

A movie poster for the film 'Games Empaths Play'. The poster features a large, close-up, monochromatic image of a woman's face on the left side, with her eyes closed and a serene expression. In the center, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark, form-fitting, off-the-shoulder jumpsuit, stands with her hands on the shoulders of a man and a woman. The man is shirtless and has his head bowed, while the woman is wearing a white tank top and blue jeans, looking towards the man. The background is dark. The title 'GAMES EMPATHS PLAY' is written in a large, stylized, light blue font at the bottom. The name 'CYNNARA TREGARTH' is written in a smaller, light blue font at the top right. The text 'Loose Id' is written in a small, white font at the bottom right.

CYNNARA
TREGARTH

GAMES
EMPATHS PLAY

Loose Id

Praise for the writing of Cynnara Tregarth

Jack's Back

Jack's Back is a wild ride that readers will not want to miss. The emotional pull is deep and visceral, and the book is well deserving of RRT's Perfect 10.

-- D.S. Shadows, *Romance Reviews Today*

These characters just leap from the pages and into the reader's heart... Ms. Tregarth writes an emotional tale with just the right mix of suspense that will keep the reader turning the pages and hanging onto the edge of her seat.

-- Valerie, *Love Romances*

Cynnara Tregarth has created an action packed story that reaches out and grabs you right from the very start. You are on the edge of your seat throughout the whole book. The people in this book are so true to life, they step right off the pages into your life.

-- Janean Sparks, *Romance Junkies*

Jack's Back has definitely made me want to read more by Cynnara Tregarth and I can recommend this book to all erotic romance readers who enjoy having their spines tingled.

-- Anya Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Jack's Back is a thrilling, edge-of-your-seat romance that is sure to delight fans. The action within the story is immediate and never drops off, as readers are held spellbound by the descriptive imagery and style of Ms. Tregarth's writing.

-- Amanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Jack's Back is now available from Loose Id.

GAMES EMPATHS PLAY

Cynnara Tregarth

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage, mild BDSM).

Games Empaths Play

Cynnara Tregarth

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Chapter One

Lady Astra of House Crysomark slowly walked among the clustered groups of government officials, business professionals, and other members of the aristocracy. Annoyed, tired, and basically bored, she decided to meditate by walking the labyrinth that House Fulton had provided tonight as part of the entertainment for this banquet. The hall within the house was beautifully decorated in various colored tapestries, flowers, and other plants that gave a true, luxurious atmosphere of serenity. Too bad she didn't feel serene inside.

She hadn't wanted to come tonight, but her best friend, Pillar, had sent the invitation. Then her father had found out and, after two huge arguments, she gave in. Their personality conflict had heightened recently with the family business problems as well as their private problems. Her father seemed to have gotten worse with being lord of House Crysomark, forgetting that he was only the head of the House until certain requirements were fulfilled. *I don't want to be head of the House. Father enjoys it too much, to the detriment of the House of late, but what more can I do? Mother would agree with me, but in the end, who else can handle this family or even the issues surrounding our business?*

The night sky sparkled with stars and the pale light of the dual moons, Tareth and Verun. Kissing the curled fingers of her left hand, she placed them on her heart and then her

forehead before lifting her hand in a sign of respect to the moons and the gods they represented. Various groupings, couples, and singles meandered through the gardens of House Fulton, the House's power coming from the gardens and nurseries they owned.

Walking the labyrinth, though not simple, was worth the effort of gaining control of her emotions. She felt like she was being pulled so many ways, pleasing everyone but herself. Granted, sometimes her work was wonderful, especially in helping right wrongs, but in other ways, she felt so alone. Being one of only a handful of class-ten empaths meant she was never completely alone, or alone with anyone of her own choosing. Too many restrictions ruled her life -- including her sex life.

Taking a right turn, following the dimly lit path as it curved beneath a willow tree, she enjoyed the fragrances that filled the air, the scents of the night orchids, the jasmine, as well as the sounds of the insects scurrying to taste the sweet nectar of the night blooms. Astra smiled and let go of a bit of tension as she continued her walk through the spirals.

Voices carrying over the next set of tall hedges piqued her interest. It seemed to be a minor argument or something. Opening her shields, she directed her empathic ability toward the sounds and was stunned to feel a wash of lust, desire, and something else clinging to the words. Following the voices, she turned the corner; the sight before her had her clenching and unclenching her hands as emotions flooded through her.

She stood unmoving, her heart clamoring and the tingling sensation of desire pooling in her breasts and her pussy. What she was looking at was forbidden to those of her station, but it didn't stop the desire. Nor did it stop her from watching the scene before her. Her eyes widened as she watched twin males, Devon and Garth of the House Polgarde, tease a lady from House Geldar as she lay naked, tied down to ground stakes, her genitals exposed to any and all who walked the back path in the labyrinth. Astra shivered at the thought of her being in such an open position.

Devon pushed his hard cock deep into the woman's mouth. "Suck, Lady Innana. Perhaps you'll work off your family debt to House Polgarde quicker than most." His brother,

Garth, grinned as he knelt in front of the woman's spread legs and slipped two fingers deep inside her pussy, causing her to moan and buck her hips.

Astra's mouth went dry as she watched the twins work in tandem; one would push the woman one way, and then the other would follow. Unconsciously, Astra's curved hips swayed in time to the rhythm they set. When Garth stopped, lifted Innana to an almost sitting position so he could slide under her, and placed the tip of his engorged cock at her vagina, Astra bit back a gasp as the emotions and sensations washed over her. *Damn my empathic ability!* As Garth rammed himself in to the hilt, the woman screamed in pleasure before Devon slid himself back into her mouth. Lady Innana sucked him eagerly as Garth methodically pounded into her. Within moments, both twins climaxed with simultaneous groans of pleasure. Even the Lady Innana seemed happy as her body twitched with sated desire. And Astra felt it all, each emotion, each thrust, each sensation linked to the act of sex. Her body was alive with need and rising lust.

Astra swallowed hard as waves of emotional and sexual tension, desire, and completion enveloped her. As she fought for control, her hands began to steal toward the dampness between her thighs. The emotions flowed around her, through her, and increased in delicious ecstasy with each inhalation as she watched them. On Peruth, high-level empaths were forbidden to feed off or experience the sensual emotions of others. If she had been seen, she could've been banished from the city of Lurien.

Her breath came out in short pants, her body tingling for release. Astra knew that she couldn't do a thing about it. Empaths were forbidden the pleasures that others indulged in, told it was for the good of the people. They could have sex, but not the emotions and the passion that went with it. Too many people, including scientists, thought that the empaths' important skills would be nullified, though that research was hundreds of years old. Without those emotions, empaths couldn't be swayed by temptation, thus avoiding the pitfalls that surrounded non-empaths. Iji's balls! Technically, her even seeing and sensing such passion was illegal enough to get her sent to counseling by government-approved psychiatrists. The

laws about empaths enjoying sexual release were specific. No emotions were to cloud an empath's mind, as that might affect the empath's ability to discern truth from fiction. *But why do I feel that if I could just have that, I'd be so much happier?*

Voices further down the path brought her out of her reverie. Quickly, Astra composed herself, straightened her dark green gown, and scurried further along so it wouldn't be obvious that she had watched and listened to something forbidden. Spotting a free bench, she sat down, the coldness of the stone seeping in through the gown's material. Her father had insisted that if she was going to be working for the company, she had to learn to mingle and associate with others. However, she doubted that watching a sex debt being paid would count as appropriate mingling in her father's eyes. Astra smiled, thinking about how her father would've reacted to seeing that. The forbidden thrill made this annoying party worthwhile.

Thoughts of her father forced her to remember just how much unlike they were and that before her lay a path sure to destroy whatever had bound them together by blood. But what choice did she have, with him insisting his way was the only way? If only he realized that it was his behaviour that had sent her looking for the reasons for his belligerence when dealing with the family company. The results of her search -- including the discovery of an upcoming merger with another company -- had shocked her, but not as much as the fact that it changed everything for her now. Had they been closer, would it have been an issue? She wasn't sure, but being estranged from the man who was her father didn't help in their personal relationship, much less the business aspects. Now, because of her father's behaviour and actions within the company, they were on the path of merging with another House business to remain successful.

"Astra? Astra, are you around here somewhere?" a female voice called out in the darkness. Recognizing the voice, Astra smiled.

"I'm sitting on the stone bench by the palmetto tree," she answered back. "I'm not too much further ahead, Pillar."

Within a couple of minutes, Pillar, a stunning redheaded beauty, appeared before Astra, along with a gorgeous man on each arm. As they stepped forward into the moonlight, Astra's heart thudded. They were like gods of ancient myth and legend. One had golden blond hair that had a slight wave to it. His eyes were dark brown, the colour of semisweet chocolate. His air of extreme confidence caused her eyebrow to rise in curiosity.

The other had dark hair, the same dark, haunting eyes, but had a smile upon his lips. Though he was slightly narrower in the shoulders, there was some indefinable quality that tugged at her empathic defenses. Their facial structures showed them to be related -- perhaps brothers.

"Astra, I'd like you to meet the brothers Hespawn, Noah and Timeon. Noah and Timeon, this is Astra of House Crysomark." Pillar's hand touched the blond. "Timeon is the co-chairman for his family's company."

"Pleasure to meet you both in person, instead of through the family channels of information." Astra smiled, setting her shields firmly in place. There was no way she wanted anyone to accidentally pick up on her feelings.

Noah's hand captured hers. He turned it so he could kiss her inner wrist. Warm lips caressed her skin, causing her pulse to race. "'Tis our pleasure to meet you, Lady Astra. I've heard of your family and your unique skills."

"Have you, now?" Curiosity piqued, Astra sent a mental question to the dark-haired Noah. *Can you hear me?*

Yes, Lady Astra. Can you feel me? A soft wave of amusement and curiosity gently caressed her mind, creating a picture of him stroking her cheek.

Indeed. You're an empath as well, I see. 'Tis my pleasure to meet a fellow worker within the worlds we work.

I'm a broadcaster and not just a receiver, Lady Astra.

So I've noticed. Your sensation creation is quite remarkable.

Ah, but so is yours.

Astra's eyebrow lifted. *I don't broadcast. I'm null on that account.*

Since when?

Since ... I don't know. For as long as I can remember.

You need to be retested, Astra. I can feel your hands caressing my cheek and chest while your body is pressing against my cock, which is raging for your attention.

Oh, my gods. Breaking the mental link, she smiled at Noah. "Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Astra." Winking at her, he stepped back.

"Forgive my brother's arrogance," Timeon said with an exasperated sigh. "He has a tendency to push when there are gorgeous women around. *Accept my apologies, Lady Astra.* Timeon's voice was clearly that of a tolerant older brother, even in her mind.

Done, and thank you. She inclined her head. "I see it's more of good brother and bad brother?"

"More like we're both bad, but Timeon is the better behaved of the two of us," Noah answered, taking Astra's arm. "Walk with us."

Strolling further along the path, they spoke of the weather and some of the most recent findings regarding the latest psychic talents that had presented themselves on Peruth. They avoided talk of business, as all were quite aware of the merger in the works between both companies, Crysocorp and Helsguard.

Inside, Astra shivered. There was something about the brothers that called to her. Something that urged the rebellious streak in her to take a chance. But not until after the companies were merged. There was no way she could afford to be snowballed, not with her family's financial future in jeopardy.

Once this negotiation is over, I can find some kind of release for this tension inside me. It can't be normal to want sex this bad. Hell, I'm so cranky, I'm ready to buy black-market porn for empaths. Her gaze flitted first to Timeon, then lingered on Noah. These were

definitely men whom she could easily enjoy watching pleasure another woman, or even her. They'd be hard, thick, and more than willing to indulge her in her deepest fantasies. Wouldn't they?

What do you think of Lady Astra? Noah asked his brother as they walked with Pillar and Astra among the labyrinth.

She's got that spark. I think she's more like us than she realizes, Noah. I'd like her for our family.

You mean, for a short time? Or the long haul?

What do you think? Timeon grinned as they continued down around the curves of labyrinth.

I think she would make a wonderful first wife for us both. And it'd have to be permanent. Once I taste her, I don't think I can walk away.

She'd think us bloody-minded to be considering marriage like this. Especially a permanent group marriage. We don't even know if she'd like such a thing.

Noah smirked. He knew. He had picked up those images of what she'd seen just prior to their arrival. *I don't think that will be a problem. She just needs time. I'm more worried she might want to postpone our happiness until the merger between the two businesses is completed.*

She wouldn't -- Timeon paused, looking at Noah, catching his smile.

Yes, she would. She's the type, and I think her dad is just a wee bit overprotective in regards to his daughter. Noah chuckled mentally, allowing his brother just a wee glimpse of what he'd experienced with Astra.

What do you recommend?

Wait 'til we're alone; then I'll go over my ideas with you. First, let's see how open she is to things.

Fine, but it had best be good. She's suspicious of us enough. With all we've found out about her, she'd be a good match for us both.

Noah smiled and patted Astra's hand as they all headed toward the house. *I know. There's something damned special about her, Timeon, and I want her. Bad.*

With caution, both brothers smiled at Lady Astra and her friend as they entered the house. They both knew that one misstep could cost them anything and everything, including the woman they had fantasized about for the past year. They couldn't lose, not when it meant losing part of their hearts or their lives.

Chapter Two

Ten days later

Astra stood listening to her father and uncles in front of the Mediation Centre. Part of her tuned them out as they rambled on about alleged slights done them personally during the negotiations. The past few days of negotiation hadn't gone well without the truthsayer empaths, especially Astra. Now they were worried that they had lost some initiatives by not having her in there from the beginning. Personally, she didn't want to be involved in this anymore than necessary, but her father and favourite uncle insisted on her participation at this stage. Quickly, she typed a small memo on her wrist unit to remind Flit of some upcoming business she needed to take care of. Then she heard her father commenting on her lack of participation and interest.

Tamping down her exasperation, Astra tried to remain calm. "You forget, Father, that I don't work exclusively for Crysocorp. I couldn't have been here any earlier. The rules regarding the laws of negotiation and merging are clear on when to bring in an empath."

"Don't tell me the laws, daughter. Since I am descended from one of the original families, I think I know full well the laws." He glared at her while she looked back at him,

showing no emotion. “But we think they had an empath with them the entire time before this.”

“Oh? Why would you think that?”

Her favourite uncle, Stavros, spoke up. “Because they would bend on certain points that would’ve been overlooked until empaths would’ve been brought in.”

Astra paused. Was it possible? Did Helsguard Corporation in fact have an empath among the negotiation team prior to the empathic portion of negotiation as specified by law? If so, what would it mean for her family and taking care of their employees? Her thoughts wandered back to Timeon and Noah. She knew Noah was the empath, but that Timeon had some telepathic speaking ability. But if Timeon was head of the company, he had to attend negotiations. Noah wouldn’t. *He’s a registered empath, just as I am. Best to go in and find out why my relatives feel this way.*

“I’m going to go in and look things over before we convene for this portion of negotiations,” Astra said quietly. “You all figure out what you’re willing to give up and what must remain during the merger. If you do not, then it will fall to me to decide what’s best for the company, and you might not like what I choose.”

Without waiting for her father’s reaction, she walked into the large white marble building. Wearing her professional armour -- a dress, and her hair up in a French-styled twist -- she knew she looked every inch the professional empathic negotiator, even if she felt burdened inside. The company was, in truth, mostly hers, and the family knew it. They made and marketed products for empaths and their companions. Because she was the highest-level empath, she had inherited controlling portion of the company, something that many of her relatives ignored because she was willing to let them run it while she had her life. Now she might be forced to be the boss of a company she didn’t want, didn’t have a use for, and didn’t have time to run.

Rubbing her neck, she made her way to the elevator, where she would be identified by retinal scan and brought to the correct floor. Her world was a technological marvel, but in many ways very backwards. For all the reverence shown empathes for making their world easier to live in, especially in handling emotional aspects, it was feared that the empathes would lose control to the point of trying to take over, perhaps ridding Peruth of nonempaths.

Ever since meeting Noah and Timeon, her dreams had shifted slightly into what it would be like to be touched like Lady Innana's lovers had touched her. Then there was the research on the rights and demands placed on empathes. What she had found had shocked her to the core.

Shaking off those thoughts, Astra stepped into the elevator and faced the front. As she did, a small camera lowered in front of her face. Without blinking she spoke. "Astra of House Crysomark and empath consultant for Crysocorp."

"Identification confirmed and verified. Welcome to the Mediation Centre. You will be on the tenth floor today, Lady Astra," the computer announced.

"My thanks, Hall."

The ride was swift and controlled. Once the white doors opened, the muted blues and greens of the Empathic Negotiation level greeted her. These colours were used to help keep empathes on an even keel as they helped both parties come to an agreeable resolution in business matters. Today, though, she wasn't sure that the colours alone would be enough. She was still perturbed by Uncle Stavros's accusations, and that unsettled her. If Timeon was using his empathic skills and he didn't have himself listed with the Hall as being empathic, then she was obligated by law to report him or lose her credentials.

Without thought, she took a right and found the area for empathes to prepare for their cases. No one was there, to her relief. As she walked past the barrier that probed her for empathic skills to keep out non-empaths, she sighed as she heard the subharmonics set in her tones to bring out emotional balance.

One of the pale grey chairs beckoned to her, and she sank into its softness, allowing it to adjust to her temperature and build. As it adjusted, she felt the subharmonic amp adjust for her specific needs, doing ringing lower tones that helped ease the pain in her head and between her shoulder blades where tension built up first. Sighing, she allowed herself to slip into a meditative state, sensing the pressures slipping away.

Giving herself the time to recenter reminded her just how much time and energy the world government of Peruth spent on helping empaths. Though there were points of contention, at least she knew she was highly valued for her skill, if treated more like a thing than a person. The soothing sounds of water, low-toned bells, and the scents of peppermint and orange helped release the last tension caused by her thoughts, achieving a state that gave her a way to see truth from lie, even of the most subtle kind. Being a class-ten empath meant that she could effectively stop all mediation and arrest those who were working for their own benefit at the expense of others. In fact, she was getting ready for another undercover case once this deal with her family's business was completed.

A small, chiming bell caught her attention as another empath entered the room. She kept her eyes on the mutating colours floating before her and allowed her fellow empath consultant their own privacy. Closing her eyes, she afforded the other empath the courtesy of being left unknown to anyone but themselves. No empath would ever willingly read a person unless they were in a boardroom situation or were asked to do so. Between empaths, it was a matter of respecting the personal shielding that each had. Sighing, she inhaled deeply, allowing herself to believe that she could help negotiate well for her family and for the other company, as well.

A double bell with the lower then higher half-tone signaled that it was time for her case to start. Opening her eyes, she blinked as she noticed Noah looking out the window in front of her. Wordlessly, she stood and turned toward the doorway.

"Good morning, Lady Astra," he said without looking at her.

"Morning to you, Lord Noah."

“Just Noah. Our family is a bit lower in rank. At most, you can call me Sir.” He chuckled as he faced her.

“I don’t use my title unless necessary,” she replied, drinking in his attire and how sexy he looked against the blues of the room. He wore a midnight-blue shirt and dark grey pants. His House’s traditional insignia was embroidered on the matching grey jacket. There wasn’t a tie in sight, which didn’t surprise her. He wasn’t the tie type.

“Ah. Astra, then. Shall I escort you to the chamber where our families and business partners wait for our arrival?”

She flashed him a knowing smile. “Trying to provide a unified front?”

“You’ve got to admit, House Hespawn has offered an attractive merger package.”

Astra’s hand went to the amethyst set in the titanium torc around her neck. Fiddling with it, sliding it back and forth, she pondered how to say what needed to be said. Finally, the words came to her. “Yes, it would be an attractive merger package if my company didn’t hold the higher sales as well as the better products. You approached us about the merger. Though we don’t have as much ready cash crystals as your company, we are the one given higher regards. Your comprehensive package doesn’t cover those let go, nor does it allow for bidding for positions within the joint company. And it fails to allow for the letting go of Helsing employees if they’re less appropriate for the job.”

Noah stepped back, and Astra smirked. She had been right in her thoughts -- Noah had no clue about her place within Crysocorp. He had just thought he could push his way through with the empathic aspects without worrying about the business problems. *You have no idea what I am or what I won’t allow. You sold me short, and you’ll pay for that, Noah.*

“I see. Since we’re the ones offering to merge, why should we take the personnel cut?”

“Ah, but that’s the rub, isn’t it?” Astra nodded toward the entrance. “Instead of taking Helsing’s fair share of cuts, they’re wanting to make Crysocorp take them all. That is unacceptable and will be considered unfair conduct by the CEO of Crysocorp.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! Everyone knows that that the CEO of Crysocorp has nothing to do with the daily running of the company.”

Astra smirked and bowed. “That’s right, I don’t. But I do know what I will accept, and as a class-ten, I outrank you in both business and empathic decisions. You had best inform Timeon that unless he’s willing to cut his staff by an equal amount as Crysocorp, and the best suited keep their jobs, I’ll be turning him in to the authorities for being an unregistered empath.”

