

Chapter 689

Security Oversight

Taika looked down the hallway at the messenger floating at the end of it. After being impaled and smashed into walls multiple times, the once-glorious being now looked like a bird that couldn't stop flying into windows. As for Taika himself, he was in a strange state where he was both exhausted from his recent rank-up and simultaneously tingling with energy from his shape-change ability.

Ability: [King of the Sky] (Wing)

- Special ability (shape-change).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Take the form of a garuda. [Power] and [Speed] attributes are increased. Wings allow for gliding but not flight without an additional power. Powers that conjure wings instead use the wings of this form and have significantly enhanced flight speed and manoeuvrability.

- Effect (bronze): Aura suppression and suppression resistance against any creature with wings or that is currently flying is significantly increased.

- Effect (silver): Certain other abilities have enhanced effects. Affected abilities: Emerald Flesh, Grace of Garuda, Golden Wings, Block Out the Sun, Feaster of Serpents, Amrita, Brother of the Dawn.

Taika was reminded of a time before he knew magic was real, fending off sleep deprivation with enough coffee to animate the dead. His poison resistance would now put paid to any effect caffeine once had on him, yet he found himself with that same odd sensation. His body was heavy, yet an electric charge ran through it.

He was starting to think that Jason may have been right to warn him against going outside in his current state. Even so, he still had a ragged bird man to deal with before he sought out precious slumber.

Fal glared back at Taika, conjuring fresh swords yet again. Then he glanced down the passage where the hallway turned, leading elsewhere in the building. Taika saw him looking and burst out laughing.

“Are you gonna leg it? If I were you, I'd definitely scarper, but I'm not a messenger. Where's the pride, bro? If you run, that kind of makes me look superior, and I once

squashed my plums trying to sit on a chair like a guy from *Star Trek*. You wouldn't know him."

Fal faced Taika, his conciliatory façade completely gone. Although bloodied and beaten, his eyes stared imperiously, his pride and disdain no longer hidden away. His arms became a blur, firing off blades of wind that rushed unavoidably down the corridor at Taika.

Taika didn't try to dodge or even stand his ground and endure. He launched himself down the hallway, not running, not even really flying. He was shooting like a bullet.

Ability: [Momentum Charge] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Charge attack. Rapidly gain [Momentum] during the charge. Can culminate in a non-combination special attack.

- Effect (bronze): Can cover extreme distances and move through the air. The speed of the charge escalates over the duration of the charge.

- Effect (silver): The damage from [Momentum] is enhanced by your speed at the moment the attack lands.

- [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.

Fal's wind blades exploded onto Taika in rapid succession but failed to penetrate his skin as it again turned green to resist the damage. With hits landing all over his body, Taika had turned almost entirely emerald, his tattoos standing out in stark contrast. Damage was not the primary purpose of the wind blades, however, which exploded with force that pushed back against Taika's forward motion. Taika saw the surprise on Fal's face as he didn't slow down at all.

Ability: [Unstoppable Strike] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: One minute.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Melee attack. If any instances of [Momentum] are triggered by the attack, they deal an amount of disruptive-force equal to the resonating-force damage.
 - Effect (bronze): When combined with a movement-combination special attack, the physical momentum of that attack is extremely hard to impede. Physical barriers and constraints are struck with resonating-force damage. Magical barriers and constraints are struck with disruptive-force damage. Resistances to any effect that impedes motion are significantly increased for the duration of the combination attack.
 - Effect (silver): The cooldown of this ability is reset when using a movement-combination special attack, allowing this ability to be combined with that attack.
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Fal managed to interpose his wings between himself and Taika, snaking them around his body from where they were tucked behind him. They absorbed the damage, but the damage was still enough for blood to stain where the blunt attack crashed into them. Fal bounced off the wall behind him like a ball as Taika threw aside the protective wings. The beak of his eagle-headed face came down like a pickaxe digging for ore.

