

Cricket 84

Chapter 84

Standing at the doorstep of my home, I felt a mix of emotions swirling inside me—excitement, anticipation, and a tinge of nervousness. I had my truffle bag slung over my shoulder, and my kit bag rested on the ground beside me. My mom stood at the door, her eyes moist but her smile unwavering.

"Be safe, Aarav," she said, her voice gentle yet firm. "Remember everything we've taught you. Stay grounded, no matter how high you fly."

I nodded, my throat tightening with emotion. My father stood beside her, his usual stoic demeanor intact, but there was a glimmer of pride in his eyes.

"You've worked for this moment, son. Now go and give it your all," he said, his hand resting on my shoulder.

I smiled back at them, my heart swelling with gratitude. Bowing slightly, I touched their feet in reverence, seeking their blessings.

The familiar rumble of the Defender pulling up broke the momentary silence. Karan, our family driver, stepped out, a warm smile on his face. He quickly picked up my kit bag and loaded it into the car.

"Ready for the big day, Aarav sir?" Karan asked as he held the car door open for me.

I gave him a grin. "As ready as I'll ever be, Karan."

Sliding into the backseat, I glanced back at my parents one last time. My mom waved, her smile unwavering despite the tears in her eyes. My dad gave me a small nod, a gesture of quiet encouragement. As the car pulled away, I couldn't help but feel a pang of homesickness, even though I was just leaving.

The drive to the team's meeting point was relatively quiet, giving me time to reflect. The roads, the buildings, the bustling life outside the car—all of it felt surreal. Today wasn't just another day. It was the day I officially stepped into a new chapter of my life, joining the Indian cricket team.

I glanced out of the window, watching the city pass by, and my mind wandered to all the moments that had led to this. The early mornings, the grueling practice sessions, the sacrifices my parents had made to support my dreams. And now, here I was, a step closer to achieving everything I had ever wanted.

Karan broke the silence. "You know, Aarav sir, the whole neighborhood is talking about you."

I chuckled, slightly embarrassed. "I'm just doing my job, Karan."

He glanced at me through the rearview mirror. "You're not just doing your job, Aarav. You're inspiring a lot of people."

His words struck a chord with me. It wasn't just about me anymore; it was about everyone who believed in me, who saw their dreams reflected in mine.

As we neared the meeting point, my excitement grew. This was it. I was about to meet the team, share a space with legends I had only seen on television. I wondered how they'd treat me, the rookie among seasoned players. Would they be welcoming? Would I fit in?

Karan pulled up to the designated spot, and I could see the team bus parked nearby. A few players were already there, chatting and laughing, their easy camaraderie evident.

"Here we are," Karan said, stepping out to retrieve my luggage.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. This was the start of something big, and I was ready to embrace it with everything I had.

"Wish me luck, Karan," I said as I stepped out of the car.

He smiled. "You don't need it, Aarav. You've got this."

With my truffle bag slung over my shoulder and my kit bag in hand, I walked towards the team, my heart pounding with excitement and determination. This was my moment, and I was ready to make it count.

As I entered the hall, a mix of awe and nervousness swept over me. The room was filled with legends—players I had idolized growing up, and now I was here, part of the same squad. It felt surreal.

The first person to approach me was none other than Virat Bhaiya. Dressed casually but exuding confidence, he walked over with a warm smile.

"Aarav!" he said, patting my shoulder. "Welcome to the team. Nervous?"

I nodded, trying to manage a shaky smile. "A little, bhaiya."

Virat chuckled. "Don't be. You've earned this. Just remember, it's the same game you've been playing all your life. Nothing's changed except the stage."

His words felt reassuring, a calming presence amidst the chaos in my head. Then he noticed someone else near the door.

"Gill! Come here, yaar," Virat called out.

Shubman, my longtime friend and fellow newbie, walked over. We exchanged a quick nod, both of us clearly feeling the weight of the moment.

"You two are the future of Indian cricket," Virat said, looking between us. "But you don't need to carry that burden alone. We're all here to support you. Remember, play for the team, and the rest will fall into place."

