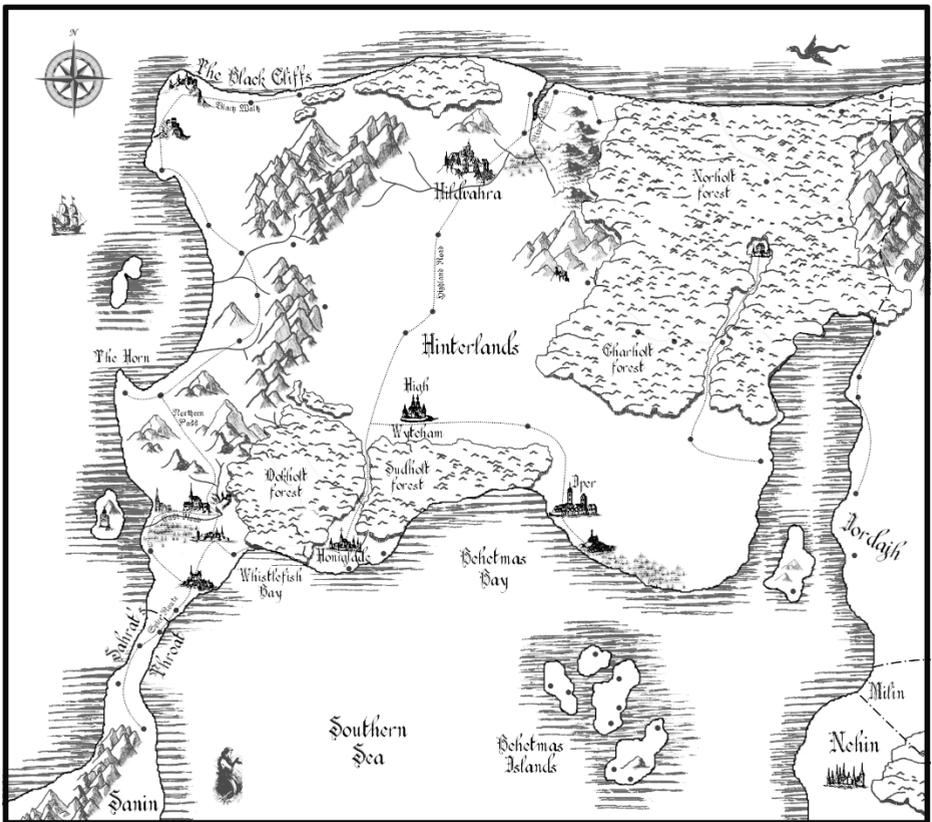


Nine Gods Wait

Map of Advahrin



Prologue

A thin dawn fog hovers on the grass when the man steps outside. He walks quickly through the yard, the grass soft beneath his boots, and pauses at the entrance of the forest to cast a glance back over the grounds, at the still mansion. The morning light is cold and blue, and his breath fogs in the air.

These mornings have become ritual after so many years: to rise at dawn, eat a large breakfast, and leave early in the day; the pattern calms him. Nine times a year, on each full moon, he packs supplies to last a few days and sets out.

The trees grow larger after he has walked a mile, and eventually he is striding past trunks wide enough to accommodate small houses. When he reaches a slope on the right of the path, he skids down the side to the brook at the bottom and walks along it for a while longer. When the lady waiting at the entrance to her cave comes into view, he hops across the water to meet her.

"Hello, Mira." He says brightly.

"She will arrive before Echan's moon."

"I'm fine, thank you. Have you had a busy week?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Of course, I did." He says, and sighs. "The others are not pleased about it. I think perhaps she should go to Hildvakra directly."

"That would bring its own dangers." She replies, as cryptically as ever. "Kharis has heard about it."

The man runs his hand through his hair. "I would rather discuss this another time, if you don't mind."

The lady nods her head politely, then takes from her pocket two small bottles which contain a thick, silver-blue liquid. The contents shimmer and swirl thickly as she holds them up in the light. She hands them to the man; he does not need instruction.

