

Cricket 139

Chapter 139

The third match was behind us, and while we lost the final game, the series was ours. However, there was no time to celebrate or even reflect too much on our performance. The moment the match ended on February 13th, we barely had an eleven-hour break before our flight back to India.

I had hoped to meet Shraddha after the series, maybe steal a moment to talk, to just be with her, but the schedule was relentless. The BCCI had made it clear—on February 16th, we had the prestigious BCCI Awards, also known as the Naman Awards. Attendance was non-negotiable, and as professional cricketers, we understood our obligations.

After the match, we had our night's rest in New Zealand, and by early morning, we were off to the airport. Our flight back to India was scheduled for 12:30 PM. Exhaustion was catching up with all of us, but we had no choice but to push through. The thrill of victory, the adrenaline of playing, and the anticipation of returning home kept us going.

The moment I stepped into my home, a rush of emotions hit me. The familiar scent, the warmth—it was a feeling no hotel, no stadium, no airplane could ever replicate.

"Aarav!" My mother rushed toward me before I could even set my bags down. She threw her arms around me, holding me tight as if she had been waiting for this moment forever. "Finally, my son is home! You have no idea how much I missed you!"

I chuckled, squeezing her back. "I missed you too, Ma."

She pulled away to look at me, her hands cupping my face. "Look at you! You've lost weight. Have you been eating properly?"

I groaned playfully. "Ma, I'm a professional athlete! I have strict diet plans, nutritionists, and a full meal schedule."

"Hmph," she scoffed, shaking her head. "No diet is better than a mother's food! I'm making you a feast tonight."

I smiled, knowing there was no escaping it. Then, my father walked in, a proud yet composed expression on his face. He wasn't as expressive as my mother, but I could see the pride in his eyes.

"You did well, beta," he said, patting my back. "Winning the series and amazing 200, I saw every match. You held your ground."

His words meant the world to me. "Thank you, Papa. That means a lot."

"Now go freshen up," my mother ordered. "Then come and eat. I won't take no for an answer."

I laughed, grabbing my bag and heading to my room.

After a long, relaxing shower, I changed into comfortable clothes and walked into the dining room. The sight in front of me nearly made my jaw drop. The table was covered with dishes, each one made with love.

There was paneer butter masala, rich and creamy, with soft chunks of paneer floating in the thick gravy. Dal tadka, the aroma of tempered garlic and ghee filling the air. Jeera rice, fluffy and steaming. Homemade rotis, fresh off the stove. Aloo paratha, crispy and stuffed to perfection. And, of course, my all-time favorite, gajar ka halwa, topped with dry fruits and glistening with pure desi ghee.

"Ma!" I exclaimed. "Are we feeding the entire neighborhood?"

She smiled mischievously. "You've been starving yourself for months. It's my duty to make sure you're well-fed."

I took a seat, my father joining me. The first bite of paneer butter masala melted in my mouth. Nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to home-cooked food.

As I ate, my mother kept piling food onto my plate. "Ma, you'll ruin my diet!" I protested between bites.

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, nonsense! Just go to the gym for a few extra hours. It'll balance out."

My father chuckled. "Just listen to her, Aarav. You know she won't let you go until you finish everything."

I sighed, helpless against her determination. The love in every bite, the warmth in her voice—I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

After what felt like an endless meal, I finally pushed my plate away, full to the brim. "Ma, that was amazing."

She beamed. "Good. Now, go rest. You've barely had any sleep."

After spending some time talking with my parents, sharing stories, and catching up on everything I had missed, I finally made my way to my room.

The bed felt softer than ever, the comfort of home washing over me. As I lay down, staring at the ceiling, exhaustion finally caught up. The next few days were going to be busy—the BCCI Awards, more training, more commitments. But at this moment, in the silence of my home, I allowed myself to breathe, to relax.

The fatigue from months of matches, travel, and pressure all seemed to fade away as I sank deeper into the mattress. My mind replayed moments from the series—the thrill of the wins, the lessons from the losses, and the small moments that made the journey worthwhile. The sound of my mother bustling in the kitchen, my father's calm presence, and the warmth of my home made me feel at peace.

Sleep took over quickly, pulling me into its embrace, giving me the rest I so desperately needed.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, new responsibilities. But for tonight, I was just Aarav, a son who had come home.