Fal's skull was hard and the beak slid across it and down the messenger's face. The result was a massive gouge that took one of his eyes with it. Taika didn't waste time, immediately following up with rapid punches. Despite his wound, Fal was just as fast, his short swords clashing with Taika's fists. Even boxed into a hallway, both men showed off their blinding speed, their movements a blur as they clashed.

Ability: [Grace of Garuda] (Wing)

- Special ability (movement).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): [Speed] attribute, reflexes, movement speed and perceptual speed are increased.
 - Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs of movement abilities are reduced. Gain instances of [Momentum] while moving at high speed.
 - Effect (silver): Instances of [Momentum] gained from other abilities take longer to drop off when not moving. When [Momentum] is triggered, instead of all instances being immediately consumed, they begin rapidly dropping off one at a time. This continues until all instances are gone or additional instances are gained.
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The difference between the combatants swiftly became apparent. While Fal did have a slight edge in speed, he didn't have the room to dodge that was a hallmark of his elusive fighting style. They traded blows at staggering speed, with Fal coming out the worst. Forced to block a much stronger opponent, he was constantly being hammered with fists that landed like wrecking balls. When he got a blade past Taika's blocking arms, by contrast, they managed little more than shallow cuts in jade flesh. If Taika got an arm in the way, they did nothing at all. The only real damage Fal managed to inflict came from magical attacks, his spiral cutting magic proving the most effective.

Bleeding from spiral cuts, Taika managed to body-press Fal into the wall. He then conjured an amphora to drink from while keeping the messenger pinned. As soon as he drank, his wounds began healing faster.

Ability: [Amrita] (Garuda)

- **Special ability (conjunction, restoration).**
- **Cost: Varies.**
- **Cooldown: Varies.**

- **Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).**

- **Effect (iron):** Conjure a jar containing one to five doses of restorative elixir that bestows an ongoing health and mana recovery effect. The elixir may be shared and does not interact toxically with other potions. Cooldown is predicated on how many doses are conjured, from one minute for one dose to fifteen minutes for five doses. Mana cost is low, moderate, high, very high or extreme, depending on the number of doses conjured.

- **Effect (bronze):** For the duration of the elixir's recovery effect, abilities that provide damage reduction are enhanced.

- **Effect (silver):** Duration of the elixir's ongoing recovery effect is increased. The elixir can be converted to a life elixir at an extreme mana cost per dose. Life elixir has no effect when consumed but does not disappear after being removed from the amphora and may be used as a material in rituals and crafting.

Fal's body turned slick while Taika was drinking from the amphora. He slid from between Taika and the wall, dashing down the hallway Taika had goaded him into not using earlier. Taika dropped the amphora, which vanished before it hit the ground, but didn't rush after Fal.

"Drinking with a beak is tough," he observed to himself, then looked down the hall. Fal was swift, having already vanished around a corner. Taika glanced at the trail of blood left behind.

“I don’t know where you think you’re going, bro. There’s no way out and you’re Hansel & Gretaling pretty hard.”

“I feel obligated to point out, Mr Williams,” Shade’s voice came from Taika’s shadow, “that ‘Gretaling’ is not a verb. Or a word.”

“Bro, have you been in there the whole time?”

“Mr Asano has given me strict instructions not to explain when or where I may be at any given time. He likes people to realise I could always be watching.”

“The Panopticon effect, I get it. That’s a rude thing to do to your friends, bro.”

“Indeed,” Shade concurred. “Mr Asano has some rather authoritarian tendencies. But your attention should be on the blood trail, Mr Williams.”

Taika looked at the blood trail and saw the floor turn from hard stone to soft cloud material and siphon the blood away. A glance at the wall he had smashed Fal into showed that it was likewise being automatically cleaned and repaired.

“Oh, bloody oath,” Taika muttered and then rushed off, following the rapidly disappearing trail of blood.

Fal realised in short order that not only was the pyramid all hallways and no doors, but it was also changing as he moved through it. Dead ends forced him to backtrack into places that were not the same as when he passed through moments earlier. He recalled what Taika had said about Asano waiting for the gold-rankers to invade. He didn’t know if the pyramid was powerful enough to contain them, but knew that they would test it sooner or later. He was not getting out and they would assume he died and come after, to eliminate the pyramid as a threat.

