

Major League System

Chapter 561 - 561: Tryout (1)

"Alright good." Steve shouted, getting to his feet. He headed over to the mound after Ken was done with his warm up throws.

When he arrived he spoke softly, "What pitches do you know?"

Ken thought for a little bit, he had reduced his pitching repertoire while he was readjusting his pitching form since they weren't as sharp anymore. But now that his system was back, he wasn't sure whether to use them or not.

"Fastballs, changeup, curve." He eventually said, deciding to err on the side of caution. Since this was a tryout, he didn't want to mess up badly and give the coach a bad impression.

Steve nodded before going through the signs with him. They were pretty standard, nothing that he hadn't seen before.

He headed back to the plate and took up position, giving the first sign. Ken nodded and was about to get into position, but he was interrupted from the sidelines.

"Ken, how about we up the ante and add a batter?" Coach Wyatt called out, his gaze flickering to the other players watching intently.

"I don't mind." Ken stated. It didn't matter to him if someone tried to hit his pitches, if anything it would be more fun.

Happy with the response, Coach Wyatt's mustache seemed to be quivering with excitement. "Nico, you're up first." He said, pointing to one of the players.

The guy was regular height, and had short blond hair which met his eyebrows. His build was similar to Yusuke, which told Ken that he would likely be fast on his feet.

'Is he the lead-off batter for the team?' He thought.

"Let's go Nico!"

"Smack him out of the park."

As Nico placed his helmet on and walked to the batters box, his teammates cheered for him, trying to hype him up. Ken stared blankly, blinking a few times in confusion.

'Do these guys hate me or something?'

But at the same time he kind of understood. If someone suddenly joined his team and wanted to take over someone like Shiro's position, he might feel a little annoyed.

However, baseball was a competitive sport. This was why Shiro patiently waited his entire first year of High School before he could join the 1st squad and replace Yuta.

Nico arrived in the batters box and sent a glare to Ken, causing the latter to let out a dark chuckle. He had seen this look many times before, at least until he started pitching.

'He's looking down on me... Very well.'

Ken's eyes moved to Steve behind the plate, waiting for his lead.

Steve briefly looked at Nico in the box and called for a fastball, bringing his glove to the inside, close to the chest of the unsuspecting batter.

Ken felt a grin creep onto his lips, he rather liked this Steve fellow. He nodded and took the ball into his glove, letting out a deep breath and relaxing his body.

Since he had been practicing his new pitching form for so long now, it had practically been ingrained into his body. Ken no longer had to purposefully think about his movements, everything just came naturally.

He lifted his left leg upwards and leaned back slightly before kicking off with his back leg. The momentum propelled him forward with a large stride as his hips opened up towards the 3rd base.

The sheer force from these 3 simple steps generated an absurd amount of torque. By the time he cocked his arm and threw the ball, all of his momentum ended up on his lead leg.

With deft movements, Ken balanced perfectly on his foot, following through effortlessly as if he'd done the action thousands, if not tens of thousands of times.

His eyes followed the path of the ball, watching its course carefully. This was the first proper pitch he'd thrown since his system had come back, so he wanted to ensure everything was still in order.

"Holy CRA—"

PAH!

The ball landed squarely in Steve's outstretched glove, exactly where he'd placed it. Steve on the other hand, fell back from the force as the glove was pushed back and hit him in the face mask.

Nico who was giving him an audacious gaze earlier, was still in the same position, however his expression had suddenly changed. No longer was he confident, in fact, his body seemed to quiver, as if he was outside in the Winter breeze.

Steve managed to get to his feet slowly, but his gaze was transfixed on Ken, like he was looking at a monster.

"Was that a strike Coach?" Ken asked Coach Wyatt who had become eerily silent.

"Y—Yes. Strike!" He called, finally snapping out of his stupor.

It wasn't just him that was shocked, the other Gladiator players were in awe. Their captain Max Blair looked as if he'd just seen a murder, his jaw wide open in disbelief.

"How fast was that pitch?"

"I—I didn't even see it properly."

Ken held out his glove, gesturing for Steve to throw him the ball again. He was rather pleased with how the first pitch felt and was eager to experience the feeling once more.

It was a little different from how he normally pitched, almost as if his form had improved once more.

'My earlier theory might be correct, the system was subconsciously correcting my form and mechanics. Since I've improved substantially, I should now see even better results this time around.' Ken thought inwardly.

While Ken was deep in thought, Nico looked towards his coach with the fear of God in his eyes. He didn't say anything, but it was clear that he wanted to be anywhere except in the batters box right now.

Coach Wyatt didn't blame him. Even he who was behind both the catcher and batter was feeling unsafe despite wearing protective gear.

"Just try and hit the ball okay Nico?" He said, flashing him a supportive smile.

However, Nico looked like he had been sentenced to death by the courts.

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

Chapter 562 - 562: Tryout (2)

Ken received the ball and waited for the next lead. This time it was a fastball right down the middle, which seemed a little odd. However, he was sure that Steve had his reasons for doing so.

Unbeknownst to Ken, Steve was filled with both panic and excitement. He had barely even seen the previous pitch, so he was lucky that Ken's throw was extremely accurate and landed in his glove perfectly.

However, Steve wasn't satisfied with this. Now that he had finally met such a great pitcher, he wanted to catch the balls on his own, which meant he needed to do better. What better way to see a pitch than ask for one right down the middle?

The fire was lit within him, merely from seeing a single fastball from Ken.

Once again Ken entered his pitching form, his actions nearly identical. The ball whipped out like a rocket, its target the center of the strike zone.

WHOOSH

PAH

"Strike two."

Nico failed the timing so bad that his bat seemed like it swung after the ball had been caught by the catcher. However, no one made fun of him, not even Ken who seemed to be enjoying the dull expression on the guys face.

Steve on the other hand was getting even more excited.

'I finally saw it!' He shouted inwardly, praising himself. Now that he knew what to expect, seeing the ball the second time was much easier than the first.

That wasn't to say that Ken's pitches were easy to see, just that Steve's vision was rather excellent. Not only did he get the timing down after only 2 pitches, his mind started to be filled with ideas on how to utilize his amazing speed.

Nico's body language told a different story. He had never faced such dangerous balls before, despite playing baseball for over half his lifetime. His shoulders were slumped, looking as if he'd already given up.

"Come on Nico! Just make contact."

A voice roused him from his depressed state, causing him to turn his head in the direction.

The bulky figure of Max was there, cheering him on. But soon enough, the rest of the team joined in, trying to give him strength.

'Guys...!' In all honesty, Nico felt touched.

Despite not feeling like he would be able to hit the ball, he managed to get his mind back on track. Even if he was going to strike out, he would do his best to hit the ball and not look lame or afraid.

After all, he had his pride as a baseballer.

Coach Wyatt smiled after seeing the teams camaraderie in full effect. Usually this was the toughest thing to ingrain into a team, but seeing that it was alive and well made his expression soften.

By now Ken had already received the ball and was waiting for the next lead from Steve behind the plate. Upon seeing the sign, he was a little taken aback, but nodded nonetheless.

He wasn't sure, but he felt like he could see the mischievous smile behind the guy's mask even from his spot on the mound.

Feeling a little amused, Ken took a deep breath and composed himself.

Once again, he entered his wind up and took a large stride, whipping the ball out accurately.

Nico's eyes narrowed as his body filled with strength. He only had a small window of time to swing, since the pitches were so fast. Despite being made to look silly right now, he was the lead-off batter for the Gladiators, that should mean something.

'I won't let you guys down!' He screamed in his heart.

Nico planted his foot, twisting his body and sending an almighty swing at the ball, his intentions obvious. What better way to send a message than to hit the ball for a home run?

The power he generated was commendable, creating a wicked noise as the bat flew through the air.

WHOOOOOOSH

By the time he'd completed his full swing, it was obvious that he'd hit nothing but air. However, there was a moment where Nico's mind was full of confusion.

'Where is the ball? My timing wasn't that far off was it?'

PAH

He heard the ball enter the catchers glove and was even more confused. It was clear by now that his timing was off, but for it to be such a big margin hurt his pride.

"Strikeout." Coach Wyatt said softly, his eyes sparkling.

"What a masterful changeup!" He exclaimed, applauding. In his eyes, he had not seen anything different with the throwing action, nor the wind up from Ken, meaning there was no obvious tell.

To see such a vast difference in speed showed just how much control Ken had over his body, even at such a young age.

Hearing the word "changeup" Nico finally understood where he'd gone wrong. He was still trying to time the fastball, which happened to be at least 10-15mph faster than the pitch he'd just seen.

It made sense why he lost.

'Mmm, that felt good.' Ken said inwardly, looking at his hand.

He had been a little worried that something might change or he may have needed some time to readjust with the return of the system, but he was pleasantly surprised. It seemed that the system adjusted itself to him, not the other way around.

"Well, is there anyone else who wants to go up against Ken's pitches?" Coach Wyatt asked, his attention on the players close by.

Everyone looked to Max, as if he was their last line of defense.

Feeling their gazes, the Captain felt like he didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

"Alright, I'll go." Max said, grabbing a helmet and a bat before heading onto the field.

Before stepping into the batters box, he took a few practice swings, creating an imposing noise as the bat flew through the air. Ken could instantly tell that the guy was a good batter, likely the clean-up for the Gladiators.

However, it didn't matter.

WHOOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

PAH

PAH

"Strikeout..."

"What a damn monster..."

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

Chapter 563 - 563: Batting (1)

The more Ken pitched, the more excited Coach Wyatt became. Not only this, Steve seemed to have adjusted well to his pitches, leading him effectively and making use of the insane speed that Ken had to offer.

It was only 6 pitches, but it was enough for the coach's mind to race with possibilities. He could already see himself and the team holding up all of the tournament trophies in both Spring and Fall.

"Alright, I think we've seen enough." He said, trying to hide his grin. However, his thick mustache was curled upwards and giving it away.

Coach Wyatt turned to the other players and spoke up, "Well, what do you guys think? Is he in or out?"

Brett already had his head lowered, knowing his fate. Even seeing the pitches from so far away he could tell that they were nothing like he'd ever witnessed before, at least by a High Schooler.

The sound of the ball entering the catchers glove was like thunder, its clap echoing in his ears even now.

Max who had just experienced the pitches first hand, walked over from the batters box and stood beside the coach. He had mixed emotions on his face at first, but it quickly turned serious.

"I think it's pretty obvious coach." He said, cutting to the chase.

"Mmm. Then its settled." Coach Wyatt didn't press the issue, Ken's performance was enough to gain the respect of the players. Now no one would have any complaints, making his job a lot easier.

With that, he turned to Ken who was still waiting patiently on the mound. He waved him in, still wearing his grin.

"Well, it looks like its unanimous. Welcome to the Gladiators." The Coach said, holding out his hand for a handshake.

However, Ken was wearing a weird expression on his face. "Err coach, I still haven't batted yet." He said, feeling a little odd.

"Ah..." Ken's performance was so shocking that he'd completely forgotten about anything else.

He was about to decline, but seeing the look on Ken's face, he quickly changed his mind. "Brett, go warm up on the mound and face Ken."

"Huh?" Brett who still had his head and shoulder drooped, heard his name and almost jumped in fright.

Even the other players seemed confused. Most of the pitchers they had played with would use Designated Hitters, especially the older they got.

"Y—Yes coach." He responded after receiving a nudge from one of his teammates.

He was filled with trepidation, but a part of him wanted to at least show his worth. Not only to his teammates, but also to himself.

With a determined expression he made his way up to the mound.

Unaware of the atmosphere, Ken walked over and grabbed his helmet from his bag. He looked around and saw a bunch of bats by the side.

"Coach, can I use one of your bats?" He asked politely.

"Mmm, go for it."

However, his actions seemed to cause a wave of incredulity amongst the players. Just what kind of batter wouldn't have a bat?

With those words, they lost a good chunk of expectations.

Out of the people present, only Steve and Coach Wyatt were looking forward to seeing what Ken could do with the bat. They knew of his pitching abilities, since they had watched the final of the World Cup before.

