

Warning:

The following material contains sexual content meant for mature readers. "DANGEROUS HEAT" has been rated NC-17, erotic, by four individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic book in a place where young readers not meant to view it are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

This one is for Marisa and Goldie, who made me do it! For Kit-Kat and Laura Brat who insisted that I do it. This goes to the ladies of FlameKeeper, to Eric the Red, and Teresa, the stuffed Chicken who provided encouragement and stimulation in the form of taunts, demands, and never ending patience. This one is for my parents who provided the mold for Flame and Kendall's brand of parenting and the love that exists years after taking the plunge. And as always, to My Wild Irish Viking who would not let me kill off family members. Love you Guys!

I am

I am the darkness that you fear,
and the bright that lights your way.
I am she that watches this forlorn world,
and grieves at its destruction.
I am the one who knows your highs,
your lows, your fear's.
They are forever present, always near.
Don't you ever put them away?

I am love.
I am the soft touch and warm embrace
that comforts you each night.
I am feather- likes kisses that tease you,
and the one you turn away.
I am your heart, your soul, the very air you breath.
I am the fire in your being
I Am your desire.
I Am.

Brette Ponnette

Chapter One

The man purposely gunned the engine of the large electric blue and silver bike, smiling at the loud roar he created. It made an echoing, growling sound that more than matched his mood in the underground garage.

He paid no attention to the well-dressed couple who nervously eyed him while they hurried to their car. Dressed as he was in tight brown suede pants and the tasseled vest, many people gave him wide berth. The corded muscles of his upper body strained the confines of the vest he wore and seemed to make the plain brown rawhide gauntlets seem something special.

As he skidded into a parking spot next to the skittish couple, he lazily kicked down the bike stand. He mumbled some unheard words under his breath and the massive bike rumbled to a stop. Again, with deceptively lazy movements, he pulled the large blue helmet off his head and the woman turned to stare.

“Why do I let myself get talked into these things?” he questioned no one, as he gripped the visor of the helmet in frustration. Barely leashed energy emanated from his body as he ran his hands over his eyes.

A mass of waist-length red hair, contained by a leather thong near the bottom of the length, caressed his back as he seemed to look for guidance from the heavens.

The woman in the car stopped looking nervous and began to look intrigued. Her husband seemed a little angry. This was a man who all women secretly dream about, and the type who most men instantly dislike while secretly envying.

The red-haired man ignored the sudden roar of the car engine and the angry squeal of tires as the couple roared out of the garage. He had bigger fish to fry.

“Why did I answer that phone?” he mumbled to himself, as he swung his long legs over the saddle.

He reached around and grabbed a set of black leather saddlebags and slung them over one muscular shoulder, before walking to a bank of mirrored elevators.

The sight of his reflection made him burst out in laughter, causing a woman just pulling out of a parking space to pause and eye this golden-skinned man.

“Eric is gonna have puppies.” He grinned at the thought.

He was a victim of hat hair. He raised one hand to try to fluff out the mass of red hair, then changed his mind. Let them take him as he was.

Unbeknownst to him, far from being unattractive, the slightly flattened hair only gave him a sexy, just-climbed-out-of-bed look. His lazy gray eyes emphasized that point, even though he was alert and aware of almost everything going on around him.

The elevator dinged and he stepped into air-conditioned comfort that was a startling contrast to the summer heat. Leave it to his Aunt Caressa to find a building with air-conditioned elevators. She probably insisted on it before moving there with her modeling agency, *Crystal Faces*.

By the time he reached the twentieth floor, he was all but regretting getting out of bed today.

“Why me?” he mournfully questioned the empty elevator. “What did I do to deserve this?”

He exited directly into a hurricane of activity. *Crystal Faces* was in full business mode. Against one mirrored wall sat a cluster of young women, the hopefuls who wanted to be the next Tyra Banks or Cindy Crawford. Across from them, and separated by a low silver and glass coffee table, sat two guys

who preened at themselves in the mirrors.

For a moment, when he made his entrance, all movement stopped as if to give tribute to such an awesome force of energy. But this went unnoticed by the man. He was used to his commanding presence and the attention that it brought.

The gaggle of girls immediately began to practice their vamping for the handsome stranger who had entered their domain, by licking their full lips and pouting.

“I didn’t know that they were going for beefcake!” one outraged, tanned individual murmured to the guy beside him. “I thought they were looking for sexy!”

Overhearing this, the girls rolled their eyes at the complaining man. If the stranger got any sexier, he would soon start a riot.

The stud in question ignored all comments as he walked over to the receptionist’s desk and cleared his throat.

The perfectly coifed blonde wearing wire-rimmed glasses wrinkled her perfectly arched eyebrows in annoyance. Her pale blue eyes looked down at the table as her perfect cupid’s bow lips pursed slightly. With a put-upon sigh, her eyes traveled up the massive personage that stood before her until she hit his face.

He swore she almost looked relieved, which was hard to pull off in her case because his cousin never showed emotion...ever.

“Gloria,” he began, his deep, slightly accented voice causing the group of hopefuls to gawk at him in startled disbelief. His voice was heavenly, the stuff dreams and fantasies...erotic fantasies...were made of. “I believe Auntie Caressa is expecting me.”

His mellow voice hinted at the mysterious and the exotic. Where on Earth did this one come from? Who was he? They all wanted to know.

“Spark!” her breathy voice was almost infused with a little excitement.

What was going on here? He began to feel like a lamb being led to the slaughter under her anxious gaze.

“Caressa is waiting in her office for you now.”

He almost turned and ran away when the cool and patrician Gloria half stood and eagerly motioned him to the door.

What was happening? Gloria considered everyone she met beneath her and never had an excited moment in all the years that Spark had known her. She never even called Caressa, her mother, Mom!

So, with a little trepidation, he turned and walked to the large double doors embossed with the *Crystal Faces* logo. Out of curiosity, he looked back and froze like Lot’s wife. Gloria had a half smile on her face.

“My God!” Spark shuddered as he quickly turned and opened the doors to his aunt’s office.

“Sparkles, my dear!” His aunt Caressa almost leaped across her large glass desk to take his hands and clasp them into her uncharacteristically damp ones.

Her green eyes were wide with...relief? And her long brown hair was flowing freely around her head, slashed and curled into the latest trendy style.

“Eek!” another voice sounded out almost at the same instant. Spark whipped around and eyed Eric, amusement lightening his concerned mood.

“What have you done to yourself!” The tall man barreling from the corner of the room looked as if he was about to have a massive coronary.

“You rode that monster of a bike over here, didn’t you? Do you know what dry skin can do to your career? And that hair, honestly!”

He was called Eric the Terrible on the sets. The master hair and makeup artist was easy to spot. Every time Spark saw him, he pictured a Viking wielding a hair comb as if it were a sword, and a makeup mirror like a shield. The massive blond could easily be a model for *Muscle and Fitness*, but instead chose to work his magic behind the scenes.

“Hello, Eric,” Spark said with a grin, trying to disconnect himself from his aunt’s ever tightening grasp.

Before he could continue, Caressa began to make a pitch.

Wait! A pitch?

“Here he is!” she announced to the room at large. “The perfect male model for your needs.”

“Model!” Spark managed as his aunt began to talk to a person seated in front of her desk.

He had been too shocked by his aunt’s reception to notice her. The tall woman was definitely a suit, a scout for a large company. She was dressed in a red power pantsuit, wore her black hair in the requisite French roll, and gazed at him through gold, wire-rimmed glasses. Definitely a suit.

“He definitely is big enough, but is he proportional?” The woman pulled her glasses down to the tip of her nose and began examining him like a prized animal at a 4H show.

He turned back to his aunt who seemed to grow a little more nervous. “Take off your, ah, vest, Spark.” She avoided his sudden scowl and motioned with her hands to the garment in question.

Caressa knew that Spark wanted to end this phase of his life. He’d modeled for her agency before he made the serious decision to go into the family business. The extra money had been a big help when he moved out of his parents’ house, but he never liked the way modeling made him feel. Once he graduated from college, he told his aunt that he was through and hadn’t looked back, despite years of her begging and pleading. He had too many things to do now, and prancing down a catwalk just wasn’t one of them.

Determination stiffening his features, he turned to his aunt and was struck by the tears swimming in her large eyes.

Damn! He hated to see women cry. It was his one weakness and Caressa knew it. Although usually manipulative and underhanded, Caressa wouldn’t trap him like this unless it was an extreme emergency.

Then he began to smile a slow, wicked smile that had the suit catching her breath and Eric rolling his eyes waiting for whatever bomb he was about to drop.

There had been a few changes to his body over the years, changes that just might make him...slightly less than perfect for any modeling job. The suit would turn him down; Caressa would fail at whatever her plan was while giving it the old team try. And best of all, he would be off the hook. This was so perfect it was almost foolproof!

The thick silver carpet that covered the floor muffled the sound of his saddlebags hitting the floor, but still it sounded like the final nail being driven into the coffin of his aunt's plans.

Wearing his trademark wicked grin, he began to undo the three buttons holding the rawhide vest closed, building tension just as his aunt had taught him to do in his modeling days. With a flourish, he whipped the vest off and let it slowly slide down his arms until it dropped to the floor.

Eric muffled a small chuckle and Caressa bit back an unladylike curse. There, clamped onto his golden right nipple was a tiny golden nipple, ring so small it almost blended in with his skin. If it were not for sunlight pouring in from the massive window behind Caressa's desk glinting off of it, not many would have noticed it. But Spark wasn't through.

In a move that made prancing horses famous all over the world, Spark tossed his mane of fiery red-gold hair while turning his back to the small crowd gathered in the office. In doing so, the thong slipped from the ends of his hair, striking Eric in the chest, prompting his startled "Hey!" and releasing his waist-length hair to flow freely down his body.

Still smirking, he shoveled one arm beneath that mass of hair, flipped it forward, and exposed his perfectly naked, perfectly symmetrical, and perfectly tattooed back.

There, on his right shoulder, rippling each tiny detailed scale with each of his movements resided a scarlet, silver, and ice blue dragon. Instead of having the evil leer of most tattooed beasts, this dragon's familiar gray eyes seemed to be filled with knowledge and never ending patience.

Spark beamed at his aunt over his shoulder, a completely innocent look on his face. And he had to fight to stifle a laugh.

"Those are my dad's eyes," he pointed out to his mute aunt. "I was sure you would recognize them."

"Why?" Caressa finally managed to croak through her suddenly tight throat. "Why would you put that...thing...there?"

"It's simple, really," came his chipper reply. "My dad has always "gotten on my back" no matter what I did in life. I put to there to remind me of that."

Spark had to fight to keep from bursting with pride from the ingenious way that he had handled his aunt. No one would be hurt and he would be allowed to go about his merry way.

"He's perfect!" the other woman exclaimed, causing the other three in the room to look at the suit in various degrees of amazement.

"Me?" Spark questioned, once again, the feeling of a noose tightening around his neck returning with a

vengeance.

“Him?” both Caressa and Eric echoed, looking at each other before turning to the woman in red.

“I want him on contract today. Do what ever it takes. He’s perfect for my needs. And that spiritual touch about his father was just the icing on the cake. I should have put more faith in you Caressa; you found me the perfect Brazen Man. Now tell me, my dear,” she said, turning to Spark. “Are those streaks of white in your hair natural?”

In a last ditch effort to stop himself from sinking fast he nodded. They wouldn’t want someone with prematurely silver hair, would they? It was too much pop and not the classic look that they needed, right?

With that, the woman rose from her chair, picked up her briefcase and walked over to Spark, who took an involuntary step back.

“Yes, he will do nicely. Always a pleasure, Caressa.” The woman took his aunt’s slow-moving hand, although Caressa still seemed to be paralyzed into some state of shock, and briskly pumped it up and down. “I’ll be seeing a lot more you later, young man,” she shot at Spark before turning and leaving the room.

Still in somewhat of a daze, Caressa walked back to her seat behind her glass desk and pressed a button on her intercom.

“Gloria, can you come in here, please?” she requested, her normal voice sounding a little strained.

Spark stood there in confusion. How could his master plan fail! He was pretty sure that tattooed and pierced models were not in vogue today.

The glass doors silently opened and a tense Gloria entered the room.

“I saw Mrs. Heart leave.” Gloria took in the expressions of the people in the room; Caressa slumped behind her desk with a strange expression on her face, Spark and Eric looking confused and mute standing in the center of the room. Her face drained of color.

“Are we all unemployed now?” she asked calmly, for Gloria was nothing, if not...calm.

“She thought that he was perfect!” Caressa responded, still looking a little shocked. “He is perfect!” she added with a little more conviction. “My Sparkles is perfect!” she finally cried as she flew from behind the desk and began to do the dance of joy.

“We’re saved!” the normally taciturn Gloria cried, before she grabbed Eric and kissed him full on the lips.

“We all get paid!” Eric cried, catching the happiness bug too, before he and Gloria began to dance around Spark, who stood in the center of this maelstrom still frozen in place observing these people make fools of themselves.

“Okay! Does someone want to let me in on this?” he finally roared. “What’s the punch line?”

“Oh, my Sparkles, you did it!” Caressa crowed as she placed her hands on his shoulders and began to jump up and down like an excited teenager. “You saved my ass!”

“What?” Now Spark was more confused than ever.

“My business. You saved my business. Richard was going to call in the loan he gave me to start this agency if I didn’t turn a certain profit by the end of this year.”

“He was gonna what?” Spark was incensed. He always knew that his Uncle Richard was a little, well, stiff, but this was ridiculous. “He was going to cut off his own wife?”

“But it doesn’t matter anymore, Sparkles.” Caressa exclaimed. “Do you know who that was? That was Amelia Heart. Ame Heart? Ame Heart of Brazen Heart Publishing?”

His confused look cleared up in an instant. Brazen Heart Publishing produced a wide genre of romance novels, but their claim to fame was a steamy line of books, all with a strong bondage theme.

“You’re going to be their spokes-model, Spark! You will be featured on each cover and on each advertisement.” Caressa looked up at him with such joy, that he almost hated himself for what he had to do next.

“Aunt Caressa,” he began, removing her hands from his shoulders and holding them down in front of her. “There is no way in hell that I’m going to be on the cover of any erotic thriller. The answer is no.”

The sudden cessation of all sound in the room caused him to look from his aunt’s suddenly stricken eyes to the stricken eyes of Gloria and Eric. Guilt slammed into him and made him flush a little. “I’m sorry.”

“But...but you are the answer to my prayers, Sparkles. I can’t make it without you.” Caressa’s lips began to tremble and her large, brown-green eyes began to fill with tears. “I can’t make it without you.”

Damn, not the water works, Spark thought as he pulled one hand free from his aunt’s clutches and ran it through his hair.

“Aunt Caressa, I have just been made a full partner in *Flash and Flame*. I still have my job at the Renn Fest. I just won’t have time to do this.”

At her continued silence, Spark found himself feeling like the Grinch. Maybe when he left, he could find some puppies to kick.

“Please, Spark?” Caressa’s watery eyes stared up at him and her tears began to make silvery tracks down her face. Suddenly she threw herself, as much as she would allow herself to be thrown, to her knees at his feet. “Do you want me to beg?”

She raised impassioned watery eyes up to him and clasped her hands in supplication before her.

“Please, my Sparkles. I’m on my knees before you!” she cried, her voice shaking, before throwing herself over his feet with a sob.

It was an Oscar-caliber performance, and although he knew it to be a perfectly orchestrated act, Spark felt himself giving in.

“Get up off the floor.” He sighed at last, looking at her body gracefully thrown across his boots. “I’ll do it.”

In a flash, Caressa was on her feet and signaling her daughter and her master makeup artist to start gathering the paperwork for the contract. All tears evaporated immediately.

“My mother warned me about this, but did I listen?” he muttered to himself as he watched the partners in crime scurry around the office to prepare the piece of paper that would change his life.

“I have to go,” he finally grouched as the busy bees buzzed around him. “I’m late for my day job.”

Suddenly all of the activity around him ceased again.

“Please sign the contract first, Sparkles.” Caressa now looked less like a fragile hothouse flower and more like a hungry wolf. “I don’t want you to change your mind later.”

Feeling like he was being stalked, Spark bent down to retrieve his vest and saddlebags. His fight or flight instincts were kicking in and he chose...flight.

“I’ll call you tonight, Auntie,” he stammered as he backed from the room, keeping a wary eye on the alpha wolf and her pack. “I promise I will.”

Before they could make a move to stop him, he bolted for the doors and escaped to the reception room. But right on his heels was the pack, with Caressa in the lead waving a contract and pen.

“You will sign this thing and right now, Sparkles!” she cried as she stalked her skittish prey, the other two bringing up the rear.

All movement in the outer office stopped to watch the confrontation taking place. The group of female hopefuls gawked at Spark’s bare, muscular chest and shared bemused grins with each other. Guess who was going to star prominently in their dreams this night! The two guys, on the other hand, eyed Spark with a combination of hatred and jealousy.

“But...but...” Seeing no way out, Spark grabbed the contract from her hand and skimmed through it.

“The things that I do for you and your family!” he ground out as he looked over the contract.

It was pretty standard stuff, one year with an option to renew with his aunt’s company. The contract with *Brazen Heart* would take a little longer to prepare. He knew that his aunt, the barracuda in sheep’s clothing, would negotiate for a big contract.

“What’s the world coming to when people get forced into signing modeling contracts when they least expect it!” he declared to the room at large.

Hearing his outburst, one of the male models waiting to be seen rose and walked to the bank of elevators with a disgusted look on his perfect, male fashion-doll face. He was going to start weight lifting today.

Spark slammed the contract down onto Gloria’s desk, and with bold angry slashes, signed his name.

“Did I ever tell you how much I hate the name Sparkles?” he growled before stomping to the elevator door and punching the down button already pressed by the soon-to-be weight lifting hopeful.

The guy took one look at Spark, cursed, and then headed for the stairs at the end of the hall. He would start bulking up right now! Stair stepping was good for building muscle, right?

Spark looked back once to see the trio crowing their delight and exchanging high fives. Whatever happened to family loyalty?

When the doors slid open, Spark stomped inside and automatically slammed the button for the garage, completely missing the small figure that stepped back at his dramatic entrance.

With another curse, he pulled on his vest when a soft voice from the back of the car asked, "Rejected?"

Spark turned and flushed with embarrassment. He didn't know anyone had witnessed his little fit of temper.

"I'm sorry?" he stammered as he took in the woman. "Did you want to get off at that floor?"

"I don't mind another trip down," she answered in a low voice that sent shivers down his spine.

She had to be a model, Spark thought, as he took in all that she was. Her head would reach just under his chin, which would make her about five-feet-ten inches to his six-seven. He had inherited his great height from his father.

In deference to the heat, she was wearing a kind of halter-top in emerald green, which had long ties that wrapped in back and crisscrossed her slender waist. Her skirt was long and black and had a split down the center of the front that stopped above her thighs. His heart almost stopped as she shifted one delicately muscled leg, and the skirt parted to reveal that she was actually wearing short shorts with the split skirt attached. On her feet was a pair of deadly looking heels that made a man think of how good those legs would look reclining in his bed. Her long black hair fell softly to her waist, outlining and emphasizing her café au' lait skin.

But he was most captivated by her eyes.

They were sparkling green, slanted cat eyes that were fringed with long lashes. Her full lips were sexy, and her high cheekbones added to the feline appearance, but it was her eyes that captivated.

"So, were you rejected?" she asked again. "Is that the reason for your 'tude?"

"Ah...no." Was that rusty sound his voice? He felt a stirring in his blood and fought to control the hungry energies that suddenly decided to make themselves known.

"Then why the tantrums?"

"Because I was just signed." He looked again into her beautiful eyes and felt himself falling.

"Well, then congratulations are in order...ah...what is your name?" she asked as she took one step forward and extended her delicate, fine-boned hand.

"Spark," he managed as he engulfed her dainty hand within his large paw. "Excuse my manners. I'm Spark MacIntyre."

She raised one arched eyebrow and Spark felt the temperature rise in the small car. Right now fantasies

of him hitting the stop button and having his way with her were strong in his mind.

“Really, it is,” he insisted as he released her hand and dug into his back pocket to pull out a slim gold card case. He carefully extracted a small black card and extended it to her.

“Flash and Flame Pyrotechnics?” she asked as she looked up into his gray eyes. “You do fireworks?”

“With laser light shows,” he added, going automatically into sales mode. “It’s a wonder no one thought of the combination before. You have to see it to believe it. We are putting on a display this evening at the Renn Fest if you’re interested in seeing us in action.” And in seeing him again.

“Renn Fest?” she asked.

“The Renaissance Festival in Crownsville,” he clarified. “Today is the opening day of the fair and I would be proud to have you attend.”

“Maybe I will, Spark,” she added with what could only be interest on her part. “Maybe I will.

Spark didn’t get the chance to press his advantage because the doors opened and the smells of exhaust and motor oil began to fill the small car, slapping him back to reality.

“I’ve...uh...got to go now,” he stammered as she continued to look him over with those cat’s eyes. He took one step outside the doors, feeling like a stuttering fool.

“I will see you later...Spark.”

His whole body shuddered at the sound of his name rolling off of her tongue. He especially loved the way that she almost hissed the first part of his name and emphasized the “k” in Spark.

He turned to speak with her, only to have the door close in his face.

“Smooth move, Ex-lax,” he muttered to himself as he readjusted his saddlebags on his shoulder and made his way over to his bike.

Maybe he would see the beautiful black love goddess again tonight, if he were a lucky man.

He stalked over to his bike and attached the bags to the back. He had eased the helmet over his head before he realized that he had completely forgotten about his aunt and his return to the glamorous world of modeling.

He silently fumed and fought the urge to blow something up. He could and easily did things like that, because, like his father, he was *Keeper of the Flame*. Fire held no secrets from him.

Chapter Two

“Spark,” Zanya mused to herself as the slow-moving car began to rise toward the twentieth floor.

With such presence, he would be an asset to *Brazen Heart*. Who was she kidding? He would be an asset anywhere he chose to be!

When Ame called her earlier in the day on her cell phone and asked her to go to the offices of *Crystal Faces*, she had no idea that good looking hunks would be throwing temper tantrums in elevators.

At first, she thought that the man was another rejectee taking his anger out on the building equipment, but then he turned and apologized for his rudeness and Zanya got a good look at that mountain of muscle.

His face was her ideal of masculine beauty. His forehead was just high enough to appear rugged and those cheekbones! She knew men who had gotten cheek implants to get that look! His eyes were an unusual shade of gray; almost the color of old silver, and they flashed with the promise of passion. His lips were just the icing on the cake. Never before had she seen such full, succulent lips on a man. His bottom lip was made for chewing and his top lip was a perfect cupid's bow. On any other man his lips would have appeared feminine, but on Spark, his lips were a work of art!

And the body! He was muscled up and filled out in all of the right places. Those scandalous suede pants left very little to the imagination, and she was now imagining a lot! Like those strong arms wrapped around her, comforting her after a wild round of hot...Whoops! Better get back on track!

She hadn't even gone out with the man and already she was imagining them doing the horizontal hoochie-coochie!

She looked down at the plain black business card and smiled at the memory of his clean masculine scent, a scent that still filled the elevator with his essence, and at his embarrassment at turning and finding a witness to his bad manners. The gray-eyed man actually blushed, and she would assume by how quickly he pulled himself together that he did not make it a habit to lose his temper.

And he invited her to see his company in action at a Renaissance Festival. Did that mean swords and strangely dressed people dancing around and speaking Old English? What did one wear to a Renn Fest? She ran the small card over her full bottom lip before placing it within a small pocket sewn into the side of her skirt. Was she actually contemplating going?

Yes, she decided, as the elevator doors opened into the offices of *Crystal Faces*. She reached down and pulled up a rather large and bulky black bag. Her whole life, her sole reason for existence, was contained within its dark confines.

As she slung the bag up onto her shoulder, she noticed that there was quite a bit of excitement going on in this office. She stepped into the large reception area where she was stunned to see a trio of "beautiful people" hopping around the room as if they had just overcome some great obstacle.

As she watched, two of them, a rather large, blonde man and a shorter woman easily recognized as Caressa Tanner, danced a conga line through a set of glass doors, waving some papers into the air like the spoils of a long, hard-fought war, and slammed the door shut.

The third person, a young woman, took a seat at a glass desk and proceeded to energetically punch numbers into a phone and crazily spin her chair in circles before patching the call through to some other office.

She looked around the room and again was amazed at what she saw. A gaggle of scantily clad young women were gossiping earnestly amongst themselves, proper decorum thrown out of the nearest window. A lone representative of the human male modeling species, looking slightly affronted as he sat alone in the female dominated area, glanced over his shoulder as if he expected someone to make an

appearance. He did not look too happy either, as he eyed the woman in front of him. He grunted and sat up at some comment that one of the young ladies had said.

“Sure I can put on that much muscle mass if I wanted to! You women seem to forget that a man has more important things to do in life than to try and look like the Incredible Hulk!” He pantomimed a crab pose before giving the girls a back-handed wave. “He was probably on steroids anyway, and you know what that does for, shall we say, the money shot?”

“Jealousy rears its ugly head!” one girl said as she shook her head in the direction of the now pouting young man.

Still poking out his collagen enhanced lower lip, he shot her the universal finger of insult and turned his back to the women, eyeing the elevator longingly while the girls giggled at his reaction.

Shaking off the feeling that she had just entered the Twilight Zone, Zanya turned away from the group of beautiful people turning ugly, and strode to the excited woman in the merry-go-round chair at the receptionist’s desk.

Immediately, the woman’s happy-time-chair-ride closed down with a thump and a cold mask replaced the joy that was previously plastered over her face. Frozen blue eyes examined her from the top of her black hair to the tips of her heeled sandals, and she got the distinct impression that she was found...well...wanting.

“We do not accept walk-ins, under any circumstances, Miss.”

The cold voice that came from that frozen face was enough to almost make her turn tail and run. But then she remembered who she was! Zanya shook her head to remove any lingering drops of ice left in the air by this glorified secretary’s voice and then she got serious.

“That’s good,” Zanya replied with a little heat. “Because you couldn’t pay me to willingly walk into this madhouse! The only reason that I am gracing you with my presence is because a friend asked me to brave this den of apparent lunatics to help her out!”

“I beg your pardon?” exclaimed the blonde, one professionally arched brow rising as she shot her an offended look.

“You had better, sister, because my time is valuable and I’m too important a commodity to be left waiting and offended.”

Zanya now had her back up! How dare this woman treat her as if she was of no consequence! She slung her bag higher up onto her shoulder and bent low to stare at this...this woman straight in the eyes. She was Zanya Burke! She was the greatest....

“Oh my God!”

A loud screech cut her off in mid thought.

“It’s you!”

Both women turned to see Caressa Tanner racing out of her glass office towards them in what could only be described a frantic pell-mell manner.

“Gloria, do you not know who this is?” she questioned as she reached Zanya’s side and grasped both of her hands in hers.

At her daughter’s blank look, she added, “This is Zanya Burke! She is only *the* most sought after photographer in the polite world to date!” Then to Zanya, “Please tell me that you’re freelancing and decided that no one could provide you with better subjects than *Crystal Faces* . That would honestly complete what is turning out to be a nearly perfect day!”

Taken aback a little by this new reception, Zanya shook her head and smiled. Why not go with the flow? If the psycho-conga-line chick wanted to fawn all over her, who was she to stop her? Besides it took a little sting out of the ice-maiden’s earlier comments and treatment of her.

“I am here at the request of Mrs. Ame Heart. She asked me to be here today to meet my new assignment, the Brazen Man.”

Hey, a pesky thought intruded into her mind. Maybe Spark would make a perfect Brazen Man. She definitely would have to get a few shots of him at the Renn Fest, another perfect excuse to go chasing the man down, and show the photos to Ame. As if she needed a reason to see that man again beyond that perfectly formed ass of his.

“You’re going to photograph my Sparkles?” Caressa’s eyes widened with excitement. “You have to come into my office right now!”

Her Sparkles? Oh no! Zanya sighed with dismay. Why were the great ones always taken?

That perfect hunk of a man was already claimed, and by none other than the queen of glam herself? Why is there no fairness in the world? But then, wait! Why was he flirting so hard with her? The rat bastard! He must have polished up that oh-so-cute and innocent stutter and blush for years! Just wait until she saw him again!

In a light fog of anger, Zanya was led into the large office that Caressa Tanner occupied.

“Eric!” Caressa cried with some excitement. “Zanya Burke is going to be photographing our Sparkles! She is the photographer that Ame Heart has set up for the photo shoots! Isn’t this a dream come true! Ah, the publicity! My name will go down in history as the smartest and most talented agent known to mankind! I told you that Ford would eat their hearts out!”

That jerked Zanya out of her daze. Our Sparkles? What was actually going on around here anyway? He now belonged to the both of them! Zanya decided to sit up and pay close attention. What she felt for a subject was often seen in her work, so she had better find something to like in the red-haired giant, to cancel out this unnerving feeling of betrayal that she now felt. And she wasn’t even dating the guy! Her reaction to him was strange, yet she needed to know more about him because of it.

“That ‘dear boy’ will be the death of me yet!” the tall blond man exclaimed as he eyed Zanya with some interest, “So you are the great Zanya Burke. You will be working closely with me, then. I am the only person allowed to touch our star, Spark. It is a pleasure to meet you. You are somewhat of a legend in your field.”

“Thank you,” she said as she turned to examine the man before her. Yes, she could see just about anyone attracted to the man, darn it! Was Spark doing them both?

When did her mind start focusing on sex anyway? The man had addled her brain and all he did was ask her to go to a festival to see him in action! Oh, the pictures that thought conjured.

“My nephew is a stubborn man, Zanya. May I call you Zanya?” Caressa asked as she directed the stunned woman to a seat in front of her massive glass desk and gently placed her bag at her feet. “He gets it from both of his parents, I guess. Never have there ever been two more stubborn people in existence!”

So Spark was not sleeping with this woman. She was his aunt! A weight lifted off of her shoulders and a relieved smile settled onto her face. One out of the picture and one to go!

She turned to face the man, Eric. Was anything funny going on there?

“He is just going to die when he sees what Ame Heart has lined up for him. Too bad you just missed him. Sparkles was feeling a little...trapped. Yes, trapped is a good word to describe it, and he had to run along to try and contain his, uh...joy.”

Zanya raised one dubious eyebrow. “Are we speaking of the same man who not five minutes ago almost put a fist through the control panel of the elevator because he was so thrilled to be part of the *Crystal Faces* family?”

Caressa had the nerve to blush.

Eric exploded into laughter!

“So you have met our rogue!” he laughed. “Did he manage to get that vest thing he was wearing on before he fled the scene of the crime?”

“And what crime would that be?” Zanya had to ask.

She was beginning to understand why Spark was...concerned about working for these people, but to flee in anger? Or was it self-preservation? She felt a sudden urge to move closer to the exit herself. These people were one donut shy of a dozen!

“Why, his modeling for us again.” Eric put in while watching the famous photographer closely. She had the gams, but she just didn’t have the calm Joe Cool attitude of Mrs. Heart.

“Our dear Caressa neatly trapped him in with her plans and the poor boy had no choice but to follow through or risk hurting his favorite aunt,” he replied pulling his mind back to the present.

“His only aunt!” Caressa felt the need to add. “Family has to stick together and help each other out, you know?”

“But I thought he had you with the piercing thing. And that tattoo!” Eric whooped.

Zanya’s head began to turn back and forward between the two, like a spectator at a tennis match. Who had a piercing? Who was family? Who was hurt? What tattoo?

“Can somebody please explain this to me, and this time in English?” she asked. Enough was enough! Okay, her Spark wasn’t sleeping with anyone here. The woman was his aunt and the man was just

too...strange. But then, that was good.

Her Spark seemed to have been manipulated into this deal. That was bad. But he had a nice tattoo and a piercing. That was...intriguing. Where, exactly, were they?

"It's simple, dear, Spark never really wanted this job," Eric finally said after regaining his breath. "He did it to help his dear Aunt Caressa in her time of need. It just so happens that he was exactly what that hot dish...I mean hot executive...I mean what Mrs. Heart wanted."

Was there a blush on the man's face? Zanya wouldn't exactly call it a blush, but he definitely had a little more color to his skin.

"You don't think that it will make him a little harder to photograph, do you?" Caressa asked Zanya. "I mean, he is supposed to look a little fierce, right?"

First and foremost, Caressa wanted some useable pictures for *Brazen Heart*, and if the fierce look was out then they were all screwed.

"He's supposed to look tied up," Zanya got out with a small smile.

"Tied up?" Caressa asked, her world-famous eyes crinkling up into an expression of concern.

"Tied up!" Zanya confirmed. "And tied up with some really neat nylon cords, I might add. But that's only for the inside flap of one book. He'll be tied with silk scarves too. And then there is the leather."

"Oh my!" Caressa's neatly manicured hand went to her throat, like a true southern belle, before she forced that hand back to the table. Suddenly it had gone quiet in the room.

"You mean he won't be posing with some big-haired starlet in some kind of a clinch?" she asked, tossing a worried look to Eric.

"Oh no," Zanya said with no little glee, the positions she was going to put him in racing through her mind. "I get to tie him up and strip him down. The basic premise for *Brazen Heart* books is to show love that is a little more...shall we say, intense than the average romance. There is some light bondage and some domination, but I'm sure it's nothing that Spark can't handle."

Oh boy, this was going to be a fun couple of weeks! Then Zanya eyed the two silent individuals in the room. "Is there a problem with that?"

"Tell me that I'm dreaming!" Eric crowed, then caught himself. He looked over at a confused Caressa and shut his pie hole.

"I think that our boy can handle anything that you dish out to him, Ms. Burke." Eric tried for a calm, professional look but failed miserably. His lips kept twitching and his eyes gleamed with barely suppressed mirth.

This man was hiding something. Zanya looked over at Caressa, but the woman seemed to be lost in thought and staring at a stack of papers before her. She looked at Eric, only to see him again try to fight back a grin.

"Since we are to be working closely together, why don't you call me Zanya," she again insisted

“Zanya it is, then.” Suddenly he was all perfect manners and genuine smiles. It was a bit alarming, like a wolf trying to smile with a mouth full of sharp fangs.

“And since we will be working so hard together with Spark, is there something that I should know about? Does he have a fear of ropes or of camera flashes?”

For the life of her, Zanya could not figure out what the strange reactions were about! Eric looked about ready to bust a gut laughing while Caressa looked almost disturbed by the idea of her nephew in light bondage.

“Well, he is most conservative,” Caressa finally admitted. She ignored the sudden fit of coughing from the blonde in the room, and bravely strove on.

“I couldn’t get him to wear anything risqué when he was modeling for me before and it’s gotten even worse over the years.”

By this time, Eric’s coughing had gotten so bad that he had to race from the room to get to the water cooler she had spotted on the way in.

Zanya turned again to Caressa. “How conservative are we talking here?”

“Well...” she was cut off by a fit of loud laughter coming from the outer office. Zanya rose as if to check on the noise, but Caressa motioned her to sit.

“One of the hopefuls probably said something to him. Eric is, well, a little different. He has a unique sense of humor. Did you know that he was an electrician for years before deciding to go into modeling? I saw him hooking up some lights for a shoot one day and said to myself, ‘there is a *Crystal Faces* man!’ He decided that he likes the makeup end much better than the modeling end, but he helps out every now and then. But now, back to my Sparkles.”

She laid both of her hands on the table, the perfect picture of a concerned guardian before continuing with her assessment of her nephew. “The boy is such an introvert. I worry about him, I truly do!”

“The man has a body piercing and a tattoo! How much of an introvert can he be?”

“You’ll just have to see that for yourself, Zanya.” Caressa sighed and shook her head as if Spark’s conservative nature was a failing that affected world peace.

“I guess I will,” Zanya decided before rising to her feet to leave. “It’s been interesting meeting with you,” she added before bending over to pick up her big black bag and leaving the glass room.

As she turned to begin the long walk towards the elevators, she caught sight of the crazy makeup artist. He took one look at her and burst out into uncontrollable laughter again. Tears began to actually roll down his face.

Fed up and wanting to know the reason for his laughter, she stalked over towards the nearly incapacitated man.

“What is so funny, Leif Erickson?” she demanded. “What do you know about Spark MacIntyre that I don’t?”

“Spark...introvert...nylon cords!” he managed between great guffaws of laughter.

“What is so funny about the man being a little shy?”

There was a muffled thud when Goldilocks hit the floor, laughing so hard he wrapped his arms around his stomach to keep from shaking apart.

Shaking her head in disgust, Zanya looked down at the man writhing on the floor before walking away. She would help Spark through his problem with shyness and her shoot would go according to schedule. Maybe she might get him to unwind enough to take on a date. Shy men offered such possibilities.

“Look,” she nearly groaned as tears began to fill the laughing blonde's eyes. “Meet me at my studio on Tuesday for the first real shoot. He might feel more comfortable discussing this bondage thing if you're around to help him through it.”

“Stop, please!” he begged as tears rolled down his face and he rolled over to his back, presumably to help his breathing, and tried to control his hysterical laughter.

“That's it! I'm outta here!” the male model cried as he eyed the large man rolling on the floor. “If they are reducing men the size of the Viking over there to tears, I don't stand a chance! And Vogue said that a slimmer, more realistic man was in for this season! Well, Vogue can kiss my ass! I'm going to the gym!”

In a huff, he left the twittering girls and headed for the elevator. He then changed course and started for the fire escape before firing off his parting shot. “And I'm starting with the stairs!”

As the elevator doors opened, Zanya quickly entered and pressed the button for the garage. The fashion business was an ugly one, and if the truth be told, quite scary at times! Look at the models and the people who were representing them! You couldn't get any weirder than this!

Chapter Three

Would she show? Was she even interested in a stuttering fool like himself? Why did he invite her in the first place?

Spark stared out at the crowd of costumed people wandering around this year's opening day of the festival, and let his head drop to the counter of the booth with a bang. Here the things that made him feel good surrounded him, the manly implements of war created by his own hand, and all that he could think about was *her*.

He had gunned his engine and made it to the festival site with just enough time to confirm his family's business there and to open his booth, but all the while he was thinking of her bewitching green cat's eyes and her miles of smooth, golden-brown skin.

"I don't even know her name," he complained, because grown men don't whine, and lifted his head a few inches at the sound of feminine laughter.

"Woman troubles, big brother?" a deep, husky voice asked.

"What do you want, pest?" he groaned as he rose to his full height to glare at his charming, red-haired sister.

"Just to let you know that the gang's all here. Hail, hail!" she replied with that oh-so-smooth voice of hers.

True to her heritage, Ember stood almost six feet tall and was possessed of the proud carriage of a true house leader. Her laughing gray eyes shot a challenge to her older brother, while the sound of her voice caused many a man to stop and pay attention.

She tossed her free-flowing, silver-streaked hair over her shoulders as she struck a provocative pose guaranteed to catch the attention of some poor, unsuspecting male and raise her brother's ire.

As predicted, some poor schmuck walked straight into a wall trying to eye the tall beauty dressed in what could only be described as Early Amazon. A tight leather halter, which stopped inches above her navel, held her breasts high, while the skin-tight black leather pants she wore outlined, in perfect detail,

every well-formed muscle in her legs. In lieu of the normal warrior's boots, Ember was wearing a pair of leather and metal sandals that showcased her pedicure to perfection. Draped over her bare shoulders was a special piece of jewelry, a specially-made piece of female chain mail, which accented her golden skin while it crisscrossed over her bosom in metallic drapes. The piece was one of many that she made and sold at the Renn Fest with her brother.

"You can cut the vamp routine," Spark growled as he turned a scowl onto some approaching boob who had set out to catch his sister's attention.

The man took one look at six-feet-seven inches of the suede-clad, angry behemoth, turned a sickly shade of green, executed a quick about face, and walked away with his body still intact.

"I'm only trying to drum up business, big brother," she said with a small laugh as she watched her would-be suitor retreat from the scene. "Anyway, what woman managed to get away from you without even giving you her name? And where did you meet this smart woman?"

Spark screwed up his face into the meanest expression that he could manage, the one that sent rough bikers into quakes of fear and crying for their moms. His sister just stared back. They had reached a stalemate.

Finally, with a sigh, knowing that she would drag it out of him anyway, he flopped back to the counter, crossed his arms and let his head drop into the nice comfortable nest that he had made. He didn't have any sand, but this ostrich knew when to hide his face.

"Oh, I see!" his sister exclaimed with delight. "You made an ass of yourself, didn't you?"

"Go away!" he growled. He opened one eye to peek at the joyous expression on his sister's face. When did she become such a shrew anyway, enjoying another's misfortunes?

"Who was she? Some starlet on a mission? A woman here at the festival? A biker from that ridiculous club that you belong to?"

Ember was a woman on a mission, and she was determined to find out all that she could about the woman who had stymied her brother. Such a woman was worth knowing when so many airheads threw themselves at Spark's feet. He needed a challenge and any woman who managed to fluster his legendary cool was all right by her. "A model?"

Spark's whole body flinched as the word "model" crossed his sister's lips.

"A model!" she exclaimed, her voice rising with dismay. "You're all worked up over a bubble-headed model? I thought that you were done with the industry, Spark. And Aunt Caressa!"

"And who says that I'm not?" he demanded in a nasty tone of voice.

No one could ferret out his secrets like his sister, and he did not wish his involvement with Aunt Caressa to be made public knowledge just yet. He had barely assimilated the fact that he was once again a walking clothes hanger.

"Where else would you meet a model? For goodness sakes, Spark, this is Maryland, not New York! Models don't come traipsing through town every day hunting down biker dudes! I thought that you said that you had outgrown that life?"

Spark sighed loudly and again dropped his head with a clunk.

Ember walked over to the counter and began to rub her brother's shoulders. There were a few people who could convince Spark to go back into the modeling business, something that he said he would never do again, and he had a meeting with one of these people today. "It's Aunt Caressa again, isn't it?"

Angrily, Spark shook her hands from his shoulders and glared at her as she hopped up on the counter and gave him the "I told you so" eye.

"So what if I am?" he asked. "The last time I checked, this was a free country and I was a grown man."

"Who acts like a little boy at times," she shot back. "What hair-brained stunt has Caressa got you doing this time? Is it another garbage bag clothes thing? If it is, so help me, Spark, I'm gonna tell Mom! It took us weeks to stop all of those bimbos from trying to get into the house, not to mention all of the used underwear we got in the mail! She had to threaten some sex magazine to get them to stop calling and asking you to be a male centerfold! Mom is gonna have your hide, mister, and Dad will let her tan it!"

"It's not like the last time, Em!" Spark cried with no little disgust. "This time I had to do it! Uncle Richard was going to close down her company if she didn't have a certain cash return soon. It just so happens that *Brazen Books* want a spokes model and unfortunately, I fit the bill."

Ember's eyes flew open at his words. "Uncle Richard would do that to her? But she is such a success at what she does! And it keeps her away from the house, our house, all the time. And Gloria! Gloria can't exist in the real world! She's too bitchy! Someone might kill her!"

"I know, I know," Spark returned with a loud sigh. "I even tried to get out of it, before I knew the whole story. But once I had heard everything and she started crying those crocodile tears, Em, I caved like a house of cards in the wind."

"The nipple ring?" Ember asked with obvious amusement. "Even with the nipple ring they want you?"

"Yeah," Spark nodded, still contemplating what went wrong with his foolproof plan. "With the ring and the tattoo. Of course, I thought Aunt Caressa would swallow her tongue, that was the highlight of the meeting, but the owner of the company, Ame Heart, loved the look."

"Oh! You met Ame Heart? Isn't she one of your idols, Spark?" Ember crooned.

There was nothing like having one over on her big brother, and she planned on rubbing his face into this whole fiasco.

Spark had been hoarding Ame Heart novels for years! He loved the leather, and the love scenes weren't hard for him to digest either! But most of all, he loved the romance of the whole thing.

"So I like to read her books," he said, a blush spreading slowly up his face and staining his cheeks a nice shade of scarlet. "It's not a crime, you know."

"And all of that leather!" Ember crowed, sliding off of the counter and moving to stoke the small forge that they both used to create their masterpieces.

"But that doesn't explain about the smart woman who managed to get away from you without giving you

her name,” she shot over her shoulder.

“Let the forge do the work, Em,” Spark commanded as he guessed what his sister was about. Looking around, he saw that no one was paying them any attention, but still he cautioned his show-off of a sister. His personal woes were no match for the woes that they would face if news of their abilities leaked out. “It’s still dangerous for us to use our energies in public.”

“I know what I am doing, you worrywart!” she retorted. “And just because you’re one minute older than me, Spark, don’t presume to tell me what to do!”

Spark felt a familiar presence and looked over his shoulder just in time to see their father making his way towards the booth.

“Uh, Em?” Spark tried to warn her. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“But you’re not me, big brother. I am a woman and fully capable of making my own decisions and taking responsibility for my actions.” She bent down to check the flame burning in the forge.

“But Ember...” he tried to explain as their father entered the stall to stand behind him and observe their interchange with curiosity.

“Why don’t you concentrate on the one who got away and leave all of the important stuff to me? I know what I am doing!”

With one last defiant look, she turned her attention to the forge and the low fire that slowly burned inside it.

Drawing in a deep breath, Ember opened her eyes and focused a steely gaze onto the fire burning in the forge. Red pulses of light began to shimmer in her eyes and her hair began to wave slightly in the breeze. There was a slight popping sound and then the fire in the forge began to heat until the flames turned almost white in their intensity.

“How’s that for control?”

With a cocky grin, she turned to brag to Spark, but instead met the calm gaze of her father.

“Uh, hi...Dad,” she stuttered as those piercing gray eyes latched onto hers.

“You risk a lot with your games, my Ember.”

With the calm of a man of the Brotherhood, and the control of a true Keeper, Flame commanded respect and awe with his very presence. He was wearing his usual color black, this time tight leather pants that showed off his physique to good advantage and a vest remarkably like the one Spark was wearing but without the tassels. Flame stood before his wayward daughter, one red eyebrow raised in question. His waist-length auburn hair flowed freely around his tall, muscular frame as he stood and waited, arms akimbo, for a suitable explanation from Ember.

“I was just...I mean I was...oh dear.” Ember lost her composure and dropped her eyes to the ground in the face of her father’s direct gaze.

Darn it! How can the man make her feel like a bad little girl with just that look! Her dad had never raised

his voice to them. He didn't have to. That look in his eyes was enough to quell any youthful rebellion out of them, and still worked to this day.

"Well..." she tried again. "You see..."

"It's my fault, Dad," Spark said, moving to stand beside his sister. "I goaded her into it."

"The things I put myself through for you," he muttered to his sister as he stood bravely in front of their father. Spark always tried to protect his sister, even from their father's rightful disappointment.

Ember looked up to her big brother with gratitude, but she couldn't let him take the heat for her. She was a princess, after all, and a princess needed to learn to stand up for the truth, no matter how it hurt. And boy, was this going to be painful!

"No he didn't, Daddy," she sighed. "I was just showing off again."

She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes, a move almost always guaranteed to garner a little sympathy from her daddy, but this time, no dice.

If anything, his gaze became harder and she knew she would not be able to cute her way out of this one, damn it!

"Oh lighten up, Lover," a new voice interjected.

"Mother," the twins exclaimed with obvious delight. It was a new game now! Mom would leash in their irate father, and do it with style.

They both relaxed and began to look forward to the show, until Spark caught a gander at what his mother was wearing. A frown replaced his look of happiness.

Kendall MacIntyre strode onto the scene, bells tinkling, with a casualness only she could achieve. She was wearing an outfit that was like no other one, but then again, that was Kendall. Her ebony skin was highlighted by what she was wearing.

She wore a solid metal breastplate, worked with intricate scrollwork that barely covered her full breasts and was cut high enough to expose her bare midriff. Its shoulder straps were made with tiny metal links that climbed over her bare shoulders and crisscrossed over her graceful back.

Instead of tight leather pants, she wore some loose and blousy pantaloons, tied to fasten tightly around her hips where an intricate golden girdle emphasized the span of her hips while exposing her small waist. The pants, harem pants by design, split on each side from ankle to upper thigh, were tightly gathered around her ankles, where several chains and bells combined to announce her presence to the world.

On her feet was a pair of metal and leather sandals, just like her daughter's. Around her upper thigh and exposed by the slit was a tight band of metal, one that matched the band around her right bicep. Her hair was pulled back into a neat bun at the base of her head that exposed her delicate neck while giving her a no-nonsense look. Kendall was still a beautiful woman, and was the only woman who could handle Flame.

She placed a calming hand onto the arm of her life mate and smiled brightly at her children.

“My Heart,” Flame acknowledged as he stepped back and drew her to his side. With a look of sheer devotion on his face, Flame gently clasped her right hand in his and raised it to his mouth to gently kiss her palm.

