

Champions 331

Chapter 331: From Youth Team to First Team Part 2

Gareth Bale gave his dad a call after getting onto the First Team. On hearing that Forest was offering a professional contract, Bale's father did not wait for him to finish his words before dropping the phone and driving from Cardiff to Nottingham in a rush.

Still, he needed time to get all the way here. Tang En and Bale could not possibly just sit and wait in the office. So, even though they had not officially signed the professional contract, Tang En brought Bale to the training grounds to introduce him to the members of Forest's First Team.

Wes Morgan was delighted to see yet another player from the Youth Team coming to join them. Although he did not have much status on the First Team, he was still happy to help the newly arrived boy.

Tang En washed his hands of the matter after making the introductions; with a push, he passed Bale off to his team members.

After seeing Bale quickly become friendly with Wes Morgan, Kerslake stepped forward and announced that the day's training was officially beginning. Meanwhile, Tang En continued standing by the sidelines and supervising them.

To Gareth Bale, the First Team, with the presence of Wes Morgan, George Wood, Kerslake, and Tony Twain, felt no different from the Youth Team he was familiar with. He believed that he would be very happy here and able to quickly adjust to the managers' demands. He was also sure he would swiftly meet with opportunities to display his abilities.

Wes Morgan took great care of this little brother, helping him out numerous times during training. Tang En took it all into consideration. While Wes Morgan could only play as a substitute fullback from the perspective of his abilities, his warmth as a person was irreplaceable on the team. Because of that, Wes Morgan was also a non-saleable player of Forest.

The training had barely started when Tang En's phone vibrated in his pocket.

He took it out. It was Allan.

Ever since Allan had taken on the matter of discussing Anelka's transfer, he had for a while disappeared from Tang En's sights. Tang En did not know how the negotiations were going; if everything was going well, or if they had gotten into a stalemate. He figured Allan's call must have something to do with Anelka.

He took quick strides to the rest area on the sidelines and found a quiet corner to pick it up.

"Allan, I almost forgot about you."

"Ha! I'm sure you know what I'm calling you for, right?" From Allan's voice, Tang En found it hard to tell if the situation was good or bad; he excelled at hiding his emotions and intent.

“Of course. Other than Anelka, I can’t think of anything else.” Tang En shrugged.

“That’s right. I wanted to confirm your intent towards the French forward. Do you absolutely have to have him, or does it not matter either way?”

Tang En thought briefly. “Doesn’t matter either way.” He could approximately guess the situation; the transfer had probably progressed into a stalemate. “I can wait until Eastwood recovers from his injury. I can even take this chance to search for another forward on the transfer market. But the timing has to be quicker on your end and conclude sooner. Have you met with some trouble, Allan?”

“Mmm...” Allan pondered for a moment. “The two agents have big appetites. They regard the treatment of their younger brother highly. Straight off the bat, they’ve already asked for a signing fee of 1.25 million pounds. And that’s only for the two agents; it doesn’t include what we need to pay their younger brother.”

Hearing Allan relate the matter, Tang En was not angry. Instead, he laughed. He had known that it would be this way, so he was not in the least surprised.

“They’ve always been that way and always will be. You can tell those two guys that Forest’s manager said this: either they accept Allan Adams’ terms, or they can pack up and run back to Turkey! Let them understand their situation. It’s not us, Nottingham Forest, begging to buy Anelka. It’s them who’ve taken the initiative to look for us, hoping for us to give their brother a way out.”

Allan burst out chortling when he heard Tang En’s words. “You’ve been keeping a lid on those words, haven’t you, Tony?”

“Of course. Ever since you intended to speak to them.”

“Oh right, Tony. The team recently bought a Chinese player? What kind of considerations did you have? The Chinese market?”

“You’re not the Marketing Manager for nothing, Allan. Your whole mind is filled with thoughts of market expansions... I bought him because he compliments our team’s abilities well, not for his commercial value. Plus...” Tang En hesitated. “I don’t think that well of the Chinese market. If you’re intending to sell jerseys, we should sign-on a Japanese player. Japanese fans are really easy to rip off.”

Allan laughed and said, “Tony, you aren’t the manager of the Sports Competition Department for nothing either. Market expansion isn’t just about selling jerseys or opening merchandise stores for fans. But the joining of the Chinese player reminded me; I’ve got a new plan. Maybe it’s just because you’re the manager, so whenever you’re signing them on, you believe in looking only at a player’s techniques and their ability to enhance the team’s potency. However, I’m the Market Manager. What I’m interested in is how the players you’ve signed on can broaden the influence of the club and their effects on the market. It’s your job to train players and lead them to win matches and championships. Figuring out how to get the players to help the club make money is mine.”

“You’re right, Allan. We each have our jobs to do. Oh, are you negotiating with Anelka’s agents?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you doing here, calling me and discussing market development in China?”

"I need to let those two guys cool down somewhat. They've probably never seen real money in their lives. If you're free, we can keep chatting about other stuff. Do you like listening to music? I like Elvis. Is that surprising? In this age, I don't think there are many who would still like his song. Evan likes Elvis a lot too. Both of us have the same hobbies. We've been old friends for many years."

"I like Queen...Ah, Allan, you're evil!" Tang En laughed uproariously, attracting even the attention of the players on the field. "You're just letting the two Frenchmen wait for no reason in the room?"

"Yes. If I hadn't suddenly remembered the Chinese player, I would have gone to find a room to nap for a bit after asking you about your intentions towards Anelka. Or maybe, I'd have gotten a cup of coffee and some sunshine. There are quite a few cafes on the streets of Paris. I'll treat you the next time we come. In truth, the taste of the coffee isn't that crucial... What's important is the surroundings and the atmosphere. The atmosphere on Paris' streets goes impeccably with coffee. In that aspect, England is not at all..."

Before Allan, Tang En would admit to a complete defeat. Allan, with his baby face, was easily underestimated by others. But, whenever that happened, the person was in for some bad luck.

"Then, what drink is suitable in America?"

"Cola. Walking and drinking it at the same time."

The two chatted happily as if they had entirely forgotten about Anelka. Only after a long while did the two finally end their call, and Tang En returned to the sidelines of the training grounds to watch the team practice.

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On the other side, Allan headed to the washroom after hanging up the phone. He faced the mirror and held his breath. His reflection in the mirror got redder and redder, and beads of sweat began to line up on his forehead. His neck also started reddening. He suddenly opened his mouth when he could not hold it in any longer, gasping roughly for air. Leaning heavily with his hands on the sink, he breathed raggedly to satisfy the demands of his lungs of getting fresh air.

As he breathed, Allan reared his head to look at the mirror. Satisfied with his current state, he unbuttoned the top of his shirt and turned to walk out of the washroom.

While Allan and Tang En were laughing and joking with each other over the phone, both Claude Anelka and Didier Anelka were becoming impatient waiting in the hotel room.

When Allan left, he had told them he was going to give the team's manager a call to inform him about their terms. Who knew he would be gone for so long...

Each time they heard footsteps in the corridor, the two would straighten up their posture. But each time, it was not Allan returning. It was very frustrating.

When Allan opened the door, he immediately noticed the two Frenchmen leaning back on their chairs, looking bored stiff. Naturally, he pretended not to see the astonishment on their faces and said to the both apologetically, "I'm sorry about making you wait for so long."

"Ah... it's no matter. Can we continue now, Mr. Adams?"

Allan Adams sighed. "What I'm even more sorry about is... Our main manager Tony Twain, does not intend on accepting your terms. I argued with him for a long time, but he insisted on his opinion that Anelka is not a player that he needs. I'm sure you all know, but I am immensely keen on bringing Anelka into the team. From the beginning, he was against the idea. So... if he isn't agreeable, I'm afraid there aren't any other options. You must understand; the team is under his charge. Furthermore, our club's chairman, Mr. Evan Doughty, has extremely good relations with Mr. Twain..." he shrugged. "I'm truly sorry, but there's nothing I can do. He says, if you don't accept the current terms offered by Forest, then there is no need to continue transferral negotiations."

Anelka's brothers were utterly boggled.

Chapter 332: Eight Million Part 1

Three days after Allan called Twain, he still had not received any updates about the transfer negotiations for Anelka. Twain thought the matter was over, and it looked like Allan could not handle the two Frenchmen either. Unexpectedly, he received a telephone call from Fenerbahçe in Turkey this time, hoping to talk to the Forest team about Anelka's transfer.

