

Cricket 85

Chapter 85

The team hotel in Napier was buzzing with activity. Players moved in and out of the lobby, some heading to team meetings while others were preparing for brief sightseeing trips. Gill and I sat in the lounge, sipping on cold beverages. The atmosphere was light, but my mind was elsewhere.

"Aarav, come on, let's head out," Gill said, nudging me. A group of players had planned a day trip to explore the breathtaking landscapes of New Zealand.

I shook my head. "You go ahead, Gill. I'll catch up with you later."

Gill frowned but didn't press me. "Alright, but don't overdo it, okay?" he said before leaving with the others.

The truth was, I didn't want to spend my day sightseeing. I had been restless ever since the squad was announced and my name wasn't in the playing XI for the first two ODIs. Watching from the dugout had been enlightening, but it also fueled my desire to be out there in the middle, contributing to the team.

After a light lunch, I grabbed my kit and headed to the practice ground. The stadium was quiet, the only sounds being the occasional rustle of leaves and the faint hum of machinery in the background. I set up the ball machine, adjusted the settings, and took my stance.

For the next hour, I faced delivery after delivery. Fastballs, yorkers, bouncers—I tackled them all. Sweat poured down my face, but I didn't stop. Each shot I played was an effort to refine my technique, to iron out any flaws.

Unbeknownst to me, Ravi Shastri had entered the training ground. He was there to oversee preparations for the next day's practice session but stopped in his tracks when he spotted me.

For a long moment, he stood there silently, observing. My footwork, my timing, the way I adjusted to different lengths—it all caught his attention. There was a raw determination in my approach that seemed to resonate with him.

Finally, Ravi broke the silence. "Aarav," he called out, his voice echoing across the empty field.

Startled, I turned off the ball machine and looked at him. "Coach!" I exclaimed, quickly wiping my face with a towel.

"What are you doing here?" Ravi asked, walking closer.

"Practicing," I replied simply. "I wanted to work on a few things."

Ravi raised an eyebrow. "The team's on a break, and you're here hitting balls on an empty ground? Why?"

I hesitated, then said, "Because I don't want to waste any time, Coach. I know I'm not in the XI yet, but I need to be ready when my chance comes. I don't want to let anyone down—not my family, not the team, not myself."

Ravi nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. "That's the kind of attitude I like to see," he said.

He gestured for me to sit down on a bench nearby.

"Your technique is solid," Ravi continued. "But cricket is as much about the mind as it is about the body. Stay focused, stay hungry, and when your moment comes, grab it with both hands. And remember, it's not about proving others wrong; it's about proving yourself right."

His words struck a chord with me. I nodded, feeling a renewed sense of determination. "Thank you, Coach. I'll do my best."

Ravi smiled and patted my shoulder. "I know you will, kid. Now, go get some rest. You've earned it."

As Ravi walked away, I sat there for a while, reflecting on his words. I realized how fortunate I was to have such mentors around me, guiding me on this journey.

Later that evening, back at the hotel, Gill noticed the tired look on my face. "You've been practicing again, haven't you?" he asked.

"Yeah," I admitted with a grin.

Gill shook his head. "You're going to make the rest of us look bad, Aarav."

We both laughed, but deep down, I knew that this relentless drive to improve was what set me apart.

The next day, the entire team assembled for a light practice session. The mood was relaxed, with players joking around and enjoying themselves. Virat Kohli, always the leader, gathered everyone for a quick pep talk.

"Alright, boys," he said, "we've got a good thing going here. Two wins in a row, but we're not done yet. Let's keep the momentum going."

As he spoke, I felt a surge of pride. Being part of this team, even if only as a reserve, was a dream come true.

Over the next three days, we trained rigorously, honing our skills and strategizing for the remaining matches. I spent a lot of time with Gill, practicing in the nets and discussing various aspects of the game.

On the fourth day, the team was given another break. This time, I decided to join the others for a brief outing. We explored the local markets, tried some New Zealand delicacies, and even posed for pictures with fans.

But even amidst the fun, my mind kept drifting back to cricket. The desire to make my debut and prove myself burned brighter than ever.

Finally, the day of the third ODI arrived. As the team bus pulled into the stadium, I felt a mix of excitement and nerves. The roar of the crowd, the sight of fans waving the Indian flag—it was a surreal experience.

As the team sheet was announced that morning, I couldn't believe my ears. My name was there. I was in the playing XI. I stared at the list, my heart racing, and my mind struggling to process the news. This was it—the moment I had been waiting for my entire life. I was finally going to don the Indian jersey and represent my country on the international stage.

Gill sat beside me, his face calm but slightly disappointed. "Congratulations, Aarav," he said, giving me a small smile.

"Thanks, Gill," I replied, my voice filled with emotion. "Your time will come soon, I know it."

He nodded, patting my shoulder. "Make it count, alright?"

The walk from the dressing room to the ground felt surreal. The roaring crowd, the sea of tricolors waving in the stands, the electrifying atmosphere—it was overwhelming. As I stood on the lush green field, trying to steady my nerves, Virat bhaiya approached me with a smile.

He held out a cap with the Indian emblem embroidered on it. "Aarav," he said, his voice steady and full of pride, "welcome to the Indian cricket team."

I took the cap with trembling hands, my emotions threatening to spill over. I looked up at Virat bhaiya, then around at my teammates, and finally at the crowd. "Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

The team gathered around, clapping and cheering for me. It was a moment I would never forget. My debut. My dream come true.

After a brief huddle, it was time for the toss. Virat bhaiya walked confidently to the middle, shaking hands with Kane Williamson. The coin was flipped, and we won the toss. "We'll bat first," Virat announced, and the team cheered.

