

## PRAISE FOR K. V. JOHANSEN

### Praise for *Breath and Bone*

A joy to read. *Breath and Bone* is a wonderful tale of rescue and redemption, family and friendship - all told in a gentle and lyrical voice that harks back to the great fantasy of the past.

– Tom Lloyd

KV Johansen employs a classic fairy tale trope as a starting point for a dark fable of witches and demigods. Lyrical and finely honed, *Breath and Bone* mixes conflict, magic, and intrigue to great effect

— Anthony Ryan

This fairytale-like story has both teeth and heart. KV has created something very special here.

— K.D. Edwards

## PRAISE FOR K. V. JOHANSEN

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— *ForeWord Reviews*

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— *Publishers Weekly*

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— James Latimer, *The Fantasy Hive*

# BREATH AND BONE

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K. V. JOHANSEN



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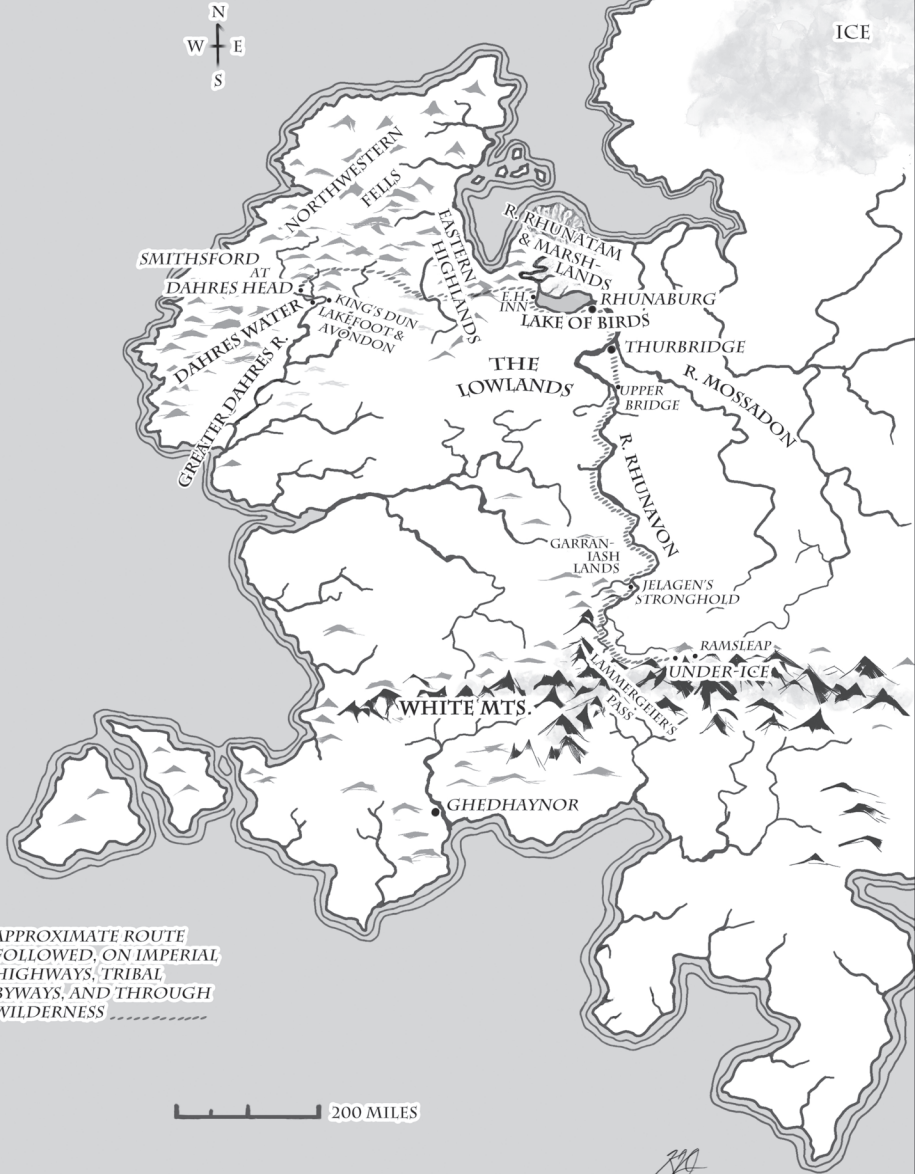
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PLACES OF INTEREST IN THE  
TRAVELS OF HEDGE & PONY  
TO THE VILLAGE OF  
UNDER-ICE



