

God of Cricket!

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The "taps" continued.

The scoreboard, which had been frozen on 4/1 for what felt like an eternity, had finally thawed. It was now a slow, agonizing crawl.

11/1.

12/1.

14/1.

Each run was a Leg Glance, a soft click of the bat, a jogged single. Each run was a papercut, bleeding the patience from the Spring Dale champions.

On the sideline, Raghav watched Rohan Sharma. The champion captain was a coiled spring of frustration.

He stalked behind the stumps, his gloves restlessly slapping his thighs. He had been forced to move a fielder from the Off-Side to Deep Square Leg, a concession that visibly infuriated him..

His premier fast bowler, Ashu, was finishing his over. He was breathing heavily, his anger spent, replaced by a sullen exhaustion.

He had thrown everything at Vikram—Bouncers, Yorkers, raw pace—and Vikram, though rattled, was still standing there. Ashu's last ball was a tired, Full-Length delivery on the stumps.

Vikram, his confidence now a hard, sharp shell, met it with a simple Forward Defensive Block. The ball died at his feet. The over ended.

"This is the moment," Raghav whispered, his good hand gripping his cast.

"He's tired. He's compromised his field. They have to see it."

Coach Sarma just grunted, his eyes locked on the pitch. "They see it. The question is, do they have the nerve to use it?"

The left-arm spinner came back on to bowl to Gourav.

Rohan Sharma, desperate to stop the Leg-Side "leak," brought his Mid-On fielder closer, almost to a Short Mid-On position.

The Off-Side, already weakened by the man moved to Deep Square Leg, now looked vast. The Cover fielder was cheat-stepping towards Extra Cover, trying to cover a gap the size of a bus.

The spinner tossed his first ball up. Good Length, on Middle Stump.

Gourav, his nerves settled, played the "tap." A single.

15/1.

The batsmen crossed. Vikram was now on strike.

Vikram surveyed the field. He saw the Deep Square Leg.

He saw the spinner. And then, he saw it. The gaping, undefended Off-Side.

It was the second half of Raghav's plan.

He wasn't just supposed to survive. He was supposed to punish.

The spinner tossed his second ball up. It was a classic, tempting delivery, drifting in, inviting the batsman to hit against the spin.

But it was on the Off-Stump.

The "old" Vikram, the one from the first over, would have blocked it. The "panicked" Vikram, the one who faced the bouncers, would have left it.

The "new" Vikram, the one who had survived, saw his moment.

His front foot moved, a smooth, confident stride. His head was still, his eye on the ball.

He didn't "tap."

He drove.

CRACK.

The sound was completely different. It wasn't the dull click of the Leg Glance. It was the sharp, sweet, resonant crack of a bat's middle.

The ball rocketed off the bat.

The Cover fielder, who had been cheating, dove. He was a foot short.

The Mid-Off fielder, who was too straight, dove. He was three feet short.

The ball, a white blur against the green, dissected the field with surgical precision. It was a shot of pure, unadulterated confidence. It was a shot that said, "The game has changed."

It raced to the boundary rope for four.

19/1.

A stunned silence fell over the Spring Dale team. Their entire, suffocating strategy—the Off-Side trap—had just been turned against them with contemptuous ease.

On the Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench, the players who had been sitting in tense, fearful silence, erupted.

They were on their feet, yelling, clapping.

"YES, VIKRAM! YES!"

"WHAT A SHOT!"

Rohan Sharma stood up. He tore his gloves off.

Raghav could show his anger. It wasn't in shouting. It was in the sudden, violent stillness that came over him.

He stood perfectly still, his back to the batsman, and just stared at the boundary where the ball had gone. He was calculating. He had been out-maneuvered, and now he was being humiliated.

"He's lost," Raghav breathed, his voice tight with a vicarious thrill. He felt his Intelligence Boost [SP: 165] begin to wane, its job done.

"He's completely lost. He has no answer."

Rohan had a choice.

Move the Deep Square Leg fielder back to Cover, which would re-open the "tap" on the Leg-Side.

Keep the Deep Square Leg fielder, and watch his Off-Side get torn apart.

He was trapped. Raghav and Sarma had created a pincer movement, and Rohan was stuck in the middle.

He chose to do nothing. He put his gloves back on, his face grim. He was betting, praying, that Vikram's shot was a fluke.

The spinner, his confidence now shattered, tossed his third ball up. He was visibly nervous. He tried to compensate, to bowl fuller, faster.

It was a Full Toss.

Vikram's eyes lit up. He didn't even think. He just hit it.

Another Cover Drive. Another CRACK. Another four.

23/1.

It was an unraveling. The Spring Dale champions, the "Surgeons," were coming apart at the seams.

Gourav, at the other end, caught the fever. When the spinner, in his panic, bowled a Short ball, Gourav rocked back and played a Square Cut through the Point region for another boundary.

27/1.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench was a party. Coach Sarma was allowing himself a small, grim nod of approval.

The score began to climb, the partnership solidifying from "survival" into "dominance."

32/1.

38/1.

45/1.

Vikram and Gourav were no longer just "tapping." They were playing real, expansive cricket shots.

The Off-Drive, the Square Cut, the Flick. They were touching gloves, smiling, their shoulders back.

They had broken the champions.

Vikram, his score now in the 20s, was feeling more than confident. He was feeling heroic. He was the captain who had faced the bouncer and hit back. He was the giant-slayer.

The fast bowler, Ashu, came back for a new spell. He looked exhausted and demoralized.

His first ball was fast, but it was a desperate, angry effort. He bowled it Short, but it was a bad Short ball—it sat up, begging to be hit.

Vikram, his eyes wide and adrenaline pumping, saw the ball. He wasn't thinking about "the plan" anymore. He was thinking about glory.

He rocked back, his entire body coiling, not for a defensive block, but for a magnificent, cinematic Pull Shot.

He wanted to send it over the boundary for six. He wanted to end them.

On the sideline, Raghav's stomach dropped.

"No," he whispered.

Vikram's movement was all power, no control. He was too early. The ball was a fraction slower than he anticipated.

He didn't hit it with the middle of the bat. He hit it with the top edge.

The ball went up.

And up.

And up.

It was a "skier," a tower of white against the blue.

A terrible, profound silence fell over the field.

Vikram, frozen, watched the ball he had just murdered.

Rohan Sharma, who had been brooding behind the stumps, ripped his helmet off.

"MINE!" he bellowed, his voice cracking with desperate authority.

He sprinted out, his eyes locked on the tiny white speck as it reached its apex.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench was silent. Raghav held his breath.

The ball hung in the air for one, two, three seconds.

Then it fell.

Rohan, his gloves outstretched, positioned himself under it. He wasn't a keeper; he was a safety net.

Thwack.

The ball settled into his gloves with a sickening, final sound.

He closed his gloves, stood up, and roared, not in celebration, but in a raw, animalistic release of all his pent-up frustration.

OUT

The umpire's finger went up.

Score : 45/2.

The partnership was broken. The hero was out.

Vikram stood at the crease, stunned. He looked at his bat, at the sky, at Rohan.

He had done all the hard work, survived the bouncers, broken the code... and thrown it all away on a single, arrogant, emotional swing.

He tucked his bat under his arm and began the long, agonizing walk back to the bench.

The Spring Dale team, dead just moments before, was alive. They were clapping, cheering, slapping their bowler on the back.

Rohan Sharma had his "in."

He tossed the ball to his bowler, a grim smile on his face. He walked back to the stumps, his eyes sweeping the Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench, looking for the next batsman.

His gaze fell on the number four batsman, who was nervously putting on his gloves.

The pressure was back. The fear, which had been vanquished, was creeping back in.

Raghav watched Vikram trudge off the field, his head low.

'He did his job,' Raghav thought, his own emotions a cold, analytical block. 'But he just showed them something. He showed them we can bleed.'

RSarma, his face like stone, just grabbed a water bottle and held it out for the next batsman.

"Don't," Sarma said, his voice a low command.

The batsman, a boy named Ajit, looked at him, confused. "Don't... what, Coach?"

Sarma's eyes were like ice.

"Don't be just a hero also try to be a wall."

...I mean a defender .

(To be Continued)

Chapter 32: The Semi-final Day Match [5]

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[Score: 45/2. Gourav: 11*, Ajit: 0*]

Vikram's bat clattered against the bench leg. He sat down hard, burying his face in his hands.

The brief, heroic high of his boundaries had evaporated, leaving the bitter taste of a foolish, emotional mistake.

On the field, Ajit, the new number four, was just arriving at the crease.

Raghav, on the sideline, watched him with an analyst's cold eye. He could show Ajit's fear. It was in the way he adjusted his thigh pad. The way he tapped the crease, tap-tap-tap, a nervous, rabbit-heart rhythm.

He looked up, his eyes wide, taking in the vast, silent stadium and the Spring Dale fielders, who were now buzzing like sharks that had tasted blood.

Rohan Sharma, back behind the stumps, was no longer the frustrated, out-thought captain. He was back in control. The frantic energy was gone, replaced by a cold, patient focus. He had his opening.

He signaled to his fast bowler, Ashu. The message was clear: Attack.

Ashu, still steaming from Vikram's earlier assault, was more than happy to oblige. He was at the end of his over, but he had three balls left to deliver to the new, terrified batsman.

[Ball 8.4] Ashu thundered in. He delivered a fast, searingly accurate ball on a Good Length, just outside the Off-Stump.

It was a classic "tester" ball.

Ajit, his mind a white fog of panic, barely saw it. He just reacted, bringing his bat down in a clumsy, vertical Block.

The ball hit the shoulder of the bat and dropped, harmlessly, at his feet.

The Slip cordon groaned. "He's scared!"

[Ball 8.5] Ashu, smelling blood, dug the next one in Short. A Bouncer, aimed right at the grille.

Ajit wasn't Vikram. He didn't have the arrogance to Pull. He just collapsed, his knees giving way, ducking so low his helmet almost touched the ground. The ball whistled over him.

THWACK.

Rohan caught it with a contemptuous sneer. "No stomach for it, boys!"

[Ball 8.6] The final ball of the over. Ashu, seeing Ajit was weak on the back foot, went full. A fast Yorker, aimed at the toes.

Ajit, expecting another Bouncer, was too late. He just jammed his bat down.

CLACK.

The vibration rattled his teeth, but he had kept it out. He had survived.

The over ended.

[Score: 45/2. Gourav: 11*, Ajit: 0*]

Ajit, his legs feeling like jelly, made the walk to the non-striker's end. Gourav, who had been the "support" batsman for Vikram, now had to be the senior partner.

"Breathe," Gourav said, his voice tight. "Just... breathe. Forget them. Just watch the ball."

Ajit just nodded, his throat too dry to speak. He was remembering Coach Sarma's words.

'Don't be a hero. Be a wall.'

A wall doesn't hit back. A wall doesn't get scared. A wall just... stands.

He repeated it, a mantra in his head. Be a wall. Be a wall.

Rohan, seeing his fast bowler was spent, took him off. He brought back his left-arm spinner. It was time for the squeeze.

He also made a field change. The "tap" shot that Vikram had used? Rohan wasn't going to be fooled again.

He moved a fielder into a permanent Leg Slip position.

The "easy" run was gone.

Raghav, on the sideline, saw it instantly.

"He's adapted," Raghav said to Sarma. "He's plugging the Leg-Side."

"Good," Sarma grunted. "Makes him weaker somewhere else. They just have to find it."

But Gourav and Ajit weren't looking for gaps. They were looking for survival.

The spinner began.

[Ball 9.1] A flighted, looping ball. Gourav, who was now the set batsman, pushed it to Cover. No run.

[Ball 9.2] Another. Gourav blocked.

...

[Ball 9.6] The entire over was a maiden. The pressure was building again.

[Score: 45/2. Gourav: 11*, Ajit: 0*]

The next over, from a new medium-pace bowler, was the same.

Ajit was on strike.

[Ball 10.1] Good Length, on Off-Stump. Ajit, his mantra echoing, played a perfect Forward Defensive Block.

[Ball 10.2] Same ball. Ajit blocked.

[Ball 10.3] The bowler, frustrated, tried a Yorker. Ajit blocked.

He was a wall. It was ugly. It was boring. It was excruciating to watch.

And it was exactly what his team needed.

On the fourth ball, the bowler, desperate, strayed onto Ajit's pads.

[Ball 10.4] Ajit, his confidence growing by the second, didn't try the "tap."

He just nudged it, a simple, soft push into the Mid-Wicket gap.

They ran. A single.

Ajit was off the mark.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench clapped, not with the wild joy of a boundary, but with the grim, respectful applause for a soldier who had won a small, vital trench.

[Score: 46/2. Gourav: 11*, Ajit: 1*]

And so, the game found its new rhythm. The "grind."

The partnership, built not on flash but on pure, stubborn grit, began to form.

Gourav, seeing Ajit's resolve, settled down. He was the aggressor, but he was a smart aggressor. He waited for the bad ball.

The score crawled.

50/2 (in the 13th over).

55/2 (in the 14th).

Rohan Sharma was getting agitated. This wasn't in his script.

The weaker team was supposed to collapse after the hero got out. They weren't collapsing.

They were... blocking.

