

God of Cricket!

#Chapter 41: Taking the Spot - Read God of Cricket!

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[Score: 0/0. Over: 41.0. Batsman: Rohan S. Bowler: Raghav R.]

A maiden over.

Rohan Sharma, the district captain, stood in the center of the net, his chest heaving, his face a mask of crimson humiliation.

He 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.

The silence on the Shanti Vidya Mandir field was absolute.

The district players, who had been laughing and smirking just minutes before, were now standing in a silent, stunned line, their arms crossed. They were watching.

Rajat, the hostile fast bowler, had a look of pure, baffled disbelief on his face. This... this was not possible.

Raghav said nothing. He didn't celebrate. He didn't smirk. He just turned, his face a blank, professional mask, and walked back to his mark, tossing the old, scuffed 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.

Sarma let the silence stretch for one, two, three more seconds. He let his captain stew in the humiliation.

Then, his voice cut the air.

"Rohan."

Rohan Sharma flinched. He didn't look at the coach. He was still jabbing his bat into the crease, his anger a visible, vibrating aura.

"You're out," Sarma said, his voice flat.

Rohan froze. He looked up, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Coach? It's the nets."

"You were beaten six times in six balls. In a real match, you'd be walking back. You're done. Get your pads off. Rishi!"

The public dismissal was a brutal, calculated power play. It was a slap in the face.

Rohan Sharma, the golden boy, stared at Sarma. He showed his fury. His jaw was so tight it looked like it might crack. He wanted to argue. He wanted to yell.

But he just pressed his lips into a thin, white line.

"Yes, Coach," he bit out.

He didn't make eye contact with anyone. He walked out of the net, his movements stiff and angry. He walked right past Raghav, their shoulders almost touching. Raghav didn't move.

Rohan didn't look at him. But Raghav felt the wave of cold fury coming off him.

This wasn't over.

"Rishi! You're in!" Sarma barked.

Rishi, the vice-captain, was already walking. He was a different player to Rohan. Where Rohan was "textbook" and "perfect," Rishi was a "fighter."

He was shorter, stockier, and his face was set in a permanent, analytical frown. He wasn't here to look good. He was here to solve problems.

And as he took his stance, he looked at Raghav, not with contempt, but with a cold, piercing analysis.

He had just watched his captain, his partner, get dismantled. He was here to restore the hierarchy.

"Right," Rishi said, his voice a low, gravelly thing. "Let's see it, then."

Raghav was at his mark. His arm was beginning to talk to him. The Iron Grip was not magic; it was a stabilizer. The muscles, torn and rebuilt overnight, were beginning to burn. The throb was returning.

He didn't care. He began his short, rhythmic glide.

[Ball 42.1]

Rishi was waiting. His eyes were narrow. He was looking for the trick.

Raghav's arm came over. He snapped his wrist. The Off-Cutter.

It pitched on Middle Stump and, just as it had with Rohan, it kicked, jaggging back in viciously.

But Rishi was not Rohan.

He wasn't trying to play a "perfect" block. He had waited for it, his weight on his back foot.

At the last second, he didn't block. He jabbed.

He played a jerky, ugly, back-foot punch. He got the bat's edge on it, but he played it with "soft hands," and the ball dropped dead at his feet.

He had survived.

He looked up at Raghav, his eyes saying, 'I see it. And it's not good enough.'

[Ball 42.2]

Raghav knew the cutter was now expected. He glided in.

This time, he pushed it through. The Skidder.

Rishi, expecting the jag, was half-stuck. But his reactions were fast. He just jammed his bat down, a desperate, vertical chop that connected with the bottom edge of the bat.

Again, ugly. Again, safe.

Rishi was the anti-Rohan. He didn't care about looking good. He just cared about not getting out.

[Ball 42.3]

Raghav, his arm now burning, tried the cutter again.

Rishi was ready. He went back, opened his stance, and just... nudged it.

He guided the ball, using Raghav's own pace, into the gap at Square Leg. In a real match, it would have been a single.

The smirks were back on the faces of the district players.

Rajat, the fast bowler, called out, "There it is, boys! He's figured him out! Just a one-trick pony!"

Rishi, from the crease, just stared at Raghav. He was the problem-solver, and he had just sent a clear message to his team: Problem solved. He's nothing.

Raghav ignored them. He walked back, his face calm, but his 42-year-old mind was churning.

Rishi was the worst possible opponent for him. He was a survivor. He wouldn't be fooled by tricks.

Raghav bowled again..

[Ball 42.4]

simple, straight ball. Rishi blocked.

[Ball 42.5]

A skidding ball. Rishi jammed it.

[Ball 42.6]

A cutter. Rishi nudged it.

The over was done. No runs. But no wickets. No fear.

Raghav had been neutralized.

"My turn," a new voice called.

A new batsman, one of the ones on the list—Pawan—was walking into the net. He was an aggressive, front-foot player. He was showing his arrogance. He didn't have Rishi's caution. He was here to hit.

"Keep bowling," Sarma ordered, his voice flat.

Raghav looked at the coach. He had been bowling for two overs. His arm was on fire.

Sarma just stared at him.

Raghav turned, and walked back to his mark.

Pawan settled into the crease. "Come on, kid. Show me that little 'trick' ball."

[Ball 43.1]

Raghav, his arm aching, his pace dropping, delivered the Off-Cutter.

But he was tired. It didn't "kick." It "sat up." It was slow.

Pawan's eyes lit up. He saw the slow ball, and his front foot planted.

CRACK!

He smashed the ball, a clean, powerful On-Drive that rocketed past Raghav, missing his head by inches.

WHAM!

The ball hit the back netting so hard it sounded like a gunshot.

"YEAH!" one of the players yelled. "That's how you do it!"

Pawan just held his pose, a picture of dominance.

[Ball 43.2]

Raghav, his jaw tight, ran in again.

He tried the Skidder. But his arm was dead. The ball was slow, flat.

Pawan saw it coming, rocked back, and smashed it. A Pull Shot.

CRACK!

Another rocket into the side netting.

"Go fetch that, water boy!" Rajat sneered from the sideline.

Raghav was being found out. His one weapon, his surprise, was gone. Now he was just a 12-year-old with a weak arm, and the district team was lining up to take their cuts.

He bowled two more balls. Both were hit, hard.

"Alright, that's enough," Sarma called. "Pawan, you're out. Rajat. Get your pads on. You're batting."

Rajat's sneer turned into a predatory grin. "Oh, this is going to be good."

"Roi," Sarma said.

Raghav looked at him, his arm hanging limp, his chest heaving.

"Keep bowling."

The team laughed. This was a public execution. Sarma was going to let his fast bowler, the one who had been mocked, get his revenge.

Rajat, his pads on, strode into the net. He wasn't a batsman. He was a bully. He held the bat like a club.

"Okay, reserve," Rajat spat, his voice full of venom. "You and me. Let's see what you've got when they're not scared of you."

Raghav closed his eyes for just a second.

He felt the throb in his arm. He felt the burning fatigue in his lungs.

He heard his father's broken sigh.

He heard his uncle's voice: "Just... playing."

He opened his eyes. The 42-year-old's resolve flooded his body, drowning the 12-year-old's pain.

This wasn't about tricks. This wasn't about cutters.

This was about intent.

He started his run-up. He was barely jogging.

[Ball 44.1]

Rajat was waiting, his bat raised high, ready to send the ball into the next town.

Raghav, his arm feeling like a dead weight, bowled.

It was a pathetic delivery. Slow. Short. It sat up, a fat, hittable melon.

Rajat's eyes were saucers. He licked his lips.

CRACK!

He Slogged it. He connected perfectly.

The ball flew, high and long, out of the nets, over the boundary fence, and into the tall grass by the school wall.

It was a monster. A hundred-meter Six.

Rajat held his bat in the air. He turned to the other players, who were roaring with laughter.

"THAT'S his spot, boys! In the grass!"

Rajat turned back to Raghav, who was just... standing there.

"Go get it," Rajat ordered, pointing with his bat. "That's what the reserves are for. Go fetch."

The entire team was laughing. This was the hierarchy, re-established.

Raghav stood there. He looked at Rajat. He looked at the team. He looked at Sarma, who was watching, his face a mask of stone.

This was the real test. Not the cutters. This.

Raghav's face, which had been calm, hardened.

He turned, and began the long walk. He didn't run. He walked, slowly, into the outfield. He found the ball in the weeds, picked it up, and began the long walk back.

The team's laughter died as he walked. His pace was deliberate. It was heavy.

He reached the crease.

Rajat was still grinning. "Ready for another one, kid? I can do this all day."

Raghav looked down. He gripped the ball. He could barely feel his fingers. His arm was completely, totally, spent.

He had one ball left. One.

He closed his eyes. He pictured Rohan, frozen on his front foot. He pictured Rajat, his feet planted, swinging for the fences.

He began his run-up.

He wasn't gliding. He was stumbling. He was a marathon runner at the 26th mile.

Rajat saw the pathetic approach. His grin widened. He set his feet, planting himself for another mighty heave.

Raghav reached the crease.

He put every ounce of his 13.7 Strength, every bit of his 25.7 Cricket IQ, every drop of his 42 years of anger and resolve, into one, final, desperate delivery.

He did not bowl a cutter.

He did not bowl a skidder.

He did not bowl a slow, hittable piece of trash.

He remembered the Yorker. The ball that had beaten Rohan's perfect technique.

He used his Iron Grip not to spin the ball, but to propel it.

He emptied his tank.

It was not fast. It was not a thunderbolt.

It was a low, fast, skidding Yorker, aimed not at the stumps, but at the one place a slogger always leaves open.

His toes.

Rajat, his feet planted in concrete, his mind in the clouds, was expecting another hittable, slow ball.

He saw the ball, low and fast, only when it was too late.

His bat, which was raised high for a six, was a mile away.

He tried to jam it down.

CRACK!

It was not the sound of willow. It was the sound of hard leather on bone.

The ball slammed, with a sickening thud, directly into Rajat's unprotected front foot, just above the shoe, on the ankle.

Rajat didn't just gasp.

He screamed.

It was a high-pitched, genuine, agonizing howl. He dropped his bat, collapsing onto the pitch, hopping and grabbing his foot.

"AAAAAGH! MY FOOT! HE HIT MY FOOT!"

The field went dead silent.

The laughter was gone. The smirks were gone.

All that was left was Rajat, a crumpled heap on the ground, and Raghav, standing at his mark, his body trembling with exhaustion, his right arm hanging completely useless at his side.

He just watched.

He had, for the second time, physically hurt a player who had disrespected him.

PHWEEEEEEEEET!

A long, sharp, final blast from Sarma's whistle.

"PRACTICE OVER!" he roared.

The players were frozen. They were staring, not at Raghav, but at their fast bowler, who was now sitting on the grass, his face white with pain and shock.

"EVERYONE! IN! NOW!" Sarma bellowed.

The team scrambled, their faces a mix of fear and confusion. Two players helped the wincing, cursing Rajat to his feet.

They formed a tense, silent semi-circle around their coach.

Sarma stood in front of them, his arms crossed. He looked at Rajat.

"You'll live," he grunted. "It's a bruise. Let it be a lesson: respect the man bowling to you. Every time. Or he will put you on your back."

