

Doctorow, Cory

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#2

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#2

1 Wei-Dong Rosenbaum woke one minute before his alarm rang, the glowing numbers showing 12:59. 1AM in Los Angeles, 6PM in China, and it was time to go raiding.

He wiped the sleep out of his eyes and climbed out of his narrow bed
5 -- his mom still put his goddamned Spongebob sheets on it, so he'd drawn beards and horns and cigarettes on all the faces in permanent marker -- and crossed silently to his school-bag and retrieved his laptop, then felt around on his desk for the little Bluetooth earwig, screwing it into his ear.

10 He made a pile of pillows against the headboard and sat cross-legged against them, lifting the lid and firing up his gamespy, looking for his buds, all the way over there in Shenzhen. As the screen filled with names and the games they could be found in, he smiled to himself. It was time to play.

15 Three clicks later and he was in Savage Wonderland, spawning on his clockwork horse with his sword in his hand, amid the garden of talking, hissing flowers, ready to do battle. And there were his boys, riding up alongside of him, their clockwork mounts snorting and champing for battle.

20 "Ni hao!" he said into his headset, in as loud a whisper as
he dared. His father had a bladder problem and he got up all night
long and never slept very deeply. Wei-Dong couldn't afford that.
If his parents caught him at it one more time, they'd take away
his computer. They'd ground him. They'd send him to a military
25 academy where they shaved your head and you got beaten up
in the shower because it built character. He'd been treated to all
these threats and more, and they'd made an impression on him.
Not enough of an impression to get him to stop playing games
in the middle of the night, of course.

30 "Ni hao!" he said again. There was laughter, distant and flanged
by network churn.

"Hello, Leonard," Ping said. "You are learning your Chinese well,
I see." Ping still called him Leonard, but at least he was talking
in Mandarin to him now, which was a big improvement. The guys
35 normally liked to practice their English on him, which meant
he couldn't practice his Chinese on them.

"I practice," he said.

They laughed again and he knew that he'd gotten something wrong.
The intonation. He was always getting it wrong. He'd say, "I'll go
40 aggro those demons and you buff the cleric," and it would come out,

"I am a bowl of noodles, I have beautiful eyelashes." But he was getting better. By the time he got to China, he'd have it nailed.

"Are we raiding?" he said.

"Yes!" Ping said, and the others agreed. "We just need to wait
45 for the gweilo." Wei-Dong loved that he wasn't the gweilo anymore. Gweilo meant "foreign devil," and technically, he qualified. But he was one of the raiders now, and the gweilos were the paying customers who shelled out good dollars or euros or rupees or pounds to play alongside of them.

50 Here was the gweilo now. You could tell because he frequently steered his horse off the path and into the writhing grasp of the living plants, having to stop over and over to hack away their grasping vines. After watching this show for a minute or two, he rode out and cast a protection spell around them both, and the vines sizzled
55 on the glowing red bubble that surrounded them both.

"Thanks," the gweilo said.

"No problem," he said.

"Woah, you speak English?" The gweilo had a strong New Jersey accent.

"A little," Wei-Dong said, with a smile. Better than you, dummy,
60 he thought.

"OK, let's do this thing," the gweilo said, and the rest of the party caught up with them.

The gweilo had paid them to raid an instance of The Walrus's Garden, a pretty hard underwater dungeon that had some really good drops in it -- ingredients for potions, some pretty good weapons, and, of course, lots of gold. There were a couple prestige items that dropped there, albeit rarely -- you could get a vorpal blade and helmet if you were very lucky. The deal was, the gweilo paid them to run the instance with him, and he could just hang back and let the raiders do all the heavy lifting, but he'd come forward to deal the coup de grace to any big bosses they beat down, so he'd get the experience points. He got to keep the gold, the weapons, the prestige items, all of it -- and all for the low, low cost of \$75. The raiders got the cash, the gweilo got to level up fast and pick up a ton of treasure.