He urged his spinner to be more aggressive, to flight the ball, to tempt them.

The spinner, trying to buy a wicket, bowled one Short.

[Ball 14.3] It was a terrible ball. Short, wide, and slow.

Gourav's eyes lit up. He rocked back, his feet moving into position, and unleashed a furious Cut Shot.

CRACK!

The ball flew past the Point fielder before he could even move. Four runs.

The first boundary in nearly six overs.

Raghav let out a sharp "Yes!" from the sideline.

[Score: 62/2. Gourav: 21*, Ajit: 5*]

The partnership was now over 30 runs. They were rebuilding. They were taking Shanti Vidya Mandir School to a place of respectability.

Gourav was playing with maturity, punishing the bad ball, respecting the good.

Ajit was an immovable object, blocking everything, and nudging a single whenever the ball strayed onto his legs.

The score climbed.

71/2.

78/2.

They were heading into the 18th over. Only three overs left. Rohan Sharma was running out of time.

He had to break this partnership.

He made his last, desperate move. He brought his ace, Ashu, back on for his final over.

"This is it, Ashu! Everything you've got!" he yelled.

Rohan was a "textbook" captain. And the textbook said: when you need a wicket, you set an attacking field.

He packed the Off-Side. A Gully. Two Slips. A Point. A Cover.

He was daring them. "Try to score," the field placement screamed. "I dare you."

Raghav saw it. "He's suffocating them. He's setting the classic Off-Side trap."

Ashu, finding his last reserve of energy, ran in. He was bowling to Gourav, the set batsman.

[Ball 17.1] Fast, Good Length, on the Off-Stump corridor.

Gourav, his discipline absolute, let it go.

[Ball 17.2] Same ball. A perfect copy. Gourav let it go.

[Ball 17.3] Ashu, frustrated, pitched it up, fuller, trying to get the Drive. Gourav, his feet firmly planted, Blocked it.

The pressure was immense. A maiden over at this stage would be a victory for SDI.

[Ball 17.4] Ashu pulled his length back. Not a Bouncer. Not Good Length. It was the trap ball. Short-of-a-Good-Length, just wide enough of Off-Stump to be tempting.

It was designed to look like the Cut Shot Gourav had hit for four.

But it was too close to his body. It would cramp him.

Gourav's eyes lit up. He saw the width. He saw the boundary. He remembered the crack of his last four.

He took the bait.

He went for the Cut Shot.

But just as Raghav had seen in his mind, he was cramped. He was trying to hit a ball that wasn't there to be hit.

Snick.

A thin, fatal Outside Edge.

The ball flew, fast and low, to Rohan Sharma.

Rohan, who had been waiting for this exact, pre-planned mistake, moved to his right.

His gloves were soft. The ball nestled in. He was up, roaring, before the umpire's finger was even raised.

[Score: 78/3. Gourav: 32. Ajit: 8*]

The partnership was broken. Gourav, the senior batsman, was out.

He walked off, slamming his bat against his pad, furious at his own impatience.

A new batsman, Sunil, was walking in.

And Spring Dale was alive.

[Ball 17.5] Ashu bowled to the new batsman. Sunil, his nerves shot, swung wildly. He missed.

[Ball 17.6] Ashu bowled a Yorker. Sunil just managed to get his bat down. A dot ball. The over ended.

[Score: 78/3. Ajit: 8*]

Rohan, a ruthless tactician, took his spinner on.

[Ball 18.1] Spinner to Sunil. A flighted, tempting ball. Sunil was new, he wanted to be the hero. He ran down the pitch, swinging for the stands.

He missed. Completely.

The ball turned, sailed past his wild swing, and...

Clack.

It hit the Middle Stump.

He was Bowled.

[Score: 79/4. Ajit: 8*]

It was a collapse. The Shanti Vidya Mandir School bench was silent.

[Ball 18.2] New batsman, Rakesh. He blocked

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[Ball 18.3] Rakesh tried to sweep. He missed. LBW appeal. Not out.

[Ball 18.4] Rakesh, in a panic, pushed the ball to Cover and ran. A suicidal single.

Rohan threw the ball, but the throw was wide.

[Score: 80/4. Ajit: 9*]

Ajit was back on strike. The "Wall."

He blocked the last two balls of the over.

Now, only the 20th and final over remained. Ashu, the fast bowler, was back.

[Score: 80/4. Ajit: 9*]

Ajit was batting with the tail-enders. He knew he had to do something.

[Ball 19.1] Ashu ran in, tired but still fast. He bowled a Full Toss, a mistake.

Ajit's eyes lit up.

He swung. He wasn't a hero, but he was a survivor.

He swung with all his might.

He got a thick Outside Edge.

The ball flew, high and ugly, over the Slip cordon. It wasn't pretty.

It wasn't a "shot."

But it was four runs.

[Score: 84/4. Ajit: 13*]

[Ball 19.2] Ashu, furious, bowled a Bouncer. Ajit ducked.

[Ball 19.3] Ashu bowled a Yorker. Ajit blocked.

[Ball 19.4] Ajit, seeing the Mid-On was back, nudged the ball and ran a hard single.

[Score: 85/4. Ajit: 14*]

The tail-ender, Rakesh, was on strike.

[Ball 19.5] Ashu bowled. Rakesh swung. He was bowled.

[Score: 85/5. Ajit: 14*]

[Ball 19.6] The last ball of the innings. The new batsman scrambled a single.

[Innings End. Score: 86/5. Ajit: 14*]

The team walked off the field. The total was 86 runs. It felt impossibly small. In 20 overs, it was a run rate of just 4.3.

The players were silent, dejected. They avoided eye contact. They had survived, but they hadn't won.

Raghav, his cast heavy, stood by the boundary.

Coach Sarma waited for the last player, Ajit, to walk off.

Ajit, his face caked in sweat and dirt, looked at the coach, expecting to be yelled at.

Sarma just put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You were a wall, son. Good work."

The team gathered in a tight, nervous circle on the grass.

"That's it?" one of the bowlers whispered. "86? They'll get that in 10 overs."

Coach Sarma's shadow fell over them. He looked at their downcast faces.

"They are the champions," he said, his voice a low growl. "They are the 'Surgeons.' And you made them ugly. You made them angry. You made them panic."

He kicked the dirt.

"86 is not a score. It is a fight. It is what you earned with blood and patience. It's a statement that says we will not lie down."

He looked at his bowlers.

"They think this is over. They think the hard part is done. They are relaxed. They are arrogant."

He leaned in, his eyes burning.

"Do not let them breathe. 86 runs... is more than enough."

(To be Continued)

Chapter 33: The Semi-final Day Match [6]

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The ten-minute innings break felt charged with a strange, reversed energy.

On the Spring Dale side, there was a casual, relaxed air.

Their players lounged on the grass, laughing and sharing jokes.

Their two openers, Captain Rohan Sharma and his partner Sameer, padded up with the unhurried ease of men heading for a routine net session. The chase was a formality.

On the Shanti Vidya Mandir School side, there was a tense, coiled silence.

The players sat in a tight semi-circle on the ground, gulping water, their knuckles white on their bottles.

They were showing their exhaustion and their nerves. Coach Sarma didn't sit. He paced in front of them, his shadow falling over each player like a judge.

Raghav, his arm throbbing in its plaster cast, stood beside him.

His Intelligence Boost had long since faded, leaving him with the cold, analytical 25 points of his base Cricket IQ. He was scanning the relaxed SDI batsmen, his mind racing.

'They are arrogant,' he thought. 'They think 86 is a gift. They're not expecting a war.'

Sarma stopped his pacing. The team looked up.

"Listen," he growled, his voice low and guttural.

"86 is not a score. It is a fortress. Every single run they take, they must bleed for. I want fielders so close they can smell what that batsman had for breakfast."

He pointed to his chest. "I want noise. I want pressure. Every block, every leave, I want you to cheer like it's a wicket. Do not let them breathe. Do not let them get comfortable."

He jabbed a finger at his lankiest bowler.

"Parag. You have the ball. You are not a bowler. You are a sniper. You have one job: find the crack."

The umpire called for the teams. The Shanti Vidya Mandir School players rose, their faces grim but set with a new, hard resolve. They ran onto the field, not with a jog, but with a sprint.

Rohan and Sameer, watching them, shared an amused smirk. 'How cute,' their expressions said. 'They're trying.'

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team formed a tight, desperate huddle.

"For the school!" Vikram, his voice hoarse, yelled. "For the fight!"

"FIGHT!" they roared, the sound echoing in the mostly empty stadium.

They broke and sprinted to their positions. The field Sarma had set was hyper-aggressive. Two Slips, a Gully, a Short Leg.

They were hunting.

Rohan Sharma took his stance. He was relaxed, his shoulders loose.

[Score: 0/0. Target: 87]

Parag, a tall, awkward medium-pacer who relied on movement, held the ball. He was nervous.

[Ball 0.1] Parag ran in. His first ball was a "loosener." Full-Length and so wide outside the Off-Stump that Rohan didn't even flinch. He just watched it, a look of almost bored contempt on his face, as it went through to the keeper.

The keeper, Rohan (the other Rohan, Don Bosco's keeper), fired the ball back, hissing "Good ball, Parag! Good pressure!"

[Ball 0.2] Parag found his line. A perfect Good Length delivery, on the Off-Stump corridor. Rohan Sharma, the "batsman," played an equally perfect, "textbook" Forward Defensive Block.

The ball hit the middle of his bat and dropped dead at his feet. It was a statement of superiority.

[Ball 0.3] Parag pitched it up, Fuller, trying to entice the Drive. Rohan, a master of the "textbook" himself, played a beautiful, flowing Cover Drive.

He didn't hit it hard. He just "placed" it, expecting an easy single to get off the mark.

But the Cover fielder, Ajit—the "Wall"—remembered Sarma's words.

Bleed for it.

He threw himself, a full-length, desperate sprawl to his right, his body skidding on the perfect grass.

He got a hand to it, stopping the ball just a few feet away. No run.

A huge "WOAAAAH!" erupted from the Shanti Vidya Mandir School field.

Rohan, who was already halfway down the pitch for his casual single, had to stop, turn, and scramble back.

He glared at Ajit, his rhythm broken. He was annoyed. The formality was being interrupted.

[Ball 0.4] Parag, inspired by the fielding, delivered another good ball. Rohan blocked.

[Ball 0.5] Parag again. Rohan, getting impatient, tried to force a run. He pushed the ball firmly towards Mid-On and took a step. Gourav, at Mid-

On, sprinted in, his head down, and attacked the ball. "NO!" Rohan yelled, sending his partner Sameer scrambling back. No run.

The pressure was on.

[Ball 0.6] Parag, growing in confidence, saved his best ball for last. He ran in, his long arm coming over the top.

He delivered a Good Length ball, on the Off-Stump, but this one... this one seamed away at the last possible second.

Rohan, forced to play, pushed at it. The ball beat his edge.

Whoosh.

THWACK.

It slammed into the keeper's gloves.

[End of Over: Maiden. Score: 0/0. Target: 87]

A maiden over. The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team was electric. They clapped, they shouted, they converged on Parag, patting his back. "YES, PARAG! THAT'S THE LINE!"

The Spring Dale dugout, which had been laughing, was now quiet. Rohan Sharma, walking to the non-striker's end, was not smiling.

On the sideline, Raghav watched Rohan's feet. He had seen it.

On the Forward Defensive blocks, Rohan's front foot was perfect. But on the ball he left (0.1) and the ball that beat him (0.6), his front foot was lazy. It was planted.

'He's a "plant and drive" batsman,' Raghav thought, his mind latching onto the detail.
'He trusts his hands, not his feet.'

He hates the ball that makes him guess. He's vulnerable to the one that moves away.'

This was the crack

The second over began. Coach Sarma brought on his little left-arm spinner, Sunil, from the other end.

[Ball 1.1] Sunil, nervous, bowled to the new batsman, Sameer. Sameer, seeing the pressure on his captain, wanted to be the hero.

He took a big step and Slogged the first ball, a crude, powerful heave over Mid-Wicket. It was ugly, but it was in the gap. They ran hard. Two runs.

[Score: 2/0. Target: 85]

[Ball 1.2] Sameer tried the exact same shot. This time, the ball turned, beat his wild swing, and just missed the Off-Stump.

"Aaaah!" the keeper screamed.

[Ball 1.3] Sameer, rattled, just blocked.

[Ball 1.4] He pushed a nervous single to Cover.

[Score: 3/0. Target: 84]

Rohan was back on strike.

Raghav, his cast forgotten, sprinted down the sideline to the Cover fielder, Ajit.

"Ajit! AJIT!"

Ajit looked over.

"Tell the keeper! Tell Parag! His front foot! It's planted! Make him drive at the one that leaves him! Outswinger! Tell him!"

Ajit, understanding, waited until the over ended. While the fielders were changing, he sprinted to his keeper, Rohan, and relayed the message.

The keeper subtly tapped his own helmet, then signaled to Parag, who was at Mid-Off. Parag, seeing the signal, gave a curt, almost imperceptible nod.

The message was delivered.

[Score: 3/0. Target: 84. (End of Over 2)]

Parag had the ball for his second over. He was bowling to Sameer.