With a flourish, she walked out the door, leaving Noah behind to stare. *Gods above, that felt good. Almost too good.*

Did you hear her, brother? Noah asked in amazement.

Most definitely. Seems our wife has hidden talents and is more than we could have ever hoped for.

We’re fucked if we don’t give in. She will turn you over to the authorities. Astra does not lightly threaten things. I’ve heard about her tactics, and she’s very honest.

Timeon laughed. *Yes, but on some level, you’re turned on by her behaviour, aren’t you?*

Yes, but so are you.

Not like you, Noah. Not like you. Catch up to her, and tell her we will make the necessary adjustments. She has a valid point, one that I think she was saving ’til just this kind of moment. Now go charm her for us before some asshole claims her for himself.

Noah saluted as he strolled after Astra. His brother was right -- if other Houses realized just how special Astra was, it wouldn’t be long before they set their sights on the unmarried first daughter of House Crysomark. When he and Timeon had come of marriageable age, they’d done the smart thing -- taken control of the family business, helped build it up, and then began methodically searching for women who could handle their unique psi talents as

well as their need to share. Astra had crossed their radar because of her status and the fact that she was considered one of the most powerful receiver empaths. But their investigation into Astra's history showed that some of the records of her empathic-level testing had been tampered with, especially the broadcasting portions. They wanted answers for her and from her on why.

I have a feeling she has no clue that there was tampering. If she did, then her life would only be in service for our world, not for her own pleasure or life. They would force her to further the aims of Peruth and the government, not what is best for her and her family. Noah walked more quickly and tugged on Astra's bare arm. "Lady Astra Crysomark, one moment, please."

"Yes, Sir Noah Helspawn?" Her voice was frosty, as was her icy gaze.

Those sapphire eyes could radiate death or passion. Noah pulled her to an alcove where they could invoke an empathic privacy bubble. She waited until he erected the privacy shielding before she opened her mouth. Before she could utter anything, his fingers covered her mouth while he spoke instead.

"We agree to what you've asked, as long as you abide by your promise not to turn Timeon over to authorities. There are reasons he's unregistered as an empath. He's a pure telepath as long as he's had touch contact with a person. He doesn't wish to be a plaything of the government flunkies as they try to figure out how such a thing developed within our House. We're entrusting you with this information as a symbol of our faith."

Slowly his fingers traced her lips and pulled away. She looked at his fingers, then into his eyes. As she swallowed, her lips trembled. "I told you I'd be quiet as long as you complied. Thank you for telling me. Let's go in now."

Noah placed a hand under her chin and lifted it so their eyes met. "Are you afraid of me, Astra?"

"No!"

“Liar,” he whispered as his thumb caressed her lower lip. “You’re afraid of me and what I do to you. You’re trembling.”

“You surprised me. That’s all,” she countered, leaning toward him. “If you’re ready, we should go in and deal with both our companies.”

He moved into her personal space and pressed against her empathically. “My brother and I would like to thank you later for your discretion.”

“Thanks, but no, thanks. Not during negotiations. Perhaps after,” she said as she bypassed him and cancelled the privacy bubble.

Noah watched Astra walk away and chuckled to himself. She was going to be a hell of a conquest. All that built-up passion tightly controlled under her empathic leash. Getting her to give in and let it flow through her was going to make him a very happy man. No, he and his brother very happy men, he corrected.

Following her lead, he went to the door and opened it for her. “After you, Lady Astra,” he announced formally, calling the chamber to attention.

The assembly stood as both Noah and Astra entered the room. The walls were various shades of blue and green, while the tables and chairs were made of pale oak with dark blue coverings. Noah walked to the front, where Astra stood waving him over to the two specially designed seats waiting for them. Empaths were given seats that helped nestle the body and thus protected them from psychic attacks.

Easing herself into the blue and cream oval chair on the left, Astra felt it adjust to her comfort level. The neck support billowed slightly, ensuring her maximum comfort for the long day ahead. Why people couldn’t be as efficient as the makers of this chair was beyond her. “Sir Noah Hespawn and I were comparing notes and making some adjustments. Thanks to both Houses, Crysomark and Hespawn, for their patience.”

Noah sat in the green and cream oval chair on the right. As he adjusted himself in the chair, he added, “In fact, Helsguard Corp has agreed to one major conflict point -- that of firing people only from one firm. We are willing to match reduction numbers in forces where there is overlap.”

“Yes, in fact, what will happen is that any personnel in overlap will be allowed to put forth their résumés and their stats on what they do before a committee that will be composed of one empath, two members of House Hespawn, and two from Crysomark. The better employee will be kept on, and the person let go will be given a generous severance package if another equivalent job can’t be found for them within the merged company.”

She shot a smile at Noah, then at Timeon. Both inclined their heads toward her, bowing to her way of negotiating around a point that could have taken them weeks to deal with if it hadn’t been for her classification. She picked up a few plasti-sheets and thumbed through the information. *I take it your nods mean you’re acceding to this?*

Damn straight. It’s fair, and with an empath there as the tie-breaker, it’ll keep both sides honest. Great compromise, Astra, Noah answered.

Good. Now, about this next set of decisions -- what does Hespawn want in regards to daily running? I’ve read the circuitous requests, and I’m asking you straight.

We want to be part of it. Not just the monetary end. We want to be involved in the process of creating these products, start to finish, including marketing.

Astra rolled her eyes. *Then why the hell didn’t you just say so? Iji’s cock, it’d be easier to handle than this excuse for circular reasoning.*

Noah laughed in her head at her comment. *Let’s see what the boards have to say.*

Astra nodded and motioned for him to take the lead on this part. Best to have him come out with what Helsguard Corp really wanted than for her to do it. At least this way, she could defuse her own family and some of the other board members of Crysocorp. “Noah,

would you please talk about the daily running of the merged company and how your part would like to work it out?”

Noah took over, his chair inching forward to draw attention toward him. As he started talking, Astra leaned back and opened her shields to take in the emotions from both sides. The initial anger from the Crysomark board slowly gave way to curiosity and suspicion. Per the norm, her father was generating enough distrust to infect the others. *Thank Iji that he can't broadcast his emotions any higher than a class-two empath. I'd have to fine him, otherwise*, she thought to herself.

She slowly allowed her gift to scan the Helsguard Corp board and found herself riveted by the emotion that Timeon was generating. On the surface level, he was agreeing with various facets that Noah was speaking about, but below that, he was thinking of her. Not in the boardroom, but in his bed.

Wiggling in her seat, she tried to forget what she felt, but then something deeper grabbed her attention. Though Noah was talking to both boards, empathically he was stroking her arm.

I want you, Astra. In her mind's eye, she saw him approach her in a separate, almost dreamlike state. Suddenly, she felt part of herself enter the dream.

Chapter Three

She stood before Noah. Looking down at herself, she noticed she was in almost see-through sapphire lace. Her gaze went back to Noah, who stood there dressed in black leather from neck to toe. "Um, you want me? Want me how? Looking like a common slut?"

"You're not a common slut, Astra. You're a beautiful, sensual empath who deserves to be treated to passion as it's meant to be. Not anything like what the government says we're allowed to experience," Noah said as his hand stroked down her bare arm until his fingers interlocked with hers. He drew her toward a large bed covered in dark red sheets. "Let me please you, Astra."

"But the others ... the boardroom," she exclaimed before his mouth covered hers.

His taste wasn't like the drones allowed her by the government. Noah tasted of sex, sinful chocolate, and something totally male. Even his body heat turned her on. Slowly she drifted into the moment, and her hands slid up to play with his dark hair. Tongue slid upon tongue as their kiss intensified.

Shuddering, Astra eased away, only to notice she was lying on the bed, with Noah over her. "You look wonderful lying on my bed like that. But you'd look better with nothing on," he said. She watched his eyes darken as his fingers tugged the tie at the back of her neck,

releasing the fabric. "I've invited someone to enjoy this with me. Someone who wants you almost as badly as I do."

She stiffened. "I don't --"

"Oh, but you will here. Timeon wants to touch you, too, Astra. I know you saw the twins from House Polgarde fucking Innana. I know how you wished it was you tied to the stakes, being ravished," Noah whispered as he slowly pulled the fabric down and away from her breasts. He nodded as Timeon entered the dream, wearing a deep burgundy leather outfit that hugged his muscles, accentuating every part of his body. "You know you want to feel both our cocks deep in your pussy and then your ass, fucking you senseless. You want it bad, don't you, Astra?"

She whimpered as Timeon sat on her left side, his large hand stroking one breast as Noah teased the nipple of the other. It was useless to hide it from Noah. Even if he wasn't as high as she was, between them both, they were at the outer reaches of the class system for empaths. "Yes, I want it. I want to be fucked. I want to experience sex like it was meant to be, not with my sensibilities and talent protected at all costs."

Timeon smiled as he bent over her breast, his tongue swiping across the taut, rosy tip. "I can make sure that any excess emotionality is taken from you so as to not impede your empathic talent, Astra."

"What?" Then she stopped thinking as both mouths suckled and bit her nipples, causing lust to shoot straight to her pussy. Tingles slid through it, making the moment stronger. "Oh, gods, yesss ..." she hissed.

Her hands clenched the sheet beneath her body as the sensations and pressure increased. Her pussy was wet from the dual pleasure. The onslaught was only starting, and she already felt overwhelmed with desire.

Noah bit her nipple hard, then started suckling on it as his other hand tugged her dress down over her rounded hips. As he pushed the lace further down to her knees, she wiggled,

finally managing to kick it out of the way. Before she could close her legs, his hand slid up her inner thigh.

A whimper of need burst from her throat as Timeon pulled back, a smile showing how much he enjoyed toying with her breasts. "Oh, my fine lady, you're so responsive. Look at how your breast begs for more of my attention."

She looked from him to her left breast, the nipple tight and hard. The tingling sensation deep inside told her he was right. She wanted more of his attention, wanted him to tease it, to play with it, to make the ache deep inside her burst. Turning her gaze back to Timeon, she noticed he was removing both his shirt and the leather pants. He wore no underwear, his hard cock springing up from the dark blond curls between his thighs.

"Do you like the look of my cock, sweet Astra?"

"Yes, Timeon. It pleases me." She reached for it with her hand. It was harder than she'd imagined it could be, yet so silky to the touch. Stroking it, she enjoyed the sensation of his pulsing and expansion. "It's bigger than anything I've had before," she admitted.

He pushed closer, kneeling on the bed. "Suck on me, Astra. Taste it, lick it, suck on it."

She shook her head. "No, I don't --"

Noah bit her nipple, and his hand cupped her mons tightly. "Yes, you do. You shall do as we tell you, or you will not receive pleasure, Astra."

The purplish tip of Timeon's cock pressed against her lips. "Take it, Astra. You know you've imagined what it would be like to suck on a man and know that you can make him come with that hot, wet mouth of yours."

Slowly, she opened her mouth, letting his cock fill it. His taste was briny and different from the one she associated with Noah. His fingers undid her braid and ran through her long hair as he guided her mouth in a slow rhythm. "You're a sexpot deep inside, aren't you, Astra?" Timeon asked as he flexed his hips, sliding his cock further into her mouth.

Noah watched as Astra's full lips sucked on his brother's cock. "I think, since she's being so cooperative, we should give her some pleasure, too." He slid off the bed and quickly shed his clothes. Moving between her legs, he opened her wide so she was spread before him like a feast. Part of her wondered why she just accepted it, but the other part reveled in how erotic it all felt. Even though the whole experience was solely empathic, both brothers were making it feel as if it were physically happening.

Astra cupped Timeon's balls and squeezed them gently as her other hand stroked the part of his cock that her mouth couldn't reach. Timeon moaned her name and picked up his pace just as Noah spread her labia and licked her from top to bottom. Her moan matched Timeon's, and she tasted a drop of pre-cum in her mouth.

Noah licked Astra's slit again, then gently raked his teeth against the tight bud of her clitoris. Feeling her wiggle under him, he chuckled, letting his tongue vibrate against her. "So responsive, Astra. I love that," he muttered against her bundle of nerves. Slow, deliberately, he stroked down her swollen nether lips, spreading the nectar that flowed from her core. "You're so turned on by this, and we're so turned on by you."

"Yes, we are," Timeon agreed. "Tighten your lips around my cock more, luv. That's right, just like that."

Noah inserted two fingers, and she moaned as her cunt clenched violently against them.

Her tunnel was so damn tight and hot. Fucking her was going to be a mind-blowing experience. He moved his fingers in and out of her wet core in time with his brother's cock as he used his tongue and teeth against Astra's clit. Before long, she shuddered and screamed wordlessly as her orgasm ripped through her body. Her emotions exploded around her and them as they all felt the deep sensation of satiation.

Timeon pulled out of Astra's mouth and urged her to lie on her side. She complied wordlessly as Noah moved with her, so that they were almost face-to-face as three fingers thrust deep in her pussy. Timeon lay behind her and placed her leg over Noah's. Slowly he parted her ass cheeks and moaned. "Oh, baby, you've got such a sweet ass. No one has ever fucked it, have they?"

"No," she whispered nervously.

"It's a delectable pleasure once you're properly prepared," Timeon reassured her. "Right after Noah and I both fuck your hot cunt."

"Oh," Astra gasped. Noah smiled wickedly at her as he pulled his fingers from her pussy.

"Taste yourself, Astra," he commanded as he placed one of his fingers against her mouth. "See how sweet you taste."

Her mouth closed upon his finger, and she greedily sucked on him. His moan made Timeon chuckle. "She has quite a mouth, doesn't she, brother?"

"Indeed. Perhaps you'd like to taste her cunt before we fuck it."

Timeon said nothing, but slid further down the bed. Spreading her cheeks further apart, he grinned as Noah slid down to join him. Noah held her legs open. "Gods, she's beautiful down here. Our sexpot has been hiding this from us for too long." Timeon moaned, burying his face against her pussy, delving his tongue deep.

"Oh, my gods!" she screamed as Noah joined his brother in sucking her cunt.

Their fingers stroked her clit as their tongues dueled for supremacy over not just her cunt, but her ass as well. Two fingers slid into her ass, and she arched in pain and intense pleasure. "Oooohhhhh." Her whimpers of pleasure echoed around them.

Noah nibbled on her clit as he and Timeon stroked their fingers in her ass, preparing her with her juices. Mentally, he reached his brother. "She is ours. I won't give this up, Timeon."

"Neither will I," Timeon responded. "It's time to make her ours."

Noah nodded as he bit her clit sharply, then suckled, causing Astra to climax as Timeon lapped up her creamy juices. Slowly, they licked up Astra's front and back, kissing and stroking her body. "So beautiful ... So made for fucking ... Our sexpot ... Yes, ours ..." they muttered over and over until they both kissed her, their tongues sharing her taste.

Their emotions combined, escalating, slow and fast, pulling them all toward the peak.

Astra was only aware of the sensations, of the men who touched her body and soul. Emotions coiled and released in her with each explosion. Then she felt the tips of both large cocks vying for her pussy. Need welled up, and she slid her leg higher along Noah's body. "Please, yes," she begged.

"What do you want, Astra?" Noah asked harshly. "Tell us or we stop."

Timeon stroked her hair. "What is it that you want? You want us to stop?"

"Don't stop. Please ... fuck me. Fuck me hard," she begged, her body aching with need. "My ... pussy aches for you both. Please."

In one movement, the brothers flexed their hips and entered her with matching thrusts. Astra cried out, her nails raking Noah's back as multiple orgasms raced through her body.

Noah ground his teeth as hot desire flooded his body. Her cunt was so damn tight, even tighter with his brother's cock sliding inside with his. He grabbed her hips, his brother's hands over his. Then in mutual need, they began pounding her in a one-two rhythm, never letting the sensations fade inside Astra's spasming cunt.

Noah pulled her hips toward him as he slammed his cock deep into her, feeling his brother slide partially out. Then her hips shifted away as his brother moved deeper into her. His brother's emotions filled them both, forcing the boundaries around their minds down,

allowing total access. Astra continued to whimper and moan their names as she absorbed the sensations and the passion that flowed through the three of them. He knew he needed release, and so did his brother. He leaned forward and captured one nipple with his mouth and bit it hard. Mentally, he urged his brother to take her how he wished.

“Oooohhhhhh! Noah!” she panted, each breath enhancing the pleasure racing through her.

Timeon slowly slid out of her pussy at her moan, guiding his penis to her puckered asshole. As Noah suckled her tit and continued to ram himself into her pussy, Timeon slowly pushed himself into her ass, feeling her tighten at first, then relax as another series of orgasms rocked her body. “That’s it, baby. That’s right, let me into that ass of yours.”

Finally, Timeon’s cock was buried to the hilt. Grinning triumphantly over Astra’s shoulder at his brother, he murmured, “Now you’ll know what true multiple orgasms are, dearest one.”

Noah let go of Astra’s nipple and kissed her fiercely on the lips. “Do you like this so far, Astra?”

She nodded wordlessly as she arched against Noah, then pressed backwards against Timeon’s hips. “More. I need more,” she gasped.

Noah drew her leg up onto his shoulder. “You’ll get more, my love. More than you ever experienced. Let out the emotion as you feel it. Timeon can handle it.”

With a nod, Timeon pulled almost all the way out, then, with a tug on her hips, slammed himself into her ass. Astra moaned in pleasure as Noah followed it up with his own thrust. In sync, both brothers pounded into her as Noah slid her other leg onto his shoulder and Timeon moved himself so he could get the deepest penetration.

The three of them gasped in tandem as pleasure overtook them, and she begged them for more. Their cocks slid in and out of her spasming pussy and ass while she struggled to

impale herself on them. Noah leaned in and bit her nipple. "Now, don't come. Not 'til we say so. Do you hear me, Astra?"

Nodding, she tried not to let the sensations take her over the edge as she felt their cocks thicken and lengthen further, filling her to capacity. Noah moved harder, faster, his hands teasing and pulling on her nipples as Timeon rode her ass. Just when she was on the edge, ready to fall, she saw that Noah was smiling at her. He kissed her as he thought to her, "Now, Astra. Come for us. Show us just how much you love us fucking you!"

Her body trembled as the mother of all orgasms coursed from her dripping wet cunt through the rest of her body and back again, starting another round of tremors.

Gasping, Astra blinked as she tried to not cry out as her body crashed while the orgasm physically tore through her body. Shutting her shields completely, Astra turned to see Noah smirking at her as she struggled not to show the sense of completion as it flooded her body and soaked her panties and pantyhose. Inhaling and exhaling rapidly, Astra finally gained a modicum of control over the sensations flooding her body.

Her gaze immediately went to Timeon, who wore the same smirk on his face as his brother. Cautiously she opened her shields only to him. *Did that --*

Just happen? Yes. On the astral realm, as well as empathically. Timeon grinned, his hand instinctively brushing down his left arm in remembrance of their touches.

But how did you do that?

I just know that it's possible only with Noah. Without him, I can only touch you lightly with empathic feeling. But I felt you touching and sucking. Noah says you deny being a broadcaster.

I'm not. I don't know why or how you felt me. There should've been no way.

Perhaps you need testing. Meet Noah and me tonight at our home. We have private testing facilities where the results don't go to the central computers.

I can't.

You will, Astra. His eyes narrowed.

Maybe. It's not right to see each other during this merger business. It will make things harder for both sides.

Maybe not, Noah said, inserting himself into the mental conversation while still speaking aloud to both boards. *Perhaps this will help make it easier to merge on what's best for both companies, without having to deal with this shit.*

As he made a final comment on how the daily production would remain unchanged while at the same time allowing both boards control, Noah turned his attention fully to the board. "Anyone have any questions so far?"

Astra pressed her back against the chair, cueing it mentally for a slightly cooler temperature. She tried to ignore her father as he started listing reasons for refusing all of the points Noah had made. Casually and surreptitiously, she brushed her fingers across her breasts. Inhaling quickly, she realized they were sensitive and still hard to the touch. *Damn them both. I'm still on edge.*

"Further, trying to insinuate the Helsguard way of doing things would take inordinate amounts of time," Lord Giles Crysomark stated.

Astra lifted a brow and stood up. As she'd expected, all eyes shifted toward her. She hoped no one noticed just how hot and bothered she was. "Father, sit down and stop with this nonsense."

"You will *not* --"

"I said to sit down, Lord Giles!" Astra's voice rang out clear and cold. "If you will not listen to the class-ten empath, perhaps I should ask the guards to enter and force your cooperation."

Reluctantly and with a glare, he sat down. "I am allowed --"

“Actually, Father, no, you are not.” Astra sat back in her chair. “Let’s be honest and upfront. I own and I control Crysocorp. No one else. You all have your parts in earning us money, but of anyone here, Father, you alone have no job outside of being the figurehead of the company.”

Warming up, she rubbed her hands and urged the chair forward. “You didn’t listen to what Noah said. In fact, you were actively trying to influence those nearest to you with your slight empathic skills. If it weren’t for the fact that you are a good man with some skill at sales, your ass would’ve been out of the company last year when I discovered you were skimming money from the company.”

A gasp rang through the room as she leveled her father with a look. He tried to protest, and she shoved toward him the blue plasti-sheets she had kept separate. “I’ve got copies of your accounts, including the ones hidden under three assumed names and not linked to a House.”

