

God of Cricket!

Chapter 49: The Wall

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[Score: 51/5. Overs: 16.2. Batsman: Tarun 4*, Raghav 0*]

Raghav walked out of the shade, his bat dragging in his left hand. The world had shrunk to a small, suffocating bubble of heat, dust, and the sharp, throbbing, seismic pain in his right arm.

Sarma's words, "I picked a bastard," echoed in his ears. It wasn't a compliment. It was a sentence.

He felt the eyes on him.

The Goalpara team, their "scrapper" senses tingling, were like a pack of wolves that had just seen a three-legged deer. They were grinning.

The Kamrup dugout was a wall of silent, staring faces. Rajat and Chinmoy were sitting in the front, their expressions a mixture of contempt and hungry anticipation. They were waiting for him to fail.

Aakash, his roommate, was standing by the boundary, his face pale, his eyes wide with a terrible, shared knowledge.

Rohan and Rishi stood together, their arms crossed. They weren't angry. They were calculating. Their expressions were grim. 'What, exactly, is this kid going to do?'

Raghav stepped onto the dry, cracked, "minefield" of a pitch.

He passed the other batsman, Tarun, who just looked at him with wide, panicked eyes.

"They're... they're all over the place, man."

Raghav just nodded. He didn't have the breath or the will to reply.

He reached the crease. He showed the Goalpara keeper his bat, to take guard.

"Heh, look at this," the keeper chirped, his voice loud enough for everyone. "They're sending in the children! Hey, kid! You lost?"

The Slips laughed.

Raghav ignored them. He tapped his bat. Middle Stump.

He settled into his stance.

And the pain... oh, God... the pain.

The simple act of lifting his right arm, of raising the bat, of setting his shoulder, was a white-hot, blinding agony. The torn muscles in his rotator cuff screamed.

His vision went gray for a second. He felt the sweat break out, cold, on his forehead.

He was a 12-year-old boy, in agony, facing a team of scrappers, with an arm that wouldn't work.

His 42-year-old mind, the engineer, the analyst, shoved the panic down.

'This is not a game,' he thought, his jaw setting. 'This is a physics problem. The pitch is an unstable variable. The ball is the projectile. My arm is a failed component.'

He looked at his bat.

'And this... this is my shield.'

He re-adjusted his grip. His left hand, his "good" hand, was high on the handle, firm, ready to guide. His right hand, his Iron Grip hand, was low. It wasn't there to swing. It was just there to hold. To be an anchor.

The Goalpara fast bowler was at the top of his mark. He was the one who had taken two wickets. He was fast, raw, and he was smiling.

"Come on, boys!" the keeper yelled. "A nice, quick one! Let's send him home crying!"

The bowler ran in.

[Ball 16.3]

He was going for the "kill" shot. He saw the new, small batsman, the collapsing score. He was going to end this.

He dug the ball in Short.

It was a brutal, fast, nasty Bouncer, aimed right at Raghav's helmet.

The Kamrup bench gasped.

Raghav saw it. His seasoned, adult mind didn't panic. It analyzed.

'Too fast to hook. Too high to pull. No need to run.'

He didn't duck. He didn't flinch.

He just... stood.

He swayed, just an inch, out of the line. His head was perfectly still.

WHOOSH.

The ball, a red blur, rocketed past his ear, so close he felt the wind of its passing.

THWACK.

It slammed into the keeper's gloves, a sound of pure, unadulterated violence.

The keeper, stunned, fumbled the catch, but recovered.

The bowler, who had been expecting terror, was now confused.

Raghav just... settled back into his stance. He hadn't shown a single emotion. He hadn't even blinked.

Rajat, on the sideline, who respected only one thing—aggression—stopped smiling. 'He... he didn't even flinch.'

[Ball 16.4]

The bowler, angry now, ran in again.

'If I can't scare him, I'll hit him.'

He bowled fast, straight, at the stumps.

But the pitch... the "minefield"... had its say.