Soon after, Virat led us towards the rest of the team. I spotted MS Dhoni, sitting calmly with a cup of tea, exuding the same composure that had made him a legend. Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan were laughing about something, their camaraderie infectious. Kedar Jadhav and Ambati Rayudu were engaged in a light conversation, while Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal seemed to be sharing some sort of inside joke. Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Mohammed Shami were nearby, quietly discussing bowling strategies.

Virat introduced us one by one, and each player greeted us warmly. But when we reached Mahi Bhai, both Shubman and I felt a distinct shift. It was MS Dhoni, after all—the captain we'd grown up idolizing and watching.

Mahi Bhai looked up at us with his trademark calm smile. "So, the new recruits," he said, his voice steady and composed. "Welcome to the team, boys."

"Thank you, Mahi Bhai," we said almost in unison, our nervousness evident.

He gestured for us to sit. "Relax. You don't need to be so formal. This isn't just a team; it's a family. And like every family, we look out for each other."

I felt a lump in my throat as I absorbed his words. He looked directly at me.

"Aarav, I've seen your records. You've got a lot of talent, but remember, it's not just about talent at this level. It's about discipline, consistency, and handling pressure. Focus on the process, not the outcome."

I nodded, his words sinking deep. "Yes, Mahi Bhai. I'll remember that."

Then he turned to Shubman. "Gill, you've got the technique, no doubt about it. But don't let the pressure of expectations weigh you down. Enjoy the game, and the runs will come."

"Yes, Mahi Bhai," Shubman replied, his voice steady but respectful.

Virat added with a grin, "And don't worry about making mistakes. We've all been there. Just don't repeat them too often, or Mahi Bhai might give you the stare."

Everyone laughed, easing the tension in the room.

Rohit Sharma chimed in, "And if you ever need tips on how to hit sixes, you know where to find me."

"Or if you want to learn how to make bowling attacks cry," Shikhar Dhawan said with a mock-serious expression, "just watch my cover drives."

The banter continued, and slowly, Shubman and I started to feel more at ease. This wasn't just a team of great players; it was a group of supportive mentors who genuinely wanted us to succeed.

As the evening went on, Mahi Bhai shared one final piece of advice that stuck with me. "Aarav and Shubhan, the journey you've started is a marathon, not a sprint. Celebrate your successes, learn from your failures, and always stay true to the game. Cricket is not just a sport; it's a way of life."

I left the meeting feeling a mix of gratitude, inspiration, and a renewed determination. This was the start of something incredible, and I was ready to give it my all.

After an hour of final preparations and goodbyes, the team gathered at the airport, ready for the long journey to New Zealand. The energy was electric—some players chatted animatedly about the series ahead, while others, like me, soaked in the moment quietly, reflecting on the opportunity we'd been given.

We boarded the flight, a luxurious setup arranged by the BCCI to ensure maximum comfort for the players. The plane was buzzing with lighthearted banter and laughter. Virat bhai and Rohit Sharma were already engrossed in a debate about the best batting conditions in New Zealand, while Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal cracked jokes that had everyone chuckling.

I found a window seat next to Shubman Gill, who was flipping through a book on New Zealand's pitches. "Nervous?" I asked.

"A bit," he admitted. "But excited too. What about you?"

"Same here," I said. "It still feels unreal, like a dream."

"Well, Aarav," Shubman said with a small smile, "let's make this dream worth it."

The first leg of the journey to Singapore was smooth. During the layover, we stretched our legs and enjoyed the elite lounge privileges. The senior players were approachable, sharing tips on how to adapt to New Zealand's conditions. Mahi bhai reminded us to stay hydrated and to adjust our sleep cycles quickly to combat jet lag.

The second leg of the flight to New Zealand was longer and quieter. Most of the team dozed off, but I found myself unable to sleep, gazing out at the endless night sky. My mind replayed everything—my journey so far, the challenges ahead, and the pride of wearing the Indian jersey.

When we finally landed in Napier, the crisp, cool air greeted us as we stepped off the plane. The BCCI had arranged for a warm welcome. Local officials and staff members greeted us with garlands and smiles, and a small group of Indian fans at the airport cheered enthusiastically, waving flags and shouting our names.

From the airport, we were transported in a luxury bus to a stunning five-star hotel near the stadium. The drive was picturesque, with Napier's beautiful coastline and vineyards passing by, but fatigue from the journey made it hard to fully appreciate the scenery.

