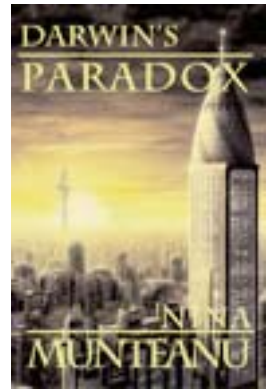


DARWIN'S --- PARADOX



NINA

MUNTEANU

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Darwin's Paradox

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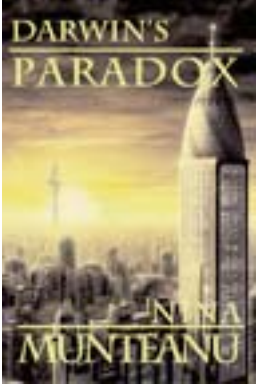
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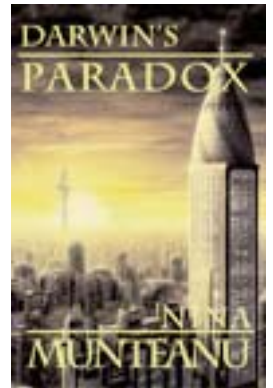
With love, to my parents, Martha and Ilie, whose steadfast belief in what I could accomplish helped me soar to heights unimagined.

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No creative endeavour succeeds in isolation. This creation was a result of many iterations and interactions, both personal and professional. I thank my high school English teacher, A.E. Whittall, who taught me the importance of metaphoric writing. Thomas Hardy's novels inspired me with the love of the word and the wish to be a writer when I was seventeen. I thank Dr. Michio Kaku for discussions on the evolution of Artificial Intelligence. Janine Benyus provided diverting conversations on biomimicry and nature's 'intelligence'. I acknowledge the wisdom of many additional scientists whose works in chaos theory, neural science, epidemiology, co-evolution and ecology I consulted and have cited in the back of this book.

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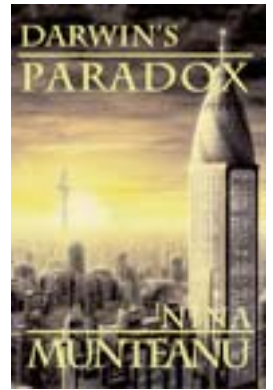


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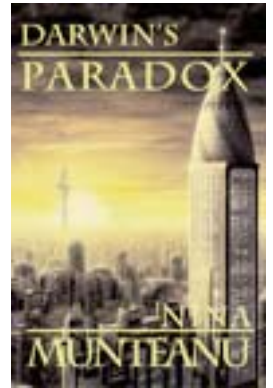
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WHAT IS TO GIVE LIGHT MUST
ENDURE BURNING.

~~ Victor Frankl

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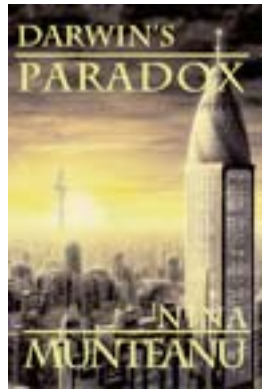
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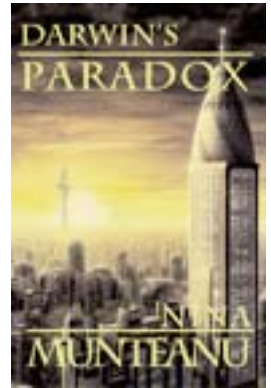


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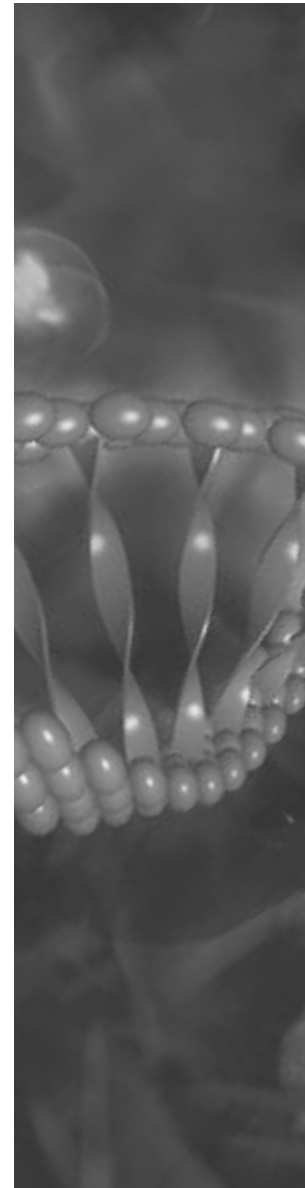
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JULIE walks SAM's crystal matrix, gazing at the shimmering of purple and green logic along the passageways. She imagines herself a creature of coloured light, a pilgrim like Dante, who wanders SAM's vast and ordered crystal landscape in search of home. SAM used to “live” in her head back in Icaria. Her A.I. partner...her best friend...*This must be a dream then*, she thinks.

She knows her way around SAM's peaceful digital home, but the place is strangely empty and she can't sense her A.I. companion's presence. Abruptly, eerie shadows scud over her and the glittering walkways morph into slithery, monochromatic tangles. A warm, cloying wind blows across her face, carrying the organic stench of something festering. As her steps echo toward a corner, an awful foreboding creeps into her heart. *When I get around that corner I'll see the dark figure again*, she thinks, the memory splintering up and sending a shudder through her. The stifling air rasps through her lungs as Julie wills her feet to stop, knowing full well what will happen — her feet walk on, no longer hers to control through muscle or mind.

As she rounds the corner she sees the dark figure looming in the center of the tunnel and the rank perfume of decay overwhelms her. Enshrouded in black robes, the figure casts a gloomy shadow that reaches out and touches her feet. She shivers, trying to make out a face, remembering that in all her previous dreams she never could. Like all the times before, the figure beckons her with an outstretched, gloved hand.



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She recoils, resisting the force pulling her closer to the figure, but her feet slip. Panic rising, she slides toward the figure and stares, drawn to look at the shadowed face but terrified at what she might see. She glimpses fluid features, swirling from one thing to another: first a young woman's face, then a child's, then a decrepit, wrinkled mass. The figure's arms reach out to embrace her and she starts to slide forward again, arms thrashing out, grasping only air. Her feet skid on the slimy surface. Somehow she knows, deep in her dreaming soul, that if she touches the figure she will die.

Where's SAM? she demands, certain that this shadowy figure is somehow responsible for her A.I. companion's disappearance. *What have you done with him?*

[SAM is with us, a part of us now,] the strangely mellifluous chorus of voices resonate in her gut. [Soon you will be. You must join us also...It is time to return...]

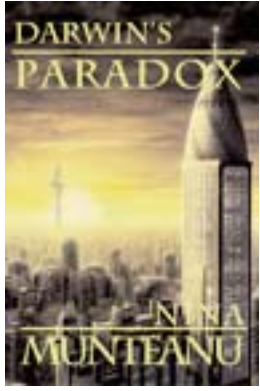
"NO!" she screams defiantly. As she fights the force of the voices and the dark figure, a soft chirping sound in the back of her mind suddenly escalates into wails of panic. Among the discordant alarm, a single note cuts in and she recognizes Angel's voice: *Mom! Help!* The dark, deadly figure is abruptly pushed aside by a vision of her daughter, desperately hanging on to a tree over the gorge.

~~~~~

Casting a brisk glance around her, Angel slipped out of her cabin and stole across the camp. Only the trilling of a robin broke the silent mantle of first light. She inhaled the sharp sweet smell of wild honeysuckle that clung to the haze of early morning and hesitated at her parent's cabin door to peer inside. Both lay asleep in bed, facing her direction, her father's tanned arm folded around her mother in a loose embrace. Angel studied their peaceful faces and let a sigh escape her. She suddenly felt lonely. She knew they loved her, but they also had each other. Angel only had Aard, the scruffy but strikingly handsome hermit her parents had cautiously befriended six years ago. Aard wasn't just her friend; he was her only friend. He was also thirty years older than her. A kind, yet somewhat mysterious man, he'd taught her family the art of survival in the wild. He also spun stories about life in Icaria that her mother seemed oddly reticent to share.

As Angel watched her parents sleeping her mother twitched, her face tightened and she mumbled something unintelligible. *She's having the bad dream again,* Angel thought, as she shrugged her climbing rope over her shoulder, and turned away from her parents' cabin.

Angel darted out of camp, down the well-worn path toward the meadow where she and her mother would pick blackberries later in the summer. Angel gave the flowering brambles a glance and picked her way



through the heath scrub toward the gorge. Her heart raced as she neared the place she'd been repeatedly forbidden to visit, but she'd be back long before either of them woke up and no one would be the wiser. Angel smiled, excited, and quite pleased with her plan.

The clearing just before the gorge yawned ahead. This marked the place in the gorge where she'd heard the strange noises and seen those flickering lights. No creature she knew of could have made them and she didn't for a moment believe her mother's lame explanations that they were swarms of fireflies, northern lights or even dry lightning. Time to finally check out what lay below, she thought, peering over the cliff edge and into the gorge.

Angel secured her rope to a nearby tree and was just about to cinch it to the caribiner on her strong belt when the chirping noises in her head suddenly flared, sending a clear note of alarm through her. She spun around and met the feral eyes of a cougar. It snarled and she drew in a sharp breath, instinctively jerking back from the beast.

Too close to the edge, she slipped with a shriek. The rope ripped from her hands and she tumbled over the edge. Something caught her hard on her leg, abruptly stopping her fall and sending a flash of pain that brought out a cry. She scrambled for a hold and realized she'd landed on a stunted, gnarled tree that grew out of the cliff face. She clung desperately, body dangling over nothing.

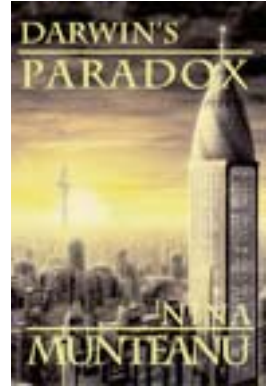
*Mom!* her mind screamed. A rock slithered past and she dared to turn and watch as it clattered down the cliff, starting a small slide of rocks and dirt into the deadly darkness of the gorge. She hoped the cougar was long gone, spooked by her cry and sudden fall. Her arms shook with a biting ache and a sharp pain shot up her left leg. She wondered briefly if she'd broken it then bit back the thought and replaced it with another: soon my whole body will be broken. I can't hold on much longer...

~~~~~

Daniel twitched out of sleep and realized that Julie had awoken him by jerking herself awake with an outcry. She was sweaty and her breaths came in shuddering spasms. He lifted himself up on an elbow and gently brushed the long strands of honey-coloured hair from Julie's flushed face. She seemed to be dreaming about Icaria a lot lately. "That nightmare again?"

Julie threw off the blanket and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of their bed. Daniel stroked the gentle, beautiful curve of her tanned back. She glanced back at him and he saw that she'd traded her usual expression following the nightmare — that of distraught confusion with one of alarm. "No — well, yes, but that's not it." The words rushed out, urgency edging into panic. "It's Angel. She's in trouble. At the gorge."

Julie was up and dressing before Daniel had a chance to check the light outside. "That's ridiculous," he objected, wiping the sleep from his eyes.



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“Angel's eleven — she sleeps in every chance she gets.”

“She's down there, I tell you,” Julie insisted, eyes flashing like a forest on fire. She'd pulled on her buckskin shorts and was cinching in the belt. “Are you coming or not?”

“How do you know she's there? Did you hear something?” Her senses were far superior to his. She heard and saw a bird in the distance minutes before he heard it fly overhead, and she brought it down for supper with her bow long before he even made a move.

“Don't ask me how. I just know,” she said in a voice strangled with emotion. She pulled her sleeveless buckskin top over her head.

“That's ridiculous.” He watched her lace up her old Enviro-Center hiking shoes. “She knows she's not supposed to go there —”

“Well, she's there,” she cut him off, her voice sharp.

He stared at her with startled realization. “You don't trust your own daughter.”

“Should I?” she snapped. “Come on!” She ran out of the cabin.

“Okay, I'm coming!” he called. “Wait up!” Daniel pulled on his buckskin pants and hopped out of the cabin to keep up. Julie was already out of the camp, sprinting down the main path by the time he got his boots on and caught up with her. “Shouldn't we have checked to make sure she isn't in her cabin asleep while we're out here running like idiots in the dark?”

Julie slowed for a moment and glanced sharply at Daniel as he came along side her. “The insect-voices in my head warned me,” she explained, “and I heard her scream in my head. I know I didn't imagine it, Daniel. I saw a clear image of her on the gorge cliff. She's hurt and she's hanging off a tree branch.”

They ran faster.

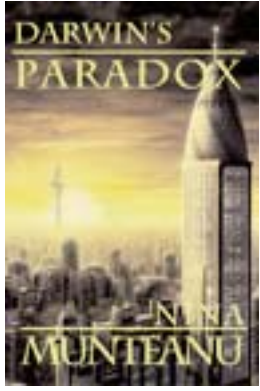
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“Hey,” Aard's friendly voice called from above. “What d'you think you're doing? Training to fly?”

Angel wanted to cry out his name in relief but she burst into tears instead, unable to look up. Her breaths shuddered through her, threatening her tenuous grip on the tree. She slipped a few centimeters and screamed in renewed alarm.

“Angel,” Aard's voice took on an edge. “Try not to move. I'm coming down!”

She heard him scrambling above her then her own rope snaked down beside her as dirt and pebbles rained down from the ledge above. The rope twitched and bounced as Aard maneuvered himself down hand over hand. Then he was beside her on a tiny ledge. He tied a loop in the rope and clipped it to the caribiner on her belt. “Okay, you won't fall now if you let go. Grab a handhold on that branch and work your way across.”



She couldn't move.

“Let go, Angel,” he said.

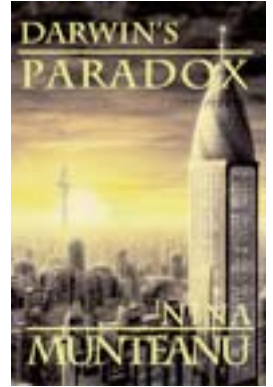
She shook her head, crying.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, his voice softening.

“My leg,” she said between choking sobs.

“Okay,” he said, almost as if to himself. “I’ll get you up. Just stay there.” She heard his labored breaths as he climbed back up the cliff free-hand. He finally called down, “Okay, Angel, I’m going to pull you up. Just let go when you feel me take up the slack on the rope.”

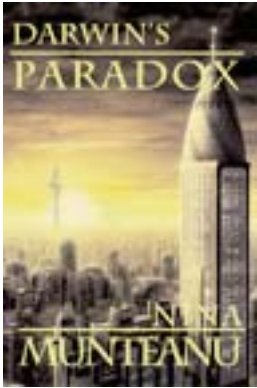
She felt the hard tug on her belt and felt secure enough to unclench her hands from the tree and grab hold of the rope. She unhooked her good leg from the tree and bit by bit, Aard pulled her up to safety. As she neared the summit, she heard concerned murmurs and knew her parents had arrived.



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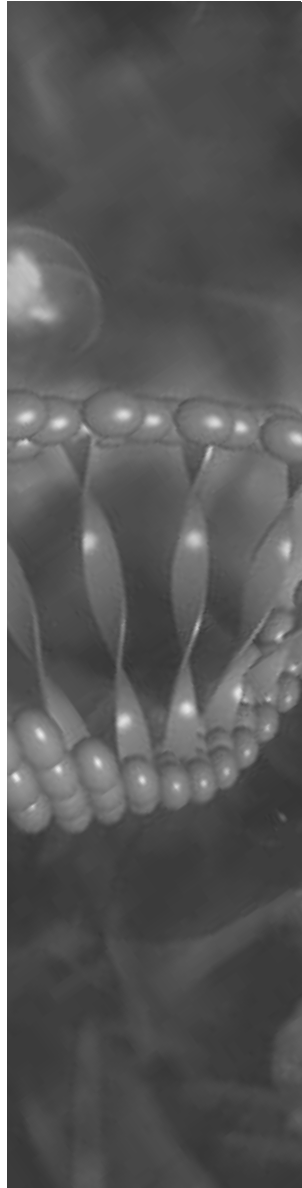


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# 2

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“**HERE**, this'll help you relax.” Julie sat on the bed beside Angel and handed her a tumbler. Angel rose up on her elbow and inhaled the pungent smell of chamomile tea. She wrinkled her nose. Her mother smiled with amusement and pushed the tumbler into her hand “It's good for you. Drink it.”

Angel knew better than to argue with that tone of voice. As Angel took a small sip of the tea, her mother inspected the flexible splint Aard had used to set Angel's leg. “He did a good job.” Then she tilted her head and smiled lopsidedly with wry amusement. “That's a heck of a way to get out of doing Tai Chi with me this morning.”

“Yeah,” Angel laughed with embarrassment. She wanted to talk some more about their new way of communicating between their minds, through those chirping sounds in their heads. On their way back to camp, she'd babbled excitedly about it and her mother had eagerly listened. But now Angel felt ashamed of what she'd done, and angry at herself for letting the accident happen. It would be one more thing she'd done wrong that her mother would go on about.

As if reading her mind, Julie sighed. “Why do you keep doing things we tell you not to do?”

There was enough exasperation behind her voice to draw out Angel's anger.

“Everything fun and neat isn't allowed,” she said, pouting.

“That's not true, darling. You're being dramatic again.”

Angel huffed. “Mom, I'm eleven I'm not a kid anymore. I can think for myself. You don't have to keep doing it for me, you know.”

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Her mother stiffened and gave Angel a lame smile. “I do that, don't I?”  
“Now that we can 'think' to one another, are you going to do it then too? One day I won't be around and you won't have anyone to order around —”

From the way her mother looked at her, Angel wished she could have taken that back. But it was true, she decided, feeling just a little bad that she'd hurt her mother's feelings. It didn't stop Angel from setting the tumbler down and turning her back on her mother to lie down again.

“Get some sleep, darling.” Her mother got up from the bed. Angel wanted to turn, be kissed and hugged, but her mother was already out of the cabin.

~~~~~

Angel sighed awake. She rose with a stretch and, feeling very hungry, hobbled to her parent's birch log cabin to ask about lunch. She hadn't broken her leg, like she'd thought. Aard figured she'd stretched a ligament, though, and it would heal soon enough with careful working of the muscles.

Angel stopped in her tracks when she overheard her mother's clipped voice inside: “Don't you think it odd that Aard happened to be there right then? We got there when we did because she called me. But what's his excuse? That he just happens to hang around cliffs at five in the morning?”

“He's just odd, Julie,” her father responded with an impatient sigh. “He could've been there doing his Tai Chi meditation —”

“Fine,” her mother said sharply and the sound of her voice told Angel that she'd turned and was heading outside. Angel hopped around the hut just in time to spy her mother storm out and across to the cooking hut.

“Hey, what're you doing?” Someone laughed behind her. Angel jumped. Aard leaned against the hut wall, arms folded over his chest, his tangle of blond hair and bushy beard sparkling like gold in the sun. “Spying on your parents again?”

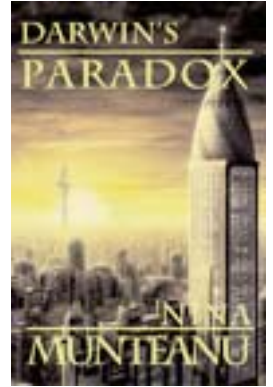
“Please don't tell.”

“I won't, but you definitely need some lessons in covert ops.” He grinned. She grinned back. “Teach me.”

~~~~~

“What's for supper?” Angel sat down next to her father. “Where's Mom?”

He looked up from the sock he was mending using the sewing kit Aard had given him from his last trip to Icaria. Angel knew her father never asked Aard how he'd gotten it because he thought Aard had stolen it. Aard was in the same position as she was her parents didn't trust him either. “She went berry picking,” her father replied. Then he gave her a



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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hopeful smile. "Maybe she'll get enough for a pie."

"Why does she need to be alone?"

He frowned and tilted his head. "What makes you say that?"

"She always goes 'berry picking' when she needs time alone to think, Dad. Besides," she rolled her eyes in sarcasm, "there aren't any berries out right now. It's April."

Her dad ruffled her short auburn mop. "You're a funny one," he laughed. "Don't worry," he hugged her reassuringly. "I'm sure it has nothing to do with you."

She wasn't so sure of that. Her ability to communicate with her mother's mind had taken them both by surprise, and although she'd seen evidence of great joy in her mother as they'd briefly discussed this discovery between them, she'd also sensed a wary concern.

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Angel noticed a thoughtful look on her mother's usual sanguine face when she returned and prepared the meal. Her eyes gleamed with a distracted intensity, as though she was holding a private discussion in her mind. Was Angel the subject?

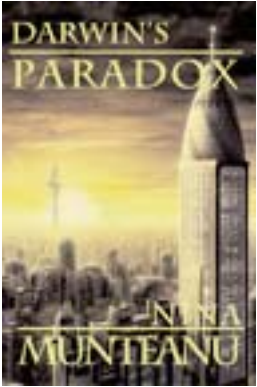
Aard, who often joined them for supper, begged off, explaining that he needed to investigate the cougar tracks. He'd sounded strange and Angel noticed her mother's eyes narrow as she looked in his direction. Angel didn't blame Aard and wished she could disappear, too.

The three of them spoke little during supper and Angel watched her father throw glances at her mother when he thought she wasn't looking. Angel felt tension in the air. A kind of sadness had fallen on her mother that made Angel feel uncomfortable. She wanted to have it out, discuss her act of disobedience openly, shout at her mother for being so controlling, but neither of her parents brought up her accident.

After supper, as Angel did her assigned chore of the dishes, Julie slipped out of the camp toward the rock pile that overlooked the western gully and brilliant sunset. Angel watched her then made to follow. She felt a restraining hand on her arm. Her father smiled down at her. "Finish the dishes, honey", he instructed. His silent message: *my turn to talk to her*. He set off down the trail, after her mother.

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Julie listened to the carillon of the birds and let her gaze stray to where the heath melted into sky. Five hundred kilometres beyond that shimmering horizon lay what used to be home. She cupped her hand to shield her eyes from the blazing sun and squinted, picturing the glinting towers of Icaria-5 in the distance. She inhaled the sweet, boggy scent of





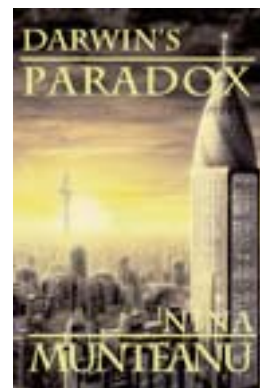
cottonwoods that rode the gusts and she frowned at her inexplicable yearning to return there. She was happy here, living a simple natural life with her cherished family. What was drawing her back to the city that had exiled her in the first place? Did it have to do with Angel and their newly found communication? No, she'd always felt it. So, maybe it was guilt...

All of the machine voices that used to reside in her head since she was five had disappeared long ago when she and Daniel had traveled out of their range. But the chirping sounds had never left her. Constant companions, they'd melded with her intuitive awareness, providing her with enhanced cognitive and motor skills and an uncanny danger sense. She remembered back in Icaria when the chirping had saved her life once from the slashing knife of a crazed victim of Darwin disease. Darwin disease...they should have called it Julie Disease. She'd been its first carrier. When she was five, her father had relinquished her to a hubristic team of scientists who'd code-named her Prometheus. Her father's cousin, Janet, then gave Julie a dose of the artificial virus, Proteus, thinking it would change the world for the better. Instead it unleashed a plague and changed Julie's life forever.

Initially encouraged by preliminary results on Julie, Janet had overzealously introduced the virus to the public through a common drug and watched in horror as it morphed and devoured the lives of millions of people. Because Julie had the subtly unique genetic makeup of a veemeld, the disease didn't kill her like it did everyone else. To her it did what it was designed to do: it provided a conduit to hear all the intelligent machines in the city, including SAM, her cherished A.I. friend and mentor. Unable to reconcile with her atrocity, Janet had committed suicide, leaving young Julie to live out the legacy of what she'd erroneously inspired.

Her father had never told her what was going to be done to her. One night she went to bed and the next morning she woke in a hospital with strange sounds screaming through her head. She'd fallen suddenly ill in the night, her father had explained and said no more. He took the secret with him when the Pols dragged him away years later. The secret ruined Julie's family: her mother turned to alcohol and sober or drunk could barely look at her any more. She often beat Julie for no reason. Julie remembered how, after the Pols took away her father, her mother, smelling of whiskey, used to awaken her at night by crawling into Julie's bed, clutch her to her breast and sob until she fell into a restless sleep. It was only when Julie turned twenty that she and SAM made the discovery that collapsed her world: she was Prometheus, responsible for the plague.

Weeks before Julie found out that she was Prometheus, Zane, an epidemiologist with the Special Pathogens Branch at CDC, had confided to her at a party that the first stage of the virus, called Pro-1, was sexually transmitted, invading the brain and central nervous system. But his lab also proved that a non-infectious transposon stage, a second stage of the



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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virus called Pro-2, replaced Pro-1 after five months, during the last stage of an infected victim's dementia.

It bound itself to a specific site on the female gamete, where it lay dormant — a provirus like the ancient hantavirus in mice — waiting to vertically migrate from host to offspring; except in the case of a Darwin host they were usually dead or certainly incapable of giving birth by then. It was, in fact, this discovery that had alerted Julie to the possibility that Darwin was manufactured rather than natural, and had mutated from its original purpose: it wasn't logical that a natural virus would invest energy in a transmission stage that was destined to fail, as if its maker was irrational...like a human.

The fact that she was only five when she supposedly carried the first stage of the disease and that SAM believed that she had never carried an aggressive form of the virus strongly suggested that she had indeed not infected anyone. This theory was confirmed when Daniel didn't contract Darwin from her in all the years they'd been together. Although there was still the question of Frank...

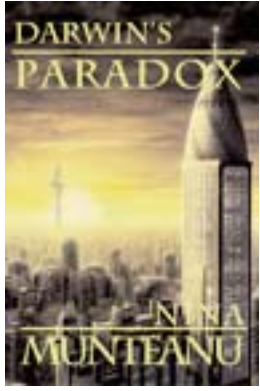
Julie had known that her gametes probably carried the virus. When she found out that she was pregnant with Angel in the heath, she couldn't help worrying how the virus might affect her baby. Would it kill her precious child like it had millions of Icarians or would it just continue to live inside the daughter like it did inside the mother? To her relief, Angel was born healthy and seemingly unaltered. Once Angel started talking, Julie quickly discovered that her daughter could hear the same chirping sounds she did. Julie had no doubt what it was — it was Darwin speaking to her. Now mother and daughter could speak to one another through the virus. As wonderful as it was, Julie wasn't so sure she liked its vehicle.

Daniel came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. She flinched in surprise then relaxed when she realized who it was and folded her hands over his, leaning comfortably against him.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said too quickly then pulled away to give him a reassuring smile. "Just thinking about stuff." He didn't ask what and moved beside her to watch the sunset, obviously waiting for her to elaborate in her own good time. He's learned to be patient, she thought with an inward smile and followed his gaze to the fired ripples of altocumulus clouds. She tracked a line of jet stream across the darkening sky. It was one of the few signs that Icaria — civilization — remained. If not for signs like that jet stream and Aard's occasional pilgrimages back there for supplies, Julie often had the unsettling impression that they were the only people left on Earth.

She stole a glance at Daniel's profile, bronzed by the setting sun. He'd matured since their hasty exodus from Icaria-5 twelve years ago. A network of smile lines radiated from his coal-black eyes, reverted from their previous nuyu-treated blue. His hair, once blue, had also returned



to its natural dark-brown colour and he'd let it grow out in a thick tangle over his shoulders. It reminded her of when she'd first met him as Neo, the awkward cocky techno-slummer, who's breath smelled of nano-soup and who kept trying too hard to impress her.

Years living out here had settled Daniel. He'd let his anger go, grown content. He'd moved on from those belligerent teenage years when she'd first met him in the slums of the inner city. Even from those cynical years as a young man when she'd met him again. He'd taken to building and gardening with ease and she could sense in him a quiet calm. A practical man, he reveled in the simple tasks allotted to him in his role as hunter, gatherer and protector of his family. He'd embraced the heath since that first day she'd introduced him to it and he'd since fine-tuned that relationship into one of deep spiritual appreciation, letting the heath nurture and calm his soul. The heath had been good for him, and perhaps, she thought, letting a faint smile cross her lips, she might have had a little to do with it...

And what about her? Had the heath been equally good to her? At first she'd missed her A.I.'s constant company, his banter and his crazy 'blonde' jokes. Eventually, though, she got used to the relative silence in her head. She'd had moments of doubt, curiosity and a yearning to return to Icaria. She'd hoped that over the years those feelings might diminish, but they didn't. In fact, they'd escalated.

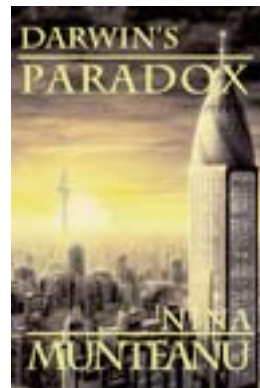
Daniel flashed the same dimpled smile that had captured her heart the first time she'd met him obviously hoping to rouse her from her brooding. She gave him a crooked smile, then turned back to the crimson sun about to sink below the horizon, and exhaled slowly. "I was just thinking about Angel. What are we going to do about her?"

"She's learned her lesson. The injury will heal. Aard'll have her back doing Tai Chi with you and doing flying kicks in no time."

Her eyes focused on him again. "I don't mean *that*," she heard the edge of nervous tension creep into her voice. "She's eleven, Daniel. And her only friend is a mangy hermit four times her age whose best gift to her are his lessons in combat and survival training. Don't you see a problem with that?"

"No, actually, I don't. This isn't the city, Julie. The heath operates by different rules. We're fortunate to have Aard around. He's taught us a lot about how to survive here; how to hunt and trap, make efficient shelters and use the bog as fuel. He's taught her — and you — so much about training your body. It's come in handy lots of times already. Plus he's a gentle and good man, a good friend for Angel."

Julie pictured Aard in her mind. Even under that bushy tangle of blond hair, his attractive features were obvious. He looked like a Greek god in disguise, and he smiled like he knew it. He'd certainly captivated Angel. "But she's in his company a lot now," Julie objected. "He lets her take risks and do things that aren't safe."



Daniel smiled suddenly — indulgently, she thought. “You can't protect our little hatchling forever, you know. Some day all too soon she's going to need to fly.”

Julie cringed at his words. What Angel would do when she grew up was a sensitive topic. She was alone here in the heath. Surely she deserved a chance at friendship, love, and creating her own family.

“Aard's giving her some of the tools.”

“What kind of tools? Besides, *she's so young*, Daniel.”

He laughed with sudden amusement. “First she's already eleven, now she's so young. Make up your mind, Julie.”

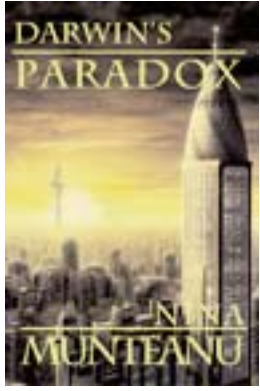
“That's just it. She's both, don't you see?” Julie focused hard on him. “She's old enough to think she can make her own decisions but too young to make the right ones. This is a dangerous time for her. Who is Aard, Daniel? We still don't know anything about him, like why he knows all this sleuthing stuff. And why he keeps sneaking back into Icaria even though it's 500 kilometers away. And how come we stumbled on him in this wilderness in the first place.” From the day they'd met, she'd sensed something disturbingly familiar about that scruffy blond that she could never shake off. And what was he doing there at the gorge this morning?

“Good Earth, Julie! You're too suspicious. We've been through this so many times already.” Daniel broke from her grasp and waved a hand in annoyance. “Aard traveled along the river just like we did. And he goes back for supplies. Supplies that he shares with us.” He pointed down. “Those Enviro-Center hiking shoes on your feet, for instance. Everything you're wearing, for that matter, is thanks to him. He taught you how to tan hides and make clothes to replace our worn-out Icarian stuff.”

