

Major League System

Chapter 421 - 421: Push (1)

Of course what Ken was referring to was something he'd picked up with the help of his new Academic trait. After watching all of the US games in the World Cup so far, he was able to notice certain "habits."

These habits were so obscure that not many would have picked up on it, at least not with the limited amount of footage that was available.

Yet Ken was able to spot them.

"Batting 5th, Right outfield, Ken."

Ken walked into the batters box, sending a glance towards Leo behind the plate. Once again, the ice statue didn't even spare him a look, as if he was beneath him.

Yet instead of getting angry, Ken grinned widely in his heart.

'Your arrogance will be your downfall.' He laughed inwardly.

The moment Ken stepped into the batters box, Ryan's face turned serious. His eyes glared at him with a ferocious intensity that one might expect fated enemies to possess.

But this was not a fantasy drama, they were merely teens playing a baseball game.

'I must have hurt his pride in that interview.' Ken thought, feeling great amusement.

It almost felt surreal that he was facing the US prodigy who took over the Major's by storm. Of course, he was not yet that same person, just a much younger version of it.

Without a doubt, he would stand no chance against the prodigy if he was in his prime.

Donning his poker face, Ken got into position with the bat floating behind him, ready to strike.

'You've finally arrived Ken...' Ryan thought, his eyes never leaving Ken's figure. His gaze spoke volumes of just how much he hated the cocky guy in the batters box.

Not only had he humiliated him in the interview, others were even comparing Ken's pitching to his own.

'How can this idiot who wastes his time batting hold a candle to me?'

Such was his true thoughts. To Ryan, such a statement even if said in passing was just like a slap in the face. He had spent his whole life trying to pitch with the sole goal of becoming the best.

He wanted to get into the Major's and make a name for himself.

So who did this random idiot from Japan think he was?

"I'm gonna crush you." He muttered, gritting his teeth.

Like usual, Leo provided the signal, prompting Ryan to nod in response. He took a deep breath and looked towards 3rd base momentarily before lifting his leg and sending the ball flying out of his fingers.

The pitch was a blizzing four-seam fastball, its course slated for the outside. It was one of those 50-50 balls that could either be called a ball or a strike, yet the catcher behind the plate was skillful enough to tilt the odds in his favor.

While Ken's face was still clad in his Poker Face, his eyes widened as he saw the pitch.

'Heh, as expected.'

Ken planted his foot, twisting his hips and generating enormous torque as he swung his bat through the air.

Leo's eyes snapped open as he felt the approaching bat disturbing the air in the vicinity. In the next moment he saw the bat fly into his vision, on a collision course towards the ball.

Time seemed to slow down for a fraction of a second as the two forces met.

DOOOOOONG!

Like a thunderclap, the bat sang out, its sound echoing through the arena. The faces of the US players froze as they saw the ball propelled into the outfield with great force.

"O-OHHHH!"

"LET'S GO!"

"Nice hit Ken!"

"Kyaaaa, that's my son!"

Yuki who was decked out in her national colors, jumped up and down with excitement.

Ken followed the ball for a few seconds from the batters box before tossing his bat onto the ground next to him. He turned his attention to Ryan on the mound, only for them to lock gazes a moment later.

He had the urge to lift his poker face and send a teasing smile to the teen, however he chose to save it. The game had just started after all, there was plenty of time for this in the future.

For now, he would be satisfied with the confused and helpless expression on the face of the prodigy.

Yet Ken was surprised after seeing the glare from Ryan.

Santiago in the center outfield, ran towards the back wall, his eyes glued on the ball in the air. As he approached the wall, he quickly realized that he had no hope of catching the ball so he slowed down.

He could only watch on as the ball flew into the second row of the empty stands.

Yet instead of looking disappointed, he seemed impressed.

"Mmm, I expected no less."

The sound guy played a few sounds from his booth, getting the crowd involved. While they may be the US team supporters, this crowd could appreciate a good home run when they saw it.

A few cheers and applause rained down from the stands, though it seemed more like a consolatory prize than anything.

Yet Ken didn't care. He jogged around the bases, enjoying his first home run against the US team. While he had hit quite a few in this World Cup alone, none of them felt as good as this one.

Not only was it because the US were a tough team, but because he hit it off the prodigy, Ryan Smith. There was also the fact that his Grandfather was watching, even if he was the Head Coach of the opposing team.

As he rounded 3rd base, he glanced at his Grandfather Mark Williams and let out a small smile. He could see the pride in the man's face, but it was quickly hidden due to his position.

'He's come so far...' Mark said inwardly as he watched his Grandson round the bases.

He felt a mixture of emotions. Pride, regret and vindication, leaving a bittersweet taste in his mouth.

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

Chapter 422 - 422: Push (2)

Ken finally made it to home plate and saw Daichi waiting for him with a big grin on his face.

"Nice hit bro." He said, holding out his fist.

"Hehe, it's easy when you know the trick." Ken replied, bumping his fist in return.

The two approached the dugout and received all sorts of welcomes. Yet surprisingly, the first person who came up to him was the Head Coach.

"Haha! That's my boy Ken, I knew you could do it." He shouted with a jolly expression, slapping him on the back a few times out of excitement.

Just from his actions, one could tell that he was beside himself with joy.

"Err, thanks coach." Ken replied, trying not to wince from the slaps. Despite his old age, the man had some serious power that his teen body struggled to withstand.

Ken turned around to glare at his brother and Miho in the distance, only for them to shy away. He could tell that it wasn't just because he'd scored a home run against the US that the coach was so happy.

The likely scenario was that he was getting buttered up, still under the impression that Ken's father was going to talk to him about dating Miho.

Therefore he tried to play it off, quickly running through the players who were in his way.

"Ow~!"

Aki happened to be the unfortunate soul who was kneed in the mid section by Ken's blitz offense on his way to the bench. He bent over, feeling the wind escape from his sails.

Ken didn't turn back, having successfully escaped from the onslaught of back slaps and the looks filled with ulterior motives from the Head Coach.

He finally plopped down on the bench, feeling a burning sensation in the middle of his back.

"H-Hey... Sorry about this." Miho said from beside him.

Ken didn't even look at her, feeling the burning gaze of the coach on him from the entrance of the dugout. He didn't look up, but he could already envision the expectant expression on the old man's face.

He let out a small sigh, wishing that it would just end.

"It's not your fault. Your Grandfather obviously cares about you, he just sucks at matchmaking." Ken spat out.

"Hahaha." Miho giggled, feeling a little better already.

Meanwhile, on the field. Ichiro stepped forward, his usual serious look plastered on his face. Though inwardly, he was actually sweating bullets.

Like Yusuke, Ichiro was faced with the unfortunate job of following up the batting schedule after Ken. It was quite a predicament, especially going up against the US team who generally kept teams to little to no runs in games.

"Batting 6th, 2nd base, Ichiro."

Taking a deep breath, Ichiro stepped into the batters box, yet instantly he felt something was off. He glanced at the catcher, only to feel an freezing aura emanating from his entire being.

It was as if he was standing next to a giant iceberg, wearing only swimming trunks. With one look, he could tell that the guy was pissed.

'Just ignore him... Pretend he's not there.' He told himself.

Ichiro shivered subconsciously before turning his attention to the mound.

His eyes widened, feeling the sweltering wrath directed at him from the US pitcher. If the catcher was like a freezing glacier, then the pitcher was like a volcano about to erupt.

'Oh no...'

PAH

"Strike."

PAH

"Strike."

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Ichiro left the batters box, his gaze lowered to the ground. He was disappointed after being beaten so thoroughly, yet part of him was happy to not be facing the scary battery anymore.

'Monsters...'

He had no idea how both Daichi and Ken had hit those pitches, which made him even more confused. He locked eyes with Aki on his way back and slowly shook his head.

"Good luck..." Ichiro muttered, feeling sorry for the guy.

"Psh, watch how a real batter hits it." He replied haughtily.

Instantly, Ichiro's empathy vanished. He resisted the urge to spit on the cocky Aki and just decided to wait patiently for his "triumphant" return to the dugout.

"Batting 7th, Short stop, Aki."

The instant Aki stepped into the batters box, his confident smile was wiped off his face. He felt the opposing hot and cold aura's from the US battery and felt his body freeze in fear.

"Eh?"

By the time he got his senses under control, the first ball came flying towards him.

PAH

"Strike."

He shivered, subconsciously looking up to the jumbo screen and seeing the 3 digits appear in red. The 100mph fastball was terrifying.

'I'm gonna die...'

Seemingly accepting his fate, Aki slowly inched his body a little further away from home plate, not wanting to get near the ridiculous pitch.

PAH

"Strike."

"What are you doing Aki!? Swing!"

Aki's neck cranked as he turned to his right, trying to figure out who would be yelling such a thing at him. He saw Ken's head standing at the rail, shouting at him.

'D-Damn it Ken!'

If it were anyone else in the dugout he could have ignored them. After all, he and Daichi were the only one's who had successfully hit against the US battery, he was also the guy who could throw 100mph pitches.

Aki gulped, reaching deep within to find his manhood that had retreated after facing the first ball.

What looked like an intense mental battle appeared on the guy's face as he inched his way forward a little closer to the plate, his hands tightly gripping the bat.

"I hate you Ken..." He muttered, gritting his teeth.

The next ball came flying, its course similar to the last one on the outside. Aki didn't have much time to make a decision, so he just swung and hoped for the best.

WHOOOSH

DOOONG

"Eh?"

Aki was shocked as he felt his bat hit the ball.

"RUN!!!"

Thankfully, Aki was only frozen for a second before Ken's yell reached his ears. He dropped his bat and ran with all his might as the ball flew over the right outfielders head.

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

Chapter 423 - 423: Momentum (1)

Ichiro's jaw dropped as he saw the ball rocket into the right outfield. He had thought Aki had been talking out of his rear like usual, yet unlike him, the guy had actually managed to make contact with the ball.

"GO GO!"

The Japanese bench screamed and hollered, urging Aki on as he rounded first base. He wasn't the fastest on the team, but he was still part of the National squad.

He pumped his short legs, glancing into the outfield for a moment before sliding onto 2nd base safely.

Aki slowly got to his feet, getting his breath under control. Upon hearing the cheers from the dugout, a wide grin crept onto his features.

"ORYAHHH! See that Ichiro? That's how you hit a ball!" He shouted, pumping his fist in triumph.

Ichiro picked up his jaw, feeling his body shake in annoyance. He could understand Aki being happy for hitting the ball, but why did he have to shout such things from the field?

'That was a lucky hit...'

Ken had seen the whole thing happen from his vantage point and felt incredulous. There was no doubt that Aki's double was lucky. He had managed to recreate the scenario that Ken had just pulled off by accident.

An outside fastball, the pitch that Ken, Daichi and Hiroki had all aimed for.

Throughout all of the games that he'd watched, he noticed a certain quirk of Leo's that no one else had. He tended to call balls that would more or less be on the fringe of the strike zone.

Leo knew that with his abilities that he'd be able to frame the balls as strikes, therefore instilling fear into the batters he faced. He would then make them swing at balls that they had no hope of hitting.

Perhaps it was arrogance, or some kind of personality disorder, but Ken could tell that the guy got a kick out of making batters despair.

Due to this, he would often use the same pattern unconsciously in the earlier innings.

Increase the perceived size of the strike zone with the proper framing, before toying with the batters until they get struck out.

Of course once it was well established, he wouldn't need to do so in the latter innings. This was why Ken needed to capitalize on this fact before Leo moved onto his next phase of leads.

In addition to Leo's quirk, the main contributor to his game plan was the teen who looked as if he'd swallowed a lemon on the mound. Ryan Smith, the prodigy.

He had a certain habit that Ken had picked up during his study session. Whenever he was about to throw a fastball, he'd glance at 3rd base for a couple of seconds before entering his wind up directly.

If that was all, then the coach's would easily be able to fix this tell. However, it was also his lead leg that gave it away.

In all the times he threw a fastball, he would step out further. While one might argue that it would be tough to make the distinction in that fraction of a second based on where his foot landed, Ken had another way.

