

PoSaG - Chapter 0: Alpha

The fiery axe cleaved from the sky.

It was not a weapon any mortal hand had ever swung, but a verdict spoken and a sentence passed, shaped from fire old enough to remember when the world had no name.

The head of flame alone spanned several hundred meters, its edge honed to a precision that mocked the very concept of mercy, and when it struck the magic barrier raised above the crest of the hill, the collision did not sound like an impact at all—it sounded like the world disagreeing with itself about what had just happened.

The cacophony of sound that followed did not so much enter the ear as replace everything inside it, and every soldier within several kilometers who had not known to brace or prepare for it crumpled where they stood, hands flying to the sides of their heads, blood already threading down from burst eardrums before they fully understood what had happened to them.

The shield, however, held.

Aldric Voss did not move.

He stood at the foremost point of his army's formation—ten times ten thousand soldiers arrayed behind him across the scorched and blackened hillside, every one of them understanding without being told that the line between living and dying was the width of the singular man in front of them.

The gemstones set into his armour burned with cold light, eleven of them, each the size of a knuckle, each carved from a different stone quarried from a different corner of the world.

His jaw was locked.

The cords of his neck stood out like rope pulled taut.

Sweat coursed freely down his face and dripped from his chin to vanish before it reached the ruined ground, consumed by the residual heat rising off the earth in shimmering waves.

He was not the only one.

Eight other hills—eight other formations of similar size, spread across a stretch of blasted landscape that had once been the outermost farmlands of the greatest empire in existence—bore the same assault simultaneously.

Nine torrents of axe-shaped fire, nine magical barriers, nine men and women in gemstone-set armour holding the line through sheer, grinding will.

From above, the scene would have resembled nothing so much as a diagram of siege warfare drawn by a god with a cruel sense of geometry.

Then, suddenly, a portion of the third hill from the left ceased to exist.

The barrier meant to protect, ruptured with a sound like a bell being shattered rather than rung—a single, sharp and catastrophic note—and the fire came through.

It did not burn, for burning implied a process—a progression from a specific beginning, moving over a certain reaction and culminating in an end after a given time.

This was different.

Wherever the axe of flame touched, there was simply a person, and then there was not.

Six times six thousand souls turned to ash in less time than it takes a heart to complete a single beat, then the fire subsided.

For one suspended breath, nothing moved.

Then the gemstone mages answered.

It began with Aldric himself—a lance of white-hot lightning launched with both hands, every stone in his armour blazing simultaneously—and spread outward as the other surviving mages joined the assault.

Lightning came first, as was its purview, then pillars of condensed flame shaped nothing like the axe's casual arcs, then meteors of ice the size of carriages and smithies pulled screaming from clouds that hadn't existed seconds before, followed by lances, arrows and vines of pure magic, and finally the earth itself, the ground tearing apart in jagged, rupturing seams that raced across the lowland toward the ruins at the valley's heart.

Reality, already straining under the accumulated weight of the night's work, bent visibly around the barrage:

Light refracted at angles that had no business existing. Sound arrived before the events that caused it. The air tasted of copper and ozone and something so old that it had no name in any living language—the particular flavour of the membrane between this world and its neighbours being worn dangerously thin.

The first rift to answer this violation, opened without warning above the eastern flank.

Then a second, a third, a dozen, tearing into existence like wounds in the fabric of the air.

Through them came riftspawn—the things that lived in the spaces between and beyond, always pressing, always waiting for exactly this kind of invitation.

Some were the size of houses, slow, lumbering and catastrophic.

Others were small, fast and moved in the way that centipedes move, with the horror of too many parts working in too-perfect unison.

Several had wings and were already climbing, readying themselves to dive.

The armies reacted immediately.

Not with panic—for these were not men and women who had come to this valley to panic—but with the grim efficiency of soldiers who had been briefed on every contingency including the ones they'd hoped would not occur.

Generals shouted. Their Officers repeated the calls. Formations pivoted. Shield walls closed around the gemstone mages like hands cupping a candle flame against the storm.

The ensuing fighting was brutal, immediate and desperate, and in the midst of it, men and women died holding the line for the mages behind them—because they understood *exactly* what those mages were still doing, and *exactly* what would happen if they ever stopped.

Across the valley floor, the lone figure at the centre of it all had not moved.

She stood before what had once been a castle—or the memory of one.