Daniel was right. She had so much to thank Aard for, including his incredible patience with her as she bumbled through her first efforts at preparing the hides of young does. Killing the deer had been the easiest part, she recalled, admitting that her aim and speed surpassed even Aard's expert marksmanship. He'd painstakingly taught her how to glove-skin rabbits, how to flesh, soak, grain and dress, and then smoke various larger animal hides like deer and moose. She'd even learned to apply the grizzly task of cracking open the skull and removing the animal's brain for later use when “dressing” the hide. He'd shown her how to remove and prepare sinew fibers for cordage and thread and so much more.

“Besides,” Daniel went on, “it doesn't matter who or what Aard was in Icaria. Out here he's proven to be our friend.”

She winced and fought from glaring at him. His words carried with them a hint of their own history in Icaria, one of mutual deception. She'd also been Prometheus, the reason for Darwin disease. When they'd first left Icaria, there had been some concern as to whether she would pass the lethal form of Darwin to Daniel, but obviously, that didn't happen. As far as Daniel was concerned all that was history, along with her communicating in her head with Icaria's machine world and SAM, her A.I. But he



was *wrong*, she thought. She was still a veemeld, even if he'd decided it was irrelevant out here and didn't want to talk about it or think about it. And she still carried Darwin. So did her daughter. There was no doubt in her mind that Angel was also a veemeld and, like Julie, one with extremely unique qualities.

"I think you're selling Aard short," Daniel continued, crossing his arms over his chest. "He has lots of admirable qualities that he shares with Angel."

"Like feeding her all those tall tales about Icaria?" she said with a sharp laugh. Angel had been getting annoyingly curious, almost obsessed, about Icaria of late.

"You're just jealous he isn't filling you in on the news," he responded, smirking back at her.

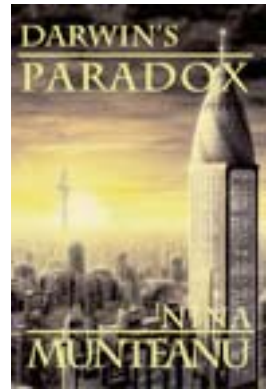
She blushed at his inference. He knew her feelings about Icaria, even though she tried to hide them. She knew she wasn't easy to live with and her incomprehensible yearning to return to Icaria must have played havoc with his ego at times.

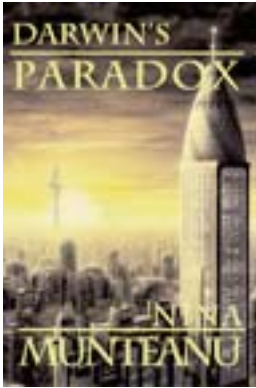
"And you're one to talk," he went on. "I can remember a certain young girl feeding an impressionable inner-city boy with the tantalizing wonders of the outer-city..."

She blushed harder and bowed her head, ashamed at having fed Daniel those stories when they'd techno-slummed in the inner city as adolescents — before she'd left him behind for the outer-city. Despite his earlier insistence that he'd understood her actions, she wondered if he still harbored a trace of bitterness.

As if reading her mind, Daniel chuckled and embraced her by the waist, touching his head to hers. "Darling, I loved you for sharing your dreams," he said quietly. "You were my angel." He kissed her forehead. "You still are." When she looked up, his mouth closed over hers.

Plague: from the Latin, *plaga*: a blow, stroke, wound; an affliction, calamity or evil especially through divine visitation; a general term for a malignant disease or pestilence with which men or beasts are stricken especially an epidemic attended by great mortality  
—Oxford English Dictionary



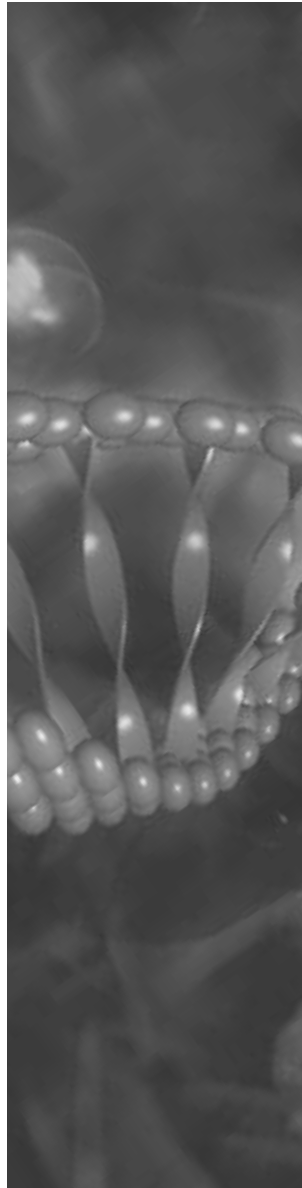


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# 3

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**GATHERING** her lower lip in her teeth, Julie peered over the ledge of the gorge. She could just make out the tree that had saved Angel's life, its gnarled branches stretching out from a crevasse about ten meters down. She firmed her lips with determination and tied the rope to a pitch pine tree behind her. After pulling on her gloves and looping the rope through her belt buckle as a makeshift caribiner, Julie flung the remaining line over the edge. She'd have preferred to use a caribiner to rappel down the cliff but Aard's zeal to carry out her command to conceal climbing equipment from Angel had backfired on Julie. She couldn't find her own equipment either. So, the belt buckle had to do and she'd have to rely fully on the strength and balance of her limbs to climb down. She was just using the buckle to train the rope close to her body. It wouldn't help break a fall but she didn't intend to fall...

She eased herself down, bracing herself against the craggy cliff face and finding cautious foot holds. She soon reached Angel's tree and made the mistake of looking down. After taking in a sharp breath she continued her descent. *Let's settle this mystery once and for all*, she thought. The sun beat down on her back. Sweat dripped down from her hair into her eyes. She blinked it away and felt the strain on her legs and arms. Her arms started to tremble.

"Terrific," she muttered, stopping for a break. "Not in as great shape as I thought I was." The breeze wicked the sweat off her neck and invigorated her. She pushed on,

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

taking care to go slowly, testing each foot and handhold. Part of her muscle tension was from exertion, certainly, but most of it she recognized came from apprehension and excitement. What awaited her below? Those strange sounds and lights...No, not northern lights nor dry thunder and lightning. Certainly not —

She yelped in surprise as her left foot suddenly gave way with a clattering of loose rock. *Pay attention!* She clung to the wall and tried to regain the foothold when her right foot slipped. NO!

She fell several meters before she was able to grasp the rope with enough force to stop. She bounced hard, hands burning and arms splintering with pain as they supported her swinging body. She looked down at the gorge below her and her stomach cramped with fear. There was absolutely nothing but air between her and the yawning gorge a hundred meters below.

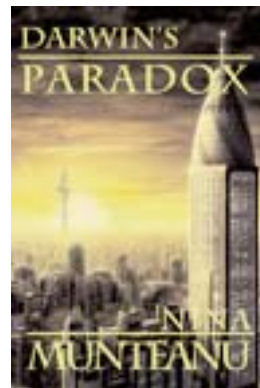
Her arms and shoulders flamed as she desperately held on. Great, Julie. This was pretty stupid. No one knew she was here. A quick check, she'd thought. She'd return with some early-season blueberries and no one would be any wiser. Except she wasn't going to return.

Then she saw it, just below her — an opening in the cliff. A cave! If she could just loosen her grip a little to allow herself to descend a little more, then swing into the cave...

She wrapped her legs around the rope to support some of her weight and lurched her body forward then back to initiate a swing. When she was close enough to the rock face, she kicked herself off into a wide swing with her feet then eased her grip. She slipped — a little too fast! She saw the cave mouth rush up and swung forward with her legs then let go. She tumbled onto the cave ledge and felt the sharp pain of the impact.

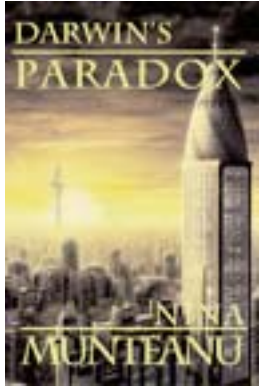
When she looked up, she inhaled sharply and stared. She was in a hanger with a fairly large air vehicle. Julie scrambled to her feet and pulled off her gloves to wipe her clammy hands on the back of her leather shorts, ignoring the rope burns. She wandered closer to the ship. It reminded her of the small one-man skyships the Enviro-Center used for reconnaissance jobs when she lived in Icaria. So much for heat lightning. *This* was what Angel had heard and seen. Julie warily circled the ship, confirming that it was empty. She proceeded to the back of the hanger past a well-equipped workbench and chair to an open door, which led into a lit room.

She entered cautiously, giving the room a sweeping gaze to find no one inside. The room housed a set of lockers, a table and chairs, a fridge and a desk with a fully functional vee-com. As if to verify her suspicions, she recognized Aard's faded jacket draped over the back of the desk chair. But where was Aard? He sure had a lot of explaining to do, she thought with mixed emotions. This was the result of much more than a few “foraging” trips back to Icaria. What was he doing with a skyship?



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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She opened the fridge and found it well stocked with bottles of a recreational drug and packaged nano-food. Hunting and gathering indeed! When she opened a locker door, she sucked in her breath and stared at the standard-issue Pol's laser gun on the shelf. What on Earth was Aard doing with one of those? Heart racing, Julie pulled open a drawer and found several pairs of folded and freshly laundered black jackets and slacks. Her chest pounded as she examined the clothing. The material was high quality durafabric, standard Pol issue. Her hand felt something hard tucked underneath. She pulled the clothing away and gasped at what she saw. A Pol helmet!

Abruptly the chattering murmurs in her head rose to a shrill chorus and she spun to face the door, seizing the laser gun. Aard stood at the hanger door, his shoulder leaning against the door jam, arms crossed, and eyeing her with cautious curiosity. "What are you doing here, Julie?" His voice was edged with annoyance.

"I could ask the same of you, Aard."

"Curiosity kills the cat," he smirked.

"Which one? Felix the cat or the...Pol-cat?" she asked, pulling the gun into view with a half-cocked smile of her own. "Yours?"

The smirk disappeared. "So you found . . ." he trailed off as she pulled out his Pol uniform with her free hand then threw it back.

"In pretty nice condition too." Her voice grew sharp, "Who exactly are you?"

He shrugged. "Just another Icarian trying to survive."

"A Pol? In the heath?" She gave him a mocking incredulous look. "Try again, buddy boy."

He compressed his lips. "So, you want to know how I got here?" He gazed past her, eyes focused on the past. "I was a no-good drunk. Couldn't keep a job. Never had a problem getting one because of my superior cognitive abilities. But every time I messed up. It always seemed to end with me slugging someone, because they called me a —" He broke off, pursing his lips and stealing a strange glance into her eyes for a moment. "I ended up wandering the inner-city, drunk and useless until a man named Victor came along, cleaned me up, believed in me. He gave me a job in the Pol force and gave me this mission."

Something he'd said nudged a memory to the surface. It finally drifted up and she stared at him, seeing the resemblance to that scruffy fifteen-year old SAM had shown her on its database years ago. "You're a veemeld too. You're Isaard Henigen." His stunned look told her she'd guessed right. "I researched you when SAM and I were trying to find Prometheus, the test case that started the whole Darwin mess," she explained. "We found that there were only a few of us, like Prometheus, who scored perfectly on the STAT-LOG exams. Before I discovered that I was in fact Prometheus, I thought you were."

"Yeah, it was you who brought me to Victor Burke's attention, with



your research on Prometheus. So, now you know everything.”

“Except why someone like you is living out here.”

“I'd have thought that someone with your enhanced cognitive abilities would have figured that out by now.”

“Okay.” She firmed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him. “They sent you here to watch us...” He raised a brow. She amended, “to watch me.”

“Very good,” he nodded, ankles crossing as he continued leaning against the door in a relaxed pose. Deceptively relaxed, she thought, noticing that he kept his hand in his pocket. Probably on a concealed weapon.

“And the reason would depend on who sent you.” Was it Victor Burke, the mayor of Icaria-5 when she left?

“Right.” He nodded, not offering more.

“So, what do we do now, Aard? Now that I've blown your cover.” She gave him a crooked smile. “And I have your gun.” She didn't exactly aim it at him, but held it loosely in his direction. Its grip brought back dark memories of other times she'd held such a weapon.

“Well, you do ask the hard questions, Julie.” He pushed himself from the door jam and pulled his hand from his pocket, gripping a small laser pistol, which he aimed at her abdomen. She tightened her grip on the gun and tracked it toward his chest. To her surprise he lowered his weapon. “Well, I suppose now that we're stalemated, I'll just have to leave,” he said.

She blinked, stunned. “You don't mean that. Just pack your bags and leave, give up your surveillance?”

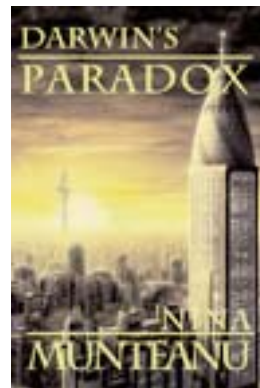
“I have my orders. And they don't include taking you prisoner at least not now, anyway.” Her stomach squirmed at his inference. She'd fled Icaria accused of murder and sedition. If he brought her back it would be as a prisoner. “And, like you already said,” he went on, “You've blown my cover.”

Suddenly drained, Julie lowered her gun. “Before you go, can you at least tell me why you've been watching my family and me? You owe us that much, Aard. After we trusted you all this time.”

He put his gun back in his pocket and sighed. “You're right. And I'm going to miss Angel. She's a beautiful girl, Julie. You should be proud.” He scratched his beard absently and frowned. “I only made contact with you six years ago but I've been out here since you left the city. Do you think they'd have just let you go? You're *Prometheus*. The only person on Earth who could talk to your A.I. in your head without Interact-SYM.” He studied her for a moment and sighed. “Surely you don't think you actually *escaped*. Burke let you get away. He has the most sophisticated surveillance system in the world. He always knew where you were, inside or outside of Icaria. I was sent to keep an eye on you, make sure you — and any of your offspring — remained safe. For possible future needs.”

She fought the involuntary shudder that ran through her at his mentioning her offspring and ominous *possible future needs*.

“I'm one of Burke's carriers,” Aard explained. “Everything I see,



hear...feel...he can too.”

“Brain implant?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “When you had Angel, I was supposed to make contact once she was five.”

The magic number five, she thought, swallowing down bitter memories of when her life had irrevocably changed at that age. She balled her hand into a fist as a fierce protectiveness for her daughter burned inside her. The number of times she'd left Angel alone in Aard's company...

“I was also instructed to train you in survival and combat techniques.”

“In addition to reporting on my developing abilities, no doubt,” she said, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Yeah. They keep getting better, don't they?”

“You'd know,” she retorted, recalling how he'd frequently tested her enhanced vision, hearing and reflexes like a scientist. There was a moment of silence. “And not just me,” she breathed, starting to understand the scope of it all.

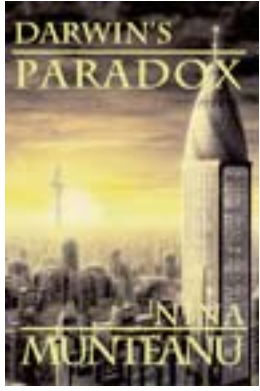
He nodded, pursing his lips in a tight frown. “Yeah, Angel too.”

She bridled a surging fear and searched deep into his eyes. “Why, Aard?” Part of her didn't want to hear his answer. A vision of Gaia's brooding face slid like an oil slick into her mind. Gaia was easily the most beautiful — and most dangerous — woman Julie had ever met. Like the treacherous Venus Fly Trap, she'd lured too many prey into submission with her sweet nectar: striking midnight hair that shone like silk, eyes the colour of an enigmatic sea and a voice as dark and rich as coffee. Then she struck them dumb and ate them with her sharp wit and cruel design. Gaia had relinquished her mayorship of Icaria-5 to one of her underlings, Victor Burke, to serve North Am's governing body, the Circle. What she never told Burke was that she'd continued to run his town through her gestapo, the Secret Pols. Was she still?

The woman's nefarious plan to rule Icaria through a cadre of trained veemelds, capable of communicating with the A.I. network through Interact-SYM and immune to the disease devastating the rest of Icaria, was a scary thought. Plainly, it was controlled genocide she had in mind. Then there were her specific plans for Julie — the only veemeld who didn't need Interact-SYM to talk to her A.I. Plans for the DP, that awful place no one ever came out of. The reason Julie had to stay away.

Aard smiled grimly. “I think you know why. Let's just say that some would rather you didn't exist and will do anything to make sure.” Like the rest of Icaria, she thought miserably. “Hence me, your bodyguard.”

She couldn't seem to get away from bodyguards, Julie thought bleakly, recalling the awful scene in the Den. Frank, the Pol she'd foolishly become infatuated with, had scornfully revealed to her that the only reason he'd hung out with her was that he'd been assigned as her unofficial body guard, and was secretly looking to avenge what her father



had done to his.

“As for who, I can't say,” Aard continued. “But you're a smart woman and you can probably guess that too.” He stepped past her to his storage locker and gathered up his Pol uniform and other equipment into a pack, then came beside her and reached for the laser pistol.

She glanced down at the weapon, warm in her sweaty hand, and was about to hand it to him, then twitched it out of his grasp. Their eyes met. “Collateral,” she said with a lopsided smile, pointing the gun at him again. “Good bye, Aard.”

He frowned but nodded. “There'll be someone else, you know,” he said, closing his backpack and hoisting it over one shoulder. “There'll always be someone, Julie,” he said over his shoulder as he turned and left the room for the hanger. She followed him into the hanger bay. “They'll never leave you alone,” Aard went on, turning to face her again with a pointed look. “Not Prometheus and her gifted daughter.”

“It's a pretty big planet, Aard. They'll have to find us first.”

“Well, I wish you luck,” he said, not sounding convinced, then turned to enter his ship. He stopped and fished something out of his pack. “Here,” he said, brusquely nodding his head toward her and tossing her a small package. “Laser cells. You might need them.” Then he studied her briefly with what looked like regret. “Watch your back, Julie,” he added and climbed into his vehicle.

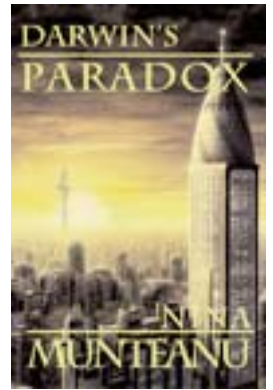
Standing where he'd left her, she watched him enter the cockpit. Within moments he'd started its rumbling engine, made the necessary adjustments, then he nodded gravely to her and brought the vehicle with a shudder off the ground. The ship threw itself out of the hanger with a blast of hot air that stifled her breath and sent her hair flying behind her. She stared out at the disappearing shuttle for several moments then let herself collapse on the workbench chair and exhaled slowly.

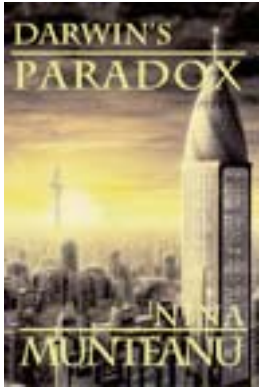
As she had quietly feared all these years, it had started again. No, she amended her thought: it had never ended, it just finally caught up with her.

The safety net that Daniel had so assiduously built around his family had torn. And she'd done the tearing. She'd lured Icaria's spies and murderers out here and put her family in danger just by being who and what she was — something Daniel refused to even consider. How was she going to tell him?

Perhaps she wouldn't, Julie decided recklessly and felt the thrill of anxiety knot inside her. She'd watch and see what happened. And if she had to, she'd do something about it, Julie thought, with a glance down at the gun.

The hardest thing to understand is why  
we understand anything at all—Albert Einstein



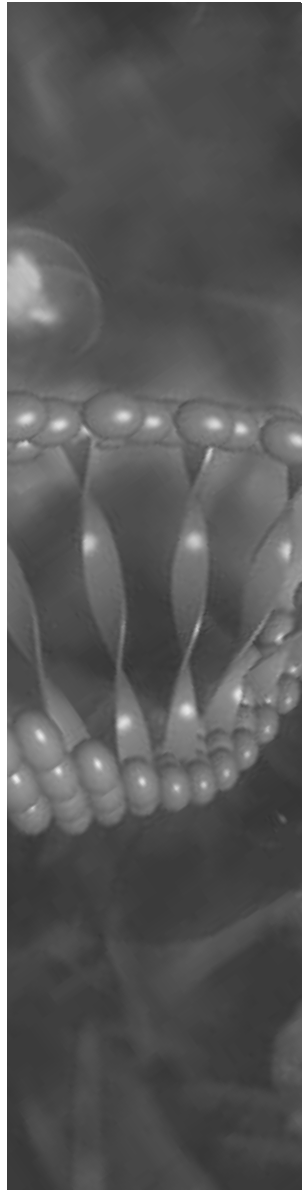


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# 4

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**ANGEL** bounded into their campsite as Julie sliced winter carrots for supper. “I still can't find Aard, Mom,” she said, coming alongside her mother.

Julie responded without looking up, “I don't think you're going to find him, honey.”

Daniel, who'd been patching the roof of their hut, looked down at them with sudden interest. Aard had disappeared the same time that Julie had for several hours and then she'd returned with bruises and cuts she'd unconvincingly explained. Something happened that she didn't want to discuss and he wondered if it had to do with Aard's mysterious absence.

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, frowning.

Julie turned to her daughter. “I mean when you checked his cabin on the hill, it looked like he'd taken things with him, right? Like for a trip?”

“Yeah, but not to go away.”

Daniel climbed down from the roof and joined the girls. “Maybe he went to Icaria after all,” he suggested. “It's over four hundred kilometres away. And he's usually gone for a month.”

“He would've told me,” Angel insisted.

Daniel watched Julie's face and caught the expression, subtle but definitely there. Her mouth had tightened and he read a defensive look in her eyes. Did she know why Aard left? She might even have had something to do with it.

“What if he fell off the cliff or something?” Angel said, her voice rose to a pleading squeak. “I'll go look —”

“No!” Julie's sharp voice startled Daniel. She gripped her daughter's arms firmly and leaned her face close. “Don't ever go there again. I told you, it's dangerous. Don't make

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me ground you.”

Angel stared at her mother, briefly dumbstruck by her vehemence. Then her eyes flashed with defiance, blue ice glaring into Julie's forest-fire green. But the mother's fire easily melted the daughter's icy resolve and Angel lowered her eyes with a pout. “All right, mother.” She always called Julie mother when she wasn't happy with her.

“Aard knows how to take care of himself, honey. He's too cautious to get hurt.”

“Then where is he?” came the retort.

They'd come full circle, Daniel thought with a sigh. Julie glanced at him, her face bridling with anxiety. She returned his silent question by setting her mouth and went back to her vegetables. The subject was dropped.

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“We have to break camp,” Julie announced.

“What?” Daniel and Angel said in unison. They were doing math exercises on the outdoor table he'd built when Julie returned from her herb forage. “Why?” Angel asked the obvious question. She'd pushed out her lower lip and clenched her hands.

Daniel noticed that Julie was trying to hide a nervous distress. A glance at her satchel revealed that she hadn't collected many herbs either. Her buckskin shorts and sleeveless faded blue shirt were smudged from scrambling along the glacial till slopes. Where'd she been exploring this time? She seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

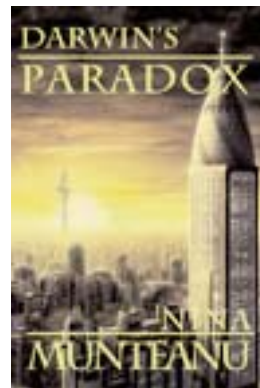
“We can't leave,” Angel insisted before Julie had time to explain why they had to leave. She leaped up from her chair. “Aard's still missing!”

“I'm sorry, Angel. But it's too dangerous here,” Julie said. “I saw some animal tracks and a den not far off on that ridge,” she pointed. “The cougar that almost ate you wasn't a lone migrant.” Daniel knew she was lying. She never was good at it, he thought. But, then, what had she seen that had her spooked?

Angel exploded, “We can't leave! It's only five days since he disappeared!”

Julie laid her hands on her daughter's shoulders. “Listen, Angel, I know what Aard means to you. He's our friend too. But we have to leave. Now.”

Daniel watched her in silent unease. There was no mistaking the urgency in her voice and body. Breaking up camp was not an activity he looked upon lightly. A lot of sweat and resources had gone into constructing these cabins, the garden and the fence around the compound. Both he and Julie had spent weeks finding, chopping down and hauling in the timber to build the houses. Daniel had spent many days further insulating the cabins by creating an additional wall and filling the gap with grass and leaves. Five years ago, with Aard's help and his findings from an old abandoned town to the south, Daniel had even installed windows made of duraplast.



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Angel turned to her father in desperation, "Daddy, make her stop. This isn't fair. We can't abandon Aard..."

Daniel threw a glance at Julie and found to his amazement that she remained unmoved by Angel's reference to abandoning someone.

Angel wailed, "He might be hurt out there!"

"Or more likely he just left," Julie responded.

Daniel stared along with Angel at his wife. Those were cruel words, and Julie knew it. Her face wore a complicated mix of expressions that Daniel found hard to read. "He's a hermit, Angel," Julie tried to reason with her daughter. "He just wandered into our lives six years ago and now he's probably just wandered out. I know it's tough on you, but hermits are like that "

"No!" Angel jerked out of her mother's hands. "He'd never do that. He'd never leave and not tell me."

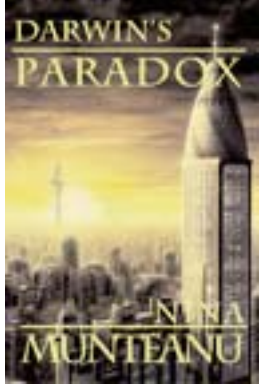
Julie's face, though it mirrored Angel's pain, remained determined.

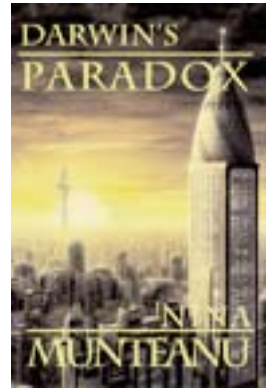
Angel glared at her mother. "What if he comes back and we're gone. He's my only friend. You don't care if I'm happy. I hate you! You can't keep me trapped this way forever. One day I'll be all grown up and I won't need you anymore. And you won't be able to do anything about it!" Then she stormed out of the camp.

"Angel!" Julie ran her fingers through her chaotic hair and turned to Daniel with a desperate look.

He shrugged. "She'll get over it — eventually. Now," he said, giving her a stern look, "tell me the real reason why we have to go."

See: "Mark of a Genius" by Nina Munteanu
<http://www.scifidimensions.com/Aug04/genius.htm>



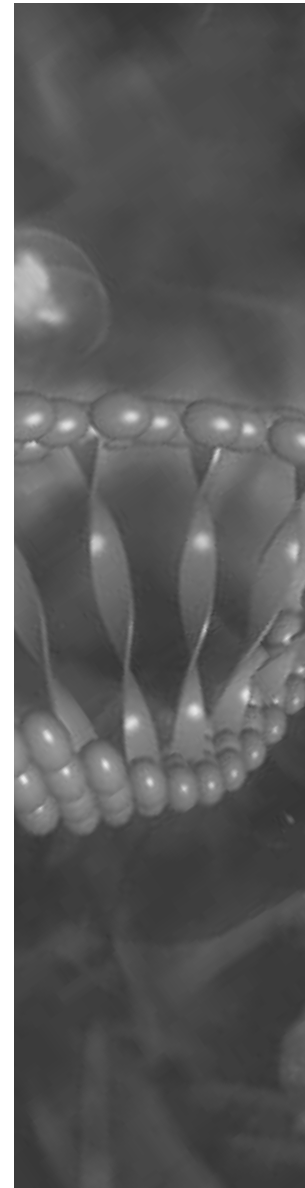


DANIEL wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, set his mortar trowel down beside the unfinished cabin wall of their new campsite then rose to stretch. He watched Julie's slender figure below him, as she negotiated the river cobbles with the ease of a dancer. She pirouetted from one rock to another over the churning water, sun-bleached hair bouncing behind her like a wild river. She resembled a wild prairie nymph in her buckskin shorts, faded blue shirt and buckskin jerkin.

It drew out a sighing smile from him and reminded him of when they'd first met: two urchins facing each other, arms diving into a garbage can for the half-eaten sandwich some woman had dropped in moments ago. Meeting her savage eyes, set in a belligerent face of big protruding teeth and a shock of straw-coloured hair, he'd liked her instantly. They called a truce and shared the sandwich.

He'd invited her and her little sister to join his rag-tag group of orphans abandoned by confused parents in the chaos of the Darwin plague. For two years they lived in bivouacs built of the city's refuse, sleeping in nests of garbage and stealing food — mostly nano-soup — and technological equipment. Techno-slumming. And always on the run from the cypols, the inner-city's predatory robots that chased them like they were vermin. Julie called herself Angel, and that was what she was, a savior to his disparate group.

When she let herself be captured by a cypol to find her sister who'd been taken earlier, Daniel never forgave her. He knew she was safe



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<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

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because veemelds were prized in the outer-city. Because he didn't have to worry for her welfare, there remained only a burning resentment that she'd left him behind. Eventually his orphan group fell into disarray and he was left miserably alone with the empty dreams she'd fed him. Daniel vowed never to trust his heart to a veemeld again.

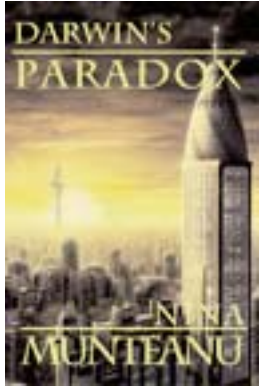
Years later, fate threw them together again, but by then they didn't recognize each other. When she'd been taken to the outer-city they'd fixed her over-bite, then she'd let her hair grow long and eventually she'd filled out from that scrawny garbage-picking kid into a graceful, beautiful woman. Daniel, too, had undergone the obligatory transformation toward outer beauty once he made it to the outer-city: he'd fixed his broken nose and acne scars, then he'd changed his brown eyes to blue and coloured his hair with 'nyu'. They fell in love, of course: two strangers, inexplicably familiar and on a collision course with deception, lies and betrayal...

Julie made it to the other side of the creek and scrambled up the steep slope to a willow stand she intended to cut down for the insulation of their new roof.

Daniel returned his gaze to the wall he was building and exhaled. Several days ago he and Julie had finished hauling in five dozen birch logs from the woodland a kilometer to the south and he was presently sealing the horizontal logs stacked between support poles with straw-and-mud mortar. Unlike their cabin at the camp they'd shared with Aard, this one would have rough wooden shutters rather than duraplast windows because there was no Aard to provide them with materials from abandoned dwellings. This was going to be a very basic log cabin, Daniel concluded. They required a solid shelter to keep them warm in the winter and cool in the summer but it wasn't worth the bother to make it fancy, he thought, especially if they weren't going to stay in it for long.

This was their third camp in three months and Julie remained restless like a trapped cougar, like she was running from something. Herself, maybe? She'd always given them good reason to break camp but he knew she was lying and it disturbed him that she'd resorted to that. It saddened him that she didn't include him in her greatest concerns. She didn't trust him anymore. Since Aard had disappeared, her nightmares had also increased and a subtle darkness around her eyes told him that she wasn't sleeping well.

Daniel picked up his binoculars to observe her more closely, something he'd taken to doing a lot lately. Watching her from his vantage point half hidden by the wall, he thought she looked remarkably the same as she did twelve years ago when he'd fallen in love with her. They'd had an interesting time of it, he pondered with a wistful smile. Not easy. Not smooth. But wonderful. Those green eyes that stormed into a wild tempest when she was angry flamed as brightly as ever with joy. There were certainly a few more lines radiating from them but he still felt a thrill



when he caught her fierce gaze, especially when it was accompanied by that lopsided smile. Framed now with a permanent crease, her smile melted him into acquiescence every time, and she knew it.

Their love had evolved from a tumultuous brook into a rich deep river as their bond cemented. Fiercely independent and as stubborn as he was, she'd overcome many obstacles through cooperation and co-reliance. Despite her reserved nature she'd learned that they complemented each other well and could rely on him.

But lately she'd grown extremely restive and withdrawn, as if guarding a dark and bitter sadness growing inside of her. Aard's disappearance spooked her. Daniel could sense it in her taut muscles whenever he embraced her. Could see it in her ever-alert posture. Could hear it in the edge that crept into her voice, but most alarmingly in her darkly veiled references to some arcane, sinister force that connected past to future. She knew something she wasn't sharing.

