

# BROCK

by Tanya Huff

Tanya Huff lives and writes in rural Ontario with her partner, six cats, and a chihuahua who refuses to acknowledge her existence. Her latest book, out for DAW in May of 2003, was the third in the Keeper Chronicles called *Long Hot Summoning* and she's currently working on the first of three books spinning the character Tony off from her Blood series (DAW spring 2004). In her spare time she gardens and complains about the weather.

"It's just a code."

Trying not to smile at the same protest he'd heard for the last two days, Jors set the empty mug on a small table. "Healer Lorrin says it's more, Isabel. She says you're spending the next two days in bed."

The older Herald tried to snort, but her nose had filled past the point it was possible, and she had to settle for an avalanche of coughing instead. "She cud heal me," she muttered when she could finally breathe again.

"She seems to think that a couple of days in bed and a couple of hundred cups of tea will heal you just fine."

"Gibbing children their Greens..."

That was half a protest at best and, as Jors watched, Isabel's eyes closed, the lines exhaustion had etched around them beginning to ease. Leaning forward, he blew out the lamp, then quietly slipped from the room.

"Oh, she's sick," the Healer assured him, exasperation edging her voice. "What could have possessed her to ride courier at her age, at this time of the year? Yes, the package and information she brought from the Healer's Collegium will save lives this winter, but surely there had to have been younger Heralds around to deliver it?"

Jors opened his mouth to answer.

Lorrin gave him no chance. "If she hadn't run into your riding sector, she might not have made it this far. She needs rest and I'm keeping her in bed until I think she's had enough of it."

Jors didn't argue. He wouldn't have minded an actual conversation&mdash;Lorrin was young and pretty&mdash;but unfortunately, she seemed too determined to run this new House of Healing the way she felt a House of Healing *should* be run to waste time in dalliance with the healthy.

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"Have you good as new. You see. Good as new. Soft and clean."

Jors stopped just inside the stable door and stared in astonishment at the young man grooming his Companion. The stubby fingers that held the brush, the bulky body, the round face, angled eyes, and full mouth told the Herald that this unexpected groom was one of those the country people called Moonlings. He wore patched homespun; the pants too large, the shirt too small, both washed out to a grimy gray. His boots had seen at least one other pair of feet.

He'd already groomed the chirras and Isabel's Companion, Calida&mdash;the sleeping mare all but glowed in the dim stable light.

:Gervis?:

:His name is Brock.: The stallion's mental voice sounded sleepy and sated. :Can we take him with us?:

:No. And how do you know what his name is?:

:He talks to us and he knows exactly&mdash;oh, yes&mdash;where to rub.:

Companions were not in the habit of allowing themselves to be groomed by other than Heralds' hands. Jors found it hard to believe that they'd not only allowed Brock's ministrations but were actually reveling in them. He stepped forward and, at the sound of his footfall, Brock turned.

His face broke into a broad smile radiating welcome. Arms spread, he rushed at the Herald and wrapped him in a tight hug. Staring up at Jors, their faces barely inches apart, he joyfully repeated "Brother Herald!" over and over while a large gray dog leaped around them barking.

:Gervis?:

:The dog's name is Rock. He's harmless.:

:Glad to hear that.:

"Brock...I can't breathe ..."

"Sorry! Sorry." Releasing him so quickly Jors stumbled and had to grab the edge of a hay rack, Brock shuffled back, still smiling. "Sorry. I brushed." One short-fingered hand gestured back at the Companions. "Good as new. Soft and clean."

"You did a very good job." Jors stepped around the dog, now lying panting on the floor and ran his fingers down Gervis' side. There wasn't a bit of straw, a speck of dust, a hair out of place on either Companion.

:Better than very good,: Gervis sighed.

Jors smiled and repeated the compliment. :Did you say thank you, you fuzzy hedonist?:

In answer, the Companion stretched out his neck and gently nuzzled Brock's cheek, receiving a loud, smacking kiss in return.

"Okay. We go now." Brock bent and picked a ragged, gray sweater out of the straw and wrestled it over his head. "We go now," he repeated, placing both hands in the small of Jors' back and pushing him toward the stable door. "Or we come late and Mister Mayor is mad and yells."

"Late for...?"

:The petitions.: Gervis' mental voice sounded more than a little amused and Jors remembered he'd intended to merely look in on the Companions on his way to the town hall.

Heading out into the square, he realized Brock was trotting to keep up, and he shortened his stride. "Does the mayor yell a lot?"

"Yes. A lot."

"Do you know why?"

Brock sighed deeply, one hand dropping to fondle the ears of the dog walking beside him. "Mister Mayor wears the town," he said very seriously after a moment. "The town swings heavy heavy."

Okay; that made no sense. Maybe we should try something less complex. "Is Rock your dog?"

"He's my friend. They were hurting him. I... Wait!"

Uncertain of just who had been told to wait, Jors watched Brock and the dog run across to the town well where a pair of women argued over who'd draw their water first. Ignored in the midst of the argument, Brock began to draw water for them. He had no trouble with the winch, but while pouring from bucket to bucket, he splashed the older woman's skirt. Suddenly united, they turned on him. By the time Jors arrived, Brock had filled another bucket in spite of the shouting—although his shoulders were hunched forward and he didn't look happy.

The older woman saw him first, shoved the other, and the shouting stopped.

"Ladies."

"Herald," they said in ragged unison.

"Let me give you a hand with that, Brock. You bring the water up, and I'll pour."

"Pouring is hard," Brock warned.

"Herald, you don't have to," one of the women protested. "We never asked this..." When Jors turned a bland stare in her direction, she reconsidered her next word. "...boy to help."