The towers were long gone. The walls had been reduced to low, irregular ridges of slag and rubble, the stone not broken but melted, poured, resolidified in shapes that suggested violence on a geological scale.

She stood amid the ruins as though she had placed them there herself, or perhaps simply as though they were beneath her notice, which amounted to much of the same thing.

Her robes were unadorned and the colour of old bone, streaked with threads of red.

Her hands were at her sides, sweat dripping down each finger.

Every spell the mages had thrown her way had ceased before it reached her, blinking out the way a candle goes out in a hard wind, or meeting barriers so seamless they were invisible until struck, at which point they revealed themselves only briefly, only partially, only enough to be understood as vast.

She watched them all: Her eyes taking in the nine times ten times ten thousand soldiers, fighting the riftspawn. Her eyes taking in the nine gemstone mages and their attempts to kill her. Her eyes taking in all that was arrayed against her.

There was nothing cold in it, which was somehow worse. Merely pity and hurt.

Then she changed her approach, as she raised both of her arms high above her own head.

They appeared above each of the nine hills at the same moment—meteorites, but wreathed in living fire that burned in colours no meteorite had ever burned, trailing tails of light that left afterimages on the eye.

Each one was large enough to level the formation beneath it entirely.

The gemstone mages snapped their shields back up in unison, pouring everything remaining into the barriers above their heads, and for a moment the scene hung suspended—nine pillars of descending fire, nine desperate, blazing defences.

Four hills did not survive.

The meteorites came through where the shields broke upon contact and met the earth with sounds that crossed the valley like physical blows.

The mages in those positions were simply gone.

So were the armies—or the remnants thereof—protecting them.

The ground where they had stood was cratered and burning; the craters already cooling to glass at their very edges.

Five remained.

Aldric Voss was one of them.

He was on one knee before he realized he'd gone down, his right palm pressed into the ruined soil and bubbling at the heat cooking it far from gently, head bowed, chest heaving in ragged pulls.

The stones in his armour had dimmed.

He could feel the cost of the night in a way that was no longer metaphorical—it lived in his bones, in the trembling of his hands, in the edge of his vision that had begun to grey and soften.

He had been pouring himself into this work for three hours. What was left was not a lot.

The presence arrived beside him without footstep or sound.

"You have done well, human." The voice was quiet and without particular inflection. "One more exertion, and it is finally over."

Aldric looked up slowly.

The robed figure beside him was shorter than he'd expected, the first time they'd met, and remained shorter than expectation every time since.

The hood hiding its features was drawn. It was always drawn.

He spat. The spittle turned black and evaporated before it reached the ground.

"Time to see how a Goddess dies," he muttered, with the tone of a man settling a very old account.

He pressed himself upright, vertebra by vertebra, until he was standing.

He looked across the valley at the distant pale figure in the ruins, and then he looked down the hill at what remained of his army—fewer than he'd started with, *far* fewer—and then he raised his right fist and opened it.

A thunderclap rang out from above his formation.

The signal.

Across the valley, four other fists opened, their respective magics flaring briefly.

The five remaining gemstone mages dropped their shields in the same instant the goddess' next assault was already in motion—and the goddess's attack, finding no resistance for the first time since the fighting had begun, arrived unimpeded.

Ten times tens of thousands of people who had come to this valley because *someone* had to simply ceased to be, in the span between one breath and the next.

The five mages were already attacking.

Every stone in every suit of armour blazed to its absolute limit, then cracked, shattered and turned to dust.

The combined working that launched from those five points was not five spells, but one, shaped and threaded together through months of preparation and years of understanding between the people throwing it.

It crossed the distance to the ruins in less than a second.

The goddess' shields held.

One of the five mages fell as their Soul was spent. Then another.

Three.

Aldric was swaying on his feet.

He was throwing everything remaining, just like the others had—not just the power channelled through the stones or through his being, but the deeper reserve, the one that you were *never* supposed to touch because touching it meant you were spending something you could not ever earn back.

His hands shook.

His vision narrowed to a tunnel with the goddess at its end. He was dimly aware of the ground rushing up to meet him and correcting his footing through instinct alone.

And then the figure that had been beside him was no longer beside him.

The world *stopped*.

The spell hanging in the air froze in place. The riftspawn halted mid-lunge. The soldiers stood as still as paintings. The fire stopped burning. Even the sound of battle ceased—and the sharp, copper-and-ozone reek of reality fraying at its seams with it—replaced by a quality of nothingness so complete it physically hurt.

