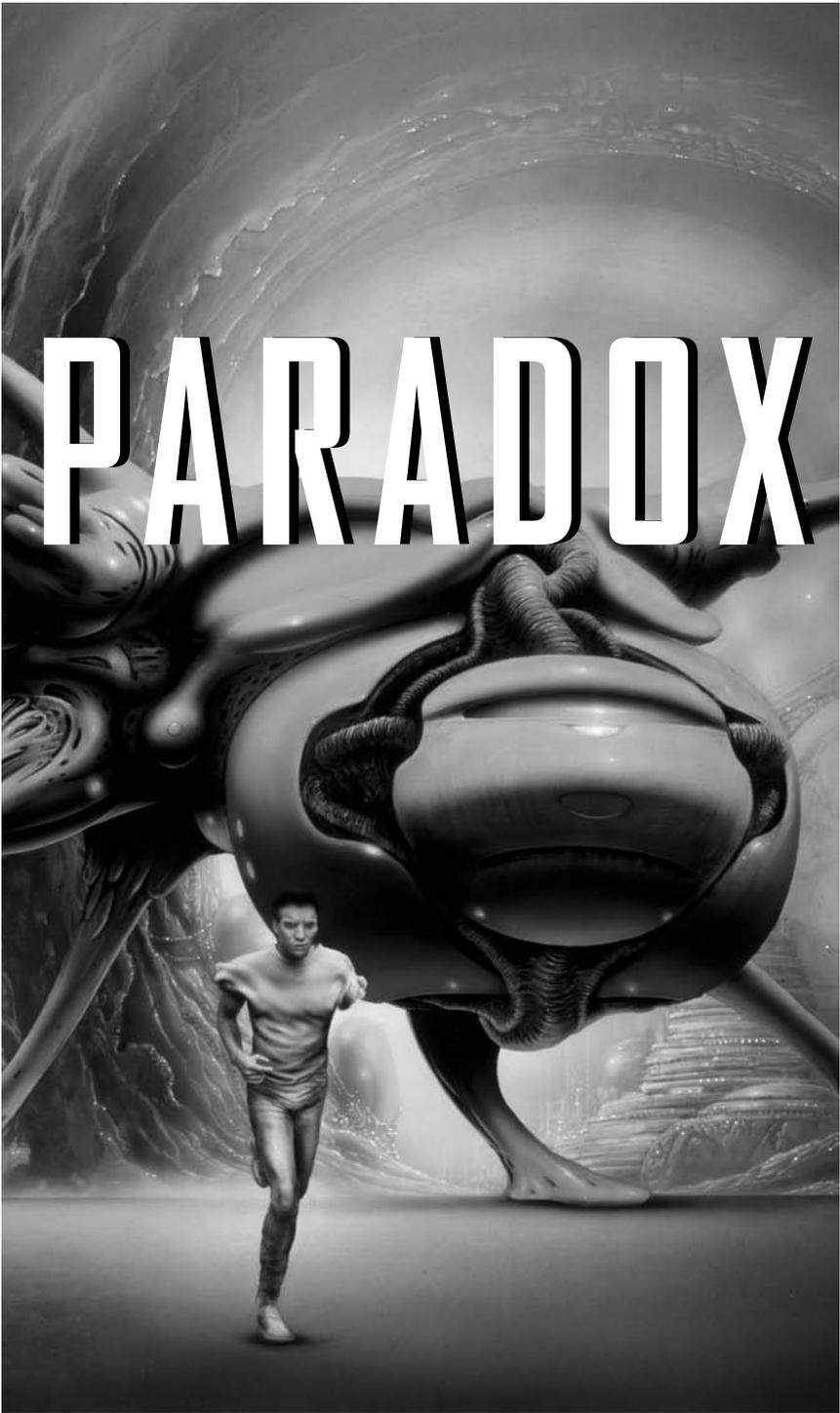


PARADOX





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PARADOX

BOOK ONE

OF THE NULAPEIRON SEQUENCE

JOHN MEANEY



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To *Anne McCaffrey*—
who weaves bright dreams
and changes destinies.

NULAPEIRON AD 3404

Like scarlet/amber fireflies hanging in the tunnel's darkness, the floating tricons read:

*His desperate hooves are flying, flying—
Hunt the moon which now lies dying
Where all about, and all around
Falls barren, grey and broken ground.*

Tom froze.

