

1. Socrates

The first time I met him was by a crumbling city gate. All that was left of the so-called city gate was rubble. Mottled fragments of lime clung fearfully to dilapidated bricks, teetering on the verge of collapse. By the foot of the walls that had not seen the light of day for years was a patch of slippery moss, exuding a deathly smell. I wasn't concerned about whether this place should be called a city or a town. In my eyes, this was just a section of ruins, a carcass of an old city gate.

But ruins still have their worth. Precisely because of their status as ruins, even a weakling incapable of trussing a chicken could follow the inclined slopes and walk up effortlessly to stand at the top, surveying the faraway surroundings while launching into a daydream: "Behind me I do not see the ancient men, before me I do not see the ones to come" [1]. If the city gate had been in perfect condition, reaching the top would have been impossible without considerable force and equipment.

I was precisely infatuated with these ruins. During a mad sweep just a moment ago, I had already lost track of how many people I PK'd [2] off. There was only one reason to pull back: my artifacts bar could no longer be stuffed with anything. I casually glanced at my already uncountably large sum of money and quickly calculated how much two boxes full of weapons, protective gear, and medicine could roughly sell for, then strolled up to the old city gates.

Every time after a large-scale PK, I would find a spacious and uninhabited area and quietly stay for a while to catch a glimpse of the sunset before going offline.

Sunset was the name of this game.

The weather: cloudy. The sky in the backdrop carried a muddled reddish-gray tone, overcast and stifling, giving people a feeling of being unable to let go of pent-up frustration. I wasn't sure why the sky was always this sort of color every time I held my bountiful harvest and waited for the sunset. The red spiral-shaped clouds were like bloodstains unfurling layer by layer on a watery surface, and the sun was like the pale ghost of a hanged person in a place that reached neither heaven nor earth, set against the gloomy skies across the mountains and rivers.

Faced with this kind of sky, the only word I could think of was resentment! But I did not believe that the souls of the deceased who died unjustly or not by my hand would gather into a formidable resentful ghost and haunt me. By now, they should all be struggling to return to life at various resurrection points. Among them, some with fragile minds might choose to leave. That was their freedom. The game had its own rules, and sore losers were better off leaving. I saw it often — every day, droves of people left dejectedly, and every day, even more people flocked in.

As I walked down from the city walls, bored to death and angry, I bumped into him head-on. His name was Deng Huo Lan Shan [3]. It was impossible to determine anything about his identity from his clothing. His top, bottom, gloves, and shoes were all mismatched; even his weapon was just a small low-grade knife used among all roles. A bunch of hastily collected and pieced-together junk, trash picked up from who knew where. It seemed like this fellow was drifting about in a rather miserable state. This type of person in the game was as numerous as the number of migrant workers eking out a meager living in any big city. This type could never stimulate my appetite for PKing. I only paid attention to high-level characters; they were the ones I targeted.

My name in the game was Fei Fei Lu. A very cute and cartoonish young girl's name. But these three lovely characters were now dyed blood red. Suspended over the head of a little girl with an innocent and guileless face, they made for a ghastly scene. In the game, I was a professional PKer that others feared on sight.

As I walked down to the foot of the walls by the city gate, I saw two swordsmen who barely qualified to be my targets fighting each other at close quarters — or, more accurately, fighting to PK. I didn't know the cause of the fight, nor did I care. In the game, PKing didn't require a reason.

Clearly, the two swordsmen already had their eyes blinded red by killing intent, or else experienced players would not continue to fight an evenly matched PK in front of a low-level player. The reason was simple: new hands were like scavenger animals, specifically waiting for a high-level PK match to wipe out both parties before searching the corpses to collect leftover items.

In any case, I didn't need to go offline urgently, so I lazily stood to one side and watched the battle while silently observing Deng Huo Lan Shan, who was also standing to the side. He was still far from qualified to be my target, but as long as he dared to plunder corpses in a moment, he would be

able to rise in rank. I hated guys like that who gave out a rotten flavor from head to toe.