In reaction, Kendall’s eyes sought out those of her husband, filled with a love that could not be hidden, and bestowed upon him a wondrously beautiful smile.

“I can’t believe that Dad let you out of the house in that get-up!” her only son exclaimed, cutting into their private moment. He frowned, eyeing the barely-there outfit that showcased his mother’s charms to the free world. “Where is the rest of it?”

“Watch it, Bubba!” Kendall replied in her best “controlling the rowdy patient” voice, as her eyes cut to her errant son. “I’m trying to save your bacon, my man, and don’t you forget it!”

Spark had the grace to flush with embarrassment.

“So what did the terrible twosome do now?” she asked Flame, while gently withdrawing her hand. Her eyes were glued to Spark, who suddenly found the ground more interesting than his mother’s attire, and Ember, who caught a sudden interest in fly watching. She could see that Ember was carefully examining the little pest that was buzzing around the stall now with the attention that scientists devoted to scrutinizing new life forms under a microscope.

“It seems that our little Ember needs another lesson in control, My Heart. And Spark needs a lesson in knowing when not to take up arms for a lost cause.”

Both of the twins groaned upon hearing this.

“And I shall expect them to put in an appearance this weekend for that lesson,” he said, his eyes once again firmly fixed on his two children. His tone said that he meant what he said, that his children would drop everything and report home, or there would be hell to pay. And no one could dish out hell quite like Flame. He was a master of it.

After a lecture in protecting their very lives, he would engage them in hour-long torture sessions to practice their control of the energies that flowed through their bodies. After that, it would be lessons in sound strategy, where they would endeavor to explain what they did wrong, how they could have avoided doing wrong, and of course, the favorite, how they could have avoided being caught practicing that wrong.

“But it was only a little fire!” Ember exclaimed, then shut up as her father’s eyes were once again drawn to her.

“And if someone noticed that a fire that should have taken hours to heat to the proper temperature for metalwork suddenly arrived at that proper temperature?” Flame quietly asked, once again arching that auburn eyebrow with his question.

“Oh, brother!” Kendall exclaimed as she rolled her eyes to the heavens. “We don’t have time for this now, Lover. We have to go and set up the equipment that we need for this evening’s show. Get your explanations later. It’s not like they won’t come home, not after you so kindly extended your lovely invitation.”

Flame turned his eyes onto his wife, the love of his life and his reason for being. “You protect them still,

My Heart?”

“Of course, My Love. They are a part of me. I will always watch over them.”

This was said with plain truth. Although not born of her body, the twins were a part of her soul. She could not love them more if they were of her blood. They were her children in every sense of the word.

“Then I shall bow to your knowledge and wisdom, My Heart. I will rail at them later,” he added with a twinkle in his gray eyes.

Ember sighed with relief then smiled a wicked, Cheshire cat’s grin. She was having a hard time coming up with a suitable answer to Flame’s question, other than sheer stubbornness, but then her relaxation died a quick death at her father’s next words.

“You will accompany us, Ember. We may need an extra hand in setting up the sequences and with the voiceover.”

Her smile died a sudden death.

“But, Dad!” she began, but a raised eyebrow silenced any objections that she might have voiced.

“Off you go, brat!” Spark chortled as a subdued Ember followed her parents out of the stall and down the long lane filled with the many different artisans’ stalls.

“Now, where was I?” he questioned out loud as he turned to view the stall owned by him and his sister.

On one side, a large wall was set up to display the delicate chain work done by his sister. The elegant and fragile-looking chains held mass appeal at the festival, almost as much appeal as his handcrafted swords and dirks. A few mannequins stood wearing some of Ember’s creations while a glass display case held delicate-looking earrings, bracelets, and necklaces. On the floor lay a beautiful oriental carpet, purchased and added by Ember in an attempt to add a little class to their operation. He had to admit the vibrant red and gold designs added appeal to the booth and helped to showcase their wares.

On the other side of the booth, Flame’s side, stood a display case. And locked within its depth lay the original and masterful swords and daggers that Flame had felt compelled to design and create. The gleaming polished blades of bronze and steel caught the sun and seemed to glow with a life of their own. In the cabinets under the counter where most of their transactions were completed lay other, more mysterious implements of war, the shakrum, the mace, and one of his favorites, the bola.

“I’m late enough as it is,” he decided out loud. “It’s time for me to set up.”

“Is this a private conversation, or can just anyone join in?” a low, husky voice spoke from behind,

Spark quickly turned to see who had spoken, and was knocked for a loop when he saw the woman of his dreams standing there.

And boy, was she there! All there! She was wearing a large, filmy poet’s blouse and tight green suede pants. The butter-soft looking suede matched the green of her eyes. On her feet was a pair of tight, black thigh-high boots with little golden spurs. Cinching in her tiny waist was a belt of twisted gold. Her waist-length hair shimmered in the sun and once again framed a face that was golden-brown perfection to his greedy eyes. Those luscious full lips were painted a deep, dark red, and he could easily see himself

nibbling and tasting her there. Those same lips widened into a smile as she took in him taking her in.

“I...I...you came!” he managed to stutter as he felt a blushing heat spread up his neck. Again he sounded like an untried schoolboy but then, look at the woman! She was a goddess, sheer perfection on two legs, and she had come!

“Of course I did. How could I resist such a charming invitation?” she asked as she walked, *noglider*, in his direction.

Spark felt his mouth go dry at the sight of her gently swaying hips and gorgeous legs moving closer to him. “Think, fool!” he silently chastised himself as temptation took a step closer. Her name, what was her name?

“Uh...I’m glad that you made it...what do I call you?” he suddenly blurted, then felt the blush reach extreme redness at his crude question. What do I call you, indeed! He mentally kicked himself again playing the bumbling idiot. He groaned, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose with his right forefinger and thumb, wishing that his hands were large enough to hide his whole head inside.

Incredibly, he heard soft laughter. He looked up to see her face break into a full wide smile. He had never seen such perfect teeth.

“My name is Zanya Burke, Spark,” she laughingly said. “But please call me Zanya; after all, we will be spending a lot of time together.”

She walked over to the counter, spurs jingling, and leaned both arms on its smooth wooden surface.

“We will?” he asked stupidly, face devoid of any expression.

His facial muscles refused to move. They didn’t have the energy to. All of his energy was focusing in on her words. Spending a lot of time together, nude perhaps? Preferably in his house, in his large custom-made waterbed, covered in baby oil. He could picture her now, lying back on the gently undulating mattress, while he rubbed and massaged the fragrant oil into every exposed inch of her. He could see her head thrown back in ecstasy as he lifted his large frame above her. “For you, I hunger!” her low voice moaned, sending frissons of passion throughout his tightly drawn body.

“Uh, Spark? Are you okay?” her voice asked, popping his illusion of lust. He blinked to clear his eyes then realized that she was speaking to him.

“Yes, yes of course,” he quickly added, trying to give the impression that he was concentrating on her words. He would have to censor his thoughts around this dangerous woman. Already, she probably thought that he was a bumbling little boy in a big man’s body. No need to add idiot to the list as well. “Please continue.”

“Well, as I was saying, I’m your photographer, so I think we need to spend some time getting to know each other.”

Over a cool champagne rub down, he was thinking when her words penetrated the sexual fog that his brain had sunk into.

“Photographer? You’re from *Brazen Heart*.” His hearing must be impaired. That might account for his dizziness around her.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, baby. You and I are gonna make beautiful pictures together.”

Shock! He was in shock! The woman of his dreams was gonna tie him up and dress him in leather. And then take pictures of it! *Mercy!*

Stock still, he watched as Zanya wandered around the counter to look at Ember’s wall of jewelry.

“Some of this stuff really gives me ideas, Spark. And you don’t have to worry. I’ll take good care of you.” With a wink, she turned to examine a display of metal cup-like devices with curious chains hanging from them.

Again her words halted any protests that he might have made. She would take care of him? How?

“And your shyness is no problem. I’ll bet that I can make you forget all about it once you’re in front of the camera.”

Camera? Flashing lights? Lots of flashing lights! Blue lights! Strobe lights! Shy? Shy!

“Now wait just a minute!” he began. He was already a buffoon in her eyes; he refused to be a shy buffoon!

“What is this?” she asked holding one up for his inspection.

Again he was speechless! She was caressing and rubbing the thing with those long beautiful fingers, and for the life of him, he could only picture her hands rubbing and stroking something else.

“It’s a codpiece,” he barely was able to force out of his throat. “About that shyness...?”

“A what?” she interrupted, hefting the thin metal to eye level to examine it closer.

“A codpiece. It is...well look at it as...it’s a medieval jockey strap.” Will the floor just open up and swallow him now?

She raised startled eyes to him before comprehension dawned. “Oh, I get it! I think that this would make the perfect wardrobe for you! I bet this photographs well!”

“What?” he almost shrieked. “You want me to wear that? And what else?”

“Nothing else. I think that this is enough, don’t you?” She eyed his body again, slowly, like she did in the elevator, and he felt his blood pressure rise as his blood began to drop to his lower extremities.

“Well...”

“Oh don’t be shy, Spark! This will be fun! You have worn one before, right?” she asked,

“Of course, but...”

“Then let’s try one on now,” she cut him off. “Just to get the feel of it.”

Before he could make his confused brain respond, she dropped to her knees in front of him.

“Now how do we get it on?” She cocked her head to the side and began to examine his waist as if the mysteries of the world were hidden there.

The sight of her kneeling before him turned what was left of his brain to mush. He could barely speak; could only stare down at the top of her bent head and try to keep his tenacious hold on reality.

“I think that the two side straps go around your waist, and the other goes between your legs, right?”

He open up his mouth to protest, to complain, to say anything, when he felt her slim hands between his thighs, but only a yelp emerged.

“It’s okay, Spark. I have to dress and position male models all of the time. You’ll get used to it. Now this fastens...” her voice trailed off as she went about dressing her shy new model.

“I think that it’s too big.” she said suddenly causing him to choke on his own spit. “It just won’t fit.”

Zanya was fighting with a stubborn clasp, but was determined to get the thing on him. She really wanted to see what it looked like on his body, and what a body it was! She would enjoy this assignment and use any extra time to get to know her model.

Coughing, Spark raised his head to gulp a breath of much-needed air, then groaned when he saw a familiar figure walking towards him.

“Uh...Zanya?”

“Just a minute, babe,” she said. “I’m going to do this right.”

She swore as the sticky clasp refused to open and connect with the waist chain.

“Zanya?” he tried again as a second, then a third figure joined the first and approached the stall.

“Come on!” she gritted out, more to herself than anybody else. “Almost there!”

Spark closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands as he watched his parents and sister stop at the counter. How would he ever explain this one? Mom, Dad, Ember, it’s not what it looks like? There may be a woman on her knees behind the counter moaning and groaning, but nothing is happening?

“Zanya?” he tried again.

“It’ll all be over in a minute, Spark, and then you can relax. You’ll get what you want, and I’ll get what I want. Now hold still and don’t squirm.”

His eyes flew to his father, who merely raised both eyebrows into the air. His mother had a, well, a shocked expression on her face, as if she never pictured her son doing these things. Ember was biting on her knuckle to hold in the laughter and sardonic comments that he knew were coming. No way out of this one! His goose was cooked for sure.

Deciding that swift and decisive action was needed, he reached down and grasped Zanya by the shoulders.

“Oh, Spark!” she wailed in frustration. “I was nearly there!”

“Zanya, I would like you to meet my parents!” he cried, lifting her to her feet so she could see her audience.

“Oh dear,” she managed, at a loss for words until her professionalism came to her aid. Straightening her clothing, she eyed the trio of people standing nearby, watching them in varying degrees of shock and dismay. “Uh...hello?”

Chapter Four

“Dad, it’s not what it looks like!” Spark began, but was cut off by his sister

“Is it what it sounded like?”

As he glared at Ember, Zanya decided it was time to take action. They were all adults here! Besides, the mother was giving her a very peculiar look.

“He’s right. It’s not what it looks like. I’m his pho...umph.”

Zanya turned to glare at Spark who had just very ungallantly stepped on her foot. She turned her gaze forward to try and explain to his parents again.

“I’m his....”

“Friend!” Spark cut in, giving her a warning look.

Was this shy man afraid to tell his parents that he was going to be a model? No, he was probably too shy to tell them that he was going to be a cover model for a series of books that contained bondage. Suddenly she smiled. That had to be it!

“I am his friend. We met earlier today and he invited me here to see the pyrotechnics. Just now he was showing me an authentic codpiece. It wouldn’t fit, though. The codpiece, I mean. It was too big to fit in the mouth of the...I couldn’t get the clasp to work.”

Spark groaned and covered his face with his hands again.

“You’re the model?” Ember questioned, easily stepping into the breach and earning her brother’s eternal gratitude.

“Heavens no! I don’t photograph well. I’m a photographer.”

“Oh, I know where I have heard your name before!” Ember exclaimed, as she turned to her parents. “She is one of the best photographers in the business! She made Daniel Day Lewis look sexy!” Then to Zanya, “It’s an honor to meet a photographer of your caliber!”

“Thank you.” The woman had to be his sister. The two looked too much alike to be anything else.

“It is indeed an honor to meet you.” That low, accented voice sounded exactly like Spark’s, like liquid pleasure. She turned to the man who simply had to be his father and her eyes widened with amazement! This was where Spark had inherited his good looks and his unusual hair.

“Flame MacIntyre,” he added as he extended his hand.

“You must be Spark’s father!” she exclaimed, as her eyes flashed back between the two men. She gave his hand a firm and vigorous shake. “You are so much alike!”

Flame smiled at the young woman. “It is a pleasure to meet such a lovely and talented young lady. May I present to you my wife, Kendall.”

Kendall stepped forward to take the offered hand with a smile on her face. “It is indeed a pleasure to meet you! Have you been to a renaissance festival before?”

“No, never. I hope I dressed appropriately. Although I must say, that is a stunning outfit you are wearing. Where did you get it? It looks lovely on you.”

“Thank you, dear. My husband made it for me.”

“Do you mind if I get a picture of you all together?” she asked as she reached into a large black bag and pulled out a camera with a huge lens. “You all look so good together, like a family should.”

“I don’t know,” Spark began, but then his father surprised them all by agreeing to the picture.

“As long as I may have a copy when they are all developed.”

“It’s a promise!” Zanya quickly agreed. You could see the love and respect that was shown by this family, and it was sheer pleasure for her to attempt to capture it on film.

“But we have to do it later!” Spark exclaimed. Again turning an interesting shade of red as his father raised that one eyebrow in question.

“I promised that I would take Zanya for a ride. She has never been on a bike before.”

“But I...”

“We’ll be back soon!” He grabbed Zanya by the hand and pulled her from behind the counter. “Em, you hold down the fort until I get back!”

"But what about the light show?" Ember called out as her brother pulled Zanya, still clutching her camera, around his parents and towards the dirt path that led to the employees' exit. Zanya pulled back a moment and placed her camera on the table. But then Spark was racing off again, taking her along for the ride.

"We'll be back way before that starts! I know my job. Em, please keep an eye on Zanya's stuff. Bye, Dad, Mom, see you both soon!" This last was shouted over his shoulder and he nearly bounded down the path with Zanya in tow, and disappeared around a corner stall.

"I think that boy's in love!" Kendall said with a small smile as she looked up at her husband. "Why else would he act so crazy?"

"I do not know, My Heart. Maybe she confuses him. I know that feeling well." He smiled down into her *tarcas* brown eyes and felt a rush of desire for his precious Mistress. He still desired only her after all of these years. Kendall smiled up at her husband, understanding shining in her eyes.

"I hope he knows what he's doing," Ember added with a concerned look. There is more than meets the eye with this woman. Ember would have to keep a close watch on Zanya.

* * * * *

"Why the sudden escape act, Spark?" Zanya asked as they entered a private parking area. "I know that you are shy, but running away like that was ridiculous!"

"I'm sorry...let me explain," he stammered. "My family doesn't know that I'm going to help my aunt with this modeling gig. I don't want them to know about it."

"Why?" she asked, her curious cat-eyes staring straight into his soul.

"Because...well, it's a long story. But let's just say that my Aunt doesn't always have my best interest at heart."

"Speaking of which, Spark, I have left tomorrow open for your first *Brazen Heart* photo shoot."

"Tomorrow?" he nearly wailed and Zanya smiled at his little boy actions so at odds with his grown man's body. "Why so soon?"

"We have to get moving as soon as we can, Spark. Time waits for no one and you, my friend, have about twenty book covers to shoot!"

"Twenty?" he gasped, gray eyes almost bulging at the thought.

"And that doesn't include the billboards and photos for the press release."

"What have I done?" he sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He never knew that this gig would generate this much publicity. He would have to tell his parents soon, probably this weekend.

"You offered me a ride on your bike. That is what you told your parents, isn't it?" she asked, as she

placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. "The shoots won't be that bad and you will have one hell of a story to tell your children. Don't sweat the small stuff, Spark. Life will give you enough reasons to be down. Now, where is this monster machine?"

She turned away from him to eye a neat row of motorcycles parked in the grassy lot. "Which one is yours?"

"None of them." Pull yourself together, man, he thought to himself, one thing at a time. And this tiny thing was eyeing the line of bikes with something akin to eagerness. Would she look that eager lying on her back on a large fur throw, watching him undress? Would she lick those full luscious lips as he slowly eased his shirt off and let his hands drift down to....

"So which one is it, Spark? Are you okay? You have a really funny look on your face."

Her words snapped him out of his newest fantasy. She was standing close to him, waving one hand in front of his eyes, a concerned look on her face.

"Hello? Spark? Anyone home?"

"Sorry!" he forced out of his suddenly dry throat. "I was thinking about something. My bike is over here."

Placing one hand at the small of her back, he nearly groaned at the feel of her heat through the poet's blouse that she wore. "This way." His voice almost sounded strangled.

Mental note: Check for any drug or alcohol abuse, but quickly changed that to mental problems as she felt his trembling hand on her back. Then she changed her thoughts again. Terminal shyness! I wonder if he has ever been really touched by a woman.

But all thought of his possible problems was lost as soon as she saw the silver and blue monster crouched waiting in the far corner of the lot.

"That's yours?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Yup. All mine, and built to my specifications." He motioned her closer to the wonder of computer technology and horsepower, and caressed the big black leather saddle. A look of pride and accomplishment knocked away the nervousness in his voice and Zanya felt inspiration strike, but she had to see how he handled the big machine first.

"Can you handle this big monster?" she asked, eyeing how sensuous he looked with his red hair coming undone from his queue, his eyes focused totally on his bike while his large hands gently caressed the leather seat.

With a small grin, he opened a rear compartment and pulled out two very different helmets, one large electric blue one that perfectly matched the paint on the bike, and a smaller black one. He handed her the black helmet and watched as she examined the offering.

"Take a lot of women out on this thing?" she asked, lifting up one raven dark eyebrow. She didn't know why, but the thought of hanging onto his back while essentially riding a very large vibrator, did wicked things to her stomach, and other parts of her anatomy.

"Nope. That helmet belongs to my mother. Every now and again she gets the urge to take a walk on the wild side, so I take her for a spin. Dad can ride and is licensed, as is Ember, but he rarely does."

Feeling greatly relieved, she happily plopped the helmet on her head and lifted up the dark visor. "Your father borrows your bike?"

"Nope." He placed his helmet on his head and adjusted it so that it rested comfortably on his head before lifting the mask-like visor. "He has his own, but mine is one of a kind."

"Looks like a regular bike to me." She eyed the metal behemoth in front of her. "A trifle large and tricked out, but it just looks a bike to me."

With a grin, he tossed one leg over the seat and motioned her to hop on the back.

"Have you ever been on a bike before?"

"Yes I have. I used to own one of these things until my brother snatched it away. He didn't think that they were too safe, but he sure had fun trying it out," she giggled. "So I know where to put my feet to keep me from being burned on the exhaust pipe."

Grinning wildly, she threw her leg over the seat and settled herself in behind him.

At the first contact of her body, Spark began to feel parts of his anatomy stiffen and swell, something that was not very conducive for a comfortable ride. He was forced to adjust his position or risk serious damage to parts of his body that he valued greatly. With shaking hands, he lowered his visor and took a few deep, cleansing breaths. He figured that if it worked for pregnant women in labor, it should work with aroused men who had no hope of immediate relief.

"How do you start it?" her voice intruded in on his controlled breathing techniques, and made him lose his place. Now was he at two deep breaths and one shallow, or was it the other way around? "I don't see the ignition."

"Voice activated," he mumbled.

"What?" she asked, leaning in closer so that he felt her soft, full, round breasts flatten against the suede of his vest. He barely controlled a shudder of delight and brought his mind back to the situation at hand.

"Lower your visor!" he called out, motioning with one hand. Immediately she got the hint and lowered her tinted facemask.

"Can you hear me now?" he asked and noted her surprised gasp.

"There is a microphone in here, right?"

"Right. Activated when there is a heat reading within and the face visor is lowered."

"Neat!" She sounded surprised and pleased.

"And the bike is voice activated. It only responds to my voice saying the correct phrase."

"Built in security!" she breathed out in awe. "You are a genius, Spark!"

"Thank you. It seemed the safest thing to do at the time. Are you ready?" He loved the sound of her voice coming clearly through the mike, and decided that he had better do something before he embarrassed himself in front of her yet again.

"Yes!" Her voice rang with excitement and delight at the promised freedom of the ride.

"Then here we go! *Flare up* !"

At his words the bike roared to life, and before she could blink they were flying down the grassy path that led to a paved road.

"Oh, wow!" she giggled as they quickly took a turn that led to an abandoned country road. The world rushed by in a swirl of color as they raced past horses, cows, and trees.

"Faster!" she urged and, bowing to her need for speed, Spark popped the clutch and shifted up. "This is better than sex!" she cried out, as farmhouses looked like passing flashes of red and the cop car sitting in the field looked like a flash of blue and white.

Cop car?

The wail of the siren caused them both to groan in dismay, and Spark slowly rolled to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

"I'm so sorry, Spark!" Zanya cried as they heard the approaching crunch of booted feet on gravel.

"Stay on the vehicle, ma'am," an officer said in a low, cold tone as he approached the two cowed people on the bike.

Shades of Cool Hand Luke, anyone? This was the absurd thought that flashed through Spark's head as he watched the portly police officer pull off a pair of mirrored sun shades and clamp his teeth down on an all-but-chewed-up tooth pick.

"Remove your helmet, sir," he ordered and slowly, Spark complied.

"Turn off the motorcycle," was his next command.

Spark said quite clearly. "Hush up!"

"What?" the officer demanded, looking angry at the disrespect shown by what had to be a red-haired hippie on crack.

As the bike revved down into silence, the cop appeared amazed by the magnificence of the machine.

"I didn't mean you, sir. You see, Officer, my mother never liked the term *shut up* , so I had to improvise with the voice commands." He looked sheepishly up at the officer, who continued to look amazed by his bike.

"Voice command? This thing operates by voice command?"

"Yes, sir," Spark supplied, the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach easing a bit.

"Well, son, where did you buy it?" His voice lost most of its cold command and he sounded almost friendly.

"I built it myself." Spark smiled cheerfully up at the officer as if he was a favored friend at a picnic.

"Got a card?" he asked and a grinning Spark reached into a side pocket on the saddle and pulled out a thin black card.

"I can be reached at this number almost anytime during the day after the Renn Fest is over. We're doing a laser light show there this evening and I was taking my friend out for a ride beforehand."

Zanya lifted her visor and grinned up at the cop. "Hello, Officer."

"Ma'am." He nodded at her before turning his attention once again to Spark.

"Well, son, you need to cool it a bit with the speed. I'll let you folks off with a warning this time, but don't let me catch you speeding again."

"Yes, sir!" Spark said, relief heavy in his voice as the officer turned and pocketed the card.

"I will be in touch, son. I always wanted a bike and now seems as good a time as any to start making my dreams come true."

Within moments the officer was pulling away in his cruiser and they were once again on the road, heading back to the festival grounds.

"You were lucky, Spark, my man!" Zanya crowed as they raced back. "I almost got you a ticket."

"I was the one at the controls, Zanya. I make my own choices. *Zeb nacht ou tupatis.*"

"That was beautiful, Spark! Is it Gaelic, Russian, or Italian and what does it mean? What other languages do you speak?"

"None of them," he said a smile. Maybe she was interested in him, despite his buffoon act that had been continuing throughout the day. "And it means, 'To each, his own path.'"

"That's simple, eloquent, straight to the point and so true!" she laughed. "Is it a motto of some kind?"

"Something like that." He downshifted as he approached the employees' parking lot and eased the bike up onto the grass. "It's from the Brotherhood and it is a rule that the men in my family choose to live by."

"The Brotherhood?" She had never heard of an organization called the Brotherhood. Maybe it was from Ireland. "It sounds so mysterious and alien."

"Zanya," he sighed, as he brought the bike into its berth. "You have no idea how right you are. And I speak nine different languages. My mother insisted that we all have a well-rounded education."

With simple yet graceful movements, he lowered the stand and said the shutdown code. Instantly the big bike rumbled to a halt, and silence filled the parking area.

Spark lifted his helmet from his head and shook the matted strands of red hair loose.

Zanya lifted her visor and caught her breath as the falling sun caught and highlighted the platinum streaks in his hair. His corded neck was exposed when he tossed his head back as if tossing off the weight of responsibility. He looked male and primal, and Zanya wished that she had brought her camera along with her.

"I have to get a shot of you in the rays of the sinking sun, Spark."

She eased her borrowed helmet off of her head and handed it to him as he turned in her direction. Her own hair was a bit flattened, but a few quick swipes of her fingers set it to order.

"Uh, about my family...."

"What we do in the studio is between you and me, Spark. You can take your time and tell them anything you want. I understand this isn't something to spring on your family, especially as conservative as they seem. But I want to get started right away, tomorrow at my studio, Spark. And we'll work around this shyness of yours, too."

That settled in her mind, she hopped off of the bike and waited for her model to join her.

"I'm not shy!" he insisted. Did that sound like a whine? "Really, I'm not! It's just that around you, I...what I mean is that you make me...I'm not handling this well at all," he sighed.

"Forget about it, Spark. We have plenty of time to discuss your shyness...uh, reluctance to act around strangers," she revised when he gave her a dark look. "In the meantime, I believe you said there were going to be fireworks?"

"Yes, of course."

He quickly dismounted his bike and stowed the helmets in their proper place. Looking up at the sky, he decided that they had plenty of time before the fireworks display. He turned to his walking fantasy.

"I have to get back to the booth. Will you come with me?"

As she continued to stare at him, he felt the hated blush climb up his neck. It wasn't like he had never asked a woman out before. So why did this one make him feel so self-conscious?

"I have to go back with you, Spark. You have all of my cameras. Then I want to walk around this place some more. It's absolutely breathtaking."

Still feeling like a schoolboy, Spark reached out and offered her his arm.

"Milady?" he asked, bowing to her with courtly manner.

"Why, thank you, kind sir," she replied as she rested her arm atop his.

Spark again took in a deep breath at the contact, but this time he inhaled the sweet aroma of her perfume.

"I have to tell you something, Zanya." He sighed as he caught her staring at him with a funny expression

on her lovely face. But then again, how many men stood in a parking lot sniffing after a woman like a dog going after a bitch in heat?

"What, Spark?" Her cat-green eyes looked up into his, her whole attention focused on him.

"I kind of...well. You see, I...oh, hell!" he finally muttered, his blush burning into his cheeks. "I really think that I like you."

"Well, I like you too, Spark." Confusion lessened as awareness dawned.

"I mean, I really like you. You are the best thing to come my way in a very long time."

"Are you asking me out, Spark?" Her eyes shone with pleasure.

"Yes. Yes, I am. Only it's coming out all wrong." He shook his head at his own sorry state.

"I would be delighted to go out with you, Spark. If you can handle the cliché," she giggled. So she was not far off track. Spark was coming on to her, in his sweet adorable way. Well, that was good, because she liked being around him too. Plus, he made her skin tingle.

"Cliché?" he asked. He felt his heart rate return to normal, whatever normal was around her.

"Photographer dating the model. You know?" She giggled at the surprised look on his face. "And just think, you won't have anything to hide, considering I will be seeing you in almost next to nothing. Talk about not hiding any secrets!" Her rich laughter spread out across the field, making his bones tingle.

"Oh, God!" he muttered, the blush returning, causing her to break out into fresh peals of laughter.

Chapter Five

The low drum of the music caused the crowds to quiet as the low, husky voice filled the arena.

"But the people were afraid, thinking the dragon was evil. They gathered their greatest forces and charged the lair, forcing the gentle creature to flee for his life!"

There, painted in the sky, the multi-colored lasers drew out the scene of the red and gold dragon racing from a wooded cave, the creature looking back over his shoulder at the small yellow soldiers who chased him. Each cannon shot was punctuated with a burst of colorful fire, launched into the dark heavens perfectly on cue.

"This is amazing!" Zanya sighed, turning her head toward Ember, who sat behind the large computer console that ran the whole operation.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Em whispered back as Kendall continued to read from the prepared script.

At the climax of the story, driven by a need to protect the fair princess who aided him, the dragon turned fierce and spat monstrous fireballs at the troops. At the height of the battle, the sky erupted in colorful starbursts and the booming sound drew the entranced audience to their feet, the night filled with their thunderous applause.

Finally at the end of the story, the fierce yet gentle dragon became a man, the perfect mate for the princess. And as the two figures embraced, the finale of the show began. For three minutes, the sky exploded in wondrous shapes and colors and the mortars exploded in time with the swirling climax of the dramatic music.

As the last mortar exploded and the bright flash faded into the night, there was a hushed silence, then the crowd leapt to their feet, clapping and shouting their pleasure.

"How did they do that?" Zanya asked, amazed that they could take such a simple idea and turn it into something this glorious.

"Magic!" Em exclaimed as she grabbed Zanya's hand and pulled her over to the ring of busy people that surrounded her family.

"The timing was a little off, Son," Flame said as he and Spark began the laborious task of breaking down the equipment.

"I noticed that too, on the final stanza." This Spark was all business. There was nothing shy or retiring about him now. He behaved in a professional manner that gave Zanya hope that he would not be too squeamish under the camera.

"So what did you think?" Kendall asked as she helped wind up the numerous wires that ran to the computer console. "Did you like it?"

"It was great! I never thought to use laser to tell a story and then use fireworks to emphasize it. I never even considered doing it like that!"

"We did this one special for the Renn Fest," Spark added as he hefted large pieces of equipment onto a hand truck.

He looked over at Zanya, but for once she was quiet.

"Zan?" he asked as he turned away from the loading and walked towards her. "Are you all right?"

"You are really strong, Spark," she said, her eyes slightly glazed over.

She knew that he had muscles, but she just assumed that he was one of those body builder types, large muscles, but only good for show. They never wanted to injure a muscle lifting something as unworthy as computer equipment.

"It comes with the job, Zan," he replied, still puzzled as to what was bothering her. But he knew what was bothering him! Zanya in the moonlight, naked and walking towards him with that dazed look in her eyes. Zanya saying, Spark I want you, Spark I need you...

"...you two go and check if the men have disconnected the firing table. Spark?"

Spark jumped as he heard his father's voice. He realized that he was standing there starrng at Zanya, lost in a fantasy while his father was giving him orders.

"Huh, Dad?" His brows lowered over his still dilated gray eyes.

"Never mind, Son. Why do you not take Zanya home? It is late and we are finished here."

Flame noticed the look in his son's eyes and stifled a chuckle. He understood what was pulling his concentration away from his work and sympathized.

"Great idea," he said with gratitude in his eyes as he gave one last glance at Kendall and Flame then turned towards his Lady Fair.

"May I see you home?" His eyes drank in her beauty eagerly.

"Yes, please do. But only as far as my car. I drove here today."

Her heart began to beat faster, just as it had in the elevator this morning. She was forever glad she'd taken the risk to come here and see Spark.

Silently he took her hand and guided her through the throng of people exiting the festival. Spark nodded to several people who called out greetings, but continued on to the front gate.

"Zanya," he began but the boom of a nearby cannon drowned out his words.

"Time to exit the festival!" a crier called out, bearing a large torch and leading a parade of people in period clothing to the front exit.

"What were you saying?" she yelled, stepping closer to him, to his heat, as she struggled to hear what he was saying over the commotion taking place.

"I just wanted to say that I...that I feel...oh, hell!"

He reached out and pulled her to his chest. Before she could protest, he lowered his lips to hers and tasted a bit of ambrosia.

"Spark," she mumbled against his lips, but he took the opportunity to invade her mouth with his tongue, and she melted.

Spark tasted like cotton candy. His lips were soft and moist, and she couldn't help but press closer to him. His body was giving off such an intense heat that she felt warmed to her toes. In fact, he felt almost scalding hot.

"Damn!"

A frightened cry broke them apart and they turned to see the crier toss his torch to the ground, its tip flaring up like a Roman candle.

"Well...uh, good night, Spark. See you tomorrow." She practically ran through the exit.

"Good night," Spark whispered to her retreating back. Then he reined in his energies that had slipped from his control while he was kissing Zanya. *Kissing Zanya* ! He liked the sound of that.

His pleasure was obvious, because the torch continued to blaze despite the best efforts of the crier to roll it out.

Without missing a beat, Spark walked over to the torch and stomped on it. Instantly the flame went out.

"Too much kerosene," the crier stuttered as he looked up at the big, dangerous-looking man with the cold glint in his smoldering eyes.

"Probably," the man agreed and swore that he felt the air around him drop several degrees.

The man turned and walked away, a chill wind blowing in his wake. But Spark noticed none of it. All his thoughts were on Zanya with the dangerous kisses and the fiery soul.

* * * * *

That night, he lay in his bed, painfully aroused. He was hard enough to crack walnuts with that mindless piece of flesh between his legs, and he cursed himself for this weakness.

He sat up abruptly. "Go away," he muttered, looking down at his swollen penis, formerly, in his opinion, his best feature. "You will not do this to me! We have to go to sleep!"

But as usual, it refused to listen.

"Just because a woman thinks that we are sexy, says that she wants to date us, doesn't mean that she's the one! You've behaved yourself all of these years, a little longer won't kill you!"

But there was no positive response. His flesh remained hard and throbbing and his blood refused to

return to its proper place.

"Just because a woman has smooth flawless skin, bright shinning eyes, full succulent lips the exact shade of red I imagine her nipples to be, moves like cat in heat and is built like a brick shithouse, doesn't mean that we will be indulging in carnal delights!"

Who was he trying to kid? Any and all thoughts of Zanya made his mouth water and his body sing! With a huff, he threw himself back on the bed and stared up at the painted ceiling. Tonight, the stars and constellations didn't calm him as they usually did. Tonight, he was just too on edge!

"Please, just ease up a bit?" he begged his ramrod straight hardness. "Too many nights like this will kill me!"

The cold shower he'd taken earlier hadn't helped, thinking of his crying aunt and what she'd tricked him into didn't do it, picturing a naked Chris Farley didn't do it, and that had always worked before!

He ran a lazy hand down his bare stomach, over the hard planes and muscled valleys that made up his stomach, but stopped when his fingers met the soft thin tangle of hair below. His body stiffened as he thought about taking care of the problem manually. He could be mono-sexual tonight but that held no appeal. The need would still be there and he would mess his bed sheets for nothing.

Groaning loudly he flung his hand over his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Virginity ain't that bad, pal," he assured his male member. "Maybe Zanya is the one to make my soul sing, and maybe she isn't, but that is no excuse for this behavior! Go to sleep!"

But as expected, there was no let-up of the blood flow and his nerves were still jumping. So much for the pep talk!

He reached over and pulled from a stack that lay beside his bed a dog-eared copy of Bound and Determined, one of the first Brazen Heart books to hit the market. But tonight, the antics of Mandor and Veronica did not help ease his mind. His favorite romance offered no solace tonight. Each page he turned to, each chapter that he read, he could picture Zanya's face, tied up and longing for his possession. With a groan, he tossed his book atop a pile of others in the Brazen Heart line, and again attempted to block the images flowing through his mind.

Late into the night, Spark sighed and argued with himself, but always in the back of his mind was the picture of Zanya's amazed face after their first kiss. Never had he drawn that look from a woman. As he struggled to sleep, he hoped that he would get the opportunity to do so once again.

* * * * *

Spark felt like an idiot as he showed up the next day at Zanya's studio. Here it was, early in the morning, when he didn't get a lick of sleep the night before, and he was confused about how to approach the woman of his dreams.

Today he was dressed in early bum, as Eric the Terrible would say. His sweatpants were loose and faded and his T-shirt was sleeveless, due to the fact that he had ripped them out some time ago. Calling his shoes "shoes" would have been kind. The dilapidated deck shoes were the extreme in comfort. Heck,

they barely had any material left on them! His hair was a loose wavy mass that gave him the hippie look, but it was the downtrodden expression on his face that caused a compassionate woman to stop him and offer him a few dollars.

"Just until you get back on your feet," she gushed as she looked at him like he was holding a "Will Have Sex For Money" sign.

"No, thank you," he muttered as he dragged his feet down the sidewalk as if he were making his way to the executioner's chambers.

"But you seem like such a nice young man!" she murmured. "You can always pay me back some other way," she offered, a hungry gleam in her eyes.

"No, thank you," he said again then sighed. "I'm on my way to work."

The woman gave him a disbelieving double take, before pocketing her money and handing him a card. "If you need me, Hon, don't hesitate to call."

He nodded his thanks and pocketed the card. She watched him as he made his way to the studio's front doors and knocked.

"Damn," she thought as she hurried across the street. "I should have known. Beefcake is making a comeback!"

He stood there at the door, waiting for his dream girl to answer her door, to entice him with her big green eyes, to make him trip over his words and blush again. "I have to get myself together!" he thought out loud as he heard footsteps approach.

"Hey Zanya? What do we do...?"

The sight before him choked off any words that would have passed his lips.

Zanya, his Zanya, was dressed in black leather straps! He swallowed his tongue as he eyeballed the firm flesh of her breasts as they strained against the confines of the black leather band. Another small strip of leather, supposedly a skirt, covered her from below her navel to the top of her thighs. The two strips were connected by one tiny gold chain, a chain that matched the leash around her neck.

"What do you think?" she asked as she spread her arms wide and gave him the full effect! On her feet were high leather boots that made her legs seem so long and muscular.

"I...uh, did I...can I...very nice," he finally managed, his eyes and his face taking on the same glowing red hue. "I mean, it's not much, is it? I mean, if that's what turns you on, I mean, pleases you...I mean different. It's very different!"

"Ame sent it over as inspiration," she giggled as she turned and walked away, giving him an unhampered view of her rear. His hand automatically drooped low to cover his sudden and full arousal as he watched the twin globes of firm female flesh sway down the hall.

The leather skirt, if you wanted to be generous and call it that, was cut high across her buttocks, exposing the black leather thong that exposed more than it concealed. A groan built up in his chest, but he managed, barely, to suppress it.

"Well, are you coming?" she called as she looked over her shoulder and motioned him to follow her.

"Not yet, but if you so much as jump, I might!" he muttered to himself before giving her a cheery nod and limping down the hall behind her. "Please let me survive this!" he groaned as he stepped out of the hall and into a world of lights and fantasy.

"Give me a moment to change out of this and we can begin." She called as she climbed a circular stairway to an upper loft shielded by shoji screens. "I thought that we would take some test shots today, just to get you used to the camera and the look that we are going for, then tomorrow we can get into the serious stuff."

"Serious," he muttered as he stepped further into her studio and examined an array of medieval torture devices spread out on a table. Beside a short, velvet quirt laid a gold leather paddle and a set of nipple clamps.

"Are you nervous?" her voice called down to him as she disappeared behind her cloth-covered barriers.

"Getting there!" he called as he picked up something that resembled a leather slingshot with a studded pocket. Was he supposed to fit into that? Well if she thought that he would stoop so low as to...

...stoop on the carpet or the wood floor? Which would she prefer?

Zanya emerged wearing a tiny black sleeveless belly blouse and a bronze sarong. In her navel glinted a tiny opal that winked at him with each step that she took. Her long hair was tied back in a bun at the base of her neck and held there with two lacquer chopsticks. She was barefoot but on the middle toe of her right foot sat a tiny golden ring.

Spark swallowed deeply at the thought of taking that tiny little digit into his mouth and....

"So are we ready to begin?" she asked as she sauntered over to a table and picked up one of the cameras.

"How...?" He paused and tried again. His dry throat was making it difficult for him to speak without sounding like he was eating chalk! Or was it blood loss, seeing that all the blood in his body had suddenly rushed down below? "How do we do this?"

"Well," she purred. "We start by stripping you out of some of those clothes."

She walked over to him and plucked at the material of his shirt.

"What did you do, Spark? Rummage at the bottom of a garbage can for that outfit?"

He blushed a little at her words and sought to explain.

"These are just comfortable and familiar, Zan. Besides, I thought that the whole purpose of bringing me here was to strip me down in the first place."

"How right you are," she replied, chuckling a little to herself. Her shy Sparkles had a security blanket. That was fine by her.

"Well, I have decided that for these practice shots, we would get you bare-chested." And heaving! Now where did that come from? "I, uh, want to see how you show up on film?" she finished lamely, hoping that he couldn't read her thoughts.

"Fine by me," he muttered, a blush still highlighting his cheeks. She wanted bare-chested, she was going to get bare-chested!

As Spark raised his hands to divest himself of the shirt, Zanya felt the overwhelming need to bite on her knuckles, or to bay like a wolf in heat! What a body this man had! His skin was smooth and golden, but what would you expect when his father had the same complexion. They must be about as much of a mutt ethnically as she was! But all of that smooth gold skin was just the beginning! There was no hair on his mountains of hard muscles! The thin, soft trail of red-gold hair started below his navel, a cute indentation that was exposed as his pants dipped dangerously low on his hips. His nipples were....

Holy shit!

Zanya stared at the tiny ring that pierced his right nipple. She had never seen a man with one done and always thought that she would find it repugnant. But the tiny gold adornment seemed to fit. It screamed out for her to touch, to pluck, to tease!

By this time his head was clear of the shirt, she dragged her eyes, with great difficulty, back to his face.

"Nice piercing," she managed, praying that her face didn't give her libidinous thoughts away. After the kiss they'd shared last night...well, this only moved him up on her 'dateable' scale. Nonconformists always were more interesting than the everyday average man on the streets.

"Thanks," he replied, as he tossed his shirt to that table of exposed tortures, and stood indecisively before her. "Where do you want me?"

"On my bed and covered in chocolate," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" he asked, his eyes widening. No, surely she did not just say what he thought she'd said!

"On the bench over there," she repeated, all the while cursing herself! Where was her legendary cool? The man had her flustered! This was another reason to explore this new emotion.

Shrugging, he turned and walked over to the small bench that sat on an Oriental rug and was surrounded by tall light stands and silver umbrellas. He recognized the tools used to direct and reflect light and sat calmly as she approached, light meter in hand.

"I want a shot of that tattoo next, Spark. I caught a glimpse of it earlier and I want to get a quick picture of it."

He nodded his understanding and examined her perfect features from his low seat.

Her eyes were still the same startling shade of green cat's eyes, and her lashes were long and curly. Her full nose looked cute enough to nibble on and her lips looked, well, delicious. He had to fight back the energies he felt humming through his body at the thought.

He'd never encountered this before, he thought with a small frown. The power that grew within his body seemed to come alive at the very thought of her! Already he could feel the temperature in the room rising

several degrees and sought to clamp down on any runaway energies before he gave himself away as the source.

"Getting warm in here," she commented as she backed off and went to grab her camera.

"A little," he managed, thankful that his loose fitting sweats hid his arousal.

My, he looks well...endowed, Zanya thought as she eyed him through the lens of her camera. Maybe he thought that he was hiding from her by hunching over in his loose pants, but there was no mistaking his reaction to her! But she wouldn't say anything about it! As shy as her Spark was, he would clam up and go all stiff and nervous on her.

Adjusting a light with a remote, she aimed a brilliant beam of light across his face, highlighting his eyes, and another across the planes of his chest. This lighting hid his body partially in the shadows and emphasized the strength in his upper body.

"Look at me, Spark," she ordered. "Look right into the camera."

Slowly, with the grace of a mountain lion, Spark turned his head and looked directly at Zan. Slowly his long shiny hair slid over his shoulders and framed his face. In that moment, he was primal, elemental, and raw. Like a curious cat, he tilted his head to the side and made love to the camera with his eyes.

Struggling to remember her job, Zanya took a deep breath and pressed the shutter.

Lights flashed, reminding Spark of a fierce lightning storm. Zanya circled him, motioning him to follow the camera with his body, and he quietly complied. Like an animal scenting its mate, Spark's eyes remained glued to the woman as she knelt and snapped a photo at yet another angle. His eyes grew more intense and he could almost feel the energy in him reaching for her.

Zanya must have felt something too, because she paused and slowly lowered the camera.

"I think that we need a little music," she announced as she almost ran over to a wall of electronic equipment and pressed a button.

They both mentally groaned as the slow strains of Prince's *Adore* filled the air.

"Until the end of time," Spark sang slowly. "I always loved that song."

Zanya looked up as the rough timbre of his voice reached out to her. He was beginning to sound less shy and more aggressive.

"Yes, it's one of my favorites too."

Again she took her place in front of him and snapped off a few more shots.

With his body hunched low and his gray eyes piercing, he took her breath away with his outward sensuality. Even his hair swayed enticingly as he turned his head and watched her. His whole body seemed tense and poised to spring.

"Turn around." She wanted to get a picture of his back. She also wanted a chance to compose herself without him watching.

Without a word, he rose and reversed his position on the bench.

"Lift your hair," she ordered as she took several deep breaths and patted away the sweat from her brow. It sure was getting hot in here! This man had a way of heating her blood.

Then she almost smacked herself for that last direction as one heavily muscled arm swept under that long fall of hair and slowly lifted it away to expose his tattoo. Looking over his shoulder, her perfect face in profile, he asked, "Is this what you wanted?"

"Oh, yes," she nearly moaned as she lifted the camera. "Don't move a muscle."

Spark held in a growl of frustration as the lights from her flash flashed brightly in the room. The silky feel of his own hair swaying against his sensitive skin was making his arousal worse! The sight of an intense Zanya at work wasn't helping his situation either! He wondered if her eyes got that intense while making love. Did she bite her lip in concentration as the pleasure built up within her? Would she close her eyes and silently savor each new sensation, or would she beg and scream for more?

"Let's take a break now," she announced as he realized the clicking sound of her shutter had stopped. "I need to reload."

Sighing in relief, Spark let his hair drop back over his back and bent to rest his elbows on his knees.

To Zanya, he looked like a lost little boy. While the power of his body was still evident, the posture was that of a sulky kid.

"Something troubling you, Spark?" she asked as she stepped closer to this living god in mortal flesh.

Looking up at her from under his lashes, he observed the concerned look on her face.

"I was just wondering when you would go out with me." There! He couldn't get more plainspoken than that!

Zanya smiled as she took a seat beside him.

"How about tonight, slick?" she asked.

Inside, she was jumping for joy, but on the outside, she was as calm and collected as ever.

He turned his head and again observed her actions. She didn't seem all that thrilled, but then again, she didn't run screaming from the room either.

"Tonight sounds wonderful," he managed, then paused. Wait a minute! He was supposed to be the one doing the asking! Where were his balls? How did she manage to wrest control away from him?

"I mean..." he stuttered, trying to regain his manhood. "Is tonight good for you?"

For a moment, Zanya had forgotten that this powerful male animal was her shy Sparkles, but his stuttering answer reassured her and reminded her that she would have to move easy with this one. She didn't want to scare him away!

"Tonight is fine, Spark. Wonderful in fact." She smiled at him, to reassure him, and patted his hands encouragingly. "Whenever you say so."

Spark gritted his teeth in frustration! She was treating him like a child again! Here he was, trying his best not to throw her to the ground and ravish her to within an inch of her life, and she was about ready to hand out milk and cookies! This was unbelievable!

"How about seven?" he gritted out. He was determined to show her that he was a manly man and a stud worthy of obtaining the coveted position as her bed warmer and personal pleasure slave.

Poor thing is so shy, she thought as she smiled like sunlight up at him. "That sounds wonderful! Now, let's finish this shoot so that we can figure out just where we are going to go."

She rose to her feet and flounced over to her table monument to the Marquis De Sade, and selected a long leather thong.

"Ready to get a little tied up?" she asked, wagging her eyebrows and approaching him with wicked intent in her eyes.

"Damn!" Spark thought at the sight of his walking fantasy brandishing leather and looking sexy as hell. This was going to be a long shoot!

* * * * *

Spark stood in the downpour of cold water and silently cursed the fates that were determined to torment him. "Ready to get a little tied up?" he mimicked in a high falsetto. "I'd like to show her a few things about being tied up!"

The leather was the worst part of it! His body shuddered at the memory. The rough-soft slide of those leather thongs against his skin almost caused an eruption of volcanic proportions in more places than his pants!

