

Champions 421

Chapter 421: The Price of Defense Part 1

Martins' shot did not lead to a goal. The Meazza fans in the stands might still be shaking their heads, but Mancini already saw hope because Nottingham Forest's impenetrable defenses finally had a loophole.

Furthermore, the attack sent a positive signal to the Inter Milan players: if they closely marked Albertini, both Nottingham Forest's offense and defense would fall into chaos.

In that way, their work was made simple. As long as they prevented Albertini from controlling the football, it was equivalent to preventing Nottingham Forest from controlling the ball.

George Wood was of no help to the Forest team's offense. When Inter Milan stepped up on their offense, he was able to defend the middle and even help with the defense of both flanks. But what the Forest team needed now was not to hold, but to turn the defense into offense. He was powerless.

Albertini was closely marked by Cambiasso. Many of the Argentine's actions bordered on becoming fouls, which made him very uncomfortable. But he could do nothing about it, because the referee did not blow the whistle, so it was not a foul. He was the team captain. He could not get angry over this or else the team's core would be in an upheaval.

Who could he depend on now? If no one could relieve his pressure, he could only rely on his own strength to compete with the opponents' midfield defense. However, as the game progressed, he was afraid of being worn down by the younger and stronger Cambiasso before long.

Should he pass to Ashley Young or Franck Ribéry?

They were both on the flanks and those positions limited their play. Passing the ball on the flanks required coordination because they could easily be blocked by the opponents if they played too narrowly.

Only George Wood's position was the best in the middle. He could pass to the front, back and sides.

But did he have a choice?

Albertini passed the football to Wood. Compared to him, there was no defensive pressure on Wood. Inter Milan's players clearly knew that Wood's contribution to offense was almost zero, so no one was specially arranged to mark him.

When he saw that the football was passed to Wood's feet, Mancini whistled off the field to signal for his players to press up with speed and rob Wood, forcing him to make a mistake.

This time, it was Juan who came up to rob him. Wood was somewhat helpless against the aggressive Inter Milan player.

"Get past him!" Albertini shouted.

Wood recalled the scene when he had bypassed Materazzi in front of the opposing penalty area, and he intended to repeat it.

But this time, it was different.

Wood's dribbling in the Forest team might have to be counted down. The last time he was able to successfully bypass Materazzi was because the other had lacked preparation. It was not so much that he had bypassed Materazzi, but rather that Materazzi himself had hit a wall, and then was pushed down to the ground by the rebound force. But real bypass techniques? Wood practiced those in training, but it was a different thing to show what was practiced during training in a game.

Wood wanted to send out the football, but he did not expect Juan to be so quick. The football he kicked was stopped by Juan, who simply flitted past him without even stopping for a beat!

"George Wood's ball has been robbed!"

Cheers broke out in the Meazza stadium. They finally saw the number one villain in their minds for this game being made a fool of!

"Dammit!" Twain stood up from his seat in shock when he saw George Wood lose the ball.

What was Wood's position? He was the defensive midfielder, and behind him was the center back! Losing the ball in this position meant that Juan could go up against a flimsy central defensive line. His breakthrough, long shot, or passing could all pose a great threat to Edwin van der Sar's goal!

When his ball was intercepted this time, George Wood did not turn around immediately. Instead, he froze for a moment, and then suddenly turned to rush towards Juan.

Juan dribbled the ball as Wood gave chase at the back. In a flash, both of them were in the penalty area. Due to that, Piqué dared not make a rash move in the front. He also had to pay attention to Adriano and Martins on both sides for fear that Juan would suddenly send the ball out.

After entering the penalty area, Juan deliberately slowed down. He seemed to be observing the situation.

George Wood charged up. He leaned against Juan from behind, trying to intercept the ball.

How experienced was Juan? When he saw Wood leaned over, he immediately shifted his body to put the football in front of him.

Adriano raised his hands up high on the side of the penalty area, "Pass it to me!"

At that moment, he forgot his feud with Juan. But he did not know if Juan hadn't seen him, or he did see him and deliberately chose not to pass. In short, after he protected the football, he did not hurry to send out the ball. He was waiting for Wood's follow-up action.

Wood did not intercept the ball for the first time. Instead, he was forced to the back of Juan. This time, he pushed his body forward and extended his leg to intercept the ball again with his arm raised up.

Just as he was about to intercept the football, Juan suddenly fell forward to the ground.

The referee's whistle sounded!

"Penalty kick!"

The Meazza Stadium was a sea of joy.

“This is a penalty kick! No doubt about it!”

Wood was stunned. He had poured all his attention into taking the ball. How could he have fouled?

Juan stood up from the ground and opened his arms to welcome his teammates’ support. He had successfully induced Wood to make the action he most wanted to see. Wood might not think he had fouled, but he had actually pushed Juan down from behind.

Twain sat down on the sidelines, covering his face in agony.

Wood wanted to turn around and look for the referee and reason with him, but he was held back by Albertini.

“If you still want a yellow card...”

Hearing the captain, he stopped in his tracks.

“I’m sorry.”

Albertini shook his head. “Why are you apologizing? Just learn from this. Next time I’ll still pass the ball to you, just don’t look so unprepared.”

“But, I-”

“Remember, George. When you take the ball, even if you don’t know what to do, don’t show it. You have to look like you have a plan. You have to act calm and confident to make people feel that you already have a lot of ways to deal with the ball and keep your opponent’s guessing! If you think ‘I don’t know what to do,’ then you really don’t know what to do. But if you keep your cool and observe your opponents, you’ll naturally know what to do.” Albertini took advantage of the opportunity to give Wood a lesson. “It’s actually not that complicated. If you have a better route to pass the football, you pass it. If not, pass it to your nearest teammates. That’s it.”

Wood bit his lip and listened quietly.

“Don’t take this penalty kick to heart. We don’t even know if the ball will get in yet. Even if it does, it will just be an equalizer. It’s not the end of the world.”

Albertini patted Wood on the back and walked out of the penalty area. The opponents were ready for the penalty.

Wood gave Juan a glare and turned to walk out.

Adriano walked in with the football.

Chapter 422: The Price of Defense Part 2

“This is a great opportunity for Inter Milan to equalize the score. Juan’s interception in the front field won a penalty kick for the team! George Wood’s blunder was terrible. His performance in this game

started off well and just went downhill. When faced with Inter Milan's frenzy of interceptions, he did not play well, letting Juan seize this opportunity."

The commentator chattered incessantly. Both the Inter Milan fans and Nottingham Forest fans wanted him to shut up.

"He's still young." The guest commentator made a very apt comment on Wood's performance.

"Young man..." Twain sighed as he looked at Wood standing outside the penalty area. "He had to go and intercept that ball. All he had to do was to block at the back. Piqué was already blocking Juan's shooting angle and forward route in front. By the time our defense had regrouped, Inter Milan would not have had the chance. He's really... Oh, God."

"Think about what to do next, Tony."

"What else is there to do? Continue to play like this... A draw is fine for us, but it would be so nice if we could win." Twain's voice became softer, and he eventually stopped talking. He just stared at the penalty area.

Adriano carefully placed the football, and then stepped back. The referee carefully checked that the unrelated players had exited the penalty area before he whistled to signal the kickoff.

After the whistle had sounded, the noisy Meazza suddenly quieted down.

Adriano ran and energetically volleyed a shot!

"GOOOAL!! Adriano!"

The football slammed into the net. Adriano shook his fists and shouted.

The Meazza Stadium erupted in earthshattering cheers.

"Inter Milan equalizes the score. Both teams are now back on the same starting line!"

Inter Milan's players rushed to the corner flag to celebrate the goal. The Forest team had already walked towards the center circle, waiting for the kickoff to restart.

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This goal greatly boosted Inter Milan's morale. Following that, the situation did not change much in the game. The visiting Nottingham Forest played under pressure from Inter Milan. The game became passive for the visiting team, which was utterly dominated by the home team.

The statistics for the two teams' ball possession rate were displayed at the bottom of the screen: Inter Milan had 69%, Nottingham Forest had 31%.

Furthermore, this was not the most extreme situation. At its lowest point, Nottingham Forest's ball possession rate dropped to 27%!

The idea that "the result is more important than the process," which Twain had always insisted on, was exemplified most vividly in this game. It seemed that he was more conservative than the Italian footballers.

If he were to coach a La Liga team, it was estimated that he would have been ousted many times. However, in Nottingham Forest, the Forest fans were eager to be champions again after a downfall of twenty-odd years. They just wanted to have a manager who would pursue victories by hook or by crook and lead them back to glory.

Under Inter Milan's frenzied attacks, the Nottingham Forest defenders were strained and on high alert. There were several near-misses with Inter Milan. All the Nottingham Forest fans who were watching the game on the television must have had their hearts in their throats.

Nottingham Forest tried to fight back, but Albertini was very closely marked by Inter Milan, which also took turns using foul tactics. Cambiasso was the first to foul. After a while, it was either Juan or Materazzi. In short, they would not let him take the ball comfortably and on the other hand, they also shared the risk of getting a card. After all, if Cambiasso was the only one who fouled, he was likely to receive two yellow cards and be sent off.

Forest did well in the first half because Albertini controlled the team's rhythm. He knew when to attack, how to attack, when to defend, and how to defend. Everyone on the Forest team was familiar with Albertini's passing routes on the field and had a rapport. It was very normal for them to be ahead of a team like Inter Milan.

But now that Albertini could not control the rhythm, the Forest team would naturally be suppressed by their opponents.

Inter Milan attacked ferociously amid the cheering of their home fans. Twain had already stood up from his seat. The current situation made him unable to sit still.

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"Adriano shoots! Edwin van der Sar firmly holds the ball under his body."

After the goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar pounced on his power shot from the penalty area, he did not rush to serve the ball. Instead, he pressed the football down and rested on the ground to allow his wildly beating heart to calm down. He was almost a depiction of the entire team. Under Inter Milan's oppressive offense and defense, almost everyone had to brace their nerves to deal with the opponent's every attack. They did not dare to slack off in the slightest bit.

Next, Nottingham Forest's counterattack hastily came to an end. Anelka's long shot did not cause any trouble to Júlio César, Inter Milan's goalkeeper, due to Samuel's interference. Inter Milan was in control of the game. Their fans were not worried about their defense at all.

Although Twain had insisted that the team played a defensive counterattack tactic, the current situation was not defensive counterattacking. They were so pressed by their opponents that they could only play defense and could not counter. They could not continue like this. He turned to ask Kerslake, "How long has it been?"

"It's been seventeen minutes in the second half."

"This is not working. We have to make some changes. I hope it's not too late. David, let Arteta warm up. We need him."

Kerslake nodded and got up to summon Arteta.

Twain turned and continued to stare at the field. He thought about what specific task to arrange for Arteta after he returned from his warm-up.

At that time, the Inter Milan midfielder intercepted Albertini's ball and launched another attack. Twain thought as he watched that if Arteta was on the field, he would be able to share the pressure Albertini was under and the opponents would not be able to intercept the ball so easily.

As he was still deep in thought, Cambiasso, facing George Wood, cleverly chose to change direction on time and passed the ball Figo on the flank. Just when the Forest team thought that Figo would attack from the flank, he passed the ball to the middle, to Cambiasso who rushed up!

George Wood gave chase, and after attracting his attention, Cambiasso passed the football to Adriano in the penalty area.

The Brazilian striker leaned against another Brazilian player, Pepe. He did not choose to pass the football to Cambiasso, who continued to rush forward. Instead, he took advantage of the fact that Nottingham Forest's defensive line was currently focused on the Argentine defensive midfielder. He suddenly turned and struck!

Even Pepe did not think that Adriano would choose to force a shot under those circumstances. The football drilled between his legs!

Edwin van der Sar's line of sight was blocked by Pepe. It was far too late when he wanted to make the save.

"Adriano! Twice in a row! That was so beautiful! The perfect combination of teamwork and personal technique! The tables have turned for the leading team and Nottingham Forest is in trouble!"

"Inter Milan reverses the score, 2:1! In fact, the arrival of this goal was just a matter of time. Look at Forest's performance; they play too conservatively! Manager Tony Twain has paid the price for his lack of courage! As it turns out, just like defense, a one-goal lead simply doesn't work!"

Chapter 423: Looking On the Verge of a Loss Part 1

If Tang En had known that the commentator's evaluation of him was "timid," he would probably fly into a rage right then and there. He had never thought that persisting for victory was a performance of timidity. However, to recover his image in other people's hearts, he needed to do something, something that fit with most people's aesthetic sense of what was an attack adjustment.

On the other side, while the reserve players were excitedly celebrating the goal, Mancini only gave a simple high-five to his assistant before walking back to the manager's seat. He was not trying to act cool. He had been standing from the first minute of the match and could finally sit comfortably for a brief rest.

A lead of 2:1. Though that single away goal felt like a nail in his heart and annoyed him, it was better to win than lose or even get a draw. Furthermore, from the two goals, Mancini could tell that Nottingham Forest was only bluffing with a strong front. When Inter Milan got serious with them, they were

immediately seen through, revealing themselves. Teams lacking in depth were like that. With a moment's momentum, they could gain the upper hand briefly, but it would never last long.