Meanwhile, Allan showed up at Evan Doughty's office, looking travel-worn. Evan joked that Allan had returned with the sand from Turkey. Twain realized the delay in the last few days was because Allan had gone to Turkey to negotiate with the Fenerbahçe club.

When he saw Twain, Allan showed a bright smile. "There's nothing good to drink in Turkey; no tea, no coffee, no coke."

The two men laughed loudly.

"It's settled." After laughing, Allan sat down, ready to reap the rewards for his efforts. "We'll give Anelka's brothers some appropriate remuneration. They helped us put pressure on the Fenerbahçe club. Because you're in England, you don't know the news over there. In Turkey, lots of negative news had popped up recently about Anelka being late for training and talking back to the coach. They were the work of the two agents. Fenerbahçe Club had been overwhelmed by the disruptions. When I went to Turkey, I was able to quickly put the process of Anelka's purchase into place. Guess how much money we need to buy Anelka?"

Both men shook their heads.

Allan raised both hands and splayed his ten fingers.

"Ten million?" Twain slightly creased his brows.

Allan shook his head with a smile and retracted two fingers. "Eight million."

The other two men laughed at the same time. This deal was a bargain. The price of eight million to buy Anelka was well within the range that Twain could afford. If it were ten million, Twain would inevitably feel the pinch.

"To have earned one million in half a season, the Turks don't feel like they've lost out. In addition, the individual contract with Anelka was settled before that. A four-year contract period with a weekly wage

of..." Allan deliberately kept them in suspense, "forty-five thousand pounds and an annual increase of 10% percent per year, plus a six hundred thousand signing fee. As a concession, we gave up all of Anelka's publicity rights."

Twain was also very satisfied with the conditions. Previously, the team's top weekly wage was forty thousand pounds for Edwin van der Sar. However, with the new season, the Forest team had adjusted the team's pay structure. Although it had not been publicly announced yet, the level of forty-five thousand was only in the upper middle strata of the new wage structure.

As for publicity rights, it was fine to give that up. Anelka's publicity rights were not worth much money. Only his brothers were still hanging on to it like a treasure.

Delighted, Evan suddenly thought of a problem. "Allan, what you said made me a little worried. Now that we've allowed Anelka's two agents to treat Fenerbahçe this way, who can guarantee that after a year or two, no other team will secretly instigate these two greedy guys to treat us like this too?"

Allan did not answer but looked to Twain.

Twain gave a cough. "Evan, you know... The football world may be short of good players in many positions, but there is never a shortage of good strikers. It does not mean that we stop looking for a good striker now that we have bought Anelka. I will always keep an eye on the transfer market. If they want to make trouble, let them. We'll make a profit in the transfer market."

Evan suddenly saw the light. He turned around to retrieve a bottle of whiskey and three glasses from the liquor cabinet. He poured into each glass and then gave them to Twain and Allan.

"Two and a half years ago, my father summoned me back from the United States and wanted me to take over his club. In order to make me interested in running a football club, he took me to the Forest team's training base to look at the Forest team's stadium, and to meet with the Forest players and coaches. But he didn't think those were enough. He thought that perhaps the best way to make a basketball fan like myself interested in football was to watch a match. So, he brought me to an official Forest team game." Evan looked at Twain. "It was the third round of the English FA Cup, and the League One team Nottingham Forest's home challenge against the Premier League team, West Ham United."

Twain knew what Evan wanted to say. He touched the tip of his nose somewhat embarrassedly.

"In the first half, I looked at the full grandstand and felt unable to comprehend the thoughts of those people. It was a game with a low-level team which was of a low standard, played badly, and even conceded three goals to their opponent... What was so good about a game like that? I thought the fans who sat in the stands to watch the game, or my father who spent his energy and money on the team, were stupid and wasting their time."

Evan shrugged his shoulders.

"During halftime, my father insisted on taking me to the locker room to meet the players, even though I didn't think it was the right time. Who would want to go to the locker room for an awkward meeting when the team was lagging behind? Then we heard something amazing in the locker room." Evan winked at Twain. "It was wonderful. I was interested in football for the first time. I think it would be

difficult now to see those twenty-seven thousand middle fingers that made up the Sherwood Forest again, wouldn't it?"

"That had become a swan song, Evan," Twain answered with a smile.

"You're right, Tony. The current Forest team is no longer the team that lost all hope. I still remember that second half very clearly, even though we lost in the end... But Tony, no matter how long ago, I have to say it was still the best game I've ever seen."

"Thank you."

"Since that game, I became interested in running a football club. I suddenly felt that it might not be a waste of time to sit in the stadium box and stands every weekend and watch my team play. After returning to the United States, Allan and I had a serious discussion about giving up our existing business and returning to the UK to run a football club. At first, Allan thought I was crazy." He looked at Allan Adams again.

"You told me you were really crazy because of that game." Allan smiled and took over the conversation. "I studied the operations of the American NBA teams and the business model of the UK's traditional football clubs, and I thought Evan might be crazy, but not without reason. The American NBA is the world's most commercialized and most successful league. I think their way of doing business is worth learning. The British football clubs and NBA are different. Due to historical factors, many people think that a club belongs to the fans themselves. It's beside the point whether it can make money or not. But I don't think so; if we want the team to make money, we must change some of the old ideas. Fortunately, the Forest team was in a terrible situation at that time. There was its financial crisis, the continued decline in the team's performance, and the fact that the fans were tired of the team's current situation, and they wanted change. So..." He glanced at Evan again, "Evan and I came up with a plan to push the Forest team further into the abyss at that time. The plan was dangerous and entailed great risk. If it had failed, Evan and I would not only lose the anticipated rewards but also lose even more to compensate, just like walking a tightrope on top of the Empire State Building. Fortunately, we succeeded."

"So, as the person who came up with this plan and even implemented it, you're crazier than I was, Allan." Evan Doughty joked.

Twain listened to the two men recounting the past. Although he experienced those things, he still admired Allan, looking at this now from a different angle. He was able to break new ground in the management of the football club.

"Businessmen always have to deal with all kinds of risks, especially an opportunistic businessman like myself." Allan laughed.

"So, in fact, I'm not a man with any special talent. I don't know how to coach the team and not that good at making money. With your help, Tony and Allan, the Forest team is where it is today. Thank you," said Evan Doughty as he raised his glass.

"Isn't too early to say thank you now?" Twain asked.

Allan nodded. "Save it for when we reach our goal, Evan."

"You're both killjoys!"

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As it was already settled with Fenerbahçe and the player's agents, the transfer negotiations became a formality. The representatives from both clubs sat together with the player's agents and conferred for half an hour to confirm the terms of the contract and sign their respective names on the contract.

The entire negotiation and signing process was private. Allan was only aware of the situation during the course of his discussion with Anelka's brothers, so he could quickly rule out the other party trying to use the Forest team to ask for a higher wage for Anelka from Fenerbahçe. On this afternoon, when the Fenerbahçe club announced the official transfer of the French striker, Nicolas Anelka to Nottingham Forest on its own official website, the ripples caused by the earth-shattering news were conceivable.

Half a year ago, all of the British media was delighted by Anelka's departure. They did not expect that half a year later, this eccentric player and his two annoying brothers would be back again!

All the English media still remembered how difficult it was to interview Anelka, the French striker, during the season when he was still doing well in Manchester City. You want to interview Anelka? Sure, just hand over forty thousand pounds. The media only needed to give eight thousand pounds if they wanted to interview the Manchester United star, Ryan Giggs!

Anelka's reputation was ruined by his agents in England and he was not well-received anywhere. This time, even the famous BBC football show host, Gary Lineker, who always thought well of Twain, could not understand. He talked about the transfer deal in his online column, "Manager Twain's behavior is always incomprehensible, and this is no exception. I think he should know very well what Anelka will bring to his team... goals, of course; I never deny the guy's talent and abilities. But I think the team will pay a huge price for those goals."

Chapter 333: Eight Million Part 2

The day after the Fenerbahçe club's announcement of Anelka's transfer, Nottingham Forest's official website also published a large photograph of Anelka with a prominent headline to usher in the Forest team's new outstanding striker.

The high-profile publicity also confirmed the news from the Turkish side. The English media went into a tizzy.

Almost everyone looked down on the transfer. Many people questioned Twain's decision.

"...I can hardly believe my own eyes. I thought today was April 1. Anelka's back! Damn it! Pardon my language, but I really can't figure it out. Why did Twain choose this man?"

"Tony Twain must be out of his mind to choose Anelka. Does he feel like his locker room is too calm?"

