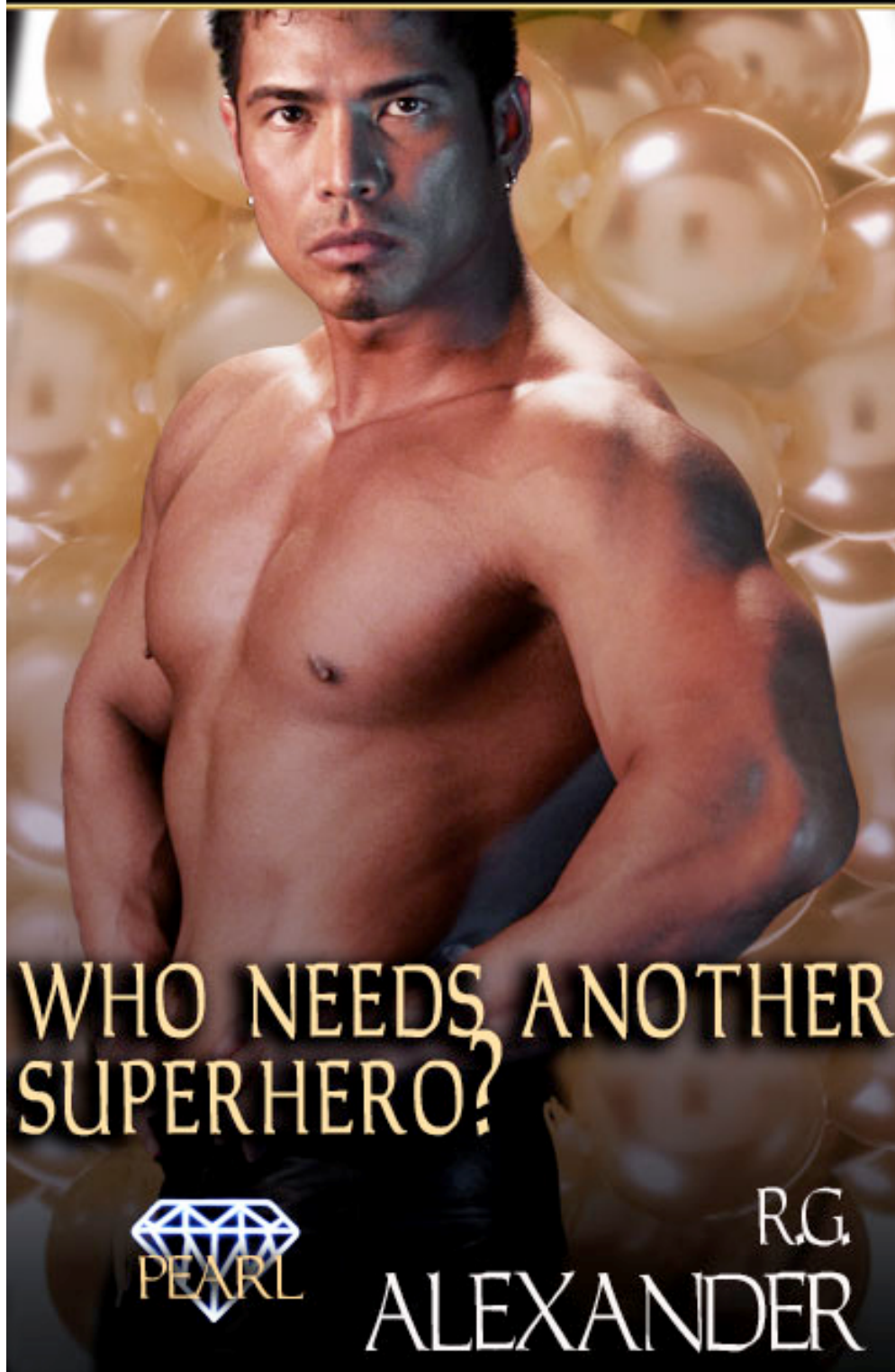


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



WHO NEEDS ANOTHER
SUPERHERO?



R.G.
ALEXANDER

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Who Needs Another Superhero?

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WHO NEEDS ANOTHER SUPERHERO?

R.G. Alexander

Chapter One

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Dayna...um...we ‘go live’ in five. You sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

Manny’s tinny voice in Dayna’s ear-com didn’t sound as confident as she would’ve liked. That could only mean one thing—dangling from a flimsy rappelling rope off the top of the tallest building in Gaia City *looked* as dangerous from her producer’s point of view as it felt to her.

She could say she didn’t know how she got herself into these messes. But who was she trying to fool? It looked as if she was about to fall to her death in front of those hovering skycams anyway. The situation demanded a little self-reflection and honesty. She knew *exactly* why she was up here.

Gaia’s Guardians.

The hot-bodied, tight spandex-wearing heroes protected this part of the world from the whims of Mother Nature and that ever-present nuisance, The Syndicate of Villainy.

Sure, they were superheroes. Sure, they were gorgeous. The hottest news in town—blah, blah, blah. But to Dayna, they were family.

And that was the problem.

She’d been the *Gaia Press*’ star reporter for years because she always got the story before anyone else. They said she had her finger on the pulse of the action.

Of course, her editor had no idea that her source on the street was none other than Theta Wave himself. Or that the telepathic powerhouse was her older brother, Graham.

She’d grown up around the four crime fighters. Triad, Spark, Rock Hammer and Theta Wave were the only family she had. But being in on the comings and goings of the “superstuds” wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. When you didn’t have any abilities

of your own, it stank. Her life was spent on the sidelines, watching them take all the risks and have all the fun.

She was nothing more than a cute, forgettable little mascot to them. Someone to be patted on the head and occasionally thrown a newsmaking headline for their fans. Oh and let's not forget her other job—keeping the lair neat, the files organized and their occasional identity mishaps in check.

Yeah. She was livin' the dream.

The final season of the popular reality show “Who Wants to Date a Superhero?” had been one of her most popular stories so far. Villainous contestants, danger and mayhem, a heroic rescue... Her exclusive was so hot, the vid news had interviewed *her* for a change. And she had to admit, she reveled in the attention.

She couldn't tell them the real story—that her brother had fallen hard for her friend, Cassie Sheridan. That story wasn't exactly fit for the local paper.

The studio had been impressed with her superhero exclusives. When they realized their reality cash cow had dried up, that no more Guardians would be volunteering as the bachelorette booby-prize, they'd offered her a show of her own—*The Scoop*.

The boys would get a huge kick out of the name, of course. It's what they'd been calling her for years. Scoop.

The rope jerked a bit under her weight and her grip tightened. *Shit!*

So now here she was, debuting her show on...yep...superheroes. She'd thought this first segment was a great idea last night. Dayna Jamison, intrepid local reporter on the scene, drops in—literally—on a local businesswoman thought to be funding The Syndicate. Talk about drama.

Now she was desperately wishing she'd taken the producer's initial suggestion. “What do the Guardians eat? Spinach, Ginger and Other Secret Super Foods”. She could have stayed safely in the studio for that one.

“And recording in five...four...three...two...”

Dayna took a deep breath and flashed a brilliant smile at the nearest skycam. “Welcome to the first edition of *The Scoop*, the show where you too can be a super-sleuth. Ever dreamt of helping Gaia City’s finest fight the bad guys? Here’s your chance. Give me the skinny on the crime and we’ll make them do the time. Had a secret rendezvous with one of our heroes? Tell us, we want to know.”

Her focus shifted toward the skycam on her right at a cue from the production assistant on the ground below. “Today I’m ‘hanging around’ the corporate office of Lazarus Communications, the brainchild of Fortune Lazarus—heiress, entrepreneur and pillar of the community. Or *is* she? A tip from a very reliable source tells us she may have recently added a new charity to her company’s roster—The Syndicate of Villainy.”

Dayna winked into the nearest vid lens. “Gossip heard through the super grapevine is that Fortune went to private school with Jade Snow, a fellow heiress with romantic ties to Syndicate bad boy, the electrifying Vane.

“Do they share more in common than their uptown addresses? Is Jade sponsoring Fortune’s entry into her villainous clique? Stick with us. After this commercial break, we’ll drop in on her and her board, all of whom just happen to be meeting one floor below us—and see what she has to say about these *rumors*.”

She heard Manny’s voice echo through the ear-com and the bullhorn below. “Annnnnnnnd—break. Great job, Dayna. Two minutes.”

Two minutes.

She flipped open the cover on the metal grappler and pressed a few buttons. The magnetic fibers in the rappelling rope clicked on and she felt her body rising toward the roof.

A cameraman was waiting to follow her down into the Lazarus stronghold. They had to hurry. Someone was sure to have noticed her dangling from their building by now.

They'd been lucky so far. Borrowing the window cleaner's hover-boots, they'd bypassed security altogether—but Dayna knew it wouldn't last. As long as she was on camera, however, she'd probably be safe.

"What—no!" The surprised shout of her cameraman came at the same time her rappelling rope jerked to a stop.

She saw a shadowy, masked figure lean over the roof and watch her sway in shock for a moment before a high-pitched giggle reached her from behind the mask...and then the rope snapped.

"Son of a—" Her breath was knocked out of her as the wind whipped around her.

Her hands scrambled for the insta-chute button on her belt. The mini parachute might slow her fall enough to save her life, if not her bones, from the concrete streets below.

She couldn't reach it! The rope had tangled around her. Fear blinded her, dark spots invading her vision as time seemed to slow. There was no one to save her. Her brother, Cassie...she'd never get to tell them—

Thud. The air was knocked out of her lungs as she landed on something hard and immovable. It curved around her trembling body and began to run down the street. Wha— who?

"Of all the stupid, *idiotic* fucking decisions I've seen you make—"

The angry man bit off a curse and Dayna almost smiled despite her pain. Rock Hammer. *Stone.* How he'd gotten here so quickly, she'd never know, but thank the Goddess he had. She promised herself she'd thank him personally, as soon as she remembered how to get air into her lungs.

Her ear-com buzzed.

"Dayna? Dayna, hon, why didn't you tell us you had this up your sleeve? We would have brought more skycams. Could you tell that gorgeous golden man to slow down a bit and let our mobile catch up? This rescue is must-see vid-vision!"

The growl beside her ear told her Stone had heard the producer's excited request. He placed his lips against her ear, no hesitation in his long strides as he spoke. "You'll call your flying metal spycam back right now. You've had all the show you're going to today. Someone tried to kill your host—giving them her exact location would kind of defeat the whole superhero rescue angle you're going for."

Her producer shrieked in her ear and Dayna winced. "He's right, Manny." She wheezed out a rough breath. "I think someone hurt Lance up on the roof and then cut my rope. Call the medi-van and make sure he's okay. I'll check in with you later."

She reached up to click off the ear-com and leaned her head wearily against her savior's muscled chest. This might be the only time she'd get this close again—she might as well enjoy it.

Stone Matthews, also known as the invincible Rock Hammer, had been a thorn in her side for years. A thorn in her side, an ache in her heart—not to mention other parts of her anatomy. She sighed. Was there ever a time when she *hadn't* wanted him? Probably not.

Though she did recall with crystal clarity the exact moment when he began to piss her off.

She was only thirteen when Gaia's Guardians had formed. She'd been a part of it from the beginning. Ever since her father had died and she'd discovered the whole truth about his experiments...and what her brother had suffered at his hands.

From the moment she'd seen the giant wall of a man who'd joined his brother and the two other supermen, she'd been lost. Stone was the star attraction of her every adolescent fantasy, every innocent orgasm. And he'd spoiled her, seeming to enjoy the young girl who followed him around the lair like an adoring puppy.

On her eighteenth birthday, everything had changed. She'd been determined to get his attention—to make him want her as badly as she had always wanted him. He'd noticed all right, but his reaction had been more humiliating nightmare than fairytale.

The distant, antagonistic way he'd treated her since that awful night ticked her off. If he wasn't hard as steel and one of her brother's closest friends, she was fairly sure she would have hauled off and hit him by now. As it was, she avoided him like the plague.

"I think we've lost them."

"Who?"

They were traveling through the back alleys of the city toward the building that held their lair with a speed that would have been impossible for a normal man, forget a densely packed muscle-bound jerk. He must be wearing those swift shoes that he and Triad had created to insure they could both keep up with the flyers of the group, Theta and Spark. At her question he stopped in his tracks, looking down at her for the first time since her lucky landing.

"Who? *Who?*" The vein beside his right eye began to pulse, a sure sign of his frustration. "The people who just tried to *kill* you, Scoop. What the hell were you doing there anyway? We told you about Fortune Lazarus so you'd stay away from her—not hang from her building on live vid for everyone to see."

She tried to defend herself, but he wasn't done with his lecture. "And you choose now to do this? Triad is off playing kidnapped hero with his twisted girlfriend, your brother and Cassie are off on their honeymoon and Spark is, well, Spark. What if I hadn't been watching? When are you going to grow up and stop pulling these dangerous stunts?"

Dayna glared at him. Damn the man, he'd done it again. Ruined the feelings of gratitude and arousal that had been lowering her guard. How long had it been—five minutes? It must be a new record.

She struggled in his arms until he set her down. Her knees wobbled, but anger shot steel through her spine. She didn't need any help from this pompous, condescending —

"Thanks, Gravel Guy, I've got it from here. Consider your babysitting detail terminated."

Forget him. What she needed was to get home and drown her frazzled nerves and slightly bruised body in a bottle of wine and a hot bath, respectively.

She'd only gotten a few steps when the brick-wall-on-two-legs picked her up again, throwing her over his shoulder and racing down the narrow alley. This wasn't the way to the lair. He was heading toward her apartment building.

She thumped him on the back with her fist. "What do you think you're doing? You're *not* impressing me. You're acting like a jackass. Put. Me. Down."

He just kept going as if she hadn't said a word.

Fine. Let him wear himself out playing the hero. He wasn't winning any brownie points by bouncing her already aching body on his broad, sexy shoulder.

So what if he smelled amazing and held her as if she weighed next to nothing? Who cared if she had the perfect, albeit upside-down, view of his impossibly tempting, biteable ass?

He was only a man, albeit a handsome one, with superpowers and a body that made her want to wrap her legs around him and... She sighed against the soft, golden material of his bodysuit. Goddess, she was weak.

Be strong. If you can get him to talk again, you can remember what a jerk he is.

It suddenly occurred to her to ask, "How'd you get there so fast?"

"I'm a superhero. Didn't you get the memo? Speed and timing are job requirements."

Without lowering her to the ground or waiting for her to do as he asked, he slid his hand onto the ident-pad in the front of her secured apartment building. The doors opened in silent recognition. "What the... How in the hell—"

"All the Guardians are keyed in, Scoop. It was the only way we'd agree to let you live on your own."

That better be guilt in his voice. She huffed in indignation. As if he'd had any choice in the matter. She was a grown woman, after all. Maybe she couldn't lift a transbullet

car without breaking a sweat, control people's brainwaves or shoot fireballs out of her hands—but she wasn't helpless.

