

Cricket 42

Chapter 42

The hum of the plane engines filled the cabin, a steady backdrop to my racing thoughts. I stared out the window, watching the vast expanse of clouds stretch endlessly, reflecting the brilliance of the sun. The letter from Coach Rahul Dravid and BCCI sat safely in my backpack, its contents still echoing in my mind.

It wasn't just any letter—it was an invitation, a second chance. Coach Dravid, the man whose calm demeanor and sharp cricketing acumen had inspired countless young players, had personally written to recall me for the upcoming formation of the Under-19 cricket team. He had expressed confidence in my growth as a cricketer, praising my control over the game and the experience I had gained in the first-class cricket.

The words that stood out most to me were, "There's a very high chance the board will decide to make you the captain. Your experience and leadership potential make you the ideal candidate."

The gravity of those words weighed heavily on me, but it wasn't fear—it was anticipation, a challenge waiting to be conquered. Leading a team wasn't just about strategy or skills; it was about responsibility, trust, and the ability to inspire.

When I first opened the letter back at home, my mother had been ecstatic. Her smile had lit up the entire room as she clasped her hands together, tears brimming in her eyes.

"I always knew your hard work and determination would pay off," she said, pulling me into a warm embrace. "You've earned this, Aarav. And I'll always be here to support you."

Her unwavering faith in me had always been a source of strength. Seeing her happiness reminded me why I had worked so hard, why I had pushed through every rejection and setback.

Later, I had a conversation with my father. He wasn't one for overt displays of emotion, but the pride in his eyes was unmistakable.

"You've come a long way," he said, his voice steady but warm. "I know how much this means to you. And I want you to know, Aarav, that I fully support you. Cricket is your dream, and we'll make sure your education isn't left behind either. Bengaluru will give you the best of both worlds."

I nodded, gratitude swelling in my chest. "Thank you, Dad. I won't let you down."

As we sat together discussing my next steps, it was decided that I would complete my Class 12 exams under the supervision of BCCI's management in Bengaluru. As currently I am enrolled in BCCI affiliated School. It was a relief to have my parents' blessing, knowing how much they valued education alongside cricket.

Now, as the plane soared towards Bengaluru, my thoughts drifted to the journey that had brought me here. From the crushing disappointment of being rejected for the Under-19 World Cup years ago to grinding it out in the domestic circuit, playing in tournaments like the Ranji Trophy and Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, every experience had shaped me. And now, this opportunity—a 50% chance to lead the Under-19 team, possibly as captain—felt like the culmination of all those efforts.

I leaned back in my seat, letting the rhythmic vibration of the plane lull me into a light sleep.

When the plane landed in Bengaluru, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. The city's bustling energy greeted me as I stepped out of the airport. A sleek black Range Rover awaited me outside, the driver holding a placard with my name.

"Aarav Pathak?" he asked, a polite smile on his face.

I nodded, shaking his hand. "That's me."

The Driver was sent there from the headquarter of PVMART to pick me up. My dad had already given me his details, his name is Ramesh Ravi and is here to pick me and drop me to National Cricket Academy.

The drive to the National Cricket Academy (NCA) was a long one, nearly an hour and a half. As the car wove through the city's streets, I gazed out at the familiar sights. Bengaluru had always been special to me—a city where dreams were nurtured and transformed into reality.

When we finally arrived at the NCA, a wave of nostalgia hit me. The sprawling grounds, the sound of leather on willow, and the faint scent of freshly cut grass—all of it brought back memories of my earlier days here. After submitting my forms and papers, I was escorted to my room. To my surprise, it was the same one I had shared with Abhishek during my last stay here.

Abhishek Sharma—my best friend, my confidant, and my fiercest competitor. Sharing the room with him back then had been an experience filled with laughter, late-night talks, and countless dreams of making it big.

Dropping my bags, I made my way to the field. The sun bathed the lush green ground in a golden glow as I approached. There, in the midst of a group of players like Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Tilak Verma, Kartik Tyagi, Ravi Bishnoi, Prithvi Shaw, Shubman Gill, Riyan Parag, Abhishek Sharma, Anukul Roy, Arshdeep Singh, Shivam Mavi some I know and some I don't. In front of them stood Coach Rahul Dravid. His presence was magnetic, his calm yet authoritative demeanor commanding respect.

"Ah, Aarav!" Coach Dravid exclaimed as he spotted me. He walked over, his hand extended in greeting. "How are you? It's so good to see you again."

I shook his hand firmly, unable to suppress a smile. "I'm doing well, sir. It's an honor to be back."

He nodded, his eyes gleaming with pride. "Your records in the Ranji Trophy and Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy are phenomenal. You've grown immensely as a player, Aarav. And I believe you're ready for this next challenge."

Before he could introduce me to the team, a familiar figure stepped forward—Abhishek. His face lit up as he pulled me into a tight hug.

"Bro!" he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. "Look at you, making records in first-class cricket while I've been stuck here at the academy. Congratulations, man!"

"Thanks, Abhishek," I replied, laughing. "It's good to see you again. How have you been?"

"Same old," he said with a shrug. "But now that you're here, things are about to get interesting."

The rest of the team gathered around as Coach Dravid introduced me formally. Among them were some of the most talented young cricketers —Prithvi Shaw, Shubman Gill, Riyan Parag, Anukul Roy, Arshdeep Singh, Shivam Mavi, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Tilak Verma, Kartik Tyagi, Ravi Bishnoi, and more.

Many of them I recognized, either from playing alongside them or watching them excel in domestic and international tournaments. The camaraderie among the players was palpable, a shared bond forged through their love for the game.

Coach Dravid clapped his hands, signaling the start of a training session. "Let's get to work, boys. Aarav, you've had a long journey. Take the day to rest and get acclimated."

I nodded, grateful for the chance to recharge. Heading back to my room, I allowed myself a moment to reflect. Lying on the bed, I stared at the ceiling, my mind buzzing with thoughts.

This was my moment—a time to shine, to prove myself not just as a player but as a leader. The road ahead was steep, but I was ready to climb. The throne of the king wasn't just a destination; it was a journey. And I was determined to give it my all.

As sleep claimed me, I dreamed of the future—of victories, challenges, and the endless possibilities that lay ahead.