

## Cricket 164

### Chapter 164

I still can't believe I'm writing this... but here it is, the hardest goodbye to someone who's been my hero, my inspiration, and the reason I stayed glued to Test cricket for so long. Virat, you were never just a cricketer; you were a symbol of fire, of passion, of unwavering belief. Watching you play was more than just watching a game—it was an emotional rollercoaster. Every cover drive, every aggressive celebration, every fiery stare at the opposition—it was all poetry in motion.

And now, with you stepping away from Test cricket, my heart feels heavy. No farewell test match, no grand send-off. Just like that, the chapter closes. 770 runs short of 10,000 runs in Test cricket—a milestone you've dreamt of for years. It's almost like you're leaving a part of yourself behind. Your commitment, your sacrifice, and everything you've done for the game... it feels so incomplete without that final, epic moment to honor you.

You might be choosing to step away, perhaps for family or to escape the constant criticism of recent form, but as fans, we wanted one last time to cheer you on in the whites. We deserved that moment too. To see you out on the field, one last time, giving us that aggressive energy, that raw intensity that only you brought to the game. That fiery Kohli who made Test cricket come alive for us, for me.

You've shaped my childhood and my love for the sport. I've spent countless hours watching your blistering knocks, your unmatched energy, and that never-say-die attitude. And now, knowing that I'll never see you in whites again... it's like a piece of me is walking away with you.

But even as I write this with tears in my eyes ☹ and a broken heart 💔, I can't bring myself to wish you anything but happiness. You've earned this rest, this time with your family. And while the Test cricket fan in me feels like it's almost died with this retirement, I can't deny the legacy you've left behind.

You are the KING, Virat Kohli 🏏. Your journey is legendary, and your impact will never fade. You've inspired millions, and we will carry that fire in our hearts forever. Even if you're not on the field, you'll always be a part of us.

I miss you already, Paaji.

Thank you for everything. You will always be the heartbeat of Test cricket. ❤️◻

Your Dear Fan,

Kynsta

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The golden sun of Adelaide filtered softly through the nets, casting dappled patterns over the hallowed turf. The air was crisp but not biting, scented faintly with the cut grass of the Adelaide oval and the distant waft of sunscreen from the sidelines. The quiet hum of preparation echoed in the near-empty practice arena, where only a handful of players swung bats, bowled tirelessly, and exchanged murmured strategy. There were no noisy crowds, no media frenzy, just a couple of BCCI media team filming discreetly—capturing the sacred, silent build-up to one of the best test cricketing wars of modern era.

Aarav stood at the crease, helmet snug, hands gloved firm, heart drumming with focus and the weight of expectation. He could feel every muscle in his legs, every bead of sweat on his brow, but more than anything—he felt clarity. Jasprit Bumrah, or "Jassi bhai" as everyone fondly called him, charged in from

his long run-up. The ball zipped in at a devilish angle, seam upright, threatening to crash into the stumps. Aarav moved forward with precision, letting the bat meet the ball with a resounding crack that echoed across the net.

"Shot, champ!" called out Umesh Yadav, grinning from mid-off. "Aise hi khelega kal toh pareshani ho jayegi Aussies ko."

They bowled in tandem—Bumrah, Umesh, Shami—even a few deliveries from Ashwin. Again and again, they tested him—short balls that reared up at chest height, toe-crushing yorkers, cutters that wobbled off the seam. And every time, Aarav responded. He ducked, blocked, punched, drove. Sweat drenched his shirt, the sun beating down harder now. But he didn't stop. This wasn't just a net session. This was war rehearsal. This was his dream on the cusp of reality.

After nearly two hours, Coach Ravi Shastri blew his whistle, signaling a wrap. Aarav pulled off his helmet and gasped in the thick air, walking toward the shade of the tent, towel draped over his shoulder. His breath came in heavy pants, but his eyes sparkled with something fierce, something unshakable.

Virat Kohli, the captain and mentor, walked up with his trademark intensity, placing a reassuring hand on Aarav's shoulder. Ravi Shastri joined them too.

"How's the body holding up, champ?" Kohli asked, his voice carrying both concern and confidence.

Aarav gave a half-laugh. "Little sore, but I'm feeling good. Better than I thought."

Ravi smiled, arms crossed. "That's good, because I have some news. Pujara's tested positive for COVID."

Aarav blinked. "Is he alright?"

"Yes," Kohli replied quickly, "He's asymptomatic and isolated. But it means you're playing. You'll bat at one-down."

The world seemed to freeze. The words floated in the air longer than they should've.

"Me? One-down?"

