

## Chapter 907

### You Want Your Adventurers Happy

In the aftermath of the battle, Millicent stood atop the magic tower. As the highest point in the city, it allowed her to survey the goings on below, without the need to start flying around. There were going to be a lot of anxious aristocrats and city officials so, for the moment, she wanted to be stationary where people could find her.

Ribbons of rainbow smoke rose up as her people looted the dead messengers where they had fallen into the city. There would be damage from an army of dead angels landing on things but hopefully minimal casualties. The populace had evacuated to bunkers while the defensive barrier still held, but there were always those who were too stubborn, too old, or too sick to move.

A woman was suddenly next to Millicent, arriving almost too fast for even a gold ranker to sense her approach. She'd realised, belatedly, who these people were. If not distracted by the existential threat to her home, she might have recognised some of their more distinctive members. The man in rainbow armour riding a shape-changing dragon definitely should have been a giveaway. They were Team Biscuit, who had recently returned to Yareh along with other famous adventurers for reasons unknown.

This woman had dark hair and a swarthy complexion, so she wasn't the team's famously beautiful speedster. But the team leader's mother was even more famous than the team itself, and this woman did fit the description.

"You're the Time Witch of Vitesse," Millicent said.

"I'm actually from a place called Greenstone. And I prefer to be called Danielle, to be honest."

Danielle offered her hand and Millicent shook it.

"You're in command of the local forces?" Danielle asked.

"General Millicent Marks, Segurado Defence Force."

"Danielle Geller."

"Thank you for the help. Our forces are battle hardened, and determined to protect their homes and families, but determination isn't always enough."

"No," Danielle agreed sadly. "It's not."

Millicent looked up at where the strange, humungous eye had transformed into a mass of cloud. It was now slowly taking the form of a sky liner, the largest class of airship.

"Is that what you travel around in?"

“For the moment,” Danielle said. “The man that owns the vessel has a penchant for the dramatic.”

“Is this what it’s like?”

“It?” Danielle asked.

“Being a famous adventurer. I was born and raised here in Segurado. Trained here, not in some big city like Vitesse. I had this dream, back when I was iron rank, about hitting gold rank and swanning into one of the famous adventurer cities like a queen. In the end, I never roamed far. There was always too much to do, and it was always going to be a dream. By gold rank standards, I’m a little fish.”

“There are no little fish at gold rank.”

“Of course you’d think that. Your life is all world travel and transforming sky ships. Swooping in to rescue little no-name places you won’t remember in a week. I’m not trying to sound ungrateful — I’m profoundly thankful for the swooping in, believe me. It just makes me realise that, even if I hadn’t been stuck guarding this place for all these years, I wouldn’t be anything special in a place like Rimaros or Kacha Kille.”

“Believe me, Miss Marks, you are special. I have known many adventurers from outside of the famous cities, and few choose to stay and protect their homes after reaching high rank. Of those that do, it is less often out of duty than a desire to be a big fish.”

“You said there were no little fish.”

“And I meant it. Even those who reached gold-rank with cores are notable people, but those who did not still have the potential to go further. Many famous gold rankers never reach diamond, while some that no one in Rimaros or Vitesse has ever heard of reach diamond. The path is long and strange, and many lose sight of duty as they walk it. If you told the Adventure Society that you were leaving this place behind, who would stop you? The society, and the leaders of this city would ask you to remain, but they would do no more than ask. Because you’re a gold ranker, and that makes you special, wherever you are from.”

“Did the Adventure Society send you here?”

“Yes. They’ve been using the sky link communication network to report messenger movement. They’ve also been asking us to move through more remote areas on our travels, where the society can’t afford to station major forces. We happened to be in the area just as a messenger army decamped and headed your way, so they asked us to intervene. We were lucky to be in the area.”

“Not as lucky as we were.”

Danielle nodded.

“It’s unfortunate that so many lives are reliant on luck, but that is the situation in which we...”

She trailed off as two arguing voices reached them from above. Two men were floating down on a small cloud, approaching the tower.

“...every city, just most of them,” Neil said.

“I have never destroyed a city,” Jason shot back. “I’ve been to lots of cities, and hardly any of them were destroyed. Look at this one. It’s fine.”

“How many is hardly any?”

“I don’t know. Three. Four, I guess, but one was more of a big town. And the brightheart city was basically destroyed before we even got there. Also, don’t act like you weren’t there for half of them.”

“Is four counting Rimaros?”

“Why would I count Rimaros?”

“That flying Builder city was dropped on it.”

“It was dropped *near* it, Neil. And there was hardly any damage. The priests of Ocean stopped the tsunami.”

