jersey on his shoulder. Perhaps it was Shearer’s. He looked frustrated as he stood on the corner of the field, staring distractedly at the others.

“With the equalizer in this game, the Liverpool players are well aware that they have slowly pulled out of the top four in the league,” said the commentator. “With forty-eight points in thirty-one games, two points away from the fifth-ranked Nottingham Forest, three points away from the fourth-ranked Everton... Manager Benítez should put all his efforts into the Champions League semi-final.”

Dunn now understood but he still said, “In fact, now it’s easy for the Forest team to stay within the top six in the league.”

Twain shook his head and interrupted. “I no longer want to play in the UEFA Europa League. I would rather not have this trophy in my trophy room than play the UEFA Europa League again. People always have to aim high, don’t they?”

“You’re right, Tony.” Dunn nodded.

The television broadcast continued to the post-match press conference. When Benítez was interviewed, in less-than-perfect English, the Spaniard said, “I have not thought about next season’s plan; that’s for after the end of this season. Now I think we should get a trophy in this competition first.”

“Are you referring to the UEFA Champions League?” asked the reporter.

“What else is there?” Benítez smiled.

The two men were caught up in this interview. Dunn pointed to the television and asked, “Do you think one day... you will too?”

Twain looked at Benítez and then at Dunn. Then he nodded. “In order to win the UEFA Europa League, I went a little crazy and gave up the Premier League. For the Champions League title, I don’t mind going a little crazy again. But...” Suddenly he burst into laughter, and it was a wicked laugh. “why can’t we grasp with both hands and make sure both hands hold tight?”

Chapter 309: A Job Well Done Part 1

The news of Liverpool having drawn a crucial match was wonderful for Nottingham Forest. Tang En was certain that there were a number of players who were also concerned and watched the match on TV. Before the commencement of afternoon training the next day, everyone was still discussing the previous night’s match.

Tang En was delighted. As he gathered the players for training, a smile stayed on his face the whole time. Looking at the players who were also beaming, his smile deepened. Finally, he could not resist and shouted, “Who watched yesterday’s match?”

A flurry of hands came up; nearly half of them.

“Does anyone remember what I said to you before Everton’s match?”

Tang En had his hands on his hips as he stood before the players, looking like a spirited general lecturing them.

“I said, Liverpool would definitely fall behind, definitely fall behind!” He waved his hands vigorously, pointing downwards. “Was I right?”

“Yes!”

“Hey, boss! Tell me the lottery numbers for next week!”

A burst of laughter erupted from the team.

Tang En waved his hands and said, “Nonsense! This isn’t foresight on my part. But what does it show? Liverpool is playing in more than one league. Giving up one of them is a certainty. To them, The UEFA Champions League is much more important than the Premier League. On the other hand, to us now, there is nothing more crucial than being in the top four of the Premier League and qualifying for next season’s Champions League. Some people have called us a new promotee, and they think the aim of a team like us for our first season should only be to avoid relegation. In their eyes, the best we can do is merely to avoid early relegation. Let us correct their mistaken assumptions! Who says a newly promoted team can’t participate in next season’s Champions League? This time, we are going to show them!”

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April 10, the 32nd round of the Premier League. Nottingham Forest challenged Bolton Wanderers F.C. in an away match. Forest, with high spirits, launched their offense against Bolton Wanderers on the away grounds. The two teams scored a total of five goals with the final score being 3:2; Forest attained a risky victory.

Everton’s home match in the same round ended in 4:0 against Crystal Palace, a huge victory. They maintained a one-point lead over Forest.

In Liverpool’s rescheduled match three days before, Liverpool came to a draw against Newcastle. Originally, they had had the same number of points as Everton, 51 points, which was still slightly higher than Forest. However, perhaps because they had truly shifted their season’s aim to the Champions League, they lost 0:1 in an away match with Man City in the 32nd round of the Premier League.

The 32nd round of the League matches concluded. Everton had 54 points, Forest had 53, and Liverpool had 51.

April 17. The 33rd round of the Premier League. Nottingham and Everton’s matches were both delayed. Everton’s away match against Newcastle was rescheduled to May 11, while Nottingham Forest’s away match against Chelsea was changed to April 26.