The robed figure stood beside the goddess in the ruins below.

Even across the impossible distance of the valley, even through three hours of accumulated ruin in his own eyes, Aldric could see her face clearly in that moment—which was itself a strange thing, and perhaps not accidental.

He saw the surprise move through her expression first, utterly unguarded, the surprise of something that had lived long enough to believe itself beyond surprising.

It moved into hurt, which was less obvious, and yet somehow larger still.

Then came the confusion, which was the worst of the three, because it was the confusion of someone genuinely trying to understand not *what* was happening, but *why*.

She looked at the robed figure the way people look at the ones they trusted most.

Then her knees gave way, and she folded to the ground and was forever still.

The sigh that left Aldric's chest had lived there for a *very* long time.

He became aware of the robed figure beside him again.

He did not startle.

"Aldric Voss," the figure said. "You have done well. As have the others." A pause followed that was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable—simply honest. "I am sorry that it has had to come to this."

"As am I."

He looked out at the ruins.

At the still valley.

At the shape of the woman on the ground, small from here, smaller than something that had shaken the foundations of the world for longer than any of the kingdoms arrayed against her had existed for had any right to be.

"Even a Goddess cannot escape the Gaze of Roth, huh?"

Roth did not answer.

Aldric nodded slowly, as though an answer had been given regardless. "Farewell, Roth."

"Farewell, Aldric Voss." The voice was precisely as quiet as it always was, and somehow held more weight than anything that had been unleashed in the valley that night. "I will make sure your Souls find the right path."

Aldric Voss closed his eyes.

The breath that left him was long, and slow, and when it was finished, he did not draw another.

The world *continued*.

From the place where the goddess had fallen, the light came first—not as a wave or a surge or a bloom, but as a single instantaneous declaration, white, absolute and total, reaching every corner of the valley in the same moment it left its source.

There was no sound. There was no heat. There was no pressure.

There was only the light, and then the absence of *everything* the light had touched.

The armies were gone. The mages were gone. The riftspawn, the rifts themselves, the ruins of the castle, the scorched and battered hills—gone.

The valley floor was gone. The very geography of the place was gone.

Where ten times ten years of accumulated human endeavour and three hours of apocalyptic battle had left their combined marks on the landscape, there was now simply *nothing*.

Only sand remained. Flat and pale and silent, in every direction, to every horizon.

As though nothing had ever been there at all...

—

"[...] And that is how the *Era of Divinity* came to an end," the bard finished, dipping into a bow as the longhouse erupted around me—boots stamping, hands clapping, my own small ones among them.

"With the death of Aevindra, her domains over Fire and Prophecy died with her. But, as most of you know from this cozy little thing right here—" he gave the rough-stone hearth a light kick, the wood crackling steadily within it, "—Fire was *not* lost to the world. The Gods and Goddesses have always shared some of their domains, and with Aevindra gone, Solveyne was able to pick up the metaphorical—and literal—torch for all of us."

He let that sit for a moment, his gaze drifting across the arrayed villagers, something wry and a little rueful settling into his expression. "Prophecy, however... *well*. There's a reason Seers and Oracles are considered charlatans these days. Without Aevindra, their visions are only as accurate as the Twins allow—and the Twins, as ever, are content to give you nothing better than fifty-fifty."

The questions came fast after that, as Edvar—that was the bard's name, I'd heard someone use it earlier—took a breath and signalled with open hands that the floor was free.

Marta, the tanner's wife, went first, asking whether Aevindra had really been as small as the story made her sound, or whether that was just bard's flourish.

Edvar smiled and said that was a matter of some debate among scholars, but that the accounts he'd drawn from described her as simply... *present*—until she wasn't—in a way that made size feel like the wrong question entirely.

Old Fenwick, who always sat closest to the hearth on account of his knees, wanted to know more about the riftspawn—whether the rifts had ever closed fully, or whether some of them were still out there.

Edvar assured him they had closed, every last one, the moment Aevindra fell. Her death having wiped the slate clean entirely and repaired the Veil between the worlds.

Bram, the miller's eldest, called out from somewhere behind me.

"What about magic?" he asked. "Is it all just... gone now, too? I never seent any of it."

I sat up so fast I nearly knocked over the boy beside me.