For numerous Forest fans, being able to gain the results of 1:2 in an away field already satisfied them. After all, they had gotten one away goal and were only behind by a ball. They could achieve more when they returned to their home field.

But, as the team's main manager, Tony did not think the same way. From the beginning, he had never thought that losing by one goal was a victory. He wanted to counterattack, a real defensive counterattack.

Arteta jogged back from the warmup area. Tang En pulled him back and personally explained his mission on the field.

Upon hearing that the person he was substituting was fullback Leighton Baines, Arteta was somewhat taken aback.

"I'm not putting you in to defend, Mikel."

"Yes, I know, Boss. But..."

"You're worried about defense? That's is not something you have to consider. Your mission is to get in and help organize attacks; relieve Demi of some pressure." Tang En held the tactical board and spoke as he drew on it. "After getting in, discuss in more detail with Demi how the two of you want to do this. Whatever it is, don't let him get surrounded again."

Mikel Arteta nodded, but he was still fretting over the defense. "So, the defense..."

"Tell George to run more."

"Okay, I understand."

"Go now, we don't have much time!"

Kerslake waited for Arteta to stand by the sidelines, awaiting entry, before walking over to Tony.

"Tony, you're really bold. Inter Milan's attack is that strong, but you're choosing to use three rear defenders?"

"I have no choice. The four-man grouping in the midfield is already set, and Arteta works in the middle. Between Albertini and George Wood, I can't move either. If I change out George, it would be equivalent to having no one defending the midfield. When that happens, Inter Milan's counterattacks would likely become even easier for them. If I change out Albertini, Arteta would be tightly marked very quickly after he gets in. That would be a complete waste of the substitution. The two on the forward line also helps to divert some of the opponent's defensive energies, relieving our midfield of some pressure. So... only the players on the defensive line can be changed out."

"You're not worried about losing goals?"

"I'm worried. But... if I keep holding onto the idea of 'not losing any more goals' and refuse to make an unconventional change of players, we'll definitely lose."

Nottingham Forest was awarded a throw-in at the front field. Arteta finally got his chance to switch in. The Fourth Official raised the player change sign: Number 22, Leighton Baines, out; number 14, Mikel Arteta, in.

“Nottingham Forest is making a substitution. An attacking midfielder for a fullback. Manager Tony Twain has finally remembered that they needed to attack... but, how are they going to deal with Inter Milan’s attacks if they change out a fullback?”

“That isn’t something we have to crack our heads over.”

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Arteta ran into the field and related Tang En’s tactical intent to Albertini.

Hearing that Arteta was being sent in to help share his burden, Albertini’s first reaction was to turn back and look at George Wood standing behind him.

If Arteta is in, he would no longer need to clutch stubbornly onto Wood as a life-saving straw. This way, Wood could properly focus on defending while Arteta and himself could focus on the offense. There would surely be some change in Forest’s situation.

From an overall perspective, this was a great adjustment.

But if the Boss was always using Wood as an engineer, when was Wood going to become a true well-rounded midfielder? Unavoidably, they all needed Wood for their defense. But, surely, they could not always take out a fullback and put in an attacking midfielder whenever they meet with these sorts of situations, right?

No matter; the main manager had decided. As a player on the field, he needed to adhere to it.

Albertini nodded to Arteta. “I got it.”

After completing his mission, Arteta ran back to his position. Albertini then ran to Wood.

“Wood, you’re in charge of defense. We only have three fullbacks, and our opponents are attacking fiercely. You’ll have to do the work of two players on your own.”

“No problem.” Wood nodded.

“Mm...” Albertini hesitated to speak, and finally just smiled at him.

“Go for it!”

From the angle of the television broadcast, it was evident that the Forest Team had adjusted their formation. Due to Leighton Baine’s departure from the field, the three—Chimbonda, Piqué, and Pepe—had become a defensive line formed by three fullbacks. In front of them was George Wood, a single defensive midfielder. Albertini and Arteta, along with Franck Ribéry and Ashley Young, formed a flat four positioning in the midfield. Meanwhile, Mark Viduka led them right at the front with Anelka slightly behind.

It was the 3:1:4:2 formation.

This set-up directly relieved Albertini of having to take care of both ends. At the same time, it also relieved George Wood. Now he could devote himself entirely to carrying out what he did best. He no longer faced a state of being at a loss whenever he needed to help Albertini with offense. Defending had already seeped into Wood's blood, becoming an inherent ability in his body. There was no need for excessive words when asking him to defend; he knew what he had to do. Going on the attack, however, was not the same. To George Wood, defending was as simple as eating, while attacking was something much too complex.

As there were only three rear defenders left, Tang En stopped Chimbonda from assisting with the offense. The flanks were left entirely to Franck Ribéry and Ashley Young. At the same time, Forest had more options to attack through the middle with Arteta in the fold. Besides Albertini's precise long passes, Arteta's ability to dribble and break through, as well as his short passes, created more offensive maneuvers for Forest's attack through the middle. This made it more difficult for Inter Milan to defend.

Naturally, when defending, the two side midfielders still had to retreat to help. Otherwise, Forest's flanks would be almost empty. The good thing was that Forest's players on the flanks were both younger and more physically capable than Inter Milan's players; they could afford to run more.

George Wood obediently defended in the back, no longer thinking about the pressure he faced from sharing Albertini's burden in organizing the attacks. Despite Inter Milan's continued attacks without weakening, such work was something he did with ease. With his entire focus now on dealing with his enemies, his performance naturally started looking up again.

Verón wanted to face-off on his own against Wood. This time, Wood unceremoniously cut him off with his body, forcing his way in to steal the ball. Following that, Wood continued blocking him bodily and passed the ball to his nearest teammate, ignoring whatever attempts Verón made from behind. Thereafter, it was no longer Wood's business. He continued awaiting the next attack from their opponents without worrying about the progress of Forest's own attacks. If the passes from his teammates were intercepted, he would simply rinse and repeat what he did earlier.

Chapter 424: Looking On The Verge Of A Loss Part 2

Arteta's appearance on the field indeed ended up disrupting Inter Milan's planned defense. Cambiasso's man-to-man against Albertini completely lost its meaning; when Albertini was being marked, Forest's players could pass the ball to Arteta instead. Alternatively, if they sent some of the defending troops to guard against Arteta, the pressure on Albertini would inevitably be reduced... Regardless, the two Forest midfielders demanded all the defensive capabilities of Inter Milan. Any one of them could independently take charge of organizing the attack. It was as if there were two cores. Placing a limit on only one of them was useless. Left with half of the second half, Nottingham Forest with their double core began gunning their engines. Inter Milan's players gradually started feeling that something was wrong.

After gaining the lead, Inter Milan's press for the ball became less severe. Following Mancini's request, they gradually retreated to attract Forest to advance in their attacks, while Inter Milan took available opportunities to counter.

Mancini knew that the Forest Team, who was now behind, faced two choices. One was naturally to go on the offense to equalize the scores, while the other was to ignore Inter Milan's retreat and continue buckling down on defense in hopes of defending to the final second. For them, it would mean bringing back the results of gaining an away goal and losing a goal back to the home field, strategizing from there.

Regardless of which situation it would turn out to be, both were advantageous to Inter Milan. If Forest advanced forward to attack, the defense in the back would surely have many gaps that could be made use of. Inter Milan could take the opportunity to counterattack and steal a few goals. If they chose not to attack, it was also a good option for Inter Milan to get a victory in their home field.

Tang En chose the first option; that conformed even better to Mancini's hopes than the second would have. But Mancini had not expected Tang En to be that bold. Not only did he remove a full back whilst facing such enormous defensive pressure, he even put two playmakers in the midfield. Wasn't he afraid of an overlap in their positions, or a clash in their intentions?

Unexpectedly, the two cores did not conflict with each other at all. Instead, they complemented each other so well as to draw out each other's capabilities.

Furthermore, even with only three rear defenders, Forest's defensive line stabilized after letting George Wood focus only on the defense.

"How could it be..." Without managing to even warm the seat under his bum, Mancini stood up again.

Nottingham Forest had very simply split into two parts of offense and defense. The defense cared nothing about the offense, while those going on the attack were almost entirely relieved of defensive duties. Both parties could put all their energy into their primary function. In this way, Inter Milan began feeling the strain.

After Albertini faked a pass to Arteta, he pulled the wool over Cambiasso's eyes and took the ball for a breakthrough instead. When Cambiasso managed to refocus his aim on him, Albertini did a one-two combination with Ribéry via a wall pass. After entering the 30-meter range of Inter Milan's field, he executed a beautiful long shot, announcing his awakening in the match.

"What a pity, it grazed the crossbeam and flew out!"

"Dammit... mark him closely..." Outside the field, Mancini was biting his lip tightly.

"Oh, oh! Mikel Arteta! Breaks through into the penalty area and shoots! Júlio César's extraordinary performance saves Inter Milan! This is unexpected. Manager Twain made only one substitution, but it's managed to revive Nottingham Forest."

"Anelka! It slipped right by the goal!"

"Mark Viduka! The header is too strong, but this disappointment is to be expected..."

During that period, the words emerging from the commentator's mouth were mostly filled with the names of Nottingham Forest's attacking players. With the rise of Nottingham Forest's offense, the jeers in the air of Giuseppe Meazza Stadium also increased.

Both managers stood at the sidelines. Mancini bit his lip tightly with a serious expression, while Tang En stuck both hands in his pockets with a calm face. Each was worrying about something.

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Ten minutes passed, but Mancini did not see what he was hoping for. Listening to his words, the team did retreat. Forest Team also pressed outward as he had expected. However, Inter Milan's attacks were unable to find any path in. The match pace was beginning show signs of leaning towards Forest; that wouldn't do.

"Go out on the offense! You guys have retreated too much!" Mancini finally could not stop himself from shouting from the sidelines.

"This won't do..." he muttered, and then turned to walk towards the substitute's bench. He pointed to an Argentinian forward, Cruz.

"Cruz, go warm-up and come back immediately!"

Cruz obediently ran out. Mancini turned and pointed at another person on the bench.

"Recoba, you too."

Very well, Tony Twain. If you want to go on the offense, I'll go head-on with you!

Three minutes after, Inter Milan made a substitution. Mancini substituted in two attacking players in one go. Cruz substituted for Verón, who had been performing just averagely, while Recoba substituted for Stanković. Inter Milan transformed into a formation with greater offensive capabilities, 4:3:3.

The mighty Inter Milan finally forced Forest to show some restraint. The short duration of the crazed tidal wave of attacks stemming from the "double core" receded. The situation on the field became more balanced. Both parties had opportunities that they failed to capitalize on. But it was no longer the scene of any one side suppressing the other.

Looking at the time, there was still 10 minutes before injury stoppage time. Tang En decided to make another substitution. This time, he put in Eastwood and changed out Mark Viduka. Of course, he was not putting the skinny Eastwood in to be a center-forward and face-off with the ferocious Italian rear defenders. Instead, he pushed Anelka up and situated Eastwood behind him. Neither of them was the traditional sort of center-forward; both had extremely strong capabilities in playing independently. After Tang En's overall adjustment to the strategy, he did his best to send in another player with the potential of creating miracles on their own. No matter what method he used, he did not want to lose this game!

Especially when Shania was watching on from the spectators' stand. They had not met in a long while; his first meeting gift with her must not be a loss.

In truth, Tang En did not know if Shania had really come to watch the match. Before the match, they did not communicate, and he was also too busy then to care about it. However, he believed. He believed that Shania, who had said "I have to work tomorrow," would certainly come. At that time, her tone had sounded as if she said it only in a moment of pique...

The match was close to its end, but neither side gave up. Inter Milan's players were unwilling to beat Nottingham Forest by only one goal, while Nottingham Forest's players were unwilling to lose to Inter Milan on the away field. Everyone's spirits were high, going all out to the final moment.

Albertini could no longer run much. Many times, he only stood in the front field, panting as he waited for his teammates to pass the ball to him. Then, he would dribble the ball a few steps for show and pass it to someone in front the moment he had an opportunity. If he saw no openings, he would pass it back again.

The close-marking from Cambiasso earlier had forced him to use up large amounts of his stamina. Now, he truly had the heart and will, but not a body that could comply.

The trust from his teammates caused the ball to once again be passed to him. Cambiasso also came up to guard against him at the first instance.

While Albertini was focused on dealing with Cambiasso, he did not expect him to be just a decoy. Inter Milan's captain, Javier Zanetti, suddenly abandoned his position and dashed out from his diagonal, stealing Albertini's ball from the other side.

Chapter 425: This Is My Way

No one had thought that Javier Zanetti would suddenly give up his position and rush to the middle of the midfield to fight for the ball. Even his teammates had not expected it.

Cambiasso was surprised to see the captain intercept the ball from under Albertini's foot, and then watched him dribble the ball to the center circle.

"This is Inter Milan's counterattack! At the final moment!"

The stands in the Meazza stadium erupted into earthshattering cheers.

"Javier Zanetti! He's still fighting in the final moments of the game!"

Albertini was startled when he saw the football under his foot suddenly fly out. Then he saw his old opponent's back, Inter Milan's number 4, who flitted past him.

