

THE WARLORD AND THE FEM

By Angela Knight

I had no idea everything was about to change that day. We were all killing time in the ship's big recreation hall, some of us sprawled on the thickly upholstered couches and chairs, either drinking or watching simmies on VR glasses, while others played cards or simmie games at the scattered tables. Most everybody was waiting their turn to go on leave.

Planets usually don't like a big group of mercs hitting the bars at one time. Leads to public disorderly conduct and the occasional drunken homicide, so the captain liked to send us out in shifts to keep the trouble down.

Me, I'd already found trouble at the Dirtside Grill the day before, so I wasn't all that eager to go out again anyway. I suspected the warlord would be looking for me, so I was just as happy to play poker with Lyonet and keep my ass safely aboard *Drunna's Victory*.

So when the warlord walked in with Captain Drunna, I damn near swallowed my tongue. His narrow black eyes locked in on me, and my heart leaped into a hard, fast beat at the dark determination in his gaze.

Oh, Lady! He'd found me.

"This is Baird Airell," the captain announced, and the entire company looked up from whatever they were doing to study the warlord with calculation. "He wants to join the unit. Says he's genetically engineered for combat." Drunna sounded justifiably skeptical, since every merc says she's genetically engineered for combat. In the warlord's case it happened to be true, but I sure wasn't going to vouch for him.

"Looks to me like he's genetically engineered for sex," Lyonet whispered in my ear. "And a woman designed him."

Though he was all the way across the rec hall, Baird's gaze sharpened as he looked at us. He'd heard her low murmur, of course; a warlord's hearing could put a ringbat's to shame. He smiled slightly, the barest curve of his hard, erotic mouth. I felt my face heat. Lyonet was right, damn it. He had been genetically engineered by a woman. And it showed.

He had the unearthly beauty of all the warlords, chiseled cheekbones and a broad, square jaw, a narrow nose that flared slightly across the nostrils, a wide mouth with full, sensuous lips framed by a short, dark goatee. On his right cheekbone glittered an iridescent blue tattoo – a sharp slash of color against his tanned skin. His hair fell around his shoulders in careless waves, one lock of it twisted into a thin braid that swung beside his cheek. He'd worked a red gemstone and silver beads into the braid, and they gleamed against the dark silk of his hair. In a fight, I knew, he'd club back that long mane and leave the gems at home.

Looking around at my fellow mercenaries, I saw the males looking skeptical, the women, sexually interested but doubtful. I knew what they were all thinking. On the one hand, he was just too damn pretty. On the other, that body was one you had to take seriously. I was probably the only one who

knew just how seriously you'd damn well better take it. The others had never even heard of Vardon and its warlords, and had no idea what Baird was capable of.

He had the big, powerfully muscled build of a warlord geneeered for hand-to-hand; he probably could have put his fist through a deck plate without so much as a scrape across the tough skin of his knuckles. But he was also lean, with long legs and long arms, so he also had speed and reach.

Not a Pershing, then. Commanche Class, maybe. I couldn't be sure; I'd never seen anything but a Pershing, and that was long ago.

But the Captain and the others didn't realize what they were dealing with. I did. I also knew something they didn't. Baird Airell didn't give a rat's ass about joining Drunna's Rangers. He was after me.

Captain Drunna lifted one dark hand for silence, and the murmur of speculation flooding the ship's recreation hall cut off. Drunna was a big man, with a round, merry face and the coldest eyes I ever saw, and when he gave an order, you damn well obeyed. "Mr. Airell, here," and he nodded at the warlord standing beside him, "has offered to give a demonstration of his skills with one of you...."

"Me, me, me!" Lyonet whispered, grinning, and I kicked her under the table. Baird would probably be more than happy to give her the demonstration she meant, though. Unbonded warlords were notorious womanizers, and Lyonet, with her curvy little body and wicked green eyes, attracted the attention of every man she met. Men looked at me too, but it tended to be the kind of look that mixes intrigue and caution. They liked the breasts and the legs and the ass, but I looked too much like the fighter I was. Besides, I was taller than damn near every human male in the rec hall. Except for Baird Airell. Next to him, I'd look delicate.

Why did I find that thought intriguing?

Captain Drunna looked the length of the hall and said, "Mr. Jogox, would you mind giving Mr. Airell a hand here?"

"Or a fist," someone shouted. "Or maybe a kick...." Everyone laughed.

Baird smiled tightly, grabbed the hem of his black tunic, and pulled it off over his head. The sight of him cut off the laughter. His magnificent chest more than fulfilled the promise of those broad shoulders. Every inch of it was plated in thick muscle, beautifully defined, forming a lovely sculpted V covered with a pelt of chest hair that looked tempting and soft. He saw the eyes locked on him and shrugged. "Don't want to ruin the tunic." He folded it neatly, his biceps bunching and rippling with the movement, then placed it on the bar running the length of the room. Then he turned to stride toward Jogox, now rising endlessly from his table.

Like all his people, Jogox was well over two meters tall – he never met a doorway he didn't have to duck under. His skin was white as milk and tough as plate armor, and he was so broad he looked like an animated wall. He had four sets of bright red eyes that glowed against his pale face, a mouth full of razored teeth and huge, seven-fingered hands. I'd seen drunken Marines run from him, but he was normally a very sweet man.