"What's so good about the Frenchman? There are a lot of strikers who can score as well as he does, but there are few strikers in the world like him who are a headache for every manager."

"I'm sorry, but I think Twain wants to challenge himself."

“...This is good. We can take this opportunity to expose Anelka’s misdeeds in England over the past few years. But don’t expect us to interview Anelka.”

“I wonder why Anelka chose to return to England after just half a season. It seems like he wasn’t happy in Turkey. But I think that if he doesn’t change his character and fire his two agents, he won’t be happy anywhere.”

“To be honest, I’m completely doubtful about Tony Twain’s decision. Initially, I was full of anticipation for the Forest team’s new season, but now I’ve changed my mind ...”

Twain shook those newspapers in front of Dunn and complained. “I never said I wanted to buy that Frenchman, and now I’m the one taking the blame for Allan’s decision.”

“But the media doesn’t know what happened between you two.”

Twain obviously knew this. After he fretfully paced around the room, he went upstairs to get his laptop from his room.

“What are you doing?” Dunn asked in puzzlement.

“I’m going to write an article for my column to scold those media bastards!” Twain gnashed his teeth as he pressed the power button.

“What are you going to reprimand them about? Scold them for not knowing what’s going on between you and Alan, and making stories up?”

“No, I’m gonna scold them for all their doubts, criticisms, and gibes about Anelka.”

Dunn was so surprised by his answer that he stopped watching his video. He stood up to go to Twain’s back and watched him open a document.

“You are not...”

Twain knew what he was going to say, so he nodded. “Yes, I don’t like that French striker’s two agent brothers, and by virtue of their relationship, I don’t like the French striker either. But now Anelka has become a member of the Forest team, which means he’s one of my men. I will never allow the media to chew out my players. I can’t break my own rules over Anelka. No one can criticize my players, except me. If someone wants to discipline the dog, it still depends on its master, does it?”

Dunn frowned and thought for a moment, “Are you angry with the media for questioning you?”

Twain shrugged his shoulders. “Think what you want.” Then he stopped talking and his fingers quickly jabbed at the keyboard.

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The next day, the Nottingham Evening Post published the full text of Twain’s column, which fully refuted the media’s doubts and gibes about Anelka. Still, in the eyes of many professional sports reporters, the purpose of the article was not to refute the media but to demonstrate Twain’s stance. He was on Anelka’s side.

As the closest journalist to Twain, Pierce Brosnan was aware of Twain's view of this transfer. Hence, after receiving the article, he was very surprised at Twain's manner taking a 180-degree turn.

If it was about taking care of his own men... Brosnan thought that explanation was somewhat far-fetched.

Like Brosnan, Evan Doughty also thought it was strange. This afternoon was the press conference for Anelka's joining of the Forest team. He felt that it was necessary to ask clearly.

Faced with the question, Twain smiled mysteriously. "Whether I like Anelka or not, he's here. I can't possibly tell Fenerbahçe to take the player back just because I don't like him. That's not how it works, right?"

Evan nodded in agreement.

"Since he's here, I'm certainly not going to put him on the bench just because I don't like him or send him to the reserves. That would be a waste of the club's money. So, I'm going to use him well and let him play to the best of his ability."

Evan continued to nod. Even an idiot could understand his point. But he did not understand what that had to do with his question.

Looking at the puzzled Evan, Twain cleared his throat. "Everything that was said before was nonsense. I'll tell you the truth, Evan. There's a saying in China: 'an iron hand in a velvet glove,' which means to use gentle methods and force at the same. The carrot and stick have to be used to deal with Anelka. A single method is not effective. You have to let him know that the manager trusts and supports him. At the same time, I have to let him know that if he intends to use this to step out of line, there will be nothing good coming for him. And now, as a welcome gift, I made him feel the warmth of the team and a manager's support for him. And later..." Twain winked.

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At the press conference that afternoon, Twain showed his so-called "enthusiasm" in front of everyone. He praised Anelka's scoring ability, which was a headache to the opposing defenders, but he did not mention Anelka's equally troublesome temper. In short, if one listened to Twain's speech at the press conference, one would think that this was the Forest team's most important acquisition of the summer. Anelka was simply the future hope of the Forest team.

Brosnan shook his head as he listened. Based on his understanding of Twain, when Twain was being so obvious and slightly exaggerating his praise of a person, it often meant that the person being praised was not going to have an easy time.

However, Anelka, who did not have much contact with Twain, did not know that. He was very happy with the support and trust showed by the manager.

Being able to return to the heart of the football world and have the manager of the new team support him made him talkative at the press conference. Naturally, he also talked about his original intentions in joining the Forest team:

“The Forest team is a very enterprising team. Manager Twain is also a very capable coach. He has talked to me about his many great goals. I hope I can help him achieve them.”

Almost all the reporters rolled their eyes internally. Who could believe Anelka’s words?

Did he believe them himself?

When Twain and Anelka stood up at the end, holding the number 39 Forest team jersey for a group photograph, the reporters looked at the dazzling smile on Twain’s face and then saw Anelka’s slightly shy but confident smile; they all knew that there would be a good show from the Forest team this season.

Chapter 334: The New Season Part 1

Anelka’s performance in the press conference managed to satisfy Forest’s supporters. Not only did he appear resolute in playing his part to serve the team, but he also made a fuss about Forest’s once glorious results. He said that Nottingham Forest was a “great” club and a “great” team.

Fans were naïve. If a new player said that they loved the team and was able to mention a thing or two about the team’s past glories, the fans would be more than happy to accept them. So, even a player like Anelka could receive the support of numerous Forest fans.

There was another important reason that explained how they could so quickly accept Anelka. As fans who had personally experienced their journey these past few years—of Nottingham Forest being a no-name to being renowned throughout Europe; of a team that was bogged down by a mire of relegations to a team that had gotten into the qualifiers of the UEFA Champions League; of a Forest that was the champion of the EFL Cup—they all had a kind of fanatic trust in following and supporting their manager, Tony Twain.

They were fond of Tony for more than his lack of standoffishness with the fans; when he saw them on the street, he would greet and chat with them like they were old friends. But what was more important were the results he produced when he led the team. Before him, perhaps only Brian Clough performed better.

While the fans liked the faithful old blokes who had been serving in Forest’s managerial team for decades, they liked, even more, a manager who could lead the team to victory and glory.

Forest’s fans believed that Manager Tony would have a way of dealing with Anelka, no matter how eccentric he was.

So, what method did Twain have?

“What method could I possibly have? I’m not the Encyclopedia Britannica, Superman with his underpants on the outside, or a particularly smart person who can solve any issue with a scratch of their brain...” On their way to the training grounds, Tang En was grouching to Dunn. “It is difficult to change a person’s character. It’s even more difficult to change a person who is stubborn and willful. And it’s above and beyond difficult to change someone who’s stubborn, willful, and has two agent brothers by his side feeding him lousy ideas!”

Dunn stayed quiet, allowing Tang En to vent his frustrations. When they got to Wilford Lane and the two had to go their separate ways, Tang En suddenly stopped short. He looked up at the thick shadow from the trees and muttered to himself, "But why do I have to change him? If he's useful, use him. If not... We'll see!"

Returning to the manager's office, Tang En found David Kerslake waiting there. It appeared as if he wanted to discuss something with him.

"Is anything the matter, David?"

Kerslake looked like he was struggling to say something.

"This isn't your style, David," Tang En said, feeling odd. "You've always been very straightforward."

"Uh... I'm a little worried about Anelka. Would he disrupt the mood of the team? You know, our team's atmosphere has always been pretty good..."

Tang En started laughing. "Isn't it a little too late to be worrying about that? Now that he's a member of Forest, there's no point worrying. If not... Should we put him in the reserve?"

Kerslake's head shook like a pellet drum. "No way. If we do that, we'll become laughing stocks. Who on earth would put a player costing eight million pounds onto the reserve team?"

"So." Tang En shrugged. "Whether we want him or not, Anelka is here. We need to treat him just like any other First Team player."

The reasoning was understood easily enough by Assistant Manager Kerslake. "I know... Should we speak to Anelka privately?"

Tang En looked at him oddly. "What about?"

"Uh... To tell him to take note of the unity in the locker room..."

"Don't joke, David." Tang En laughed again. "Telling someone with an eccentric personality, 'I think you have a bad temper, and you need to change.' Do you think he'll listen?"

Kerslake shook his head. "I guess not..."