It was the same as every other time: one swordsman fell to the ground, signaling the conclusion of the PK, while the other survived with their life hanging by a thread. At that very moment, if any person nearby were to so much as lift a hand, they could immediately take the life of the survivor. This kind of thing happened often in the game, so the survivor didn't even have time to check the corpse, instead frantically hurrying to replenish himself with blood. When he saw that the two of us had no intention of making a move, he seemed slightly dazed for a bit, then hastily ran up to plunder the corpse. After he was done, he straightened up and swaggered around to flaunt to the observers, Deng Huo Lan Shan and me, as if somewhat intoxicated. I could tell that his energy was due to extreme excitement over his PK victory, the spitting image of a vampire that had just finished sucking blood.

I watched this entire sequence expressionlessly, feeling that it was all extraordinarily dull. Just as I wanted to leave, he suddenly called out to me: "Hi, beauty! Little girl!..." His following words were a neutralized mix of irreverent and obscene. *This pig!* I stood calmly, waiting for him to lean over with his salivating face, and raised the Rain Cut in my hand as fast as lighting. A few slices later, the man who had just been standing beside me became a corpse lying by my feet. I bent down and examined the corpse in a practiced manner. *Fuck, a pile of rubbish.* That was when I finally remembered that my artifacts bar was already stuffed to the brim, and there was no way to add anything else.

I regretfully picked off the items on his body one by one and threw them to the ground, then cast another glance at Deng Huo Lan Shan, who was still standing to the side. In my head, I was thinking: *You're getting a bargain deal.* But at that instant, my mood suddenly turned extremely sour; it wasn't because I didn't fish out any spoils of war — to me, money had already become an impractically long string of numbers with no real meaning; it also wasn't because of the dirty words from earlier, because even the most unpleasant dirty talk couldn't make me furrow half a brow after hanging around in this place for too long; it was because of a gaze coming from the side. The gaze of Deng Huo Lan Shan. This entire time, he had been incessantly staring at me.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable. *The hell are you looking at?* I was only sweeping up trash and taking away the rewards that I deserved along the way.

But that gaze stirred up a sense of guilt in me as if I were a thief caught red-handed at night by a sudden flash of light. I turned sharply and tried to leave quickly without looking back. I didn't expect a line like this to jump out in the text channel ——

【Deng Huo Lan Shan】 Is there a point in PKing over any minor disagreement?

I was inexplicably startled. Soon after, my thief-like guilty conscience began to make me abnormally furious. I stopped in my tracks, but he was still stupidly standing in the same place. I cursed myself under my breath and replied darkly with one sentence ——

【Fei Fei Lu】 You say that one more time!

This sentence had some amount of deterrent effect, causing him to hesitate. But he only hesitated for a short while and recklessly responded ——

【Deng Huo Lan Shan】 Is there a point in PKing over any minor disagreement? Are people like you playing the game or being played by the game instead?

He had guts! My blood rushed upwards at once, and I walked over in big strides, raising my Rain Cut and cleaving down toward his head. It went even more disappointingly than I had imagined: he didn't even have time to let out a groan before collapsing face-forward, a depressing “puh” sound coming out through my headphones. My rage grew even stronger at this. It was like summoning enough strength to round up your palm and slap down, only to discover that all you killed was a tiny insect that didn't even know how to fly. I was angered to death. *Who the fuck do you think you are? Even if you want to seek death, don't come seeking me!*

【Fei Fei Lu】 Sending three words to you: quit playing already! —— This is for your own good.

All the while until I went offline, I was continuously cursing him out in my head. Shit [4], I actually ran into a fucker like that. What kind of place did he think this was? This was a game, this was Sunset!

