

## **God of Cricket!**

### **#Chapter 21: SVS v/s SLS [3] - Read God of Cricket!**

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The world returned in a wave of sound and pain.

The first thing Raghav registered was the roaring of his entire team, a chaotic mass of white uniforms, was on top of him, screaming.

Gourav was lifting him by his armpits, his face split in a grin of pure, primal joy.

"YOU DID IT! YOU DID IT! I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT YOU DID IT!"

The second thing he registered was the pain. It was a white-hot, blinding fire that shot from his right palm, up his wrist, and exploded in his forearm.

It was a pain so sharp, so immediate, that his mature self which had experienced its share of injuries, screamed one word: Broken..

"Get off him! Get back to your positions!" Coach Sarma's voice, amplified by a megaphone it seemed, cut through the celebration.

As his teammates reluctantly dispersed, Raghav staggered to his feet. He cradled his right hand against his chest, his face pale, sweat beading on his forehead not from the heat, but from the shock.

He looked at the scoreboard. 10/2.

Two of the most arrogant, dangerous batsmen were gone. And he had taken the captain.

Then, he saw him.

The new batsman walking to the crease.

Thomas.

The six-foot fast bowler, the demon who had ripped their batting order apart, was now walking in at number four. He wasn't laughing.

His bat wasn't resting on his shoulder. He was gripping it so hard his knuckles were white. He was marching to the crease like a man on his way to a war, his eyes locked on Gourav, a look of murderous intent on his face.

This wasn't a batsman coming to save a match. This was an executioner coming to end it.

Raghav instinctively clenched his right hand, readying himself.

Agony.

He hissed, a sharp intake of breath. The pain was so intense it almost made him vomit. He couldn't make a fist. He couldn't even grip the inner lining of his pants.

'It's broken. It has to be broken.'

His heart sank, the euphoria of the catch vanishing instantly. He couldn't catch another ball. He couldn't even throw one. He was now, without a doubt, the single biggest liability on the field.

Just as the panic began to set in, a familiar blue light flickered in his vision, so bright it almost made him flinch.

Ding~

[Miracle Play Detected!]

[Host has performed an action far exceeding current stat parameters, fueled by pure determination and a willingness to sacrifice the body.]

[Side Quest: Fielding Foundation has been updated!]

[Objective: 1/1 "Miracle" Catch registered.]

[The path to greatness is paved with such moments. The system acknowledges your grit.]

[Rewards Issued:]

[+0.5 Fielding (Bonus Reward!)]

[+0.2 Strength (For bodily impact resistance)]

[+15 SP (Quest Reward)]

[New Stats Updated: Fielding: 8.5, Strength: 13.6]

[System Points (SP): 55]

Raghav stared at the screen, the pain momentarily forgotten. A miracle play. The system had rewarded him for the sheer, desperate will of the act.

He had sacrificed his hand for the catch, and the system had paid him out.

The +0.5 to Fielding was massive, an unprecedented leap. He could feel it, a new-found understanding of angles, a sharper focus.

But it was a cruel joke. He had the knowledge of a better fielder, trapped in a body with a broken hand.

'It doesn't matter,' he thought, his thoughts on his mind taking over. 'I can't show it. If they know I'm injured, they'll run on me. They'll target me. I have to hide it.'

He forced his throbbing hand to hang naturally at his side, his fingers limp. He walked back to the Gully, every step a new wave of nausea.

On the boundary, Coach Sarma watched Raghav. He hadn't celebrated the catch. He was a statue.

He watched Raghav stagger, he watched him cradle his hand, and he watched him try to hide it. Sarma's eyes, sharp as a hawk's, missed nothing.

He saw the grimace. He saw the limp, unnatural way the boy's hand was hanging.

He nodded to himself, a grim, silent acknowledgment. He turned to Vikram.

"Vikram! After this over, move Roi from Gully to Deep Third Man. And put Suraj in the Gully."

Vikram looked confused.

"But Coach! He just took a blinder there!"

"He's injured," Sarma said, his voice flat. "He won't be able to take another. Get him to the boundary. His only job now is to get his body in front of the ball. Go"..

At the crease, the atmosphere was electric. It was Thomas versus Gourav. Pace against pace.

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Over 3 (Bowler: Gourav. Batsman: Thomas)

*[Ball 3.3]* Gourav, still high on adrenaline, ran in. He delivered a fast Good Length ball.

Thomas, with the eyes of a fast bowler, saw it early. He wasn't here to block. He cleared his front leg and swung, a brutal, horizontal-bat Slog.

CRACK!

The ball rocketed over Mid-Wicket like a missile. It was flat, hard, and unstoppable. It smashed into the boundary fence before the fielder could even move. Four

**[Score: 14/2.]**

The silence was broken. The SLS dugout erupted. Thomas hadn't just hit a boundary; he'd made a statement.

*[Ball 3.4]* Gourav, rattled, dug the next one in Short.

Thomas was waiting. He was on the Back Foot in an instant and unleashed a ferocious Pull Shot. The ball soared high and long, disappearing over the Deep Square Leg boundary. Six.

**Score: 20/2.**

Just like that, in two balls, the momentum that Raghav had paid for with his hand was stolen back. Thomas was single-handedly crushing their hope.

*[Ball 3.5]* Gourav's confidence was shattered. He bowled a nervous, floating Full Toss.

Thomas's eyes lit up. He smashed a Cover Drive for another Four.

**Score: 24/2.**

Thomas hadn't moved his feet. He was just standing and delivering brutal, punishing blows. He glared at Gourav, who couldn't meet his eyes.

*[Ball 3.6]* A defensive block from Thomas, just to show he could.

End of Over. 14 runs from it. The game was back in SLS's control.

As the over changed, Vikram ran up to Raghav. "Coach says you're moving to Deep Third Man. Suraj is coming to Gully."

Raghav just nodded, relief washing over him. The Gully was a nightmare. The boundary was a hiding place.

He jogged the long 70 yards to the boundary rope, his throbbing hand cradled against his stomach. He was as far from the action as he could be. 'Just... just don't hit it to me,' he prayed.

=====

The game entered a new phase. The "Juggernaut" was back on track. Thomas, having asserted his dominance, was now batting with terrifying, calculated aggression. The other batsman, the #3, was smart. He knew his job. He blocked the good balls and gave the strike to Thomas.

The score began to climb, no longer in a trickle, but in a steady, confident flow.

24/2... 30/2... 40/2...

Prakash, the off-spinner, was brought back. Thomas just waited on the back foot and cut him, or used his long reach to drive him.

Gourav, his pace and confidence gone, was now just bowling medium-fast, trying not to concede.

The SLS dugout was loud again, their laughter echoing across the field. Raghav's team was silent, their shoulders slumped. The spark was dying.

**[End of Over 10. Score: 58/2]**

They needed 39 runs to win, with 8 wickets in hand. It was a foregone conclusion.

"Get your body in front of the ball, Roi!" Coach Sarma's voice roared from the sideline, a sharp reminder.

Raghav, who had been lost in his own painful haze, snapped to attention. He was at Deep Third Man, a lonely figure near the boundary.

The bowler was Prakash, the off-spinner. The batsman was Thomas, who was now on 41 runs. He was toying with them.

*[Ball 10.1]* Prakash, in a final act of desperation, tossed the ball up, slower, outside the off-stump, trying to tempt him.

It was a fatal mistake.

Thomas's eyes lit up. It was the "come-hit-me" ball. He rocked onto his back foot to smash it through the covers.

But his IQ, unlike Raghav's, was not his strong suit. He was a power player. He misjudged the slowness of the ball.

He hit it too early.

Instead of a clean Cover Drive, he sliced it, the ball taking the thick outside edge of his bat.

It screamed, low and fast, not towards Cover, but spinning viciously towards the gap between Point and Third Man.

The Point fielder dove, but it was too fast.

It was rocketing towards the boundary. It was heading straight for Raghav.

Raghav saw it coming. His body tensed. This was it. The moment his coach had warned him about. His only job was to get his body in front of it.

'Stop the four. That's all. Just stop the four.'

He moved to his left, his legs feeling heavy. He got into position. He bent down, bracing for the impact.

The ball was skidding, faster than he thought.

He had to stop it with his hands. There was no other way.

He put his hands down, the correct way, the way Coach Sarma had drilled into them...

...right hand on top, left hand below, forming a cup.

His broken right hand.

'Nononono—' his mind screamed. But it was too late.

The ball was on him.

He had a split-second, agonizing choice. Pull his hand away and let the boundary be scored, or...

...endure.

He shut his eyes, his 42-year-old mind screaming in protest, his 12-year-old body's instinct for survival at war with his one, insane goal.

He forced his throbbing, shattered hand into the path of the ball.

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 22: SVS v/s SLS [4]**

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THWACK.

The sound was not a clean 'thud' of leather on willow. It was a wet, sickening crunch.

A white-hot explosion of pure agony erupted from Raghav's right hand. It was a pain so total, so blinding, that his 42-year-old mind, which knew the feeling of strains and sprains, instantly recognized this as something far worse. This was the feeling of bones grinding.

His vision went white. The air was punched from his lungs in a silent scream.

He had, in that split second, made his choice. He had forced his already damaged hand into the path of the ball. The impact was brutal. The sheer, kinetic force of Thomas's sliced shot was meant to shatter bats, not the delicate bones of a 12-year-old.

Raghav collapsed onto his side, a strangled gasp tearing from his throat. He couldn't even look at his hand. He just cradled his entire right arm to his chest, his body curling into a fetal position as waves of nausea washed over him.

But he had done his job. He had stopped the boundary.

The ball hadn't stuck. The impact was too much for his shattered grip. It hit his "cup" and popped loose, rolling to a stop on the grass about ten feet away from him.

On the pitch, the play was still live.

Thomas and the #3 batsman had seen the ball rocket off the bat and were sprinting for an easy single. When they saw Raghav go down, Thomas, ever the opportunist, bellowed,

"AGAIN! GO AGAIN!"

