

Major League System

Chapter 601 - 601: Breaking the News (1)

Ken stared blankly at his friend, too dumbfounded to even respond to his words.

"Ken? You all good man?"

"Sorry, could you repeat that..." Ken replied, his voice sounding deeper than usual.

Steve flinched, but the idea of going to prom with Stephanie gave him the courage to speak up once more. "Look man, I need you to go to the prom with Sarah. That's the only way Steph will go with me."

Ken paused and nodded his head, "Oh, so I didn't mishear you." He said simply, however there was a dangerous undertone with his words.

"Absolutely not."

"W—What!? Come on man, I really need this."

Ken resisted the urge to smack his idiot friend over the head. Since they were now driving, and he wouldn't be able to control his strength, it would put them both in danger.

"Hold on, so you're asking me to take another woman to prom, that isn't my girlfriend. Am I understanding it correctly?"

Steve's expression was a little uneasy, but he doubled down. "I mean, when you put it that way it doesn't sound great. But I can guarantee that your girlfriend won't need to be worried."

"Huh!? What the hell is that supposed to mean." Ken asked, such a statement did not make sense to him.

"Don't you remember Sarah? The one that's always at the front of the class?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" To Ken, no matter who it was that he took to the prom, it would be disrespectful to Ai. There was no way he'd jeopardize his relationship for such a small reason.

Steve cleared his throat, "Ahem. She's the... larger one."

"Larger?" Ken went into deep thought for a moment. With the help of his Academic Trait, he was able to scan his memories, after which an image appeared of the girl in question.

Yet instead of feeling relieved, Ken's face turned horrified.

"You want me to go to prom with that Sarah!?" His voice rose a few octaves, his shock and terror evident.

Steve was silent, placing his hand on Ken's shoulder firmly. "Please man..."

Ken quickly shoved the guy's hand off of him, still in disbelief he would ask such a thing of him. Inwardly, he had already signed Steve's death warrant, his mind planning out the most excruciating workouts imaginable.

The next 10 minutes of the trip was spent in silence. Steve knew that he was asking a lot and knew not to push the issue, this was something that Ken would need to decide himself. In fact, speaking up would probably go against his favor.

Ken on the other hand was having an internal crisis. Never had he been asked to go against his morals like this before. His first instinct was to reject it, but then he remembered how his parents had come up with the promposal to begin with.

After stewing for a while, he decided that he would need to talk to them and Ai before making a decision.

He let out a deep sigh, "Do you have a photo of Sarah?"

"Hmm? Why the hell would I have a photo of that beast—" However, Steve quickly stopped himself and turned to Ken who was wearing a dangerous expression.

"Ahem... I think there was one on the High School website."

Ken continued to glare at the side of Steve's face for a few moments, making his annoyance known. "I'll give you an answer by tomorrow morning." He said eventually.

Steve's expression lit up, however he just nodded. He'd put enough pressure on Ken for now, it was best to take a step back.

"Thanks man."

A few minutes later they arrived at his house and Ken alighted from the truck, grabbing his bike from the tray. No more words were spoken between the two before Steve drove off.

Ken was in a rather dark mood right now, but he tried to wipe the sour expression from his face. He placed his bike in the car port and took out his phone.

After tapping the screen a few times, he brought up the school website and soon enough found a photo of his potential prom date. He sucked in a cold breath of air and subconsciously shook his head in defeat.

Sarah had a cute face, but it was rather round. In fact, her whole body was rather round, or perhaps spherical would be the more apt description. The frizzy hair and braces were the icing on the cake, making her wholly unattractive, at least from Ken's perspective.

Ken let out a sigh, shaking his head once more, this time chastising himself. He hadn't met Sarah personally, so it was rather rude of him to make such assumptions, after all, she could have a great personality.

Locking his phone screen, Ken walked into his house and called out to his mother.

"I'm home."

Frantic footsteps rang out as both Chris and Yuki's face suddenly appeared in front of him.

"How did it go!?"

Their expression was filled with expectation, as if the matter was some huge news that they couldn't wait to share in. From what he remembered, his parents weren't even this excited when Daichi got the scholarship from Osaka Toin.

"It's... Complicated." Ken replied, feeling rather stifled.

A few minutes later, the trio were sitting around the table after Ken had just broken the news.

"Absolutely not!" Yuki exclaimed, her face filled with anger.

"Mmm, your mother is right. I won't allow you to take any woman to prom if it's not Ai." His father was also of the same opinion, shaking his head in disapproval.

Ken let out a small sigh, this was what he was also thinking.

"Can you imagine how poor Ai might feel if she heard you were taking another attractive young female to prom?" Yuki almost had tears in her eyes just thinking about it.

Ken flinched, hearing the word attractive. Perhaps Sarah could be classed as attractive by others, but certainly not himself.

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

Chapter 602 - 602: Breaking the News (2)

"Mhmm. But out of curiosity, what does this girl look like? She must have good taste to want to go to prom with you." Chris said, his intrigue piqued.

Ken reached for his phone and was about to pull up the photo before his mother spoke up.

"Honey... Why are you asking such a thing?" Yuki placed her hands on her hips and stared at her husband with a judgmental expression. However, in the next moment she grabbed the phone from Ken and was the first to look at the picture.

Her face froze, sweat suddenly appearing on her face. "S—She's gorgeous." She muttered, attempting to keep a neutral expression.

A smug grin crept onto Chris's face as he heard his wife's words.

'Just like I thought, just like his old man.' He said inwardly, reaching out for the phone in Yuki's hands.

However, as he grabbed it and looked at the photo, Chris almost dropped the phone then and there. He looked at his wife, only now seeing the signs of her lies.

Then, without looking at his son, he tossed the phone back to him. "Ahem... How about you go talk with Ai about it, she deserves to know about this situation." He stated, turning his back to Ken, albeit unnaturally.

Ken let out a sigh, not feeling any better about the situation. "I'll go call her now." He said meekly, before heading towards his room.

His parents who were left in the dining room both looked at each other with a weird expression. Neither of them said a word, but it was clear they were both quite shocked by the situation.

"That Steve sure has balls..." Chris stated plainly.

"Mmm..."

Ken sat down on his bed, letting out another sigh. He knew that this conversation would not be pleasant, but he decided to listen to his parents and talk things over with his girlfriend.

If she said no, then he could tell Steve with a clear conscience that he would need to find another way. The fact that he was entertaining it at all could be considered enough, at least from his point of view.

RING RING

"Hey stranger." A soft voice rang out from the phone, filled with affection.

"Hey, sorry to call you out of the blue." Ken replied, feeling uneasy.

It was then that Ai's voice turned concerned, she could instantly tell that something was up. Call it women's intuition or whatever, but she caught on rather quick.

"Alright, spill the beans."

Despite this, she was comfortable enough to know that it likely wasn't too serious. However, her tone soon changed.

...

"Hold on... You want to take another woman to prom?" She asked, her tone icy.

"W—Wait... I never said I wanted to take her to prom."

Ken felt a cold sweat run down his back as he tried to clarify his position. But now that he thought about it, what kind of response did he expect when calling up his girlfriend about taking someone else to a formal event.

"Well the fact you're calling and asking me about it makes it sound like you do. If you didn't want to go with her, why didn't you just reject your friend?"

Once again, Ken was slapped in the face with cold logic. He massaged the bridge of his nose, and asked himself the same question. This wouldn't have happened if he'd just outright rejected Steve.

"I—I guess I was just trying to be a good friend." He replied meekly.

"Yeah! Such a great friend. So great that you'll cheat on your girlfriend just because he asked." She snapped back, the venom dripping from her words.

"Ai... It's not like that. You see—"

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Before Ken could try and defend himself, the phone cut out. It was clear that Ai had hung up, not wanting to hear any of his excuses on the matter.

Ken looked at his phone screen and let out a deep sigh. It looked like he had really stepped in it this time.

Things were hard enough since they were in a long distance relationship. There was a lot of mutual trust that laid the foundation of their relationship, something which he had just trampled upon by asking something so ridiculous.

Thinking about it now, how would he feel if the shoe was on the other foot? Would he be okay with Ai going to an end of year dance with another man, no matter who it was.

A vision of her and Katsuya standing side by side in formal attire appeared in Ken's head, eliciting a deep frown on his features.

"Damn it... How do I make this right?" He thought, gritting his teeth.

After furiously thinking for a while, Ken came up with something. One might say it was a little manipulative, but he didn't think it was far from the truth.

Opening up his messages, Ken began to type out something and attached the photo of Sarah before letting out another sigh.

"I know I've hurt you Ai, and I'm really sorry. I think the reason why Steph asked Steve to do this was because she was worried that Sarah would not have anyone to go to prom with. While it still doesn't make things right, I hope you can forgive me for prioritizing someone else's feelings above our relationship."

He read the message a few times, making sure that it conveyed his sincere apology. Ken didn't want Ai thinking that he was just trying to get a free pass to pursue other women, nor did he want this to affect their relationship.

After a moment of hesitation, Ken sent the message and laid back down on his bed.

Meanwhile in Japan, Ai was doing her best to calm down. She was hurt, but also angry. She never thought that Ken would be such a person, but it seemed like it was a misjudgment on her part.

BUZZ BUZZ

She looked at her phone, only to see Ken's name pop up. Ai scoffed and was about to throw the phone, but accidentally opened the message.

The first thing that she saw was the photo of Sarah, which confused her. Wanting more context, she read the message before taking a closer look at the picture.

Instantly, she felt her empathetic heart ache as she looked at Sarah. The thought of a fellow woman being forced to either miss out or go solo to such a big event like prom tugged on her heartstrings.

After agonizing for a while, she typed up a response and sent it. Unlike before, she was calm and her lips were turned up in a small smile.

"Idiot..." She muttered, but her heart felt warm.

BUZZ BUZZ

Back in Austin, Ken suddenly sat up, reaching for his phone quickly.

"You can go. Just don't make any moves on Sarah - Love you x"

He blinked a few times before letting out a smile. That was until he realized that he now had to go to prom with Sarah.

"Damn it! You were supposed to say no..." He cried, clutching his chest dramatically.

Part of him wanted to tell everyone that Ai had declined, but if she came over in the future, his lies would only cause drama.

Letting out a sigh, Ken laid back down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling.

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

Chapter 603 - 603: White Knight (1)

"Dude, will you just stay still?" Ken whispered harshly, his voice dripping with annoyance.

Steve who was fidgeting like crazy, couldn't even look at his friend. They were currently in Steph's house, waiting in the lounge room while the girls got ready for the big night tonight.

Stephanie's father was sitting across from them, wearing a serious expression. Ken wasn't at all intimidated by the guy, partly because he wasn't taking his daughter to the prom.

The other part was because he'd seen far more intimidating people back in Japan. Hell, Tetsu was 10 times as scary as this guy, yet Steve looked like he was about to sweat out of his suit.

"So, I'll be expecting my daughter back before 11pm tonight Stephen. And if I smell even a hint of alcohol on her, there will be dire consequences." Steph's dad stated, his expression stern.

"Y—Yes sir!" Steve almost jumped out of his chair, his whole body shaking.

Ken on the other hand rolled his eyes inwardly. In reality, he was not looking forward to tonight at all. He could think of countless things that would be more productive than going to prom, namely his Image Training or even a quick workout.

"Honey! They're ready." A voice called from atop the stairs.

Steve shot up to his feet, his throat dry and his palms sweaty. He did not look like someone who was going to an end of school year dance with his crush.

The boys walked over to the foot of the stairwell and were met with the sound of heels upon the wooden steps. Steve's eyes lit up as he first saw the glittery blue shoes and tanned legs come into view.

Soon enough, Steph appeared for all to see. She was wearing a blue dress which hugged her figure nicely, causing different reactions from the three men downstairs.

Her father wore a proud expression on his face, while Ken nodded in satisfaction. Steve on the other hand couldn't help but stare, finally stopping his incessant fidgeting.

"You look beautiful..." He blurted out, unable to hide his wonder.

Steph's smile lit up her face, showing off her natural beauty and glowing features. While she had used some makeup, it was applied sparingly, enhancing her appearance effortlessly.

She stepped off the stairs and looked Steve up and down, "You don't look so bad yourself."