Stavros glared at his brother, and Astra smiled. Though she was in charge of things, for something this big, the family had to vote, thus potentially clogging up the Mediation Centre with the business issue for months, even years. Having her uncle’s support meant that this would move along faster. “Do you deny these accusations before class-eight and class-ten empaths?” Her mind railed at her brusque tone. *Am I in control? Has what I experienced clouded my abilities?*

“I doubt he will, Lady Astra. But perhaps we should go over the information and allow him to counter the arguments as they come up,” Timeon said. *You’re fine. I’ve wiped away the entire emotional overload from your system. It’s just the physical response.*

Thank you, Timeon. I was afraid I was reacting out of emotion, not truth, she confided. I had planned this exposure here, but not after such an intense --

I know, dearest. Now, let’s handle this. Noah and I stand beside you on this issue and how you wish to handle this.

“You are most wise, Lord Timeon Helspawn.”

Slowly, as both Noah and she worked in tandem, the dealings with her father and the true reasons behind him not wanting the Helsguard Corp to be part of the day-to-day business came out and were dealt with by votes from both sides. Every time her father tried to bamboozle or stampede her with emotions or words, Noah and Timeon blocked his way. By the time each point of Lord Giles’s objections was overturned by the Crysocorp and Helsguard Corp boards, followed by the family fining him for each failure, it was after four in the afternoon.

Adjourning the meeting for the day, Astra led the way out the door. She needed the relaxation room. She needed time away from everyone, including the brothers Helspawn. Before she could duck into the room, Uncle Stavros called to her. Straightening her shoulders, she turned and smiled at him. “Yes, Uncle?”

“I’m proud of you, Astra Petra Crysomark. I know just how much that cost you, both emotionally and physically. As your second, I and mine stand by your side. Your ideas with the brothers Helspawn will help both companies to succeed.”

“Do you think the merger is a solid idea, Uncle Stavros?” she asked, looking for signs of lying.

“Actually, yes. They’re up and coming. They know the people better than we do, though we have the technology and the special group of empaths we work with. They’re just the shakeup needed to propel the joint company into the future.”

“That’s what I thought when I read their prospectus. It’s good to know I’ve not lost my business sense even though I haven’t been in charge of the company fulltime in the past four years.” She kissed her uncle’s cheek. “Thank you for being here and for helping me deal with Father.”

“Anytime, chiclet. Now, take yourself into that room and go decompress. We’ll see you tomorrow at the same time for the next round of negotiations. I have a feeling your father won’t be part of it.”

“I can hope not. ’Til tomorrow, Uncle Stavros.”

“Iji’s kiss, Astra. See you tomorrow.”

Her uncle walked off, and she dealt with a couple other family members. Shooing them away from her, Astra scooted quickly through the entrance before anyone else could grab her. Once past the barrier, the soothing sounds began working at the knots that tied up her shoulders. “Oh, gods, Iji, Tama, and Dylan, thank you for this,” she moaned, kicking off her shoes. Dropping her briefcase, she threw herself into the nearest chair and then hit the massage button. Closing her eyes, she let the sounds, heat, and the vibrations loosen the tension and soothe away the leftover physical effects from Noah and Timeon. Facing her father and his infidelity to the family had been difficult. But she owed both brothers a debt of thanks for not leaving her side whilst she handled the private problem in such a manner. Now the question was whether to see them this evening.

She knew they would leave her alone to let her decide and deal with the family issues. Sighing, she allowed the computer system to minister to her needs to help revitalize her as she debated the issue.

Chapter Four

A noise penetrated Astra's foggy sleep, and she moved stiffly as awareness filtered into her brain. Something had woken her, caught her attention. Then it happened again, a slight scratching sound. Opening her eyes, realization hit her. She was still at the Mediation Centre, and it was early in the morning. *I need to go home. Shit, I just meant to relax, not sleep here all night.*

Standing, she lifted her hands over her head to stretch out the kinks. Luckily there weren't as many as she'd thought she would have for sleeping in a massage chair. Those chairs for empaths -- chairs her company manufactured -- were indeed quite capable of helping an empath achieve almost complete rest and relaxation. "Wow, I can honestly say I've slept in one of our chairs for a night and didn't notice any problems, just some slight stiffness from not moving around. I'm the perfect advertisement for these things," she mumbled to herself.

The scratching noise got slightly louder as she tried to find her shoes. As she saw what was making the noise, Astra chuckled. It seemed that the small computer-controlled vacuum cleaner was losing the battle against sucking up or moving her shoes. Picking them up so the vacuum cleaner could continue its job, she laughed. "There ya go, Fido. Now you can finish

your work, and I can rush home and change.” Her stomach clenched and rumbled to remind her she hadn’t eaten. “Oh, yes, and get food. Lots of food.”

Grabbing her fallen briefcase, she headed out the doorway and made her way downstairs and out of the building. Finding her vehicle, she unlocked the door with her retinal scan and slid behind the guide seat. “Home, James,” she muttered, punching in the coordinates.

The engine revved, and the onboard computer took over the controls. Her body throbbed, but a hot shower would help revitalize her. Food in her belly would help combat the floating feeling she had. She concentrated on her thoughts and the fact that she had slept dreamlessly. Neither taunted by images of Noah and Timeon, nor worried about her family and the business issues. Amazing and so very freeing. It meant something, and she wasn’t sure she was willing to find out the reason, at least not in the case of the brothers Helspawn.

The car pulled into the driveway, and Astra smiled at the sight of her small home. Granted, it was on the huge Crysomark estate, but it was her own private home, given to her by her grandmother and one where no one, not even Father, could enter without permission. She sent the car into standby mode and alighted from it, then walked briskly to her front door. Once there, she glanced up for three seconds, twisted the doorknob, and entered.

A small, flitting ball came to her. “You have messages, Lady Astra. Two priority, two personal.”

“Play the priority first, Flit.” She made her way up the stairs, heading toward her private bath.

She listened to the message from her father, his ranting and raving about making her pay for her public disclosure of his use of House Crysomark funds. When that was over, Uncle Stavros’s voice followed.

“The family knew you’d seclude yourself from us after your father’s exposure and denouncement. We gathered and voted, as is our right. You will be the new head of House

Crysomark. We shall make official declaration in four weeks. Unofficially, it takes place now. I know this is not what you wanted, Astra, but there is no one else. I'd take the position, but your father's cronies would protest. I promise you that it'll work out."

Astra stopped with a sigh on one of the stairs. Her worst fears had come true. She was head of Crysomark, which meant more restrictions and less freedoms heaped upon her. Not to mention that she'd be forced to take some kind of marriage contract within a year. *But there's no one I want to marry -- well, no one long-term.*

Sighing, she hurried up the stairs. Once at the bathroom door, she called out, "Shower, regular temperature." Turning to Flit, she spoke. "Play the personal, but my hearing range only."

"As you command, Lady Astra." It clicked and whirred as it brought up the personal messages and angled them for her hearing.

The first message, from Noah, came with a hologram. Astra continued to strip off her clothing as the message played.

"Dearest Lady Astra. You've not shown up tonight, and I'm concerned for you. I know things with your father have probably made your life complex, but my brother and I would like you to come visit us as soon as possible. Just let me know you're okay, and we can figure another time that's more convenient for your visit to our home."

Astra smiled. Noah was being very reserved, more like Timeon than himself. She looked at the dark hair and eyes, enjoying how concerned he seemed for her. She could fall for his charms oh-so-easily if she let go of her vaunted emotional control. Stepping into the hot shower, she allowed herself a moment to enjoy the attention that Noah and Timeon had given her. The water pounded on the muscles of her back and shoulders as she leaned back, wetting her hair.

"Next message, Flit."

"Yes, my lady. It's from House Hespawn's Lord Timeon."

“Audio only.”

“As you wish.”

She shampooed her hair and rinsed while listening to Timeon’s smooth-as-velvet voice. Her grin grew larger as he also expressed concern for her and offered his assistance, as well as that of House Helspawn in any matter that needed taken care of.

Knowing that both men wanted to help and be there for her, intimately and personally, made her feel protected and safe. Unusual sensations, considering that no one but her uncle had ever moved to protect or comfort her in her time of need. Astra cleansed her body and released the new emotions, allowing her ability to sense deception to remain clear and untainted. There wasn’t much time to prepare herself for another day of negotiations.

“Water off, air on,” she commanded as she spread her arms and legs out. A whirl of warm wind replaced the water, drying her thoroughly and quickly, including her hair. Once she felt she was ready, she stepped out of the shower and grabbed a multicoloured silk robe, wrapping it around her body. She sent the laundry into the nearby chute and sighed.

Without wasting more time, she slipped past Flit and into her dark green bedroom. The room was her oasis, just like this home. Even being the head of House, she wasn’t giving up this place. *I won’t, and they can’t make me. That huge house can go rot, for all I care.*

“Lights, thirty percent.”

Walking directly to her closet, she palmed the lock and waited for the small screen to come to life. She had coordinated her wardrobe early in life to prevent her from having to rush in the mornings, but today was different. This day was her first as the acknowledged and publicly designated leader of Crysomark and Crysocorp, not just a class-ten empath. Scrolling through her many suits, dresses, and ritual gowns, she finally picked the one she knew would make an impression on both houses and perhaps urge people to finish the negotiations.

“Selection alpha thirty-one and gamma fifty, please.” Walking over to her dresser, she removed the matching lingerie set, enjoying the feel of silk under her fingers. This would be the first time she wore this outfit outside of the house; it wasn’t one she’d previously thought she could pull off. It was more daring than any outfit she’d ever worn, though it was something her mother would’ve worn without a thought. Today, she had no choice. There were many things at stake, including her reputation.

Pulling on her bra and panties, Astra whirled to the open closet, both items shimmering in the dim light. Touching the silky fabric, she sighed. Her mother had originally designed this outfit, and when she’d died, the design had been put away. Two years ago, Astra had decided to honour her mother by having it made. Now it was time to honour Lady Allista Crysomark again by taking her seat as head of House and as the captain of her life. No more dealing around her father or taking things from the government. Her position allowed her a place upon the government council -- the first high-class empath in such a position, as far as she knew, since no other empaths were head of House among the major Houses.

Maybe this was meant to be. Maybe, just maybe, I can make a better world for everyone, including us empaths. Or perhaps I’m to do what I can for my House and make changes for empaths through my status this way.

“Mistress Astra, a class-four emergency message,” Flit tittered as it entered into the bedroom. “Audio and visual.”

Sighing, Astra quickly tossed her robe on and looked at Flit. “Open channel.”

A small image of Uncle Stavros appeared in front of her. “Astra, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I’m the only one who won’t muck around, trying to play games. I’m sorry, but your father has killed himself inside the Crysocorp building after learning from Aunt Sedonia about your ascension.”

“What?” The room seemed to spin while she tried to get her thoughts under her.
“Father is ... dead? I don’t understand.”

Stavros sighed on the hologram, and Astra realized that he hadn’t contemplated her father’s mental state and was as shocked as she was. No one had anticipated Giles reacting in such a way. “I’m sorry, Astra. Last night, your father stomped over to Sedonia’s estate and demanded that she do something to counter the actions taken against him. Then she, being Sedonia, gave him the coup de grace. She told him that you were taking over as head of House and that he was to go to one of the smaller houses owned by the family and he could shove his attitude.”

“Oh, gods above. You know how much Father --”

“I know, Astra. However, Sedonia is our family line matriarch. Giles should’ve just listened and accepted. There are notes left for you, me, and Sedonia in his office. I’ve taken the liberty of contacting House Hespawn and explaining the circumstances. They’ve agreed that we all need four days in order to get affairs straightened and look at the requests for contract revisions. We’ll join back together in five days.”

Astra nodded. “Of course. Stavros ... was it bad?”

His eyes seemed to darken as he nodded. “He used one of the neural stimulators, Astra. He then cut himself to embed it.”

“Oh, Iji’s heart!” Tears sprung at the corner of her eyes, and her body shook with emotions that she hadn’t thought she possessed about her father. “Why? Did he say why?”

“You have your letter from him to open, Astra, dearling.”

“I can’t go there. I don’t think I can go there, Uncle.”

Stavros nodded. “You are Head, though. But you are also a class-ten empath and might be affected by residual emotions. Is there anyone you trust to escort and protect you?”

“I’m not sure. I -- I might know two people,” she stuttered, her heart crying out for Noah and Timeon. “When must I arrive?”

“In the next two hours. The incident is being dealt with by the government and cleanup crews, but you must be here within that time,” Stavros extended a hand. “I grieve with thee, child of my sister.”

“I grieve with thee, brother to my mother. May his soul be entrusted to Iji and Helu.”

“Peace, Astra. I shall see you when you arrive.” Stavros faded from the transmission field.

Astra placed her back against the closet door and allowed tears to flow. Her body shook as she sobbed for herself and for her father, who had chosen death over punishment. “Oh, gods ...” she cried as she allowed herself to vent out the hurt, anger, embarrassment of having Giles as her father and knowing that despite all that, in the end, she would miss him. Flashes of her life with him made her cringe with pain at his treatment of her and, at the same time, remorse for what she hadn’t done to make it better.

Gathering herself together, she wiped away the last of the tears and pulled her robe tighter around her. “Flit, please call Noah and Timeon of House Helspawn.”

“I’m dialing, Mistress.” The ball dipped slightly in the air, acknowledging the request.

“You can call me Lady, Flit. Just because I’m head of Crysomark doesn’t make me a Mistress. Whether that’s the title given to the head of House or not, it’s not one I want.”

“But it’s the formal --” The silver and blue ball danced anxiously in front of her.

“I know, Flit, but don’t.” Astra rubbed her eyes and inclined her head. “Connect now.”

Side-by-side images of Noah and Timeon filtered up from the holo imaging. She nodded to them both. “Thank you for taking my call. As you’ve probably heard, my father, Giles, committed suicide at the Crysocorp building. I need to go there, but going alone isn’t an option. Not --”

“You’re class-ten, Astra. We’ll be at your home in thirty minutes. My deepest condolences.” Noah looked at her intently. *Worry not. We won’t let you handle this alone, Astra.*

I don't think I can. It will be bloody, and I fear the emotional residue.

Don't worry, my love. We'll not leave your side.

"We'll be there shortly, Astra. Just know we won't be pulling out of the merger, no matter what. We'll get someone in to clean the place and remove the psychic residue," Timeon pronounced.

"Thank you, Timeon. This means more to me than I can say." Astra paused and inhaled deeply before speaking. "I am now head of House Crysomark."

"Oh." The men shared a glance, then looked back to her.

"Please, don't." She felt emotions churning in her. They were going to pull away; she knew it. What was to stop them? It was okay when she was only the daughter, but as head of House, she would be almost untouchable. "Please don't leave me," she whispered so very softly.

Noah's head snapped up. "We're not leaving you, Astra. It just complicates some matters."

"Our businesses? I don't see how."

"No, our personal lives, dearest," Timeon soothed as he gave her a reassuring smile. "But we'll work it out. I promise."

"So, you'll still come with me to see --"

"Yes, dearest. Now, go ready yourself. We'll exchange information in person." Noah closed his transmission, leaving only Timeon in front of her.

"He's worried about you. We both were. You never called last night."

She felt herself blushing. "I fell asleep in the empath room at the Hall."

"Did we tire you out that much?" He smirked at her.

Saying nothing, she just looked at him, the heat rising in her cheeks.

“I see we did. Well, you tired us, as well, Astra.” His smile reassured her and caused another round of flushing. “Now, go get ready. We’ll escort you, and you won’t have to worry.”

Timeon dismissed the holo vid, and Astra stood there for a moment. They were going to go with her. That was all she needed to know. Relief filled her, and the dread sense of going in alone disappeared. She put back the outfit she had picked out and selected another.

Carefully, with respect, she pulled it on. It was an outfit she’d thought she wouldn’t have to wear for years. The pearl-grey fabric was soft and silky, but the meaning was clear -- mourning. On the sleeves were the marks of her House and her station. Technically, she should get them changed, but not today, not right now. It was too soon to contemplate her status shift. She had barely recovered from that, and now her father’s death made it almost impossible to bear.

The custom was to wear nothing beneath the long gown. Mourning meant forgetting yourself and thinking only of the person. Thinking about her father was hard. Many times she had wished for no father. When her mother had died, that thought had only increased when he demanded more from her and her talents, yet gave nothing back, not even love. Had he loved her, she could’ve forgiven his behaviour. Now, he was gone, and part of her felt like an orphan. Truly an orphan lost in the world of Peruth.

Reaching for the soft grey leather boots, she sighed as she felt a new heaviness descend on her shoulders. Head of House, daughter of a suicide, and a class-ten empath who’d had an emotion-based sexual encounter, which was illegal in her world. Could anything more press down upon her? Of course it could, especially now. Resisting the urge to sigh again, she slipped on the boots, then headed out of the bedroom. Her hair was left loose, instead of the usual trademarked French twist. Without any makeup on, it was easy to see she was in mourning. People would leave her alone. Right now, she wished they’d all leave her alone, though that was impossible, not with how her father had died.

Taking her time going down the stairs, she watched as Flit passed her and headed toward the kitchen. At least Flit made things seem normal. “Flit.” The silver and blue ball stopped as she spoke. It hovered near eye-level, always awaiting her next command. “Please have someone make me a piece of toast or a small breakfast sandwich before I leave. I’m starved, and I doubt I’ll get to eat anytime soon once I leave the house.”

“As you wish, Lady Astra.”

“Thank you, Flit. I appreciate it.” Once downstairs, she stopped in the hallway as a stray thought caught her short. Before her was one of the few pictures she had of her mother and father together.

Staring at it, she wondered why on Peruth her mother had married her father. He was a good businessman in House Crysomark, but Allista had had the chance to marry outside the House. Guaranteed her freedom through Sedonia, Allista instead chose Giles Crysomark. No one had understood the reasons, not even those closest to her parents. Allista looked much like Astra, with long blonde hair, a curvaceous body, and a straight nose. The only difference was that Astra had her father’s eyes, while her mother’s were a pale, icy blue. Seeing her father standing there smiling alongside her mother, his dark hair not tinged with silver, Astra wondered if her mother’s death had somehow unhinged him. Allista had died suddenly, but no one in the House had ever told the young Astra the cause of her mother’s death. Questions filled her, but as the smell of eggs wafted past her nostrils, her stomach clenched in hunger.

She walked past the picture and took the left fork, entering the gleaming grey and white kitchen. Approaching Verona, the family cook, Astra asked, “You heard the news?”

“Yes, Astra. How are you?” The older woman embraced her, providing Astra the only comfort she had known for most of her childhood and adult life. “I’ve made you an omelet. If I remember how these things work, you probably won’t get food ’til later tonight, child.”

“Thank you, Verona. What would I do without you?”

“Eat out all the time and ignore the basics in nutrition, which would kill your abilities,” the woman teased while forcing Astra to sit at the small table. “Eat.”

“Yes, Verona.” Astra picked up her fork and stabbed at the luscious omelet before her. “How did you know I’d want something like this?”

“I heard you come in this morning. What happened that you stayed out all night?”

The blush was there before she could repress it. “I fell asleep at the Negotiation Hall last night. I guess my worrying on things and then the blowout with Father knocked me for an emotional loop.”

She felt Verona’s gaze on her, but there was no way she could explain everything that had happened, not with her and the brothers Hespawn. In fact, in some way, part of her debated if it had really occurred or if it was a release that had been a long time coming. Concentrating on her food, Astra ate the delicious egg-cheese-and-vegetable dish. She sipped on tangelo juice, enjoying the sweet taste with the savory food.

Flit hurried back into the room. Astra wondered when he’d left, as normally she was attuned to the little flying computer’s action, since he was her prototype to the FLI8 series out on the market. “Flit, where did you go?”

“Company is here for you, Lady Astra. I’ve taken the liberty of seating them in the living room.”

“Company?”

“Head of House Hespawn and his brother.”

“Ah. Thanks, Flit. Verona, time for me to go. Thanks for being here. I don’t know when I’ll get back. Can you put something in the fridge for me that I can reheat and eat?”

“Not a problem, Astra. Go wash up and go see your young men.” Astra whirled and looked at Verona, who smiled not-so-innocently back at her. “Did you think I wouldn’t guess? You’re much like your mother before she married. They are good men and ones whom I think you need more than you realize. Go. They won’t be patient for much longer.”

Impulsively, Astra hugged the older woman. “Thank you. But this means, later, you need to explain that comment about my mother.”

“I know, and now it’s time. Before now, no, I’d have never risked it. Go.”

“Love you much, Verona.”

“And I, you.”

Feeling a bit lighter inside, Astra left the kitchen, stopping in the bathroom to quickly brush her teeth before meeting Noah and Timeon. Why she was preening when she wore no makeup, she wasn’t sure, but still, her mother had told her often when she was young that bad breath was offensive, even when in sorrow. Once that was finished, she strolled easily through the archway into the living room.