There was no delay for Liverpool’s match, but they still failed to attain victory. In their home match, they drew with Tottenham Hotspur at a score of 2:2. As Forest Team and Everton were both missing a match, the accumulation of points and overtaking of ranks remained incomplete.

From the beginning of the 34th round on April 21, Forest’s opponents in turn were:

Manchester United, Forest playing as home team; Chelsea, with Forest as away team (the rescheduled match of the 33rd round); Liverpool, against Forest on their home grounds; Arsenal, with Forest as away team; Charlton, with Forest as away team; and finally, Birmingham City, with Forest playing on home grounds.

Such a schedule was ridiculous.

That was also the biggest reason why Moyes believed Everton would be able to maintain the fourth position.

In the remaining six matches, Forest could not afford to lose any.

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At the end of the final day of training before the matches, the players came off the field and entered the locker room to find someone else already there. They were intending to shower and change, but found their manager busy in the locker room instead.

Tang En had put up an enlarged version of the match schedule in the locker room. On it, all of Forest's opponents from the first to the 38th league match were written. Up to the 32nd round, each of their matches had the final score noted between the names of the two contending teams. There were wins, losses, and draws. Starting from the 33rd match against Chelsea, the area in the center that was meant for the score was blank. Those opponents were the ones Forest would be facing in the upcoming half of the month.

After carefully putting up the gigantic schedule sheet, Tang En hopped off the stool. As he dusted his hands, he turned around and noticed the players gathered at the door.

"What is it?" Tang En asked as he looked down at his pants, patting the dust away.

"Boss, this is..." The players were perplexed. They had already memorized the match schedule. Why was there still a need to put it up in the locker room?

"I'm just putting up the match table. It's enlarged. You guys can see it clearly, right?" Tang En turned back and gave the match table a pat as he spoke.

"But... but we all know who our next opponents are..." One of the players said.

"Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool, Arsenal... Everyone knows that? Then that's good. I'm sure I don't need to say anything more about the abilities of our opponents."

Tang En had not finished speaking before he was interrupted by Albertini.

"Boss, what are you trying to say? Are you worried that we'll be unable to perform out of fear for our opponents?"

Tang En scratched his head somewhat embarrassedly. Albertini had hit the nail on the head; that was exactly what he was thinking.

Looking at the manager's response, Albertini knew. He turned to his teammates and all of them started laughing.

"Such provocation isn't going to work," Ribéry said with a pout. "We're already immune to it."

Albertini said with a laugh, "You can stop worrying, Boss. We're more eager than you in wanting to qualify for the Champions League. Ask anyone here. Is there anyone who doesn't want to play in the Champions League?"

“The captain’s right!”

“Champions League! Just thinking about it excites me!”

The group of young men started getting fired up as they imagined what it would be like to participate in the Champions League next season.

“Eh, Matthew, who do you think we’ll meet then? AC Milan or Barcelona?”

“What’s the point of meeting with such strong teams? I’d rather we meet with all the weak ones. Without anyone noticing us, we’ll kill our way through the weak teams and get into the final 16.”

“You have no ambition! I’ll hope to be in the same group as the strongest teams in Europe. That way, I’ll be able to show the powerhouses how good we are!” Bendtner said, tossing his head of blonde hair.

Tang En watched the group’s enthusiastic discussion and shook his head, at a loss as to whether he should be crying or laughing.

“Alright, alright! Go take your showers, go on! Don’t be getting the flu now.” Tang En waved his hands at them, disrupting their daydreams.

Only after everyone ran into the locker room to start changing did Tang En turn to take his leave.

Although he restrained himself outwardly, Tang En was deeply elated. This group of kids turned out to be better than he imagined. He had nothing to worry about. Even if they had to face teams like Manchester United, Chelsea, and Arsenal, so what? If he had worry about the teams in their domestic league, even if they did break into the top four of the league as they hoped and passed the qualifiers for the Champions League, how could they hope to cope with the powerhouses in Europe? Were they going to surrender just from hearing their names? In that case, they might as well just give up now rather than shaming themselves all the way to Continental Europe in the next season.

Wasn’t it just the top three teams in the Premier League? What’s the big deal? They just had to give it their all!

