

## Chapter Four

This time the noise of boots in the hall was much louder. Paksenarrion struggled to sit up as they came closer. It must be morning. Her heart began to pound. Maia had said that Stammel believed her, but Stammel's belief was not enough, she realized. She still didn't know if they would even listen to her side of it. The door opened. Two guards carried torches, and two came into the cell.

"Come on, now," said the darker one. "It's time."

Paks made it to her feet, unsteadily, then stumbled over the bucket. The guards caught her arms to steady her. She was even stiffer than she had been the night before, and her head swam. The guards urged her out of the cell, holding her upright. With every step, the bronze chain rattled on the stone flags and dragged at her ankles. She had never imagined how hard it would be to walk with chains on. She peered toward the stairs—a long way. The guards pushed her forward. She clenched her teeth, determined not to faint. As she walked, her tunic began to pull free from her legs; she could feel blood trickling down as one of the scabs tore loose.

At the foot of the stairs, Paks swayed as she tried to look up. Her right foot would not lift enough to clear the first step. She tried the left, and made it. With the guards' help, she hauled herself from one step to the next, but at the landing she could go no further. She broke into a cold sweat and her vision blurred.

"No sense in this," she heard one of the guards say. "Let's get her on up." She was hoisted between them and carried to the top of the stairs, and then to the barracks entrance.

Although the sun had not cleared the wall, there was ample light to see the precise formations drawn up facing the messhall and infirmary. An open space larger than usual had been left in front of them. The guards turned Paks to the left, and began moving her along the left flank of the assembly. Paks tried to hold herself upright and walk properly, but she could hardly hobble along. Not an eye slid sideways to look at her; she stared straight at the mess hall windows ahead. If only this weren't in front of everyone—everyone would see her battered face and ripped tunic. She shivered.

"Just a bit more," muttered the fair guard, holding her up as she tripped over the chain yet again. At last they came to the corner, turned right, and approached the center of the open area. Now Paks could see the bearded man in chain mail—the captain—and the corporal with a mouse under one eye and a bandaged hand, and Korryn. She had caught a glimpse of Stammel, but he was now behind her, at the head of his unit. She was placed in a line with Stephi and Korryn, facing the captain. Behind him were two strangers, a graybearded man in a plum-colored robe, and a one-armed woman in brown. Paks shivered again at the bite of chill morning air on her cuts and bruises. The captain stepped back to confer with the two strangers; Paks could not hear what they said. Then he came forward to address the assembly.

"We are met, this morning," he said, "to consider evidence pertaining to an assault or apparent assault yesterday evening by a recruit on a corporal of the regular Company. Evidence is taken at open assembly, so that none can doubt what was seen and heard. This evidence will be presented to Captain Valichi, who has presumptive jurisdiction, on his return. Two witnesses, having nothing to do with any of those being examined, will assess the physical condition of those implicated and hear their testimony. The witnesses are Mayor Heribert Fontaine of Duke's East, and Kolya Ministiera, on the Council of Duke's East. You may proceed."

The two witnesses went first to Stephi, walked around him, and then approached Korryn. After looking him over, they came to Paksenarrion. She tried not to look at them. The woman reached out to touch Paks's swollen face; her touch was gentle, but Paks winced. One of them felt of her tunic in back, where it was stiff with dried blood. They walked back to the captain, and spoke softly. He nodded.

"Guards, strip them," he ordered. Paks was suddenly terrified; she began trembling violently.

"Take it easy, now," muttered the dark guard. "They just want to look at all the damage. Be still." Meanwhile the other guard had run a dagger along the shoulder seams of her tunic from neck to sleeve-cuff, freeing it from the chains to fall around her feet. She glanced sideways. Stephi was taking off his own uniform; the guards pulled Korryn's tunic off over his head. Again the witnesses approached them in the same order. Paks waited, trying not to show her fear.

At last they were back to her. Again they walked around her—but this time they spoke to her and each other.

"Tilt your head up," said the woman. "Look, Mayor, that's a bruise, isn't it?"

"Surely—one hand only, I think. Stand up a bit straighter, there—" Paks tried to straighten, but her belly was too sore. "Bruises there, too, and she can't straighten. Can't tell what instrument—could have been fist, foot, elbow—"

"Those welts are clearly from a strap of some sort—"

The witnesses walked back to the captain, leaving Paks shaky and sick. This time they spoke loudly enough to be heard by all.

"That man," the mayor nodded toward Stephi, "has a bruise on the left cheekbone, probably from a fist blow. Two fingers of his right hand are broken. The knuckles of his left hand are skinned and bruised; he also has a bruise on his right shin. We find no other injuries.

"The male recruit has skinned knuckles on both hands, and a skinned knee. We find no other injuries."

