

Prologue

Origins

1563 AD, the Himalayan Kingdom

No birds ever approached the Fortress of Alessia. This was the first thing Esma noticed when she arrived after her long trek into the barren Tibetan foothills. The second was the architectural precision of the gothic castle, its steep black ramparts, towers and twisting spires rising skywards, as if uprooted from the earth by the stars themselves. Its cruel beauty went beyond anything she'd ever seen. Although it was over four hundred years old, Alessia's Fortress looked as if it had been built yesterday.

Archers' slits in its three tall towers stared out over the surrounding land, unblinking eyes daring anyone below to step onto the path to its iron gates. The guide had left a mile earlier, unwilling to proceed further, and in the end had begged her to return with him to the safety of his village. But Esma turned her back on him, as she did on the rest of humanity, and continued alone.

A savage wind scoured her sheepskin coat, leather face-mask and gloves as she walked with a measured gait under anvil-shaped clouds threatening winter's first snowfall. Atop the towers, red and gold pennants displaying bloodied eagle's claws whipped and crackled, the emblazoned talons seeming to grasp at the air. Prayer wheels, adapted from naïve Buddhist ideology to worship another entity, one altogether more sublime and not of this world, whistled like banshees across the bleak countryside.

Esma had left her family for good this time, after one beating too many, and had not told her bitter mother or sickly brother where she was going. They would not understand, and she no longer cared. For two years Esma had secretly followed the Order of Alessia as an acolyte-in-waiting, after being noticed by a wandering monk visiting her home city, Padua. He made a speech in the central plaza, addressing anyone who would listen, and asked what they all saw when they raised their eyes to the night sky. Most in the lingering crowd talked of God and his marvels. Esma waited till the throng dispersed and approached him on her own; she had often looked up, craving an alternative to the misery she and others endured.

"Our star, the sun, has worlds around it," she said. "I believe, and I pray, that other worlds are up there too, better ones." She glanced around to ensure no one else was listening. "With a God less tolerant of human depravity."

Within a year she had a job working with a scribe, learning to copy and translate theological documents; a cover for her induction into the Alessian Order. Esma had to endure three more years at home, but each time her father's hand raised above her, she knew that revenge would come, and never once cried out in voice or with tears, which only angered him further. On the night she left, Esma slit his throat with a razor clutched in trembling hands, where he lay snoring, drunk, in the kitchen. Only then did the tears come, as she watched the life bleed out of his bloated, twitching body. She knew that her mother, despite being regularly beaten herself, would never forgive this act, but after Esma had finally stopped shaking, she left a note for her mother and brother that simply said, "My parting gift."

On her way to the mountains, she passed through a village where the very same wandering monk who had first inspired her three years earlier had been arrested for heresy. As an outsider sheltering against the winter at a local inn, she was questioned by men in scarlet cloaks, witchfinders. Seeing his battered, tortured body

chained in the market place, scorched eye sockets in his listless head, and beholding the faces and shrieking accusations of the local villagers filled with rage and bloodlust, fear seized Esma. When dragged before the monk, she vehemently denied knowing him, adding her voice to those crying out for him to be burned at the stake.

Once released, she fled the village. Huddled in her coat on the hillside that evening, she watched the smoke rise from the pyre, occasionally catching the shrill screams of the monk's voice that had so entranced her in Padua, and the jeering of the crowd. Afterwards, Esma wandered for five days and nights, not eating, punishing herself for being so weak, vowing it would never happen again. On the months-long journey, she studied hard, always dwelling on the words of Alessia, promising a better life than Esma had known.

Now she would finally meet the High Priestess herself, or at least glimpse her. As she strode against the wind, up the winding cobbled pathway and endless granite steps, she spied something from the corner of her eye – a blue-black beast, its carapace shining like that of a beetle. It had a strangely shaped head, not quite a rectangle, more like the silhouette of a half-open book. But this creature was the height of two men, and moved so fast it was gone almost before her mind could paint its picture. Esma had heard the rumours. So, it was true, they were here. She quickened her pace.

