

## Chapter 548

### Delicate Flowers

Sophie's attempt to escape the clutches of the gold-rank monster did not go as planned. Her time-accelerating power, Eternal Moment, did not last as long as the name suggested. She did escape the tentacle forest rising from the water in her frozen moment, but as soon as it ended, even more tentacles emerged from the water to surround her again.

The monster was clearly a vast presence under the water, despite her not having sensed it at all. Escaping it would be trickier than she had anticipated, especially with Eternal Moment now on cooldown. Instead, she had to start pushing her other abilities to the limit, digging out every skerrick of speed and skill she had.

As the tentacles lunged after her with gold-rank speed, she used every trick at her disposal to remain untouched. She soared through the air, dashed on the wind, ran on the choppy water kicked up by the tentacles and even ran along the thick tentacles themselves.

The purple-red tentacles were quick, flexible and as wide as her entire body; at least, they were at the level of the water. They tapered the closer they came to their barbed tips, becoming increasingly more swift, flexible and supple. There were intermittent barbs along their length that, if hooked into her flesh, would easily let her be dragged into the water. Sophie didn't let that stop her from using the tentacles, feet falling between the barbs as she ran up the length of one and kicked off of it. She had little choice but to weave tightly through the tentacles, baiting them into entangling one another as she zipped through the fleshy forest.

As Sophie made her way over the water, roiling from the thrashing tentacles, it became clear that the monster beneath the surface was abnormally fast. She estimated that while it was both gold-rank and very fast, she could outpace it if not for the web of tentacles hunting her. Even with her near-miraculous mobility, navigating safely was slowing her down.

She considered flying up and out of their reach but immediately dismissed the idea. Where they emerged from the water, the tentacles were girthy and relatively slow. They were more flexible where they thinned out, further along, but reaching back down to grasp at Sophie gave them an awkwardness that made them less difficult to evade. If she went into the air, their greater flexibility and speed would give them a much greater chance of catching her out.

She stayed low instead, darting through the jungle of limbs that kept expanding as she moved through it, tentacles continuously emerging from the water ahead. The monster tried pushing less of each tentacle out of the water to use the more flexible portions, but because Sophie stayed close to the surface, water-resistance slowed the appendages just enough that she could neatly evade them.

Each second that ticked by was a fresh escape from death, with Sophie's dashing, pinball flight in constant danger of being yanked to a halt. In every moment, she was a hair's breadth from a tentacle hook skewering her flesh, arresting her momentum and dragging her into the water. She used blasts of air with maximal efficiency, not just launching herself but simultaneously pushing tentacles out of her path.

While Sophie's Wind Wave power could send even hefty monsters tumbling through the air, it barely made the massive tentacles waver. That, however, was enough. Like Jason, Sophie understood that battles were won and lost in critical moments. Every moment she stole and exploited was a step closer to victory as she clawed her way to escape, instant by instant.

Sophie needed to be victorious in every moment or she would be dragged into the water and certain doom. Every tool at her disposal was employed, blinking with Mirage Step, dashing with Wind Wave and kicking off from the tentacles to shift her flight trajectory. When putting a foot to the tentacles wasn't viable, she used the air itself as solid ground.

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#### Ability: [Cloud Step] (Balance)

- Special ability (movement).
- Cost: Low stamina and mana.
- Cooldown: 15 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (94%).
  
- Effect (iron): Take a single step on air as if it were solid ground, becoming intangible for a brief moment. This ability can be used while all steps are on cooldown at an extreme mana cost per step. If used within mist, fog or cloud, this ability has no cooldown.
  
- Effect (bronze): Can be used a second time. Cooldown reduced to 15 seconds, with each cooldown restoring one use. The next attack suffered within a brief period after the intangibility ends is significantly reduced. When not using this ability within mist, fog or clouds, a short-lived mist can be produced at a low mana cost. The mist is too thin to obscure vision.

- **Effect (silver):** Can be used a third time. Cost of use while on cooldown reduced to very high. When using this ability within mist, fog or cloud, the intangibility effect can be extended. The mist produced by this ability covers a wider area and lasts longer.
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A tentacle swiped through Sophie as she became intangible for a brief but critical moment. The inherent magic of the monster inflicted a little harm on her life force, but only a fraction of what the limb slapping into her body would have done. Mostly there was a tingling sensation as the tentacle passed through her. Another tentacle swipe seemed to hit her solid form, yet missed because of dimensional displacement. Each passing moment brought with it a narrow escape from death, but her attempts to escape the monster increasingly felt futile.

No matter how fast she moved, the monster managed to keep up, raising more and more tentacles as if the sea itself were trying to snatch her down. The tentacles were too numerous, too flexible and too quick to maintain her maximum pace while avoiding capture. Even her incredible reflexes and silky-smooth evasions were insufficient to fully accelerate, yet she still navigated the tentacles more quickly than most adventurers of her rank could move in a straight line.

She was confident of outpacing the monster given the chance to make a straight-line dash. Even a zigzagging dash would be enough, so long as the terrain wasn't actively attempting to drag her into the ocean. The monster may have been gold-rank but its main body had to be massive to support all the tentacles. The drag of the water on that bulk meant that the speed it was going was already implausible and she was certain it was at or near its limit. She didn't have the time to check but she imagined a creature that size, moving at that speed, had to be causing small tidal waves.

Sophie's formidable endurance came into play as minutes ticked past, every second spent in wild desperation. Even though she constantly employed her powers, she was in no danger of running low on mana. Multiple abilities reduced the mana consumption of her already inexpensive powers, while others boosted her mana recovery. As a result, even her most costly power, Eternal Moment, did not tax her reserves too greatly.

