



X

Thought And Favour



Sarenya sprawled in the mud, gasping for air, her left side screaming in pain, and found some comfort in the knowledge that the beast who'd put her there was going to regret it.

"Saren!" Jarrisam's shout, honed on Turns of yelling at apprentices in distant paddocks, carried like a message drum. "You all right?"

The other journeyman came slogging up the hillside as Sarenya struggled to catch her breath. Tarnish had returned, humming anxiously in her ear, but she couldn't summon the wherewithal to reassure him.

"Knew that ram had a mean streak," she gasped as Jarrisam approached.

"I know, I know." Jarrisam raked his fingers through his hair, a concerned gesture. "Can you move?"

Sarenya started to lever herself upright, but the white-hot pain that stabbed through her ribs stopped her. "Ouch, shard it!"

"Stay still." Jarrisam crouched beside her, running a Beastcrafter's sensitive hands over her side. Sarenya hissed with pain when his fingers touched the most painful spot. "You might have cracked some ribs. We need to get a Healer down here. Know any dragonriders?"

"A few," Sarenya replied painfully. Breathing was getting easier, but deep breaths still hurt. "Send Tarnish to C'mine. Pencil's in my belt.... Tarnish! Get back here!"

The bronze fire-lizard had vanished *between* in an uncharacteristic show of disobedience. Sarenya closed her eyes: angry, frustrated, and hurting. Sleek had stayed back at the cot, grounded with his broken wing, none of the other Beastcrafters had fire-lizards, and the Weyr, for all that the great crater seemed close, was several uphill miles away. "Shard blast it!"

Jarrisam shook his head. "Dorvan! Anthelle!"

The apprentices had been watching the spectacle of their supervising journeyman being laid out by an obstinate ram with eager eyes. As they ran up, Sarenya resigned herself to the teasing she'd come in for by sundown. Butted by a randy sheep - certain parties were going to have a good laugh about that.

"Take a runner up to the infirmary and tell them what's happened," Jarrisam told Anthelle, the younger apprentice. "Dorvan, get two of the other lads and round up that ram. And don't let him go for you."

"Faranth," Sarenya muttered, crossing her right arm over her chest to hold the painful ribs still.

"I don't want to move you," Jarrisam said frankly. "Making you ride runner-back would do more harm than good, so we'll have to wait for Anthelle to -"

He was interrupted by the frightened bleating of ewes as a dragon materialised from *between* and glided low over the paddock. "Shards, where did he come from?"

Tarnish swooped down towards Sarenya to partially answer the question. Sarenya frowned at her delinquent lizard. "Hey, you, come here!"

The bronze landed by her head, folded his wings to his back, and strutted with his chest puffed out, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. Sarenya didn't try to twist round to identify the dragonrider: pain aside, if her ribs were broken she knew better than to make things worse. "Who've you brought?"

"Your timing is excellent, brown rider," said Jarrisam, sounding relieved.

But before Sarenya could mentally catalogue which browns she knew, the rider had spoken. "Saren, are you all right?"

"M'ric?" Sarenya looked up, startled, as the tall Peninsula brown rider strode into her limited field of view.

"Tarnish came screaming out of *between* like Thread was falling." M'ric knelt beside her, ignoring the mud, taking in the situation with a glance. Augusta clung to his shoulder, one forepaw wrapped in his curly dark hair. "Next thing I know the pair of them are flying up Trebruth's nose. What happened?"

"Rammed," Sarenya replied shortly.

"That ram," Jarrisam added, nodding at the beast that the three apprentices had wrestled under control and were half-leading, half-dragging back towards the paddock. The ram resisted all the way.

M'ric frowned. "Those horns look nasty."

Sarenya dragged in another difficult breath. "Feel it, too."

"You've hurt your ribs?" M'ric asked, and then nodded. "Stay put. We'll bring a Healer." He rose and covered the distance back to his dragon in rangy strides. "Journeyman, she's not to move a muscle. If those ribs are broken...."

A moment later Sarenya heard and felt the first massive downstroke of Trebruth's wings. She turned her head against the fine spray of loose earth, unsure if she should be embarrassed or relieved by M'ric's appearance. She settled for some of each.

"That's a smart lizard you've got there, Saren," said Jarrisam, hunkering down beside her.

"Not smart," said Sarenya. She shifted a bit, starting to feel rocks digging into her back. She'd chosen an excellent place to fall - stony and muddy and covered in sheep droppings. "He's obsessed with M'ric's queen."