Steve smiled dumbly, somehow managing to remember to hold his arm out for her.

THUD

Ken flinched, quickly looking around the vicinity after hearing the noise. 'What was that?' he thought in confusion.

THUD THUD

The sound rang out a few more times, yet no one seemed to be alerted. In fact, Steph, her father, and Steve were all looking up at the stairwell, as if expecting something.

Ken's gaze moved upwards, only to see a red set of heels attached to a white leg. It looked like they were strapped on so tight that it could cut off the circulation.

As more of the figure appeared, Ken's face fell.

[Activating Poker Face skill.]

He didn't even hear Mika's words as his mind was in shambles after witnessing his prom date. As Sarah appeared, she was garbed in a striking sleeveless red dress which also hugged her figure.

Her frizzy hair had been straightened, accentuating her cute face. If Ken were to give an opinion, he would say that she had the potential to be pretty.

"You look... Beautiful..." Ken said, his expression emotionless.

While the exact same words were said by Steve earlier, they each had different connotations. Wanting to be nice, he tried to do his best to make her feel pretty on such an occasion.

However, Sarah looked up and down at Ken, barely hiding her scowl of disapproval.

Ken blinked a few times, as if not believing what he was seeing. He turned to Steve, but the guy was too enamored with his own date to even spare him a glance.

Ken swallowed his dissatisfaction and held out his arm towards Sarah, intending to walk her out of the house and to the limousine which would be taking them to the venue.

She let out a small huff and grabbed his arm, to which Ken almost yelped in surprise.

The woman's arms were bigger than Makoto's and seemed to hold just as much strength as him. If it weren't for Ken's height, he likely would have been easily carried by her as an accessory.

The four walked out to the limousine, with both couples linked together. Upon arriving, the two men opened the door for their date's and gestured for them to get inside, as was expected of them.

While Steph easily entered the car, Sarah struggled a little. With her size, the vehicle tilted to one side, letting out a small groan.

Ken cringed inwardly, his attention turning to Steve once more. This time, Steve actually looked at him, only to feel a cold sweat appear on his back in the next moment.

"You owe me... Big time." Ken spat through his teeth in a harsh whisper.

The two then sat in the car and the group began to chat amongst each other. The venue was around 25 minutes away at Brazo's Hall in Austin, which meant they had some time to burn.

Ken tried to make some small talk with his date, however, he soon noticed that he was receiving short and direct answers. It was as if Sarah had a vendetta against him for some reason.

This caused him to frown inwardly. If it weren't for the effects of his Dauntless trait, he might have actually snapped back.

'Aren't I doing this girl a favor? Why is she so hostile towards me?' He thought, feeling incredulous.

The other two didn't seem to notice Sarah's behavior, perhaps because they were busy with each others company.

For the next 25 minutes, Ken felt like he was a bystander. There was not much that he could do besides sit back and hope that the night would be over fast.

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

Chapter 604 - 604: White Knight (2)

By the time they arrived, Ken had already mentally checked out.

He went through the motions, his mind elsewhere. He had already made some adjustments to Mika's training plan specifically for Steve to try out over the next couple of weeks, or at least until his anger had subsided.

"Smile for the photo."

As they entered the venue, there was a backdrop with a sign which read "Prom 2019" on it. Steph and Steve dragged him and Sarah forwards, to which he was forced to have his photo taken.

Even at the best of times he didn't like such things, but now he was in a foul mood. Thankfully, the person behind the camera didn't single him out since there was a long line behind them.

After walking into the hall, they took in the atmosphere. The decor was formal, with a DJ booth and dance floor on one side of the venue. There were tables and chairs on the other end, as well as what seemed to be a buffet.

"I'm going to get some food."

Both Sarah and Ken called out at the same time, causing them to look at each other weirdly. It was then accompanied by a scoff from the former, before she walked off first.

"Can you guys get us a table? We'll go mingle first." Steph asked politely.

Ken let out a sigh, following after Sarah a moment later. He was hoping that he might be able to eat alone and avoid his hostile "date", yet it seemed it wouldn't be that simple.

'Maybe I can sneak off after the dance.' Ken thought, already planning his escape route.

Feeling slightly depressed, he grabbed a plate and began to help himself from the buffet. There was a large spread of meats, seafood and even rice which seemed to lift his spirits a little.

After piling his plate as high as he could manage, he spotted Sarah, or rather her large back from afar. Letting out another sigh, he walked towards the table she'd secured and put his plate down.

He glanced at her food, only to have his eyes widen in response.

Looking down at his own plate, he secretly compared. Ken had thought that he'd placed as much food as practically possible on his plate, yet upon seeing Sarah's it was clear that he lacked the experience and efficiency of this woman.

Without a word, he sat down and began to dig into his food. Mouthful after mouthful, he shoveled it in, hoping to drown himself in the carnal pleasure of eating in order to escape his predicament.

Upon finishing his food, he looked up and saw Sarah was gone. Letting out a sigh of relief, he sat back in his chair and debated getting another plate of food since it was so delicious.

Yet before he could get up, Sarah had returned with another plate, towering at the same height as the previous one.

Once again, Ken's eyes widened in both surprise and appreciation. He had thought that he had a large appetite, yet this woman was putting him to shame.

Sarah's gaze lifted, yet upon seeing Ken's face, her features softened slightly. She had been expecting to see a look of disgust, or even a mocking expression, yet they were not present.

But it was not enough for her to speak up. She silently tucked into her food once more, ignoring him. It was only for a brief moment, but Ken saw this change in her attitude and was suddenly curious.

Without a word, Ken decided to get another serving, returning a few minutes later. This time he sat right next to her, almost causing her to let out a yelp in fright.

"Alright, what's your deal?" Ken asked casually, not even glancing at her. Without waiting for a response, he started digging into his second plate of food.

Taken aback, she was silent for a little while.

"You ruined it..." She said in a small voice.

"Hmm? Ruined what?" Ken asked in utter confusion. He had only properly met the girl today, so how could he have ruined something of hers.

Sarah sighed, her face turning slightly red in embarrassment. "You ruined my prom date with Steph..."

'Eh!? What does she mean?' Ken's mind raced, trying to understand her meaning. However, after his shock wore off, the answer was rather evident.

She had a crush on Steph, there was no other explanation.

Now that he came to the conclusion, her behavior towards him was rather understandable. To Sarah, he was the one who had stepped in and allowed Steve to take Steph to prom.

If he had declined, then none of this would have happened.

Ken massaged the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming along. Here he was, thinking that he would be the white knight, allowing Steve to get a date, while also being a proxy date for Sarah so she wouldn't be embarrassed.

But the actual situation was so much different than he had imagined. Instead of being the savior, he was in fact, the villain, as far as Sarah was concerned at least.

"I'm sorry..." He said eventually. He had no other words to comfort her, especially after what he'd done in this situation.

"It's fine. It's not like she would go for me anyway... I mean look at me." Sarah replied, gesturing to herself.

Ken agreed, but he couldn't exactly say it out loud. If he wanted the night to be somewhat pleasant, there were other ways to go about it.

"Have you tried dieting and exercise?"

Sarah sent a glare his way, causing a cold sweat to roll down his back.

"Oh thank you for your wise words, why didn't I think of this sooner?" She retorted sarcastically, digging into her food once again.

'Well, I deserved that.' He commented inwardly.

'Mika, Can I use the training plan function on Sarah?'

[...Why would you want to do that?]

Ken almost choked on his saliva, not expecting Mika to be so blunt. But when he thought about it, the was related to baseball, why would it care about anything outside of that?

Eventually, he got confirmation from Mika and pulled out his phone.

"What's your number?" Ken asked, typing away.

"W—What? Look man, I'm not attracted to you at all." Sarah replied, her face turned up in disgust.

Feeling his ego crack, Ken did his best to remain calm. "I'm going to send you a tailored training plan. The exercises will be low impact and will significantly reduce the chance of injury. As long as you follow my training plan and don't exceed a certain amount of calories each day..." He paused, raising his gaze.

"I can guarantee that you'll be able to find a proper date for Senior prom."

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

Chapter 605 - 605: WWBA Tournament (1)

After talking things out with Sarah, things became much less hostile between the two. Thanks to this, Ken was somewhat able to enjoy the rest of the night.

In some ways, knowing that Sarah was not attracted to him, nor had any intentions towards him, had made things far less awkward. The night continued onwards, and after the dance, both he and Sarah left the venue.

"You sure that this training plan of yours will work?" She asked, lifting her gaze from her phone with a hint of hope in her eyes.

"Mmm. As long as you stick to it for 3 months, you'll see some results. I'll give you an updated one in 3 months time." Ken replied confidently.

"Thanks..."

"No problem."

The two awkwardly stood outside the venue for a while, waiting to be picked up. It was already 10pm, but Steph and Steve were still enjoying themselves inside.

Thankfully, a couple of taxi's arrived a few minutes later, breaking through the awkward atmosphere. Sarah walked to the cab and turned to Ken, "Good luck in the tournament." She stated, not waiting for a response.

Ken smiled, shaking his head. It turned out that Sarah was actually a nice person, once they had gotten past the initial dislike from Ken stealing her date.

With that, Ken got into the other cab and went home.

'I'll definitely take Ai here next year.' He thought inwardly watching the venue disappear into the distance through the cab window.

A couple of days later, the Gladiators team stepped into the lobby of the airport in Georgia after a 3 hour flight. Ken had faced much worse travel times, so he was happy that it had not been too long.

"Alright guys, we have a bus waiting for us outside already. Let's get a move on." Coach Wyatt stated, rounding up his players.

It was obvious that he was a father, particularly in this moment. For some reason, all dad's became hyper efficient when stepping into an airport.

The team followed, lugging their bags along with them.

"You still not talking to me?" Steve asked, anxiety plastered onto his face.

Ken turned to his friend and scoffed, ignoring him. He didn't really hold a grudge for the prom thing, but the fact that Steve had basically ignored him after getting into the venue had ticked him off.

"Come on man, I'm sorry okay. Like I said, I owe you big time." Steve pleaded, walking beside him.

"Hmph, you don't say?" Ken spat out sarcastically.

Steve let out a sigh, realizing that he had messed up. He'd thrown his friend to the wolves, barely even acknowledging him during prom. It was almost like he'd taken him along just to babysit.

"What can I do to make us even?" He asked sincerely.

"...Suffer." Ken said under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

With Steve pestering him all the way to the bus, Ken did his best to ignore the guy. He didn't plan on letting this drag on for too much longer considering how annoying the guy was being.

Eventually, he stopped him. "Dude, just shut up already. It's done now, let's not bring it up again."

"Wait... So you forgive me?" Steve's features lit up, clearly not expecting to get off scot-free.

"Yes, so can we please just drop it?"

"Ah, sure man!" he almost jumped in glee after being pardoned from his sins. It was as if his charges had been acquitted, turning him into a free man.

Now filled with relief, he began to talk more freely. Unfortunately, it was all about Steph. Ken was forced to listen to the bright-eyed and excited stories of the teen who was clearly experiencing some puppy love.

'This is torture.'

Thankfully, they arrived at their destination in around 30 minutes.

"Alright guys, I know I went over this before. But while we're here, let's run through it again." Coach Wyatt said, standing up at the front of the bus. With his words, the players went silent, giving him their attention.

"We're in Pool M, alongside Hawaii Elite, Upstate Mav's, Exposure National Scout Team and Elite Squad National. Out of all the teams, Elite Squad has the most D1 commits, meaning they should be our toughest opponents."

"Remember, the winner of the pool automatically advances to the single-elimination bracket, but there are also wild cards. Even if we don't win against Elite Squad, as long as we perform well in the other matches, we'll have a good shot at making the bracket." The Coach stated.

He grinned, his eyes moving over Ken briefly. "But, I have no intention of losing to them."

A few chuckles rang out within the bus, and Ken got a few more glances from his teammates. Ken on the other hand, was wearing a determined expression.

This is the kind of tournament that he'd been waiting for ever since he made the decision to move to America. Not only would he be playing against the best competition in his age bracket that the country had to offer, it would also be on a big stage.

It was likely that more scouts would be watching this series than those who had watched the U18 World Cup.

