

IMPROVING SLAY TIMES IN THE COMMON DRAGON

by Catherine Haluska Shaffer

Abstract

*An extract made from the juice of the Hesperidensian pomegranate, injected intramuscularly, will weaken the common dragon, *Draco areuginosa*, sufficiently to allow a killing blow to the head or hearts (Richardson, et al.).*

*In order to isolate and characterize this effect, four adult male dragons of the species *Draco areuginosa* were attracted to our laboratory using Jaffronium's method and slain using either traditional methods or Richardson's technology. Richardson's method improved slay times by 34%.*

Ivan Quickblade arrived at Dr. Diabolvsky's promptly at ten o'clock. This was to be the first meeting with his new Alchemy mentor, who would guide him to achievement of his wizard's robes.

A sign reading "Necromivor Diabolvsky" marked the lab entrance. The door opened easily at Ivan's hesitant touch.

Inside was a maze of counters and shelves. Debris covered every surface: arcanelly shaped glassware, bottles of chemicals, books, cathode-ray displays, empty soda cans. Clouds of fog boiled out of a bucket of dry ice in one sink. The air buzzed.

There was a movement in the rear of the room. Ivan ventured further inside.

“Hello?”

A black man with rasta braids appeared from behind a stack of books. He greeted Ivan with a nod.

“I’m looking for Dr. Diabolovsky’s office?”

The man pointed across the room. Behind two rows of lab benches, a door hung ajar.

“Thanks! I’m Ivan. I’ll be joining your lab.” He extended his hand.

“Larry.” He turned and sauntered away, humming to himself.

As Ivan sat in the cluttered office, he wondered how the mentor-student relationship would unfold between them. Certainly, there would be long hours, frustrations, set-backs, even resentments in his graduate career. But this man had experienced it all. And they shared the same passion: Alchemy.

At 11:00 he emerged from the office and approached Larry, who was working at the sink. “Do you know where Dr. Diabolovsky is?”

Larry chuckled. “Nope.”

The smell of rotted meat surged up from the sink and he realized that Larry was cleaning partially defleshed human bones there. He worked with all the unconcern of a master chef carving a leg of lamb. Ivan tried not to gag.

“Is this usual for him?”

“What?”

“Well, not being here when he’s supposed to, I guess.”

Larry rinsed a vertebra under the faucet, then turned to face Ivan. “Let me explain something to you, man. Follow me.”

Larry led him to a wall with a map of the castle grounds. Undulating contour lines covered it.

“Now, I assume you’re familiar with Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle?”

Ivan nodded.

“Well, you see, Dr. D exhibits both wavelike and particle-like behavior. On a hunch we applied Heisenberg’s principle and created this surprisingly accurate map of his location.” Bits of flesh clung to Larry’s finger as he jabbed the map.

“What? Where is he, then?”

“Slow down, my man. We can either determine his velocity or his position, but not both. Fortunately, Necromivor’s velocity is not very interesting to us.” Larry shifted on his stool and tapped the map. “This, my friend, is a Necromivor Density Map.”

“Necromivor Density?”

“Yes. Now, you’ll remember from your studies of quantum mechanics that electrons in their orbitals can be described by a wave function, and rather than being found at any one position in orbit around the nucleus, we imagine them as a cloud of electron density. The pi orbital, for example, is like a barbell with two bulbs of electron density at the ends and a narrow isthmus between.”

“Yes, yes, yes...” Ivan glanced at his watch. 11:15. Where was that man?

“Well, this shows us a Necromivor Density cloud.”

Ivan squinted at the map, and suddenly it came into focus. There was a cluster of density around his apartments, the privy, the delicatessen, and the sheep pens.

Materials and Methods

Twenty kilograms of Hesperidensian pomegranates were obtained, seeded, and juiced. The juice was fermented and distilled to yield one liter of pomegranate extract.

Four adult, male dragons were captured using Jaffronium's method. (NIH permit for research on animal subjects #501J6). The cardiac output for all three hearts was monitored with Biomatronic EEG. The experimental dragons were dosed by Remington Hypodermic 100 pound Recurve Bow. All dragons were sacrificed with Roury 9000 Superslasher, model TX24.

"You've got to be kidding! This thing isn't even calibrated!" Ivan hefted the Roury Superslasher. Its balance was uneven, imprecise. It was obsolete by more than a decade.

"It's all we've got." Larry shrugged.

"How about the SlashTech Vorpall Blade XLT? Anyone in the department got one of those?"

"Nope. I'm afraid not. We're the only lab left doing bladework. The other groups are working on lead-to-gold conversions, love potions, etc." His big, tropical print shirt fluttered in the breeze.

"You're kidding, right? But the reason I came to this University was its reputation in the martial arts."