They turned for a second run.

"RAGHAV! THE BALL! GET THE BALL!" Vikram's voice was a desperate shriek from the infield.

Raghav heard the voice as if from a great distance. His world was a tunnel of roaring pain.

He tried to open his eyes, his vision swimming. He saw the ball, a blurry red sphere on a green field. He saw the batsmen, two white blurs, charging down the pitch.

'Get up,' his mind commanded. But his body wouldn't obey.

'THE BALL!'

He looked at his right hand. It was already a swollen, purple mass. It was useless. He couldn't move his fingers.

Sacrifice. The word echoed in his head. His own. Coach Sarma's.

'If I fail here... everything was for nothing.'

With a guttural groan, he shoved himself with his left shoulder, rolling onto his knees. Ignoring his mangled right hand, he scrambled forward, half-crawling, and scooped up the ball with his left hand.

He was still on his knees, dizzy and sick. He could barely see. He just saw Rohan, the wicketkeeper, sprinting towards the stumps, his own glove off, screaming.

Raghav didn't have the strength to stand. He was 60 yards from the stumps.

He pulled his left arm back and threw.

It was a weak, underarm lob. A pathetic, wobbly throw from his non-dominant hand. It was the throw of a small child. It barely had the strength to make it halfway.

But it was on line.

The #3 batsman, his eyes wide in panic, was now scrambling to get back. Thomas was already safe.

Vikram, from his position at Cover, saw the wobbly throw. He saw it was going to be short. He charged in, intercepted the throw on the full, took two steps, and fired a perfect, flat throw to the keeper.

The keeper grabbed the ball.

Smashed the stumps.

The bails flew.

The umpire's arm went up.

WICKET! RUN OUT!

**Score: 58/3!**

The field was silent. Utterly, completely silent.

The SLS dugout, which had been on its feet, sat down as one.

Thomas, safe at the non-striker's end, was bent over, hands on his knees, staring at Raghav. He wasn't angry. He was in disbelief. He couldn't comprehend what he had just seen.

A 12-year-old, who he was sure he had broken, had just created a wicket from the ground.

Then, the roar from Raghav's team was deafening. It was a sound of pure, impossible hope.

Vikram and Rohan were the first to reach Raghav, who was still on his knees, his head bowed, shaking from the pain.

"Raghav... Raghav, my god..." Vikram didn't know what to say.

And then, the blue screen flickered, pulsing in time with his throbbing hand.

Ding~

[UNYIELDING WILL DETECTED!]

[Host has consciously chosen to sacrifice personal well-being for the objective. You have pushed beyond the established limits of a 12-year-old body.]

[Your spirit is being forged in pain. Your determination is carving new pathways.]

[A new Trait is being permanently etched into the Host's foundation...]

[New Trait Unlocked: IRON GRIT (Passive, Lv. 1)]

[Iron Grit (Lv. 1): You are not easily broken. When injured in a match, your willpower and determination are amplified. Pain tolerance is moderately increased. All stats receive a temporary +0.1 "Adrenaline" boost as long as you remain on the field.]

[Bonus Reward: +30 SP (For Unlocking a Foundational Trait)]

[System Points (SP): 85]

=====

A strange, cold clarity washed over Raghav, cutting through the hot agony. The new trait, Iron Grit, flared to life.

The pain didn't go away, but it retreated. It was no longer a blinding, all-consuming fire. It was a distant, roaring furnace, caged by his will.

He felt the +0.1 "Adrenaline" boost. It was tiny, but it was everything. It was a thread of strength.

"Get up, Rag..." Vikram was saying, his hand on Raghav's good shoulder.

"I'm... I'm okay," Raghav gritted out, the words tasting like metal.

"UMPIRE! TIME!"

Coach Sarma was striding onto the field, his face a mask of thunder. The umpire met him.

Sarma didn't even look at the scoreboard. He walked straight to Raghav, who was being helped up by Vikram.

"Show me," Sarma commanded.

Raghav, his face pale and slick with sweat, slowly held up his right arm.

The hand was unrecognizable. It was swollen to twice its normal size, a grotesque, purple-black claw. It was visibly, horribly broken.

Vikram and Rohan, seeing it up close, both recoiled, their faces pale.

Sarma's expression didn't change, but his eyes were burning. He looked from the mangled hand to Raghav's eyes, which were clear, intense, and—frighteningly—ready.

"I can stay, Coach," Raghav said, his voice a low rasp. "Put me at Mid-On. I can stop with my legs. We're not short a fielder. I can stay."

The Iron Grit was talking. The 42-year-old was talking.

Sarma looked at him for a long, silent moment. The man who had been a taskmaster, a distant, hard coach, was now looking at him with something Raghav had never seen before. It was a deep, profound, and terrifying respect.

"No, son," Sarma said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "You're done."

"But Coach, we're 10 men if I leave—"

"You will not lose your hand for a school match," Sarma said, his voice now steel.

"You've done more than enough. You've taken three wickets with your hands. You've given them a chance. Now get off the field."

The umpire nodded. "He's 'Retired Hurt'. He must leave the field of play."

Sarma put his own hand on Raghav's back. "Vikram. Rohan. Help him."

As his two teammates flanked him, supporting his weight, Raghav finally let the adrenaline go. His legs felt like water.

They began the long walk back to the boundary.

The entire SLS team, including Thomas, stood where they were and clapped.

The small crowd in the pavilion, parents and teachers from both schools, rose to their feet, giving him a standing ovation. They had just witnessed one of the most incredible displays of courage they would ever see

Raghav didn't hear them. He just watched the scoreboard.

**Score: 58/3.**

Target: 97.

They still needed 39 runs.

Thomas was still at the crease.

And his team now had to defend those 39 runs with only ten men on the field.

He had given them a spark. He had given them a chance. But as he crossed the boundary rope, his head spinning, he knew the truth.

He had won the battle, but the monster, Thomas, was still very much alive. And now, Raghav was helpless to stop him.

—

Vikram and Rohan helped Raghav across the boundary line, the applause from the crowd and the St. Louis team still ringing in the air.

The moment his feet touched the grass on the other side, the Iron Grit trait seemed to flicker. The "cage" holding the pain buckled, and a wave of sickening, throbbing agony surged up his arm, making him gasp.

"Easy, easy," Vikram muttered, his own voice shaky as they lowered Raghav onto the team's simple wooden bench.

Coach Sarma was already there. He hadn't run onto the field. He hadn't joined the applause. He had simply walked back, his face unreadable, and retrieved a large, white first-aid kit.

He knelt in front of Raghav. The noise of the match, the distant calls of the fielders, all faded for a moment. There was just the coach's intense, focused gaze.

"You are a fool, Roi," Sarma said, his voice a low rumble.

Raghav, breathing hard through his teeth, looked up in confusion.

"A brave, stubborn, incredible fool," Sarma continued, his expression not softening, but the words carried a weight Raghav had never heard.

He began deftly opening packets of gauze and a roll of bandages, his movements economical and precise.

"We are going to the hospital as soon as this is over. For now, we immobilize it. Don't move."

Sarma didn't try to set the bone. He just wrapped the hand and wrist, creating a tight, supportive, and agonizingly painful cast of bandages and tape.

Raghav looked down at his 85 SP. 'System, can I buy anything? Healing? Pain reduction?'

But the System Store was greyed out. A new line of text was visible: [Store & Missions are locked during active matches.]

He was on his own.

"I... I can't," Raghav said, his voice strained as Sarma tightened the tape.

"Bite on this," Sarma said, holding out a clean towel.

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 23: SVS v/s SLS [5]**

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Raghav shook his head. He gritted his teeth, the Iron Grit trait flaring back to life, caging the pain once more.

"No. I'm okay. I'm watching."

Sarma paused, his hands on the bandage. He looked at the 12-year-old kid, who was pale, covered in dirt, and vibrating with pain, yet whose eyes were already focused back on the field.

He finished his work in silence and stood up.

"Gourav! Mid-Wicket! Get back! Don't let him get a single!" Sarma roared, his voice that of a coach once more.

Raghav was now a spectator. A wounded general, forced to watch the last stand from a distant hill.

On the field, the ten men of his team had gathered in a huddle.

The hole Raghav had left at Deep Third Man was a gaping wound in their field setting.

"Listen up!" Vikram's voice was hoarse. He pointed with his chin towards the bench.

"You see him? He broke his hand for this. For us. He took two catches and a run-out with a broken hand. Ten men? So what. We are not letting that be for nothing."

He looked at Gourav, who was still shaken from the beating Thomas had given him.

"He gave us a chance. We do not waste it. Every single ball, you dive. I don't care if it hurts. It doesn't hurt as much as that."

The huddle broke. Ten pairs of eyes, all burning with a new, desperate fire, fanned out across the field. They were no longer a school team. They were a fortress.

The new batsman, a nervous-looking #5, took his stance. Thomas was at the non-striker's end, flexing his grip on his bat, his eyes like thunder. He was furious.

Prakash, the off-spinner, had the ball.

**Score: 58/3. Target: 97. (39 runs needed)**

The game resumed.

And Thomas was in a hurry.

Over 11 (Bowler: Prakash. Batsman: Thomas)

[*Ball 11.1*] Prakash, seeing the new, aggressive field, tossed the ball up, trying to bait him. It was a mistake. Thomas let out a roar and launched himself at it.

CRACK! A brutal Slog-Sweep.

The ball sailed high and deep over Mid-Wicket. SIX.

**Score: 64/3. (33 runs needed)**

The SLS dugout, which had been quiet, exploded. This was the Juggernaut they knew.

*[Ball 11.2 ]* Prakash, terrified, flattened his trajectory. A fast, flat ball. Thomas was waiting. He rocked back and cut it, a vicious, scything motion.

The ball rocketed past Point. FOUR.

**Score: 68/3. (29 runs needed)**

*[Ball 11.3*

*]* Thomas was a machine. He saw the Long-On fielder was deep and just punched the ball down the ground. An easy single.