Tang En abruptly slammed his fist into the wall. His expression turned stern as he gritted his teeth. With a ferocious look, he looked forwards and fixed his gaze on the light from where the exit was, as if that was the path of glory towards the Champions League.

After staring for a long while, Tang En exhaled. “Crap! This hurts! Damn it... what did I have to smash the wall for? I...” He quickly withdrew his fist and hugged it to himself, cursing quietly.

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The next day was the beginning of the matches. Following the advancement into the final stages of the Premier League, the fight for their own goals also intensified to a fervor. Tony Twain’s team only needed to fight to be within the top four of the League, for the mere qualification to enter the qualifiers of the Champions League. Similarly, Manchester United hoped to get the qualifications to enter the Champions League. It was no longer possible for them to become the League Champions.

On the other hand, Arsenal and Chelsea were fighting for the title of League Champion. Despite Chelsea already having 82 points and ranking at the top, Arsenal was only 11 points away from them. The League

had not ended yet. That point difference was not large enough to allow Chelsea an early claim on the title of Champion. This round would be key; Arsenal was matched up against Chelsea in an away match. To maintain their hopes of being champions, Arsenal must defeat Chelsea. If Arsenal lost, the gap between the two would become 14 points. With both teams having left 5 matches (one of which was the rescheduled match from the 33rd round) and a 14-point difference, Chelsea would have to lose all matches with Arsenal winning all of theirs for them to take the title. That condition seemed all but impossible...

So, if Wenger still intended on defending their title of Champion, the crucial step lay in taking down Chelsea in today's away match. That would shrink the point difference between the two teams to only eight points. Furthermore, triumphing over the opponent in their home grounds would put enormous psychological pressure on Chelsea.

Everton's opponent for the current round was Man City. They were also playing an away match against a difficult opponent; Man City had just defeated Liverpool. To participate in the UEFA Europa League, Man City would be happy to defeat Liverpool's arch-rivals from the same city.

Liverpool's match for the round was against Portsmouth. If there were no surprises, the three points were already in the bag.

Should Forest Team lose to Manchester United while playing on home ground, they not only run the risk of Everton expanding their point difference to four points, Liverpool would also catch up with them. After all, the difference between them and Liverpool now was only two points.

Even if Forest fought to a draw, Liverpool and Forest would both have 54 points. In the rankings, Liverpool would hold the advantage in the goal difference, ranking ahead of Forest.

With the situation at hand so clear, what they needed to do was beyond obvious.

Chapter 310: A Job Well Done Part 2

Tang En placed his palm on the tactic board's rack; the tactic board itself, which had become a mess of drawings, had already been relegated to being next to his feet. He gazed at the prepared players, saying resolutely and steadily, "I only have a single request for this match: winning!"

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Nottingham Forest wanted to defeat Manchester United?

If that news had spread half a season ago, anyone who heard about it would end up in stitches laughing. It would have been as nonsensical as Mr. Bean.

But when Nottingham Forest said something like that now, there were not many that dared to doubt their intentions.

Half a season. Tang En had used half a season to change Forest's image of a "weak team" in the eyes of others. If they were a weak team, how could they possibly still be ranked steadily within the top six of the Premier League by its 34th round and even sit atop Liverpool? If they were a weak team, how could they have maintained no losses until now whenever facing the top four teams in the League? Drawing

against Arsenal and beating Chelsea on Forest's home grounds; drawing with Manchester United when playing away; and against Everton, drawing on the away match and winning on home grounds. This was the result shown by the young Forest Team. It was such a satisfying result, there was no way to ask for even more from them.

Before the match began, Ferguson and Tang En both behaved gallantly, shaking hands on the sidelines before parting.

To be honest, Tang En did not hate the old Scot at all. Even though the other party mocked him, he had done the same to them. In football matches, such occurrences were very common. The taunts between him and Ferguson were not as severe as the ones between Ferguson and Wenger.

But while the absence of hate is one matter, not giving face is another. When there was a need to be merciless, they had to be.

In this match, Tang En's Forest team had to win, but so must Manchester United.