Her apartment door was open and a moment later she was upright and pressed against her living room wall. She blinked the spots from her eyes, a little dizzy and a lot mad, to glare into his determined expression. "You arrogant—"

"No more talking." He pushed the door closed with one hand, his gorgeous brown eyes never leaving hers. One hand tangled in her spiky, shoulder-length hair and he smiled grimly.

"Words don't seem to work with us. We've spent years trying. So now we're going to try something else."

Her heart stuttered, climbing to her throat in disbelief as she watched his lips lower to hers. For one frantic second, she wondered if she'd fallen to her death after all—then thought was nothing but a distant memory.

There was no hesitation, no question in his kiss. He claimed her mouth as if it belonged to him, turning her head this way and that, his questing tongue exploring every curve.

Damn.

Her memories hadn't done him justice. The single kiss they'd shared all those years ago couldn't compare—an awkward press of lips that didn't even come close to this passionate mastery. This hot melding of lips and tongues.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, his calloused hand gripping one bare thigh to pull her closer. Closer. She tensed as she remembered how this had ended that ill-fated night, how he'd pulled away from her kiss, mocked her youthful attempt at seduction. He wrenched his lips from hers, sensing the turn her thoughts had taken.

"I won't stop this time. I've wanted this too long. Don't push me away."

The harsh, graveled voice had her womb clenching with arousal. She wanted to argue, to remember all the reasons why she should deny him. The rough caress of his

fingers on her thigh rose beneath her small, one-piece shorts suit. She held her breath when his thumb grazed the edge of her thong, forgetting every reason she had to say no.

His big body shuddered against her. "Damn, Scoop. You're ready for me, aren't you? I could take you now, here."

"Yeah, well, don't get a big head about it. It's been a while, that's all."

When he laughed and continued to tease the flesh around the edges of her lace thong, she knew he hadn't bought her breathless lie. It *had* been a while, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd been this aroused. And he'd barely touched her.

Those questing fingertips slipped beneath the fabric and began slowly circling her clit. He moaned softly, his whole body leaning closer, pressing her hard against the wall. She winced.

"You're hurt." The accusatory tone, not to mention the cessation of his erotic touch as he lifted her gently away from the wall to carry her to the bedroom, ticked her off.

"I fell from a building." *Duh*. "I think I'm doing pretty well under the circumstances. Or I was until you stopped." The last was a pitiful grumble that he ignored, setting her gently on the bed and looking for the hidden zipper of her shorts suit.

"What the hell are you wearing, anyway? Pretty risqué for live vid, isn't it?"

"Sex sells. If it didn't, you wouldn't be poured into a gold, shiny bodysuit that shows off your...everything."

"Glad to know you think it's sexy, but that is *not* why I wear it."

Whatever. The public saw a lot more of what he was offering in that than they could in her outfit. She would never admit she'd been hesitant when wardrobe had first tucked her into the getup. More leg than she ever thought she could lay claim to was showing, and it pushed her tiny A-cups into her chin.

They called it the Sporty Scoop Ensemble, perfect for scaling buildings and confronting high-powered execs. Why was she in this business again?

Goose bumps rose as he slid her top slowly down her arms. When it was pushed down to gather around her waist, he moved behind her and traced the two long bruises she could already feel forming on her back. He swore under his breath again.

"I did this."

His guilt made her want to comfort him. "Hey, if you hadn't caught me... Well, let's just say I'm glad you did."

She turned around quickly to face him and his hands, which had been barely grazing her back, slid across the hard peaks of her nipples. She gasped and he froze, seemingly unable to tear his gaze away from the sight of his hands on her breasts.

He wanted her. Stone wanted *her*. She couldn't doubt the heat in his eyes. If he hadn't realized she was hurt, he would be inside her right now. Despite her previous pique, despite the rejection that was still raw after all these years, she wanted that. Wanted him. And she wasn't going to take the chance of his getting away before she got what she wanted.

Her hands covered his and squeezed. His fingers twitched and he looked into her eyes. "Shit, Scoop – Dayna, I—" He blinked and took a ragged breath. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't stop." She rose to her knees, hands still firm over his. Her lips quirked as she watched him swallow hard. "And let me be on top."

It was her turn to swallow past the dryness in her throat. He left her to stand beside the bed and one of the benefits of his bodysuit became quickly apparent. The stretchy, specially made fabric wouldn't tear, no matter how rough he was with it.

And he was rough.

Watching him race and fumble to remove it was the sexiest thing Dayna had ever seen. She'd seen him charm the panties off one woman after another, his words and actions smooth as silk. Jake always called him Casanova in a unitard.

But not tonight. Tonight he couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't stop long enough to remove his swifts before he took off his pants.

She laughed softly, still kneeling on the bed, covering her breasts with her hands. He leaned on the bed, pretending to huff in irritation, though he couldn't quite keep the smile off his face at her laughter.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? I'm so hot for you I lose my balance. And you love it. It'd turn you on to have me fall on my ass, wouldn't it?"

"Probably." She attacked him before the last swift was off, still chuckling as her lips pressed against his.

She didn't think a jury in all of Gaia City would convict her. The man was a mountain of sexy, flexing man-meat. And right now he was all hers. She was never one to waste an opportunity.

He moaned into her mouth, allowing her to push him onto his back across her bed. His fists gripped her shorts convulsively, the sound of the fabric shredding around her hips filled her with a fresh wave of arousal.

His palms caressed her ass, dragging her flush against his erection, scalding the curve of her belly with its heat. His fingers lowered between her thighs, slipping through her wetness as he explored her sex.

He slid his lips to her ear. "Your pussy feels so good, baby. So hot. I knew — I knew you'd feel like this. You have to let me —"

She inhaled sharply when he gripped her hips and lifted her easily above him, until she was straddling his smiling mouth. "Yes. Yes, that's what I —"

Her hips lifted in instinctive surprise and he growled, his fingers tightening, unwilling to let her go. She braced her hands against the wall for balance and he tugged her down to his mouth once more.

Stars burst behind her closed eyelids at the sensation of his lips wrapping around her clit, his tongue exploring the lips of her pussy, thrusting inside with a gratified groan.

How many nights had she lain in this very bed, reaching for release with her fingers or her favorite vibrator, imagining exactly this? Too many to count.

He thrust deeper, curling his tongue as if to gather as much of her taste as he could, his nose pressed hard against her clit. He tilted her hips, spreading her cheeks to press his index finger between them suggestively.

Goddess, yes. Whatever he wanted. However he wanted it. Her thighs trembled, back arching as the first orgasmic wave crashed over her. Her hoarse cry incited him. He drank down her juices greedily, his thumb pushing past the tight barrier into the dark heat beyond.

She backed up into his hand, showing him without words that she wanted more. He slid out, his mouth leaving her, lifting her as if she weighed no more than a feather to place her on her hands and knees on the bed.

“Wha—” She looked over her shoulder to find him reaching to open the drawer of her bedside cabinet. Inside the cabinet was a wooden jewelry box, which he opened without hesitation. When he found what he was looking for, he smiled.

“How did you know that was in there?”

He didn’t answer right away, opening the bottle of lube and coating the small butt plug in his hand. She shivered, but asked the question again.

“Would you believe I used my super senses?” His tone was distracted and aroused, all his attention focused as he settled behind her, one hand on her hip, the other rubbing the soaked plug against her clit.

"Nooo," she groaned. "Try again. The truth this time."

He slid the toy between the lips of her sex teasingly and she shuddered against him.

"That is the sexiest thing I've ever seen, Scoop."

Her body trembled again at the hoarse rasp. Great Gaia, how many times had she dreamed this? Dreamed of his big body against hers, his fingers thrusting inside her as she rocked against him.

His hard cock grazed her thigh and she moaned. "You're trying to distract me from the question. And I thought—*oh, yes*—I thought I got to be on top."

"Next time. You are so *fucking* tight around my fingers, Scoop. I can barely wait to get inside you."

He slid his wet fingers up between her ass cheeks, the slippery plug pressing slowly inward. She automatically pushed out, breathing deep through her nose as he stretched her, teased her, inch by full, powerful inch. She arched, reveling in the sensation. She'd never shared her secret kink with anyone. Never let another lover go that far.

"*Goddess*. I stand corrected. *That* is the sexiest thing I've ever seen." He growled low in his throat, a sound that had Dayna squirming, pressing back against the plug until she was finally, deliciously full.

"I've got to—" Another groan escaped his chest as he shifted, one hand still gripping the base of the plug, the other on her hip.

Her forehead banged against the pillow, holding the sheet beside her in a white-knuckled grip as he entered her. The feel of his incredibly thick cock pushing its way past her clinging walls, the fullness off the plug only adding to the sensation—was indescribable.

She cried out, tears slipping out from beneath her lids and onto the pillow before she could stop them.

"Scoop, baby, are you okay? I don't think I can go slow, not now. You feel too damn good." They both cried out in pleasure when his hips were flush against her ass, pressing the plug a little deeper as he leaned over her back to hear her reply.

"How. Did. You. *Know*?" It was hard to concentrate, hard to breathe. She wanted to beg him fuck her, to ignore everything and just take her again and again until neither one of them knew their own names. But some stubborn twisted part of her had to hear his answer. Had to know how he'd discovered her secret.

He sighed against her shoulder, dragging his hips back slowly. "I... A few weeks ago I came in to check on you and, well, I heard a noise from the bedroom. The door was open so..." He thrust hard.

Yes. "You came into my apartment? You watched me?" He was driving deeper now, faster, one hand slipping around to slide through her wet curls.

"Goddess, yes. It was beautiful. Amazing. Your legs were spread wide and bent, you were fucking yourself with that damn vibrator. You lifted your hips and I saw this." He touched the base of the plug, giving it another wicked twist. "I almost came like an untried teenager."

He pumped his hips harder against her, shaking the bed with the power of his thrusts. She loved it. She craved it. The idea that he'd watched as she masturbated, while she pleased herself, secretly imagining his touch, his cock inside her—it was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard.

"Did you...?"

He gave a pained grin. "Yeah, I took four cold showers that night. I had to. Every time I closed my eyes I saw that sweet pussy, heard your cries as you came. Come for me now, Dayna. Call out my name. My *real* name."

"Stone!" Her body responded to his command, his erotic confession. Her orgasm burned up her spine, her limbs shaking from the earth-shattering ecstasy.

He'd stilled against her when her inner muscles tightened around his cock. And then he was joining her, her name a hoarse cry on his lips, head thrown back as he came

inside her. His body shuddered with his own release, hips thrusting hard—once—twice.

He collapsed on the bed beside her a moment later, his fingers tracing her back as they both caught their breath. It had never been like that with anyone else. Not even in her imagination. Never.

Well damn.

Chapter Two

The sun was shining in a sky that had never seemed bluer. Birds were chirping on her windowsill. *Chirping*.

Everything was a little bit too perky and cheerful for her peace of mind.

Dayna huddled over her coffee, glaring at the birds until they took off for more appreciative windows, wondering how the hell she was going to handle a “super” morning after.

She should be happy, right? She should have satisfied her need for revenge and her unusually long-lived schoolgirl’s crush and be ready to move on.

She’d had fantasies about making him regret passing her up all those years ago. Daydreams about finally having that overconfident brick wall, who’d gotten her more aroused by arguing than she had ever been with the handful of men she’d dated.

So what was her problem?

It had been too good. Too perfect. The best sex in the history of the world. All *five* times. She shook her head, sipping the hot liquid carefully as she marveled. What kind of man could go five times without the need to nap or refuel?

Rock Hammer. Super stud of Gaia City.

She scratched one ankle with her toe, feeling the amethyst anklet Cassie had returned to her. She’d let her friend borrow it when Cassie had decided to be a contestant on that ridiculous show.

What it did was no mystery. Hadn’t her father told her in soft, paranoid whispers all about her dangerous brother? How they had to protect themselves, ensure he would never violate their minds? She’d disregarded his ramblings, of course. But she’d always kept the anklet. And it had come in handy.

She loved her brother, but he did have an unfair advantage. Cassie had had very private reasons for entering that competition, reasons she told him...when *she* was ready. Her brother may have been mad at first, but Dayna wasn't sorry. The wise Theta Wave had been thrown for a mental loop, just what he needed to finally get off the fence and make Cassie his.

Thank the Goddess her friend had given it back. If her protective brother sensed her turmoil now, came flying back to save the day – well, that was the only thing that could make this morning more awkward than it was already destined to be.

It wasn't as if she were naïve. She'd watched Stone go through woman after woman, never dating anyone more than once. Why should he have to? It wasn't like the ladies of the city played hard to get. Not with a Guardian.

Like you're any better.

She needed some perspective. A little distance. It had just been the adrenaline of the moment. Someone had been trying to kill her. He'd saved her life. That was all it was.

So when he came out, all uncomfortable and apologetic for losing control, again and again...and again, she would be ready with a haughty smile and a cold shoulder. She would not turn into another groupie. Not even for him.

Everything would go back to how it was before. Except...now she knew. Mere fantasy would never be enough. Not anymore.

Shit.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Her chair flew backward as she ran toward the com desk. She wasn't ready for the sleeping giant to wake up yet. At the last minute she grabbed a throw pillow from her couch to cover her naked chest, sitting down to push the accept button before it could beep again. "Jamison here."

"Dayna, darling, you're okay!" The short, rosy-cheeked man appeared on her com screen, so close to the vid lens she could almost see his thoughts before he pulled back with a beaming smile.

“Yes, Manny. What’s up?”

“Other than my blood pressure and the ratings? Not much. And before you ask, Luke is fine. Had a hell of a headache, but he’s fine. Your nanosecond-long pilot was a huge success. Hit all the news feeds. Fortune Lazarus is making noises about suing for slander, no more than we expected. That, however, is not why I called you.”

He paused dramatically, sighing in disappointment when she raised her eyebrow, unimpressed. “I have a delivery boy here who says he has something of vital importance for The Scoop. He is fairly adamant that it is for your eyes alone. I mean, *a delivery boy*, Dayna. How old school can you get? Intrigued?”

She was. She saw the boy shuffle nervously into view, he couldn’t be more than thirteen. He took one look at her and turned beet red, swallowing audibly. She tapped the vid lens, trying to hide her grin. “My face is up here, little man. What’ve you got for me?”

He tried to speak several times, his eyes looking everywhere but at her. Finally, he held up a small package wrapped in plain brown paper. “Fr-from Professor Kaine. Said it had to do with yesterday’s me-meeting. Said it was urgent.”

“Professor Rudolph Kaine, the archaeologist? What does he have to do with Lazarus Communications?”

The boy shrugged, shifting uncomfortably.

“Well, it got through the studio security, so I imagine we’re safe. Send it through the com-link, Manny.”

After trying unsuccessfully to remove the package from the stubborn teen’s hands, Manny let the boy place the package in the com-link slot. He pressed some buttons and Dayna’s desk started to hum. Beneath her monitor, her own slot lit up. When the light faded, she opened the small partition and slid the newly arrived package out, holding it up for the boy to see.

His shoulders slumped with relief. He really took his deliveries seriously, she chuckled. “Pay the boy, Manny, while I look at my prize.”