Normally. In a fight, he underwent a personality change. There weren't many men I'd hesitate to mix it up with, but big, sweet Jogox was one of them, because sometimes his instincts overcame his judgement. And then people tended to get hurt.

My shipmates had hastily cleared all the tables and chairs from the center of the room so the two would have a place to fight. A crowd already ringed the space, so I stood up on my chair to get a better view of the proceedings. My mouth was dry as sand, but I had to dry my damp palms on my unisuit covered thighs.

I wasn't sure even a Commanche Class warlord had the strength to mix it up with Jogox. A Pershing, maybe, but the Commanche Class, though inhumanly strong, was designed for speed and agility. Baird could end up badly hurt. That would solve my problem, true, but I found I didn't want it solved like that.

"Hey," Lyonet said suddenly, looking at me as she stood on her own chair. "I just realized something. That tattoo on your cheek looks just like the one he's wearing. What's the deal?"

I ignored the question, too busy concentrating on Baird and Jogox as they stood on either side of the circle sizing one another up. Captain Drunna stepped into the middle of the space, obviously ready to play referee. "Okay, gentlemen," he said. "I don't want anybody hurt badly enough to need an extended stay in Regeneration. Begin." He moved back.

And with a blur of movement, they did just that.

Jogox came in charging, probably figuring to knock the warlord cold. Baird Airell just flowed away from his attack like liquid mercury, the long, powerful muscles in his bare torso shifting as he ducked and spun. He also gave Jogox something to remember him by as he danced away: a hard punch in the gut that tore a grunt from the big, pale alien.

Jogox eyed Baird a moment, and something malevolent slid through his four red eyes. His lips drew back from those razored teeth, and I swore under my breath.

"Ooooh!" Lyonet gasped. "He's pissed Jogox off! The shit's hit the turbos now!"

I chomped down on my lip. Jogox was going to rip off his head, and it would be all my fault. *Stubborn, stupid stallion, more balls than sense....*

The Zurine charged Baird again, swiping at him with one of those huge hands, and again the warlord ducked. But this time Jogox was waiting for him; a backhanded blow caught him across the face and sent him flying like a spiked grav ball, slamming into the crowd behind him. People tumbled amid a chorus of yelps and curses, and chairs went flying at the impact. I caught my breath, hoping the warlord wasn't hurt....

Then he catapulted out of the mass of bodies in a low, hard rush, those dark eyes glittering, no expression at all on his bloodied face – not rage, not fear, just cold, inhuman determination. I was probably the only one in the room who knew what that look meant.

Baird had entered *driatt*. Like the Viking Berserkers, a warlord in *riatt* becomes insanely strong, but what's more, he feels no pain or pity. He will keep going, relentless and remorseless, until his enemy falls or he dies of injuries too severe for his supercharged body to survive.

The crowd he'd hit were still regaining their feet when Baird rammed into Jogox like a torpedo, one big fist scything out to hit the long white nose. A spray of lilac flew; Zurine blood. The big alien staggered, then regained his balance and struck out, rapping Baird hard in the jaw. The warlord shook off the blow as if it was nothing.

The next few minutes were a blur as Baird and Jogox pounded at one another, flat footed, trading punches like boxers. I caught my breath. The Zurine was so much bigger than the human, yet Baird's ferocious blows staggered him, while the warlord himself didn't seem to feel the impact of those huge white hands at all. In minutes, the watching crowd was spattered with red and lilac and sweat as they fought.

"Damn," said Lyonet, awed. "I've never seen a human hold his own with Jogox before. The big guy's actually looking worried."

Baird, on the other hand, simply looked feral, the gold striations in his brown eyes expanding as he went deeper into *riatt*, sweat and blood rolling down his magnificent torso. His powerful arms worked like pistons as he shot punches into Jogox's white hide, the thick muscle of his chest rippling with every blow.

I had never seen anything like it. I grew up hearing my mother's stories of the warlords, been quietly envious as my sister boasted, but the reality was breathtaking. It was all the more unnerving when I knew what his real objective was.

Me.

Baird never looked at me, never took his eyes off Jogox; he was too utterly focused on his opponent. But I knew. In his mind, I was the prize he was fighting for.

I tried to reject the thought. No one would fight like that, suffer like that, just to clear the way to me. What was I, after all? He was doing this for his own pride, his own honor.

Yet deep in my mind, some illogical fem part of me saw a message beaten out in the rhythm of every punch and kick: *I'll have you, I'll have you, I'll have you.*

Suddenly he finished it. There was a blur of movement, as Baird swarmed up Jogox's massive back. He wrapped his powerful thighs around the Zurine's torso and both arms around the thick white neck, applying a vicious choke hold. Jogox fought it, clawing at Baird's arms so hard he left bloody furrows. Still the warlord clung and choked him. I saw disbelief in all four red eyes as the Zurine realized he was losing to a human.

He slammed down on his back, trying to break Baird's hold, but the warlord would not release him, though the Zurine's weight was crushing. Somehow Baird managed to flip them both so he was on top, his body riding Jogox like a horse.

And that treacherous fem part of me showed me an image – myself, stretched out under Baird's masculine power. But in the dream, those big, hard hands were gentle and skilled on my skin. I shook it off.

"Enough!" Captain Drunna called, throwing both arms up and stepping into the center of the ring of spectators. "Don't kill my Zurine, Baird."

