

Cricket 39

Chapter 39

The morning of December 13 dawned with a mix of hope and anxiety. Eight months had passed since I joined the U19 team, and today was the day the much-awaited U19 World Cup squad would be announced. My performances had been nothing short of Amazing: 12 centuries, 7 half-centuries in 24 matches, and 57 wickets at an economy of 5.91. I had played on diverse pitches—South Africa, Bangladesh, New Zealand, England, the West Indies, and India. Yet, even amidst my confidence, a slight doubt lingered, one rooted in my recent struggles to control the bowling speed inherited from Dale Steyn's technique, now 50% complete through the system. But seeing my performance I was confident. Surely, my name was bound to be on the list. How could it not be?

We gathered in the team planning room, a space filled with nervous energy. The players exchanged whispers, their voices a mixture of anticipation and unease. Coach Rahul Dravid, the epitome of calm and wisdom, entered the room with a solemn expression. In his hand, he carried the list that could change lives. My teammates exchanged nervous glances, some fidgeting with their caps, others tapping their feet. I sat upright, confident for my name.

His demeanor was calm but firm as he began announcing the names.

"Captain: Ishan Kishan," Coach announced, his voice steady but deliberate. Applause erupted in the room as Ishan grinned and nodded.

"Vice-captain: Rishabh Pant." Another round of cheers followed.

Coach continued, listing names of all-rounders like Washington Sundar and Mahipal Lomror, and then moved on to bowlers. The tension was palpable. My heart raced as the list dwindled, yet my name hadn't been called. Surely, it was just a matter of time.

And then, it was over.

Coach folded the paper and looked up. The room fell silent. Everyone turned to me, their eyes wide with confusion. My name wasn't on the list. My chest tightened. This had to be a mistake. I raised my hand, my voice shaky but firm, "Coach, what about me? Did you miss my name?"

The silence was deafening.

Dravid's gaze met mine, his expression somber. "You weren't selected," he said plainly, though there was a hint of regret in his tone. "The selectors felt you lacked the experience and pointed to your inability to control the speed of your bowling. We believe you need more time."

The words hit me like a freight train. For a moment, I couldn't breathe. My mind reeled. Was I overconfident? I asked myself. Was it arrogance that blinded me to my shortcomings?

My world crumbled in that instant. Every ounce of confidence I had built over the last eight months felt like a lie. "Are you joking, Coach?" I asked, my voice trembling with disbelief.

He shook his head solemnly. "I wish I were, Aarav."

I couldn't breathe. The walls of the room seemed to close in on me. I stood abruptly, the chair screeching against the floor. Without another word, I stormed out, ignoring the calls of my teammates. Ishaan, Rishabh, and Sarfaraz tried to follow, but Coach stopped them. "Let him be," he said quietly. "He needs time."

I wandered aimlessly until I found myself at an open field near the NCA academy. The winter sun was pale, its warmth barely grazing my skin. I sank to the ground, the cold grass prickling my hands. My thoughts spiraled. Had I been too cocky? Had the system made me complacent, convincing me that I was invincible? Was I overconfident, thinking everyone would beg me to play for them? I sat on the grass, staring at the horizon, replaying the coach's words in my mind. Had I been too cocky? Too reliant on the system? Had I truly believed that having this extraordinary tool meant I was invincible? I thought about the hours of training, the sacrifices, the sweat, and the tears. And now, it felt like all of it had been for nothing.

As the cold December breeze brushed past me, memories of my journey flooded my mind. I thought about my first day with the team, The thrill of hitting my first boundary, the camaraderie with my teammates, the countless hours spent perfecting my craft. My mind drifted to happier times, the moments of joy shared with my teammates—Rishabh's jokes, Ishan's leadership, Sarfaraz's quiet determination.

A small, bittersweet smile formed on my lips as I remembered one particular moment. It was the day the Class 10 board results were announced. I had been on a video call with my parents, my nerves at an all-time high.

"Enter the roll number, beta," my mom had urged, her voice full of encouragement.

"I'm scared," I admitted, my hands trembling.

"Don't worry," my dad chimed in. "You've worked hard. Just see the result."

Just as I was about to hit 'Enter,' Abhishek burst into the room. "I scored 76.98%!" he announced, grinning ear to ear. His joy was infectious. Soon, everyone had gathered around me, urging me to check my result.

"Namaste, Uncle. Namaste, Aunty," my teammates greeted my parents, their laughter filling the room.

My mother's voice crackled through the call. "Beta, just click enter!"

I clasped my hands in prayer, whispering, "Please, God," before pressing the enter key. I couldn't bear to look and shut my eyes tightly. "Tell me what it says," I pleaded.

The room went silent, and for a moment, my heart sank. Had my past knowledge failed me? But then, the silence broke into a deafening cheer. My parents' voices were jubilant, their pride evident. I opened my eyes to see the screen: 96.74%. Relief and joy washed over me as my teammates clapped me on the back, and my parents beamed with pride.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I sat on the field, lost in the memory. It was a simpler time when success felt pure and untainted. I wiped my face quickly as I heard footsteps approaching. Turning around, I saw Coach Dravid walking toward me, his expression unreadable.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked gently.

I nodded, shifting slightly to make room.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The silence was both heavy and comforting. Then he finally broke it.

"Aarav," he began, his voice low but firm, "I know how much this hurts. I've been in your shoes. I've faced rejection when I thought I deserved the world. But this isn't the end."

I looked at him, my eyes filled with frustration and sorrow. "How can it not be? I've worked so hard, Coach. I've given everything."

"And it shows," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "But cricket is as much about patience as it is about talent. You're an extraordinary player, Aarav, but extraordinary players are built in moments like these—when the world tells them 'no,' and they choose to fight back."

"You're talented, no doubt about that," he said, his voice calm but firm, each word carrying weight. "But talent alone won't take you where you want to go. Control, discipline, resilience—those are just as important. The selectors saw your potential, but they also saw where you need to grow. This isn't the end, Aarav. It's just a pause. Now, show them that you can overcome your shortcomings and rise higher than anyone ever thought possible."

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "You are ready, in many ways. But cricket is a journey. Sometimes, the setbacks teach you lessons that success never can. Use this time to work on yourself—not just your bowling, but your mindset. The next opportunity will come, and when it does, you'll be unstoppable."

His words struck a chord. For the first time since the announcement, a glimmer of hope sparked within me.

We sat there for what felt like hours, talking about cricket, life, and everything in between. Coach shared stories of his own struggles, times when he doubted his abilities but chose to persevere. His words didn't erase the pain, but they planted a seed of hope.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden hue across the field, I felt a small flicker of determination reignite within me. This wasn't the end of my journey. It was just a detour—a chance to grow stronger, to prove myself not only to the selectors but also to myself.

I stood up, brushing the grass off my hands. "Thank you, Coach," I said, my voice steadier than before.

He smiled, the kind of smile that held both understanding and encouragement. "You've got this, Aarav. Remember, it's not about how hard you fall. It's about how quickly you get back up."

As he walked away, I stayed in the field a little longer, the weight on my chest feeling just a bit lighter. This wasn't the end. It was just the beginning of a new chapter—a chapter where I would prove to myself, and to the world, that I belonged on that team.