'Yes. That!'

That was the question I needed answers to.

I had been turning it over in my head since the moment Edvar had described Alveric's gemstones blazing, since the lightning, since the meteors made of ice—none of which I could really even imagine as I didn't know what "gemstones" or "meteors" even were, but that hadn't stopped me from *trying*.

I had been sitting on it the whole time since then, barely breathing, waiting for *someone* to ask it so I wouldn't have to, because I couldn't—I was not even supposed to be here.

I caught myself and quickly looked around, checking the faces of the nearest adults for any sign that my reaction had been noticed. Nobody was looking at me. The cluster of children I had buried myself in the middle of had kept me hidden well enough so far.

'Okay. I'm okay.'

I had slipped into the longhouse the moment I heard the bard would be there, worming my way under the furs laid out along the far wall for the elders before the adults had properly settled.

It had seemed like a *very* good plan at the time.

It still seemed like a good plan now, mostly, except for the part where I had not finished washing the clothes before I left, and if anyone here recognized me and mentioned it to my mother, it would stop being a good plan *very* quickly.

'Can't let that happen...!'

I pulled my knees up to my chest, fixed my eyes on Edvar, and tried very hard to look like I belonged.

The bard held up a calming hand.

"Magic is *not* gone," he said, and I felt something loosen in my chest. "Nezath still lives."

He paused, tilting his head.

"Long may he live."

The hall repeated it back in a low murmur. "*Long may he live.*"

"Magic still exists in the world. It simply... requires something most of us do not have."
Edvar's hands came together in front of him. "*Divine blood*. To channel magic—true magic, the kind Alveric and his kin wielded—you must carry the blood of the gods somewhere in your line."

The longhouse went quiet.

I felt it land in my stomach too.

I didn't entirely understand what divine blood meant—not really—but I knew what *noble* blood meant, because my father had explained it to me once when I'd asked why some people had more rooms in their houses when he'd told me about his life before the village.

Noble blood was apparently something you were born with or you weren't, and there was nothing to be done about it either way.

Now, divine blood sounded *even grander* than noble blood.

'I wonder how many rooms they would have in their houses...?'

I looked across the fire at Daven—Headman Croft's firstborn, broad-shouldered even at nine summers, who everyone agreed would be the next headman as sure as seasons changed.

If anyone in the village had something special running through them, it would be him, for sure. But Daven's face had gone the same flat, deflated shape as everyone else's, and somehow that just made it worse.

If even *Daven* didn't have it, then the rest of us *certainly* didn't.

'Of course...'

I stared down at my own hands dejectedly.

"Now, now." Edvar's voice cut through the settled gloom. "Before you all decide the night is ruined, let me remind you of something important here."

He stepped forward, away from the hearth, and his shadow stretched long across the rushes.

"Alveric Voss—the man you just applauded, the man whose name you will remember until your grandchildren's grandchildren are old—could not have laid a *finger* on Aevindra alone. Not him, not any of the Gemstone Mages. Divine blood and all."

That got some attention back—mine included.

"*Those armies*," Edvar continued, pointing outward as though the valley beyond the longhouse walls was the valley from the story, "were not mages. They were not touched by gods or magical creatures or even nobility. They were farmers and smiths and guardsmen and the second sons of headsman who had nothing to their names but a weapon and the *decision* to show up."

He let his eyes move across the room.

"All it took was that: Determination. Grit. The willingness to stand in the path of something that could kill you with a thought and hold the line anyway. *That* is what made the difference at the end of the day: Human *hands*; Human *will*."

The mood lifted.

I smiled along with everyone else.

But the cold stone was still there.

'*Alveric.*'

Edvar had said his name like it truly *meant* something.

The soldiers—the ones who had held the line and died and kept dying until there was almost nothing left of them—I didn't know a single one of their names. Not *one*. They had been in the story the whole time and I still couldn't have told you who any of them were.

Neither could Edvar, I assumed.

'*That's not fair,*' I thought, and then immediately felt bad for thinking it, because the bard had just said they were brave and I believed him. But being brave hadn't given them names.

Being brave had just meant they were there, *behind* Alveric, doing the minor things that let Alveric do the important thing.

'*I don't want to be behind someone doing unimportant things like washing clothes...*'

The thought arrived plainly.