It took the warlord a moment to come out of *riatt* enough to obey him, but finally he released Jogox and let him gasp in a hard breath. Baird rolled off the alien and shot to his feet, staggering a little.

Drunna put out a hand to brace him. "Easy there, Airell. Damn, I didn't think you could do it. Guess you really are genegeered." He clapped one thick, bloody shoulder. "You're in, boy. Welcome to Drunna's Rangers."

Baird's gold shot eyes went to me and narrowed. "Thank you, Captain."

The rest of the crowd pressed around him, slapping his back and congratulating him while medtechs raced to tend Jogox.

"What a fight!" Lyonet said breathlessly. "I've got to meet him. Come on, Kyna. Let's introduce ourselves."

She scrambled down off the table and I followed mechanically. My first impulse was to run, but I'd never run from anyone in my life. I wasn't about to start with Baird Airell. So I stayed where I was, listening to the sounds of backslapping and congratulations as my comrades at arms welcomed the warlord into our midst.

I heard a shout of approval as Jogox made it to his feet. There was another surge of movement as folks started toward him to commiserate and compliment him on the fight.

Then Baird stepped out of the crowd and started toward me. Frozen with a kind of feminine panic I'd never known before, I watched him come.

He gleamed under the rec hall lights, his skin slick with sweat, muscle rippling as he stalked me. Blood marked him in red and lilac like alien camouflage, and the silken hair on his chest was slicked down and matted.

He kept coming until he loomed over me. Every muscle in my body tightened, including those down low in my belly.

Baird stared down at me. His brown eyes looked wide and wild still from *riatt*, and the gold striations snaking through them were so wide his gaze had a manic glitter. I met his gaze uneasily, taking in the tight triumph on his face, the hungry line of his sensuous mouth.

"You said you would not leave your crew," he rumbled in a dark, purring bass so much deeper than the voice he'd addressed the captain in. "So I have joined it."

I clenched my fists, feeling panic rise. I couldn't handle him, and I knew it. "Baird..."

"You wear the half-circle," he interrupted, simply plowing over what I was going to say. "I mean to fill it."

I lifted a hand to touch the tattoo on my cheekbone. It was different from the one on his – except for one mark: a half circle that hung from the bottom point. When I became bonded, my mate would add the other half of the circle, showing my new status. And I'd do the same for the one he wore.

Baird lifted one hand and brushed his index finger across his blooded lip. Frozen, I watched his big hand approach my face, felt his fingertip press against half circle. Covering it with a full circle of his blood.

I closed my eyes as the tips of my breasts began to tingle.

The hand brushed my lips, and my eyes flew wide as I tasted the smear of blood he left. Leaning forward, he took my mouth in a kiss.

It seared me as no touch ever has – the softness of his mouth, the feeling of his long, powerful body pressing against mine. I felt the sweat and the blood and the heat of his battle, and I gasped. Jerking free, I did the only thing I could do.

I ran.

Fems are genetically engineered for speed, and there are few that can outrun me. But I'd barely hit my full stride in the corridor when Baird Airell's big hand closed on my arm and pulled me to a stop. I wheeled on him, snarling.

"Let me go, Baird!"

"Not until you do me the courtesy of telling me why you run!" A tendon ticked violently in his broad jaw, but every muscle in his powerful body was tight with self-control.

I opened my mouth to growl something insulting, but looking into those dark eyes, I saw confusion and hurt. Almost at once his face slid into expressionless lines, but I knew what I'd seen. And it surprised me. I hadn't realized my rejection would hurt Baird. I thought he viewed me as nothing but a brood mare, but now I saw I'd been wrong.

I groped to explain. "Baird, I wasn't raised on Vardon."

He frowned impatiently. "None of us were raised on Vardon, Kyna. They drove us from the planet thirty years ago."

"But you told me you grew up on one of the colonies. I didn't. We lived on mercenary vessels. My father was a warlord, but he was killed when I was five. I have lived all my life in that culture. I don't know if I can submit to you."

The hard lines of his face softened into a smile. I thought again how breathtakingly handsome he was. "The submission is only in bed, Kyna. You are my equal otherwise."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. And that's the point. I'm at least twice as strong as any man I've ever been with. But you.... I've practiced with Jogox myself. I didn't last five minutes before he put me halfway through a bulkhead. You not only lasted with him, you put him down."

He lifted a dark brow, that beautiful mouth curling in a one-sided smile. "What I have in mind for you is not a contest of strength, Kyna." Suddenly the smile faded, and shock flooded his dark eyes. "You don't think I would hurt you?"

I made a dismissing gesture. "No, no." The warlords might play hard in bed, but they're also strictly raised to honor. They're taught never to turn their formidable strength against anyone under their protection, particularly bond mates and children. To abuse one's own is a mark of great dishonor.

"If you don't fear my strength, I don't understand your objection," Baird said. "Aren't you tired of sleeping with civs?" He spread his beautifully muscled arms, and for a moment I was distracted by the play of shifting sinew. "It's like trying to make love to a soap bubble. I dare not release my passion lest I deal some injury. By Our Lady, I have had to confine my attentions to my own hand."

Hoo, boy. "How long have you been celibate?"

