

Major League System

Chapter 281 - 281: Family Lunch (1)

"As I said, I don't have any official information as yet from the hospital. As soon as we hear anything, we'll make an announcement."

Seiji Hanada wrapped up what felt like his 20th phone call of the afternoon. Ever since the incident occurred, every news outlet was wanting the latest updates on how Ken was fairing.

Unfortunately, even he did not have any information to go off.

He let out a sigh and stared up into the sky. The orange hue of the setting sun against the clouds intermixed with his feeling of helplessness in that moment.

BUZZ BUZZ

"Damn it, what now?" He cursed, ready to throw his phone into the street.

However, his face changed in the next moment when he saw the message was from Chris, Ken's father.

'Ken is fine. Doctor said he made a remarkable recovery, but wants to keep him overnight.'

After reading the message, Seiji felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The instant relief after finding out that Ken was okay was enough to change his mood swiftly.

"I better tell everyone else." He muttered.

The Yokohama players had been even more shocked and depressed than he was, some even forgoing food and heading right to bed.

He made his way back into the residence and was about round everyone up. However, he had found that they were already in the dining room, waiting for the buffet to begin.

Not only this, their depressed demeanor was all but gone, replaced by jubilant expressions and merriment.

Coach Hanada could only look around in confusion. This was not the state that he had left them in not even 10 minutes ago.

'Could they have heard the news too?' He thought.

"Coach! Did you hear? Ken's perfectly fine!"

Shiro who was one of the most depressed and anxious after witnessing the scene, jumped around like a toddler who'd had too much sugar in one sitting. There were unspent tears at the corner of his eyes, showing just how happy he was at the news.

"Yeah, that guy is as tough as nails. No way would a baseball to the dome hurt him at all." Hiroki added with a beaming smile.

The rest of the team agreed with their words, putting on a 'I wasn't worried' facade.

"How did you guys find out?" Coach Hanada asked, his curiosity bubbling.

Ai who was with the other managers slowly raised her hand.

"My mom is close with Ken's mom, so she told me the news not long ago." She admitted with a smile.

She conveniently left out that she had talked to him personally, since the whole team didn't need to know such a thing. Yet it seemed the explanation was sufficient enough for the coach.

Coach Hanada smiled softly. Since the whole incident, none of them had gotten the chance to celebrate their win against Osaka. While it was technically by forfeit, they had clawed to a 2-0 lead and likely would have closed it out in the 9th innings anyway.

Especially if Ken kept his form from the first 8 innings.

He was quiet for a little bit, as if trying to find the right words.

"Alright listen up everyone." He raised his voice, getting the attention of all his players.

"Everyone played a great game out there today and I couldn't be prouder of you all." His gaze moved along the players that he'd been in charge of all this time. While some he'd only coached for 5 months, others like Makoto were over 2 years.

"But, it's not over yet... We still have one more match before we can call ourselves the National champions."

At these words, a hushed excitement fell over the entire group. This was the goal that they'd aspired to for the longest time.

"I know we're a man down, but I still believe that we have the ability to continue our momentum and secure the flag for Yokohama." Seiji said confidently.

"Damn right!"

"ORYAAAHH"

"Let's enjoy our victory for tonight and we'll worry about the finals tomorrow."

"YEAH!"

"YOKOHAMA!"

"FIGHT!"

Hearing the loud shouting, Seiji sent a silent look of apology to the staff members who had to put up with such teenage rabble. However, they merely smiled and laughed in amusement at the happy atmosphere.

So the team dug into their dinner, celebrating their victory against arguably the toughest opponent at Koshien.

The next morning, Ken was discharged from hospital around 10am.

He could have left as early as 7am, but his Doctor wanted to run a few more tests to ensure that they had missed nothing.

Even after giving the all clear for Ken to leave, Doctor Hige was still perplexed. The primary tests had shown that there was a significant chance of bleeding in the brain which could lead to clotting and intracranial pressure.

Yet only a couple hours after admittance, all of those things had seemingly disappeared.

If it wasn't for the signs of bruising on the side of Ken's head, he would have never thought there was an injury at all.

"Just remember, no physical activity for a few days and if you feel light headed or any nausea come straight back for testing." The Doctor said with a small smile.

"Ah, Doctor. Is there a certain diet I should consider to help recovery?" Yuki asked, her notepad in hand.

"Erm... Not really, just make sure he gets the recommended daily intake of calories."

Ken was doing his best to end the conversation and leave, but his mother kept on asking questions to the Doctor. She began writing furiously in the notepad and opened her mouth once more as if wanting to continue.

"Mom, the Doctor said I'm fine. Aren't Dad and Daichi in the car waiting for us?"

Yet his words fell upon deaf ears. Yuki continued to talk the Doctor about anything and everything she could think of until he began to grow red in the face.

"A-Ah, sorry Mrs. Takagi. I'm being paged."

Then without saying goodbye he quickly left the room, almost running into the wall in his haste to escape.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 282 - 282: Family Lunch (2)

"But Doctor, what temperature should the bath water be to boost recovery?" Yuki shouted after him, her features looking a little annoyed.

Ken could only let out a sigh of relief as he finally managed to drag his mother out of the hospital. Despite staying there for only a single night, he did not enjoy his stay at all.

He never liked hospitals, especially since it brought back memories of his shoulder injury in his previous life.

After getting in the car with his family, they decided to go out and get some lunch. Ken was already starving since he hadn't eaten breakfast at the hospital.

They chose a Ramen place, coincidentally the one where the Yokohama squad had celebrated their first win over Shinjuku over a week ago.

However, it might have been a mistake.

"Ken!? Oh thank god you're okay young man."

The owner of the restaurant who had asked for a photo and signature from Ken the last time saw him walk in and couldn't help but shout out in surprise. His wife who was taking the orders also overheard him and came rushing over as fast as she could.

"Ah, yeah I'm fine haha. Sorry for worrying you." He said meekly in response.

"Is this your family? Come come, we'll give you some specials on the house." The owner's wife said, ushering them inside.

Daichi, Chris and Yuki looked at each other oddly, not expecting such hospitality from a stranger. It was almost as if Ken was a celebrity which was quite weird for a High Schooler.

However, Chris didn't refuse since he believed it would be rude to refuse such service.

After sitting down, the four got comfortable.

"Do you know those guys?" Daichi asked curiously.

"Um, they asked for a photograph and signature after I threw the perfect game in the first round." He admitted, although feeling slightly embarrassed.

"Wait, is that you on the wall?" his father exclaimed, pointing to a framed photo upon the nearby wall.

Everyone took a closer look and could quickly tell that it was the case. Ken looked a little awkward in the photo with the owner's wife, so much so that his family couldn't help but laugh and giggle.

"I think you'll have to work on your poses in the future." Daichi said with a laugh.

Ken could only roll his eyes. It wasn't his fault since he wasn't expecting to receive such attention after a single match.

As his gaze moved further he caught some more framed photos, which he had obviously failed to see the last time he was here.

In the frame next to his was another photo of the owner's wife standing next to someone in a baseball uniform. He squinted his eyes, trying to make out the name which was written underneath the photo.

"Yu Tanaka..."

"EH!?"

Ken quickly stood up, his face full of shock as he suddenly recognized the name.

"What is it?" Chris asked, raising an eyebrow at his son's reaction.

"T-That's Yu Tanaka, the Ace of the Japanese National Team..." Ken pointed at the photo frame he'd been looking at.

"That's not all sonny."

The voice of the owner's wife called out from behind him, carrying their food.

She placed the bowls down and walked over to the wall, a large grin on her face.

"Every year we take a photo with the most promising players who visit our shop. We've got a lot more than just you two."

With that, she walked along the wall and introduced the players whom they'd taken photo's with over the years.

While Yuki and Daichi seemed oblivious to the names, both Ken and Chris's faces grew darker with every player she mentioned.

By the time she got to the very end of the wall, she'd named 3 Japanese players who had played in the Majors and another 5 or so who were in the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame.

"That's very impressive. You must have an eye for talent." Ken said, feeling a little overwhelmed.

"You can say that again." She said with a grin.

"Have you heard of my brother here? He's the catcher for Osaka Toin." Ken mentioned with a grin, pointing to his brother.

"Ah." Daichi felt heat rush into his face from embarrassment, however there was a hint of anticipation within his eyes. He wouldn't mind being placed on the wall next to his brother.

"Ohhhh Daichi... Never heard of him." She said plainly.

"..."

"Well, you guys enjoy your meal. Feel free to come back anytime."

With that she walked off, heading back to take some more orders.

Silence...

Ken and Chris had a serious expression on their faces, yet inwardly they were suffering. The searing pain of containing the uproarious laughter which was threatening to explode at any moment was torture in of itself.

They could only stare at the bowl of ramen in front of them, afraid that if they made eye contact with each other, the floodgates would open.

Daichi's red face heated up once more, this time almost reaching a fluorescent pink.

Out of all the people at the table, only Yuki seemed oblivious to what was going on and had already dug into her ramen.

Thankfully, the moment passed and everyone eventually dug into their food. The sound of slurping noodles followed shortly after, blending in with the atmosphere of the restaurant.

Only after 30 minutes when they were about to leave, did all chaos break loose.

Like a bunch of mad bulls, news reporters entered the restaurant and began to look around feverishly, as if they were looking for someone in particular.

Ken happened to see the figure of Miya Furuka at the forefront, wearing one of her tight fitting dresses and followed by a camera man.

They just so happened to meet gazes and Ken's face flushed red.

"Ah there he is!" She pointed, making the other reporters go into a feeding frenzy.

"W-What the hell is happening." Ken cried in shock.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 283 - 283: Ken Returns (1)

The group were stunned as a whole bunch of reporters entered the restaurant and went into a frenzy after spotting Ken. Like a group of sharks who had smelled blood, they rushed forwards and bombarded him with questions.

"Ken, is it true that you suffered brain bleeding from the pitch that hit you?"

"Is it true that you have a fractured skull?"

"What are your thoughts on the opponent pitching through an injury?"

Question after question was shouted towards him, causing his mind to go blank. While some were at least decent questions, there were others that were quite ridiculous.

Chris instantly stepped in front of the reporters, trying to shield his son. He'd had plenty of practice being in front of camera's through his work overseas.

"Hey, what are you doing? We're trying to interview Ken here."

"Come on, don't be like this. We've got jobs to do too."

Miya's eyes flashed imperceptibly as she scrutinized Chris's face. Suddenly her expression turned to one of recognition.

"Ah, that's Chris Takagi the NPB foreign adviser." She said, finally putting a name to the face.

"What? Foreign adviser?"

There was another stir within the reporters as they heard the big title associated with the name. At first they were wondering what such a big shot in the professional leagues was doing here with a High School student, yet they soon put 2 and 2 together.

"Ken's father is the NPB Foreign Adviser!?"

The journalists who could smell a scoop from a mile away suddenly went into another frenzy, furiously writing down the information.

Chris frowned, he had never liked the media, especially since they liked to embellish things or create drama out of nothing.

"We're just trying to have a meal in peace, would you mind not filming at this time?"

Since he was a reputable figure, he needed to maintain his cool, lest it reflected badly on the NPB. However, there was a glint in his eye that warned the people present to be respectful, otherwise there would be consequences.

"I'm sorry Mr. Takagi, would you mind making a statement regarding Ken's injuries and his availability for the final match tomorrow against Koryu?"

Miya retained her professional yet bubbly personality, getting straight to the heart of the matter. This was the question on everyone's mind since the incident had occurred earlier that afternoon.

The other reporters quietened down, holding out their voice recorders and awaiting the response from Chris.

Ken felt a wave of relief after his father stepped forward. He really couldn't deal with the onslaught of the media, at least right now. Even the last interview he had done with Miya was nerve wracking.

Chris let out a sigh and turned to his family briefly.

"I'll say this. Ken has been discharged from the hospital this morning under instructions to do no physical activity for a few days. This means he will not be playing in the finals tomorrow."

