

NANDIA'S COPPER



NED WOLF

BOOK I OF THE NANDIA TRILOGY

Also by Ned Wolf

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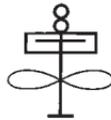
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NED WOLF

THE THERAPEUTAE



PRESS

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Published by:

The Therapeutae Press
P.O. Box 23542
Flagstaff, AZ
U.S.A. 86002

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-9675575-4-0

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-9675575-5-7

TheTherapeutaePress.com

THE THERAPEUTAE



PRESS

DEDICATION

*... to all who follow the yearning to nurture
the growth of consciousness.*

NANDIA'S COPPER





TELEPORTING INTO THE GREAT CHAMBER of the Galactic Council ended just as abruptly as it had begun. All motion stopped as the brilliant, spiraling, white light cleared from my head. I looked around, first at the unusual array of beings seated at a curved dais above me, then at the gloomy chamber that surrounded us. It looked as ancient as Agoragon, my mentor, had described it—fivescore or more centuries old, by his reckoning.

When he notified me of this journey, he hadn't prepared me for the sudden projection that had propelled me here. Another of his coyote-like teaching tricks, I decided. My no-spring-chicken of a teacher delighted in playing pranks, which did add spice to his invariably long and solemn sermons, to be sure. He would regularly remind me to hold my horses and focus on the present. "And the purpose of such equine equanimity is what, Bernard?" he would ask, his gaze resting steadily upon me as he awaited my response.

“The present is my only point of power.” While trying to sound dutiful, I knew I sounded impatient.

I did have a tendency to impulsively dart off into the future, anxious to see what gifts, troubles or promises the present might bring. Taking a deep breath, my mind stilled. I remembered where I was. It suddenly became very clear to me that my horses definitely needed to be reined in.

This was my first meeting with the Grand Council. In response to an urgent summons a week earlier, Agoragon had submitted my bona fides as a delegate candidate. The memory rekindled old apprehensions, which I decidedly did not want to wrestle with at that moment. Instead, I let my mind wonder about the Council. Why had they chosen such a dark and gloomy place? The domed marble ceiling, deeply smudged, must have been cobwebbed from antiquity. A golden light emanated from God-knows-where, highlighting the Elders before me and the spot where I stood. The rest was shrouded in shades of grey and dark. After another long breath, I had to admit that I felt like a schoolboy being accosted by his angry headmaster. In short, I could not have been more apprehensive.

“This place effectively shields us from mental eavesdropping.” This telepathic explanation seemed to have been timed to let me to clear my head. I scanned the Elders seated atop the semicircular dais, hoping to identify the message’s source. It was a male voice I’d mentally heard, flavored in an accent unknown to me. However, since the raised Council table seated only two beings who were remotely female, the gender of the telepathic Elder did little to help me identify him.

Agoragon had briefly mentioned that the Council

was represented by a wide diversity of life forms. I could hear his irritating coyote chuckle as it dawned on me how unhinged I was becoming at the raw novelty of what I was seeing.

“We need today’s decisions to be well hidden from telepathing intruders,” the voice continued. “If these proceedings go as hoped, Bernard, we trust you are prepared to travel?”

“I am quite prepared t ..., t ..., to travel.” I recoiled in apprehension as I heard the stammer in my voice. I had just violated my solemn oath to exude only confidence at this meeting. The growing wave of apprehension welled up through my body. And then I made matters worse by blurting out, “I hope no one here views me as food, do they?”

In the silence that followed, I vacillated between feeling ashamed of the blunder and feeling hopeful. Ashamed that, once again, I had failed to rein in my horses. Hopeful that the remark would be seen as a bit of lighthearted humor. And even more hopeful that it would deflect the Council’s attention away from my fears.

“Feather-light humor, I will, perhaps, concede,” replied an incredibly large, black, ugly creature. “To several of us, you do look and smell like a small, yet delectable, morsel. Your attempted joke reveals that you know of the famines of long-ago, when humans were a food source for several of our species. But our purpose today is not culinary.

“Your teacher, Agoragon, we hold in high regard. We trust him. For many years, he graced these chambers, quite generous with his wisdom. He would not have teleported you here were you not fully capable of

looking after your own well-being. I say this despite your question about our appetites. We fully expect that you can exercise your innate power to hold yourself above violation. And so ...," he paused. I worried, wondering what was coming next.

"... and so," he continued, "I imagine your question about our appetites was to determine just how well you've masked your insecurities?"

I nodded. I resumed breathing deeply. Then I decided to simply accept my feelings of trepidation and give up trying to control them. I remembered Agoragon's advice that my feelings of fear are cooperative messengers—feelings I can learn from provided I don't try to hide or fight them.

"I have long looked forward to this meeting," I focused my thoughts toward the entire Council. "Yes, I fully accept that I am creating my life and my state of well-being. And I hope that if you did want breakfast, I would serve something more satisfying than eggs Béarnaise." Several Council members chuckled appreciatively at the pun I had made of my name.

"I am honored that my training and talents have been honed enough to be granted this opportunity." My confidence grew, and I mentally telegraphed my gratitude. "I wish to follow only the highest ideals for my life. I dream of being a Council delegate. Yet, I must admit, that in my fervor to be of use, I have worried that my fears would somehow disqualify me."