Heshrugged, the play of contours in his torso a marvelous thing. "Five months, perhaps." Which, for a man with a warlord's appetites, is a very long time. Lust would be riding him hard. For a moment, my treacherous imagination summoned an image of what it would be like to have all that ravenous hunger turned on me. I felt my nipples harden. What would it be like to share one night in a warlord's bed? "Perhaps...."

His dark eyes sharpened on mine, and I saw calculation flicker in their depths. Then, reluctantly, he said, "One coupling would not be enough for me, Kyna."

I lifted a brow at his honesty. "Another man might have taken me to bed, thinking to seduce me into yielding."

"Aye," he said steadily, and reached out a big hand to touch my cheek, his fingers leaving a wake of heat. "But another man would not be me."

And another man would be harder to resist, I thought. But I could not yield to him. I knew what it meant to be bonded to a warlord, and I did not think I submit so utterly.

"But perhaps," he said softly, "you'll allow me to court you as a civ male would. Give me a chance, Kyna."

I looked at him, at the warm, heated chocolate of his eyes. "Very well," I said, before I knew what I was about.

Then, silently, I cursed myself.

I watched Baird's long fingers close gently over the black queen and move her into position to threaten my king. "Check," he said, his deep voice amused.

Damn it. I scanned the board, realizing he'd beaten me yet again. He'd ruthlessly, systematically stripped me of my pieces, and I had nowhere left to go. True, I'd made inroads of my own; all he had left were his king, a knight and the queen, but even so, he'd managed to trap me. With a groan, I tipped over my own king in a gesture of defeat. "Damn, Baird, you got me again." Laughing, I looked up into his eyes – and froze.

His dark gaze was hungry and fixed on my mouth. "Ah, if only you meant that."

I felt heat roll from my belly all the way into my face. Disgruntled, I knew I was blushing. I never blushed. I looked away from his face and began putting captured pieces back on the board, concentrating hard on what I was doing. "Another game? You've won ten games to my eight, and I want revenge."

"I think not. I find I am too ... restless." He stood. I didn't look at him, knowing the sight of that big, hard body clad in snug black unisuit would do serious damage to my eroding self-control. But as he strode away, I couldn't help stealing a look at his muscular butt. Oh, Lady.

Lyonet blocked my view of it as she stepped up to the table we'd occupied in the rec hall. "On behalf of

woman everywhere,” she said, and swatted me across the side of the head. I yelped in shock. “Hey, what was that for?”

She leaned across the table and glared into my eyes. “Every woman on this ship would give her left nipple to sleep with that man, but the only one he looks at is you. And all you do with him is *playchess*. He gets up from this table with a hard-on that I, personally, will dream about for weeks, and you just sit there playing with your pieces. Are you flatline?”

My fingers tightened around Baird’s knight. “It’s more complicated than you think.”

“It must be complicated as all hell if you’re playing board games when you could have both legs wrapped around that incredible ass. And don’t tell me you’re not tempted, because I saw you leering at it as he left.”

“Yeah, I’m tempted, but he wants a lot more than one night of hot sex.”

“Good. Give it to him.” Lyonet dropped into his abandoned chair.

“You don’t know what he wants.” To give my hands something to do, I started gathering up pieces and putting them briskly on the board.

Lyonet leaned forward and looked hard into my face. Her jaw dropped. “You’re scared of him. I didn’t think you were scared of anything. What’s going on?”

I didn’t answer as I carefully lined up the pieces, concentrating on getting them in mathematically straight rows.

“Talk to me, Kyna,” Lyonet said, one of her hands wrapping around one of mine. “I’ve seen you charge mercs twice your size with a grin on your face and mayhem in your heart. Why on earth would you be afraid of sleeping with the hottest thing either of us have seen in years?” “He’s a warlord, Lyonet. Genetically engineered.”

“Yeah, I figured that out when he kicked Jogox’s ass. So? And what the hell’s a warlord?” “It’s a long story.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I sighed and picked up Baird’s black knight again. Nervously, I began to turn it over and over in my hands, concentrating on its smooth contours. “About three hundred years ago, a group of colonists settled this planet called Vardon. It was back when all those weird little colonies sprang up, all those religious sects and lunatic groups. This one wanted to form a matriarchy – women running the show. They thought they could create a perfect world if they eliminated male aggression through genetic engineering, making their male citizens more like women.”

“Sounds like a real good way to get a lot of lousy lovers.” Lyonet said, rolling her eyes.

“Exactly. Anyway, it wasn’t long before they started having trouble with a neighboring planet. Colonists there wanted Vardon’s mineral reserves. The Vardoneese fought them off, but just barely. After it was over, they decided then needed a race of warriors to fall back on if they ever had a similar problem, so they created the Warlords. Stronger, faster, nastier than damn near anything human, and a lot of things that aren’t.”

She nodded. "Sounds like Baird, all right."

"Uh huh. Thing is, turns out their perfect soldier came with a sex drive that was that much more powerful than an ordinary human's."

Lyonet's eyes lit wickedly. "This is sounding better and better all the time."

"Not to the Vardoneese. They'd been systematically eliminating their own sex drives, so the sudden presence of all these amorous males disconcerted them, to say the least. Plus, the men were so damn strong, sleeping with one could be hazardous to your health. They tried eliminating the sex drive, but what they got was even nastier – a warrior that was cold and vicious and basically uncontrollable. So they decided to go with the oversexed version, while adding loyalty and a highly affectionate nature. Then, to give their supersoldier something to sleep with, they created the Fem – female versions of the warlords."

