

# PLĒROMA

THE NECTAR TRILOGY

BOOK 1

**Pleroma**  
**Book One of the Nectar Trilogy**

*Published by:*



**ShastaCor Press**  
[www.shastacorpress.com](http://www.shastacorpress.com)

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ISBN: 0-9840670-7-8  
13-Digit: 978-0-9840670-7-7

Cover Artwork: Spot Studios, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

*To Jamin, Micki, Ethan, and Leah  
my very own Pevensies*



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## CHAPTER 1

The air bit his skin. Every pump of the pedals pushed him harder against the cold and reminded him of the danger that waited at home. Normally this was a leisurely ride where Lane took in the sights and sounds of his suburban neighborhood and the cool autumn air washed over his face like a refreshing splash of water. Not today.

He had to get home before his father did. Josh was there, all alone. *If Dad gets there before I do...* Lane squeezed the thought from his mind and dug harder into the pedals to gain speed. *Don't think about it, just get there. I can't believe I let this happen!*

The bike skidded around the corner. He kept it together and pressed on for the last stretch of his ride.

The Murphys' house, the O'Briens' house, the Hogans' Home. *Please don't be there, please don't be there.*

Lane's heart jumped to his throat. Dad's car was already parked next to the house. He was too late.

With one fluid motion he slid the bike sideways, laid it down, and jumped over it and onto the front porch. The doorknob was stuck. On the third twist it gave way. He slammed his body against the door and stumbled into the tiny entryway.

Fear pierced his body. His worst nightmare played out in front of him. Two figures stood in the living room; neither reacting to his abrupt entrance. Lane's father stood hard, eyes full of rage and riveted on the small figure standing in front of him. Josh stood dwarfed and paralyzed.

Dad cocked his right hand back to deliver a blow to the boy's

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face. Lane lurched forward and pulled Josh back.

“Run, Josh! Get up to your room and lock the door. Now!”

Lane pushed Josh toward the stairs behind him. *Crack!* He turned and met the hand that was meant for Josh. It crashed against his left cheekbone and threw him to the floor.

“What do think you’re doin’, you stupid brat?” The words spewed from the man’s mouth. “You think you’re so smart. Don’t get in the way when I’m trying to discipline my kid.”

The staggering man scanned the room behind him. He grabbed an empty beer bottle from the coffee table.

Lane shook his head and popped back to his feet. He stood strong and squared off to counter the attack. He was tall for a sixteen-year-old, but his dad’s three-inch advantage was magnified by the drunken rage.

For an instant they locked eyes, and time froze. Spidery red veins intensified Dad’s gray blue eyes. In spite of the rage, there was a softness there. A hesitation. In the small space of a heartbeat, the man’s face morphed until he looked like the father Lane once knew—the kind man from when Lane’s mother was still alive. It was the faint image of a time when things were different. He hoped.

Lane reached out his hand to touch Dad’s shoulder.

His touch broke the spell. As quickly as it came, the soft moment was gone. The spark of hope was snuffed out by fear, and the image of that other man was replaced by the rage of a drunken beast.

“Dad, no!”

The bottle swung through Lane’s left peripheral vision and grazed his temple, spinning him backwards. He twisted and stumbled toward the stairs, slamming against the wall.

Through the flashes of light in his vision Lane could see that his father was coming after him. He had to get upstairs now! Lane scrambled with his hands and feet up the short first flight. He was on his feet by the landing, took the hard right turn, and leapt up the last flight in two big steps. A hard left down the short hallway and he was at his bedroom door.

*Josh.* His father’s footsteps were halfway up the stairs

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and Josh's room was halfway back down the hall. Did he have time?

Lane doubled back down the hall and twisted on Josh's door handle. Locked. Good. Dad was at the top of the stairs now, and just a step away. Lane spun back around, ran down the hall in one big stride, flung open the door, and threw himself into his room, slamming his body against the door.

*Click!* It was locked. He was safe.

Usually this was it. The locked door somehow stopped his father's rage and sent him back downstairs to the couch, where he would drink himself to sleep. Today was different for some reason. Instead of going away, he started pounding on the door and screaming. Pounding and pounding. Was he kicking it? *He's gone crazy.*

Lane didn't know what to do. His dad had never been this angry before. What would happen if he actually broke the door down? Lane rubbed his arm where the "accident" had happened three years ago and shuddered at the thought.

*I have to hide.*

The closet was so crammed with books and clothes that there was no way he could fit in there. Under the bed! Lane flopped down on his hands and knees and threw back the comforter to see if there was any space. It was dark and dusty, but there seemed to be just enough room between the boxes to squeeze in. He backed himself under the bed so he could watch the door.

There he was, a big, teenage, high-school junior hiding under his bed like a scared little kid. He didn't care what he looked like. A drunken, raging man was breaking down his door. He was scared out of his mind.

Lane buried his face in his arm and beat the ground with his other hand. *Oh God. Help me! Somebody help me!*

The door burst open. The bed shook. The floor rumbled. *He's in the room. He's on my bed!*

The shaking and rumbling got louder and louder. Not only the bed shook, but the floor heaved as well. The wooden floorboards rattled and bounced out of their places, shooting puffs of dust up from the cracks. The whole floor billowed like water.

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He was sinking.