"Oh no! I couldn't take any money, ma'am. Thank you. He just wanted me to ask you to look at it right away. Said to tell you the balance was in danger."

"The balance of what?"

He shrugged again. Talkative child. "Everything, I think." He rushed out before she could ask him any more questions, leaving Manny slack-jawed in his wake.

Her producer rubbed his hands together and stared hard at her through his monitor. "Okay, this I have got to see. Come to Daddy."

She heard shuffling behind her and a laugh lodged in her throat.

"I think you've seen enough...*Daddy*."

"Holy Gaia's Girdle, is that—"

"Later, Manny." She slammed her palm on the end button, severing the com connection without turning around.

"I hope you mean, 'Later, when I'm not bare-assed for every passerby and com hacker to see, Manny'. And don't roll your eyes at me."

Her eyes froze mid roll. Know-it-all. She inhaled slowly, clutching the small square of fabric closer. She stood up, turning around with her chin in the air, determined to make this brush-off as quick and painless as possible—

The pillow fell out of her nerveless fingers. He was naked. Gloriously naked. His arms were crossed over his chest, his jaw clenched in anger, but his aggravated stance hardly diminished his appeal. In fact, it seemed to have the opposite effect, if the rush of liquid desire swamping her body was anything to go by.

It really wasn't fair how unbelievably attractive he was. Golden skin stretched over a broad-shouldered, muscled body that held the female population of Gaia City so captivated. But it wasn't just his body.

Dayna loved the streaks of honey wheat running through his wavy, light brown hair, the way one curl stubbornly fell over his forehead. She loved his eyes, not brown or green or gold, but an ever-changing combination of the two.

She loved...Man, she really needed to get a grip. She took a breath and tried to focus as he sighed. Did he just say something?

"What did he *want*?" This obviously wasn't the first time he'd asked that question.

She noticed the trouble he was having holding her gaze. His eyelids practically twitched with the need to study her as she was studying him. Interesting. She smiled, stretching her arms above her head with an artificial yawn.

"What does Manny always want? Ratings. He says your rescue was a hit. The Scoop is officially a success."

"And you answered him without your robe on because...?"

"I was in a hurry. I didn't want the com ring to wake you. Besides, Manny has a crush on Ernesto in makeup." She lowered her arms and noticed the direction of his gaze. Her nipples peaked under his scrutiny—they hadn't received the brush-off memo either.

The expression that came over his face said he'd decided to hold off on the interrogation for something a hell of a lot more fun. "I woke up reaching for you. Come back to bed."

She wanted to. It was crazy how much. Her gaze strayed lower. He wrapped his broad fingers around the object of her fascination, stroking the hard, flushed erection while she stared, unblinking. This was not the morning after she'd been imagining.

The memory of him deep inside her, stretching her wide with his cock, turned her legs to rubber and she leaned on the chair. "It's a tempting offer, but I'm afraid I have to pass."

Stone paused. "Pass?"

Her body was crying out in angry protest. It didn't care if she saw heartbreak down the road, didn't care about her pride. It was too busy imagining sessions number six through ten. But she had to be strong.

"I have a lot to do today. The next show is only a few days away. The studio's lawyers will no doubt need a deposition about the whole falling-from-a-building incident."

She waved her hand absently, shuffling as the silence met her explanation. "I had fun."

"Fun." His face had lost all expression. Was he angry? She got her answer when he turned without another word, heading into the bedroom.

She found him stuffing himself swiftly and methodically into his bodysuit. He reached into the closet and threw a robe in her direction. She fumbled to cover herself, suddenly exposed and uncertain.

He sat on the bed to slip his wide feet into the swifts. "I'll call Jake."

"Ja-Jake? But why wo—"

"Someone cut your grav line on purpose. No doubt one of Fortune's goons. You've implicated her, connected her to the Syndicate—she isn't going to take that lying down. Until we can find out more, you need to be protected."

His brusque tone had her crossing her arms defensively. "This isn't the first time my reporting has ticked people off. I can handle Fortune Lazarus just fine all by myself. I do *not* need Sparky getting in my way."

Her breath caught when he stepped in front of her, gripping her shoulders and shaking lightly. "*Damn it*, Dayna, don't argue. I get it. You want me gone. But unless you want me to call your brother back from his honeymoon in Tara—and I will..." His eyes narrowed in warning. "You'll let Jake watch over you until we can assess how much of a threat Lazarus is planning to be. It's Jake or me. Your choice."

His grip eased, fingers absently caressing her shoulders through the silk of her robe as he waited for her answer. She wanted to take back her thoughtless words. She knew him too well to doubt that she'd hurt him. But he had rejected her before. A part of her was terrified he would do it again. She wasn't sure she could handle it this time.

So she chose Jake.

* * * * *

"I lost her."

"*What?*" Stone knew he was shouting—he could practically hear Jake twinge on the other end of the ear-com—but he couldn't believe it. How on earth—

"Who was she?"

Jake laughed nervously. "What makes you think it was a woman? You know how sneaky Scoop can be." He hesitated when Stone refused to respond.

"Okay, Okay. There was this librarian. A redhead. I was just helping her with some...filing."

Stone sighed. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Scoop was doing research. Very secretive about it too, so I sat at a table nearby. She noticed the librarian giving me that look. You know that look, right? And she told me I should go say hello, since she was going to be there for at least two more hours."

"So you left Dayna alone."

"It was a library, man. Have you ever seen a supervillain in a library? *I* haven't."

Stone wasn't listening. He walked down the hallway to the lair's center of operations. He had to find her. He stepped up to the large bank of computers and his hands flew across the central keyboard.

The main monitor lit up and a three-dimensional map of the globe appeared to be orbiting on the screen. He continued inputting data, glancing up occasionally to see the image zooming forward, until an aerial view of Gaia City came into focus.

Within seconds, the building that housed the lair became visible...and then the command center itself. Stone almost turned to look behind him, but then the positioning system dropped four levels directly below his current position. "What the hell is she doing *there?*"

"Where? What's happening? Is she okay?"

"Her signal is coming from the sub room." If Dayna had been upset that they were all scanned into her apartment security, she would definitely blow a fuse to learn that the belly ring she thought was her little rebellious secret was actually a locator beacon.

Now that the mainframe had picked up her signal, the security cameras in the sub room took over. Dayna's face came into focus, grinning like the devilish imp she was.

She was in so much trouble.

"Give me ten minutes, I can get there in no ti—"

"No. I've got this one. Wouldn't want to take you away from your *filing*."

"Damn, Stone. I'm sorry."

Stone was too relieved to see her safely within reach to yell, but he didn't have the time or desire to assuage the guilt in Jake's voice. "Next time, keep your eyes on your mission instead of chatting up the local color. Stone out."

He turned off his ear-com, heading for the lift that would take him to Dayna. He laid his hand on the panel beside the metal doors. A low hum of vibration rang up his arm as the DNA scanner recognized him. Stepping into the lift, he ran a hand through his hair and prayed for calm.

What was it with that woman? She had no sense of self-preservation. It wasn't as if she didn't see dangerous situations everyday. Didn't see him and the other Guardians battle the Syndicate and protect those without powers from all the things that went bump in the night. She acted as though *she* was a superhero.

And it scared the shit out of him.

She used to listen to him. Used to think he'd hung the moon. Call him a prick, but he enjoyed the hell out of it. The pretty little brainiac, so full of questions, so admiring. But that had all changed. And he knew it was his fault.

It was the night they'd all donned their plain clothes, the rest of the Guardians camouflaged as their alter egos to take Dayna out for her eighteenth birthday.

Stone had never cultivated his alter ego. He hadn't seen the point. What he'd been before he became Rock Hammer was...unappealing. He wasn't tortured like Theta or Triad. He loved being a superhero. He rarely even bothered with the mask that had been made to go with his suit. People always thought he looked like someone they knew, but no one expected to see a Guardian grocery shopping, so the others didn't bug him about his choice.

They'd gone dancing at her request. Stone had immediately found a luscious bombshell to partner up with. The sexy blonde had spent the evening *ooing* and *ahhing* over his broad muscled chest, telling him how much he reminded her of her favorite superhero.

Stone had finally maneuvered her into a small, dingy storeroom in the hopes of making all her dreams come true when they were interrupted with a squeak of surprise.

Dayna had stood in the open doorway. He'd never forget the wounded expression in her eyes. He had felt like a heel. Weren't they there to celebrate her birthday? And he hadn't even danced with her. His best friend's sister. The Guardians' good luck charm.

He'd sent the pouting blonde away and given Dayna what the critics had always called his irresistible trademark grin. "Sorry, kiddo. Let's go back out there and show them how it's done."

Instead of smiling and taking his arm, the little urchin took a step inside, closing the door behind her. It had shamed him to the core, but he still recalled how hard he'd gotten with that simple action.

He found himself noticing the gold halter top that pressed her small, ripe breasts impossibly high. He watched her swaying walk, the low rise of her jeans allowing him to glimpse the patches of skin that showed there when she moved.

"Do you know what I want for my birthday?" So sweet and breathless. Had he never noticed the smoky rasp in her voice? His cock jerked.

“Graham mentioned you wanting a new com—”

“A kiss. All I want for my birthday is a kiss.” Faster than he could blink, she had her strong, slender arms wound around his neck—balancing high on the tip of her toes to reach his mouth.

The smart thing would have been to give her a quick peck and drag her out of that storeroom. Or unwrap her arms and let her down gently. She didn’t deserve what happened next.

He wasn’t used to denying himself. And now that she was pressed against him, he wanted to taste those full, sweet lips more than he could recall wanting anything before. Or since.

He ducked his head, allowing her clumsy caresses for a panting heartbeat, and then he took over. He pulled her hard against him, forcing her mouth open with his voracious tongue, sliding his large palm over her ass to slip between her legs.

She was so delicious, felt so amazing, that he almost didn’t hear the surprised, intimidated noise she made at his touch. Almost. A transbullet hitting him dead-on wouldn’t have knocked him off his feet the way the realization of what he was doing did in that moment.

This was Graham’s baby sister. He’d sworn an oath to help protect her from people like her father. Graham trusted him. And what would he think if he came in and saw Stone’s hand between her legs and tongue down her throat. Not exactly the actions of a superhero.

Disgust with himself had him pushing her roughly away. Her beautiful blue eyes were huge in her face, her cheeks flushed. “You got your kiss, kiddo, now get out of here.”

“But Stone, I—”

“What? You want a birthday fuck? Sorry, I don’t do that kind of charity work.” She flinched, but he couldn’t stop, desperate to make her leave before he took her virginity in a grimy closet.

"You're just a kid. I like a woman with more experience and a little more meat on her...bones." He turned to stare hard at the dusty shelf, unwilling to face her again.

He heard a small sound. *Oh Goddess, please don't let her be crying.* And then she was gone. When he made it back to their table, Graham told him she'd left with some of her friends from school and told him not to wait up.

They'd never talked about that night. But then, they'd really never talked *since* that night. Not like they used to. And Stone had never known what he was more ashamed of—his cruelty toward a young innocent with a crush, or his unceasing desire to touch her, kiss her again. A desire he'd barely sated last night.

She'd scared him to death with that stunt of hers. And he wouldn't rest until whoever was responsible for cutting her grav-line was paid in kind—but that wasn't what last night was about. He'd decided during that fiasco of a reality show that he was tired of denying it. Dayna was his.

Whether she knew it or not.

When she kicked him out this morning, he was thrown. There was no question in his mind that she felt the same way he did. She'd responded so beautifully, so passionately, there seemed no way to deny it. And yet, she had. What kind of game was she playing?

The lift stilled, and he was jolted out of his memories and back into the present. He stepped out into the small prep room on the sub level, watching as she rummaged through the supply boxes, mumbling to herself.

"Looking for something, Scoop?"

She froze, before heaving an irritated sigh and glancing at him over her shoulder. "Yeah. A magical pill that will keep you overbearing super snoops out of my business."

"Nice to see you too." He took in her snug rubber two-piece suit, the supplies and personal cam she had piled neatly on the platform beside one of Triad's favorite toys, the Guardian Underwater Transport Submarine. G.U.T.S.

"Do you know how much trouble I could get in if I let you take that sub out of here?"

"You're a big, strong mutant who can turn into indestructible rock on command. I think you'll be okay. Besides, it looks like you're safe for the moment. I can't find the bloody key." She tried to walk past him to search through another box when his arm shot out, stopping her where she stood.

"I know where the key is."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's this gonna cost me?"

He couldn't stop the triumphant smile that bloomed on his face. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter Three

Dayna was in serious trouble. She knew it. Stone appeared to be barely holding himself in check. His smile couldn't quite temper the hard pulse at his temple, his clenched jaw.

But she was fine! Yes, she'd ditched her fiery bodyguard and taken a shortcut to the lair. But she'd been careful. Maybe she should have waited for Jake, but when she realized what the package from Professor Kaine contained...well, she knew she had to act fast.

In her hand, she had held a journal and a letter that contained the key to her story. This was the reason Fortune Lazarus had teamed up with The Syndicate – she knew it.

The Pearl of Isis.

The Professor had been on an expedition years ago, where they had found the abandoned tomb of an ancient queen's consort who'd been purported to have miraculous abilities. The glyphs on the wall had hinted at another tomb that held the queen, chosen by the deity Isis herself to bring balance to the lands.

She, the stories claimed, brought rain to the desert, ruled over the ocean and had the ability turn the very tides with the gift Isis had bestowed upon her – an amulet containing a single perfect pearl.

Professor Kaine had never been able to find the queen's chamber. A rockslide at the consort's tomb had ended his expedition prematurely. But he never stopped researching the pearl's legends. He was close to discovering the exact location when disaster had struck.

His funding had disappeared, along with his most trusted research assistant and nearly all of his data on the queen's chamber. Years of work ripped away in a single day.

Thankfully they hadn't taken everything. One tattered leather journal in which he had copied all of his findings, including a rendering of an obscure map that he hadn't wanted to put into the official documents until it had been authenticated, remained. That was how he found out who was behind his recent theft.

A representative from Lazarus Communications had come into his office with an offer so outrageously generous, he was immediately suspicious. A lifetime worth of total funding, no questions asked, on two conditions. He was to halt any and all further research related to the ancient queen and her magical amulet...and they wanted the map.

Since no one but Kaine and the runaway research assistant knew about the map, it was easy to put two and two together. He'd asked to think about it over the summer semester and they seemed to agree. But since then, he knew he was being followed. He'd sent the journal to Dayna because of her reputation and because he knew she, unlike the police, would be more likely to seek out the truth than take a bribe.

It had only taken Dayna a half an hour in the library to come up with a plan. It would be too dangerous to confront Fortune Lazarus directly. Regardless of what Stone thought, she was not a moron. And she'd been just as shaken up by the attempt on her life as he had.

As she turned the pages of the journal, studying the scribbling that covered every inch of every page, she became fascinated with the legends surrounding the jewel.

She already knew from her father's work that the natural properties of certain gems could be enhanced. Her anklet was a prime example. Did this pearl really exist? And if so, did it have all the properties that history alluded to? She had to find out for herself.