"The Roury is fine. You'll have to calibrate it manually, and it doesn't have some of the fancy features of the Vorpall Blade, but it's reliable and enchanted. Remember, our grandfathers were killing dragons with nothing more than sharpened bamboo spikes. No adjustable grip, no safety guard, no glowing digital display."

"Sheeeyit," said Ivan. He swung the Roury through the basic forms as Larry sauntered away. It put far too much pressure on his wrists. He wondered if he could up the output on the propelling field a tad to make up for the slop in the swing. Too much of that would give him blisters.

“An elegant weapon, for a more civilized age.”

Ivan jumped. A dwarf was standing behind him. “What?”

“You must be Ivan Quickblade.” He extended his hand. “Ned Diabolvsky.”

Ivan gaped, ignoring the hand. For three days, he had received vague messages from Diabolvsky via Larry, who never seemed to leave the lab. *He'll meet you at three tomorrow, or He wants you to read these articles, or Here's a Superslasher, calibrate it.* So far, he had never shown up for a meeting.

“I looked for you everywhere--your rooms, the deli, the privy, the sheep pens...”

Diabolvsky's eyebrows rose and he withdrew his hand. “I guess you missed me.” He was mostly bald with tufts of gray hair around his ears, and wore bicycle shorts with elbow and knee pads. “I see you've got a good start on your project. Let me get a cup of coffee and we'll go over the details.”

Diabolvsky drifted toward the courtyard entrance. Ivan, relieved to have met his mentor at last, collected his notebooks and went inside to wait. Now, he would finally begin the difficult journey to power. He could almost taste the Medallion of Magnificence resting on his breast. He thought about what he would say in his acceptance speech. Of course he would thank his mentor, and he might mention his mother.

It was over an hour before he realized Diabolvsky was not coming.

Results

Table 1.1 summarizes the effect of various stimuli on the heart rate of Draco areuginosa. Dragons 1 and 2 were dosed with 100 ml of pomegranate extract. Dragons 3 and 4 were slain in their natural state. The stimuli measured were a)

singed by reflection of own fire, b) stab to the upper palate, c) severing of the distal tarsals, d) broken clavicle, e) incision between the fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae, and f) cardiac laceration (single only)

The girl stood comfortably lashed to a post below a hillside several miles from the castle wall. She wore denim bell-bottoms slung low around her hips and an insect-green sweater. Her uncombed hair had a calculated, four-day coat of oil. It was pinned back on one side and hung loose, partially covering her face, on the other.

“Excuse me! I have an appointment. Could you hurry up?” She gestured urgently with her chin. Three dragons lay dead at her feet.

“I’m doing the best I can,” Ivan said.

The trouble had started with a Superslasher malfunction during the last round with dragon Three. It barely had enough power to accomplish the final cardiac laceration.

Then he had spilled the pomegranate extract. Now they had a situation. The volunteer had been told that there would be no risk involved and that she could go home at five. In truth, there was a significant risk involved if they did not dispatch all of the dragons quickly. Jaffronium’s method of attracting dragons relied on the propensity of Draco areuginosa to develop an appetite for virgins on the night of a full moon--midnight, to be exact. It was well past sundown already.

“Who does that kid think she is, ordering us around?” Ivan dropped the Superslasher in disgust.

“Sarinalova Royalanishka.”

“What? The King’s daughter?”

“Yup.” Larry seemed unconcerned. He was playing drums in the air while Ivan

jiggled the Superslasher's dials.

"Then why didn't we get a different volunteer? If her father finds out she's here, our heads will be decorating the palisades!"

"Fine. If you can find another virgin over eighteen, we'll use her for the next study. But this was the best we could do for now."

"There isn't going to be a next study! I can't work with this junk." Ivan kicked the Superslasher where it lay. "To hell with it. I'm going back to my room to order a pizza. Why don't you get Ned over here to deal with this."

Larry's laid-back manner evaporated. "Now wait a minute, Thickblade. Let me tell you a few things. I am NOT here to run errands for YOU. I'm here supervising your ass. If you want to tell Ned something, you run over and do it your own damn self." Larry jabbed him in the chest. Ivan realized for the first time that Larry was several inches taller than him. "But I'll save you some time and tell you what he'd say. He'd say that you're the one that wants those robes, you're the one that wants the power, you find the solution. Otherwise, you'll never be more than what you are now--a second-rate technician."

Ivan sighed. He looked out over the valley--the three corpses, the live dragon at ease, the girl staring plagues and damnation at him. What made him think he could be an Alchemist? Maybe he really was a washout technician.

"Find the solution? My sword is broken and we've got three hours until midnight." Ivan hated the whine in his voice. "Just what do you suggest?"

"Look around you. Improvise."

Ivan turned in a circle. They were in foothills that flanked the Black Mountains. Stands of bamboo dotted the vales that nestled in the foothills. Bamboo.

"No! Wait! You don't mean..."

“Why not?”

“I can’t. It’s too dangerous!”

