

## Chapter 688

### A Pretty Creepy Dude

Taika had both hands against the shower wall as the water sluiced the ichor from his trembling body. Nothing short of crystal wash would get the foul, clinging gunk the body produced during a rank-up off, but that was fine. The cloud palace showers had the water infused with crystal wash. Jason was surprisingly free with the stuff, given how there had been a shortage in Rimaros.

“Oh,” Taika said to himself, suddenly realising why.

He scrubbed away the foul black-green residue with a cloth that he was going to dispose of, crystal wash or no. He knew he shouldn't go straight out and fight, but he was going to anyway, the moment he stopped looking like a swamp monster. His body was still strained from the rank-up and what he needed was sleep. But that was not going to happen with a war raging outside.

Jason also knew that Taika shouldn't fight. He had told him as much, but also knew that his friend would not be deterred. Or so he thought. His body had mostly stopped shaking by the time he emerged from the shower to find, instead of his fresh clothes, Shade.

“You forgot a change of clothes, Mr Williams.”

“I did not forget a change of clothes.”

“I suspect that Mr Asano forgot for you,” Shade said, his tone soaked in disapproval. “This building tends to eat things he wants to disappear. He has, however, provided you with what he declared to be an appropriate outfit.”

Taika looked at the purple stretch pants that Shade held out for him.

“Seriously?”

“I can assure you of my firm protestation, Mr Williams. But you know how he gets.”

Taika chuckled, took the pants, slid them on and tied off the waist cord.

“Yeah, I know. Good looking out, bro.”

“Now that you are fully attired,” Shade said inaccurately, “Mr Asano has something he would like you to handle, Mr Williams.”

“He doesn't want me to fight.”

“He does not.”

“I managed to rank up in time, and I won't be fobbed off. Unless what he has for me is a fight, I'm not interested.”

“Which he anticipated. This task is, indeed, a fight.”

“What kind of fight?”

“I mentioned that this building tends to eat things that Mr Asano does not like. There is a messenger floating around who fits that description.”

“He wants my first fight after ranking-up to be a messenger?”

“Yes. I would add that I do not care for this particular messenger either.”

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Fal Vin Garath's day was only getting worse. He was trapped inside Jason Asano's pyramid, boxed into a dead-end corner by a man with garuda powers. If it came to a fight, Fal's quick and mobile style would be all but useless. His only advantage was that the man in front of him had only just ranked up. Even so, fighting would be a bad choice until he could find a better battlefield.

Garuda powers were a problem. The garuda were natural born kings of the sky, and whether it was a garuda in person or an adventurer tapping into their power, they were some of the worst enemies that messengers could face.

Fighting an adventurer with garuda abilities would bring Fal prestige. He could add it to the list of reasons that winning fights in his current circumstances would bring him glory. That was also the list of things he desperately needed to avoid today, but he didn't seem to have much choice.

With the worst possible opponent in the worst possible place, talking was the better strategy. This was not a strong area for Fal, and for most other messengers as well. Messengers didn't negotiate with the servant races. That was beneath them. Should the servant races be graced with the presence of a messenger then all they required was the honour of obeying whatever directive they were issued. Reality, however, was not always kind. Fal, given his current circumstances, would need to talk this man, Taika, around. He did his best to not show his annoyance at needing to learn the man's name.

“Your aura power comes from the garuda essence,” Fal said.

“Yep,” Taika confirmed.

“And you're an outworlder. Did the garuda bring you here? Or did it come here looking for you in the first place and only stumble upon the egg?”

“I barely know that bloke. He came here for the evil egg you lot had hidden away. I have met him, though. He saw me doing the garuda thing and gave me some tips.”

Fal didn't let a grimace cross his face. Not only did this man have garuda powers, but guidance, however brief, from an actual garuda. That was even assuming the man was telling the truth. Fal had not developed the gift of reading people from their body language,

as very few could hide their emotions from his senses. In this place, though, his magical senses were impeded, along with his aura.

“We don’t have to fight,” Fal said. “I’m here for Asano, and not even to assassinate him. I’ve been instructed to test him. With a duel. No tricks, just honest combat. Honourable combat. I’m led to believe he’ll go for that.”

“I wouldn’t go trying to predict Jason unless you predict he’ll do something insane and then make a sandwich. I don’t think he’ll go for your honourable duel, bro; he doesn’t much like honest combat. He’s more into shameless cheating. Back stabbing. Poison. Luring people into his evil magic pyramid.”

“Harpooning someone through the chest is a rather unsubtle lure.”

“You think that’s bad? Get a look at his floral shirts then you’ll know what unsubtle is.”

