

Major League System

Chapter 361 - 361: Hotel Room (1)

After dinner, Hiroki tagged along with Ken and Daichi to their room under the pretense of watching the United States vs Mexico match online. Of course his real goal was to avoid his roommate Aki, though no one called him out on it.

"How did you even get a laptop anyway?" Hiroki asked.

"Dad said we could borrow it most nights if we wanted to review the games online." Ken said dismissively. He was trying to find the link on the website.

Seeing that he was bothering the technician, Hiroki looked around the room a little.

"I wonder if they have any portable mattresses in the hotel?"

Daichi raised his eyebrow in response, "I'm sure they would... Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason..."

"There it is!" Ken called out, finally getting it to work.

The first thing they noticed was that the stadium was smaller than the one they'd played in today. At a glance, there was far less seating capacity, meaning it was probably a minor league stadium.

"Welcome folks to U18 World Cup broadcast. We have our home team United States taking on Mexico in the group stages this afternoon."

The narrator spoke as the camera zoomed in on the players as they lined up. The first thing that Ken noticed was that a lot of the United States players looked tall and athletic. There was a layer of confidence in their gazes.

Though some might translate it as arrogance.

"Ken, what is that guy saying?"

"Hmm?"

Ken turned around and saw both Daichi and Hiroki with confused looks on their faces. Since the broadcast was hosted in America, the commentator was speaking in English, something he hadn't noticed right away.

"Man, you guys need to learn English some day." He complained.

While Hiroki was in his 2nd year of High School, English was his weakest subject. At least he was better than Daichi who couldn't understand almost anything.

Just as Ken was about to try and find a Japanese hosted live stream, the camera settled on a figure wearing the United States National jersey. He had gray hair and a stern expression with deep brown eyes.

"Hey, does that old man look familiar to you guys?" Ken asked, pointing at the figure.

However, neither Hiroki nor Daichi had seen him before.

Ken scoured his memories, yet nothing seemed to pop up right away. It was then that the name appeared on the screen, labeling him as the Head Coach for the United States team.

"Mark Williams..." Ken muttered.

He wasn't sure where, but the name definitely sounded familiar. Perhaps this coach was someone he'd seen in his previous life, someone who would become famous in the future?

Either way, he quickly put it to the back of his mind. It took him a few minutes, but he managed to find a Japanese website that was hosting the World Cup.

"Ah can finally understand the commentators." Daichi said with a grin.

"First up to bat is Keith Anderson. He's been solid all year and already has offers from various colleges though he has yet to commit."

The trio watched closely as the Mexican pitcher sent a wicked cutter on the very first pitch.

DONG

The camera zoomed out as it followed the ball's trajectory all the way into the stands.

"On the very first pitch, Keith smacks the ball for a home run. This is why the United States is one of the most feared teams, not many can compete with their strength and athleticism."

The commentator was animated as he seemingly blew smoke up the rears of the US team.

It wasn't just Ken who thought so. Both Hiroki and Daichi looked at each other with odd expressions on their faces.

"Maybe we should go back to the English website." Daichi suggested.

"I agree."

However just as he was about to, a familiar voice interrupted the male commentator's tirade.

"I don't think we can count out our Japanese team. Both Ken and Daichi Takagi scored 2 home runs each in their match, blowing out a top tier South Korea out by 15 runs."

"T-That's very true Miya. Forgive me, I seem to have gotten ahead of myself."

"Ah that's Miya Fukuda!" Ken said, his eyes shining.

It seemed the two other boys were aware of her too since they straightened up.

"Thank goodness she came on to talk some sense into this guy."

With the addition of the pleasant and capable voice of Miya, the game actually became watchable.

From the beginning, the US dominated the scoreboard. Every one of the players could hit big and often did so, even if it resulted in a catch in the outfield.

Ken felt that there was hardly any strategy involved in their approach, yet it seemed effective. It was almost like the coach had told them just to go out there and hit it big no matter what.

For some reason it left a bad taste in his mouth.

When it came time for them to pitch, he felt like he could understand why they weren't trying.

"Ryan Smith..." Ken murmured.

This was one of the players who would go on to have a successful pitching career in the Majors. Ken could still recognize his face, despite seeing the teenage version of him.

"That guy is good." Daichi said, his expression turning grave.

The trio continued watching the game, yet their expressions continued to darken as the game went on.

By the time the game finished in the 5th inning, they were all stunned.

"With that, the game has been called by the umpires and finishes at 16-0 in favor of the US. From the beginning, it didn't look like Mexico were given a chance were they Miya?"

"Mmm, that Ryan Smith truly is a great pitcher. Not only is his pitching arsenal large, he also has a killer fastball that tops out at 100mph." Miya sounded a little worried, but she kept her professional air.

"What do you think Japan's chances are against this United States team?"

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

Chapter 362 - 362: Hotel Room (2)

Miya was silent for a moment as if she was choosing her next words carefully.

"I think we still have a good chance of competing against this team. While they have Ryan, we have a similar threat with Ken on the mound."

Hearing his name called, Ken's ears perked up.

"Wasn't Ken playing in the outfield against South Korea? Do you think that Coach Takashi doesn't trust him? Or maybe he thinks that he lacks experience." The anchor asked.

"Have you thought that maybe he's saving Ken to use in the big games?" Miya responded, her tone hiding some sass.

Ken rather enjoyed the back and forth between Miya and the anchor. He felt vindicated when she would defend him, despite only meeting her two times in the past.

"Man, they seem tough to beat." Daichi said, feeling a little intimidated by the match.

Ken couldn't dispute his words. Probably the worst thing about it was that the US team hardly looked like they were trying to win. If anything, it seemed as if they were playing in a friendly match.

"I'm not sure if that coach intentionally told the players to do as such, or if that's just the way they play. If it's the latter, we might have a chance. But if it's the former..."

Ken's eyes narrowed as he saw the coach appear on the laptop screen once more. He still couldn't pick where he knew this person from, but just the fact that he thought the guy looked familiar, probably meant that he was a famous coach in his previous life.

'We'll find out soon enough.' Ken thought.

He closed the laptop and stretched his tired limbs.

"We should probably get some rest, the next game against Cuba is at 9am tomorrow."

"Yeah, good idea."

Ken went to sit down on his bed, only to feel a figure underneath him. He quickly turned around to see Hiroki pretending to be asleep on his bed.

His eyes twitched in annoyance before he spoke up, "You have 3 seconds to move before I kick your ass."

"1.."

"2.."

"O-Okay okay!" Hiroki sprung up out of the bed in panic. He had successfully snuck into Ken's bed, hoping that the latter would give up and grab a spare mattress.

Ken let out a sigh, feeling a little guilty.

"Go ask the service desk for a spare mattress." He said, making a shooing motion.

Yet instead of looking relieved, Hiroki gulped.

"What? Can't you do something so simple?" Ken said with annoyance.

"I-I don't speak English... Can you please do it big bro?" Hiroki gave him a pleading look, even resorting to such tricks as calling him big bro.

"Damn shameless idiot..." Ken groaned, heading over to the phone.

Soon enough there was a knock at the door and a portable mattress was delivered by a man in his early twenties. Not even 10 minutes later, both Hiroki and Daichi were already fast asleep.

While the game hadn't gone for long, it had taken a lot out of everyone. Not to mention that they were still suffering from a little jet lag.

Ken decided to take their advice and head to sleep himself.

"Father, did you hear that Japan thumped South Korea in today's U18 World Cup match"

A teen with perfectly maintained cropped hair spoke up after dabbing a handkerchief on his lips. He sat at a large dining table with a variety of food placed carefully in front of him.

"Hmm? What did I tell you about watching sport?" The man responded, losing most of his interest.

An exasperated expression appeared on the youth's face as he retorted. "Father, don't you remember that our family is sponsoring the World Cup this year?"

"Ah... Very well. As long as you don't let it affect your studies."

The man ate with perfect table manners, choosing various dishes and eating slowly. He was a rather handsome man in his early 40's with not a single gray hair on his head. His face was clean shaven and looked rather young despite his age.

"Yes father. Don't forget that you'll need to attend the Finals in person." The young man reminded him with a soft smile.

The man paused, yet his expression grew odd in the next moment.

"Honey... You don't have to if you don't want to. Daisuke can go in your place." A beautiful woman with dark hair and flawless white skin placed her hand upon the man's arm in a gesture of kindness.

Her eye's moved to the teen sitting across from them, as if waiting for his confirmation. If it weren't for a few wrinkles which gathered at the corner of her eyes, the woman would easily pass for someone in their twenties.

"Absolutely father, I'd be more than happy to go in your stead."

However, the man recovered shortly after and shook his head.

"It's fine, we all have a duty to the family. If your Grandfather found out that I'd shirked my duties, he would turn over in his grave." He said, giving his son a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I've lost my appetite." The man announced before standing up from the table. Without another word, he left his wife and child alone at the table.

Daisuke frowned, doing his best to process what had just happened.

"Mother, what was that all about?"

The fair woman let out a small sigh, a troubled expression forming on her face.

"Both your Grandfather and Uncle loved baseball. They played together often many many years ago when your father was your age. But now that they're gone, just mentioning the name brings back such memories."

Daisuke nodded. He didn't understand it too much, but he could feel that his father was saddened at the mention of baseball.

"So why did we sponsor this World Cup if father is sensitive to baseball?" He asked.

The woman let out a small sigh before briefly explaining the situation of their business to the teen.

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

Chapter 363 - 363: Taking on Cuba (1)

The next morning, the three amigos woke up after their impromptu sleep over. Thankfully, the alarm was set for early enough that they had time to get everything ready.

Coach Takashi had called for an early meeting today since they would be playing at 9am. Therefore, other than Hiroki who had to creep back to his own room to get changed, Ken and Daichi made their way to the meeting spot.

It was the same room they'd had their film session in yesterday, but this time breakfast had been brought in to feed everyone. Since they only had around an hour and a half before they needed to head to the arena, the meeting had to be quick.

"Alright you lot, hurry up and grab some food we don't have a lot of time before we need to head to the stadium." Chris clapped his hands and relayed the urgency they were in.

Once everyone was settled with some food, the film session began.

"Like we had already talked about, Cuba is one of the biggest threats in this years World Cup. They have a couple of the best sluggers under the age of 18 in the world."

The screen flickered, showing two player profiles. Side by side, it was clear that the two were brothers, twins for that matter.

They both had wide shoulders and a large waist and looked rather intimidating, at least in the photos.

"These are the Lopez twins, both ranked in the top 10 in US high schools. They've already received multiple offers from prestigious colleges, so that should tell you how dangerous they are."

The screen began to play a few clips of their highlights against the Dominican Republic whom they played yesterday. Each of them scored a home run and multiple base hits.

"Yet even though they played phenomenally, the score was still close. DR managed to keep it competitive until the final inning where the match ended 7-6 with Cuba coming out on top."

Coach Takashi spoke up next, his arms crossed in front of him.

"We'll need to put pressure on the twins this match, since they're left-handed batters, we'll be starting Kei on the mound. You should have the advantage in the match up."

Everyone seemed to agree with what he said since left handed batters struggled more against left handed pitchers.

"Daichi, I'm counting on you to make the correct calls. If we're even a little complacent, it will cost us dearly." He added, singling the teen out.

"Yes sir!" Daichi quickly swallowed his pastry before yelling out.

Miho saw this and couldn't help but let out a silent giggle.

"Alright, let's go over our performance yesterday. I believe there are some avenues in which we can improve." Chris said, sending a signal to the person on the laptop.

He then went into an in depth analysis of the game.

"Masayuki, I know you were sitting closer to Ken's side of the field for most of the match yesterday, but I think he's got it covered for now."

"I agree. We'll be taking off the training wheels today Kenny~" Masayuki chimed, eliciting a few chuckles in the room.

Ken cringed after hearing the nickname his parents called him all the time. Apparently Masayuki had overheard Chris call him this recently, which led to the current situation.

He could only laugh it off, after all, tears were useless in such a situation.

Speaking of tears, he had gotten in trouble for not reaching out to his mother yesterday. She called him while upset, saying that he had not even acknowledged her while on the field.

