

Cricket 115

Chapter 115

With the ad shoots finally completed, Aarav could fully shift his focus back to cricket. The South Africa series was just around the corner, and he was eager to get back into rhythm. His body was well-rested, his mind sharp, and the hunger to perform burned stronger than ever.

As he finished his last training session before departure, a familiar notification flashed before his eyes.

[SYSTEM MESSAGE: West Indies Tour rewards combined into SUPER REWARD!]

Aarav's eyes widened slightly. This was unexpected. He had been so immersed in the present that he had almost forgotten about the system's pending rewards. He quickly opened the system panel, curiosity piqued.

Reward 1: Chance to Yorker increased by 40%

A smirk formed on his lips. This was huge. His yorker had already been a weapon, but now, with a 40% boost to its effectiveness, it would become even deadlier. Batsmen would find it nearly impossible to dig out his toe-crushing deliveries.

Reward 2: Test Innings Save – The Ben Stokes Spectacular Save, innings experience card! => Use One Time Only!

Aarav's heart skipped a beat. He knew exactly what this meant. This wasn't just an upgrade—it was a game-changer. It would allow him to channel the experience of one of the greatest rescue innings in Test history, where Ben Stokes had single-handedly turned the game around. The system was giving him an ability to tap into that moment, to understand the mindset, shot selection, and composure required to pull off an innings-saving masterclass.

He clenched his fists, excitement coursing through his veins. The South Africa series was already important, but now, with these new abilities, he felt invincible.

Closing the system panel, Aarav took a deep breath. His path was clear. It was time to get back on the field, time to prove himself again, and time to make these rewards count.

After a refreshing break, I was back in action, ready for the next challenge—an intense T20I series against South Africa. This time, the Proteas were coming to India, and we were set to play a thrilling series across multiple venues.

I had been eagerly awaiting my selection confirmation, though I already knew deep down that my spot was secured. My recent performances had been nothing short of spectacular, and I had consistently delivered under pressure. Still, there was something special about receiving the official call from the selectors, confirming my place in the squad. It was a moment of validation, a sign that my hard work was paying off.

The BCCI had arranged my flight tickets to Dharamshala, where the first match of the series was scheduled. This would be going to be my first match in India. I had played 3 series before. 2 were in

West Indies and one was in New Zealand. Dharamshala had one of the most picturesque cricket stadiums in the world. The thought of playing there again filled me with excitement.

As I boarded the flight, my mind replayed past matches, strategies, and memories from my previous encounters with the South African team. They were a formidable side—aggressive, disciplined, and never ones to back down from a fight. This was going to be an exciting series.

Upon landing in Dharamshala, I was greeted by familiar faces. The moment I walked into the team hotel, I spotted my teammates in the lobby. Everyone was relaxed yet focused—after all, we had played together for quite some time now, and the camaraderie within the squad had grown strong.

"Arre, Aarav!" Virat Bhaiya called out with a grin. He walked over and gave me a friendly pat on the back.

"Virat Bhaiya! Kya haal hain? (Virat Bhaiya! How are you?)" I replied, smiling.

Shikhar Bhaiya and Rohit Bhaiya soon joined in, followed by Hardik, Surya, and the others. There was laughter, light banter, and a general sense of excitement in the air.

But amidst all the familiar faces, there was one that made this series particularly special for me.

This was the first time I would be playing in the same squad as my template owner, KL Rahul!

For years, I had modeled my batting technique on his elegant stroke play, learning from his ability to adapt across formats. Now, I was finally sharing the dressing room with him in an international match. It was surreal.

The team soon gathered for a meeting where our coach and support staff briefed us on the game plan for the series. South Africa had a powerful batting lineup and a lethal pace attack. We needed to be prepared for every scenario.

After the meeting, we headed out to inspect the pitch. Dharamshala was known for its unpredictable weather, and as we reached the stadium, the sky was already turning gray. A light drizzle had begun, and the ground staff was on alert.

The next morning, match day, we woke up to an even darker sky. The rain had intensified overnight, and there was a sense of frustration among the players.

Despite the poor conditions, we still followed the match-day routine—team huddles, stretching sessions, warm-ups, and strategy discussions. The umpires and officials were monitoring the weather closely, but deep down, we all knew what was coming.