While it wasn't the answer they had been looking for, the reporters still accepted it.

"Can you go into more detail about the injury itself?" Miya probed. However, she quickly shrunk back when she felt an icy gaze from the woman next to Ken.

"We won't be discussing any personal medical concerns with the media at this stage. Ken is not a professional athlete and we are not required to release anything."

Chris's reply was a little curt, but it seemed to have done the trick in getting the reporters to back down.

Miya was the first to bow and thank him for his statement. It was clear that she was the most respectful person in that regard.

A couple of minutes later, the group left the restaurant and the atmosphere returned to normal. Though the other patrons seemed to be staring their way now, wondering what kind of celebrities they were.

"Thanks Dad..." Ken said after a while.

Chris sent a smile his way, yet there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. Being a professional athlete put one under a high level of scrutiny. Incidents like this would be more frequent if his son's chose to continue down this career path.

"I know you said that I won't be playing tomorrow..." Ken started, not wanting to make eye contact with his parents.

"But can I still head into the dugout and be with my team?"

Both Chris and Yuki's expression softened a little. They had originally thought that Ken would try and somehow weasel his way into playing, but thankfully he was more mature than that.

"I think you should. It'll probably give them a boost of morale if you still attended the match with them." Chris said in agreement.

Ken's expression brightened. He had worked so hard together with his teammates to make it this far, so it would have been a big blow if he wasn't there to experience the final game of Nationals together with them.

He thanked his father as his mood brightened considerably.

"Daichi will you be staying for the finals?" Ken asked.

However, Daichi shook his head. "I have to return back to school. But I'll be coming back home for the final week of Summer break."

"Awesome!"

The group chatted for a while longer in the restaurant before leaving.

Chris and Yuki dropped Daichi off at the train station and Ken at the residence. Since the two were in another part of the country together, they decided to make the most of it without their kids.

"We'll see you tomorrow after the game. Remember, no physical activity..." Yuki's tone was stern as she advised Ken.

"Yes mom." Ken nodded like a pecking chicken. He was far too scared of the consequences to disobey her at this moment, despite knowing he was fully healed.

If chilling out for a couple of days would help ease their worries, then there was no harm in doing so.

After waving goodbye to both his parents, Ken walked into the residence with his bags and headed to the room to drop them off. On his way back however, he noticed a TV which was displaying the sports news.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 284 - 284: Ken Returns (2)

"We have word that Ken Takagi has been discharged from the hospital after receiving an errant pitch to the head in yesterday's semi-final match at Koshien."

"Our sources say that although no further information was divulged about the injury, he will not be eligible to play in tomorrow's finals."

As the news reporter was talking, Ken saw the footage of him receiving the ball to the helmet at full speed. There was even a slow motion replay showing the impact, making him shudder.

It was weird to see himself on TV, more so getting dropped by a pitch to the head.

He inwardly thanked the system for providing him with the Recovery Elixir, otherwise things could have gone real bad at the end. Yet it wasn't something that he wanted to think about.

'I'll need to work on my dodging ability.' He thought inwardly.

Ken had lost focus after seeing Yatsuo fall to the ground clutching his wrist. This led to the unfortunate moment where he'd been hit in the side of the head.

"Ken?"

Shiro emerged from the room where he'd just dropped off his bags, looking like a zombie. His hair was disheveled and he had bags under his eyes, looking like he hadn't slept at all.

"KEN!"

The small guy ran forwards and launched himself at him, clinging his legs around Ken as he went for a hug. Due to his short stature, he almost looked like a child who had rendezvoused with their father after a long time.

Ken's face turned up in disgust and he was about to throw the guy off him, however that was until he heard Shiro's next words.

"I thought you were going to die..." Shiro mumbled, holding on for dear life.

Ken's features softened a little bit as he patted the teen on the head.

"Don't worry, it'll take more than that to kill me." He said laughingly.

"Oh damn, should we get you guys a room?"

Yusuke's voice called out from the side, his expression full of smiles. It wasn't just him who had arrived either. Hiroki, Yuta, Kaori, Yuko and even Ai were nearby and had spotted him.

Seeing Ai, he suddenly tried to pry the Koala-like figure who was clinging onto him so tightly, yet he failed. Before he could try once more with all his strength, he felt the floor vibrate as if it was the prelude to a stampede.

Ken turned around only to see the entire team rushing towards him, only one thing on their mind.

"Ah no wait!"

However it was too late. He was suddenly bombarded by the group, receiving hugs and slaps all over. While it would usually be a heartwarming moment, it soon devolved into chaos.

"Hey! Who punched my butt?"

"It's your damn fault for putting it in my face"

"Argh someone stepped on my toe."

Ken struggled violently within the mass of bodies. Thankfully he was tall enough that he could breathe properly, though some didn't have that luxury.

'M-Mika! Activate Limit Break... Please'

He pleaded with Mika to use one of his skills so he could break out of the entanglement.

[User cannot use this skill outside of a baseball match]

Ken cried inwardly. He could see Ai giggling next to the other managers while the whole team bombarded him, yet that didn't help his cause.

Feeling desperate and out of options, Ken latched onto the only thing he believed could save him.

'Please Mika, use anything that can help me get out.'

[Understood. Activating flatulence protocol]

'Huh? Flatulence protocol?'

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRT

Like a V-Twin motorbike engine the fart roared itself into existence, threatening to blow away those who made the mistake of being too close.

The sound was intimidating, yet it was not the most dangerous part of the attack.

"Urgh, damn it. Who farted?"

"BLERGH"

"M-Makoto! Is that another one of your protein farts?"

Suddenly, those in the vicinity began choking as they were assaulted by the deadly weapon. Soon enough, only Ken and Shiro were left at the epicenter of the detonation zone.

Ken grabbed Shiro by the collar and easily removed him from his earlier position. His face was bright red as the embarrassment of letting a huge one rip assaulted his ego.

'Ah, he's unconscious...'

Suddenly, Ken had an idea, one that he was not too proud of in that moment.

"Damn it Shiro, what the hell kind of fart was that?" He yelled before placing him on the floor gingerly.

With that, he quickly ran away and left the poor guy to be stared at by everyone on the team. Though he felt really bad at that point in time, Shiro had been the cause of this whole situation to begin with.

"Does someone need to check his underwear?"

"Man, I didn't know that guy had such an atomic weapon."

"Forget that. We need to open up some windows or something."

After a few minutes, the smell began to disperse. Ken who was feeling guilty, went over and grabbed the poor guy before taking him outside to get some fresh air.

Funnily enough, this was not the first time that he'd carried the teen's broken body. In fact, it seemed to be a trend with Shiro after any heavy workouts to be carried by him.

The other two managers had already left once the bomb dropped. Only Ai had broken into an even more uncontrollable laughter than before. She had to leave shortly after since her sides were cramping so much.

Thus Ken was welcomed back into the team after such a scary incident. Dinner that night was full of jokes and lighthearted laughter as everyone enjoyed the return of their Ace.

Shiro had recovered from the earlier incident, though he swore that he didn't remember letting out a fart. While Ken kept his mouth shut, he vowed to tell him what really happened in the future.

Though everyone seemed in good spirits, there was an undertone of determination beneath each player. Tomorrow was the finals of Koshien and they needed to play without their Ace.

There was one player who felt the pressure more than anyone, and that was Akira.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 285 - 285: Pep Talk (1)

The next day around lunch time, the Yokohama team settled into the room they were all familiar with by now. This was where they discussed tactics for their upcoming matches.

Coach Hanada was up the front as usual, going through the things to look out for in the game. He had bags under his eyes, evidence of the late night he had pulled in order to gather all of this information.

Ken hadn't seen it the last few times since he was paying attention to the content, yet now that he was not playing, his mind wandered a little.

It was not only the head Coach, the other assistant coaches also looked dead tired. Perhaps it was because of the added pressure of the finals, or the fact that Ken was not going to be playing the game, but everyone in the room carried a fierce determination.

Ken was filled with mixed emotions. He thought that he would be okay not playing today, especially since he had achieved what he wanted to by getting his father to leave his job overseas.

However, now that he was here, he felt a little selfish.

'I really hope these guys can win... They deserve it.' He thought inwardly.

Coach Hanada wrapped up his talk about the other team and finally focused on their own.

"As you all know, Ken is unable to play today which means we'll be relying on you Akira." Seiji pointed to the teen who seemed to be locked in despite not playing this Koshien tournament.

"Yuta, I'll need you to do your best behind the plate. These guys have high on base percentages so I'm expecting a lot of hits particularly later in the game."

"Yes Coach!"

"Good. The rest of the lineup will be the same with Akira slotting into the 9th batting position. Everyone after Hiroki will be moving up a spot."

The players nodded, it was easy enough to understand without the coach spelling it out.

Seiji let out a smile, having finished what he needed to say. However, he still looked like he wanted to add more.

"So far you've all played remarkably to get us through to the finals. No matter what happens today, just know that I'm proud of all the hard work that you've accomplished. Yet even more so, I'm proud that you've grown together as a team."

He looked at his players and felt a sudden surge of pride.

"However, since we're already here... Why don't we go and win it all?" The Coach said with a hearty laugh.

"YEAH!"

"ORYAHH"

"Let's win the whole damn thing."

Taking his cue, Makoto walked into the middle of the group and placed his large hand in the center. His eyes moved around his teammates in a silent order to reciprocate.

Ken was the first to get up as he moved forward and placed his hand on top of Makoto's.

Soon enough everyone joined in, including Seiji and the assistant coach's.

"YOKOHAMA!"

"FIGHT!"

The room walls reverberated from the cheer, the echoes bounding around.

The players went straight from the room and picked up their bags and equipment before heading out the door. Since the game was scheduled to start at 2pm, they wanted to get there with plenty of time to spare.

Ken was one of the last out the door, his mind rather preoccupied.

"What's the matter? Are you bummed that you can't play?"

He heard the coach's voice right behind him, startling him out of his thoughts.

"Oh haha. Yeah it sucks, but I've got faith in our team." He replied as they made their way out of the residence and into the street.

Seiji nodded. He would be lying if he said he wasn't disappointed that Ken couldn't participate in today's finals. However, he knew that he needed to prioritize Ken's health over the championship.

He wouldn't be able to forgive himself if anything happened to Ken if he allowed him to play.

Of course, even if he placed his name on the roster, he could already imagine the scene of Chris marching onto the field and causing a ruckus.

Thinking of such a thing, he couldn't help but smile.

He wouldn't expect any less of his Senpai.

"Akira has really improved since the start of the year. As long as he keeps his head cool, we have a good shot of winning." Coach Hanada added.

Ken too had noticed how hard Akira had been working. Although he hadn't been paying too much attention, the guy had also been in attendance at the team training events he was hosting.

"Yeah, let's hope he keeps a cool head."

As the two chatted, they finally arrived at the stadium around 15 minutes later. Much like the other days that they had attended, there were thousands of people outside the stadium.

Some were lining up for tickets, while others were waiting for the doors to the arena to open. Once they spotted Yokohama's team walking towards the entrance, some people began to shout.

"Good luck today Yokohama!"

"We're rooting for you"

There was only positive words thrown their way which made the team feel good about themselves. It wasn't often that High Schoolers would receive the same level of treatment as professional athletes.

For some, this was just a taste of what was to come. Yet for others, it would be something they'd never get to experience again.

Not long later they were ushered to their locker room for the final match against Koryu High. Despite not being on the roster, Ken had decided to get into his uniform as well.

Whether or not the won, he wanted to be on the field for the award ceremony after the game.

The winners would receive a gold plaque and gold medals, while the runner up would get the same but in a silver color. There was also the individual accolades that were given out after the match.

Since he'd made it to the finals, his hopes of winning one of these were high.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 286 - 286: Pep Talk (2)

Ken's mouth was salivating just thinking about the rewards that were up for grabs from the system's mission. If they won today, he would receive a SS-Grade Physicality Elixir and if he got player of the tournament it was a SS-Grade Mental Elixir up for grabs.