**Score: 69/3. (28 runs needed)**

He was now at the non-striker's end, and the nervous #5 had to face.

The #5 batsman, under immense pressure, somehow managed to block the last three balls of the over, his bat shaking in his hands.

End of Over. 11 runs from it. The hope that Raghav had bought with his body was evaporating under the assault.

**Over 12 (Bowler: Gourav. Batsman: #5)**

Vikram ran up to Gourav. "He's scared of Thomas. Don't give him an easy single. Bowl at the stumps."

*[Ball 12.1 ]* Gourav ran in. A fast, straight Yorker. The #5 batsman just managed to get his bat down. A Block. (Dot ball).

*[Ball 12.2 ]* Another Yorker. The batsman, in panic, squirted it out to Square Leg. "NO!" Thomas roared from the other end, but it was too late. The batsman was already running. A single.

**Score: 70/3. (27 runs needed)**

Thomas was back on strike.

[Ball 12.3 (to Thomas) ] Gourav, his eyes squeezed shut in concentration, ran in and bowled as fast as he could, just outside Off-Stump.

Thomas, seeing the 10-man field was spread thin, didn't go for a six. He just angled his bat, a calm, professional Glide, and guided the ball into the massive, empty gap at Third Man—the very spot Raghav should have been.

The ball rolled leisurely for Four.

**Score: 74/3. (23 runs needed)**

It was a calculated, cruel, and intelligent shot. Thomas was punishing them for their weakness, for their 10-man status.

The game wore on. The 10 fielders were running twice as hard. They were diving, tumbling, and saving runs they had no right to save.

A Cover Drive that was a certain boundary was met by a full-length dive from Vikram, keeping it to two.

A leg-side Flick was cut off by Rohan, who was now fielding and keeping wicket in his mind.

But Thomas was too good.

He was a professional among children. He took his singles, hit his boundaries, and the score kept climbing.

**Score: 88/3. (End of Over 18)**

It was the final over. Over 19.

SLS needed 9 runs to win.

Thomas was on strike, batting on 62. He was a monster, an immovable object.

Coach Sarma, from the boundary, just nodded at Vikram. It was his call.

Vikram looked at Gourav, who was breathing heavily, exhausted. He looked at Prakash, the spinner.

"Prakash," Vikram said, his voice a rasp. "One more.... Give me one more."

He was gambling. Gambling that Thomas, in his arrogance, would make a mistake against the slow ball.

On the bench, Raghav gripped his own leg, his broken hand a dead weight. "Come on, Prakash... come on..."

Over 19 (Bowler: Prakash. Batsman: Thomas)

On Field - Every man was on the boundary. It was a 9-run fortress.

*Ball 19.1:* Prakash, his heart pounding, walked in. He tossed the ball up, a brave, looping Off-Break.

Thomas's eyes lit up. He had been waiting for this.

He planted his front foot and swung, a clean, powerful, perfect arc.

The ball vanished. It went high, high over Long-On, over the trees.

SIX.

**Score: 94/3. (3 runs needed)**

The SLS dugout was on their feet, screaming, hugging. It was over. Three runs needed. Five balls left. Thomas, the hero, was on strike.

Thomas smirked at Prakash, who looked like he was about to cry.

Ball 19.2: Prakash, on pure instinct, bowled again. Another toss.

Thomas, in his arrogance, tried to end the match with another six. He swung, even harder this time...

...and missed.

The ball, slower than he expected, dipped under his bat. (Dot ball).

[Last six ball: 6,0 ,]

**Score: 94/3. (3 runs needed)**

A murmur. Thomas's smirk vanished.

*[Ball 19.3]* Prakash, his hope suddenly back, tossed it up again.

This time, Thomas was cautious. He wasn't going to be made a fool. He simply punched the ball, hard and flat, to the Long-On fielder. An easy single.

[Last six ball: 6,0,1]

**Score: 95/3. (2 runs needed)**

The fielder collected it.

And then, the entire field, the entire stadium, froze.

Thomas, by taking the single, had put the nervous #5 batsman on strike.

The #5 batsman, who had been a spectator for this entire drama, looked like he was about to be sick.

Thomas, at the non-striker's end, was staring at him.

"Just get a single, man! Just touch it!"

Vikram, in a flash of brilliance, brought all ten fielders into the inner circle. The fortress was no longer on the boundary. It was a suffocating ring.

*[Ball 19.4]* Prakash tossed it up. The ring of fielders was terrifying.

The #5 batsman, his eyes wide as plates, swung in pure, blind panic.

He missed. Completely. The ball went through to Rohan, the keeper. (Dot ball).

[Last six ball: 6,0,1,0 ]

**Score: 95/3. (2 runs needed)**

*[Ball 19.5]* One ball left to tie. Two to win.

Prakash bowled. Another simple, looping ball.

The #5 batsman, his nerves shredded, just blocked it. He was too scared to even move. (Dot ball).

[Last six ball: 6,0,1,0,0 ]

**Score: 95/3. (2 runs needed)**

It had all come down to this. The final ball.

The Juggernaut, St. Louis School, needed two runs to win. One run to tie.

And the man who had scored nothing, the nervous #5, was on strike. Thomas, the monster, could only watch, 22 yards away, a prisoner of his own arrogance.

On the bench, Raghav had stood up, his broken hand forgotten. He was screaming, his voice raw.

"ONE MORE! ONE MORE, PRAKASH!"

Prakash took a deep breath. He wiped his hand on his pants. He turned. He ran in.

He tossed the ball up.

It was his best delivery. It floated, it dipped...

The #5 batsman, in a final, desperate act, swung for his life.

Whoosh.

He missed.

The ball sailed past his bat.

Rohan collected it cleanly behind the stumps.

It was a dot. They had...

"RUN! RUN!" Thomas was screaming, already halfway down the pitch. They were trying to steal a bye! They were running to tie the match!

The #5 batsman, in a daze, finally realized and started sprinting.

Rohan, the wicketkeeper, watched him come. He saw the sprinting #5. He saw the stumps.

He didn't throw.

He held the ball in his gloved hand.

He took two calm steps forward.

And with a smile, he dislodged the bails, the batsman still five feet away.

WICKET! RUN OUT!

[Last six ball: 6,0,1,0,0,W ]

The umpire's arm went up. The match was over.

They had won.

By one run.

For a second, there was silence.

Then, the field erupted.

The ten-man fortress, the team of underdogs, had done the impossible. They had beaten the Juggernaut.

Raghav, on the sideline, just sank back to the bench, the world spinning.

His team, his real team, didn't celebrate on the pitch.

They didn't even look at the SLS players. They sprinted, as one, bypassing their coach, a stampede of white uniforms...

...sprinting straight for the boy on the bench with the broken hand.

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 24: A Hero's Welcome**

Chapter 24: A Hero's Welcome

Raghav's world was a roaring, dizzying blur of white uniforms.

He was still on the bench, his entire being a single, throbbing beacon of pain, but he was grinning, a wild, tear-streaked grimace.

They hadn't celebrated. They had run to him.

Vikram, the captain, was the first to arrive.

He didn't say anything. His face was a mess of sweat, dirt, and tears. He just skidded to a halt, grabbed Raghav's good shoulder, and pulled him into a bone-crushing, one-armed hug, his voice thick.

"You... you crazy... I..." He couldn't form the words.

Then Gourav was there, his eyes red. He grabbed Raghav's head, his big hand surprisingly gentle.

"You're insane, junior! Absolutely insane! I've never... I've never seen anything like it!"

The rest of the team piled in, a shouting, weeping, laughing mass of bodies. They were careful of his arm, but they were all trying to pat his back, his head, his leg.

"He did it! He did it!"

"One run! We won by one run!"

"Those catches... my god, those catches!"

"He's a wall! A f\*cking wall!"

Raghav was laughing, the sound a half-sob, high on adrenaline and the pure, uncut euphoria of a victory he had literally bled for.

He felt a dozen hands on him, a dozen voices shouting his name. In his past life, he had died alone in an empty apartment. In this life, he was at the bottom of a pile of brothers, a hero.

This was it. This was the feeling he had been reborn for.

A long shadow fell over the celebrating pile.

The shouting died instantly.

The team, as one, looked up.

Thomas, the six-foot Juggernaut, was standing over them. His bat was tucked under his arm, his helmet was off, and his face was slick with sweat.

He was not angry. He was... still.

Vikram and Gourav moved instinctively, creating a partial shield in front of Raghav.

Thomas ignored them. His eyes were locked on Raghav, who was being helped to his feet by his teammates.

Thomas's gaze dropped to the mangled, blood-soaked bandage that Sarma had wrapped around Raghav's hand.

A long, tense second passed.

"You're a maniac," Thomas said, his voice a low rumble.

Raghav, his breath coming in short, sharp pants, met his gaze.

"You shouldn't have done that," Thomas said, nodding at the hand. "It's a school match."

"You were going to win," Raghav replied, his voice a rasp.

Thomas stared at him, the logic of it sinking in. This kid hadn't just played. He had calculated his own body as a resource and spent it to win.

"You," Thomas said, his voice rough with a new, strange respect, "are not a normal player."

He stuck out his left hand.

"What's your name?"

Raghav, surprised, reached out with his own left hand and shook it.

"Raghav. Raghav Roi."

Thomas nodded, his grip firm. "I won't forget it."

He turned, his team's defeat a heavy cloak on his massive shoulders, and walked away.

The Juggernaut had not just been beaten; he had been humbled. The team watched him go, their own celebration muted, replaced by a profound, shared awe.

"Alright. That's enough." Coach Sarma's voice cut through the moment. He was all business.

"The match is over. St. Louis, good game. My team, pack the kit. Roi, you're with me."

The team finally dispersed, their energy still buzzing, as they went to shake hands with the shell-shocked SLS team.

"Coach, I..." Raghav started, but Sarma just put a hand on his good shoulder.

"Not here. Let's go."

As Coach Sarma led him toward his old Bajaj scooter, the world finally, blessedly, went quiet.

And the blue screen lit up.