I saw her jaw drop. "That tattoo on your face – you're one of them. Why the hell didn't you tell me you were genengineered?"

"Because I'm not, technically. My parents were. Dad was a warlord, Mother was a fem. I just inherited their genetic characteristics."

"The strength and speed."

"Right. Anyway, about thirty years ago, the Vardoneese went through one of their periodic political convulsions. They decided the Blood People – that's us – were responsible for the wars they kept getting themselves in. If we didn't exist, they wouldn't be so quick to rely on violent solutions." "Oh, bullshit," said Lyonet. "They'd just end up hiring merc units like everybody else." "Probably, but they didn't see it that way. They deported the lot of us. Every last warlord and fem, to the far corners of the galaxy. They were afraid if they put us in one place, we'd come back and conquer them."

"Paranoid bunch of bitches."

"Got it in one. So anyway, Baird was raised on one of those colonies. But everybody in the colony had come from the same basic genetic root stock. They didn't have enough genetic variation to sustain the population. The colonists decided to send their unbonded warlords and fems out to look for Blood People they could bring home as mates."

"And Baird found you."

"Looks that way."

"And he wants to make it permanent."

"Yep."

She leaned forward and glared into my eyes. "So what the hell's the problem?"

I clenched my fingers hard around the knight. "I don't want to become his slave." Lyonet blinked, startled. "Come again?"

"The warlords are very ... dominant in bed. And fems ... we're designed to give them what they want. To

submit.”

She leaned back in her chair and lifted an eyebrow. “I have trouble imagining you as submissive.”
“We’re not. Ordinarily. In combat, we’re designed to function as backup. Not as strong, but better at some things warlords can’t do because of their sheer size. Agility, speed, getting into tight places. We’re cool and controlled when they’re in riatt – the berserker frenzy Baird used to beat Jogox. We keep them from getting carried away and making mistakes.”

“Sounds like equals more than master and slave.”

“And equals are exactly what we are -- outside the bedroom. Inside...”

“... He wants to tie you up and screw your brains out. So? I don’t see why you’d find a few sex games intimidating.”

I shook my head. “What if it’s more than games, Lyonet? I’ve never actually known any warlords other than Baird, and I’m not sure what I’d be getting into. My father died when I was young, so I never really knew him.” I swallowed and looked down at the knight, finding I could not quite meet

Lyonet’s perceptive green gaze. “My didsister bonded with a warlord she met off-planet when I was fifteen or so. She brought him to our home on Fairworld, but they stayed only a short time before they left for his colony.”

Her eyes sharpened, and I knew she’d read the discomfort on my face. “Something happened during that visit, didn’t it?”

I glanced up, then away. “I saw them together. One night. I heard her cry out in pain, and I went to help. They were out in the garden. She was tied, and he was” I stopped and swallowed. “God, he was beautiful, but the look on his face was so feral. And my sister – she was in pain, and yet she loved it. I didn’t interfere, but I didn’t leave either. I just stood there in the shadows, frozen. Watching.”

“Yeah, I can see how something like that would spin out a fifteen-year-old virgin.” Lyonet’s expression was compassionate. “But just because your brother-in-law played rough, that doesn’t mean Baird would.”

“But that’s how warlords are, Lyonet. Erotic dominance is part of their nature. I researched it on our house comp, and I talked to my mother about it. She said I would understand once I was bonded.”

Lyonet’s eyes widened. “And that’s what you’re afraid of.”

I nodded. “What I saw in that garden scared the hell out of me. But part of me was ... excited. I don’t want to lose myself that way, Lyonet. I’m a soldier. I don’t want to be mastered by some genetic imperative a bunch of techies programmed into my ancestors.”

She shook her head. “Damn, girl. I see your point. But here’s another thing you need to keep in mind.” Leaning forward, she met my eyes. “Baby, you’re not fifteen any more. And I think it’s time you find out just what your nature is. Because it sure as shit isn’t going away.”

I knew Lyonet was right, of course. I just wasn’t sure I had the guts to explore that particular dark corner of my psyche.

For one thing, I'd have to go to Baird to do it, and I wasn't sure he'd let me go.

A month went by as Baird courted me – with more restraint than a civ male would have shown, to tell the truth. We played chess and talked, me of my life as a mercenary, him of his as a warlord. But no matter how carefully he hid it, I could sense his hunger, humming just under the surface like thousands of volts of electricity flowing through a power cable. When he'd touch me, I could almost feel the snap of it.

At such times, the part of me that feared him would babble a warning. I was testing his control to the breaking point, and knew it. Yet I found I didn't want to back off. He was so damn charming, so intelligent, so rock-bottom decent that I couldn't bear to walk away.

And he wasn't the only one who hungered.

So often, some casual movement of that big body would send my desire leaping – the flex of a muscle, the curve of his chest, the hot, dark glitter of gold striations in his eyes.

What I didn't realize was that Baird knew it. And like the skilled warrior he was, one day he took advantage of my weakness.

He asked me to fight.

"It's been a long time since I've practiced with one of the people," he told me over lunch one day. "I'm afraid my dueling skills are getting rusty. The first time somebody challenges me to a formal duel, I'm going to get minced."