As the rain poured relentlessly, the covers remained firmly on the pitch. The fans who had traveled to watch the match sat patiently in their seats, hoping for a miracle, but the downpour showed no signs of stopping.

By the time the scheduled toss was supposed to take place, the umpires made the inevitable decision—match abandoned without a ball being bowled.

No toss, no overs, nothing. Just a wasted day of waiting.

The dressing room was filled with a mix of disappointment and humor.

The night ended with team bonding, stories, and laughter.

Though the match had been washed out, the real takeaway for me was getting to interact with some of my cricketing players in a relaxed environment. And with two more matches to go in the series, there was still plenty of action ahead.

After the rain-washed disappointment in Dharamshala, our focus shifted to the second match of the series, set to take place in Mohali. As the team landed, the mood was a mix of excitement and determination. This was our first proper game of the series, and we all wanted to make a strong statement.

The bus ride from the airport to the hotel was filled with casual conversations, with everyone discussing strategies, South Africa's strengths, and, of course, the famous Punjabi food we were all looking forward to.

As soon as we checked in, we were given a short break before heading to the stadium for our practice session. The ground looked perfect, the pitch seemed promising, and we had just one day to fine-tune our preparations. The training wasn't too intense—a light session focusing on drills, catching practice,

and net batting. Ravi Shastri, as always, was full of energy, giving us pep talks and ensuring that everyone was in the right frame of mind.

By the time we wrapped up, the sun had set, and the floodlights had taken over. After a quick team huddle, we were told to rest for the night. Tomorrow was match day.

The next afternoon, around 5 PM, all the players gathered in the team meeting room as Virat Bhaiya announced the playing XI.

Rohit Sharma

Shikhar Dhawan

Virat Kohli

Aarav Pathak

Risabh Pant

Manish Pandey

Hardik Pandya

Ravindra Jadeja

Krunal Pandya

Washington Sundar

Deepak Chahar

I couldn't help but smile. Playing my first game in India, in front of a home crowd, was going to be a surreal experience. It was an honor, a dream come true.

After the meeting, we made our way to the stadium. The buzz was electrifying. The Mohali crowd was known for its passion, and even though the match was an hour away, the stands were already filling up.

As we walked past the boundary line, I noticed the Star Sports broadcasting team setting up their pre-match analysis. Harsha Bhogle and Irfan Pathan were discussing the pitch conditions in their usual engaging style. Just as I was passing by to get to the team dugout, Harsha spotted me and called out.

"Aarav! Hold on a second, young man. Join us for a quick chat," he said with his trademark enthusiasm.

I smiled, nodded, and walked over. The cameras adjusted as I stood next to them, the stadium noise humming in the background.

Harsha: "So, here we are, in Mohali, finally getting some cricket after the washout in Dharamshala. And look who we have! Aarav, welcome. How are you feeling?"

Me: "Thank you! I'm feeling great, honestly. It's my first match in India, and the energy here is just different. I've played outside India before, but stepping onto the field in front of a home crowd is something special."

Irfan (grinning): "We all saw you making headlines with that century abroad. But now, here you are, playing at number 4—a position where India has been searching for a dependable batsman since Yuvraj Singh. No pressure, right?"

Me (laughing): "Oh, no pressure at all! Just filling the boots of a World Cup winner and a legend, that's all!"

Harsha: "Haha, well said! But jokes apart, how are you approaching this role? Number 4 is a crucial position in T20s—sometimes you walk in during a powerplay, sometimes in the middle overs, and occasionally, in the death overs with only a few balls to go."

Me: "Absolutely, and that's what makes it exciting. It's a position where adaptability is key. I've worked a lot on my game awareness—when to attack, when to rotate strike, and when to build a partnership. Having captain like Virat Bhaiya and many senior players for mentorship like Rohit Bhaiya or Shikhar bhaiya and everyone else around helps a lot. They keep things simple: watch the ball, play your game, and back yourself."

Irfan: "Speaking of confidence, you've got Ravi Shastri in the dressing room. We all know he's a character! How has his coaching style influenced you?"

Me: "Oh, Ravi Sir is amazing. He's always full of energy, and his speeches before matches? Unreal! He makes you feel like you can take on the world. His main message to us is always clear—express yourself, play with confidence, and don't let pressure get to you. And he and Virat Bhaiya together? That's next-level motivation!"

