

#6

1 Wei-Dong's game-suspension lasted all of 20 minutes. That's how
long it took him to fake a migraine, get a study-pass, sneak
into the resource center, beat the network filter and log on. It was
getting very late back in China, but that was OK, the boys stayed up
5 late when they were working, and they were glad to have him.

Wei-Dong's real name wasn't Wei-Dong, of course. His real name was
Leonard Rosenbaum. He'd chosen Wei-Dong after looking up the meanings
of Chinese names and coming up with Strength of the East, which
he liked the sound of. This system for picking names worked well
10 for the Chinese kids he knew -- when their parents immigrated
to the States, they'd just pick some English name and that was it.
Why not? Why was it better to pick a name because your grandfather
had it than because you liked the sound of it?

He'd tried to explain this to his parents, but it didn't make much
15 of an impression on them. They were cool with him being interested
in other cultures, but that didn't mean he could get out of having
a Bar-Mitzvah or that they would call him Wei-Dong. And it didn't
mean that they approved of him being up all night with his buds
in China, making money.

20 Wei-Dong knew that this could all be seen as very lame, an outcast
kid so desperate to make friends that he abandoned his high school
altogether and sucked up to someone in another hemisphere with free
labor instead. But it wasn't like that. Wei-Dong had plenty
of friends at Ronald Regan Secondary School. Plenty of kids thought
25 that China was the most interesting place in the world, loved
the movies and the food and the comics and the games. And there
were lots of Chinese kids in school too and while a couple clearly
thought he was weird, lots more got it. After all, most of them were
into India the way he was into China, so they had that in common.
30 And so what if he was skipping a class? It was Social Studies,
ferchrissakes! They were supposed to be studying China, but Wei-Dong
knew about ten times more about the subject than the teacher did. As
he whispered in Mandarin into his earwig, he thought that this was
like an independent study project. His teachers should be giving him
35 bonus marks.

"Now what?" he said. "What's the mission?"

"We were thinking of running the Walrus's Garden a few more times,
now that we've got it fresh in our heads. Maybe we could pick up
another vorpal blade." That's what the guys did when there weren't
40 any paying gweilos -- they went raiding for prestige items. It wasn't
the most exciting thing of all, but you never knew what might happen.

"I'm into it," he said. He had a free period after this one, then lunch, so technically he could play for three hours solid. They'd all be ready to log off and go to bed by then, anyway.

45 "You're a good gweilo, you know?" Wei-Dong knew Ping was kidding. He didn't care if the guys called him gweilo. It wasn't a racist term, not really, not like "chink" or "slant-eye." Just a term of affection. And as nicknames went, "Foreign ghost" was actually kind of cool.

50 So they hit the Garden and ran it and they did pretty well, and they went and put the money in the guild bank and went back for more. Then they did it again. Somewhere in there, the bell rang. Somewhere in there, some of his friends came and talked to him and he muted the earwig and said some things back to them, but he didn't really
55 know what he'd said. Something.

Then, on the third run, the bad thing happened. They were almost to the shore, and they'd banished their mounts. Wei-Dong was prepping the Queen's Air Pocket, dipping into the monster supply of oyster shells he'd built up on the previous runs.

60 And out they came, a dozen knights on huge, fearsome black steeds, rising out of the water in unison, rending the air with the angry chorus of their mounts and their battle-cries. The water fountained up around them and they fell upon Wei-Dong and his guildies.

He shouted something into his earwig, a warning, and all
65 around him in the resource center, kids looked up from their
conversations to stare at him. He'd become a dervish, hammering away
at his keyboard and mousing furiously, his eyes fixed on the screen.
The black riders moved with eerie synchrony. Either they were
monsters -- monsters such as Wei-Dong had never encountered -- or
70 they were the most practiced, cooperative raiding party he'd ever
seen. He had his vorpal blade out now, and his guildies were all
fighting as well. In his earwig, they cursed in the Chinese dialects
of six different provinces. Under other circumstances, Wei-Dong would
have taken notes, but now he was fighting for his life.

75 Lu had bravely taken the point between the riders and the party,
the huge tank standing fast with his mace and broadsword, engaging
all twelve of the knights without regard for his own safety. Wei-Dong
poured healing spells on him as he attempted to make his own mark
on the riders with the vorpal blade, three times as long as he was.

80 The vorpal blade could do incredible damage, but it wasn't easy
to use. Twice, Wei-Dong accidentally sliced into members of his own
party, though not badly -- thank God, or he'd never hear the end
of it -- but he couldn't get a cut in on the black knights, who were
too fast for him.