Here, you could be a bandit or a knight, a beauty or an overlord; you could behave unscrupulously, act entirely without restraint, hide sinister intentions under an innocent pretense, be cold-hearted and merciless; in

brief, you could do whatever you wanted and become whichever character you wished. But there was one thing you could not do. You could not pretend as if everyone else in the world was drunk and you were the only one sober. What did we come on to do? Was it not just to chase illusions and satisfy our desires? To put it bluntly, it was like taking psychedelic drugs as a group, and you fucking calling us crazy while taking the same drugs yourself! What was there to be all virtuous about? In reality, didn't virtuous people all lead lives as bland as water and sentence themselves to depressing and secluded existences [5]? If you're so virtuous, what did you even come here for?

I stretched my foot out to the floor, and with a casual push, the swivel chair I was sitting on slid out several paces. I stood up to stretch my body and twist around my neck, then padded over to the water dispenser by the counter and filled a cup of water. Just as I took a gulp, my boss grabbed me firmly. He whispered a few sentences into my ear and pointed surreptitiously toward a distant corner. I glanced in that direction, impatiently clicked my tongue, and turned my head back around, intending to ignore the situation. But my boss was still grasping me, and behind the mask of a polite request was a command that could not be refused. There was no way out. No matter how easy he was to talk to, he was still my boss, so I had to tough it up.

That kid was still there! Around a month ago, he came to our internet cafe to buy a monthly pass, and then he just started living here. During the past month, he never once left the cafe doors. When he was hungry, he would call over the administrator — that would be me — to boil a bowl of instant noodles, and when he was thirsty, he would ask for a bottle of mineral spring water. In the beginning, he didn't get off the computer for several days and nights in a row. I almost thought his bottom was soldered to the chair. Later, when he finally became too sleep-deprived to keep going, he took a nap on the long bench to the side. When he woke up, he rubbed his eyes and simply continued playing. For a whole month, he didn't shower, brush his teeth, comb his hair, or change his clothes. With the sweltering heat of the summer, there was no guarantee that each person would not sweat, no matter how strong the air conditioning inside the cafe was.

Right now, he was still sitting in front of a screen. His white cotton t-shirt had turned into a mass of varying shades of gray, his hair was stuck together with grease and stood up messily, and his body emitted a rancid, sweaty smell

that was an assault to the nostrils. His bloodshot eyes were more parts white than black and seemed fixed in place, staring at the display screen without blinking. His foul breathing resembled a dead fish spurting out poisonous fluid with a half-open mouth. Others held their breaths and cast sidelong glances when passing by him, but he himself was completely unaware. Just as the Buddhist saying went, what was piled up in that chair was just a lump of stinking meat, and his spirit had long since flown away without a trace.

My boss once had me tactfully remind him to go home and rest a bit, but he puffed out his toxic gas, saying it was not as if he owed us payment. I could only cover my nose and leave. But over the past few days, that stench became so overpowering that there were always five to six empty seats beside him. This time, my boss couldn't take it anymore and forced me to ask him to leave. I inhaled deeply, held my breath, and walked over with extreme determination.

Subconsciously, my right hand reached for my waist and tugged upwards as if touching an invisible knife.

"Friend, aren't you tired? Go home and rest for a day," I asked. I stared vigilantly at his mouth.

Thank the heavens that he ignored me.

I carefully poked his arm again with one finger: "I said, could you please go home and wash up before coming back?"

He became irritated and waved his hand: "What are you doing? It's not like I owe you payment!"

I was even more irritated and tugged on his sleeve: "You indeed don't, but other people are afraid to come just because you're here! How can you not smell it yourself? I'll turn off your monitor if you still won't leave!"

He stood up madly but failed to find steady footing and swayed around. After spending multiple days and nights glued to a screen, he couldn't stand straight.

My boss saw that the situation didn't look good, so he rushed over, stared at me, and pulled me behind him. Putting on a smiling face, he urged, "It's been so many days. I say you had better go home and take a look lest your family be worried. The next time you come, I'll give you two extra days of internet time. That should be fine, right?"

I thought it was funny. It already came to this; what family could there possibly be to bring up? This person spent a month living in an internet cafe, and no one noticed. I was willing to bet that either his family had long given up on him or he himself had long thrown away his home.

