

# Major League System

## Chapter 581 - 581: Dirty Play (1)

Around an hour and a half later, the score was sitting at 4-0 in favor of the Gladiators. However, the team currently in the lead looked stifled, as if they'd swallowed a lemon.

If someone had just arrived at the game, they might be confused about the atmosphere.

Ken walked up to the batters box, wearing his poker face. Instead of doing his pre-hit ritual like he usually did, Ken merely placed the baseball bat on his shoulder and stared at the pitcher.

Alex completely ignored him, sending a looping throw close to 10 feet away from the strike zone.

"Ball."

Ken let out a sigh, feeling his boredom reach an all-time high. This was now the 3rd time he'd been walked, something that he could never get used to experiencing no matter how many times it happened.

There were a few jeers from the audience, but Alex simply blocked it out. After getting hit by Ken soundly in the first inning, he'd completely given up fighting against the guy, a sentiment he shared with his catcher.

However, just because he didn't allow him to hit, didn't mean that the guy wasn't annoying when on base either. In the second innings he'd managed to steal 2 bases and get into a scoring position quite easily.

Alex frowned in contemplation. It was as if he needed to pick his poison, a devastating home run, or getting made to look like a fool around the bases.

'I hate this guy...' He said inwardly before sending another ball.

A few throws later, Ken flung the bat to the side and made his way to first base once more.

"We meet again friend." Ken said to Troy, the unfortunate soul who had faced his showdown pitches.

The guy nodded, not saying a word in response. Troy seemed to harbor a grudge towards Ken, but seeing his imposing figure caused him to think twice before saying anything.

'At least I can practice my base running.' Ken thought, loosening up his legs.

He looked at the scoreboard, noting that it was the top of the 9th inning. There was a good chance that it would have already ended if he hadn't been walked all this time.

On the other hand, the game reaching a full 9 innings meant that he could pitch for a lot longer. But the only issue was that it didn't really feel like a game of baseball, at least to Ken.

There was something that was missing, leaving a bit of a bad taste in his mouth.

'Why does it feel so... boring?' He thought.

[Answer: User's skill level is too high for this level of competition.]

Mika's words suddenly breached his mind, causing his eyes to widen in realization. He was a little skeptical at first, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed to be true.

But it was also something more.

When he thought back to the tournaments he'd competed in before, they all had high stakes. Prefecture tournament, Summer Koshien, Jingu Tournament, Senbatsu, not even mentioning the U18 representative baseball he had played.

Besides the latter, the rest of the tournaments were cutthroat. A single loss would mean elimination, creating a sense of danger and excitement that he had gotten used to.

Every game was a must win, therefore even the blowout games were considered a great achievement. Even now he remembered nearly every single match of his first year run with the Yokohama team.

'Is it because the stakes are low?' He thought.

For the first time, doubts began to creep into his psyche. Had he made the right decision moving to America? If this was the level of competition he would be playing against for the next 18 months, was it worth uprooting his life?

Ken shook his head, 'I need to focus on the game.' He thought.

He slowly took a bigger lead from first base, his eyes rooted onto Alex's leg. Since he had already memorized the guy's quick pitching form, he knew in an instant what was coming.

Ken quickly dove to his left, utilizing his long limbs and touching the base with his left hand. Alex's pick off throw landed directly in the first baseman's glove a few moments after Ken had put his hand on the bag.

However, Ken's eyes widened as he saw the foot of Troy, the first baseman descending towards the base with force. Everything seemed to slow down as it looked like the cleats would end up crushing down upon his hand.

In a moment of panic, Ken pulled back his hand, effectively giving up control of the base while still on the ground.

Still in shock, Ken felt a tap from the leather glove hitting his right shoulder.

"Out."

Instantly, Ken felt his anger bubbling up to the surface. In a single fluid motion, he got to his feet and towered over the first baseman, a dangerous expression on his features.

Troy, who had just attempted to crush his hand, quickly shrunk back, fear painted in his eyes.

"Oi! Break it up." The first base umpire shouted, moving forward to separate the two.

Ken turned his attention to the obviously blind fool and glared. "Did you not see what he just did?"

"W—What are you talking about? I slipped!" Troy shouted from behind the umpire, trying to defend himself.

Feeling Ken's stare, the umpire was taken aback for a moment before getting flustered. But in the next moment, the guy quickly rose to anger, his face turning red.

"I saw that you weren't making contact with the base when he tagged you. You're out, plain and simple."

Ken's features dimmed, barely holding onto his anger. He turned again to Troy, a flicker of a grin forming on the corner of his lips.

"I'll see you in the next inning. Better hope the ball doesn't... slip out of my fingers." Ken replied, his tone cold.

With that, he walked away before he made the situation any worse than it was. There was no changing the umpire's mind, nor was there any instant replay reviews in this level of competition.

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

## Chapter 582 - 582: Dirty Play (2)

Troy could only gulp, feeling a shiver run down his spine.

'Wait... I'm not batting next inning.' He thought, letting out a sigh of relief.

In fact, Ken was currently on track for a perfect game, having not given up a single hit or walk in the previous 8 innings. As long as he continued, Troy who was the lead-off batter would not get another chance to bat.

However, remembering the cold tone and terrifying grin on the guy's face, he had a bad premonition.

'He wouldn't give up a perfect game just to get back at me right?' He thought, suddenly feeling regret well up from inside.

Ken returned to the bench, his mood slowly recovering. If he didn't have his Dauntless trait, it was very possible that he would have snapped and done something that he would have regretted.

Despite considering walking the 9th batter and pitching to Troy once more, he had already discarded this idea. Perhaps if he had actually been injured he might have resorted to such things, but he now had a cool head.

"What was that all about man?" Steve asked as he approached the bench. The Gladiators bench was on the 3rd base side, too far away from the action to properly see what had happened.

It wasn't just him, Ken's other teammates were also curious as to what could have set him off. To them, he was a calm and collected individual, never getting angry or heated about anything. Unless it was training of course.

"The bastard almost crushed my hand." Ken said simply, however he spoke as if it had happened to someone else.

"What!?" Steve shot to his feet, anger evident in his features. He sent a death stare towards Troy on 1st base, ready to yell some threatening words his way.

However, Ken placed his hand on the guy's shoulder, already feeling a little better. To see that his friend was angry on his behalf was enough for him.

Meanwhile in the audience, Tex frowned after seeing the altercation on the field. Despite being so far away, he had a better angle than the Gladiators bench and could see Ken move his hand off the base.

"What do you think happened?" The other scout asked, his face showing he was a little uncomfortable.

Tex didn't respond for a moment, as if deep in thought. "That guy probably tried to step on his hand." He said confidently.

"Really? You sure it wasn't an accident?"

Tex instantly shook his head. He had seen plenty of such plays from desperate and dirty players who were pissed at people much better than themselves. It was almost human nature to want to destroy something that one felt inferior towards.

"His team is getting destroyed by Ken's pitching, he probably wanted some form of vengeance. Unfortunately for him, he just tried to ruin the best prospect we've seen in a very long time."

There was a hint of anger beneath the tone of the large Texan, it was clear he had been offended by the dirty play.

"What was his name? Troy Knight? I'll be sending a few emails out tonight." Tex stated, writing the name down in his notepad.

The other scout was thoughtful for a moment before doing the same thing.

"We're just lucky that he was quick and smart enough to move his hand out of the way..." The scout said, letting out a sigh of relief.

If Troy had known that his actions would essentially blacklist him from being recruited by colleges, he definitely would have rethought his actions. Performing such a dirty play was not usually in his nature, but anger and his inferiority complex had gotten the better of him.

"3 outs, changeover!"

The plate umpire yelled, bringing an end to the top of the 9th inning.

Troy made his way back to the bench, sending a skittish gaze towards the opposing bench, or more accurately, the tall frame of Ken. The moment he saw the guy's unreadable expression, he gulped.

'Is he gonna hit me?' He cried inwardly.

After returning to the bench, he agonized over what he would do if Ken really gave up his perfect game to pitch against him. 'Do I ask for a pinch hitter?' He thought, bringing his nails up to his mouth and chewing them.

Ken on the other hand, had almost completely forgotten about the guy. To him, someone who would resort to such dirty plays was not worth his attention.

In reality, he wanted to quickly finish this game. They still had another two matches scheduled for today, and if he was going to be walked after the first inning in both of them, he wasn't exactly looking forward to playing.

The thought actually reminded him of someone he hadn't thought of in quite a while. Carlos Toro, the cleanup hitter for Shuei, who had disappeared for quite some time.

'I wonder how he's going?' Ken mused inwardly.

But his thoughts were interrupted by the next batter who arrived into the box.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

PAH

"Strike"

PAH

"Strikeout."

Ken quickly and easily dispatched the guy. Despite throwing around 80 pitches so far, they were as crisp and accurate as his first pitches, showing his almost godlike precision and consistency.

The next batter also posed no problems, falling to another 3 pitches.

Shortly after beginning the bottom of the 9th, the Panthers were already at 2 outs and were about to lose the game.

As the 9th batter came up, everyone had basically checked out already, including the batter himself. He looked rather defeated, which no one could blame him for.

However, the whole field went into a state of shock when Steve stood up and made the motion to walk the batter.

"EH!?" Troy jumped up in fright, instantly feeling his body quiver with fear. His worst nightmare had come true, and he would be stuck facing a pissed off pitcher who could throw literal bullets at him.

But a few moments later, a laugh could be heard from the field as Ken quickly waved off Steve's antics. He was rather amused since he hadn't asked to walk the final batter, yet his friend had made the first move.

The situation left the audience in confusion, apart from a couple of men who were seated next to each other.

"Hahaha! I bet that put the fear of god into that kid." Tex guffawed, his large belly bouncing from the action.

The other scout was also wearing a grin, appreciating the joke that the catcher put forward.

PAH

"Strike."

"Strike."

"Strikeout!"

"Game set, Gladiators."

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

## **Chapter 583 - 583: Stifling (1)**

The following day, Tex arrived back at work, looking a bit more tired than usual. He had stayed an extra night after watching the Gladiators, or specifically Ken, compete in the PG Tournament.

By the final match, he and the 3 other scouts had congregated together to watch it. There were many sighs shared between them as they were forced to witness Ken get walked every inning.

But thanks to him also being a pitcher, they were able to see him shine upon the mound. From all 3 games, he'd only given up a single hit, even though he'd only pitched 3 kinds of balls.

This was something unprecedented at this age, causing a stir among the group.

The problem was, the kid was only in his junior year. Which meant that colleges were forbidden to make contact with him directly, at least until September 1st of this year.

Tex sighed deeply, lamenting the situation. By now, Ken's name would be spreading throughout their circle, meaning plenty of eyes would be focused on him in the next 6 months before the recruiting period began.

"Why the long face Tex? Didn't you say you found us a good prospect?" A stocky gentleman dressed in jeans and a polo shirt asked, his eyebrow raised in concern.

Hearing the voice, Tex once again let out a sigh. "Yeah, but it won't be long before all the other colleges will get wind of him." He replied in resignation.

Tommy was a little surprised, so he probed him further, "Really? I never even heard of a Ken Taka before. Is he that good?"

"Ah, no I got the name wrong. It's Ken Takagi." He corrected.

Tommy's face changed momentarily, as if he recognized the name. "It sounds familiar..."

However, he gave up a few moments later. "Don't worry, we'll have as good a chance as any when it comes time for recruitment."

Tex nodded, though he didn't add anything. "Did you want to see some footage?"

"You recorded the games?" Tommy asked in surprise.

"No, but there's some old clips of him in the National Team."

"National Team!?" This time, Tommy almost jumped in fright. "If he's from the National Team, he can't be an unknown prospect." He said with certainty.

"He's a Japan native who played for their U18 team." Tex replied with a wry smile.

With his interest piqued, Tommy quickly told Tex to take out his laptop so they could watch the videos together. It was clear that he was eager since the two were still out in the open at the sports facility.

After only a few minutes, Tommy understood what Tex was on about. He hadn't watched much of the U18 World Cup, otherwise he would have recognized Ken.

As they were deeply engrossed in the film, a tall figure appeared in the lobby and saw them huddled together staring at a laptop.

"Tommy, Tex, Good morning." He called out, only to receive no response.

