



## I

HAVING JUST TELEPORTED from the dank and gloomy chambers of the Galactic Grand Council, we suddenly appeared in the middle of a gaily decorated ballroom. It was packed shoulder-to-shoulder with waltzing couples. The mixture of male and female perfumery, as malodorous as varnish remover, was a stark contrast to the musky atmosphere from which we had just departed.

Feeling the warmth of Nandia's hands nestled in mine, I began swaying slowly to the music. Thankfully she followed, apparently familiar with this shuffle-and-glide two-step number that had been arranged to fit a waltz tempo.

Abruptly, I stopped. I released her hands, bowed and innocently asked, "Has this dance been taken?" With her unusual angelic smile Nandia settled into my arms and off we sailed. Neither of us wanted to be the only motionless couple in this undulating sea of dancers. It was bad enough that we were the only

ones not wearing the ornately gilt-edged garb that was currently in favor at King Sabre's court.

The monarch was sitting slightly askew on a throne at the far end of the dance floor, occasionally dribbling wine from the glass he so casually held. A gaggle of supplicants minded him, all as anxious to please as the highest paid geishas back home on Earth.

Guards were stationed along the ballroom's outer walls. The golden glitter of their over-embellished uniforms fought for attention with a ceiling full of sparkly chandeliers, each bestowed with a brilliantly colored floral garland. A formally attired orchestra played the planet Aesir's latest music.

Yet, despite the court's well-appointed opulence, most people looked troubled. Their auras were muddy, their voices low, their sentences clipped. I asked Nandia if she thought they seemed preoccupied, as if nagged by a guilt over some secret crime. Peering over my shoulder, she scanned the ballroom. We were well in step with the flow of dancers that circled the floor. Gliding ever closer to the King, I stooped a bit to better blend in.

"From what I'm picking up," Nandia telepathed, resting her head once again upon my cheek, "many are here in the hopes of finding some thread of redemption for the woes of the kingdom. And, no one is being reassured by the antics of the King or his minions."

One of the reasons we had been selected by the Grand Council for this mission was the effectiveness of our telepathic communication. I was glad that, here on Aesir, I could so easily hear her thoughts.

It is often said that everyone has telepathic abilities. However, many of us won't use them for fear of

exposing our true thoughts and feelings. We mostly send messages through our energy fields that say “Don’t get too close, I’m hiding.” Hypocrisy cannot be telepathed.

We first met at a Grand Council briefing that had launched our previous adventure in the city of Geasa on the planet Fantibo. There, Nandia and I found that we trusted each other implicitly. Naturally, with such transparent openness, we telepathed quite easily, delightfully, and at times playfully. Telepathy had saved our lives more than once on Fantibo, after a good measure of Nandia’s deft detective work, and surviving, with injuries, a nighttime attack. It was only then that we puzzled out the energetic disruptions to telepathy that we’d initially encountered in Geasa.

I enjoyed the scent of Nandia’s hair on my cheek. I also reveled in how she felt in my arms. But, the first moments of a new mission were not the time to pamper that oh-so-familiar indulgence. Instead, I recalled what I knew of the previous Council delegate’s attempts to extricate King Sabre from his tangled affairs on Aesir.

The reports were that Sabre still blamed the former delegate for the precipitous decline in his planet’s economy. And, rather than accept responsibility for his own misdeeds, the King condemned the man for planting rumors that he was becoming unhinged. Upon hearing that bit of news, the monarch had thrown one of his more noteworthy tantrums. Adding to the list of Sabre’s woes included a palace haunting by the shade of the King’s father, plus an unhealthy dependence upon alcohol.

As Council delegates, we had been directed to

restore some semblance of order to Aesir's royal house. At the very least, this required that we befriend this garrulous monarch. I had not the slightest idea how we might inveigle ourselves into Sabre's good graces.

I did, however, have a pretty good idea that Nandia and I, the latest hope of the Grand Council, would not enjoy the King's good graces, should our first meeting occur while traipsing about on his dance floor.