"I know." His tone cut off any further protests and neither woman said anything until all the buckets had been filled, then they thanked him far more than the work he'd done required. He'd turned to go when at the edge of his vision he saw one woman lean forward and pinch Brock on the arm, hissing, "Now that's a *real* Herald."

"HERALD JORS!"

Across the square, the mayor stood on the steps of the town hall, chain of office glinting in the pale autumn sunlight, both hands urging him to hurry. *Well, he'll just have to wait!* Lips pressed into a thin line, Jors turned back toward the well, had his elbow firmly grabbed, and found himself facing the mayor again.

"Mister Mayor is yelling," Brock explained, moving Jors across the square.

"Let him. I saw what happened back there. I saw that woman pinch you."

"Yes." He turned a satisfied smile toward Jors, never lessening their forward motion. "I made them stop fighting. Heralds do that."

"Yes, they do." They'd almost reached the hall and Jors had a strong suspicion that digging his heels in would have had no effect on their forward motion. "You're stronger than you look."

"Have to be."

*I'll bet*, Jors thought as he caught sight of the mayor's expression.

"Brock! Get your filthy hands off that Herald!"

"Hands are clean."

"I don't care! He doesn't need you hanging around him!"

"I don't mind." Jors swept through the door, Brock caught up in his wake, both moving too quickly for the mayor to do anything but fall in behind.

"Heralds work together," Brock announced proudly. He clapped his hands as heads began to turn. "Be in a good line now. Heralds are here."

"Heralds?" a male voice jeered from the crowd. "I see only one Herald, Moonling."

"Heralds!" Brock repeated, throwing his arms around Jors' waist in another hug. "Me and him."

*Oh, Havens.*

*:Trouble, Heart-brother?:*

*:I just realized something that should have been obvious&mdash;Brock believes he's a Herald.:*

*:So? You'd rather he believed he was a pickpocket?:*

*:That's not the point.:*

But he couldn't let the townspeople chase Brock from the hall as they clearly wanted to do and Brock wouldn't leave because it was time for the Heralds to hear petitions, so Jors ended up sitting him at the table and hoping for the best.

He realized his mistake early on. Brock had a loudly expressed opinion on everything, up to and including calling one of the petitioners a big fat liar&mdash;which turned out to be true; on all points. Unfortunately, short of having him physically carried out of the hall, Jors could think of no way to get him to leave.

*:Have him check on Isabel.:*

*:How... ?"*

*:You're worried. You're projecting. And I'm only across the square. If he wants to be with a Herald, send him to check on Isabel. She's sick and she needs company.:*

*:That's a terrific idea.:*

Gervis' mental voice sounded distinctly smug. *:I know.:*

It worked. Jors only wished the Companion had thought of it sooner. A Herald's office protected him or her from the repercussions of a judgment&mdash;no matter how disgruntled the losing petitioner might be, few would risk the grave penalties attached to attacking a Herald. Brock didn't have that protection. *Good thing he's safely tucked away with Isabel.*

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"No, Brock's not here." Healer Lorrin continued rolling strips of soft linen. "He left at sunset for the tavern."

"The tavern?"

"He's there every evening. He fills their wood box and they feed him&mdash;him and Rock."

"He works there?"

Lorin nodded. "There, and the blacksmith's whenever there's a nervy horse in to be shod—animals trust him. I tried to have him deliver teas to patients, but if he's carrying something, there's always troublemakers who try to take it from him."

"I'm surprised." Jors rubbed his elbow at the memory. "He's quite strong."

"Is he?" She set the finished roll with the others and picked up a new strip of cloth. "He's bullied all the time, but I've never seen him defend himself. Did you know that poorer mothers have him watch their infants if they have to leave them? I'll tell you something, Herald. When I came here a year ago, I was amazed to discover this town has almost none of those horrible accidents that happen when a baby just starting to creep is left alone and burns to death or drowns—that's because of Brock."

"Where does he sleep?" This far north, the nights were already cold.

"In various stables when the weather's good. By someone's hearth when it isn't."

"Has he no family?"

"His parents were old when he was born, old and poor. They died about three years ago and left him nothing."

"Why doesn't someone take him in?"

"He doesn't want to be taken," the Healer snapped. "He's not a stray cat, and for all he can be childlike, he's not a child. He's a grown man, probably not much younger than you and he has the same right as you do to choose his life."

"But..."

She sighed and her tone softened. "There are those who try to make sure he doesn't suffer for those choices, but that's all anyone has a right to do. Besides..." One corner of her mouth quirked up. "...he tells me that Heralds never stay in one place so no one thinks they like some people more than others."

Simpler language but pretty much the official reason, Jors allowed. "How long has he believed himself to be a Herald?"

"As long as I've been here. I'm surprised you haven't heard about him from other Heralds. You can't be the first he's latched on to."

"He wasn't in the reports I read and I..." About to say he doubted Brock would come up in casual conversation between Heralds, he frowned at a distinct feeling of unease. "I should go now."

"There's no need to go to the Waystation tonight, I've plenty of room." Her smile edged toward invitation. "I doubt anyone will accuse you of favoritism if you stay here."

"No. Thank you. I need to..." The feeling was growing stronger. "...um, go."

He doubted she'd be smiling that way at him again, but personal problems were unimportant next to his growing certainty that something was wrong. Taking the steps two at a time, he hit the ground floor running and headed for the stables. *:Gervis?:*

*:We can feel it, too. Calida says it's close.:*

It wasn't in the stables or the corral, but when Jors opened the small door, a pair of huddled figures tumbled inside.

Brock lifted a tear-drenched face up from matted gray fur and wailed, "Heralds don't cry."

"Says who?" Jors demanded, dropping to one knee.

"People. When I cry."