He wanted to fall back to defend. The ball was snatched from him. If Inter Milan made use of this chance to score, then he would become a sinner. He could never let this happen!

But just as he was about to run, he saw another figure dash from his side.

It was definitely not another Inter Milan player to the rescue. The figure was clad in red. It was number 13!

"After their intense offense, Nottingham Forest's rear is empty! This is Inter Milan's best chance. If they get 3:1, they can eliminate Nottingham with peace of mind. Oh, no! George Wood... Good heavens, he's really fast! Did he just start to play?!"

George Wood sprinted toward Zanetti dribbling the ball. Watching him run at his full speed was like watching a leopard chasing its prey.

“Son of a b**ch! Go up and help him!” Mancini bellowed off the field without caring whether the players on the field could hear him clearly in such a noisy environment.

Twain also rushed to the sidelines, but he did not call for his players to withdraw and defend. He waved his hands forward!

“Don’t fall back! Dammit! Charge forward! Losing by one ball is still a loss, losing two is still a f**king loss! This is our last chance... George, take the f**king ball!”

In a flash, Wood caught up with Zanetti.

The Inter Milan captain had the ready-for-battle Pepe in front of him, and George Wood was closing in on his side. He knew for certain that he could not rely on his speed or force a breakthrough to get rid of the defense. It was not going to work. He was not the type of player who used speed. But if he stopped to hold the ball and wait for the support of his teammates, perhaps the opponents would fall back into place. That would put the football in his team’s possession, and they could drag out the game to the end. But Zanetti did not want to do it. If they only won by one goal in their home game, then when they played the away game, as long as the opponents won by 1:0, Inter Milan would be eliminated. For the safety of the team, in order to ensure that they could advance, it was imperative that they got as much of a goal difference as possible at home.

This was their last chance to attack before the game ended. He must seize it!

The fourth official appeared between the two referees. He raised the sign for the injury stoppage extra time. But almost no one looked at him. Everyone was focused on the sudden changes on the field.

“Three minutes of injury stoppage time. Inter Milan is in attack mode...If this ball gets in, Nottingham Forest will have conceded two goals. It will also be a tough fight when they return to their home ground. But if...”

The commentator had finished speaking when George Wood spotted a slightly bigger gap in Zanetti’s dribbling. He suddenly powered on and rushed to overtake him. Then he shoveled the ball with his foot and intercepted it from Zanetti. Before he could kick the football again, Wood jabbed it to Pepe!

Zanetti, who was unable to stop in time, kicked Wood in the thigh, staggered, and then fell forward.

“Foul!” A huge roar broke out in the stands.

The referee raised his right hand as he ran over. He shook his extended forefinger.

“Well played!”

All of a sudden, the roar turned deafening and heart-stopping.

Pepe easily received the ball from Wood. He had initially wanted to shoot a long ball straight ahead because most of the Forest players had not had time to fall back. Furthermore, a long pass was the most time-saving way when they were trying to quickly equalize the score.

However, he saw that George Wood had already got up from the ground and was waving to him.

Waving?

What did that mean?

“Give me the ball!” Unable to stand it any longer, Wood finally shouted when he saw Pepe staring blankly at him.

Though Pepe passed the football over, he was still in doubt that he had heard wrong. Since when did Wood show such strong initiative to take the ball?

Wood received Pepe’s pass, but he did not kick a long ball forward. It was largely empty in front of him. The Inter Milan players had just from shifted from defense to offense and now suddenly had to change back from offense to defense. The players had not reacted yet, so no one came up to defend against him.

At the same time, in the stands, a faint song suddenly rang out amidst the deafening hiss. It was certainly not a song to cheer for Inter Milan. It was the singing voices of two thousand Nottingham Forest fans. The singing was intermittent and always drowned out by the Inter Milan fans’ boos and roars, but not completely submerged. Like a small boat wrestling with the wind and waves, a wave would knock it into the water, and it would still emerge from underneath. The storm could toss it into the air and thwack it into the water, but it could not capsize it or make it disappear.

Martins used his speed to chase Wood. He quickly caught up with his target but was completely at a disadvantage when up against Wood! He had wanted to use a tactical foul from behind to stop Nottingham Forest’s counterattack. But he had not expected that when he struck, Wood would only stagger, whereas Martins himself completely lost his balance and fell to the ground.

The boos in the stands got even louder. The Inter Milan fans had already decided that each time one of their players was in a physical confrontation with Wood, it must be Wood’s foul if their player fell. The referee would not penalize because that cunning player’s dirty tricks were well-concealed.

Wood staggered a little, but he soon steadied the football.

At that time, he suddenly did not worry about how he was going to pass the ball because he simply did not care.

He saw the empty tracts in front, so he decided to dribble the ball forward.

Albertini saw the scene up ahead. He paused for a moment before he suddenly turned and ran forward. The Inter Milan players had closely marked the usual Forest offense players. If George suddenly inserted himself, he would be able to disrupt the opponents’ defenses. In that case, he or anyone else would have a chance. Now it was down to whether Wood could see it, think of it, and pass the ball.

Wood dribbled the ball in a straight line. Finally, someone came up to defend against him: Júlio Ricardo Cruz.

As a striker, Cruz’s defensive standard was underwhelming. George Wood just poked the football beside Cruz, used force to kick the ball, and then ramped up his speed. He just bypassed the Argentine.

Wood bypassed the player easily, but he did not have the time to gloat over his success.

Instead, Cruz remained rooted on the spot. He had not thought that Wood would be so fast. He had just made a turn and Wood, who was two meters away, had already swept past. It was not that he did not

want to react, like reaching out with his hand or extending his foot to trip him; he just could not respond in time!

Relying on his speed to bypass Cruz, George Wood was already close to Inter Milan's heavily guarded penalty area. This time, if he blindly barged in, there would probably be only one result: the ball would be cut off.

Wood was not a fool. He slowed down, but he still moved forward. As Cambiasso looked at George Wood, already close at hand, he recalled the profile of this opponent from before the game, which highlighted his defensive abilities. As to his offensive standards, it was glossed over with one remark: "When the Forest team attacks, you guys can treat it that he doesn't exist." His previous performance during this game also proved that point. If not, how did we get in our first goal? Didn't Juan rush forward to intercept this kid's ball?

If Juan can do it, why can't I?

I don't know what's the matter with this kid that he thinks he can dribble the ball and tear open our defenses. He must be out of his mind!

I'll finish you, boy.

Because he was the nearest Inter Milan player to him, Cambiasso rushed up.

Wood's dribbling looked like he had done it to a T. His basic drills were done properly, but he was too rigid.

Cambiasso knew that Wood was stout. He did not intend to slam against him like that fool, Materazzi. Stealing a ball also required some scheming. I just have to let you think that I want to intercept the ball directly to force you to make a move. Then I can look for an opportunity to cut off your clumsy dribbling.

Take a good look, kid.

Cambiasso extended his leg as if he was going to poke at the football. As long as Wood jabbed the football out in panic according to his estimation, he would immediately turn his body to wedge into position. After he intercepted the football, he would organize the counterattack. Zanetti, Martins, Adriano, and Cruz were still in front and had not returned. This was truly a great opportunity to launch a counterattack against the Forest team.

George Wood was also in a bind. He had dribbled the ball to this point in one shot. What should he do next? The front was full of people now, and there was a bald man trying to rob his ball. Wood knew that if he did not pass the football and the ball remained at his feet, then there was a good chance that it would be intercepted again. The best scenario would be if he immediately fouled after the opponent robbed the ball to delay the Inter Milan offense.

That was not the result he wanted. He hoped that the Forest team could equalize the score. Why else would he dribble the ball from the backfield and dash over thirty meters to do something that he wasn't good at?

As he was trying to figure out what to do, he saw a red figure flash ahead and disappear into the blue-black clad crowd.

“If you don’t know how to pass, then pass the ball to the teammates you see. It’s that simple.”

He did not see his teammates around, except for that red figure.

The bald opposing player was about to make a move, and another figure clad in blue and black also rushed up. They looked like they were going to double-team him and try to intercept the ball to fight back. There’s no time to consider, just do it!

Cambiasso’s toe tips were very close to the football. He did not poke directly at the football. Instead, he went around to the side of the ball. In that way, when Wood kicked the ball out, it would naturally be intercepted. But he overlooked something.

English boy, your show time is over... Huh?

Wood did indeed kick the ball aside when Cambiasso made it look like he was going to steal. But it was not a rush to thrust the ball before a breakthrough, but a direct pass! And, most importantly, the one thing that Cambiasso did not expect was that the football drilled through in between his legs! In order to successfully intercept the ball, Cambiasso spread his legs apart widely, but he did not expect to open a path for Wood instead!

But in the crowded penalty area, who did he pass the football to?

“Albertini!”

Nottingham Forest’s number 4 suddenly appeared in the middle of the defensive line, and because there was no Inter Milan player dedicated to marking him, he received George Wood’s direct pass!

The Inter Milan players had never imagined that Albertini would suddenly appear here, and much less thought that George Wood, who had never performed well in offense, could pass such a piercing shot!

Albertini extended his foot to take the ball and then simply turned. He could already see the goal very clearly. He could see the goalkeeper Júlio César’s mixed expression of alarm and astonishment plainly.

You didn’t think of this, did you, Inter Milan boys?

Nice work, George! I knew you could do it!

“Don’t let him in, block him!” Materazzi shouted as he rushed up. They were now in the penalty area. He definitely would not use a foul to stop the shot, but he believed that he would be able to obstruct Albertini’s goal if he leaned against him. He remembered very clearly the sight of Albertini holding his knee in the front field while gasping for breath. With this level of physical strength, he just had to exert a little impact, and that could cause him to miss the shot.

I can’t run anymore, and I don’t have the strength to return to defend. I’ve not been substituted because my manager and teammates trust me. Before this game, Chief said that he would let me play the entire game. I can’t end the game without showing any results.

Materazzi, when I played in San Siro, you were still a kid in some low-level team. I’m the master here!

I’m Demetrio Albertini. This is my way!

Albertini swung his leg to shoot, and Materazzi bolted to block with his leg raised high. But he missed his target because it was just a feint. The Nottingham Forest's number 4, once Inter Milan's number 4, overly lifted his leg, and then buckled down. He flashed past Materazzi, but Samuel also rushed over. Looking at his appearance, it seemed that as long as Albertini lifted his leg again, he would have the opportunity to kick the football out.

But Albertini would not give him the chance. He raised his leg to directly shoot into the goal!

The football flew between Samuel and Materazzi. It was not fast, and not very powerful, but it was sudden enough! It flew in an arc and bypassed Júlio César's hands. Then it went downwards, drilled into the goal, and hit the net.

"A terrific goal!"

"Oh my god! Nottingham Forest scores an equalizer at the last minute!"

"GOOOAL!"

"Demetrio Albertini, the Nottingham Forest captain, captures the city of Inter Milan!"

"Nottingham Forest strikes back, and they've won! Two away goals! Two!"

Twain rushed out of his seat. He repeatedly waved his fists vigorously and showed off at Inter Milan's home ground.

Albertini found it hard to suppress his inner excitement. He turned and ran towards Wood. He hugged him and then excitedly pulled him down to the ground.

"Thank you, George! Thank you!"

"Beautiful job, captain!" Eastwood sprang forward as more of his teammates leaped forward and stacked on top of one another. Even the veteran, Edwin van der Sar, came running from the goal post and jumped up while he waved his fists.

"George Wood's assist was a complete surprise. Look at the excitement of the Forest team. It's as if they have already been promoted. Two away goals are enough to make the English players leave Italy with a smile."

The boos, abuses, and roars in the Meazza stadium were gone. Only the singing voices of the two thousand English people rang out in the stadium. The storm was over, and that small boat was still floating. The sun was shining on the boat after the storm had passed.

"We are the best team in England! We are the best team in the world!"

They were such arrogant lyrics, but looking at the scene on the field now, no one would think of the word "arrogant."

They had really done it.

They had equalized the score with Inter Milan! Two away goals were worth thousands!

Mancini's face was ashen, and his lips were white from biting. He seemed to be able to foresee what situation he and his team would face in England a week later.

Oh, f**k... Son of a b**ch!

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The Nottingham Forest players' crazy celebration required the referee's intervention so that the game could continue. But with less than two minutes left, it was pointless.

After Inter Milan kicked off, it was a long shot to the front field, in hopes that the Recoba would be able to receive the ball. But the kick used too much force, and the ball flew directly out of the sidelines. They handed over the possession of the ball in vain.

What happened next was simple. Albertini returned to the backfield and used his technique and experience to keep the football firmly at the Forest team's feet. He was not in a hurry to kick forward. He slowly whiled away the remaining time.

When the referee blew the whistle at the end of the game, the Nottingham Forest players held their arms aloft and celebrated on the field while the Inter Milan players slung back to the locker room with their heads lowered. For decorum's sake, Mancini had to come up to shake hands with Twain.

"Congratulations, Mr. Twain." Despite being dissatisfied with the score, Mancini still congratulated Twain with a smile on his face.

Twain obviously knew that Mancini's smile was forced and that he would not be in the mood to smile with this outcome. Therefore, he tactfully gave a short and simple reply and the two men parted. Mancini was interviewed by several reporters in the mixed zone, and then he hurried away.