Nandia reminded me that Aesir's news reports had compared the King's penchant for public outbursts to that of a petulant child. He was notoriously cranky when faced with disappointment. My partner also reminded me that, with every gliding step, we were dancing closer to being discovered. "Bearn's," she telepathed with an attention-getting tone of alarm, "we need to get out of here NOW!"

I spotted an exit down a side hallway and guided us in that direction, dancing obliquely through the crowd. I rushed the orchestra's tempo only slightly to make good our escape. Several couples stopped talking as we glided by. A few brows wrinkled quizzically in reaction to our out-of-fashion, dark attire. Thankfully, very few eyes stole curious glances at our faces. It was of some small comfort that we were being ignored by most.

While navigating across the dense tide of dancing couples, I wondered what this event was celebrating. Nandia picked up on my question, tilted her head to the left and telepathed, "Behind us, there's a tall blonde who seems quite interested in you. She just remarked to her partner that this thirtieth anniversary of Sabre's coronation doesn't hold a candle to the celebration of ten years ago."

I glanced over Nandia's shoulder to see if we were

attracting the King's attention. At that moment, he was being distracted by a wine steward. I sailed us out of sight down our getaway hall.

"I didn't know you could dance so well," Nandia said, as we nonchalantly hurried down the corridor seeking further sanctuary from prying eyes.

"Someday, we'll just have to find out how well you can keep up," I bragged. "We wouldn't have escaped the King's notice if that orchestra had been playing a tango."

Nandia grabbed my arm and led me through an archway into a darkened library. As we stepped through the doorway, her arms encircled my neck. She graced my lips with a kiss that took my breath away. Parting, she whispered, "It's lovely to be working with you again, Bearns. Now, do you have any bright ideas about how we're going to meet this King?"

It took me a moment to catch my breath. As I did, I scanned our surroundings, pleased to find that we were well concealed. "We're probably safe here for now," I said. "But, I'm betting that by this evening's end, several of Sabre's meddling minions will have mentioned the off-world couple who appeared from out of the blue and danced off into the night."

Just at that instant, I caught a brief mental image of the two of us waiting in Sabre's bedchambers. As I focused on the projection, it evolved into a vision of the inebriated Kings staggering into the room. I then imagined the two of us respectfully coming to our feet, stepping forward with hands outstretched and formally introducing ourselves.

"I've just had an idea," I said. "Too bad it's doomed to fail."

“Come on, Bearns, spill,” Nandia prodded.

After some doubtful hesitation, I decided to spill. “Well, we could find Sabre’s bedchambers and be waiting for him when he returns from this celebration.” As I said the words, I had to grimace. It was just plain crazy! I would as soon attempt to ride a donkey down a flight of stairs. We knew the King’s state of inebriation and could pretty well predict how receptive he would be. What’s more, we had no idea what the royal chambers looked like, nor how to find them.

In order to teleport, a traveler must have a target that can be visualized. We needed more information if we were to weave our way through King Sabre’s maze of a palace, whether we teleported or not. A map, a guidebook, or, even better, a tour guide would have been nice.

Suddenly, flashing past my mind’s eye was an image of Dunstan, the Scottish musician we had befriended in Geasa. He had proven to be a tireless guide and quite crucial to the Fantibo mission’s success. After encountering the disruptions to our teleporting and telepathic abilities, Dunstan had been instrumental in solving that puzzle. I sincerely hoped that here on Aesir, we could teleport our way out of tight spots. It was another of the reasons we had survived the mission. Danger is so much easier to face knowing that one can effect a quick exit as necessary.

In Geasa, I’d remembered an ancient water dowser’s story that had set us on the path to unraveling the mystery of our lost abilities. The aged diviner told me of the one day his dowsing had failed him—the day he had divined three dry wells. After returning to his lab, he discovered that the metal copper resolved the

problem. We used his remedy, plus a little help from our friends, to recover the abilities we were afraid we'd lost.

That experience had taught us that we must test-drive our teleporting abilities before counting on them. And, the sooner, the better.

Yet, this was not our most pressing problem at the moment. There was certainly no value in further anticipating the risks of meeting a boozy king come to roost in his chambers. I knew that if I were suddenly surprised by two strangers after a drunken entrance into my own bedroom, I would erupt into an explosion that would rival any of the King's well-known outbursts.