With a quizzical expression on his face, the man walked over and looked over their shoulder, seeing the footage playing on the screen.

"Oh? You're watching the U18 World Cup? I was actually part of the coaching staff." Chris said, a hint of pride in his tone.

"What!?" Tommy quickly turned around, noticing the tall figure of Chris standing nearby.

"Coach T, are you serious?" Tex asked, his face filled with disbelief. Many of the staff and students called Chris this, since pronouncing his last name was too burdensome, and many got it wrong.

"Mmm, we were lucky enough to get first place." He said, nodding in satisfaction.

After a few moments, something clicked in Tommy's head. "Then do you know this player?" He said, pausing the video and pointing at Ken atop the mound.

Both guys wore an expectant expression, as if they were waiting for some good news. After all, making use of past connections to secure a top prospect was not out of the ordinary for colleges.

Chris frowned and looked at the two, making sure they were not mentally handicapped.

"You're asking me if I recognize my son?" He asked incredulously.

"WHAT!?"

Both Tommy and Tex leapt to their feet, causing the laptop to fall directly onto the ground, making a crunching noise. However, they ignored it, too focused on Chris's bombshell statement.

"Ken is your son?" Tex repeated, his mind blank.

"Yes... We moved here from Japan over a month ago. He plays for the Gladiators if I remember correctly." Chris stated simply.

"D—Dude, why didn't you say something!?" Tommy blurted out. Since he was the head of scouting, of course his prerogative was to find suitable players to bring into the organization.

Chris shrugged in response, "He's only in his Junior year. Plus, I wanted him to earn his scholarship himself. What's the point if he gets in through my recommendation?"

The words were reasonable, causing both Tex and Tommy to calm down somewhat. It was clear that Chris was a pragmatic parent, who handled his family in a firm manner.

In reality, it was a breath of fresh air. Many colleges were rife with nepotism, creating toxic environments with inflated ego's and even worse team chemistry.

Seeing that the two were silent, Chris asked, "Why were you looking at Ken's plays anyway?"

"Ah, I just saw him play down in San Antonio." Tex replied.

"Oh cool. He told me last night that his team won and he was given MVP." Chris said matter-of-factly.

"Y—Yeah, he played brilliantly."

A silence stretched out between the three for a few moments before Chris excused himself. "Well, I got some work to do, I'll see you guys around."

"Wait... Do you think you could have a word to your son about potentially coming here for college?" Tommy asked, knowing that it was a little shameless.

However, as he expected, Chris shook his head.

"I won't get in the way of my son's future. I don't want him to feel obligated to attend Texas University. Ken will make his own decisions."

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

## **Chapter 584 - 584: Stifling (2)**

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"Haah haah."

Ryan tried to recover his breath as he wiped the sweat from his brow. While it was nearing the end of Spring, it felt as if Summer had arrived early, baking him underneath its heat.

Taking a large gulp of water, he looked at the large house where he'd grown up, a mixture of emotions painted on his face.

There was a sense of reluctance, like he didn't want to go inside. But eventually he gathered up the courage, walking up the long driveway and heading inside.

"You're back, very good." A deep voice called, causing Ryan to flinch.

"Yeah, I just went for a run." He replied, albeit a little meekly.

"Mmm."

The figure stood up, his wide shoulders and tall frame looking rather intimidating. He had a handsome face, but there was something a little off about it, almost like it was hiding something more sinister beneath.

Ryan only briefly met his father's gaze, before lowering his head.

"Have you been studying? You won't be able to attend Kansas State if you don't get a decent GPA." The man stated.

At the mention of Kansas State, Ryan's hands subconsciously balled into fists. It took a lot of willpower to keep silent, but he nodded in response.

"Good. I've already assured Coach Blanch that there will be no issues." With those words, he placed his hand on Ryan's right shoulder.

Ryan flinched, quickly stepping back from the man's touch.

"F—Father... What if I don't want to go to Kansas State?" Ryan blurted out, instantly regretting his words. For some reason, these words had been projected forth against his will.

In horror, he looked up at his father, only to see the man frowning deeply.

"It's been decided. There will be no further discussion." He stated, his tone sounding more dangerous.

A surge of anger rose within Ryan, stoking his emotions. Against his will, words that he'd been repressing for so long started flying out of his mouth.

"What gives you the right to decide this for me!? I worked my ass off to get here, and you want to keep controlling me?"

Ryan's father seemed taken aback for a moment, however his expression quickly turned menacing.

"You ungrateful little whelp. Do you think you could have gotten to where you are today without me? How dare you question my authority, in my own home no less." Despite not raising his voice, each word was like a dagger, slicing at Ryan's psyche.

Ryan shook his head, his anger out wrestling his fear. "No! I won't go to your damn Alma Mater. This is MY future we're talking about, not yours."

At this point, his father went silent, his expression stiffening. Without a word, he reached down towards the belt that was secured around his waist, unbuckling it slowly.

"It seems I have been too lenient with you lately..."

Seeing this, Ryan's face twisted in horror. Without waiting for the man to finish, Ryan quickly ran, leaping up the stairs towards his room as if his life depended on it.

Due to his earlier run, his muscles were still fatigued, but the adrenaline pumping through his veins gave him the boost he needed.

Arriving in the safety of his room, Ryan didn't relax. He knew that the man would be bearing down on him shortly, with his weapon in hand.

In a rush, he quickly locked the door and grabbed his bag, packing it with his essentials. Ryan never thought that today would be the day, but it was clear he had been thinking about leaving for a long time.

BANG BANG

"Open this door." His father's voice was even, but Ryan could tell that he was seething.

He ignored the man, gathering up the last of his things. He briefly looked at the room which had been more of a prison than anything before picking up his baseball bat and gripping it tightly.

Ryan stood to the side of the door, his eyes focused.

BANG BANG BANG

The door surged, as if someone was barging into it. Every time it moved, Ryan flinched, his heart beating out of his chest. He knew that he would only have a small window of time to complete what would happen next.

In the next moment, the door burst open, revealing the large figure of his father wielding his belt.

Ryan's eyes widened and he swung the bat with all of his might, aiming for the stomach of his father.

THUD

"Urgh."

The man let out a grunt of pain, quickly falling down to his knees as the wind was knocked out of his lungs. A look of shock and anger appeared on his face as he turned to Ryan like he was going to kill him.

However, Ryan was already a step ahead of him. He lifted his leg, kicking his father right in the solar plexus, sending him flat onto his back in the next moment.

Having incapacitated his father for now, Ryan wasted no time, leaping over him. But he was quickly stopped in place by the large hand now wrapped around his ankle.

Ryan turned around and wielded his bat once more, "LET ME GO!"

THUD

"ARGH"

The hit seemed to work, allowing Ryan to go free. Before the mad man could chase after him, he'd already flown down the stairs, running towards the front door.

As he exited the house his mind was blank, but his heart was still racing. He needed to get as far away as possible, before the man could catch him.

Thankfully, his car was already parked on the road since his father didn't like him parking in the driveway. He hopped into the Mazda and tried to start it, only for it not to turn over.

A dreadful panic assaulted him.

"No... Please no." He muttered, trying once more to start the car.

He looked back at the house, only to see his father appear at the doorway looking menacing.

"Please..." As his father got closer, Ryan felt as if his heart was going to implode. Why was this happening?

VROOOOM

Finally, the engine turned over, roaring out in defiance. Ryan quickly kicked it into gear and sped off, not daring to breathe a sigh of relief until he was far enough away.

He looked in the rear view mirror only to see his father standing in place, watching him leave.

"Thank God..." he muttered, finally feeling a sense of relief.

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

## **Chapter 585 - 585: Rendezvous (1)**

Ryan continued to drive for a while with no destination in mind. While he had been thinking of leaving over and over, he had not yet figured out where he would go afterwards.

In an ideal world, he would have waited till finishing High School before leaving. Afterwards he would be free to join any college that he decided on, so long as it was far away from this place.

Perhaps he could have even entered the MLB draft directly.

After an hour, Ryan pulled over and grabbed his phone which had been on silent. There were over 20 missed calls from his mother's number, causing his face to soften.

The only thing that he regretted in that moment was leaving his mother alone in that house with his father.

"I'm sorry mom..." He muttered, removing the notifications.

He went through his phone, stopping on a contact. After a brief hesitation, he dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Hey Leo... You got a moment?"

"Ryan? Why are you calling me?" Leo's tone sounded rather cold on the other end.

"I need your help."

...

After some time, Ryan hung up the phone and breathed a sigh of relief. He had no other person to contact, so he was betting all of his chips on his old teammate.

Feeling a little better, Ryan got back onto the road and began to drive. He needed to stop a couple of times for gas, but after a grueling 10 hour drive, he eventually arrived into the state of Florida.

Around 20 minutes later, Ryan pulled up to a set of apartments and got out of his car. He quickly checked to see that this was the right address and walked up the set of stairs to the second floor.

It was already night time by the time he'd arrived, so he quietly knocked on the room door.

As the door swung open, Ryan saw the familiar face of his long time High School catcher. He was still as handsome and suave as ever, despite wearing a simple tank top and shorts.

One could tell just how hard he worked by the symmetrical and well toned muscles on his arms and chest. Usually, Ryan would make some off-handed comment about him being too handsome, but he wasn't in the mood right now.

"Come in." Leo said, motioning him inside.

Ryan let out a sigh of relief. Up until this very moment, he still wasn't sure if this guy would actually let him stay over, especially since they had not really left on good terms.

As he walked into the apartment, he noticed that it was minimalist and clean. There was also some free weights and a bench in the corner of the room, giving insight onto just how crazy the guy was about training.

"You can crash on the couch." He said, gesturing to the L shaped lounge not far away.

"Thanks..." Ryan was tired, not only because of the day he'd had, but also because of the long drive from North Carolina to Florida.

He walked over and placed his bag down before sitting down on the couch, letting out a contented sigh. Thankfully it was soft and seemed rather comfortable.

Without a word, Leo sat down on the other side of the couch and looked at him.

"So? What's your plan?" He asked, skipping over the details about why he was here.

Ryan was thankful. While he had given Leo some information, it wasn't in detail. He had just told the guy that he was running away from home.

"I... I don't know yet." Ryan replied truthfully.

He had come here because he had nowhere else to go. He didn't want to be controlled and abused any longer and needed to break free from the confines of his father.

But since he had left before finishing High School, he had essentially ruined his plan.

Leo was silent for a while, his mind working. Despite this, his face still wore his handsome, almost icy expression.

"Well, if you still want to go to college, you'll have to complete your GED. Since it would be too much work to transfer schools this late in the year, I'd recommend doing it online."

Ryan's eyes lit up, like a drowning man who was thrown a life line.

"You can do that?" He asked in disbelief.

"Mmm. Since you've almost finished your senior year, you should be able to get it rather simply. As long as you're not lazy."

Ryan nodded in appreciation, feeling his eyes begin to sting. Ever since escaping from his home, he was filled with worry regarding this. The decision to leave could have really screwed up his future as someone who wanted to enter the MLB.

Yet hearing that he could get his GED online, and even being told that it was a simple procedure, Ryan's body filled with relief. He could almost feel the anxiety leave his body, causing a few unshed tears to pool at the corner of his eyes.

"But at the same time, if colleges hear that you left school, they might even rescind their offers." Leo added thoughtfully.

The words were like a cold bucket of water poured all over him. As someone who was well sought after by college scouts, he had never thought that this could be a scenario.

Seeing Ryan's face change, Leo continued, "What do you expect? Colleges are looking for student athletes, not just athletes."

"Of course you could declare for the draft once you get your GED... But you'll likely be taken a lot later than you would if you were to get drafted out of college."

Ryan nodded, feeling as if it made sense. For now, he would just need to bite the bullet and get his GED, as for whatever option he decided to do, that could come later.

'As long as it's not Kansas State...' Ryan said inwardly.

Leo got up from the couch and let out a small sigh, "Go shower, you stink. We'll chat again tomorrow before I have to go to class."

With that he left the room, returning a few moments later and placing a towel on the couch.

"Thank you... for everything." Ryan said, the gratitude evident in his voice.

