

Overture 1.2

One of the first things I learned about my power was that it relied — to some unknowable degree — on my own strength. In those early days, when I first learned I even *had* powers, I could only install a single Hero on any given day, and even then, I could only hold it for maybe five minutes before the strain got to me. It was like trying to stay on the back of a bucking bull in full rage; every second became harder and harder, until my fingers finally gave out and I had to let go.

After that first week, though, I started running in the mornings and every other afternoon, filled with a drive to improve myself and make up for my limitations, and that was when I found out that it seemed to make a difference. There was no way to know how much it helped — I'd been practicing every day, too, so when the strain started to lessen and I could add one more Install, then another, then another, as the weeks progressed, the improvement was way too exponential to match the more linear improvements in my physical fitness.

Maybe (and this one was my personal favorite theory) the more often I Installed and the longer I held it for, the more my body was taking on the characteristics of the Heroes I called upon. On the other hand, the more likely possibility was just that my body was getting more used to the strain, like working out some metaphysical muscle of some kind. It wasn't my power that was improving, it was how much of it I could safely handle before I did serious damage to something inside me.

Either way, as a result, I'd gotten to know the east side of the city fairly well, even though I steered clear of the bad parts of town my parents had always told me to stay away from when I was younger. Once I slipped into an Install, however, and used the Hero's innate skills to sneak out of the house just after midnight that Sunday night, I made an immediate beeline for the Boardwalk and crossed the line over into the Docks and the bad side of town.

I stuck to the rooftops as I made my way deeper in, enjoying the freedom that my new strength and speed allowed me. In my base Breaker state, like I'd dropped back into after I made it out of my neighborhood, I wasn't going to be setting any speed or strength records, but it was enough of a boost that I could do some serious free-running and make those jumps between buildings that normal people could never hope to. On the streets below me, there was a noticeable decline in the quality of everything, from the buildings to the asphalt to the traffic signs.

It was once the lights disappeared behind me that I had to stop and reorient myself. A lack of power, I decided, looking around. The buildings were so rundown that I doubted most of them had even the basic utilities, let alone the sort of amenities even *I* could take for granted. Running water? *Maybe*, if they were lucky, and it probably came through rusty pipes. Electricity, though? Apparently not.

Without any lights, though, I couldn't run quite as carelessly, because it was harder to see where I was going, and the lack of streetlamps meant I could no longer rely on my peripheral vision to catch anything worth stopping happening down below me. So, since I didn't want to waste an Install to try one of my more...*exotic* methods of finding crime, I strode over to the side of the roof and looked down.

For a long moment, there was really a whole lot of nothing. I couldn't see well enough to make out shapes very well, and anything more than ten feet away from me was indistinct enough that it could be a person or just my eyes playing tricks on me. The beginnings of frustration started to kindle

inside me; how was I supposed to fight crime and be a superhero if I couldn't see what was happening?

I was ready to straighten up and try the next block over when a spark flickered to life on the dark street below, and a spot of glowing orange lit up a group of faces huddled around it — people that I had, at first, thought were nothing more than shadows. They were Asian, each and every one of them, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese — hell if I knew how to really tell the difference, especially in the dark like that — and though they wore different things, each was decked out in the same colors: red and green.

ABB, the Azn Bad Boys.

The street was unlit, so once they finished lighting their cigarettes, I could only rely on the moonlight to see them, but now that I knew they were there, it was easier to notice their movements. I glanced up and down the street — just being gangers wasn't enough reason for me to jump them on my first night out — and that was when I caught sight of more of them, pouring slowly and steadily out of another building. They were gathering in the street, like they were attending a rally of some kind.

I hesitated for all of a second, then I centered myself and pulled on my power.

“Set. Install.”

In an instant, it was like I was being flooded with energy and strength, and I felt my clothing and even, to a lesser degree, my body shift form. I was cloaked now entirely in black, masked by a plate of white shaped like a jawless skull. I was the Hundred-Faced Hassan, one of the nineteen candidates for the position of head of a league of assassins.

Delusional Illusion

“Zabaniya.”