Ken felt that it was a little backwards, but it seemed that colleges were mostly focused on local talents, rather than ones from overseas countries like Japan.

"Okay great. Our first match starts in an hour or so, but Hawaii Elite are playing the Elite Squad right now. Let's go check out our competition ay?" He said, twirling his mustache.

With that, the whole team alighted from the bus and made their way to the field.

As the fields came into view, Ken nodded with satisfaction. For such a big venue, the facilities were pristine. It was slightly better than the Titan's practice ground which was more modern.

For some reason, Ken preferred the older fields, possibly because it reminded him of back home. Either way, he would be happy to play baseball anywhere.

Ken glanced at the scoreboard and a small smile appeared on his face.

Hawaii Elite - 0

Elite Squad National - 6

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

Chapter 606 - 606: WWBA Tournament (2)

It was the top of the 5th inning and Hawaii were fielding. Their pitcher was rather thick, but his wind up was full of power. Just from a glance, Ken could tell that the guy was pitching in the 90's.

He glanced at the batter whose face seemed as if he was wearing a cold mask. In a way, the expression reminded him of Leo, but there was some differences.

While Leo was almost too handsome, this guy had thick eyebrows and a square jaw. His body was also top-heavy, lacking the symmetry that the model-like Leo Cameron possessed.

However, this was not a competition of looks.

WHOOOOSH

THWACK!

The sound of the wooden bat was like a thunderclap, causing Ken's ears to perk up. He was used to hearing the resounding gong of a metal bat, so he took a moment to register what had happened.

His eyes followed the ball which soared into the air, hearing the cheers of the small crowd follow shortly after. The batter was stationary for a moment before casually tossing the bat aside and beginning his run around the bases.

"Damn, he hit that slider like it was nothing." Steve commented, letting out a whistle of appreciation.

"Mmm, it was a good hit." Ken commented, watching the ball sail over the back fence.

"Hey, what's up with the wooden bat?" He asked casually.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Ken turned to Steve as if he was dumb, "I'm asking why he's using a wooden bat." He reiterated.

Steve gave Ken a weird look, which only annoyed the latter more.

"What? It's a simple question." He snapped.

"Bro, we're in the WWBA tournament. What did you think we were going to hit with?"

"WWBA?" Ken felt like the guy was making fun of him or something. There was obviously something that he was missing.

Steve let out a sigh, shaking his head out of pity. He leaned closer and whispered, wanting to spare his friend from embarrassment.

"The WWBA stands for World Wood Bat Association. It would be quite unusual if we were allowed to hit with a metal bat in this tournament."

Ken's eyes lit up in understanding, though he felt a little embarrassed. Oftentimes, students would hit with metal bats in school. Not only were they cheaper, they were also much safer.

With metal bats, there was no risk of the bat cracking and sending someone to the hospital.

Ken had looked at wooden bats before, but after seeing the price tag, he quickly disregarded the idea. While he had some money from his Grandfather, he didn't want to waste it.

He could see why the WWBA tournament would restrict players to only using wooden bats, particularly when these were used in the MLB and College. Unfortunately, Ken had never used one before.

"Are they much different from metal bats?" Ken asked curiously.

This time, Steve's expression warped. "Wait... Don't tell me you've never hit with a wooden bat before?"

Ken frowned. 'It shouldn't be a big deal right?' He thought.

Eventually, he confirmed his friends suspicions, causing the guy to pale almost instantly.

"Damn it. You're gonna have a tough time then." He said, wearing a sour expression.

"Can you just tell me the differences? Maybe I can make some adjustments in game." Since there was nothing he could do now, Ken wanted to get as much information as possible to help his chances.

Steve sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Look, there are a few differences between the two, but the biggest one is that wooden bats are far less forgiving. The sweet spot is considerably smaller, meaning if you're even a little inaccurate, you'll end up mis-hitting."

"They're also heavier, which means it might take a while to adjust your swing to compensate."

Hearing this, Ken felt a little out of his depth. He had swung tens of thousands of times with a metal bat, possibly even more. To make the switch so suddenly before a massive tournament, was less than ideal.

However, he shrugged in the next moment. There was no use in getting worked up about it now, not when the tournament he'd been looking forward to was about to commence.

"Hurry up you two." Coach Wyatt called out to the duo who had fallen behind the pack.

They quickly caught up to the team, though Steve looked as if he'd just swallowed a lemon. But soon enough he went back to normal, his gaze falling upon Ken.

'It's fine, as long as he pitches like usual, we should be able to get some runs and win.' He thought, comforting himself.

"Are the baseball's the same?" Ken asked, his face showing genuine curiosity.

"...Are you being serious?"

SLAP

"Stop judging me and just tell me." Ken growled, slapping his friend in the middle of the back.

After letting out a groan, Steve shook his head. "The balls are the same as we use in High School." He muttered, dealing with the stinging sensation on his back.

He didn't complain, he knew that he deserved it. If anything, he was surprised that Ken had enough restraint not to use his full strength.

"You should probably start practicing your swing with the wooden bats now." Steve suggested when they arrived at a spot near the fence.

Ken nodded, the sooner he got used to the weight distribution of the bat, the more confident he would be when they entered the game. Without a word, he approached the coach.

"Hey coach, can I start practicing my swings?" He asked.

"Oho, a bit eager are we?" But he shook his head, "It'd be a bit rude to do so while the match is going on. Let's wait till they finish." He stated.

"Ah sure I guess. I've just never hit with a wooden bat before, so I wanted a bit of practice."

"EH!?" Coach Wyatt squealed, almost jumping in fright from the statement. He suddenly felt a glare from the field where the 1st base umpire was standing.

"Ah, sorry." He called out, wearing an apologetic smile. However, his expression changed when he turned back to Ken, letting out a sigh.

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

Chapter 607 - 607: Balance (1)

Coach Wyatt felt a headache coming on. Hearing that his best player had never swung a wooden bat almost an hour out from competing in the biggest National Tournament of the year was not ideal.

If the tournament didn't require players to hit with a wooden bat, it wouldn't be an issue. However, it was literally the WWBA, its whole purpose to showcase how these players could perform under the same rules as professionals.

He thought for a while, eventually grabbing a wooden bat out of one of the bags on the ground.

The coach handed Ken the bat and looked at him seriously, "You can swing the bat, just make sure you're far enough away that you don't interrupt the game."

Ken accepted the bat, instantly feeling the weight was heavier than he expected. Despite being a similar size to his metal bat, it felt far more solid.

"Yes Coach." He stated, walking back to the carpark.

Steve quickly followed after him, feeling as if he could help in some way. Either that or he felt guilty for judging him earlier.

Soon enough, Ken found a clearing and stopped in place, his attention on the bat in his grip. At first glance, it looked to be a similar size to the metal bat, but it felt more narrow.

Ken sized it up, holding it out in front of him horizontally.

"What do you think?" Steve asked after a few moments.

"I dunno yet, let me try swing it."

Ken reached into his pockets and pulled out his batting gloves, slowly placing them onto his hands. Once happy, he collected the bat and got into his position.

Already, he could feel the weight above his head. It was not too taxing, especially since he'd performed this stance so many times in the past.

Letting out a deep breath, Ken suddenly sprung into action.

WHOOOOOSH

The bat sailed through the air much quicker than he'd expected. With the additional weight, his body's center of gravity was thrown off, causing him to stumble.

While this would have been fine, the bat that was meant to be securely attached to his hands, was now flying through the air and into the shrubbery 40 yards away.

"Ah..."

Both Steve and Ken stared in silence at the bushes which now had a new resident. It took all of the former's self control to not burst out into laughter, in turn, preventing him from receiving further reparations later.

"Ahem. It's a good thing that you're practicing now." Steve commented, his voice sounding a little odd.

Ken felt his face heat up in embarrassment, but he quickly jogged towards the bushes and retrieved the bat. He checked the bat briefly, letting out a sigh of relief after seeing no obvious signs of damage.

Without a word, he returned to his previous spot and got back into position, acting like nothing had happened. Steve played along, allowing him to keep up the illusion.

'I'll need to make adjustments to my follow through.' He thought inwardly.

Since he swung the bat with such power, adding a few ounces was enough to mess with his center of gravity. While he didn't want to go into the exact science of it, there was a clear indication that something had to change.

WHOOOSH

The next swing came a few moments later, but it lacked the same speed as beforehand.

Before going all out, Ken wanted to make some minor adjustments to his follow through. Only by slowing down his swinging speed could he start in the right direction.

Despite this slower swing, Ken still felt himself get pulled off balance by the weight of the bat as he swung. This caused a frown to form on his face.

'Mika, what am I doing wrong?' Ken asked.

Usually, he would try and fix the problem himself, however there was only around an hour until he was set to play. Having a few hints from Mika would make things move along a lot quicker.

But before she could answer, Steve piped up.

"Man, it looks like you're center of gravity is out of whack."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Ken asked curiously.

"Swing again for me."

Ken did as he was asked, performing another swing. Once again he felt his balance teeter as he swung through. Feeling a little frustrated, he turned to Steve with a questioning gaze.

"Mmm, looks like I was right." He stated matter-of-factly.

Just as Ken was getting impatient, Steve walked over and told him to get into his stance.

Ken obliged.

"Right, it looks like you're trying to make up for the weight of the bat. I can see you're intentionally leaning towards your back leg."

"Really?" Ken didn't feel like that was the case, after all, he had swung a baseball bat many times and it didn't feel that he was acting any different.

"Yep, just trust me."

"Move your head further towards your lead leg and make sure it's in between your feet." He followed up.

"In between my feet? What the hell do you mean by that?" Ken retorted.

Choosing not to snap back, Steve patiently explained what he meant. The idea was to make it so Ken's form was as natural as possible before swinging.

"If there was a line directly in the middle of your feet, your head should be on that line. You might feel that the weight in your shoulders feels a little different because of the bat, but that's fine."

Ken raised his eyebrow, but did as he was told. He could feel that holding the bat like this was a little uncomfortable, but ignored it for now.

"Now, try and swing as you usually do. Just make sure you hold tight on the bat..."

Ignoring the verbal jab at the end, Ken did as he was told. He planted his foot and brought his wrists forward, twisting his back leg and core as he sent the bat swinging with an almighty force.

WHOOOOSH

As he followed through, he could still feel the weight of the bat, but this time it didn't throw him off balance. With his front leg fully extended and his bat now over his shoulder, his eyes widened in surprise.

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

Chapter 608 - 608: Balance (2)

"Wow, that was easy." He commented, sending Steve an appreciative glance.

"Heh, what can I say. I'm kind of a savant when it comes to hitting." Steve replied with a mischievous grin.

"So why are you only the 6th batter?" Ken replied dully.

Steve's smile froze on his face, not knowing how to respond. In actuality, he had been so bad at hitting that he had to receive one on one lessons for over a year before he improved.

He had repeated what one of the coaches had taught him back then when he also suffered from not being able to keep his balance.

"Ahem... Well, I'm going to watch the rest of the game. Don't be too long." He said, quickly leaving the vicinity before his pride was wounded any more.

Ken let out a smile, "Thanks man." He called out after him, receiving a wave in response.

Now being left alone, he felt a bit better.

'Hey Mika, sorry you got interrupted there.'

[It's fine. He was mostly right, user is overcompensating for the weight of the bat.]

Ken let out a sigh of relief, though part of him was still a little spooked. While the system had been upgrading, Ken's pitching mechanics had subconsciously changed without his knowledge.

Hearing about his batting form being affected just from the weight change of the bat gave him PTSD. If it wasn't for Steve and Mika, there was a chance that he would have embarrassed himself in this tournament.

'Thanks Mika. Can you let me know if I do anything wrong?'

[Affirmative.]

With that, Ken took up the bat once more and began to complete more and more swings in the clearing. Every time the bat swung through the air, a devastating noise could be heard from afar.

A little while later, some figures appeared, wearing red and white baseball uniforms. They were making their way from the field after having just finished a match.

The stone-faced batter who had hit a home run in the previous match was at the front, his expression unreadable. His dark brown eyes scanned the parking lot, only for his ears to perk up a moment later.

He paused, looking around with interest. Only after walking closer did he finally find the source of the noise. His eyes narrowed as he saw a tall figure swinging a bat by himself in a clearing.