*What's happening?*

His fear shifted. Dad's ominous threat was shoved to the side. A shot of adrenaline focused his attention on the fact that he was definitely sinking down into the floor. Was this an earthquake?

The weight of his body pushed the floor down and pulled all the boxes and toys in on top of him. He reached up to grab the bottom of the bed. *Snap!* The floor broke away underneath him. Falling...and floating?

It was silent. Everything was light. Blue light. Then white. Was that a cloud? Was he in the air?

The floating sensation only lasted a second, and then reality rushed in around him. Lane was falling through the sky. Tumbling and falling. Cloud, sky, ground. Cloud, sky, ground. The ground grew larger. A big patch of yellow expanded beneath him. Cloud, sky, yellow...*thud*...black.

His eyes cracked open, and he was conscious enough to feel pain shoot through his body. He was on his back, on the ground. There was blue sky. Where was he? His eyes closed. Black again.

## CHAPTER 2

Earlier that day...

The alarm beeped. 6:30am. Lane didn't move. The book he had been reading the night before lay open across his chest.

The alarm beeped again. Reluctant eyelids slowly opened to reveal the familiar greeting of all his closest friends. They surrounded his bed and looked down at him from their hedge of protection. Every morning they were there when he woke up, and every night they tucked him into bed. Safe, secure, predictable. He loved his books.

A heavy hand silenced the alarm. His head flopped back on the pillow, and his body melted into the sheets.

*Just five more minutes, that's all I need.*

Then, as though electricity shot through his mattress, Lane sat straight up, flinging the book to the foot of the bed.

"It's today!" he shouted.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and planted his feet on the floor. Paper scraps and doodles flew everywhere. He went to the door to tear it open, then stopped short. Excitement succumbed to caution, and he opened the door slightly.

Through the small crack he could see that the door at the end of the hallway was open. That was a good sign. He crossed to the window that faced the garage in the backyard. Breath held tightly, he looked out. Dad's car was gone.

The air rushed from his lungs in a great flow of relief, and Lane's excitement returned. Once again he sprang to his door and this time flung it open.

"Josh! It's time to get up! Come on, man."

He banged on the door.

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“Josh, get up!”

He checked the knob. Locked. That was good.

“Come on, Josh. You know I can’t get in there to pull you out of bed. We can’t be late today!”

“Uh-huh,” came a muffled response from inside the room.

A few moments later a very small, seven-year-old boy stood in the doorway. Heavy eyelids barely revealed his large blue eyes.

“Come on, little J.” Lane tussled his fingers through Josh’s hair. “We’ve got to get this rat’s nest under control and get ready for school.”

The one bathroom in the house was very small. Two grown people could not stand in front of the sink and look into the mirror at the same time. Fortunately for Josh, he was not a grown person.

Lane stood in front of the sink and looked into the mirror. The few hairs that sprouted on his chin stared back at him. It was a good day to shave.

Josh stood to the side, step stool beside him on the floor, and tried to wait his turn. Inch by inch, as if Lane didn’t notice, Josh scooted his stool closer to the front of the sink. Impatience won out, and a wild-haired head popped up into the bottom of the mirror, launching the two boys into their morning dance around the sink.

By the time Josh made it to the top step he was fully awake, and his bright eyes fixed on his big brother. Then the questions began. Usually he would ask things like, “Lane, why is the sky blue?” “What makes a lightbulb glow?” “What really lives under my bed?”

Lane didn’t mind answering the questions. They kept his mind sharp.

Today the questions took a more personal nature.

“Lane?”

“Yeah, little J.”

“Why are you so excited about today? Are you getting a new baseball mitt? I didn’t think you liked baseball.”

“A baseball mitt? What are you talking about?” The tooth-

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brush hung out of Lane's mouth. He rinsed and spit, sloshing Josh's words in his brain.

It hit him. "Oh, mitt!" Lane laughed and patted Josh on the shoulder. "Not baseball mitt, Josh. *M-I-T*. It stands for Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I'm excited about today because after school I am going to be taking a test that will tell me whether or not they will let me apply to a special early admittance program next year at MIT."

"What's so special about that?"

"MIT is just about the best school you can go to if you want to study all the really cool stuff about science and technology. You know, if you want to be the first person to invent time travel or something like that."

"Cool! Do I get to come to school with you?"

"Well," Lane placed his toothbrush back in the holder. "MIT is a long way from here." He screwed the cap back on the toothpaste tube and weighed his next words. "I would have to move away from home if I went to MIT."

Josh's eyes dimmed.

The morning routine continued without another word. Hair combed. Breakfast eaten. Clothes on. All with a tense silence that hung thick around them.



Lane walked into his room to find Josh standing in front of his small desk. He was looking at a solitary photograph that stood in its frame, tucked securely between the Chronicles of Narnia boxed set and the tattered Lord of the Rings books. Four very happy people beamed back at him through faded ink. A man and a woman, dressed in formal attire, held each other close. The woman held a toddler in her arms. On the man's shoulders sat a ten-year-old boy with a big, wild head of hair and a huge, laughing smile.

"Lane, tell me again. What was she like?"

Lane couldn't speak. He looked around the room at all the books that lined the walls. His fascination with the world and his

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love of learning were because of her. Tears blurred the photo.