The mayor paused to clear his throat. "The female recruit," he said, "has more extensive injuries. A cut two fingersbreadth wide above the left eye, another such cut above the right eye, much bruising of the right cheek and jaw, the right eye swollen shut, broken nose, possible broken jaw, bruised throat, bruises on both upper arms and both forearms, bruised and skinned knuckles on both hands—"

Paks, listening to the list of her injuries, felt the descriptions as an echo of the blows that caused them. She was determined not to faint in front of everyone, but her knees loosened and her head drooped. The dark guard shook her arm. "Don't listen to that," he muttered. "Look up; count the mess hall windows. You can make it." Paks stared at the windows, trying to shut out the mayor's voice.

"—two welts across her shoulders," the mayor was saying, "and a gash that could be from a blade or some stiff instrument on a whip. Similar welts on buttocks and thighs, including several more gashes. Bruises on ribs and belly—from hard blows, but with what is uncertain. Bruises on thighs, especially intense on upper inner thighs. Some sign of internal bleeding. The external evidence, Captain, is consistent with rape. Additional examination would be necessary to confirm that, if it is at issue."

Paks noticed that the captain was looking at her for the first time; she could not tell if he was still angry with her.

"Have you any additional comments, Councilor Ministiera?" asked the captain.

"Captain Sejek, when one finds a woman beaten up like this, and two men only lightly marked, the usual interpretation is that the men assaulted the woman." The dark woman's voice was brusque, with an edge of sarcasm. "But she is in chains, so I suppose she's charged with assaulting them. On the evidence, without testimony, that's absurd. Even if she started the fight, she didn't do much damage—and she's been well punished. Furthermore, chains are clearly unnecessary. She can hardly stand up, let alone escape. She should be in the infirmary if you want her in shape to stand trial."

The captain nodded. "Sergeant Stammel," he called.

"Sir."

"Convey your recruit to the infirmary; the witnesses will take her testimony later. Guards, you may strike the chains."

"Hold up, now, till we get them off," said the fair guard softly. "Seb'll have to go for a chisel and stone—not long."

Stammel slipped an arm under hers on the other side. "You'll be all right, Paks. Take it easy."

The dark guard came back with his implements, and chiseled off the bent spikes that fastened wrist and ankle cuffs. "There you go. Need any help, Sergeant?"

"We'll make it. Keep an eye on Bosk; he may need you."

The guard grinned. "Aha!" He picked up the fallen chains and moved to the side of the courtyard.

With Stammel's support, Paks was able to manage the few yards to the door of the infirmary. Once inside, she slumped against him, shaking and sick again. He swung her into the nearest bunk, and pulled a linen sheet over her. Maia was ready with a bowl of poultices and a jug of numbwine.

As Stammel came back out, he looked square at Korryn's face. Korryn ducked his head and turned even paler than before. Stammel walked back to the head of his unit, impassive.

"Are you ready to take testimony?" asked the captain. The witnesses nodded. "Very well. I'll begin. After supper last night, I was chatting with the recruit sergeants and corporals in the Duke's Court, when one of the guards brought word that a recruit sought Sergeant Stammel because of trouble in the barracks. The recruit stated that Corporal Stephi was involved. Stammel and I and Stammel's two corporals went directly to the barracks. As I came to the door, I saw that recruit—" he pointed at Korryn, "holding the woman. Stephi was lying on the floor with blood all over his face and tunic, and fingermarks on his throat. The woman appeared to have a black eye and bloody nose; she didn't look nearly as bad as she did this morning, nor did she complain of any injury. The recruit holding her stated that he had restrained her from killing Stephi, that he had just then gained control of her. Stephi seemed dazed and was unable to give a coherent story, but did say that he had asked the woman to bed him. The recruit said that Stephi had teased her when she refused, but nothing more, and that she had attacked him. On the evidence, Stephi appeared to be injured, perhaps

seriously. I had the woman secured under ban, and set a summary trial for this morning. Sergeant Stammel requested permission to question the woman about her actions, which I granted, and several hours later he appeared with a request for a formal trial, and evidence to be taken today by witnesses."

"Did the woman say anything yesterday? Did you question her then?"

"No. The other recruit did all the talking. She didn't argue. It seemed obvious."

The mayor turned to Stammel. "Is this the way you remember it?"

"Yes, Mr. Mayor. May I amplify?"

"Go ahead."

"When I visited Paksenarrion in the cell, I realized that she had taken more damage than was at first apparent. It seemed to me that her injuries made the story told by Korryn—the other recruit—inconsistent or even impossible. Her story made more sense." Stammel repeated what Paksenarrion had told him, and then reviewed his own reasoning. "This story fit her injuries better than Korryn's. Paksenarrion has been, until this, an outstanding recruit, honest and hardworking. Korryn has a grudge against her; she has refused to bed him."