She had gripped his wrists and in a playful manner, lashed them together to the bench. He was forced to sit on the floor as he was tied helplessly to the low seat. Then he had to face the challenge of not embarrassing himself and his whole line with an inadvertent release as she played in his hair, arranging tendrils of it over his shoulders and face.

He sat there, a willing captive, and fought against the urge to show her the correct way to bind a lover's hands. That was too dangerous for one with his appetites. Instead, he sat there like a sullen child, while she arranged his head on the seat, stepped back, and began to snap test photos. When she finally let him loose, he practically ran for the front door and didn't stop until he reached his car and the safety of his cold shower at home. Only problem was that the cold shower wasn't exactly working.

"What are you doing to me?" he groaned as he looked down at his turgid flesh. "Haven't I always been good to you? Didn't I stop myself from getting you pierced! And this is the thanks I get!"

With a groaning sigh, he dropped his head forward against the white tile of his shower stall and prayed for strength.

But all he could see behind his closed eyes was Zanya. Zanya stalking him with that blasted camera. Zanya leaning over him, giving him a clear view of her cleavage while she twisted the leather strip around his wrists. Zanya dressed in leather and sex as she pranced around in that ridiculously small outfit.

There was no hope for it! This ache had to be appeased!

With a small prayer for strength, he reached for his liquid soap and spurted a goodly portion in his palm. Closing his eyes and picturing the lust of his life naked and waiting, he reached for his throbbing penis and grasped it in a firm grip.

Shudders wracked his body at first contact with the warm slippery soap. Would it feel half as good being buried inside her hot, wet body?

His moans echoed in the tiny shower stall as he began a slow pumping rhythm. His flesh grew harder and harder with each pass of his hands.

Would his Zanya cry and beg for more? Would her moans fill his ears? Would her fierce demands be blocked out by any sounds that he made while loving her body? His hand moved a bit faster.

In his mind he saw Zanya tied to his headboard while he trailed the peacock feathers over her hard nipples and glistening woman's flesh. He imagined her gripping her ripe breasts and offering them to him, pleading with him to take her into his mouth and suckle her bursting fruits.

"Oh, God!" he whimpered as his hand moved faster. His other palm, pressed against the tile wall, began to grow warm and smoke. Electric tingles raced around his body, causing him to sweat despite the cold temperature of the water. His panting breaths heaved within his chest, making his nipples hard and causing a teasing itch in his pierced flesh.

Would she lie back and spread her legs for him? Would her flesh be golden and glistening, her clitoris swollen and bursting from its cowl, her nether lips drenched with her dew?

His skin took on a rosy hue, and then began to faintly glow as his energies fought a raging battle with his desire, with both fighting for release. Small amber lights began to flash and surround his heaving body as pressure built up within. His throbbing cock seemed to swell impossibly large as he continued to force this pleasure onto himself, to force his fantasies of his woman to greater heights of erotica.

"Zanya!" he cried out as his hand moved swiftly, faster and faster, his mind blotting out the present, his surroundings, and his control. "Zanya, love!" he moaned as the tiles began to vibrate with the energies contained within his body. He let loose a high-pitched moan as suddenly the tension fighting in his body broke! With a coarse shout of pleasure, his body arched, exploding in one powerful, earth-shattering climactic release!

"Oh, God, Zanya," he panted as his whole body shook with the force of his pleasure. His knees wobbled as he withdrew his hand away from his overly sensitive flesh and slammed his hand against the wall, pressing it for support.

His whole body shuddered as he reached out and flipped the switch that caused hot water to mingle with the icy cold pouring down over his head.

He would finish showering, he would dress in his best clothes, he would be so suave and smooth that she couldn't help notice that he was a man! Then, by God, he would get laid! His body had spoken!

Zanya was the one! His period of life-long celibacy was over! He had found his perfect mate and nothing would keep her from him!

Chapter Six

God had turned His back on him and the Heavenly Choir was snickering! Hell, even old Satan himself was having a good chuckle off of this one!

Here he was, dressed to the nines in his Armani suit, his leather hand-crafted shoes, his hair tied back into a respectable queue, and the woman insisted on treating him as if he was a brainless sycophant that didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground!

"Are you sure we can afford this place, Spark?" she asked as he pulled into the parking lot of the Midnight Dove.

Situated on the Harbor Place waterfront, the Midnight Dove was one of Baltimore's most expensive and elite restaurants. The dress code was decidedly formal and the understated elegance shouted expensive to all those who entered. There was a hush of awed amazement as one entered the marble foyer of the converted mansion and saw the massive crystal chandelier. One could hardly miss it! The mirrored walls reflected the masterpiece of wire and brass in all directions. There was silk wallpaper on the walls, for heaven sake! And the maitre'd was wearing a tuxedo that had to be custom fitted!

Zanya suddenly felt a little out of place, although she would never show it, in her loose black dress of chiffon.

When she opened the door earlier to admit Spark into her abode, she felt like the most desirable woman to walk the face of the earth! His face had reddened to the tips of his cute shapely ears and he had had to run a nervous finger around the collar of his sparkling white dress shirt.

"You look...I mean you are...beautiful." His blush deepened after he stammered, but he recovered nicely.

"You look lovely, Zanya. I could have never found a more enchanting dinner companion. Are you ready to go?"

Zanya smiled as she eyed the cut of his suit. Pyrotechnics must pay well, she thought, as she turned to fetch the silken shawl that she chose to wear with her outfit.

Her black dress loosely skimmed her body from neck to ankle, covering anything that even looked like flesh in the front. The back was another matter entirely.

His sharp gasp told her that he had noticed the back, or rather the lack of a back.

Her dress dipped low in the back, so low, in fact, that it necessitated a minimal of underwear. From neck to the enticing dip at her bottom, the dress exposed her smooth golden skin. And just to make things a little more visually interesting, around her waist was a tiny gold chain, a present from one of her subjects for making her look like the millions that she was supposedly worth.

She looked back over her shoulder at him, a grin on her face, glad that she'd decided to wear her hair

up. His eyes were glued to her bare skin and his breathing had noticeably increased.

"Am I dressed appropriately, Spark?" she asked, a teasing glint in her eyes.

"Perfect," he breathed. "Absolutely perfect." And she was sure that he wasn't talking about the dress.

Now as she stood in the middle of this monument to ostentation, she wasn't quite so sure.

Yes, I can," he replied, a little bit defensive. Did she think that he squandered his money to the point that he couldn't afford a rare treat every once and awhile? For goodness sake, he was partner in a lucrative business, owned his own mail order business with the creative and exotic weapons that he made, and he was getting paid to let her tie him up and take pictures of his nearly bare hide! Of course he could afford an expensive restaurant every now and again!

Zanya sighed to herself as she realized her mistake. It wasn't good to insult the masculine pride of the man you hoped to seduce, especially when one was as shy and delicate as Spark. She ought to have known better than to question his financial status with such a dumb comment. She was just concerned that he would wipe out his savings trying to impress her, when it was absolutely unnecessary. She was impressed enough with his personality and, well, his body.

"I never meant to imply that you couldn't," she assured, but that discrete cough from the maitre'd ended any comment that she would have made.

"Reservations?" the man asked, eyeing Spark's hair flowing from its queue and Zanya's concerned expression with a sour twist to his lips.

"Yes," Spark replied curtly, not liking the man's expression at all. "MacIntyre."

The man made an expansive show of examining a large black book before again eyeing Spark with something akin to snobbery on his face.

"What? You want ID?" Zanya snapped as the man continued to stare at them as if they were part of an elaborate joke.

With a sniff, the man turned and whispered to a waiting busboy before turning again to these two persons polluting his elegant foyer.

"If you would follow James..." he began, but Spark cut him off.

"Do you have a problem with my appearance?" he asked, the civilized sophisticated veneer that he worked so hard to polish earlier beginning to disintegrate in the face of his rising temper.

"No, sir," the waiter sighed, as if a conversation with this great hairy man was beneath him. "If you would but follow James...."

"Jeaves can cool his jets for a minute. I am trying to ask you a question and get an acceptable response. Now, again, do you have a problem with my appearance?" He leaned closer to the man, who took a wise step back.

"Not at all, sir," the man sniffed.

"Then maybe my date is a problem for you?" He took another step closer to the man.

"Not at all, sir." The man assured, beginning to get a little frightened, but sure that he could handle this overgrown ape with the intimidating scowl.

"Then surely, there must be a problem here." His deep voice began to rise as he took yet another step towards the stupid man. Any slights against himself he could ignore, but if any one so much as implied an insult towards his Zanya....

"Is there a problem here?"

The new voice was calming and assured as a short man stepped into the foyer.

"Spark!" the man cried out as he stepped closer to the people involved with the small altercation. "It's been ages since I last saw you! How is your father? How is your lovely mother? I do wish that they would drop in more!"

Taking a moment to shake off his anger, Spark turned to the man and offered him his hand.

"Mr. Dove. It has been awhile. My parents are fine and are now enjoying a weekend alone at The House. May I introduce to you my date for this evening, Zanya Burke."

"Charming, simply charming!" the man exclaimed as he took both of Zanya's hands and brought them to his mouth for a quick kiss. "But what is the problem here?" he asked as he let her hands go and turned to the red-faced maitre'd.

"I was wondering if my appearance or my date bothered this gentleman here," Spark growled, his expression darkening again as he turned to the man in question.

"Of course not, sir!" the man stammered.

"If you back-pedal any more, you'll go right through the hat mirror and shatter the elegant illusion," Zanya said with some satisfaction.

The man glared at her but didn't respond.

Michael Dove said nothing, but pointed to a back door that had been unnoticed before. Shamefaced, the maitre'd gave them one final sniff for good measure before turning and exiting the foyer.

"You'll have to excuse Peter. He sometimes forgets that he is not God and the world is not here to cater to him. Be assured that he will be dealt with, Spark," Michael assured them as he spread his arms wide and welcomed them into his small bit of paradise.

Zanya caught her breath as they turned to the right and entered the small dimly lit room. This room was exquisite!

There were a few tables scattered around, small round tables with long midnight blue cloths that touched the dark carpeted floor. And that carpet wasn't anything to sneeze at, either!

It was so plush and thick Zanya had to fight the urge to take off her shoes and stroll barefoot across the room. As it was, her feet sank with each step she took. She turned and smiled up at Spark. This was impressive.

Zanya expected Spark to start stuttering again at any moment. He was doing his best to overcome his shyness, even to the point of standing up to that officious waiter!

On each table there were simple yet different flower designs, each giving off a floral scent that complemented the enticing aromas that were emanating from some unseen kitchen. There were also small tea candles floating in a crystal bowl of water in front of each arrangement.

There were two place settings on each table, a light rose dinner plate with a smaller midnight blue plate resting atop it. The napkins, also of a deep rose color, were folded into an elaborate triangle and rested on top of the blue plate.

This was definitely a three-different-fork kind of restaurant and Zanya appreciated the efforts that Spark put forth to bring her here on such short notice.

"Please have a seat," Michael invited as he stopped at a table near a back wall. They had to step up on a small landing where the carpet ended and a warm gold marble began.

There was only one table here, and the wall was totally covered with a dark window treatment with soft cream, gold, and rose highlights. "The best seat in the house for the man who not only designed the best opening night celebration that this city has ever seen, but who also was there monitoring each phase as it happened. Your family helped put this restaurant on the map."

"Nonsense," Spark laughed off the compliment in a friendly manner, a blush that could be seen in the dim candle hidden lights of the place, highlighting the features of his face. "Your amazing cuisine would have pushed any other restaurant around here out of business anyway!"

"Not without the people to eat that fine cuisine, Spark," he returned. "Don't discount your part in my success. I know I don't!"

Spark ducked his head as he accepted the compliment and grinned sheepishly at Zanya. Always the gentleman, Spark took her shawl and seated her with some pomp and circumstance before taking his own seat.

"Now the best is yet to come!" Mr. Dove said as he pulled a small remote device from his pocket and depressed a small button.

"Oh, that is beautiful!" Zanya breathed in awe as the curtains parted to expose a breathtaking view of the harbor. Thousands of bright lights flashed across the water, tiny boating lights echoed the shine of the stars. Bright colorful illuminations outlined a magnificent cityscape, making the restaurant seem as if it were floating in the night sky, about to touch down on some distant alien planet. The muted noises of the restaurant faded as she turned bright eyes on the man who had brought her to this magical place.

"Enjoy," Michael whispered before he too disappeared and a discrete wine steward approached.

"Sir?" he asked in low tones.

But Spark was again lost in Zanya's eyes, her perfect cat's eyes. A man could get lost there, he thought,

as he sighed and rested his elbow on the table.

And nearly slid to the floor!

"Spark!" Zanya cried as he went plummeting downward. Only his quick reflexes saved him from landing face first on the carpet at her feet.

Face blazing red in mortification, Spark righted himself and prayed that the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

"Are you all right, sir?" the wine steward asked as he eyed Spark as if the man had had a few drinks too many before coming to dine.

"I, uh..." he stammered as he struggled to remember the complicated wine list that he had mentally compiled to impress Zanya.

"Well?" the man asked and suddenly he felt as if every eye in the place was on him, watching him make another fool of himself and lose points with Zanya.

"I'll have a Coke," Zanya said, amusement pulling at the corners of her lips. Spark was so cute when he tried to impress her with his maturity!

"Very good, Madame." The steward sniffed as he looked towards Spark.

"Make it two," he mumbled as he fought against the urge to bury his head in his arms in shame. Being a debonair man of the world was tough!

And the evening went downhill from there!

* * * * *

"How could you have known that I was allergic to shellfish, Spark? I didn't think to mention it when you invited me out."

Zanya's wide eyes looked up at him with that "it'll be okay" look.

They were in his car and heading back to her place after the disastrous meal.

"Salad. All you ate was a salad!" he sighed as he sped through the evening streets of Baltimore.

Several tourists were out and about enjoying the nightlife that Baltimore had to offer. Luxury limos were parked on a side street while curious people tried to peek inside to see who was paying a visit to Charm City. Groups of black-dressed Goths, heading into their favorite clubs, shocked people with their various piercing and wild clothing. Still another group of businessmen were strolling into the hottest bars in Fells Point, the strip known for its old-fashioned pubs and live entertainment. All in all, it was another wonderful evening in the city, except for the depressed man and the consoling woman in the black car currently making their way east.

"But it was a very good salad, Spark! It was nice of them to add the bacon and the extra seasonings. Plus, for the bread sticks alone, I would have made the trip. And that dressing was to die for!"

Zanya giggled as she recalled how dismayed he looked after she explained that if she partook of any seafood, she would swell up like a blowfish and would turn roughly the color of his bright red hair.

"I'm sorry, Zanya," he sighed, as he slowed for a red light. "I should have brought it up! Otherwise I never would have taken you to that place."

"But the Midnight Dove is all the rage among my clients, Spark!" she grinned up at him. "Do you know how many people were telling me about trying to get the window seat? I'll be the envy of the horsy set when I tell them I actually ate there and then show them who'd been my escort!"

She smiled as the tension eased a little from his shoulders. Spark was really a sensitive man!

"Then, you'll go out with me again?" he asked, hope shining in his gray eyes.

"Of course, Spark!" she laughed. "We're going to be seeing a lot of each other! Green light."

Was she giving him a green light to start this seduction? Was he going get laid tonight? His senses instantly perked up and the poor deprived piece of flesh between his legs began to do the dance of joy!

"Green light, Spark!" Zanya said again, nudging his shoulder. "The people behind us are getting mad."

Spark plummeted back to reality with a jolt and suddenly he could hear the angry honks behind them. Shaking his head, he stepped on the gas and continued on their journey. Lust was hard on a man's mind!

When they finally reached Zanya's studio, Spark, proving that chivalry was not dead, got out and opened the door for her before escorting her to the front door.

"When can I see you again?" he asked.

Although the ordering was a disaster, they did manage to have a decent conversation. The daydreams that had been plaguing him since meeting her never reared their lust-induced heads. He'd learned about her brother the reporter who was on assignment from The African Star, now in DC reporting on some political scandal. In turn he told her all about his family, his fierce mother and gentle father, and his annoying but lovable sister Ember.

"You will be seeing me tomorrow, Spark, or is that I will be seeing you?" she asked with a smirk.

"Oh, the shoot," he muttered causing her to burst out into laughter.

"You make it sound like the Spanish Inquisition, Spark!" she laughed as she stepped close to him and ran one finger down the lapel of his jacket. "I promise, you won't feel a thing."

"I wish!" he mumbled before he pasted a smile on his face. "I was speaking of another date. Want to risk it again? I promise, no seafood restaurants!"

At his words, she exploded into laughter. He bit back a groan as he watched her firm, high breasts rub against the material of her dress, the dress that should have been banned in all fifty states!

"Well?" he asked when her laughter eased.

"Yes, Spark. I would love to go out with you again. And this time you can explain to me how you all do

these wonderful light shows that we are all in awe of."

"Tomorrow night?" he asked, tentatively placing a hand around her waist, his callused hands brushing against the soft skin of her lower back, feeling her tiny vertebrae shift as she stepped closer to him.

"Tomorrow night is fine, Spark," she said as she rose on her toes and leaned her body against his.

"So, uh, tomorrow is good, really good," he choked, trying to regain his voice. Where did that squeak come from?

"Kiss me Spark," she finally whispered against his lips as she moved in closer for the kill.

"Kiss?" he asked, his breath harsh and rasping. "God, yes!"

His arms gently wrapped around her body, pulled her closer to him, and lifted her off of her feet as his lips gently fed off of hers.

Spark moaned as thunder boomed in his blood and his energies sang, trying to show their joy by breaking free of his tight rein. His body trembled as he absorbed a low, slow moan of her own, and returned it to her in a grumbling growl. He could feel his blood rushing to his lower extremities, awakening the need, making his legs tremble. Then her tongue forged a path inside his mouth.

"Sweet fire," he breathed as her sweetness exploded hot and full in his mouth.

Unable to resist, he devoured her mouth, thrusting his tongue deep to savor more of her.

"Spark," she breathed, pulling away from his drugging kisses. "You move me."

"Zanya," he began as he let her slide slowly down his body. Spark shuddered at the feel of her soft breasts and soft skin rubbing against him.

"Tomorrow, Spark," she breathed looking up at him with glazed eyes. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Reluctantly, he let her go and watched as she thrust the key into the front door and eased the door open.

Looking back over her shoulder at him, she repeated, "Tomorrow," before gently closing the door.

"Well, hell!" he muttered as he turned and walked away, stopping every few steps to readjust Mr. Happy. "At least she didn't laugh in my face and slam the door," he said out loud as he opened his car door and carefully eased his tense body behind the wheel. "But I hope she gives me a sign soon! Blue is definitely not my color!"

With that thought in mind, Spark hurried home to his cold shower.

Chapter Seven

The next day, bright and early, Spark was knocking at Zanya's door, a smile on his face and anticipation sounding through his blood.

Memories of the sweet Zanya and her sweet lips were driving him insane with desire. Maybe today they could get inventive with his bindings and they could get it on!

When the door opened, he immediately hopped to attention and plastered on his most seductive look ever.

"Hello, green eyes," he purred. "Missed me?"

"Not really," a deep male voice replied in a deadpan. "You only just saw me a few days ago, although I'm flattered that you noticed my eyes."

"Eric?" Spark wailed, a red blush highlighting his cheeks. "I, ah, thought that you were someone else." He managed to step past the blond Viking and into Zanya's hall.

"And just look how you came a-calling! Spark, I am ashamed of you! Didn't I teach you better than that? Did you at least bother to wash your hair when you showered, if you showered?"

Spark snorted at Eric, agitation replacing his embarrassment.

"Of course I did, nimrod! But I am going to be photographed nearly naked so I didn't bother to dress for the occasion!" He looked down at his comfortable and worn sweats and shook his head in disgust. What was wrong with comfort? He liked being comfortable!

"But where is your sense of class, Spark!" Eric wailed as he led him back to the studio. "At least think of your reputation!"

"What reputation?" he shot back! "And I don't need class when I've got style! It's a second cousin to class!"

Eric snorted as he led Spark deeper into a photographer's heaven. It was set up differently today. There were tall screens placed in strategic places that cut the large area up into several smaller spaces. Eric motioned to a screened off area where he had set up his makeup kit and pushed Spark down in a chair.

"Besides, my sweats aren't that bad!" he continued, as Eric glared at him and the tangled mess on his head. With a sigh to show how extremely put-upon he was, he grabbed a comb and began untangling the

waves of hair that were loosely bound at the nape of his neck.

Without another word, Eric went to work on the tangled tail of hair, muttering about demon bikes and the idiots who rode them.

"Why all the screens?" he asked, wincing as Eric gave a tangle a particularly rough tug. He was hoping to distract the man so that he would have some hair left on his head! His hair was almost as sensitive as...well, Mr. Happy and he didn't want pain to be the main expression on his face. After all, he had read the books that Ame Heart produced, and pain was definitely not on the menu!

"Early client. Last minute thing," Eric muttered as he held up a hunk of hair to his special, lighted mirror, examining Spark's ends.

"Oh," he said as he closed his eyes and thought of Zanya circling him with her camera, an intense look upon her beautiful face. Was she on birth control or would he be required to use a condom? But it would be better to use both. The way he was feeling, he was working up a lot of steam and under intense heat, condoms had a tendency to...

"...split. At least they aren't split. Spark, do you know how much damage wind can do to your hair?"

"I know! That's what was troubling me. And I know that Trojan makes a...." He broke off as Eric shot him an amused look. "Never mind!"

With a small sigh, Spark gave up his new pastime, xxx-rated fantasies involving Zanya, and looked up at Eric.

"Don't you have someone else to bug? I mean a sister or a brother?"

"I have you, dear boy!" Eric said as he dropped his comb into a basket. Someone had called his name while Spark was...sulking and he was going to see what was wanted.

"And as far as siblings go, who needs them? I have you, you big baby!" With that parting shot, Eric the Terrible left the area.

"Is adoption an option?" he called back after a second. Eric always made such dramatic exits!

He had just settled back in his chair, content to wait for the Lord of the Makeup Sponge, when he heard a small snuffle. Was someone crying? Was someone more miserable than he was?

Curious, he rose and parted the screens to look into the large studio space. There, sitting among a pile of brightly colored pillows and several stuffed forest animals, was a little sobbing fairy. Well, she was dressed like a fairy.

The little girl had a short mane of curly, dark brown corkscrews and glowing, caramel skin. Her bright brown eyes were filling with more tears even as he watched. Her bottom lip trembled and she pressed her hands against her eyes, hiding.

His heart shattered! Above all things, he hated to see people cry! Especially family, his women folk, and little girls.

"Ah, hello?" he said softly as he slowly, cautiously approached her. He was a stranger after all, and he

didn't want to frighten her.

"Helwou," she replied, still sniffing but watching the strange man approach with big watery eyes.

"My name is Spark," he said. "What's yours?"

No answer.

"Is there anything I can help you with, sweetheart?" he asked as he made his way to her throne of pillows and sat at her feet, the attentive courtier.

"I wan' my ducky!" she cried, pointing with authority to a small yellow plastic duck sitting on a bench across the room. She was obviously a fairy queen! The attitude was a dead give-away, even without the small crystal tiara that sat upon her head.

"Want me to go and get it?" he asked gently, a smile pulling at his lips. Kids were the coolest, but they were especially cute when they were so dramatic and confident.

"I can'!" she said, blinking her large innocent eyes up at him. "Mommy says no pigturs holdn' ducky!"

"Well, of course!" he said as he stood up and strolled over to the bench. Once there, he looked at her over his shoulder, before picking up the rubber duck in question. "Have you watched Sesame Street?" he asked.

"Un-huh," she gasped, her tears drying as she watched the red-haired man.

"Then you know the Owl told Ernie to put down the ducky!"

"Yes," she said slowly, trying to understand what the happy man was telling her. She remembered the brown owl telling Ernie that he had to put down his ducky before he could learn to do things.

"Do you remember the song?" he asked while stepping closer to her.

"Put down da ducky! Leave the ducky 'lone?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it!" Spark said as he took one cautious look around to see if anybody was watching. "Put down the ducky," he softly sang. "Put down the ducky if you want to play the saxophone! But it applies to pictures too!" he added.

"Weally?" she asked perking up. "Ducky won' mind?"

"Not at all!" he assured her. Taking another look around, he bent down and asked in a low voice, "Wanna sing it with me?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" the little fairy queen sang out loud, jumping to her feet and grabbing a crystal scepter from the floor beside her.

"Put down da ducky!" she crowed. "Put down da ducky!"

"Put it down!" Spark happily added the background vocals.

"Put down da ducky if you wanna take a picture now!"

"All right! One more time!" Spark crowed as he bent down and clasped her little warm hands within his large rough ones. Together they danced around the pile of pillows singing loudly, "Put down the ducky!"

Giggling and twirling, they danced across the room, her childish laughter lighting the whole studio as the two sang.

In fact they were having such a grand time of it, they never even noticed the screens parting and Eric, followed by an unknown woman, Zanya and no less then Ame Heart, entering the room.

"Put down the ducky!" he crowed as he danced around the room squeaking the yellow duck! "Put down the ducky!"

While his fairy queen clapped and urged him on, he put one hand on his hip and began to boogie down! He waved his hips Elvis style while bending low and tossing his hair like a crazed woman at a Ricky Martin concert! "Put down the ducky if you wanna take a picture now!" he sang as he executed a perfect pirouette while keeping an eye on the little queen and squeaking the duck in time to their singing.

"Put down the...."

His voice trailed off as he suddenly realized that they weren't alone! He didn't know what did it, his dancing partner's sudden silence, or the bright lights of a flash bulb as a picture was taken.

Slowly he turned, bits of hair hanging out of his mouth and partially blocking his face, until he faced the group of people standing behind him.

"Hi?" Boy, did his voice sound weak!

"Well, somebody certainly is!" Eric chortled.

"I can explain," he began with a sigh. Again he had made a fool out of himself in front of Zanya. At this rate, he would never lure his fantasy chick into his arms or his bed!

"Mommy, did you see?" his little queen cried as she ran to the smiling woman. "We danced and everything!" She launched herself at her mother, her long skirts flying around her little legs.

"I saw, baby," the woman smiled as she lifted her daughter into her arms.

"Spark, this is Areiana James. She is...."

"The author of *Strokes* !" he cried out, his embarrassment forgotten and his attention on one of his favorite *Brazen Heart* authors. He walked over to her, holding out his hand as a smile broke across his face. "Your books are all but dog-eared and torn, I have read them so much!"

"Why, thank you," she said in genuine pleasure as she shook his hand. "I am glad that you like what I do, although not many men would admit to reading erotic romance."

"Aeriana," Zanya continued. "This is Spark MacIntyre, the model for your new book."

"New book?" Spark's ears perked up.

"Yup. It's called *Pant* . You like?" Laughter caused her brown eyes to sparkle and her face to light up.

"When will it be out?" he asked. "Will you autograph a copy for me?"

"Hon, for getting my daughter to laugh like that, I'll give you an autographed copy of it! Thank you! She hasn't smiled in weeks since moving here. It's been a big adjustment for her. I can't thank you enough!"

"But I didn't do anything." A blush again filled his face and he looked down at the little girl. "I just can't stand to see a Fairy Queen cry."

"Well, if you think that you can hold that smile a moment longer, honey, I will get this picture taken and you can have your ducky! Would you like that?" Zanya asked as she broke off from the group and set up her camera.

"I want Spark," she cried as she ran over to him and held up her little chubby arms.

"My Lady," he said as he lifted her up into his arms. There was nothing that Spark loved more than children! They had a newness about them that fascinated him.

"Your children will love you," Aeriana said as she observed the easy way that her daughter interacted with the model. "You will spoil your girls rotten!"

"I know," he grinned as he walked back over to the pillow throne and placed the fairy queen properly. "All my kids are going to be spoiled rotten! My dad is the same way!"

He smiled at the little girl as he stepped back out of the frame, her eyes following his every move.

Once out of range of the camera, he gave the ducky a little squeak and the queen gifted all with a beautiful smile.

After snapping several pictures of her playing and dancing with her wand, Zanya motioned her mother into the picture and got a few frames of them together. Then as she was about to end the session, she motioned Spark into the picture.

"Me?" he asked. While this small shoot was taking place he had kept the little girl, Mikel, happy by squeaking her duck and making faces. He didn't expect to be in the finished product.

"Yes you, Sparkles," Zanya laughed. "I want this one for my personal portfolio."

"Okay," he said finally. "But the duck comes with me."

The last shot was of Mikel, Spark, and Ducky, all doing the dance of joy.

* * * * *

"I told you that he would be perfect for the job," a deep, masculine voice whispered to the woman beside him as they observed Spark and Mikel.

"Yes, you were right. So far," the woman purred as she ran one finger over a stubborn masculine jaw. "But we have yet to see if he is the perfect man."

Chapter Eight

"It's time to hear that snapping sound!"

"Already?" Spark moaned as Zanya led him over to the table of torture.

"Already, big guy," she laughed as she picked up what looked like a tiny black nose warmer and pointed to a screened off area.

"Where is the rest of it?" he asked, incredulous as he eyed the thin leather straps hanging from her finger.

Silently, she dangled a pair of leather restraints from the other hand.

"Zanya," he moaned, moaned because he knew that the scanty outfit would hide none of his reaction to her. "Can't I wear pants or a nice long robe, or something?"

"The name of the book is *Pant* , Spark. You have to make the public pant!"

"In that?" he asked, taking the tiny bit of material off of her finger and stretching it out in front of him. "I don't think it'll fit."

He is so shy, Zanya thought as she smiled at this wonderful man. She had tried to get that little girl to smile all morning. She, Ame, Eric, and Aeriana were in the back room discussing options for the picture when they had heard the childish laughter coming from her studio. Rushing back there, they were all shocked to see the little girl laughing and playing again, all because of the man now standing in front of her sporting a blush almost as bright as his hair. He was special.

"It will stretch, Spark," she assured him. "It only looks like leather."

"But..." he began but Eric's voice cut him off.

"You're not too shy, are you?" he asked, trying to bite back laughter. "Of course, knowing you as long as I have, I wouldn't believe that for a moment."

"I am not shy!" he gritted out as he glared at the blond giant.

"Sure you're not," he placated. "I know you aren't."

"Damn it!" he growled before he turned on his heel and disappeared into the indicated area.

"You have to know how to handle these shy types," Eric whispered to Zanya as they both watched Spark vanish behind the screen. "They are very delicate, these shy ones. Reverse psychology usually works the best."

Giggling, Zanya turned to Eric and nodded. "Thanks for the advice," she whispered.

"Anytime, doll," he answered. "Anytime at all."

* * * * *

First there was a glint of red from behind the shoji screen. Then, one gray eye made its appearance as Spark quickly looked around to see if anyone was watching.

Spying no one there, he quickly darted behind the next barrier, the table of tortures. Once behind the table, with its wicked array of toys, he ducked down and again his head popped up for a quick peek, then disappeared again.

Two golden arms reached up and grasped the handles of two pleasure paddles, then the broad hand and the wide slats of wood disappeared, only to reappear as imitation fig leaves as Spark darted over to the next hiding spot.

"If I can just make it to the bench," he muttered to himself as he saw the blanket-covered, prepared cot. "I can use that blanket for cover. Damn, I feel a draft."

"And you're putting on quite a show too," Zanya's droll voice came from behind.

Spark paused in his mad dash for the bed, and his shoulders tensed as he slowly turned around.

Sure enough, there were Zanya, Ame, and Eric laughing at him. "Kill me," he muttered as he dropped his head down in embarrassment. "Just shoot me now."

His answer was a bright flash of white as Zanya did just that.

"Everybody is a comedian," he grouched as, still holding his paddles in place, he walked over to the cot.

"Just giving you what you asked for, babe," Zanya laughed as she advanced to the next frame on the film roll.

"Will you?" he asked softly, his gray eyes sparkling like new diamonds.

For a moment there was complete silence in the room as Eric and Ame suddenly took up an interest in the screens surrounding the room, and the lights. They tried to look at anything but the couple staring at each other with glowing eyes.

"We'll see, Spark," her quiet voice caressed his ears. Never one to let being timid stop her, Zanya was quite direct in what she wanted. And she decided that she wanted Spark. "But that is moot at this point, babe. We have a job to do. Drop those paddles."

Again Spark looked nervous, then a resigned look crossed his face.

"Oh, hell," he muttered before flashing Zanya a leering grin. He slowly opened his hands and let the paddles drop.

"Oh, my," Ame gulped.

"Oh, brother," Eric snorted.

"Oh, hell!" Zanya muttered as her prized camera, the one that had never ever touched anything but the butter-soft leather of its case or the cool kiss of its steel tripod, hit the floor.

Bending quickly to retrieve her prized possession, and ignoring the knowing looks being tossed her way by Eric and Ame, she gathered the tattered remains of her dignity.

Spark smiled knowingly at her unexpected reaction. His beautiful Zanya was as affected by him as he was by her! This was wonderful!

"See something you like?" he purred as he took a step closer to her, but again Zanya was speechless.

The tiny gold hoop caught the shine from the many lights she had positioned around the room, rivaling his golden skin for beauty of color. His eyes seem to ignite and the temperature in the room climbed several degrees.

"Makeup?" she asked, quickly turning away from temptation and facing Eric.

"Powder," Eric sang as he hefted a huge tackle box filled with cosmetics and, fighting to hold in laughter, walked over to Spark.

"Okay, lover-boy," he said when he drew closer. "Let's get the glare off of you before you burst out of your skivvies and really embarrass yourself."

"My control is admirable," he muttered as he eyed longingly the object of his desire. "She still has her clothes on, right?"

"Like you, gentleman that you are, would do anything like actually attack the woman. Heaven forbid!" Eric laughed as he pulled out a large body puff and began to pat the skin of his upper body.

"I let her know how I feel," he argued as he watched Zanya adjust the equipment that she would need. He bit back a groan as she bent low to adjust a tripod.

"I guess that's why she thinks that you are so cute and shy," Eric snorted.

"I'm working on it," Spark muttered as Eric finished up with the puff and produced a hairbrush. "But every time I try to impress her, something happens and I wind up making a fool of myself."

"Because you have a heart?" Eric asked as he motioned Spark to sit so that he could see to his hair properly. "Women eat that stuff up!" He fluttered his eyes and sighed loudly. Then he attacked Spark's hair, making it a wild, if artistic, mane on his head.

Before Spark could retort, Ame called, "Are we ready?"

"We need to add the restraints!" Eric called back. "Zanya?"

Now this is the stuff fantasies are made of, Zanya thought as she looked over the goodies on her prop table and selected a long, thin, black leather cord.

Turning to face Spark, she blinked at the sudden mental picture of him bound by the wrists to her bed.

She would slowly stroke his naked, quivering length with large peacock feathers and watch as he squirmed closer, greedy for the fiery caress, yet struggled to free himself from the slow, maddening arousal. Yes, thin leather cords were a good choice, so small and delicate against his obvious muscular strength. What a contrast!

"Here," she almost panted as she handed the length of leather to Eric. "Tie him up good."

"No such luck, honey," Eric replied with a small pout on his lips. "I am off to greener pastures."

"What?" Zanya wailed in dismay. "I'm losing my help on this one?"

"No, dearest," Ame said as she walked over to the small group clustered around the near naked man. "We are needed back at the office. I have to sign a few contracts and Caressa is expecting me. I'm sure Spark here will give you all the help that you need. Just wanted to sneak in a peek at your operation and, as always, dear, I'm impressed."

Motioning to Eric, she turned on her stylish heels and started for the front door. "Lovely seeing you again, Spark. I can't wait to see the results."

Like a trained puppy, Eric quickly collected his box and out the door they went.

The clang of the shutting door sounded overly loud in the small, tension-filled area.

"I guess it's just you and me," Zanya said, then paused as she realized how sexual that sounded.

"So, are you going to do the honors?" Spark asked as he eyed the leather strap that Zanya still held.

"I guess I have to," she said, her voice a bit huskier than usual. "And I have no idea where to begin."

"Start at the top," he breathed as she stepped even closer to him. "That is usually the best place to begin."

"As if you have the experience," she breathed, excited by his words yet knowing what a shy man he was.

Stepping forward, she motioned for him to cross his wrists in front of himself before she began to lightly wind the black thong around his hands, binding him and relishing the feel of his firm-soft skin.

"It's obvious that you don't know what you're doing," he breathed as he looked up at her, again almost rendered breathless by her beauty.

"And you can do better?" she teased him with a small laugh.

"Indeed I can, madam," he answered, a twinkle showing in his gray eyes. "As a matter of fact, I am an expert on the subject."

"Oh really, oh shy one," she laughed. She quickly unwound the thong before handing it to him. "Then by all means, baby, show me."

"As you insist," he purred, suddenly all business as he swiftly stood and placed her in his spot.

Still chuckling at the thought of her shy honey tying her up, she crossed her wrists and held them up to him, as if in supplication.

"Be gentle!" she urged as her smile filled his heart and his loins.

"Only if you beg," he returned, before swiftly and neatly winding the cord around both wrists and leaving them not crossed, but bound closely together.

"I thought you were supposed to cross them?" she asked as her breathing rate increased. She looked up at her wrists, then higher at the man who now appeared almost dazed as he examined his handiwork. Instead of frightening her, it kind of turned her on.

"Only if you are going for hard-core domination," he answered. "This won't cut off your circulation and still gives you a tension release."

"Tension release?" she asked, her voice cracking as she suddenly developed another mental picture of them. This time she was the one tied up and helpless at his mercy.

"Yes." His sure quiet voice drew her out of the growing fantasy. "You can grip the thongs and pull if things build up too quickly, or you can wiggle your way free, if you want."

She swallowed hard as she looked up at him. Suddenly taking pictures was the last thing on her mind. Suddenly she wanted to be the one wearing less than nothing under his adoring gaze. She definitely didn't want to wiggle free, maybe closer, but not free. But would voicing this fantasy scare him off? She decided to take a chance.

"I wouldn't wiggle away from you, Spark. Not you."

"Oh my God!" Spark breathed as he saw her beautiful green cat's eyes darken with, dare he hope, desire. "You want me!"

"I never made a secret of that, Spark," she said as she stood and faced her walking fantasy.

"You want me," he said again as his brain began to short circuit.

His body, on the other hand, knew just what to do with the sensual promise it heard in her voice.

"Are you scared, Spark?" she asked as she took a step closer to him, pleased to see that he didn't back up and that, looking down, he was very interested. That is, if the sudden too-small fit of his undies told the tale. "You act as if you have never done this before."

A scarlet blush exploded onto his face and he self-consciously looked down.

"You haven't done this before?" she asked, amazed, as her eyebrows shot almost straight up to meet her hair line.

"Well, I probably understand more of the mechanics than you do, but I have never really uh, put them, umm, to use," he stammered as his blush increased, feeling like it was going to burn off his face.

Let me die right now, he thought, as he shook his head at his own sorry self! Zanya, his Zanya, admitted to wanting him! The day of his deliverance was at hand! He was going to get his cherry popped, so to

speak. But once again, he managed to fumble up the effort!

"You have never done this before?" Zanya asked, amazed.

Zanya felt her body go limp as she lowered herself to the bench in dazed shock. She had known that he was shy, but she had always assumed that it was because he was still uncomfortable in his big body! It took some guys years to develop any comfort with themselves, and she had thought that Spark just fell into the mold with the rest of them! That will teach her about assuming

"Not really, no." He sighed as he opened his eyes and looked down at her. "I am physically a virgin. But that doesn't mean that I am hot to lose my virginity to just anyone! I mean, you are not the first woman that I have ever been attracted too. I mean, I am not just using you to get rid of my cherry! I mean, I am not using you at all! I mean...oh hell!" He dejectedly dropped on to the bench beside her and looked at her with eyes that begged for her understanding.

"I never thought that you would use me, Spark," Zanya laughed gently as she raised one bound hand to cup his cheek. "And I understand what you are saying. You are not using me to be rid of your virginity, but you want to share it with me. Me of all people! I am not offended Spark. I am honored," she said, as she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his.

Then she gasped at the almost electric tingle that shocked her lips.

"Oh, Spark," she breathed, as her whole body jerked with the sexual shock.

"Zanya," he breathed, as he looked at her in awe. She understood what he was trying to tell her. She understood that he was not trying to use her, but that he wanted to share this important event with her.

"You are a special man, Spark MacIntyre. And I refuse to make love to you in this studio. When we come together, it will be in a bed! I am going to respect you and treat this occasion with all the ceremony it deserves!"

"Zanya," he breathed again, his eyes sparkling like the fireworks that he used in his regular job. "When? Not to sound pushy or anything, but I would like to have some idea of when this event is going to take place, so that I can be prepared."

Zanya looked into his earnest eyes and smothered a chortle of laughter. "You are something else, Spark!" she giggled. "How about after we finish this photo shoot? That way business won't be on our minds and we can relax and enjoy each other."

His answer was a gulp as his gorgeous eyes, his luminous gray eyes, examined every nuance of her face.

"I would be honored," he finally breathed.

With some difficulty, Zanya pulled her eyes from his and tried to put on her business face.

"Then let's get rolling with these pictures. Untie me, please. And yes, Spark, we will discuss the bondage thing that you know so much about. And I don't share!"

She stood and presented her hands for her release, a wicked grin on her face.

"Yes ma'am," he said, his heart beating triple time in his chest.

"And keep that thought, no matter what it is," she said as she looked down at the excited awareness that heated up his face. "I want to capture that look."

Spark grinned as he gently massaged her wrists to return any feeling that was lost. He felt like a kid in a candy store. His hands trembled in his eager excitement. He was more than ready.

Chapter Nine

The snap of the shutter seemed endless as Zanya positioned Spark to her liking. He had to thread a sheet between his thighs to hide an erection that could no longer be contained. His eyes were wide and glassy, dilated with the passion of his thoughts. He looked like a hungry jungle animal, on the verge of breaking free and devouring all that he saw. The thick leather cuffs around his wrists and ankles only made him look more masculine, more untamed, more savage.

"Enough," Zanya finally sighed as she finished a fifth roll of film. "I think I have enough for *Pant* and for the first billboards."

Spark groaned at hearing this, he still had yet to tell his family what was going on. Tomorrow, he decided, then his eyes lit upon Zanya, his beautiful Zanya. Maybe the day after.

"I need a shower," he said as he looked down at the thin sheen of sweat that covered his body. "I need to be clean."

Suddenly his hands began to shake as he realized what was about to happen.

"Spark?" Zanya asked as she placed her camera on its stand and walked over to her red-haired Adonis. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he stammered as he looked up at her from beneath his lashes. He was lying on a small camp mattress that was covered in a white silken sheet. The colors set off his golden skin and bright auburn hair. Lying there, he looked like a confection waiting to be eaten. Maybe later, Zanya thought as she knelt beside the suddenly nervous man.

"We don't have to do this, you know?" she told him.

"Yes we do!" he immediately contradicted. Then a blush spread across his face again. "I mean, I haven't changed my mind, Zan. Have"

"No, I haven't Spark. But I don't want to rush you...."

"You're not!" he interrupted with some heat. The temperature of the room seemed to rise a bit, but he quickly pulled his emotions under control. "I mean I am proud and pleased that you would allow me to pleasure you," he said with a smile. "I am just so anxious to get it right, Zan. I don't want to disappoint you."

Zanya's heart began to melt all over again as she stared at the earnest look on his face. He really wanted

to please her, wanted to give her pleasure.

"You can't disappoint me, Spark. And if you do something that I don't like, believe me, I'll tell you about it." Her smile belied the seriousness of her words.

"Then I have to shower, woman. I refuse to come to the woman I love sweaty and smelling of talcum powder!"

Zanya froze, stunned for a moment, before she exploded into laughter. He didn't even realize that he'd said he loved her.

"I concede the point, man. You shower, and I'll be waiting for you."

"No," he decided as he rose to his feet, making sure to keep the sheet wrapped securely around his waist. "Let's go back to my house. I have a few things that I will need there." The blush on his face told her exactly what those things were.

"Fine with me, Spark," she decided as she stepped back and watched him scurry to the changing room.

"And pack a bag!" he called from behind the walled partition. "I finally have you where I want you and I refuse to let you go home tonight!" There was a pause. "Is that okay?" he called.

"It's fine, Sparkles. If the night goes the way I think it will, I won't be able to come home anyway."

She could have imagined the choking sounds coming from the back room, but she knew exactly what it was.

Spark broke every speed limit known to mankind!

He dodged through evening traffic, cut off drivers on the highway, and even was flipped off by some old lady crossing the street! He drove with a skill born of impatience and with the luck that God reserves for fools and drunkards. And Spark was very intoxicated, drunk on joy. Zanya would soon be his! All of his wildest dreams had not prepared him for this!

All during the trip to Spark's house, he was extremely quiet. His hands nervously worked the gears and the clutch of his car while his fingers tapped on the steering wheel. He kept stealing little glances at the woman beside him as he made his way down the crowded streets of Baltimore.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, catching his eye for a moment and smiling at the flush that seemed permanently affixed to his face since leaving the studio.

"Well," he began honestly, tearing his eyes from the road for a moment. A woman this special deserved an honest answer. "I don't know what I am," he said at last. "This is the moment that I have been dreaming about all my life. You are the woman that makes my body scream and my mind shut down. I have learned so much over the years, so much, Zanya, but I only just realized that I'm going to have to put all of that knowledge into practice."

"Spark," she began. "I just want you to be yourself, baby. That's all. We enjoy each other. Relax, the rest will come."

"I know, Zan, but again, I don't know."

"You are unsure," she decided.

"Oh, I'm very sure," he laughed as he reached over and took her hand and rested it against his hard thigh. Would she take the hint and ease her hand up to investigate his rate of sureness? He hoped so! "I just don't want to disappoint you or disgrace my father's training."

"Your father's training?" Her curiosity was piqued. None of the fathers that she knew ever taught their sons anything beyond tossing a condom at them and telling them not to get caught. What kind of training was he speaking of? She absently stroked the firm flesh beneath her hand.

"My father taught me that it was the journey that was important when being with a woman. He said that it was a long and bumpy road that could change at any minute, so I had better be prepared." Spark's eyes nearly glazed over as her fingers lightly teased and caressed his thigh.

"Wise words," she murmured, giving him a seductive smile as she removed her hand, ignoring his disappointed groan. Funny, but his flesh seemed to burn through the material of his pants it was so hot.

Within minutes it seemed they were driving down a small street that held his house and were pulling into the short driveway.

"Nice place," she whistled as she took a look at the Victorian splendor that sat between two large oak trees as the car rolled to a stop. The house had a large covered porch that ran the width of the front with a matching garage that sat at the bottom of his fenced-in back yard. The house's white shingles and cobalt blue trim fit in perfectly with the flower gardens that surrounded the place.

"You garden?" she asked, as she opened the door and stepped out onto the paved drive. Spark took her hand with a smile and led her up the stone steps that faced his large wooden front door.

"No, my mother does, and yes, she makes trips out here just to check on her babies." He laughed as he gestured to the many rose bushes and moonflowers that surrounded the place. The smell was magical in the darkening sky, and almost at once Zanya fell in love with the delicate flowers.

"She has a good eye," Zanya murmured as Spark opened the large double doors that led into his home.

"Come in," he said. He was a bit nervous as he ushered her into his house. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Later," she said as she grinned up at him. Her bag rested on her shoulder and she looked like a guest who would stay for a while. He hoped that she would.

"Want to look around?" he asked as they stepped deeper into the living room, Zanya backing him up all the way.

"I want to see one room very much, Spark," she breathed, pronouncing his name in that special way of hers, making his skin flush with heat.

"The bedroom," he sighed as he took her hand and led her to the stairs, "Is this way."

He was almost running by the time they made it to the second floor, and Zanya was fighting back giggles. She felt like a schoolgirl set free for the first time.

"In here," he breathed, as he pulled her around to face him at a door.

He looked down into her grinning cat's eyes and could not help himself. With a small groan, he bent low and gently brushed her lips in a tender kiss.

Instantly, he began to shiver as a tingling heat flooded his body. Would he always feel this passion for her?

Zanya gasped at the tingling that seemed to come from Spark's excellent kisses then wrapped her hands around his neck, tangling her fingers in the silk of his hair. Her fingers trembled as the heat from his scalp seared her. He was so hot.

"Shower," Spark muttered as he pulled away from Zanya. "I have to shower. I will come to you clean."

That said, he opened the door and led her into a large sitting room with a door at one end and a large curtained-off room on the other.

"Make yourself at home," he choked, wondering if he remembered to make the bed that morning.

Zanya looked around the peach-colored walls and smiled. There was a tall wardrobe in one corner and a large Oriental rug in shades of peach, gray, and cream that covered the hardwood floor. The room was almost a half circle, with three large windows facing the front of the house. Their curtain rods hung with cream-colored curtains with large, wrought iron tiebacks. The wood molding was in a creamy white and set off the intricate scrollwork done to decorate them. A large fainting couch sat underneath the windows, its thick cushions looked inviting.