So regardless if they won or lost today's match, both Daichi and Ken had promised to meet their mother and spend some time with her.

The film session lasted until 7:45am, after which the players quickly headed up to their rooms to grab their things.

"How do you think Kei will go today?" Ken asked his brother as they packed their things.

"I'm not sure. I haven't had too much time to train with him." He admitted, feeling a little nervous.

With the additional comment from the Head Coach in the meeting, Ken could understand what pressure Daichi would be feeling in this moment. There was also the fact that he didn't want to make a bad impression on Miho's Grandfather...

Ken felt a grin pull at the corner of his lips as he placed his hand on the poor guy's shoulder.

"You'll do fine bro, just play how you always play and things will work out." He said simply, before leaving the room.

Daichi stood silently for a little while after Ken had left.

"I wonder when I'll get to catch your pitches." He mumbled.

He felt for his brother who had been relegated to the outfield, despite being one of the best pitchers in the country. With the addition of the slider to his arsenal, there was no doubt in Daichi's mind that he could excel in the World Cup.

The problem was, why didn't the coach want to put him on the mound?

Unfortunately for Daichi, there would be no way of knowing unless he asked the Head Coach himself. Of course, he could probably ask his father, but he could already imagine the kind of response he'd receive.

Letting out a small sigh, he grabbed his gear and left the room, throwing the issue to the back of his mind.

As he left the room, he saw Hiroki coming out of a door on the same floor with a pale look on his face.

"Ah, Hiroki. I was meant to ask you earlier, what's so bad about Aki as a roommate? I know he's a bit brash and mean sometimes, but he can't be that bad right." Daichi asked, his face full of curiosity.

Hiroki let out a harrumph, clearly not happy with his assessment.

"You're welcome to swap with me if that's what you think." He said gruffly.

He leaned closer and whispered to Daichi.

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

Chapter 364 - 364: Taking on Cuba (2)

"He talks in his sleep, with his eyes open!" A look of horror washed over his face, as if he recollected something.

Daichi shuddered in response, not expecting such a quirk.

"I... I'm sorry for your loss." He said simply before power-walking away to the elevator.

'It has nothing to do with me!' Daichi shouted inwardly.

Ken stepped onto the field at Rodgers stadium, feeling the morning sun shine down upon him. They had lost the coin toss and would be fielding first against Cuba.

His gaze fell upon the tall figure of Kei on the mound and couldn't help but feel a little jealous. Of course he was lucky to still be a part of the starting line up, but he still wanted to pitch.

"Play ball!"

Ken quickly shook these thoughts out of his head. Masayuki was no longer covering for him, which meant the training wheels were off essentially.

'I can't get complacent.' He thought.

Kei fired off his unorthodox wind up and sent a fastball to the outside, approaching speeds upwards of 150km/h.

DING

The ball shot out along the ground between first and second base.

Thankfully Ken had been paying attention and managed to scoop the ball up, however the batter had already safely arrived at first base by that time.

He threw the ball back to Kei before retreating back to his position.

'Ahhh, it sucks getting hit on the first ball.' Ken lamented inwardly. Seeing this only made his itch to get on the mound increase even further.

"Don't mind!" Daichi shouted out to Kei. He was happy with the pitch which looked sharp, even if it was hit.

"Batting 2nd, Left outfield, Ricardo"

As the next batter stepped onto the plate, Daichi's eyes flashed imperceptibly towards first base as the runner took his lead. He already knew that these lead off batters were fast and not afraid to steal a base.

Daichi made the signal and received a nod from Kei.

WHOOSH

In one fluid motion, Kei threw a pickoff to first base, catching the runner by surprise.

Tap

He did his best to slide back onto base, but felt a tap on his arm before he could reach it.

Both he and Hiroki looked at the umpire in question.

"Yerrr out!"

"Alright!"

Ken pumped his fist, feeling a surge of elation. Only now did he remember how good Kei was at picking runners on first off, especially since he was a lefty.

The Cuban runner was forced to suck up his grievances and head back to the dugout. It was clear that he'd underestimated the Japanese side and was planning on stealing some easy bases.

Upon his return, he could feel his coach's stern gaze, yet he didn't dare to raise his head.

"What did you expect to happen against a lefty pitcher?" There was annoyance and exasperation in the tone, causing the player to lower his head even further.

"Don't get complacent, Japan are not an easy opponent." He said a moment later.

Back on the field, Daichi was feeling pleased with the result. However, he still needed to get through the next batters.

He crouched down once more and called for a cutter. This was one of Kei's most effective pitches, especially against a right handed batter.

Kei nodded and performed his wind up, flinging the ball from his fingertips. The ball acted like a fastball until the last moment when it broke towards the inside.

Ricardo had already begun his swing, yet upon seeing the ball cut inside, he tried to contort his body out of the way.

DING

The ball ricocheted off the bat and flew directly up with lots of backspin.

Daichi sprang into action and quickly discarded his face mask with his eyes on the ball. He moved forward and stepped into the batters box with the intention of catching the ball.

Yet as he got closer, Daichi felt a forceful shove, killing his momentum and pushing him away from the falling ball. He was forced to watch as the ball slipped past his outstretched glove and fell onto the ground in front of him.

"O-Oi what the hell was that!?"

Kei stormed forward, his face turned up in anger as he gestured to the umpire. It was clear as day that the batter had interfered with the play, despite being in the batters box.

"Hey I didn't touch him man." Ricardo cried out in English, holding his hands up as if to protest his innocence.

The umpire was silent for a while. He was behind Daichi, so he couldn't exactly see what happened. He called over the first base umpire and they had a brief discussion, yet Kei was still riled up.

"Hey man, calm down. You getting upset won't help our cause at all." Daichi said, holding him back.

Kei's delinquent tendencies were starting to come out, however he decided to listen to his catcher. Though he wouldn't take the decision lightly if they were screwed over.

After a few moments, the plate umpire returned and gave his verdict.

"Batter interference, you're out." He said, pointing to the Cuban batter.

"What!?! This is ridiculous!" The batter shouted, throwing his bat to the side.

He stormed off the field in annoyance before heading back into the dugout. In reality he knew exactly what he did, he just wasn't happy that it didn't work. Either way he would have been out.

Ken breathed out a sigh of relief seeing that the umpires had made the right decision. He could already tell that the Cuban players would be extra competitive.

"Batting 3rd, 3rd base, Manuel"

Before anyone could relax after securing the 2nd out, one of the Lopez twins stepped into the batters box. His curly hair could be seen underneath his helmet, along with his bushy eyebrows.

The guys wide shoulders and powerful body was enough to make even Kei serious as he stood upon the mound. Even if they hadn't studied the guy earlier, it was obvious that this guy had some power.

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

Chapter 365 - 365: Pinch (1)

Daichi could feel the pressure that the newest batter exuded in front of him. It also felt a little strange to have a left handed batter in the box, but it wasn't something that he hadn't trained for.

'I need to make the most of our favorable match up.' He thought.

Crouching down, he made the sign for a two seam fastball. Since they were both left handed, the ball would slightly break to the inside.

Kei nodded. He just needed one more out in order to end the inning.

WHOOOSH

PAH

Daichi almost flinched as he felt the dangerous wind from the bat rush past his face. Thankfully he was able to keep his composure and catch the ball under such a circumstance.

"Strike."

"Nice pitch!" He said aloud, throwing the ball back to the mound.

'I can't give him any easy balls.' Daichi concluded. As long as that swing was on target, there was nothing to stop it from going into the stands for a home run.

The next ball he asked for was a curveball.

WHOOOSH

Pah

"Strike."

Once again, the bat barely missed the ball before landing in his glove, causing a cold drop of sweat to fall down Daichi's back. He could feel the pressure intensify, despite being up in the count.

Manuel however, seemed unaffected. His face was stoic as he set his gaze upon the mound. One could see his burning confidence, built through countless hours of swinging his bat with the goal of hitting big.

'Okay, we're up in the count. We can afford to waste some pitches and hope he swings.' Daichi thought before sending the ball back.

This time he called for an inside and low pitch, something that would be tough to hit even if the guy was expecting it.

Once again, Kei entered his wind up and sent the ball whipping out perfectly.

'Nice!'

Daichi saw the sharp pitch and knew that it was perfect. It was also super close to the strike zone which meant as long as he framed it properly, it should be a strike.

"Hmph!"

Manuel let out a harrumph before twisting his body and sending his bat thundering forwards. Daichi could only watch on in shock as the bat and ball entered a collision course.

DOOOONG

The ball was smacked with tremendous force, causing the sound to echo throughout the arena. Before anyone could register what happened, Ken was already running with all his might towards the back fence.

Yet as he got closer and closer to the fence, he could only resign himself to his fate.

"Nice hit Manuel!"

"Woohoo, first homer for the day."

The ball entered the third row of seats, far out of Ken's reach for a home run.

"Hehe." Manuel let out a small chuckle after seeing the despairing looks on the Japanese players faces. There was nothing more satisfying for him than seeing such expressions.

The Japanese team were forced to watch as he jogged around the bases, chuckling to himself.

Meanwhile, Daichi approached the mound to talk with Kei. He could tell that the guy was annoyed, but he wanted to reassure him.

"Don't worry about that hit, your pitches are sharp. In fact, that one was probably your best pitch so far." Daichi said earnestly.

"Hah, telling me that my pitch that got smacked was my best one is just too cruel." Kei said, slightly self-deprecatingly.

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah yeah, don't worry about me I'm fine." Kei said, giving a shooing motion.

Daichi let out a hollow chuckle and shook his head.

'Man, the soft ego's of these pitchers...!' He lamented on his way back to the plate.

He wasn't wrong. Every game for a catcher would involve having to babysit their pitcher and make him feel good about himself. Not everyone could pull off such a thing.

"Batting 4th, 2nd base, Jorge."

Japan were not out of the woods yet. The 2nd twin, and arguably the better batter was up next to the plate.

Like his twin brother, Jorge had the same wide shoulders and dangerous aura about him. Yet he was wearing a large grin on his face.

"Yo, call for that same pitch." He said to Daichi in English.

"Huh?"

The only thing that Daichi understood was the word pitch since he couldn't speak English.

"The. Same. Pitch." Jorge reiterated, talking slowly as if that would help him understand what he was saying.

"Alright, no more chatting." The umpire said, warning Jorge. He didn't want to deal with any inflammatory remarks or trash talking at the plate.

"Tsk, damn Jap's." He muttered under his breath. Thankfully for him, it was out of the umpire's earshot.

If Ken was there to hear his words, he probably would have got right in the guy's face. Japanese players were often looked down upon for their lack of athleticism, particularly in baseball and other active sports.

Daichi couldn't tell what the guy was saying, yet he felt a wave of annoyance for some reason. He locked gazes with Kei and suddenly felt fired up.

'I won't let this guy touch the ball.' He thought.

Kei entered his wind up and kicked his leg out, sending his arm whipping out. The ball was sent flying towards the outside where Daichi's glove was waiting.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

"Nice pitch!"

Daichi felt some heat on the ball. This paired with the fiery expression on Kei's face told him all he needed to know.

'This guy is fired up. Let's keep this going.'

The next ball was a slider which broke down and inside.

DING

Jorge managed to get his bat on the ball, but it went foul, flying along the ground outside 1st base. Yet despite hitting it, Japan were once again ahead in the count at 0-2.

Daichi sent a side-along glance at Jorge whose grin had already worn off.

'Heh, not so smug now are you?' He thought inwardly.

Yet things changed after the next ball.

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

Chapter 366 - 366: Pinch (2)

WHOOOOSH

DOOONG

This time, Jorge held nothing back as he smacked the leather off the two-seam fastball which broke inside. The ball soared into the air, its destination already apparent.

In a flashy display, Jorge turned his gaze to Daichi and let out a wide grin before flipping his bat onto the ground.

"Too weak."

With that, he let out a laugh and jogged onwards to complete his victory lap. The Cuban bench roared out in cheers after seeing the display.