When the great gate opened, uncreaking and seemingly of its own accord, three men in full-length grey robes faced her, their hands hidden in long sleeves, eyes intense, uncompromising. While the tallest asked questions concerning the Order's scripture, which Esma had to answer without reflection or error, the other two walked and stood close behind her. After what felt like half an hour of relentless examination, she faltered, unsure of the answer, and rather than give a wrong one, bowed her head. She heard a blade slipping from its sheath behind her. The man in front paused, his deep blue eyes scrutinizing her. "And what if you are called upon to kill those of your own flesh, Esma, your family?"

She raised her head high as she slowly pulled out the curved knife from her coat pocket, showing him the dried blood on its blade. "I already have."

The man before her gave the barest of smiles. "I am Brother Tilgar. Welcome, Esma, to the abode of Alessia."

Life in the fortress was hard, its rules strict and unforgiving, but Esma endured it, doing whatever was asked no matter how menial, without question or complaint. Tilgar was stern with her in front of others, gentler when it was just the two of them, as he instructed her in the Order's ways and in her chosen specialism, the study of written scripture. With his quiet but sharp mind and constant attention to detail, and his patience with her, he became the father figure she had never known.

When she had a spare moment she would approach the narrow windows where the wind howled, and stare out, hoping to catch sight of the beast, but to no avail. Esma told no one what she had seen; in the Order, it was dangerous to know more than one should. She did however catch rare glimpses of Alessia, easily recognised by her mane of flowing red locks as she swept across the inner courtyard from the base of one stone tower to another.

Early one morning, Esma had to fetch a bucket of water for her master, Tilgar, for his morning ablutions. Ice with a dusting of snow covered the surface of the deep well, and she had to lean down precariously and hack at it with her knife, chopping hard. The ice suddenly cracked, and her foot slipped and she lost her balance, tipping

forward, arms flailing as she tried to grab onto anything to save her from an icy death. A firm hand seized her ankle and hauled her back from the brink, another yanking her back out of the well's embrace by the shoulder, turning her around with deft ease and power. Esma landed on the frosted ground, panting, by Alessia's feet. Aghast at her mistake, she got to her knees in front of the High Priestess of the Order, though she maintained eye contact: in the Order, deference was never blind. "I am sorry for my foolishness, Your Eminence."

Alessia at first said nothing, the hint of a smile playing across her lips. Her jade eyes fixed on Esma, the smile evaporating. "Once is a mistake, twice is a fault." Alessia turned and continued in her whirlwind fashion towards the principal tower where the Order's Council met regularly. Esma watched Alessia go, feeling as if she had just been touched by an Angel of God.

Esma had never been interested in boys, or in the sinful pleasures of the flesh, but she was still young, and that night she found herself unable to sleep, and with a gnawing sense of disgust, she exorcised the bad thoughts in the only way she knew. But it was different this time. Instead of trying to conjure up enthusiasm in her mind's eye for the handsome young groom other girls fantasized about, Esma imagined Alessia's beatific face, her slim but strong hands caressing her. In her ecstasy Esma cried out in the female dormitory. But in the morning her shame at this profane, animalistic activity bubbled to the surface like acid on skin. She had been disrespectful to Alessia, and Esma vowed never again to demean herself or another by proxy. She threw all her energy into her work.

Months passed, and Esma progressed in her duties – she could write well, and Tilgar had been teaching her a challenging new script, one with serifs, barbs and jagged points, an aggressive rune alphabet that looked sharp enough to draw blood. But she didn't just copy, and learning more, Esma began to translate, occasionally finding herself staring at these words and their unfolding concepts like none she had ever heard, even inside the Order. Her ability to fathom meaning behind the alien language didn't go unnoticed by Tilgar. Esma did not know if this was good or bad news.

One night Tilgar woke her quietly – she had been summoned to a room at the top of the second tower, where the elite lived. Once there, Tilgar ushered her inside and then left, closing the heavy oak door behind him. A flaxen-haired knight in chain-mail armour sat upright in a high-backed wooden chair. Silburn: she had seen him occasionally in the fortress, often with Alessia. He was second-in-command. Silburn rose.