But since it was such a low scoring game and Ken didn't really bat much during the final, they weren't aware of his skills.

Of course if they had watched his performance in the group stages and super round, they would have already known just how dangerous he was in the batters box.

Ken picked up the bat, weighing it in his hands. He took a few steps onto the field and began to swing, eliciting a crisp noise as the bat flew through the air.

After a few practice swings, Ken nodded in satisfaction.

His mind was clear, especially after pitching just before. Ken knew now that he wouldn't have to adjust to the system, it would adjust to him. All he needed to do was play how he usually played.

With his confidence sky high, Ken's eyes moved to Brett atop the mound. The guy was just finishing up with his warm up throws, but Ken wasn't intimidated. He had faced the best High School pitcher in America, why should he care about some random guy.

It wasn't so much arrogance, but more a supreme confidence he had in both his abilities and the system.

Once his mind thought this far, Coach Wyatt called out for Ken to step into the batters box.

Not wanting to linger any longer, Ken did as he was told. He tapped the bat onto home plate before tapping it on each of his toes. It was unknown when he started to do this, but it became part of his pre-batting ritual.

After squaring up his shoulders, he faced Brett on the mound. The guy was a little lanky, but shorter than Ken. He reminded him a little of Akira, at least his body archetype that was.

"Play ball." Coach Wyatt called out, prompting Ken to take his position.

Steve kept on sending side glances towards Ken, his mind racing. While he wanted to see what the guy could do, his catchers pride didn't allow him to call for any easy balls.

With his trademark mischievous grin, he called for a slider, one of Brett's signature balls.

'If I can get him swinging early, we might be able to put him on the ropes.' Steve thought, his excitement burst.

Brett nodded, taking his ball into his glove and beginning his wind up.

Ken watched intently as the guy whipped the ball out towards him. Almost instantly he could tell that there was far more spin than usual, narrowing down which pitch it could be.

Information flooded his mind, calculating the trajectory with great precision. It only took a moment for him to understand it was a slider.

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

Chapter 564 - 564: Batting (2)

Ken planted his lead leg, twisting his body and generating immense torque as he began his swing. His eyes were transfixed on the ball, his entire being focused on sending it on its way.

WHOOOOSH

DOOOONG!

The metallic sound of the bat hitting the ball echoed throughout the field, sounding like someone had belted a Chinese gong with all their might. The ball sailed into the outfield, right over where the right fielder would be.

It didn't take long for everyone to understand that one of them would have to go searching for that ball later.

Ken watched the ball fly away, his body filled with satisfaction.

'Damn that felt good...' He said in his heart.

His batting was the most affected with the system going offline, since it was so difficult to train his balance and coordination. This home run felt a little different however, from both the form and follow through.

Ken thought back to his intensive training with his father for those couple of months and felt a warm sensation rise from within. He had polished his form and was now reaping the benefits with the help of the system.

It took a few moments for everyone to react to the hit, but Coach Wyatt was by far the most enthusiastic.

"Holy crap! What have you been eating boy?" He exclaimed, almost tossing his cap into the air with great enthusiasm.

Once again the Gladiator players were stunned into silence. It was one thing being a kickass pitcher or batter, but another thing entirely to be good at both.

Brett on the other hand was silent. He had literally thrown his best ball, yet it was easily taken care of by the newcomer, shattering whatever confidence he had in his own abilities.

However, there was a fire that suddenly lit in his eyes.

'I can't give up now...!' He said in his heart, gritting his teeth. A part of him believed that it was a lucky hit, but he dared not say anything aloud.

"Again..."

His voice was too quiet, so nobody heard him. He looked up to see the coach practically doing a celebratory dance.

"AGAIN!" He shouted, drawing everyone's attention.

Everyone turned their head towards Brett who looked like he was in a bad state. The clenched fists and defiant expression on his face only elicited looks of sympathy.

Seeing this, Coach Wyatt seemed to have recognized his mistake. He had been so caught up in Ken's abilities that he hadn't thought how his actions would affect Brett, who was also one of his players.

He cleared his throat and turned to Ken, "Are you willing to face some more pitches?" the coach asked Ken respectfully.

According to him, Ken had already ticked all the boxes and passed the tryouts. Ultimately it was up to him if he wanted to continue to face Brett's pitches or not.

Ken turned towards Brett and could empathize what the guy was going through. Of course he could refuse, but he didn't mind hitting some more balls, especially since he didn't want to lose the feeling he had just grasped.

"Okay, I'll take as many pitches as you want." Ken said calmly, getting back into position.

Steve's expression softened upon hearing this. Though he had only met Ken today, he could already tell that he was a kind and gentle man with his own principles.

He grabbed another ball from the bucket close by and threw it to Brett on the mound. Throughout his time at the Gladiators, he'd played with Brett for a couple of years. Though they weren't great friends, there was some mutual respect between them.

Steve squatted down, taking another glance at Ken.

'He really is a good guy.' He thought before turning his attention back to Brett.

He decided to call for a fastball this time on the inside. Since he'd already seen the slider, it would be best to try and jam Ken and save Brett some face. If he had guessed accurately, Ken would probably dial it down a little in this at-bat.

Seeing the lead, Brett nodded once more and quickly entered his wind up. He was intent on striking the new guy out and regaining some of the respect that he felt was lost in the last exchange.

'Don't look down on me!' He shouted in his heart.

The ball flew out, its trajectory spot on. Although it was accurate, Ken could see the course with ease, almost as if there was a trail through the air.

From first glance, the fastball was about 85mph. While it was a decent speed, it was nowhere near the peak that he'd experienced back in Japan, let alone the tricky bombs that Ryan would throw.

Ken twisted his body once more, keeping his wrists relaxed. Since he already knew it was an inside ball, the rest was history. To him, the result was already a foregone conclusion.

WHOOOOOSH

DOOONG

Once again, the ball was sent into the air, this time into the left outfield. Much like the previous ball, it found itself over the fence, waiting to be found by the unfortunate soul tasked with collecting them later.

Steve stared blankly at the ball go over the fence and couldn't help but wear a wry smile.

'I guess he's not as nice as I first thought...' He said inwardly.

However, his mischievous smile returned shortly after. It made sense why Ken would go for broke, after all, he didn't care about the team politics. It was clear that he was here for one thing... To play baseball and win.

After seeing what he was capable of, Steve felt that it wouldn't be impossible for the guy to turn pro as early as next year. Of course he couldn't say first hand, but it was just a feeling.

Instead of jumping for joy like last time, Coach Wyatt quietly walked over to the mound and patted Brett on the shoulder, whispering some words into his ear.

Meanwhile, Ken nodded inwardly, happy with his performance. Now that he had secured his position on the team, he only wanted to one thing...

'I want to see my status window...' He complained inwardly.

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

Chapter 565 - 565: Return of the Training Demon? (1)

After his tryout, Ken was surprisingly well received by his new teammates. The bulky Captain, Max Blair was one of the first to approach him, welcoming him to the team.

He met a few of the other players, but in all honesty, Ken forgot their names almost immediately. It wasn't that they weren't memorable, just that he had already met quite a lot of people today since it was his first day at school.

"Alright, let's give the new guy some space." Steve said, wearing his trademark grin.

He walked in between the players and separated Ken from them all. "You guys know Ryan Smith right?" Steve said, looking at the players expectantly.

They seemed a little taken aback at the sudden change in subject, but still answered.

"Of course, he's the number 1 recruit who just committed to Kansas State... Why?" Max responded. He seemed to have great knowledge of the baseball circuit.

Hearing this, Ken's eyes widened. 'Ryan already got a scholarship?' He thought, feeling the forgotten rivalry begin to rekindle.

It wasn't that he didn't think Ryan was good enough, only that it had slipped his mind. Ryan was a year older than him and in his Senior year, it made sense that he would commit to a college.

If his previous life was anything to go by, Ryan would only stay in College for a year before getting drafted.

"Hehe, I'm glad you asked." Steve responded, placing a hand on Ken's shoulder.

"This guy right here actually beat Ryan." He boasted, waiting to hear the cries of shock and awe from his teammates. However, he was left wanting, since no one even reacted.

"Yeah, right... And I was Ryan's personal chef." One of the players called out, resulting in a few chuckles of laughter. Ken's gaze fell on him, trying to remember his name, however he came up blank.

"Didn't he say that he's from Japan? How would he play against Ryan anyway?"

However, the moment he said that, everyone in the surroundings froze.

Finally getting a reaction that he liked, Steve broke out into a hollow laugh. "Anyone remember the Japanese Ace who sent both Ryan Smith and Leo Cameron to the jaws of defeat? Well, you're looking at him."

The penny finally dropped. If they looked at Ken like he was a freak before, now it was even more intense.

Ken shifted a little uncomfortably, but he tried to look on the positive side. If the team knew his skill level and resume, they might respect him more and follow his lead. Now that he had the system back, it meant his Training Demon skill was back in full force.

Just thinking of all his buffs made caused a dark grin to form on the corner of his mouth.

To the players looking at him, his smirk made him look devilish. They all felt a shiver run down their spine, as if they were in the presence of something truly evil.

"Alright you lot, we've got some training to do, no slacking." Coach Wyatt approached, noticing the weird atmosphere, but he quickly changed the subject.

Ken's ears perked up. He had been doing solo training for the last month, so the thought of actual baseball training was quite appealing.

With great enthusiasm, he entered the field and waited for directions. However, after around an hour of various drills, the coach called an end to the training session.

Ken looked around seeing the players sweating lightly and busy chatting amongst each other. A frown formed on his face shortly after, feeling that the training was inadequate.

This was like a light warm up compared to what he was used to in Japan.

"Coach, are we done already?" Ken asked.

"Hmm? Yeah we've finished for the day." He stated simply, "We all got families to go back to kid."

Ken couldn't really refute those words, but it left him feeling a little miffed.

As if feeling his frustration, Steve wrapped his arm around Ken's shoulders and laughed, "Don't worry man, this is only our daily training. On the weekends when we're not playing in a tournament or scrimmage, it gets more intense."

However, Ken was unmoved. It might be okay for the other players to get by with this, but not him who had dreams of becoming a pro in the future.

It was clear that he would need to take things into his own hands down the line. As for who would join him... Ken looked at Steve, his eyes flashing with malice.

"Eh?" Steve felt a cold sweat suddenly drip down his back, but he didn't know why.

"Hey Steve. You look like you've got some energy left to burn." Ken crooned, trying to act innocent. However, the twisted expression on his face was the complete opposite.

"I—I... What do you mean?" Steve instinctively backed up, feeling a sense of danger.

Eventually, Ken managed to sink his claws in, having Steve join him for some follow up training on the field. Apparently the bus left every 30 minutes back to the school, so Ken decided to just do an extra hour of training this time.

The players saw Ken and Steve begin to run around the field while they were busy packing up and getting ready to leave. Most of them felt it was a little weird, but there were some who were feeling inspired.

Max hesitated, feeling the urge to join them. However, he remembered that he had already told his mother he would be home by a certain time. If it wasn't for the spontaneity of the situation, he might have joined them.

Another was Latrell, he had dark skin and dreads with an athletic build. He stopped in place before dropping his equipment on the ground and heading onto the field. Without a word, he joined the duo in their run.

Ken was a little surprised, but he smiled in response, his gaze moving to the group of players leaving.

'Soon you'll all be running alongside me.' Ken thought, smirking.

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

Chapter 566 - 566: Return of the Training Demon? (2)

By the time an hour had passed, both Latrell and Steve were flat on their backs, sucking in deep breaths of air to recover. Ken on the other hand was standing upright, pacing back and forth to cool down his muscles.

While he was covered in sweat, his breathing was only a little uneven.

"Nice work guys. Tomorrow we'll go a little harder okay?" He said, only to receive frightened gazes from the two in response.

Ken wore his evil grin, his eyes gleaming with malice. "You'll be fine, just eat plenty of protein and carbohydrates. Make sure you get 8 hours of sleep and your body will do the rest."