Ding~

[Match Concluded. System Unlocked.]

[Victory detected against an overwhelmingly superior opponent. Evaluating Host contribution...]

[Host Contribution: Legendary.]

[Despite critical stat deficits, Host was directly responsible for 3 of 4 wickets, shattering enemy morale and leading a 10-man team to an impossible victory.]

[Quest Completed: The Underdog's Victory]

[Calculating rewards...]

[Base Reward: 50 SP]

[Bonus: Victory (x1.5)]

[Bonus: Legendary Contribution (x2.0)]

[Total SP Awarded: 150 SP]

[Stat Growth Detected!]

[+0.5 Batting Technique (For surviving a high-speed pace assault)]

[+0.5 Cricket IQ (For tactical battlefield awareness and sacrifice)]

[Host's Fielding stat has permanently increased by +1.0 (from Iron Grit and Miracle Play)]

=====

[Final Status Update:]

[Host: Raghav Roi]

[Age: 12 (Stat Cap: 25)]

[Stamina: 17.1 (+0.1)]

[Strength: 13.6 (+0.1)]

[Batting Technique: 13.5 (+0.1)]

[Bowling Skill: 5.1 (+0.1)]

[Fielding: 9.5 (+0.1)]

[Cricket IQ: 25.6 -> 26.1]

[Trait: Iron Grit (Lv. 1)]

[System Points (SP): 85 + 150 = 235 SP]

=====

Raghav's eyes widened. 150 SP! It was a fortune. And his Cricket IQ had broken the cap. The +0.1 adrenaline boost from Iron Grit had pushed his stat over the 25-point limit. The system itself was adapting to his will.

'System Store!' he commanded in his mind, his heart hammering.

The store flickered open.

[SYSTEM STORE (Novice Period Expired)]

[All base prices have been permanently increased by 100% (2x).]

[Stat Points:]

[Stamina (+1 Point) - 200 SP]

[Strength (+1 Point) - 200 SP]

[Batting Technique (+1 Point) - 400 SP]

[Bowling Skill (+1 Point) - 400 SP]

[Fielding (+1 Point) - 300 SP]

[New Item Detected (Special Offer):]

[Minor Healing Potion (Single Use): A blend of system energy and biological accelerants. Instantly begins the healing of one minor-to-moderate injury. Mends simple fractures and heals severe tissue damage over a 24-hour period.]

[Cost: 500 SP]

Raghav's heart, which had been soaring, crashed to the earth.

500 SP.

He had 235.

He couldn't afford it. The system, in its cold logic, had offered him a lifeline and dangled it just out of reach. There was no magic fix.

He was stuck. He had to heal like a normal, 12-year-old boy.

-----  
(HOSPITAL)

The hospital was a blur of white walls and the sharp, clean smell of antiseptic.

Coach Sarma sat with him, his presence a silent, solid reassurance, as they waited for the X-rays.

The doctor, a kind man with tired eyes, clipped the films onto the light-box.

He sighed.

"Well, son, you certainly did a number on it."

He pointed with a pen. "It's not one break. It's three. Two metacarpals here and here... and a spiral fracture in the third. This wasn't a fall. This was a crush injury. What on earth did you do?"

"Caught a cricket ball, sir," Raghav said, his voice small.

The doctor looked at Sarma, who just nodded.

"Right," the doctor said, rubbing his eyes.

"The verdict is simple. We're going to set this and put you in a hard plaster cast, from your knuckles to your elbow. You'll be in it for eight weeks. Minimum."

"Eight weeks..." Raghav felt the blood drain from his face.

"Eight weeks," the doctor affirmed.

"No cricket. No PE. And with it being your right hand, no writing. You'll need someone to take notes for you at school. This is a serious injury, young man. You're lucky you didn't do permanent nerve damage."

It was 5 PM when Coach Sarma's scooter pulled up to Raghav's house in Jalukbari. The evening sun cast long shadows. Sarma helped Raghav off, his new, heavy white cast a glaring badge of honor and stupidity.

"You're a hero today, Roi," Sarma said, his hand on Raghav's good shoulder.

"But the doctor is right. Eight weeks. Don't even think about picking up a bat. Your semi-final is in three weeks. You won't be playing."

"But Coach..."

"You won't be playing," Sarma repeated, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

"You got us there. Now let your team do the rest. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

Raghav nodded, his heart heavy. He turned and walked to his front door.

He pushed the door open with his left hand.

"Ma? I'm home."

Nirmala came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a cloth. "Raghu, you're late, dinner is almost...".

She stopped. Her eyes fixed on the massive white cast that encased her son's arm.

Her hand flew to her mouth, a small, horrified sound escaping.

"Raghav! Oh my god! What happened?! What did you do?!"

She rushed to him, her eyes filling with tears as she held his arm, her touch feather-light, as if the cast itself were fragile.

"It's... it's okay, Ma. I just... I had a fall. At the match."

"A fall? This is not a fall! Umesh! UMESH! Come quickly!"

Umesh Roi walked out of the bedroom, his reading glasses perched on his nose. He had been going over his accounts. He stopped, his gaze falling on Raghav.

He didn't move. He didn't rush over. His eyes just... hardened.

He looked from the cast to Raghav's face, then to the door, where Coach Sarma was still visible, respectfully waiting.

"Coach Sarma," Umesh said, his voice polite.

"Mr. Roi," Sarma nodded. "Your son... he was exceptional today. He won the match for the entire school. He's a hero."

Umesh's eyes didn't waver from the cast. "A hero," he repeated, the word flat.

"He has three fractures," Sarma said, his voice professional. "The doctor says eight weeks. He's in a lot of pain."

"I see," Umesh said. He gave Sarma a short, sharp nod.

"Thank you for bringing him home, Coach."

Sarma, dismissed, nodded back. "I'll see you tomorrow, Raghav."

The coach left. The door clicked shut, leaving Raghav alone in the living room with his parents.

Nirmala was already getting a glass of water, her hands shaking.

"Sit, beta, sit. Does it hurt? Oh, my poor boy..."

Raghav sat at the small dining table, the cast feeling like a 100-pound weight on his arm, and his heart.

Umesh pulled out the chair opposite him and sat down. He folded his hands. He was perfectly, terrifyingly calm.

He looked at the plaster cast on his son's right arm. His writing hand.

"Your final exams," Umesh said, his voice quiet, "are in two weeks."

Raghav's blood ran cold. He had forgotten.

"How," his father asked, his voice dangerously soft, "do you plan to write them?"

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 25: New Assistant Coach?**

Chapter 25: New Assistant Coach?

The small living room was suffocatingly silent. The only sound was the low hum of the ceiling fan, wobbling on its axis.

Nirmala stood frozen by the kitchen, her hand still over her mouth, her eyes wide with a fear that went beyond the injury..

Umesh Roi, his face a mask of cold disappointment, did not move. His quiet, level voice was a thousand times more terrifying than a shout.

"How," he repeated, "do you plan to write them?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and absolute. This was the checkmate his father had been warning him about since the beginning.

Raghav, with his old mind, knew that any emotional outburst, any plea, any mention of the "win," would be a fatal mistake. His father wasn't angry about the injury; he was angry about the consequence.

Raghav took a slow breath, his left hand gripping the edge of the table. "I can't," he said, his voice quiet.

Nirmala let out a small sob.

"No," Raghav said, looking at his mother, then back to his father.

"I can't write. But I can dictate. I will need a scribe. For the exams."

Umesh's eyebrows rose. It was a practical, mature answer. It was not the response of a 12-year-old.

"A scribe," Umesh repeated. "And who, exactly, will do this? Will you ask your teachers? Will you ask me, to take time off from the job that pays for this cricket? Or perhaps your mother, who has the house to run?"

"I'll ask Priya," Raghav said, his voice steady, though it cost him.

Priya, who had been standing in the doorway to her room, her own school books in hand, flinched as if she'd been struck.

"Me?" she almost shrieked. "I have my own exams, Raghav! I can't be your personal secretary!"

"Priya, please—" Nirmala started.

"No, Ma! It's not fair! He's the one who was being stupid, and I have to pay for it?"

"Priya," Umesh said. His voice was sharp. Priya went quiet.

He turned his gaze back to Raghav.

"You see? Your... game... does not just affect you. It is a stone tossed in a small pond. The ripples break on every shore. You have broken your hand for a match, and now you ask your sister to risk her grades to fix your problem."

Raghav bowed his head. He had no defense.

"I know. It is my fault. But... I cannot fail. I will not fail. I will study. I just need... a hand. I'll make it up to her."

Umesh stared at his son for a long, agonizing minute.

He saw the genuine, weary intelligence in his eyes, the absence of childish excuses. He saw the filthy, grass-stained uniform. He saw the monstrous white cast.

He sighed, a deep, rattling sound that seemed to pull the energy from the room.

"Fine," Umesh said.

Priya looked betrayed. "Papa!"

"Fine," Umesh repeated, holding up a hand. "You will get your scribe. Priya will help you. And you will pass your exams. But we are adding a new rule to our agreement."

He leaned forward.

"This," he said, tapping one finger on Raghav's white plaster cast, "is the end. Not for eight weeks....The end. When this comes off, you are done. Your bat is to be locked away. You have proven my point. This hobby is too expensive. It costs time, it costs health, and now it costs the focus of this entire family. Your 'win' today has cost you your cricket."

"Do you understand me?"

Raghav felt a cold spike of panic. The end? But his journey had just begun!

He looked at his father's unflinching, iron-willed expression. He was trapped. A 12-year-old could not argue this. Not now. Not when he was this vulnerable.

He had to bend. He had to survive.

"...Yes, Papa," Raghav said, the words like ash in his mouth. "I understand."

The next three days were a new kind of hell.

The pain in his hand was a constant, throbbing drumbeat. Sleep was difficult. But the humiliation was worse.

He, a 42-year-mature man, had to be helped to dress by his mother. He couldn't tie his own shoes.

And at school, he was a living spectacle.