"Come," he said, walking out to the balcony where flurries of snowflakes swirled, in no rush to reach the ground. She stood a little behind him but he gestured for her to stand at the edge, a knee-high stone wall separating them from a sheer drop into darkness. Silburn's hand went to the small of Esma's back. She stiffened. One small shove and she would depart this world.

"Look up, girl, and tell me what you see."

Esma's heart raced. "Stars," she said, the word barely escaping her lips, her mind trying to ignore the hand that could end her life so easily. A snowflake entered her left eye, ice cold, making her blink rapidly. She was not dressed for outside, and the chill air bit through her woollen dress. She ignored it, tried to focus, unsure what was required of her, or which answer would spare her life. But the Order was not about closing minds; that was why she had joined. She remembered Alessia saving her from a messy, futile death in the well, and cleared her throat. "Stars," she said again. "But they do not circle us, for we are not the centre of the universe."

The hand remained firm, a judge deciding her fate. “Continue.” Silburn’s voice was as unfeeling as the stone wall at her sandaled feet.

Esma tried not to shiver. “Somewhere out there is another life, another way, more than us.” She paused, then decided to say it. “I saw one. When I first arrived. Barely a glimpse. But what I saw... impressed me. Such grace and power.” She waited, then continued. “I know they are not gods, yet it seems to me – from what I have read – that they are closer to God than we.” She dared to glance across to see Silburn’s reaction, but his face was as unmoving as the granite walls. Her own face turned downwards, to the oblivion below.

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No,” she said, a shiver breaking through despite her best efforts.

“Not even Tilgar?”

She had hinted several times, asked Tilgar questions that might have given away what she had seen, but Esma didn’t want to get her master into trouble; he had been kind to her. She shook her head. Esma knew that words held deadly power in the Order, especially secrets. Sometimes acolytes disappeared, and no one asked questions afterwards. The line between savant and heretic was of a hair’s breadth.

“Esma, would you die for the Order?”

The words echoed in her head, like the eddies of snow before her, making her feel giddy. “Yes,” she said, swallowing, guessing she had over-stepped the mark. For the first time in months she visualised her mother, sneering, saying that Esma had always had too much to say, had never accepted her place, and would now pay the price. She would end her life gashed open on the rocks below, leaving carrion birds and insects to pick her bones dry. Esma thought of her sickly brother, Arnault, surely by now taken by the plague ravaging the land. At least he would be sad for her fate. So be it, she and her sibling would comfort each other in whatever came after.

Silburn’s face turned to her. “Then *will* you die for the Order, Esma?” He removed his hand from the small of her back.

Esma found her hands shaking, her lips quivering. She stared into Silburn’s eyes, but they were pitiless, they had probably seen and dispatched such death that there was no mercy remaining in his soul. Bracing herself, she squeezed her lips together, clenched her fists against the biting pain of cold in her fingers. She lifted one foot on top of the low wall, then pushed up and stood atop the slippery, uneven stone. Her mind, awash with fears and inner cries, suddenly cleared, as if she had broken through its surface ice to clear water underneath. The shaking stopped, and she felt at peace. She wanted to say some last words, and then it came to her, the only two things she cared about. “I do this for Alessia, and for the truth that cannot yet be known or spoken.” Eyes wide open, she sucked in a deep breath, leaned forward and took a step.

Silburn’s large hands snatched the waist-band of her dress and held her in place, Esma’s right foot stretched out over the abyss. “You will indeed die for the Order one day, Esma, but not this night.”

Meeting his eyes, she stepped back down cautiously, the shaking returning with a vengeance, her breathing ragged. A single tear escaped. She brushed it away as if it was snow, and in her mind’s eye her mother was silent for once, while her brother beamed.

To her surprise, Tilgar joined them on the balcony, wearing a look somewhere between shocked admiration and pride as he wrapped a blanket around her trembling frame.

Silburn patted her on the back. “Go with him. From now on you are no longer an acolyte, you are *Sister* Esma. You will have new chambers, and new duties. Oh, and Tilgar, I know it is late, but give her some ale to warm her, or else she will not sleep.”

