

Major League System

Chapter 441 - 441: Before the Game (1)

"Welcome everyone to the finals of the U18 Baseball World Cup. We've just seen Cuba take out Mexico and secure 3rd place after a brilliant 2-run walk-off home run."

Ai and Rie were sitting in her apartment with the laptop plugged into the TV. Since none of them spoke enough English to enjoy the American production, they were going to watch the game live through the website.

It was currently 3:30pm in LA, which meant it was now 7:30am in Japan. Rie was busy in the kitchen fixing up some breakfast for the two of them while Ai set up the stream.

Since it was the finals, there was no way she wouldn't watch it live.

"I'm joined by a special guest this afternoon, the current Ace for the Texas Riders, Yu Tanaka. Yu, have you been following the U18 World Cup thus far?"

The screen showed a middle-aged man and Yu Tanaka at a table, both dressed in nice suits for the broadcast.

"I have been watching our young Japan side very closely over the past 2 weeks. I'm very impressed with how the team has been playing, though I can't say that I'm surprised."

Yu said this matter-of-factly, as if it was a foregone conclusion.

The other host seemed to be a little bit puzzled, asking him to expand.

"Well, Coach Takashi is an amazing coach. It's understandable that he's been able to leave a lasting mark on the team despite the short training camp."

"Ah yes, of course. What do you think the chances of Japan being victorious in this match are?"

"I'd say around 40%."

"Eh!? What does he mean? Didn't we beat them convincingly last game?" Ai said, her features turning up into a frown.

"Ai~ Did you want cream on your pancakes?" Rie asked from the kitchen.

"Yes please."

The chatter on the TV continued for a while, yet Ai didn't feel like listening to this special guest after his input. Just as she was about to mute it, Rie walked in with two plates full of fluffy pancakes.

"Has the game started yet?" She asked, placing the plates down on the coffee table.

"Not yet, they're just talking crap before the game." Ai said, making a shooing motion towards the TV.

"Ooo, he's kinda hot." Rie said, fan girling a little.

"Really? Too bad his brain is mush though." Ai replied spitefully.

"What do you think Japan needs to do to increase their chances of winning this game?"

"Well that's simple... Put Ken on the mound." Yu said, his intelligent eyes turning sharp for a moment.

"Ah! Never mind, it seems like it's not all mush."

Hearing her boyfriend mentioned on the TV, Ai quickly changed her opinion of Yu Tanaka. Anyone who could recognize Ken's talents was someone to be respected in her book.

Yu Tanaka continued, elaborating on his remark.

"Out of the 4 games he's been on the mound, he's yet to give up a single hit, let alone a run. I believe that he'll be able to make a greater impact pitching, than he would in the outfield."

"Exactly!" Ai said aloud, almost screaming at the TV.

Although he was great at batting, Ai thought that Ken looked the coolest when he was standing on the mound. Even at Koshien, whenever he took the mound, it was as if he made his whole team better.

Rie looked at Ai weirdly, she had never seen her get this excited before. Usually the girl was reserved, particularly when they were at school, yet the person in front of her almost looked like a gangster with the way she sat and yelled at the TV.

"Yes that's very impressive. While we're on the subject of Ken; there are many in Japan who are making comparisons between you two, calling him the second-coming of Yu Tanaka. What are your thoughts on that?"

Ai's ears perked up and her eyes narrowed, as if telling the man through the TV to pick his answer carefully.

Yu smiled at the question, taking his time to answer.

"Ken has a weapon that I don't, and that's a 100mph fastball. That's something that no one can teach you, so for that reason, I'm very thankful for the compliment. He is still in the first year of High School so his potential is through the roof."

Yu was poised and concise with his answer, taking a humble approach. Yet his expression changed a little afterwards.

"However, he still has a long way to go. Besides the odd forkball, and two-seam, his pitching repertoire is quite limited. While it might work at his level of competition, he'll soon find out that it's not enough."

Ai frowned in response to the words from the guy and let out a harrumph.

"Hmph, don't think that my Ken is a one-trick-pony. He works harder than anyone." Ai retorted, as if the man would hear her words.

Rie stifled a chuckle. Though she wasn't used to it, seeing Ai get so worked up over her boyfriend was rather amusing. She was like a cute hamster with her puffed cheeks and non-threatening comebacks.

"Eat your pancakes before they go cold." Rie said, pointing to the plate in front of her friend.

"Ah, sorry Rie!" Ai asked for forgiveness before tucking into her food. If she slightly resembled a hamster before, then now the resemblance was almost uncanny.

"Hahaha"

Rie broke out into a peel of laughter, watching Ai shove an entire pancake into her mouth and chewing violently.

She felt as if she'd learned more about her friend in the past 20 minutes than she had ever since they met a few weeks ago.

"Hmm?"

Ai tilted her head in question, her jaw still moving up and down while trying to chew her fluffy pancakes.

"Hahahahaha!"

The scene was just too cute, causing her to enter into another fit of laughter.

"Well it looks like the players are now on the field and are lining up for the National Anthems."

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

Chapter 442 - 442: Before the Game (2)

As the Japanese team walked onto the field for the National Anthem, Ken felt a burning gaze fixed on him from the other team. A pair of clear blue eyes stared at him from across the field, as if no one else was present.

Ken didn't have to guess to know who it was.

He raised his head and saw the sandy blond hair waving in the wind. A malicious grin was painted on the teen's features, as if he'd been waiting for this moment for the longest time.

That look was all it took to understand that the US team were well prepared for today's match. One would think that Ryan who performed poorly in the last game might still be affected, yet his attitude was the opposite.

'Just as I thought, they've figured out what we were aiming for last match.' Ken thought in his heart.

However, he never intended to use the same tactic to begin with.

Ken removed his Poker Face, showing his true emotions on his face for the first time since walking onto the field. A confident, almost cocky grin crept onto his lips, one that someone might expect from the victor.

Sparks seemed to fly from both ends of the field as the two pitchers stared each other down.

Only when Ken was pulled into line did their pre-match showdown finally end.

This time, a guest singer walked onto the field to sing the Star-Spangled Banner. The whole audience stood up as the music began to play, filling the US citizens with pride and patriotism.

The stadium broke into cheers once the song had ended. The sound was loud, giving them a precursor to what they should expect from such a large crowd.

'Still not as big as Koshien though...' Ken thought.

While Rodgers stadium was the biggest in the world, Japan's Koshien stadium wasn't too far behind. There was also the fact that when he played at Koshien, all of the 47,000 seats were filled.

Yet for this afternoon's game, there was around 30,000.

When the Japanese Anthem, "Kimi Ga Yo" began to play, the Japanese players linked together, placing their arms around each others shoulders.

Like the last time they played against the US, the players sang loudly with pride. This time was no different.

"May Japan's Reign, Last for ten thousand years, Until the pebbles, Grow into boulders, Lush with moss."

A respectful round of applause followed the passionate performance, though it lacked a little compared to the response that the US team received. This was understandable considering they were the home team.

Then came the next part.

Both Leo and Masayuki walked over to the umpire for the coin toss. Leo was still his cold and unapproachable self, yet instead of completing ignoring the Japanese captain like last time, he stared at him intently.

He had never been so humiliated before in a game, so he was out for blood. It was clear that he knew his responsibility in their loss the last time they played.

Masayuki grinned. It felt rather good to see the person who once looked down on you acting like this.

Ignoring the tension between the two, the umpired pointed at Leo and told him to call it.

"Heads."

With that, he tossed the coin in the air before it floated down towards the ground.

"Heads it is." The umpire stated.

"We'll field first." Leo said, not taking his eyes off the opposing Captain.

"The US have won the toss and elected to take the field first." The umpire said, after which the information was relayed via the stadium speakers.

A cheer rang out as everybody began to get pumped up for the game ahead.

The Japanese team assembled in the dugout, waiting for the pep talk from Coach Takashi. Such things had become a ritual before the game.

Seeing the team waiting for him expectantly, the Head Coach smiled.

"I have nothing else to say to you all that we haven't covered already. We're at the precipice of victory, all we need to do is play like a team. Trust yourselves, trust your teammates... But most of all, have fun."

The words were so unexpected that everyone looked at each other afterwards in confusion.

It was only when Chris stepped forward and raised his hand in the air that people snapped out of it.

"Alright guys, this is our last game in America. Victory on 3!"

1

2

3

"VICTORY!"

After the chant, Riku and Masayuki made their way up onto the field. The first thing they noticed was Ryan standing on the mound and beginning his warm up throws.

"Haha, I'm getting fired up~" Riku commented.

Masayuki ignored him. It was hard to take Riku seriously while he danced his way on the field. He remembered the time when they first started playing together for the National Team, he hadn't changed much since then.

Ken's eyes narrowed after seeing that Ryan was going to be pitching. He was a little surprised that his Grandfather chose for him to start considering how bad he performed in their last outing.

But at the same time, Ryan was their best pitcher so far. As long as he cleaned up his little tell, they would struggle to land any hits at all today.

"Looks like it's going to be a pitchers duel today." Ken said. Search the * website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

"Are you getting nervous?" Daichi asked with a grin.

"Pfft. There's no way I'll lose to this guy."

"That's not what I meant... This is your first time as a starting pitcher in the World Cup. Are you telling me that you've got no nerves at all?"

Ken turned around to his brother and looked him dead in the eye.

"Do I look nervous to you?"

Daichi's eyes widened. It was only for a fleeting moment, but he felt an immense aura from his brother that threatened to overwhelm him.

In that moment he saw the potential air of a professional player, one that stood at the pinnacle of baseball.

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

Chapter 443 - 443: Play Ball! (1)

"Play Ball!"

The umpire made the call after receiving confirmation from Ryan that he was ready to start. At these words the crowd went into a frenzy, cheering out loudly for their home team.

Their national pride was on the line as they faced the seemingly unstoppable Japanese team who had blitzed their way through the group stages and super round.

"Batting 1st, Left outfield, Riku."

Riku seemed unaffected by the incessant cheering from the home crowd as he stepped into the batters box. The only thing on his mind was getting in base.

Leo stared him down for a few moments before giving the sign.

While the atmosphere in the crowd was filled with expectation, the field felt tense to all the other players. The grudge match for the US team would begin now.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

A rocket-like fastball flew into the strike zone like a barrage from an artillery. Riku could have sworn he heard the cry of an eagle as the first pitch left Ryan's arm.

Uncle Sam seemed to be smiling down on the US team, giving them his blessing.

Riku's eyes widened, his gaze moving to the giant screen at the back of the stadium.

'99mph'

He paused for a moment before his arms began to shake slightly.

"Hehe, I'm starting to get excited." He mumbled.

Riku gripped his bat even tighter, determined to hit the next one.

Ryan's face was unreadable as he stood atop the mound like an General, looking down at his battlefield.

Ken felt his heart race in response as he saw the Ryan's face upon the big screen. He could remember this face clearly in his memories as the prodigious pitcher took the Major League by storm.

It was at this moment that he knew, things were going to be a lot harder than he thought.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

Riku seemingly stood no chance against the assault. Not only were the balls fast, they were elusive.

There was no longer any pattern to the leads, nor was anything telegraphed. Despite facing the battery in the last game, it was as if he was against two completely different players now.

Finally, the third ball was a wicked cutter which broke away from him. Even if his arms grew another 10cm longer, the bat still wouldn't have made contact.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Riku let out a small sigh before stepping out of the batters box. He'd struck out plenty of times before in his career, yet he would always take something away from the exchange.

Yet this time he was left confused. He was sure that they were the same type of pitches, but the courses felt as if they were unpredictable.

'Just what has changed?' He thought to himself.

Seeing the silent Riku, Masayuki didn't say a word. He knew the guy too well to worry about him. They wordlessly exchanged knuckles on the way past before it was the Captain's turn to face the assault of the US team.

Unfortunately for him, he faced a similar barrage, his bat nowhere close to the ball in all 3 pitches.

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Upon returning to the dugout, Ken waved both him and Riku over.

"What's his pitching like so far?"