Things were different when that picture was taken. Back then they were a family. They laughed together. They went places. They played and talked and read stories. That photograph was the last memory Lane had of his mother. It was taken the night of the accident. She was gone...and so was his dad. Sure, Dad was there physically, but ever since that day, as far as Lane was concerned, neither his mom nor his dad ever returned. The man who lived with them now was scary, angry, and dangerous. What was Lane supposed to do? His stomach turned. He had to go to MIT, for her, but he couldn't leave Josh behind with Dad.

"Oh, Josh." A single tear fell on the desk. "I wish you could have known her. She loved you very much. I remember when they brought you home from the hospital. Her face lit up so bright. She said she had brought me the best present I could ever imagine—a little brother."

He pulled Josh close to him.

"You don't remember this, but she would take us both up on her lap and read stories. I never got tired of it. 'Read another one, Mommy' I would always say. Even though you were just a baby, you didn't seem to get tired of it either. I think it was the sound of her voice. It was so smooth and rich. I loved that voice. Man, what I would give to hear it just one more time."

They both stared at the photo in silence.

"Whoa, Josh, what are we doing? We're going to be late!"

Quickly they ran down the stairs, out the back door, and to their bikes. Side by side they rode down the driveway to the street and stopped at the sidewalk. Lane needed to go right to get to school, and Josh needed to go left.

"OK, little J, don't forget. I'm going to be later than usual today, so, when you get home, go to your room. I'll make sure I'm here before Dad gets home, so don't worry." Lane gave Josh a reassuring smile and one last tussle of his unmanageable hair.

"Don't worry, Lane. I'll be all right."

They rode off in separate directions.

## CHAPTER 3

Lane loved the ride to school, especially on fall mornings. The last hint of summer's green was fading from the trees that lined the street. Soon they would burst into a blaze of oranges, reds, and yellows.

He methodically pedaled his bike and allowed the crisp air to wash over his face. The cares and tension of home fell away and skidded on the road in his wake. This was one of the few times during his day when he felt free.

At the end of the street, a park formed a large square that was full of tall oak trees. The trees stood too far apart to call it a forest, but there was enough cover to form a leafy archway over the path. It ran diagonally through the park and led directly to his school on the other side.

He rode up to the large brick building. Its massive stone staircase opened wide from the front door. Lane dismounted and hoisted the bike over his shoulder. He was allowed to store his bike inside because several episodes of vandalism had rendered his last one unusable. This one had been a special gift from some of his favorite teachers, and they didn't want anything to happen to it.

"Hey, geek boy. How's it goin' with the ladies? Have you figured out what those are yet?" heckled one of the boys who perched like crows on the staircase.

Lane kept his eyes forward and moved past the heckling flock, fighting back images of violent retribution falling on their heads. Idiots.

With the gauntlet of mindlessness behind him, Lane focused

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on what was otherwise his favorite place and procedure. First, he dropped off his bike in the storage closet. Once he had secured it, he slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed off to Ms. Mitchell's homeroom class. Moving, invisible, past several sets of indifferent eyes, he found his seat and welcomed the next moment: a greeting from the girl in front of him. Heather Jyles.

She spun around and flashed her wide smile full of perfect teeth. Her dark eyes twinkled. He always loved the way her short, dark curls bounced when she spun around to look at him like that. Every time she smiled at him something in his belly jumped. What was that look in her eye? Was it one of affection, admiration, or pity? Lane decided it had to be pity. It couldn't possibly be the others. It might be admiration. After all, he was at the top of his class academically, and Heather was one of his leading competitors. It would only be natural for her to admire her notable rival. But she was too pretty and too popular to have affection for him. On good days he thought it was admiration. On particularly bad days he was convinced it was nothing more than pity coming from a truly kind person.

"Well? Are you excited?" Heather asked. She crossed both arms on the front of his desk. Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"What?"

"The test, you dork. Are you excited?" Heather teased. "This has got to be one of the coolest things I've ever seen. How many kids get to take this test?"

"Yeah, I'm excited, I guess."

"Right. You don't fool me, I know you're busting at the seams."

The bell rang and the rest of the students slipped into their seats. Before she turned around, Heather leaned over to Lane and whispered, "I know you're going to do great. You're my hero, you know." She paused and looked at him with her dark eyes. They flashed, and then she turned away to face the teacher.

He was stunned. Hero? If he hadn't known better, that last look might have been more than admiration. Impossible.

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The homeroom class proceeded as normal, and the bell rang, dismissing everyone to begin their day. Heather turned around and looked at Lane.

“Good luck today. We’re cheering for you.”

His eyes followed her as she disappeared into the hallway.

“Heather Jyles, huh?” Ms. Mitchell said. She walked up to Lane’s desk.

“What?” He shook himself from a dumbfounded stare.

“I saw how she looked at you, Lane. I was a young girl like her once, you know.” Ms. Mitchell smiled and looked at him with motherly admiration.

“Heather? Me? Come on, Ms. M.” He vigorously shook his head. “First of all, you know I don’t have time for that sort of thing. And, secondly, she is way out of my league.” He shrugged it off.

“Well, don’t underestimate yourself, young man,” she scolded him. “Which reminds me...don’t forget to be right here after school. Three thirty sharp. They allowed us to use this room. It should make you feel nice and comfortable.”

