

done — he'd managed to incinerate everything from about my elbow on down, leaving only the gauntlet and — somehow — the leather padding intact. The most surprising thing was the faint stinging in my forearm and the patch of slightly reddened skin where the fire must have been hottest.

A worthy challenge.

For some reason, I felt strangely pleased by that.

A long moment seemed to pass as the ball of fire continued to burn, but it was probably only a few seconds. When it vanished, the low *fwoom* of the superheated air rushing upwards was almost enough to drown out the growl that rumbled across the distance as Lung tried to murder me with his eyes.

That wasn't where I was paying attention to, though. My attention turned to the stump of his left arm, which was still bleeding, if much more sluggishly than it had at first. It was healing, I was pretty sure it was still healing at an accelerated rate, but it was healing much slower than it had been even a few moments before. I looked towards his right side, where I'd cut him less than a minute ago, and found it was still dribbling blood. It hadn't healed up, either.

I felt a smile pull at my lips. I was right, then. Like this, he was a dragon, and so like this, he was more vulnerable to my sword than ever.

I gripped Balmung's hilt with both hands, then kicked off the ground and leapt into the sky. Lung tracked me with his head, massive neck coiling, and he seemed to know what I intended to do, because he lifted his remaining arm up to block —

“Ha!”

But my sword carved through his wrist like a hot knife, and Balmung continued on to bite deep into his torso, spilling blood and scales and all sorts of unmentionable things across the pavement. Lung howled something that might have been a startled exclamation, then he held his arm across the wound and jumped backwards. A gesture with the stump of his left arm called forth a wall of flames to block my way.

I'd injured him. Badly.

No dragon can resist this sword.

My brow furrowed.

Maybe *too* badly. I didn't really have a good handle on the limitations of his healing or on how my sword impairing it might affect his survivability. I wasn't about to try beheading him, but if I *had* tried it with a hero who wasn't a dragonslayer, would he have survived? If he did, what would grow back — his head from his body or his body from his head?

Not important. What mattered was that I'd gotten a very solid hit on him, solid enough to put him on the back foot and force him to create some space.

Solid enough to force him to retreat?

Maybe. Maybe it *was* enough. If he was going to go running with his tail between his legs, should I let him? After all, the whole point of this fight was to distract him enough to keep him from killing those kids he'd been talking about. Now that he was sufficiently distracted, did it matter if he left? Was it okay to let him go and lick his wounds?

Fight. Slay the dragon.

No, I decided after a moment. No, it wasn't. I might have achieved my original goal, but wasn't it better to put him down for good? If I let him go now, he'd probably just come back again later and go kill those kids he'd been talking about before. He'd be able to continue terrorizing the docks and the city, and who could say I'd be in the area, next time?

Better to defeat him now, completely and decisively, and let him get put away like the criminal he was.

I stepped forward, and with a single swing of my sword — *woosh* — the flames were extinguished and I could see Lung again. His elongated, lipless mouth pulled into a sneer, and the gleaming red eyes that stared out of his face glittered with hate and malice.

He'd grown again.

The beast gets ever stronger.

Not nearly as dramatically as before, but another few inches, at least. The wounds I'd given him were no longer bleeding, but they healed with a slowness that must have been agonizing. Compared to where he'd been only a few minutes ago, it was a snail's pace. Still faster and better than any human could ever hope for, but nowhere near as quickly as I might have thought, given the speed with which he'd regrown his arms before.

What were his limits? I couldn't remember where I'd heard it, but hadn't he fought Leviathan essentially by himself? Where was that power? Where was the strength that could give even an Endbringer pause?

I will defeat you at your best.

A part of me wanted to see it, wanted to see it so badly that I was almost willing to wait, to blunt my attacks just to push him to those heights. But I put that impulse in check. The Endbringers routinely *demolished* cities, and when they left behind anything at all, it was often so badly damaged that the people might choose instead to abandon it rather than try to rebuild upon the ruins. A fight with something that could go toe to toe with one of *those* would not end well for Brockton Bay, even *if* I could come out on top.

Lung snarled and growled, and it was still something that could never have come from a human mouth, but it was nothing like his previous roars. Was he feeling cornered? I didn't know. But the idea that I could so terrify one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful, parahuman in the Bay gave me a kind of vindictive satisfaction that I'd been denied with the trio for nearly two years.

“Are you afraid, Lung?”

No more holding back. Avoid the head, avoid separating the head from the rest of the body, but even if I had to individually hack off each arm and leg, I was *going* to put him down.

I rocketed towards him again, but instead of going in for a swipe and letting him interrupt me again, I threw Balmung with all of my strength. It flew like a buzzsaw, whooping as it cleaved through the air, and Lung had to dodge to the side to avoid having it bite into his flesh. By now, he had undoubtedly learned that it could stunt his healing and his growth.

But I'd never been aiming to actually hit him, just distract him. He dodged Balmung, yes — right into my path. The heat that he gave off was sweltering and approached unbearable, but Siegfried had fought in uncomfortable situations like that, so I kept my focus, pulled back my fist, and blasted him in the gut with a full force punch.