Despite being almost 100 yards away, he could still hear the crisp noise of the bat flying through the air.

"Who is that?" He muttered, feeling a sense of curiosity blossom from within.

"Trent, you comin'?"

The stone-faced teen took one last look at the figure before turning around and joining the rest of his team. "I guess I'll find out soon." He muttered, a small smile finally breaching his cold mask.

"Ken! The game is starting soon." Steve yelled out, jogging towards his friend.

Trent's ears perked up but he didn't turn around, merely committing the name to his memory.

Unaware that anyone had taken notice of him, Ken wiped the sweat from his face and turned to see Steve jogging over.

"Hasn't it only been 30 or 40 minutes?" He asked. From what he knew, the game wasn't meant to start for at least another 30 minutes.

A pained smile appeared on Steve's face, "The game ended at the bottom of the 6th because of the mercy rule. Elite Squad got another 3 individual home runs..."

Ken's eyes widened. The fact that 3 players were able to get home runs meant that the Elite Squad's batting lineup was stacked. However, instead of giving him a sense of foreboding, his excitement bubbled to the surface.

'Elite Squad huh? I can't wait.' He thought inwardly, a dark smile forming on his face.

Seeing the smile on Ken's face, Steve shuddered. Whenever he saw this smile, it was usually followed by something bad happening, generally when it came to training.

However, Steve inwardly told himself that the smile was not meant for him. Or at least, he prayed that it was not.

The two made their way back to the field, only to see Coach Wyatt and their teammates already on the field warming up. They quickly joined in, not wanting to miss out.

Ken's muscles were already warmed up from swinging the bat for the past 30 minutes, so he only did a light exercise to keep himself warm.

"How did you go?" Coach Wyatt asked, his face betraying his nervousness.

"Mmm, I think I made some progress." Ken stated rather confidently.

The coach had no reason to not believe him, so he breathed out a sigh of relief. There would be many people watching this tournament, he needed to make sure the team had a good showing.

"Okay good. Are you fine to bat 3rd as usual?"

"Sure, no problem." Ken replied nonchalantly.

"Alright. We're going to start Brett for the first few innings today, but you'll come on soon okay?"

Ken shrugged, "Sure coach, no worries."

There was no doubt that Ken would get his chance to pitch at this tournament, so he didn't mind switching it up every now and then. As long as he could pitch the full game against Elite Squad, he didn't care too much.

The team continued to warm up before being called over by the umpire. Max and a player from the other team walked up to participate in the coin toss.

"Heads, Gladiators choose." He stated, pointing to Max.

"We'll field first." Max said confidently.

"Gladiators have won the toss and have chosen to field first!"

With that, everyone returned to the bench and grabbed their things. Ken placed his hat and glove on, heading over to the outfield. The coach had made the decision a few days prior when he had revealed his prior experience from the World Cup.

It was clear that the coach wanted to keep Ken in the batting line up, while also giving him a break from the mound. The fact he could play in the outfield was perfect for this.

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

Chapter 609 - 609: Game 1 (1)

After finishing his warm-up pitches, Brett stood atop the mound and let out a deep breath. He had been a little surprised that Coach Wyatt had chosen him to start the very first game of the tournament, but he was by no means going to reject this opportunity.

He subconsciously sent a glance to Ken in the right outfield before turning his attention back to the batters box.

'As long as I get some playing time, I don't care.' He stated in his heart.

After all, if they kept winning, even more eyes would be on their team. Disregarding Ken who was a freak of nature and could pitch over 100mph while still hitting like a truck—he wasn't someone to be overlooked.

With this sort of mindset, he nodded at Steve, accepting the lead.

'A slider for the first pitch? This guy is always so bold...!' He thought.

Brett entered his wind up, expertly striding forward and throwing a perfectly controlled slider towards the plate. Being one of his best pitches, he had practiced it thousands of times.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

The tremendous spin on the ball caused it to veer off to the outside, escaping the reach of the opponents bat.

"Nice pitch!" Steve called out, sending the ball back.

Feeling his confidence rise, Brett caught the ball and took his position on the mound once more. He felt good and his arm felt light, a good sign that he was in for a great performance.

After another couple of accurate pitches, the first batter for ENST (Exposure National Scout Team) was sent back to the bench after striking out.

Brett pumped his fist, feeling a surge of adrenaline. Striking out a lead-off hitter was always a good confidence booster, particularly in games of this level.

Facing the new batter, Steve asked for a fastball down low. Nodding his head, Brett sent it exactly where he'd asked, putting some heat behind it.

WHOOOSH

CLICK

The ball was mis-hit, striking the underside of the bat thanks to the placement of the pitch. It kicked into the dirt and ran along the ground towards the middle of first and second base.

In a flash, Brett ran towards first base.

"Nicolas!"

The first baseman Nicolas collected the ball with ease, scooping it up and turning his body in mid-air. The throw was fast and accurate, landing into the open glove of Brett who managed to place his foot on first base before the runner.

"Out!"

It was an easy call, leading to the second out of the innings.

"Nice!"

The easy outs filled the Gladiators with some confidence. Ken on the other hand let out a sigh. There was a reason why he didn't like playing in the outfield, and that was purely because... it was boring.

Letting out a sigh, he walked back to his position, trying to hide the boredom from his expression.

'I want to pitch...'

Unfortunately, he was stuck out here. And if Brett continued to pitch well, it was possible that he might not even get to pitch this game.

As the third batter came up to the plate, Ken marveled at just how big the guy was. He made the Lopez twins that he'd met from Cuba, look like children.

'Is that guy in the right sport?' Ken mused. It seemed like the guy would be a better fit to play football as an offensive lineman.

At a glance, it was obvious that the guy had some power behind him. Subconsciously, Ken moved backwards a few yards, feeling that he was going to hit.

Steve also seemed to be wary of the big guy. If Ken thought he was large from all the way in the outfield, then Steve who was up close and personal, really understood just how big he was.

"Hit it Solly!"

"Smash it out of the park!"

The cheers of a few spectators entered Steve's ears. He moved his gaze to the origin of the sound and his eyes widened as large as saucers.

'So huge!'

There were two big guys who looked quite similar to the teen in front of him. It was clear that they were older, judging by the facial hair on their faces.

Steve gulped, turning back to Brett on the mound. Thankfully, the guy still seemed to be feeling confident, not intimidated by the large guy in the batters box.

'Let's start out with a slider. We can't afford to give him anything easy.' He thought, making the call.

Brett nodded, quickly getting into position. They just needed one more out and that would be the end of the first inning.

He entered his fluid pitching motion, sending his trademark slider down the lane.

Steve flinched, feeling a sense of danger right beside him. At first it was the sound of the displaced air, roaring into his eardrums. But right after, he saw a black blur enter his vision for the briefest of moments.

WHOOOOOOSH

THWACK!

An almighty crack was heard as the impact of the ball on the wooden bat resounded through the field. It didn't take long for the spectators to cheer out with glee as the ball flew in the air towards the right outfield.

Ken's eyes locked onto the ball, his mind already calculating. Since he'd already retreated towards the fence, he could focus on figuring out where the ball would land.

'It's going over.' He determined pretty quickly, turning his gaze towards the back fence.

Since the ball was hit so high, Ken had plenty of time to run some simulations in his mind. He had robbed a home run before, twice in fact, as part of his U18 World Cup mission.

This experience seemed to help his decision making in that moment. He quickly turned his head and began to run towards the fence, glancing at the ball briefly.

'It's now or never...'

He felt that he had the timing, down, so now he just needed to execute according to the plan.

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

Chapter 610 - 610: Game 1 (2)

With a leap, Ken brought his right leg upwards and kicked off the wall. Due to his height and long limbs, the jump had catapulted him high above the wall.

Once he felt like he'd reached the maximum altitude, he turned his head, only to see the ball much closer than he had anticipated. At some point he must have run off course, causing the ball to be on a direct pathway to his face.

'Crap!'

With the reflexes of a cat, he placed the glove in front of his face, only to feel the ball make impact with his nose through the mitt. However, he didn't have time to feel sorry for himself, quickly turning his attention to his descent.

With the ball secured in his glove, Ken did his best to land on his feet without risking injury. Thankfully, he had the Fine motor control skill, allowing him to control every aspect of his body with relative ease.

A moment later, he landed safely on his feet. Only then, did he feel the pain of being smacked in the nose by a ball. It was a shooting pain, but he quickly shrugged it off, showing the ball in his glove to the nearby umpire.

"Out!"

"3 outs, changeover!"

"Holy crap!"

"Nice one Ken."

Latrell trotted over from the center outfield position and offered a high five. But his face changed a second later, "Are you okay?"

Ken sniffed, only to feel a warm liquid exiting his nose.

"Ah damn it." He muttered, trying not to get blood on his uniform.

The large teen who had hit the home run and was leisurely jogging around the bases, suddenly heard the out call and almost tripped over his own feet. He stood frozen on the spot and looked out towards the right outfield in shock.

Coach Wyatt on the other hand was gobsmacked. When Ken told him that he had played the outfield position before, he wasn't expecting much, merely using it as a reason to keep him in the batting lineup.

But in the very first inning he'd already robbed a home run.

However, upon seeing Ken getting closer with a worried looking Latrell beside him, his expression changed.

'What happened?'

He soon found out, as Ken approached with blood pouring out of his nose.

"Quick, get the first aid kit." Coach Wyatt ordered one of his assistants.

When Ken arrived, the coach placed his hand on the teen's shoulder, "Nice catch out there. Let's get you sorted out."

Thankfully, they were now batting, meaning there was some time to get Ken patched up before he needed to bat. At first glance, he could tell that there was no break, allowing him to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Can you breathe through your nose?" He asked.

Ken tried, but it felt as if it was blocked. He shook his head in response.

"Okay that's fine. I'll shove these in for now to stop the bleeding, you should be fine to continue playing. Only if you want to of course."

Ken gave the coach a look, which was all he needed to see.

"Haha, alright go take a seat. We'll need you to hit big this inning." He said with a grin.

Apart from feeling stuffy and having a bit of a headache, Ken was fine. He moved over to the bench, only to become the center of attention.

"Dude that was so cool."

"I can't believe you robbed a homer so casually."

"Thanks for that Ken..." Brett said, looking as if he'd just swallowed a lemon. It took a lot for him to speak up like this, especially since finding out Ken was also good in the outfield and apparently anything to do with baseball in general.

Ken gave him a simple thumbs up, turning his attention to the field.

"You all good man?" Steve asked, sitting down next to him.

"Yeah, no worries. My girlfriend's father hits harder than this." He said with a grin.

However, the words caused Steve's face to pale. Just what kind of father would hit their daughter's boyfriend? His mind wandered for a while, imagining himself in a ring against Steph's father.

'I could probably take him...'

BANG

The sound of Nico hitting the ball into open space jolted him out of his reverie. The rest of the bench cheered as he easily made it to first base without any opposition.

Ken got up from his feet and collected the bat he'd practiced with earlier. He made sure to place it aside, wanting a sense of familiarity in his first at-bat.

Latrell approached the batters box with a determined expression, his eyes focused on the pitcher. From this angle, Ken could see the definition of the teen's muscles through his tight uniform.

While he was already in good shape when they met, after Ken's training for the past 2 months, there were some differences. Most notably, Latrell's stamina had greatly improved from all the running and conditioning he'd been put through.

Sure, baseball might not be a stamina intensive sport, but there were only benefits associated with training it.

Latrell's batting form looked powerful, despite him standing in what some would call a neutral position. Perhaps it was because of his physique, but it looked like he could hit some bombs.

PAH

"Ball."

The first pitch came flying past, entering the glove on the outside of the strike zone.

Ken whistled in appreciation. The ball was a cutter with some good movement and judging by the sound it made going into the glove, it was fast.

"Good vision Latrell." Ken called out, egging on his friend.

Keeping his composure, Latrell waited for the next ball. It wasn't long before a fastball came right down the middle, taking him by surprise.

WHOOOOSH

WHACK

The ball was hit, sailing over the shortstops head with some speed. The player tried to jump for the ball, but missed out by only a few inches.