When performing an action like stepping forward, there were other muscles that were activated to facilitate this movement. Since Ryan needed to thrust himself forward more with a fastball, he needed to generate more lateral movement.

Therefore he would almost kick his lead leg forward in doing so. The difference was almost imperceptible, but with Ken's Academic trait, he could see it.

So with the quirks of these two players, Ken had figured out a way to get through the US team's stalwart defense. The problem was, it could only last for a short while.

'This is a chance...'

Ken hadn't expected Aki to hit the ball originally, but it opened a window of opportunity for the Japanese team that wasn't present beforehand.

Originally it was just Hiroki, Daichi and Ken who could be the attacking force with their knowledge. But with only 1 out, Aki had managed to get onto 2nd base.

Ken debated inwardly for a few moments, trying to decide on his next moves.

In the end, he threw caution to the wind.

"Atsushi, Riku, Captain. Come here for a moment." Ken called out, gesturing for the three to join him.

"Hmm? Finally willing to spill the beans eh?" Masayuki tried to act calm, but inwardly he was curious.

He leaned in close and began to speak up about his game plan. As long as these guys could capitalize on the situation, they may be able to break out into an even bigger lead.

"Huh? No way."

All three were stunned when Ken laid out his knowledge. They had studied film for over 2 hours last night with the team, and even the coach's had not been able to find out such information.

From their questions earlier, it was also safe to assume that they had no idea about this tactic either.

Ken gestured for them to turn to the field and keep an eye on Ryan while he pitched against Kuro.

"Batting 8th, 3rd Base, Kuro."

Kuro's gloomy figure appeared in the batters box, looking as if he did not want to be there in that moment. He could feel the burning gaze of both the US players digging into him, only serving to increase his own gloomy aura.

Leo's eyes widened in surprise as he felt his fighting spirit to begin to wither in the presence of that aura. It wasn't just him, Ryan shivered subconsciously on the mound as he saw the anomaly in the batters box.

'What's with this guy?' He thought, feeling creeped out.

Earlier he was livid after giving up another hit. He had never been so humiliated in his life. Since they were going up against the latter half of the Japanese batting line up, he was going to take out all of his frustrations on them.

But then this mushroom headed guy came out.

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

Chapter 424 - 424: Momentum (2)

His earlier anger turned into wariness, forcing him out of his mood.

Ryan took a few deep breaths, doing his best to compose himself.

Coach Williams in the dugout saw this and nodded. It was only the second inning, so he was reluctant to pull Ryan from the mound. Yet if he was going to continue being rash and angry, he would be left with no choice.

For some reason, the guy had quite a grudge against the Japanese team.

Leo too managed to compose himself. It seemed that the gloomy aura of Kuro had successfully tamed the Ice and Fire duo of Leo and Ryan.

However, he had no idea of this. In reality, he just wanted to do his best, keeping the momentum up for the Japanese team.

After letting out a small sigh, Leo called for an inside pitch.

Ryan nodded, lifting his leg and performing his pitch.

The ball flew towards the inside, yet Kuro judged that it would be outside of the strike zone. He calmly leaned back a little, which would have been enough if the ball was a four-seam fastball.

Unfortunately for him, it was a two-seam fastball which broke towards him a few feet away from the plate.

"Eh?"

Thud

A dull thud sounded as the 90mph pitch hit his forearm, narrowly missing the elbow guard that he had on his left arm.

For a moment, the gloomy guy produced the scream of a banshee, causing those who heard it to shiver uncontrollably.

Even the plate umpire was stunned into silence for a few moments, trying to understand what had just happened. It was only when he saw Kuro crouched in the batters box cradling his arm that he sprung into action.

"H-Hit by pitch. Take your base."

Kuro was silent for a few moments before he got up and jogged over to first base, still massaging the spot where he was hit on the arm.

Ken's eyes widened in shock and elation. While it wasn't great that Kuro was hit by the ball, the fact that he was now on base made him almost jump for joy.

"Was that Kuro who screamed like a girl?" Riku asked, his eyebrow raised in concern.

"I don't know, but that was creepy."

"Is he okay?"

Only when Kuro sent a thumbs up to everyone in the dugout did they feel a little better.

"Atsushi, try and watch some pitches first. If you see an outside fastball, that's the one to swing on." Ken reiterated.

The guy let out a grunt of understanding, before placing his helmet over his perfectly shaped bowl cut. He grabbed his bat and headed up onto the field, followed by Riku who was going to be after him.

"Do you think he'll keep throwing outside?" Masayuki asked, his face showing a little concern.

Now that he had heard about such a tactic, he wanted to capitalize. There was no point in knowing this information if they couldn't use it to get as many runs as possible.

"Yeah, at least in this game." Ken said simply, his gaze moving toward the opposition dugout, specifically where his Grandfather was.

"I have a feeling this will only work once. Also, Ryan will probably be substituted at the end of this inning."

Ken seemed sure about his guess, though he didn't have any evidence to back it up.

"I see." Masayuki didn't question Ken, just choosing to go with the flow. For this guy to come up with such a tactic against the best team in the World Cup, who was he to question how his brain worked.

If he thought that Ken was special due to the talent he'd shown on the field, he now thought so even more after hearing his genius tactics. What Japan lacked was a player like Ken, a proper general off and on the field.

Even he as captain could only marvel at the effect Ken had on the other players.

The moment the guy stepped onto the mound, all of his teammates would breathe a sigh of relief. It was as if the match was already decided, and no more runs would be given up.

Masayuki suddenly felt a little old, despite only being 2 years Ken's senior.

"Now I know how my Grandpa feels..." Masayuki muttered.

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Nevermind."

"Batting 9th, DH, Atsushi."

The announcer called out for the next batter, prompting the wide-shouldered youth to step into the batters box. He was calm, yet his eyes held an imperceptible twinkle as he stared at Ryan on the mound.

Ryan on the other hand felt his frustration mount again. He glanced at Kuro and Aki who were on base and couldn't help but grit his teeth.

'Why am I playing so poorly?'

In reality, it had been so long since he'd been in this kind of position. Even then, it had never happened while Leo was his catcher.

Usually, the guy would always choose the best lead, giving him the confidence to just focus on pitching the best ball possible. This was what allowed his High School team and in this case, the US team to succeed.

Yet for some reason, his pitches were being hit, by none other than a foreign team from Japan.

"Unforgivable..."

No one knew whether he was mumbling to himself or the Japanese team, yet everyone could notice the shift in him.

Ryan's whole body seemed to have grown in size as he entered his wind up. He lifted his leg and pounced forward, sending the next ball firing down the inside of the strike zone.

PAH

"Strike!"

"101mph! Holy crap is that his fastest pitch ever?"

"That's almost as fast as the Japanese guy."

The crowd let out a cheer after finally seeing the US pitcher let loose a crazy fastball. While he had been pitching in the high 90's thus far, the last ball was something that got the crowd going.

Atsushi's eyes widened in surprise as he began to question his life decisions.

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

Chapter 425 - 425: The Long walk back (1)

"101mph huh?" Ken muttered, feeling impressed.

While he enjoyed matching up with Ryan, he wouldn't shortchange him when it came to giving his respect. For a 17 year old to pitch at 100mph, it was immensely impressive.

The only reason he could pitch like that was due to the system. So for someone to reach this point at his age through hard work and talent alone, they deserved respect.

'I wonder what grade his pitching is?' He thought for a moment.

He'd been holding off on analyzing Ryan, mainly because of pride. Ken felt that it was borderline cheating to do such a thing, so he refrained.

At least for this game.

Knowing his potential, Ken would be silly not to use Identify and bring him into his Image Training. He had done the same thing to Yatsuo, the 3rd year Osaka Toin pitcher, yet he hadn't had the chance to make use of it.

'Mika, copy Ryan Smith for use in the Image Training.' Ken called out to his AI friend, ensuring to use proper etiquette.

[Understood. Copying Ryan Smith will cost 5,000 Major points. Will you proceed?]

Ken sucked in a cold breath at the price. Even when he copied Yatsuo during Koshien it had cost him only 1000 Major points. Did that mean Ryan was 5 times as good as that guy?

However, there was no point being stingy. He had plenty of points after all.

'Please proceed.'

[Affirmative. Copying Ryan Smith...]

[92% Accuracy achieved.]

'Excellent...'

Ken would need to find time to use the Image Training since he had picked up such a big fish. As long as he could get some hours against this guy, he was confident that he'd be ready whenever they'd meet again.

Next time he wouldn't need to rely on some quirks and could face him at his best.

While Ken was thinking, Atsushi had already faced another 2 balls, bringing the count up to 1-2. If he hadn't caught hold of the outside ball earlier, he would have been struck out.

The guy in question was sweating hard in the batters box and it had nothing to do with the midday sun. Just the sheer pressure of facing Ryan's fastballs were enough to make him anxious, let alone in combination with the catcher's leads.

Even though he knew when the fastball was coming thanks to Ken's insights earlier, that didn't mean he was able to hit them.

He saw the guy wind up again after looking towards 3rd base briefly. This time, Atsushi gripped his bat tightly, his face flashing with determination.

'I'm gonna hit it!'

The ball came blitzing towards him, at the top of the strike zone. He didn't have time to pull back the swing, so he did his best to adjust, pulling the bat towards him.

DOOOONG

Somehow, some way, the bat connected firmly despite how ugly the swing looked. It was sent rocketing into the left outfield, prompting the runners on the base to sprint from their marks.

The ball floated for a long time, giving the illusion that it wasn't going very far.

Yet as the outfielder made it to the wall, he stopped in place, his face painted with shock as it sailed over the wall for a home run.

"EH!?"

Atsushi who had just made it to first base, suddenly cried out in shock as the ball made it for a home run.

"WHOOOAA! Nice hit Atsushi!"

He almost didn't know what to do in that moment, like he'd forgotten how to play baseball.

"Oi! Go run." The first base coach yelled at him, resisting the urge to kick him in the behind and send him on his way.

"A-Ah yes sir!"

Atsushi bolted towards 2nd base, acting like the ball was still in play. This caused the remaining players in the dugout to laugh out loud from his antics.

"What a weirdo! Hahaha."

Both Kuro and Aki were waiting on the field for Atsushi to touch home plate, their faces filled with happiness. Even Kuro sported a genuine smile, lighting up his gloomy features.

"Nice hit Bowl-kun." Aki said with a grin.

Atsushi didn't even react to the comment as he accepted the high five from his two teammates.

As he walked back to the dugout, everyone sent him words of congratulations and encouragement, filling him with happiness.

Once Aki reentered the dugout, he looked for Ichiro.

"Ah there he is. See what I told you my man? You just need to swing and everything will work out. You better shape up or I'll be taking your #6 spot in the batting line up." He said, lecturing the guy.

Ichiro wanted nothing more than to dig a hole and hide in it. After receiving such advice from Aki of all people, there was no turning back for him.

'Damn him.' He cursed, retreating to the bench.

"Nice work Atsushi." Ken said, approaching the guy.

"T-Thanks. I never thought I'd be able to hit that pitch that far.

Ken smiled, "You'd be surprised. The faster the pitch, the faster the exit velocity. If you hadn't have hit that ball with the center of the bat, you definitely would have gotten caught in the outfield."

Atushi was quiet for a moment, but he soon nodded. He hadn't expected his last moment decision to yield a home run, but he sure wasn't complaining.

If anything, he wished he could do the same every time. But he knew that he was lucky in this instance.

With his 3-run home run, Japan were now sitting comfortably ahead in the 2nd inning at 5-0. Unexpectedly, this was against the supposed best High School pitcher in the country, something that no one would have expected in a million years.

Yet this was just the beginning of Japan's attack. Now that Atsushi had batted, their batting lineup was back to the beginning, ready to perform another assault on the frazzled US battery.

However, it seemed that someone had had enough.

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

Chapter 426 - 426: The Long walk back (2)

Coach Mark Williams ascended the stairs from the dugout onto the field, grabbing the attention of the plate umpire. He pointed to Ryan and said a few words before making his way back.