As with Chelsea, Arsenal was missing a match. In 32 rounds, they had accumulated 67 points. Everton, ranked fourth, was a good 13 points away from Manchester United. It would probably be too difficult for Everton to overtake them. On the other hand, Manchester United's difference with Arsenal, ranked second, was only a mere three points. If Arsenal was defeated by Chelsea in their away match, Chelsea would practically have won the championship prematurely. Meanwhile, Manchester United would end up having the same points as Arsenal; in the next five rounds of the League, their chances of overtaking them would become very high.

Ferguson cared nothing for the position of runner-up in the Premier League. He did not need such false titles. In fact, there was no real difference between being second or third in the League match to him. If it were now Newcastle in the second position, Ferguson would not give two hoots about it. However, it was not anyone else but Arsenal who sat atop Manchester United. Ferguson would not allow such a scene. No matter how they did it, Manchester United had to drag Arsenal down and sit above them.

With both teams aiming for victory, the two were embroiled in an intense match from the second it began. For this match, Tang En and Ferguson had deployed their strongest formations. Tang En did it for survival; to get into the top four of the League and qualify for the Champions League. Their qualification for it translated to greater monetary rewards and bonuses, which in turn meant they could buy better players to help little Forest Club slowly move towards fulfilling their glorious goal...

On the other hand, Ferguson did it for the honor. He would not allow himself to lose to Wenger.

The match had only been going for 20 minutes, and neither side had scored a goal. Yet, the cumulative scoring attempts were a total of 24, an average of 12 attempts per team. As for foul counts, Nottingham Forest had racked up 14 fouls while Manchester United had 10. Manchester United players also went offside slightly more often than Forest, 3:2. While the data was extremely dry, it clearly reflected the intensity of the match.

On their home grounds against a strong foe, Forest was not at all reserved. They brought out the attitude of offensive-style football with all intentions of suppressing Manchester United. Not to be looked down upon, Manchester refused to budge. Ferguson was not someone who enjoyed pretending to be pitiable. The more his opponents displayed their strength, the more Manchester United would try

to utilize an even stronger force to defeat their opponents. Ferguson and Wenger's conflict with each other stemmed precisely from the unwillingness of Wenger's Arsenal to submit to Manchester United, and their persistent desire to suppress them and reign over the Premier League.

Both Forest and Manchester United held the stance of one who was unwilling to cede to a strong opponent; both parties desired to be that strong one. They were the types that would become stronger when facing a tough opponent. As a result, the match naturally developed into one of meteoric intensity.

Sky plc's choice of live broadcast was not this match, but Chelsea's home match against Arsenal. From the perspective of the end-impact level of the matches, although Forest's home match against Manchester United was more important, what was between Arsenal and Chelsea was beyond just the field.

Barely a season after Mourinho's arrival in the Premier League, he had already offended anyone he could offend: Ferguson, Wenger, Benítez, and Tony Twain. Sky plc's decision to live broadcast the match was made because of the mutual disdain between Mourinho and Wenger. Such a match was assumed to be explosive.

It was a pity that they had guessed wrong.

The actual match between Arsenal and Chelsea turned out extremely boring. While Arsenal was keen on winning, Chelsea only wanted to get a draw. This led to Mourinho's team choosing a tight defensive formation, allowing Arsenal to launch a tidal wave of attacks from the outside. Even with the storm of attacks, Mourinho refused to come out. A match without mutually attacking parties was devoid of any entertainment value. The commentator, Andy Gray, watched with a yawn. He wrenched off his earphones and mumbled as he covered the microphone, "If I had known, I would have done the commentary for the other match!"

The other match he was referring to was indeed Nottingham Forest's match with Manchester United.

Based on the match data transmitted to them in sync, it was evident that Forest's match was highly intense. By a minute before the end of the first half, both teams had already drawn to a score of 2:2. Meanwhile, the score at Stamford Bridge remained at 0:0. It was truly boring...

With the end of the first half, Andy Gray handed Martin Taylor a glass of water after watching him take off his earphones.

"Thanks."

Gray shook his head. "External factors, external factors... Even if the external factors of this match were enough to fill a wagon, what about it? What are the people at the TV station doing? They can't even differentiate which match is actually more important..."

Taylor smiled as he put the empty glass back. "Don't complain. In the next season, I'm afraid you'll be commentating on his matches until you puke."

Gray maintained a straight face as he said, "That's impossible. He's a pretty interesting fellow."