Her gaze found both brothers standing in front of the fireplace, gazing at her family pictures. They spoke quietly and shielded their thoughts to where she couldn’t pick up any emotions from them beyond concern. As she stepped forward, they straightened and turned simultaneously.

“Are you okay?” Timeon asked, offering her his hand. “We grieve with you.”

“I’m all right,” she responded, stepping forward to take his hand with hers. “Thank you for being here.”

Noah said nothing, but went behind her and wrapped his arms around her in comfort and solace. Warmth and acceptance flooded her at his touch. Then Timeon pressed against her, and in their arms she felt safe, protected, cherished. They said nothing, just enveloped her in their strength, and for once in her sheltered life, she realized what it meant to be special.

Yes, you’re special to us, Astra.

Truly, Timeon?

Don't doubt us, love. We're not going to leave you alone through this. We're here together now, and we'll be here for you whenever you even think our names, Noah answered. You're a damn special woman, and you deserve this.

Thank you, Noah. I -- I have to admit, this is a lot tougher than I thought it'd ever be.

"Talk to us angel," Timeon coaxed as he pulled back a bit. "What about this death has you so worried?"

"Besides the fact that you and your father didn't seem to see the same way on things," Noah remarked, pulling Astra to sit on the couch between them.

"That's part of it," she sighed, laying her head on Noah's shoulder while her fingers intertwined with both men's. It seemed so natural to be affectionate with both of them. "Father and I never seemed to get along, not even when Mom was alive. Never a kind word, but always pushing me to be the best empathic receiver, sometimes making me try for things I didn't understand."

"Like what?" Timeon stroked her hair.

"Once, when I was about fourteen, he had me try to focus on one mind only and to drop my shields and see if I could read it, not just interpret the emotions." Astra felt them look at each other, then down at her. Could they know something that she didn't? Feeling that what she remembered could hold a key to understanding her father's death, she continued. "Many times when growing up, I felt more like a thing than a person. Granted, I went to the best schools and had some of the best empathic trainers, but the only warmth at home was my mom and Verona, who's now my cook and majordoma for this place."

Stopping, she bit back the tears that threatened. Talking about her mom often brought up a shock of emotions, but this time it seemed to want to overwhelm her. A finger softly wiped away a tear as she sniffled. Her gaze rose and met Timeon's. "Do you want to continue?" he asked quietly.

“Yes. My mother died when I was thirteen. While she was alive, Father wasn’t as harsh in how much he pushed me. Mom wouldn’t let him. Once Mom died, the only restraint on his behaviour was removed. What’s tough is that no one will speak about my mom’s death.” Sensing their rising anger, she sought to defuse it. “It’s not like he abused me physically or mentally, but he was cold and uncaring. At Mom’s funeral, he cautioned me to not cry, to not shed a tear, as the daughter to the head of House was to be elegant and in control. Thing was, he hadn’t been confirmed as Mom’s replacement as head. I don’t think many in the family wanted him to be. But somehow, he was chosen.”

“Do you think he had blackmail on other family members?” Noah’s voice was warm. She needed warmth; speaking about her father always made her feel ice cold. But his words made her pause. Her initial thought was *No, that’s not possible!* but now, part of her wondered if that was how her father got the position.

“I don’t know. I really don’t. But I wouldn’t rule against it, Noah.”

“Tis okay, Astra. We don’t know, and we might never know, the truth on that, but continue. What else has you upset?”

She gave Noah a wan smile. “My shielding isn’t so grand right now. I guess seeing my mom and father’s picture combined with his death has really affected me.”

“Why do you call him Father and not Dad?”

Startled, she blinked. “You know, I’ve never called him Dad. Not any time in my life. He was always Father. He never encouraged informality. But Mom was always Mom, never Mother.”

“You loved your mom very much. We’re like that with our parents. Dad had a tough time with his parents; they were very into the whole head of House thing. But he and Mom always made sure we knew we were loved and wanted.”

“You’re lucky. Both of you. For the longest time, Noah, I felt almost like Father hated my mom and me for some unknown reason. Granted, Mom was head of House and he wasn’t

even considered for the job when Sedonia's husband died, but she was also the empath and he wasn't," she said slowly, piecing together things she'd picked up, overheard, and other puzzle pieces that had remained apart for her entire life until now. "There was something -- something I thought I imagined I overheard as a child, but now ... now I wonder." Glancing up at the stuccoed ceiling, she tried to piece her thoughts together without sounding stupid. "My parents fought on things, often out of my hearing, but I had gone down after finishing with the upgrades to Flit, and they were arguing over me."

"Flit?"

"My computer that opened the door to you. It's the beta for the FLI8 series. It's like an interactive date book, communications center, and more. Expensive, but I think he's more than worth it. Luckily for me, I didn't have to pay for him, just create him and make him feasible."

"What did they say about you, dearling?" Timeon asked.

"I only caught bits and pieces of it. Something about my 'genetic makeup is Crysomark,' and there was a comment about my mom's past. Her old boyfriends? Something I didn't quite understand, and my mom slapped him and reminded him that he was only there because of what he did. Not for any other reason."

"Dearling, I don't want to upset you --"

"Just ask, Timeon. Right now, there isn't anything more that could get me more upset." She watched as the brothers exchanged glances and sighed heavily. "Please, just ask. No more silent glances and such. If you know something, tell me."

He stroked her cheek, flooding her with caring and support. "Is it possible that you're not Giles's daughter?"

"Huh?"

"Could another man be your father, love?" Noah asked again, his hand now stroking her hair, urging her to lay her head back down on his shoulder.

The idea stunned her. Was it possible? *Mom, did you cheat on Father? Is that why he never loved me?* Part of her considered the question logically, dissecting all she knew surrounding her conception and birth. There were rumours about where she had gotten her empathic talent because Crysomark had no history of any class-ten empaths. But her mother had other psychic talents that could have upped her daughter's empathy. Couldn't they?

"I don't know. I guess, maybe, it's possible." She stumbled over the words as her mind processed what they were saying. The idea seemed so preposterous, but with the memories flooding her, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Before she said anything else, Noah's hand cupped her chin as his lips moved slowly over hers. "Shh, it's okay, love. It's okay. Don't think. We're here. We won't leave you." Then his tongue slid possessively against her lips, delving past them to mate with her tongue. The emotions behind the movements were of concern, caring, and something deeper. Something that called to her and begged her to reciprocate. She hadn't known them long, but they made her feel whole, most especially this man, this empath who put her welfare first in her moment of need.

Her arms went around his neck, her body pressing against him. Then she sensed Timeon scooting closer against her. The feel of his hand against her lower back sent her forward more, until her ass lifted slightly off the couch. A tugging up of her dress and she felt the cool air against her naked backside. She shivered at the sensation, then moaned as his hands cupped her ass.

Timeon's emotion tugged at her, giving her quick images of what he wanted her to do. She pushed against Noah and slid one knee up on the couch, so she was almost pouncing on Noah while giving his brother access to her naked ass. A small voice told her that this wasn't appropriate behaviour for the head of House to be doing in the time of mourning, but she shut it up. She needed this, this loving, this affirmation of life and care. They knew it, and without satisfying themselves, they were giving to her unselfishly. It touched her heart and

soul. The need for something more than what she had was finally filled, if she were honest with herself. "Please, Timeon. Touch me," she whispered against Noah's neck.

"I will, my darling," he purred.

Before she could urge him, she gasped as his tongue slid down her slit. Her body instinctively arched toward his open mouth, urging him onward as she renewed her attack on Noah's throat, placing openmouthed kisses up and down it. Each lick that Timeon gave her, she mimicked on Noah's neck and lips. "You both feel so good, so safe," she whispered.

"We won't ever hurt you," Noah promised as his hands caressed her breasts, encouraging her to touch him how she wanted. Moaning his name, she leaned into his hands while her mouth covered his.

Their tongues met, both demanding and giving. This was what she'd wanted for so long, and now it was here, with him. His taste was exquisite -- chocolate, mint, and something more, perhaps a touch of cinnamon. Whatever the taste, she loved how he seemed to meld with her, around her. His emotions were open to her, except those most private. He cared for her, and he loved how she touched him.

She slid her fingers down his grey shirt, enjoying how he shivered beneath the silk material. "You entrance me, Noah Helspawn," she whispered.

"You fascinate me, Astra Crysomark," he replied as his fingers speared her hair. "You make me want to rip aside the mask that houses Lady Astra of House Crysomark and find the woman who craves to be loved, touched, and cosseted."

"Yes, I'm here," she cried, his lips covering his again, her fingers stroking down the shirt and back up. "I'm here, Noah. Please don't leave me. Neither you nor Timeon."

She felt Timeon's response as his fingers entered her wet pussy and his mouth brushed against one ass cheek. "I won't leave you, Lady Astra, darling. I won't. We will be with you always."

Her body tightened as Timeon's fingers continued plunging deep within her, pulled out slightly, and slid back in, each time harder and further. Moaning, she arched with the rhythm, allowing herself this moment to feel complete, allowing herself to let go of the problems before her, giving herself this moment with these men. Trembling, she bit Noah's lip as her orgasm rumbled through her body. Suddenly darkness overtook her, along with the sensation of happiness.

Noah eased Astra off his body, helping Timeon to lay her down on the couch. "That was unexpected," he grunted as he rubbed his temples.

"She's repressed a lot of feelings. Class-ten broadcaster, at the least," Timeon responded as he looked at Astra. "Getting her to believe and testing it will be tough."

"Considering we just got bashed by her orgasm, and that was with only our personal mental shields being up, nothing more, I think we should be able to get others to believe in it."

Timeon shook his head. "We can't do that, Noah. You know as well as I do that the official records list her as receiver only. Her father lied about her broadcasting skills. He'd have lost her from the House if the truth were known."

Noah let loose with a string of curses as he knelt beside the woman he thought of as mate and wife. There was no way she'd survive the governmental bullshit that would come if it came out. They'd strip her of House, home, and job, all in the name of keeping the planet safe by utilizing her talents for the planet. To lose everything, including the protection of a House, would decimate most people, no matter how resilient they were. "But why hide her true talents? Even if he wanted to prevent her from being taken, he could've claimed her as heir to the House -- which she was anyway, without declaration."

"Because she would've been put through genetic and full testing, which couldn't be allowed," said a voice from the doorway.

Both men jumped and stared at the person. “Who are you?”

“The one who knows the truth about Astra and, until today, the only one who truly loved her beyond her mother.” The woman stepped into the room. “I’m Verona, her nursemaid, her mother’s best friend, and Sedonia’s daughter.”

“Then you should’ve been --”

The woman held up a hand. “We will not discuss House Crysomark policy. But know there is more to the young woman you love than even you’ve guessed at. I know much about House Helspawn. Both Gerard and Kaledonia are friends of mine.”

“You came to see us when we were just tykes,” Timeon noted.

“Ah, you do remember me, then,” she answered, a smile brightening her face.

Noah squinted at her. “You changed the results. When we were ten and tested for the Academy.”

“Yes, I did. I created the damn tests and the machines. I saved you and your parents much grief.”

“Like you did for Allista, Astra’s mother.”

She said nothing, but went straight to the unconscious Astra. She bent over and brushed back the younger woman’s hair. Timeon spoke again. “You helped Allista.”

The woman nodded silently as she quickly checked over Astra. When she seemed satisfied, she went to a nearby green chair and sat. “Yes, I did.”

“How did you manage to sabotage the equipment?” Noah lifted Astra’s head and sat on the couch, placing her head on his lap. “I mean, we’re all told that the psi equipment is sabotage- proof.”

“Oh, it is. I didn’t sabotage it at all.” Verona chuckled. “I don’t have to. I’m the creator of the damn thing, and there are fail-safes that allow me into any one of those machines. I wasn’t going to let high talents be taken away from families that love them.”

“That didn’t stop Giles from abusing his daughter,” Timeon pointed out, taking a seat next to the couch. “Did it?”

The older woman sighed. “No, it didn’t. But I was here to counteract as much as I could. Unfortunately, there was much Allista never told me in regards to Giles and her true relationship with him.”

The room seemed to darken with the woman’s presence, as if it reacted to her emotions. She nodded. “This room tunes in to the emotions of the people in it. As the highest-level empath, since Astra is sleeping, it attunes to my needs. Where to start on all of this?”

“Don’t you think Astra should be hearing this?”

“No, not yet. She must face her father’s death, and then she can handle the truth. Otherwise, to learn the truth before severing herself from her father’s wishes and thoughts, she’ll blame herself for what was his choice alone.”

“Was it his choice?” Noah asked, concentrating on finding out whether Verona spoke the truth to him and his brother.

“Noah!” Timeon growled. “Do you realize who Verona is? Forgive my brother, Trifecta Leader Valinora Crysomark. He didn’t recognize your true self.”

“Ah, so my disguise is shot to hell. You are much more talented than I imagined, Timeon. How much did you read from my mind?”

“Not much, just that you were also thinking of the latest policies put into play by your opposites. It gave much away. If you were at full strength, I don’t think that I’d have snagged that thought.”

Noah looked at his brother, then to the woman, who seemed to shed ten years and her hair lighten to a dirty blonde. “You’re part of the Trifecta rulership? That makes my question doubly important, then. Astra is at risk, and it means you can read my heart, Leader Valinora.”

“Yes, I can, Noah Hespawn. Sheathe your claws, tiger. I did not kill that idiot. I wish I had, but no, I didn’t.”

“Was it suicide?”

“Yes and no. It was suicide, but it wasn’t totally by his choice. Not that he was given much choice unless he wanted to publicly announce that he wasn’t Astra’s full genetic father and that he had paid to keep some of her abilities secret.”

No one said anything as Astra moaned and turned on her side, her face towards Noah’s hip. Valinora grinned mischievously and said nothing.

Brother, do you believe her? Noah questioned, watching the woman intently.

What’s there to doubt? Mom and Dad have the connections, and we’ve met this woman -- well, in her true form -- at least half a dozen times.

I know, but this is Astra, and I won’t see her harmed by stuff that is none of her doing.

“Which is why you’re being told this now. You both and she are well suited, and if you both are determined to declare a PGMC with her, you’ll have mine and Sedonia’s blessings.”

“You would allow the head of House Crysomark to enter into a permanent group marriage contract with us?” Timeon asked, shock colouring his tone.

“She can marry anyone she wishes. It’s not up to me, but the blessing of the matriarch and that of her blood mother would be good.” She laughed as both men’s mouths gaped open. “I take it you hadn’t realized who her parents truly are yet.”

Noah shut his jaw, his mind working overtime. *It’s not possible! There’s no way that it can be!*

Are you sure, Noah, twin but not twin to Timeon?

Get out of my mind, Valinora. Trifecta leader or not, this is against the empathic laws that we empaths live by!

But I’m not just any empath, child. Look at your thoughts again.

“She’s got two mothers and two fathers,” Noah whispered.

“Yes. Astra was genetically engineered using Allista’s, Giles’s, Elijah’s, and my genetic codes. We used the best of the best we had. Since you and your brother were already in your mother’s womb, we had to make sure she would come along soon after. Of all of my handiwork, you three are the ones who truly are the reflection of what Peruthians will become one day.”

“You’re fucking mad,” Noah retorted. “We were conceived the old-fashioned way!”

Timeon leaned over and put his hand on Noah’s arm. “Actually, we were helped a bit. Remember Dad’s faulty gene in the twenty-second chromosomal sequence?”

Noah gritted his teeth. “I don’t trust you, Valinora. I know Astra trusts you, but you’re part of the Trifecta that has allowed the House prefects to create some of the most close-minded laws -- supposedly for the benefit of empaths -- in the past twenty years. As an empath, why haven’t you fixed that?”

A soft voiced answered Noah. “Because she’s one woman, one empath with her counterparts -- one of whom is a mild empath, class-two, and one who is a null.” Astra sat up and yawned, stretching her arms over her head. “I should’ve known you were more than just Mom’s best friend. You always knew of the changes happening before anyone else. Also, Noah, how many empaths get to be head of House and get a say in the prefects?”

They all stared at her. As she stood up, Noah put an arm protectively around her waist. “I’m here for you,” he whispered with concern.

“I know. Verona -- or do you prefer Valinora?” Astra asked.

“Either, Astra. Verona is my family name. Valinora is for the Trifecta.”

Astra kissed the woman’s cheek. “I knew that you were among the prefects, but hadn’t realized your true status beyond the fact that Mom always told me that you’re important to Peruth.”

“I hadn’t realized your mom told you anything in regards to me.”

Astra's laugh filled Noah's soul with light. Somehow, she was taking this well, and he was curious as to why. But not yet. It wasn't time to ask. He slid his hand into hers and squeezed it reassuringly.

"She told me a lot, actually. Some of it was put under a hypnotic keyword, but I knew about your position because I can put together the puzzle pieces," Astra teased.

Timeon stepped and took her other hand. "Can you explain, Astra? I think you've lost me and Noah."

"Oh. See, I knew Verona had something to do with the government when she helped me develop some of the best devices for empaths -- for relaxation and for focusing their talents. She seemed to always have a hand in what was wanted, what the major issues were for empaths, and Mom always deferred to Verona's thoughts. In fact, I realize now that Mom was her second in handling the House and business, as well as being an occasional lover."

Verona nodded. "Yes, to all of it. I was not in the marriage contract with your father, however."

"No, you wouldn't be. But Mom was in another marriage contract, wasn't she? It's one reason she and Father fought."

Verona turned away and nodded. "Yes. I wish -- I wish she hadn't married your father, but I found out too late. I'd been on the other side of the planet, busy with some political business. I came home and went through the roof about it."

"The argument that happened before Mom died -- she was to renew her group marriage contract with you and others, wasn't she? Against the laws that say we can only be in one valid contract and that if there is a child to another contract, that is the one that takes precedence," Astra said quietly.

Noah tightened his grip. "We need to get going, Astra."

"Wait one moment, Hespawn child." Valinora stood and took Astra's hand. "Look at me, Astra. I want you to know this. It's something you must understand."

“What?”

Their eyes met and held. Valinora smiled. “The child portion of the contract guaranteed that she had to sign the group contract, my dearest child. Go to our business. Go get the note your father left you. I think, then, all will be clear.”

“As you wish, Trifecta Leader,” Astra whispered.

“No, I am still and will always be Verona to you. My position in the leadership comes second to my first duty -- to you, Astra.”

Astra let go of the brothers’ hands and ran into Verona’s arms, hugging her tightly. She cried against Verona’s shoulder as the woman comforted her. Both women wept for the misunderstandings, the rush of information that would cause upheavals, and for something more -- a relationship bound by blood and love.

When Astra stepped back, she wiped the tears from her face with the palms of her hands. “I’m ready. We need to get to the office before Uncle Stavros has a fit.”

“I’ve taken care of everything else, Astra. Including the funeral arrangements.”

“Father wasn’t born a Crysomark, was he?”

“He was half Crysomark, but also half Polgarde.” Verona’s gaze bored into Astra’s. Both men stood still, not moving as the exchange continued.

“Ah. Thanks, Verona. You’ll be here when we get home?”

“The men will be accompanying you.” It was more of a statement than a question, but no one treated it as such.

Astra nodded. “I need them.”

“Yes, I’ll be here, and I’ll make sure there’s food enough for three.”

“Thank you, Verona.”

The older woman left the three of them alone. Astra stood there, not looking up at Noah or Timeon.

“Did you mean that?” Timeon asked, cupping Astra’s chin and forcing her gaze to meet his.

“Mean what?”

“For us to come home with you?” Noah looked at her, caressing her arm with affection.

“Yes, I need you. I can’t explain everything; I just know I need you both.”

“We need you just as much, Astra.” Timeon kissed her.

“Indeed, we do need you just as much, dearest. Let’s go get this over with, so we can spend more time talking and learning more about each other.” Noah tugged her toward the doorway. “We don’t want to be late.”

“You’re right, Noah. You both will come back here with me?”

“You don’t need to ask. The answer is always yes.”

Chapter Five

Astra looked around the office and cringed. Though the people in charge of the investigation had done a great job in removing the remains, the swirling emotions still lingered within the room. There were no pictures of the family, no mementos of her or her mother in her father's office. The walls were a plain grey and the furniture deep ebony. It was a room for a man with a mission, one that Astra wondered about, not the first time, but with a clearer eye.

Neither brother had left her side once they'd arrived, and she was grateful. The ride over to CrysoCorp had truly opened her to the joys of being around them. They distracted her with talk about their childhood, their lives up until the merger, even some of their ideas about how to make both companies merge more easily as well as take things to the next step in production. Timeon showed her how they could make a larger profit in the next quarter without changing anything major, just by increasing affordability in certain areas. She was grateful for the distractions. It helped her to process all that had happened in the living room earlier.

I don't quite get all of it. Woke up too late to get all of the information and what it means, but somehow I'm linked to Verona. But I'm missing something. If Father wasn't my birth father, then who is?

Her eyes scanned the room, fear clogging her throat as she approached his desk. It had been off-limits to her for as long as she could remember. She hadn't been able to use her abilities, either. This was one of the few rooms where she had felt her innate talent suppressed, but no longer. "Why can I sense emotions in this room now? I used to be blocked or something."