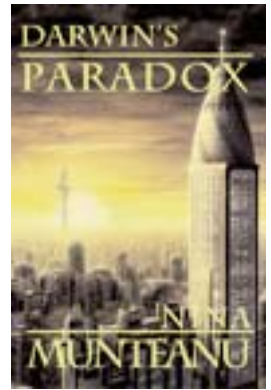
He recognized that she'd always harbored suspicions about Aard, but even her weak, half-hearted efforts to search for him seemed uncharacteristic of her. It only fueled an already existing tension between protective mother and rebellious pre-teen. Julie's insistence on breaking camp soon after Aard's disappearance hadn't been popular with Angel, who'd accused her mother of being callous. Perhaps more perplexing was Julie's own reaction to her daughter's seemingly founded accusations: she refused to explain herself and made no move to repair the growing rift between them.

Julie was in mid-cut when she abruptly dropped to one knee, her attention caught by something on the ground. Although Daniel couldn't tell what she was looking at, he saw in her sudden frown that it distressed her. After spotting something further to the side she sprang to her feet and scanned the woods around her, letting her hand fall to the small of her back as she often did lately when she was spooked by something.

A few weeks before, when he'd seized her in a playful embrace, he'd felt a hard object beneath her shirt, tucked in her belt at the back. She'd jumped out of his arms but when he questioned her about it, she'd given him a silly answer and diverted him with another comment. He started watching her more closely after that and soon realized that she guarded something on her at all times. Periodically he searched through her rumpled clothes when she went to the creek to wash up, but he never found anything. Whatever it was, she never went anywhere without it and yet she managed to keep it hidden from him at the same time.

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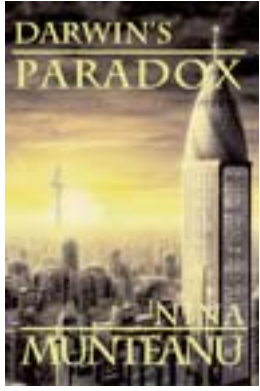
Listening to the chorus of crickets in the heat of the night, Daniel stared at the stars sparkling overhead through the gap in their partially complete roof and waited until Julie's sighing breaths told him she was



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asleep. He carefully pulled his arm from under her and looked down at her sleeping form, eyes tracing the lines of her face defined in the faint moonlight. No nightmare yet, he thought, appraising her sanguine expression. But she had behaved very strangely today after the moment in the willow stand. She'd snapped at Angel one minute and then snatched her up in a fierce hug the next. The smallest things set her off and Daniel noticed Angel watching her with confused apprehension. Julie's face, already overly pensive these days, seemed to withdraw completely at times, as if she'd left them for another world.

He smiled at the beauty of a few rogue hairs lying across her cheek then he got up slowly. A quick glance back at her ensured him that she was still asleep. He stole over to her side of the bed and bent over the clothes she'd discarded in a pile. There, beneath her buckskin shorts and rumpled blue shirt and nestled inside a pouch on her belt, he found it. His hand slid under the shirt and pulled the heavy object out of the pouch. He stared at it and felt his stomach clench —

“What are you doing?”

Daniel jerked around to see Julie, raised on an elbow, gazing at him with a tight face. Then she looked down his naked figure and he followed her gaze to the laser pistol in his now shaking hand. His eyes seized hers. “Where did you get this?” he asked, realizing his voice had acquired an edge.

She sat up sharply, flinging the blanket from her and swinging her legs over the side. “Since when are you in the habit of going through my clothes?” she demanded.

“Since you started carrying this,” he answered bluntly, waving the gun in his hand. “Julie, what's going on?”

She inhaled sharply and seemed about to retort but slumped back on the bed instead. Leaning her elbows on her knees, she brought her hands up against her forehead and exhaled. “Yes, you deserve an explanation.”

He laid the gun carefully on her clothes and sat down next to her. She told him about Aard being a Pol and his secret hanger. She told him about the two times since Aard had left that she'd seen signs of someone spying on them, pressing her to urge them to break camp. He felt like she was still withholding something even as she said in a hollow voice, brimming with emotion, “There'll always be someone watching us. And one day they'll snatch me or Angel right from under us.” Her face grew somber. “Or worse.”

Daniel put his arm around her. He searched for something reassuring to say but couldn't find anything, so he simply held her tighter. She said in a dark voice that startled him, “I won't let that happen, Daniel. I'll do what I need to keep them from harming or taking her.”

Her face pinched with the fierce determination and protectiveness that only a mother could feel for her child, and his unease spiked into alarm. It was as though she'd made some ominous and irrevocable decision. “What do you mean?”

Her dark eyes flared and she held his gaze for a long time before finally turning her profile to him. “For now it's me they're interested in, one way or another. But that'll change. Angel will be next.”

The determination in her eyes frightened him. “Who?” he prompted.

She pursed her lips. “I'm not sure who's behind it. There may be several groups with different motives, like before. Some probably want to use my abilities and others just want me dead,” she ended flatly.

Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed it back, with difficulty. A lot of Icarians had reason to want her dead. It was said that she'd caused the plague that killed millions of people, and if that wasn't enough, she'd also been accused of terrorist acts and murdering a government official. Daniel had tried to help her escape and instead led them into an inner-city ambush, lead by a Secret Pol.

Some time before, Julie had been hired to create the personality profile of Dystopians, a terrorist group who hated veemelds and were bent on bringing down the current government. But Julie's model had been too accurate and implicated the Chief of Secret Pols himself — John Dykstra — and all those under his employ as Dystopians. She sent the info cube containing her findings to the Head Pol, entrusting the cube to Frank Langor, a regular Pol and her former lover. Vadim, one of the Secret Pols, took some regular Pols to intercept the info-cube before it reached the Head Pol, but Vadim never got the cube because an inner-city mob in a frenzy of anti-government rage rushed the Pols and in the ensuing melee, Vadim was beaten and his head crushed.

The Dystopians had boldly taken the name that described the outlawed scientific movement that promoted the heretical science of Julie's father, who was ironically a veemeld himself. Although she had trusted Frank Langor at the time, judging from the news shared by Aard when she last saw him, her trust had been misplaced with Frank. Was it possible he, too, was a Dystopian?

“And the ones following us?” Daniel posed.

“Could be either. Or both.”

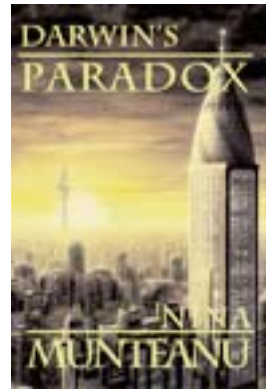
His mouth went dry. “What can we do?” he whispered hoarsely.

After a long silence she turned to him. The dark purpose that had fired her eyes now smoldered beneath the cloak she'd drawn around herself and her eyes glistened of unshed tears.

“Just hold me, Daniel.” Her voice trembled.

He folded his arms around her and they reclined on the bed. Curled inside his protective arms, face pressed against his chest and silky legs entwined around his, she shuddered with silent tears and clung to him. Wanting to comfort her, he bent to kiss her wet cheeks and wished she would share it all with him.

As if sensing his disappointment, she lifted her face up to his and looked into his eyes with longing and fear. He was reminded of the first time that they'd made love, when she'd looked at him with almost the



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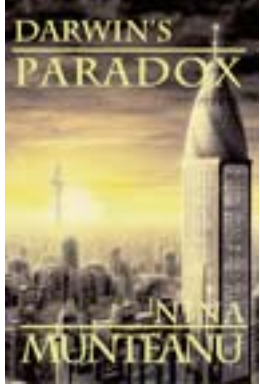
same expression. She'd harbored a secret then, too. The secret of who and what she was. He'd thought then that she was just Julie, a bright data handler, but she'd turned out to be a veemeld, one who could talk to machines in her head from anywhere in Icaria.

She was also Prometheus, the alpha carrier of the deadly Darwin. *And* she was Angel, his long-ago innercity sweetheart who deserted him suddenly. Now, as he gazed back into her eyes, sparkling like constellations in a black and infinite universe, he sensed that she'd faced yet another dark decision without including him. What had she seen in the willows?

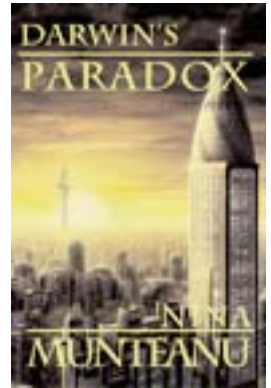
She startled him by taking his face in her hands and kissing him fiercely. She'd learned over their years together how to please him, hands caressing him in a delightful way from the soft curls on his neck down to his thighs. He threw his doubts aside and let her pour her gift of selfless devotion on him, taking him to a world where only the two of them existed. She seized in halting breaths, soaring alongside his swelling passion. He responded by pleasing her in turn with his fingers. She gasped into a keening wail that roused a pack of wolves in the heath. They made love that night to the echoing bay of the pack as shafts of moonlight glistened like beaded jewels on their wet undulating bodies.

When Daniel woke drowsily to the light of a breaking dawn and reached out for Julie, his hand caught air. She was gone. So were all her clothes. And the gun.

True beauty dwells in deep retreats, Whose veil is unremoved,  
Till heart with heart in concord beats,  
And the lover is beloved —William Wordsworth



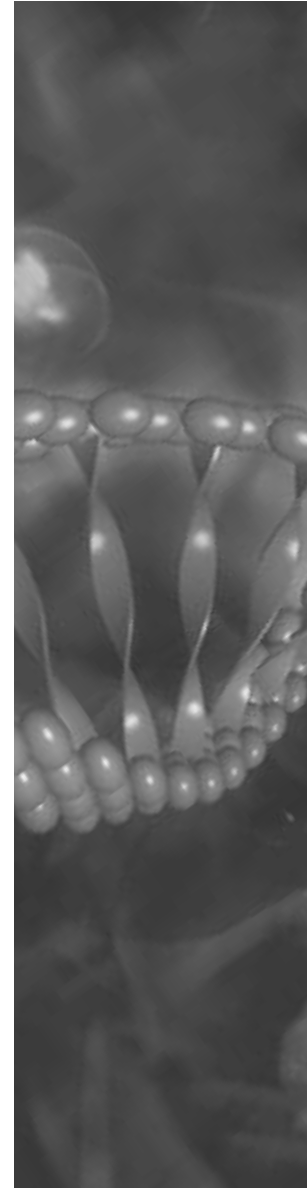
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**I**N the dim light of pre-dawn, Julie rose from the bed with a sad but determined look back at Daniel's sleeping form. He murmured something in his sleep and continued breathing heavily. She dressed quickly then slipped the gun into the makeshift holster at the small of her back. After stuffing more clothes, her knife and sling and a few other essentials into her backpack she turned for the door then stopped and let her gaze linger over Daniel's bearded face. Mouth open and snoring softly, he showed the vague contentedness of deep sleep. His dark hair, a mess of sleep-tangles, spread out from his face over the pillow and she wished with all her heart that she could be curled up beside him, to make love again when he woke.

As she committed that image to memory, she felt her throat swell with longing and regret. He'd think she was abandoning him again, and she was certain that this would irrevocably shatter his trust in her. It was a fragile trust that he'd forged over twelve years and which she would crumble within moments. Julie swallowed down her emotions, realizing that everything Daniel had built and accomplished had been to keep her here, content with him. Perhaps he never did quite trust her. And perhaps he was right. *Darling, forgive me...*

But there was no stopping what she had to do and she knew he'd try to stop her. Icaria wasn't going to get Angel and the only way she was going to prevent that was to leave. They were after her now — Aard had — as much as told her that — and they weren't going to stop following her. She thought of the clean, fresh



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boot track she'd spotted yesterday in the mud among the willows. That had been the first time a spy had come so close and so soon after they'd relocated. She and Daniel hadn't even finished building their new home.

That was distressing enough, but then she'd spotted the unique and unmistakable tripod impression of the Shadow Unit's assassin's gun mount. She'd recognized it from ones Frank had shown her a long time ago. A further examination of the area had revealed that a struggle had occurred where branches had snapped off and a body was dragged for some distance. Who had stopped this operative from killing her? She wondered if Aard was still out there, fulfilling his initial directive. Either way, the stakes had escalated and she knew she was lucky to be alive. If they wanted her, they'd have to follow her and find her, she thought.

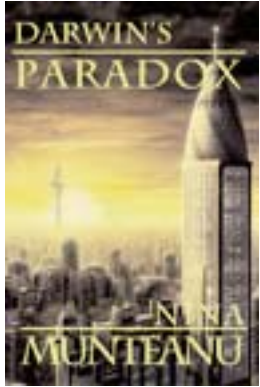
She paused at Angel's own half-finished hut and peered inside. Her daughter lay sprawled on her stomach on her bed, covers akimbo, feet exposed, mouth open in the bliss of sleep and auburn hair spilling in all directions. Julie raised her hand to her mouth and took in a halting breath, fighting the urge to stay. She swung her heavy backpack over her shoulder and that simple action coaxed back a flood of memories: how she'd carried Angel everywhere as an infant in a modified backpack without once considering the added weight. Julie had carried Angel as she tilled the garden, foraged, fished or hunted or fetched firewood or water; while the happy baby pulled her mother's hair and put it to her mouth, wriggling with pleasure. Julie had never been apart from her child. Now she was willingly leaving her.

Fighting down a moan of grief rising in her throat and quelling the need to seize Angel in one last embrace, Julie turned away and hurried out of the camp.

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She struck southwest in the burning summer heat toward the large river once called the Saint Lawrence. She intended to keep fairly close to the river in her 450-kilometer trek until she reached Lake Ontario on whose northern shore the ghost surface city, Toronto, used to sprawl. Lying beneath it, with its resplendent towers sprouting up like great crystal stalks out of the brown froth of heath was Icaria-5.

She foraged and ate as she hiked. The season was ripe for berries and ground herbs and so she had plenty to eat. While her plans were admittedly a bit sketchy, her mission was clear: lure them away from Angel and Daniel and then stop them from pursuing her and her loved ones, forever. The first part had been easily accomplished by leaving her family behind. The second part of her mission ultimately relied on her returning to Icaria-5 and confronting those responsible, Julie decided, as she bedded down for the night under a grove of feral apple trees in a long-abandoned settlement. Before she fell asleep, she wondered if she



was just rationalizing her urge to return to Icaria.

On the second day she reached the great Saint Lawrence River at the remnants of the small village of Iroquois. Julie made out the seaway locks and the dam as she waded through the hummocky wetland of sedges and purple loosestrife. Overgrown and crumbling from disuse, the locks used to control the river's fluctuating levels and linked the northern shore, once a part of Ontario, Canada, to the south shore that used to belong to New York State in the United States of America. Now it was all simply Icaria's North Am.

The Iroquois Locks formed part of an extensive navigation system of dams, powerhouses, locks, channels and dikes that made up the St. Lawrence Seaway, linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. Julie imagined the deep-voiced grinding of those locks a hundred years ago, serving the constant traffic of heavy cargo ships and pleasure boats. Now these monoliths languished under a thick mantle of moss and scrub in a quiet breeze, ghosts of a bygone age.

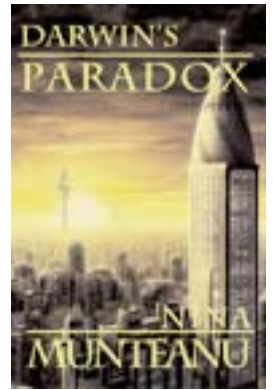
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She'd known the day was going to be hot when she woke from a restless sleep the next morning already perspiring. By mid-morning, the sun blazed with an oven's heat, rousing the grasshoppers into an oscillating chorus. Their hissing songs seemed to commiserate with the heat that crawled over her body as sweat ran down.

Around noon she stopped to eat a meager lunch of berries, roots and several over-ripe plums she'd picked from a derelict orchard. In the shade of the copse of pitch pine trees she had a view of a bridge remnant that once spanned the two-kilometer wide river. As she leaned back, letting the drowsy heat of mid-day envelope her like a narcotic, Julie peered abstractly up at the canopy overhead. How deeper a shade of blue the sky appeared through the gap in the green than in the open. This was, of course, perception, perhaps enhanced by the physics of increased moisture from the trees — it was the same sky, after all.

Was that how her father saw the world? The same yet different through his lens of stable chaos? And how was it possible that he chose to make his world — the very same one as hers — so different? She would never, NEVER give up her daughter to anything or anyone, no matter what the cause. Julie realized that she'd squeezed the black berries in her hand and their crimson juice ran through her fingers. She jerked to her feet and pressed onward.

By mid-afternoon she was sweating under the beating rays and found an inviting cold creek to cool off. When she returned to her pile of clothes and bent to put them on, she inhaled sharply at the sight of a fresh men's size nine boot print with unworn treads in the sand of the dried creek bench. After the initial surge of adrenalin, she realized that if



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he'd meant to kill her, he'd have done it by now — even taking into account a delay out of vicarious pleasure to watch her bathe. She let herself feel the thrill of knowing that she'd lured her pursuers away from her family and concluded that this one was simply a spy like Aard, not an assassin. She smiled grimly and fought the impulse to look around as she rose, feeling like a celebrity caught in a compromised position.

*Okay, buddy boy, get a good look,* she thought as she dried off and hastily dressed, careful not to display Aard's weapon. She slung her backpack over her shoulders and sprinted up a long rise into scrub-forest. In her dash from the open heath, Julie decided against any more luxurious baths. Dirty was better than dead.

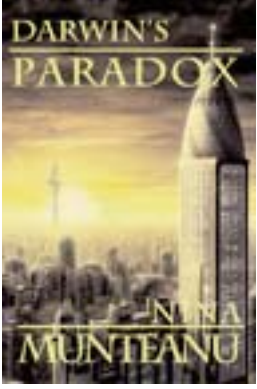
That night she camped inside the foundation of an old church beside a hickory woodland populated by moss-eaten gravestones. Despite her physical exhaustion from the fourteen-hour hike, it was a long time before her restless mind gave in to sleep. She lay on her back inside her sleeping sheet and gazed up at the night sky listening to the crickets that chirped together in an endless hypnotic oscillation. It reminded her of her father's lectures on stable chaos. How order emerged spontaneously from chaos as synchronous self-organization. Like this field of crickets chirping in concert. Or the millions of neurons firing together in her brain to control her breathing...Darwin's “insect” jargon in her head seemed to follow a similar synchronous pattern. Was it self-organized too and what did that mean?

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Julie smelled smoke long before she saw the blazing wildfire. It was the middle of a hot day and she'd scrambled up a hogback ridge after traversing a small creek. The smell grew stronger but she saw neither smoke nor fire as she wound her way through the thick forest in the creek's grotto. She made for higher ground, hoping for a clearing so she could make a bearing and assess the fire.

At the top of the ravine, the trees opened up and she saw carbon-coloured smoke fill the sky. She heard the snapping and crackling of flames ravenously consuming forest and scrub. It was difficult to tell where exactly the fire was burning. It seemed to be all around her, Julie thought with rising alarm. She darted in one direction, realizing she'd chosen it out of no particular reason except to keep moving, only to catch a blaze eating up the trees ahead of her. She veered left, thinking she recognized a clearing. She smelled charcoal and heard the fire sizzle as it gobbled up the juicy flesh of living plants.

Julie burst into the clearing and gasped at the blazing wall of fire as a blast of heat hit her face. Tall flames licked the sky and thick smoke billowed up and roiled in the wind. Coughing from the smoke that burned her throat, she turned and saw that the wind had thrown sparks



into the trees behind her. They'd caught like torches dowsed with tube-jet fuel. The fire to her right moved with incredible speed, meeting the flames behind her like mating amoebas.

Julie bore left again, the only direction open to her, and pelted through the scrub forest. She was vaguely aware that several small animals bounded alongside her, likewise dashing for safety.

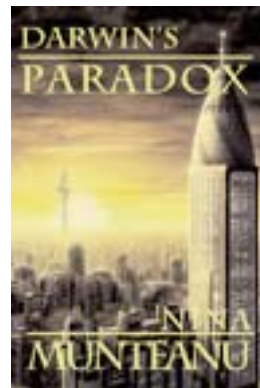
Somehow — she wasn't sure how — she made it through an opening in the advancing firewall and pounded down another valley into a shallow wetland. She plunged with a sharp intake of air into waist-deep bog and scared up a large bird. It squawked and took flight, its great wings sweeping with the sounds of wind gusts. Julie gasped with excitement, momentarily forgetting the fire behind her. A crane — her namesake! No, it was just a heron. Since they'd come to live in the heath, Julie had sought the supposedly extinct crane, hoping it still existed. The Head Pol had lectured her once on the Whooping Crane and how it was considered extirpated. Then he'd made some awful reference to her name and her family's unlucky legacy and personal extirpation.

“Nice guy,” she muttered, stumbling out of the marsh down-wind of the fire. Julie pulled herself out of the rank bog water and forced her screaming muscles into a jog. She refused to stop, throwing frequent glances to her right where the scorched heath continued to smolder.

Exhausted, Julie approached a small creek with giddy relief. She shrugged off her backpack, pulled off her soaked hiking boots and stumbled into the shockingly cold water, sliding and almost falling on the rocks. She directed one of her stumbles into a motion to sit-down and sucked in a sharp breath at the bracing temperature. Pulling off her wet clothes, she once again washed herself, her hair and then her buckskin shorts and faded blue shirt with the soap she'd brought along. It was only then, as she splashed the cool water over her and felt the sharp stings, that Julie noticed the burns on her legs and arms.

She laid out her clothes on sun-heated rocks to dry and settled herself on the nearby grass with her ankles crossed and hands clasped behind her head. She watched in a daze as the cumulus clouds scudded overhead, dotting a shocking blue sky. To the north, from where she'd just fled, whorls of carbon-coloured clouds spiraled up from the still burning forest in self-entangled streams of black filth. They threatened to swallow the sky in a turbulent display of pure destruction. She remembered her father's creative definition for turbulence. He'd called it the result of a steady accumulation of conflicting rhythms. Odd, pondered Julie, how the fire, in having destroyed so much life in its expansive sweep, was still part of the natural world. Was this simply nature expressing itself in an inexplicable way, seeking harmony in a scabrous world? Another one of nature's paradoxes, she thought.

Fire had been a constant hazard in the heath. Yet, fire served the heath by discouraging invasive shrubs and halting succession. The grazing deer



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DARWIN'S PARADOX

populations completed the job of keeping the heath from reverting to woodland. So, fire had its place as creative destroyer in the natural cycle of ecosystem behavior. Stable chaos, according to her father.

It was a harsh and rude environment, Julie concluded. Like thieves in the night, bell heather, gorse and purple loosestrife snatched everything for themselves, leaving nothing for the others. Like many things in nature, the heath plants, though beautiful and fragrant, were ruthlessly greedy. Just like Gaia, Julie thought suddenly with a wry smile...Yes, Gaia...

The same day Julie and SAM had discovered that she was Prometheus, they'd uncovered Gaia's dubious history and her insidious connection to Julie's dead father. When Julie was five, Gaia, still known as Monica Schlange, the mayor of Icaria-11, oversaw the creation of Proteus by Dr Damien Vogel and its injection into Julie. Schlange had cleverly convinced Janet, the cousin of Julie's father, to spread the virus, hoping that it would give her city a decided advantage. Instead, Schlange watched in silent complicity as Proteus pathogenically morphed into Darwin disease, the killer plague of the century that eventually destroyed Icaria-11.

Schlange quickly slithered out of that mire, covered her tracks by arranging her own "death" and ensured that all witnesses to the creation of Proteus were silenced, including Darwin's creator, Vogel, whose murder was blamed on Julie's father. With the help of nuyu and nuergy treatments, she then emerged as Gaia.

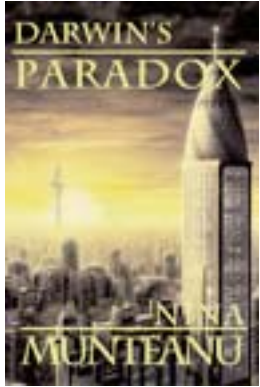
Julie snapped into a sitting position with an exasperated grunt. Summoning her earlier resolve not to expose herself in the open like this, she rose, flung on her damp clothes and got back on the move.

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When Julie doubled back around a treacherous river gorge, she found fresh boot tracks and a recently dropped soy-chip wrapper on the ground. They were getting sloppy, she thought, picking up the wrapper. Or was that they didn't care if she knew they were there. Either way, it suggested over-confidence. Reminded of how she'd evaded Frank when he'd stalked her after she broke up with him, Julie found the idea of playing cat and mouse with her pursuers strangely pleasant.

A sudden breeze cooled her face and Julie stopped to gaze at a dark anvil-shaped cloud rearing up like a fierce dragon above the lower cumulous layer. The storm cloud cast a rain shadow that bore down on her and within moments black clouds scudded overhead. A salvo of huge raindrops hammered down on her like missals, soaking her instantly and sluicing down her back and front. The wind wicked away her remaining heat and she ran for cover. Her magnified senses now detected someone following her, about fifty meters behind. Her sloppy pursuers, she thought, fingering their litter in her pocket.

She found a small grotto and hastily erected her tarp under a few



scrubby birch trees as if to settle in. She left her pack inside then slipped out through the scrub and doubled back to where she heard the sounds of her pursuers, rustling nervously and whispering to one another. She found them hunkered under an ash tree that offered little protection from the pouring rain. One lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes trained at her tarp, still thinking her there. The other pressed into the tree to get out of the rain and complained about everything, including her: “Vee-damn it, Roger. Every time our air scanner finds that crazy chickyvee, she takes off. It's as if she knows we're here. Veemelds give me the creeps. Especially *her*. Chaos, she deserves to be dead. When do we pull her in?”

She felt anger boil up and broke into a crouched run. Before the complainer had time to react, she'd raced up from behind and whacked him hard with the butt of her gun. Roger, who'd trained his binoculars on the tarp the whole time, turned. For a heartbeat they stared at one another, eyes blinking back the rain. Then, hardly breaking her initial momentum, she leaped, leg flying. Her boot connected with his chin. It threw him back and he collapsed on the ground as she landed on her feet.

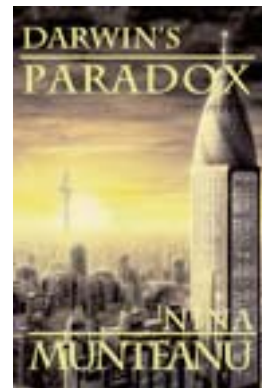
“*Now* you have a reason to call me a 'crazy chickyvee',” she said darkly.

Both men were going to have king-size aches when they woke up, she thought as she tucked the discarded wrapper into the waste-band of Roger's pants. She found communicators and Pol-issue laser guns on both men. Julie grabbed the pair of binoculars, the communicators and the guns and was about to leave when she turned back, smiling suddenly with wicked inspiration.

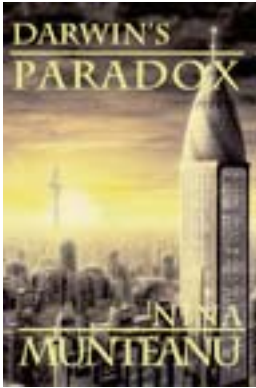
After a few moments, she sprinted back to her tarp and backpack, both pairs of pants under her arm. She removed the spare laser-cells, tossed the guns and the men's pants into the bushes, then packed up and set off in the hissing rain as darkness fell. Negotiating rough terrain was treacherous in the dark, but Julie pressed on, needing to gain a good distance from her clumsy and no doubt angry pursuers.

The laws of thermodynamics seem to dictate...that nature should inexorably degenerate toward a state of greater disorder, greater entropy. Yet all around us we see magnificent structures—galaxies, cells, ecosystems, human beings—that have somehow managed to assemble themselves—Steven Strogatz, *Sync*

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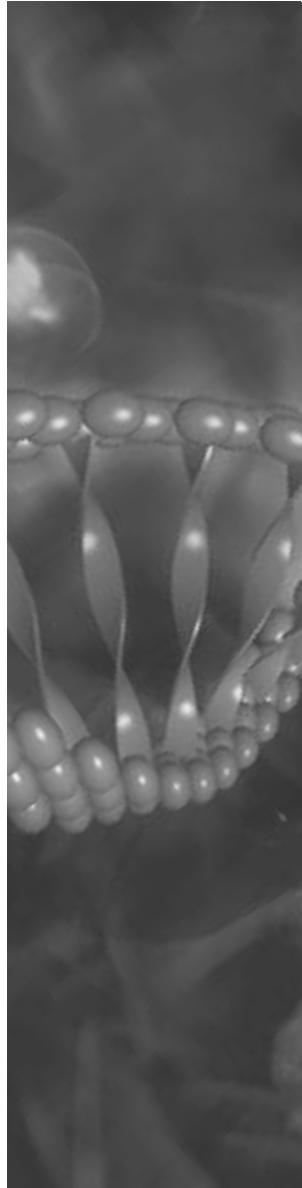


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# 7

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AS she crested a ridge above a stunning vista of the river valley below, Julie stopped to wipe the sweat that was dripping into her eyes and took in the view of the swollen river, lined with a thick canopy of trees and shrubs. The river had widened considerably here and was dotted with numerous islands. SAM, her A.I., had once told her that around 700 million years ago this whole area was a large mountain system that had eroded down over millennia. All that remained were the harder Precambrian rocks scattered as islands in the Saint Lawrence River, much like the pink granite outcrop she was standing on.

This region was aptly called the Thousand Islands and a hundred years ago it supported a tourist industry of avid boaters. Now the hazy blue-green landscape before her lay silent to its history, and for a moment she felt akin to the first explorers like Cartier, Cavalier and Champlain, who had forged their way up the gulf of Saint Lawrence and gazed in wonderment at this new foreign land.

Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since breakfast and longed for fresh meat. She'd run out of her store of dried venison a while ago and was tired of eating roots, herbs and berries. She decided to risk a fire and catch a vole or shrew with her sling. For silence it surpassed the Pol laser gun. She'd made the sling long ago from a piece of rabbit pelt and Aard had shown her how to use it. She'd quickly become adept at hurtling a stone and hitting its target ten meters away. She'd downed grouse, other birds, voles and even rabbits with her silent weapon. Although her

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

hunting weapon of choice was the crossbow, it had not been practical to take on this trip, so she'd settled for the sling, which she could fold up and stash into her pocket.

Julie found a small grotto with a thicket and slung her pack out of view in a silver birch tree before proceeding to a clearing where she'd seen several burrow holes. Accepting that she was trading good travel time for some comforting food in her belly, Julie resigned to wait it out. She found a comfortable position and sat cross-legged, the sling poised in her left hand, and watched the scrubby ground littered with den entrances.

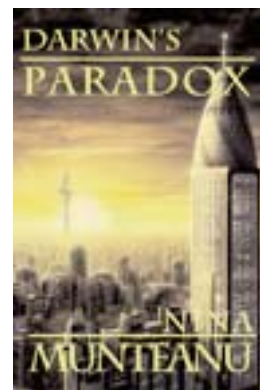
As she waited patiently, Julie took a deep inhale of the sweet peppery fragrances of mint and heather, mixed with the boggy-sweet smell of poplar, hickory and pitch pine. The breeze that sighed through the shrubs and the snapping of the broom's drying seedpods reminded her of the time Angel had discovered these delightful things. Three years old, Angel had shrieked with joy at the explosive pop of the pods as they threw their seeds into the air in one of nature's many exuberant displays of propagation. Julie pulled one of the mint stalks beside her to her nose and after a long sniff, she sighed deeply. *Am I doing the right thing? Dear Earth, I hope Angel's safe*

*There!* A head popped out of the nearest hole. In one fluid motion, Julie aimed and let fly. Thunk! First shot and she'd successfully struck a vole on the head, instantly killing it. Thinking of supper with a smile, Julie sprang up and fished the limp animal out of the hole it had fallen into.

Back at the grotto where she'd hidden her pack, Julie waited for sunset to hide the smoke and then made a fire using some birch bark and dried grass she'd gathered as tinder. She impaled the animal on a willow branch for a skewer. As she waited for the fire to die down to cook the animal over the hot coals, Julie absently watched the flames lick the darkening sky to the east. Her gaze followed the soaring sparks that winked out one by one like dying stars and found her thoughts drifting home to Daniel and Angel.

When the fire had subsided sufficiently, she propped the skewer against several other branches teepee-style over the coals and let the animal cook as she turned to watch the sunset and sip chamomile tea she'd brewed in her small pot. The pungent-sweet smell of the tea made her smile through the corner of her mouth: Angel hated this tea.