On the other hand, Twain went onto the field to celebrate the "victorious draw" with his players.

Albertini led the players to thank the English fans who had traveled from afar. George Wood was next to him.

He thought of the last goal. I really did not expect Wood to send out that kind of shot. Was I dreaming?

But regardless of the process, the outcome was still a good thing. He got the desired results, so he did not care too much about how Wood had achieved that pass.

Watching the celebrating players, Twain did not want to disturb them, so he turned and walked towards the players' tunnel.

The inside of his pocket vibrated. It was his cell phone. He put it on vibrate during games.

There were two text messages. The first one was sent by Clarice Gloria.

"The game was a success, and that last goal was perfect. Thank you for your support and cooperation these days, Mr. Twain. May you go even further in the Champions League."

Twain replied with one sentence: "I want to thank you too, Miss Gloria." Then he looked at the next message.

It was not a text message, but a multimedia message.

Appearing on the screen of Twain's cell phone was a selfie.

Shania stood in front of the camera with a happy smile and made a peace sign with her hand. Behind her was the jam-packed Meazza stadium stand. On the far end was a grandstand in a sea of red, which was the assemblage of Nottingham Forest fans.

Twain looked up and turned his eyes to the stands. The fans were already leaving. He could not find Shania in the mass of people in the stands.

But it did not matter.

The important thing was that Twain had had faith that Shania would come, and Shania had come.

Chapter 426: George and Demi's Future

Even after returning to Nottingham and resuming training, some of Wood's teammates still talked to him about his forward cut at the final minute to assist with the offense. Precisely because of how he had moved up abruptly with the ball, Albertini was able to create an opportunity to equalize the score. Even the teammates who were familiar with George were mystified by his actions. Without considering actual matches, it was extremely rare to see George Wood dribble the ball for more than 30 meters even when they were playing against each other in practice matches during usual training.

"Uh huh. Wood, could you tell us how you felt after taking off with the ball to assist with the goal, from the back?" Ribéry asked Wood, acting like a reporter during a moment's rest in training.

Wood look at him and expressionlessly said, "Not bad."

Ribéry scratched his head. "Hey, George, you're not cooperating at all. Reporters would have a headache, you know that? Didn't that playboy agent of yours teach you how to deal with the media?"

"But you're not a reporter."

The surrounding teammates laughed.

Ribéry coughed twice and muttered, "Can't tell if you're not immersed enough in the act, or overly immersed..."

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While Ribéry was joking with Wood on the training grounds, Albertini was not sitting at the sidelines and resting. Instead, he found his way into the manager's office.

"Is anything the matter, Demi?"

Tang En was making tea for himself in the office. He liked drinking tea very much, but his habits of tea-drinking were not at all like those of an Englishman. Everyone in the club knew about that.

"Boss, I would like to discuss something about Wood with you..."

Tang En set the teacup on the table. "George? What's the matter with him?"

"I think you're using him in a rather limited way," Albertini said seriously.

Tang En understood this man's personality. He was the kind of person who would say exactly what he thought. That was the reason he had clashed with every other manager he previously worked under. However, nothing like that had taken place throughout their cooperation so far. Tang En was just beginning to think something was wrong, and he had immediately come knocking.

Tang En turned back to the tea. "Would you like sugar or cream?"

"Ah? Oh, no. Thank you, Boss. But water is fine for me."

Tang En handed a glass of water to Albertini. "Now, tell me more, Demi."

"Boss, you've been using George as a midfield engineer, but I don't think he should be used that way. His position and effect shouldn't be restricted to just being an engineer, to be responsible for the defense and ending his mission there. It shouldn't be like that." Albertini said, shaking his head.

"Then, what do you suggest?"

"I want George to become a midfield player who is capable of both offense and defense. To become a midfielder like me."

"To take control of the pace of attacking and defending?"

Albertini nodded. "Where he has the edge over both Arteta and I is the fact that his stamina is better than either of ours. He can persist and play in every match in the season for the full 90 minutes without needing to be rotated. I believe stability is a prerequisite for being a core; regardless if it is the stability of his condition or the amount of time fielded. In that way, the team could also adapt to him more easily."

Tang En nodded as he listened, and noticed Albertini looking at him. He waved his hand at him, saying, "Go on."

"George has an outstanding physique. I think it is rather wasteful for him to only be a defending midfielder. If he could put his body into offense, he would surely create huge trouble for his opponents. Did you see the final goal we scored? Martins, Cruz, and Cambiasso all failed to threaten him. If we had a player like him capable of holding the ball in our front field, someone who was not afraid to lose the ball, our offense would be better paced."

Tang En pointed to Albertini. "You could do it with George. You hold the ball, he protects. Haven't we always done that?"

"If one person can achieve that, do we need two?"

Albertini's question stumped Tang En.

"If one person can do the work of two, then wouldn't the other person be relieved to do other things? Wouldn't that be equivalent to having 12 people on the field for us?"

"You could be right, Demi. But you know that George is lacking talent in attacking."

Albertini shook his head. "Perhaps that's only because he performs too well in the defensive arena and it obscured his talent the other way. Did you see his performance in the final moments of the last match?"

Tang En nodded.

"Wasn't it beautiful?"

"Yes. It was great, very beautiful."

"If he truly had no talent, how could he have discovered that pass route? You must understand that the penalty area was entirely filled with people. I also made no signal for the ball from within that crowd. I only ran diagonally towards the gap I spotted, praying that George had also seen it. He did, and passed the ball accurately, without error."

Speaking of that ball, Albertini was somewhat excited even now. However, he was not excited over scoring a goal himself; while he had not scored that many goals over the course of his professional career, scoring a goal was just not worthwhile enough for him to be that thrilled about it. What he was excited about was the fact that the ball came from George Wood's assist.

"Uh... I think it was just a wild shot, Demi. It was a coincidence."

"But, behind every such accident must surely be an inevitability. I believe that maybe he did not know I was in the penalty area. But he had surely seen that gap, otherwise, he wouldn't have passed the ball to that spot. Do you agree with that, Boss?"

Tang En nodded. "Agreed."

"Some football players would never be able to see that gap, even after playing football their whole life. But Wood could. Isn't that also a kind of talent? It's just that he expressed that talent a little later than other aspects of his genius."

As the two were discussing that point, David Kerslake walked in.

"What are you guys chatting about?"

"We're chatting about George's future," Tang En said, opening his hands.

"George's future?" Kerslake asked, confused.

"I told Boss that he has a misconception about how to use George. George shouldn't just be a midfield engineer, knowing nothing except defending."

After hearing Albertini say that, Kerslake looked up at Tang En, wanting to know his opinion.

"We were just discussing whether George has any talent in attacking. What do you think, David?" Tang En asked.

Kerslake thought about it. "When he was in the Youth Team, I always let him play the position of a defending midfielder. I also told him to guard at the back whenever they were attacking... Because, truthfully speaking, I don't see any attacking talent in him."

Albertini was unhappy with Kerslake's answer and shrugged.

"If you only tell him, 'when attacking, you should stay at the back and wait', how could you possibly discover other talents outside of his defensive capabilities?"

"Demi. Right in the beginning, George's position in the team was a forward. But he never scored a single goal. Instead, he tackled Eastwood's leg and broke it," Kerslake explained to Albertini.

The Italian nodded.

"I know about that, coach. But, George back then and the George now are different. The current George is more mature. I believe he can do better than before... But, of course, I don't think he is suitable to play as a forward. The best position for him is still a defensive midfielder, not merely an engineer who can only defend."

"You want Wood to become the true core?" Tang En asked, understanding Albertini's intention.

"Yes. Not just in spirit, but even more strategically." Albertini paused momentarily and said, "In truth, there's also another crucial reason. The other reason I hope for George to become a player like me, to become a midfielder who can both defend and attack is... I've decided to retire."

The teacup that Tang En held by his mouth stopped moving. He thought he had heard wrong.

Kerslake turned to look at the Italian sitting on the sofa.

"I'm sorry... if I didn't hear wrong, Demi, did you say you were going to retire?" Kerslake asked.

Albertini nodded. "My contract ends after this season."

"Oh, no. No... the club has already drafted a new contract for you. The conditions are no problem at all. So long as you sign off it, you can continue to play. There's no problem at all..."

Kerslake panicked. He thought Albertini was only saying that because the club had yet to announce a contract renewal with him.

"You misunderstand me, David. When I got injured before the season, I seriously pondered this issue. I feel that my body can no longer recover. If I continue like this, I will certainly continue getting injured in the matches I play. I won't be of any help to the team. I don't want to become a good-for-nothing who sits on the spectators' stand drawing a pay."

Tang En put down his teacup and pulled out his drawer. He scoured through it, looking for something.

"So, I decided not to renew my contract with the club after the end of the season. After that, I'll go back to Italy to register for the manager's course. After retirement, I plan to become a manager. This is something I've planned for since a long time ago..."

Tang En walked over, and with a wave, stopped Albertini from saying any more. He handed a document over to the Italian.

"It's still not time to say goodbye, Demi. This is the draft contract the club has prepared for you. We were just planning to contact your agent for a discussion."

Albertini flipped through the contract and returned it to Tang En. "I'm very grateful for the trust the club has in me. This is an extremely generous contract."

It truly was generous. Same as before, it was a two-year contract. It was without stipulations on the number of times fielded, goals scored, assist counts, or any other conditions that would restrict him from continuing to receive a salary. In comparison to the first contract, the salary had been raised even higher due to the improvement in the club's financial condition. At the same time, the salary standards across the team had also been raised.

"But I can't accept it."

Tang En looked at Albertini's expression. "Do you think this is charity, Demi?"

Albertini shook his head.

"Your performance is worthy of this contract. The team still needs you. At this moment, if I walked out to tell them that their team captain has decided to stay on the team, do you know how elated they would be?" Tang En said as he pointed to the windows behind him.

"Look at your last match. Your performance was stunning. You're not old yet, Demi."

Albertini cocked his head and laughed. "I'm already 34. Not old? When I was young, I could play matches like that throughout the entire season. Now, I can only occasionally play that way. That's the difference."

That news came too suddenly for Tang En. During Albertini's period of injury, Tang En had once worried about it. But at that point, Demi had appeared greatly optimistic. So, Tang En had also gradually forgotten about it. He had not expected the optimism to only be a façade; he had been planning this the whole time.

Kerslake looked at the stubborn Albertini and was at a loss for words.

But Tang En was even more stubborn than Albertini.

"No, Demi. I hope you will reconsider your retirement. Didn't you just say you hoped for George to become a midfielder like you? If you retire after this season ends, how will he ever become like you? If you must leave, please stay for another year and help us. Train George. You can do it in the matches and training. You can personally coach him about what he should do... what do you think?"

Albertini looked at Tang En. "The one who suggested this was me."

Tang En nodded.

"So, the person to resolve this also has to be me."

Tang En continued nodding.

Albertini dropped his head and thought seriously. Tang En did not hurry him, turning back to continue drinking tea.

"Really? Only for a year?" Albertini's voice sounded.

“A year. But, if you think a year isn’t long enough, and you need more time, I won’t object.” Tang En said with a laugh.

“Alright. I’ll sign. I’ll call my agent to come tomorrow. You’ve won, Boss. But this is my final contract. When the next season ends, I’ll officially retire.”

It was already a rather good result, having retained Albertini’s service for another season in the team. Tang En had nothing more to ask.

“As you wish, Demi. Okay, return to your training.”

Albertini left with Kerslake. Tang En was in no hurry to return to the training grounds. He added some hot water to his now cold tea. Then, holding the teacup, he returned to stand by the windows, looking out at the training grounds outside.

He had thought that providing Albertini with an extremely generous contract would let him feel more for Forest Team. But in the end, whether it was Atlético Madrid, Lazio, or Nottingham Forest, none of them had managed to leave a deep impression in his heart; just like having the back of a blade running through it, it would only leave a white mark that would gradually disappear with time, no matter how hard one tried. AC Milan to him, on the other hand, was like a mark from the sharp edge of a blade; it was extremely painful and bled. But after the bleeding stopped, it left a permanent scar that would stay there no matter how much time passed, to the point of death.

Tang En sighed as he watched Albertini return to the training grounds.

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The next day, Nottingham Forest held an official press conference. Evan Doughty, Tony Twain, as well as Demetrio Albertini were all in attendance.

The first piece of information Tang En announced during the press conference was the renewal of Albertini’s contract.

“... I am very delighted to announce this decision. Demi has signed a new contract with the team. Next season, our number 4 captain will remain here and fight with us.”

A round of applause sounded from where the reporters were seated.

Tang En pointed to Albertini. It was his turn to speak.

“I’m very grateful that the club was able to provide me with a good contract. I like Nottingham Forest very much. Playing for Forest for two seasons has brought me great joy and terrific memories. Everyone here treats me very well, to the point that it made me feel as if I was not a foreigner here. That’s is the main reason I decided to renew my contract for another year. Thank you to the club’s Chairman Evan Doughty, Manager Twain, and each one of my teammates. I’ve decided to stay and battle through another season with you.”

Another round of applause sounded.

