

## Cricket 36

### Chapter 36

It had been three weeks since I joined the U19 team, and life had taken on a rhythm of its own. Training sessions were intense, but friendships bloomed in the shared camaraderie of the game. Among my teammates, Rishabh had become one of my closest friends. His lively humor was infectious, making even the toughest days lighter. I also got to know some of Abhishek's friends from the NCA—Shubman Gill and Arshdeep Singh. Both were from Punjab, and like me, had been selected after shining in the Vijay Merchant Trophy. Our shared journey created an easy bond between us.

One lazy afternoon, I sat in the clubroom with Rishabh and a few others. The air was filled with chatter and laughter as we discussed everything from cricket to random jokes.

"Bro, Aarav," Rishabh began, nudging me, "when are you going to teach me that fancy flick shot of yours? You're making the rest of us look bad!"

I smirked. "As soon as you teach me how to hit sixes with just one hand, deal?"

Rishabh burst out laughing. "Deal! But beware, Aarav. My six-hitting skills come with a price—endless teasing rights."

The room erupted in laughter as others joined in, throwing playful jabs at both of us. Just as I was about to counter, the door swung open, and Coach Rahul Dravid entered. The energy shifted instantly; a respectful silence fell as everyone straightened in their seats.

Dravid glanced around, his calm demeanor exuding authority. "Alright, everyone," he began, his voice steady yet inspiring. "You all are here because you're some of the best players in the nation. Three days from now, we'll head to South Africa for a series of three 50-over matches. Our venues will be Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban. Use the next two days to rest and mentally prepare. The bus to the airport leaves early on the third day."

We all nodded in unison, absorbing the weight of his words. After some additional instructions, he left the room, leaving us buzzing with anticipation.

Later that evening, I decided to visit Pat Culinaria, the branch opened in the Bengaluru. With my laptop open and a bowl of salad in front of me, I scrolled through Instagram. To my astonishment, I noticed my follower count had surged to 142k. Sharing snippets of my life—travel, training, and candid moments—had clearly resonated with people.

As I posted a quick update, I glanced out the window and noticed a massive construction project underway across the street. The scale of it was impressive, though my thoughts soon drifted back to the upcoming tour. Shaking my head to refocus, I hopped on my bicycle and pedaled back to the stadium.

That evening, I had a long call with my parents. Their pride and excitement over my South Africa tour were evident.

"Beta," my mom said warmly, "this is such a huge milestone. We're so proud of you. Make sure you stay focused and enjoy every moment."

"Thanks, Maa," I replied. "I'll give it my best."

"And don't forget to call us whenever you can," she added.

"I will," I promised, feeling their unwavering support fuel my determination.

The next day, the team announcement for the South Africa tour was made. The squad comprised 18 players, and the anticipation of playing my first international series was electrifying. Saying goodbye to Abhishek was bittersweet, but his encouragement meant the world.

"You're going to kill it out there, Aarav," he said, clasping my shoulder. "Make us proud."

"I'll try, bro. Keep me updated on your progress too."

later, the team boarded the bus to the airport. The mood was a mix of excitement and nervous energy. Rishabh kept the atmosphere lively, cracking jokes and pulling harmless pranks.

On the flight, Rishabh leaned over to me. "Aarav, quick question. What's scarier: a fiery bouncer or sitting next to me for a 10-hour flight?"

"Easy," I replied with mock seriousness. "Sitting next to you. At least with a bouncer, I know what's coming."

The laughter that followed eased any lingering nerves, and before we knew it, we were landing in Cape Town. The city was breathtaking, with its iconic Table Mountain serving as a stunning backdrop. We

were whisked away to a hotel near the stadium, where the next few days were spent settling in and undergoing rigorous training.

Coach Dravid was meticulous, ensuring every player understood their role. Despite the packed schedule, we managed to steal moments to explore Cape Town's vibrant culture and scenic beauty. These fleeting breaks were a welcome respite from the intensity of our preparations.

The day before the first match, Dravid gathered us in the team meeting room. As he began announcing the playing XI, my heart raced. However, my name wasn't called. Noticing my disappointment, Dravid addressed me directly.

"Aarav, you'll make your debut in the second match," he assured me.

After speaking to Aarav, Dravid couldn't help but reflect, This is my first match as a coach, and I want to field a seasoned team to ensure a strong start to my coaching career. But in Aarav, I have no doubts about his raw ability. The real question, however, is whether he can handle the pressure—transitioning from playing in front of a handful of spectators to stepping onto a stage where 40,000, maybe 50,000, eyes will be on him. The only gap in his game is experience.

His words were a balm to my nerves, and I nodded in understanding. The match day arrived, and the team played brilliantly. India won convincingly, thanks to stellar performances from Rishabh, who scored a breathtaking 96, and our captain Ishan, who anchored the innings with finesse. The bowlers shone as well, with Sundar's four-wicket haul and Avesh's crucial breakthroughs.

As we reveled in the post-match euphoria back at the hotel, Rishabh spotted me in the corner, a sly smile tugging at his lips. "Guess who's next to shine?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Water boy."

I raised an eyebrow of my own, playing along. "Let me guess," I grinned. "The most handsome guy on the team?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Nah. It's the rookie about to make his debut in Johannesburg. Better get ready, he's going to set the field on fire."

The following morning, we boarded a bus to the airport, bound for Johannesburg. The energy within the team was infectious, and as I stared out the window, the reality of my journey began to sink in. The anticipation of what lay ahead filled me with equal parts excitement and determination.