

Cricket 34

Chapter 34

The warm sun shone brightly over the training grounds as Aarav and Abhishek stepped onto the lush green grass of the National Cricket Academy. The air was electric with the sound of leather striking willow, encouraging shouts from coaches, and the focused energy of players practicing. Aarav's heart raced with excitement and nervous anticipation.

As the two friends approached, they were split into different groups. An official gestured to Abhishek, "You'll be training with the U19 NCA team for now. Follow me."

Abhishek turned to Aarav, giving him a reassuring nod. "All the best, bro! Catch you later!"

"You too!" Aarav called out as he was directed toward a different area—the U19 team camp.

The moment he stepped into the U19 training area, he was greeted by the sight of players practicing in full swing. Some were batting in the nets, others bowling with fiery intensity, and a few working on their fielding drills. Amidst the crowd, one figure stood out—the current U19 coach, Hrishikesh Kanitkar. Aarav recognized him instantly but what truly made his heart skip a beat was the man standing beside him: Rahul Dravid, "The Wall" of Indian cricket.

For a moment, Aarav felt starstruck. Rahul Dravid was a legend, someone he'd grown up idolizing. Gathering his composure, Aarav walked up to them. Dravid noticed him and smiled warmly.

"Hello, sir. I'm Aarav Pathak from Mumbai, age 14. I've been selected for the U19 team." Aarav handed over the selection letter he'd received.

Dravid took the paper, glanced at it, and smiled again. "I know who you are, Aarav. I'm the one who selected you for this camp."

Aarav's jaw dropped slightly. "You... you selected me, sir?" Although I'm fully aware of this, hearing those words come from his lips is nothing short of Amazing. Like a dream come true.

"Yes," Dravid replied, his tone calm but encouraging. "I saw you play in two matches live during the Vijay Merchant Trophy. Your technique is impeccable—pure Classy cricket. Your batting has the elegance of a seasoned player, and as a cherry on top, your bowling is equally fabulous. A rare combination, Aarav."

Hearing such high praise from someone like Dravid made Aarav's heart swell with pride. His smile widened, and he replied, "Thank you so much, sir. It means a lot coming from you."

Dravid nodded. "Well, talent needs to be nurtured, Aarav. This camp will push you to your limits, but I believe you have what it takes to excel."

Just then, Hrishikesh Kanitkar blew his whistle sharply, gathering all the players on the ground. Aarav followed Dravid and stood with the group. As he looked around, he recognized several familiar faces—players who had already made a name for themselves in the Indian cricket scene or the IPL: Ishan Kishan, Sarfaraz Khan, Rishabh Pant, Mahipal Lomror, Washington Sundar, Khaleel Ahmed, Avesh Khan, Mayank Dagar, and Shivam Mavi.

Their curious eyes were on Aarav, sizing him up. One of them, Sarfaraz, leaned over to Washington Sundar and whispered loudly enough for Aarav to hear, "Who's this kid? Did they recruit him from the school next door?"

The group chuckled, and Aarav felt a wave of nervousness, but Hrishikesh quickly intervened.

"Alright, listen up!" he called out, silencing the murmurs. "This is Aarav Pathak. He's just 14 years old and has been selected to join the U19 team. If he passes the trials conducted by your next coach, Rahul Dravid, he'll be debuting in the upcoming tour to South Africa."

Aarav blinked in disbelief. South Africa? A debut at just 14 years old? The weight of the moment settled on him. He felt a mix of excitement and pressure but managed to maintain his composure.

The players exchanged glances, a mix of surprise and skepticism visible on their faces. Sarfaraz gave Aarav a mock salute, while Rishabh Pant took a step closer to him, his face lighting up with mischief.

"Yo, Aarav, is it?" Rishabh said, his tone playful. "You look like you just walked out of a school debate competition."

Aarav couldn't help but laugh nervously. "I guess I do. But trust me, I'm more comfortable holding a bat than a mic."