Esma found she needed Tilgar’s arm to steady herself as she walked to the door.

Alessia chaired the Council meeting, the atmosphere around the heavy oak table tensing with her news. “The last Q’Roth surgeon will depart shortly. We will be on our own now, for exactly five hundred years.”

Silburn banged his fist on the table, rattling his chain mail. “Our enemies, the Sentinels, are hunting us down, and our number diminishes every month. Without our Masters’ aid our ability to quicken new members in the Order will be severely limited.”

Sister Esma recalled her own ‘quickenings’ three months ago, the day after that fateful night on Silburn’s balcony. She had been transformed, her muscles and tendons made stronger and tougher. Several organs had been changed or even replaced, notably the heart, kidneys, and liver, extending her life expectancy by centuries. But it was her mind that she noticed reborn; faster, able to grasp ideas formerly occluded, though she knew it would take another fifty years for the treatment to raise her intellect to Level Five.

Her transformation had also been a chance to see the noble Q’Roth in action as they performed surgery on her; they were indeed God-like, tremendously powerful yet elegant creatures, with scientific and medical marvels beyond her wildest imaginings. And such discipline and harmony – they never bickered or suffered the endemic pettiness and rivalry afflicting mankind.

She snapped herself out of her reverie, back to the grave matter of the day – the last Q’Roth were departing, going into hibernation, leaving the Order to take care of things until their return. But Silburn was right; it could not have come at a worse time. Those damned Sentinels, the only people who knew of the Order’s existence, were hunting them down, one by one. They were not as advanced as the Alicians, but were just as determined, and had been given instruction by a visitor not of this world, warning them of the latent threat to its populace. She had witnessed the torture of one of these infidels, captured and dragged to the fortress. He had been resilient, but Tilgar, draped in a butcher’s full apron and armed with a dazzling array of metal implements, spent days and nights working relentlessly on the man who screamed and squirmed, extracting valuable information before the end, when the whimpering wretch’s heart gave out.

The Sentinels had been given a formidable weapon, a device hidden somewhere in one of their strongholds, to locate those touched by the Q’Roth surgeons; something to do with the blood. The Sentinels used their influence with the Church of Rome, and the paranoia of the great witch hunt gripping Europe, to prosecute their silent war. When someone of the Order was suspected and arrested, a Sentinel masquerading as a witchfinder would prick their thumb with a special dagger to see if they bled – witches would not bleed, they told the crowds. Esma did not yet understand how, but the knife would detect the hint of Q’Roth blood and stem the flow, after which the man or woman would be dragged away in chains and burned at the stake. Those of the Order who used their new-found strength to try to escape only confirmed and enflamed the local people’s convictions of witchery in their midst, and

were hunted down and slain like dogs. The Sentinels preyed upon the wild, ignorant fears of ordinary men and women to amplify their power base. And they were winning.

Silburn continued. "If the Q'Roth gave us some of their weapons, or left just a handful of warriors, or one of their flying machines, we could destroy our enemies."

No other Council Member spoke, all awaiting Alessia's reply.

"They have done this many times before, Silburn, as you know well, on a number of worlds. This is their way, and we do not question their methods. The automaton they have left behind will still be able to quicken those we judge worthy, but only at a rate of ten per year. We must be careful, bide our time and use stealth until the Q'Roth return. Remember that it is us, Silburn, whom they have chosen. We must determine a way to prevail, or else we are not worthy of their patronage."

But Silburn's grim face remained set. "The Sentinels, backed by the soldiers of the Church of Rome, outnumber us ten to one. They use the witch hunt as a pretence, or any other excuse, to track us down and kill us. We have lost two hundred members of the Order this year alone, a third of our entire force! We cannot keep taking such losses. Soon they will trace us here." He sat back, folding his silver-coated arms. "What is your grand plan, Alessia, now that our Masters are all but gone? I am sure we would all like to hear it."

All eyes fell on Alessia. She stood, leaned across the table on splayed fingers, russet locks tumbling over her shoulders, and glared at Silburn. "I sense you have a proposal, great warrior that you are."