"So, we're not going to do anything. Remember what I said earlier. Just treat him like any other player. That'll do. We'll treat him just as we treat the others. If he thinks he's a huge star who won in the Champions League before and wants to throw his weight around here... very good." Tang En nodded firmly. "I'm not afraid of wasting Allan's money."

"I thought you and Anelka had discussed this... During the press conference yesterday, the both of you looked so cheerful," Kerslake said with a shake of his head.

"How is that possible? I only gave him a call after the signing of the contract to welcome him to Forest Team. Nothing else was said. And what was said during yesterday's press conference was entirely arranged by those two brothers of his."

It dawned on Kerslake. "Their arrangements for these sorts of matters are always impeccable looking from the outside."

“But, of course. Those two are the best at putting on a show. Transferring six times in six years; even if they didn’t know how to, they would have learned it by now,” Tang En remarked, sarcasm dripping off his words.

Resuming his normal tone as he turned to speak to Kerslake, he said, “Anyway, David, just remember this. No matter what, don’t treat Anelka in any special way. You don’t have to worry about anything. After joining a new team, I believe he will behave himself for a while...”

Tang En was unaware of what had happened in Turkey. But, according to what he had heard from Allan, the transfer this time was not planned by the two greedy agents. In fact, it was Anelka who had initiated it. However, Fenerbahçe S.K. was unwilling to let the forward who had only played for half a season and cost seven million pounds go. So he privately contacted Nottingham Forest, who was desperately looking for a forward.

Perhaps the lofty French forward could not withstand the differences he felt after abruptly leaving the heart of the soccer scene for such a remote place; perhaps he was greatly disappointed by the atmosphere in the Turkish Leagues; perhaps he felt that he had not yet fallen to the point of playing there; or perhaps he even hoped to earn more money through his return to the center stage of soccer... Regardless, he hoped to gain something.

That was good; Tang En did not need anyone who had no desire for glory, victory, or money. He was not afraid of someone who was hard to tame, he was afraid of someone without the will.

No matter how Anelka was as a person or what nasty ploys the two brothers behind him were cooking up, so long as he was useful to the team, Tang En would use him.

But, if you want to pull any tricks... I’m sorry to say, the eight million did not come from my pocket. I would not feel any pain at all if I let this money go to waste.

“Let’s go, David. I think they should have arrived.”

It was Anelka’s first time participating in Forest’s training. As per the custom, Tang En would be introducing the new player to his teammates. Even if the player joining was a big, internationally-renowned star like Beckham, he still had to go with the procedure and make an introduction.

“Nicolas Anelka.”

Tang En motioned to the French forward standing beside him, saying, “Even though there are many rumors out there, I hope everyone will use their own eyes to see if he’s really a jerk.”

The crowd laughed lightly.

“From today onward, he’s a member of Forest.” Tang En gave Anelka’s back a pat.

“Go on. They’re all great to mingle with.”

Anelka smiled somewhat bashfully, walked towards the team, and stood to the side.

Tang En waited for the attention on Anelka to fade before clapping his hands, indicating that he wanted to say something else. “Alright, everyone. A new season has started again. Champions, victory, and a trove of prize money... That all awaits us. There’s nothing more exciting! After the rest you’ve had, I’m

sure everyone's feet have begun to itch, hoping to have a match with some team to scratch them, right?"

The Forest players who had followed Tang En through the last season, and those from the season before the last, all let out knowing laughter.

"You're right, Boss!"

Tang En waved a hand. "Of course, the opponents in your warm-up matches can't rouse your spirits at all; and not mine either. I'd like to have real fights, real opponents!" He balled his hands into fists. "It's meaningless to win a competition that comes without a prize. If we want to win, we've got to win the Premier League, win the Champions League! Win the toughest competition and beat the most difficult opponents! Last season, we made those who looked down on us pay a painful price. Think about Chelsea, Manchester United, Everton, and Liverpool. Think about all those who we have beaten. And then think again about the faces of those who took us lightly at the end of the season. How do you guys feel?"

"It feels awesome!"

"Oh yeah!"

"Good. Let's continue that this season!"

Tang En had barely finished his sentence when whistles, laughter, and clapping spilled over one another. He did not stop them from going wild but instead stood by with an indulgent smile as he watched them.

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After bringing in Anelka, Tang En seriously re-examined the members of the team and discovered that there was no further need for them to procure more players despite having gained the qualifications for the Champions League. His plans to build up the team culminated from when he had first taken over until this moment. Every player was slowly bought over according to how he wanted it. Forest did not need to crazily wipe out the entire transfer market, buying seven or eight players at a go while letting go of the ones they had like they did some summers ago.

Nottingham Forest no longer needed such a huge change of blood on the team. The team now had a reasonable age variation and adequate allocation of players; there were no wastefully hoarded players.

In other words, the Forest Team no longer needed to continue their search on the transfer market. The formation of Tang En's football team had essentially been confirmed.

Chapter 335: The New Season Part 2

For the goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar remained the core player, with Barry Roche and Paul Gerrard. There were no changes there. So long as Edwin van der Sar remained uninjured, the other two would not have many opportunities to be fielded. However, Tang En might consider fielding Barry Roche for the EFL and English FA Cup. Darren Ward, who had lost his core position because of Edwin van der Sar's arrival, was sold to an EFL Team, Norwich City, for a price of 1.5 million pounds.

For the fullbacks, Davy Oyen had already been sold by Tang En to the EFL Team, Crystal Palace, for a price of one million pounds. In the previous season, Oyen barely had any opportunities to represent the team. His abilities were also no longer on par with the team's expectations. Selling him in exchange for funds was the best way to go about things.

Sun Jihai's arrival nudged John Thompson from the position of the first reserve for right back to second reserve. Although Tang En was not willing to sell him for cash, Thompson himself had requested a transfer from Tang En. With the team's development taking off as rapidly as a rocket, Thompson knew that it no longer had a position for him; and it probably would not in the future either. He might as well capitalize on whatever fame he had accrued from the previous few seasons and leave Forest while there were still other teams interested in him. For him, that might be the better path to take.

Tang En had originally intended to loan out Thompson for the short-term or leave him on the reserve team so he could continue playing matches and maintaining his condition. However, Thompson had his own plans. Tang En was very fond of the guy. After all, in the earlier period when Tang En had had it the toughest, Forest's main right back had been Thompson. For the Forest Team to have successfully broken into the English Premier League, his contributions were indisputable.

Tang En still retained a sort of Chinese mentality. He thought of a player like Thompson as one of the founding members of the team. So long they had some ability, Tang En wanted them to stay. He would rather have the team take care of them. They had once gone through trials and tribulations together; now, he wanted everyone to be able to experience great wealth and fortune together.

But Thompson did not give Tang En that chance. He was very resolute in his departure. Before leaving, he asked Tang En if Forest still had a place for him. Tang En was unable to lie, so he could only sigh and let him go.

Clint Hill would also be loaned out to Reading F.C. At the same time, Forest Team had established an agreement with them: Reading F.C. had priority to sign on Clint Hill. At the end of the loan period, Reading F.C. only needed to fork out another 1.5 million pounds if they wished to acquire him from Forest. To a team at the EFL level, Clint Hill was considerably strong. However, to Tang En's Nottingham Forest, his position was a little awkward. Originally, he was a center back purchased by Tang En as a quick aid for the team. After the team gained Piqué, Pepe, and Upson, it no longer had a place for him. While Wes Morgan's abilities were slightly inferior, he was a player groomed by Forest themselves. No matter what, Tang En would not be letting him go. As a result, the only person who could leave was Clint Hill.

For the midfield, Brynjar Gunnarsson was retained by Tang En. He promised to give him more time on the field and expressed his importance as a player on the team... As a football manager, he needed some degree of talent in lying. Fortunately, Tang En had had no lack of practice since he was a kid. He had already reached the stage of being able to lie without blushing or unevenness in his breath and could maintain a stable heartbeat.

The other defensive midfielder, Eugen Bopp, was no longer able to keep up with the needs of the team; Tang En added him to the list of players to be purged. It had to be acknowledged that while some people were geniuses, there were also others who were mediocre. It was not that Eugen Bopp did not put enough effort into training, but that he simply did not achieve growth to assure Tang En. In

comparison to Wood's tremendous improvement, Bopp's growth was much too small... Bopp's future direction was a little more cumbersome. Due to the issue of his abilities, there was no Premier League team nor any England team who wanted him. The final team, a League One Club, Rotherham United, was very interested in him, but could not afford the transfer fee of 500 thousand pounds. In the end, Tang En had no choice but to loan Eugen Bopp out to Rotherham United. After the season ended and the contract between Eugen Bopp and Forest Team comes to its end, Rotherham United would be able to sign him on for free, if Forest did not have the intention of renewing the contract and they were still interested. Even though Tang En was unwilling to lose the 500 thousand pounds, he had little choice in the matter.

