

Major League System

Chapter 381 - 381: Take Over (1)

"Why is the outfielder pitching now? Wasn't he a batter?" Jorge asked, his brow furrowed.

After seeing Ken bat earlier in the match, he had assumed that the guy was a batter and should have no business on the mound. In the United States, 2-way players were something that they almost never saw.

This was especially the case when one got to this level of competition.

Most coach's recommended players to focus on one or the other, perfecting the skill that they were best at in order to not waste any time or effort.

In essence this made quite a lot of sense. If one were to place all their time and effort into one aspect of their game, they would progress at a far faster rate.

For some reason, Jorge had a bad feeling about this.

The whole Cuban dugout watched on as Ken threw some warm up pitches, uncertainty in their expressions. They knew about Satoshi since he'd been part of the U18 team before, but Ken was an unknown.

While it was true that Ken shined in Koshien just a month ago, it was obvious that the Cuban team had not done their research.

After completing his warm up throws, Ken sent a nod to the plate umpire, indicating his readiness.

"Batting 8th, Catcher, Guillermo."

Guillermo approached the batters box and stared at Ken warily.

'What kind of pitches does he throw?' He thought inwardly, gripping his bat tightly.

Daichi squatted down behind the plate, unable to remove the smile from his face. After all this time, he and his brother were going to show what they could do as a battery, he was ecstatic.

'Let's put some fear into them first.' He said in his heart, calling for a fastball.

Ken nodded, his expression donning his poker face. If he hadn't activated it, there would be a giant grin plastered on his lips.

He raised his left leg and coiled his body before stepping forward. The dirt was kicked up as he heavily planted his foot and whipped the ball out of his fingertips.

PAH!

The sound of the ball hitting the leather glove echoed through the field, bringing with it an eerier silence afterward.

"S-Strike!"

The plate umpire almost forgot that he had to call the pitch, lagging behind a little after seeing the display in front of him.

Guillermo was frozen in place, unable to move from shock. His eyes slowly moved to the jumbo screen and saw the 3 digits staring back, as if taunting him.

"100mph!?"

"Where the hell did this guy come from?" The Cuban coach seemed to mirror everyone's thoughts in that moment as he stared at Ken on the mound.

"Nice pitch!"

Daichi yelled out, sending the ball back to Ken. He knew that he'd achieved his goal after having Ken unleash his greatest asset, promptly scaring the crap out of the Cuban team.

'Ah that felt good.' Ken thought inwardly, receiving the ball back from Daichi.

He had been getting a little frustrated this game having to watch from the outfield as Kei struggled.

'As I thought, pitching really is the best.'

Guillermo subconsciously moved his gaze to the Head Coach, as if to ask for directions. Yet seeing the shocked expression of his coach, it was clear that even he was unsure what to do.

'I'll just have to try to hit it...' He thought.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

The two-seam fastball came flying towards him, breaking inside at the last moment and causing him to miss terribly. Yet even if the ball was straight as an arrow, Guillermo knew that he would have been lucky to hit it.

'Swing early and hope for the best.'

He had no other strategy available to him in this moment. It was either that or just watch as the ball rocketed through the strike zone.

Ken wound up once more, sending the next ball flying from his fingertips.

WHOOOSH

Pah

'Eh!?'

Guillermo swung far too early, almost falling over from the missed swing. He had expected a similar speed, yet the ball was at least 10mph slower.

"Curveball?"

"Strikeout!"

"Nice Ken!"

3 consecutive pitches was all it took to get his first strikeout of the World Cup, sending Guillermo back to the dugout filled with uncertainty.

The next two at-bats were over just as fast. No one could keep up with the pairing of Ken's speed and Daichi's accurate leads.

"3 outs, changeover!"

Just like that, the tide had changed for Japan as they ran off the field in high spirits. Although Ken had only cleaned up the latter end of Cuba's batting line up, it provided a much larger impact than anyone had expected.

The Japanese players almost skipped off the field, ruffling Ken's hair and nudging him on the way past.

"So the real Ace has finally stepped up huh?" Riku said with a grin.

"Nice pitching Ken."

Hiroki was probably one of the happiest people on the team in that moment. He knew just how hard Ken worked, and to see him rewarded lifted his spirits.

This time, Ken let his true feelings appear on his face, smiling widely. It sure felt good to pitch with this team.

"Alright, now time to go get some runs." He said, grabbing a bat and helmet.

Last time he was up to bat, he had started to get used to the sinking pitches, though the slider still eluded him. As long as he could watch the ball properly, he should have a good chance of hitting it.

As he walked onto the field, he could feel that the Cuban team looked at him a little differently. It was subtle, but definitely apparent.

"Batting 6th, Pitcher, Ken."

For some reason, hearing himself announced as a pitcher felt a lot easier on the ears than outfielder.

As he stepped into the batters box, Ken focused on Antonio. His goal for this at-bat was to at least make contact with the ball, whether it resulted in him getting out was inconsequential.

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

Chapter 382 - 382: Take Over (2)

As long as at least one person got a hit, he'd have another chance to bat in the 9th inning.

So he watched the first ball, scrutinizing it intently. It was the deadly slider right away, which seemed almost impossible to hit.

"Strike."

Ken's face never changed and he got back into position. There was no need to rush anything.

PAH

"Ball."

PAH

"Strike"

Now that the count was 1-2, he was in a tough position. However, seeing the last few balls gave him enough confidence to try and hit the next one.

Antonio entered his wind up and sent another sinker Ken's way, this time on the inside.

Ken's eyes locked onto the ball and knew that the angle was tricky. Even if he got a hit, it was likely going to be difficult to get any real distance from it.

He twisted his body and tracked down the trajectory while swinging through, intending to foul the ball and buy himself some more time.

DING

Unfortunately, he hadn't got enough of the ball and instead of going foul, it went straight back to the pitcher. Ken let out a small groan of annoyance before throwing the bat down and running to first base.

"Out."

However, he was easily beaten by the throw.

Ken shook his head, yet he decided to be satisfied with just making contact with the ball.

'I'll definitely get it next time.' He thought.

Once he returned, both Aki and Kuro didn't fair much better than him in their attempts. While Kuro had managed to foul the ball once, Aki hit nothing but air.

"3 outs, changeover!"

And thus, Japan returned to the field to start the 8th inning with the score still at 6-5 in favor of Cuba. They would be facing the 2nd batter Ricardo, which meant that the Lopez twins were not far behind.

Yet unsurprisingly, the Japanese players were filled with confidence with Ken now at the helm. Suddenly, keeping the two sluggers at bay didn't sound that hard to accomplish anymore.

Of course this was likely a result of Ken's charisma, paired with his Dauntless trait. But that was only part of the reason.

Ken was a player who held supreme confidence, or at least that's what it looked like to those who watched him. He never let his fear or anxiety show when on the mound, looking like a fierce warrior before battle.

"Batting 2nd, Left Outfield, Ricardo"

Daichi wasted no time, hitting the lead off batter with a nasty fastball which made his eyes spin.

"Strike!"

The guy wasn't even able to track the ball, let alone swing in time.

"Strike!"

"Strikeout!"

He was forced to retreat after only 3 balls. Not a single pitch was wasted since Ken appeared on the mound, showing just how aggressive and accurate the Japan battery was.

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

Manuel approached the batters box, his expression serious.

Ken could already spot the weakness in the big guy's form, seeing that he was intimidated. To him, facing an opponent like this wasn't a challenge at all.

Daichi who was still wary from Manuel's big hits in the previous inning, called for a safer pitch, not wanting to push the envelope from the beginning. However, Ken shook his head, now was the time to go in for the kill.

Instead of getting annoyed, he could tell that his brother had something in mind.

'Eh? You want a fastball down the middle?' Daichi was stunned, not expecting such a decision from his usually calm and composed brother.

However, he trusted Ken and therefore got into position.

Ken felt his body heat up in excitement before sending a devastating fastball right down the lane. It was one of his fastest pitches yet, spinning wildly before entering the glove.

PAH

"Strike."

Despite a rather easy course, Manuel didn't even swing. For some reason he was full of hesitation.

"Manuel! What are you doing!?"

Jorge shouted from the side of the field, his tone filled with annoyance. From his vantage point, his brother should have at least swung at the obvious strike.

"Ah."

Only after hearing his brothers voice did Manuel seemingly snap out of his mood. It seemed that the pressure exerted from Ken had caused him to lose a big chunk of his confidence.

Although he was still rather wary, he managed to straighten up and correct his form. He gripped onto the bat tightly as his eyes focused back on Ken.

'Oh so you're awake now?' Ken thought with a chuckle.

"Just as well... I need to pay you back for earlier." He muttered.

Ken's eyes flashed with determination as he accepted Daichi's lead. This time it was a forkball, aiming for the middle of the strike zone once again.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

Manuel's impressive strength sent his bat flying towards the spot where the ball had been thrown last pitch. If it had been a fastball at 90mph instead of a forkball, he would have definitely made contact and sent the ball into the stands.

"Strike."

"Nice pitch!"

Daichi returned the ball to Ken who felt a smirk creep onto his lips. The next ball would send Manuel back to the dugout.

Ken nodded before raising his leg and stepping forward with dangerous intent.

The ball propelled itself from his fingertips on a straight course, yet it broke away from the batter at the last moment.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Manuel held his follow through, feeling a wave of disappointment overcome him. It wasn't often that he was unable to make contact with a pitch when he was at bat, especially in high school.

Not once did it feel like he could hit those pitches thrown at him. If this wasn't the World Cup, he might feel even more depressed.

As he left the batters box, he sent a final glance to Ken as if to burn his features into his mind.

'I guess the world is a big place.' He said, giving Ken the respect he deserved.

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

Chapter 383 - 383: Duel (1)

A hush came over arena as both the crowd and players became silent. They watched the large frame of the Cuban slugger as he made his way out onto the pitch.

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

The sound of the announcer broke the silence, yet Ken didn't even hear it.

Everything seemed to fade away as he locked gazes with Jorge. Ken could almost see an intense aura surrounding the big teen, burning with determination and the will to fight.

However, Ken did not lose out. Jorge in turn saw the billowing fighting spirit surrounding his tall frame ahead of him. It climbed and sprawled through the air like an ancient tree, its roots firmly secured in the mound.

'Mika, please use Showdown on Jorge'

[Confirmed]

Ken felt his body heat up immediately, causing his muscles to swell slightly, filling him with immense strength. He felt a boundless energy overcome him, causing his lips to morph into a smile.

Jorge felt a shock run through his body as he saw the once firm and stalwart aura surrounding Ken explode. It was as if flames had ignited on each branch of the tree, painting a dreadful sight.

'W-What the hell is with this guy?' He thought, gulping subconsciously.

The palms which gripped his bat began to feel clammy and cold sweat began to creep down his back.

Suddenly, it felt as if he was fighting against a deity, a higher level being which threatened to snuff out his existence. Not once had he ever felt this sort of pressure from a pitcher.

It now made sense as to why his brother had performed so poorly. Who could possibly remain calm when standing within 60 feet of this monster.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

Before he knew it, a fastball flew right in front of his eyes, not giving him the time to react. He blinked a few times in disbelief, not knowing what had happened.

Yet his ears suddenly picked up a roar from the meager crowd. Despite being so far away from his position, he could hear the commotion.

"Holy crap! What a pitch!"

"101mph? Isn't he still a teenager?"

'What?' Jorge slowly moved his gaze to the jumbo screen and almost felt his soul leave his body as he saw the 3 digits staring back at him.

"Impossible... He can't be that fast" He mumbled in disbelief.

Yet as he turned his attention back to Ken on the mound, he felt different. The guy staring back at him was like a monster, his dreadful aura drilling deep into his soul.

'I can't hit it...!' He said inwardly, feeling a hint of fear and dread well up from within him.

"Jorge. Take your position or I'll be calling a strike."

The sound of the plate umpire's voice entered his ears, snapping him out of his train of thoughts. Jorge hadn't noticed that he'd been staring at Ken with his bat resting on the ground for quite a long time.

"A-Ah, yes." He answered, lifting the bat and preparing for the next ball.