"People are wrong. I'm a Herald and I cry." He stretched out a hand, keeping half his attention on the big dog who watched him warily. Herald's Whites meant nothing to Rock, and he didn't lower his hackles until Gervis whickered a warning of his own. "What happened? Did someone hurt you?"

"Heralds don't tattle!"

His various tormentors had probably been telling him that for years. "If someone does something bad, we do."

"No."

"Yes. If we can't make it right on our own, we tell someone who can. Bad things should never be hidden. It makes them worse."

Brock drew in a long shuddering breath and slowly held out his arm. Below the ragged cuff of his sweater was a dark bruise where a large hand had gripped his wrist.

"Is that all?"

"Rock came. The man ran away."

"Who was it?"

"A bad man."

No argument there. "Do you know his name?"

"A bad man," Brock repeated, wiping his nose against the dog's shoulder.

*:You catch him and I'll kick him.: The Companion's mental voice was a near growl. :Calida says she'll help.:*

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"It's a bad bruise, but it is just a bruise. Healer Lorrin wrapped it in an herb pack and she says he'll be fine. He won't stay, says he's not sick enough, but I can't just let him wander off into the night."

"Coors you cand."

"And I can't take him to the Waystation and I can't stay with him because that would be seen as losing impartiality. So, do you mind if he spends the night with Calida?"

Isabel managed a truncated snort. "Fine wid me, bud you'd bezd ask her."

Leading Gervis and the chirras out of the stable, Jors turned for one last look at Brock curled up against Calida's side. The elderly mare had been pleased to have the company and had positioned herself in such a way that Brock could pillow his head against her flank. Rock had snuggled up on the young man's other

side and although his face was still blotchy, Jors had never seen anyone look so completely at peace.

*:Why do you two care about him so much?:* he asked as he mounted.

*:He believes he is a Herald.:*

*:Yes, but...:*

*:And he acts accordingly.:*

\* \* \*

The next day during petitions, the mayor tripped over Rock sprawled by the table. Jerking his chain of office down into place, he snarled, "That dog is vicious and ought to be destroyed."

Jors pushed Brock back into his chair. "Who says this dog is vicious?"

The mayor's lip curled. "I heard he attacked a man last night."

"I heard that, too, Herald," called out one of the waiting petitioners.

"Brock, show everyone your arm." The bruises were dark and ugly against the pale skin. "The man Rock attacked did that and would have done more had the dog not come to his master's defense. This dog is no more vicious than I am."

"We've only your word on that, Herald. You can't truth-spell a dog."

"No, but I *can* truth-spell the man who made the accusation if he's willing to come forward."

No one was surprised when he didn't.

Mid afternoon, as Jors was returning to the hall after a privy break, the town clerk fell into step beside him and apologized for the mayor's earlier behavior. "It's just he feels responsible for the whole town, and it weighs on him and makes him short-tempered. Believe me, Herald, he's a whole different man when he can take that chain off."

*"Mister Mayor wears the town. The town swings heavy heavy."*

Brock's explanation suddenly made perfect sense.

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It had been arranged that Brock would spend another night with Calida.

"Companions need Heralds. Lady Herald is sick. I am not sick. I am here." He threw his arms around Jors. "I see you tomorrow, Brother Herald."

"No, not tomorrow, Brock. Tomorrow, I'm going to see the tanners." Tanning was a smelly business, tanners set up their pits downwind of towns, far enough away they could work without complaint but not so far they couldn't get skins or find buyers for their hides. These particular tanners had chosen distance over convenience and had settled nearly a full day's travel away. The townspeople he'd spoken to about them had made it quite clear that the animosity was mutual. No one went near the place unless they had to. "I'll stay overnight, then go back to the Waystation the next day. The day after that, I'll be back in town. That's why I brought my chirras in today, so he won't be left alone at the station."

"No."

"It's okay. Gervis travels very fast, I won't be gone long."

"No!" Brock released him, stepping back just far enough to meet Jors' eyes. "Don't go!" Pulling the hair back off his face with one hand, he grabbed the Herald's wrist with the other. "See?" An old scar ran diagonally from the edge of a thick eyebrow up into his hairline.

"The tanners did that?"

"I bumped mean lady's cart. Don't go." His eyes welled over. "Mean lady is there."

Jors pulled free of Brock's grip and squeezed his shoulder. "I'll be fine. Really. The mean lady won't do anything to me." The sort of people who'd strike a frightened Moonling were unlikely to be the sort who'd strike a healthy young man in Herald's Whites. "But I have to go and check on them. They haven't been into town for a long time and it's almost winter."

"Not alone."

"Don't worry, I'll have Gervis." He gave the trembling shoulder another squeeze, then swung himself up into the saddle. "You stay with Calida, and I'll see you in two days."

He supposed he'd been half expecting it. When Jors came out of the Waystation early the next morning there sat Brock—which was the half he supposed he'd been expecting—on Calida—which was a total surprise. It wasn't often a Companion would choose to bear anyone but her Chosen—and those exceptions were almost always Heralds.

"Good morning, Brother Herald!"

Actual Heralds. "Brock, what are you doing here?" The young man's crestfallen expression insisted on better manners. Jors rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Good morning, Brock."

The smile returned. "It's early!"

"Yes, it is. What are you doing here so early?"

"I go with you. To tanners."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I go with you."

"No."

"Yes."

Jors hated to do it, but... "What about the mean lady?" The smile faltered as Brock sucked in his lower lip. "You don't want to see the mean lady."

"Don't want you to see mean lady alone." He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I go with you."

"That's very brave of you." And he meant that. Courage was only courage in the face of fear. "But even though I know you mean well, you can't just take a Companion."



Brock's eyes widened indignantly. "Didn't take!"