My boss gave me a meaningful look, and I promptly grasped his sleeve and towed him out the door, thinking about when I became a hired thug in addition to my role as the network administrator.

He turned his head and glared at me with a face full of anger, a massive piece of crust hanging from the corner of each eye. I held back a stomach full of nausea and looked at him face-to-face without yielding. He glared at me for a while, then blinked in confusion as he was subjected to my pushing and dragging. As if he had inhaled poison, he eventually staggered out with an unsteady gait and a hazy expression.

The dazzling white sunlight outside stopped us both for a few seconds. Hot air blended with the smoke and dust that permeated the roadways and the loud noise of human activity. It felt like being spattered head-on by a boiling pot of thick soup. I quickly took a step backward and shrunk away.

Stale, frigid air soon struck me like an icy wall, sticking to my back and giving me goosebumps all over. I finally understood what it meant to be as incompatible as ice and coal in the same furnace. Once I was back inside the internet cafe, the clamor from the streets was replaced by the humming noise of dozens of machines. Even though the volume was not high, my eardrums ached from all the vibration.

From behind the counter, my boss gnashed his teeth and lowered his voice to complain: “Can’t even do one small thing right.” I acted as if I didn’t hear his words, but then another type of noise unique to internet cafes emerged from all four sides, taking advantage of the chaos. This time, I could not pretend to be a deaf-mute.

“Administrator, make me a bowl of noodles!”

“Get me a bottle of Xian Cheng Duo [6]!”

“Administrator, there’s no sound coming from my headphones!”

“Administrator, empty out the ashtray!”

“Administrator...”

All of these sounds rose and fell amidst the extremely poorly ventilated air, causing my temples to throb violently without end. The customers dug out their filthy pocket change and tossed the money next to their mouse pads without even sparing a glance. I had become a waiter, rushing everywhere to serve tea and deliver water. The whole time, I was puzzled by how they clearly did not count their money yet still had a good idea of the amount I collected. No wonder people said that those skilled at gaming had eyes that could watch six roads and ears that could listen in all directions.

I looked at the group of warriors in front of me: behind rows and rows of computers were young, focused, nervous, excited, pale, numb, demented faces, one after the other. For a moment, all I could think of was the mental image of a piece of crust hanging from each of their eyes and spurts of poisonous gas coming out of each of their mouths. My scalp immediately went numb, and the nausea I had failed to suppress earlier began to spread rapidly like a virus, instantly overflowing from my chest and heading straight to my throat. I gripped a table corner hard, suddenly hating that I couldn't just push them all out in one fell swoop. Sooner or later, I would have to shoo them out one by one anyway!

Get the fuck out of here, you herd of zombies!

Are you fucking playing a game, or are you being played by a game?

That line flashed in my head abruptly, startling me. When I was playing the game, could it be that I also had the same sort of appearance? As for the person who said such a line, they at least shouldn't also have this kind of sallow and monstrous face, right?

Deng Huo Lan Shan, the general defeated by my hand — no, he didn't even count as that. He was just a stupid bird that crashed into the edge of my knife, but I actually remembered his name. It looked like I was the superfluous one. The internet, games, role-playing; you could play the hero, the demon, the beauty, the Casanova, but Deng Huo Lan Shan was apparently playing the role of Socrates, standing in the agoras of Athens, delivering speeches full of wisdom that no one else understood, awaiting his death penalty.

And I was stupid enough to act as the executioner.

Notes

[1] 前不见古人，后不见来者：Line from the poem “Song on Ascending the Youzhou Tower” by Chen Zi’ang. Translation taken from *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century* by Burton Watson.

[2] PK: Used in the original text. Short for Player Kill.

[3] 灯火阑珊：Fading lamplight.

[4] TNND: Foul language. Literal meaning is “his grandmother’s.”

[5] 吞下一肚子的郁闷隐居去了：Swallowed a stomach full of depression and headed off to live in seclusion.

[6] 鲜橙多：A brand of orange-flavored soft drink.