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

## Chapter 586 - 586: Rendezvous (2)

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Ken alighted from his bike and placed the lock on it, checking that it was secure. He stretched briefly before walking out of the cages and heading into the school building.

By now, he'd already gotten used to the stares of the students once more. However, he still lamented inwardly about the enigma of his skill Charismatic Air. Sometimes he wished that it would only activate on the baseball field.

"Yo Ken!"

Ken turned around, hearing a familiar voice call out to him. He saw the dreads and dark skin of his teammate, Latrell.

"Hey man, I didn't know you went to school here?" Ken asked, rather surprised. However, at the same time he knew that there was a whole lot of people, so it wasn't impossible for him to not see the guy in a single week.

"Yeah I'm only a Sophomore after all."

Ken raised his eyebrow in question. From what he could remember, the system had said that he was 18, the same age as him. But it was also possible that the guy was either held back a grade earlier in his life or just had a late birthday.

"Do you play baseball for McCallum High as well?"

"Mmm. We did pretty well last season."

Ken nodded. He was fond of Latrell, especially since the guy had a good work ethic, despite his limited potential.

In the next moment, Latrell looked left and right before leaning forward. "Do people stare at you like this all the time?" he asked with concern.

"Hah, yeah. You get used to it after a while." Ken replied off-handedly.

"Right..."

"Anyway man, Steve and I will be doing some intensive training over the next 3 months. Are you keen to join us after practices?" Ken asked, changing the subject.

"We'll be doing what?" Steve's concerned voice called out from a few meters away, apparently he had overheard the conversation.

Ignoring the panicking Steve, Ken was wearing an expectant expression on his face as he stared at Latrell.

Latrell looked to Steve who seemed to be filled with anxiety, as if he'd been sentenced to a jail term. However, remembering just what kind of player Ken was, he felt a sudden burst of motivation.

'If I train with Ken, maybe I'll improve dramatically.' He thought inwardly.

To someone who had dreams of playing professionally, hugging the thigh of the best player in the team couldn't hurt.

"Sure man, sounds good." He replied eventually.

Yet almost as soon as he said that, Ken's expectant expression turned slightly more sinister. His lips curled slightly and his face darkened, almost as if someone had walked into his well prepared trap.

"Excellent! We'll see you this afternoon." Ken said, tapping him on the arm.

Steve on the other hand sent his gaze towards Latrell, slowly shaking his head. "What a foolish mistake." He muttered, closing his locker and following after Ken.

"Hmm? What does he mean by that?" Latrell asked no one in particular.

Later that afternoon, he immensely regretted his actions.

"Stop slacking, onto the next exercise!" Ken shouted like a drill sergeant, directing both Steve and Latrell.

The two painfully got up to their feet and followed along, albeit shakily. They stared at Ken as if he was a monster, noting that apart from sweating, the guy looked like he could go on for hours and hours.

Thankfully, the session lasted a total of 1 and a half hours only. However, to Latrell and Steve, each moment had pushed them to the limits, almost breaking them.

If it wasn't for Ken doing the exercises with him, they might have rebelled.

Ken's eyes landed on the two figures now flat on their back with exhaustion and frowned slightly. He had decided to cut the training session short, since they were just lagging behind all the time.

Mika's training regime to boost his physical grades was the most intense he'd seen yet. Even he was beginning to struggle a little at certain parts.

While the two were resting, Ken made the decision to continue the rest on his own. He would rather get everything done now instead of having to complete it at home later.

Steve sat up, seeing Ken in the middle of doing what seemed to be a variation of burpees and almost cried out in shock. After everything they'd done already, he couldn't believe Ken was still going.

Something stirred within him, making him feel indignant.

'I can't be slacking like this...' He thought, feeling annoyed at himself.

With a determined expression, he struggled to get to his feet, stumbling a few times. However, he grit his teeth, slowly making his way over to Ken.

Ken had seen the guy get up, but didn't pay attention to him. But inwardly he smiled.

'It seems that the Mirror Effect really is a thing.' He thought.

Steve then began to perform the same burpees that Ken was doing, albeit far slower and with less technique. However, it was enough that he still had the will and drive to continue.

Latrell on the other hand had also tried to get up, but fell down a moment later. It was clear that he also wanted to join, but his gas tank was completely empty.

After another 20 minutes, Ken finally finished Mika's workout and began to suck in deep breaths. If he hadn't have had to wait for the other two and therefore taken a few short breaks, it was likely that he would be completely spent.

The trio finished their work out and slowly arrived at the water taps. Steve didn't hold back, putting his head underneath the water trying to cool himself down.

Ken drank greedily, before doing the same.

"Make sure you guys eat more carbohydrates and try to increase your calorie intake. I'd suggest eating more rice with every meal, it's good for you and filled with carbs."

Despite not being a dietitian, Ken knew that part of growing one's body required the correct fuel intake.

"Alright, get some good rest and we'll do it all again tomorrow." Ken said with a smile.

These words caused the duo to pale, however they still nodded in response.

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

## **Chapter 587 - 587: Mentee #2 (1)**

Ken hopped into bed, nursing his bulging stomach after a hearty meal. His mother's cooking always filled him up after his ridiculous work outs. Ever since he asked her to increase his portions, she had not disappointed.

"Hahhh, I'm so full." He muttered, letting out a contented sigh.

Out of habit, he opened up his status window. None of his stats had changed yet, which wasn't too surprising. However, upon going to the starting window, his eyes happened across a notification.

USER MENU:

-STATS

-MISSIONS

-SYSTEM SHOP

-LOTTERY (Locked)

-IMAGE TRAINING

-IDENTIFY

-TRAINING PLAN

-MENTOR (1)

"What?"

Intrigued, Ken clicked on the icon.

USER HAS MET THE CONDITIONS TO TAKE TEAMMATE STEPHEN ADAMS AS A MENTEE

ACCEPT?

[Y/N]

Ken's eyes widened in surprise. He had not seen this prompt since he made Shiro his mentee way back then. In actuality, Ken had almost completely forgotten about it.

From what he remembered, making someone a mentee would mean he'd be able to give him one of his skills. Thinking like this, Ken didn't see a reason to reject.

'Accept'

\*DING\*

USER HAS TAKEN TEAMMATE STEPHEN ADAMS AS HIS MENTEE

[Please select a skill to impart]

Fine Motor Control: Grants the ability to intricately and effortlessly control one's body, improving all aspects of their game.

Bunt: Ability to bunt even the fastest of balls with optimal precision and strength.

Charismatic Air: People are drawn to you and are more likely to listen to your suggestions.

Fatigue Management: Reduces fatigue and boosts recovery for extremities

Poker Face: Allows user to maintain a neutral expression, even when emotions are unstable.

'Whoa! Talk about the mother lode...!' Ken exclaimed inwardly, letting out a small whistle of surprise.

To see so many good abilities at once, it was rather unexpected. When he accepted Shiro as a mentee, there was no Fine Motor Control, nor Poker Face, not that he would have selected either at the time.

The fact was, while these were good auxiliary abilities to him who had access to many skills, they would be almost useless to Steve. Just imagining the expressive Steve walking around with a poker face brought a smile to Ken's lips.

'I don't think there's any other choice but Fatigue Management... ' Ken thought, hovering over the skill.

It was perfect timing since they had just begun Mika's grueling 3 month training plan and he wasn't sure how he the guy would cope.

Without any fanfare, Ken selected the Fatigue Management skill.

[User has selected Fatigue Management Skill]

[Imparting...]

[Success.]

As Ken watched the words appear in front of him, he suddenly realized something.

'Oh crap! Didn't Shiro fall unconscious after I imparted a skill to him?' How could he forget? They happened to be in the showers at the time and he was forced to wake the guy while stark naked.

'I hope the guy is okay...' Ken thought.

He worried for a few moments before turning his attention to the Image Training. It had been a while since he'd visited, so he had some high hopes.

With a thought, Ken's vision darkened for a moment before appearing in a familiar stadium.

"Ah I miss Koshien..." Ken muttered, taking in the sight with a sense of nostalgia. Since he was so far away from home, seeing this place had brought back some memories.

Ken shook his head, removing any useless thoughts. It was time to focus. As he willed it, a menu appeared in front of him.

#IMAGE TRAINING MENU:

>PITCHING

>BATTING

>FIELDING

Without hesitation he selected pitching.

[Please choose difficulty]

>MAJOR LEAGUE

>PROFESSIONAL [Recommended]

>AMATEUR [Current] (Stats will not be recorded towards missions in this difficulty)

>HIGH SCHOOL (Stats will not be recorded towards missions in this difficulty)

>MIDDLE SCHOOL (Locked)

>ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (Locked)

"Hm? It looks like the system views my pitching at the professional level." Ken stated, feeling rather proud inwardly.

The fact that he couldn't cheese the missions by pitching on a lower difficulty didn't bother him. In fact, he had been complaining about the lack of competition in the PG tournament just a couple of days ago.

'Maybe this will give me enough stimulation to survive another year playing against scrubs.' He thought.

Although it might be a harsh statement, he felt that the baseball he'd played in America so far had been below his expectations. He had pitched in 5 games over the weekend and only given up a single hit.

If that wasn't garbage competition, he didn't know what was.

However, to the others, Ken was just a freak of nature. For a Junior in High School to pitch over 100mph consistently was just unheard of. They could not be blamed for failing to hit such pitches.

As he selected the difficulty, he was suddenly teleported to the mound with a ball in his hand already. With practiced ease, he brought up the missions menu and took a look.

'What rewards have we got lined up this time?'

#PITCHING MISSIONS:

- > Pitch 10,000 strikes - 50,000 Major points
- > Pitch 10,000 breaking balls - 50,000 Major points
- > Throw pick-offs 10,000 times - 50,000 Major points + Platinum Lottery ticket
- > Pitch 100mph 10,000 times - 75,000 Major points + Skill
- > Strike-out AI (upgradeable) - 100,000 Major points + Diamond Lottery ticket

"Holy crap!" Ken exclaimed with wide eyes, staring at the window in front of him. Not only were the number of pitches insane, but the rewards were much higher than he last remembered.

He had seen the Platinum Lottery ticket before which allowed him to select from a pool of skills, but he'd never heard of the Diamond version. However, from what he gathered, the Diamond ticket should be better than the former.

Unknowingly, Ken began to drool.

But when he thought about it for a bit longer, he shuddered. If the maximum time he could spend in the Image training was only a few hours a night, he might only get to throw 250 pitches.

After a few moments he gawked. "That's like 5 months of pitching..." he uttered half in despair.

"I guess this should be enough to keep me busy."

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

## **Chapter 588 - 588: Mentee #2 (2)**

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The next day, Ken rode his bike to school as usual, enjoying the morning breeze. Unlike when he went for his morning runs, he wasn't covered in sweat. There was also the fact that most of the ride was downhill, making it quite enjoyable.

After arriving at school, Ken saw his friend pull up in his Silverado.

Steve was seemingly in a great mood, his face looking fresh and healthy as if he'd partaken in a day spa before arriving.

"Wow, you look fresh as a daisy." Ken commented, smiling inwardly. He of course knew that Steve was now the beneficiary of the Fatigue Management skill.

"Right!? It was so weird, last night I collapsed while I was in the shower, but I felt fine around an hour later." Steve said, his face showing his confusion.

Ken flinched, feeling his face heat up.

'Why the hell are they always in the shower when it happens?' He cursed inwardly.

"Yeah, my dad had to break down the door when I wasn't responding to his calls. Thankfully mom wasn't home and didn't see me on the floor butt naked." Steve added, his face reddening in embarrassment.

"Ahem... Well I'm glad you're all good now. I'm surprised you aren't sore from our workout yesterday." He said, quickly trying to change the subject and prevent the laughter from escaping his lips.

"Yeah me too! I think I might be able to keep up with your training if I can recover like this." He replied with excitement.

"Yes yes, very good." Ken patted his friend on the shoulder, smiling slyly.

The two made their way to class, only to see that the atmosphere was gloomy. Ken felt like he was walking on eggshells as he walked over to his desk. He saw that his desk which was usually next to Steve's was now a few feet away.

He looked around the room, only noticing now that everyone's desks were now apart, leaving a few feet in between.

Thinking it was odd, he sat down with a frown on his face. Not long later, the bell rang.