'This is no time to be thinking such thoughts. I just need to time my swing and I've got a chance.'

Jorge gripped his bat tightly, trying to quell the fear which threatened to rise within him.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

Despite swinging at the oncoming ball, he hit nothing but air. Due to the sheer speed of the throw, he had trouble timing the swing, resulting in another strike.

'Damn it! This is pathetic.'

A feeling of self-loathing crawled its way inside of him, attacking all of his inadequacies fiercely. It was as if he'd developed a trauma just from facing these two pitches.

'What top 10 prospect? I don't deserve such praise.'

From an outsiders perspective, Jorge was spiraling into despair. With his head lowered, he looked nothing like the confident and cocky teenager who had hit 2 home runs in the game so far.

The Cuban dugout was quiet. It was hard watching their best player appear like this in the batters box.

Manuel watched his brother, feeling as if something was piercing his heart. Throughout his whole life, he'd never seen his brother react in such a way against an opponent. It was as if he was scared and defeated.

He grit his teeth and balled his fists, almost drawing blood from his palms.

"JORGE!"

At the sound of his brother's voice, Jorge snapped his gaze towards him, his expression like that of a drowning man who had found a lifeline.

"You can hit it! Just swing!"

Manuel's words echoed throughout the field, drilling into Jorge's mind. They fell upon his psyche like the desert rain, filling it with hope and life.

Suddenly, the entire Cuban bench began shouting out as well. Their voices overlapped and mixed together, yet their message was similar to Manuel's, filled with trust and belief in his abilities.

The oppressive feeling that was weighing him down began to give out, little by little. With the encouraging words from his teammate, he was able to slowly stand up against the pressure Ken was giving off.

While he could still feel the dreadful aura from Ken, it no longer left him feeling hopeless.

'Thank you guys...'

Seemingly pulled out from the pits despair, Jorge straightened his back and gripped his bat tightly. He faced Ken with a stubborn and determined expression, not wanting to back down an inch.

'Oho, looks like he's recovered.' Ken thought as he moved the ball around in his glove.

"It wouldn't be fun otherwise." He muttered to himself.

He quickly got into his windup and sent the ball rocketing towards the inside where Daichi's glove was placed.

WHOOOOSH

DING

The sound of the bat making contact rang out on the field, right before the ball went whistling away along the ground and into the foul zone.

"Foul"

"Yeah! Nice work Jorge!"

Manuel pumped his fist, feeling his blood surge.

While a foul wasn't something usually worth celebrating, this one certainly was.

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

Chapter 384 - 384: Duel (2)

Jorge felt his confidence surge once more after making contact with the ball. What seemed impossible just a few moments ago, was achieved once he got his emotions under control.

The right mind frame was half the battle, these words never felt more true until now for him.

'I'll hit this next one properly.' He thought, once more taking his position.

Even after having his 100mph fastball hit, Ken looked unconcerned. In fact, he looked to be having fun on the mound during this battle.

'Again.'

WHOOOOSH

DING

"Foul."

DING

"Foul."

DING

"Foul."

The two battled back and forth for 9 pitches, Ken's fastball vs Jorge's bat.

Yet despite seeing the same pitch over and over, Jorge was not able to do anything but foul it off each time. For some reason, the ball would never take the same course, almost as if the pitch was alive.

Ken probably had his Lively Fastball skill to thank for this, yet he was too focused on the battle to think about such things.

Daichi who had been dictating the pitches, felt as if Ken was pitching the best he'd ever seen. Each one of the balls was something that needed his complete focus, just in case it made it past the bat.

'I think it's time to change it up.' Daichi thought, calling for a curveball.

He had been hoping that the fastball could get out Jorge, but he hadn't expected the guy to be so resilient, especially as time went on.

However, Ken shook his head in response. There was a huge part of him that wanted to beat Jorge with his fastball, even if it wasn't the right play.

Perhaps it was pride, or perhaps the passion of youth was to be blamed. Either way, Daichi could see the stubborn expression on Ken's face and knew when to relent.

So without making a fuss, he once again made the call for a fastball.

Ken let out a grin, thanking his brother inwardly. Maybe if it was a different catcher, they might step up and give him a grilling, but Daichi was different, at least to him.

He entered his windup once more and executed another perfect fastball.

DING

DING

"Foul"

'Eh?'

'Was that the system just now, or am I hearing things?'

The unexpected sound of a notification popped up in his mind, yet he had no time to check if it was real or just his imagination.

'I need to get this guy out first before I can check.' He said inwardly.

Once again, Daichi called for a fastball, knowing that Ken wasn't yet satisfied.

Ken grinned, sending his brother a nod. He had the added incentive of the possible system notification, making him even more fired up to put an end to the dogfight.

He wound up once again, intent on blasting through the strike zone. As he planted his foot, he felt a little different.

Every one of his movements seemed to flow subconsciously, inducing an out of body experience. Ken wasn't sure what was happening, but he went with the feeling, ingraining it into his body.

The ball sailed out of his fingertips, blitzing its way down the lane.

WHOOOOOOSH

PAH!

The sound of the ball landing in the glove echoed loudly through the field. The silence afterwards was deafening as everybody tried to make sense of what just happened.

Jorge felt the strength in his body leave him after what he'd just witnessed. All of the fighting spirit he'd accumulated merely vanished after facing this ball.

Daichi felt pins and needles from his hand, yet he paid it no mind as he stood up slowly and turned his attention to the jumbo screen.

"102mph..."

He knew the pitch was fast, yet seeing the flashing numbers on the screen confirmed his thoughts. This was the fastest pitch he'd ever caught, and it was thrown by none other than his brother.

"S-Strikeout! 3 outs, changeover."

Even the umpire was slow to call the strike, still recovering from the crazy pitch.

"H-Holy crap man!"

Aki almost sprinted to the mound, his round face filled with shock and adulation. Not only had Ken struck out Jorge after a long battle, the pitch he threw was ridiculous.

Suddenly, Ken was mobbed by the rest of his teammates as he tried to make his way back to the dugout. One might have thought that they'd already won the game at that point, the way his teammates were carrying on.

"Alright alright, it's not over yet. We still need to get another 2 runs before the game ends." Ken said, trying to calm down his teammates.

"Still... That pitch was craaaazy~" Riku interjected.

"You should try catching the damn thing, my hand is still numb!"

Daichi intercepted Ken and sent him a grin, holding his fist out for the fist bump.

"Ah, my bad. I'll try dial it back in the next inning." Ken retorted sarcastically, sending his brother a wink and bumping his fist.

"I think Dad might sub you if you did that." He said with a chuckle.

As if hearing his name, Chris appeared in front of Ken, tears already streaming down his face.

"I-I'm proud of you my boy."

"Eh?"

Not expecting the waterworks, Ken felt a little awkward. Especially with so many of his teammates surrounding him.

However, as if they'd all agreed beforehand, they turned away and ignored it, leaving the two to have their moment.

Chris couldn't help but be filled with pride, yet there was also a bitterness beneath it all. Back when Ken had declared he would become a professional player, he had his doubts.

Yet seeing how far Ken had come and his work ethic, made him feel guilty. After all, weren't parents meant to be their child's number one supporter?

"Thanks Dad." Ken replied, going in for a hug. He could tell that there were probably other reasons for his reactions, yet he didn't pry.

He might have been embarrassed before, but he didn't care who watched in that moment.

To have the opportunity to hear his father tell him that he was proud, made him a lucky man.

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

Chapter 385 - 385: Final Inning (1)

When everything finally settled down, Ken headed over to the bench and sat down with an excuse of resting before the final inning. Of course he still had plenty of stamina left in the tank since he'd only thrown 20 pitches total this game.

His real reason was to check if he had any notifications from the system. It was hard to tell, since the sound of the bat making contact with the ball was a similar sound.

Saying a little prayer in his heart, Ken opened up the system, only to see a flashing icon.

[Congratulations, user has completed the hidden task: Consistency is key]

Hidden Task: Consistency is key

*Details: Throw 10 pitches above 100mph consecutively.

*Rewards: Upgrade pitching by 2 grades

'Eh!? There was this kind of thing?'

Ken felt elated as he read the mission window. He had not been expecting such a boon in the middle of a World Cup game.

'What's my pitching grade now?'

With that, he brought up his information, something he hadn't done in quite a while.

SYSTEM LEVEL: 4 (77,880/100,000 Major points to level up)

NAME: Ken Takagi

AGE: 16

TALENT ASSESSMENT: SS

POTENTIAL: SS+

MAJOR POINTS: 77,880

USER MENU:

-STATS

-MISSIONS

-SYSTEM SHOP

-LOTTERY (Locked)

-IMAGE TRAINING

-IDENTIFY

-TRAINING PLAN

-MENTOR

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: SS

>Pitching: SS+

>Fielding: B

>Game Intelligence: B

>Mental: SS

>Skills: 20

>Traits: 1

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS+

Agility: SS-

Strength: SS

Stamina: SS+

"SS+! I'm so close to SSS..."

It suddenly made sense why he felt so different in his last pitch. With Showdown active, his pitching grade rocketed into the SSS grade, opening up a whole new sensation for him.

Ken felt his excitement reach a peak as he thought about the prospect of activating both Showdown and Limit Break at once. Just what kind of experience would he have when his pitching grade entered the realm of the professionals?

While Ken was in his own world, the game continued.

With Atsushi taken out of the lineup because they didn't need a DH anymore, Tomoya was up to bat. Since he'd just entered the game, he had almost no chance to get used to Antonio's sidearm pitches.

Thus he was quickly struck out, which meant Riku would be back in the batters box.

Once again, Riku attempted a bunt, however this time he'd pushed it too far towards the fielder. What should have been a close match of speed was instantly put to rest as Antonio scooped up the ball and threw to first.

Just like that, Japan already had 2 outs in the 8th inning.

Masayuki's luck wasn't much better. Though he had hit the ball a fair distance, the right outfielder made an amazing diving catch to his left to secure the final out.

"3 outs, changeover!"

With the score still 6-5 in favor of Cuba, Japan only had the final inning to work their magic. If they tied the game it would go to extra innings, something that neither team wanted.

Since they needed to play a game every day, having to play longer games would just add to their fatigue over the long stretch.

Thankfully, the clean up batters would be coming out for Japan in the 9th inning, meaning they had as good of a chance as any.

But before this, Ken needed to come up and pitch.

As he made his way up to the mound, the crowd cheered loudly. While it wasn't the same as Koshien since the stadium was pretty much empty, it still made him smile.

"LET'S GO JAPAN! GO KEN, GO DAICHI!"

Hearing their mom's screams, both Ken and Daichi looked at each other with a grin.

"I should invite Mom to all my games." Ken said, half-jokingly.

Daichi chuckled in response, "Not if I do it first."

The two laughed before taking their positions. Though they were behind, they had confidence in their abilities. While they hadn't managed to hit against Antonio just yet, they still had another chance coming up.

"Batting 5th, Short stop, Sergio."

Jorge who was in the Cuban dugout watched closely on the field, his eyes trained on Ken's figure. He didn't feel the same aura that he felt while facing him, yet it was probably because he was so far away.

"Hey man, why are you brooding over here."

The sound of his brother's voice drifted into his ears, garnering his attention.

"Psh, I'm not brooding. I'm just watching the game." He said dismissively.

PAH

"Strike."

The two watched on in silence as Ken continued to pitch. There was a look of awe on their features, almost as if they were watching a real professional pitcher.

"He's fast..." Manuel said, breaking the silence between them.

"Mmm."

"Do you think that guy can compare..."

"Are you talking about Ryan?" Jorge muttered, deep in thought.

"Yeah. I got the same feeling when facing Ken." Manuel explained.

Jorge's expression flashed imperceptibly for a moment before he shook his head.

"It's close... But this guy is only a freshman." He stated.

"WHAT!?"

Manuel seemed to have heard the most preposterous thing in the world, not believing his ears. How could such a monster pitcher appear at only 16 years of age?

A wry smile crept onto Jorge's face at his brother's reaction.

"I have a feeling we'll be seeing him on the same stage in a few years time." He stated.