He sounded like a drill instructor, without a hint of sympathy in his tone at all. However, the fact that he was also doing the same training without complaining, made it a lot easier to digest.

If he were just an instructor, both Latrell and Steve probably would have cursed him out to his face long ago and left.

"Good hustle Latrell." Ken said, holding his hand and helping the guy up. Despite his frame making him look like a sprinter, Latrell had done quite well to keep up with him.

"Thanks."

Steve on the other hand had been lapped almost 7 times by Ken. With the return of the system, Ken felt that his stamina was endless. His sore muscles were already beginning

to ease as he cooled down, a sign that his much beloved Fatigue Management skill had returned.

"Steve, we should head back."

Steve who was still sucking in deep breaths on the ground, looked at Ken in a new light. He held out his hand to which Ken helped him to his feet. He wanted to say something, but had to focus on catching his breath first.

"You're intense." He said after a while.

The way he said it wasn't so much of a compliment as it was an accusation. However, Ken took it in his stride. As long as the guy didn't complain like Shiro did, it would make his life much easier.

"So, you down to do this every day with me?" Ken asked, raising his eyebrow in question.

Steve's face paled visibly, however he nodded. Perhaps he saw how dedicated Ken was and felt inspiration, or maybe it was something else. Either way, Ken got the result that he desired.

The trio finally left the grounds which had already been abandoned. It was around 5:30pm and the sun was still a little way off from setting, a sign that Summer was just around the corner.

Unfortunately, just as they were walking out of the grounds, the two saw the bus fly past, causing them to freeze.

"Argh damn it..." Steve cursed, feeling a bunch of annoyance.

Ken sighed too. Back in Japan, public transport was super efficient, with trains going both ways from Tokyo every few minutes, particularly in peak hour.

"If only I had a car..." Steve mused, his annoyance evident.

"Wait, you have a license?"

"Yeah, I've had it for a while now and have been saving up for the past year for a car. I'm still about \$1000 short." He admitted, letting out another sigh.

Ken thought for a while before his face turned up into a smile. "I have a proposition for you..."

"Hmm?"

...

"What? You'll lend me the money?" Steve was flabbergasted. He had only met the guy today, yet he was willing to part with such a sum of money right away?

"Yeah. But you'll have to pay for gas and take me to and from practice every day." Ken stated his terms.

However, Steve didn't think they were too overbearing. The fact was, he would be driving from school to here anyway, there was no problem taking Ken with him.

"But... Are you sure? How do you know I won't just completely ignore you afterwards or try to renege on our deal?" Of course he would never do such a thing, but for Ken who had known him less than a day, it was certainly a possibility.

Ken shook his head, "I'm a good judge of character, don't you worry."

"Hmm..." Steve really didn't have any reason to refuse. Not only would he be paying the guy back, they would also travel to and from practice together.

"Alright, you've got a deal." He said, sticking his hand out for a handshake.

"Haha good. Good riddance to buses." Ken laughed, shaking his hand tightly.

The two chatted merrily while waiting for the bus which came almost exactly 30 minutes later. Being trapped in the bus while both smelly and sweaty wasn't the most ideal, but thankfully there weren't many people on board.

Eventually they arrived at the school where Steve and Ken parted ways. Thankfully Ken's bike was still in the cage when he arrived. He unlocked the bike and pedaled his way back home.

By the time he arrived home it was already around 6:45pm and the sun was almost fully set. The streetlights had come on and there was a cool breeze which assaulted him.

"I'm home." Ken said, taking his shoes off at the door.

Both Yuki and Chris were already seated at the dining table, wearing bright smiles.

"Welcome home Kenny." They both said.

Chris seemed to be especially happy in that moment, "I heard that you want to join a travel team." He said with a grin.

"Mmm. I've got all the paperwork here." Ken said, pulling out the pages that were stuffed in his bag.

He handed them to his father and asked, "Why didn't you tell me that the High School team's season had already ended."

This time, Chris's expression faltered a little. Sure he had played in the US during High School, but it wasn't in Texas.

"Some states also play during Summer and Fall, but apparently not Texas." He replied, feeling a little embarrassed. He would have likely signed up Ken to a travel team even earlier if he had remembered.

"That's okay, anyway I need a long shower." Ken said, heading towards the bathroom.

'So I can check my system...!' He thought, grinning widely.

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

Chapter 567 - 567: Status Window (1)

With a flash, Ken almost ran into the bathroom, turning the tap on and waiting for the water to heat up. He eagerly discarded his sweaty clothes and threw them to the side, scrunching up his face from the smell.

'Finally...!' He thought, taking a deep breath. For some reason he was starting to feel nervous, wondering if this 18 months off had regressed his abilities or something.

He even used to have bad dreams where his potential reduced to an F rating. Of course there was no way that was possible, right?

Taking a step into the shower, Ken willed the system to open and was greeted with the familiar and nostalgic status screen.

SYSTEM LEVEL: 5 (64,880/1,000,000 Major points to level up)

NAME: Ken Takagi

AGE: 18

TALENT ASSESSMENT: SS

POTENTIAL: EX-

MAJOR POINTS: 64,880

USER MENU:

-STATS

-MISSIONS

-SYSTEM SHOP

-LOTTERY (Locked)

-IMAGE TRAINING

-IDENTIFY

-TRAINING PLAN

-MENTOR

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: SS

>Pitching: SSS+

>Fielding: A+

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental: SSS-

>Skills: 21

>Traits: 2

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS+

Agility: SS-

Strength: SS

Stamina: SS+

"EX-? What does that mean?" He mumbled.

The first thing that he noticed was the new grade next to his potential, instantly throwing him into confusion. However, in the next moment, it dawned on him.

'Is that the grade above SSS!?' A wave of happiness assaulted him, causing him to almost slip on the tiles. He took a moment to steady himself before continuing down the list.

'Pitching SSS+, Mental SSS-. I swear they weren't this good before the system started its upgrade.' He mused.

The only thing he could think of was because he improved his pitching form before the system returned. Since it was a mechanical change, the system should have changed the grading accordingly. Or at least that's what he thought.

As for his mental... He had gone through a traumatic experience with Tetsuhiro and the gangs, perhaps that helped him harden his mental faculties.

However, upon seeing his physical fitness grades, he frowned slightly. They had remained the same, despite all of the training he had been doing.

But in the next moment he shrugged. It was a lot better than the alternative of the grades regressing.

Ken stood underneath the shower for a long time, staring at the status screen he'd been missing for 18 months. It was a surreal experience, making him realize that he had taken it for advantage.

Once his mind thought to this, he suddenly remembered someone else he had taken advantage of...

'Mika... Are you still mad at me?' He asked warily.

[Mad? I am merely an Artificial Intelligence. I do not experience such trivial emotions...]

Though the voice sounded monotonous in his mind, Ken could almost taste the venom dripping from her words. If he knew anything about women—which he didn't—this meant that she was indeed still mad at him.

'Hey, I'm sorry I didn't speak to you right away okay? It was my first day of school and I got a bit busy.' Ken said, trying to placate her.

[...]

After a few moments of silence, Ken let out a sigh.

'Well, I missed having you around. It's good to have you back.' He said, his thoughts genuine. It had indeed been tough without Mika's help, not only for his workouts, but also his sleeping schedule.

Of course he would never say this to her, lest he hurt her feelings, or code? He wasn't sure.

[It's... Good to be back.]

Ken's eyes widened in surprise, not expecting such a response from Mika. For a moment, her voice sounded almost human.

However, not wanting to press the issue, Ken left it.

'Hey Mika, I have a few questions if you don't mind answering?' He asked politely.

[Sure.]

Ken breathed a sigh of relief. There had been a few things that were plaguing him throughout the 18 months of radio silence without the system, things that he had regretted not asking Mika about back then.

'Thank you. First, why did the system take so long to upgrade? Is this something that will increase as the level gets higher?'

Ken's face turned serious as he awaited the answer. If this was the case, then he would have to think carefully whether or not it was worth leveling up the system in the future. If he made it to the Majors one day, his dip in performance without the system could cost him his position.

[Answer: User's body had not matured enough to experience any further growth without sustaining long term damage. The bones, tendons and muscles needed to naturally grow and adapt to the increased levels of strength.]

Ken was hit with a bombshell right off the bat. He had not considered this at all, merely thinking that the system needed a hell of a lot of time to upgrade on its own.

[Now that user has almost reached maturity, the system will no longer require such a lengthy time to upgrade. However, this may change depending on various factors.]

"Mmm." Ken nodded in satisfaction. This was the news that he most wanted to hear.

'Thank you Mika. Next question, what are the grades beyond SSS+?'

[Answer: the grades following SSS are EX and L. Each only have one iteration and are incredibly difficult to ascend to.]

'EX and L?' Ken thought for a moment, trying to figure out why it would be called such. However, he was interrupted by Mika who gave him the answer without prompting.

[Extraordinary followed by Legendary.]

"Ah, makes sense..." Ken muttered.

Yet this only gave him additional questions. 'Mika, do you know which players have Legendary grades in this world?'

[Apologies, until user has used "Identify" on these people, Mika cannot give out such information.]

Ken nodded in understanding. Basically Mika was saying that she knew such people existed, but wasn't going to tell him. Ken understood that he was being a little greedy, but at the end of the day, even if he learned the information it wouldn't help him.

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

Chapter 568 - 568: Status Window (2)

'One more question please... Can you tell me what has improved in this upgrade?'

There was a few moments of silence as Ken waited for an answer. He was hoping that he would get a new function or something that would help him in the future.

[User now has access to items and skills exceeding SSS grading.]

Ken was silent for a little while, but inwardly he was a little disappointed. He thought that such a thing would be unlocked organically as he continued to get better, just like it had always been.

However, when he thought about it for a bit, it did kind of make sense. There was a clear divide between the SSS grade and the EX grade, so much so that he was unable to even view it before the system upgraded.

Which led him to his next train of thought. Was Daichi's potential Extraordinary or Legendary? Just thinking of this made him feel a burst of exasperation.

'Just what kind of monster is my brother?' He thought.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Ken, are you okay in there?"

His father's voice called out from behind the door, almost causing him to cry out in surprise.

"I'm all good, almost finished!" He yelled back, inwardly chastising himself.

Ken had been so focused on talking to Mika and looking at his status window that he had lost track of time. His father probably thought he was doing something weird in the shower, something that he didn't want to speak about.

This only caused him to remember "The birds and the bees" chat he'd had with his dad after he and Ai had started dating properly.

It was not only awkward for him, even his father looked to be severely uncomfortable. Unlike in the states, Japan was rather private when it came to things like sex.

Apparently the only reason Chris had even had the conversation with Ken was because his own father had done the same when he was just a teenager.

Ken quickly got out of the shower and toweled himself down. The moment he opened the door, he saw a judgmental gaze from his mother who happened to turn around from her spot in the kitchen to look at him.

'It's not what you think!' He shouted in his heart.

However, voicing his thoughts would likely be admitting to his guilt. With tears in his eyes, Ken retreated to his room and got dressed, cursing his far too eager past-self.

Ken returned to the dining room a few minutes later, donning his poker face. He made sure to set the skill before he opened the door, and intended to ignore or deflect any conversation made towards his actions in the shower.

Thankfully, everyone seemed to move on rather quickly, apart from a few odd stares every now and then.

"So tell me about this team." Chris said, trying to steer the conversation appropriately.

Ken let out a sigh of relief internally and opened up about his experience. He downplayed his impact at tryouts, but told his father all of the basic information he needed to.

"Who cares about baseball right now," Yuki exclaimed while she was setting the table, "How was your first day at school honey? Did you make any friends?"

"Mmm, I met this guy called Steve, he's a little mischievous, but he seems genuine. He's actually the one who introduced me to the Gladiators team." Ken said sincerely.

"Oh? Does he play baseball as well?" Chris asked, his interest piqued.

"Yeah, he's the starting catcher believe it or not, Haha."

"Eh? Wow, how good is that?" Chris exclaimed, his face full of incredulity.

