

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 13: A Captain's Knock

The sun blazed down on the MCA Stadium as the match began. Aarav stood beside the opposing captain, Aman, at the center of the pitch for the toss. The coin flipped into the air, glinting in the sunlight.

"Heads," Aman called confidently.

The coin landed, and the umpire announced, "Tails it is."

Aarav suppressed a grin and turned to the coach's stand, signaling his decision with a thumbs-up. "We'll bat first," he said firmly, knowing his team had the firepower to set a daunting target.

The players walked onto the field to the faint hum of chatter from the few spectators—mostly MCA trainees and affiliated school students. Mayank Tiwari and Abhishek Sharma took their positions as openers. Aarav settled in the dugout, observing the bowlers and visualizing his turn at the crease.

The game began. The first delivery was a peach—a fast, swinging yorker—and Mayank missed it entirely. The sound of stumps shattering echoed across the ground. A gasp went through the players and spectators.

Aarav's name was called. Gripping his bat tightly, he strode onto the field, his heart steady, his mind clear. This is it, he thought. Time to lead from the front.

The first few overs were about settling in. Aarav and Abhishek exchanged quiet nods as they faced the bowlers. Aarav started with a defensive push, timing it perfectly to send the ball gently back to the bowler.

As the innings progressed, Aarav began to find his rhythm.

Glorious cover drive! A half-volley outside off tempted him, and he leaned into the shot. The effortless grace of his swing was mesmerizing as the ball raced between extra cover and mid-off, eliciting appreciative murmurs from the sidelines.

The bowler adjusted, pitching it shorter. Aarav responded with a punch off the back foot, sending the ball skimming to the boundary through point.

Singles and doubles came steadily as Aarav rotated the strike with Abhishek. They communicated seamlessly, calling out "Yes!" and "No!" with unwavering clarity. Aarav's quick running between the wickets added to the pressure on the fielding side.

By the 10th over, Aarav was in full flow. He played with a mix of aggression and elegance, dissecting the field with precision.

The pull shot: A short ball climbed toward his chest, and Aarav swiveled expertly, pulling it hard past square leg for four. The flick: On a straighter delivery, he stepped forward and whipped the ball through mid-wicket with his wrists, the shot oozing finesse. The lofted drive: A slower ball tempted him, and Aarav lifted it over mid-on for a majestic six, the crowd—small as it was—erupting in cheers.

His 50 came up with a quick single. Aarav raised his bat to acknowledge the applause from his teammates and coaches, but he didn't linger; he was far from done.

As the overs ticked by, the partnership between Aarav and Abhishek grew stronger. Abhishek was a picture of aggression, but Aarav complemented him with calculated shots, ensuring no delivery went unpunished.

With the scoreboard reading 97 against Aarav's name, the bowler steamed in for the next delivery. It was a low full toss. Aarav stepped forward and drove it hard and flat, splitting the fielders at extra cover and long-off. The ball kissed the boundary rope, and Aarav's century was complete.

He punched the air, his bat held high, a broad smile lighting up his face. His teammates stood to applaud, their cheers echoing across the field. Abhishek jogged over to congratulate him, giving him a firm handshake and a pat on the back.

Aarav took a moment to soak it in. This is what hard work feels like, he thought, his heart swelling with pride.

The partnership between Aarav and Abhishek continued until the end of the innings. Abhishek reached his own century soon after, celebrating with equal fervor. Together, they propelled the team to a mammoth total of 223 runs in just 20 overs.

As they walked off the field, Aarav looked back at the pitch. He felt a deep sense of satisfaction, knowing he had led his team not just with words but through action.

Coach Ashwin met them at the boundary line, clapping. "That was brilliant, boys! Exactly what I wanted to see. Aarav, Abhishek—you've set the tone for the rest of the team."

The team was buzzing with energy, their confidence sky-high. Aarav knew the job wasn't done yet, but for now, he allowed himself to savor the moment. The next phase is about strategy and execution, he thought.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but for now, Aarav had shown everyone what he was capable of. He wasn't just a player; he was a leader.