By noon he has walked fifteen miles east into the forest, immersed in the quiet of the forest. Here, he allows himself a break to rest and takes off his bag, then sits down on the damp ground. The purpose of the walking was two-fold: firstly, to tire him, and secondly, to put as much distance between himself and the westerly towns as possible. He had learnt not to take a horse, and through trial and error found the best distance for his purpose.

He eats an apple and thinks on the orphan girl and how best to help. It is always best to stay in good spirits in the face of hardship, so he does not dwell in sadness but instead enjoys the warmth of the air and thinks proactively. One of his favourite things about summer is the late, balmy evenings. After half an hour he rises again, shoulders his pack, and continues.

In the golden light of late afternoon, the wanderer finally comes to a halt deep in the Dokholt forest. It is the same shaded glen he visited several months ago and has a charred patch in the centre. It is far enough from the closest towns and farmhouses not to worry about the smoke, and it has not rained in several days, so building his dinner fire is easy.

By the time the fire is crackling gently and there is a pile of wood for the evening, night has begun to fall. The man takes out the stuffed pigeon and suspends it over the fire on a skewer, then collects some water from the stream in his small pot and sets it to boil. The tingling,

excited feeling has is beginning to awake within his muscles now and exhilaration flutters his heart. He eats and drinks observing the sensations with practiced calmness: there are burning aches inside his joints and an itching all up his spine. A need for freedom. Though the sky is cloudy beneath the dark outline of the tree canopy, he knows what is coming; it will soon be too late. He packs up his cooking gear, undresses and takes out one of Mira's bottles, then stows his coat and bag tightly into a hole in a nearby tree.

He sits naked on the forest floor now, beside the fire, and prays to the goddess Mila and her Mother while he listens to the last evening songs of the birds. He tips the bottle back and forth in the bright flickering light and watches the contents shimmer silver as it flows. His expression is not optimistic. But then he decisively unstoppers the vial and drinks it in one gulp.

Immediately his mouth is cool and numb, and the sensation flows to his stomach, as though he was cool and made of rubber inside. Within minutes his body feels numb, but his mind is as sharp as a knife, hyper-alert. He smells the dirt, the river, the trees and their birds. The pungent smell of another like him far off causes a guttural growl to rise into his throat and he listens carefully for it but can only hear the fish swimming and the trees swaying in the breeze. He waits. Then, finally, the moonlight touches him.

He falls forward onto his hands and knees as a burning, stretching sensation begins to rush through his veins and every muscle. His skin sears with the sensation of course hair growing out at unnatural speed. He begins to convulse in pain, screaming involuntarily as his bones and muscles bend, twist, stretch and break, reforming into a new shape underneath his leathery skin. A bony tail sprouts from the base of his

spine, his organs change size. Eventually, as always, he loses consciousness in agony.

CHAPTER 1

The East Road

Nobody cried for the boy that was thrown over the rail into the churning sea. Like Imogen, he had been orphaned by the plague. Instead, the passengers cried in fear for their own lives because he had brought the fever aboard. Imogen listened to them running along the corridor outside her small, yellow cabin, shouting and weeping.

She passed the weeks watching the ocean through her small port window. When the weather was good, she opened the window to let in the breeze and craned her head out to feel it. When they were becalmed, she threw orange rinds and peas out of the window to watch the birds. She would think of her father as she heard mournful wails through the walls, and waited for the ship to be swallowed up by Nyet in another dramatic storm, or eventually skate onto a foreign shore and excrete unto it the diseased and tormented cargo.

One day the noises became excited and Imogen caught glimpse of land on the horizon. They passed an island, and later that day passed another, so she piled her belongings back into her large case, making sure to check the cabin thoroughly. It was dawn the following morning when the boat came into the port of Vesthof, pink sky shining off the calm waters into the window. Imogen waited, wearing her traveling cloak and with her luggage beside her as people scurried past the door, until the ship had fallen silent and a babble of voices was coming from the wharf. Then, an attendant came to tell her that she had to disembark, and she followed the lady to the portside of the boat and

crossed the wooden bridge that connected it to land, heaving her case along with her.

