

It was a cold rainy night in the middle of winter and most people were doing all they can to stay warm. Mike sat cross-legged on his computer chair nestled in blankets. He'd been playing for eight hours straight and lost every game. And he was about to lose another one.

'I'm done with this shit!' he yelled into his microphone. 'I'll be back on later tonight.' He ripped his headset off and threw it against the cupboard. It was probably broken, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered when he lost. He shut down the computer, closed his eyes and stared into the abyss.

Thoughts twisted and turned in his mind like a serpent chasing its tail. He tried to focus on something else – like the sound of rain hitting the roof, which made a peaceful thrum. For a moment it calmed him down, but he slipped back into a stream of thoughts and remembered all his failings and disappointments.

Mike didn't want to listen. He tuned out the mind chatter and focused on his breath. He felt the air flow in and out of his nostrils and noticed how it made his chest rise and fall in perfect harmony. It ebbed and flowed like a wave in an ocean.

Suddenly, he heard a thud, followed by another, and another. It was the sound of footsteps, and they were getting louder. The bedroom door flung open.

'Mike, what the hell was that noise?' yelled a voice.

Mike opened his eyes and turned around. It was his sister, Megan. She stood in the doorway with a concerned look on her face.

'What noise?' he said.

'I heard a loud bang,' said Megan. 'Did you punch the wall again?'

Mike shrugged. 'Don't know what you're talking about,' he said.

'Sure,' said Megan, sarcastically. 'Stop playing games if they make you angry. Come watch some shows downstairs.'

'Games are better for your brain than watching bullshit reality shows' said Mike. 'They keep your mind and reflexes sharp. Tell me that isn't better than watching morons argue about nonsense.'

Megan didn't respond. Mike saw it as an opening to say more.

'Those shows are scripted too,' he said. 'They're as real as storylines in a soap opera.'

Megan rolled her eyes to the ceiling, wondering why she bothered to ask at all.

'I think you should hit up some bars and clubs,' she said, with a hint of smugness. 'You could easily pick up some chicks.'

She wasn't wrong. There is a bit of a stereotype about competitive gamers. It's easy to imagine them as geeky-looking people who spend too much time hunched over monitors for hours on end, with little to no social skills, no confidence, and no life experience. And many confirm the stereotype. Mike wasn't one of them.

He looked less like a competitive gamer and more like a model, which contradicted his personality. He was twenty-four years old, about average height, with hazel eyes, a trendy faux-hawk haircut and deliberately unkempt facial hair. And he had always been a socialite too. But anxiety and depression got the better of him since he dropped out of university a year ago. And he spent more and more time on the computer.

'There's more to life than socializing for the hell of it,' said Mike.

'Better than sitting in front of a screen all night,' said Megan.

'But you just asked me to sit in front of another one,' said Mike.

'How is TV any different?'

Megan didn't respond. She closed the door and walked away. His family wanted to help but they didn't understand him and had no idea about the gaming world.

Mike played a lot of games, and he wasn't the only one. Almost a third of the people on earth played them, and they all had a different reason. Most wanted to have fun. Others wanted to escape from their problems and be someone else in a different world for a while. And some wanted to improve and compete and become the best they can be. With time and dedication, they could become professional and compete with

others to become the best in the world. And the best of them could earn salaries, prize-money and sponsorships.

Mike played for a semi-professional team called 'The Cobras.' It wasn't much, but he earned a bit of coin on the side and enjoyed playing it. Though he hated it sometimes too. He liked winning and improving, but never aspired to become a world champion. He was too busy trying to figure out what to do in life and didn't think being a professional gamer was realistic or sustainable. And most of the time, it wasn't.

The game he played is called Defence of the Ancients. Matches are played between two teams of five players, with each team defending a base on the map. The players control a powerful character known as a 'hero' with its unique abilities and playstyle. In a match, they collect experience points and items for their heroes to make them stronger. A team wins by being the first to destroy a large structure inside the enemy base. The premise is simple but many things can happen and no two matches are the same. It all came down to skill, strategy and team-work – and all three had been lacking today.

Mike couldn't stop thinking about the losses. He climbed out of his chair, plonked onto the bed and closed his eyes. But a sudden loud beep jolted him back into reality. It was a phone call from his friend and teammate, Barret.