“At the same time, I’ve also decided that this will be the final contract of my professional football career.”

Faced with that declaration, the reporters were clearly unprepared. All of them looked at each other blankly.

Tang En sat to one side, quietly listening to Albertini speak.

“At the end of the next season, I will officially retire and end my professional football career. This is a decision I’ve made after immense consideration. Thank you, everyone.”

After Albertini finished speaking, he stood up and shook hands with Tang En before turning to leave.

Tang En turned his head and said to the reporters, “Just as everyone has seen today, we are lucky that Demi agreed to play another year. What’s not so lucky is that he will only be playing for one more year. I have nothing else to say. Today’s press conference ends here. Thank you, everybody. Goodbye!”

Chapter 427: Famous

The day after the announcement of the contract renewal, Nottingham Forest ushered in their league tournament opponents at home.

Nottingham Forest’s current situation was very delicate.

On one hand, they were making triumphant progress in the Champions League; on the other hand, Manchester United continued to narrow the gap in points.

By the time they got to this game, the point difference between the two teams had shrunk from the highest at twelve points to the lowest at four.

Despite that, Twain still hid away half of his main force before the second Champions League game with Inter Milan. Even George Wood was seated on the substitutes’ bench.

The recent competition schedule was so intense that Twain had to consider every player’s stamina, which was also a decision made by the fitness coach.

In the end, Nottingham Forest shook hands and made peace with Aston Villa at 2:2 in the home game.

On the other side, Manchester United defeated Bolton Wanderers by 2:1 in the away game. The point difference between both teams was now at two points.

It was two points with a one-game difference.

The media in Manchester had already called out the catchphrase that they were going to overtake Nottingham Forest and return to the second place in the rankings.

Since they were being eliminated from the Champions League group stage, Manchester United’s condition became better. It was a blessing in disguise.

While Nottingham Forest and Manchester United were constantly tangled with each other, Chelsea continued to leave everyone else in the dust. At the end of the 32nd round of the league, Chelsea had already accumulated seventy-nine points. They had ranked first since the third round of the league and had never been dethroned.

Chelsea now looked like an invincible legion with outstanding players, excellent coaches, and a generous boss. This season, the English media had been discussing who could surpass Chelsea and unseat them. They came to a conclusion now; there was no hope of it happening this season.

Chelsea had accumulated 79 points, and Nottingham Forest had 71. With six rounds left in the league tournament, eight points might not be insurmountable, but the theoretical possibility of winning the title was useless to Twain. He was aware that if he wanted to win the title this season, not only must his team win consecutively for the last six rounds, but Chelsea must also lose in succession. Considering the fact that the Forest team also had to participate in the Champions League, it would be too difficult to achieve that.

Twain's goal was to go as far as possible in the Champions League while holding the second place in the league tournament. In that way, they could continue to be in the Champions League next season and make money.

Now he sensed danger in the two-point gap between them and Manchester United. For the first time in the entire league tournament, he felt that the chasers were closing in on them. With only two points, too many things could happen with only six rounds left in the league tournament.

However, what troubled Twain even more was that he had no time to worry about the relentless Manchester United at all. In his mind, the crisis of Manchester United catching up needed to be temporarily placed in second. The first thing which urgently needed to be resolved was the second leg of the Champions League quarter-finals with Inter Milan.

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The next day after the game with Aston Villa, Inter Milan's plane flew to London.

Twain had originally planned to rely on the tactic of defensive counterattacking in the away game and then using offense to eliminate Inter Milan when they returned to their home ground.

However, he had changed his mind after scoring the two away goals at the Meazza stadium.

Having lost two goals at home, Mancini must let Inter Milan choose to play offense in this game if they wanted to advance. Not to mention that surpassing those two away goals, Inter Milan must at least break the balance of the 2:2 score. Therefore, they must attack. If they still chose to play defense in this game, then Inter Milan would just be eliminated ninety minutes later.

As long as Inter Milan attacked, they should be able to find their opponents' defensive loopholes. Twain was resolved to use the defensive counterattack at their home ground and quietly lie in wait for Inter Milan.

When they went to Italy, the two thousand Nottingham fans deeply felt the Inter Milan fans' enthusiasm. Now it was their turn to show the Italian fans their more enthusiastic side.

The thunderous singing voices in the City Ground stadium, which could only accommodate twenty-seven people, made it impossible for the Italian fans to be heard.

“These English madmen...” grumbled the Italian fans. But that remark was not an exaggeration. The Nottingham Forest fans really were crazy. The Englishmen’s singing started before the game had even begun and had not stopped once.

Their voices never seemed to be hoarse and never stopped singing. In other countries’ league tournaments, so as to liven up the atmosphere and make the game look more exciting, there could be a live broadcast to play the fans’ cries to cheer the players on and to make everyone feel as though the fans were really singing and shouting in the stadium.

However, only the stadiums in England used “manual labor.” The live broadcast was only used to announce the list of appearances, goals, substitutions, and other procedural items. The atmosphere of the game completely depended on the fans’ mouths.

A qualified English football fan must carry lozenges with him when he attended a game.

With all the singing, cursing, and cheering, they seemed to be a harmonious chorus. They reacted along with the changes in the situation of the game. Those who did not understand would think they were too noisy, like static. And those people who understood thought that it was the most wonderful thing. When one thought about it, tens of thousands of people shouting one’s name at the same time, singing spontaneously written songs praising oneself, that feeling was wondrous!

Of course, for their opponents, it was a nightmare.

In this game, Inter Milan actively launched an onslaught in Nottingham Forest’s penalty area right from the start. Nottingham Forest also retreated, just like the first leg of both teams.

No matter how ugly the battle was when they were bombarded by the opponents in a siege around the goal area, they would not hear the Nottingham Forest fans’ dissatisfied boos. They continued to cheer for the team as always. As long as they made one fantastic defense, they would receive the full applause from the stands.

That was the driving force that supported the Forest team to move forward.

In the first half, the Forest team and Inter Milan tied at 0:0.

This was what Twain wanted to see.

In the second half, the teams changed sides and fought again. The Forest team did not change their tactics. They launched occasional counterattacks to threaten Inter Milan’s goal.

Inter Milan had more chances in this game than in the first round. But after the bombardment, when the smoke dissipated, Inter Milan supporters hopelessly discovered that Nottingham Forest’s goal remained intact. The score on the electronic scoreboard did not change in the slightest.

The Forest team’s defensive formations were well maintained. Once the Inter Milan players charged into the thirty-meter area, they found that there was no room to pass the ball.

As the game progressed, the more Nottingham Forest defended, the more confident they became and the more impatient Inter Milan became.

The Inter Milan players realized that if this score remained the same to the end, they would be eliminated because of the lack of away goals. They just needed one goal to change that outcome.

Inter Milan's offense came in waves. Mancini sent all the attacking players he could send to strike a goal at the last moment to save him and their fate.

"One goal! We just need one goal!" Inter Milan's captain, Javier Zanetti, urged his teammates on so that they did not give up the game.

"Defend! Don't let them get close!" Albertini shouted.

The game had entered a climactic stage. For the sake of their own victory, it could be said that both teams became almost unscrupulous as far as the rules were allowed in the situation. In fact, the main performance lay with Nottingham Forest.

In order to waste time in the game, the Forest players paid the price of three yellow cards in the last five minutes. Even Edwin van der Sar received his first yellow card in the season's Champions League because he took too long to throw the ball. Moreover, the players who received the yellow cards were spread out. Twain specifically briefed those players. He could not allow the players with existing yellow cards to deliberately get another one. The gains would not make up for the losses.

In addition to some overly obvious time-wasting in the game, there were some actions which would not result in a yellow card but objectively did cause the game time to be used up. In the last five minutes, for example, Nottingham Forest had three players fall on the field with cramps in their calves due to depleted physical strength. They were Anelka, Franck Ribéry, and Leighton Baines, who were in the forward, midfield and rear positions. When those three men held their calves in pain as they tumbled to the ground, who knew if they really had muscle cramps or were faking it?

However, the Forest players played fiercely. It would make sense that they were unable to endure physically in the last moments. If George Wood suddenly fell in pain to show that he was cramping, he would probably be booed; it would be too fake.

George Wood had excellent stamina. Whenever the Inter Milan players ran until they were exhausted and could still see the opposing number 13 in full sprint, they would feel a surge of despair from the bottom of their hearts.

The last moment of the game was the most stressful. Twain would never dare to joke and laugh with David Kerlake next to him about how they had won. His heart would not feel settled until the last second of the game.

Inter Milan had one last chance to attack. It was a corner kick!

Even their goalkeeper, Júlio César, gave up defending the goal and rushed over to huddle in the crowd to prepare for the fight for the header. There was no need to defend the goal any longer. If the ball did not get in, Inter Milan's road to this season's Champions League would end here.

After the corner kick was out, the Forest team's goal area was chaotic. The people in the stands, in the commentator's box, and technical area on the sidelines could not see clearly what had happened in front of the goal.

Did the ball get in?

Who has possession of the ball now?

Son of a b**ch, don't block my view!

Is there a foul?

What's going on down there?

Amidst the chaos, an Inter Milan player seemed to raise his arms, but his arms were quickly put down.

Materazzi's header into the goal was very powerful. Edwin van der Sar could not save it in time. However, Chimbonda, who stood next to the goal post, blocked it. Chaos immediately followed. Someone kicked the ball, and someone else kicked another person. In the complete messy situation, Júlio César discovered that the football was right in front of him!

This was his chance to be a hero!

When he swung his leg, he found that someone else was faster to kick the ball than he was, except that it was in the opposite direction.

Amidst the chaos, George Wood became keenly aware of the unmarked Júlio César, as well as the football in front of him. Therefore, he risked being awarded a penalty kick for tackling a player in the penalty area and shoveled the football before César!

When they saw the football fly out of the sidelines, all of the Nottingham Forest people heaved a sigh of relief.

At the same time, the referee blew the whistle to end the game.

"The game is over!"

Twain stood up with both his arms raised high and his fists tightly clenched. His nails dug into his flesh. His heart had almost exploded just now, it was all so thrilling. If César had scored that goal, perhaps he would not have been able to stand up from his seat.

Fortunately, it was no longer in doubt.

"Congratulations Nottingham Forest! They now advance into the Champions League semi-finals! This is a great achievement for Tony Twain's team!"

"On the other hand, I feel sorry for Inter Milan. They fought bravely in this away game. Unfortunately, luck was not on their side. Farewell, Inter Milan. Try again next season!"

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The Red Forest returns to Europe!

That was not the local Nottingham media tooting their own horn. It was the front-page headline of La Gazzetta Dello Sport in Italy. Under the headline, the image of the red Nottingham Forest players racing to celebrate contrasted sharply with the opposing blue-and-black Inter Milan players.

There was also a small photograph below the large cover photograph, which showed the same red figures. But the style of the jerseys was very old. It was a photograph of the glorious period when Nottingham Forest had won the UEFA Champions League for the first time in 1979.

With the two photographs put together, the meaning was obvious. It was to remind everyone that the team, after being almost forgotten by the world, was back.

The Italians analyzed the game from a tactical level and thought that Inter Milan's defeat to Nottingham Forest was not unfair. Twain had used the Italians' best defensive tactic to eliminate the Italian team. He made the Italians wholly concede their defeat.

Invincible Youth

That was the headline of the Spanish newspaper Diario AS. The main highlight of the article focused on the ages of the Forest players. The Spanish reporters said it was not unbelievable for the Forest team to reach the semi-finals. After all, the team was considered to be the darkest dark horse in the group stage of the Champions League. What amazed people more was that the team was so young. From the assistant manager to the manager and all the players, they were all so young. The 37-year-old Tony Twain was the youngest manager in the history of the UEFA Champions League semi-finals.

All of a sudden, Twain's name and photograph were on the front pages of the major European sports media. The UEFA Champions League Magazine even released a carefully prepared feature film to introduce an overall view of Tony Twain and the astonishing Forest team.

The name Nottingham Forest was repeatedly mentioned in various articles. Evan was so delighted he could not stop smiling. He was once again convinced that he had made the right decision in choosing Twain and letting him stay on.

Nottingham Forest's opponents in the Champions League semi-finals had already been decided. It would be an English civil war. The confrontation between the two sides had its origin in history. It began from the Nottingham Forest players who had first established this now brilliant club: Arsenal.

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When the assistant manager Pat Rice knocked on the door of the manager's office, Wenger was fiddling with his video recorder.

"You called for me, what's the matter? What are you doing, Arsène?"

"I asked you to come and study my latest video." Wenger squatted on the ground and did not lift up his head. "As you can see, I'm jiggling with this VCR. There's a little bit of a problem, but it doesn't matter."

"But there was no competition yesterday..." Rice opened his hands in puzzlement. He walked over to the snowy television screen.

"It's not a video of a game, Pat." Wenger stood up with the remote control in his hand, turned to his assistant manager, and said, "Did you watch it? The latest edition of the UEFA Champions League Magazine."

Pat Rice guessed, "You mean the edition that introduced Nottingham Forest?"

Wenger nodded. "What do you think of that episode?"