Riku felt a little embarrassed, but he answered. "It's hard to explain. He's definitely pitching the same balls as last game, but the course seems slightly off."

Masayuki nodded in response, he felt the same.

"Yeah, it's almost like they're more unpredictable."

Ken was silent for a while, closing his eyes for a brief moment. On the outside it looked like he was thinking deeply, however he was using his memory recall.

He'd watched plenty of Major League games even after getting injured, usually while playing a mobile game on his phone. This was how he passed the time if he wasn't drinking after work.

He scoured his memories, drowning out all the other noises around him.

In the next moment, his eyes suddenly opened, yet his face turned grave.

'Damn it... Has my interference sped up his progress?' Ken thought.

In his previous life, it wasn't until halfway through his rookie season that Ryan had a crazy growth in effectiveness. He was almost written off as a failed prospect after a slew of bad games.

His memories told him that the guy had taken a few weeks off before returning with an unpredictable fastball. It was similar to the lively fastball skill that Ken had, yet a little different.

Ryan could manipulate the course of his fastball and breaking balls by slightly altering his grip on the ball. While it was only minute changes that he made, it could completely alter the course of the ball, stumping batters.

His dynamic use of this technique was what propelled him back into the spotlight, nabbing him the rookie of the year honors despite his poor start to the season.

While those pitches didn't seem like they were up to the standard of his Major League potential, the guy was only 17 years old right now.

At some point, Ken had completely ignored his impact on future events. Too much had changed from his previous life to be able to predict what would happen in the future.

It seemed that the utter humiliation Ryan had received in their last game worked as a catalyst to speed up his progress.

Ken massaged his temples briefly, trying to digest the conclusion he'd come to.

'I've created a monster...' he thought inwardly.

"Ken, what is it?" Masayuki's expression stiffened upon seeing Ken's reaction. He trusted his opinion tremendously, despite only being a freshman.

"This game is going to be tough, but we might have a chance. Keep an eye on his pitching throughout the game, make him pitch as many times as you can." Ken said, his mind racing.

"Alright, we'll do our best." Riku replied.

"Should we tell the coach?" Masayuki asked, showing a little concern.

Ken nodded. While he had the Academic trait to rely on, it couldn't make up for the 3 decades of pro baseball experience the coach had.

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

Chapter 444 - 444: Play Ball! (2)

As he made his way over to the Head Coach, Hiroki was fighting for his life in the batters box. The first ball he faced was a scorching 95mph two-seam fastball that broke at the last moment.

It was merely a few millimeters from grazing his glove, causing him to let out a sigh of relief. Being hit by a fastball on the fingers would have sucked big time.

'What the hell happened to this guy?' Hiroki thought, gripping his bat tightly.

Even without the telegraphing of his fastball, Hiroki believed that he'd be able to hit the ball. Yet something seemed to have completely shifted, turning Ryan into an entirely different pitcher.

His eyes widened as the next ball approached.

'A fastball!'

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

Despite getting his timing perfect, Hiroki's bat sailed over the ball which seemed to have dipped at the last moment.

"Strike!"

Hiroki began to get a little frustrated. It almost felt as if the ball was magnetized against his bat. No matter where he swung, the ball would go the opposite direction.

Suddenly, it was 0-2 and nothing was looking good for him.

'I've got to do something...' He thought.

Ryan seemed unfazed atop the mound, still wearing his cold expression. Yet inwardly he was rejoicing.

'It's working! I can't believe it.'

He received the ball back from Leo and took it into his glove. After a quick glance at the ball, he adjusted his grip slightly and stared back at the Japanese batter.

'I just need to throw a shutout this game and wipe that performance from my memory.'

Ryan glanced at the sign from his catcher and nodded, lifting his left knee close to his chest. He stepped forward and sent his arm flying like a whip.

'Crap!'

The ball's velocity was high, yet its spin was lacking.

Leo's eyes widened in shock as he saw the sluggish fastball creep towards the outside of the strike zone. While it wasn't a meatball, it certainly wasn't sharp like the others he'd pitched so far.

Hiroki planted his foot and twisted his body, aiming for the spot just under the ball.

'It's going to break like last time...' He thought.

WHOOOOSH

DING

The ball skyrocketed into the air above home plate, spinning like crazy. Hiroki was frozen in place after realizing that the ball had not moved like before and was merely a straight fastball.

'Damn it!'

He had missed such a perfect opportunity to get a big hit, all because he predicted incorrectly.

Leo flung his face mask off and quickly got underneath the ball. Aside from the spin, the ball went straight up into the air with what should be an easy catch.

With no surprises, Leo safely collected the ball into his glove, quickly showing the umpire.

"Out! 3 outs, changeover!"

A look of disappointment crept onto Hiroki's face as he made his way off the field.

He was too distracted to notice the look of relief on both Leo and Ryan's face. Both of them instinctively knew that it was an easy pitch.

However, 2 sets of sharp eyes saw everything.

"If what you say is true, then I think we just found a path back in the game." Coach Takashi said as he stroked his goatee.

A smile crept onto Ken's features as he seemed to realize it too.

"There's a reason why there is certain grips for each type of pitch... Without experience, meatballs like those are bound to appear in time." The coach continued.

Ken nodded. While it seemed that Ryan had evolved earlier than he did because of Ken, it may have been too premature.

As the coach had eluded to before, Ryan lacked the adequate baseball experience in order to properly make use of such a technique.

'If he pitched 9 times with only 1 meatball, then we might only have 1 chance per inning to actually get a hit...' Ken thought inwardly.

Of course their odds would increase if they could foul off some balls and waste pitches.

While Ken was deep in thought, Coach Takashi placed his hand on his shoulder, snapping him out of his reverie.

"For now, place your focus on the mound. We'll have no chance if you can't keep the heavy hitters at bay." He said with a grin.

Ken could feel the trust from the Head Coach and suddenly felt warm inside. There was a part of him that felt a little guilty for being discontent with his position as a closing pitcher, but he quickly threw that to the back of his mind.

He grabbed his glove, shooting his father a brief smile before heading onto the field.

For the first time in a long time, he felt butterflies in his stomach as he made his way up to the mound. Despite the crowd having less people in attendance than Koshien, it felt like the stakes were higher.

Of course they were, this was the finals of the U18 World Cup.

Ken slowed down his approach to the mound, taking in the atmosphere.

"YAY! GO KEN!! GO DAICHI!!!"

He felt a smile pull at the corner of his lips as he heard his mother's voice echo out. Despite being in such a large stadium, she was still audible.

"It looks like they've brought out Ken Takagi as a starting pitcher for this game. Apparently the Japanese U18 coach is taking your advice Mr. Tanaka."

"Mmm, it seemed like the most logical choice to make after his past performances in the World Cup." Yu Tanaka responded simply.

"Ah! There he is!" Rie shouted, pointing at the TV.

"What!? W-Wait for me." Ai shouted from the bathroom, her FOMO on full display.

She quickly burst into the lounge, fixing up her shorts along the way.

Ai stood in front of the TV, looking at the close up of Ken now standing atop the mound. His face had a carefree smile on it, making her smile subconsciously.

Her heart was filled with pride as she watched him intently.

'I miss you Ken...'

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

Chapter 445 - 445: Ken on the Mound (1)

"So you've finally decided to bring him out." Mark Williams muttered after seeing Ken ascend the mound.

As a Grandfather, he was thrilled to see his Grandson on the mound. Yet as the U18 US coach, he felt a little trepidation.

His eyes narrowed onto Coach Takashi, the World Renowned National Team coach for many years. He had a feeling that the guy had been saving Ken for this very moment, wanting to stifle their batting line up.

While placing Ken who was still a freshman as a closer, he was able to attune and prepare him for the big stage. This gave him valuable experience, pitching against the best batters in the world.

Though it might have been frustrating for Ken, this truly was the best path for his future development.

As his thoughts moved to this, he couldn't help but turn his attention to Ryan who was calmly sitting on the bench. Unfortunately for Ryan, the spotlight had been on him since a young age.

He was forced to be at the forefront from the very beginning. Any slump in performance was heavily criticized, while his achievements would be lauded throughout the media as if he was the next prodigy.

'I can't imagine what such pressure does to a person.' Mark thought, his gaze softening.

In truth, Ryan had faced a ton of backlash for his struggles against the Japanese team in his last match. While Mark had tried to shield the teen, there was only so much that he could do.

He had Ryan sit out of the remaining games and was considering benching him for the finals. However, he could not deny the kid after seeing his vast improvements in only a few days time.

On the other side of the field, Chris watched on as Ken began to warm up his arm on the mound. His heart surged with pride as any good father would.

"Thank you for trusting me." Coach Takashi said, placing his hand on Chris's shoulder.

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Chris turned around, not entirely sure where these words were coming from.

The Head Coach let out a little chuckle before responding, "When I suggested Ken as a closing pitcher, I could see you hesitated. While you agreed with me verbally, your eyes suggested otherwise."

"Eh?"

Chris suddenly felt a little embarrassed. He inwardly cursed his stupid face that portrayed his emotions too easily.

"Hahaha!"

This only caused Coach Takashi to let out a peel of laughter in response.

"This is why I like you Chris, you're easy to read."

Back on the mound, Ken threw his final warm-up ball and sent a nod to the plate umpire. A small grin graced his lips.

'I feel sharp today.' He said inwardly.

He thought back to the conversation he had with the Head Coach after the meeting.

"Alright, now that we're at the finals... All bets are off." Coach Takashi said, his face dead serious.

"Really? You mean I can throw my other pitches?"

"Pitches? As in plural?" he said with a shocked expression.

Just thinking about the coach's reaction filled him with amusement.

"Batting 1st, Center outfield, Santiago."

Before he could continue to think about the past, his first challenge appeared in the batters box. Santiago Williams who was now technically his Uncle...

The guy sent him a wave, causing Ken to let out a muffled laugh. Even with all of this pressure, the guy still wanted to be friendly with him.

Yet the moment he got into position, Santiago's whole disposition changed. His tightly gripped bat was poised to strike the first ball that entered his range.

'That's more like it...' Ken said inwardly, beginning to feel fired up.

Daichi crouched down and made the sign, his expression serious. Whenever Santiago was in the batters box, he felt an oppressive aura that made it hard to breathe.

Ken nodded before lifting his left leg and clutching the glove to his chest. He planted his foot and sent his arm out like a whip, raking down hard with his fingertips and sending the ball blitzing towards Daichi's glove.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

'Ah.'

Santiago felt a shiver run through his body after facing the pitch. His bat was far too slow to catch the bullet-like projectile that streamed past him.

This was the first pitch he'd experienced from his new family member, and it didn't disappoint.

"Wow! Nice pitch!" Santiago said, sending a thumbs up to Ken.

The umpire watched on with confusion, not knowing whether the guy was being nice, or if he was being inflammatory. Yet judging by the batters expression, it seemed likely that it was the former.

'What a weirdo.' He thought.

"Ahem... Take your position Santiago."

"Yes sir!"

Ken received the ball back from Daichi and took his position once more.

"They're a lot faster in person." Leo said, his eyes narrowing.

"Are you feeling nervous?"

Leo turned to see the bulky Sam next to him, yet he scoffed in response.

"Me? Nervous? I'm as cool as a cucumber."

No one rebutted him, showing just how much they respected their Captain. Some believed that Leo would be calm even if the apocalypse suddenly happened out of nowhere.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

The second ball was just as fast as the last one, yet the result was the same. Unlike Ryan's grip changes, Ken used the traditional grip for his fastballs, yet the increased spin enabled them to move around a lot more.

The result was similar, yet Ken's technique was far more reliable.

'I think it's time to change it up.' Ken thought after receiving the ball.

He was about to make a sign to Daichi, however his face turned up in a grin in the next moment.

"Looks like we're on the same page." He muttered.

Ken wound up and sent the next ball out.

'This is it!'

The ball lacked the same spin as the last one, prompting Santiago to plant his foot and swing for the fences.

WHOOOOSH

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

Chapter 446 - 446: Ken on the Mound (2)

Pah

"Strikeout!"