'Hey man, you feeling alright?' he asked.

Mike didn't respond.

'Don't worry about that last game,' said Barret. 'It wasn't your fault. I think your decision was the right call.'

'Eh, I don't know,' sighed Mike. 'I'm a support player. I shouldn't initiate team fights like that.'

'If the rest of us reacted quick enough, it would have worked,' said Barret. 'Forget about it. Let's grab a bite to eat. I'll shout you.'

Mike didn't feel like going anywhere. It was cold and late and he couldn't be bothered. But he was a little hungry and his stomach growled

in anticipation. Maybe it was a good excuse to get out of the house, he thought.

‘Alright,’ he said, half-heartedly.

‘Be there in five,’ said Barret.

Mike hung up the phone and scurried around his room to get changed. Empty plates and piles of clothes were scattered everywhere. It looked like a post-apocalyptic wasteland. And it smelt like one too. The spicy odour of old pizza, half-empty beer cans and far too many smelly socks. He walked towards the cupboard, nearly tripping over his headset in the process. He kicked it out of the way in frustration. If it wasn’t already broken, it was now.

The cupboard was packed with storage and clothes. He moved old sports trophies around trying to find jeans and a jacket. It took a while, but he found them hanging behind some of the clutter. He slipped on a pair of shoes, closed the cupboard, fixed his hair in the mirror and headed downstairs. It crossed his mind that Megan might say something obnoxious. And he wasn’t wrong.

‘The vampire has emerged from his tomb,’ she said, raising her arms towards the ceiling.

‘Piss off,’ said Mike, though he thought it was pretty funny. ‘I’m grabbing a bite to eat. I’ll be back in a while.’

‘It’s good you’re getting out,’ she said. ‘But be careful on the road. It’s raining cats and dogs out there.’

Mike nodded. He opened the fridge and poured himself some water, trying to avoid listening to whatever nonsense she was watching. To kill some time, he aimlessly browsed the internet on his smartphone. And soon enough he heard the honk of a car horn. He grabbed his keys and wallet and headed for the door.

‘Alright, I’m out,’ he said. ‘See you in a little while.’

Megan was too focused on her show and didn’t say a word. But their mother heard and bid him farewell.

‘Be careful out there,’ she said. ‘It’s raining cats and dogs.’

Mike stepped outside and felt a cold sting pierce the skin on his face. It was like he opened the door into another dimension. Adelaide wasn't known for its cold winters, but the extremes had worsened due to climate change. The rain swirled and turned in the heavy wind. Mike needed to cover his eyes. His fingers were almost numb, but he managed to lock the door after a bit of a struggle and zipped his jacket up to his chin. He hurried towards the car, opened the door and climbed in.

'Where are we heading?' he said, fastening his seatbelt.

'Kwon Kitchen,' said Barret. 'Nothing better than fried chicken and beer.'

'Shit yeah,' said Mike. His stomach roared in excitement too.

Barret reversed his car onto the road and headed into the darkness. The roads were wet and dreary, with hardly any cars on the road. Mike was freezing, but the car's heater slowly worked its magic.

Barret defied the stereotype about gamers in his way too. He was friendly, sociable, confident, and a gym-junkie – which made sense since he used to be a semi-professional footballer. But a serious injury ended his career but left his competitive spirit unscathed, and he played games to fill the void it left behind.

'I hate losing, man,' said Mike.

'Nobody enjoys it,' said Barret, reassuringly. 'It goes against human nature.'

'I hate losing more than I like winning,' said Mike. 'And losing for eight hours is agony.'

'I feel you,' said Barret. 'But we let you down big time today. You're the best player on the team. A mechanical god, if you ask me. The way you control your character, it's like you're not controlling it at all.'

Mike didn't want to hear it. His harshest critic was himself. He sighed and turned towards the window. Rain still poured outside, and he couldn't see anything other than droplets and darkness. The retro-futuristic sound of synth-wave blared through the speakers, and its melodious tone drowned out the roar of the storm outside. And each

song on the playlist was better than the last. In the middle of the fifth song, Mike noticed glowing neon-signs starting to emerge in the distance, but they were dulled by foggy dew and rain.

‘We made it in one piece,’ said Barret.

Mike nodded.