## IN WHICH ARRANY STEALS A HORSE

**Y**oung Arrany did not like the way the bears were looking at her. They were altogether too knowing, and, she considered, malevolent. All very well to tell herself that cave bears generally confined themselves to eating plants. Claws, though. Big claws. And teeth. The previous autumn she'd seen a pair of the boars, the great he-bears, fight—roaring, snarling, grappling, savagely biting—and been glad she was much lower down the valley on her errand to round up the witch's goats. These were sows, she thought. Smaller. They stood only as tall as the top of her head at the shoulder, which was not so tall as all that.

Quite tall enough.

She tried an innocent smile, not for the bears, but for the half dozen humanfolk with them. Armed, armoured in a motley of leather and scraps of mail, and with the self-satisfied swagger that said, whether robber band or ill-governed chief's guard, they figured they owned this road, or at least the bridge. She should have followed her first instinct and turned aside, gone down into the thick-wooded ravine and tried to find her own way across. They had come swarming out onto the old stone bridge, three behind and three before, when she was halfway over. Two of the robbers—definitely

robbers—were mounted on skinny horses. Three, including the boy on the yellow horse, had bows, and though the boy had his unstrung and stuck carelessly through a strap, the other two were strung, and if they were held casually down at the side, there were nonetheless arrows swift to hand. And then there were the bears, blocking the way ahead.

“Blessings of the day, friends,” she offered. “Is it much farther to Thurbridge?” That was the largest town she knew of on this old imperial highway, which she’d been following northerly along the valley of the Rhunavon since turning to put the great ice-shrouded heights at her back, and knowing, every step, that she’d been a fool. Setting out on the road in the year’s waning, as if the one she sought might vanish away like dew in the sun for her delaying. As if she hadn’t been in service to the witch, hiding her thoughts, hiding everything, behind a meekly downcast gaze and quiet obedience, since she and her brother had come to that high meadow in the height of green summer, a year and more gone. A sensible lass—well she knew it—would have bided her time and waited for spring and the greening of the world, but no. She told the story over in her head to herself every morning, how she’d panicked, stolen what little she could lay her hands on—a loaf, a cheese, a few apples—and slipped away in the night. Shameful. Cowardly.

Wild godlings are chancy beings, maybe, but she ought to have thought things through. Her dying on the winter roads or starving as a beggar in some town wasn’t going to find the one she sought any quicker, or be much use to anyone, least of all her unfortunate brother. It might be that summer was just ripening into autumn; the second cut of the hay all in, the grain swelling golden, the earliest apples yellow and red, falling soft and squashing into the road from the hedgerow trees to the delight of the wasps, but she had half the old empire to cross, on her hunt for the little northwestern lake called Dahres Water, and the wild godling said to live in the hills above its shore. She’d have done better to wait, bide her time, and set out in the spring.

Not that it was actually me she was looking for.

“Thurbridge, is it? Far enough,” the big man on the brown horse said, and the lot of them grinned, a couple of women nudging one another. Thurbridge, of course, lies where the Rhunavon is joined by its more easterly sister, the Mossadon, growing great and broad and flowing unbridged from there north to the Lake of Birds, which some say is merely a vast broadening of its channel, a pool in the river, and that the Rhunatam, which flows from the eastern end of the lake north to the sea, is no more than the continuation of the Rhunavon. But those are arguments best left to the scholars in their universities in Thurbridge and the towered town on the eastern hill overlooking the ruins of the imperial city of Ghedhaynor. “We might see you safe on your way to Thurbridge.”

“Very kind of you.”

“There’s a fee to consider, of course.”