The umpire said a few words on his headset before the arena was graced with the voice of the announcer.

"US team announces a substitution, Maxwell Gomez will be substituting in place of Ryan Smith at pitcher."

Ryan stood upon the mound with his head dropped. He heard the words of the announcer and felt a hopeless sensation descend upon him.

For the first time, he felt despair. It was as if there was nothing that he did against Japan was enough.

He raised his head, his gaze moving right to the opposing dugout. He searched for a while until he laid eyes on the person he hated the most.

'Ken... This isn't over.'

Ryan said these words in his heart. This was the first time that he had lost so completely against someone else. Sure he had lost games before, but this felt even more than that.

"Don't mind man, I'll turn it around for us."

Ryan raised his head, only to see Maxwell holding his glove out. After a few moments, he reluctantly grabbed the ball from inside of his glove and placed it in Maxwell's.

With that, he made his long trek from the mound on the way to the dugout.

Perhaps it was just his imagination, but he felt the searing gazes of the 5000+ crowd burn into him. He felt like they were contained pity and disappointment, filling him with even more despair.

This was the longest and most embarrassing walk of his life.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally arrived at the entrance of the dugout. Just as he was about to walk down the stairs, he felt a heavy hand land on his shoulder.

"You'll do better next time."

The tone was deep, yet it were filled with assurance and expectation. The words didn't forgive his lackluster performance, nor did they pamper his ego.

They might not be the words that he wanted to hear in this moment, but they were what he needed.

Ryan felt tears begin to pool at the corner of his eyes, filled with disappointment. However, he quickly wiped at them before they had the chance to fall down his cheeks.

"Yes Coach."

With that, he walked down the stairs and sat down on the bench, covering his head with a towel.

No one approached the guy, wanting to give him some space. This was the biggest game in the World Cup so far and Ryan had failed to perform up to standard. From the US team's perspective, there was no one to blame but the guy himself.

Coach Williams let out a deep sigh, turning his attention back onto the field. He had tried to give Ryan enough time to adjust, yet he needed to step in after Japan were starting to build momentum.

If he had continued to leak runs, never mind a comeback, the game might be called early in the 5th innings thanks to the mercy rule.

His gaze moved to Ken in the opposing dugout, feeling like he had a hand in the situation.

'Just what did you figure out...!' he thought.

They would be going over these 2 innings over and over again once they returned back to the hotel, there was no doubt about it.

Mark let out another sigh, feeling himself aging a little more. Yet in the next moment, he gripped the side of his body, his face wincing in pain.

It was a momentary slip, but thankfully he managed to control his expression in the next moment before someone noticed.

Yet there was one person on the opposite team who saw.

Chris's face turned into a deep frown as he watched his father. It was soon replaced by a sad expression, almost as if he knew the reason for the coach's condition.

Thankfully, Ken was too preoccupied with the game to see it.

While he was a little sad that Ryan had been taken off the mound, it didn't mean that their opportunities had dried up. If anything, they had a small window before the pitcher would be operating at their best.

Since Leo was still the catcher, they could possibly capitalize early and put this game to bed before anything else were to change.

After a couple minutes of doing some warm up pitches, Maxwell was now ready to resume the match.

"Batting 1st, Left outfield, Riku."

Riku stepped into the batters box and gripped his bat tightly. Now that Ryan wasn't on the mound, he wouldn't be able to tell when a fastball was being thrown.

Yet this was fine by him. He had seen enough of the US film yesterday to be able to face this pitcher. Or at least that's what he believed.

"Looks like we sent your Ace crying back to the dugout." Riku said, a grin slowly creeping onto his features.

Leo simply ignored him, not that he could understand the foreign language being spoken.

He crouched down and called for the first pitch.

Since Max had just started, he wanted to test the waters. The guy would be useless to him if he couldn't pitch accurately.

In the event his control was not up to par early, Leo needed to make sure that he wouldn't give up an easy hit.

He placed his glove on the outside, barely within the strike zone.

Max nodded, beginning his wind up before sending the ball accurately towards the outstretched glove of Leo.

Riku's eyes widened as he saw the ball flying towards the outside. Judging by the speed and course it was clearly a fastball, something he'd been prepared to swing at.

"Thanks. For. The. Meal!"

Riku shouted, digging his front foot into the ground and twisting his body with great force. The moment he said the word "Meal" the ball hit the center of the bat, getting propelled into the outfield.

"YES!"

"Nice Riku!"

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

Chapter 427 - 427: Boss Arrives (1)

A black BMW with tinted windows made its way down the street, reflecting the street lights and neon signs that it passed. Those who saw it quickly moved away, knowing what it signified.

It crawled to a stop outside of a bar, alongside other identical cars.

"We've arrived boss." A deep voice spoke up from the drivers seat.

"Mmm."

The man got out of the drivers seat, his height towering over the car. He had wide shoulders and a long mustache, donned in an expensive black suit. The sight was rather intimidating, yet it could be seen he was not used to wearing such things.

He looked around briefly, as if scouting for any potential dangers before heading over to the back door. Due to the tight suit, his movements looked a little strained, yet he did his best to hide it.

Upon opening the door, a man wearing a similar suit stepped out of the car. He was considerably shorter than the other and was clean shaven. The man ran his hand through his balding hair and let out a sigh.

"Chibi, I told you to get a suit tailored. It looks like you're gonna rip the damn thing every time you walk." Tsukasa said, his tone full of exasperation.

"A-Ah sorry boss. They said they didn't have enough material to make one in time." Chibi responded, feeling a little embarrassed.

Tsukasa waved his hand dismissively, letting out a small sigh.

"Anyway, let's hurry up."

The two made their way forward, stopping in front of the door to a bar.

Chibi knocked a few times in a certain sequence and stepped back behind his boss, showing the correct etiquette for such an occasion.

A few moments later, the door opened, showing a well-dressed man with slicked back hair and a simple mustache. His looks were borderline model material, though his eyes held a restrained viciousness that would make people uncomfortable.

Though not as bulky as Chibi, his frame was well-toned, visible even through the suit he was wearing.

"Tsukasa! It's good to see you brother." His face flashed with a smile, showing his perfectly straight teeth.

He walked forward and embraced Tsukasa as if it had been a long time since they'd last met.

"Good to see you Tomo." Tsukasa replied, hugging back half-heartedly.

He wasn't really fond of such physical contact, though he did his best to accommodate the man in front of him. It had always been like this for this guy.

The man called Tomo stepped back, placing Tsukasa at arms length.

"I almost didn't recognize you in that suit." He said with a chuckle.

"Are you going to let us in?" Tsukasa asked, shaking his head at the hospitality of his counterpart.

"Ah yes of course, I got too excited seeing you again." He said matter-of-factly, ushering the two inside.

Once they walked in, Tsukasa made a gesture with his head, directing Chibi to the corner where some of the other guards were standing by.

Chibi did as he was told, not uttering a peep. The people in here were far too influential for him to have a chance to get a word in.

"Who is here so far?" Tsukasa asked.

"Naoki and Shin will be here soon but the boss won't arrive until 8pm. Apparently he has a bit of business to take care of." Tomo's words were enough to insinuate some things, yet Tsukasa didn't seem bothered. S

Tomo took Tsukasa into the back room where there was a luxurious lounge set up. There was a poker table in the corner, alongside a pool table and some fancy couches spread out.

The moment he walked in, he saw a few people in the midst of playing some pool. As they turned around, their faces changed instantly and they bowed.

"Welcome, Lieutenant Tsukasa."

"Mmm." He nodded in response, quickly losing interest.

"Katsuya, Kiyu, come say hello to your Uncle." Tomo said with a grin.

At his words, two of the teens made their way over and bowed once more, showing great respect.

"Oho? These are your two boys?" Tsukasa asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

The two raised their heads, showing their youthful faces. He could tell at a glance that they were Tomo's children, since they both looked extremely handsome. Especially the one on the left who looked like a model.

"Hehe, last time you saw them Kiyoo was barely 10." Tomo replied, his features showing just how proud he was.

"Mmm, you two have grown." He said, patting them both on the shoulder.

"In sports news, the U18 baseball World Cup Super Round continued today. Here's a report from Miya Fukuda"

The sound of the TV report in the background sounded out, causing Tsukasa's ears to perk up. He swiftly ignored the two boys and walked over to the TV.

"Hey, can you turn this up?"

Everyone seemed a little confused by the change of pace, but someone quickly obliged.

"Thank you Rika. Our Japanese National Team took on the US in what many are saying would be a preview of the Finals."

"In an unexpected twist, the US team were overwhelmed by the batting prowess of the U18 Japanese Team who managed to amass 10 runs by the 2nd inning. The game was cut short in the 7th inning with a score of 11-1 in favor of Japan."

"Hahaha! Take that you American scum." Tsukasa shouted, his face lit up in a big smile.

Tomo raised his eyebrow in question, not understanding the reaction.

"I didn't know you were into baseball?" He said questioningly.

Tsukasa turned around and laughed, his mood clearly improved from earlier.

"I'm not really, but the boyfriend of my niece is playing in the U18 National Team." It could be seen by his expression how proud he was of the fact.

"Your brother?" Tomo's face morphed, as if he was trying to remember.

"Iron Chin Tetsu, you remember him right?" Tsukasa said with a grin.

At those words, Tomo shuddered subconsciously.

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

Chapter 428 - 428: Boss Arrives (2)

How could he forget the guy with such a nickname. After all, they were all from the same generation and grew up around the same sort of people.

"Yes... I remember him well. I'm surprised you still kept in contact after he turned down the boss's offer." Tomo said, his expression looking a little unpleasant.

However, Tsukasa shrugged nonchalantly.

"He's still my brother, no matter what."

Tomo frowned, "Just as long as he doesn't interfere in our business." He said warily.

"Pfft... Hahaha!"

Tsukasa couldn't help but burst out into laughter at these words. Thinking about what Tetsu looked like now with his bakers apron and soft hands, it seemed like a silly joke.

"There's no need to worry about him. The only things he cares about is baking and his daughter." He added, still wearing an amused expression.

Tomo nodded, seemingly satisfied with the response.

"I can understand, family is everything after all." He replied, looking at his sons fondly.

"Speaking of Family..."

A deep voice came out from the door behind them, prompting everyone to turn around.

There was a short man with long black hair tied into a ponytail at the door. He was garbed in traditional Japanese Kimono and held a Samurai sword still in its sheath in his left hand.

He was flanked by an average sized man who looked to be in his early 50's. His gray goatee was long and his eyes seemed to surge with intelligence.

"Shin, Naoki! It's good to see you two."

Tomo went in for a hug, yet he was pushed back by the hilt of the Samurai sword from the shorter gentleman.

"Ah come on Shin, give your fellow Lieutenant a hug." Tomo said with a playful grin.

"Touch me and you'll lose a hand." He said plainly. In the next moment he sent a glance to Tsukasa and nodded in greeting, a small smile gracing his lips.

"Good to see you both." Tsukasa added.

"Mmm. Tomo, where's your hospitality? You won't even offer your brother's a drink?" Naoki said, feigning displeasure.

"Ah yes yes, that's my fault. Kiyo, Katsu, go warm us up some Sake" He quickly said, ushering his two sons out of the room.

"Everyone else should also leave." Shin said, his words a statement, not a suggestion.

No one rebutted, quickly grabbing their things and quickly leaving the room as fast as possible. They would not dare ignore a direct order from one of the Lieutenants.

Once the room had been cleared out, Naoki moved forward and took a seat at the table, letting out a small grunt as he lowered himself down. With his age, he needed to rest more than ever before.

The other three joined him a few moments later, sitting on opposite ends of the rectangular table.

There was a short pause before the atmosphere turned melancholic.

"It's been a while since we all gathered like this." Naoki said, letting out a sigh.

"Mmm. I'm afraid it's not for any good news though."

Everyone nodded, they were not so naive to think that the boss had called a meeting just for them all to catch up.