*:Calida says if she hadn't wanted him to ride her, he wouldn't be here.: Gervis scratched his cheek on a post and added thoughtfully. :He's very bad at it.:*

*:At what?:*

*:Riding.:*

*:No doubt. What does Isabel say about this?:*

*:Herald Isabel trusts her Companion.:*

*:That's not very helpful.:*

*:It should be.:*

One more try. "Brock, by taking her Companion, you've left Herald Isabel alone."

"No." He leaned carefully forward in the saddle and stroked Calida's neck. "Left Rock."

Jors reached for Calida's bridle, but the Companion tossed her head, moving it away from his hand. "Calida, you have to take him back."

The mare gave him a flat, uncompromising stare.

*:She says, "make me.": Gervis translated helpfully.*

*:Yeah. I got that. What do you think I should do?:*

*:Help him down.:*

*:You think this is funny, don't you?:* Jors demanded doing as the Companion suggested.

*:I think this is inevitable, Chosen. You might as well make the best of it.:*

Even with Jors' help, Brock stumbled as he hit the ground, fell, rolled, and bounced up, declaring, "I'm okay!"

*:Now, get ready. : Gervis shoved at Jors' bare shoulder. :We'll be moving slowly and Calida says it's going to rain.:*

*:And won't that make this a perfect day?:*

*:No. She says it's going to rain hard and I don't like to get wet. I want to be there before it rains.:*

That began to look more and more unlikely as the morning passed and the clouds grew darker. Brock managed to stay in the saddle at a fast walk and Calida refused to go faster. Once or twice, Jors was positive he was going to fall off, but at the last instant he'd shift weight and somehow stay mounted.

*:His balance is bad. But Calida's helping.:*

*:Why is Calida doing this?:*

One ear flicked back. *:So he won't fall off:*

*:No, I mean why is Calida allowing any of this? Why is she allowing Brock to ride her? Why is she allowing&mdash;insisting&mdash;he come along today?:*

*:She has her reasons.:*

Jors sighed. He knew that tone. *:And you're not going to tell me what those reasons are, are you?:*

*:He's very happy.:*

*:I can see that.:*

Happy was an understatement. For all he held the pommel in a death grip, Brock looked ecstatic. *This is really not helping his delusion that he's a Herald*, Jors realized. Something would have to be done about that and since the two of them were spending what was likely to be a full day traveling together, now would be the time to do it. Maybe that was why Calida had brought him.

There'd be no point in bluntly saying, *"Brock, you're not a Herald."* The townspeople said that all the time, shaded in every possible emotion from amusement to rage, and it had no effect.

"Brock, do you know what makes a person a Herald?"

"Heralds help people. Heralds can cry. Heralds tell when bad things happen." He beamed proudly. "I remember the new things."

"Yes, all those things make a Herald, but..."

"I'm a good Herald."

"...but there's other things."

Brock twisted in the saddle to look at him and Calida adjusted her gait to prevent a fall. "Heralds wear shiny white."

"Yes..."

He looked down at his gray sweater, then looked back at Jors smiling broadly. "Clothes are on the outside."

*:And a Herald is on the inside.:*

*:I get it.:*

A sapphire eye rolled back at him, distinctly amused. *:Just trying to help.:*

"Brock, all those things are part of being a Herald, but the most important part is being Chosen by a Companion. You don't have to be a Herald to be a really good person but you do have to be Chosen. Do you understand?"

Brock nodded. "Companions have Heralds."

"You don't have a Companion."

"Yes!" He bounced indignantly, lost a stirrup, and nearly went off. "Have Calida," he continued when he was secure in the saddle again.

"But she's Herald Isabel's Companion. Herald Isabel is letting you ride her."

"No. Calida is letting."

*:He's got you there.:*

Jors sighed. "Riding a Companion isn't the point, Brock. You're not Calida's Herald."

"Not her Herald," Brock agreed, his smile lighting up his whole face. "A Herald."

Between the less than successful conversation and the glowering sky, Jors had picked up a pounding headache. They rode without speaking for a while, Brock humming tunelessly to himself. Finally, more to put an end to the humming than for any real desire to know, Jors turned in the saddle and said, "So, you were going to tell me how you saved Rock."

"Kids were hurting him." Brock's placid expression turned fierce at the memory. "I made them stop." Although he wouldn't defend himself, he seemed quite capable of defending the helpless. "He was hungry. I counted his bones. One, two, three, four..."

"Where did he come from?" Jors interrupted, unsure of how high the other man could count and not really wanting to find out.

"Don't know. Now, he is my friend." The broad brow furrowed as he searched for words. "Some mean people aren't mean now because he is my friend."

That was hardly surprising. Rock was a big dog. Probably a hunting dog of some kind who'd gotten separated from his pack and managed to finally find his way back to people. "Why did you call him Rock?"

"So when kids are mean, it doesn't matter."

"I don't understand."

Brock stared down between Calida's ears and chanted, "Brock, Brock, dumb as a rock." Then he grinned and turned just far enough in the saddle to meet Jors' gaze. "Rock isn't dumb. I fooled them."

He looked so proud, Jors found himself grinning in return. "Yes, you did. That was very smart."

"I am a smart Herald."

It was a good thing he didn't need affirmation because Jors had no idea of what to say. *:And now,:* he sighed quietly as large drops of cold water began splashing against his leathers, *:it's raining.:*

*:I know. I'm getting wet.:*

*:So am I.:*

*:I'm bigger. There's more of me, so I'm more wet.:*

In a very short time all four of them were so drenched there was little point in comparisons. Fortunately, as they crested a rise in the trail, the tanners' holding came into sight on the other side of a small valley. Neither Companion needed urging toward the river running through the valley center although they both stopped well back from the bank. The water was brown and running fast, the log bridge nearly awash.