"I don't know how much competition I'd be," I told him, ignoring the flare of heat that rose low in my belly. "I haven't practiced with a sword and dagger since I left home. Mercs don't duel – it's either fists or straight to homicide."

As I watched, the gold striations in his eyes brightened. "Oh, I'm sure any contest with you would be well worth my time."

I knew what he was up to, of course. I supposed that's why I agreed. The part of me that hungered for him wanted to overcome the part of me that feared him. He wasn't the only one who wanted an excuse to lose control.

We reserved one of the small practice courts during the late watch. When I arrived, he was positioning a padded exercise mat on the floor for us to fight on. I didn't comment, though the people have never been concerned with falls during practice. If you're so clumsy as to get hurt hitting the ground, you probably deserve it.

I knew Baird wasn't concerned about falls.

He rose from his task as I sauntered in. As he turned to look at me, his eyes widened. So did mine. I wore a tight black breastband that left my arms and belly bare and revealed a great deal of cleavage. A pair of skin tight black huggers cupped my ass and hips, ending at mid thigh.

He'd also dressed to tempt in the male equivalent – his own pair of huggers and nothing else, so that his beautiful chest was bare. His eyes were shot with gold striations of hungerlike a night sky cut with lightning bolts. He'd left that long, silken hair loose to tumble around his broad shoulders. Baird, no fool, knew what my weakness was

But neither of us commented on the other's dress -- that would have been an admission that we knew what we were really there for. Instead his eyes flicked to the blunted practice sword and dagger I held in either hand as he gathered up his own from a case on the floor. "Nice weapons." "Not as nice as yours. May I see?"

He moved over beside me. I was instantly aware of the heat of his body as he handed me his sword and took my own. I made a quick pass through the air with the blade, feeling the precise balance that made it seem almost weightless. "Beautiful." I held it at full extension. "It's a little long for me, though."

I looked up to see him staring hungrily at my cleavage. "I think you can manage," he murmured. "I'll stick with my own for now." I hid a smile, feeling my excitement leap as I returned the sword. "Shall we begin?"

Baird smiled slowly. "Oh, yeah. I'm more than ready."

My heart pounding hard, I turned and moved to the other side of the mat as he fell into guard on his side. Lifting my weapons, I stared into his gold-shot eyes and waited for the signal to begin. "Begin," he murmured, and we did, staking each other slowly, watching eyes and hands. Baird wore a hot and wicked smile, but his eyes glittered with fierce determination. A month before, I would have viewed his intentions with misgivings, but now my nipples peaked at the thought of what he wanted to do to me. I realized at some point I had begun to trust him. Anything he did when we made love would be something we both enjoyed.

He tested me with a flick of his blade. I parried neatly and reposted, driving in my own attack, which he scooped aside with his dagger. At the same time, his blunted rapier tested my defenses again, and again I parried it with my own dagger. We disengaged and danced apart again.

And so we toyed with each other. With his greater strength, he could have pounded my weapons aside and scored off me easily, but he fenced on my terms – his speed, agility and skill against mine in a lovely dance of steel.

I found myself half hypnotized by him, by the grace and quickness of his big body, by the flex and play of muscle as he moved. And I could feel his eyes on me, on my breasts and legs, lingering between my thighs as I lunged or retreated. The mood of sensuality growing between us intensified until I felt my breath come shorter, not with exertion, but with desire.

Suddenly the blunted tip of his blade flicked out and raked gently across one of my pointed rock-hard nipples. I gasped at the wave of heat that zinged through me at the contact.

Baird's gold-striated gaze met mine. "A touch," he purred.

I nodded, acknowledging the point as a hot blush of raw lust rolled up my face.

I attacked in a long, hard lunge that shot my body forward. Baird knocked my sword aside with his rapier, but at the same time his dagger dipped. The rounded blade stroked right between the lips of my sex in a bold, erotic caress I could feel even through the tight fabric of my huggers. Stunned, I let my

body collide with his. For a moment we were chest to chest, his hot, damp skin pressing against my breasts. Eyes widening, I stared incredulously at his face. He gave me a taunting grin.

“Point to me,” he said, his breath puffing gently against my face, smelling ever so slightly of brandy and mint.

I leaped back. He laughed softly.

Lazily, he began to circle me, standing not in a swordsman’s crouch now, but with shoulders back, his magnificent chest on display in all its heaving, sweat-streaked glory. Letting my gaze dip, I saw he had a massive erection.

“You may not know this,” Baird said, his voice a dark rumble, “but back on Vardon these were called mating duels. Fems and warlords would meet to test each other. If the fem won, she’d usually seek another opponent. But if the warlord won...” He grinned. “...he didn’t let her go for a very long time. Often she’d end up with her circle filled.”

I remembered the touch of his fingertip on my tattoo a month before, filling the half circle with his blood.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” he said softly.

My mouth went dry, but I made myself give him a taunting smile. “Only if you win.” “Oh,” he drawled, his eyes darkening, “I will.”

If Baird’s arrogance was meant to tease me into a reckless attack, it worked -- but not the way he intended. I launched another lunge in a burst of blurring speed. He retreated, flicking my sword from its path with a bat of his rapier as he sought to parry my dagger with his own. His eyes widened. I knew he’d felt the delicate, teasing stroke of my blunted knife’s point along the steel-hard length of his erection. I smirked at him. “I think you missed that parry, Baird.” “So I gather,” he said, sounding a little breathless.