Wei-Dong often wondered what kind of person would pay strangers to help them get ahead in a game? The usual reason that gweilos gave for hiring raiders was that they wanted to play with their friends, and their friends were all more advanced than them. But Wei-Dong had joined games after his friends and being the noob in his little group, he'd just asked his buds to take him raiding with them, twinkling him until his character was up to their level. So if this gweilo had so many pals in this game that he wanted to level up to meet them, why couldn't he get them to power-level his character up with them? Why was he paying the raiders?

85 Wei-Dong suspected that it was because the guy had no friends.
"Goddamn would you look at that?" It was at least the tenth time
the guy had said it in ten minutes as they rode to the seashore.
This time it was the tea-party, a perpetual melee that was a blur
of cutlery whistling through the air, savage chairs roaming
90 in packs, chasing luckless players who happened to aggro them,
and a crazy-hard puzzle in which you had to collect and arrange
the crockery just so, stunning each piece so that it wouldn't crawl
away before you were done with it. It was pretty cool, Wei-Dong
had to admit (he'd solved the puzzle in two days of hard play, and
95 gotten the teapot for his trouble, which he could use to summon
genies in moments of dire need). But the gweilo was acting like he'd
never seen computer graphics, ever.

They rode on, chattering in Chinese on a private channel. Mostly,
it was too fast for Wei-Dong to follow, but he caught the gist of it.

100 They were talking about work -- the raids they had set up for the rest
of the night, the boss and his stupid rules, the money and what they'd
do with it. Girls. They were always talking about girls.

At last they were at the seaside, and Wei-Dong cast the Red Queen's
Air Pocket, using up the last of his oyster shells to do so.

105 They all dismounted, flapping their gills comically as they sloshed
into the water ("Goddamn," breathed the gweilo).

The Walrus's Garden was a tricky raid, because it was different every time you ran it, the terrain regenerating for each party. As the spellcaster, Wei-Dong's job was to keep the lights on and the air
110 flowing so that no matter what came, they'd see it in time to prepare and vanquish it. First came the octopuses, rising from the bottom with a puff of sand, sailing through the water toward them. Lu, the tank, positioned himself between the party and the octopuses, and, after thrashing around and firing a couple of missiles at them
115 to aggro them, went totally still as, one after another, they wrapped themselves around him, crushing him with their long tentacles, their faces crazed masks of pure malevolence.

Once they were all engrossed in the tank, the rest of the party swarmed them, the four of them drawing their edged weapons
120 with a watery and going to work in a writhing knot. Wei-Dong kept a close eye on the tank's health and cast his healing spells as needed. As each octopus was reduced to near death, the raiders pulled away and Wei-Dong hissed into his mic, "Finish him!" The gweilo fumbled around for the first two beasts, but by the end, he was moving
125 efficiently to dispatch them.

"That was sick," the gweilo said. "Totally badass! How'd that guy absorb all that damage, anyway?"

"He's a tank," Wei-Dong said. "Fighter class, heavy armor. Lots of buffs. And I was keeping up the healing spells the whole time."

130 "I'm fighter class, aren't I?"

You don't know? This guy had a lot more money than brains, that was for sure.

"I just started playing. I'm not much of a gamer. But you know, all my friends --"

135 I know, Wei-Dong thought. All the cool kids you knew were doing it, so you decided you had to keep up with them. You don't have any friends -- yet. But you think you will, if you play. "Sure," he said. "Just stick close, you're doing fine. You'll be leveled up by breakfast time." That was another mark against the gweilo: he had
140 the money to pay for a power-leveiling session with their raiding guild, but he wasn't willing to pay the premium to do it in a decent American timezone. That was good news for the rest of the guild, sure -- it saved them having to find somewhere to do the run during daylight hours in China, when the Internet cafes were
145 filled with straights -- but it meant that Wei-Dong had to be up in the middle of the night and then drag his butt around school all the next day.