"Is he a good friend of yours?" Jarrisam asked, with the forced jollity of someone trying to keep a patient's mind off the pain.

"Only known him a sevenday," Saren managed. "He's new. Been showing him around." She closed her eyes against the memory of being thrown flying. "I stink like sheep musk, don't I?"



Jarrisam chuckled. "It *is* mating season."

Sarenya groaned in mortification.

It seemed like hours before Trebruth returned, though it could only have been a few minutes. The brown chose a more considerate approach this time, although the entire flock had huddled at the far side of the enclosure. The short, wiry Healer M'ric had brought was Heftan, a senior journeyman of the craft.

"I hear you're having trouble with the beasts today, Sarenya," the Healer said cheerfully, kneeling beside her and setting down his case, marked with the purple caduceus of his Craft.

"A bit," Sarenya admitted.

"Can you tell me where it hurts?"

Gingerly, Sarenya took her hand away from the left side of her ribcage. Heftan ran fingers gentler than Jarrisam's over the area, feeling each rib in turn. Sarenya clenched her teeth against the pain when Heftan probed the fifth, sixth, and seventh ribs. She could see M'ric standing behind the Healer, and his presence had roused her sense of self dignity.

"Does breathing hurt?" Heftan asked when he had finished his first examination.

"Yes. If I breathe too deep."

"I need to see if there are any irregularities in the way you're breathing, Sarenya. Your tunic," and he touched the thick hide garment, "absorbed some of the blow, but I'm afraid it's going to have to come off."

He had to cut it, in the end, slicing through the rows of stitches that Sarenya had repaired so many times. She wore a woollen sweater over a cotton shirt underneath, but Heftan was able to perform his examination through them. Under the Healer's direction, Saren took several long, uncomfortable breaths. "I know that hurts," Heftan said sympathetically, "but you need to resist the urge to take shallow breaths. You risk pneumonia if you don't clear your lungs frequently. Would you cough for me?"

Sarenya coughed. "Ouch," she said weakly.

"Can you taste any blood?"

"No, it just hurts."

Heftan nodded, as if confirming a suspicion. "Well, I think you've fractured those painful ribs, Sarenya, but I don't believe there's any secondary damage to your lungs from the broken bones. I'm going to immobilise your upper body, and then if M'ric and his dragon would be so kind, I'd like to get you back to the infirmary straight away."

The Healer folded Sarenya's left arm across her chest, so her palm was flat against the opposite collarbone, and secured it there with broad bandages. The support made Sarenya more comfortable without constricting her breathing, and with Heftan's assistance she was able to get to her feet.

"Will you be all right without me?" Jarrisam asked anxiously. "I'd come up to the infirmary with you, but I shouldn't leave the apprentices, and I'm not sure there's room...."

"I'll be fine," Sarenya assured the other journeyman.

Jarrisam nodded. "I'll send one of the lads to Arrense, to let him know what's happened."

At M'ric's prompting, Trebruth flattened himself almost to the ground to make mounting easier. Heftan didn't comment on the brown's size, and Sarenya knew better, but it was a good thing that the Healer was slight and M'ric lean. Even then, they made a snug fit between Trebruth's neck ridges. At least, Sarenya thought dully, the forcible removal of her work tunic meant that she was a bit cleaner than she had been.

Behind her on Trebruth's neck, M'ric turned back to Heftan. "Can we take her *between*?"

"Certainly," the Healer replied. "And a smooth take-off, if you would."

M'ric chuckled as he turned back. Mounted forward of him, Sarenya heard the brown rider murmur, "Smooth as you like."

With no further preamble, the brown dragon went *between*. Sarenya barely had time to register the intensity of cold and dark before they were out above the Bowl. Trebruth had gone *between* from the ground, but he might as well have gained ten dragonlengths of air: he'd assumed a flight profile before emerging, and his easy spiral down towards the ground was as controlled and precise as any Sarenya had ever seen. The shock almost made her forget about her injured ribs. "How'd you do that?"

The wind whipped away her words, but she could feel M'ric laughing.

As Trebruth descended, Sarenya braced herself for the impact of landing. She needn't have worried. The brown controlled his final approach with consummate skill, and Saren barely felt a shiver when the dragon's hind feet touched down. Trebruth settled the upper part of his body to the ground without a jolt.

"Stay here a moment," M'ric said in her ear as he released the fighting strap that had secured them all in place for the duration of the flight.

With the obliging Trebruth once more pressing himself close to the ground, Sarenya heard first Heftan and then M'ric dismount, the brown rider with more confidence than the little Healer. She steadied herself with the arm that wasn't strapped, wondering how she was going to get down. Lateral movement hurt.