“That’s great,” Lane replied.

“I’m so proud of you. I just know you’re going to do great. Now, you better get moving, or you’ll be late and you’ll have to take the test from detention hall.”



The rest of the day went smoothly. It started out in Mr. Lancaster’s AP Physics class.

“Yes, Derek.” Mr. Lancaster hadn’t had a chance to begin class when a hand shot up in the back of the room.

“Mr. Lancaster,” Derek said, “I watched a show last night that talked about parallel dimensions. Do you think there really are alternate realities?”

Mr. Lancaster’s eyes brightened beneath his bushy white eyebrows. He squinted his left eye, which bunched up the skin at the corner like folds of leather. When his head tilted to the side everyone in the class shot excited glances at each other.

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They got him. Everyone knew Mr. Lancaster was a sucker for science fiction and discussing the bizarre aspects of physics. All the students leaned forward to enjoy the ride.

All but Lane. He slumped back in his chair and raised his hand.

“I don’t mean to be rude, sir, but is this really what we were supposed to discuss today?”

Audible groans echoed around the room as Mr. Lancaster’s spell was broken.

“Look, everybody,” Lane said, “it might be cool to talk about having to slingshot around the sun to go back in time or finding your alternate personality in another dimension when you are watching science fiction, but I thought this class was about science reality. Don’t get me wrong, I love a good story, but I’m here to learn something that is actually going to get me somewhere in life. Can we get back on the subject please?”

Mr. Lancaster smiled. His pure white hair and slightly hunched back did not conceal the impish mischief that lay behind his eyes. He sat back in his chair, put his arms behind his head, and stared at Lane.

“Mr. Reality, huh Lane?” he said. “It’s all about the tangible, the concrete, and the here and now for you, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much, sir. I used to be into all that fantasy stuff...”

His mind wandered back to the times his mom would sit with him on his bed and read classics like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *A Wrinkle in Time* to him late into the night. The two of them would dream together about all the magical places that might be lurking around any corner and about how cool it would be to find one of them. Now that was all gone...

“...but I don’t have time for that kid’s stuff anymore. The world is in too much danger, and we need to use science to do something real about it.”

Mr. Lancaster lifted his eyebrows and redirected his attention to the topic at hand. “OK, you are the whiz kid after all.”



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After physics it was calculus, then AP Lit, AP History, a brief stretch of the right brain with an art class, and finally German.

Three fifteen, and the final bell rang. The moment had come. Lane stopped off at his locker to gather his things and then made the trek down the main hallway to Ms. Mitchell's room. As he walked through the doorway, things seemed different somehow. The room that was usually bristling with the energy of his homeroom classmates was now strangely still. It was almost suffocating.

"Hey, Lane, are you ready?" Ms. Mitchell greeted him.

"Yeah, I guess. But could we open the window or something? It seems really hot in here." Lane rolled up his sleeves and opened his collar a little more.

"Sure." Ms. Mitchell slid open the archaic window.

"Now, find a comfortable spot, and when you're ready, I'll give you the packet."

Lane scanned the room and decided that the most comfortable spot was the seat that had been his since his freshman year. He sat down and looked up at his teacher.

"I'm ready."

She placed the thick stack of paper in front of him.

"You'll have one hour from the time I say 'go.'"

The clock on the wall said it was 3:30. He'd be done by 4:30. That would give him plenty of time to take the exam and be home before his father came home from work.

"Perfect." He looked up at his admiring teacher with a confident smile.

Ms. Mitchell situated herself behind her desk and then looked up at Lane.

"I just want you to know how proud I am that you are even able to take this exam. Now, just relax." She picked up the timer and pressed the button.

"Begin."

He cracked open the test packet and opened to page one. The first question actually made sense to him. That was a good sign. He progressed through the questions, carefully taking them one at a time, not wanting to look ahead.

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The time went by quickly. Fifteen minutes passed, then thirty. The pages turned, and the wheels in his mind spun wild and fast. The questions energized him, and he reveled in the stimulus they provided for his mind. He loved it. He hadn't felt this good in a long time. It was 4:15 and he was on the final question. Perfect.

His enthusiasm came to a screeching halt. His breath caught in his throat. In big, bold letters at the bottom of the page he read the words "YOU MAY NOW TAKE A 10 MINUTE BREAK BEFORE PROCEEDING TO PART 2 OF THE EXAM."

What? Part two? Lane looked up at the clock then darted his eyes to his teacher.

"Ms. Mitchell, it says there is a part two on this test." His voice cracked as the words squeezed from his tightened throat.

"Yes? Is that a problem?"

"Well, I...just...wasn't expecting that." He looked up at the clock again. His foot bounced on the floor, racing with his accelerating heartbeat.

"Lane, I'm sorry. I thought you knew it was a two-part test. You have one hour to complete part one and one hour to complete part two."

He studied the clock and tried to make the calculations in his head. His mind was so scrambled now he felt like he couldn't even tell time. *It's four thirty now. If it takes an hour, that will put me at five thirty. I'll have to get my bike and ride home. I'll barely make it home by six. What day is it? Thursday? Does he get home early or late today? Oh man, I can't remember.*

He fidgeted in his seat. "Ms. Mitchell, is there any way I can take part two tomorrow?"