'*I want to be Alveric. I want someone to say my name like **that!***'

I looked down at my hands again, small and a little red from the washing I hadn't finished, and tried to imagine gemstones set into armour on my wrists, blazing with cold light.

Which proved utterly impossible, as I still had no idea what gemstones were—or what an armour that could fit them would even look like.

The cured leather that the village watchmen wore had no slots for extras, last I checked.

'*This sucks... I'll have to ask father.*'

The next question came from further back—a man's voice, deeper, one of the adults.

Aldous, the woodsman, a big quiet man who rarely spoke in gatherings.

"The other one," he said. "You said his name at the end: Roth."

The shift in the room was immediate and instinctive.

Every hand went up in unison, palm in, held just in front of the eyes—shielding, the way you shield against the sun during the high-summer months.

I threw mine up too, *fast*, because I had been told about this more than once and had no intention of being the only one in the room who forgot.

You did *not* speak the name of the God of Death with your eyes open and your gaze forward.

"You did not mishear me," Edvar said, his own hand raised briefly before he lowered it.

"Hands down, friends. I will not say his name again tonight."

Hands came down slowly, cautiously, like people testing whether the clouds had darkened the sun enough to see again.

"The question of *why* he helped is a fair one," Edvar said. "And the answer begins with Aevindra herself."

He moved back toward the hearth, and his voice settled into a different register—lower, less energetic and more... rueful.

"Gods walking among men was not unheard of in the Era of Divinity. It happened. But it *was* rare, and the reason it was rare was not indifference." He looked around the room. "It was *fear*. Even gods can die. When they step outside their Domain, they step into a world of mortal edges and mortal weapons and the unpredictable press of human will, and they are vulnerable in ways they are not when they remain where they belong. Most gods understood this and respected it."

"Aevindra did not?" Oliver, one of the woodcutter's older sons—fourteen summers, if I remembered correctly—asked.

"Aevindra was powerful enough that she did not *have* to. Outside her own Domain, she remained formidable enough that the usual caution did not apply to her. And so she made a choice that very few gods had ever made, or ever will again."

He paused once more, meeting everyone's eyes—I quickly hid behind the boy next to me.

"She became *human*. Truly human—flesh and hunger and cold nights and the fear of losing the people she had come to love. Or at least, as much as a goddess truly could. She walked among us for long enough that she stopped merely being a visitor."

The fire crackled and popped.

Nobody spoke.

"And she *did* love us," Edvar said, quietly. "That part of the story is true, and it matters more than anything. In the beginning, her presence was a blessing—winters did not claim the sick and old, natural disasters were avoided long before they came, wars ended before they truly began... She was not cruel. She was not malicious. She loved humanity the way you love something precious and fragile that you cannot stop yourself from hovering over."

He stopped once again, but this time did not meet anyone's eyes.

When he continued, his voice was slower.

"But the *love* of a goddess is not a simple thing. It does not stay still. It does not know its own boundaries... She had lived for longer than memory could reach, and in all that time she had never been attached to anything the way she became attached to us—and when you are *that* old and you love something *that* much, the fear of losing it becomes its own kind of madness."

He turned the words over carefully.

"It started small. A village that had slighted one of her chosen, reduced to ash. A king who had made war on a people she had decided to protect, his entire line ended before the day changed. *Judgements*, she called them. The judgements of a goddess who had appointed herself the shepherd of all humanity—and who had long since stopped being able to tell the difference between *protection* and *possession*."

I didn't fully understand all of it. But I definitely understood the gist of it:

'Love is madness...'

"By the end," Edvar said, "there was not much of what she had *been* left in what she had *become*. She had decided, in the logic of her unravelling, that humanity could only be truly safe if it was *hers*—entirely, completely, with no part of it beyond her reach or her keeping. Every kingdom that refused her. Every people that chose their own way. She began to see them not as beloved children making a mistake, but as a tear in something that was supposed to be *whole*. And so humanity had to make the hardest decision it has ever made."

Edvar spread his hands. "Not to defeat an existential *enemy*. But to let go of something that had once been a protector, and a blessing, and—in its own catastrophic way—a source of genuine, unconditional and all-encompassing love. Before there was nothing left to save of who she had once been."

He glanced upward towards the ceiling briefly, and as he continued, every hand in the room twitched upward for just a moment before settling again.