"Right, then Bearn's," Nandia telepathed, interrupting my musing, "your idea sucks." She does have a tendency to eavesdrop telepathically, which at times can be quite annoying.

"Since that's not the way to meet the King," she continued, "what say, instead, we introduce ourselves to this ghost who has a predilection for haunting his own son?"

To honestly consider that suggestion, I had to face a feeling of disquiet I'd been hoping to avoid. It was a feeling that had begun as soon as I learned of the ghost in King Sabre's court.

Reluctantly, I breathed into the tightness that was lightly clutching the center of my abdomen. I let myself accept that sensation and breathed deeply again. I was surprised to discover there sat a fear of meeting the ghost. While the discomfort was not raging in intensity, I'd hoped that I was through hiding my fears from myself.

Then I remembered that I did have a tendency to

monitor my spontaneity around Nandia. I could still be apprehensive over losing her approval—despite the time I'd spent in Geasa wandering through that swamp. I touched the feeling in my body and asked for insight. In quick response was the mental suggestion that I examine my attitudes of prejudice.

And I certainly found one. Disembodied entities are largely unknown to me. As a child, I'd been exposed to my culture's fears of poltergeists, and absorbed a bit of those. True, in my early studies, I'd learned techniques for dispelling such beings. But still, I found I was quite disinclined to meet a discarnate who was bedeviling his own son. That came under the heading of unusually perverse behavior for any father—living or dead.

Agoragon, my mentor, came to mind. A lightning-quick image of his face, smiling, emerged from within my inner vision. I heard him once again reminding me to trust my inner resources. Each of us has all that we need to look after our own well-being.

"Bernard, you've again forgotten that you always have the power to hold yourself above violation," he would scold whenever I took on the victim's role, hiding from fear and hoping for sympathy. But, I'd never tested that particular power while dealing with cranky, disembodied royalty.

So, I was frightened to meet this ghost. Yet, I knew that Nandia's plan made a lot more sense than my crazy idea. And, how difficult could it be to find at least some common ground with a spook? After all, each of us is fundamentally a disembodied spirit, anyway. Despite my occasional mistrust of the idea, I had to remind myself that every being, whether of this dimension or another, is basically of good intent.



But, I had to admit that there were other hidden apprehensions about a ghostly encounter. Foremost was my occasional inclination toward rudeness. I could make paint peel off walls if I felt someone was trying too hard to crowd me into a corner. An early teacher had likened me to a bull in a china shop. In those days I tended to impulsively explode over even petty irritations. Over time, I learned to calm such storms by using Agoragon's deep-breathing exercises.

Effusive in his recitations about the value of ten deep, connected breaths, Agoragon would not stop preaching about the oxygenating and detoxifying benefits of the practice until I had resumed breathing deeply, despite my feelings of apprehension, impatience and irritation.

"There are proponents of this discipline who swear that breathing is all that is needed to heal any disease," he often remarked.

Still, I was worried that I might react badly if cornered by an apparition. However, I did find reassurance in remembering that only once in a blue moon did my paint-peeling indulgences get the best of me.

And, on the bright side, we just might befriend this spirit, and so learn how to approach his son. It was glaringly obvious that we needed to cultivate allies here—and soon. I further had to concede that tenancy in a physical body is not necessarily a requirement for an ally. Luckily, both Nandia and I shared an intuitive sense of whom to trust—yet another advantage that had proven useful on Fantibo.

I had assumed that the purpose for our most recent Grand Council summons was to congratulate us for our success on that mission. A little over two

years ago Nandia and I had teleported to the city of Geasa. Dunstan, our new found friend, had been marooned on the planet for more than a decade. A Council envoy himself, he was a charismatic and flamboyant musician, whose masterful horn-playing had opened many doors in Geasa. He had a unique style of Gaelic humor and a playful flair for the dramatic. Without him, we would have surely failed in our attempts to assist the city in its recovery from the Saragalla epidemic.

Yes, the Grand Council had given a quick nod to our work in Geasa, but their underlying reason for summoning us was to brief us on the problems of planet Aesir.