With those thoughts in mind, Ken moved around the locker room and checked in on every single one of the players, ensuring they were all locked in.

While the first few players like Makoto and Yuta appreciated his concern, by the time he got to Yusuke and Hiroki, they shooed him away like an annoying fly.

"Go sit on the bench or something, you're annoying me."

"Yeah, or maybe grab us some water?"

Ken's eyebrow twitched in response, feeling the sudden urge to inflict some pain on his so called friends. However, just before he acted on his impulses, he saw Akira sitting by himself in the corner.

He decided to extricate himself from Hiroki and Yusuke in order to check on him.

The two hadn't really spoken before, but Ken could instinctively tell that the guy was nervous. In all honesty he could understand and even sympathize with the guy.

Playing the finals of Koshien in your first ever match on National TV. Starting on the mound after the Ace had gone down to an injury?

The pressure must have been suffocating.

Without a word, Ken sat down beside the lean guy and looked at him dead in the face.

"Are you nervous?" He asked simply.

Of course that was a ridiculous thing to ask. It was quite obvious due to the circumstances that he would be freaking out right now.

Akira raised his head slowly before nodding.

Ken wasn't one to console his competition, however at the end of the day, this guy was his teammate and they needed him in order to win the game.

"I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't jealous of you right now." He admitted.

"We came all this way and now I have to sit out the final game of the tournament, the most important match of the year."

Akira's face darkened a little, he was sure that Ken was going to come over and try to make him feel better. But this was definitely not what he had expected.

If anything, he felt even worse after hearing those words.

"But... If there is anyone that I would trust in getting us the win, it's you Akira."

'Huh?'

Akira's eyes widened in shock, thinking that he might have misheard Ken thanks to the acoustics in the locker room or something. He had almost nothing to do with Ken since he'd joined the team, so why was he saying so much.

"I've seen your work ethic this whole time. Don't think that I don't know you stay behind after practice to continue working on your pitching." Ken said, a small smile touching the corner of his lips.

Once again Akira was speechless.

'When have I ever stayed back after practice?' He thought inwardly.

Taking his silence as permission to continue, Ken wove this brilliant story about Akira who had fallen from grace as the Ace pitcher and was on the path to redemption. The way he talked about him made Akira think he'd gotten the wrong guy.

'What the hell is this guy talking about?'

"In conclusion, your hard work has paid off. You get to pitch on the biggest stage against the toughest competition with the best teammates." Ken said, bringing his story to a close.

"Just know that you don't have to do everything by yourself. Everyone behind you has got your back okay?" He placed his hand upon Akira's shoulder and smiled widely.

"U-Um... Sure. Thanks" Akira said, feeling slightly awkward.

"Good! Now let's go kick some ass." He said with a grin before leaving.

Watching Ken's retreating figure, Akira couldn't help but let out a laugh. The made up story seemed like a fairy tale compared to what had really happened.

While he had been doing his best since Ken took over as the Ace, he was also pragmatic enough to know he was only good enough to be a relief pitcher.

All it took was for a 1st year to come and humble him in the very first month after arriving.

So instead of going for speed and flashiness like he used to, he focused on pitching to contact. Since he didn't have the body strength and speed to capitalize on brute strength, he picked the only other route that made sense.

Suddenly he felt all of the anxiety from before begin to dissipate.

Why should he stress over something that he couldn't control?

All he needed to do was pitch just like he'd been training to do this whole time.

Coach Hanada happened to witness the exchange between Ken and Akira. At one point he had considered stepping in because the latter seemed to be getting worse, however he stopped himself.

Now seeing the look on Akira's face, he knew that he made the right decision.

'Nice work Ken.' He said inwardly, giving Ken a thumbs up in his heart.

Around 30 minutes later, the coach rounded up everyone and they made their way to the field. While walking through the tunnels, they could hear the commotion upon the stands as everyone made their way towards their seats.

Despite making this walk quite a few times in the past two weeks, the atmosphere felt rather heavy today. This was likely since everyone knew this was the final match to decide the champions of this year's Koshien.

If they were to win, then they'd bring themselves and the school glory.

Feeling the pressure, the Yokohama team made their way onto the field and were greeted by the cheers of the crowd. While there was still another 20 or so minutes until the game was scheduled to start, the seats were filling rapidly.

"Alright everyone, take your things to the dugout and meet back on the field for warm ups." Coach Hanada directed, his voice needing to compete with the crowds.

The final for this year's Koshien was not far away.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 287 - 287: Final Match (1)

The final match of Koshien was underway with thousands packing the home stadium of the Hanshin Tigers. Many of the professional players had also arrived to watch the game, looking out for any new talents.

In many cases, Koshien was viewed with more fervor than the NPB. Though none of the professional players thought it was odd, as many of them had played in this very tournament before making their big break.

Koshien could be compared to March Madness in the United States, or more like the College World series despite it only consisting of High School students.

This was an indication of just how popular this tournament was for the people of Japan.

The siren sounded to begin the game with Koryu batting first. There were a few people who were surprised to see the new face on the mound, however most in attendance had seen all the news articles and reports from the days prior.

In fact, some were even shocked to learn that Ken was in the dugout and not still in hospital after taking such a hit to the head.

"Batting 1st, Left Outfield, Riku."

A tall and athletic figure approached the batters box, his dark brown hair sitting firmly above his eyebrows. Despite the serious atmosphere in the arena, his face was beaming with a smile, showing no fear as he faced Yokohama's pitcher.

"Looks like Riku's team has done well this year to get to the finals." A deep voice commented. He was dressed in a business suit despite the summer afternoon sun bearing down.

"Yes, though I heard they had an easier run than Yokohama." Another voice spoke up.

Since the two were seated in the stands behind home plate, it showed just what sort of connections they had. A person had to know the right people to secure those seats.

"I'm not sure that it would have mattered either way though. Riku's been a mainstay on the National team since his first year of High School." The guy in the business suit commented.

DONG

"Heh, see what I mean?"

However, the ball which looked like it was going to skip between 3rd base and the short stop was suddenly secured by a dive from a muscular fielder. Instead of standing up and making the throw to 1st himself, he scooped it up to the short stop.

Naoki collected the ball and sent a bullet throw towards the outstretched glove of Hiroki.

"Out!"

"Ah..."

The two men who had been commenting on the player's skill earlier suddenly felt a little odd. They hadn't expected the National team player to be out on the very first swing.

However, Riku who had just gotten out didn't seem to be effected. His wide smile was still plastered onto his face, yet his eyes shifted imperceptibly as he stared at Naoki.

The next batter arrived for Koryu, only to suffer from the tight fielding of Yokohama.

Despite looking easy enough to hit, the pitches still felt odd upon making contact. It was like the ball wouldn't listen to where they wanted to hit it.

The 3rd batter also fell prey to the odd pitching style, getting caught directly in the outfield.

As the Yokohama team went off the field, those in attendance felt that they were a completely different team without their Ace on the field.

If having Ken pitch was like using a python to constrict and suffocate the other team, then Akira was like a fisherman, laying well laid out traps on the field and luring in the opponents.

While both seemed to be effective for now, Akira's seemed to draw power from the fielders whereas Ken's style focused on his own strengths.

Looking at it from an outsider perspective, it seemed like Akira had chosen the correct path to fulfill the role of a relief pitcher.

"Batting 1st, Left Outfield, Tatsuya"

Tatsuya walked up to the batters box, his face filled with determination. As he heard the calls from the crowd and the noise of the band, he filtered them out.

It could be seen just how much experience he'd received while playing at Koshien, something that everyone on Yokohama had also been through.

DONG

He flew like the wind after sending the first pitch over the head of the short stop. Not having expected to be hit in such a way right from the start, the outfielder was a bit slow to react, allowing him to get all the way to 2nd in time.

"Nice hit Tatsuya!"

"ORYAAAHH!"

Tatsuya was recovering his breath, but he still sent a thumbs up to the dugout.

"Batting 2nd, Center Outfield, Jun."

His twin stepped up to bat next, his reserved attitude showing even more with all the eyes of the arena on him. However, like all the others, he was used to it by now.

DONG

Tatsuya had already shot off from 2nd base as the ball was being thrown, therefore he was safe before the right outfielder had collected the ball and sent it back infield.

Just like that, Yokohama had a great advantage in the very first innings. With a runner on 1st and 3rd base, they were in prime position with the clean up batters on their way.

"Batting 3rd, 3rd base, Makoto"

The muscular figure of Makoto stepped into the batters box, his size intimidating to those around him. He had the perfect physique for Rugby, yet for some reason he'd chosen baseball instead.

"Let's send you all home." He muttered with a grin.

The last match against Osaka had been a little stifling. Although he'd managed to get on base, it was only after getting hit by a pitch which annoyed him.

This time however, would be different.

The pitch came flying towards him, causing his eyes to bulge.

Thud

The ball landed right on his muscular thigh, bouncing into the foul zone near 3rd base.

"Hit by pitch, take your base."

Makoto stared daggers at the pitcher who had dared to take away his opportunity to redeem himself. He could do nothing but place his bat on the ground and jog towards first base, his eyes still honed in on the pitcher.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 288 - 288: Final Match (2)

Tatsuya who was on 3rd base couldn't help but laugh out loud, feeling his sides hurt.

"N-Nice one Captain!" He called out with a thumbs up between laughs.

Jun who had to move up to 2nd base also let out a chuckle seeing Makoto's reaction. He could guess exactly what was going through the guys head after what had happened last game.

It wasn't just the two on the field, the dugout was full of laughter from the ordeal.

Ken however, was focused on Hiroki who was next up to bat. They couldn't have asked for a better set up in the first innings. If he hit big then they were guaranteed at least 1 run.

"Batting 4th, 1st base, Hiroki"

As the beautiful voice descended upon the arena, the calm and collected Hiroki stepped up to the plate. His eyes were sharp as he surveyed the pitcher in front of him.

There was a cool confidence instilled in his body as he waited for the pitch to come. It was as if he knew for a fact that he would hit the next ball, no matter what it was.

And he was not wrong.

The fastball left the fingertips of the pitcher and took an inside course, looking to jam Hiroki and force a bad shot. However, the pure technique he used caused the bat to accelerate at the last moment and hit it dead center.

DOOOONG

An almighty sound assaulted everyone's ears as the ball was struck heavily with the center of the barrel. The vibration of the metal bat echoed out into the arena, accompanied by loud cheers.

"W-What a hit!"

"YOKOHAMA!"

The crowd followed the ball all the way past the left outfielder and into the stands where a lucky spectator was able to catch it cleanly with his glove.

"ORYAAAAH!"

"Grand slam!"

Hiroki had managed to smash the inside ball that was meant to jam him, sending it into the crowd for a 4-run home run, or better known as a grand slam.

Tatsuya, Jun and Makoto made their way around the bases before stepping onto home plate. There they awaited Hiroki who was making his own victory lap.

The moment he stepped on the plate, they assaulted him with slaps to his helmet, their ritual every time he hit a home run.

Yokohama's bench was ecstatic as the home run hero returned to them, eliciting a cheer.

The Koryu players on the field seemed to be at a loss. Their pitcher was someone who took a while to warm up, so this was generally the most dangerous time of the match for them.

Yokohama was the only team who had punished them so thoroughly at the beginning of the game.

However, after this, the pitcher seemed to switch gears. He did not let another person on base for the next 6 innings.

Akira on the other hand, was not able to keep a clean sheet.

By the end of the 7th innings, he had given up 3 runs and multiple base hits, Yet this was no just a fault of his own. In fact, Akira had been pitching the best game of his career so far.

The problem with pitching to contact was that it relied heavily on the fielders. So while this was good in short spurts, sometimes there would be oversights or mistakes that could lead to some runs incidentally.

Since they were still High School kids, it was understandable for a few mistakes here and there.

