

Sahil Armaan Kumar

CW 100

IRL

A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead, peeking out from the edge of my brow, crawling around the outer-curve of my left eye, till it finally made its way beneath my nose, nestled comfortably in its own little cave above my upper lip, unmoving. Naturally, I was too focused to notice. Trivial things belonging to this flimsy world meant nothing to me. They were mere hindrances keeping me from my true calling.

I was in another dimension, transported by the onslaught of a thousand pixels slaving to constantly change the screen my eyes so intently darted around. I was in a jungle, hidden carefully in a bush, silent as the grave I had readied for my enemies. I peeked out, red tinted goggles helping me see through the thick fog that covered the ground and most of the area around the Rift. Confident in my guise, I tumbled out of the bush, crossbow drawn, bolt loaded, ready to fire at the first sign of danger.

A second passed, then two. I was safe. I stepped forward just as my eyes caught the momentary glint of sunlight on metal, and I froze. I was too late. I had already stepped on the trap, and a huge cat jumped out of the bush I had just come from, massive claws tearing through my flesh like a lightsaber on butter. I tried to turn, to run, but I couldn't. I was frozen in place. My screen turned grey and I slammed my mouse down in a fiery fit of fury, suddenly brought back to this boring, monotonous world. All hope was lost. We were doomed.

I looked away and was about to get up, but something made me turn back around. The enemy was in our base, I was dead, it was over. Right? I scanned the screen, desperately looking for a sign, for any chance at a comeback. Then I saw it, a small dot on the map approaching the enemy base. It was the monk. He had snuck past the other team and made it

to the core of their base. He started destroying their Nexus, doing massive damage with each strike. Suddenly, seemingly out of thin air, the same huge cat pounced on him, claws sinking into his chest and back. Defiant, he kicked the cat off his back and, with a final burst of energy, struck the Nexus with all the force he could muster. VICTORY! WE WON! He had done it. He'd saved us all. **Friend request sent.**

When we reached Copenhagen, the first thing that stood out to me was how big everything was. I got off the subway and trudged up the colossal staircase, finally emerging into the brisk late-summer air of the city, pausing to take everything in. Massive buildings spanning twenty, thirty stories on either side. Canals running parallel to rows of multicoloured houses, straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. It was beautiful.

I turned around again, still trying to soak in my surroundings, when all of a sudden, I couldn't move. It was only a second. A brief pause. But that second took me back nearly five years. Back to that fateful game, to the trap I had foolishly stepped on, to the first time we had met. There he was, standing before me, flesh and everything, in real life.

It's a strange thing, meeting someone in person for the first time after having been best friends for half a decade. Talking to them for that long, you form an image of them in your head, a picture that their voice soon becomes synonymous with. When you finally meet them, however, you realize how incredibly far from the truth that picture was, and they turn out to look miles off of who you thought you'd been talking to that whole time.

He was taller than I imagined. He had messy, golden-brown hair. Dark brown eyes, unnaturally thin eyebrows, but that same deep, thickly accented voice I had become so familiar with, a comforting reassurance that this was, in fact, real.

"Armaan," he asked. "Is that you?"

“Magnus,” I replied, not even trying to hide my excitement. “Yes! It’s me! I can’t believe you’re actually here. How are you?”

“C’mon guys, what’s with the pleasantries, give him a hug,” Mom said, her previous hesitations fading away with his calm demeanor.

We embraced, and that was that. All awkwardness faded away, and we were us. Two people who met online five years ago, who’d spent hours grinding League, Overwatch, Paladins, who lived thousands of miles away from each other, finally together.

“Come with me, I’ve got something to show you. You’re going to love it,” Magnus said, his words teeming with mischief.

I looked up to the bearers of responsibility, eyes silently pleading for approval. They exchanged glances, and Dad replied, with a barely audible sigh. “Sure, go. Don’t be out too late, and remember, we’ve got dinner tonight.”

“YES!” I said, practically screaming. “Thanks guys, you’re the best. I’ll call you about dinner. Tell me where to meet you.”

Two quick hugs and a small exchange of currency later I was off, whisked away by Magnus into the heart of the city, skin tingling in anticipation of the day to come. Our first stop was back at his house. As any true gamer would, the first place he took me was his bedroom, anxious to show me where the real magic went down.

His room was an absolute mess, and I couldn’t have loved it more. Clothes carpeting the dirty floor, wrappers flowing out of the small, thoughtful but totally ineffective trash can. His bed was full of hair, courtesy of his feline partner in crime, Dora.

His desk, on the other hand, was kept surprisingly clean. Energy drinks neatly stacked in the corner, monitor wiped till it sparkled, keyboard looking like he’d just unboxed it, wires

perfectly managed. His setup was red themed, same as mine, and he showed off his high-performance graphics card and state of the art processor. As he beamed with pride, I couldn't help but stare, infatuated, embarrassed of my own messy setup back home.

Apparently pleased at my level of absorption, Magnus decided it was time for us to leave. He led me further into the city, through shady alleys and side lanes, finally stopping in a suspiciously empty parking lot.

I spent a minute looking around, wondering what adventure we would go on next. The parking lot was pretty plain, albeit a small doorway in an unassuming wall, and as luck would have it, he grabbed my hand and dragged me through the door, down a dark, spiralling staircase, into a room I can only hope to describe.