She should have known Stone would find her. The man was stubborn as a bulldog with a bone. But he knew where the key to G.U.T.S. was...and she had to have it.

"What do I have to do to get you to give me that key, Rockslide?"

He rolled his eyes. "No more nicknames, for one. You know my name, Scoop. As I recall, you cried it out over and over again as you came for me."

She tried to repress the shiver of need his words evoked. She couldn't think about that right now. *Good Luck*. She'd been trying to put last night out of her mind all day. She couldn't believe she'd been so insatiable, begging for whatever he was willing to give her and still hungering for more. But he didn't need any extra ego stroking, so she raised one eyebrow in silence.

Stone shook his head. He released her, pulling out a folding chair from where it leaned against the wall and making himself comfortable. What was he doing? She was in a hurry, dammit!

"You want the key? You'll have to make it worth my while. Come here."

Uh oh. Her throat went dry as he beckoned her over. What kind of game was he playing?

She complied, as slowly as possible, until his knees bumped against her legs. "Now what?"

His hand reached out to tug on the clingy material of her shorts. "Lose these."

"What? You are certifiable. If you think I'll just—"

He released the waistband with a snap, his lips quirking at her warning glare. "It's not as if I haven't seen it before. How badly do you want the key? Is this a pleasure cruise, yet another rebellious, childish prank? Or is there something important you should be telling me?"

That sneaky son of a— He didn't think she'd do it. She'd wipe that smug look off his face and hopefully get out of here without him finding out what she was up to.

Dream on, Dayna. Great. Even the voice in her head doubted her chances. She blew her bangs out of her eyes in frustration, pushing down her scuba shorts without fanfare.

As soon as her feet cleared the legs of the fabric, Stone slid an arm around her and knocked her off balance, sending her tumbling face first across his lap.

A highly undignified squeal escaped before she could prevent it. She squirmed, desperately trying to escape his hold, but it was like trying to move—well—someone with super strength.

“Bastard.”

“I thought I told you no name calling. Quit wiggling—you’re only making this harder on yourself.”

“You’re kidding, right? Haha, very funny. Now let me up.” One hot palm covered her ass cheek gently, fingertips tracing patterns that had her biting her lip in sudden arousal.

“Now that I have your attention, I think we need to discuss your tendency to ignore everything I say and put yourself directly in the line of fire.”

Whack!

“Ow! Dammit, Stone, that hurts!”

“Ah. She *does* know my name. And you know I would never hurt you. I’m trying to make a point.” *Whack!* “Do you know how worried I was when I realized you’d ditched Jake at the library? How terrified I was that something had happened to you?”

Whack!

Her ass was on fire. She could feel the matching heat in her face at her humiliating position. What made it even worse—she liked it. She could feel the wetness gathering on the lips of her sex in response to his “punishment”. Goddess, she was a masochist.

He was silent as he lightly caressed the reddened skin, coming closer and closer to the part of her that was dying for his touch. “I’m sorry, but Stone, *please*—”

“Stone, please. I really like the sound of that. Say it again.” Those thick, deliciously calloused fingers delved between her thighs. “You want me to stop, Scoop? Tell me to stop.” He slid one finger, then two, deep inside her and she moaned low, pressing her forehead hard against his leg.

She couldn't tell him to stop. She didn't want him to. She spread her dangling legs and arched her hips higher against his hand in a wordless plea. *More.*

He pulled his fingers out and cupped his hand, spanking her lightly once more, this one lower, closer to her sensitive flesh. She cried out against his thigh. "Shit, yes. You love this, don't you, Scoop? You are so fucking *hot.*"

Then he was inside her once more, thrusting again, his fingers pumping, slipping easily through her arousal. She could feel his steel-hard cock pressing against her side. She wanted him. *Now.* "Please, Stone. Goddess, please."

"Please what, baby? Take you down to the floor and fuck that sweet pussy? Fill your ass with my cock? Or should I spank you again? What do you want? I want to hear you say it. I *need* to hear you."

Yes. "Yes, Stone. *Anything.* Just fuck me!" She lifted her head on that plaintive cry, desperate for more, so close to coming she wanted to scream.

Her gaze locked on a shocked Jake.

She tensed, mortified, before attempting to wriggle out of Stone's lap. His hand came down with a loud crack right between her legs.

The sensations were too shocking, too amazing for her to control her reaction. A loud, broken moan tore out of her throat, climax quaking up her spine before she could stop it. Her lids closed, blocking out the stunned expression of her longtime friend, a part of her humiliated beyond belief that he had seen her like this. A smaller, obviously insane part of her, reveled in being watched.

"We're a little busy, Sparky. Make it quick." The arm across her back tightened as Stone spoke, his hand patting her clit soothingly, gentling her as she shook with the last strong ripples of her orgasm.

He knew? He knew Jake was there?

"I just thought...I felt bad and I wanted to hel — Oh fuck, Stone, does Graham know about this?"

"It has nothing to do with him."

"The hell it doesn't."

"Is that all?" Stone's rough growl had Jake taking a step back. She peeked through her lashes to see Jake's glare catch on the curve of her ass. She knew it must be bright pink with handprints from her spanking, knew that with her legs spread, he could see that Stone had begun to finger her again, coating the line between her cheeks with her juices, pressing his index finger against her ass as if they were alone. As if he were about to —

Goddess, just the thought of him doing that with an audience had her close to coming again. She bit her lip hard.

"Take your eyes off my woman, Sparky. Or else." The quiet warning sent goose bumps up her arms.

Jake lifted his palm and a perfect ball of flame appeared, hovering above his hand. "Or else what, Pebble Breath?"

Dayna's chuckle turned into a whimper when Stone's finger pushed inside her ass. The man had no shame. No shame at all. And she loved it.

"Or I tell a certain wide-eyed innocent principal about your own special... *proclivities*."

Curiosity at Stone's calmly delivered threat distracted her. Principal? He couldn't mean...Kimberly? Cassie's fellow contestant on the show? Was Jake seeing her? And if so, what the heck had he been doing with the librarian today?

Jake flinched, the flame sputtering out as he turned to stomp away. "I was leaving anyway. Do you have any idea how much this is gonna cost me in therapy? Scoop and Rock Hammer? *All kinds* of wrong. I'll be in my room rocking in the corner if anyone needs me." The lift doors closed behind him with a petulant whoosh and they were alone again.

“Damn it, Stone. Why didn’t you stop?” She was breathless, pumping back against his hand once more, pressing his finger deeper inside her as her muscles tightened around him.

A dark sound rumbled from his chest and then they were on the cool, tiled floor. The hidden flap of his suit opened and his impressive erection pressed hot against her cheek as he placed her legs on either side of his head.

“You liked having someone watch you. I felt your reaction, Scoop. I always knew you were trouble, but I had no idea you were this...*bad*.” He smiled against her clit. And then he was everywhere, lapping at her juices, spreading her ass cheeks wide as he groaned against her sex.

She *was* bad. Goddess help her. All the years, all the fantasies she’d had about this man. She wanted to do everything.

It wasn’t smart. Nothing about this was smart. But when he called her his woman, damned if her heart didn’t skip in her chest. Skip, for Gaia’s sake! His tongue plunged deep and she pressed her hips closer, turning her head to swipe his cock with her tongue.

“Yes, that’s...take me in your mouth, baby. Suck me. Suck my cock.” He bit her thigh, licking the juices there as he waited. She let her breath heat his skin, her mouth opening over the flushed head, tongue sneaking out to taste the salty arousal glinting at the tip.

His hips jerked and he inhaled sharply, the movement pushing him deeper. Her lips parted, wide as they could to accept his girth, her tongue greedily tracing a path along his silken shaft. She loved his taste—dark and mysteriously spicy, like something forbidden. She wanted more.

She relaxed her throat and wrapped her fingers around the base of his erection. They didn’t even touch. There was just...*so much* of him. She hummed her appreciation against his burning skin, swallowing until she felt him hit the back of her throat and he shouted.

His teeth gently tugged on her pussy lips, a low growl emerging before he began sucking on her clit, joining her in the rhythm she'd set.

The room filled with the sounds of their moans, each one focused on the other's pleasure. Every inch of her body felt hyper-sensitive and alive. She reveled in the feel of the smooth, cool material of his Guardian suit sliding across the curve of her belly—the heartbeat pumping through the veins of his erection against her tongue.

Stone's fingers were thrusting inside her again, faster and harder, curving against her G-spot. She could feel the power of her orgasm building, growing inside her.

"That's it, baby. Your mouth is so hot, it feels so good—I can't wait—I have to—" His ragged breath heated her sensitive clit, his words sending her over the edge and into blissful oblivion.

He joined her, his hips lifting off the ground, filling her mouth with the rich tang of his climax as she struggled to swallow every last drop. She could feel his big body trembling beneath her, an echo of her own erotic tremors. She dropped her cheek to his thigh with a shaky sigh.

He kissed her inner thigh, one hand coming up to squeeze her hip affectionately. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind. You are way too distracting, Scoop. Next time if I want you to take me seriously, I guess I'll just have to threaten *not* to spank you."

"Another record. Thank you for reminding me why we shouldn't do this again so quickly." She chuckled without humor as she dragged herself off his body.

"What? Where are you going? What did I say?"

She shimmied into her scuba shorts, watching through narrowed eyes as he shoved himself awkwardly back into his own suit. "Forget it. It's apparently too much to ask that a man have looks *and* the common sense Gaia gave a gnat."

He looked confused. And pissed. Great. Should she have pretended he hadn't taken such a powerful moment and ruined it once again by opening up his mouth. He'd just meant to punish her for disobeying him. He didn't expect to turn her on, although he wasn't above taking an opportunity when it came up, was he?

“You said you knew where the key was.” She focused on a point over his shoulder, trying to ignore the feel of her shorts rubbing against her sensitive flesh.

He ran a hand through his hair, tugging hard at the strands as he stared her down. Her chin rose. Sexy, irritating superheroes notwithstanding, she had to find the pearl before Fortune and her goons got their hands on it. Why it had to be her and not Stone or Jake or any of the others was something she didn’t want to wonder about right now.

After a long, uncomfortable moment, he sighed. “Okay, Scoop. I have no idea what you’ve got up your sleeve...but I’m in.”

He picked up her bag of supplies and started walking to the staging area where G.U.T.S. rocked in silent, unpowered oblivion. Tossing her things inside, he glanced at her over his shoulder.

“Where are we going?”

Chapter Four

She looked so peaceful. So innocent. So...quiet, lying there. But it wouldn't last. Any minute now she'd wake up and start glaring at him again, telling him she could take care of herself. She might even throw in a little name-calling.

He smiled. He couldn't help it. He loved her passion. Even loved how easily he could rile her up. She'd always been that way. So protective of her brother, of all the Guardians—she fought like a tiger when she believed in a cause. She was a tiny slip of a woman with the heart of a Valkyrie.

She also drove him crazy. She was oversensitive, always putting herself in danger, forever believing the worst of him.

He'd been high on his release, body actually shivering from the power of his orgasm. He'd been happy. They fit. She matched him need for need. But he'd said something wrong...again. Reminded her about their argument instead of telling her how amazing she was, how beautiful.

You're still the same socially backward dork, aren't you? No amount of super strength can change that. At least, not in front of her.

After so many years, he'd hoped the persona of Rock Hammer, smooth and tough and bulletproof, would take. Hoped that Stone Matthews, cyber-geek and geophysics savant, owner of two left feet and an extra one continuously inserted in his mouth, would fade from existence forever.

It wasn't as if anyone had even missed him. He'd been a small notation in the paper mentioning his disappearance after that rockslide. Missing. Presumed dead. The end.

He had been one of the anonymous masses, no family, distant colleagues but no friends. He'd been fourteen when he'd been accepted to the university. Not exactly conducive to bonding with your peers.

After he'd become Rock Hammer, everything had changed. Triad, Graham and the others had understood him in a way no one else ever had. They were his family. Maybe that was why he'd pushed Dayna away back then. All he could think of was losing the only friends he'd ever known, the way of life he'd never have had if it weren't for them.

He took one more look at the feisty pixie, her trademark spiky shoulder length hair, dark as night with magenta tips, spread out on the cot in the living area of the sub, before heading toward the helm.

"Status."

"Estimated time of arrival—five hours, twenty-three minutes and sixteen seconds. All systems running at peak efficiency."

"Thanks, G.U.T.S. Display that map Scoop scanned into your mainframe, would ya?"

Stone watched as the three dimensional image of the map that had been folded in Professor Kaine's journal appeared and hovered over the console. He sat in a nearby chair and pulled out the leather notebook, leafing through it as G.U.T.S. highlighted their current course and destination.

"It's exciting, isn't it, Mr. Rock Hammer?" The voice coming through the speaker had been programmed by Triad to emulate a throaty feminine purr that had always made Stone a little uncomfortable. It probably had something to do with the emotional personality that went along with it. "Here we are, way beneath the depths of the briny deep, on a quest for buried treasure!"

"The briny deep, huh?"

The lights of the console flickered excitedly. "Sailor talk," she assured him. "This is just like those old stories Mr. Triad loves me to read to him. Adventure on the high seas, a pearl imbued with magical powers by Isis herself...lost for centuries. And *we're* going to find it."

"I suppose you're right, G. Hey, there's something on the left corner of the map, can you make that out?" Where the X marked the spot, a small notation had been smudged or faded by time.

The image was cropped and enlarged, the faded markings enhanced and darkened before his eyes.

The Portal guarded? Force field?

Monster? Or figurative?

It was Kaine's handwriting. He must have found something in his notes that led him to believe the entrance would be difficult to get into. "Great."

"*Monster?*" G.U.T.S. gasped. "What kind of monster do you think that's talking about? Is it anything like the Sinister Serpent? Because the last time Mr. Triad took me out, it was to find the Sinister Serpent and I did not like that villain *at all*."

"I'm only equipped with defensive shielding and an analyzing scanner. Mr. Triad promised to retrofit me with a laser, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet. Maybe we should return to the lair and talk to the other Guardians about this."

G was babbling. That couldn't be a good sign. "I'm sure there's no monster, G. No need to worry. Besides, I would never let anything happen to you or Scoop, you know that. You're my girls."

Good Goddess, he was placating a computer.

The sounds of consoled sniffles faded as she returned the full map to the holo-screen. While G.U.T.S. was distracted, he opened the journal again. It all looked too familiar. His past was catching up with him.

The notes were thorough, but he'd expect nothing less from the brilliant Professor R. Kaine. He'd been the most beloved and famous archaeology professor at the university for years.

So famous that a young, gawky geophysics major had jumped at the chance to join the professor's crew to dig at what was the theorized resting place of the Isissian Queen's consort.

It had been a decision that had changed everything.

Shaking his head as if to erase the memories, Stone looked for references to "the monster". Yep. There it was. He had a bad feeling he was going to get the opportunity to use Triad's special gel breather before this was over.

And there was more. After the doorway was opened, they still weren't out of the woods. It seemed, unlike the consort's resting place, the queen's tomb was rife with traps and tests to keep the unworthy at bay. Clever.

