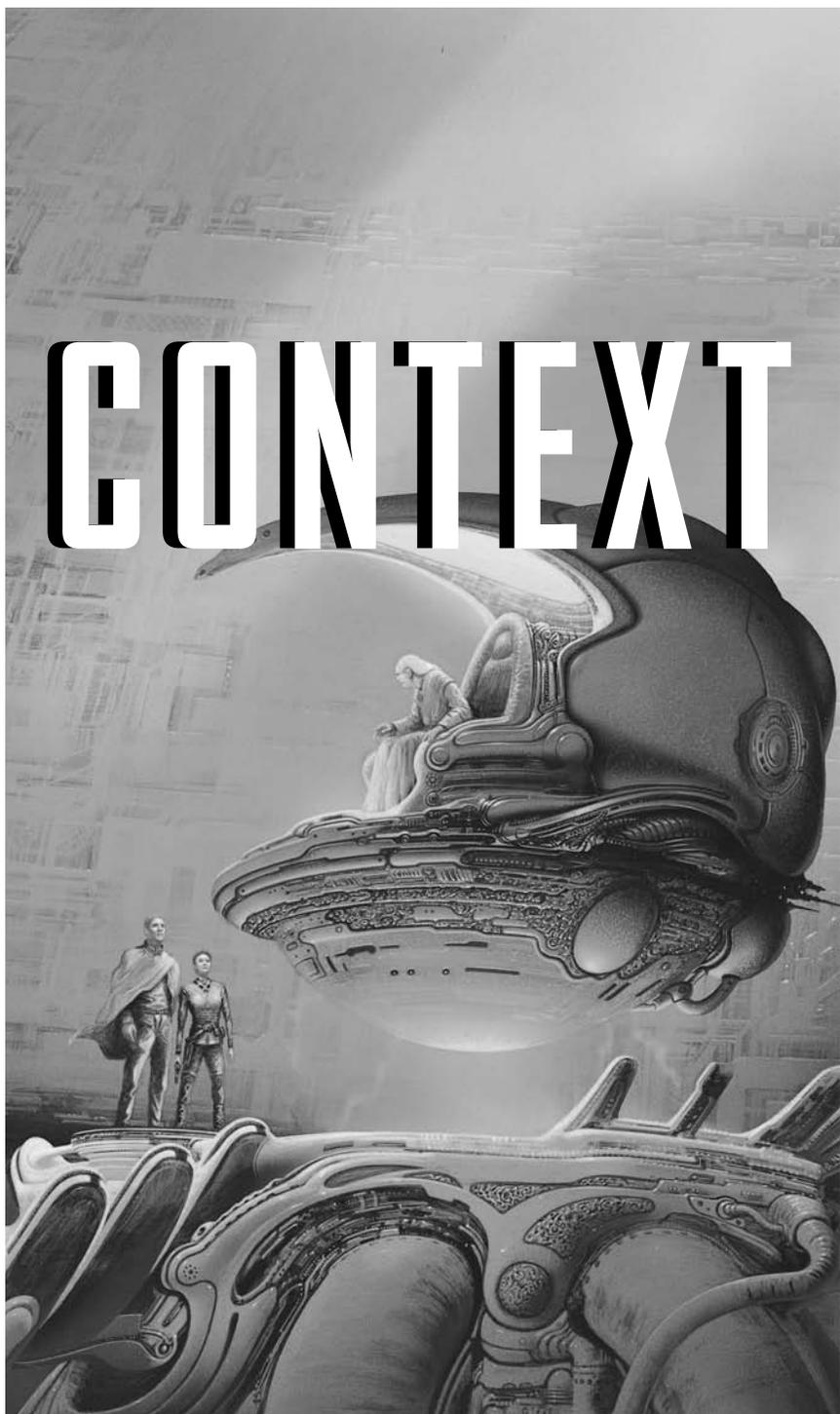


CONTEXT





THE CROWN ROSE *Fiona Avery*

THE HEALER *Michael Blumlein, MD*

GENETOPIA *Keith Brooke*

**GALILEO'S CHILDREN:
TALES OF SCIENCE VS. SUPERSTITION** *edited by Gardner Dozois*

THE PRODIGAL TROLL *Charles Coleman Finlay*

**PARADOX:
BOOK ONE OF THE NULAPEIRON SEQUENCE** *John Meaney*

**CONTEXT:
BOOK TWO OF THE NULAPEIRON SEQUENCE** *John Meaney*

TIDES *Scott Mackay*

SILVERHEART *Michael Moorcock
& Storm Constantine*

STARSHIP: MUTINY *Mike Resnick*

HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE *Chris Roberson*

SILVER SCREEN *Justina Robson*

STAR OF GYPSIES *Robert Silverberg*

THE AFFINITY TRAP *Martin Sketchley*

THE RESURRECTED MAN *Sean Williams*

MACROLIFE *George Zebrowski*

CONTEXT

BOOK TWO
OF THE NULAPEIRON SEQUENCE

JOHN MEANEY



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2005 by Pyr™, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Context. Copyright © 2005 by John Meaney. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a Web site without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2197

VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 207

FAX: 716-564-2711

WWW.PYRSE.COM

09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meaney, John.

Context / John Meaney.

p. cm.

Originally published: London : Bantam Press, a division of Transworld Publishers, 2002.

ISBN 1-59102-335-1 (alk. paper)

1. Wounds and injuries—Patients—Fiction. I. Title.

PS6113.E17C66 2005

813'.6—dc22

2004027137

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

For *Yvonne*—
always and forever

NULAPEIRON AD 3418

This was the view from inside the long passenger cabin: glowing orange mists, redolent with inner fires, which billowed and swirled beyond the clear membranous hull. In dark gaps amid the pulsing orange vapours, glimpses of cavern ceiling high above, of rock-strewn floor below.

On distant walls, black teardrop shapes hung, their strong tendrils splayed against the raw, cold stone. They were armoured arachnabugs: military-grade, single-occupant, and armed.

The passenger-transport was a long shuttle-bug, currently holding still, poised at the vast cavern's exact centre. For security scans? None of the passengers seemed worried.

"Why we did stopped?" A child's voice, plaintive.