“We must give some credibility to the rumors that Aesir’s royal palace is haunted,” said the alien Council Elder, whom I had privately named Liberace. While the Elder’s bald pate in no way resembled that flamboyant pianist’s overgrown pompadour, it was his ornate gowns and outlandish manner that led me to bestow that name upon him.

“The King has been complaining of nighttime disturbances by a ghost,” he continued. “Many castle residents have corroborated his stories. Sleep deprivation combined with excessive alcohol consumption have added to the monarch’s growing anger and hostility. Reports are that his mental and emotional stability is deteriorating. He grants royal commissions to incompetent friends. Corruption and graft are endemic. The economy is showing signs of unraveling while major corporations are moving many of their operations off-world. Unemployment is rising, debt growing and inflation nearly out of control. But, that’s not all!

Recently, there have even been rumors of an attempted coup d'état."

He paused to wipe his forehead with a large, embroidered handkerchief. Then his voice dropped to a loud whisper, dripping with disdain. "Indeed, one of our previous delegates on Aesir turned renegade.

"Imagine, a delegate from this very Council! King Sabre's paranoia has led to accusations that we purposefully sent such a man to poison his court. Of course that is nothing but an absurdity." This last assertion was so loud that his voice echoed throughout the chamber.

Liberace again wiped his brow, and then cleared his throat. He seemed to be enjoying the drama of his performance. "This Council admired your ingenuity with the Geasa affair. We now have great hopes that you can help Aesir return to some semblance of respectability. You may go now."

With a flamboyant flourish of his bejeweled hands, we were dismissed. A council functionary stepped forward with a stack of Aesir's currency and wished us well. After exchanging quizzical frowns, Nandia and I faced each other and clasped hands—the position used whenever teleporting in tandem. I felt the familiar spiral of white energy expanding through my consciousness and suddenly the drab Council Chamber dissolved into King Sabre's ballroom.

I had hoped Liberace's briefing would have been a bit more enlightening, rather than as sparse as the hair on his head. It raised many more questions than it had answered. We both knew that our first meeting with the King had to build a solid foundation of trust. Otherwise, there was no chance that the troubled

monarch would want to rebuild his relationship with the Grand Council.

I had a pretty good idea that Nandia's presence would make the job easier. We had squeaked through several tight spots on Geasa because we men are so powerfully attracted to her.

Leaving those reminiscences behind, I answered Nandia's question. "Let's go meet the King's ghost of a father—if only to find out what he's made of." Only a touch of feigned bravado tainted my words.

Nandia smiled knowingly and together we stepped into the corridor. Both of us were eager to investigate King Sabre's palace. And, despite my misgivings over facing a discarnate spirit, Nandia's idea was the best one we had at the moment.

"But, before we go any further," I said as I stopped. "Let's find out if we can teleport here on Aesir. Meet me at the far end of the hallway?"

I pointed toward the corridor's end, where hung a portrait of what appeared to be a former Aesirian king. The life-sized painting portrayed a young man regally seated upon a scarlet throne while holding a golden scepter. Dark-haired, fit and handsome, he was attired in an officer's uniform replete with a parade of pips, stripes and medals glittering across his chest.

Nandia closed her eyes, breathed deeply and disappeared. The golden-red-violet hues of her aura shimmered and then faded from view. Shifting my gaze I began searching for her at the far wall. There, those same vibrating colors began to faintly emerge, quickly grew in intensity and finally materialized into her body.

Hands on hips, she frowned and telepathically chided, “Why am I always waiting on you, Bearns?” I enjoyed the tease as we both laughed.

Breathing deeply, I began my teleportation discipline. First, I imagined the cells of my body being playfully filled with white light. This is an energy that naturally emanates from my Inner Self. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Agoragon, reminding me that energy always follows thought. It was one way he encouraged me to accept the unlimited power of my consciousness. Next, I intensified my focus, imagining my cells plump with energy and felt a familiar rush of tingling throughout my body.