"Mr. Rock Hammer? I don't think Ms. Jamison wanted you to be looking through that journal without her."

Stone rolled his eyes. G.U.T.S. was right, of course. Scoop couldn't have made herself clearer. This was *her* story. He was along for the ride because he had something she wanted. The key to the submarine.

She didn't know about his past with the professor. Didn't know how much help he could be deciphering the man's scholastic ramblings. "I'm just getting a head start, G. She needs her rest. She won't mind."

"Wanna make a bet?"

Shit. He tried to look sheepish as Dayna came through the door, ripping the journal from his loose grip before he could blink. "Hey!"

"Hey what? You wouldn't even know about this if it wasn't for me. The professor entrusted me with that information, not Gaia's Guardians."

"You really need to deal with that chip on your shoulder there, Scoop."

She glanced up, startled, as he came to stand beside her. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Your hang-up with being 'normal'. Graham has always been afraid to have this conversation with you. Afraid to bring up the past he thinks is better left buried. At first I thought he was right, but now I'm not so sure."

"Let me guess. You've decided to change your name to Super Shrink?"

"I don't think you really understand what your brother went through because of Doctor Jamison."

Her father? She really did not want to have this conversation. "Don't be ridiculous. I know everything."

She knew about the experiments her father was involved in—first with members of his staff, then his own young son. She remembered her bedridden brother screaming in agony as he fought against the sweat-soaked sheets on the cot his father had placed in the lab.

She'd watched him from the control room, her mother sobbing behind her as she begged her husband to end Graham's torture. For weeks, each day was the same.

And then one day everything changed. Her mother was gone, her father a widower...and her brother had changed from an easygoing playmate to a quiet stranger.

Her father had always been strange, wrapped up in his work. But after Graham came home, he seemed to go a little insane. He made the anklet for Dayna, which matched the wristbands he'd made for himself, telling her that her brother was dangerous, that he would read her mind and tell everyone her most important secrets—maybe even hurt her if she didn't wear it at all times.

Even years after Graham had moved away, her father couldn't be calmed. She learned to cook for him, take care of him when he moved his labs to his basement. On the rare occasions he'd join her upstairs, she knew he didn't see her. His red-rimmed gaze would dart here and there, his foot tapping with impatience to return to his experiments.

A few days before his death, he'd called her in and told her he had finally perfected his life's work. He rambled on and on about the mistakes he'd made with Graham, giving Dayna a list of all the new abilities her brother had been given. "But I wasn't able to limit or direct them, you see? I didn't realize that he would react so well, that he would know..." He'd wandered away mumbling to himself, leaving her wondering.

He was sure he'd solved the problem. And then the next day, her brother arrived at school to take her away. She was almost relieved when he'd told her that her father was dead.

She blinked away the memories to find Stone studying her closely. "I remember everything. More than he does. I had to deal with Dad's insanity all alone."

She bit her lip. She hadn't meant to say that. She knew Graham had gone through a lot after he'd left. He'd been too young, and frightened by the abilities he couldn't control. He'd been afraid he would hurt her.

"You don't know that your brother saved you from becoming your father's last experiment. You don't know that your father tried to kill him and that Graham had no choice but to defend himself. And you still don't understand that having the abilities we do isn't as wonderful as it seems."

She fell back into the chair when her legs collapsed beneath her. She tried to take in everything he was saying. "My father wanted to do to me what he did to Graham? And Graham...killed him?"

"Your father had found a way to turn the abilities on and off at his command. He wanted a drone. The bastard wasn't willing to test himself—he wanted to alter *your* brain so that you'd have to obey him. Graham felt his father's insanity reach out to him, knew Jamison wanted to use you to hurt him. He couldn't allow that to happen. Couldn't allow you to suffer the way he had."

She'd known her father was mad, but she'd had no idea. Even more unsettling was the surprising flare of anger she felt toward her brother—not for killing the man who had sired them, but for stopping him from giving her powers of her own.

Stone knelt in front of her. "Graham didn't want you to know how hard it was for him. It almost broke him, Scoop. Being able to hear everyone's thoughts, know everyone's secrets. Things moving with a thought before he knew how to control his powers. He was in hell. He would never have wished that on you."

He reached for her, but she leaned back with a negative shake of her head. "What does this have to do with anything, anyway? My family issues have nothing to do with this journal, Fortune Lazarus, or the pearl."

"Are you sure? You told me the professor believes Fortune wants to find the legendary Pearl of Isis. That she believes it will grant her its powers. There were other ways to stop her. Why do you have to be the one to find it first?"

Because a part of me wanted it for myself. She couldn't say it aloud, but she knew he saw the answer in her eyes. The answer he'd already known. Was it wrong for her to want to be considered an equal by her brother? The rest of the Guardians? They were her family. She saw the regret in his gaze and she closed her eyes. She was no better than Fortune.

"Mr. Rock Hammer?" Dayna's lips quirked at the hesitation in G.U.T.S.' tone.

"Yes, G?"

"About that monster? I was running some statistical scenarios and it seems to me that we *would* have a better chance of dealing with anything like...that, if we recalled Mr. Theta Wave from his honeymoon, as well as Mr. Triad. I can do it you know. Mr. Triad brilliantly insured that all of your communication devices were connected to my systems in case of an emergency. I think a monster would qualify."

When no one filled the void of silence for several uncomfortable minutes, G.U.T.S. felt the need for emphasis. "If we were voting, my vote would be to contact the others."

"Your vote is duly noted, G." His voice lowered and he leaned toward Dayna to whisper in her ear. "I really think Triad should rename her, don't you? I'm sorry for bringing all that up, Scoop. Let me help you look over the journal. We can do this together. I'll do anything you want—just let me help."

She felt his heated breath on her cheek and forgot all about the pearl, all about her past, everything but the need to be with him again. He did this to her every time. Made her want him to the point of distraction, regardless of the consequences. And each time she had him only made it worse, made her crave him more.

"You'll do *anything*?"

He leaned back to look into her eyes, a small smile of anticipation curling that sensual mouth as he caught the emphasis. "Name it."

"G.U.T.S.?"

"Yes, Ms. Jamison?"

"I need you to turn off your internal monitoring sensors."

"Oh, I don't think that would be advisable, Ms. Jamison. Mr. Triad is very strict about following certain protocols pertaining to the health and well-being of every life aboard this submarine. I'm to monitor your vital signs at all times, as well as the oxygen ratios, the pressure gauges and the sonar to ensure that we are not picked up by any—"

"We'll be fine. We have several hours of auto-nav before we get close to our destination. If we need anything, we will let you know, G. Do as she says."

Dayna kept her gaze locked with Stone's as G.U.T.S. silently contemplated the command. Finally, she seemed to relent, albeit grudgingly. "Internal monitoring sensors, apart from vital functions, temporarily shutting down."

The light above the console that indicated the AI's presence turned off, and Dayna chuckled. "She hated that."

“Triad really has his hands full with this particular invention. He may be sorry he gave her so much sensitivity one day. But she’s his problem. Back to our conversation—what’s it gonna be, Scoop?”

Her thighs clenched tightly together as the carnal possibilities raced through her mind. Anything she wanted. She knew he could take the book if he wanted, that wasn’t what this was about. In the sub room he had taken total control. This was her chance to get some of it back.

She wagged the journal at him teasingly before placing it on the console behind her chair. She pointed to the seat resting against the opposite wall. “Go stand over there.”

He rose slowly, his giant frame towering over her. Backing up until he stood beside the chair, he planted his strong legs...and waited.

A fine tremor of excitement flashed up her spine as she stood as well, hands going to the hem of her water-resistant top. “Strip, Stone. And this time, don’t forget to take off your shoes.”

Chapter Five

Damn.

Stone wasn't sure he'd ever seen a sexier striptease. He knew her body. Knew those small, perfect breasts, those sensitive nipples. Knew the curve of her belly, which sparkled when she moved as the small gem there caught the light. Knew the sweetness of what lay beyond. It was her expression, that playfully seductive, aroused expression, that had him fumbling again.

He managed to remove the clinging fabric without falling on his ass this time. *Thank you, Gaia.* He tried to look unaffected as he stood there, watching her torturously slow disrobing, but he knew it wasn't working. All the blood, along with all his brain cells, was racing south. His cock was already hard enough to burst and she hadn't even touched him yet.

"Sit down."

He sat. The cool, textured fabric of the seat eased his heated flesh, but not enough to take the edge off his need. "What now, Scoop?"

Her smile widened and her eyes twinkled with feline delight when she surprised him by sitting in her own chair, away from him. "Scoop, you may be overestimating my abilities," he joked. "I can't reach you from there—you'll have to come closer."

She shook her head. "Anything I want, you said. *This* is what I want. Watch me."

Sweat beaded his brow despite the environmental controls. She had placed one delectable thigh over each armrest of her chair, giving him a perfect view of—

"Goddess, help me."

Her devilish fingers had slid down her thighs, tracing seductive circles closer and closer to the only place he wanted to be. When she reached her goal, one slender hand

spread the lips of her dew-drenched pussy, displaying that delicate, swollen bud for him. He moaned, white-knuckled fists tense on his thighs.

"You said you watched me that day. That you went home and thought of me."

"Yes. Shit, Scoop, what are you —"

"Show me." She thrust two fingers deep, arching into her hand without breaking eye contact. "Show me what you did when you thought of me."

"Fuck."

Touch himself? She wanted him to masturbate? Now? He had said anything. He knew control was important to her, knew she'd been thrown by how much she enjoyed her "punishment". But this was...this was...*too intense, too erotic.*

She paused, drawing his gaze before raising an eyebrow at his aching cock, which was hard with need as it pressed against his abs. He knew she wouldn't continue until he did. Wouldn't come for him, show him how she brought herself pleasure if he didn't respond in kind.

His fist wrapped around his cock, gripping tight. He inhaled sharply at the sensations, all heightened with the knowledge that she was there, watching his every move.

He remembered being inside her, swallowed hard and tasted her on his tongue. He pumped his fist slowly, following her cues as she began to ride her hand again, her lids growing heavy with arousal.

"You're so sexy, Stone. I've always thought so. Do you know, that day? When you saw me on the bed, playing with my toys?"

She bit her lip, pressing the palm of her hand against her clit with a soft moan. "I was fantasizing about a certain superhero. That he came into my room, threw me down on the bed without a word. I was so wet, so hot for him, he knew he didn't have to wait."

Her other hand glided up her body to her breast, pinching one nipple between her fingers as he watched. "He fucked me. So hard the bed rattled, deep and fast again and again and —"

"Dayna, damn it." He thrust hard into his hand, his body on fire with the images her words were invoking. He'd seen it too. Watching her through the doorway, imagining striding through the door, ripping away the vibrator and filling her with his cock.

The fact that she'd been thinking of him as she screamed out her orgasm... "Scoop, baby please. I don't want to come this way. I've done it too many times, wishing I could have the real thing. I want to be inside you."

She was flushed, her tongue slipping out to lick her lips and he growled. "*Please.*"

She nodded jerkily, dropping her legs and lifting herself off the chair. "Come closer, Scoop. You wanted to be on top. Ride me."

Keeping still was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. It seemed to take an eternity for her to reach him. He released the death grip he had on his erection, placing his hands on the armrests where she could see them. "You're in control, Dayna. Don't stop now."

She gave him a shaky smile, placing her hands beside his and moving to straddle his lap. Yes. He could feel her heat, was desperate to force her hips down, to thrust deep inside her. Instead he waited, gaze caught by the hard tips of her nipples, so close...tempting him.

"Taste them."

He didn't need to be told twice. He sucked a nipple hard against the roof of his mouth. She cried out and he groaned against her breast when he felt her tiny hand grip his shaft, positioning him until the head of his cock brushed against her soaked sex.

They both shouted out their pleasure as she pressed down, her body stretching wide to accept all of him. His heartbeat pounded loud in his ears, his mouth widening

to encompass as much as he could of her perfect breast until he was lodged inside her as deep as he could go.

Yes.

She slid her hands into his hair and tugged. He leaned back and she was there, her mouth taking his with a passion that sent him over the edge. His hands gripped her ass, helping her set the rhythm that he craved.

He pulled back and bit her lip. "That's it, Scoop. Goddess, yes, ride my cock. *It feels so good.*"

She whispered his name over and over against his mouth, following the pace he set. She arched her back, her hands leaving his hair to grip his knees behind her for balance as her hips slammed against his — searching, reaching for her climax.

He palmed her breasts, squeezing her nipples between his fingers. His gaze was riveted to the sight of her pussy taking his cock again and again. It was beautiful. Carnal.

Right.

"Stone, I'm... *Stone!*"

Her muscles tightened around his cock as she came and he felt lightning shoot up his spine. Her head flew back, arching her neck as her movements turned frenzied and she lost herself to the moment. He knew he couldn't hold back.

His hands returned to her hips and he pumped deep inside her. Once. Twice. On the third thrust his climax shattered around him. He heard himself shouting her name, his cock jerking as he filled her with his release.

When he came back to himself, she lay draped across his chest. For a moment he thought the trembling he felt was coming from her. But it was him. She made him tremble.

Goddess, he loved her. More than he'd ever imagined he could love anyone or anything. Looking back, he knew he always had. That was why her crazy stunts

terrified him. That was why he'd fought against the attraction for so long. The thought of losing her... It was too painful to contemplate.

* * * * *

Dayna fidgeted in her seat as she looked over a copy of the list of "challenges". They'd both realized from the professor's notes that three obstacles to the Pearl of Isis in the queen's main chamber had been set up for the unwary. The clues were vague, garnered from a few translated scrolls and the pictographs the professor had copied from the consort's tomb before the landslide.

It was hard to concentrate. She couldn't stop thinking about what they'd done only a few hours before in this very room. She'd been shameless. It felt wonderful. And the look in his eyes after... She was too afraid to trust what she'd seen there. No matter how much she wanted it to be true.

"After the Portal challenge, it looks like the scrolls refer to passing through 'water that is not water' and then we need to face 'an undying flame'. That sounds crystal-clear to me."

She glanced up in time to see him rub his temples in frustration. She understood. She dealt in facts, enemies you could see, not ancient poetic codes written to confuse even the most scholarly of minds. Before she could comment, an annoyingly chipper voice beat her to the punch.

"It is a puzzle, isn't it? Usually I'm so good at those. I've been running comparison subroutines, attempting to find correlations in all known rites and literature of the period. 'The Undying Flame' has come up several times, in direct relation to the Queen and her Consort. But the context implies that it has to do with their relationship, nothing tangible. So far I've found nothing about the other."

"Thank you, G." Dayna rolled her head forward, trying to work out the kinks in her neck. "I guess we'll just have to wing it."

"You mean I'll have to wing it."

She sighed. How did she know he was going to say that? “Stone, we’ve been over this —”

“Then we’ll go over it again.” He stood, pacing the small room like a caged tiger. “Look, I’ll get through the challenges and bring you the Pearl of Isis on a silver platter. All I ask is that you stay in here where it’s safe.”