M'ric stepped up to Trebruth's side. "Put your hand on my shoulder," he told her. "Down you come."

And as simply as that, the brown rider lifted Sarenya from Trebruth's neck and placed her lightly on her feet. Sarenya almost staggered, catching herself against him just in time. M'ric steadied her with a supportive touch on her right shoulder, smiling down at her. "All right?"

"You've done ambulance runs before, brown rider," Heftan said approvingly.

The smile suddenly died on M'ric's face, and for a moment his eyes were more than dark. "Once."

Trebruth turned his head to look at his rider with an unreadable expression.

“Let’s not stand about,” said Heftan, with a note in his voice that suggested he wasn’t oblivious to the sudden strain in the air. “Thank you, brown dragon.”

“Thanks, Trebruth,” said Sarenya, patting the soft, dark brown neck awkwardly with her free hand.

As she walked between Heftan and M’ric to the infirmary, the journeyman wondered what memory had pained Trebruth’s rider so. Did it have something to do with his transfer to Madellon? There was still so much she didn’t know about the Peninsula rider.

“Beast journeyman Sarenya, suspected broken ribs,” Heftan said to the Healer behind the desk in the waiting area.

“Take her straight onto the ward,” the duty journeyman replied. “We’re having a quiet day.”

Sarenya had never had reason to visit the Weyr’s infirmary before. The ward was a long room with curtained cubicles on either side. Most of the hangings, drawn back, revealed empty, neatly-made beds. The antiseptic scent of redwort hung on the air. Several Healers – apprentices and journeymen – moved quietly about their business up and down the chamber.

Agusta and Tarnish winked in from *between*, their eyes wide and green. “Go and check on Sleek, Tarnish,” Sarenya told her bronze. “Don’t want him hurting himself.”

The little bronze cheeped and vanished. Agusta blinked at her friend’s sudden departure, drawing herself up in fire-lizard affront, then alighted on the foot of the closest bed and started to preen her wings.

“If you’d like to wait here, journeyman,” Heftan told Sarenya, indicating the cubicle Agusta had commandeered. “Apprentice, would you bring some extra pillows?”

As Heftan vanished off down the ward, the senior apprentice he had addressed – a girl of about eighteen – collected an armful of pillows from a locker and brought them into the cubicle. She smiled understandingly at Sarenya as she built up the head of the bed. “Broken ribs?”

“Looks that way,” Saren replied.

“Is the other guy worse off?” the apprentice asked.

Sarenya laughed and then regretted it. “He will be,” she said when the flare of pain in her side had died down, thinking of the ram. “No more stud service is going to be the least of his worries.”

The Healer apprentice looked perplexed, but M’ric laughed, his normal good humour apparently restored.

“People laughing in the ward, that can’t be right,” Heftan said as he returned with water and redwort. He set the basins down on the table beside the bed. “Now, I’m going to need you to take off your sweater and shirt, there, Sarenya.”

“Ah,” said M’ric. “That would be my cue to step outside.”

Heftan chuckled. “If you would, please, brown rider.”

“Is there anything I can get for you, Saren?” M’ric asked. “Anyone you want to know you’re here?”

“My Master will be up here soon enough,” she replied.

The Peninsula rider nodded. “I’ll wait outside.”

“You too,” Heftan said to Augusta. “I know what fire-lizards can be like.”

The queen chirped, insulted, and flew to M’ric’s shoulder. The brown rider winced as her hind claws dug through his shirt. “Now she’s offended.”

As the apprentice pulled the curtains around the cubicle, Heftan started to untie the bandages that had served to immobilise Sarenya’s torso. “Gara, would you help the journeyman with her sweater?”

“You’re not going to have to cut that off, too?” Sarenya asked, dismayed.

“No, I don’t think so. Let’s see how you do.”

With the apprentice’s help, and a bit of uncomfortable manoeuvring, the sweater came off in one piece. The shirt was easier, although unbuttoning it one-handed proved almost impossible. Gara’s deft fingers finished the task.

Heftan whistled softly as the extent of Sarenya’s injury became apparent. “That’s quite a bruise.”

Half the left side of Sarenya’s ribcage had blossomed an angry purple, dramatic against her pale skin. The Beastcrafter sucked in her breath sharply as Heftan ran his fingers gently over the contusion. “Yes, I think those three ribs are definitely fractured. And a lot more would have been, but for those layers of leather and wool. The skin is broken, although not so badly as I might have feared.” He directed her to lie back on the bed, propped half-upright by the pillows Gara had piled there. “Had big horns, did he, this sheep?” he asked conversationally as he reached for redwort and a cloth.