"Huh? Curveball?"

Santiago blinked a few times, his expression confused. Of course he knew that Ken had this pitch, but during the film sessions, he'd only thrown it a small handful of times in the World Cup.

Even in Koshien he'd only thrown the pitch once.

He slowly walked back to the dugout and looked at his father quizzically.

"I thought you said that Ken wasn't comfortable with the curveball?"

This time it was Mark's turn to be confused.

"Err, I thought because he had only pitched it a few times he was still not used to throwing it..."

In truth, Ken hadn't needed to throw the curveball often since his fastball was so effective. His forkball had also faded into the background since it often left his elbow feeling sore by the end of the day.

Unfortunately for the US team, his whims had made them misunderstand his pitching abilities. Yet now that they'd seen it, they would be more wary.

"Batting 2nd, Short stop, Ayden."

The youth stepped up to the batters box with a confident expression on his face. His bright blue eyes stared directly at Ken on the mound, as if issuing a challenge.

'Hmm? This guy is a little cocky...' Ken thought, a grin creeping onto his lips.

Daichi felt the same way, his next sign was a brutal one.

Ken almost laughed out loud, but quickly regained his composure. He entered his wind up and fired out a fastball towards his open glove.

The ball's course was inside, approaching the 100mph range.

PAH

"Strike!"

Ayden stepped back from the batters box, his eyes wide with fright. Now that he'd experienced the fastball up close, he had a monumental change of heart.

Seeing his reaction, Daichi felt a wave of amusement. There was nothing better than killing the confidence of a cocky batter, Ken's fastball was perfect for this.

He threw the ball back to Ken on the mound and made the next sign. He called for a fastball towards the top of the strike zone. Since he didn't feel a threat from the batter, there was no point in throwing a breaking ball or wasting any pitches.

Ken nodded, performing his wind up.

As the ball came flying out, Ayden grit his teeth and held the bat straight out with two hands, his eyes focused on the ball.

"Bunt!?"

Ken reacted quickly, moving forward off the mound after his follow through.

DING

"Ah"

The ball hit the metal bat, yet instead of going towards the field, it propelled upwards around 10 feet in the air with spin.

Daichi quickly flung his catchers mask off and got into position with his glove above his head.

Pah

"Out!"

Ayden stared in shock at the proceedings. This was the first time he'd had the ball pop up so much after trying to bunt. It went to show just how fast and powerful Ken's fastball was.

Feeling deflated, the teen made his way back to the dugout. Originally he had been full of confidence to at least hit the ball, yet he quickly found out the hard way that it was not the case.

Before he could rejoice, Ken saw the bulky guy who was heading over to the batters box. He looked like a lumberjack pretending to be a High School student.

"Batting 3rd, 3rd base, Sam."

Once he stepped into the batters box, Daichi felt as if the guy took up all of the available space, making him feel restricted. He'd faced this guy before with Satoshi and already knew which pitches he didn't like.

However, Ken had already instructed him to disregard everything they knew from the last game. Though he wasn't exactly convinced, he decided to listen to his brother.

"Let's see how fast these pitches really are." Sam grunted. His long and wide arms made him look like a gorilla holding a bat, painting quite a peculiar sight.

Though one thing was evident, he had power.

'Here is when it gets tough.' Ken thought, eyeing the imposing figure.

If Santiago was like a swift and agile Jaguar, then Sam was like a brutal Ape who was full of immense strength. Even if he caught an edge of the ball with his bat, it could probably easily head into the outfield.

However, all strengths had a weakness. It just so happened that Ken had something that trumped power.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

And that was speed.

"101mph!? Damn that kid is fast!"

"Heh, I've been watching Japan's games for the past 10 days, he can go even faster." A fan said, his chest puffed out.

There was another kid in the crowd who looked about 13 years old. His bright blond hair was waving in the wind as he watched on with stars in his eyes.

"So cool..." He muttered.

"Michael, how many runs do you think we will win by?" One of his friends asked, causing him to get snapped out of his reverie.

"I... Ugh. Are you sure that the US will win though?" He asked, testing the waters.

"What!? You think Japan can win? Our Ryan will easily destroy those guys. Who cares about some stupid Japanese pitcher anyway."

"H-Hey... You take that back!" Michael said, his eyes burning.

Taken aback, young boy hesitated. "Uhh, sorry. Why are you getting so worked up?"

Michael seemed to realize that he had lashed out, but it was true that he was annoyed that his friend was badmouthing Ken.

"Sorry..." He said, keeping his reasons to himself. He didn't think that his friend would understand if he stated his true intentions.

He wanted to be a pitcher, just like Ken.

Ever since he retrieved the ball from the stands in the game against Cuba, a fire had been lit inside of him. It was fanned even further after receiving an autograph from the man himself.

Just knowing that he was the first person to ask for Ken's autograph made him feel special. Now that they were at the finals against his home team, Michael still felt like cheering for Ken.

'You can do it Ken!' Yet he only cheered in his heart, afraid that his friends might look at him differently.

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

Chapter 447 - 447: Fastballs, fastballs everywhere (1)

Sam sucked in a cold breath of air after experiencing the fastball firsthand. It wasn't just the intense speed, the ball felt alive as it flew through the air like a dragon riding upon the clouds.

Yet instead of being intimidated, a dumb grin appeared on his face.

"I wanna hit it..." He muttered.

There was nothing that got Sam more excited than smashing a tough ball into the stands. The harder the ball was to hit, the more he obsessed about wanting to hit it.

His imposing figure seemed to grow larger as he glared with excitement towards Ken on the mound. Sam's blue eyes seemingly shined, reflecting the afternoon sun brightly from the batters box.

Both Daichi and Ken felt a shift in the atmosphere, giving them a sense of foreboding.

If Sam wasn't intimidating before, he sure was now.

Daichi glanced at the large figure and debated which pitch to request. The US batters were still on their first at-bat, which meant the more pitches they could conceal, the better it would be in the long run.

However, there was a part of Daichi that was worried about getting hit.

Just as he was about to give his sign, he saw a wide grin on Ken's face. He wore an expression that said he wouldn't cower, even when faced with the devil himself.

'Heh, why am I stressing over nothing?' Daichi asked himself.

'Let's kick his ass with fastballs.'

Ken nodded, liking his brothers enthusiasm. They couldn't afford to be scared now, not when it was only the first inning.

He let the pitch go, aiming for an inside course.

Sam's eyes widened, yet his face still wore a dumb grin.

'I want to hit it!'

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

"Hehehehe."

Both the umpire and Daichi exchanged odd glances as they heard the large figure begin to laugh. It was an odd laugh, one that you wouldn't expect from a guy the size of Sam.

"Throw it again... Please."

Sam turned to Daichi, asking for another fastball. However, since Daichi knew very little English, there was no way that he could understand him.

"Err, Hallo." He replied.

The two looked at each other blankly for a few moments, both of their faces showing confusion.

Daichi let out his pent up breath after the hulking teen shook his head and turned back around to face the mound.

'Damn, I really need to learn English...' He thought inwardly.

Ken received the ball, not knowing about the awkward dialog exchanged between the two. The count was currently 0-2 with 2 outs, 1 more strike would end the first inning.

"Throw me another fastball!" Sam yelled out.

Since the catcher could not understand him, he hoped that the pitcher would.

Ken blinked a few times in disbelief.

'Is he trying to play mind games? Or does he really want another fastball?'

"Hey, enough of that. Get back into position." The umpire called out, getting Sam's attention.

There were plenty of eyes on this game, the umpire didn't want the game to devolve into chaos, especially since this was an under 18 tournament.

"Haha, sorry sorry." Sam replied, sending a smile to the umpire.

He had gotten a little carried away with his antics. Unfortunately he had trouble controlling himself when it came to exciting pitches.

Funnily enough, Sam was completely different when he was off the baseball field. Many of his friends and family knew him as a big teddy bear who was a bit of a goofball.

Ken shook his head in amusement, taking his position back on the mound.

'If you want a fastball then I'll give you a fastball...'

In the next moment he entered his wind up, the ball flying from his fingertips shortly after, spinning wildly.

Daichi narrowed his eyes and tried to follow the course of the ball with his glove. The lively fastballs were the most difficult for him to catch, especially because of how much movement they had.

'YES!'

Sam's body jolted with excitement as he saw the ball approach. He could feel the breakneck speed of the pitch coming towards him, filling him with more and more anticipation.

He longed to feel what hitting Ken's pitch would be like.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't get the chance to experience it, at least not in this inning.

Stuck in his follow through, Sam let out a small grunt of displeasure. Yet it quickly turned back into excitement as he remembered he'd get another chance soon.

"3 outs, changeover!"

"Yay! Go Ken!" Yuki cheered loudly, waving her Japanese flag that she'd brought over from home.

She had a great seat near first base, yet it wouldn't have mattered if she was in the second row, Ken still would have heard her.

With a smiling expression, Ken waved to her. He couldn't ask for more in this World Cup final. Not only was he the starting pitcher, his parents were also both in attendance.

A part of him felt like this was his peak, like he would be content if everything ended after this match.

'Wait what am I thinking?'

Ken quickly caught himself. Why was he thinking such things right now? Especially since he still had his whole career ahead of himself.

Perhaps if he was his old self, he might be content with such an ending. Yet he had his second chance, along with the to help him.

As his thoughts moved to his system, Ken suddenly felt a thread of guilt begin to weave around his heart. It was only for a moment, but he began to doubt all of his achievements so far.

Pitching a perfect game at Koshien, taking home the winners trophy as well. Getting onto the Japanese National team, and even pitching right now...

Was he in this place right now because of the system? The obvious answer was yes.

As his thoughts began to spiral, he felt an arm wrap around his shoulder, snapping him out of his reverie.

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

Chapter 448 - 448: Fastballs, fastballs everywhere (2)

"Nice pitching bro. Let's keep up the momentum." Daichi said, flashing him a smile.

Ken saw his brother smiling at him and instantly felt better. If there was one thing he knew that he did right without the system, it was saving Daichi from his abusive mother and bringing him into his family.

"Say that after you make it onto base." Ken replied haughtily.

"Ah, that reminds me..." He continued.

He didn't have a chance to relay the information that he'd found out about Ryan to Daichi just yet. There was no doubt that the Coach was going to tell the rest of the team, but Daichi was up to bat first so he might not have the time.

By the time they arrived to the dugout, Ken had already explained the general situation to his brother.

"He changes his grips?" Daichi was shocked.

He'd never heard of such a thing before, granted he was still fairly new to baseball.

While he was still processing this information, Ken grabbed a helmet and stuck it on Daichi's head, only to hear a murmur of thanks.

Daichi grabbed a bat and headed up onto the field, yet his mind was racing. He had enough trouble picking the course of Ken's fastballs since they spun so much.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Daichi."

As he stepped into the batters box, Daichi glanced at Leo briefly. He felt his level of respect for the US Captain increase tremendously.

To be able to completely rely on his instinct and reflexes to catch Ryan's pitches, it was very impressive.

Leo didn't even look at him, too focused on the task at hand. With Ryan's new pitching style, it demanded a lot from him, yet it was something that only he could handle. At least from those his age.

He crouched down into position and gave the sign for a low fastball.

Ryan nodded, his expression calm. He lifted his leg before stepping forward and whipping out his arm, sending the ball flying from his fingertips.

Both Daichi and Leo's eyes widened as the ball flew towards them. It quickly lost height and bounced on the ground a few feet in front of home plate, kicking dust up in its wake.

With lightning fast reflexes, Leo managed to get a hold of the ball after the second bounce, catching it in front of his knee.

"Ball."

Ryan let out a sigh of relief as Leo cleaned up the wild pitch.

"S-Sorry, it slipped." Ryan shouted aloud.

Of course that wasn't the case, but he didn't want Japan figuring out his technique so soon. He visualized the grip the he just used and made a mental note not to use it again.

He had only been exploring this technique for a few days, so there was still quite a bit left to iron out. Ryan retrieved the ball from Leo and sent him an apologetic glance, if it was anyone else behind the plate, it could have ended in disaster.

