To Hold
INFINITY

Other Pyr® titles by John Meaney

Paradox: Book One of the Nulapeiron Sequence
Context: Book Two of the Nulapeiron Sequence
Resolution: Book Three of the Nulapeiron Sequence

To Hold
INFINITY

JOHN MEANEY

Dedication

To the memory of my father,
Thomas Francis (Pat) Meaney,

And of the best wee Mum in the universe
Maimie Meaney, *née* Dullaghan,
immersed in infinity

Flicker. Blindspin. Darkplunge. Golden light-fragments rip apart cobra's death-promise eyes. Laughter spirals. A muted discord: cymbals clash. Light, and light, kaleidoscopic fireworks burst above, below, drowning distant muttering.

Latch onto that. Ignore illusory cobras. The voice. Decode.

Tetsuo's fingers flicker in a manic dance of control gestures. Clammy sweat breaking out—ignore—and a huge fragment breaks loose, unfurls in golden sheets of holographic text.

[[[LogBegin: Module = Node75AG23: Type = PivotCentre: Axes = 6.
    Concurrent_Execute
        ThreadOne: <video> timestamp = 23091313:001, linkfile =
            call_logs/#78AF239
        ThreadTwo: <audio> timestamp = 23091313:001, linkfile =
            internal.thislog
        ThreadThree: <kinaesthesia> insert pending
        ThreadFour: <proprioceptive>, linkfile = *Creeping-Dread*
    End_Concurrent_Execute]]]
[[[HeaderBegin: Module = Node98*34P9: Type = FlatText: Axes = 1
    FARSTEEN: You bastard. I know. I know what you've been doing.
    {UNIDENTIFIED}: Me? Surely you mean Rafael.
    FARSTEEN: What's worse? That abomination, or your sur   -
        veillance? My God, man! If he was only . . .

{UNIDENTIFIED}: You've played your part.
FARSTEEN: I knew I was selling to a middleman. But . . .
    <<<Error condition: LUCFMT009867; diagnosis =
Object fragmented. Error is fatal.>>>]]}

"Bloody hell."

It's a video-log, encrypted in Luculentus format, and Tetsuo has cracked just enough to scare him.

Clasping hands on the mound of his belly, he stares at the code fragments. They spark reflections from the glass desk, throw highlights across his burgundy silk kimono.

Rafael. The log mentioned Rafael.

Tetsuo minimizes the display, moving the shrunken image off to one side.

He reaches up to scratch his scalp, but remembers just in time. Gently, he touches the filigreed wire headgear inserted into his skull. Two days since the op. His hair an itching stubble, just starting to grow back.

And now this. Just when he has finally made good.

A chime: incoming realtime call. Sender IDs indicate Stargonier and Malone.

Damn. Another project slipping behind.

An external video view hangs beside him: his villa's white sweeping curves, the meadow and silver-dappled stream. Hot white sun, emerald sky. The beta moon's blue disk setting . . .

He shifts a peripheral display to strategy ware, and opens up the incoming call.

"Hi, Tetsuo."

Sylvester Stargonier's handsome profile. Beside him, a convoluted network diagram grows.

"Market forecast, with divergent contingency plans in the third tenday," Stargonier says, by way of explanation.

Elizabeth Malone's image: "Is the tech spec on schedule?"

Glowering hawk icon: the strategy ware notes her antagonism.

In a couple of tendays, when the mindware starts kicking in, Tetsuo will be able to hold his own against these Fulgidi merchants.

"Ahead of time," says Tetsuo. His palms are damp.

The strategy ware pulses: nine first-level outcomes. Second-level shifting too fast to read.

Win-win-win probabilities are in sharp decline.

"Here's the first design," Tetsuo adds, uploading.

"And the rest?"

Tiger, tiger, burning bright: a background icon. The ware is recommending a decisive attitude.

"Two days early," says Tetsuo, hoping he can make it true.

"Fine. Endit."

Malone's image disappears. Stargonier nods, and fades.

This is going badly.

The mindware isn't going to integrate in time for this project. Besides . . . he didn't deserve the upraise, in the first place. His family's association with the Pilots gave him an edge. And Rafael's sponsorship. Not his own pitiful talents.

A plaintive beep. His cracker ware has been busy, burrowing through near-sentient protocols and teasing out another shard of log-code.

Tetsuo gestures: go ahead.

A Luculentus appears, clad in green and burgundy. A LuxPrime courier.

"I'm Farsteen," says the image. "At least, a partial analogue. If I am online, the real Farsteen is surely dead."