One of the officers answered. "We found an empathic suppressor in a hidden vault behind the Trocia painting above the desk."

"Oh." *What else did Father use to keep me in control and unaware of things here at work or even at home? Did I ever know him at all?*

"Even the normal dampeners are turned off until we can catalog the emotions with our police empath, class-six."

"That's fine, Captain." Astra touched Noah's arm. "Please, Noah. The letter will be in the top right-hand drawer. I don't think I can open it. Not without risking myself." She swallowed harshly as she tried to explain. "Father never let me in here alone. I was never allowed to touch anything."

"You fear he booby-trapped his desk in case you opened anything," he answered, his hand brushing against hers.

"Yes. The police might've disengaged it, but they also might not have. It could be tuned specifically to my brainwaves." Her thoughts turned to the various appliances that Crysocorp manufactured for protection against empaths, and she wondered if her father had suggested those ideas as a normal protection or specifically against her. Luckily, she knew the fail-safes to all the devices manufactured by the family corporation. "You'll have to try to key in my

thinking, but keep your own alpha waves. We could link, but that would put you at risk -- something I won't do."

"Don't worry. Remember, we have Timeon to help, Astra." Noah smiled at her, melting her heart further. What would she have done without these two men? A week ago, she'd had no idea who they were; now, she couldn't imagine being without them in her life. Something for her to think on later.

"He could be affected, too, Noah. The stuff my father had is cutting edge, the latest in technology. Granted, the three of us together could circumvent it, but at what cost? Let's try it this way, without the linking first. He wouldn't think of anyone besides me knowing the fail-safes for a Crysocorp product."

"Good point, dear." He grasped her hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "So, we're going to do the standard empathic coaching while I open the drawer, etcetera?"

"Yup. I'll show you how to recognize the coding in the audio emanations." She smiled at him. "It's fairly easy; you just have to learn to hear the tone."

Timeon interrupted. "There is no tone from those things. I own a couple for our business."

"Sure there is. But it's masked as well. It's my design; I should know." She chuckled softly, before sobering. "Let's get this done. The emotions don't go anywhere, but they're angry, upset, and desperate. The longer I'm in here, the worse I'm feeling."

"Just be careful, brother," Timeon cautioned, taking Astra's other hand. She felt him squeeze, and she returned the sentiment as Noah placed his hand on the handle of the drawer.

Mentally, she sent Noah the information on how to hum at the right pitch. As he hummed, she squeezed his hand as she felt the hum reverberate back at her shielding, indicating he'd gotten past the first part of the back door. With quiet confidence, knowing

exactly how this product worked, Astra empathically sang the five-tone keyword to Noah. When he sang it, a short beep sounded.

“It should be okay now,” Astra announced.

Noah opened the drawer and pulled out the envelope, trying to prevent Astra from seeing the blood spatter, though it was too late. She stepped back as Noah slammed the drawer shut. “Here, sweetie. Sit down in one of the chairs. We’re here with you.”

She allowed them to escort her to a red chair, not her father’s, and sat. The envelope was a plain ivory colour, with his personal wax stamp on it, but there were no emotions on the envelope, which was unusual. Steadying herself, she broke the seal.

She wasn’t sure who was screaming -- herself or her father, but either way, there was only pain, betrayal, and an all-consuming anger that she’d never felt before. Inhaling through her mouth, she breathed shallowly while trying to increase her shielding against the psychic onslaught. “Help!” she cried as she started to slide off the chair toward the floor.

Timeon grabbed her first and sat her on his lap. His arms wrapped around her while Noah barked orders. “We need a cleanser, now! She’s a class-ten, and her father knew that! Now, dammit!”

As a policeman rushed to grab the empathic cleanser who could handle the emotions and filter them, Noah took the paper away, scanning the words on the page. “Timeon, keep her safe. I’m going to get this out of here.”

“Just get it away from Astra,” Timeon grunted as he stroked her hair.

She looked at Noah. “He hated me. Always. He knew --”

“Not one word, Astra. I know what he wrote, but I’m blocking myself from the emotions. I’m not as high a class, so my shielding is more effective. Just concentrate on Timeon.”

She watched Noah stalk out of the room, then turned her attention to Timeon. She looked at his golden hair and thought about how it made him look like Iji incarnate,

complete with the compassionate look he was giving her. He placed a finger over her open mouth in a comforting, loving gesture.

“Shh, don’t talk. Just let me comfort you,” he whispered, his finger lightly tracing her lips as she felt warmth envelop her, separating her from her father’s last emotions. The pounding, palpable emotions were receding, letting her inhale deeply.

“How could one man --”

“Shh, not now, Astra. Relax. Get your shielding back up to normal.” He pulled her closer, stroking her hair and back. “Any being is capable of much emotion. You know that. That he hid it from a class-ten empath means he was carrying a suppressor often.”

“But why? Why around me? What was he so afraid of? Me finding out that he hated me? He basically showed me that with how he treated me. I don’t understand, Timeon. Why hate me so much?”

“Darling, it’s not just you he hated, but all of the Crysomarks, especially your mother and Verona,” Noah stated from the doorway, the letter dangling from his fingertips. “I’ve had the emotions downgraded to a manageable level, but since they’re embedded, you will feel them while reading it.”

“I don’t want to read it, Noah. Not with what it did.”

“Yes, you do, Astra,” he responded firmly, dropping to the floor when he was close to her. “Trust me, you need to know this information. So does Verona. Do you understand me?”

Astra lifted her gaze to his, inhaling as she saw his intense look. There was something he wanted to say to her telepathically, but while there were others in the room and intense emotions lingering in the air, he wouldn’t risk it. There was no choice; she had to read the damned letter.

“Yes. Give it to me. Just don’t leave.”

“We won’t.” Noah handed her the letter and placed his hand on her thigh, warming her skin and her soul with the gentle, loving touch.

With suddenly numb fingers, Astra unfolded the letter completely and felt a whiff of emotion, the acrid taste of bitterness. Licking her lips, she inhaled slowly, then exhaled, making sure she centered herself.

Dear Astra Crysomark,

You thought that by insulting me publicly, you removed me from the equation that runs Crysocorp, but I made it the success it was; no one else. It was I who harnessed your talent in receiving and your degree in electronics, which helped to push us to the forefront of empathic equipment both for and against empaths. But never think that I owe you or thank you. Because of you, you cost me both my life and my dignity.

Just know this, daughter of Allista, you are not my child -- you aren't mine. I never wanted you or what you represented, but you were part of the package in order to get what I deserved. Empaths like you should be destroyed at birth, as your anomalies make those who can never reach or breed to that capacity seem inept and nothing. You make it harder for us to do what needs to be done. Had it not been for Allista and Verona, I'd have killed you when you first showed your skills at age two. You and others like you are an abomination and should've been removed, but your mother and Sedonia said that you should be treated well and brought up with new rules.

But I did have the last laugh. Having bought off a technician, I managed to skew your testing, and now no one knows what you're truly capable of. And if you try for a test anywhere else, you'll be considered a fraud or to be hiding from the government -- punishable by isolation and jail. That will serve you and your family right. The fact that I was never completely accepted by the rest of the Crysomarks will be paid in full when the corporation fails without me.

I'm told I can either live in shame or die with dignity. I choose to die a death that causes you and the others the most trouble. That's the least I deserve. Everything I've strived for has been taken away, and I will never forgive nor forget.

With distaste and hate,

Giles Polgarde-Crysomark

Astra stared at the paper in shock before dropping it. Noah snatched it and handed it over to the police while Astra stood there, trying to comprehend the nuances of the letter. She recognized her father's flair for coding as well as the presence of hidden meanings behind sentences. Rubbing her head, she stepped forward, only to collide with Noah.

"Let's go home, Astra," he said softly.

Having no words, she nodded, allowing both men to escort her. If she had been asked her thoughts on that moment in her father's office, she'd have told anyone that her thoughts had stopped the moment the drawer was opened. The implications were staggering, something she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle alone, or even with help. But what choice was there?

Astra didn't remember much of the ride home, just that the brothers attempted to engage her in conversation. She thought she responded, but her mind was working the puzzle of the letter. It seemed so straightforward, but she knew her father better than anyone else. There was something more to the letter, something that was evading her grasp. When she got the key, then she'd be able to unlock the other message that he'd encoded for her eyes only. His hate was still clinging to her skin, but knowing it was out in the open instead of hidden was a relief, not a burden. She'd never had any illusions regarding her father, but this banished any lingering thoughts of love.

When they reached her home, Flit and Verona greeted them all at the door. Timeon took her to the living room and made her lie down while he and Noah accompanied Verona to the kitchen to get food and drinks. Flit beeped near her head, which she barely responded to. The computer was one of the few individuals she could count on to be there at her side, but right now, she wasn't sure anything could be that devout. There was something ... "Flit, can you do a correlation for me?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"I'll ignore that you said that, Flit. Please correlate the following for known codes used by my father." She rattled off the entire note, word for word, and impressed the emotions with each word. "Please search his database, as well, for codes."

"Are you authorizing me --"

"Yes, Flit. Use the backdoor codes to unlock my father's files. I want the code to undo that letter." She grunted as she lay back down on the couch.

"Yes, Lady Astra. I'll retrieve the necessary data, and when I'm finished, I'll make a copy translation as well as give you the plasti form."

"Thanks, Flit. Make sure you take time out for a recharge and for some rest."

"As you wish, Lady Astra."

She watched the floating computer leave the living room as the men entered with two trays of food and drinks. "Feeding an army?"

"Three empaths. What's the flying ball up to?" Timeon teased as he set his tray on a nearby table and sat in the chair to her left.

She chuckled. "Flit is doing some work for me."

"I see," Noah noted. "Anything we should know about?"

"Nope, not unless it pans out. Just some personal stuff."

"Sounds dull," Timeon kidded as he handed her a sandwich. "How are you feeling?"

She smiled as she took the sandwich. It was her favourite kind. “I’m okay. A bit weak, a bit overwhelmed, but okay otherwise. Things that I had always wondered on are now answered, though there are some more questions.”

The guys said nothing, instead biting into their thick sandwiches. Together the three of them sat and enjoyed the filling food. It seemed that Verona had had some idea about just how draining going to the company would be for her and them. Astra took another bite of her sandwich and chewed on it contentedly. The connection between her and the brothers seemed so strong, so right, that she wasn’t sure how she had lived without these two men her entire life. But even that thought made her wonder. There was something in the emotions that her father had broadcasted, even muted, that hinted at something about her birth that wasn’t normal. But what? Did it really matter what he thought? Could it be true?

A whisper of lips brushed her neck, and she shivered. Timeon smiled at her, his lips near her cheek now. “What are you thinking? You seem a bit concerned. You’re radiating some emotions, love.”

“I’m not a broadcaster,” she responded, reaching for her drink. “How many times do I need to remind you of that?”

“You promised us you’d come to our place and be tested. I think you need to see the truth for yourself, Astra. You can broadcast, and do so strongly,” Noah countered. “We can ask Verona to assist.”

“We can do it here, if you wish,” Verona said from the doorway. The three of them looked up at her, not surprised by her timely entrance. “I’ve managed to rebuild our system at the main house, undoing the crap that Giles had done to it. You’ve been given false reports, Astra.”

“He hinted as much,” she said, fear clutching her stomach. “From the note, I don’t think he ever let me have a normal test.”

“You did as a child of two. After that, no. He fought your mother, saying he wanted his child to be somewhere they could watch over the testing. Because she loved him, she let him overrule her in that one area.”

“Thank you, Verona. I do have a testing machine in my laboratory. I’m not sure if it’s been tampered with since I retrieved it from one of our northern relatives and had it upgraded without Father’s knowledge.”

“Most likely it’s not. But at least I can check it over. I’ll have Flit let me in. You three need to talk about things.” With that, the Trifecta leader left the room.

Astra looked at Noah, then Timeon. “What is there to speak on?”

The men shared a look, annoying Astra. Their tendency to speak mentally to each other while not to her made her angry. She hated being left out, even if it was a private conversation. She wanted to know what they were thinking.

“Our feelings for you, Astra.” Timeon took her hand and kissed her inner wrist. “We’ve known about you for a couple of years, and we’ve lusted for you since we’ve known about you.”

“You two ... lusted ... me? What?” Astra stared at them both. “I don’t understand.”

Noah’s lips captured hers as his hands cupped her breasts. Once he pulled back, he whispered, “Feel your heart racing beneath my palms?” She nodded. “That’s how we’ve felt for you over the past couple of years. When Timeon inherited the title of head of House, we both knew that one day we’d have to find wives. What we discovered was that there was only one woman we wanted -- you.”

“Why me?”

Timeon chuckled. “Why not you? You’re the first daughter of a House that leads the way in handling empaths, as well as in the business in which our company also participates. You seem to have the same moral background we do, and you are a strong empath, both receiving and broadcasting, even if you were unaware that you could broadcast. You

fascinated us from the first, Astra. No other woman has measured up to you, and trust us, we tried to fall for others before realizing it was only you.”

She felt her mouth drop open, realizing that she’d had no idea that anyone saw her as desirable. Before them, she had just figured she was untouchable, as no man had ever asked to date her. She’d only had the assigned drones, who wouldn’t incite emotion or anything else within her to obscure her empathic ability. But here were men who wanted her, desired her, and it seemed they wanted more than just sex with her.

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve thought a lot about you both since that night in the garden, but I hadn’t realized that you knew me before that.”

“We begged Pillar to introduce us to you. We wanted your attention before the damn merger. The past few events you were supposed to attend, you didn’t,” Timeon pointed out.

She sipped her drink before answering. The idea that they had gone out of their way to attract her attention left her feeling flattered. “I didn’t attend because most times those functions drive me nuts.”

“Understandable. We feel the same way.” Noah took her cup from her, then turned her so she faced him. His hands cupped her cheeks, and his forehead touched hers. “But we wanted to know you before this. We wanted to make contact so you’d not think we wanted you because of the merger. You don’t think that do you?”

“No! Oh, my gods above, no! I know you’re keeping business separate from private. I never would’ve thought you guilty of anything like that,” she answered, surprise lacing her voice.

“Good. Let’s go to bed, dearling,” Noah whispered as his mouth brushed hers. “I want to love you alone tonight. Timeon can watch us, but right now, I want to make you mine alone, just as I know Timeon will do another time.”

“Yes, I want you, too.”

“Good. Timeon will follow along shortly.”

He led her out of the living room and up the stairs. Without any mental hints, he guided her directly to her bedroom, shutting the door almost completely. With a smile, Noah pulled her close and kissed her, this time not sparing her any of his emotions. She felt his passion for her, his desire, his love as it surrounded her, touched her, enveloped her with a heat that she easily returned.

Sliding her hands over his shoulders, she allowed herself the luxury of stroking his silky black hair. “You feel wonderful,” she whispered.

“I think you feel much better, but I’m biased,” he softly teased as he nipped her bottom lip, suckling it gently. “I want to take you, Astra. Make you mine.”

“I ... I am yours, Noah.”

“No, my love. I want you to submit to me.”

“Submit?” She pulled back, her fingers tugging gently on his hair. “What do you mean?”

Noah stroked the side of her cheek with the back of his hand. “Do you trust me not to harm you, Astra?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Then submit to me. Be my love slave. Let me control you here, at this moment in time.”

“Control me?” Her eyes widened in understanding. “You want me to be like the *pt’ahavshas*?”

“Yes. Be mine to command. Not always, only once in a while.”

“Will I be able to ask this of you in return?” The thought of having him as her love slave, forcing him to pleasure her or denying him pleasure, thrilled her. The idea of him under her command made her pussy clench in desire.

“Yes, but not tonight, my love. Tonight, I wish you to be my *pt’ahavsha*.”

"I ... I accept," she whispered against his lips, allowing herself this last act of control. "I am your slave tonight, Master."

"Good. Now. Go stand at the foot of your bed and remove that garment." His voice was a bit hard, but not scary.

Moving to do as he commanded, Astra glanced back and noticed him smiling at her. Something inside her realized that he wanted this to be as pleasurable for her as it was for him. Tonight would be their first physical experience, and he wanted to make sure that it was special. Taking off her dress, she leaned against the post of her bed, knowing it made her look slightly disrespectful of his commands. She wondered how far she could push him before he became rough. The idea of him overpowering her had her on the edge of an orgasm already. Her inner thighs were already damp from the thought.

"What are you doing, Astra-*chara*? I told you to stand, not recline," Noah said, taking four short steps to face her. The look on his face was one that to anyone else would've been frightening. It just turned her on further.

"I don't take orders lightly, Noah-*kas*. You may be my Master, but you've not mastered me."

"But I shall, *chara*, my slave. Now, stand up straight so I can inspect you thoroughly." His eyes hardened as she stood taller. "You may not touch me unless I command it, and you *will* obey my every order. Do you understand?"

Her chin tilted as she spoke. "I hear you, sir. However, I'm not just any *pt'ahavsha*. I don't bend to the whim of just any man, only those who deserve it."

A chuckle startled them both. Timeon gestured for them to continue as he entered the room. "Sorry, I see I came at the right time." He circled past his brother and to the other side of Astra. He moved swiftly, claiming a hard, punishing kiss, then moved away toward the recliner chair that sat in the corner of the room. "I'm going to enjoy your submission, Astra. Truly I am."

She glanced defiantly at both men. *I know they're not serious about me being their love slave, but they obviously take themselves seriously when they enter this sex-play mode. Can I handle this?* As she watched, Timeon sat back in her black velvet recliner and undid his pants, his semi-erect cock visible. Licking her lips, she turned back toward Noah.

"I understand that you wish me to capitulate, Noah-*kas*. I will not make it easy for you."

His hands captured hers, raising her arms above her head. "Oh, I don't expect you to make it easy, *chara*. Not at all, that's what makes your conquest, your surrender, even sweeter. Kiss me, Astra."

Quickly, she leaned forward and, without touching him anywhere else, kissed him chastely. She wanted more, but now was not the time to give in to that. The goal was to see if he could really make her want to submit to his will. It was a challenge, one that made her wetter, hotter, and needier than she'd ever thought possible.

"There you go, my lord," she smirked. "A kiss, just as you asked."

"So hard to get," he whispered into her hair, his hand stroking up one arm. "But so easily conquered." His laugh caught her attention as she felt his touch tugging not just her skin, but her emotions.

Looking up, she noticed that he had wrapped a silken cord around her wrist. He pulled downward and tied it low, around her waist. Before she could react, he grabbed her other wrist and did the same to it. Then he pushed on her shoulders, forcing her to her knees.

"You will learn to submit to me, Astra-*chara*. Only in giving up control can you feel safe with me. Knowing and trusting in me fully," he whispered. "Submit to me, Astra. Submit, and let me take care of you as I know you'll care for me."

Oh, how she wanted to give in. Gods above and below, she craved to just let him have his way with her, but there was something inside her that said that by holding back, she'd experience more when she surrendered fully to him. Something that would quiet that noisy

part in her soul that cried out for submission. The part she never acknowledged or gave voice to except with her illicit reading material, banned to all empaths.

“No. I won’t willingly submit, Noah. You’ll earn it, or you won’t.” She looked up into his face; amazed at the play of emotions he let her see. Swallowing, she continued. “Though submission would be easy, it would be easily denied. Earn it, and you shall have it always.”

“Always? This you swear?” His voice dropped to a husky whisper.

“Yes. I swear this, always and forever.” And she meant it truly with her soul. If he earned it, she would willingly submit to him when he asked, but only in the bedroom.

“Then I shall earn your submission. But by doing so, you will earn my domination for those times when you resist me.” Noah pulled off his shirt, tossing it to the side while toeing off his boots. Within moments, his pants and underwear joined the pile of discarded clothing.

His cock stood tall, showcased by the thatch of midnight curls. She wanted to touch him, but her hands were still tied. She drank in the sight of his naked form and knew that the empathic image she possessed of him was no lie. Desire pooled low in her belly as she warred with the urge to lean forward and flick the purplish tip with her tongue. She knew it drove him crazy, but she couldn’t give in. Not yet.

“Now, my sweet, darling *chara*, you shall pleasure my dick with your mouth.”

“I shall not.” *Gods above, I want to. I want to lick it, nibble it, and suck on it until he moans for release.*

His hand closed over the length while his other cupped the back of her head. Guiding his cock to her lips, he whispered, “You know you want to taste me, Astra. Even my scent calls to you, turns you on. I can feel you tremble at my touch. Suck on me.”

There was a slight pressure against her lips, and with a soft sigh, she gave in to her wants. He was right. She wanted to suck him and pleasure him. Though he was putting his

pleasure first, she had willingly agreed to this sex play. Opening her mouth, she felt the head of his cock slide past her lips.

Flicking her tongue across it, she loved how it jumped at her playful touch. Softly, she brushed her tongue around the edge of the bulb, enjoying the taste and sensation. His appreciative moan made her happy, and she eased her mouth forward, taking in more of his length.

“Gods above, woman, your mouth is divine,” Noah moaned as his hands slid through her hair.