Not long after, Mr. Johnson walked into class, holding some paperwork in his hand. He looked over the class, a small smile touching the corner of his lips.

"Morning all. I can see we're all prepped for the SAT today." He said in almost a sing-song tone.

Both Ken and Steve's face dropped. Without a word, they both looked at each other in horror. They had both seemingly forgotten about the test, too busy with training and the travel team.

"Did you study?" Steve whispered, his voice quivering.

Ken didn't even respond with words, silently shaking his head. However, he had a bit more hope than Steve, who unfortunately did not share the Academic trait like him.

Still, Ken was feeling a bit nervous. The last time he had properly studied was before the system upgraded, since he wanted to make the most of the trait while he could.

The problem was, he didn't know what to expect. In Japan, they would sit for 5 days straight and complete multiple exams in each of their subjects. If the SAT exam was anything like this, he might have a hernia.

"We'll be taking roll, then I'll hand out the tests." Mr. Johnson said before calling out the names of the class.

Both Steve and Ken stewed in anxiety, sharing in their worries.

A few minutes later, the teacher grabbed a pile of paper from his desk and started to walk around the room, his footsteps echoing against the walls.

"The first test is reading and writing and will last no longer than 64 minutes. We'll then take a 10 minute break before resuming with the Math test. You'll have 70 minutes to complete it." He stated, placing a sheet of paper on each student's desk.

Ken listened to the teacher and raised his eyebrow in question. He turned to Steve who still seemed to be sweating bullets, his anxiety evident.

'Is that it?' Ken thought. However, judging by his friend's expression, it was likely to be very difficult.

Eventually, he received a stack of paper placed upside down on his desk. Ken gulped, feeling that he was wholly unprepared for today's exam. This had to be the first time he hadn't studied for a test in his whole life.

"Alright, when I say so, turn your exams over and begin. I'd suggest not trying to cheat, otherwise I'll remove you from class immediately and you'll be spending the day in the Principal's office." He said threateningly.

"And your time starts... Now."

The moment he said the word, the sound of paper being handled rang out in the room. Apart from this, everybody was dead silent.

Ken hesitantly turned over the paper and looked down at the sheet. He read the first question and his expression froze.

'What is this?' He thought, feeling incredulous.

However, he shook his head, moving onto the next question. But the same expression remained on his face.

Ken quickly scanned the remaining questions on the first page and frowned. He looked up at his friend who was deeply engrossed in his exam, sweat already dripping down his face.

'Is Steve actually stupid?'

The questions were almost too easy. Even in Japan he was familiar with the English reading and writing questions that were asked in the exam, yet Steve looked like he was struggling.

There was also the fact that they were multiple choice questions. Even if he didn't exactly know the answer, he could always eliminate a couple of options rather easily before making an educated guess.

With his confidence restored, Ken breezed through the first few pages of questions, almost as if he had access to the answers in his mind. Even without his Academic trait, he believed that he could get most of the questions right.

Before long, he had already completed the first part of the exam and turned his sheet back over. He looked around the room and saw that everyone was still focused on their papers.

'What now?'

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

## **Chapter 589 - 589: Goal (1)**

By the end of the exam, Ken was mystified. Both the Math and English tests were rather simple, although he had to think a little on some of the ending questions. Even with that being the case, he wasn't sure why everyone was dreading it so much.

After everything was finished, the class went to recess. Ken sat across from Steve who looked to be in the pits of despair.

"Was it really that bad?" Ken asked.

Steve raised his head, his face looking pale. "Man, you don't understand. I haven't studied since before Easter break."

As if depressed, Steve quietly dug into his food, stuffing his face. It seemed that the guy was an emotional eater, swallowing the pain down with every mouthful.

Ken found it a little amusing, but he didn't probe any further. Worst case scenario he would help tutor the guy in the future as well.

'I am his mentor after all.' Ken thought, a grin pulling at the corner of his lips.

If Steve had to hear what he was thinking, he might just take a swing.

"I really think you should be packing your own lunch." Looking at the food his friend was consuming made Ken worry about the kind of nutrition he was receiving. While he wasn't a dietitian, the food looked ultra processed.

"Too much work." Steve said between chews.

Ken shrugged, he couldn't exactly force the issue. "I mean, if you want to go pro, you have to treat your body as a temple." He said, gesturing to his own figure.

Steve raised his head once more, sending Ken a confused look.

"Who said I wanted to go pro?"

Ken raised an eyebrow, "You don't want to play professionally?"

Steve shrugged, "Haven't really thought about it much."

At this response, Ken didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The fact that someone with an EX grade potential was not fully focused on becoming a pro seemed quite crazy when he thought about it.

Just how many people with capped potential wanted to make it into the Majors, yet this guy wasn't even sure what he wanted to do with his life.

Ken frowned, putting his gaze on the flippant guy. "Well, what do you think my training is for? You think I'm doing it for funsies?"

Steve was a little taken aback at the comment and the tone in which it was delivered. He stopped eating and turned his attention to Ken, as if to gauge his mood.

"Look man, I originally took up baseball for fun. I still haven't decided if its something that I want to pursue in the future." He admitted, though he sounded a little defensive.

"Well, If I told you that you had the potential to play at the highest level, what would you say to that?" Ken asked, his face serious.

"Hah! Me? I can't even complete your workouts without almost dying. There's no way I could play in the Majors." Steve waved his hand dismissively, his words rather self deprecating.

"You think I'm joking?"

"Look, Ken. Not everyone is as talented as you okay? Some of us regular folk just like to play baseball on the side to keep fit and have fun."

Ken's face stiffened in response to the words. He could tell that Steve didn't mean anything malicious with his words, however they rubbed him the wrong way.

"Talented? You think I got this way because of talent?" Ken's voice was low, sounding a little dangerous.

"A—Ah, that's not what I mea—"

"Do you know how much pain and suffering I've been through to get where I am today? How hard I've worked, day in, day out. I've dedicated the last 4 years of my life to nothing but baseball, sacrificing all of my free time in the pursuit of my goal."

Steve paled, knowing that he'd touched a nerve. He had unwittingly downplayed Ken's work ethic and struggle, chalking up the results of his hard work to just being talented. But before he could respond, Ken continued.

"And that goal is... The Majors."

There was a silence that stretched out between the two as Ken stared at his friend.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you Ken." Steve said sincerely.

Ken sat back in his chair and let out a small sigh, calming down. In all honesty, he wasn't angry at Steve, but hearing the guys attitude towards something he'd dedicated his life to had pushed his buttons.

"It's fine, you're right. I can't expect everyone to share the same level of motivation towards baseball as me. What right do I have to set that expectation on others?" Ken stated, his features softening.

"But, I stand by what I said. You have the potential to be great, Steve. If you follow me, I can guarantee that you'll be ready for college by the end of our Senior year."

Steve froze, his gaze locking onto Ken's eyes as if to verify if he was telling the truth. All he saw staring back at him was supreme confidence. If anything, the guy believed what he was saying to be true.

For a brief moment, Steve was silent. The picture of him standing on the field in front of packed crowds and playing for his home team the Texas Riders appeared in his head.

His heart surged while he imagined catching the great Yu Tanaka's pitches.

'What is this feeling? Is it joy?'

Ken waited patiently, watching his friend's expression change a few times. He couldn't make the decision for Steve, in the end, he had authority over his own life. But inwardly he hoped that the guy would choose to follow him.

Steve returned to the present, his eyes flashing with something unknown.

"How confident are you?" He asked softly. From the way he asked, it seemed like he didn't have a lot of faith in his own potential.

"99.9% confident." Ken replied with a grin.

"Why not 100%?"

"That 0.1% is if you slack off."

"Hahaha! Alright, you got a deal." Steve said with a hearty laugh, holding out his hand.

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

## **Chapter 590 - 590: Goal (2)**

After school, the duo hopped in the trusty Silverado and headed to the Gladiators for practice. Now that they had truly spoken about the future, Steve seemed to be a lot more determined, rather than his mischievous self.

Ken was feeling rather happy after clearing the air. Back in Japan he had his brother who had helped push him along towards the end goal, but he was lacking this in America, at least until today.

Not only did Steve have crazy potential, he was also the kind of guy that mirrored the motivation and work ethic of those around him. Next to Ken who was essentially a training freak, Steve would never have a day of rest until the end of his Senior year.

Just thinking about it brought a smile to Ken's face.

"You're doing that thing again..." Steve muttered, pulling his gaze back onto the road.

"Huh? What thing?" Ken asked with confusion evident in his tone.

"That damn creepy smile of yours!"

Ken was puzzled, moving his hand up to his lips. He then confirmed that he was indeed smiling for some reason. Feeling a little self-conscious, he pulled down the sun visor and looked in the mirror.

What he saw was just his regular smile. He turned to Steve with a blank expression, "Are you making fun of me?"

"Eh? Not really. I mean, since you're like 6'4 and 200 pounds, God had to balance you somehow." Steve quipped, his mischievous smile returning.

Ken blinked a few times, his gaze planted to the side of the guy's face. He looked him up and down before delivering his next line with a straight face, "Looks like God gave you all the wit, but no intelligence."

Steve's face fell, turning to Ken as if he'd just insulted his ancestors. The two looked at each other before bursting into laughter. The sudden dark insult had been too abrupt, yet the two found it hilarious.

The good thing about male friendships was that they could throw heinous insults at each other, yet still remain comrades, even finding the humor buried underneath it all.

As the trip continued, it was quiet for a little while as the two sat in silence. Ken had a few worries that he'd been bottling up for the last week, something that he wasn't too comfortable airing.

However, he felt that the dynamic between him and Steve had progressed enough to bring it up.

"Hey, is that the best competition we'll be facing with the Gladiators?" Ken asked.

"Hmm? You mean the PG tournament last week?"

"Yeah."

Steve turned to Ken with an incredulous gaze, however he quickly remembered that the guy had only been in America for around a month. It made sense that he didn't know.

"Well, last weekend was a regional tournament for San Antonio and the immediate surroundings. You shouldn't be surprised that there weren't many big names there." Steve said simply.

Ken nodded, but before he could ask, Steve continued.

"But with the Gladiators, we also enter National Tournaments with a few of the teams. Since it's a rather big club, we get invited rather regularly."

"Eh? Really?" Ken's eyes lit up. The biggest concern he had with the Gladiators was the level of competition that they'd be facing. However, with this new information, it seemed that he was worried for nothing.

"Mmm. We're actually one of the biggest clubs in Texas. Have you heard of Adidad?" He asked.

"The clothing line?"

"Yeah, they actually sponsor us."

"What!? How come I didn't know that our club was this big?"

"Well, you've only been on the team for almost 2 weeks. In fact, you missed out on the tryouts where almost 200 people turned up for our age bracket alone." Steve replied matter-of-factly.

Ken went into deep thought. He felt a little bad that he'd essentially skipped the tryouts, but there was no doubt in his mind he would have made it anyway. But the fact that the Gladiators was actually a big club left him feeling joyous.

If he could go up against the best teams in the country, not only could he get access to college scouts, but he'd also not die of boredom.

"Thank you..."

"Hmm?" Steve turned his gaze to Ken briefly, only to see him clenching his fists in excitement.

"If you hadn't have introduced me to the travel team, I probably would have missed out on this opportunity." Ken admitted, feeling grateful.

Steve felt his face heat up a little, "Ahem. What are friends for right?"

"Mmm."

Ken sat in silence for the rest of the trip, his mind working. It was such a relief to know that he would not have to patiently wait until finishing High School to face some decent competition.

'Ai, Daichi... For the first time I feel like I made the right decision.' He said inwardly, thinking about his brother and girlfriend.

After over a month apart from them, only now did he feel like it was worth it. This past week he had constantly been questioning himself, wondering if he'd taken a step backwards by making this decision.

He was sacrificing seeing the two who meant so much to him, just to waste away in America. In addition to being homesick and missing his loved ones, he missed his old team and the collective goal of competing at Koshien.

There honestly was nothing like it here in the states.

But now things had changed. With the opportunity to play in large tournaments with his new travel team, Ken felt a surge of excitement and determination. Would the home of baseball be able to challenge him just as well as Japan could? He wasn't sure.

The only thing that he wanted to do now was keep improving, alongside his friend.