The ball pitched on a Good Length, hit a small, invisible crack... and stayed low. It skidded, a dirt-tracker, never getting more than two inches off the ground.

It was an unplayable ball. A wicket ball.

Raghav's 12-year-old body would have been too slow.

His 42-year-old reflexes, his eyes, saw the puff of dust.

He didn't "play a shot."

He reacted.

He just jammed his bat down.

BAM!

The ball, traveling at over 110km/h, slammed into the bottom edge of his bat.

The impact was catastrophic.

A shockwave of pure, kinetic, agonizing force exploded from the bat, up his right arm, and into his shoulder.

His scream was a sharp, inward gasp. His vision went white. The pain was so intense, so sudden, he almost blacked out.

His Iron Grip... held.

His hand did not break. His wrist did not buckle. The bat did not turn.

The ball, its energy completely absorbed by the unyielding grip, just... died.

It rolled, pathetically, to a stop at his feet.

He was not out.

But he was in agony.

He was showing it. He was trembling. His right arm was now, officially, just a piece of meat he was carrying around. He couldn't lift it.

He used his left hand to prop his bat back up into his stance.

The bowler stared. The keeper stared.

"This kid..." the keeper whispered. "Is he... okay?"

Rajat, on the bench, was on his feet. "He... his hand... did you see that?"

Raghav just took a deep, shuddering breath.

[Ball 16.5]

The bowler was now completely unnerved. This kid was a freak.

He just wanted to finish the over.

He bowled a "nothing" ball. Full, and wide of the Off-Stump.

It was a "hittable" ball. A "run-scoring" ball.

Raghav, his arm screaming, his body a single, unified protest, just... let it go.

He just watched it pass.

A "dot ball."

On the Kamrup bench, Chinmoy exploded.

"What is he doing?!" he hissed, his voice full of venom. "That was a 'four' ball! He's not even trying! He's just... standing there! He's a coward!"

Rohan and Rishi, standing nearby, looked at each other. They saw what Chinmoy didn't.

'He didn't swing,' Rohan thought, his mind analytical. 'He didn't even try.'

He looked at Raghav's right arm, the one hanging limp.

'He... he can't.'

[Ball 16.6]

The last ball of the over.

The bowler, exhausted, just lobbed one in.

Raghav just... blocked.

Thud.

The over was done.

A maiden. A brutal, agonizing, painful, surviving maiden.

Raghav was at the non-striker's end. His partner, Tarun, walked up to him, his face pale.

"Are you... alright?" Tarun whispered. "That... that looked like it hurt."

Raghav, his face white, just leaned on his bat. He couldn't speak. He just nodded.

He had survived.

Now, it was Tarun's turn.

[Score: 51/5. Overs: 17.0]

The leg-spinner, the one who had taken Pawan's wicket, came on.

[Ball 17.1]

Tarun, seeing his partner's sacrifice, was showing his own new resolve. He was no longer the scared boy. He was the senior partner.

He blocked the first ball.

[Ball 17.2]

He blocked the second.

[Ball 17.3]

The spinner, seeing this, tossed one up. A "sucker" ball.

Tarun's eyes lit up. He swept. And he connected.

Thwack!

He hit it hard, into the Square Leg gap.

"RUN!" Tarun yelled.

Raghav... ran.

He shoved his bat, with his Iron Grip, into his left hand, and he sprinted.

He was running on pure, desperate adrenaline. His arm was a bonfire, and every jolt was a new splash of gasoline.

But he was fast.

He made it.

He was off strike.

[Score: 52/5. Overs: 17.3]

He was now at the non-striker's end, leaning on his bat, his lungs on fire. He had done his job. He had given Tarun the strike.

He just had to survive.

The game now became a slow, ugly, agonizing grind.

Raghav was a statue.

The bowlers would come in.

The ball would hit a crack. KICK!

Raghav would just... block. Iron Grip. Thud. Pain.

The ball would stay low. SKID!

Raghav would just... jam. Iron Grip. BAM! Agony.