Thankfully though, at the top of the 7th, Yokohama once again broke through the defenses of Koryu.

Tatsuya had managed to get onto first base once more, only for Jun to be caught in the infield after getting jammed. Makoto who was next up to bat left nothing to chance as he sent a compact swing towards an inside ball and sent it flying towards the outfield.

The center outfielder barely missed the catch near the fence, allowing Tatsuya to run all the way to home plate while Makoto stood securely on 2nd base.

This brought the score to 5-3 in favor of Yokohama, taking them one step closer to winning the championship.

Hiroki came up to bat next, his determination evident. They were in another good position to score some runs which could be their last opportunity this game.

'Akira is starting to look fatigued already. We need to strengthen our lead.' He thought inwardly, sending a glance to the dugout.

He could see Ken was in Akira's ear, likely giving him a pep talk or some pointers. Either way, the guy looked exhausted.

Hiroki shook his head and turned his attention back to the pitcher.

Makoto was on 2nd base with a gaze that was telling him to hit big.

'Don't need to tell me twice Captain.' He said inwardly, gripping his bat tightly.

The ball came roaring to life as it veered away from him. It was a cutter, yet it lacked the same impact as the ones that he had faced 2 days ago.

WHOOOOSH

DONG!

The bat connected squarely with the ball, sending it thundering towards the outfield at high speeds. After checking the angle, a wide grin appeared on Hiroki's face as he proceeded to drop his bat and begin his jog.

"WHOA!"

"Nice work Hiroki!"

"ORYAAHHH!"

Makoto screamed his regular catchphrase as he saw the ball sail over the fence for another home run. His body was filled with jubilation as he was once again sent home by Hiroki.

Once the two completed their lap and returned to the dugout, they were given the royal treatment. Hiroki once again received the ritualistic slaps on the helmet as congratulations.

Coach Hanada smiled with pride as he watched his players succeed on the field. Now that the score was 7-3, he could see that Koryu had begun to lose heart.

The last two innings saw Akira give up another 2 runs, however at the top of the 9th with 2 outs and 1 on base, Koryu were on their last legs.

With the game at 7-5, they needed to either get a home run or the game would end in Yokohama's favor.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 289 - 289: Award Ceremony (1)

Akira was dead tired as he took his position on the mound.

He did his best to catch his breath as he rolled the rosin bag around in his hand and looked at the jumbo screen behind him. The count was currently 2-2 with 2 outs and 1 runner on base.

Unlike Ken, he was not able to limit his pitches by blowing through the strike zone. He needed to use every trick in the book in order to get outs, sometimes by wasting pitches.

He had already thrown 125 pitches by now and he was feeling his muscles fatigue, particularly in his thin legs.

However, the only thing driving him forward at this moment was his sheer willpower.

'I'm a member of this team too.' He thought inwardly, taking in deep breaths of air.

'I want to win...'

'Win with everyone.'

"You can do it Akira!"

"Just one more out!"

Seeing his current state, both the fielders and his teammates remaining in the dugout sent words of encouragement his way. They were so close to victory that they could almost taste it.

Akira felt the weight of his teammates hopes upon him, yet they did not drag him down. If anything they elevated him, filling him with energy that he thought was already spent.

His eyes narrowed as he entered his wind up and stepped through, sending his arm out like a whip and forcing the ball towards Yuta's open glove.

This ball was the fastest he'd thrown all afternoon, despite pitching more than 120 balls that day.

The batter had not expected such a change in pace and was caught lacking.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"Game, Yokohama."

DING

"ALRIGHT!!!!"

"ORYAHAHAHA!"

The Yokohama players stormed the mound on the way to congratulate Akira on his pitching performance. Even the dugout was emptied as everyone made their way onto the field in the excitement.

Coach Hanada lost his composure and began to jump up and down in jubilation. The assistant coach was also drawn into the celebration, casting a happy atmosphere upon the field.

The crowd roared and cheered, congratulating Yokohama for their well fought victory.

"YOKO HAMA"

"YOKO HAMA"

"YOKO HAMA"

Ken too had joined the field, sprinting towards the middle of the pack along with Shiro. Unlike yesterday's dogpile, everyone was too busy celebrating to worry about their feet getting stepped on.

Not long after, the coach came over and broke up the celebration. He didn't want to appear rude in front of the losing squad and all of the fans.

Soon after, they lined up for the ceremonial bow amidst the cheers of the crowd.

"Thank you for the game!"

The Koryu team were emotional, yet they still held their heads up high. Making it to the finals of Koshien was still an amazing achievement, even if they didn't win in the end.

While the award ceremony was being set up, both teams were given black bags in order to collect some dirt from the ground. This was a common tradition for teams who were fortunate enough to attend Koshien.

The bag of dirt would become a memento that they would keep for their whole lives.

Of course the dirt was constantly replaced by the groundskeepers.

Ken received his bag and kept it. Even though he also had a bag in his previous life, it did not mean as much as this one right here. He was knocked out in the first round against Shinjuku back then after all.

After around 10 minutes, the stand was set up just behind home plate, facing the field. The two teams were directed to line up in front, about 20 meters away.

The players stood side by side as they waited for the award ceremony to begin.

Before long, the band began to play a tune as some people walked out from the tunnels to the side.

"Please welcome, the chairman of the High School Baseball Federation, Koji Kubota"

A person that Ken recognized from the opening ceremony walked up onto the podium after being introduced. He was wearing a suit and looked to be in his mid to late 50's.

'If his speech is anything like the one at the opening ceremony, we're gonna be here for a while.' He thought inwardly, letting out a small sigh.

However, he was pleasantly surprised as the man only said a few brief words before they were called to action.

"Congratulations Yokohama High for winning the 97th Annual Koshien Summer Tournament. Please come forward and receive the flag."

Makoto stood to attention before walking the 20 meters towards the podium. He bowed slightly before receiving the same flagpole they'd used for the opening ceremony.

However, instead of having the flag of 1 school, it contained all of the flags from the 49 teams who had competed in this years Koshien.

He walked back towards the team and stood beside Ken on the end. Though his face was serious, one could see glee within his eyes.

"Please come forward and receive the winners plaque."

This time, Ken received a nudge from Makoto as if he was telling him to go up.

'What!? Me?'

While Ken was in baseball uniform, he hadn't played the final game. He wasn't expecting to come forward and receive any awards on behalf of the team.

Only after receiving a glare from Makoto did he finally make his way up.

He bowed slightly before receiving an item. It was a wooden lacquered board around 70cm tall and 50cm wide and had a golden colored plaque which depicted a baseball player and the number 97.

The words beneath detailed the year and the competition.

It was surprisingly bulky which made for an awkward walk back to the line up. However, with Ken's tall frame it was easier than it would have been for someone like Shiro.

Once he returned to the group, the man on the podium spoke up once more.

"Congratulations to the runner-up, Koryu High School. Please come and collect your plaque"

A tall and athletic player from the opposing squad walked up and received their silver plaque before returning. It seemed that most of their players had adjusted their emotions after the loss.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 290 - 290: Award Ceremony (2)

The next part of the award ceremony was the receiving of the medals. The same girls that were part of the opening ceremony wearing blue dresses stepped forward and placed the medals over their heads one by one.

While Yokohama received gold medals, the Koryu team received silver ones.

Everyone took their hats off to receive the medals, finally completing the first part of the ceremony.

"We would also like to draw attention to the truly spectacular players who had stood out during this year's competition." The Chairman said, his gaze looking down upon the players.

"Our Top Batter award goes to... Hiroki Kondo from Yokohama High. Please come forward and collect your award."

Hiroki who was standing next to Ken suddenly stiffened, surprise etched onto his features. Ken couldn't help but smile as he gave the teen a nudge forward.

The boy then walked forward awkwardly, before bowing and receiving a small trophy with a player swinging his bat atop it. He also received a small certificate before returning back to the lineup with a grin on his face.

Ken couldn't help but feel happy for the guy. After suffering with a capped potential for so long, he was able to break through and receive recognition for his hard work.

Of course Ken wasn't jealous at all. He was a pitcher before he was a batter...

Plus there was another award that would net him the most benefits.

He subconsciously licked his lips as he thought about the reward from the system.

"Ahem."

The Chairman cleared his throat, prompting the crowd to quieten down a little before he read out the next award.

"Our Top Pitcher award goes to... Ken Takagi from Yokohama High also. Please come forward to receive your award."

Ken was happy, but he wasn't too surprised for receiving such an award. If they didn't give this award to the first pitcher to throw a perfect game in Koshien history, then who else would deserve it?

He passed the plaque onto Yusuke who was a little further along the line before walking up and receiving his small trophy. This one depicted a player on the mound instead of a batter like Hiroki's.

After returning to the lineup, Ken waited in anticipation for the next awards before he was interrupted.

DING

Ken's face turned to one of joy as he heard the system notification ring in his mind. This could only mean one thing...

"Our Most Valuable Player award goes to... Ken Takagi once again."

A loud cheer burst out from the crowd before a rain of applause came down to the field. Both Chris and Yuki were grinning from ear to ear as their son walked up and received his second individual award.

However, their happiness couldn't be compared to Ken who almost skipped his way towards the podium to receive his award. The only thing on his mind at that moment were the juicy rewards waiting for him from the system.

After the awards were given out, everyone stood for the national anthem as the Japanese flag was lowered from atop the stadium. This was the final part of the ceremony and brought everything to a close.

Once they were given the all clear, they were led into the tunnels by the girls in the blue dresses towards their locker rooms.

The Coach closed the door behind him before looking at his players with a wide grin.

"We did it!"

"ORYAAHHH!"

The team broke into another round of celebration behind closed doors. Now that they weren't in the eyes of the public or in the middle of a ceremony, their accomplishment finally began to sink in.

The plaque which Ken had given to Yusuke earlier was already making the rounds between the players who were appreciating it greatly.

Seiji Hanada felt his heart was full in that moment. He couldn't believe that the players he'd been in charge of had managed to take themselves all the way to a Championship. There truly was no better feeling than this.

"Everyone, I want to say a few words."

Almost instantly the players turned to the coach and gave him their full attention, showing just how much they respected him.

Seeing this, Seiji's smile grew wider. If it weren't for his shabby hair and stubble-like beard, he might actually look handsome.

"I'm so proud of each and every one of you in here today. We worked hard all year, sacrificing our blood sweat and tears in order to pull this off."

He paused for a moment, taking the time to look around at everybody in the room.

"Whether you played 6 games, 1 game or even cheered in the dugout, you all deserve a piece of this championship. Everyone made their own contributions to our success, so all I can say now is rest well, you all deserve it."

The players let out a cheer, their joy boiling over.

"Does anyone want to say some words? Captain?" Seiji looked over at the muscular captain who had a satisfied smile on his face.

He appeared to be calmer than usual, lacking the typical intensity that he always had. Nevertheless, he got up and stood in front of the players.

"I... I wanted to say thank you to you all. My time at Yokohama has been the best time of my life and I wouldn't want to share it with anyone else." Makoto lowered his head, his emotions barely in check.

The mood turned a little somber in that moment. Although it was left unsaid, everyone knew that the 3rd years would retire after the Summer Tournament.

"Coach..."

Makoto turned to the side and addressed the coach, his eyes moist. In one swift movement he bowed at 90 degrees, showing immense respect for the man who had mentored him for the past almost 3 years.

"T-Thank you for everything!"

His voice broke at the beginning, but everyone could feel his heartfelt words.

It wasn't just him, the remaining 3rd years like Yuta, Yuki and Naoki all walked up and stood beside him, bowing towards the coach.

"Thank you for everything!"

Seiji felt a lump form in his throat as he looked at the 3rd years.

'Damn it! I said I wouldn't cry in front of the players...'

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 291 - 291: Returning Home (1)

Ken met up with his parents after the game who showered him with praise for everything. They both looked proud as punch, leaving him feeling a little embarrassed by the end of it all.