[Ball 2.1] Parag, his confidence high, ran in. He bowled a simple Inswinger. Sameer, still in Slog mode, just tapped it to Mid-Wicket for a single.

[Score: 4/0. Target: 83]

Rohan Sharma was on strike.

This was it.

The field was set. Two Slips. A Gully. An attacking Cover-Point.

Raghav held his breath. Parag had the message. He knew the plan.

[Ball 2.2] Parag ran in. He bowled Good Length, on that perfect, tight Fourth Stump line, forcing Rohan to make a decision.

The ball seamed in. Rohan, his front foot planted, just angled his bat and blocked it. Solid.

[Ball 2.3] Parag delivered the exact same ball. Good Length, Fourth Stump line, seaming in. Rohan, disdainful, blocked it again.

He was showing Parag that this line didn't threaten him.

[Ball 2.4] This was the one. Parag thundered in. His arm action was identical.

The ball was aimed at the identical spot. It was pitched just a fraction fuller. It was the Drive ball. It was the "sucker" ball.

Rohan's eyes lit up. He saw the Full ball. His front foot planted, his body coiled, ready to execute the same textbook Cover Drive he had played in the first over.

But Parag, his lanky frame uncoiling, snapped his wrist.

The ball, disguised perfectly, was not the Inswinger.

It was the Outswinger.

It pitched on Middle-and-Off, looked for all the world like it was coming in with the angle, and then, at the last second, it seamed away.

Rohan, his front foot planted like a statue, was committed. His hands, his hips, his shoulders... all were moving into the Cover Drive for a ball that was no longer there.

He couldn't stop. He pushed.

Snick.

The sound was tiny, sharp, and absolutely fatal.

A thin, perfect Outside Edge.

The ball flew, fast and low, to the right of the First Slip.

But Coach Sarma had two Slips.

The ball rocketed straight to Gourav at Second Slip.

It came fast. Gourav, his reflexes sharp, got his hands up.

FUMBLE!

The ball hit his palms and shot up into the air, spinning.

A collective gasp of horror from the Shanti Vidya Mandir School team.

Rohan Sharma, his life flashing before his eyes, started to turn to get back in his crease.

But Vikram, at First Slip position on the field, his captain's instincts screaming, had already moved.

He saw the fumble. He saw the ball pop up.

He threw himself.

He dove, his body parallel to the ground, his right arm outstretched, a desperate, horizontal lunge.

He snagged the rebound, his gloved hand closing around the ball just inches before it hit the sacred grass.

He rolled, and came up holding the ball aloft.

"WICKET!"

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team exploded. They didn't just cheer; they screamed.

They dogpiled Vikram, who was roaring from the ground. Parag was on his knees, his arms to the sky, a prayer of thanks on his lips.

The umpire's finger was up.

[Score: 4/1. Target: 83]

Rohan Sharma, the "batsman," the champion captain, was out.

He just stood there. He looked at his bat. He looked at the celebrating mob. He looked at the umpire, his face a mask of disbelief.

His fortress of arrogance had been breached.

On the sideline, Raghav allowed himself a single, hard pump of his good left arm.

He looked at Coach Sarma. The coach's face was stone, but his eyes were on fire.

The SDI dugout was a graveyard. The laughter was gone.

The "formality" was now a dogfight.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 34: The Semi-final Day Match [7]

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The roar from the Shanti Vidya Mandir School team was a primal, collective scream.

It was the sound of disbelief turning into fact. Vikram was at the bottom of a pile of bodies, his hand—the hand that had snagged the rebound—clutched tight, the ball held aloft like a trophy.

Parag was on his knees, his face buried in the grass.

[Score: 4/1. Target: 87. Overs: 2.4]

Rohan Sharma, the "batsman," did not move. He stood at the crease in a bubble of profound, ringing silence.

The world had narrowed to the 22-yard strip. He looked at the celebrating mob. He looked at his bat, as if it had personally betrayed him.

He looked at the umpire, whose finger was still pointing to the sky, an unmoving monument to his failure.

He had been exposed.

He had been hunted.

And he had been taken down.

Slowly, deliberately, he tucked his bat under his arm. He began his walk.

It was the longest walk of his young life.

He didn't run. He didn't look at his dugout. He kept his eyes on the grass.

The cheers of the Shanti Vidya Mandir School fielders were a physical weight, pressing him down.

Raghav, standing on the boundary line, watched him. He could show Rohan's fury. It was in the whiteness of his knuckles as he gripped his bat.

It was in the rigid set of his shoulders. It was in the way he stepped over the boundary rope, not on it, as if it were a contamination.

He reached the bench. His teammates, who had been laughing just ten minutes prior, were now silent, their faces pale.

They looked at him, their fallen god, with a new, unsettling emotion: fear.

Rohan didn't look at them. He sat down, a good five feet away from everyone else.

He ripped his helmet off, his hair matted with sweat.

And then, in a single, vicious movement, he tore his batting pads off.

RRRIIP. RRRIIP.

The sound of the velcro tearing in the quiet dugout was like a scream. He threw the pads to the ground. He had been beaten by a plan. Beaten by a bunch of state-school nobodies. Beaten by a boy with one arm.

He sat there, his face like stone, and just... stared... at the field, a cold, patient fury radiating from him. The formality was over. This was a war.

"COME ON, BOYS! ONE BRINGS TWO!" Vikram roared, his voice raw as he got back into his First Slip position.

"HE'S SCARED! THEY'RE ALL SCARED!"

The new batsman, Karan, was walking out. The walk from the pavilion to the crease felt like a mile. He was the number three, the "anchor" of the team.

He was supposed to be the calm one.

But he was showing his terror. His bat trembled in his grip.

His walk was a stiff, robotic march. He arrived at the crease, his eyes wide, and avoided making eye contact with the keeper, who was hissing like a snake.

"Good ball, Parag... good ball... he's shaking..."

Sameer, the non-striker, walked down the pitch. He looked rattled himself. "Karan," he whispered, "Just... just survive the over. Watch the ball. Forget them."

Karan just gave a jerky, noncommittal nod. He took his guard.

Tap. Tap. Tap. A nervous, frantic rhythm.

Parag was at the top of his mark. He was a god. The ball felt like a perfectly balanced weapon in his hand. He had tasted blood, and he wanted more. He had two balls left in his over.

Coach Sarma, on the sideline, cupped his hands.

"TIGHT, PARAG! TIGHT LINE! ON HIS TOES!"

[Ball 2.5] Parag thundered in. He was aiming for the kill shot. The same Good Length ball, the same line, the same Outswinger. He wanted to end this.

But he was too pumped. His adrenaline was surging, making him rush.

He over-pitched.

It was a Half-Volley on the Off-Stump. A gift.

Karan, the new batsman, was a bundle of raw, terrified reflex. He saw the full ball and did what he was trained to do: he Drove.

It was a stiff, panicked, jerky Drive. His feet didn't move. It was all arms.

He didn't hit it cleanly.

He hit it in the air.

The ball looped, almost in slow motion, in a gentle arc towards the Cover fielder.

It was Ajit. The "Wall."

Raghav's heart stopped. 'This is it! Two wickets! The game!'

Ajit's eyes were as wide as dinner plates. He saw the ball coming. This was his moment.

He was a "Wall," not a "Cat."

He lunged. A desperate, clumsy, two-handed dive.

The ball hit his outstretched fingertips.

And dropped.

It bounced, mockingly, on the perfect green grass.

A collective, agonizing groan erupted from the Shanti Vidya Mandir School team. Parag put his head in his hands.

Vikram slammed his fist into his own thigh.

Karan and Sameer, their hearts stopping, saw the drop. They scrambled, a panicked, desperate single.

Rohan Sharma, on the sideline, slammed his open palm onto the bench. A chance. They had been given a chance.

[Score: 5/1. Target: 82. Overs: 2.5]

Karan was off the mark. He had survived. He was breathing in huge, shuddering gasps.

Sameer was back on strike.

[Ball 2.6] Parag, furious at himself, furious at Ajit, lost his composure. He dug the last ball in Short and fast, a spiteful, angry Bouncer that sailed harmlessly over Sameer's head.

The over was done.

A monumental over. One run. One wicket. One dropped catch.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team's elation was now tainted with the bitter taste of a missed opportunity.

"IT'S ALRIGHT! IT'S ALRIGHT!" Vikram yelled, his voice sounding a little less confident.

"KEEP THE PRESSURE! HE'S STILL NERVOUS!"

Coach Sarma brought his left-arm spinner, Sunil, back on.

The SDI batsmen, Sameer and Karan, had just been given a reprieve. The shock of Rohan's wicket was still there, but the immediate threat of a total collapse had passed.

Now, the "Batsman " did what made them champions.

They didn't panic. They didn't counter-attack.

They were absorbed.

[Ball 3.1] Sunil tossed a looping ball to Sameer. The "old" Sameer, the slogger, would have tried to hit it to the parking lot.

The "new" Sameer, the one who had seen his captain fall, played a perfect, "textbook" Forward Defensive Block.

[Ball 3.2] Sunil again. Sameer blocked.

[Ball 3.3] Sunil, trying to tempt him, tossed it wider. Sameer just padded it away.

The entire over was a display of pure, negative, defensive discipline. They were not trying to score. They were trying to heal.

[Ball 3.6] Sunil's last ball. Sameer just nudged it to Square Leg. No run. A maiden over.

[Score: 5/1. Target: 82. Overs: 4.0]

Parag came on for his third over.

[Ball 4.1] He bowled his Outswinger again. Karan, his nerves settling, just watched it go by.

[Ball 4.2] Good Length, on the stumps. Karan blocked.

[Ball 4.3] Full-Length. Karan blocked.

The game, which had been a chaotic, adrenaline-fueled knife fight, had suddenly become a slow, agonizing chess match.

This was the "grind," but it was a defensive grind.

The score did not move.

5/1.

5/1.

Raghav, on the sideline, felt a cold knot in his stomach. The Intelligence Boost was long gone, but he could see the new strategy.

"They're not trying to win, Coach," he said, his voice low.

Sarma, who was pacing, stopped. "What?"

"They're not trying to score.

They're trying to survive. They're waiting for Parag to finish his spell. They're waiting for us to get tired. They're trying to bore us to death."

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School fielders were still energetic, but their chirping was becoming forced. "Come on, boys... something's gonna happen..."

Nothing was happening.

[Over 5.0. Score: 6/1. Target: 81] (A single was nudged).

[Over 6.0. Score: 7/1. Target: 80] (Another single).

The champions were absorbing the punch. They were weathering the storm. They had given Shanti Vidya Mandir School their adrenaline dump, and now they were just... waiting.

They were taking the 87-run chase and turning it into a 5-hour Test match.

Parag finished his fourth over. He was breathing hard. The fire was gone, replaced by the frustration of bowling to a brick wall.

Sarma had to rest him.

He signaled for a new bowler. A medium-pacer.

The moment Parag was taken off, Sameer, at the non-striker's end, looked at Karan. He gave a single, hard nod.

The storm was over.

The new bowler, his arm not as fast, his line not as threatening, ran in.

[Ball 6.1] He delivered a Good Length ball.

Karan, who had been a wall, suddenly came to life. His front foot moved, and he drove the ball firmly, past the Mid-On fielder. They ran, not in panic, but a smooth, easy single.

[Score: 8/1. Target: 79]

[Ball 6.2] The bowler, nervous, delivered to Sameer.

Sameer, who had been blocking, now stepped out and punched the ball through Cover.

CRACK.

It wasn't a "tap." It was a shot.

Ajit dove, but this time it was too far. The ball raced to the boundary.

Four runs.

[Score: 12/1. Target: 75]

On the sideline, Rohan Sharma finally allowed himself to nod. The panic was over. The counter-attack had begun.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team, their shoulders suddenly slumped, looked at each other.

The fortress, which had seemed so strong just moments ago, was already starting to crumble.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 35: The Semi-final Day Match [8]

Chapter 35: The Semi-final Day Match [8]

[Score: 12/1. Target: 75. Overs: 6.0]

The boundary from Sameer had an effect on the Shanti Vidya Mandir School team that was far greater than just four runs. It was a psychological blow. It was the sound of the champions, the "Batsman," picking up their scalpels.

The nervous energy that had fueled Parag's opening spell and Vikram's miracle catch was gone. The adrenaline dump was over.

Now, all that was left was the cold, hard math.

75 more runs to get. 14 overs to do it.

It felt like an ocean.

On the sideline, Raghav felt the team's spirit deflate. He didn't need a system to tell him. He could see it.

Vikram, at First Slip, was no longer crouched on his toes, hissing encouragement.

He was standing almost upright, his hands on his hips. Ajit, the "Wall," looked exhausted, his shoulders slumped.

The energetic "chirping" that had filled the air just moments ago had died, replaced by a tense, professional silence.

"This is bad, Coach," Raghav said, his voice quiet.

Sarma didn't reply. He was pacing, a caged tiger, his jaw muscle jumping.

He knew his team's one great weapon—raw, chaotic belief—was fading.

"They're not fighting anymore," Raghav continued. "They're just... playing."

And against the Spring Dale "Batsman," just "playing" was a death sentence.