A moment later, and more of myself appeared, each one slightly different from the others and all crouched in the dark atop the roofs around me. There was one each for each ganger, to facilitate a quick and easy takedown. Each of my brothers and sisters would strike simultaneously, unseen and unheard until the moment of attack, and render each ganger unconscious with a single blow.

Zabaniya: Delusional Illusion, the power of the Hundred-Faced Hassan. In the original hero, the power might have manifested itself such that each individual body had an individual personality, but that was because the Hundred-Faced Hassan had fractured his own mind so that he could fulfill whatever role was required of him for whatever task. In me, however, I couldn't split my mind that way, so each of the copies was just another me and would vanish once the Install was let go.

It was kind of lame and pretty tame for a parahuman to do on her first night out, taking out a rally, but gangers rarely gathered in numbers like this just to give each other pep talks. They were probably about to go and shoot up some rival or some business that had decided not to pay them protection money, and I wasn't about to let them go and do that.

It was at that moment, however, just as all of myself was tensing to strike, that the gangers pulled away from the building, and out stepped one final man. Naked from the torso up, with Eastern

dragons etched across his chest and arms and a draconic metal mask hiding his face, he could only be the ABB's boss: Lung.

I paused, and all of me backed down. I knew very little about Lung; there were stories about him fighting entire Protectorate teams and winning, and his powers were described as allowing him to transform more and more over the course of a fight, but I didn't know how accurate the information was, and I had no idea if he kept an ace up his sleeve for emergencies.

I *really* didn't want to fight him unless I absolutely had to; there were so many unknowns, and a guy who could hold his own against full hero teams was probably so far out of my league that it wasn't even funny.

I *did* know he had one other parahuman in his gang, a scary guy named Oni Lee, but of the gangers gathered, only Lung himself was wearing a mask. Oni Lee probably wasn't among them.

Down below, Lung started talking, but I couldn't quite make out what he was saying. I felt my lips pull into a frown, then I glanced over the rooftops to one of the other mes that was perched closer by and concentrated, stretching out my awareness. In an instant, her senses were mine, and Lung's words came through clearly.

"...the children," Lung was saying. I could hear the snarl in his voice, "just shoot. Doesn't matter your aim, just shoot. You see one lying on the ground? Shoot the little bitch twice more to be sure. We give them no chances to be clever or lucky, understand?"

I recoiled, even as the mooks down below murmured their assent, and around me, the others of myself recoiled, too.

They were going to kill kids?

For a moment, I was still. I think I had trouble processing the idea that someone could sink so low as to kill children, but aside from that, I was completely calm. I probably should have been freaked out, maybe I should have been panicking and wishing I'd had a cellphone or a nearby payphone so I could call in the Protectorate or something to deal with it all, but I wasn't. I was cool, calculating, and rational.

I didn't need to worry about calling anyone. I didn't need to bring in the cavalry to save the day and slay the big, bad dragon. There was no need for backup or reinforcements or other heroes to charge in on white steeds. I was enough. And I wasn't about to let Lung and his goons kill anyone, let alone children.

Ten more of myself slid into existence like shadows given substance. The total number was thirty-five, but I could have done more. If I pushed it all the way, there would be eighty Taylors waiting in the wings, crouched on rooftops in a gray so dull, so deep, and so close to black that only the white skulls would stand out. I was knives in the dark.

I was an army.

I could have struck then, as Lung grabbed one of his mooks and checked the time, but I didn't. I waited, all of myself on edge, all of myself wanting to jump down and end it *now*, as something like

an instinct told me to wait, and in the meantime, a car pulled up and discharged three more gangers, all in ABB's red and green. Still, I waited, because it wasn't the right moment, it wasn't the right angle.

Not much longer after that, the group started moving northward, walking — towards where, I didn't know. I only knew what awaited them at their destination, what they intended to do once they got there. I only knew that I couldn't let them go.

And as they passed under me, all of me, I struck.

