

Cricket 51

Chapter 51

The morning air was thick with anticipation, the kind that settled deep into your chest and refused to budge. Aarav, Gill, Abhishek, Jaiswal, Tilak, Arshdeep, Prithvi, and Parag had gathered in one of the common rooms, laptops and phones spread out before them. A crowd of other players, some curious, some supportive, had formed around them. Even the ever-charismatic coach had joined, sipping his tea and offering his usual one-liners to ease the tension.

"Alright, boys," Ravi said, leaning against the doorframe, "this is the real test match, huh? The CBSE scoreboard. Let's see who's going to be the centurion today."

Gill, seated with a laptop on his lap, gave a nervous laugh. "Ravi, don't jinx it, please. I barely made it through my math exam."

"Relax, Gill," Aarav said, though his own hands hovered nervously over the keyboard. "We'll face it together, like we decided. One by one."

Tilak piped up, "Why don't we just open it at once? Like a grand finale?"

"Grand finale or a grand disaster," Abhishek quipped, eliciting laughter from the group.

Arshdeep, holding his phone tightly, muttered, "I swear, this feels worse than bowling a super over."

"Okay, who's going first?" Ravi asked, taking charge. "Gill, you've been pacing around since morning. Open it up and end the suspense."

Gill hesitated, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. "Alright, here goes nothing." He typed in his credentials and hit the submit button. The screen refreshed, and for a moment, everyone held their breath. Then, his results appeared.

"87%!" Gill exclaimed, a grin spreading across his face. "I got 87%!"

The room erupted in cheers.

"Not bad, Mr. Consistent," Aarav teased.

"Consistent on and off the field!" Ravi added with a hearty laugh.

Gill looked visibly relieved, leaning back. "Man, I thought I was barely scraping by. This feels like a win."

"Okay, my turn," Abhishek said, shifting in his seat. He opened his laptop and logged in, his expression tightening as the results loaded.

When the numbers flashed on the screen, he pumped his fist. "90%! I got 90!"

"Look at this genius over here!" Jaiswal teased, clapping him on the back.

"Top of the class," Ravi said, nodding approvingly. "And still scoring runs on the field."

Tilak leaned forward. "Alright, let me show you what average looks like." He opened his laptop and entered his details. A second later, his result popped up.

"84.25%," he announced, shrugging. "Not too shabby."

"Solid, Tilak," Aarav said, giving him a thumbs-up.

"Consistent middle-order," Arshdeep joked, lightening the mood further.

As the banter continued, Aarav felt the weight of his own expectations settling heavily on his shoulders. It was his turn. He took a deep breath, opened his laptop, and entered his roll number.

The page loaded slowly, as if mocking his anticipation. Then, the numbers appeared.

"97.78%," Aarav read aloud, his voice almost disbelieving.

The room went silent for a beat before erupting in a mix of cheers, whistles, and applause.

"Skipper, you don't just score centuries on the field, huh?" Ravi exclaimed, genuinely impressed.

Gill clapped him on the back. "Man, Aarav, you're an all-rounder in every sense."

Abhishek whistled. "Bro, leave some marks for the rest of us!"

Aarav laughed, his cheeks slightly red. "I don't know how this happened. But yeah, I'll take it."

As the excitement simmered, it was Arshdeep's turn. He opened his phone, and with a deep breath, checked his result.

"91.12%," he announced with a grin.

"Another one in the 90s club," Tilak said, nodding approvingly.

"Bowler with brains," Prithvi joked, earning a round of laughter.

Prithvi was next. He logged in quickly, his fingers trembling slightly. The result appeared, and he exhaled deeply.

"91%," he said, looking relieved.

"Consistent with Arshdeep," Aarav remarked. "Solid performance!"

Finally, it was Parag's turn. He seemed the most nervous of all, fidgeting with his phone before finally opening the results portal. When his marks appeared, he scratched his head.

"69%," he said quietly.

The room was silent for a moment before Gill broke it. "Well, at least you're not out for a duck!"

Everyone burst out laughing, including Parag.

"You passed, buddy, and that's what counts," Aarav said sincerely.

"Exactly," Ravi chimed in. "It's not always about the percentage. It's about how you carry yourself forward from here."

As the celebrations continued, Aarav's phone buzzed. It was a video call from his parents. He excused himself and stepped aside to take it.

His mother's face appeared on the screen first, tears glistening in her eyes. "97.78%? Aarav, is this real?"

"Yes, Maa," Aarav said, smiling. "It's real."

His father's voice came from the background. "This is incredible, beta. We're so proud of you."

"Thanks, Papa," Aarav said, his voice thick with emotion. "I couldn't have done it without your support."