The new medium-pace bowler, whose name was Amar, ran in again. He was a 'stock' bowler, meant to keep things tidy. But he wasn't Parag.

He didn't have the swing, the angle, or the venom.

[Ball 6.3] Amar delivered a simple, Good Length ball.

Karan, the number three, who had been a trembling wall, now played a smooth, confident Forward Defensive Block.

[Ball 6.4] Amar, trying to compensate, bowled a fraction Fuller.

Karan, his head still, his front foot moving into a perfect line, just punched the ball. It wasn't a Drive, it was a Punch. He used the bowler's pace.

The ball rocketed past the stunned Mid-Off fielder.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 16/1. Target: 71. Overs: 6.4]

It was an effortless, clinical shot. The kind of shot that breaks a fielding team's heart. It showed that the batsmen were no longer "surviving." They were "batting."

The left-arm spinner, Sunil, came on from the other end.

[Ball 7.1] He tossed his first ball up, inviting the Slog-Sweep that Sameer had tried earlier.

Sameer, who had learned his lesson, just calmly pushed it to Long-On for a single.

[Score: 17/1. Target: 70. Overs: 7.1]

[Ball 7.2] Sunil bowled to Karan. Karan nudged it to Square Leg for another easy single.

[Score: 18/1. Target: 69. Overs: 7.2]

There was no risk. There was no panic. They were just... accumulating. They were dissecting the field. Every time Sarma plugged a gap, they'd find another. Every time a bowler missed his line by an inch, they'd take a run.

It was a slow, methodical, boring squeeze.

And it was absolutely lethal.

Raghav watched as the score ticked over.

21/1.

25/1.

29/1.

The partnership was now over 25 runs. The Shanti Vidya Mandir School players were just going through the motions.

Rohan Sharma, sitting on the SDI bench, was now calmly sipping water, his face unreadable. His job was done. His team was on autopilot.

"They're toying with us," Vikram spat, kicking the grass.

Coach Sarma had to act. His team was dying on their feet.

"Parag!" he shouted.

Parag, who was at Fine Leg trying to catch his breath, looked up, surprised.

"Get the ball. Now."

It was a desperate move. Parag had bowled his fiery opening spell. Bringing him back now, in the 10th over, was a full-on gamble. He was tired. His "X-Factor" swing was likely gone.

But he was the only one who had taken a wicket. He was the only one they feared.

Parag, his face grim, took the ball. He knew what this was. A last stand.

[Score: 30/1. Target: 57. Overs: 9.0]

Karan was on strike. He looked at Parag, his eyes narrow. He and Sameer had been waiting for this. They knew Sarma's hand.

[Ball 9.1] Parag ran in, his long arms pumping, trying to find that last reserve of energy. He delivered his Outswinger, the "miracle ball" that had taken Rohan.

But he was tired. His arm was a fraction slower. The ball didn't "zip" off the pitch. It curved.

Karan saw it. He saw the swing early. He just calmly, disdainfully, let it go.

[Ball 9.2] Parag, frustrated, ran in again. He put everything into it. A Good Length ball, on the stumps.

Karan just blocked it. Dead.

[Ball 9.3] Parag dug it in Short.

Karan just ducked.

The SDI batsmen had a plan: See off Parag. Neuter the threat. The other bowlers can't hurt us.

[Ball 9.4] Parag, his lungs burning, delivered another Good Length ball. Karan blocked.

[Ball 9.5] He tried the Outswinger again. Karan let it go.

[Ball 9.6] The last ball. Parag was visibly exhausted. Karan just blocked it.

A maiden over.

But it was a hollow maiden. Parag had thrown his last bullets, and the champions had just stood there and let them bounce off. He hadn't beaten the bat. He hadn't created a chance. He had just... bowled.

[Score: 30/1. Target: 57. Overs: 10.0]

Parag finished his over, his shoulders slumped. He was done. The team knew it.

Coach Sarma knew it.

The "Batsman " knew it.

As Parag walked to his fielding position, Sameer, the non-striker, gave Karan a tap on the helmet. "Well played. He's finished."

The last member of hope for Shanti Vidya Mandir School seemed to die right there.

The score was 30/1. They needed 57 runs from 10 overs. For a team of this caliber, it was a simple walk in the park.

The fielders' heads dropped. The silence was deafening.

Vikram tried to rally them. "Come on, boys! One more wicket! We can do this!"

But his voice was hollow. Raghav could see the lie. Vikram's eyes were dead. He didn't believe it. And because he didn't believe it, no one else did.

Sunil, the left-arm spinner, came on to bowl the 11th over. He felt hopelessness.

[Ball 10.1] He tossed a ball up, a defeated, listless delivery.

Sameer's eyes lit up. The threat was gone. The chase was on.

He skipped down the track, his feet moving like a dancer's, and met the ball on the Full Toss.

CRACK!

He launched it, a high, soaring arc over Mid-Wicket. It was a shot of pure, arrogant dominance.

The ball sailed... and sailed... and sailed.

It cleared the boundary rope by twenty yards.

SIX RUNS.

[Score: 36/1. Target: 51. Overs: 10.1]

It was a statement. A nail in the coffin.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School players just stared, their faces blank.

[Ball 10.2] Sunil, his confidence shattered, bowled a Short, panicked ball, trying to "fire it in."

Sameer rocked back and pulled it, hard, into the Square Leg gap. Another boundary.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 40/1. Target: 47. Overs: 10.2]

Ten runs in two balls. The game was over. It was now just a matter of time.

[Ball 10.3] Sameer, his blood up, his score now in the 30s, got too arrogant. He was showing his dominance. He wanted to finish this.

Sunil tossed another ball up. Sameer went for the kill.

He went down on one knee for a massive, pre-meditated Slog-Sweep. He was trying to hit it for another six.

But he was too early.

The ball, which he hadn't seen, dipped. It beat his wild, swinging bat.

It missed the bat completely.

THWACK.

The ball slammed hard into his back pad, dead in front of Middle Stump.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team, dead just a second ago, came to life.

"HOWZAT!"

The keeper, Rohan, was screaming. Sunil was on his knees, his arm in the air. Vikram was roaring.

It was plumb. It was the most obvious LBW (Leg Before Wicket) Raghav had ever seen.

Sameer, frozen in his "slog" position, didn't even turn around.

A dead silence fell on the field.

The umpire, who had been watching the "Batsman " dominate, raised his hand to his hat. He adjusted it.

He looked at the bowler.

He looked at the batsman.

And slowly... agonizingly... he shook his head.

"Not out."

The umpire's arm did not move.

"Not out."

The words, spoken quietly, were a nuclear detonation on the field.

Sunil, the left-arm spinner, who was on his knees appealing, simply froze.

His arm, raised in celebration, stayed in the air for a second, a statue of disbelief, before falling limp at his side.

Vikram, at First Slip, who had roared "HOWZAT!" with the rest, just stood with his mouth open. He stared at the umpire, his face a mask of utter bewilderment.

"What?" he whispered, the sound audible in the sudden, terrible silence. "Sir, it was... it was plumb!"

The umpire, his face an impassive mask, just turned and adjusted the bails on the stumps.

"Play the game, kids"

On the sideline, Raghav's good hand clenched his chest. He didn't need a system. He didn't need 200 IQ. He was 42 years old, and he knew what he had just seen.

He had seen a team of champions, a dynasty, call in a favor. He had seen the invisible weight of reputation and politics press down on an official and crush him.

The decision was not just wrong. It was corrupt.

Coach Sarma, who had been pacing, stopped. He didn't yell. He didn't curse. He did something far worse.

He turned his back to the field.

He stared, unseeing, at the empty stands, a silent, profound gesture of contempt. He had seen it too. The fight was over.

On the field, Sameer, the batsman who had been trapped dead-to-rights, got to his feet. He calmly brushed the dirt from his trousers. He didn't look at the umpire. He didn't look at the bowler.

He just... smirked.

A small, private, knowing smirk.

He walked down the pitch to his partner, Karan, who looked as stunned as anyone. Sameer just tapped his bat on the ground. "Come on," he said, loud enough for the fielders to hear. "Let's finish this."

That smirk did more damage than the umpire's call. It was the confirmation. It was the admission of guilt.

And it was the final, twisting nail in Don Bosco's coffin.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team's spirit didn't just break. It evaporated.

The players, who had been fighting with the rabid energy of cornered animals, now just... stood. Their shoulders slumped.

The fire in their eyes was gone, replaced by a dull, hollow, teenage despair. The injustice was too much.

Sunil, the bowler, had to be told to get the ball. He walked, his feet like lead, back to his mark. He was crying. Tears of pure, childish rage and helplessness streamed down his face.

"It's alright, Suni!" Vikram tried to yell, but his voice was a broken croak. He didn't believe it. No one did.

[Ball 10.3] Sunil, his vision blurred, just tossed the ball in. It was a Full Toss, a nothing delivery.

Sameer, his blood up and his conscience clear, was merciless.

CRACK!

He smashed it, a flat, brutal Pull Shot that rocketed to the Mid-Wicket boundary.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 44/1. Target: 43. Overs: 10.3]

[Ball 10.4] Sunil, in a daze, bowled again. Another Full Toss.

Sameer hit it again. Same spot.

CRACK!

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 48/1. Target: 39. Overs: 10.4]

There was no attempt at strategy. No more "Batsman ." This was a "Butcher."

The dam was broken. The fortress was being overrun.

"Stop this, Sunil! Bowl properly!" Vikram yelled, but it was useless.

[Ball 10.5] Sunil's last ball. It was short and wide. Sameer cut it, hard, for another boundary.

[Score: 52/1. Target: 35. Overs: 10.5]

Sixteen runs from three balls. The game was over.

The rest of the match was not a contest. It was an execution.

Raghav watched from the sideline, his face cold. He was no longer a participant. He was a 42-year-old man, watching a painful, predictable, human tragedy unfold.

The fielders, who had been diving for every ball, now just jogged.

A Cover Drive from Karan. The fielder at Cover, Ajit, put in a half-hearted dive and missed. The ball trickled past him. They ran two.

A Leg Glance from Sameer. The Fine Leg fielder, who had been sprinting, just trotted, allowing them to come back for a second run.

The "Batsman " were toying with them. They were taking singles, hitting a boundary to releasethe pressure, then taking more singles.

The score raced.

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A Leg Glance from Sameer. The Fine Leg fielder, who had been sprinting, just trotted, allowing them to come back for a second run.

The batsmans were toying with them. They were taking singles, hitting a boundary to release the pressure, then taking more singles.

The score raced.

60/1...

68/1...

77/1...

83/1...

They needed four runs to win. Amar, the medium-pacer, was bowling the 15th over.

[Ball 14.2] Karan, the "Wall" who had become a "Palace," was on strike. He had 32 runs. He was the picture of calm.

Amar ran in, a defeated, listless jog. He bowled a Half-Volley on the Off-Stump. It was a batting-practice delivery.

Karan's front foot glided to the pitch of the ball. He didn't try to slog it. He played a "textbook" Cover Drive.

CRACK.

The sound was pure. The shot was perfect.

The ball, a white streak, raced past the demoralized Cover fielder.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 87/1. Spring Dale International School won by 9 wickets.]

The Spring Dale dugout gave a polite, professional clap. A few players stood up, gathered their bats.

It was a job, completed.

Sameer and Karan, the victors, just touched their bats together, took off their helmets, and walked calmly towards the pavilion.

"Line up," Coach Sarma's voice was a flat, dead command. "Shake their hands."

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School players, their faces streaked with sweat and, in Sunil's case, tears, dragged themselves into a line.

The ritual was agonizing. The winners, fresh, smiling, and clean, walked past the losers, who were covered in dirt, grass stains, and shame.

"Good game," they said, one by one. "Good game."

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School players just nodded, their eyes on the grass.

Vikram was the last in line. He stood, his shoulders slumped, as Rohan Sharma approached him.

Rohan, the champion captain, stopped. He didn't just shake his hand. He gripped Vikram's shoulder.

"You had us," Rohan said, his voice low and for Vikram alone. "You had me. That Leg-Side trap... that was inspired."

Vikram looked up, his eyes red.

Rohan gave a small, appreciative nod. "You'll be a problem next year. Good game, Captain."

He clapped Vikram on the shoulder, a gesture of respect that felt, somehow, like the final, devastating blow.

Vikram just nodded, speechless.

As the SDI team walked away, Rohan paused. He saw Raghav, standing by the boundary, his right arm in a dirty plaster cast.

Rohan's eyes, sharp and analytical, swept from Raghav's face, to the cast, to Coach Sarma, and back to Raghav.

He didn't need to be told. The 42-year-old mind, the "strategist," the boy who was different. He connected the dots.

He knew.

Rohan Sharma didn't smile. He didn't speak. He just held Raghav's gaze for a long, cold second.

He gave a single, almost imperceptible nod.

It was a nod of acknowledgement. 'It was you.'

Then, he turned and walked away.

The Shanti Vidya Mandir School team collapsed onto the grass, a silent, broken heap. The stadium felt vast and empty.

Coach Sarma stood over them, his arms crossed. The silence stretched.

Finally, he spoke.

"Get up."

No one moved.

"I said, get UP!" he roared, the sudden noise making them flinch.