"I think I'll be quite comfortable waiting for you, Spark," Zanya said as she went up on her tiptoes to press a small kiss to his lips.

The flare of heat fascinated her, drove her to want more. Her bag fell unheeded to the floor. It had been so long since she'd touched a man like this, since she'd wanted to!

"Shower," he mumbled as he broke contact. "I have to shower."

"Go shower," Zanya breathed against his lips. "But make it fast."

Spark had the fastest shower in history!

He burst through one of the doors at the end of the room at almost a flat out run. Once inside, he ripped off his clothes and tossed them in the general direction of his hamper, not checking to see if they made it neatly inside.

He lost a moment as he nearly ran through the glass shower door that protected the hunter green carpet in the bathroom, but at the last moment remembered to slide it open.

With a flip of a switch, gallons of hot water came exploding from the shower, although the heat didn't bother him. In fact, his body seemed to absorb it, making it one with the energies that he possessed.

He felt good! Nothing could go wrong today!

He quickly shampooed his hair, noting that his silky strands were almost vibrating with his excitement. Looking down, he saw that his penis was in total agreement with his plans! It even stood up and saluted! Nothing was going to go wrong! This night would be perfect!

But fate had other ideas. Spark nearly burned the house down!

Chapter Ten

"Zanya?" Spark called as he stepped from his steamy bathroom. In his mad rush to get to the woman that he craved, he nearly ran naked into the room. But at the last second, he pulled a towel from the tile rack and hastily wrapped it around his waist. His intense body heat managed to dry any water droplets from his body as he fought to keep his emotions in check.

He rushed out of the bathroom, tripping over a misplaced shoe, and almost dove headfirst into his sitting room-his empty sitting room.

"Zanya?" he called again as his brow wrinkled and he made a quick visual search of the room.

"In here, Spark," her low voice called, making the mound of flesh beneath the towel take on a second life as a tent pole.

Like a sailor being drawn to a Siren, Spark followed the sound of her voice as if in a daze. He walked through the doorway that led to his bedroom and almost passed out at what he saw.

Zanya, his Zanya, was reclining in his bed, butt-naked, save for one of his white dress shirts that she had filched from his wardrobe. The partially unbuttoned shirt gapped enticingly, showing glimpses of golden-brown skin, and...was that a hint of a dusky nipple?

She lay on her side, a goddess of sensual pleasure, long golden legs, wrap-around-a-man legs, crossed at the ankles and giving him a full view of all their glory!

She was slowly flipping through a book, a *Brazen Heart* book, and taking note of the folded down pages.

"I see you are familiar with this line, Spark. This shoot must be a dream come true for you." Her green eyes glittered as she slowly gave his body a thorough perusal, noting the condition of his towel and his sparkling gray eyes.

Sparkling eyes? It must be a trick of the light, she decided, but noted how the colors of the peach room reflected in his eyes.

"Busted," he breathed, for once his hated blush not darkening his skin. He was aroused and needy as he had never been before. His only thoughts were to strip that shirt from her body, restrain her so that she couldn't move away, and feast upon her until the hunger in him was appeased.

"Some interesting stuff here," she noted as she closed the book and sat up, the shirt falling from one shoulder. "Is it getting hot in here?" she asked as she felt the temperature in the room jump a bit.

"It's going to get hotter," he said as he stepped closer to her, his every illicit thought written on his face.

"Good," Zanya decided, as she rose up on her knees and reached for him.

In an instant, he was on the bed and in her arms.

The moment he touched her, a low animal growl of need rumbled up from his throat and his insides began to quiver. Any doubts that he'd ever had about pleasuring this woman faded. He was slowly being swallowed whole by his animal desires and he found that he rather enjoyed the feeling.

"You are so hot," Zanya murmured as his arms wrapped around her, easing her back to the bed. Her legs automatically opened, making a spot for him between their long expanses. She reached up and brushed the long strands of his hair back from her face. "But you feel so right," she murmured as she gazed into his passion-tightened features. She felt her breath catch at the untamed beauty that was hers for the taking.

"You are mine," he gasped as he felt her soft arms wrap around him. "You are mine."

Any further words that he could have uttered were cut off as she tangled her fists in his hair and pulled his head down to meet her moist lips.

Zanya gasped as the zing of electricity shot through her, sizzling her senses, and causing her eyes to widen then close as she gave in to the warm tingle.

Never before had a kiss affected her so! His lips were magic, fire contained. She moaned softly into his mouth and pulled him closer to her, longing to feel more of his burning heat.

Spark felt his whole body stiffen at first contact with her soft lips. His energies zinged out of control as sweat began to bead on his forehead. A wave of fire, burning hot and thick, traveled through his veins. He had held many women in his arms over the years, kissed many women, embraced many more, but he had never experienced anything like this before!

He felt his hot blood rush low to his already engorged flesh, felt his sac tighten with his intense arousal, and thought that his head would explode. His thighs began to quake and his arms to quiver as he held himself above his Zanya.

The nerves along his back began to tingle and his muscles to twitch. Before he could stop it, a loud deep groan passed through his lips, sending vibrations throughout his body. The sound of his own desire heightened his arousal.

"Spark," Zanya gasped as she pulled away from the kiss. But she paused as his eyes lifted to meet hers. They were positively liquid and made his face glow. Little silver sparkles that she had never noticed before were glittering at her. She could see herself in his eyes, surrounded by a thousand little starbursts, and she was awed and stunned by the beauty that she saw. If only he saw her in half the beauty that was reflected there.

"Zanya," he breathed. "You are so beautiful, so damn perfect."

His hands trembled as he shifted his weight to his elbows so that he could cup her head between his large hands. He marveled at how tiny she seemed to him.

"No, Spark. It is you who are perfect, and special. I have never felt this way about any man before. And

you...you just feel right. Like home."

"Zan," Spark breathed as he dropped his forehead against hers, overcome by the new emotions that were racing through his body. "I am humbled," he finally breathed. "You humble me."

Zan smiled as she ran her hands over his shoulders, brushing his hair back to expose his tight firm flesh.

"And you awe me, man," she breathed as she began to lose herself in the feel of his hot skin and masculine smell.

"I am going to shame myself if you keep petting me like that," he breathed as he again lifted his head to gaze down at her.

"Oh, no," Zanya laughed. "Not yet! You have too many clothes on!"

She immediately reached down and began to tug at the towel around his waist, anxious to feel all of him, to see what she had been teased with.

"Hey!" he smiled widely. She tore the towel from his body and cupped his firm cheeks in her hands.

"Did I ever tell you that you have a nice ass?" She stifled a giggle at his reaction. "You are one nice, fully packed, parcel of man, Spark." Her eyes glittered with humor and arousal, an irresistible combination for Spark.

"Yeah?" he asked as he lowered his head and began to lick at her lips with tiny soft laps.

"Mmm, yeah," she answered as she gave the bottom in question a little squeeze.

"Well, you are wearing one of my favorite shirts," he responded as his mouth tilted in a sexy grin, desire causing his face to flush.

"So?" she asked as she wrapped her legs around his slim hips. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Damn, that feels good," he groaned as his eyes closed for a moment, then opened half-mast, Zanya within his sights. "I'm going to take it back."

With her legs still wrapped around his waist, he planted his hands beside her head and pushed himself back on his knees. In this position, he got a complete view of Zanya, his Zanya, lying in an erotic sprawl below him.

With the shirt half-open, exposing teasing snatches of breast and nipple with her every breath, Spark closed his eyes and began counting loudly in his mind.

"What are you doing?" Zanya asked as she smiled up at her man.

"I'm trying not to do something that hasn't happened to me since I was a kid. I once dreamed about Dorothy Dandridge, Janet Jackson, and that woman from Enigma giving me a sponge bath."

Well, he said that he would be honest with his Zanya!

Zanya blinked up at him in surprise, then her mouth spread into a slow sensual smile. She unwrapped her

legs from around his waist and eased herself back on the bed.

Spark's bed was a curious thing. It was large and four posted with gauzy white material draping over the rails. Reaching out, she grasped the posts and eased herself backwards.

"Zanya, what are you doing?" he asked as his breathing increased. He watched her full breasts push against the material of the shirt, emphasizing their fullness and the perfection of her upturned nipples.

"Giving you back your shirt," she purred as she slowly began to feed each tiny little button through its hole. It was such a simple action, but she made it totally erotic.

Spark felt his mouth go dry as more of her skin was exposed, as the shirt slipped a little more, playing a sexual peek-a-boo for his greedy eyes.

When there was one button, one tiny button left holding the shirt on her soft body, she reached back and pulled her hair forward, obscuring his view of her almost bare body.

"Zan," he breathed as sweat broke out on his body and his thighs began to quake. "Please don't tease me."

She flipped the last button free and eased the shirt off of her arms. "Here, you can have your shirt back now." Her eyes flashed with green fire and challenge. "Come and get it."

Before Spark could even think to move, his body was in action. In a desperate lunge, he caught her around the waist and pulled her to his chest, shaking as her hair gently tangled around the small hoop in his nipple, shooting fire down his chest.

Zanya threw her arms around his shoulders, tangling her hands in his hair and burying her face in his neck. She deeply inhaled his musky sweet scent. His body was burning hot to the touch and she found that she craved his heat.

"Oh, you feel so damn good!" he moaned as he ran his hands over her back, one fist locking in her hair to pull her head back for an intense kiss.

Almost forcibly, his tongue invaded her mouth, drinking in her special flavor, savoring the taste of her, the ridges at the roof of her mouth, the smooth hardness of her teeth.

Zanya moaned as her body began to writhe uncontrollably against his. Like a cat in heat, she rubbed herself against him, letting her hands trail down his back to his sides, feeling his body grow even hotter and hearing his breath hitch.

She felt his hardened length pressing against the skin of her stomach, creating a burn low in her body, making it respond in a rush of liquid heat. Her breathing increased until their breath united as one. A low moan built up in her throat.

"I don't want to hurt you," Spark breathed as he felt his control begin to slip. His mind had shut down and his body had taken over. This was better than all of his fantasies; they had never been this hot! He was incoherent with lust, with need. But the thing that he needed the most was right there in his arms.

"You can't hurt me, Spark," she breathed against his neck, making him quiver with excitement, making his legs weak. "You would never hurt me."

With a growl, Zanya was pushed back onto the bed as Spark loomed over her. But her eyes were not on his lustful, dangerous expression. They had traveled a lot lower and were now stuck on his favorite body part, soon to be her favorite, too.

Huge was a good word to describe him. Equine was another. Surrounded by a soft down of fiery red hair, Spark had an eminent pillar of hard flesh that seemed to preen and quiver with joy at her gaze.

"Oh, my goodness," she breathed as she reached out to touch him.

But Spark had other ideas. He wanted to reach out and touch her! And there was so much of her to touch!

Her firm breasts rose high and proud, her hair sliding back to expose their berry colored tips. The thin thatch of moist hair that guarded her feminine secrets drew him like a moth to a flame. He was suddenly overcome with the desire to touch, to taste, to experience his Zanya in the raw.

But she was reaching for him and their hands tangled, keeping him from his goal.

"Let me," he begged. "Let me, Zanya. I want to eat you alive."

"Spark," Zanya breathed as she tore her eyes away from his turgid flesh and up to meet his compelling gaze. "I, uh, I have never had, I mean, no man has ever...."

"Good!" he breathed, as he easily pushed her hand aside. "Then I will be the first!" And the last, he added to himself.

"But I want to touch you first," she argued and Spark closed his eyes in sexual agony.

"Will you give me what I want?" he finally asked, his eyes blazing as he stared down at her. "Will you give me a taste?"

Zanya's "yes" was very faint, but he heard her.

With a groan, he laid his trembling body beside her, tossing his hands over his head, looking over at her longingly.

"Hurry," he breathed, his whole body wracked with shivers.

"You are so beautiful," Zanya nearly moaned as she rose up on her knees and straddled his hips. There was so much to touch, to feel. Where to begin?

The glint of gold caught her eye and she knew what she wanted.

"Will it hurt if I play with your ring?" she asked, watching his eyes really begin to sparkle. He was named correctly.

"No." His voice broke with the word. His groan sounded loud to his ears.

"Good," Zanya panted as she bent low and lapped at the skin around the nipple ring.

"Oh, shit," Spark moaned as the sensitive skin around his nipple began to puff up and stand at attention for her. And Zanya wasted no time playing with her new toy.

"Some men don't like their nipples touched, Spark," she breathed as she bent low, letting her breasts brush against the hard wall of his abdomen. "I'm glad that you are not one of them."

Then she wrapped her tongue around the golden ring and tugged.

Spark jumped as a jolt of pleasure shot through his chest to his quivering staff. He closed his eyes, pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, and prayed for deliverance from this torture even as he prayed that it would continue. His body arched under her squeezing thighs, shifting her so that he could feel her wet heat so close and yet so far away.

"I love your body, Spark. I'm jealous that hundreds of women will be staring at it. But they only have the fantasies. I have the real thing.

Her fingers plucked at his other nipple as she bent low and grasped the ring with her teeth.

Spark bucked and his flesh expanded as she gently pulled the ring, making his flesh burn and causing a few droplets of clear liquid to emerge from the slit in the tip of his penis.

"Zanya," he gasped, as his head rolled from side to side, denying this pleasure even as his body, his mind, his being, opened up to embrace it. Sweat beaded up on his forehead and his body began to shake in earnest.

But Zanya was not done. She trailed her fingers down, raking her fingernails across his abdomen, sliding them over rippled muscles, until she reached his navel.

Spark growled at her motions, and moaned in loss when they stopped. Her hands were almost there, almost touching the full hard heat of him. His body rejoiced even as he felt it reach heights that he had never obtained before.

"You are so warm, Spark. Your skin is almost sizzling," she purred as she slid further back on his legs and ran her fingers through his soft fiery red hair surrounding her object of lust. "And this part of you...is *hot*."

Her fingers trailed to the base of his erection, smiling as she realized that she could barely wrap her hand around his great width. This would take some fancy maneuvering, but she was determined to take him fully inside her body, to thoroughly enjoy riding her red-haired stallion.

"Zanya," he gasped as he felt electricity zinging through him, her fingers erotically teasing him. "I can't hold out much longer."

But Zanya flashed him a smile, a secret smile, a sexy smile as she made a ring of her thumb and forefinger and squeezed his base.

"Yes, you will," she purred as she lowered her mouth and began to lap at his thick, purple-colored, heart-shaped head.

"Zan!" he all but shouted as he felt the warm rasp of her tongue as she circled him, her fingers gently stroking his length as her impromptu cock ring held him in check.

"Soon, baby," she breathed, as she popped his head in her mouth, closing her eyes at the salty-sweet tang of him.

Spark threw back his head and hissed as he felt his eyes roll back into his head. His hands clutched at the sheets, tearing them from the bed, melting them with the intensity of his passion. "Zannn!" His voice sounded rough and broken to his own ears, and it sent him spiraling up to another level.

He was breaking, falling apart at the seams, and Zanya was the only one to pull him back together.

"Spark," Zan gasped as she felt his cock swell even more. She could taste him, taste his failing control as she raised her head to stare at her handiwork.

Spark was almost out of control! His body was tense and trembling, a fine sheen of sweat coated his magnificent body, making his tight muscles stand out in relief. Tension and all consuming desire were written all over his face.

Seeing the effects of her loving attention caused a heated reaction in her as well. Her nipples became hardened peaks that seemed to beg for his attention. Her legs felt watery and her mouth went dry as her hands quivered to touch and arouse. The inferno had moved between her thighs and the only thing that could quench it was the man lying helpless beneath her. She felt her heart melt and a flood of emotions broke free in her body: lust, love, desire, and they were all for the man she was sitting upon. *Her man.*

"Spark," she whispered, her eyes growing more dilated with her passion. She bent over him, moaning as her nipples dragged against his chest, bounced against his ring, and settled her mouth gently over his.

Spark broke.

With a growl, he neatly flipped Zanya over onto her back and with his legs, forced her willing thighs open.

"Yes!" she fairly sang as she felt his heat, his hardness pressing against the portal of her feminine opening, dragging against her throbbing clit.

"I wanted to take this slow, to please you," he panted, as he rested his weight on his elbows and thrust his fingers into her hair.

"Take me, Spark," she gasped as his incredible heat surrounded her. It was a sensual burn, a fire that she had never felt before! And she wanted more, more, more, right now!

"Oh, God, Zanya!" he cried as he felt his body arch, forcing himself into her. Closing his eyes in absolute pleasure, her slick inner walls embraced him. A tear fell from his eye as he felt himself being slowly absorbed by her.

He wanted to rush, to pound her, to slam into her until she acknowledged his mastery over her. He wanted to move slowly, to make her beg for each and every inch of his flesh. He wanted to love her tenderly, to express with his body what was flooding his heart. It was the only thing that was truly his...that he had the ability to share fully. Instead, he closed his eyes and shouted her name, everything around him exploding in a massive burst of orgasmic proportions.

"Zanya!" he screamed, as he felt her walls gripping and releasing him, easing his entrance into the portals

of heaven, stealing his breath and his soul.

"Umm," Zanya moaned as she felt him parting her, filling her as she had never been filled before. His magnificent cock sank an inch at a time inside, stretching her, making her aware of places that her past lover could only dream of touching. He made her body buck and tremble to take more of him.

She felt her breath catch, her muscles clench and suddenly she was lost. Drunk on Spark and her own wild imaginings, Zanya felt her body respond, felt him striving for and reaching the pinnacle of desire.

Then Spark closed his eyes and yelled her name once again. Never had she had so vocal a lover, so handsome, so virile, and so masculine a man. It was enough to tip her over the edge of midnight and into a diamond-studded oblivion.

"Spark," she gasped as her head snapped back, her hands automatically reaching for his shoulders to hold him closer. Her climax triggered her inner spasms that welcomed the feel of his invasion.

"Oh, baby," he moaned as he finally merged them together fully. He felt the head of his penis touching her womb, felt his love fully embrace him, caressing him with her contractions. Then his body took over.

Spark's hips began to slam into Zanya, knocking the breath from her lungs even as he drove her up the pleasure path yet again. Faster and faster he moved, his body heating up with every lunge, his moaning becoming louder. He felt pleasure destroy the tight control he held over his body and threaten to overtake it.

"Spark," Zanya moaned, caressing his back, urging him forward toward his release, even as she relished the feel of his hard muscles shifting beneath his silky moist skin.

"You are so hot, and wet, and slick, and tight, and mine!" he panted as he moved. "Oh, Zanya..." Then suddenly, "I think I'm going to come."

His whole body tensed as a bright color flushed his face. His jaws tightened and he gritted his teeth as he began to come face to face with his own crisis.

"Zan," he gasped, as his eyes flew open.

Zanya was shocked by what she saw. Silver spirals floated in his eyes, his beautiful gray eyes, making them light up the room, making them sear her very soul. She felt his body tighten, his back arch, then there was a low keening moan as the tension in his body broke.

With one final lunge, Spark threw back his head and roared his pleasure to the heavens. His long streaked hair flowed over his back, and stuck to his face. It entangled him to Zanya as if tying them together as one.

She could feel his pleasure, his boiling hot seed as it erupted into her body in spurts, filling her with a contentment that she had never before felt. She closed her eyes and held him tighter, relishing his release, greedily savoring each of his shudders as he relinquished the gift of his innocence into her loving arms.

Even as he was swirling in the melee left by his thunderous release, Spark felt the whoosh of heat as his energies escaped from his control.

Shuddering from the aftermath, his muscles weak, Spark opened his eyes and watched as the sheer

drapes around his bed exploded into flame.

Oh, shit! he thought as he struggled to gather enough of his cold energies to extinguish the flame.

"Oh, shit!" Zanya squeaked as she looked up and realized the bed was on fire.

In a move worthy of a WWF wrestler, Zanya tightened her hold on Spark and rolled them from the bed. She landed on top of him with a thump and ignored his groan as she quickly disengaged from him and leapt to her feet.

"A fire extinguisher!" she cried, but now the flames were leaping towards the walls.

Spark, his mind still befuddled by his first real orgasm with a real live girl, *his girl*, lay there in a daze, watching his house catch fire.

"Extinguisher?" he asked, as the fire crawled across his carpet and leapt to the window at the foot of the bed.

In the distance, he could hear a fire siren rushing in his direction, and a distant ringing sound coming from his hallway.

His fire detectors and private alarm were working fine, he thought, as he tried to reattach his brain to his body.

"Spark!" Zanya cried as she shook his shoulder. "We have to get out of here! We have to move!"

Spark looked up into her frightened face, noting that she was still trying to move a man probably three times her weight, and suddenly connected with his surroundings.

He leapt to his feet, pulling Zanya further back from the spreading fire, and rushed her through to the sitting room.

"Get out!" he ordered as he forced his wobbly knees to carry him to the wardrobe where he thrust the first shirt he saw at her, then turned back towards the bedroom. Zanya latched on to his arm.

"You can't go back in there!" she screamed, as she tried to move him towards the front door.

"Go on, love," he urged as he pushed her towards the door. He didn't need witnesses to his energies.

But they were interrupted by a banging at the front door. In seconds, the room was crawling with firemen as they dragged big hoses into the room, trashing his Oriental rug and squirting water at the growing blaze.

In seconds, Zanya and Spark were hustled out of the house, wrapped in blankets and standing with the neighbors as they watched the spectacle taking place.

"Quick response?" Spark offered as he watched the orange and yellow flames die.

"Oh, Spark! Your house! What happened?" she asked as she adjusted the fit of the shirt she wore under the blanket while brushing her hair out of her eyes and trying to comfort her man at the same time.

Sighing, Spark wrapped his arm around Zan, pulling her close to his body as he felt her began to tremble.

"I don't know," he honestly answered, cuddling her close.

"I always knew you could set the sheets afire," she tried to joke. "But this is ridiculous."

Spark looked up as the fire fighters began to exit his house, and sighed. Ridiculous was not exactly the word that he was looking for. The word he was thinking began with an "F" and explained eloquently how he felt. Especially when he looked up and saw his parents' minivan pull up behind the fire truck.

Yes, the "F" word fit perfectly!

Chapter Eleven

"Having a little trouble, Son?" Flame's voice intruded on Spark's misery as he watched the better part of his bedroom do the "*burn, baby, burn.*"

"The roof is on fire, Dad," he said in a deadpan voice before a chuckle escaped his tightly pressed lips.

Zanya looked over at Spark, head tilted to the side as she watched his strange reaction. Was the sight of his house burning starting to affect him? As sensitive as he was, she hoped it wasn't too much of a strain.

"Good to see you again, Zanya," Flame nodded politely to her after nodding to his son, as if he had just said something very wise.

"Although I didn't expect to see this much of you," Kendall added as her eyes swept from her state of undress to the blanket that barely covered her son. "And I haven't seen that much of you in quite some time, dear," she said as she visibly examined her son.

"You seem calm," Zanya had to add, wondering if she would be as calm if she had pulled up in front of her child's house and saw it on fire.

"I would have been a lot less calm if I had walked in on whatever you two were doing that would cause you both to be in such a state of...disarray?" she said quietly, watching as a blush blossomed on the young lady's face.

"What are you two doing here?" Spark finally recovered enough to ask. He was trying his best not to flush under his parents' calm demeanor, but it was hard. Damn it! He was a grown man! If he wanted to take a young lady home to his house for a few hours of mind-blowing sex, then it was his business! So then why was he fighting the urge to crawl under the nearest fire truck and hide? Damn! Having morals was a bitch!

"We came to remind you about this weekend," Flame said as he reached into the pocket of his leather jacket and handed Zanya a pristine white handkerchief. "And I had hoped to go over the plans for the new show with you."

"But I never thought to find you butt-naked on the front lawn giving a show to the neighbors!" Kendall finally hooted, breaking the tension that had begun to arise.

"Just wait until the billboard shows up," Zanya chuckled, realizing that she and Spark weren't going to be scolded like two naughty children. Kendall and Flame cared, but they let their children run their own lives.

"Billboard?" Kendall asked.

"Oh, shit," Spark sighed.

"Language," Flame admonished, nodding to Kendall and Zanya.

"Billboard?" Kendall asked again, her eyes boring into her son's.

"Oh, hell," he sighed before wincing in apology to his father. "I meant to tell you this weekend, but I guess the cat's out of the bag. I went to see Caressa...."

"*Caressa!*" Kendall exclaimed, her brown eyes growing hard and cold.

"My Kendall," Flame said calmly and reached out his right hand. Automatically, she took it, feeding off of his calm and feeling it ease her temper. He always had that effect on her, and after all these years he still could ease her with a word or a gesture.

"Sorry," she said and nodded to Zanya and Spark. "Please, continue."

"Well, she needed my help or Uncle Richard would have taken *Crystal Faces* from her. Honestly, I didn't go in expecting to help her, but it just...kind of...happened. Come to think of it, I'm still not quite sure how it happened." His disgruntled expression was enough to tell Kendall the whole story.

She knew her older sister well enough to know that Spark had probably walked in on a setup. She also knew that Caressa had probably used tears and theatrics. The only male that she knew who was immune to her monologues was Flame. And that was because she reminded him too much of his past relationship.

"So to make a long story short," Spark added, as he again shook his head in confusion. How could that wonderful plan go so wrong? "I am a spokes model again. But this time it's nothing like the last assignment that entangled me with Aunt Caressa."

"Do tell?" Kendall probed gently as she watched a blush blossom onto his face.

"Uh, are you familiar with *Brazen Heart*?" he asked sheepishly, peering down intently at his mother.

Then another thought hit him.

"Oh, Lord! My books!"

His wail was loud and anguished. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair as he contemplated the fate of his rather extensive collection. Then he silently cursed his lack of control as he realized that his collection was gone because his control had slipped.

"*Brazen Heart*?" Kendall asked, then her eyes grew wide.

"My books!" he snorted. Then Spark realized something elemental. What he had was better than books,

that is, if she didn't go running from the scene of this disaster, thinking that he and his family were weird.

The reality of Zanya was better than any piece of erotic fiction that he had ever read! Just thinking about her soft skin and her hot wet center, her perfect mouth and the little sounds that she made...

"Leash it, son," Flame murmured quietly only for his son's ears as Spark realized that his eyes were beginning to, well, *spark*.

Another blush spread across his face, as he quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed.

"You are safe enough," Flame assured him as he fought to hold his face neutral. He understood what his son had to deal with. He recognized the signs even if Spark didn't. His son was falling in love.

"You are going to be the spokes model for erotic sex?" Kendall asked, her eyes shooting to her son, then to Zanya.

"Bondage and erotica," Spark added, waiting to see what his mother was going to say. "And Zanya is taking the pictures." He might as well get all of the shock out at once. Clean and quick, like lancing a boil.

Kendall looked at her blushing son and the quiet woman who stood beside him, who silently offered him support. She looked over at her husband and the amusement he was fighting so hard to hide. She looked over as the last of the flames were extinguished from his bedroom, and at the firemen who were calmly exiting the house.

Kendall started to softly laugh.

"They always told me to watch out for the quiet ones!" she chortled, until her eyes lit on her extremely quiet and controlled husband. Then she roared with laughter.

"Mom," Spark nearly wailed as his blush continued to grow.

"Spark, you are a grown man!" she laughed, as she watched him try to control his reactions. "And you have your own home now so I won't have to worry about underwear being left in the mail or strange women peeking through your windows!"

"What's left of my house," he grouched.

"You just have a few control issues," his father assured him, before he clamped his mouth shut. He peered at Zanya. How much did she know? By her blank expression, he decided, not a lot.

"Control?" Zanya asked, clearly not following the conversation.

"Men talk, or should I say MacIntyre talk," Kendall calmly added as she brought her attention back to the matter at hand. "But for now, Hon, you need a place to go for the night. I don't think this place is livable and the fire marshall will want to talk to you."

"Yeah," he sighed, looking a bit defeated, and making her want to mother him all over again.

"You are certainly taking all of this well," Zanya added as she watched his parents and wondered at their calmness. She had to say something! She knew that they loved him and cared a lot, but their calm was...unreal.

"Spark is alive," Kendall said, turning to face the confused woman. Strange happenings had lost their power to unnerve her a long time ago. "That house can be rebuilt or repaired, but my son is irreplaceable. As long as he is alive, future losses mean nothing."

That shut Zanya up. Kendall and Flame realized what was important in life, and it wasn't the house.

"You have wonderful parents," she said, turning to Spark and hitching up her blanket.

"I know," he returned, with a smile in their direction.

"You are welcome to return home until your house is repaired," Flame said, taking control of the conversation. "Your rooms are as you left them and your mother and I would welcome a visit."

Spark looked at his father, then down at Zanya. After experiencing sex, real sex, for the first time, if they thought he would calmly trot back home and give her up for a time, they had to be crazy.

"Good enough," Flame added, easily reading Spark's expression.

Zanya flushed again as she realized that Flame understood his son's unspoken gesture. It was one thing to have a frank and open dissuasion about sex with your lover, but having his parents actually know what you were doing, well, that was a bit unnerving.

"Oh, honey," Kendall said, shaking her head. "This family is absolutely scary sometimes! But what are you both going to do about clothing?"

"I, oh, damn!" Spark groaned as he realized that everything he owned was going to be either stained or smoky as hell. "I guess I get to go shopping."

"You can come to my place, Spark," Zanya added, realizing that he didn't want to go home. "You can shower and we can figure out what to do about your clothes there."

"I'll bring you a few things, son. You do leave clothing at the house," Flame added dryly.

Spark nodded his thanks. "I'd appreciate it, Father," he said, thankful that his parents were the way that they were.

"But now I think that someone needs to speak with you."

Flame nodded towards the fire marshall, who approached with pad and paper in hand.

"Would you like us to wait?" he asked, trying to give his son space. Flame had every confidence that his son did not need to lean on his parents as if he was still a child, but he had to fight the urge to rush in and protect his only son.

"Nah," Spark said finally, running a hand through his tangled hair. "I can handle this. You guys go on home and I will be there this weekend as ordered."

"Invited," Flame added with a small grin.

"And bring Zanya," Kendall added quickly. "I'd like to meet her when she isn't hiding a blush, is not on

her knees in front of you, or doing interesting things to your libido, young man!"

"Mom!" Spark wailed, blushing furiously and trying not to hide his face as his mother chortled in delight.

"Leave him alone, My Kendall," Flame sighed as he fought a grin of his own and offered his wife his arm. "You will have time enough to embarrass him this weekend."

Then with a polite bow to his son's lady and a knowing glance tossed to Spark, he turned to lead his wife over the tangle of hoses that the street had become.

"I guess separate rooms are not in order!" Kendall called back as they reached the minivan.

"Mom!" Spark cried again, this time breaking down in laughter and shaking his head in dismay. "They will never grow up!" he moaned to Zanya as the Marshall approached.

"Consider yourself lucky," she laughed. "Are they always that way?"

"Yes," he sighed with great disparity. "But someone has to claim them."

Zanya giggled as the fire marshall introduced himself.

Chapter Twelve

"Faulty wiring," Zanya sighed, as they slowly walked into her studio.

"I can believe anything at this point," Spark said, as he tried to tighten the blanket around his hips.

His house, the "crime scene," had been closed down for that moment and he didn't want to wait around for them to declare his house structurally sound so that he could reenter and gather up some clothing.

He would do it tomorrow. He had business to attend to.

"What day is it?" he asked, as he followed her into her studio to the spiral staircase that led up to her private domain. "I seem to be losing time for some strange reason."

"Tomorrow is Friday, baby," Zanya said, as she tossed her tangled hair over her shoulders and started up the staircase. Her overnight bag was still in what was left of Spark's bedroom and although her shirt/blanket combo was nice, she wanted to get into something more comfortable, like Spark's large arms.

"Friday," he replied, as he stopped at the foot of the staircase and watched her slowly climb to the top. "Renn Fest is tomorrow."

"After the photo shoot," she called over her shoulder, then stopped and stared at him.

He was still a handsome shy thing, but he wasn't moving his shy handsome butt up the stairs and closer to the bedroom.

"Why aren't you moving?"

"Because I wasn't invited," he replied as his eyes looked up at hers, an undeniable emotion swimming in their gray depths.

"As if you have to ask," she replied, but Spark didn't move.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

He realized that she had been through a lot today, and after the fire, his parents and the fire marshal, he would have slept on the couch to let her get some rest. He would not be happy about it, but he would have done it.

"Spark!" Zanya called as she sighed and rolled her beautiful green eyes at him. "Get your tanned ass moving, man! I want you beside me!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Spark grinned as he read impatience in her eyes and hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Whatever the lady wants!"

Zanya shrieked with laughter as he lifted her up in strong arms and rushed to the bedroom, past the shoji screens that provided the loft with privacy.

"To the bathroom, slave!" she laughed as she snuggled deeper into Spark's embrace. "I smell like smoke and I want to smell like flowers for you."

Spark quickly followed the direction that she pointed. He ignored his blanket skirt as it slipped around his feet, and reached for the wooden door.

Just as he set her on her feet to adjust the temperature of the water, the phone began to ring.

"Ignore it," Zanya purred as she took his face between her hands. "If it's important, they'll leave a message."

"Okay," he agreed, with an eager smile. He wanted to know that their earlier experience was not a dream, a fluke, or a delusion brought on by build up!

But his mind turned towards other things, other naked things, as Zanya's message played and her fingers began to tear the buttons off of his shirt.

He had always liked that shirt too, but he could care less about expensive silk blends as his ladylove slowly denuded the shirt of its fasteners.

The sound of the buttons hitting the white marbled floor sent a shock of fire through his bloodstream! The sight of the shirt parting wider and wider left his mouth dry. It also caused an instantaneous and undeniable reaction within his nether regions.

But the voice bellowing on the other end grabbed both of their attention.

"Zanya Burke! Pick up the phone and do it now or so help me I'll come over there!"

"It's my brother!" she gasped, a rare blush heating the skin of her face as she turned towards the door, her striptease forgotten.

"I know you are there, girl, and I want answers! I just heard your name over the police band and I am not amused! Fire? Damn it Zanya, pick up! Are you okay?"

Zanya almost tripped over Spark in her race to get to the phone. She reached out and snatched it up while hissing at Spark, "Get dressed!"

"In what?" he asked, amused to see superwoman flounder.

"Zanya!" the voice demanded. "Is that you? Are you okay, honey? Who is that with you?"

"Uh, hi, Big Bro," she offered as she glared at Spark who stood there naked. He was thoroughly enjoying her discomfort. "How are you?"

"How am I?" he roared so that even Spark could hear his voice. "Are you okay? Do you need me to come over there?"

"You sound like a reporter!" she sighed. "So many questions!"

"I am a reporter, Zanya! And I want to know the answers to these questions. First, are you all right?"

"I am fine, James," she said, glaring at Spark as he continued to stand there and grin like an idiot, a well-hung, delicious idiot, but idiot nevertheless!

"What happened?"

"Well, I was visiting a friend when a fire broke out. That's all! We are both fine!"

"Friend? That Spark MacIntyre? I have been hearing some interesting things about him and his whole family, Zanya. I'm not sure that you should be hanging around him!"

"Hanging around...James! I am a grown woman with a career of my own! I can hang around with whomever I choose!"

At this, Spark raised one red eyebrow and moved closer to the scene of the action. Zanya was scowling at the phone as if she could reach through and grab her brother. Was he warning her away from him?

"Zanya," he soothed. "I am just looking out for your best interests. I have gotten a few reports about that guy! Making medieval weapons, pyrotechnics, modeling? Sounds funny to me! And there was a fire at his house! A fire, Zanya! Most pyrotechnics are pyromaniacs in disguise!"

"That is enough, James!" she snapped. "I have met his whole family and I found them charming, caring and delightful! You spend so much time around criminals that you're starting to think everyone has an MO or a rap sheet! And you are way out of bounds!"

"I'm just worried about my sister! When I heard over the police band that you were involved in a fire, it scared me, honey!"

Zanya sighed as she forgave her brother instantly. She knew that his actions were motivated by fear and

love.

"I understand, James, but I am a grown woman. I can make decisions for myself! In fact, I will be spending the weekend with his family. I was invited to their house for a gathering! It should be fun."

"Oh, hon, are you sure about him?"

"Very sure," she grinned up at Spark who was beginning to look confused, but at her declaration, smiled as if the sun had come out after weeks of rain. "I think I'll hang on to this one for a while."

"Love?" her brother squeaked.

"Maybe," she said, as she blushed again.

Now that her brother was no longer yelling, Spark could not hear what he had asked, but he felt that it was important. He moved closer.

"I want to meet him," her brother growled, wanting to see the man who was trying to claim his little sister's heart.

"Tomorrow, at the Renn Fest, James. He's working there tomorrow and I am going with him. Is that okay?" she asked unthinkingly, turning to Spark.

"It's fine," both men answered at the same time.

"Who was that?" her brother demanded suddenly yelling into the phone again. "Is that boy there with you? What is going on?"

"Bye, James," Zanya laughed as she hung up the phone, ending his tirade.

"Brothers," she sighed as she looked up at Spark, amusement in her eyes.

"Oh, I understand," Spark said, imagining his reaction if he ever caught a man in his sister's bedroom. "I understand perfectly and I think better of him for it!"

"Family is important to you?" she asked, standing so that she could run her fingers over his prominently displayed chest. Already a few personal photo ideas were popping up in her head.

"It is," he said, smiling, suddenly remembering that they hadn't used any birth control. "Oh, damn."

"What?"

"I think I may have goofed," Spark said suddenly looking apologetic.

"What?" she asked again.

"Birth control," he sighed looking down and waiting for the explosion.

But the explosion that came wasn't the one he'd expected.

"I'm on the pill, you silly man!" she laughed, placing kisses on his chest.

"But...I just forgot! I mean I would have had no trouble putting on...They come in boxes of thirty-six you know?" he finished, a blush heating his face.

Now I am ready for death, he thought. I sound like an insensitive jerk!

"I understand, Spark!" Zanya laughed. "But I know that you don't have any Health Department warnings, right?"

"Right," he agreed, looking sheepish. "I am as healthy as an ox and twice as strong."

"And I don't have anything. I get tested regularly, my man. So if the pills do what they have been doing all of these years, we will be fine. If not, I am a responsible woman, and I always keep in mind the repercussions of my actions."

"If you got pregnant, Zanya, I wouldn't abandon you," he said softly, wondering how he got so lucky as to find a woman as smart and sexy as Zanya.

"I wouldn't have climbed into bed with you if I'd thought that, Spark," Zanya smiled. "But since neither one of us is ready to start being parents, we should just keep it down to practice."

"Practice?"

"Yeah, practice making babies, man! Got to get the sex act down perfect! Then if we ever decide to become parents, together or apart, we both know how to go about it without embarrassing the future offspring!"

Spark exploded into laughter at her words and was easily led back to the showers.

But in the back of his mind, her words got to him. Together or apart? He was thinking more along the lines of together and he wondered if she had considered it. Is that why she had said it, because she had considered it? Was she beginning to think in the long term, like he was? Then all thought left, beyond the pleasure of the touch, the sinfulness of some tastes, and the delight in joining with another.

Those questions could wait, but not forever.

Spark was beginning to play for keeps.

Chapter Thirteen

"Remember...oral stimulation?" Zanya purred.

"Mmm, yes," Spark hissed as his eyes began to slowly dilate.

"Remember what it feels like?"

"Hot and wet," he breathed, his chest beginning to rapidly expand and contract with the force of his

growing desire.

"Hot and wet, baby," she whispered, then grinned as beads of sweat began to break out on his forehead.

"And tight," he breathed as he looked up at her through his wet stringy hair.

He was the consummate animal, the sexual predator seeking more of what made him complete.

His eyes flashed almost silver and his full lips parted slightly as his tongue lashed out to moisten them.

"Yes!" Zanya hissed. "Give me more!"

The bright burst of light from her flash only added to the sensuality of his movements as Spark crawled across an imitation tiger skin rug, his glistening body dressed only in a brief loincloth.

His wet hair clung to his muscles as he moved, those muscles bunching beneath his skin. His eyes seemed to scream, 'Take me now,' while his body countered, 'At your own risk.'

"How much longer?" Spark growled, crawling closer and closer to where Zanya knelt with her camera snapping pictures wildly.

"Almost finished the roll," she answered, stepping back out of his reach.

It was too dangerous being within touching distance of the man. He may have been a virgin, but physically only!

She had awaked this morning, covered in sweat and convulsing with the first of many orgasms brought about by his talented tongue and fingers.

Never had she had a lover so eager to fulfill her desires!

He controlled his body perfectly, knowing when to proceed and when to push harder. And then the way he waited on his own release, trying to make their explosions simultaneous...! He was magical between the sheets! And she knew that she was the luckiest girl in Baltimore!

"Hurry," he breathed, as he flopped down on his side, his long hair trailing enticingly over his body as he rested his head on one arm and began to pet the rug with the other. I am getting lonely down here."

He pulled one leg slightly up towards his chest, teasing her with glimpses of the bulge that the skirt of the loin cloth barely covered.

"All right, jungle man," she breathed.

"Me Tarzan, you Jane," he growled, lifting his hand and crooking his finger at her. "Come over here and feed my monkey!"

"Me sick," said a loud voice from behind them. "And you nauseous!"

Spark jumped as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on him, then turned to glare at Eric as he and Ame made their way into the studio.

"Doesn't anyone ever knock?" Spark growled as he tried his best to hide almost seven feet of hard male flesh into a tiny leather loincloth.

"Don't let us stop you," Ame crowed, a look of interest in her eyes as she eyed the scene. "I find the artistic process fascinating."

"It is if you are into the jungle thing!" Eric laughed. "Bananas anyone?"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" Zanya laughed, as she placed her camera on a nearby table. "What are you two doing here this early in the morning?"

"We were worried," Eric said quietly. "We heard about the fire and came over to see if you were both okay."

"How did you hear about the fire?" Spark asked, not sure if he wanted his address made public if his face, and a good number of his other body parts, were going to be plastered over billboards and book covers around the country.

"Your brother called," Ame said as she took a seat by a far wall, away from the harsh glaring lights that Zanya used. "He was worried, so I gave him this number to check on you. I can see that you both are fine."

"Freakiest thing," Zanya said to her friend of many years. "The bedroom just exploded into flames! We were lucky to make it out!"

"We?" Eric drawled out, latching onto her unlucky choice of words. "*We*? What were *we* doing in the bedroom?"

"None of your business!" Spark cut in before Zanya could say anything.

Losing patience and losing his ability to be nearly naked with other people in the room, Spark grabbed the rug and wrapped it around his waist.

"Well, I hope you practiced safe sex," Eric kidded, and laughed as a fiery blush exploded across Spark's face.

"Leave him alone, Eric," Zanya said, fighting back a grin. Spark looked so adorable dressed up like a jungle fantasy and blushing to the roots of his red hair. "He is shy."

"Not too shy, I hope!" Eric interjected. "If he is, then it is such a total waste!"

"That's it!" Spark growled. "I'm going to go and get dressed."

"In what?" Zanya couldn't resist teasing. "Your parents are bringing you clothes, remember?"

"Oh!" Eric cried, clapping his hands in delight! "A floor show! Sparkles in the raw!" he laughed. "I love it!"

"Leave him be, Eric!" Ame laughed. "You'll spoil that untouched look about him! It's absolutely intriguing, Spark. Zanya, don't educate him too much, I like that look."

Spark prayed that the floor would open up and swallow him.

But gamely he tightened his hold on his manmade animal skin, and turning with as much dignity as he could muster, headed for the steps.

"Hey, Lord of the Jungle!" Eric called out. "Your vine is showing!"

Spark froze, and sure enough, he felt a draft.

Looking behind him, he saw that the tail end of his loincloth had caught in his rug, which, unfortunately gapped around his bottom. Even more unfortunate, the repositioned cloth left the thong underwear that went beneath it exposed to the room. The flash of a camera was the last spike needed to deflate his dignity.

Heedless of the laughter, he re-draped his blanket, turned and harrumphed at the spectators in the room. Just as quickly, but with as much dignity as he could muster, Spark ascended the steps.

"Spark!" Eric called, and he turned to see what the blonde giant wanted.

He groaned when he saw the makeup artist waving a dollar, a hopeful look in his laughing eyes.

Fighting a blush, he turned and ran the rest of the way!

He groaned as he heard Eric intone loudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, Spark has left the room."

And the crowd went wild...wild with laughter, that is.

* * * * *

"Come on, baby!" Zanya laughed as Spark sat on her bed, waiting for the uninvited guests to leave. "Come on down!"

"No," he sniffed as he made himself more comfortable on her bed. "I am not coming down until either my parents get here with my clothes, or those two have divorced themselves from this house."

"Ohh!" Zanya laughed as she tugged at a now dry lock of hair.

Spark had not wasted any time hopping in the shower and washing away the water and glycerin mixture she had smeared all over him to give his flesh the moist, wild look. Now he was squeaky clean and hiding out in her room.

The poor thing was still so shy! It only endeared him to her more.

"Using big words, big man?"

"Zan," he sighed. "It's not that funny." Even as he said the words, a wicked glint of humor showed in his eyes.

"But you didn't see your face!" she laughed. "It was priceless!"

"You are not helping your case," he said as he flopped back onto the bed.

"Well, if you don't go back down, they will tease you," she said as she straddled his waist. She noticed with pleasure that his naked cock reacted to her presence by slowly starting to fill.

"I like it up here."

He reached up to wrap his hands around her trim waist. Her smallness was a direct contrast to his largeness. In fact, they were a study in opposites. His golden skin contrasted with the deeper hue of hers. Her long black hair was juxtaposition to his own fiery red locks with their platinum streaks. Her features were fine and delicate, while his were rougher, coarser, and more masculine.

"I do too, but we have company," she reminded him.

"Hmm," he mused as he tugged at the white T-shirt that she wore. Her denim shorts were very short and showed off the mile of leg that had first entranced him...and drawn him to her side.

"Hmm, nothing! Your parents will be here soon and we don't want to embarrass them."

"My parents?" he said with a raised eyebrow. "Are we speaking of the same people? Nothing surprises them anymore! Believe me! Ember and I have tried to shock them! Not even X-rated birthday cakes cause them to blush!"

"You got your folks X-rated birthday cakes?" She bent low and sipped a small kiss from his lips. "That is not behaving like a proper son."

"Ha!" he retorted, lifting his head to steal a longer kiss. "They thanked us for the suggestion and told us that position had already been tried. Then dad calmly cut the damn thing and fed a slice to mom. We just sat there, with egg on our faces, and my parents never even flinched!"

"Serves you right," Zanya laughed. "Picking on your poor parents like that!"

"Well, my poor parents had better hurry up. I have to man the booth today. I hope Dad remembers to bring the right clothes."

"I think your dad will remember. He seems very competent, just like his son."

Spark flushed with pleasure at her words and held her down for a thank you kiss.

Things were just getting interesting, when Ame called from the stairs below.

"We will be leaving, darlings. We just wanted to make sure that you were okay."

"Don't do anything that I wouldn't do!" Eric called with laughter in his voice. "And that ain't a lot!"

Spark and Zanya exploded into laughter, breaking off the kiss and burying their faces in each other's hair.

"All by ourselves," she purred as she pulled back to stare into his expansive eyes.

"All by ourselves," he repeated as he lost himself in the glittering depths of her green orbs.

"Hmm," she purred as she lowered her face for another deeper, uninterrupted kiss.

"Let's hope it stays that way," he whispered before their lips made contact.

Spark's hand was up the back of her T-shirt, caressing and rubbing her soft skin, while Zanya was squirming around, trying to feel all of his flesh from his nipples to his knees.

Spark, finally losing patience, flipped her over in a wild mix of tangled hair, and laughed raunchily.

"Now you are mine," he mock-growled, and Zanya squealed in laughter.

Then the door slammed.

"Go home, Eric!" Spark bellowed as he groaned and dropped his head beside Zanya's face as she gripped his shoulders and giggled. "We already have the stuff you want to peddle! We have condoms, lube, whips and chains, of course, dildos that work underwater for when we feel freaky, and a two-gallon drum of chocolate pudding with bananas! We are all set!"

All through his shouted lecture, Zanya giggled and bounced on the bed in hopeless laughter!

This was a side of Spark that she had not seen before! Maybe being with her was easing his painful shyness.

"What?" a loud masculine voice exclaimed from the foot of the stairs! "Zanya Burke! What do you think you are doing?"

"James!" Zanya gasped then exploded in an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"James?" Spark asked, horror on his face and visions of a baseball bat to the back of the head dancing through his mind.

He would do the same thing if someone had said half of that stuff about his sister!

"Chocolate pudding with bananas?" a softer voice asked.

"Mom!" Spark yelled, then deflated, his body covering a still giggling Zanya.