The door opened in the next moment as Katsuya and Kiyoshi brought in the warmed Sake, placing it on the table. Just as the latter was about to pour the cup, Naoki placed his hand on the teen's arm.

"No, let me pour my brothers a drink." He said simply, waving the two off.

They quickly obliged, leaving the room once more.

Naoki proceeded to pour the cups full of the warm Sake, sending it around the table until everyone had one in front of them.

He raised up his cup in front of him, prompting the others to do the same.

"Here's to family... May we never grow apart."

Naoki's tone was somber, showing some unexpected raw emotion.

"To family."

Everyone responded before throwing back the drink.

The group then began to catch up, speaking of certain things that were happening in their designated areas. Of course since they were part of the family, some of the topics were a little gruesome, yet no one seemed too bothered.

As the drinks flowed, everyone began to loosen up. The topics moved to lighter things like their children or even sports events.

"My Niece is the cutest thing you've ever seen." Tsukasa said, his tone full of pride.

"She actually moved to Tokyo recently to study at a design school. Make sure you keep an eye on her Tomo." He added, pointing to the guy over the table.

"Eh? She goes to Joshibi High then?" Tomo responded in question.

"Hmm." Tsukasa ran his hand through his hair, thinking deeply.

"Yeah! That's the one. I helped her move a couple weeks ago."

"Alright, Katsu goes there too. I'll tell him to keep an eye on her for you. What's her name?"

Just as he was about to answer, the sound of the door opening cut through the atmosphere.

Everybody stopped what they were doing and stood up in one smooth motion.

"Welcome, boss."

The four men bowed deeply, showing their respect.

The man they called boss was a person in their 50's, donning a simple Kimono. Though he was middle aged, his back was still straight like a spear, his intelligent eyes scanning the four men.

"I hope you left enough Sake for me." He said, letting out a small laugh.

Upon hearing this, everyone relaxed. Naoki stood up and pulled out a chair for the man, prompting him to take a seat beside him.

It wasn't until the boss sat down that the rest of the men followed suit, another sign of respect only given to the boss.

Naoki poured another round of drinks, emptying the bottle on the final cup.

"I'll go get some more." Tomo said, however he was interrupted.

"No need. We have important things to discuss." The man said simply, stopping Tomo in his tracks.

By the sound of his tone, it was definitely something important.

The boss's expression turned serious.

"We might not be peaceful much longer..."

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

Chapter 429 - 429: Meet my Son (1)

"What time did you say Grandpa is coming?" Ken asked.

"He should be here in a few minutes, stop asking." Chris responded, feeling a little exasperated.

Ken, Daichi, Yuki and Chris were all sitting at a table in the same restaurant they visited the other day. It had been an hour or so since the game had finished and all 3 boys seemed to be hungry and exhausted.

Ken especially seemed rather antsy in that moment. This was because his father had been acting weird ever since seeing his Grandfather, almost as if he was upset with him.

Yuki also seemed to be somber, seemingly in on the situation.

He suddenly knew what it felt like for his family when he would keep his secrets from them.

As Ken tapped his foot under the table, a tall figure appeared from around the corner, being ushered over by a waiter. His serious expression lit up upon seeing his family, bringing a smile to his face.

"Sorry we're late." Mark said, coming closer for a hug, starting with Ken.

Once Ken moved in to hug him back, he blinked a few times, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Standing behind his Grandfather was a handsome teenage boy with olive skin, someone he was very familiar with.

"S-Santiago?" Ken uttered in shock, his face full of confusion.

The guy waited patiently by the side as Mark completed his greetings around the table. He moved back towards Santiago and placed his hands on both the teen's shoulders before taking a deep breath.

"You guys have met before, but I'll make the formal introductions now. This is Santiago... My son." Mark said, his face turned up in a smile.

"EH!?"

Both Ken and Chris shouted out in shock, both of their gazes turning to each other, as if questioning what they heard was real.

Poor Daichi and Yuki who couldn't understand English, looked towards them with confusion.

"What did he say?" Daichi nudged Ken and asked him to translate.

Only after a few moments did Ken snap out of his stupor, quickly repeating his Grandfather's words back in Japanese for both his mother and brother.

"EH!?"

This time, the two of them were the ones to go into shock. Never in their lives would they have expected such a revelation, especially from a man of Mark's age who was in his mid to late 60's.

Santiago didn't seem bothered by their reaction, even thinking that it was a little funny. He pulled out the seat for his father before sitting down next to Ken, his eyes shining as he looked at him.

"Apparently I'm your Uncle, but I would prefer if you would call me brother." Santiago said, feeling a little embarrassed.

Of course Ken was too stunned to respond with any coherent words, so he just nodded slowly. Even though the kid was older than him in this life by a year, it didn't mean that he could so casually call him Uncle all of a sudden.

"D-Dad, would you care to explain this?" Chris asked, taking the news of his newfound brother not so well.

Mark smiled, seemingly enjoying the look of confusion on everyone's face.

"Well, there's not too much to the story. Santiago was living in a foster home when I met him a few years back, though he seemed to be struggling."

"He happened to be passing by when I was coaching a little league team at a local field. He would often watch as the kids would have fun together." Mark said, turning his attention to the boy and placing his hand on the teen's shoulder.

"It took around a few weeks before he would join in, but the moment he held a glove I knew he was destined to play baseball."

Both Ken and Chris nodded, they knew how good Santiago was, especially after just playing against him earlier today. Yet that didn't quite answer the question.

As if understanding that he still needed more explanation, Mark continued.

"After a month, he stopped turning up altogether. For the first few days I wasn't too concerned, but after 2 weeks I knew something was wrong."

"I searched the town up and down, looking for someone who might know where he was living. It took almost a week until I found him by chance, packing his bags into a car on the street."

Ken's eyes widened as he turned his gaze to Santiago. He could already guess what the next part of the story was, causing his heart to ache.

Mark let out a small sigh, "His foster family was shipping him off, not wanting to deal with him any longer. I saw a young kid who had closed his heart once more being sent off to another home."

Chris felt a bitter taste in his mouth as he heard the story. He hadn't objected once, just letting his father explain softly.

"Hehe, it took a little convincing, but I managed to adopt the kid and have been training him ever since."

COUGH COUGH COUGH

After saying these words, Mark broke out into a coughing fit. He clutched the side of his body with his left hand and tried to cover his mouth with the other.

The sound was morbid, causing everyone at the table to panic, yet none more so than Santiago.

"Dad! Are you okay?"

Only after a few moments did Mark finally calm down. He looked down at his hand and saw blood, yet he didn't seem surprised.

"My medicine please Santiago." He muttered before sneakily grabbing a napkin from the table and wiping away the blood on his hand.

Santiago fished in his bag and pulled out a pill bottle, passing it to Mark who then popped one in his mouth. A worried expression crept onto everyone's faces as they saw the man in pain.

"What was that about?" Ken asked, his expression serious.

Mark waved his hand dismissively, "Let's not talk about such subjects. Today is a time for celebration."

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

Chapter 430 - 430: Meet my Son (2)

Ken wasn't exactly happy with the response, yet it wasn't like he could make him spill the beans. The atmosphere after the incident was very tense, though it managed to soften considerably after the drinks and food arrived at the table.

Santiago managed to distract himself by chatting to Ken, though he would send concerned glances to Mark every so often, as if he was checking on him.

Ken's eyes narrowed as he thought of something.

'Mika, please use identify on Mark Williams.'

[Understood.]

NAME: Mark Williams

AGE: 65

TALENT ASSESSMENT: N/A

POTENTIAL: N/A

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: D+

>Pitching: F

>Fielding: F

>Game Intelligence: ??

>Mental: SSS+

Additional information: Inflicted with stage 4 terminal cancer of the lungs, due to years of excessive smoking. His Doctors have given him a maximum of 12 months to live, 6 of which have already come to pass. The cancer is expected to spread through his other organs until they will lose functionality.

Ken read the information in front of him and felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He dismissed the window and stared at his Grandfather's smiling features as he chatted away happily.

For some reason eyesight became blurry as his eyes began to sting.

He didn't remember hearing about the passing of his Grandfather in his previous life, which meant he likely died without telling his mother or father.

Just thinking of such a sad thing caused his heart to ache.

However, he turned to Santiago in the next moment.

'Maybe he had Santiago to stay by him in my previous life too...'

Suddenly, his appreciation grew for his new family member. Just knowing that his Grandfather didn't have to die alone was enough of a consolation to him in that moment.

As tears streamed down his face, Santiago looked shocked, not knowing what to do.

"D-Dad, Ken's crying. What do I do?"

Mark turned his attention to his Grandson and was instantly confused.

"Why are you crying Ken? What's the matter?" He asked with concern.

"It's nothing..." He responded, wiping the tears with a spare napkin.

"I was wondering, how did you become the U18 National Coach?" Ken asked, trying to change the subject.

"Hmm? Oh, well I happened to know a few people from my day's in the Majors." He said with a grin.

"You played in the Majors!?" Ken was aghast, how could he not know such information.

"Haha, no my boy. I was an assistant coach for the Texas Riders." Mark explained, finding the situation funny.

"I also trained your Dad while he was in High School, though he isn't as talented as you three." He added with a wink.

Chris harrumphed, though he was still rather proud of the statement. What father didn't want his own sons to surpass them?

"So you just decided to come out of retirement to coach the U18 US team?" Ken probed further, though he could probably understand why.

Not only could he help Santiago if he made the team, he would also be able to impart all of his knowledge to the younger generation of the US. Judging by his Game Intelligence and Mental grades, his Grandfather knew a lot.

Mark smiled, his expression sincere.

"Of course. As a man enters the twilight of his life, they often want to be remembered, even after they're gone."

Ken felt as if someone had twisted a knife in his heart at those words. Knowing that his Grandfather had a maximum of 6 months left to live, it was clear that the guy had accepted his fate.

He was now doing what he could to be remembered.

The table was silent for a little while as both Ken and Chris pondered this statement. It was clear that Chris knew something about his Grandfather's condition, but judging from his expression, it was likely only recently.

'If we hadn't have come to the US, would Grandpa have even told us?' Ken thought.

The answer was probably no.

The Grandfather in his memories was a tall and kind man who would always play with him, no matter how tired he was. While he had made a good impression, before today he couldn't even remember how he looked.

Ken was silent for a while, his mind whirring.

No one seemed to notice apart from Santiago, yet he didn't try to initiate any conversation, leaving him to his own devices. S

After a few minutes, Ken looked up, determination evident on his features.

He cleared his throat a few times before addressing the table.

"I'm gonna get a drink, does anyone else want anything?"

Most of the people at the table said no, apart from Mark who could still feel a metal taste in his throat from his earlier coughing fit.

"Can you grab me a diet coke please?" He asked with a strained voice.

Ken breathed out a sigh of relief, though he quickly hid it.

"Sure no problem!"

With that he skipped away like a schoolgirl, leaving the others at the table with confused expression on their face.

Even without knowing English, both Yuki and Daichi could feel that Ken was acting suspiciously. Thanks to Chris's translation skills from his job, they were able to contribute to the conversations that had been happening all this time, making it a little less awkward.

Ken left the table and approached the bar, asking for two diet cokes. After paying, they said they would bring it to the table, however Ken refused.

"I'd like to serve my Grandfather a drink if you don't mind." He said politely, giving his best smile to the woman behind the bar.

Thankfully his charm seemed to work and she agreed with a blush.

'I guess Charismatic Air isn't that bad after all.' He mused inwardly.

After receiving the drinks, Ken split off to the side, avoiding everyone's peeping eyes.

He took a few gulps of the drink on the left and placed it on the ground gently.

'Mika...'

In the next moment, a flask appeared in his hands, filled with a clear liquid.

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

Chapter 431 - 431: Operations (1)

Ken returned to the table a little while later, carrying the two drinks. Doing his best to remain nonchalant, he placed the drink in front of his Grandfather and walked back over to his chair.

Mark was animatedly talking with Chris about the state of baseball in the country, something that he was obviously passionate about.