Barret turned into the car park and found the perfect spot. It was close enough to not feel like a nomadic stroll through a murky and wet hinterland, and far enough to avoid the hustle and bustle. But it didn’t stop them from getting soaked in the mad dash to reach the door.

The moment they stepped inside, the crisp smell of fried chicken and the pungent smell of beer, herbs and spices wafted in the air. An ensemble of air heaters hummed in unison, caressing them with waves of warmth.

‘Is this heaven?’ said Barret.

‘Now it is,’ said Mike, gesturing towards the waitress approaching them. She had raven black hair, big brown eyes and a picturesque smile. And what she lacked in height, she made up for in personality.

‘Hwan-yeong haeyo!’ she said, much too loudly. ‘It means welcome. I’m guessing you guys don’t speak Korean?’

‘Nope, but we sure as hell eat it,’ said Barret.

‘Well, you’ve come to the right place,’ she said, chuckling. ‘Is there only two of you, or will there be others?’

Mike kept looking at her smile, and she noticed too. She turned towards him, hoping he would say something. Barret beat him to it.

‘Two more people are coming,’ said Barret. ‘And maybe a third, if he decides to show up.’

Mike wasn’t impressed. If he knew the other guys were coming, he probably wouldn’t have come. Barret knew that too and didn’t say anything on purpose. It’s not that he didn’t enjoy their company. He didn’t feel like he was in the right headspace to socialize properly.

‘Okay, follow me,’ said the waitress.

She led them down a maze of mostly empty tables and chairs. Only the desperately hungry were willing to brave the cold weather for a deep-fried feast. She gestured towards a cosy booth nestled in the back corner.

‘This is your stop,’ she said. ‘The menus are on the table. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes once your friends arrive.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mike, making sure he answered quick enough this time.

The waitress smiled and walked away. They sat down and picked up a menu. Mike already knew what he wanted to order but looked at the menu anyway.

‘I know you’re probably pissed,’ said Barret. ‘But we need to talk about the team.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Mike. ‘But don’t expect them to come.’

‘They’re already on their way,’ said Barret.

‘What about Marc?’ asked Mike.

‘Haven’t heard from him,’ said Barret. ‘When does he ever leave the house anyway?’

Mike expected him to be the most bitter. Marc was an authoritarian at heart and captain of the team. He demanded strict obedience and had a massive ego. They clashed all the time.

‘I’ll be right back,’ said Barret. ‘Need to make a pit stop’. He stood up and headed towards the toilet, winking at an onlooking waitress along the way.

Mike nodded and pulled out his smartphone. He swiped through some articles, memes and shit-posts and stumbled on one that caught his eye. It was an article about an artificially intelligent team beating world-champions in different games and platforms. It was a project funded by an eccentric billionaire named Reeve Crisp. Mike pondered for a moment, then swiped to the next article.

‘Well, well, well,’ said a voice from afar. ‘If it isn’t the boyband member in the flesh.’

Mike looked up. He saw a tall and round man with an eggplant-shaped head with ginger hair nuzzled on top. It was his teammate, Dave.

‘Somehow, you look more and more like an albino ginger as time goes on,’ said Mike, laughing.

‘And I’m proud about it too,’ said Dave. ‘By the way, have you seen a meerkat anywhere? I brought one with me but can’t seem to find him’

Mike looked confused. It was hard to tell if it was another one of his bad jokes.

‘Piss off,’ croaked a voice behind him. ‘If I had a dollar for every shitty joke you made, I’d be rich.’

Mike stuck his neck out and saw it was his other teammate, Jackson. A meerkat seemed like a fitting comparison. He was tall and gangly, with dishevelled hair and a hooked nose. Mike couldn’t help but laugh.

‘I see you’re still hanging out with this clueless oaf,’ said Mike, gesturing towards Dave.

‘He’s been a thorn in my side for years,’ said Jackson.

‘I’m touched,’ snorted Dave. ‘And I’m starving too.’

They pulled up a chair and sat down at the booth. Barret made his way back too and greeted them, shaking their hands. He sat down too and they all looked at their menus. Mike twiddled his thumbs and folded some napkin paper in the meantime. He looked around to see if he could spot the cute waitress. And sure enough, she looked on in the distance, trying to find the right time to come and take their orders. They locked eyes for a moment. Mike panicked and averted his eyes towards the ground. A minute later, she headed toward their booth with a pad and a pen.