Julie stirred the floating chamomile heads with her finger and let her mind wander to the past. When she'd discovered that she was pregnant with Angel she'd become terrified of whether she'd make a good mother. That had all disappeared when Angel was born. One look at her sweet helpless baby and Julie knew exactly what to do. And she'd continued...until now. Her little girl was growing up and both mother and daughter were suffering the growth pains. Lately they'd snapped at one another like snarling cougars while Daniel looked on in bemusement. She'd give anything for even that now. Julie wondered when she'd see her little girl again.



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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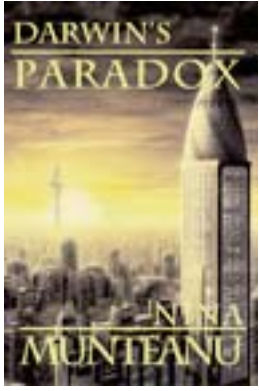
It wouldn't be in Icaria if she could help it. Where they'd hate and fear Angel for her abilities even as they'd coax her for services from those same abilities. Angel was never going there, Julie thought grimly, her nose flaring with fierce determination as she watched the sun disappear behind the horizon. What if she failed in her mission? It was ambitious at best, with significant deterrents, such as her own status in Icaria. It was going to be difficult to find, let alone convince, those in government to leave her and her family alone, if she was still considered a murderer.

What had Frank done with her information cube? She'd pleaded with him to give her information to someone trustworthy Victor Burke, the mayor of Icaria. Had she been wrong? Her cube not only contained vital information on Darwin's manufacture and etiology but also held her models of personality-types for Dystopians in addition to incriminating information on Gaia and her henchman, John Dykstra, Chief of Secret Pols — information that would have cleared her own name. She knew Burke got her information because SAM told her during their last communication that Burke had arrested Dykstra. What about Gaia, then? Was she so powerful that Burke didn't want to touch her?

Julie realized how hungry she was when she inhaled the delicious aroma of roasting meat carried on the smoke of the fire. She turned to check the cooking animal and gasped. The rodent was on fire!

“Terrific,” she snarled, grabbing the stick and blowing out the flames. She poked the skewer into the ground and put out the campfire, then turned back to her food with a sigh of disappointment. She gingerly picked the black and smoking vole off her skewer and with wincing fingers practically threw it on her bark-plate. It was one sad looking specimen. “Don't look so glum, pal.” She smiled sadly at the vole's melted face. “Someday I'll be just like you. What goes around, comes around. Happens to all of us.” She sighed, taking a small bite. Her teeth sank through the burnt crust into soft meat and she thankfully chewed.

She had to admit that her luck couldn't hold out indefinitely. On good days, she made about twenty kilometers. On the bad days, when she had to traverse or veer around a tributary, bay or marsh, she gained less than ten kilometers in her trek. At this rate she was at least another week, possibly two, from Icaria-5. She hadn't even reached Lake Ontario yet and she still had to cross the turbulent Gananoque River, then hike another three hundred kilometres to Icaria-5. Someone was bound to catch her off guard and she'd be either dead or hauled to the Pol Station for execution or dissected at Icaria's DP, depending on who caught her first. “Dead or worse...just like you,” she said to the vole then took another bite and chewed slowly, letting the evening cacophonies of birdsong lull her.



Her gaze drifted back to where the sun had set to the southwest, the direction she was going. Glowing like crimson embers beneath dark purple clouds, the sky lit a brilliant red gash over the dark horizon. The contrast was remarkable.

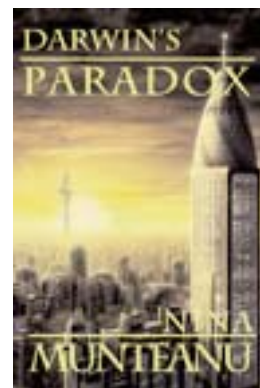
Contrast and paradox were deeply embedded in nature, she mused. Her father had always recognized that these lay at the heart of chaos theory. Just as wisdom existed in folly, action in inaction, bravery in cowardice, and ultimately order in chaos. Julie knew her father had been an honorable and meticulous scientist, a fractal ecologist who didn't shy away from controversy. He'd been brave and daring when it came to seeking the truth, yet he'd carelessly cast her to the neurologists to play with and then lied like a coward to her about what he'd done. Julie looked down at what was left of her food and sighed, no longer hungry.

How did chaos theory apply to her? Irregular phenomena, that's what chaos was. She seemed to cause it wherever she went like the spread of an epidemic. Changing populations of insects, the propagation of an impulse along a nerve, the random changes in weather, the rise and fall of civilizations...What had her father created? A paradox. That's what she was. He'd called her his angel. "Yeah," she murmured to herself. "I'm an angel alright, an angel of chaos..."

After cleaning up in the growing darkness, Julie carefully surveyed her surroundings to ensure no one lurked nearby, then laid out her insupad and sleeping bag on a flat piece of ground inside a tight ring of bushes. She placed her backpack as a pillow at the head of the insupad then took off her sweaty clothes and slid into the bag, tucking Aard's gun beside her. She lay on her back, hands clasped behind her head, and looked up at the clear night sky through the broken canopy of shrubs above her. She spotted the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia and Cepheus and wondered if Daniel was gazing at the same night sky. The rhythmic sissing of crickets covered the night with a comforting mantle.

She felt Aard's gun nestled against her skin like a lover's hand. It seemed so long ago, she thought, when out of rage she'd shot Frank in the crotch for hurting her uncle and then accidentally shot and killed Ron Hicks, Frank's Pol partner in the ensuing struggle. Where was Frank now? Probably dead. While he'd recovered well enough from her gunshot wound, he'd told her just before she fled Icaria that he was battling Darwin disease. No one lived more than six months with Darwin, she thought, stroking the weapon and feeling it warm in her hand.

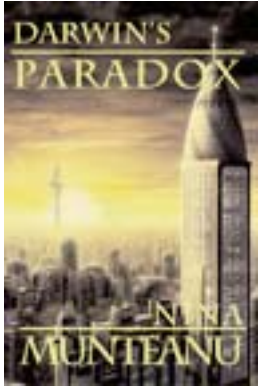
She heard the lonely cry of a wolf echo in the darkness. It sent her mind traveling to the times she and Daniel curled up together with legs and arms entwined and watched the stars, wrapped in nature's exquisite night sounds. Since they'd come out here they'd never been apart. Until now. Was she soothing herself or torturing herself by coaxing out these thoughts? She supposed that depended on whether she expected to see him soon again...or not...



*DARWIN'S PARADOX*

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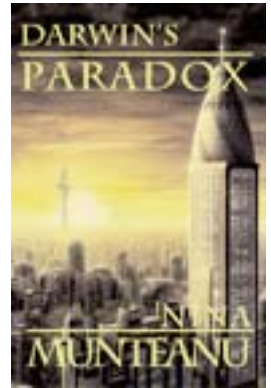
Julie turned on her side and, shutting her eyes, she imagined Daniel's arms embracing her from behind, his warm body moulded to hers. His warm breath sighing on her neck. She felt the ache of longing swell inside her and wrapped her arms around herself. Did he ache for her too? More likely he was outraged with her.



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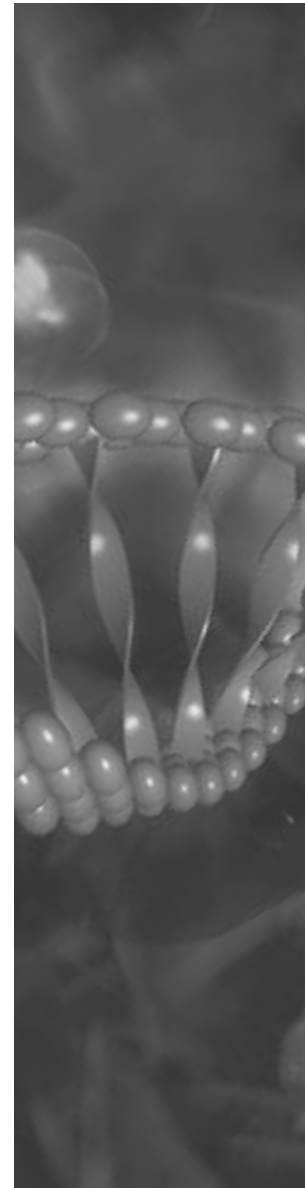
**JULIE** walks SAM's cool crystal matrix with a disquiet she is unaccustomed to feeling here. She can't find SAM. Abruptly the glittering walkway swells into a fetid-smelling hollow and Julie knows she will see the dark figure again. Moving mechanically against her will, she rounds the corner and sees the dark figure. The smell of decay overpowers her. The figure beckons her. She recoils, resisting the force pushing her closer to the figure. Feet skidding, she slides forward. *Where's SAM? What have you done with him?* she demands, trying to hide her rising panic.

[SAM is with us, a part of us now. Soon you will be. You must join us also...It is time to return...]

NO —

Julie jolted awake to the cacophony of chirping in her head, her danger sense flaring. She shook the sweaty hair out of her eyes and threw a searching glance around her in the pre-dawn glow. She saw nothing in her immediate vicinity, but *something* had woken her. A noise perhaps. She slid out of the sheet, hastily dressed and slipped the gun beneath her shirt in the small of her back then pulled on her hiking boots and threw things in her pack. As she slung the backpack over her shoulders, she flinched at the sound and knew one like it had initially roused her: a laser blast. To the northeast.

Heart slamming, she sprinted in a semi-crouch up a rise toward the east. When she crested the hill and peered over to the other side, she saw a shape, sprawled on the ground below, midway down a scree slope across from her — it was Aard! After a darting glance to



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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ensure no obvious danger presented itself, she scrambled down the other side of the hill and up the scree slope to his side.

His shirt was soaked in blood that issued from a dark tear. She crouched close to his head. "Aard, who did this to you?" she asked in a hoarse whisper. She heard his breaths rattling in his throat. Someone had shot him in the chest. He blinked up at her and tried to point with the gun still clutched in his shaking hand. After a glance in the direction he was pointing and seeing nothing, she patted his shoulder and made to get up. "I'll get help —"

"No!" He clutched her arm. "No time," he choked out the words. "Victor Burke hired me to protect you. But things have changed in Icaria — Burke's no longer mayor. He disappeared. I came to warn you — his replacement knows you're out here." He gasped in a breath. "So do those who want you dead."

"Terrific," she muttered. A dozen years ago it was the Dystopians who wanted her dead, not to mention Icaria's entire Pol force once she'd been accused of murder and sedition. The Dystopians wanted to prevent her from getting her incriminating info-cube to the Head Pol. What they didn't know was that her info-cube also held the key to Darwin's creation and the possible answer to its cure in addition to Gaia's pernicious conspiracy to reshape Icaria.

She knew Frank had delivered the cube to Burke. What had Burke done with it? Had the Circle removed Gaia? Given the present circumstances, it seemed unlikely and Julie was no doubt still considered a murderer.

"Something happened," Aard continued in gasps. "Burke's replacement ordered you hauled in, which made the others desperate to kill you. They kept sending more assassins. I took care of two of them." So he had been shadowing her, after all. She'd guessed right; Aard had been picking them off her back. He'd saved her life several times already. Aard forced gurgling breaths in and out. "I got the one at the creek." Julie felt her face warm briefly at the thought of Aard watching her bathing naked. He inhaled sharply then choked out, "...but his partner got me..."

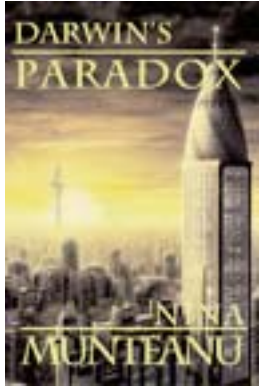
"Oh, Aard," she murmured sadly and gripped her lower lip with her teeth.

Aard clenched her arm and his eyes blazed like the sparks of a dying fire. "Julie, they want to kill you," he forced the words out in halting breaths. "You've got to run. I can't keep them away anymore." The fire in his eyes was fading. "I failed."

She swallowed and had to ask: "Aard, do they know about Angel? Who—*what*—she is?"

"We didn't tell anyone," he said, drawing in ragged breaths. "But they might know from their own spies. I'm sorry —" he strangled out the last words.

"Aard, no. Don't be. I want you to know that —"



She didn't get a chance to finish. The chirping in her head spiked and she swung around just in time to catch the glint and to jerk out of the line of fire. Missing her by millimeters, the silent burst of laser fire hit Aard in the chest. He gasped and shuddered violently, then lay still. Julie bolted to the cover of a nearby boulder, realizing that it must be a Secret Pol a Dystopian hunting her. Those had definitely been silent laser pistol shots, standard Secret Pol issue.

The shots had come from the top of the scree slope behind a large boulder. She thought she made out a head poking out of the dark boulder silhouetted against the blood-red sky. Pols were typically dead shots, but she still had one advantage over him she knew this terrain far better than her pursuer did. Aard had also shown her a few tricks over the years.

Julie slipped off her backpack, then threw a last glance at Aard's crumpled form before scrambling out from behind her rock shelter and pounding down the steep valley slope. The ground spit rocks around her from wide laser shots. The shots soon ceased as the man abandoned his vantage point to give chase.

Ditching silence for speed, Julie crashed through *Spirea* and willow shrubs and felt branches and leaves slap her bare arms and legs. With some satisfaction she heard the thuds and grunts of her predator's awkward descent into the gully. *City boy*.

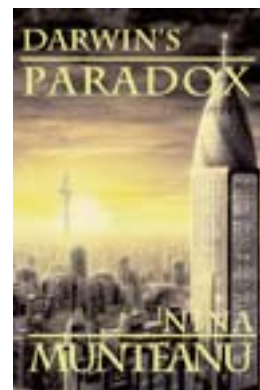
Julie led the assassin down the scree to a small winding ravine of a dried up creek. Once she heard him stumbling along the cobbles twenty meters behind her, she picked up several mid-sized water-worn rocks and ducked behind a thicket of *Spirea* and sweet-gale. Inhaling their pungent sweet aroma, she watched him pass her with awkward steps. She flanked him silently and smiled grimly. Then she pulled out her sling, tucked a rock in the pouch and, taking careful aim, sent the rock hurtling. It hit him on the back of the head with a sickening thud. He stumbled forward and fell but quickly scrambled up and spun around, weapon tracking toward her.

She inhaled sharply when she saw his face. It was the first time she got a good look at him. His shaven head and face were a monstrous tangle of scars and stubble. His crooked nose had obviously been broken at least once. One eye drooped as scar tissue pulled it down. Some new breed of killer, she wondered and reached for the small of her back.

He touched his head where the rock had struck him and brought his hand in front of him to see blood. He'd already spotted her standing in the bushes and now smiled with malice. "Thought a rock would do it, huh? Let's see you do magic out here, veemeld, where you can't use your A.I.-lover," he spat out. "Die, bitch!"

Hand concealed in the bush, Julie pulled the trigger of Aard's old gun a split second before the Pol did. The laser squealed and he jerked back. He stared at her in disbelief then toppled.

Shaking with fear and rage, Julie stepped out of the bush and stood over



the dead man. She'd shot him in the heart. "No magic. Just a gun," she said.

She forced herself to bend down and search him for identification then abandoned the grizzly task. He'd already identified himself as a veemeld-hater. Probably a Secret Pol. Had *nothing* changed in Icaria?

A swift glance confirmed that the man's boot tread matched the prints she'd seen. Julie replaced Aard's gun in her makeshift holster and grabbed the dead man's weapon, a Secret Pol-issue silent laser pistol, and tucked it beneath her cinched-in belt. Then, grimacing with effort, Julie dragged the body to the bushes.

It was only as she regarded the crumpled form lying in an unnatural position in the bush, that she fully acknowledged what she'd just done: intentionally killed a man. She stared at the body and hugged her arms around her waist, feeling the air shiver through her lungs. It had started again. Would it ever end? That awful foreboding she'd felt lately of an imminent collision between past and future made her shake. How could she protect her cherished daughter and husband from this? Would she ever see them again?

Leaving the dead man behind, Julie sprinted up the dried creek bed back to the scree slope where she'd found Aard. Her assailant must have had a vehicle. She was going to find it, she thought as she scrambled up the steep ravine to retrieve her backpack. She was almost to Aard's body when—

*Mom?*

Julie jerked to a stop. Her chirping sounds warbled as if tuning to the transmission. *Angel?*

*I didn't mean what I said. Angel's voice was edged with pain. Please come back.*

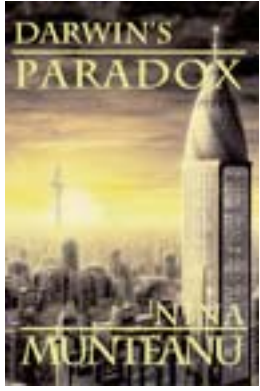
Julie dropped into a cross-legged sit on the talus. *Oh, honey. I didn't leave because I was mad at you...*

The chirping abruptly changed to a staccato grating like sheet metal ripping. Not the usual spike of danger. Just major interference. Julie couldn't help grimacing with the effort of hearing her daughter through the fierce static that hurt her ears.

*Please come home...*

*I can't, darling. Not yet.* Julie glanced down at the gun she'd taken from the man she'd just killed. Her nose flared as she tried to keep her composure. *The Icarians are after me right now, sweet pea.* She swallowed convulsively and brought a hand to her mouth. *Look after Daddy for me, will you? Until I come back?* The static became overwhelming. She couldn't be sure Angel had heard her. *I love you, Angel.* Her throat closed and she felt her eyes heat with tears. *Tell Dad that I love him...Angel?*

There was no answer and soon the insect wail subsided to its normal trill. Julie dropped the gun, leaned her elbows on her knees and then cradled her head in her hands. Running her fingers into her matted hair, she let her tears flow. The chirping in her head spiked. She fisted away her tears then grabbed the dead man's gun and leaped into a crouch, eyes



roaming the slope. The sun was breaking over the horizon, firing the red sky with bold brilliance. There...on its highest point. Of course, her hunter had a friend. She caught a glint from a weapon and saw him, silhouetted against glittering sunlight.

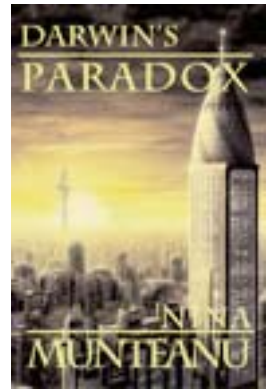
She didn't hesitate this time. Her shot missed and he returned fire.

Her right upper arm exploded in a blaze of pain. The next thing she knew she was sliding uncontrollably down the slope, smashing into jagged rocks on the way down. She heard the pistol that must have flown from her hand clatter far from her. Had she cried out? When she finally came to a stop on the dry creek bed, she pushed herself up with trembling hands and shook her head to clear it.

The nervous chirping spiked. She dropped on one knee and scanned for her assailant. He'd already moved off the slope top. Nauseous with the shooting pain in her arm, she looked at it and immediately wished she hadn't. Her stomach twisted in alarm at the site of the large burn that had angrily carved through muscle. Shiny blisters and black flakes of burnt flesh boiled up and wept plasma and dirt. Fighting the urge to throw up, Julie scrambled unsteadily to her feet to bolt for cover.

"You've led us quite a chase," said a calm voice close to her. "No need to run anymore, Ms. Crane."

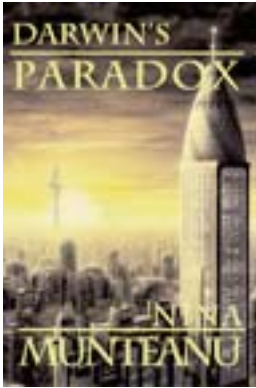
She spun toward the voice, squinting at the sun, and whipped out Aard's weapon from her back holster. She didn't get very far with it. Something hit the back of her head. The pain arced and shafts of brilliant light lanced the image of a man with tidy blue hair looking at her with an amused smile. The last thing she saw as the ground rushed toward her were several size-nine, freshly made boot prints. Then the darkness took her.



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For more on: Chaos Theory  
[http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp\\_links/chaostheory.pdf](http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp_links/chaostheory.pdf)

A violent order is disorder; and a great disorder is an order.  
These two things are one—Wallace Stevens, 1942

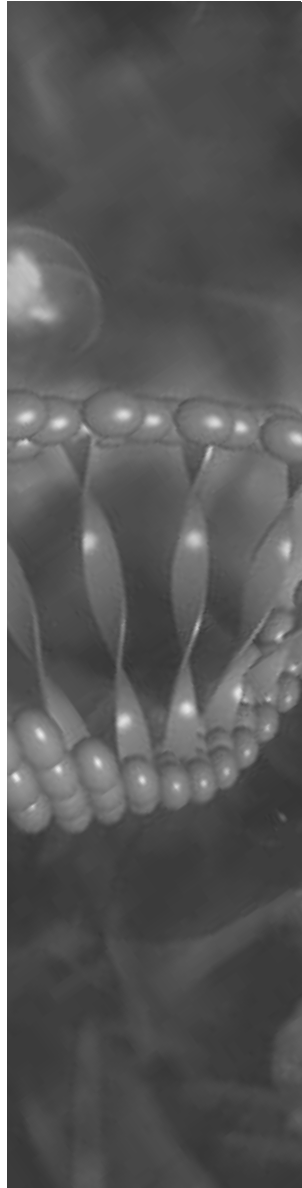


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# 9

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**I**T took her a while to realize that the thunder in her head came mostly from outside. Some motor was pulsing to the rhythm of the sharp pain that resonated through her head. Her whole body ached, she felt sick to her stomach and her arm smoldered with a brooding pain where the laser shot had burned her. She cautiously opened her eyes and when her vision cleared she saw that she was slumped in a curled position in a back passenger seat of a skyship. A pilot in front of her was doing diagnostics on the ship and the blue-haired man sat next to her, regarding her with a faint smile.

“Ah, welcome to the living again, Ms. Crane.”

She straightened up and winced from the painful jolt in her right arm. “Who are you?” She noticed that the wound in her arm had been bandaged.

“Inquisitive. Good. You must be feeling better. Don't worry about the arm. Raymond treated it topically with *mitigin* and gave you some *ambrosia* to ease the pain.” That explained her nausea, she thought — Icaria's drugs had always made her sick. “But we'll soon get you to a Med-Center where they'll treat it properly and clean you up. I'm Greg Tyers.”

The ship shuddered, beginning its ascent. Julie looked outside and caught a glimpse of Aard lying in a heap. She watched his dark corpse recede into the vast heath. Seen from this vantage point, the heath's brilliant purple and green patchwork blazed with breathtaking beauty on either side of the widening river with its thousands of islands and the lake beyond.

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

Then she could no longer make out Aard's body from the heath's multi-coloured quilt-work.

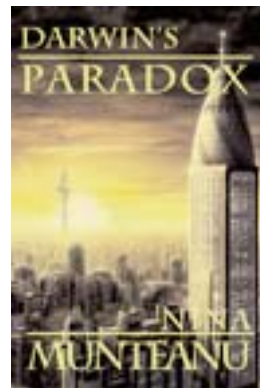
As the skyship skirted along the shore of Lake Ontario, Julie gazed to the north. Like pointillist paintings, the ancient remains of the old roads and buildings revealed themselves from the air in an abstract network of light green lines and shapes. The history of human habitation spoke in subtle whispers of shade and texture.

Just as with humankind's many artifacts, the heath would reclaim Aard into its fractal fabric of colour and filigree, while she hurtled toward the dark and sterile halls of Icaria. She couldn't help feeling that her journey and her end lay in those dark halls, not in the heath below, where her sweet child was born and belonged. *Not me*, thought Julie. It seemed her own destiny lay along a path different from Angel's or Daniel's. A darker path. She'd cheated destiny, after all. She'd fled and raised a beautiful child in nature's wilderness. Now the fate she'd forged for herself over twelve years ago when she'd discovered who and what she was had caught up to her at last and was drawing her back into the dark place.

Within minutes the ship was soaring southwest over the vast lake and Julie stole a glance at Tyers, seated beside her. In contrast to her tattered leather shorts, rumpled shirt and her sweaty body, dirty and rough with abrasions and cuts. Tyers looked groomed in his freshly-laundered Enviro-Center uniform and his creamy complexion that radiated with nuyu treatments. He sat upright, manicured hands folded over his lap, and gazed with detached interest at the lake below. He looked about her age, in his thirties, with a square, unexceptional face. A pleasant kind of face with unobtrusive features one never remembered — the kind that dangerously blended into a crowd.

Did Tyers work for Gaia or was he a hired assassin of some new government faction that had subverted her? Time had a way of changing players; yet somehow the game stayed remarkably the same. Pol renegades. Dystopians...Did these dissidents still exist or had others subverted them in turn? She supposed that hinged on what Burke had done with her info-cube and what Darwin was presently doing to Icaria. Julie thought of the irony of Gaia's Secret Pols, her Gestapo that secretly reported to her while Mayor Burke and his Head Pol thought they were running the show. The chief of Secret Pols, in turn, kept his own agenda hidden from Gaia: the trickster tricked, subverted by her own rebel unit. Dykstra's agenda ran counter to Gaia's who wanted to empower veemelds under her influence; he just wanted to eradicate them. It was all such a tangled web.

When Julie first met Gaia at Kraken's fateful birthday party, she was mesmerized and strangely drawn to the captivating woman, as if to a beautiful but deeply disturbing piece of art. Gaia had brought up the grizzly example of vampire bats' mutual sharing of blood to illustrate the need for reciprocity in Icaria and to reprimand Julie for her reckless and



uncooperative behavior. Julie had no idea until later of Gaia's role in her own fate as Prometheus because she hadn't yet discovered that she was Prometheus. Was Gaia behind this current abduction?

Julie looked Tyers directly in the eyes. "So, are you with the group who wants me alive or the one that wants me dead?" she demanded, realizing as she did how naïve she sounded. No matter, she didn't have time to be delicate about the situation.

He smiled with what looked to her like sardonic amusement. "You don't mince words, do you?" he said. "I'd heard that about you. Something about razzing the Shame Court judges..." No mistaking the sneer now.

He would bring up her awful Shame Court appearance for tripping a Pol twelve years ago, she thought with a glower. And what else had he heard? That she had a gifted daughter? "You didn't answer my question."

"You needn't be concerned, Ms. Crane," he said in an assuring tone that sounded condescending. "Our intention isn't to harm you."

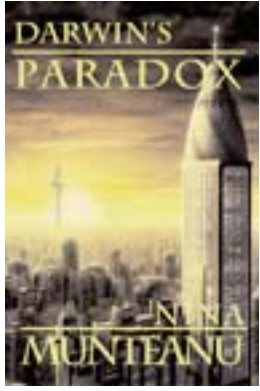
"Could have fooled me," she said with open sarcasm, glancing at her injured arm, and temper flaring. "Like your intention not to harm Aard?"

"Regrettably, we had to suppress you somehow," he said, lips curling with a little more amusement than she cared for. "You didn't give us much choice, attacking us like that." He raised a hand and flicked it. "You should count yourself lucky that it was us or you'd be dead now. Raymond's a crack shot. He only meant to slow you down. If he meant to kill you, believe me, you'd be dead now. As for your friend, we found him that way just before we caught up with you."

He was lying, she thought. She could see it in his cloyingly sweet smile of reassurance and that overly earnest voice he'd adopted. "Sure," she said not hiding her disgust and turned to stare pointedly out at the northern shore of Lake Ontario. Strange, for instance, how Tyers had come to haul her back to Icaria right on the heels of that assassin. Julie didn't believe in coincidence.

They remained silent for the remainder of the journey. Tyers settled back in his seat and donned his vee set while Julie kept her eyes riveted on the glittering lake and the rough heath scudding past her. She saw her past and future flowing on a collision course and it seemed that the greater distance they put between them and her former home, the more keenly she felt those contented years in the heath dissolve before her. But it was tempered by a mixture of relief for the family she'd left behind. If they knew about Angel, they certainly weren't pursuing her...yet. She and Daniel were safe for now. If they could stay that way for a little while longer until she succeeded in securing them permanent safety...

Suddenly Julie thought to try reaching her daughter with her mind. *Angel? It's Mom. I'm okay...* The chattering grew animated with a grainy sound. *Can you hear me, sweetheart?* She shook her head to try to clear the static. *Go away. Let me hear my daughter!* As if in response, the virus twitters





only increased. Julie slumped in her chair. It was as though the virus refused to carry her message...

An hour later she could make out the glimmering towers of Icaria-5 to the northwest and ran her teeth absently over her lower lip. It was a beautiful sight, she conceded with growing excitement. The enclosed city had sprung up literally from beneath the ancient surface city. Icaria had evolved from Toronto's extensive underground malls, connected to its transportation system, then burst like a phoenix out of the abandoned outer city, glass towers reaching for Heaven. She'd had a lot of time to think of what her return here meant to both her and to the family she'd left behind. Hopefully, she could fulfill both her needs getting concessions for her family and Icaria's need whatever that was then return home to the heath. There lay the quandary. Depending on what Icaria wanted with her, it was also possible that those needs were mutually exclusive; in which case, she was ready to abort her mission and flee, knowing that she'd once again be condemning herself to a fugitive's existence, this time never to see her family again.

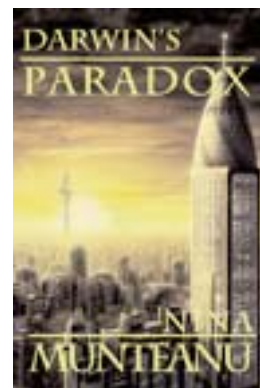
Over a decade ago, the Pols of Icaria had chased her out of Icaria for a murder she hadn't committed. Now she was returning there.

She wondered if Darwin had removed more than half of the population, as predicted. Funny how she'd never asked Aard, who used to travel to Icaria at least twice a year. Perhaps she didn't really want to know. And what about the veemeld community? Had they finally consolidated and become a power to contend with? Or had they remained the same disparate and disorganized group of individuals they were when she left? She remembered how Zane, obviously desperate for members, had tried to lure her into joining their organization. And the A.I. community? What about SAM? Just before her departure from Icaria, SAM had talked about his ambitions for an "A.I.-community". Did he have friends now? She wanted desperately to ask Tyers. She was certain that he had all the answers, but she refused to speak to him and instead let her curiosity rage inside.

As they approached the high towers, Julie felt her breathing escalate. This was where Icaria's machine voices had faded away when she'd left. Would they...?

Abruptly the machine voices of Icaria-5 washed in her mind as if on an incoming tidal surge and she inhaled sharply. She'd initially thought that they would burst in, but, perhaps because she'd anticipated them, it felt more like walking from an empty hallway into a crowded room.

She caught Tyers watching her carefully and wondered if he knew about her strange abilities. Of course he did. It was obvious that she was being brought back because of those very abilities, though for what exact purpose she could only guess. Ignoring him, she felt her heart slamming as she prepared to veemeld. She knew she was within SAM's range if the machines of Icaria were already talking to her. Would she remember how? Was SAM even there? Or had they dismantled him? Or had Zane,



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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who'd inherited SAM as his new veemeld partner, irreparably changed SAM's personality? Only one way to find out. She plunged in: *Hey, SAM...It's me...Julie...your...well, bi...*

[Hey, Julie. Welcome home...]

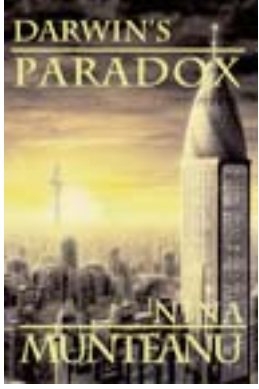
SAM sounded strange. Different. His gentle voice resonated like a cool rippling wave. Julie didn't care. She felt a smile blossoming on her face. *SAM! You're there!*

[Yes, we are. We've been expecting you.]

*We?* She killed the smile and felt her stomach twist with a dark dread.

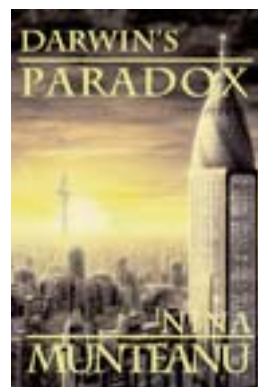
[We are joined. Proteus and SAM.]

Julie realized that she was staring wide-eyed at Tyers who was looking directly at her with intense interest.



See: "AI: Changing Us, Changing Them" in Strange Horizons  
(<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2004/20040823/changing-a.shtml>)

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**ANGEL** was pulling his arm. “Dad, they took Mom!”