Seeing how the conversation had turned back to baseball, Yuki rolled her eyes. She looked at her husband and son and could literally see baseballs rotating on top of their heads.

'Why is everyone in my family only concerned about baseball...?' She complained inwardly.

She was hoping for some juicy gossip like she'd seen in American TV series or movies. Yet all these two could think about was baseball.

Yuki let out a sigh, placing the final dish on the table and sitting down in her chair.

Both Ken and Chris looked at her with question, not understanding her mood.

"Oh, I spoke with Mrs. Rogers the other day." Ken said, as if he'd just remembered. "She asked if you wanted to join her ladies book club."

"Book club?" Yuki raised her eyebrow in question. She was not really an avid reader, but she was in an entirely new country and had yet to meet any friends.

Chris placed his hand on her own, his face lighting up. "That sounds great honey, why don't you join?" He seemed far more eager than Yuki herself, but the enthusiasm made her heart feel warm.

It was clear from his eyes that he was worried about her being lonely. With Ken going to school and him working so much, she was stuck at home with no one else.

If they were still in Japan she would have her friends like Naomi and the other ladies in town she could go see if she was bored. Yet here it was different.

Seeing the expectant looks from both him Yuki didn't really have a choice but to agree.

"Okay, I'll go. Give her our number the next time you see her." She said, letting out a small sigh.

The mood seemed to improve after she agreed, with both boys happily digging into the dinner she'd cooked. There was nothing that brought her joy like seeing her boys enjoying her food.

With that, her mood improved significantly.

"Ah, I almost forgot. I need to withdraw \$1000 cash." Ken stated, his face serious.

Chris almost spat out his food in shock, while Yuki sent him a gaze full of disbelief.

Ken continued to eat, as if what he said wasn't extremely suspicious and concerning.

"Come again?" Chris said, sizing up his son with suspicion.

Thus, Ken was forced to painstakingly explain the situation with Steve and his proposed loan until his parents were satisfied. Sure they weren't too happy, but it was also his money at the end of the day.

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

Chapter 569 - 569: Status (1)

"You got the money?" Steve asked, looking left and right suspiciously.

Ken blinked a few times, feeling a little odd. However, he pulled out the cash from his wallet, casually handing it over to his friend.

"Damn man, be a little more careful where you're waving that stuff." Steve hissed, quickly snatching it from his hands and putting it away.

"Oi, what are you two doing?" A teacher yelled, seeing the suspicious activity from afar.

Steve froze, his face full of panic.

Ken on the other hand looked way less guilty as he turned to a teacher he didn't recognize. "Morning Sir." He said politely, bowing slightly.

The teacher in his mid forties was slightly taken aback at the polite gesture and instantly seemed to calm down. However, his gaze moved to Steve who looked to be sweating bullets.

He let out a sigh, holding his hand out. "Hand over the drugs now and I won't involve the police."

"Drugs?" Ken was immediately bamboozled. How did the conversation move to such a subject out of nowhere?

Even Steve who was crapping his pants before, looked at the teacher with utter confusion. "Mr. Paul... I have no idea what you're talking about." He answered simply.

Seeing their reactions, the teacher could tell that they were being genuine, but something didn't seem right. "So what did you hand Steve just now?" Mr. Paul asked, sending an accusatory gaze towards Ken.

"I just gave him my joining fees for the Baseball team." Ken said simply, his poker face in full effect.

Steve's eyes widened a little in surprise, but he quickly managed to hide it. He hadn't expected Ken to lie, and so easily as well. If Steve didn't know about the situation, he might have even believed him.

Mr. Paul frowned, not knowing whether to believe him or not. Eventually, he decided to take the next step. He had a duty to ensure that no drugs were on school grounds, even if that meant taking things a step further.

"Alright, turn out your pockets, or we'll be heading to the principals office." He said, moving closer.

Ken let out a sigh, feeling it was a little harsh. However, he still complied.

After a few minutes, they were still taken to the school's office despite there being no signs of drugs on the two. The fact that two teenage students were exchanging such a large sum of money was concerning enough for Mr. Paul to escalate it.

Both Ken and Steve sat down, their expressions somber.

"Dude... This is because you were so suspicious." Ken stated, his tone carrying some blame.

Steve lowered his head, feeling a little bad at the misunderstanding. This day was meant to be a joyous occasion when he would finally be able to buy his car, but such a thing had happened.

Meanwhile, back at Ken's home, Yuki was busy cleaning around the kitchen after breakfast. Ken had only left around 45 minutes ago and Chris had likely arrived at work by now.

RING RING

Suddenly, the land line phone rang, causing her to raise an eyebrow. She had not really given out the number yet, so receiving a call was unexpected.

"Is that Mrs. Rodgers?" She mumbled, picking up the phone.

"Hello, this is the Takagi residence." She answered politely.

"Hi Mrs. Takagi, we have some news about your son Ken." The woman on the other line spoke, causing Yuki's face to turn up in worry.

"I—Is he okay?" She stammered, feeling her heart drop.

However, after a few minutes of conversation, her face turned up into a frown.

"Yes, I was there when Ken withdrew \$1000 from his own bank account. He said that he was going to give it to his friend Steve so that he could purchase a car today." She said sternly.

Her tone was curt enough for the woman on the other side to feel her annoyance.

"W—We're terribly sorry for the mix up Mrs. Takagi." She said, quickly hanging up on the other end.

Back in the school administration office, the receptionist hung up the phone abruptly and felt her face heat up in embarrassment. Her eyes moved to Mr. Paul, the one who had started this whole mess.

"Mr. Paul... Please tell Ken and Steve that they can go to class." She said, her self control barely in check.

"What? Wait, aren't you gonna tell the principal and get these two suspended?" He said, filled with confusion.

"Suspended? I just confirmed with Ken's mom that the money was indeed his own and not stolen. He also has a valid reason to be lending the money to Steve, in order to buy a new car."

"Huh?" However, the teachers face morphed a few moments later, "Wait, he lied! He told me that it was for joining fees for his baseball club. The stories don't match, we can't trust them." He said matter-of-factly.

"Jason! Send them to class." The lady said, almost yelling and drawing the eyes of the other receptionists to her.

Jason Paul almost jumped in fright. He wanted to retort, but it seemed that the shout had snapped him out of it.

"A—Alright." He said, agreeing reluctantly.

He walked out to the lobby of the administration building and saw the two teens waiting patiently. "Alright, you two head to class. I'll be keeping an eye on you guys from now on though." Mr. Paul said, his eyes showing his suspicions.

Steve breathed a sigh of relief, but Ken simply stood up and went to leave. He could understand why the teacher might have suspected something off, but it didn't mean he wasn't annoyed.

As Ken walked out the door, Steve quickly caught up with him.

"Man that was close..." he said, wiping the non-existent sweat from his brow.

However, noticing that Ken was silent, he queried him, "You okay man?"

"Mmm, I'm fine. But you owe me." He said simply.

"Huh? W—What do you want?"

Ken grinned, "Oh nothing much, I just need a new training partner."

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

Chapter 570 - 570: Status (2)

After school, Ken and Steve caught a bus and headed to the place where the car was. Steve got some more money from the ATM, prompting Ken to facepalm.

Couldn't he have just got his own money out here instead of bringing it to school? If he'd known then they wouldn't have gotten into all that mess this morning.

However, Ken didn't interrupt the clearly excited Steve as he counted the money in his hands. After he was satisfied, they walked into a used car dealership and made the transaction.

After only around 20 minutes, they received the keys and were set to go.

The car, or rather pickup truck was a red Chevrolet Silverado, complete with a tray and some obvious signs of rust. Ken felt that it was overly bigger than what he was used to, but he didn't have any complaints.

Steve sat in the drivers seat for a while, his hands moving over the steering wheel with glee. His eyes were sparkling, as if he'd been waiting for this moment for a long while.

Ken couldn't help but smile, seeing the pure joy in his friends expression.

"Alright, let's go!" He said, turning the key. The engine roared to life, bringing a wide smile to the guy's face.

Ken quickly put his seatbelt on, feeling a little nervous for some reason.

But surprisingly, Steve was a good driver. Apart from a few crunches of the gearbox, the ride was smooth enough.

They soon arrived back at the school. "Go chuck your bike in the back." He said, slapping the roof of the truck.

After he was done, the two drove to the same field they went to yesterday to participate in club training.

"You guys are late." Coach Wyatt said, sizing up the two. Inwardly he was a little worried that Ken might be one of those guys who didn't show up on time, however he quickly shook his head.

He had seen both Ken and Steve stay back after he'd left, so that shouldn't be the case.

Instead of harping on about it, he told them to quickly get ready. The team was already doing some drills on the field, mainly grounders and outfield training.

Once again, the training lasted for a little over an hour before everyone began to pack up. Both Latrell and Steve stayed back once more and decided to do some extra training with Ken.

Max watched as the trio began to work, his face expressionless. However, there was a certain unreadable look in his eyes. Eventually, he joined his other teammates and left the field.

By the end of the training, Latrell had already emptied the contents of his stomach. He had done his best to keep up with Ken's regime, however he suffered because of it.

'This is more intense than yesterday!' he screamed in his heart.

Steve on the other hand was doing his best to catch his breath. Though he equally had a hard time, it seemed that his stamina was ahead of Latrell's, but not by much.

Ken got curious after looking at the two and decided to use the Identify function on them both.

NAME: Latrell White

AGE: 18

TALENT ASSESSMENT: S

POTENTIAL: SS

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: SS

>Pitching: C

>Fielding: S+

>Game Intelligence: A

'Not bad...' Ken thought, reassessing the teen currently throwing up his guts. Despite the guy's physical fitness being graded at SS, it was likely that they were skewed further towards speed rather than stamina.

He turned his attention to Steve's figure who was collapsed on the ground.

NAME: Stephen Adams

AGE: 18

TALENT ASSESSMENT: S

POTENTIAL: EX

STATUS: Mirror Effect

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: S

>Pitching: C

>Fielding: SSS

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental: SS

Additional Information: Player is rather impressionable, almost to a fault. He will mirror the work ethic of those around him, good or bad.

Ken's eyes widened. The first thing he noticed was the EX rating for Steve's potential, meaning they both had the potential to be great. This was a huge surprise, who would have thought he would meet such a player in this town?

However, what he saw after left him flabbergasted.

'Status? I've never seen that before.' He frowned, 'And what's this mirror effect?'

It was only until he got to the final section that he started to understand. Sometimes the system will give an update on the personality or affliction of those who he used Identify on.

Wasting no time, Ken asked his trusty AI friend.

'Mika, what's this new section in the identify window?'

[Answer: A result of the new upgrade. User can now see if players are under a certain status if applicable, when using Identify.]

Ken nodded, he had thought as much. However, the fact that Steve had such a great potential was very surprising to him, especially since he hadn't ever heard of him in his previous life.

If his theory was correct about the EX grading being linked to the MLB level, then Steve should have been able to make it eventually.

But as Ken's eyes hovered over the additional information once more, he could already understand what happened. Just basing off his interactions with the Gladiators teammates, it was clear that they lacked the proper work ethic to achieve anything great.

Out of the 10+ other players, only Latrell was the one who stayed back with them for additional training. This was polar opposite to the situation in Japan where literally everybody in his team wanted to join in with him.

At first Ken thought it might just be a cultural thing, but it seemed like it was rooted deeper than he believed.

After all, not every baseball player would be motivated to turn professional. The odds were extremely slim, even if one put their all into training every waking moment.

His eyes lingered on Steve once more, a small smile approaching his lips.

'No need to worry about your work ethic when I'm around...'

Steve who was busy catching his breath suddenly felt a cold sweat run down his back for some reason.

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

Chapter 571 - 571: Elixirs (1)

Ken was laying in bed after his first week of school, staring at his new ceiling. Tomorrow he would be playing in a tournament with the Gladiators, his first official match since moving to America over a month ago.

He couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement, finally being able to play some organized baseball. From what he knew, they would be playing 3 games tomorrow and if they qualified, there would be a single elimination setting on Sunday.