They had scheduled to return the rental car today and were going to head back home on the bullet train tonight. Ken was given the option to leave with them or go with the rest of the team tomorrow.

It wasn't a difficult choice for him in the end. There's no way he would miss out on celebrating with the rest of the team, not after such a big win.

Of course he might not get the chance to collect all of the system rewards just yet, but there it wasn't like they were going anywhere.

"We'll see you at home tomorrow then Kenny. Have fun with your teammates, but make sure you get proper rest... And no physical activities."

Yuki who was still reluctant to let Ken leave after the hospital incident, made sure to give out instructions for him. There was an obvious care behind her words that made it difficult to get upset at her nagging.

"I will mom, I promise." Ken said with a grin.

With that, he bade farewell to his parents and rejoined his teammates as they headed back to the residence to get changed. While there were showers in the locker rooms at the stadium, everyone felt more comfortable doing so at their residence.

By the time they had all showered and got changed, it was almost time for dinner.

The coach had ordered around 20 pizzas as a celebratory meal, something that the teens had not expected.

Seiji had gone all out, sacrificing his savings in order to celebrate properly with the team. It just showed how much he was invested and cared about the players.

Thus, the team gorged on their food and savored the sweet taste of victory that only hard work and dedication could achieve.

It wasn't until around 11pm that their energy began to decline and one by one they retreated back into the rooms to sleep.

Yuta and Yuko had disappeared much earlier in the night, their whereabouts unknown to anyone. However, thanks to the jovial atmosphere, no one seemed to notice their disappearance.

Surprisingly it was the usual group of Hiroki, Yusuke, Ken, Ai and Kaori that were left standing this late into the night. They had all grown as friends since the beginning of this trip to Osaka.

Shiro was asleep at the table, like a child who was out with their parents a little too late.

Ken could notice Kaori stealing glances at his sleeping face every now and then, causing him to smile briefly. Now that he looked at Shiro, he did look kind of peaceful while asleep.

"Well, we should probably get some sleep." Hiroki announced after letting out a yawn and stretching slightly.

"I'll take Shiro back to the room." Yusuke said, approaching the small figure and picking him up easily.

Now that it was just the 3 of them left, Kaori cleared her throat, sensing her cue to leave.

"Ahem. I am also tired... Goodbye."

With that, she slunk out of the room, leaving Ai and Ken as the only ones still awake.

Ken felt slightly awkward having been left alone with Ai. For some reason he was terrible when it came to making conversation in a one on one setting with the opposite sex.

Perhaps this was a common thing for teenagers, or perhaps he was just an awkward individual. Either way the result was the same.

He stared at the table for a while, his mind racing on what to say next.

Yet it was Ai who said something first.

"You looked really happy on the mound back then..." She stated softly.

'Hmm?' Ken turned his gaze to Ai in question. He had been on the mound a lot of times these past 2 weeks, which time was she referring to?

As if reading the question directly from his mind, she continued.

"Just before you pitched to your brother, it was like all of your worries had disappeared."

Ken silently took in her words, his mind going back to that point in time. He remembered it vividly, the shedding of his old life and finally accepting that this version of him was who he truly was.

After a few moments of silence he nodded. "Yeah, I think I just figured out some things you know?"

He didn't know how to explain it to her, though he wanted to. She would probably think he was crazy if he told her that he had already died once and returned to the past.

Ai nodded, seemingly satisfied with his answer.

There was another long silence, but this time Ken didn't feel the urge to fill it. He could see that Ai was still thinking deeply about something, so he didn't want to interrupt her.

After what felt like an age, she spoke up.

"I... I want to chase my dreams too." She said. Her words were soft, but he could feel an underlying determination within them.

However, she seemed a little uncertain, or perhaps unwilling would be the better description.

"That's good right? It's better to chase your dreams than to live with regret." He replied, wearing a soft smile.

Ken wanted to encourage her. He didn't like seeing the unsure expression on her pretty face, he liked the confident and assertive Ai that he had a crush on all this time.

Ai paused at his words, her expression changing a few times. Finally it seemed that she had made her mind up, though her eyes began to water slightly.

"Thank you Ken." She said, her soft lips turning up into a radiant smile.

Ken was almost blinded by her beauty, however there was something a little off. Her smile should have shown happiness, yet her eyes spoke of a deeper emotion.

Was it sadness?

"Well, I'm feeling a little tired so I'll head to bed first. Congratulations on winning player of the tournament." Ai said before swiftly leaving.

Ken was dumbfounded as he watched her retreating figure.

'Why did she look so sad?'

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 292 - 292: Returning Home (2)

The next day the group of students boarded the train back to Yokohama. When it came time for everyone to go their separate ways, there was a bit of reluctance.

After all, they'd just spent the past 2 weeks together and had accomplished something great. So even though they would see each other once school resumed in another week, the goodbyes made it seem as though that wasn't the case.

Ken and Ai returned home, going their separate ways at the intersection.

Despite their conversation last night, Ai had returned to normal. Being a man, he could not understand the intricacies of his female counterpart, so he decided to ignore it completely.

'She'll tell me if there's anything wrong.' He said inwardly.

Soon enough he arrived home to see his Mother and Father already waiting for him.

It felt kind of odd to return home after being away for 2 weeks, though there was a certain charm to it. Ken hadn't realized just how tired he was until he walked into his own house.

After yawning a few times at the table, Yuki flashed him a glare.

"I thought I told you to get some good rest last night..."

Ken felt the hairs on his neck stand up in the next moment.

"A-Ah, I just had trouble sleeping I swear."

Chris laughed at the response and calmed down his worried wife.

"Honey, let's not blame Ken for being tired. He's played 5 games in the past 2 weeks, the fatigue was bound to catch up to him eventually."

His response seemed logical enough to calm her down, giving Ken a way out.

"How about you go have a nap for a while. Daichi won't be home till later today anyway." Chris said, sending a wink his way.

Ken sent a thankful glance his father's way and stood up from the table, excusing himself. In all honesty he was rather tired, likely from the mental fatigue he'd experienced.

More than that, he really wanted to accept the rewards that had been burning a hole in his pocket this whole time.

"I'm gonna go have a nap for a bit then." He said, doing his best to walk slowly up the stairs.

If he had it his way, Ken would have run up the stairs in a flurry before slamming his door shut. However, he was a patient man.

Yet the moment he finally arrived in his room, he couldn't even wait to lie down before opening the system window.

SYSTEM LEVEL: 4 (10880/100,000 Major points to level up)

NAME: Ken Takagi

AGE: 16

TALENT ASSESSMENT: S

POTENTIAL: SS+

MAJOR POINTS: 10880

USER MENU:

-STATS

-MISSIONS

-SYSTEM SHOP

-LOTTERY (Locked)

-IMAGE TRAINING

-IDENTIFY

-TRAINING PLAN

-MENTOR

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: S+

>Pitching: SS-

>Fielding: B-

>Game Intelligence: B-

>Mental: S

>Skills: 20

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. S+)

Balance and Coordination: S+

Agility: S+

Strength: S+

Stamina: S+

Without a word, he laid down on the bed and brought up the thing he wanted to see the most, the mission.

MISSION: Summer National Tournament

*Task 1: Strike out players 50 times [76/50] [Completed]

*Task 2: Hit 6 home runs [6/6] [Completed]

*Task 3: Make the Quarter Finals of Koshien [Completed]

*Task 4: Make the Semi Finals of Koshien [Completed]

*Task 5: Make the Finals of Koshien [Completed]

*Task 6: Win the National Tournament [Completed]

*Task 7: Win player of the Tournament [Completed]

REWARDS:

- >Task 1 rewards - 3000 Major points [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 2 rewards - 3000 Major points [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 3 rewards - 7000 Major points [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 4 rewards - 7000 Major points + Gold Lottery ticket [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 5 rewards - 10,000 Major points + Gold Lottery ticket [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 6 rewards - 15,000 Major points + SS-Grade Physicality Elixir [Claim Reward]
 - >Task 7 rewards - 15,000 Major points + SS-Grade Mental Elixir [Claim Reward]
- Hidden Task: Throw a shutout - Platinum ticket [Claimed]

Seeing all of his tasks with the completed sign, Ken felt his body shiver in the feeling of success. This was the first time he'd completed all the tasks in this kind of mission, making him feel an even bigger sense of accomplishment.

'Come to me rewards, be mine.'

[Received:

60,000 Major Points

2 x Gold Lottery tickets

1 x SS-Grade Physicality Elixir

1 x SS-Grade Mental Elixir]

Ken felt the rush of having gained an immense amount of wealth all at once. It was as if he had won the lottery, filling him with pure joy.

'Which Elixir should I take first?' He thought excitedly.

However, when he remembered the pain that he was going to experience after taking either one of them, he gulped.

Yet he had already come this far, there was no way that he would back down after working so hard to secure these. What was a little bit of pain when it compared to the immense benefits he would receive?

After a little bit of a mental back and forth, Ken decided to go with the Mental Elixir first.

He had already figured out that increasing ones mental capacity was valuable not only for everyday intelligence and remembering things, it also helped him grasp insights which would improve his other grades.

Apart from Physical Fitness which was purely physical, his other grades required not only constant practice, but also sufficient insights in order to ascend.

Therefore, the quicker he upgraded his Mental grade, the easier he would be able to increase his other grades.

Ken gazed at the Mental Elixir in his inventory for a while, gathering the courage to use it. Having suffered from the excruciating pain of the baseball to the head, he was not so keen to have another round of suffering.

He sucked in a breath of cool air and pressed the button, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth in anticipation of the pain.

After a few seconds of nothing, just as he thought something went wrong, he heard a voice in his mind.

[Mika has determined that user may alert others in the vicinity of the activities taking place. Activating muting and paralysis protocol.]

And just like that, Ken was made unable to move and unable to scream as his brain began to feel like it was melting. All he could do was stare at the fan and try and count the rotations lest he slip into madness from the excruciating pain.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 293 - 293: Feels like Home (1)

Around a few hours later, Ken stirred from his sleep. As his eyes opened, he could see the afternoon sun filtering in through the gaps in his curtains.

His eyesight was sharp, allowing him to see things that he couldn't before. Unconsciously he began to count the particles floating through the air while maintaining his focus on the spinning fan.

Ken's mind began to work in ways that he never thought was possible.

All the information that his brain would subconsciously ignore or disregard was readily available to him in that moment.

'W-What the hell is this?'

He marveled in the new sensation for a few moments, drinking in the feeling. Yet he frowned in the next moment.

His eyes began to feel strained, causing a headache to appear out of nowhere.

'Mika, what's happening to me?' Ken asked, feeling slightly panicked.

[User is using his full mental capacity to examine the room. This will lead to mental fatigue if overused.]

Mika's monotonous voice sounded in his mind, giving him the information he needed in that moment.

'So I just need to teach my brain on what to disregard or ignore again?'

Despite not being told to do so explicitly, Ken's improved intelligence allowed him to intuitively come up with a solution. He began to will his brain to ignore certain things, almost like retraining it once again.

The moment he started doing this, he felt an instant relief.

He breathed out a sigh of relief as he felt the budding headache suddenly fade away. Now that that was done, he laid back down and smiled.

With his newfound mental capacity, he did the first thing that he could think of. Throwing the memory of the torture he had experienced earlier into the deep recesses of his mind.

It served no purpose other than to eat away at his sanity.

'Now that that's gone... Let's see how much I improved.'

[You have consumed: SS-grade Mental Elixir.]

[Mental grade has been increased by 3!]

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: S+

>Pitching: SS-

>Fielding: B-

>Game Intelligence: B-

>Mental: SS

A wide grin crept onto his features as he looked at his new mental grade. Even if he chose to remember the torture it had taken to get it, Ken would still say that it was worth it.

He could already imagine what kind of details he could pick up from upon the mound in the middle of a baseball match.