*:What do you think? Is it safe?:*

Gervis stepped cautiously out onto the edge of the logs. *:If we move quickly.:*

But Calida hesitated.

*:What is it?:*

*:Calida says the river's already undermining the bridge supports. That the bridge is going to wash away.:*

*:Tell her that if it does, better we're all on the side with shelter. I'm half drowned and half frozen and Brock's got to be colder still. She's got to get him out of this weather.:*

Eyes wide, the mare stepped up beside Gervis who took her arrival as his cue to leap forward. One stride, two, three. As Jors watched anxiously from the other shore, Calida slowly followed, placing each hoof with care.

Wood screamed a protest as the bridge supports caved.

The huge logs dipped and skewed out from the bank, dragged by the river.

Calida half-reared as her front hooves scrambled for purchase in the mud.

Brock bounced over the cantle and disappeared.

"No!" Jors threw himself to the ground. Stumbling to the Companion's side, he grabbed the mare's saddle and heaved. Step by step, as she managed to work her way forward, he worked his way back until, to his amazement, he saw a very muddy Brock holding on with both hands to Calida's tail, his feet in the river. A heartbeat later, with solid ground, beneath all four of them, he dropped to his knees and gathered Brock up into his arms.

"Are you all right?"

He looked more surprised than frightened and returned the hug with wet enthusiasm.

"I fell."

"I know. The bridge broke."

Brock twisted around to look, and clutched at Jors' arm. "I'm sorry!"

"It's okay. It wasn't your fault." His heart slamming painfully against his ribs, Jors grabbed a stirrup and hauled himself onto his feet. "Come on, we're almost there."

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The tanners' holding looked deserted as they stumbled up to the buildings. Jors called out a greeting, but the wind and rain whipped the words out of his mouth.

Brock grabbed his arm. "Smoke," he said, pointing to the thin gay line rising reluctantly from a chimney. "I'm cold."

"Me, too."

All thoughts turned to a warm fire as they made their way over to the building, the Companions crowding in close under the wide eaves.

*:We'll be right back as soon as we find someone.:*

:*Hurry, Chosen.*: Gervis sounded completely miserable. Covered in mud almost to his withers, his mane hanging in a tangled, sodden mass, he looked very little like the gleaming creature who'd left the Waystation that morning. Calida, if anything, looked worse.

Jors considered leaving Brock with the Companions, but the other man's breathing sounded unnaturally hoarse so he beckoned him forward as he tried the door. The sooner he got him inside the better.

The door opened easily. It hadn't even been latched.

"Hello?"

Stepping inside wasn't so much a step into warmth as a step into a space less cold. It looked like they'd found the family's main living quarters although the room was so dim, it was difficult to tell for sure. The only light came from a small fire smoldering on the fieldstone hearth and a tallow lamp on the floor close beside a cradle.

"No." Brock charged across the room, trailing a small river in his wake. "No fire beside baby!"

Remembering what Lorrin had told him about Brock and babies, Jors held his position by the door. The younger of two, what he knew about babies could be inscribed on the head of a pin with room left over for the lyrics to *Kerowyn's Ride*.

Squatting, Brock picked up the lamp. "No fire beside baby," he repeated, began to rise, and paused. "Baby?" Leaning forward, he peered into the cradle.

"Is it all right?" The lamp and the fire together threw barely enough light for Jors to see Brock. He couldn't see the baby at all.

Setting the lamp down again, Brock stretched both hands into the cradle. When he stood and turned, he was holding a limp infant across both palms, his broad features twisted in sorrow. "Baby is dead."

:*Jors!*:

Jors spun around as the door slammed open and five people surged into the room. They froze for an instant, then the man in front howled out a wordless challenge and charged.

Bending, Jors captured his attacker's momentum then he straightened, throwing the other man to the floor hard enough to knock him breathless. The immediate threat removed, he faced the remaining two men and two women. "I am Herald Jors. Who is in charge here?"

"I am," the older woman snarled.

The hate in her eyes nearly drove Jors back a step. He didn't need Brock's whispered "mean lady" to know who she was. It took an effort, but he kept his voice calm and understanding as he said, "The child was dead when we arrived."

"Dory came to say the babe was sick, not *dead*," she spat as the younger woman ran silently forward and snatched the body from Brock's hands. "The Moonling killed him."

"He did not..."

"You're here and he's there," she sneered. "You can't see what he did."

Spreading his hands, he added a mild warning to his tone. "And you weren't even in the building. I understand this is a shock..."

"You understand nothing, Herald." She placed a hand on the backs of the two remaining men and shoved. "Have the guts to support your brother!"

They sprang forward, looking like nothing so much as a pair of whipped dogs.

"Jors?"

He ducked an awkward blow. "Outside, Brock. Now!" If anything happened to him, the Companions would get Brock to safety.

"There's two of you and one of him, you idiots! Don't let him protect the half-wit!"

:*Chosen?:*

:*It's all right.:*

Fortunately, neither man was much of a fighter. Jors could have ended it quickly, but as they'd just suffered a sudden terrible loss and weren't thinking clearly, he didn't want to do any serious damage. After a moment, he realized that had it not been for the old woman goading them on, neither would have been fighting. Maybe I should have Gervis deal with...

He'd forgotten the first brother. The piece of firewood caught him on the side of the head. As he started to fall, he felt unfriendly hands grab his body.

"No!"

Then the hands were ripped away, and he hit the floor. Two bodies hit the floor after him, closely followed by the third.

"Never hit a Herald!"

"Get up, you cowards! That's a Moonling&mdash;not a real man!"

"But, Ma..."

"He killed *my* grandson!"

*Hers.* Jors thought muzzily. *Not grief Anger. Anger at the loss of a possession.*

"You never loved him!"

Apparently, the child's mother agreed.