Ken pumped his fist, letting out a smile as he watched Latrell easily cruise to first base. In only the first inning, their team already had two players on base and no outs.

Now it was his job to send them home.

'Let's see how far I can hit it with this bat.'

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

Chapter 611 - 611: You Reap what you Sow (1)

Ken walked up to the batters box, wielding his new bat. His nose was stuffed with wads of gauze, making it difficult to breathe, but at least blood wasn't pouring down anymore.

Thankfully his eyesight was fine, meaning he had no excuse not to smash this next pitch out of the park.

He stepped into the box and completed his pre-hit ritual, tapping home plate and the toes of his cleats. The feedback felt slightly different, lacking the bounce that came from a metal bat.

Ken got into his stance, standing square to the pitcher. After mentally ensuring that his stance was correct, he turned his head and stared down the guy on the mound.

He waited patiently, adjusting his grip on the bat.

A moment later, the pitcher entered his wind up and sent a ball to the inside with some speed. Ken's eyes widened and he was forced to lunge backwards, falling on his backside as he dodged the ball.

"Oi, that's a warning! Try that again and you'll be gone." The plate umpire roared, pointing directly at the pitcher.

These umpires were specifically selected for the WWBA tournament and were professionals. Their job was to ensure that the game was fair, but also safe since those competing were all top prospects.

There was a lot of pressure on their shoulders, making them even more sensitive to such plays.

Ken was flabbergasted for a moment. 'Did he just intentionally try and hit me?'

He had to almost leap backwards to avoid the ball, otherwise it would have landed right in his rib cage, doing some serious damage. A surge of irritation crept up from inside, causing his expression to stiffen.

Without a word, Ken got to his feet and took up his position once more. Yet this time, there was a dangerous light in his eyes.

Accident or not, that last pitch was dangerous. Not to mention that the pitcher didn't even look to be apologetic on the mound. The guy simply rolled his shoulders and got back into position, a small grin pulling up the corner of his lips.

'I see how it is...'

Now filled with even more motivation, Ken patiently waited for the next ball.

The pitcher entered his wind up, sending the next ball rocketing towards the outside. Based on the spin and trajectory, it was the same cutter that got past Latrell earlier.

Ken's eyes tracked the ball, already knowing where it would go.

His body sprung into action. Ken felt the weight of the bat accelerate as he planted his foot and twisted his body, generating tremendous torque as he swung hard and fast.

WHOOOOOOSH

WHACK!

"Tch."

Ken's hands stung after hitting the ball. Since he hadn't hit the sweet spot in the middle, the feedback felt jarring, something that he was not used to.

He watched the ball sail into the air and over the fence, but no one celebrated.

"Foul."

The crowd broke into mixed reactions as the ball landed foul.

"W—What power..."

"Man that was so close."

Both Latrell and Nico on base felt that it was regretful, especially after the pitcher had thrown a bean ball in the previous pitch. It would have been sweet poetic justice to send the next ball over for a home run.

However, they quickly got over it. Ken had the capability to send almost any ball over the fence, there would be another opportunity.

'Steve was right, the contact point is less forgiving.' Ken mused, looking at his bat briefly.

The pitcher on the other hand let out a sigh of relief. He had been shocked the moment he saw Ken easily make contact with one of his best pitches. Besides Ken's tall stature, the guy didn't look like he had such power.

However, he was far more wary now. In fact, if first base was free, he would have probably walked Ken. Unfortunately, his team was in a pinch right now and desperately needed an out.

The pitcher nodded, accepting the lead from the catcher and quickly entered his wind up. The ball whipped out from his fingertips, on course for the top of the strike zone.

If Ken wasn't so good at reading pitches, he might have swung low, hitting an easy fly ball to the infield. Unfortunately for them, his enhanced mental capacity allowed for quick calculations in both velocity and spin.

"Hup!"

Ken dug his foot in, twisting his body. His muscles condensed, squeezing out every bit of strength they could muster in that moment. With the added weight of the bat, his swinging speed was terrifying.

WHOOOOOOSH

THWAAACK!

He followed through, feeling a sense of satisfaction run through his whole body. It was clear that he'd hit the ball in the sweet spot of the barrel since everything had felt so clean and crisp.

Ken felt like he didn't even have to watch the ball which was flying into center-right field, but he still did. His eyes lingered on it for a few moments before a big grin crept on his face.

He turned to the pitcher and mumbled something in Japanese before casually throwing his bat to the side so he could begin his victory lap.

The ball easily cleared the fence, to the point where even if the center outfielder was on a 15 foot ladder, he wouldn't have been able to touch it. This was probably the biggest home run that Ken had ever hit, and his first with a wooden bat.

Ken casually jogged around the bases, his heart filled with happiness. By the time he arrived back at home plate, Nico and Latrell were waiting for him, wearing beaming smiles.

"Nice homer."

Once he stepped on home plate, they celebrated, dishing out high fives left, right and center. This played out again when they returned to the bench, with the rest of the team joining in on the festivities.

"You should have hit a line drive back to the pitcher..." Steve said, his face showing his usual mischievous smile.

"Next time." Ken replied with a grin.

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

Chapter 612 - 612: You Reap what you Sow (2)

With his home run, the Gladiators were now up by 3 runs and had no outs in the first inning. It was honestly a terrible situation to be in for the opposite team, but by no means would they give up in a tournament like this.

"Let's not get too complacent." Ken said, taking a seat next to Steve.

"Mmm. Brett is pitching well today, like he has something to prove."

"Good..." Ken replied, but inwardly he complained, 'Hurry up and let me pitch...'

Steve looked at his friend and could almost tell what he was thinking. But in the next moment he froze, as if he remembered something. "Ah, what did you say to the pitcher after your homer?"

"Hmm? Oh, I just said something in Japanese." Ken said, waving his hand dismissively.

"Tell me..."

Ken glanced at Steve briefly. One look was all it took to understand that the guy would keep bothering him until he told him what he said. Wanting to avoid the annoyance, he gave in.

"Jigou Jitoku" He said simply.

"..."

"What?" Ken asked, raising an eyebrow.

Steve looked at him expectantly, "So, you gonna tell me what it means? I don't bloody know Japanese..."

Ken grinned, "You should learn it, it's rather simple."

"Tell me..."

"You reap what you sow." A voice spoke from behind them, catching both Ken and Steve off guard.

Ken turned around, seeing that it was Coach Wyatt who had answered him. He was wearing a thoughtful expression, as if the words meant more to him than what was on the surface.

"Coach, you know Japanese?" Ken asked in surprise.

The coach shook his head, "Goodness no. I watch a bit of Anime here and there. It's quite a common saying in those."

Ken's surprise turned into disinterest almost immediately. He had already been hassled by many people at school about Anime. They seemed to think that just because he was from Japan that he would know everything there was about it.

Apart from a few of his favorite sports Anime that he had seen, Ken preferred to read Manga, as did a lot of Japanese people around his age.

"It's quite a good phrase and can be used in many situations. When you simplify it, it basically means that you get out what you put in." Coach Wyatt stated, still wearing his thoughtful expression.

Steve looked at the coach weirdly, clearly not expecting a lecture at this point in time.

"Take baseball for example, if you don't put in any effort, you won't get any success. But if you train hard and continue to practice, your rewards will be great, both on and off the field."

Ken nodded his head in agreement. He was the biggest proponent of training hard so he could perform well on the field and reap the rewards.

'Rewards?'

Ken froze, panic gripping his entire body as if he had realized something.

'Wait, this is a national tournament... Why haven't I received a mission?' Ken thought, feeling a sense of loss.

Usually when he entered a tournament like Koshien or even the U18 World Cup, the system would give him a set of goals to hit with great rewards offered. He had forgotten since he'd played for 18 months without the system.

[Answer: User requires a higher level of competition to qualify for the next set of missions.]

Mika's monotonous voice rang out in his head, dousing whatever hope he had left. There was a part of him that had guessed this might happen, but that didn't mean it was an easy pill to swallow.

After all, it was tough to let go of free rewards.

'What sort of competition are we talking Mika?' He asked, his disappointment evident.

[Answer: College equivalent competition.]

It was a simple answer, but Ken felt his heart sink. He was currently in his Junior year, which meant he still had another year until he could go to college. Missing out on any missions in that time would likely slow his progress.

'I guess its not all bad news... ' Ken thought after a while.

Considering he wanted to increase his physical grades without the Elixirs for now, it might not be so bad. Of course he would miss out on any new skills or Lottery Tickets that might be on offer, but he also had the Image Training in the meantime.

Plus, he still had the SSS-Grade Physical Elixir he hadn't used. In a few weeks time he should have caught up to his physical grades and would be able to use it, propelling his fitness to another level.

"Alright, I gotta get ready." Steve said, sitting up from the bench.

"Watch out for the beanball's." Ken replied with a grin.

Steve froze for a moment and looked as if he was going to say something, but he quickly ignored Ken and grabbed his bat and helmet.

Ken turned his attention to the field. Since he'd been busy chatting away and having an internal crisis, he had missed the last bit of action.

He saw Max standing on 3rd base and in scoring position. Dion was up to bat right now, meaning that the opposing team had still not gotten an out.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strikeout!"

Ken wore a wry smile, 'Maybe we do better when I'm not watching...' he thought.

With that, Steve was now up to bat. With Max standing on third base, Steve turned to the coach, as if asking for the play.

The coach made various signs, receiving a nod from Steve in the process. Ken's eyes lit up, a small grin touching the corner of his lips.

As the pitcher threw the ball, Steve held his bat out with two hands, tracking the ball easily and delivering a beautiful push bunt towards first base.

Even before he'd made contact with the ball, Max had taken off at full speed towards the plate. His big frame must have looked menacing since the Catcher didn't dare to stand in his way.

"Safe."

"Out."

Steve was called out at first base, but he had already done his job. With the squeeze play, their team was already up 4 runs in the very first inning.

"Nice play."

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

Chapter 613 - 613: Stealing (1)

"Ball four, take your base."

Ken let out a pained smile and threw his bat to the side, trying not to show his annoyance. After his home run in the first inning, he was subsequently walked in the following at-bats.

'This sucks...!' He mused inwardly, taking his spot on first base.

He let out a sigh, feeling frustrated. Ken had never been walked this much in his life, yet only a couple of months in America and he had to face a new kind of reality.

Compared to back home, baseball in America felt far more calculated. In Japan, coaches spoke about fighting spirit, teaching their players to never give up and continue to challenge themselves.

This oftentimes led to a pitcher not wanting to walk a batter, even if it made perfect sense to. Some might call this arrogance, but to Ken, it was just a way of life.

What was the point in running away now? What would you do if there was no chance to walk the batter next time?

But Ken couldn't expect for everyone who played baseball to follow his own ethos. If all players were the same, just what kind of game would they be playing?

Ken imagined playing against 9 carbon copies of himself and shuddered. It was quite vivid, especially since he often batted against himself in his Image Training.

Shaking such weird thoughts out of his head, Ken looked up at the scoreboard. It was currently the bottom of the 6th inning with a score of 10-1, causing him to let out another sigh.

They just needed 1 more run and the game would be over thanks to the mercy rule. If not, Ken would have to suffer through the boring match, wasting away in the outfield for the remainder.

Since Brett had been pitching so well, Coach Wyatt kept him in the game under the excuse that he might not get much playing time in the future. Unable to argue with such a stance, Ken merely accepted it.

WHOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

'Oops, I better pay attention.' Ken thought, turning his attention back to the game.

His mind stalled for a moment, but then his lips turned into a grin as if he'd thought of something.

'I can probably get this run myself...!' He thought, taking a lead from first base.

Since there were no outs, Ken had plenty of time to try and work his way to 3rd base. Though he hadn't been given the signal to steal bases, he didn't think the coach would mind.

Because the pitcher was right handed, he should have an easy enough time getting to second base.

However, upon remembering the tournament in Texas, Ken turned to the first baseman and glared at him. Of course this wasn't the same guy who had tried to stomp on his hand, but Ken was still wary.

Being the recipient of a glare for no reason, the first baseman stepped back, raising his hands. "W—What did I do?" he asked sheepishly.

But Ken ignored him, turning his attention back to the pitcher. The moment he started his wind-up, Ken kicked off the ground in a hurry.