Since they were Senior's in High School, they were 2 years older than Ken. Of course their goal was to go onto college and be drafted into the Major's, so it was a rather large compliment coming from one of the best prospects in the nation.

While they were chatting, Ken had already struck out 2 of the Cuban players. He hardly seemed affected by the sun bearing down on him, nor the pressure of being behind.

It was like Ken was in his favorite place on the Earth, the mound.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"3 outs, changeover!"

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

Chapter 386 - 386: Final Inning (2)

The Japanese team came off the field for possibly the last time in this match, their confidence at an all time high. With Ken at the mound, no one was even close to hitting his monster pitches.

Of course they still had a tall task in front of them, which was getting at least a single run in this next inning.

Once they returned, Coach Takashi stood up and addressed the players. He'd been silent for most of the game, trusting the players and not giving too much direction. Yet with the game on the line, it was now his duty to speak up.

"Well done everyone for making it this far. Last time I asked you to watch as many pitches as possible and try to understand the courses. Well this inning you'll need to go for broke."

His expression was stern, yet his eyes held belief in his team. It was this duality that gave the Head Coach a certain air about him, like he was always in control of everything.

"Yes sir!"

The team yelled back in response.

"Hiroki, you're up first. How confident are you?"

"100% sir!"

"Hehe, good. Now go get on base for us." He replied with a chuckle.

"Let's go Hiroki, you got this."

"Show em how it's done." Ken placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, sending him some words of encouragement.

As long as either of their next 3 batters got a hit or a walk, Ken would have a chance to bat afterwards.

Daichi followed Hiroki onto the field with his helmet and bat equipped. He had fouled off quite a few pitches earlier, filling him with confidence.

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

When Hiroki stepped into the batters box, he immediately took his position and stared intently at Antonio upon the mound. His body felt loose and he was filled with supreme confidence, despite not being able to land a hit from him this game.

Since Antonio had pitched a full 7 innings, he had become a little fatigued. Many people argued that while submarine pitches helped ease the tension on a pitcher's elbow, it put a lot of strain on one's back.

This was particularly the case in older pitchers.

Of course Antonio was still young, but he often got back spasms if he pitched for too long.

Guillermo called for the first ball, a sinker to the outside.

PAH

"Strike."

Hiroki chose to observe the first ball, as if to confirm the course in his mind. After seeing the pitch so many times now, he was filled with confidence.

His eyes lit up as the next pitch came roaring out, a deadly slider.

PAH

"Strike."

Once more he patiently watched the ball. It was not the pitch he was looking for.

WHOOOSH

"Heh."

He couldn't help but grin as he locked onto the ball headed his way. It was a sinker that dipped below the strike zone, yet it lacked the usual flair of the previous pitches.

DONG

Hiroki quickly dropped the bat and ran to first base, watching as the ball sailed in between the 1st and 2nd base fielders.

"Alright Hiroki!"

The Japan dugout shouted in excitement. This was the first base hit they'd gotten over Antonio ever since he entered the game in the 2nd inning, thus it was a great time to celebrate.

He stood upon first base and grinned widely. While it wasn't a home run like he was capable of, he was only aiming to get onto base. If either Daichi, Ichiro or Ken could send him home, then they could at least tie the game.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Daichi."

Seeing Hiroki get onto base, Daichi smiled. As long as he didn't hit a terrible grounder which resulted in a double play, they were in a good position to possibly score some runs here.

Antonio seemed a little annoyed that he'd broken his streak, but he quickly recovered his composure. Cuba only needed 3 more outs in order to close out the game, something he'd done plenty of times during his career.

'I won't let you guys come back.' He thought, quickly entering his low wind up.

Daichi's expression flashed and he swung without hesitation.

WHOOOOSH

DOOONG

The ball sailed into the air, flying off into the outfield. Hiroki turned his head, but it was hard to tell if it was going to beat the fielder, leaving him in an awkward position.

'Damn it.'

He quickly sped off towards 2nd base, praying that the fielder wouldn't get there in time.

"Go back!"

The third base coach screamed at him, forcing him to pause the moment he stepped onto second base. Just as he turned around, he saw the outfielder catch the ball, causing his eyes to bulge.

"Out!"

He quickly ran as fast as he could back to first base. If he didn't get back in time, it would be a double play.

Thankfully, the outfielder had to dive to catch the ball, which gave him enough time to return without being run out.

"Ah damn it!" Daichi cursed. They could have at least got a double if the fielder didn't get to it in time.

"Don't mind, I got this." Ken consoled him on his way back, placing his hand on his shoulder.

Daichi nodded, though he was still a little disappointed at the missed opportunity.

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

The serious looking Ichiro was now up to bat, his eyes locked onto the pitcher. He hadn't had much success outside of the first inning, much like the rest of the Japanese team.

Inwardly however, he wasn't satisfied with his play today.

He watched as two strikes flew past, biding his time. He wanted to be the hero, the one to give Japan the winning runs in the final hour.

Just imagining himself being tossed up by the team made him subconsciously smile for the first time this match.

However, caught up in his imagination, he failed to gauge the next pitch well enough.

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"Huh? That was a strike?"

He could have sworn that it was outside the strike zone, yet there was nothing he could do to refute it since the plate umpire had already made the call.

"1 more out! Let's go Antonio."

With the final batter approaching, Cuba felt the game was just in reach. As long as they got this final out, the game would be over.

However, they still had a worthy foe to overcome before that happened.

"Batting 6th, Pitcher, Ken."

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

Chapter 387 - 387: Face Me! (1)

Ken walked up to the batters box with a determined gaze. He locked eyes with Hiroki upon first base who looked to be a little anxious, but who could blame him.

It was 2 outs in the 9th inning and Japan were losing by a single run. The game was literally resting on Ken's shoulders, a freshman and débutante on the U18 world stage.

All eyes in the arena and dugout were focused on him in that moment, waiting to see if he could pull off a miracle and turn the game around.

Ken would be lying if he said that he didn't feel any pressure. All of his teammates hopes were carried on his back, weighing down heavily on his psyche.

Yet amidst all of this, a smile crept onto his lips.

This was what he had dreamed of, what he'd been preparing for all this time. As a pitcher, he was used to being heavily scrutinized by everyone, this scenario was no different.

Only that he was on the opposite side this time.

'Why did we have to get this guy last.' Guillermo commented in his heart. Ken was probably only person that he was wary of left in the batting line up for Japan.

He thought for a while before letting out a small sigh.

Guillermo got to his feet and waved at the pitcher, calling for a walk.

'E-EH!?'

Ken's eyes bulged as he looked at the Cuban catcher, not believing what he was seeing. Suddenly cold sweat poured down his back as he panicked tremendously.

'W-Wait a moment! Where is this guy's pride?'

He had expected the teenagers of the Cuban National Team to have a sense of pride, or at least cajones. Even Japan had not walked either of the Lopez twins throughout the game, showing off their gigantic stones.

"What!? They're walking him?" Chris shouted in surprise, his expression almost mirroring his sons.

Coach Takashi frowned. He had been keeping an eye on the Cuban coach all this while and knew that there were no signals sent out to the field, which meant this was completely the catchers decision.

It wasn't just the two coach's who were up in arms, the Japanese bench were going crazy.

"Boo!"

"You call yourselves men? Ptooi!"

"Cuba? More like... COWARDS" Aki shouted, yet he received a few questioning looks.

The small crowd also didn't seem to appreciate the decision and called out their frustrations. The game was about to reach the most exciting part, yet it was marred by such a controversial decision.

Ken turned to Antonio, wanting to gauge his reaction. He almost breathed out an audible sigh of relief as he saw the torn expression on the guy's face.

'Yes yes! Tell him you don't want to walk me. Face me head on!' Ken screamed in his mind.

However, after hesitating for a few moments, he seemed to accept the decision and threw an overhand ball into the waiting glove of Guillermo.

"Ball."

'DAMN IT.'

Ken truly felt panicked in that moment. He turned his attention to the side of the field and saw who Aki who was next up to bat digging something out of his nose vigorously.

'No no, I can't let them walk me.' He thought. There was no way he would trust Aki with the final at-bat of the game.

He quickly tried to compose himself, trying to think of a way to stoke the competitive fire in the Cuban battery.

"Ball."

'Crap! Time is running out.'

Ken let out a deep sigh filled with disappointment, lowering his bat until the top end rested on the ground.

"So this is Cuba's answer to a real threat huh? To run away." He shook his head, doing his best to sound like he was let down.

Guillermo frowned at the words directed his way, feeling as if he was being made fun of. Yet he ignored him, or at least tried to.

"Oh man, and here I thought that the respected team who has the most U18 World Cup wins wouldn't shy away from a challenge. Guess I was wrong since you're dodging me like this."

Ken's words were harsh, almost too much. They dug at the players pride in their nation, as well as the hot blooded nature of youths.

Before Antonio could throw the next ball, Guillermo moved his glove and held his other hand up to stop him.

"What did you just say!? Are you talking crap?"

The plate umpire had heard all the words of the youth and couldn't help but side with him. Therefore he didn't interject, wanting to see what would happen.

Ken shrugged, trying to act as if he didn't care either way.

"I mean, if that's the way Cuba wants to win their games, then by all means please continue. It was my mistake for thinking that you guys were honorable."

Of course Ken was just talking out of his rear. Guillermo was well within his rights to walk him as a batter, many professional teams did this to minimize the risks, especially in such a circumstance.

Yet just because it was a viable strategy, that didn't mean that he wanted it to happen to him.

Guillermo was flustered for a moment and he tried to retort.

"I— Y-You... You bastard take that back!" He said as he grit his teeth. It was clear that he had pride in his home country, therefore hearing someone talk smack right in front of his face was enough to get his blood boiling.

'But if we face him and he hits... We might lose.' He thought, looking torn.

On one hand was his pride, and in the other was the game. Which was more important in that moment.

"Let him hit!"

The shout echoed over the field, causing everyone to turn their heads to the source of the sound.

Ken too turned his gaze, trying to locate his savior amidst the chaos.

'Jorge?'

Surprisingly it was Jorge on 2nd base who had shouted these words, single handedly reopening the door for Japan to win the ballgame.

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

Chapter 388 - 388: Face Me! (2)

"Yeah! Let him hit, we won't let anything pass." Manuel mirrored his brothers sentiments, resulting in a few other voices coming from the rest of the field.

Ken's gaze was still remaining on Jorge. While he couldn't fully see his face from that far away, he raised his hand in a thank you gesture.

Jorge couldn't help but chuckle, shaking his head in exasperation.

'I'm not doing this for you... Our pride is worth more than a single game. Not that we intend on letting you win.' He thought, getting into position.

While Guillermo was still in shock, he turned his head to the Head Coach, as if to get confirmation. He felt like he needed some validation before making such a decision.

The Head Coach let out a small sigh before nodding, telling the catcher to face Ken head on.

"Alright, well you wanted a face off. I hope you're prepared." Guillermo said, before squatting down into position.

Ken felt elated. For some reason this guy had been goaded into facing him.

'Haha! My charm must be out of this world.' He thought, gripping his bat tightly.

Of course he still had to face the submarine pitches of Antonio, but at least he now had an opportunity to win it for Japan.

Guillermo called for the pitch, placing his glove on the outside of the strike zone.

Antonio nodded before winding up and sending the ball out from a low angle.

Ken's eyes widened, following the course of the pitch. In an instant he knew that it was not the sinker he was looking for, therefore he simply watched it as it entered the glove of the catcher.

PAH

"Strike."

He wasn't confident in hitting the slider. It was far too tricky to make contact with, especially since he'd only seen it a few times this match. Were it not for being in the final innings, he might have tried to hit it out of principle.

Ken returned to his position and stared back at Antonio.

'Throw it... I know you want to.'

The next ball came, taking on almost the exact course as the last ball.

PAH

"Strike."

This time, Ken frowned.

'Two sliders in a row? Does this guy know I'm waiting for a sinker?'

He was now in a pickle with the count at 2-2 due to the 2 consecutive strikes. He now needed to make contact with the ball if it looked like it was going to be a strike, otherwise it was quite literally game over.

Ken took in a deep breath through his nose and out through his mouth, savoring his clear mental state.