Yet because he was talking so much, he began to have a coughing fit once more. The painful expression on his face was almost too much to bear for Chris who stood up in concern.

However, Mark quickly waved him off.

"Dad, have a drink." Santiago said, grabbing the glass of soda and presenting it to him.

Ken was on the edge of his seat in that moment, waiting for his Grandfather to drink his diet coke.

Mark did as he was told, taking up the offered beverage and quickly downing the whole thing. Only after a few moments did he sit back and let out a small sigh.

Meanwhile, Ken breathed out a sigh of relief. It didn't look suspicious at all since everyone else had the same expression on their face.

"Sorry, I must have got too worked up." Mark said with a grin.

Once again he grabbed another napkin and wiped the blood from his hand and mouth.

"Ah, I'm starting to feel a little light headed." He admitted, "Perhaps we should call it a night."

He flashed an apologetic glance to Ken and the others. It was clear that he wanted to continue catching up, but it would have to wait.

"It's okay Dad, let's catch up again after the World Cup finishes." Chris said, getting to his feet. It hurt seeing his father like this, but there was nothing he could do in such a situation.

Santiago helped the older man to his feet and turned to his newfound family.

"It was good to meet with you all, I look forward to catching up again soon." He said, bowing slightly.

The group walked out of the restaurant together, seeing Mark and Santiago into a taxi.

'I hope it works...!' Ken said inwardly, watching as the cab drove off.

Yuki could sense her husband's mood and quickly wrapped her arms around him.

"I'm okay." He uttered, a small smile forming on his face as he hugged her back.

"What is it that you wanted to talk about?" Coach Takashi asked after sitting down. His expression was bright, unlike how he was in front of the Japanese team.

Miho sat on the chair in front of him nervously, fidgeting with her fingers. Her anxiety was genuine, though probably not for the same reasons her Grandfather thought.

"I-I know that you're busy with the team and everything... But I wanted your advice." She said, doing her best not to squirm under his discerning eye.

"Hmm? Sure, you know you can always ask me anything."

Miho raised her head and looked at the man she respected with all of her heart. Though his misunderstanding might have caused some grief for her, she could tell that it had come from a good place.

She felt a little guilty for what she was about to do, but it was not only her livelihood at stake here.

"I have a crush on one of the players." She replied, her face instantly turning a deep shade of red. It took all of her willpower not to move her gaze from her Grandfather's.

"Oho?" Coach Takashi grinned widely, inwardly praising his intuition.

'Never underestimate my matchmaking skills.' He proclaimed in his heart.

Seeing the self-satisfied expression on his face, Miho did her best not to scold him.

'Damn old man, you were trying to set me up with the wrong person!' She shouted inwardly.

"Ahem. So what kind of advice do you need my beautiful Granddaughter? Any one of those ratbags would be lucky to have you." He replied with a wink.

"Well... I first wanted to ask your opinion on the matter since you are the Head Coach of the National Team. I wouldn't want to cause any dilemmas within the team."

Coach Takashi wore a thoughtful expression, his hand subconsciously moving up to his goatee as he began to run his hand through it.

"Mmm, that's very thoughtful of you. But I'm sure Ken is mature enough to not let it affect his performance on the field, nor come between his teammates." He replied.

He locked gazes with Miho, his lips turning up into a grin.

'The look on her face is going to be priceless...!' He thought.

His mind seemed to runaway with the scenario of Miho getting embarrassed and asking how he could possibly know she had a crush on Ken. Yet to someone as intuitive and clever as himself, it was plain as day.

"Huh Ken? No way." Miho responded flatly, her face even turning up with slight disgust.

If Ken were here to experience the conversation, he might even be a little offended at the way she said those words.

"Eh?"

Coach Takashi blinked a few times, feeling a wave of confusion. All of the smugness that he'd been feeling earlier quickly disappeared.

He would have thought that Miho was lying out of embarrassment, however the look on her face was enough evidence to the contrary. He thought back to the few times he'd seen her with Ken and tried to corroborate his evidence.

Both Daichi and Hiroki were always with Ken, which meant it had to be one of those two.

'YAY DAICHI!'

A sudden memory of their game against Cuba played out in his mind. After Daichi had plowed through the catcher to get to home plate, he remembered Miho jumping up and down, cheering like a schoolgirl.

It was beside the point that she was in fact a schoolgirl, especially since Miho was much more mature than others her age.

"Daichi?" He uttered.

Miho's eyes widened in surprise, giving him all the evidence he needed.

Though he was a little surprised, he wasn't against it. Just as he was about to give his blessing, he froze.

"AH!"

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

- Chapter 432 - 432: Operations (2)

Chapter 432 - 432: Operations (2)

Ken, Daichi and Chris made their way back to the hotel in silence. Everyone could feel a heavy atmosphere pressing down on each of them.

"Is Grandpa okay?" Daichi asked reluctantly. He didn't want to reopen any wounds that Chris was trying to deal with, but he truly wanted to know.

Chris was silent for a while before letting out a sigh.

"He has stage 4 cancer in his lungs."

"What!?"

Ken was silent while Daichi called out in shock. Despite only meeting him properly earlier that day, he had been excited to finally have a Grandfather. To hear such news was rather devastating.

"He's gonna be okay though right?" Daichi asked naively.

Chris was about to open his mouth, but Ken quickly interjected, placing his arm around his brother's shoulders.

"He'll be fine. He's a strong man."

Chris frowned and turned to Ken, about to reprimand him. However, he saw Ken's gaze pointed straight at him. His eyebrows were bunched together, the sign of someone trying to keep their composure.

He quickly swallowed down what he was about to say and nodded.

"Yeah, he's going to be okay. He has a son to look after him now too." Chris added, a soft smile appearing on his features. Though it was evident he was emotional.

Ken on the other hand was still filled with doubts. He had spiked his Grandfather's drink with the Recovery Elixir and he saw the guy consume it, yet he still felt uneasy.

The only time he'd used the Recovery Elixir was when Mika administered it. He was unconscious at the time, so he didn't know how long it took to take effect.

There was also the issue of him never using it on another person before. Would it work? Would pouring it into the Diet Coke ruin the effects?

All he could do in that moment was pray that things would work out. After all, what was the point in keeping the Recovery Elixir for himself since he could no longer use it.

As Ken's thoughts continued to churn, they finally arrived back at the hotel, only to see a frantic looking Coach Takashi waiting out the front.

"Eh?"

"C-Coach Takagi... Can I have a word please." He asked, his face flushed with anxiety.

Instantly, everyone went on alert. Just what could the coach be so worked up about?

"Sure... Let's go chat in the meeting room." Chris said, urging the coach to calm down.

Both Ken and Daichi watched the two leave with suspicion and worry. It was only when Miho popped her head around the corner that the two started to put all of the pieces back together.

"Hi Daichi~" Miho said with a sweet smile.

"H-Hi Miho." He replied, eventually smiling back.

Ken felt like chopped liver as he was promptly ignored by the two.

"So I take it everything is now under control?" Ken asked from the side, interrupting their rendezvous.

"Oh, hey Ken." She replied, as if finally acknowledging his existence.

He resisted the urge to massage his temples and simply smiled at her, waiting for a response.

"Yeah, everything went well. You should have seen his face when I told him, fufufu~"

It was clear that Miho was in a good mood, which was enough of a reassurance for him. Hopefully now, the coach would stop sending him odd glances every now and then.

"So what does that mean... for us?" Daichi asked, his tone a little raw.

Perhaps it was because he just learned the fate of his Grandfather, or maybe he was just a little tired after the long day. Either way, he seemed more emotional than usual.

As if sensing this, Miho straightened up a little and looked into his eyes.

"He told me to tell you that I'm interested in you and that it should get your attention." She said, trying to hold back a smile.

"I see..."

"Well... I'm interested in you." She said softly, grabbing his hands.

Ken quickly looked away, feeling his body shudder from the romantic atmosphere.

Without a word, he escaped inside. There was no way he felt like being around for such a sappy atmosphere.

Daichi didn't even notice his brother leaving, too caught up in the beautiful woman holding his hands. He couldn't be blamed, especially since he was just a regular teenager with terrible social skills.

"Do you want to date me? Officially?" He asked softly.

Though he had propositioned a similar question last night, this time it was with the Head Coach's approval. He wanted to make sure everything was crystal clear, lest any misunderstandings arise.

Miho let out a small giggle, though she was very happy in that moment.

"Of course I do." She responded, taking back her hand and holding out her pinky.

"Let's make it a promise."

Her eyes were filled with playfulness, bringing Daichi some amusement. He hadn't made a pinky promise since he was a child, so it felt rather odd.

Yet in the end he nodded with a smile and wrapped his pinky around hers.

"There, it's a promise." Daichi announced.

"Not yet."

Daichi felt Miho pull down on his hand, causing him to lean forward a little. In the next moment, he saw a beautiful face closing in on his own.

Tap~

He suddenly felt something soft upon his lips, causing a stir within his heart. At first, Miho's gorgeous green eyes were looking into his own, but they slowly closed.

Daichi felt his mind go blank as his eyes gently closed.

The two stood in front of the hotel, seemingly frozen in time. The afternoon summer breeze was silent, as if not wanting to disturb such a tender scene.

Ken happened to turn around in that moment and froze as he saw the two locked into a kiss.

'That's my boy!' Ken said inwardly, pumping his fist.

Despite not wanting to be among the awkward and sappy atmosphere, he was truly happy for his brother. Yet the sight reminded him of how much he missed Ai.

'Maybe I should call her.' He thought.

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

Chapter 433 - 433: Miraculous Discovery (1)

Mark arrived back at the hotel where the US team were staying. Santiago gave him a hand out of the cab, making him feel even more frail than usual.

After walking a few feet, he stumbled briefly, only to be caught by his son.

"Dad! Are you okay?" Santiago's face was shrouded with worry as he propped him up on his shoulder.

"I... I'm just a bit light headed. Help me to my room." Mark responded, his voice lacking the usual deep and commanding tone that he was used to.

Santiago hesitated, "Shouldn't I call an ambulance?"

"No, it's not my lungs. I think I'm just tired." He replied.

Yet this was a lie. His lungs had been burning ever since they left the restaurant, giving him the urge to cough. The pain was nothing like he'd ever felt before, but he did his best for his son not to worry.

As they approached the main entrance of the hotel, he could see a few of the players lounging in the lobby. They looked to be down, likely because of experiencing their first loss of the World Cup.

Mark straightened his back and quickly got his breathing under control. He moved Santiago's hands off him before walking on his own.

The players saw their coach enter through the front doors and instantly got to attention. Seeing the serious expression on his face, they knew that they were likely to be chewed out at the meeting tonight.

"We're postponing the meeting till tomorrow morning. Take tonight to relax and think about what part you played in our loss today."

Not waiting for a response, Mark walked towards the elevators alongside Santiago, causing everyone to breathe out a small sigh of relief. They had been worried he would give them some sort of disciplinary action.

The moment the two stepped inside the elevator, Mark nearly collapsed, causing another shout of fright from Santiago.

Thankfully, the two managed to make it to Mark's room without anyone seeing them.

After laying on the bed, Mark couldn't keep his eyes open, instantly falling asleep.

"Don't call an ambulance."

That was the last thing he said before laying down.

Santiago dropped down to his backside and sat on the floor. He held his head in his hands and felt his eyes begin to tear up.

This was by far the worst he'd seen his adoptive father, causing him to feel all sorts of emotions. The once strong and kind man who saved him from a life of struggle and maltreatment was reduced to such a state.

"Why is life so cruel?" He muttered, feeling overwhelmed.

He stayed this way for some time, before feeling a bout of exhaustion himself. Today had been a long day filled with both excitement and fear.

Santiago stood up and checked that his father was breathing before grabbing the key to his room and leaving. He planned to shower and come back to sleep here, afraid that something might happen in the night.

A few minutes after he left, Mark began to mutter something in his sleep.

"Yuna... I miss you."

It seemed that he was having a pleasant dream.