Others shrank away from the table, knowing how quick to anger both of them were, but Silburn leaned back, the fire gone from his voice. "I have a strategy, but it requires great sacrifice."

Alessia righted herself. "I am listening."

Silburn spoke in an unusually quiet tone. He stared down at the gnarled table in front of him, for once not meeting Alessia's eyes. "The only way to make them relax their efforts is to make them think they have won. They believe that if they cut off the head of the snake, the snake will die."

There were gasps in the chamber. Esma glanced from Silburn to Alessia. Surely she would not even consider it!

Alessia glared, then spread her arms wide, addressing everyone, but keeping her eyes fixed on Silburn. "Get out, all of you, now! Leave us!"

Esma fled along with the rest, but waited in the snow-bound arches under the meeting room. An hour later, when all the others had departed to the relative warmth of their rooms, Silburn walked out, head proud in his armour, and tramped across the courtyard's fresh snow. Esma waited, but no one else stirred. For once the wind had stopped, leaving the prayer-wheels idle and silent. The castle's pennants hung as if in mourning of what was to come. Quietly, Esma climbed back up the steps, wondering what she would find.

Alessia sat alone at the great oak table, studying a wooden chessboard with carved pieces, the black queen lying down.

Alessia looked up. "Ah, the gifted translator. Remind me your name, girl."

Esma bowed deeply, and told her, adding her honorific, as was appropriate.

"Do you know this game, Sister Esma?"

Esma nodded. "A little, Your Eminence."

Alessia gazed out the window into the far-off, approaching snowstorm. "What have you gleaned from their writing?"

Esma thought carefully. She had been pondering the most recent document day and night. “That the heavens and time are curved. And this means that although the stars are very far away, our Masters can arrive in an instant.”

Alessia turned back, giving her a searching look. “Bravo, Sister Esma.” She smiled, and picked up a pawn from the board, weighing it in her hands. “People think a pawn will always be a pawn, because they think the game is flat, in two dimensions. But it is also curved by time.” She nudged the fallen queen with a finger. “A queen cannot become a pawn. Her destiny is set. She is strong yet entrenched by her own power. But a pawn...” Alessia pursed her lips, deliberating. “Sit,” she said.

Esma obliged, sitting next to Alessia, the chessboard in front of them.

“Few truly understand that which you so easily grasp, Sister Esma.” She played her fingers across the king, bishops and rooks next to her fallen queen. “You see, all of these may fail, or may fall to the Sentinels. I need a pawn to stay in the background, to wait, just in case.”

Esma stared at the pawn in Alessia’s hand. “Your Eminence, I –”

“Five centuries hence, if your wits keep you alive that long, you will see our Masters again, and they will feed on the life energy of ordinary men, and take us to the stars, to a better future. Mankind is fatally flawed, and will be forgotten. Only we and our progeny will reach our true potential.” Her eyes gleamed momentarily. “We will travel to the very stars themselves! You understand this, don’t you Sister Esma?”

Esma nodded.

“Take this,” Alessia said, handing her the wooden queen. “Remember this day, but tell no one of it.” With that, she stood, carried the rest of the wooden set to the window, flung the pieces into the snowdrift outside, and stormed out.

Six months later, a long and bloody battle ensued. Alessia was slain by the Sentinels, alongside fifty of her acolytes who defended her until the last. Alessia and her most trusted had attacked the Sentinel stronghold that held their locator device, and finally destroyed it, but during her escape she had been overwhelmed by hundreds of Sentinels.

Sister Esma arrived the next day with Tilgar and a handful of others to retrieve their leader’s body from the battlefield, only to find it almost unrecognisable apart from strands of red hair. Esma spent hours gathering Alessia’s hacked-apart remains and assembled them into the semblance of a corpse. She wept openly during the cremation, and vowed vengeance, swearing never to forget nor forgive.