"That's your natural spot, right?" Ravi added. "We've seen you there for IPL and domestic, i.e. all the red ball tournaments. Time to show the world."

Aarav's heart pounded. One-down wasn't just a spot in the batting order. It was a statement. It meant trust because one-down batsman handles one of the most important position in batting order!

Kohli patted his back. "You've earned it. Just bat like you did today. Play your game. Simple."

That moment carved itself into Aarav's bones. A permanent memory.

The first call he made was to his father telling him about this, because for him cricket is only test cricket, not any other format.

"Papa... I'm playing. Tomorrow. At one-down."

Then came Shraddha.

Aarav (Text Message): Hey love. Big news.

Shraddha: What? Tell me!

Aarav: I'm playing tomorrow. Test debut. One-down.

Shraddha: OMG!! Aarav!! 😊😊 I'm so proud. You'll kill it. I'm already imagining you raising your bat after a 50. Or 100 hee hee or even 200. ❤️◻️❤️◻️

Aarav: Just need your prayers. Talk to you at night.

The following week blurred into one of sweat, exhaustion, and unrelenting focus. Aarav practiced like a man possessed. Early mornings started before dawn with dynamic warmups, sprint drills, and high-catch sessions with the support staff. He dived full-stretch onto the turf, practicing his reflexes and getting every inch of his fielding sharper.

Batting followed. Two hours in the nets. Facing Bumrah and Umesh and other bowlers again. Then throwdowns, then simulation drills against left-arm angle deliveries. He shadow-batted in the hotel mirror at night. Visualizing, correcting. Visualizing again.

In between all of it, there were strategy meetings. Whiteboards. Laptop sessions. Discussing lineups, pitch reports, and key Aussie wickets.

And evenings? Evenings were a cocoon. His daily call with Shraddha became a ritual. Her voice steadied his nerves.

The night before the match had an energy of its own. The final nets session had been brutal—sharp, intense, filled with team spirit and unspoken expectation. Even the air seemed tighter.

Kohli hit balls with a vengeance, Ashwin spun with uncanny deception, and Shami was clocking serious pace. Aarav batted like tomorrow had already begun. Everything flowed—timing, footwork, placement. Like the cricketing gods had whispered, "We're watching."

After practice, the team formed a huddle under a deepening pink sky.

"Tomorrow," Kohli said, eyes scanning each face, "we don't just play. We fight. This is the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Their turf. Our pride."

He turned to Aarav. "Debutant or not, you're one of us. Go out and make your story. Don't hold back."

"JEETENGE!" the team roared in unison.

Back in the hotel, Aarav sat silently by his window, the city lights of Adelaide flickering like a dreamscape. His kitbag was packed. His whites pressed and spotless. His bat lay beside his bed, polished and waiting. He couldn't sleep, so he messaged Shraddha.

Aarav: You awake?

Shraddha: Was waiting for you. Couldn't sleep either.

Aarav: Nervous. But good nervous.

Shraddha (Video Call): Her face appeared, glowing. "You've waited for this moment all your life. Just go out there and enjoy it. Pressure will always be there. But so will I."

Aarav: "You'll be in my heart every ball I face."

They didn't speak much after that. Just watched each other, the silence heavy with dreams, fears, and love. Slowly, Aarav drifted into a peaceful, weightless sleep—the sleep of a man ready to carve his name into history.

Tomorrow, the Baggy Greens would learn his name.

And Aarav? Aarav was ready.

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The night before the match, Aarav lay still in his hotel bed, the dim blue hue of the ceiling lights washing over his thoughts like a restless tide. Just as sleep began to tiptoe toward him, a memory crashed into his mind—like a bouncer aimed straight at the head.

36.

The number pulsed in his head, brutal and unrelenting. India's second innings collapse from his past life—36 all out. Adelaide Oval. His debut ground.

Goosebumps prickled across his skin.

It was this match.

The one that left a scar across Indian cricket. The one he watched on his laptop back in his old life, helpless, fuming. But now, fate had thrown him into the very storm he once spectated. A second chance.

He clenched his fists. Not again. Not if I can help it.

He texted Shraddha.

Aarav: Can't sleep. Remembered something.

Shraddha: Want to talk?

Aarav: No. Just wanted you to know—I'm gonna give it everything.

Shraddha: That's the only thing you do. ❤️ Now sleep. The world's waiting.

The next morning, he rose before the sun.

The sky outside the window had just begun to blush with a soft, pale orange. He texted Shraddha a quick, "Good morning," then rolled out of bed. His body moved with ritual precision—hot shower, meditation, light stretch, and gear check. Each motion was purposeful, grounded in the rhythm of a cricketer who had waited lifetimes for this day.