As I woke up the next morning, the familiar comfort of my bed embraced me. I stretched lazily, feeling more rested than I had in weeks. Just as I was about to close my eyes for a few more minutes, a sudden thought struck me like lightning.

System! Give me my reward for the New Zealand series!

A familiar chime echoed in my head.

Ding! Host, you are getting really good at remembering this!

Ding! Reward for your fabulous performance:

Reward 1: Power Arm – Jadeja-like throw! Both hands gain the power arm ability!

Reward 2: Singing – You can now sing at a medium-good level! Not professional, but your voice will be loved by many!

I sat up, wide-eyed. Thanks for the rocket arm! But why the hell are you giving me singing abilities?!

No response.

I sighed, shaking my head. Whatever. The power arm alone was an incredible addition to my skill set. Having an arm as strong as Jadeja's would give me a serious edge on the field. But singing? What was I even supposed to do with that?

Shoving those thoughts aside, I reached for my phone and checked the time.

5:30 AM.

As soon as I unlocked my phone, I saw 17 messages from Shraddha. My stomach dropped slightly.

I quickly scrolled through them.

Shraddha:

"Hey, why didn't you pick up my call?"

"Are you ignoring me?"

"At least reply!"

"I've been waiting!"

"Fine! Be like that!"

"Good night!"

And then, the last message: 😞😞

Damn.

I immediately typed a response.

Me: "Hey! I was on the plane, that's why I couldn't pick up your call. Then I was with my mom and didn't check my phone. Sorry! I had no rest at all and passed out as soon as I got home."

I hit send and sighed. Hopefully, she wouldn't stay mad for too long. Knowing Shraddha, she'd either cool down in a bit or keep ignoring me for a few hours just to make a point.

After sending the message, I got up and stretched. I had to shake off the laziness and get back to my routine.

I freshened up quickly, put on my gym gear, and headed out for an extensive gym session.

The feeling of pushing my limits in the gym was always satisfying. With my new Power Arm, I could already feel an improvement. The weights felt lighter, and my grip was stronger. My throws in the practice nets were faster and more precise. This was going to be a game-changer.

By the time I was done, it was 9:30 AM. I returned to my room, drenched in sweat, and went straight to the shower.

The hot water felt heavenly against my sore muscles. After freshening up, I changed into comfortable clothes and headed to the dining area.

My mother, of course, had prepared a massive breakfast.

"Aarav, eat properly! You barely ate anything yesterday," she said, placing a plate full of poha, parathas, and fresh fruits in front of me.

I laughed. "Ma, if I eat this much, I'll have to double my gym time!"

She rolled her eyes. "You work so hard anyway. Just eat."

I shook my head with a smile and started eating.

Halfway through breakfast, my phone vibrated.

Shraddha: "Fine. But next time, at least text me that you're busy."

I smiled, knowing that meant she wasn't mad anymore.

Me: "Got it. I'll make sure to inform you next time, madam! 😊"

Me: "Now let me have Breakfast!"

She replied almost instantly.

Shraddha: "Good. Now don't eat too much. Remember, you still have an award function to attend in a few days. You need to look perfect."

I smirked.

Me: "Why? Are you worried I won't fit into my suit? 😊"

Shraddha: "Just saying! Anyway, I'm heading to practice. Talk later."

Me: "Alright, have a great practice!"

After finishing breakfast, I headed back to my room to get some work done.

I powered on my PC and navigated to a website:

meet.astra.com

Astra's newest platform for online meetings.

It had the simplicity of Zoom, the versatility of Google Meet, and the enterprise integration like Microsoft Teams—all packed into one seamless experience. Unlike the future competitors, Astra Meet offered both a cloud-based experience and a downloadable client for power users. It also had AI-driven noise cancellation, smart scheduling, and real-time meeting summarization powered by Astra's own language model.

This was a product of my company, Astra.

The interface loaded smoothly, and soon, I was in a conference call with my top executives. Parag Agrawal, the CEO, Aaditya, our CTO, and department heads from every major division.

The agenda was clear: Performance analysis, sales reports, investment opportunities, product roadmaps, and long-term projections.

RayGlasses Sales Report

Aaditya was the first to speak.

"Let's start with the RayGlasses report."

A detailed presentation appeared on my screen, showcasing staggering numbers. RayGlasses was a massive hit!

Revenue: ₹10500 crore in Q1 alone.

Units Sold: Over 1.2 million globally.

Market Penetration: 18% increase in the AR/VR space.