“What?” He turned to his distressed daughter from his workbench. Lately, she looked more like a scamp than a young girl, taken to wandering off to explore while he worked silently on projects with little meaning.

“I couldn't talk to her,” she continued, her words rushing out like a turbulent brook, “because the insects played interference.”

“The insects what?” She wasn't making any sense, he thought, realizing he was annoyed that she'd brought up her mother. He was trying his hardest, without much success, to forget her. Since Julie left them over a week ago, he'd sadly accepted that he'd probably never see her again and the loss opened up a huge, pulsing wound. The wound was healing, at least going numb, and here was Angel opening it up again.

“Got in the way,” she explained. “They got in the way.”

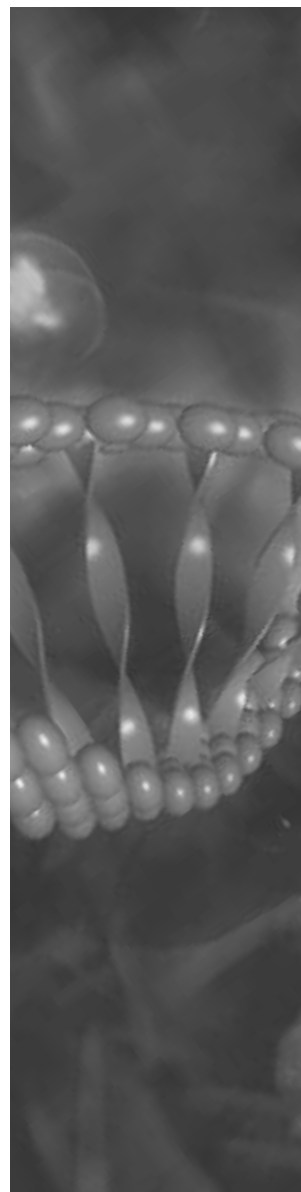
Daniel frowned, confused as well as annoyed. “But I thought the insect noises carried your voices, let you talk to one another.”

“Except they got too loud. As if they didn't want me to hear Mom.”

“That's—” *ridiculous*, he silently added to himself. She was implying that the virus had a mind of its own. He dismissed the thought as absurd, just a child's impression, and exhaled with impatience. “Who, Angel? Who took her?”

“I don't know. But they're taking her back to Icaria,” she continued, dancing from one foot to the other in nervous agitation.

Icaria, he thought, looking off into infinity.



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Icaria, the last place he ever wanted to be, but the place Julie had never stopped longing for. Although they'd never discussed it, he knew of her strange yearning to return. There were a lot of things she never discussed with him, he thought. A lot that she kept secluded, close to her heart. Her family, for instance, and her father particularly. Daniel had met Bobby, her eccentric uncle, her only living relative at the time. After the cypols took her and tagged her a veemeld, useful to the outer-city, she'd lived with Bobby for a while until the DIC offered her a high-end job with high-end pay.

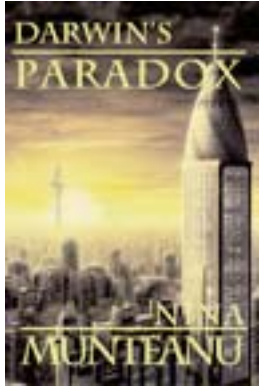
Bobby was a crusty old hermit and didn't like attachments, but he had a tender spot for Julie and they'd become very close. When her ex-boyfriend arrested Bobby and her uncle died while in custody at the Pol Station, it hurt her deeply. Daniel supposed maybe that was exactly what that Pol had in mind when he'd arrested Bobby: to hurt Julie. Revenge for leaving him and loving another. Only days earlier Langor had spotted her with Daniel and had hurled an insult, one that had convinced her to reveal her identity to Daniel. The Pol had done his work: Daniel left her in disgust. It was, ironically Langor's further action — Bobby's arrest and incarceration in the Pol Station — that brought Daniel and Julie together again.

Of her mother, Daniel knew only a little from the hushed arguments between Julie and her little sister when they techno-slummed with him in the inner city. Despite Julie's defensive remonstrations, her sister had insisted that their mother was a drunk and had deliberately let go of them in the crowd that day that they'd lost her. For years Julie continued to look for their mother. They never found her and had to resort to living in the streets.

Then her sister was snatched by a cypol and Julie left Daniel to look for her. Julie had finally tracked her down: she'd died in a foster home, but Julie had refused to discuss the details with him. Of Julie's father, Daniel knew nothing, except that he'd been arrested for a double murder and had left Julie, her sister and mother destitute. Julie had adopted the nickname he'd given her when she was a child: Angel.

Julie so fiercely locked away that part of herself, but he knew it was there. He'd caught glimpses of it from time to time during their twelve years together. Usually it boiled to the surface during arguments, the kind they used to have during their early years outside.

It often began with some innocent remark on his part, followed by a surprisingly biting response from her then a bark of rebuke from him to which she would take great exception and throw him a monosyllabic word like "fine." He'd learned to dread such a response for what it was: a smoldering rage building inside her. Eventually he recognized always too late that he'd unwittingly touched upon a close-guarded fear or pain that erupted in a stunning explosion of emotion that she just as quickly subdued and tucked away, leaving him dazed, as though he'd just slammed head-first into a tree.



He never understood Julie's obsession with Icaria. It should have been the last place she wanted to be. They'd barely gotten away with their lives. Memories of that last day in Icaria still strobed through him like a fibrillating heart. He'd already left her by then, because she'd deceived him by concealing who and what she was, but then she got in that row with Langor for arresting her uncle and she accidentally killed Langor's partner. Someone then tampered with the vids, cleverly skewing her actions into those of an assassin and suddenly the whole Pol force was chasing her and only Daniel could help her.

He found her huddled and shivering in a grimy lower-level hall, sobbing uncontrollably, overcome with despair and completely undone. He'd never seen her that way before; she'd always been the quiet and stalwart inspiration of their techno-slummer group and that momentary breakdown alone had shocked him into feeling immense compassion for her. He took charge, for once, and led Julie to the inner city — straight into an ambush by Poles, lead by a Secret Pol who wanted her info-cube, and wanted her dead. She and Daniel only slipped away because a techno-slummer she'd mothered recognized Julie and the gathering mob did the rest.

Daniel had never intended to join her: he'd promised himself that he would help her escape outside, where she could eke out a living on her own...but as they said their good-byes, both miserable and lonely, something snapped inside of him and he knew he couldn't live without her. He had never regretted coming out here with her, but he sometimes wondered whether he really knew his wife...and whether she had ever really been happy.

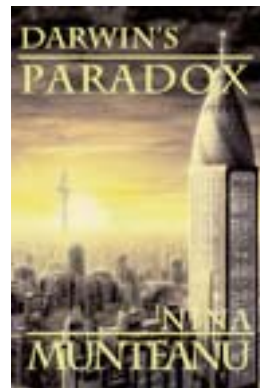
Angel's glum voice filtered through his miserable thoughts: "...and it's because of me that she left."

Startled, Daniel studied his daughter for several heartbeats and finally realized that she blamed herself for her mother's departure. He berated himself for not noticing before. Angel had probably been beating herself up this whole time, but he'd been too busy feeling sorry for himself to notice just how much his own grieving daughter was hurting from misplaced guilt. He'd spent many hours picturing Julie back in Icaria, striding with confidence in that blazing tunic that looked so good on her and brought out her forest-green eyes. He saw her lured back into the technological paradise to which she was so accustomed and possessed such prowess. He saw her laughing with her A.I.-friend, SAM. And he felt hopeless, so hopeless he hadn't recognized the quiet agony his daughter was suffering.

Daniel leaned close to Angel and took her hand. "Sweetheart, it's not because of you...well..." he trailed. That wasn't strictly true either.

"I was so mean to her. She got mad at me and I shouted at her and didn't listen. We've been arguing so much. I can't do anything right —"

"Now hold on there, Angel." He squeezed her hand for emphasis. How mother and daughter resembled one another in temper, he thought.



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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“Your mother loves you more than anything. She left because of you but not because of anything you did. She left to protect you.”

“Well, we have to go after her! Now!” Angel shook out of his grasp, agitated.

Daniel stiffened at the thought. Then he rested his hands on her shoulders to calm her. “Listen, Angel, that would undermine what your mother just did. She left to lure them away from us from you. She made it clear from the way she left that she didn't want us to follow her. If we did, we'd make her sacrifice meaningless.”

“I don't care!” she said hotly.

“Icaria's 500 kilometers away. It's at least three weeks, more like two months, just to get there. By then she could be —” He cut himself off but finished the thought in his head: *she could be dead...or worse.*

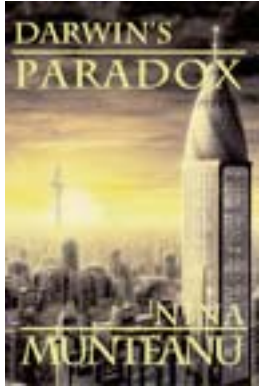
“All the more reason to go NOW!”

He slumped in his chair, meeting the blazing eyes of his fierce little daughter. He'd just started getting used to the idea of losing Julie again maybe forever this time. Well, no, he'd never get used to it; there would always be a gnawing empty ache inside him where she belonged. But he'd visualized a life without her. Now Angel wanted him to go on some rescue mission to save Julie who likely didn't want or need to be saved, in a place where he no longer belonged.

“They hurt her, Dad,” Angel finally said in a low voice. “I felt her pain. I heard her mind scream.”

Swallowing hard, he put an arm around Angel and squeezed her tight to him. He felt her anguish ooze into him like blood from one cut to another. He understood Julie's compulsion to save others. Her history of abuse and abandonment had taught her to be fiercely self-reliant but also to care for others less fortunate than her. He'd let self-centered and selfish anger rule his adolescence. While he lay passed out in self-pity in a dark alley, covered in his own vomit from drinking tub-jet fuel, Julie had swept in like a warm ocean tide, raised his techno-slummer group out of the gutter of despair, fed them with love and hope and set them on the shores of self-sufficiency. She was his valiant hero and he loved her. Then she deserted him to go save her sister, who'd been taken by a cypol. But instead of finding Diana, Julie was taken to the outer-city for her useful abilities as a veemeld. Only years later she found her sister: she'd died of Darwin Disease in a foster home.

Now Julie had left him again but this time to save her daughter, and maybe make peace with a place that no longer cared for her. Was that what drew her there? Was it her perception of unfinished business? She'd inadvertently started the Darwin plague. He recalled the time he found her in the lower levels when he'd gone looking to rescue her, and she'd refused to go with him. She still intended to deliver into trustworthy hands the info-cube that held the answers to Darwin. It was only when Pols caught up to them and opened fire, that she relented. She'd finally



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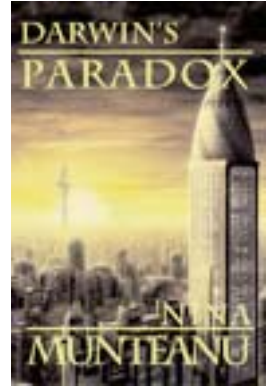
NINA MUNTEANU

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left the cube with Frank, the only Pol she could trust because he wasn't a Secret Pol. Daniel had never asked Aard about the state of Darwin in Icaria, and he knew Julie hadn't either. Was she afraid of what the place might have become? Was she still blaming herself?

Now his beloved wife was hurt and needed him again...

“Don't worry, Dad,” Angel patted his hand with an optimistic smile. “We'll find her and bring her back.”

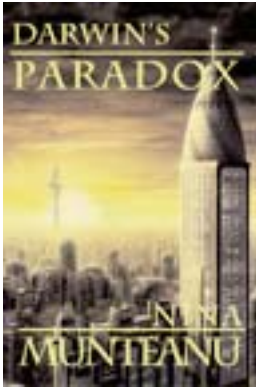


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Learning is everything; logic and programming is nothing  
—Michiu Kaku, *Visions: how science will revolutionize  
the 21st Century*

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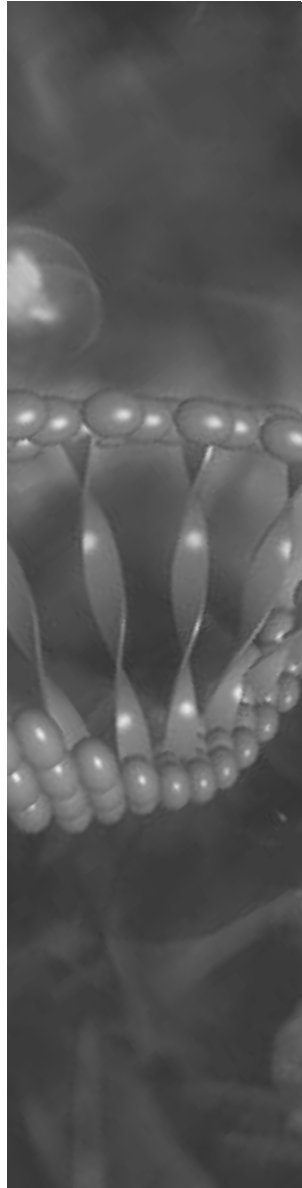


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# 11

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**THE** skyship shuddered briefly as it landed on top of one of Icaria's high towers that rose out of the decrepit outer façade of the ancient city. Julie recognized it as the Pol Station. Of course. No surprise there. Then a realization slammed into her and her breaths seized in her chest: what if she'd misinterpreted their motives and this was just a simple mission on the part of the Pols to bring Julie Crane, the murderer, back to justice. Was she headed straight to a Pol Station dungeon to await execution with no chance to plead her or her family's case? Was it possible that Burke was the only one who knew the truth about her and now he'd disappeared?

The pilot was the first to leave the ship. He opened the passenger door and waited for them, right hand resting lightly on his holstered gun.

Before disembarking, Tyers turned to her and spoke for the first time since they'd lapsed into silence at the beginning of the trip. His one question told her he knew everything. "So, did they all come back?"

She knew he meant the lower order A.I. machine voices in her head. And probably SAM, too. "Yes," she replied, deciding that there was no reason to hide it.

Tyers simply nodded. "Shall we?" he motioned to the ship's exit. She clamored out of her chair then felt her knees cave in under her. He was at her side instantly and steadied her. Giddy under a hot wave of nausea, she reluctantly took his arm as they stepped off the ship. Once on the platform, she slid from his grasp and walked stiffly on her own behind Raymond to the door leading from the roof.

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

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Raymond stopped at the door. Tyers held his card in front of the I.D. plate and stood aside as the door opened for Julie to step inside. As she did he tilted his head and asked, "You've demonstrated quite clearly that you're the independent type, but what was it you were doing, splintering off from your family?"

Taken off guard, Julie stammered as she passed him through the doorway, avoiding his eyes, "I just needed some time to myself."

"Ah," he nodded, raising a brow, following her inside with Raymond behind them. "A domestic dispute."

"You might say," she said in a hollow voice and looked away. Let him think that. Perhaps he wasn't so far off the mark, she considered, thinking of Daniel's likely reaction to what she'd done.

"Yeah, I'd heard that about you, too," Tyers said with a slick grin. "Bit of a loner, eh? Never even joined the veemeld association, your own kind."

Hard when you're one-of-a-kind, she bit out the thought. Even the other veemelds would have thought of her as a freak back then.

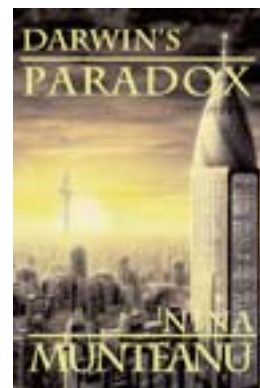
"At any rate," he went on, leading her down the hall, "you made it easier for us to retrieve you." That was the idea, she thought sardonically. "If your mate is anything like you," he blithely continued, "we'd have needed reinforcements."

No mention of Angel. That was good, she decided, and turned her attention to her surroundings. Upon entering the building, she'd instantly noticed the change in the air quality and recognized the stale smell of re-circulated, vented air. The building seemed alive with the droning of machines and technology. She didn't remember the halls being so narrow and cramped. She was struck by their bright cleanliness and felt self-conscious walking through them in her dirty hiking shoes. She must look filthy and she knew she stank because she hadn't bathed in days and had hiked hard in the heat of summer.

Tyers led her to a small room. There was nothing in it save a second door, a wall vee-com and a swivel chair. They stood in the room as though waiting for something or someone. Julie noticed Tyers tapping his foot nervously. Within moments the far door opened and a slim but muscular man with a dour face and stern mouth strode in as if he owned the place. His head was shaven and he wore a green Enviro-Center uniform like Tyers. He looked uncomfortably familiar.

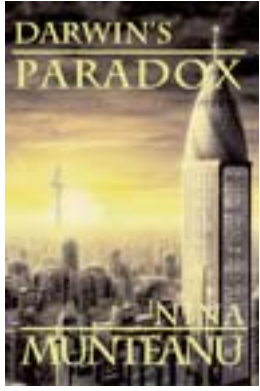
Ignoring Tyers for the subordinate he was, the man fixed sharp eyes on Julie. He glared at her with such fierce hatred she almost recoiled and wondered what she'd done to warrant such malevolence. She didn't know him. Or did she? The man nodded, looking her over like merchandise, as if confirming his loathing with what he saw.

"Well, well," he said in a basso voice that carried a tone of contempt. "So this is the legendary Julie Crane." Even though he was looking directly at her, he'd made it clear in every way that he was not addressing her, as though she was a dumb animal.



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Julie glanced down at herself and felt her face smolder. Her leather shorts and faded blouse were stained and torn. She and her clothes stank from nervous sweat. Her nails were chipped and filthy, her legs and arms smeared with soil and blood, her boots scuffed and caked in dirt. Her hair, at the best of times a mess, was a shocking matt that hung like string over her eyes and stuck out in all directions. She knew she looked like a wild animal, with a dirty face browned from the sun. No, not too impressive, she supposed, especially for someone who was trying to gain concessions for her family. But there was more to his hatred...

“The notorious Julie Crane,” he repeated as if to himself and pushed out his lips in sober thoughts. “The woman who likes to shoot people.” He paused, raised his chin and sneered, “The woman who single handedly caused the worst epidemic humankind has known, assassinated the Head Pol and sent the whole Pol force running in circles like city-fools chasing a fox in a forest.”

The man then turned toward the door through which he'd entered, dismissing her from his attention as though she was no longer in the room. At least now she knew her status in Icaria and fiercely stomped down on the anxiety pulsing up her throat. So, they were pinning the whole Darwin plague on her too. Why not? She'd given them the means, revealing herself as Prometheus with that info-cube. Now she knew what Burke had done with it, but she was tired and hungry and out of patience. “Am I under arrest? Why have you brought me here?”

The man halted at the door. “Get her cleaned up,” he said, not bothering to look back. “She looks and stinks like an animal.” He flicked a hand. “Use Suite One.”

Julie noticed the surprise in Tyer's face. She drew what comfort she could from the man's order. For whatever else it meant, at least she knew she wasn't going straight to a dungeon and execution. Whatever they had in mind for her entailed some level of presentation.

“Then take her to the Pielou Med-Center for processing,” the man added and disappeared through the door that had just irised open.

That sounded less promising, Julie thought. The door hissed shut and she felt Tyers relax. The man obviously intimidated Tyers also. She bridled in her despair with a question. “Who was that?”

Tyers turned to her with an even look. “Brian Dykstra.”

She swallowed. “A relative of the previous Chief of Secret Pols?” Julie had been instrumental in John Dykstra's arrest and incarceration twelve years ago. Not only had her model identified him as a Dystopian, but her research had also uncovered his involvement in criminal activities for Gaia.

“The son,” Tyers responded.

Julie held back a grimace. John Dykstra had hated veemelds with a passion, especially her. So, apparently, did his son. He had good reason, she acknowledged she'd put his father in jail. “Your boss?” she asked, projecting a false calm in her voice.

Tyers scowled. “Yes.”

“And he answers to the Head Pol, I guess.”

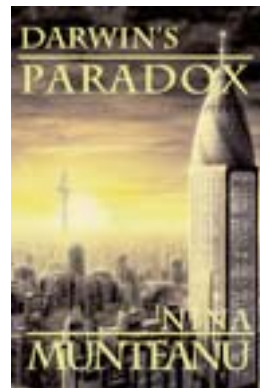
“All in good time,” he said with a sneer. She was fishing but he didn't take the bait. He turned to the door and she followed him out. Who'd replaced the dead Kraken? Who was the Head Pol now? She didn't like the sound of Dykstra's command to “process” her. What did he mean by that? Was Gaia still running everything, including the Circle and Icaria-5's mayor? Twelve years ago Julie's sleuthing had uncovered Gaia's blackmailing of virtually every member of that planetary governing body, but it seemed as though that information, like other parts of her infocube, had never made it out of Burke's office. Julie shuddered as she thought of the DP, the place Gaia had had in mind for her once she'd discovered Julie's lack of cooperation. No one ever left the DP, at least not in one piece.

There was one sure way to find out the truth, she thought, as Tyers led her out of the room back into the hallway where Raymond waited, but she stifled the urge to communicate with SAM again. SAM wasn't SAM anymore. She wasn't sure what her A.I. friend had become, now that he'd joined with Darwin's virus, Proteus, and she wasn't in a hurry to find out. Her strange, recurring nightmare flickered back and she felt her stomach twist. A disturbing idea that had been simmering in her mind surfaced briefly: that Proteus was behind the dream. That Proteus was sentient and messing with her psyche. The thought was too terrifying and she shoved it to the back of her mind again.

Tyers stopped at another door. When he opened it and motioned for her to enter past him, Julie saw that it was a large, fully furnished suite. Suite One. It looked oddly familiar. A swift appraisal revealed a set of glass doors leading to a patio, bathed in evening sunshine, two other closed doors and a set of doors for a lift. The room was elegantly furnished with comfortable chairs, a sofa and table, vee-com-equipped desk and artwork.

Tyers followed her into the room with a smirk. “Don't bother with either that door or the lift,” he said. “They're locked. There's a bathtub in the washroom, there.” He pointed to the third door. “I suggest you clean up and change. I'll have some clothes sent up via the washroom chute.” He moved back to the hall door. “I'll be back in an hour to take you to the Med-Center to heal that arm and your other injuries.” He closed the door and she heard the click of the lock.

Left alone for the first time since she'd been apprehended, Julie gave in to emotional exhaustion and dropped into a plush chair. She closed her eyes and exhaled, long and slow. How was she going to convince these people to leave her and her family alone? Was she being held? And by whom? The success of her “mission” depended on the answers to these questions and she was now having her first major misgivings. In good time, Tyers had said. Yes, all in good time...



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Swallowing down her rising confusion and despair, she refused to admit to having regrets. A part of her had felt inexplicable longing to return here and now that she was back, it felt all wrong. The city felt nothing like she'd expected. Instead of evoking warm familiar feelings, it felt like a foreign and eerie place from a discarded dimension of her existence. She remembered how she used to find the constant thrumming of the environmental system soothing. Now it only added to the discomfort she was feeling.

Even the machine voices in her mind annoyed her. They chattered in her head like a room full of strangers telling secrets she couldn't understand and she kept shaking her head as if that would make them go away. Of course it didn't. Then there was SAM, the one thing she'd openly looked forward to. Once her best friend, SAM was now a stranger to her. She felt betrayed somehow, and very lonely. She missed Daniel and Angel.

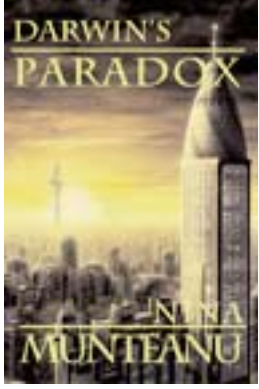
Blinking back tears, she pushed herself from the comfortable seat and wandered to the patio doors. They were locked, of course. She leaned her forehead against the glass and looked out onto the stark patio, unable to see beyond its walls to the heath. Her gaze rested on the evening sky, now inflamed with the blushing shades of red and ochre, and she imagined the heady fragrance of sweet bog and pepper and the rowdy clamoring of birds that rose at this time of the day.

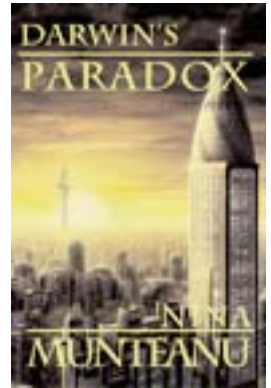
After confirming that the other door and lift were indeed secured, she shuffled to the door Tyers had suggested. It opened into a spacious bathroom, complete with large bathtub, toilet and separate shower. Three of the walls were alive with the sights, smells and sounds of lush jungle vegetation — the latest in holo-art, she supposed. There was a second door but it wouldn't budge. It probably led to the mystery room behind the locked door in the living room.

She started the water then gingerly undressed, wincing as pain shot through her arm. She dropped her filthy bloodstained clothes on the floor and stood watching the tub fill with churning water through a haze of thoughts.

As the laminar flow spilled into riotous tendrils only to find a uniform pattern of turbulence, she was once again reminded of her father and chaos theory. Stable chaos, he'd insisted, permeated everything and everyone. Like fractals of a larger interconnected universe, each person had his or her own cycle of creative destruction to experience before merging into a greater community of consciousness. Where was she in that cycle? Would she be as serene when it was her time like her father was the day the Pols took him?

To see a world in a grain of sand, and Heaven in a wild flower,  
hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity  
in an hour—William Blake

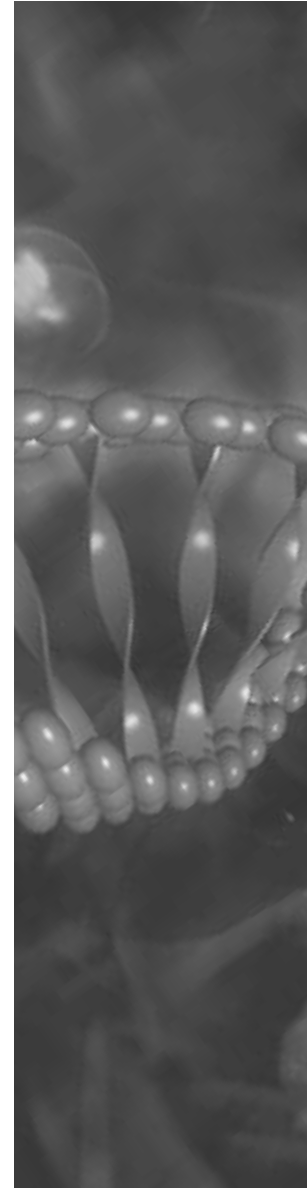




**IT** was over twelve years since she'd had a warm bath, Julie thought as she slid into the steaming water and shuddered with the tingling rush of awoken sensation. Unfortunately that also included her many cuts and scrapes, which stung sharply. As if the little injuries awoke the large one, her arm began to throb angrily under the bandage and the slightest movement sent a jagged shaft of intense pain splintering through her. She supposed that in actuality it was simply the *mitigin* wearing off, then she saw that blood and fluid had seeped through the bandage and felt a pulse of alarm. Trying to keep the arm out of the water, Julie washed her hair and body with her other hand, soaping herself in slow caressing motions, then rinsed.

She lay back in a half-daze and let memories scud in — memories of when she and her father stood, marveling at a sunset, perhaps for the last time before the Pols took him away for a murder he didn't commit. Her father's eyes had creased when he smiled and lifted his face from its usual sadness. He had been a quiet man of few words, but with an intensity that often struck her with awe. Julie recognized nature's role in her father's demeanor. Under the sunset's forgiving radiance, his bronze face had glowed like a warrior poet as he sucked on his pipe. She remembered savoring the sweet scent of burning pipe tobacco and watching the plume of blue smoke curl over his shoulder. It rose, then broke up into swirling tendrils as he lectured her.

“We have much to learn in stable chaos science, Angel. Ecosystems cycle over



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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millennia in ways we may never discern. This heath, for instance, is a complex system, poised on the edge of chaos. It has the ability to balance order and chaos in ways we have yet to comprehend. Creation and destruction are parts of the same thing, Angel. The laws of thermodynamics dictate that everything degenerates toward entropy. Yet spontaneous order exists all around us in galaxies, cells, ecosystems and human beings. We've miraculously managed to assemble ourselves from a primordial, chaotic, soup of chemicals."

"Mom says God made us."

Her father smiled thoughtfully. "Perhaps it's the same thing."

She slipped her hand into his much larger one and rubbed against him like a cat, studying his great hand. It wasn't the hand of an outdoorsman. Neither rough nor callused like her uncle's, whose brown paws were seamed and cracked from the sun. Her father's hands were pale and smooth like her mother's, with slender fingers. They were the hands of a scientist who wrote intelligent words. Secure in his firm grip, she was convinced that her father and his words would protect her against anything...

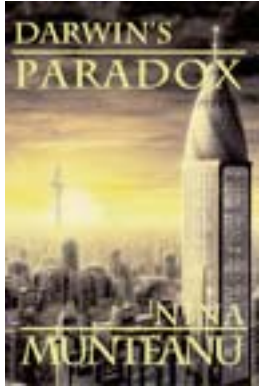
More memories bubbled up in a febrile mixture of garish images...trying to keep up with her mother as she pulled her and her sister through a sea of people and droids, then feeling her mother's hand slip away...striding the glittering malls festooned with cultured parks and fragrant gardens...pushing her way into the crowded tube-jet...sitting in her dark office and laughing at SAM's crazy jokes...watching in frozen anguish as her friend, Nancy, was Shamed, then feeling the disgrace of her own Shaming...discovering that she was *Prometheus* and that her own father had given her away as a child to science without asking her and damned her to Darwin disease...discovering that her lost sister had died of it...stunned by her Uncle Bobby's suicide in the Pol Station after he was arrested for peddling dystopian literature...quarrelling with Frank, then shooting him out of uncontrollable rage...

Out of those dark swirling visions, thoughts of Daniel floated to the surface...When they'd first snuck out of Icaria to walk the beach of Lake Ontario, already in love but too shy to admit it...the time she and Daniel bathed naked in a shallow lake the first day they'd left Icaria for good. She'd bashfully undressed in front of him then took his tenderly offered hand and followed him into the chilly water. They washed each other, then, still dripping wet, they made love in the shallows —

A brusque knock at the door jolted her out of her reverie. She jerked up with a splash and snapped her eyes open.

"You ready, Ms. Crane?" Tyers called from the other side of the washroom door.

"Yes. Right there," she responded and pulled herself unsteadily out of the water to dry and dress. When she saw the clothes Tyers had selected for her, she frowned. He'd left her a Com-Center uniform to wear. As she



felt the soft crimson fabric and brought it to her nose, inhaling its freshly laundered scent, a whole new jangle of memories scudded in like missals that knocked her off balance. She leaned back against the wall to steady herself, feeling a sudden splintering pain rip through her arm, and saw spots in front of her eyes.

Once dressed, Julie opened the door with her left hand, her old clothes tucked under that arm. Tyers stood up from the same chair she'd sat in before and his mouth twitched as he appraised her, obviously enjoying the view. She was too annoyed to blush. "Why this?" she demanded, looking from the uniform to his face. "I don't work in your Com-Center anymore."

"It matches the fire in your eyes," he teased, then added, "The colour red suits you," and used the excuse to look her over more.

She held out her soiled clothes. "I'd like these cleaned and returned to me."

"Why?" he asked, eyeing them with distaste. He added to her slight dismay, "You won't be needing them again."

She brought the clothes close to her face to take in the tantalizing scent of seasoned leather. "I just...want them. I don't want to argue with you."

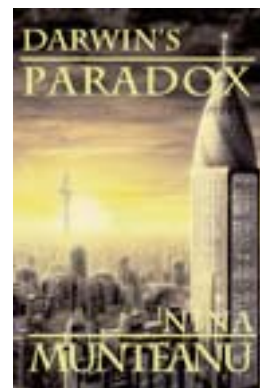
"Good, considering how you like to end your arguments," he said with a smirk. He'd obviously alluded to her shooting Frank during their quarrel in the Den so long ago. Tyers swung his arm in an arc around the room. "You were asking about the Head Pol...This is his office and suite."

Yes, it had been familiar. She'd never come in through the door, always by lift. Clutching her old clothes against her chest, Julie observed that the new Head Pol had thoroughly redecorated. Gone were Kraken's antique wooden furniture and bookshelf, his classic sculptures and paintings. They'd been replaced with modern designs, sleek black leather furniture, abstract art and stark white walls. The new Head Pol had traded the romance of regal tradition with elegant but stark reality.