For forwards, only David Johnson was unincorporated in Tang En's plans. He was loaned out to Sheffield United.

Other than letting go of the players who were not in Tang En's plans, he had to turn down numerous transfer requests for the other players. For example, Chelsea and Liverpool's offer to buy Franck Ribéry for 15 million, Real Zaragoza FC's loan request for Piqué, Aston Villa's offer of eight million for Ashley Young, Birmingham City's loan request for Nicklas Bendtner, and Tottenham Hotspur's offer to purchase Aaron Lennon at a price of five million.

The players who had caught the attention of those teams made up Forest's framework. Tang En was not about to sell off the entire team for just a little money.

In the previous season, although Aaron Lennon had spent most of his time training with the First Team, he was competing in the Youth Team instead. There, he had become bosom buddies with Gareth Bale. This season, like Gareth Bale, he was officially transferred to the First Team by Tang En. With the Forest Team playing in multiple leagues, their right wing needed him and Ashley Young to take turns.

Tang En regarded Lennon highly. He seemingly did not have an iota of doubt about his potential and capabilities. In fact, he believed that Ashley Young may be forced to become Lennon's substitute after half a season.

On August first, Forest submitted their team's complete player list to the League Committee of the EPL. At the same time, Tang En informed Evan and Allan that he was not planning to take any further action in the transfer market; Nottingham Forest's transfers would stop here.

Goalkeeper: Edwin van der Sar (1), Barry Roche (12), Paul Gerrard (25).

Fullbacks: Leighton Baines (22), Gareth Bale (2), Pascal Chimbonda (3), Sun Jihai (21), Gerard Piqué (24), Matthew Upson (33), Pepe (6), and Wes Morgan (5).

Midfielders: George Wood (13), Demetrio Albertini (4), Brynjar Gunnarsson (8), Kris Commons (20), Ashley Young (18), Aaron Lennon (17), Franck Ribéry (7), and Mikel Arteta (14).

Forwards: Freddy Eastwood (11), Nicklas Bendtner (9), Mark Viduka (10), and Nicolas Anelka (39).

Tang En felt immense satisfaction looking at the list. From the quality of the players, they could certainly compete in the UEFA tournaments; and from the numbers, he did not have to worry about unhappiness among the players from not being fielded frequently enough. A matured team with the strength to

compete should have at least two strong players in each position. The current Forest had satisfied that requirement.

With the name list confirmed, this was a crucial period for Tony Twain to lead the team in their final preparations. But at that point, he received some bad news.

Chapter 336: The Injury Part 1

Albertini was injured.

Less than a week from the first round of the UEFA Champions League qualifier, he pulled his left thigh muscle during training.

There was no fierce impact. It did not happen during a training match. It was when he turned around during a normal sprint. Regardless of whether he had finished running or not, his mood was very relaxed. This was just a warm-up before the start of training.

At that time, Twain was still talking to Kerslake about how to make tactical changes against Villarreal and to ask the team to pay attention during the usual training.

On the field, it was Albertini and George Wood's group doing laps. Wood sprang ahead in the first sprint. He was always like this during usual training. He ran as hard as he did in official games. Albertini did not have to run as hard as that silly boy. He should have kept to his rhythm and speed, with George Wood easily shaking him off and leaving him in the dust.

However, it was different today. Right from the beginning, Albertini tried to nip at Wood's heels and Wood dashed without knowing that Albertini was gritting his teeth to try and keep up. But competing with the young Wood in speed was too straining for the already 33-year-old Demetrio.

During the first return, Wood easily and smoothly turned around while Albertini suddenly slowed down. Then he went from running to walking. After a couple of steps, he simply stood still.

The first to realize the anomaly was the team doctor, Fleming, who was always on the sidelines of the training ground. He ran up when he saw Albertini stop.

Soon after, Kerslake's attention was drawn by Fleming's action. He interrupted his conversation with Twain and looked at the training ground. Twain followed his gaze and only saw the moment Albertini sat on the ground.

The other players apparently noticed their captain's unusual behavior. They stopped their training, ran towards Albertini and surrounded him.

George Wood rushed to the finish line in one shot. And when he realized that no one else was around him, he turned his head in bafflement and saw the crowd behind him. He still did not know what had happened. He saw Fleming push through the crowd and rush in. Before his teammates could close the gap, Kerslake also rushed in. Twain was blocked outside.

After he rushed in, Fleming did a simple examination; Kerslake was at the side, asking non-stop, "What's the situation?" Fleming did not answer him, but just stood up and called for a stretcher. Hearing that, Kerslake shut up.

Being lifted out of the training ground on a stretcher meant that the injury could be serious.

When he heard Fleming call for a stretcher, Twain pushed aside Wes Morgan and Franck Ribéry in front of him and squeezed in.

"Demetrio?"

When Albertini saw that Twain had appeared in front of him, he suddenly came to his senses. He found himself surrounded by his teammates, coaches, and team doctor. He saw through the gaps in the crowd that there were two men running up with the stretcher.

He abruptly put his hands out and struggled to sit up. "No, no need." He was the captain of the team now. Being carried away on a stretcher during training and in front of all his teammates... Can't I walk on my own? No.

"George!" Twain suddenly yelled, "Get over here and help carry Demetrio to the sidelines!"

Wood quickly ran up and parted the crowd. He obediently helped Albertini up and then supported him by the arm as they moved step by step to the sidelines.

After watching the two men and Fleming go to the sidelines, Twain turned and waved his hands. "Keep training, there's nothing to look at."

Then he turned around and went towards Albertini. Kerslake took the hint and blew the whistle.

"Concentrate!"

Twain walked to Albertini's side, looked at Wood beside him, smiled, and patted him on the shoulder. "Go back to training, there's nothing more you can do here."

When Wood was gone, Twain crouched down and comforted Albertini. "Don't worry; you'll be alright, Demetrio."

Albertini nodded. "I'm going to miss the qualifying game."

Twain waved that aside. "It doesn't matter. It's just a qualifying game. You just wait to return and go straight to the actual games!"

Next to them, Fleming said to the two men who had just lifted the stretcher, "Take Demetrio to the infirmary."

The two men stepped forward to help Albertini up and slowly walked off the training ground.

Fleming did not follow them but stayed behind.

"What's the matter, Gary?"

Fleming shook his head. "I don't know yet. I'll only know his specific injury after he undergoes a detailed examination. But according to my experience, it doesn't look good. He suddenly stopped when he

turned and restarted. My guess is a pulled muscle. This kind of injury can be very troublesome. Even if he recovers within a short period of time, he will not be fully recovered. Instead, his injury may recur more frequently. As Demetrio gets older, it will become much more pronounced.”

Twain frowned and bit his lip.

It was the UEFA Champions League soon. As a player who was the team captain with plenty of championship experience that few players on the team had, Albertini’s injury at this time was a huge blow to the team.

Seeing that Twain did not speak, Fleming turned to leave. He was going to be busy with Albertini’s check-up to determine his injury and its severity.

Twain looked at Fleming’s back and turned to watch the players training on the field. Several players were obviously distracted and worried about Albertini’s injury. He looked up at the clear sky. He really wanted to curse.

Why was he so unlucky in 2005? Was this the end of his good luck? Was the ill fortune of injuries starting to plague his team?

What was a professional team most afraid of? It was not a strong opponent, a bad environment, or even a vicious referee working against them. They were most afraid of injury.

No matter how powerful or invincible they were, a team could be brought down by an injury overnight even if they had established a great undertaking that surpassed all others of its kind.

Twain was reluctant to think about the teams and players who had been dragged down by injuries. He felt that it was ominous to even think about the lessons of those predecessors.

Looking at the flickers of doubt in his players’ eyes, Twain steadied his mind and stood on the sidelines again. He did not turn to leave or look around distractedly. He stood on the sidelines and supervised the training as usual.

He looked as though nothing had happened here just a few minutes ago.

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The results came out a day later. Twain was the first to get the results, even before Albertini himself. This was customary in English football. A player’s knowledge of his injury must be after the team manager had been informed. Any team doctor who directly told the players of their injuries before the managers would be dismissed by the clubs and would almost be never appointed by other clubs.