A lurch, and the long shuttle-bug slid forwards along its longitudinal filament, thread-like braids flowing across the hull. Adults laughed, and the child gave a gap-toothed grin.

Tom was slumped in the soft seat, and his pale skin was etched with unvoiced suffering. Unseen beneath his dark treads, amber gel—sprinkled with healing silver motes—encased his left thigh.

Above them, on the cabin's furry ceiling, big purple servolice crawled, offering snacks. One paused overhead, but Elva, beside Tom, waved the thing on. Few passengers wanted refreshment; they were nearing journey's end. The plush cabin was filled with bright excitement at entering a new realm, or the sweet pleasure of returning home: many people, recently, had been granted wander-leave for the first time in their lives.

But in Tom's injured leg, dark pain crouched like a venomous spider.

“Are you OK, my—Tom?” Elva looked concerned.

Don't call me Lord. His rank meant nothing now.

But he said only: “I'm fine.”

It was a lie. His leg wound was serious, maybe mortal, but pure agony defined his missing left arm. In the thirteen Standard Years since it had been severed, never had the nonexistent limb burned more painfully than now.

“Good security.” Elva stared out at the unbreathable orange vapour.

Always the tactician. Years ago, Tom had learned to count on her.

Then the glowing clouds were gone, and polished walls were sliding past, tessellated with intricate square-patterned mosaics in bright primary hues. Crystal and bronze sculptures stood in white-lit alcoves.

A huge platform, of pale marble with pale grey swirls, drew close. At its rear stood ornate high archways filled with shimmering scan-fields: entrances to the rich, fabled realm which lay beyond.

The shuttle-bug whispered into position, and docked.

And as the transport's doors dissolved open, a long row of mirror-masked soldiers in tan capes hoisted shining grasers, snapped bootheels together, coming to sharp attention.

Huge holos glimmered into being above the exit arches:

*** WELCOME, HONOURED GUESTS ***

*** TO THE ***

*** AURINEATE GRAND'AUME ***

Alongside the disembarking passengers, soldiers—uniformly tall—remained unmoving at strict attention. Watching, from behind their faceless mirrormasks.