To make things believable, he grabbed the rosin bag and began to shuffle it around in his right hand, causing powder to cling to his fingers.

After a few moments he got back into position, awaiting the signal from Leo.

He nodded once more, sending another pitch a little higher this time.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

Daichi frowned. If he were to explain the fastball in a few words it would be fast and erratic. The odd spin on the ball caused it to move around weirdly in the air, giving the illusion that it could break at any moment.

Suddenly Ken's words seemed to hit the nail on the head. It would be far too difficult to predict the course of these balls, which meant they had to aim for something else.

The so-called meatballs would only appear somewhere once every 10 pitches or so. If he assumed that the first pitch he threw into the dirt was one, it meant that he'd need to wait another 8 or so pitches for the next one.

"Tch."

Daichi clicked his tongue. It would be tough to make contact with the ball, let alone foul it off consecutively.

'Is this really the only option we have?'

While his mind was working, Ryan had already begun his wind up.

PAH

"Strike."

Daichi's expression once again fell. He had tried to watch the ball this time instead of swinging, yet he did not find any answers that he was looking for.

'Is it just going to be up to luck?' He thought.

Yet on the subject of luck, he considered himself to be pretty lucky, at least lately. First he was adopted into Ken's family, then he received a scholarship to one of the best baseball schools in the country.

If he added his success with Miho into the equation, then he could consider himself one of the luckiest people in Japan, or even the world.

He nodded, taking a deep breath in through his nose and out his mouth.

"I am a lucky boy." He muttered.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!" Search the * website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

"Ah..."

Daichi's shoulders lowered as he swung at nothing but air, receiving his 3rd consecutive strike. He moved out of the batters box and let out a sigh on his way back to the dugout.

"Maybe I used up all of my Luck..." He mumbled.

Ken who had just walked into hearing range suddenly paused and tilted his head in question.

"Huh?"

'What is he even talking about?'

Daichi just waved dismissively, giving him an unenthusiastic "good luck" from under his breath.

Ken shook his head slightly in amusement before turning his attention back to the field.

"Batting 5th, Pitcher, Ken."

The moment his name was announced, he felt two pairs of fierce gazes aimed at him. This was the Fire and Ice attack that he was met with in their last game against the US team.

"Well if it isn't the Ice cold beauty and the Fiery Phoenix, sorry to keep you waiting."

Ken's face morphed into a haughty grin as he spoke out in Japanese.

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

Chapter 449 - 449: Dangerous Batters (1)

Upon seeing Ken walk into the batters box, Ryan's once serious expression faltered a little. Seeing the smile on Ken's face only reminded him of his humiliation just a few days ago on this very field.

He couldn't help but grit his teeth, feeling his anger mount.

It was only after seeing Leo stand up and look at him deeply that he managed to compose himself. There was no point in getting worked up in this situation since it would only serve to distract him.

'Just stick to the game plan.' He told himself inwardly.

They'd already dissected their previous game film over and over in order to make sure they didn't make the same mistakes. Yet the fact that Japan was able to pinpoint and take advantage of such small nuances was concerning.

Ryan nodded his head, accepting the sign from his catcher.

He wound up before sending the ball flying towards the strike zone.

PAH

"Strike."

Ken didn't move an inch as his eyes were glued to the ball from the moment it left the pitchers fingertips. Though his face didn't change, he frowned inwardly.

He might have looked confident coming into the batters box, yet experiencing the moving fastball firsthand had caused him to reevaluate.

The idea was to foul off as many pitches as possible, waiting for the meatball so he could crush it into the stands. A single run would make all the difference in this pitchers duel.

He tightened his grip on the bat and faced Ryan once more. If he wanted a chance to hit the ball, he would need to use his mental capacity to try and calculate the trajectory.

The only problem with this, was that it caused great mental fatigue. Considering he was planning on pitching the entire game, he needed to use it sparingly.

Of course he had his Academic Trait to back him up, but he wasn't sure of the effects of using it so frequently.

'Let's just see what happens.' Ken thought.

In the next moment, the ball flew out of Ryan's fingertips towards the outside of the strike zone. Ken didn't hesitate to swing as he threw all of his power into it.

WHOOOOSH

DONG

Like a rocket, the ball ricocheted off the bat and flew straight past first base. Unfortunately, it was outside the field of play.

"Foul"

"Tch, lucky hit." Ryan muttered.

Though saying this, he would be lying if he said that the situation hadn't made him nervous for a brief moment.

'Okay good, I can hit them.'

Ken felt his confidence boosted after making contact with the last ball. Although it wasn't the most solid of hits, he would be fine with just doing so until the meatball came knocking at the door.

Daichi who had already returned to the dugout alongside Miho, felt his ears perk up at the sound of the bat hitting the ball. His respect grew for his brother who had been able to achieve what he was trying to do almost right away.

'How does he do it?'

Daichi shook his head. There was no use trying to understand Ken with logical terms. Many people would just chalk it up to the guy being a genius, though those people didn't know the amount of work he put in to get where he was.

Meanwhile, Leo had already crouched down and sent out the next sign towards Ryan. There was a brief pause before Ryan nodded and got into position.

Ken's eyes narrowed as he awaited the pitch. His game plan was the same, foul until the right ball came along.

The pitch came out and Ken's eyes never left the pitch. Once again he poured his strength into the swing, intending to hit it into the foul zone.

'Crap!'

It was a slider, but the ball was lacking any of the erratic movement he was expecting.

WHOOOOOSH

Ken's bat flew over the ball, missing it by a hairs breadth and striking nothing but air.

PAH

The sound of the ball landing in the glove taunted him as he completed his follow through.

"Yeah!!!"

The crowd erupted after seeing the Ace strikeout 2 consecutive batters.

As Ken lowered his bat, his glance moved to Ryan on the mound who wore a haughty expression on his face.

Ken could only chuckle wryly before turning around and heading back to the dugout. It was only the 2nd innings, he had plenty of time to wipe the smirk off the cocky American's face.

As he made his way back to the dugout, Ken's mind was racing. With the last slider, Ryan had reverted back to the orthodox grip. Either it was because he wasn't confident in throwing it accurately otherwise, or he was incorporating both grips into his repertoire.

If it was the former, then they might be able to capitalize on the slider as well, increasing their odds of getting a hit.

But if it was the latter, then they would be screwed. The original estimation of a meatball every 9 pitches would decrease, creating even less of an opportunity for them to hit the ball.

He passed by Ichiro and gave him a fist bump, wishing him good luck, receiving a nod in response.

As he entered the dugout, he approached his father and the Head Coach. This game he couldn't just rely on his own mind, he needed to make use of the incredible experience and game knowledge of the two coach's.

Ken quickly relayed what he had learned to the two, waiting to hear their feedback.

Both coach's frowned and seemed to be in deep thought for a while. At least for Chris, this was something that he hadn't encountered before and was considered out of the norm.

While scouting for a professional Japanese team, techniques like Ryan's were generally frowned upon.

"I think it's a little early to jump to conclusions." Coach Takashi said, his deep voice sounding out.

"There's still plenty of time left in the game, look for your opportunity."

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

Chapter 450 - 450: Dangerous Batters (2)

Ken nodded, he was thinking along the same lines.

"Strikeout!"

"3 outs, changeover!"

During their conversation, Ichiro had been quickly struck out in 3 balls. He retreated back to the dugout, removing his helmet and revealing his glorious hair.

His face looked like he was constipated, though he was in fact just frustrated. He had finally thought he'd be able to get a hit after Ken was struck out, yet he couldn't even make contact with the ball.

Unaware of the unspoken rivalry directed at him, Ken retrieved his cap and glove and walked back onto the field to begin the bottom of the 2nd inning.

He waited for Daichi and leaned close.

"Get ready for some heat." Ken said with a grin.

"Hmm?"

He turned his attention to the other dugout and saw Leo practicing his swing. The sound of the bat cutting through the air was audible halfway across the field, indicating just how dangerous he was.

Daichi nodded. Leo was the only one who had managed to score against them in the previous match, even when Daichi called for all the pitches he was worst against.

This just went to show what kind of player Leo was. In some ways he was what Daichi aspired to be like, at least when it came to his play style.

However, playing beside people like Ken and Masayuki, Daichi felt as if he was lacking in the leadership department.

"Stay on your toes." Ken remarked before jogging over to the mound.

He had a good reason to say this, since the next balls would only get tougher to catch.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Leo."

As the statuesque Leo stepped into the batters box, Ken's lips turned up into a grin.

'Mika, please use showdown on Leo.'

[Understood.]

The euphoric feeling of his muscles filling with power overcame Ken. No matter how many times he used the skill, it never got old.

Leo's eyes narrowed as he stared at Ken suspiciously.

'What the hell is happening?'

The moment he stepped into the batters box, Ken's aura changed. He began emanating a terrifying pressure, filling Leo with a sense of foreboding.

Not even when he'd played against college players had Leo experienced such a sensation. Who would have thought that such a monster would appear from all the way over in Japan.

As Ken lifted his left leg for his wind up, Leo felt an intense pressure.

PAH

"Strike!"

Leo blinked a few times after the ball had flown past him, struggling to understand what had just happened. His gaze moved to the screen, only to see the numbers flash boldly.

"102mph..."

For the first time in a long while, Leo felt pressured in the batters box. He turned back to Ken on the mound and nodded inwardly.

'Okay, I acknowledge you... But that doesn't mean I'll go down without a fight.' He said in his heart, adjusting his shoulders slightly before getting into position once more.

Daichi felt the atmosphere thicken as Leo lifted his bat. A dangerous yet icy cold aura emanated from his figure, threatening to overwhelm him.

Daichi gulped, feeling a sense of trepidation. This was the most intimidated he'd been behind the plate, yet he had no choice but to try and ignore the guy.

He squatted down and made a sign to Ken, his fingers quivering subconsciously.

Ken frowned for a moment before shaking his head.

'What kind of lead is that? Don't tell me he's intimidated?' Ken thought inwardly.

Usually his brother was extremely aggressive behind the plate, yet the ball he called for was quite passive. Why would he throw a curveball now? Wasn't that just giving Leo a free hit?

'Fastball or nothing bro...'

Daichi was taken aback a little at the refusal. It wasn't until he felt Ken's burning gaze on him that he had a realization.

'What am I doing?'

In truth, the moment Leo got serious, it had a large mental impact on Daichi. He started to believe that if Ken threw another fastball, it was inevitable that it was going to be hit.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Ken, it was just his primal instinct as a catcher to want to minimize the chances of being hit. Perhaps if it was Satoshi or Kei on the mound, calling for a breaking ball would make sense.

Yet it was Ken standing up there right now, his brother.

Daichi's expression changed, his face showing a fierce determination.

'There's no way Ken's fastball will lose here.'

He placed his glove right in the middle of the strike zone and called for a fastball.

'Give it all you've got bro!' He shouted in his heart.

Ken's eyes widened in surprise, yet he grinned widely in the next moment.

"That's the Daichi I know and love." He muttered.

In the next moment, Ken lifted his left leg and stepped forward. The moment his foot planted on the ground, dust flew up, seemingly shaking the ground beneath him.

The ball fired out from his fingertips, blazing forth towards Daichi's open glove.

'Down the middle?'

Leo's face turned up in annoyance as he saw the course. He felt like he was being underestimated.

"Hmph!"

WHOOOOOSH

DING

The bat made contact with the ball, slamming it into the ground and up high into the air from the rebound. It went straight towards Ken and seemed like it was about to sail over his head.

Leo dropped his bat and made a run for it, silently cursing in his heart. With the movement of the fastball, he wasn't able to make proper contact with it.

By the time the ball arrived above Ken's head, he'd already leaped into the air with his glove outstretched. Thanks to his long limbs, Ken was able to collect the ball out of the air

"First!"

Aki yelled from his position at short stop, yet Ken didn't need reminding.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, he sent a blistering throw into Hiroki's outstretched glove.

"Out!"

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

Chapter 451 - 451: 5th Inning (1)

"Nice fielding!"