Elsewhere in the building, a certain teen was sitting in his dark room, the lights from his laptop screen flickering against his face.

The handsome teen wore a frustrated expression on his face as he stared at the screen showing the game which took place only a few hours ago.

"How were they picking my pitches..." He muttered, biting his fingernails.

Ryan mumbled and grumbled as he used his right hand to rewind and fast forward through every pitch. He focused in on the actions of the batters, starting with Hiroki in the first innings.

He watched everything from Leo's lead, to his wind up and the action of the batter.

DOONG

The moment he heard the sound of the bat, his expression darkened even further.

"Damn it!"

Ryan slammed the table with his left hand, causing the mouse to fall off and hit the ground. Somehow, the mouse seemed to have messed with the video, pausing it on a certain frame.

He saw himself looking towards 3rd base, his glove held close to his chest.

"Hmm?"

His curiosity piqued, Ryan picked up the mouse and pressed the play button.

He saw the pitch go outside, right before Hiroki hit the ball with ease, as if he was expecting it.

Ryan frowned, moving to the next inning where he pitched against Daichi first. Once again he repeated the movements, only for the ball to go flying into the outfield.

For the next 10 minutes, Ryan watched himself pitch, breaking down his form little by little.

"Ha ha ha... HAHAAAAA."

Scary laughter began to come out of his mouth as he raised his head up, facing the ceiling. After a few moments he let out a contented sigh, as if a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulders. S

"You're a bunch of sneaky bastards, I'll give you that." He said softly, running his hand through his sandy blond hair.

All of his previous depression seemed to have disappeared in that moment, replaced by his usual confidence. After figuring out how Japan overran them, correcting the mistakes just became a lot easier.

"I'll tell the coach tomorrow. I'm sure he'll be pleased with this information." He said, a smile creeping onto his features.

Yet it froze in the next moment.

He suddenly remembered how the coach acted in front of Ken and their assistant coach, causing him to feel a certain way. Perhaps it was because he respected the coach so much, but it annoyed him to see them getting along like that.

"I'll crush you in the finals Ken... Don't you dare lose until then." He said, narrowing his eyes.

With that, he got up from the chair and stretched, feeling a cold calmness envelop him.

"Man I'm hungry... I should probably get some food." He muttered before grabbing his key and heading out the door.

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

Chapter 434 - 434: Miraculous Discovery (2)

The next morning, Mark stirred from his slumber, feeling his mouth a little dry. Yet that was quickly overshadowed by the damp clothes he was wearing. Mark shivered a little before sitting up on the bed.

He looked around the room, only to see Santiago asleep on the couch. A small smile appeared on his face momentarily before he got up and fixed his blanket.

"What's the time?" Mark muttered.

He didn't remember falling asleep, nor did he know how long he slept for.

"4:30am..."

Mark let out a small sigh. He had not done any work last night, which meant he would be ill prepared for the meeting this morning.

Thinking about all of the work he had to do, he almost felt like going back to bed. Yet the only think preventing him was the damp clothes he was wearing.

"Suppose I should go take a shower." He said softly.

Unfortunately, this hotel had one of those bath and shower hybrids. While it might not be an issue for young people to step up so high into the bath, for someone at his age with his condition, it was a recipe for disaster.

However, there were no alternatives.

Letting out a sigh, he went into the bathroom and disrobed, letting the shower heat up before getting in. Only when the room began to steam up did he attempt to get into the shower.

He lifted his leg and easily navigated his way into it, causing him to pause for a brief moment. Usually his arthritis was terrible in the morning, but only now did he realize that the familiar pain was absent.

"Hmm, that must have been a great sleep." He mused, quickly forgetting about it.

As he showered, his mind began to drift to all of the work he had to do. He was a methodical person, so he liked to plan out his schedule beforehand to maximize efficiency.

Thinking about this, he let out a small chuckle. While some might praise this way of thinking, he remembered someone who would always complain that he lacked any spontaneity.

"Yuna..."

COUGH COUGH

Mark began to violently cough while in the shower, likely a result from the excessive steam that had built up in the bathroom. He struggled to breathe as the coughing began to wrack his body.

Just when he thought that he might never get to taste oxygen again, he felt something eject from his mouth. The taste was hard to describe, but if he were to sum it in a single word, it would be... Disgusting.

He looked down at the bottom of the shower and saw some black lumps. The rising steam caused the smell to drift upwards, right into his nostrils.

Without any fanfare he kneeled down and began to empty the contents of his stomach.

Since it had been so long since he'd eaten, not much came up.

Only after a few minutes did Mark finally recover from the episode, though he was still in a panic. He had no idea what had just come out of him, though he knew that whatever it was, wasn't good.

Although he'd already washed himself, he did so again, reaching over and grabbing his toothpaste in order to remove whatever bad taste was remaining.

After brushing his teeth 3 separate times, he finally felt that it was enough.

Mark removed himself from the shower and dried himself off.

"I'll need to make a doctors appointment for this afternoon..." He said, feeling freaked out.

He left the bathroom after getting changed, only to see Santiago staring at him with worry. Yet in the next moment his face turned into one of shock.

"W-What happened to you?" He asked, his eyes looking Mark up and down.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Mark asked, trying to see if there was something wrong.

"Go look in the mirror..."

Seeing that he was not going to get a coherent response, Mark did as he was told and walked in front of the mirror on the other side of the room since the bathroom was still steamy.

Not expecting much, he looked straight into the eyes of his reflection. He saw the doubtful expression on his face morph slowly into one of shock.

His once wrinkly features seemed to have become smoother, though it was still obvious he was past his prime. The gray hair on his head seemed to be thicker, as if he'd not been balding for the past 30 years.

It was as if he was staring back at a younger version of himself, someone in their late 40's.

"W-What the hell is going on?"

Mark's hands moved up to his face, as if to make sure it was really his. This situation paired with the scary one he had in the shower made him feel on the edge.

"Dad... Are you feeling any pain? I heard you coughing in the shower." Santiago said, his tone back to showing worry.

He wasn't sure why his father's face seemingly changed overnight, but he was hoping that it wasn't a sign of something bad.

Mark turned around and faced his son, his emotions in turmoil.

"I... I think I'm okay?" He said, twisting his body a little.

He would usually feel a sharp pain if he twisted a certain way, so he was trying to do so and get a gauge on his body's condition. Yet even after trying a few times, he couldn't feel any pain.

"Huh?"

Mark was stunned.

Just to be sure, he began to move his body in certain ways that he hadn't done in many many years. He began to stretch his arms, roll his shoulders, lift his legs and soon went straight into doing star jumps on the spot.

Santiago watched on with shock and horror as the 65 year old man performed a set of warm ups like he was about to step onto a baseball field.

"Haha... HAAAAHA. Look at me go Santiago!" Mark wore a brilliant grin as he continued to jump on the spot.

"OW~"

It was only when he kicked his toe on the end of the bed that he let out a yelp of pain, scaring Santiago half to death.

"Hehe, I got a little carried away." He said with amusement.

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

Chapter 435 - 435: End of Super Round (1)

A few days later, two girls were sitting in a cosy apartment with a sewing machine and bits of fabric all over the place. One might think that it looked like a textile shop more than a place to live.

"Thanks for helping me with my costume, you're so good at this." Rie said, pulling Ai into a hug.

"It's no problem, I love designing things like this." Ai said with a smile.

The two had been at it since early in the morning, custom designing pieces for Rie's next comiket function that she'd be attending. Ai wasn't familiar with the character, but she had plenty of references to use.

"Ah, where's my phone?" Ai asked, as if suddenly remembering something.

"Umm, I don't know?"

The two frantically looked through the apartment, only to find it a few minutes later under a bunch of fabric.

The first thing Ai saw were a few messages, causing her face to light up.

"We finished top of the Super Round just above the US. The final will be held tomorrow!"

"Yes!"

Ai jumped up and down, her face filled with excitement. She hadn't had a chance to watch their game against Canada this morning since she'd stayed over at Rie's house for the night.

"Hmm? What's got you so excited?" Rie asked with interest.

"Japan made it to the U18 World Cup finals!" She said, throwing up the victory sign.

Whatever second hand excitement Rie was feeling suddenly went down the drain as she lost interest.

"Eh? I didn't know you liked baseball." She said, a little disappointedly.

"Well I used to be the manager of my last school's baseball club." She replied, fidgeting a little.

Rie let out a sigh, "Here I thought you got a text from Katsuya or something."

After she said these words, she almost swooned, "He's so handsome."

Ai's face turned up in disgust almost immediately, "No way, he gives me the creeps."

"Huh!? I could have sworn you two were dating or something, since I always see you guys talking." Rie was shocked.

"Dating? Hell no... Plus, I already have a boyfriend." Ai said, puffing out her chest.

"What? Don't tell me it's someone at our school?" Rie looked like she'd just uncovered the mother lode of gossip, her face turning into one of deep interest.

Ai shook her head. She'd only been attending Joshibi High for a couple of weeks, when would she have found the time to get into a relationship there.

"He's from my old High School in Yokohama." She explained.

Rie's features lit up, "Well? Show me a photo!"

Her enthusiasm was a little odd, but Ai still did as she said. She went through her phone quickly and pulled up a selfie of them together.

Rie snatched the phone out of her hands and looked closely. At first she was a little disappointed since she'd expected someone even better looking than Katsuya, yet as she took the liberty of scrolling to the next photo her expression changed.

In front of her was the picture Daichi had taken of Ken in his new National Team jersey. It was clear by the photo how awkward the guy looked, causing her to let out muffled laughter.

"H-Hey, give that back." Ai's face reddened in embarrassment, feeling as if she was being teased.

Rie didn't resist, handing the phone back to her friend. She saw the puffed cheeks and sulky look on Ai's face and felt a little bad.

"Sorry sorry! I just thought he looked so awkward in the photo." She said with another peel of laughter.

"Yeah, he is kind of awkward sometimes. But he is a real inspiration to everyone around him. I wouldn't be here chasing my dreams if it wasn't for Ken." Ai's expression turned a little serious as she said this.

"Oh?" Rie felt like she might have hit a sore point and decided to tone it down a little.

"What makes you say that?" She was curious after all, since Ai was so good with helping her design and fit her costumes.

"Well..." Ai fidgeted a little before deciding to tell her friend about everything.

She told her about applying for both Yokohama and Joshibi, eventually being too afraid to accept enrollment to the art and design school. How she followed Ken into the baseball club since she had a crush on him in middle school.

Then there was the drama with her stalker and situation with her parents.

Yet when she talked about Ken and all the hard work he'd put in, all the way up to winning Koshien, Ai wore a beautiful smile. It was clear to Rie that she indeed liked this guy.

"So now he's over in America, pursuing his dreams." She said.

"Hmm, I see... Wait what!? He's in America?"

Rie's jaw dropped. What kind of long distance relationship was this girl into.

"Yeah, he's playing in the U18 Baseball World Cup for Japan. Didn't I mention that?" Ai replied, tilting her head in confusion.

"Um, no..."

At first, Rie thought Ken might have been one of those guys who had a lofty goal of going professional but never stood a chance. Yet the fact he was representing Japan, as a freshman...

Even she knew that it was impressive, despite not knowing anything about baseball.

"Wow, no wonder you don't like Katsuya." She replied in understanding.

Ai blushed a little, but her face changed a little afterwards, "There's something about that guy that gives me the creeps. Sure he's attractive, but it feels as if he's trying too hard to be charming, almost like he's wearing a mask."

"A mask?" Rie pondered for a moment.

"That would explain why he's so handsome..." She said seriously.

...

"Pfft..."

"Hahahaha!"

Ai saw the serious expression on Rie's face and couldn't help but burst out into giggles. This was the airhead side of her friend that came out sometimes, usually when she didn't fully understand something.

Hearing Ai's giggles, Rie couldn't help but laugh in response, though she didn't fully understand what they were laughing about.

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

Chapter 436 - 436: End of Super Round (2)

Ken, Hiroki and Daichi were working up a sweat in the hotel gym, joined by a few other of their teammates.