Fal was recovering swiftly. His burst eye had grown back but its vision was still blurry. Even if he was fully restored, however, it didn’t matter. There was no door he could break through in search of hostages or a better place to fight. His most powerful attacks had bounced off the walls in his attempts to breach them. Taika had made some serious dents, mostly with Fal’s head, but Fal himself lacked the strength. Powerful attacks were not his strong point. There was no escaping Taika in these halls, and Fal had accepted that in these halls, he couldn’t win. All that remained was choosing the most dignified manner in which to lose.

Taika followed the blood trail being rapidly devoured by the cloud palace’s passive cleaning functions.

“I suggest you hasten, Mr Williams. The gold rankers have decided to invade the building. The gap at the top was apparently too tempting to resist.”

“How’s it going?”

“They rushed in deep before they realised that walls were closing behind them. The afflictions are just starting to break past their resistances and they are debating whether to start smashing walls to go deeper or smashing walls to get out.”

“Which one do you want them to do?”

“It doesn’t matter. They don’t realise that Mr Asano can reorient the chamber they are in, gravity included. Whatever wall they break through, he will choose where it leads. They will need to rapidly break through walls in a straight line if they want to get out. Mr Asano will allow that, so long as they don’t head in the direction of one of the dormitories where people are secured.”

“How is he doing all this? Doesn’t he have his own thing going on elsewhere?”

“Mr Asano’s unusual nature includes a certain level of multitasking. It’s similar to how gods watch all of their followers and sacred grounds. On a much more limited scale, obviously.”

Taika rounded a corner and found Fal waiting for him. The messenger was looking much-restored but his former glory remained buried under a coating of blood, pounded out of him by Taika’s fists. His swords were in his hands, dangling loosely at his sides.

“I won’t surrender,” he said, resignation in his voice. “There is no shame in failing an impossible task, only in giving it up.”

“Cool story, bro.”

Taika was leaving a fresh trail of silver-gold blood as he dragged Fal through the hallways by the hair. Along with the thick line on the floor, marks punctuated the walls where Taika occasionally slammed the messenger’s head. The fast healing messenger kept blearily rousing. Shade had emerged from Taika’s shadow to move alongside him.

“You did very well, Mr Williams.”

“These are pretty controlled conditions,” Taika said. “I don’t think anyone needed me to deal with this guy.”

“Will you go out to join the fight, then?”

“Nah, bro. I got that out of my system. I’m barely staying on my feet here. I’m glad you kept me from going out, so thanks. It would have been pretty rough.”

Fal moaned insensibly as he threatened to rouse again. Taika was about to slam the messenger’s head into the wall again when Jason’s aura surged. This wasn’t the

background aura that always suffused the cloud palace but something coming from further away. It was a deeper, richer aura projection than anything Taika had experienced.

“Is that Jason himself?” Taika asked.

“Boosted, but yes,” Shade said. “I believe his pursuers will be able to find him now.”

The messenger started thrashing like a fish on a hook, his hair still gripped in Taika’s hand. Taika wasn’t sure if it was some kind of frenzy or if Fal was having a seizure, but it stopped when the messenger’s head hit the wall hard enough to crack the dark stone. The stone turned into mist briefly, drawing away the blood and restoring the wall to a clean, undamaged condition.

“Do you think I could get that installed at my mum’s house?”

“Perhaps not that exact thing, Mr Williams, but I imagine something similar. You should talk to Miss Farrah or Mr Standish once we make our way back to Earth.”

“Bro, why do you only ever use women’s first names? I’ve heard you call Emi and Erika and Farrah by their first names, but you even use Jason’s surname, and you’re his familiar.”

“I don’t use all women’s first names,” Shade pointed out. “Only the ones I like the most. Also, it made things easier when everyone was named Asano.”

Taika gave Shade a side glance.

“Jason still doesn’t let you spy on people in bathrooms, right?”

“It’s observing, Mr Williams, not spying. But no; that security oversight remains.”