Her face showed deep concern as she began to piece together what was bothering him.

"Oh Lane, I'm so sorry. The rules clearly state that once you open the packet the test must be completed in the allotted time, or else you will forfeit the opportunity."

He rolled his head back and raked his hands through his hair several times, massaging his brain to come up with an alternate solution. The timer beeped and his ten-minute break was over.

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“Lane, it’s time to start part two.”

Perhaps some kind of miraculous intervention would happen. Maybe the fire alarm would go off. Maybe Mr. Lancaster would barge into the room and finally ask Ms. Mitchell to marry him and carry her away. Maybe aliens would suck him out through the window.

No help came. He dropped his head in defeat.

The page weighed a hundred pounds. The words of the first question were thick and meaningless. A heavy head pressed into his hand, and he wondered how he was going to make it through part two.

*Pull it together, man. Just breathe deeply and focus. You can do this.*

The next hour took an eternity. It was amazing how different he could feel from one part of the test to the next. In part one he felt brilliant and energized. Now his mind felt splintered, and all his knowledge dribbled out his ears. Loud clicks from the minute hand marked his trudge through each thick question.

Five twenty-seven. It had taken him the full hour to slog through the boggy test. He wasn’t sure if he had understood the questions, let alone answered them correctly. Hopes of MIT melted away as he placed the packet on Ms. Mitchell’s desk. He would be stuck here with no hope of getting out...and away from him.

*It’s all his fault, again.* Anger surged inside him. Teeth clenched, he stared a hole through the desk.

“Lane, what’s wrong?”

Ms. Mitchell’s question jolted him back to the moment. He looked up at her and then at the clock. The anger was quickly displaced by fear.

“Josh!” He bolted for the door. “I’ve gotta fly, Ms. M. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He slid out of the room onto the green and black vinyl floor of the hallway and scrambled to make the turn. A frantic stop at the storage closet produced his bike, and soon both were out the front door, down the big stone staircase, and onto the path that led through the park.

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He had to make it home in time. Couldn't he pedal any faster? His legs started to burn, but he had to keep pedaling.

CHAPTER 4

Later that day...

The sound of voices was the first thing he heard. Whispers, really. Muddy words swirled around in Lane's mind like milky clouds. As the sounds became clearer, so did the pain that shot through his head. Where was he? The darkness around him was not the heavy kind of darkness that he would expect to feel when stuffed underneath a bed. It was a bright darkness. Even through closed eyes, white heat burned in his vision. Sunlight? He didn't dare open his eyes.

"Jethro!" The muddy whispers formed words. "Jethro! Come here." The voice was a whisper trying to be a shout. "Jethro!"

Sounds like snapping twigs or peanut shells underfoot moved away from him and disappeared. More sounds emerged. A light breeze blowing through leaves, the occasional buzz of a flying bug, and a rhythmic beating of some sort. The beating was not a deep boom, like a drum beat, but more high-pitched and short—like the sound of a bean bag falling on the ground. It was distant and very faint, but it continued, consistent and rhythmic.

Under ordinary circumstances these would be the calming sounds of a lazy summer afternoon in the park, but Lane was anything but calmed. The pain in his head grew stronger, and every muscle in his body was tensed and hard.

Did he dare open his eyes? Where could he possibly be? Waves of possibilities whirled in his mind. A tingling sensation coursed through his body. First in the ankles, then shooting up his back, it exploded like the feeling of ginger-ale bubbles at the base of his head. Was this fear or excitement...or both?

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Just as he was about to open one eye, footsteps approached. Two distinct sets of footsteps swished through the sound of branches brushing, bending, and snapping back into place.

“Jethro, do you see what I mean? Just look at the size of him!” It was the voice he had heard before.

“Hmmm,” a deep growl rumbled from the second set of footsteps. “You are definitely right about his size, Gustov. I will grant you that,” the grumbler said, “but how can you know if he is the one?”

“Jethro! Slap yourself! Look at him. What other explanation can there possibly be?”

“Gustov, keep your voice down. You do not want to attract attention to this thing. No matter what he is, we have to figure out what to do with him.”

Footsteps paced back and forth from one side of Lane’s head to the other, snapping twigs, pausing, then moving again.

“We cannot very well have him stand up. The guards will spot him for sure. If they see him then all kinds of trouble will rain down on us.”

“That is true,” Gustov agreed.

The three of them were silent for a while.

“I am telling you, Gustov, nothing good will come of this. We should just walk away from this right now and let the guards deal with him.”

“The guards? How could you possibly think about letting the guards learn of him? That is just the opposite of what we should do. No, we have to come up with a plan. You wait here and keep an eye on him. I will be right back.”

One set of footsteps faded into the distance. Lane could hear the heavy breathing of the voice he now knew as Jethro. Did Jethro just growl?

“Oh, this is just lovely,” grumbled Jethro. “There I was, just minding my own business, working on my row like a good little worker, and then you have to show up and send Gustov into a fit. *Pleroma*...that is a bunch of rattlescat if you ask me.”

*Pleroma? What’s he talking about?*

Lane felt a sharp poke in his right shoulder. Another jab

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poked into his ribs.

“You are probably dead,” Jethro growled.