Daichi's yell was the precursor to the cheers around the field after the most dangerous batter was dealt with. Seeing Leo drive one into the dirt seemed to boost morale heavily.

"Okay 1 out!"

Ken grinned, giving his brother a thumbs up. While it was only the first out of the inning, it held a lot more weight than all the others so far.

Leo slowed down his speed after running past 1st base, his expression full of annoyance.

'That bastard...'

Receiving a fastball right down the middle was disrespectful enough, yet he had not been able to hit it cleanly because of the ball's movements. This not only infuriated him, but also left him feeling rather humiliated.

He turned his gaze to Ken as he began his trudge back to the US dugout.

"Hmph."

On the way past, he heard a harrumph from the 1st baseman who was looking at him with a challenging gaze. Leo frowned in response, thinking to himself why this person was getting involved.

"Shut up you ant." He said in passing.

Hiroki's face fell in the next moment. Of course he didn't understand the words from the US Captain, but the guy was holding up his thumb and index finger around an inch apart.

"Are you calling me small?" Hiroki said, puffing out his chest towards the guy and tensing his body.

He was like a peacock, fully displaying his assets towards Leo in a threatening manner. Just as the 1st base umpire was about to step in, Leo let out a scoff and continued on his way.

"Yeah, keep walkin' buddy. I bet your calves are tiny underneath those pants."

Feeling his ego brought to the surface, Hiroki called out to the retreating figure who completely ignored him.

"Pfft..."

"HAHAHA"

Everyone on the Japanese team who heard Hiroki's words burst out into laughter. It was as unexpected as it was hilarious, filling the team with joy and amusement.

Hearing the laughter, Leo's eyebrow began to twitch furiously. While he couldn't understand Japanese, it didn't take a rocket scientist to guess that the guy was making fun of him.

While it took a lot of self control, he managed to compose himself and continue the walk back.

'We'll see who is laughing at the end of the game.' He said inwardly, clenching his fist.

Only after a few moments did the field finally calm down. Just as Ken was heading back to the mound to get into position, he heard uproarious laughter in the outfield from Riku who almost fell to the ground.

It looked like the words had been relayed to him by Masayuki.

"Dude get it together." Masayuki said, kicking him in the shin.

"Ow~"

Now that the field had returned to normal, Ken felt the effects of his showdown skill leave his body. There was nothing good about feeling your body lose strength, yet he managed to keep a calm demeanor.

He turned to the next batter and grinned. Now that the most dangerous batter was behind them, they should be able to blitz through the latter half of the line up.

Around 30 minutes later, a figure walked into the corporate box. He was a rather handsome man in his early 40's with not a single gray hair on his head. His face was clean shaven and looked rather young despite his age.

Yet it was clear by his expression that there were many places he would rather be than here.

"Ah, Tetsuhiro, you're here." The voice of a kindly sounding old man rang out as he saw the man walk in.

The man named Tetsuhiro nodded, his expression softening a little.

"It's good to see you again Martin." He said, shaking hands with the older gentleman.

"Yes yes, thank you for joining us. I'm sure your Grandfather would have wanted to be here as well to see the next generation of baseball in full swing."

At the mention of his Grandfather, Tetsuhiro's expression flashed with sadness for a brief moment before he could compose himself.

There was a few moments of silence before Martin realized he may have misspoken.

"Ahem, let me introduce you to everyone." He said, quickly trying to change the subject.

"This is the president of the WBSC, Richard Fresco."

Martin brought Tetsuhiro over to a man who looked in his late 50's early 60's. He was rather plump and wore glasses, though he seemed to be fawned over by many in attendance.

"Ah, it's nice to finally meet you Tetsuhiro. Thank you again for your hand in sponsoring this World Cup." Richard said, promptly ignoring everyone in the vicinity.

The two shook hands briefly, though it was clear who was the most interested party.

"You're a little late, the game has already entered the 5th inning." Richard said, pointing to the field beyond the large glass window.

"I see." Tetsuhiro said, barely seeming interested.

Yet he was still a courteous man, so he took a brief look at the field. Since they were so high up, he could see the whole thing. His gaze moved to the jumbo screen which was showing the face of a Japanese player in the batters box.

"Tatsu?"

A look of utter shock and disbelief appeared on his face in the next moment. He rubbed his eyes a few times, only finally noticing some differences in the facial features.

"Who is that boy?" He asked after finally composing himself.

"Hmm? The Japanese batter?" Richard asked. He turned to one of his staff members in order to get confirmation.

"That's Daichi Takagi, he's the catcher for Japan but also the clean-up batter." A female dressed in a suit responded at the president's request.

Tetsuhiro went silent for a while before nodding his head.

"If you'd excuse me for a moment." He said, before leaving the room.

He left the president feeling a little awkward as he looked to Martin for confirmation on what just happened.

Martin merely shrugged his shoulders in response.

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

Chapter 452 - 452: 5th Inning (2)

Back on the field, Daichi was in the batters box, his face serious.

He'd just faced two fastballs with a ridiculous course. Since this was his 2nd at-bat, he thought that he might have more of a chance to hit the ball after seeing more of the pitches, but he was wrong.

It wasn't just impressive that Ryan could throw the balls with an unorthodox grip, it was also crazy that he was able to keep them within the strike zone. Apart from the supposed meatballs which had appeared a few times since the beginning of the match, it was incredible.

He could finally understand why the guy was hailed as a prodigy.

Yet that wasn't the only impressive thing. Leo was able to contain the pitches, never having dropped a single one.

It was without a doubt that the duo were a battery to be reckoned with.

Yet saying all this, Daichi didn't think that he or Ken would lose out to them. At the current moment they were both freshman, while Ryan was a sophomore and Leo was a Senior.

Not to mention that Ryan and Leo were both from the same High School. They were given plenty of time to work together on the field, showing just how much chemistry they'd accumulated.

'We won't lose.' Daichi said inwardly.

At some point they would be given an opportunity. It might not be in this inning, but there would definitely be a time where they would have a chance.

Ryan took a deep breath on the mound, regaining his focus. It was currently the 5th inning and the 2nd at-bat for the Japanese batters.

For now, his grip changes were working against the Japanese batters. There were a few bad balls that he'd thrown today, but thankfully they were either misses, or nowhere near the strike zone.

Leo was doing a good job of cleaning them up, keeping the other team off the bases.

He looked down the lane at his catcher and nodded when he saw the next sign. He wound up and threw the ball out with force.

It was a slider, one of the pitches he was most confident in. Unfortunately, he couldn't utilize his new technique with it just yet since the ball would lose its sharp break otherwise.

Daichi's eyes lit up and he swung at the ball hard. His wide shoulders carried the load while his body twisted, propelling it forward with force.

WHOOOOSH S~earch the * website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

DING

He felt a shock wave through his body as the end of the bat made contact with the ball. It flew high into foul territory, prompting Daichi to roll his shoulders and prepare for the next ball.

'I missed out on a good opportunity.' He thought.

"Woah!"

The crowd cheered wildly, causing Daichi to raise his head in confusion.

'What happened?'

"Out!"

"EH!?"

Only then did Daichi see the 1st base fielder extricate himself from the rolled up tarp on the side of the field. His eyes widened after seeing the ball expertly tucked into his glove.

"Damn it. Just when I thought I was getting close." Daichi cursed in annoyance.

He was forced to leave the batters box, feeling shortchanged. Of course no one liked to get out from a foul ball, especially when even making contact with a ball was so difficult.

"Unlucky bro." Ken said, on his way past.

"I was so close..." He complained, heading back to the dugout.

He received a hand on the shoulder from his father as if to console him. Coach Takashi looked as if he was going to say something, but shut his mouth a moment later.

Since the whole mismatch situation with Daichi and Ken, the Head Coach had felt a little embarrassed in front of him.

"Ahem. Nice try Daichi, get him next time okay?" He said a few moments later after Daichi had already walked past.

"Yes sir!"

Hearing the comforting words of the Head Coach, Daichi felt a little better.

He moved over to Miho and looked out at the field before letting out a small sigh.

Miho giggled, sending him a nudge with her elbow. It wasn't often that Daichi was like this, honestly she thought it was kind of cute.

"Don't be so down, it's not like we're losing." She said, her tone sweet.

Daichi was a little taken aback, but he soon nodded.

"I guess I'm just a little frustrated with my performance so far." He said truthfully.

Miho was silent for a while as she watched Ken face the first pitch. It was a fastball in the high 90's, making a wicked sound as it entered the catchers glove.

"I don't think beating yourself up is going to help with your performance." She said simply, not taking her eyes off the field.

Daichi turned and looked at her side profile, taking in her beauty. Her words rang true, there was no point in dwelling on what had transpired so far, not unless he intended on learning from his mistakes.

Before he could respond, she turned her head and gazed into his eyes, grabbing his hands in her own.

"Just focus on what you can do, not what you have failed to do." She said with a sweet smile.

"Miho..."

While the two were having a touching moment in the dugout, Ken was busy trying to read the pitches in the batters box. It was already the 5th inning, which meant they were starting to run out of time.

Since he was the 5th batter, if no one got onto base this match he'd only have 1 more chance at batting after this.

'I can't keep this up.' He said inwardly.

It was time to pull out all the stops. Just a single run would be enough to give them the edge.

As Ryan sent the ball from his fingertips, Ken's mind went into overdrive. He released the seal on his huge mental capacity, flooding his brain with information.

He counted the spins on the ball and projected possible trajectories, all within a fraction of a second. The headache he experienced was almost instantaneous, yet he grit his teeth and pushed through.

WHOOOOOOSH

DOOONG!

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

Chapter 453 - 453: Time for a Change (1)

DOOOONG

Ken threw his bat to the ground and sprinted towards 1st base. He had to quickly seal his mental capacity once more since he had started to become dizzy.

'Where is the ball?'

In his rush to reign in his mental prowess, Ken had not seen where the ball went exactly. He briefly raised his head and looked towards the outfield, trying to discover its path.

'Crap.'

The ball was headed to the one place that he didn't want it to go, Center outfield.

Santiago was already in motion, running towards the back fence with his eyes not leaving the ball. With his long strides it seemed almost inevitable that he would be able to track it down.

'Please don't reach it.' Ken thought as he ran around 1st base.

Everyone in the stadium seemed to hold their breath as the ball began its descent from the air. With the majority of the audience being from America, they were rooting for the home team.

'Catch it!'

Only a few people like Michael shouted the opposite in their heart.

Time seemed to slow down as Santiago approached the wall at full pace. His athletic body leaped into the air, showing a mesmerizing grace that one wouldn't expect.

He stuck his leg out, hitting the wall and preventing himself from running directly into it. Then, with a kick, he propelled himself upwards, defying the laws of gravity in a daring move.

Pah~

The sound of the ball entering the leather glove sounded out before Santiago gracefully descended back onto the field. With the help of the wall, he had jumped over 6 feet in the air for the catch.

"Out!"

"Argh damn it." Ken muttered in disappointment.

With this catch, they had lost a great opportunity to get a much needed run. He would have been much more confident going into the latter half of the game with such a buffer.

"WHAT!?! NO way!" Ai screamed at the TV.

"Wow what a hit! Your boyfriend is so cool." Rie said, dancing around in celebration.

It took her a few moments to notice that Ai was not joining in on her celebration any longer. The moment Ken hit the ball she had been straight to her feet and pumping her fists wildly.

"Err, what's wrong? Was it a foul ball or something?" Rie asked, her expression showing her confusion.

She had never watched baseball before, let alone had the time to understand the rules.

Back at the stadium, Michael in the crowd looked like he'd swallowed a fly. There was no doubt that the catch was marvelous, yet it was definitely not the result he was after.

On the field, the US team cried out in adulation after the home run saving catch.

"Nice work Santiago!"

Even Ryan who rarely gave out compliments, turned around and gave his teammate a thumbs up. If he had have conceded a home run at this point in the game, It would be a large hit to morale.

Ken who had almost made it to 2nd base before the catch, was forced to make his way off the field. He was rather disappointed, but not all was lost.