Slowly, painfully, they got to their feet. They stood before him like condemned men.

Sarma's face was like granite.

"I saw it. You saw it," he said, his voice dropping to a low, rough growl. "Today... we were not beaten. We were robbed."

The players looked up, their eyes wide.

"But that is not what I will remember. I will remember that for ten overs, you made the best, most arrogant, most well-funded team in this entire state... panic."

He jabbed a thick finger at Parag. "You took their captain."

He pointed at Vikram. "You made them re-write their entire fielding plan."

He looked at Ajit. "You showed them what a wall looks like."

He took a deep breath, and the hard lines on his face seemed to soften, just for a moment.

"I have been coaching for fifteen years. I have never... ever... I have been proud of a losing team in my life."

He kicked the dirt.

"Now, get your heads up. Hold them high. Go to the bus. The season is over."

The players, one by one, lifted their chins. They were still broken, but the shame was gone, replaced by a dull, aching, righteous anger.

They picked up their kit bags and began the long walk off the field.

Raghav was the last to leave. He stood for a moment, his good hand on the boundary rope, looking back at the scoreboard.

SVS: 86/5. SDI: 87/1.

He thought about the dropped catch. He thought about Vikram's arrogant Pull Shot. He thought about the umpire.

'A perfect, logical plan,' he thought, his 42-year-old mind turning the pieces over. 'Derailed by three things: a lack of skill, a lack of discipline, and a lack of power.'

He closed his eyes. He heard his father's voice in his head.

...Announcing some big 'District Cricket Tournament'...

He opened his eyes, and the despair was gone, replaced by a cold, calculating fire.

'Good,' he thought, clenching his one good hand.

'This stage was too small anyway.'

(To be Continued)

Chapter 36: The New Calculus

Chapter 37: The New Calculus

The ride back from the ACA Stadium was a funeral procession.

The old Don Bosco bus, which had been buzzing with nervous, hopeful energy on the way there, was now a tomb of suffocating silence. The only sound was the rattle of the windows and the cough of the old engine.

No one spoke.

The players were slumped in their seats, staring out at the streets of Guwahati passing by. They were showing their defeat in a dozen different ways.

Sunil, the left-arm spinner, had his face pressed against the cool glass, his eyes puffy and red. He was staring at nothing, his mind replaying the umpire's shake of the head.

Vikram sat near the front, not with the other boys, but alone. He was slumped forward, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, just staring at the floor between his feet. He was replaying his arrogant, top-edged Pull Shot.

Ajit, the "Wall," was quiet, but his exhaustion was different. It was the bone-deep weariness of a man who had done his job perfectly, only to watch the building collapse around him.

Raghav sat in the back, his broken arm resting on his kit bag. The dull, throbbing ache had returned, a physical echo of the team's loss. He was no longer the 12-year-old strategist. He was just a boy with a broken bone, and he felt tired.

He watched his teammates, not as a friend, but as the 42-year-old analyst. He saw their limits.

Vikram had heart, but he lacked discipline.

Parag had one good trick, but no stamina.

Ajit had discipline, but no skill.

The rest? They were just... boys.

The loss, he realized, wasn't just the umpire. The "robbery" had only accelerated the inevitable.

They were too weak. They didn't have the skill to score more than 86. They didn't have the discipline to avoid the hero-ball.

And they didn't have the power—the political clout of a school like Spring Dale—to survive a bad call.

'Skill, discipline, power,' he repeated in his mind. 'I'm missing all three.'

The bus rumbled to a stop outside the school gates. The players filed off, a silent, shuffling line of dirty, grass-stained uniforms.

Coach Sarma stood by the door.

"Vikram," he said.

Vikram stopped, his head still low.

"You made a mistake," Sarma said, his voice flat.

Vikram flinched.

"But you were the only reason we were in a position to make that mistake at all. You led them. I'm proud of you."

Vikram looked up, his eyes wide.

Sarma clapped him on the shoulder, a hard, firm grip.

"Go home. All of you. The season is over. Go. Focus on your exams."

The team, given their dismissal, just nodded and scattered, melting away into the side streets.

Raghav was the last one left. He stood before the coach.

Sarma's hard eyes softened for just a fraction of a second. He looked at the plaster cast.

"That was your plan," he stated. It wasn't a question.

"It was our only chance," Raghav replied.

"Hmph. A good plan. A brave plan." Sarma nodded, looking back at the empty bus. "But a plan is only as good as the soldiers who execute it. We... are not Spring Dale."

He turned back to Raghav, his face serious. "Go home, Roi. Rest. Get that thing off your arm. Your father is right, so focus on your exams. Pass them."

He started to walk away, then paused.

"When the cast comes off," he said, not looking back. "Come find me. We'll talk."

It was the hook. The promise of the next stage.

"Yes, Coach."

The walk home was long. The adrenaline had worn off completely, and now his arm just hurt. The weight of the cast, combined with the emotional exhaustion, made every step feel heavy.

He opened the gate to his small house. It was late afternoon.

He could hear the quiet clink of utensils from the kitchen.

He pushed the door open.

"Ma? I'm home."

Nirmala came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her sari. Her face was a mask of anxiety.

"Raghu! How did... oh, beta (son), you look so tired." She saw his slumped shoulders, the dirt on his clothes, the defeat in his eyes. She didn't need to ask if they had won.

"We lost, Ma," he said, dropping his kit bag by the door.

"It's okay, it's okay," she said, her voice soft. "You played. You were brave. That is all that matters. Now, wash your hands. I'll make you some tea."

He nodded, grateful for the simple, uncomplicated comfort.

He walked past her, towards the small washroom.

"So."

The voice came from the dining table. It was heavy, and final.

Raghav stopped.

His father, Umesh, was sitting at the table, a cup of tea in front of him. But he wasn't reading his accounts. He was reading the Assam Tribune.

He had it folded open.

Raghav didn't need to see the page to know. The local sports section. The semi-final pairings.

His father had been paying attention.

Umesh looked up, his eyes meeting Raghav's. There was no "I told you so." There was no anger. There was just a quiet, profound weariness.

"So, it is finished," Umesh said. It was not a question. It was a statement.

Raghav paused, his hand on the washroom door. "The school tournament is, yes."

Umesh nodded, taking a slow sip of his tea. He placed the cup down with a deliberate click.

"Good," he said.

The word hung in the air, heavy and sharp.

"Your final exams are in two weeks," Umesh continued, his voice flat and devoid of emotion.

"This... distraction... is over. You have had your 'game.' Now, it is time to focus on what is real. On what matters."

Raghav's 12-year-old self wanted to scream. It wasn't a distraction! I was robbed! I broke my arm for it! It's the only thing that matters!

But the 42-year-old man, the one who understood strategy, knew that a head-on collision was a losing battle. His father wasn't being cruel; he was being practical. He was offering the only path he knew.

Raghav met his father's gaze. He held it for a second. And then, he looked down.

"Yes, Papa," he said, his voice quiet.

He didn't argue. He didn't fight. He just... conceded.

Umesh gave a single, curt nod, as if to say, 'Good. You are a sensible boy.' He picked up his newspaper, and the conversation was over.

Raghav turned and went to wash his face, the cold water stinging his skin, but not as much as the quiet, crushing weight of his father's pragmatism.

Later that night, Raghav lay in his bed. His arm was propped on a pillow, throbbing. His house was silent. His mind, however, was on fire.

He replayed the loss. The dropped catch. Vikram's shot. The umpire.

'Skill. Discipline. Power.'

The Don Bosco team had none of them. He had none of them.

He needed to get stronger. He needed to get better. And he needed to get on a team that mattered. A team with influence.

'The District Team.'

He closed his eyes.

'System,' he thought.

The blue screen instantly filled his vision.

[SYSTEM NOTIFICATION]

[Main Quest: 'Win the School Tournament']

[Status: FAILED]

A cold jolt went through him. He had never failed a quest before.

[Penalty Assessment...]

[Host has shown exceptional strategic planning and resilience in the face of failure.]

[Host has correctly analyzed the three core components of victory: Skill, Discipline, and Power.]

[Penalty Waived.]

[Calculating rewards based on performance...]

[Rewards Issued: 'The Warrior's Defeat']

[+100 System Points (SP) for advanced strategic planning.]

[+0.5 Cricket IQ (Permanent) for accurate post-match failure analysis.]

[+0.5 Strength (Permanent) for enduring match play with a hairline fracture.]

Raghav let out a slow breath. So, the system rewarded analysis and endurance, not just victory. This was crucial.

He looked at his stats.

[Host: Raghav Roi]

[Age: 12]

[Stamina: 17]

[Strength: 13.5]

[Batting Technique: 12]

[Bowling Skill: 10]

[Fielding: 8]

[Cricket IQ: 25.7]

[Age 12 Stat Cap: 25.0]

[System Points (SP): 300]

His Cricket IQ had bypassed the cap. It must be a "special" stat. But the rest were still pathetically low.

He had 300 SP, but the store prices were doubled. He could only buy 3 points of Strength, or 1.5 points of Batting. It wasn't enough.

The school tournament was a dead end. He needed a new path.

As if reading his mind, the system flashed again.

[NEW MAIN QUEST ISSUED]

[Quest: The District Stage]

[Objective: The School Tournament was merely a prequel. The true stage is the U-14 District Championship. You must represent your home district.]

[Goal: Get selected for the Kamrup District U-14 Team.]

[Obstacle: The official district trials are in three days. Your broken arm (Type: Buckle Fracture, Ulna) renders you medically ineligible to attend.]

[Note: A 'textbook' path is no longer available. You must find another way. Seek the gatekeeper.]

[Reward: +5 to all Core Stats, 200 SP, 1x [Standard Lottery Spin]

Raghav stared at the screen, a slow, cold smile spreading across his face.

The obstacle was the point. The system was confirming his thoughts. The "textbook" path, the one his father loved, was closed.

He had to force his way in.

'Seek the gatekeeper.'

His mind went to the last thing Coach Sarma had said to him.

"When the cast comes off. Come find me. We'll talk."

The exams were in two weeks. The cast would be on for at least four.

The path was set.

First, he would do exactly what his father wanted. He would be the perfect, obedient son. He would study, and he would ace his exams.

And then, he would go see the gatekeeper.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 37: The Gatekeeper

Chapter 38: The Gatekeeper

The two weeks that followed the semi-final loss were a blur of quiet, domestic routine. Raghav, for the first time in his two lives, became the perfect, model son.

He woke up. He ate. He studied.

The house, which had been tense with the unspoken conflict of cricket, settled into a peaceful, studious rhythm.

His father, Umesh, was visibly pleased. He would sit at the dining table reading his paper, and Raghav would sit across from him, his cast-bound arm resting on the table, his head buried in a science textbook.

Umesh saw an obedient son finally accepting the "real" world.

Raghav saw a necessary ceasefire.

He attacked his Class 8 final exams with the same cold, analytical fury he had used to plan the match against Spring Dale.

His 42-year-old mind, which had once grappled with advanced engineering concepts at IIT, found the 12-year-old's syllabus almost insultingly simple.

Algebra was a joke. The history of the Ahom dynasty was just a set of facts to be memorized.

Priya, his older sister, was baffled. She watched him, day after day, not just studying, but consuming his books.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked one afternoon, her own studies forgotten. "You're... actually studying."

Raghav just turned a page in his geography book. "Have to pass, don't I?"

"You're acting weird," she decided, and went back to her own work.

It was the ultimate deception. By fulfilling his father's every wish, he was silently, perfectly, preparing for his own.

He felt his father's approval. It was in the extra ghee his mother put on his roti, a silent instruction from Umesh. It was in the way his father would clear his throat and say, "Good. Good," when he saw Raghav finish his homework.

This approval was a currency. He was earning it, saving it. He knew he was about to spend it all.

On the final day of his exams, he put his pen down. It was over.

That afternoon, he went to the local clinic.

"It's a buckle fracture, beta," the old doctor said, tapping the plaster. "It's healed well. You're young."

He wrapped the plaster in a towel and, with a small, motorized saw, cut it off.

The sound was a high-pitched, terrifying whine.

When the cast fell away, Raghav's arm was pale, thin, and covered in dead, flaky skin. It was weak. But it was free.

The doctor gave him a small rubber ball.

"Squeeze this. Every day. It will take a week or two to get your strength back. No cricket for at least another two weeks."

Raghav smiled. "Thank you, Doctor."

He paid the fee and walked out, squeezing the ball, the muscles in his forearm screaming, a dull, forgotten ache.

That evening, he waited.

Umesh came home, sat for tea. The mood was light. The exams were over. His son was healed.

"So," Umesh said, "Now you can rest. Enjoy your holidays."

Raghav placed his teacup down. The click sounded loud in the quiet room.

"Papa," he said, his voice level.

"Yes?"

"I've finished my exams. I believe I will do very well."

"Good. That is what I expect," Umesh said, nodding.

"And my arm is healed," Raghav continued, holding up his pale, thin arm.

Umesh's eyes narrowed. The peace was ending. He felt the shift.

"And?"

"And Coach Sarma... from Shanti Vidya Mandir... he asked to see me. He wants to talk about the... the District Team."