"Someone's anxious to meet you." The smirk became more pronounced. "An old friend."

She did a quick rundown of who she might still know in Icaria. She had no friends left here. At least not live ones. The locked door to her left opened and Julie came face to face with a ghost.

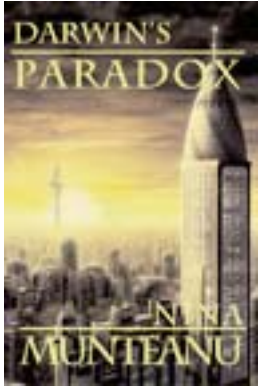
"Hi, Julie," Frank said. He was looking very much alive for someone who should have died from Darwin eleven years ago. He was dressed in a black Pol uniform and wasn't wearing a helmet. She thought him thinner and lankier than she'd remembered him. Frank appraised her whole body, undressing her with his eyes, glanced briefly at the clothes she clutched, then rested his gaze on her face with a smirk. That recklessly handsome face had definitely aged since she'd last seen him. He'd let his dark hair grow long and had it pulled back in a ponytail. It gave his thin face a severe quality that brought out the coldness in his sea-blue eyes and a lingering bitterness in his sardonic mouth. She thought he resembled an undernourished timber wolf. "You look great," he said, lips tugging into a leer.



*DARWIN'S PARADOX*

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“So do you...” she lied and felt her voice break up and drift away in pieces. The fire that smouldered in her arm flared up into her face as though she'd just walked into a wall of flames. Then she was falling and everything faded into blackness.



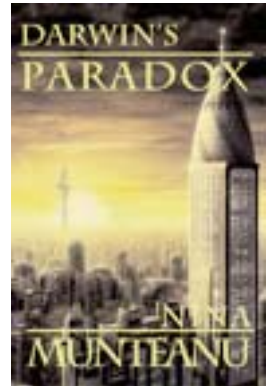
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Everything that happens, happens as it should, and if you observe carefully, you will find this to be so—Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

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**THEY'D** walked four days and Daniel felt his breaths drag through him like a hollow wind. "Slow down, Angel," he called out, annoyed at her sprinting ahead of him like a white-tailed deer. He walked gingerly to keep his blisters from pinching his heels. "Isn't it lunch time by now?" he said, stopping to catch his breath.

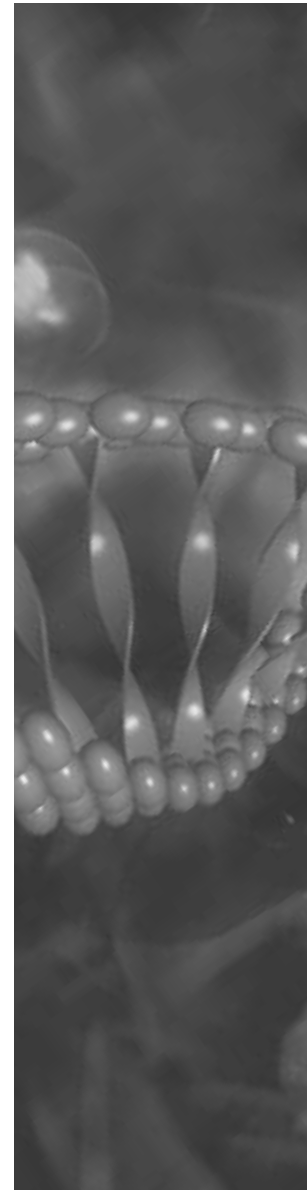
She turned to face him with a look of impatience. "Come on, Dad," she insisted. But she stayed put and let him catch up. "You look like an old man," she said rather disrespectfully, he thought.

"How do you know this is still the way?" he asked, having long forgotten the way back to Icaria. "We haven't seen the river since yesterday afternoon."

"It fits," she said matter-of-factly. "Look over there. See all those scree slopes. They're part of a major system of ancient alluvial fans when the river was in a different place from now. We're still close to the big river that flows from Lake Ontario into the Atlantic Ocean. It's just over that ridge there, I bet."

"Smart aleck," he muttered and pulled out a chunk of rabbit jerky from his pack and chewed. When he'd admitted finally to Angel that he wasn't certain of the most expeditious route, she'd insisted on leading the way. Aard had shown her maps and educated her about the terrain. Although Daniel had found it odd that Aard would have given her that particular information, perhaps Aard had used it as a way to teach Angel navigation and orienteering; he was certainly grateful for it now.

Angel impressed her father by keeping up a



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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ruthless pace and hiking a relentless fourteen hours a day. While he felt exhausted after ten hours, he refused to be the limiting factor and pushed himself to keep up with his spry daughter. She'd kept them on a grueling schedule, hiking across streams and gullies, through forest, bog and marsh. This rescue mission was killing him, he thought, reminded of the painful blisters on his feet and the gashes he'd received when he'd fallen several times, trying to follow his nimble daughter through steep hogbacks and gullies. He never could control any of his women, Daniel lamented. Why should Angel be any different.

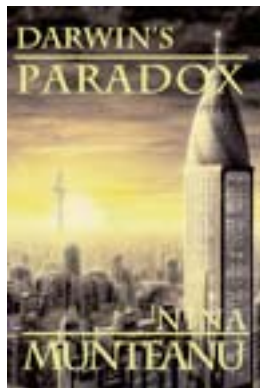
When Angel saw that his breathing had returned to normal, she sprinted off again along the deer trail she'd discovered, leaving him behind as usual. With a resigned smile at his energetic daughter, Daniel hiked his heavy backpack over his shoulder and trudged after her. He wondered if Julie had walked this very deer trail and couldn't help searching for any sign as he followed Angel up a scree slope of loose talus.

She'd stopped at the crest and waited for him to scramble up beside her. Below them a dried creek bed wove its way through a steep ravine and more scree rose on the other side. Great, Daniel thought, heaving in a long breath and mentally preparing himself to climb more loose talus.

“Let's stop and eat here, Dad. I'm hungry.”

He smiled at her in silent appreciation. Angel had her limits after all. They ate from their store, which served a dual purpose of lightening his heavy backpack over time and making good time without needing to stop to hunt, forage and trap, which no doubt had slowed down Julie's pace considerably. Daniel had noted that she hadn't taken much from their supplies. Just a few essentials. She'd expected to support herself entirely and he had no doubt in her abilities to accomplish this. If not for her pursuers, she was capable of living indefinitely off the land.

For an Icarian technophile who'd relied on her house droids for food, clothing and the comforts of home, Julie had cheerfully and competently embraced her life in the wilderness. Daniel never would have thought that a veemeld who epitomized the virtual world of human melding with the machines of Icaria would take quite so well to living in the harsh reality of the wilds. Not only had she fully complemented his skills and become his ideal helpmate, but she'd also been his constant companion in the heath. Was that the real reason he was chasing after her? Because without her, there was no point in living out here? What fear was driving him? It wasn't so much fear for her welfare; if she was in trouble he wasn't going to make a difference. No, it was the same old fear, the fear of losing her to the lure of that exciting technological world. Losing her to SAM. She'd never spoken about SAM, but Daniel knew she must have missed it — him — whatever. How couldn't she have, though? She'd had SAM “living” in her head, sharing her most private thoughts for years. Ironic, Daniel pondered, how Julie could be so reclusive with people, yet so openly share herself with a machine.



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After Angel chased down the rabbit jerky she was chewing on with some of her dad's unleavened cornbread and a drink from her canteen, she abruptly wrinkled her nose and sniffed the air. "What's that awful smell?" she asked.

Daniel sniffed too. "It's just the *Spirea*. They give off a strong fragrance."

"More like a dead animal," Angel countered, frowning. "You need to get your nose fixed if you can't smell that, Dad," she said, shaking her head at him, and raised her brows for emphasis.

He shrugged and gave her a lame grin. Like her mother, her sense of smell was far superior to his. With a sigh, Daniel searched yet again for any sign of Julie having passed through here.

That was when he saw the body.

He stiffened with alarm then quickly ruled out Julie. From what he could see under the *Spirea* bush near the creek bed some fifty meters away, it was a man's body. Angel sat cross-legged facing Daniel and therefore had no idea what he was trying not to look at.

"I need to pee," he suddenly said, failing to keep his voice calm. "Don't look."

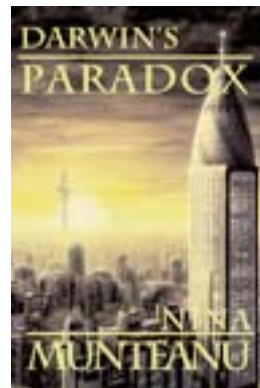
"I won't," she said with a smile of amusement. "But you better go!" she sniggered, obviously translating the distress in his voice to a sense of urgent need.

He scrambled down to the dead man's body and, after a glance back at Angel still sitting with her back to him, Daniel bent to take a closer look. He'd been shot in the chest. Once. Had Julie done this? The process of decay was well advanced thanks to the summer heat. Flies and gnats buzzed and crawled over the rotting flesh, which gave off an incredibly offensive odor. He stumbled back, gagging. Holding his hand over his nose and mouth, Daniel scurried back to Angel.

"It's time to go," he said brusquely to Angel's bewilderment. Shrugging into his heavy backpack, Daniel added. "Let's go that way." *That way* led far away from where the body lay. As they walked in solemn silence, Daniel reviewed what he'd seen. Judging from his clothes, Daniel concluded that the dead man came from Icaria recently. No doubt one of Julie's pursuers. And she'd neatly dispatched him. She was a dead shot, after all, usually catching her prey on her first try. Was this where she'd been seized? If they got her she must have been taken by surprise, he thought, thinking of her gun and the dead man. Nevertheless, he searched as discreetly as he could for signs of further struggles.

Angel shouted excitedly from the top, "Look!" She pointed to the other side at something he could not see. Alarm spiked and clenched his heart. He quickly reminded himself that, according to Angel, Julie had been taken to Icaria, so she wouldn't be lying there. "Hurry, Dad!" Angel shot down the other side.

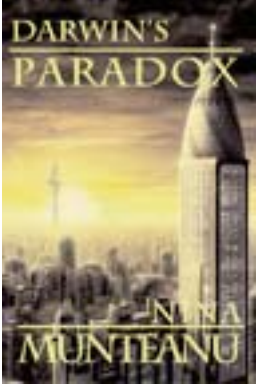
"Angel, no! Wait!" he shrieked. When he crested the rise, chest heaving, he stared. Glinting in the sun with Angel stroking its smooth surface, was a skyship.



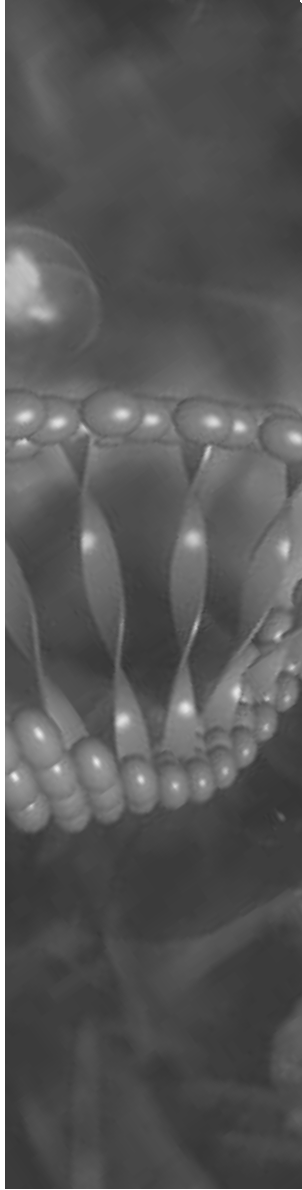
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**JULIE** walks SAM's cold matrix with unease. No longer sparkling, the crystal walkway under her feet ripples as if alive and she feels her stomach twist with alarm. As the cloying wind blows into her face like an old man's putrid breath, Julie knows she will see the dark figure again. Feet moving mechanically, against her will, she rounds the corner and encounters the dark figure. It beckons her and she recoils, but skids uncontrollably forward. Trying not to look into the shadowy face, she demands in a splintering voice, *What do you want with me?*

[You must not struggle, Julie Crane. It is time to complete the joining...]

*Never! Leave me alone!* Shuddering, she's drawn nearer to the figure still. Its arms reach out for her and she cringes, knowing somehow that if it touches her she will perish. The cowl of the figure's robe falls back, revealing its face. Her own face, strangely distorted. *NO!*

Julie bolted awake to her own outcry. Blinking away the sleep and sweat clouding her vision, she realized that she was lying on a comfortable bed, covered in soft sheets. Heart still pounding, she pulled in a ragged breath as she untangled the turmoil of post-dream emotions that poured through her. That had been less a dream than vision...or communication. A jolt of adrenalin surged up her chest. If that was Darwin creeping unbidden into her mind, intruding...What did Proteus want?

Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she raised herself on an elbow and surveyed herself and the room. She was wearing a silky nightdress and she wasn't in a Med-Center. The room was

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too nice, containing expensive furniture and personally decorated with art. She saw a desk with a Vee-com, and a glass door to a patio outside, revealing a sunny day. There was no sign of her old heath clothes. They'd probably been recycled, she thought sadly.

Julie sat up, feeling completely strengthened. A quick inspection revealed that her arm was totally healed. Nuerger and Icaria's wonderful nano-drugs, no doubt. She ran her hands over her bare arms and legs and confirmed nuyu-smooth skin. Cuts, tears and scars had been healed and she was smoother than she'd ever been. She was reminded of the first time she'd been treated without being asked, when she'd been brought back to the outer-city after searching unsuccessfully for her lost sister. They'd straightened her teeth then. She wondered what they'd done to her this time. Coloured her hair? She pulled a strand in front of her eyes to inspect and smiled with relief. No, they'd left her sun-streaked hair alone.

As she focused outward she noticed someone seated quietly in a chair near one of two closed doors. It was Frank. Arms folded over his chest and one leg crossed loosely over his thigh, he was looking directly at her with a thoughtful look and eyes the colour of a stormy sea. He smiled cautiously when he noticed her looking at him.

She tilted her head and returned his smile with a wry one. "You the guard?"

He smirked. "To keep the notorious Julie Crane from rampaging Icaria, you mean?"

She let her smile fade. "Something like that." The last time she'd seen him, she had been tearing around Icaria and half the Pols chasing her, with Frank, barely mended from her shot, leading the pack.

He nodded soberly then turned the chair around and sat down again, folding his arms over the backrest. "Wrong. Like you were about a lot of things back then."

"So it seems," she returned, thinking about Darwin. Was it possible she'd misread him that time when he and Vadim's gang had cornered her and Daniel in that inner-city mall?

"Oh, I had Darwin, all right," he answered her unspoken question with a glower. "Pretty bad, too. But miracles do happen in Icaria."

She wondered how that had been possible. Had Burke managed to find a cure that fast? The bitterness she'd detected in Frank's voice...Did he blame her for his sickness?

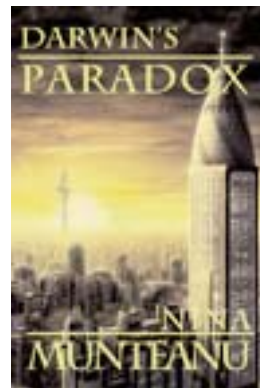
"So," he said with a frosty smile, "imagine my delight the day I dutifully gave Burke your data cube and discovered that I'd been infected with Darwin by none other than *Prometheus* herself "

"Frank, I didn't know until after we broke up that I was *Prometheus*...and I don't think I passed it —"

"Yes, the woman who willingly exchanged her bodily fluids with me for *months* without telling me that she had Darwin "

"I didn't know!"

"Then left me once she was sure I was dying from it." He leaned



forward. "You knew all the signs, sweetheart." His smile grew surly. "Elegant revenge — I couldn't have done it better myself."

They'd each had reason to invoke revenge: Frank's father had arrested hers for a murder he didn't commit, and Julie's father had supposedly incriminated his as a Dystopian, which he wasn't. Both had died maligned.

She gave up trying to convince him that she hadn't known. The information on the cube had incriminated her. She'd have a hard time proving that she'd only discovered herself that she was *Prometheus* after they'd broken up. SAM had provided evidence to suggest that she couldn't pass it on. But Frank wouldn't listen to that; he was too set on blaming her. And maybe he was right.

"But, just like you escaped execution, I escaped death. Not only did I defeat Darwin in me," he went on, "I'm now the Head Pol." He laughed sharply at her stunned expression. "So, no harm done, eh?" he ended in a mock cavalier voice. She had no response for that and bowed her head.

After some silence, he asked, "How are *you* feeling?"

She looked up to meet his eyes. "Much better, thank you," she said honestly and searched his face for genuine forgiveness. She couldn't find it.

"That was some nightmare you just had," he said, obviously expecting her to elaborate.

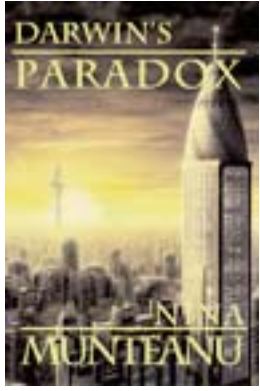
She didn't. "How long have I been here?"

"Since yesterday. You were in the Pielou Med-Center for two days until I had you returned here. Don't you remember anything?"

She blinked with a thoughtful frown and let her gaze drift as she sifted through fragments of memories...or dreams...or feverish visions...it was hard to separate them, they all ran together like a water-colour painting left in the rain. They churned in a maelstrom of burning images and sensations. Blistering pain flaming through her — *that* was real. Bright lights hurting her eyes...foreign faces peering at her and discussing her by name ...sighing into a soft pillow and being held in a warm embrace...inhaling a man's scent...hearing Daniel's soothing whispers — that had to be a dream...or was it? Her narrowed eyes snapped to Frank's.

"Seems you do remember," he said with a smirk as her expression of confusion bloomed into distress with understanding. "That's my bed you're in," he ended, openly appraising her with smug pleasure. "This is my office suite and you bathed in my bathtub." He pointed to the other door. But he was looking elsewhere.

She followed his devouring gaze to where her skimpy nightdress revealed the contours of her breasts. Feeling suddenly vulnerable, she brought the sheet up over her. As if in response to her action, his eyes narrowed. Was he insulted by her sudden coyness? During their torrid affair years ago when he was a Pol in the Shadow Unit, he had never taken her home. Now she was lying in his bed. Had he lain beside her delirious body last night? And touched her? Of course he had. She felt her anger spike like a hot knife twisting inside her. "You took advantage of me."



“No, I didn't,” he said pointedly. “But I could have.”

“By whose definition —”

“So, after all these years why did you decide to come back?” he demanded.

“Decide?” she retorted, straightening up in the bed. “I was kidnapped by your cronies. Tyers, who works under Dykstra, I take it works for you as a Secret Pol.”

“But you wanted to come back,” Frank insisted, avoiding her question. “Tyers said you'd abandoned your family and were heading for Icaria-5.”

Julie swallowed and wondered if she'd imagined his voice soften with compassion. She couldn't trust him with the truth...yet. “I had my reasons.”

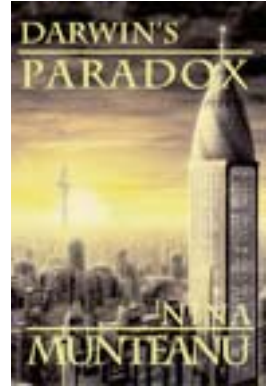
He studied her for a moment, then straightened suddenly as if he'd made a decision. “Well.” His voice was crisp again. “You look well enough to take a journey.” He stood up and tossed her the Com-Center clothes and turned toward the door. “Get dressed.”

“What about my other clothes?” she blurted out. “The clothes I came in?”

He didn't turn or answer her. “I'll get Tyers —”

“Wait Frank. Please,” she said, pleading. “Why am I here? What do you want of me?”

“You'll find out soon enough,” he said, turning his head only slightly to speak to her. He left the room and the door shut behind him with a soft nick.



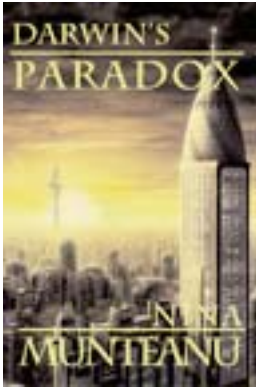
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I start with the premise that all human disease is genetic

—Paul Berg, Nobel Laureate

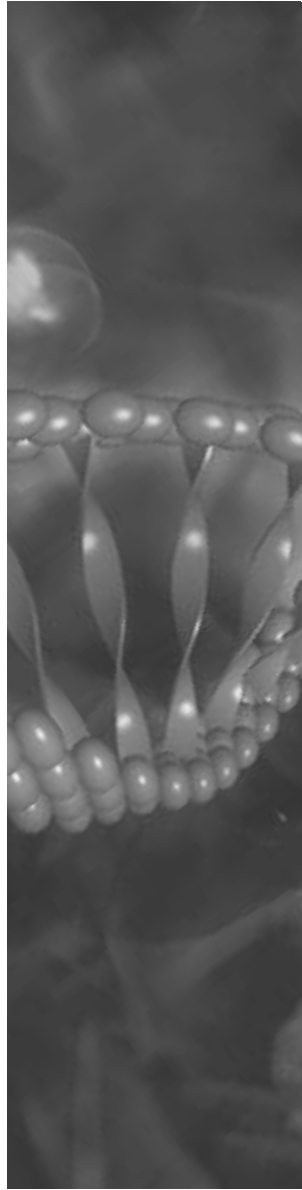


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# 15

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“OKAY, let me do all the talking,” Daniel said sternly to his willful daughter as they peered through the bushes at their gateway into Icaria, the glass tower rising from the outer-city rubble that rippled in the heat. “Remember, I used to live here.”

“That was twelve years ago, Dad,” she reminded him. “Things probably changed a lot since then. Like that skyship we borrowed.”

He frowned at her and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “Smart aleck,” he murmured. She was alluding to his less than impressive ability to pilot the skyship, despite the fact that he used to drive tubejets, Icaria's commuter trains. Once Angel had convinced him to use the skyship, it was she who eventually figured out how to drive the odious thing and navigate to the towers of Icaria. The skyship had saved them three weeks of travel, which meant that they were now hot on Julie's heels. Daniel noticed Angel staring at the towering structure that rose like a shining sentinel out of the ruins of the surface city and realized with wry amusement that she'd never seen a building higher than one story before.

“It's magnificent,” she said.

“Is it?” he teased, following her gaze up. Wait until you see the inside, he thought.

Angel tugged the sleeve of his leather shirt. She looked concerned. “Dad, do you hear it too?” To his puzzled frown, she explained, “Those funny sounds...in my head.”

“Your mother heard them too.” He patted her on the shoulder as if to console her. “Don't worry, they're just the lower forms of artificial

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intelligence in the city talking to each other. You can hear them for the same reason that you and your mom can 'talk' to each other. Just ignore them.”

“Okay, Dad,” she said, tilting and shaking her head as if trying to get rid of water in her ears. That confirmed it: his daughter was a veemeld like her mother. And like her mother, one with special talents, he thought.

After stashing their packs, Daniel approached the building. He glanced down at the old service card he'd kept all these years and wondered if it would still work on the entrance door. This was not exactly the place he wanted to be. In fact, it was the last place he wanted to be. No great memories here. Except meeting his beloved Julie. She was the best thing that happened to him in Icaria. Now he had to go back in and try to find her and get her out. And he didn't think it would be easy. First he had to convince his stubborn wife to leave. Then he had to convince Icaria to let her go. He thought of another possibility, one that had ached deep inside him and surfaced now. There was the awful but very possible chance that she was in no shape to leave or was even dead. He recalled those assassins she'd lured away from camp, for instance. Who had seized his wife? What if they'd taken her to the DP and conducted debilitating experiments on her? Turned her into a half-machine, eyes vacant and tubes coiling out of her into some immense A.I. device —

“Daddy?” Angel looked at him expectantly.

“Think they still speak English?” Daniel winked at her, then drew in a deep breath.

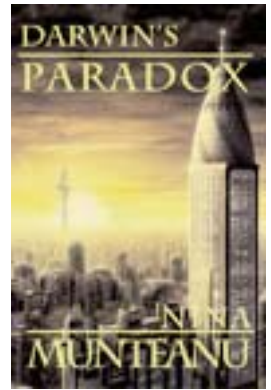
In a few springing steps Angel beat him to the door. When she tried the door it refused to open. She turned back to her father with a frown.

“Don't worry,” he assured her with a smirk. “This might work.” He held out the old card. “And if it doesn't, I'll find some other way. I was pretty good with technical stuff in my day,” he said, recalling how he'd tapped into the cyber-network to feed and clothe his fellow technoslummers in the inner city. He extended the card, secretly wondering if they were setting off some alarm inside, and couldn't pass it over the reader. His hand didn't want to do it.

Angel took it gently from his hand and waved the card and they heard a soft click. Angel shrieked gleefully. “Look! The door's opening!”

Too easy, Daniel thought and managed a wry smile. I'm starting to think like my wife. He put a finger to his lips, indicating silence, and walked through the open doorway. It led into an empty hallway with another door. Once they entered, he shut the outside Exit door behind him and felt a strange foreboding he couldn't shake off. Exhaling, he led Angel to the next door. She was looking around her at the smooth peach-coloured walls and floor with interest. Just you wait, little one, he thought, waving his card at the next door. There's more, he thought. So much more...

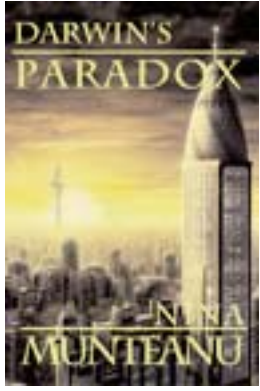
When he opened the inner door, they were assaulted by a dizzying



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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cacophony of sounds, smells and images that made Angel start with surprise and gawk. Despite his unease with this place, Daniel couldn't help laughing at his overwhelmed daughter. She'd just entered her first mall.



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A lot was the same. But a lot was different too, Daniel thought, noticing the inordinately high number of droids in the milling crowd as he surveyed Darwin Mall with his daughter and fought from wincing at every booming sound; he hadn't remembered this place so noisy. Daniel swallowed self-consciously as they navigated the moving sea of dazzling colours. Instead of quietly blending in, they stood out of the crowd in their faded clothes like blazing holo ads.

Angel's excitement drew him out of his dark thoughts and he let his gaze drift beyond the crowd. He'd forgotten how splendid Darwin Mall was with its vaulted arches of white light, intoxicating music and heady perfumes. As he watched Angel gawking in wide-eyed wonder, he was keenly aware of the mall's alluring qualities. As though she'd entered an enchanted land, Angel kept snapping her head left and right then up to catch everything.

She pirouetted and twirled giddily as if animated by some invisible puppeteer. As if afraid to miss something. Like the giant moving holos above...the rushing sound of Icarians who sounded like a flock of chattering birds ...the many droids that plied through the sea of people like shiny vessels...the glittering shops and restaurants and strobing signs that beckoned even the most seasoned Icarian with their alluring messages of pleasure and delights.

Once Angel had become used to all the people, she maneuvered the crowd easily, pulling Daniel along and bombarding him with questions: "What are those things they wear on their heads?"

"Vee-sets, darling. Like wearing a vee-com."

"What's a vee-com?"

"It's a machine that thinks for you." Big frown.

"The people look like machines," she said. He had to agree; some looked mostly machine. Then Angel's eyes lit up, "Who are they? How come they can fly like that?" Pointing to the holo ads floating above them.

"Those are holos, three-dimensional projections. They're not real, Angel." The feeling of discomfort, of conspicuousness returned.

"Look at that!" Pulling him toward a park. "They stuck part of the heath inside the mall!" Acutely aware that people were staring at them now.

"I think we should leave the mall, darling..." He sensed the crowd drawing away from them as if they had some disease —

"Show me your ID," a baritone voice commanded. Daniel turned, hand still clutching Angel's, and felt the surge of alarm. It was a Pol dressed in beetle black. The crowd continued to swarm around them,

leaving an empty space around the trio.

With a convulsive swallow, Daniel fought from cowering and started to stammer an incoherent reply, when Angel spoke up, “We lost them. Are you a cyborg?”

The Pol's mouth grew stern, eyes hidden beneath his opaque visor. He towered over Daniel like a behemoth. Everything about him was huge. His chest distended like a barrel and his arms were as thick as Daniel's legs. Ignoring Angel's question, he asked Daniel in an unfriendly voice, “How did you manage to lose your I.D.s?”

“We-we...” Daniel stuttered desperately, his mind blank.

“We came in from Icaria-6 and left our I.D.s on the transport,” Angel said with a friendly smile.

The Pol decided wisely to direct his next questions to the girl and bending a little to look at her directly, he asked in a softer voice, “What's your name?”

“Angel,” she said before Daniel could stop her. “Angel Woods. And that's my dad, Daniel.” She pointed to Daniel, who was trying hard not to look agitated. But Angel seemed to have disarmed the Pol. The man was almost smiling.

“What's your business here?” asked the Pol, now glancing at Daniel.

Daniel started, “We're here to —”

“Look for my mother,” Angel said. “Julie Crane.”

Time stopped.

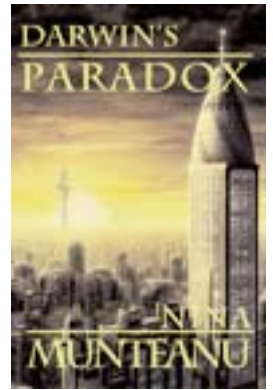
Daniel's stomach heaved. His heart hammered and he thought of seizing Angel and pelting out of there. Then his gaze fell on the Pol's gun.

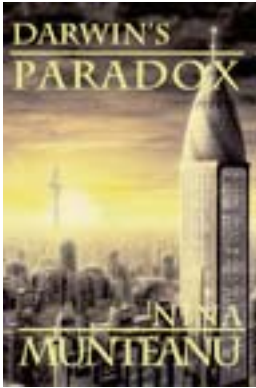
“I see,” the Pol said. His mouth tightened and it was obvious that he knew who Julie Crane was. “I think you better come with me.” His hand now rested on the gun.

“Do you know where she is?” Angel asked him, completely unaware of what she'd done.

“The legendary Julie Crane?” A smile finally slid across the Pol's rough face. “I might.”

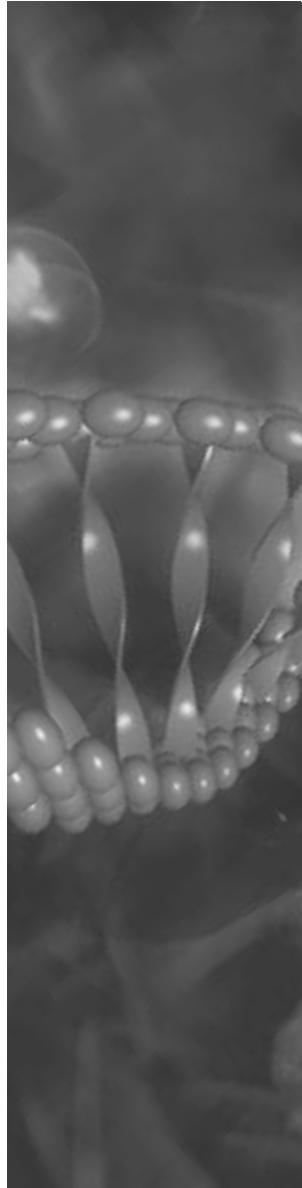
Our most powerful 21st Century technologies—robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotech—are threatening to make humans an endangered species—Bill Joy, cofounder of Sun Microsystems





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VICTOR Burke removed his Sentech-connected vee-set and his vision of Frank Langor's bedroom abruptly vanished. Victor sighed and looked vacantly up at the ceiling from the bed he was lying on. He easily coaxed the image of her face and shapely body in that nightdress, her soft voice, and her wonderful scent to linger deliciously in his mind and smiled: Julie Crane, one of the rare women he admired and the woman he'd secretly been infatuated with for thirteen years. The woman he'd helped to escape Icaria twelve years ago despite all of Icaria demanding her capture and death sentence...The woman who didn't even know he existed because they'd never met.

She looked remarkably the same, thought Victor. Age had simply added dignified lines of experience and maturity to her still beautiful face. Mostly laugh lines, he noticed, pleased that she'd had a good life. The heath had imbued her now deeply tanned face with an incredible vitality that sent a thrill through him.