His mother wiped her tears. "You've made us so proud, Aarav. First the match, and now this. You're a champion in every way."

"Don't let this get to your head, though," his father joked, appearing on the screen. "There's still a long way to go."

Aarav chuckled. "Don't worry, Papa. I know."

After ending the call, he rejoined the group, who were still buzzing with excitement.

"Alright, boys," Coach Dravid said, clapping his hands. "Enough celebrations for now. Let's get back to the grind tomorrow. But tonight, you've earned a good meal and some rest. Well, done, all of you."

The players dispersed, their hearts lighter and spirits higher. Aarav sat back, reflecting on the days. Between the match, the IPL buzz, and now the results, it felt like life was throwing one challenge after another. But for now, he allowed himself a moment of pride and gratitude.

The party was already in full swing by the time Aarav and his friends arrived. The venue was vibrant, the music a steady pulse that seemed to electrify the air. Laughter and chatter filled the space, with players and staff mingling around the tables. The buffet was spread lavishly, and a faint aroma of grilled delicacies added to the evening's charm. Aarav and the group scanned the room, looking for a table, but it seemed like every seat had already been claimed.

"Looks like we're late," Abhishek muttered, his eyes darting around.

Tilak nudged him, "You're just worried about missing out on dessert. Relax."

Aarav chuckled but quickly realized their situation was becoming trickier. Just then, one of the staff approached them.

"There's some space at that corner table," the staff member said, pointing to a table where a group of girls about their age was seated.

"They don't seem to mind sharing," the staff added.

The boys exchanged hesitant glances before Abhishek shrugged. "Guess it's better than standing around."

As they approached, the girls looked up, their expressions ranging from curiosity to mild awkwardness. Aarav quickly stepped forward, his natural leadership instincts kicking in.

"Hi," he said, offering a polite smile. "Looks like there's no space left. Do you mind if we join you?"

One of the girls, with curly brown hair and a warm smile, nodded. "Of course, no problem. There's plenty of room."

"Thanks," Aarav said as they all settled in. The initial silence was palpable, each side unsure of how to break the ice. The girls whispered among themselves, and the boys did the same. It was only when the same girl from earlier leaned forward that the mood began to shift.

"Hey," she said, directing her question at Aarav. "What's your name?"

"Aarav," he replied, smiling. "And you?"

"Freya Allan," she said, extending her hand. Aarav shook it politely.

(Just Think of her as Aarav's Friend).

The others soon followed. The curly-haired girl introduced herself as Mia, the tall one with glasses was Zara, the one with dyed pink streaks in her hair was Lily, and the soft-spoken girl beside her was Emma.

"I'm Abhishek," one of the boys chimed in, breaking the tension further.

"Gill here," another added with a small wave.

The introductions circled the table until everyone's names were exchanged.

"So," Zara began, adjusting her glasses, "are you guys tourists here?"

"No, not really," Aarav said. "We're here for cricket. Just played a tournament, actually."

Lily's eyes widened. "Cricket? Like... professional cricket?"

"Well, kind of," Abhishek interjected. "We're part of the under-19 squad."

"That's so cool!" Freya said, genuinely impressed. "We're here because our secondary school results just came out. All of us passed, so we thought we'd celebrate."

"Oh, congrats!" Aarav said, and the others joined in with nods and cheers.

"Thanks!" Emma said shyly. "And congrats to you guys too. It must be a big deal to play at your level."

"It is," Aarav admitted. "But it's also a lot of pressure. We're always trying to balance cricket with studies. Today, we were just checking our results too."

"Really?" Mia asked, leaning forward. "How'd you guys do?"

The boys shared their scores, earning impressed reactions from the girls.

"97.78%?" Freya exclaimed when Aarav shared his result. "That's insane. How do you even manage that with cricket?"

Aarav chuckled. "Lots of late nights and early mornings. It's not easy, but it's worth it."

The conversation soon became more relaxed, with everyone sharing bits about their lives.

"So, what do you guys want to do in the future?" Aarav asked, looking at the girls.

"Well," Freya began, "I want to get into the entertainment industry. Acting, maybe. Or hosting. Something creative."

"That sounds amazing," Aarav said. "Have you done anything in that space yet?"

"Not really," Freya admitted. "But I've joined a few workshops. It's a start."

Lily chimed in, "I'm more into music. I want to become a songwriter or maybe perform someday."

Zara adjusted her glasses. "I'm planning to study psychology. I've always been fascinated by how people think."

"And you, Emma?" Abhishek asked, noticing her quiet demeanor.

"I'm not sure yet," she said softly. "Maybe something in art. I like painting."

"That's really cool," Tilak said. "You should definitely go for it."