The entire school was buzzing about the match.

He was a legend. The "Hero of Don Bosco," the "Wall of Jalukbari." Boys he'd never spoken to slapped his good shoulder.

Girls whispered and pointed as he walked by, his arm in a sling.

Abhinav was the worst, walking beside him like a proud bodyguard.

"You saw it, right? He just... stopped it! With his hand! And Thomas, Thomas, clapped for him! My best friend is a hero!"

Raghav just smiled, but it felt hollow.

In class, he sat, his right arm useless.

Priya, her face set in a permanent scowl, sat next to him, scribbling his notes as he dictated. It was slow, awkward, and frustrating for them both.

He was a hero to everyone, but a burden to his family.

That night, alone in his room, he stared at the ceiling. The 235 SP in his system felt useless.

'System,' he thought, 'the potion is 500 SP. I can't get it. I'm useless. I can't even do my physical quests.'

A long pause.

Ding~

[The Host's primary objective (God of Cricket) is currently blocked by a secondary, real-world objective (Academics).]

[The Host's father has issued an ultimatum. The Host must overcome this social/familial obstacle.]

[New Quest Issued: The Scholar's Duty]

[Quest: Your father's faith is broken. Your academic path is your only route to rebuilding trust. You must not only pass your final exams, you must excel.]

[Objective: Achieve an 'A' Grade (or 85%+) average across all subjects.]

[Reward: 100 SP, +0.5 Cricket IQ.]

[Failure: The 'Parental Trust' variable will collapse, permanently locking all cricket-related quests until age 18.]

Raghav's blood ran cold. The system had just confirmed his father's ultimatum.

He had to pass.

'Okay,' he thought, his jaw tightening. 'Okay. If I can't train my body, I'll train my mind.'

He looked at his 235 SP. 'System Store.'

He scrolled past the mocking healing potion..

[New Item Available (Academic):]

[Minor Intelligence Boost (1 Hour): Sharpens focus, increases memory recall, and accelerates comprehension. Ideal for study sessions.]

[Cost: 10 SP]

Raghav almost laughed. The system had a tool for everything.

'Buy one,' he commanded.

[SP: 225]

A cool, minty sensation flooded his brain. The throbbing in his hand faded to the background. His thoughts became crystal clear.

He opened his Physics textbook. For the first time, the dense paragraphs on light and motion weren't just words. They were clear, logical systems.

He was going to ace this exam.

---

A week later, his team was on the field. Raghav was on the sideline.

His exams were finished. Thanks to a grueling, potion-fueled week of study, he felt confident he had met the quest's objective.

Priya had even given him a grudging nod of respect. "You actually studied. I thought I'd be writing gibberish."

But now, he was back at the ground, his heavy cast a reminder of his new, useless status.

The team was practicing, but the energy was gone. The high of beating SLS had faded, replaced by a sullen, nervous dread.

They were a team of followers who had lost their leader.

Vikram was trying his best, but he was a blunt instrument, not a motivator.

"Come on, Gourav! That was a lazy shot! My grandmother could have hit that!"

"Shut up, Vikram! You're not the coach!"

"Boys!"

Coach Sarma's voice cut through the bickering. The team gathered, their heads low. Raghav walked over, standing on the edge of the circle, an outsider.

"Alright, listen up," Sarma said. "The semi-finals are this Saturday. I just got the fixture. We are playing Spring Dale International."

A collective, audible groan went through the team.

"Sir, not them!"

"They're the champions!"

"My cousin plays for them. He said their bats cost more than my father's scooter."

"They beat Cotton Collegiate 150 to 0. They didn't lose a single wicket."

Sarma let the panic bubble for a moment before silencing it with a look.

"Yes. They are the champions. And unlike SLS, they are not a one-man-army. They are a team...They have the best facilities, the best gear, and the smartest captain in this tournament."

He paused for a moment and continue

"They don't just beat you; they find your one weakness and they break you with it. They will not be arrogant. They will not be reckless. They will be perfect."

The team looked utterly defeated. They had performed a miracle to get here, and their reward was an execution.

Then, Coach Sarma turned his gaze to Raghav.

The team went quiet.

"Roi," Sarma said, his voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Yes, Coach?"

"You're out. Your hand is broken. You are not a player on this team anymore."

Raghav nodded, his stomach tightening. "I know, Coach."

"But," Sarma continued, a rare, thin smile playing on his lips, "your brain isn't. And that brain, as foolish as it is, read a googly that no one else saw. It saw a run-out that no one else dreamed of. You can't be my player."

He tossed a clipboard to Vikram, who fumbled it and passed it to Raghav's good left hand..

"You're my new Assistant Coach. I want you at my side. I want you to watch every practice. I want you to find me a weakness in the 'perfect' team. You got us this far, Roi. Now, you're going to get us through it."

Raghav looked down at the clipboard in his left hand.

He looked at the 14 exhausted, terrified faces of his teammates. And for the first time since his father's ultimatum, he felt the fire return.

His Cricket IQ, now 26.1, felt like it was humming.

'They have the best gear. They have the best facilities. They have the perfect team,' he thought.

'But they don't have me.'

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 26: Trainer! Scholar!**

Chapter 26: Trainer! Scholar!

The world, for Raghav, had shrunk. It was now a 22-yard pitch he couldn't walk on, and the four walls of his room.

The day after his "promotion," he stood at the edge of the school ground, his heavy plaster cast an anchor.

He held the team clipboard in his left hand, a cheap pen wedged awkwardly between his fingers.

He watched Vikram and Gourav practicing in the nets.

Gourav, his confidence high after the last match, was playing with a new, wild aggression.

He swung hard at one of Prakash's off-spinners, intending to send it over Long-On, but his front foot was all wrong.

He'd planted it too far across, closing his body. The ball took the inside edge and rattled his stumps.

Clack.

"Ah, bad luck!" Vikram called out.

"It's not bad luck," Raghav muttered, his voice too low for them to hear.

He felt a familiar, burning itch in his muscles. The 42-year-old in him knew exactly what was wrong.

'His front foot,' he thought, 'he's 'planting.' He's not driving through the ball; he's just swinging at it.'

His right hand twitched inside the cast, a ghost limb desperate to grip a bat and show him.

He couldn't.

He uncurled his left hand, frustrated, and made a clumsy, mirror-image note on the clipboard: Gourav - front foot planting.

He was a general who could see the entire battlefield but couldn't fire a gun.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

Raghav startled. Coach Sarma was standing beside him, his arms crossed, his eyes on the net. He hadn't heard him approach.

"Just watching," Sarma clarified. "Knowing you can't go out there."

Raghav just nodded, his throat tight.

"It's a different kind of strength, Roi," Sarma said.

"Playing is easy. It's all instinct. Watching... that takes patience. It takes a different kind of mind."

Sarma turned his gaze to Raghav, his expression unreadable.

"Spring Dale. They practice at the ACA Stadium in Barsapara. The ground is private. Top-class facilities. We practice on packed dirt. They practice on imported grass."

He didn't need to say anything else. The implication was clear.

"They won't let us in to watch, will they?" Raghav asked.

"Not a chance," Sarma said. "Their coach is a professional. He runs that team like a fortress. They're playing a practice match tomorrow against a city XI. Pity we won't get to see it."

Sarma looked at Raghav, a long, meaningful pause. The emotional beat hung in the air. He wasn't ordering Raghav.

He was presenting a fact.

Then, he turned and walked away. "Fix Gourav's foot. Use your words."

Raghav understood. He was an assistant coach. He was also a spy.

The next day, Raghav felt a knot of anxiety in his stomach. He'd lied to his mother, a clumsy,

"Abhinav and I are going to the library to study."

The lie tasted like soap.

He had 225 SP. He spent 10 on another Minor Intelligence Boost, not for academics, but for observation. He needed his 26.1 Cricket IQ to be as sharp as possible.

The ACA Stadium was a different world. It was a concrete bowl, new and imposing, a monument to the real money in cricket.

Raghav, in his dusty school uniform and a sling, felt like a beggar at a king's feast.

He couldn't get in. The gates were guarded.

He walked the perimeter, his good hand rubbing the rough edge of his plaster cast—a new, nervous habit.

He felt stupid. He was a 12-year-old boy with a broken arm, trying to spy on the best team in the state. This was insane.

He was about to give up.

Then he saw it. A gap in the wall on the far side, where a section of the outer stands was still under construction. A few twisted pieces of rebar and a loose sheet of tin. It was just big enough.

He slipped through.

He found himself on the top tier of an empty, sun-baked concrete stand, looking down. The field below was a perfect, almost artificial green.

And on it, Spring Dale International was putting on a clinic.

Sarma was right. They were perfect.

Their openers were like textbook diagrams: high elbows, straight bats, perfect Cover Drives.

Their bowlers ran in with smooth, repeatable actions. Their fielders moved as one, cutting off angles, their throws flat and hard.

Raghav watched for an hour, his heart sinking. There was no weakness.

Thomas, from SLS, had been a monster of pure power. He was a blunt object.

This team was a team of surgeons. They were methodical, precise, and cold. They weren't arrogant. They were just... better.

The city XI team was getting frustrated, trying to hit their way out of the suffocating pressure. A batsman tried to slog a fast bowler over Mid-Wicket.

The Spring Dale captain, a tall, elegant boy named Rohan Sharma, simply signaled to his fielder.

The fielder moved from Mid-Wicket to Deep Mid-Wicket.

The batsman tried the same shot again.

He was caught.

Raghav felt a chill. The captain hadn't just reacted. He had anticipated. He had seen the batsman's frustration, set a trap, and the batsman had walked right into it.

This captain... his Cricket IQ had to be 25, at least. He was Raghav's equal, but with a fully functional team.

Raghav felt hopeless. His team of gully cricketers, with their sloppy footwork and wild swings, would be dismantled.

He was about to leave. His quest was a failure.

Then, he focused on the captain, Rohan. He watched him for ten straight minutes. The captain was also the team's wicketkeeper.