Raghav showed his resolve. He didn't fidget. He didn't look away. He kept his voice calm, respectful. He was not a boy asking for a toy. He was a man stating a fact.

The air left the room.

He could see his father's internal battle. The anger, the disappointment... and the promise. Raghav had been the perfect son. He had held up his end of the bargain.

Umesh's lip trembled, just once. "This... this foolishness again?"

"I told you I would study," Raghav said. "And I did. This is... this is the next step."

"There is no 'next step'! The next step is Class 9!"

"Papa," Raghav said, his voice softening, "Just... let me go and listen. That is all. I am just... listening to what he has to say. He is my coach."

Umesh stared at him. He was trapped. To deny this, after Raghav had been so obedient, would make him the unreasonable one.

He let out a long, slow sigh. It was a sound of complete and utter defeat.

"Fine," he bit out, the word sharp. "Go. Listen to your 'coach.'"

He stood up, his tea unfinished, and walked into his bedroom, closing the door behind him with a final, quiet thud.

Rag-"He is my coach."

Umesh stared at him. He was trapped. To deny this, after Raghav had been so obedient, would make him the unreasonable one.

He let out a long, slow sigh. It was a sound of complete and utter defeat.

"Fine," he bit out, the word sharp. "Go. Listen to your 'coach.'"

He stood up, his tea unfinished, and walked into his bedroom, closing the door behind him with a final, quiet thud.

Raghav didn't flinch. He had won. He had used his father's own logic against him.

He had his permission.

The next morning, Raghav woke up before dawn. He left a note for his mother and walked the two miles to the Shanti Vidya Mandir school grounds.

The sun was just beginning to turn the sky grey. The field was empty, covered in dew.

And there, in the middle of it, was Coach Sarma.

He wasn't in his coach's whistle and shorts. He was in a simple shirt and trousers, holding a metal bucket. He was using a small cup to pour water onto one of the practice wickets, tamping the mud down.

He was preparing the pitch. By hand.

Raghav stood at the edge of the field, just watching. He watched for five full minutes.

He saw the care Sarma put into the work. The focus. This wasn't a job for Sarma. This was a ritual.

Finally, Sarma sensed him. He stood up straight, his back aching, and turned.

He saw Raghav, standing there, his thin arm free of its cast.

Sarma's face was unreadable. "You're early. Or you're late. The trials were last week."

"I know, Coach," Raghav said, walking onto the damp grass. "I was... ineligible."

"Hmph." Sarma turned back to his bucket. "So you are. The Kamrup team is picked. They had their first practice yesterday. You missed it. The team is full."

He poured more water on the pitch. Splash.

Raghav's heart sank. This was it? He'd missed it?

'No,' his 42-year-old mind countered. 'This is a test.'

Raghav walked up to him. "Coach. The team that... that lost... to Spring Dale. You said you were proud."

"I was," Sarma grunted, not looking up.

"But we were weak," Raghav said.

Sarma stopped tamping.

"We were," he agreed, his voice low.

"I want to get stronger," Raghav said.

"I want to play for the district. I don't care that the team is 'full.' I want a trial. I want a chance."

Sarma turned, his eyes hard. "A chance? You want a chance? The 'textbook' path is closed, boy. The forms are signed. The list is submitted. There are no more chances."

"You're the gatekeeper," Raghav said, his voice quiet, using the system's own word.

Sarma froze. His head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. "What did you just call me?"

"You are the coach of the school team. You are a selector for the District Association. You're the one who found Parag. You're the one who saw Rohan Sharma before he was a newbie batsman. You're the one who... who is respected. Even by them."

Raghav had done his research. Sarma wasn't just a PE teacher. He was a low-level, but deeply respected, figure in the Assam Cricket Association.

Sarma stared at him, a new, dangerous light in his eyes.

"You're smart," Sarma said, his voice a low growl.

"Too smart. That plan... that was all you. You cost those Spring Dale bastards their 'clean sheet.' You embarrassed them."

"We lost."

"You lost that game," Sarma corrected, jabbing a muddy finger at him.

"But you made them show their power. You made them use the umpire. In their world, that's a loss for them."

He paused, looking Raghav up and down, from his healed arm to his burning, intense eyes.

"The Kamrup team is full," Sarma said, turning back to his bucket. "Sixteen boys. The list is locked."

Raghav's shoulders slumped.

"However," Sarma continued, tamping the dirt.

"The ACA, in its infinite wisdom, has allowed each district team to carry four 'reserve' players. Net bowlers. Water carriers. Boys who are there to... learn."

Raghav's pulse quickened.

"The three other selectors... they have already picked their boys. From the big clubs. Boys whose fathers pay for their kits."

Sarma stopped, and looked Raghav dead in the eye.

"I... have not submitted my name yet. I have one spot left."

He hefted his bucket. "The U-14 Kamrup team, led by their official captain, Rohan Sharma, will be practicing here. On my ground. Tomorrow morning. 6 AM sharp."

He started to walk away.

"Coach," Raghav called out, his heart pounding. "What do I... what do I have to do?"

Sarma stopped at the edge of the pitch. He didn't turn around.

"You're not on the team, Roi but you're not out of the team....You're a net bowler....A reserve... That means you get no glory. You get no respect. You just... work."

He finally turned, his face a granite mask.

"You show up... You see your arm is broken and you bowling might be effected the main team process so I put you on the substitute section...."

Coach paused for moment to see my reaction and continue" but I will give a chance, firstly you have to build up trust from your teammates and the best way is...you ball until Rohan Sharma and other batsman miss shot to strike.."

"Also until all of them... see you as more than a water boy."

"You want me to irritate them by bowling...is that what you mean?"

"I want you to break them, kid," Sarma said, his voice a low, terrifying growl.

"I want you to show them, and me, that what I saw in that semi-final was not a fluke. The team is full. But a spot... a spot can be earned by your efforts in this team."

He nodded once.

"6 AM. Don't be late. And... don't be weak."

Coach Sarma walked away, leaving Raghav alone on the dew-covered field, the sun just beginning to rise, his path, blocked and impossible, now suddenly, terrifyingly, clear.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 38: Uncle!

Chapter 38: Uncle!

Raghav walked home. The sun was a hot, heavy blanket on his neck.

His mind was a locked room, echoing with Coach Sarma's final, terrifying words: "I want you to break them, son."

In his left hand, the small, red rubber ball was already becoming an extension of his body.

Squeeze.

A sharp, radiating burn, a signal of dormant muscles waking in agony.

Release.

He flexed his pale, thin fingers, the skin slick with sweat.

Squeeze.

He looked at the arm. It was a pathetic, weak thing. He had less than twenty-four hours to turn it from a patient's limb into a bowler's weapon.

'System,' he thought, his steps not faltering. 'Status.'

[Host: Raghav Roi]

[Age: 12]

[Stamina: 17]

[Strength: 13.5]

[Batting Technique: 12]

[Bowling Skill: 10]

...

[System Points (SP): 300]

Three hundred points. He could, in theory, buy +3.0 Strength for 300 SP. It was a tempting, immediate fix.

But the 42-year-old mind knew it was a fool's move. It was a shortcut.

The system had rewarded his analysis of the loss, his resilience. It didn't just reward victory; it rewarded work.

'I don't buy my way out. I earn it.'

He squeezed the ball again, harder, his teeth gritting. The pain was a good, sharp, grounding reminder.

'You are weak. Get stronger.'

He arrived at his house. The front door was open to let in the breeze, but the house itself was unnaturally quiet. His father would be at the government office. His sister, Priya, would be at her college classes.

He walked in, and the feeling of the house was wrong.

His mother, Nirmala, was in the kitchen. He could see her back. She was washing rice, but her movements, usually smooth and practiced, were stiff, short, angry. She wasn't humming.

"Mother?"

"They are here," she said. Her voice was a low, tight whisper. She didn't turn around, her knuckles white as she scrubbed the rice.

Raghav's blood ran cold. He knew that tone.

From the small living room, he heard a man's laugh. It was too loud for the small space, an oily, obsequious sound.

"Ah, but my big brother always kept the best accounts! He knows where every last cent is!"

Raghav walked out of the kitchen.

His father's younger brother, his Uncle Ramesh, was sitting on their best sofa, his weight making the old springs sigh. Beside him, his wife, Aunt Bina, sat perched on the very edge of the cushion.

She was a hawk, her sharp eyes darting from the faded curtains to the small, boxy television, to the crack in the ceiling. She was not visiting; she was appraising.

"Raghav!" Uncle Ramesh boomed, his smile wide and false. "There he is! Look at you!"

Aunt Bina's thin, reedy voice cut in. "My goodness, the cast is off. Finished with your... game... for the day?" She let the word "game" hang in the air, a mild, curable disease.

"Uncle. Aunt," Raghav said, his voice flat. He nodded, but he did not smile. He hated these visits.

"Nirmala," Aunt Bina called out, her voice sharp, not even turning her head toward the kitchen. "Some tea. And not the everyday biscuits. The ones in the blue tin."

Raghav saw his mother's back stiffen in the kitchen. He felt the vibration of her humiliation.

"Umesh isn't home," Nirmala said, her voice tight, emerging from the kitchen. "He is at work."

"We know!" Ramesh said, laughing it off, patting the sofa. "We will wait. It is lunchtime, after all. He must come home for his meal."

They weren't visiting. They were staging an ambush.

Raghav, the 42-year-old, understood. This was a shakedown. He sat at the dining table, a few feet away. He picked up the red rubber ball. And he just... watched.

And squeezed.

Squeeze. Release.

An hour later, Umesh Roi walked in.

He was tired, his shirt damp with the humidity, his shoulders slumped from the workday. He walked in, saw his brother and sister-in-law on his sofa, and he froze.

The weariness on his face vanished, replaced by a rigid, controlled mask. His shoulders, which had been slumped, straightened into a stiff, formal posture. It was a shield.

"Ramesh." His voice was flat. He nodded, once, at Bina. "What a... surprise."

"Big brother!" Ramesh jumped up, all false sincerity. "We were just in the neighborhood! We thought, why not stop by for lunch!"

Umesh's eyes flicked to his wife, who was standing in the kitchen doorway, her face like stone. His gaze then slid to Raghav, who was sitting at the table, methodically squeezing the ball. Squeeze. Release.

"We've already eaten," Umesh said, his voice cold. He walked to the sink to wash his hands.

The lie was a slap. Aunt Bina flinched, her thin smile tightening.

"Oh," she said, her voice losing its sweetness. "Well. We can just talk, then."

Umesh dried his hands, his back to them, taking his time.

"Big brother," Ramesh began, the false smile gone, replaced by a nervous, wheedling tone. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers.

"It's... well, it's about our Ritesh. You know, my son."

Umesh just stood there, his back a rigid wall.

"He is so smart, brother. So smart. Top of his class. He... he has a chance... to go to Spring Dale International."

Raghav stopped squeezing.

He looked up. Spring Dale. The place with the air-conditioned bus. The place with the power.

"That is a fine school," Umesh said, his voice dangerously quiet, still not turning around. "It is also... expensive."

"Yes, yes," Ramesh said, rushing his words. "That is the thing. A school like that... they have so many 'fees.' We... we are just a little short. For the admission... 'donation.'"

Aunt Bina, seeing her husband fumbling, took over. Her voice was practical, sharp.

"We need fifty thousand, Umesh. For the fee."

Click.

Umesh, who had been putting a cup away, set it down on the counter. The small sound was as loud as a gunshot in the silent room.

Nirmala, in the kitchen, let out a tiny, involuntary gasp.

Fifty thousand. It was a king's ransom. It was a house deposit. It was a daughter's wedding fund. It was everything.

Umesh turned around. He looked... old.

"Fifty... thousand." He didn't ask. He just repeated the number, the sound a hollow breath

.

"You... you have savings, big brother," Ramesh said, his voice now a desperate whisper.

"For the children. For Priya's wedding, maybe. We will pay it back! With interest! This is... this is Ritesh's future."

Aunt Bina stood up, her eyes glinting. "It's an investment, Umesh. A real one."

She took a breath, and delivered the killing blow.

"It's not as if you're using your savings.

Priya is in that little state college. And Raghav..." She glanced at Raghav, who was watching her, his hand frozen around the ball.

"He's just... well." She gave a small, dismissive shrug. "He has his hobbies."

The knife. She had twisted it.

The implication was clear: You are wasting your money on a daughter with no prospects and a son who plays games. My son... my son is a real investment.

The room was vibrating with unspoken, ancient resentments.

Umesh, finally... spoke.

His voice was not loud. It was a low, ragged, dangerous growl. The voice of a man pushed beyond his limit.

"Get. Out."

"Brother, we just—"

"I SAID, GET OUT!"

Umesh roared. The sudden explosion of sound was a physical force. It made everyone flinch. He was shaking, his finger pointed at the door, his face a dark, terrifying red.

"Do you see this house? Do you see me? I am a clerk, not a bank! Every single bit of money I have... every last bit... it is for my children! For my family! That I... that I cannot even..."

He couldn't finish. He was showing his shame. He was a man who, at his core, felt he had failed because he could not produce fifty thousand.

Nirmala rushed to his side.

"Umesh! Your heart... please, calm down..."