Farsteen. The name from the video-log. Tetsuo glances at the log display, but leaves it minimized.

This is getting worse.

"I see you have been upraised. Perhaps the real Farsteen was in

Skein when you were presented. My congratulations, Luculentus Tetsuo Sunadomari."

Tetsuo's scalp crawls.

"I am damaged. Your biog-info was hard-linked to my framework. If you were not responsible for my death, then you are in great—"

The image shatters.

There is a distant crash of sound, like thunder.

An electronic wail splits the air.

"SecSys!"

A display opens at his command: across the meadow, black-suited, black-visored figures are running.

Running this way.

Tetsuo can only watch as his systems respond. Dark winged shapes —polyceramic smartbats catapulted from the house eyries—snap into formation and swoop, spitting toxins and screaming ultrasound.

The intruders brush them aside, and keep on coming.

Dry throat.

Tetsuo is frozen.

Five years on Fulgor. Five years of not hacking it. Drowning in the intense competition, on a world whose upper and mer cantile classes drill their children relentlessly in the academic disciplines, in the hope of upraise to Luculentus greatness. He couldn't compete with his parents' brilliance on Earth, but this is worse.

But for one chance: the sudden demand for his mu-space tech speciality, Rafael's sponsorship, and the offworld quota, for upraising non-Fulgidi adults. His one chance of making it.

And now it's all coming apart. He saw a LuxPrime courier—the one in the log?—and heard the screaming ar gument with the proctor, and took that stupid chance. Just when things were going right.

Alarms squeal at a higher pitch, and the r eek of smoke stings his nostrils.

Got to move.

He grabs a case of Luculentus-format info-crystals from his desk, and pockets them. There's no time to get the cr ystal he was working on. Though he was decoding from here, the crystal itself is still plugged into his bedroom terminal. No time—

Oh, no.

Mother. Perhaps he can get a message to her , before she leaves Earth.

He gestures for a holo-still: himself, long-haired, before the shaved skull and implants from the upraise op. Hand shaking, he indicates a monologue commencement.

"Mother. I'm looking forwar d to seeing you, but I have ur gent business to attend to. Per haps Akira can ar range for a later trip? I'll contact you soon."

His fingers twist, as though tying a knot, and the speech and image objects are linked.

He points. The message is sent.

It *must* reach Mother, in time to stop her leaving.

An awful tearing sound. Grasers splitting the ceramic ar moured inner walls.

Gods. All this security. He never expected to use it.

He leans back in his chair.

"Backdoor."

For a moment, nothing happens.

"BACKDOOR! NOW!"

The chair's arms clasp him, envelope him. The chair whisks back-wards.

The bottom drops out of his stomach.

Amber lights strobe vertically upwards, as he falls, encapsulated, through the drop-shaft.

Impact.

His teeth smash together . The burnt cupric taste of blood in his mouth.

His flyer's cockpit.

Above him, the cockpit's liquid bubble-membrane hardens. Ramjets roar, echoes crashing back from the cavern's walls.

In front, white lights suddenly arrow towards infinity , as the exit tunnel lights up.

His chair melds with the cockpit, and status displays spring into life.

All subsystems active.

An icon, glowing gold with outspread wings: a falcon.

Acceleration kicks him back as the lights race past. The flyer hurtles along its track.

Curving upwards, now, with the g vector tugging at his guts.

A speck of light.

Rocketing vertically. Combined accelerations pull him deeper into the control chair.

The speck is growing.

Hard to breathe.

. . . growing into a circle of greenish light . . .

He's yelling now, almost screaming.

. . . which is the sky, growing huge . . .

His eyes are squeezed almost shut.

. . . and bursting into being all around him, in a tear   -blurred explosion of pale clear light.

He forces his eyes wide open.

Greenish skies, vanilla clouds.

Downward scan shows a tan plain, blotched with spinach-green, streaking past below . Kilometres flee beneath him, tracked by the broken cursor of his flyer's shadow.

The terrain's colours wash acr oss the flyer's chameleon skin, as its smartatom processors furiously work to pr ovide countermeasures to SatScan, orbiting high above the planet.

Distance covered: twelve hundred kilometres.

Ahead lies a bank of creamy golden clouds. The ground below is dark.

The flyer drops.

Acceleration grips his throat.

Going down, into darkness.

Now.

Diving into purple shadow.

Sheer purple gold-streaked rockface, the walls of Nether Canyon, streak past on either side.

Ghostly hand clutching a throat: the atmospheric-warning icon.

Ramjets howling, the flyer dives deep, far below the terraformed altitudes, into the region's hidden heart.

Into the hypozone.