Rishabh grinned. "Good answer. But let's see if that bat of yours can handle what's coming your way. Welcome to the camp, by the way. Don't mind Sarfaraz; he's just jealous of your smart Looks."

"Oi, Pant!" Sarfaraz shot back, pretending to be offended. "At least I don't look like a mischief-maker straight out of a zoo or circus."

The group burst into laughter, and Aarav felt the tension ease slightly.

Rahul Dravid stepped forward, bringing the group's attention back. "Alright, Aarav. Go change into your kit. Let's see what you've got with the bat."

"Yes, sir," Aarav replied, rushing to the changing room.

As he returned to the nets, fully padded up, he saw a lineup of bowlers warming up. Some he recognized—Mahipal Lomror, Washington Sundar, Khaleel Ahmed, Avesh Khan, Mayank Dagar, and Shivam Mavi. Others were unfamiliar to him but looked equally formidable.

Taking his position at the crease, Aarav gripped his bat tightly, feeling the weight of every eye on him. As he adjusted his stance, a voice called out from behind.

"Yo, Aarav!" It was Rishabh Pant again. "No pressure, buddy, but if you mess up, you'll be remembered as 'the kid who couldn't survive a single over.'"

Aarav turned to him with a smirk. "And if I smash your these bowlers, will you remember me as the 'kid who humbled your team'?"

"Ooooh!" The group erupted in mock cheers. Rishabh laughed, holding up his hands. "Alright, alright, let's see what you've got."

The first ball came from Khaleel Ahmed, a sharp left-arm pacer. Aarav watched it closely, his mind calculating the pace and line. With a perfect textbook drive, he sent the ball racing past mid-off.

"Not bad for a debate champion!" Rishabh shouted, clapping dramatically.

The next ball was from Washington Sundar. Aarav played a delicate late cut, the ball gliding between the slips and gully for another boundary. The group grew quieter, now watching him with a mixture of respect and curiosity.

By the time Aarav faced Mahipal Lomror's spin, he was fully in his rhythm. He danced down the pitch and lofted the ball over long-on for a six.

From behind the net, Rahul Dravid and Hrishikesh Kanitkar exchanged knowing glances. Dravid smiled slightly, crossing his arms. "He's got the temperament," he said softly.

As Aarav finished his session, he walked back to the group, sweating but satisfied. Rishabh Pant greeted him with an exaggerated bow. "Alright, Mr. Classy Cricket. You've earned my respect. But don't get too comfortable; there's still fielding drills."

"Looking forward to it," Aarav replied with a grin.

Over the next hour, Aarav participated in various drills, from catching, bowling to ground fielding. He even Bowled both Pant and Sarfaraz bowled on the very first bowl. The camaraderie among the players

grew, with Aarav slowly becoming part of the group. Sarfaraz even came to me said sorry as he was just testing the waters, and later we became friends.

During a break, Rishabh sat next to Aarav, handing him a bottle of water. "So, tell me, genius. How does a 14-year-old end up in the U19 team? Are you secretly some cricketing prodigy?"

Aarav chuckled. "I wouldn't call myself a prodigy. I just love the game and work hard at it."

"Well, don't let the hard work stop," Rishabh said, his tone turning slightly serious. "This camp is just the beginning. The real test starts on the field."

"I know," Aarav replied, determination flashing in his eyes. "And I'm ready for it."

By the end of the day, Aarav was physically exhausted but mentally invigorated. As he lay on his bed in the dorm, his phone buzzed with a message from Abhishek as Abhishek was still in his camp.

Abhishek: Bro, how was your first day? Did you survive the legends?

Aarav: Amazing. Made many friends and smashed each and every existing bowler! and even took wickets of the batsman here too.

They continued chatting for another five minutes, their conversation flowing effortlessly.

Aarav smiled as he put his phone away. Tomorrow promised to bring more challenges, but for now, he let himself bask in the thrill of his first day at the NCA. The road ahead was long, but he was ready to walk it—one step at a time.

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