While Ken was still struggling to remember the names of his teammates, he still had some faith in their abilities. Sure none of them wanted to train after practice, but most of them had sound fundamentals.

The Captain Max who played 3rd base was the clean-up hitter and was rather impressive, at least compared to others his age. Of course someone like Leo and Hiroki were a cut above him, but that wasn't a fair comparison.

Ken let out a sigh, thinking back to his first week. Apart from the boring classes, he had enjoyed hanging out with Steve both in school and outside. The two were almost inseparable, though he couldn't exactly replace his brother Daichi.

Thinking of his brother, Ken looked at his phone, not seeing any new notifications. He would often message Daichi and Ai back home, but the time difference was the most annoying.

The two were generally busy with either school or practice, and could only message at night. This conflicted with his own schedule, especially now that he'd started school and working out with the Gladiators.

'I should probably enter the Image Training tonight.' Ken thought to himself.

He had been putting it off for a while, taking advantage of Mika's sleep protocol once more. The past week's sleep had been the best he'd had ever, easily allowing his mental and physical fatigue to fade away.

'Hey Mika... I'm reluctant to take the Physical and Mental Elixirs.' Ken said in his mind, his true thoughts coming out.

[While the Elixirs may cause pain, they are completely safe.]

Hearing the monotonous response, Ken chuckled.

'I know that, but I'm just worried that I might be missing out on benefits by taking them now. I don't think that I've organically raised my physical grades more than 2 times in total.'

This was the truth. Despite having the Disciplinarian skill, he had only increased his physical grades a couple of times through his own hard work. After losing the system for 18 months, he was worried that he'd been relying on the Elixirs too much.

[...]

Mika was silent for a while, almost like she was thinking.

[Affirmative. User has been reliant on Elixirs to improve. But this is the reason why the system created the Elixirs, as a way to increase the user's bodily functions.]

Ken nodded, feeling like it made sense. However, what was the use in the Elixirs if their effects would disappear or diminish while the system was offline?

'I've been meaning to ask... Why did my fitness drop so much while the system was upgrading?'

[Please wait... Searching for analogy to ensure better comprehension...]

Ken blinked a few times, feeling as if his intelligence had just been insulted.

[If we consider the user as a game character, then the Elixirs can be considered as a buff. While the system is active, this buff will always be in effect.]

"...What?" Ken blurted out, not expecting such a response. He had agonized over this question for the better part of a year, creating theory after theory.

He even did research on muscle growth and the like, trying to get to the bottom of things from a biology standpoint. However, this response seemed far more simple, yet unbelievable at the same time.

'But that doesn't explain everything. Firstly, the Elixirs physically change my muscles, causing ridiculous amounts of pain. Secondly, how was I able to make breakthroughs when the system was offline?'

[Of course the Elixirs change your muscular structure. How else would the body be able to handle such a buff? The user would be injured almost immediately.]

"Ah..." Ken felt like he'd just been slapped in the face with this new realization. He couldn't help but inwardly chastise himself for his idiotic way of thinking in the past.

But that didn't explain the second part of the question.

[This "breakthrough" was likely a result of reaching one's limit, causing the remnant healing agent to disperse through the users body.]

A silence stretched out between the two as Ken stared at the ceiling, his face revealing just how stupid he felt.

With the missing pieces now found, Ken's mind began to extrapolate. Part of his theory about his muscle "Potential" being upgraded was backed up by Mika's words, which made him feel a little better.

But the crux of the matter was, the Elixirs were not something that he could fully rely on. He needed to attain his current level of fitness without them, if only to give him some peace of mind.

'Mika, if you were to remove the Elixir buffs on me right now, what would my physical grades be?' He asked, steeling his heart.

[Calculating...]

In the next moment a window appeared in front of him, causing a pitiful look to appear on Ken's face.

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. S+)

Balance and Coordination: S

Agility: S

Strength: S+

Stamina: SS-

In actuality, it wasn't as bad as he had expected. His balance and Coordination was the most affected, losing 4 grades, whereas the other three were only 2 grades behind.

Ken nodded, accepting his situation. Inwardly, Ken knew that it would have likely been a lot worse if he didn't actively train his butt off in the final 6 months before the system came back.

'If I wanted to achieve these grades by myself, would it be possible? And how long would it take?' He asked.

[Affirmative. As long as the user follows a set training plan, this should be achievable in 3 months of intensive workouts.]

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

Chapter 572 - 572: Elixirs (2)

Hearing this, Ken's eyes lit up.

'Thanks Mika, it really is good to have you back.' He said, wearing a genuine smile.

[...You're welcome.]

Ken let out a small sigh and tried to fire himself up. He had a feeling that the next 3 months were going to be hell, but if it meant reaching the goal he had set for himself, then nothing else mattered.

Plus, he had a loyal training partner that would join him on the journey. Just thinking about it brought a concerning smile onto his lips.

'Okay, let's take the Mental Elixir.'

Ken didn't even address what his mental grade would be without the Mental Elixirs. He knew that he had neither the time, nor the patience to increase this stat on his own, therefore he shamelessly sought to use the SSS-Grade Mental Elixir.

[Muting vocal chord functions... Standby.]

'Ah crap...'

As soon as he heard the monotonous voice of Mika in his mind, Ken instantly regretted his decision. A wave of anxiety attacked him from, activating his PTSD.

In the next moment, he was assaulted by a mind splitting headache. If he were to describe it, it would be like taking an Ax to the back of the head repeatedly.

Instantly, he felt nauseas. If Ken wasn't laying down he would have already fallen to the ground and likely begun emptying the contents of his stomach. His body began to seize and he ground his teeth back and forth, trying to hold onto his sanity.

He held on for dear life, facing the waves of pain which seemed to never relent. It felt like hours, no, days of torture. Ken opened his mouth, trying to let out a scream, as if it could ease his suffering even a little.

However, nothing but a soft breath came out, leaving him to suffer in silence. Just as the pain became unbearable, it slowly began to ease like a receding tide.

By the time he came to, Ken was already soaked in sweat. His mind felt like it was packed full of cotton, making everything feel fuzzy.

All he could manage was to slowly get up off the bed and turn the fan on before collapsing back on the bed. In a matter of moments, he was already asleep.

The next morning, Ken woke up in the same place that he fell asleep. He was drowsy for a few moments before a sudden clarity hit him.

He quickly opened up the system, seeing a flashing notification, begging for him to open it.

[Congratulations, Mental grade has increased by 3!]

USER STATS:

>Physical Fitness: SS

>Pitching: SSS+

>Fielding: A+

>Game Intelligence: A

>Mental: EX-

>Skills: 21

>Traits: 2

PHYSICAL FITNESS: (Avg. SS)

Balance and Coordination: SS+

Agility: SS-

Strength: SS

Stamina: SS+

Ken breathed out a sigh of relief, feeling that the pain had somewhat been worth it. Funnily enough, his first stat apart from his potential to reach the EX grade was his mental, something that was his lowest stat to begin with.

"Ken, your friend is here." Yuki called out, grabbing his attention.

"Oh crap, what time is it?" Ken mumbled, looking for his phone.

He quickly got dressed, grabbing his bag from the ground and heading out the door. Thankfully he had already packed his bag the night before, a habit he had picked up along the way.

The moment he walked out, he saw Steve's pick up truck out the front with him waving from the drivers seat.

Ken said goodbye to his parents and quickly headed out the door. If it were any other scenario he would have invited Steve in for breakfast, however they had quite a ways to travel this morning for the tournament.

"Mornin' sunshine." Steve said, wearing his usual grin. He seemed to be in a good mood, despite the 2 hour drive ahead of them so early in the morning.

"Morning." Ken jumped in the truck and got comfortable, placing his bag onto the back seat.

"We got a bit of a drive ahead of us, you want McDonald's on the way?"

"Sure, why not."

While Ken didn't often eat fast food, he could really use something greasy after what had happened last night.

"Ah, before I forget." Ken said, pulling out his wallet and taking out a \$20 note. He opened the center console and placed it inside.

"What are you doing?"

"Gas money."

"..."

"Wasn't our agreement for the loan that you wouldn't be paying for gas money?" Steve said incredulously.

Ken shook his head. "That was only for local training. You think I'd let you pay for a 4 hour round trip by yourself?" He chuckled darkly, "You must not think of me as a good friend."

Steve's eyes widened in surprise, but he shook his head in the next moment. "Alright, I yield." He said, holding his laugh. However, inwardly he was thankful at the kind gesture.

He drove off, leaving the quiet street behind quickly.

"Ya know, you kind of remind me of my Grandpa." He said off-handedly.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, he hands me money under the table and threatens to beat me up if I don't take it. He won't even let my mom find out."

"..."

"Hahaha!" Ken broke out into laughter, feeling his cheeks begin to cramp up right away.

The scene reminded him of his own Grandfather who completely bypassed his father to give him the money from one of his investment properties. Sure it was for a good reason, but the concept was the same.

"He sounds like a good guy." Ken stated, still amused.

"Mmm, he's the best."

The two picked up some breakfast on the way and made their way to San Antonio for the Perfect Game tournament.

Steve seemed to know his way around the roads, which meant that he had probably been to San Antonio before. Ken was thankful that he didn't have to drive, not that he could just yet anyway.

He had gotten his learners permit before joining school, but had yet to even drive.

After just under 2 hours, the duo arrived at Missions Baseball Academy. The first thing Ken noticed was the sheer amount of cars already present in the carpark.

Thankfully, they eventually found a park and alighted from the truck.

"You been here before?" Ken asked Steve, his eyes focused on the fields.

"Yeah, we generally come here in Spring and Fall." Steve replied, his gaze turning to Ken.

"You ready?"

"Of course..." Ken stated, his whole body oozing confidence.

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

Chapter 573 - 573: PG Tournament (1)

As the sun began to retreat from its peak in the sky, a dirty pickup truck pulled into the car park, its driver furiously looking for any available spaces. After a quick look, the guy drove up onto the curb and parked, putting his handbrake on.

The figure hopped out of the truck and stretched, revealing his large gut from beneath his shirt. At first glance, the checkered shirt, denim jeans, and leather boots was an easy indication that he was a Texas native—all he was missing was a cowboy hat.

Instead, he was wearing a Texas orange cap with a bull logo on its front.

"I'm getting too old for this..." He complained, stretching his protesting muscles. The two hour journey seemed to have affected his mood.

BUZZ BUZZ

"Damn it, give me a break." The guy cursed, pulling out his phone from his jeans.

"Whaddya want?" he asked grufly.

"Tex, how's the scouting going?"

The moment he heard the voice, Tex's expression changed slightly and his voice sounded more respectful thereafter.

"Ahem. I had some car troubles boss, I only arrived now." He responded.

He heard a sigh on the other line, but it seemed resigned.

"Get yourself a motel for the night after today's matches. You'll be staying for tomorrow's games as well."

Tex frowned, but he dared not question the person on the other line. All he could do was respond affirmatively before hanging up the call.

"I hope they got some good bars around here." He muttered, pulling up his pants slightly.

After locking up his truck, Tex walked towards the fields with almost negative enthusiasm. Despite his sour expression, his presence seemed to elicit excitement from both coaches and players when they saw him.

'What the hell?' Tex thought, finding it extremely odd. He was meant to be undercover as a scout, yet everyone was paying attention to him.

However, in the next moment he froze, his hands moving up to his head.

'DANG IT!' he shouted inwardly.

Upon his head was the official Texas Shorthorns cap, something that only players and staff were given. His face turned up in annoyance and he quickly made his way back to the pickup truck and threw it inside.

He pulled out his cowboy hat and placed it on his head, feeling a sense of both embarrassment and annoyance.

'The boss is gonna kill me.'

Thankfully, only a few people had seen him, however it was likely that this would spread by the end of the day. Letting out a sigh, Tex made his way back to the fields, completely ignoring those who had seen him earlier.

From the schedule he'd been given, there were currently 3 games going on at the moment, with teams from all over the state taking part.

Out of his bag, he pulled out the schedule.

