

Chapter 922

It's More Complicated Than That

Aircraft had been one of the earliest examples of integrating magic and technology. Long before magic went public, the Network had been employing private planes with unadvertised optional extras. After twenty more years of development time, and no more need for secrecy, private air travel involved some of the most advanced magitech available.

Annabeth Tilden's plane rocked as if struck by turbulence, but the cause was rather more dangerous. She had participated in enough combat training to not be useless in a pinch, but she was not a fighter. She was especially not up to the task of fending off monsters attacking her aeroplane while in flight.

She couldn't properly see their attackers through the window of her passenger seat, given the speed and the dark. She did spot silhouettes in the flashes of blue as the monsters struck the plane's shielding. They looked like round bodies with wings sticking out, in flagrant defiance of aerodynamics. Armour plating dropped over the windows, cutting off her view entirely.

"It'll be fine, Mrs Tilden," the man sitting opposite her said. Morris Manning was a slight man, short and lean. He didn't look like much, but he was both her bodyguard and her minder. He was an operative from the US Department of Supernatural Affairs, what the US Network had ultimately morphed into. On loan to the United Nations for this trip, he was a likely candidate for reaching gold rank without cores.

"The plane's defences can handle it?" Anna asked. She glanced at her wife, asleep in the seat beside her. Susan could sleep through a bombing run.

"It'll hold up to attack for a good while, but the weapons won't be able to kill them. If they're not enough to drive the creatures away, Mr Clovis will handle it."

There were sixteen passenger seats on the plane, all occupied. Six were delegates sent to meet with the Asano clan, including Anna. Susan and a nine-person security detachment occupied the remaining seats. Morris was the leader of the security contingent, meaning he did the administrating and organising. The most powerful member of the group was a gold ranker, Patrick Clovis. His infrequent words came in a thick Bostonian accent.

"Not going out for some jumped-up sky chickens," Clovis said. "Do it yourself, Manning."

“Sadly, Mr Clovis, my power set is ill-suited for high-speed flight. Ms Keener, would you be so kind?”

Another member of the security team got up and moved towards the back of the plane. There was a hatch in the rear compartment that allowed people to exit mid-flight without disrupting the rest of the plane.

“Travel in Europe is dangerous,” Morris explained to Anna. “It’s not the vampires, though, but the monsters. The vampires don’t clear them out unless they threaten a blood farm or one of their other interests.”

“Oh, I had no idea,” she said lightly.

An awkward smile crossed his face as he looked across at the former Network branch director and current Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Supernatural Affairs.

“Apologies, Mrs Tilden.”

“It’s fine, Mr Manning. Monsters were only to be expected when approaching the Asano territories. The magic level is higher, making the monsters commensurately more powerful.”

“We avoid referring to them as Asano territories or anything similar,” another delegate said. “It implies that those lands belong to them and not the nations of France and Slovenia.”

Maël Baffier represented the French government in exile. Anna didn’t point out that France, like most countries in Europe, hadn’t functionally existed in well over a decade. The negotiations for who would join Anna on her visit to the Asano clan had gone on for weeks. Knowing Jason and his grandmother, the clan matriarch, she had a feeling on how they would respond to the self-invitees.

The UN and the other factional and government interests hadn’t consulted Anna very much, despite her being the ostensible leader of the delegation. She’d been open about Asano wanting to recruit her, which had eroded trust in her as she had not pre-emptively refused. She remained in charge on paper, however, as without her, there would be no getting eyes and ears on the ground inside the Asano clan. The delegates themselves were politicians, and she was certain that most of the security team were all former or current intelligence operatives.

The plane’s intermittent shaking stopped and the armour panels over the windows retracted. Moments later, Kenner returned, dirty and drenched.

“That,” she said, “was unpleasant.”

She took the bag containing a change of clothes from under her seat and then headed back to the rear compartment.

The captain had announced a short time ago that they were approaching Asano territory, prompting a scowl from the French delegate. Anna looked up from her tablet as Morris tilted his head, listening to something on his earpiece. He looked over and asked her to follow him to the cockpit.

Susan stirred as Anna stepped past her.

“Are we there yet?” she asked blearily.

“Almost, love.”

“Did I miss the meal?”

“There’s a protein bar in the arm rest.”

“Boo,” Susan jeered.

Morris watched the exchange with amusement before leading Anna to the front of the plane. The pilot had arrested the plane’s movement, tilting the engines for vertical take-off and landing mode. They were hovering near, but not directly over, what had once been the city of Saint-Étienne. After claiming the territory originally, Jason had reproduced the city, previously ravaged by vampires and then wiped out entirely by a transformation zone. Only the areas outside of the domain showed the broken remnants of vampiric occupation.

Now, the ruins around the clan’s domain had been cleared away, leaving only the city inside the domain of Jason’s power. The architectural style remained the same, but there were distinct changes from when Anna had lived there as liaison. Largest was a massive expansion of green areas and waterways. Streams ran through parklands and a whole section of the city had canals in place of streets. What it did not have was an airport.

“Ma’am,” the Captain said. “Our original instructions were to land at the former military base site, but it no longer appears to exist.”