'Once I finish Mika's training plan, I'll be able to take the SSS-Grade Physical Elixirs. By then I'll already be as physically fit as some of the best college players.' Ken thought, squeezing his fists in anticipation.

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

## **Chapter 591 - 591: Different Paths (1)**

BUZZ BUZZ

Daichi picked up his phone and looked at the notification, his face showing a surprised expression.

"Ai? Why is she messaging me?" He muttered, opening up the message.

"Hey, I saw this article about Ken. Thought you might wanna see it."

With his interest piqued, Daichi opened up the link included and was taken to an English website. At first he was overwhelmed by the foreign letters, but he tried his best to decipher them slowly.

He'd been working quite hard on his English, especially with the tutoring packs that his brother had left him before leaving for America. It was clear that he was working towards their end goal of joining the Majors.

"P—Purodigy... Prodigy... What does that mean?" Daichi frowned, seeing that the first word he read was already one he didn't recognize.

"Oh, Tensai..."

After a few minutes struggling, he could finally read the title of the article.

"Prodigy secures a perfect game in the Perfect Game Tournament."

Having accomplished this much, Daichi switched the language to Japanese, patting himself on the back for a job well done. His eyes scanned the article, only to widen upon seeing Ken's name.

They listed his accolades which included 5 home runs and 13 walks over the course of 6 games, as well as his near perfect pitching record. In all honesty, the way they were describing it was like a professional player had been put into an amateur league.

However, Daichi read with a twinkle in his eye. There was nothing more satisfying to see an entire article praising his own brother. Especially since the Japanese media had torn him apart when he went through his slump last year.

"Ken has gathered the attention of many scouts throughout the country, who are awaiting his next performance in the upcoming WWBA National Championship later in June."

Daichi sat back, feeling a mixture of emotions running through him. He was wearing a large grin on his face, as if he was the happiest guy in the world right now.

But inwardly, he felt the fires of determination roaring to life. This was something that only a rival could stoke properly.

"I can't afford to slack..." Daichi muttered.

"Eh? Slack? When have you ever slacked?" A voice called out to him from across the room, causing Daichi to freeze.

"Kouichi, were you eavesdropping?"

"Bro, I've been here the whole time..." Kouichi said with incredulity.

"Ah, my bad. I just read an article about Ken in the states." Daichi admitted.

"Really? How is he doing?"

Since Kouichi had played together with both Ken and Daichi back in Seiko middle school, he always looked up to the guy. If it wasn't for Ken and his father mentoring him back then, it was unlikely that he'd be where he was today.

"Heh, he's the same as usual. He threw a perfect game on the weekend and caused all the scouts to go nuts." Daichi wore a grin as he responded, enjoying the fact that he could brag about his brother.

"Wow, that's impressive. But you've also been doing really well too Daichi, don't sell yourself short." Kouichi replied.

He had noticed that when it came to Ken, Daichi would often defer to him, even going as far as downplaying his own achievements.

"Well, I mean we play different positions so it's not like we can compare."

Kouichi frowned, "We just won both Summer Koshien and the Spring Invitational, that's gotta tip the odds in our favor right?"

Seeing Kouichi get so worked up, Daichi let out a smile. "Yep, we've done well." He said, jumping down from his bed and walking over to the guy.

He ruffled his hair, much like a father would to their own son. "I also had a lot of help you know."

Kouichi blinked a few times, "What the hell was that about?"

Daichi shrugged, "I pissed on my hand earlier and we were out of paper towels, your hair seemed like a reasonable place to wipe it."

"..." Kouichi stared at him in utter shock and disbelief.

In the next moment he pounced forward, trying to tackle Daichi.

"Hahaha!" Daichi let out a roaring laughter and began to wrestle with the guy. Despite growing into his tall figure and putting on some muscle, Kouichi still lacked the strength to get an upper hand.

Soon enough, the guy was forced to tap after Daichi secured a head lock.

"Hehe, that was funny."

After horsing around, there was a silence that stretched between them, but it wasn't awkward.

"We finally made it to our 3rd year..." Kouichi said softly, staring up at the ceiling.

"Mmm."

Now that Daichi thought about it, it had been over 2 years since he moved to Osaka to live on campus. There had been tough times, but it was infinitely better than living with his mother back then.

Many of his teammates like Kouichi he now considered his friends. After all, it was tough to not get along when they saw each other almost every day.

Classes, practices, meals and games. They were practically his family at this point.

"What are your plans after school?"

"I don't know..." Daichi answered truthfully. He wasn't sure if he wanted to go over and join his family in America and attend college over there, or opt for Tokyo University where Miho was.

"I'm going to declare for the draft."

"Huh?" Daichi sat up from the ground and looked at his friend with shock. He hadn't expected the usually reserved Kouichi to be so forward.

"Don't be surprised... I've changed a lot over these past few years." He replied with a soft smile.

Daichi nodded. Kouichi had indeed changed since joining Osaka Toin. He could now pitch consistently over 90mph and had expanded his pitching repertoire considerably.

"Why don't you declare? I'm sure you'd have a better shot than me."

"Really?" These words caused Daichi to fall into deep thought. Did he want to play in Japan and continue to get better before joining the Majors?

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

## **- Chapter 592 - 592: Different Paths (2)**

### **Chapter 592 - 592: Different Paths (2)**

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"It's the bottom of the 9th inning with the Chiba Cougars behind a single run against the Hanshin Tigers. With 2 outs and a runner on 2nd base, the Cougars will need to pull something out of their hat."

"Hiroki, you're up." The coach called, causing everyone to look in surprise at the young kid on the bench.

Hiroki stood up slowly, his movements filled with confidence. He wore a solemn expression, but he seemed to be invulnerable against the pressure.

"Substitution for the Cougars. Hiroki Kondo will be replacing Himura Daigo."

The announcers professional voice rang out over the stadium, causing a round of confusion to take hold on the spectators.

"They're sending out a rookie? Now?"

"No way! Are they trying to lose?"

"Wow! The Cougars are bringing out their most recent draft. This will be his debut match in the NPB, what are the coaching staff thinking? I sure would hate to be Hiroki right now."

As Hiroki entered the field, he could feel the gazes of the 10,000+ crowd focused on him. There were some jeers, as well as some shouts of support from the stands, however, he simply ignored them and walked towards the batters box.

"Coach, why did you send the newbie in? Isn't this too much to ask from a rookie?" One of the players asked with concern.

The coach merely shook his head. "He might be young, but I can feel a fighting spirit within him. If anyone can give us the edge, it's this kid."

The player shook his head, clearly not agreeing with the call that was made. However, there was nothing he could do about it in the end. He looked towards the field from the dugout and focused on Hiroki's figure.

Stepping up to the plate, Hiroki lifted his bat and got into position, his gaze upon the pitcher. He felt the noise in the surroundings begin to get quieter as his focus increased.

The pitcher lifted his leg and sent the ball flying towards the strike zone. It's trajectory was tough, almost slithering through the air like a snake as it approached.

Hiroki's eyes never left the ball, watching it complete its journey into the catchers glove.

PAH

"Strike."

He didn't swing, not even flinching as the dangerous ball flew past him. However, this didn't fill the audience with much confidence.

"Swing at the damn ball!"

"What are you doing!?"

But Hiroki didn't hear them. In his mind, all of the outside noise was worth nothing, so he discarded it. He'd played in Koshien stadium before, many times. The fact that he would also be debuting here against the Tigers seemed like fate.

He patiently waited for the next ball, gripping his bat tightly.

The next pitch came, a slider to the outside. He once again watched the ball closely.

PAH

"Ball."

"Good vision!" The coach called out, trying to reassure him.

However, Hiroki didn't even hear it.

As the pitcher entered his wind up once more, the sound of running echoed in his ears. Instantly, Hiroki guessed that the player on second base was trying to steal third.

In that moment, he made up his mind.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike"

Hiroki had swung at the ball, exaggerating his follow through. With the swing, he positioned his body between the catcher and the 3rd baseman, preventing an easy throw.

The catcher cursed, trying to move to the side before letting the throw go towards 3rd base. However, the extra movements he had to make had given the runner enough time to slide onto the base.

"Nice steal Hideki!"

The coach's eyes widened, appreciation evident in his features. Perhaps the layman wouldn't have realized what Hiroki did, but he sure did. His already good impression of the kid increased even further.

Back on the field, Hiroki rolled his shoulders and positioned himself once more. He tightened his grip on the bat, staring towards the pitcher once more.

'They're not that fast.' He said inwardly, a small grin forming on his face.

Seeing this, the pitcher seemed to grow a little annoyed. To have such a young kid look at him like that wounded his pride.

With exaggerated movements, the pitcher wound up and took a long stride forward. The ball was whipped out of his fingertips, producing a great amount of spin.

The spin made the trajectory difficult to predict, for both the catcher and the batter.

"Hup!"

Hiroki let out a grunt, planting his foot and twisting his body. His large muscles groaned, wringing out every ounce of power that could generate in this single moment.

The noise of the wooden bat displacing the air around it was terrifying.

WHOOOOOOSH

THWACK!

The ball struck the center of the wooden bat, producing a thundering noise which echoed across the stadium. The arena was quiet for a brief moment before erupting into a roar.

Hiroki watched as the ball sailed into the outfield, like a bird flying into the horizon. He discarded his bat and began his run towards first base, his eyes locked onto the ball.

By the time he'd reached first base, he understood that it was already over.

"HOOOOOOOOME RUN!"

The stadium lights began to flicker as the announcers voice called out over the speakers. The arena was abuzz with cheers and the whistling, raining down upon Hiroki as he completed his victory lap around the bases.

Hiroki couldn't help but grin from ear to ear, basking in the feeling of hitting the first home run of his professional career in the NPB.

As he rounded 3rd base, he saw all of his team waiting for him at home plate, their faces filled with shock and wonder.

By the time he placed his foot onto home plate, the team basically attacked him, jumping up and down and ruffling his hair. At some point he'd lost his helmet, but he didn't care.

All he knew was that this moment felt perfect, almost too good to be true.

'I finally made it... Thank you Ken.'

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

## **Chapter 593 - 593: Interest (1)**

"Alright guys, gather up." Coach Wyatt called out, putting an end to the practice.

Since it was the weekend, training was quite a bit harder than their daily routine. It was only now that Ken understood the coach's words back then. Since they were away on tournaments and trained hard on the weekends, the coach limited weekday training to around an hour and a half.

The whole team turned their attention to the coach and headed in. Since it was nearing the end of spring, the sun was hot and everybody was feeling the effects.

Ken made his way in alongside Steve, his curiosity piqued. Usually the coach would just say a few cursory words before sending them on the way, but now he looked like he had something important to say.

Once everyone had gathered, Coach Wyatt nodded and addressed them. "Alright, I'm sure you know that the WWBA National Championship is coming up next month." He said, twirling his mustache.

At these words Ken's ears perked up. He had no idea what the WWBA meant, but the words National Championship were enough for him to know that it was a big deal.

"Our team is pretty much set, so we'll be increasing our training from this point forward. Both us and the 16U teams will be competing over the 5 days, so Coach Henderson and I will be doing joint training sessions from now on."

There was a wave of excitement throughout the team once they heard the news. Generally, the Gladiators only sent 1 of the teams to the National Championship each time, but now it was two.

To be given the opportunity to play on such a big stage, it was the exposure that they needed this close to College.

Coach Wyatt continued, "We'll be flying out in approximately 4 weeks, please make sure that your payments are in at least 10 days prior to us leaving. Failure to do so means you'll miss out on the tournament."

"That is all. Make sure you get plenty of rest, starting tomorrow training will only get tougher." He stated, adjourning the meeting.

The moment he stopped talking, the team broke out into excited chatter. Even Steve who could be a bit sarcastic at times, was wide-eyed and happy.

"Dude, I told you!" He said, slapping Ken on the shoulder.

"Ken, you got a moment?" Coach Wyatt's voice called out, causing both him and Steve to turn.

"Sure." Ken was a little perplexed, but he still went over.

Once they were far enough away, the coach turned to him, his expression unreadable. He let out a pained sigh, as if something was bothering him.

"Man, you've really caused quite a stir." The coach said, causing Ken to raise an eyebrow in question.