“I am perfectly capable of keeping up with you.” She rose and placed herself in front of him, placing her hand on his chest. “I know I don’t have any special abilities. It’s always bothered me that I haven’t been able to help you and my brother in fighting The Syndicate. And yes, that was part of the reason I wanted to come on this trip.”

She lowered her voice and took a step closer. “I want to do this with you, Stone. The Syndicate isn’t here. Just you and me and one exciting adventure. We should be there any minute, so we can’t stop now. I promise I’ll stay close. I trust you, Stone. I know you won’t let anything happen to me.”

She could see the moment she reached him. Elation filled her. She recalled one of Cassie’s favorite sayings, “You can catch more flies with honey.” Apparently it worked on superheroes too. Good to know.

“Mr. Rock Hammer! Mr. Rock Hammer!”

Dayna backed away as Stone rushed to the console at G.U.T.S.’ panicked cry. Sonar readouts popped up on the holo-screen and she swallowed past the sudden lump in her throat. “Um...G? What is that giant red dot coming toward us?”

Stone swore under his breath, reaching beneath the console for a small device Dayna recognized right away. “What do you need the breather for? Where are you going?”

He popped the pill-shaped device in his mouth. Dayna knew the gelatinous substance would expand and protect his airway from the water while supplying him with a good hour’s worth of oxygen. Another Triad invention. She’d never tried it out and it seemed terrifying to her, but Stone didn’t hesitate.

He couldn't speak but his expression and hand gestures were easy to read. *Stay here.* He turned back, typing a rapid command into the console before brushing past her down the hall to the disembarking room.

She tried to follow him, but he locked the door behind him just as she reached it.

"Son of a bitch!" She ran back to the sonar image. "G, what the hell is that thing?"

"It's the monster! *I told him.* I told him there was a monster. I told him we should go back to the lair and get the rest of the —"

"Calm down. We need a better visual. Send the surveillance pods. Now."

She saw the three orbs blast out into the water in front of the window before it became opaque. Three view screens appeared, giving Dayna a multi-angled view of Stone powering through the water.

The cliffs they'd been headed toward were clearly visible. Somewhere in that jagged line of rocks was the doorway to the queen's chamber. The portal supposedly guarded by a monster.

Stone's head turned as he noticed the surveillance pod beside him. He smiled and winked. Overconfident bastard. Her gasp joined G.U.T.S.' at the giant shadow that fell over Stone. He flipped onto his back for a better look and whatever he saw caused his eyes to widen in surprise.

Dayna watched as her lover changed before her eyes. His body seemed to expand, the suit stretching easily to accommodate his new girth. His face took on the texture of granite, solid and immovable. Rock Hammer.

He reached up with his massive arms just as two horrific tentacles appeared before the cameras. "Holy — G pull one of the pods back, we need a wider angle!"

As soon as she had a visual, she wanted to take the command back. What in the name of Gaia and all the goddesses was *that*? It looked like some giant mythical water dragon with tentacles for limbs. The scales on its back glowed with an eerie phosphorescent light as it circled the waiting Stone.

"That can't be real." Dayna clutched her throat, afraid to blink as she stared at the screen.

"My sensors aren't detecting anything misleading about its biological signature. But I am picking up a strange energy buildup inside the monster's body. I think it's about to—"

The creature opened its mouth on a soundless roar, and G.U.T.S. went silent as they watched a visible energy blast send shockwaves through the water toward Rock Hammer. Large shards of the cliff cracked and tumbled down the rock face, missing him by inches. Dayna watched as he tumbled over and again with the force of the blow. Even the submarine was rocked by the wave.

"I can't just sit here and do nothing."

She reached for a breather capsule and headed for the door. Instead of opening, it too sealed shut and locked before her eyes.

"G," she snarled. "I'm warning you. Open that door."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Jamison. In the event of an emergency situation, I'm programmed to keep you safe at all costs. If only Mr. Triad had equipped me with those lasers he promised, maybe I could help. He's just been so busy."

She was going to kill them. All of them. As soon as Stone kicked that sea monster's scaly ass and got back here safe.

"We need a distraction. We need to help him somehow." She paced the small confines of the room, stopping sharply, her eyes widening. "The pods! Use the surveillance pods to draw that thing's attention."

G.U.T.S. sent two of the brightly lit balls toward the creature's head, where they circled madly, drawing its eyes. The third hovered from a safe distance as the beast's head swiveled, following the taunting lights, giving Rock Hammer the perfect opening.

Dayna held her breath as she watched. He was swimming toward the monster with amazing power and speed, gripping two of its tentacles before it had time to notice its

prey had moved. Milky white eyes rolled with enraged surprise when he twisted the long feelers around each other, whipping up to wrap them around the beast's snout in an impossible maneuver that had Dayna gaping.

There was no sound in the sub as he made quick work of the remaining tentacles, leaving the once terrifying sea monster looking more like a helpless cartoon version of itself. Without its limbs or the ability to open its jaws, the creature fell harmless to the sea floor, angry but subdued.

"I knew he could do it all along."

Dayna chuckled at the bald-faced lie, relief and adrenaline causing her to collapse weakly into her chair. "Of course you did, G. I did too."

The surveillance pods returned to Rock Hammer, who glared directly into the lens before heading for the cliff and the doorway, its camouflage having been knocked away by the fight.

He studied the circular stone, which was bigger than the monster and the submarine put together, looking for a lever of some kind. There was nothing. Bracing himself at the base of the stone, digging his feet into the fine-grained soil, he pushed.

His back muscles strained, legs flexing as the large wheel of solid rock moved, one inch at a time, from the cave's natural opening. Dayna felt her heart flutter, her skin heating at the raw display of power. He was just so strong.

She'd never thought about how much he must have to hold back in passion. She knew that with very little effort he could break her in two. And yet it had never happened. Even when he'd spanked her, she blushed at the memory. Even then he had never really hurt her.

G.U.T.S. called two of the surveillance pods back and returned the windows to their normal state as Stone pushed the door completely out of the way. Dayna glanced down at the writhing mass of monster and wondered how long it would take for the thing to break free.

Stone gestured toward the last pod and G.U.T.S. sent it his way as she directed the sub into the large opening. As soon as they entered the dark, water-filled cavern, she could see a light above them in the distance. They'd made it.

As soon as they completed their ascent Dayna was headed toward the hatch. "You can open the door now G, the helpless little human isn't in mortal danger anymore."

"That isn't exactly true, Ms. Jamison." But Dayna's excitement must have been infectious, because the doors all opened wide and she rushed out to take a look.

"Not. Another. Step."

Chapter Six

Dayna looked over her shoulder guiltily as Stone, looking once more like himself, lifted up out of the water. He must have used the pod to propel him up to the surface to have gotten here so quickly.

She wanted to rush him and wrap her arms around him. She'd been so afraid when that creature had rushed him. But for some reason she had a feeling he wasn't in a cuddly kind of mood.

That vein was pulsing again. He looked pissed.

"I'd like to believe that it was a glitch in G's programming that sent those pods racing around that animal's head. I know she didn't do it of her own accord. For an artificial intelligence, she has all the characteristics of a soft-bellied chicken. But I'd rather believe she short-circuited instead of the other option."

"You mean the option where you needed help before he blasted you with his sonic wave thingy again and I thought a distraction for my *teammate* would be a good idea?" She placed her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. Forget the cuddling—she'd rather smack him upside his hard head.

He took a menacing step toward her, hands curled as if to grab her and shake her. But he stopped, palms up. "Scoop..." he sighed. "What if he'd decided you were the bigger threat to his guard duties? What if he'd aimed his aggression at the sub?"

He stepped closer, looking so haggard and worried that she forgot her own pique and took his outstretched hands without thought.

Stone pulled her into his arms and nearly squeezed the breath out of her. "I'm sorry," she said. And she meant it. Images of her brother and the other Guardians with similar expressions of concern raced through her mind.

Every time she decided to make up for her lack of superpowers by throwing herself into the line of fire or off a cliff... She'd never considered what it did to them. She'd always thought they patronized her for her lack of skill. It had never occurred to her that they worried for her in the same way she did for them. Because they were family and they loved her. She was an idiot.

"I'm just glad you're okay, Scoop."

"Ditto, Rock Man."

He pulled back and studied her expression for a heartbeat. Whatever he saw there made him smile. He leaned down, pressing his lips softly to hers. She lifted up on the tips of her toes, needing more, needing to feel him solidly against her.

He picked her up, holding her aloft with ease as he ate at her mouth. She wrapped her legs around his waist, unwilling to lift her mouth from his. Their tongues dueled gently, leisurely. She was just about to suggest they head back to the submarine to...celebrate, when Stone tensed against her.

"Don't stop on my account. I'm always up for a free show."

Dayna knew that voice. She dropped her legs and Stone kept her close as she slid down his body, turning in the cradle of his arms to face the intruders.

It was Fortune Lazarus—looking as if she just stepped off the pages of a magazine instead of out of the dark waters below. She'd pulled off a clear, bubble-shaped helmet, shaking out her perfect, shoulder-length blonde hair as she spoke.

There were three men behind her. One of them piled the jet packs they'd obviously used to get to the cavern while the other two aimed guns directly at Dayna and Stone.

"Tsk. Tsk. Nothing to say? You have a lot to answer for, the both of you. I guess we all know now how the brilliant Dayna Jamison gets all her Guardian exclusives, hmm? Don't worry, honey. You aren't the first woman to get what she wants by using her most valuable assets. In fact, I may like you more at this moment than I ever have."

Fortune's patronizing smile changed as she lifted her eyes to Stone. "And Rock Hammer. This is a little bit out of your depth, isn't it? You're more a smash and grab kind of guy. What interest can you possibly have—apart from the obvious—" she sneered with another nod to Dayna, "in sneaking around down here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Ms. Lazarus."

Stone's thumbs caressed the back of Dayna's shoulders gently, calming her when she tensed under Fortune's digs. The goons behind her were familiar—syndicate kiss-ups, lower echelon villains looking to kiss up to the big boys.

Fortune's laugh drew her eye. "Me? It's the funniest story. I was sailing on the Lazarus II when our sonar picked up the strangest readings I'd ever seen."

She walked a little closer until she was standing opposite Dayna, the open hatch to G.U.T.S. between them. "Everyone knows I can't resist an adventure. So we threw on our packs and followed the clues. Imagine my surprise when we saw that gift-wrapped sea monster rolling in front of the opening to this cave. An opening that this beautiful little submarine was disappearing into as we watched."

Dayna saw her calculating glance aim toward their sub once more and knew exactly what she was planning. "G—Stealth mode!"

A distinctly nervous squeak came from the open hatch before G.U.T.S. shimmered from view. The water bubbled around the now invisible submarine and Dayna knew she had submerged, was hopefully even now heading back to the safety of the lair. Fortune would never get her hands on the professor's journal now.

"You bitch. I should let them kill you for that alone." That much more vicious for its control, Fortune's monotone reaction prompted her henchmen to cock their weapons.

"You'd only be hurting yourself, gorgeous. This little reporter is the only one, apart from Kaine, to have studied what was in that notebook. She is the only one who can find the pearl." Stone lifted his hand from her shoulder to gently tap Dayna's temple.

Fortune raised one slim brow. "If that's true, then we really don't need you, do we? Although I will admit, I would miss the view. Jade was right. You are even better-

looking in person, Rock Hammer. Under different circumstances, I think I would have fucked you. Just for the experience.”

Dayna took an angry step forward. “Disgusting as that thought is, you need *him* too. Some of the challenges require his skills. Why do you think I convinced the big galoot to bring me? None of your goons could manage. If you want the Pearl of Isis—and I *know* you do—you’ll keep us both alive.”

The two women stared silently at one another, but Dayna would not blink. She had to admit she was a little nervous. She’d always been close to the danger, watching the Guardians battle The Syndicate. But she’d never been the focus, never been in any direct danger. It was a fact that used to drive her crazy. Now she was wondering why.

“You mentioned challenges? Professor Kaine never said anything about challenges, though we did finally get the exact location of the cave out of him before he...retired.”

Retired? Dayna bit her lip to hold back the sound of dismay. So they’d gotten to him after all. She could only pray to Gaia that he was all right. At least she knew he hadn’t told Fortune much. He’d left them an advantage. Dayna had a feeling they would need it.

“There are four challenges to get to the queen’s tomb and the pearl amulet. Rock disabled the guardian at the portal, but we still have three to go.” Stone squeezed her shoulder in instinctive surprise. He knew there were only three challenges. But Fortune didn’t.

“The next one should come up just after that first passageway.” She pointed to the narrow hall of rock. It seemed to widen in the distance, indicating another room. “It’s the challenge of water. ‘Water that *is not* water’.”

Dayna didn’t see any reason to lie about that. Let Fortune try to figure out what it meant. She was still winging it. She left the safety of Stone’s arms and headed fearlessly toward the passage, her back turned to the crowd.

They had no choice but to follow.

"Since you've stranded us here without the journal, mind letting me in on the plan?" Stone's voice was low as he closed in behind her. She could hear Fortune murmuring with her little entourage, so confident that she had the upper hand that she hadn't heard a thing.

"Well," Dayna whispered over her shoulder without slowing her stride. "I thought we'd lead the bad guys directly to the artifact. After that, I might be able to bargain for my life by offering you to Fortune as a sex slave. She seems to like you."

"Funny girl. So...nothing?"

"Nope. You?"

"Apart from wishing I'd tied you to your bed yesterday? I'm drawing a blank."

"At least we're on the same page. Do you think—" Dayna skidded to a halt. "Gaia's garters, will you look at *that!*"

Her raised voice alerted the others. They hurried forward, stopping in stunned silence as they took in the view.

"What the heck is this place?" A rat-faced, wheezing man that Dayna recognized as Playback, one of The Syndicate's little pets, stepped forward, his eyes sparkling with greed.

Even Dayna was impressed. The impossibly high ceiling of the cavern was encrusted with giant pearls, each seeming to sparkle and glow like stars looking down on a fantasy-inspiring landscape. The entire expanse had been made of gold and jewels of every kind, created to look like a mini-magical kingdom.

"A mirror image of the land in which she reigned," Dayna suddenly recalled the line from the professor's notes. But she'd thought he was talking about pictographs or murals...not this masterpiece.

Before them stood a waist-high model of the golden palace, surrounded by turquoise and marble dwellings. Perfectly proportioned streets paved in silver, empty of traffic, but impressive nonetheless.

To the left they could see mountains of tiger's eye and diamonds. To the right, standing nearly as tall as the palace, stood a temple made of shimmering opal and columns of pearl. Beyond the buildings lay an ocean of what looked to be liquid sapphire. The light of the pearls from above gave off the illusion of rippling movement.

"Stunning." Fortune's voice echoed Dayna's thoughts, but seemed to break the men out of their shocked stupor.

The tallest of the goons cleared his throat. "There's no way around that stuff. There's a platform we could lower over the narrowest part, but it's near the exit—way on the other side."

Playback sneered, his voice changing until he sounded just like Dayna. "Yeah, that's a tough one. This must be what the professor meant when he said, 'water that is not water'. Those ancient booby-trappers were really clever. We'll never find a way across that blue goo. Unless..." He paused to make sure everyone was looking his way. "Unless we take that boat."