“Someone in your family had to have some guts. The name is Quickblade, right?”

Ivan sighed and looked at the tableau. Sarinalova slumped in her ropes and stared at the stars. Well, he was a Quickblade after all.

“Okay, if you’ll just help me...”

“No way, man. My soaps are on. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Larry gestured vaguely with one hand as he turned to go.

Conclusions

Although the study was marred by equipment malfunctions, the data in Table 1.1. shows a clear correlation between use of the pomegranate extract and depression of the circulatory system in the rampant Draco areuginosa. Overall slay times were 34% faster (Table 1.2).

It was half an hour before midnight when Ivan finished sharpening his bamboo spike. He wrapped his right hand around the grip and caught a splinter in his left when he tried to cock it. The spike was different from any weapon he had ever wielded. There was no hum, no gauge to watch, no battery, no fuel cell. Ivan estimated that the upkeep would be extremely simple. It would likely require simple weekly tuning and lubrication.

Dragon Four waited for him in a moonbeam below. It was perhaps two human body-lengths long and the color of dry grass. It wasn’t the appearance of the dragon

that was so chilling, but rather its culinary habits. Dragons are frequent raiders of manure piles and outhouses. It was really only in the cases of virgins and full moons that they gave up their coprophagy. Ivan held his breath against the reek, raised his shield, and charged down the hill.

He was able to administer the first of the experimental abrasions with his shield. He skipped the palate pierce for the moment and went directly for the tarsals. This is where he encountered his first problem. Without the Superslasher's Turbo Assist, he couldn't penetrate the dragon's hide with the tip of the spear. A sudden burst of fiery breath caught him off guard and singed his hair before he made a clumsy retreat to the hilltop.

"Damn you, Four," said Ivan as he wrapped the grip of his spear with cloth. He felt the beginnings of hate, but it wasn't all directed at Dragon Four. He hated Larry for leaving him in a difficult scientific situation. He hated Diabolvsky for abandoning him to Larry's supervision. And he hated Sarinalova for putting not only his scientific career, but his life, at risk.

The cloth eased the pressure on his palms. He looked for some way to add a Turbo Assist to the spear. When he could find nothing, he took a few cleansing breaths and ran down the hill.

Four swatted him out of the way just as he was about to administer the tarsal laceration.

"Damnation!" He had taken a hard bump to his big toe on the way back up. When he stopped cursing long enough to examine it, he couldn't tell whether it was broken or not. He put his boot back on. The limp would skew his aim.

Ivan began to appreciate the Superslasher. Certainly it was obsolete, and the Turbo Assist didn't work right, but it worked. Now his thrust would be weak and

laterally unbalanced. And he could not correct it because, unlike the Superlasher, the spear did not come equipped with sway bars.

Ivan raised his shield, bellowed, and rushed down the hill again. This time he didn't even reach the bottom. He tripped over his broken toe and fell.

"You know there's a better way, don't you?"

Ivan jerked his head out of the grass. Four was staring at him.

"You talking to me?"

"Who else?"

"If there's a better way, I'd like to know it now, because I need to kill you in the next five minutes."

"Easy. Fudge the experiment."

"I can't do that. My reputation--"

"What reputation? You're a green apprentice. No one knows your name and no one cares. Do you think that Diabolvsky never fudged an experiment? He's the one who'll get credit for this escapade anyway."

"True, but how do I keep you from eating Sarinalova?"

They both looked at the sleeping Princess. She drooled a little and murmured something.

"Do you really care?"

"No, but her father might get angry. And if I fudge the data, and Sarinalova gets eaten, they are going to know that it's fake, right?"

"Look at it this way. What is more important to Diabolvsky--her life, or publishing this study?"

"Ah, I see your point. So you're saying that Ned will cover for me in order to publish the data."

“Exactly.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Well, first, I won’t kill you. That spear is no defense, I’m afraid.” Four stretched. His back arched and his twin tails cracked audibly.

“My ancestors killed dragons with this!”

“Yes, but they were using the sharp end. I have a better offer for you.” Four leaned conspiratorially toward Ivan. “It’s really power you’re after, not an ‘academic reputation,’ right?”

“Well, I guess...”

“Have you considered studying dragon magic? It has far greater depth than your pathetic human alchemy.”

Ivan considered, weighing the benefits of a continued presence in Necromivor Diabolovsky’s research group against learning the secrets of dragon lore. Having his name in Alchemy paled in comparison to the thrill of flying, of living for a thousand years, of breathing stardust and sunshine. And dragon magic involved no peer review or yearly grants.

“Will I have to eat compost?”

Four made a sound that might have been a laugh or a roar. “That’s the spirit, my boy! You have much to learn.”

“Will I get tenure?”

Another roar.

“And her?”

Four’s lips curled back in a dragon grin. “Do you know how hard it is to find a virgin around here?”