Coach Takashi frowned. He didn't appreciate the showboating, though he understood that they were currently in a pinch.

"What do you think Coach Takagi?" He asked, his arms crossed in front of him.

Chris was silent for a little while as he observed the field. He saw that Kei was watching as Jorge jogged around the bases, his expression fiery.

"I don't think we need to make any drastic moves yet." He said after a while.

"Mmm. What's your reasoning?"

"Well, if we replace Daichi, we're losing a big tool on offense." Chris said matter-of-factly.

Coach Takashi nodded, "I agree. I'll leave the conversation with Daichi to you." He said simply.

With the additional home run from Jorge, the game was now 2-0 in favor of Cuba. The next batter appeared but was quickly taken out in 3 strikes, putting an end to the inning.

"3 outs, changeover."

The Japan squad marched off the field, their expressions rather grim. Even though they had been aware of how good the Lopez twins were, getting smacked for two solo home runs in the first innings was not what they expected.

Ken was eyeing the mound even as they walked in, yet he had a feeling that it wasn't Kei's fault for the situation.

Daichi could be seen gritting his teeth in frustration as he returned to the dugout.

"Wait here." Chris said simply, tapping his son on the shoulder.

"Ah... Okay."

As Riku and Masayuki grabbed their helmet and bat, Chris pulled Daichi aside from the others. His expression was stern, yet he placed his arm around his son.

"We need you to pick up your game Daichi. If you keep playing like this then we'll be forced to substitute you out."

Daichi's expression flickered a little. He felt a little exasperated, particularly since he thought that it wasn't entirely his fault.

"I know what you're thinking, and you should certainly keep it to yourself, especially in front of the Head Coach. You seem to have forgotten that Coach Takashi was a catcher himself for many years." Chris added.

Yet this didn't do much other than sour Daichi's expression further.

"Why did you keep calling for inside pitches?"

"Eh?"

Daichi wasn't sure to begin with. He had only been thinking of sending difficult pitches in order to make it harder for the Lopez twins to hit the ball. He knew that as long as the bat made contact, it would go a long way.

"I'm trying to take advantage of the lefty match up." He said simply.

Chris let out a small sigh and shook his head.

"Do you think that the Lopez twins haven't faced a lefty pitcher before? They're part of the top 10 High School prospects in the Nation. You can't tell me you thought such an advantage would be enough?"

"I... I don't know." He admitted frankly.

If anything, he felt rather attacked in this moment. If it weren't for the fact that he knew his father well, he might have lashed out in frustration.

Chris patted him on the shoulder, trying to cheer him up.

"Use the strike zone and don't rely on such petty things like a left arm advantage, these guys are too good for that. Trust your skills and take charge." He said, a smile forming on his face.

Daichi's eyes widened, as if he finally got the message. He had been so caught up in trying to make the most of the left handed pitcher that he had forgone most of what he'd learned this past year as a catcher.

It wasn't Kei's fault that they were behind in the first inning, it was due to him being easy to read. If the batter knew what kind of pitches were coming, then it was no surprise if they could hit them easily.

'Use the strike zone...' He said inwardly.

"Thanks Dad." Daichi said, his expression turning softer. He could feel the trust that his father had in him to perform, giving him the will to not let him down.

"Alright good. Don't worry, your team has your back." Chris said, sending him a wink.

DONG!

A moment later, the two swiveled their heads as Riku sent a ball into the outfield between the two players. He sped along the lane and rounded first before sliding onto 2nd base gracefully.

'That's right... The game has only just begun. We've still got plenty of time to come back.' Daichi said inwardly, gripping his fist tightly.

Ken saw Daichi's expression as he walked over and let out a sigh of relief. From his viewpoint in the outfield he wasn't particularly sure what was going on, but he could tell that something was off.

Thankfully, his father seemed to set things right with his brother.

"Batting 2nd, Center outfield, Masayuki."

Masayuki set his feet and lifted his bat, moving his gaze towards the large pitcher on the mound. The guy was one of those top-heavy pitchers who held a lot of power in their arm, yet lacked athleticism.

As he set his eyes on the pitcher, he could see Riku to the left who had taken a lead towards 3rd base. The guy had his usual wide grin on his face, making Masayuki let out a grunt of annoyance.

The pitcher entered his wind up and sent the ball flying towards the open glove of the catcher.

Masayuki held out his bat, intending to bunt the ball.

"Ah bunt!"

He forced both the pitcher and the guy on first base to run forward before he pulled the bat back and stood up straight before the ball sailed into the glove of the catcher.

"Strike."

"T-Third!"

Sergio at short stop yelled out, pointing towards third base and trying to alert the catcher.

"Damn it!"

By the time the catcher got into position to throw the ball, Riku was already in the midst of his slide onto 3rd base.

"Whoa! Nice steal Riku!"

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

Chapter 367 - 367: Masterful Play's (1)

Riku stood upon 3rd base grinning ear to ear. He'd played with Masayuki enough to have such a chemistry built up between them.

"Hahaha, the old bait and switch!" He yelled out triumphantly, sending an emphatic thumbs up to the captain in the batters box.

Masayuki merely shook his head and promptly ignored the fellow. In his mind, there was no point in celebrating until they converted the run.

Gustavo the pitcher felt his eye twitch in irritation. While he couldn't understand what the Japanese players were saying, he was sure that it was nothing good.

"Such petty tricks." He said spitting on the ground.

His eyes burned with a renewed fire as he stared down at Masayuki.

'Hehe, looks like he's fired up.' Masayuki thought with a grin.

Gustavo coiled his large body before firing out a blazing fastball towards the plate. There was no doubt that he had successfully pissed him off with his previous fake bunt.

Yet as if to rub it in once more, Masayuki held out his bat again as if he was going to bunt.

'Hah, you can't fool me this time.' He thought with a grin.

DING

This time, Masayuki didn't pull back his bat at the last moment, successfully performing a push bunt towards first base.

"S-Squeeze!"

Gustavo who had hesitated after thinking it was a fake out, was slow to react as he tried to run and cover first base. The Japanese captain was like a shooting star as he blitzed his way towards first.

Riku had already begun his sprint towards home plate before the ball had made contact. His faith in his fellow teammate was on full display as he put on the afterburners and sailed across the plate to secure Japan's first run.

"First!"

By the time the 1st base fielder collected the ball, he heard the catcher call to throw it to first. He quickly turned around in one swift motion throwing the ball at the same time.

"Ah!"

It was only when he let go of the ball that he realized Gustavo who was meant to be covering his base was still a few steps behind.

The ball sailed past the runner and flew into the outfield since there was no one to catch it at first base.

"Go Go Go!"

Masayuki pinned his ears back and rounded first base after seeing the errant ball fly past him. He didn't hesitate to continue his run, trusting the words of the first base coach.

The Cuban team was thrown into turmoil as the right outfielder sprinted towards the overthrown ball.

By the time he had recovered the ball, Masayuki was already standing upon 2nd base and recovering his breath.

"Holy crap!" Ken couldn't believe his eyes after seeing the two veterans play around with the Cuban team. It was like they had everyone in the palm of their hand.

Although it might seem like Masayuki was the maestro in this situation, the play wouldn't have been possible if both he and Riku didn't trust one another.

It wasn't just Ken that was in awe of the play. Those who had yet to see the lead-off duo together were just as impressed.

"Nice run Riku!"

As Riku walked triumphantly into the dugout, he received plenty of high fives and pats on the helmet. Of course the guy lapped up all the praise gracefully, his trademark grin never leaving his face.

In only a few pitches, Japan's morale had been restored.

On the other hand, Cuba weren't doing so well.

"Gustavo! What the hell was that man?" Rogelio the first base fielder was incensed since the guy had not returned in time to cover 1st.

Gustavo who was just as pissed off as Rogelio, kicked the dirt in annoyance.

"So it's my fault!? Why didn't you look before you threw it to first you idiot?"

Tensions were running high between the two, so much so that it seemed like a fight could break out in the next moment.

That is when one of the Lopez twins came forward and put an end to it.

"Shut up you two and move on. What's done is done." His voice was deep and full of annoyance.

Hearing this, the two swallowed their grievances and quickly agreed. This just went to show how much they respected the skills of the guy. Or perhaps they were intimidated by his size.

Either way, both Gustavo and Rogelio returned to their positions so the game could take place once again.

Hiroki who had been patiently waiting for his turn to bat let out a small chuckle. He felt any nerves disappear after seeing the display of animosity between the Cuban players.

"Batting 3rd, 1st base, Hiroki"

Daichi was already waiting on the side of the field and warming up as he watched the previous debacle. It was obvious that tensions were running high in the Cuban team, which gave him a sense of vindication.

Hiroki gripped his bat tightly, waiting for the pitch. Unknowingly he had a grin on his lips as he gazed at the pitcher.

PAH

"Ball."

The first pitch was inside, forcing him to back off the plate in order to avoid getting hit. Usually something like this would make a person annoyed or frustrated, yet Hiroki couldn't hide the smile on his face.

This only further fueled the anger of Gustavo on the mound. He had been wanting to wipe off the annoying expression upon the Japanese players face, yet he seemed unaffected.

WHOOSH

DING

"Foul"

The next ball was sent flying along the ground into the foul zone past 1st base.

DING

"Foul"

DING

"Foul"

Hiroki was starting to get into his rhythm, hitting 3 foul balls in a row. His actions seemed to annoy the pitcher even further who was already on the edge.

Jorge Lopez on 2nd base frowned. He had not been happy with Gustavo's attitude in this game and could feel like something was about to happen.

It seemed like his intuition was spot on.

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

- Chapter 368 - 368: Masterful Plays (2)

Chapter 368 - 368: Masterful Plays (2)

DOOOONG

Hiroki swung with all of his might, hitting the ball dead center. The sound reverberated through the arena, causing a wave of cheers to follow.

"ORYAHH!"

Ken shouted out loud, sounding exactly like their captain Makoto. He couldn't help himself after seeing the familiar sight of Hiroki hitting a bomb.

Hiroki laughed out loud midway towards first base, feeling the tension leave his body. He watched the ball soar into right field for a while, confirming that it was indeed a home run.

Gustavo began to seethe on the mound, especially after hearing Hiroki let out a laugh. He gripped his glove tightly and tried to restrain himself as he watched the guy jog around the bases.

As soon as he saw the guy past 2nd base, he saw a pair of eyes staring back at him, causing him to freeze in place.

Jorge looked at him as if he was a piece of trash on the side of the road.

His anger lost its focus, causing him to reflect. Without saying a word, Jorge was able to snap Gustavo out of his dangerous frame of mind and bring him back.

He sent a wordless apology to Jorge before trying to compose himself.

The Cuban coach was already looking for a replacement within their ranks, yet he held his tongue upon seeing the teen regain his composure.

It would look real bad if he were to switch out his starting pitcher in the first inning, particularly after he'd only thrown 5 pitches. That would be like throwing in the towel and giving their opponents a morale boost.

'I'll give him till the end of the inning to shape up.' He thought inwardly as he adjusted his cap.

"Nice hit Hiroki!" Masayuki was waiting at home plate for the guy, sending a blitzing high five his way.

"Haha, thanks Captain."

He had a large grin on his face as he made his way back to the dugout. Yet it quickly changed once a rain of slaps atop his helmet ensued.

Ken sent him a wicked grin as he stood by the side.

"Feels like home right?"

Hiroki froze in place before smiling. If he was being perfectly honest, he felt rather nervous coming to another country to play the sport he loved.

Ken's imitation of Makoto's catchphrase and the slaps on his helmet reminded him of Yokohama. It was likely that Ken had told the team to do so while he was running around the bases.

A surge of emotion rose up from within him at this thought and he looked at Ken in another light.

Despite being younger than him, Ken sometimes acted like he was much older and more mature. Times like this reminded Hiroki of just how cognizant and aware Ken was of those around him.

His train of thought was broken as the announcer called up the next batter to the box.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Daichi."

Daichi stepped into the batters box, his face filled with determination. He wanted to get back at the Cuban team who had managed to steal two home runs off him earlier.

Despite seeing that the pitcher had already calmed down from his earlier outburst, he knew that they were in a great position to score some more runs.