Ramesh and Bina, their faces pale, scrambled for the door. This was not the defeated, quiet man they had planned to bully. This was a cornered animal.

"You... you will regret this, Umesh," Ramesh stammered, his pride stung.

"I already do!" Umesh bellowed, his voice cracking.

The door slammed. They were gone.

The house was left in the ringing, awful silence of the aftermath.

Umesh stood there, breathing in huge, shuddering gasps.

"Fifty thousand... for Spring Dale..." he muttered, his voice breaking. He looked at his own hands, as if they were useless. "Fifty... thousand..."

He sank into the chair at the dining table, right across from Raghav.

He didn't yell at Raghav. He didn't even look at him.

He just... sat. He put his head in his hands, his shoulders slumped. He was a man who had won the battle, but had just been shown, in the cruelest way possible, that he had already lost the war. He was a man who could not provide.

Raghav watched his father.

And the 42-year-old mind finally, completely, understood.

This was the fear. This was the terror that drove his father. It wasn't that he hated cricket. It was never about cricket.

It was about this. This... humiliation. This... powerlessness.

The feeling of being poor. The feeling of having his "useless" son's hobby thrown in his face by his "successful" brother.

Umesh was not a tyrant. He was a terrified man, trying to protect his son from this exact, humiliating pain.

Raghav's heart, the 12-year-old one, ached for his father.

His mind, the 42-year-old one, went cold.

He looked at his uncle's half-drunk teacup. He looked at his father, broken, at the table. He looked at his own pale, weak arm.

'Power,' he thought. 'Skill. Discipline. And power. The kind Rohan Sharma has. The kind that comes from a place like Spring Dale. The kind that comes... from fifty thousand.'

He made a promise to himself. A cold, hard vow.

'My father will never feel this way again. And I will never be the one to make him feel this way.'

He stood up. His father didn't look up.

Raghav walked to his room and quietly closed the door.

He sat on his bed in the dim light.

He looked at the small, red rubber ball.

6 AM. Coach Sarma. Rohan Sharma.

He thought of the umpire's "Not out." He thought of his uncle's sneer. "Just... playing."

He picked up the ball.

Squeeze.

His forearm screamed in protest.

'This is not a game,' he thought, his eyes cold and hard in the dimness.

Squeeze.

'This is the price.'

Squeeze. Release. Squeeze. Release.

He would not stop.

The system, silent until now, flashed in his vision.

[SYSTEM NOTIFICATION: 'The Weight of Money']

[You have analyzed a core conflict. You understand the true stakes. Your resolve has been forged in family pressure.]

[NEW QUEST: 'The Squeeze']

[Objective: You cannot be a 'Net Bowler' if you cannot hold the ball. Your arm is weak. Your time is short. The gatekeeper will not wait.]

[Goal: Perform 1000 Squeeze-Reps before 6 AM.]

[Rep Count: 112 / 1000]

[Reward: +0.2 Strength (Permanent), 1x [Minor Skill: 'Iron Grip']]

Raghav didn't even look at the reward. He just squeezed the ball.

Squeeze.

His arm was on fire.

Release.

He could hear his father, still sitting in the living room, letting out a long, quiet, broken sigh.

Squeeze.

'6 AM,' he thought. 'I'm coming.'

(To be Continued)

Chapter 39: The Iron Grip

Chapter 39: The Iron Grip

Raghav's room was dark, but not silent.

From the living room, he could hear the scrape of a chair, followed by a long, quiet, broken sigh from his father. It was the sound of a man hollowed out.

That sigh became the metronome for his task.

Squeeze.

His forearm, pale and thin from weeks in a cast, erupted in a sharp, fiery protest. The muscles, atrophied and weak, felt like they were being torn.

Release.

His fingers, slick with sweat, uncurled.

Squeeze.

He gritted his teeth, his jaw aching.

[Rep Count: 247 / 1000]

He wasn't thinking about his uncle. He wasn't thinking about his father's shame. He had processed that.

The 42-year-old mind had analyzed the data—the humiliation, the anger, the fifty-thousand-rupee gap between his family and "power"—and had converted it all into a single, cold, efficient fuel.

This was just work.

Squeeze.

The pain was no longer sharp. It had become a dull, roaring blaze, a hot wire running from his knuckles to his elbow.

Release.

[Rep Count: 419 / 1000]

He ignored the system. He ignored the pain. He just continued. His world shrank to the small, red rubber ball, the sound of his own breathing, and the steady, rhythmic pulse of his failure.

At seven o'clock, his mother's voice, strained and quiet, called him for dinner.

The small dining table was a theater of tension.

His father, Umesh, was already seated. He wasn't reading his accounts.

He wasn't looking at the newspaper. He was just staring at his empty plate. His face was a mask of gray exhaustion.

Priya, his sister, sensed the atmosphere. She sat down slowly, her eyes darting between her father and the empty doorway to the kitchen.

"What's wrong with everyone?" she whispered.

Raghav said nothing. He sat down, his face calm.

Nirmala brought out the food. Rice, lentils, a simple vegetable dish. She placed the bowls on the table, the clink of the ceramic loud in the suffocating silence.

Umesh picked up his spoon, but didn't eat.

Nirmala sat. "Priya, how was your college today?" Her voice was brittle, an obvious attempt to stitch the silence back together.

"It was fine," Priya said, her gaze fixed on her father. "Papa? Are you... are you feeling alright?"

Umesh looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed, unfocused. He seemed to look through her.

"I am fine," he said. His voice was a flat, dead thing. "Eat."

He put a spoonful of rice in his mouth and chewed, slowly, as if it were ash.

The family ate. No one spoke. The only sound was the scrape of spoons on steel plates.

Raghav ate with his left hand.

His right hand, hidden beneath the table, was a knot of agony.

Squeeze.

He held it for five seconds, his leg twitching under the table from the strain.

Release.

Priya, sitting next to him, felt the movement. She looked down, confused.

Raghav met her gaze. His eyes were cold, focused. He offered no explanation.

He picked up his glass of water with his left hand. And under the table, his right hand closed again.

Squeeze.

He was detached from their drama. He was no longer a part of this quiet, sad family scene.

He was a machine, in his room, on the bus, and now at the dinner table. He was a machine with a single, repeating function.

His father had built a wall of pragmatism to protect himself from the world.

Raghav was building a weapon.

By 4:00 AM, the pain was no longer a fire. It was a white-hot, chemical numbness.

Raghav was sitting on the floor of his room, his back against the bed.

His right hand was a claw.

[Rep Count: 789 / 1000]

He tried to squeeze, but his fingers wouldn't obey. They were locked in a rigid, cramped paralysis. He stared at his hand, frustrated. It looked like a stranger's.

He used his left hand to physically pry his fingers open, one by one, the joints cracking.

He massaged the spasming, rock-hard muscle of his forearm. It felt like a stone.

'Come on,' he thought, his voice not a plea, but a cold command. 'Work.'

He forced his fingers closed again.

Squeeze.

[Rep Count: 790 / 1000]

He fell into a rhythm. Squeeze. Pry open. Massage. Squeeze.

It took him two more hours to get to the end. The sky outside was a pale, sickly gray.

[Rep Count: 998 / 1000]

He took a deep, shuddering breath. His entire arm was trembling violently, a leaf in a storm.

Squeeze.

[Rep Count: 999 / 1000]

His vision grayed out for a second. The pain was absolute.

He let his fingers uncurl, one last, agonizing time.

He made a fist.

Squeeze.

[Rep Count: 1000 / 1000]

He held it, roaring silently, his face a mask of effort, as the system's blue light flooded his vision.

[QUEST COMPLETE: 'The Squeeze']

[Reward: +0.2 Strength (Permanent) added.]

[Reward: 1x [Minor Skill: 'Iron Grip'] (Passive) acquired.]

The moment the notification cleared, the pain changed.

The hot, searing, wire-like agony that had consumed him for hours suddenly cooled. It didn't disappear. It solidified.

The fire was replaced by a deep, dense, pulsing throb.

He felt the +0.2 Strength. It wasn't a magical infusion.

It felt like his muscle fibers, torn and ravaged, had been instantly healed and replaced, not with muscle, but with something denser. Something stronger.

He looked at his hand. The trembling had stopped.

He slowly closed his fingers into a fist.

It felt... different.

His grip had always been a 12-year-old's grip. Weak.

This new fist felt heavy. It felt solid. The tendons in his wrist, the small muscles in his hand... they felt like bundled steel cables.

[Iron Grip (Passive): Your grip strength and wrist stability are permanently enhanced. Reduces muscle fatigue from repetitive impact (e.g., bowling, blocking with bat).]

He smiled. A cold, thin smile in the pre-dawn gloom.

It was 5:15 AM.

At 5:30 AM, he was dressed. His old, slightly-too-small school practice uniform. He picked up his kit bag with his left hand.

His right hand, the new, heavy tool, was just at his side.

He walked into the living room.

And stopped.

His father was in his chair. Sitting in the dark.

He hadn't slept.

He was just sitting, a dark shape in the gray light, staring at the wall where his brother had sat.

"You are going," Umesh said.

His voice was hollow. It wasn't a question. It was a statement of defeat.

Raghav stood at the door. "Yes."

A long silence filled the room. The only sound was a crow cawing outside, greeting the new day.

Umesh turned his head.

His eyes, in the gloom, were just dark, tired shadows.

"Do not," he said, his voice a low, rough whisper. "Do not come back... hurt."

He was not talking about cricket. He was talking about the loss. The humiliation.

He was talking about the pain he felt, sitting in that chair.

Raghav looked at his right hand. He slowly, deliberately, closed it into a fist.

It felt like a piece of iron.

"I won't," he said.

He opened the door and walked out, leaving his father alone in the dark.

5:55 AM.

Raghav walked through the gates of Shanti Vidya Mandir.

The air was cold, damp. The dew on the grass was thick, sparkling like diamonds in the first, weak rays of the sun.

The field was empty.

Almost.

Coach Sarma was already there. He was at the far end, a bucket in his hand, tamping down the earth on a practice net. He was a dark, solitary figure, performing his ritual.

Raghav walked onto the grass, the swish-swish of his trousers loud in the silence.

He didn't call out. He just walked up, stopping a respectful ten feet away.

He dropped his kit bag.

Sarma didn't look up. He just kept tamping.

"You're here," he grunted.

"You said 6 AM," Raghav replied.

Sarma nodded once. He finished his work, picked up his bucket, and turned.

He looked at Raghav. His eyes were sharp, analytical. He looked at Raghav's pale, thin arm, and then at the hand, which was clenched at his side.

"The others will be here soon," Sarma said.

As if summoned by his words, Raghav heard a sound.

A hiss.

A sound he viscerally remembered. The hiss of air brakes.

He turned.

A new, white, air-conditioned bus was pulling up to the gates. The Kamrup District Cricket Association logo was painted on the side.

The doors hissed open.

Boys started to file out.

They were loud. They were confident. They were all wearing matching blue Kamrup District practice kits. They were the elite.

And leading them, his own kit bag slung over one shoulder, laughing at a joke, was Rohan Sharma.

He stepped onto the grass, the captain. He saw Coach Sarma and gave a respectful, confident nod.

Then he saw Raghav.

Rohan's laugh died in his throat. His confident smile faltered, just for a second. His eyes narrowed.

He wasn't looking at a rival. He was looking at an anomaly. A ghost from a game he should have dominated, but hadn't.

Raghav just stood there, unmoving.

He met Rohan's gaze.

He didn't smile. He didn't nod.

He just... squeezed his new, iron fist.

The stage was set.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 40: The Water Boy

Chapter 40: The Water Boy

The air on the Shanti Vidya Mandir field was cold and still.

Rohan Sharma, his new blue Kamrup District cap set perfectly on his head, stood at the front of his team. His laughter had died the moment he saw Raghav.

His eyes, sharp and analytical, swept over Raghav. He looked at the boy's old, faded Shanti Vidya Mandir practice whites—a stark, impoverished contrast to the new, matching kits of the district team. He looked at the pale, thin, healed arm.

Then, he looked at Raghav's eyes.

The boy who had broken his arm, the boy who had masterminded the semi-final trap, was standing here. On this field. It was an anomaly. It was... interesting.

Raghav just stood there, his kit bag at his feet. His face was a mask of calm.

His right hand, hidden from view, was a dense, aching knot of muscle. He didn't make a fist. He just let it hang, the heavy, solid feeling of his new Iron Grip a silent anchor.

Coach Sarma, holding his metal bucket, broke the silence. His voice cut the morning air.

"Alright, listen up."

The district team, which had been chatting, instantly fell silent. They turned to Sarma, their posture respectful. This was his ground, and he was a district selector.

"Welcome to Shanti Vidya Mandir," Sarma grunted. "This ground is not the ACA stadium. It's rough. It's honest. It will test you. We have two weeks until the tournament."

He gestured, not at Raghav, but past him. "Nets are there. Gear shed is open. Warm-ups first. Laps. Five of them."

The team groaned, but it was a good-natured, disciplined sound.

"One more thing," Sarma said.

He pointed his thumb at Raghav.

"This is Raghav Roi, from this school. He is a... reserve. He's here to learn."

The word "reserve" was a brand. Raghav saw the immediate shift in the team.