They had just beat Canada convincingly earlier that day and had a few hours for leisure before the next film session. By this point, everyone had played 10 games in 10 days and were starting to feel the fatigue build up.

Therefore, the workout they were doing was rather light.

Well, except for Hiroki who seemed to be on his own schedule.

"Dude, it's the finals tomorrow, why don't you calm down a little?" Daichi said, looking a little concerned.

However, Hiroki ignored him, continuing his run on the treadmill.

"Just leave him. You know how he gets after standing on 1st base all day." Ken said with a chuckle.

Daichi shrugged, mumbling that it was none of his business.

"Ah, did you text Ai to tell her we made it to the finals?"

"Yeah, she said she's going to stay up and watch it with a friend." Ken said, grabbing his phone and showing Daichi the photo that she sent.

It was a picture of Ai standing next to another girl.

Daichi briefly glanced at the photo, intending on going back to his workout, but in the next moment he did a double take.

"W-What the hell?"

"What?" Ken asked in confusion.

"N-Nothing..." he replied, his face turning red.

"So damn huge." He muttered, going back to his workout.

A couple of pairs of ears perked up within the small gym at those words. Both Riku and Aki seemingly teleported in front of Ken, snatching the phone in his hand.

"HOLY MOTHER OF MILK!" Aki squealed, rubbing his eyes in shock.

Riku felt his soul almost leave his body as he saw the photo, his face turning green with envy.

"That's your girlfriend!? I hate you so much right now." Riku said, almost crushing the phone in his hand.

"How do you not suffocate?" Aki added, his curiosity overcoming his jealousy.

Ken's face frowned as he snatched the phone back from the two perverts.

"My girlfriend is the one on the left." Ken said, his face serious.

"Oh... Yeah she's really cute." Riku stated, his voice lowered.

"Ahem... You wouldn't happen to have the other girls number would you?"

Aki ran his hand over his bald head and sent a pleading and innocent look towards Ken. If he didn't know the guy, he might have been fooled by his acting.

"Piss off." Ken said simply, shooing him away like a fly.

Throughout the entire interaction, Hiroki was focused on his running. Rather than women, there was something, or someone else on his mind.

'Leo... I won't lose to you.'

If his teammates could hear his thoughts, they may think very differently of their friend.

Around 30 minutes later, the guys finished their workout. Apart from Hiroki who looked as if he just ran a marathon, everyone seemed to be loosened up.

"The film session will be starting soon, we should get ready." Ken stated.

"Yeah, let's go shower and head down." Daichi replied.

Everyone got into the elevator and headed up to their rooms. However, since there was only 1 shower in each of the rooms, it was a rush to see who could get there first.

As they approached the door, Ken's face turned serious.

"Have you thought about what's gonna happen when we return back to Japan?"

Daichi paused after opening the door, not expecting such a question.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're currently living in Osaka at the school dorms. Isn't Miho living in Tokyo?"

"Mmm... I haven't thought that far." Daichi said truthfully.

Ken placed his hand on his shoulder and let out a deep sigh, "You need to start looking at the future little bro. You're always so... Naive."

As he said the last word, Ken shoved Daichi out of the way in one quick movement, launching himself forward and into the bathroom before slamming the door shut.

It took Daichi a few moments to understand what had just happened.

"Damn it Ken! You cheated."

It looked like Ken had intentionally misled Daichi into letting his guard down so he could shower first. Though he couldn't exactly complain since he'd done something similar in the past.

He let out a small chuckle, but quickly fell silent. Though it was used as a distraction, Ken's words were weighing on him.

Since they'd just officially entered a relationship, he hadn't thought about anything in the near future. He was still in the first year of High School, while Miho was in her final year.

After graduating, she would likely be going to Tokyo University to continue her studies.

Would a long distance relationship work?

Daichi was thrown deep into thought and felt his anxiety levels worsen.

By the time Ken got out of the shower, he found Daichi in the same position where he left him, albeit with a depressed expression on his face.

'Oh man, he can't be that upset right?' Ken thought, feeling a little bad.

"Shower is free..." He uttered, heading over to get some of his clothes.

Yet he received no response.

"Dude, go shower. There's no point thinking about that stuff right now, you can talk to Miho after dinner."

As if knowing what he was thinking about, Ken softened his tone a little. He had wanted to talk about the subject at some point, since he didn't want his brother to end up like him.

With Ai, everything happened right before she left for Tokyo. While it had all worked out eventually, he would have rather they'd talked about everything in person beforehand.

Of course, he was mostly to blame for this since he'd been busy at the tryouts for the National Team, but that was neither here nor there.

Daichi nodded, taking on board what Ken said.

"Thanks bro." He said, before making his way into the bathroom. Yet even after he got into the shower, his mind was preoccupied.

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

Chapter 437 - 437: Old Friend (1)

Mark stepped out of the white cab and did a quick pat down, making sure he had everything he needed. After handing the driver some money, he walked into the clinic he'd been dropped in front of.

These past couple of days had been eye opening for him. Now that he felt no pain, he realized just how much he'd been enduring for the past few years.

It was as if he had grown 20 years younger, not only physiologically, but also in his mannerisms.

Creak~

The sound of the door creaking open alerted the woman behind the counter that someone had arrived. She raised her head from the computer screen and said a greeting.

"Good Afternoon, do you have an appointment sir?"

"Hi Fiona, I'm just here to see Frank again." Mark replied. It was clear that he had been here many times by how he responded.

"Er, what was your name?" Fiona asked, feeling a little awkward.

Mark blinked a few times, as if he didn't understand.

"Fiona, it's me... Mark. Mark Williams."

"Oh, Mark... EH!?"

Fiona almost fell out of her chair, feeling an immense shock wash over her.

"M-Mark? What happened to you?"

Mark suddenly remembered that he looked quite a bit different since the last time he visited this place. His face turned up into a grin, somewhat enjoying the shocked expression on the receptionist's face.

"I'm not sure, that's why I'm here" He replied playfully.

"A-Ah... I'll go get Frank now." She said absentmindedly.

Fiona quickly left the counter and headed out the back, leaving Mark on his own in the lobby.

To be honest, Mark was feeling quite nervous.

While all of these things that had happened to him seemed beneficial, there was a part of him that felt it was too good to be true. After all, who had heard of someone recovering seemingly overnight from Stage 4 cancer?

He didn't want to get his hopes up in case his diagnosis had not changed. Only now that he saw some hope did his mindset begin to change.

If before he had already accepted his fate to die from this disease, now his will to live was stronger than ever.

A few minutes later, Frank peaked his head out the corner and almost fell back in fright.

"M-Mark!? My goodness, did you find the fountain of youth or something?"

Doctor Frank was an elderly gentleman, just a few years younger than Mark himself. He had thick hair despite his age and a long nose which suited his facial features quite well.

"Heh, are you jealous old man?" Mark replied with a chuckle.

Yet it was clear by Frank's expression that he was more confused than jealous.

"Come with me." The Doctor said, waving for Mark to follow.

"Thanks Fiona." Mark said, tipping his hat.

Once the two arrived in his office, Frank closed the door and sat opposite his friend, his eyes burning with curiosity.

"Before you ask, I have no idea what happened to me." Mark stated flatly, stopping Frank in his tracks.

"Ah." Frank looked a little disappointed, but his expression changed a moment later.

"So I take it you're here for a check up?"

Since Mark had stage 4 cancer, he had opted not to go through with chemotherapy. There was such a small chance of it working, not to mention he would spend what little time he had remaining being sick and frail from the radiation.

Therefore Frank was able to pinpoint his reason for coming.

Mark nodded. He wore a pensive expression, which wasn't surprising considering the circumstances.

"Alright, let's go get an x-ray of your lungs then." Frank said, getting out of his chair slowly.

He watched on as Mark seemingly jumped to his feet, like a man in his 30's.

"Damn fountain of youth." Frank muttered under his breath.

The two went into the x-ray room where Mark replaced his shirt with a gown and stood inside of the machine with his arms up.

The process only lasted for a few minutes before the two walked back to Frank's office.

"The photo will take a little while to print." Frank said, "But in the meantime, I've got some old x-rays here."

With that, the old man went through his filing cabinet and pulled out Mark's file, fanning through the documents until he found what he was looking for.

Without a word, he moved over to the light pad and clipped the x-ray onto it.

Even if one knew nothing about x-ray's, they could tell that there was something wrong in this one. There were tens of white spots of varying sizes spread throughout the lungs, lighting up the photo like a Christmas tree.

Mark began to feel his anxiety spike as he looked at the x-ray. It was this photo that had practically sentenced him to death just a mere 6 months ago.

Seeing that his friend was getting uncomfortable, Frank switched off the lights that illuminated the photo before going and taking a seat.

"How's the U18 US team going?" Frank asked, trying to change the subject.

"Hmm? Yeah they're good. We lost to Japan a few days ago, but we still qualified for the finals tomorrow." He replied. Despite recounting the loss, he still wore a smile.

"Oh? Now that I think about it, wasn't your late wife from Japan?"

"Yes she was..." Mark's face dimmed a little, but he still kept his smile.

"Did I tell you that my Grandkids are actually playing for the U18 Japanese National Team?"

"What? Really?" Frank's voice turned high pitch as he heard this.

He suddenly felt that his own Grandkids paled in comparison to Mark's. While they were busy mooching off their parents, Mark's were playing baseball in another country.

"Hehe, Ken's all grown up now." He added, his eyes losing focus for a moment as he reminisced of earlier days.

"My son is actually the Assistant Coach for Japan, alongside that old fart." Mark added, his mood improving significantly.

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

Chapter 438 - 438: Old Friend (2)

"Ah, such a talented family." Frank lamented.

If he hadn't forced his son go through medical school, there was no way that the guy would have achieved much on his own.

Knock Knock

Both Frank and Mark stiffened as they heard the knock on the door.

"Doctor Frank, here are the x-ray's." Fiona announced as she opened the door.

"Thank you dear."

Mark felt his palms get sweaty as he looked at the large envelope which contained his fate. There was a large part of him that didn't want to see the results, yet he had come too far now.

Even Frank began to shake as he opened up the envelope, using his fingers to gently pull out the x-ray.

As he walked up to the light board, his shaking hands almost dropped the picture.

He gathered himself before clipping the x-ray on and turning the light on.

Mark suddenly put his head in his hands, not having the ability to look. He prayed inwardly, hoping that a miracle had befallen him.

He stared at the ground for a few moments, as if waiting to hear the bad news. Yet almost a full minute passed and he hadn't heard Frank utter a single word.

"Just tell me straight up Frank." He said.

But he didn't get a response.

"Frank?"

Mark raised his head and saw his old friend staring at the x-ray with shock. He frantically moved his gaze from one photo to the next, as if trying to understand the anomaly that he was facing.

"Frank!"

Mark yelled out, his anxiety too much to bear. Despite looking younger, he felt like he had aged another 10 years due to all of the stress heaped onto him.

As if finally being snapped out of his stupor, Frank turned to Mark with a confounded expression.

"It's a miracle..."

Before Mark could say anything, the old man slowly walked over to his friend and wrapped his arms around him. Tears slowly pooled at the corner of his eyes, a result of the joy overflowing from his heart.

"No... Are you serious? Please don't joke with me Frank, I won't be able to take it." Mark uttered, not wanting to relinquish the seal on his small thread of hope.

Frank felt the body of the old man quiver, causing him to stand back and hold him at arms length. He looked up at his old friend and smiled.

"The cancer... It's all gone."

"Gone?"

Mark felt the corner of his eyes sting before a flood of emotion broke through his defenses, causing the tears to run unabashedly down his cheeks.

He dropped down to his knees, feeling his body lose strength from the gratifying relief he felt overcome him.

Frank panicked a little seeing the old man lose his composure. Even when he had been given the diagnosis, Mark had been as stoic as ever. This was the first time he'd seen his friend like this in the whole 30+ years that he'd known him.

He crouched down out of concern, his hand rubbing the man's back in comfort.