The crowd that had disembarked from the ship was loitering around the wharf, which directly abutted to the main square of the town. Here, faded canvas stalls swayed gently in the morning breeze, housing traders and their sleepy children and displaying colourful fabrics, baskets of bread and fresh fish that smelt all the way up the street. The buildings were upright and wooden affairs made from timber and plaster, completely foreign to Imogen. Rose-amber clouds laid gently on the shoulders of the sharp mountains beyond the town. None of it provided any comfort as Imogen disembarked the passenger ship that had carried her far away from Echoss.

She lugged her case through the main street, past the stalls and side passages, to the far end of the town as she had been instructed: she had read the letter from her estranged uncle so many times that she had memorised the directions.

'When you disembark, I shall have a servant meet you ... walk through the marketplace to the back of the town ... I offer my sincerest condolences about the loss of your father ...'

Imogen shoved the thought away and hoisted her case over a puddle of muck.

At the back of the town, the buildings stopped at a low, stone wall and gave way to vast arable plains on every side. To her right, the fields sloped to a broad, marshy estuary that cut inland from the black-sand beach; on the left, a great mountain range loomed closely. Where she stood was the beginning of the East Road: a dirt gravel path that snaked away from Vesthof and over the grassy slopes into the distance.

It was marked by a sign which read

EAST ROAD
RHODAIR 17 MILES
HONIGLADE 78 MILES

The words had been painted long ago, the paint faded, and the wood was splintered and weathered. Behind it stood an open-top cart, with a horse grazing leisurely nearby. In the driver's seat sat a tanned old man with a smoking pipe poking out from his greying beard, who was languidly inspecting his nails.

"Good morning," she said.

He looked up, "Are you Miss Adelheid?"

"Yes."

"I din'spect you to speak Valhrrin."

Imogen didn't know what to say to that, but the man introduced himself as Ubaid, the stable master at Adran House, the seat of the Isenbert family. He was to escort Imogen to her uncle's manor.

gave him a wide berth as he climbed down and stowed her trunk in the cart.

"Y'ready to go?" He asked when he turned around.

"No, well... there was plague on the ship. I might make you sick."

To her surprise, the man laughed gruffly. "Do'n worry 'bout tha'."

"Why do you laugh? The pestilence is incurable!"

"We surviv'd it twenny years past," he said, harnessing the horse onto the cart, "an' a fair few of your lot 'ave come by recent, but nobody's dyin'. We've good apothecaries."

Imogen climbed into the cart after her trunk and it began to trundle down the gravel road in the morning sunshine. They rode slowly along

the East Road for the entire day, past farmers' fields and peat marshes, the river south, below them on their right, sometimes closer to them or further, as mountains watched them from the north.

Around dusk, they reached a town called Rhodair. The first indication was the blending of wild plains and marshes into squared farm lands under the deep blue sky. It was chased by a dark, mass of stone – a wall twice the height of a man. Ubaid slowed slightly as they approach, and expertly guided the cart through a narrow aperture in the wall. A moment ensconced in brick, then they emerged onto a peaceful, wide street lit by gently burning lanterns that hung from the townhouses.

Ubaid paused here to talk with the town guards, then they rumbled on, across the plaza to the stables of a large, lively inn on the far side, where they stopped and dismounted and allowed a servant to take their horse and cart inside. There was a swinging painted sign on the side of the building which named it 'The Inebriated Ogre', accompanied by a depiction of a dopey, warty ogre smiling widely and holding a tankard the same size as its fat head.

The place was bustling: a jovial piano tune poured out of the windows into the street and flowed over the crowd within. Amongst the villagers sat travellers conversing in strange tongues, overall creating such a din that the innkeeper had to shout to greet them as they squeezed through to the bar. He had been expecting Ubaid and his charge and summoned his son to show them to their room. The boy, about twelve summers of age and somewhat stressed, led them through the throng to the back corner of the tavern and into a closed porch that led up to a flight of stairs to the bedrooms.

The room they were given was small and plain, quiet and with two invitingly cushiony beds and a dim, cosy fire dancing in the hearth, but as soon as the servant had left them, Ubaid that he was going downstairs to drink.

"I'm goin' t'have some ale. You can do as y'like but remember to keep ye wits about you. Don' tell anyone yer name."

Imogen laid in her bed and looked at the ceiling for a while, but the muffled raucous noise of the crowd was loud even through the floors, so eventually she rolled out of bed again, pulled on some clothes over her nightwear, and went downstairs after her companion.