All of me descended like a wave of black, and as the power concealing my presence was torn apart like a veil of tissue paper, the gangers could suddenly see me, hear me, *feel* my cold, righteous anger fall upon them like the hammer of God.

There really wasn't much to what happened next. All of me had coordination to a ludicrous degree, and the mooks had only a split second's worth of warning, if even that. Twenty-five simultaneous taps to the head put each of them down in a single blow, and they all collapsed to the ground like puppets with cut strings.

Except, I discovered as an angry roar rumbled across the street, for Lung.

I spun to face him as two of me were thrown back, then all of me started scrambling away — but in that short moment, two balls of fire burned the faces off of another two of me, and I felt them vanish, both from the world and from the ability of my Delusional Illusion.

That was the downside to it: I wasn't duplicating myself, so my power didn't increase by making more of me at full strength. Delusional Illusion *split* me, so the power of each of myself decreased with each new myself, even if our overall strength remained the same. We were all also the same, even if we were all separate, so each one of myself that died was stricken from the Delusional Illusion.

This wasn't going to be enough. I realized that as Lung incinerated a third me; the Hundred-Faced Hassan was too weak, too close to an ordinary human. He could beat normal gangers, probably most low level parahumans, and the numbers I could bring to bear with him might be enough to overwhelm even a few of the upper tiers — but it wasn't enough against Lung. I couldn't hope to beat him with Hassan.

The rest of myself did an about face, throwing myself against him and in his path while I, the *true* I, continued to back up. Lung roared again, and as he grabbed another two of me by my heads and roasted their faces off, I caught a glimpse of him, now six inches taller and starting to show more bulk on his chest and arms.

That was fine, though. I wasn't trying to beat him with Hassan, I was just making room.

The rest of myself appeared from the shadows, replacing and bolstering the previous numbers until I capped out. Several had already died, so I didn't have the full eighty, but there was enough of me to put in his way, even as he carved through more of them with flames and now brute strength. I kept backing up, running backwards so I could keep my eyes aimed in Lung's direction, and I only stopped once there was about sixty feet between us.

That should be enough.

I was about to let it go, let Hassan fade, but I hesitated and waited again, urged by some unknown instinct. The rest of myself piled on Lung, swarming him and slamming their fists and their dirks into him with as much strength as possible, but they might as well have been gnats for all the damage they seemed to do. If I tried, I could look through the eyes of one of my other selves and see Lung grow just a little bit, become just a little bit stronger, but every few seconds, another of myself was incinerated.

Sometimes, I was jarred out of my new perspective entirely, and sometimes, my sight just transferred to another of myself. For what felt like several minutes, but was probably only about thirty seconds, I was jostled and switched between more than a dozen of myself, trying to find something — *anything* — that would hint at a weakness, at a spot or trait of which I could take advantage. But Lung only grew stronger and more resilient, and every new attack was shrugged off and ignored more easily than the last.

I wasn't getting anywhere, I realized. All I was doing was throwing fodder at him to let him get stronger, and eventually, there'd come a point where he would have burned through all of my other selves and become too strong and fast for me to switch to a stronger Hero. At that point, I'd be done, dead, game over.

Right. While I still had time and room, then —

“Release.”

The word wasn't really needed, but it helped me focus. I let go of the Hundred-Faced Hassan, and immediately, all of myself vanished, leaving just me. Lung, blazing bright with orange flames dancing around him, was suddenly clear of bodies and directly within sight. I could see the moment his eyes found me, the snarl that curled on his mouth. He had already grown another few inches, and his fingers were tipped with wicked-looking claws. Splotches of silver were starting to pop out atop his skin, small and shiny and shaped vaguely like —

Wait. Lung meant “dragon” in Chinese, didn't it? I couldn't remember where I'd heard that, maybe on PHO, but it was like a bolt of lightning struck my brain. Lung didn't just get *bigger* and *stronger* the longer he fought, he *transformed*. And what would a guy who named himself “dragon” transform into? A *dragon*.