Back in the dressing room, there was a buzz of activity as the openers prepared to head out. With Dhawan rested for the game, it was Rohit Sharma and Virat bhaiya who were set to open.

"Alright, boys," Ravi Shastri said, addressing the team. "Let's play smart, play hard, and make it count. And Aarav—enjoy yourself out there. This is your moment."

I nodded, the weight of his words sinking in.

The match began with Rohit Sharma and Virat bhaiya walking out to a deafening cheer from the crowd. The first few overs were steady, with both batsmen taking their time to settle in. Rohit bhaiya played a couple of elegant cover drives, and Virat bhaiya rotated the strike with ease.

But in the ninth over, disaster struck. Trent Boult bowled a short-of-length delivery, and Rohit bhaiya mistimed his pull shot. The ball went high in the air, and Ross Taylor, stationed at midwicket, took a comfortable catch.

The crowd groaned, and Rohit bhaiya walked back to the pavilion, shaking his head. India was one down, and the pressure was on.

As I watched from the sidelines, I knew my turn would come soon. My debut innings. My chance to prove myself. My hands were clammy, and my heart was pounding, but I was ready. This was my time.

As I sat in the dugout, staring at the field, my name was called. "Aarav, you're up next," Coach Ravi Shastri said, patting my shoulder. My heart raced as I grabbed my MRF bat and adjusted my gloves.

"Go out there and show them what you're made of," he said firmly.

I nodded, taking a deep breath to steady myself. Just as I was about to step onto the field, I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Mahi bhaiya, MS Dhoni himself, standing there.

"Don't be nervous," he said, his calm demeanor soothing my jitters. "Just be natural. Play your game, and you'll be fine."

I managed a small smile. "Thanks, Mahi bhaiya. I'll do my best."

Walking out to the middle was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The crowd roared as I jogged onto the field, my bat lightly tapping against my pads. The stadium seemed larger than life, the atmosphere electric. I could hear my heartbeat over the noise.

Reaching the crease, I paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and tapped my bat against the pitch. I gestured to the umpire for the leg stump mark, carefully aligning myself. Everything felt heightened—the noise of the crowd, the shine of the pitch, the weight of the bat in my hands.

Jogging over to where Virat bhaiya stood, I was greeted with his reassuring smile. "Relax," he said, his voice steady and confident. "Just play your natural game. No pressure. You're here because you deserve it."

I nodded, his words easing some of the tension in my chest. "Thanks, bhaiya. I'll do my best."

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Remember, stay calm, watch the ball, and trust your instincts. You've got this."

With a deep breath, I nodded again and made my way back to the crease.

As I took my stance, I scanned the field. The New Zealand players were adjusting their positions, Boult getting ready at the top of his mark. The pitch looked good, but I knew Boult's pace and swing would test me.

The walk to the middle had been intense, but now, standing on the crease, it felt surreal. My heart pounded, my palms were clammy inside my gloves, and a bead of sweat trickled down my temple despite the light breeze. I tried to focus solely on Trent Boult, who was pacing back to the start of his run-up. His eyes locked onto me, calculating. This wasn't just any bowler—it was Boult, one of the best in the world, and I was facing him on my debut.

In my head, I repeated the advice from Virat bhaiya and Mahi bhai.

"Stay calm. Play your game."

"Be natural. Don't overthink."

I took a deep breath, adjusted my stance, and gripped the bat tighter. The noise of the crowd faded into the background. The only sound I could hear was my heartbeat and the soft thud of Boult's boots hitting the ground as he began his run-up.

The ball was released, and for a split second, time seemed to slow. It was full, angling toward my pads. My mind screamed at me to focus. The advice from Mahi bhai to stay natural played in my head. I bent my knees slightly, positioned my bat, and with a smooth flick, connected the ball with the middle of my bat.

I didn't even feel the impact; it was that pure. The ball sailed high, higher than I'd ever seen, and I instinctively craned my neck to follow its path. For a moment, there was silence in my mind, but then the crowd erupted. The roar was deafening, a wall of sound that made the ground beneath my feet seem to vibrate.

The ball had cleared the boundary with ease, landing deep into the stands. A six on the first ball.

From the commentary box, a voice boomed over the noise. "What a way to start your international career! The debutant has flicked it for a massive six on the very first ball he's faced! Talk about confidence under pressure. This young man is announcing his arrival on the world stage in style!"

The crowd cheered louder, a sea of fans rising to their feet, waving flags, and clapping. Some even blew conch shells, their sound reverberating across the stadium. The Indian fans were ecstatic, chanting my name.

At the non-striker's end, Virat bhaiya grinned, clapping his hands. "That's how you make your name, Aarav! Keep it up, but stay focused," he said, his voice carrying over the noise.

I nodded, my heart still racing. The adrenaline coursing through my veins was unlike anything I'd ever felt.

In the dugout, the team erupted in cheers. Rohit Sharma stood up and clapped with a wide grin. "Now that's a dream start!" someone said, their voice full of pride.

The coach smiled knowingly, leaning back in his seat. "This kid's got the nerves of steel. A moment like that can define a career."

Back on the field, Boult walked back to his mark, his expression neutral, but I could sense the fire in his eyes. He wasn't going to make this easy. I tightened my gloves, took another deep breath, and got back into position.

The noise of the crowd filled my ears again, but this time it felt different—energizing, not overwhelming. I glanced around the stadium, briefly taking in the sea of blue jerseys, the waving flags, and the chanting fans. This was my moment.

I tapped my bat on the ground and got into my stance again. Whatever was coming next, I was ready.