Not that it wasn't worth it.

Now they were into the crags and caves of the garden, dodging
150 the eels and giant lobsters that surged out of their holes
as they passed. Wei-Dong found some more oyster shells and
surreptitiously picked them up. Technically, they were the gweilo's
to have first refusal over, but they were needed if he was going
to keep on casting the Air Pocket, which he might have to do if
155 they kept up at this slow pace. And the gweilo didn't notice, anyway.

"You're not in China, are you?" the gweilo asked.

"Not exactly," he said, looking out the window at the sky over Orange
County, the most boring ZIP code in California.

"Where are you guys?"

160 "They're in China. Where I live, you can see the Disneyland fireworks
show every night."

"Goddamn," the gweilo said. "Ain't you got better things to do than
help some idiot level up in the middle of the night?"

"I guess I don't," he said. Mixed in behind were the guys laughing
165 and catcalling in Chinese on their channel. He grinned to hear them.

"I mean, hell, I can see why someone in China'd do a crappy job
for a rotten 75 bucks, but if you're in America, dude, you should
have some pride, get some real work!"

“And why would someone in China want to do a crappy job?” The guys
170 were listening in now. They didn’t have great English, but they spoke
enough to get by.

“You know, it’s China. There’s billions of ,em. Poor as dirt
and ignorant. I don’t blame ,em. You can’t blame ,em. It’s not
their fault. But hell, once you get out of China and get to America,
175 you should act like an American. We don’t do that kind of work.”

“What makes you think I ,got out of China’?”

“Didn’t you?”

“I was born here. My parents were born here. Their parents were born
here. Their parents came here from Russia.”

180 “I didn’t know they had Chinese in Russia.”

Wei-Dong laughed. “I’m not Chinese, dude.”

“You aren’t? Well, goddamn then, I’m sorry. I figured you were.

What are you, then, the boss or something?”

Wei-Dong closed his eyes and counted to ten. When he opened them
185 again, the carpenters had swum out of the wrecked galleon before
them, their T-squares and saws at the ready. They moved by building
wooden boxes and gates around themselves, which acted as barricades,
and they worked fast. On the land, you could burn their timbers,
but that didn’t work under the sea. Once they had you boxed in,

190 they drove long nails through boards around you. It was a grisly,
slow way to die.

Of course, they had the gweilo surrounded in a flash, and they all had
to pile on to fight them free. Xiang summoned his familiar, a boar,
and Wei-Dong spelled it its own air bubble and it set to work,
195 tearing up the planks with its tusks. When at last the carpenters
managed to kill it, it turned into a baby and floated, lifeless,
to the ocean's surface, accompanied by a ghostly weeping. Savage
Wonderland looked like it was all laughs, but it was really grim when
you got down to it, and the puzzles were hard and the big bosses were
200 really hard.

Speaking of bosses: they put down the last of the carpenters and
as they did, a swirling current disturbed the sea-bottom, kicking
up sand that settled slowly, revealing the vorpal blade and armor,
encrusted in barnacles. And the gweilo gave a whoop and a holler and
205 dove for it clumsily, as they all shouted at once for him to stop,
to wait, and then --

And then he triggered the trap that they all knew was there.

And then there was trouble.

The Jabberwock did indeed have eyes of flame, and it did make
210 a "bubbling" sound, just like it said in the poem. But the Jabberwock
did a lot more than give you dirty looks and belch. The Jabberwock

was mean, it soaked up a lot of damage, and it gave as good as it got. It was fast, too, faster than the carpenters, so one minute you could be behind it and then it would do a barrel roll -- its tail
215 like a whip, cracking and knocking back anything that got in its way -- and it would be facing you, rearing up with its spindly claws splayed, its narrow chest heaving. The jaws that bite, the claws that catch -- and once they'd caught you, the Jabberwock would beat you against the hardest surface in reach, doing insane damage while
220 you squirmed to get free. And the burbling? Not so much like burping, really: more like the sound of meat going through a grinder, a nasty sound. A bloody sound.