By 8:00 AM, he was in the team lounge, grabbing a protein-packed breakfast. The aroma of oats, scrambled eggs, buttered toast, coffee, and sports gels filled the air, mixed with the buzz of anticipation and clinking of cutlery. Conversations were muted, heads low. Each man lived in a bubble of focus.

The Indian team bus pulled out of the hotel by 9:15 AM. Players were quiet, earphones in, minds tunneling inward. The roads of Adelaide sped by in a blur of eucalyptus trees, sandstone buildings, and occasional cricket fans waving flags at red lights. For Aarav, it all moved like a dream—part surreal, part cinematic.

By 10:00 AM, they were at the gates of the Adelaide Oval—a stadium so beautiful it almost distracted from the match that was about to begin.

Aarav stepped off the bus, his spikes clicking softly against the concrete. He breathed in the sharp, clean morning air. This was it.

The outfield glistened under the sun. Practice stumps had been set up, and cones marked warm-up lanes. The Australians were already jogging in formation on the far side. Mitchell Starc's balls whipped behind him like a warning.

Aarav jogged with the Indian squad, the rhythm of his breath syncing with the pounding of sneakers on turf. Then came stretches, catching drills, throwdowns, and some slip cordon practice with low pink balls skimming across the turf. Around noon, the players retreated to the shade for hydration and a final team talk.

At 1:00 PM sharp, it was time.

The toss.

Matthew Wade stood at the center with his signature wide grin, mic in hand. Cameras swiveled to capture the moment. The breeze played with the captains' jerseys, and the scent of freshly cut grass lingered in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the toss for the first Test match between India and Australia here at the Adelaide Oval. With me are the two captains—Virat Kohli and Tim Paine, alongside match referee David Boon."

The coin flew into the sky. Kohli called, "Tails."

David Boon checked the coin, on the ground and nodded, and nodded.

"Tails it is. India wins the toss."

Matthew Wade turned to Virat. "You've won the toss, what's the decision?"

Virat didn't hesitate. "We'll bat first. It's our first day-night Test outside India, and the wicket looks good. We want to put runs on the board."

Matthew continued, "Any surprises in the lineup today?"

Virat smiled, turning slightly toward the Indian huddle. "Yeah, we've got a debutant—Aarav Pathak. He's replacing Pujara, who unfortunately tested positive. We're playing five bowlers including Aarav."

Wade moved to Tim Paine. "Would you have batted too?"

"Yeah, absolutely. This pitch is a beauty early on." Paine glanced at his squad. "We've also got a debutant today—Cameron Green. He and Aarav were rivals back in the Under-19 World Cup. Good to see them both on the big stage now."

With the toss complete, the teams split. The Indians formed a tight circle near the boundary.

Virat stepped forward, cap in hand. It was navy blue with the golden BCCI emblem, fresh and majestic.

"Aarav," he called.

Aarav stepped into the circle.

Virat placed the cap in his head.

"From gully cricket to domestic, from net sessions to here—you've earned this. Wear it with pride. And play the way you always have—fearlessly."

The team clapped, some whistled, and Prithvi Shaw even hooted, "Ab to Australia gaya kaam se!"

Aarav put the cap on, fighting back the sting in his eyes.

As the team broke formation, a tall figure approached—blond, broad-shouldered, familiar.

Cameron Green.

"Hey mate," he said. "Congrats. Big day."

"You too," Aarav smiled. "Our battles continue."

Green smirked. "You beat us in the U19 semis, remember? Today, I get my revenge."

Aarav's eyes twinkled. "You can try, mate. But remember—we're playing for billions."

They shook hands, firm and respectful. Rivals, yes—but also two boys turned men, writing history in real-time. Their paths had crossed in youth, now again under bigger lights, brighter cameras, and a heavier weight of legacy.

Back in the dressing room, Aarav suited up. Whites crisp, pads tight, gloves softened with talcum. He tied a red thread Shraddha had given him around his wrist. His armor was complete.

He sat for a moment, soaking in the sounds—the clicking of cleats on tile, murmurs of strategy from the coaches, the thump of a ball bouncing rhythmically off a wall. Outside, the crowd had started to swell, the Adelaide Oval pulsing with anticipation.

He stood at the doorway, looking out at the ground. His ground. His moment.

Today, he told himself, I fight fate.

Today, 36 becomes just a number.

The pink ball gleamed in the sunlight like a gemstone, waiting to write a new tale.

And with that, he stepped onto the field.