He turned to the rest of the team.

"This... is the Kamrup District Team. The best in the region. And today, you were arrogant. You were sloppy. And you were disrespectful."

His eyes burned.

He looked at Rohan. "You, our captain, were beaten."

He looked at Rishi. "You, our vice-captain, were stalled."

He looked at Rajat. "And you, our fastest bowler... were humiliated."

He walked over and stood next to Raghav. Raghav was just trying to breathe, his right arm so numb he couldn't even feel his fingers.

Sarma put a heavy, calloused hand on Raghav's shoulder.

"This," he said, his voice dropping to a low growl for everyone to hear, "is a reserve. A 'water boy.' He is twelve. His arm is barely healed from a break. He has been bowling, non-stop, for almost an hour."

He looked at the team, his eyes full of a cold, measured fire.

"And he just dismantled you."

A thick, heavy, ashamed silence.

"The list I submitted to the ACA had sixteen names," Sarma said, his voice quiet now. "That list was... incomplete. I kept a spot open."

He looked at the official team manager, who was holding a clipboard. "Mister Baruah. Add a name. R-A-G-H-A-V. R-O-I."

Raghav's head, which had been hanging in exhaustion, snapped up.

He felt the system flash, a bright, validating light, but he didn't read it.

Sarma was looking at him.

"He is no longer a reserve. He is on the team. He has taken the seventeenth spot."

Sarma's expression was still a mask of stone. "You did not 'earn' this, Roi. You took it. This is not a gift. It is a burden. From now on, your failures are my failures. You will be held to the same standard as them. You will be better. Understood?"

Raghav, his arm screaming, his body spent, his 42-year-old mind finally seeing the path, locked eyes with his coach.

"Yes, Coach."

Sarma nodded once. "Good."

He turned to the humbled, silent, angry team.

"Now, pack the nets. All of you. Including you, Rajat. Walk it off."

The players, like scolded dogs, started to move.

Rohan Sharma, his face a complex mask of anger, respect, and confusion, walked past Raghav. He stopped.

"That... was a good spell of bowling," Rohan said, his voice stiff. It was the only apology he could offer.

Raghav just nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

Rohan walked away..

Raghav stood there for a moment, his quest complete.

The real game had just begun.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 42: The Seventeenth Man

Chapter 42: The Seventeenth Man

Raghav's walk home from the field was a stark contrast to the previous day's. His arm, which had been a numb, useless appendage, was now a single, throbbing beacon of pain.

He had pushed it too far, and the Iron Grip skill didn't stop the underlying protest of muscles and tendons that had been torn, rebuilt, and then immediately brutalized.

He felt exhausted, a deep, bone-weary fatigue that the 12-year-old body was not equipped to handle.

He entered his house. It was quiet. His father was at work. His mother was in the kitchen, but the suffocating tension from yesterday was gone, replaced by the familiar, comforting sounds of chopping.

Nirmala looked up as he entered. She saw his face, pale and slick with sweat.

She saw the way he was cradling his right arm with his left.

Her face, which had been calm, creased with immediate, maternal concern.

"You've hurt it again," she said. It was not a question. Her voice was sharp with worry.

"No, Mother," Raghav said, his voice quiet. He couldn't lie, not completely. "It's just... tired. From the exercise."

Nirmala's hands stilled on the knife. She looked at his arm, then at his face. She saw the deep, adult weariness in his eyes.

"This... 'game' of yours," she said, her voice soft, but with an edge of fear. "It is going to break you, isn't it?"

Raghav, the 42-year-old, heard what she was really asking. It is going to break you, like it broke your father's spirit yesterday?

He just looked at her. "It's just work, Mother. I'm fine."

He walked past her to his room, leaving her in a cloud of unspoken fear.

He sat on his bed, the throbbing in his arm so loud it was all he could hear.

'This is not sustainable,' he thought. His 42-year-old mind, the analyst, took over. 'I have one trick. A trick that relies on a semi-healed arm. I beat Rohan because he was arrogant. I beat Rajat because he was stupid. But Rishi... Rishi 'solved' me in one over. I'm not a weapon. I'm a gimmick. And the gimmick is fading.'

His arm gave a vicious, sharp pulse of pain.

He needed to be stronger. He needed to be better. He wasn't just here to be a net bowler. He was here to play.

He looked at the blue, translucent screen that only he could see.

[SYSTEM NOTIFICATION]

[A new HIDDEN QUEST has been discovered.]

[HIDDEN QUEST: 'More Than a Reserve']

[Objective: You have taken the 17th spot. This is the spot of a reserve, a water boy, a practice dummy. This is not the spot of a player. You must prove you are an All-rounder, worthy of the 'Playing Eleven.']

[Goal: Be selected in the 'Playing Eleven' for the first match of the District Tournament.]

[Reward: 1x [Super Healing Potion], 1000 SP, +2 Bowling Skill, +3 Fielding Skill]

Raghav's pulse quickened. He stared at the rewards.

+2 Bowling, +3 Fielding... these were massive, permanent boosts.

But it was the potion that held his gaze.

[Super Healing Potion: Can heal any wound or broken bone instantly.]

He thought of his father. He remembered the future timeline from his first life. The tragic accident. The man who had been broken by his brother's visit, who would one day be broken by something far worse.

'I can save him,' the thought was a sudden, sharp, emotional spike that cut through his cold analysis. 'With that... I can fix anything. I can save him.'

The quest wasn't just about cricket anymore. It was about life and death.

He had to get in that playing eleven.

The next morning, at 5:45 AM, Raghav was back at the Shanti Vidya Mandir field.

The air was thick with a new kind of tension.

The district team was already there, assembled in a quiet, sullen group.

The casual, aristocratic arrogance from the first day was gone.

Raghav walked past them, his kit bag in his left hand.

Nobody smirked.

Nobody called him "water boy."

Rajat, the fast bowler, was there, his ankle heavily strapped. He was showing his anger. His eyes, dark and furious, were fixed on Raghav. He didn't say a word. He just... stared.

Rohan Sharma, the captain, was standing apart from the team, his arms crossed. He was showing his analytical nature. He wasn't angry. He was just watching. He was observing the anomaly, trying to deconstruct it.

Rishi, the vice-captain, just nodded at Raghav. A short, curt nod of acknowledgement. 'I see you.'

"Alright!" Sarma's voice boomed. "Yesterday was a disaster. Today, we become a team. Warm-ups. Laps. All of you."

He pointed at Raghav. "That includes you, Roi. You're not staff anymore. You're a player. Run with them."

It was the first small step up.

Raghav fell in at the back of the pack. As they ran, he felt the hostility. No one would run next to him. They left a small, empty bubble of space around him, the 17th man.

After the warm-ups, Sarma gathered them.

"Nets are for individual skill," Sarma growled. "But this is a team game. We are going to have a match simulation. Center wicket. Ten overs. Batsmen versus bowlers."

He pointed at Rohan. "Captain. You and Rishi. You're batting. Aakash, you're keeping."

He then looked at his bowlers. "Rajat, you're injured. Utpal, Sahil, you're on. You bowl five overs each."

Utpal, a tall, wiry leg-spinner, and Sahil, a short, bustling in-swinging, nodded.

"Rest of you," Sarma barked at the remaining players, including Raghav. "Fielding. Take your positions. This is not a drill. Anything that gets past you, you will run for. I want to see intent."

This was the next test.

Raghav, his heart sinking slightly, trotted out. His fielding was his worst stat.

[Fielding: 8]

He was clumsy. He knew it.

He deliberately placed himself at Deep Square Leg, a "safe" position, far from the action, where he could hopefully do the least damage.

Sarma, standing by the stumps, saw it.

"Roi!" he bellowed.

Raghav froze.

"What are you doing in the outfield? Get in here."

Sarma pointed.

He pointed at a spot on the Off-Side, just inside the 30-yard circle.

He was pointing at Cover.

It was one of the "hot" positions on the field, where the ball was hit fastest and most often. It was a position for the team's best, most athletic fielders.

Rohan Sharma, padding up, looked at Sarma, his eyebrows raised. He was showing his surprise.

"Coach," Rohan said, his voice hesitant. "That's... that's Pawan's spot. He's our best."

"Pawan is at Mid-Off," Sarma said, his voice final. "I want to see what the new boy is made of. Roi. Cover. Now."

A cold dread filled Raghav. This was not a test. This was a sacrifice. Sarma was deliberately exposing his weakness.

The team knew it. They were showing their anticipation. They wanted to see him fail.

Raghav jogged to the Cover position. He felt naked. He felt slow.

Rohan and Rishi took their places. Utpal, the leg-spinner, had the ball.

"Play!" Sarma yelled.

[Ball 0.1] Utpal tossed his first ball up. A beautiful, looping Leg-Break. Rohan, all elegance, leaned into it and played a graceful Cover Drive.

He hit it firmly, but not at full power. It was a "placement" shot, aimed right into the Cover gap.

It was aimed directly at Raghav.

Raghav saw the ball. His 42-year-old mind knew what to do. But his 12-year-old body, with its '8' in fielding, was slow.

He stumbled as he changed direction. He was clumsy. He dove, not with athletic grace, but with a desperate, falling lunge.

He was too slow. The ball beat his dive, racing past him for an easy two runs.

From Mid-Off, Pawan, the man whose spot he had taken, let out a loud, frustrated groan. "Come on, man! That's a routine stop!"

Raghav picked himself up, his knees and elbows stinging, and threw the ball back. His face was hot with humiliation.

[Ball 0.4] Utpal bowled to Rishi. Rishi, the survivor, rocked back and cut the ball hard.

It was aimed wide of Raghav, to his left.

He moved, again, too slow. He had to stop, change direction, and chase it. Another two runs.

He was a liability. The team saw it. The pressure was mounting.

"Useless!" he heard Rajat mutter from the sideline.

Raghav clenched his jaw. He got back in position.

[Ball 1.2] Utpal bowled to Rohan again. Rohan, seeing the weakness, was going to exploit it.

He saw the Full ball and played another Cover Drive. This one was not a placement. This one was power.

The ball screamed off the bat. It was a white blur, aimed a foot to Raghav's right, and it was traveling like a rocket.

There was no time to think. No time to be clumsy.

Raghav just reacted.

He threw his right hand out. His "Iron Grip" hand.

He was not trying to catch it. He was not trying to be a hero. He was just... a wall.

THWACK!

The ball, traveling at over 100 kilometers per hour, slammed into his open palm.

The sound of the impact was terrifying.

The shock, the raw, kinetic energy, exploded up his arm. It was a force that would have broken a normal 12-year-old's wrist. It would have sent the ball flying.

But Raghav showed his new power.

His Iron Grip engaged. His hand, his wrist, his forearm—they held. The muscles, forged in a night of agony, absorbed the impact.

The ball didn't pop out.

It just... stopped.

Dead.

It stuck in his palm as if it were glued there.

The entire field went silent.

Rohan Sharma, who had already taken a step for a certain boundary, just... stared.

Raghav looked at the ball in his hand. He couldn't believe it.

The team couldn't believe it.

"How..." Pawan whispered from Mid-Off.

Raghav, his hand numb and ringing like a bell, underarmed the ball back to the bowler.