Japan were currently leading 3-2 and still had no outs in the first inning.

Gustavo stared down the lane at his catcher, his face now showing no emotion. He nodded in the next moment, accepting the lead.

He wound up and sent the ball whipping out from his arm.

Daichi's eyes inspected the pitch thoroughly as he made some mental calculations.

'Outside and low, plenty of spin. I can hit it!'

He easily identified the pitch as a slider and planted his left foot before swinging wide to chase the ball to the outside.

DONG

"Tch."

Daichi clicked his tongue, yet threw the bat and ran as fast as he could. The ball sailed towards the the back fence, but the angle and carry was not high enough to make it over for a home run.

In fact, the ball bounced off the bottom of the wall and rolled back onto the field to where the right outfielder was waiting.

"Third!"

For some reason, instead of stopping at 2nd base, Daichi accelerated. He flew past the second base, doing well to not disrupt his pace as he stepped on the bag.

Even the third base coach was surprised that he continued his run. He watched as the ball was thrown towards him, quickly giving the sign to slide as he watched Daichi approach at top speed.

'I can make it...'

Daichi pushed through, removing all distractions from his mind in that moment. He dived forward, propelling himself along the ground into a slide, reaching out as if his life depended on it.

And then he felt it. The bag and the tag on his arm at almost the exact same time.

Both Manuel and Daichi looked up at the umpire who was just a few feet away from the play, their eyes filled with question.

"S-Safe!"

The umpire extended his arms to the side and shouted safe after a few moments.

The call was accompanied by a cheer from the Japan dugout and a groan of protest by the Cuban players on the field.

"You can't be serious! There's no way that he was safe." Manuel said animatedly. His large stature seemed threatening, yet he kept his distance from the umpire.

It was clear that he had a lot more self control than some others on the team.

However, the umpire shook his head and ignored the player. Once he'd made a decision, he wouldn't take it back.

Perhaps if this was a Men's National Team match they would have instant replay available, but that was not the case now.

Daichi let out a sigh of relief as he got off the ground, making sure to keep at least one part of his body touching the bag at all times.

Afterwards, he sent a grin to Ken who was walking onto the field before turning his attention to a certain girl in the dugout.

Ken shook his head and let out a hollow chuckle.

'What a show off.'

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

Chapter 369 - 369: Rough Play (1)

"Batting 5th, 2nd base, Ichiro."

The stoic and serious Ichiro stepped into the batters box, no hint of emotion on his features. He turned his gaze to Daichi on 3rd base briefly before turning his attention to Gustavo on the mound.

While it might not seem like it, Ichiro was evaluating his options. He wasn't fast like Riku or Masayuki so a squeeze was likely out of the equation.

Since there was no outs, there was another way to secure an easy run.

Cuba seemed to have come to the same conclusion as the outfielders slowly made their way closer to the infield.

'I won't make it easy for you.' Gustavo said in his heart as he wound up for the pitch.

Ichiro kept his stance as he coldly surveyed the pitch.

WHOOOSH

DONG

The ball soared high into the center outfield, much higher than anything that had been hit today. It slowly floated in the air, giving the fielder plenty of time to get under the ball.

Daichi looked at the ball briefly before setting his feet on the bag, ready to rush towards home base at the right moment.

His peripherals were on the 3rd base coach who was ready to give the signal.

After what seemed like far too long, the ball finally dropped into the hands of Noel in the outfield.

"Go Go Go!!"

The 3rd base coach yelled, prompting Daichi to kick off the bag and enter a sprint towards home plate. His eyes honed in on his destination, phasing out any distractions.

Noel caught the ball in rhythm, taking a few steps forward before delivering a rocket-like throw back to home plate, hoping to beat the runner.

Guillermo the catcher moved in front of home plate, waiting for the perfect time to try and make the tag out. As he assessed Daichi's speed and the velocity of the ball coming his way, he knew that it would be close.

Daichi spotted the ball coming into his peripheral vision as he quickly approached the plate and his mind started to work overtime.

Since he was a catcher, he knew what he would do in such a situation if he needed to cut off a runner heading towards home plate.

As he thought this, the scene unfolded in front of him. Guillermo leaned his body into the running lane with his arm still held out in order to catch the ball.

Since he had a wide frame, his body was taking up the real estate that Daichi needed to pass through.

It was a slippery slope at the business end of home plate when it came to defending the base. Oftentimes catchers would toe the line, bending the rules in order to prevent the run.

Daichi was now at a crossroads. If he were to go around the catcher, there was a large chance that it would buy enough time for him to get tagged, stopping Japan's momentum.

However, if the guy was in possession of the ball and he hit him, he was as good as out. Of course, that was only if the catcher could keep hold of the ball.

These thoughts happened in the span of a single second and soon it was the time to act.

"MOVE!"

Daichi screamed out as if to give a final warning to the catcher who was in his way. Yet even if Guillermo could understand Japanese, he wouldn't have listened anyway.

THUD

Daichi lowered his left shoulder, bumping straight into the center of the catchers chest. Since the guy had his arm raised in order to catch the ball, his body was wide open for the frontal collision.

Guillermo let out a grunt, feeling the air within his lungs get forcefully removed from his body in one swift moment. The ball which had almost reached his glove was swatted away as a result from the collision.

Another thud sounded and dirt particles were kicked up as his large frame fell upon the ground. The secondary impact caused his vision to swim, followed by the pain of getting laid out.

Daichi shook off the impact using his broad shoulders, trucking his way through to home plate like he was delivering a touch down. The moment he stepped on the plate, his body reacted on its own.

"YEEEEAAHHH!"

Daichi felt a sudden primal urge to yell out rush over him, one which he didn't suppress. He raised his arms in triumph, feeling a dump of adrenaline enter his body from the stellar play.

The Japanese dugout were stunned, not even able to react until a cheer from the bench sounded out.

"YAY DAICHI!"

The Japanese players and coaching staff all turned their head at once to see Miho jumping up and down in excitement as she cheered his name.

'Eh?'

Coach Takashi seemed the most bewildered as he stared at his beloved Granddaughter. However, he was quickly distracted once the cheering ensued from the rest of the players.

"Holy crap! What is this the NFL?"

"That dude got bulldozed"

"Nice work Daichi!"

Ken couldn't believe his eyes. He had never seen Daichi act so violently, particularly yelling and screaming like that after the play.

However, his shock was quickly overwhelmed by the pure joy he felt afterwards.

Since he was already on the field waiting to bat next, he had seen the entire play up close. He rushed forward and celebrated, slapping his brother on the back a few times with joy.

"Dude that was sick! How are you even standing after that hit?" Ken asked in wonder.

Daichi grinned widely before leaning closer to his brother.

"That really hurt... Don't tell Miho I said that."

Ken was taken aback for a moment before letting out a peel of laughter.

Before he could usher Daichi back to the dugout, Guillermo managed to get to his feet, his expression livid.

"What the hell was that!? He clearly stopped me from catching the ball!"

The umpire watched on coldly as the Cuban catcher approached him and began to protest the play.

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

Chapter 370 - 370: Rough Play (2)

His expression looked as if he was staring at an idiot, to the point where he didn't even feel the need to explain himself.

"You were obstructing the plate and you didn't even have the ball yet. Are you sure you don't have a concussion from that hit?" He replied in exasperation, not forgetting to add some sass at the end.

"PFFT"

Ken felt his body seize as he heard the umpires words. He did his best not to break out into laughter and risk escalating the situation. Yet his antics didn't go unnoticed.

Guillermo felt his face go red in anger. He couldn't lash out at the umpire otherwise he could risk getting thrown out of the game for good.

He set his eyes on Ken for a moment, as if to burn his features into his mind.

'We'll see who is laughing soon.' Guillermo said in his heart as he returned to his position.

"Batting 6th, Right outfield, Ken."

As Ken stepped into the batters box, Daichi did his best not to limp on his way back to the dugout. Upon arrival, he was met with lots of praise, particularly from his father who seemed fired up.

"Ohohoho my boy!" He could hardly contain his excitement as he shook Daichi by the shoulders.

'I'm dying...'

Still not recovered from the earlier collision, Daichi did his best to endure the thrashing around of his father and teammates in the vicinity.

Amid his rendezvous with the team, there were a pair of eyes that looked at him suspiciously from the side with a burning gaze. As if feeling his life in peril, Daichi turned his head slowly only to see Coach Takashi scrutinizing him.

Daichi let out a gulp, not knowing what was happening.

The Head Coach slowly approached him and placed his hands on each of his shoulders while staring at him intently.

'Oh no... has he found out?' Daichi despaired inwardly, his mind already thinking the worst.

Yet his worries were quickly forgotten with the next words out of the coach's mouth.

"Miho, grab some ice. Daichi's shoulder is inflamed."

"Yes Grandfather."

Meanwhile on the field, Ken was in the hot seat as he awaited the first pitch to come his way. Cuba had used a timeout in order for Guillermo to catch his breath after the collision.

Ken could feel some animosity in the air for some reason, making him high on alert. There was a part of him that believed they would try some funny business in order to get back at their team.

It was currently 4-2 in favor of Japan and they were only in the first inning and with 2 more outs remaining, they still had an opportunity to score.

'Let's see if I can hit another home run.' He thought with a grin.

Finally, play resumed once again.

Gustavo's eyes widened briefly after receiving the sign from his catcher. However, his face turned up into a grin a moment later before he let out a nod.

In one swift movement, he lifted his arms and began his pitching action, using his large upper body to send a roaring fastball towards the plate.

Ken felt his body tingle the moment the ball left the pitchers hand.

'W-What the hell!?!'

Instinctively, Ken leaned back with all of his might, falling to the ground in the process.

The ball which was flying at at least 150km/h, shot straight past him, narrowly missing his chest on the way down.

"Oops. Sorry the ball slipped!" Gustavo yelled out, however his expression said otherwise.

"Hey, if you do that crap again, I'm ejecting you!" The umpire was having none of it, quickly sending a direct warning to the pitcher.

"Oi that was on purpose!"

"These dirty players..."

The Japan bench were livid, as was the few members of the audience. Even they could see that the actions of the Cuban team were blatant.

The Head Coach of the Cuban team felt a headache coming on. He massaged his glabella and resisted the urge to lose his cool. It was only the first inning, yet this kind of crap was happening.

Ken got back to his feet and dusted off his pants, doing his best to keep his cool. In reality, he was super pissed off right now.

After being hit by an errant pitch only a few weeks ago, he did not take such things lightly. If he hadn't have had the Recovery Elixir back then, there was a large possibility he could have suffered brain damage.

It was also a one time use item per individual, meaning he could no longer use it again on himself despite having one in his inventory.

"You think this is funny?" Ken asked in an icy tone.

"Eh? You speak English?" Guillermo was stunned as he heard the fluent americanized accent from the teen.

"Answer my question."

"Tch, I don't know what you are talking about. The ball slipped out of his hands." After being ignored, Guillermo gave a half-hearted response.

Hearing this, Ken gripped his bat tightly before turning his attention towards the pitcher, his expression cold.

[Limit Break activated. All grades increased by 2]

Mika's monotonous voice rang within his mind before he felt his body fill with strength. It seemed like the system had felt his rage and decided now was the time to go all out.

Ken did not move, focusing all of his attention onto the pitcher.

In the dugout, Daichi now had a bag of ice on his left shoulder. He looked onto the field with a hint of worry on his features after seeing the blatant attempt at a Beanball.

The scene of Ken unconscious in the batters box was still fresh in his mind, causing some anxiety to surface. If he felt such a way, then how did Ken feel right now? S

Gustavo entered his wind up once more, sending the ball towards the strike zone for real this time. There was only so many times he could get away with such a stunt, so he focused on trying to strike the guy out.

Yet Ken had other plans.

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

Chapter 371 - 371: Go for Broke! (1)

Ken felt a serene calmness overcome him as he watched the ball leave the pitchers fingertips. His mind was fully focused as it took in all the information available.

Spin, velocity, trajectory.