"It wasn't bad. I learned a lot of things that I didn't understand before. It was interesting. I seldom see such a meticulous feature about a football club. But that guy, Twain, doesn't act like a football manager. He acts more like a primetime soap opera star."

"That isn't something we care about. Even if he decides to release an album, it's none of our concern." Wenger was not interested in Twain's character.

"So, you called me here to..."

"I recorded that episode. I partly agree with you. The show is very detailed, as if it were a documentary. I don't think that's Tony Twain acting and showing off in front of the camera. That's just how he is." Wenger pressed the remote control in his hand and an image appeared on the screen. It was the scene where Twain was urging his players on the sidelines of the training ground. "So, I think that this episode is very valuable for our research. Especially before the Champions League semi-final game."

Chapter 428: "I"

"Uncle Tony, I saw that week's show, but can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"The next time you go on television, remember to iron your suit." Shania started laughing in delight.

Tang En, holding the phone on the other end, scratched his head.

Ever since the matter with Inter Milan, he had managed to patch things up with Shania. That probably made him even happier than eliminating Inter Milan. Just like before, they could chat on the phone or the internet. Clarice Gloria was no longer a problem. Still, Tang En still maintained contact with that beautiful woman.

During the period after the away match against Inter Milan, the English media attempted to stir up the gossip between him and Gloria. This time, Tang En completely ignored it, letting it pass. He did not appear in front of the media to explain his relationship with Gloria, and the lady in question made no further response. With time, their audience started to get bored. Or, more accurately, they found some other topic that piqued their interest. The relationship between them slowly fell out of the limelight, and everyone's interest in Tang En refocused itself on football.

Shania laughed loudly over the phone. Her peals of laughter, sounding like silver bells, were like a song with a graceful melody. Tang En liked hearing it, so he said nothing.

"No matter what, you're a huge star now. You have to be more attentive to your public image."

"It's alright, I do attend to it... I think it's already pretty good that I'm not out every day wearing just sports attire. You haven't seen how Dunn dresses. That's what I call terrible!"

Tang En could almost sense Shania rolling her eyes over the phone.

“Two men living together. That’s the end of the world. How often do you clean the place? And how often do you wash your clothes?”

Tang En suddenly felt that Shania’s tone was not exactly one that a younger person should take on when addressing their elders.

“Uh, it’s fine.”

Shania sighed. That must be some kind of chronic disease for men. There was nothing she could do, so she changed the subject. “How’s Auntie Sophia? How’s her health?”

“It’s okay. She’s still recovering and maintaining her health. Now, Dunn and I have dinner with her once every two weeks. She’s been in good spirits.”

“I’m really sorry. We couldn’t spend Christmas together last year, and this year is unknown as well. Christmas is the busiest time for me. I really hate this job!”

“Shania.”

“Alright, alright. I’m just saying. I’ll stop here, I’ve got to sleep. There’s still work tomorrow.”

“This early?” Tang En raised his wrist to look at his watch. It was only 9:03 pm.

“I need rest so that I can maintain myself better.”

Hearing Shania act maturely and say something like that made Tang En smile. “Okay. Good night, Shania. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Uncle Tony.”

After hanging up the phone, Tang En walked down from his room upstairs. Dunn was still silently watching recordings from the matches and training. Tang En stood at the staircase and took in the mess in the living room; all sorts of packaging from the recordings, clothes, and newspapers were strewn all over the floor and on the sofa.

He had always lived in that kind of environment. But, after having it pointed out by Shania, he also found it somewhat unbearable. He walked down and began cleaning up the house.

Dunn heard some sounds behind him and turned to look. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning up.”

“Now?” Dunn looked up at the wall clock.

“Of course. I have to do it when I remember it.”

Dunn saw that he was about to arrange the packaging of his recordings and hastily stood.

“I’ll take care of that.”

Tang En passed the mission of cleaning up the record packaging over to him. He himself took the dirty clothes on the sofa into the washroom and dumped them into the washing machine. When he came out, he was holding a rag to wipe the table.

“You... finished chatting with Shania?”

Seeing Tang En being so Zealous, Dunn could guess the reason behind it.

Tang En nodded.

“Is she coming?”

Tang En looked up and glanced at Dunn before shaking his head.

“No. I just thought that it was scary that we’ve been living in a pile of rubbish.”

Dunn grimaced but said nothing.

“Hey, Dunn. Shouldn’t you consider getting married more?”

Looking at Dunn, who was so casual that he was somewhat slovenly, Tang En thought that having a woman who could take care of Dunn’s living conditions, entering his heart and occupying an important position, could effectively change his character and temperament.

“But I’m not interested in women now.”

“Oh, stop... I get nervous whenever you say that.”

Dunn saw Tang En’s anxious face and suddenly broke into a smile; it lasted for a mere second before disappearing.

“The law in China states that a male can only get married when they’re above 23 years of age. According to my age, I have only just crossed the average. There are still many in their thirties who aren’t even married.”

“But your true age...”

Tang En thought about the unique situation of their identities, and said, “Ah, how weird...”

“I’m Dunn now. 24-year-old Dunn.”

Tang En coughed twice. “That’s right, that’s right. I am Tony, Tony Twain.”

“37-year-old Tony Twain. Haven’t you, as well, yet to consider your own marriage?”

Tang En glared Dunn. “There’s history behind that. And there’s something I’m really interested in... How many memories do you have of me, Dunn? I’ve only retained memories of the period after you arrived here. I know nothing further back. What about you?”

“The entirety,” Dunn answered. “Since I began understanding things up to now.”

“I thought it was an equivalent exchange...” Tang En grumbled. He never knew the memories of the previous Tony before coming to Nottingham Forest. After meeting Dunn, it was not told to him. So, Tang En figured Dunn was purposefully trying to avoid letting people know. Perhaps, that was an extremely important or beautiful period for him, so he did not wish to share it with others. But it was no matter. If Dunn did not wish to talk about it, Tang En would not force him to. It was not as if he could not live on without having those memories. He did not care about those things.

“Because I... In the past, I’ve tried very hard to forget those days. Maybe that’s why you don’t remember them.” Dunn said, as if he knew what Tang En was thinking. Tang En would not be surprised if that were the case. When they were together, there was always a sense of telepathy between them. Perhaps it was due to having exchanged their bodies and souls.

It seemed that they were bad memories...

“Then, have you forgotten?”

“...No.”

Tang En did not wish to pry into his privacy. So, even though he was greatly curious as to what kind of period it was for Dunn to so desperately try to forget, he did not continue asking.

“Do you want to know about it?” Unexpectedly, Dunn initiated the topic.

“Huh?” Tang En was surprised.

“Do you want to know about ‘your’ past?”

Tang En did not know if he should say yes or no. It was true that he very much wanted to know what had previously happened to the body of Tony Twain, but...

“But, haven’t you always been unwilling to talk about it?”

“I want to talk about it now.”

“Why, suddenly...”

“Because I think it’s unfair to you. I know everything about your past, but you don’t know mine. Do you have anything scheduled tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Uh, I’m bringing the team to London for an away match against Chelsea.”

Dunn looked at Tang En. “That’s not an easy team to deal with.”

Tang En shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Do you need any suggestions?”

Tang En shook his head. “No, but thanks. And that sort of work can wait ‘til you become a First Team manager.”

“Alright. When you return from London, I’ll bring you to look at your past.”

The sound of dripping water could be heard from the washroom.

“Ah. The laundry is done. I’ll hang them up.” Tang En tossed the rag down and turned, leaving the living room.

After bundling up the boxes from the recordings, Dunn took up the rag Tang En had tossed aside, continuing what he was doing earlier.

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After eliminating Inter Milan, Tang En could, for the time being, finally put his focus on the domestic league. Currently, Nottingham Forest only had a two-point difference from Manchester United. Getting a draw in their match would allow the opponents to be on par with them while losing would set them back. In the final stages of the League matches, Forest still had two tough battles. A home ground match welcoming Manchester United, and an away match challenging Chelsea.

Even though all top four teams of the EPL would be awarded participation rights for next season's UEFA Champions League, there was still a difference between entering the matches directly and needing to participate in the qualifiers. Leaving out the impact it would have on the team's preparation for summer to play a few additional matches, the issue of saving face was no small matter; it was incredibly embarrassing if a strong team always needed to go through the qualifiers before participating in the Champions League proper.

The match with Chelsea was going to be a hard battle. But, the good news to Tang En was that this match was not scheduled in the period between the two Champions League matches. Otherwise, he would certainly give up the Premier League match and prioritize the Champions League. However, now that he had a week's time to prepare, he made a detailed plan, formulated battle strategies, and researched his opponents thoroughly.

He was so busy that he had forgotten about his "fight" with Mourinho. That greatly disappointed the media, who were all too ready to watch the show and stir things up.

Tang En had no time to entertain the media and novelty-seeking audiences.

"Everyone, we have not been preparing a whole week only to come here and lose," Tang En said to his players before the start of the match.

In this match, Tang En took everyone by surprise; he did not implement his most commonly used tactic of buckling down on defense. It not only took the audience aback but Mourinho as well. On Chelsea's home ground, Nottingham Forest did not choose a reserved option of tight defense. Rather, they chose to clash directly against Chelsea, who had planned on slaughtering them with their offense.

It was a clash with no holds barred. It made those who had thought Tang En only capable of defense and nothing else watch dumbstruck. The match intensified to a white heat as soon as it kicked off. The pacing of the switch between offense and defense was so rapid that it left people speechless. Of course, it was also tremendously intense. In the first half alone, the main referee gave out a total of six yellow cards to the players. On average, each team gained three.

Chelsea crashed their gates first. Making use of a chance after Forest pressed forward, they counterattacked. In front of the penalty area, Drogba leaned back against Piqué, making Forest's players think he was waiting for a teammate to take over. When their attention shifted to the others, Drogba made an abrupt turn and volleyed the ball. The ball flew beautifully into the goal, shocking the commentator so much that he repeatedly screamed, "Incredible!"

However, the Forest Team quickly equalized the score after the brief bout of happiness on Chelsea's end; the goal was an own goal from Chelsea's player. Carvalho made a mistake under Eastwood's pressuring in the front field and headed Ashley Young's pass into their own goal.

Both teams entered the second half with a score of 1:1. After changing sides, the primary pacing of the clash between the two continued unchanged.

There was also no end to the goals. Both parties scored in a very orderly manner; the home team would first score and then the away team would think up a way to equalize it. Thereafter, the home team would again grab an opportunity to take the lead, with the away team soon tenaciously equalizing the score.

When the main referee blew the final whistle of the match, the score was set at 3:3. Using another defensive method, Tony Twain managed to secure his one point in the away field. Meanwhile, Mourinho continued his awkward record of failing to defeat Forest in the Premier League.

“3:3. You madman.” Mourinho said that with gnashed teeth when they shook hands after the match. Before the television lens, however, he put up a smile. He had not at all expected Tang En to go on the offensive this boldly during their away match. They had the momentum of having put everything on the line, taking Chelsea’s players by utter surprise.

“A crazy match needs two crazy managers,” Tang En answered with a smile.

Someplace away from the ears of the media, the two engaged in another short verbal battle with neither the loser nor winner defined.

In truth, this result was the worst acceptable to Tang En. However, he had no choice. It was too difficult to win against Chelsea on their home ground. Currently, Mourinho’s football team was in prime condition; they were practically unassailable.

With Manchester United in hot pursuit of Forest, Tang En urgently wanted to pull apart their point score difference. At this crucial period, however, they had to meet with Chelsea. It was already incredible that Tang En did not end up losing the match.

On Forest Team’s journey back to Nottingham Forest, Tang En finally received a piece of good news. In a match between two strong teams, Manchester United, ranking number three, drew with Liverpool, who ranked at fourth in an away match. Neither side gained anything, instead benefiting Tony Twain.

When Kerslake announced that news, a loud cheer went up on the bus. Tang En also messed around with the players for a while before falling into deep thought. He leaned towards the window, looking outside and watching the scenery whizz by him, disappearing in mere moments.

Since Manchester United had failed to win, the difference between the two remained two points. At the same time, Arsenal, who had been focusing on the Champions League for the season, put in a last-ditch effort in the final stages of the Premier League and caught up. They were only three points away from rank four, Liverpool. As the three teams—Liverpool, Arsenal, and Tottenham Hotspur—were quite a ways in their point accumulation from the top three of the League, the final participation rights of the Champions League would be given to only one of them. It could be foreseen that the final rounds of the Premier League would be extremely cruel to those three teams.

Conversely, there was little meaning in watching Manchester United and Nottingham Forest’s fight for runner-up in the Premier League. When the time came, Tony Twain could also sit in front of the television and watch as everyone fought tooth and nail for a single Champions League entry ticket.

When the League progressed to its 33rd round, Tang En looked back on the season. What allowed him to sit back and relax now was the eight-match victory streak midway through the League. That helped the team earn numerous points. When the Champions League started, the team's results immediately started becoming unstable. They had won no matches in the recent three rounds of the EPL, getting two draws and one loss. A little further before, they had only won a single match out of seven rounds. They were in the sorry state of being pursued this hot on their heels by Manchester United because of their terrible results from those seven rounds; one win, two losses, and three draws.

Despite Tang En's current fame as a manager throughout Europe, his mind remained clear.