“We don’t have to fight. What would you get out of it?”

“Cardio? But you’re right, we don’t have to go at it. You could surrender. Jason wants us to take any messengers we fight alive if we can. That being said, you might want to fight to the death instead.”

“Why? What does he want us for?”

“I’m not going to lie: I stopped paying attention pretty early when he explained it to us. It’s always ‘astral this’ and ‘spirit that’ with him. I think you messengers have some kind of energy he can... well, he didn’t use the word *eat*, but it sure felt like he was talking around it.”

“Eat?”

“I know, right? Jason can be a pretty creepy dude. I mean, he’s probably not going to *eat you* eat you, but he is big on sucking the life force out of people. Which he insists is not the same as drinking blood or eating people, but I dunno, bro. There’s only so many times a bloke can tell you he’s not eating people before you start to think he’s definitely eating people.”

“Eating is a disgusting practice, whatever you eat. We messengers sustain ourselves on the power of the cosmos.”

“Jason too. It’s a little weird how much you guys are like a copy of him.”

“We are a copy of no one. My people are ancient, while he is less the three decades old. He is a copy of us.”

“If you say so, bro,” Taika said sceptically.

“Why don’t you take me to Asano? He and I can settle things between us.”

“I told you he’s not here.”

“But he is somewhere.”

“Sure, but he doesn’t want you there. He wants you here. You think he can’t kill you with this building? The only reason you aren’t a puddle of gooey flesh soup right now is that he doesn’t want you to be. He’s waiting for your gold-rank friends to come in here, too. As for you, he fed you to me.”

“Are you saying you eat people as well?”

“What? No, gross. It’s an intimidating metaphor, bro. Was it scary? This is my first time bantering with a supervillain. It kind of sucks that you’re basically evil Angel, though. He’s the worst X-Man. People might tell you it’s the guy whose only power is to blow himself up the one time, but at least that’s interesting. Angel’s just got wings. He should start a courier service or something, not fight evil. Why are you looking at me like you have no idea what I’m talking about?”

“Because I have no idea what you’re talking about. You and I may well fight to the death.”

“Can’t take yourself too seriously, bro. I watched Jason do that and it kind of messed him up. So, yeah, it’s a little bit gallows humour, but I’ll get by. So long as you’re the one swinging on the gallows.”

“Again, we don’t need to fight.”

“Bro, you and yours just smashed your way into this city. As we speak, you pricks are trying to break into the places the innocent people are hiding so you can kill them just to make a point.”

Fal saw a potential way forward in Taika’s words. It could be considered traitorous, but he’d never been ordered not to voice conclusions he came to on his own. And since the Voice of the Will had thrown him to the wolves, he had no loyalty to her.

“That’s not really what’s happening,” he told Taika. “The woman who masterminded this attack doesn’t even care about what happens. She’s just using me, like she is you. She doesn’t tell me anything, but her plans go beyond this attack, and I know what she really wants. It’s all internal messenger politics and her own ambition.”

For the first time in their encounter, Taika looked hesitant.

“Then what’s it really about?” he asked.

“I know why she wants Asano. Take me to him and we can talk about it. Work out something that forwards all our agendas, rather than those of the people that sent me here.”

“The best I can do is lock you up until he comes to you. I mean, you’re locked up already, if I’m being honest. Jason could just seal off the hallway and leave you in there. Or make your body rot away, although I hope he doesn’t. Not for your sake, but I just had

a shower. Washing off this blood will be bad enough, but I don't want melty messenger on me. It should be fine, though. He decided to let me test out my new power level on you, where he can keep me safe. It's a little condescending, but he means well. Unlike you."

"We may be on different sides, but we at least have some common interests."

"Mate, I'm hearing words but it's not your mouth you're speaking out from. You're talking about some kind of what? An alliance against your bosses? You think I'm that easy to manipulate? That you can lure me into that kind of trust? You didn't even tell me your name. It didn't even occur to you that it might be a good idea, when you're trying to suborn some bloke, to give him the basic courtesy of an introduction."

"I am Fal Vin Garath."

"I don't care what your name is now. You missed your window to paint yourself as anything other than a piece of crap that knows how long his odds are. Jason put me here to kick the crap out of you, and that's what I'm going to do. You're training wheels, bloke."

"I can be far more valuable to you than that. I have to serve the messengers above me, but they've sent me here to die. We can work something out. You, me and Asano. The attack on the city doesn't matter."

Fal immediately saw that he'd made a mistake as Taika's expression went from amiable to stormy.