Alessia’s sacrifice had of course been a gambit, one that worked. The Sentinels grew complacent and soft, believing they had won. But the Q’Roth-enhanced upgrades, Alessia’s chosen, lay low with Silburn, barely ageing, and never forgetting. They emerged a hundred years later with a savage pogrom against the Sentinels’ descendants, rooting out their hidden cells from the Russian Steppes all the way to the shores of Ireland, slaughtering nine tenths of their number in a single week of synchronized fury. Assassinations of key vassals in the Vatican in the same week forever broke the support of the Church of Rome. These and subsequent brutal murders were masked by a more virulent, genetically-concocted version of the plague still ravaging Europe, forever tipping the war’s balance in the Order’s favour, though enough escaped to be a constant, if greatly diminished, menace.

Silburn was slain in one of the final raids on a Sentinel stronghold in Tibet, though those who found his body said he looked serene. Esma was not surprised – a king might sacrifice his queen, but will never be the same without her.

In the spring of 1693, when the Order had shifted its headquarters to the New World to escape the lingering political influence of Rome, Tilgar was arrested as part of the trumped-up Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts, while he and Esma were recruiting for the Order. Esma had been in a distant village when Tilgar had been cornered by two Sentinels masquerading as witchfinders, backed up by a dozen local soldiers. Esma arrived just in time to be present in the seething throng gathered to watch him hang. Ordinary people yelled obscenities, threw rubbish at his limping, tortured and battered frame. His left arm was missing, a cut so clean just below the shoulder it could only have come from one of the fabled Sentinel nano-swords.

Tilgar had been one of the best of their new breed she had ever known. He held his head high despite his injuries and time on the rack. He raised his remaining hand, and the crowd briefly grew quiet to hear and then spit on his last words. “Your time will come,” was all he said, looking over them, catching her eye at the end. The crowd, including men, women, children, young and old, screamed “Witch! Hang him! Torture him some more! He still has another arm, cut it off!” and other profanities she tried to close her ears to. One young man looked so much like her long-dead brother, Arnault, that Esma caught her breath. With spittle on his lips and an ugly snarl, he hurled abuse at Tilgar, as she knew Arnault would have done, and inside her the last vestige of her umbilical cord with humanity snapped.

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks as she regarded Tilgar’s brave face for the last time. He could have taken half a dozen of the guards on the stage with him, but now more than ever the Order needed to snuff out the last public embers of this war, and so he accepted his fate. Her eyes met his, and she nodded the unspoken vow to avenge him. As his body twisted and turned at the end of a crude rope, bloating his face purple, she could barely breathe, long fingernails inside her fists digging so deep they drew blood. Esma wanted to kill all those cheering, stinking peasants with her bare hands, not only the two Sentinels masquerading as witch-finders, who she dispatched the following summer.

That year was the turning point for her, when she saw how the Q’Roth classification of ordinary people as Level Three – galactic weeds that would never be fit for Grid Society, instead ripe for culling – was right and just. Humanity’s future was a dead end. Ordinary men would wage war and kill and violate each other for all eternity. More likely, men would annihilate all life once they developed the type of weapons she had read about in Q’Roth scripture, weapons that could raise the heat of the sun on Earth itself. No, the only possible future lay with the brothers and sisters of the Order of Alessia, later to be called Alicians, augmented by their Q’Roth patrons. Alicians were neither fractious nor small-minded, and worked together tirelessly toward a common goal – their salvation at the hands of the Q’Roth, deliverance from this flawed world to a new one, and a better way of life. Helping the Q’Roth to cull humanity would only bring forward mankind’s inevitable demise.

As time passed, the balance of evidence against humanity accrued in her mind. By the nineteenth century, the Order’s numbers had swelled, and they had a stronger foothold, subtly influencing many political decisions. The Alicians fomented wars to keep mankind off-balance and divided in collective mind and spirit. However, individuals began to appear amongst the normal population, showing great intellect. This had always been a concern – that humanity was beginning to produce Level Four specimens – Leonardo, Galileo and others had until that time been statistical outliers. Now, a clear trend emerged of new men and women with genius potential, and the Alicians set about finding them, detecting them through universities and learned societies. Some were recruited, but most were unreceptive to Alician ideology and

became the unfortunate victims of accidents or strange illnesses. A few inevitably slipped through the net, Darwin one of the most dangerous.