"You always complained about him! You said if he didn't stop crying you were going to strangle him! If anyone killed him..."

"Don't you raise your voice to me, you cow. If you were a better..."

"ENOUGH!"

The doors slammed open again. Hooves clattering against the floor boards, the Companions moved to flank Brock. From Jors' position on the floor, it looked as if there were significantly more than a mere eight muddy white legs.

"Don't lie there with your idiot mouths open! They're just horses!"

"They're not just horses, you stupid old woman!"

:Gervis?:

:*I'm here, Heart-brother.*:

Jors felt better about his chance of recovery. Gervis was angry but not frantic.

"A baby is dead. Is time for crying, not fighting. A Herald is hurt. You hurt a Herald."

:*Is that Brock standing up to the mean lady?*:

:*It is.*:

:*Good for him.*:

"You will cry, and you will make the Herald better!"

"I will not."

No mistaking that hate-filled voice.

"Then *I* will."

Nor the voice of the child's mother.

For the first time, Brock sounded confused. "You will cry?"

"No. I will help the Herald."

:*Out of spite....*:

:*You need help, Heart-brother. Your head is bleeding. Spiteful help is still help.*:

Jors got one arm under him and tried to rise.

:*If you say....*:

:*Chosen!*:

His Companion's cry went with him into darkness.

\* \* \*

Jors woke to the familiar and comforting smell of a stable. For a moment he thought he'd dozed off on foal-watch, then he moved and the pain in his head brought everything back.

:*Gervis!*

:*I'm here.*: A soft nose nuzzled his cheek. :*Just open your eyes.*:

Even moving his eyelids hurt, but he forced them up. Fortunately, the stable was dark, the brightest things in it, the two Companions. He could just barely make out Brock tucked up against Calida's side, wrapped in a blanket and nearly buried in straw. :*How long?*:

:*From almost dark to just after moonrise. Long enough I was starting to worry.*:

He stretched up a hand and stroked the side of Gervis' face. *:Sorry.:*

*:The young female made tea for your head. There's a closed pot buried in the straw by your side.:*

The tea was still warm and tasted awful, but Gervis made him drink the whole thing. *:I take it we're in the stable because you and Calida wouldn't leave me?:*

*:The old woman said the young woman could do as she pleased but not in her house. I do not want you to be in her house.:* The obvious distaste in the young stallion's mental voice was hardly surprising. Even on short acquaintance the old woman was as nasty a piece of work as Jors ever wanted to get close to. *:Brock told two of the young males to carry you here.:*

*:He just told them what to do and they did it?:*

*:They are used to being told what to do.:*

*:Good point,:* Jors acknowledged.

*:And,:* Gervis continued, *:I think they were frightened when they realized they had struck down a Herald.:*

*:They knew I was a Herald!:*

*:Knowing and realizing are often different. Had the blow struck by the child's father been any lower, they would have killed you and that frightened them, too. They were thankful Brock took charge. He saw you were tended to, he was assured you would live without damage, he groomed us both, and then he cried himself to sleep.:*

*:Poor guy. Good thing he was there. If he hadn't been, I wouldn't have put it past the mean lady to have finished the job and buried both our bodies.:*

*:The Circle would know.:*

*:We'd still be dead. Is this why Calida insisted on bringing him?:*

*:She has told her Chosen we need no assistance and convinced her not to ride to the rescue. The Herald Isabel agreed but only because she felt the townspeople would lay the blame on Brock.:*

*:That's ridiculous.:*

Gervis sighed, blowing sweet, hay-scented breath over Jors' face. *:There is already much talk against him taking a Companion.:*

All of which he needed to know but didn't answer his question. About to ask it again, he stopped short. *:Calida can reach Isabel from here? I couldn't reach you from here!:*

*:Nor I you.:*

He sounded so put out by it, Jors couldn't prevent a smile. *:Never mind, Heart-brother. Calida and her Chosen have been together for many years; when we've been together for that long, I'll hear you if I'm in Sorrows and you're in Sensholding.:*

*:I'd rather we were never that far apart.:*

Jors wrapped one hand in Gervis' silken mane. *:Me either :*



*:Sleep now, Chosen. It will be morning soon enough.:*

\* \* \*

When Jors opened his eyes again, weak autumn sunlight filtered into the stable. An attempt to rise brought Gervis in through the open door. He pulled himself to his feet with a handful of mane and, throwing an arm over his Companion's back, managed to get to where he could relieve himself.

*:The old woman made them bury the child this morning.:*

*:They're only a day's ride from town; they can't wait for a priest?:*

*:The bridge is gone. The priest cannot come.: He pawed the ground with a front hoof and added. :I don't think the old woman would send for a priest even if he could come.:*

*:Do you know where they are?:*

*:Yes.:*

Jors took a deep breath and, holding it, managed to swing himself up on Gervis' bare back. *:Let's go, then.:*

The tanners had a graveyard in a small clearing cupped by the surrounding oak forest. When Jors arrived, the three men had just finished filling in the tiny hole. As Jors stopped, half hidden by a large sumach, Brock wiped the tears from his face on Calida's mane and stepped up to the grave.

"There is no priest. I will say good-bye to the baby."

"I'm not listening to a half-wit say anything," the old woman snarled. She turned on one heel and started down the hill. "I only came to see the job was done right. Enric, Kern, Simen; back to work, there's hides to be sammied."

Two of the three moved to her side, the third looked toward the young woman and hesitated. "He was my son, Ma."

"He was my son, Ma." She threw it mockingly over her shoulder. "Look around you, Simen. I've buried a son, two daughters, and a husband besides, and it don't make hides tan themselves. Stay and listen to the half-wit if you want."

"Dory?"

She lifted stony eyes to Simen's face. "Better do as your ma says," she sneered. "'Cause you always do as your ma says."

