

Doctorow, Cory

Drápela, Martin (editor)

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#5

1 Matthew stood outside the door of the Internet cafe, breathing
deeply. On the walk over, he'd managed to calm down a little, but as
he drew closer, he became more and more convinced that Boss Wing's
boys would be waiting for him there, and all his friends would
5 be curled up on the ground, beaten unconscious. He'd brought four
of the best players with him out of Boss Wing's factory, and he knew
that Boss Wing wasn't happy about that at all.

He was hyperventilating, his head swimming. He still hurt.

It felt like he had a soccer ball-sized red sun of pain burning
10 in his underwear and one of the things he wanted most and least
to do was to find a private spot to have a look in there. There was
a bathroom in the cafe, so that was that, it was time to go inside.

He walked up the four flights of stairs painfully, passing under
the gigantic murals from gamespace, avoiding the plastic plants
15 on each landing that reeked of piss from players who didn't want
to wait for the bathroom. From the third floor up, he was enveloped
in the familiar cloud of body odor, cigarette smoke and cursing
that told him he was on his way to his true home.

In the doorway, he paused and peered around, looking for any sign
20 of Boss Wing's goons, but it was business as usual: rows and rows

of tables with PCs on them, a few couples sharing machines, but mostly, it was boys playing, skinny, with their shirts rolled up over their bellies to catch any breeze that might happen through the room. There were no breezes, just the eddies in the smoke caused by the growl
25 of all those PC fans whining as they sucked particulate-laden smoky air over the superheated motherboards and monster video cards.

He slunk past the sign-in desk, staffed tonight by a new kid, someone else just arrived from the provinces to find his fortune here in bad old Shenzhen. Matthew wanted to grab the kid and carry him
30 to the city limits, explaining all the way that there was no fortune to be found here anymore, it all belonged to men like Boss Wing. Go home, he thought at the boy, Go home, this place is done.

His boys were playing at their usual table. They had made a pyramid from alternating layers of Double Happiness cigarette packs and empty
35 coffee cups. They looked up as he neared them, smiling and laughing at some joke. Then they saw the look on his face and they fell silent.

He sat down at a vacant chair and stared at their screens. They'd been playing, of course. They were always playing. When they worked in Boss Wing's factory, they'd pull an 18 hour shift and then they'd
40 relax by playing some more, running their own characters through the dungeons they'd been farming all day long. It's why Boss Wing

had such an easy time recruiting for his factory: the pitch was seductive. "Get paid to play!"

But it wasn't the same when you worked for someone else.

45 He tried to find the words to start and couldn't.

"Matthew?" It was Yo, the oldest of them. Yo actually had a family, a wife and a young daughter. He'd left Boss Wing's factory and followed Matthew.

Matthew stared at his hands, took a deep breath, and made a decision:

50 "Sorry, I just had a little fight on the way over here. I've got good news, though: I've got a way to make us all very rich in a very short time." And, from memory, Master Fong described the way he'd found into the rich dungeon of Svartalfaheim Warriors. He commandeered a computer and showed them, showed them how to shave the seconds off
55 the run, where to make sure to stop and grab and pick up. And then they each took up a machine and went to work.

In time, the ache in his pants faded. Someone gave him a cigarette, then another. Someone brought him some dumplings. Master Fong ate them without tasting them. He and his team were at work, and
60 they were making money, and someday soon, they'd have a fortune that would make Boss Wing look like a small-timer.

Sometime during the shift, his phone rang. It was his mother.

She wanted to wish him a happy birthday. He had just turned 17.