A twig cracked, and then something came extremely close to his head. Warm, moist air tickled his ear. It was very difficult to lay still when his personal space was being violated by...whatever it was that was violating him.

*What is Jethro? Why is there a Jethro? I'm supposed to be under the bed in my room.*

A sharp, pinpoint pain shot into the top of Lane's head.

“Ow!” the exclamation jumped from Lane's mouth and sprung his body to a sitting position. His eyes popped open. Lane's sudden movement sent the mysterious Jethro sprawling backwards into the shadows.

Trying to match the sounds with what he saw was disorienting. It took a few seconds for the two senses to come in sync. Lane was definitely outside. The clear blue sky sprawled above him, and the sun shone brightly overhead. It was midday. Yellow and green dominated the color palette. He sat in the middle of a field of plants that stood straight and tall. They reached a little higher than the top of his head when he was sitting up. A cluster of buds crested the top of each tall green stalk and revealed a small stripe of yellow down their sides where they were starting to break open.

The plants completely surrounded him and obstructed his view. Several stalks fanned around him on the ground, apparently crushed by the impact of his fall. If he wanted to see any more of his surroundings he was going to have to stand up.

Just as he pulled in his legs to hoist himself to a standing position, a voice shot out from the plants in a constrained, whispered shout.

“NO! Do not stand!”

Lane froze. It was the voice of Jethro. Lane stared into the wall of stalks. His stomach churned as he anticipated what was about to emerge from the plants. He was sure it was going to be grotesque and frightening. He just hoped it would not hurt him. Lane braced himself.

Jethro stepped out from the wall of plants and into the sun-

## THE NECTAR TRILOGY

light. A laugh escaped from Lane's mouth before he could catch it. What stood before him was anything but an intimidating or grotesque creature. Jethro was a pint-sized, middle-aged man wearing a simple, beige tunic that hung loosely from his torso, brown pants, and some dirty leather boots.

The top of his head came to just below the tops of the plants. His body was well proportioned, except for the fact that his head seemed a little too large for the rest of his parts. His arms were thick and strong, culminating in wide and calloused hands. A thick, bushy mustache tucked under his bulbous nose and blended in with an equally thick beard that hung down to mid-chest.

The most unusual feature on this strange little figure was a lack of feature. Jethro had no ears. Dark eyes blinked in the sunlight, revealing strange, goatlike, horizontal pupils that constricted vertically in the brilliance. Other than these two things, his features were very humanlike.

"Did you just laugh at me?" Jethro scrunched up his nose and scowled.

Lane didn't respond. After all, what do you say when one minute you are under your bed and the next minute you open your eyes and you find yourself staring at a Munchkin?

"I'm sorry?" Lane hunched his shoulders and opened his hands, palms up.

They stared at each other for a few uneasy moments, and then Lane resumed his attempt to stand up.

"No!" Jethro ran full speed toward him.

Jethro's impact knocked Lane backwards onto his rear. The momentum of the charge caused Jethro to tumble on top of Lane. They both lay on top of some newly crushed plants.

Jethro looked at the plants he had crushed and lamented, "Oh no, more flowers destroyed. We are going to pay for that. What is worse is we are going to have to explain it as well."

Jethro looked up at Lane and squinted in the bright sunlight. "Pleroma, huh? I think you are nothing but bad luck. Humph!"

Before Lane had a chance to respond, a rustling sound approached them from the other side of the clearing they had

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formed. Another small man appeared from within the plants. Overall, this man was very similar to Jethro. He had no ears, and his pupils were goatlike. His face, however, was round and jovial. He had cherry cheeks that smashed up into his smiling eyes. Thick salt-and-pepper sideburns covered the sides of his face and grew down his jawline, took a sharp turn below the corners of his mouth, and converged to form a thick mustache. This left his chin exposed and clean-shaven. He was not fat, but his body was round. Combined with his rosy cheeks and the gleam in his eye, it gave him an aura of Yuletide.

“Oh, Great Father, he is awake!” Lane recognized the voice as that of Gustov. “This is wonderful.”

“Wonderful?!” Jethro protested, “Look at all these crushed flowers. How are we going to explain this, Gustov? I am telling you, this thing will be the death of us. We need to run away, now!”

“Oh, stop it, Jethro,” Gustov waved him off. “Just look at him. If this is not the one, then I do not know what else it could be.”

“Trouble,” Jethro muttered under his breath. “That is what it is.”

“Well,” Gustov said, “we will just let the council figure that out.”

Lane sat, speechless, and stared at his two new companions. Perhaps he was dreaming? But it all seemed so real. He could feel the stalks of the plants under him and the breeze blowing against his skin. The warmth of the sun beat on his head. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and a drop ran down the side of his face. The sounds, the textures, the colors, they were all so vivid. It couldn't be a dream. What was it?

Gustov walked closer to Lane and planted himself in front of him. At full height, the round halfling's eyes were even with Lane's when he was sitting down. Horizontal pupils scanned Lane up and down. They stopped and looked deep into Lane's eyes as if searching for something. He felt awkward, but somehow knew he shouldn't look away. Gustov's stare penetrated deeply and lasted for several minutes.

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A smile spread across the round face, and Gustov's eyes disappeared under the upward thrust of rosy cheeks.

"Ah, yes, Jethro, he is the one. I can feel it."