Rohan was, like the rest of his team, flawless. He collected the ball cleanly. His movements were economical. He was a wall behind the stumps.

Raghav narrowed his eyes. The Intelligence Boost was making his mind race, connecting patterns.

He watched the fast bowler come in. The ball was pitched just outside Off-Stump, a Good Length delivery. The batsman left it.

Swish. Thud. The ball hit Rohan's gloves. Perfect.

Another ball. This one was wide. A Short Length ball. Rohan moved to his right, a fluid, easy side-step, and collected it.

Another ball. This one was on the Leg Side.

Rohan moved to his left.

And Raghav saw it.

He paused. His heart skipped a beat.

It was tiny. A normal person would never see it.

But to Raghav, with his cricketer IQ, it was a glaring, flashing red light.

When moving to his right, Rohan's movement was a single, fluid motion.

When moving to his left... it was a two-step movement. A small, initial "trigger" step with his right foot, before his left foot moved. It was a fractional, almost imperceptible delay.

A technical "hitch."

He was slow to his left. By maybe half a second.

Raghav held his breath. 'It's a pattern,' his mind whispered. 'He's been trained to move right for Off-Side deliveries so much that his left-side movement is a compensation, not an instinct.'

For a team that played "by the book," this was a fatal flaw. Because a 'by the book' batsman never intentionally hits the ball fine on the leg side.

But a 'gully cricket' team? A team of improvisers?

Raghav's mind began to race, a new, chaotic plan forming. A plan that didn't need power or perfection.

It just needed to be very, very annoying.

That evening, Raghav found Coach Sarma in the empty sports room, inventorying old bats.

The room smelled of linseed oil and old leather.

Raghav, breathing a little hard from running back, stood in the doorway.

Sarma didn't look up. He just continued making notes in a ledger. The silence was the question.

"You were right, Coach," Raghav said. "They're perfect."

Sarma's pen stopped moving. He slowly closed the ledger.

"And?" he asked.

Raghav stepped into the room. He held up his clipboard with his left hand, his eyes burning with a new, fierce light.

"Their captain is a genius. He anticipates everything. He's also their wicketkeeper."

Raghav took a breath, letting the emotional beat land.

"And he's slow to his left."

Coach Sarma's head snapped up. For the first time, Raghav saw a genuine, predatory smile spread across his coach's face.

"Slow," Sarma repeated, the word tasting sweet.

"He has a hitch in his footwork," Raghav said, "But it's only exploitable if you're not playing proper cricket. You have to play ugly. You have to play on the Leg Side. You have to... flick. A lot."

Sarma was quiet for a long time. He stood up and walked over to the window, looking out at their own empty, dusty field.

"Play ugly," he mused. He turned back to Raghav, his smile gone, replaced by that familiar, intense focus.

"Good work, Assistant Coach," he said. "Now... how do we teach this team of brawlers to flick a ball... in three days?"

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 27: Forging the Ugly Weapon**

Chapter 27: Forging the Ugly Weapon

The next morning, the sun was already beating down on the Don Bosco ground, kicking up a dusty haze.

It was Monday. The semi-final against Spring Dale was on Saturday. They had five days.

Coach Sarma gathered the fourteen boys. His face was like stone.

"You all know Spring Dale," he began, his voice flat. "You know they are the champions. You know they are better trained, better funded, and have not lost a match in two years. If we play a normal game of cricket, we will lose."

The team shuffled. This was not the pep talk they were expecting.

"We are not going to play a normal game of cricket."

He turned and pointed to Raghav, who stood beside him, clipboard in his left hand, cast on his right.

"Roi," Sarma barked.

"Yes, Coach."

"Tell them."

Raghav felt fifteen pairs of eyes lock onto him. He was a newbie with a broken arm in there eyes, trying to tell seniors how to play.

"Their captain, Rohan Sharma, is also their wicketkeeper," Raghav said, his voice clear. He'd used 10 SP on an Intelligence Boost just for this meeting.

"He's a genius. He anticipates everything on the Off-Side. But... he's slow to his left. He has a technical flaw. A half-second delay."

He paused, letting the beat land.

"So," Raghav continued, "we are going to play 90% of our match on the Leg Side."

Vikram frowned. "What do you mean? Like, Pull Shots?"

"No," Raghav said. "They're too smart. They'll just put a fielder at Deep Square Leg. I'm talking about ugly cricket. I'm talking about Leg Glances. I'm talking about Flick Shots. We're not trying to hit boundaries. We're trying to hit the ball fine, just past the keeper, over and over, until he breaks."

A thick silence fell over the group.

It was Gourav who broke it, a short, disbelieving laugh.

"A flick? Sir, that's a tap. It's a girl's shot. It's weak. We need power! We need to hit them hard, like we did to SLS!"

Coach Sarma's eyes snapped to him.

"You," Sarma said, his voice dangerously quiet, "hit one six against SLS. And then you got yourself out. Raghav, with a broken hand, stayed in and won the game. Your way is loud. His way is winning. We will do it his way."

Gourav's face flushed. He shut his mouth.

"Now," Sarma bellowed, "Pair up! Prakash, you're on. Bowl. I want you to aim for their legs. Only for their legs. Everyone else, get a bat. You will practice the Flick Shot until your wrists bleed. Move!"

The next three hours were chaos.

It was a disaster.

These boys were brawlers. They were Sloggers and Drivers. They knew one way to play: plant the front foot, see ball, hit ball.

The Flick Shot, in contrast, was all subtlety. It was about timing, not power. It required delicate wrist-work, letting the bowler's pace do the work.

Gourav was the worst. He kept trying to hit the flick, planting his foot and swinging, sending the ball spooning up to Mid-Wicket for an easy catch.

"No!" Raghav shouted, his patience shredding. His cast was itching, and his inability to show them was driving him insane.

"You're too early! And stop planting your foot! You have to wait for it, and use your wrists!"

Gourav threw his bat onto the dust. "I am using my wrists! I don't know what you're talking about! 'Wait for it'? It's a fast ball! If you can do it so well, you show me!"

He gestured angrily at Raghav's plaster cast.

An emotional beat landed. The whole team stopped, watching.

Raghav was the brain, but he had no authority. He was just a kid telling them they were wrong

Raghav looked at the bat, then at his cast, then at Gourav's frustrated face. The 42-year-old mind took over. Shouting wouldn't work.

"Alright," Raghav said, his voice quiet. He walked over. "Forget the textbooks. Forget 'wrist-work.' You're in the gully. Your house is behind you. Your neighbor's angry uncle is at Mid-Wicket. Your mother's prize-winning flower pot is at Cover. You're playing with a hard tennis ball. Where do you hit it?"

Gourav paused, the anger on his face fading into confusion.

"...What?"

"Where do you hit it so you don't break anything and you can keep playing?" Raghav pressed.

Vikram, leaning on his bat, suddenly snorted. "You hit it late. You just tap it. Behind you. Towards Fine Leg."

"Exactly," Raghav said, his eyes locking on

Gourav. "You don't swing. You don't try to kill it. You let the ball come to you, and you just... tap it. You're not trying to smash it.... You're just trying to be annoying. Let the bowler's pace do all the work."

Gourav picked up his bat, his expression thoughtful. He was no longer thinking about a 'flick shot.' He was thinking about gully cricket.

"Prakash," Raghav ordered. "Again. Aim for his legs."

Prakash bowled. The ball came in, fast and straight at Gourav's pads.

Gourav didn't plant. He didn't swing. He just... waited.

Click.

His wrists, almost by instinct, rolled at the last second. The ball deflected off the bat and raced away, fine and fast, past the imaginary wicketkeeper, exactly into the 'safe' zone.

The field went silent.

Gourav stared at where the ball had gone, then at his bat, then at Raghav.

A slow grin spread across his face. "Huh. That... was easy."

"Again," Sarma barked, his voice betraying a hint of approval.

The next three days were the most grueling, monotonous, and painful practice of their lives.

Raghav was relentless.

He spent another 20 SP on two more Intelligence Boosts [SP: 205], his mind sharp as a razor, his voice growing hoarse.

"No, Vikram! You're rolling your wrists too early! Wait! Wait... Now!"

Click.

"Suresh! That's a Pull Shot! You're dead. Spring Dale's captain will have a man there. I want it finer! I want it almost behind you!"

Thwack (The ball hit Suresh's pads).

"Again!"

They practiced nothing else. Their legs were a mess of purple and blue bruises from the balls they'd missed.

Their wrists ached as they were tired and they were bored but they were learning.

Click. Click. Click.

The sound of the Leg Glance became the new rhythm of the Don Bosco ground.

---

On Friday evening, the day before the match, Sarma called them into a final huddle. They were exhausted. They looked miserable.

"Tomorrow," Sarma said, "Spring Dale is going to come out. They will bowl a perfect line, just outside Off-Stump, and they will wait for you to make a mistake."

He paced in front of them, his shadow long in the setting sun.

"You will not make it. You will let those balls go. You will bore them. You will bore the crowd. You will bore me."

The team looked confused.

"And then," Sarma said, his voice dropping, "you will see their captain get frustrated. You will see him talk to his bowler. And that bowler will change his line. He will get aggressive. He will aim for your stumps. He will aim for your legs."

He stopped and looked at each of them, his eyes like steel.

"And the moment he does... you will tap them to death."

He clapped his hands once. "Go home. Rest. Tomorrow, we play ugly."

Raghav stayed behind, packing the kit with his left hand.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Sarma said, watching him.

"They hate me, Coach," Raghav said, a small, tired smile on his face.

"Good," Sarma replied. "It's not your job to be liked, Assistant Coach. It's your job to be right."

[System Points: 205]

(To be Continued)

## **Chapter 28: The Semi-final Day Match [1]**

Chapter 28: The Semi-final Day Match [1]

The day of the semi-final morning, Raghav woke up earlier than his alarm. There was a throbbing in his right arm that was a reminder of his powerlessness. The weight was big, a tumble of plaster, which bound him up to the fringes.

He felt useless.