He now had no choice but to use everything at his disposal and wait for the sinker.

Antonio once again dove into his wind up, once again sending out a damned slider.

Yet this time, Ken seemed to undo his mental shackles, taking in every bit of information that entered his vision. The angle, velocity and even rotation of the ball were all taken into consideration as he watched on like a hawk.

DING

"Foul."

Guillermo almost jumped in surprise as he saw Ken actually make contact with the slider. He had noticed earlier that the guy wouldn't even swing at them usually, as if he was waiting for another pitch.

Therefore, he thought that the guy had no chance of making contact with it. Yet this foul had subverted his expectations.

But that didn't mean he'd given up calling for it.

The next ball that came was another slider, this time wider than the last.

PAH

"Ball 3."

Ken let it go through to the catcher out of instinct. Yet when he heard the count, he almost had a heart attack.

'Crap! I forgot they already had 2 balls from before.'

That meant that if there was another ball he'd get walked to 1st base, going right back to his earlier predicament.

'Please oh please for the love of baseball, throw a damn sinker.'

Despite complaining inwardly like a child, Ken kept his poker face. He needed to pay close attention from now on. If there was one wild pitch that he didn't make contact with for a foul, it would be game over.

Feeling slightly suffocated, Ken returned to his position.

Antonio wiped the sweat off his brow, feeling the fatigue of the long match start to eat away at him. He had been pitching non-stop since the 2nd inning and wanted nothing more for the game to be over.

'This guy is so stubborn.' He thought inwardly.

Perhaps if he hadn't had to waste so many pitches in the past couple of innings, he might have been fresh enough to persevere. Yet there was no point in thinking about such things.

'Let's end it with this one.'

In the next moment, he bent down and sent his pitch blitzing towards the plate. It was one of his best pitches of the day, despite being so late in the game.

Yet the moment it left his fingertips, he saw a wide grin appear on Ken's face.

'What?'

Ken felt as if time had slowed down, instantly recognizing that his Crunch Time skill had activated. He felt strength enter his limbs, causing his body to heat up in response.

'I've been waiting for this.' He thought with glee.

There was no need to overuse his mental capacity in this situation, therefore he sealed it once more to avoid a headache.

He felt his body filled with power as he twisted his core and sent the bat roaring towards the path of the ball with ill intent.

DOOOOOOONG

Like the sound of a gong, the bat resonated in the arena, causing everyone to subconsciously get to their feet and follow the path of the ball.

Antonio swung around, feeling despair grip at his heart.

Hiroki almost jumped a few feet in the air in excitement as he began his run.

Ken followed the ball for a while, but he knew the result already.

Walk-off Home Run.

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

Chapter 389 - 389: Interview (1)

The Japanese team erupted with cheers and excitement as they watched the ball fly into the stands. Even coach Takashi pumped his fist in triumph, showing a rare sign of emotion.

As Ken began his victory lap around the bases, his attention turned to his mother who was sitting in the stands. Yet instead of cheering, her hand was over her mouth as she cried tears of joy.

Ken felt a little embarrassed, but he waved at her, wanting to include her in this moment.

'I'll have to make sure I spend some time with her today.' He thought, a smile appearing on his face.

As he was rounding the bases, he saw the dejected expressions on the Cuban player's faces, yet he didn't rub in his victory. They had been a tough opponent and he respected them.

He turned his attention to Hiroki who had just stepped onto home plate, only to see the rest of his team waiting for him with excited expressions on their face.

'What the heck!?'

Aki was at the front, his lips puckered as if he was going to kiss him the moment he came close enough.

The sight was almost enough for him to want to turn in the opposite direction. But he needed to step onto home plate otherwise the game wouldn't end.

Ken's face morphed, turning serious. Taking a page out of Makoto's book, once he got close enough, he sent a swooping uppercut into the stomach of Aki before stepping onto home plate.

"OOOOOOF!"

Aki bent over from the pain, feeling his lungs deflate from the impact. Yet no one paid attention to him, showering Ken with anything from high fives to slaps on the top of his head.

Yet the celebration soon turned uncomfortable as everyone was too close to each other. Soon enough, people were getting their toes stepped on among other things.

"AY! Who twisted my nipple!?"

"Hee hee~"

"Riku! I know that was you."

"Nuh uh~"

Ken felt the atmosphere turn weird so he quickly tried his best to get out of the mix of bodies. He didn't want another flatulence protocol situation to happen. He could already imagine the echo in the arena afterwards.

"Ken! You did it!"

Chris came swooping in from the side and placed his hands on top of his shoulders, his eyes filled with immense pride.

"Of course coach" Ken replied with a grin.

"Alright alright, the next game is due to start soon. Please gather your things and leave the field." Despite the fairy tale ending, the plate umpire alerted the Japanese team, trying to move them along.

This was the problem with tournaments like the world cup and even Koshien. Everything was on a tight schedule which meant the teams needed to pack up almost immediately after the game was over.

"Ah, yes thank you umpire." Chris responded.

"Everyone line up!" He shouted in the next moment.

The Japanese team did as they were told, lining up and facing the Cuban team who was in the midst of returning to the dugout.

"Bow!"

"Thank you for the game!"

The group who were still bummed from the loss, received the bow and felt a little awkward. Though this thing was commonplace in Japan, foreign teams would barely even shake hands let alone bow to each other.

Despite being downcast from the loss, Jorge moved his large body towards the Japanese team. He stood in front of Ken who was a little shorter than him.

"What? Does he want to fight?" Aki said, squaring up. Yet upon closer inspection he was half-hiding behind Kuro.

Ken didn't feel any malice from Jorge, so he stood his ground. It felt a little odd having to look up to another person that wasn't his father.

The two stood apart in silence for a little while, creating a tense atmosphere.

Yet in the next moment, Jorge smiled and held his hand out.

"Let's fight again in the Super Round."

Ken grinned, grasping the large hand presented in front of him. He could feel the callouses on the rough hand of Jorge, evidence of how hard he worked to get where he was.

"I'll see you there." Ken said simply.

After that, the big guy returned to his dugout, allowing the Japanese team to heave a sigh of relief.

"Alright let's pack up." Chris said, gathering the team.

The Japanese team were about to leave when they were approached by an American man dressed in a suit.

"Sorry, could I please grab a word with one of your players?" The man asked Chris. He spoke rather slowly, but he was polite.

"Sure, who did you need?"

The man seemed a little surprised that Chris answered in fluent English, but he breathed out a quick sigh of relief afterwards.

"Can we speak to Ken? It's for an interview we'll be placing on the World Cup page."

"Ken, this gentleman wants to interview you." Chris said, in Japanese so the rest of the team could understand.

"Ooooooh! Our Kenny is now a bigshot." Masayuki said with a cheeky grin.

He was the biggest contributor to Ken's nickname being spread amongst the team, always quick to call him so in front of everyone.

"Good luck bro." Daichi said, smacking him on the back.

"Hurry up the rest of you." Chris shouted, spurring them to get back into the dugout and pack up.

"Yes sir!"

Ken followed the American man who took him over to the side of the field where a camera was set up. He stood in front and gestured for Ken to stand next to him.

"Ah crap! I forgot a translator." The reporter cursed, quickly looking around behind him.

"Oh, I speak English sir." Ken said, a little amused at his antics.

"Oh... Fantastic!"

"Sorry, my name is Brandon Anderson. Sorry for not introducing myself earlier." He felt a little guilty since he had assumed the guy only spoke Japanese.

Ken nodded, though he wasn't offended. "Ken Takagi, nice to meet you."

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

Chapter 390 - 390: Interview (2)

The two shook hands before getting the prompt by the guy behind the camera. S

The moment the count reached zero, Brandon turned into a completely different person.

"Good morning, this is Brandon Anderson reporting from Rodgers stadium after the exciting Cuba vs Japan match. I'm here with the sensational freshman Ken Takagi who had a massive impact on today's game." He gestured to Ken who felt a little nervous.

While he had participated in interviews before, he still had trouble concealing his nerves. If it wasn't for his poker face, his expression would seem awkward.

"Ken, tell me what it was like hitting the walk-off home run for your team in the dying moments of the game?" Brandon asked, placing the microphone closer to his face.

"Ah what can I say? Of course it felt amazing. But a big reason why I got the opportunity was because of my team." He replied succinctly.

"Of course. But you also had some amazing individual plays, both in the outfield and on the mound. Do you think that you should have been the starting pitcher this match?"

Though his words were said nicely, there was an undertone behind them. Almost as if he was fishing for some drama.

Thankfully Ken had his poker face skill active, otherwise he would have sent a frown towards the man.

"I trust Coach Takashi and think he made the right decision. He trusts me with closing out games on the mound which lines up perfectly with my skill set. There's no dissatisfaction within the Japanese team."

He had to choose his words carefully, not showing his true thoughts. If he were to be honest, he would have chosen to go on the mound in the 6th inning against the Lopez twins, but that did not happen.

"Wow very humble of you Ken. One last question if you don't mind."

"Sure go ahead."

Brandon cleared his throat briefly away from the microphone and spoke up.

"After your performance today, some people have compared you to Ryan Smith. What do you think of that comparison and are you looking forward to playing him in the World Cup?"

He moved the microphone over to Ken and looked at him with sparkling eyes.

'Heh, Ryan Smith... America's darling.' Ken thought inwardly.

Of course he knew who Ryan Smith was, the next prodigy who would take the Major Leagues by storm in the coming years. He was a monster, yet Ken didn't feel like he would lose to him.

No, he refused to lose to him.

"Ryan Smith? Sorry, I've never heard of him."

Silence.

Ken was convincing thanks to his poker face, so much so that Brandon was taken aback. It took him quite a few seconds to compose himself before he managed to bring a close to the interview.

"Ahem. Well congratulations again on your comeback victory over Cuba. I'll be looking forward to seeing your matches in the future."

"Thank you." Ken said, bowing slightly.

"This was Brandon Anderson reporting on the U18 World Cup. We'll be back with the next game Canada vs South Korea shortly."

"And Cut." The cameraman said, turning off the camera.

Brandon let out a deep sigh, feeling as if a storm was brewing. He could already see the comments on the video from the American audience directed to the teen beside him.

"Man, you've just gone and stirred the hornets nest." He said to Ken, expecting to see a confused expression on his face.

However, he was taken aback as the teen grin widely at the comment.

"Don't worry, I know. I'll see you around Brandon." Ken remarked before running back to the dugout to grab his things.

"Huh? Don't tell me..."

Yet Ken was gone by the time he managed to put everything together.

"Haha, what an interesting kid." He said with a chuckle.

"Ken! Can you please sign this ball."

As the team were about to walk through the tunnels, Ken heard his name being called from the side line. There was a young kid around the age of 12 or 13 who was holding out a beaten up ball and a pen.

"Hmm?"

He walked over to the kid calmly, yet inwardly he was screaming for joy.

'My first time being asked for an autograph!'

"Sure buddy, let's take a look."

Yet after grabbing the ball, he noticed that the seams were broken and some of the leather was hanging off the ball.

"I can get a fresh ball to sign if you like?" He asked.

"No no! This was the ball from the first home run you hit today, I wanna keep it." The kid replied vigorously.

"What? Really?"

Ken almost didn't believe it. He tried to recall what had happened when he hit the first home run under the effects of Limit Break.

Only now did he remember that the fielder had almost robbed him of a home run, despite him hitting the crap out of the ball.

'So that's why it didn't go as far as I thought... The ball broke apart.'

Ken decided to sign his name on the only part that didn't look beaten up. His signature was beautiful, a sign that this was not his first time writing it.

In reality, Ken had practiced his signature for an embarrassing amount of time in his previous life. So much so that he had already perfected it, despite never becoming a professional athlete.

If anyone were to ask, he would vehemently deny the claims, for it was far too embarrassing.

"Ken! Hurry up."

Daichi yelled at him, a hint of jealousy in his tone.

"Here ya go." Ken handed the beaten up ball and the marker back to the kid, a wide grin on his face.

"T-Thank you!" The kid looked as if his day had been made.

Ken was about to leave, but he thought of something suddenly.

"You're the first one who has asked me for my autograph. What's your name?"