The tavern was perhaps even fuller and louder than it had been before. Ubaid was nowhere to be seen amongst the sea of strange faces. Imogen squeezed between people looking for Ubaid and occasionally calling for him over the din, with no success. After searching the whole tavern, she found a quiet booth in the corner and sat down to watch for him in the crowd. There was a man asleep here with his head in his arms on the table, drooling slightly.

There went the innkeeper's son, covered in ale and damp with sweat; strangers came and went; a man stumbled about falling into people. In the next booth two brown men were deep in conversation in a language she had never heard.

"Amir?" Somebody mumbled. The stranger asleep on the table stirred and turned his head to look at the girl with groggy bloodshot eyes. "Oh, who are you?"

"Emma." She lied.

"Oh," He paused, and briefly seemed to fall asleep on his arms again, before asking, "where's Amir?"

"I don't know."

"Are you a traveller? I've not seen you before."

"Yes. My ship docked this morning in Vesthof, I am from Echoss."

"Ah I can hear your accent now, but your Valhrrin is good."

"Thank you."

"Amir's wife is Echossen, too." The drunk trailed off again, and Imogen couldn't tell if he was still conscious. She was beginning to think she ought to retreat upstairs again, uncomfortable in such a raucous crowd.

"Who's Amir?" she asked.

The man sat up and laughed, "a good tradesman when he's not drunk! We work together. My name is Nestor. What brought you to here, then?"

"I have come to live with my uncle because my family are dead."

Nestor's face fell. "Oh... I'm so sorry. And you are so young!"

"I suppose," Imogen said, and shifted nervously. "Do you know Ahdran House?" she asked, then immediately regretted it: the man's face drained of colour.

"Don't go near that evil place." He said in a low voice, with a slightly cross-eyed expression of revulsion.

She leaned in closer conspiratorially. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

A heavy hand landed on her shoulder. "Is this drunkard being a nuisance?" Ubaid's gruff voice said. She looked around, startled.

"No,"

"Come on, s'time to go." He pulled her up and through the thinning crowd, away from the table. The man at the booth stared after them with a grave expression.

"That man... he called Ahdran House evil."

"e was drunk." Ubaid grumbled in a dismissive tone. He smelt strongly of the nutty, sickly white ale that most of the patrons had been drinking.

"But why would he say *that*?"

"Some of the villagers – some of the *stupider* ones – are supers'titious of the bad luck the place has suffered... over the years, y'know." He said this with the distinct impression of someone withholding information, but due to his tone and the fact that he couldn't walk straight without tripping and grappling onto people, Imogen decided not to pursue the matter and supported him in climbing the stairs. "You shouldn' tell shifty characters where we live."

"He didn't *seem* shifty."

"Don' quarrel with me!" The oaf was infuriating. "Put the nonsense out o' ye head an' go to sleep." They did not speak again until the morning.

The journey onwards was shorter, only a few hours, but they did not leave until late afternoon due to Ubaid's thumping headache, and the need to buy groceries in the town. They rumbled out of the eastern gate of Rhodair in sunshine under a peaceful blue sky and down the hillside amongst fields of crop and herds of sheep. Imogen had not slept well either, and lounged in the back of the wagon on top of her cloak as they trundled on.

Without realising, she fell asleep, and then awoke in the dark. The carriage had come to a stop. She sat up: looming out of the darkness ahead was a huge black building. It curled round the driveway on both sides and had a steep, pointed roof. None of the windows were lit.

Imogen picked up her cloak and climbed down, waiting while Ubaid beckoned to somebody near left side of the house and retrieved her case. A tentative boy appeared. He did not look at Imogen, instead keeping his eyes to the ground, lead the horse with its cart out of sight behind the mansion.

One of the front doors opened and candlelight spilled out over the stone steps. An old butler stood in the doorway, peering into the darkness through cataract-misted eyes.

"Good evening, Miss Adelheid." He said with a wrinkled smile.

"Hello, sir." She replied.

"Please do come inside. Ubaid will take care of your luggage."

Imogen walked up the steps, passing between two large, empty stone vases, and into the house.