Sarma, at the stumps, just nodded. 'Good. That's one.'

But the test wasn't over.

After ten overs, the batsmen were done.

[Score: 68/1. A good session for the batsmen.]

Sarma blew his whistle. "Alright! Batsmen, pad off. Bowlers, good work. Roi, Pawan, Aakash! Pad up. You're batting next."

This was it. The other half of the "All-rounder" test.

The team's eyes were on Raghav again.

'He can bowl. He can... apparently... field. But can he bat?'

Raghav walked to the kit bag. He pulled out his old, worn-out Shanti Vidya Mandir pads. They were cracked. The white was yellowed.

He strapped them on, a stark contrast to the new, blue-and-white pads of the district team.

He picked up his old bat. The grip was worn.

He walked out, the 17th man, to the center wicket.

Rohan and Rishi, pads off, stood on the sideline, watching.

"Who's bowling?" Sarma barked.

"I will," a voice growled.

It was Rajat.

He was still limping, his ankle taped, but his eyes were pure venom.

Sarma looked at him. "You're injured."

"It's a bruise, Coach," Rajat sneered, using Sarma's own words against him. "I can walk. I can bowl. I want... to bowl. At him."

The challenge was laid. This was not a drill. This was a duel.

Sarma nodded once. "Fine. Aakash, you keep. Utpal, you're at Gully. Sahil, Short Leg. I want pressure."

He was setting a hostile, "kill" field.

Raghav, alone at the crease, watched them move. A Gully. A Short Leg. Two Slips.

They were hunting him.

Rajat, his face a mask of hate, picked up a new, cherry-red ball.

He stood at the top of his mark, a full twenty paces back.

"Ready, reserve?" he spat.

Raghav didn't answer. He just settled into his stance. He wasn't thinking about his '12' Batting Technique. He was thinking about his 42-year-old mind. He was thinking about his father.

Be a wall.

Rajat began his run-up. It was not a run-up. It was a charge. He was a wounded bull, thundering in, his limp forgotten, his face contorted in a mask of pure, violent effort.

He was not trying to bowl. He was trying to hurt.

He dug the ball in Short.

It was a Bouncer, a red blur, aimed not at the stumps, but at Raghav's helmet.

The team gasped. This was too far.

"RAJAT!" Rohan yelled from the sideline.

Raghav saw it. The 42-year-old mind, which had analyzed thousands of hours of cricket, saw the bowler's arm, saw the angle, saw the intent.

He did not panic. He did not flinch. He did not duck.

His feet, in a smooth, automatic, "textbook" motion, moved back and across.

His 12-year-old body was calm, his head still.

His bat, held with his Iron Grip, came up, vertically, in front of his face.

It was the Forward Defensive Block. The "dead bat."

THUD.

The ball, traveling at over 120km/h, slammed into the middle of his old, cracked bat.

And it just... stopped.

It dropped, harmlessly, at his feet.

The entire field, the entire team, went dead silent.

Rajat, who had been charging forward, stopped in his tracks, his mouth open.

He had just delivered his ultimate weapon. A "fear" ball. A "hospital" ball.

And the 12-year-old "water boy" hadn't even blinked. He had just... blocked it. Perfectly. As if it were a medium-pace delivery in a school match.

Raghav didn't say a word. He didn't look at Rajat.

He just... adjusted his stance, ready for the next ball.

That single, quiet, perfect block was more humiliating to Rajat than the Yorker to his foot. He had thrown a bomb, and the boy had caught it.

Sarma, at the stumps, watched for a long, long second.

He saw the perfect technique. He saw the Iron Grip. He saw the absence of fear.

He had seen enough.

PHWEEEEEEEEET!

"STOP!" Sarma roared. "Practice is over. Everyone, in. NOW!"

The team was confused. "But... Coach..."

"I said, IN!"

The players all ran in, their minds reeling. What was happening?

They gathered. Sarma stood before them, a small, black notebook in his hand.

"The Inter-District Tournament starts in three days," Sarma said, his voice quiet, which made it even more terrifying. "Our first match is against the team from Nalbari. It is an elimination match. We lose, we go home."

He opened the notebook.

"I am announcing the 'Playing Eleven.'"

The team went rigid.

"Rohan Sharma, Captain."

Rohan nodded.

"Rishi, Vice-Captain, at number three."

Rishi nodded.

"Aakash, wicketkeeper."

"Pawan, Akhil, Bikash... batsmen, four, five, and six."

"Utpal, Sahil, bowlers."

He kept reading. He named his two fast bowlers. Ten names.

There was one spot left.

The number seven spot. The "All-rounder" spot.

Rajat was staring at Sarma, his face pale, pleading. He was the team's enforcer.

The rest of the team was staring at Raghav.

Sarma looked at his notebook. He was showing them his deliberation.

He looked up, his eyes scanning the team.

"Number seven," he said.

He looked past Rajat. He looked past the other reserves.

His eyes locked with Raghav's.

"Roi."

A jolt went through the entire team. Rohan's head snapped up. Rajat showed his disbelief, his mouth falling open.

"Roi, you are at seven," Sarma continued, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You will be our first-change bowler. And you will bat."

He closed his notebook.

[HIDDEN QUEST COMPLETE: 'More Than a Reserve']

[Rewards Issued... Verifying...]

[1x [Super Healing Potion] (Stored in Inventory)]

[1000 System Points (SP) Acquired. Total SP: 1300]

[+2.0 Bowling Skill (Permanent) Acquired. New Skill: 12.0]

[+3.0 Fielding Skill (Permanent) Acquired. New Skill: 11.0]

A warm, electric surge flooded Raghav's body. The ache in his arm didn't disappear, but it was overshadowed by a new, deep, solid strength.

His mind was clear. He had the potion.

He could save his father.

He had done it.

Sarma looked at his stunned, silent team.

"This is the eleven. The decision is final. For those of you not on the list, your job is to support them. For those of you on it... do not make me regret my choice."

He stared hard at Rajat, then at Rohan, and finally, at Raghav.

"Practice is over. Get in the school bus."

He turned and walked away.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 43: The Grind

Chapter 43: The Grind

The two days before the tournament were a whirlwind of logistics, not glory. Raghav's last conversation with his father had been brief and strained.

Umesh had stood in the doorway of Raghav's room, watching him pack his small, worn bag. He was showing his disapproval, his arms crossed, his face a mask of stern disappointment.

"This... hotel. The Association is paying?"

"Yes, Papa."

"You will be... away. For how long?"

"I don't know," Raghav had replied, his voice quiet. He folded his last shirt. "It depends on if we keep winning."

Umesh had just grunted, a sound of deep dissatisfaction. "Do not," he said, his voice low, "ask me for any money."

"I won't," Raghav said.

His father had just stared at him for a long, heavy moment, then turned and walked away. There was no "good luck." There was no "goodbye."

The bus ride to the hotel was a new lesson in team dynamics. Raghav sat alone, at the very back. The other boys, giddy with the freedom of their first "tour," were loud, telling jokes and bragging.

Raghav, however, saw the trip not as an adventure, but as a business trip. His perspective, seasoned by a lifetime he alone remembered, made him feel utterly detached from the childish joy around him. He just watched.

He watched Rajat, the fast bowler, holding court in the middle of the bus, his taped ankle propped up, his voice the loudest.

He watched Rohan Sharma, the captain, sitting near the front with Coach Sarma, discussing a notebook. He was serious, professional.

He watched the other boys, the reserves, who were already fetching snacks for the senior players.

Raghav was not one of them. He was not a reserve, and he was not truly a player. He was an anomaly, the 17th man.

They arrived at a simple, three-story government hotel in a busy part of Guwahati. It was not a place of luxury. The paint was peeling, and the air smelled of stale curry and disinfectant. But to the boys, it was heaven.

"My own room!" one of them yelled, running into the lobby.

"Silence!" Sarma's voice bounced off the tiled walls. "You are not here on holiday. You are here to represent your district. Get in line. Get your keys. You are two to a room. The list is on the wall. Find your partner. Be in the dining hall at 7 PM for a team meeting. No exceptions."

The boys, chastened, scrambled to the notice board.

Raghav walked over, his bag in his one good hand. He scanned the list, his eyes searching. He saw Rohan and Rishi were roomed together. He saw Rajat was with Pawan.

Then he saw his own name, at the very bottom.

17. Raghav Roi / Aakash Biswas

Aakash, the wicketkeeper.

Raghav turned. Aakash was already there, his kit bag neatly at his feet. He was a small, thin boy with large, intense eyes behind a pair of glasses. He was the one who, during the net session, had been practicing his footwork, alone, while the others joked. He was a worker.

Aakash looked at Raghav, his expression not hostile, not friendly. It was neutral. Analytical.

"You're Raghav," Aakash said. It was a simple statement of fact.

"You're Aakash."

Aakash just nodded. "Right. Room 304. Let's go."

Their room was small, with two hard, narrow beds and a single, buzzing fluorescent light. Aakash immediately began to unpack. He laid out his keeping gloves, his inner gloves, and a bottle of linseed oil, and began to methodically work on the leather of his gloves.

Raghav watched him for a moment. "You do that every night?"

"Every night," Aakash replied, not looking up. "The leather needs to be soft. If the leather is hard, the ball doesn't 'stick.' It pops out. It's about the process."

Raghav understood. This boy was a technician, just like him.

Raghav said nothing more. He unpacked his own meager bag, took out his small red rubber ball, and sat on the edge of his bed.

In the silence of the room, there were only two sounds: the soft, rhythmic rubbing of Aakash's cloth on his gloves, and the quiet, agonizing, relentless...

Squeeze... Release... Squeeze... Release...

Aakash paused his rubbing. He heard the sound. He looked at Raghav's hand, at the ball. He looked at the boy's pale, thin arm. He saw the flicker of pain that crossed Raghav's face with every squeeze.

He didn't say anything. He just... watched. Then, he went back to his work.

The two of them, the quietest, most focused boys on the team, worked in silence.

At 7 PM, the dining hall was loud, the boys clattering plates. Sarma stood at the front, a blackboard behind him.

"QUIET!" he roared.

The hall fell silent.

"Welcome to the Inter-District Championship," he said, his voice low and serious. "I will be blunt. This is not a 'fun' tournament. This is a grind."

He turned and picked up a piece of chalk.

"There are 28 district teams," he wrote 28 on the board. "They are divided into four groups. A, B, C, and D. We are in Group C."

He wrote Group C and underlined it.

"In our group," he continued, "are seven teams. Us. Goalpara. Lakhimpur. Sivasagar. Nagaon. Jorhat. And Karimganj."

He looked at the sea of young faces.

"This is not a knockout. This is a round-robin. You will play every team in our group... twice."

A murmur went through the room.

Rohan's head snapped up. He did the math. "Coach... that's... that's fourteen games."

"Fourteen games," Sarma confirmed, his voice like stone. "In three weeks. We play almost every single day. This is not about talent. This is about endurance. This is about who can survive."

He let that sink in. The giddy, holiday atmosphere was gone, replaced by a cold dread.

"Only one team from our group," Sarma said, holding up a single, thick finger, "will qualify for the semi-final. The team with the most wins. There is no second place. There is no 'wild card.' You finish first... or you go home."