"Oh, angel of death, in all of your infinite wisdom and mercy, please take me now!" he prayed, and was given an answer.

It was just not the answer that he wanted.

"We have your clothes, Spark," Kendall called up. "And I remembered to bring the leather gauntlets, the sword sheath, and the whips. Oh, did you want the metal codpiece that Zanya liked so well? I didn't think she'd want you to use it this time. I remember all the time she spent on her knees the other day."

Zanya stopped laughing.

"Well," Kendall called out, not even trying to hide her laughter. "Are you coming?"

"Argh!" James bellowed, anticipating the answer.

Chapter Fourteen

Spark pouted as if he were pursing his lips because his parents had taken away a particularly sweet piece of candy.

Zanya blushed a deep red, almost the exact shade of Spark's hair, as she glanced at his parents, then blanched as she turned to face her brother in the minivan.

It was a tense, silence-filled ride to the festival grounds. Well, tense in the back seats. Flame looked calm, despite his placid features, and appeared rather amused.

Kendall was still chuckling as she peeked in the back seat from time to time, then looked to her husband. Finally, she pulled a book out of the glove compartment and flashed it at Spark.

He flushed, then sighed, as he tried to make himself smaller in the seat. His loving, adoring, sweet mother held a *Brazen Heart's* book in her hand, eyes wide as she innocently glanced at him.

"Mother," he hissed, squirming a bit. "Please!"

"So, when's the wedding?" James snarled as he sat behind Spark and Zanya, who shared the middle seat.

James had the same stunning green eyes as Zanya, but that was about all they had in common. James sported a head full of inky black curls, cut short around his ears. He was only about five feet ten inches tall, but every inch was filled with powerful muscle. His keen reporter's eyes missed no details as he stared at Spark, marking him for death as he imagined what had put those suck marks on his sister's neck.

"Come off it, James!" Zanya sighed as he turned to glare at her brother.

"When my sister cheapens herself...."

"Would you care to rephrase that?" Spark snarled as he turned to glower at James.

"Children, don't make me stop this vehicle!" Flame said calmly from the drivers' seat. "Believe me, you will not like the consequences."

Immediately, Spark turned to face front. Zanya followed suit, though she didn't know why.

"But that boy stole my sisters' virtue!"

At that comment, the van went silent! Even Kendall stopped grinning and put her book away.

"Excuse me?" Kendall hissed as she slowly turned to face the man who tried to cast aspersions on her son's honor.

"My Kendall," Flame said quietly, and Kendall fell silent, though she continued to shoot daggers with her eyes.

"Now, James Burke," Flame said quietly. "If you ever again in your life refer to my child as a thief of virtue, I will take great pleasure in showing you what the men in my land do to those who assume too much without much thought. Not only have you damaged my son's honor as a man and your sister's as a woman, but you have blackened mine as a parent. Please do not make this mistake again."

Flame spoke quietly, his eyes on the road, but the intensity of his words was not to be dismissed or taken lightly.

"But he...."

"Did exactly what I wanted him to do!" Zanya said, smiling at Flame's words. He had defended her, and had done it without the violence that Spark surely would have used. He was acting almost like her father! It warmed her heart, though again she didn't know why.

"Zanya!" James hissed, running a hand through his curls in frustration.

"His parents should be asking me about my intentions!" she sighed. "I ruined him, not the other way around!"

"Argh!" James nearly screamed, outraged.

"Ruined?" Spark nearly screamed in disbelief! "As if a body can be ruined by such a wonderful, loving gift!"

Zanya blushed, Spark flushed, James fumed, Flame smiled, and Kendall beamed with pride.

"We raised a fine son," he said quietly to Kendall, who was still shooting daggers at James.

"The man insulted my child," she hissed, eyes still narrowed in her anger. Kendall was not one to forgive easily.

"I...I apologize," James finally stammered, realizing what he had said and how it must have sounded. "This is all such a shock!"

"What?" Zanya asked. "Finding out that I have a life?"

"Zanya!" James breathed as he sank back into his seat. "Don't be angry. You are my baby sister! I worry about you!"

"Worry about yourself, James," she said as she moved her hand across the leather couch seat to take Spark's. "And stop embarrassing me in front of...Spark's parents." That was not the best way to describe the friendly family that she had been openly welcomed into, but she didn't know how else to describe them.

"I'm sorry," he sighed as he closed his eyes in frustration.

"I must apologize as well," Spark said, gripping Zanya's hand tightly in his. "I thought that you were

someone else! I never meant to give the impression that I abuse or use Zanya in any way. I too have a younger sister, and I would probably murder the man I found her sleeping with."

James glared, shooting daggers of his own, then grunted.

Nothing was forgiven and nothing was forgotten.

Silence reigned as the van pulled into the employee parking area.

Flame immediately hopped out and opened the door for his lady fair, a smile on his lips as he saw her in her *Testrious* garb. She looked stunning, as usual.

He was dressed in his usual black leather pants and flowing shirt. He still could not bring himself to wear white.

Spark, opening the door and holding a hand out for Zanya, was dressed in brown and black. Brown leather, black knee boots, and a deep quill-decorated, brown leather vest. On his wrists were his favorite pair of black leather gauntlets and around his neck was his favorite pendant, a yin yang of fiery copper and cool silver. Ember had made them both matching necklaces when she'd first become a silversmith. The copper and the silver represented both houses that they were born to, and the yin yang represented them, two different facets of the same shining jewel.

Spark had immediately recognized the symbolism and was almost moved to tears by it. Flame had smiled grandly as he saw the necklaces adorning his children. He had taught them well. They would not forget or forsake the past. They would learn from it and use the gifts bestowed upon them by the Great Houses that they were born to. It made him proud.

Zanya emerged, also in leather, but wearing black tight leather from head to foot.

When the guests had arrived, she took one look at what Spark's parents were wearing and remembered the Renn Fest.

She'd reached deep into her closet and pulled out a black leather vest and a pair of matching pants. On her feet were black leather gladiator sandals that she had bought years ago. Around her upper arm was a slave band and around her neck was a thick silver choker, engraved with Celtic designs. Her hair was left wild and free around her back, giving her the look of a lady warrior about to kill something. Too bad her face showed nothing but embarrassment.

James exited last, dressed in jeans and the T-shirt he had arrived in.

His face showed his displeasure, but he wanted to talk to his sister and his contact, and this was the only way to do it.

Besides, he had a hot tip about this family from one of the workers here, and he suddenly felt the urge to follow up on it.

"So, this is it?" he asked as he glared at the array of people in all types of Renaissance garb.

There were at least three Henry the Eighths running around, a half-dozen Celtic warriors complete with kilts and sporrans, a slew of over-bosomed peasant girls, and even a Hell's Angels biker broad from hell!

Wait...the biker broad was walking his way. As she moved closer, the family resemblance was stunning.

This had to be the sister who was waiting for them to arrive.

She was hot, James thought to himself as he watched her approach on legs that stretched a mile. Too bad she was related to the red baboon who wanted to use sexual devices on his sister!

"Spark!" Ember cried as she raced onto the scene. "Are you okay? Is Zanya all right? Oh, your poor house! Did you lose anything important?"

Her questions came pouring out of her mouth as she reached up and gave her big brother a hug. Then she caught sight of James and pushed Spark hurriedly aside.

"Well, hello," she purred, sisterly concern melting into sudden interest. "I am Ember, as in fire. And who might you be?"

Flame shook his head and turned to escort Kendall inside.

She was acting like a true House Leader, he thought with a chuckle. Going after what she wants, deciding if it's worth her while, then making off with the goods or discarding at her leisure,

"Did you hear your daughter?" Kendall asked, making an effort not to turn around and smack some sense into her child. "Where did she get that attitude?"

"Her mother," Flame answered easily.

"That Ice House bitch?" She was still angry with Katla, even though the woman was dead.

"No, you," Flame said quietly.

Kendall's mouth snapped closed and her eyes flew to Flame.

"You are joking, right?"

"Remember the bathtub?"

Kendall, for the first time in years, felt a blush heating her face.

* * * * *

"I'm James, and I am that one's brother," he said as he pointed to Zanya, who rolled her eyes at him.

"Ignore him, Ember," Zanya said. "He has his panties in a bunch!"

"Well, I found my sister in bed with a strange man, Zanya! How am I supposed to react?"

"Who invited you?" she returned, growing angry.

"Strange man? Bed?" Ember said, gray eyes glowing. "Spark! You got your cherry popped!"

"Ember!" he wailed, sounding like a twelve-year-old before he could regain his equilibrium. "That's enough! We will not examine my love life in public! It is insulting to me and unfair to Zanya! She has been embarrassed enough!"

He was no longer embarrassed--he was growing angry. Too much stress was pushing him over the edge and he hated having to fight for his control. Even more, he hated anyone saying a bad word about Zanya where he could hear it. In fact, it made him kind of crazy!

The area around them felt a sudden drastic increase in temperature, just a hot flash, but it was noted.

"Spark," Ember said quietly, reading her brother. "You are right. I was out of line and I apologize.

Hoping that no one would notice, she used a bit of her energies to cool the air around them. She didn't try to mask her brother's power, just slide in before it to add a cooling barrier.

Everyone shivered at the sudden blast of cold, but that could be explained as a sudden cool wind. Maryland was notorious for its shifting weather patterns, so this wasn't unusual.

Except for a person trained in details. James could not help but wonder why none of the many trees that surrounded the field had moved a single leaf.

He turned to examine the brother and sister more closely. Maybe the wacko who'd called in was onto something.

"I'm all right," Zanya said, pulling her brother's attention toward her. "Words cannot hurt me, and it's not like it was a secret! We ran out of the house almost completely naked!"

"Spark didn't douse the flames?" Ember asked curious. Those flames were a piece of cake to douse after the training that their father insisted upon.

"He was incoherent at the time!" Zanya laughed, then folded over with roaring laughter as Spark's face again matched the color of his hair. He was so shy!

"That good?" Ember asked Spark, trying not to explode into laughter. Spark was always trying to be Mr. Super Control Man! It was amusing to know that he could lose that legendary cool sometimes.

"I refuse to discuss this!" Spark said stiffly, trying to ignore the flash of color to his face. "Shall we go, my lady?" he asked, offering Zanya his arm.

"Hey! What about me? Don't I get escorted?" Ember laughed as her brother tried to change the subject, and not too subtly either!

"You can hang on, I guess, poor old spinster peasant," Spark said, causing both Ember and Zanya to explode into laughter.

Ember was dressed as an American's idea of a biker girl, complete with tight, leather vest worn sans shirt, and poured-on leather pants. Her chain link belt rode low on her hips and she wore enough jewelry to show the customers what she was wearing; yet she still managed to move like a walking advertisement for sex.

"Coming, James?" Ember asked, turning to Zan's brother.

"Good to see that someone remembered me," he growled, glaring at Spark.

"As if I could forget," Ember purred, offering him her arm.

James looked at her, looked into her eyes and swore that he saw swirling patterns of red fire. But she blinked and the illusion passed. The jewels, he decided, but stored that fact for later examination.

"No thanks," he replied slowly. "I am here because I promised to meet a contact."

"All work and no play," Ember murmured, but took her brother's hand after staring with consideration at James for a moment. "Later then," she said, as the trio turned and moved towards the entrance.

James glared at their backs. Okay, Spark's back, before turning to go to the main gate.

Once there, he paid his entrance fee, gathered his program of the day's events, and walked over to the costume rental. Here he pulled a green and red pen out of his pocket and stuck it behind his right ear and settled back to wait.

Not long after, a voice from behind whispered, "You James from the paper?"

"I am," he replied. "And you would be my Deep Throat."

"I don't know about that, man," the voice whispered, "but I do have something for you to hear."

"About the MacIntyres?" he asked slowly, turning to face the short, rumped jester that stood beside him.

"Yeah, strange family, that one! Did you know that they are obsessed with fire? The parents do the fireworks display and the son works the forge with the sister. I've heard strange rumors about all of them!"

"Really?" James said slowly. Was his sister sleeping with a family of pyromaniacs? Was she in danger? Hell, he just wanted something good on that Spark. Whoever heard of naming a kid after a plug anyway? He wanted something to tear that man a new hole and run his sister away from him! Not that he didn't trust her judgment, but something about that man rubbed him the wrong way!

Maybe it was his comment about battery-operated devices.

"Yeah! Been hearing strange things about them for years!" the torchbearer said, looking nervously around.

To drop a dime on a Renn Fest artisan was like squealing about the Mafia to the feds. It was something that was not done without consequences. He hated consequences almost as much as he hated work.

"Do tell," James said, with a sly grin. "I'm all ears!"

Chapter Fifteen

"I told you that they would be great together," one voice said gleefully.

"But we don't know that yet," the second protested. "It may fizzle out before it begins."

"Trust me," the other said. "They have been waiting a long time for this. They need each other. You'll see!"

"All I see is that this may backfire on us," the second voice said. "And I really don't want that to happen."

* * * * *

"So, are you taking pictures today?" Ember asked, as she adjusted her leather vest. She looked so much like Spark it was almost uncanny. "Because I would love to see you work."

"Nope!" Zanya replied as she watched the twins open their booth. "Today I am here strictly as an observer. I want to watch you and your brother at work. Is it hard to be a silversmith?"

"Not too hard," Ember said, as she pulled a heavy tarp off of her workstation and began to fold it. Zanya immediately walked around the glass case that ran across the entrance of the booth to help. "So long as you have your design and know what you're looking for, it is fairly easy."

"So says the woman with all the awards," Zanya laughed. "I have done some research on you and your brother, and you both are considered true artisans."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Ember laughed. "Hear that, big brother?" she called. "This woman knows talent when she sees it! I think she's a keeper!"

"Ember!" Spark said tiredly, as he began to stoke the fire in the large forge that they shared. "Please remember your age is not your shoe size and act accordingly."

"Stick in the mud!" she called back, sticking out her tongue then turning to grin at Zanya. "I love getting his hair up," she laughed.

"His hair?" Zanya asked, grinning at the interplay between the siblings. She wished she and her brother had an easy relationship like these two, but she guessed that they were just two entirely different people when they were two kids struggling to stay together in their youth.

"Yes," Ember laughed. "His Macintyre! His Irish up!" She turned and blew Spark a kiss before she turned again to Zanya. "He gets way too serious sometimes, and it's my job to make him take life a little less seriously. Well, then again, I guess that is your job now!"

She laughed as Zanya gave her a wicked leer in return.

"And baby, believe me, I do my job well!"

Ember exploded into laughter, then turned to stare at her brother intensely for a moment.

"What?" he asked, as he began to sort large bars of metal, trying to decide what the day's choice would be.

Zanya and Ember both giggled at his perplexed expression.

"I would say that it's hormones, but I want to live to see tomorrow," he shook his head sadly as he turned back to his work. He would never understand women! When they got together in groups of two or more, the strangest things happened.

"So, are you going to hang around here and be a model and a saleswoman?" Ember asked, as she opened a locked, waist-high safe and pulled out a tray of delicate bronze links. "Or are you going to wander around and get the feel of the place?"

"I think I'll stay here a bit and ooh and ahh at Spark's biceps before I explore. What is there to do here?"

"Funny you should ask," Ember said with a grin. "See that stall over there?" She pointed to a far off corner where there was a set of benches and nothing else.

"Yes?"

"That's where Violet works. He'll be around any moment to give pony rides."

"He? Violet?" Zanya looked confounded by a man named after a delicate flower.

"Oh, you'll know him when you see him," Ember laughed. "He is the human pony today. You have to get a ride and he will tell you all of the hot spots to visit. Like the elephant ride, the sword swallower, the human chess match, and of course, the food court!"

"But you have to wait to do the pubs with me," Spark added, as he selected his rod and pumped the bellows to get the fire burning hotter. Waves of heat wafted up from the large metal forge and began to make his body sheen with moisture.

Spark had tied his hair back into a long ponytail and braided it before he began, so there was no chance of him catching himself on fire. Now with his hair pulled back, exposing his masculine face and his body beginning to glisten, Spark was a sight to make any woman swoon.

"Okay," Zanya murmured, remembering the feel of those hard muscles under her fingers. The man exuded sex appeal and he wasn't even aware of it.

"When you are ready, just wander over and let me know. I do a demo at four, so that gives you a lot of time to explore."

"Mmm-hmm," she answered, watching as a bead of sweat rolled down his neck to disappear in the mountain of muscle that made up his chest.

"Zan? Are you okay?" he asked. Shoveling the rod into the fire, he walked over to her.

"Damn, Spark!" Ember laughed. "You are so oblivious sometimes!"

"What?" he asked, as he took Zanya's shoulders in his arms and examined her flushed face. "Is it too hot in here for you, babe? I am kind of used to the heat, so I hardly ever notice it."

"I just bet you are," a voice said from behind them, and they all turned to see James standing there, a nasty look on his face.

"And that is supposed to mean...?" Ember asked as Zanya stared at her brother, wondering at the venom in his voice.

"Nothing, but a lot of accidents with fire happen around you, huh, Spark?"

"What?" Zanya asked, turning her back to Spark to rest protectively against his chest. She shot her brother a menacing look before she picked up one of Spark's arms and wrapped herself in his embrace.

"Fire-related accidents seem to follow you around, Spark Macintyre, if that is your real name," James said calmly, as he pulled a notebook out of his back pocket.

"What are you up to, James?" Zanya sighed tiredly. "I told you once before that you have no right to check up on me or my friends!"

"But as you are my sister, I have the right to protect you from maniacs!"

"Excuse me?" Ember said, walking around Spark and Zan to face the man attacking her brother.

"Let the man speak, Ember," Spark said quietly, as he looked calmly at James, almost bored even.

"Since the floor is open," James said with a smirk, "let's talk about the fire at your house."

"Electric," Zanya growled. "I was there when the inspector made that pronouncement."

"True, but I am talking about the fire at your parents' home five years ago. Reports said that a five foot ball of flame shot up into the air, endangering trees and the surrounding foliage, yet your house wasn't damaged and the fire department wasn't called."

"Pyro sometimes blows," Spark said as he hugged Zanya tighter to him, inhaling her scent. He wondered if James would let the grudge go, or if he would have to do something about that. He would seriously hate to have to injure his future brother-in-law, but a man had to do what a man had to do. "Please continue."

"If you insist," James said, with a grin. "What about the fire in your school, Spark? It started in the bathroom with you as the only witness. The police had no explanation for that one, yet a stall was burned to a crisp...just the stall! No other part of the bathroom was damaged."

"I remember that! I thought someone set a cherry bomb off in the toilet. These things tend to happen in public schools. Mom and Dad decided to home school after that."

"Interesting," James mused out loud "Interesting that after running your name by some friends of mine, they seem to keep coming up with fire-related accidents, Spark. Some even swear that you caused all of these fires, that you are obsessed with it. Kind of like your names," he said, nodding in Ember's direction.

"Oh, get real, James!" Zanya growled. She had had enough! "That is it! You come down here uninvited

and start sticking your nose where it doesn't belong! Who asked you to check on Spark? How dare you insinuate that he is some kind of firebug who is going to burn me at the least provocation! You are really sick and I want you to go home right now!"

"I have a responsibility to protect you, Zanya!"

"You have no right to butt into my affairs, James, especially when it comes to Spark!"

"And we were named for our hair," Ember truthfully added, trying not to laugh at the sullen expression on James' face. "It is rather red, don't you think?"

"I think that you don't look like your mother!" James snapped. "A true pity!"

"Hey!" Spark said, easing Zanya out of his embrace. "I can understand that you are upset because you found you sister with a man in strange circumstances. If you were me, I probably would have tried to flatten you by now! But you leave my mother and my sister out of this! You have your issues with me, but you had better leave my family alone!"

"James!" Zanya nearly screamed. "What did you mean by that?"

"Nothing," James huffed, knowing that he'd gone too far.

"No, it's not 'nothing'!" Zanya said as she stepped in front of Spark to face her brother eye to eye. "What is your beef here really? What is it you have against Spark and his family?"

"Let it go, Zan!" James said as he slammed his book back into his pocket and glared at Spark and Ember.

"I will not let it go!" Zanya said, getting up in his face and slamming her fists on her hips. "Just what is your boggle here?"

"Zan!" James growled, his eyes narrowing as he began to lose his temper.

"What?"

"Dammit, Zanya!" James finally bellowed. "If you are going to sleep around, couldn't the man at least be black?"

Zanya took two steps back as if she had been struck! What was this racist crap doing coming from her brother? Her brother!

"What?" she gasped, oblivious to the shocked looks coming from Spark and Ember.

"Couldn't you find a black man, Zanya? That's what's wrong with the black woman today! They have given up on the black man!"

"I can't believe this shit!" Zanya screamed, her green eyes sparkling in her anger and disbelief. "I can't believe that you are saying this to me!"

"Look, Zan...if you are going to throw your life away, at least let the man be black! What's wrong? Can't find a brother to take you on?"

Wham!

Zanya balled up her fist and before she knew what was happening, let it fly at her brother's smug face.

There was a loud crack as her knuckles met his jaw, and James began to tumble backwards.

"Zanya!" Spark bellowed as he reached around to grip her arms, to hold her from advancing on the fallen man.

"Hit him again!" Ember cheered as her red, angry face loomed over James as he settled on his backside in the sand that surrounded the booth. "Once is never enough for a bigot!"

"I can't believe you did that!" James mumbled, as he gingerly raised one hand to his jaw and stared up at his sister.

"You'd better be grateful that's all I did," she screamed, suddenly kicking and rearing, trying to break free of Spark's hold. "You hypocrite! How dare you come here and lay your hang-ups on me! Mom and Dad must be spinning in their graves! Let me go!" she screamed at Spark. "He can't get away with that!"

"Zanya, calm down!" Spark whispered in her ear, fighting to hold her bucking body and keep her hair out of his eyes. "Please!"

"Let her go!" Ember drawled, as she watched James climb slowly to his feet, still looking amazed. "I personally would like to see her stomp a mud puddle in his face, then walk it dry."

"Ember!" Spark growled, grunting as Zan's heels struck his shins. "You are not helping."

"Zan," James began, looking stricken. "I didn't mean...."

"You meant what you said, you black Nazi!" she railed. "Go home! Go away! Get out of my sight! I don't want to see you, James! Go away!"

She suddenly stopped fighting, shocked by what her brother had said. "Please, just go away!"

"Zan...."

"Now!"

"This is all your fault!" James growled at Spark, sneering at Ember as he turned away.

"I think you need to look in your mirror, buddy," Spark growled as he changed his hold on Zanya. He tenderly pulled her close, sheltering her from the world that suddenly attacked her happiness. "That's where you'll find the fool responsible."

In a huff, James turned on his heel and stormed away, knocking aside a few curious stall owners who'd come out to see what the commotion was about.

"Zan, are you okay?" Spark held her close as a rather large, bronze-skinned man walked over.

He was almost seven feet of pure muscle, topped by a crown of raven black hair that hung to his waist.

He was wearing leather leggings and a breechcloth that went nicely with his bare chest. Braided in his hair, was a string of beads and feathers that perfectly suited his Native American features. It lent him the look of a warrior on a mission.

"Ember!" he called out. "Is there a problem that I may help you with?"

"Violet!" Ember called out, some of the anger leaving her face.

"The Festival is about to open and you all looked like you could use my services."

"Violet," Spark said, still hugging Zanya. "I would like to introduce you to my soul mate, Zanya."

Soul mate? Violet looked puzzled, but then smiled, storing this information for later.

"Yeah," Ember said. "We had some heated words with her brother."

"The dude that ended up ass over heels?" Violet asked. "Looked like more than words to me."

"I have to apologize for him," Zanya suddenly said, breaking her intense silence and coming out of her shock. "I never thought I'd hear James speak that way!"

"Time changes people," Spark said. "Though that doesn't excuse what he said."

"There is no excuse for that ignorance!" Zanya bristled. "I am ashamed for us both!"

"Both?" Ember asked before Spark could and moved to take her hands, chafing them between her own as she realized how cold they were.

"Him for obvious reasons, and me for being related to him!"

"Ahh, Zan!" Spark groaned. "You are not your brother, any more than I am my sister."

"Got that right," Violet added with a leer at the sister in question.

"Watch it!" Spark growled, his eyes narrowing at Violet, who lifted his hands in the universal "no harm" gesture.

"The point is," Spark continued, "he doesn't speak for you. You do that very well on your own!"

"With your fists!" Ember added, as she struggled not to laugh. "You should have seen his face!"

"This is nothing new!" Spark said as he hugged his woman tighter. "Believe me, we've heard it all before, from teachers, from doctors, from people walking by as we'd sit in restaurants. It gets easier to ignore. Hell, it's almost too pitiful to laugh at a racist!"

"Almost!" Violet added. "But then, I always had a sick sense of humor."

"A-men!" Ember giggled, then turned to hug the feigned hurt look right off of his face.

"So it was a racist thing?" Violet said, placated by his hug from Ember. "Shoot, we ignore that stuff around here. I mean look around! If we ain't a bunch of misfits, pigs might fly out of my butt!"

"Pigs? What have you been doing this week?" Ember sassed, causing them all to chuckle.

"Still, I would like to apologize for James. Ember and Spark, especially Spark, I just want you to know that I don't feel that way at all."

"Oh, we know, hon!" Ember said quietly, as she smiled at her brother's love. "Your love shows up in your work. Besides, Spark wouldn't have you if you were packing that type of baggage. I wouldn't allow it!"

"You wouldn't allow it?" Spark snarled, grabbing one of Zan's arms and placing it across his chest. "Hold me back, Zan! I have to hurt that girl!"

Giggling, Ember slipped behind Violet and peered at her brother from under his arm. When she saw she had his attention, she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Brat!" Spark laughed as he leaned down to kiss Zan. "No more sad looks! The festival is about to begin! This is a day for fun and adventure!"

A reluctant grin tugged at Zan's lips as she shook her throbbing wrist.

"Yeah, fun and adventure," she said, with a smile. "And some ice!"

"Ice?" Ember asked.

"Yeah, no one ever told me that punching someone in the face would hurt so much!"

"Then you didn't do it right!" Ember added sagely. "I'll teach you to make a fist!"

And off the girls went, Zanya from Spark arms and Ember from around Violet, leaving the two men standing there, dumbfounded.

"She's going to teach her to make a proper fist? You had better behave, man. Zan's going to knock you on your red ass for sure."

"I have one thing to say to you, Violet!" Spark said, a serious look on his face. And he let his finger do the talking.

Chapter Sixteen

"See you soon, babe," Zanya said, as the small litter that Violet pulled carried her away from the booth where Spark stood, muscles bulging, as he hefted a large metal hammer, the fire blazing behind him, casting his body in shimmering waves of heat, sweat leaving a sheen on his body.

She smiled and waved, noticing that his eyes were on her, while the eyes of several passing women were glued to the overtly masculine sight of Spark at work.

"He is something, isn't he?" Violet asked, as his litter bumped slowly along, with Zanya's head straining back to catch one last glimpse of her man.

"Huh?" she asked, as she turned to face this mountain of a man.

"Spark, he is something. Back in school, he was the nicest guy but he took crap from no one."

"Known him that long?" Zanya watched as the muscles in his back flexed as he easily pulled the weight of the litter. For the umpteenth time, she wished she had brought a camera.

"Since we were kids, that's how long. His parents took him and Ember to school the first day of kindergarten and they kind of blew everyone away with what they knew. Elephant rides over there," he interrupted his monologue long enough to point in the general direction of a horrid stench that even the fresh green of nature couldn't cover. "They just cleaned out his pen so the smell is strong. In a minute, you won't even notice it."

"Blew everyone away?" she asked, waving her hand in front of her face and wrinkling her nose at the rancid stench. She guessed that Violet was used to it, working in the Festival and all, but it overpowered her ability to smell for a moment.

"Yeah, they came to kindergarten writing in cursive. None of us could do it. Plus they had a time not answering questions in different languages. They knew so many of them, it seemed out of this world. But I guess it's because of their father."

"Don't stop there!" Zanya wailed, as Violet paused in his speaking.

"Don't get me wrong. Flame and Kendall were like parents to a lot of us in the neighborhood, but that man knows so much it's eerie!"

"Flame is a genius?" Zanya asked, leaning forward in her curiosity. All around her the sights and sounds, not to mention smells, of the Renaissance era swirled around her, but all she desired was more insight into Spark.

"Yeah, got so many degrees it's amazing! And Spark and Ember are right behind him. But he never acted snooty, you know?"

"I know," Zanya answered. In her career she had run into a lot of intellectual and scholastic assholes. In her opinion, Spark and his family came across in no way like them.

"Anyway, Flame wanted Ember and Spark to learn how to deal with kids their own age so he enrolled them in school. But that was a bad idea. Birds of prey over there, and the Castle Stage where the sword swallower will be performing later, to your right."

"Why was it a bad idea, Violet?" Zanya asked, ignoring the tour. She wanted answers.

"Well, they didn't fit in. I mean, look at them! One teacher wanted Spark to cut his hair, he always had those platinum streaks in it, but his father refused. Then they tried to expel him because of it."

"What happened?" Zanya asked, knowing how much Flame loved his children.

"Well, from what I heard, that man started out speaking in English and by the time he finished putting

them in their places, he was speaking Dutch, Gaelic, or Russian. And he was deadly calm while he was doing it, too!"

"So he spoke to them?"

"More like threatened to sue them, cited how they were infringing upon his first amendment rights, and then outlined a more proficient program to teaching kids and getting them to adapt."

"Wow!" Zanya laughed. "I would have loved to see that!"

"Then he pulled them from school."

"But I thought..." Zanya said, confused.

"He pulled them out and home schooled them until they were about fourteen or so. Then he let them go to high school. They remembered me from kindergarten. I had long hair myself so we all kind of hung out together, and we hooked up again."

"That's amazing!" Zanya said. "They were home schooled until high school?"

"Yup. Then their father said that they could ably defend themselves, so he let it go. And boy, was that an interesting four years."

Violet chuckled to himself as he lost himself in his memories.

"What? Were they totally cool kids and everyone wanted to be with them?"

"Nope. They were a couple of egg-headed nerds!" Violet laughed. "But I remembered them and had loved them anyway. Food court's that way," he pointed to his left.

"My Sparkles was a nerd?" Zanya asked, incredulous. But then again, it would explain his almost painful shyness and complete lack of self-awareness.

"He was the biggest Poindexter since Eugene from the movie Grease," Violet laughed. "But no one would tell him that to his face. I remember he even corrected the physics teacher when she had a theorem wrong. No one wanted to mess with him, not the teachers, not the staff, and definitely not the students. He was almost the size he is now, and Ember, she was too mean to mess with."

"I can see that," Zanya chuckled as she pictured Ember thumbing her nose at the world.

"Then there was that fire incident."

"Fire?" she asked, remembering her brother's words.

"Yeah. Some dude was messing with Spark big-time. I guess he wanted to make a name for himself by beating on the biggest kid in school, but Spark ignored him like he didn't exist. I think the straw that broke the camel's back came when he threatened to do something to Ember."

"Oh, no!" Zanya gasped.

"I know!" Violet continued. "Ember kept to herself, so this guy and a few of his friends tried to get her

alone after school, if you know what I mean. Em was holding her own, but Spark came around the corner and saw this guy connect a punch to his sister's face, and man, did he explode! The dude runs into the bathroom, 'cause Spark is basically kicking his ass, and Spark follows him. I don't know what he did, 'cause the door got stuck, but that dude left school the next day and never came back. Everyone said Spark tried to set that boy on fire, but there was nothing they could find to prove it. I guess they ran into the bathroom when someone was trying to play a joke with a cherry bomb or something and the boy got singed a bit. But I have never seen Spark that mad in my life. And if you think that was bad, you should have seen what happened when his parents showed up."

"Flame went off?" she asked.

"Nope, Kendall did."

"Kendall, kind of a tall, black woman, hair in a bun, always laughing?"

"One and the same. She flew into that school dragging Em who was sporting a nice black eye, and proceeded to get into the principle's face. I mean she was cursing so loud, we could hear her in the hallway! Flame said nothing, but then the boy's mother called Spark a deviant and said that he should be whipped for beating up on her precious boy. Flame had to pull Kendall off of that woman."

"Kendall?" she asked, awe in her voice.

"Kendall. And when the woman brought up Spark and Ember not being her own kids and that she would never understand, Kendall read her the riot act."

"Kendall is not their mom?" Zanya asked. Both Spark and Ember had very dark skin for Irish people. And their hair was the texture and color of several different races.

"Well, their mother died when they were babies, Spark told me once. And their father met Kendall and fell in love with her soon after. I think they met in the hospital when they were infants or something. But Kendall loves those kids as if they were her own. I mean, she is like a lioness protecting her cubs. She would kill anyone to protect her babies."

"That's beautiful," Zanya sighed, trying in vain to remember her own mother.

Both of her parents had died when she was just a girl, and her brother had basically raised her. But she couldn't remember a time when she hadn't longed for the tender embrace of a mother, someone to love her and understand her unconditionally. Sure, James loved her, but he was a man. No one but another female could understand the special pains and agonies of growing up female.

"Oh, it is," Violet agreed. "And Kendall was kind of like 'the mom.' And she was Mom for all of us kids in the neighborhood."

"What happened to the boy?" Zanya asked, wanting closure to the story.

"Well, he transferred out. Flame and Kendall didn't prosecute. I mean, it was assault and they could have had him put away, but they said that Spark taught him a lesson that he wouldn't forget. And all the girls wanted to date Spark for being such a hero. But most of the guys were kind of afraid of Ember."

"Why?" Zanya asked, thinking that Ember's beauty would be hard for any teenaged hormone-in-tennis-shoes to resist.

"'Cause while Spark was kicking the shit out of the boy who attacked Ember, Em was kicking the shit out of his two friends."

Zanya exploded into laughter. She could easily picture Ember taking on the world and winning with one hand tied behind her back.

"Poor Em!" she chuckled. "Did she get a date to the prom?"

"I said most guys," Violet preened. "And of course she had a date. She went with me."

"Violet!" Zanya gushed. "You Casanova, you!"

"Ain't it the truth?" he chuckled. "And up ahead is the human chess match," he said, pointing to the field in front of them. With an easy gait, he took her over to watch.

* * * * *

"Kevin," James said into the phone. "I'm going to need a favor from you. Remember those night vision goggles and the telephoto lens? I need to borrow it. And no, I can't tell you, but I'll need it by tomorrow. My sister's getting in over her head, and I need something to help pull her butt out of a sling. You know how women are, turned by a pretty face."

James examined an old photo of Spark from back when he was a teen modeling sensation. "Yeah, Kevin. She's mixing with the wrong crowd and I think she needs some proof to make a believer out of her."

Chapter Seventeen

"This is the spot," Violet said, as he stopped in front of a large pavilion. "The man of the hour should meet you here around two or so. Just remember, if you get lost come back here. It's the central pub."

Before she could answer, there was a loud boom that almost shook the rafters of the pavilion.

"What was that?" she asked, alarmed, visions of an exploding forge running through her mind.

"Oh, it was the signal to start the day's festivities," Violet laughed, as he released his hold on the litter and extended her a hand to help her down. "It was also my signal to get moving. There will be a lot of people wanting the grand tour."

"Thank you, Violet," Zanya said sincerely, as the first of the tourists made their way around the circle of trees that shaded the pub.

"No problem, Fair Lady," he responded, a twinkle in his eyes. "Methinks that thou art a grand looker, perfect for yon blockhead forge master."

Upon hearing that, Zan's tinkling laughter filled the air.

"I bid you anon," he said, in full Old World charm, as he bent to pick up the handles of his litter.

"Wait!" Zan called, as he started to turn away. "Is Violet your real name?" Again she wished that she had brought her camera! She would make a point of bringing it the next day.

"Yes, My Lady! Violet is truly my given name, yet not the full name."

"Well, what is it?" she asked, curiosity eating away her manners. She had an insatiable desire to know.

"My Lady, I am called 'Violet Eyes of the Panther Who Summons Death.' That is a loose translation, by the way, and quite a mouthful. Now you can see why I just go by Violet."

"Wow!" Zanya said, shocked. "That is some name."

"Thou tellest me, My Lady," he laughed.

"So, have you summoned any death recently?" she asked, a mischievous grin tugging at her lips.

"You are so much like Mama Kendall," he laughed. "And no, I have not summoned any death recently. Pity," he said softly, talking to himself. He watched a torchbearer pass, a self-contented look on his face. "Some people could use a little fear of death."

"Violet?" Zanya asked, becoming concerned and placing a hand on his bulging forearm, bringing his attention back to her.

"It's okay, My Lady," he sighed. "It's just that some of us here would sell out their own mother for a grudge and a dollar."

"What...."

"Pay it no heed, Zanya," he said, turning his charming smile to her once again. "We all have our demons to bear."

"Amen to that," she whispered, clearly remembering her brother and his actions.

"And on that note, I leave you to explore, Fair Lady," he laughed, picking up the handles of his litter and turning away. "And don't forget to be here at two. Spark can be mean when he doesn't get his way."

"My Sparkles?" Zanya laughed. "He wouldn't hurt a fly!"

Violet grunted as he turned away, heading back to his stand and his assigned duties as official litter bearer. "It's a good thing I didn't tell her about the time he found that guy trying to get Ember's blouse off," he muttered to himself. "Or about the time some jack-off said something nasty about his mother, or about the time that weirdo tried to steal his blade designs."

Spark was a dominant male animal, Violet thought. And Zanya was going to be shocked when he got over his infatuation with true love, regained his balance, and let his true colors show.

* * * * *

"Can you believe that brother of hers?" Ember asked as she added another delicate link to the girdle that she was making. "I mean, get out of the fifties for goodness sake."

"There are many like that," Spark panted, as he lifted the large metal hammer and let it fall to the red hot bar that he held with a pair of large metal pincers.

The billowing fire from the forge changed his hair to a glowing nimbus as beads of sweat rolled across his frame, emphasizing the girth of his muscles, showing each contraction in stark relief. He turned slightly. His glowing golden skin looked both hard and soft as he deftly flipped the rod over and hefted the hammer for another blow.

Sparks flew, drawing attention to his god-like body, as he efficiently went about pounding and beating a hot piece of metal, bending it and shaping it into the form that he chose.

The sharp metal clangs beat out a rhythm as he breathed deeply, forcing his body to maintain the beat, perfecting the shape of this new sword. He created a masterpiece from sweat, bone, iron, and might.

A group of female visitors, looking at a selection of metal adornments, froze in place as they watched the show that Spark was inadvertently putting on.

Eyes narrowed in concentration, his leather apron protecting him from flying sparks, he never even noticed as the women stood there, open-mouthed with awe as they watched him work.

"If you tarnish that piece with your drool, I'll have to insist that you buy it," Ember said softly to one of the women handling a hair ornament, stroking the long shaft as if it was the object of her recent attention.

"Huh? Oh," the woman responded, and absently handed Ember a fifty.

Shaking her head, Ember made change and had to nudge the woman to get her attention.

"He's taken," she said, and the woman's face exploded into a nice deep pink, her embarrassment obvious.

"Sorry," she whispered. "But is he as good as he looks?"

"How would I know?" Ember laughed. "I'm just his sister. His boyfriend might know the answer."

"Boyfriend?" the second woman gasped, looking dismayed.

"They don't call this the *House of Fire* for nothing," Em sighed.

"Fire?"

"As in flaming!" She sighed.

"Do you think I can make him interested in girls?" the first girl asked, biting her lip in frustration.

"Honey, he came home one day and told me...and I quote, 'I have never felt so good since I ditched the bitch and made the switch!'"

"Oh," the girl mourned forlornly as she and her girlfriend turned away. "What a waste."

"You don't know the half of it," Ember laughed, drawing her brother's attention.

"What?" he asked as he paused in his rhythm to wipe the sweat from his face.

"Nothing, oh great one," she laughed. "While you are over there creating weapons of chaos and destruction, I have been protecting your virtue."

"Huh?" he raised one eyebrow, looking exactly like their father for a moment, as he stared at her in question.

"Never mind, super stud. Get back to work! This ain't no soup kitchen, you know. You have to earn your keep."

Shrugging, Spark again lost himself in the rhythm of the metal pounding against his anvil, lost in thought about the one woman who could bend him like the rods that he was currently working on...his Zanya.

Zan rounded the bend where the elephants were kept as she checked her watch again. She was having a great time on her own!

Already, she had thrown an ax at a target, pretending that it was her brother, and winning a free soda, thrilled at the birds of prey, had a horseback ride, had her picture taken with King Henry the Eighth and his Plantagenet wife number two. She wondered if the wife knew that she was headed for the chopping block.

She ate cream of broccoli soup in a bread bowl, had steak on a stick, and a delicate, flaky funnel cake. Now it was time for the human chess match and the elephant ride. After that, she would meet Spark at the pub for their promised drink.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder as she took her seat in the bleacher-like stands.

She looked around and groaned when she saw her brother standing there.

"I thought I told you to beat it before I forget that we are blood. I might just borrow one of those swords to run you through."

"Zan," her brother began, but she cut him off.

"I know how to make a proper fist now, James, so I'd advise you to leave me alone. We have nothing to say to each other."

"Zan, listen to me," he said, running his hands through his hair in frustration. "I only want to keep you safe."

"I will be safe. Right in Spark's golden arms that are peppered by his bright red Irish hair," she retorted

with some heat. She tried to keep her voice down as their discussion drew a few glances from others waiting for the match to begin.

"Okay, Zan. I was out of line."

"Don't you mean out of your mind? Yes, that I will agree with."

"Zan, listen to me! I don't trust that family! They come out of nowhere and suddenly they are taking Maryland by storm! Did you know about his modeling career? How he posed half-naked for his aunt's company years ago? He is probably a player or worse."

"And guess who's photographing him naked now, James? Little old me! Spark is not a player and furthermore, I trust him more that I trust you at this moment! Good day, James. I have suddenly lost my appetite for chess."

She stood up, only to have him grab her arm, stopping her short and almost pulling her off of her feet. In shock, she looked up at her brother, her face draining of color.

"I am telling you Zan, he is no good!" James said again, his face turning angry with her resistance. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from him and his family! They are going down, Zan. There is something strange about those people, and I intend to expose them for what they are."

"Is there a problem?"

They both looked up to see Flame standing there. A concerned Kendall stood by his side. He looked pointedly at the arm that James gripped so tightly it was sure to leave a bruise, then back up to the man's face, anger showing in his gray eyes.

"Family business," James hissed, twisting her arm a bit.

"Then I guess we had better intervene," Kendall said in a low growl, her fists clenching. "Zanya is family now, and I'd hate to have to hurt someone who's hurting her."

Abruptly, James realized that he was almost breaking his sister's arm and released her.

She jerked away, embarrassed and incensed that her brother would treat her this way.

"Are you all right?" Flame asked her quietly, keeping one eye on her shamefaced brother.

"I am fine," she said as she moved away from her brother.

"A sibling is like one half of our flesh, a permanent part of us," Flame said as a flash of pain drifted through his eyes. "Oftentimes we don't realize what we have until it's gone and out of our reach."

James flushed at the subtle reprimand and grimaced as his sister looked up at the man. Thankfulness showed on her face.

"I'll be spending the weekend with Spark and his family," she said as she turned to glare at her brother. "If you have ever loved me, if you were ever capable of love, you will take this time to think about what you have done and who you have hurt. Then maybe I'll see you again, James."

She turned and stalked away, followed by a concerned Kendall. Flame took one last moment to stare at James, making his point about loss and love, and then he too turned away.

James sat on the bench, afraid by what he had done to his sister, his only living family member. She had a right to fear him, he thought. He had been acting like a jealous animal.

"Hey, reporter man." A quiet whisper from behind made him turn to see who was addressing him. It was the torchbearer.

"What do you want?" he sighed, thinking that he had gone too far and had possibly lost the one person that he truly loved.

"Don't let them get to you. I saw what happened, and they had no right to interfere! And if she's spending the weekend with them, who knows what they'll have her into! Drugs, sex, porn, you name it. And they are capable of it!"

"What do you want?" James said again, this time his anger and frustration showing in his voice. He didn't know what to do!

"Just to give you this," he said as he slipped a piece of paper into James' hand. "It's their address. You know what you have to do."

"Yeah, yeah," James sighed as he pocketed the paper, thoroughly put out with the gossiping man.

"Take it easy, partner," he said as he quickly disappeared into the crowd.

The address, James sighed to himself. Maybe it was time to make an apology to his sister and her boyfriend. Or maybe he could find out something useful.

He gazed out at the checkered grass, lost in thought, oblivious to the roaring crowds and the outrageously garbed players.

Maybe this was check, he decided as he fingered the piece of paper. Maybe he had been going about this all wrong! Maybe it was a time to use strategy instead of brawn.

As he focused in on the game and watched the players move, watched the pawns being shifted around the board, he thought, maybe this wasn't check after all! Maybe this was checkmate!

Chapter Eighteen

As Spark approached the pub, he was met with the sounds of loud revelry and song. Even a few people dressed in perfect replicas of period clothes danced on a small stage as they entertained the crowd.

The smell of beer mingling with the smell of roasted meats and potatoes reminded him that he hadn't had any food at all today.

But he had to stop and admire the skills of the dancers and the people they pulled on stage with them. He smiled as a red-haired woman twirled and clapped to the beat, her eyes on a handsome balding man dressed in friar's clothes, complete with tonsure and glasses.

In the corner, a female peasant clapped in time to the boisterous music of the lute, tambourine and drums. Her ample bosom was held up by a bone corset and almost spilled out of her white blouse. A tall man dressed in a kilt complete with muggans, sporran, and sword tore lustily into a haunch of beef, his wooden cup filled with ale held firmly in his other hand. And there, in the very center of the stage, belting out a ribald song about a one legged Irish woman, pounding on *abodhran*, was Zanya!

Spark threw back his head in laughter as he watched her tell of how the woman chased down a prospective suitor and hit him with her wooden leg to tell him that she wanted him.

The crowd roared with laughter, and Spark felt a wonderful sense of pride fill him. That was his woman up on stage, having fun and entertaining others. That was his woman, who was confident enough to not only mingle freely with strangers who had to appear like weirdoes to a woman who had never been to a period event, but who also gladly clambered up on stage to join in the festivities. God, how he loved her!

"Spark!" a voice to his right called. He looked up to see his mother waving at him. "Over here! We saved you a seat."

Spark pushed his way through the thick crowd of warriors, thieves, peasants and noblemen of apparent good breeding. He slowly made his way toward the table where his parents were sitting.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, glad to see them but wondering why his parents were double dating with him.

He took a seat, oblivious to the stares that he received in his skimpy attire, and smiled at his parents.

"Ale, my good tavern keep!" Kendall called out, totally in the spirit of the festival. "My son doth need to quench his thirst."

Chuckling, Spark took the mug of cola the tavern keeper handed him. After years of working with this family, he knew that Spark never drank while on duty and that his parents rarely drank at all.

"So why do I have a chaperone?" he asked, after tilting back his head to take a long pull of his drink.

A few women sitting around sighed deeply, *Diet Coke Break* ringing through their minds as the cool condensation dripped down the mug to run in small rivers down his chest.

"But he is gay," one woman whispered to her friend.

"I don't care!" the other whispered back. "The view is wonderful."

"We won't be here long," Kendall said, as Flame remained silent. "We just stayed to keep your lady company."

"Thank you," he politely replied, as he turned his eyes to the stage. Now Zanya was singing about a sleeping Scotsman and what he wasn't wearing under his kilt, much to the amusement of the band.

"But there is something you should know," Flame added quietly.

"Father?" Spark sat up straight and stared his father in the eyes, serious and waiting for whatever he had to tell him. When Flame used that tone of voice, it was important.

"There will be problems with her brother," he said quietly.

"I know!" Spark sighed. "That bigot. You should have heard what he said earlier! She punched him in his face."

"But there is more to it than that. She was having a rather intense conversation with him earlier," Flame added. "And I thought that it would turn physical."

"What? Did she ball up her fist and try to hit him again? Ember taught her how to make a proper fist earlier."

"No. I thought that he would do her harm, something that neither I nor you can allow."

For a moment a red haze of fury blinded Spark! Calling names and shouting out stupid judgments was one thing, but laying hands to a female, especially his female, was something that he would not allow.

"Where is he?"

"Calmness, my son," Flame said quietly, as he watched anger darken his son's eyes. Flame often had the same problem controlling his emotions when he was angry. But losing control here could be dangerous for them all.

"I am calm," Spark answered, taking a deep breath and letting his immediate and first reaction, blinding anger, slide away.

"Good. I only tell you in warning to be on guard. A man that abuses a woman is capable of anything."

"Yes, sir," Spark said politely, already making plans for Zanya's protection.

"And we will be at the van around eight tonight. Will you and Ember be able to close *Keeper of the Flame* down early?"

"No problem," Spark said, a small grin returning to his face as his father said the name of their booth. He loved that title. "We wanted to close early today anyway to go home for the weekend."