85 Then Lu fell, going down on one knee, pierced through the throat
by a pike wielded by a rider whose steed's eyes were the icy blue
of the Caterpillar's mist. The rider lifted Lu into the air, his feet
kicking limply, and another knight beheaded him with a contemptuous
swing of his sword. Lu fell in two pieces to the gritty beach sand
90 and in the earwig, he cursed them, using an expression that Wei-
Dong had painstakingly translated into "Screw eight generations
of your ancestors."

With Lu down, the rest of them were practically helpless. They fought
valiantly, coordinating their attacks, pouring on fire from their
95 magic items and best spells, but the black knights were unbeatable.
Before he died, Wei-Dong managed to hit one with the vorpal blade and
had the momentary satisfaction of watching the knight stagger and
clutch at his chest, but then the fighter closed with him, drawing
a pair of short swords that he spun like a magician doing knife
100 tricks. There was no question of parrying him, and seconds later,
Wei-Dong was in the sand, watching the knight's spiked boot descend
on his face, hearing the crunch of his cheekbones and nose shattering
under the weight. Then he was respawning in the distant Lake
of Tears, naked and unarmed, and he had to corpse-run to the body
105 of his toon before the bastards got his vorpal blade.

He heard his guildies dying in the earwig, one after another, as he ran, ghostly and ethereal, across the hills and dales of Wonderland. He reached his corpse just in time to watch the knights loot the body, and the bodies of his teammates. He rose
110 up again, helpless and unarmed and made flesh by the body of his toon, vulnerable.

One of the knights sent him a chat-request. He clicked it, silencing the background noises from Shenzhen.

"You farmers aren't welcome here anymore, Comrade," the voice said.
115 It had an accent he didn't recognize. Maybe Russian? And the speaker was just a kid! "We're patrolling now. You come back again, we'll hunt and kill you again, and again, and again. You understand me, Chineese?" Not just a kid: a girl -- a little girl, threatening him from somewhere in the world.

120 "Who put you in charge, missy?" he said. "And what makes you think I'm Chinese, anyway?"

There was a nasty laugh. "Missy, huh? I'm in charge because I just kicked your ass, and because I can kick it again, as many times as I need to. And I don't care if you're in China, Vietnam,
125 Indonesia -- it doesn't make a difference. We'll kill you and all the farmers in Wonderland. This game isn't farmable anymore. I'm

done talking to you now." And the black knight decapitated him with contemptuous ease.

He flipped back to the guild channel, ready to tell them about what
130 had just happened, his mind reeling, and that's when he looked up into the face of his father, standing over him, with a look on his face that could curdle milk.

"Get up, Leonard," he said. "And come with me."

He wasn't alone. There was Mr Adams, the vice-principal, and
135 the school's rent-a-cop, Officer Turner, and the guidance counsellor, Ms Ramirez. They presented him with the stony faces of Mount Rushmore, faces without a hint of mercy. His father reached over and took the earwig out of his ear, gently, carefully. Then, with exactly the same care, he dropped the earwig to the polished concrete floor
140 of the resource centre and brought his heel down on it, the crunch loud in the perfectly silent room.

Leonard stood up. The room was full of kids pretending not to look at him. They were all looking at him. He followed his father into the hallway and as the door swung shut, he heard, unmistakably,
145 the sound of a hundred giggles in unison.

They boxed him in on the walk to the vice-principal's office, trapping him. Not that he'd run -- he had nowhere to run to, but it still made him feel claustrophobic. This was not good. This was very, very bad.

Here's how bad it was: "You're going to send me to military school?"

150 "Not military school," Ms Ramirez said. She said
it with that maddening, patronizing guidance-counsellor tone. "The
Martindale Academy has no military or martial component. It's merely
a very structured, supervised environment. They have a fantastic
track record in helping students like you concentrate on grades and
155 pull themselves out of academic troubles. They've got a beautiful
campus in a beautiful location, and Martindale boys go on to fill many
important --"

And on and on. She'd swallowed the sales brochure like a burrito
and now it was rebounding on her. He tuned her out and looked
160 at his father. Benny Rosenbaum wasn't the sort of person you could
read easily. The people who worked for him at Rosenbaum Shipping and
Logistics called him The Wall, because you couldn't get anything past
him, under him, through him, or over him. Not that he was a hardcase,
but he couldn't be swayed by emotional arguments: if you tried
165 to approach him with anything less than fully computerized logic,
you might as well forget it.

But there were little tells, little ways you could figure out
what the weather was like in old Benny. That thing he was doing
with his watch strap, working at the catch, that was one of them.
170 So was the little jump in the hinge of his jaw, like he was chewing

an invisible wad of gum. Combine those with the fact that he was away from his work in the middle of the day, when he should be making sure that giant steel containers were humming around the globe -- well, for Leonard, it meant that the lava was pretty close to the surface
175 of Mount Benny this afternoon.

