

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 12: The Call to Lead

A week later, on the Shivaji Park Cricket Academy's Group B training ground, Aarav, Abhishek, and their teammates were hard at work under the watchful eye of Deputy Coach Mr. Soni. A former Mumbai Ranji player, Mr. Soni carried himself with a commanding presence. His sessions were intense, every drill aimed at pushing the players to their limits. Aarav relished the rigorous training, feeling his game sharpen with every passing day.

Midway through the session, Head Coach Ashwin strode onto the ground, his expression unusually serious. His mere presence was enough to make everyone pause. "Assemble here, boys!" he called out, his voice echoing across the field.

The players quickly gathered, sweat dripping from their brows, hearts pounding in anticipation.

"Listen up," Coach Ashwin began, his eyes scanning the group. "In one week, we have a friendly under-15 match against the Mumbai Cricket Academy at

their stadium. This isn't just a game; it's an opportunity. For the next five days, you'll undergo intense training. At the end of this period, we'll select the playing XI for the match. This is your chance to prove yourselves."

The announcement sent a ripple of excitement and determination through the group. Aarav's heart raced. This is it. My chance to show how far I've come.

The next five days were grueling. The players pushed themselves through rigorous drills, practice matches, and fitness tests. Aarav focused on every aspect of his game—his footwork, bowling accuracy, and captaincy skills. His bond with Abhishek grew even stronger as they motivated each other through the exhausting sessions.

On the sixth day, the team assembled again, nerves palpable in the air. Coach Ashwin stood with a list in his hand, flanked by the other coaches.

"I will now announce the playing XI," he began.

A hush fell over the group.

"Opening the batting will be Abhishek Sharma and Mayank Tiwari," the coach declared. "At number three, Aarav Pathak—who will also be your captain."

Aarav's breath hitched. Captain? Me?

Coach Ashwin continued, listing the rest of the team:

Rohan Desai – Middle-order batsman

Siddharth Kulkarni – Middle-order batsman

Dev Malik – Wicketkeeper

Ishaan Verma – All-rounder

Rahul Jain – All-rounder

Aniket Singh – Spinner

Yash Mehta – Spinner

Karan Rawat – Medium pacer

Arjun Nair – Medium pacer

The team erupted in cheers and applause, but Aarav stood momentarily frozen, overwhelmed by the weight of the responsibility.

Coach Ashwin's voice broke through his thoughts. "Aarav, you've been chosen as captain not just for your skills but for your ability to inspire and encourage your teammates. You've shown leadership qualities both on and off the field. Now, lead this team to victory."

Aarav nodded, his chest swelling with pride but also a sense of responsibility. "Thank you, sir. I'll give it my all."

After the announcement, the selected XI gathered around the coach. The rest of the players, though disappointed, took to the nets for extra practice, their resolve to improve evident.

Coach Ashwin addressed the team in a more confidential tone. "This match isn't just a friendly. It's a stepping stone. After this, we'll start preparing for the zonal matches and the trials for the Vijay Merchant Trophy. Some selectors will be present tomorrow—not to select but to observe. Use this opportunity to impress them."

The players exchanged glances, excitement bubbling under their composed exteriors.

Coach Ashwin continued, "This information stays within this group until the match is over. We don't want any distractions. Tomorrow, be at the academy by 9 a.m. sharp. We'll head to the MCA Stadium, where you'll have a couple of hours to get acquainted with the pitch and conditions before the match starts at 1 p.m."

He turned to Aarav. "Aarav, as captain, you're responsible for leading the team on and off the field. I trust you to set the tone. Show them what Shivaji Park Cricket Academy is all about."

Aarav felt a surge of determination. "Yes, sir. I won't let you down."

That evening, Aarav couldn't sleep. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind racing with strategies and scenarios for the match. The thought of leading the team filled him with both pride and pressure. He replayed his bowling action, visualized himself at the crease, and thought about field placements.

In a moment of self-reflection, he whispered to himself, "This is just the beginning. Tomorrow is my chance to step up, not just as a player but as a leader."

The stage was set, the team ready. Tomorrow, at the MCA Stadium, Aarav would step onto the field—not just as a player, but as a captain, leading his team into battle and laying the groundwork for an even bigger journey ahead.