Of course there was. Everything she had, down to her boots, likely, and lucky if they stopped short of taking the shirt off her back. She leaned on her staff, picture of shabby weariness, her cloak, patched and darned, hiding the sax she wore fastened to her double-wrapped belt along the small of her back. She hoped. Not that she could fight so many, but it might protect her another time, if she didn’t lose it now.

“I’ll have to thank you and find my own way, then, good friends. I’ve not a farthing to my name. Looking for hire, in fact.” Brightening up. “Might your lord or lady be looking for a herd? Goats, sheep, cattle, swine?”

Not altogether a fool, only young and impulsive, as the young are, and she knew what she was about, now. She had a lifetime, a short one, admittedly, of not-getting-hit being a well-practised art, and to be charming, to be funny, was a strong shield.

One of the bears shuffled closer, big broad head lowered to snuffle her face, reminding her of the old mastiff that had guarded the porch of her mother’s hall when she was a child.

“Bears?” she asked. Make them laugh and maybe she’d get out of this unscathed. Arrany didn’t quite dare reach out to scratch the beast’s ear. She’d never heard of anyone but the travelling folk out of

the east taming bears, and these men and women had the tongue of the northern range of the mountains.

“Bearherd,” the younger woman snorted, and elbowed her companion again. “Go on, little sister, try. Get them moving, we’ll watch.”

The bridge was a high double span, humping up and down and up again, two gentle waves, with a low parapet. The water far below, a tributary rushing to join the Rhunavon, ran swift and shallow, braiding white around rocks. Beyond it, the road ran through more open woodland, grazed by wild beasts or maybe pastured herds. Not much cover, though the sun was slipping down into the west, shadows gathering. Make a run for it, get off the bridge and down into the ravine, all vines and thorns and tall lush green, and hope they didn’t find her worth the sweat and mosquitoes to harry out. Might be her best chance, she considered. But the two with horses could ride her down before she got off the bridge, and there were the bows to consider. And the bears.

Tame bears. She raised her staff towards a bear’s rump, meaning nothing more than the tap she’d give a cow or goat to start it moving, yelped as the man on the brown horse seized and wrenched it from her grasp, swinging his horse in close, just about knocking her over and raising the staff over her head.

“Don’t touch the bears.”

“Here, leave her,” the boy said, and crowded his yellow horse in. The bears didn’t like that, grumbling a warning and for a moment Arrany was caught there, ground between the horse and the boy’s knee and a bear’s shaggy flank. “You’re the ones told her to try it.” He flashed a grin down at her. “Let her go, Wolcha. She’s got nothing worth taking.”

The younger woman moved in even as the bear shuffled away. Arrany struck her reaching arm aside.

“None of that,” the woman said, and slapped her, while the other plucked at the thin red cord about her neck, dragging out the little sparrow carved from antler. A charm against notice. Protection on the road. “That’s pretty.”

“I saw it first.” The younger woman, one of the archers, snatched and the older shrugged and let her have it.

“Take it if you want, Tia. It’s hardly worth fighting over. The boots might fit Tiny. I’ll take them back for him.”

“Come on,” the boy said. He had vhalbairn eyes like her brother, a metallic sheen to the brown of them, vertical pupils like a cat. Human enough, otherwise. Maybe it had been he who’d seen through the protection, Arrany thought. Almost two weeks she’d been travelling, doing odd labour for a bowl of pottage and a bed in the haymow, with the mountains marching ever on her left shoulder and now at her back, sometimes nearer, sometimes farther, but slowly dwindling overall. And no trouble from humanfolk or wild beasts or tame, till now. “She’s not worth it. Bigger fish’ll be along.”

“No reason to throw this one back.”

“Bet she’s got something Jaslyn wants.”

The boy scowled at that. “Grandma’ll have your ears if you’re suggesting what I think.”

“Just a kiss. Go on, take a kiss off her.”

“I can find my own kisses, thanks, unlike some. Though I won’t say no if she offers.” The boy, Jaslyn, winked at her. “Maybe some time when you’re not hassling her off the road? Go on, little bearherd. We’ll throw you back till you’re grown and your purse is fat.”