She leaned into him and took him further in her mouth. The taste was male, musky, and delicious. Never before had she gone down on a man, but she had always wanted to. With her hands restrained, she trusted he wouldn’t push himself too far and gag her. His lust for her shimmered across her body and ignited her further. Letting go of her inhibitions, she pulled back, then quickly moved forward, taking as much of him as she dared into her mouth, cupping her lips tightly around his thick cock.

“Slow down, love. Slow down, or you’ll make me come too soon.” Noah panted as he tried to slow down Astra’s hunger. “Patience, my sweet.”

She hummed as her mouth enveloped his full length, loving how he jerked in response. Suddenly, his cock was out of her mouth. Whimpering, she looked up at him. “Was I doing it wrong, Noah-*kas?*”

“No, my darling. You were just wonderful, but I’m not going to come in your mouth. Not this time.” He untied her hands and, holding on to the cords, led her up onto the bed.

She followed him, and when he moved her so she was in the center of her large bed, she tugged at the bonds as he retied first one hand, then the other. A moment of panic filled her. “I want out.”

“No, my lady, you don’t. You may not admit it, but you want this as much as I want to do this to you.”

“Do what to me?” Her voice softened, and she felt her eyes widen in worry.

“Make you scream as you climax multiple times and beg me to fuck you until you can’t think of your name,” he whispered as his hand slid down her naked body to one ankle, fastening it to one post with another cord that his brother handed him. Then he tied the other, making sure that escape wasn’t an option for her.

Astra knew she should scream for help or tell Noah she couldn’t do this. Only, she really did want this. Though she was stretched out completely and at his mercy, there was a part of her that craved this moment with him. No empath was allowed this kind of experience. It was simply lie down, open legs, drone comes in and lies between the legs, rubs a bit as he shoves his cock in, and then it’s done and over with. But this -- this wasn’t like anything that she had ever been allowed to do before. Anticipation filled her, as well as the realization that she wanted this more than anything before in her life.

“This won’t hurt my abilities?” she asked breathlessly, her mind grasping at one final straw of sanity.

“No. My brother, because of how his skills work, can draw off the excess emotion, love,” Noah answered as he slid onto the bed. “But I might let you wallow with the emotions for quite a while before I have him take the overload from you. I have a feeling that when you hit that point, nothing will stop you from enjoying the feeling.”

She flashed him an encouraging smile. They had obviously done this before and wouldn’t hurt her, or let her career be hurt. *Thank the gods above!* She tugged at her restraints, noting that they didn’t hurt, just kept her from moving her arms and legs. Then she noticed that Noah was crawling toward her -- stalking her, really. Her body clenched in anticipation. What would he do to her? Would this be anything like what they’d shared on the astral plane?

“Anticipation builds up within you,” he whispered across her belly, his fingers drawing designs over the softly rounded flesh. “I can feel you tremble at my touch.”

“Why are you teasing me?”

“Oh, this is nothing, Astra-*chara*, compared to what I plan to do.” His grin was wild, feral, and sent spiraling heat into her pussy.

“Oh.” There wasn’t anything else to say, but her imagination worked overtime.

His fingers slid down her bare mons and gently caressed her outer lips. Her hips bucked, wanting him to touch her more. “Are you giving in, Astra? Will you submit to me?”

Hesitating, she wondered if giving in would give her what she wanted. Then she realized that the sex play would help heighten the intensity and the results of their joining.

“No. I won’t submit!”

“We’ll see, princess. We’ll see.” Noah chuckled as he bent closer and parted her lips. Then puffs of air hit her clit, making her even wetter for him. It would have been embarrassing if it weren’t for the fact that she couldn’t stop wiggling, couldn’t stop moving. She wanted more, dammit, and he wasn’t playing fair!

“No, dear, I don’t play fair. But you’re also not submitting.” Noah continued to blow against her clit while his fingers stroked her from top to bottom. He looked up from between her thighs and smiled at her. “You seem to like this. You’re wet for me.”

Astra said nothing. She couldn’t lie. It was true. But she wanted those fingers in her deeply. Then her wish came true as one of his fingers slid deep into her cunt, easing some of the ache. It whirled around in her, caressing her muscles and teasing that one aching spot without soothing it. Arching her hips, she wanted to force him to do more.

She screamed as his mouth captured her clit, pulling on it tightly. Shudders ran up and down her body as she exploded in a hard climax. But Noah kept sucking, nibbling, not letting her catch her breath as he continued to tease her hardened clitoris. Another finger joined the first deep in her pussy in a quick in-out rhythm. She thrust her hips to match the rhythm his fingers set, but his mouth hummed, breaking her into another climax.

Gasping for air, she tried to speak, but could only moan as Noah's teeth rasped her clit, tugging it again, forcing another climax to shake her body while it yearned to be filled completely, not partially with his fingers. "Noah!"

He paused and looked at her, his face gleaming with her juices. "Yes, Astra-*chara*?"

"Please. Your cock. I need --" She moaned as his thumb caressed her clit while a drenched finger slid easily into her anus. "I need you to fuck me."

"Do you submit?"

"I ... I don't know. How can I submit when I can't think?"

A moan distracted her, and she saw Timeon stroking himself. She noticed a small drip of pre-cum on the tip, which he then stroked down with his thumb. "Iji's cock, Astra, you look beautiful spread like that," he moaned.

"Timeon, so hot, so damn hot you are," she whimpered as Noah lightly bit the inside of her left thigh. "Oh, gods, Noah, fuck me!"

"Submit," he insisted, slowly licking up her mons, thrusting his fingers deep within her cunt and ass. "Submit, and I'll fuck you like you want, Astra."

"Tell me how!" Astra moaned as his teeth clamped onto one tightly budded nipple. "Noah!"

"Submit, Astra," Timeon groaned, walking toward her. "Submit. I want to hear you scream when my brother fucks you."

Astra fought the words until Timeon's mouth took her other nipple tightly. Questing fingers caressed her cunt, sliding in and out. As her next orgasm rocked her, she heard herself scream, "*I submit!*"

Did she groan, or was it them? She wasn't sure, but then she felt herself being turned slightly as a warm male body slid under her a bit and Noah kissed her lips.

"Your submission means so much," Noah growled as his cock nudged her soaking entrance. With a quick thrust, he sent her back over the edge.

“Noah!” She arched into him, trying to get more, but a pair of hands pulled her hips down, sliding Timeon’s cock into her ass. “Gods, yes!”

The three of them moved in time, just as they had empathically. Each time Noah pulled almost completely out of her, Timeon thrust his cock deep into her ass. Then the rhythm reversed, Noah driving in deep and Timeon slowly withdrawing. Astra gasped as she tried grabbing them both, kissing Timeon deeply as she turned her head.

Repeatedly, they entered her and exited, the rhythm increasing until Astra couldn’t handle it anymore. Her body pulsed with passion and desire. The love she had for these two men exploded from her as she cried their names. Noah followed her, his whisper of her name a caress on her soul as his dick sent his semen deep within her squeezing cunt.

“Astra, *mij vrostra*, my wife love!” Timeon moaned into her ear as his cock spurted deeply into her channel.

Moments passed as the three of them communed empathically, their minds merging, sharing feelings, thoughts, and sensations before slowly coming back into themselves. Their breaths were all in harmony, before each of them splintered off into their individual patterns, gasping greedily for air. Noah kissed the corner of her mouth as he rolled onto his side, undoing one of her bonds as Timeon released the other hand.

Before she could move, she was out of the restraints and cemented firmly between two hard male bodies. Astra smiled happily at Noah before turning to give Timeon a grin as well. “I love you both,” she whispered softly as sleep captured her.

“We love you, too,” both men replied as they surrendered to the goddess of sleep.

Chapter Six

Astra woke to snoring. It was a slightly baritone noise, just off-key enough to jar her out of a sound sleep. Trying to roll to her left, she found herself face-to-face with Timeon's sleeping body, his hand still cupping her breast. Softly she kissed him, then slid his hand from around her breast. Carefully, she moved Noah's hand off her hip and made her way to the end of the bed.

Looking at the sleeping men, Astra wondered at her luck, having two men who loved her and cherished her above anything else. Her heart felt complete, knowing that they chose her and that she reciprocated the feelings. Seeing that they still slept, she grabbed her robe, wrapped it around herself, and headed downstairs. She could get food and then return to wake both men up.

Descending the stairs, she heard voices in the kitchen. Checking the clock, she realized that it was way too early for even Verona to be around. Sliding her hand against the wall, she stealthily made her way closer. Seeing Flit, she shook her head and put one finger to her lips. Flit said nothing, but hovered to one side, out of sight. Whatever he wanted to tell her had to wait.

“Don’t you understand? She and the twins are perfect for each other,” a familiar voice stated. *Verona? What is she doing here this early?*

“Because you created that need artificially! Verona, don’t you think this should be their choice? All three of them?” The woman’s voice was a bit high, but cultured.

“The need is not artificial. They are allowed choice. But they were created in order to be perfect for each other if they found themselves attracted.”

“What do you mean?” the cultured woman asked. *Yeah, what do you mean, Aunt Verona?*

“Free will. They always had free will.”

Is that true? Or are we somehow being manipulated to love each other?

“Including my sons? Did they choose Astra of their own free will, or because of manipulation to provide the next step for the destiny of both our Houses?” The woman’s voice seemed harder, but hopeful as well. *What the fuck is going on? Is that their mother?*

“Timeon and Noah were genetically engineered to have certain proclivities, like wanting a high-level empath. It augments them and completes their own talents. Astra feels secure with them because of her own needs. Most are her own; a couple are genetic in nature, to ensure that if they met, there would be awareness and attraction.”

“But this need for each other -- is it their own? I must know this, Valinora!”

“Keep your voice down, Kaledonia. Your sons sleep with my part-daughter. And yes, this is their own choosing. There was always a chance of them not wanting or falling for each other. Yes, they would’ve been close friends, but not lovers. That choice was theirs, and theirs alone. The genetics we all agreed to would only help them to their fullest,” Verona explained. “The manipulation would give them the greatest use of their potential and skills, taking advantage of their mutations and allowing them to ascend to higher political levels to institute changes that I can’t. Remember, I’m the token empath in the Trifecta. I can have some say, but always are the other two wary of mental-emotional manipulation!”

The woman sighed as Astra resisted the urge to storm in and demand answers. *Dammit, I need more information. What if we're just programmed to want each other? Granted, Verona said we have free choice, but how free is free? Come on, I need more info! What is this destiny you all plotted for me, Noah, and Timeon?*

"I know, Valinora. Hell, most of us class-tens and above have to hide the extent of our power. Now you tell me that Astra is untrained in her ability to broadcast because that ass Giles decided to make her believe she was only a receiver?"

"She trained herself, but yes, she's unaware. I don't doubt her level is at least a class-ten. I know her receiving is above that, but the machines are set to do only to ten, at least the ones where she gets tested regularly. Just as Noah and Timeon are above that in broadcast and receiving. The issue is the secondary abilities. Those she needs to be trained in, and only your sons can do that."

I need them? It's not my choice? Can't think. I must go! Astra's thoughts raced as she quietly left moved away. Pulling her robe tighter together, she tried to think of where she could go. Leaving here had to be immediate. Flit followed her as she made her way toward the front door.

Astra? What's wrong, sweetie? Timeon's voice was sleepy.

Nothing, Timeon. I got thirsty and am getting a drink. I tripped on a rug. You want anything?

Sure. Bring something for Noah when he wakes up. Hurry up; the bed is cold without you.

I'll be up in a minute.

She hated to lie, but what other choice was there? Astra signed to Flit exactly what she wanted and needed. It blinked a flashing code at her and she resigned two items. Then she added, *Do this, Flit. It's a command.* The little robot floated away, but she knew it was upset and disappointed.

There was no choice. She had to know if she'd chosen them for them, or if, because of their genetic compatibility, they were made to love each other. She opened the front door, walked out, and silently closed it behind her. As she did so, her vehicle, in whisper mode, floated out to the front of the house. *Thanks, Flit. I wish I could take you with me, but you'd wax poetic about Verona and the guys. I don't need that right now.*

She climbed into her car and shut the door. As she sat back, she rattled off three destinations. First things first: the main house. She still had clothes there, and taking those for this trip seemed the easiest route, since the other alternative meant facing the men. The car smoothly took off and went through the gateway without a hitch. But there was one hitch, and she felt it keenly. Already she craved and missed Noah and Timeon. They would be furious when they awoke and found her gone. Tabbing a contact to Flit, she sent him instructions on how to handle both men and her aunt. Once that was done, she exhaled as she tried to let go of the emotions that threatened to consume her.

* * * * *

Timeon's eyes fluttered open as he reached for Astra. She still wasn't back. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to focus on the doorway. Something flitted about, back and forth. Pushing himself up to a sitting position, he poked his brother. "Noah, wake up. Something's wrong."

"Go away. Tired. Sleeping. You die."

"Noah, wake up! Astra didn't come back up to bed."

His brother's eyes opened suddenly, and he looked around. "What do you mean, she didn't come back up? What's going on?"

"The last thing I remember before I fell back asleep was a sense that Astra was upset or startled. When I contacted her mentally, she said she was in the kitchen getting a drink, so I fell asleep before she got back. But now, I don't think she is. Take a look at who's pacing in the doorway."

Noah's eyes slid to the door where Flit zipped back and forth. "Flit, where's Astra?"

“Thank gods you and Master Timeon awoke, Sir Noah. I’ve got news; I’m upset. She left me behind!”

“What? Start over, Flit.”

“I have a message for you and Master Timeon,” Flit intoned formally. Then, after a series of beeps, Astra’s voice came through.

“I’m sorry, Noah and Timeon. I have to go away for a few days. When I went to get a drink, I overheard Verona and your mother talking about us and that our attraction might not be natural, but genetically built. Because of this, I need time away. My father will be buried in three days. I will see neither of you, nor my aunt, during that time. Don’t look for me. Flit has no clue, and we know that an empath can blend in.” Her voice wobbled with emotions that both men picked up on. *“Don’t think you can trace money chits, either. When I was younger, I had aspirations of being a spy, so I created false identities and pocketed money away for them. Finding Mistress Astra of House Crysomark will be impossible. I -- I want to tell you that I love you, but right now, I don’t know if it’s love from my heart and soul, or love created in a laboratory. Hopefully time away will help me to figure out which it is. End transmission.”*

Timeon didn’t want to believe it. She’d up and left them. What was this nonsense about their mother being in the house? He climbed out of bed and put on his underwear and pants. Noah was doing the same while asking Flit questions about Astra’s plans. While the machine denied any knowledge except that the first stop was the main Crysomark home, it tried to postulate about where she might head.

“Let’s find Verona. There’s got to be a mistake,” Noah growled, all sleep gone from his voice.

“What if it’s true, brother? What if what she overheard was truly said?”

“Then we get answers. I won’t stand for this. I love Astra. Period. Not because of genetics, but because she’s a wonderful person and the gods meant for her to be mine.”

Timeon said nothing as he made his way downstairs. Though he agreed with Noah's sentiment, he wondered if the gods meant for them to be marriage mates, or if it were the families. They entered the kitchen in time to see two backs walking out the door.

"Stop! Mother! Verona!" Noah ran and grabbed at the one that flinched. Turning the purple-covered figure, he gaped. "So it *is* you, Mom. What the hell are you doing here?"

The blue-hooded figure turned around and placed a hand over his. "Step back, Noah. What do you want? Your mother came by because she hadn't heard from you or your brother for a while. She called me privately, and I explained that you spent the night here comforting Astra. Being your mother, she had to be sure you both were here. Once she was satisfied with that, she was leaving. Why?"

Timeon stepped forward, shaking his head. "You're lying, Verona. I can hear it. You forget just how well you genetically engineered us. Which is why Astra left the house." The shock on Verona's face let him know that Astra had gone about it unseen, even with all the technology that made this home complete.

"How?"

"She overheard what you two were talking about. Flit?"

The small machine flew into view. "Yes, Master Timeon?"

"Repeat Astra's message to Noah and me." Noah came to stand at his side. Timeon put an arm on his brother's shoulder, sending him reassurance.

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to play the message Astra left for her aunt, as well?"

"Definitely."

Flit played the initial message the men had heard, and Timeon tamped down his brother's anger while also controlling his own. That was part of his skill, taking the excess of any emotion that could harm an empath's ability and siphoning it away. Today would test him to the max, he feared.

Once that message was delivered, Flit shimmied a bit and, after a three-toned beep, began the second message, directed to Verona. Timeon figured this one was not going to be liked by anyone.

“Aunt Verona, she who is Valinora, first Trifecta leader, true head of House Crysomark, I hate you. Right now, in my life, I should be sorrowing over the death of a father who hated me because of who I am. I should be in bed with the two men who love me. But I’m not. Why? Because I don’t know if your genetic manipulation made me love them, or if they love me because it’s from the soul. There’s no way to tell, is there? The yearning, the need -- it can easily be a genetic derivative since we sexually joined. So, how do I know if this is really the love that you, my mother, and the two men you both married with had? I can’t.” Astra’s voice broke, and small sob escaped. *“I hate you for this. I wanted to believe that I was loved for me, not for some stupid genetic code in my body. I overheard you and Kaledonia speaking in the kitchen. Their mother is right in wondering if it’s free will or not. You taught me that empaths deserved to have full rights under Peruthian law, just like those who aren’t empaths. Yet you enslaved three souls to your own ideals and for your own ends, regardless of their unborn feelings and needs. How do you live with yourself? How do you justify forcing this upon us? Had you asked me to carry forth your legacy freely, I would’ve done it. But now ... now, I’m not sure I want to acknowledge any bond with you, Aunt. I’ve gone into hiding. Don’t send your people after me. We both know I know how to hunt and kill those bots better than anyone. I’ll be back in time for my father’s funeral. You’d better clear the air with Noah and Timeon. End transmission.”*

Flit beeped, then fell silent. No one said anything. Nothing more had to be said. A class-ten empath had run away. The newly chosen head of House Crysomark had disappeared. Worse, because of her skills, no one except the best trained would be able to find her. And even then, due to her genetic code, she might escape them. Timeon rubbed his brow, glaring at Verona and his mother.

“Talk. Explain. But gods above, you best find a way to prove this is not the result of genetic manipulation. Because if it is, there is no place on this world that will hide you,” he growled.

Verona wiped away the one tear that slowly slid down her face. Her stance seemed firm, determined, but Timeon saw that she was upset by this news. Things hadn’t gone the way she’d planned, he observed. Their eyes met, hers so much like those of the woman he loved. “I didn’t realize she overheard us. None of you were to know.”

“Did you think us so stupid that we wouldn’t consider it a possibility? Especially with everything Astra’s father put her through?” Noah roared, stepping forward. Timeon’s hand grabbed his arm and squeezed. Noah stepped back. “We’re not fucking idiots. You saw to that, Verona!”

Kaledonia pushed back her hood, her eyes taking them all in. “You have no idea what was going on when you all were conceived. Do you know that empaths have only had such a luxury status within our society because of the work of Verona and our small group? Do you? Did you know that had you both been born and tested under the old laws, you’d have been taken from us and trained to be as emotional as automatons? Did you know that because of Verona, we managed to get legislation pushed in order to guarantee the rights of empaths? That only those who tested with unusual mental abilities and above class-ten were to be taken, because there were those who still considered psi talents a weapon and an abomination? Do you have any fucking clue what it was like for your father and me to hide our talents to the point where we can’t access them anywhere near like you both can?”

Timeon stood his ground as his mother advanced on each point. Noah backed away. Passing words, conversations that stopped, phone calls cut -- all poured into his head, and he processed it all with this new information. “When did the new laws get passed to protect all empaths?”

“After you were conceived. Because of our status and abilities, we worried that if we had children, they’d be forced into suppressing any unique talent, thus losing it for further

generations. Talents, no matter how unusual, are not a crime and should be allowed to flourish. Diversity is a good thing, regardless of what other idiots in the Prefects say.”

Noah cleared his throat. “Wait a minute. What you’re saying is that these genetic manipulations --”

“Were nothing more than making sure that your innate talents, unique or not, wouldn’t be suppressed but would respond to training. The hardest part was making sure that they wouldn’t flair up and reveal themselves during the mandatory testing for all children at age seven,” Verona stated.

Timeon rubbed his temple, taking it all in. “What modifications did you make to us, Verona? Honest. We need honesty if we’re to face Astra afterwards. She will be the one who must be convinced. You at least have us here to show her the truth.”

“Let’s get out of the garden. My quarters are near her laboratory. I can show you all the things that have been done -- and not just to you both and Astra.” Verona turned away and walked inside.

Reluctantly, Kaledonia turned. Noah stomped after Verona while Timeon faced his mother. He took her hand and walked with her. “I do love you, Mom. I just need to understand this.”

“I know. I wanted to make sure that you both chose Astra freely and that it wasn’t part of the genetic manipulation. Verona assured me it wasn’t. I had just seen the paperwork and planned on leaving well enough alone when you spotted us. Please believe me, son. We wanted you all to have chances that no empaths in our world had prior.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. My twin sister was taken from me when we were eight.”

Timeon stopped walking. “What?”