Rows of fully customized PCs lined the walls, each manned by a kid my age, back arched forward, right hand expertly guiding a cursor across the screen, left hand mashing long strings of characters together in patterns hours of practice had firmly etched into memory. The strong smell of worked-in leather seats intermixed with various snacks and an assortment of soft drinks filled the air, making my head dizzy.

We approached the counter and rented two PCs, bought a bag of chips and a can of coke at the vending machine, sat down and began. The next hour was somewhat a blur. Each computer had titanic internet speeds, courtesy of fibre optic cables, and I had never played on such a smooth interface in my life.

Magnus and I didn't speak once. We didn't need to. We were an unstoppable force, our opponents cowering away as they beheld our immense synergy. As the hour came to an end, we looked up from our screens, up at each other, and smiled. We were both thinking the same thing. How amazing was it that two foolish 16-year-olds, brought together by messed up priorities and abnormal sleep schedules, raised in different countries, no, continents, were

now in the same dingy basement, separated only by a few feet of nothing but air? Pretty damn amazing, if you ask me.

After our excursion to gamer heaven, Magnus and I both rented bikes and cycled around the city. He showed me his old school and the college he hoped to go to the following year. We rode through Christiania, a part of the city the stoners and misfits had made their own, and the posh street with all the huge brands that only the super-rich and elite could afford. As the sun started to sink, Magnus took me to a huge field on the banks of one of the central canals, probably the only place in Copenhagen where you could see far into the distance, view unobstructed by towering buildings and skyscrapers. We lay down on the grass, facing the canal, and talked.

“Dude, you see that bush down there, the big one by the water?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, unsure where this was going.

“A few weeks ago, I got drunk as fuck,” he continued, the corners of his mouth peeking upwards in a sly grin. “So drunk, I took off all my clothes, threw them in the bush, and jumped in the water. BUTT NAKED. It was so cold, literally freezing. And I swear I could feel something slimy touch my leg. I freaked out. Got out of the water, made it halfway home before I realized I’d left my clothes in the bush. I’m a dumbass.”

I looked down at the small pond cornered off by the mound of grass we were laying on. Down at the murky, brownish-green water, fading to a tar-like black in the centre. Then I looked back up at him, with his playful smile and beaming eyes, making me certain he was proud of his extravagant drunk escapade. Picturing his much-too-inebriated-self running zig-zagged across the grass, fully nude, we erupted with laughter, perfectly on cue, only pausing to gasp for breath a few minutes later before returning to our hysterics.

We would've spent all night there, sharing crazy stories about all the stupid shit we'd done and even stupider things we wanted to do, but for the unavoidable interruption of a billion missed phone calls.

That night our families had dinner together at Magnus' favourite restaurant. We laughed about how crazy it was that my dad had coincidentally rented a house just a block away from where Magnus lived, and how absolutely none of this was planned. We discussed how amazing the weather in Denmark was, and how Delhi was suffering a horrible heatwave that year, with absurdly high temperatures. We made plans for Magnus to come visit me in India, plans we knew would probably never work out but were excited to make anyways. We ate till we could eat no longer, and then ate some more.

Our parents drank, both pairs happy that the other had turned out to be genuine, feeling foolish for having ever expressed doubt in the slightest. They exchanged numbers and emails, promising to keep in touch.

"It's so crazy this even happened," Magnus' mom said. "I keep telling him to get off that stupid game of his, but I never expected it would lead to something like this. I'm so glad we got to meet you guys. Speaking of which, Vinay, how did you plan the trip? Armaan told me it was completely random, but there's no way that's true, right?"

Mildly tipsy, my dad started sharing the bizarre circumstances that resulted in this fateful trip.

"So, I was just sitting there," he started, his bold voice demanding attention.

"In your underwear, as usual." My sister, Simran, added, usefully.

"In my underwear, as usual," he continued, "doing some work in the living room, when I decided I needed a change of scenery. It was about to be summer of Armaan's junior

year, and I knew he'd have too much work to go on a long vacation as a senior. Knowing Rebekkah and Simran had always wanted to go to Europe, I remembered that we had family staying in Norway, and picked a few countries near there I wanted to visit too. I asked everyone if they wanted to go, looked at the dates we were all free, and bought the tickets."

"A few days later, as Magnus and I were playing League, I remembered that he lived in Denmark," I added, picking up where Papa had left off. "Excited, I asked Papa for the address of the Airbnb he'd booked and told Magnus the details."

"When he told me," Magnus began, "I thought he was kidding. I searched it on google maps, just to make sure I wasn't mistaken. A four-minute walk! We got so lucky. When I told him on call, we both started screaming."

"Yeah, I could hear you guys," Mom interjected. "Y'all almost made me spill coffee all over my yoga matt."

"I honestly thought Mom saw a cockroach." My sister concluded, resulting in a round of happy chuckles.

Stuffed and worn out, we said goodbye, wasting no time on tears, and left the restaurant. Magnus' family took a left, and my family exited right. As I walked back to the apartment and started to pack for my flight early next morning, I smiled. Five years of online friendship and a whole lot of luck later, we had met. IRL.