His Quick First Step skill activated, boosting his acceleration between the bases.

"Second!"

PAH

"Ball."

The catcher stood up in one smooth motion, sending the ball flying accurately towards 2nd base. The pitcher had to dive out of the way, almost getting cleaned up by the throw.

Ken leapt forward with his legs out, performing a slide towards second base. Almost as soon as he made contact, the glove holding the ball was tapped on his shin.

"Safe!"

Keeping his foot on the base, Ken sprung up to his feet and began to dust off the dirt from his uniform. He winced a little, feeling as if he'd gone a little too hard into the slide.

'I wish I had a sliding skill. Maybe then I won't have to worry about hurting my ass.' He mused inwardly.

"Tch."

The second baseman clicked his tongue in annoyance, clearly upset he couldn't get the tag in time. .

Ken waited until the pitcher had the ball again before taking his lead. The count was 1-1, as long as he could get to third base, a pop-fly into the outfield would end the game.

With this motivation, Ken stared at Max in the batters box, as if to convey his intentions before looking back at the pitcher.

The pitcher's arm twitched, setting alarm bells off in Ken's mind.

'Crap!'

He quickly ran back to second base, moments before the throw came from the pitcher. Thankfully, he was able to securely step on base before the ball reached him.

"Haaahh." The second baseman let out a frustrated sigh after once again being thwarted by the runner. In fact, he looked to be having a bad time.

Ken couldn't blame him. If he was down 10-1, he would probably be depressed as well.

Paying the second baseman no mind, he took another lead. His hawk-like eyes descended on the pitcher, looking for any suspicious movements that might indicate another pick off.

As soon as the pitcher moved, Ken lowered his head and sprinted towards 3rd base. He didn't hesitate, catching everyone off guard.

PAH

"Strike."

"Damn it!" The catcher cursed, hopping to his feet and launching the ball towards 3rd base. His frustrations were evident and he'd put his all into the throw.

Unfortunately for him, the throw was off. The ball flew through the air, sailing over the head of the 3rd baseman. The guy jumped high, stretching his glove in order to try and save it from getting past.

Yet there was nothing he could do. The ball cleared his glove, flying into the outfield.

Ken who had already begun his slide, suddenly kicked off the ground, wearing a big smile. He stepped on 3rd base and rounded the corner, heading straight for home plate.

Max quickly stepped back from the plate, giving him a wide berth.

Tap~

"Game set, Gladiators!"

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

Chapter 614 - 614: Stealing (2)

"Nice man!" Max practically bear hugged him after Ken had made the winning play. His large shoulders and arms fully encompassed Ken, squeezing the life out of him like a boa constrictor.

"E—Ease up man." Ken spat out with the little air he had left in his lungs.

Max let him go with a big grin on his face. "Sorry man, I got a little too excited." He admitted, patting him on the back.

Just when Ken thought he was out of hot water, the team arrived shortly after, dousing him with their celebrations. He was poked, prodded, cuddled and even slapped on the behind, making him feel violated.

His face stiffened and he dropped his shoulder, bulldozing his way out of the group. Yet once he got past the initial crowd, Steve was waiting for him with a smile on his face.

Steve's expression morphed into one of horror as he saw Ken steamrolling forward like a running back towards him.

Upon seeing his friend, Ken tried to slow down, but the momentum he'd built up was too much. In the next moment, his shoulder barged into the center of Steve's chest, knocking him flat onto his back on the field.

Steve let out a pained groan after being trucked by Ken, his lungs now empty after the impact.

Before he could complain anymore, Ken held out a hand. "My bad, I didn't see you there."

He accepted the help, getting to his feet groggily. "Are you sure you're in the right sport...?" Steve asked, massaging his solar plexus.

"Hmm? Of course, I love baseball." Ken replied, thinking it was a stupid question.

Seeing the innocent expression on Ken's face, Steve shook his head. It was clear that Ken hadn't understood his meaning.

"Nice work team." Coach Wyatt called out, his mustache pulled up into a wide smile.

"We have to leave the field pretty quick for the next game, so grab your things and we'll meet in the parking lot." He said, gathering up the players.

He watched as they walked off the field, his eyes lingering on Ken's tall frame. He shook his head with exasperation, wondering how he had gotten such a player.

Coach Wyatt almost felt bad for the competition, since Ken was such a monster. He had a feeling that some people might even request his birth certificate, suspecting him of lying about his age.

"Hehe, our club should get even more prestige after this tournament." He muttered, happy as punch.

"Coach, do you have a moment?" A deep voice called behind him, causing him to turn around.

The man looked to be in his early 50's, but it was clear at a glance that he was in shape. His slicked back salt and pepper hair and polo shirt gave him a handsome and distinguished look, but his eyes were sharp.

"Can I help you?" Coach Wyatt replied, not recognizing the man.

"Mmm. That player of yours, did you fill out his details on our website?" He asked, straight-faced.

"Website?"

"Sorry, I probably should have introduced myself first. I'm Rob Fisher, the Chairman of the WWBA." He said, holding his hand out for a handshake.

Coach Wyatt quickly became flustered, "O—Ohhh, Sorry about that Mr. Fisher. I'm Jaye Wyatt, it's nice to meet you." He said, grasping the outstretched hand with both of his own and shaking it.

To have the Chairman of the WWBA approach him so casually, the coach was stumped. It was rare to see people of such status attend the group stages, so he couldn't be blamed for being shocked.

"Mmm, good to meet you. As I asked before, did you create a profile for your player on the Perfect Game website?" he asked once again.

"No I haven't sorry... I was going to get around to it." He said, stretching the truth.

Rob's face froze, but he nodded a moment later. "If you wouldn't mind doing it as soon as possible, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Ah, sure thing. I've got my laptop with me, I'll do it as soon as I can."

"Good good. I've got too many people contacting me trying to get his details, it will be easier if they're available online." Rob said, letting out a sigh of relief.

Coach Wyatt couldn't help but laugh. It seemed like he wasn't the only one being pestered by college scouts and coaches alike.

"Well, I'll go do that now then." He said, "It was nice to meet you Mr. Fisher."

"Mmm, likewise. I'm sure I'll see you guys in the single-elimination tournament." Rob replied, leaving shortly after.

Coach Wyatt watched him leave before grabbing his bags and heading back towards the bus. He would need to make sure that all of the player's profiles were up to date on the Perfect Game website while he was at it.

After all, their results and stats would be uploaded for anyone who wanted to see them.

Many coaches and scouts from colleges and even the MLB would use the site to check out past performances of players. While the kids might not put a lot of stock in their stats, it was often used as part of their assessments on who would receive a scholarship.

Upon returning to the parking lot, he saw the team awaiting him.

"Alright, let's go get some lunch. We've got another game in a few hours." The coach called out, gesturing for everyone to get on the bus.

Since they'd started early and finished in the 6th inning, they had some extra time to kill.

Ken got onto the bus and took a seat, stretching his muscles. He was in a pretty good mood since he was able to secure the winning run and put an end to the game.

If he had to sit through another 3 innings in the outfield, he might have just asked to be benched. After all, if he couldn't pitch and was walked every at-bat, the game would just drag on.

His eyes moved to Coach Wyatt who had just got onto the bus after everyone.

'He better let me pitch in the next game...!' Ken mused.

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

Chapter 615 - 615: Wings & Honey (1)

The group soon arrived at a place for lunch, much to the relief of Ken who felt his stomach protest. He hadn't eaten anything since before the plane ride this morning.

As they got out of the bus, Ken's attention moved to the restaurant nearby.

"Willy's Mexicana? Howlin' hot chicken? What kind of name is that..." He muttered, wearing a weird expression.

"Oh man, I love chicken wings." Steve exclaimed, donning a big smile.

"Don't dilly dally, let's go inside. I've got some work to do."

Coach Wyatt was like a mother duck as he tried to usher the players into the building. After getting the proverbial kick up the rear by the Chairman of the WWBA, he needed to create a profile for Ken as soon as possible.

They quickly entered, being assaulted by a delicious, mouthwatering smell.

Ken felt his stomach grumble loudly as the scent drilled its way into his nose. Whatever it was, he was going to devour it soon.

Without even finding a seat, Ken went up to the counter and looked at the pictures of the delicious foods on offer.

"Can I please grab the Willy's classic sandwich, a 12 pack of wings, coleslaw and some fries thanks." He asked, doing his best to keep his saliva within the confines of his mouth.

"Oh, are you ordering for me too? You're the best." Steve stated, placing his hand on Ken's shoulder.

Ken turned to him with a straight face, "This is all for me..."

"Ah..."

"That will be \$27.65." The young lady behind the counter stated.

"Sorry, can you add another classic sandwich on please?"

Ken felt a little sorry for Steve who had very little spending money while they were away this week, so he decided to throw the guy a bone.

"Thank you so much... You're such a good friend." Steve exclaimed, tears almost pouring out of his eyes.

Shrugging off the emotional guy, Ken waited by the side, his eyes locked onto the kitchen staff. He was so hungry that he had to resist the urge to go out the back and make it himself.

Seeing that his friend was hangry, Steve kept his mouth shut. He had an uncanny ability to sense when and when not to talk to Ken, almost like they were a couple.

Perhaps some of the people at school still thought they were a couple, but it no longer bothered Steve who had been seeing Stephanie since prom.

When Ken's number was called, he swooped in like a vulture and grabbed the tray, heading to the nearest table. Without bothering to grab any cutlery or napkins, he quickly dug into the sandwich with ferocity.

The overabundant lettuce was flung out with every bite, but he didn't seem to care. The slight heat and the acidity of the pickles and sauce caused his taste buds to dance in euphoria.

Only after demolishing his sandwich did Ken take a moment to breathe. His eyes moved to Steve who was just sitting there, staring at him.

"What are you waiting for? Eat something." He said, ripping into the closest chicken wing.

Now that he'd received permission, Steve let out a sigh of relief and grabbed the sandwich, helping himself. He let out a groan of satisfaction, reveling in the flavor.

It wasn't until they'd almost completed the food that Steve dared to spark some conversation.

"Did I ever tell you about what happened at prom between me and Steph?" He asked, wiping his face with a napkin.

Ken sent him a glare, "Don't bring up the prom again. I still haven't forgiven you for throwing me under the bus."

Steve shrunk back, regretting his wording. "A—Ah, I was just saying... It turned out that you were right."

"About what?"

"Well... The short of it is, she was jealous." Steve said, his features softening. "When I left homeschooling and started going to McCallum, apparently I stopped talking to her as much."

"She started seeing me with other girls and began to pull away. And instead of trying to chase after her, I just gave her space." He stated with a wry smile.

"Yeah, you're pretty stupid." Ken replied, throwing another fry into his mouth.

Steve froze, considering whether or not to react to the statement. However, under his calm judgment, he managed to keep himself from making a mistake.

"...Anyway. It looks like I'm officially off the market." He said, wearing a grin.

"Mmm, congrats." Ken replied, nodding. "Just be careful of Sarah, she'll be coming for Steph when the next prom comes around."

Steve's eyes widened in disbelief, unsure if Ken was being serious or not. His smile was the same one that he showed when it came to punishing him during training, causing Steve to feel uneasy.

"W—What do you mean by that?" He stammered.

Ken shrugged, turning his attention to the coleslaw left on his plate. "I gave you the heads up, my job is done here."

Before Steve could ask again, Latrell, Max and Nico appeared beside them with their food trays in hand. "Got room for us?"

The two moved over in the booth, allowing the others to take a seat.

"Damn, you guys are finished already?" Max commented with shock. They had only enough time to order and receive their food, yet the other two were already done eating.

"Everything I do is fast." Ken commented, leaning back in his chair.

Everyone's face turned weird in that moment, turning to Ken with question.

Steve smiled mischievously, "Everything huh? I feel sorry for your girlfriend."

"What!? Ken has a girlfriend?"

Ken frowned, only to suddenly understand what Steve was getting at. His face turned red in the next moment and he spluttered, "N—Not everything alright. I like to take my time in some things."

"Haha, yeah sure buddy." Steve waved his hand dismissively.

"Bro, talk to me when you finally lose your virginity. Until then, I am still your Sensei." Ken shot back scathingly.