The shuffling of feet of the runners who wanted to steal a base, or the twitches of the batters fingers as he anxiously awaited his pitch. As long as he could train his brain to filter out all the unnecessary information, it would be a massive boon to his game.

As Ken was thinking of all the benefits he could gain, he heard a knock on the door.

"Ken, your brother is home." Yuki stuck her head in the door to check on him and let him know the good news.

"Thanks Mom, I'll be down in a second."

As soon as Ken exited his room, he once again felt overwhelmed by all the new information that flooded his brain. It took him a few seconds to once again tell his brain what to ignore before he could move on.

'Is this some kind of superpower or something?' He commented inwardly.

Despite just waking up from a nap, he already felt exhausted.

As he descended the stairs, he saw Daichi grinning widely at him.

"Here he comes, the most valuable player and winner of Koshien." Daichi's tone held a little sarcasm, but it was clear that he was happy.

Thanks to his improved mental capacity, he could see every detail on Daichi's face while also interpreting the emotions behind it.

'He wants to attack me?' Ken was shocked when he came to that conclusion, and instantly went on guard as he reached the end of the stairs.

The moment he placed his foot down, Daichi charged forward with his head lowered, aiming for his mid section.

In a fraction of a second, Ken made the decision to pivot his body out of the way, like he was dodging a charging bull.

However, even though his mind was working overtime, his body felt extremely sluggish.

"Eh?"

Daichi managed to grab a hold of him and lifted him off the ground, his arms squeezing him into a tight bear hug. The strength required to haul his tall frame around like a sack of potatoes was quite frightening.

"Hnnng"

Ken felt the air get squeezed from his lungs as he was forced unwillingly into a hug.

"Daichi darling, be gentle with Kenny. He was just in the hospital yesterday remember?"

Yuki's concerned words came from the kitchen, instantly causing Daichi to seize up. He quickly and gently placed Ken on the ground and his face was apologetic.

"A-Ah Ken I'm so sorry!" He quickly looked over his brother up and down, like he was a piece of fine china.

Ken sucked in a few breaths of air, doing his best to recover from the incident. However, he waved his hands, telling him that he was fine.

Soon enough, everything seemed back to normal as they sat down and talked as a family.

Yuki was busy preparing a large feast for the homecoming of her two kids. There was also the added celebration for Chris since she knew that her husband would be quitting his job tomorrow morning.

Once again the house was filled with laughter and merriment. Although they had done this two weeks ago when Daichi last visited, this time felt different.

Her two sons seemed to have grown closer after the tournament, despite everything that had happened in their game. Daichi appeared to look up to his brother even more so than usual.

When the noise of the dinner died down, everyone remained at the table to continue their chat.

"Boys, you'll be pleased to know that I'll be handing in my resignation tomorrow." Chris said, a small smile forming on his lips.

"Awesome!"

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 294 - 294: Feels like Home (2)

Both Ken and Daichi looked excited at the news. Yuki had already been told beforehand so she merely smiled in response and continued to take the dishes into the kitchen to be washed.

"Will you be taking up your old job?" Ken asked curiously.

Chris's last job was as a scout for Yokohama Warriors. So while it still did involve some travel, it wasn't as exaggerated as his current position which required him to stay in America for months at a time.

His father paused for a moment before nodding, "Only if they'll have me back."

Ken went silent. He hadn't thought this far ahead, thinking that the Yokohama Warriors would give his father his old job right away might have been wishful thinking on his part.

Seeing the mood dampen a little, Chris shook his head.

"Well, no use stressing about it now. We'll find out the details tomorrow after I hand in my resignation."

"Yeah, you're right." Ken replied before standing up and stretching.

"I didn't get a chance to go for a run this morning, so I might go now." He turned to Daichi with a grin, wordlessly asking if he wanted to come.

"Ah good idea. We only had a light practice this morning anyway."

With that, the two left shortly after, heading out to work off some of the succulent dinner they'd had.

After the two left, Chris was silent for a while as he stared out the window at the setting sun.

"Are you worried?"

Yuki's concerned tone reached him from the kitchen, causing him to turn around and flash her a smile.

"About them? Of course not." Chris replied, though the smile did not reach his eyes.

Yuki sighed softly, "You know that's not what I meant."

She knew her husband enough to know when he was anxious. After all, they'd been married for almost 18 years by now.

As much as Chris tried to put up a front or act like everything was okay, she was always able to peak through the facade, getting right through to the matter.

Chris chuckled. It was times like this that he truly remembered just how much he loved this woman.

Without a word he got up from his seat and embraced his wife, hugging her tight.

With his tall frame and her petite body it looked a little funny, but by the way they held each other, it was clear that they had hugged each other like this many times.

"It'll all work out somehow, we just need to have faith." He said softly, kissing the top of her head gently.

In that moment, he knew he had made the right decision. As long as he had his wife and family at home, he would find a way to keep a roof over their heads, no matter what.

Around an hour later, both Ken and Daichi returned home with sweat pouring down their features. It was clear at a glance that the two had turned the workout into somewhat of a competition.

Chris and Yuki smiled in amusement at the two teens.

"Can you grab me a water Ken?" Daichi asked between gulps of air.

Ken let out a small chuckle and began walking towards the kitchen, "Heh, you have much to learn little brother. You can't just come back and expect to win aga—"

As he was letting out his victory speech, Daichi seemingly recovered out of nowhere and sprinted into the bathroom before shutting the door and locking it.

"I'll be showering first~" He said behind the door laughingly.

"Damn it!"

Ken knew in that instant he had been tricked.

"HAHAHA" Chris couldn't help but let out a deep belly laugh, seeing the antics of his sons. All of the anxiety he was feeling before suddenly disappeared after looking at Ken's miffed expression.

"It looks like you have much to learn Kenny."

Yuki added fuel to the flames as she handed Ken a glass of water. Her smile was warm yet there was a hint of amusement in her eyes.

Not knowing how to deal with Daichi's shamelessness, all he could do was drink his water and wait for the guy to finish in the bathroom.

Ken suddenly wished he'd kept his focus on Daichi with his new mental capacity, yet it was too late now.

Soon enough, the night passed and everyone went to bed.

Despite having already suffered from the last Elixir he'd taken, Ken made the decision to take the Physicality Elixir anyway. The sooner he used it, the better benefits he would receive.

Once again, Ken was put into a catatonic state by the system while his body was tortured. It was as if every muscle fiber in his body was stretched and twisted until it broke, only to be healed moments later.

If there was one person on Earth who knew what it felt like to be stretched and kneaded like pasta dough, it was Ken.

Thankfully, the warm sensation of the healing brought some sense of relief. However, by the end of it he was covered in sweat and a black filth which almost brought a tear to his eye with its smell.

If it wasn't for this, Ken would have likely passed out after the excruciating process. Yet he was able to force his tired muscles back down the stairs and into the shower.

Luckily everyone was asleep and could not notice the stench coming off his body.

While in the shower, Ken felt invigorated. This was especially the case when he saw the notifications from the System.

[You have consumed: SS-grade Physicality Elixir.]

[Balance and Coordination grade has been increased by 3!]

[Agility grade has been increased by 1!]

[Strength grade has been increased by 2!]

[Stamina has been increased by 3!]

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS+

Agility: SS-

Strength: SS

Stamina: SS+

With a single Elixir he had skyrocketed all of his physical grades into the SS range. After a night of recovery, he would be able to truly put them all to the test.

However, right now he just wanted to sleep.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 295 - 295: Chance Meeting (1)

The next morning, Chris got up early and donned one of his best suits. Despite his discussions with his wife the night before, he still felt a whole lot of nerves as he stared at himself in the mirror.

What would be the outcome of today? Would the commissioner of the NPB prevent him from getting a job in the same industry out of spite?

However, Chris shook his head in the next moment before a flash of determination crept into his features.

If he couldn't find a job there, then he would just find somewhere else.

With his mindset fixed, Chris walked down the stairs and was soon greeted by his wife who had already sat down for her morning coffee.

Usually she was not a morning person, however today she put on a smile and handed him a travel coffee mug.

"Thanks honey." He said with a smile before placing a kiss on the top of her head.

"Where are the boys?"

"Out on their morning run."

Chris nodded and took a sip of his coffee.

"I should leave now. It'll take around an hour to get to Tokyo"

"Have a safe trip." Yuki said with a bright smile.

The two said their goodbyes before Chris walked to the car.

"Tell the boys we'll be having hamburgers for dinner tomorrow night." He said with a grin.

Yuki's eyes widened, yet she smiled brilliantly in response.

Chris only cooked hamburgers on the grill for special occasions. Him saying this was all Yuki needed to know that he had already made up his mind to leave the job no matter the consequences.

Thus Chris made his way to the headquarters of the NPB in Tokyo, his current employer. The trip was quiet as his mind was going over each scenario, as if to mentally prepare himself for the encounters.

Upon arriving, he walked through the automatic glass doors and was met with the familiar lobby. He paused for a moment before taking a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth to compose himself.

'Alright, just gotta rip it off like a band aid.' He said inwardly.

"Good morning Chris, how was your leave?"

An older lady at the reception spoke up from behind her desk as he walked past.

"A-Ah it was good thank you Miyo. I'm in a bit of a rush this morning sorry."

He did not want to appear rude, however he didn't feel like getting into a conversation at this moment. So after a few superfluous words, he continued forward, trying to keep his mindset.

Thankfully, it was early enough that only a few people were present in the office at this time. His boss was known for starting his day as the sun rose, therefore it was the perfect opportunity.

Chris breathed out a sigh of relief after seeing the suited man through the window of his boss's office and he moved forward to knock on the door.

"Come in."

The deep voice beckoned him inside.

"Ah Chris, what brings you in so early today? I thought you were still on leave to spend some time with your family."

Sakai Tomo's tone lightened as he saw Chris walk in, however he was astute enough to see there was something wrong on his features.

"Um, about that sir..."

Sakai let out a small chuckle before gesturing for him to take a seat, "Come, let's have a chat."

Chris couldn't help but smile wryly. It was clear that the commissioner had already figured out that there was something wrong, perhaps his acting was just terrible.

He obliged, taking the offered seat and shifting a little to get comfortable. Since he was so tall, he always felt a little uncomfortable in the chairs provided by the office.

Sakai closed his office door before walking slowly over to his desk and taking a seat. After a moment, he trained his gaze on Chris and smiled softly.

"So, what can I do for you today?" His words sounded sincere, to which Chris was thankful.

Chris hesitated a little, but finally managed to find the words he wanted to say.

"I won't beat around the bush. I've come here to resign from my position as Foreign Adviser."

He kept his gaze on Sakai's face, looking for any signs of emotion. However, the man in his 50's was like a stone statue, showing no change to his expression.

After a few moments of silence, the older man sat back in his chair and let out a small sigh.

"Truly a shame. But what can you do?"

It seemed like he was talking to no one in particular.

"Um, did you want to know my reason sir?" Chris who was beginning to feel a little awkward, spoke up. He didn't want the boss to get the wrong impression.

"No no it's fine, all the signs were there already. I knew you were always a little reluctant to take on the role because you'd be away from your family." His voice trailed off, as if reminiscing about an old memory.

"S-So you're not upset?"

"Upset? God's no. If anything I envy you Chris... To be able to make such a decision in favor of your family. It's something that I wish I did all those years ago."

Sakai's eyes were full of melancholy as he thought back to his own decisions.

Chris breathed a small sigh of relief, happy that the news hadn't caused a rift between them.

"Ah, if you're looking for another job... Stick around for another 20 minutes and I'll introduce someone to you."

"Eh?"

Out of all the scenarios that he had been through in the 1 hour trip to the office this morning, this was nowhere close to how any of them had gone. He was prepared for curses to be thrown or names to be called, yet this was way out of his expectations.

However, he didn't refuse. There was no harm in hearing the commissioner out, it was the least he could do.

Knock Knock

"Ah you're early!" Sakai called out, focusing his attention on the new arrival.