“So, just the four, then.”

“Exactly.”

“You do realise that four is a lot when you’re talking about destroyed cities, right?”

Danielle let out a motherly sigh.

“I may,” she said to Millicent, “be forced to acknowledge your point about what my life is like.”

The pair landed and the cloud they were riding on streamed into an amulet hanging from one the men’s necks. The other moved forward to shake her hand.

“Neil Davone,” he introduced himself. “Team healer.”

“Were you the one putting shields on my people?”

“I might have tossed the odd barrier out, here and there. Nothing remarkable.”

“You saved lives that would otherwise have been lost. The lives of my people. You have my thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And this is—”

“John Miller,” the other man introduced himself as he moved forward to shake her hand. “Team cook.”

“Cook?”

He certainly wasn’t dressed for adventuring, in a floral shirt, shorts and sandals, topped with a straw hat. It was appropriate for the sunny day, but not for fighting monsters.

His aura was human and silver-rank, with the signature taint of monster cores. He looked every bit the auxiliary adventurer, yet he seemed a little off to Millicent. He had a translation power that sounded a little odd, and seemed to own the cloud transport they were riding on. Comfortably carrying two meant it was expensive, even if he was working for famous adventurers. How much did they pay their cook?

Mostly, it was the way he carried himself. He was a core using silver ranker, surrounded by gold-rank adventurers, some of whom were extremely famous. Even Millicent was uncharacteristically hesitant around the Time Witch of Vitesse. This man showed none of the wariness or deference she was used to from lower-ranked people. He acted entirely as if he belonged.

She took a slightly rude glance at the emotions in his aura. She saw little more than the same confidence displayed in his. He gave her an amused smile, as if he realised what she was doing. He certainly shouldn't have been able to, but could probably guess from the curiosity in her gaze. He took his leave, asking if he could use the elevating platform, leaving her with the adventurers.

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An impromptu street festival had sprung up seemingly from nowhere, long tables and food stands filling the market district. While the city of Segurado celebrated their reprieve, Millicent's concerns were with what came next. She wandered through the crowded streets as people feasted, sang and laughed.

She didn't join in, mentally exhausted after going from one meeting to the next for almost two days, often repeating the same things over and over. There was the Duke and his people, the city parliament, the local Adventure Society, then representatives from the Continental Council.

It had been two nights since the battle, during neither of which she had found a chance to sleep. She had finally slipped away, but instead of finding a bed, she found herself walking the streets in the late morning. People teemed around her, not recognising her with her aura carefully retracted.

Her mind was still racing, preoccupied with the next threat. The populace was celebrating, but their leaders still didn't know what brought the messengers to their gates. Was it a part of their ongoing search for the rumoured artefact, or something more specific? Would they return, with a greater force? The Adventure Society had no more idea than she did, spending two days asking her questions to which she had no answers.

The smells coming from the stalls took her back to her days as a girl at market. Her family were never poor, or she'd never have gotten essences, but she hadn't lived in the

fancy part of town, either. Her parents were fruit merchants, and she'd grown up around markets and trade halls. She knew these streets. The yelling and laughing, the aromas of the food vendors. When an unfamiliar scent wafted her way, it arrested her attention.

Her gold-rank senses allowed her to track the scent like a hunting dog. What she found was a stall where a group of local stall vendors were crowded around an outsider, as if he were holding court.

"...season with some salt and then caramelize them in the oven with oil. Nice and simple. I like to add a splash of water to help them soften. Now, let me explain how we make fresh pasta back home. It's so fresh you can practically cook it by waving it over the steam from a kettle. Pass me that roller..."

Millicent found herself listening discreetly out of the way. There was definitely something unusual about the Team Biscuit cook. After around ten minutes, the group started breaking up. Then she heard him whisper, too low for anyone but an attentive gold ranker to make out.

"Can I offer you a meal, General? Pop around behind the booth."

She hadn't realised he'd noticed her, in the middle of teaching the locals a foreign recipe. But she shortly found herself in an area boxed in by stalls, shielding them from prying eyes. A folding table and chair set awaited her, draped with a tablecloth and festooned with dishes, plates and bowls. She could sense the magic of gold rank ingredients. Was this how Team Biscuit always ate?

"One of the secrets of Team Biscuit's success," John Miller said as he sat down. "Live off spirit coins when you have to, but eat proper food when you can. Well-fed adventurers are happy adventurers. And you want your adventurers happy, believe me."

She looked from the food to him as she sat down. As she did, he pulled out a privacy screen device and activated it, setting it on the table.