Mark sobbed, his emotions getting the better of him. The hope that he had once buried was now set free, filling him with gratefulness.

The two remained this way for a while, comforting each other silently.

Fiona knocked briefly before opening the door, only to see the two men on the ground. Before she could open her mouth, Frank turned around and wordlessly waved his hand, telling her to give them some time.

She did as she was told, though she felt a little curious.

Only after a few minutes did Mark calm down. He slowly got up to his feet and let out a self deprecating laugh.

"Sorry old friend, I let my emotions get the better of me."

Frank shook his head, "Don't worry, I'm sure if it were me, I'd still be bawling." He said with a grin.

Seeing the tear marks down his face, Frank grabbed a few tissues and handed it to the guy.

"Thanks."

After cleaning himself up, Mark took a seat once more, feeling lighter than he'd felt in many many years.

Frank did the same, staring across from his friend. If he were a regular Doctor, he would bombard Mark with questions, perhaps even ask him to give some blood samples. Yet thankfully, he wasn't that type of guy.

"Since you're cancer free, let's forget this ever happened. Since you didn't need to use your insurance for the last x-ray, I can wipe your records clean."

Mark's eyes widened for a moment, not expecting such an act.

"But isn't that illegal? Won't you get in trouble?"

Frank shook his head, "I won't tell if you don't."

With that, the old man grinned.

"Hahaha." Mark let out a peel of laughter, feeling the rest of his worries wash away.

"Thank you old friend, I'll treat you for dinner after this World Cup is over."

With that, Mark got up and held out his hand for a handshake.

Frank grinned, "I'll have to run it past my wife first."

The two shook hands firmly before Mark pulled him into a hug. In the next moment he leaned back and picked up the old Doctor, causing him to let out a cry of shock.

"Hahaha, this truly is a blessed day." Mark stated, putting the old man back on the ground.

Frank laughed in response, eventually shooing out the young old guy. "Alright alright, off ya go Benjamin Button."

"Hahaha!"

Mark left the office, laughing loudly.

Fiona saw the man who was sobbing just a few minutes earlier, walk out in a jolly mood. Instantly her expression was confused, not understanding what the hell was going on.

"Bye Fiona, I'll see you next time." Mark stated, waving on his way out of the clinic.

"B-Bye."

That was the only word she could manage. Once he left, she ran into Frank's office her expression full of questions.

"Don't ask, everything has been taken care of." Frank replied, shooing off the nosy receptionist.

"Ah come on, tell me please..."

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

Chapter 439 - 439: Preparation (1)

Ken and Daichi made their way down to the meeting room, arriving a little early. Seeing as how the door was still closed, they decided to wait in the lobby, only for more and more of their teammates to join up.

Masayuki looked as if he'd just been woken up from a nap as he fell back into one of the couch's. It wasn't just him, many of the players looked fatigued, which was understandable.

They had now been in America for 11 days, if they counted the day that they arrived.

Over this span, they had played 10 baseball games against the best U18 players in the world. The fact that they had been able to hold on this long and remain undefeated was a testament to both their skill and drive.

The group sat in silence as the team started to congregate in the lobby. While they would usually be chatting or messing around, everyone seemed to have hit a wall.

"It all ends tomorrow huh?" Daichi spoke up, his tone laced with hidden emotion.

It seemed as if he wasn't just talking about the World Cup, but the current status quo.

"Yeah... We'll either be bringing back home the trophy, or going home in defeat." Kuro stated, his gloomy aura only adding to the melancholy of the atmosphere.

"What do you mean? We smashed the US team last time, and we'll do it again." Riku replied, not even wanting to entertain the thought of losing.

"It won't be that easy this time." Ken stated matter-of-factly.

He felt everyone in the lobby turn to him in that instant, though he didn't shrink back.

Masayuki sat himself forward and stared at Ken.

"Why do you say that?"

Ever since their last game against the US where Ken divulged his game plan to him and a few others, Masayuki had looked at Ken in a whole new light.

At first he had thought that the guy was a player who used their instinct to play the game, yet he had been greatly mistaken. Not only was he able to pinpoint the patterns in the US play style, he was able to come up with an effective measure to target these quirks.

"Whatever we learned last game will need to be scrapped. I can guarantee that the Coach would have seen through all of our plans by now." Ken replied.

His reason was simple. Because of 3 people... Ryan, Leo and his Grandfather.

Ryan had such a large ego that he would never let his performance down. If Ken knew his personality well enough, he believed that the guy would be reviewing their game like a hawk.

There was also the fact that he hadn't pitched at all in the following 2 games, likely conserving his strength for the finals tomorrow.

The next person was Leo, a man dubbed the catching machine. He was so methodical that Ken was able to use his own patterns against him. Due to the fact that Japan were able to score against not just Ryan, there was no way that he wouldn't figure anything out.

Lastly, his Grandfather... The Head Coach. The man who had taught his own father everything he knew about baseball.

Ken had no doubt that if anyone could figure out what he had done in their game, it was that man.

Masayuki nodded. Not only did he believe Ken, he didn't even ask for any supporting evidence.

"So we're back to square one?" Riku asked.

"Pretty much."

Before they could continue the conversation, a tired looking Chris walked into the lobby and directed everyone to enter the meeting room. Judging by his body language, he'd been working non-stop.

Ken was the first to get up, walking next to his father.

"We're on the home stretch." Ken said with a grin, placing his hand upon his father's shoulder.

"Mmm, 1 more game." Chris replied, flashing his son a grin.

Everyone filed into the meeting room, taking up the empty seats. By now, everyone had already claimed a regular seat that they would take up for every meeting, showing just how often they spent in there.

It took a few minutes for everyone to settle down, but eventually they regained their focus.

Coach Takashi made his way up the front, wanting to kick the meeting off in his usual fashion.

"With our last game against Canada today, it brings an end to the Super Round. Since we have remained undefeated in the World Cup thus far, we're sitting on top of the leader board." He said simply.

There were no flowery words, nor emotion in his tone. It was as if he was speaking about something completely irrelevant to himself and those present.

"Be that as it may, our job is not finished..."

He scanned the faces of his players in front of him with a serious demeanor.

"I could stand here right now and tell you all that you've done a wonderful job so far. I could pat you on the back and tell you how proud I am that we were able to remain undefeated against the best teams in the world..."

"But I won't."

The Head Coach began to pace back and forth, his words channeling directly into the player's hearts.

"I won't do such a thing because it means nothing. It holds no value... Not to you, and not to Japan."

His voice remained firm, yet there was an underlying passion within his words, one that evoked a rising response from those who heard it.

"You don't want words of comfort from me do you?"

"No sir!" The players shouted back in response.

"You're not a bunch of kids who need me to give you a pat on the back and coddle you right!?" This time the coach's voice rose in volume.

"No SIR!"

"Good... I won't mince any words with you, tomorrow will be our toughest game yet. Whatever happened against the US team in the last game was nothing but us catching them off guard."

"We can't afford to be complacent, not against this team... Which is why we'll be making some changes to the line up."

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

Chapter 440 - 440: Preparation (2)

The next day, the Rodgers stadium staff were currently feeling the pinch. People arrived in droves to the stadium in order to watch the two final matches of the U18 World Cup.

First on the schedule was Mexico vs Cuba, who were competing for bronze.

Despite not being the finals match, the crowd still stood at an impressive 20,000 fans, almost a 3rd of the total capacity of the stadium.

The game was a brutal back and forth melee with each team trading runs until the final inning.

As fate would have it, Jorge was up to bat in the bottom of the 9th inning with his team down by a single run. His brother Manuel was sitting on 2nd base after hitting one into the outfield.

With 2 outs on the board and the count at 3-2, Cuba were definitely backed into a corner.

Since the Mexican closer had come up to the mound in the 7th inning, he'd only given up a single hit to Manuel in the previous at-bat.

Even though he was under so much pressure, Jorge gripped his bat tightly and stared calmly at the figure on the mound.

His expression was serious as he tried to faze out the pressure upon his shoulders. A ball would send him to first base, leaving the next batter to clean up his mess.

But this was his job as the clean up batter, to send the runners home, Jorge would never leave this moment to someone else.

Suddenly, the ball was thrown, a slider which crept inside to his left-handed stance. It was a rather tricky angle, but something he'd hit thousands of times.

WHOOOOOSH

DOOOONG

"YEAHHHH!"

The Japanese team alighted from the bus, only to feel the entire arena shake as the 20,000+ fans applauded.

"Holy crap, what's happening in there?" Aki shouted, looking around as if the whole building was about to collapse.

"The game must still be ongoing." Ken replied.

"Does that mean we'll have to wait to use the locker rooms?" Daichi asked, seeming a little annoyed.

"I wonder who won?"

"Let me check." Kuro said, grabbing his smart phone out and searching the web.

Ken's eyes widened, "Is that the J-phone 8?"

"Oh? How did you know?"

How did he know? This was the phone that Ken had been stuck with from his 2nd year of high school. He had it right up until the moment he regressed in his past life.

"Ah, I just remembered seeing an ad for it somewhere." Ken eventually said. It wasn't like he could tell him the real reason.

"Well it only came out a few weeks ago. Let me tell you about all of its functions." Kuro said excitedly. He seemed real happy and wanted to show off his latest model.

"Man, just check the damn website." Riku said with a scowl.

"Er, whoops. One moment." Kuro realized his mistake and continued where he'd left off.

"Holy crap! Jorge hit a walk-off home run?"

"Oi let me see."

Quickly, everyone but Ken crowded the poor teen, almost causing him to drop his new and expensive phone. Thankfully he managed to keep control over it through the chaos.

Ken knew just how fragile the screen was on that phone. Just a sneeze could cause it to crack, forcing the owner to pay a hefty amount for a replacement.

"So Cuba won hey?" Ken muttered, looking towards the direction of the field. He still remembered their first game where he had managed to throw a 102mph fastball.

'Strong competition truly brings out the best in people.' He thought, seeming a little melancholic.

Just as he was reminiscing, another bus pulled up nearby. It was the same charter company as their own, which could only mean one thing.

As the doors opened, a group of teens walked out, led by an imposing figure. Leo Cameron who was in his National Team tracksuit looked like a model as he descended the stairs, his ash blond hair perfectly styled atop his head.

One by one the American players departed the bus, instantly training their gazes upon the Japanese players. The atmosphere was so thick that one could cut through it with a knife.

Yet this seemingly changed when Santiago walked out. He saw Ken and Daichi and his face lit up into a big smile.

"Hey guys!" He said cheerily, waving his hand to and fro.

The tension shattered at once, causing a few of the players to let out muffled giggles.

"He's like a Golden Retriever! Hahaha." Riku yelled, holding his sides.

Ken couldn't help but smile, waving back to the guy. Yet his expression changed after Mark stepped off the bus, or at least someone who was supposed to be Mark.

The man looked to have gone back in time 20 years, showing someone who was not yet 50 years of age. He wore a glowing smile and his eyes seemed even sharper than before.

Daichi's jaw dropped, not believing his eyes.

"Is that... Grandpa?"

Ken felt elated seeing his Grandfather in such a state.

'Does this mean the Recovery Elixir worked?' He thought, praying inwardly.

'Mika, please use Identify on Grandpa.'

[Understood.]

NAME: Mark Williams

AGE: 65

TALENT ASSESSMENT: N/A

POTENTIAL: N/A

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: B-

>Pitching: F

>Fielding: F

>Game Intelligence: ??

>Mental: ??

Additional Information: With the use of the Recovery Elixir, all traces of his cancer are now gone. The arthritis he was suffering from has also been cured, returning him to top physical condition.

Ken breathed out a sigh of relief. Now that he had confirmed his Grandpa was cured, he wouldn't have to worry about him in the future. Not only that, Santiago wouldn't be without a father in 6 months time.

A moment later, Mark turned his head and locked gazes with Ken. It was only for a fraction of a second, but Mark felt that Ken's expression was one of relief, as if he was expecting to see him like this.

'It couldn't be... right?'

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