"Sorry?"

However, Coach Wyatt let out a small chuckle, patting him on the shoulder. "We weren't originally going to send the 18U team to the WWBA tournament this year... But all that has changed because of you."

"What do you mean?" Ken asked, not knowing what he could have done to cause this.

"Heh. Well, ever since last weekend's regional tournament, my phone has been blowing up from both scouts and coaches. They know they can't talk to you directly, so they're harassing me." Though he said it like that, his face was still wearing a smile.

Ken's mind almost exploded.

'Scouts are interested in me? Already?' He thought, slightly confused. He'd only played a few games at a regional tournament a week ago and he already had so much interest?

Ken usually tried to keep his ego in check, however this news almost caused it to balloon out of control. A big reason why he moved to America was to secure a college scholarship, yet only just over a month had passed and he was already drumming up interest.

"Coach, what do you mean they can't talk to me directly?" He asked curiously.

Ken couldn't be blamed for not knowing the rules surrounding amateur athletes since he was not from the United States. Coach Wyatt then patiently explained to him a few things.

"First off, the NCAA, which oversees most college sports, has strict guidelines on when coaches can contact high school athletes. Since you're a Junior and 18, college coaches can't directly reach out to you until September 1st of your Junior year for Division I schools." He explained, ensuring that Ken was listening properly.

After adjusting his mustache, Coach Wyatt continued, "Secondly, many college coaches rely on showcases, tournaments, and camps to get a feel for a player's skills. While they were impressed by your performance last weekend, the guys I talked to wanted to see more."

He grinned in the next moment, "Which is why we were forced to send the 18U team to the WWBA this year. If we didn't... I don't even want to think about the consequences."

Ken blinked a few times, processing the information. The coach had done well to explain it so that it was easy enough to understand.

"So they can't contact me until September... Are there any rules about me contacting them?" Ken asked, feeling a little hopeful.

Coach Wyatt nodded, "They've already conveniently left their email addresses for you to reach out. Some have even tried booking in some official visits for when September comes around."

"Official visits?" This unfamiliar term sounded rather foreign to him. Why did they need to specify if the visit was official or not?

Seeing Ken looked confused, the coach let out a small sigh. Most kids his age would be well aware of the situation leading up to college, since that was the best way to get to the pro leagues. But since Ken was from Japan, it made sense why he didn't know.

"Well, unofficial visits are basically paid for by yourself and you won't be able to speak to any of the coaching staff. Official visits are paid for by the college and allow you to see and speak to anyone you like. Of course that only comes available after September 1st."

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

## Chapter 594 - 594: Interest (2)

Ken nodded, feeling like it made sense. "Thank you Coach, I've learned a lot today." He said, bowing slightly.

"Hehe, it's no problem." Coach Wyatt replied, twirling his mustache once more. Just as Ken was about to leave, he handed him a folded piece of paper.

"That's the list of emails that the scouts left with me. Do some research and see if there are any schools that you like the look of. There's no harm in exploring your options before September 1st."

Ken accepted the piece of paper and opened it. He was shocked to see around 15 email addresses, each with the name of the college above it.

Seeing the look of shock on his face, Coach Wyatt couldn't help but laugh, "Don't be too surprised. I've seen how hard you work, you earned it."

With those final words, the coach turned around and left the field.

Ken was stunned for a few moments, not knowing how to react. To hear the coach compliment him after only around 2 weeks since he joined, he had to admit that it felt pretty good.

But nothing was as good as the piece of paper he held in his hands.

"What have ya got there?" Steve asked, poking his head over Ken's shoulder to try and take a peak.

Ken quickly folded the piece of paper, "Just a bunch of girls phone numbers." He quipped, sending his friend a cheeky grin.

"Oh damn, you gonna share or what?" Steve fired back, though his expression said otherwise.

Ken looked around and saw the other players still in the vicinity, "I'll tell you about it on the way back." He said, heading towards where he left his bags.

"Alrighty."

When they began their trip back home, Steve didn't pressure him at all, silently focusing on the road. Ken couldn't help but smile, feeling warm inside. It was clear that the guy knew more than he was letting on, but wanted to let Ken speak about it on his own terms.

"The coach gave me a list of contact details left by some scouts." Ken stated, his eyes moving to his friend's face.

"Oh that's awesome man." Steve replied enthusiastically, holding out his fist for a fist bump. "It was only a matter of time before someone tried to recruit you."

Ken laughed, "Thanks man." He said, accepting the bump.

"What colleges reached out?"

Ken listed off a few, "Florida State, University of Oregon, West Texas A&M, University of Texas."

"Whew, that's quite a few Division 1 schools." Steve exclaimed, nodding his head.

He was silent for a few moments before asking, "Did you know that you have to complete 3 years of College before you can join the MLB?"

"EH!?" Ken almost dropped his paper, causing it to fly upwards from the window being slightly opened. Thankfully he managed to save it, before it got lost on the road.

"Hahaha, I figured you wouldn't have known." Steve said, wearing his usual mischievous grin.

'Damn I really need to research this stuff myself.' Ken thought, chastising himself inwardly. First it was the travel teams, then the recruiting rules, and now the MLB draft. It was clear that he was walking blindly.

"What would be the fastest way into the Majors?" He asked curiously.

Steve turned his attention away from the road briefly, raising his eyebrow at Ken. "Well, you can be drafted straight out of High School, as long as enough teams are interested in you. But many teams won't take such a risk, unless you've got enough exposure. Not to mention you'd probably get drafted low."

Ken nodded. Though it might seem unlikely, it was always an option that he could explore in the future. Who knew how good he would be by the end of his Senior year after all.

"Another way is going to JUCO, Junior College. You'll get exposure to plenty of MLB scouts and only need to complete a year before you're eligible for the draft." Steve continued, his focus now back on the road.

"Well that sounds a lot better than 3 years..." Ken muttered.

"Yeah, but then you miss out on College man..." Steve said, his mouth practically drooling.

"Dude, you've never even been to College, what would you know?" Ken retorted, feeling a little creeped out from the drool pooling in the guy's mouth.

"Two words... College Girls. Sorority's, frat parties... Ringing any bells?"

"I have a girlfriend, and I hate parties." Ken responded, stone-faced.

"WHAT!? You have a girlfriend!?" Steve almost swerved off the road due to the shock he'd just experienced.

Ken held on for dear life, almost letting out a squeal before Steve finally fixed his driving.

"Dude what the hell!?" Ken complained.

"That's what I should be asking you!" He cried out, a look of betrayal painted on his features.

"What?"

"Aren't we best friends? Why are you only telling me this now? I had all these plans where we could be each others wingmen, pulling chicks left, right, and center."

Ken blinked a few times with a blank expression. He wasn't sure about the best friend title, but Steve looked to be rather upset so he didn't correct him.

"Well, you never asked..."

"Bruh. Why you gotta do me like that?"

The next 10 minutes was filled with Steve basically pouting, muttering to himself every now and then about how the dream team was destroyed before it could even form.

"You were going to be the Goose to my Maverick..."

'Goose? Maverick? What the hell is this guy on about?'

Thankfully, Steve seemed to get over his crisis. "Oh right, I guess you can still be my wingman. At least I know you won't try to hog all the girls." He added, his mischievous smile returning.

Ken shook his head, letting out a sigh.

It was clear by Steve's enthusiasm that he did not fully understand Ken's ineptitude when it came to women. If he did, there was no way that Steve would try to rely on this man in such a crucial role.

"Alright, see ya tomorrow." Ken said, quickly jumping out of the truck and grabbing his bike from the back.

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

## **Chapter 595 - 595: Study (1)**

A couple of weeks later, Ken had noticed that Steve seemed rather anxious. It was as if a cloud of gloominess was following him around everywhere he went.

"Dude, you've been bummed out all day. What is wrong?" Ken finally asked. He had given the guy the opportunity to speak up on his own, but he just kept to himself.

Steve sent him a pitiful look, "I got my SAT score back last night... My parents are upset with me."

"What? Wait, the results are out?" Ken raised his eyebrow in surprise.

"Yeah... You can check them online." Steve replied, his face looking sour.

Ken nodded, he would need to check his own scores tonight after practice. He had already researched what a decent score would be, so he knew what to aim for.

"So... What was your score?" he asked surreptitiously.

Steve flinched, but he answered in a low voice. "900..."

"900!?" Ken's voice rose in shock and horror, causing everyone in the hall to face his direction. Some of the gazes were full of sympathy, while others showed schadenfreude, reveling in someone else's plight.

Steve shrank back, with tears almost forming in his eyes. "I know! I just suck at tests okay."

Ken shook his head, ignoring the gazes sent their way. "Dude, even if you're the best athlete, no College is going to be happy with a score like that."

"I know, I know... You sound just like my father." He replied gloomily.

Letting out a sigh, Ken massaged the bridge of his nose and began to think. "Looks like we'll be seeing each other a lot more often." He said, a hint of resignation in his tone.

"Hmm? What do you mean by that?"

"Well it's obvious that you need tutoring, and who better to teach you than me?" Ken replied simply.

Steve shook his head, "Man, you didn't even study, your score can't be much better than mine." He stated, getting a little defensive.

Ken shrugged, "I haven't checked my test scores yet."

"Hah! Well let's go check now then. If your score is higher then 1200—No 1100, I'll let you tutor me. Hell, I'll even call you Sensei from now on." Steve stated, wearing a confident expression.

"Deal." Ken instantly grabbed Steve's hand, his face stone-cold and serious.

Taken aback at the abrupt movements of his friend, Steve suddenly had a bad premonition.

'Why is he so confident?' He thought. However, he shook his head in the next moment. There was no way someone could score well on the SAT's without any prior study, he even remembered the pitiful expression Ken made before the test.

The two made their way to the computer lab and secured one of the PC's. Since it was lunch time, there were only a few people present.

Steve typed in the address and had Ken enter his information. The two waited while the slow internet loaded the results.

"Hmm, 1550... That's almost a perfect score." Ken muttered, nodding his head in satisfaction. He turned his attention to Steve whose jaw was wide open, as if he'd seen a ghost.

There was a few moments silence as if the guy was coming to grips with the situation. But in the next moment he threw himself onto the ground and kowtowed, "Please teach me your ways Sensei!"

"Hehehe, so you have now seen the light my disciple. Very well, I shall impart my knowledge unto you, so that you may prosper in the future." Ken said dramatically, raising his chin in triumph.

A figure at the back of the computer lab suddenly stood up and saw the scene, her face turning weird. "What the hell are you guys doing?"

Steve raised his gaze from the floor and saw Stephanie's judgmental gaze directed at him, though he felt no shame. "Oh hey Steph, Ken said he was going to tutor me." He said nonchalantly, as if he wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary.

Stephanie blinked a few times, her blue eyes filled with both confusion and annoyance. Without a word, she walked out of the room, not sparing him another glance.

Ken let out a light cough, feeling the awkwardness deep in his bones. He had gotten a little carried away with his acting, but Steve was the one who started it.

He looked towards the guy who seemed to be a little forlorn at the moment and cleared his throat. "Ahem, so you gonna tell me what's up with you two?"

Steve got up off the floor and slumped into a nearby chair, his body like jello. "I dunno man, I think she hates me for some reason." He admitted, ruffling his hair in frustration.

Ken nodded, leisurely taking a seat of his own. "And what do you think you did to deserve the treatment?" He asked, crossing one leg over the other. If he had a pen and notepad, one might think they were in a therapy session.

"Do you think I would know!?" Steve snapped, letting out a resigned sigh. "It started after I left homeschooling to join McCallum High."

"Mmm, interesting." Ken mused.

Ken tapped on the desk with his index finger a few times, but his mind was blank. In all honesty, he didn't really understand women. The fact that he was able to get with Ai was still a complete mystery to him.

After chasing her in his previous life, it was rather confusing that she would go after him this time, even joining the baseball club as a manager to get closer to him. This left him with a single conclusion.

'Women are too mysterious.'

"So what do you think it could be Sensei?" Steve asked, his eyes filled with hope.

"Mmm... Did you stop wearing deodorant?"

"..."

"Is that even relevant? What kind of question is that..."