He put the chalk down.

"This is a war of attrition. You will be tired. You will be sore. You will be homesick. I do not care. All I care about is the 'Win' column. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach!" the team replied, their voices now a single, subdued, serious unit.

"Good. Curfew is 9 PM. Our first match is tomorrow. 9 AM. Nehru Stadium. Be in the lobby, in your whites, at 7:30 AM."

One of the players, Pawan, raised his hand. "Who are we playing, Coach?"

Sarma looked at his notes.

"Our first opponent," he said, "is Sivasagar."

The meeting was over. The boys stood up, the room now filled with a low, nervous murmur.

As Raghav stood, he felt a body slam into his shoulder, hard, knocking him off balance.

"Watch it, reserve," a voice growled.

It was Rajat. The fast bowler was limping, his ankle still taped, but his eyes were full of venom. He had used the old, dead nickname on purpose.

Before Raghav could even react, Rohan Sharma's voice cut in.

"Rajat. Enough."

Rohan was standing right there. His voice was quiet, but it was the voice of the captain.

"He's on the team. He's in the eleven. That makes him one of us. Are we clear?"

Rajat's face darkened. He showed his insubordination, his lip curling. "He's in your spot, Chinmoy," he said to another boy, an all-rounder who was standing next to him, looking at the floor. "He took your place."

Chinmoy, the boy who had been bumped for Raghav, just looked at Raghav, his face a mask of quiet, burning resentment. This was the sub-plot. Raghav hadn't just gained a spot; he had taken it.

"That was the coach's call," Rohan said, his voice final. "And it's done. Back off."

Rajat held Rohan's gaze for a long, hostile second, then turned and limped away.

Rohan watched him go, then turned to Raghav. He was showing his frustration, the burden of leadership.

"Don't... don't mind him," Rohan said, his voice awkward. "He's just... angry."

"I know," Raghav said.

"Just..." Rohan paused, trying to find the words. "Just be ready tomorrow. Sivasagar isn't Spring Dale. They're tough. We need you."

He was not a friend. But he was a captain. He was offering an olive branch.

"I'll be ready," Raghav said.

Rohan nodded once, then walked away.

Raghav stood there for a moment, the resentment of Chinmoy and the hatred of Rajat like a physical weight on his back.

He went back to his room. Aakash was already in bed, reading a book on wicketkeeping techniques.

Raghav sat on his own bed. He didn't turn on the light.

He just sat in the dark. And in the silence, he picked up the red rubber ball.

Squeeze. Release. Squeeze. Release.

He had fourteen games.

It was, as Sarma had said, a grind.

The next morning, the bus was quiet. It was a 7:30 AM ride, and the players were nervous, focused.

They arrived at Nehru Stadium. It was a massive, old, concrete bowl, far bigger than the ACA ground.

Coach Sarma gathered them at the gate.

"This is it," he said. "Sivasagar. They are a tough team. They are scrappers. They will not give you anything. We have to be clean. We have to be ruthless. Rohan. You and I. For the toss."

Raghav, his heart beating a low, steady rhythm, watched his captain and coach walk out to the center of the vast, green field.

He saw the Sivasagar captain, a tall, broad-shouldered boy (let's call him Akhil), meet them. The umpire was there.

He couldn't hear, but he could see the ritual.

The umpire showed the coin. Akhil, the Sivasagar captain, called.

The umpire tossed it. It spun, a silver speck in the morning sun.

It landed.

The umpire looked at it, then pointed at Akhil.

Sivasagar had won the toss.

Akhil spoke to Rohan, his expression confident.

Rohan nodded, his face unreadable, and walked back with Sarma.

The team crowded around him. "What is it? What did they pick?"

Rohan looked at his team, his eyes scanning each face.

"They've chosen to bat."

A sigh of relief went through the Kamrup team. They were a strong bowling side. This was a good start.

Sarma grabbed Rohan's arm. "Good. Good. This is our strength. Rajat... your ankle?"

Rajat, who was testing his ankle, grimaced. "It's not 100%, Coach. I can bowl... but I'll be slow."

Sarma cursed under his breath. He looked at his bowling lineup.

"Fine," he said. "Sahil, you take the new ball. Utpal, from the other end. I want spin and swing. I want them confused."

Then he turned, and his eyes found Raghav.

"Roi. You're first-change. You'll be on in the eighth over. Be ready. I want that 'trick' of yours. I want you to break them."

"Yes, Coach."

The team ran onto the field, their blue caps bright against the green.

Raghav took his position at Fine Leg, his new "safe" spot.

The Sivasagar openers, Akhil and Bikash, walked to the crease. They looked tough, confident, their bats swinging.

The umpire called, "Play!"

The first match of the grind had begun.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 44: The First Test

Chapter 44: The First Test

The vast, concrete bowl of Nehru Stadium felt hollow. The cheers of the two dozen teammates from each side were the only sounds, echoing in the 9 AM stillness.

Raghav jogged to his position at Deep Fine Leg. His new Fielding stat of 11.0 was not just a number; it was a feeling. He felt lighter on his feet. He felt his perception change. His experienced mind, the one that had watched thousands of hours of cricket, was no

longer trapped in a clumsy, slow body. The 12-year-old's hardware was starting to catch up. He crouched, his eyes on the batsmen.

At the crease, the two Sivasagar openers, Akhil (the captain) and Bikash, looked exactly as Sarma had described. They were "scrappers." They weren't wearing new, pristine pads. Their equipment was worn, their bats were old, and they looked tough.

Rohan, Kamrup's captain, set his field. It was an aggressive, opening field.

Aakash, the wicketkeeper, took his position, his movements precise and quiet.

Sahil, the medium-pace In-swinging, was at the top of his mark.

"Play!" the umpire commanded.

[Score: 0/0. Target (Kamrup): -]

Sahil ran in, his action short and bustling.

[Ball 0.1] His first ball was a "sighter." Good Length, on the Off-Stump. Akhil, the Sivasagar captain, just watched it go by, his bat raised. A confident leave.

[Ball 0.2] Sahil adjusted his line. He delivered his specialty. The In-swinging. It started wide and jagged back in. Akhil, showing his "scrapper" nature, didn't play a pretty shot. He just brought his bat down, a stiff-legged, awkward-looking push, and nudged the ball to Mid-Wicket. No run.

[Ball 0.3] Sahil, seeing his awkwardness, tried the In-swinging again. This time, Akhil was ready. He stepped across his stumps and "clipped" the ball, a wristy, powerful shot.

It was not timed perfectly, but he had hit it hard.

The ball was racing towards Raghav at Fine Leg.

It was his first test.

The old Raghav, with his '8' in fielding, would have been slow to react. He would have fumbled.

The new Raghav, with '11', moved.

His seasoned mind instantly calculated the angle. He didn't run at the ball; he ran to intercept it. His movements were efficient. He didn't break stride. He bent, scooped the ball cleanly with his right hand, and in one fluid motion, stood and fired the ball back to the wicketkeeper, Aakash.

His Iron Grip and new Strength made the throw flat and fast.

The Sivasagar batsmen, who were fast and aggressive, had already run two. They saw the throw and, thinking it was a 12-year-old's arm, turned for a third.

Aakash, seeing the throw coming, took his position. The ball bounced once, perfectly, into his gloves.

THWACK.

He whipped the bails off.

"HOW'S THAT?!" he screamed.

The non-striker, Bikash, had been forced into a desperate dive. The umpire's eyes went to the crease.

Bikash had just... just... dragged his bat over the line.

"Not out," the umpire said, his voice calm.

The batsmen had completed three runs. But the message was sent.

Rohan, from Mid-Off, clapped his hands. "GOOD ARM, RAGHAV! GOOD STOP! ONE LESS!"

It was a small, professional gesture of respect. Raghav just nodded, his heart beating a steady, cold rhythm. 'My arm strength is still weak,' he thought. 'That should have been a two.'

[Score: 3/0. Batsmen: Akhil 3*, Bikash 0*]

Sahil finished his over. Bikash, the other opener, blocked the last few balls.

Now, Coach Sarma's first gamble.

He brought on Utpal, the leg-spinner, from the other end. Spin with the new ball.

[Ball 1.1] Utpal tossed his first ball up. It was a big, looping Leg-Break.

Akhil, the "scrapper," saw the slow ball and his eyes lit up. He was not a "textbook" player. He was a "hitter."

He went for a massive, agricultural Slog over Mid-Wicket, his feet planted.

He missed. Completely.

The ball, buzzing with spin, ripped past his bat. Aakash, the keeper, moved beautifully, taking it cleanly.

"WOAAAAH!" Aakash yelled, a sound of pure appreciation for the spin.

The Sivasagar captain's face flushed. He'd been made to look foolish.

[Ball 1.2] Utpal, seeing the aggression, tossed it up again. This time, Akhil connected, but he was swinging so hard, he got a thick Inside Edge. The ball squirted, ugly, to Square Leg. A single.

[Score: 4/0. Batsmen: Akhil 4*, Bikash 0*]

[Ball 1.3] Bikash was on strike. Utpal, clever, bowled his Googly.

Bikash, like his captain, had no idea. He played for the Leg-Break, but the ball turned in. It beat his bat and slammed into his pad.

"HOWZAT!" the Kamrup team roared.

The umpire shook his head. The ball, he signaled, was missing the stumps.

The Sivasagar openers were rattled. They were swinging, they were missing. They were all at sea.

[Ball 1.4-1.6] Bikash just blocked out the rest of the over. He was terrified.

[Score: 4/0. Overs: 2.0]

The Kamrup team was electric. They were on.

"YES, BOYS! YES, UTPAL!" Rohan a_s_s. "THIS IS IT!"

But the Sivasagar batsmen were "scrappers." And scrappers, when they're embarrassed, don't play pretty. They survive.

The game found a new, hard rhythm.

Akhil and Bikash stopped swinging. They put their heads down. They were showing their grit.

Sahil ran in. They blocked.

Utpal ran in. They blocked.

They weren't scoring. But they weren't getting out.

They pushed the ball into gaps, using their "scrapper" mentality to run everything hard. They turned singles into twos. They ran at the slightest misfield.

The Kamrup bowlers, Sahil and Utpal, were getting frustrated. They were bowling well, but the batsmen were just... there. They were like a pair of annoying rocks.

The score crawled.

11/0 after 3 overs.

19/0 after 4. Sahil gave up a boundary, a thick Outside Edge from Akhil that flew, luckily, past the Gully fielder.

24/0 after 5. Utpal was tight.

31/0 after 6. Sahil was starting to get tired. His In-swing was gone.

35/0 after 7. The partnership was solid. Akhil was 19. Bikash was 12. They had weathered the new ball. The fielders were starting to droop. The 9 AM energy was gone.

Rohan, Rishi, and Aakash converged at the end of the 7th over.

"They're set," Rohan said, his voice tight. He was showing his frustration. "Sahil, your swing is gone. Utpal, they're just blocking you. They're not taking any chances."

"They're not trying to hit, Captain," Aakash said, his analytical eyes sharp. "They're just... waiting. They're trying to see off our main bowlers. They're waiting for the 'easy' part."

From the boundary line, Coach Sarma saw it. The team was flat. The momentum was gone. He needed to change the energy.