All of these details which should have been almost impossible to calculate were being processed by his insane mental capacity. Time seemed to slow down as he analyzed the ball in flight, even counting how many stitches there were.

Ken felt a headache from behind his eyes, similar to the one he had upon the increase of his mental capacity. It was a sign that his brain was being overloaded with too much information.

Yet he didn't care.

Like an unfeeling computer, he processed the information and made the appropriate actions.

Planting his foot, Ken rotated his body, using both his leg and core muscles to increase the torque of his swing.

The sound of a typhoon approaching entered the ears of Guillermo the catcher, causing him to flinch in response. To his horror, a metal bat came flying into his vision with murderous intent.

He froze for a moment, barely able to process what he was seeing.

DOOOOOONG!

An almighty sound reverberated from the batters box, spreading out onto the field. The ball seemed to have met its match as it was catapulted into the air and sent flying.

Ken watched the ball's flight for a moment before turning to the catcher, his eyes still blazing.

Then without a word he dropped the bat gently onto the ground and began his jog around the bases, not even taking a second glance at the ball.

"W-WHOA!"

"HOMER! Let's go!"

Chris pumped his fist a few times in glee before he was able to collect himself. Despite not being the first home run that he'd seen Ken hit in the World Cup, this one was a bomb worth celebrating.

"Holy crap what a monster..." Kei muttered in disbelief. He couldn't imagine just how much practice would be needed to be so good at both batting and pitching.

The outfielder did his best to track down the ball, even jumping up on the wall, yet it just sailed out of his reach. Perhaps if he had reacted a little sooner then he might have been able to get a hand to it.

Though he was a little perplexed. The sound of the bat hitting the ball was louder than any home run he'd heard before, yet for some reason it didn't carry as far.

Unaware of their thoughts, Ken jogged silently around the bases, finally managing to cool down his head a little. With the activation of Limit Break, his mental grade had shot up to SSS-, giving him a much larger capacity.

Unknowingly, he had focused all of his attention on the ball and received an influx of information.

'I need to be careful in the future...' He thought.

While it was obviously a great ability, it put far too much stress on him mentally. Until Ken had gotten used to the sensation he decided to use it sparingly.

As he rounded 2nd base, Jorge Lopez followed him with his gaze.

"Nice hit." He said simply.

Ken didn't even spare him a glance, leaving him with two words.

"I know."

Jorge was taken aback a little, yet he let out a laugh in response.

"Cocky bastard."

Despite saying so, he had a big grin on his face. He couldn't exactly be upset at the guy considering what had happened, not to mention he had been talking smack earlier.

It seemed as if he had accepted Ken to be someone at the same level as him, or at least someone to take note of.

As Ken returned back to home plate, one of the fans in the audience made their way over to the stands in order to look for the ball. It was a teenager who picked up the ball and suddenly frowned.

"Huh? This ball is broken?"

"That's my son!" A shrieking voice came out from the audience in broken English as she cheered loudly.

"Mom?"

He moved his gaze only to see his mother decked out in white and red colors with the Japanese flag in her hand. She waved emphatically after seeing him turn towards her.

"Hi Kenny! Nice hit!" Yuki yelled with glee.

Instead of being embarrassed, Ken's features lit up with a smile. Whatever bad mood he was in earlier was washed away in an instant as he waved back to her before returning to the dugout.

Chris had entirely blown his cover as Ken and Daichi's father as he poured praises on Ken without regard for his image.

"Hehe that's my boy!" He said with a grin.

"Bro that hit was awesome! What did you say to the catcher?" Riku was one of the first to mob Ken excitedly.

"Ah nothing at all." Ken replied, feeling a little caught off guard by the question.

"Eh? So you just stared at him? Hahahaha! Serves him right." Riku broke into laughter as if he'd heard the funniest joke in the world.

"I never thought you would be one to do such a thing Ken."

"Ah!"

Ken jumped in fright as the gloomy Kuro popped up right next to him with a look of disapproval plastered on his face.

"No way, you should have said something cool like 'Better luck next time'" Aki piped up, throwing his 2 cents into the conversation.

"It wouldn't have mattered, the guy can't understand Japanese anyway." Masayuki said from his seat on the bench.

"Ken speaks English, didn't you know that?" Hiroki added.

"Eh!?"

This time everyone turned to Ken with a look of shock and adoration.

"I amu pleased to meetu YOU."

Aki couldn't help himself, saying the only phrase he knew in English.

Ken felt the headache which he had worked hard to get rid of begin to rear its head again. That was when he saw Daichi looking at him from the other side of the bench.

"I'm gonna go sit down for a bit." He said abruptly, squeezing past the group.

"AKI! You're up to bat damn it." Coach Takashi roared out.

"Oh no!" he replied in English.

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

Chapter 372 - 372: Go for Broke! (2)

Ken ignored the hasty movements behind him and took a seat next to his brother and Miho on the bench. The effects of Limit Break wore off in that moment, filling him with a feeling of weakness that spread through his body.

"Man, I can't believe those guys threw a Beanball at you."

Daichi was the first to speak, his tone showing his disapproval.

"Yeah, I'm not gonna lie, it really pissed me off." Ken admitted, staring at the palm of his hand.

"Hey, at least you have good reflexes though." Said Miho from the other side of Daichi.

Before Ken could respond, he saw Miho's eyes flash briefly before she got up from the bench.

"Ken you look so pale, what happened? Are you injured?" Her intelligent green eyes stared at him with concern.

At the word injury, Daichi's ears perked up as he turned to his brother with a hint of anxiety. Like a mother, he quickly inspected Ken's body, going so far as to lift his arms and poke him everywhere.

"S-Stop it!" Ken said, sending a pinch to his brothers love handles.

"I'm fine I'm fine." He muttered.

'It's probably the side effect of Limit Break that made me look pale.' Ken thought.

He was quite surprised that Miho was able to tell at a glance that something was wrong with him, despite only interacting with her for a few days. The only problem was, would she go and tell her Grandfather that something was wrong with him.

'Damn it, I need to tell a convincing lie otherwise I might get taken out of the game for something so trivial.'

The side effect would only last for a maximum 5 minutes, so there was no need to worry there.

Miho looked unconvinced, turning her gaze to Daichi as if to confirm something. Of course Daichi was even more worried than her. Together they looked at him with anxious eyes.

"Tsk, I'm okay. Facing that pitch brought back some memories that I'd rather forget." He spoke the first thing that came into his mind.

While this was in fact true, it wasn't the reason why he looked so pale right now. But hopefully this was enough of a tale that the other two would run with it.

Miho tilted her head in question before a look of understanding appeared on her face. She had been watching Koshien closely and knew exactly what had happened in the semi-final of that match.

"Ah! You were the catcher for Osaka!" Miho said in surprise, pointing at Daichi.

"Eh!?" This time it was Ken's turn to be surprised. How had these two been chatting so much yet this point was left out.

"Yes?" Daichi was flabbergasted.

"Wait, what do you guys even talk about?" Ken asked, a mystified expression on his face.

Ever since they arrived at Tokyo University for training, the two had been messaging each other every night. If he compared it to himself and Ai, there was quite a difference between them.

Both Daichi and Miho blushed slightly at his question, causing his expression to morph once more.

"W-We just talk about stuff, ya know." Daichi said evasively.

"Yeah, just stuff..." Miho added.

"Like when you'll get married and how many kids you want right?"

"Eh?"

If their faces weren't red before, they certainly were now. Steam could practically be seen coming off of Miho's cheeks as she stammered, trying to eek out a response.

"K-Kids... Marriage... Kids... Marriage."

Daichi brain seemed to have overloaded from Ken's words, to the point where he was stuck in a loop. It didn't look like he was going to break out of it on his own either.

"W-W-What are you saying? Ha haha ha. We haven't talked about that kinda s-stuff."

Ken smiled widely as he saw the display.

'Ah, diversion successful.' He thought inwardly with glee.

"Strikeout!"

The sound of the umpire yelling from the field brought him back to reality. He saw Aki walk back into the dugout with a flustered expression on his face.

"Ah, the hero returns from another successful adventure." Riku proclaimed, resulting in a few chuckles from the players.

"Damn it. Looks like they were so worried about me that they brought out the secret weapon." Aki complained before setting down his helmet.

"If you're talking about the slider, that's the pitch I sent into the stands."

Hiroki was brutal as he broke down Aki's attempt at saving face. It was clear that the guy was not going to hold back when it came down to such things.

"Hahaha!"

Riku felt his sides hurt from laughing so much, forcing him to almost fall onto the ground in pain.

Aki let out a grunt of disapproval as he ran his hand through his shaved hair.

"I see how it is..."

"I'll be watching you buddy." He stated, using his two fingers to point to his eyes before pointing at Hiroki.

These words caused Hiroki to pale significantly as if he'd seen a ghost. Hearing this reminded him that Aki slept with his eyes open, even talking in his sleep.

He looked around in panic, finally seeing his lifeline sitting on the bench with a grin on his face.

"B-Big bro!"

Ken's face turned into one of disgust after seeing the groveling face of Hiroki coming towards him.

"Strikeout! 3 outs, changeover!"

"Thank goodness..." Ken said, quickly standing up from his seat.

Unfortunately the side effects of his Limit Break skill had not yet worn off. But if he had a choice between dealing with the emotional Hiroki and the muscle fatigue, he would choose the latter every time.

With deft movements, he sidestepped his friend and headed towards the stairs and onto the field. Not looking back, he jogged out into the outfield, feeling his sluggish muscles protest in response.

'2 minutes... I just need to survive another 2 minutes.'

By the time he arrived in position, that number had already dropped.

It was the start of 2nd inning finally with Japan in the lead 5-2

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

Chapter 373 - 373: Substitution (1)

"Strikeout"

"Strikeout"

"Strikeout! 3 outs, changeover!"

Ken had been worried for nothing. After receiving the pep talk from his father, Daichi was back to his old ways, conducting the pitches as if he were a maestro behind the scenes.

The three Cuban batters were struck out in succession, not even able to get a whiff of the ball.

"Pitcher change for Cuba. Antonio Parra will be replacing Gustavo Torez on the mound."

As the Cuban team walked onto the field, the announcer called the substitution. Gustavo who had given up 5 runs in the first inning was quickly replaced by another teen with long limbs.

Surprisingly, this pitcher was not someone that the coach's were familiar with.

"Antonio Parra? Do you know him?" Coach Takashi asked, his hand running through his beard in thought.

Chris shook his head, even with his resources he had not heard of such a player.

"Atsushi, keep your eyes peeled. If you see an opportunity, swing." Chris spoke a few words to Atsushi who was the designated hitter for Kei.

The guy nodded before placing his helmet on top of his perfect bowl cut.

"We'll be careful, don't worry~" Riku added on his way up the stairs.

"Batting 9th, DH, Atsushi."

After walking on the field, Atsushi watched as the new pitcher began his warm up throws. There was nothing out of the ordinary for a while, but as he entered his last few throws, something was very odd.

"Eh?"

Antonio lifted his leg and bent forward, dropping his right shoulder before whipping it out parallel to the ground. The ball flew from a low angle and made a crisp sound as it entered the glove of the catcher.

"Submarine pitcher?" Riku murmured, his face turning a little serious.

These type of pitchers were a nightmare, particularly for batters who used the same dominant arm. Since the ball started so low, it often needed to be thrown above the strike zone.

This meant every ball would sink to some degree. This in conjunction with the spin on the ball, caused many jams and unpredictable courses for the batter.

The style of pitching was rather rare, especially so in Japan. There were only a couple of players who had successfully pitched as a submariner, most notably "Mr. Submarine" Shun Tanaba.

Funnily enough, Shun also held the Japanese record for skipping stones, putting his pitching action to good use.

"Play ball!"

Atsushi stepped into the batters box, his expression mirroring his anxiety. He had never hit against this type of pitcher before, thus it was no surprise that he was worried.

The first pitch came at a tricky angle, causing him to freeze in place. He remembered the coach's advice to keep his eyes peeled, so he decided to let the ball go to the catcher.

PAH

"Strike"

Yet even after watching the ball carefully, he still had no idea what to expect next pitch.