At these words, the kid's expression brightened even more, if that were even possible.

"M-My name is Michael." He responded, feeling a little starstruck.

"Thanks Michael, I'll see you around!" Ken said, waving goodbye.

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

Chapter 391 - 391: Lunch Date (1)

"In sports news, Japan managed to overcome Cuba in the final inning with a walk-off two-run home run. The match was full of back and forth action, yet it was the heroics of the freshman two-way player Ken Takagi that sealed it."

As the TV went on in the background, the American U18 team were getting changed after playing their own game. While the locker rooms weren't as luxurious as Rodger's stadium, they were still top tier.

The atmosphere was relaxed as everyone did their own thing, chatting casually between each other. One wouldn't have expected that they'd just triumphed over one of the top teams in the world.

Of course by their standards, Australia was certainly not up to their standard in baseball.

A player with styled sandy blond hair and clear blue eyes sat lazily on the couch. His long limbs and toned body spoke of his dedication to fitness.

"Yo Ryan. You seen this guy?" A deep voice asked, pointing to the TV.

Ryan who was the one sitting on the couch, lazily turned his head to the sound of the voice, his gaze looking uninterested.

Yet that changed as he saw what was being displayed.

His eyes widened as he saw the 102mph fastball from Ken flying into the glove of the catcher. Ryan subconsciously stood up, approaching the TV step by step.

'He's good...'

These were the two words that appeared in his mind as he scrutinized everything from the wind up to the release.

Yet a moment later, the play changed to his home run that won the game.

"He's a batter too?" Ryan scowled.

He seemed to be disappointed that the person he'd just complimented was wasting his time with batting. Ryan was one of those pitching supremacists, believing that focusing on anything but pitching was a waste of time.

"What a pity..." He muttered.

As he walked away, the post-match interview replayed.

"After your performance today, some people have compared you to Ryan Smith. What do you think of that comparison and are you looking forward to playing him in the World Cup?"

'Tch, comparing that idiot to me? What a joke.' Ryan thought as he turned back around to see who would utter such filth.

"Ryan Smith? Sorry, I've never heard of him."

The moment these words came out of the TV, everybody in the locker room went silent.

"Hahahaha!"

The room erupted into laughter, some players even holding their sides from laughing too hard.

Ryan felt the whole left side of his face twitch in anger as he stared back at the face on the TV. He took in Ken's features, as if he wanted to burn them into his mind.

"Haha, don't mind Ryan. The guy lives in a small hole on the other side of the world, of course he hasn't heard of you." A tall dark skinned teen placed his hand on Ryan's shoulder and tried to console him.

However, his tone was still filled with amusement, making it seem as if he was making fun of him.

Yet Ryan paid him no heed, still staring at the TV screen.

'Ken Takagi huh? We'll see if you've heard of me by the end of the World Cup, after I've crushed you.'

It was then that the Head Coach Mark Williams came into the locker room. He was a tall man with gray hair and had deep brown eyes, one could tell that he was past his prime, but his back was straight as a sword.

Upon entering, everybody quickly settled down, turning their attention to him.

It was clear by these actions that they respected the coach greatly.

"What was all the fuss going on in here?" He asked, his tone deep, showing no signs of his age.

The players were reluctant to speak up, as if they were expecting some form of punishment if they answered wrong.

"We were just having a joke at Ryan's expense sir."

"Ah, I see. Care to let me in on the joke? I like jokes." He answered monotonously.

No one believed his words at all. They were well aware of the man's disposition, especially when it came down to discipline within a team setting.

"T-There was a Japanese player who said that he didn't know who Ryan was... We just thought his reaction to the guys words was funny."

Yet nobody was laughing now. They merely waited for the coach's reaction.

"Hmm? Japanese player... What was his name?" Mark put his hands to his chin as if he was deep in thought, rubbing his stubble.

"Ken Takagi." Ryan spoke out loud. He was the only one who had bothered to remember the players name, since he'd consciously added him to his list.

Mark's eyes flashed imperceptibly for a moment.

"So he's playing for Japan huh?" He muttered.

"Wait, you know him sir?" Ryan asked, slightly surprised. This was the first time that he'd seen Ken and it was only because he'd participated in the World Cup.

"Hmm? Sure. Who wouldn't know the number 1 High School pitcher." He said matter-of-factly.

"Uhh, sure I guess."

The team didn't sound too convinced. However, it was only Ryan who seemed to notice the distinction that the Head Coach had given.

He didn't say the number 1 High School pitcher in Japan...

Yet before Ryan could ask any further, the coach moved on.

"Alright, enough of this. We've gotta be out of the locker room pronto." Mark said, making some gestures to hurry everyone up.

Since he'd sat out this game against Australia, Ryan was already ready to go. He thought about approaching the coach separately, yet quickly gave up when he saw the thoughtful expression on the coach's face.

'Does he think this Ken guy is better than me?' Ryan thought, feeling his pride wounded.

He grabbed his bag and placed it on his opposite shoulder, his eyes narrowing.

'Let's see what he thinks when we annihilate Japan in the Super Round.' He said in his heart.

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

Chapter 392 - 392: Lunch Date (2)

Ken, Daichi and Chris left the hotel shortly after dropping of their things. The sun was shining in the sky, the late summer breeze showing signs of cooling down for Autumn.

This was the first time they'd left the hotel like this since arriving in America. Granted they had a full schedule and it was only the 3rd day.

Chris hailed a taxi and the three got in. Both Ken and Daichi were like country bumpkins as they took in the sights of the city through the windows.

Around 5 minutes later, they arrived at their destination. It was a fancy looking restaurant just off the busy road. Judging by how many people were inside, it seemed to be a popular establishment.

"Table for 3?" The waiter asked.

"No, we have a reservation under Chris." His father replied.

"Excellent, someone is already here waiting for you." He said, leading the trio into the restaurant.

As they turned the corner, they saw Yuki patiently waiting at one of the round tables. The moment she looked up, her eyes lit up like fireworks.

"I missed you guys!" She said, hugging each one of them individually.

Despite being in the country for 2 days now, she hadn't been able to interact with the three of them, feeling a little left out. It was clear that she wasn't expecting this situation when Chris said that they would be going as a family.

But she was not a greedy person. She didn't want to interfere with the Japanese National Team duties that they had.

"You guys were so good today, both of you." She stated, looking at her boys with pride.

"Ahem..." Chris seemed to be feeling left out as he grabbed his wife's hand and tried to get her attention.

"Yes yes dear, you too." She replied with a chuckle.

Both Ken and Daichi let out a laugh. A lot had happened since they left Japan, yet there was still a long way to go before they were finished.

Since they'd now won 2 of their games in Group A, they were sitting on top of the leader board. Of course there were still 2 games that needed to be played today, Canada vs South Korea and Chinese Taipei vs Dominican Republic.

But it could be said that they had started off their World Cup campaign wonderfully.

The family chatted for a while before looking at the menu. Chris read out the options to Yuki while Ken did the same for Daichi.

It turned out that this was one of the best Italian restaurants in California, and judging by the costs, they certainly charged as if they were the best.

Yet Chris didn't flinch as he told them to order whatever they wanted.

Eventually, they ordered a spread of dishes ranging from pizza to carbonara.

While they waited for the food, Yuki got straight down to business.

"So, have you been making sure to message Ai while you've been away?" Her face was stern, leaving no room for Ken to make up any excuses.

"Yes mom... The time difference makes it a little tough, but I've messaged her every day since we got here." He said truthfully, not wanting to face his mother's wrath.

Daichi couldn't help but grin, seeing his brother under interrogation. Yet he seemed to have forgotten that Ken also had his achilles heel.

"Mom, ask Daichi if he's been messaging Miho." Ken said with a goading smile.

Yuki perked up at this information before she turned her attention to Daichi.

Yet Daichi merely chuckled, as if he was the perfect child. "I message her every night, we even hang out every day since she's with the team."

"Very good Daichi, I just hope that you're treating her right." Yuki said, sounding pleased.

Daichi sent a smug expression to Ken as if he'd easily escaped the interrogation. However, his face changed when he saw that Ken was still wearing his goading smile.

'W-What does he have up his sleeve?' He thought, feeling a little panicked.

Ken let out an audible sigh, gaining the attention of everyone at the table.

"I just find it a little weird that she doesn't really know anything about you. She only realized that you played for Osaka today, even though you've been talking so much. What do you guys even talk about?" Ken acted out his part perfectly, seemingly showing his deep concern for his brother.

Yet when their eyes met, Daichi could feel that it was all intentional.

'That bastard!'

"That's wonderful of you to be looking out for your brother Ken." Yuki said, reaching out and grabbing his hand on the table.

Yet in the next moment her eyes darted to Daichi. Judging by her expression, he knew that there was no way of getting out of this painful conversation.

He could almost hear Ken's inaudible laughter from beside him, taunting him in front of their parents.

However, all he could do was suck it up and speak about the truth.

"We've been doing a lot of chatting about our plans for the future. Rather than talking about the people who we are now, we've been speaking of our dreams and aspirations."

Daichi felt his face redden a little, but he didn't hear any laughter or anything from those present at the table. He looked around, feeling a little embarrassed, but all he saw was Chris and Yuki smiling back at him.

Ken himself was flabbergasted. Just what kind of 16 year old kid was this mature?

He had thought that maybe their messages were of a dirty nature, yet Mr. Goody two-shoes over here was talking about his dreams for the future instead.

Ken suddenly felt a little bad for throwing his brother under the bus like that, but it was just so they could experience the same level of discomfort together as a family.

He placed his hand on Daichi's shoulder and smiled. Daichi turned and looked at him, reciprocating the smile.

The two brothers felt closer than ever, despite being away from each other for over half a year while they attended different schools. Yet that meant nothing in this moment.

"Did you tell Mom and Dad how many kids you decided to have with Miho yet?"

"AH"

Daichi's face twisted as he heard the exclamations from his mother who had just stood up in shock. It wasn't only him, Chris began to cough, trying to control his reaction.

"Hahahaha!"

Ken let out a peel of laughter, feeling a sense of happiness in that moment.

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

Chapter 393 - 393: End of Group Stage (1)

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Yuki warming up to the idea of being a Grandmother and holding a baby once more. Daichi was of course appalled, while both Ken and Chris seemed to be giggling like school girls.

By the end of the meet up, everyone felt relaxed and happier than ever.

"Remember, just because you're overseas it doesn't mean that you can forget about your homework. I don't want to see your grades go down when you return to school."

Yuki left them with these parting words, reminding the duo of their other responsibilities. The two paled at the mention of homework, realizing they were behind.

"Well, gotta go mom."

Both Daichi and Ken disappeared a moment later, not wanting to talk about such depressing matters.

"We'll come see you again soon." Chris said, planting a kiss on her forehead.

Yuki bid farewell to her husband and watched him leave the restaurant with a smile. Yet once he was out of sight, she let out a small sigh, feeling lonely once more.

She shook her head in the next moment.

'I guess it's better than being alone back in Japan.' She thought inwardly.

The Japanese player's schedule was jam packed. When they weren't actually playing games, they were either working out, eating or doing homework.

Before they knew it, the end of the group stages had already approached.

Since beating Cuba, they faced Chinese Taipei, Canada and the Dominican Republic.

None of their remaining games was as tough as their match against Cuba, showing just how talented the Cuban team were.

The matches were as follows:

Japan 12 - Chinese Taipei 1

Japan 13 - Canada 3

Japan 10 - Dominican Republic 4

Despite such win margins, Ken wasn't too satisfied. He was only allowed to pitch in the final game against Dominican Republic as the others were finished by the 5th inning.

He had hoped to see Carlos Toro on the DR team, but he quickly found out that it was not the case. Perhaps the match would have been closer if he was part of their line up.

Ken didn't feel right voicing his displeasure since Japan were sitting firmly on top of the Group A ladder with 5 wins and 0 losses. They were in a great position with the current line up.

If he were to say something, it might rock the boat and mess with the team chemistry.

So he decided to bite his tongue. An opportunity would present itself as long as he was patient. It was also in his best interest to remain in the outfield if he wanted to complete the hidden task.