This season happened to coincide with Wenger's focus moving from the domestic leagues to the European match scene. Adding to that a persistently low period for Manchester United, the traditionally strong teams did not manage to perform at the level of their true capabilities. Only this had allowed Forest to get to where it was. If Forest's aim was only to assure their yearly participation in the European competitions, Tang En should be quite satisfied. However, his aim was to become the champion. How could they be worthy of the championship with such a performance? If he could not resolve the instability of the team when playing in multiple leagues, next year would be the same for them...

"Tony, what are you thinking about?" David Kerslake asked him with a smile.

"Ah... nothing much. You seem to be in a good mood?"

"Manchester United didn't win, and we weren't overtaken. How could I be in a bad mood?"

Tang En laughed. "We can't always expect the opponents to perform badly... I think we should sum up our mistakes in our work this season, David."

Kerslake stopped smiling. "The season hasn't even ended."

"We need to prepare for the future."

"But I think you've already done well enough."

"David," Tang En said, looking at his assistant manager. "You have to understand, we are aspiring to become champions."

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On their return to Nottingham, after the announcement that the team was dismissed and to resume training the next afternoon, Tang En went home alone to find Dunn waiting for him. The two did not call for Landy's cab, instead taking the tram directly towards a small town, Eastwood, north-west of the city.

"The same name as one of your favorite players on the First Team," Dunn said, acting like a tour guide. The two stood outside a small church.

"Eastwood. Once upon a time, my hometown."

When Tang En saw the church, he guessed as much.

They walked directly through the front of the church to enter the graveyard at the back. They stopped at a tombstone, the name on which had already been eroded to the point of being unclear. Dunn bent over and scrutinized it before standing up, saying, "This was my father."

Chapter 429: A Hidden War

The two men stopped in front of a tombstone with a faded inscription that had been eroded by the elements. It was just an ordinary tombstone. Sweeping their gazes across it, they saw that the cemetery had countless other similar-looking tombstones quietly erected.

However, this particular one was distinctive because it lacked care. The white tombstone had turned to a dark grey and it looked decrepit.

"This is 'my' father's," Dunn said as he stood in front of the tombstone.

Twain squatted down and reached out to pick out the black spots on it. He thought they were just regular spots. He had not expected the marks to penetrate the inner layers of the tombstone. It was impossible to pick them out.

"I haven't been here since the burial."

"How long ago?"

"Ten years."

Twain looked up at Dunn. That was indeed long enough. The British people's notion of a family was not the same as that of the Chinese. Children would leave their parents once they grew up and did not often stay in touch. However, to not even visit his father's tombstone for ten years... It was too much, wasn't it?

Dunn knew what Twain thought, so he said, "He was my father only because he and my mother gave birth to me."

"You dislike your father?"

"No." Dunn shook his head. "it's more like hatred."

Twain was speechless. It looked like ten years ago, a lot of things happened that Dunn desperately wanted to forget but ultimately could not.

"Because of his drinking and smoking, they detected three types of diseases in him before his death. Each one could have killed him on its own."

"Where's your mother?"

"She ran off a long time ago. Long enough that I don't remember the exact time."

"And she never contacted you again?"

When he heard Twain's question, Dunn suddenly smiled. "She couldn't wait to cut all ties with this family, even to the extent of forgetting she ever had one. Her drunk of a husband and incompetent,

weak son were her nightmares. How could she possibly want to contact me? Maybe she's already dead and buried in a public cemetery God knows where. I think the three of us being together was a big mistake."

Twain was dumbstruck by what he heard. He had had no idea that "his own" history was so complicated that it appeared to be more miserable than George Wood's.

He stood up again.

"Now I think I know why you were so willing to become Tang En."

"I'm sorry. I took your family..." Dunn looked down.

Twain hugged him instead. "I never used to think that it was a great thing to have an ordinary nuclear family of three. I still don't think it's that great. But after knowing you, I think I was lucky to have that. You're going back to China this summer, aren't you?"

"Yes, I told them it was my 'family leave.'"

"Say hello to the parents for me... Wait, no. Don't." Twain suddenly changed his mind. "When are you leaving?"

"I'm not sure yet, but it definitely has to be after the end of the season."

Twain looked up and thought. He was thinking about Shania's plans for the summer holidays. He was not able to call the young girl now and ask about her plans for the summer, but... He guessed she would be busy. She wasn't a student anymore.

"See, Dunn. When the season ends, don't be in a hurry to go home just yet. Come with me to Germany."

"Germany? The World Cup?"

Twain nodded. "To watch the entire World Cup and see if there are any cheap bargains to be had along the way. Then I'll go back to China with you."

Dunn was somewhat surprised. "You want to go back too?"

"Well, do you remember when I met you in Chengdu? That time I tried to go back to my hometown to visit my parents. I just wanted to check in on them, because I didn't know how to explain to them why a foreigner suddenly wanted to visit them. Now the problem is solved. I'm your friend. I can enter the house openly to visit... our parents."

"Okay... That's a good idea."

"Come on, let's go back." Twain turned to leave the cemetery.

Dunn looked back at that tombstone and then turned to catch up with Twain.

"Hey, Dunn....in the past, I mean before we swapped our bodies, have you ever been in love? Have you ever liked a girl?"

"No."

“God, your life is so boring.”

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Now that Twain knew what “Tony Twain” had been like, his family background and his life, he felt the distance between him and Dunn lessen again.

He had already considered transferring Dunn to the First Team’s coaching unit next season. The chap had proven his ability in the youth team. In just two seasons, he had gone from being a coach in the youth team to being its assistant manager. Everyone on the team knew that Dunn had real ability and learning. He would not encounter any obstacles in convincing Evan at this point.

After the matter was settled in his mind, Twain put it aside for the time being and devoted his energies to preparing for the final stage of the season.

On April 15th, the Forest team ushered in Tottenham Hotspur at home. They must win this game because Manchester United was close at their heels.

The Forest players’ performance did not disappoint Twain. They beat Tottenham Hotspur by 1:0 on their home ground.

At the same time, Manchester United’s away game with Sunderland was a tie at 0:0. The gap between the two teams widened to four points.

On April 17, during the 35th round of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest won by 2:1 against Birmingham City at home. Two consecutive wins at this critical moment bought Twain some time.

Although Manchester United had won this round too, the four-point lead gave him peace of mind to prepare for the Champions League semi-finals.

At the same time, while preparing for the semi-finals against Arsenal, Twain had a strange feeling that this was not the Champions League semi-finals, but just a regular league tournament game.

Why did he feel that way? Because both teams were so familiar with each other. They were in the same league and often played against each other. Twain and Arsène Wenger also had some kind of personal relationship.

He did not feel as excited about the semi-final game against Arsenal as he was about Inter Milan. He thought maybe if his opponent were switched to Barcelona or AC Milan, he would feel more excited.

At the mention of Arsenal, Twain suddenly remembered another thing. He had not taken the matter to heart before. However, now that the two teams were going head-to-head in the Champions League semi-finals, he had to re-examine it.

He went through Arsenal’s accomplishments for the Champions League this season.

Since they had entered the top 16, Arsenal had repeatedly scored big.

During the eighth-final game with Real Madrid, Arsenal’s total score for the two rounds was 4:2.

And they scored 3:2 in total for both rounds in their quarter-final game with Juventus.

Reviewing that data, Twain frowned.

It was not the same as what he had remembered.

He remembered that Arsenal's ability to break into the UEFA Champions League finals this season was related to Wenger's decision to take a strong defensive position. After Arsenal entered the top 16, they did not concede a single goal, which enabled them to advance into the finals. This was the best proof. At the same time, while emphasizing their defense, Arsenal's offensive firepower was weakened, which was the price to pay for focusing on defense.

Twain recalled that he used to joke that Wenger had become smarter because he knew that defense was most important in the competition to win the championship.

So, what was happening here? Arsenal had not changed their usual style. Wenger still insisted on playing offense in the Champions League as always. They used swift attacks and subtle coordination to defeat Real Madrid and Juventus.

It was clear that the difference between the timeline that Twain occupied now and the timeline that he knew was widening increasingly. Arsenal did not rely on defense and yet they had advanced to the semi-finals. Their offense was still gorgeous and incisive.

Watching Arsenal's game highlights on the television screen and examining at their familiar offensive routines and styles, Twain was certain that the team was indeed Arsenal. There was no doubt about it.

To tell the truth, Twain liked Arsenal like this because they were more wide-open. As their opponent, he would have more opportunities to find his opponent's defensive weaknesses and loopholes when they were wide open, and then to make use of them. A football game was one that looked for the opponent's weaknesses and tried every means to conceal one's own weaknesses.

If Arsenal was really different from what he remembered and they still stuck with this open play in the semi-finals, then...

Another thought popped up in Twain's mind.

"Dunn."

"Hm?"

"Do you have a video of Arsenal's recent league matches?"

Dunn stood up from the floor and walked to the front of a row of bookshelves. Although they were bookshelves, they were neatly lined with videotapes and CD-ROMs.

He stood before a shelf marked with the word "Arsenal" and asked, "Which rounds?"

"Starting from the 33rd round up to the present."

Dunn took out the three videotapes that Twain needed and handed them to him.

"Thank you. Can you help me put them on?" Twain pointed to the video recorder.

When the footage of Arsenal's latest three competition rounds came onto the television screen, Twain and Dunn watched the screen intently in silence.

After watching the three games in fast-forward, Twain stared blankly for a while.

"This was totally different than what I saw in the Champions League highlights. They played defensive counterattack, defensive counterattack, defensive counterattack. I'm surprised to see Arsenal play like that."

Arsenal won all the three rounds of league tournament and the scores were all 1:0 without exception.

Arsenal did not dominate the games and played under pressure by their opponents most of the time. They also did not have the upper hand in the possession of the ball. The typical "Arsenal style" was nowhere to be seen, or it was cleverly concealed by Arsène Wenger. Henry and the other players were as efficient as ever, seizing the few chances that they had to end these three rounds in victory.

"Do you know what I think?" Dunn suddenly asked.

Twain nodded. He pointed to the screen and said, "Of course I know, this is classic Nottingham Forest."

"Wenger spends more time studying you than you spend studying him."

Twain bit his lip.

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While Wenger was still busy at his office, his assistant, Pat Rice, came in.

"It's really incredible. I thought I was back in the middle of the 1990s. I'm a little worried, Arsène."

"Rest assured, Pat." Wenger stopped his work and took off his glasses to put them on the table. "I'm not George Graham. Today's Arsenal is not the Arsenal of yesteryear."

George Graham was a Scotsman who had brought brilliant success to Arsenal and created a real "invincible army." But he was also a manager hated by countless Arsenal fans because their supporters were tired of his "1:0 doctrine" and dreary football. Although Arsenal's tradition was to be tough and never compromise, the tradition, which lasted for almost one hundred years, had reached another extreme and people began to tire of it. Their playing was ugly to watch, and they played a football match like it was a military mission.

Until this Frenchman had appeared.

"Arsène, we all like this Arsenal now."

"I like it too, Pat. But sometimes we need to make changes. Of course, it's only temporary. Pat, you know what we're up against this season. During the final stages of the league, we need to compete against Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool for the last spot in the Champions League, and at the same time, we're now in the semi-finals of the Champions League. Do you want to end up empty-handed?" Wenger opened up his hands.

"No, I don't."

“Neither do I. No one does.”

“But, Arsène, we stuck to our guns and broke into the semi-finals. I don’t think we need to start changing to another style two weeks ahead.”

“The boys are doing well,” Wenger answered, changing the subject slightly. “I’m amazed at the speed with which they adapted to the new tactics, and I’m proud of them.”

“Don’t change the subject, Arsène.”

Wenger shrugged and then pointed to the computer monitor, “Come, Pat. Take a look.”

Rice walked over and found a WORD document on the screen. In addition to a couple of long paragraphs of text, there was an image of Tony Twain.

“Oh no... You’re still studying him? Are you infatuated with him, Arsène? There are only going to be two semi-final games...” Rice covered his face.

When Wenger first came to London, he was very low-key and led a hermit-like lifestyle. He was touted as a homosexual by the English media. The impact of that incident on Wenger was that he would never accept any media interviews and completely hid his personal life.

“If it were only just two games, it certainly would not be worth putting in so much effort. But Rice, the contest between us and him will not end with just two games. I have to fully understand this person before I can understand his team. In this season and every season in the future, we’re going to keep competing. There’s a good saying from the East: if you want to defeat your opponent, you have to fully understand him first.

“He said,” Wenger pointed to the image of Twain on the monitor, “He doesn’t care which method to use, whether they play beautifully, or if their playing is ugly to watch, it doesn’t matter to him. He only cares about one thing, and that’s victory. Tell me, Pat, who comes to mind?”

Rice froze for a moment, and then said, “George, George Graham.”

“Take a look at their performance this season, especially in the Champions League, where the most typical example of them was in the quarter-finals with Inter Milan. The entire team retreated and compressed every inch of space and every second of time in their backfield, so that they were in a highly pressurized situation with their opponents. The game was suffocating and ugly, but they won.” Wenger spoke frankly and with confidence. “Twain likes to play aggressive teams the most. He prefers to lie in wait quietly, patiently searching for his opponent’s loopholes and mistakes; and then he strikes!” Wenger’s hand suddenly reached forward and startled Pat Rice.