Scarred hands curled into fists, but they stayed at his side. "Fine. I'll go."

"I don't care."

"Fine." But when he turned, Brock was in his way.

Jors tensed to urge Gervis forward, but at the last instant, for no clear reason, he changed his mind.

"Stay and say good-bye." A heavy shove rocked him in place but didn't move him. "Stay." And then gently. "Say good-bye to baby."

Simen stared down into Brock's face, then wordlessly turned back to the grave.

Brock returned to his place and rubbed his nose on his sleeve. "Sometimes," he said, "babies die. Mamas and papas love them, and hug them, and kiss them, and feed them, and they die. Nobody did anything bad. Everyone is sorry. The baby wasn't bad. Babies are good. Good-bye, baby."

"His name," Simen said, so quietly Jors almost missed it, "was Tamas."

Brock nodded solemnly. "Good-bye, Tamas. Everyone is sorry." He lifted his head and stared at Tamas' parents standing hunch-shouldered, carefully apart. "Now, you cry."

Dory shook her head. "Crying is for the weak."

"You have tears." Brock tapped his own chest. "In here. Tears not cried go bad. Bad tears make you hurt."

"You heard Aysa. She buried a son and two daughters. She never cried."

"She is the mean lady," Brock said sadly. "You can't be the mean lady." He opened his arms and, before Dory could move, wrapped her in one of his all-encompassing hugs.

Jors knew from experience that when Brock hugged, he held nothing back.

It was a new experience for Dory.

She blinked twice, drew in a long shuddering breath, then clutched at his tattered sweater and began to sob. After a moment, Brock reached out one hand, grabbed Simen and pulled him into the embrace.

"Cry now," he commanded.

"I..." Simen shook his head and tried to pull away.

Brock pulled him closer, pushing Dory into his arms and wrapping himself around them both. Simen stiffened then made a sound, very like his son might have made, and gave himself over to grief. All three of them sank to their knees.

*:These people need help.:*

*Gervis shifted his head. :It seems they're getting it:*

\* \* \*

With the funeral over, Jors pulled himself into something resembling official shape and sought out Aysa.

"Your son attacked a Herald."

"His son just died. He was mad with grief."

"You goaded his brothers..."

"To stand by him," she sneered triumphantly. "I never told no one to hit you. And now I'm givin' you and that half-wit food and shelter. You can't ask for more, Herald."

Given that he and Brock were trapped on her side of the river, he supposed he'd better not. "About the bridge..."

Without the bridge, there was no way back. The river wasn't particularly wide, but the water ran deep and fast.

"You come out here to stick your nose in on us, then you're stuck out here till we head in to town and we ain't headin' nowheres until them hides is done. We wasted time enough with Dory having that baby. You want to leave before that, then you and the half-wit can rebuild the bridge yourself."

"That's fair. I can't expect you to drop everything and assist me." His next words wiped the triumphant sneer from her face. "I'll have them send a crew out from town."

"You can't get word to town."

He smiled, hoping he looked a lot more confident of the conversation's outcome than he felt. "There's a Herald there and I already have. By this time tomorrow, there'll be a dozen people in the valley."

"Liar."

"Heralds can't lie, Ma."

"Shut up!" Aysa half turned and Kern winced away as though he expected to be hit. Lip curled, she turned back to Jors. "I don't want a dozen people in the valley! And it don't take a dozen people anyway. And the water won't be down enough tomorrow."

"Then I'll have them come when the water goes down."

"You won't have no one come. My boys'll rebuild."

"Then the townspeople can help."

"My boys don't need help. They ain't got brains for much, but they can do that. You let them know in town I'm hostin' you and the half-wit till then."

It was a grudgingly offered truce, but he'd take it.

Jors wasn't surprised that Aysa'd refused help. The last thing she'd want would be her sons exposed to more people, to people who'd make them realize they were entitled to be treated with kindness. Over the next few days, while they waited for the water to recede, she proved that by keeping him by her side, keeping him from interacting with anyone else at the holding.

Brock, she considered no threat.

Which was a mistake.

Because Brock treated everyone with kindness.

\* \* \*

"You call that supple?! I could do better chewin' it! How could you be doin' this all your life and still be no damned good? You're pathetic." Enric and Kern leaped back as she threw the piece of finished leather down at their feet. "Pathetic," she repeated and stomped away.

"Mean lady calls me names, too," Brock sighed, coming out from behind the fleshing beam and picking up the hide.

Enric ripped it out of his hands. "We ain't half-wits."

"Mean lady calls me half-wit. Not you."

"You *are* a half-wit!"

"Are you pathetic?"

Kern jerked forward, face flushed. "You callin' us pathetic?"

"No. It hurts when people call names." Brock looked from one to the other. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"If your half-wit falls in a liming pit," Aysa snarled as Jors caught up, "my boys'll stand there and laugh."

"You taught them that."

"I'm all they got."

"They're terrified of you."

"Good."

"Dory isn't."

"You think one of my boys is stupid enough to pick up a weakling?" Aysa nodded toward the garden where Dory heaped cabbage into a basket. "But she does what I say like the rest. If she doesn't like it, she can leave any time."

While they watched, Dory lifted the basket, gave a little cry and let it fall.

Aysa snorted. "Course that baby left her stupidly weak."

Jors took a step toward the garden but stopped as Simen came out of the chicken house and hurried across to his wife.

"Simen! You get back to work, you lazy pig."

His mother's voice froze him in his tracks. Then he shook himself, and began retrieving the spilled cabbages. "Simen!"

He ignored her.

"This is your fault, Herald. Turning a woman's family against her." Muttering under her breath, she strode toward them.

Dory looked up, saw her coming and stood, hands on hips.