He didn't yell. He just signaled.

He looked at Rohan, then pointed to Utpal, who was at the top of his run-up. Sarma gave a sharp "cut" signal. 'You're done.'

Then, his arm moved, his finger uncurling.

He pointed to the outfield.

He pointed at the 17th man, the boy at Fine Leg.

He pointed at Raghav.

Rohan saw the signal. His head turned. He looked at Raghav.

"Raghav! You're on! Get the ball! Sahil, you take Fine Leg!"

Raghav's heart didn't "pound." His pulse didn't "race." His seasoned mind just went cold and quiet.

'It's time.'

He started to jog in, his face calm.

The rest of the team was... confused. Rajat, sitting on the sideline, his ankle propped up, actually scoffed. "Now? He's bringing in the kid? When the batsmen are set? Is he trying to lose?"

Chinmoy, the all-rounder Raghav had replaced, just shook his head, his face a mask of bitter resentment.

Raghav reached the center. Rohan was waiting for him.

"This is it," Rohan said, his voice low, professional. "I don't care what you did in the nets. I need a wicket. I need you to break this partnership. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Raghav said.

He took the ball from the umpire. It was not the old, scuffed-up net ball. This was the real, hard, white leather match ball. The seam was still new, sharp.

He felt it in his hand. The Iron Grip closed around it. It felt perfect.

He looked at the field.

Rohan was already one step ahead. "What do you want?"

Raghav's mind, the one with 25.7 Cricket IQ, analyzed the batsmen. 'They're scrappers. They hit with their hands, not their feet. They hate the ball they can't 'slog.'

"Keep Aakash up," Raghav said, his voice quiet, but firm.

Rohan's eyebrows shot up. Aakash was a keeper, but... "Up? To you? You're not a spinner."

"Keep him up," Raghav repeated. "And... I want a Gully. And a Short Leg."

Now the whole team was staring. Gully and Short Leg... for a medium-pacer?

Rohan was baffled. This was a "pressure" field, a "leg-spin" field.

But he had seen what Raghav had done to him. He looked at Raghav's cold, certain eyes.

He made a captain's decision. He trusted his gut.

"You heard him!" Rohan yelled. "Rishi, get in at Gully! Pawan, go to Short Leg!"

The batsmen, Akhil and Bikash, were watching this. They showed their confusion. A Short Leg? For this skinny kid?

Akhil, who was on strike, smiled. He tapped his bat on the crease, then pointed it at Raghav.

"Hey, kid!" he yelled, his voice friendly, but full of condescending arrogance. "You sure you're not a bit... slow... for a field like that?"

The Sivasagar dugout laughed.

Raghav didn't answer. He just stood at the top of his mark. He tossed the white ball in his hand.

He looked at Akhil.

He thought of his father. He thought of the Super Healing Potion.

He began his run-up.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 45: The Ripper

Chapter 45: The Ripper

[Score: 35/0. Overs: 7.0. Batsmen: Akhil 19*, Bikash 12*. Bowler: Raghav R.]

Raghav stood at the top of his bowling mark. The white, hard, match ball felt heavy and real in his right hand. His Iron Grip closed around the seam, a familiar, solid vice.

In front of him, the field was a strange, aggressive, hybrid creature of his own design.

Pawan, the team's best fielder, was crouched at Short Leg, uncomfortably close, his helmet grille glinting.

Rishi, the "problem-solver," was at Gully, his knees bent, waiting for an edge.

Aakash, the keeper, was standing up to the stumps, his gloves raised, his glasses fogging slightly in the humidity.

This was a field designed to suffocate.

Twenty-two yards away, Akhil, the Sivasagar captain, watched this. He was a "scrapper," and this setup was an insult. It was a trick. He showed his contempt by tapping his bat on the crease, then pointing it, playfully, at Raghav.

"Hey, kid!" he yelled, his voice echoing in the vast, near-empty stadium. "You sure you're not a bit... slow... for a field like that?"

The Sivasagar dugout, a small cluster of boys by the boundary, laughed.

On the Kamrup sideline, Rajat, the injured fast bowler, scoffed. "He's going to get murdered. This is a joke."

Raghav didn't answer. He didn't look at Akhil. He looked at the spot on the pitch he wanted to hit.

His perspective, seasoned by a lifetime he alone remembered, had already analyzed this batsman. 'He's arrogant. He's a "hitter," not a "batsman." He's expecting a trick.'

So, Raghav decided, he would give him nothing.

He began his run-up. The short, simple, rhythmic glide.

[Ball 7.1]

His arm came over. His pace was medium, at best. He bowled a simple, straight, Good Length delivery. No cutter. No skidder. It was the most "nothing" ball he could possibly bowl.

Akhil, who had set himself for a spinning, jaggling, trick ball, was completely baffled.

He was showing his confusion. His feet, which had been ready to dance, were stuck. He was forced into a clumsy, stiff-legged Block. The ball thudded, harmlessly, into the middle of his bat.

"There it is, boys!" Rajat yelled from the side. "Just a normal, slow bowler!"

Raghav just walked back. His face was blank. 'Good. He's confused.'

[Ball 7.2]

He ran in again. Same glide. Same pace.

He delivered the exact same ball.

A Good Length, straight, simple delivery on Middle Stump.

Akhil was annoyed now. He was the captain. He was set on 19. This... this water boy... was boring him.

He played another block, this one more aggressive, more forceful. He was showing his impatience.

[Ball 7.3]

Raghav saw it. The impatience. The fatal flaw of the "scrapper." They hate, more than anything, to be bored.

He ran in. Same glide.

Akhil, his mind made up, was convinced Raghav was just a slow, one-note bowler. He was going to create a shot.

But Raghav, his analytical mind one step ahead, pulled his length back. It was a fraction Shorter-of-a-Good-Length.

Akhil, already committed to coming forward, was caught. He was cramped. He tried to force a Pull shot on a ball that wasn't short enough.

CLACK!

He got a thick, ugly Inside Edge. The ball thudded, hard, into his own thigh pad and dropped at his feet, nearly rolling back onto his stumps.

A collective "Aaaaah!" came from Aakash and the Short Leg fielder.

Akhil was now furious. He had been made to look clumsy. He had been made to look weak.

[Ball 7.4]

Raghav walked back. He saw it all. The flushed red on Akhil's neck. The death-grip on the bat. The batsman was no longer thinking about "tricks." He was no longer thinking at all.

He was just angry.

'Now,' Raghav thought. 'Now I give him the trick.'

He began his run-up. The identical glide. The identical arm action.

Rohan, at Mid-Off, leaned in, his eyes narrowed. He felt the shift.

Akhil saw the "same" ball coming. He was going to smash it. He planted his front foot, his body coiling for a massive, redeeming On-Drive.

But this time, Raghav's hand, his Iron Grip, did its work.

His wrist snapped. His fingers ripped down the hard, new seam of the match ball.

It was the Off-Cutter.

The ball pitched on Middle Stump, looking exactly like the first three deliveries.

Akhil, his swing already in motion, was committed.

And then the ball hit the pitch.

It didn't just "turn."

It kicked.

It exploded off the rough, hard surface, jagging back in, violently.

Akhil's bat, swinging on the path of the ball that wasn't there, sliced through empty air.

Whoosh.

The ball, moving like a snake, passed the inside of his bat.

It passed the inside of his front pad.

Aakash, the keeper, who was standing up, was the only one who saw it. He saw the ball's destination.

CLACK!

It was not the sound of the bat. It was not the sound of the pad.

It was the sharp, crack of wood.

The Leg Stump bail, struck with vicious force, flew up into the air. It spun, end over end, and landed on the grass.

WICKET!

The field went dead silent.

The Sivasagar dugout, which had been laughing, was a silent row of shocked faces.

Akhil, the captain, was frozen in his Drive pose, a statue of disbelief. He stared at his stumps. He looked at the umpire.

Aakash, the wicketkeeper, was the first to react.

"YES! YES! GONE! BOWLED HIM!"

He roared, ripping his gloves off and throwing his head back.

The Kamrup team, as one, exploded.

They sprinted in from all corners of the field.

"YES, RAGHAV! YES!"

"WHAT A BALL! WHAT A BALL!"

Pawan, the Short Leg, was the first to reach him, pounding him on the back. Rishi, from Gully, sprinted in, his face a mask of pure, analytical shock.

Rajat, on the sideline, was standing, his mouth half-open. "What... what the hell... was that?"

Rohan Sharma, at Mid-Off, just stood there, his hands on his hips. He was watching Akhil. He wasn't celebrating. He was... analyzing. He had been a victim of that same, impossible delivery. He was watching, with a cold, detached respect, as his rival captain was dismantled.

Akhil, his face a dark, furious red, finally moved. He tucked his bat under his arm and began the long walk off. He didn't look at anyone. He had been tricked. He had been humiliated. He had been beaten.

Raghav just stood at the center of the storm. He didn't pump his fist. He didn't yell. His arm was screaming in agony from the effort of that one, perfect ball. He just took a deep, ragged breath.

'One,' he thought.

[Score: 35/1. Overs: 7.4. Batsmen: Bikash 12*. New Batsman: ?]

The umpire picked up the bail and reset the stump.

The new Sivasagar batsman, a small, nervous-looking boy (let's call him Romen), was walking out, his steps slow and heavy. He looked like a man walking to his own execution.

He walked past Bikash, the other opener, who was still at the non-striker's end, his face white.

"What... what was that?" Romen whispered.

Bikash just shook his head. "I don't know," he muttered. "It just... it moved. Watch yourself."

Romen, his heart pounding, took his stance.

Raghav had two balls left in his over.

Rohan, now a true believer, kept the field. The Short Leg. The Gully. He was showing his trust. "Go on, Raghav," he yelled. "Finish him."

Raghav looked at Bikash, who had crossed over to the striker's end. Bikash was showing his fear. His feet were like cement.

[Ball 7.5]

Raghav knew the batsman was terrified. He was expecting the "magic" ball, the cutter.

So Raghav gave him the opposite.

He glided in. His arm action was identical.

But this time, he bowled the Skidder. He pushed it through, fuller, faster, on Off-Stump, using the Iron Grip to just propel it.

Bikash, who was expecting the ball to jag in, was frozen. His feet didn't move. He just pushed his bat out, a late, panicked, defensive jab.

He was beaten for pace. The ball just missed his Outside Edge.

Whoosh!

Aakash took it, his gloves snapping shut. "Aaaaaah!" he screamed.

Bikash was a nervous wreck. He had no idea what was coming.

[Ball 7.6]

One ball left. Raghav felt the pulsing throb in his forearm. It was a race against time. He had to finish this.

'He's scared of the fast one. He's scared of the one that moves in.'

Raghav's seasoned mind made the call. 'One more. The big one.'

He ran in. The same glide. The same arm action.

Bikash, his mind poisoned, was playing for the Skidder. He was playing for the last ball he faced.

He set himself, his bat coming down in that same, panicked jab.

But Raghav's wrist snapped.

He ripped his fingers down the seam.

It was the Off-Cutter. Again.

The ball pitched on Middle Stump, a perfect, tempting, straight delivery.

Bikash pushed at it.

And the ball kicked. It jagged in.

