

Doctorow, Cory

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#9

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#9

1 Matthew Fong and his employees raided through the night and
into the next day, farming as much gold as they could get out
of their level while the getting was good. They slept in shifts, and
they co-opted anyone who made the mistake of asking what they were up
5 to, dragooning them into mining the dungeon with them.

All the while, Master Fong was getting the gold out of their accounts
as fast as it landed in them. He knew that once the game Gods got
wind of his operation, they'd swoop in, suspend everyone's accounts,
and seize any gold they had in their inventory. The trick was to be
10 sure that there wasn't anything for them to seize.

So he hopped online and hit the big brokerage message-boards. These
weren't just grey-market, they were blackest black, and you needed
to know someone heavy to get in on them. Matthew's heavy was a guy
from Sichuan, skinny and shaky, with several missing teeth. He called
15 himself "Cobra," and he'd been the one who'd introduced Matthew
to Boss Wing all those months before. Cobra worked for someone
who worked for someone who worked for one of the big cartels, tough
criminal organizations that had all the markets for turning game-gold
into cash sewn up.

20 Cobra had given him a login and a briefing on how to do deals
on the brokernet. Now as the night wore on, he picked his way through
the interface, listing his gold and setting an asking price that was
half of the selling price listed on the white, above-ground gold-
store that gweilos used to buy the game gold from the brokers.

25 He waited, and waited, and waited, but no one bought his gold.
Every game world was divided into local servers and shards, and when
you signed up, you needed to set which server you wanted to play
on. Once you'd picked a server, you were stuck there -- your toon
couldn't just wander between the parallel universes. This made buying
30 and selling gold all the more difficult: if a gweilo wanted to buy
gold for his toon on server A, he needed to find a farmer who had
mined his gold on server A. If you mined all your gold on server B,
you were out of luck.

That's where the brokers came in. They bought gold from everyone, and
35 held it in an ever-shifting network of accounts, millions of toons
who fanned out all over the worlds and exchanged small amounts of gold
at irregular intervals, to fool the anti-laundering snoops in the game
logic that relentlessly hunted for farmers and brokers to bust.

Avoiding those filters was a science, one that had been hammered
40 together over decades in the real world before it migrated
to the games. If a big pension fund in the real world wanted to buy

half a billion dollars' worth of stock in Google, the last thing they want to do is tip off everyone else that they're about to sink that much cash into Google. If they did, everyone else would snap
45 up Google stock before they could get to it, mark it up, and gouge them on it.

So anyone who wants to buy a lot of anything -- who wants to move a lot of money around -- has to know how to do it in a way that's invisible to snoops. They have to be statistically insignificant,
50 which means that a single big trade has to be broken up into millions of little trades that look like ordinary suckers buying and selling a little stock for the hell of it.

No matter what secrets you're trying to keep and no matter who you're trying to keep them from, the techniques are the same. In every game
55 world there were thousands of seemingly normal characters doing seemingly normal things, giving each other seemingly normal sums of money, but at the end of the day, it all added up to millions of gold in trade, taking place right under the noses of the game Gods.

Matthew down-priced his gold, seeking the price at which a broker
60 would deign to notice him and take it off of him. All the trading took place in slangy, rapid Chinese -- that was one of the ways the brokers kept their hold on the market, since there weren't that many Russians and Indonesians and Indians who could follow

it and play along -- replete with insults and wheedles. Eventually,
65 Matthew found the magic price. It was lower than he'd hoped for,
but not by much, and now that he'd found it, he was able to move
the team's gold as fast as they could accumulate it, shuttling dummy
players in and out of the dungeon they were working to take the cash
to bots run by the brokers.

70 Finally, it dried up. First, the amount of gold in the dungeon
sharply decreased, with the gold dropping from 12,000 per hour
to 8,000, then 2,000, then a paltry 100. The mareridtbane
disappeared next, which was a pity, because he was able to sell
that directly, hawking it in the big towns, pasting and pasting and
75 pasting his offer into the chat where the real players could see
it. And then in came the cops, moderators with special halos around
them who dropped canned lectures into the chat, stern warnings about
having violated the game's terms of service.

And then the account suspensions, the games vanishing from one screen
80 after another, popping like soap bubbles. They were all dropped back
to the login screens and they slumped, grinning crazy and exhausted,
in their seats, looking at each other in exhausted relief. It was
over, at last.

"How much?" Lu asked, flung backwards over his chair, not opening
85 his eyes or lifting his head. "How much, Master Fong?"

Matthew didn't have his notebooks anymore, so he'd been keeping track on the insides of Double Happiness cigarette packages, long, neat tallies of numbers. His pen flickered from sheet to sheet, checking the math one final time, then, quietly, "\$3,400."

90 There was a stunned silence. "How much?" Lu had his eyes open now. Matthew made a show of checking the figures again, but that's all it was, a show. He knew that the numbers were right. "Three thousand, four hundred and two dollars and fourteen cents." It was double the biggest score they'd ever made for Boss Wing. It was the most
95 money any of them had ever made. His share of it was more than his father made in a month. And he'd made it in one night.