Apart from the first game against South Korea and the home run save against Cuba, he hadn't had another opportunity to rob a home run.

Frustratingly enough, Riku had performed one against Canada in the left outfield, making him even more depressed.

Ken let out a sigh as he lounged on a couch in the lobby. They were waiting for the Super Round fixtures to be released since America had just finished wiping the floor with South Africa.

"What's up with you?" Daichi asked, sending Ken a glance.

He sighed once more, barely paying Daichi any attention.

"You wouldn't understand." He muttered.

"Hehe. Kenny is just mad that he only got to pitch 2 times in our group stage." Masayuki retorted, sending Ken a wink.

"Oho? Is our hidden Ace unhappy being with us in the outfield?" Riku said dramatically, even putting on his best pouting expression.

Ken lazily turned to Riku and shuddered unconsciously, seeing such a sight was not good for his mental faculties.

"Put that face away, you're scaring all the locals." Ken retorted, making a shooing motion.

"That's not a very nice thing to say." Kuro said, his head popping up from behind Ken's couch.

"Damn it!" Ken jumped in fright, not expecting the gloomy-faced Kuro to appear so close to him.

"Hahaha"

The room broke out into laughter at Ken's expense, creating a ruckus in the hotel lobby.

Chris walked into the lobby, causing everyone to quickly lower their voices.

"The fixtures have been released, let's go to the meeting room."

"Finally~"

The team was still fatigued from their game earlier today and wanted nothing more than to rest and relax. If it wasn't for this they'd probably be in the pool or getting a nap in.

The problem was, they still had at least another 5 games to go in the World Cup, 6 if they managed to get top 4 in the Super Round.

A few moments later, everyone sat down in the meeting room, their attention fixed upon the large screen at the front. It was currently displaying the results of the group stages.

Group A

1 - Japan

2 - Cuba

3 - Canada

4 - Dominican Republic

5 - Chinese Taipei

6 - South Korea

Group B

1 - United States

2 - Mexico

3 - Australia

4 - South Africa

5 - Netherlands

6 - Italy

Coach Takashi waited until everyone was seated before standing next to the screen and addressing the players. His hands were placed behind his back and he wore his usual stern expression.

"First of all, I want to congratulate everyone on a successful group stage. Other than our game against Cuba, the others were not close." He said, a grin forming on his face.

The players had no time to celebrate these words, as the coach quickly moved on.

"However, this is only the first step on our way to our ultimate goal... Beating the United States and taking home the World Cup."

The room was silent, everyone deep in thought.

While this was something that the coach had said before, it had never been as close as it was now. After going up against some of the best teams in the world, it was only natural that the players would have built up confidence.

Yet there was a thin line between confidence and arrogance.

"We need to stay focused and together as a team if we want to continue our success."

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

Chapter 394 - 394: End of Group Stage (2)

The coach's words made sense. They were on their opponents home turf, against the team which had held supreme dominance over the sport since its inception.

If they weren't working as a team, there was no chance that they would win.

Seeing the serious faces of his players, the Head Coach nodded in satisfaction before moving to the side.

Chris took the stage next, a clipboard in his hand. He gestured to the staff member behind the laptop, prompting him to change the display.

The fixtures for the Super Round appeared on the screen in the next moment, showing their game schedule.

"As I said earlier, the fixtures have been released. Like the group stages, we'll be playing 5 games over 5 days. The two teams who end up on top of the group will play one another for 1st place, while the 3rd and 4th teams will play for 3rd place."

Most of the players were aware of this fact beforehand, but it was good to hear it once more. They turned their attention to the screen as Chris continued.

"We'll be up against Australia first, followed by Cuba and United States. Our toughest match ups will be back to back, so we can't let our guard down."

Ken frowned. Going up against Cuba again was one thing, but to play against the US the following day was a bit of a concern.

He had watched most of their games at night with Daichi and the squatter Hiroki who still didn't want to return to his room.

Much like Japan, they had a pitching rotation. The prodigy Ryan Smith had only pitched in a few matches, and never for long. It was like they were conserving him for some reason.

"We'll now go through some footage of Australia's games since we're playing them tomorrow." Chris said, sitting down in front of the laptop.

The film started to play, showing Australia up against South Africa. The first thing that stood out was the quick and efficient defense from the infield.

A small figure was yelling loudly, directing the fielders as if he was a general on the battlefield. He had light skin and was only 5'6 with some scarring on his face, making him stick out.

"That's Nikko Diwa. Despite finishing 3rd in the group stages, he was a big reason why Australia were able to keep their point differential down." Chris added, zooming in on the player.

Ken nodded. The short stop was essential for dictating the movements of the infielders, it was generally played by the loudest and most energetic of players in the team.

Subconsciously, his gaze moved to Aki.

'And the most annoying apparently...' He thought inwardly.

"That's not all. This big guy is Jebadiah Stauber, his arm is perhaps the strongest in the World Cup."

The camera moved to an almighty specimen in the outfield. If one compared his height to the back wall, one could instantly tell that he was a giant.

On the screen, the tall guy plucked the ball out of mid air and let his arm loose, throwing it all the way back towards home plate from deep in the outfield.

"Holy crap!"

The team recoiled after seeing his ridiculous arm.

However, the shock only increased a moment later. As the ball rocketed through the air, it cleared the catcher's head by at least a foot, soaring over him and allowing the runner to slide home for the run.

"H-He overthrew that!?"

Chris smiled in amusement, he was also this shocked upon seeing the teen's arm the first time. Since they'd been in different groups initially, he hadn't needed to do any research on Australia to begin with.

"I'd love to say that was all we had to worry about from him... But he's also one of the best batters in the tournament."

The next few scenes was the giant in the batter's box. It was only now that one could see how big the guy really was.

DOOOONG

An almighty sound came from the speakers as the ball was sent into the stands with force.

"Whew that guy can hit." Riku whistled before adding his two cents.

"Indeed. But as long as we can limit the runners on base by the time he's up to bat, there shouldn't be any issues." Chris said matter-of-factly.

The meeting went on for a while longer, but it was pretty similar to their other ones. Australia's pitcher wasn't anything outstanding, at least compared to their own and the other top teams.

He was a pitch to contact kind of pitcher who had great stamina and control. Out of all the pitchers in the World Cup so far, he was leading in number of pitches, considerably.

"Man I'm craving rice..." Riku said on their way out of the meeting room.

It had almost been a week since they arrived in America, and they'd been able to taste all different types of foods. But since the players were used to eating rice at least 2 times per day, they were missing it.

"Tell me about it. I think if I see another hamburger or fries I'll be sick." Kuro added, massaging his stomach.

His nausea added another layer to his gloomy expression, causing everyone to back away slightly at the sight.

Even Ken who loved his father's hamburgers was starting to get over the food.

He suddenly remembered the conversation that they had before leaving for Tokyo University.

'I miss mom's cooking...' he thought, feeling the same way as Kuro.

After dinner, the players retreated to their rooms for the night. Ken managed to secure the laptop once more, in order to watch some of the games that were played today.

It had become somewhat of a ritual that these 3 would gather in their room every night to do some research.

Since they'd studied film today about Australia and had already played Cuba, Ken decided to turn on the United States vs Netherlands match that was played earlier today.

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

Chapter 395 - 395: Late Night Chat (1)

The trio got comfortable and watched the match, their eyes glued to the laptop screen.

"Oh? That pitcher is starting this game." Daichi said, feeling a little surprised.

"Wasn't that sandy haired guy their closing pitcher?" Hiroki added.

"No, I'm sure we saw him starting on the first day of the World Cup. I wonder why he hasn't been pitching lately?" Daichi scratched his head in thought as he responded.

However, Ken's eyes narrowed as he saw the guy warm up on the mound. Like his friends had said, Ryan had barely been given an opportunity to play since his team was usually always ahead.

Yet for some reason, the guy was pitching today, against a much lower ranked team, Netherlands.

'Very odd.' Ken thought to himself.

What happened in the next 45 minutes was a complete and utter slaughterhouse.

United States 17 - Netherlands 0

The teens stared at the screen, their eyes filled with a mixture of emotions. This was the team that the coach wanted them to beat?

"Man these guys are tough..."

"You don't say? If it wasn't for the mercy rule they could have scored 40 runs easily."

Daichi seemed a little anxious, mainly because the American batters were just too good. From the beginning of their line up to the end, each one of them had the ability to hit a home run.

Ken was silent, his gaze still upon Ryan who was shown on screen.

"We'll hand you over to our reporter on the scene Brandon Anderson for an interview with America's own Ryan Smith."

Ken's ears perked up as he heard the announcer speak up about an interview.

Yet due to the audio being in English, both Hiroki and Daichi hadn't been paying attention, too busy speaking amongst themselves.

"Shush guys, I'm trying to listen." He chastised, turning up the volume.

"Hmm? What is it?"

The two turned around and saw the interviewer Brandon and Ryan on the screen and instantly got curious.

"Ah damn it, they're speaking in English."

"Ken, quickly change it to the Jap—"

"Shut up! I'll summarize it for you later." He snapped back, causing the other two to throw him a questioning gaze.

"We're here with America's own Ryan Smith. Firstly, I want to say my congratulations for a masterful game on the mound. With this victory, you've cemented your spot at the top of Group B."

Ryan merely nodded, waiting for the interview to continue.

"Not wanting to take away from your performance here, but it seemed a little odd for you to be pitching today against the obviously weaker Netherlands team. Is there a reason the coach decided to put you as the starting pitcher?"

'Nice question Brandon!' Ken yelled inwardly. This was the kind of journalism he wanted, especially since it aligned with his own questions.

He placed the microphone in front of Ryan, who answered with only 4 words.

"To send a message."

"Ah... I see. Who was this message intended for? Your opponents in the Super Round?"

Brandon was a little taken aback, but since he was a professional, he rolled with the punches, trying to fill in the blanks.

However, Ryan shook his head, prompting Brandon to give him the microphone once more.

"Do you know who I am now?" He said, staring into the camera intently.

Ken felt as if Ryan was gazing at himself, despite this not being a live interview. He couldn't help but feel a smile creep onto the side of his mouth.

'Looks like I really pissed him off in that interview.' He thought with amusement.

Brandon was an intelligent guy, instantly recognizing who he was talking about. It also helped that he was the one who interviewed Ken a few days ago when he had said those things on air.

Unbeknownst to those who watched the interview, Brandon had seen Ken's playful expression afterwards. It was obvious to him that Ken's words were merely a provocation towards his competitor.

Brandon composed himself, deciding to add some fuel to the fire.

"Do you have any comments regarding the recent comparisons between Ken Takagi and yourself Ryan?"

Ken's eyebrow twitched as he heard those words, causing him to look at Brandon in another light.

'Looks like that guy is also instigating.' Ken thought, inwardly praising the wily reporter.

Though looking at Ryan's facial expressions after his words were even more entertaining than the question itself.

"Haha! Why does he look like he swallowed a worm?" Daichi laughed aloud.

"Shhh!"

Ken once again made a shushing noise and tried to focus on Ryan's answer.

"We're not on the same level, so what's the use in comparisons?"

Ryan's voice oozed arrogance, as if he thought Ken was not worth any of his time. Though his actions and words seemed to be at odds with each other.

If Ryan truly felt Ken was beneath him, then why was his first words "Do you know who I am now?"

Ken burst out into laughter immediately, tears forming at the corner of his eyes. To see such a lauded figure in his past life get shaken by him was almost too much to bear.

Both Daichi and Hiroki looked at each other, concern evident in their expressions.

It suddenly made much more sense why Ryan had come out and pitched today. He wanted to try and assert his dominance, claiming the World Cup as his own playground.

However, that only served to get Ken more fired up.

'Bring it on!'

Yet the interview wasn't done. Brandon who had just heard possibly one of the most arrogant words he'd heard this year, wanted to bring the guy down a peg.

"You say you're not on the same level, but Ken pitched a 102mph fastball against Cuba a few days ago. Are you saying that you're above him?"

"..."

"This interview is over." Ryan said, before walking out of frame.

"HAHAHAHA! I love you Brandon!"