The first time Wei-Dong had managed to kill a Jabberwock -- after a weekend's continuous play -- he'd crashed hard and had nightmares
225 about that sound.

"Nice going, jackass," Wei-Dong said as he hammered on his keyboard, trying to get all his spells up and running without getting disemboweled by the nightmare beast before them. It had Lu and was beating the everloving piss out of him, but that was OK, it was just
230 Lu, his job was to get beaten up. Wei-Dong cast his healing spells at Lu while he swam back as fast as he could.

"Now, that's not nice," the gweilo said. "How the hell was I supposed to know --"

"You weren't. You didn't know. You don't know. That's the point.

235 That's why you hired us. Now we're going to use up all our spells and
potions fighting this thing --" he broke off for a second and hit some
more keys "-- and it's going to take days to get it all back, just
because you couldn't wait at the back like you were supposed to."

"I don't have to take this," the gweilo said. "I'm a customer,
240 dammit."

"You want to be a dead customer, buddy?" Wei-Dong said. He'd barely
had any time to talk with his guildies on the whole raid, he'd been
stuck talking to this dumb English speaker. Now the guy was mouthing
off to him. It made him want to throw his computer against the wall.

245 See what being nice gets you?

If the gweilo replied, Wei-Dong didn't hear it, because
the Jabberwock was really pouring on the heat. He was out of potions
and healing spells and Lu wasn't going to last much longer. Oh, crap.
It had Ping in its other claw now, and it was worrying at his armor
250 with a long fang, trying to peel him like a grape. He tabbed over
to his voice-chat controller and dialled up the Chinese channel
to full, tuning out the gweilo.

It was a chaos of fast, profane dialect, slangy Chinese that mixed
in curse-words from Japanese comics and Indian movies. The boys were
255 all hollering, too fast for him to get more than the sense of things.

There was Ping, though, calling for him. "Leonard! Healing!"

"I'm out!" he said, hating how this was all going. "I'm totally empty. Used it all up on Lu!"

"That's it, then," Ping said. "We're dead." They all howled
260 with disappointment. In spite of himself, Wei-Dong grinned. "You think he'll reschedule, or are we going to have to give him his money back?"

Wei-Dong didn't know, but he had a feeling that this goober wasn't
going to be very cooperative if they told him that he'd gotten up
265 in the middle of the night for nothing. Even if it was his fault.

He sucked in some whistling breaths through his nose and tried to calm down. It was almost 2AM now. In the house around him, all was silent. A car revved its engine somewhere far away, but the night was so quiet the sound carried into his bedroom.

270 "OK," he said. "OK, let me do something about this."

Every game had a couple of BFGs, Big Friendly Guns (or at least some kind of Big Gun), that were nearly impossible to get and nearly impossible to resist. In Savage Wonderland, they were also nearly impossible to re-load: the rare monster blunderbuss that you had
275 to spend months gathering parts for fired huge loads of sharpened cutlery from the Tea Party, and just collecting enough for a single

load took eight or nine hours of gameplay. Impossible to get -- impossible to load. Practically no one had one.

But Wei-Dong did. Ignoring the shouting in his headset, he backed
280 off to the edge of the blunderbuss's range and began to arm it, a laborious process of dumping all that cutlery into the muzzle. "Get in front of it," he said. "In front of it, now!"

His guildies could see what he was doing now and they were whooping triumphantly, arraying their toons around its front, occupying its
285 attention, clearing his line of fire. All he needed was one...more...second.

He pulled the trigger. There was a snap and a hiss as the powder in the pan began to burn. The sound made the Jabberwock turn its head on its long, serpentine neck. It regarded him with its burning eyes
290 and it dropped Ping and Lu to the oceanbed. The powder in the pan flared -- and died.

Misfire!