“You don’t give the orders,” the big man said.

Jaslyn’s eyes narrowed. “Someone’s getting above himself,” he observed. “If grandma—”

“Grandma, grandma—when your grandmother names *you* her lieutenant, then you can tell me to stand aside. Till then, you jump when you’re told.”

The boy wasn’t going to win, not from the way the others were jostling and grinning. “Some brat’s looking for a thick ear,” one of the men growled.

Confusion then. Shoving, horses upset, heads tossing, a bear snarling, rearing up on its hind legs, a threat that had a horse squealing and shying away and the humans yelling and scattering, not so easy with their pets as they pretended. Arrany wrenched

herself free of a gripping hand, felt the fiery pain of the amulet cord about her neck slicing skin before it broke, and took off at a run, the satchel that held all she still owned in the world thumping at her hip. Off the bridge, down into the ravine, hide. She was small, her cloak was a drab brown, her hat a faded green...maybe she would have had a chance.

A yell, and hoofbeats. Quick glance back; Jaslyn riding after her. Couldn't run faster, couldn't survive a leap from the parapet, the river was not so deep as all that. Hooves, the horse nearly on her, alongside, matching her. Arrany sprang away but he had grabbed her, he was saying something, laughing, up, come up, he said, dragging, come up and I'll take you on to Thurbridge, and she was falling and she grabbed at saddle skirt and almost she was under the hooves but the horse was trotting by then, and between her and the boy she was still upright, running alongside. He wanted her to put a foot on his and come up and—

Yell. "You fool!" she would realize it was, later, the big man shrieking. "Tia, you damned fool!"

And Jaslyn's tug on her hand that should have helped her up behind had brought him down, his eyes wide, confused, mouth open on a grunt, a word broken, the horse circling around, equally puzzled. "What?" Jaslyn said, and she was lying on the road with him heavy atop her, no cuddling, no kissing; he had fallen. There had been a horrible crack like axe hitting log; he was atop her but his head had struck the road.

He was still. Arrany wriggled free and laid him gently down. There was an arrow standing out from his back, which didn't make sense, they'd shot Jaslyn and he was the robber-queen's grandson. They were yelling, they were running. The brown horse, the bears—racing ahead.

There was blood on her hand. There was blood soaking his back. There was blood pooling around his head.

They were going to kill her, then and there. They meant to. One of them did. They had missed.

Shouts, cries, a roar and the bears rushing towards her.

Arrany snatched for the reins, got a foot in the stirrup, heaved herself up. A while since she'd been on a horse and some might say the ponies of the Marshlands didn't count, there not being so far to fall, but she had her balance, knew the shift of muscle and living will under her, dropped low and dug her heels in and the yellow mare took off a gallop, another arrow hissing over her head.

Behind her...the bears, for a little, but she had too great a start and they turned or were called back. Galloping, galloping, till she must let the mare slow and still she kept her at the trot, on and on, walking to breathe her, trotting again. Shadows stretching into night. Nothing behind her. Nothing on the road at all, only her and the robber-prince's stolen horse.

A long, long road lay ahead. The lowlands, the uplands, the bare sheep-downs and the hills. The high country. Old imperial highways, eaten by turf and the leaf-mould of a hundred autumns. Village lanes and drovers' paths and the pack-pony tracks. Bridges, fords, villages, rare towns. Chiefs' halls and the halls of queens and kings, though she avoided all the latter. She had a horse; she had a bow and was a better shot than the robbers had proven. The marshfolk are fowlers, after all. Errand-rider, merchant's escort. There was work to be had and she avoided travelling alone when she could. Winter caught her, though, and she scraped a bare living in a walled town of five chiefs, serving in the kitchen of a chief's hall and hiring herself and the yellow mare out to carry burdens about the town, to earn her stabling. They were both of them lean and weary when spring came, overworked and underfed.

Sometimes she dreamed of Jaslyn. Robber on the highway, handsome, bronze-eyed vhalbairn lad reaching for her hand in a dance, and the arrow thunks into his back and he falls against her...and she would wake cold and sweating and blinking tears for a fool young man she never even knew.