'Gladiators vs Hawks on field 4... It only started around 45 minutes ago, so I'll start there.' He thought, placing the brochure back in his bag.

Tex casually made his way towards the field, trying to blend in with the passersby. Upon arriving, he casually looked up at the scoreboard and his eyes widened.

"15 to 6!?" He exclaimed in a small voice.

Since the game had only started 45 minutes ago, he was surprised to see such a scoreline. It was only the top of the 5th inning, yet the Gladiators were already ahead by 9 runs.

"Strikeout, changeover!"

Despite the situation, Tex quickly adjusted. As a scout with almost 20 years experience, he had seen almost everything that the sport had to offer.

Without a word, he moved over to one of the spectator seats and sat down, letting out a grunt. Due to his weight, the metal seat groaned slightly, causing those in the vicinity to glance his way.

Placing his bag on the ground, Tex pulled out a speed gun and a notepad. He had heard that the pitcher for the San Antonio Hawks was fast, so he needed to at least catalog some of his speeds.

However, upon seeing the score, he had lost a bit of faith in the information. Just how good could the pitcher be if he already gave up 15 runs.

"Pitcher change, Rob Thompson will be replacing Brian Dawson." The umpire stated.

'Ah, makes sense.' Tex nodded in understanding. It seemed that the Hawks had tried to save their pitcher's stamina, but now had no choice but to play him.

After the warm up throws, Rob threw his first pitch, a deadly fastball at the top of the strike zone.

Tex looked at the speed gun and nodded in satisfaction, writing down the number on his notepad. To see a 90mph fastball on the very first pitch was quite promising.

"Excuse me, are you a college scout?" A voice called from just behind him.

Tex's wrinkled face turned up in annoyance, however he turned around with a smile.

"Sorry bud, I'm with the local newspaper, doing an article on the Perfect Game Tournament." He replied in a chirpy voice.

The man who had asked the question initially seemed disappointed, however after hearing that he was from the media, his face lit up again.

"Oh fantastic, that's my son on the mound you see. If you have any questions or even want a one on one interview, just let me know!"

Tex resisted the urge to curse the man, almost instinctively crossing off Rob's name from his list. However, remembering what the GM had told him, Tex managed to keep his calm.

"I'll let you know, thanks."

He then turned his attention back to the game, grumbling something under his breath.

"Strikeout!"

Tex rolled his eyes. The idiot had caused him to miss the next two pitches, annoying him even further.

It was then that he saw a tall figure dressed in the white and blue uniform of the Gladiators walk onto the field. At a glance he could see the impressive height and toned frame of the teen, causing his eyes to widen in shock.

"Strike him out Rob!"

"You can do it Robby!"

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

Chapter 574 - 574: PG Tournament (2)

The Hawks crowd cheered for the pitcher, shouting out their well wishes. Even though they were obviously behind, what parent wouldn't still cheer for their child.

However, Tex's eyes were drawn to the figure approaching the batters box. The confident expression on his face and even the way he walked spoke of a true professional. There was something about him that screamed star power.

Instinctively, he pulled the speed gun up and aimed it at the strike zone, his instincts tingling. For some reason, it felt like the guy would definitely hit the ball.

After a few moments, the tall figure took his position and awaited the pitch. He didn't have to wait long before a 90mph rocket came flying towards the outside of the strike zone.

WHOOOOSH

DOOONG!

With a steady hand, Tex managed to catch the exit velocity of the ball as it was struck soundly by the metal bat. He took his eyes away from the speed gun and followed the ball that soared over the fence in the right outfield.

The Gladiators bench erupted with cheers, their faces showing pure joy.

"Game, set!"

Thanks to the home run, the Gladiators moved to 10 runs ahead and were given the win by way of the mercy rule.

Tex was silent for a few moments, still caught up in the huge home run that he'd just witnessed. His eyes moved to the speed gun and his eyes almost popped out of his head from fright.

"97mph!?" He shouted, quickly standing to his feet.

The father of the pitcher Rob Thompson almost squealed in excitement. "Really!? My boy threw a 97mph fastball??" All disappointment from losing the match was thrown out the window as he heard this number.

For a moment, his mind was filled with all of the college offers his boy would receive after news got out of his crazy pitching speed.

"What? No you idiot." Tex scowled, sending the guy a incredulous gaze.

"W—What?"

Ignoring the annoying guy, Tex's mind began to work in overdrive. To have such a strike and be in an 18U team, he should already be a well known prospect. However, he had never heard of anyone matching the guys description.

'I need to find out more information...!' Tex thought, his emotions in turmoil. If his guess was right and this guy had yet to be scouted, their team could get in early and pick up a great player without a struggle.

With this in mind, he placed his notepad and speed gun back in his bag and picked himself up from the chair. As if breathing a sigh of relief, the chair let out a groan once more.

He waited for the players to get off the field and directly approached the umpire who was busy chatting with some other officials.

"Hey, did you have the team lineups I can take a look at?" Tex asked politely, or at least what he thought was polite.

The umpire flashed him a look of annoyance, "Look buddy, it's been a long day."

Tex sighed and leaned forward, saying something in a low voice. Only then did the umpire's eyes light up a little, "Ah sure thing man, why didn't you say so?"

Feeling a little embarrassed, the guy walked over to the scorers table and procured a piece of paper, handing it to him.

"Thanks." Tex replied, "Which one was that guy who just hit the home run?"

"Ah, I think that's Ken Taka or something." The umpire replied.

"Mmm, thanks again for your help."

With that, Tex turned around and quickly pulled out his phone. The first person that he called was his boss who had been on his ass since earlier.

"Tommy, I found a gem. The kid hit a bomb home run with a 97mph EV."

"What!?! You sure he's not a prospect already?" Tommy replied with a hint of disbelief.

"I'm telling you man, I've never heard of the kid. But his batting is just next level." Tex continued, disregarding his boss's reservations.

"Hmm, alright. Send me through the details and I'll get back to you."

With that, Tommy hung up the phone.

Meanwhile, Ken was packing up his gear with the rest of the team, unaware of the stir that he'd caused on the sidelines. Despite him playing in 3 games, he was a little dissatisfied.

'I thought there would be more competition.' He thought.

Out of 3 games, he'd only pitched in the first 2, amassing a grand total of 100 pitches. That was only an average of 50 pitches per game.

Ken, who was used to pitching 200 a day, felt as if he hadn't even warmed up properly. However, he dared not to voice his complaints, especially since the rest of the team seemed to be in good spirit.

"Bro, at this rate you're gonna carry us to the championship." Steve said, placing a hand on Ken's shoulder.

"It was a team effort." Ken replied modestly. In actuality, the batters on the Gladiators team were rather good at getting onto base.

With both him and Max playing at 3rd and 4th batter respectively, they were in great positions to put runs on the board.

"Very true, if it weren't for my leads then you might have even given up some runs." He replied, sending Ken a wink.

Ken scoffed, "Yeah, of course."

"Hahaha."

In a great mood, the team left the field, followed by the wildly grinning Coach Wyatt.

"Excuse me coach, have you got a moment."

The coach swiveled on the spot, his mustache flapping in the wind. It was clear from his expression that he was pleased as punch. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me more about your player Ken Taka?"

"Ken Taka? Do you mean Ken Takagi?" The coach replied, however, he instantly figured out why someone would be asking.

"Ah, that must be it."

"Well, I'm assuming you're a scout, I'd be happy to tell you all I know. As soon as I first saw Ken pitch, I knew that scouts would be knocking at the door right away." Coach Wyatt replied matter-of-factly.

However, Tex's face turned up in confusion, "Pitch? I'm talking about the guy who just hit that home run..."

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

Chapter 575 - 575: Texas BBQ (1)

Coach Wyatt patiently explained the scenario to the slack-jawed Tex. In truth, he was doubting his initial assumption that the man before him was a scout, especially since he seemed to know next to nothing about Ken.

'Did he even watch him play?' He thought, raising an eyebrow.

Tex didn't reply for the longest time, letting an awkward silence flow between them.

"Well, I better get going." Coach Wyatt said, breaking the silence.

"W—Wait, what time do you guys play tomorrow?" Tex asked, his facial expression seeming a little desperate.

"8am tomorrow morning." He replied, not waiting for a response. Coach Wyatt quickly jogged away, his mustache bouncing with every step.

Watching his retreating figure, Tex stood in place, his mind working. Originally he had planned to check out the local bars tonight, but he now thought differently.

BA-BUMP

His hand moved up to his heart, feeling it almost beat out of his chest. Tex couldn't help but replay the scene of that home run in his head over and over. He hadn't felt this kind of way for such a long time.

Without another word, he walked back to his truck, his mind still preoccupied. In a daze, Tex didn't even notice the parking ticket slipped under his windshield wipers. As he hit the road, it flew off, never to be found again.

Soon after, he checked into a motel close by and got his laptop out, placing it onto the desk. There was only one thing on his mind right now, finding out who Ken Takagi was.

After hearing the situation from the Gladiators coach, he knew that there was no way Ken was an unknown player. But the question was, what was he doing here?

He opened up a search engine and typed in the name. The first thing that came up was t an Anime character, causing him to frown in response.

Since he wasn't great with computers, Tex fiddled around for a while before narrowing down the search.

"Ken Takagi baseball high school... That should do." He muttered, typing slowly with two fingers.

Finally, he discovered what he had been looking for.

"Genius 15 year old pitcher throws 100mph and a perfect game at prestigious Summer Koshien..." Tex's eyes widened as he read the headline of the article. His eyes scanned the text, excitement building with every passing moment.

He continued on, seeing the related articles.

"U18 World Cup MVP overcomes the US in enemy territory..."

Tex was amazed. Just what kind of player had he stumbled across?

However, his face turned up in question at the next article he encountered which seemed to be a hit piece on Ken.

"Overrated prodigy exposed, the downfall of Ken Takagi."

This time there was a video attached. Tex spent the next 15 minutes going through the footage, only for his brow to furrow. From what he could see, his pitching was rather flat and predictable, despite the decent speed.

"Is this why he's not a prospect? Too inconsistent?" He mumbled, deep in thought.

By the end of the video, Tex felt his enthusiasm wane slightly. But then he remembered that he was initially drawn to Ken's batting ability, causing his features to soften.

"We'll see what happens tomorrow." Tex lifted his arms, stretching slowly.

Ken stared at the huge plate that was plopped in front of him with wide eyes. There was 4 different kinds of meats that he couldn't identify alongside mac and cheese and some greens.

As someone from Japan, every dish he ate growing up was accompanied by rice. Seeing such a spread was both intriguing and at the same time confusing.

"What, you've never had Texas Barbecue before?" Steve asked, his mouth already full of food.

Ken watched on as juices from the meat began to run down his chin, yet the guy stared at him unabashedly, as if the scene was normal. After a moment, Ken shook his head, feeling out of his depths.

'I just want rice...' He thought.

"That's ribs, brisket, sausage, and turkey. The turkey can be a little dry sometimes but it makes up for it with flavor. Go on, try it." Steve said between mouthfuls, wielding his greasy fingers and pointing to the food on his plate.

If he was honest, Steve's wet lips and terrible table manners had affected his appetite a little, but he didn't want to appear rude. Gulping slightly, Ken picked up one of the slices of turkey and took a bite.

He chewed a few times, only for his face to light up in surprise. There was a smoky and rich flavor that assaulted his taste buds, making them sing out in praise.

Steve grinned, nodding his head slowly. "You're in Texas now bud, ya better eat like a Texan."

Ken disregarded his friends words, his appetite once again roaring to life. He grabbed a knife and fork and dug in, going to flavor town with every single bite he took.

"Oi, whose usin' cutlery at a Barbecue joint?" Nico Daniels the shortstop called out, resulting in the whole table turning to look at Ken.

"Hahaha look at Ken, you'd think he hadn't eaten in days." Max called out, eliciting a few rounds of laughter.

Ken sent the people a brief look before turning his attention back to the delicious food in front of him. The smoky flavors were far too addictive for him to ignore right now.