He stood back, tapped his index finger against his lips, and searched the ground for answers.

"What to do, what to do."

Gustov looked up at Lane. "Well, Jethro is right about one thing. We cannot have you standing up and getting noticed by the guards. We will have to wait until nightfall before we can bring you into the village."

Gustov slapped his hands together with a great flourish. "It is settled, then. Jethro, you stay here with him, and you," he pointed at Lane, "blessed Pleroma, you stay down, and wait until I return."

The small, round form vanished into the plants. Jethro ran after him, leaving Lane alone. Muffled whispers volleyed back and forth, and then silence. A few moments later a very dejected Jethro reappeared. He took one look at Lane, huffed, then plopped on the ground.

"That is it then. We wait." Jethro turned away from Lane and stared into the wall of vegetation in silence.

Lane thought it was just as well that his reluctant companion did not want to speak. The silence would give him time to think through his situation. What was happening? There wasn't enough information to form a hypothesis. He would have to wait.

His head was really throbbing now. The pain and the weight of these strange events pulled him to the ground. Everything grew misty, then black. He fell asleep.

CHAPTER 5

No more sunlight. Night had fallen while he slept, and the plants that encircled his field of vision were rimmed with bright moonlight. Sleep did not extinguish the throbbing in his head. In fact it seemed to be more intense.

A strange sensation crept over Lane. Someone was watching. At first he was afraid to look, but then he remembered his previous encounter. He turned his head and saw two sets of eyes gleaming in the moonlight, intensely fixed on him. It was Jethro and Gustov.

“Ah! You are awake!” Gustov boomed in a loud, robust voice. “Get up, Pleroma. We must walk.”

The volume that bellowed from this small body was remarkable.

“You want me to stand up?” Lane asked. “What about the guards? Aren’t we supposed to whisper and stay low?”

Gustov laughed.

“Good, you learn quickly. Yes, when the sun shines we must be very cautious of the guards. They watch our every move. But, when the sun goes to bed and our Three Sisters rise to guide the night sky, the guards become worthless. The nectar has done its work, and they will sleep soundly all night.”

Gustov extended his hands to the night sky.

“In the day we are prisoners, at night we walk free.”

The two small men walked away from Lane and into the wall of plants.

Gustov called back over his shoulder, “Come, Pleroma! Stand and walk.”

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He stood up. For the first time since his arrival in...wherever this was, Lane was able to see past the small patch of plants that had been his cell. The darkness cast a deep purple shadow over everything. He stood in the middle of a large field of plants that rose to his waist. Far on the other side of the field there was a long ridge of darkness. He couldn't tell if this was a line of trees or the silhouette of distant mountains. Straight ahead, another wall of darkness tore a jagged edge against the dark gray sky. It seemed to be a cluster of trees.

Two blurry dots moved toward the dark outcropping. He assumed these dots were his guides, so he followed. By the time they reached the edge of the mass, he caught up with them.

At this point it was obvious that they stood at the edge of some woods. The tree trunks were rim-lit with silky white light. The majority of the trees were of a broad, leafy type with strong, exposed trunks. Scattered amongst them stood the furry outlines of pine branches. The ground was covered with loose leaves and dirt and relatively free of undergrowth.

Gustov and Jethro did not miss a beat, but continued to press on into the woods. Lane stopped at the edge and looked back. The source of the strong rim-lighting was apparent. Spread evenly in the sky hung three moons. Each of them was nearly full. Their brightness illuminated the landscape in rich, monochromatic tones. Wide fields spread away from him over rolling hills as far as the eye could see. The fields were punctuated by dark patches of forest.

"Ah, our Sisters," Gustov said. "You are not the first man to be distracted by their beauty. When the three of them dance together it is especially captivating."

Gustov paused to bask in the moonlight.

"It also makes it very easy to see in the darkness," Gustov said, "even in the deeper woods. So, we must not waste their mercy. We need to go!"

Gustov turned and headed quickly back into the woods where Jethro impatiently waited. Lane had no choice but to follow his guides into the dark woods.

As much as the three "Sisters" illuminated the woods, it was

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still very dark and difficult to navigate the forest floor. He tripped and stumbled along, skinning his hands as he caught himself against the rough trunks. Eventually the ground began to rise steeply. Soon he needed to use his hands and feet to climb. The two guides were barely visible, but it was clear that they did not struggle as they climbed. Twiggy shrubs served as handles as he pulled his way up the slope. Breathing became more difficult, and his head pounded.

Finally, they came to the top of the ridge. It flattened out into a moonlit clearing about ten feet wide. The other side was edged by another wall of forest. Rocky, flat ground spread out to their right. It was a path.

Gustov and Jethro continued along the path without hesitation or instruction. He followed, thankful for a level surface that was free of trees. The two halflings walked briskly, but Lane's long strides quickly overtook them. He slowed his pace and settled into a leisurely gait in order to let them lead.

The subdued cadence of his walk, combined with the milky white moonlight and the warm summer air allowed his body to slip into autopilot and his mind to kick into overdrive.

Where was he? Who were these two strange little men walking in front of him?

One thing was certain. He had not fallen into another world. That was not possible.