“Bloody big horns.”

“They’ve left quite an imprint.” Heftan sounded fascinated.

Sarenya closed her eyes as the first cold swipe of redwort stung her abraded skin. “So long as that’s all you’re looking at.”

“Of course, journeyman. Apprentice, would you go to the cold room and bring me an ice compress?” Heftan finished cleaning the area and reached to the table for something else. “You’ll be glad to know I haven’t forgotten the existence of numbweed.”

Sarenya sighed in relief as the Healer started spreading the pale green salve over her painful ribs. “Faranth, that’s better.”

“It will reduce the pain from the surface contusion,” Heftan agreed. “However, it won’t provide much relief from the discomfort of the broken ribs themselves. The ice compress I’ve sent Gara for will help to reduce the swelling, as will rest.” The Healer finished coating Sarenya’s bruise with numbweed and opened a packet of gauze. “There isn’t any secondary damage to your internal organs, so I’m not going to strap you up again. I will cover the wound, though. The surface graze would benefit from fresh air, but your side’s going to be very tender for a good two sevendays or so.”

Once Heftan had dressed the ugly bruise, he let Sarenya put her shirt back on. "I'm going to prescribe you willowsalic for the pain," he said. "You'll need to brew it as a tea and drink it four times a day. If it's not effective, I'll prescribe you something stronger. Ah, Gara, thank you."

The apprentice had returned with a cold compress, covered with a thick towel. Heftan removed the towel to reveal the bag of crushed ice. He wrapped it in a thinner cloth and applied the ice pack to Sarenya's injured side.

Before long, Sarenya felt the cold begin to seep through her shirt. It was an uncomfortable sensation, but it did ease the throbbing of her ribs. Sarenya had never used an ice compress on an animal – the Beastcraft simply didn't have the access to ice that a Weyr's infirmary did – but she would have treated a beast that had been kicked or rammed in much the same way as Heftan has treated her. The main difference was that animals couldn't tell you where it hurt.

"Keep holding that in place," Heftan told her. "I'll get that willow. Gara, would you finish up?"

The Healer journeyman had barely gone two paces when he poked his head back around the curtain. "Sarenya, your Master's here."

"Better let him in," Sarenya said, sitting up. "Open the curtain, in fact. I'm decent."

Master Arrense, the Weyr Beastcrafter, stood with M'ric across the corridor from Sarenya's cubicle. The Weyr Master was frowning - an expression Sarenya had heard she often mirrored. Little wonder. Arrense was her uncle, on her father's side, and although they played down the blood tie in favour of a more professional working relationship, the family resemblance betrayed them.

"How are you feeling, journeyman?" Arrense asked with typical gruff concern.

"Sore, Master. Some broken ribs."

Arrense folded his arms across his chest, made burly from decades of handling powerful animals. "That daft girl Anthelle came running up to the cot blathering something about you being stampeded by half the flock."

Sarenya groaned at the embellishment. "Not stampeded so much as...well, rammed."

The Master regarded her with bright blue eyes. "What happened?"

"We were trying out that young ram Jessaf sent us in their last drive."

"The one with the big horns?"

"I always thought he'd be mean. But we put him in with some of the experienced ewes, to see how he'd get on. He got nasty with them, so I roped him." She sighed. "I should have waited for Jarrisam before I pulled him out of the enclosure. I got Dorvan to put another rope on him, but he didn't have a good enough hold. Ram pulled loose as I was closing the gate. Tarnish ran him off, but not before he'd tossed me."

"Dorvan's a big lad," said Arrense. "He should have been able to hold it."

Sarenya shrugged her right shoulder. "He didn't."

Arrense moved closer, looking at the ice pack Sarenya still held to her side. "Broken ribs, you say? You're lucky it wasn't worse."

"I know," Sarenya said sourly. With the pain under control, she was annoyed with herself.

"Well." Arrense frowned down at her. "What are we going to do with you?"

"The Healer says I'll be sore for at least two sevendays."

The Weyr Master nodded. "You won't be going back out into the pastures for a while, journeyman. There's the hatchery, of course."

"Oh, Faranth," Sarenya groaned. Wherries were as smelly, ugly, and disagreeable at birth as at any time in their lives.