He turned to his dad. "Shouldn't we be talking about this as a family, Dad? Why are we doing this here?"

Benny regarded him, fiddled with his watch strap, nodded at the guidance counsellor and made a little "go-on" gesture
180 that betrayed nothing.

"Leonard," she said. "Leonard, you need to understand just how serious this has become. You're one term paper away from flunking two of your subjects: history and biology. You've gone from being an A student in math, English and social studies to a C-minus.

185 At this rate, you'll have blown the semester by Thanksgiving. Put it this way: you've gone from being in the ninetieth percentile of Ronald Regan Secondary School Sophomores to the twelfth. This is a signal, Leonard, from you to us, and it's signalling, S-O-S, S-O-S."

"We thought you were on drugs," his father said, absolutely calm. "We
190 actually tested a hair follicle from your pillow. I had a guy follow you around. Near as I can tell, you smoke a little pot with your friends, but you don't actually see your friends anymore, do you?"

"You tested my hair?"

His father made that go-on gesture of his, an old favorite of his.

195 "And had you followed. Of course we did. We're in charge of you.

We're responsible for you. We don't own you, but if you screw up so

bad that you end up spending the rest of your life as a bum, it'll

be down to us, and we'll have to bail you out. You understand that,

Leonard? We're responsible for you, and we'll do whatever we have

200 to in order to make sure you don't screw up your life."

Leonard bit back a retort. The sinking feeling that had started

with the crushing of his earwig had sunk as low as it would go. Now

his palms were sweating, his heart was racing, and he had no idea

what would come out of his mouth the next time he spoke.

205 "We used to call this an intervention, when I was your age,"

the vice-principal said. He still looked like the real-estate agent

he'd been before he switched to teaching, the last time the market

had crashed. He was affable, inoffensive, his eyes wide and

trustworthy. They called him Babyface Adams in the halls. But Leonard

210 knew about salesmen, knew that no matter how friendly they appeared,

they were always on the lookout for weaknesses to exploit. "And we'd

do it for drug addicts. But I don't think you're addicted to drugs.

I think you're addicted to games."

"Oh come on," Leonard said. "There's no such thing. I can show
215 you the research papers. Game addiction? That's just something
they thought up to sell newspapers. Dad, come on, you don't really
believe this stuff, do you?"

His dad pointedly refused to meet his gaze, directing his attention
to the Vice-Principal.

220 "Leonard, we know you're a very smart young man, but no one is
so smart as to never need help. I don't want to argue definitions
of addictions with you --"

"Because you'll lose." Leonard spat it out, surprising himself
with the vehemence. Old Babyface smiled his affable, salesman's
225 smile: Oh yes, good sir, you're certainly right there, very clever
of you. Now, may I show you something in a mock-Tudor split-level
with a three-car garage and an above-ground pool?

"You're a very smart young man, Leonard. It doesn't matter if
you're medically addicted, psychologically dependent, or just
230 --" he waved his hands, looking for the right words -- "or if
you just spend too darn much time playing games and not enough time
in the real world. None of that matters. What matters is that you're
in trouble. And we're going to help you with that. Because we care
about you and we want to see you succeed."

235 It suddenly sank in. Leonard knew how these things went. Somewhere,
right now, Officer Turner was cleaning out his locker and loading
its contents into a couple of paper Trader Joe's grocery sacks.
Somewhere, some secretary was taking his name off of the rolls
of each of his classes. Right now, his mother was packing
240 his suitcase back at home, filling it with three or four changes
of clothes, a fresh toothbrush -- and nothing else. When he left
this room, he'd disappear from Orange County as thoroughly as if he'd
been snatched off the street by serial killers.

Only it wouldn't be his mutilated body that would surface in a few
245 months time, decomposed and grisly, an object lesson to all
the kiddies of Ronald Reagan High to be on the alert for dangerous
strangers. It would be his mutilated personality that would surface,
a slack-jawed pod-person who'd been crammed into the happy-well-
adjusted-citizen mold that would carry him through an adulthood as
250 a good, trouble-free worker-bee in the hive.

"Dad, come on. You can't just do this to me! I'm your son! I deserve
a chance to pull my grades up, don't I? Before you send me off
to some brainwashing center?"

"You had your chance to pull your grades up, Leonard," Ms Ramirez
255 said, and the Vice-Principal nodded vigorously. "You've had all

semester. If you plan on graduating and going on to university, this is the time to do something drastic to make sure that happens.”

