

TWENTY-TWO



Aladdin Sane

Tuesday, September 10

WHEN BLAKE WOKE AGAIN, the sun was rising. Serena was still asleep, her head on his shoulder. Careful not to disturb her, he shifted his eyes to look at the green landscape outside the window. As he watched the countryside gliding past, feeling Serena's breath against his neck, Blake went over the details of the quantum transceiver again and again, probing for any weak points. In his mind's eye, at least, every element seemed to check out. *Let's hope there are no surprises tomorrow*, he thought.

It was noon when they passed under the Hudson River and rolled into Manhattan. Filing off the train with his fellow passengers, Blake was shocked at the dilapidated condition of Penn Station. The walls and floors were lined with cracks, and electrical wiring dangled from gaping holes in the ceiling. Everywhere he looked, panhandlers held out cups beseechingly.

"Come along, brothers and sisters," said the Reverend. The group climbed the stairway to Seventh Avenue and walked east through garbage-strewn streets to the subway. When the downtown express finally arrived, it was filled to bursting. Through persistent pushing, the

entire choir forced their way inside along with their instruments. With a resigned sigh, the blind guitarist's guide dog lay on the subway floor, pressed against his master's legs. As the packed train moved away from the platform, Blake heard the hummed strains of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" rising around him in three-part harmony.

Ten minutes later they exited into the sunlit expanse of Union Square. Again, Blake was startled at the rundown condition of the park and the surrounding buildings. There was a feeling of danger in the air that hadn't been there when he'd visited a decade earlier—a reflection of the poverty that seemed to have seeped in everywhere. The upscale food, clothing and appliance shops that once lined 14th Street had given way to discount retailers and down-at-the-ears grocery stores, while apartment buildings that had boasted doormen and landscaped entrances were now unmanned and unkempt-looking, the residents hurriedly opening the locked lobby doors with keys as they arrived home.

"Brothers and sisters, I can't tell you if this is the wilderness or the promised land—but either way, we have reached our destination," said the Reverend. "Can I hear a song of praise?"

"Swing low, sweet chariot," crooned the blind guitarist.

"Coming for to carry me home..." sang the others in response. Voices ringing, the Midway Minstrels carried their song east toward the UZ entrance at 14th Street and Third Avenue.

Just outside the UZ wall, a cyclone fence had been erected along the curb of Third Avenue. As they stood inside the fence, waiting to pass through the entry checkpoint, Blake saw an open white tent with wooden flooring a few yards away. Along the near edge of the tent, a low set of risers faced outward toward the UZ entrance. Several dozen neatly dressed men and women sat in the tent's interior on folding chairs, fanning themselves and listening to a man in a clerical collar as he paced in front of them, speaking into a microphone.

"Are you ready to make your voices heard by the unwashed multitudes?" the man said loudly. The listeners nodded their heads and

shouted assent.

“What are we waiting for?” someone yelled.

“Before we begin this hour’s singing of His praises, let us bow our heads and pray,” the preacher continued. Halting in place, he lowered his chin and closed his eyes. “Dear Lord, lend our lungs and voices the power and might of your divine goodness, and grant that the music we create be filled with your heavenly light, that it may pierce the darkness which blinds our fellow human beings to the truth and glory that is your path.”

“Amen,” the group responded.

“And now, if you’ll turn to page two hundred forty-one, let us loose His mighty sword!”

Clutching their hymnals, the group rose and filed onto the risers as the strains of an electric organ rose from inside the tent, sounding the opening notes of “Oh Sinner Come Home.”

With the hymns droning in the background, the security queue inched slowly forward. To pass the time, Blake watched the activity swirling around the various TV news vans parked inside the fence. A young NBC reporter stood by the nearest one, clutching her microphone and staring into the camera.

“Ready when you are,” said the cameraman.

“We are outside the entrance to the New York City Urban Zone,” began the reporter, “where tens of thousands of UZ residents from across the nation are taking advantage of their Zoner status to gain entry to one of the most unusual cultural events of the year—the annual Urban Zone festival, commonly known as UZFest.”

The camera panned to the checkpoint entrance where the officers were searching each person in turn and checking any electronic devices they were carrying. Above the entry point was a sign that read:

Absolutely no cell phones, video or still cameras, or audio recorders. All personal computers must have their cameras and recorders disabled. Any illegal devices found will be confiscated.