"What is her background, Sergeant?"

"She's a sheepfarmer's daughter, from the northwest. She ran away from home to join us."

"And this—uh—Korryn?"

"He joined us in White Creek; claimed to have been in Count Serlin's guard, but wanted more—action, I believe he said."

"And his record?"

Stammel frowned. "He has not done anything that would require his expulsion." The unsaid "yet" trembled in the air. "However, he has been the subject of complaint by Corporals Bosk and Devlin, and Armsmaster Siger."

"That's not fair!" Korryn's face twisted in anger. "You favor her; you always have! A pretty face—I'll warrant one of you has bedded her—"

Bosk and Devlin each took an involuntary step forward; Stammel was rigid and white with fury. Before he could say anything, Kolya Ministiera stepped toward Korryn and looked him up and down.

"Hmmp!" she snorted. "A fine—man—you are." She spat at his feet, and turned back to the captain with a swirl of her brown robe. "I suppose we must hear his testimony, just to keep things straight."

"He's out, whatever he says now," growled Stammel.

"Nonetheless," said the captain. "He must speak. And keep to the truth—" he said to Korryn, "—if you can, recruit."

Korryn's eyes slid from side to side. "It is the truth—what I said. She went crazy, and started hitting this corporal, and I thought he could take care of her, and I guess he did hit her a few times. Then she got a grip on his throat, and I decided to help him out and pull her off. He'll tell you—" Korryn gestured at Stephi. "I—I thought it was just a bit of fun at first, and then—I did what I thought was right," he said, pulling himself erect. "Maybe I made a mistake—but you can't punish a man for doing what he thinks is right."

The captain and witnesses received this in tight-lipped silence. "Is there," the captain asked Stammel after a pause, "any other witness to all this?"

"That recruit we met coming out of the door—the one who said he was going for help—he should have seen something."

"Where is he?"

"Corporal Bosk," said Stammel. "Escort Jens to the front, please."

"No!" came a squeal from behind Stammel. "I—I don't know anything—I didn't see—I—I just came out—"

"He's a friend of Korryn's," said Stammel, as Bosk half-dragged Jens out of formation to the front.

The captain beckoned to two of the guards. They took Jens's arms and forced him upright. "Now then—what's his name, Stammel?"

"Jens, sir."

"Jens. I expect you to tell us the truth, right now. Did you see a fight involving Paksenarrion, Korryn, and Stephi, or any two of them?"

"I—" Jens looked frantically from side to side; when he met Korryn's fierce gaze he flinched. "I—I saw a little tussle, sir—sort of—"

"A little tussle? Be specific now: did you see it start?"

"N-no—I was—was—uh—cleaning my boots. Sir."

"Did you see any blows struck at all?"

"Well—I saw—I saw Paks and that man rolling on the floor, and then Korryn said—said go look at the door—" Jens was staring at his feet.

"At the *door*?"

"Yes, sir. He—uh—said I should—should look for the sergeant, sir."

"Oh? And did you?"

"Yes. I looked, but I couldn't see him—I mean, until you came."

"And just what did he tell you to do if you saw the sergeant, eh?" asked Kolya. She moved to his side and jerked his head up. "Look at me! What did he tell you?"

Jens began to tremble. "He said—he said to tell him."

"Tell who, the sergeant?"

"No. Tell him—Korryn—"

"If you saw the sergeant. I see." Kolya backed away. "I don't know about your Corporal Stephi, Captain, but that recruit—" she jerked a shoulder at Korryn, "is lying in his teeth."

"Agreed," said the captain.

"And the other one isn't much better," she said with distaste, looking at Jens.

"They'd both better go under guard," said Sejek. "Captain Valichi won't be back for several days, so they can't be confined under ban the whole time, but until tomorrow morning—"

"But—but ask him!" interrupted Korryn. "Ask the corporal! He'll tell you I'm not lying."

The witnesses turned toward Corporal Stephi, who had stood silent through everything. But the captain intervened.

"Before you question him, I want to tell you what happened this morning."

"Very well, Captain," said the mayor.

"This morning when I woke, I had a message from the surgeon. Stephi woke last night, and wanted to see me, but they did not call me because it was so late. This morning I went to see how he was, and found that he had no memory of the events last evening. None at all. I did not want to suggest things to him, so I told him only that he would be examined by witnesses about some trouble. The surgeon could find no physical cause for his loss of memory, and as you can see, the blood I saw on him yesterday was not his own. I must say that since he's been in my cohort, he has always been a competent, sober soldier and a good corporal, with no faults against him. I cannot imagine what caused his behavior, but I can swear that it is not typical."