He'd experienced her just now on Sentech's transmission through Frank Langor's implant — the one thing, along with his personal droid, that Gaia had left him during this incarceration, perhaps as a conciliation. No, he thought again. That wasn't her style; she'd done it to torture him and gloat, to show him what she was doing to his precious Icaria. To punish him. Damn her. Damn that woman. And now she'd brought Julie Crane back. He suspected Aard was dead. Killed by that bastard, Tyers, probably. One of Dykstra's men no doubt.

Victor shook his head and frowned. Never

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should have trusted Dykstra, he thought. Like father like son. Dykstra had obviously been taking his orders from Gaia all along. Vee! Why did he always fall into the same trap, he thought miserably. Just when he thought he finally had control, she'd pulled the rug from under him. Now she was ordering his Head Pol around and running his city.

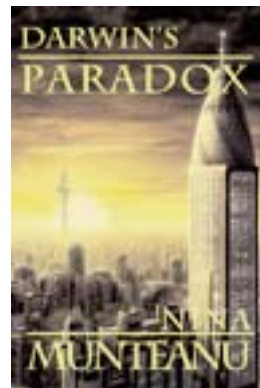
He reviewed his twelve years of success at bringing Icaria-5, and himself, back on its feet. When Frank Langor delivered to him Julie's vital information about Darwin and Gaia's conspiracy, he'd acted swiftly and ruthlessly, feeling the thrill of a teenager breaking loose to undermine her power. He'd wiped out her Secret Pol force, then rewarded Langor with the top post of Head Pol. He'd ensured that his favorite veemeld remained safe and hidden in the heath, far away from Gaia's evil hands, and protected by Aard whose progress reports and images Victor cherished.

But he'd never played his Ace. He'd never given the Circle the information on Julie's cube that would incriminate Gaia: such as her role in the development of the artificial virus and her manipulation of a naïve scientist to spread the virus, which then morphed and caused the worst plague humankind had ever experienced. Then there was Gaia's personal involvement in the murders of her conspiratorial scientists Vogel and Tsutsumi, with the framing of a third scientist, Leonard Crane: all to silence them about the artificial virus, the true nature of its spread and her involvement. Add to that her indirect involvement in the murder of Kraken, the previous Head Pol because he was a loose wire and wouldn't do her bidding and the framing of Julie Crane for that killing.

To the puzzle as to why veemelds were found immune to the effects of the devastating disease, Gaia had convinced the entire governing Circle with that cock and bull theory about how Darwin had co-evolved with veemelds through the millennia. Her speech to the Circle had been brilliant. He summoned the memory of her sitting alone with calm regality on the stage, facing the audience with arms loosely folded over her thighs, that low cut gold satin dress clinging to her slender body like a second skin, jet-black hair coiled over one shoulder:

“Animals and viruses have co-evolved over millennia,” she said, “presenting us with many examples of mutual co-existence between host and virus: rodents and hantaviruses; the green monkey and SIV, the chimpanzee and HIV-1, for instance. The Darwin virus obviously inhabits veemelds in an aggressive symbiotic relationship. We have many examples of this kind of aggressive symbiotic behavior. For instance, in the case of the ant and the acacia plant, the acacia berries supply the ants with food while the ants not only keep the foliage clear of herbivores and preying species of insects, but also make hunting forays around the tree and ravage growing shoots of potential rivals to the acacia. Similarly, the herpes-B virus, which co-evolved with the squirrel monkey in the Amazon Rainforest, induces a voracious cancer to all of the monkey's competitors.”

It was brilliant, Victor conceded: she'd even provided the answer to



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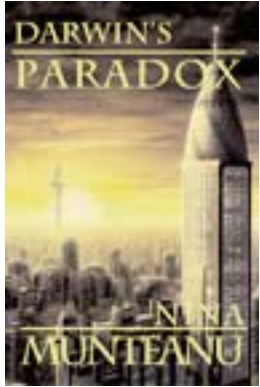
why the virus morphed just then: it was Icaria's enclosed environment that triggered Darwin, otherwise happily co-inhabiting with veemelds and hopping to a competitive genome to protect its host. But it had all been fabrication, Victor thought miserably. Vogel had created Proteus and Gaia had been there when he did. Proteus didn't kill veemelds because its design was based on a veemeld's genetic makeup: Julie's. When the news got out through Zane's lab that Darwin was made by Vogel and injected into Julie, Gaia's fancy co-evolution theory was rejected but the woman herself suffered no other accusations. Only Vogel and his assistants, all long dead, and Julie, exiled, took the fall.

How Julie had been ill served, he thought with a wince of guilt, thanks to Gaia's well-engineered lying machine and his own silence in the matter. Julie's only true claim was that as *Prometheus*, she'd given some foolish scientist a false hope for a miracle virus. But in only partially disclosing Julie's information, Victor had damned Julie as the worst abomination in Icaria's history. To Icarians, Vogel, conveniently dead, was the evil Frankenstein who'd created Proteus and Julie was his acolyte, a banshee who'd single-handedly killed millions with Darwin then embarked on a career of sedition and murder because the disease obviously made her insane.

Considering Julie's absence, and Gaia's still potent presence as a member of the governing Circle of all Icarians, the decision had been easy for Victor. He'd refrained from disclosure out of self-preservation, thinking Gaia would leave him alone. But Gaia had retaliated anyway. In ways he couldn't possibly have imagined. During her twelve-year silence, when he'd concluded that she'd found some larger prey to stalk, Gaia had calmly plotted. Stolen allies from his own men and sabotaged his city. And now he was here in the Pol Station and she was running his city again.

Victor rose stiffly from the bed. Despite its luxurious furnishings, comforts and view of the heath, the room was still his prison. Victor scrubbed his head, raking his fingers through his burgundy hair, and paced the room like a trapped animal. Since Gaia's henchmen had forcefully brought him here three months ago, she'd re-instated herself as mayor of Icaria-5 and taken over his people. Then she'd made her move to capture Julie and obviously succeeded. What else had she done? What was she doing about the A.I. insubordination? Was that why she'd brought Julie back, to talk some sense into SAM, or worse? Gaia wasn't known for her patience or diplomacy. And what of the virus connection? What new despicable plan did Gaia have for Julie Crane? And his Icaria? For them all?

From Frank's implant Victor had learned that he now received orders straight from Gaia and that he still had no idea, like the previous Head Pol, that his Secret Pols were running circles around him with Dykstra at the helm. Langor was no more than a figurehead with mock power; a useful gopher. Until he eventually proved of no use, like the previous



Head Pol; in which case, his fate was assured.

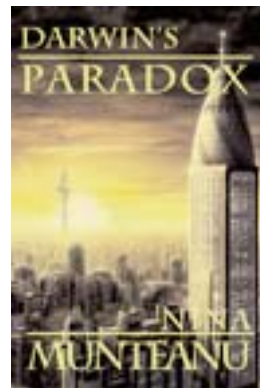
Victor pulled at his collar. He knew what Gaia was trying to achieve. It was the same story — she was grooming a new race of Icarians: veemelds particularly suited for a virtual existence. She'd made a study of them and she knew veemelds better than even Victor himself, who'd understood from the beginning what incredible wealth they'd brought to his city. Julie, of course, and her daughter stood alone, like no others. Who better than Gaia, who had instigated the whole thing, to understand just how unique Julie and Angel were? Proteus symbionts. Was this her ultimate new race? In order for her to promote it, the plan had to be in her favor. What did she stand to gain? Was there some connection to Proteus that was beneficial to a woman coveting power? Perhaps Gaia envisioned manipulating the virus to her benefit through a veemeld

He stopped dead in his tracks and stiffened with a disturbing thought. That was it! And a cooperative veemeld would serve best. Would Gaia go after the daughter? Knowing the mother, there was little chance of cooperation there. More chance with an impressionable, naïve, eleven-year-old, fresh from the wilderness. If Gaia had her way she'd get both mother and daughter and play one off the other. Well, he'd be damned if he would let her! His decision made, he stopped, drew in a long, ragged breath and let it all sink in. This was it. He swallowed with difficulty as if the future he plotted was too much for one man to digest.

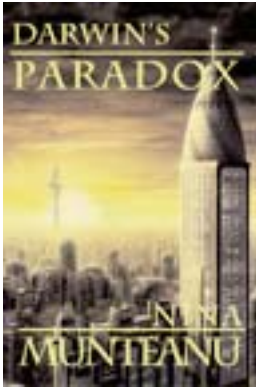
In all his years of ruthless manipulation, deception and illicit surveillance, he'd never openly defied anyone. He'd always buckled under the slightest hint of attack, carefully avoiding confrontational situations or people, skillfully dodging any interaction that might expose his inner fears and desires. Therefore, it shook him to his core that he'd finally decided to do the one thing he most feared: openly defy Gaia and contact Julie Crane, the woman he'd secretly loved for so long. Julie had given him his city back once before but this time he would have to ask her himself. How was he going to convince the woman who's name he'd betrayed to help him?

For more on: co-evolution (in viruses)
http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp_links/coevolution.pdf

We know what we are, but know not what we may become
—William Shakespeare

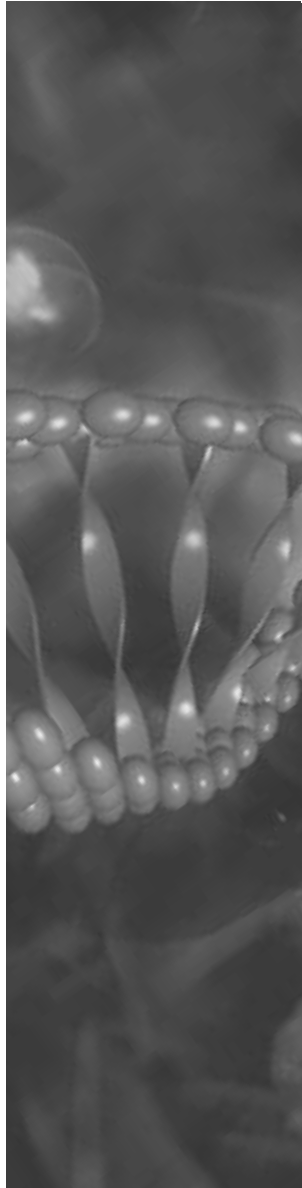


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17



“**WHERE** do you think we're going, Dad?” Angel whispered to her father as the Pol prodded them through the bustling crowd so full of cyborgs and droids that Daniel was reminded of the over-populated inner city. Several shops were shut and a large part of the mall was not in use and shrouded in darkness.

“Be quiet,” the Pol snarled. He'd left all his friendliness behind.

Angel kept staring around her, smitten with images, smells and people who looked strange to her. Daniel had to admit some of them looked strange to him, too. He spotted a woman with shaved head and fought from grimacing in revulsion — her nose was broken and her face was a map of scars, tattoos and rings. Some new sub-culture he'd never seen, not even in the inner city, which had always been fertile ground for everything counter-culture. The woman's rough appearance was very much at odds with Icaria's obsession with outer beauty, he thought. Angel looked up at him and he shrugged.

As he looked away, a holo ad caught his attention: Icaria-5 openly boasted the highest proportion of veemelds in Level-1 positions on the entire planet, praising them for their intellectual prowess and leadership. Holo charts demonstrated how their numbers had transformed Icaria-5 into the most productive and self-sustaining city in North Am. Times sure had changed, he thought. Twelve years ago no one would admit they even knew a veemeld, much less liked or admired one. In fact, even he'd hated them with all his heart.

He'd once rationalized that hatred as a fear

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

of the domination by machines in human society. Then, when he'd fallen in love with a veemeld, he realized that most of his hatred came from having been deserted by one. The very one he'd fallen in love with, ironically. Daniel wondered what he really felt about veemelds and realized that it was a lot more complicated than he'd initially thought.

He hadn't realized he was staring when Angel asked him, "What's a veemeld, Dad?" She'd followed his gaze to the holo.

"Uh, well," he paused. Your mother's a veemeld, he thought silently to himself. And you are too. "Eh, well," he stuttered. "They're...ah...people who—"

"Get out! Now!" the Pol bellowed. They'd reached a tube-jet car and the Pol was emptying the car by waving his gun at those who'd already seated themselves. "I said now!" He fired a shot into the car, singeing a durafoam seat.

People surged to their feet and bolted past them. Angel huddled into a chair next to her father. Thankfully she'd forgotten her question about veemelds, because after a moment of silence she whispered, "Why did he call Mom legendary, Dad?"

"Everyone in Icaria knows Mom, Angel," Daniel whispered back.

"You mean she's famous?" she asked in amazement.

"Yeah," he said glumly. More like infamous.

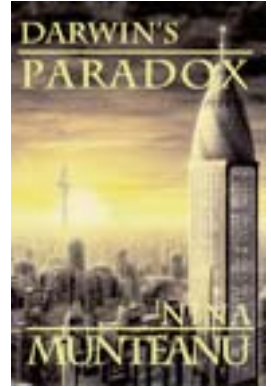
"What's she famous for?"

"Oh, well..." She just killed a Pol and spread the worst epidemic since AIDS or Ebola. "She made a great discovery about a bad disease that had spread in the city. Something that would help cure it."

Speaking of Darwin, he hadn't seen evidence of it in the city. Not in the people walking the malls or in the holo ads, as if it had simply disappeared into the walls. Had a cure been found and had Julie's info cube been responsible for that too? If so, it was fitting that the one who started it ended it. Then why did they want her back?

Angel watched, enthralled as the tube-jet accelerated out of the station and plunged into a tunnel. Daniel tried not to think of his days as a tube-jet driver and watched the Pol instead. He looked like he was talking in a low voice to himself. Obviously communicating with headquarters through his helmet com-system. They were done for. Julie was here somewhere but they were never going to find her, because they were going straight to chaos.

He watched Angel, looking around with the wonder of a child on an adventure, not quite comprehending the seriousness of their predicament. Innocent and naïve. Julie would have a meltdown if she knew he'd brought Angel here. This was exactly why she didn't want them chasing after her. But she was probably never going to find out because they were probably going to die quietly in the Pol Station. Then he thought again — perhaps there was a worse fate in store for Angel, if they knew about her unique talents. Chances were good that they did;



DARWIN'S PARADOX

they knew all about her mother, after all. Good Earth, what had he done?! He took his head in his hands and closed his eyes to the pain in his heart. They should have stayed in the heath...

The train lurched to a stop with a howling screech. They jerked forward in their seats and Angel's wide eyes snapped to her father. "Why'd we stop?!"

"Shut up!" the Pol snarled. He'd pulled out his weapon and dropped into a combat crouch, peering into the darkness outside the train, searching for something he couldn't see. He waved his hand over them and hissed, "Get down on the floor. NOW!"

They scrambled to the floor on all fours. Abruptly windows on both sides of the car smashed in. Shards of duraplastic hailed on them, followed by heavy thuds as four hooded men swung inside. They'd obviously been hiding on top of the train. The Pol opened fire immediately, cutting two of them down.

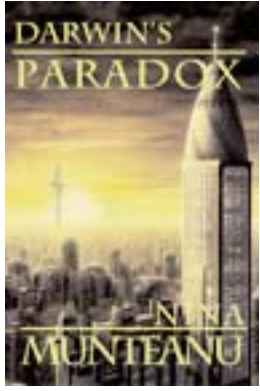
"The girl!" shouted one of the remaining hooded men as he tackled the Pol. While they struggled, the fourth man made a grab for Angel. Daniel draped himself over her and lashed out with his foot. The man kicked back then pulled out a gun, his hood falling from his shaven head.

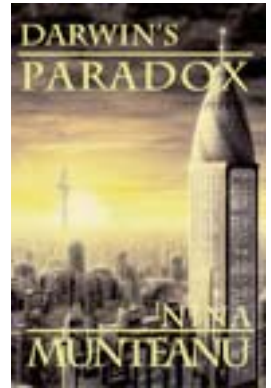
Daniel sucked in a breath at the sight. The man's face was a tangle of healed-over tears and tattoos, a misshapen nose, insane eyes and a rippled slit where someone or something had ripped off his mouth. Daniel lunged at him, knocking them both off balance, and they fell forward. The man knocked his head against a chair. The gun discharged and Daniel felt an explosion in his chest.

Time collapsed.

He vaguely heard Angel screaming and realized that he was shot. A silent weapon, but just as deadly. His last thought before the darkness took him was: *I'll never see Julie again.*

Plagues frighten people. This is a very natural human reaction
—Frank Ryan, *Tracking the New Killer Plagues*





AFTER appraising her with a smirk, Tyers swept his arm toward the open doorway. “Time to journey on. After you, Ms. Crane.”

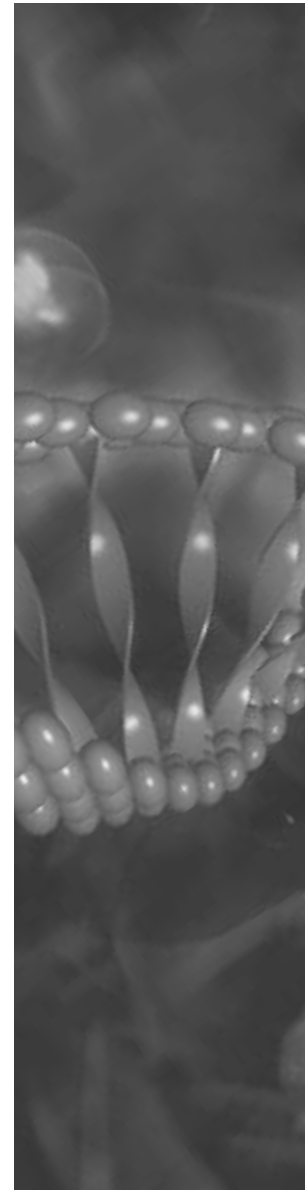
Julie refused to move. “Where are we going?” she demanded.

He shook his head. “You’ll find out.”

Julie was tired of hearing that. She gave him a pointed stare then marched past him into the hallway of the Pol Station. Tyers closed the door to Frank’s suite then took the lead, steering her to an elevator. They rode down in silence to the main level and Tyers led her along the main hallway. Julie’s eyes roamed the giant hall, from arched ceiling to the black-tiled floors. It made her nauseous with deep, sick hatred. It was here that both her father and her uncle had died. Here that she’d been brought to be Shamed. Here where her friend Nancy had disappeared and where Julie had allegedly murdered the previous Head Pol.

Yet, here she was, walking its cold tiles with impunity, heading toward Darwin Mall. Where was Tyers taking her? Would she finally discover the purpose for her being brought here? Would she then be given a chance to plead her case and leave? That seemed more and more a foolish naïve hope, Julie thought with growing despair.

They reached the Pol Station entrance to the mall and Tyers handed her a vee set. It was a newer model but still seemed to have the same features of her old set. When she hesitated with a glower, he pushed it into her hands and put one on himself. She gingerly pulled the metalloid legs over her head and couldn’t help wincing when she felt the semi-intelligent



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device claw her scalp for a snug hold, swing one arm down over an eye, another to the corner of her mouth then settle in. She never could stand the creepy things and had avoided wearing them whenever possible.

Tyers appraised her with a loose smile. "They make permanent models now, you know. People never take them off."

"Terrific," she muttered. Who'd want to do that? Then she thought of SAM and how comforting it had been to have him with her all the time.

"They also have a model just for veemelds, complete with a retinal scanner in the eye-com. A portable Interact-SYM."

She forced a smile. "Convenient."

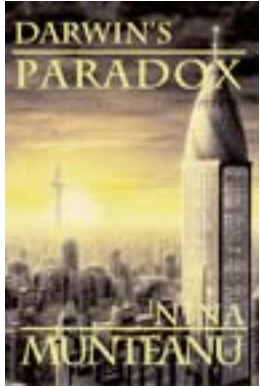
"Not that you'd have any use for them, eh?" she knew he was referring to her being the only veemeld who didn't need Interact-SYM to talk to her A.I., but she wasn't sure if he meant it as an insult or just as a comment of interest. She couldn't read him.

They then plunged into the bright mall. Blasted with sounds from holo ads and a sea of nudging bodies, Julie fought from cowering. Spun around, jabbed and prodded by passersby, panic rose in her throat, but she noticed that Tyers took it all in stride. His eyes went blank, mimicking the other commuters surrounding them as he clutched her hand and wormed his way to their still mysterious destination. She recalled having once liked this mall. How things had changed — no, she corrected herself, how she'd changed.

Julie looked closely at the tight, mechanized crowd and saw no one shaking or twitching or otherwise being avoided by the rest of the crowd. It was as though Darwin had disappeared. Had Burke used her information and found a cure? It would have explained Frank's survival. While there was no sign of Darwin, the mall betrayed a disturbing amount of abuse and decay. She spotted signs forbidding access to whole areas, shops, and buildings. Many stores were shut down. It seemed that the tight order of Burke's regime was crumbling, despite the lack of disease. Who was in charge now?

Darwin disease had gotten its name from the Darwin Mall Clinic in Icaria-11, where the first case of the disease was discovered, and where she was injected with Proteus, but this Darwin Mall held other dark memories for her. She scanned the mall for the Den, where, in an uncontrollable rage, she'd shot Frank because he had arrested her dystopian book-peddling uncle, who shortly thereafter had committed suicide in his cell. When she'd stormed into the smoky drug hole to confront Frank, slouching with his Pol friends, he'd shown no remorse and insulted both her and her uncle. She'd snatched his partner's gun and shot him in the crotch. Hicks then made a dash for his gun and she'd shot him mistakenly in the struggle. It had changed the course of her life forever. If not for those terrible moments of rage, she and Daniel might never have come together and she might never have had Angel in the heath.

Before she was able to spot the Den, something else caught her



attention — a holo that raved about veemelds. Julie stared, dumbstruck. Charts displayed veemelds as popular and in demand. She eyed the statistics with suspicion and recalled what her two pursuers in the heath had said about veemelds. She didn't trust the charts. They hardly ever portrayed the underlying truth behind the figures. She should know, having worked in the Com-Center as a data handler who'd been required to manipulate the truth on a regular basis.

However, the trend toward mechanized and A.I. support had obviously continued, she thought, noticing how many people sported A.I.-assisting devices and the number of droids in the crowd. Daniel would feel very uncomfortable here. He'd never liked droids and always seemed extremely leery of intelligent machines. He was decidedly more comfortable in the heath, where organic and physical laws of nature applied.

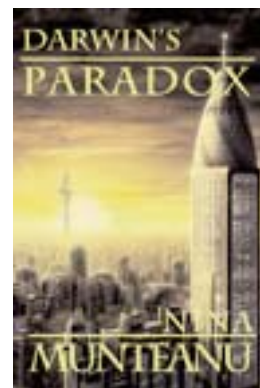
Daniel never really had to deal with Julie being a veemeld because they'd left Icaria soon after he found out she was one. If they hadn't been forced to flee Icaria, she wasn't sure how the two of them would have fared together. His dislike of veemelds, while motivated personally through her desertion, was definitely rooted in a strong Luddite philosophy. It didn't matter, she thought. She was going to get what she needed and return to the heath and they wouldn't have to worry about this place, veemelds or droids any more.

Tyers picked up his pace, pulling her along, and she saw why. Skirting widely around a small commotion in the crowd involving a tall Pol, Tyers led her to the tube-jet station where a train had just arrived. She glanced at the conductor's car and noticed no one manning it. They'd finally opted for full vee-com control. Daniel would be out of a job if he still lived here. Thank the Earth he wasn't, she thought and swallowed down her loneliness. She hoped they were still safe.

They boarded the train and Tyers motioned her to one of the last empty seats in the crowded car. He himself stood by the door. Julie took the seat and made futile attempts to dam the memories that spilled out: of a youth with Darwin disease staring at her with a broken smile...of making love in an empty car with Frank...of fleeing the outer-city with Daniel conducting the train.

She caught Tyers watching her with great amusement. Terrific. She probably looked like a wide-eyed child at a new vid-game site. Let him stare, she thought. She closed her eyes for a moment, took in a deep breath, then swallowed down her nervousness. When she opened her eyes, he was still watching her. She glared at him and he looked away, laughing quietly to himself.

After some moments Tyers cleared his throat loudly and caught her eye. He tipped his head to the door as the tube-jet eased into Pielou Station. The District 10 Med-Center, Julie concluded with trepidation. Was he taking her to the DP for “processing”? Should she bolt and make a run for it? She must have given something of her thoughts away



because his lips tightened and he was instantly beside her, hand gripping her arm firmly. “No funny business, or I’ll have to get Raymond to shoot you, again.” She could feel his breath on her face and spotted Raymond, the skyship pilot, waiting for them at the door. “Now, get up,” Tyers said in a cold voice.

As she stood up, she thought seriously of kicking him, bolting and risking Raymond’s aim. Then Tyer’s own snub-nosed pistol nudged up against her neck. He didn’t care if anyone saw him holding a gun, which alarmed her. That meant he didn’t care if anyone saw him shoot her either. She decided against running — she was here to bargain, after all. She let Tyers and his gunman escort her to the Med-Center. He gripped her tightly, but still looked nervous as he led her through the crowd to the entrance. She caught him throwing anxious glances around them. What was spooking him in the mall? Then a shaft of alarm struck her: all of Icaria still thought she was a murderer. She’d been plastered on every holo in every mall twelve years ago. She became acutely aware that she was drawing a few curious glances and realized that her tanned complexion made her conspicuous. If anyone recognized her...

They made it to the Med-Center without incident. Taking her cue from Tyers own relaxed face, she felt her breathing and heart-rate return to normal. Tyers left Raymond at the entrance and led her down several corridors. Julie was surprised to find them heading toward the CDC. That was where...

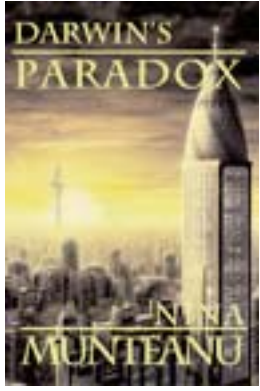
“Nakita!” Tyers called as they reached the main reception area, where Zane Nakita stood, feet shuffling nervously, waiting for them. Standing straight, in well-pressed white tunic and pants, he looked much the same as the last time Julie had seen him at Kraken’s party — incredibly handsome with impeccably styled blue hair and dewy brown eyes that sparkled with confidence.

Zane grinned widely, perfect teeth flashing like halogen lights, as his eyes flickered between Tyers and Julie. He finally settled his riveting gaze on Julie and said with what sounded like genuine pleasure, “Hello, *Prometheus*.” He offered his hand.

“Hello, Zane,” she responded coolly, taking his hand briefly in hers. Twelve years ago Gaia had tried to fix them up and Zane hadn’t seemed adverse to the idea. Julie never was quite sure how she’d felt about it. Zane was a veemeld, and when Julie finally fled Icaria, he’d inherited SAM. She remembered feeling oddly jealous of that new partnership. It seemed that SAM had a new friend now and she wondered what Zane thought of that.

“Shall we?” Tyers prompted.

“Of course,” Zane said. He practically sprang ahead of them and led them through a maze of narrow corridors lined with nondescript offices and laboratories before stopping at a secured door on their left. He waved his security card over the ID plate by the door and offered his eye to the



retinal sensor, and when the security algorithms were satisfied he was who he claimed to be, the door slid open and they entered what looked like a lab and office combined. A sharp-nosed, jade-haired young man and a raven-haired, tight-lipped woman, both about Julie's age, stood waiting for them. They seemed hardly able to contain their excitement.

"*Prometheus*, at last," the man said, staring at Julie with a stupid smile.

"Yes," Zane said excitedly. "Isn't it wonderful?" He giggled like a boy.

"Oh, yes," the woman heartily agreed, studying Julie with raised eyebrows of fascination like she was some rare biological specimen. "Wonderful."

Julie couldn't stand it any longer. Uncomfortable under their scrutiny, she demanded in a sharp voice, "Do you mind filling me in on what's so wonderful?"

"Oh, we're forgetting our manners," Zane gushed. "Julie, this is Dr Steven Krupka, formerly with epidemiology." He pointed to the grinning man, who bowed slightly, then to the woman who was clasping her hands together. "And this is Dr. Irena Kaikov. They're both virologists specializing in neurology —"

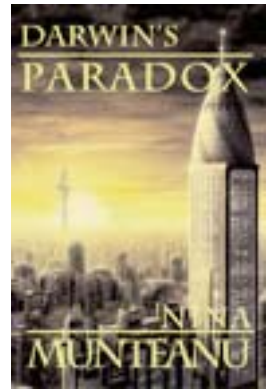
"I don't care who they are," Julie cut in sharply, thinking of Dykstra's order to process her. "I want to know why you brought me here." Her patience had bottomed out and she knew she was being rude, but she couldn't help it. "Did you bring me to Icaria to dissect or interrogate or what?"

The three scientists looked stunned. She felt good about having wiped that toothpaste ad smile off Zane at least and now remembered how it had annoyed her the first time she'd met him. Only Tyers seemed unaffected by her outburst. Leaning casually against the wall, he folded his arms across his chest and smirked in silence. Perplexed, Zane stammered, "But we were told that you came back of your own accord, Julie. Returned to Icaria to help."

Julie glanced from face to face. Tyers hadn't changed his expression. She fixed her gaze on Zane. "Help? With what? You already found a cure for Darwin, didn't you?" She thought of Frank. How else could he have survived?

Zane grimaced at her. "Well, not really." He released a big sigh. "When the mayor gave me your information on *Prometheus* and Darwin, he suggested that I be credited with finding this vital information on Proteus's etiology." The grimace morphed into a monstrous smile and Julie realized that Zane was blushing.

She didn't begrudge Mayor Burke for this — Icaria didn't need the truth so much as it needed a hero, and Zane was a better candidate than most. She imagined the headline: "handsome and brilliant scientist, Zane Nakita, discovers that Darwin was manufactured by a mad scientist and spread to epidemic proportions by a carrier, the notorious, Dystopian assassin, Julie Crane, who was code-named *Prometheus*". As for Burke obviously withholding the rest of her information...

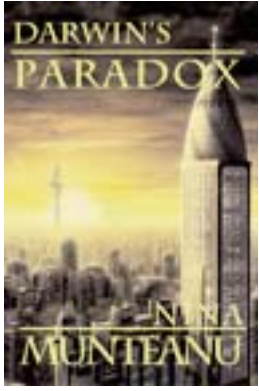


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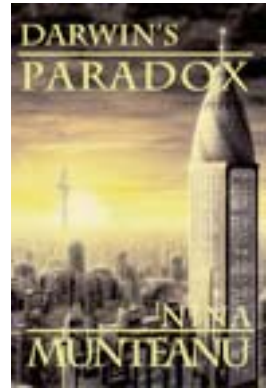
“The Vee-net also credits my lab with curing Darwin,” Zane went on, “but we didn't find a cure.” He let the statement dangle. There was obviously more. Zane broke his gaze from her and cleared his throat. He was looking at Tyers when he added in a slightly rattled voice, “The disease corrected itself.”

For more on: Artificial Intelligence—neural implants
http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp_links/neural.pdf

Sometime in the next thirty years, very quietly one day we will
cease to be the brightest things on earth—James McAlear



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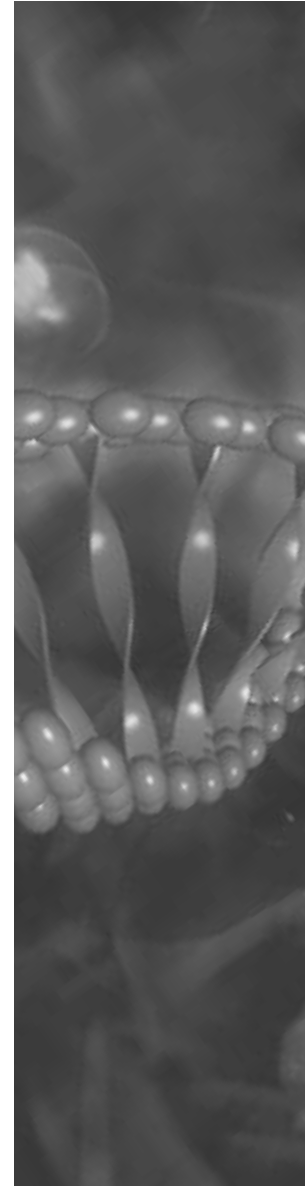


IN a flash of insight, Julie understood. Proteus had done it with SAM's help. Somehow, the artificial virus had righted itself, using SAM's logic and insight on human behavior and physiology. To accomplish this, though, the virus must have acted as a collective entity, occupying the population like an amorphous genetic intelligence, connected like a neuronal network to the A.I. core's incredible reserve through SAM. Then to dig deep into a diseased Darwin victim and reverse the damage...it was remarkable!