"Ah..." Steve held his heart, acting as if the words cut him deep. In reality, he had no ground to stand on.

Nico, Max and Latrell were speechless after arriving amidst the lovers quarrel. Just as they were about to try and make an excuse to leave, Ken and Steve both burst out into laughter.

"Hahahaha."

The laughter cut through the tense atmosphere, allowing the three to breathe a sigh of relief. However, they still felt unsure of the relationship between the two.

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

Chapter 616 - 616: Wings & Honey (2)

Thankfully, it was rather harmonious after the small tiff, allowing the other three to relax. With good food and good company, they were soon having a grand time.

"Okay done..." Coach Wyatt closed his laptop and let out a deep sigh. Now that he'd updated Ken's player profile on the website, he could relax.

He checked his watch, only to see quite some time had passed.

"I better get some food." He muttered.

After another 30 minutes, everyone was finished with their meals and started to filter out of the restaurant. Many of the players were nursing a full stomach, yawning every now and then.

Ken especially felt like taking a midday nap on the bus.

Once everyone got on the bus, it was silent for the whole trip. Everyone was clearly tired and ready to go into a food coma.

They soon arrived back at the fields and parked up in the bus.

"Alright guys, we still have around an hour until the match. You're welcome to stay in the bus for another 20 minutes, but after that I'll need you guys in top form." Coach Wyatt seemed to understand how his players were feeling, giving them the best news of the day.

With that, he left the bus, leaving majority of the players where they were seated. Only a few got up and followed after him.

Ken stayed in place for a few moments, working up the strength to get up. There was something about American food that made him feel lethargic after eating, especially with his appetite.

If he had eaten the same volume of his mother's cooking, he would have already felt better by now.

'Maybe I just don't have the stomach for it.' He thought.

He got to his feet after some internal debate, heading towards the exit.

"You going already? Coach said we still had 20 minutes." Steve called after him.

"I need to go move my body so I'm ready to pitch." He replied, not even turning back to respond.

With that, he left the bus and felt the heat bear down on him. It was around 1pm now, and since it was summer, Ken felt like he was back home with the crazy heat.

'I should go sweat off this food.' He mused inwardly.

He soon broke into a leisurely jog, not enjoying the bouncing of the food in his stomach. However, he pushed through the first 5 minutes, finally feeling his energy return.

After 20 minutes had elapsed, Ken already had a sheen of sweat on his body. Remembering that the Coach wanted him at the field right around now, he made his way over.

"Ah... What field is it again?" He muttered, looking around with a lost expression.

"Excuse me, are you Ken Takagi?" A soft voice called out to him, causing him to turn around.

What he saw left him speechless. A woman dressed in a low cut white sun dress and wearing a straw hat smiled at him. Her long blond hair reached her waist and her beautiful tanned skin looked flawless.

"Um... Yes." He responded after catching his bearings.

Ken tried his best to keep his eyes directed at the woman's face, but due to the height differences between the two, he could see directly in between the two peaks. He gulped, wanting nothing more than to leave as soon as possible.

"Oh cool. I came out here from Florida to watch our 18U team compete." She said, flashing him a brilliant smile.

"Ah right... Well, I better—"

"Have you thought about what College you'll be attending?" She asked, cutting him off.

At this point, Ken felt that something was a little off. "Not yet, I'm still not eligible for official visits until September this year." He said warily.

"Oh that's a shame. I go to University of Florida, go Crocs!" She replied, giving a little pump of her fist which caused her peaks to jiggle mesmerizingly.

Ken was physically unable to comment, too engrossed in the spectacle before him. However, he soon felt a cooling sensation spread throughout his body, snapping him out of his stupor.

'That was close...' He thought, inwardly thanking his Dauntless trait for settling him down.

Yet before he could extricate himself from the situation, she moved towards him. "You know, we have a really good catcher in the team. Leo Cameron. Have you heard of him?"

Ken's eyes widened at the mention of this name. How could he forget Leo Cameron? The player who had given him such a hard time in the U18 World Cup almost 2 years ago.

'So he's going to UF huh?'

"Ken! There you are." A voice called from afar, clearly out of breath.

Ken turned his head to see Steve running in his direction, eliciting a sigh of relief. He turned to the forward woman and bowed slightly, "Well I better be off. Nice to meet you."

With that, he jogged off, meeting Steve halfway.

"Dude, I've been looking for you everywhere." He said, trying to recover his breathing.

"Mmm, I got lost on my jog."

Steve's face froze, noting that this was not the first time Ken had gotten lost while exercising. "Who was that girl?" He asked, leaning around Ken's frame and seeing the retreating back of the figure.

"I think she was sent by one of the staff at the University of Florida..."

"What? What do you mean?" Steve asked in confusion.

"Nothing, don't worry." He replied, throwing an arm around his friend's shoulder and beginning to walk. However, his expression soon turned cold.

Once he'd calmed down, Ken was able to understand what was happening. Since no coach's or scouts could reach out to him until September, it seemed like they had tried to use other means to lure him to UF.

Unfortunately for them, Ken was not a naive teenager, at least in the traditional sense. After almost being beguiled by the woman's beauty, this only served to piss him off.

'You lost whatever chance you had...'

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

Chapter 617 - 617: Next Game (1)

It didn't take long for Ken to switch gears from what had happened earlier. Whenever he was going to pitch, it was as if a fire was lit deep inside of him.

No matter the place, nor the time, he would always be ready to pitch.

"Where have you been?" Coach Wyatt asked, his face showing just how worried he'd been. If they had lost their Ace pitcher, then it would have been disastrous.

"Sorry, I just got lost on my jog." Ken replied apologetically.

"Right... Well, go and join in on the drills. We're up against Elite Squad this game, our hardest match up of the group stage." He said, waving him off.

"Yes sir." Ken replied back, jogging onto the field.

Coach Wyatt let out a sigh, stopping Steve on his way past. "Next time, don't let him go off by himself alright? I want you to never let him out of your sight."

Taken aback from the serious expression of the coach, Steve nodded frantically. He then jogged onto the field, feeling a little weird. 'What am I, a babysitter?' he thought.

After around 20 minutes, the Gladiators were done with their warm ups and headed back to the bench, allowing the Elite squad to begin their warm up.

Ken's eyes lingered on their players, silently evaluating them. From his initial inspection, their fundamentals looked sound, giving him the impression their fielding was tight.

'It might be a low scoring game.' He thought to himself.

Of course he didn't plan on giving any runs up this game when he was pitching. But baseball was never so straight forward.

His eyes happened to move to the crowd, seeing a familiar face staring back at him. The figure flashed him a brilliant smile and waved.

'It's that woman...' Ken's face soured, and he quickly ignored her. There was a good chance that she was here under the guise of watching the Elite Squad, which were from Florida.

While the staff at University of Florida might be brazen enough to try and tempt him with this woman, they wouldn't be so stupid to risk accusations of foul play.

From what he knew, the penalties from the NCAA for contacting an amateur athlete prematurely were quite harsh. The college could receive a ban from recruitment activities in addition to involved staff being reprimanded or even terminated.

No player was worth such a hit to their reputation.

On the other foot, Ken could also face a sanctioning from the NCAA body if he was proven to be complicit in the recruiting. This held the possibility of him losing his eligibility for college altogether.

Just this was enough reason to remove the University of Florida from his consideration.

"You all good man?" Steve asked, seeing the scowl appear on Ken's face.

"Mmm, just thinking about some stuff."

Steve looked at him with wide eyes, "Wait, you're not nervous are you?" he asked with disbelief.

"What? Why the hell would I be nervous?" Ken spat, as if the notion itself was offensive.

"Well, they've got one of the best High School hitters in the country, so I wouldn't be surprised if you had some nerves." He replied matter-of-factly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Who?"

"You don't know?"

Ken gave him a deadpan look, "You think I'd be asking if I knew the answer?"

Feeling his frustration, Steve raised his hands in submission. "Damn dude, it was just a question." He mumbled, wondering why his friend was so testy today.

"Trent Waters, he's that guy over there." Steve said, pointing to one of the players warming up.

Ken moved his gaze, landing upon a figure in the middle of a fielding drill. The guy was a bit taller than average, but he had a wide chest and large shoulders. His square jaw and thick eyebrows made him look heroic rather than handsome.

At a glance, it was obvious that the guy had power.

"I see... Is he as good as Leo though?" Ken asked.

It couldn't be helped that Ken would compare all of the US batters to Leo Cameron. In his baseball career, Leo was the only one that had truly tested him. Even when going all out with his showdown skill, the guy was able to foul off his pitches consistently.

"Huh? What kind of question is that?" Steve asked, staring blankly at his friend.

Ken shrugged, losing some interest. He would soon find out the level of this Trent Waters after the game started.

Soon enough, the toss was made and Elite Squad chose to bat first, sending the Gladiators onto the field. Ken couldn't help but smile as he made his way up to the mound.

Despite developing his batting skills in this life, he much preferred pitching. If he was told to pick one, then he wouldn't even have to think before choosing the latter.

After getting his warm up throws in, he nodded towards the umpire who then gestured for the batter to come up. Search* The * website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

"Play ball!"

Ken looked down the lane and waited for the first lead. He wasn't surprised when Steve called a fastball.

With a small grin touching the corner of his lips, Ken got into position and lifted his leg. Pushing off his back leg, he strode forward, sending a whip-like fastball down the lane towards the outstretched catcher's glove.

PAH

The batter didn't even have enough time to register that the ball had beaten him, his eye's wide in shock. He turned to the catcher behind him, as if to confirm that the ball had indeed gotten past him.

"Strike."

The umpires call confirmed it, but that didn't make the information any easier to swallow.

The Elite Squad bench were silent, their expressions grave. They didn't need a speed gun to understand that the ball was fast. Just the sound of the ball hitting the leather of the glove was enough to tell them just how dangerous it was.

Trent's expression turned thoughtful, 'Isn't that the guy who was swinging earlier?'

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

Chapter 618 - 618: Next Game (2)

But he quickly shook his head. There was no way that a pitcher this good could be the person who he'd seen earlier. If that was the case, then he should just retire from baseball altogether since it would be too unfair.

Despite coming to this conclusion, he was still rather wary of the pitcher on the mound.

Unaware of the opposing bench's crisis, Ken rolled his shoulders, catching the ball the Steve threw back.

'Mmm, I'm feeling sharp today.' He mused inwardly, heading back to his mark.

The next ball was just as fast as the last, this time heading towards the inside. The batter was able to react in time, sending an errant swing that sailed over the top of the ball.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

"Damn it."

The batter cursed, feeling a sense of helplessness overcome him. But it wasn't until the next pitch that he truly understood how helpless he was.

Expecting the ridiculous speed of the previous fastball, he swung early.

WHOOOOOSH

...

PAH

There was a significant delay from when he swung and when the ball entered the catcher's glove.

"Strikeout!"

"W—What the hell was that?" He exclaimed, looking at Ken as if he'd just seen a ghost. Even now he didn't understand what had happened.

"You ever heard of a changeup?" Steve replied, pulling his mask off just to give his trademark mischievous smile. To him, there was nothing more satisfying than seeing a batter swing so out of time.

Hearing this, the batter couldn't even reply.

"Okay, move along please." The plate umpire said, making a shooing gesture towards the batter.

Steve let out a chuckle, finding the situation hilarious. He would feel a little bad if this wasn't a national tournament, but they needed to advance so he could get plenty of eyes on him for college recruitment.

With his spirits broken, the lead-off batter for the Elite Squad walked back to the bench, still wearing a stupefied expression.

"Don't mind Brad." The next batter patted him on the shoulder on the way past, yet received no reply.

Unfortunately for the next batter, he too fell victim to Ken's ridiculous fastball. In only 3 pitches, he was quickly dispatched, forcing the next batter up to the plate.

"Nice pitching!" Steve said, throwing the ball back to Ken on the mound.

Ken felt great, letting out a contented sigh. 'There truly is nothing better than being on the mound.' He thought, picking up the rosin bag and flipping it around in his right hand.

His eyes moved past the next batter and locked onto Trent who was practicing his swing on deck. At just a glance, Ken could tell that the guy knew how to hit, but it was tough to understand just how well.