"Don't you have to talk with the fire marshall, dear?" Kendall asked, eyes showing deep concern as she looked at her son.

"I am not able to get back to the house until Saturday or Sunday. If I may borrow a car, I will go and speak with them then. I already told them of my plans to spend the weekend at home with you two senior citizens," he laughed.

"I'll show you senior citizen," Kendall growled, as she reached across the small round table and latched onto a lock of his hair.

"Mom!" he whined, laughter in his voice.

"I'll senior citizen you!" With that, she gave a sharp tug to his hair and laughed as he winced in pain.

"Dad!" he called out. "Make her stop! Mom is mean! This is child abuse!"

"No, abuse is the drill I intend to put you through tomorrow morning," Flame said quietly, a wicked grin pulling at his full lips.

"Mom, save me! Dad is being mean," Spark laughed, batting his innocent-looking eyes up at his mother.

"Save it, brat!" Kendall said, as she took the last pull from her wooden mug, wiped it out with a napkin and snapped it to the holder on her belt. "He just better hope that he saves some of your butt for me!"

"I have such mean parents," he sighed, as he looked balefully around the pub.

"Your parents are wonderful!" Zanya said in mock anger. "You are lucky to have them! I may steal them!"

Spark jumped a bit as Zanya's voice came from behind him. He wasted no time in gripping her arms and pulling her close to him.

"Just don't bring them back," he laughed, ducking his head and playing innocent as his mother shot him a look that promised retribution.

"And on that note," Kendall laughed and stood as Flame pulled back her chair, "we will be divorcing ourselves from your presence, my ungrateful spoiled brat."

"Yes, Mommy." Spark laughed.

"Where did you go wrong?" Kendall asked Flame as she took his arm and they began to make their way through the crowds.

"Me?" Flame asked, his deep voice sounding most amused. "It was all of the rightful beatings that you never allowed."

"As if you would raise one hand to our babies! That's the problem! We spared the rod and spoiled the child!"

Zanya was almost paralyzed with laughter as the two adults disappeared into the crowd. Their good-natured bantering was lost in the sound of the people around them frolicking and having fun.

Still chuckling, she slid into the seat beside her man, and sighed as she looked up at him.

"What?" he asked, suddenly conscious of the sweat that stained his body. The dust heavily covered him, and Spark prayed that his body heat activated deodorant was still working as it claimed. He patted at his hair, grimacing at the oily feel of it, before patting his vest and bringing up a small cloud of dust.

He was a big dirty mess, he decided. He hoped that he didn't offend Zan.

"You are too beautiful for words," she answered finally, after sighing again.

"Me?" he asked, his voice going up one octave in surprise.

"You," she confirmed, as she leaned forward to kiss the full, delicate lips that drove her mad.

Mesmerized by what he saw in her eyes—could it be love?—he eased forward, slowly coming towards the mouth that he craved.

"Excuse me."

They turned to see two slightly steamed women staring down at them.

"Can I help you?" Zanya asked, her eyes shooting green fire.

"He is the blacksmith, right?" one woman asked, glaring at him with her arms akimbo.

"What of it?" Zan asked, starting to rise out of her chair.

Spark put a gently restraining hand on her arm and suddenly understood what his father had gone through to keep his mother out of trouble.

"He is supposed to be gay! Why are you kissing on him?" she asked hotly.

"What?" Both Zanya and Spark shouted the question at the same time.

"Is he?" she asked indignantly. "Are you?" she asked Spark directly.

"He's much worse!" Zanya answered as a suddenly beatific smile crossed her face. "He is mine!"

"We never had a chance!" the second woman wailed. "She lied to us!"

"Ember!" Spark sighed as he shook his head and prayed for the blush that stained his cheeks to fade. "She would do this to me! She is always doing this to me."

"You have to admire her style," Zanya laughed, as the two women looked on in envy.

"No I am not gay, but I am taken."

Spark stood swiftly. Taking his mug in one hand and his woman in the other, he bowed shortly to the women and pulled Zanya out of the pub.

"But I was just beginning to have real fun!" Zanya laughed, as they quickly left the two disappointed women behind.

"You have had your fun!" Spark said in an aggrieved tone. "And now I have to get back to work. We are closing early and I have a demonstration to do."

"Whatever you wish, Spark," Zanya said in mock obedience.

"Yeah, right," he laughed, seeing some humor in that situation. "You say that now, but just wait until I really ask something big of you."

"Like leather?" she asked, causing him to stumble before he turned to face her. "Well, you told me that you were an expert at it. I want you to show me."

Spark looked into her eyes, swallowed twice, and said the only thing that came to mind.

"*Mercy!*"

Chapter Nineteen

"Can't this crate move any faster?" Spark growled lowly to himself, as the silver minivan streaked across the highway.

They were only about fifteen minutes away from his childhood home, but those fifteen minutes felt more like fifteen years.

At his side, Zanya stifled a laugh and wished for the hundredth time that Ember was here to see this. But she was catching a ride home later on with Violet.

After the pub scene, Spark had raced her back to *Keeper of the Flame* to finish his sword demonstration and finish the day's business.

When Flame and Kendall walked over to see if they were going home with them or catching a ride with one of their friends, Spark nearly dragged her out of the festival grounds.

An amused Flame and an almost-senseless-with-laughter Kendall quickly got the van moving to get them home.

"Young love," Kendall laughed, as she peeked back at the tight expression on her son's face and the amused one on Zanya's.

"Love?" Flame asked quietly, reaching for her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Love, lust...let's just hurry and get them home. This makes me glad that we opted to add onto the house instead of just leaving them just in their rooms. I have a feeling that tonight's revelry will keep us awake for hours.

"Well, who said anything about sleep?" Flame asked, as he glanced at her, his eyes sparking a bit with those red lightening bolts that never failed to make Kendall's body melt.

"Getting bold in our old age," she murmured, knowing that he could read her body language easily and interpret her every feeling.

"Forced into it by my mate," he replied as he returned his attention to the road.

"Flatterer, you," Kendall purred as she again took in her husband's body. He had not changed much over the years and all of the differences in him were for the better. She could not wait to get him home and run that electrified hair all over her body. She wanted to feel the fire as he touched and stroked her to her release, to watch him while he struggled for control as he released his own pent-up tension in a spiraling climax.

Kendall sighed softly, thankful once again that she had taken a chance on love. She had really come out on top.

By this time they'd pulled into the driveway of the house, its lush gardens sending up a delightful perfume to scent the air, even at night.

Looking over at Kendall, Flame eased the car into park. His eyes never left his lover's gaze.

"Good night!"

Spark's voice made them both jump and turn...just in time to see the van door slam and Spark make his way to the rear of the house. Zanya's overnight bag was in one hand and a laughing Zanya was being dragged behind him.

"He is moving like the hounds of hell are on his heels," Kendall laughed, and squeaked as Flame reached over and disconnected her seat belt.

"He has such bright ideas for such a young man," Flame growled. He lifted Kendall out of the van and hefted her over his shoulder in a fireman's hold. "I think I will improve upon his, though."

Wisely, Kendall remained silent as she was carried into the house and into the hot sex ro...uh, bedroom.

Once safely inside, Flame tossed her body onto the bed, and leered as her breasts bounced and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Feeling frisky?" Kendall purred, as she blinked innocent eyes up at her mate.

Flame had come a long way from the total submissive lover with a dominant streak, to a full alpha in control of his life.

"You have no idea," he purred, as he began a slow striptease for her. There was no music, yet his body swayed to a beat that played in his mind^¾the same beat of her rapidly pounding heart as he gazed upon the beauty of his Kendall.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Kendall made herself comfortable on the bed and watched Flame go to work. He was in one of *those* moods again and she wanted to take full advantage of it.

"Move for me, baby," she whispered, as she rolled on her stomach to watch. This would be good.

Flame popped the buttons off of his shirt, ripped them off one by one until his shirt hung free, skimming his massive upper body. Flame was always gifted with a large frame, and the work he was doing in his business, the lifting of heavy equipment, just added to his natural muscle. Now he flexed his muscles, making them pop for Kendall as he ripped off the shirt and let his long red hair frame his body.

Stepping back, he kicked off his boots, letting them fall where they may, and started to untie the thong that cross-tied the fly of his pants together.

"Let me," Kendall said, her mouth watering just watching his little act. Climbing to her hands and knees, Kendall crawled across the bed slowly, making each languid move special and precise as a cat's as she approached.

Grinning madly, she ran her hands over his chest, down his sides as she brought her face closer to the placket of his pants.

Using her teeth alone, Kendall grasped the trailing edge of the thong and slowly pulled, loosening the waist of his pants and inhaling his masculine scent.

“Hungry, My Kendall?” he cooed, as he ran his fingers through her hair, releasing her neat bun and allowing her soft brown tendrils to fall about her face.

“Feed me,” she answered, as she buried her hands in the waist of his pants and pulled them free.

She had to quickly sit back to avoid being hit by his erect cock as it dropped from his pants.

“Damn, that always gets to me,” Kendall murmured, as she stared at his massive erection, watched as his veins pulsed in beat with his heart.

“I plan on getting you, My Mistress,” he purred as he stepped out of his fallen pants and reached for her.

Kendall’s clothes flew around the room as Flame tore them from her body. He rapidly exposed the brown flesh he loved so well, watching the passion and the love fill her *tarcus* brown eyes.

Soon she was panting and naked on their shared bed, lying on her back, her hair in wild disarray around her. She looked more erotic and exotic than any woman he had ever seen.

“God, how I love you,” she breathed, as he rose above her body, blocking out the dim light and casting her body in shadows. “You are my heart.”

“It is you who are my savior,” he replied, as he settled himself comfortably atop her, careful not to put too much of his weight on her smaller frame. “You are my reason for existing on this world and in the next.”

That said, he lowered his lips to cover her face in tiny butterfly kisses. Small fluttering kisses that awakened her nerves and made her moan in delight.

The years together showed as each knew where to touch and how to bring their partner to the ultimate pleasure. Kendall’s legs were comfortably wrapped around Flame’s waist as his hands gently kneaded her breasts and rolled her nipples.

“Yes!” Kendall called out, as she arched up her back. “Just like that.”

Flame lowered his head and took one hard, berry-colored nipple into his warm mouth, laving her with his tongue and groaning at the taste of her. He would never get enough of his Kendall’s sweet flesh.

Kendall tunneled her hands through his hair, pulling him closer as she felt the electric current begin to run through her body. Soon he had her buzzing in delight as his energies began to escape his control, and as he grew wilder in their mating.

Almost roughly, he pulled away from Kendall. His gray eyes filled with red fire as a glow began to suffuse the surface of his skin. He was going mad with lust and he was taking his mistress along for the ride.

“Give me more, my Kendall,” he purred, as he began to lick a trail down her stomach to her navel, where his tongue played for a moment.

Kendall tangled her hands in his hair and pushed him lower, urging him to his now wet goal.

But not one to be rushed, Flame fought against the urge to ravish her where she lay and continued to lick and nip at her flesh.

The area below her navel was nibbled. The crease where thigh met hip was lovingly licked. The skin of her inner thigh was delicately tasted and caressed. He was drawing out the loving until they both were ready to scream in frustration.

“Damn it, Flame! Stop playing with me!” Kendall moaned as he yet again moved by the area she wanted his touch the most and centered on her thigh.

“I thought you liked it when I played with you, my Kendall,” Flame answered, innocently as he could, while spreading her thighs apart and making room for his large shoulders.

Before she could protest again, his tongue trailed up her swollen lips and he flicked it gently against her clit.

“Flame!” She gasped as he began to work his magic on her, as he allowed a small portion of his energies to sizzle this very intimate part of her body.

Flame buried his head in her wet flesh, lapping up her juices as he tested the limits of her passions yet again.

“Yes,” Kendall wailed. “Eat me, Flame!” and eagerly he complied, easing two of his fingers inside her tight, grasping channel as he once again returned to her swollen bud of desire.

One of Kendall’s hands rose up, sprinkling his hair across her breasts, and she used it to gently abrade her nipples.

“Oh yes, Flame,” she moaned, as her legs wrapped around his neck, “So good, so damn good!”

Grunting in agreement, Flame pulled away from her body, her juices glowing wetly on his face, and began moving up her body, dragging the wet head of his cock against her as it moved.

“Feed it to me,” she gasped, as her hands wrapped around his waist and pulled him closer to her.

Resting with his knees just under her arms, Flame leaned down and rubbed the purple head of his throbbing manhood against her lips.

Eagerly, Kendall parted her lips to receive the gift of his cockhead, licking up the drop of precum that beaded up on its tip.

“You make me feel so good, my Kendall,” he shuddered and groaned as she took him inside her hot mouth and began to suckle gently upon him.

“That’s the idea,” she pulled off long enough to say before opening her throat to swallow him to the hilt.

“Kendall!” he gasped. He was still amazed that she could do this to him after all of these years.

She urged him to pump slowly, filling her mouth and throat with his essence, leaving every part of her

stamped by his possession.

All too soon, he felt the familiar tingling in his testicles as they rose up against the base of his cock, signaling that he was drawing close to a massive release.

He pulled away and eased from her throat.

“Now?” she asked, licking her lips, savoring the flavor of her Flame.

“Now!” he growled as he eased back and lifted her legs over his shoulders.

Lips pulled back in a sensual snarl, Flame lined himself up with her dripping opening and plunged home.

Kendall screamed her pleasure as she felt his cock filling her, hitting places within her that only he could touch. Instantly her legs tightened and her hands tangled in his long hair, feeling the thrill of energy as it coursed through his locks.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she felt more and more of his power shuddering through her. She felt his energies, the thing that made her Flame so unique, make her senses tingle and her nerves stand on end.

Flame gritted his teeth as he was encased in the welcoming sheath. This was his Kendall, his home, and within her he felt as close to paradise as he could ever come.

He opened his eyes as a fiery aura seemed to cover both of their writhing bodies. Her eyes were closed and an expression of agonizing pleasure spread across her face. Her bottom lip was held captive between her teeth as she thrust her body up to meet his lunges.

Her hands slid through his hair and wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer to her until her hardened nipples brushed against his sweat-sheened chest.

Faster and faster they moved, the sound of their animalistic grunts and groans filling the room as the scent of their combined bodies filled the air. Together they pounded each other, took what they wanted, and gave exquisite waves of emotion as they shared the most basic of human needs.

The bedsprings began to creak and groan with the force of their coupling, until Flame seemed to swell even larger within his mate.

Kendall, feeling his extra girth, shuddered as her senses seemed to explode in a conflagration of bright shining light.

“Flame!” she shrieked, as waves of release rushed through her body. Her inner muscles began a rhythmic clenching that milked Flame, making him curse under his breath as he slammed himself as deep as he could go inside her.

“Kendall, *arrgghh!* ” he roared as his cock shuddered, and began to powerfully spurt his seed within her. Her muscle contractions dragged him over the top. Bright colors sparked through the room and his hair flew in the nonexistent wind.

Shuddering, his mouth hung slack, as Flame climaxed, his groans and moans sounding louder as Kendall’s orgasm eased.

Finally with one final tremor, Flame collapsed into the waiting arms of his life mate.

"Kendall," he breathed, as he reached up one trembling hand to brush his hair from her face.

"Flame," she purred, as she wrapped her arms around him and cradled him to her body.

"I love you," he whispered, as he eased to his side, bringing her with him, never losing contact with her body.

"As I love you," she returned, as her eyes drifted shut, content with her life and the man who had made all of her dreams come true.

"As you love me," Flame whispered, then gave in to the pull of sleep.

They were not as young as they used to be. *They* needed their rest.

* * * * *

"Out to break speed records?" Zanya laughed. She only caught a glimpse of the house as Spark practically dragged her behind it and into a side entrance.

"Not tonight, though my first performance needed work," Spark answered, as he punched in a code and opened the door.

"You have a wing built onto your parent's house?" she asked, incredulous. "You are a spoiled rotten rich kid."

"Well off kid," he returned, as he flipped on a light and lifted Zanya into his arms.

"Is there a difference?" she laughed, as she was whisked past a small living room and up a flight of stairs.

"Yes," he replied. "My parents were well off, so I didn't get the Porsche I wanted when I turned sweet sixteen, and I never went to charity balls."

"Just decorate for them," she laughed, then squeaked as she was tossed onto a bed.

And what a bed it was! Unlike the bed at his house, this one was a masterpiece on a pedestal. A richly colored black comforter covered the enormous king-sized feather mattress. She landed with a bounce, laughing up at her man.

"Is it big enough for you?" she asked, her eyes dropping to half-mast.

"It can never be too big," Spark answered as his hands went to the leather ties that held his vest shut.

"Oh, baby!" purred Zanya. "Bring it on!"

With a grin, he did just that, easing the thong out of its tiny holes with his finger, letting the material slide open to drape against his chest. Spark deliberately showed his chest and the shining tiny gold ring in his

nipple to great advantage.

Zanya sat up, entranced by the sight of Spark easing his clothes off of his magnificent body ever so slowly. Her mouth went dry and her tongue lashed out to lap at her lips, at the sight before her. Her eyes were riveted to the silent striptease that Spark was performing.

Spark's tongue lashed out in mimic of her actions, causing a groan to build up in her chest as she watched. With a smile that was more feral than joyful, Spark let the vest slide from his body to pool at his feet.

Spark kept his eyes on Zanya as he reached up while rocking his hips from side to side. Slowly, he undid the thong that held his hair in place. He freed the red and silver mass to flow around his shoulders. Shaking his head, he tossed his locks around his head and down his back, shivering as it brushed against his skin, making his nerves tingle.

He toed off his boots as he kept his eyes on his mate. Kicking them to a corner as he ran his hands across his chest, Spark paused for a moment to flick the nipple ring, letting his thumbs meet above his abs. Winking at her, he let his hands slide down to either side of the hard bulge that pushed against the leather constraints of his pants and pressed hard, emphasizing its girth.

His twinkling eyes seemed to say, 'All for you' before he undid the buttons that held them closed...slowly.

Zanya sat forward, her breath held in anticipation as she watched his finger slide each button free. Her Spark had gained a bit of confidence and she found it erotic. It was amazing what a little nookie could do to a man!

Turning his back to her, Spark wiggled his tight butt as he eased the leather down his legs. Peering at her over his shoulder, he blew her a kiss before swiping his hair to one side so that his tattoo showed. Winking, he let the pants pool at his ankles, exposing his tightly muscled cheeks and muscled thighs. The sight nearly made her swoon. Then he ruined his seduction and almost tripped as he tried to kick them free.

Zanya stifled a snort of laughter, earning a glare, before he regained his composure and went on with the show.

"Give it to me, baby!" Zanya breathed as he let his hair fall back into place, covering his bottom, but also contrasting with his golden skin.

He looked like a flame-haired god standing before her, posed perfectly so that she could take in all of his glory.

"What's next?" Zanya asked breathlessly, ready to leap out of her clothes. She could feel her body prepare itself for the Sparkles invasion. "Gonna turn around, or what?"

"Or what," he said as he turned and walked out of the room.

"Hey...hey!" Zan called when she discovered that he wasn't joking. "Where are you going?"

"To shower, babes!" he called back, laughter in his voice. "I am dirty and I stink! I refuse to come to you like this!"

"Tease!" she called back, pouting a bit, but ultimately trying not to explode with laughter at his antics. Spark had gained a lot of confidence and lost a lot of the nervousness that seemed to plague him.

"You could always join me," he called back in a singsong voice.

Zanya wasted no time in speaking. In a flash she was out of the bed and through the door, shedding her clothes as she moved.

"Hold the soap for me!" she called. "I've been itching to get you wet for the longest time!"

"Mercy!" Spark called back, his voice directing her to his bathroom.

"Mercy!" she repeated as she kicked off her the last of her clothes and stepped into a Roman odyssey.

Chapter Twenty

There was just a bath in this room!

Well, a shower would be a more accurate description, as there was no tub to in sight. But there were miles of pure white tiles. They covered everything, the walls, the floor, even the ceiling. All those pure white glistening tiles reflected the light of a thousand suns.

But to break the monochromatic scheme, there were pots filled with luscious green plants hanging in clusters in one corner. Against a far wall, there was a massive marble bench that was long enough for Spark to stretch out on comfortably while being surrounded by standing pots of gorgeous orchids, scented geraniums, and feathery ferns. There was a door to her immediate left, the toilet she assumed, while continuing her visual examination of the room.

Now, where were the showerheads? For that matter, where was lover boy?

There was a small hissing sound, and then Zanya became drenched as the heavens, ah, ceiling opened up and warm water rained down like...rain.

Jumping back, Zanya sputtered and tried to wipe wet clinging locks of hair from her face as her mouth opened wide in surprise.

"Spark!" she bellowed, eyes wide in shock. Blinking rapidly to get the water out of her eyes, she backed away from the downpour and backed into something hard, solid and flesh.

"You rang?" he crooned in a deep Lurch-like voice, a voice that was shaking with surprised laughter.

"You jerk!" Zanya screamed, as she turned to face the jerk in question, then her mouth opened again. But, oh my, did the man look good wet.

Warm water ran in rivers down the mountains of his pecs, creating a tantalizing trail that led straight down over powerful washboard abs to wet that hair around his erect...*oh, my!*

Slowly bringing her eyes back up to his face with some reluctance, Zanya was again struck by how handsome and put together her man was.

His gray eyes laughed at her, their long lashes made spiky by the water. His hair, pulled off of his high forehead, draped across his body, clinging like a greedy lover. His smile was more of a wicked leer as he ran his eyes over her body. He paid close attention to how her nipples puckered and begged for his kisses. He could feel the heat of her gaze as her eyes roamed his own body.

"Jerk?" he asked as he reached out and took her hand. Still smiling, he led it to his stiffened cock, wrapping her fingers tightly around it. "Jerk this," his voice purred.

"Oh," Zanya gasped as she felt his hardness pulse in her hands. She watched him close his eyes as pleasure spread up through his body.

"'Oh' me anytime," he crooned, as he reached out and wrapped his arms around her warm wet body, dragging her into close, very close, contact with his wet heat.

"Anytime?" she moaned. She rubbed her body along his wet skin, and shuddered at the contact.

"Oh, yes," he breathed, as her hand began to stroke him gently. His eyes closed and his head fell back.

But just as quickly, he pulled himself together and tightened one fist in her hair.

"You want to know what I am an expert at?" he asked, as he bent to lick the water droplets from her face.

"Show me," she purred, as she released him and tangled her hands in his hair. "Show me, now."

A low rumbling moan came from the depths of his throat as he lifted her and carried her to a nearby wall, shaking his head as he passed through the showers pulsing all around them.

Zanya was shocked as her back hit the cool surface of the tiled wall. She arched her back and tried to pull away from the cold sensation.

But Spark pressed her harder against the wall, letting his weight hold her. He enjoyed the squirms that she made as her body adjusted to the cool wall.

"Rotten trick," she hissed, when the tile behind her began to warm as she relaxed against it.

"Yes, but what are you going to do?" he asked, as he began to run his hands down her sides, closing his eyes at the feel of her soft, wet skin. The water acted as a lubricant, easing his strokes, making his exploration more enjoyable.

"Nothing yet," Zan replied, as she pulled his head down for a kiss. "But the night is still young."

Spark sighed deeply as her lips tenderly brushed against his, sipping at the moisture that coated his lips, teasing him with her softness.

Finally she let her lips part and he took his chance to invade. Holding her closer, he let his tongue slip between her lips, inhaling as her heat and sweetness surrounded him.

Nothing else on this planet tasted like his Zanya and he was quite sure that he would never forget her taste for as long as he lived.

Zanya moaned as he took control of the kiss. She felt her temperature rise and her skin began to tingle with more than the heat from the water. As he deepened the kiss, she felt herself lose more of her strength as her knees began to weaken.

"Now, let's add some soap," he whispered, as he reached beside her to a shelf that she had not noticed and pressed his hand to a pump.

Aromatic and sudsy foam filled his hand and with a sigh of pleasure, he backed off a little from Zanya's wiggling body.

"This is the fun stuff," he said, as he began to apply the soap to her body.

"Very fun," Zanya agreed, as she pressed her palm against the dispenser, smiling as the foam exploded in her hands. "Fun for two," she added, as she reached up and let her soapy fingers slide across his chest.

"Zan!" Spark gasped, as her fingers ran across his erect nipples, tugging at them slightly. Bolts of pleasure shot across his chest and down to center on his pulsing cock.

He shuddered and forced his hands to duplicate her moves, letting his thumbs slide beneath her breasts, letting his fingers circle her roundness.

Zanya moaned and breathed, "More," in a broken voice, and immediately Spark lost all desire to play and began to caress her in earnest.

One hand rubbed and pulled at a breast before gently circling her nipple, while the other slid down her left side to cup her bottom and lift her leg to his waist.

"Yes, baby," he breathed, as he bent his knees and began to press his hardness against the heat of her desire. Slowly, he gyrated his hips, teasing her with the feel of him, while his lips reclaimed her mouth.

Zanya sighed deeply and began to grind against him, tightening her leg around him, and holding him closer and harder.

"We are supposed to be cleaning," he reminded her, as he pulled away from her lips with a gasp. "We are not doing this in a shower!"

"Why not?" she purred as she took him off guard by lifting her other leg and wrapping them completely around his waist, riding the shaft of his hardness as she wiggled her bottom more.

"Zan!" Spark gasped, as he stumbled a bit under her weight. But he recovered marvelously and pressed her back against the wall, sliding his cock across her wet opening.

"Why not?" she asked again.

"Because the leather straps are in the bedroom!"

She was off of him in a flash! And taking his swollen throbbing penis in hand, she led him through the

rinsing waters and out of the door they'd used to enter from the bedroom.

"I hope you can shut this thing off," she said, as she marched purposefully through the door.

"Controls are on the outside," he gasped, following her and enjoying her hold upon him. "It's also a sauna."

"Oh, love in the jungle," Zan purred, as they paused so he could touch some controls mounted beside the door.

Spark paused, stared into her eyes, and began to shudder.

"The leather cuffs?"

"Right this way," he breathed, as he motioned her to continue into the bedroom.

"I can hardly wait," she said, as she glanced up at his body. "Then maybe I can use them on you."

Chapter Twenty-One

"It won't be the same," he said, as he pushed her through the bedroom door. "You lack the skill to top."

"And you don't, my previously innocent one?" Zanya licked the moisture from her lips as she grinned up at Spark. "Or were you just playing innocent?"

"Watch and learn," he purred, before he gave her a slight push that landed her on the bed.

Giggling, Zanya laid out, spread-eagle, and watched as Spark's eyes darkened with desire.

"First, your body has to recognize me as its top."

"You're on top, I get it." Zan sighed, impatient with his lessons and wanting to get straight to the loving.

"Not quite," he purred, as he climbed onto the bed and began to crawl over her body, letting his larger, harder frame brush against her.

He was still smiling as she felt his hard cock brush against her woman's center as he settled upon her.

"Wow," she purred, as he lightly rested his weight upon her, holding her in place.

"Now, I have to explain a few things to you." His eyes bore deeply into hers, grabbing and holding her attention.

"Explain away," she purred, as she raised her arms and let them drape over his back, delicately holding him in place.

"I am not into pain." A small kiss punctuated his words. "Although a small spanking here and there can be stimulating, as a rule, I am not into those scenes."

"I can't tell you how relieved I am." She lifted her head for another kiss, which was cheerfully given.

"But," he continued, "I will tie you up, make you helpless, and use several of my toys on your body for the purpose of bringing myself extreme pleasure."

"What about me?" Although she was taking him at his word, Spark had yet to lie to her. She couldn't see this shy man doing wicked things to her body. It just didn't fit the image she had of him.

"Oh, you will enjoy it, but I will enjoy it more! The term is called bondage. I just like doing it with leather."

"Oh, my!"

With that said, he reached over the side of the bed and as he rose to his knees to straddle her body, he produced a rather large duffel bag.

"You leave sex toys at your parents' house?"

"Baby, I have sex toys with me wherever I go!"

"Not at dinner," she crowed with delight, laughing as she watched him open his bag of tricks.

"What is my tongue?"

That shut her up.

"Why do you have this stuff anyway, Spark?" Zanya looked up at him. There was curiosity in her eyes as she looked at the toys.

"I've been collecting this, Zan," he breathed. "For years I have been collecting and practicing, waiting for the right woman to come along to share this side of myself with. You are that woman, Zan. You and no other can fulfill my fantasies."

Still smiling, he reached into his bag and pulled out what appeared to be small leather cuffs held together with extremely long leather thongs.

"These are padded with silk and velvet," he purred, as he reached out to lift her hand.

Pulling it to his lips, he placed a tender kiss on her palm, before he gently wrapped the first cuff around her wrist and fastened it securely.

"Is that okay?" he asked, as he smiled down at her.

Zanya looked dubiously at the leather band on her wrist. She flexed her hands and stared at how the dark black leather contrasted with her skin. As she moved it before her face, playing with it, she felt a tingle began deep in the pit of her stomach, a rather exciting tingle.

"Yes," she said quietly, looking to her lover to supply the next bit of information, never even realizing that she was looking to him to supply her pleasure.

"Good." Just as quickly, her other hand was captured and bound, the leather thong trailing between the cuffs. Efficiently, he attached the connecting thong through to a spring clip in the headboard.

Spark slid backwards off of her body, until he could raise her feet and rest them on his taut thighs.

With a wicked grin, he lifted her right foot and lapped at its sensitive bottom.

“That tickles,” Zanya gasped, as she tried to wrench her foot from his grasp. He only smiled and took her big toe in his mouth, giving it a small lap with his tongue.

While her eyes bugged at this unexpected source of pleasure, Spark fastened the next cuff securely to her ankle, tight enough that it wouldn’t chafe, but not too tight as to cause a blockage to her circulation.

As she flexed her foot, smiling at him faintly and smiled at the way the thick leather made her look and feel, he bound the other ankle.

“Almost ready to play,” he said, as he rose to his feet and walked around the bed, observing her from several different angles.

“Please hurry,” she said, smiling at him. “This waiting is killing me.”

“All in good time.”

“You are not going to come out here with a leather mask and a harness with a pair of thick black boots, are you?” she asked, as he gripped the first ankle thong and tied it to the base of the bed securely.

“Um, not as much, no.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

He ignored her question and soon had her bound, hand and foot, to his bed, almost completely at his mercy.

“I am going to play,” he said, as he walked back to the bed and upended the bag, scattering a wide variety of leather goods between her widespread legs.

“Spark?” she asked a little nervously, as he lifted a rather large black leather pole from the pile. “What are you going to do?”

She had begun to feel a little delicious fear, the excitement building as she tugged at the restraints and found herself unable to escape.

“Should we have a safety word or something?”

“Seeing that the only pain you experience will be the exquisite agony of waiting, I don’t think so. But if you must have a safety word, how about *harder* ?”

He waggled his eyebrows at her as he continued to separate his toys.

“Very funny,” she huffed, slightly relieved that her man was not going to turn into the Marquis de Sade.

“Not in the mood for that,” he said as he tossed several objects back in the bag, rejecting them as being too intense for a newbie. “And that would scare you.”

“Ha!” she cried, as he dimmed the lights. “I have more experience than you.”

“Not at this,” he said, as he picked up a remote from a table and the sounds of Prince’s *Scandalous Sex* suite filled the room.

The driving drumbeats and the sexy sax had her closing her eyes, imagining the way Spark danced between her thighs. A slow smile spread across her mouth.

Looking at her, all beautiful and spread for his pleasure, Spark felt his hardness throb. Nothing had prepared him for the actuality of having his hottest fantasy laid out before him like a long awaited meal.

The dim light cast shadows on her skin, bathed her body in its softness, and made her appear otherworldly. Her eyes were orbs of green fire that watched him, curious, a bit apprehensive, and very aroused.

He would hate to cover up those eyes, but....

“You are going to blindfold me?” Zan asked, as she watched him pick up a small black leather mask.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Anticipation adds to excitement,” his deep bass voice rumbled. “And I want you excited.”

Then there was darkness.

She could see nothing, but the feel of the soft supple leather against her face was almost calming.

The sound of his moving about the room became more apparent as the moaning and sighing on the CD sounded louder, more intense.

“Spark?”

“Shh. Just feel.”

There was the brush of his hand against her sides, brushing past, and missing, all of the important places, but nevertheless, setting her skin afire.

“You look so lovely,” he crooned, as his hands lifted her at the hips, and the feel of cold leather draped around her waist.

“What?”

“Don’t make me gag you, Zan. Your mouth is too pretty free. But so that you won’t be afraid, it is a waist belt. It is made of the softest cowhide and lined in chamois. It will not chafe, but it will give me leverage to lift that delicious body of yours.”

That statement was ended with a long swipe of his tongue across her stomach, before the strange belt was fastened.

Zanya moaned, almost in fright of the unknown, because she could never be afraid of Spark, and waited to see what would happen next. She should have figured out that her Spark had a kinky streak, with all of those *Brazen Heart* books that had littered his bedroom.

There was the sound of clinking glass, then she felt a warm thick substance dribble over her nipples and between her breasts.

Knowing that he meant business with the gag, Zanya kept her mouth shut, but moaned at the sheer torture of the slippery oil awakening her arousal.

Spark gently stroked his hard-on as he watched Zanya squirm in the restraints. Her body was so exciting to him, so passionate and giving, that he had to pause in his ministrations to reclaim his control.

He glanced down at the angry purple head of his penis and promised it soon. Soon he would quench his thirst for her body. Soon he would climb upon her, and revel in the contrasting feel of soft female flesh and tough supple leather. Soon he would fulfill a fantasy that had driven him since childhood. He would take his woman, dominate her sexually, and bring them both to burning climax.

His body trembled as he whipped his hair behind his shoulders. Already sweat had begun to sheen his body, his nerves and his eagerness taking hold of him once more.

“I am stroking myself, Zan,” he breathed. “I am stroking myself, yet I am thinking of you.”

He moaned as he closed his eyes and his strokes became faster.

“Can you hear me, Zan? The oil makes a nice lubricant, but not as nice as what your body pumps out in such large quantities.”

He reached out and with two oiled fingers, stroked her opening held wide open by the spread of her legs.

“You are so hot, baby,”

He stepped close, retrieved the oil bottle and drizzled some of the oil directly onto her swollen clit, licking his lips as the oil mingled with her wetness.

“Soon, I am going to lie between your thighs and have a midnight snack.”

Zan shuddered at his words, and pulled against the restraints, but the leather held fast. She shuddered as she felt the pass of his fingers across her swollen flesh and gasped as two fingers pushed deeply within.

“You are so ready,” he purred, as his weight caused the bed to dip. She felt his heat first, then his welcoming bulk as he settled between her widespread legs, his broad shoulders forced her thighs further apart. “And you smell so tasty.”

That was the only warning she got, because Spark dropped his head and with one long loving lap, tasted the fruits of his labor.

“Ah!” Zan cried out, arching her body into his mouth, but the bindings checked her movements.

His fingers, those large rough digits, slid up her side to massage the oil into the sensitive skin of her breasts, rolling and pinching her nipples.

“Mmm, baby!” Spark moaned. “You are so good!”

His words, his tone, the intensity in his voice made her body shiver as her stomach quivered beneath the leather belt. Small zips of electricity traveled down her thighs and to her toes. Never had she felt so empty, so needy! She wanted to urge him to hurry, but she knew that now that she was bound and unable to move, he would take his own sweet time.

Spark parted her quivering lips and supped at her womanhood, tantalizing first the right, then the left sides of her clit, trying to discover the most sensitive side. It was the right.

With this newfound knowledge, he set up a gentle ravishing of her erotic zones, tenderly nipping and rapidly flicking his tongue over her most sensitive spots.

His fingers began to explore his territory, as he thought of it now, caressing her opening, and teasing the small area between vagina and anus.

She jumped at this touch, so he applied a small pressure as he left her swollen nubbin, and began to tease her opening.

“You are pink and gold, Zan, the color of raw sex.”

He slid his questing finger up and gently circled her moist opening, rubbing in the protective oil as he delved deep to discover her hot spot.

His other hand was not idle during this exploration. It pulled at her nipples then massaged the whole of her breast before switching sides and repeating this maddening pleasure to the other side, never letting the tension abate.

“Spark!” Zanya moaned, as her head began to roll from side to side, tangling her hair over her face and leaving her almost mindless with need. “Please!”

“But you are just getting tasty,” he complained, as he drilled his tongue as far as it would go into her, enjoying her from the source. “And I am not ready to stop.”

He hummed deeply in his throat. The vibrations traveled through him and into her body, setting her off as no vibrator ever could.

“Oww!” she wailed, as he did this, thrashing her body, trying to get closer to this dizzying pleasure while at the same time pulling away! It was too much!

Sensing that she was becoming almost frantic with need and knowing that there was a thin line between ecstasy and annoyance, Spark left his newly forged territory and began to trail kisses up her stomach. When he reached the belt, he smiled, licking her juices off of his lips, and gripped it between his two hands, lifting her a bit. This would work splendidly for his needs.

Leaning over, he lapped at her right breast, before taking her nipple between his teeth, and gently holding her erect knob of flesh. She gasped at the touch of his teeth, but sighed in pleasure as his tongue darted out to lave the nipple, sizzling it with his unique heat.

She began to sweat as her temperature rose and her body was swamped with tingles that awakened her every nerve ending.

Spark groaned and bit back a curse as he felt the power welling up inside of him. It demanded a release, but he tamped it back down. His eyes began to sparkle red and his hair began to rise as his body shuddered with an almost painful pleasure. His skin heated up noticeably and his hands began to tremble as he caressed the small body beneath him.

A red-gold aura began to surround his body, pulsing and growing, lightening up the room as he stared down at his captive mate. She strained deliciously against her bonds as her body begged for his touch.

Releasing her nipple, he dove for her mouth, forcing his tongue inside to feast upon the sweet taste of her, moaning as her flavor washed over him.

“I am ready, baby,” he panted, as he broke off the kiss to lick at her lips, her eyelids, the curve of her ear, and her tender neck. “Will you come with me?”

“Yes, Spark! Yes!” Zan moaned, as her whole body writhed for his possession.

“Let us begin.”

His hands tightened on the belt, lifting her slightly as he positioned his hard cock at the portal to her womanhood.

Zanya moaned at the feel of his large hot head and her thighs quivered as she waited for this final conquering.

“God, I love you!” he breathed, his breath panting in his chest as he began to force himself inward.

Zanya moaned at the feel of him parting her! He seemed larger than before and she delighted that her body was able to open and accept him.

He slid in, hitting all of her sensitive areas, touching places that no man had ever reached before, and sending passion skyrocketing inside her.

Spark’s grip on the belt was the only thing keeping him focused, making it possible to enter her in this position.

Slowly, he slid, growling and sighing at the feel of her slick, velvety walls surrounding his cock. Her wet walls squeezed him in a tender vise.

“So hot!” he panted. “So wet! So tight!”

Zanya could only moan at this, lost in the sensations of his ravishment, delighting in tugging at the restraints that she knew would hold her. It was the sense of being helpless that drew her excitement to a fever pitch.

Then she felt his hot testicles brush against her bottom and knew that he was seated to the hilt. Now! Please now, she thought, and then he began to move.

Fire! It poured into her from where he was gently thrusting to travel throughout her body! It pooled in her abdomen, streaked across her arms and legs, pointed her toes and made her body shake and shiver.

It was nothing like before, though that was fire and passionate. But this was so intense, she was glad that she was restrained! Otherwise she may have rocketed out of the bed!

“Spark!” she gasped, as he filled her completely. Her gasp then turned to groans at the loss as he pulled back, leaving just his mushroom-shaped head inside.

Spark was trembling, the colors behind his closed eyes swirling madly as he experienced his lover’s passion. Zanya’s body was perfectly fitted to him, made to enhance his every movement! His hands grew damp where they gripped the belt as sweat began to pour off of his body.

Then he dropped her, the leather slipped from his hand as he leaned over her, brushing his chest against her straining breast, his nipple ring thrashing her overheated flesh.

He sighed as he slid in and began a steady thrusting rhythm. Moving to the beat of the music, they sent the bedsprings singing in harmony.

Slow grunts and gasps fill the air as the perfume of raw sex circled them.

Spark inhaled deeply! This was the smell of Zanya and himself. It was a heady perfume that caused his body to shudder and his penis to tense up.

But then he remembered the body underneath him writhing and tangling the sheets. He was here to serve her pleasure, so he began to concentrate on hitting her every erogenous zone.

His hands gripping the leather cuffs at her wrists, Spark twisted his hips, ground and gyrated himself into her. He noticed when she gasped and rose against him, and returned to those spots often.

His body jerked and contracted over her, pleasuring her and sending both of their senses reeling.

“Um, oh! Spark! Please!” Zanya sang out, her body tensing as she felt her climax reaching the explosive point. “Harder!”

“Want me to stop?” he asked, stilling the movements of his hips, chuckling at the small cry of disappointment and how she thrust her hips up to get him moving again!

She was on the edge, damn it! How dare he stop? “No!” she screamed. “Keep moving!”

“Whose pussy is this?” he asked, closing his eyes and biting back a curse as she tightened the walls of her sheath around him. He ground out louder, “Whose?”

“Mine!” she called out in defiance, but that only made him release one wrist and grip the belt.

“Wrong answer,” he sang out as pulled her flat against the bed, breaking her lock on his manhood and taking away the pleasure.

“Please?” she whispered her mouth open and panting.

“Whose body is this?”

“Mine!”

He lowered his head and began to lick and suck at her nipples, holding her in place, but tormenting her with his touch.

“Whose?”

“Yours!” she screamed out, the tension in her building to never before reached levels. “Yours, Spark!”

“Say my name!”

“Spark!”

“Again!”

“Sparrrr...”

With one deep thrust, he buried himself home.

Then gripping the belt again, he raised her to the perfect level, and began to hammer inside her, dragging her screaming over the precipice into orgasm!

A wordless scream erupted, drowning out the climax of the music, as Zanya faced her crisis!

Her inner muscles tightened around the pillar of marble that thrust within her, bringing her more intense pleasure as the fire bathed her body. The tension that had filled her limbs and made her body arch in completion, snapped.

She screamed again, the release holding her captive, before it began to slowly drain from her body. Her powerful release dropped her into a golden afterglow that drenched her body in exhaustion even as it refreshed her senses and restored her soul.

Spark closed his eyes, tightened his control, and let his own explosion wash over him.

He felt his manhood expand to its fullest, before it began blasting his release, three, four, five times inside her receptive body.

His shouted wordlessly as her muscles almost pulled the seed from his body, singeing his senses and almost releasing his power into the room!

His aura, now a brilliant ruby red, exploded, filling the room with a flash of light. It made his hair stand on end and exploded the temperature in the room for a few seconds.

Sparkles danced along his body, covering her, flashing from his body to hers as he exploded into climax. He shuddered as he felt his body reabsorb the energies, felt his bones melt, felt her soft body tremble beneath him.

“Zan!” he breathed, his chest rapidly rising and falling with his breath.

She began to softly collapse into herself. “Spark,” she answered, as she struggled to be free, dragging

his attention to her bound body.

Without a word, the wrist cuffs were freed and the blindfold removed.

Zanya opened her eyes, and saw a sweaty, tired, and replete looking man grinning down at her.

His tangled hair was plastered to his face, his eyelids languid, his mouth slack, but his eyes shined with the force of his love.

"I love you," he blurted out suddenly. "My life is complete with you."

"Spark!" Zan gasped, tears flooding her eyes. "I love you too! So much it scares me!"

"Don't be scared!" he said, as his hands gently cupped her face, his nose dipping to nuzzle against hers. "Please, never be scared of me or my love."

"I scare myself," she returned, lifting her face into his caress. "But I think it's supposed to be that way. It's a good fear."

"Good fear?" he asked, as he stole sipping kisses from her swollen lips.

"Like when you pulled out that leather pole," she laughed.

"Ah!" he laughed. "I think I understand."

"What was the pole for anyway?"

"You don't want to know!" he replied, as he moved down her body, dropping kisses, before he undid her ankles.

"Thank you," she laughed. "Sex is a messy thing and I need to get to the bathroom."

"Oh the thrill is gone!" he laughed as he helped her to her feet. "In romance novels, the heroine never runs off to the bathroom for a wash!"

"That is fiction!" Zanya chided, as she shakily made her way out of the room. "This is real life, kid! Complete with bathroom breaks and a good cleanup afterwards!"

"It must be love!" he joked, as he sat on the rumpled bed and awaited her return. "Only a woman secure in her love will mention something about bathrooms and the messy aftermath of sex!"

Her laughter filled his heart with joy as he began to contemplate a future with his Zan.

"Yeah," he said to himself out loud. "I am in love and she loves me! Life is good!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Spark growled in contentment, purring like a large cat actually, as he wrapped himself tighter around the warm soft body in his bed.

Burying his head in her hair, he inhaled her special scent, and stroked a large thumb along her gently rising and falling stomach.

She shuddered and snuggled her bare bottom deeper into the curve of his body and directly onto his stiffening cock.

At last, his body seemed to scream, we are home!

"Oh, yeah," Spark grumbled, as he ran his caressing hand over her hip and down....

"Oh, my God! Are you still at it? Stop reaching for the brass ring and get your ass moving!"

Spark jumped, grateful that they were still covered by his comforter, as Ember, damp with perspiration, stalked into the room.

"Em!" Spark hissed. He glared at Ember after checking to see if Zanya had been as rudely awakened as he had been.

"It was me or Dad, Sparkles baby, and I thought that you would not like to be retrieved by him. He is in a mood."

"Good or bad?" Spark asked as he motioned for Ember to toss him his robe that rested behind the bedroom door.

"Oh, it's good! Very good," Em sighed, turning her back as her brother donned his robe. "He had me running laps for my indiscretion earlier in the week."

"Oh, shit," Spark groaned. "Thanks, Em, be right there."

Ember bounced out of the room accepting his word, and Spark looked back longingly at the woman in his bed, still curled up in sleep.

"Later," he promised his body, as his half-hard penis set up a hue and cry. "Now we have to go and face...*him*."

Showered and dressed in record time, Spark stopped long enough to leave a note with Zanya about where he had gone, and then raced to meet his father by the field designated for practice.

The area was surrounded by tall, thick trees, and far enough away from the other houses that no one would suspect what was going on there.

"Father," Spark greeted, with a low bow.

"My son," Flame acknowledged. He turned to look at Ember, who was lying on the grass, panting for breath.

"Um, Fire or Ice?" Spark asked her.

"Who knew that fire contained a core of cold?" Em asked, as she glared at their father while trying to collect her breath.

"If one had studied the tomes one had been given, the knowledge would have been in one's mind," Flame answered, as he shook his head at his daughter.

"But how could you not be frozen in place?"

"All elements are used to create one," Flame answered calmly. "It was just a matter of isolating the core of heat used to produce snow, and manipulating that to my advantage."

Groaning, Ember dropped her head back onto the grass, ignoring her brother's laughter.

"I knew that," Spark chuckled, as he watched his sister collect herself and rise to her full height.

"Oh, shut up," she snapped half-heartedly.

"Go and study, my daughter," Flame said with amusement in his eyes. His daughter was so much like her mother; he sometimes had to reassure himself that he was the one who had actually borne her. "We will meet again tomorrow and you will improve."

"Yes, Father," Ember said formally, then bowed.

"So, what was it?" Spark teased, as she walked by him to go back to the house. "Fire storm or fire ring?"

"Mid-air, fire whip," she sighed. "And it lifted me four feet off of the ground before it wrapped me in flames. I had to concede defeat because any ice I used was turned into fire and added to the whip."

"Oh, he is in a good mood today." Spark released a determined sigh as he turned to face his father.

* * * * *

Zanya read the note again as she raced out of the house with her camera, fresh from her overnight bag, in hand.

Spark was going to meet Flame at the practice field and she hoped to get a few shots of him and his father working together. She assumed that they would be working with lasers today, as it was too light out to see fireworks, and wanted to get a few shots of her Spark lifting heavy equipment. She also wanted to see him without his usual shyness.

Okay, he wasn't so shy in bed, but in public the man was a nervous bundle of energy. Not that she was complaining, but she wanted to get a few relaxed shots of him for her personal files.

She raced through the trees, searching for the field, hoping to surprise them after she got a few shots of them at work.

Sure, Spark said he would meet her back at the house after they were done, but that was no fun! Besides, maybe Flame would love a few pictures of them working together.

Hearing voices up ahead, Zanya scrambled to a point where she could get a few shots of them while still

unnoticed. Those types of pictures, where the subject was not paying attention to the camera, often came out the best.

Peeking though the greenery that surrounded the field, she noticed that there was no equipment around, only Flame and Spark, both breathing heavily and facing off.

"What the..." she mumbled, as she watched the two large men converse, their words low and indefinable.

"Oh!" she decided. "They must be preparing for one of those festival exhibitions." The thought of Spark on horseback doing the joust or of him in a sword competition made her breath catch and her mouth water.