It beat his bat.

It beat his defensive push.

THWACK!

It was not the sound of wood. It was the dull, heavy thud of leather on pad.

The ball slammed, hard, into Bikash's front pad, dead in front of Middle Stump.

Raghav didn't even wait.

He spun around, his right arm—his sore, aching, weaponized arm—raised high to the sky.

"HOWZAT!" he roared.

The entire Kamrup team erupted with him.

"HOWZAT! GONE! PLUMB!"

The umpire, who had seen it all, didn't hesitate.

His finger went up.

WICKET! LBW!

The field exploded.

If the first wicket was a celebration, this was a coronation.

The Kamrup team didn't just pat Raghav on the back. They mobbed him.

"TWO! TWO IN AN OVER!"

"WHAT IS HAPPENING!"

Pawan, the Short Leg, was the first one there, grabbing Raghav in a headlock. "You're a freak, man! A freak!"

Sahil ran in from the outfield. "He's a magician!"

Rohan Sharma just ran up, his face split in a grin of pure, unadulterated shock and joy. He grabbed Raghav by the shoulders.

"That... that... is what I'm talking about! YES, RAGHAV!"

He was screaming the name.

[Score: 35/2. Overs: 8.0. (Wicket on last ball)]

The game was shattered. Sivasagar was in ruins. Two set batsmen, gone in three balls.

Raghav stood at the center of the mob, his arm on fire, his body aching, just trying to breathe.

[SYSTEM NOTIFICATION: 'Partnership Breaker' (Micro-Achievement) Unlocked!]

[+50 System Points Acquired. Total SP: 1350]

[Hidden Quest 'More Than a Reserve': Progress 3/11 (Selected), (Broke Partnership)]

On the sideline, Rajat was silent, his face white. Chinmoy, the all-rounder, was just staring, his resentment now mixed with a terrifying, undeniable awe.

Coach Sarma was a mask of stone. He watched the celebration. He watched the two new, terrified Sivasagar batsmen (Romen and a new one, Pawan) meet in the middle of the pitch, their shoulders slumped.

He watched Raghav, the 17th man, who was now being escorted back to his fielding position by a grinning, ecstatic Rohan.

Sarma just pulled out his notebook and made a small, sharp mark next to Raghav's name.

The "water boy" was now the team's executioner.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 46: The Echo

Chapter 46: The Echo

The Kamrup team was a single, roaring, blue-and-white entity, a mob of ecstatic 13-year-olds who had just witnessed a miracle. They were pounding Raghav on the back, grabbing his head, his shoulders, their voices a chaotic chorus of "What was that?!" and "You're a magician!"

Raghav, at the center of the storm, just tried to breathe.

His face was pale, his entire right arm a dead, heavy thing that hung at his side, screaming with a pain so deep it felt like it was in his bones. He felt the system's reward (+50 SP) as a tiny, insignificant drop of warmth in a cold ocean of agony.

He had done it. But the cost was immense.

The celebration broke as the umpire, his face impassive, reset the stumps for the third time. The two new Sivasagar batsmen, Romen and the new man, Pawan, were now at the crease. They were just... there. They looked like ghosts. Their two set, "scrapper" captains—the soul of their team—had been surgically, impossibly, removed in the space of three balls.

Raghav, his moment of triumph over, began the long, painful walk back to his new fielding position. His elation was gone, replaced by the cold, analytical reality of his physical state.

'One over. That's all I had.' His mind, seasoned by a lifetime of understanding limits, was blunt. 'That was it. The arm is done.'

Rohan, the captain, jogged alongside him, his face still flushed with adrenaline and shock.

"That was... that was unbelievable, Raghav," Rohan panted, his eyes wide with a new, profound respect. "Can you... can you bowl another one? Can you finish them?"

Raghav looked at his captain. He showed his exhaustion. He didn't need to fake it. His face was slick with a cold sweat.

"I need... a few overs, Captain," Raghav said, his voice a low, ragged breath. He couldn't admit he was broken. "My arm... it's just a little tight."

Rohan, a smart captain, saw it instantly. He saw the paleness. He saw the way Raghav was protecting the arm, cradling it against his chest as he walked. He wasn't just "tight." He was spent.

"Right," Rohan said, his voice instantly becoming professional. He was showing his leadership. "Right. You're done. Go to Fine Leg. Rest. Do not... do not even look at a ball."

Raghav just nodded, grateful.

As he jogged, slowly, to the furthest, safest position on the field, he passed Coach Sarma, who was standing at the edge of the 30-yard circle, his arms crossed.

Sarma didn't look at the field. He looked at Raghav.

Their eyes met. Sarma saw the boy's pain, the exhaustion, the price of the magic trick.

"Go," Sarma grunted, his voice too low for anyone else to hear. "You're done. Go stand in the shade. Do not throw with that arm. Do not. That's an order."

It was the closest the coach would ever come to saying "Good job," or "Thank you." He was protecting his new, fragile, devastating asset.

Raghav nodded. "Yes, Coach."

He took his place at Fine Leg, a solitary blue figure in the deep, his body screaming, his work finished.

But the game wasn't finished.

Sarma signaled to Sahil, the medium-pace In-swing. "You're back on. Finish what he started."

Sahil grabbed the ball, his face lit with a rabid, newfound confidence.

This was the "Echo Effect."

Raghav, from 150 yards away, watched the new batsman, Romen, take his stance. The boy was terrified. He was showing it. His feet were moving, a nervous, rabbit-like dance. His eyes weren't watching Sahil. They were darting around, at the Gully, at the Short Leg, at the keeper. He was expecting an attack from all angles. He was expecting the "boogeyman" ball.

His mind was poisoned.

[Ball 8.1]

Sahil, his chest puffed out, ran in. He was not a "trick" bowler. He was a "swing" bowler. He delivered his stock ball: a simple, Good Length In-swing. It started on Off-Stump and moved back in.

Romen, the batsman, was paralyzed.

His mind was screaming at him: 'The ball from the new kid... it moved IN! This one is moving IN! It's the same! It's the same!'

He was caught in a loop of pure, unadulterated terror. He was so afraid of the Cutter that he didn't even see the In-swing.

He was expecting a trick. He was expecting magic.

He was not expecting a simple, textbook delivery.

He froze.

He didn't play a shot. He didn't block. He didn't move his feet.

He just stood there as the ball, moving in a gentle, predictable arc, passed his bat, passed his pad...

CLACK.

It hit the Middle Stump.

He was Bowled.

The stump cartwheeled back.

[Score: 35/3. Overs: 8.1]

For a second, the Kamrup team was just... stunned. They had been bracing for a new fight.

And the fight had ended before it began.

Aakash, the keeper, was the first to react. He just... started laughing. A high-pitched, hysterical laugh of disbelief.

Then the team erupted.

This time, they didn't just mob Sahil. They were pointing. They were pointing back at Fine Leg. They were pointing at Raghav.

"HE'S A GHOST!" Pawan roared from Short Leg. "He's not even bowling, and he's taking wickets!"

Raghav, from the boundary, just watched. His seasoned mind understood the psychology perfectly. 'I didn't take that wicket. The idea of me took that wicket. They're not playing against us anymore. They're playing against the boogeyman.'

The Sivasagar team was in a full-blown, catastrophic mental collapse.

Their next batsman, an all-rounder named Kaushik, walked to the crease. His face was white. He didn't just look nervous; he looked sick. He was the fourth man in, and the score was still 35.

Sahil bowled out the rest of the over. The new batsman just blocked, his bat trembling, jabbing at the ball like it was a snake.

[Score: 35/3. Overs: 9.0]

Sarma didn't relent. He kept the attacking field. He brought Utpal, the leg-spinner, back on from the other end.

[Ball 9.1]

Utpal saw the terror. He tossed his first ball up. A big, looping, beautiful Leg-Break. It was a "sucker" ball, begging to be hit.

The new batsman, Kaushik, saw the slow ball. His mind was screaming, 'Don't get tricked! Don't get tricked!'

His other mind was screaming, 'We need runs! I'm the all-rounder! I have to be the hero!'

The two impulses collided. He tried to do both. He tried to "attack" and "defend" at the same time.

He went for a massive, panicked Slog, but he didn't use his feet. He was "stuck" in the crease.

THOCK.

He got a massive, towering Top Edge.

The ball went straight up in the air. A "skier."

It hung in the air for what felt like an eternity, a tiny white speck against the blue sky.

Underneath it, the world went silent.

Aakash, the keeper, ripped his helmet off, his eyes on the ball.

Rohan, the captain, at Mid-Off, was settling under it.

"CAPTAIN'S CALL!" Rohan roared, his voice clear and confident.

He positioned himself. He waited. He waited.

His hands were soft. The ball nestled into his palms. A simple, easy, devastating catch.

[Score: 36/4. Overs: 9.1]

Utpal, the bowler, just pumped his fist. This was easy.

The Sivasagar dugout was a morgue. Their coach was just staring, his clipboard forgotten.

This wasn't a match. This was a rout.

The "scrappers" had no "scrap" left. They were a house of cards, built entirely on the bravado of their two openers. Raghav had pulled out the two bottom cards, and the entire structure had imploded.

The end came swiftly.

[Ball 10.3] Sahil, bowling with renewed venom, brought an In-swing back in. The new batsman (Dinesh) was hit on the pads, plumb in front. LBW.

[Score: 40/5. Overs: 10.3]

[Ball 11.2] Utpal, bowling his Googly, completely fooled the number seven batsman. The batsman stepped out, missed...

Aakash, his glovework immaculate, whipped the bails off. Stumped.

[Score: 42/6. Overs: 11.2]

At this point, Coach Sarma showed his mastery.

He saw the game was won. But the war for his team's loyalty was not.

He made a change.

He took Raghav off the field entirely. "Roi. You're done. Ice that arm. Now."

Raghav, his body screaming, was grateful. He took his cap and walked off, to a smattering of applause from his own teammates.

Then, Sarma put Chinmoy, the resentful all-rounder Raghav had replaced, into Raghav's "hot" spot at Cover.

He also brought him on to bowl.

This was a political masterstroke. He was giving Chinmoy a chance to feed on the carcass. He was managing the ego of a player who felt wronged.

Chinmoy, his face a mask of furious determination, was desperate to prove he was better than the "freak" with the "trick" ball.

He didn't bowl spin. He didn't bowl cutters. He just ran in and bowled fast, straight, angry deliveries.

And it worked.

[Ball 13.1] The Sivasagar number eight, his spirit broken, just swung, blindly. He missed. Chinmoy hit. Bowled.

[Score: 45/7. Overs: 13.1]

Chinmoy let out a roar. 'See? I can do it too!'

[Ball 13.3] He got another one. A catch, popped up to Rishi at Gully.

[Score: 45/8. Overs: 13.3]

The end was a formality.

[Ball 14.5] The number nine was Run Out, a brilliant, flat throw from Pawan, who was desperately trying to atone for his earlier fear.

[Score: 47/9. Overs: 14.5]

[Ball 15.2] And finally, Chinmoy, in a blaze of glory, bowled the last man.

[Score: 48. All Out. Overs: 15.2]

The Kamrup team walked off the field. The Sivasagar team was already on their bus.