Customer Feedback: 92% satisfaction rating, with top reviews praising the seamless integration with Astra OS and gesture-based controls.

Even more exciting—we had multiple investment offers from venture capitalists and major tech giants. Companies like SoftBank, Sequoia, and even Apple had shown interest in investing in Astra.

But we had made a strategic decision.

"We'll postpone any investment talks until the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021," I stated firmly.

Parag nodded in agreement. "We want to maintain our independence for now. Once we establish Astra as a major force, we can negotiate from a position of strength."

Aaditya added, "Our goal is to refine the RayGlasses ecosystem first. We'll expand into AR-driven gaming, AI-powered smart assistants, and real-time translation features."

I smiled. "Let's dominate the AR market before anyone else gets close."

Next, we moved on to Astra Reels.

Launched as a competitor to TikTok, it was doing exceptionally well.

Active Users: 150 million monthly.

Revenue: ₹67 crore in ad revenue within six months.

Top Performing Markets: India, Brazil, and Southeast Asia.

We discussed plans to further integrate AI-driven recommendations and exclusive celebrity collaborations to boost growth.

Parag leaned forward. "Our AI-generated content suggestions have increased watch time by 62%. We need to expand that."

Aaditya added, "Next update, we introduce the 'Creator Fund.' We pay influencers based on engagement rather than views."

I nodded. "Let's take this market by storm."

Despite being a new product, Astra Meet was gaining traction at an impressive rate.

Corporate Subscriptions: Over 30,000 companies onboarded.

User Base: 20 million active users within 3 months.

Feature Roadmap: AI-powered real-time transcription, end-to-end encryption, and deep enterprise integration with Astra Workspace.

Parag leaned forward. "If we play this right, Astra Meet can become a dominant player in the online communication market."

I nodded. "We need to focus on seamless user experience. Make it smoother than Zoom and more versatile than Teams."

Aaditya smirked. "And let's not forget—our AI-powered background removal and auto-captioning are already outperforming Zoom and Skype!."

Parag chuckled. "If we keep this up, Astra Meet will be the gold standard for virtual meetings."

Aaditya brought up the final slide—Astra GPT.

Our very own AI GPT, designed to dominate AI sector. Unlike any other web apps, Astra GPT wouldn't launch as a beta.

"In six months, we release Astra GPT in full version 1.0. No beta testing. We go all in."

This was huge.

No company had dared to launch a full-fledged AI without a beta phase.

Parag smirked. "This will set us apart. No half-measures."

I agreed. "We'll push our AI to the limit. Train it with proprietary data. Increase Budget for Marketing for all our products."

Parag tapped his fingers on the table. "Marketing plan?"

I responded immediately. "We go aggressive. Celebrity endorsements for Reels, real-time AI demos, and live interactions for Meet. and make plan to make Astra a household name."

Aaditya added, "We also integrate it with Astra OS, RayGlasses, and Meet. One AI for everything."

I leaned back, satisfied. "Let's change the world."

After 2.5 hours of discussions, strategies, and analysis, we wrapped up the meeting. Every department had its objectives set, and Astra was on track for a revolutionary year.

As I shut my laptop, a wave of excitement coursed through me.

This was just the beginning.

Just as I was about to take a break after the long meeting, my phone buzzed. Incoming call from Prithvi Shaw.

I picked up.

Gill: "Yo, we're officially invited to the Naman Awards! Time to suit up 🕶️"

Abhishek: "Black coat, black pants—strict dress code. We gotta look sharp."

Jaiswal: "Mannn, I can't wait! First time attending something this big."

Me: "This is crazy! When do we leave?"

Prithvi: "Tomorrow morning. BCCI's arranged everything."

The excitement was real. The Naman Awards were one of the biggest events in Indian cricket, recognizing the best performances of the year.

Abhishek: "Imagine if one of us gets an award 🏆"

Gill: "Haha, chill. Let's just enjoy the night. Also, who's gonna steal the spotlight with their outfit?"

Me: "Obviously me. Ever seen me in a suit? Too dangerous 😊"

Jaiswal: "Bro, you'll look like a businessman trapped in a cricketer's body."

Abhishek: "Let's be honest, Prithvi's gonna pull up with some weird sneakers and mess up the whole black-tie vibe 😊"

Prithvi: "Abe shut up! I'm coming fully suited this time. No risks."

The banter kept going, excitement building with every message. This was going to be a night to remember.

(To be continued...)