Albertini had a pulled muscle in his left thigh. The estimated recovery time was one month, and the full recovery time was unknown.

“Basically, there’s little possibility of a full recovery due to his age,” Fleming said to Twain. “After one month, he’ll look like he’s not hurt, but we won’t know when he’s going to get hurt again in the same area. Moreover, this was not his first injury. That area belongs to an old injury over the course of his career. Frankly speaking, this cannot be cured. All we can do is try to let him recover as soon as possible and then take good care of him. He will undergo a half-hour massage after training every day. That will help...”

Twain interrupted him. "Don't rush his recovery. Better to be safe. I can wait. I don't want to rush him back to the field and then get hurt again after playing two games. I don't want Albertini to rest for a month to play two games, and then rest again for another month."

"In that case, the team's game..."

"That's for me to worry about, Gary. You just let Demetrio rehabilitate. Don't tell him the exact recovery time. Just let him know that he'll get better soon."

Fleming was silent for a moment and then nodded. "I understand."

After he left Twain, Fleming went back to his own office. Twain was right. He did not have to worry about what would happen to the team without Albertini. The only thing he needed to worry about was how to let Albertini recuperate with peace of mind and how to let Albertini's injury heal smoothly. He was the head of the Forest team's medical team and was duty-bound to do those things.

But he did not believe that he could hide that from Albertini. Demetrio was not a young man who had just entered professional football. Some things could be understood just by looking.

However, he also knew that Twain was being kind, so he could only do his best.

On this end, Fleming fretted about how to face Albertini; on the other side, Twain agonized over Albertini's injury.

Fleming had just stepped out of his office. When he closed the door behind him, he swore.

Only thirty-three years old! Matthäus played till he was forty years old, and Zidane's retirement at the age of thirty-four was considered too early. You're not old, Demetrio.

Chapter 337: The Injury Part 2

Albertini's injury suddenly made the team's atmosphere a little more somber. Having a key player fall at a critical moment was a huge blow to the team's morale.

Regardless of Twain's wishes, he must now accept the reality that the team would have to start the new season in the absence of the team captain.

He made some adjustments and placed Arteta in the core midfield position during training. It was obvious that the Spaniard would replace Albertini.

At the same time, because Arteta would play in the starting lineup, the Forest team's offensive tactics also required further adjustments. After all, Albertini and Arteta had different ways of organizing attacks. The team needed to familiarize with them. Fortunately, in the final stage of the last season, Arteta played in a lot of games and the team was not unfamiliar with this more meticulous offense tactic.

The only problem was that George Wood and Mikel Arteta's coordination was not tight enough. Less than half a season of conditioning was far from enough. Most of the time, Wood still followed the ideas and routines of his partnership with Albertini. The most obvious example was Arteta would get closer to

the opposing penalty area than Albertini and in that way, the distance between Wood and the Spaniard was imperceptibly widened. It was easier for the opponents to cut off the connection between the two players. Once the defensive midfielder could not provide enough protection to the attacking midfielder, then the Forest team's offense could not be organized. It would be easy for opponents to intercept and break up their pace. Then they would completely lose control of the midfield; losing the midfield control was tantamount to losing the game.

Twain saw that situation on the training field and felt dismayed. If this had not happened, he would not have realized that Albertini's influence on George Wood was so deep.

This had been a good thing in the past. But now, with their current situation, Twain was getting a headache again.

If there was any good news during this time, it would be that Anelka's performance was still in line with the team. He did not give Twain any trouble to add to the chaos.

As he was new to the team with a new manager and teammates, he would naturally behave himself since he did not know the manager's temperament. Twain did not relax his vigilance against Anelka due to this. He firmly believed that a leopard could not change its spots.

He did not think that Anelka would suddenly become an optimistic, cheerful, likable chap just because he had come to Nottingham Forest. Even if he seemed to be that way on the surface, it was only because he was trying to suppress his true nature.

Anelka was not a player he had advocated for the introduction of. It was different for Bendtner and Eastwood. He was not enthusiastic about Anelka. Although he told Kerlake to "treat him like any other regular First Team player," he was still somewhat prejudiced. He could not help it.

If you perform well, I'll give you a chance, just like giving any good player a chance. But if you have a problem, I'll give other players a chance.

But if Eastwood had a problem, Twain would shoulder it and help Eastwood return to his condition.

That was the difference.

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On August 10th, the first game of the third round of the UEFA Champions League qualifier would be held two days later at the Forest team's home, the City Ground stadium.

This was the first step for Nottingham Forest to return to the UEFA Champions League after twenty-four years. What was an ordinary and even low-level qualifying tournament had become a hot ticket right away because of its new significance. The tickets for this game were completely sold out a week in advance. Everyone in Nottingham was very interested in the game. Up until two days before the game, there were still many people in the square outside the City Ground, holding "I need a ticket" signboards, hoping to meet someone who wanted to refund. But all were disappointed. Not only were there no refunds, even the scalpers were nowhere to be found. Any tickets which could be sold were sold. Even if the scalpers wanted to make more money, there were no tickets.

Now the players with families in Nottingham were starting to fret because their relatives and friends who did not have a ticket came to them hoping to get tickets which were allocated to the players and club staff members. There were not many tickets. There were only three to four tickets for each person.

As a result, the tickets for the players whose families were not in Nottingham or even abroad were all snatched up by the local players.

Of course, there were exceptions. George Wood was a local player, but all of his tickets were given to Wes Morgan. Other than his mother, he had no relatives or friends asking for a ticket. He did not even know whether it was a good or bad thing to have relatives and friends.

Twain had six tickets with him, which was the manager's entitlement. But no player dared to take his tickets, which was also the privilege of a manager.

Twain could not think of who to send the tickets to. Shania was still in Brazil and Sophia also did not need his special attention. Wood would save a ticket for his mother.

The six tickets in his possession had no one to go to.

The group of people in the Forest bar were loyal Forest fans. How could they not have tickets for the game? Kenny Burns needed to watch over his bar. He had not been to the stadium for a long time to watch a game. No matter how important the game was, he would not go.

But Twain thought of a person when the Forest bar came to mind.

He went to look for Fat John and asked for Michael's contact address in the United States.

"What are you going to do? Send him a ticket? He won't come. Plus, he's in the States. By the time you mail it over, the game will be finished..." John was puzzled.

"Of course, I'm not asking him to come watch the game." Twain said to John as he wrote the address on the airmail envelope, "I just want to tell the guy, even though he's sworn that he will no longer love football, that I didn't just make the Forest team return to England's top league. I also led the Forest team back to the top league in Europe. I don't care if he's not interested or whether he remembers that or not. I promised him before, and now I've done it." Twain looked up at John and put the ticket in the envelope.

John kept quiet.

Twain mailed out a ticket and there were still five tickets left. He took them all to Gavin Bernard's gravestone. He lit a fire with a lighter. Following a Chinese tradition, he sent the tickets to the Forest team's eternal fan, little Gavin.

"Five tickets may be too many, but I have no one to give them to. You can keep the extra ones as keepsakes."

Chapter 338: The Captain's Armband Part 1

Tang En did not dare take Villarreal CF lightly. In the past, though the team was only capable of ranking between the lower and middle tiers within Spanish football leagues and had little fame to their name, Tang En knew exactly how strong this season's Villarreal CF was.

The 05-06 season was one of the most glorious seasons for Spain's "Yellow Submarine," Villarreal CF. From the beginning of the Champions League qualifiers, where they defeated Everton (ranked fourth in the English Premier League), they commenced their stunning journey as the dark horse of the Champions League. On the way, they eliminated Celtic F.C. and A.S. Roma, battling all the way into the semi-finals of the Champions League. However, they could not defeat Wenger's Arsenal in the semi-finals and had to, regrettably, halt their steps at reaching the top four.

Villarreal CF's line-up for this season was not actually its strongest. In truth, that would occur only one season later. However, the current capabilities of the team were enough to be considered the strongest in the club's history.

In Barcelona, Riquelme was an untrusted player when he was under Louis van Gaal and Frank Rijkaard, However, in El Madrigal (Villarreal CF's home), he found his place as a core player; Villarreal CF made him the core of the team, with the team's strategy revolving around him. The team's offensive pace was controlled by him alone, strung along in tandem with the speed of his movements.

In the last season, Nottingham Forest had already suffered at his hands during the Europa League matches. In this match, Riquelme was slated as a priority target to mark. And of course, the person defending him was still George Wood.

