

## Cricket 104

### Chapter 104

The call came early in the morning. My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and as I reached for it, my heart raced slightly. It was from the Mumbai Cricket Association.

"Aarav, we need you for the upcoming Ranji match. You ready?"

I grinned, already knowing my answer. "Always."

"Good. It's against Uttar Pradesh. Report to the stadium tomorrow for the final practice session."

The next day, as I walked into the stadium, a wave of nostalgia hit me. I had played here so many times before, but every time, the energy was different. I spotted some of my old teammates and couldn't help but smile.

Surya Kumar Yadav was the first to notice me. "Aarav, you're back!" he said, walking over with that ever-present grin.

I chuckled. "You thought I was gone forever?"

Sarfaraz Khan joined in. "Man, we've missed having you in the squad. How's life treating you?"

Before I could answer, my buddy Prithvi Shaw clapped me on the back. "Forget life, tell me you're ready to smash some bowlers into next week."

I smirked. "You already know the answer to that."

Shardul Thakur and Ajinkya Rahane came over, nodding in greeting. "Good to have you back, Aarav," Ajinkya said.

And then, there was my old buddy, Tushar Deshpande. He grinned. "Don't embarrass us, okay?"

I laughed. "No promises."

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Match day. The sun blazed down on the pitch, but all I could feel was the electricity in the air. The stadium was buzzing, fans cheering, anticipation thick in the atmosphere.

We won the toss and elected to bat first. As I padded up, Prithvi grinned at me. "Remember, we're here to have fun."

I nodded. "Fun for us, nightmare for them."

The first few overs were all about settling in, playing cautiously, and reading the pitch. But once I found my rhythm, there was no stopping me.

Boundaries flowed effortlessly. Cover drives, pull shots, flicks over fine leg—I was in the zone. Uttar Pradesh's bowlers tried everything, but I had an answer to every delivery.

Sarfaraz joined me at the crease after we lost an early wicket. "You're seeing it like a football, aren't you?" he said after watching me send another ball racing to the boundary.

I smirked. "More like a beach ball."

Runs piled up. The scoreboard kept ticking. 100... 150... 200... The crowd roared with every milestone.

By the time I reached 300, even my teammates were in awe.

Shardul, from the dressing room, shouted, "Aarav, leave some runs for the rest of us!"

I just raised my bat in response.

I had shattered records. No player had ever scored this many in a single Ranji Trophy match. When I finally got out for 452, the entire stadium rose in applause. The team total stood at 756.

As if my batting heroics weren't enough, my bowling spell turned the match into a complete domination.

I ran in hard, focused, each delivery landing precisely where I wanted it.

The first wicket came in my second over—an inswinging yorker that crashed into the stumps.

The second? A bouncer that forced the batsman to mistime his pull straight to mid-wicket.

One after another, wickets fell. 6 in the first innings. 5 more in the second.

The match was over in no time. We had won by an innings and more.

At the post-match ceremony, as I stood to receive the Man of the Match award, the announcer's voice boomed through the stadium.

"Ladies and gentlemen, history has been made today. Aarav has become the first player in Ranji Trophy history to score over 450 runs in a match and take 10+ wickets!"

I looked around at my teammates, my friends, my mentors. This was just the beginning.

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After four days of well-deserved rest, I was lounging on the couch when my phone rang. It was my father.

"Aarav, do you want to go to the NASSCOM Product Conclave 2019?"

I sat up immediately. "NASSCOM? The big tech and startup event?"

"Yes," he replied. "We've received an invitation. It's a great opportunity to see emerging companies, network with entrepreneurs, and maybe even invest in some promising startups. You have a good knack for this, so if you're interested, you should go."

I paused for a moment, my mind racing. And then, it hit me. The reward I had received from the system—access to OpenAI and DeepSeek models. This wasn't just an event; it was the perfect place to lay the foundation for something huge.

"I'm in," I said firmly. "Book my tickets. I'll go."

"Good," my father said, sounding pleased. "I'll arrange everything."

As I hung up, a smirk formed on my lips.

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As my flight landed in Bangalore, I stretched my arms and took a deep breath. The energy of the city was always something different—fast-paced, full of innovation, and a hub for technology in India. This was where the future was being built, and today, I was here as an investor, not just a cricketer.

A sleek black Mercedes S-Class was already waiting for me outside the airport, arranged by my father's team. As I stepped inside, my personal assistant, Riya, handed me a folder with the schedule for the day.

"The event is already in full swing, sir. We'll be heading straight to the venue. You have a VIP pass, so we can bypass the general entry line."

I nodded, flipping through the documents, scanning the list of startups that were showcasing their projects. Some of them were working on AI-powered automation, others were revolutionizing electric mobility, and a few were developing futuristic gadgets that looked straight out of a sci-fi movie.

"Good. Once we arrive, I want to take a complete round of the booths before deciding on anything," I said, closing the folder.

After a 45-minute drive through Bangalore's traffic, we finally arrived at the NASSCOM Product Conclave. The sheer scale of the event was impressive—hundreds of people moving around, discussing ideas, showcasing their innovations, and looking for potential investors.

As I stepped out, the organizers immediately recognized me and escorted me inside. My VIP pass granted me smooth access through the crowd, bypassing long queues.

Inside, the entire hall was divided into multiple sections, each filled with booths of different startups. Some founders were passionately explaining their ideas to investors, while others were demonstrating their products.

One booth caught my eye—a startup working on AI-powered processing chips, claiming to outperform existing market leaders at a fraction of the cost. Another company had developed smart glasses with an integrated high-quality camera and audio system, aiming to replace traditional headphones and smartwatches in one go. There was also a startup working on electric scooters with swappable batteries, a promising concept for urban transportation.