Ken began to roll around on the floor with laughter, feeling his sides quickly cramp up from the strain. He hadn't expected Brandon to go in for the kill, but it only served to increase Ken's opinion of him.

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

Chapter 396 - 396: Late Night Chat (2)

Seeing Ken's state, both Hiroki and Daichi were burning with curiosity. What could have been so funny that he spontaneously burst into laughter.

Only after a few minutes was Ken able to calm down before he was instantly bombarded by questions from the duo. He was forced to translate the interview line by line until both Daichi and Hiroki were satisfied.

"HAHAHA" S

"What a Muppet!"

Loud sounds of laughter ensued as the 3 enjoyed the entertainment that Brandon had given them. It brought a lighter atmosphere to the constant state of stress and exertion that they had been feeling over the past 5 days.

Soon enough, everyone got into bed and turned the lights off. It had been a long day and everyone was beginning to become fatigued after playing many matches.

Strangely enough, Daichi was the first person to fall asleep. Usually he would message Miho for at least 30 minutes before getting some shut-eye.

Ken smiled. It was obvious that his brother had been working hard, both off and on the field.

'Maybe I should check out my mission progress.' Ken thought, bringing up his system.

Yet the moment the window appeared in front of him, he heard a voice from the portable bed beside him.

"Ken, are you awake?" Hiroki asked in a soft tone.

"Hmm? Yeah, what's up." Ken asked, stealthily closing his system window.

There was silence for a few moments before he spoke up once more.

"Do you think we have what it takes to beat the United States?"

Ken couldn't help but chuckle at the question. Of course he had no idea since he'd never played them before, but judging by the matches they'd watched, it would be a tough one.

Yet there was a large part of him that wanted it to happen.

"I think we have a chance." He eventually said.

"Mmm, me too..."

Ken waited a while, yet his friend didn't say anything. Just when he thought Hiroki had fallen asleep, he spoke up once more.

"Man, you really are amazing Ken. When I see you on the field, it looks like you have the whole game in the palm of your hand. Nothing seems to faze you at all."

Ken frowned. This was not something that his friend would usually say, meaning something was up. He turned his body and propped himself up onto his elbow, looking in Hiroki's direction.

"What's this about?" Ken asked, his tone serious.

"Sometimes it feels like I don't belong here ya know?"

Before Ken could respond, he continued.

"I've always worked hard to get better my entire life. In middle school I was one of the best players because of my work ethic, but once I got to High School, I realized that it wasn't enough."

"No matter how much I tried to improve, I would never get better. To the point where even those who hardly trained surpassed me, leaving me in the dust."

Ken swallowed deeply, choosing not to interrupt his friend. He could feel the pain and frustration within Hiroki's voice, showing just how much he had suffered over the years in pursuit of greatness.

"But then you came to Yokohama..."

Hiroki grinned, though Ken could not see through the darkness.

"Not only were you talented, you also worked harder than anyone. You were always training with the intent to get better, carrying everybody along with you, whether they wanted to come or not."

This time it was Ken's turn to smile. The face of Shiro popped into his mind briefly, followed by all the torturous training that he put him through.

"I still remember our conversation on the bus back from our friendly match when I had to swallow my pride and ask for your help. Though it's not my proudest moment, it was the best decision I ever made."

Hiroki's words were sincere and filled with emotion.

"Well, it's not like it was easy." Ken muttered, trying to ease the mood.

"Haha, you're right, that training was pure torture for 2 months. I still get nightmares from it sometimes." He said with a hint of melancholy.

He was silent once more, as if trying to choose his next words.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is... Thank you. Without your help and guidance, there's no way that I would have been able to tryout for the National Team, let alone play on the starting line up."

Ken shook his head vehemently, not wanting to take such credit.

"You were the one who put in the work man, you should be thanking yourself." He said sincerely.

Yet Hiroki quickly dismissed these words.

"Yeah right. I'd probably still be swinging my bat in the backyard, dreaming about moments like this haha."

Ken didn't know what to say. While it was maybe possible for Hiroki to increase his potential through enough stimulus, would he have been able to do it without Ken and the systems help?

Well, since Hiroki had never made it to the professionals in his previous life, it seemed like the answer was no.

If he took himself as an example, Ken knew damn well that he would not be in the position he was in right now if it weren't for the system. Though that was another thought for another time.

"So, are you going to make the most of your newfound potential?" Ken asked, laying back down onto his back.

"You mean go pro?"

"No, I mean become a model..." He answered sarcastically.

"Hahaha, I'm way too shy to become a model. Plus, I think I'd need to be a bit more handsome to pull that off."

Ken's eyebrow twitched, feeling a bout of irritation. If the so-called Greek God needed to be more handsome to become a model, then what chance did anyone else have?

Hearing Ken go silent, he answered.

"It's always been my dream to go pro in Japan. There's no way I'm letting go of that dream, especially now that I'm finally capable of doing so."

"Good, then let's win the World Cup and get you more exposure."

"Haha, you bet."

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

Chapter 397 - 397: Next Game (1)

The next day, everyone gathered in the lobby after a quick breakfast. Today they would be facing Australia in the first match of the Super Round.

Since the number of teams had been reduced to 6, everyone would be playing at Rodgers stadium from this point forth. This was also the point where more and more spectators would start to appear in the arena.

To be frank, the audience numbers for the U18 World Cup so far were rather abysmal. Ken was pretty sure that his middle school prefecture tournament finals had similar numbers in attendance.

But from what Coach Takashi said, the Men's World Cup had the biggest draw and not the U18 version. Though this did not seem to affect him at all.

Ken found himself deep in thought after last night's discussion with Hiroki. Having all of that praise heaped on him left him feeling like a bit of a fraud.

In all honesty, his skill level could be completely attributed to the system. Without it, he would likely have been a mediocre player up to this point, despite having a second chance at chasing his dreams.

This brought up old questions and a feeling similar to that of imposter syndrome.

'Would I be able to continue like this if I didn't have the system?'

The answer was pretty obvious, even at a glance.

No.

He almost felt like he was cheating against these teens around the same age as him with their god given talents and extreme work ethic.

But it wasn't like he could ever find out the answer to his question. It wasn't like a computer, there was no way of turning the system off so he that could find out.

And even if there was a way to turn it off, would he want to?

Who would want to risk their future career for something as fickle as pride?

Ken turned his gaze to his brother who was busy chatting away to Hiroki. He saw the two smiling while they talked about this and that, ignorant of Ken's thoughts and worries.

He couldn't help but smile warmly, seeing the two.

Ken felt his guilt slowly ease. His friends and teammates had also been beneficiaries of the system, mainly through the targeted training regimes.

There was also Yusuke whose career and possibly life had been saved by the system's information. If Ken hadn't alerted Coach Hanada about his injury, then history would have repeated itself.

'I shouldn't feel guilty...' Ken thought inwardly.

While the system was definitely a cheat, it had also done many good things, even for his opponents.

Just remembering his middle school game against Fujimi High where the system gave him the "Free the slaves of Fujimi" mission, brought a smile to his face.

The system seemed to have its own morals, deeming the coach of Fujimi unfit to teach his own players.

There was also the time against Carlos when they played Shuei. It wanted Ken to strike him out 3 times, all in order to show Carlos that he wouldn't get anywhere with how he was playing.

As Ken was walking down memory lane, he suddenly remembered what had happened in that game, causing him to shudder at the thought.

After Carlos got out the 3rd time, Ken only needed to not let anyone on base again for Carlos to not have another chance in the batters box. His pitching was sharp, and no one even got close to landing a hit throughout the game.

Yet by some miracle, they faced each other again in the 9th inning.

Sure, Ken might have chalked it up to his bad luck in the past, but now he was more suspicious.

Was it the system who had pulled the strings from afar?

If that was the case, just what kind of power did the system hold over this world?

What was its goal?

"Ken, why do you look so pale?" Daichi asked, a hint of worry on his face.

Ken quickly snapped out of his reverie, turning his attention to his brother.

"Ah, I think I just ate too fast." He replied, gesturing that he was fine.

Daichi pondered for a moment before giving his brother the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes Ken got like this and became rather secretive, though it would usually pass by pretty quickly.

Therefore he decided to drop the matter.

"Hey, I heard that the Australian team brought over their own cheerleaders!" Riku said, his eyebrows dancing with excitement.

"Eh! Really? I heard Australian women are beautiful." Aki piped up, his face full of expectation.

"Mmm, they are indeed beautiful."

Everyone turned their heads after hearing Kuro answer. His gloomy features were serious, as if he truly knew with certainty.

"What? How do you know what Australian girls look like?"

Kuro's face turned up into a creepy grin, his expression giving others an uneasy feeling.

"My family manage a hotel complex, we get a lot of tourists from all parts of the world." He said confidently.

However, everyone was silent at these words. They could only imagine how scared these women would be when confronted with Kuro's face at check-in.

"Ahem. We can't be distracted by such things today, stay focused." Daichi said, clearing his throat.

"Booooring~ Just because you've got a girl, doesn't mean the rest of us have." Riku retorted, waving Diachi's concerns off.

"Am I right Ken?"

"Tch, Ken also has a girl back home. He's not like the rest of us who struggle with those sorts of things."

Silence...

Everyone turned their attention to Hiroki who was acting like a typical disgruntled teenager with no female attention.

"Get him!"

Masayuki shouted out his orders, prompting the players in the vicinity to attack the imposter.

"W-Wait what are you doing!?" Hiroki shouted, feeling aggrieved.

He was suddenly faced with the onslaught of all his jealous teammates.

"What do you mean "US"? You're obviously a pretty boy!"

"Damn it, I hurt my fingers trying to pinch him."

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

Chapter 398 - 398: Next Game (2)

The violence only stopped a few moments later when Chris left the meeting room and walked over to them. He saw Hiroki on the floor with disheveled hair and his clothes a mess, yet peeking through his shirt was a chiseled 6-pack.

Chris's face darkened briefly.

"Get off the ground and fix yourself up Hiroki, no one wants to see that."

Hiroki once again looked aggrieved, yet he picked himself up and quickly adjusted his clothes. Yet in the corner of his gaze he saw two women in their early twenties staring at him with wide eyes.

He quickly turned red from embarrassment before sitting down next to Daichi.

Ken didn't miss the interaction either, causing him to stifle his laughter. He wasn't surprised that others would react in that way after seeing Hiroki's muscular figure.

"Alright, everyone get to the bus, we'll be leaving in a few minutes." Chris announced.

As the team filtered out of the doors, the two women were still busy whispering to each other.

"Damn, that guy had a rockin' body."

"Was he a model or something?" The other girl asked.

"Surely not. They look like baseball players since I can see equipment in their bags."

"Hmm, I'll check it out." She said, grabbing her phone.

"They're the U18 team!?" A few moments later she almost yelled, feeling her cheeks redden.

"Oh man... That was close."

The team arrived at the stadium and went straight to the locker room. Since this was their 6th game so far, everyone knew what they were doing. It was even to the point where they had claimed their own lockers despite not being labeled.

"Looks like there's a few more spectators today." Ken announced.

"Yeah, but it's still nowhere near filling the stadium."

"It's not like we came here to play in front of fans." Masayuki replied, shrugging his shoulders.

To him, it didn't matter if there were no spectators, he just wanted to win.

"I guess that's a fair assessment."

The Japanese team were rather relaxed as they got ready. One of the perks of being the first match of the day was that they were allowed to arrive a bit earlier than their scheduled game.

This allowed for more time to get ready and to go through the game plan.

After around 20 minutes, most of the players were ready. They sat comfortably while they waited for the coaching staff to address them.

Not long later, Coach Takashi approached the front of the room and addressed everyone.

"We've pretty much gone over everything yesterday in the film session, so I won't say much." The coach said, running his hand over his goatee like he usually did.

"I don't expect us to have any problems against this team as long as we stick to our game plan. Remember to hit into the outfield or into the stands, there are no in between."

"Bunts are out of the equation, If I see you bunt, you'll be spending the rest of the match on the bench, regardless if you make it or not. If you see an opportunity to steal a base, be decisive."

The Head Coach said a few more words, basically giving a summary of what they had talked about yesterday in the film session.