As one, their heads turned in the direction of Playback's gaze. A small, narrow boat of reeds, big enough for one, sat on the shore beyond the model palace.

"If all the challenges are this easy, we may not need you to find the pearl after all, Ms. Jamison." Fortune was smug. "Spider, take the boat across and lay down the platform so the rest of us can cross."

Dayna's brow furrowed in confusion. It couldn't be this easy. It felt wrong, somehow. Too much effort had gone into hiding and protecting the tomb for there not to be any fail-safes inside.

Spider smiled, untying what she'd thought had been a belt around his waist as he headed toward the small craft. Another set of arms joined the first, hefting the light boat up and walking it to the sapphire lake. At least his name made sense now.

As he dipped the oar into the liquid, paddling swiftly across, Fortune touched the palace model. "She ruled over them all. A queen who, with the Pearl of Isis, controlled

the rain, the storm. A queen who commanded tidal waves and tsunamis. How they must have cowered before her.”

“Professor Kaine’s research would disagree,” Dayna said. “From what he’s gathered, she was known as a healer, Isis on earth. She helped the crops grow and was a fair and compassionate leader.”

Fortune scoffed. “A weak ruler would never have been able to control that vast a kingdom. Besides, can you imagine having all that power and *not* using it to get what you wanted?”

Dayna smiled as she met Stone’s eyes. Yes. Yes, she could. His expression warmed as if he’d read her thoughts.

“What the *fuck*?”

She spun around in time to see what had been a calm, serene body of “water” come alive. Spider was flailing all four arms, his face a frozen mask of horror. The boat was sinking, liquid bubbling angrily around it.

When the thick fluid touched his legs, wisps of smoke curled up from his jeans and he started screaming and kicking hysterically. He dove out of the remains of the boat, swimming with frantic, jerky movements toward the shore, agonizing yelps and cries for mercy escaping his lips with every stroke. Dayna’s stomach lurched.

“It must be corrosive. An acid of some kind. It’s killing him.” Stone took a step forward as he spoke. Dayna tried to grab his arm, but he shook her off.

“Don’t you dare. We don’t know you’d be okay, even with your abilities.”

He ignored her pleas, and Dayna watched as he transformed into Rock Hammer without slowing down. Spider had stopped a few feet from shore, the pain too much for him. Rock stepped into the sizzling acid purposefully, reaching the whimpering man and quickly carrying him to shore.

Rock Hammer's granite-like legs had taken a beating, even in super form. The powerful corrosive had taken its toll on his hands as well. She bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. He was alive. That was all that mattered.

He laid down the suddenly too-still body onto the ground and Dayna wound her arms around him, hiding her head in his broad chest. The henchmen's body was... Oh Goddess.

No one deserved that kind of end. Not even a member of the evil Syndicate of Villainy. Stone's arms tightened around her as he spoke. "Not as easy as you thought, eh, Fortune?"

"An unfortunate fact of life." She sounded more intrigued than horrified by what she'd just seen.

"Here is another. Ms. Jamison has ten minutes to recall the professor's notes about this challenge and how to get us across that deathtrap. If she fails, we'll shoot you and throw her in with Spider.

"And before you start thinking you can avoid these bullets because of your current state, know that I came prepared. These bullets contain explosive charges and they will do serious damage to you – whatever your form."

Dayna dragged herself out of his arms to face Fortune. "I'll find a way across."

"There's a clever reporter."

She didn't comment, walking the perimeter of the model in silence. Her body was a shaking mass of nerves. A man had just died before her eyes and now the man she loved – *yes, loved*, with every fiber of her being – was in jeopardy. Hell, he had already put himself in danger.

She had to find a way across. Had to buy some more time while praying to the goddess that G.U.T.S. had disobeyed them and sent a signal out to Spark and her brother. They needed reinforcements.

A glimmer of light from the temple caught her eye. She knelt beside the small building, admiring the minute attention to detail, the carvings and small statues of Isis that lined the building. That's when she noticed it, at the doorway to the temple, the only human figure in the model's complex. One arm was raised as if to knock on the temple door, the other holding a flaming torch made of amber.

It was so small, so out of place, that it had to mean something. Knocking on the door...knocking... "The Pearl will not be won by force, but knock and Isis will open the door."

Fortune rushed over. "What?"

"More of the professor's notes." Dayna held her breath as she lifted her knuckles to the opal door...and knocked.

She almost swore she heard footsteps before the little doors slid open. Seconds later, she stood as the back wall of the temple receded and a slender path of marble unfolded and arched out above the manmade lake, reaching the other side with a soft thump as it hit the ground.

"Cool." Dayna huffed out a relieved laugh at Stone's quiet praise. It was amazing. If Triad were here, she knew he'd have to stay behind and study the contraption, figured out how it was done.

"I suppose I can't kill you yet. Two more challenges to go." Fortune marched confidently onto the solid bridge, Playback close behind her and the man holding the gun gesturing to Dayna and Stone.

Stone glared at the goon and placed Dayna in front of him. She marveled at the strength of the bridge. The three of them, even with Stone's current density, which was substantial, barely affected the walkway.

She tried to hide her worry. She knew why he hadn't changed back. The damage the acid had done was going to hurt a heck of a lot more in his normal form. She wanted to scream at them all to stop so she could take care of him. Wanted to make sure he was okay.

"What's next, Jamison?" Fortune spoke over her shoulder as they followed her through another long tunnel in the cavern. It wasn't dark here either. There must be light coming from somewhere. Wherever it was, it had to be bright to have such a far-reaching effect.

"Facing 'The Undying Flame'." And she had absolutely no idea what that challenge would entail, but after that water that was more like deadly acid...she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

"Well, I hope you know more about it than the last one. I can't afford to lose any more of my men, you know. You will have to do whatever is required. Rock Hammer can keep me company."

She sounded so pleased with herself. Dayna made a face at her back. Right about now, she wished she had a superpower. One that involved kicking blonde heiress ass all over the queen's chamber.

There was a symbol over a carved-out arch that led into the next room. Stone's hand flinched on her back. "What?" she whispered.

"Nothing. It just...looks familiar."

They'd entered a throne room. It was sparse, but still stunning, with silk pillows tossed carelessly around a coral throne against the far wall. There were chests full of smaller pearls, but Dayna knew that none of them was the one they were looking for.

She watched as Playback grabbed a handful and stuffed them in his pocket. Fortune raised her eyebrow but didn't reprimand him, her attention drawn to the device sitting like a lonely sentinel in the middle of the room.

"Looks like this challenge requires the both of you."

It was strange-looking, a dark, bluish metal object, with seats on each side and a solid mass between them that looked like a table. Some kind of game?

G.U.T.S. had mentioned that all references to the flame had been pertaining to the queen's relationship with her lover, her consort. Maybe that explained the larger, male seat and its daintier equivalent.

Her mind was racing with possibilities, desperately trying to recall what the professor had said, when goon number three shoved her forward.

Stone growled, but Dayna shook her head, taking his hand and leading him toward the device.

She glanced up at him with a wobbly smile before taking her seat. "Here goes nothing."

He followed her lead, sitting down carefully with a suspicious look in his eyes as he studied the table.

Both their hands, resting on the table as they waited, suddenly seemed magnetically glued to the metal. Cuffs made of the same material slid out to bind their wrists before they had a chance to blink.

"Fuck!" Stone went wild, trying to stand, but the seats had them trapped as well. She watched his face take on that granite sheen as he pulled against the cuffs with all his might. Since she'd known him, she'd never seen a wall he couldn't bust through, a prison he couldn't escape. Until now.

Fortune whistled in surprise. "Something that can snare our strongest superhero? Oh the Syndicate will love to get their hands on this. When I hold the Pearl of Isis, hold sway over the oceans, *and* deliver a great enemy to the SOV, they won't just allow me entry into the inner sanctum...I will be their leader."

"Wow," a masculine voice rang out. "Looks like we're early. I was hoping we'd miss the big villain speech. She hasn't even done her evil laugh yet."

"Spark! Theta Wave!" Dayna had never been so happy to see them in her entire life.

"Coming, Scoop. You just keep the big guy calm for another minute or so while we—"

Dayna's heart stopped as a loud roar drowned out her brother's words. Flames erupted in a wide circle around the table, blocking Fortune, Playback and the others from view. It formed a solid dome of fire around them. Her wild eyes sought Stone's.

This couldn't be good.

Chapter Seven

"Stone. Stone, stop. Talk to me."

He could barely hear her through the pounding of his blood, the panic jangling against his nerves.

Trapped. What were these chains made of? He couldn't seem to calm his breathing. The thought of being helpless, now when he needed his strength to protect her... It was his worst nightmare come to life.

"Stone, look at me."

He met her eyes. The bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Goddess, he loved her. He had to get them out of this. "I just need to figure out a way to—"

They both heard it at the same time. As if a match had been lit on the ground beside them. Stone glanced down to see a line of blue fire heading from the edge of the dome of flame straight to them. It was unearthly.

It climbed the table until it danced between their bound hands, caressing their fingertips lightly. It didn't burn. His skin tingled with warmth, but he wasn't even singed by the flame as it wove through their hands, joining them together. It grew brighter and brighter until—

Flash.

A little girl with dark hair, so terrified at her brother's screams. She was worried for him...and sad. So sad. So alone. No one noticed her. Her father and mother were both too focused on her brother to notice that they'd left her alone. Daddy told her that her mother had finally left, but no one would tell her why.

One of her father's assistants was nice to her for a little while. Then she disappeared too. One by one, everyone left. Until only her father remained. And her brother, screaming in the night for someone to "Make it stop! Please, Goddess, make it stop!"

She was ashamed for thinking it, but she often thought she would take her brother's pain, take his place. Not to ease his suffering, but so someone would notice her...

Flash.

A tall gangly young man with thick glasses and a chip on his shoulder. He'd thought this trip would be different, that Professor Kaine would appreciate his invention. With it, he could map the consort's tomb and anything that lay beneath it with one thorough sweep.

Instead, his fellow students sneered. He tried to tell himself it was jealousy. Most guys his age would be going to the prom, not finishing grad school. But he was lonely. If only someone would notice him. Really see him...

He took his scanner into the tomb when everyone else had left for the night. He would show them all what he could do. He leaned against the wall opposite a detailed mural of the consort and his queen.

And then he fell.

The wall had disappeared. It was a hidden room, empty but for a throne of granite, a strange symbol carved into its back.

He walked up to it, noticing something glittering there on the hard, uncomfortable-looking seat.

An amulet. The chain was sturdy and a circle of gold engraved with symbols framed a large yellow diamond. It was incredible.

He picked it up and felt a rush of adrenaline that made him dizzy. Power. Images appeared in his mind faster than he could recognize them. A strong, deep voice seemed to echo around the chamber.

You are the one.

He turned, trying to find the invisible speaker. His feet, large and clumsy on a good day, tripped over each other with the swift movement. He fell face first into the dirt, the priceless amulet breaking in his hand, the diamond rolling away.

Swearing and imagining the ridicule of his peers when he delivered the most important find to the professor in pieces, he reached for the stone.

Pain. A fire began to burn in his blood, his muscle tissue tearing, changing. He watched in horror as the diamond began to glow, burrowing into his hand like a hot, living coal until it disappeared beneath his skin.

He heard the ripping sound as his clothing shredded around his expanding body. What was happening to him?

Flash.

Stone met Dayna's dilated gaze. What had just happened? He'd seen her, been her as a little girl. For just a moment he'd known her.

And from her expression, he could see that she'd known him, seen the day he'd become Rock Hammer. That she knew where his powers came from and who he'd been before.

The blue flame drew their attention once more, growing tall between them. A beautiful female voice spoke directly in his ear.

There can be no secrets in love.

"Did you hear that?" He watched Dayna look around, searching for the voice.

Flash.

"Oh, my Queen, so sweet."

"Yes, love. Oh Isis, yes. *Harder.*"

He had no wish to disobey. She was so beautiful, her dark hair rippling like ocean waves across the silk sheets of their bed, her body spread out before him like a feast before a starving man.

He watched her hips pump hard against the crystal phallus they'd had specially made. She loved it. And he loved her. Her passion, her heart, everything about her pulled him. She was his match in every way.

"More, my love. Please. You know what I want."

His cock was so hard, he feared he would explode at her words. Yes, he knew what she wanted. His lusty sea nymph. His queen.

He filled her tight sex with the smooth quartz and lifted her legs high over his shoulders, opening her to him completely.

The spiced oil beside the bed was in easy reach. He saturated his fingers with the warming liquid and pressed them against the tight ring of muscles that hid the entrance to heaven. She pushed down against his hand, accepting his thick fingers, stretching so perfectly for him that he could no longer wait.

"Is this what you want, love? You want to feel my cock inside you here? You want to be filled and taken, front and back?"

"Yes!"

He gripped his cock with his fist, working his way slowly inside her impossibly tight flesh. *Heaven*. Only with her. Only with his queen had he ever felt this way. Complete. Powerful. Loved.

A dark groan rumbled in his chest when he was finally seated to the hilt inside her. Yes. He could feel the hard crystal against his shaft, her muscles gripping him tight, holding him inside.

His hand spun the end of the crystal so it pressed against her swollen bud and she arched off the bed. Her face was flushed, those impossibly blue eyes shining up at him with absolute trust. She was his.

Their fingers wove together, eyes promising forever, bodies thrusting, reaching for the fulfillment they could only find with each other.

"Do it."

He leaned forward on his elbows, close enough that his Earth Stone — her gift to him all those years ago, lay against her amulet. The Pearl of Isis.

Just as addictive as having his cock deep inside her, the merging of these two Goddess-given stones was indescribable.

He craned his neck to take one perfect breast deep into his mouth. He heard her scream, felt her joy as she found her release. He felt it too. Felt her pleasure as if it were his own. He couldn't hold back. He lifted his mouth, calling her name as he followed her into paradise.

She is the one.

Flash.

Stone trembled with the aftermath of the most powerful climax he'd ever experienced, only to realize he was still trapped to the be-damned table, surrounded by a shield of fire.

Dayna was biting her lip, obviously coming back from the same, earth-shattering visuals that had held him in their thrall.

The Queen and her Consort. As he'd watched them together, he'd felt everything the consort felt. All the need, all the fire...all the love. And there at the end. He'd heard her voice. *She is the one.*

Dayna? Did she mean that Dayna was the true heir to the Pearl of Isis after all? In that moment, it made perfect sense to him. Reliving that day, he realized that it wasn't a simple twist of klutzy fate that had made him Rock Hammer. The Earth Stone had chosen him. And, it seemed, the Pearl may have chosen Dayna.

Her brow was furrowed in confusion as she watched the blue flame coalesce, solidifying to form the queen's amulet. The cuffs slid away from her hands and the flames began to die as she reached for the pearl necklace floating above the table.

Why wasn't he being released? He watched the fading flames and a renewed sense of anxiety swamped him. "Dayna. Come over here and help me out of this —"

"No! *It's mine.* The Pearl of Isis is mine!"