The conversation flowed effortlessly now, moving from dreams to funny anecdotes about school, cricket, and life in general.

Freya turned to Aarav. "So, what's next for you? More cricket?"

"Hopefully," Aarav replied. "There's a chance some of us might get into the IPL. It's not confirmed yet, but we're optimistic."

"That's huge!" Freya said, her eyes lighting up.

"It is," Aarav said, smiling. "But it's also nerve-wracking. The competition is intense."

"You'll do great," Freya said confidently. "I can tell."

"Thanks," Aarav said, feeling a warmth he couldn't quite explain.

As the evening wore on, the group became increasingly comfortable with each other. They shared jokes, mimicked accents, and even debated over the best movies and music. By the time the party started winding down, it felt like they'd known each other for years.

As the boys got up to leave, Freya looked at Aarav. "It was really nice meeting you. Good luck with everything."

"Same here," Aarav said, smiling. "And good luck with your acting career. I'm sure you'll do great."

As the party wound down, everyone began gathering their belongings and saying their goodbyes. Aarav noticed the waiter approaching their table with the bill, and without hesitation, he pulled out his wallet. Before anyone could react, he waved at the waiter to bring the check to him.

"Wait, Aarav," Freya said, catching on. "We can split it. There's no need for you to pay for everyone."

Mia nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's only fair. We all enjoyed, so let's share the cost."

But Aarav shook his head firmly, a small smile on his lips. "It's really no problem. I've got this."

Abhishek, who had been standing beside Aarav, chuckled and leaned in, whispering loud enough for everyone to hear, "Don't worry, guys. He's rich. This is pocket change for him."

The boys burst into laughter, while Aarav playfully elbowed Abhishek. "Stop exaggerating," he said, though the grin on his face betrayed his amusement.

"Seriously," Zara said, raising an eyebrow, "we can't let you do this alone."

"Let him," Gill quipped, throwing an arm around Aarav's shoulders. "Think of it as him sponsoring tonight's good vibes."

Freya still seemed hesitant but eventually relented when Aarav insisted, "Really, I insist. It's a thank-you for such a fun evening."

With that settled, the group started dispersing, everyone exchanging goodbyes once again. Aarav promised to keep in touch with Freya and her friends, and they walked out of the restaurant with smiles on their faces.

Back in his room, Aarav flopped onto his bed with a sigh. The day had been long but fulfilling. His thoughts wandered to the party, the laughter, and Freya's kind smile. A small smirk crept onto his face as he stared at the ceiling, lost in the memories.

But then, like a jolt, he remembered something. "The system!" he muttered, sitting upright.

He hadn't thought about it since the match, and now it hit him like a ton of bricks. He had performed exceptionally well—179 runs and 3 wickets. Surely that warranted some kind of reward?

"System!" he called out loud, his voice filled with urgency.

There was a faint hum, and then the familiar robotic tone replied, "Yes, Aarav?"

"Where's my reward for the match?" he demanded. "I scored 179 runs and took 3 wickets. Surely, that deserves something?"

The system responded with a hint of indifference, "You didn't ask for a reward, so I didn't give it."

Aarav's jaw dropped. "What do you mean I didn't ask for it? Isn't it your responsibility to remind me?"

The system's tone was unbothered. "No. The responsibility to claim rewards lies with the user."

Aarav groaned, throwing himself back against the pillow. "Unbelievable. Fine. Give me my reward now."

There was a pause, and then a faint loading screen appeared in Aarav's mind. A mechanical voice chimed, "Processing... Generating rewards based on performance."

Aarav waited, his frustration slowly morphing into curiosity. The system continued, "Performance: 179 runs scored, 3 wickets taken. Rewards generated: Language Fluency and Beginner-Level Cooking skills."

"Language Fluency?" Aarav repeated, confused but intrigued.

"Correct," the system explained. "You now have fluency in speaking, reading, and writing in all the languages, Example: - All Indian Languages, French, Spanish, Japanese, German, Chinese and Italian etc."

Aarav's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That's... actually pretty cool. And cooking?"

"Beginner-Level Cooking skills," the system elaborated. "You can now prepare a variety of dishes across different cuisines with Beginner proficiency."

Aarav grinned despite himself. "Well, I wasn't expecting that, but I guess I won't complain. Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome," the system replied before falling silent.

Aarav lay back, letting the reality of his new skills sink in. Language fluency and cooking—two skills that could actually be quite useful in his life. He closed his eyes, already imagining impressing his friends with a homemade meal or surprising Freya with a conversation in French.

A soft laugh escaped him. "Not bad, system. Not bad at all."

And with that, Aarav drifted off to sleep, the echoes of the day's events playing in his mind like a favorite song.