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While the commentators were evaluating Tang En in private, City Ground's match had just ended its first half. The electronic scoreboard displayed a score of 2:2. Forest had Viduka and Crouch scoring a goal each. Manchester United also stepped up; each time Forest Team took the lead, they would swiftly equalize the score. The main credit for Manchester's success belonged to their mighty combination in the forward line: Ruud van Nistelrooy and Rooney.

Hierro was old. In the face of Rooney's assaults, Hierro's abilities evidently fell short of his own wishes. Fortunately, George Wood knew what he had to do. Without needing Tony to shout at him, he took the initiative to assist Hierro in his defense and take some pressure off of him.

When it came to halftime, Tang En showered the players' performance with praise despite them allowing the opponent to score twice in that duration.

"Well done! Let's keep playing this way in the second half!"

After the kick-off of the second half, Forest had the home ground advantage. Amid the shouting of nearly 30 thousand fans, Forest launched fiery attacks one after another against Manchester United's penalty area. Without Edwin van der Sar, the major problem in Manchester's defense persisted. Ferguson knew that. So he had no intentions of retreating to defend in the second half. Instead, he made an identical decision to Tang En's – to continue strengthening their strong point; to attack.

Tang En brought in Arteta, continuing to enhance their offensive power, while Ferguson switched in Alan Smith. Both were attack-type players.

A head-on clash. While the fans were greatly delighted, the managers began to frown as they stood on the sidelines, closely supervising the changes taking place in the field.

As the pace of the switch between attack and defense got faster, the mistakes made by both parties also began increasing. Although the scene appeared spectacular, the technical content had decreased.

There was no other good strategy Tang En could use, and he believed Ferguson was in the same boat. In such kinds of clashes, the manager could do very little. What counted for more were the performances of the players on the field.

A single moment of inspiration could decide the result of the match.

Suddenly, Arteta dribbled the ball in a forceful breakthrough from the center. This prompted Roy Keane to advance forward to stop him. Arteta, after seeing Keane move up, abruptly passed the ball outwards instead, to Ribéry, who received the ball. Rather than taking it to the endline and passing center, Ribéry chose to suddenly cut inward despite being pressured by a pincer defense from Cristiano Ronaldo and Gary Neville. He dashed towards the penalty area!

This change took Manchester United by surprise. They hastily shifted heavy manpower to entrap and intercept the ball. Following Ribéry's successful diversion of three of Manchester's defenders, he did not continue to breakthrough, but faked a move and passed the ball into the penalty arch.

"Mikel Arteta!"

Without killing the ball, Arteta took a direct long shot!

Keane did not think that Ribéry would so quickly pass the ball back. Even more unexpected was Arteta's choice not to run into the penalty area, but to stop outside instead to wait for this pass.

Carroll's reaction was not slow either. He made a furious leap to save the ball and successfully knocked it out. But the ball did not fly outwards away from the goal line, instead rebounding inwards. While the ball flew high, and when everyone could only look up at it, Crouch took a leap. Without any interference, he headed the ball right into the unguarded goal using his usually less-than-stellar skills in heading.

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Stamford Bridge. Andy Gray yawned again. The score was still 0:0. Regardless of how spectacularly the media had stirred up news of this match, it was not in the least bit worth its ticket price. A row of text appeared at the bottom of a small monitoring device in front of him, attracting his attention:

Nottingham Forest 3:2 Manchester United. Scorer: Peter Crouch, 79th minute.

His eyes widened.

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The cheers in City Ground continued from Crouch's goal until the end of the match. Despite having tried all ways and means, Manchester United failed to break through Forest's defense again and could only helplessly accept the result.

Ferguson stood before Tang En, his face grim as he put out a hand. "Each time I see such you with your youth, I think... Have I gotten too old?"

"Ah... that's..." Tang En did not know what to say. Since he had won the match, reason dictated that he should say something pleasant to comfort Ferguson. But he felt that Ferguson was not the kind of person who needed the victor's comfort after his loss.

"I'm kidding. After seeing you, my plans for retirement have to be delayed again." The old general heartily gave Tang En's palm a good smack and turned to lead his managerial team into the players' corridor.

After seeing him off, Tang En turned and saw his excited players.

"Well done, boys. This was a job well done."