The fact that he was able to use his mental capacity to track the ball was already a boon. There was still another chance in the game for him to make use of it as well.

Santiago stopping the home run seemed to have brought Ryan some back bone.

"You won't be getting any hits today Ken." He said, wagging his finger.

There was a haughty grin on his face, which looked like a big target to anyone on the receiving end.

However, Ken merely laughed in response, shaking his head in amusement. To him, Ryan was just acting like a kid which made him easier to ignore.

"Tch."

Seeing how his provocation had not worked, Ryan clicked his tongue in annoyance. He had hoped Ken might lash out at him, but he was unable to get under his skin.

"So close!"

"Damn, that Santiago is a real beast..."

The moment Ken stepped into the dugout, he was quickly surrounded and consoled by the other players. They were obviously as devastated as him about the denial of the home run, but things like this happened in baseball.

"Nice hit Ken. Try hit it a little farther next time though okay?" Aki said, patting him on the shoulder gently.

"..."

Ten different pairs of eyes fell on him, yet they were all thinking the same thing.

'Idiot.'

Ken laughed aloud in response, finding the comment funny. Just like Ryan, this guy was also a kid, though he was probably more annoying than the cocky American.

"Sure sure, go show me how its done." He replied in amusement before walking past him.

He approached Daichi and Miho who greeted him.

"Unlucky bro, I was sure it was going over." Daichi said.

Ken shrugged his shoulders, there was no point in complaining since it was already done.

"Our Uncle sure is athletic though." He replied, a grin creeping onto his features.

"Hahaha."

Daichi couldn't help but laugh out loud at how ridiculous the situation was.

Only Miho was by the side with a confused look on her face.

"Uncle?" She muttered.

Back on the field, everyone's favorite side show had already faced a couple of balls with no success. Once again he was battling against his inferiority complex, comparing himself with Ken the entire time.

'I just need to get a hit and I'll have done better than him so far.' He said inwardly, gripping his bat tightly.

Yet throughout every ball he faced, he could never seem to even get close to hitting it. Frustration was starting to mount as he stared at Ryan on the mound.

The pitcher began his wind up and sent the ball out, this time a two seam ball which broke inside.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

"3 outs, changeover."

Atsushi let out a deep sigh and retreated. He saw Aki's figure on the side of the field shake his head, as if he was a teacher that was disappointed in his student.

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

Chapter 454 - 454: Time for a Change (2)

Seeing this, he balled his hands into fists, resisting the urge to punch the short guy in the face. If it wasn't for the fact that Aki had made a hit in the previous game against the US, he wouldn't have to bite his tongue.

"Don't mind Atsushi." Ken appeared from the dugout and placed his hand on the guys shoulder.

For Ken, as long as he didn't let the US put any runs on the board, it didn't matter how long he needed to pitch for. He used to pitch 200 balls a day, 12 innings was nothing.

All they needed was one opportunity to send a runner home, he would handle the rest.

Atsushi felt the heavy hand upon his shoulder and felt comforted. There was a brightness that came from Ken's figure which seemed blinding, yet it filled him with reassurance.

As the Japanese team walked back onto the field, Leo was already swinging his bat by the side. His glare was intense as he stared at Ken with determination in his green eyes.

Once everyone got into position, the announcer called out over the speaker systems.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Leo."

Upon stepping into the batters box, Leo once again felt the pressure increase from Ken on the mound. It was an odd feeling that only he seemed to experience.

Yet this time he was more prepared. Having connected in his first at-bat, he had some confidence to do the same in this inning.

'Let's see what you've got this time.'

Ken reveled in the feeling of his muscles strengthening once again under the effects of Showdown. With the boost of 2 grades, his physical prowess was catapulted into the SSS range on average.

What better way to make use of his newfound strength than with a fastball.

Daichi seemed to be on the same wavelength, calling for a four-seam towards the outside.

Ken nodded before lifting his leg and stepping forwards, his arm flashing out like a whip beside him. As it left his fingertips, it spun like crazy, affecting its course.

"Hmph!"

Leo let out a harrumph, his muscles seemingly growing bigger as he swung at the ball.

Daichi felt a breeze on his face as the bat swung past him and into the strike zone.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike!"

Unless one had played baseball themselves, they wouldn't understand the feeling of striking nothing but air. While the body was prepared for some resistance, upon receiving none, it felt rather jarring.

This feeling, coupled with the embarrassment, was enough to create a surge of annoyance.

However, Leo was like an Ice Emperor as he channeled his feelings inside. His surroundings started to get chilly, almost as if a cold wave had fallen over home plate.

Daichi shivered, subconsciously backing away from Leo's figure in the batters box. Despite the summer sun still clutching onto the horizon, the temperature seemed to have plummeted.

He stood up, sending a throw back to Ken on the mound before getting into position. Daichi eyed Leo warily and began to think of the next ball.

Turning to Ken on the mound, the guy's expression said it all.

'FASTBALL'

Daichi shook his head in exasperation. If he could understand what Ken wanted, then there was a good chance Leo could to. Yet it was his job to make the call at the end of the day.

'It's only 0-1, there's no harm in another fastball.' He thought, before giving the sign.

Ken nodded before bringing both of his hands together and lifting his leg. He planted his foot with power, kicking up the dust from the mound in the process before whipping his arm out.

Even at a glance, Daichi could tell this was the fastest ball yet.

WHOOOOOSH

DING

'Eh?'

Daichi's eyes snapped to where the ball had gone, almost not believing what had happened. Thankfully the ball was fired across the ground and into the foul zone, yet there was some serious speed behind it.

"Foul."

'He hit that?'

Daichi turned to Leo who was still wearing his cold mask and seemed as if what he did was only natural.

'How could he touch that 102mph fastball?'

Even Ken seemed surprised that he'd made contact, yet a smile crept onto his face a moment later.

"Good, very good..."

Daichi retrieved another ball from the umpire and threw it over to Ken. Seeing that Leo was starting to hit the fastballs, he was a little reluctant to throw a 3rd one in a row.

If he could get a decent curveball, they might be able to catch the guy off guard.

Yet upon looking at the icy figure, Daichi had a premonition that it wouldn't be so easy to achieve such a thing.

'Damn it... Do I call for a forkball then? Or maybe the slider?'

As Daichi was stressing over what ball to call for, Ken poked his 2 fingers out beside his glove, trying to get his brothers attention.

It took a few seconds, but finally the guy looked his way. Daichi's eyes went wide in surprise, but they also flashed with worry.

'Is he serious? He wants to throw that now?'

Daichi felt his nerves begin to fray as he debated the call inwardly.

Eventually, time began to run out and he was forced to go with the flow. He grit his teeth and got into position, calling for the ball Ken wanted.

"Hehe, I knew you'd trust me." He muttered happily.

Ken grinned as he lifted his leg, his eyes focused on the extended glove behind the plate.

'Here goes nothing.'

The ball flew out of his fingertips, its course set.

Leo planted his left foot and swung hard at the ball, intending to blast it over the fence in one smooth motion. He could already hear the cheers of the crowd before his inevitable victory lap around the bases.

Yet in the next moment his eyes widened in shock.

WHOOOOOSH

...

PAH

"S-Strikeout!"

Leo felt the world around him crumble as a single word was brought to the forefront of his mind.

"Changeup?"

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

Chapter 455 - 455: Discovery (1)

"Huh!?"

"Since when could Ken throw a changeup?"

The two Japanese coach's were filled with shock and confusion as they subconsciously turned to each other, as if to confirm what they saw was real.

"Did you know?" Chris asked the Head Coach, his expression mirroring his shock.

"I was going to ask you the same question."

If anyone would know what Ken was capable of, surely it would be his father. Yet judging by his reaction, it must have been a surprise to him also.

There was even more chaos on the field as everyone looked at Ken like he was a monster. Since they'd played together for a little over 2 weeks, everyone was more or less aware of each others capabilities.

This included Ken who was the closing pitcher for most of the World Cup.

Yet even they hadn't seen Ken throw this pitch ever.

After the initial shock, Leo's mind began to race. There was no weapon more deadly for a fastball pitcher than a changeup. The arm action was the same, yet the speed was significantly slower.

Expecting the 100mph fastball, he'd swung at the pitch with all his might, only for the ball to appear much later. Since there was no change to form, it was insanely difficult to pick it.

'Things just got a lot harder...' Leo thought, his face turning into a frown.

Ken let out a small sigh of relief upon the mound after successfully throwing his first changeup. Even he wasn't sure if the pitch was going to work, yet it seemed like the best option in that moment.

As for when he learned it...

After receiving the Academic Trait, one of his perks was enhanced learning. This was a very broad skill and only recently had he begun to test the limits surrounding it.

He had watched tutorials and game footage for many hours, doing his best to learn the pitch in as little time as possible. Afterwards, he bit the bullet and entered the Image Training to flesh things out, dealing with the risks.

Since there was no real time to practice his new pitch physically, this was in fact his very first time throwing it.

If anyone heard this information, they might just find it ridiculous.

To pitch a changeup for the very first time in the finals of the U18 World Cup, against the team's best batter... What could that be called except madness?

Before the game, Ken had pulled Daichi aside and told him about his new pitch. Since they were a battery, he needed to be completely transparent, especially since he planned on throwing it during the game.

Of course, the conversation went as well as he expected. Yet thankfully, Daichi eventually agreed to his selfish demands, choosing to trust him once more.

If it were any other catcher, there's no way they would have risked such a thing.

While everyone around the field were exclaiming and shouting words of praise, Ken's attention was on one person only, his brother. He flashed him a grin, his unspoken words pasted across his face.

'I told you so.'

Daichi could only grin in response, feeling a weight off his shoulders. While some might not understand the gravity of the situation, he sure did.

Now that Ken had a proper changeup, as long as he made the correct leads, this game was as good as done.

One person who understood it thoroughly, was Ken and Daichi's Grandfather, Mark Williams.

"Damn it, they got us good." He muttered, trying to hide the smile on the corner of his lips. If some of the players saw it, they might question his loyalties.

He was surprised enough when Ken through the curveball, yet this was many times more shocking.

Leo stopped in front of Coach Williams, his expression not good. This was the first time he'd had such an expression at all in the World Cup, even after they lost the last game against Japan.

"Tell me what to do..." He said, swallowing his pride.

Seeing the usually stalwart figure of Leo like this, Mark couldn't help but nod in appreciation. This is what a good Captain would do in this sort of situation.

Mark put his arm out and placed it on Leo's shoulder before letting out a small sigh.

"I'll tell you how to recognize a changeup, but it won't be easy. Especially since we won't have the time to go over everything." He said.

Leo nodded. Anything the coach could tell him right now was beneficial. With his inherent ability and instinct, as long as he had direction, he was confident that he could put up a good fight.

It wasn't that he hadn't faced changeups before, just that none of the competition he'd been against threw a 100mph pitch in High School. Since Ken's changeup was upwards of 20mph slower, it made a huge difference.

"Please teach me coach."

"Me too please coach!"

A bulky figure almost bowled the tall old man over as he interjected between the two. Sam's face was full of expectation and excitement, wanting to be told the secrets of hitting Ken's pitch.

Meanwhile on the field, Ken had already struck out the next batter with ease. No one other than Santiago, Leo and Sam were even close to making contact with his fastballs.

After another 3 pitches, it was already the end of the 5th inning. With no one being able to break the status quo, the score was still tied at 0-0.

"What do you think of the game so far from your perspective as a professional athlete Mr. Tanaka?"

The host's voice spoke up as the US team made their way back onto the field. Like many commentators, he felt the need to fill the silence with chatter in order to entertain the viewers.

"..."

There was a brief silence that stretched out a little too long before he received an answer.

"It seems that I underestimated Ken Takagi. He's the real deal..."

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

Chapter 456 - 456: Discovery (2)

"Hah! I told you not to underestimate him." Ai said, pointing at the TV and yelling as if the hosts could hear her words.