"I thought a woman of your stature would appreciate some discretion," he said. He ladled food from various dishes onto a plate that he set in front of her. He then made up a plate for himself, apparently unworried about what gold-rank food would do to a silver ranker.

"It would take a lot of strength, and a lot of finesse," she said, "to create an aura mask than would fool a gold ranker. Something that would hold up, even if the gold ranker gets pushy and starts probing for emotions."

"Messengers are good at that," Miller said. "I've even seen them mask people they were using as spies."

"It sounds like you've had a lot of strange experiences for a cook."

“A cook can see a lot in search of new recipes,” he said, and skewered a chunk of saucy vegetable with a fork. “And new ingredients.”

He plopped it into his mouth with a grin.

“Is that why you’re travelling with Team Biscuit?”

He didn’t answer until he was done with his mouthful.

“More of a happy accident,” he said. “An opportunity I take advantage of while attending to other tasks.”

“How did you end up with them?”

“I knew some of the team before they were famous. You might say I hitched a ride on their coattails.”

“You’ve been there since the beginning? I’ve never heard of you.”

“I’m the guy who makes the food. Who talks about the cook when there are people fighting monsters?”

“It sounds like you get to see a lot of cities destroyed.”

“I have been unfortunate enough to witness some tragic disasters, but that was just Neil teasing. Which I hope was obvious.”

“Even so, you strike me as someone who can’t help standing out.”

“But you don’t strike me as someone rude enough to sit down with a cook and not touch his food. Doesn’t smell to your taste?”

She took a slice of bread, dunked it into a thick soup and took a bite.

“It’s good,” she said.

“Thank you.”

They chatted intermittently as they ate.

“You know who else I haven’t heard of?” she said lightly. “That man in the battle with the dark cloak and the shadow arms. I’ve also never heard about Team Biscuit riding around in a giant eyeball that shoots butterflies of death.”

“Oh, you don’t want to meet him. He’s not very nice.”

“Is that so?”

“Remember when I said you want your adventurers happy? He’s how I figured that out.”

“Why does the team keep him secret? Or is he just travelling with you, like the Time Wi... like Danielle Geller?”

“No, he’s part of the team. Has been from the beginning.”

“Like you.”

“Yes. He’s just been away for a long time. I imagine he’ll be known soon enough.”

“What kept him away? Conflict in the team?”

“He has responsibilities that he’s finding increasingly tiresome. He’s looking to wrap them up and get back to adventuring.”

He looked her dead in the eyes.

“Without anyone making a fuss.”

“That might be hard if he keeps fighting messengers. They had a rather drastic reaction to him.”

“He has a lot in common with the messengers.”

“Like a talent for aura masking?”

“Try the casserole before you finish the soup. I think you’ll find it’s a nice accompaniment.”

They ate in silence for a while.

“People are going to have a lot of questions,” she said.

“He’s a known quantity. To those who need to know.”

“You’re saying that if I don’t know already, I shouldn’t go asking?”

“I would advise against it. The Adventure Society can be touchy when it comes to him.”

“Why is that?”

He raised his eyebrows and she sighed.

“Right, I shouldn’t ask.”

He plucked an envelope out of the air, accessing some dimensional storage power. He sat it on the table, next to her plate.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“You told Danielle Geller that you were born and raised right here in Segurado. And you’re still here protecting it, even with all the opportunities your power would afford you.”

“She told you that?”

“I overheard you on that tower.”

“You have good hearing.”

“Don’t we all?”

“What’s in the envelope?”

“Are you familiar with Lady Allayeth, of Yaresh?”

“She’s a diamond ranker that’s active in the general population. Of course I have.”

“Have you met?”

“Yaresh may be somewhat close, but she’s a diamond ranker. Even gold rankers don’t just call by for a cup of tea. Why bring her up?”

"I'm guessing that your choice to stay and protect your home during the messenger invasion is bound up in the path that got you to gold rank."

"I don't see how that's your business."

"Call it reciprocation for you poking around about Jason Asano."

"I suppose that's fair. Yes, that sensibility was integral to reaching gold rank."

"Lady Allayeth is on a similar path. She may be able to help you on yours, so perhaps you should call in for that cup of tea."

"I don't know that she'd even see me?"

He reached out and tapped the envelope on the table.

"A letter of introduction to break the ice."

"Cook for her too, do you?"

A smile teased the corners of his mouth.

"Once. Just recently, in fact."

He pushed his chair back and stood up.

"I need to get back to the stall," he said. "I'll leave the rest to you."

He walked off and was just about to disappear around the side of a stall when she called out.

"Wait."

He stopped, half turning to look back.

"I already expressed my gratitude to the others. Thank you for saving my city, Mr Asano."

"It's what we do, General."