Patchy fluorofungus, clumped upon the tunnel ceiling, palely pushed back the shadows. No visible motion. Had there been the faintest whisper of a sound?

Nothing.

Heart beating faster—he did not want to be caught by the other market boys, not when he was writing poetry—he returned his attention to the battered blue infotablet on his lap. He was sitting in a cold stone alcove, and when he shifted position the holodisplay jerked in mid-air.

Something . . .

No. Shaking his head, Tom unwrapped a sweet-ginger jantrasta strip and bit off a piece. He chewed, thinking, then swallowed. He gestured for dictation mode.

“Hard-striking sparks are pounding, trying—
With bursting heart is crying, crying:
Pursue the love his . . . no, er, damn it . . .”

Left hand arcing horizontally, right index and forefinger scissoring together, he killed dictation and wiped the final stanza.

With another glance into the shadows, Tom leaned back, reached inside his coarse-weave tunic, and drew out his talisman on its black throat cord. It was a silver stallion: wild-maned, its hooves frozen forever as they cut through the air.

He remembered the day of its creation: Father, sweating, bent over the white-hot graser beam; the metal block spitting, bubbling; the air redolent with the close, heavy scents of oil and scorched metal. The joy which leaped through Tom when Father gave the stallion to him instead of selling it.

It was his good-luck piece, his inspiration when the words would not come. Stroking the smooth metal mane, he closed his eyes.

And heard: "Don't stand up on my account."

Paralysed, Tom could not have risen. The woman before him was cloaked in burgundy, her hood drawn, but he could see the elegant, pointed chin, the clear olive complexion. Her silver voice was a flautist's dream.

"May I?" she asked, and somehow she had slipped the cord and the small stallion was in her slender hand.

Throat constricted, Tom could only nod.

"Quite beautiful."

"It—" Tom swallowed. "It's a stallion. A mythical beast."

"Hmm."

"My father made it." He started to point in the market's direction, then stopped. The woman was bent over, examining the hanging tricons.

"And this poetry?"

"Mine." An odd emptiness in Tom's stomach. "I write—"

"Competently." She gestured to rotate the display. "A nice sense of space, for someone who has never seen the sky."

How did she do that? The infotablet was keyed to Tom's gestures alone.

“Good harmonics, too.” Enlarging the tricons, she pointed to the subtlest colourplay: grey to silver, suggesting shivering cold, agoraphobic chill. “Do you ken mathematics?”

Wordlessly, Tom brought up the triconic lattice of *My Market*: crowd-flow as fluid dynamics. Poetry and maths combined.

“Ah,” the woman breathed. “Nice. Perhaps”—she pointed into a floating hamiltonian matrix—“you could be more rigorous here with the third differential. But it works.”

Tom inclined his head.

“What’s your name, young poet?”

“Uh, Tom Corcorigan, ma’am.”

“I—” She stopped, listening. “Time, I think, to go.” A small hesitation, then she seemed to come to some decision. Holding the stallion talisman, she held out her other hand. “Take this.”

It was a small, black, ovoid capsule. *Strange*, Tom thought, picking it up. *Looks slippery, but isn’t*. Almost as though it was not there at all.

A small needle adhered lengthwise to the capsule.

“Trust me now, for a moment.” The woman wore a dark copper thumb ring. Briefly, it sparked with a ruby light. “I won’t damage your father’s work.”

Suddenly the stallion lay in two silver halves on her palm, its once solid core hollowed out like an empty womb. Tom was speechless.

“Hold the stallion, and give me back the nul-gel cap.”

Taking the black ovoid, the woman gave Tom his sundered talisman, which he accepted automatically. He flinched as though burned, but the metal felt cold.

“Quickly, watch me.” She unfastened the needle and stabbed it into the capsule. “Push this, and the processor’s accessible.” Swiftly removing the needle, she laid it lengthwise once more against the capsule. It held in place. “Download just one module at a time, then disengage, otherwise they’ll detect emissions.”

With deft fingertips, she placed the capsule inside one half of the

stallion, closed the other half over it, and gestured. The stallion was whole once more.

“Did you see the control gesture?”

“Yes,” said Tom. “Like this—”

“No, don’t show me. Left hand opens, right hand closes.”