Having now been in the Gladiators for a week, Ken had been a little skeptical of his teammates. At some points it felt like they were ostracizing him, or at least wary of his presence.

In fact, it wasn't until after the first game today that he felt like they were warming up to him.

Max was the first to clear the air, having become a lot more chummy towards him earlier today. Inwardly, Ken knew that it likely had to do with his performance on the field.

Once they saw he was not arrogant and could actually play, it was as if they had lowered their guards.

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

Chapter 576 - 576: Texas BBQ (2)

"Hey, if the Ace wants to eat with a knife and fork to keep his fingers clean, there's nothing wrong with that." Latrell spoke up for Ken, sending him a nod.

"Ay? I just clean my fingers like this." Steve said, sucking the juices of his fingers exaggeratedly, making some rather odd noises in the process.

Ken almost dropped his cutlery, staring at the guy as if he had two heads.

This only caused the table to erupt into laughter. It was a rather odd affair, almost as if the team was coming closer together in this short span of time.

Coach Wyatt saw the scene and couldn't help but smile widely, his mustache mirroring the shape of his lips. If one squinted, they would find an uncanny resemblance to the Cheshire cat.

His eyes landed on Ken with mixed emotions. He had been coaching for almost 15 years, yet this kid was the most talented he'd come across, especially at the tender age of 18.

Having been an NCAA player for 4 years during college and going undrafted, he played around in the minor leagues for a few years before calling it quits. If it wasn't for his undying love of the sport, he would have left it behind for good.

'This is why I do it...!' He thought.

It wasn't often that he became sentimental, but finding such a player really stoked something from within him. Even if it had only been a week, he could feel the drive and determination from Ken, something that he wished he possessed.

"Coach, has the schedule been released for tomorrow?"

A voice snapped him out of his reverie, bringing him back to reality. "Ah, yes. I'll email it to you."

The next morning, Ken woke up at 5am sharp and could hear the soft snores of his roommates. It was still dark, but his great eyesight managed to cut through and locate his friend.

Ken walked over to the sleeping figure and nudged him, "Time for our morning run." He said softly. After receiving no response, he began to nudge harder, only to see the guy stir awake.

Steve opened his eyes slowly, staring up at the figure who had awoken him. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust, but what he saw made him jump in fright, dumping adrenaline into his system.

He gawked in horror at the devious smile that stared at him through the darkness.

Steve did the sign of the cross, whispering a prayer for protection from the demon who had appeared in his room.

"Dude... Stop messing around and get dressed. We're going for a run." Ken said, raising his eyebrow in question. With that, he moved towards the door, unaware of the fear he'd just invoked in his friend.

It took Steve another minute to calm his beating heart and understand what had happened. He was not really a morning person at the best of times, yet he still followed Ken, albeit like a man who was being sent to the gallows.

However, once they started their run, Steve began to get into it. He wasn't opposed to things like this, but he was never really pushed to do so, nor did he have the motivation to do it himself.

'I could get used to this.' He admitted, getting into a rhythm.

"Alright, warm up is over. Let's start the workout." Ken said beside him, instantly kicking it up a gear.

"Huh!?" Steve saw the guy's figure pull ahead at a fast pace, causing him to almost curse under his breath. It was clear that his expectation of a light morning run was not what Ken had in mind.

He did his best to catch up, but Ken's figure seemed to get farther and farther away from him. It was only after around 30 minutes that he saw the guy stopped in the middle of the pathway, waiting for him.

Upon arriving, Steve bent down with his hands on his knees and began to suck in deep breaths. He didn't even address Ken, focusing on his own flailing lungs and lack of oxygen.

Only after almost a minute did he look up, only to see the tall guy looking around with a weird expression on his face.

"What is it?"

"Mmm... I have no idea where we are."

"..."

"HUH!?" Steve blurted out incredulously. He had been so focused on trying to catch Ken's figure that he hadn't paid attention to any of the twists and turns they encountered along the way.

Not only this, the sun was not even out yet, but they were now lost.

"I guess we'll just turn around and hope for the best." Ken said, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

Before Steve could retort or even properly catch his breath, Ken began to run back the way they had come from.

"W—Wait for me!"

Almost an hour later, Ken finally arrived back at the motel they were staying at and nodded in satisfaction. Thankfully, he managed to ask another person on their morning jog for directions.

Ken waited out the front, completing his usual cooling down stretches. All up he estimated they ran around 12 miles which was more than what he would run back in Japan.

Of course, this wasn't intentional, just that he'd taken a few... Detours.

Around 10 minutes later, a figure appeared from the pathway, his every step sending sweat flying onto the ground. The sound of heavy panting filled Ken's ears as he watched the sorry figure of Steve arrive.

"What... The... Hell man..." Steve spoke in between his gasps for breath. However, he seemed to be far too tired for any sort of confrontation, collapsing onto the ground in the next moment.

Ken shook his head, feeling a sense exasperation as he looked at the sorry figure before him.

'Will he even be able to keep up with the Mika's training plan?' Ken said inwardly, having his doubts. This past week could be considered a test, however, the real training would start after the tournament.

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

Chapter 577 - 577: Tournament Day 2 (1)

After a quick shower and some breakfast, the team left the motel and made their way back to the Academy. The mood was jolly, likely a result from their performances the day prior.

Ken and Steve got out of the red Silverado, heading towards the field they were playing on. Since it was the second day, only 6 teams with the best record had made it through to the single elimination round.

"You all good man?" Ken asked, his gaze moving to Steve's obviously fatigued figure.

Steve groaned in response, his knees buckling every now and then. Ken would have laughed if they didn't have to play a possible 3 games today.

"Steve, what's wrong with you?" Coach Wyatt's voice asked, prompting the two to look in his direction.

However, it was as if a switch was flipped. Steve suddenly stood up straight, puffing out his chest and letting out an awkward laugh. "Ha Haha, nothing coach! Just a little tired is all." He responded quickly.

Coach Wyatt raised his eyebrow, a suspicious look creeping onto his face. "Well you better wake up, we're against the Panthers first up. With the exception of Ken, their pitcher is the best in this tournament."

Ken's ears perked up, his curiosity piqued. Unlike the baseball he played in Japan where film study was a regular occurrence, it seemed like this team did not have such a practice.

"What's he like?" Ken asked.

"He can pitch around 93mph and has a wicked change up. I have a feeling it might be a pitchers duel." Coach Wyatt responded, however he didn't seem too worried. In fact, the guy was giving him an expectant look.

"It doesn't matter, as long as we can score one run, the game is ours." Max seemingly appeared out of nowhere, his confident tone surprising Ken.

It seemed that the guy had quite the opinion of Ken.

"He's right. We just need to keep playing like we have been and the tournament is ours." This time it was Steve who piped up, building on the confident words of his Captain.

Ken shook his head, letting out a small chuckle. He didn't mind the vote of confidence, but there was never a sure thing in baseball.

Eventually, they made their way to the 2nd field and placed their things on the bench. The game was starting at 8am which gave them around 20 minutes to warm up and begin their drills.

When it was time for the game to start, Ken felt a little odd. He was still not used to forgoing the bowing tradition that he was so used to in Japan.

"Gladiators will be batting first." The umpire announced.

Ken took a seat and watched as the pitcher for the Panthers came up to the mound. The guy had brown skin and large shoulders with a bit of a stomach. He kind of reminded Ken of Gustavo, the Cuban pitcher he met at the U18 World Cup.

As they went through the warm up throws, Steve spoke up beside him. "That's the guy, Alex Vega. I heard he's already got a few college offers."

Ken nodded, paying close attention to the guy's movements. His throwing action was rather quick, almost as if he was only sliding forward with his lead leg. Sometimes, timing like this could throw the batter off, giving him less time to react to the pitch.

"He seems decent." Ken replied. Though his words might sound a little arrogant, he had played against the best U18 players in the world.

"Good luck Nico."

"Get on base for us!"

Nico Daniels the lead-off batter for the Gladiators walked up to the batters box, his expression taciturn. His eyes scanned the pitcher, but there was no hint of hesitation in his gaze, only determination.

Ken nodded in approval. There was no point in being afraid of this pitcher, worry and dread would only weigh on a player and cause them to perform poorly.

"Play ball!"

With the umpires shout, a few cheers rang out from the spectators and the game was underway.

The atmosphere quickly turned tense as Alex's whole demeanor seemed to shift. His expression was fierce, as if he was about to enter a life or death bout against his opponent.

His large body skipped forward, sending the first ball rocketing towards the outstretched glove of the catcher.

PAH

The action was so quick that Nico didn't have a chance to react in time. This was the advantage of his short wind-up, disrupting the timing of the batter.

"Strike."

Like that, the first strike came quickly, causing a few murmurs to sound out in the crowd. There was no screen showing the speed of the pitch, but the spectators could easily see that it was fast.

"Nice pitch Alex!" The catcher called out, sending the ball back to him.

A small grin crept onto the pitcher's face as he received the ball. If Ken was close enough to see it, he would have felt the disdain painted on the pitcher's face.

PAH

The next pitch arrived just as quick as the last one, once again finding the open glove of the catcher with no interruptions on its path.

"Strike."

This time, Nico's face morphed slightly. It was the second time that he'd allowed the ball to pass without swinging, giving up another easy strike. Nothing made him more annoyed than this, after all, it was his job as the lead-off batter to get onto base.

He gripped the bat tightly and took up his position once more, a fire dancing in his eyes.

Alex scoffed inwardly at the display, his arrogance barely hidden beneath the surface. In his mind, a sub-par player in a regional tournament had no way of hitting his pitches, it was just absurd thinking about it.

The only reason he was playing in this tournament was to attract more offers from College programs, otherwise he wouldn't have bothered attending.

With his confidence sky high, Alex shot forward and threw another fastball, aiming for the outside of the strike zone.

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

Chapter 578 - 578: Tournament Day 2 (2)

Nico's eyes lit up, his body roaring into action.

WHOOOSH

DING

The ball shot along the ground with speed, heading into the gap between first and second base. Nico quickly discarded his bat and ran towards first base, safely arriving as the outfielder collected the ball.

"Nice hit Nico!"

On the mound, Alex clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Lucky hit." He muttered, kicking the dirt on the mound as he turned back around. It seemed that getting hit in the first at-bat had wounded his pride.

Nico on the other hand looked pleased as punch as he stood upon first base.

Unbeknownst to anyone, there were a couple of scouts in the audience right now, their attention on the pitcher. Despite his pitch getting hit, they didn't seem too affected with some taking notes and others watching Alex's reactions.

Having your pitches hit in any level of competition was part of the job. However, it was how one recovered after being hit that these scouts were focused on.

As if knowing their thought process, Alex proceeded to pitch wonderfully in the next at-bat. Latrell swung three times, missing every time, leading to the out.

"Don't mind Latrell." Ken said as the guy walked past him.

"Mmm, hit it big for me." The guy said, flashing him a smile.

"Let's go Ken!"

"Hit us a homer!"

The Gladiators seemed to light up as Ken went up to bat, their voices rising as they shouted out words of encouragement. Even Coach Wyatt paid close attention, his eyes wide in anticipation.

As Ken walked up to the batters box, his eyes moved to Nico who had a lead on first base. His eyes were almost screaming at him, like he wanted to steal a base.

But Ken shook his head, gesturing for the guy to stay put. In his mind, there was no point in stealing a base, not when he planned on sending the ball out of the field.

"Heh, good idea sending your runner back. He would have been an easy out if he tried." The catcher said behind Ken, his voice filled with haughtiness.

Ken ignored him, going through his pre-hit ritual. He tapped the plate and toe of his cleats with the bat before getting into position. Due to his height, the bat was elevated, hanging like an executioner's blade ready to reap the life of the ball.

Seeing that he was ignored, the catcher's face fell. However, in the next moment a grin crept onto his features as he called for the next ball. He held the glove close to Ken's chest, asking for an inside fastball.

Alex merely nodded, scratching his nose before getting into position. He briefly looked at 3rd base before skipping forward with his lead leg and sending the ball flying towards the spot.