“Tasteless.” Elva nodded towards the giant holos, then handed Tom his cane.

But Tom knew her trained awareness was centred upon the soldiers, evaluating the threat. Tom drew his cloak close, limped slowly towards the shimmerfields.

Were there always troops to greet new arrivals? Or was there conflict nearby?

Other passengers streamed past, rushing for the exits. Floating mesodrones bore their luggage; but everything Tom and Elva owned fitted into the one small bag she carried.

“Ahem.” Elva cleared her throat.

Up ahead, near the shimmerfields, stood a slender woman robed in black. Decorative fronds sprouted cowl-like from her collar—black, in contrast to her triangular, bone-white features—moving slowly, as if stirred by unfelt breezes. Black cuffs trailed to the floor.

A bronze microdrone hung above each shoulder. Behind her stood an honour guard of twelve soldiers: bare-headed, stone-faced, formal scimitars fastened across their backs.

“I see her,” murmured Tom.

They had wanted neither fuss nor ceremony. Had thought that, in the Aurineate Grand’aume—one of the few major realms with neither Lords nor Ladies—they could arrive incognito.

“It’s all right,” said Elva. “No-one else cares.”

A tight grin stretched momentarily across Tom’s face. She was right: they were anonymous travellers, unnoticed amid the crowd.

They headed towards the waiting woman.

*** INDEPENDENCE & COMMITMENT ***

Another holo shone its greeting.

“Let’s hope their medicine”—Tom stopped, pointed at the holo with his cane—“has more class than their advertising.”

Elva looked away. It was nothing she could joke about. Inside

Tom's infected leg, a colony of femtocytes was growing. Engineered pseudatoms, replicating fast, threatened to phase-shift into action and dismantle his cells.

If the Grand'aume's medics were not as advanced as their reputation suggested, then Tom would very shortly die a quick but agonizing death.

The black-robed woman curtsied.

"I am Nirilya." She spoke in accented Nov'glin. "Your guide, Lord Corcorigan."

Tom appreciated her effort: speaking his native tongue.

Beyond the marble platform, the floor was purple glass, the exact colour of orthoplum wine. On it, the twelve-strong honour guard stood to attention. Overhead, near the gilded ceiling, rosy glowglobes floated.

"And you"—Nirilya's tone was cold—"must be Captain Elva Strelsthorm."

Elva's hands tightened into half-fists, then relaxed. Such stark words, in another place, would have borne grave insult. Had Elva been noble-born, they would constitute a death-duel challenge. But this was another culture, and Nirilya was not speaking her own language; they would have to make allowances.

Nirilya was staring at Tom: another breach of protocol.

"If you'll permit me"—she gestured towards the purple glass floor—"my Lord."

It rippled.

A deformity spread across the floor. Then a two-metre swelling grew, morphed into a lev-chair, and detached itself with a gentle *pop*. It slid towards Tom.

He glanced at Elva, then surrendered, and eased himself inside the chair.

Fate . . .

A spasm shook his leg, and he briefly closed his eyes.

“Are you—?”

“Let’s go.”

The chair rose. Inside, Tom tried to relax.

He was twenty-nine Standard Years of age, athlete and warrior, but he felt like an old, old man.

It was a rich realm. They passed through corridors of solid sapphire; tunnels of stone carved with microscopic intricacy, lit by familiar fluorofungus upon the ceilings. Walls were panelled in milky jade, or polished granite across which ALife mandelbrot pulsed.

Surrounded by the honour guard, Tom’s chair skimmed across the floor. Nirilya and Elva walked side by side, like old friends; only the tension in Elva’s shoulders indicated otherwise.

They crossed a noisy, energetic boulevard whose pearly ceiling glowed with opalescent light. Everyone here wore blue, yet the variety was immense: diamond-crossed doublets, loose jumpsuits, trailing robes.

There were no discreet passageways for servitors. A demesne where everyone was equal?

I wanted to achieve something like this.