Tom nodded to show his understanding: one control gesture to undo the two halves, its mirror image to meld them together.

“Damn it.” The woman’s fine mouth grimaced. “If only I had more—Well, I don’t.” Another glance along the corridor. “Life is a mortal pilgrimage, my friend.”

She closed Tom’s fist over the talisman, enclosing his grip with her own. Her hand was smooth.

“When the dark fire falls, seek salvation where you—” Her head turned swiftly to one side.

And then she was standing.

“I won’t tell anyone.” The words came straight out of Tom’s mouth, surprising him.

Gentle fingertips brushed his cheek. Her touch was electric.

“Good luck.”

Her farewell seemed to hang in the air as she slipped into the shadows, broke into a silent run, and was lost among the darkened turns.

On his way home, infotablet tagged to his belt, Tom halted suddenly. From a side tunnel, a militia squad appeared. They were running in time, a distance-eating jog, graser rifles held at port-arms, boot soles slapping softly on the worn stone. As the squad disappeared around a bend, two militiamen dropped out of formation and came back towards Tom.

He felt caught, a blindmoth trapped in a hanging web.

“Hello, lad.” The bigger militiaman smiled, then continued in thick-accented Nov’glin: “Seen a stranger, have ye? A woman?”

Tom could only shake his head.

“Where, then?”

Tom stared at him, confused, but the other trooper laughed harshly. “We’re in Darinia Demesne,” he said. “Part of Gelmethri Syektor.”

“Yeah. So what?”

“So”—the trooper brushed Tom’s head with a rough hand—“round here, a shake of the head means no.”

“Bleedin’ Fate.” The big militiaman scowled at Tom. “Ya wouldn’t lie to me, would ya, mate?”

Tom started to shake his head again, then stopped.

“Wastin’ time. Come on.”

Suppertime. Silent tension seemed to knot the air. Mother bustled about the small family chamber, her startling red hair tied back, her pale, beautiful face lined with strain. Father, looking blocky and resigned, followed her with his gaze. Tom said nothing, unable to tell them what had happened.

Throughout supper, he was conscious of the talisman beneath his tunic, warm against his skin.

Meal over, Tom ran the dishes under the clean-beam, then retired to his sleeping-alcove and pulled the hanging across—failing to shut out his parents’ icy tension. Placing his moccasins on the floor, he sat on his cot, infotablet in his hands, thinking about the mysterious woman. Eventually, with a sense of distant surprise, he realized he was exhausted, and lay back, clutching the infotablet.

Grey sleep seemed elusive, and his mind drifted—

And then he was *clinging by his right hand, void beneath him, desperate, and a flake of stone broke off and tumbled into space . . .*

“Fate,” he murmured, feeling the danger. Strong winds rocked him, turbulence tugged.

Turbulence. Chaos. Terms of ancient days, before fate became hardwired in humanity’s souls.

He clung to his precarious hold, aware of the weapon sheathed at his back, fuelled by the inner core of rage, murder in his heart as he was jerking awake, and Father's broad hand was on his shoulder.

"Nightmare again?"

Father's square, fleshy face, beneath his heavy thatch of grey hair, was creased with concern.

"Sorry." Tom struggled up into a sitting position. "I don't remember."

But his body was drenched with sweat.

Cold breakfast, bitter dastral. Tom and Father left early, but there were already people moving in the quiet corridors. The old trinket-seller, carpet roll across his shoulders, nodded wearily.

At the market's entrance, Trude Mulgrave waved her thin, bony hand.

"Hi, Davraig." She brushed back a long, grey lock of hair which had escaped from her red-and-white headscarf, and her large earrings jangled. "And Tom. How are you both?"

"Good," said Father. "And you?"

"'Twixt great and middling." A typical Trude reply. "Good business today, I think."

"Let's hope so."

Grey shadows, pale rose-hued glowglobes: early morning in the market chamber. The unpacking—the head trader's surly sons unloading their lev-platform—and the setting-up. The dragging-in of carts; the untying of stalls' fastenings, for those who relied on the nightwatchman to guard their goods. The fish-vat woman's gaggle of children. The unsnapping of membrane tents and the tying of knots; the scents of heavy hemp and dusty fabric.