At the hotel, we were greeted with refreshing drinks and were quickly checked in. Each player was assigned their own room—a spacious, modern suite with all the amenities one could ask for. As I walked into my room, the exhaustion from the journey hit me.

The room was pristine, with a king-sized bed, a large TV, and a balcony overlooking the lush green surroundings. A welcome note from the hotel staff and a basket of fruits awaited me on the table.

After unpacking and a quick shower, I sat on the edge of the bed, taking a moment to process everything. This wasn't just another step in my journey—it was a leap. Being here, among the best cricketers in the world, preparing for my debut series, felt surreal yet empowering.

The schedule for the next day included a light training session and an official team meeting. But for now, I decided to rest, recharge, and let the reality of the moment sink in. My dream was no longer a distant vision—it was here, in Napier, waiting for me to take the next step.

After a day of much-needed rest, the team dove into a rigorous three-day training session. The energy at the training ground was electrifying as players sharpened their skills, focused on fielding drills, and worked on specific strategies for New Zealand's unique conditions. Gill and I trained intensely, knowing we weren't yet part of the playing XI but determined to prove ourselves ready at any moment.

The seniors, especially Virat bhai and Mahi bhai, made sure to include us in discussions and drills. Their advice was invaluable, and their belief in our potential kept us motivated.

After the training session and two days of light rest and strategy meetings, the day of the first ODI between India and New Zealand arrived. Napier buzzed with excitement, the stands filling up with fans eager to witness the clash of these cricketing giants.

Gill and I were understandably disappointed when the playing XI was announced, and neither of us was included. Virat bhai approached us, sensing our disappointment.

"Remember," he said, "this is just the beginning. Watch the game closely, learn from it, and be ready. Your time will come soon, and when it does, you'll shine."

With those words of encouragement, we settled into the players' viewing area, ready to cheer our team.

The match began with the toss between Virat Kohli and Kane Williamson. The New Zealand captain won and chose to bat first, hoping to put pressure on India by setting a formidable target.

However, the decision quickly backfired. Indian bowlers unleashed a dominant performance, dismantling the New Zealand batting lineup with precision and aggression. Mohammed Shami struck early, sending both openers back to the pavilion within the first powerplay. His fiery spell had the Kiwis on the back foot right from the start.

Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal then spun a web around the middle order. Kuldeep's variations were nearly unplayable, and he ended with four wickets, while Chahal's clever leg-spin added three more to the tally. Even Kedar Jadhav chipped in with a wicket, cleaning up the tail.

By the end of their innings, New Zealand had crumbled to a mere 157 all out. Gill and I watched in awe as the bowlers executed their plans flawlessly. "This is the level we need to reach," Gill whispered to me, and I nodded, inspired by the display of skill and teamwork.

India's chase began steadily, with Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan opening the innings. Unfortunately, Rohit fell early, scoring just 11 runs before edging a delivery to the slip cordon.

Dhawan, however, held his ground, anchoring the innings with calm and confidence. Virat joined him at the crease, and the two put on a crucial partnership, weathering the Kiwi bowlers' attempts to claw back into the game. Virat played a fluent knock but fell just shy of a half-century, dismissed for 45 after mistiming a shot to mid-wicket.

With the target within sight, Ambati Rayudu joined Dhawan, and the two ensured there were no further hiccups. Dhawan's unbeaten 75 was a masterclass in composure, while Rayudu added a quick 13 runs to seal the deal.

India chased down the target comfortably in just 34.5 overs, securing a comprehensive victory and taking a 1-0 lead in the series.

As the team celebrated in the dressing room, the atmosphere was jubilant. Virat bhai and Rohit bhai were already analyzing the game, discussing areas for improvement despite the emphatic win. Gill and I joined the huddle, soaking in the lessons and experiences from the match.

"See, boys," Chahal teased us, "this is how you do it. Learn fast, or we'll have to give you extra bowling drills!"

Everyone laughed, but behind the jokes was a sense of camaraderie and support that made the team feel like a family.

Gill and I walked back to our rooms that night, reflecting on the match. "Next time, we'll be out there," I said, determination in my voice.

"Definitely," Gill replied with a smile. "We'll make it count."

With that, we closed the day, ready to train harder, learn more, and prepare for the opportunities that lay ahead.