Wood was evidently quite excited about his mission, filled with eagerness to try. Since the time he heard that Forest's opponent in the Champions League qualifier was to be Villarreal CF, he had been anticipating this day.

He did not care about the kind of position Riquelme had in the football scene or the Argentine team, one of the strongest in the world. He only knew one thing: he had once lost to this person, and now he was going to win.

Of course, as the main manager, Tang En's considerations were not only for the issue of Riquelme. He was well-aware that Villarreal CF's gobsmacking achievements in this season were not just because of Riquelme's go-between play in the midfield, or Forlan's siege in the forward line. Instead, the crux was an Argentinian player, Sorin, hidden behind Riquelme.

The Argentine captain's tireless running on the field to intercept and assist was the true moving force propelling the submarine forward.

If Forlan and Figueroa were the torpedo launcher, and Riquelme was the control room, then Sorin would be the engine of the yellow submarine.

Just like Sorin, another escort of the submarine for Riquelme was the Brazilian defensive midfielder, Marcos Senna. Even though Senna was Brazilian, he had no hope of being selected for the National Team in the land of Brazil which was filled with experts. Instead, due to his outstanding performance in the La Liga matches, he attracted the favor of the Spanish manager, Camacho. At the end of the year, Senna would be granted Spanish citizenship. Rumor had it that Camacho was interested in bringing Senna, a Brazilian with Spanish citizenship, into Spain's National Team. Senna could play numerous

positions, not just as a defensive midfielder; he could also play as fullback. He would be a beneficial addition to Spain's defense.

The Villarreal FC under Chilean Manager Manuel Pellegrini was a team consisting of excellent football stars with a strong emphasis on unity. The overall team was a team with tenacious combat ability.

Such an opponent was tough to deal with, so it was no surprise that Everton met their end at their hands.

That was what occurred during the same period in Tang En's memory. Right now, right here, in City Grounds, Tang en did not wish for history to develop as he remembered.

Utilizing the time before the match began, Tang En went through their strategy in the locker room with the players once more. He reminded them of how they could interfere with Riquelme's performance, block Sorin's path forward, prevent Senna from assisting Riquelme, and contain Forlan so that he remained helplessly isolated.

All those strategies were already implemented and practiced during their usual training sessions, but Tang En still felt the need to repeat himself again before the match. The pressure on him for the match was not minor. The club had spent so much effort as well as funds, and the fans were all harboring enormous hopes for the Forest Team in the new season. If they suffer a thrashing defeat in their first match, Tang En would not know how to look at all those faces in the spectators' stand afterward.

After revising all the strategies once and making sure every player had a clear idea of what they needed to do, Tang En removed a Captain's Armband from his shirt pocket.

Ever since Albertini had gotten injured, there has been no one wearing the armband. While it mattered little to have nobody wearing the Captain's Armband during their training, it was now a formal match. How could they allow the absence of a Captain on the field?

He swept his gaze across the locker room. Based on their age, experience, and convention, Edwin van der Sar was likely to be the best candidate. However... Tang En remembered Evan's hope. So, he waved a hand, saying, "George, come here."

Wood stood from the corner and walked forward.

Tang En raised the Captain's Armband with the intention of putting it on for Wood. But his conditioned reflex was to dodge it, spurring loud chortles from the rest of the room.

Tang En glared at the group of boys, and with a twist of Wood's left arm, slipped the Captain's Armband on him firmly. Following that, he gave a hard slap to Wood's arm, saying, "From now on, when Demi isn't around, you're the Captain."

Wood naturally knew what the Captain's Armband represented, and what a person in such a position did. He looked at Tang En in shock.

"What are you staring at me for?" Tang En stared back. "From now on, you have to work even harder than before. And you can't just bury your head in hard work all on your own. There are many more matters you need to consider now. You'll learn slowly, lad."

After lecturing Wood, Tang En turned to ask the audience of players in the locker room, "George Wood is to become the team's second Captain. While Demi is recuperating, Wood will temporarily stand-in as Captain. Does anyone object?"

Not everyone had an interest in being the captain. Although some would think they would look impressive with the Captain's Armband, gaining a sort of status, most would likely see only the endless duties and responsibilities that came with it; they would never be able to stop asking the best of themselves. To conclude in a single word: tiring!

Furthermore, George Wood's captaincy had already been decided by the Boss. His fondness for Wood was obvious to everyone. If someone still stood up at that point to say, "I object," they would just be asking for death.

So, as expected by Tang En, no one had any opinions about his decision.

"What's left..."

Tang En heard a flurry of footsteps from outside the locker room. It was probably the away team, Villarreal CF, getting ready to enter the field. He looked at his watch. "There are still three minutes left. There's no hurry to get out there. Let them wait for a bit. Everyone, go do something... At least, stop sitting there in such a silly way; you looking at me, and me at you."

A burst of laughter erupted from the locker room.

Chapter 339: The Captain's Armband Part 2

Tang En made his way to Kerslake and the two started chatting in a low voice. The other members had also slipped into a relaxed mood quickly, finding those they were on good terms with to mingle. As the locker room livened up, everyone's attention was diverted from the Captain's Armband to other places.

Tang En glanced sideways at Wood. He did not look for anyone to chat with, and no one approached him. He was just staring blankly at the Captain's Armband.

Kerslake noticed the same thing. "Tony, is this too early?"

"It'll happen sooner or later. There are benefits to having it happen earlier... I don't think George is the sort of person who will crumble under pressure and responsibility. Otherwise..."

Tang En thought about Wood, who worked to feed his family while worrying about his mother's illness. All that time, they also had to stay in a dangerous environment with a need to be constantly alert, having no peace at all.

"...He would have crumpled by now. By putting the Captain's Armband on him, I hope he can become even more mature and learn to consider things from a well-rounded perspective, giving him the ability to see the bigger picture."

Kerslake nodded. He understood Tang En's good intentions. There was no need for him to worry about Wood. It was someone else he was worrying over.

“You assigned Anelka to play as a reserve in this match. Was he... dissatisfied with anything?” he asked quietly.

Tang En retrieved his gaze from Wood, turning instead to Anelka who sat in another corner of the locker room.

“Right now... I can’t tell. He’s quite introverted; he wouldn’t easily express some of his emotions.”

“Didn’t you explain to him?”

“What about? I’ve already said. I’ll just treat him like any normal player. Isn’t it normal for the players to be either on the starting line-up or reserve line-up?”

Tang En still chose to treat Anelka coldly.

Kerslake laughed.

Tang En was well-aware of what he was doing. Whatever he said now would not be the least bit persuasive. His tone softened as he said, “I’ll find a chance and speak to him... but not now.”

As the final player to join the team as a new member, Anelka seemed rather misplaced in the lively locker room. He sat alone in a corner with his headphones on, listening to music.

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Forest’s starting lineup for the match was not much different from the final segment of the last season. Tang En did not use the newly-joined Anelka on the forward line. Instead, he partnered up Mark Viduka and Nicklas Bendtner. In the midfield, the position of left midfielder was firmly held by Franck Ribéry. Meanwhile, for the position of right midfielder, Forest chose to use Ashley Young, who had greater chemistry with the team, in this match. Aaron Lennon was put on the substitutes’ bench.

In the center of the midfield were George Wood and Mikel Arteta.

In the position of center back, the starters were two young champions – Brazilian midfielder Pepe and Spain’s National Youth Team player, Piqué.

In fact, the entire defensive line in Forest’s starting line-up was made of youths. The starter left back was Leighton Baines, 20 years old, and the right back was Chimbonda, who was 26.

Within this team Edwin van der Sar was one of the oldest, his experience becoming strikingly important on the youthful Forest Team.

Tang En instructed George Wood to mark Riquelme. Riquelme’s actions were slightly slower as he liked maintaining possession of the ball. That would be Wood’s opportunity. Whatever the method—even fouling—he must not allow Riquelme to be comfortable with the ball. He must give him neither the space nor the time to.

Boxing out Riquelme was equivalent to completely disabling Villarreal CF’s offense.

On Forest’s side of the offense, due to their deployment of two center forwards, their main offensive direction would be from the two wings. In matches, Sorin was quite active; his favorite activity was to run back and forth on the wings, making use of his enthusiastic sprints to supplement the offense of his

team. However, Tang En did not intend to especially manage the Argentine madman and his tendency to cut forward. Since Sorin was fond of advancing forward to assist, Tang En planned to go all out on the offense to suppress him. With both of their wings launching ferocious attacks, it would force Sorin backward, allowing him to stay only on the defense without daring to attack.