In that moment, the contest changed. Suddenly we were no longer competing to hit one another, but to inflict teasing little touches. Our eyes met as we clashed, hot as the grins on our faces. My nipples were as hard as his erection, and I could feel the electric trickle of cream in my sex. Suddenly he straightened again, dropping both his weapons out and to either side so he stood with his arms spread, the thick bulge of his cock an irresistible target. His gold-shot eyes dared me as one corner of his sensuous mouth kicked up.

I darted forward, wanting only to touch that brazen masculinity with my blades. In a move almost too fast to follow, he swept his weapons around and up, tangling my blades with his own. He rotated those strong wrists of his, and the skillful leverage he brought to bear sent my rapier and dagger spinning from my hands in opposite directions. At the same time, his pull brought me stumbling

against this massive chest. He dropped his weapons and grabbed my forearms as he hooked the back of my ankle with a foot and pivoted to one side

With a yelp, I hit the thick, padded mat on my belly – and was suddenly covered in his powerful body as he gently twisted both arms behind my back, then trapped them there. “At this point,” he said, his voice a seductive croon in my ear as his hard cock pressed against my bottom, “I think it’s safe to say I’ve got you where I want you.”

Slowly, deliberately, Baird rolled his hips. I bit back a moan at the sensation of that rock-hard erection

grinding against my sex.

He transferred both my wrists into the grip of one hand and kept them pressed to the small of my back. Wary, excited, I turned my head and watched as he delved into his pocket with his free hand. When I saw what he pulled out, I swallowed.Hard.

It was a length of cuffcable, padded so itwouldn't cut the skin. He meant to bind me.

He wrapped the strong, flexible cable around my wrists in a figure-eight pattern,then lifted himself. Bracing one booted foot beside my hips while kneeling across me, Baird flipped me over on my back. I stared up at his handsome face, stark and predatory with hunger, and felt my knees part oftheir own accord.

His big hands went to my breastband and pulled it up with one rough jerk, baring my tits. His eyes blazed at the sight, but hewasn't done.Next he slid off me and grabbed the tight fabric of my huggers, then stripped them down my legs with a single, ruthless yank. Tossing them across the room, he rocked back on hisheels, taking in my bound, naked body with eyes so striated with gold they seemed molten.

He raked the length of me with his gaze, thoroughly, possessively. A dark smile kicked one corner of his mouth. "By Our Lady, I've dreamed of this moment since the instant I looked across that bar and met your eyes. You've led me such a dance, I wasn't sure I'd ever have you." When he looked into my face again, his eyes were narrow and hard, and his mouth took on a cruel, determined slant. "You're going to pay the price for tormenting me, Kyna."

Oh, Lady, I certainly hoped so.

His big hands closed over my breasts, stroking,fondling , taking possession of them. Calloused thumbs stroked my hard nipples as he caressed the soft skin. The sensation made my breath catch in the back of my throat. I closed my eyes.

Only to snap them wide again as something hot and wet closed over one nipple as he twisted the other with delicate brutality. Gently, he licked and nibbled, his tongue, his lips,his teeth sending heat rolling through me in thick, honeyed waves. At the same time, his long fingers tormented the other pink tip, twisting and pulling and stroking until I writhed.

He came down over me completely, his body resting across my thighs, trapping and immobilizing me even more while he tormented my aching breasts. Feeling him pressing thick against the notch of my thighs, I whimpered in lust.

"Baird," I gasped, my pride melting in the heat he generated. "God, please, take me!"

"Not yet," he said, lifting his head from my breasts, his eyes dark and determined. "You haven't evens started to pay."

Then he slid down my body and buried his face between my thighs. I sucked in a hard breath at the sensation of his mouth pressing against my most sensitive, desperate flesh."Oh, Lady! Oh ...Take all the revenge you want, Baird," I gasped.

He lifted his head, his eyes glinting up at me from over my cunt. "Oh, I will."

Then he began to lick, slowly, thoroughly, tasting my desperately creaming sex, licking the labia he

spread wide with two fingers, circling my clit, thrusting his tongue deep up my snatch. I rolled my head against the mat and whined in mindless pleasure, loving it, loving everything he was doing to me, feeling my orgasm building, building. The pleasure grew with every hot pass of his tongue, heat and pressure building until I rolled my hips desperately against his face, grinding, striving for the peak that was so close, so close....

Then he stopped.

“Baird!” I cried, desperate. “Don’t stop!”

“Am I your master, Kyna?”

The question made me gape. I lifted my head and looked at him, looming over my sex, his muscled biceps bunching as he watched my face with a predator’s hunger. “What?” I couldn’t believe he’d asked the question.

He lowered his head and flicked my clit, punctuating each word with a skillful stroke of his tongue. “Am...” Lick. “...I...” Lick. “...your...” Lick. “...Master?”

My climax was so close I could only twist mindlessly. “Yes! Oh, yes, whatever you want!” “Good.” He sat back on his heels, living my stiff, desperate clit to cool without his mouth. “Then your master wants the satisfaction you have denied him.”

He reached down and caught me by the shoulders, pulling me onto my knees facing him. Dazed, I could only watch as he rose easily to his feet and opened the fly of his huggers. His cock thrust out, so broad and thick I was momentarily startled. I had never seen an organ of such menacing size. “Take it down your throat,” he ordered.