"The *God of Death* had his own reasons for lending his hand," Edvar said carefully, stepping around the name. "His domain is not cruelty. It is not the ending of things for the pleasure of ending them. It is the turn of the wheel—the dying that makes room for the living, the Souls that pass on so that new ones may arrive. Humanity is the wheel. Without us—without our living and loving and aging and dying in our right seasons—his domain does not just weaken slowly; It collapses. A world where a goddess of fire and prophecy had decided that *nothing*

she loved would ever be permitted to end was not a world the God of Death could allow to exist. Not out of malice but *necessity*."

He was quiet for a moment, and something in his expression shifted—turning softer, and a little sad. "And make no mistake. He loved her too. As all gods did, save the dark ones, who have never loved anything but themselves... Even gods," he said at last, "cannot escape the turning of the cycle."

The fire popped again. Someone shifted on a bench.

Outside, the wind moved through the eaves of the longhouse with a low, patient sound.

Then the doors to the longhouse suddenly opened, the cold of the late-afternoon autumn sweeping through the spacious room.

"*Maret Fieldend*, are you in here?!"

Every part of me went completely still.

I knew that voice the way I knew the sound of our door, the creak of our particular floorboard, the specific way my name—my *full* name, especially—sounded when the person saying it was *not* pleased with me.

I knew it in my stomach before my ears had even finished hearing it.

Around me, heads were already turning—toward the door, toward my mother's silhouette framed against the dark outside, and then, one by one, sweeping the room.

Fifty heads, or so my father had said, lived in this village.

More than half of them, if I had to guess, were in this longhouse right now.

I had nowhere to go, nothing to hide behind and the first eyes found me almost immediately.

I did not wait for the second ones.

"Y—yes, Mom."

"You come *right here*, young lady!"

I stood up. The boy beside me shifted to let me out.

I kept my eyes low and made my way through the gap between bodies, face burning so hot I was half-convinced everyone could see it even in the firelight—and maybe they could, because I could feel *every single* set of eyes in the room tracking me as I went, the silence that had settled over the longhouse somehow louder than all the noise that had been there before.

I knew *every one* of their faces, and they knew mine, and tomorrow and the day after and every day for the rest of my life in this village, they would all remember *exactly* what I looked like walking up to my mother like this.

Her voice had not changed temperature at all as she said, "I went to check on the laundry. It was not done and you were nowhere to be found! You are more than seven summers old now, why are you still behaving like a baby? What did I tell you about listening to the bard, Maret?"

I stopped in front of her and looked at the ground.

"To finish the laundry... or I wouldn't get to listen to him."

"And what, pray-tell, *did* you do, young lady?"

I couldn't make myself look up. I stared at the toes of her sandal and felt even more heat climbing from my chest up into my face and ears.

The *slap* came fast.

"Look at me while I'm talking to you, *Maret*."

Her voice had not risen. That was almost worse.

"What, *exactly*, did you do instead?"

My eyes were stinging before I had fully raised them to meet hers, though whether it was more from the cheek or the embarrassment I couldn't have said.

"I—I went to listen to the bard, before finishing the laundry... I didn't want to miss—"

The second one landed on the right side, then.

"I did *not* ask for excuses." She held my gaze until she was satisfied I would keep it. "But at least you are not so far gone that you don't understand *where* you went wrong."

She stepped back and held the door. "Let's go! You have laundry to finish, and then you have dishes, and then the mats need puffing out before anyone can sleep tonight. Only once *all* of that is done do you come back—if you're fast and Edvar is still here."

My eyes went wide before I could stop them.

There was no way. There was simply *no* way.

I would be lucky to finish half of it before it was fully dark, let alone *all* of it.

Even if I ran the whole way and worked without stopping and nothing went wrong, Edvar would be *long* done and gone before I knocked the last mat.

I could feel the protest rising in my throat, hot, urgent and entirely reasonable—I swallowed it.

She was my mother, and my father was not here, so her word was the only word that counted. And beyond that—beyond *all* of that—the entire village was still watching.

I had already given them enough to look at tonight and had gotten myself into enough trouble.

So I held my tongue and followed her out.

The doors of the longhouse closed behind me, and through the wood I heard the low murmur of Edvar's voice picking back up again—carrying on without me, the way stories always did, the way the world always did: Patient, indifferent and entirely unconcerned with whether I was there to hear or be part of it.

I shivered as I followed my mother home, the cold, late-afternoon air cutting straight through my hemp tunic like it wasn't there at all...