This was Forest's home ground. Tang En hoped that the team would be able to establish the grounds for their advancement in this match. He wanted to absorb the lesson he had received last season from the match against Sporting CP; for two-legged matches where they first played at home and later away, he certainly could not allow the deciding moment to be left to the away match.

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Not long after the beginning of the match, City Ground became a cacophony of noise stemming from the audience.

From the start of the match, George Wood made his attitude clear: he was going straight for Riquelme.

The away team Villarreal CF won the toss; they were to kick-off. As the core of Villarreal CF, Riquelme very quickly received a pass. He was the person launching the attack. Like a wolf in search of food, George Wood rapidly closed in on him.

After half a season of experience, the George Wood of today was not the same boy who had been easily toyed with by Riquelme.

Foul.

George Wood had tripped Riquelme.

Riquelme lay on the ground and looked up at Wood. He recognized the kid. In the previous season, this boy was toyed with to the point of helplessness. It directly led to Forest's loss in that match, while he himself was selected as the match's best player.

How was it that when meeting him again after half a season, he was actually donning the Captain's Armband?

He was the captain of Forest?

"George Wood is wearing the Captain's Armband for Nottingham Forest. This is somewhat surprising. With Albertini injured, the best candidate for captaincy should be Edwin van der Sar. Honestly, I don't think much of Wood as a captain. He could be an amazing defensive midfielder—a genius at defense—but, such talent is separate from being a captain. I don't understand why Tony Twain would make such a choice... Look at when they were tossing the coin earlier; his awkward performance is truly worrying!"

The commentator did not praise Wood's defense this time around. Meanwhile, Forest fans felt that the commentator was being too noisy, spouting nonsense that had nothing whatsoever to do with the match. What about Wood becoming the captain? He was a player groomed by their Youth Team; their own people! As fans, they supported Tang En's decision to make him the captain.

Numerous fans began to reminisce about the times they had had, while Forest was still competing in League One, of John Motson commentating for them. Since Forest's rise to the English Premier League,

Motson's voice had practically vanished from their ears. It was just too bad that England's BBC channel had failed to attain the broadcasting rights for the English Premier League.

Although Martin Taylor and Andy Gray were extremely popular commentators, they remained objective towards the Forest Team. On the other hand, John Motson made his fondness for Forest obvious; it was something that truly won the favor of Forest fans.

After tripping Riquelme, Wood ran back to the team.

Sorin came forward to give his Argentine comrade a hand. "Are you alright?"

Riquelme shook his head.

"Watch out. That lad... I've heard some things about him. Last season, he kicked the Brazilian from Sporting CP and caused a major injury."

Riquelme looked at Sorin, who nodded. "I'm not kidding. That Brazilian is still lying in the hospital. And for 18 months."

Chapter 340: Bright Red Part 1

The competition was very intense. With the Nottingham Forest team full of expectations for the new season, how could Villarreal not be as well?

Both sides parried each other on the field. The speed of their offense and defense conversion was very fast.

The spectators were enjoying themselves.

But in reality, Pellegrini secretly complained in his heart.

The Spanish team was very uncomfortable with the pace of this type of offense and defense conversion. Furthermore, Villarreal still had Riquelme, whose "slowness" was world-famous.

He knew it must have been deliberately arranged by the opponent's young manager. The English Premier League was the fastest league in the world, and this Premier League team was also very familiar with how to rip their opponents' defenses apart in a fast-paced attack-and-defend rhythm.

Nottingham Forest wanted to establish a home advantage for the qualifier.

Pellegrini paced back and forth on the sidelines, anxiously watching the field. He wanted to tell the team not to follow the opponents' rhythm. However, he could not do it from the sidelines. The deafening shouts in the City Ground stadium completely drowned out all the sounds he had made.

The Yellow Submarine players were unconsciously led by the nose by Nottingham Forest.

Riquelme also wanted to regain control of the rhythm and get the game back on a familiar track. But he was under so much pressure from George Wood that he could not fend for himself. So how could he lead his team?

He had to admit that this guy behind him was a lot better than he had been half a season ago. He might not be able to easily intercept the ball at his foot, but he could make him unable to pass the ball comfortably to where he wanted it to go. There was no way he could smoothly dribble the ball to break through without any impediment and clear the way for Villarreal's line of attack.

Wasn't that the purpose of defense?

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Off-field, Twain looked at Kerslake next to him and laughed. "Looks like the captain's armband motivated him."

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Twain was right. Wearing the captain's armband really did make Wood feel different. When his arms moved as he ran, he would catch a glimpse of the armband on his left arm from the corner of his eye and remind himself that he was the team captain now. What did it mean to be the team captain?

Just like Demetrio, he had to work harder than the others and even harder than before at any time and under any circumstances.

Wood did not know how to lead a team, and he certainly did not know how to lead the team to victory. All he could do was to help the team with practical actions. Previously, he could run 50,000 feet in a game. In that case, he would run 65,000 meters in this game.

Wood's style of football was very simple. He used running distance to measure whether he was doing his best.

Every time the captain's armband on his left arm appeared in the corner of his eye, it served to remind him repeatedly:

This is what Demetrio wore; so you cannot put Demetrio to shame and you cannot let Demetrio down.

In training before the game, Twain repeatedly told Wood to not easily make a move when he faced Riquelme, or that he must guarantee to intercept the ball in one shot if he made a move. If not, he should keep pressing on him, constantly interfere with him, and harass him to force him into a dead corner and into a siege.

Those were the only two approaches.

Wood chose the latter. When Riquelme did not have the possession of the ball, he was only 15 feet away from the Argentine. Once the football was passed to Riquelme, he would rush over. When the opponent had the ball, it would become a close marking defensive stance.

Wood's advantage was that he was faster than most of the defenders Riquelme encountered, giving Riquelme no chance to get rid of him. After more than two years of competition experience, Wood now grasped how to maintain a reasonable distance.

Riquelme had a technical advantage and George Wood had the physical advantage. Both of them played a well-matched game in the midfield.

The commentator was amazed by this. Before this game, he had not thought that Riquelme would be immobilized by George Wood.

“This is unbelievable. The Argentinian football midfielder genius was trapped in the quagmire of George Wood’s defense. Villarreal’s offense has entered into a deadlock at the same time!”

As if in response to the commentator’s doubts and surprise, a loud singing broke out in the stands. It was sung for their new team captain, George Wood.

Each time Wood successfully defended against Riquelme, the stands cheered and put great psychological pressure on the Villarreal players. Such a crazy stadium environment could not be seen in Spain. The English football hooligans were world famous, and so were the English hardcore fans.

The thousand-strong Spanish fans, who followed the Yellow Submarine team, did not dare to make a noise amidst this powerful outpouring at home. In fact, even if they tried to make a sound, they could not be heard. From the start of the game, the entire City Ground stadium was surrounded by sounds of feverish clamor.

The Spanish football tradition was completely different from England’s. In La Liga, there were very few visiting fans who would follow the team and attend an away game. They focused more on their home games. Moreover, the Villarreal home stadium, El Madrigal, could only accommodate seventeen thousand people, which was ten thousand people less than the Forest team’s City Ground stadium.

If the atmosphere of the stadiums were to be compared, the Spanish fans could not compete with the English fans in any case.

Faced with the fanatical onslaught of the English fans, these poor Spanish fans were powerless to fight back, just like the team they were supporting right now.

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While Wood was trying his hardest to enmesh Riquelme, the Forest team’s offense was not idle either. The situation on the field was evolving. Villarreal did not pose a threat to Forest’s penalty area, so it was the Forest team’s turn to create trouble for the opponent.

Franck Ribéry continued his excellent play from last season and faithfully carried out Twain’s tactics. He zealously assisted on the left flank. He kept pressing on, again and again. He alone pinned the two Villarreal players.

On the other side, Ashley Young also performed well. Although he was not like Ribéry who could contain two players simultaneously, he made Juan Pablo Sorín rather afraid. He was less active in plugging in to assist than before.

Together with Arteta’s control of the middle, the Forest team’s midfield turned around smoothly. The four players each had a clear division of labor and their respective roles. Their well-oiled coordination made a strong overall formation in the Forest team’s midfield, rather than each fighting on his own. That was what Twain would like to see the most.

Unlike a striker such as Anelka, Viduka and Bendtner required more support from the midfield. They would only have a chance to score when the midfielders could deliver the strikes.

And now, in the contest for the midfield, Nottingham Forest had beaten Villarreal. In that case, the striker's breakthrough was only a matter of time.