

Chapter 547

Speed

Jason and his team were having a relatively relaxed time in the days after the Builder island expedition. The monster surge raged on and the Purity worshippers remained a lurking threat, but after a day off, the team were assigned to low-priority missions. With Jason awaiting word from his familiars stuck behind enemy lines, Liara didn't want him roaming all through the Sea of Storms, at least not for any length of time. As such, Jason, Humphrey and Clive were all placed on portal duty.

They spend the day with Jason portalling Clive and Humphrey around the Sea of Storms to various locations he had already visited, just long enough that they could use the destinations themselves. This meant primarily fortress towns and other regional centres strong enough to withstand a monster surge. As none of them could transport whole adventurer teams, or anyone higher than silver-rank, they would be assigned to serving as portal-hopping delivery men for critical supplies.

The rest of the team were also assigned relevant tasks. There was always room for more healers, so Neil had been sent to work with his church. While the priority for healing was the adventurers, the needs of Rimaros did not pause for the monster surge. As for Belinda, she found herself quickly snatched up for an expedition. One of the priority projects for the Adventure Society was exploring former strongholds of the Builder cult as they were discovered and she was roped into one of those.

Following the destruction of the Builder's cities, the great astral being's forces abandoned the Storm Kingdom and more than a few of their secret strongholds remained. As launching points for their efforts to seize the local astral spaces, the long-hidden redoubts had been exposed and were now left empty. The Adventure Society was eager to explore these lairs and eliminate any threats left as parting gifts. More importantly, they wanted to find anything that would help those still fighting the Builder elsewhere around the world.

Most freshly discovered strongholds had traps and defences still in place, which made Belinda an excellent asset. Long before she obtained the trap essence she had years of experience getting people into places the owners did not want people going in. Years of adventuring had further honed those abilities to a fine point.

The only member of the team with no specialty role was Sophie. She considered joining Belinda but it quickly became clear the expedition leader would sideline her, only wanting Belinda's expertise. Instead, she took on a contract to deliver goods overland

using dimensional bags. She would be moving alone to low-priority destinations on the southern mainland coast, in areas designated as low-threat.

It would be a rare chance to truly open up her abilities and push her speed to the limit while on a contract; normally it was something she could only do in low-pressure circumstances. When moving with her team, she could only speed around in short bursts, usually in combat. Even travelling, the alternate forms of Stash and the travel form of Onslow were unable to match her pace when she truly pushed her limits. Only Shade's jet forms were her match, and even those took time to accelerate and the thin air of altitude to outpace her. Those had already reached their full potential, though, and by the time she was into the upper levels of silver, she expected to blast by him.

For Sophie, her speed was nothing so simple as one essence ability that increased it, although that was certainly something she possessed. It had been her first and, for many years, only essence ability, to the point of reaching bronze-rank before she gained a second one. Now, however, it was very different. More than half of her powers were movement abilities, movement-enhancing abilities or otherwise related to speed. By chaining them together, exploiting the synergies and drawing out the nuances, the resulting speed vastly outpaced any single essence ability. Short of teleporting to the destination, only speed-specialised vehicles were better for the rank and she had her eye on beating them.

Almost no terrain could slow her down. Tangled forests or even thick jungles were barely an impedance. Even running along walls or on the surface of water didn't slow her unless the terrain had been enchanted to actively resist her passage. The only difference between harsh terrain and flat roads was that roads were less fun. Even the sky was becoming part of Sophie's domain as she increasingly became as comfortable in the air as standing on her feet.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Wind)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (67%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

- **Effect (bronze):** Moderate control of nearby airflow while in use. Cost of gliding reduced to low mana-per-second. Strong winds increase your rate of stamina and mana recovery, even when this ability is not in active use.
 - **Effect (silver):** Fly for moderate mana-per-second; highly effective at riding the wind. Gliding no longer costs mana. You can control the airflow around you, including using winds to carry others with you when you fly. Carrying others increases the ongoing mana cost and incurs a speed penalty, both scaling with the number of people carried.
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Jason's cloak ability also offered outright flying at silver-rank, along with a suite of other useful powers. Sophie's flight ability was far more focused. Even at a default level, ignoring the power to carry others or gain benefits from riding the wind, it offered superior speed and control to what Jason could manage. It also had benefits that fit right in with Sophie's general trend of minor effects that, when used in conjunction with one another and the sufficient application of skill, became very formidable.

The description of the silver rank effect included a passing mention of being effective at riding the wind. It did not stand out within the description compared to flying around with other people but, to Sophie, it was possibly the most important point. For one thing, the ability itself gave her some ability to manipulate the airflow around her. Rather than use it to push her speed, however, she had taken to shifting air around her as she moved through it instead. Reducing the resistance instead of pushing harder against it proved the more effective means of improving her speed. While it required more finesse when using the ability, the results were exceptional, impacting acceleration, top speed and fine movement control.