They traversed a series of crystal lev-steps, over a copper fountain, to a low balcony where Nirilya dismissed the honour guard. The officer-in-charge bowed, then the men wheeled away, and marched into a transverse corridor.

A doorshimmer evaporated at Nirilya’s gesture.

“Your apartments, my Lord.”

Inside: sweeping buttresses of dark blue glass; glassine columns, slowly morphing; holoflames dancing above hexagonal flagstones. And for rehab, there was a chamber with a laminar-flow strip for running, and a glassine wall sloping inwards at forty-five degrees and covered with tiny knobs and protuberances, some shaped like miniature whimsical gargoyles.

“You’ll need a climbing wall,” said Elva. “As soon as you’ve recovered.”

Tom, still in his lev-chair, nodded silently.

A large reception chamber, a dining chamber, a small art gallery and library, and half a dozen sleeping chambers completed the ensemble.

Elva turned to Nirilya. “This is quite satisfactory.”

Her words were a dismissal, and Nirilya’s face tightened.

But her voice was steady as she said: “We can go straight to the medical centre, if you wish.”

Tom, standing in the med centre’s reception chamber, watched his lev-chair melt into the glassine floor. Elva, looking more relaxed since Nirilya had left, examined their surroundings.

“Here we are.”

A barefoot young woman, shaven-headed and clad in a russet tabard, came into the chamber. She genuflected.

“Please follow me, my Lord.”

Then she retraced her steps . . . walking *backwards* into the corridor from which she had come. Tom leaned on his cane, glanced at Elva, and followed.

Twin rows of arches lined the long corridor. To the left, the first chamber contained a semi-translucent clone/regrow vat. All around the vat, a circle of barefoot men sat cross-legged, watching and waiting.

“A moment.” Tom halted.

“Sir?” The young woman stopped, trembling. “Have I given offence in any—?”

“Not even a tiny bit. Are you a servitrix?”

“My Lord? I’m a vassal in the ownership of Malfax Cortindo, who is owned by Dr. Xyenquil himself.”

There was pride in her statement.

I should have known.

In the realms of Gelmethri Syektor where he had lived, servitors were owned only by nobility. His own years of servitude were etched forever in his soul. But there had also been opportunity; finally, the joys of logosophical discovery in the Sorites School.

Yet here—he understood immediately—a vassal could be indentured to another vassal, held to merciless account for the most trivial of offences, restricted in education and work, in living quarters and even in marriage. So easily abused, beyond even the immense range of privileges which the law accorded any vassal's owner, knowing there was no redress: receiving the misery passed down from their owner's own suffering.

It was an endless hierarchy of manipulation and cruelty, of all the capricious, devastating acts which follow when human beings are held to be no more than property.

No matter that such propensities come from neural patterns laid down by primate genes, and that Tom could have written the logistical equations to prove it. When ethical systems become possible, they also become *necessary*, and that was why Tom had once been part of a revolution which aimed to bring liberty to all of Nulapeiron's ten billion diverse souls.

But now that seemed a time of almost child-like innocence.

So arrogant—to think that I could change all this.

In the last chamber on the right, a grey-haired man with no legs was struggling to cross the floor, walking on his stumps. Pain and determination etched deep lines in his sweat-drenched features; his breath came in painful rasps.

Sweet Destiny. Tom could only stare. *Be strong, my friend.*

He almost asked the female vassal to explain, but then he realized: clone/regrow vats could regenerate damaged cells, but the processes were expensive. Reserved for whatever élite held sway here: Lords and Ladies, by another name.

"They can fit prosthetics," Elva murmured, "once he's able to walk like that."

Hardening the skin on his stumps, learning to use his hip flexors to maximum effect.

Often, Tom had run and climbed for hours—had once ascended, as a solo free-climb, the outer surface of a kilometre-wide terraformer sphere hanging in the clouds above the surface: the day he killed the Oracle. That same day, he had run sixty klicks in one long, unbroken ultra-endurance session, after escaping in a drop-bug to the ground.

But he had never pushed himself as hard as this poor injured vassal struggling to cross a modest chamber, forcing himself to walk upon legs which did not exist.