"My knight," she purred, as she decided that her best vantage would be from above.

"Well, it's been years since I climbed a tree," she giggled to herself. "But one never forgets."

Looping the long camera strap around her neck, she began to climb.

* * * * *

"Got ya, old man!" Spark crowed, as he easily neutralized a fireball that his father sent hurtling at him.

"Indeed," Flame said quietly, his expression giving none of his emotions away.

Then just as fast, a hot wave of air surrounded Spark and sent him hurtling backwards. "Ouch!" he grumbled as he landed on his keister a few feet away from where he was standing and gloating. "I deserved that."

"Indeed," his father/teacher/tormentor said.

Dad and Mom must have had one hell of a night, he decided. The old boy was in rare form!

Before Flame could launch into one of his lectures, Spark tried to get the advantage of surprise and attacked. A large wall appeared, a wall of constantly changing fire and ice. The bright red of the flame reflected off of the ice blue, casting dark shadows over the green grass. Spark used this distraction to pull himself to his feet, for he knew that this defense would only slow Flame down for a moment.

Closing his eyes, he began to quickly gather energy, making the air around him hum and his loosely bound hair to break free of its restraints and fly wildly around his head. He opened his eyes, the gray completely covered by flashing red and silver sparks as he began to swiftly form the energies that he had gathered.

Just as his wall collapsed, a giant flame-colored tiger with broad stripes of silver over its body leaped at Flame, its orange and red eyes almost as terrifying as its inches long clear ice claws. With a silent roar, the animal of flame and ice attacked, slashing at Flame who neatly sidestepped its launch.

As the creature prepared for another leap, Spark created a giant bolt of white-hot heat, which he launched while his opponent was off balance.

Catching sight of the bolt from the edge of his vision, Flame dropped to one knee and held up his hand, seemingly ignoring the crackling beam of hot energy that heated the air around it and promised instant death to anything in its path. Holding his hand in place, Flame kept one eye on the beast of energy that again launched itself in his direction.

In what appeared to be slow motion, the beast hit his palm and instead of frying him, Flame easily redirected the path, striking the beast mid-leap and causing the energy to dissipate with a loud crackling boom.

But Spark was not done.

As his father regained his feet, Spark created a large bird of ice that quickly shot from his chest and dove at Flame. The shining white creature with eyes the color of fury and bright red tail feathers swooped towards the man, its ice blue talons outstretched and reaching.

Smiling now, an action that made Spark sweat, Flame dove towards the ground, rolling easily to avoid the bird's claws and its dangerous trailing tail, something that Spark hoped would provide a double attack. Quickly, he thrust his hand out.

Instantly, a clear force field of incredible heat surrounded the bird, melting it as it threw back its head and opened its mouth as if it were calling out in the throes of death. At the same time, Flame's eyes began to sparkle red, his hair flew around his body, and the air crackled with power. The Warrior of the Brotherhood was on the attack.

Before Spark could build up a defense or fathom his father's next move, several balls of white-hot fire were launched at him.

"Shit!" he called out inadvertently, as he dove towards the ground, but just as quickly, he was back on his feet. The battle had been engaged and now it was time for some fun.

Racing across the field towards the man with the glittering red eyes and flaming hair, Spark let go with a volley of ice pellets. These were designed to distract and allow him an opening in his opponent's defenses.

Still smiling, Flame quickly erected a wall of red flame as he moved to engage his son in hand-to-hand combat.

Forming a sword out of the energies that hummed through his body, Flame waited until Spark was almost an arm's length away, then swung quickly at his head, then his knees, bending his body with the force of his swing.

Spark, seeing his mistake almost too late, created a long tear-shaped shield of ice, using it to absorb some of the energy from his father's blade and redirecting it back at him in the form of a bright bolt of pure white light.

Anticipating this move, Flame quickly threw up a shield of the darkest red. Absorbing the light and adding its energy to his blade, the shield forced the energy away from the shield with a small explosion that threw both men back.

Quickly gathering his wits, Spark created a sword of his own, one of purest blinding white and prepared

to engage. It was elemental fighting time!

They met with a clash; both swords--one of flame and one of ice--sent sparks flying into the air around them.

Although Spark had youth on his side, Flame had years of training and experience. So as they rapidly swung, striking glances and sharp blows off of each other's weapons, no one gained an inch of ground.

"That's it!" Spark yelled, as he had to duck a particularly vicious swing from his father's four-foot fire sword. "Hey!" he called out again, as he leapt back to miss the next blow. "I am your son!" he called out, hoping to use parental bonding to ease his father's attacks and to distract the dangerously controlled attacking man.

"Then fight like it!" Flame answered, as he almost cut his son's knees from his body.

"Okay!" Spark answered as he jumped back and executed a series of perfect one-handed back flips. Holding his sword out to the side, he rapidly put distance between his father and himself.

Finally, a few feet back, he landed on his feet and quickly dropped to one knee, sweat soaking his simple white T-shirt. His chest heaved rapidly while his hair flew around his body. Almost as soon as his feet touched the ground, Spark launched his sword of ice into the air, aimed directly at his father, and transformed the sword into a brilliant, icy blue dragon.

Not one to sit back and idly be defeated, Flame heaved his own blade into the air, morphing it into a fiery dragon, whose colors constantly shifted from red to orange, and then back to fiery red.

Keeping one eye on his son, Flame began to dance with his hands, moving them in an elegant ballet of movement that controlled the flying creature as he used it to attack its counterpart.

Smiling, Spark began to move his hands. The practiced motions flowed easily from his body as he countered his father's movements. A determined look was on his face.

In mid-air, the two dragons battled, snapping at each other. Showers of ice and flame rained down upon the earth as they slashed at each other, trying to destroy as their masters commanded.

Then suddenly, the icy dragon had the fiery one on the run, its crackling wings of fire and snapping tail of flame trailing behind it as it circled the field.

Thinking to have his enemy on the run, Spark caused his blinding blue-winged lizard to pursue, circling the field and diving at the dodging red dragon.

In the sky, the two lizards flew and dove, jaws snapping at each other as they picked up speed. Soon they were a blur of red and blue that circled each other, a whirl of bright color that rained down sparks of energy where they touched.

Then in a sudden reversal of movement, the red dragon broke off the chase, changed direction mid-air and dove towards the ground, straight at Spark.

Stunned, Spark had no time to counter this attack. His eyes grew wide as the dragon of flame swooped towards his unprotected chest.

Before he could blink, the dragon struck him! But instead of exploding into a blow of concentrated energy, the dragon began to slide through his body, its foreign energy throwing him up on his toes as his arms flew out helplessly away from his sides. His beast of ice dissolved in the air.

Shaking, Spark felt the beast slide through his body with a tingling snap. As it passed, it burned away anything in its path. His shirt dissolved as its toothy jaws exploded through his back, making him gasp as the rest of its body pulled through.

There was a distant gasp and thud of sound from behind them. Neither noticed as the dragon slid free of his body from behind. It triumphantly flew towards the heavens where it exploded in a shower of glowing red and brilliant blue.

Slowly, Flame walked over to his fallen son, and curiously stared at him, his naked chest showing no trace of damage or of the thin material that had shielded it from view. Patiently, he stood there and waited.

"That was a rotten trick," Spark groaned, gasping for breath. He opened his eyes, eyes that had turned back to their normal gray color.

Flame opened his mouth to speak, but Spark cut him off. "I know, I know...indeed!"

It must have been a really, really good night, he decided.

"What did you do? I am completely neutralized!"

"I sent foreign energies, my energies, through your body. You made no attempt to find the common thread between them and your body fought the invasion. My energy recognized like energy in your fire element and absorbed it to shut down the ice. In essence, I turned your energies against each other."

"Like two negatives canceling each other out."

"Correct."

"But for how long?" he asked, as he felt no humming of the energies through his body. It was an odd feeling, as if a part of him that had always been there had been taken away.

"It is a momentarily loss, I believe," Flame decided. "Because I have never tried it on anyone before, I am not sure, but your energies should return soon."

"Should?" Spark nearly shouted as his surprise sent him sitting straight up. "Dad!"

"Your energies are a part of you, Spark. Nothing can take them away for long. Besides, we all have a bigger problem."

"What could be bigger than taking away half of my soul?"

"The other half of your spirit just fell out of a tree."

"Zanya?" Spark cried as he turned to see the fallen form of his love lying at the base of a tree.

"She is okay. I cushioned her fall," Flame offered as he reached down to help his son to his feet.

But Spark was already in motion, his feet racing towards his mate.

"She saw?" Spark asked, momentarily forgetting his personal loss.

"She saw," Flame answered with a sigh.

"Oh, damn!" Spark muttered.

"More like your mother every day," Flame said, as he watched his son kneeling beside the love of his life. "This may prove to be problematic," he said, but expected no answer.

Zanya had begun to groan and now their troubles were *really* about to start.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Mmm...."

"Baby? Can you hear me?"

"Fire," Zanya mumbled as she struggled to open her eyes.

"Um, yeah."

"Yeah," she muttered.

Then her eyes popped open.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed. "What are you?"

"Zanya?" He reached out to touch her, to help her into a sitting position, but she scrambled backwards, scuttling away from his touch.

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!"

"Zanya?"

"What are you? Are you some kind of a freak?"

"Zan!"

"I slept with a freak! I had sex with a freak! What are you? Are you some kind of alien?"

Her eyes were big, wide with shock as she stared at him.

"Zanya," Flame said, noting the hurt look in his son's eyes. "There is no need to resort to name calling."

"And you get away from him!" she screeched, sliding in between Spark and his father. "What did you do to him?" Zanya peered over her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Turning, she reached out to examine Spark's bare chest, running her fingers over the familiar landscape of muscle, even as she glared at Flame."

"What?" Spark asked, incredulous. First she was treating him like he was a leper, then she was trying to defend him from his own father.

"He hurt you!" she said as if he was a numbskull. "He sent fire through you! I saw it! Maybe you should lie down?"

Her mind was racing a mile a minute! She didn't know what to say or do from one moment to the next, but she had to see if he was hurt.

"Are you in pain? Where are you burned? Do you need a doctor?"

"Zanya," Flame tried again, noticing his son was struck mute.

"You shut up, you!" she hissed, eyes narrowing into green slits of anger. "Does your wife know that you are barbecuing your only son?"

"Ah?"

"Bad father! Bad alien! Bad...whatever you are! You stay away from my Spark!"

"Zan?" Spark said, reaching out to touch her arm.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed at him, turning her eyes on him, freezing him in place, even as her fingers checked for signs of tenderness or broken skin. "Don't touch me, you...you...Martian! You just lie there and let me check you!"

"But...."

"Quiet, you!" she bellowed, trying to organize her thoughts.

"Zanya!" Flame had had enough! This chaos only led to disorderly thinking, and they all needed clear heads right now. "You will cease this madness!"

"Or what?" she shot back.

That stunned Flame into silence. Then his eyes started to sparkle and glitter, the silver shots turning his eyes into some strange, stormswept landscape.

"Or I will go and get my wife."

He said that as if it were the scariest thing that he could think of.

Zanya sat back and blinked a few times.

What was she doing? What was going on with these people? It had to be a trick, some new lasers or something.

"Okay, so where are the machines? Where is the radio receiver or sensor or whatever you used to do that?"

"We...I...." Spark sputtered, still trying feverishly to come up with anything to explain what he was not ready to explain.

"The truth, my son." Flame said as he rose to his full height and turned to walk away.

"But...."

"We will deal with problems, if problems arise."

Both Zanya and Spark watched as the silent giant of a man walked away.

"What truth?" Zanya asked, breaking the silence that had sprung up between them.

"Well, this is kind of hard to explain."

"Try me."

Zanya wasn't sure what she felt, but she was sure that it wasn't fear. At least, not anymore. Her mind tried to force her heart to believe what her eyes had seen, but she was sure that there had to be some reasonable explanation.

"Do you want it with or without the sugar coating?"

"Spit it out!"

Spark dropped his head, his hair falling to hide his face from her scrutiny.

This is what he had always feared. He knew that someday he would have to explain what he was, what his family was, but he thought that he could put it off until their first child accidentally incinerated its crib. But that was a pipe dream.

Zanya deserved the truth...an explanation. He only hoped that she would understand, that she would not run in fright or shout it out to the rooftops that aliens had landed and were living in suburban Maryland!

* * * * *

"This house has to be around here somewhere," James mused, as he drove carefully through the waterfront neighborhood. There was at least an acre of land for each house and they all backed a beautiful lake. But they all looked alike.

"Why couldn't he have given me a description," he snarled, as he looked at yet another house with the same accretions of its neighbors.

Then he saw it.

"This has to be the place," he decided, as he drove up to a house surrounded by a jungle.

There were all types of decorative grasses and plants, and they were all well maintained, but the place was odd!

There was an addition built on to each side of the house, as if the family decided that they needed room after the original house was built. Each addition was as tall as the house, almost like wings.

"This has to be the place," he decided, as he sat and stared at this monument of extra space and green thumbs.

But since he had no cause to go barreling into these people's homes and demand the return of his sister, he decided to sit and wait. Maybe something would happen that he could use to separate his only remaining family from the strange people who dwelled within the place.

His reporter's nose twitched as he sat back and waited. "Something will happen soon."

* * * * *

"Zanya, we are not like other families," Spark began. "We are...different."

"Come on, Stephen King! Get to the unabridged version!"

"Well, you see...my dad... he kinda crashed here."

"So is he like, an illegal alien or something? What does that have to do with the lasers?"

"Well..."

Spark ran his fingers through his hair, his face scrunched up in indecision. How does one tell the woman that one is in love with that one is an alien being from an advanced culture and has the power to destroy a city single-handedly?

"Well?"

"Kind of," he decided with a smile. Would she let him get by with that?

By the frown on her face, the answer was a resounding *no!*

"Kind of?" she almost snarled. "Kind of! Spark, get to the point!"

"He fell out of the sky."

"Out of the sky, like a bird?"

"No, it was more like a man hurtling through time and space in a personal aircraft traveling at the speed of light."

She looked...blank.

Scotty, beam me up, Zanya thought. There is no intelligent life here.

"What do you mean, 'light speed'?" she screamed.

"We are not from here!"

"Then where are you from? California? There are so many weirdoes in California! That's why I hated living there!"

"Testrios," he sighed.

"Testrios. And that is...."

"...several light years away from Earth."

She blinked again.

"You are an alien?"

"I am an alien."

"I slept with an alien?"

"You slept with an alien."

"I had a mind-blowing, sexual experience with someone of a different species?"

"Ah, yeah, I think that sums it up."

"Spark, I have no problem dating outside my race, but isn't this pushing it a bit?"

At her confused look, Spark exploded into laughter.

"Stop laughing! This is serious! Does birth control work for people like you? Why am I asking you that! You are a near virgin!"

"Hey!"

"Now don't get huffy! This takes some getting used to!"

Zanya stared at the nearly naked man that she loved, yes loved. She still loved that man! If he were out to harm her she would have been dead. The whole family could have roasted her for supper, but they were kind and supportive.

"Does anyone else know?"

"Just you."

"Violet? Your aunt? Eric?"

"No one else knows. What are you going to do?"

"First I am going to get a pregnancy test. Second I am going to develop these pictures. And third, well, I guess I have to get used to you doing weird things."

That decided, Zanya was ready to move on to other matters. Her panic had passed.

"That's it?" Spark almost yelled.

"Yup."

"That's all you have to say? No, 'Are we out to destroy the Earth?' No wondering if I gave you spades, space AIDS? No, 'Are you going to kill me now that I know'?"

"Um, no."

"Well, why the hell not?"

Spark had tried to imagine every scenario that could occur when the news finally broke. He saw her cursing his very name, saw her running to the tabloids, or saw her hating him for the rest of his alien life! But she just sat there and smiled.

"Because acting like that it is a waste of energy. Is your mom an alien too?"

"No!" he snapped. He wanted a chance to at least use one of the many speeches he had thought up for this occasion! She *wasnot* cooperating.

"Then you are half-alien?"

"No! I am full blooded Testrios male."

"How...."

"My father birthed me."

"What?"

"My father pushed me out of his body during what I am told was a painful but blessedly quick labor! He is quick to remind me of the pain when I act stupid."

"Well."

"Well what?"

"Well, that settles the subject of children."

"What do you mean?" He was still a bit annoyed that he couldn't use any of his great speeches.

"What I mean is that if you get to do the dirty hard work, I want to have your baby! Hell man, even if you are an alien that alone would make me stay with you!"

"Zan!"

"And I want a large family, Spark! I am talking five or more kids!"

Spark stared at his mate, his Zanya with her sparking green eyes, and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"What a weekend!" Zanya sighed, as they made their way back towards the house. "I mean, I find out that the love of my life is not from Earth."

"Can we drop it, Zan?" Spark asked. "I know this is new to you, but I am kind of afraid of what you may ask."

He ran his hands through his hair and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

"Sure we can drop it," she laughed. "Right after I get these pictures developed."

"You can't! Someone will find out!"

Spark had been adamant about the need for secrecy. Some government types could show up and try to take them all alive! Even worse, some government types could try and use them for test subjects! That thought almost scared his hair white, more than what was already in it.

"I will develop them in the studio, Spark! No one will ever know! But these pictures are too good to pass up! Your father will love them! That dragon thing was so cool!"

"Cool is not the word!"

He shuddered as he felt the loss of his energies keenly! The roaring warmth that usually filled his veins was missing! There was no hum as energies raced through his body, causing a tingling in his extremities and making him burn with life.

He felt as if a part of him were missing.

Sometimes he had wished that he were not different from the others. He wanted to be just another normal kid who could throw temper tantrums and lose himself to the wild abandon of childhood frivolities. But all of that was impossible.

Any excess of emotions could very well release the energies that were always just below the surface, and cause someone serious injury.

He remembered, on more than one occasion, wishing he was someone else, that he could not heat his

bathwater with a touch, or cool his juice with a glance. He wished that he did not have to control himself with women--that he could argue and race with his friends. That he was *normal*!

Now that he had his wish, that he was as human as the rest, he suddenly didn't feel so special or as powerful. He actually felt like a piece of his soul was missing.

He hoped that he could regain it before something happened. He needed it back in case he needed to protect Zanya, and Ember wasn't able to protect her for him.

He wished....

...he did not have to control himself with a woman! The possibilities boggled the mind!

No more forced control, no more pulling back from the edge of madness that teased his body, no more not letting go completely for fear of burning down his house, like he had already done!

"Spark?"

He turned to face his mate, and realized that she had been trying to gain his attention for some time.

"What is wrong? You look...funny."

"Zan," he said calmly as heat, a different kind of heat, but heat nevertheless, roared through his veins.

"Spark?"

"Run."

Zan took one look at Spark's glazed eyes and took a step back. She stared as he slowly licked his lips. But it wasn't until she saw the erection pressing out the front of his jeans that she turned and ran!

Spark was in heat!

And she was about to have a grand old time!

Laughing, Zan circled the house, ran past the front door, and squealed with delight! Maybe now she would find out what the leather covered stick was for!

"I'll develop the film later!" she screamed as she rounded to the front of the building.

"No film!" Spark roared as he eagerly followed, some primitive part of his body delighting in the chase. "Strip!"

His muscles moved, pumping beneath his skin, his breathing rasped deep and heavy in his chest. He was a hunter on the prowl, and his prey had just skittered around that house.

Good! He was herding her in the right direction!

"But I want the pictures!" Zanya called back, giggling as she found joy in the fact that her Spark wanted her this badly. "I want to look at you and your father playing with fire!"

She ducked behind a clump of rather tall, clumpy white-tipped grass and peeked out at her pursuer. This was fun! She fought to control her breathing, holding her camera in one hand.

"Later!" he growled as he paused nearby, turning his nose to the air as if he were a wolf scenting his mate. "We will discuss it later."

Now where was she? She should be upstairs taking off those confining clothes and getting ready to be whammed and bammed!

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty!"

"Looking for a bit of pussy?" Zanya shrieked as she darted out from behind the grass. "Come and get it!"

Spark took off like a shot, his body honed and tuned for the chase.

The look on his face was so fierce, Zanya dropped her camera.

His red hair was flowing wildly behind him, blowing in the wake he created with his movements. His muscles were pumping, each sinew outlined by his glistening skin. His eyes were bright, filled with longing and lust and a lot of love. His nostrils flared as he moved with the grace of a stallion flying through the canyon floor, each muscle and limb moving in perfect synchronicity.

Spark was poetry in motion, magic, and a piece of art all wrapped into one tall package.

Zanya stared at the golden god racing towards her and did the only thing that she could do. She lifted her arms up, offering herself, surrendering to this masculine creature that promised to fulfill each and every one of her erotic fantasies.

With a roar of triumph, Spark scooped Zanya up in his arms, clasping her tight to his heaving chest, and raced for the door to his private wing.

He had his woman! His passion would not be denied. He held his life in his arms.

"Zanya!" he breathed as he kicked open the door and carried her to his bed. "Let's get buck-naked and fuck!"

James sat and stared at the spectacle that he had just witnessed.

When his sister had come charging around the side of the house, screaming at the top of her lungs, his first reaction was to open the door and race to her rescue! He actually opened the door, and had one foot out, when her actions became clear to him.

As he saw her hide and giggle behind that damn tall grass, he knew that she was playing a sex game with that Irish horse she called a boyfriend.

Disgusted and a bit angry, thinking that he came out here to protect her and she was playing 'roll me over in the clover' with Spark, he began to reenter his car, but their words stopped him.

There were pictures?

Pictures of Spark and that damn Flame playing with fire!

Would he dare dream—did he dare to hope—that they were torching a building?

Had he stumbled onto a family of firebugs out to do more damage than Mrs. O’Leary’s cow?

He had to know!

He began to think of ways to buy, borrow or steal the film from his sister when she dropped the camera.

Quiet as a mouse and crouched in his driver side door, he watched as his sister was lifted into the beefy arms of that...that...*man* and carried into the house. His sister was playing the slut to that red-haired creature while he was out here worried and....

...looking at her fallen camera.

Zanya had dropped and forgotten her camera, something that told him about the state of her emotions. Zanya never forgot her camera! She never abused her equipment! This man was teaching her bad habits!

But, he thought happily, she had left her camera!

Luck was with him once more!

Playing commando, James let his door ease forward, until it rested in the proper position, but not fully closed. He may need a quick get away and fumbling for the door handle would only delay things.

Looking furtively to the left and right and spying no one on the isolated cul-de-sac, he crouched over and raced for the jungle of a yard.

Freezing as a dog barked some distance away, James dove behind a tall clump of bee balm...and rolled face down into a brilliant red climbing rose vine.

"Ou..." He slapped his hands over his mouth to prevent further sound as tears formed in his eyes. The thorns, the vicious, thick, long thorns, had almost hit a crucial part of his anatomy and prevented the children that he often dreamed about.

Sucking in his breath over the pain, he eased to his knees and gingerly plucked the thorn from his inner thigh.

"Thank you, God!" he whispered as he popped his head up...and came face to face with the reason it was called bee balm!

Three of the angriest, nastiest looking bees buzzed around his head, out for revenge because he'd disturbed their work! And his nose looked like the perfect target!

James’ prayers turned to silent curses, as he rose to his feet, squatted, and tried to brush the angry bees away. His arms wind-milling, he cursed as he swung his torso away and lost his balance.

He held in his tears as he landed, butt first, into the same vine that had punctured his thigh.

"Shit!" he hissed, momentarily forgetting the bees in his quest to free his butt from the now bloodthirsty vine.

But he paid for his lack of vigilance as one bee took aim and landed a direct hit to the tip of his nose!

"Fuck!" he shouted, as he grabbed at his wounded nose!

"Damn it!" He mentally cursed as his cry echoed around the area! Would someone come to investigate?

Whimpering, he again removed the thorns with one hand, the other hand protectively covering his nose, and inched his way closer to the camera, crawling on his belly, the only uninjured part of his body.

Yes! So close, he thought, as he caught sight of the thirty-five millimeter camera with its special telephoto lens, and laid his face on the ground in relief. So close he could taste it!

But then he realized that it was not victory that he tasted, it was the fertilizer used at the base of the plants.

"Have mercy!" he whimpered, as he used the hand protecting his nose to brush the loose, rich, horsy-smelling soil from his mouth and tongue. "Why me?"

But he got no answer, and expecting none, this was good.

Trembling with delight, and no small amount of pain, James reached out and grabbed the camera! Success! It was in his grasp!

Giggling like a schoolgirl, he checked the number of exposures left and giggled as he realized the roll was done.

Still chuckling gleefully, he pressed the automatic rewind and waited the few seconds as it hummed though its job.

"That is real work!" he hissed at the remaining bees that, now that he was out of their work area, ignored him. "Listen to that hum!"

As the sound abruptly cut off, he popped open the back and pocketed the film, and returned the camera to the place on the ground where it had fallen.

"Time to see what all the fuss is about!" he chuckled, as he slipped the film into his pocket. "Time for the mighty to fall!"

Hissing with laughter, he turned and rose to his feet, still crouched over.

He chuckled as he raced over the grass and made his way back to his car.

This was worth the bee sting and the taste of horse crap, he decided. This was victory and revenge, rolled into one neat package.

Proud of himself, he climbed into this car, slammed the door shut and started the engine. As he raced away, he never realized that someone was watching his every move.

* * * * *

"He is up to no good," the first voice said, watching the departing car.

"This does not bode well for our plans," the second returned. "And we just came here to check on the two of them! When will the madness end? They need to be together."

"We may have to step in here."

"I know," the voice sighed. "How come these things are never easy?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Do you trust me?" he asked, as he wrapped the leather cuffs around her wrists.

"Yes," she whispered, as a quiver of excitement worked its way through her body.

"Do you trust me not to hurt you...in a bad way?"

"Y-Yes," she whispered, as his hot breath shot shivers down her spine. She tossed her hair back and stared at him with heated green eyes.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," she managed, as he backed her to the bed and gently pushed her onto the clean white sheets. Man, was she ever thankful that she had changed the bed before she went hunting him down. "What is that padded leather bar for?"

He chuckled, a low rumbling laugh.

"It is a spreader bar, baby. It keeps your legs spread while I...do things to your body."

"Oh...my!"

Zanya sighed in true delight as Spark, still dressed in his jeans, began to rub and massage her legs.

When he carried her into his room, he instantly stripped her of all her clothing and began a torturous tongue bath, leaving no part of her body untouched.

"I always wanted to do this," he whispered, as he flipped her onto her stomach and ran his tongue down the soft curve of her back and around each buttock. "You taste salty and sweet at the same time, making my tongue tingle, like a woman should make me feel."

Zan groaned and arched her back, rising to her knees to expose her most needy of places to his energetic touch, but he stopped and flipped her over.

Spark made a feast of her flesh, paying close attention to the sensitive skin around her nipples and the curve of her neck. Her shoulders were nipped and chewed and the crease where thigh meets hip was lovingly laved until Zanya was a writhing mass of femininity on the bed.

Wet with need, she could soon only moan her encouragement and marvel at his quick understanding of human sexuality! He was exploring her body slowly, learning each and every nuance, leaving no inch unexplored.

He pulled her to her feet and wrapped the cuffs around her wrists, promising an out of this world experience.

Now she lay on her back. Spark loomed above her, her wrists cuffed together tightly while he placed a matching pair of cuffs around her ankles.

"Oh, my," he returned, as he grabbed her bound wrists and attached them to the headboard.

"How...?"

"Shh! Relax and let me drive."

Spark picked up the short leather bar and grinned.

His gray eyes lit with a passion that he could fully give rein too. He winked at Zanya, before bending over and attaching the bar to the cuffs with a pair of silver D rings.

He stood back and looked up.

Curious and still turned on by the sight of a near naked Spark, she followed his line of sight to the hook that hung over the bed. She had never noticed it before!

"For later," he purred as he pulled a small silver chain from his bag of goodies on the floor and attached them to the D rings as well.

"What...?"

"I am going to make you cum so hard," he purred, as he began to lower the tab of his zipper. "You are going to scream my name, beg me to stop, and plead for more."

"Spark?"

This was a side that she had never seen! It was kind of dark, very dominant, and so powerful!

"You are going to beg to be my little cock whore, Zanya, and then maybe I'll deliver the goods."

Zanya blinked, twice!

"Cock? Whore? Wooo!" Maybe reading all of those Brazen Heart books had had an effect on him, or at least taught him something!

She didn't know what to think about this new and improved Spark, but her body sure approved! It was

more than wet and more than ready.

Spark eased the zipper low, exposing the fact that he was *sans* drawers, as fiery red pubic hair peeked into view.

She unconsciously held her breath as he began to slide his jeans from his body, making her beg with her eyes for every inch of bare, hard flesh.

Breath held, Zanya watched, eyes wide, as Spark turned and presented the elongated muscles of his back. With one arm, he swept the long length of his hair over his shoulder, exposing his tattoo. He turned his head to stare at her, the dragon's and his eyes startlingly familiar.

Leering for all that he was worth, Spark slowly, ever so slowly, pulled the low-slung material over his hips, exposing the firm golden globes of flesh that made up his cupable ass.

"Mmm," Zan purred, as the jeans slipped lower, exposing the tops of his muscular thighs and the almost tender spot where thigh met buttocks. Yup, he had forgone underwear!

"Turn around," she whispered. "I want to see you."

"What you want is not important, Zan. You wanted the real me, you got it. I am not the clumsy man that I appear to be. I only get that way around you."

"Spark...."

"And I want to do to you the things that I only read about in those books. Now that I can't set the house on fire, I want to let go. Will you let me?"

Zanya stared as he slowly turned around and exposed his erection. He was hard, long and thick, pulsing with need and begging to be touched.

Slowly, he eased the jeans from his body, his eyes, bright and gray, locked onto hers. His nipple ring glinted in the light, making her mouth water with the desire to lick it.

All too soon, the slow strip was over and Spark stood before her, naked and raw with need.

"Will you?"

She had no choice in how she answered. Her heart made the decision.

"Yes."

* * * * *

James rapidly made his way back to his sister's studio. It was amazingly easy to pick her lock and shut off her alarm. For as long as he could remember, she'd used the same date for everything, 9-27-02. The September twenty-seventh, and the number of people killed in that auto accident, their parents.

Zanya was so careless sometimes, so predictable, that she scared him. But this just happened to be one

of those times when her set system for numbers came in handy.

Almost trembling in anticipation, he made his way to her darkroom and began processing the film.

What would he find?

Maybe the red-haired half-breed and his father were into ritualistic animal slayings! But that would be too good to be true. Maybe Zan had caught them violating some safety law or regulation. That is what he expected. But at the very best, she had caught them flaunting some federal regulation and endangering lives. That would be enough to ruin their business, the same way that they had ruined his relationship with his sister. That would show them!

But even as these thoughts rambled through his head, he realized how ridiculous he sounded. If he was having problems in his relationship with Zanya, it was because they never spent much time together anymore.

He ran his hands through his hair, his frustration growing as his anger at the situation increased. He could see how easy it was to fall for someone who would tell you what they wanted you to hear. Apparently, this Spark person saw her weak and vulnerable side and took advantage.

Shaking his head, he continued to develop the photos, his anger at that particular unnatural family still egging him on.

They had no right to treat him this way, to turn his sister against him. He was ready now, ready to commit to his sister, to help her in her career, and they were standing in the way!

Nothing personal, but they had to go.

Okay, *it was* personal, but they still had to go!

Smiling in anticipation, he made ready to unroll the film to a reel, to place it in its proper tank.

He flipped off the light and removed the film from its cassette and in a few practiced moves, loaded the 35mm film onto a metal reel. Once it was loaded into a light-tight container and sealed in protectively, he flipped on the light and grinned.

Time for the fun to begin!

He dumped the developer into the sealed film tank, turning it and tapping it lightly to remove all of the bubbles. After the proper amount of time passed, he dumped the developer out and added glacial acetic acid and water, a stop bath, and let it sit for about thirty seconds, to wash off any remaining developer.

Quickly he added a fixer with a hardener to protect the precious negatives from being scratched, and impatiently waited the ten minutes for the film to set. When that was done, he soaked the film again in water to remove the fixer and added a hypo eliminator to ensure its removal. After a final wash in clean water, the film was hung with film clips to dry. He was ready to wait the few hours it would take to dry. Triumphant and patting himself on the back, he walked out of the darkroom and did a small jig of joy! The bee sting on his nose hardly bothered him at all!

"Enjoying yourself?" a sarcastic voice asked.

Shocked, James whirled around to see two people standing before him, an unpleasant expression on their faces.

This could be trouble.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Spark!" Zanya gasped, as he positioned himself just so over her prone body. His head was now buried completely between her upraised thighs, his tongue gently lapping at the crease where thigh met hip.

His positioning also placed his cock in almost perfect alignment with her moist lips. The heat from his body poured over her, making her hair stand on end even as she struggled to raise herself towards him for contact.

But Spark was in control of this game, a Spark that she had never seen before! Her beta male was turning out to be alpha extreme! And all it took was for him to trust her completely.

"You want it?" he whispered, his hot breath wafting over the glistening wetness that coated her inner thighs, proof of how much she needed him.

"Um-hmm." His penis was hanging there, just above her lips, the tip shiny with his pre-cum. If she could get him to lower it just a bit...

"How much?"

His words were followed by the firm caress of his callused fingertips as they brushed over her throbbing clitoris and gently outlined the swollen lips to her opening, giving her enough pressure to make her yearn for more.

"Really bad. Spark, I need it," she murmured as she struggled lightly, enjoying the feeling of being bound in his bed, a captive to his every sexual whim. Her bound hands twisted in their manacles as she again tested their strength. She was confident enough in Spark to know that if she called a halt to this little game, he would instantly stop.

"Not badly enough."

He lowered his face; his heated breath caressed her straining flesh, things that made her jump and shake. His tongue eased out and gently ran across the smooth wet skin of her inner thigh.

"Spark, please!" The silver chains rattled as she writhed in his grasp.

"If you are going to open your mouth, Zan, put it to practical use."

He dropped his hips enough to let the head of his cock run across her parted lips, feeling her breath and shuddering as it caressed the dewy drops of pre-cum on his tip.

Before he could congratulate himself on a really good quip, Spark's eyes widened and his body

shuddered as Zanya took him at his word.

"Mmm," she purred, as she opened her mouth and popped him inside.

The warm wet heat of her mouth was almost too much! Spark closed his eyes tightly as fire leapt from the sensitive nerve bundle below the head of his penis to his tightening sac. Tingles began at his toes and fingers, spreading upward rapidly to his stomach and nipples, making his little golden ring burn.

It almost felt like his energies were rising, but his was different! This was magical, and in some ways more intense. He realized that he no longer had to struggle to control his emotions; he could give in to the feelings swamping his body. This was freedom, this was excitement, and he found it within his Zanya.

Marveling at her talent as she took him to the back of her throat, Spark lowered his head and buried his lips into her overflowing wetness. She likes doing this, he thought, as he lapped and slurped the moisture her body mass-produced. *I am one lucky man*, he thought to himself.

For Zan, the feeling of having Spark in her mouth, the knowledge that she made him react so powerfully was a heady aphrodisiac. Some women might not like the taste of man, the taste of raw sex, but Zan was one who delighted in using all of her feminine wiles. She felt Spark leap against her tongue, tasted the sweet drops of his lost control, felt the heat rise within his body and reveled in all that was womanhood. Even though she was the one in chains, she still maintained a lot of power in this situation.

Then all thoughts ceased as Spark began an oral attack that made her forget to breathe.

With swift lips and a lapping tongue, Spark went after the swollen lips of her vulva, teasing them with long rough licks and nipping bites.

Zanya felt her hips rise off the bed, felt fire in her stomach and sucked Spark harder, using him as her pacifier.

"God, Zan!" Spark groaned. "Do it, baby! Harder! Oh, shit!" His mumbling ceased as he brought up one finger and gently circled her clit as he munched on her flesh.

Zanya groaned.

The vibrations on his sensitive member made Spark curse more, as he tried to force his fingers lower. "More?" he questioned as he slowly inserted the tip of one finger, closing his eyes and imagining her wet heat surrounding his dick.

In reply, Zan took a deep breath, opened her throat and took him to the root.

"Shit!" Spark screamed, as she swallowed once and pulled back, letting him slowly slide free while rapidly flicking her tongue along his length.

"That's enough!" He pulled free of her, ignoring her superior smirk, and reversed his position over her.

"You like games?"

"Apparently," Zan replied, as she rattled her chains at him and slowly licked her lips, savoring his flavor.

"Then try this one."

Zan held that smile on her face until he reached beside the bed and pulled that sack out again. Grinning, he reached inside, his body sheen of sweat glowing in the light that flowed through the windows. Raising one red eyebrow at her, he smiled broadly as he found what he was looking for.

Zanya's eyes widened in shock as she stared at the thing in his hand.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Rock your world, baby!"

"Um, what are you doing here?" James asked, as he stopped his dance of joy.

"We get that a lot," the female replied, as she curiously stared at the man who looked as if he was going to wreck their hard work.

"But why?"

"What's in the darkroom, James?"

"Something that may shock you."

"What?"

"I, uh, haven't looked."

"You went through all of that trouble to steal that film, and you haven't looked?" The man stepped up beside the woman and stared incredulously at James.

"Well, the negatives are developing. Besides, what do you care? I thought you were his friend?"

"I am his friend. So, who says I won't kill you for what's in those photos?"

James backed away from the man, a shiver of fear traveling down his spine.

"Stop it!" the woman hissed to her companion. "This is not answering any of our questions."

"You haven't asked very good ones," James felt obliged to point out.

"Oh, shut up!" Both people shouted in stereo, causing James to back up another step.

"I have a question for you," the man said, his eyes boring into James'. "What do you have against Spark?"

"He may be dangerous!" James's eyes glowed with fury. "And it is my right to protect my family from danger. Any danger!"

"But Spark is about as dangerous as an ant!" the woman snorted, as she waved one manicured hand in James's direction. She discounted any rumors about the family's weirdness as jealousy and the fact that

the family was in an unusual business.

"We will see when the negatives develop."

"No, we won't!" the man insisted.

"Yes, we will!" James insisted, growing bold once more.

"I have you on breaking and entering, destruction of property, and grand theft...film! You wanna try and pull that one-upmanship on me? Go right ahead. I have you over a barrel!"

"This pissing contest isn't getting us anywhere!" the women sighed. "And I would not let Zanya walk into anything dangerous."

"You don't know what I know about these people!" James insisted. "They are dangerous!"

"And you get your information from?"

"A very reliable source!"

"Who is...?"

"I don't have to tell you!"

"Well, guess what, pal?" The man smiled as he pulled up a chair and sat, facing James. "Reliable or no, we are sticking with you until those negatives develop. Then we are going to see what is so important that you have to wreck your sister's love life and bring charges against your person."

"Hey!" James snarled.

"He is right, young man," the woman insisted, perching herself on the man's knee. "We can wait. We have all night. But we will find out what is in those pictures that you stole. And we will end this nonsense once and for all."

Groaning silently, James started to argue, then changed his mind.

"Fine! But when we find the illegal doings of that mutt that my sister is screwing, we go straight to the police."

"Are you so sure that it's illegal? Or do you want it to be so that you can tell your sister 'I told you so' and have a legitimate reason for doing this?"

"What do you know?" James snarled as he shoved his hands into his pockets, pissed because he wasn't as clever as he thought. These two had discovered him, but that was okay. When they saw the truth, whatever the truth was, they would turn on the red-headed freak too.

"I know that I want nothing but their happiness," the man retorted. "I know that they both deserve some happiness. I know that they complement each other, that they belong together."

"Then you know nothing!" James snarled, as he stalked over to a wall and pulled out a chair. "My sister is fragile!"

He stopped as they both broke out laughing.

"She is!"

"Okay!" the woman soothed. "If you believe that!"

"She is! She is delicate and fragile! She is too gentle for that red-haired brute!"

* * * * *

"Do it harder, Spark! Make me feel it! Feed it to me"

Zanya threw back her head and wailed as Spark plied the vibrating cylinder over her aching clit! She had passed from shocked into amazed euphoria ten minutes ago. Now she was one large throbbing organ begging for release.

Spark groaned and wiped the sweat from his brow again as he bent over and pulled her swollen nipple into his mouth, chewing it delicately, making her whimper in pleasure, as the other hand held the vibrator in place.

"Spark! Oh, shit! Oh, yes!" Zanya screamed as she felt herself rising to an unbelievable plateau of pleasure, then cried out in disappointment when Spark backed off, letting her excitement wane. "You bastard!"

"Who's your daddy?" Spark chuckled, as he pulled on her flesh yet again.

In answer, Zanya whipped her head back and forth on the bed, body straining, sweat coating her flesh.

"Not ready?" he asked. "Fine by me! We have all night."

The vibrator slipped between the moist folds of her flesh, its rapid movements touching just the tip of her clit as he eased it forward.

"Hmm," Zanya gasped as she again pulled against her bindings.

Her mind had shut down! Her body was taking over! It wanted a release, and she knew that this one would be terrifyingly perfect. She was flying so high, she was almost afraid that she would never come back down!

Her nipples throbbed, her stomach was clenched into knots, her breathing was labored and sporadic, and her body hummed with the attentions of the vibrator, but still she felt so empty! Only Spark could fill this void within, and she needed it filled now! She could hold out no longer.

"Fuck me!" she screamed as he pressed the vibrator against a particularly sensitive spot. "Please, Spark! Now!"

"Hmm, I don't think so! Not what I want to hear." He growled as he stared down at her.

His control was slipping! His hair was wet and plastered to his head and body! Sweat coated every inch of his flesh. He was primed and ready for action, hard as steel and growing harder, yet he waited to hear the right thing.

"Please, Spark!"

"You can get a fuck anywhere, Zan! What do you want from me?"

"I want you to screw me! Prong me! Pound me!"

Spark actually whimpered as he slammed his eyes closed and tried to regain some control.

"Not what I want to hear!" he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"Love me!" Zanya screamed. Her frustration had reached almost painful levels! She needed her man! She needed her Spark! Only he could give her the orgasmic explosion that she craved.

"What?"

"Make love to me!"

"That's what I wanted to hear!"

The vibrator was pulled from her body with a slurping sound and was tossed heedlessly across the room.

Spark almost threw himself on top of her, slicing between her suspended legs to place the straining tip of his erection against her portal.

"Spark!" she moaned.

"Look at me!"

"Please!"

"Open your eyes! Look at me!"

"Spark!"

"Damn it, Zanya! Look at me!"

Her eyes popped open and connected with his! Green vied with gray, then all vision faded as Spark eased himself inside, knocked at the door to his home.

"I love you!" Zanya whispered, and Spark rested his forehead against hers.

"I know it, baby! I love you more than life!"

Then he slammed himself home.

Zanya's piercing cry echoed around them as she felt his hard marbled flesh rush deeply inside where she

needed it most.

"Spark, love you, love you, love...Oh, God!"

One stroke! All it took was one stroke and Zanya exploded into a million starlit pieces.

But that was not enough for Spark.

"Again!" he breathed as he took her lips in a powerful kiss, invading her with his tongue even as his body carved a niche for itself within her.

Tightening his stomach, he raised his hips and began a powerful series of hard strokes. His position was perfect for running the head of his penis over her g-spot with each entrance and exit.

Zanya threw her head back and screamed as another climactic wave poured over her.

She tried to close her legs around his hips, to pull him in closer to her, but the leather spreader bar held fast and kept her in the perfect position to receive the ultimate pleasure. Her inner walls clenched around his thrusting cock, increasing her pleasure and dragging him close to the edge that came with such skill and dexterity.

"More! I need more," he groaned, as he tore his lips from hers and buried his face in her neck. His teeth locked on the skin near her shoulder and he bit down as his hips slammed into hers. The room was filled with the wet slapping sounds of their bodies coming together and the almost bell-like tinkling of the chains.

Zanya threw her hips up, meeting him stroke for stroke, building to yet another release. She mumbled, she cursed, and tears ran down her face. She fought to meet the next orgasm and to bring Spark along with her, to lose herself in the lightning and fire he created within her body.

Spark began a high keening wail as every muscle in his body clenched and froze! Lights exploded behind his eyes. From his toes to the top of his head, streaks of zinging pleasure screamed down to his groin.

He felt himself swell to unbelievable heights and slammed himself as deep as he could get into his Zanya! His hands locked around the cuffs that held her hands immobile. His testicles boiled and suddenly he felt his ass clench as his release roared over him.

"Zanya!" he bellowed, his muscles twitching as he gasped at each rhythmic explosion as his seed blasted from his body to fill her.

"Spark!" Zanya screamed, as her body reacted to his release and catapulted her into yet another climax, milking his body and shooting shards of pleasure through her entire body.

Crying, whimpering, thanking God for this precious gift, Spark collapsed against the body of his woman, holding fast to her quivering form.

"Spark," Zan whispered, tears flowing freely as she struggled to put her world back to rights.

"I love you," Spark whispered. He pulled a lock of his hair off of her face and stared at her features slack in repose as her body still shivered beneath his.

"I will never let you go," Zan whispered, as she forced her eyes open to see the liquid gray of his, shining in happiness and love.

"I am not going anywhere," he replied, as he reached up to free her hands before they both fell asleep.

"Good," Zan sighed as her hands were released and she wrapped them around his body. "I don't think I can get my legs free alone."

"You have to let me go first," he chuckled, as he felt the strength of her grip.

"Later, okay?" she asked. "In a second I'll let you go. I need to feel you."

"I repeat, I am going nowhere, Zan." Spark said, as he reached back to free her ankles. "But I don't want you hurt."

Once freed her legs wrapped around his hips, holding him in place.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you," he replied. "And nothing is going to keep me from you."

* * * * *

"Call the government!" James gasped as he stared at the pictures. "This bastard isn't human!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"You know you want this!" Spark breathed, as he pressed Zanya against the tile wall. "You know you do."

"Yes," Zan moaned, as she wrapped her legs around his waist. "But we are going to be late."

"I don't care."

"You care! It's your house."

"Let it burn!"

"It already did! Zan, stop distracting me!"

"Then let me get dressed!"

"You are the one who invaded my shower."

"You told me you needed help washing your back. Now we are done, so let me go."

"But it's your legs wrapped around my waist."

"And it's your tongue licking my nipple."

"And that was your moan, Zan! Admit it! You want me! You can't resist me! There! That was another moan!"

"That was the phone, you moron!" Zan laughed as she pushed Spark back and took a deep breath.

How did she ever imagine that this man was shy?

"So it is," he muttered, as he stared at her from under a long wet swath of hair. "Let it ring."

"No, Spark! We have work to do! Now be a good boy and put me down and get your phone."

"Want me to show you how good I can be?" He leered for all that he was worth while waggling his eyebrows at her.

"Behave! That's an order!" Zan giggled as he released the leg lock she had on his waist and dropped her feet to the ground. "Besides, it could be your parents. You are supposed to be working the Renn Fest today. And we have to check out your house. And I have to get back to the studio and start processing film."

"Slave driver," he muttered, as he mock snarled at her before dropping a tender kiss on her swollen lips.

"And anyone looking at you will know it."

"Hmm?"

"You have that freshly laid look."

Zan exploded in laughter as Spark's face bloomed in color.

"Do not!"

"Do too!" she retorted, as she pulled away from him and headed for the towels. "And your phone is still ringing."

Snorting, Spark strolled by her, wiggling his butt, as he grabbed a towel and headed back to the bedroom.

"This had better be good!" he called back, ignoring her laughter and trying to get the picture of her bending over to blot her legs out of his mind. A wet Zanya was a sexy Zanya.

Here she was, the woman of his dreams, the woman he was going to marry, the woman who made him complete, and Spark discovered that he was perfectly content. He was satisfied. He was sated. He was in love.

"City Morgue!" he snapped smartly, as he picked up the phone. "You stab 'em, we slab 'em!"

"Something is going to get slabbed if you don't get your ass down here!"

"Eric?"

"Right the first time, Fire Plug!" a disgruntled Eric snarled into the phone. "And you had better bring Zanya with you! Your ass is in the fire, my man! And this idiot plans on watching you burn."

"Eric? What idiot? What are you talking about?"

"Eric?" Zanya called as she walked into the room, a towel around her wet hair and another wrapped around her body. A look of concern was on her face. "What's going on?"

"Just get down here, Lover Boy! Zanya's brother has some dirt on you and it doesn't look good!"

"What are you talking about, Eric? Talk to me!"

"I am talking about some film!" There was a moment of silence and some muffled voices could be heard in the background. "Get to Zanya's studio! Pronto!" he hissed before the phone line went dead.

"What was that about?"

Spark stood there, staring at the phone as if his whole life was coming to an end. "Zan, where is your camera?"

"Oh, shit!" She gasped, as her eyes grew wide. "I left it outside! That is an expensive piece of equipment and I left it lying in the grass!"

"Zan, the film..."

"What film?"