Once Sophie added in her Wind Wave power, her mobility entered a whole new realm. Usable every handful of seconds and producing a massive blast of wind, it launched her forward like a squid using a water jet. On top of this were the various passive bonuses that affected one or both abilities.

Ability: [Free Runner] (Swift)

- **Special ability.**
- **Cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (06%)**

- **Effect (iron):** Increased speed. Low stamina and mana per second cost to run on walls and water. Momentum must be maintained on walls or water to prevent falling.

- **Effect (bronze):** Enhanced balance and spatial sense.

- **Effect (silver):** Control over leaps made using a run-up is significantly increased, including the partial control of movement through the air. Can combine with glide and flight powers to travel beyond normal top glide, flight and running speeds by chaining gliding leaps. Any other effects that enhance glide and flight speed are enhanced for a brief period after leaping.
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The Free Runner power was Sophie's original speed boost that, as it turned out, also applied to flight. The silver-rank effect allowed her to use a movement style that combined running, gliding and flying together, the result being a comprehensive transfiguration in the way she moved. It turned her collection of movement powers into different aspects of a holistic mobility style as sophisticated and nuanced as a martial art. Even so, it was far from the full extent of the powers boosting her mobility.

Every celestine had a racial gift that enhanced essence powers of the special ability type, much as humans and elves had affinities to special attacks and spells respectively. Many dismissed the celestine bonus as less powerful because, while it applied to the broadest range of abilities, the elves and humans boasted the powers most obviously useful in combat.

The celestine special ability aptitude was mostly appreciated for enhancing portal powers. This was doubly true because they also possessed astral affinity, which improved portal powers even more. Celestines were known as the top portal users amongst all the essence-using races.

Sophie was not a portal user but the enhancement to dimensional abilities did not go to waste as she had no shortage of appropriate powers. While her Mirage Step ability could move her short distances through space instantaneously, more often her powers bent the space around her. They enhanced her movement, helped her to navigate obstacles or even dodge without dodging, making attacks that seemed to land miss her entirely.

Sophie's relentless pursuit of speed had pushed her racial gifts to the limit, eventually triggering gift evolutions. As with the rest of her team, she had managed to evolve several of her abilities, but the one that evolved between Jason's death and return had not come during combat but as she trained with hellish self-discipline.

Ability: [Way of the Wind]

- **Transfigured from racial gift [Special Ability Affinity].**
- **Special abilities have increased effect.**

- Abilities related to movement and speed that are affected by the wind have the effects of wind on those abilities significantly increased. Synergistic effects between abilities related to speed and flight are significantly increased.
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Even that had not been the end of the powers stacking up to enhance her movement. Her Avatar of Speed power enhanced her movement abilities while reducing their mana and stamina costs. Child of the Celestial Wind was the rarest essence ability in her power set. It only appeared amongst races that had astral affinity as a racial gift which, on Pallimustus, meant celestines. Or, potentially, outworlders. The ability not only boosted all her racial gifts but her wind and dimension powers as well.

The result of all of these overlapping effects was bonus on bonus on bonus; a synergistic rat king of intertwined abilities. Clive had once attempted to map out Sophie's power interactions using Magic Society records of the various abilities. He spent the whole time complaining about not having Jason's interface and eventually gave up. The one time Clive brought up trying after Jason's return, Jason had vanished into a shadow and the cloud house snack fridge became mysteriously locked. Taika and Gary explained very clearly that Clive was not to do it again.

After taking a delivery contract, Sophie took charge of a high-capacity dimensional bag. Designed specifically for those with flight powers, it was svelte and strapped firmly onto the back without impairing mobility. She then set out from Rimaros, flying south over the water at breakneck speed. Unlike the airships that measured their pace so as to avoid attracting monsters, Sophie moved over the sea so fast that air displacement left a wake in the water behind her.

Every so often, a monster would erupt from the water beneath her and attempt to snatch her out of the air. Some she sensed coming and easily avoided, while others were stealth ambushers. She lacked Jason's powerful senses and had to rely on pure reflexes to avoid them, blinking away from their teeth with her Mirage Step power, leaving only an afterimage to explode in the monster's mouth.

The monsters attacking her were silver-ranked, with no bronze foolish enough to try after sensing her. In one instance, however, a gold rank monster appeared. She didn't sense its approach at all until a forest of tentacles sprung out of the water with a speed surpassing that of silver-rank. Instinctively, Sophie's Eternal Moment power kicked in and everything around her slowed as her personal time stream accelerated.

She passed through the suddenly glacial tentacles with effortless speed, weaving between them without interrupting her subjective pace at all. Sophie hadn't stopped to fight

any of the previous monsters that had popped out of the water, leaving them all in her wake. She was going to do the same with this one.

The gold-rank monster, however, was not so easily left behind. As the Eternal Moment power came to an end, the tentacles slipped back into the water behind her as an even larger number rose all around and ahead of her.

“How big is this thing?”