“It’s time to go,” his father said, ostentatiously checking his watch. Honestly, who still wore a watch? He had a phone, Leonard
260 knew, just like all normal people. An old-fashioned wind-up watch was about as useful in this day and age as an ear-trumpet or a suit of chain-mail. He had a whole case full of them -- dozens of them. His father could have all the ridiculous affectations and hobbies he wanted, spend a small fortune on them, and no one wanted to send
265 him off to the nuthouse.

It was so goddamned unfair. He wanted to shout it as they led him out to his father’s impeccable little Huawei Darter. He bought new one every year, getting a chunky discount straight from the factory, who loaded his personal car into its own container and craned
270 it into one of Dad’s big ships in port in Guangzhou. The car smelled of the black licorice sweets that Dad sucked on, and of the giant steel thermos-cup of coffee that Dad slipped into the cup-holder every morning, refilling through the day at a bunch of diners where they called him by his first name and let him run a tab.

275 And outside the windows, through the subtle grey tint, the streets of Anaheim whipped past, rows of identical houses branching off of a huge, divided arterial eight-lane road. He’d known these streets

all his life, he'd walked them, met the panhandlers that worked
the tourist trade, the footsore Disney employees who'd missed
280 the shuttle, hiking the mile to the cast-member parking, the retired
weirdos walking their dogs, the other larval Orange County pod-people
who were still too young or poor or unlucky to have a car.

The sky was that pure blue that you got in OC, no clouds, a postcard
smiley-face sun nearly at noontime high, perfect for tourist shots.
285 Leonard saw it all for the first time, really saw it, because he knew
he was seeing it for the last time.

"It's not so bad," his dad said. "Stop acting like you're going
to prison. It's a swanky boarding school, for chrissakes. And not
one of those schools where they beat you down in the bathroom or
290 anything. They're practically hippies up there. Your mother and
I aren't sending you to the gulag, kid."

"It doesn't matter what you say, Dad. Just forget it. Here's
the facts: you've kidnapped me from my school and you're sending me
away to some place where they're supposed to ,fix' me. You haven't
295 given me any say in this. You haven't consulted me. You can say how
much you love me, how much it's for my own good, talk and talk and
talk, but it won't change those facts. I'm seventeen years old,
Dad. I'm as old as Zaidy Shmuel was when he married Bubbie and came
to America, you know that?"

300 "That was during the war --"

"Who cares? He was your grandfather, and he was old enough to start a family. You can bet your ass he wouldn't have stood still for being kidnapped --" His father snorted. "Kidnapped because his hobbies weren't his parents' idea of a good time. God! What the hell is

305 the matter with you? I always knew you were kind of a prick, but --"

His father calmly steered the car to the curb and pulled over, changing three lanes smoothly, with a shoulder-check before each, weaving through the tourist traffic and gardeners' pickup trucks without raising a single horn. He popped the emergency brake with one

310 hand and his seatbelt with the other, twisting in his seat to bring his face right up to Leonard's.

"You are on thin goddamned ice, kid. You can make me the villain if you want to, if you need to, but you know, somewhere in that hormone-addled teenaged brain of yours, that this was your doing. How many

315 times, Leonard? How many times have we talked to you about balance, about keeping your grades up, taking a little time out of your game? How many chances did you get before this?"

Leonard laughed hotly. There were tears of rage behind his eyes, trying to get out. He swallowed hard. "Kidnapped," he said.

320 "Kidnapped and shipped away because you don't think I'm getting good enough grades in math and English. Like any of it matters -- when was

the last time you solved a quadratic equation Dad? Who cares if I get into a good university? What am I going to get a degree in that will help me survive the next twenty years? What did you get your degree
325 in, again, Dad? Oh, that's right, Ancient Languages. Bet that comes up a lot when you're shipping giant containers of plastic garbage from China, huh?"

His father shook his head. Behind them, cars were braking and honking at each other as they maneuvered around the stopped Huawei. "This
330 isn't about me, son. This is about you -- about pissing away your life on some stupid game. At least speaking Latin helps me understand Spanish. What are you going to make of all your hours and years of killing dragons?"

Leonard fumed. He knew the answer to this, somewhere. The games were
335 taking over the world. There was money to be made there. He was learning to work on teams. All this and more, these were the reasons for playing, and none of them were as important as the most important reason: it just felt right, adventuring in-world --

There was a particularly loud shriek of brakes from behind them,
340 and it kept coming, getting louder and louder, and there was a blare of horns, too, and the sound didn't stop, got louder than you could have imagined it getting. He turned his head to look over his shoulder and --

Crash

345 The car seemed to leap into the air, rising up first on its front
tires in a reverse-wheelie and then the front wheels spun and the car
shot forward ten yards in a second. There was the sound of crumpling
metal, his father's curse, and then a clang like temple bells as
his head bounced off the dashboard. The world went dark.