Wide-eyed, I lifted my gaze to his. Those gold-shot eyes were narrowed, fierce. Demanding. “You’ve been torturing me for weeks, Kyan,” he growled. “Now you’re going to use that sweet mouth for something besides telling me no.”

He reached out a big hand and wrapped it in my hair. Helplessly, I leaned forward, opened my mouth, and took that big, threatening cock inside.

“Yeessssssss,” he hissed. “That’s it. Like that. Deeper.” He rocked his hips, forcing the massive shaft more fully into my mouth. He tasted hot and salty, and the texture of his skin was slick as his cock slid past my lips. I felt hot cream flooding my cunt, shockingly aroused by his dominant pose. It should have offended and outraged me, but it didn’t. Instead I saw it as a mark of his extreme arousal. And his lust sent mine spiraling even higher.

He wrapped both hands in my hair, holding me still as he rolled his hips, forcing more and more of his cock down my throat. I choked, and he backed off, but only slightly. I could sense his ruthless intent to come in my mouth. With my hands bound behind me and his hands controlling my head, he could use me as he pleased. And he did, fucking my mouth as I sucked him, rumbling blunt orders about how to use my tongue and lips. Orders I, helplessly aroused, could only obey.

Until he drove in a thrust that made me gasp around his shaft. The big, plum head jerked, and something hot and salty flooded my mouth as he groaned out a low, animal sound of pleasure. “Very nice, my captive,” he rumbled at last, releasing me. I collapsed gasping, my cunt burning in helpless lust. “Now I can tend to you properly.”

He stepped around behind me. In an instant, my every erotic instinct went on alert. With a helpless moan, I drew my legs up under my body and lifted my hips to him, offering him my desperately needy cunt. He tapped my thighs with one foot. "Wider, captive."

Licking my lips, I obeyed. My face pressed to the cool mat, my ass in the air, I waited. It was a gallingly subservient pose but I didn't care. Suddenly I understood why my sister had been so willing to play this game with her warlord husband.

He stepped away from me for a moment, and I shut my eyes, fighting the need to beg. Something cold touched my hot cunt, and my back arched in shock. "Baird!" I gasped.

I heard him laugh. "I thought you liked the touch of my blade?" A long, cool object sought the opening of my cunt and pressed inside. I yelped and jerked my head around.

Baird was fucking me with the hilt of his rapier. He grinned at me wickedly as he pushed the thick, leather wrapped grip deeper into my creamy cunt. Until finally the long quillions of the guard pressed my sex and ass, cool steel grinding against my clit.

Helplessly I moaned. The lust I felt scalded me.

Eyes dark gold with raw lechery, Baird slowly began to fuck me with the hilt. Each time he drove it in up to the guard, he twisted it so the cold metal raked my clit. The sensation made me writhe. But despite the wicked pleasure, what I really wanted was the feeling of that hot satin shaft of his, driven all the way to my core. "Baird, please," I whimpered. "Take me!"

"Baird?" He withdrew the hilt and drove it in hard. I yelped at the brutal pleasure. "Master! I meant, Master! Please, give me your cock!"

"Do you really think you deserve it, after the way you've tormented and denied me?"

"Aaah!" I sucked in a breath as he twisted the hilt skillfully. "No, but...but you do. Oh, please, Baird. I'm so wet..."

"Yes," he growled. "You are. I can scent you, hot and slick and wanting. But is your cunt all you want filled?"

"No," I groaned, knowing it was true. "I want you to fill the circle. Give me your mark, Baird. Please."

"Finally!" He jerked the hilt from my body and threw the sword across the room. No sooner did it bounce clattering off the bulkhead than he flipped me onto my back and covered my body with his. In an instant he was in me, driving to my heart with one hard thrust of his cock.

I screamed at the sensation of that broad shaft filling my cunt. But he gave me no quarter, no time to catch my breath. He simply started ramming me in long strokes that hit me deep and hard, just where I needed it.

I keened at his rough possession, staring up into those narrow, gold shot eyes. His teeth were pulled back from his teeth as he fucked me. Every stroke sent pleasure spiraling tighter, deeper. Until I could not take any more. I felt it rise in me like a molten wave, searing every last thought, every last feeling, out of me. Leaving only the mind-detonating sensation of his cock, shuttling inside my spread and helpless body.

I threw back my head and screamed. He roared in pleasure and drove to the hilt, freezing there, pumping out his come.

Finally the storm was over. He rolled off me to lay beside my sore, well-used body. I groaned softly as my strained muscles protested deliciously.

Suddenly one of Baird's long fingers slid into my cunt, making my back arch in shock. Before I could yelp a protest, he withdrew his hand. Something wet and white covered his fingertip – his come.

With a wicked grin, he pressed the finger against my cheekbone, filling the circle just as he had the month before with his blood. "Now," he said, grinning with smug male possessiveness, "you are mine."

I eyed him, then reached between my thighs and slipped my own finger deep. Then I pressed our mingled juices against his arrogant cheekbone, covering the half circle tattooed there. "As you're mine."

He smiled, the dark light lifting from his eyes. "I love you, Kyna."

I grinned back. "And I love you too, Baird." Lifting my head, I kissed him, sliding my tongue deep in my mouth. I heard a startled growl of lust...

And then it began all over again.

THE END