By now, Rie was accustomed to Ai's outbursts. The moment Ken was on TV or even mentioned by the commentators, she knew that there was no point in trying to get her attention.

Yet she wasn't too upset, especially since she'd found a piece of eye candy to look at.

Her eyes were glued onto a figure that was walking back to the dugout from 1st base, ogling the muscles through his tight National Team uniform.

"Achoo!"

Hiroki sneezed loudly before feeling a shudder run up his spine. He looked around in question, feeling as if he was being spied upon.

"Dude, cover your damn face when you sneeze." Aki complained, grabbing a nearby towel and wiping himself down.

"He's right Hiroki, that's very unsanitary."

After being scolded by Kuro, Hiroki quickly apologized before finding a place to sit on the bench. Only after he sat down did the feeling of being watched intently disappear from his body.

BUZZ BUZZ

In another part of the stadium, Tetsuhiro retrieved his phone from his pocket and saw the caller ID.

"Please excuse me for a moment."

He quickly left the corporate box and answered the call, his actions obviously impatient.

"What did you find?" He asked.

Unperturbed by his eagerness, the female on the other line calmly answered.

"This Daichi was adopted by the former NPB Foreign Advisor, Chris Takagi. His biological mother is Sachiko Koga and biological father... Tatsuhiro Suzuki"

Upon hearing these words, Tetsuhiro dropped to his knees, tears instantly falling down his face. He felt a mixture of emotions, each clashing against each other painfully.

"Boss..."

"Boss?"

He took a few moments to sort out his feelings before slowly getting to his feet and straightening his suit. Then, he put the phone to his ear and spoke.

"Track down that woman. I don't care how long it takes..."

"Understood."

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Tetsuhiro was silent for a while, as if he was taking in all of this new information. He was thankful that no one had seen him in his earlier vulnerable state since men of his position were never to show such weakness.

The last time he had broken down like this was when his Brother and Grandfather died, leaving him all alone to manage the family business.

"I've finally found your son Tatsu... Don't worry, I'll take care of him for you." Tetsuhiro muttered these words as he looked upwards towards the ceiling. His gaze seemed to look past the confines and into heaven itself.

"Mr. Suzuki, dinner will be served shortly."

A voice came from the door, one of the stadium's staff members who was in charge of the corporate areas. He seemed a little reluctant to call out, but the guests had already asked for the man's whereabouts.

Tetsuhiro let out a small sigh, his back turned to the staff member. He quickly fixed his tie before turning around with no evidence remaining from his earlier emotional state.

"Thank you." He said, walking through the opened door.

His eyes looked around the room briefly before tracking down the President of the WBSC, Richard Fresco. He was currently snacking on some of the food brought out and chatting merrily to the others in attendance.

Tetsuhiro curled his lip in distaste, but he quickly composed himself.

"Richard, may I have a word?" He asked politely.

"Ah, of course. What can I help you with?" Richard replied, quickly using a napkin to remove some of the sauce left on his lips.

"Who will be presenting the awards tonight?"

"Uhh, that would be myself."

Tetsuhiro frowned, not bothering to hide his displeasure.

"Don't you believe that my family have made a solid contribution to the running of this event?" He asked, causing the others within earshot to be slightly taken aback.

"W-Well o-of course Mr. Suzuki. We wouldn't have been able to fund this event without your family's assistance in the matter." Richard replied, stammering a little.

"Mmm, as I thought. Do you think perhaps that I could represent my family and give my home team their awards tonight?" Tetsuhiro asked, his tone slightly softening.

He was well versed in business, having run his family business for many years. As long as he showed his displeasure initially, the other party would scramble to satisfy him in order to not offend.

Richard frowned for a few moments, yet upon seeing the expression on the man's face, he knew that he was left with little choice.

While generally it was his job to hand out the awards, it wasn't uncommon for sponsors to stand beside the President during the award ceremony.

Yet from the information he received from Martin, Tetsuhiro was not fond of baseball. There were even talks that he would send his son as a proxy member of the family to attend today.

'Why the sudden change of heart?' He thought.

Of course he would not ask the man directly. The last thing he wanted to do was question a man in Tetsuhiro's position.

"I'm sure that won't be a problem. It will also be good for the Japanese team since there will be no language barrier." Richard said eventually.

Tetsuhiro's face lit up, his stern expression disappearing as if it were never there in the first place.

"Excellent! Let's watch the game." He replied, smacking the large gentleman on the back a couple of times softly.

"Ha haha, sure thing. Can I get you anything to drink?" Richard let out a sigh of relief seeing that everything had worked out fine. He couldn't afford to offend the rich man in front of him, otherwise his job may be forfeit.

The two engaged in more conversation surrounding the game as Richard got him up to speed on what had happened. He explained some of the terminology and happenings as if his counterpart was a newbie.

Despite knowing mostly everything about baseball, Tetsuhiro nodded along, allowing the other man to feel comfortable.

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

Chapter 457 - 457: Breakthrough (1)

"3 outs, changeover!"

The plate umpire called an end to the bottom of the 6th inning with Ken once again putting the US batters in place. If even the clean-up batters had no chance against him, then the tail end of the batting order surely would not either.

The US team took the field for the start of the 7th inning. Since there had been no hits or bases taken, they were up against the beginning of the Japanese batting order once more.

Riku took the field, his usual happy-go-lucky attitude nowhere to be found. He wore a serious expression as he made his way towards the batters box, not happy with his performance so far.

'I'll hit it this time...' He said inwardly.

"Batting 1st, Left outfield, Riku."

Ryan's expression contained a veiled scowl when he looked at Japan's lead-off batter. Yet this only served to pump Riku up even more.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

It was another fastball, the same thing he'd been taken out by in the last two at-bats. If there was something that hurt a batters pride, it was continually getting struck out by the same ball.

While Riku was facing Ryan on the field, Ken gathered Hiroki and Daichi together. If the game were to remain at the current status quo, they risked sending it into overtime. No one wanted to play extra innings, especially after playing 10 games in 10 days.

"This is our opportunity to get some runs on the board." Ken said, his intelligent brown eyes seemingly sparkling in the afternoon sun.

It was around 6pm, but since it was the tail end of summer, the sun wasn't due to set for another hour or so.

"Tell us what to do."

Both Hiroki and Daichi nodded. Whenever Ken had a plan, it usually worked out for them.

"We've had no luck with the meatballs this game since they're usually thrown far outside the strike zone. That catcher is too good at covering this weakness and not allowing us to capitalize effectively." Ken stated.

The two kept quiet, waiting for him to continue. After all, they were already aware of this information.

"We need to aim at the slider or the two-seam fastball, preferably the former."

"Why do you say that?" Hiroki asked. It was one thing to settle on aiming for a certain pitch, but he wanted to know the reason.

Ken didn't feel offended at his question, deciding to explain his reasoning.

"I'm not sure if its because he can't use a grip variation for the slider, but it's the only pitch that has a proper course. The only problem is trying to bait him into throwing it."

Both Daichi and Hiroki were silent in thought for a while.

"But what about the two-seam? Did you notice something about that pitch?" Daichi asked in the next moment.

Ken was a bit reluctant, but he spoke his mind anyway.

"His two-seam breaks a lot later than usual, meaning we may be able to get away with a hit by pitch..."

Daichi's face went pale. He had caught many 90-100mph fastballs as a catcher, there was no way he would want to intentionally put himself in the firing line.

"I'll do it." Hiroki said simply, his muscles flexing underneath his tight uniform.

"Wait, let's not get too far ahead of ourselves." Ken interjected, though he liked the guys enthusiasm.

"You'll need to sell it well enough, like you were doing your best to get out of the way. If the umpire calls that you intentionally took the hit and it is within the strike zone, it will get called a strike."

Ken was thorough with his explanation, not wanting to lose an opportunity because of some form of miscommunication.

"Strikeout!"

Meanwhile on the field, Riku was struck out promptly, interrupting the trio's conversation.

"Alright, wish me luck." Hiroki said, before leaving to get his bat. He would be directly after Masayuki.

"Good luck, remember what we said."

"Mmm."

After Hiroki left, Ken and Daichi discussed a few more things regarding the slider.

"Should we stand as far back from the zone as possible before the pitch is thrown?" Daichi asked.

Ken nodded, "You can try that, just make sure you adjust your form while he's in pitching motion. It might not work, but do your best."

"Wait, why are you saying it like that? Won't you be going for the slider as well?" Daichi was a little confused with Ken's wording.

Ken shook his head in response, a smile forming on his face.

"Don't worry about me. If either you or Hiroki can't get onto base, my plan will come to nothing." He said with amusement.

As if mirroring his words, the umpire called out loudly.

"Strikeout!"

This time it was the Captains turn to retreat from the field, his ego bruised in a similar fashion to Riku's. He grumbled and groaned as he descended the stairs into the dugout.

"Alright, I'm going."

"I'll see you on the field." Ken said with a wink.

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

Hiroki stepped into the batters box with a determined expression. Those who saw his face might think he was about to step into battle against a fated enemy.

Perhaps it might not be too far from the truth.

Standing on the mound, Ryan was reveling in his performance so far. He had not let anyone get a hit, nor reach first base at all this game. Since almost no one could hit his pitches, he'd only accumulated around 70 pitches so far.

'I could easily throw another 70.' He remarked inwardly.

Unaware of his internal thoughts, Hiroki gripped his bat tightly and got into position, tilting his body forward slightly. He wanted to be subtle about it, but it didn't escape the eagle eyes of the catcher behind him.

Leo's eyes shined for a moment before he called the next pitch.

Ryan grinned from ear to ear before letting the ball rip from his fingertips.

'Here it comes...'

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

Chapter 458 - 458: Breakthrough (2)

Hiroki's face was like that of a holy martyr as he embraced his fate. The ball which was aiming for the inside, suddenly broke inward at the last moment.

In an exaggerated display, Hiroki shot back, throwing his bat into the air behind him as he desperately tried to get out of the way of the incoming ball.

Thud~

A dull thud of the ball crashing into his left arm rang out, causing those in the vicinity to cringe from the impact. There were a few moments of silence as everyone looked at the scene with incredulity.

If one didn't hear the sound of the ball making contact, one might think that it was a scene out of a slapstick comedy manga.

"H-Hit by pitch, take your base!"

"BOO!"

The crowd reacted right away, letting the umpire know what they thought of the call.

As soon as the call was made, Leo quickly got to his feet and into the umpire's face. With his solid frame and icy expression, the guy was instantly intimidated.

"You can't be serious right? That should be a strike!"

Once the plate umpire was able to compose himself, he shook his head vehemently.

"He tried to get out of the way, not a strike."

"You call that trying to get away?" Leo stated, gesturing at Hiroki's figure on the ground who was in the process of getting to his feet.

"Why must we suffer for his terrible reaction speed?"

"Leo! That's enough."

Mark jogged onto the field, causing a few of the US player's eyes to bulge out in surprise. Since when was a 65 year old man able to jog so fast...

Leo heard his coach's words and instantly calmed down, apologizing to the umpire. Thankfully it was right on time as the guy was considering handing out some punishment.

Only after seeing that things had calmed down did Mark send an apologetic glance to the umpire. He then jogged back to the dugout, taking back his post.

"Eh!?"

Chris was flabbergasted with his father's newfound fitness. Just a few days ago the guy had needed help to get up from his chair, yet now he was able to do this much?

"I need to get his training regime..." Coach Takashi mumbled, stroking his goatee softly.

"Don't mind Ryan!"

"Just one more out."

It would be a lie if Ryan said he wasn't disappointed. He had been secretly aiming for a perfect game, yet his hopes were dashed in that moment. Yet since there had been no runs yet, he still had a chance at a shutout.

Nothing else would properly wash away the humiliation he had felt in the last game against Japan.

He nodded towards his teammates and composed himself, awaiting the next batter.

"Batting 4th, Catcher, Daichi."

Daichi stepped up, his gaze moving to Hiroki who was standing beside 1st base with a small lead. The guy had clearly been feigning his pain earlier as he was now too busy sending winks and gestures towards him now.

