

## Cricket 21

### Chapter 21

December 23, 2013.

It was a quiet afternoon, and I was relaxing on the couch, scrolling through my phone, when the shrill ring of our landline broke the silence. My mom picked up the call, her expression casual at first. But within moments, her eyes widened, and she gestured wildly for me to come over.

"It's for you, Aarav," she said, handing me the receiver.

"Hello?" I said, pressing the phone to my ear.

"Is this Aarav Pathak?" a warm yet formal voice on the other end asked.

"Yes, it is," I replied, my heart beginning to race.

"Congratulations, Aarav. This is an official call from the Mumbai Cricket Association. You've been selected to represent Mumbai in the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy for 2015!"

For a moment, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My mind raced back to the four grueling days of trials, the endless drills, the pressure, and the camaraderie with the other players. And now, this—validation of all that hard work.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" I exclaimed, my voice trembling with excitement.

"There's more," the man continued. "Training begins on January 15th, and we need you to bring your parents to the MCA office to complete some formalities. Please ensure they're available for the form signing."

I nodded fervently, even though he couldn't see me. "Yes, of course. I'll talk to them right away."

As I hung up, the words spilled out of me in a rush. "Mom, Dad, I got in! I'm going to play in the Vijay Merchant Trophy!"

My mom's face lit up with pride. "Oh, Aarav, that's amazing!"

"Here," I said, handing her the phone. "The MCA wants to talk to you."

She took the phone and listened intently as the person explained the details. After a moment, she nodded. "Yes, we'll be there. Thank you so much."

When she hung up, she hugged me tightly. "We're so proud of you, Aarav. This is just the beginning."

That evening, our family decided to celebrate in style. We headed to Pat Culinaria, the restaurant my parents owned. It was always a bustling place, filled with the aroma of spices and the chatter of happy customers, but that night felt special.

As we walked in, Abhishek, Mayank, and Kamal greeted me with wide grins.

"You're not the only one with good news," Abhishek said, punching my shoulder lightly. "We're in too!"

"That's amazing!" I exclaimed, pulling them into a group hug.

Abhishek, my closest friend since the academy trials, beamed with pride. We'd shared so many cricketing dreams over the past months, and now we were about to step onto a bigger stage together.

"Man, can you believe it?" he said as we sat at a table. "From playing gully cricket to representing Mumbai? This is surreal."

"It is," I agreed. "And we've got to give it everything we've got. The Vijay Merchant Trophy is no joke. You know this is where first-class records start, right? This is where legends are born."

Abhishek nodded solemnly. "We're going to make those records ours."

The party that followed was unforgettable. The restaurant was buzzing with energy as our families, friends, and even some regular customers joined in the celebration. There was laughter, music, and a cake shaped like a cricket bat, complete with icing stumps.

Abhishek and I found a quiet moment amidst the chaos. "You know," he said, leaning back in his chair, "none of this would've been possible without the endless hours we spent practicing together."

"You're right," I said, smiling. "Remember those nights under the lights? Playing until our coach Ashwin had to drag us out of Academy?"

"We've come a long way," I said. "But this is just the beginning."

Abhishek raised his glass of soda. "To the Vijay Merchant Trophy—and to making history."

"To making history," I echoed, clinking my glass against his.

Later that night, after the party had wound down and the guests had left, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The excitement of the day still buzzed through me. Then, suddenly, a familiar ding broke the silence.

"Aria here, master," the AI system's voice chimed in. "After processing today's training, your profile has been updated."

I sat up, wide awake. "Show me the update."

A screen appeared in my mind's eye, displaying my stats:

Name: Aarav Pathak

Age: 13 years (Birthday: 31 August 2000)

Talent Level: SS (Rare)

Skills: Low injury risk, fast recovery, sleep fatigue healing

Bowling Type: Left-arm medium pace

Fielding Skill: Best fielder (54.12%) + Training Module

Height: 5'3"

Talent Development:

KL Rahul Talent: 50.97% (Training Module active – estimated 1-2.5 years for 100% completion at current pace.) Reward Unlocked: Cheteshwar Pujara Test Match Technique (31%)

"Congratulations, host," Aria continued. "You've crossed 50% of KL Rahul's talent. Your reward is the Cheteshwar Pujara Test Match Technique, with training already in progress."

I couldn't contain my excitement. "Test match technique? That's incredible!"

"Indeed, master. With the Vijay Merchant Trophy's format involving two-day matches and 90 overs each, this skill will prove invaluable."

I jumped out of bed, laughing and punching the air. This was perfect. The longer format of the Vijay Merchant Trophy would give me a chance to showcase my newfound technique, testing my endurance and mental strength.

"Congratulations again, host," Aria said. "The system will now undergo an update and will be active again by January 20th. Don't worry; you'll retain all your skills during this time. Good luck, and thank you, sir."

As the days passed, my focus sharpened. Every waking moment was dedicated to preparing for the tournament. My bond with Abhishek grew stronger as we trained together, pushing each other to the limits.

"You know," Abhishek said one day during practice, "this is it. This is our chance to make a name for ourselves."

"And we will," I replied, adjusting my grip on the bat. "We've got everything we need—the skills, the support, and the determination."

"Let's do it," he said, his eyes shining with determination.

Together, we dove headfirst into training, driven by a shared dream and an unbreakable bond.

The Vijay Merchant Trophy was just the beginning, and we were ready to seize it with both hands.