Dayna's fingers wrapped around the amulet just as the angry shout ricocheted off the walls of the cave. She turned to see an enraged Fortune bearing down on her with dark intent.

"Put it on!" She heard Stone's command and obeyed without thought, slipping the silver amulet over her neck even as she leapt up from her chair to defend herself.

"I did not come this far to have some little sleaze-seeking reporter take what is rightfully mine." Fortune took a running jump, turning mid-air, her leg aimed to deliver a powerful blow to Dayna's head.

She rolled away just in time and Fortune hit empty air, stumbling as her feet slammed hard against the rocky floor.

"Finders keepers," Dayna taunted, though she continued to back away from the angry debutante, her eyes scanning the cavern for her brother.

She saw Spark first. He was locked in a wrestling match with goon number three. Spark's hands were glowing with fire, but it was plain to see that the goon had some sort of armor plating covering his entire body...and it was fireproof.

Theta was spinning Playback in the air as the rat-faced, wannabe villain squealed in fear. *You go, Graham.*

Then she heard an angry shriek and saw Fortune pulling a sword from the piles of jewels and pearls in the corner. Uh oh. She was looking for something, anything to defend herself when she felt it. Serenity. Knowledge. Power.

The blonde, murder in her eyes, swung the sword as if she'd been born to it. "I am a Lazarus. A Lazarus does not fail. We win. The pearl is mine. And I will have it if I have to cut it from your pretty little neck."

She is not the one. She cannot touch you.

Dayna heard the whispers and she understood. "I'm sorry for you, Fortune. But the Pearl of Isis will never belong to you."

She made no move to escape as Fortune lurched closer. "*Sorry for me? You? I don't need your pity, you bitch. I need you to die!*"

The distressed shouts of the men Dayna loved seemed to come from a great distance. Her eyes were riveted to the sword as it sliced through the air toward her.

The world slowed around her, her flesh vibrating where it made contact with the pearl. This was nothing like the amethyst anklet. It was so much more.

You are the one. You are chosen.

The blood pounding in her ears sounded like the ocean as the sword came closer.

She thought about Stone.

"Dayna! Shit, Theta, *save her*—I can't move!" Stone noticed the blood on his wrists, realizing he'd changed back to his normal form since he'd been locked into this contraption, but he felt nothing but terror for Dayna. Why wasn't she running? He couldn't lose her. He couldn't live without her.

"I'm trying, Rock—something is repelling my telekinesis. I can't— What in the name of—"

Stone felt his head turn slowly, terrified at what he might see. His heart nearly stopped in his chest.

The Pearl of Isis. It was protecting her. A shield of crystalline water appeared around her, the blast of power so strong it knocked Fortune Lazarus through the air and into the far wall of the cavern where she dropped, unconscious.

"Thank Gaia. Thank Isis. Whoever is listening, thank you."

He saw Spark gathering up the demented debutante from the corner of his eye, feeling totally fucking helpless as Theta approached the still shielded Dayna.

"Scoop, honey? It's safe now, little sister. Whatever you're doing, you can stop now."

She didn't seem to hear him, though her eyes opened and turned toward the still-shackled Stone.

Her body was held aloft by the water around her. She began to float in his direction. Stone's eyes narrowed, trying to see her through the rippling liquid. Something was different.

Her eyes were wide and dilated. She was staring straight at him, but he wasn't sure she was seeing him at all. The amulet resting against her throat was glowing brightly, making the space within impossible to see.

"Baby? Dayna, are you okay?"

She didn't respond. When she reached him, one of her hands extended, pointing to the strange metal cuffs that held him immobile. He heard the soft click as they opened, sliding off his wrists to disappear into the table.

He stood immediately, reaching to take her into his arms. The shield wouldn't give. Her eyes narrowed on him and she smiled, holding up her hands to press against the other side of the barrier.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know, Spark." Theta sounded concerned. "But I think he's the only one who can reach her now."

As he heard his friend's words, he knew it was true. He was chosen by the consort's stone. Destined to be with the chosen of the pearl. It all seemed fated somehow. As if they had always been meant to be together.

His hands grew large, turning to granite. They reached for hers and this time, they succeeded.

The moment they touched, the shield disappeared. As Dayna collapsed in his arms, he saw it.

The amulet was empty. The Pearl of Isis was gone.

Chapter Eight

"You look unbelievable. That outfit just screams..."

"Screams what? Defender of mankind? Superhero extraordinaire? Oceania, Queen of the Waves?"

"No, it just screams. It's very bright and shiny."

Dayna laughed, aiming a half-hearted swat at the teasing Cassie.

They were in her old room at the lair, the only place the testosterone wasn't at critical levels, while she tried on her superhero duds. "I just thought blue would be too obvious. Plus, then I would match my brother and that would just be—" She pretended to gag, making Cassie snort and roll with laughter on the bed.

"Well, I like it. It makes a statement. It says, 'I'm a superhero and I'm not afraid to clash'."

"You are asking for it." Dayna smiled, doing a small spin in the mirror.

Triad had been waiting for them at the lair when they'd returned, as if he'd never been gone. He had helped create the design, working his magic with the nano-fibers that were incorporated into every suit and programmed to adapt to each individual's powers.

He'd grimaced a bit at her color scheme, but fuchsia and lime green were her favorite colors, darn it. And the two-piece *was* eye-catching. And snug. "I still can't believe my hair turned blue. I've tried to dye it three times already."

"Oh that's my favorite part. I think it's gorgeous. You'll definitely need a wig though. Even though you aren't doing the show anymore, that hair is too distinctive to miss."

Dayna nodded glumly. The rest of the Guardians had told her in no uncertain terms that her reporting days were over. Spark put the best spin on the declaration, saying she wouldn't be reporting the news anymore since she'd be too busy making it.

The rest of the Guardians. She was a Guardian now. It was hard to believe. She'd wanted it for so long. Wanted to make a real difference.

When she'd woken up in G.U.T.S., surrounded by Jake, Graham and Stone, she'd known something was different. Even before she'd seen the concern on their faces, she'd known.

She'd been transformed on a cellular level. The Pearl of Isis had chosen her, just as the consort's diamond had chosen Stone all those years ago. It was enough to make a cynical reporter believe in magic. Or Fate.

Graham had been helping her in the lair's workout room for the last few days as she experimented with her abilities in a baby pool full of water. She'd made mini weather patterns, shaped the water into squares and triangles—he'd even wanted to see if she could talk to fish.

She could. Well, sort of. They sensed each other and she could guide them, but she couldn't reprogram their thoughts the way Graham had with the newly freed Sea Monster on the way to save her. Apparently the giant man-eater now believed his only mission in life was to seek out pretty seashells on the sea floor—and stay as far from humanity as he could get.

"Your brother is worried about you. His...transformation was less than pleasant. He wanted me to make sure you were really okay."

"He's just upset that I haven't taken off the anklet," she joked, before seeing Cassie's serious expression. "I'm fine, Cas, I swear. I got the full physical and Triad's special third-degree. I'm still me, I'm not in any pain and, well, I'm happy. I know it's rare, but it does happen. It feels natural, like this is what I'm supposed to be, you know?"

Cassie nodded, her brilliant smile firmly in place as she rose to wrap her arms around Dayna.

"Then I'm happy for you. And Stone, of course." She pulled back with a wink, her hazel eyes sparkling. "You do know what happens when Earth and Water come together?"

"Mud?"

"No, goofball. Balance. Harmony." Cassie hugged her again. "And happily ever afters."

* * * * *

"Water Girl?"

Dayna stuck out her tongue at Jake. "No."

"Aqua Hottie?"

"No."

"Scuba Scoop?"

She gave him the evil eye. "You really stink at this."

Stone bit his lip to hold in his laughter. Dayna was floating in the water next to G.U.T.S. while Jake measured the excitable AI sub at Triad's request. Apparently, Dayna still hadn't decided on her superhero name.

"You about done there, dude?"

Jake looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "Thank the Goddess. She's driving me crazy. Here I am, innocently measuring up our little hero for her laser fitting..." An electronic squeal of delight drifted from inside the open hatch of the submarine. "And Scoop here has ridiculed every single suggestion I've come up with."

"Why did he finally decide to give her a laser, anyway?" Dayna was speaking to Jake, but her gaze kept returning to Stone.

"She set off the alarm in the lair as soon as the monster's blip came up on sonar. If she hadn't, Theta and I wouldn't have taken the sub-skis in time to meet up with G, get to you, and save the day."

Stone wasn't really paying attention. He hadn't been alone with Dayna in days. She'd been holed up with Cassie and Graham, testing her powers and healing.

He knew her brother wanted to take care of her, but a part of him resented it. She was *his* to care for. And though Graham had argued for a few more days, Stone couldn't stay away any longer. He needed her.

Jake coughed into the silence and made a big production of standing and gathering his tools. "Well, Triad wants to do the rest himself, so I guess I'm through. I don't think anyone will be down here again until tomorrow, so you shouldn't be interrupted or anything."

Stone didn't say a word.

"G, sleep mode." At Jake's words, the hatch closed and the sub shut down for the night. He walked away without a backward glance.

Stone waited until the doors of the lift slid shut. And then he began to strip. Dayna's eyes grew wide, her arms treading water slowly as she watched him methodically remove his suit.

"Planning on joining me?"

He smiled. "Only if you take off your new outfit. Nice color scheme by the way. Criminals will run screaming."

"Ha ha." But she hurried to comply, her wet suit landing by his feet before he could get his pants off.

"In a hurry?"

"Yes."

He stilled at her words, waiting for the punch line. She met his gaze without blinking, her expression impossible to deny. Raw need. At the sight, all the blood rushed to his cock, haste making his movements clumsy.

"You always do this to me, Scoop. Make me crazy. Make me feel like that awkward adolescent, tripping over my own feet to get to you. And you love it, don't you?"

She nodded, licking her lower lip as he dropped his pants. "Grab a breather, Stone. There's something I want to show you."

He hurried over to the supply shelf, past the table they'd taken from the queen's chamber. He'd been unwilling to leave it behind. The only material that could hold him.

He popped a breather into his mouth and jumped into the water beside her.

Dayna reached for him, dragging his head closer for a breathless kiss. She'd missed him so much.

Not that she wasn't grateful for the time she'd spent with Graham. They'd talked about things they never had before. Her mother's murder, their father's obsession—even Dayna's childhood isolation and loneliness. They were closer now than ever before.

But she wanted Stone. He'd made himself scarce, making her wonder if he still wanted her now that their adventure was over. If Cassie hadn't told her about Graham telling *her* how Stone really felt... Well, thank the Goddess for good friends. Still, she'd needed it to come from him.

As soon as he'd walked into the sub room and caught her eye, all her doubts vanished. He still wanted her. And suddenly the only thing she could think of was touching him, feeling him inside her.

He tried to pull her closer in the water, but she broke away with a smile, shaking her head. She had something special planned. And maybe she wanted to show off a little.

She took his hand and submerged, marveling at the feeling. The water seemed to caress her, welcoming her as if an old friend. Breathing was easy, everything was easy.

This was one of the gifts of Isis that came with the pearl. And it was Dayna's favorite. She belonged here. She was home.

She pulled him out of the lair waters and into the open ocean. The sun rained down on them in shafts of unbroken light, bringing his big, muscled body into view, heating her blood.

Somewhere nearby there was a— Yes, there it was. A small underwater grotto. She reached out her hand to caress the dolphins that had come to greet her, pointing to Stone to show him the direction she wanted to go.

As soon as they arrived, he reached for her, pressing her back against the smooth limestone, his mouth on her breast. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer. Goddess, it felt amazing. Better than it ever had. Just the simplest graze of his thick cock against her clit and she was ready to come.

She needed more.

She tugged his hair, lifting his head, to gaze into his eyes. She tried to show him with that look how she loved him, how much he meant to her, had always meant to her—but arousal clouded her vision, and all she could think of was getting him inside her. Now.

He silently agreed, his knuckles brushing her sex as he positioned his cock against her. Taking her mouth once more, he thrust deep. Yes. She'd missed him, missed this feeling.

When she'd seen the queen and consort in that vision, felt their connection, she'd known exactly what the queen was thinking. *Here is my mate, my match in every way. Here is my heart. I would die for him.*

Dayna felt the same. This man, geek or god, had been hers since the moment she'd laid eyes on him. Stone was her mate, her match, her heart.

She bit his lip and felt him jerk against her with a smile. Her hands slid over his shoulders, whole body tingling with love and need. She pressed her chest against his, heart to heart. There it was. Earth and Water, the Pearl of Isis and the Consort's Diamond, together once more.

She could feel the carnal hunger beating at Stone, the need for more. *Faster. Yes.* She could feel his joy at being with her this way. And love. Unconditional love. He loved her, just as much as she loved him.

With a thought, she directed the water to swirl around them, caressing her lover's body like a million fingers, a thousand tongues. She felt more than heard his moan against her mouth. He liked that. She pressed a small funnel of water between the rock-hard cheeks of his ass and he ripped his mouth from hers, his expression surprised, eyes narrowed in warning.

Her laugh became a whimper of pleasure, his hips powering against hers, filling her again and again until her orgasm crashed over them both, bringing him with her over the edge.

The current was gentle, rocking their trembling bodies as the last of the tremors subsided.

He floated away from her and she followed his movements with a sleepy gaze as he headed deeper into the grotto. Where was he going? She found him with his back to her, shoulders hunched in concentration. She touched his back, trying to peer over his shoulder, but he turned, hiding whatever he was doing from her curious eyes.

He glanced at her over his shoulder and she saw the shy, nervous boy from the vision. Her heart melted. He took her hand and slid something on her finger. She gasped. He'd used his powers to twine two slender branches of coral into a ring. For her?

Her vision blurred. His eyebrows furrowed in concern, mistaking her reaction. She gripped his chin between her fingers and nodded, kissing him with all the love in her heart.

Life was good.

* * * * *

Life sucked.

"Looks like we're going to have to stock up on breathers, eh, lass?"

"Yes, Mr. Triad."

"And we'll be needing to convert Scoop's room into a nursery for Cassie's babe before too long."

"Yes, Mr. Triad."

"I swear to Gaia, if Jake brings a woman to the lair, I'll just disband the Guardians and retire. This isn't a blasted commune...it's a *lair*, fer cryin' out loud."

"I know, Mr. Triad. Can you move that a little to the right? My right side is my best, you know. And I think the laser would look rather dashing just there."

Triad sighed. "Yes, lass."

About the Author

Stolen away by a free-spirited gypsy as a child (though she still swears she's my mother), I spent my childhood roaming the countryside, meeting fascinating characters and having amazing adventures. As the perpetual "new kid", my friends more often than not were found between the pages of a book...and in my own imagination. I read everything I could get my hands on. At the age of 11, I read my first romance and I've been hooked ever since.

I've been a nurse, a lead vocalist in several bands, a published lyricist and even a returning student at University majoring in Anthropology and Mythology. Throughout all of my varied careers I would sigh as I read one fantasy-filled story after another saying, "Someday I want to write one of those." Until one day my husband said, "So do it." And I did. Now I can't imagine doing anything else.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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