I had accomplished much during my fifteen-plus years of training. Agoragon had helped me to fully accept the talents and abilities I had developed. "If you are hoping to project humility by minimizing or hiding your talents, you limit their growth," he had chided.

Once was enough for that message. That day, I learned that my false modesty was an attempt to prove that I was humble. Which was not the same as being humble. The Grand Council had long been recognized as supporting only the highest ideals for human endeavor, and here I was, in the midst of my greatest dream.

An ancient institution, the Council boasted no army, no police force, no power to impose economic sanctions upon a planet. Yet, it was well regarded for its accomplishments. Council Elders were chosen from only the most advanced societies, each individual well-known for their wisdom, intelligence and perspicacity. For uncounted centuries, the Council had aided civilizations that aspired to the exalted purpose of nurturing individual talents, abilities and purposes. It held to the ideal that each individual's greatest passion is to contribute to the evolution of consciousness. The Grand Council had long demonstrated that nurturing that ideal was the most effective means of building sustainable, creative societies.

By the time of my interview before the Council, only a handful of planets had evolved beyond the need for Council interventions to resolve wars, famines and epidemics. These planets were home to civilizations that had elevated social consciousness to the point where they no longer needed to create such suffering in order to grow.

However, most planets still held to the economies of avarice, guilt and fear. So they created extremes in abject poverty and obscene wealth. The best of these still had grossly ineffective health-care systems, war machines that devoured a lion's share of energy and resources, deteriorating environments and educational

systems that preached mostly superstition and irrational thought. When such a society reached a crisis, the Grand Council sent in delegates to help remedy the situation. These delegates were healers of renown with a resilience beyond the human norm. Over the centuries, many delegates had failed in their missions. Some died. Some of the more troubled planets self-destructed. Some few evolved and instituted the contributions of the Grand Council and its delegates.

So, here I was at the very epicenter of the greatest dream for my life. Once again, I reminded myself to rein in my horses. Letting my consciousness reach out to the Council, I telepathically acknowledged my desire to openly and honestly reveal myself. I felt, at the very least, that they deserved that.

In return, they seemed to have a humorous, if somewhat sardonic attitude toward me. As I scanned the different Elders seated at the Council table, I was drawn to one of the women. An unusual beauty, she fit no description I'd ever known of a Council Elder. I felt embraced in a blanket of warmth and wondered if she was sending me an affectionate nudge. She appeared youngish, dressed in autumnal colors that picked up golden highlights in her otherwise auburn hair. But it was her almond-shaped eyes that captured my attention. As if cast from some rare, blue-green gemstone, they projected an intelligence that piqued my curiosity and calmed me at the same time. I reined in my excitement and recalled my last meeting with Agoragon.

We had wandered through his Zen gardens until he bade me sit beneath the wide canopy of a Banyan tree. There, he filled our cups with his predictably acrid-tasting tea. As we sipped, I complained of my

impatience and frustration over the few opportunities I'd had to express my skills. He had simply smiled and reminded me that within all desire lay the keys to its fulfillment. Then, he had washed my feet. Now, that was a truly humbling experience.

My reverie was interrupted by the large, dark Elder who had spoken earlier. "He must have his uses, otherwise Agoragon would not have honored him so." This was directed to a rotund humanoid seated to his right, a smaller gentleman as hairless as a billiard ball. He was garbed in a glittering golden robe reminiscent of a Liberace gown.

My great-aunt Tilly was in love with Liberace. Even decades after his demise, he was regaled for his flamboyance, his pompadour and his masterful piano playing. During my childhood visits to Aunt Til, I was sternly urged to sit and watch vids of his performances on an ancient black-and-white television.

With a piercing look, the bald Elder spoke. "Recommend your abilities to us, please, Bernard."

"While you're well aware that I can be notoriously clumsy in social situations," I began, "I am quite effective in helping people heal. And, I'm a fair hand at using my thoughts to seed my desired outcomes. I'm also known for my skill at extricating myself from sticky situations."

"Ah, yes, I recognize you from one of your past lives as a villain," smiled the bald Elder whom I had decided to nickname Liberace.

"You robbed my stagecoach at sword point, and weren't above wounding a guard or two to discourage argument." I did not recall the incident, but knew of the lifetime. As a robber, I was proud of my skills with

sword and lock pick, though none too proud of the parasitic nature of that chosen profession.

“Bernard, perhaps you would prove useful with the dementia epidemic that rages in the city of Geasa, on the planet Fantibo,” the attractive woman stated. Her words struck me as being said for my benefit alone. This must have been the reason behind the Council’s call for delegate candidates. Facing an epidemic would be a new challenge. Suddenly, I was hungry with a thousand questions.

“Over a third of the city’s population has died, while another third is in the throes of the first stages of the disease,” explained the large Elder. “We can project you there; however, your return will be up to you.”

This said, he reached across the table and handed me a stack of currency. Then he added, “Bernard, you will receive more than ample support from this Council. However, be mindful—there is a need for haste. Right now, we are in the midst of unusual solar activity. The atmospheric conditions created by these radiations require your projection to Geasa within the hour. You will have only seven days to complete the assignment. If you do not return within the week ...” he paused to consider his words. “... well, the next time you will most likely be able to safely teleport back to this solar system won’t be for at least another year.”