Long road ahead. The lowlands, the uplands, the bare sheep-downs and the hills. Into the high country of the northwest, and the hills rose, and rose. Stony fells, low mountains beyond. Up the Greater Dahrin, through the king's dun, on to the town at the lake-

foot, the east of the lake where the Great Dahrin flows out to curve away south and curve again to seek the western sea. The shore road south of the Dahres Water. The road she'd set out to follow, desperate road, not understanding how far it was she had to go, in the golden days of harvest.

She was chasing a song, a rumour, a name, was young Arrany.

A legend, was what she was chasing. Now she let herself think the name, now she was so close and the witch of Under-Ice, who held her brother in thrall, so far behind. Not the godling, not Thallyn, the little god of the land who turned minstrel, they say, after the fall of the thrice-damned emperor and wandered the world alone till the wounds of her heart healed and she went again into the northwestern lands which had given her birth. Not her. But Naskanna, that name was Arrany's seeking. Naskanna Deathdealer: vhalgod warrior, traitor, among the greatest of the vhalgod emperor's captains, his daughter. Emperor's bane. The hero who'd taken the emperor's head. Naskanna, who went wandering in the world, they said, and loved a wild godling, and had gone with her into the hills of the north-west.

Naskanna, who might, if she could be found, save Arrany's brother.

Me, I was just a means to that end.

Shows what humans know.

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IN WHICH A STRANGER  
COMES TO SMITHSFORD

**I**t was shaping up to be one of Hedge's bad days, rare though those had become over our long years. Yet still, come they did, for all you'd think the past well-left behind us. But nightmares had ridden her hard, that night, so that she had twitched and whimpered and leaked tears she would have hotly denied, if she'd been woken to know them, but I hadn't risked it. A temper, the vhalgod had, caught in weakness, and besides, half waking into grief and fear she could forget where she was, and when, and lash out with a hand that forgot its claws. Better to hold her gentle, to wrap her in arms and legs and tuck close and whisper soothing nothings till the dreaming ebbed. Lost brother, lost honour—Hedge would deny she saw it that way but she did—loss of all she'd been born and raised and shaped to be, just and right though her rejection of it had been. The nightmare was maybe her sire's voice, his poison words telling her of all that. Or maybe she dreamed some battle lost, maybe her brother's dying, or a certain grim fastness in the south that in a weak moment I might admit came crawling like worms and rot into my own dreams too. Though there was a cure for that, for me, at least, and it was remembering fire and sword and the blue sky opening up above and Hedge, Hedge, Hedge, who was fire and sword and glory in

her rage... And now the arrogant wretch hadn't spoken a word but to grunt at the breakfast I had roused early to so painstakingly prepare, hot oatmeal bannock, dew-wet wild strawberries piled on a dock leaf, duck eggs beaten up with the last of the butter and only a bit of ash fallen in; the vhalgod had taken staff in hand and gone striding off into the dawn, scattering ducks.

Hard to stride off all grim and menacing with a dozen speckled ducks squawking indignant outrage around your feet, but Hedge managed it, veering to the left at the offering-stone, the grey boulder crusty with lichen, feathery with ferns and big as a small cabin, to plunge down the steep twisting way to the lakeshore.

I sat—broodingly—on the warm stone of the doorstep for a time, eating the strawberries and watching the white mist rising from the lake below, filling the hollow of the hills, hiding the little pine-dark islands. The ducks were foraging for slugs in the wattle-fenced vegetable patch, murmuring cheerfully among themselves and trampling the new-sprouting beans. Forgiving souls, ducks. If ducks have souls. I have my doubts. Though soul and wit don't necessarily go together, witness not some few humans of my acquaintance. I went down to shoo them out and prop the wooden hurdle that served as gate back in place. Eventually, when it seemed Hedge was off to roam for the day and had not gone down merely to dunk her head in the lake, I ate a good chunk of the bannock (burnt on the outside and sodden in the middle, because cooking is something best left to less distractible mortals), and a precise half of the pan of cooling eggs. Set the rest indoors on the table with a cloth over against flies. Splashed my own face with icy water in the stone-carved basin, strictly forbidden to ducks, filled where the spring came trickling ledge to ledge down the cliff-face, flowing out to wind its way to the brook, and eventually, to find the lake. I shook myself, abandoning human seeming, and went trotting down the path, leaping the stepping-stones where it crossed the channel from the spring, hooves a hollow drumbeat beneath the oaks. I took the right-hand fork, which ran away along the hillside above the lake for a good couple of miles, beaten earth track turning to soft-tramped old pine needles, before