‘Is everyone ready to order?’ said the waitress.

‘I think so,’ said Barret. He looked around and saw everyone nodding. ‘And I don’t think the fifth person is coming.’

They all ordered the same thing; a bucket of boneless chicken. The waitress didn't write anything down. It was probably the easiest order she'd ever taken.

Mike wondered why nobody mentioned the losses that happened today. Maybe they didn't take them to heart as he did, he thought. Or maybe they did but handled it well. But he felt a little better about himself. Nothing soothed the mind like good company and a good conversation. They talked and laughed for a couple of minutes, but were interrupted by an unexpected guest.

'How typical,' hissed a voice. 'You scoundrels couldn't wait for me to order.'

Mike looked up and was surprised to see the voice belonged to Marc. He sounded different on the microphone. And it'd been a while since he'd last seen him. He looked thinner, paler and his hair-line had receded quite a bit.

'Oh captain, my captain,' said Dave. 'Come sit next to your most valuable player – which is me.'

Marc didn't look impressed but sat down next to him, hesitantly. He avoided making eye contact with anyone. The waitress noticed and scooted over to greet him. She was accompanied by another waitress, and together they brought all the beer and glasses. They placed them on the table and poured beer into each glass.

'Number five,' said the waitress, smiling. 'Looks like you decided to show up. Can I get you anything?'

'No,' said Marc, in a brash tone.

Some competitive gamers personified the stereotype, and he was the perfect example. Nobody knew what he did other than play games. For what he had in strategic knowledge and skill, he lacked interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Mike felt compelled to say something to make it less awkward.

'Don't mind him,' said Mike, embarrassed.

The waitress nodded and walked away. She looked a little surprised but didn't seem too bothered. Mike hoped he made a good impression or any impression at all.

'So, what's the deal with this meeting?' said Marc, crossing his arms. 'Better be for a good reason.'

Barret reached into his pocket, grabbed a piece of paper and placed it onto the table. Marc snatched it before anyone had a chance to read what was on it. His eyes scanned across the page like a madman. Sometimes it did seem like he was an android.

'A local tournament,' said Marc, widening his eyes. 'It starts in two weeks and has a five-thousand-dollar prize-pool.'

'That's it?' said Dave, unimpressed. 'Split between five people, it's a thousand bucks each.'

'There's more, you imbecile,' yelled Marc. 'The winner gets a chance to play in an exhibition tournament a few weeks later. And all the tier-one teams will be there.'

'That's right,' said Barret. 'Not only would we have a chance to meet our favourite players, but we'd have a chance to play against them too – and maybe even impress them.'

A wave of excitement swept across the table. Mike felt it too. He wondered whether he could stand toe to toe against the best in the world. And deep down, he felt like he could. But not everyone shared his optimism.

'We'd get our asses handed to us,' said Jackson.

'Ain't that the truth,' said Dave.

'We can beat them,' said Mike, with a spark in his eye. 'They're human, and so are we. Yeah, they're better and more experienced. But anything can happen.'

'Stop getting ahead of yourself,' yelled Marc. 'You did that today and it cost us the game.' He was insufferable at the best of times. Mike didn't like him, but he respected him. Defence of the Ancients has a ranked system based on individual performance. Marc was in the highest

division, but only barely. Everyone else in the team was in the second-highest division.

‘That wasn’t his fault,’ said Barret.

‘Oh, piss off,’ hissed Marc. ‘Of course, you’re going to back up your pal.’

‘I want this team to work,’ said Marc. ‘But it will only work if we’re all on the same page. And I’m the one who writes that page. Strategy is paramount, and teams need to be disciplined.’

‘It’s not all about strategy and discipline,’ said Mike, shaking his head. ‘It’s about mindfulness and presence of mind. Things happen and you need to adapt. Opportunities present themselves, and you need to take them. If everyone’s thinking too focused on sticking to some bullshit plan, they’ll miss them.’

‘You know what your problem is, Mike,’ said Marc. ‘You don’t have a plan at all, you’ve never had a plan, and you don’t believe in plans. It’s stupid and childish, and it’s the reason why your life is a mess.’