Then I envisioned a single cell from my heart and projected it to Nandia’s location. I knew that my desire combined with my imagination would activate a wave of energy from my body. I directed this wave to pursue the seed cell. Finally, I asked my subconscious to project my body’s field of ions, atoms and molecules to follow that wave of energy, clearly seeing my destination in my mind’s eye. Instantly, the familiar spiraling of white light flooded my mind and almost immediately I found myself standing in front of Nandia. I felt like I was seeing her for the first time—and once again, her beauty startled me.

“That was fun,” I said, as we hugged. “Even if we don’t know our way around here, we do know how to get there.” I surveyed our surroundings and found no clues that might help us learn more.

“So, My Dear,” I said, feeling somewhat at a loss, “do you have any bright ideas of how we’re going to meet this ghost?”

“Meeeuw,” came the response.

“Excuse me?” I asked Nandia, wondering why she’d chosen to imitate a cat.

She shook her head, letting me know that the sound hadn’t come from her. She turned and pointed down the hallway. I caught a glimpse of a black cat just as it disappeared around a corner. Its feet flashed white as it scampered away.

“That cat just appeared out of thin air, at exactly the same instant you mentioned the ghost,” Nandia explained. “I wonder— could it be telepathic as well? Let’s go find out.” She raced out of sight around the corner, hot on the critter’s trail.

I wasn’t far behind as we arrived at a doorway off a second hallway. But the cat was nowhere to be seen. I tried the door and found it locked. The sound of my fumbling was answered by a second “Meeeuw,” but from the far side of the door.

I extracted my lock pick from its belt-pouch and quickly tickled the door into submission. As it swung open, we saw our four-legged guide ascending a long stairway, bereft of any patience for those with fewer limbs.

Nandia quickly projected herself to the head of the stairs. “Keep moving, Bears. I’m not going to stand around admiring your burgling skills when we’ve got ghosts to meet.”

I quickly joined her. I decided to trust her instincts about this creature. What’s more, it was fun, this teleport-tag.

We followed the cat up three flights of stairs before chasing it down another long hallway. Finally, it stopped at an open utility closet. There a chambermaid

was loading a cart with linens, each monogrammed with Aesir's royal crest.

Slight in stature, the woman was fair-haired and quite pretty. Inexplicably, she carried herself with an ancient, yet youthful, elegance. As she looked up from her work, I was touched by her unusually bright, blue eyes. She then flashed a beautifully dimpled smile that immediately warmed my heart.

However, just as I was about to say hello, she stooped to pet the cat. "Good job, Arcturus." Her words musically chimed with praise. "I was beginning to think you might have trouble with these two."

This was a new experience, being guided by a small, furry creature. As only cats can, it soaked up the maid's affection, purring with eyes at half-mast. There were spots of white fur highlighting each of its toes. That accounted for the glow we'd seen as he scampered down the dimly lit hallways.

It was heartwarming to watch the mutual displays of affection between the beauty and the beast. The chambermaid then straightened up and graced us with a second winning smile.

"Hello," I said. "This is Nandia. My name is Bernard."

Her eyes radiated a warmth and devotion that spoke of centuries of loving service to Aesir's royal family. Right away, I had the sense that I could trust her implicitly.

"We are here at the request of the Grand Council," I explained. "We hope to befriend King Sabre and become his allies. Our mission is to help tame the torments that are haunting him."

"Welcome, Bernard and Nandia." The maid curtseyed with a grace borne of years of practice. "My

name is Elli. I know of your assignment. I had the good fortune to watch your arrival in the ballroom. The two of you dance divinely." As I listened, I realized her lips had not moved. This woman was telepathic as well.

"Thank you, Elli," Nandia telepathed in response. "Tonight was our first attempt at dancing. Bearns, as he likes to be called, even challenged me to a tango to test my mettle. Perhaps, if time allows, we might all go dancing together."

That evoked yet another smile. "Now, that's a lovely idea," Elli agreed.

She bent and picked up Arcturus. "My friend here is telepathically quite articulate. But, being a cat, he can be a bit standoffish until he gets to know you. He wants to know, Bearns, if you're related to King Sabre in any way. He thinks you are the very image of his father of eighty years ago."

I was stunned to think that I looked like a younger version of the castle ghost. My outer, rational mind went into overdrive.