Its power to make time seemingly freeze around her was a trump card for when things went wrong. Her intention had been to hold off using it as long as she could but critical moments came again and again, forcing it into one cooldown after another. She managed to keep a balance and not overtax her mana, but overtaxing her concentration was the greater threat.

With every moment requiring utmost focus, Sophie knew that it was only a matter of time until she slipped up, and that would be the moment that she died. Something needed

to change; without some chance coming along, sooner or later the monster would drag her beneath the waves.

The break came when she saw an island in the distance. It was small and unremarkable but exactly what she needed. She had to be careful not to let her desire to reach it make her sloppy and rush, causing her to fall on escape's doorstep. The monster seemed to understand her intentions, perhaps already dealing with shallower water as they approached land. Geysers of scalding water erupted from the sea, which at first made Sophie wonder why the monster had held the ability back.

She realised that it was a panic reaction as they were not especially hard to dodge. If anything, the geysers offered more cover for her evasive manoeuvres. Using Cloud Step for a moment of intangibility let her pass through the geysers unharmed, neatly avoiding tentacles and opening a path forward. What's more, the steam they gave off let her use Cloud Step without incurring the cooldown. Cloud Step ability created its own mist to trigger the cooldown reducing effect but Sophie's speed always left that mist behind before she needed the ability again.

Sophie didn't stop when she reached the shore of the island as the tentacles continued to pursue her from the water. They stopped appearing ahead of her, to her relief, having half-feared they would start bursting out of the ground. Or even worse, that the island itself would turn out to be the monster's main body. She had heard of such a creature in the Storm Kingdom's northeast, but that had turned out to be a native magical beast, and a diamond-rank one at that. It had awoken in an uninhabited region of tiny islands during the surge and was better at clearing out monsters in its territory than the Adventure Society. As the handful of population centres had already evacuated to fortress town, the society decided to leave the creature be.

Tentacles chased her from the water and there was a dangerous moment as she passed through their fastest and most flexible range. She took one solid hit but timed a Cloud Step to trigger the damage reduction effect. She was bounced off a beach of loose rocks and popped right back up, flying further inland.

It was a rocky island, strewn with jungle. She skimmed over the treetops, wary of more monsters popping up through the canopy. She felt a surge of relief as she finally moved beyond the tentacles' reach but did not allow herself to relax. A small, empty island was no safe harbour but she could use it as a roadblock for the humungous monster. Now that she was clear of tentacles it was time to pour on the speed while the monster was forced to go around. She wouldn't stop until she reached the southern mainland.

Sophie shot out over the water on the far side of the island, rocketing along with all the pace she could muster. There was no sign of the monster, but there hadn't been any before its first attack, either. She practised absolute wariness along with absolute speed.

As time passed she was increasingly confident that she'd left the monster behind but didn't let up on speed or alertness. The ambush of a silver-rank monster bursting from the water was actually a relief as it would not have drawn near if the gold-rank leviathan was close by. Even so, she didn't relent on her breakneck pace.

Not until she reached solid, continental landmass did she finally allow the tension to escape her body. Slowing to a stop on an empty beach she let herself fall back onto the golden sand, looking up at the sky and laughing like a madwoman.

Many adventurers would have regretted her choice to race across the water after it attracted such a terrifying monster. She still had no idea exactly what the monster was but didn't especially care. She felt energised; all the more alive for having escaped the grasping tentacles of death. She kicked herself onto her feet, threw up both arms and let out a triumphant whoop of victory. She stopped, startled, as silver light started shining from within her body.

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- Celestine racial ability [Celestial Swiftmess] has evolved to [Princess of the Firmament].

Ability: [Princess of the Firmament]

- Transfigured from racial gift [Celestial Swiftmess].
- [Speed] attribute is increased.
- Dimension effects related to non-teleport and non-portal movement are enhanced. The speed-enhancing aspects of your abilities have increased effect.

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Sophie was surprised at still having access to Jason's interface ability, as far as she was from his location in Rimaros. She vaguely recalled Clive talking about it; something about magical density and soul strength. She generally tuned him out when he got that specific tone in his voice. It meant he was trying to turn Jason into an administrative tool again.

She looked over her changed ability. Many might look at the impressive name – which she suspected Jason was somehow responsible for – and think it didn't match the simple, passive effects. Sophie knew better. When she saw some powerful ability, it generally meant that it did what it said in the description and that was the end of it. The

ones that appeared unimpressive were the ones that had all the depth. Those were the powers that let her build an unassailable fortress out of synergy, one brick at a time.

She grinned, closing the window as another one popped up.

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➤ Party leader [Jason Asano] has initiated voice chat. Accept [Y/N]?

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"You checking up on me, Asano?"

"Racial gift transfiguration isn't triggered by a leisurely ocean trip, Wexler. Do you need us to come save you already? I was just about to portal off and deliver some... what are those things? Are they alive? Why are they wiggling like that?"

"I'm fine," Sophie said with a laugh. "Let the Adventure Society know that there's a very, very large tentacle monster roaming the waters south of Rimaros. Gold-rank."

"Are you sure you're alright? You don't have to act all tough with us; embrace your vulnerability."

"We're not all delicate flowers like you, Asano. You think some creepy ocean doodle forest is enough to catch me? I blew past that thing so fast I doubt it even realised I was there."

"Doodle forest?"

"I'm getting back to work."

She ended the voice chat and pulled out a magic map that could track her position. It wasn't as good as Jason's map power but it got the job done. She found her location, figured out the direction to her first stop and set out.