Lung let out what might have been a scream in a human, crumpling around my arm as ribs snapped and organs ruptured. Against another foe, that single blow would have been enough to declare a decisive victory.

Not Lung. As he had proven several times, he was much harder to put down than that.

So, I reared back my other fist, and as I pulled the first away, I slammed him with another punch, just as strong, right in the spot where I remembered carving him up, before. The sound Lung made now was even more agonized, but I didn't wait for him to recover or counterattack; as his arms came around to protect his injured torso, I grappled with one, grabbed it with both hands, then, with a twist and a motion that probably looked ridiculous from the outside, I flung the twenty-foot Lung over my shoulder and onto the ground.

The thud of Lung hitting the road was like an earthquake, and he had to weigh in excess of a thousand pounds, now, but I didn't wait, I didn't stop. I took one, two, three bounding steps and retrieved Balmung, then turned back around and made to deliver the finishing blow.

Aim for the heart, straight and true.

The thing about a dragon, however, is that they have far too many limbs to be in any way fair. Lung's tail came around again, whipcord fast, and slammed into my chest like a speeding car. Without Siegfried, my entire ribcage would probably have been reduced to a maraca, but all I felt was something akin to a light slap.

It would have — it *did* — sent me flying, but I wasn't willing to give him that much space and time to regain his bearings. I gripped Balmung with both hands and thrust it into the road, digging in my heels; instead of soaring twenty or thirty feet, I slid about five or seven, and I had barely managed to stop before I was moving again.

Lung had grown another foot as I came back upon him, and the wing I had sliced off had been replaced. I paid it barely any mind as I took aim at his back, intent on staking him through the heart from behind.

But Lung spun around to meet me, and quick as lightning, one hand shot out to grab my sword hand, then another to grab my free hand, then as he lifted me up off of the ground, two more came up to grasp at my head.

What?

My mind boggled at the strangeness of it, and for a few seconds, I wasn't sure what to make of it. Four arms. He had four arms, now. Two arms, two legs, a tail, and a pair of wings, sure, but four arms? What the hell kind of dragon had four arms, anyway?

This kind, apparently.

“████████████████████!”

He tried to say something to me, likely a proclamation of his victory, but it came out as a garbled, inhuman noise. The hands around mine tightened, and the hands holding to my head began to heat up and glow. Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw an intense light, starting at a low orange and steadily climbing towards yellow. I could feel my skin begin to warm.

He was going to burn me. He was going to burn me up, just turn up the heat until my head ignited or exploded, whichever came first. No mercy. No live-to-fight-another-day nonsense. Just like that, he was going to kill me. No pomp, no circumstance, no bullshit about worthy opponents or last words or anything like that. Just...as casually as he had talked about killing those kids, he was going to kill *me*.

Worthier men have tried.

Like Hell.

I let out a wordless scream, and with a feat of agility that would have made professional gymnasts green with envy, I swung my torso up, curled my knees against my stomach, and planted both of my feet in his chest with all of my strength.

Snap-snap-snap, went his ribs, barely healed from my previous punches. Lung gave what might generously be called a startled yelp and reflexively let me go to cradle his injury again as the force shoved him back several feet. I'd only just landed back on the ground before he'd uncurled himself and turned a blazing glare my way.

But I'd learned my lesson.

I leapt away, putting even more space between us, so that the distance was now something like fifty feet. I didn't need much, just enough to give myself some time. As long as he didn't interrupt me, this would be the finishing blow — for real, this time.

I gripped Balmung with both hands.

The thought I'd had before, that it was time to stop holding back, even then, I'd held back. There was a multitude of reasons I could have given why, but at the end of the day, I just didn't want to risk killing him. I didn't like the idea of becoming a murderer.

But I liked the idea of becoming a murder victim less. Especially on my first night out as a hero.

“O sword...”

Energy surged through my arms and into Balmung. An eerie orange light shone from the jewel in the hilt.

“Let thee be filled.”

I lifted the sword above my head. Two seconds — that was how long it had taken me. Lung was already approaching, dashing with such speed and strength that he was eating up the ground and the world felt as though it was shaking. Against one of the Protectorate heroes, he probably would have been too fast to counter.

Not me.

Phantasmal Greatsword

“Bal —”

I swung down.

Felling of the Sky Demon

“— mung!”

A wave of twilight. A cresting wave of energy surged outward from the arc of my swing, traveling over the ground even faster than Lung. What pavement had not been broken and shattered throughout the rest of the fight was utterly destroyed by its passing, upheaved and rendered into dust.

An Anti-Dragon weapon. The feat which had been captured by the legend of Siegfried and Balmung was that of slaying a great dragon with a single blow. The wave of energy moving swiftly through the intervening space now was the embodiment of that attack, an attack which could defeat an entire host of five-hundred men and laid low anything that could call itself a dragon. If even Fafnir, who only Siegfried had been strong enough to defeat, had been killed by it...

Lung met the wave head on.