“It will make him very happy if we launch a large-scale attack. I believe he’s quite familiar with Arsenal’s style. He must have devised a set of tactics to deal with our style, just like he did with Chelsea, Inter Milan, Manchester United, Liverpool, and Real Madrid. So, we can’t act according to his expectations. We have to surprise him.”

“But, Arsène. we’ve won three uninteresting games with this set of tactics. Do you think that Twain wouldn’t figure it out by now?”

“Then let him have a taste of what it’s like to deal with his most commonly used tactics.” Wenger shrugged.

Pat Rice stayed for a while. He had to admit that Wenger was right. Tony Twain was such a fellow. “All right, Arsène. Our ranking in this season’s league is really terrible. I hope we can make it up in another competition arena. A historical entry to the semi-finals is not enough, we also have to advance to the finals and make history by holding the championship trophy in our hands!”

Wenger smiled and said, “I just read Twain’s words to you just now and you said it made you think of George Graham, the manager who would score a victory by all means. But I have to correct you. Twain is not like Graham. He does insist on the results, but his football is not as boring as Graham’s. He assimilates a lot of things and knows when to make adaptations. I think if we want to achieve a historic breakthrough, we also need to make some adaptations and incorporate things that are advantageous to us.”

“I understand, Arsène. I’ll make a move first.”

“Goodbye, Pat.” As he watched his assistant manager leave his office, Wenger put on his glasses again and gazed at the image of Twain on the LCD monitor.

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Meanwhile, Twain was still bothered by his problem.

“Wenger, you wily old fox!”

Chapter 430: Highbury

Tang En carefully considered the problem of Arsenal’s new strategy.

Although Arsenal had not played beautifully in those three matches, they had still managed to win. Tang En did not believe it was a coincidence. In fact, he felt that Wenger must be using the Premier League to train for the Champions League. While it would be difficult for Arsenal to achieve any breakthroughs in the Premier League this season, they could set a record of breaking into the semi-finals of the Champions League for the first time in history. Wenger would certainly not give up easily on that.

It seemed certain that Wenger would begin emphasizing defense in the Champions League. However, it was outside Tang En’s expectations for Wenger to change into playing defensively in the current Champions League because of him.

Now, Tang En did not feel an iota of achievement. His head was killing him.

If Arsenal decided to play defensively... Tang En was not in the least doubtful of the team’s ability under Wenger’s management; they would surely be able to accomplish it. The crucial factor was not how the opponents were, but how they themselves should respond to it. What was Nottingham Forest going to do?

If both Arsenal and Nottingham Forest went on the defensive, the match wouldn't be able to go on. Would everyone only end up shrinking back into their penalty areas and waiting for the 90 minutes to end?

Tang En tried to recall, in detail, the original two rounds between Real Madrid and Arsenal. Although he could not remember the precise situation, he remembered the goal scored by Henry on Real Madrid's home grounds. It was a classic fast break. Arsenal did not invest very much into their attacking forces, but their efficiency was extremely high. Furthermore, Real Madrid was at a complete loss against their tight defense.

If this was how Arsenal planned to deal with Forest in the future, how should Forest respond?

Arsenal had a troop of mega stars who were able to individually decide the match's result. Tang En believed that playing defensive counterattacking would be more than simple for them. Henry was certainly one of the players who had to be closely watched, as well as Fàbregas, Robin van Persie, and so on.

As with Mourinho, Tang En had a knot in his heart.

Ever since Mourinho had joined the English Premier League, he had yet to defeat Tang En's team even once. Similarly, since Tang En had led his team to enter the EPL, he had not been able to defeat Wenger.

Was this a coincidence, or Fate's arrangement?

Their first round was to be held on April 19, and the second round a week later. Tang En did not have much time to prepare. If Arsenal was going on the defensive, he had to attack.

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In contrast to when they had played against Inter Milan, Tang En led the team, a mere day before the match, in a coach to the hotel they would be residing in during their time in London.

"This doesn't feel like going for a Champions League match," Ribéry mentioned as he chatted with his teammates on the bus. Unexpectedly, many of them agreed with him.

Everyone felt the same way. Being at such close distances and sitting on a coach to get to the competition felt no different from the usual League matches. Shouldn't the Champions League be of a higher standard, be something different?

Apparently not.

Before, after everyone's flight to Spain or Italy, seeing Bernabéu Stadium and Giuseppe Meazza Stadium on their bus rides roused their emotions; the thirst for competition and their pursuit of victory filled their hearts.

Now, when the red coach, fully seated with Forest's players, cruised past the corner of the street and saw the top of Highbury Stadium in the far distance, everyone's mood remained completely calm without any feelings.

They visited this stadium at least once every season. If they met with Arsenal in the EFL Cup or the English FA Cup, they had to come by even more often. Even in pretense, they could not muster up any intense emotions.

Tang En felt that such an emotional state was good. It meant that everyone saw the match as nothing unusual. Once their attitudes were right, the match would also no longer be difficult.

He stopped worrying.

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Beyond being a civil battle within England, there was another matter of the match that made it a highlight; this match was to be the final European match held in Arsenal's Highbury.

Countless people appeared on match day. Outside Highbury Stadium were massive crowds and bright lights that lit up the entire place. With both teams from the same nation, it was more convenient for away team fans to make the trip and watch the match live. However, more of the crowd came to commemorate the departure of the European battles from Highbury. A large number of fans wearing the nostalgic maroon version of Arsenal's jersey swarmed out from the exit of Arsenal Station. The crowds meandered forward. Numerous streams of people moved towards the same spot—Highbury Stadium—hidden amongst the European-styled villas in the residential area.

Highbury, which could seat up to 38,500 people, was devoid of empty seats today.

While the fans made their way into the stadium, both teams were in their locker rooms making their own preparations.

"There's no need for us to get used to the field. We're no stranger to it. For the past week and more, we have been practicing going on the offense; attacking through all sorts of routes and in all sorts of situations. Do you know why?" Tang En stood before the players and said, "Because I plan to attack in the away field. Arteta, you're a starter for this match."

The team looked at the Spaniard. He nodded.

Tang En drew out the midfield positions on the tactical board. It was a standard flat diamond.

"Your position needs to be slightly forward, and a bit more active."

Arteta continued nodding. "I understand, Boss."

"And... George." Tang En put a dot in the circle.

"Protect him?" Wood asked.

Tang En looked at him before nodding.

"Yes, protect Arteta. There's no difference from before. Watch out for Fàbregas." Tang En hesitated briefly and added, "Oh, if... If you have an opportunity, cut forward to assist in the offense."

Everyone in the locker room was stunned to hear that. He had almost never asked for Wood to participate in offense. Though he would give Wood all kinds of missions, they could all, to a high degree, be summarized with one word: "defense."

Wood had not expected that. His face was astonished.

“Uh... I’m saying, if there’s a chance... with the pre-requisite of securing the defense. Do you understand, George?”

Wood nodded. “Understood.”

“That’s good. You must know that an offense is built on the foundations of defense. George, and all our guys in the defensive line, you are our foundation.”

“Do you mean they’re all getting stepped on?” Eastwood loudly commented.

“What?” Tang En had not expected Eastwood to pull the rug out from under him that way. Unprepared, he was stumped with a hilarious expression on his face.

The locker room exploded into uproarious laughter.

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In comparison with the somewhat relaxed atmosphere of Forest’s locker room, everyone’s expressions in Arsenal’s locker room were stern and serious, even rather grim.

The players had already changed into their jerseys, and Wenger stood in the center among them.

“Everyone knows Highbury will be getting demolished in the next season. It’s been our home field for 93 years. This match will be the final European match she hosts. Everyone knows what I want to say, right?”

Some of the players began nodding.

“How many trophies have we held up in this very stadium? So many I can’t even count them. She has been a witness to Arsenal’s glory and victories. Today is her first time hosting the semi-finals of the Champions League. Her legend has yet to end. Lads, don’t let her leave behind any regrets!” Wenger’s pre-match talk ended there. It was not long, having ended in just five minutes. But the effect was instantaneous. The eyes of Arsenal’s players were brimming with a thirst for victory; a passionate fire was burning ferociously.

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“Okay, guys.” Tang En dipped his head to look at the watch. It was almost time. “Let’s go.”

The players stood up one after another and strode toward the doors.

As Anelka walked past Tang En, Tang En nodded to him.

“How are you feeling?”

Anelka stopped and turned to look at him. “Not bad.”

“You don’t sound too excited...”

“I’ll be excited after scoring a few goals.”

Tang En chuckled. “Go on.”

Anelka walked out with his head lowered. He knew what his manager was trying to say, or what he was worried about. Today marked his return to Highbury. He was certain that later, when the stadium broadcast announced his name, what he faced would not be cheers or applause.

But he was used to it. So Twain need not worry about that at all. In fact, Anelka thought he would probably not feel any motivation if those fans failed to jeer at him.

He had already become used to playing soccer among jeers and curses.

While Tang En's gaze was still following Anelka, Albertini stepped in front of him.

"Thank you, Boss."

"What are you thanking me for?" Tang En asked, feeling odd.

"You gave George a chance..."

Tang En laughed. "It's still early. He's got a ways to go."

"But at least you gave him a direction, a sort of hint. That's crucial."

Tang En silently assented and changed the topic.

"Hey, Demi. Why don't you just stay in England after you retire? I believe the members of the managerial team would be happy to see you join them."

Albertini shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Boss. I like Italy, and I'm Italian. I hope for my managerial career to begin in Italy."

"That's a pity." Tang En's brow furrowed. He recalled the "Calciopoli" incident in summer that year. He really did not wish for Albertini's future to be a trip into those muddy waters.

"Don't worry, Boss. I was thinking, perhaps one day in the future, we could meet again on the sidelines of a match? That's something I'm looking forward to."

Tang En recalled Keane and sighed in anguish. "Why do you all like being my opponents so much?"

"Maybe because defeating you and seeing your flustered, exasperated expression would give me a sense of accomplishment," Albertini said with a laugh. "I should go now."

Tang En waved.

The locker room was already empty beside himself. He looked around at the empty place and walked out as well.

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Players from both teams jogged out from the players' corridor, inciting the first high on the spectators' stands. When Arsenal's fans noticed that Nottingham Forest's starting line-up included French forward Anelka, they showed off their chemistry jeering together as a unit.

"This is truly unfair," The television commentator mocked. "Selling Anelka benefited Arsenal. They used half of the transfer fee to purchase Henry, while the other half was used to build the most high-tech

training facility in Arsenal's history, London Colney. Without all that money, Wenger's team may still need to head to the hotel to shower and change after training every day.

As he spoke, the stadium broadcast announced Henry's name. At that moment, the jeers were replaced by deafening cheers and applause.

"Welcome Thierry Henry, Highbury's King, Arsenal's captain!"

Wearing the captain's armband, Henry, who was walking foremost in the team, raised his hand up high and fully displayed his leadership bearing. Initially, he came to Arsenal as Anelka's successor. But he had unexpectedly surpassed Anelka, doing even better. In the club, he was the King, a representative player. Within France's National Team, he was a core figure second only to Zidane.

Meanwhile, Anelka had become a Judas, who was spurned by the people.

The world is impermanent, and fate makes a fool of all of us. It was nothing more.

Among the piercing cheers, Nicolas Anelka kept his head up high. He stepped into the stadium, which had once given him immense glory but was now left only with heartless jeers and curses; a stadium that had already become someone else's palace.

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"This is the final UEFA Champions League match in Highbury. It is also the first time in Arsenal's history that they have successfully fought their way into the semi-finals of the Champions League! On this memorable and special day, Wenger's team will certainly not allow themselves to lose, on their home ground, to Nottingham Forest. Similarly, this is also the first attempt for genius Manager, Tony Twain, at leading his team in the Champions League. In a single stroke, they managed to barge into the top four. There is still much more for them to look forward to, and they will certainly be unwilling to end their steps here. This is a civil war in English football; two historic teams have walked to this point together. Welcome to ESPN's live broadcast of the first round of UEFA Champions League semi-finals for the 05-06 season!"

Tang En walked out of the corridor to find Wenger standing in front of the home team's technical area. He walked up to him and put out his hand.

"Mr. Wenger, I won't be wishing for your team to do well."

Wenger smiled in response. "Same to you, Mr. Twain."

"Then, I'll see you after the match."

"See you after the match."

The two managers briefly greeted each other before going their separate ways. Even though both knew each other well enough personally, this was prior to a match between them. They were still enemies and could not appear too close to each other. That would negatively influence their players.

The die-hard fans on Highbury's spectators' stands continually yelled "Arsenal" and "Highbury," while those from Nottingham Forest went toe-to-toe with them from the Southern stands, shouting

Nottingham Forest's name. As much as they could, they wanted to make this match into Nottingham Forest's home match.

Tang En returned to his seat. Next to him, the managerial team and reserve players took their seats in turn. Everyone was anticipating the match that was about to begin.

UEFA Champions League Semi-finals. Tang En took a deep breath.

The referee's whistle sounded.