Chris turned his gaze to see an older man with balding gray hair and sporting a goatee. The guy looked quite familiar.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 296 - 296: Chance Meeting (2)

Later that day, Chris walked through the door of his home with a look of disbelief plastered on his face.

"Welcome home."

Yuki's smiling face greeted him at the entrance, though her expression changed a moment later after noticing her husband's weird actions.

"What is it honey? Did it not go well?"

A look of worry appeared in her eyes as she surveyed him.

It was almost 5pm now so she had assumed everything had gone well at the office, otherwise he would have called her. Yet it didn't seem like it.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

Before he had a chance to answer, both Ken and Daichi peaked their heads around the corner and asked together.

Seeing his family's concerned expression, Chris quickly snapped out of his mood and took his shoes off.

"I'm okay, we'll chat about it tonight after dinner."

His words were firm, using the tone he usually reserved for serious moments. The others looked at each other briefly with questions in their eyes.

Yet Chris didn't elaborate. Simply giving his wife a kiss and entering the hearth.

"I'm gonna go shower."

He then walked up the stairs and left his wife and kids to guess what the heck was going on.

After a painstaking 1 hour wait, Chris finally returned to the dining room just in time for dinner to be served.

He acted like normal throughout dinner, asking the boys how their day was and talking about anything and everything that didn't involve his own day.

Even Yuki who was asking a few leading questions was stonewalled.

Eventually, the 3 gave up in their pursuits for answers and just focused on their delicious meal. Chris had said that they would discuss it after dinner, so they decided to wait for him to bring it up on his own.

Only after everyone had finished eating and the dishes had been put away did Chris finally address his family.

"Everyone, please take a seat. It's time we talk about what happened today."

Chris's words were serious, prompting everyone to sit in silence, waiting for him to continue.

"Firstly, I'll confirm that I did resign from the position of Foreign Adviser effective immediately."

His words cause Ken to let out a small sigh of relief. He was worried that his father might have been coerced into keeping his job for whatever reason.

However, it seemed like there was more to the story.

"But... I've been given another opportunity elsewhere. Unfortunately it means I'll have to leave for America in around 2 weeks time."

"What?"

Ken felt a hint of frustration. Didn't his father leave the Foreign Adviser position because it forced him to go overseas all the time? What was the point in resigning if his next job would do the same.

It wasn't just Ken who had a look of disapproval on his face, both Daichi and Yuki looked as if they had swallowed a fly.

Chris moved his gaze around the 3 and couldn't help but let out a peeling laughter.

However, he was quickly forced to stop when he saw Yuki's expression darken.

"Did you just play a prank on us?" Daichi said, his eyes drooping in annoyance.

Chris shook his head, "No, I'm serious. I'll still be going to America."

Now everyone was just confused. Was it really such a laughing matter that he needed to go overseas once again?

"But... You'll all have the opportunity to come with me." He said, grinning ear to ear.

"Huh?"

"Say what?"

Even Yuki tilted her head in question.

Chris once again chuckled in amusement, as though he was the only one who got the joke.

"I met with an older fellow today just after my meeting with the commissioner. He is a bit eccentric, but he's a genius no doubt."

"You might have heard of him... Hajime Takashi."

Ken's eyes widened in recognition, almost not believing his ears. However, both Yuki and Daichi looked like lost lambs, having no idea of who Chris was referring to.

"T-The Hajime Takashi? The Head Coach for the National Team?" Ken asked, feeling his body heat up in excitement.

Daichi's ears perked up when he heard the words National Team. Suddenly Ken's exaggerated reaction made sense.

Chris shook his head.

"He's now the Under 18 National Team coach since he wanted to focus on training the younger prospects. He told me that he finds it difficult to train those who have played professionally already."

The gears in Ken's mind began to turn, putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

If he wasn't so shocked at the name drop, he would have likely figured it out long before with his improved mental capacity. It seemed that the gradings weren't so infallible after all.

"So what does meeting this Hajime Takashi guy have to do with you going to America?"

While Ken was deep in thought, his mother spoke up. She was getting tired of the back and forth and just wanted to know what was going on.

It seemed that Chris understood where she was coming from because he quickly cleared his throat and got to the point.

He corrected his posture briefly before letting out a grin.

"You're looking at the new Assistant Coach and scout for the U18 Japanese National team."

"EH!?"

Ken's eyes went wide and his jaw slackened as he stared at his father. Even Daichi with his limited amount of knowledge outside of High School baseball knew how impressive being a National team coach was.

Yuki frowned, "Is that a full time job? Isn't the National team only active a few times a year?"

Chris nodded, though he seemed a little disappointed about her reaction.

"Coach Takashi said that he'll be able to set me up with another coaching gig when the National Team isn't active."

"But Dad. What did you mean when you said we would have the opportunity to come to America with you?" Daichi asked, still confused on how the two things were related.

"Hehe. You've both been invited to the National Team tryouts in a few days time."

Chris's face was full of pride as he said these words. He would have felt awkward if he'd mentioned it to Coach Takashi, but that guy was the first one to bring up both of his sons.

"National Team tryouts..."

Ken felt his whole body jolt with excitement.

'I can't wait...'

Volume 2 - End

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 297 - 297: Towards the Future (1)

As the afternoon sun trickled into her room, Ai stared at the letter in her hands. Her long black hair fell down her back like a waterfall and her blue eyes showed a hint of indecision.

She'd been sitting like this for the past hour, caught at a crossroads which would possibly change the course of her life.

Knock Knock

"Ai honey, are you okay?"

Naomi poked her head through the door and saw her daughter in such a state. She instantly became worried.

Ai turned to her mother and let out a small sigh.

"Is Dad around?"

Without answering the question, she fired one back of her own.

Naomi looked a little surprised, but she still nodded. It wasn't often that Ai would look for her father, particularly in these situations since he was known to have the emotional intelligence of a wild boar.

"Can we all have a talk?"

"Ah sure. Let's meet in the dining room." Her mother responded before racing down the stairs.

Her mind was going wild, filled with possible scenarios that she didn't want to consider at this point in time.

'She's only in high school... Why am I having these thoughts?'

But then just as she was about to reach the TV room, she suddenly remembered something and stood stock still, her face heating up.

'Weren't those two on a trip together for a full 2 weeks...'

As the realization that something might have happened hit her, Tetsu happened to walk past and see her face.

"W-What is it!?"

He immediately went on guard after seeing her scared expression. His muscles brimmed with power and his eyes darted around the place, searching for any kind of threat that might have wandered into his house.

"P-P-Pregnant..."

"WHA!?"

Tetsu yelped out in fright, his whole body going into shock.

"No no no... We're too old to have another child."

His expression was one of despair, acting as if his whole life savings had been lost in a gambling debt.

Tetsu staggered back to the wall and slid down onto his backside before cradling his head and rocking back and forth. He was like a mental patient who was having a manic episode as he thought about having another child.

A few moments later, Ai walked down the stairs only to see her mother mumbling to herself and Tetsu rocking back and forth in the corner.

She could only let out a deep sigh, realizing that her parents' imagination had gotten out of hand once more.

"Mom, Dad... I don't know what conclusions you've jumped to, but this isn't the time to be messing around."

There was a part of her that found it amusing, yet this was a serious matter involving her future.

It took a little while, but Tetsu and Naomi both found their way to the dining table and sat down. While both of them still looked a little pale, Ai was happy that they were at least paying attention.

"I'm sorry for keeping this from you two." She said, placing the letter she'd been looking at earlier upon the table.

However, she soon regretted her choice of words.

"W-W-What is this? Don't tell me you actually ARE pregnant?"

Naomi stammered, not even wishing to grab the letter upon the table.

Tetsu's expression morphed into one of shock before he was assaulted by a bout of dizziness, forcing him to almost face plant into the table.

Ai's face reddened in both embarrassment and anger as she slammed her hand on the table and pushed the letter forward.

"I'm not pregnant! I'm still a v-vir— I'm still pure..."

It was such an embarrassing thing to discuss in front of her parents, but she wanted to get things back on track.

"Just look at the letter please."

Hearing the confirmation that they were not suddenly about to become grandparents, both Naomi and Tetsu let out a synchronized sigh of relief.

They had calmed down enough that their curiosity was piqued. It was not often their daughter came to seek advice or discuss such things with them.

Naomi picked up the letter and began to read it, only for Tetsu to poke his head over her shoulder to take a look.

"Congratulations Ai Koyama, your application to Joshibi High School of Art and Design has been accepted."

Her mother read the words out loud and suddenly wore a surprised expression.

"What is this?" Tetsu asked, not following along.

"During the entrance exams for High School, I applied for Joshibi High also. But in the end I chickened out and went with Yokohama." Ai admitted.

Tetsu frowned. He didn't understand why his daughter was telling them this now since the second semester of the school year was about to begin.

However, Naomi seemed to understand.

"Are you serious about this?" She asked, her gaze locked onto her daughter's eyes.

Ai nodded, her face filled with determination.

"I'm not scared to fail anymore. I don't want to live with regrets."

"Wait, what's happening?" Tetsu asked, feeling out of the loop. However, the two girls ignored him.

Naomi smiled, her face lighting up with pride.

"Just tell us what you need and we'll do it."

"Thanks Mom, Dad."

Ai excitedly got up from the table and ran back upstairs, leaving both her mother and father at the dining table still. While Naomi was smiling and feeling a sense of motherly pride, Tetsu was still confused as to what was going on.

"Hello? What is happening?" Tetsu asked, trying to get his wife's attention.

"Damn it honey, what's so hard to understand? Our daughter is finally ready to chase her dream." Naomi answered, her voice sounding a little emotional towards the end.

"A-Ah okay... Very good."

Not expecting such an outburst, Tetsu quickly dropped the matter and pretended like he understood. He quietly hugged his wife from behind and gave her a kiss on the top of the head before quietly leaving the room.

Only after around an hour did Tetsu finally put all of the pieces together.

"EH!?"

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 298 - 298: Towards the Future (2)

BUZZ BUZZ

"Hey Ken, did you have time to talk?"

Ken pulled out his phone and saw that he had a new email from Ai which seemed to be a little cryptic. In any other situation he wouldn't have hesitated to put some time aside to talk to her, however he was a little busy at the moment.

"Ken! Hurry up and warm up. The coach will be here soon."

The sound of his brother's voice interrupted his train of thought.

"O-Okay one moment!"

He quickly typed away a brief message back before closing his phone and stashing it away in his bag.

It had been a few days since his father had mentioned the tryouts for the National Team and now the time had arrived.

Ken made his way over to the field where around 25 teens were busy going through their own warm up routines.

His gaze fell upon a few familiar faces within the crowd that he'd seen at Nationals just a couple of weeks earlier. The one's that stood out were the delinquent Kei, the tall outfielder for Koryu and...

"Ken!"

A warm and familiar voice called out to him from the crowd, causing the others who were warming up to look at him weirdly.

"Hiroki." Ken couldn't help but smile as he saw the teen waving enthusiastically at him from the field.

He was happy to know that one of his teammates had managed to get invited to the tryouts. Surprisingly he was the only other one even though they had taken the championship at Koshien.

Ken beckoned to Daichi and walked over to where Hiroki was warming up.

"You didn't tell me you were invited too Hiroki."

"Hehe, I only found out the day before yesterday through the coach. He didn't tell me you were coming though." Hiroki responded as he went through his stretch routine.

Ken and Daichi also didn't dilly dally, performing their warm ups. They had been a little late thanks to some traffic on the way here.

"Do you recognize anyone here?" Ken asked, gesturing at the 20 something other players sharing the field with them.

Hiroki gestured towards a figure close by, "That's Riku Sato. We played against his team Koryu in the finals. Apparently he's been a mainstay on the National Team since U15."

Ken nodded. He thought that he had recognized him from somewhere else.

The guy wore a constant smile, almost as if he was perpetually happy.