The hong-owner's daughters, caped and beribboned, on their way to school, flanked by patient housecarl bodyguards: "Darling! Isn't this

wild?” Holding up a shawl or jewellery which they would not buy .
 “Perfect for Darkday.”

The girls grew quickly bored, as always, and continued to the market chamber’s centre. Waiting until their earstuds flashed, confirming IDs, they stood aside as the silver ceiling disc rotated and the flanges spiralled downwards and snapped into place.

Slender ankles flashed beneath their capes as they ascended the helical stairway to the stratum above, a place Tom had seen only in his imagination.

“Tom?”

“Sir?” Tom flushed guiltily.

“Put these on the front display, would you?” Heavy medallions.

“OK, Father.”

Tom laid them out on the velvet tray and checked the rest of the cluttered booth: perfumed candles, bronze dragon lamps, pewter amulets and cape clasps. Twisted-knot brooches and amber tag-holders.

The stairway had folded back up into the chamber’s ceiling, solid and impenetrable.

Gradually, the market-going crowd built up. Within two hours, the chamber was filled with the sound of haggling, the digging for bargains. Among the multitude of matt ochres and dull blues, among the brown and grey tunics, bright silk flashed here and there. Trude’s stall, with its bolts of exotic fabrics, was as popular as always, though many were merely looking.

An eerie hush descended.

Soft movement brushed through the crowd: a shuffling, a drawing-apart, forming clear passage from one entrance all the way to the chamber’s centre. Tom’s skin prickled as a squad of militiamen marched in. Up close, their goose-step was not silly, but an expression of controlled power: wide shoulders, muscular gait, heavy weapons held one-handed as though they weighed nothing.

Their prisoner was in the centre, surrounded.

The woman! Tom's heart pounded. *No—*

Hood drawn forwards, bur gundy cape torn, her slender wrists manacled to a heavy silver bar: her bent posture spoke of defeat. A sympathetic ripple passed through the marketgoers, a tiny forward motion as though to assist, then a retreat.

Please . . . The words cut through Tom's mind. *Help her, somebody!*

What was her alleged crime? Somehow it made no difference. The crowd held its collective breath as the militiamen halted. At their centre, the woman slumped: a figure of broken grace. Ahead of them, an officer strode forwards and raised his baton. It blinked scarlet, and the ceiling disc span as silver slats spiralled downward.

It must have been what she was waiting for.

Tossing her head back, she freed her mass of black, curly hair from the hood's confines. Her olive-skinned face was triangular, almost feline. She reached up, despite the manacle bar's weight, dabbed at her eyes and flicked something aside.

Her eyes were obsidian black, without surrounding whites. Glittering jet.

"Sweet Fate!" Father's voice was a shocked whisper. "A Pilot!"

Pilot? Weren't they just a legend?

In each eye, a tiny spark grew. Remembering the stories, Tom glanced away just in time, as golden fire coruscated across her eyes and lightning flashed, a blinding light, and people screamed, clutching at their eyes.

When Tom looked up, the Pilot's chains and manacle bar had fallen to the flagstones. She tossed her cape at a trooper. Lean, clad in tight burgundy, she whirled into motion, and ashen-faced militiamen staggered back.

A big, grizzled trooper lunged forwards, arms wide, but the Pilot's shin scythed into his ribs and the blade-edge of her foot whipped into his knee with a sickening crunch. He dropped.

And she ran.

She faked to one side, then sprinted *into* the main squad. Tangled among themselves, unable to bring their heavy graser rifles to bear, they fell as she span, almost dancing, through their midst: ducking low to elbow-strike a groin, leaping high to arc her knee into an exposed throat, palm-striking the troopers into each other's line of fire.

Then she broke from the *mêlée* and leaped for the spiral stairs.

Run! Tom clenched his fists. *Hurry!*

She landed on the fifth rung, ducked beneath a graser beam's sizzling crack, then launched herself upwards so fast that she looked weightless. For a moment Tom thought she was going to make it but more beams lanced through the air, impaling her. Arm flung out, she began to topple back, turning her face towards Tom. Half of it was blackened, roasted meat, her one good jet-black eye focusing on him for a moment. . . Then more beams split the air, and her lifeless body dropped.

It lay there, twisted and ripped on the cold, hard flagstones: a shattered thing, a broken shell.