Ken's eyes narrowed as he saw the ball's trajectory. It only took a few moments to understand what was happening.

With the reflexes of a cat, he leaned backwards, the ball barely missing his chest and entering the glove of the catcher.

PAH

"Ball."

Ken looked at the catcher who was snickering to himself. It seemed that he was quite pleased with how the first pitch had turned out.

Without a word, Ken stepped back into the batter's box with an unreadable expression. His poker face skill was activated, but inwardly he had already sentenced the guy to death.

His gaze locked onto Alex on the mound, waiting for the next pitch. As long as the next pitch was remotely close to the strike zone, Ken would swing for the fences.

The guy picked up the rosin bag and swished it around a few times in his hand, causing some white dust to fly into the air. He dropped it a few moments later, and let out a deep breath.

Once again he looked towards 3rd base briefly before shooting into action. The pitching motion was rather brilliant, efficiently making use of his larger body to squeeze out the maximum velocity without putting pressure on his joints.

If this was another time, Ken might appreciate the pitching form. However, there was only one thing on his mind in this moment.

Ken's muscles rippled as he planted his front foot and twisted his body. Starting from his base, the power traveled upwards, amplified by the torque of his movements. The air displacement from his metal bat created an almighty noise, like the thunders of a typhoon.

WHOOOOOSH

DOOOONG!

The ball was hit cleanly with the center of the bat, creating a metallic whine that seemed to echo loudly in everyone's ears. It was so loud that even the spectators on the other fields could hear it clearly.

Ken watched as the ball flew into the outfield, soaring above the heads of the fielders and slowly disappearing into the horizon. He then turned to the catcher briefly, as if to see what kind of expression the guy would make.

After a moment, he let out a small scoff and placed the bat down gently before embarking on his victory lap around the bases.

"Y—YEAH KEN!"

Steve shot up out of his seat, cheering with all of his might. He had seen the interaction with the catcher and stifled a laugh, as a catcher himself, he almost felt sorry for the guy... Almost.

Steve's shout snapped the audience members out of their reverie. They had been too shocked at the ridiculous home run that they had forgotten to clap and cheer for the amazing play.

The few scouts in the audience were gobsmacked, their eyes glued onto the tall figure now casually jogging around the bases. Yet a few moments later they were all digging through their files, as if to find out who this person was.

A figure which looked out of breath arrived next to the field, carrying his bag. The moment he laid eyes on the field and saw Ken running around the bases he cursed.

"Damn, I missed it." He said, rubbing his face in annoyance.

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

Chapter 579 - 579: Scouts (1)

Ken arrived at home plate, his eyes falling upon the catcher once more. He wordlessly stepped on the plate before turning towards his own bench, there was no need to say any words since he'd let his actions do the talking.

The opposing catcher on the other hand, felt his face heat up in embarrassment. His earlier cocky attitude had been rescinded after being taught a lesson.

There was something about the guy's gaze that had made him feel weak and insignificant, as if he was being stared at by someone who was leagues above him. His antics earlier only seemed to be child's play to the guy.

After staring at Ken's retreating figure for a few moments, he turned his attention to Alex on the mound who looked as if he'd swallowed a lemon. It was obvious that he hadn't expected to be hit so easily, in the first inning at that.

As someone who knew his pitcher well, a wry smile appeared on his face. The hit to Alex's ego would be noticeable and he would come out firing from now on.

'Let's hope he can control himself.' The catcher said in his heart.

"Holy crap man, that was huge." Nico, who was waiting for Ken near home plate exclaimed, his face full of excitement. He was almost like a puppy, jumping up and down.

"Thanks. Nice work getting on base." Ken replied, sending him a small smile.

"Hey, no probs, it's my job." Nico pointed to his chest with his thumb, clearly happy receiving the compliment from Ken.

On his way back to the bench, Max had already begun his warm up, his bat giving off a crisp noise as it swung through the air.

"Nice homer." He stated, holding up his hand for a high five.

"Keep it going." Ken quipped, slapping the guy's hand with a grin.

In the audience, the few scouts in attendance were going crazy trying to get information. One of them even had their laptop out, typing away furiously in order to do their research on Ken.

These scouts were originally here for Alex, but he was quickly forgotten as Ken showed off his batting prowess. They completely ignored the next two at-bats in which no hits were made, too focused on researching.

"Changeover!"

With the umpires words, the Gladiators walked onto the field, ready to face the Panthers' batting line up. Steve was already in his gear, but he was walking a bit gingerly.

Ken let out a chuckle, nudging him with his elbow. "You good?"

Steve let out an annoyed sigh, "Yeah, after squatting all day yesterday and that ridiculous run this morning, my legs are a bit shaky"

"You'll be fine. In 3 months time you'll be used to it." Ken replied simply, heading towards the mound.

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" Steve said, now frozen in place.

However, Ken continued on his way, waving him off.

A feeling of dread and foreboding crept up on Steve, making him feel vulnerable. Remembering the smiling demon who woke him up this morning, he couldn't help but say another small prayer under his breath.

"Eh!? He's pitching?" One of the scouts happened to look up and see the guy they were researching standing upon the mound, juggling the rosin bag in his hand.

The exclamation was loud enough that others could hear in the audience, prompting the other two scouts to pay attention. They were as mystified as the initial scout, not understanding what was going on.

A figure with a bulging belly approached, his voice getting one of the scouts attention.

"You don't know who that is do you?" He asked, his tone sounding exasperated.

The scout turned around, only to recognize the figure. "Tex?" His face changed a few times, "It seems you know who he is, care to enlighten me?"

Tex sighed, his head filled with mixed emotions. Upon doing his research last night, he knew that there was no way Ken would remain undetected, not with his skill level.

Whether or not he wanted to divulge his information, it would only be a matter of time before Ken's name circulated throughout all of the college scouts. He believed that this guy would be far more sought after than even Ryan Smith.

"Do you remember the U18 World Cup 2 years ago?" He said softly.

The man frowned, trying to remember. However, this prompt seemed to be all he needed as the gears began to click inside his mind.

"Wait... He's that guy? Ken... something."

"Takagi. The one who pitched against us in the finals and absolutely ran through our ranks." Tex replied, his voice wispy. He stared at Ken's figure on the mound and felt a sense of loss.

"Wait, what's he doing here in the PG Tournament? Wasn't he from Japan?" The scout asked incredulously. The fact that he was in America, in a small Texas tournament at that was quite hard to believe.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Tex shrugged, "I only saw him batting yesterday and he blew me away. From what I read online he's been struggling with his pitching ever since the World Cup."

Hearing this information, the scout frowned. The first thing that came to his mind was an injury, something far too common for teens who had pitched from a young age.

"Well, he's an absolute gun with a bat in his hand. Even if his pitching is garbage he'll still get plenty of offers as a batter." The scout replied matter-of-factly.

"Mmm. Mind if I sit here?" Tex asked, pointing to the empty chair next to him.

"Go for it ."

As Tex's large figure sat down, the metal seat groaned in protest, however it remained strong. It was clear that whoever built the seating was quite thorough in their job.

With that, Tex pulled out his speed gun from his bag and lined it up to measure Ken's pitches. While he didn't have a lot of faith in the guys pitches, it didn't hurt to get a read on them.

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

Chapter 580 - 580: Scouts (2)

Unaware of the scouts talking about him, Ken just completed his warm up throws and sent a thumbs up to the umpire.

The guy gestured for the lead-off batter to come up, and clapped his hands.

"Play ball."

The first batter was an athletic looking teen whose brown hair could be seen sticking out of his helmet. He was around 6'1 and seemed to be the speedy type, much like Riku whom he'd played with in the U18 team.

Thinking of Riku, Ken's mind began to wander. 'I wonder what that guy is doing these days.' He thought, reminiscing.

However, Ken shook his head, he needed to pay attention.

'Wait, I haven't used showdown yet. Maybe I should try now?'

After having pitched in 2 games yesterday, there was no point where he felt the need to use showdown. Even with his regular pitches, no one could touch the seams of the ball.

[Would user like to activate Showdown on opposition player: Troy Knight?]

'Yes please.' Ken responded politely.

[Confirmed. Activating Showdown.]

With Mika's words, Ken felt his entire body heat up in response. The euphoric sensation of his muscles being filled to the brim with strength caused a smile to break out onto his face.

'Ah I missed this feeling.' He said inwardly, turning his attention to the batter in front of him.

Troy on the other hand, suddenly felt a cold sweat run down his back as he looked at Ken on the mound. For some reason, a dreadful aura appeared from the mound, causing him to feel greatly intimidated.

It wasn't just Troy, everyone in attendance seemed to feel a change.

However, before anyone could voice their concerns, Ken began his pitch.

He swung his leg upwards before kicking off with his back leg and opening his hips. With practiced ease, he strode forward, his arm whipping past and sending a rocket-like ball towards the strike zone.

Ken felt his muscles contract, perfectly executing the movements with even more power than he was used to. His eyes lingered on the ball while he followed through, dissipating his momentum expertly.

Steve's eyes widened in horror as the monster pitch flew towards him with reckless abandon. He had thought that after catching Ken's pitches for most of yesterday that he would be used to them, however this one felt completely different.

The ball seemed to be alive, slithering through the air like a snake as it made its way towards him, ready to bear its fangs and complete the strike.

PAH!

Steve felt a shock run up his arm from the impact, almost forcing him onto his backside. He stared wordlessly at Ken, his mind in turmoil.

"S-Strike!"

The shout seemed to have brought him back to the present, allowing him to breathe once more. It had been rather terrifying being on the other end of that pitch, he couldn't imagine facing it in the batters box.

He looked up at the batter, only to see the guy's face visibly pale. It was as if the guy had seen the face of death itself, only to be spared at the very last moment.

Tex's jaw was slack as he watched on from the audience, his eyes on Ken. The sound of the ball entering the catchers glove was so loud that it still echoed in his ears even now.

"102mph!?" The voice of the scout next to Tex exclaimed in shock, looking at the speed gun.

"Eh?" Tex looked down at his speed gun and also saw the 3 digits staring back at him. His mind took a few moments to process it, but the truth was looking at him right in the face.

"Is that thing regulated?" The scout asked softly, pointing to his speed gun.

Tex gulped before nodding, "It was calibrated yesterday at Texas University..." He stated.

An interesting expression appeared on the guy's face as he stared at Tex. "Are you sure he struggled pitching over the past year?" There was a clear sense of disbelief or rather incredulity in his tone.

Tex couldn't help but shrug his shoulders, at this point he didn't know what to believe anymore. Although he did plenty of research last night, he was not prepared for Ken's level of skill today, once again proving that he would be a sought after prospect.

"We have to get him..." The scout said, his eyes lighting up. "We could use a pitcher like him next year."

However, at these words, Tex sent him a weird look. "He's only a Junior..."

"A Junior!?" If he was shocked before, the scout was now in utter disbelief. What kind of Junior was 6'4 and could pitch over 100mph? Not to mention bat like an absolute beast.

Unaware of the stir he had caused in the audience, Ken rolled his shoulders, smiling inwardly. The pitch he'd just thrown with showdown had felt insane. His pitching action had never felt as fluid before, nor filled with so much strength.

The next pitch was another fastball, once again finding its mark without issue. Troy seemed too spooked to even swing at the ball, as if he'd already given up.

There was something about facing such a ball that instinctively made him shy away. All it could take was a small slip of the fingers and he would be straight to the hospital with a broken bone or even concussion.

This fear seemed to take over as the final ball went straight down the middle with a half-hearted swing in response.

"Strikeout!"

The moment the umpire called the strikeout, Ken felt the strength rescind from his body like a retreating tide. His muscles still felt a little hot, but not enough to affect him, just enough to be a little uncomfortable.

'I'll need to work on my muscles more so I can stay in showdown longer.' Ken thought.

Remembering how he had felt after using showdown for so long against Leo in the World Cup, Ken could only smile wryly. If he was forced to do so for an extended amount of time, he would be as good as finished on the mound for the rest of the game.

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