

Chapter One

Umbilical

Luke touched the sonic syringe to his neck. He hesitated, knowing there would be no turning back – one way or the other he'd be dead in twelve hours. He took a breath and drove his thumb down, feeling the click followed by a small hiss as the neurotransmitters surged into his carotid. A flush crawled across his face, followed by tingling, then scalding. He doubled over and gasped. Within seconds his respiration and heart rate slowed. His senses sharpened. He could easily read the writing on his desk-pad on the other side of the room. Muted conversations in adjacent quarters amplified, allowing him to hear their banter. For the first time he detected the deep, leopard-like purr of the engines in the bowels of the gargantuan Q'Roth vessel, as the hijackers mustered power for the final transit through deep space to their new home. He knew his role well enough, and accepted it: to see that humanity never made it to their precious new world.

He marvelled at the Q'Roth technology, then grimaced at the thought of the two thousand undeserving fellow passengers who had stolen aboard this ship instead of accepting their fate back on obliterated Earth. Most humans talked of the Q'Roth *invasion* – but to him and other Alicians it had meant liberation after centuries of living in the shadows, hiding genetic advances from their inferior human cousins. Mankind had squandered its chances. Time for an upgrade.

He zeroed in on a man walking beyond the curtained doorway. Luke inhaled the pungent odour of this passer-by who hadn't showered. He cracked his knuckles. Two weeks pretending to be one of *them*, letting them think they'd escaped.

He picked up the blue stiletto, a Q'Roth ceremonial dagger, a gift from Sister Esma herself. It was surprisingly light. Yet nothing on Earth had been able to bend, break or melt Q'Roth metal, except a nuke. A thousand years old, but still micron-sharp. He cocked an ear at a measured gait nearing his doorway. As it slowed, his fingers coiled around the hilt. The curtain rustled open and he launched the blade. A hand, moving so fast that only Luke in his new found heightened state could have seen it, caught the knife in mid-air.

'I see you've taken your accelerator dose, too,' Luke said, smiling.

Saul raked the curtain closed and tossed the stiletto back to him, glaring at the thin red line drawn across his hand. Blood threatened, then retreated, leaving no trace. 'And if I hadn't?'

Luke's smile faded. 'I got carried away. It won't happen again.'

'Don't ever stoop to their level.'

Luke bowed his head. He needed to redeem himself, especially with Saul, one of the Inner Circle. Despite looking just a few years older, Saul had seen and survived the Purge, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Alician Order had been hunted and executed like dogs – under the pretence of the great witch hunt – in their Silent War against the now-defunct Sentinels. Just thinking about it made Saul want to tear the head off the first human he encountered. But such emotional recklessness was unbecoming. Strategy and patience, he reminded himself, citing two of the most vaunted Alician maxims. He swallowed his anger down, alchemising it into cold-blooded purpose: why kill a few when we can kill them all?

He cleared his throat. 'What about the other three ships?'

Saul drew his pulse pistol, checking the charge. ‘Decapitation strategy – we take out Blake, their leader, and all aboard this ship. Louise will take care of the others.’

Luke nodded. ‘Good enough for me.’ He’d only met Louise once, and had decided there and then that it was true what they said – the female of the species was the deadliest, especially after her recent Q’Roth DNA transfusion, which had apparently honed her aggressive instincts.

He shifted on his feet. ‘I want to be the one to kill Micah.’ He sheathed the stiletto. His eyes blazed. ‘Of all the parasites on this ship, his death deserves personal attention. If it weren’t for him, none would have escaped.’

Saul holstered his pistol. ‘The kill is yours. I’ve seen the roster. He should be outside with us later today. Just don’t underestimate him. Remember, Louise herself failed last time. Let’s go, it’s time to keep up our side of the bargain.’

Luke felt powerful, like a jaguar on the hunt, every muscle, every cell of DNA united in single purpose. They slipped out of the room, disappearing into the hordes of human prey infesting the corridors.