circling down through hillside pastures and the stone-fenced croplands of the village for a few miles more, joining the broader road that the pack-pony trains followed away through the fells. The dew was burning off and the day was promising bright and warm, by then. A good gallop there on the flat, into Smithsford, and I wanted a run to shake my temper out.

A rider was just crossing at the ford as I came charging down on it. Bony yellow mare, a hand or so taller than me at the withers, and her rider a slight figure, slumped and sagging for all it was fresh morning, and the horse, too, came up from the water trudging, as if she had a long road behind her and was already wearied at the sight of the high hills ahead. A young woman, it was, riding the yellow mare, and hair as yellow as her horse tied back in a long braid. Broad-brimmed hat, a leather jerkin over a faded red tunic, wide-legged russet trousers tucked into tall boots. She had a quiver at her shoulder and a bow under her knee, the hilt of a sax sheathed along the small of her back, just showing if you knew where to look, and a cloak rolled up and tied behind her cante. Saddlebags didn't bulge with much; she was no pedlar, no minstrel or bard, either, by the look of her. Some chief's or merchant's armed retainer, or a mercenary looking for hire. Trouble, maybe. Though young, for any of those things. Save trouble.

The land that gave me birth, that western headland over the sea, was burnt and dead, defiled by slaughter of all its folk, a place of mounds and mourning, and I was a living god. I didn't go back there. I'd settled in the cave under the cliff above the Dahres Water a generation and some years since, I and Hedge with me, when our years of wandering grew weary. Whatever wild godling had lived there once had been lost and gone, another victim of Emperor Eksandron of cursed memory, and Smithsford had grown at the ford of the Little Dahrun under my protection, the grandfather of the current smith being the first, building his forge and then his house, with his wife and son and son's wife who kept bees, and the son's eldest daughter was the first babe born in Smithsford. She was Marsin Smith by the time of these happenings, with children of her own, and her sister

Ashill had brought in two lads from the king's dun of the Hrastnor on Great Dahrun; they farmed together and she brewed heather beer and made chokecherry wine and kept the tavern. A dozen households now in Smithsford, and we even had our own witch, Good-brother Bessamy. It was become a stopping place for the pack-trains that wound up through the pass to the wild highlands beyond, carrying trade-goods from south and east and returning with grey fleeces and worked antlers of the giant deer and copper ingots and lead. My folk, they were and are, wild godling though I am and no town-god to live at a chief's elbow. We look out for each other, Smithsford and I.

A single rider Smithsford could have dealt with. That they'd let her ride through unchallenged seemed to say that if she meant trouble, it wasn't to them. Or to me. Still, I always liked to know who and what was passing on the road thereabouts. Besides, she looked like she had a story, and though I'll never make a bard—that takes *study*, years and years of it—I'm minstrel enough not to let the chance of a good tale pass me by.

The rider raised her head as I came down the road, which had been beaten wide and bare there between the stone walls by the cattle of the village going up to pasture and the traders' ponies climbing to the westerly route through the fells. Young, she was, surely not even twenty winters behind her yet, and her eyes pale blue in a tanned face. She reined her mare a little aside, but made no move to threaten me. Wild or stray, she figured rightly that a galloping horse was none of her concern. So I slowed, not to set the yellow mare jiggling about, and came on at a neighbourly trot, circling around to get a good look at her. Fluttered up onto the twisty branch of an apple tree leaning over the drystone wall, just to see what she would do. The crow, like the mouse-dun wild horse of the open woodland, comes easy to me. The wolf, not so happily, though I've been wolf long days at need.