Harsha: "Oh, we know that combination well! Fire and fire!"

Me: "Exactly! Sometimes, during team meetings, Ravi Sir starts talking, and within minutes, the whole squad is ready to run through walls!"

Irfan (laughing): "Haha, classic Ravi Bhai! You know, we were just analyzing the pitch before you arrived. Mohali is usually a great batting wicket, but with a bit of assistance for the pacers early on. As a middle-order batsman, how do you see this playing out?"

Me: "Yeah, Mohali has always been a fantastic ground for stroke players. The ball comes on nicely, but you also get that extra bounce. So, it's about being smart—taking your time early on and then accelerating once set. I think a good total here would be around 180-190, given the conditions."

Harsha: "Sounds like a solid plan! And finally, before we let you go—any pre-match rituals? Superstitions?"

Me: "Not really, I just believe in my play, came here score big and take wickets and then win the match"

Irfan: "Ah, the answer brimming with so much confidence!"

Me (grinning): "Well, in this game if you don't have confidence to be best, you can't reach anywhere."

Harsha: "All right, Aarav, it was great chatting with you. Best of luck for the game, and we hope to see some fireworks from your bat!"

Me: "Thank you! & I'll do my best!"

With that, I jogged back toward the dugout, feeling a mix of excitement and anticipation. The match was about to begin, and I was about to live the dream of millions—playing for India in front of a roaring home crowd.

It was time to shine.

The floodlights shone brightly over the Mohali stadium, the crowd buzzing with anticipation. It was finally time for cricket. Virat Bhaiya and Quinton de Kock walked to the center for the toss, the atmosphere electric. The match referee flipped the coin high into the air, and all eyes were on it.

"Tails," Quinton called.

The coin landed, and the referee looked up.

"It's heads. India wins the toss."

Virat Bhaiya, wearing his trademark intensity, gave a quick smile before speaking to the broadcaster.

"We'll bowl first. The pitch looks good, but under the lights, there will be some swing early on. We back our bowlers to make the most of it and chase whatever target they set."

Quinton, calm as ever, responded in his typical composed manner.

"We would've bowled first too, but it's a good wicket to bat on. We'll look to put up a strong total and back our bowlers to defend it."

With that, the captains shook hands and walked back. We had a twenty-minute break before the game began, and the team headed back to the dressing room.

The energy inside was high, everyone pumped up. A few of the guys were going over last-minute strategies, some tying their shoelaces, while others just sat quietly, focusing.

Fifteen minutes before the first ball, we walked onto the field and gathered in a tight huddle. Virat Bhaya, standing in the center, looked around at all of us, his eyes filled with determination.

"Alright, champs," he said, clapping his hands. "Come on, we can do this. We're playing at home, we have the crowd behind us, and we have a solid attack. Stick to the plans, stay aggressive, and let's make it count. Our main pace attack is Aarav and Deepak, with Hardik backing them up. For spin, we've got Jaddu, Sundar, and Krunal. Aarav, you'll open the bowling. Go for it."

I gave him a firm nod. The moment had arrived.

We all broke out of the huddle and took our positions on the field. The energy in the stadium was insane. The Mohali crowd was on its feet, chanting "India! India!" The sound was deafening, goosebumps-inducing. And then I heard it—my name echoing in the chants.

"Aarav! Aarav!"

A surge of adrenaline rushed through me. I took the new ball in my hands, gripping it firmly, feeling its smooth, hard surface. The floodlights reflected off its shiny seam.

At the other end, the South African openers—Quinton de Kock and Reeza Hendricks—were warming up, rolling their shoulders, taking practice swings. De Kock adjusted his helmet, took a deep breath, and tapped his bat against the pitch.

I took a few steps back, rotating my arms to loosen up. My heartbeat was steady, my focus razor-sharp. This was it. My first over in an international match in India.

Virat Bhaiya walked over, his sharp eyes scanning the field. "Alright, let's set this up properly. Third man, fine leg, square leg, mid-on, mid-off, cover, slip. Keep it tight, make him play."

I nodded. My field was set.

The umpire signaled the start of the match. The crowd roared louder. I turned at the top of my mark, took a deep breath, and ran in. The game had begun.