I walked slowly, absorbing everything, while my team followed behind. Among them were some of my father's core team members, a few employees from our investment firm, and two staff members who were there to handle personal needs. In total, there were eight of us, ensuring that every aspect of my visit was handled smoothly.

After making a full round of the booths, I felt something shift within me. Seeing all these ideas and innovations up close—it was eye-opening. The level of progress these young minds had achieved was commendable, but more importantly, I could see the potential in some of them.

I turned to Riya and handed her a slip of paper with two company names.

"I want to meet the founders of these two startups personally. Go and bring them to the meeting room assigned to us."

She nodded and immediately left to track them down. I exhaled deeply, running a hand through my hair. This was going to be interesting.

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The door to the meeting room opened, and in walked two men—Parag Agrawal and Aravind Srinivas.

Parag, the man behind Koo, India's answer to Twitter, had an air of quiet confidence. Dressed in a sharp blazer with a casual touch, he carried himself like someone who knew the weight of his ambitions.

Aravind, on the other hand, was the mind behind SigTuple, an AI-driven healthcare diagnostics startup. He was slightly more reserved, but there was a sharpness in his eyes that showed he was always thinking, always calculating.

As they stepped inside and saw me, their expressions instantly shifted. Surprise. Recognition. Excitement.

"Whoa! Aarav Pathak?!" Parag exclaimed, a broad grin spreading across his face. "Man, I never expected to meet you here. Huge fan!"

Aravind nodded in agreement. "Same here! I've followed your games. You've been tearing it up lately!"

I smiled. "Appreciate it, guys. But today, I'm here not as a cricketer—just as an investor."

They both chuckled, and before we got down to business, they quickly asked for a photo. It was a small request, and I didn't mind. Riya took a couple of pictures as they stood beside me, clearly thrilled.

Once that was done, the atmosphere shifted. It was time for business.

Riya stepped forward and spoke on my behalf.

"Aarav is interested in investing in both your companies. You might already know who he is on the field, but off the field, he is set to inherit and expand a massive conglomerate. He is owner and mastermind behind the companies like Pat Culinaria, PVMART, and the most recent game-changer, Campa."

I could see it instantly—a flicker of nervousness in their eyes. They had come expecting to pitch to potential investors, but now they were sitting across from someone who had the power to truly scale their businesses.

They took a deep breath, their expressions shifting from admiration to sheer focus.

At the same time, I was staring at them as well—not because of their startups, but because in my previous life, these two had very different roles.

Parag Agrawal had gone on to become the CEO of Twitter before things had taken a turn with Elon Musk's takeover.

Aravind Srinivas, though not as globally famous, had made waves in AI, but with a different company, Perplexity, which was a key player in the AI space and would come in top 5 or top 7 best AI companies.

Yet, here they were different. And this time, I had the power to shape their paths.

I leaned forward, fingers interlocked.

"Alright. Let's talk business."

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The meeting room had turned into a war zone of ideas, negotiations, and counterarguments.

For hours, I sat across from Parag Agrawal and Aravind Srinivas, debating, reasoning, and presenting my vision. My team members were present, taking notes, adding points where needed, and ensuring everything stayed structured.

At first, I laid it out bluntly.

"I want you to shut down your companies."

Silence.

Parag and Aravind looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"Shut down?!" Parag finally spoke, his voice carrying disbelief. "Are you joking? We've worked day and night to build these!"

Aravind leaned forward, his hands clenched. "Aarav, I get that you're an investor, but this isn't just about money. These startups are our dreams!"

I expected their reaction.

"I understand," I said calmly. "But hear me out before you reject this completely."

I gestured for Riya to distribute some documents—financial breakdowns, market trends, and projections.

"Your startups are in a tough position. You're bootstrapped, barely surviving, and nowhere close to profitability. Even if you keep going, it will take you years to reach any significant level of success, and that's assuming nothing goes wrong in between."

They looked through the numbers. Reality was setting in.

I continued.

"But what if, instead of struggling for years, you get something much bigger?"

They looked up, intrigued but still skeptical.

"I want to start something new—a company called Astra."

They exchanged glances.

"Astra?" Parag asked.

"Yes. An AI-focused company. I want both of you to lead it. Parag, you'd be the CEO. Aravind, you'd be the CTO. Your expertise will be invaluable in building something groundbreaking."

Aravind frowned. "And what happens to our current work? Everything we've built so far?"

"It becomes a part of Astra. I'm not just asking you to shut your startups down for nothing—I'm buying them. Three crores in total. 2 crores for Parag and 1 crore for Aravind. It's a fair valuation considering neither is profitable yet."

Parag exhaled sharply. "Three crores?"

Aravind ran a hand through his hair. "And you're saying you'd invest how much in Astra?"

"A hundred crores to start."

Their eyes widened.

I leaned forward, lowering my voice.

"You'll have full creative control over development. You'll be working with my best people. And you'll both own 8% equity in Astra from day one. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

The room was filled with tension.

Parag and Aravind looked at each other. This was bigger than anything they had planned, bigger than anything they could have hoped for. But it also meant letting go of their original vision and placing their trust in me.

Minutes passed before Parag finally broke the silence.

"We'll need time to think about it."

I nodded. "Take your time. But don't take too long. Because Astra is happening—with or without you."

The negotiations didn't end there.

For the next month, countless meetings took place—some at my home, some over calls, and some at my team's office. Every detail was discussed—the company's vision, goals, AI processing models, team structures, funding distribution, and future scaling plans.

Meanwhile, I kept up with my cricket practice and watched the 2019 World Cup, analyzing games whenever I had time.

And then, one evening, I got the final call from Parag and Aravind.

Their answer?

"We're in."