PAH

"Strike"

Atsushi grit his teeth. After only 2 pitches he was already in trouble with 2 strikes. If he continued to monitor the pitches, he'd be sent back to the dugout without getting a chance to swing.

He gripped the bat tightly and narrowed his eyes. It was now or never.

Seeing his body tense up, Guillermo let out a grin.

The next ball came flying towards the strike zone, this time a little lower.

WHOOOSH

PAH

Atsushi's bat flew right over the top of the ball which hand sunk under the strike zone and into the catchers glove.

"Strikeout!"

"Heh, enjoy your lead while it lasts~" Guillermo said playfully. He seemed to be enjoying the flummoxed expression on Atsushi's face.

"Hmph." Atsushi couldn't understand what he said, but he could tell that it wasn't polite.

"Don't mind."

Riku gave his teammate a pat on the back as he walked past. He couldn't blame the guy for not being able to land a hit on the Submarine pitcher, especially after not facing them before.

"Batting 1st, Left outfield, Riku."

As the announcer called his name, Riku shifted his hips and ran on the spot for a moment, limbering up his muscles. Then without a word he stepped into the batters box, confidently placing his gaze onto the pitcher.

"Show me what ya got." He stated, sending a wink to the new pitcher.

Antonio blinked a few times, not expecting such a reception.

"Is this guy hitting on me?" He mumbled, feeling a shiver run down his spine.

After shaking off his discomfort, Antonio sent a glare back at Riku.

"Let's see your expression after you face my pitches." He spat out, gripping the ball tightly in his hand.

After sending a nod to his catcher, he wound up before whipping the ball out sideways. Not matter how many times one saw it, it was truly remarkable.

Riku's lips turned up into a grin before he placed his bat out with two hands.

"B-Bunt?"

He easily sent a push bunt towards 3rd base with the perfect amount of strength before taking off in a flash towards 1st.

Suddenly, his actions before stepping into the batters box made sense. It looked like he had planned on doing so from the start, likely knowing that he'd struggle to hit it otherwise.

Both Antonio and Manuel the 3rd base fielder rushed forward towards the ball. Due to Manuel's size, he was a bit slower to the mark.

The ball teetered on the foul line for a moment, looking like it was going to go out. Yet Antonio didn't wait, scooping up the ball and throwing it to 1st in one swift motion.

However, Riku was too fast. The guy stepped onto first base with nearly a full second to spare thanks to his fast legs.

"Safe!"

"Hehe." Riku couldn't help but let out a self-satisfied grin, turning his gaze to meet the next player up to bat. He stuck out a thumbs up towards Masayuki, his expression screaming "Praise me!"

This seemed to be their usual dynamic.

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

Chapter 374 - 374: Substitution (2)

Of course Masayuki completely ignored the guy, turning his attention to the pitcher who seemed a little shaken from the unexpected play.

'The same thing probably won't work again.' Masayuki thought, his eyes surveying the fielders. They looked alert, ready to pounce on anything that entered the infield.

"Batting 2nd, Center outfield, Masayuki."

Despite feeling the pressure, there was no change in his expression. He faced the pitcher with an almost cold indifference.

Antonio took up his position on the mound once again, doing his best to regain his composure. He had to admit that he'd underestimated the last batter, but that would change now.

He sent a nod to Guillermo behind the plate and began his wind up.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

Masayuki sucked in a cold breath of air after seeing the movement of the pitch.

Submariner pitchers, or sidearm pitchers as some called them, were limited in their pitching arsenal. Due to the action of throwing at such a low angle, most only threw a fastball and a sinker.

It was only the truly great sidearm pitchers that could successfully throw the ball he'd just experienced.

'Slider... This could be a problem.' Masayuki said in his heart, frowning for the first time in the batters box.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"Tch."

Masayuki was forced to leave the plate after only 3 pitches. He had only played against this kind of pitcher a couple of times, yet it was apparent that this guy was much better than those others.

He walked past Hiroki and said a few words.

"Be careful, the ball drops further than you'd think."

"Alright."

Hiroki could already tell that this at-bat would be tough. If even Masayuki struggled to make contact with the ball, he would likely struggle also.

Riku seemed to be a little disappointed after seeing his partner in crime get sent back, though he quickly changed gears.

'Looks like I might have to make some moves myself.' He thought, slowly increasing his lead from first base.

"Batting 3rd, 1st base, Hiroki."

Hiroki stepped into the batters box, coming off a home run in the first inning. Despite this, his confidence was slightly shaken, having to face a sidearm pitcher for the first time in his playing career.

'Let's just see what happens.'

Antonio saw the lead from his catcher and nodded after a few moments, his eyes imperceptibly flashing.

He entered his deep windup and sent the ball slashing towards the outside of the strike zone, it seemed off by a mile.

Hiroki was confused, at least until he saw Riku speeding towards second base in an attempt to make a steal.

'Crap!'

As if planned beforehand, Guillermo was already to his feet, appearing right where the ball was. In one fluid motion he shuffled his feet and sent a bullet to Jorge on 2nd base.

'Not good.'

Riku panicked after seeing the throw from the catcher. He cursed himself for being too hasty and underestimating the Cuban team.

Just because they were up by 3 runs in the 2nd inning, didn't mean that he could treat them as a bunch of pushovers. Unfortunately for Riku, he learned this too late.

By the time he slid towards the bag, Jorge was already bearing down on him with the ball securely tucked in his glove.

Tap

"Out"

"3 outs, changeover."

"Argh damn it."

Riku's grin was wiped off his face, much to the delight of the Cuban National Team who found his expressions to be an eyesore.

"Gotta be quicker than that." Jorge said with a wicked grin.

Of course Riku could not understand the English words being directed at him, though he could sense the intent behind them. However, he wasn't petty, in fact he loved this kind of competitive atmosphere more than anything.

"Let's try it again." He responded in Japanese, his trademark smile reappearing on his face.

Thus the Japanese players returned to the field to start the 3rd inning with the score still 5-2 in favor of Japan.

Kei and Daichi continued their iron defense, successfully preventing the assault of the Cuban batters at the top of the 3rd.

However, Antonio with his sidearm pitching also kept Japan silent, despite some of their best batters coming up to face the pitch. Hiroki, Daichi and Ichiro failed to get a lock onto the ball, going down in succession.

"The real test is coming up." Coach Takashi said, running his hand through his goatee as he often did while deep in thought.

Chris nodded, his eyes focusing on Daichi behind the plate.

The Cuban batting order was starting at number 3, meaning they would be facing both Lopez twins at the start of this inning. If they were to hit big now, it would definitely make things more difficult in the future.

As Manuel stepped into the batters box, Daichi took in a deep breath and settled himself. He needed to do his best right now and hold onto the 3 run lead they accumulated earlier.

While 3 runs didn't sound like much, they had been struggling to get used to the sidearm pitcher. Who knew if they could adjust by the end of the match?

Chris's words echoed in Daichi's head as he adjusted his frame of mind.

[Trust your skills and take charge.]

A flash of determination appeared on his features as he called for the next pitch.

Kei nodded in response before sending a pitch flying towards the open glove behind the plate.

Manuel's eyes narrowed as he watched the ball sail towards him.

'Hah, too easy.'

Within an instant, he twisted his large body and sent a powerful swing towards the ball, intent on destroying its existence.

Daichi's eyes were fixed on the ball as he waited with baited breath.

'Break! BREAK!'

The metal bat and leather ball were on a collision course which would only end with one result, expulsion.

WHOOOOOSH

DING

"Huh?"

Instead of the resonating sound that he'd expected, Manuel froze for a moment. Yet as he saw the ball bounce along the ground in between the first and second bases, he quickly dropped the bat and ran as fast as he could.

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

Chapter 375 - 375: Underestimated (1)

"Right!"

Both Masayuki and Aki shouted from their positions, calling for Ken to field the ball from his position. He quickly sprung into action, chasing down the ball which was headed his way.

For some reason, the ball seemed to be slowing down as it approached, increasing the distance he had to run in order to field it. If it was another runner, there would be no chance of him getting the ball to first in time.

However, Manuel was a big boy and thus running was not his strongest suit.

Ken ran with all of his might and dipped down low to grab the ball before scooping it up in one motion. He did well to keep his balance before sending an accurate throw to Hiroki who already had his glove out ready.

While the action might look easy from an outsiders perspective, picking up the ball in rhythm was quite difficult. Not only did it require outstanding balance and hand eye coordination, it also required a degree of flexibility.

If Ken's physical abilities had not been upgraded, without proper training, he would not be able to pull off such a feat easily.

Hiroki extended his arm as far as he could while still ensuring his back foot was on the base.

Pah

The ball entered the glove at almost the same time Manuel came stampeding past. Everyone on the field was focused on the umpire at first base, waiting for his decision.

"Safe!"

The umpire extended his hands and made the call, much to the disappointment of the Japanese team. In a lot of circumstances, runners were given the priority in the way of a tie, especially without the use of instant replay.

After overrunning the base, Manuel brought his large body to a stop and worked to catch his breath.

"Damn that was close." He muttered.

It wasn't often that he had to run with such urgency, particularly since he was such a big hitter. Thankfully things had gone his way this time.

"Don't mind, you reacted well." Masayuki came over and consoled Ken after the play.

"Thanks, I'm all good." Ken replied honestly.

He would have made it if the ball didn't begin to slow down before it reached him.

"Batting 4th, 2nd base, Jorge"

Unfortunately, the bigger threat was now getting into the batters box. If they were to get a home run now, their hard fought lead would be jeopardized.

Daichi felt a little disappointed that the runner had gotten onto base, but there was no point in thinking about it now. He needed to use all of his focus on the biggest threat on the Cuban team.

"Hmm, looks like you've got some tricks up your sleeve." Jorge said with a grin painted on his face. He hadn't expected his brother to hit such a poor shot, especially against Japan's battery.

Daichi ignored him, his mind going into overdrive.

The last ball was a two-seam fastball which broke at the very last moment. If it wasn't for Manuel's ridiculous hitting power, the ball should have been an easy grounder to one of the infielders for an out.

Since Jorge was even more dangerous than his brother, they needed to tread carefully.

Kei received his instructions from Daichi and nodded. He too wanted to make up for their last battle and send this guy back to the dugout.

He wound up before kicking his right leg and letting the ball fly. It was a 140km/h cutter which broke away from the left handed batter with pace.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

The sound of the bat swinging past the plate sent a sense of danger through Daichi's veins, yet the ball evaded the swing and entered his glove.

"Strike."

'Good, that was clean pitch.' Daichi thought as he sent the ball back, feeling his confidence rise slightly.

As long as he could keep this guy guessing, they should be able to hold him off.

He called for the next pitch, this time a slider. It took the same course as the cutter, yet sunk lower before reaching the plate.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

Once again, Jorge took a giant swing and missed, sending the dried dirt around the plate into the air. There was no doubt that if the bat had connected, that it would have been disastrous.

A hint of frustration crept into Jorge's face as he began to get serious. He had underestimated both the catcher and pitcher after his spectacular home run in the first inning.

He gripped his bat tightly, no longer wearing the annoying grin on his face.

Manuel watched on from first base and couldn't help but let out a hollow chuckle. Seeing his brother's face, he knew that something good was about to happen.

"Hehe, you messed up." He muttered.

Daichi made the next call, a fastball just above the strike zone. As long as it was executed well, they could keep the dangerous Jorge at bay in this inning.

Kei nodded once more and sent a blitzing fastball down the lane, its trajectory spot on.

WHOOOOOSH

DOOONG

"Ah!"

The ball rocketed into the right outfield, its height out of this world.

"Right deep!"

Masayuki yelled out, tracking the ball with his eyes.

Daichi felt his heart sink as he watched Ken run after the ball. The pitch was high enough that it should have restricted the strength Jorge could get to the ball, yet even so, he was able to hit it far into the outfield.

Jorge let out a harrumph before dropping his bat and beginning his confident jog around the bases.

"Hmph, better luck next time."

Ken ran with a sense of urgency as he tracked the ball in the air. The hit was similar to the home run he had robbed from South Korea just yesterday.