Ohcrapohcrapohcrap, he muttered, hammering, hammering on the re-arm sequence, his fingers a blur on the mouse-buttons. "Crapcrapcrapcrap."

295 The Jabberwock smiled, and made that wet meaty sound again.

Burple burble, little boy, I'm coming for you. It was the sound from his nightmare, the sound of his dream of heroism dying.

The sound of a waste of a day's worth of ammo and a night's worth of play. He was a dead man.

300 The Jabberwock did one of those whipping, rippling barrel-rolls that were its trademark. The currents buffeted him, sending him rocking from side to side. He corrected, overcorrected, corrected again, hit the re-arm button, the fire button, the re-arm button, the fire button --

305 The Jabberwock was facing him now. It reared back, flexing its claws, clicking its jaws together. In a second it would be on him, it would open him from crotch to throat and eat his guts, any second now --

Crash! The sound of the blunderbuss was like an explosion in a pots-and-pans drawer, a million metallic clangs and bangs as the sea
310 was sliced by a rapidly expanding cone of lethal, screaming metal tableware.

The Jabberwock dissolved, ripped into a slowly rising mushroom of meat and claws and leathery scales. The left side of its head ripped toward him and bounced off him, settling in the sand.

315 The water turned pink, then red, and the death-screech of the Jabberwock seemed to carom off the water and lap back over him again and again. It was a fantastic sound.

His guildies were going nuts, seven thousand miles away, screaming his name, and not Leonard, but Wei-Dong, chanting it in their

320 Internet Cafe off Jiabin Road in Shenzhen. Wei-Dong was grinning ferociously in his bedroom, basking in it.

And when the water cleared, there again were the vorpal blade and helmet in their crust of barnacles, sitting innocently on the ocean floor. The gweilo -- the gweilo, he'd forgotten all about the gweilo!

325 -- moved clumsily toward it.

"I don't think so," said Ping, in pretty good English. His toon moved so fast that the gweilo probably didn't even see him coming. Ping's sword went snicker-snack, and the gweilo's head fell to the sand, a dumb, betrayed expression on its face.

330 "What the --"

Wei-Dong dropped him from the chat.

"That's your treasure, brother," Ping said. "You earned it."

"But the money --"

335 "We can make the money tomorrow night. That was killer, dude!" It was one of Ping's favorite English phrases, and it was the highest praise in their guild. And now he had a vorpal blade and helmet. It was a good night.

They surfaced and paddled to shore and conjured up their mounts again and rode back to the guild-hall, chatting all the way, dispatching 340 the occasional minor beast without much fuss. The guys weren't too

put out at being 75 bucks' poorer than they'd expected. They were players first, business people second. And that had been fun.

And now it was 2:30 and he'd have to be up for school in four hours, and at this rate, he was going to be lying awake

345 for a long time. "OK, I'm going to go guys," he said, in his best Chinese. They bade him farewell, and the chat channel went dead.

In the sudden silence of his room, he could hear his pulse pounding in his ears. And another sound -- a tread on the floor outside his door. A hand on the doorknob --

350 Crapcrapcrap

He managed to get the lid of the laptop down and his covers pulled up before the door opened, but he was still holding the machine under the sheets, and his father's glare from the doorway told him that he wasn't fooling anyone. Wordlessly, still glaring, his father crossed

355 the room and delicately removed the earwig from Wei-Dong's ear.

It glowed telltale blue, blinking, looking for the laptop that was now sleeping under Wei-Dong's artistically redecorated Spongebob sheets.

"Dad --" he began.

"Leonard, it's 2:30 in the morning. I'm not going to discuss

360 this with you right now. But we're going to talk about it in the morning. And you're going to have a long, long time

to think about it afterward." He yanked back the sheet and took the laptop out of Wei-Dong's now-limp hand.

"Dad!" he said, as his father turned and left the room, but
365 his father gave no indication he'd heard before he pulled the bedroom door firmly and authoritatively shut.