Mike heard enough. The words struck a nerve and he needed some fresh air. He stood up and headed for the door. The rain and wind still howled outside and there wasn’t much cover. He perched himself under a narrow strip of the roof that stood above the restaurant window.

Thoughts raced again in his mind and they tortured him with criticism. Maybe his life was a mess, and maybe it happened because he had no plan. Depression is a cruel beast. It was like an eternal storm that darkened his soul. Sometimes it faded away enough for the sun to shine. But it always came back with a vengeance, and he felt like it was happening again.

Suddenly, he heard a sound chime and the door opened beside him.

‘Hey,’ said a warm voice. It was the waitress. ‘What on earth are you doing out here?’

‘Oh, you know, brooding about my life,’ said Mike.

‘It’s the perfect weather for that, isn’t it?’ said the waitress, chuckling. ‘I heard everything you guys were saying. The restaurant is practically empty and you guys were kinda loud. I wasn’t eavesdropping or anything.’

‘Ah, so you know all about my life,’ said Mike, embarrassed.

‘Only a little,’ said the waitress. ‘I know that your name is Mike. So, it’s only fair that you know mine. My name is Luna. Nice to meet you.’ She reached out for a handshake.

‘Nice to meet you,’ said Mike, shaking her hand.

‘Gosh, your hands are freezing!’ she squealed. ‘So, are you guys a gaming team or something?’

‘Something like that,’ said Mike.

‘I play them from time to time,’ said Luna. ‘I think I’m pretty good. Not good enough to be on a team, though.’

Mike was impressed. She didn’t look like someone who played games. But it seemed dumb to make assumptions about who can and can’t play them. After all, he didn’t look like a stereotypical gamer either. Megan was right all along, he thought. Not about the bars and clubs. But getting out of the house once in a while. On a normal night, he would have stayed home and queued up another game. Now he was talking to the coolest girl on the planet.

‘What’s your favourite game?’ asked Mike.

‘Defence of the Ancients,’ said Luna. ‘My brother taught me how to play. He’s really good.’

‘That’s what I play too,’ said Mike. He wasn’t sure if he was dreaming. ‘Maybe we can play together sometime?’

‘Sure,’ said Luna. ‘My username is pretty long and complicated. I’ll write it down and give it to you before you go.’

‘No problem,’ said Mike.

‘Anyway, it’s way too cold to be outside,’ said Luna. ‘I should get back to my shift, and your food is probably ready.’

Mike nodded and they went inside. Luna was kind and cared enough to see if he was alright. She was the perfect amount of awkward, and the fact she played games was a bonus. He was already interested in her and wondered whether she felt the same. Maybe it was obvious, he thought. Or maybe she was being nice. Either way, he was grateful.

‘Thanks for checking on me,’ said Mike. ‘It’s a pretty random thing to do for someone you don’t know.’

‘Opportunities present themselves and you need to take them,’ said Luna.

‘You were eavesdropping on our conversation at the table, weren’t you?’ said Mike, laughing.

Luna winked and pirouetted towards the bar like a ballerina. She was bright and bubbly and had an infectious glow. Mike smiled and strutted towards the table, trying to play it cool. He didn’t want anyone asking any questions. So, he tried to make it seem like he was still mad. But he wasn’t fooling anyone.

‘Welcome back, Don Juan,’ said Barret. ‘Didn’t take you long to turn that frown upside down.’

Mike laughed. He pulled up a chair and took a seat. They were all on their smartphones, waiting for the food to arrive.

‘Did you guys see that article about the A.I team beating everyone?’ said Mike.

Nobody said anything and they all looked confused.

‘I, for one, welcome our A.I overlords,’ said Marc, with a furrowed brow. ‘They have won over nine-thousand matches with a win rate of 99.5 percent. If that isn’t proof that an algorithmic playstyle isn’t the best, I don’t know what is.’

‘That’s why you’re a good captain’ said Mike. ‘Don’t get me wrong. I think there’s more to the game than your plans. But it’s important to look at the game logically and objectivity. And you do that well.’

Marc nodded. Mike hoped he would say something nice in return, but he didn’t. Still, he became more amicable.

Luna and the other waitress approached the table with four buckets of fried chicken. They tip-toed between the seats and placed them on the table like a pair of synchronized swimmers.

‘Mashikeh-mogoseyo!’ they said, in unison. ‘It means enjoy your meal.’