Ken shrugged, "Well its either that or she thinks you're cheating on her." Out of ideas, Ken just blurted out the first random thing that came to his mind that would cause his own girlfriend to hate him.

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

## **Chapter 596 - 596: Study (2)**

"Huh!? We aren't even dating, that makes no sense." Steve replied, suddenly doubting his newfound Sensei's abilities.

"Also, even if we were dating, do you ever see me with women?" He continued, looking left and right as if to check if there were any around.

Ken stifled a laugh, finding his friend's plight rather amusing. "Well, aren't you close to a few girls at our school?"

Steve's expression morphed, "Well, I wouldn't say close. Stacey always asks if I want to borrow her notes or study together, but that's about it."

Now it was Ken's turn to be shocked. Even he who was absolutely clueless when it came to women, knew that this was a sign of something more.

"And has she seen you with this... Stacey?" Ken asked, trying to not sound accusatory.

"Well I mean, yeah. Of course she would have." Steve's innocent expression looked very punchable in that moment, yet Ken reeled himself in.

"So, do you think that maybe Stephanie might be jealous? Or maybe has a misunderstanding of your and Stacey's relationship?"

"Ah... I guess she could?" Steve looked unsure, "But wouldn't that be a little ridiculous?"

CLAP~

Ken clapped his hands together loudly, "Exactly! When things seem a little irrational, you know you must be close to the truth." He said mysteriously.

"Right..."

RING RING

The school bell suddenly rang, breaking the awkward moment.

"Ah crap, I didn't even get to eat my lunch." Ken complained, looking down at his stomach with pity.

"How about we skip class?"

"No way, my mom would kill me." Ken stated, feeling his body shudder at the mere thought of being caught.

"Yeah... You're probably right."

Since Steve was already in hot water with his parents thanks to his sub-par SAT results, being caught skipping class would only exacerbate the issue.

The two headed back to class and finished the day.

After practice, Ken invited Steve to his house so that he could begin their tutoring lessons. The idea would be that by September, his exam results should improve.

"Mom, I'm home. I've brought Steve with me." Ken called out from the door.

"Oi, take your shoes off." Ken muttered to his friend. Apparently it was not customary in America to do this.

"Ah, my bad."

"Welcome home Kenny. Nice to meet you Steve, I'm Yuki." Ken's mother introduced herself. She was in her usual cooking attire, wearing a clean white apron and had her hair tied up.

"T—Thank you for having me." He said politely.

"Are you staying for dinner?" She asked with a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose."

"Don't be ridiculous, you're the only person Ken has invited over since we moved. I'll dish you up some food as well." Yuki insisted, heading back towards the kitchen.

Steve was about to refuse, but Ken nudged him and whispered, "You're fighting a losing battle man. No one leaves my mom's house without a full stomach."

Ken stifled a laugh after seeing the expression on his friend's face before beckoning him to follow. "We're gonna do some studying for a while mom." He called, heading towards his room.

"Okay honey, your father will be home in about an hour."

With that, the two entered Ken's simple room. There was only a bed, a desk and a TV which didn't seem to have been used for quite some time.

Steve looked around, wearing a slightly disappointed expression. "Bro, your room is... bland." He said plainly.

Ken shrugged in response, "The only thing I do in here is sleep."

"But still. Where are your posters? The paint on your walls looks like it's at least 30 years old." He walked around the simple space and scratched his head.

If he had to live in a room like this, he'd probably go crazy from boredom in no time flat. Of course, Steve wasn't aware that Ken used the Image Training every night, which was basically like owning an immersive VR headset.

"Wait here, I'll get another chair." Ken said, leaving the room.

Steve walked around the room while he waited, a mischievous expression appearing on his face. In a flash he got on the ground and looked under the bed, as if looking for something.

"What are you doing?" Ken returned rather quickly, holding one of the dining room chairs in his hand.

"Tch, I couldn't find them."

"Huh? Find what?"

Steve looked at him seriously, wearing a dead-pan expression. "Your magazines."

Seeing as how Ken seemed confused, he elaborated, "You know, the dirty magazines with women on them..." Then he hesitated, "Or men?"

Ken blinked a few times, letting the joke linger, "I have no such things."

After hearing this, Steve looked at Ken up and down, his eyes filled with something unreadable. "Mmm, it's no wonder you're so stiff all the time."

"What do you mean by that...?" Ken asked, his eyes narrowing.

Feeling a sense of danger, Steve quickly changed the subject, "Ah, we should probably start the tutoring session."

Ken's gaze was piercing as he looked at his friend, it was obvious that the guy had been making fun of him, but he quickly brushed it off.

"Alright, since your scores were so bad, we should probably start from the basics." He stated, pulling out some of his old notepads.

Hearing the true yet hurtful words, Steve did his best to not feel offended.

Ken flipped through his old notes, but quickly realized that they would be useless.

"Why are all these notes in Japanese?"

"Haaahh, this is going to be more annoying than I thought." Ken lamented.

Eventually, Ken got out his math textbook and began to go through some equations.

At first, Steve's mind was spinning, but he realized soon after that Ken was really good at explaining everything. From the Algebra to the equations, he managed to simplify them, even using real life examples to help him understand them better.

An hour seemed to pass by in a flash, yet it felt like he'd learned way more than he had in the past couple of months at school.

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

## **Chapter 597 - 597: Rumor (1)**

"Ken, did you have a moment?"

The voice of a girl entered his ears as Ken was digging into his boxed lunch. He put his chopsticks down and turned around, seeing a somewhat familiar face.

'She looks familiar...'

The girl had long blond hair and tanned skin, her eyes were green and her face flushed for some reason. Ken wasn't sure why she would be talking to him, especially since he didn't really know who she was.

"Erm, sure I guess." He said suspiciously.

However, there was an awkward silence between them as Ken was still sitting down, having no intention to move.

"Um, could we go somewhere private maybe?" She asked softly, fidgeting.

Ken sent a look to Steve who seemed just as confused as him. Feeling that the guy was no help, he eventually agreed to follow her.

After they rounded the corner, they appeared in the hall where not many people were. The girl stopped, her head lowered towards the ground as she turned his way.

"A—Are you going with anyone to prom?" She asked, her voice wavering.

'Prom?' Ken was slightly taken aback. Wasn't prom for Seniors only?

"Um... I didn't even know that I could go to prom this year." Ken stated honestly.

The girl's gaze lifted, until she was looking directly into his eyes, filled with hope. "The prom is a Junior-Senior one. Would you be willing to go with me?"

"Eh?" Two pieces of information were revealed at this moment. Both the fact that junior's could take part in prom and the fact he was being asked by a girl he did not know.

Seeing the expectant look on her face, Ken felt a wave of regret. Even if he wanted to go to prom, he would have declined unless Ai could somehow make it. Just thinking about what would happen if he went with another woman made him feel destitute.

"I'm sorry... I have a girlfriend." He stated, giving her a soft smile.

Her hope-filled features were suddenly crushed. Ken could see tears forming at the corner of her eyes almost instantly, making him feel even worse.

"B—But I haven't seen you with any other girls. Are you sure you don't mean boyfriend?" She replied, her words a little scathing.

"Huh?" Not expecting the retort, Ken looked at her with confusion. Was she insinuating that he and Steve were boyfriends?

Before he could reply, the girl stormed off, stomping her feet along the ground as she walked. Ken was left to stare at her retreating figure, his face contorted.

'Who the hell was that?' He thought.

After a few moments, he shrugged it off. He had successfully declined the invitation and life would go on. Soon after, Ken returned to the lunch table where Steve was awaiting him with question's in his eyes.

"She asked me to prom..." He said, sitting down in front of his food once more.

"Oh... I never thought Brittany would be the type to ask a guy to prom." Steve mused, scratching his chin in thought.

'Brittany? Oh... That girl from gym class.' Ken finally recognized the person after his friend mentioned her name.

"Are you going to ask Steph?" Ken asked, a lopsided grin appearing on his face.

"Pffft, like she would say yes." Waving dismissively, Steve scoffed as if the entire notion was absurd. To him, doing such a thing was just asking to be rejected.

"Well, we could always go together." Ken replied jokingly.

"Hahaha! Yeah right, just a couple of straight dudes going to prom together. Nothing suspicious about that."

Both Ken and Steve laughed, feeling that it would be quite ridiculous.

After the bell rang, the two went to their next class. While they were walking along the halls, Steve noticed that the people around them were acting a little weird.

He was used to people looking at Ken, but this time he felt some disdainful and amused gazes looking his way. Not only that, some of the students were whispering and even pointing at him.

"Dude, why does it feel like everyone is looking at us?" Steve whispered, moving closer to Ken.

Ken frowned. He also noticed the change in the behavior of the other students. This wasn't the usual effect of his Charismatic Air, which meant that it had to be something else.

He looked towards one of the students who was whispering, using his mental capacity to try and read their lips. But what he saw made him almost jump in fright.

"I heard that Ken and Steve are a couple."

The words rang inside of his mind, echoing and taunting him. The first instinct was to immediately object, but he quickly held it inside.

'What the hell happened?' He thought, frowning deeply.

But almost as soon as he asked this question, a face appeared in his mind. Brittany, the one who had looked angry after he rejected her had said something similar about him and Steve.

'Did she spread a false rumor?'

"Haha, such a cute couple." One of the students called out, after which a few laughs broke out in the hall.

"Huh?" Steve looked behind him, wanting to see who the guy was pointing at. However, after seeing no one in the immediate vicinity, he looked back at the guy with confusion.

Right next to him, a familiar figure appeared. Stephanie looked at both Ken and Steve before her face turned up in disgust. In the next moment she ignored them once more, walking away.

By now, Steve had already understood that people thought he and Ken were a couple for whatever reason. Tears began to form in the corner of his eyes as he felt wronged.

Ken on the other hand merely brushed it off. So what if the school thought he was gay? He currently had a beautiful girlfriend who would be a famous fashion designer one day.

He didn't give two craps about what other people thought, especially people who he only knew for only 2 months.

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

## **Chapter 598 - 598: Rumor (2)**

Steve, however, felt like his life was crumbling. After receiving such a look from Stephanie, his face mirrored his indignation.

The two made their way to the next class, only to see that the rumor had spread even further. By the time the day was done, Steve seemed depressed as they made their way to his car.

"Why do you care bro?" Ken asked, genuinely curious. To him, as long as they knew it wasn't true, what did it matter?

Steve sighed, "It's not like I care what other people think, but it hurts a bit that Stephanie seemed to believe it." He admitted.

"Cheer up man." Ken stated, nudging him slightly.

"Easy for you to say. You already have a girlfriend, but I'm a damn virgin."

Ken clasped his hands together, as if he was praying. "I'm terribly sorry my friend. I will pray for you."

Steve sent him a glare, but quickly let out another sigh.

Knowing that his friend wasn't in the mood to joke around, Ken got serious. "Well, there's one way to prove the rumors wrong..."

"Hmm?"

"Heh... Just ask Steph to prom." Ken said simply, as if it was inconsequential.

"What, so I can experience rejection face to face?" he said, scoffing.

"Hey man, it's your life. I guess the alternative is that people think you're my bitch." An amused grin crept onto his face as he said these words.

"Huh!? Why would they think that I'm the bitch?" He retorted, feeling offended.

However, when he looked at Ken's 6'4 stature and size, it was rather incriminating. To him who was around 6' tall, Ken definitely looked like the one who would be in charge.

"ARGHHH, this is so frustrating." He said, pulling at his hair.

Ken chuckled, knowing that those words had done the trick. If one had a choice, there was no way they wouldn't want to clear up such rumors, unless they were like Ken who didn't care what other people thought.

Ken threw his bike into the back of the pickup truck and hopped in before Steve began to drive away. He was silent for a few minutes, as if having an internal debate in his mind.

"Alright, what do I need to do?" He asked, letting out a resigned sigh. It seemed that he'd come to terms with the need to act.

"Well, how do you usually ask a girl out to prom?" Since Ken wasn't from America, he didn't know the customs.

Steve thought for a while, "Well sometimes people do it with flowers, others do like a grand gesture I guess."

"Hmm? So that Brittany girl didn't even go all out... She shouldn't be surprised I said no then." Ken mused, feeling cheated.

"Bro... Usually it's the guy who asks the girl to prom. No wonder she spread that rumor about us..." Steve glanced at him, an accusatory expression on his face.