*I'm dreaming. That's the most logical explanation. But, I've had lots of dreams before, and none of them have been like this. This is too lucid. Everything seems so real. The bigger question is why I would be asleep right now.*

His father had been in a bad place that day. Worse than usual. Why had he been so angry? *Let's see, what happened? I hid under the bed. He kicked in the door. The bed started to shake, and then everything fell in on me...*

"A coma!" Lane shouted.

His outburst stopped Gustov and Jethro short.

"A coma, Pleroma? What is a coma, and why are you shouting?" Gustov asked.

"A coma...you know...the sleeplike state of someone who

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has suffered a head injury.” Lane said.

Gustov stared blankly.

He stepped away from Gustov and looked up at the night sky.

“Hello!”

He ran a few feet further down the path, cupped his hands, and shouted louder.

“Hello, can you hear me? I know where I am now. You can wake me up! I get it!”

“Pleroma,” Gustov said, “are you calling to the Sisters? Do you have the ability to communicate with them?”

“No, I’m not calling to the Sisters. And, oh yeah, by the way,” he continued with a new sense of confidence, “stop calling me Pleroma. My name is Lane.”

“Lane?”

“I told you he was not the Pleroma,” Jethro said.

“Be quiet, Jethro.” Gustov caught up with Lane on the path. “What does Lane mean?”

“I don’t know. It’s just my name. You know...Lane. That’s it.”

Gustov scratched his head and studied the ground.

“I suppose,” Gustov said, mostly to himself, “the term Pleroma is more of a label than a name. Why can the Pleroma not have a proper name?”

He looked up with a satisfied smile. “Lane it is, then. It is a pleasure to meet you. Now, what is this coma that you say, and why are you calling to the sky?”

“Oh, right,” Lane answered, “I guess that might look a little strange to you.”

“A little,” Jethro said. He rolled his eyes.

Lane ignored the jab and continued. “As we have been walking along this path I’ve been racking my brain, trying to make sense out of what’s happening to me. At first I thought I was dreaming, but everything is too real for that. Then, as my head kept pounding, I remembered how my dad broke into my room. He must have slammed down on my bed and broken it. The bed

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fell on my head and crushed my skull.”

Gustov and Jethro froze in confusion.

“You see, I’m not really here. Well, I’m here, but here isn’t really here.”

The confusion deepened in their faces.

He backtracked and tried again. “What I mean is that I’m actually lying in a hospital bed right now.”

“What is a hospital?” Gustov asked.

“A hospital? Well, it’s a place where you take sick or injured people so that they can get better. You know, with doctors and nurses.”

“A place of medicine?” Gustov asked.

“Yes, that’s it.” Lane replied, “A place of medicine. When the bed fell on my head I must have been knocked unconscious. They rushed me to the hospital, and I am lying on a bed. The doctors are trying to use medicine to bring me out of my coma. I probably have tubes and wires sticking out of me all over the place.”

His hands flailed as he pantomimed his bedridden and intubated state. Gustov and Jethro recoiled in disgust at the picture he painted.

He toned it down and continued.

“So, I’ve been trying to figure out what you are and what this place is. After all, how cheesy is it that I wake up in a land full of half-sized people? I mean that one is so old. That got worn out with *The Wizard of Oz*. Obviously, there aren’t half-sized people with no ears and weird eyes in real life. This is too much like all those stories my mom used to read to me when I was a kid.”

He slapped his hands together.

“That’s when it hit me! You guys exist inside my head. You, this place, this is something that my subconscious mind has created in order for me to cope with my coma. Everything I see is an image from my memory and imagination.”

There was a long, silent pause as the two halflings studied his face.

“So,” Jethro snorted, “we are not real. We only exist in your mind. That is rich.”

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Jethro looked at Gustov with exasperation.

“Gustov, do you need to hear any more of this? Do you still believe he is the one? He does not even think we are real.”

Gustov looked puzzled and hurt. His eyes shifted back and forth, scanning the ground for answers to this new wrinkle in his ideas.

He looked at Lane, “Plero—I mean, Lane. Do really think we are not real?”

Gustov’s sincerity was moving. And unexpected. The two munchkins were supposed to vanish or change in some way now that they were exposed by the light of truth.

“Well...I mean...when I said you aren’t real...I meant that you don’t exist in the real world.”

Hurt deepened in Gustov’s eyes.

“No, no, I mean...that...you are very real to me...”

The furrowed brow smoothed out and Gustov’s shoulders relaxed. The smile once again spread across his rotund face.

“You see, Jethro,” Gustov looked back with a smug superiority, “he is not crazy. He knows this is real.”

Lane deemed it best to hold his perceptions to himself. If he was going to figure out what is really going on, perhaps he should interact with this world as if it were real.

The fact that he was inside of his own mind helped to subdue his mounting anxiety. Now the task at hand was to decipher what his mind was telling him and figure out how to wake up from his coma.

“Gustov, I’m sorry if I worried you,” Lane said. “I think I’m a little confused. Could you tell me where I am?”

Gustov looked at Lane and then turned his head a little to the side. “You really do not know what is going on, do you?”

“No, I really don’t.” Lane answered, “All I know is that one minute I was hiding under my bed, and the next minute I was falling through the sky and landed in your field.”

“Hmmm... This is interesting,” Gustov said. “Let us walk and I will explain everything.”