It felt a little on-the-nose. I mean, it couldn't be that obvious, could it? Would anyone really give away the secret of their powers that easily? Maybe, maybe not — there was no way for famous capes to escape a certain notoriety about their powers and how they worked, so the effort to conceal them with a strange name wouldn't always work. That said, I would've thought you'd want to keep your powers' true nature a secret, so choosing a vague or unrelated cape name could help surprise your enemies. But the man wore a dragon-shaped mask, named himself “dragon” in Chinese, and had dragon tattoos all over his chest. I was starting to notice a pattern.

Right. Well then, what Hero was better suited to fighting a dragon than a dragonslayer?

I reached out with my power, and another time, a dozen or more Heroes might have offered themselves up for use. Each of them would have been a dragonslayer, each would have put down at

least one dragon in his myth, and some might even have tamed them. But I had already chosen one, even before reaching out. I had already done the research to know that *this* was the one I wanted.

“Set. Install.”

Power, more power than Hassan and even more than the Witch I had Installed on Friday, rushed through me. My body suddenly grew four inches, stretching out at the arms and legs. My muscles thickened, bulging, not like a bodybuilder, but lean and tightly corded, like a professional athlete. I felt my face change shape as my mask disappeared, and in my peripheral vision, I saw my hair turn silver and become wild and shaggy.

The costume that came with my base Breaker state changed, as well. I was covered in a maroon-trimmed black bodysuit, open in the center to show off the glowing green marking that covered my torso (though there was a single strap holding it together to protect my modesty). My shoulders were covered in heavy steel pauldrons, my hands and forearms by wicked-looking gauntlets, my upper thighs by tassets, and my feet and calves by matching greaves and sabatons.

But the truly impressive thing was the massive piece of steel I now held in my right hand. It was a greatsword as long as I was tall with a grip as long as my forearm and a blade that looked like it could chop down a thick oak tree with one swipe. It was a sword so large that most men would have struggled to use it with both hands, and yet I held it easily with one.

Ordinarily, the sparse armor would have been dangerous. It left too many parts open, too many places vulnerable. Any idiot could kill a guy who left his chest so wide open, and even against ordinary gangers, one lucky shot would mean death.

But the Hero I'd Installed was Siegfried, the Dragon-Blooded Knight. I'd researched his legend — in it, he'd slain the dragon, Fafnir, and by bathing in its blood, his body had become like steel. With flesh more like dragon scales than skin, he was nearly invincible, almost impervious to harm, but for the mark on his back where a linden leaf had stuck as he soaked in the dragon's blood.

And the sword in my hand was the sword that had dealt the fatal blow to Fafnir. Anything that called itself a dragon would be weakened by every blow.

As Lung charged towards me, I raced to meet him, shattering chunks of asphalt as I kicked off the ground. When we closed, he swiped at me with one clawed hand, wreathed in flame, but Siegfried's instincts now filled my head, and my arm swung around, cleaving through his bicep with Balmung.

Lung's arm went flying off into the night, but to his credit, he didn't flinch or retreat, he only howled, grabbed my wrist with his other hand, and pinned it to my chest. His flames tried to sear away my skin and melt my gauntlet, and even before my eyes, more and more silver scales were starting to bubble up from beneath his flesh, and he swelled and grew another four inches.

“GAH ‘OO!”

But his grip felt weak, fragile, and his flames were like a sunbeam on a clear summer day. The Lung before me was probably a mid-tier Brute already, capable of splattering my base Breaker state across the pavement like a rotten tomato, but as strong as he was, as formidable as other heroes might have found him, *I* was stronger still.

“Do you?”

I wrenched my arm away in the other direction, throwing his to the side and opening up his chest, then I brought my other hand forward, balled into a fist, and planted it with about half my full strength right into his ribs. Each one of them popped and broke with a sickening crunch — I could almost *feel* them, even through my gauntlet — forcing all the air out of his lungs as a gurgling wheeze, and the sheer power behind the blow sent him skidding several feet back.