He wore with his left hand, a gradual, awkward business, which now had become exasperatingly habitual. By the time he came out of the small living room, his father was already at the table reading the Assam Tribune and taking tea. The silence of the room was even more than his cast.

Umesh didn't look up. He was not talking about cricket, or the match, since that first night. He was waiting--waiting till the exams were over, till this hobby of his was pronounced dead. Raghav took a bite of roti, but his bowel was a knot of anxiety.

Hmph, Umesh grunted all at once, shaking the newspaper.

Raghav flinched.

We are wasting more money of the people, said his father turning a page.

"What is it?" Nirmala requested, and put a glass of milk in front of Raghav.

The ACA had declared a massive District Cricket Tournament in the schools which was attended by the teams of all 27 districts-Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Silchar, and others. A circus to the full, he said, gulping his tea, disapprovingly. As though we do not already have boys enough wasting their time.

The hand of Raghav stood still on the glass. A district tournament. A new, larger stage. A path beyond the school.

He glanced at his father, who was studying the state-government classifieds without any clue to the bomb he had just dropped. The 42 years old mind of Raghav stored the information; this was an important article to be kept in mind. However, first, he needed to get through today.

He quietly drank up his milk and the words of his father repeated in his mind. Wasting their time. I will show you not, I said to myself, the first time.

An hour after that the Don Bosco team bus, which was a decrepit, wheezing old tempo, arrived at the gates of the ACA Stadium. The contrast was harsh. The bus of Spring Dale was a new, air-conditioned one, gleaming white in color, and parked right before the main entrance.

Their rivals were already in the field, and were warming up, and doing it in time, in uniforms of crisp white and matching. The Don Bosco team, in unsuited whites, some of them yellow at the seams, walked out on the perfect green grass, and just stopped.

They were peasants on the lawn of a king. Raghav did not need to be told how frightened they were, but he could tell it with eyes, with the stillness, with the manner in which they carried their kit bags, with the straps pulled up. They looked in their melancholic eyes at the alien perfection of the grass.

The collapse started before it had a chance to happen, and Coach Sarma sensed it. "It's the same 22 yards. Don't let the paint fool you."

Raghav, with his left hand holding a clipboard, was on the verge of panic. He needed to be sharp.

System, he said, \_Minor Intelligence Boost. [SP: 195].

The coolness of the water that he knew had swept over him. He approached Vikram and he was gazing at the vacant stands of the stadium.

Vikram, Raghav said, in a low, steady voice.

They are, they are a real team, Raghu.

And we are the team that struck a fast bowler that broke my hand, Raghav answered. "They're clean. Let's make them dirty. Just... stick to the plan."

The toss was made by Coach Sarma, Raghav, and Vikram.

They were awaited by Rohan Sharma, the SDI captain. He was just as Raghav recalled him; very tall, very serene, very exuding a polite confidence that was more terrifying than all the curses Thomas could utter.

He nodded to Sarma. "Coach. Good to see you." He glanced at Raghav's cast.

Had a hard time, Rohan said, with sincere and true, polite sympathy. You heard you had a great innings against SLS.

It felt worse than an insult.

Sarma grunted. The umpire tossed the coin. It turned, flashed in the sun, and fell level.

"Tails," Rohan called. It was tails.

We will have a bowl, please, Rohan thought, without the slightest hesitation.

There passed through Vikram a wave of fear. Sarma's face was unreadable.

It was the "by the book" move. Bring in the weaker side of the game, take advantage of the early morning moisture of the field and watch the pressure of a large stadium bring them down.

Rohan was attempting to destroy them even before they began.

Good, Raghav heard the Intelligence Boost humming. \*He's predictable. He is doing what we want to do (con).

The number two batsman Vikram and Suresh came into the field. The stadium was expansive and dead.

Raghav had Sarma on the boundary line right next to him.

He is sure of it, Sarma said to himself. "He thinks he can roll us for 50."

"Let him," Raghav replied.

The opening bowler of the Spring Dale was a tall rhythmic pacer. It was a smooth movement, a perfect movement, which could be repeated. He began his run-up.

The first ball was a beauty. It hit on a good length, just beyond the off-stump, and seamed away. His nerves jangling Vikram, who has just seen it slip into the gloves of the keeper.

Thwack.

The sound was clean, loud.

The bowler took the ball, returned and threw the same ball.

Vikram left it again.

The third ball. Same.

The fourth. Same.

The whole Spring Dale organization was a clockwork. They were to have the classic off-side edge, slips, gully, point, cover.

The bowler finished the over. A maiden.

0/0 after one over.

The next bowler, a left-arm spinner, came on. He bowled to Suresh. His line was also tight, aimed at the Off-Stump, trying to get a Cover Drive or an edge.

Suresh, his face pale, just blocked. Block. Leave. Block.

0/0 after two overs.

Raghav could feel the tension. He saw Gourav, pads on, fidgeting on the bench. He was showing his nerves. His own team was getting impatient. They wanted to hit.

The "boring" part of the plan was the hardest.

The fast bowler came in for his second over.

He bowled the first ball. Outside Off-Stump. Vikram left it.

The bowler grunted, frustrated.

The Spring Dale captain, Rohan, clapped his gloves. "Good line, Ashu! He's scared! One more!"

The bowler, spurred on, ran in hard.

But he changed his line.

He was no longer trying to be subtle. He was getting aggressive. He aimed the ball straight at the stumps.

It was a fast, Good Length ball, coming right at Vikram's legs.

Vikram, who had been waiting for this, his body coiled, twitched. He fought the urge to plant his foot and Slog it. He remembered the gully. He remembered the "tap."

He waited. Waited.

At the last possible millisecond, his wrists, trained by a week of bruises and Raghav's relentless shouting, rolled over.

Click.

It was not a powerful shot. It was a deflection.

The ball raced away, fine, fast, and directly to the left of the wicketkeeper.

Rohan Sharma, the perfect captain, took his "hitch" step. His right foot moved first.

That half-second delay was all it took.

He dove, a full-length, desperate stretch to his left, but the ball was already past him.

It skimmed across the perfect grass, mocking the Slip fielders as it crossed the boundary rope for four.

4/0.

A stunned silence fell over the Spring Dale team.

A roar erupted from the Shanti Vidya Mandir School team bench.

Rohan Sharma, the keeper, got to his feet.

He took up handful of dust from the ground and rubbing it into his gloves and his face grew in a mask of cold calculations. His eyes were upon the Fine Leg boundary.

Then he slowly turned his head, and looked right into the sideline.

He looked over the shoulders of Coach Sarma and his gaze fell on Raghav. The gracious pity died; he was aware of the reality.

He was aware that he had been spied on and he was sure that this was not an accident. The game was on.

( To be continued)

## **Chapter 29: The Semi-final Day Match [2]**

Chapter 29: The Semi-final Day Match [2]

The ACA Stadium was quiet such that Raghav could hear the studs of the bowler smashing on the crease. Rohan Sharma rose out of his crouch.

His face was masked in a calm composure and he wiped his gloves on his thighs. The friendly, understanding lad was now a field general, and had only observed the weapons of the enemy.

He did not yell or panic. He simply adapted.

He raised a glove to stay the game, and walked very coolly to his fast bowler.

On the sidelines, Raghav had a clench in his good hand. 'Here it comes.'

Not only did Rohan talk to his bowler, he began giving orders to the field.

The Gully fielder who was in the off-side was sent over as Rohan indicated on a leg slip position.

He was sealing in the very small hole that Raghav had taken a week to plan the exploitation of.

The excitement caused by Vikram at the boundary struck dead on the Don Bosco bench.

He is aware, Coach Sarma grumbled to himself, lips clenched. 'He's smart. He's plugging the leak.'

The fielder who was a leg slipper jogged in, and stood exactly where the previous ball had been sent out four.

The trap had now been neutralized, and to make matters worse, it was themselves who had been turned into a trap.

This is bad, bad, Coach, his Intelligence Boost was running cold, Raghav said to himself. They bowl at the legs now, and our batsmen play the Flick, and the leg slip will get it every time.

"So they stop," Sarma said.

He will not allow them to stop, do not look at Rohan, replied Raghav. Not merely stuffing the hole; he is tempting us.

Ashu, the fast bowler, now had a predatory smirk of hunger. He had been given new orders. He dashed in, his movement, nevertheless, unbroken, but his object was evident.

He threw a good-length ball with a lot of speed straight at the pads of Vikram. It was the same ball which they had been practising in hitting.

The body of Vikram, pierced by a thousand repetitions, moved instinctively, his wrists ready to roll over for the Leg Glance.

But he saw him. The Leg Slip. A new, hungry fielder waiting to devour the "tap".

Vikram's mind and body went to war.

Hit it! his instincts screamed.

Stop! It's a trap! his new training countered.

In that split-second of hesitation, he did neither. He didn't flick. He didn't block. He just... froze.

THWACK.

The ball slammed hard into his front pad, right in front of the Middle Stump.

The entire Spring Dale team erupted. "HOWZAT!"

The appeal was deafening. The bowler was screaming, his arms in the air. Rohan Sharma was already on his feet, glove raised.

A terrifying silence fell as the umpire considered.

Raghav felt his heart stop. 'He's out. He's plumb.'

The umpire stared. He stared for one second.

Two.

Then, slowly, he shook his head. "Not out."

A massive, collective sigh of relief from the Don Bosco bench.

Raghav leaned against the boundary fence, his knees weak.

The umpire had given Vikram the benefit of the doubt, perhaps assuming the ball was pitching just outside the Leg Stump.

But it was a warning. A brutal, terrifying warning.

Rohan Sharma didn't argue. He just clapped his gloves.

"Good ball, Ashu! Again! He's trapped!"

The "boring" game was back, but now it was suffocating..

The Spring Dale bowlers, led by their clinical captain, went back to the Off-Side line.

Good Length. Outside Off-Stump.

Ball after ball.

Vikram and Suresh, the other opener, were forced to just leave. Leave. Leave. Block.