The Kamrup players were quiet. They were stunned. They had won, but they had won in a weird, brutal, terrifying way.

They all walked into the shade where Raghav was sitting, his arm buried in a plastic bag full of ice.

They didn't mob him.

They just... stood, looking at him.

Rajat, his face pale, his ankle throbbing, was there. Chinmoy, his anger now confusingly mixed with his own success, was there.

Rohan walked up. He looked at the ice. He looked at Raghav's pained face.

"So," Rohan said, his voice quiet. "That... thing... you do. Does it... does it hurt you? Every time?"

Raghav looked up, his eyes cold and tired.

"It's just work, Captain."

Rohan nodded, slowly. He finally, truly, understood. This kid wasn't a "magician." He wasn't a "freak."

He was a weapon. And weapons had a cost.

"Well," Rohan said, offering a water bottle. "The target is 49. We'll get it in ten overs."

He looked at Raghav. "You... you just rest. You've done your job."

Raghav, his arm numb, his mind already on the next match, just nodded.

The first test was over.

He had passed.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 47: The Price of the Potion

Chapter 47: The Price of the Potion

The ten-minute break between innings was just long enough for the Kamrup team to catch its breath and for the Sivasagar team to collapse. Raghav sat on the metal bench on the sideline, his cap pulled low, his right arm buried in a plastic bag of melting ice that dripped cold water onto his trousers.

The rest of the team was electric.

"48! We bowled them out for 48!"

"That was a massacre!"

Coach Sarma let the energy build for a moment before cutting through it. "Quiet!"

The team flinched.

"The job is not done," Sarma said, his voice a low growl. "A win is not a win until the last run is scored. You go out there, you get arrogant, you lose three quick wickets... and 48 looks like 148. This is cricket. It is a game of momentum. We have it. Do not give it back."

He pointed at his captain. "Rohan. Rishi. You open. You do not get fancy. You do not get arrogant. You get the runs. You finish this in ten overs. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach," Rohan and Rishi said in unison, their faces serious.

"Good. The rest of you..." Sarma's eyes swept the bench, and he saw the two sources of dissent.

He saw Chinmoy, the all-rounder, sulking, his arms crossed, angry that his own three-wicket haul had been overshadowed.

And he saw Rajat, the fast bowler, his foot propped up, his face a mask of pure, venomous resentment.

Sarma stared at Rajat for a long second, his gaze like iron. "Rajat. Ice your foot. Keep your mouth shut."

He then turned to Raghav. His gaze was different. It was analytical. He just looked at the bag of ice on Raghav's arm, his expression unreadable.

"Roi. You did your job. You're done for the day."

Rohan and Rishi, their pads on, walked past the bench. They were the "golden pair," the two best batsmen in the district.

"Right, let's finish this," Rohan said, tapping his bat on the ground.

Raghav watched from the bench, a silent observer. The game was no longer on the field; it was right here, on this metal plank.

Rajat, his foot propped up, slid, wincing, down the bench. He stopped, pointedly, right next to Raghav.

He didn't look at him. He just... radiated hostility.

Chinmoy sat on the other side, creating a tense, resentful triangle.

"So," Rajat sneered, his voice a low, rough growl. He was talking to the air, but the words were aimed at Raghav. "One-trick pony. You got lucky."

On the field, the demoralized Sivasagar team was taking their positions. Their shoulders were slumped. They looked beaten.

Raghav said nothing. He just watched.

[Ball 0.1]

The Sivasagar medium-pacer, his spirit broken, ran in. He delivered a slow, wide Full Toss.

Rohan Sharma, a picture of calm, just leaned on his front foot and Drove the ball.

CRACK!

It raced, perfectly, through the Cover gap for four.

[Score: 4/0. Target: 49. Overs: 0.1]

Rajat let out a frustrated grunt. "See? This is easy. We didn't need your little... 'trick.' We would have bowled them out for 60 anyway."

Raghav just watched.

[Ball 0.4]

The bowler, desperate, dug one in Short.

Rishi, the "problem-solver," had no problems. He rocked back and Pulled it, hard, to the Mid-Wicket boundary.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 8/0. Target: 49. Overs: 0.4]

The first over ended. 10/0.

"You ruined your arm," Rajat continued, his voice low and venomous. "For nothing. You're useless now. You're a cripple. You won't bowl for the rest of the tournament."

Chinmoy, on Raghav's other side, finally spoke. His resentment was different. It was quieter, more bitter.

"He took my spot," Chinmoy muttered, staring at his own hands. "I'm a proper all-rounder. I can bat and bowl. I got three wickets. After the team had given up. What did you get?"

Raghav's seasoned mind, his older, deeper perspective, understood them both perfectly. Rajat was a bully, terrified that his status as the "alpha" was threatened. Chinmoy was a worker, resentful that his work had been overshadowed by "magic."

They were both just... kids.

On the field, Rohan hit another boundary.

[Score: 19/0. Overs: 2.2]

"Look at that," Rajat hissed. "This is our team. This is our level. We don't need a... a charity case."

Raghav's eyes, cold and analytical, stayed on the game. He watched Rohan and Rishi, his "teammates," as they effortlessly dismantled the Sivasagar attack.

He felt the truth in Rajat's words. They were good. They were the best.

But they were also arrogant.

And they were wrong.

Raghav turned his head, just slightly. He wasn't looking at Rajat. He was looking at the ground.

"You were on the sideline," Raghav said, his voice so quiet, so devoid of emotion, that it cut through Rajat's anger like a knife.

Rajat froze. "What did you just say to me?"

Raghav's eyes lifted. They were not the eyes of a 12-year-old. They were cold, ancient, and utterly unimpressed.

"I said... you were on the sideline. Your foot was propped up."

He turned his gaze to Chinmoy. "You... were on the sideline."

He looked back at the field, where Rohan was taking a single.

"They were 35 for no loss," Raghav stated, his voice a flat, simple recitation of fact. "Their openers were set. They were confident. The game was... fifty-fifty."

He paused, his eyes still on the field.

"Now... it's not."

He wasn't bragging. He was not showing pride. He was telling them a simple, cold, analytical truth. He was an auditor, reading a balance sheet.

Chinmoy's face went pale. He had no answer.

Rajat's face went from angry to a dark, blotchy red. He was showing his fury. He was being dismissed, not by an equal, but by an accountant.

"You..." Rajat started, his hand clenching into a fist.

"Rajat."

Coach Sarma's voice was a whip-crack from ten feet away. He hadn't moved, but he had been listening. To every word.

Rajat flinched, his anger instantly vanishing, replaced by the fear of a schoolboy. "Yes, Coach?"

"Ice. Mouth. Shut," Sarma said, his voice flat.

Rajat's face went white. He snapped his mouth shut.

Sarma's cold gaze slid to Chinmoy, who instantly looked down at his shoes, his resentment now mixed with shame.

Sarma had, without moving, re-established the hierarchy.

He was the alpha. Raghav... Raghav was just his weapon.

CRACK!

A loud, clean sound from the middle.

Rohan Sharma had hit another boundary.

[Score: 47/0. Target: 49. Overs: 6.3]

The Sivasagar team was just... walking. They had given up.

[Ball 6.4]

The bowler, a young spinner, tossed a defeated Full Toss on Rohan's legs.

Rohan just Flicked it, an effortless, elegant shot.

FOUR RUNS.

[Score: 51/0. Kamrup wins by 10 wickets.]

It was over.

The Kamrup team, in a quiet, professional manner, clapped. Rohan and Rishi touched their bats, took off their helmets, and walked to shake hands with the Sivasagar team.

There was no wild celebration. This was not a victory. It was a procedure.

The team gathered by the sideline, packing their kit bags.

Sarma stood before them, his face impassive.

"One," he said. He held up a single finger. "That is one win. Out of fourteen. You did your job. You did not get arrogant." He looked at Rohan and Rishi, who nodded.

"But Sivasagar was weak. They were broken before you even padded up."

His eyes swept the team.

"Tomorrow... we play Goalpara. They are not Sivasagar. They are fighters. They are scrappers, just like we saw. They will not give you the game. You will have to take it."

He looked at the two boys on the bench.

"Rajat. Ice that ankle. I need my fast bowler."

"Yes, Coach."

"Roi."

Raghav looked up, his face pale, the bag of ice clutched to his arm.

"Ice. Rest. I need my bowler, not a one-over gimmick."

"Yes, Coach."

"Good. Bus is in ten minutes. Be on it."

The meeting was over.

That night, in Room 304, the air was thick with the smell of linseed oil.

Aakash, the keeper, was at his desk, methodically rubbing his gloves, his book on technique open beside him.

Raghav was on his bed. The ice was gone. The pain was no longer a sharp, localized thing. It was a deep, systemic throb that seemed to pulse with his own heartbeat. He felt broken.

He couldn't sleep. He knew, with his seasoned, adult knowledge of injury, that this was not a "tight muscle." This was a severe strain. He had torn something. He would be lucky to bowl again in a week, let alone 24 hours.

And tomorrow, he had to play Goalpara.

He had to play. He had to get that potion.

He closed his eyes.

'System. Inventory.'

The blue screen lit up the dark room. Aakash, his back to Raghav, didn't see it.

In the center of the screen, a single, glowing, purple vial sat in a slot.

[Super Healing Potion: 1x]

[Can heal any wound or broken bone instantly.]

He stared at it.

It was the answer. It was the "magic" button. He could drink it, and the pain would be gone. He would wake up, his arm at 100%. He could bowl his Off-Cutter all day. He could win this tournament, all by himself.

He... could...

His hand, the 12-year-old's hand, twitched, as if to reach for it.

And then... he saw his father's face.

He saw him in the dark room, a hollowed-out man, defeated by the weight of fifty thousand.

He saw the future he had lived once before. The accident. The sterile hospital room. The moment when all the money in the world couldn't fix what was broken.

This potion... it wasn't for this. It wasn't for a U-14 cricket tournament. It wasn't to win the approval of Coach Sarma or the fear of Rajat.

It was for that. It was for a life.

He had a choice. His glory... or his father's future.

His seasoned mind, the part of him that was 42 years old, that had lived with regret, made the choice.

It wasn't even a choice.

'Close inventory.'

The glowing vial vanished.

The room was dark again. And the pain... the pain in his arm... rushed back in, seeming to double in intensity.

It was a grind. It was a war. And he had just, voluntarily, thrown away his only weapon.

He was just a 12-year-old boy again, with a torn, weak arm.

"You alright?"

A voice from the darkness. Aakash. He hadn't been reading. He'd been watching.

"You're... shaking," Aakash said, his voice quiet, analytical. "Your arm. It's... it's bad, isn't it?"

Raghav didn't answer for a long time.

"Yeah," he finally whispered in the dark. "It's bad."

"You shouldn't have bowled today," Aakash said.

"I had to."

"That... thing... you do," Aakash's voice was curious. "The ball that... moves. It's your arm, isn't it? It's the cost."

"Yeah."

Aakash was silent. He processed this new data.

"You're done, then," Aakash said. It was a simple statement. "You can't bowl tomorrow. You have to tell Sarma."

Raghav looked at the dark ceiling. Tell Sarma. Be put back on the bench. Lose his spot to Chinmoy. Fail the quest. Lose the next potion, the one he might need...