"Satoshi will be starting pitcher today, followed by Ken as a closer if we need it. Any questions?"

"No sir!" The team responded in unison.

"Hehe, then let's continue our domination." He said with a grin. S

"Gather around, Victory on three!"

Chris moved into the middle of the pack and held his hand up high. Due to his height, it made it difficult for everyone to reach, but they did the best that they could.

1

2

3

"VICTORY!"

With that, the Japanese team left the lockers and headed through the tunnels on their way to the field. As the sun met their eyes, they heard the cheer of the crowd which had almost doubled from the group stages.

"GO KEN! GO DAICHI! GO JAPAN!"

Yet despite this, Ken could still hear his mother over the crowd.

"Hahaha, I need to bring my mom next time." Riku said in amusement.

"Mmm that would be nice." Kuro said off-handedly.

Riku's face morphed for a moment before he stared at the guy.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hmm? I just meant that it would be nice if my Mom was here too..."

Riku breathed out a sigh of relief. He had thought that the guy suggesting something completely different.

"Oh wait, where are the Australian cheerleaders?"

The whole group apart from Ken and Daichi looked around, trying to locate the pretty women who came all the way from the land down under.

"AUSSIE AUSSIE AUSSIE!"

"OI OI OI"

"AUSSIE"

"OI"

"AUSSIE!"

"OI!"

"AUSSIE AUSSIE AUSSIE!"

"OI OI OI"

Riku turned his attention over to the chanting coming from the other side of the field, his interest piqued. The first thing he saw was a bunch of shirtless guys, wearing green and gold colors and shaking pom pom's in the stands.

"Eh?" Riku's face contorted, pain and disgust evident on his features.

"Pfft... HAHAHAHA"

Ken felt as if his sides were going to explode as he was assaulted by intense laughter. The whole situation was causing him to lose his composure, unable to breathe properly from the onslaught of cackles leaving his mouth.

It wasn't just him, Daichi had also lost it. The look of disappointment on Riku's face was just far too priceless, making it hard not to laugh.

It was obvious that when Riku heard the world cheerleaders, his brain automatically assumed that they were women. Not once did he think that the cheering squad would be a bunch of shirtless men.

"Haaaahh, it's just too cruel. Will I forever be single in this forsaken world?" He muttered, feeling dejected.

"There there Riku." Hiroki comforted him, placing his hand on his shoulder.

"Get away from me!" he cried, slapping away Hiroki's hand. This was the last person that he wanted to get comforted by.

"Hahahaha." This only served to fuel Ken and Daichi's laughter.

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

Chapter 399 - 399: Japan vs Australia (1)

The Japanese team began to warm up as the coach hit grounders to the players and ran a few quick drills. At this point in time there was no sign of the Australian players since Japan had opted to come on the field a little earlier.

Once again this was one of the perks of being the first game of the day, allowing for longer warm ups. Of course there was a limit to how early one could arrive, and the game would start on time no matter what.

DONG

"Ken!"

The coach shouted, directing a grounder towards him.

Ken scooped up the ball and sent it right back to one of the other staff members. He was starting to get a lot more comfortable in his outfielder position after 5 games, though he much preferred to pitch.

Both Masayuki and Riku had accepted his abilities rather quickly, with the captain even giving him pointers outside of matches. His tall frame and long limbs were also a benefit to the position, allowing him a much longer reach than most.

He was also happy since he'd been moved up in the batting line up, slotting right behind Daichi as the 5th-hole. This meant that he'd proved himself enough in the past 5 games.

So in reality, he had nothing to complain about with his role on the team. As long as he kept performing, there would also be chances to come in as a closing pitcher.

Of course this set up would almost be impossible to replicate once he became a professional player. They would likely make him focus on a role, whether it was in the outfield, or as a pitcher.

It might be a little selfish, but Ken had a dream to pitch in the Majors, something he would continue to strive towards. Thankfully, this was not something that he needed to worry about, at least for now.

After all, he was still in the first year of High School.

As Ken moved to the back of the line for the next set of drills, he saw the Australian team emerging from the tunnels. The first thing that came into his sight was a giant...

"Holy crap, that guy looks way bigger in person." Daichi spoke up, falling into line behind Ken.

The guy was standing above 6'7 at least.

Right in front of him was an energetic figure who barely came up to the giant's chest.

"Who is that kid? Don't tell me that the giant brought along his child!?" Aki spoke up, his eyes bulging out of his face.

"Pffft—" Ken almost choked on his laughter.

Thud

"Oww~"

"That's Nikko, Australia's short stop you idiot. We talked about him yesterday in the film session." Masayuki retorted, smacking Aki on the back of the head.

It seemed that the Captain was annoyed that Aki hadn't paid attention in their meeting.

The team then quietly went back to their warm ups.

"Nikko, they're looking at us." The giant spoke up, his deep voice sounding rather nervous.

"Ay? Don't worry about them Jeb. They probably haven't seen anyone as handsome as us before in their lives, hahaha!" Nikko shoved out his chest and laughed heartily.

"Mmm, I dunno about that..."

"Guys hurry it up, we're a bit late." A person dressed in a green and gold outfit spoke up, hurrying the players along.

This was Coach Cooke, one of the leading figures in Australian baseball. He was the main reason why Australia had progressed so much in the past few years.

He moved his gaze over to the Japanese players and stopped when he saw a familiar face. Without a word, he walked over and shouted out some words.

"Oi Tucker!"

Ken's ears perked up, drawing his attention to the coach walking over.

"Yo Itamae!" Chris proclaimed, a bright smile forming on his face.

'What the hell is going on?' Ken thought, puzzled by the names the two had called each other.

Itamae was the Japanese word for Chef, but the guy was clearly a baseball coach, so he didn't understand the reason for the pet name.

Ken would later learn from his father that the Australian coach couldn't pronounce Chris's last name, and therefore called him Tucker instead of Takagi. Chris returned the favor by calling Coach Cooke, Itamae (chef).

As for how the two knew each other...

They played baseball together in High School.

The two performed a solid handshake before sizing each other up. Chris looked at the man who he hadn't seen in many years, yet looked so familiar. He had grown out his beard, yet the prominent brow and hazel eyes were just as he remembered.

"It's good to see you again Dean." Chris said, his smile genuine.

Dean Cooke grinned. He had to raise his head to look at Chris who was at least half a foot taller than him.

"Wish I could say the same about you mate, it looks like you haven't aged a day. What are they feeding you over in Japan?" He exclaimed, feeling a little self conscious.

Since the two were now in their early forties, the signs of aging were rather visible.

"Ah come on, you don't look a day over 39" Chris said, letting out a peel of laughter.

He moved his arm around Dean's shoulder and walked off the field, continuing their conversation.

"Ah piss off!" Dean replied, joining in on the laughter.

"Still, I never thought you'd make your way into coaching. Here I was hoping you'd come over and scout a few of my boys." He added.

Chris smiled in response, "Well, things change. I've now got two sons."

"Ay? How old is the other one?"

"Same age as Ken." He replied, letting out another chuckle after seeing the confused expression on his friend's face.

"We adopted him, both my boys are actually part of the team."

"Fair dinkum!?" Dean looked shocked.

"Well, of course you'd know that if you did your research." Chris replied.

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

- Chapter 400 - 400: Japan vs Australia (2)

Chapter 400 - 400: Japan vs Australia (2)

Dean waved his hand dismissively, "You know that research isn't my strong suit. That's why they give you assistant coach's right?" He replied with a grin.

"Oi, I'm an assistant coach too." Chris retorted, feigning being offended.

"Yep, makes sense."

"Hahaha."

The two continued to chat expressively, causing both the Australian and Japanese players to watch on with confusion. Ken was assaulted by plenty of questions that he didn't have the answers to.

In fact, Ken was just as clueless as everyone else.

Around 20 minutes later, it was finally time for the game to start.

Since it was the Super Round, there was a change to the start of the match. Both teams lined up and the national anthem was played for each.

The crowd who was mostly American, were quiet as they listened to the music. There was around 4000 spectators this game, with more expected to join later in the day when the United States played.

After the brief interlude, both team's captains joined the umpire for the coin toss which Japan won. Masayuki declared they would be batting first, prompting the Aussies to take the field.

Once everyone was in position, the plate umpire made the call.

"Play ball!"

"Batting 1st, Left outfield, Riku."

Riku made his way over to the batters box, shifting his feet and limbering up. He was wearing his trademark grin as he got into position, holding his bat high and staring at the pitcher on the mound.

The pitcher had shoulder length blond hair and blue eyes, but he looked rather skinny.

There was only confidence in Riku's expression as he faced the pitcher. He'd seen enough of the guy in the film session to know that he was someone he could beat as long as he was smart.

Suddenly, the first pitch came out after a quick wind up. The course was tricky, yet it lacked the blinding speed that would make it truly difficult to hit.

DONG

Riku casually hit the ball, lofting it over the infielders heads and easily cruising to first base. He didn't even look like he was breaking a sweat after making the first base hit of the game.

Despite giving up a base hit, the pitcher didn't seem too concerned.

"Batting 2nd, Center outfield, Masayuki."

Masayuki walked into the batters box with a serious expression. Usually one would be happy after their teammate got onto base, yet that didn't seem to be the case here.

The reason was because Australia lead the World Cup in double-plays, and it wasn't by a small margin.

This meant that until a runner had returned home, nobody was safe.

Coach Takashi had drilled this into the team yesterday, even going as far as to threatening anyone who chose to bunt with being sent to the bench.

The Australian pitcher performed his quick pitch, sending the ball on an outside course. The ball was thrown around 140km/h, though it seemed to be breaking far more than usual.

Surprisingly, Masayuki placed his bat out in front of him as if he was going to bunt. The moment he did so, the entire infield lurched forwards.

"S-Second!"

Nikko shouted out loud before the ball had even reached the bat, alerting everyone to Riku who had already begun his descent onto 2nd base.

At the last moment, Masayuki pulled back his bat, allowing the ball through to the catcher.

As if not expecting the fake bunt, the catcher was stunned for a brief moment.

"SECOND!"

Once again the small guy shouted loudly, prompting the catcher to recover. He quickly stood up and sent the throw over the pitchers head towards second base.

Unfortunately for him, the lapse in judgment allowed Riku enough time to slide into place before the ball reached its destination.

Many of the Japanese players let out a sigh of relief, their hearts still pumping after the scene. After hearing how serious the coach was about not bunting, they thought the Captain would be substituted right away.

"Man, the Captain is playing with fire." Daichi said, feeling a cold sweat down his back.

Miho shook her head, "Those two do that kind of stuff all the time." She said matter-of-factly.

"I guess they're used to playing with each other by now." Ken stated observantly.

Miho laughed, its sound pleasant to the ears.

"You know, I heard they used to butt heads a lot in the U15 team." She said, a smile on her face.

Both Ken and Daichi nodded, this was not a surprise to them. Riku was an odd character who always liked to tease everyone, it would be rather surprising if the stoic Masayuki didn't find issues with him.

"How did they patch things up?" Daichi asked curiously.

Miho shrugged, "I guess they just acknowledged each others skills and threw away their differences."

"Hmm..."

Daichi went deep into thought. It seemed that having a common goal was a good way of reconciling with other people.

DONG

While the trio were chatting, Masayuki managed to hit a bomb into the outfield. The ball rocketed over everyone's heads and floated into center field towards the giant Jeb.

The tall guy planted his feet and leapt into the air, causing the spectators jaw's to drop.

Tap~

His outstretched glove managed to tip the edge of the ball, killing its momentum entirely and causing it to fall onto the ground.

What should have been an easy hit was stopped in mid air before it could complete its distance.

Jeb quickly bent down and cocked back his arm, sending a vicious throw from center field all the way to home plate, much to the horror of the Japanese team.

Masayuki heard something akin to a fighter jet fly past him as he was about to run to 2nd base. He quickly stopped in place and shouted out to Riku.

"Get Back!"

Riku who had just rounded 3rd base, suddenly heard the call of Masayuki and did his best to stop his run.

PAH

The sound of the ball hitting the catchers glove sounded out, causing some cries of shock in the crowd.

"What an arm!"

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