"Godling Thallyn," the mercenary lass says, and that I was not expecting. She took off her hat and bowed in the saddle. "Thallyn of

the Dahres Head, my name is Arrany, of the Esrineyn in the Marshlands. I've been seeking you."

I had half a mind to fly off and leave her, or fly off over the ford and into the smithy, to ask Marsin Smith what she thought she was about, letting yellow-haired Marshlander infant hireswords loose on me without warning. It was a quiet life we'd come here for, built our cabin—Hedge had done the building—dug our garden—aye, that was Hedge, too—planted our orchard—that work had been mine, trees I understand, if not a vhalgod's urge to turn cottager. But the look of this lass was that of someone who'd been too long on the road, worn dry and weathered and weary, with a weight of trouble on her shoulders, and I'd seen that look on my vhalgod too long, aye, and worn it myself. How could I not have some fellow-feeling? So I didn't tease her more, but dropped down into the road with a caw, furling my wings and landing on my feet—human-like, bare and dusty as my hooves had been. I was decently dressed, at least, which isn't always the case, a deerskin tunic I'd pulled on that morning, all cut in fringes along the knee and a bit of shell-beading around the neck. Hedge is a restless sort, always needing something to be doing with her hands, and there's only so many knives to sharpen. She'll take up spinning one of these days and be after me to turn shepherd.

Human, I am as you see me, neither short nor over-tall, lean and some—that'd be Hedge—say graceful, darker brown of skin than is common in the north, my eyes blue as winter sky—Hedge's words—and my hair light acorn-brown and curling. Mostly Hedge cuts it short, because she says otherwise I look like I'm trying to turn myself into a bird's nest, all twigs and leaves. And no, I can't change my shape, be man instead of woman, be taller, paler, darker, red-haired, a child, be a black wolf instead of tawny, a bay mare or a piebald. Why not? It doesn't work that way, and you've listened to too many minstrel's tales if you believe otherwise. Hark to the true bards; they know better.

Anyhow, "Good morning to you, Arrany of the Esrineyn," I say. "And what brings you to Smithsford seeking the godling Thallyn?"

“Godling Thallyn,” she says, “To tell the truth, it’s your handfast companion I’m seeking, the vhalgod captain Naskanna.”

That, I was not expecting. Hedge is just Hedge, and I’d have been surprised if any in Smithsford remembered she ever had another name. Not that the name of Captain Naskanna, Naskanna Deathdealer, is forgotten; there’s songs enough about her, but they generally don’t mention me, not even—especially not—the ones I made myself.

“Are you indeed,” I say then, mostly to give myself time to think, and what I think is, well, whoever or whatever sent her here looking for Naskanna, captain of the second company of the Emperor’s Golden Guard, must have been very certain, and very persuasive, for she’s come a long road and no mistake. So she’s not going to be put off by my telling her I’ve never heard of any such person. And she’s been the night in Smithsford, probably supping and sleeping on a bench in Ashill’s tavern, and that’s plenty of time for all the village to have come to look her over and tell her that whatever the name, there’s definitely a vhalgod woman living up under the cliff with the wild godling, and has been since first the god and their grandparents came to this place.

“You’d better come up the hill, then,” I say, “and tell us all about it.”

I gave a leap up into the air and flew off ahead of her, circling back to be sure she took the right way where our path branches off from the track north through the fells. Once I saw her turning up the long climb under the pines, I climbed the air myself, up into the open sky, and rode the winds down over the lakeshore...up again, towering elms along the brook that comes down our cliff in a waterfall east of us, the oakwoods, the little clearings of our garden and orchard, the pines that climbed and climbed again above...Nothing moving but some deer, and a fox that knew better than to come near Hedge’s ducks, and away up where there was more stone than tree, some shaggy wild goats. The pack of wolves that hunted farther east was moving up higher, a great cave bear and her cubs were trundling down to the sweet lush water meadow of another nameless brook

where moose, too, were browsing...no, it wasn't with my eyes I saw all this. I rode the wind, and I swam the currents of the life of this fellside that I had made my own, and finally, having powers of her own and knowing I was searching and with better reason than to complain she'd let her breakfast grow cold, Hedge let me find her, and what was shadow became light and I spiralled down to see her, picking her way rock to rock across the rushing torrent that was our brook a half-mile above the waterfall.