No.

"I'll play," Raghav said, his voice a low, hard whisper.

"You can't bowl," Aakash countered.

"Then I'll bat," Raghav said, his jaw tightening in the dark.

Aakash was silent. "You're batting at seven. You might not even get to bat. You'll be a liability in the field. You won't be able to throw."

"I'll stop it with my Iron Grip," Raghav muttered, his mind racing.

"And what? Underarm it back? They'll run three. You'll cost us the match." Aakash's voice was cold, practical. "You'll be a hero for one day, and a fool for the next. Tell Sarma. Rest. It's the logical thing to do."

Raghav turned, his eyes burning in the dark.

"It's not about logic," he hissed, his voice full of a pain Aakash could not understand. "It's about staying in the game."

Aakash just stared at him from across the room. He was seeing the irrational, stubborn, burning core of the boy.

"Fine," Aakash said, turning back to his desk. "It's your funeral."

Raghav closed his eyes. The throb in his arm was his only companion. Tomorrow... tomorrow he would have to find another way.

(To be Continued)

Chapter 48: The Bluff

Chapter 48: The Bluff

The 9 PM curfew plunged Room 304 into a thick, oppressive darkness. The only light was the thin, yellow blade of moonlight cutting through the gap in the cheap curtains.

Aakash, in his bed, was a still, silent lump, breathing the deep, even breaths of a disciplined sleeper.

Raghav was not sleeping. He was staring at the cracked ceiling, his right arm lying on top of the thin hotel blanket, a useless, throbbing weight.

The pain was no longer a sharp fire. It had settled into a deep, foundational ache, a bass note of agony that pulsed with his heart.

He had lived this before, in his previous life. He'd felt this exact injury after a foolish, over-ambitious throw in a corporate league match. It wasn't a "sore muscle." It was a tear. A partial tear of the rotator cuff.

He knew, with the cold certainty of adult experience, that this was a six-week injury.

And he had to play tomorrow.

He had made his choice. The glowing purple vial, the Super Healing Potion, was locked in his system's inventory. It was for his father. It was for a day when "six weeks" wasn't an option.

Which meant this... this pain... was the price.

'So,' his mind raced, cold and analytical, 'I can't bowl.'

The thought was a small, hard stone in his gut.

'My one trick. My only weapon. The thing that got me on this team... it's gone.'

He had to play. The quest, [MoreThan a Reserve], demanded he be in the Playing Eleven.

If he told Sarma he was injured, he was out. Chinmoy, the resentful all-rounder, would be brought in. The quest would fail. He would lose the next potential potion.

He was trapped.

'It's not about logic,' he had told Aakash.

And now, alone in the dark, he realized the terrifying truth: 'It's not about logic, because it's a gamble I've already lost.'

He couldn't bowl.

He couldn't not bowl.

He lay there, motionless, for hours. He didn't just feel the pain; he listened to it. He analyzed its borders, its depth. He was a prisoner, studying the walls of his new cell.

'I can't throw,' he concluded, 'but I can still bat. My Iron Grip is in my hand, not my shoulder. I can hold a bat. I can... I can be a wall, like Ajit.'

The path was set. He would have to lie.

He would have to bluff his way through the match, praying to God that his turn to bowl never came.

The 7 AM bus ride to the new stadium was tense. The "first match" energy was gone. This was now Day Two of the grind.

Raghav sat in his usual spot, alone, at the back. His face was pale. He had "slept" for maybe an hour, a shallow, painful, feverish drift.

He showed his exhaustion.

Rajat, his ankle still taped but his eyes sharp, watched him. He saw Raghav's paleness, the way he protected his arm. Rajat nudged Chinmoy, a small, vindictive smile playing on his lips.

'One-over wonder,' his expression screamed.

'He's broken.'

Raghav just stared out the window.

The ground for the match against Goalpara was a step down.

It wasn't the grand, concrete bowl of Nehru Stadium. It was a simple club ground, the outfield bumpy and the pitch a dry, dusty, unpredictable strip of brown.

Coach Sarma gathered them.

"This is a 'scrapper's' pitch," he barked, kicking the turf. "The ball will do everything. It will kick. It will stay low. Do not... do not... trust the bounce. This match will be ugly. We win it with grit, not with pretty shots."

He looked at Rohan. "Captain. Toss."

Rohan and the Goalpara captain, a short, muscular, tough-looking boy, walked to the center.

Raghav watched, his heart a cold knot.

'Please,' he thought, his mind a quiet, desperate plea. 'Let them bat. Let us bat second. Let the target be small. Let me... just let me hide.'

The coin went up.

Rohan called.

The umpire's finger pointed... at Rohan.

Kamrup had won the toss.

A small, relieved cheer went up from the team.

Rohan walked back, his face set in a look of calm, professional focus.

"What is it, Captain?" Rishi asked.

Rohan looked at the dry, cracked pitch. "It's a minefield," he said, tapping the dust with his bat. "It's only going to get worse. We bat first. We put a score on the board. Then... we let them chase on this."

It was the "textbook" call. The smart call.

And for Raghav, it was a reprieve.

'Yes,' he thought, his knees weak with relief. 'Yes. I bat. I bat at seven. I probably won't even be needed. I can just... hide. Survive.'

Sarma nodded, agreeing with his captain.

"Good call," he said. "The 'Playing Eleven' is unchanged from yesterday. You know your jobs. Rohan, Rishi, you open. Pad up. Let's go."

The team broke. Raghav, his quest still active, his secret still safe, let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He was in.

He sat on the bench, his bag at his feet. His job today was to look like a cricketer.

Rajat scowled, his chance for revenge postponed. Chinmoy looked at the pitch, then at Sarma, his face a mask of bitter confusion. 'You're playing a one-armed boy over me?'

Raghav just sat, his arm throbbing, and waited.

The start was... shaky.

Coach Sarma was right. The pitch was a minefield.

[Ball 0.1]

The Goalpara opening bowler, a tall, raw-boned pacer, ran in.

His first ball pitched on a Good Length.

And it stayed low. It skidded, never getting more than six inches off the ground.

Rohan, expecting a normal bounce, was beaten all-ends-up. The ball zipped, harmlessly, under his bat.

THWACK.

The keeper took it by his ankles.

Rohan stared at the pitch. He showed his shock, his eyes wide.

[Score: 0/0. Overs: 0.1]

[Ball 0.2]

The bowler, grinning, ran in again.

This time, he dug it in Short.

The ball hit a crack.

It didn't just "bounce." It exploded. It flew up, violently, at Rohan's head.

Rohan just barely got his bat up, a panicked, reflexive block, as he fell backward onto the dirt.

"WHOA!" the Goalpara team roared.

[Score: 0/0. Overs: 0.2]

This was not cricket. This was survival.

Rohan and Rishi, the two "golden boys," were now just scrappers, like the Sivasagar team they had despised.

They had to throw away the textbook.

They blocked. They nudged. They got hit.

The score crawled.

[Score: 7/0. Overs: 3.0]

Rishi, trying to force a single, got an Inside Edge that just... just... missed his stumps.

[Score: 12/0. Overs: 5.0]

Then, the inevitable happened.

[Ball 5.3]

The fast bowler delivered. Rohan, his feet stuck, played for the skidder.

The ball hit a crack and stopped, jaggling back in.

It beat his bat.

THWACK.

It hit his pad. Plumb in front.

The umpire's finger went up.

[Score: 12/1. Overs: 5.3]

Rohan walked off, furious, not at himself, but at the pitch.

The number three, Akhil, walked in.

He lasted two balls.

[Ball 5.5]

He got a Good Length ball that kicked up, hit the shoulder of his bat, and looped, in slow motion, to the Gully fielder.

[Score: 12/2. Overs: 5.5]

A stunned silence fell over the Kamrup bench.

This was a disaster.

Pawan, the aggressive number four, came in. He survived the last ball.

Then... he did what he did best. He attacked.

He decided, correctly, that defense was useless. He just swung.

[Ball 6.1] He smashed a Full ball over Mid-Off for four.

[Ball 6.3] He got a Short ball and smashed it for four more.

He was playing "caveman" cricket.

And it was working.

He and Rishi built a small, desperate, ugly partnership.

[Score: 28/2. Overs: 9.0]

[Score: 41/2. Overs: 12.0]

Then, Pawan's luck ran out.

[Ball 12.4]

A leg-spinner came on. He tossed a loopy ball. Pawan's eyes lit up.

He swung for the hills.

He was too early. The ball dipped. He was Stumped by a mile.

[Score: 41/3. Overs: 12.4]

The Kamrup team was collapsing.

Bikash, the number five, came in... and went out.

[Ball 13.1] He was hit on the pads. LBW.

[Score: 41/4. Overs: 13.1]

The number six, a boy named Tarun, came in.

He and Rishi tried to rebuild.

They blocked. They survived.

They added ten, painful runs.

[Score: 51/4. Overs: 16.0]

Then, Rishi, the "problem-solver," who had been a rock... fell.

[Ball 16.2]

A ball stayed low. It skidded under his bat.

CLACK.

He was Bowled.

[Score: 51/5. Overs: 16.2]

A cold, sick feeling spread through the Kamrup bench.

And then, Coach Sarma's voice, flat and cold, cut through the air.

"Roi. You're in."

Raghav, who had been sitting, his arm throbbing, his mind a million miles away, froze.

'It's... it's my turn.'

He hadn't expected this. He was the "bowler." He was the "gimmick."

Now... he was the batsman.

He fumbled with his pads, his hands shaking. He tried to strap them on.

His right arm wouldn't obey.

The pain was so bad he couldn't even lift it properly to tighten the buckle.

Aakash, his roommate, saw it.

Without a word, Aakash knelt. He grabbed the strap and, with a vicious, hard yank, buckled the pad for him.

"Don't get out," Aakash whispered, his voice low and intense. "We need you."

Raghav stood up, his pads on. He grabbed his bat, his Iron Grip making his hand feel solid, even as his shoulder and arm screamed.

He walked out of the shade, into the blinding sun.

He was walking past Coach Sarma.

"Coach," Raghav said, his voice a low, urgent rasp. "My arm. I... I can't bowl. I can't bowl today."

It was a confession.

Sarma didn't even look at him. He just stared, his eyes like ice, at the field.

"I know," Sarma said, his voice a growl.

Raghav stopped. "You... you knew?"

"I'm not a fool, Roi," Sarma said, his voice flat. "I saw you last night. I saw you this morning. You look like a ghost."

"But... you picked me," Raghav stammered. "You put me in the eleven."

Sarma finally turned. His eyes were cold, and they were furious.

"I picked you," Sarma said, "because Chinmoy is a coward. And Rajat is a bully. And you... you are a liar."

He jabbed a finger at Raghav's chest.

"But you're a liar who fights. You're a liar who wins. I didn't pick a bowler. I picked a bastard. I picked the 17th man who walked onto my field and broke my best players."

He looked at the collapsing scorecard.

"Now, you go out there. And you be a bastard."

He shoved him, hard, toward the field.

"Go. Win."

Raghav, his mind reeling, his arm on fire, walked out onto the dusty, unpredictable, treacherous pitch.

His quest was still alive.

But now, he had to survive.

(To be Continued)