Arrense shook his head. "Teasing, Saren. Hmm. You'll need a couple of days before I can put you back on duty anyway, won't you? Well, that gives me time to think of something. And speaking of time, I should go and give Jarrisam some help before I find that he's been knocked on his backside, too."

"It's not funny, Master," Sarenya complained.

Arrense chuckled darkly. "It will be once every apprentice in the Weyr has heard it. Glad it's not too bad, Sarenya. Now you get your rest and do what you're told." He snorted with laughter. "By the Healers, if not me!"

As Arrense walked away, Sarenya met M'ric's gaze. The brown rider looked amused. "You can stop that, too," Saren told him disgustedly.

M'ric smiled. "I'm on your side."

Sarenya leaned her head against the heaped pillows. "I'm sorry Tarnish dragged you into this."

He shook his head. "Don't be. I wasn't doing anything important, and you could really have been hurt."

"It's an imposition I'd rather not have made," Sarenya insisted. "You've barely been here a sevenday and already you've minded my fire-lizards, rescued me from a sheep attack...."

M'ric laughed. "Trebruth says to call him sooner the next time a sheep attacks you." Then his expression sobered. "It's our pleasure, Saren."

Sarenya didn't quite know how to respond to that. Fortunately, she didn't have to. Heftan returned at that moment, and to Saren's surprise he was deep in conversation with C'los.

The green rider caught sight of her, and hesitated mid-stride. "Saren? What are you doing here?"

"Just visiting, C'los, what does it look like?"

Indioth's rider looked at the ice pack. "I know T'kamen likes it a little rough, sometimes, but
—"

"Oh, shut up," Sarenya told him, so vehemently that the exclamation hurt her sore ribs.

"If you'd leave the shouting until after those ribs have healed, journeyman, green rider," said Heftan, throwing stern glances at them both.

Sarenya closed her eyes against the pain, doubly irritated for having been so easily baited. Her barbed exchanges with C'los seldom strayed into viciousness, but his mention of T'kamen had hit a nerve. The unwritten, unspoken rules of the game dictated that certain lines were not crossed. C'mine knew what had happened between her and T'kamen, and by extension C'los should too.

"Willowsalic, Sarenya."

She opened her eyes to pay attention to Heftan. The Healer had set a steaming cup on the bedside table. "Two spoonfuls in water that's just gone off the boil," he told her, doling out the quantity from the packet he'd brought. "Let it steep and drink it all when it's cooled enough. You can add some mint if it's too bitter."

Sarenya nodded, familiar with the properties of willowsalic. "How often can I – "

A sudden disturbance from the adjacent cubicle interrupted her; murmurs that started soft and barely audible, but rose rapidly to incoherent shrieks.

"Shards," Heftan muttered, and pulled back the curtain, hurrying into the cubicle. The heavily-bandaged form in the bed thrashed violently. "I need some help, here!"

M'ric and C'los were closest. "Hold him down!" Heftan ordered them, and the two riders obeyed, pinning the writhing, screaming figure to the cot. Heftan unlocked the cabinet next to the bed, and Sarenya saw him seize a bottle from it.

Several other Healers arrived at that moment; one, by his rank cords, the Weyr Master. "He's in dragon-linked shock, Heftan: get him sedated. The queen's managing his bronze. Katel: hold his head."

Another journeyman immobilised the struggling rider's head, and Heftan held the cup containing the hastily-mixed sedative to his lips. Most of it spilled, but after several moments the bandaged rider's resistance eased.

"Sejanth," he croaked, "Sejanth...."

"Sejanth's going to be all right, D'feng," said the Weyr Healer. "He's going to be all right, you hear?"

From her bed, Sarenya stared at the other patient in surprise. D'feng? Her working hours meant that she sometimes lagged a day or so behind in the Weyr's news, and she hadn't heard anything about a serious injury to one of Madellon's most senior riders.

D'feng didn't seem to have heard the Healer Master's reassurances. He clung suddenly to the journeyman who was still restraining his head with clumsy, bandaged hands. "You, you, who are you, I know you.... Sejanth, no, don't flame, don't...."

"Hold him," the Healer Master said grimly, and when four pairs of hands held D'feng motionless, he administered more of the sedative mixture. The bronze rider relaxed slowly, his eyes drooping shut. Heftan felt for the carotid pulse at D'feng's throat, and nodded to his Master.

"Thank you, riders," the Weyr Healer said to C'los and M'ric. "C'los, wait for me in my office; I'll be with you shortly. Heftan, if your patient can manage without you, I'd like your help here...."

"What happened with D'feng?" Sarenya demanded of C'los as the Master Healer closed the curtain on the bronze rider's cubicle.