'I just need to do the same thing here.' He thought, feeling a sense of excitement.

Masayuki gulped, watching Ken as he approached the wall. He didn't feel the need to shout out a warning, since he'd seen the same scene yesterday.

Ken leaped into the air, planting his right foot on the wall and kicking up with all of his might.

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

Chapter 376 - 376: Underestimated (2)

His glove reached up high into the air as he tried to grasp the incoming ball. This was when it sunk in that he was not high enough to reach, even with his long limbs.

Time seemed to slow down as he hung in the air, his mind working overtime.

Judging by the speed of the ball and his descent, he would be about 5cm short. With time running out, Ken made a decision.

He moved his thumb within the glove and dislodged his hand slightly so that his fingers were no longer fully in the glove. This increased his reach by just enough to successfully make contact with the ball.

In one swift motion, he swiped at the ball, trying to swat it towards the field whilst keeping his glove on. He didn't know all the rules for the outfield, but he assumed taking off one's glove to play at the ball would be illegal.

Ken's eyes lit up as he felt the glove make contact with the ball. He snapped his gaze upwards and saw the ball falling back into the field of play as he made his descent to the ground.

As his feet touched the ground, Ken swooped in on the ball, collecting it after it had bounced a few times. In the action of picking up the ball with his glove, he made sure to slot his fingers back into place.

"Second!"

Thankfully Masayuki had managed to give out some direction after picking up his jaw from the floor.

Jorge who had been busy jogging and celebrating his home run, suddenly heard the shout from the outfield and almost jumped in fright. He saw Ken in the action of picking up the ball and was stunned.

"W-What the hell!?"

However, his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. He had only just passed first base and was lagging behind after thinking he'd hit another home run.

It wasn't just him, Manuel was just rounding 3rd base and was forced to pick up his pace. Since the throw was coming from the outfield, he should still have time to make it.

He heard the 3rd base coach screaming at him to run, his features filled with panic.

Ken's gaze lifted and saw the shock on Jorge's face, causing him to let out a smile.

'Let's see you outrun this.' He thought inwardly.

In rhythm, Ken planted his left foot and sent a bullet throw from deep in the outfield with Ichiro at second base set as his target.

Jorge felt a sense of danger as he rushed towards the second base. As he lowered his head and focused on gaining speed, he could see the ball fly into his peripheral vision, adding to his anxiety.

He moved his big frame as fast as he could, pumping his legs like a freight train.

As soon as he got close enough, Jorge lunged toward the base, sliding with as much finesse as a hippo out of the water.

Ichiro tracked the trajectory of the ball with his eyes showing a hint of surprise. He lowered his body and stuck out his glove, catching the ball just above his knees.

With one fluid motion, he was able to swipe in front of the plate, making contact with the hand of the runner before he was able to touch the bag.

"Ah."

"Out!"

"H-Holy crap! What an arm!"

The crowd broke into cheers and chattering as they witnessed the throw from Ken in the outfield.

"Forget the throw, what the hell was that home run save?"

"Did he throw the glove or something?"

"Nice play Ken!" Masayuki yelled out, his body animated.

Jorge who had just been run out felt his face heat up in embarrassment. He had been far too cocky, thinking that his hit had gone over for a home run.

If any of his potential collegiate coach's had seen this in person, they might reconsider their scholarship offers. Being cocky to the point of arrogance was one way of getting a coach to dislike you.

He picked himself up off the ground and made his way back to the dugout, ready for whatever tongue lashing he would receive. There was at least a silver lining since his brother had managed to add a run to their total.

As he approached the Head Coach he prepared himself for the worst.

"You know what you did, I just hope you've learned from it." He said simply, not even looking at Jorge.

"Ah... Yes sir."

"Good. Now don't let it happen again."

"Yes Coach."

Meanwhile, the entire team was shouting their praises to Ken in the outfield. This was the second time that he'd saved a home run in two games.

If nothing else, this showed just how genius the coach's were to place him in the outfield.

"Man, I thought you were going to throw your glove there or something for a moment." Masayuki said, still in a great mood.

"Why? Is that bad?" Ken asked, feeling a little embarrassed to ask.

"Bad? Well it's an automatic dead ball and all runners advance 3 bases. You tell me if it's bad." He said gravely.

Ken couldn't help but gulp. Technically, he didn't have full control of his glove when he swatted the ball away, so he had been lucky no one had caught on.

With the added run from Cuba, the score was now 5-3 in Japan's favor. Since the Lopez twins had now hit, they should be able to stop the bleeding, at least in these next 2 innings.

As Ken made his way back to his position, he froze in place for a moment.

'Wait, did that count as a dropped catch??'

He suddenly felt a cold sweat run down his back.

Despite his situation, he quickly opened up the system and pretended to do some stretches to hide his suspicious hand movements. Only when seeing that his task was not marked as failed did he let out a sigh of relief.

'Lucky...'

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

Chapter 377 - 377: Fatigue (1)

After securing another out, Cuba took the field once more with Antonio at the helm.

Ken was first in the batters box to start and originally was filled with confidence. Despite not facing a sidearm pitcher before, he believed that with his high grades in Balance and Coordination, paired with his upgraded mental capacity would give him an edge.

Unfortunately for him, he underestimated how tricky the balls were.

The movements of the ball were something he'd never seen before, making it almost impossible to make a connection with the bat.

Ken missed big on two sinkers and just when he thought that he could predict the course, the final pitch was a devastating slider that completely bamboozled him.

"Strikeout!"

Ken was left scratching his head as he made his way back to the dugout. While the slider was what caught him off guard, he believed that he could track down the sinker if he saw it a few more times.

Both Aki and Kuro also followed suit, being struck out by Antonio to bring an end to the bottom of the 4th inning.

Thus the game entered a period of back and forth strikeouts. Both the Japanese and Cuban batteries were rock solid, not allowing their opponents to get any hits in the subsequent innings.

Yet unfortunately for Japan, Kei was starting to show signs of fatigue.

At the bottom of the 5th, his pitches were starting to become erratic. Perhaps it was due to the pressure of pitching in a high stakes environment like the World Cup, but he was beginning to throw more balls.

He allowed the opposing DH Miguel Tellez to walk with four balls, bringing Cuba back to the top of their batting order.

The leadoff batter Noel Vega hit a line drive back to Kei on the mound and was easily cleaned up with a throw to first.

"3 outs, changeover!"

As the Japanese players made their way off the field, Daichi waited for Kei. In all honesty he was a little concerned about the quality of the pitches he was receiving, especially in this inning.

"Hey man, are you all good?" He asked, trying to mask his concern.

"Hmm? Sure why?" Kei replied, wiping the sweat from his brow.

He didn't seem worried and was doing a good job of hiding his fatigue, but it didn't fool Daichi. As someone who paid close attention to his pitcher's, he knew when something was not right.

"Your pitches are lacking the sharpness that you had at the start of the game. Are you getting tired?"

Kei's features stiffened, but he quickly composed himself. He wasn't expecting such a harsh evaluation out of the blue.

"I'm fine. I'll pick it up again in the next inning." He replied before walking off and leaving Daichi to trail behind.

Daichi narrowed his eyes, his mind torn. They would be facing the Lopez twins at the start of the next inning and they could not allow them to close the gap in score.

The problem was, they would be playing a game every day and only had 3 pitchers to choose from. Since Satoshi had pitched yesterday, he was meant to be resting today, meaning they only had one more viable option.

His gaze moved to Ken who was jogging in from the outfield.

'Is it time?'

As everyone filed into the dugout, Daichi lagged behind and entered last.

"Coach, do you have a moment?" He asked Coach Takashi

Coach Takashi could see the concern on Daichi's face yet his expression didn't change.

"I know what you're about to say, but I won't be changing pitchers until the 7th inning." He said simply, not even giving Daichi a chance to rebut.

"Ah..."

Daichi was taken aback for a moment, not expecting such a statement from the coach. Not only was he aware of his thoughts, he also seemed really stubborn on the matter.

Just as he was about to retort, he received a tap on the shoulder from his father.

"The onus is on you to keep us ahead until the 7th inning. We can't afford to change our pitching rotation, especially this early into the World Cup." Chris said, his expression soft.

He was silent for a while before nodding. Like he had expected, the coach's didn't want to call out Satoshi for this game, even if it meant they were risking losing.

"But what about Ken? He—"

"Daichi. This isn't up for discussion." Cutting off his son's words, Chris frowned a little. He had thought that Daichi would get the hint, but he seemed a little stubborn in this case.

"Y-Yes sir."

Having not got what he came for, Daichi was forced back to the bench, deep in thought. Even when Kei wasn't looking fatigued, they had struggled with holding the Lopez twins back from hitting.

If it wasn't for Ken's heroics in the outfield, the last hit from Jorge would have been a home run and they'd be in a worse off position.

'If they'll change pitchers in the 7th, that means we'll just need to get through the next inning...'

While this was happening, Atsushi had already gone up to bat for Japan to start the bottom of the 5th. He had managed to get a hit, but it was quickly tracked down by the short stop and sent to 1st base for an out.

Both Riku and Masayuki continued to struggle against the sidearm pitcher, both getting out shortly after.

So Japan was forced to go back onto the field for the start of the 6th inning. Despite being up on the scoreboard 5-3, the atmosphere seemed heavy.

This was because the two big hitters for Cuba would be up to bat soon.

"Batting 2nd, Left outfield, Ricardo."

Daichi got into position and felt a considerable pressure come over him. He gazed at Kei on the mound and felt himself losing faith in their ability to keep Cuba at bay.

However, he shook his head in the next moment.

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

Chapter 378 - 378: Fatigue (2)

'Just one more inning... 3 more outs. Then they'll make a substitution...'

After letting out a deep breath, Daichi composed himself. He made the sign, calling for a regular fastball on the inside of the right handed batter.

Kei nodded, kicking out his leg and performing his wind up.

The moment the ball left his fingertips, he knew that it was bad.

Daichi's eyes widened in shock as the ball veered off its course and headed straight for the Ricardo in the batters box.

Thud

The sound of the leather ball hitting flesh caused Daichi's heart to jump into his throat.

"Hit by pitch, take your base."

Ricardo winced in pain for a moment before sending a deathly gaze towards Kei on the mound. If it wasn't for the fact that the tall guy looked extremely apologetic, he might have thought that it was on purpose.

"T-Timeout please."

Daichi quickly called for a timeout before running up to the mound in order to have a few words with Kei.

"The ball slipped sorry." Kei said plainly. It was evident on his features that he was annoyed with both himself and Daichi for calling the timeout.

"Man we're really in a pinch now. I need you to step up, we can't afford pitches like that against the twins."

Ken saw the entire play from his position in the outfield and started to get a little nervous. His eyes moved to his father and Coach Takashi in the dugout, trying to guess what they were thinking.

'Surely they won't let him pitch against the Lopez twins after a ball like that?' He thought.

Yet the two seemed unmoved, almost as if they'd resigned themselves to whatever would happen in this inning.

Apart from being shocked, Ken was a little annoyed.

'They know that I'm ready to pitch... So why are they hesitating?'

Japan were only up by 2 runs right now. With the additional runner on base thanks to being walked, both Manuel and Jorge were capable of taking the lead if they were to clean up right now.

Being in such a dangerous position, wouldn't it make sense to substitute a fresh pitcher in now? Especially since Kei looked so fatigued?

However, what Ken was hoping for did not happen. Daichi returned to his position behind the plate and were faced with the first Lopez twin.

"Batting 3rd, 3rd base, Manuel."

The big guy looked intimidating as ever as he stepped up to the plate. Even from Ken's vantage point he could feel the power in the stance of the Cuban player.

"Ball."

"Ball."

The next two pitches were outside of the strike zone, making Daichi cringe. Despite their chat earlier, Kei looked to be deteriorating as time went on.

'Damn it! What am I meant to do?' Daichi cursed inwardly.

He called for a two-seam fastball, placing his glove in the middle of the strike zone.

It seemed that Kei's control was suffering due to his fatigue, so he could only call for pitches that were easy enough to throw. As long as the speed didn't dip too much, they might have a chance to salvage this inning.