"What else was I meant to do? I didn't even remember her name until you mentioned it."

"True..."

"Alright, we're getting off topic. What does Stephanie like? I'm sure we can come up with something." Ken prompted, trying to get back on track.

...

The two continued to chat in the car ride towards training. Even when they were running around and doing drills, the two were close by, chatting away.

After practice, Latrell walked up to them, his expression a little unsure.

"Hey... Are the rumors true?" He asked softly.

Steve's face turned red as he swallowed the curses that were about to come out of his mouth.

Ken froze, but then a smile formed on his face, "Hey Latrell, which one of us do you think is the bitch?"

"Um what?" He replied in utter shock.

Before Steve could say anything, Ken held his hand over his mouth, preventing him from talking. "Don't be shy, tell me."

Clearly feeling uncomfortable, Latrell was forced to answer. "I—I'd guess that Steve is."

"HAHA! I told you man." Ken exclaimed, letting out a hearty laugh.

Steve looked as if he'd just swallowed a lemon. His depression returned, leading to a deep sigh.

Feeling like he might have gone too far, Ken decided to set the record straight, even detailing the part where he rejected a girl in his class who started the rumors.

After having the whole story explained to him, Latrell seemed to feel a little less uncomfortable. "Man, I can't believe the rumor spread so fast around the school. Even I overheard it from some people."

It was a rather impressive feat to distribute information to the whole school in only a few hours. It seemed that Brittany had a great marketing ability.

As they say, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Once practice was over, Ken was getting ready to run through the additional training with both Steve and Latrell like they usually did. However, he was surprised to see a couple of new faces.

"Max, Nico... Are you joining in?" Ken asked with a little shock.

Nico looked a little awkward, but Max seemed determined. "We want to join in your extra training. I want to perform well in the WWBA." Max stated.

"Hmm, better late than never I guess." Ken replied.

It had been over a month and a half since he joined the Gladiators, yet this was the first time that the two had shown up to the extra training he hosted. While there was only 2 weeks left to the tournament, it wouldn't hurt to have them join in.

'Perhaps they saw the improvements in both Latrell and Steve already.' Ken thought.

Now that he looked at the two, there was a clear difference in their muscle mass, not to mention their stamina had improved by leaps and bounds.

Steve's changes were most notable. His body had far more definition than before, despite only training for 6 weeks alongside Ken. It was clear that both Nico and Max also wanted to improve themselves.

"Alright, but I won't be going easy on you." Ken said with a grin.

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

## Chapter 599 - 599: Promposal (1)

Later that evening, Ken invited Steve into his house once again. It seemed to have become a frequent affair, so much so that Yuki and Chris would ask questions if he didn't come over.

"Afternoon Mrs. Takagi." Steve said, sending her a smile.

"Stephen, how many times have I told you to call me by my first name." Yuki said, though she wore a pleased expression.

"Ah boys, you're here. Doing some more studying tonight?" The sound of Chris's deep voice called out as he walked into the dining room.

"Well not exactly. We're trying to brainstorm ways Steve can ask this girl to prom." Ken replied matter-of-factly.

Hearing his friend spill the beans so casually to the adults, Steve was taken aback. Just how much did the guy tell his parents?

Both Chris and Yuki's eyes instantly lit up, their attention turning to the young man in question. Of course Yuki's favorite pastime was matchmaking whenever she could, therefore such words were basically asking for her expertise.

"Ahh to be young again." Chris said softly, his face wearing a melancholic expression.

Yuki instantly abandoned her cooking and appeared in front of Steve, grabbing both of his hands. Before he could realize what had happened, he was already sitting down across from Ken's mother at the dining table.

"Tell me everything." She said expectantly.

Steve turned his gaze towards Ken, his expression like a man who was screaming for help. However, all he received in response was a sly grin.

'Damn it... This was intentional.'

With everyone's gaze on him, Steve was forced to spill the beans. He spoke about Stephanie and their past, as well as the changes in their relationship when he had left homeschooling and joined McCallum High.

"Don't forget about Stacey." Ken added, just as he thought Steve was going to skip past it.

"Oho? Who is this Stacey girl?" Chris asked, flashing the teen a look of appreciation.

Yuki, however, let out an unimpressed huff. It was clear that she had already settled on Steph as her favorite.

Steve sent Ken a glare, as if to say 'Thanks a lot'.

"Stacey is just a girl from our class. She keeps trying to hang out, even asking if I want to study with her." He said, letting out an exasperated sigh.

Yuki relinquished her hold on Steve's hands, her mood calming down. "Okay, it's not as bad as I thought."

"It gets worse..." He replied, this time sending a mischievous grin towards Ken.

Ken frowned for a moment, but he quickly realized what the guy was on about. "Ah don't say—"

But before he could complete his shout, Steve already started. "You see, Ken was asked to prom by this girl Brittany..."

In an instant, both Yuki and Chris snapped their attention to their son. The latter was wearing a disappointed expression, but Yuki seemed like she was about to explode in anger.

"I obviously rejected her." Ken said in Japanese, holding up his hands in defense. He had been so spooked by his parent's anger that he reverted back to default settings.

After a few tense moments, both his parents seemed to calm down. It was clear that they were very protective of Ai.

Obviously not knowing Japanese, Steve was stunned for a moment. But he continued, "Well, he obviously rejected her. But then she spread a rumor that Ken and I were... Together."

"Together?" Yuki seemed confused. English was her second language, so she didn't necessarily understand the implications of the word in this context. However, the same could not be said for Chris.

"PFFT"

He suddenly bent over, stifling the laughter which threatened to escape his lips. But it seemed that he was not strong enough in the end.

"HAHAHA, I can't believe it." He cried out, wiping away a tear which had escaped.

Yuki looked towards Ken, as if trying to understand what was going on. To which Ken replied, "Dousei..."

She stared blankly at him before a look of horror appeared on her face.

"EH!?"

The situation took a few minutes before Ken's parents finally calmed down. The duality of Chris's amusement and Yuki's shock was rather funny, but not so much for those involved.

"So has this Stephanie girl heard the rumors?"

Steve nodded, and from his downcast demeanor, it was rather obvious that she either believed them and was disgusted by it.

"Looks like we have our work cut out for us." Yuki stated plainly, letting out a small sigh. But her down mood didn't last for long as she swiftly got up off her chair and returned to the kitchen.

"Let's have some dinner first, and then we'll get down to business."

At the mention of dinner, all three guys in the dining room perked up. There was nothing more appealing than Yuki's food when one was feeling down.

Soon enough, everyone had finished their food and were nursing full stomachs. It didn't take long for the conversation to start up again.

With Yuki's expertise and Chris's understanding of prom and American tradition, they soon came up with a few options for Steve to choose from.

However, out of everyone present, Steve seemed like the one who was the least motivated. It was clear that he was doubting that Stephanie would say yes, even if he went through all the effort.

Seeing this, Chris smiled softly, imparting his wisdom. "Stephen my boy. Women are mystical creatures who are very difficult to read. But sometimes you need to make a grand gesture, putting all your feelings on the line in order to gain their attention."

Yuki raised an eyebrow at her husband, listening to his words carefully to ensure he wasn't being disrespectful.

"It's clear that this Stephanie girl liked you at one point, but you likely did something in the past to throw her off. If you sincerely open yourself up, I'm sure that she'll respond positively... I think."

Steve was enamored by Chris's words. He even managed to ignore the final line, his opinions changing on the spot.

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

## **Chapter 600 - 600: Promposal (2)**

"Mmm, thank you Mr. Ta— I mean Chris. And you Yuki."

Steve left shortly after, his mood improved. He had an odd feeling in his stomach, something that he hadn't felt before, almost like butterflies were having a party in there.

As he was driving away, Stephanie's image appeared in his mind. While he had thought of her as a childhood friend all these years, this was the first time that he imagined her as a potential girlfriend.

There was something about it that felt new and exciting, causing his heart to thump loudly.

"I'm gonna do it..." He muttered.

With prom coming up this weekend, he only had a few days to get things organized. With a smile on his face, Steve drove home.

The following day, Steve and Ken pulled up out the front of a nice looking two-story house. Ken marveled at the lawn which was comparable to some of the great baseball fields he had played on.

"Man... I'm starting to feel nervous." Steve said, trying to calm down his beating heart. He was dressed in a nice shirt and tie, but his face was covered in sweat despite the air conditioning being on full blast.

"Dude you need to chill. You look like a melted popsicle."

"Thanks..."

Ken smiled, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm here for moral support."

Steve let out a sigh, nodding his head. "Here goes nothing."

With that, he got out of the truck and opened the back door, collecting a sign and flowers which were placed on the seat. As he made his way to the door, he made sure to stay off the grass.

Ken got out of the car and leaned on it, watching his friend walk towards the house. The guy turned back a couple of times and Ken was forced to give him a reassuring smile and a thumbs up.

DING DONG

Steve resisted the sudden urge to run away, his heart beating out of his chest. He had already come this far, it would only be cowardly to turn back now.

However, when the door opened and revealed a man, Steve's throat suddenly dried up. The guy had well-maintained gray hair and looked to be wearing what could only be described as golf attire.

"Stephen? What brings you around here?" He looked rather taken aback, especially after seeing he was dressed in such a way.

"H—Hi Mr. Anderson. I was just wondering if Steph was around." He said meekly.

"Mmm sure, come in." He said, gesturing inside the house.

"Umm, I'd like to stay out here if you don't mind." Steve said, sounding a little panicked.

However, these words caused the other man's eyebrow to raise in suspicion. "Alright, tell me what's going on." He said, rather sternly.

Feeling that this was getting a little out of hand, Steve felt pressured to resolve it. He let out a sigh and turned his sign around, showing Stephanie's father what was written.

With a frown on his face, Mr. Anderson looked at the sign and almost laughed out loud. His eyes danced with amusement, but Steve wasn't sure if he was laughing at the sign, or the entire situation.

The man grinned and nodded, "I'll go get her."

Steve turned the sign back around, letting out another sigh as he waited. He already felt truly embarrassed, but he hadn't come this far just to turn around.

A few moments later, Steph appeared at the door, her face turning up in surprise after seeing who was waiting for her. However, just like usual, her expression turned sour.

"What do you want?" She asked coldly.

'Oh crap, this sucks.'

"Ahem... T—These are for you." Steve said, handing the bouquet of flowers that was hidden behind his back. They were red and white roses, and cost quite a pretty penny.

Out of instinct, she accepted them, taken aback a little. But in the next moment she frowned, "What are these for?"

Steve felt his heart sink, things were not going as he had planned.

"I... I just wanted to ask something." He said, biting his lip subconsciously. Steve turned the sign around, the one which had elicited laughter from Steph's father a few minutes earlier.

There was a moment of silence as she read the sign. He was afraid to look at her expression, fearing that it would just show the prelude to her rejection of his question.

However, Steph's face lit up and she let out a chuckle.

"Can I steal you for prom? That's pretty lame." She said, but it wasn't said in a scathing way like he might have expected.

Just as he felt the fire of hope arise from within, her next words completely extinguished it, sending his thoughts spiraling.

"Sorry, but I'm already going to prom with someone." She said softly.

The words were like a thunderclap, echoing in his ears. Steve's expression froze as he tried to come to terms with this information. It was painful, but he had been too late.

With his mind blank, Steve was about to turn around and leave without another word. But a soft voice spoke up, rooting him in place.

"But, if you can convince Ken to go with Sarah instead, I'll accept your promposal..." Steph said, her cheeks turning red.

Steve was stunned in that moment, so much so that he was unable to respond.

'She said yes?' He thought, his soul almost bursting out of his body in triumph.

"O—Okay!" Steve responded, not even second guessing his response. He grinned widely, almost jumping up and down in elation.

"Okay it's a deal." Steph replied, responding with a smile of her own.

Seeing the interaction from afar, Ken could tell that things had gone well. He pumped his fist in triumph, a smile forming on his face.

Steve returned shortly after, a perpetual grin painted on his face.

"So? Everything went well I assume." Ken said with a chuckle.

However, it was only now that Ken asked him that he suddenly remembered something.

"Um... look man, I need a favor."

"Hm?" .

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