Lung wasn't that easily beaten, however. He didn't fall or collapse, he just bent his head over — his mask had already been shifted away by the snout sprouting from his face — and heaved up a truly obscene amount of blood, which began to boil at his feet. The stump of his right elbow bubbled grotesquely; the arm I'd severed was starting to grow back, like the timelapse video I'd once seen of an injured starfish. The rest of him glimmered in the heat of his flames, shimmering silver scales reflecting the light like a tightly woven suit of mail, and because he had swelled to nearly nine feet of bulging muscles, the tattered remains of his pants fell from his body and caught alight.

“Muv'r... 'ugger...” he gurgled out.

I was confident that it still wasn't enough. My sword hadn't seemed to stunt his growth or anything, no, but maybe that was because he wasn't enough of a dragon, yet. The closer and closer he got, I thought, the more and more he'd be affected by the special attribute of my sword. Once he reached the point where he looked like the real deal, wings, tail, and all — *if* he could go that far, and I had no idea if he could — then I would have him. The wounds delivered by Balmung would heal slower, his growth would creep down to a crawl, and every hit would feel to him like a concentrated blast of *weakness*.

I leapt backwards another thirty feet, further away from the downed gangers. I had no intention of catching them in the crossfire, no matter how despicable they were, and I wasn't about to become a murderer, even on accident. This was between me and Lung, now, and we needed room.

Lung didn't seem to notice or care why I'd increased the distance, but if the crooked grin that worked its way across his twisted maw was any sign, he probably saw it as me retreating. I didn't care to correct him; it just made it easier to convince him to come my way if he thought I was trying to escape.

Fortunately, it seemed my guess was right. Lung charged in my direction as his arm finished reforming, eating up the space between us with great, loping strides. By now, his neck had elongated into something serpentine and inhuman, and his head was a mass of gleaming scales and crocodile teeth. The mask had been completely abandoned — it served no purpose anymore, because there was no way to match what I was seeing to a human being's face, not even with the best facial recognition software.

As he came upon me, he reached out with a long swipe of his regrown arm. The force of it transferred by his momentum alone would have snapped a man's head clean off, and I was sure I could have taken it completely unscathed, but it was too open, too telegraphed. Siegfried's instincts were almost impossible to ignore as I ducked and spun underneath it, bringing Balmung around and down to carve at horrific line right across his back. I was sure I had severed his spine, and his pained, angry howl told me exactly how much it hurt.

Even still, Lung only stumbled, one, two, five paces, and before his foot came down on the sixth, the line I'd carved was healed up. The scales that had been scattered by my slash were replaced in an instant, and before my eyes, he grew again, bulking outwards and shooting up nine more inches. Two bulges that I had first thought were his shoulder-blades wiggled and grew, and at the base of his spine, a third bulge began to lengthen and thin.

Wings and a tail, I realized. He really *was* becoming a dragon.

I closed again, even as he started to turn, and lopped off the same arm I'd first severed. He loosed another howl and eyed me with inarticulate fury, and the flames turned bright, blazing yellow. Even the asphalt at our feet was beginning to melt — he had to be burning at eighteen or nineteen-hundred degrees Fahrenheit, at least.

He swung out at me with his other arm, again, but I just lopped that one off, too. I stepped in, angling Balmung for a stab — but Lung's severed arm had already regrown, much faster than before, and I saw it too late to move back. It slammed into my face, claws scratching towards my eyes, with the force of a speeding truck.

There was no way to describe exactly how it felt. It wasn't exactly a tickle, per se, but he still wasn't strong enough to do any damage, and his claws slid right along my skin like water over a wetsuit. Siegfried's impenetrable flesh couldn't be broken by something only capable of destroying a car; if Lung wanted to hurt me, he needed to hit me *much* harder.

Admittedly, it would've been a much different case if I'd been using just about any other Hero. Heracles or Achilles wouldn't have felt the blow either, but they both had a similar impenetrable skin and were some of my top of the top tier Heroes, and so was Siegfried. Most of the rest of my roster would've felt that hit much more keenly, and if I'd tried to win this one with Hassan, that would've been game over, right there.