However, he was wrong.

DOOOONG

The ball rocketed into the left outfield, beating Riku for pace and landing just before the back wall. In a flurry of movements, he was able to send it back towards the infield in time to stop Ricardo from approaching home plate.

Manuel sat on 2nd base and caught his breath, yet there was a smug smile on his features after hitting the double.

"Batting 4th, 2nd base, Jorge."

Once again Japan were faced with the dangerous slugger Jorge. Despite his last at bat resulting in him being run out at 2nd base, no one underestimated him.

There was also the fact his expression was now lacking any humor. All pretenses were dropped and he was now seriously playing in order to win.

Apparently his previous mistake was enough to motivate him.

'This is the worst.'

Daichi began to panic. Now with 2 runners on base, if Jorge were to smash the ball, they would lose the lead they built up at the start of the game.

He grit his teeth and called for a ball, wanting to try and bait a swing and get ahead in the count. He felt as if his hands were tied with the way Kei was pitching right now.

Kei wound up and threw the ball, making use of his unorthodox form.

Daichi was surprised as soon as the ball left Kei's fingertips. Somehow the sharpness had returned, making him question if the guy was fatigued at all.

He regretted wasting this pitch since it was one of the best he'd thrown since the beginning of the match.

However...

WHOOOOSH

DOOOONG

Despite being outside the strike zone, Jorge chased it down and smacked it with all of his might. The ball skyrocketed into the air, its destination clear to everyone in the arena.

This time there were no doubts that the hit was going over the back wall, and there was nothing that anyone could do to stop it.

"Nice hit Jorge!"

The Cuban bench erupted as Jorge nabbed a 3-run home run, sending both the runners and himself home. Even the meager crowd cheered and chanted at the wonderful display of strength and dexterity in the hit.

Daichi could only watch as the ball sailed into the empty stands, feeling his heart drop. Everything seemed so inevitable at that point, all because the coach's did not want to make a change on the mound.

He felt bitter and a little betrayed, but there was nothing that he could do about it.

It wasn't just him, the Japanese players slumped their shoulders as they watched their lead slip away thanks to what had just transpired.

Ricardo and Manuel waited for Jorge at home plate after crossing it, only to shower him with high fives and celebratory words.

"Back on top!" Jorge said with a grin.

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

Chapter 379 - 379: Inspiration (1)

Ken felt the air around him sink into depression. After Cuba had taken the lead with a single swing of the bat, many of the Japanese players had their heads lowered.

As his gaze moved to Kei on the mound, he could see the guy gritting his teeth in frustration, his hand balled into a fist. As someone who had been in the same position as him before, Ken could empathize.

He turned to his father and Coach Takashi, expecting some movement from them. However, they seemed to be remaining steadfast, with no plan to make any actions.

'What is going through their head?' Ken asked in his heart.

While he had never been a coach himself, usually when a pitcher was fatigued, the natural thing would be to make a substitution. So why weren't they making the call?

It wasn't as if they didn't have a replacement. Both he and Satoshi were at full strength and were able to step in if needed.

Daichi felt a hint of bitterness after conceding the home run. His words were ignored earlier and they were left in this position because of it.

Just as he was about to give into despair, he heard a voice from the outfield.

Ken jogged in from the outfield, close enough so that everyone on the field could hear him.

"Don't mind Kei! We'll get those runs back in no time."

Kei who had his head lowered, turned to the sound of the voice and saw Ken staring at him. For a moment, his figure seemed to shine brightly in the sun, making it hard to see him properly.

"Let them hit the ball, we've got your back!" Ken shouted, giving a thumbs up.

At these words, Kei felt an odd sensation fill his body from the ground up. It was akin to a warmth which spread at a rapid pace, eating away at the fatigue that racked his body.

It wasn't just Kei, the other Japanese players felt their blood ignite, bringing with it a renewed sense of determination. They were simple words, yet they served as a unifying phrase which pulled the team together.

Ken was like a charismatic General who had appeared in front of the weary Japanese army, uniting their spirits and lifting the morale.

"Yeah! We've got your back Kei!" Masayuki shouted from the outfield, repeating the phrase and driving the point home.

"Let them hit!" Aki screamed, pounding his fist into his glove.

One after the other, the players on the field shouted out together, sending their confident words of encouragement to not only Kei, but to themselves.

"LET THEM HIT!"

"YEAH!"

Daichi was the last to join in, igniting his own fighting spirit after the push from Ken. No longer was he feeling cornered or in despair.

Ken couldn't help but grin after seeing the results of his Dauntless trait manifest in front of his very eyes. It was one thing seeing the description in the system, but a completely different beast when put into action.

The two coach's who were silent by the side suddenly felt their hearts beat faster. Without a word, they looked at each other and saw shining eyes staring back.

"Your son is a born leader..." Coach Takashi muttered.

"Y-Yeah, I guess you're right." Chris replied, the disbelief evident in his tone.

"Batting 5th, Short stop, Sergio."

Sergio who had just crept into the batters box, felt the sudden pressure bear down on him out of nowhere. It was as if 9 hungry tigers had locked onto him the moment he arrived, causing a cold sweat to drip down his back.

The pitcher who had seemed broken only a few moments ago was staring at him intensely, as if he wanted to rip his head off. This added with his delinquent aesthetic, made it even more intimidating.

'W-What the hell happened to these guys?'

But he had no time to think on the matter anymore as he felt a sudden sense of danger overcome him.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

"What!? That guy was hardly standing earlier and he can still throw 96mph?" The crowd in the stands felt shock as they looked at the jumbo screen and saw the speed of the pitch.

However, they weren't the ones who had to face the ball.

Sergio felt the hairs on his neck stand up at the fireball he'd just witnessed first hand.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"ORYAAAAH!"

Kei shouted out in vindication after striking out Cuba's 5th batter. All of the shame he felt earlier was overturned, at least in this moment.

"Batting 6th, 1st base, Rogellio."

"Strike."

"Strike."

"Strikeout!"

Once again, Kei blitzed through the opposing batter, not even allowing him to touch the ball. Of course Daichi played a big part with his leads, building up Kei's confidence once more.

"Batting 7th, Right outfield Armando."

"Strikeout!"

"3 outs, changeover."

Just like that, after giving up 3 runs in the inning, Japan were able to stem the bleeding and escape from any further damage.

On the way into the dugout, Coach Takashi placed his hand on Kei's shoulder.

"Nice work out there."

Kei's eyes widened for a moment, not expecting the compliment since he had been pitching so poorly up to the last 3 batters. However, he replied thankfully before going to sit down on the bench.

"Grab some ice for your shoulder, we'll be changing pitchers next inning."

While he wasn't exactly satisfied, Kei nodded and did as he was told.

Even though they had survived the inning, they were now behind on the scoreboard at 5-6 in favor of Cuba. This meant that they would have to get a run from the sidearm pitcher, something they'd failed to do since he was substituted into the game.

"Guys listen up. It's the bottom of the 6th, which means our starting batters will get at least 2 more chances in this game. I want you to properly watch the pitches in your first at-bat." Coach Takashi said, his expression serious.

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

Chapter 380 - 380: Inspiration (2)

"If you can hit it, go ahead. Just make sure you're tracking the ball at every opportunity."

"Yes sir!"

Still filled to the brim with morale, the Japanese players shouted back with vigor. There was an obvious shift in their mood after Ken's magic-like words on the field earlier.

"Batting 3rd, 1st base, Hiroki."

As Hiroki stepped into the batters box, the Head Coach approached Ken. While his gaze was stalwart, inwardly his impression of Ken had increased by leaps and bounds.

"You'll be pitching starting next inning. Think you can handle it?"

Ken felt his spirits soar at these words, yet his face remained determined. He had been waiting for this news ever since he had made the National Team over a week ago.

"Yes sir!" He replied, almost saluting out of reflex.

Coach Takashi's face broke into a smile briefly before he headed back to Chris at the entrance to the dugout.

Amidst Ken's joyful mood, he looked out at the field and could see that Hiroki was watching the ball carefully. He seemed to take the coach's words to heart and hadn't even swung at a ball yet.

The count was currently 2-2, yet Hiroki had not budged. He'd successfully completed his mission by seeing as many balls as possible.

WOOOSH

Ding

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Unfortunately for him, the final pitch still eluded his bat.

However, instead of looking depressed, Hiroki returned with a smile on his face. He said a few words to Daichi on the way past before heading into the dugout.

"I touched the ball... It was only a little, but I felt it." He told Ken before closing his eyes, as if he was replaying the moment over again in his mind.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Daichi."

It was now Daichi's turn to face the tricky sidearm pitcher. Since this was his second time, he thought that he may be able to grasp something.

The pitch approached him at speed, rising from a low angle before dropping as it came into his range. It felt rather awkward, but Daichi tilted his arms slightly before sending a swing at the ball.

DING

"Foul."

The ball shuttled along the ground into the foul zone behind 1st base with speed. After making contact with the ball, Daichi felt his confidence soar.

DING

"Foul."

DING

"Foul."

Frustration began to appear on Antonio's face after his pitches were continually fouled off. Though no one had gotten a proper hit from him in this game, he still wasn't in the business of wasting pitches.

The next ball was a wicked slider which brushed the side of the strike zone on its way over the plate.

Daichi did his best to follow the trajectory, but was left hitting nothing but air.

"Strikeout!"

"Nice Antonio! 2 outs!"

Not to be outdone by the Japanese team, Jorge shouted from his position on 2nd base. Unlike when he first started the game, his ego had been fully reigned in.

He would no longer underestimate the Japanese National Team.

"Nice work making contact Daichi." Ken said on his way past to the equipment.

Daichi nodded, "I'll definitely hit it in my next at-bat." He declared with confidence.

"Looking forward to it." Ken said with a grin before grabbing his bat and helmet.

Yet not even a couple of minutes later, he returned back to the dugout since Ichiro was struck out in 5 pitches.

"3 outs, changeover!"

As the teams were changing over, Chris ran over to the plate umpire and spoke a few words before returning to his spot.

"Japan substitution, Pitcher Kei Hama will be replaced by Ken Takagi. Tomoya Shibata will be moving to the right outfield and will be replacing Atsushi."

Daichi's eyes lit up as he heard the news over the speakers. Though he'd seen Kei icing his shoulder, he hadn't known that Ken would be replacing him as pitcher.

It wasn't only Daichi who felt ecstatic at the news, his teammates almost jumped for joy.

"Looks like they're releasing the monster." Masayuki said with a hollow chuckle.

Riku waltzed beside the captain, his face wearing a carefree smile, "Awesome, we'll be able to relax in the outfield for the rest of the game, hehe~"

Yet after feeling Masayuki's glare drilling into the side of his face, he was forced to admit he was joking.

"Tch, you're no fun." He mumbled.

"Hey isn't that the outfielder on the mound?" One of the spectators asked in question.

"Yeah, what's he doing on the mound? I know he had a killer arm, but it takes more than that to be a pitcher." Another responded matter-of-factly.

"GO KEN! GO DAICHI!"

A lone female voice shouted out in Japanese as she waved the red and white flag. Yuki felt a wave of pride which threatened to make her emotional after seeing both her boys together.

She hadn't seen her son pitch in person in over 2 years when he was in middle school. Of course she'd watched Koshien on TV, but it was not the same.

This was also the first time her sons had played as a battery, at least officially.

"Ah, camera. Where's my camera?" As if suddenly remembering their family photo album, she quickly fished through her bag and looked for her camera.

Ken happened to hear her voice and turned his gaze, sending her a wave before turning back to Daichi behind the plate.

He felt his body heat up in that moment as he stared at his brother.

Finally, they were able to pair up as a battery on a big stage.

In the final year of middle school, Ken was still injured and unable to pitch. After Daichi got into Osaka Toin, he thought that there might not be a chance to fulfill this dream until they both became professionals.

Yet lo and behold, they both made it into the National Team. Even then, they both needed to be better than all their peers in order for this opportunity to occur.

Ken grinned.

"Let's get this win."

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