The polite curiosity vanished, replaced by dismissive smirks. He was no longer an anomaly. He was just a "nobody." A water boy.

A big, broad-shouldered boy at the front of the pack—Raghav identified him as Rajat, the team's fastest bowler—actually laughed. He nudged the boy next to him.

"A reserve?" Rajat said, his voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "From this school?" He looked at Raghav's thin arm. "What's he, a charity case, Coach?"

Rohan Sharma didn't join in. He just watched, his expression unreadable.

Sarma's eyes, cold and hard, snapped to Rajat.

"He's a practice dummy, Rajat," Sarma said, his voice flat and brutal.

"He's here to bowl so you real players don't wear out your arms. Now, run your laps."

The insult, aimed at Raghav, was also a sharp rebuke to Rajat. The fast bowler's smirk faded, replaced by a sullen scowl. He had been put in his place.

Sarma turned to Raghav. The coach's face was a mask of indifference.

"Roi. You're not a player. You're staff. That means you get the nets ready. You set the stumps. You fill the water bottles. And you carry them. Now, get to work."

He tossed a heavy ring of keys at Raghav.

Raghav caught it with his left hand.

He didn't say, "Yes, Coach." He didn't complain. He didn't show the sting of the public humiliation.

He just nodded, once.

He turned, his back to the entire, staring team, and walked to the gear shed.

For the next hour, Raghav was invisible.

He worked.

He unlocked the rusted shed, the 42-year-old mind cataloging the old, cracked pads and handle-less bats. He pulled out the heavy, wheeled crate of practice balls—a mix of new, bright red, and old, dark, scuffed ones.

He wheeled it over to the nets. The district team, jogging past on their second lap, ignored him.

He took out the stumps and, using a small mallet, hammered them into the hard, prepared pitch Sarma had been working on.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

His right arm, his "Iron Grip" hand, held the wooden stump. The impact of the mallet against the wood sent a dull, heavy shock up his forearm, but the grip itself was solid. It didn't rattle.

Then, he went to the water tap and, one by one, filled the twenty blue water bottles, placing them in a carrier.

He was a ghost. The team, their warm-ups done, had broken into fielding drills. They were loud, fast, and good. Their throws were flat and hard. Their catches were clean.

Raghav just watched. He was collecting data.

He saw their arrogance. He saw their casual, privileged confidence. This was the power his father had lamented. This was the world of the fifty-thousand-rupee admission fee.

"Nets!" Sarma finally bellowed.

The team split.

Rohan Sharma and another boy—Rishi, the team's vice-captain and a technically perfect batsman—were the first to pad up.

Rajat, the hostile fast bowler, was the first to bowl.

Raghav stood by the water carrier, ten feet behind the net, and watched.

Rajat was fast. Faster than Thomas from St. Louis. He came thundering in, his action a powerful, muscular explosion.

WHOOSH.

His first ball, a Short-Pitched delivery, climbed viciously.

Rohan, his movements fluid and economical, simply swiveled, his body a perfect coil, and Hooked the ball.

CRACK!

The ball smashed into the back netting. It was a shot of pure, disdainful dominance.

Rajat just scowled, marched back, and came in again..

This was a different level. This wasn't a school team. This was a gathering of the best.

Raghav watched Rohan. He was a machine. His defense was impenetrable. His Drives were effortless. He had no weaknesses.

Raghav's 42-year-old mind filed this away. 'He's a "textbook" batsman. He's perfect. But "perfect" means "predictable." He expects the ball to do what it's supposed to do.'

For an hour, the main bowlers—Rajat and two other quicks—bowled themselves to exhaustion. The batsmen, Rohan and Rishi, were magnificent.

Finally, Sarma blew his whistle.

"Alright. Break. Water. Rajat, you're done. Good spell."

Rajat, his face beet-red and drenched in sweat, nodded, grabbing his towel.

The other bowlers groaned, rubbing their shoulders.

Sarma, his arms crossed, watched them for a moment.

Then, his head turned.

"Roi."

The field went quiet.

Raghav, who had been standing, waiting, put the water bottle he was holding back in the carrier.

"You're up," Sarma said.

Rohan, who was taking a drink, paused. He looked at Sarma, then at Raghav, a flicker of... something... in his eyes. Curiosity?

"Coach?" Rohan said, his voice polite. "Rishi and I are done. We should let the others bat."

"You're not done," Sarma said, his voice flat. "You're batting until I say you're done." He jerked his head at Raghav. "Get a ball, Roi. Bowl at your captain."

This was the test.

Raghav could feel the entire team's eyes on him. The smirks were back. The "practice dummy" was being wheeled out..

He walked to the crate of balls.

He didn't take a new one. The new ball was for "real" bowlers like Rajat.

He reached deep into the crate and pulled out an old, dark red, scuffed-up ball. The seam was half-gone. It was a "nothing" ball.

He walked to the top of the bowling mark. His heart was not pounding. His 12-year-old adrenaline was silent. All he felt was the 42-year-old's cold, quiet focus.

He stood there, twenty-two yards away.

Rohan Sharma, the golden boy, the district captain, was in the net. He looked bored.

He retook his perfect stance, tapping his expensive bat on the crease. Tap. Tap.

He looked up at Raghav, his expression not unkind, but deeply, deeply patronizing.

"Alright, then," Rohan called out, his voice echoing in the quiet. "Let's see what you've got."

Raghav looked at him.

He thought of his father, sitting alone in the dark.

He thought of the umpire's "Not out."

He thought of his uncle's sneer: "Just... playing."

He closed his right hand around the old, scuffed ball.

The Iron Grip engaged. The ball felt as if it were fused to his fingers, an extension of his own solid, aching bones.

The system was silent. This was all him.

He took a deep breath.

And began his run-up.

Raghav's run-up was not a run-up. It was a glide.

It was not the thundering, sixteen-pace charge of Rajat, the fast bowler.

It was a short, economical, eight-pace approach. He didn't waste energy. His movements were rhythmic, his head perfectly still, his eyes locked on a single, imaginary spot on the pitch.

Rohan Sharma, waiting in his perfect, relaxed stance, watched him. He felt a flicker of contempt. There was no power in this. No speed. This was a nothing ball.

Raghav's arm came over, a fluid, repeatable motion. His body was a simple lever.

But at the last possible second, his wrist—the wrist he had spent all night transforming into a knot of iron—snapped.

It was not a normal delivery. He was not trying to swing the old, scuffed-up ball.

He was cutting it.

His fingers, locked by the Iron Grip, ripped down the side of the ancient seam.

The ball flew, flat and fast, at a medium-pace. It was aimed not at the edge, but dead-on at the Middle Stump. It looked... simple.

Rohan, the textbook captain, saw the line. His 12-year-old opponent was just bowling a straight, defensive ball.

His front foot moved into position, a perfect, automated Forward Defensive Block. His bat and pad, as always, came together in a flawless, impenetrable wall. He was going to stop this ball, dead, and stare this "water boy" back into his place.

He was ready for the ball he saw.

He was not ready for the ball that arrived.

The ball, buzzing with the revolutions from Raghav's Iron Grip, hit the "honest" pitch that Sarma had so carefully prepared.

It didn't just "turn."

It kicked.

It spat off the rough, dusty surface like a cobra.

It jagged, violently, in towards Rohan's body.

The perfect, textbook block was now aimed at empty air. The ball was no longer there.

It was too fast. Too sharp.

It beat his bat.

It beat his pad.

THWACK.

The ball slammed, hard, into his front thigh, just above the protective pad. It was a direct, punishing, unprotected hit.

A dead, stinging, vibrating pain erupted from the impact.

Rohan let out a sharp, involuntary gasp.

The field went silent.

The district players, who had been lounging and smirking, stopped.

Rajat, the fast bowler, who was toweling himself down, stopped smiling..

Rohan Sharma—the golden boy, the district captain—had just been hit. He had been made to look clumsy. He was not out, but he had been beaten. Cleanly. Painfully.

He stood there, frozen, for a long second, his thigh screaming.

He looked down at the spot on the pitch, his face a mask of sudden, sharp, humiliated focus.

He looked up, and his eyes... his eyes were

different. The bored, patronizing glaze was gone. He was seeing Raghav for the first time.

Raghav just stood there.

He didn't appeal. He didn't celebrate. He didn't ask "How's that?"

He just... waited..

His face was calm, his expression unreadable. He was a machine, running diagnostics.

He walked, slowly, back to his mark.

Rohan took a deep breath, the pain in his thigh a hot, spreading bloom. He re-settled his stance. He tapped his bat. Tap. Tap.

The taps were harder now. Angrier.

"Good ball," he called out. His voice was tight.

Raghav began his run-up. The same, quiet, rhythmic glide.

[Ball 41.2]

Rohan's mind was now racing. 'It was a cutter. It jagged in. He got lucky with the pitch. I'll wait for it. I'll play it off the back foot.'

He set himself, his weight shifting back, ready to Cut or Block the "trick" ball.

Raghav's arm came over. The same action. The same Iron Grip.

But this time, he saw Rohan's back-foot preparation.

Raghav didn't cut it.

He just pushed this one through, faster. He released it like a normal, straight delivery. It didn't grip. It skidded.

Rohan, who was playing for a ball that would cut in, was now cramped. The ball was on him too quickly.

He was forced into a clumsy, jammed, defensive chop. His wrists, his "textbook" timing... all of it was gone

He just barely got his bat down in time. The ball thudded into the inside edge and dropped at his feet.

He was safe. But he looked, again, like a beginner.

Rohan's face, which had been focused, now showed a flicker of... confusion.

[Ball 41.3]

Raghav glided in.

Rohan was a mess. 'It's not just a cutter. It skids, too. What's he doing? Is he a spinner? A pacer?'

Raghav's arm came over.

This time, he used the Outswinger—the "textbook" delivery.

The ball pitched on Middle Stump and, instead of cutting in or skidding on, it just held its line, moving away with the angle.

Rohan, his mind now completely poisoned, was expecting a trick. He was frozen. His feet were stuck in cement.

He didn't move. He just watched as the ball passed his Off-Stump by the width of a coat of paint.

He hadn't even offered a shot.

He flinched, a half-second too late.

He had been beaten. For the third time.

A dead, profound silence fell over the entire practice.

The smirks were gone.

The jokes were gone.

Rajat, the fast bowler, was now standing at the back of the net, his arms crossed, watching.

This "charity case"... this "water boy"... was... weird.

[Ball 41.4]

Raghav ran in.

Rohan's front foot was "sticky." He was terrified to commit, afraid of the cutter. He was terrified to stay back, afraid of the skid.

Raghav, seeing this, bowled the simplest ball in the book.

A fast, straight, Good Length ball. No tricks. Aimed at the stumps.

Rohan, his feet stuck, just jabbed his bat down. A stiff, panicked, vertical-bat block.

He looked ugly. He felt ugly.

[Ball 41.5]

Raghav, relentless, went back to the Off-Cutter.

The ball pitched. It gripped. It jagged back in.

Rohan, who was expecting the straight ball, was beaten again.

THWACK.

It hit him again. This time, on the inside of his pad.

A muffled appeal, "Aah!" from the keeper, but Raghav was already turning, walking back.

[Ball 41.6]

Rohan was furious.

He was the district captain. He was the "golden boy." And this... this nobody... was surgically dismantling him. He was being made to look like a fool in front of his entire team.

His technique was gone. His calm was gone.

All that was left was rage.

Raghav knew it. He saw the red flush on Rohan's neck. He saw the death-grip on the bat handle.

Raghav ran in.

And he bowled, by far, his worst ball.

It was a deliberate, slow, loopy, gentle Full Toss.

It was a "gimme." A "hit me" ball.

It was a stress test.

Rohan's eyes lit up. His humiliation, his anger, his frustration... it all coalesced into one, violent impulse.

He was going to punish this ball. He was going to hit it so hard it would tear the netting.

He went for a massive, booming Cover Drive.

But he was angry.

His perfect, "textbook" technique was gone, replaced by pure, emotional spite.

His feet were still sticky. His head pulled away. He swung, not with his body, but with his arms. He was too hard. He was too fast.

He missed the middle of the bat.

THOCK.

He hit the ball with the inside edge.

The ball thudded, pathetically, into his own pads and rolled to a stop at his feet, not two inches from the stumps.

A half-run. A swing-and-a-miss, disguised as contact.

The over was finished.

A maiden.

The golden boy, the district captain, had faced six balls from the "water boy."

He had been hit twice.

He had been beaten, clean, three times.

And he had failed, miserably, to put away the worst ball of the over.

Rohan Sharma stood there, his chest heaving. He refused to look at Raghav. He just... stared.

He began to furiously jab the crease with his bat. Jab. Jab. Jab. He was showing his humiliation to the world

A dead, profound silence had fallen over the entire team.

The "charity case" was a problem.

Raghav said nothing.

He turned, his face a mask of calm, and walked back to his mark, tossing the old ball in his hand.

At the edge of the field, Coach Sarma, who had not moved, who had not spoken, watched the boy.

And then, he did something.

He nodded.

A single, almost imperceptible dip of his chin.

It was all the confirmation Raghav needed.

He had passed the first test.

(To be Continued)