Esma and others in the High Council realised mankind was nearing its evolutionary 'cusp', when it could actually advance on its own from its dismal Level Three status. The surviving and greatly weakened Sentinels grasped it too, and tried to find and protect such individuals. If another visitor from the faraway galactic society she now knew as the Grid were to come and re-evaluate the human race, and found evidence of the rising frequency of such individuals, the planned and Grid-approved Q'Roth cull would be questioned, postponed, perhaps even cancelled.

That was when Esma and other Council members came up with the strategy of world wars as a way of killing off large sections of young people. What better way to demonstrate the prospects of humanity, than peoples' willingness to slaughter each other in their millions without question. It was so easy to incite fascism and hate, fanning the flames of man's pathetic innate barbarism. Those few lone voices arguing against the atrocities and insanity of war were drowned out in an orgy of bloodletting. Esma, as other Alicians, relished the arrival of each new update of casualty statistics, almost unbelieving how well the wars went. At one point, Sister Esma and other Alicians actually had to rein in the world's leaders to prevent mankind's total annihilation. After all, the Alicians had to hold up their end of the bargain, ensuring that the newly hatched Q'Roth, upon their return, could harvest humanity.

Once, Esma and a group of Alicians visited the aftermath of a First World War battlefield, thousands of bodies lying in poppy fields, some of the soldiers not yet dead from fatal wounds. One man called out to her, in agony, lying in a growing pool of his own blood. She stood above him, listening to his lamentable supplications, while she recalled the bravery of Tilgar and Alessia. Her lip curled in disgust. "You deserve to die," she said, "all of you." Esma placed the heel of her boot on his skull, and applied her weight until his inferior brain squeezed out onto the blood-soaked grass. This single act calmed her, but only momentarily. She would need many more deaths, billions, to quench her hatred: every last human. One thing she and Darwin had agreed upon years earlier was that evolution leads to complete eradication of mal-adapted species; irrevocable de-selection. There are no half-measures in nature, and no sentimentality. A new, superior breed displaces and eradicates an inferior one. That was the way of things.

Many years later, while reading Einstein's brilliant, if imperfect and ultimately flawed understanding of relativity, Esma realised something else about the curved nature of time. The Alician perspective, granted by their newfound longevity, was so different from normal men and women with their short lifespans. As centuries passed, she watched nations fight bloody wars – often catalysed by the Alicians to keep humanity off-balance – then generations later, become allies, friends even. Despite losing their loved ones and sons and daughters in battle, eventually they wanted their grandchildren to find peace. But those touched by the Q'Roth did not age appreciably, did not forget, and so never forgave. The faces of Alessia, Silburn, Tilgar and dozens of other fallen comrades called out to her every day, demanding retribution. And she would deliver it.

By the twenty-first century humanity was where the Q'Roth needed them to be, hopelessly divided by politics and religion, and on their knees after a third world war that had finally made humanity averse to nuclear weapons and nanotechnology, the only two defences against the Q'Roth.

Esma had risen slowly and stealthily through the ranks. When new Q'Roth hatchlings stirred on Eden in 2063, right on schedule, she had taken Alessia's place.

But she never accepted any honorific other than ‘Sister’; that is what Alessia had called her, and she wanted nothing more.

2081: Savange, Alician Homeworld

Sister Esma sat on the Bridge of the Crucible Class battleship as it undocked from Savange’s orbital tether. Twice she had come close to completely eradicating humanity. Two had stood in her way: Blake – a rook – and Micah, a pawn, but like her, one who had grown into something more. This time there would be no mistake. She would wipe the board clean once and for all, as soon as Quarantine came down around Esperia, their pathetic excuse for a world. Never mind the war raging across half the galaxy. As the plague had helped mask their revenge on the Sentinels centuries earlier, so the galactic invasion led by Qorall would hide her intended actions. Worlds fell every day. Who would miss another one? Her hand dipped into a recess in her cloak and clasped a small wooden figure whose edges had grown smooth. Soon, Alessia, soon.