"Sorry, how much?"

"8,080 bowls of dumplings, Lu. That much."

The silence was even thicker. That was a lot of dumplings. That was
100 enough to rent their own place to use as a factory, a place with computers and a fast internet connection and bedrooms to sleep in, a place where they could earn and earn, where they could grow rich as any boss.

Lu leapt out of his chair and whooped, a sound so loud
105 that the entire cafe turned to look at them, but they didn't care, they were all out of their seats now, whooping and dancing around and hugging each other.

And now it was the day, a new day, the sun had come up and gone down
and risen in their long labor in the cafe, and they had won. It was
110 a new day for them and for everyone around them.

They stepped out into the sun and there were people on the streets,
thongs buying and selling, touts hustling, pretty girls in good
clothes walking arm in arm under a single parasol. The heat
of the day was like a blast furnace after the air-conditioned
115 cool of the cafe, but that was good, too -- it baked out the funk
of cigarette-mouth, coffee-mouth, no-food-mouth. Suddenly, none
of them were sleepy. They all wanted to eat.

So Matthew took them out for breakfast. They were his team, after
all. They took over the back table at an Indian restaurant near
120 the train station, a place he'd overheard his uncle Yiu-Yu telling
his parents about, bragging about some business associate who took
him there. Very sophisticated. And he'd read so much about Indian
food in his comics, he couldn't wait to try some.

All the other customers in there were either foreigners or Hong Kong
125 people, but they didn't let that get to them. The boys sat at their
back table and played with their forks and ate plate after plate
of curry and fresh hot flatbreads called naan, and it was delicious
and strange and the perfect end to what had turned out to be
the perfect night.

130 Halfway through the dessert -- delicious mango ice-cream --
the sleeplessness finally caught up with them all. They sat on their
seats in their torpor, hands over their bellies, eyes half-open, and
Matthew called for the check.

They stepped out again into the light. Matthew had decided to go
135 to his parents' place, to sleep on the sofa for a little while, before
figuring out what to do about his smashed room with its smashed door.

As they blinked in the light, a familiar Wenjhou accented voice said,
"You aren't a very smart boy, are you?"

Matthew turned. Boss Wing's man was there, and three of his friends.

140 They rushed forward and grabbed the boys before they could react, one
of them so big that he grabbed a boy in each hand and nearly lifted
them off their feet.

His friends struggled to get free, but Boss Wing's man methodically
slapped them until they stopped.

145 Matthew couldn't believe that this was happening -- in broad
daylight, right here next to the train station! People crossed
the street to avoid them. Matthew supposed he would have done so too.

Boss Wing's man leaned in so close Matthew could smell the fish he'd
had for lunch on his breath. "Why are you a stupid boy, Matthew?"

150 You didn't seem stupid when you worked for Boss Wing. You always
seemed smarter than these children." He flapped his hand disparagingly

at the boys. "But Boss Wing, he trained you, sheltered you, fed you, paid you -- do you think it's honorable or fair for you to take all that investment and run out the door with it?"

155 "We don't owe Boss Wing anything!" Lu shouted. "You think you can make us work for him?"

Boss Wing's man shook his head. "What a little hothead. No one wants to force you to do anything, child. We just don't think it's fair for you to take all the training and investment we made in you and
160 run across the street and start up a competing business. It's not right, and Boss Wing won't stand for it."

The curry churned in Matthew's stomach. "We have the right to start our own business." The words were braver than he felt, but these were his boys, and they gave him bravery. "If Boss Wing doesn't like
165 the competition, let him find another line of work."

Boss Wing's man didn't give him any forewarning before he slapped Matthew so hard his head rang like a gong. He stumbled back two steps, then tripped over his heels and fell on his ass, landing on the filthy sidewalk. Boss Wing's man put a foot on his chest and
170 looked down at him.

"Little boy, it doesn't work like that. Here's the deal -- Boss Wing understands if you don't want to work at his factory, that's fine. He's willing to sell you the franchise to set up

your own branch operation of his firm. All you have to do is
175 pay him a franchise fee of 60 percent of your gross earnings.
We watched your gold-sales from Svartalfaheim. You can do as
much of that kind of work as you like, and Boss Wing will even
take care of the sales end of things for you, so you'll be free
to concentrate on your work. And because it's your firm, you get
180 to decide how you divide the money -- you can pay yourself
anything you like out of it."

Matthew burned with shame. His friends were all looking at him,
goggle eyed, scared. The weight from the foot on his chest increased
until he couldn't draw a breath.

185 Finally, he gasped out, "Fine," and the pressure went away. Boss
Wing's man extended a hand, helped him to his feet.

"Smart," he said. "I knew you were a smart boy." He turned
to Matthew's friends. "Your little boss here is a smart man. He'll
take you places. You listen to him now."

190 Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and walked away,
his men following him.