"Accident in flaming drill," C'los replied. He looked sidelong at M'ric. "Why don't you ask your friend the Wingsecond?"

Saren shook her head. "M'ric's not a Wingsecond."

"Ha!" C'los crowed. "Wrong!"

She looked blankly at M'ric. "Are you?"

The brown rider rubbed his jaw with one knuckle, looking faintly embarrassed. "Well...."

"You need to pay more attention, Saren," C'los gloated. "It's been all round the Weyr, and you didn't know!"

"Would you shut up, for the love of Faranth?" Sarenya said, exasperated. "What happened, M'ric?"

"Sejanth lost his head in drill and flamed himself," C'los said immediately.

"You weren't there," said M'ric, and a stern note in the brown rider's voice made C'los recoil slightly. M'ric turned to Sarenya, and continued in his normal tone. "After the accident, the North Central Wingseconds took command. Sh'zon was my superior at the Peninsula, and he impressed the Weyrleader."

"T'kamen promoted him on the spot," C'los cut in.

M'ric looked at the green rider, then back at Sarenya. "Is he always like this?"

Ignoring C'los' baits was one way to deal with him. "Sometimes he's worse," she replied.

The brown rider shrugged. "Sh'zon was made acting Wingleader, and the Weyrleader approved his choice of me as acting Wingsecond."

C'los pounced. "So it's only interim rank?"

"Something like that," M'ric agreed.

"I guess it makes sense," said C'los. "Half a rank for a man with half a dragon."

"C'los!" Sarenya exclaimed, outraged.

"What?"

But M'ric seemed unconcerned by C'los' tactless jibe. "It's all right, Saren."

"It's not all right," Sarenya insisted, glaring at the green rider. "You know, C'los, one day, something's going to fly into that big mouth of yours, and I'm going to have a good laugh at your expense."

"Make it a day when your ribs aren't broken, Saren," C'los retorted and, with a backhanded wave, the green rider strolled away.

Sarenya groaned and looked up at M'ric. "Don't mind C'los," she said wearily. "He likes to think he's clever. He doesn't usually mean to cause offence."

"I'm not offended, Saren," the brown rider told her.

"Really?"

"Really." M'ric offered her the cup of cooled willowsalic. "Drink your tea."

Sarenya accepted the change of subject as non-negotiable. "So you're a Wingsecond," she said instead, taking the cup from him.

"I'm a Wingsecond."

"Just once, I'd like to see you wearing accurate rank knots." Sarenya sipped her tea and grimaced at the bitterness. "Won't there be a lot for you to learn, being so new to Madellon?"

"J'tron will direct a lot of the proceedings until Sh'zon and I are up to speed," he replied.

"Was Sejanth badly hurt?"

"Firestone burn is always bad," M'ric said soberly. "Poisonous. D'feng was protected to a certain extent by his wherhides, and wingsail regenerates fast, but if it's got into Sejanth's blood...."

"You think it might not be an interim rank for long?"

M'ric shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't like to speculate."

Heftan came back into the cubicle then. "I'm sorry about that, Sarenya," he apologised. "You'll need to drink all of that tea."

Sarenya made a face, but gulped down the remainder of the willowsalic. "Thank you, journeyman, that was revolting," she said, handing the cup back.

"If it doesn't taste bad it's not doing you any good," the Healer replied good-naturedly. "How's that feeling?"

Saren cautiously peeled the melting compress away from her ribs. Her side was uncomfortably cold, but the burning seemed to have subsided. "Better, I think."

"Good. Good." Heftan took the dripping ice pack and handed Sarenya the packet of willowsalic and numbweed tin. "You'll need both of these. If it gets worse and you need a stronger analgesic, or if you feel any sharp, stabbing pains, or start coughing up blood, then you'll need to call a Healer immediately. Otherwise, I'd like to see you again the day after tomorrow."

"Thank you, journeyman," said Sarenya. "I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

"Just try not to get on the wrong side of any more frisky rams," Heftan chuckled.

"What will happen to that ram?" M'ric asked.

"If he's lucky, he'll become some dragon's dinner," Saren replied, easing herself cautiously to her feet.

"And if he's not lucky?"

"The process is known as wethering."

M'ric raised an eyebrow.

Sarenya smiled. "Let's just say that he won't be the ram he used to be."

The brown rider winced. "Do something for me, Sarenya."

"What's that?"

"Remind me never to cross a Beastcrafter. Your methods of chastisement are *really* unforgiving."