In the first place, there was nowhere for him to go, no way for him to avoid it. Even if he'd jumped, the wave was too high and covered too large an area. The best he could have done would have been to move to the outer edges, where the attack wasn't quite as potent.

But even Lung had to obey physics. Stopping and jumping straight up might have worked to dodge the brunt of it, but Lung had already been barreling forward like a freight train. He didn't have the time or the space to get even partly out of the way.

So he crashed into it head first.

At the last possible moment, I saw him shield his head and torso with every available limb, from his arms to his legs to his wings.

When the light faded and I had blinked the bright spots out of my vision, it took me a moment to find Lung again. Not only was there no longer a hulking beast of a dragon right in view, but most of

the fires had either been swept out by my attack or were dwindling down to flickering embers. The street had, once more, been plunged into total darkness.

It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the stars and the light of the quarter moon, now that there weren't any major sources of light to let me see by, but Siegfried seemed to have better night vision than a normal human, because once I *did* adjust, I could see the street with much more clarity than I'd had before the fight. Then again, maybe Siegfried's vision was normal and the reason I'd had trouble in my base Breaker state was because my natural eyesight wasn't exactly 20/20.

Either way, it only took a moment or two of looking to find the great lump of flesh that sat further on down the road. I looked behind it, but even with Siegfried's better vision, I couldn't see the gangers we'd left behind at the beginning. Maybe they'd woken up and left...but I had a feeling the answer was actually that Lung and I had just gone so far away from them that they were too far to see in the moonlight.

I frown and cautiously made my way over to the lump on the road I'd spotted — was I just imagining things, or was it actually shrinking? Absentmindedly, I tried to keep track of the distance and found that Balmung had thrown Lung back about forty or fifty feet from where he'd collided with that wave of energy. I probably should have been more surprised that it didn't throw him further.

The lump *was* Lung and it *was* shrinking — scales sloughing off, excess skin falling away or just plain disappearing into *nowhere*, and all of the draconic features turning back into something more like a human. His arms and legs were just plain *missing*, like they had been neatly seared away by some incredibly hot flame. My attack had, indeed, defeated him in one blow. The only trouble was that I wasn't sure it hadn't *killed* him, too.

In the end, I was terrible at going all out. I was too afraid that I'd become a murderer, and that wasn't a step I wanted to take — *especially* on my first night out. I'd unleashed Balmung at something like half strength, maybe closer to two thirds. I didn't think Siegfried was entirely happy about that, but he *did* know how to do it.

Even like that, I didn't know if the ultimate Anti-Dragon weapon had killed the dragon, Lung.

Hesitantly, I leaned down and pressed two fingers against the side of his throat, feeling for a pulse, and found nothing. It was only belatedly, after I had a brief, confused moment of mingled panic and satisfaction, that I realized I wouldn't be able to feel it through the metal of my gauntlets and the leather padding on their insides.

I needn't have bothered, anyway. Even if I missed the rise and fall of his chest, his injuries were already starting to heal — much, much slower than they had at even the beginning of the fight, but still noticeable. He'd probably have his arms and legs back within an hour, three at the long end.

I took a step back and considered what I should do, and for a moment, I kind of floundered. I'd beaten Lung. I'd knocked several members of his gang unconscious before that. I'd achieved the goal I'd originally had when this whole thing started, and then I'd gone and overachieved it by beating Lung outright, rather than just stopping him from killing those kids. The only question was, now what?

Well, obviously, I needed to get the authorities out here — the Protectorate, the PRT — so that they could arrest this guy. Could they take the gangers, too? Even if they didn't have jurisdiction or whatever, they could probably hold onto them until they could hand them over to the BBPD. Either way, I needed to contact the authorities. The only problem with that was that I didn't have a phone —

I heard the roar of the motorcycle almost at the last second, and as I spun around to look, I caught a flash of something flying past me and hitting Lung. It was too big to be a bullet, but I had to stop myself from glancing back to check and make sure Lung was still alive. In front of me, a technical marvel of mechanical engineering pulled to a halt, and from its back, a single, tall man dismounted with a smooth, practiced motion that looked almost like he'd been thrown from his ride.

I almost didn't recognize him in the dark. The light on his bike helped illuminate him, but it also threw off my night vision, at first, so my natural reaction was to tighten my grip on my sword and prepare to face whoever had come — the E88, looking to take advantage of Lung's weakness and finish what I'd started? The Merchants, trying to seize a chance to muscles the ABB out by removing their leader? I had no idea.

But my vision sharpened quickly, quickly enough to catch a glimpse of blue armor, highlighted with silver accents, a visored helmet that left his lower face open to show off his neatly trimmed beard, and most importantly, the hi-tech halberd he hefted and pointed in my direction — a halberd I knew, just from looking at it, probably had more crazy functions and sci-fi gizmos than I could even begin to imagine.

Armsmaster, the premiere hero of Brockton Bay, considered one of the Protectorate's shining stars, leveled a scowl my way with tension — the kind that Siegfried recognized as being prepared to fight — writ into every fiber of his body.

“You gonna fight me?”