Feeling a little amused, Daichi tried to contain the smile on his face.

He turned his gaze to Ken who was waiting patiently on the side of the field.

'Hiroki did his part... Now it's my turn.'

With that, he turned and faced Ryan on the mound. He had been useless the first two at-bats, he couldn't afford to keep up the same performance.

He slightly leaned back in the box, keeping his eyes peeled for the pitch.

Leo had managed to calm himself down and was back to his usual composed self. He analyzed Daichi in the batters box and had a few options in mind.

'He looks to be chasing the inside ball... Should I call for a slider to throw him off?' He thought inwardly.

Yet he shook his head in the next moment and made a sign.

Ryan nodded before entering his wind up and throwing a rocket-like pitch out.

PAH

"Strike"

'Heh, as I thought...'

Leo's face turned up into a smile as if everything was under his control. Since Daichi hadn't swung at the outside fastball, he believed that his guess was correct.

Daichi kept a neutral face, getting back into position. Like the previous time, he leaned back a little in the batters box and awaited the pitch.

'Too predictable... ' Leo thought, calling for the next ball.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

The next pitch was a fastball at the top of the strike zone, far enough inwards that Daichi was forced to swing at it. Just like that, the count was 0-2 and Japan were looking like they would be unsuccessful in this inning also.

Despite this, Daichi didn't seem nervous in the slightest. His patience was on full display as he once again took his position. He could feel everyone's eyes on him as everyone waited for the next pitch.

'Time to send you back in defeat.' Leo thought with a scowl.

He crouched down and made the sign to Ryan, receiving a nod in response. His glove was placed on the outside of the strike zone, awaiting the pitch he'd called for.

"Heh, see you later." Ryan muttered before entering his wind up.

He lifted his left leg and stepped forward, planting his foot and throwing his arm out like a whip.

The moment Ryan planted his foot, Daichi adjusted his positioning, crowding the plate in an instant.

Leo's face suddenly lost all color as he saw the shift, his heart feeling a wave of dread threaten to overcome him. He grit his teeth and watched the ball approach, following its course towards the outside.

'Don't hit it!' He shouted inwardly, gritting his teeth.

Daichi's eyes were wide open as he watched the textbook perfect slider make its way towards him. After facing the unpredictable fastballs all day, this pitch was a sight for sore eyes.

WHOOOOOOSH

DOOONG

The sound of the bat echoing through the field caught everyone's attention. It rocketed into the air and into the outfield, flying past the right fielder with ease, only hitting the ground just before the back wall.

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

Chapter 459 - 459: Unexpected Decision (1)

"Run! RUN!"

Michael shot out of his seat and shouted at the top of his lungs. His earlier reluctance to show who he was cheering for was completely thrown out of the window as Japan were met with a chance.

Daichi threw the bat down in haste and quickly ran towards first base, his eyes locked onto the right outfielder.

The Japanese dugout went crazy, shouting and cheering their heads off at the miraculous hit from Daichi. It wasn't surprising since the game had been in a deadlock since the very first ball was pitched.

The defense in the outfield was caught off guard. Whether it was due to complacency, or not expecting the Japanese team to actually hit the ball, no one would know.

Darius in the right outfield cursed under his breath as he made his way towards the ball. Due to his slow reaction time, there was no chance he could get under the ball for a catch, which meant he needed to make up for it on the throw back.

By the time he reached the ball, Daichi was already on his way to 2nd base.

He took a few steps forward and sent a blitzing throw towards Ryder on the 2nd base. The throw was fast and accurate, dropping as it flew towards the open glove of the fielder.

SWISHHHH~

Daichi made the aggressive slide, his foot reaching the base well before the ball had entered the baseman's glove.

"Safe."

It was an easy call, but the cheer that accompanied it was much louder than one would expect from the home team crowd.

Upon seeing Daichi successfully make it to 2nd base, Ryan grit his teeth in frustration. All he had needed to do was get that one final strike and it would have been the end of the inning.

Yet a single wrong lead had caused the situation to deteriorate. Now there were two runners on base, and Ken was next up to bat.

Ryan felt a hint of distrust towards Leo behind the plate for the very first time.

'If he hadn't called for the slider...'

Yet before he could voice his frustrations, the sound of the announcers voice rang out over the arena.

"Batting 5th, Pitcher, Ken."

Ken stepped into the batters box and felt a smile creep onto his lips. It had been a long shot, but both Hiroki and Daichi had executed their part of the plan perfectly, which meant the next part would be up to him.

He shot a glance towards both his teammates on the base and gave them a wink.

'Leave it to me.'

Before getting into position, Ken stretched briefly and looked towards Leo.

"Hey, thanks for calling for that slider, you really helped us out."

Leo felt his eyebrow twitch in annoyance, instantly giving him the urge to lash out. However, he managed to compose himself a moment later.

"Just throw me another one if you don't mind... Hehe."

Before the umpire could chastise him, Ken got into position with a grin plastered on his face. He could feel the animosity manifesting behind him, causing the smile to grow even wider.

With the unease on the mound and the anger behind home plate, the US team were in quite a predicament. If this was left to fester, forget leaking runs in this inning, the whole game could be in jeopardy.

"Timeout please."

Yet before things could devolve, a voice behind him nipped it in the bud.

"Tch."

Ken saw Leo stand up and ask the umpire for a timeout before jogging up to the mound to speak with Ryan.

'I guess that's why he's the Captain.' Ken remarked inwardly.

He had been hoping to stir the pot and invoke some kind of rushed decision, yet the guy was far too composed to fall for his tricks.

"He was aiming for the slider." Leo said once he got to the mound.

"You don't say?"

Ryan didn't sound impressed, quipping back sarcastically.

Leo frowned in response, not appreciating the guy's tone. For a moment he considered getting the coach to replace Ryan, yet he instinctively knew that he was their best shot to get through the current predicament.

"Look, we're in a pinch right now. You'll have plenty of time to act pissy after we win the World Cup. Follow my leads like usual, we just need one more out."

These words didn't seem to improve Ryan's mood at all, in fact quite the opposite.

"Your leads is what got us in this position in the first place." Ryan said, narrowing his eyes in response.

Not expecting the back chat, Leo raised his eyebrow. Instead of fighting back, his expression turned cold.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"They can't hit my fastballs. Let me throw them the rest of the game." Ryan replied, full of confidence.

Leo's face hardened in the next moment. There was nothing that he hated more than a pitcher who would question his leads and tried to impose their will onto him.

"United States, hurry up!" The umpire called out, deeming that enough time had passed for the time out.

Leo turned around and spoke with his back turned.

"If your fastball gets hit even once, I want you to bury your pride and follow my leads. If you refuse, I'll have you taken off the mound."

With that, he jogged back to the plate and thanked the umpire quickly. No matter what he was feeling in that moment, he needed to remain civil in front of the umpire.

Ken could feel the tension between both Ryan and Leo, yet this was only good news for him.

'The best option for them would be to walk me and load the bases. Atsushi hasn't been hitting well lately and it will be easier to secure an out before Hiroki can make it back to home plate.' Ken analyzed, going through the current scenario in his mind.

However, it was Ryan on the mound right now...

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

Chapter 460 - 460: Unexpected Decision (2)

Would he swallow his pride and walk Ken despite being provoked over and over again?

A grin crept onto Ken's face as he felt it was unlikely.

Ryan's face was expressionless upon the mound, giving nothing away. After a few moments, he nodded and entered his wind up, sending a throw that caused Ken's eyes to open wide in shock.

Pah~

"Ball"

There was silence around the arena before all hell broke loose.

"BOO!~"

"Are you serious!? It's the finals of the World Cup!"

"No way!"

It was clear to everyone in attendance that the ball was an intentional walk and that Ryan had given up on challenging Ken.

'No way... He's swallowing his pride?' Ken thought, blinking his eyes a few times in astonishment.

Yes it was true that walking him was the most optimal move, but that didn't mean it was an easy decision to make. Ryan was still a teenager, and subject to the scrutiny of the American public.

While walking batters was an effective strategy even in the MLB, many fans looked at it as the cowards way out.

For him to make such a decision in favor of his team, showed just what kind of mindset he had.

But instead of freaking out or cursing him, Ken laughed out loud.

"Hahahaha! So that is your decision Ryan... Very interesting."

While this decision for him to get walked indeed wasn't good for their team, it told Ken all he needed to know about the current Ryan Smith.

The guy who took the Major's by storm had never intentionally walked a batter, regardless of circumstances. His pitching style was overbearing and full of confidence, never backing down in such situations.

Ever since the 2nd half of his rookie season, Ryan became a pitcher who was feared by the best in the world.

Yet looking upon the younger version on the mound now, Ken knew that he wasn't even close to the player he was capable of being.

'If he's that weak-willed, we still have a chance this game.' He thought, a cocky smile appearing on his face.

Hearing Ken's shout in addition to the jeering of the crowd, Ryan was under significant pressure on the mound. He grit his teeth, wanting nothing more than to shut everyone on the stadium up with his pitching.

He looked to Leo who seemed to be an emotionless statue, unperturbed by the crowd's displeasure. He hadn't even bothered to squat behind home plate, remaining standing while in the catchers box.

'You bastards...'

Ryan gripped the ball tightly in his hand before sending an overarm throw to Leo, far from the strike zone. The ball floated in the air leisurely before being collected by the catcher.

"Ball."

Ken was still wearing his cocky smile, seemingly enjoying the process of being walked. He lifted his left wrist as if checking the time on his non-existent watch. This gesture seemed to elicit a few laughs from the crowd, which further annoyed Ryan on the mound.

Hiroki was standing on 3rd base with a confused expression.

'Why is Ken acting like that? Is he trying to goad Ryan into facing him?'

Even Daichi was perplexed at Ken's antics. While his brother was known to try and rile up the opposing teams, he was generally not this disrespectful.

It was then that Ken and Hiroki's gazes met. The instant they locked eyes, Hiroki could feel a burning sensation, causing his whole body to shiver unconsciously.

'What!? Is he planning something?'

Although Ken's face still wore the playful smile, his eyes were telling Hiroki to get ready.

Hiroki fidgeted a few times, not understanding what was going to happen, but eventually he managed to calm down. In order to not alert the gorilla Sam standing on 3rd base, he let out a sigh, as if accepting his team's fate.

Although it seemed he didn't need to be so careful since the guy was busy chatting with the 3rd base coach.

Ken stepped back into the batters box and got into position, yet before Ryan could begin his throw, Ken lowered his bat.

"Ah, there's no point even pretending to receive the ball."

Leo frowned, but he quickly brushed off these words. No matter how much complaining Ken did in the batters box, it wouldn't have an effect on his calls, not when the World Cup was at stake.

Ryan too seemed to have had enough of the guy, throwing another looping overarm throw to Leo.

Pah~

"Ball."

With that pitch the count was now 3-0, meaning one more ball would send Ken over to 1st base. The jeers of the crowd continued, yet they fell upon deaf ears.

Chris and the Head Coach weren't too pleased with the decision, but it wasn't as if they could do anything about it. They would have to depend on Atsushi to try and send at least one runner home in the next at-bat.

Ken looked around nonchalantly, as if he was bored with what was happening.

Yet his eyes were filled with something else entirely...

Fighting spirit.

"Let's just get this over with." Ken said, lifting the bat above his head and stretching his back casually.

While it could be said that Ken was being disrespectful, no one called him out on his behavior. If anything, the crowd had empathy for the Japanese star who had faced every US batter throughout the entire match so far.

Ryan could only grit his teeth once more and make the final throw to mark the intentional walk. He felt that his ego was bruised for doing such a thing, but he had already made his decision.

'It's all for the World Cup...!' He said inwardly.

As soon as the throw left his fingertips, there was a sudden shift in the atmosphere. As the ball floated in the air, Ryan's eyes widened as he saw Ken position himself with his toes on the line of the batters box.

'Eh?'

Everything seemed to slow down in front of him as Ken's long limbs swung at the ball from the confines of the batters box with ill intent.

WHOOOOSH

DONG!

"W-WHAT!?"

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