But this was the exact reason I'd chosen Siegfried. As a Hero whose skin *was* his armor, he could take a tank shell in the face without flinching, and Lung would have to bring the equivalent of a ballistic missile to give me anything more than a scratch — unless, of course, he hit the vulnerable point on my back. Siegfried was just so good that the former was likely to happen long before the latter.

As Lung's claw cleared my face, I twisted with the blow, then I abandoned my stab and backhanded him across the maw with my free hand. I didn't bother to control myself, this time: Lung got the full, unfettered power of my strength, and I heard his jaw shatter like glass. He howled another time through broken teeth and shards of bone, and blood poured out of his lipless mouth where fragments had broken through the skin. The side of his face that had been hit by my fist was a mangled mass of meat only connected to the rest by strained strands of sinew, whatever cords of muscle had survived, and stray patches of skin that hadn't been ripped away.

It was really a horrific thing to witness, and if it weren't for the situation I was in, I probably would have been throwing up. Siegfried, however, was a calm presence in my head; I was borrowing his strength, his skills, and his experience, and he had seen much, much worse.

My momentum was already carrying me in that direction, so I went with the flow and thrust Balmung forward and into Lung's gut. The silver scales that must have given many an opponent so

much trouble parted effortlessly, and the huge greatsword would have nearly bisected an ordinary-sized man, but Lung was so large that he made Balmung seem normal-sized. I doubted I'd hit anything that would have ever been instantly fatal, and even if I had, he regenerated so quickly that it wouldn't have made a difference.

Lung didn't wait for me to follow up. His massive, tree-like legs pumped and pushed him backwards; he slid off of Balmung with a spray of blood and scales and cracked the pavement as he landed ten feet back. Before my eyes, his wounds vanished again, although the stab through his belly took longer than the slash to his back had moments ago. I took that as a sign that he was almost there.

I charged forward, Balmung trailing behind me, and Lung reached out and swiped at me as I came upon him, bright yellow flames blazing in the wake of his arm. I ducked under it again, but it seemed he'd learned from last time, because he spun with his swing and his half-formed tail came around for my head. I straightened and took it on my ribs, heavier and harder than the last one that hit me, but still not enough to really hurt, then wrapped my free arm around it and pinned it against my body. With my other arm, I brought Balmung down and cut the tail off of his body.

Lung let out a roar that shook the nearby buildings. Even as I threw the severed tail away, he reached around and blasted me with more fire, but I just charged through it, letting Siegfried's impenetrable skin turn the inferno into a balmy, almost pleasant warmth.

But I'd underestimated him, it seemed, because as I came through the flames, sword poised to slice into his side, he grabbed my wrist again and heaved me up and off my feet. I didn't have even a moment to struggle — he pulled me up and tossed me back like a sack of potatoes, and I went flying, skidding and rolling on the ground until I came to a rest some thirty or forty feet away. Somehow, probably because of Siegfried's instincts and skills, I'd managed to keep hold of Balmung, but I wasn't hurt. It he'd gotten me by my ankle and slammed me back-first into the ground, I might've been in trouble, but that was my advantage: as long as no one knew I was using Siegfried and that I had all of his strengths *and* his weaknesses, no one who fought me would think I was any more vulnerable on my back than I was any other part of my body.

I pulled myself back to my feet, taking a moment to move a stray strand of silver hair from my eyes, and when I looked back up and over at my enemy, I could see two great shapes spread wide like a large net amongst the flames. A new tail was already thrashing back and forth, and Lung stood, easily at least fifteen feet, powerful and dangerous and menacing, as the heat from his white-hot fire peeled the paint on every sign and building within twenty yards of him and boiled the asphalt beneath his clawed feet.

He was at the point, now, where most of the superheroes would probably have called it off and retreated. His fists were large, attached to arms like tree trunks, and could probably crumble a small house with one sweep of his arm, and his legs looked like they could crush minivans effortlessly. It wasn't hard to imagine the beast before me going toe to toe with the entire Brockton Bay Protectorate roster and coming away the victor, and even the E88 at their most fanatical would probably take one look at him and turn the other way. *This* was a dragon, as his name had claimed.

I felt my lips pull into a grin.