The scoreboard was frozen. 4/0.

Over 3: Maiden. 4/0.

Over 4: Maiden. 4/0.

Over 5: The pressure was unbearable. Spring Dale was a python, slowly squeezing the air from their lungs.

Suresh, the non-striker, was visibly crumbling. Raghav could see it. He was fidgeting, tapping his bat, his eyes wide.

He wasn't thinking anymore. He was just feeling the pressure.

And Rohan Sharma saw it, too.

He signaled to his bowler.

The bowler, who had been bowling Off-Side, delivered a surprise ball. A fuller, faster delivery aimed at the stumps.

Suresh, desperate to do something, to break the stalemate, went for a big, booming On-Drive.

But his feet were all wrong.

They were stuck, planted in the crease from so much blocking. It was a wild, desperate swing.

Snick.

The ball took a faint inside edge.

Rohan Sharma, his weakness to the left now irrelevant, moved to his right. His movement was fluid, perfect. The ball settled into the heart of his gloves.

Thwack.

He didn't even celebrate. He just tossed the ball in the air. The umpire's finger went up.

Don Bosco was 4/1.

The silence on the bench was absolute. The plan had failed.

They were being surgically dismantled.

Gourav, the next man in, stood up, his face pale. He looked at Raghav, his eyes wide with panic.

"What do I do? The Flick is a trap!"

Raghav grabbed his arm.

"Breathe. Just... breathe. Stick to the other plan. Bore them. Survive."

But Raghav's mind was on fire. [System Points: 185]. 'System, another Intelligence Boost!'

[SP: 175]

He needed an answer. Rohan was a genius. He had countered their only strategy.

Rohan, behind the stumps, was repositioning his field again. He had tasted blood.

He moved the Leg Slip back to the Gully position.

Raghav froze.

'Why would he do that? He's re-opening the hole.'

He watched Rohan. The captain was directing his bowler.

He was... he was setting up a new field.

Raghav's mind, supercharged by 27.2 IQ points, analyzed the new geometry.

Gully was back. First Slip. Point. Cover.

It was a standard, aggressive Off-Side field.

'He's not just plugging the hole,' Raghav realized, a jolt of ice water in his veins. 'He's moved on. He thinks the Leg Glance is dead. He thinks he've scared us off it. He's going back to his textbook... because he thinks we're broken.'

Rohan believed his "shock and awe" (the LBW appeal, the wicket) had terrified them into submission. He was going back to his default, to dismantle them conventionally.

Raghav looked at Coach Sarma.

"He reopened the Leg-Side, Coach," Raghav said, his voice a low, urgent whisper.

Sarma's eyes narrowed. "He's bluffing."

"I do not believe so", said Raghav. "He is a pompous, a textbook captain. We tore up his textbook, and he scared us and we went back to Chapter 1.....He believes that we will not be bold enough to attempt it again."

Sarma gazed at the field, and then at Vikram, who appeared conquered.

"He's daring us," Sarma said. It means he knows your trick, and he is not even going to both to defend it because you are too afraid to make use of it.

That was the true emotional note, the true ordeal of their nerve.

At the wicket Ashu, the quick bowler, ran in a second time.

He was obeying the orders of his captain--back to the old time weaker team attack.

He delivered a fast, aggressive ball, aimed right at Vikram's legs.

It was the same ball as before.

But this time, there was no Leg Slip. The hole was wide open.

Vikram saw it. He saw the bowler. He saw the empty field.

And he saw the ghost of the Leg Slip fielder.

He hesitated.

'He's too scared,' Raghav thought, his heart sinking..

But Vikram was the one who had faced Thomas. He had survived.

In the last possible fraction of a second, his anger overtook his fear. He was tired of being bullied. He was tired of being scared.

He didn't just "tap" it.

His wrists, strong from a week of relentless drilling, snapped over with a vicious, controlled violence.

CRACK!

It wasn't a "tap." It was a shot. A Wristy Flick played with power.

The ball rocketed off his bat.

Rohan Sharma, his weight on his toes, took his "hitch" step to the left.

He was half a second too slow.

The ball, traveling like a bullet, screamed past his outstretched, desperate glove.

It was not a "trickle" to the boundary. It was a statement.

FOUR RUNS.

8/1. (The scoreboard had been wrong before, it was 4/1)..

Rohan Sharma stood up, his face ashen.

He wasn't just beaten. He had been humiliated. He had been out-thought. Twice.

On the sideline, Raghav let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

He looked at Coach Sarma.

Sarma's face was terrifying. It was the first time Raghav had ever seen him smile.

"Now," Sarma said, his voice a low growl. "The game begins."

(To be Continued)

### **Chapter 30: The Semi-final Day Match [3]**

Chapter 30: The Semi-final Day Match [3]

The crack of Vikram's bat echoed across the silent stadium. Four runs.

Rohan Sharma stood up, his face ashen. He wasn't just beaten. He had been humiliated. He had been out-thought. Twice.

On the sideline, Raghav let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He looked at Coach Sarma.

Sarma's face was terrifying. It was the first time Raghav had ever seen him smile.

"Now," Sarma said, his voice a low growl. "The game begins."

Rohan Sharma walked, very slowly, to his bowler. He didn't yell. He didn't gesture. He just placed a hand on Ashu's shoulder and said something.

Raghav, his Intelligence Boost still active, watched the bowler's body language. Ashu's shoulders tensed. He nodded, his face darkening with anger.

He wasn't being told to be smarter. He was being unleashed.

"This is it," Raghav said, gripping his cast. "Ego."

"Good," Sarma grunted. "Let's see what he's got."

Rohan jogged back to his position. He didn't put the Leg Slip back in.

That would be admitting his bluff had failed. He was done with finesse. He clapped his gloves, a sharp, aggressive crack.

"Let's go, Ashu! No more games!"

Ashu, the fast bowler, looked less like a technician and more like a bull. He stomped back to his mark, turned, and began his run-up. He was thundering in, his arms pumping, his face a mask of fury.

He wasn't aiming for the Good Length area. He dug the ball in Short, halfway down the pitch.

It was a Bouncer.

Aimed not just at Vikram, but at his helmet.

Vikram, his blood still surging from the boundary, was caught off guard.

His feet were planted for another Flick Shot. He saw the ball late.

He didn't have time to duck properly. He just fell backward, a clumsy, panicked evasion.

The ball rocketed past his grille, so close he felt the wind of it.

THWACK.

The sound of the ball hitting Rohan's gloves, right next to Vikram's ear, was louder than the boundary. It was a threat, made physical.

Vikram was on the ground, his bat splayed out.

"Get up," Sarma said under his breath. "Get up, my boy."

From the Slips, a voice chirped,

"Heard your arm was hurting, Vikram! Want to match your new friend?"

Vikram scrambled to his feet, his face pale. The confidence from the shot was gone, replaced by the cold, immediate fear of physical harm.

Ashu was already walking back. He didn't even look at his captain. He was in his own world of rage.

He ran in again.

Another Short ball

.

This one wasn't as fast, but it was just as hostile, aimed at the ribs.

Vikram, expecting it, managed to get his bat and gloves up, playing a clumsy, defensive Block that sent the ball looping harmlessly into the Off-Side.

He had survived.

Ashu ran in a third time. Vikram was expecting another Bouncer, his weight rocked back.

But Ashu was smart. He was angry, but he wasn't stupid.

He bowled a Yorker.

A 60km/h, full-speed Yorker, disguised perfectly, aimed right at the base of the Middle Stump.

Vikram, his weight on his back foot, saw it too late. He just jammed his bat down, an act of pure, desperate reflex.

CLACK.

The bat, his shoulder, and his wrists all rattled from the vibration. The ball was stopped. Dead. It rolled, pathetically, an inch from his feet.

The over ended.

Score 8/1.

Vikram had survived the assault. He walked, his legs shaking, to the non-striker's end to meet Gourav.

"He's lost his mind," Gourav whispered, his eyes wide.

Vikram just nodded, wiping sweat from his forehead. He leaned on his bat, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

"Good," Vikram said, and the single word was full of a new, hard-earned defiance. "He's angry. We're winning."

That single over had cost Spring Dale all of their mental momentum. They had tried to break Vikram.

He had bent, but he hadn't broken.

Now, the left-arm spinner came on.

Rohan Sharma, seeing his fast bowler was too emotional, was trying to calm the game down.

But the "ugly" plan was back on.

The spinner's first ball was on a Good Length, on Middle Stump.

Gourav, who had watched Vikram's trial by fire, was no longer scared. He was focused.

He waited.

Click.

He rolled his wrists. A soft Leg Glance.

There was no Leg Slip. The ball trickled into the vacant Fine Leg area. They ran a single.

Score:9/1.

Vikram was on strike.

The spinner bowled again, aiming for the Off-Stump.

Vikram just padded it away.

The third ball, the spinner over-corrected. He aimed for the legs, trying to get the LBW.

Click.

Vikram's turn. Another soft, effortless Leg Glance. Another single.

Score: 10/1.

On the sideline, Raghav watched Rohan Sharma. The champion captain was at a loss.

His fast bowler was too angry to be effective.

His spinner was being "tapped" to death, one run at a time.

The python was being suffocated by its own prey.

Rohan was forced to change his field. He had to move a man from the Off-Side and place him at Deep Square Leg to stop the singles.

The moment he did it, Raghav grabbed Sarma's arm.

"He did it, Coach. He blinked."

Sarma nodded, a grim satisfaction on his face.

By moving that fielder, Rohan had just weakened his primary, Off-Side attacking field.

He had compromised his entire strategy... to stop a shot that shouldn't even be a threat.

The psychological war was over. Shanti Vidya Mandir School had won.

Now, all they had to do was win the actual game.

The "taps" continued. 11/1. 12/1. 14/1.

The scoreboard, which had been frozen for four overs, was now ticking over like a taxi meter. It was ugly. It was boring. It was infuriating for the Spring Dale team.

And it was the most beautiful thing Raghav Roi had ever seen.

(To be Continued)