I came down onto a stone mid-stream, landing light on my toes, flinging my arms wide for balance because maybe I'd misjudged a little and the stone was not so stable as I thought, rocking in the churning water. "We have company," I called, as Hedge took another leap past me, using her stout staff to thrust herself flying, landing dryfoot on the far bank. I sprang after her and she turned to reach a hand to steady my landing.

Beautiful, she is, my Hedge, as the wild wolf is beautiful, and the heights of the fells against the sky, and the eagle on the wing. Taller than is human wont, as are all the vhalgodkind, and ashy of complexion, whitish shading into grey, dark about the eyes and lips, and blunt black claws to her fingers and toes, fanged foreteeth, harsh-boned and craggy-featured, maybe not the common human run of beauty, you might say, but an elegance in lines and the planes of her face to catch and hold the eye, her hair black as my crow's feathers, and her eyes copper, warm as fire.

"Company, I know," she said, and if she wasn't in so grim a mood as what had taken her off without a word in her nightmare-raddled waking, she was not yet smiling. "Trouble, Pony. Jinn warned me."

You see, it wasn't only the captain of the Second Company of the Emperor's Golden Guard I'd brought with me, when I settled into the cave in the cliffs of Dahres Head. There was Jinn, prince of the empire and son of the emperor by one of his human wives, doubly a prince, for she was queen of an eastern tribe in her own right. And Jinn was half-brother to my Hedge, and with her he had slain their father the emperor in the taking of the city of Ghedhaynor in the great uprising of the human tribes and lands, and there Jinn had

died, torn asunder and burned by his own father, and his soul cursed by the emperor in his dying to wander lost forever in the Beyond rather than finding any rest in this world or the next.

And maybe that was so, that Jinn's soul wandered outcast and lost and unresting, but a piece of it Hedge had caught as he died, there even in the midst of the fighting and the horror, and she had bound him by that into a bone of his own wing— you'll be thinking, rightly, that few enough even among the vhalgods themselves were winged vhaldrachen and it was even rarer among the vhalbairn, but he was one of the blessed—and so her brother had anchor and a thread to follow in his lost wanderings. How it was, I don't fully understand, it being a thing of the vhalgods and nothing of the gods of the earth and such magic as we might claim, and nothing like a human witch's working either; maybe it was that he dreamed, and what he dreamed was his haunting of Hedge, and the flute she made of his wingbone.

However it was, sometimes Jinn came to Hedge unbidden, uncalled, into her dreams where she alone might speak to him, or sometimes in the dancing flames of our fires, and the mist off the lake and the deep dark of the pool beneath the falls, and if I was by, I might see him too, so you needn't make that doubting face that says you think my Hedge mad and I little better for humouring her. The vows we had made between us, she and I, bound us close; she felt, a little, the ebb and flow of the tides of the earth, as godlings do and vhalgods do not, and I had come to share a little in the bond with her brother, which I do not think entirely pleased him, at least at the start.

Sometimes, she might call him, by the flute to which he was bound.

And sometimes, rarely, so rarely, she might call him into a semblance of life in the world by other means, at great and dire need. But dire indeed, they both knew well, that need should be.

What I thought of it, well, it's not always comfortable, to know your beloved's brother can wander in on you unbidden and unexpected. I'd never suggest to Hedge, though, that it might be more respectful and seemly to bury that last relic of her brother or give it to

the pyre, rather than to carry a piece of him around with her. What do I know of such things? I'm a wild godling born of the earth's dreaming; I have no sibling, and vhalgod ways are not human ones, either.

“Well,” I told her, “Jinn may be meaning our guest is the trouble, and he may not. It might be that the trouble follows on her tail. Either way, we may as well go down and meet it.”