“That’s right; my twin was taken from my side when we were tested, because she had no control over her unique twist on empathic talent. She was a touch telempath, both giving

sensations and receiving. Want to guess what she probably is today?” Kaledonia asked harshly.

“Oh, gods above. I’m sorry, Mom.” He hugged his mother and realized the price she paid, being without her twin. Being without Noah would’ve been unbearable. “You have no clue if she lives or not, do you?”

“No. She and others like her are taken away and never allowed to be close to home. For all I know, she’s in the North Umber area, far from any House Helspawn.” Kaledonia looked away from her son, but not before he saw the glitter of tears.

“We’ll find her.”

“That’s not necessary, son. But make sure no other empath is taken from their family ever again. Come. Verona and Noah wait for us, however impatiently.” She took his hand and squeezed it as they walked inside the house, going down the stairway on the right of the kitchen. “The group we are part of has goals that we wish to achieve, including the true acceptance of empaths among all levels of society. We want laws to protect empaths just as nonempaths are protected. We’re no different from anyone else, though there are many who claim we’ll try to overrun the government or enslave the nonempathic.”

“Oy, that whole thing about meta humans again.” Timeon sighed as they passed through the doorway into Verona’s rooms.

“Exactly,” Verona answered. She stood before a long table, papers in piles everywhere. Noah sat reading a couple, swearing under his breath. “I know you’ve heard of the political group Empathic Positivism. There are ten founders. When we were children, each of us lost family members to the government for their lab-rat experiments. None of us ever saw them again. Our goal was to protect our future and the future of all empaths, including new variations of empaths that might come about.”

“The Emotion Riots of 2042,” Noah growled as he read more papers.

“Yes. But in the end, we had empaths acknowledged as full humans, guaranteed basic status, and no longer as slaves or objects. Since then, we’ve been progressing slowly. Until six years ago, there was no way in Mali’s fire that Timeon would’ve been made head of House.”

“Understood. So what does this all have to do with us and Astra?” Timeon asked as he picked up a few sheets of paper from the stack in front of him and looked at them.

“Because of the testing, children were still taken away if they tested higher than class-ten. This includes unusual, undocumented talents, as well. What we did was make sure you had holds on your gifts so that when tested, they would remain unseen.”

“And?” Noah added. “I know there’s more. These papers show it.”

“We wanted to make sure that the unusual talents wouldn’t be lost. So those in nine of the fifteen major Houses and twelve of the twenty minor Houses had pregnancies that were genetically altered so that once they were adults, they would seek out those like themselves - different -- in order to continue the growth of the gifts our world granted to us.”

“So, it could’ve been anybody we fell for, as long as their genetic code was enhanced?” Noah asked, a growl in his voice as warning.

“No, that’s just it. It was known that you’d form closer ties, but love knows no way to be controlled or tamed. All we did was make it so you’d seek out someone who was able to handle those unusual talents and that it would bring the group of you closer because you all knew you were different on some level. You could’ve fallen just as easily for Dyrna of House Vishnu or even Marcus of House Xerxes. Love has its own needs. The only thing we did was give you a push toward being closer, even if it was just as lovers, with others who had those enhancements,” Verona explained. “There is no way that the genetic code changes could’ve made you fall for Astra. It would predispose you to liking her and finding her attractive, since you could sense her differences, but that’s all.”

Timeon nodded. "So it shows through these lists of genetic manipulation. You hoped that when we came of age, we'd all start to become indispensable to our Houses and start taking steps to being active in government policymaking."

"I lost my sister and my favourite cousin to the government, Timeon. The only way to get change is to make the change within it. How will that happen? By empaths taking their places among the Houses and being active. You all, the twenty-five of you, were given some genetic prodding toward oratorical skills. We can hope you all help change Peruth for the better. There are no guarantees."

"Like the fact that we lost three of the twenty-five to the government, at the very least," Kaledonia whispered.

"Fuck," Noah said. "That's not right. How did they get taken away?"

"They were taken to another facility that wasn't adapted to hide their talents, and something happened," Verona theorized. "We don't know what became of them."

"Any of them female?"

"Yes, two. Why?"

"They're probably *pt'ahavshas*, unless their talents were the type to relegate them somewhere else, since women are often better than men within the *pt'ahavshas* realm. They'd be high-ranking ones, but still," Noah answered for his brother. "It's the easiest way of keeping them under lock and key while still benefiting from their special skills."

"Now we need to figure out how to find Astra and convince her of all this," Timeon sighed as he took a seat. "Hopefully with reading it, we can make a plan to show her the truth. I believe her that had you confided in her, she'd have done this without any other pressure, Verona."

"I know, and I have to live with her hate for the rest of my life. Astra is my daughter, just as she's Allista's, Elijah's, and Giles's. Now she will hate me forever for what was done."

Chapter Seven

A day later, up in the North Umber continent

Astra stood before the small cottage amid the mountains and inhaled the fresh, crisp air. Dressed in jeans, sweater, and boots, she felt like a new person. Well, almost. She missed Noah and Timeon. The feeling hadn't lessened much. In fact, it had increased, knowing that they'd love this northern continent on Peruth.

Coming here had been inspired by need and desperation. Luckily one of her friends from school had kept the family cabin. Though Zyrenia had been a bit taken aback by Astra's call, she'd easily agreed to let her borrow the cabin, what with the news of her father's death and her ascension to head of House. Zyrenia had had a similar thing happen, but hadn't had the revenue to escape further than Astra's home at the time.

"Gods above, this place is beautiful, but chilly," she muttered as she walked down the path, away from where she was staying. Making her way onto the trail, Astra made a solemn oath that the next time she came up this way, she would bring the guys and more amenities. "I'm not a wilderness child. I like my creature comforts. But there is something soothing to this place."

Before she could walk further into the forest, something caressed her cheek, then slowly moved down her throat to the front of her shirt. She stood still and concentrated on picking up where it was coming from. The touch was light and faded, so it was reaching from a distance. But the fact that it was reaching and questing for her had her nervous. Who was it? The guys?

Another caress slid across her covered belly, sliding under her waistband. She tried not to move, not to react. Reacting emotionally let the person know that they had found their target. She closed her eyes and tried not to think. The teasing empathic caresses weren't strong enough to pull her into a trance state, which would have made it easier to find her, but they were enough to set her nerves afire.

"Argh! Hurry up and leave me alone," Astra whimpered as the caresses increased slightly in pressure over her nipples and between her slick folds. Concentrating, she found the tendrils of empathy that connected those caresses back to the people in question. A low growl emanated from her throat. "Oh, want to play long-distance games, do you?"

Concentrating on her newly discovered broadcasting power, she homed in on Noah and Timeon by recalling their astral forms and empathic signatures. When she felt their essences, she mimicked their caresses, adding in some twists. Imagining her mouth on Timeon's cock, she suckled on it empathically while her hands stroked Noah's. The caresses on her body stopped instantly, and with a laugh, Astra pulled back her empathic sendings. "Nice try, but I'm not coming home before the three days. I told you that," she whispered as she took off for a walk.

"Dammit, what the hell?" Noah yelled as his cock stiffened under the empathic ministrations.

"Oh, gods above," Timeon moaned, dropping his connection to his brother as the mouth on him stopped suddenly. "Astra. It has to be."

Noah gasped as the touch ceased, and he lost the thread to trace back the sending. “Dammit! I lost her.”

“She’s better than we are, Noah. Get real. We saw her genetic code. She’s made for distance-speaking and empathic sendings. She has the ability to torture us long distance empathically, and there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.”

“There’s got to be a way to reach her and get her to come home early,” Noah insisted.

Timeon sighed, grabbing his brother’s arm. “Why don’t you let her have this time, Noah? Don’t you get it? If you push, she’ll run.”

“I think she wants us to push. To show that we don’t give a fuck about the genetics involved.”

“Maybe. How about we try again later? I’m too wiped and need a nap.”

Noah nodded. “You’re right. We’ll put Operation Seduction into play later. About nine?”

“Sounds good. You take care of the merger details while I go and do the head of House thing.” Timeon stood up, adjusting his pants. “See you tonight at nine.”

“Til later, Timeon.”

“Later, Noah.”

Noah sat back in his chair, sending out an empathic touch, questing for Astra. When he felt something, he mentally sent, “I love you. Come home. Not genetic.” Satisfied that he’d tried to make her listen, he turned his attention toward the business merger details. He hadn’t expected the information that Astra had sent while on her remote journey, nor had anyone else. This was a time of mourning, but as Astra had pointed out, business and the rest of Peruth didn’t stop because of her father’s death -- and considering his lack of fondness, neither would she.

The data sent to him, her uncle Stavros, and other key personnel in both companies was quite intriguing and contained full disclosure on certain secret research begun by her father and herself. Other things included the breakdown of combining both companies' upper-level management, including allowing management to move around to other branches, jobs, or positions within the merged company. She had also surprised him with just how much she knew about Helsguard Corp. Through shrewd manipulation, she'd found a way to minimize job loss, expand production, and blend production schemes.

Iji's cock, she's damn intelligent and business savvy. How can a man resist a woman who'll make his life easier by helping him with his work and his play? Noah grinned as he checked and rechecked the numbers, making sure of her accuracy as well as his assessment on the reconstruction lines she'd taken. He knew they were perfect, but his family and the business paid him to be sure, not to just let it go.

As he did the tallies, making notes on where a bit more negotiating would be needed, he realized he needed her there. Being able to talk this out with her directly had advantages over talking to her uncle Stavros, who ran the company in her absence. Once the funeral was over, they'd do final negotiations, and then they could all concentrate on their personal lives together -- her, him, and Timeon. Her self-imposed exile was killing him. Gone for a day and her presence was missed more than he would admit to Timeon, though he figured his brother knew. But how could he make her acknowledge it? How to make her know that it wasn't genetics, but love?

* * * * *

Noah's mouth lingered on hers. "I love you, Astra."

"I love you, too, Noah. But I've got to be sure," she whispered, her fingers playing in his long hair. "I can't afford to love you and know it's only genetic. I want it to be real."

"It's real. I promise. I've seen the papers, Astra. This love we all share, it's real." His mouth captured her rosy nipple, tugging and suckling.

Astra felt her desire peak as her cunt filled with wetness. Reaching out, she stroked his cock, loving how it jerked at her touch. Smiling, her thumb rubbed the tip as a drop of his pre-cum emerged. "We met so quickly. It can't all be natural."

"No, but that was only to give us the advantage of feeling bonded in friendship, at the least. Plus, we're empaths. How much do you know about me that I've not told you?"

She couldn't think as his mouth shifted downward, trailing kisses on her skin. There was no good answer, she knew. There wasn't anything that couldn't be broken with patience and hard work, including personal shielding. But neither Noah nor Timeon had ever hid anything from her except the deepest of thoughts and emotions. And she respected them enough to not probe there.

When his mouth found its destination, she arched against him, urging him to taste her, as her hand fisted in his long, silky hair. The heat of his mouth warmed her clit and her soul as she felt her desire spiral upward, this joining freeing her from worries. She begged him for more as her hips lifted in rhythm.

Noah surprised her as he slid three of his fingers into her slick cunt, sending her into a strong climax.

"Noah!" Astra screamed as she sat up in bed, sheets strewn everywhere. Panting, she looked around the darkened bedroom as she struggled to get control of her shaking body and brush away the tendrils of the empathic sending. He had found her. *Oh, my gods above, he found me!*

"Dammit! How the hell did you get past my shields?" she whined as she flopped back on the pillows, her body still trembling from Noah's empathic touch. Cursing her treacherous body and very willing spirit, she tried to piece together how he had entered her dream.

Once she figured out that Timeon had to be helping Noah to reach out, she decided it was payback time. She knew she'd made contact to them on her own at least once, based upon their reactions. Now it was time to up the ante. There was one more day left before she had to be home, and she wanted it uninterrupted. They wanted to play games, that was fine, but not with her. She didn't want them chasing her to make sure she knew they loved her. She accepted that. What she needed was away time to digest it, and this empathic linking wasn't giving it to her. Damn them!

Astra climbed out of the comfortable bed and went toward the kitchen for a drink. There had to be a way of paying them back for this. "Oh, the games we play in both love and war," she muttered, grabbing a fruit juice from the refrigerator. "Now, the question is, do I call you both on it, or do I just get even?"

Various scenarios played through her mind as she tried to figure out which would get her point across with the least amount of fuss and without her getting caught up in the passion that blazed between them. She admitted that she missed them, even more now, but the point was to make decisions alone and to see for sure if it was true love or genetically induced. Granted, Noah insisted that it wasn't, but that was him, not her.

Astra wished for the umpteenth time that she had brought Flit with her. He was useful to the point that doing without him was a hardship. With a sigh, she grabbed the plastic sheets she'd printed out on a nearby computer. Hacking into it had been too easy; then again, it was a fun pastime that she'd not indulged the past couple of years, testing the defense of friends' companies when she got into being one of the full-time designers for Crysocorp. She missed making her money from goofing off on the computer systems.

While she read about genetic codes and what exactly scientists could and couldn't do, she felt another tingling of a sending. Increasing her shields, she ignored the soft touch of her lovers. Now wasn't the time, and they needed to realize that. Growling, Astra opened her shields just enough to grab the tendrils and shout back, "Leave me alone! I'm reading!" at

them. Then she slammed her shields closed, upping them to a higher level with a passing thought.

Shuffling the plasti-sheets, Astra realized just how much had been done in this field. Medicine had never been something that interested her, but nanotechnology was an ongoing project for her and others in Crysocorp. Though some of the explanations were a bit difficult to understand, she tried to comprehend the various manipulations that had been successfully and unsuccessfully achieved. With her reading, she realized that the genetic shiftings that Verona and company had done weren't registered anywhere, but at least now she was getting some unprejudiced information.

After making a mug of tea, she settled in so she could make sense of what was before her. Five hours later, she stretched, caught by surprise when a yawn escaped. The research had been eye-opening, and she felt much better for doing it. Though she didn't know exactly what Verona had done to her or the brothers, she possessed a better understanding on what couldn't be manipulated. Her relief was immense. It meant that her last day on this beautiful, albeit cold, island should prove a wonderful relaxation before she headed back to Lurien for her father's funeral.

Heading off to bed, she sent a message to both men. *"I love you truly, unencumbered."*

Noah stirred as Astra's words caressed his skin and entered his subconscious. Smiling at her kiss and her words, he allowed himself to drift toward slumber. "I think we did it."

Timeon smiled back at his brother and indulged himself in the comfort of Astra's words. But he was also realistic. Whatever the cause of it, Astra had made the decision on her own, not because they had empathically reached out to her. With that thought, he too drifted off into much needed slumber.

Tomorrow would let them know if she truly accepted them or not. Her father's funeral would be one for the record books and only Iji and his mate knew whether or not all hell would break loose.

Chapter Eight

Astra stood before the main house and sighed. The trip home had been annoying and worse. The messages left for her suggested that her skills were needed to clean up the mess her father had left behind. The three days away had helped her to sort out her emotions, especially the ones dealing with her father. But living in the big house wasn't going to happen. Let others in the family have it. But for right now, this was where the funeral procession would start in an hour. *Dammit all, I don't want to be here. Then again, hiding in the library yesterday didn't do much for me, either, beyond clarifying that someone has to right the wrongs out there.*

Carefully she climbed the steps, and the door opened before she reached it. Out floated Flit. "Come with me, Mistress Astra."

"Flit ..." she warned.

"The Trifecta is waiting to pay their respects, Mistress."

"Oh." Astra allowed Flit to lead the way, realizing that the computer had done the necessary deeds, including getting to the main Crysomark home to control the funeral arrangements from beginning to end, with minimal fuss for her. Though Flit often did his own thing, at least he'd done this one thing that she'd needed. She wasn't sure how to thank

the saucy little computer, but she'd find a way, someday. Maybe she'd create him a girlfriend, or something.

Walking down the corridor, she stopped at the main receiving room and looked down at her jeans and shirt. Not the best way of receiving the Trifecta, but they'd better get used to a younger generation that wasn't cowed by them or the Prefects, which, by right, she was now part of as head of House. She pushed open the door and strode in, her back straight.

"Thank you for coming today," Astra said, nodding first to Valinora, then to Gavin of House Arian and Hect of House Via. She hugged Valinora. "My sympathies for your loss, my aunt and Trifecta."

"My sympathies, as well, Head of House."

Astra shook hands with the other two Trifecta leaders, then sat in the blue chair, giving herself an advantage, as it was higher situated as well as allowed her to amplify her empathic skills if needed. "How may I thank you three for coming today?"

Gavin cleared his throat and looked into Astra's face. The more she looked at him, the more she realized that he was older than anyone thought, but he hid it well in the deep blue colours the Trifecta wore when doing business. The blonde hair had some silver strands, but nothing to suggest he was in his late fifties.

"We're here today to honour your father's memories, as well as to speak to you about your position within House Crysomark."

She steepled her fingers together, allowing no emotion to play upon her face. "I see. What about my position as head of House Crysomark?"

"Well, you had allowed your father --"

"I allowed him as Lord of Crysomark, yes. At the time, I was busy working for the government and for Crysocorp, and was thus unable to also attend as head of House," Astra clarified.

“Thus you gave up your position,” Gavin continued. “We don’t think it’s appropriate for you to accept as head of House now.”

“Are all of you in agreement with this?” Astra asked, her heart pounding. She’d known this might happen, but that they were here justified what she was about to do. Having spent the day in the Library of Ancients was going to prove to have been a fruitful endeavor, one that helped pave the way for her responses.

“Valinora has abstained, stating that because of her House allegiance, she can’t speak on this subject without prejudice,” Hect stated, his fingers ruffling through his salt-and-pepper hair.

“She is in the right to abstain. In fact, she should’ve told you the arrangements made with my father in regards to the House position.” Astra nodded toward Valinora. “First, in the legal paperwork, signed and duly witnessed by five empaths, class-six and up, there was a clause that my father was acting as my proxy.” She watched the men look to each other and wondered how on earth they’d become Trifecta when they didn’t know the basics of House law. “Second, I never gave up the position of head of House. The records state that I’d take it in the event that my father failed as my proxy or when my duties to the government were completed.”

“But you and your father were fighting --”

“Yes, we were. So?” Astra leveled her gaze at Gavin. “Fighting does not mean anything in Peruthian laws. In fact, it’s a right of proving that is justified in the codex for ruling-House laws.”

“We already have an empathic-sensitive as head of another House,” Hect said, his gaze narrowing.

“Yes, I know. They’re very close to me. So, the actual issue is that it’s not the norm for empaths to run a House?” Astra asked, feeling the giddy sensation that signified she was about to administer a well-deserved bitchslap.

"It's not allowed," Gavin stated. "No empath may rule a House or be in the Prefects."

"You're wrong." Astra waited. "You cling to a fearful tradition. You do not speak for the ancients, nor do you speak the law as it's written. Perhaps you need a refresher course."

"How dare you!"

"Oh, I dare much. In fact, I call into review the fact that the Trifecta is not supported by law, but only have occurred through tradition, and thus are truly nothing. I demand the Rights of Truth. Flit! Come here."

She waited until the ball entered the room. "Yes, milady?"

"Please recite the law in regards to the heads of House, including the original laws, which haven't been revoked."

"Yes, milady. I would also tell you that your betrotheds, the brothers Helspawn, await you in the other receiving room."

"Thank you, Flit. Please state the law."

"In House law, as well as in the laws pertaining to the rulership of Peruth, it states that any person capable shall hold the office of head of House and has a say in the Prefects. That an empath will be accepted, cherished, and shown greater respect within this realm of law, as their goal is to help those who would lie, cheat, or steal for their own gain against the interests of the people. In fact, the goal is to eventually have the Prefects all be empaths, for the betterment of all."

"Thank you, Flit. Please ask Noah and Timeon to come in. They need to hear this as well."

The Trifecta started to argue with that, until Astra raised her hand and voice. "I invoke my right as head of House, member of the Prefects, and as a class-ten empath for witnesses."

Noah and Timeon entered the room and headed to Astra's side. Neither sat, but instead stood by her side. She touched their arms. *Thank you. I've found some answers to the questions we've had in regards to empaths being head of House and in the Prefects.*

Really? queried Timeon.

Yes. In fact, the Trifecta is unconstitutional, according to our codex of laws.

Well, that puts a new spin on the things we were looking into,” Noah said.

I’ll want to hear more later. Right now, let me handle this. Then we can talk about everything else, including the betrothed business that’s going on.

Yes, dear, both men responded.

Valinora spoke first from among the Trifecta. “Will you explain yourself, Mistress Astra, head of Crysomark?”

“Explain what? House law and the second portion read from the Law of Peruth’s Unification are quite self explanatory.” Astra leaned forward and smiled, knowing that Valinora was behind her. She wasn’t sure how, but pieces from her childhood and how Valinora spoke on the laws of Peruth slid into place, making sure she got the full scope of what was happening today. “In fact, I spent the day at the Library of Ancients, searching for information on the formation of a unified Peruth, the Trifecta, and the Prefects. I’ve submitted the information to a polit-lawyer for review, and if I’m correct, you three are out of a job.”