Was this the reason that the Council had chosen me for this mission? "This has to be more than just a coincidence! Why didn't someone on the Council tell me?"

With that, I glanced accusingly at Nandia. "Surely someone must have thought that this resemblance could have some bearing on our mission. Why is it, that I'm always the last person to find out about these things?"

Both women chuckled at my indulgent self-pity. Nandia ignored my semi-serious accusation and went on to explain our plan to Elli.

"We want to assist King Sabre in whatever way we can. We know we follow a failed Council mission that



left a bitter taste in his mouth. His relationship with the Grand Council is a shambles. We were hoping to find the Sabre's bedchambers, so we can meet this ghost who is haunting the King."

"I like the plan, Nandia," Elli replied. "And, please, call me El.

"Bearns, if I may say so, you do look like a younger version of King Sabre's father, the old goat," she continued. "Wilhelm is his name, and these days, he resembles you only ever so slightly. But, Nandia, you won't find him in the King's chambers for several more hours. He usually arrives as his son is about to retire. Then the hell-raising lasts until dawn.

"You should know, however, that we do have a ghost charmer here," she nodded toward the cat. "Arcturus has the ghouel wrapped around his smallest claw. Let's ask him to lead the way to Wilhelm. But, I must warn you—when this spook gets cranky, he can be difficult. And Wilhelm is often cranky."

Arcturus agreed to lead us to the Royal Spook. He telepathed that the ghost found this name pleasing, but only when used by his close friends. "Could count his mates on one paw, I could, with toes left over," he explained. "But, no need to go at it full lick, could be a clever rat's age before His Royal Spookness lets you breathe that rarified air."

And off he went, white spots flashing, as though he had strobe lights on his pedals to ward off traffic. The cat knew it could outrace us, and so kept us in sight by waiting at every turn,. We all hurried. El was well ahead of Nandia and me. The ageless chambermaid moved as if she trained daily with Arcturus.

Scurrying through the halls, I recalled an earlier

curiosity and mentally asked, “El, how long have you been working for the royal family?”

Her laughter bounced off the walls ahead of us. “Dear Bearns, I was Sabre’s great, great-grandfather’s third wife, that is, until he died,” she explained. “And, that was over three hundred years ago. But he wasn’t my first husband.” It suddenly occurred to me that we were in the presence of an immortal queen. My newly heightened respect for this woman was quite humbling. Especially knowing that, now, she was serving as The Royal Chambermaid and seemed to be quite happy doing so.

I began to wonder what skills I could bring to this mission that El didn’t already have. But, then it hit me that the Council Elders had most likely chosen our team for the gestalt of our combined energies. Deciding to trust the Council’s decision, I looked up from my musings. I’d fallen behind and ran to catch up. Together we hurried up more stairways and down new hallways, always pushing ourselves to keep pace with the cat.

We finally arrived at a spiral staircase. Arcturus led us up into a domed turret that towered over the surrounding structures. With tall, narrow openings that overlooked all points of the compass, it had wonderful aerial views of Aesir’s castle and distant gardens. High above us, hung a massive bell, its pull shredded and decaying after decades of neglect. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had actually heard its peal.

The cat leapt up onto a wooden bench that had been built into the tower’s circular walls. There he sniffed out a suitable spot for a nap. As he was settling in, he deigned to notice us and mentally telepathed, “Linger

together. Better with oglers flapped. Let yourselves tingle the ghost's shroud." It was only when I saw El close her eyes that I had any idea of what the cat was talking about.

So, finally a chance to rest. It took a few moments for me catch my breath and remember to breathe deep, connected breaths. I began relaxing, releasing the tensions that had accumulated since our arrival in Sabre's ballroom.

Then, I remembered a question I'd been longing to ask Nandia—similar to the one I'd so recently asked of El. At times while in Geasa, I wondered if Nandia had been traveling this realm longer than the tender years of her appearance had led me to believe. But, the press of that mission dissuaded me the several times I had thought to ask. I decided that now was the time to yield to my curiosity ...

She had been eavesdropping again, the snoop. Her soothing voice interrupted my question, "Not yet, Bearn, not quite yet ..."