"That gloomy one over there is Kuro Tojo. He's also a longtime player for the National team."

Ken turned his gaze and could instantly see why Hiroki had referred to him as the gloomy one. His hair was in a short bowl cut and he had bags under his eyes.

This, paired with his pale skin, gave him an aura of doom and gloom. Despite this, he seemed to be wearing a creepy smile, adding even more to his unique charm.

Ken recoiled a little inwardly. There was nothing about this guy that one would find approachable.

In the next moment, someone who reminded Ken of Shiro suddenly fell to the ground a few feet in front of them. He was average height and had a shaved head, looking like one of those monks you'd see in movies.

"Ah, are you okay?"

Ken walked over and offered a hand to pull the youth up.

"Oh, haha. Sorry this happens all the time." The voice was bright, albeit a little high like a woman's.

He took the hand offered and stood up, easily a head shorter than Ken.

The person looked up at Ken's imposing height and blurted. "Wow man you're so tall. What's the weather like up there? Heh heh."

Ken blinked a few times, not knowing how to respond to such a question.

After a few awkward moments, the stranger must have realized his mistake and bowed quickly.

"I'm Akimitsu Jin, but most people call me Aki. Sorry if I interrupted your warm ups, I can be a little clumsy at times."

"Ah it's no problem. I'm Ken, this is my brother Daichi to my left and Hiroki to my right."

Despite giving off a dopey vibe, he could tell that this guy was sincere so he didn't hesitate to introduce his friends.

Aki's face scrunched up for a moment as if he was deep in thought before suddenly receiving an epiphany.

"Ah! You're the guy who took a beanball to the head" He said, pointing his finger at Ken.

If that wasn't enough, he took a few steps to the right and inspected Ken's head, as if to see if there was any evidence of the offense.

Ken's eyebrow twitched a few times, only to hear Hiroki and Daichi giggling behind him.

"Ahem. Yes I'm the Ace for Yokohama High." He stated, trying to control his urge to shout at the guy for being rude.

As he said these words, he noticed some people turn in his direction before whispering to those beside them. It seemed that they had at least heard of him. Whether or not it was a good or bad thing, he had no way of knowing.

"Ah, well I better get back to warming up." Aki said before heading on his way.

"That guy was a little... quirky." Ken said, watching his retreating figure.

"You can say that again." Daichi added, stifling a laugh.

It was then that Ken saw his father in the distance, walking towards them with an older man beside him. The two were dressed in the National Team jackets which were predominately white with red on the arms and sides.

Whoever had designed the jacket did a great job of using the Japanese flag as reference.

Ken instantly recognized the older man next to his father. The balding gray hair, the sharp gray goatee and the squinted eyes that held a sharp and intelligent gaze.

"Alright everyone, please may I get your attention."

Chris's voice spoke up, easily drawing the attention of the youngsters. It was clear that he was a natural at speaking in public settings as he so masterfully controlled the crowd.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 299 - 299: Tryouts Begin (1)

"Thank you coach."

The older man's deep voice drifted over the field. It resonated in the ears of those who heard it, grabbing their attention.

"I am Coach Takashi. I've looked after the Japan Team for over 25 years. Together, we've won silver at the Olympics, and many podium finishes in the world cup."

As the coach introduced himself, he began to pace with his hands behind his back. His gait was steady as his gaze moved through the players assembled on the field.

"However... I'm tired of training those fools who won't listen." He said with a scowl, directed at no one in particular.

"What I need are soldiers who will execute orders, not civilians who make up excuses."

Ken raised an eyebrow in question, he wasn't expecting such an attitude from the legendary coach. It was almost like he was a drill sergeant in the military, not a renowned figure in the baseball circle.

Coach Takashi didn't seem to care what anyone had to think about his words, directly moving onto the next order of business.

"You've all been selected to participate in the National Team tryouts. Some of you might have been in the team before, while others are new arrivals. Yet you all have one thing in common... "

The older man stopped in place, before turning to face everyone.

"You show potential."

He smiled widely before pointing to a teen in the front.

"You there, what are you?"

The player who was picked out looked confused and slightly panicked. He looked around a little bit, yet saw that no one was going to help him.

"I-I'm a catcher sir."

"Wrong!"

Hearing such a response from the coach, the teen felt mortified. What kind of question was that anyway?

"You, what are you?"

Riku was the next to be picked, his smiling expression suddenly froze stiff.

"I am a man sir..."

This time, the coach looked him up and down briefly before shaking his head in disappointment.

"Ha-haha" Riku nervously laughed, not knowing how he should have responded.

"You! What are you?"

Coach Takashi's finger pointed directly at Ken who had just seen the previous players fail to answer correctly. He panicked inwardly, but thankfully his mind had been working furiously in the background to pinpoint the answer the coach wanted to hear.

"I'm a soldier sir!"

Ken would have saluted, but he thought that would have been too much.

"GOOD! Finally someone who gets it."

The coach looked vindicated as Ken correctly answered the question. Those in the vicinity who had already been paying attention to him increased their vigilance.

After all, until the team was selected, they were all competing against each other.

Coach Takashi ignored the reactions of the players and continued his speech.

"Like I said, I only need soldiers right now, otherwise our goal will be too far out of reach."

These words elicited some looks of confusion from the rest of the squad, yet the coach didn't elaborate. It could be seen just from this small interaction that the legendary coach Takashi was an eccentric man.

Even Chris who had seen his fair share of oddballs in the baseball world, couldn't help but acknowledge the quirkiness of his new boss.

Seeing as how Coach Takashi wasn't going to clarify for the players, Chris stepped forward and added some context.

"We're here today to select the players who will be competing in the Baseball World Cup which is being hosted in America this year. Our goal should be to win the whole thing, with no exception."

This time, the players began to murmur among themselves.

It was well known that the US were on top of the baseball world. Every other team in the world aspired to be as dominant as they were, yet none could even come close it seemed.

They had yet to be toppled from their throne.

"Exactly. We will be the first to take down the so called inventors of baseball." Coach Takashi stated, flashing a wide grin not dissimilar to a Cheshire cat.

Even Chris felt goosebumps at his words. If any other coach were to declare such a thing, one might think that they were just full of hot air. Yet this man's accolades gave him sufficient authority to speak in such a manner.

"Alright, enough about this. Today we'll be running some physical drills to get an assessment of your fitness. If you're not fit, don't expect to get a spot on the team, regardless of your position."

The coach then clapped two times before gesturing for everyone to follow him.

Most of the players felt a fire lit underneath them at the suggestion of beating the best team in the world. There was a sense of national pride at stake, along with their own individual aspirations.

Any player who could make it to the finals and take down America would have their name in lights for the world to see. A professional contract would be just around the corner if they played well enough.

Ken, Daichi and Hiroki followed the crowd towards the first set of drills, their curiosity piqued. Though they had done plenty of drills before, it had never been at this scale before, surrounded by the best teens in the country.

Once everyone had gathered, Chris spoke up and gave some instructions.

"Everyone please line up in between the cones, we'll be doing a 30 yard dash to test your speed between bases."

There were 4 cones lined up, about 1.5 meters apart from each other on the field. The players did as they were told, lining up in 3 lines and waiting for further instructions from the coach.

Ken was one of the last to arrive so he was at the end of the line with Daichi and Hiroki.

The distance between bases was approximately 90 feet or 30 yards, depending on how large the bases were. Which was likely why the coaching staff had chosen this particular drill.

"When I blow my whistle, the first of each line will begin their run. Your runs will be timed, so please take this seriously."

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 300 - 300: Tryouts Begin (2)

The instructions were pretty simple, so there were no questions.

"Set..."

FWHEE

As soon as the whistle blew, the 3 players at the front of the line sped off towards the goal 90 feet away. There were 3 people in similar clothing to the coach's at the other end holding stop watches.

They flew down the field as fast as possible, not wanting to lose any ground to their competitors.

The fastest one was Riku, the tall and smiling figure who came out on top with room to spare.

Once they finished, the 3 staff made wrote down the times on their clipboard before directing the players to return to the line.

No one said any of the times out loud, making it hard for the players to know how they faired in the first trial. The staff's faces were also unreadable.

"Set..."

FWHEE

As the other players were starting their runs one group at a time, Ken's mind began to work. He remembered seeing somewhere that the average Major leaguer stole bases in 3.5 seconds, with the fastest being just north of 3 seconds.

Since they were competing against under 18 athletes, the expectation should be 3.5 to 4 seconds to be considered a good time.

While he was thinking this through, it was already getting close to his turn. Ken quickly turned his brain off and focused on the task at hand.

As he made it to the front of the line, he looked at his father briefly before turning his attention to the staff members 30 yards in front.

"Set..."

Ken got into position, ready to push off the moment the whistle sounded. After he had taken his Physicality Elixir, his body was finally able to react to his much improved mental capacity, increasing his reaction time immensely.

FWHEE

The very moment his brain registered the whistle, Ken's body moved into action. His reaction time was so fast that it made both Hiroki and Daichi look incredibly slow.

Ken could feel his powerful leg muscles contract, giving him a burst of speed with every kick. He quickly got up to full speed, powered by his long legs and his pumping arms, pulling him towards the finish line.

As he moved over the line, he heard the click of the stopwatch, followed not long later by another 2, indicating Hiroki and Daichi had crossed afterwards.

Ken tried to peek at the faces of the staff, however they were clearly professionals at keeping their emotions in check. Not one of them looked impressed, nor did they allow him to get a peek of their clipboard.

"Damn Ken, that was fast." Daichi said, shaking his head.

Ken smiled and was about to form a witty response, until he was told to head back to the line.

They completed the drill another 3 times, likely to get an aggregate result.

Soon enough, they were taken to another part of the field where the next drill would take place. It felt a little jarring that they didn't have any of their results just yet, but they couldn't exactly complain.

"We'll be measuring your vertical leap next in this test. Please line up and have your standing reach calculated first." Chris announced, directing the players to the line.

Ken saw the odd looking equipment and felt a little confused. It was a steel frame which had horizontal vanes that looked like they could be rotated rather easily.

It wasn't only him, there were a few other players who looked at the apparatus with confusion. Yet it seemed as if the players who'd been there before knew what it was.

Riku was the first to walk up to the apparatus. He stood with his feet flat on the ground and extended his hand upwards, knocking the vanes away that he could reach.

Once that was done, he simply walked away, back to the end of the line.

As Riku approached, Ken decided to ask him a few questions.

He quickly introduced himself and performed a small bow, it was quite rude to speak up to someone new without doing so, at least in Japan.

"Hey, the name's Riku." He said, the trademark wide smile still on his face.

"It's a shame I didn't get to see your pitches in the finals." He lamented, though his expression didn't change.

"A-Ah yeah. I also would have liked to pitch on the day, but Akira did well." Ken admitted, though he quickly got back on subject.

"Hey Riku, what is that thing anyway?"

"Oh that? It's called a Vertec or something. They get your standing reach first and then measure it against your jumping reach. The difference between the two is your vertical leap."

Thankfully, Riku seemed friendly enough that he even went into more detail without prompting.

"Okay that makes sense."

"Have you done this before? What's your vertical leap?" Daichi asked, his curiosity piqued.

Sometimes people just wanted to get a base value so they could compare.

"Yeah we did it last year as well. I got a 32 inch vertical leap last time, but I've been working on my leg muscles so I'm hoping for a better score this year."

The three nodded. Now that they at least had a number from someone who'd been in the National Team before, they had a baseline to work from.

'I need to get higher than 32 inches.'

Ken, Hiroki and Daichi were all thinking the same thing in their mind as they waited for their turn.

Soon enough, the three had their standing reach recorded and went back to the end of the line. Now was time for everyone to do their jumping reach.

Riku was the first to be tested. His jump felt huge as he leapt into the air and pushed away the vanes before landing on his feet.

He got another 2 tries before he was told to wait by the side.

Once again there were no results read out to anyone, letting the teenagers minds go crazy in anticipation.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.