"Doesn't matter?" he growled, his normally high-pitched voice taking on the deeper timbre of rage. "People are dying. Innocent people. There was never a single second where you thought of their deaths as a bad thing, was there? You don't think their lives matter any more than I matter enough to give me your name."

"Yes, we come at this from very different perspectives. But perhaps we can find a way to an ending we both want. If you take me to Asano—"

"You don't get Jason," Taika said, his ominously soft. Even Fal, oblivious to social cues, could sense the lurking violence. He didn't wait, making the first attack himself.

He conjured a second sword into his other hand and swept both at Taika's neck. Each was blocked by a huge forearm but this time, Fal did not stop at a single strike, launching into a combination of flashing moves, up and down Taika's body.

To Fal's surprise, Taika didn't keep blocking. Where a blade struck without active blocking, his flesh still turned emerald green and resisted the damage, but wasn't as resilient. Fal's blades managed only shallow cuts, but they successfully scored Taika's flesh.

It only took a moment for Fal to realise what Taika was doing as the already big man grew to match Fal's height. His head became that of an eagle, red and gold feathers

running down to his shoulders like a mane. His body retained its chocolate colouring and tattoos but became leaner, sleek yet powerful. Taika went from bodybuilder to boxer, his physique optimised for quick, explosive power. His fingers and his feet became more talon-like, and wings appeared on his back. They were feathered in red and gold but, like Fal, he had to keep them tucked away.

The change took less than a second, but Fal's reflexes were fast even for a silver-ranker. He tried to use the moment to slip past Taika and escape the dead end, but it was a hard ask. Taika, as it turned out, also had superior reflexes, and superior strength to go with it. He grabbed Fal by the face and slammed him back into the wall, his feet no longer floating but dangling from where Taika held him in place.

Fal dropped his swords, grabbed Taika's arm and used one of his powers. A spiral blade of force shot its way up Taika's arm, which immediately turned green and hard. Even so, the corkscrew of energy wound its way up his arms, spraying blood as it gouged a deep, razor-thin wound in stony green flesh.

Taika's grip loosened as his arm flinched. Fal slipped out and again made to escape past Taika. Taika grabbed at a wing but another of Fal's powers rendered it almost frictionless, as if greased. It slid through Taika's fingers and Fal managed to slide around him, his wings brushing against the wall. The open corridor was still restrictive, but at least he wasn't boxed into a dead end. He conjured fresh swords as Taika turned on him, glaring with eagle eyes.

Garuda were paragons of speed, power and fortitude. Fal considered himself their match in pace and mobility, but he and Taika both had their speed constrained by the environment. That left Taika with strength and resilience, and Fal with a massive disadvantage. His best bet was to hope that Taika felt pressured by the restrictiveness of the space.

"I will face you in honourable combat," Fal declared. "But this tunnel is unworthy of our duel. Surely this place has at least one room large room for us to fight in."

Taika didn't sneer, refuse or mock. He didn't say anything. His fist broke the speed of sound, the pressure wave hitting Fal like a compressed hurricane.

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"I will face you in honourable combat," the messenger declared, Taika managing not to scoff. He had no illusions about the honour of the messengers. The fact Fal was even having a conversation instead of making imperious demands meant the messenger knew exactly how bad his situation was. He was angling for a fight where he wasn't an insect in a jar.

“But this tunnel is unworthy of our duel,” Fal continued. “Surely this place has at least one room large room for us to fight in.”

Taika’s response was a single punch.

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#### Ability: [God-Striking Fist] (Garuda)

- Special attack (dimension, holy).
- Cost: Extreme stamina, extreme mana.
- Cooldown: Six-hundred and sixty-six minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Make a hard, fast punch. Time and space manipulation will not function in the vicinity while the punch is being swung.
  
- Effect (bronze): Cooldown is reduced based on the condition of the enemy after the attack. More resilient enemies results in a shorter cooldown time. An amount of stamina and mana is refunded based on the condition of the enemy. A sufficiently resilient enemy may trigger a refund of stamina and mana greater than the initial cost.
  
- Effect (silver): Damage inflicted is transcendent.

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The very air thundered at the passage of Taika’s fist as it broke the sound barrier. Fal, astoundingly, was fast enough to start dodging, but not enough to completely avoid it. He bounced off the wall and the ceiling before hitting the other end of the hallway like a bomb.

Taika whispered urgently under his breath.

“Please don’t get up, please don’t get up.”

For all the power of Taika’s hit, the messenger floated up from the floor for a third time since being dragged into Jason’s pyramid.

“That sucks, bro,” Taika told him. “If you’d stayed down, I could have totally been One-Punch Man.”