"Is it likely that he would pretend a loss of memory, if he had done wrong?" asked the mayor.

"I think not," replied Sejek. "He has always been honest, in my experience."

"Hmm." The mayor turned to Corporal Stephi. "You have seen the evidence of the injuries suffered by you and others, and you have heard what testimony has been given. What is your understanding of what happened?"

"Sir, I have no memory from just after supper last night until I woke in the infirmary. When I woke I felt strange—dizzy—and of course my hand and the bruises hurt. I asked the surgeon what had happened, but when he found I had no memory, he would not say anything, only that I had been found hurt. I—when I heard this morning—and saw that girl—Sir, I've never beaten a woman so. I've never forced one to bed. I don't understand how I could have—but I saw her injuries. Someone hurt her, and if it was—if I did such a thing—I know what you must do—" His voice trailed away.

"Why did you ask to see the captain last night?"

"Because I was frightened. I wanted to know what had happened—I thought the captain would tell me. And—and I couldn't *remember*."

"But, Stephi," said the captain, "you must remember something—maybe just the beginning—you must be able to say whether this recruit is lying." The witnesses stirred but said nothing. Stephi looked at Korryn with distaste.

"Sir—Captain—I cannot remember anything. But I'll tell you, sir, he must be lying. What we've seen and heard—"

"You say that even if it condemns you?"

"Yes. Sir, it's obvious. That girl didn't beat *me* up—and honestly, sir, there's no way she could have." Stephi conveyed all the confidence of a senior veteran, sure of his own fighting ability.

"But you can remember nothing?" prompted the mayor.

Stephi shook his head. "No, sir, I don't. But I don't expect you to believe that. You'll want to test me, I'm sure."

"You *must* remember," yelled Korryn suddenly. "You must—I told you yesterday—" He paled as they all looked at him, and he realized what he had said.

"You told him, eh?" said Kolya softly. "You told him *what?*"

Korryn drove a vicious elbow into the midriff of the guard on his left, and as the man slumped forward he snatched at his sword. The other guard drew his own weapon and darted forward, but Korryn was free with sword in hand, dancing sideways and looking for a way out.

"Take him!" roared the captain, drawing his own sword. Stammel charged, unarmed as he was, with Bosk and Devlin behind him. Korryn swung at Stammel, cursing; Stammel barely evaded the blow. Korryn backed, edging toward the unarmed witnesses as guards converged from around the courtyard. Suddenly Kolya slipped behind him and wrapped a powerful arm around his neck. Korryn fell backwards, gasping. She held him until the guards had jerked the sword out of his hands and grabbed his arms.

"If it were my decision, he'd be in chains," she said calmly, dusting her hand on her robe.

"At once," said Sejek. The guards grinned as they dragged Korryn away. "Now, Stammel—"

"Sir," said Stammel, "I'd like permission to dismiss the formation now. They've seen as much as they can learn from."

"I think you're right. Go ahead, but I'll want you for the rest of this."

"Yes, sir." Stammel turned away. The captain, frowning, spoke to the witnesses.

"Mayor Fontaine, Councilor Ministiera, I appreciate your efforts. You will want to take more testimony from both Paksenarrion and Stephi, I presume."

"Indeed yes," said the mayor. "You have quite a complicated problem here, Captain."

"You'll remand Stephi to the Duke's Court, I assume," said Kolya,

"Yes. I must. Corporal Stephi—" he gestured to the corporal.

"Yes, sir."

"This must be investigated further. You must consider yourself under arrest from this time. I'll have to see whether Stammel will trust your parole; he's within his rights to refuse it until Captain Valichi returns."

"I understand, sir. I wish I did know what happened."

While they were talking, Stammel had spoken to the other recruit sergeants and the formation had dispersed. He had told his own corporals to take the unit outside to drill. "And keep 'em busy," he said, "until I come out and relieve you. We have a lot to work off. I'll be there as soon as I find out how Paks is, and what the captain is going to do."

So it was in a nearly empty courtyard that the captain turned to Stammel and said, "Well, Sergeant, you were right. I wouldn't have thought it, but—"

"Sir, I was sure Paksenarrion was not to blame—but I'm not sure your corporal is. If Korryn gave him something, a drug or something like that—"

"I hadn't thought of that. Something strange has happened—"

"I agree," said Kolya. "And I think this should be discussed in somewhat more privacy."

The mayor nodded. "I'd suggest the Duke's Court, Captain Sejek."

"A good idea. Stephi, get dressed and come with us. Guard, you'd best come too." The captain turned away and headed for the Duke's Gate. Stammel and the witnesses followed him; Stephi pulled on his tunic and came after them, trailed by the guard.