Hect stood up, saw the look on Astra’s face, and sat himself back down. “You have no idea of the hows and whys the Trifecta --”

Astra pointed to her aunt. “Wanna try that again, Hect? I think I know full fucking well the hows and whys of the Trifecta.”

Timeon placed his hand on her shoulder. “We, too, were trained to know about the government of Peruth, but we were told the Trifecta was necessary, part of its running. Beloved, you have reason to dispute this?”

Flashing him a smile, she continued. “Oh, yes. The Trifecta has only been in rulership for the past two centuries. However, Peruth has been unified for over two millennia. With

the help of the librarians, we searched, catalogued, and found every listing of the Trifecta and its origins, as well as the role of empaths in Peruthian society.”

“Yes, you keep stalling, but you say nothing,” Gavin sneered.

“Actually, you know the truth as well as I do; it’s part of the oath you take for office. Being the first daughter of House Crysomark, when Valinora was brought into the Trifecta, I witnessed the oaths. Recite them, Gavin. This is a command by the head of House.”

“I do not --”

Noah stepped forward. “Under the Peruthian laws of House and Unified Codex, when commanded to speak by the head of House, the party in question, regardless of station, must comply, or face penalties exacted to the tenth degree, verified by another in good standing and a high-level empath. So, yeah, you do.”

Gavin looked at both Hect and Valinora, who nodded at him. “Do it, Gavin. They can remove you from office for refusing,” Valinora urged.

“Taking my steps as Trifecta, I promise to uphold the sanctity of Peruth. The Trifecta will guide the families, Houses, and businesses of Peruth without rancor, greed, or prejudice. Our role is to give acceptance and tolerance and to encourage diversity while being a unified world. We shall oversee that the laws passed are fair, consistent, and free of prejudice to all Peruthians. If one arises that breaks these goals, then the Trifecta must act in concert to overturn and correct the law. We are to benefit humanity by our presence, not to harm it. Thus we swear to rule by love, kindness, and respect above all else.”

“Have you abided by your oath, Trifecta?” Astra asked, inclining her head slightly while lifting her hand to encourage them to speak.

Valinora nodded. “I have upheld my oath to all Peruth -- nonempath and empath alike, Mistress Astra.”

“And you, Hect?”

“I don’t have to --”

“I invoke Truth Right along with Mistress Astra,” Timeon said, his tone light, but filled with determination. “Thus with two heads of House invoking said right, if you don’t answer, you’ll be held in contempt of the Prefects as well as your own oath and removed from your position.”

Hect glared at her and the brothers. Astra tried to restrain a smirk, but Timeon and Noah were supporting her perfectly. *Thank you. This will prove to be interesting. You up to disbanding the Trifecta?*

Sure. Do we want to?

Yes! Noah’s voice rang out in their minds.

I think it’s time to force the issue. They either help bring empathys on par, or we have them disbanded.

So you know about the others?

I know there are others, but not any details.

Quickly the men caught her up on what they’d found out from Valinora’s room, while she showed them what she’d researched and more. In the space of five heartbeats, all the information was transferred and digested. They realized that their world stood on the precipice of a new beginning. They would lead the way, just as Valinora and others like her wanted, after all. There was no choice, no game -- only a way to love and a free life.

“Mistress Astra?” Flit twittered, his lights flashing a private code at her.

“Yes, Flit?”

“I’ve discovered the key to your father’s codes, and this might be the opportune moment to share what I deciphered.”

“Please do, Flit. Thank you. Perhaps then we can see if Hect and Gavin are willing to answer the question put to them.”

The little robot hovered closer, making sure that all saw him. Projecting a picture of Giles into the air before him, he began reading the suicide letter to Astra while putting the

emotional subtexts in place. “This is how it reads. The code is actually the pattern of emotions. Anger, despair, anger, resignation, desperation, anger, hope, anger, despair, fury.”

“What does this have to do with us?” Gavin demanded.

“Everything, Sir Trifecta. The code is based upon a word-emotion association. By correlating the pattern with Giles Crysomark’s codes. Your name as well as Lord Hect’s are mentioned, Lord Gavin. The letter’s secret contents read:

“Though you were not my child, I was elected to raise you because it wasn’t known that you weren’t mine genetically beyond honouring the eye colour chosen by Verona. But you have been watched by those in the highest levels. When it was time to allow you your rightful place, Gavin and Hect of the Trifecta came to me and offered me the place as head of Crysomark, if I was willing to go against policies to help empaths. Since you were not easily controlled, I jumped on it, helping you to take those government jobs. You thought they were because you merited them, but in reality, it was to force you out of the ruling position of the House. You are abhorrent to me and many like me who know that high-level empaths are nothing but living machines to be used for those meant to rule. Hect and Gavin agree. Only Verona stops them from passing legislation to guarantee that empaths are to be completely regulated and controlled. Please note that I never loved you, and I kept you only because you were useful. May you be cursed by my death. Giles Crysomark.”

The silence was daunting, but not uncomfortable. It was just as Astra had thought. Internally, she patted herself on the back while shoving aside the painful comments of the man she had called Father for so long. So now the truth was out, and with it there was freedom. She was glad it was over. No more lies. There would be no more lies in her life or ruling her life. “Well, gentlemen?”

Both men blanched at her words, her icy demeanor. They knew she had them. With this information, she could easily have them exiled to the hotter islands near the equator, which was unlivable. It wasn’t what she wanted to do, but they would be forced to being more open. As she clasped her hands, she moved her fingers, signing what she wanted from

Flit. His acknowledgment told her that he had anticipated her and had been taping the entire process and sending it to one of the television stations.

"It's a desperate man's letter. There is no proof." Leave it to Gavin to clutch on to anything to avoid what was happening.

"Actually, Sir Gavin --"

"That's Lord Gavin, you piece of metal!"

Astra held up her hand. "It's Sir Trifecta Gavin; it's questionable how much longer Lord could be used. Your actions go against the meaning of the Trifecta. In fact, we know the Trifecta has no basis in the laws of our world. And don't threaten the computer again. He's mine, and millions of viewers who are watching this would be very pissed off at you both."

"You tape us *without our permission!*" Hect roared, storming toward Astra, his hands outstretched. "You wretched empathic bitch!"

Both Noah and Timeon moved in front of Astra, Noah grabbing the enraged man and subduing him in two quick movements. Timeon shot a look at the standing Gavin. Astra never moved, never flinched. This was what she had trained for her whole life. To deal with those who hid their emotions, who hid their intentions to the ill of all Peruthians. She inhaled deeply and turned her gaze toward her mother/aunt. The glitter in Valinora's eyes and the smile on her face told her what she wanted to know. Valinora had done this just so, and now it came to fruition.

Then Flit spoke. "I've also uncovered the correspondence between the two Trifecta members and Lord Giles, Mistress Astra. Shall I forward it to the proper authorities?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Include anything you feel is necessary. Use the standard six-eighty encryption code, Flit." She turned her gaze to Gavin. "So, you've violated your own oath, you've lied to the head of House, and you've tried to kill, hurt, or reduce the status of empaths, which is against the core of beliefs established by our ancestors. Why?"

“Because I’m not an empath and I’m perfectly fine. Why should empaths be given more benefits, more training, or any other luxury that’s not given to nonempaths?”

“I agree that empaths and nonempaths should have equal opportunities at learning and developing their skills,” Astra explained patiently. “In fact, I’d say that nonempaths should be given opportunities for more schooling, as empaths and other psi talents usually pick up their training fairly easily. But that doesn’t answer why you’ve treated them as less than human. The genetic records as well as Peruthian law shows that not only are we empaths humans, we’re the hopes of the past to help keep this world alive and functioning in a peaceful manner.”

Gavin spat before her. “Empaths are nothing more than useful tools. You are encased in a human body, but you can be misused, just like any other machine. More controls are needed in order to make sure that you don’t tap into a person’s mind you’re not supposed to.”

“I see.” And the thing was, she really did. It was the ultimate of fears. But it was based on a lie. Time to break the lie out in the open. “I’m sorry you feel that way, especially when evidence shows that empaths can’t read the mind of anyone unwilling, only the emotions. The only time empaths can read minds is if they’re a fellow empath. The whole mind-reading fallacy is just that -- a fallacy made by the conspiracy theorist because he refuses to acknowledge his own guilt.”

Gavin stood there, clenching his hands. His career was in ruins, and they both knew it. Everyone in the room and watching the impromptu live conference knew it. Astra decided to be done with it. There was the funeral to deal with, as well as her personal life. Standing, she placed a hand upon Gavin and another on Hect. “With the power vested in me as head of House Crysomark and as Prefect within our governing body, I remove you both from office for failure in your duties and for breaking the ancient binding laws of our land. As the Trifecta is not within the legal binds of our ancient laws, I formally disband it. Lady Valinora shall be taken back into House Crysomark with full honour for maintaining integrity, and when the time comes, she’ll become head of Crysomark when I take over the duties of

matriarch of House Hespawn. This way, our tradition of those best suited for the ruling of our House is maintained.”

She pushed on both men, letting them know that she controlled this moment, that she did what Peruthian law demanded. Then she smiled at her betrothed. “I do believe we have my father’s funeral to attend.”

Walking past all of them, she left the room and ran for the stairs to her old room.

Chapter Nine

Later that evening

Astra leaned against the back of the couch in her home, letting out a sigh. It was over. The funeral had gone off without a hitch, even with all the reporters and other government officials who were there. She reached over, taking both men's hands in hers and squeezing them. They had run interference, letting only select people into her presence. Noah had been a bit more vocal on them intruding, but Timeon's steadying presence had helped to make the process simple as he came clean to the public about having hidden being a touch empath because of his fear of being taken from his twin and his family, thus making the plight of unusual kids into the next crusade to save those who were taken illegally.

Their group marriage contract was approved by both Valinora and the twins' parents. Though they weren't required, they wanted it on record because the aftermath of the corruption fallout put the three as contenders for the position of Trifecta leaders, something none of them wanted but might be forced to accept.

"So, my beloved betrothed, what runs in that head of yours?" Noah asked, kissing her neck.

“Honestly, just the government stuff. Feel like you were bamboozled into it, and now you’re stuck doing what Valinora and the families wanted from the outset?”

Timeon sighed, nodding his head. “Yes. I feel we’ve done exactly what they wanted. Did you see the look on their faces at the funeral? You know they were talking about it.”

“But what counts is that we’re together,” Noah insisted. “You will make this a permanent marriage contract, right, Astra?”

She stood up, pulling the men with her. As she led them to her bedroom, she answered. “Yes, I want it permanent. I don’t know if I want to bring anyone else into this marriage, unless Timeon wants someone for his regular playmate besides me.”

“Maybe one day. Right now, I’m thinking my brother and I would enjoy sharing you enough to not need another person in our group,” Timeon replied, his lips whispering against the back of her neck. “As for everything else, it’ll become clear what is wanted from us in the next week or two, once our business merger is finished.”

“True,” Astra agreed, walking into her bedroom. She gestured for the men to sit on the bed while she stood looking at them. “I love you both. I’m sorry I went away like I did, but it was necessary. When I tell you I need time alone, I mean it.”

“We were afraid that --”

She kissed Timeon on the mouth, silencing his explanation. When the kiss ended, she smiled. “I know. But know this, if I ever need time alone but need you to come for me, you’ll know. Trust me.” Sliding her hand down his shoulder, she paused at his hand. “I promise that.”

“Good,” Timeon remarked. Her hand caressed his cheek, then went to Noah’s. She mimicked the same gesture down Noah’s arm, stopping at his wrist. Leaning in, she captured his lips with her own.

After a moment, she pulled back and smiled. “I love you.”

“I love you,” both men vowed simultaneously.

“Now, remember when you both teased and taunted me?” Astra asked, knowing a sparkle lit in her eyes.

“Yes,” Noah answered hesitantly.

“Check your hands,” she chuckled. “You’re both my captives now. That means that you will do as I say.”

Both men tried to move their hands and noticed them attached to the poles and to each other. “What the hell are you doing, Astra?” Noah demanded.

“Sexual revenge at its finest,” she replied, peeling off her gown, exposing her naked body to them. She grabbed a small pen-like instrument from the nearby nightstand and put it to the seams of Timeon’s clothing. When the device clicked, Astra did the same to Noah. Then she tugged, watching their clothes fall apart, leaving them completely naked before her. She put the device back on the nightstand. “I’m going to tease you both, and neither of you will be able to do a damn thing to stop me.”

Then her lips closed over Noah’s erect cock while her left hand stroked Timeon’s. As she hummed, both men groaned in simultaneous desire.

“Oh, gods, the games empaths can play,” Noah moaned in happiness.

“Yes, indeed,” Timeon responded as both men submitted to their soon-to-be wife’s loving revenge.

 THE END 

Cynnara Tregarth

Born in Chicago, currently living in the Peninsula state, aka Florida, Cynnara loves to write, has always been writing or telling stories. Unfortunately for her, it means that her sense of direction sucks on occasion, but she can tell you all about ancient history. She always writes hot, but on occasion, delves into various other genres. Yet her first love is paranormal with various other genres tossed in for good measure.

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Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Jack's Back

by Cynnara Tregarth

Available Now from Loose Id

Jack's Back

Ian watched the exchange, listening as the two ladies quickly exchanged pleasantries. Hannah was a great waitress and always kept her mouth shut when the other members of the Metropolitan came into the diner. Tiana was hot, intense about her work, and somehow turned him on more than he wanted to admit. Yet, they were colleagues. He couldn't just let lust take him over. He doubted she realized that she was tempting him. That's what made it almost unbearable -- she had no clue what she did to his body. There was a peace in touching her so casually like this, though he was ready to do something drastic, like kiss her. Once they were done conversing about the owner, Ian spoke. "Hannah, when you're ready, can I have my usual?"

"Sure thing, Ian. Two eggs over-easy, light toast, fruit cup, and a glass of juice." Hannah turned toward Tiana again. "What about you, Tiana?"

"Hannah, tell the cook I want a New England breakfast and thank you for placing heaven in London." Tiana licked her lips in anticipation.

I'd make you lick your lips if we were alone. In fact, I can almost guarantee it'd be pleasurable for us both. Ian bit back a groan, turning it into a cough, trying to not think of a naked Tiana on her knees before him. Both women rolled their eyes at his coughing fit.

The waitress giggled. "Will do. Good thing his name isn't Joe, huh?" With that, she headed toward the kitchen while Tiana laughed hard, her face lighting up with pleasure.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here, Ian. This is a treat that I've not had in ages." Tiana chuckled. "'Eat at Joe's.' I love it that she knew the old joke!"

Ian reached and squeezed her hand. "Anytime. I'm glad. This must be a taste of home for you and remind you of your father."

“Definitely. Plus, to be honest, American breakfasts are awesome.” Tiana sipped her coffee, savoring the hot, strong brew. A lusty sigh emerged from her. “Oh, gods, real coffee. I think I might have to buy stake in this place to make sure I get real coffee beans.”

Ian threw his head back and laughed, causing several patrons to turn their heads toward them. Again, he kissed her hand, scooting her closer to his side. “You’re hilarious, Tiana. You’re the first woman I’ve known that actually enjoys food and drink with a passion.” Carefully, he brushed back a lock of her auburn hair, delighting in the feel of it. Imagining the caress of it against his naked flesh as she leaned over him, sucking on his cock.

“When you’ve done without and think you’re going to die, you learn the art of appreciating the simple things that you take for granted. In addition, like my mother, I do not function well without two cups of good coffee. The sludge that Al claims is coffee is water compared to this.”

Within ten minutes, their orders arrived. Tiana’s face lit up at the sight of English muffins, two jams, two hardboiled eggs, and a small bowl of cinnamon oatmeal. It helped to distract herself with food so she wouldn’t focus on how Ian’s touch was making her feel. *Feel? Hell, I want to undo his pants and fuck him. Hades to high water, I’ve been too long without a man’s touch. Maybe Jules was right -- perhaps I need to start dating again. I’d love to fuck -- I mean date Ian. Damn professional ethics.* “Oh, Hannah, tell the chef, I love him and will need to negotiate regular meals, since I live a couple hours or so away.”

“Will do, Tiana. I’ve never seen a customer so happy before.”

Tiana grinned at the woman. “This is a special treat I’ve not had in years. My thanks to the cook.”

Hannah skipped happily away. Ian turned his gaze to Tiana as she spread grape jam on the muffin, then took a solid bite. The moan of appreciation caused his cock to stand up, and his body tightened with a rush of desire. If she made that kind of sound during sex, she’d make him climax in a heartbeat. She ate her food with relish, pausing only to lick her lips for

crumbs. He felt his cock press hard against his slacks. *Bloody hell, this woman has me hard. It isn't fair that she has this effect on me when she seems to be so nonchalant about things.*

He started eating his own breakfast, ignoring the need to adjust himself. Something drove him to respond to her joyous noise of the good food. Perhaps it was that he could feel her warmth beside him, or that he hadn't stopped touching her silky skin. Either way, he had to say something. Otherwise, she'd continue, and he wouldn't be able to control his actions after another orgasmic moan like that. No man on earth would be able to resist trying to make her re-create that moan while he pumped his cock deep into her sexy body. "You know, you could cause a man to try to make you do those noises for him," he said casually as he bit into his eggs.

Tiana looked up, startled. "Huh?" *Did he just say what I think he said? Oh, my gods, I think he did.*

"Those moans of appreciation. They're very sensual; most men would be tempted to be the reason you're moaning, not the food." *I want to make you moan and scream my name. I want to see your body shudder as I stroke you deeply, bringing you to orgasm.*

"Oh." Her eyes sparkled as her skin flushed in embarrassment and excitement. *Please make me moan. Make me come.* "What about you?"

Ian's grin grew very sensual. "I know I can get you to moan like that. There's no doubt." *Let me suck on your nipples, cause them to tighten. Let me slide my fingers deep in your pussy until they're dripping with your wetness.*

Tiana sat up, her eyes taking him in warily. Her mouth gaped slightly at him. *Is this what I want to hear? Worse, why do I really want to egg him on to see what he does or says? Duh, you're attracted, Ti. Deal with it, as mom says.* "Are you sure about that?" *Please say yes. I need you to want me as much as I want you.*

"Definitely. However, we can't do anything until the case is over or until we no longer need your services. Which is a bloody shame." Ian licked his lips, watching as Tiana took in

his every move. *I hate professional ethics. I would rather throw you over my shoulder, take you to my house, and slowly undress you; lick your curves, slide my fingers over your skin, then slowly fuck you until you beg for me to go harder and faster.*

“Oh, my.” *Please take me. Fuck me. You can even use the toy my sister sent me, telling me that a battery penis was better than no cock at all. Hell, take me with that and your cock. Please, oh, gods above, please, Ian. But dammit, we're fucked if we get caught. Our jobs could be compromised, but damn, what a compromise.*

She blinked, unsure where to go from there. She hadn't been expecting his response. It made him smile more. They had formed an instant friendship, but he knew she was aware there was something more between them. Something that went beyond just the physical attraction.

“I think I just shook up the unshakeable Dr. Wells.” *Good, now you know how you have me feeling, Tiana.* He took her hand in his. “I find you a beautiful, attractive woman, Tiana. I know this is a shock -- it's a bloody shock to me, as well -- but I won't push. We have this case to finish first, before we even consider going out on a date socially.”

Tiana didn't pull back, but let her body sift through the emotions soaring in her. First was joy. He found her beautiful and wonderful, even though he knew her past. *Simply amazing.* Then there was the fact that he knew the professional boundaries and wasn't asking her to cross them. That eased her mind tremendously. How should she answer his words? Was there an answer?

“Thank you, Ian. I feel ... I feel the same way, but after the case is solved.” She knew she was blushing, the breakfast they were sharing becoming an event to remember in her mind. “You're handsome and compassionate. I don't know what to say.”

“Then don't. I didn't say it to embarrass you, Tiana. I just wanted you to know how much I enjoy your presence, as well as you, yourself. There were those moans, which could destroy any man's good intentions, though.”

She chuckled, as did he. "I'll try to tamp down the moans from now on."

"I don't mind, as long as you don't mind the physical effects."

"Physical effects?"

He debated a moment on whether to tell her. Deciding to take the chance, Ian leaned over the table and whispered. "I've got a hard-on like you wouldn't believe."

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What people are saying about

Jack's Back

Jack's Back is a hauntingly beautiful, fast paced thrill-ride. Ian and Tiana's plunge into the horrifying world of Jack the Ripper, his psyche, his madness, and his mayhem will give you chills. Their respect and compassion for each other will make your heart smile. Don't miss *Jack's Back* by Cynarra Tregarth.

-- Kally Jo Surbeck, author of *She Blinded Me With Science...Fiction* (Loose Id)

Cynarra Tregarth weaves a plot worthy of the original story of "Jack the Ripper." With twists and turns and a hint of magic, not to mention a hero hotter than "cyn," *Jack's Back* left me gasping for breath and panting for more!

-- Alicia Sparks, author of *Desert Moon: Ah-Ten* (Loose Id)

Jack's Back is a terrific read – dark, haunting, and powerfully sensual – you shouldn't miss.

-- Frauke, *Mon Boudoir*