“It was there,” Morris said. “We had satellite footage from yesterday with it there. You know the Asano clan best, Mrs Tilden. Any suggestions?”

“We wait,” Anna said. “I imagine this is something to do with Jason Asano’s flair for the dramatic.”

As if waiting for her prompt, an area at the edge of the city was suddenly engulfed in fog. Once it cleared, there was a space that looked like an oversized helipad, with a symbol of a plane painted on it.

“I believe you have your landing zone, Captain,” Morris said.

Two people were waiting as the delegation disembarked. One was Ketevan Arziani, assistant to the Asano clan matriarch. She had once been Anna's own deputy, back in Australia during her network days. They had remained friends, only losing touch when the Asano clan had vanished. Susan gave her a wave, earning a quickly suppressed smile but no other response. Standing next to Ketevan was Rufus Remore.

"Interesting," Morris murmured. "No Asano family members."

Anna understood that, in diplomacy, every choice sent a message, intended or not.

"They want to show us that the clan is more than just the Asano family band," she murmured back.

"Show us, or show you?" Morris asked. "That's your friend over there, isn't it?"

She gave Morris a side glance. The man clearly did his prep work.

As Rufus and Ketevan approached, the security team took reserved defensive postures, cautious but not provocative. The exception was Patrick Clovis, the gold ranker striding out to position himself between the delegation and the clan representatives. Anna and Morris let out simultaneous sighs.

"Clovis, you aren't here to protect us from the Asano clan," Morris said. "Here, it would be pointless to try. If they want to do something to us, not even you can stop them."

"Because of this guy?" Clovis asked, nodding at Rufus.

"Yes. Clovis, you're here to protect us from vampires and monsters, should anything go wrong. Don't be what goes wrong."

Clovis stared at Rufus for a long moment, then back at Morris. He growled like an animal but stalked back to the rear of the group.

"Is he really the best you could get?" Anna said.

"Sadly, yes," Morris said. "Every stakeholder insisted on sending a gold ranker, but refused to volunteer one of their own. I had to sit through weeks of pointless staff proposals before they gave me this guy."

Ketevan and Rufus approached them, now that Clovis was out of the way. Ketevan smiled at Anna and Susan, but her focus was on Morris.

"My name is Ketevan Arziani, chief of staff to the clan matriarch. This is Rufus Remore."

"Morris Manning, security detail chief."

"The patriarch would like to begin things socially," Ketevan said. "Anna, Susan, please come with me while Mr Remore sees to the rest of your group. Once the luggage is unloaded from the plane, it will be delivered to your accommodations."

"You said Patriarch," Morris pointed out. "Asano is back?"

“No,” Rufus said. “He’s still in the other world.”

“Everything will be explained to our satisfaction, I assure you,” Ketevan continued, prompting a smile to twitch on Morris’ mouth. “Please see to the luggage. The staff will take it.”

“The staff?” Manning asked.

A dozen cloaked figures manifested out of nowhere, the cloaks empty but for a glowing, nebulous eye in each hood the size of a face. After raising an eyebrow, Manning went about the task of getting the luggage unloaded and keeping the delegates settled. Anna was a little surprised that Baffier didn’t argue as he and the others were led away by Rufus. She’d been worried about the French diplomat, but he thankfully knew when to vent his frustrations and when to do his job. Left alone, Ketevan gave Anna and Susan a quick hug each.

“Susan, I’m so glad you decided to come.”

“It wasn’t easy convincing this one,” she said, jabbing a thumb in Anna’s direction. “She thought it was too dangerous for me.”

“How did you win her over?”

“By pointing out that if she comes and works for you, me being left behind would be even more dangerous.”

Ketevan nodded.

“I’m sorry that Jason’s offer put you in a tough spot. It would be great to have you here, though.”

“It’s more complicated than that, Keti,” Anna said. “It’s not just about accepting a job or not.”

“I know. And so does he, but we can get to that later. How about we have some brunch and catch up?”

A stream of cloud rose from the tarmac and turned into an open top car.

“Is this how it works here?” Anna asked. “Everything you need just magically appears? Things weren’t so accommodating during my brief tenure as liaison here.”

“It’s not usually like this, although more than back then,” Ketevan said. “For some things it is. If you want to knock out a wall in your house or something, you can just ask.”

“Ask who?”

“The wall, I guess. Jason is more powerful, now, and his influence here is stronger. I don’t want to talk business, yet, but I should warn you that you can’t escape his attention here. He’s not actively watching, as I understand it, but if he wants to know what you’re doing or something you did, he does.”

“That’s a little invasive,” Susan said, looking around as if she would spot drones spying on them.

“More than a little,” Anna said.

“You get used to it,” Ketevan said. “It’s odd, especially at first. It helps that Jason was more of a story than an actual presence, for a lot of years. But now that he’s more active, that’s good too. Old people have fallen down stairs that turned into a cloud cushion and they were unhurt. Kids have gotten stuck places that just opened up to let them out.”

She got into the driver’s seat of the car, Anna and Susan getting into the back.

“Oh, this is comfortable,” Susan said. “I know we weren’t here for long, but I missed cloud furniture.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Anna told her.

“Or do,” Ketevan teased. “I wouldn’t hate having you back here for good.”