"You think you can face me down, girl? Simen, get up!"

He stood.

"Now get back to work."

He took a step forward and put his hands on Dory's shoulders. "When I'm finished here, Ma."

Aysa's mouth worked for a moment, but no sound emerged. Finally, she spun on one heel and stomped away.

The corner of Simen's mouth curled. "You'd best help here, Herald. I wouldn't follow her right now."

\* \* \*

The river was low enough the next day.

The bridge took only a day longer to rebuild and for the most part involved fitting the original pieces back into place.

Jors stared the completed bridge in amazement. "That's incredible."

"Nothin' incredible about it, Herald," Enric snorted. "Damned thing goes out every other season. Easier to build it so it breaks apart clean."

His bare torso red with cold, Kern shrugged into a sheepskin coat. "Supports slip out so they don't shatter, logs end up in the same place, we float 'em back and rebuild. Any idiot can do it."

"Trust me, I've crossed a hundred rivers&mdash;or maybe a couple of rivers a hundred times&mdash;but I've never seen anything like this."

"Ma says it's not..." Simen paused, frowned, and looked up at the Herald. "It's really good?"

"It's really good."

The brothers exchanged confused looks and Jors had the horrible suspicion this was the first time they'd ever been praised for anything.

\* \* \*

The next day while Jors was checking Calida's girth strap for the trip back to town, Dory came out of the house with a bundle. "It's for Brock," she said, folding back a corner. "I want you to give it to him for me."

At first Jors thought it was white leather. Made sense; they were tanners after all. Then he realized the leather had been cut and sewn into a fair approximation of Herald's whites. Dory had clearly taken the pattern from his and sized it to fit Brock.

"I saw he didn't have none of his own."

*Oh, help.* "Dory, you know he's not..."

"Brother Herald! We go now? What you got?" His hands and Dory's together closed the bundle.

"It's a surprise," Dory said, her cheeks crimson. "For later."

"Not for now?"

"No."

"Okay." He took Calida's reins and stood waiting patiently while Jors tied the bundle behind Gervis' saddle. *:You seem upset, Chosen.:*

*:I can't tell her Brock's not an actual Herald while he's standing there. He'll say he is, I'll say he isn't, and I'm not sure that in this place at this time, I'd win the argument.:*

*:You shouldn't argue.:*

*:Oh, that's helpful.:*

*:Thank you.:*

\* \* \*

The whole family went with them to the bridge. Jors didn't know why the rest came, but he was certain Aysa just wanted to make sure they were off her land. He wanted to say something, something that would convince them they didn't have to live inside the darkness of an old woman's anger, but before he could think of the right words, Brock hugged Dory. And Simen. And Enric. And Kern.

Then he scrambled up into the saddle and, from the safety of Calida's back, took a deep breath, looked Aysa in the eye, and spoke directly to her for the first time. "Why don't you love your babies?"

Her lip curled. "I buried my babies, half-wit."

He nodded toward the three young men standing to her right. "Not them."

She turned, looked at her sons, looked back at

Brock and muttered, "Half-wit." But there was little force behind it.

Jors had no idea he was going to do what he did until he did it.

\* \* \*

"Jors, you hugged mean lady."

"Yeah. I know." Although he still couldn't believe it. "Everyone else got hugged, I just..."

She'd pushed him away with such force that he'd slammed back into Gervis' shoulder.

"You are the bravest Herald. Ever, ever."

"Thank you."

Then she'd snarled something incomprehensible, turned, and stomped away.

He'd probably accomplished nothing at all by it. The bundle Dory had given him pushed against the small of his back.

\* \* \*

The weather remained clear and cool and just as the sun was setting, they stopped outside the village. "Gate will close when sun is set," Brock warned. "I know. Brock, I think you should go back to Haven with Isabel."

"Lots of Heralds in Haven?"

"Yes."

Brock sighed and shook his head. "No. I have to stay here. I am the only Herald."

"Brock, you're not..." He couldn't say it.

Brock waited patiently for a moment then smiled. "Is it later?"

"Yes..."

"What's Dory's surprise?"

"Um...it's um..."

Both Companions turned their heads to look at him. Their expression said, *this is up to you.*

*:He believes he is a Herald.:*

*:Yes, but.:*

*:And he acts accordingly.:*

\* \* \*

"I couldn't do it, Isabel. They're just clothes and I know that but if I gave Brock those whites, then there'd be fake Heralds showing up all over the place."

"A bad precedent to be sure," the older Herald agreed.

"There has to be a line and that line has to be the Companions. Sometimes it seems like we're barely keeping order in chaos now. I couldn't...No matter how much..." Jors ran both hands back through his hair, he couldn't believe how much the decision, the right decision had felt like betrayal. "It wouldn't make any difference to Brock. He knows who and what he is, but for the others in the village, those who made fun and called him names..."

"Come here, I want to show you something." Isabel took his arm and pulled him to the window. "What do you see?"

Jors squinted down into the stable yard. "Brock's grooming Gervis again."

"While you four were gone, I talked to a lot of people. Seems that whenever a Herald comes into this village, the Companion manages to spend time with Brock. Even if it's only a moment or two." They watched as Calida crossed the yard and tried to shoulder Gervis away. Brock laughed and told her to wait her turn. "You were right not to give him the Whites," Isabel continued, "but you were also right when you said it makes no difference. He couldn't be Chosen because, as Heralds, we have to face dangers he'd never understand, but the Companions know him. All Brock needs from us is our love and support. Now, since Healer Lorrin has finally allowed me out of bed, what do you say you and I go down there and give our brother a hand with the fourfoots?"

Jors grinned as Brock gamely tried to brush both tails at once.

*Heralds wear shiny white.*

Brock wore his Whites on the inside.