Luna slipped a napkin into Mike’s hand and twirled away. Nobody seemed to notice except for Barret.

‘Did you get her number?’ he whispered.

‘Even better,’ whispered Mike. ‘It’s her username. She plays Defence of the Ancients.’

Barret nodded his head in approval. He held out his knuckles for a fist bump. Mike reciprocated and then opened the napkin.

LunaMoonal337 was written with a blue ballpoint pen, and the ink was a little smeared. Mike felt a warm sensation buzz in his stomach and it wasn’t from the hunger.

‘Don’t know about you guys,’ said Dave. ‘But I’m going to demolish this bucket in a minute or two.’ He grabbed three pieces of boneless chicken and popped them into his mouth.

The others followed his lead. Nobody said a word for a minute or two. The sound of crunching and chewing reverberated across the table, interrupted by the odd chug of beer. Marc was repulsed. He sat in silence until they were done.

‘Alright, now the swine have eaten it’s time to talk,’ said Marc. ‘Our team is in disarray and we have two weeks to sort it out before the tournament starts. But I have a perfect idea; a two-week boot camp at my parent’s holiday house. Bring your computers and we’ll set them up in the same room. And we’ll play from sundown to sunrise and sleep during the day.’

Everyone looked shocked.

‘Isn’t that a bit much?’ said Jackson.

Mike thought about it for a moment. It sounded extreme and he couldn’t stand playing for that many hours every day of the week. But its

how elite professional teams prepared for tournaments. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. The worst thing that could happen is they'd waste two weeks and lose their minds. But at least they would have tried and failed.

'None of us are working at the moment and we're all on holidays,' said Mike. 'I think it's a good idea.'

Marc didn't respond. But he looked pleasantly surprised.

'Damn,' said Barret. 'Did these two agree on something?'

'Looks like it,' said Dave.'

'Guess we don't have a choice then, huh?' said Jackson.

'Two weeks to become world-beaters,' said Mike. 'Let's go all-in and win this damn thing.'

They stacked their hands in the middle of the table with the palms faced down. Marc hesitated for a moment, but he didn't want to be the one left out and out his hand in too. For the first time in a while, they looked and felt like a team again.

'Cute hand-huddle guys,' said Luna, laughing.

Everyone quickly retracted their hands and put them in their pockets.

'Don't mean to interrupt,' she added. 'But can I get you any dessert or coffee?'

Everyone shook their heads. It was getting late and they were itching to get home and queue up another game.

'I think we're good,' said Barret.

'Okay,' said Luna. She walked away and came back moments later with the bill.

They stood up one by one and gathered their wallets, keys and phones. Jackson and Dave placed a twenty dollar note on the table. Mike tried to place a twenty too but Barret stopped him in his tracks.

'My shout, remember?' he said, throwing down a fifty.

Mike nodded.

One by one, they headed towards the door. Thanking the waitresses along the way.

‘Kamsa-hamnida!’ yelled the waitresses, slightly bowing their heads.
‘Have a good night.’

Mike split from the group and approached Luna.

‘Thanks for cheering me up,’ he said. ‘I’ll add you the moment I get home.’

‘No problem,’ said Luna. ‘I’ll catch you in the interwebs.’

Mike was smitten and tried not to show it. He popped his collar, put his hands in his pockets and swaggered towards the door. Everyone was waiting outside.

‘So, when does the boot camp begin?’ said Dave.

‘In two days,’ said Marc. ‘Say your prayers and eat your vitamins. Because it’s gonna be intense.’

‘Is anyone keen for a couple of games when we get home?’ said Barret. ‘I’m feeling a little pumped right now.’

‘Count me in,’ said Dave.

‘Me too,’ said Jackson.

‘Sure,’ said Marc. ‘I was planning on playing anyway.’

Mike couldn’t say no even if he wanted to. It was rare to see the team enthusiastic after such a torrid day. And he needed to log in to add Luna anyway.

‘Fine,’ said Mike. ‘Let’s crush some noobs.’

The rain started to wane but there was still a bit of a drizzle. Everyone was cold, wet and eager to get home. They said their goodbyes and went separate ways. Mike placed his hand on his stomach and felt the competitive fire burning inside once again. Maybe it was the start of a new chapter, he thought. And he didn’t want to let the team down.