Zan was racing around the room, gathering up her scattered clothing as she raced to get dressed.

"I mean the film in the camera."

"It's in the camera! You know that I was going to give it to you, hon! Men!"

"You don't understand, Zan." The phone began that annoying buzzing to let you know it was not hung up. Yet Spark stood there, his eyes wide with horror, phone clutched in his hand. The color drained out of his face. "He has the film."

"What?" Zan shrieked, as she stopped hopping around on one leg trying to get on her pants. She stared up at Spark.

"James. Zanya, I think he has your film. That was Eric. They are at your studio. We have to get down there."

"How? He would not.... damn him!"

Cold rage filled Zanya's eyes as she stared at Spark.

"This time, he has gone too far! Who does he think he is? What does he think he's doing? That...that bastard!"

"Zan..."

Spark dropped the phone and walked over to her. She was seething in such rage her body shook with it. He reached out to her, to ease the pain he saw swirling with her anger, but she pulled back, jerking her arm out of his reach.

"No!" She stepped back again. "No! I'll kill him! This time, he's gone too far!"

"Zan! Calm down. We have to go. I have to call my parents and we have to get there to stop whatever he is doing. Eric sounded scared."

"My own brother! My very own brother! My very own fucking brother!"

"Zan?"

"No! Let's go, Spark. It's time we settle this once and for all! This is the last time that he interferes with my life!"

Zan stormed out of the room, shirt hanging open, bare breasts bobbing as she headed for the front door.

Sighing, Spark reached for the phone, a mixture of fear and anger coupled with uncertainty filling him. Quietly, he pressed the hook and slowly touched in a number he knew by heart.

"It me," he said quietly to the voice on the other end. "They know."

After he hung up the phone, he slowly began to dress, dreading what was to come.

* * * * *

"Who did you call?" Eric demanded as he watched Ame and James circle around each other. James had a cell phone plastered to his ear as he easily dodged Ame's body.

"Eric!" Ame snarled as she stomped her foot. "This man is odious! He not only took those pictures of Spark and his father obviously practicing some new stunt, he now has called in the government!"

"What?" Eric narrowed his eyelids at the shorter man.

"He says that they're telekinetic or something! I mean really!" Ame threw up her hands in disgust.

"Good! Be here!" James laughed as he closed his flip phone. "That was a friend of mine in the FBI. They deal with this kind of weird crap."

"What crap? What are you blathering about?" Eric snarled. "You believe in that X-File crap? And I

thought that you were a real journalist."

"Laugh all you want, blonde!" James laughed as he slipped his phone into his pocket. "My friend can prove that these photos haven't been touched up! The man is a mother-fucking firebug, and even you can't deny it! I've got the negatives to prove it."

"Honestly!" Ame sighed as she walked out of the room. "Anybody who knows the MacIntyres knows that they specialize in special effects, pyrotechnics, and lasers! This is just an elaborate trick with bent light!"

"Bent light does not burn the shirt off of a body!" James argued, as he turned from the retreating woman to face the tall blonde man. "Even you can't argue with that."

"I say it is some trick of the light!" Eric rolled his eyes and he stepped away from the man, lest he be tempted to plunge his fist into his face.

"You would!" James sneered, and shot him a knowing look.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"Don't say 'nothing,' darling. I want to know."

"I am not your *darling* and you would know a good trick when you see one."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you are probably screwing the guy on weekends!"

A deadly silence filled the room and Eric clenched his big hands into even bigger fists.

"And what gives you that idea, sugar?" His voice was low and controlled.

"Well, you are his 'friend'," James leered. "And I know how much your type puts store in their friends. I even know some of what you store in your friends, big guy."

"You...."

"Don't sweat it, boss," James laughed, not knowing how close to destruction he actually was. "Some of my best friends are queer."

"Okay! I will say this once, darling, and only once."

Eric's blue eyes blazed as they stared into James' smirking face.

"Stay the fuck out of my way. Stay away from me and mine, baby. Or else I will take the juvenile shit that pours out of your mouth personal. And I don't give a shit that you're Zanya's brother. In fact, I wonder if she was adopted."

James just continued to smirk as Eric turned to follow Ame.

"You people are so touchy. You need to relax more."

"I'd love to relax my fist in your face, doll," Eric snarled, as he put as much distance between the jackass posing as a man and himself.

"Where are you, Spark?" he muttered under his breath. "We have things to discuss."

James sat back and smiled. The jerk at the festival had paid off! He had hit paydirt! Soon, he would be rid of all of his problems and have his sister back in his corner, where she belonged.

It was not that he was obsessive, really! It was just that he knew what was best for his sister! And sleeping with those kinds of people was wrong! You can work with them, associate with them, use them, if need be, but you never got close. That was the unspoken law and he meant to make his sister stick by it.

He stood in front of the darkroom, protecting the negatives which would bring this whole empire crumbling to the ground.

"And it only took three days," he laughed to himself. "Damn, I'm good!"

Chapter Twenty Eight

"Where is he?"

Zanya slammed into her studio and roared like an angry lioness. Her green eyes were shot with fury and her face mottled red. Her clothes hung haphazardly on her body, which in itself was strange because Zanya liked to have a well-groomed appearance. Her hair hung in damp tendrils and in her hand was the camera, denuded of its film.

A subdued Spark followed, dressed neater, but anger bubbling beneath the surface of his calm demeanor.

"Zan!" James leapt up and tried to grab his sister's arm, to take her away from the man who appeared to be capable of producing fire. "Get away from him! Now!"

Before he uttered another word, her fist came whizzing through the air and neatly connected with his already swollen nose.

Gasping in pain, James staggered back, one hand going for his nose as he stared bug-eyed at his sister.

"Jesus, girl! What's gotten into you?"

"You are no longer my brother!" she screamed, as she clenched both fists, waiting for him to make a move so she could pound him again.

"Zan," Spark said from behind her, reaching for her, but James started again.

"Don't you lay a hand on her, you sand nigger! Don't touch my sister!"

"Did you say *sand nigger*?" Spark said, as he shook his head sadly. "I haven't heard that one in a while."

Before he could comment more, Eric and Ame walked into the room, both looking between the angry Zan, the quiet Spark, and the bent over James still clutching his nose.

"You hit him, honey!" Eric said, walking towards Spark. "Good for you! If I'd hit him, I would never have stopped."

"I did nothing," Spark said quietly, looking at Zan. "The lady doesn't pull her punches."

"Eric? Ame? What are you doing here?" Zan asked, shaken out of her anger for a moment as she eyed her boss and the strange makeup artist that couldn't keep his eyes off of her legs or say enough good things about Spark.

"We were following him! Darling, are you okay?" Ame walked over to Zanya to take one of her clenched fists into her hands.

"Why is he doing this to me?" she asked, tears filling her eyes and anger abruptly gave way to sadness and heartache. "I thought that he loved me."

"Zanya, I do!" James interjected. "But being around these people has warped you! You need to come with me, back around your own kind!"

"My own kind?" Confusion, disbelief and anger filled her voice. Was this the older brother who had held her hand when they'd buried their parents? Was this the man who had always encouraged her to be objective in life? The man who claimed to love her? "What is my kind, James?"

"You know! Black like us!" His eyes dropped to the ground, as if his words were hollow and shameful to his own ears.

"Black, like us," Zan sighed, as the first tear tracked its way down her face.

"Zanya." Spark stepped close, wrapped his arms around her, but she pulled back. She may not be her brother's keeper, but she sure was going to be his teacher.

"James, look at me. Look at us!" she said, stepping closer to her brother.

"I am looking," he sighed, pulling his eyes away from the ground to stare into her green eyes.

"What do you see?"

"I see a beautiful young woman who is making the biggest mistake of her life being around these people."

"Look at me, James!" she demanded, startling him, making everyone in the room jump.

"I am looking," he said after a moment of contemplation. "You look just like our mother."

"Yes, I do, James. I look like our mother, who looked like her mother, who looked like her mother who was a slave master's bed whore."

"Zan...."

"And I have the green eyes from our father, whose father was Native American, whose mother was Native and white and black! Also slave stock."

"Zanya!"

"And have you forgotten our father's mother, whose mother was the daughter of an Indian slave, who was shipped over after slavery was abolished? Where do you think I get the name Zanya, James? Or have you forgotten your roots?"

"I haven't, but you apparently have."

"Look again, brother!" Zan yelled. "Look again. We are Black, and we are white, and Indian, and Native American, and probably a whole hell of a lot more! But do you take time to consider that, James? My hair is straight! Does that make me less black? My eyes are green, James! Doesn't that make me one of them? A sand nigger? Or better yet, the regular garden variety black nigger? I have black features, James. I am considered black on my birth certificate, but is that all that I am, James? Is my color the only significant thing about me? Is it?"

"Zanya, you are...."

"I am a woman, James! I am a human being, James! I am an adult, James! I go with whom the hell I want to, live with whom the hell I want to, screw who the hell I want to! And for your information, race never was a part of the picture! When I look at Spark, I see the man that I love! When I look at his family, I see all the struggles that they had to go through to be together, and I still see that love!

"When I look at you, James, I see confusion! I see hatred, James! Misplaced hatred! What is it about this family that you can't stand? Is it because they are a family, James? That they respect each other, as you obviously never respected me!"

"I love you, Zan!"

"Then you have a piss-poor way of showing it, James!"

Before the conversation could go any further, the door opened and a man in a nondescript black suit entered.

"James?" he called. "I am here for the negatives. And this had better be worth my time."

"Oh, it is!"

Then turning from his sister and the anguished look on her face, he made his expression go blank and faced the room. James was good at hiding his emotions, and now this talent came in handy. He was a riot of confusion and frustration. This was not supposed to turn out this way, he thought. But it would get better once she saw these freaks for what they were! Then his sister would love him again.

"Everyone, this is Agent Castle, FBI. Nick, I want you to meet the fire freak."

He pointed to Spark, who blinked innocently at the agent.

"And I have the negatives to prove it! This man and his whole family are dangerous. They need to be put away. They could kill somebody."

"Sooner than you think!" a voice grumbled from the door.

Kendall stalked into the room, followed by Ember and finally, a seething Flame. The tension level jumped threefold as the newcomers took inventory of all in the room.

"Oh, this is going to be good!" Ember said, in a singsong voice as she saw Zan wrap her arms around her beloved Spark. James stepped closer, as if he was going to pull them apart, but collected himself. The man in the black suit turned, body flowing into a defensive stance, while Eric and Ame looked as frazzled as the March Hare!

"Let the games begin!" Kendall snarled, as she advanced into the room, a look of death on her face. No one and she meant no one, hurt her babies and got away with it! War had been declared! Now she only had to decide whom to take out first!

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Who are all of these people?" Agent Castle asked, as he stared at the crowd who walked into the door and specifically at the determined black woman who was approaching.

"Um, the Fire Freak's family," Spark added, as his eyes glinted with humor. "Watch out for my mom. She packs a wallop."

"What are you doing here?" James looked surprised as he watched the MacIntyres approach.

"This is what family does, James, when one member is in trouble," Zan added, from within Spark's arms. "Or have you forgotten that?"

"What negatives?" Kendall snarled as she finally met face to face with James. He stared at her, confusion and mild disgust on his face.

"The ones he stole from my camera." Zan sniffed at James even as she smiled at Kendall. "He followed us to your house and he stole the exposures I made this morning."

Before Kendall could speak, Flame interrupted.

"Why would you trespass on my property, Mr. Burke? Of what use can my family secrets be to you?"

His low tones and friendly nature had the desired effect. James flushed bright red as he began to stutter.

"My sister.... I mean, I was looking out for her."

"You imply that I am a danger to her?" Flame's red eyebrow raised in question and he actually managed to sound hurt.

"You had better have evidence if you plan on laying that on my family, James old boy," Ember added, fighting to hold back a grin. "That is defamation of character, and my family's business is based on their character."

"I have...*proof*!"

"Proof of what?" Flame asked again. "I see your sister with my son, and she appears to be unharmed."

"I am not hurt at all!" Zan piped in, an evil grin on her face as she watched her brother's discomfort. She was still hurting inside, but it was fun to watch her bigoted brother try and worm his way out of this one.

"So, this evidence is...." The agent waited quietly for his answer.

Everyone leaned forward, waiting to see what he would do.

"It is evidence that this man creates fire!"

"Um, I am a blacksmith," Spark added helpfully.

"And he's a damn good model!" Eric and Ame chimed in.

"And great in bed," Zan whispered for his ears and tried to smother her laughter as his face turned bright red.

"Get the proof, James," Agent Castle said finally. "And I hope that you haven't gotten me out here on some domestic squabble."

"I have the evidence!" James muttered, as he stormed to the darkroom to retrieve the negatives. "You will see what I mean!"

Zanya raised fearful eyes to Spark, but he smiled and gave her hand a little squeeze.

"This is so unorthodox!"

Kendall snarled as she began pacing within the room. "I thought the government had better things to do with our tax dollars!"

"Ma'am, we must check every angle and investigate every report," Agent Castle sighed as he watched this family. The FBI had investigated them before, when they'd signed on to help with a Fourth of July display a few years ago. Though some strange things happened around them, nothing ever sent up a red flag. He decided that strange things happened to a family in a business as weird as pyrotechnics. But this was the first time someone had claimed that they were *pyrokinetic*. Although that would explain some of the displays they'd put on to packed houses and standing ovations, Agent Castle chose to believe that it was just superior computer skills and training.

As he mused, James returned, holding a fist full of the small velum sheets.

"Look at these!"

They all gathered around the agent as he accepted the negatives. Then he raised his eyes to stare at the family again! Maybe there was some truth to the claim of pyrokinesis

The first negative showed a firebird entering Spark's body, burning off his shirt as it passed.

"Oh, dear," Kendall sighed as she turned her eyes toward Zanya. "You take a mean photo, lady! You know how to pick a moment."

"I...uh...." Zan shuddered and almost passed out as Kendall winked at her.

"I need to take these back and get them tested, but how can you explain this?"

Agent Castle looked warily at the family of redheads who surrounded him. This was wholly unexpected! He looked over at James, saw the triumph in his eyes and turned to flip to the next image. It was one of two firebirds fighting in mid-air, both seemingly being controlled by the movements of the men.

"Computer graphics." Flame and Ember said at the same time.

"No way!" James shouted. "Even holographic images can't burn clothes away!"

"He has a point, Mr. MacIntyre," the agent added, a little calmer now. A computer was an explanation that he could sink his teeth into.

"Clothes can be burnt away if they were never there in the first place," Ember drawled as she winked at the agent.

"Then where are they?" James practically shouted. "Where are the computers, Red?"

"That's Miss Red to you, Jamie Boy," she snapped. "And have you never heard of a computer microchip?"

That said, she reached into her pocket, and pulled out a small round control panel.

"May I?" the agent asked, as he stepped closer.

"Why yes, you may!" Ember smiled. "If it is okay with my father."

All eyes turned to Flame.

"I think that it would be fine if the Agent looks at it. Although it is classified and my only prototype, you may look."

The control was handed off.

"How does it work?" the agent asked.

"It is a simulated reality, uh, game, for lack of a better word." Flame explained. "It is programmed to relay a certain picture and game scenario. That scenario is relayed through the optic window in the center and the image is projected with colored lasers. This is a unique system, as the light remains visible in bright daylight. It will revolutionize entertainment systems when it is completed. But for now, it enhances our displays and is more interactive."

"Fascinating!" Agent Castle murmured, as he looked over the tiny disk. "What is the power source? Does it emit any heat?"

"Lithium battery and it unfortunately emits a lot of heat. It is still in the testing stages," Flame commented in his presentation voice as he took the control from the agent's hand. "This morning's run was one of the best ever."

"I hope that explains things," Kendall glared at James. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man, calling my family dangerous freaks!"

"You are not buying into this crap, are you?" James danced around the agent as he stared at Flame with the remarkable computer in his hands. "You are, aren't you?"

"Well..." the agent fluctuated, looking from James to Flame.

"Demand a demo!" James all but shouted.

"This behavior is so unseemly in a man," Ame sighed as she shook her head. "It is childish!"

"But again, he has a point," the agent added. "Will you demonstrate this for me?"

"Certainty!" Flame said, a smile on his face.

What are you doing, Dad? Spark thought as he watched his father. This is not good!

But Flame smiled at his son as he handed the device to the agent. His look seemed to say, Trust me! He even winked at the worried Spark.

"Depress the red button."

Everyone turned eyes to the device so no one noticed the bright red sparkles that appeared in Flame's gray eyes.

The agent winced as the controller grew almost uncomfortably hot, then a small blue firebird appeared in mid-air.

"Holy shit!" Agent Castle gasped as the bird began to circle in the air around him.

"Move a bit, Agent Castle, and it will follow your movements." Numbly, Agent Castle shifted the device to the right and watched as the bird moved accordingly.

"Holy shit!" he repeated in awe, his mouth hanging open.

Even as he stared wide-eyed at the illusion, the device became red hot and began to sputter.

"Shit!" he yelled as he dropped the control, winking the bird out of existence. He watched the device smoke and sizzle as he blew on his hand.

"No!" Ember wailed. "That was the last one! It burned up!"

She turned furious eyes toward the agent and then to James as she kneeled and stared at the melting piece of metal and chips.

Picking it up, she tossed it from hand to hand, muttering "oh" and "hot" as she blew on it.

"Do you know how long it took me to get that thing working? Now I don't have a prototype! This is all your fault!"

"Miss, I do apologize," the agent stuttered, as he watched the beautiful glaring woman.

"Being sorry isn't going to fix this mess! I have to start all over! It took me years to build this thing, and now I can't build another one!"

"Surely, you have plans, blueprints, hard copies?" the agent asked in a rush, as he moved to her side. He could just imagine what this technology could do for warfare! This was revolutionary.

"No, I don't!"

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Ember glared at the man as her thoughts raced to formulate an answer.

"Because they burned in the fire!" Zanya added and all in the room turned to face her.

"What fire?" the agent asked, his eyes narrowing on Zan.

"The one in my house," Spark added quickly, hugging Zan to him. "We were lucky to make it out alive! Wiring, you know."

"Yeah!" Ember added finally rising to her feet with the melted lump of metal in her hand.

"You mean to tell me that you had no backups? Not on computer?"

"Um, no," Spark sighed. "I was working on them the night before, but I forgot to put them back. They were lost in the fire that gutted my bedroom."

"Oh, come on!" James nearly screamed as he stepped forward. "Don't tell me that you are going to believe this bullshit?"

"I held the device, James," Agent Castle sighed, as he looked longingly at the ruined technology in Ember's hand. "I operated it myself! This explains things well enough for me."

"But my sister..."

"If you are having family problems, the FBI is not a family counselor, James! You know that! But at least my trip wasn't a total waste. Mr. MacIntyre, I would like to discuss this technology with you and your

lovely daughter, if I may?"

"Well," Kendall snorted. "You go from wanting to dissect us to wanting to screw my daughter."

"Ma'am, I never..." stuttered the agent.

"Your eyes said it all. You want to screw her out of family secrets or just plain screw her."

Agent Castle had the nerve to blush. Was he so transparent?

"Mother, he wanted no such thing," Ember laughed, making the agent blush worse.

"I believe that we shall discuss this at a later date, Agent. The programming, not screwing my daughter." Flame chuckled.

"I never...Mr. MacIntyre. I would...."

"I believe it is time for us to depart, my Kendall." Flame reached out his arm and Kendall snorted once at the agent, glared at James, and nodded to Eric and Ame, before taking it and turning to leave.

"I still want a piece of that James character," Kendall snarled, fierce as ever about her babies.

"Spark will attend to that, my love," Flame added gently, as he guided his family out of the door.

Ember winked at the agent before turning to follow her parents. "Pleasure to have met you," she sighed, and blew him a kiss.

"The pleasure is all mine," Agent Castle murmured, as he watched her rounded hips and firm butt swaying from the room.

"You can stop drooling now," James snapped, as the door closed. "She's gone."

"I think I'll be on my way. I have to report to my superiors. The only reason I am not sore at you, James, is because we may have discovered a useful talent in this family. Imagine a computer that small producing such a lifelike image!"

"Whatever," James snarled as he glared at Spark, who was still holding his sister tightly in his arms.

"I'll be on my way then. Good day, folks," Agent Castle muttered as he walked out the door, no doubt thinking of what kind of bonus he was going to get for this discovery. And how he could meet up with that Ember again. Grrrr! She was a knock out.

"Eric, Mrs. Heart, would you mind leaving? I believe I need to have some words with James."

"Yeah," Eric snorted. "You talk to the racist elitist pinhead, will ya? I am suddenly in need of a shower."

"Well, you did leave your things at my penthouse, Eric," Ame purred as she ran one finger suggestively up the man's arm. "That and the strawberry jam."

There was total silence as all eyes went to Eric.

"What?" he asked loudly. "Am I not allowed to have a sex life too? Do you think all I do is slap makeup on the brain dead?"

Silence.

"With all of this speculation about my sex life, no wonder you were still a virgin!" Eric added for Spark's benefit.

"This is not about me! This is about you and...and...."

"Ame!" Zan finally got out. "You are screwing Eric?"

"Well, I have to test these story ideas, now don't I?"

With a sniff, she grabbed Eric by the arm and pulled him towards the door.

"You handle your business, dears. I have...research to finish."

The door closed on the two of them, leaving behind Zanya, Spark, James, and a tension so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Chapter Thirty

"Now, I think it's time we had a little discussion," Spark snarled, turning abruptly to face James.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Oh, but you do!"

As Spark stepped closer, his anger began to rise. He was so mad at this man who had tried to destroy his family and his relationship with Zanya, that he could kill him.

"What? You're going to tell me that I am filled with delusions too?"

"Oh, you are not delusional." With every step, Spark's anger began to fill him, making the room uncomfortably hot, making his body pulse with his heartbeat.

"What the fuck?" James took a step back as Spark's red hair began to weave around his body like some red silken aura that was sending out a warning to all he opposed.

"Do you think this is the first time we were exposed, James?" Spark bit off, as he passed Zanya and continued to stalk her brother.

"Id be ma, id be klonta."

"Oh, shit!" James hissed as he turned to Zanya. "What did he say?"

"I don't know if I hear you," Zan answered. "After all, I am not your family! Remember? I am one of them."

"Zan?" James was growing desperate.

"Not the first, not the last," Spark translated while he grinned.

He began to feel that old familiar hum as his energies began coursing through his veins once more. His eyes began to sparkle and bright red flashes of lighting pulsed through his hair, creating the illusion that his body was beginning to glow, lighting up from within.

"What are you?" James was now too stunned to do anything but stare! He was frozen in place, as his worse nightmare became reality.

"I am Spark," he answered. "I am the Keeper of the Flame."

As he spoke, he raised his hands at his sides and the temperature in the room began to jump, the pressure building so high that their ears began to pop.

"I am of fire and ice; I am the harnesser of destruction. *I am not human* ."

With every word, the sparkling increased until his eyes looked like a starburst of power, glowing and changing, never dimming or faltering. He raised his hands before him and James sucked in a quick breath, but relaxed as nothing happened.

Then suddenly a large red tiger burst into being. Crystalline shards of ice made up his stripes and his eyes glowed a fierce blue. Long claws of ice scraped the ground with his every step as he turned and sighted James. The beast began to stalk.

"Zanya!" James cried as he tried to step toward his sister, but a red streak of fire lurched in his direction, blocking his path at the first step, as if this thing could anticipate his every move.

Sweat beaded up on his forehead, as his terrified eyes remained glued to the beast of ice and flame.

"You are not the first to try and entrap us, James," Spark continued. "And no doubt, you will not be the last. But we have a plan for such an emergency."

"You are pyrokinetic!" James stammered, his eyes darting from Spark to the tiger that held him at bay. He took a step back and the creature followed, invisible waves of heat rising from his body.

"No, I am not. Actually, I am something that your FBI agent would have loved to get his hands on. I am one hundred percent pure, all outer space alien, James. Pleased to meet you."

Spark gave a short mocking bow and the tiger gracefully followed his movements.

For a moment, James forgot about his sister, the tiger and that fear that had plagued him since he'd been left alone with this madman.

"Alien?"

He wheezed. His throat felt tight, as shock took over his body.

"Alien."

Spark grinned sadistically as he took a step towards James, flinging his hair back, profiling for his captive audience.

"What...what are you going to do?"

Spark continued smiling as suddenly the windows in the room iced over with a sharp cracking sound.

James shivered as suddenly he felt shards of cold fear slicing through his veins. He took a step back, only to feel his feet begin to rise off of the ground. He threw his arms out, searching for purchase and finding none as the ceiling drew closer.

"Now, I have a problem, James," Spark murmured, as he walked close to the man who was so frozen stiff with fear that if his body bent a little, it would have broken. Holding his body up with a combination of hot drafts and cool gusts, the miniature tornado held the man at the perfect height to scare some sense into him.

"I have a big problem. What to do about James." It was a statement. James knew that Spark was going to do something horrible to him, but the question was still what.

"Uh, Spark?" Zanya was getting a bit worried. Was Spark going to kill her brother? The possibility that he could actually do someone physical harm had never occurred to her! Spark was such a gentle soul!

But then, she had never seen him this angry, this bent on protecting what he considered his. What he was doing with his 'energies,' as he called them, was amazing! She never would have thought a human being capable of such! But then, Spark was not human.

"Not now, Zanya," he said, his concentration still focused on James. "I am trying to make my position clear to your brother."

"But Spark, remember. He is my brother."

Zan turned away from the look of pitiful gratitude that filled James' eyes. She may not want him dead, but the poison that spewed forth from his mouth burned a hole in her heart where her love for him had resided.

Considering her words, Spark glared at James as he slowly lowered the man to the floor. The room began to warm as the energy tiger roamed freely around him, preventing him from bolting from the room.

"My God!" James breathed as he tried to gather his equilibrium. "You have to get away from him, Zan!"

"Shut up!" Spark suddenly roared, startling both Zanya and her brother. "Just shut up! I have had enough of you!"

As he roared his anger, the tiger leaped as if out of his control.

Zanya screamed as the energy beast landed on her brother, lashing out at him with claws of ice, ripping

his shirt into shreds.

James fell back, shrieking and screaming as he struggled to fight off a creature that was everywhere at once! The slashing claws and the ripping teeth brushed against his skin, sending alternate chills and flares of white-hot heat through his body!

Was he going to die? Was this the last he would see of his sister?

Then as suddenly as the attack had begun, it ended.

James looked up and saw Spark standing above him, eyes glowing red with his hate, his chest heaving as he stared at his nemesis.

"Get up!" Spark snapped.

"What?"

"I said get your punk ass up off of the floor, James! It's time we settled this thing between us."

"What are you going to do?"

James shakily got to his feet, finally believing that he'd bitten off more than he could chew. Bravado and quick talking was not going to get him out of this one! Suddenly, all of his prejudices and his anger towards this man and his family seemed shallow and pointless! Why did a man always reflect upon his wrongs when he knew he was about to die?

"Since Zanya would be disappointed if I killed you, I am going to have to settle for kicking the shit out of you instead."

Then the first fist flew.

James staggered backwards as Spark's massive fist connected neatly with his nose, knocking him backwards as his arms flung out for balance.

Sniffing, James wiped the flow of blood that had begun to dribble down his chin as he stared at the man.

"You and me?" he asked. "No magic, no hocus pocus?"

"You and me," Spark affirmed, ready to lash out at this man for all of the problems that he had caused, for each and every shadow he'd put into Zanya's beautiful cat-green eyes.

"And what assurance do I have that you won't get mad and fry me?"

"The same assurance you gave me before you decided to sic the FBI on my tail and involve my whole family because you can't accept your sister sleeping with a man of mixed races."

James blanched a bit at this, but quickly recovered.

"Mixed races? You are fucking ET!" James roared, as his anger took control of him again, blotting out his common sense.

"James, you are a gold-plated ass!" Spark snorted. "You didn't like me because you thought that my mother was black and my father white. Now that you discover that I am not an interracial child, you hate me because I am from another planet! Are there any phobias that you don't have?"

"Bastard!" James hissed, as he launched himself at Spark, conveniently forgetting that the man outweighed him by a good forty pounds and he had to reach up to throw a punch.

Spark stood fast and let James' fist strike him in the jaw. Nothing happened.

Spark did not move an inch under the force of the blow.

James drew back his arm in preparation for another assault, but was stunned motionless as Spark began to smile.

"Looks like you are not much of a punk after all, James. But you are still an ass!"

After that, James received a beating unlike any seen on this planet

Spark swung methodically, first hitting James in the right eye, and then the left, leaving them both a bit more colorful. Two body blows sent the smaller man staggering backwards where he bumped into the door of the darkroom and then bounced to the floor.

"Enough!" Zanya screamed as she jumped in front of Spark, stopping the rain of blows that surely would have killed her brother. "Enough, Spark! Stop it! You'll kill him!"

Spark halted, his breath heaving in his chest, as he stood over the fallen man. He turned hard eyes to Zanya, and slowly his anger began to melt away. He understood her reasons.

"I knew that you would stand by me," breathed James, as he pulled himself to his feet. "Blood is thicker than water!"

"I stopped him because I didn't want him to kill you, James."

"I know!" He pulled himself to his feet. "Now let's get out of here!"

He turned superior eyes to Spark, smirking a bit through his rapidly swelling lips.

"You misunderstand me, James," Zanya corrected. "I stopped him from killing you so that he wouldn't go to jail."

James sucked in a deep breath, his shock evident as he digested his sister's words. "Zanya! You can't mean to...."

"I have and I do!" She turned to face her brother, pulling Spark's arms tightly around her. "You are no brother to me, James. I don't even know you anymore! You are a stranger that looks like the man I once respected."

"Zanya." James blinked, wiped his nose on the shreds of his shirt and took a step towards her. "Let me explain!"

"Explain what? That you are a racist bigot? That you hate Spark far more than he hates you? That you

embroiled his family in your machinations?"

"He is an alien, Zanya! You don't know what he is going to do to you!"

"Love me! He is going to love me, James! That is all I ever wanted!"

"But he should be contained! When I tell Agent Castle this...."

"He won't believe you," Spark added as he glared at the fallen man. "No one would believe you, and your career as a writer will be over, unless you want to go and work for the tabloids."

"But...but you are dangerous! The world needs to know!"

"First me," Zan began. "Then the FBI. Then the world! Who are you trying to save? What are you trying to prove, James?"

"That I love my sister!"

"If you love me, then go. Go James! Go far away from me! I don't want to see your face again!"

James was stricken. "You don't mean that, Zan!"

"I mean it, James. And the next time, I will let Spark singe you a bit to get my point across. I have no brother."

Her eyes filled with tears...tears of what was now lost.

"I am your only family."

"I have Spark. He is my family now, James. You never wanted to be a part of this and here is your way out. Go back to where you came from. Go back and tell that informant of yours he can go to hell for all I care. Spark is my man, James. And I am never letting him go."

Beaten, James glared at his sister and then the big, red-headed ape that held her.

His eyes blazing with hate, he stormed past his sister—the woman who was no longer his sister—and the man that he now hated with an all-consuming passion.

"One day I will get even with you," he hissed as he passed Spark.

"I await that day with great pleasure."

The door clicked shut, a silent ending to what could have been a promising beginning for them all, instead was a death knell to all things wished, hoped, and prayed for. An ominous quiet filled the room.

Zanya looked at Spark...and burst into tears.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Zan." Spark reached out and brought her into his arms as her tears spilled down his chest. "You were not meant to spill your tears over what happened," he soothed, burying his head in her hair. "You cannot cry for what happened."

"I...am...crying, Spark," she sniffled, trying to pull herself under control. "For what could have been." She finished in a rush.

"Then cry, Zanya," Spark urged. "Get it all out so that we can start our future fresh."

His arms tightened around her as he pushed her head down between his massive pecs and she rested just above his thundering heart.

"Have you ever felt fragile, Spark?" she sobbed. "Have you ever felt delicate? Right now, if I breathe too hard, I think I might break."

Spark felt his own eyes water as he held his sobbing mate. Now, at this point, his tough, strong, independent Zanya seemed so small and fragile. He never wanted to see her this way again.

Finally, the storm of tears let up.

Zanya lifted her red-rimmed eyes as she pulled away. Sniffing, she wiped the back of her hands across her eyes, blinking rapidly. Her lips spread in a tumultuous smile. With her ragged hair and her face slightly swollen with her tears, Spark thought that she never looked better.

"You are beautiful," he whispered, as he reached out and caught a tear on his thumb, then quickly brought it to his mouth.

"Spark," she admonished, as her hands went to her hair and then to tug at her clothes, trying to bring them to rights. A rosy blush filled her cheeks. She was still feeling a bit vulnerable, but she knew she would be protected with Spark.

"You are mine," he said as he ran his fingers across her arms, smiling as he felt her arms shiver, felt her body began to respond to his.

"Is sex all that you can think about?" she snapped, trying to sound stern and woefully failing.

"Gee, Zan," Spark sighed. "It's been some twenty odd years. Give a guy a break."

"I did," she said, feeling more like her old self. "I broke your cherry and you have been following me around with puppy-dog eyes ever since."

"Puppy-dog eyes!" As he spoke, he pouted his lips a bit, dropped his head, wrinkled his forehead and balefully stared at her from beneath his long lashes.

"Models!" Zanya laughed as he batted his eyes at her. "You can never trust them. They all have a look."

"That wasn't a look! That was sincere pain from deep within my heart!" He again tried the pitiful look

with his eyes but could not hold it for fear of laughing.

"Sincere, my Aunt Fanny!"

"You have an Aunt Fanny?"

"Oh, Lord," Zanya moaned, looking towards the heavens. "Please help Opie Cunningham get his head on straight!"

"*Opie!* I am not Opie!" Spark snarled, replete with indignation as he leered at her. "I am more like a red-headed lion out on the prowl! Grrr!"

He hunched down and started stalking her, making her giggle as he backed her towards the stairs that led to her living area.

"Nah, your dad is the lion, Simba! You are merely a cub with a full head of hair and a deep growl."

"Simba!" Spark wailed, then charged.

Shrieking with laughter, Zanya exploded up the stairs, looking back over her shoulder to scream in mock terror before dashing to the bedroom.

"Got ya!" Spark laughed as he tackled Zan onto the bed and commenced with the tickle torture.

"Say you love me!" he ordered.

"No!" she giggled, unable to catch her breath.

"Say you love me!" He intensified his attack, rolling them over the bed, heaving his body above hers.

"I love you!"

"Good!" But instead of letting up, he began to tickle new spots, making Zan curl up into a ball to protect the parts he hadn't yet reached.

"Now say you want me!"

"I-I, oh, that tickles! Stop! Oh, I want you!"

"Very nice. Now say you'll marry me!"

"What?"

All laughter stopped.

"Say that again?"

Spark released her and helped roll her onto her back. Her cat-green eyes stared up at him, shock evident on her face. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and using her arms, pulled herself backwards until she was sitting up, facing him.

"Say that you'll marry me, Zan. You will never find another man who loves you as much as I do."

Spark sat at her hip and took her tiny hand and enveloped it within his much larger one.

For a moment he stared at those hands entwined, then brought them to his lips.

He felt his heart pound while carefully thinking about his words and trying to get them into some semblance of order. This was too important for him to pull a klutz-job now. This was his future.

"From the moment I met you, Zanya, I knew that I wanted you. I saw you standing in that elevator and I couldn't remember my own name, let alone how to breathe, to talk, to walk without tripping."

"Oh, I remember," Zanya giggled, a smile of remembrance lighting her face. "But you were so damn cute."

He blushed a bit and ducked his head, but gamely brought his eyes back to hers.

"Then when I put you on the back of my bike, I wanted to take off and never bring you back. I wanted to lose myself in you, Zan. And when we made love for the first time..."

He breathed hard as he shuddered in remembered ecstasy.

"And when we were together for the first time, I thought that my world had been shattered. Shattered and remade in your image."

"Spark," Tears again filled Zanya's eyes as she stared at this beautiful, brave man who had endured so much in his life. She ran the back of her hand against his cheek; sighing as he nuzzled into her embrace, like the big jungle cat she often compared him to.

"Zanya, I knew then that I loved you. I knew I would never be complete without you. I knew that I had to have you. Even if you were humoring the virgin boy...experimenting, taking pity on me, whatever...I had to have you. And when you said you loved me, when I looked into your eyes and knew that you meant it. I knew that I would never let you go. Please, Zan! Marry me. Be mine for eternity. Be mine for our lifetimes. Just...be mine."

He brought his eyes to meet her green ones, sighing again with the force of emotions that clearly showed on his face, as well as in his words,.

"I love you. And no matter your answer, I always will."

"Oh, Spark!" she breathed, as her tears began to flow down her face.

"Zanya! Don't cry!" Spark urged as he wiped her tears away with his free hand. "Don't ever cry on account of me."

He began to look scared as he stared at her, wondering what was going on inside her head.

"Spark, I love you," Zan managed, her voice cracking. "I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love a man! I'm...filled with joy! Yes, I'll marry you!"

"Zan!" Spark sprang across the few inches separating them and enveloped her again in his embrace,

laughing away his fears and feeling the love he held for her envelop them both.

Laughing, Zan held him just as hard. She hoped to imprint this moment in her memory, so that when it was time for her spirit to leave her body, this would be the memory that comforted her, that eased her on her journey to the great beyond.

"But," she added, as she pulled back a bit, "I want a few conditions!"

"Name them!" Spark laughed as he began to drop soft little kisses along her face.

"I get equal time with you on the pulley and spreader bar!"

Laughing, he pulled back and smiled so brightly, it blotted out the sun.

"Tying me up is not the same."

"I don't care!"

"If I must," he laughed. "But remember...I have a metal four poster bed for a reason. Revenge is sweet!" He leered at her again, making her explode into giggles as always.

"Revenge," she chuckled, then her face cleared.

"What is it? I didn't mean I'd do anything drastic," Spark explained. "I would never put you in nipple clamps or mummify you."

"My brother, Spark. He's still out there, and he will want revenge. He is not one to let a challenge or a defeat go unanswered."

"Then I will be waiting for him, Zanya. I will not let him harm you."

"It's not me I am worried about. He'll try to hurt you, Spark, you and your family. And now that he knows..."

"Nothing will happen. He cannot touch us! This I swear, Zanya. We all will be safe. I promise."

Hating to ruin the moment, Zanya nodded, and again wrapped herself around her man, her mate, her future husband. But even as she reveled in the joy, in the promise of the future, she felt an icy cold shiver sliding down her spine.

James was still out there. And until they knew what he was up to, she would be on guard. All stubborn, red-headed aliens needed somebody to watch their backs. Flame had Kendall, and Spark had her! She would be there for him and protect them all because, quite simply, Spark was hers and she loved his whole family.

Yes, she thought, all men needed protecting from themselves and from others. Even if he was a Keeper of the Flame.

Epilogue

“Summer is a perfect time for a wedding,” Violet sighed, as he looked down at Ember, who stood smiling at his side. “I can’t believe that they are going through with this.”

“I can’t believe they managed to get the bedroom fixed in time.”

“Ember, must you be so damn cynical all the time?” Violet asked, as he glared down at the woman, one of his best friends and the Maiden, *ha*, of Honor at the wedding.

Well, she did kind of look virginal in the empire-waist gown that seemed to be made of several layers of pale gauzy material. Tight to the elbow, the gown boasted long tulip-shaped sleeves that hung nearly three inches from her fingertips. The cream color was accented by gold embroidery at the tight bodice and sleeves, and then continued in pattern throughout the dress. On her head was a snood of gold filigree that she had created. The overall look was very modest, until she lifted the train of her dress. Under it she wore a pair of thigh-high leather boots.

“I am not cynical, dear Violet,” she chimed, as she watched her twin lean down for the twentieth time to lay a small kiss on his bride’s lips. “Just practical.”

Zanya was dressed as befitted a queen.

Her hair had been pulled up into a nest of curls, and a tiara of gold and precious jewels lay on it. Her gown was pure blinding white, a gift from their mother, Kendall. Made of silk and velvet, it boasted a low cut bodice that bared as much as it concealed. The tight velvet lifted her bosom to shelf-like stature and cinched in at her small waist, before coming to a delicate point over her pelvis. The gold embroidered silk of the skirt seemed to reflect the colors of the tiara, the fur trim around the waist giving it just a savage touch. The sleeves were not attached to the dress, but were separate tight sheaths that started at her biceps and continued to delicate points over the back of her hands. On her feet, unknown to Violet and the other guests, she wore a pair of tight thigh-high leather boots with high pointy heels, a gift from Ember.

Violet grumbled and took Ember's arm, intending on leading her closer to the merriment.

“Give me a second,” Ember chided, as he pulled back. “I think I see someone I need to talk to.”

Violet nodded, splendid in purple tights, high boots, and velvet tunic, turned and made his way to congratulate the happy couple.

Unnoticed by the crowd of partygoers dressed in their Renaissance best, Ember darted through the tall trees and closed booths on the festival grounds.

The further she walked back towards the forested area, the more muted came the sounds of lute, flute, and drum. The voices began to fade and soon became just a distant backdrop to the quiet that was now taking over.

Shadows deepened as she held up her dress in one hand and pushed branches aside with the other.

"I know you are here," she said, into the dim stillness that surrounded her. "You may as well come on out."

Nothing.

"Okay, James." Ember laughed. "But you should know that your informant has met with a less than desirable end. You see, I get this evil streak in me sometimes. It makes me do bad things to those who hurt my family. And I would kill to protect what I consider mine. That's the benefit of being a House Lady."

Still silence.

"Okay. We will play the game your way, James. But remember, if I catch you around my brother with other than the olive branch of peace, your ass is mine."

Silence.

Then, "What did you do to him."

The small voice echoed throughout the trees, a good way to disguise his location. And it worked in this instance, because Ember had no desire to go trekking throughout the woods to find him.

"Are you concerned about a friend, or mad because your source is gone?"

"What did you do to him?" The voice sounded frustrated.

"As if you care."

"What?"

"Well, let's just say that he had an unfortunate accident while bearing a torch a few weeks ago. Unfortunately it scared him so badly he's afraid to go near fire now. Something about it coming alive and chasing him in the form of his worst nightmares. Personally I think he is insane. How about you?"

"You monster!"

"Hmm, yes. I rather thought that would be your reaction. But if you want, I can go and find him at his mother's place in West Virginia. He can be another unexplained case of spontaneous combustion, if you want me to put him out of his misery."

"Bitch!"

"Hmm, yes, I gathered that would be your reaction to my suggestion. Well, as long as you keep your tired ass in the woods, James, and not come any closer to true happiness, I won't have to make your nightmares a reality too."

"Too late, lady. My nightmare just married my sister."

"And what a good nightmare he is, too! Did you see the full-page layout in Romantic Weekly? The

billboards that almost caused a traffic jam near the Harbor Tunnel? Oh! How about that interview on World News Tonight? As far as nightmares go, he comes off pretty clean cut and well mannered. The public just loves him.”

“He and all of your kind are a menace. You should all be destroyed to keep humanity safe!”

“As if you care about humanity, James. You still can’t get over the fact that your sister loves someone more than you. I almost wish I could take you to my home planet. Then you would discover the true meaning of menace.”

Silence.

“Okay, I guess this conversation is boring you as much as it is boring me. Hope I don’t see you around, James. The results would be...unpleasant.”

She turned and walked away, joining the wedding party, her handsome brother and his pretty wife. But something she had said began to eat at her. She began to wonder what Testrios, their real home, was like.

James watched the alien walk away, his heart racing in his chest. She had all but threatened to kill him! He had thought she had killed his informant, but found himself indifferent that he was still alive. If he were dead, James could use him as an example of savagery. But alive, he was just another casualty not worthy of attention. The public didn’t much like stool pigeons and back stabbers, so the short runt was useless.

But he watched from afar as his sister took vows to that creature, watched as she had pledged to love and honor him, to become his family.

She had family, a family she decided to forsake for his kind. This was an insult that he would not soon forget.

He turned and stormed away, ignoring the little voice inside that said maybe he was wrong, that he missed his sister, that he really loved her and wanted her happiness.

But he turned and walked away, anger riding his heels, and the little part of him that loved, that felt, that regretted, cried.

* * * * *

Spark smiled down at Zanya, his love, his life, his everything.

Never did she look more beautiful! The whiteness of the gown made her skin seem creamy and smooth, her eyes deeper, her smile blinding. How he loved her.

“Did you wear that for me?” she giggled, as she examined him yet again from head to foot, admiring the long velvet tunic he wore, the silk pants tight enough to be a second skin and the knee-high boots that seemed to strain around his calves. Her Spark was dressed to thrill! But the most exciting piece was the thin gold codpiece, the rather large thin gold codpiece that strained to cover his magnificence.

“Well, it was one of the reasons we got together,” he blushed as he spoke, “And one of my fondest

memories! The woman I desired on her knees in front of me, my parents staring shocked at the woman who was corrupting their baby boy, my sister giggling in the background..."

"Shut up Spark," Zan groaned, as a blush filled her cheeks. She rolled her eyes at her husband, then turned to face the crowd that had gathered around them.

Eric had a blast doing all of their hair before the ceremony. He was also responsible for the makeup on half the women. He refused to let them tarnish the perfection of Spark and Zanya's entrance by appearing less than perfectly coiffed. They had groaned and let him do what he wanted. It was easier than fighting him.

At his side was Ame Heart, a very satisfied Ame Heart. In one fell swoop, she managed to play matchmaker to her close friend and launch a publishing coup that would be forever imitated, but never duplicated. Nothing could ever top the Spark phenomenon and she was banking on that reality. Sales shot through the roof, and Areiana James' book, the first cover, the one with Spark all tied up and seductively staring from beneath a fringe of his fiery red hair, was now going for over two hundred dollars at auction. And the pictures of Spark and her daughter were treasured mementos that she kept close to her heart.

Caressa, Gloria, the Infamous Dr. Dick, and a few of the Crystal Faces' models added a touch of glamour to the proceedings as they pranced around trying to out-vogue one another.

And standing back, smiling and content, Flame and Kendall smiled at their growing family.

"Did you ever think, My Mistress that we would end up like this?" Flame asked, as he lifted his mate's hand to his mouth and placed a delicate kiss there.

"If I knew, I would have shoved you back into the lake," Kendall laughed, as her eyes sparkled up at her man.

"Something is happening with Ember," Flame said quietly, as he watched his daughter rejoin the festivities, a look of concentration on her face.

"What?" Instantly Kendall was in mother lion mode, out to protect her cub from the world.

"I am not sure, but be not surprised, Kendall, if sudden change occurs soon. She is looking a bit restless."

"Maybe she needs romance in her life. Lord knows she has enough work both in the lab and with her silversmithing.

"Maybe," Flame said, as he shook his head, sending his fiery red hair cascading around his black-on-black velvet outfit that befitted his stature as father of the groom. "But let us contemplate happiness for a time, my wife."

"Happiness?"

"Yes! One child properly mated and a bit more privacy."

"You just want to get into Spark's collection of erotica without him knowing!" Kendall giggled, the red velvet gown she wore making her tarcas brown eyes twinkle.

“Who do you think bought them for him in the first place?”

Her giggles ended, mid-laugh.

“Have you ever heard of a sex swing?” he purred, causing her to almost swallow her tongue before he led his now quiet and unresisting wife over to congratulate their children once again.

“To long life, happiness, and pleasures beyond the heart’s capacity!” Flame cried out, as he saluted his son and the bride. “May the winds always be at your back. May the fire of Mother Earth warm you, may the cool of ice soothe you, may the earth stay firm beneath your feet, and may the waters always run clear and plentiful! Happiness, my son! Joy! Wealth! Love!”

“Huzzah!” the merrymakers cheered.

“But I already possess all of that, Father!” Spark, laughing, called back. “I possess the most perfect creature ever to be formed on this planet. And today I married her, I put a ball and chain around her ankle and locked her to me for all eternity!”

The crowd cheered.

“Hmm, then I wish a blessing for you and me, my son! Something that will give us much peace!”

“What is it, father?” he called back. “I am indeed curious about this blessing!”

“Grandchildren!”

Everyone exploded into laughter at his comment, and the fiery blush that exploded onto his face.

“Daaaaaad!” Spark wailed, to the enjoyment of the crowd!

“What am I going to do with you?” Zanya sniggered at Spark's embarrassment.

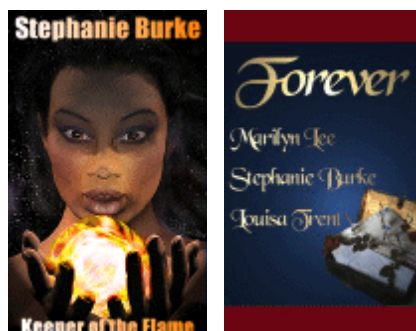
“Love me?” he asked, looking down at her with all he felt in his heart, while the laughing people around them seemed to disappear.

“More than life,” she answered softly, before his lips covers hers. “More than life.”



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