He was not batting. He was enduring.

His score was 0. He faced twelve balls. He was a perfect, unmoving wall of pure, stubborn, agonizing defiance.

The Kamrup bench was silent. The mocking was gone. Rajat and Chinmoy were no longer sneering. They were just staring. They were seeing what Sarma had seen. This kid was not a "gimmick." He was not a "coward."

He was... a "bastard." He was refusing to die.

Tarun, inspired, was fighting at the other end. He hit another boundary.

[Score: 58/5. Overs: 19.0]

The partnership was 7 runs. It felt like 70.

Then... disaster.

[Ball 19.4]

Tarun, his confidence high, tried to hit the leg-spinner over the top.

He was too early. He hit a Top Edge.

The ball went straight up.

The keeper threw off his mask. "MINE!"

He settled under it.

Thwack.

He caught it.

[Score: 61/6. Overs: 19.4]

Tarun was out.

And Raghav... Raghav was now at the striker's end.

With two balls left in the 20th and final over.

He was stranded. He was with the tail-enders.

The new batsman, Sahil (the bowler), ran out.

"What do we do?" Sahil panted.

Raghav, his arm a ruin, looked at the scoreboard. 61. It wasn't enough.

"You... run. No matter what," Raghav rasped, his voice hoarse. "On my call."

The leg-spinner, his eyes bright, was on a "hat-trick" ball. He was pumped.

[Ball 19.5]

He tossed it up. A perfect, looping, tempting, "glory" ball.

Raghav saw it.

His 42-year-old mind, his Cricket IQ, saw the trap.

And he saw the gap.

The Mid-Wicket fielder was too straight.

Raghav's body, his left arm, took over.

He did not "swing."

He pushed.

He used all his strength, all his Iron Grip, and... shoved... the bat at the ball.

It was the ugliest shot in cricket history.

It was not a Drive. It was not a Flick.

It was a bunt.

He made contact.

The ball, with no power, just wobbled, dead, into the massive, open gap at Mid-Wicket.

"RUN!" Raghav roared, his voice cracking.

He ran. He was sprinting, his useless right arm flapping at his side.

Sahil, at the other end, was already running.

The Mid-Wicket fielder, stunned by the ugly, weak shot, was slow to react.

He fumbled the pickup.

Raghav, his lungs burning, made the crease.

Sahil made the crease.

One run.

[Score: 62/6. Overs: 19.5]

Raghav was at the non-striker's end. He was safe.

He had his first run.

Sahil was on strike.

[Ball 19.6]

The last ball.

Sahil, his mind on Raghav's insane run, was a nervous wreck.

The spinner fired in a fast, flat ball.

Sahil snicked it.

An Inside Edge. It hit his pad. It hit the ground.

Run!

It was chaos. The ball was at the keeper's feet.

"NO!" Raghav screamed, his voice a roar.

But Sahil was already halfway down the pitch.

Aakash, on the bench, put his head in his hands.

The Goalpara keeper, calm, just... picked up the ball.

He saw Sahil, stranded. He saw Raghav, stuck at his end.

He just... walked.

He walked to the stumps and, with a casual, almost bored tap, knocked the bails off.

Run Out.

[Score: 62/7. Overs: 20.0]

The innings was over.

Kamrup had been bowled out.

Raghav was left not-out, on 1.

He had failed.

His team was silent.

He walked off the field, his head low, his arm on fire, his entire being a single, throbbing monument to failure.

62. It wasn't a score. It was a joke.

He walked past Coach Sarma, not daring to look at him.

"Get a drink, Roi," Sarma grunted, his voice impossible to read. "Then get your cap. We're fielding."

Raghav stopped, his blood running cold.

"Coach...?"

"You're a bowler, aren't you?" Sarma said, his back to him. "You're my 'bastard.' You're my 'weapon.'"

He turned, his eyes like ice.

"You have ten minutes to fix that arm. Because you... are opening the bowling."

(To be Continued)