'Will he be able to make contact with my pitches?'

A part of Ken wished that would be the case. The main reason he was so invested in this tournament was to find better opponents, since the Texas tournament was so underwhelming.

Back in Japan he could play against his brother, and other powerhouse schools a few times a year. The level of competition back home seemed far more accessible compared to America, which surprised him.

Shaking his head, he turned his focus to the current game. In theory, the further he got through this tournament, the better his competition would be.

'So I just need to keep winning.' He thought simply.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

"Strike."

"Strike."

"Strikeout!"

"3 outs, changeover."

In only 9 pitches, Ken got through the first inning, striking out the first 3 batters with relative ease. Part of this was because of his domineering fastballs, but it was also in part thanks to Steve with his great leads.

If Ken were to just pitch fastballs down the middle, someone would hit them eventually, even if they were over 100mph. This was why Ken trusted his friend to make the right calls.

Of course, he trusted Daichi more. But there was no point in comparing the two since they had different play styles. Not to mention Daichi was just a freak talent from the beginning.

Steve on the other hand...

Ken looked at his friend as he made his way back to the bench, seeing him sending provoking glares towards the opposing team. He seemed to be enjoying their success much more than Ken.

Feeling a headache coming along, Ken massaged the bridge of his nose, trying to soothe it.

While there was some back and forth in Japan, the whole sport was rooted in respect. The bowing ceremony at the beginning and end of matches were just a small insight into how the country approached baseball.

Seeing that it was so different in America, Ken felt that it was a little uncouth. Not that he was in any position to speak up, especially since this was the birthplace of the sport.

However, he still believed that respecting one's opponent was paramount in baseball. So unless he was somehow provoked, Ken would continue to respect the other team, at least on a surface level.

"Hehe, did you see that first batter swing so early on your changeup?" Steve said, nudging Ken with his elbow on the way back to the bench.

"I was there man, I saw it." Ken replied, shaking his head with exasperation.

"Hmm? What's wrong with you."

"Just homesick I guess." He said dismissively.

"Well, it's Summer break. Why don't you go back for a couple of weeks after the tournament?" Steve suggested, shrugging his shoulders.

"Huh?" Ken froze, not expecting such a suggestion.

He had not thought of this at all. With the money he had from his Grandfather, he could easily afford it, and his parents would likely concede since they didn't have to pay. Technically he was an adult after all.

A grin formed on his face as he thought about seeing Ai very soon. Despite it only being just over two months, he missed her like crazy.

Ken draped an arm over Steve's shoulder and laughed, "Ya know, I was wrong about you. You're actually pretty smart when you want to be."

"O—Oi, that's rude."

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

Chapter 619 - 619: Unexpected Play (1)

Nico walked up to the batters box and faced the Elite Squad's pitcher, his face as determined as always. He awaited the first pitch, gripping his bat tightly.

The pitcher took a low stance and sent the ball whipping out from the side. It span through the air, dipping towards the plate as it got closer, causing Nico to hit nothing but air.

WHOOOOSH

PAH

Ken's face fell. Seeing the sidearm pitcher, he had a flash of PTSD from his struggles in the U18 World Cup against Cuba. Of course they had won the game, but it had taken him a long time to even get close to hitting the ball.

Letting out a sigh, Ken shook his head with some annoyance. If it wasn't bad enough facing this type of pitcher, he also wasn't too confident with the wooden bat just yet.

CLICK

He suddenly lifted his head, only to see Nico running towards first base with all of his might. However, the ball was easily collected by the pitcher and sent to the first baseman with plenty of time to spare.

"Out."

Ken stood up and grabbed his bat wordlessly, heading out to the deck to get a couple of practice swings in.

'Hopefully I can read the pitches.' He mused inwardly.

Despite facing a sidearm pitcher in the U18 World Cup, he had yet to face one since. It had been almost 2 years since then, meaning it might take some getting used to again.

Ken watched as Latrell went up to face the pitcher. He seemed confident, but Ken wasn't sure if it was just teen bravado or if he really believed he could get a decent hit.

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

WHOOOOSH

THWACK!

The ball sailed into center right field with some power on a low trajectory. It split the two defenders, causing them to scramble as they rushed towards the ball.

Latrell wasted no time, putting his fast legs to good use. From the way he was running between the bases, Ken didn't doubt that the guy could probably be a top track athlete if he changed sports.

With speedy legs, he rounded first and had almost reached second by the time the outfielders had collected the ball.

Without a moments hesitation, Latrell lowered his head, pumping his legs as he sped past second base and headed towards third.

"THIRD!"

Ken's eyes widened in surprise, not expecting the guy to make such a ballsy run.

The ball was thrown from the outfield, chasing down the sprinting Latrell with speed. In the next moment, the guy dived forward, sliding face first towards 3rd base with some crazy momentum.

He managed to place his hand on the base in time, narrowly beating the tag from the third baseman. If the throw had been lower, Latrell would have been tagged without much problem.

"Nice run Latrell!"

The guy got up to his feet, wearing a beaming smile. He got his breathing under control rather quickly, thanks to his recent training.

Latrell turned to Ken who was making his way up to the batters box, only to see the guy staring intently at him. His eyes were focused, as if trying to tell him something with his eyes.

'Does he want me to run?' He thought.

On second base, Trent saw Ken step into the batters box and take up his position. His eyes widened in shock, now realizing that the guy he'd spotted in the parking lot earlier was indeed the same guy he was looking at now.

'That can't be right can it?' His mind was in turmoil. Trent could still remember the crisp sound produced by the wind displacement of the guy's swings.

The fact that such a swing belonged to a pitcher who could throw so fast was actually mind boggling to him. Generally, one would focus on either pitching or batting, since both took a lot of work to master.

He himself had been batting since a very young age, and only now was he starting to see some proper success. After painstakingly training for over half his life, he felt that he was nearing the professional sphere.

"Outfielders, be wary!" He called out, turning behind him.

They took his heed, stepping back a few yards and getting ready for a bomb. Since there was no one on base, Trent also took a few steps back, gesturing for the short stop to get ready to cover 2nd base.

Ken saw the movements of the fielders and soon a wry smile appeared on his face.

"It seems my reputation proceeds me." He mumbled to no one in particular.

However, this only served to fire him up. "You can move your fielders all you want, they won't be able to touch this next ball." He said, glancing toward the catcher with a grin.

"Hmph, cocky bastard." The guy responded, getting into position.

Ken couldn't help but chuckle, pointing in the direction of the right outfield. "The ball will be heading in that direction, mark my words."

However, the catcher shook his head, ignoring the taunt. His job was to try and prevent Ken from getting a hit, everything else was superfluous.

Once Ken was in position, the pitcher took his stance. He glanced over at Latrell who had a small lead from third base before quickly beginning his pitch.

The moment he did so, Latrell took off to the races, shocking everyone except Ken. Wearing a smug grin, he held out his wooden bat with two hands, tracking the trajectory of the ball.

"Bunt!?" Trent almost shrieked in shock as he saw the move play out. With his directions earlier, his fielders had backed up from the infield, making it difficult for them to get back in time.

Ken placed his bat out, performing a push bunt towards first base. For those watching, the scene played out like poetry in motion. The finesse in which Ken displayed seemed straight out of a ballet performance.

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

Chapter 620 - 620: Unexpected Play (2)

Coach Wyatt almost couldn't believe his eyes. His number 1 hitter was performing a squeeze bunt? Just who authorized this play?

But he soon shut his mouth as he saw where the ball went. It was the perfect distance between the first baseman and the pitcher, leading to confusion between the two.

While the two bumbled around, Ken was on the fast track towards first base at the same time Latrell had almost reached home plate.

By the time that the first baseman returned to the bag, Ken had already been called safe.

"W—What a play..." Coach Wyatt muttered in disbelief.

"Nice bunt Ken!"

The Gladiators bench erupted in cheers, showing their support. The crowd also made their appreciation known, celebrating the masterful play.

"He really bunted in that situation?" Rob Fisher the Chairman of the WWBA was in the audience, his face turned up in amazement.

"We have to have him..." A grizzly looking man in his late 40's muttered.

Rob turned to his left and let out a small smile, "Be patient Doug. You'll get your chance in September."

The man named Doug grumbled, his eyes moving to a woman wearing a white sun dress not far away. As if feeling his gaze, the woman turned around and flashed him a confident smile.

Doug grinned, his confidence skyrocketing.

The catcher stared at Ken's figure now safely standing on 1st base, almost not believing what he saw. Remembering the guy's words, he suddenly felt like a fool.

'The ball will go in that direction...!' The catcher mused, letting out a sigh. He hadn't really lied since he hadn't specified how far the ball would go, merely pointing out the direction.

Still, the words felt rather shameless, but who was he going to complain to? The umpire?

Unaware of the stir he'd caused, Ken stretched out his legs while standing on 1st base wearing a smile. He was originally going to try and smack the ball, but seeing it was a sidearm pitcher and the Elite Squad's fielders had spread out, it was as if they were inviting a bunt.

Not to mention Latrell was sitting on third base, ready to score. In his mind, this was the most optimal decision for the team, despite what some people might argue.

'A run is a run.' Ken thought, taking a lead towards 2nd base.

Max was next up to bat, his big frame looking menacing. Since they only had 1 out, Ken was wanting to steal some bases.

As soon as the pitcher began his wind up, Ken took off with his head down.

WHOOOSH

WHACK!

Ken raised his head and saw the ball fly towards left center field.

'Crap.'

He quickly pumped the brakes, feeling his muscles groan in protest. Thankfully he was able to come to a stop relatively quickly before turning back towards first base.

"Out."

The pop-fly was easily captured in the outfield, forcing Ken back to 1st base where he'd started. With this catch, they now had two outs with a single runner on base.

Max sent Ken an apologetic look, realizing his mistake. With Ken's leg speed, he didn't need to be so hasty in chasing after the ball. If he'd waited until the guy was on 3rd base, it would have been an easy tag up for an additional run.

Ken waved him off, there was no use crying over spilled milk.

Dion was next up to bat, however, he made the same mistake as Max.

WHOOOOSH

WHACK!

Since there were already 2 outs, Ken ran towards 2nd base, but it was pretty clear that it wouldn't matter. Sure enough, the ball was easily caught by the center outfielder, making his run a moot point.

"Out! Changeover."

At the call of the umpire, Ken slowed down to a walk, heading off the field.

"Sorry man, I got too far under the ball." Dion said regretfully.

"No matter." Ken waved it off, "We'll have plenty of opportunities to score again." He replied, already moving on with his life.

He'd learned long ago that there was no point in agonizing over such missed opportunities. What really mattered now was keeping the Elite Squad scoreless.

Thankfully, this was Ken's specialty.

Ditching his helmet, Ken picked up his glove and placed his cap on before heading to the mound. But just as he was about to leave, the coach tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"Where did you learn to bunt like that?" He asked, wearing an unreadable expression.

Ken raised his eyebrow, but a small smile pulled the corner of his lips a moment later, "It was just a skill I picked up quite a while ago."

Finding his own joke rather funny, Ken had a little chuckle to himself.

"Right... I just wanted to know why you didn't try and hit it big. I didn't give the signal for a bunt." He asked rather somberly.

"Hmm. Well first off, I wasn't comfortable hitting a sidearm pitcher since I've only ever hit against one before, and that was almost 2 years ago. Even then, I've still not gotten fully accustomed to using the wooden bat just yet." Ken explained patiently.

"There was also the fact that the fielders had subconsciously moved backwards, exposing the infield. Maybe they knew that I was a good hitter, but either way, it worked out in the end."

Coach Wyatt was silent for a while, but he couldn't exactly argue with Ken's points. What he also didn't mention was that Latrell was in scoring position. If it were any other player, the coach would have called for the sacrifice bunt and taken the guaranteed run.

The only reason he didn't was because he thought Ken might be able to secure them a 2-run home run. Looking back at it now, the coach realized that he might have been too greedy.

"Mmm, that's some good decision making." He stated, patting Ken on the shoulder.

"Alright, we're up one run to nothing, go and do your thing." Coach Wyatt grinned, his mustache flying in the wind.

"Heh, no worries coach."

With a confident grin, Ken walked up to the mound.

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