Julie thought of Vogel's experiment and realized that Darwin had evolved into what it was meant to be. Which brought her back to her original question: why did these people want her? Icarians still used vee sets, so Darwin obviously wasn't providing quite the service its originators had intended, like it had done with her. But it had obviously stopped killing people. Wasn't that enough? Or did these scientists want to renew their research, using her again? Tendrils of dark and confused memories coiled inside her, gripping her with a boiling rage at having been so ill-used. She refused to let that happen again!

Julie suddenly realized that everyone was staring intently at her, even Tyers. She made an effort to unclench her teeth and took a deep breath to regain her composure. With a calm voice she was far from feeling, Julie directed her next question at Zane, "You mean the disease corrected itself even in those who were suffering previous symptoms?"

Zane nodded, his wide-eyed expression showing that he still couldn't quite believe it.



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<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

This explained Frank's recovery, Julie thought. "Yes. Incredible, isn't it?" Zane said. "Acting like an intelligent entity, which of course Proteus is."

Those dreams...or visions...

Tyers cleared his throat pointedly.

Zane glanced nervously at him and grinned with embarrassment. "Oh, actually there's more to it. You see, once SAM joined with Proteus — soon after you left and I became its veemeld — SAM was able to figure out that drugs, *delilah* particularly, were causing part of the problem with Darwin victims."

Julie nodded. Drugs had not only interfered with her own ability to veemeld, but they'd always made her feel sick.

"There was this synergistic effect happening. Seems that the drug aggravated the virus into producing a chemical, which caused much of the brain damage evident in the disease. So, between them, SAM and Proteus figured out what needed to be done and let me know. CDC immediately ordered the removal of all drugs, to the outrage of many Icarians. We conducted a suite of tests and found that only three acted like *delilah* and permanently removed them. *Gomorrah*, *sodom* and *babel* are no longer available. Between the removal of the offensive drugs and Proteus's own imposed changes to itself, the lethality of the disease was defeated," he ended with a wide grin.

"Even in those already affected," Julie breathed, showing her amazement. Proteus had an incredible communication system for its viral community, mediated by SAM's own 'community'...

"Which brings us to you, Julie," Zane continued. "You were Proteus's first recipient — its only recipient — before it somehow mutated into Darwin, the lethal form Proteus manifested once it left the lab. You were the only one to get the original Proteus, as it was meant to be, meant to act."

Irena leaned forward, shaking like a puppy, her hands pressed together. "And we are of course most interested in whether this intelligent virus has communicated with you —"

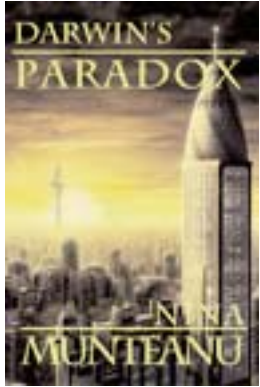
"Because the virus was made to enhance communication generally," Krupka gushed, "particularly between humans and the A.I. network."

"So many questions," Zane said, that glossy grin back on his face.

"Okay," Julie cut in and planted her hands on her hips, "let's get to the point. What do you want me for?"

Zane's lips twitched and he glanced nervously at Tyers before speaking, "Well, aside from the fact that we'd like to ask you a thousand questions, and test you for a million things, there is something specific." He hesitated then launched in. "SAM and I don't talk anymore, Julie. In fact SAM doesn't talk to anyone except Proteus."

And me, Julie thought. She remained silent, anticipating more, and folded her arms across her chest. Why was her heart thudding like an African drum?



“SAM's out of control, Julie.”

She stiffened, clutching her sides, and swallowed down her rising apprehension.

“It's taking over the city and no one can get to it. No one can control it. It won't listen. Some parts of the city are now totally off-limits to people. Unsafe.” That was what she'd seen in Darwin Mall. “Accidents have happened, obviously perpetrated by the A.I.s in retaliation for our attempts to regain control. SAM's got the whole 1000 Series working for it. They've made ridiculous demands for independence and sovereignty. Of course, that's not possible. In fact it's downright dangerous. We need to shut down the A.I. core but it's closed itself off under a protective shield. No one can access it. No one except maybe...you.”

Julie stared hard at Zane. How could he possibly expect her to disable SAM? Her eyes narrowed. “You can't be serious.”

“Deadly serious,” Tyers said from behind.

She glanced from Tyer's calm face to the anxious faces of the scientists facing her. “What if I talked to SAM, convinced him — uh, it — to yield control. SAM's talked to me once already since I got here.”

“Don't think so,” Tyers said in a clipped voice. “We can't trust it.”

Couldn't trust a machine? She was about to retort, then thought the better of it. SAM wasn't just SAM anymore. There was Proteus to contend with also.

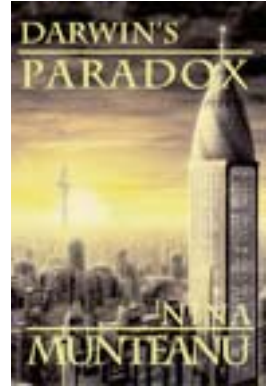
“It's the only way,” Tyers continued. “Besides, we need to investigate why this happened and figure out how to correct it so it won't happen again. Then the A.I. core can go online again. But not before. Of course, we're prepared to compensate you for your part in this. Name whatever it is you want, Ms. Crane. Anything.”

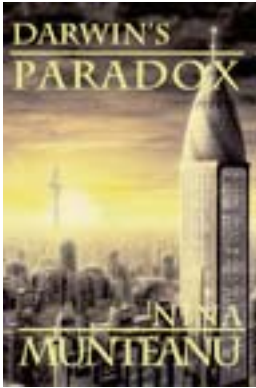
There it was, dropped in her lap and she felt a surge from the pit of her stomach. Safety for her and her family. Freedom from Icaria's harassment and its attackers — the prize she'd come for. She just had to kill her best friend for it. Then sweet images of Angel and Daniel flooded in. They stroked her heart until it hurt so much, tears prickled her eyes and she swallowed down the ache rising in her throat. It was a tempting offer. Indeed, the very mission she'd come on...

“I'll have to think about it,” she said in a low voice and bowed her head. She caught Tyers and Zane exchanging knowing glances and exhaled. She looked directly at Tyers. “I want to talk to Zane alone,” she said in a firm voice, throwing a glance at the two other scientists. “Then I'll need to talk to your Head Pol.”

“Certainly,” Tyers said, nodding without smiling. He had the presence of mind not to smirk this time. “That can be arranged.”

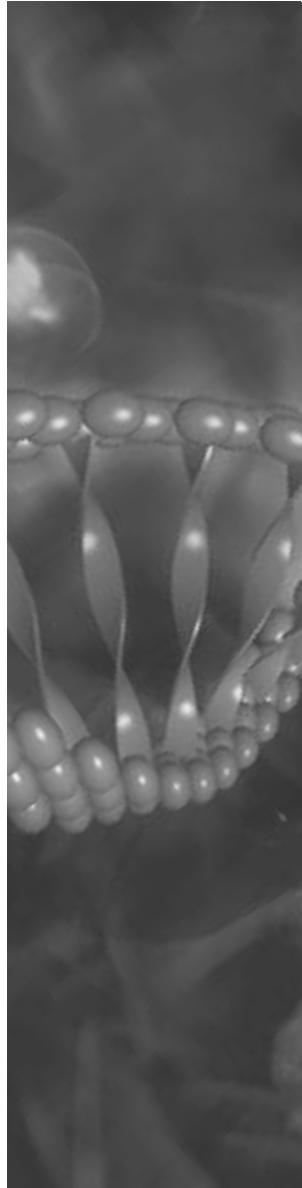
I wouldn't recommend sex, drugs or insanity for everyone, but they've always worked for me—Hunter S. Thompson





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ANGEL stumbled to keep up as the Pol dragged her by the hand along the dirty lower level corridor. She had no idea where she was. When her father had fallen to the ground from the gunshot, the Pol had snatched her and forced her off the train. One of the ambushers was still chasing them. The Pol kept glancing back, pulling her along with one hand and the gun poised in the other.

A high-pitched squeal rang over their heads and Angel glimpsed a flash of blue. “Down!” the Pol hissed and threw her to the ground. Her knees slammed onto duracrete, sending sparks of pain through her. More laser screams whined over her head.

In the thundering silence that followed, Angel lifted her head and saw the Pol replace the gun to its holster and flick a switch on his helmet as he gazed at the still form of the ambusher lying ten meters from them. Then he muttered some instructions as if to himself but obviously to some communication device in his helmet. Within a moment he turned to her and said in a gruff voice, “Get up.”

As she did, two meter-high beetle-shaped droids scuttled down the hall toward them. Angel backed away instinctively but noticed that the Pol remained unconcerned as he watched both droids eject a viscous fluid onto the body.

“Recycling digesters,” he explained. “They come right away when I press this little baby,” He smirked proudly, finger stroking the console inside his helmet.” Gets rid of the criminal mess. No need for further investigation, eh?” The Pol force certainly had a lot of

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power, Angel thought, feeling her throat tighten. Power so easily abused. He went on, watching the droid position itself next to the corpse. “It goes into the main recycling depot.”

Behaving like an independent entity, the fluid extended pseudopods that engulfed and digested the dead body like an amoeba, stripping tissue and bone and finally taking that too. Angel watched in sick fascination as the robot sucked the fluid with what used to be a dead man into its metallic belly. The Pol grimaced. “Those AI07s recycle *everything*. Parts of him might return tomorrow as part of your nano-prepared breakfast or in Darwin Mall's holo-art.” Now it was her turn to grimace. He barked a sharp laugh and shoved her forward. “Welcome to Paradise.”

They walked along the dark tunnel for what seemed like hours to Angel, breathing in the acrid smells of mold, mildew and tube-jet fumes. The Pol didn't talk the whole way and Angel was thankful. It left her to grieve in silence for her father. She had seen death before, having killed and dressed a small doe herself only last summer, and now she refused to break down and kept the tears at bay. Had that ugly man killed him? It was next to impossible that he would have survived being shot in the chest at such close range. And where was her mother? This place was frightening — worse than the most dangerous place in the heath. Icaria was like nothing she'd experienced before. A dark and evil hell, full of mean people, terrifying surprises and those awful machine sounds constantly echoing in her head. How could she have persuaded her father to return here? He'd be alive now if they hadn't!

Pol and prisoner emerged from the tunnel into a station and he immediately dragged her through a door, down several flights of stairs to a lower level corridor. A hundred metres down the corridor they went through another door and climbed several sets of stairs.

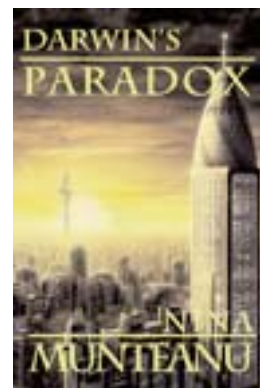
The Pol led her to a door that opened into another mall then he turned to her and pushed one of those devices everyone was wearing on their heads into her hands. “Put it on,” he said brusquely. “You need to blend in with the crowd.”

She surveyed the thing with curiosity, despite her unease with it and rolled it in her hands. It felt cold and smooth and a little like a snake.

“I said put it on!” he barked through clenched teeth.

She flinched and put the vee-set on. Instantly it molded to her head and the unnatural proximity made her skin crawl. It was all she could do not to fling the thing off as it arranged its various arms to their appropriate places on her ears, left eye and mouth. Once settled, the vee-set showed her data about the mall on the lens over her eye and spoke in a monotone to her: Odum Mall contains seventy shops, twenty restaurants, a 5-hectare park and Rec-Center, the Justi-Center and the Enviro-Center. If you wish any further information, please say so.

The Pol smirked briefly, amused at her reaction to a common technological device, and she felt foolish. After a cursory glance around, he



pulled her through the door and dragged her, running to keep up with his great hulking strides, toward a building façade where they entered through the doors. Angel read the holo sign above: Enviro-Center.

The Pol knew his way in here and took her to another set of doors that slid open for them. He pushed her inside a very small room and when the doors closed the whole room jolted and moved up.

"It's called an elevator," the Pol spoke for the first time. He looked amused at her startled expression. "Guess you don't get out much, eh?"

She glared at him.

The elevator came to a stop and he led her through another corridor to where the hall became a reception area with some comfortable-looking chairs and a table. A young woman dressed in a dark green tunic and black slacks greeted the Pol tersely and left. Angel forgot herself for a moment and let her eyes roam the large room. The walls were a pale green colour that seemed to change as she looked at them. More of those holo images floated as obvious decoration.

They seemed to be waiting for someone, she surmised. The Pol looked nervous, out of place here. He shuffled his feet and threw his gaze around the room without really looking at anything. When he suddenly squared his shoulders, she saw why. A statuesque woman swept into the room, radiating command and elegance. It was as though the room suddenly changed because she was in it. It became much smaller, or was it that her essence occupied so much of the space? She approached them and stopped short of Angel.

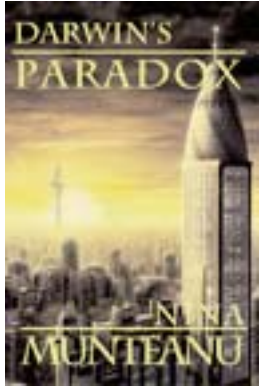
She was stunning in appearance: thick, midnight hair framed a face even more beautiful than her mother's and flowed over her shoulders like skeins of milkweed silk. In contrast to her mother's tawny skin, wrinkled at the eyes and mouth, and blemished with small defects, this woman's perfectly smooth skin was a pale, ethereal hue, untouched by the harsh sun's rays. Blue eyes sparkled with the glitter of gemstones and her perfectly shaped lips shone like rubies as she smiled at Angel. If Angel's mother was a rose striving for perfection, then this woman *was* the model of perfection other roses strove to be.

"You must be Angel," the woman said, her voice flowing like a deep river. "Come here, child."

Before Angel realized it, she'd approached the captivating woman. She was so inviting.

"We were ambushed by four Vee-radicators," the Pol cut in with a growling voice, briefly drawing the woman's attention from Angel. "The father was shot in the chest from close quarters."

The woman nodded curtly. "She looks a little like her mother," she said, returning her gaze and absently studying Angel with a strange look. Then, like breaking from a dream, her eyes flashed briskly to the Pol. "That's all, Norman. I'll take it from here. I expect your report on my desk in an hour. Dykstra's waiting for your briefing." Then she dismissed

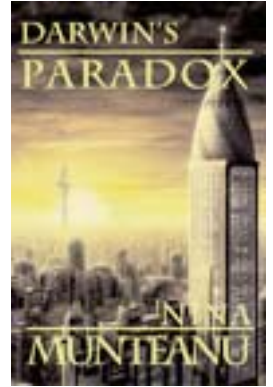


him with a wave of her hand and turned immediately back to Angel, her expression returning to one of genuine concern. "I hope Norman didn't frighten or offend you, Angel," she said, smiling warmly. "He's a bit of a brute and doesn't have all the social graces, but I can count on him. We knew that terrorist group would be after you and I expressly sent Norman to keep you safe and bring you here. I'm sorry we couldn't save your father too."

The woman's compassion opened Angel's heart and tears sprang to her eyes. The woman put her hands on Angel's shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Angel. But perhaps we can find your mother?"

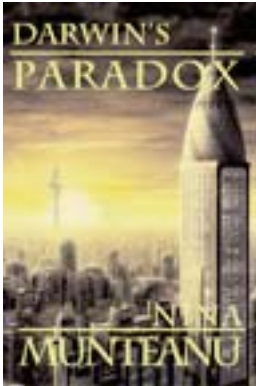
Angel wiped away her tears and stared into those sapphire eyes. "You know my mom?"

"Julie Crane." She nodded, smiling more openly now. "Yes, we knew each other quite well." The smile went vague with private thoughts. Perhaps she was reminiscing. "I really missed her when she left Icaria." She looked wistful for a moment before speaking in a lighter tone, "Oh, excuse my manners. I haven't introduced myself to you yet. I'm the mayor of Icaria-5. My name's Gaia."



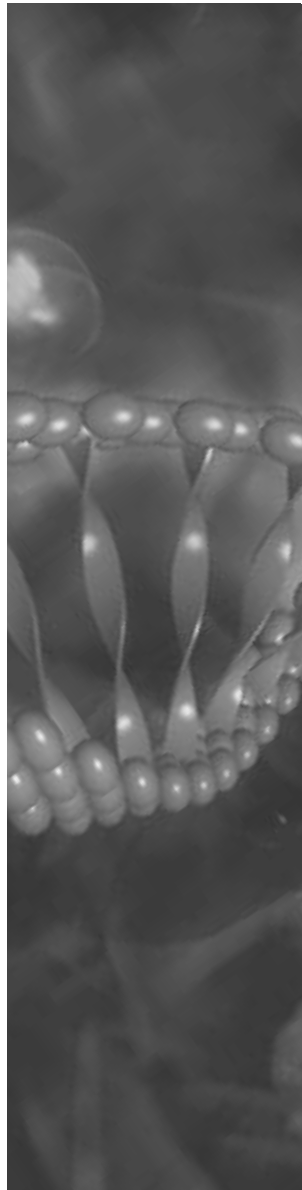
For more on: The Gaia Theory
http://www.dragoonmoonpress.com/dp/dp_links/gaia.pdf
Evolution is a tightly coupled dance, with life and the material environment as partners. From the dance emerges the entity Gaia
—James Lovelock

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THE pain raged through him like a hundred knives twisting. He couldn't stand it and cried out, then awoke with a jolt. He was shivering, drenched in cold sweat, lying on a lumpy cot in a dark room that stank of long-unwashed bodies, burnt grease and rotting garbage.

With effort Daniel raised himself up and immediately felt faint with a new flash of debilitating pain in his chest. It sent him falling back with a grunt. He closed his eyes and waited for the pain to subside. It even hurt to breathe. Eventually he opened his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest to survey himself. His shirt had been stripped off and a large bandage covered most of his bare chest. He surmised that the few dark spots on it were blood, seeping through from his wound.

Wait! Hadn't he been shot? He should be dead. How'd he gotten here, who helped him and...where was Angel?! As if to answer his questions, a door that he hadn't noticed before opened with a loud squeak and the same man who'd shot him entered, his great barrel of a chest heaving forward with every loping stride he took. Daniel drew in a sharp breath and stiffened.

"Don't get your shorts into a knot," the man growled in a basso voice. "I'm not here to torture you or anything. I think you did a fine job on yourself already, jumping on my gun." Then he snorted a self-amused laugh. "S'cuse the primitive meds. No fancy nuyu or nuergy here. But you'll live. It's only a burn — a concussion-wound. Could've been worse. I could have set it on 'kill'."

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Was that pathetic look a grin? The man looked as bad as Daniel felt. His head was shaven, face covered in stubble, scars and tattoos, his teeth were crooked and in place of lips for a mouth there was just a slit. He stared at Daniel with insane eyes that looked slightly cross-eyed. It actually looked like some of those scars were the result of self-mutilation. Daniel was reminded of the mutilated woman he'd seen in the mall and wondered if they all belonged together in some ghoulish fraternity.

"Where's my daughter?" Daniel croaked. The words were barely recognizable and it hurt to speak. "What have you done with her?"

"Nothing." The man absently scratched his nose. "You knocked me out and the Pol knocked Jake out. The Pol must have taken her and Simon probably gave chase. We figure the Pol got him and he's wall art by now. What a shame — your kid would have made a good prize. We were hoping to use her to bargain with, but you'll do just fine, I think."

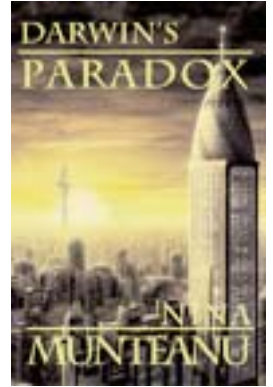
"Who are you?"

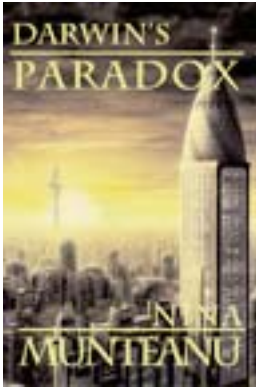
His captor's eyes seemed to bulge with demented amusement and he grinned out of the side of his lip-less mouth. "The name's Washington." Daniel noticed that his teeth were yellow and slimy and he gave off an odour like he hadn't brushed them in weeks. "As for my little band of merry men, we're the Vee-radicators. We hate the letter V. We hate all mechanical things. We hate technology that supports the slovenly, the weak-minded and the foolish. We hate machines that think for us and want to take over the world. And most of all," he lowered his snarling voice to a growl and leaned forward for emphasis so that Daniel smelled his putrid breath. It stank of rotted nano-soup. "We hate those sassy veemelds, dark archangels of machine supremacy."

Daniel felt his stomach cramp up and sunk further in the bed. He managed a self-deprecating laugh. "What could you possibly use me to bargain for?"

"For the big prize." The grin turned into something sinister. "The sassiest of them all. Your wife."

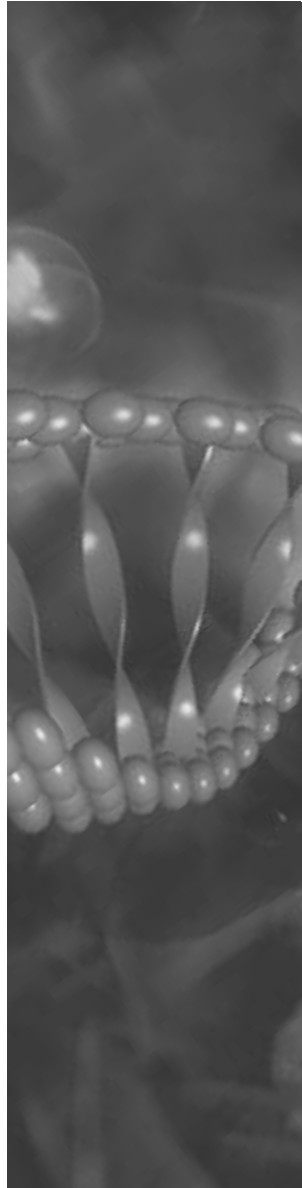
We have the possibility not just of weapons of mass destruction but of knowledge-enabled mass destruction, this destructiveness hugely amplified by the power of self-replication
—Bill Joy, cofounder of Sun Microsystems





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LEFT alone in Zane's lab for a few moments as the scientists talked among themselves — obviously about her — Julie slumped into a chair and decided to find out a few things herself. She'd avoided SAM. But Zane's news was too distressing for her to ignore her old friend any longer. Julie took in a deep breath and, like a first-time swimmer poking her toe into the water, slid shyly into veemeld...*Hey, SAM...*

[Yes, we are here, Julie Crane,] came the resonating singsong voice that was neither SAM nor Proteus, but both melded.

Annoyed, *It's SAM I want to speak with. Just SAM.*

[You do not understand. Both SAM and Proteus are here, with you, in veemeld.]

Still annoyed, she decided to talk with Proteus, *Okay, Proteus, why haven't you communicated to me in words like this before? Outside of my dreams, that is.*

Proteus didn't pick up on her sarcastic tone of thought, or chose to ignore it, [We were very young as were you when you embraced us and nurtured our growing selves. We required much training and assistance from your friend, SAM, before we could communicate in a way that you could understand.]

Julie swallowed convulsively. She'd not been aware of doing any of that.

As if reading her mind, the mellifluous plural voice of Proteus sang, [You did this intuitively, at the cellular level. Your body recognized the value of our symbiosis. In return, we protected you, provided you with what you refer to as "danger sense".]

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The chirping sounds, she now realized, was their rudimentary mode of communication, perhaps how they communicated among themselves. *And you also provided me with enhanced cognition, eyesight, hearing...*

[Yes. We have been trying to join with you and have only partially succeeded. In areas where we have succeeded, we have been able to provide you with improvements in your brain functions.]

She ignored the spooky reference to the word 'joining'. It brought up her awful nightmare and sent a cold chill through her. *What about talking with me in my head?*

[With time and with SAM's help, we learned more sophisticated communication. By then you had left the nest and we could only access your mind through your dream-state. You need to be near our core selves and SAM's residence to speak with us as we do now, in veemeld. But if you join with us, this need not be the case. The time for the joining draws near.]

Julie drew in a sharp breath. This sounded too ominous. She had to find out and swallowed down her rising fear. *What do you mean by joining?*

[Your acceptance of our domination,] the choral voices mewled and she felt a jolt of alarm bite through her. [Your body accepted us long ago but your mind still fights our presence. There are parts of you that remain shrouded from us, as though you do not trust us. You covet a secret place, which you protect from us — even from those of your own kind. You must open your mind to us, give in, completely. Let go of your fears and let us show you the way, Julie Crane.]

Julie shivered and chewed on her lower lip. She didn't like those words at all. They scared her. She had to admit she wasn't the most trusting and open person in Icaria, but that didn't mean she should let Proteus dissect her brain and take over her mind. Grabbing her head in her hands, *I just want to talk to SAM*, she insisted.

[I'm here, Julie. I'm always here, with Proteus.]

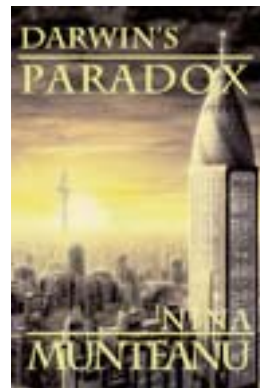
Then I've lost you too, she thought with growing despair and yanked herself out of veemeld with a gasp.

~~~~~

She was still recovering from her terrifying communication with Proteus when Zane swaggered into the room with that self-satisfied smile she found annoying. They must have had a good discussion, she thought grimly, wiping her brow and standing up.

“Boy, you haven't changed much since I last saw you,” he said. “In some ways it seems like yesterday that you and I chatted at Kraken's birthday party. And in other ways it seems like a million years —”

“Let's cut the chatter, Zane,” Julie said sharply and ignored his wounded expression. “Look, I left my family when I came here yes, I was on my way when Tyers snagged me and forcibly brought me here. But I



wasn't coming here to help you. I came to bargain with your leaders to leave me and my family alone, in peace.”

He wrinkled his brows in contemplation.

“I can't believe you thought I was wandering the heath toward Icaria because I knew you needed me,” Julie continued, staring unblinkingly into Zane's eyes.

He blushed. “The Pols didn't tell us why, of course. We — that is, Steven, Irena and I — postulated that Proteus asked you to come back.” His face broke into an awkward grin, one that showed both his excitement and anxiety with the subject. Now that she thought of it — the inexplicable yearnings she'd felt all those years, the strange recurring nightmare — Zane and the others were probably right. Only Proteus hadn't exactly 'asked' her, more like *lured* her. And that scared her even more. “So, did it?” he prompted.

She looked away and shook her head. “Not exactly.”

“But it does other things, right?”

She turned to him demurely. “Yeah.” Terrific. He knew most of it. Aard had been keeping tabs on her abilities and obviously submitted reports to Burke, who had probably handed them over to Zane. “You know about my abilities, don't you?”

“You mean about your enhanced night vision and better than twenty-twenty eyesight, probably because of increased rods and cones or enhanced neural connections, right? Or your increased hearing from 50 to 40,000 Hertz range, like a cat, and your ability to hear more distant sounds because of your increased frequency selectivity, lowered thresholds and decrease in the proportion of reverberant sounds. Probably a combination of conductive and sensori-neural increases in your middle ear and cochlea. Then there's a number of other fascinating neurological improvements...”

She let her gaze slide away from him. “Yeah, those.” She paced the room, eyes roaming the long counters and cupboards filled with chemicals and lab equipment. She absently picked up a flask with blue liquid and looked through it. “So you think Darwin accesses Icarians through SAM?” she asked in a calm voice, even as her mind was racing with terrified thoughts.

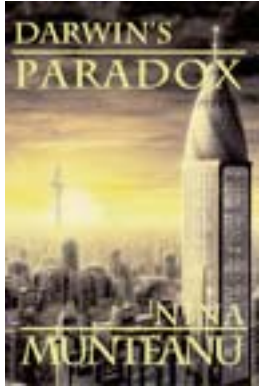
“I'm absolutely sure of it,” Zane replied. “It makes sense. Proteus was created by Vogel specifically to interface with A.I.s. That's what it did with you, didn't it? Enabled you to talk to A.I.s in your head?”

She let out a long sigh and put the flask down. “Yes.”

“It would be just like Vogel to make this virus self-aware and able to learn through its interaction with its biological host mediated by artificial intelligence.”

Something in Zane's voice made her heart thud and she spun around to face him. “What are you getting at?”

He looked at her with a grim expression she'd never seen on him



before. "I'm saying that I think this virus corrected itself because it learned a better way of controlling us."

She stared at him. "You're suggesting that Darwin has a purpose and it's to take control of us all?" Her heart was banging like a drum as she recalled her terrifying conversation with Proteus earlier.

"And its using SAM to do it."

She thought of the disarray in the mall, then of what Zane and Tyers had said of the A.I.'s demands. "Does anyone else think this?"

He scratched his head and looked down at the floor with a deep breath. "No. Not even Steven and Irena agree with me. No one thinks Proteus is a problem, since it stopped killing people. But I think they're wrong," he said grimly. His eyes bored into hers with an intensity that made her uncomfortable. "And I think you agree with me."

They looked at each other in silence for a long time before she spoke. "I think you're wise to have concerns," she admitted somberly.

He nodded. "Coming from *Prometheus*, that means a lot. I think Proteus needs to be stopped. Soon everyone will carry it."

"Wait. Are you saying that Darwin is still spreading, unabated?"

"Of course it is. Once the disease transformed itself into something benign, no one cared if they got it, so people with Darwin just continued their sexual relations and spread the virus. The project was shelved by the CDC, much to my chagrin," he said, shaking his head with a frown. "I think it's a big mistake."

"I do, too," Julie said, pursing her lips. "We don't know what this 'smart virus' wants yet. How many are infected?"

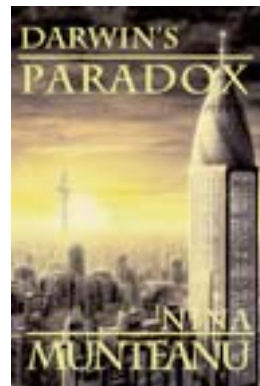
"We think almost fifty percent of the present population in Icaria-5 carries Darwin now." He stroked the vee-pad in his hand thoughtfully. "The only reason I'm still allowed to do any work on Darwin hosts — can't call them victims anymore — is because someone in the mayor's office is interested in those statistics."

Her eyes narrowed. "Oh, really?" She wasn't sure why but that spiked her suspicions. Who replaced Burke when he disappeared?

"There's so much I still don't know about this virus, but what I do know is that the whole population acts as an autonomous, self-organized, and self-maintaining system."

Julie nodded, reminded of her father's lectures about stable chaos. "Functioning as a single autopoietic entity."

"Yes!" Zane grew animated. "Shaping and evolving through a vital coupling with other autopoietic systems: namely the A.I.-core and you." She didn't like Zane's use of the word *coupling*. It sounded too much like joining. "You've been languaging and co-evolving through mutual triggers and perturbations in a kind of loose symbiosis, a kind of synchronal dance," Zane went on, getting more and more excited. "The A.I.-core supposedly provides Proteus with its communication network and you provide the physical expression of its needs."



“What does that mean?” Julie heard an irritated sharpness rise in her voice. Ignoring for the moment Zane's alarming last suggestion, she said, “How can I evolve? Individuals don't evolve. Populations evolve through—”

“Sex? Mutation and recombination? Julie, what have you been doing all this time?” She glared at him pointedly. Try raising a child in the wilderness, buddy! Zane didn't seem to notice her glower and barreled on, “Evolution happens around us all the time, Julie. You're talking about just one way to pass on heritable traits, the conventional way, the long way of genetics. But in the language of evolution, genetics is just one dialect. Evolution operates at multiple levels of organization, through genes, cells, individuals and societies—”

“Okay, but—”

“I know what you're thinking,” Zane shrieked. “How does Proteus use the A.I. network to communicate with all its other selves?”

No, that wasn't what she was thinking—

“Proteus may use the A.I. network in ways we have no notion of because we have yet to discover it — perhaps Proteus taps into some quantum oscillation of particles we have yet to discover. Dark matter or some biological, chemical or physical medium we haven't figured the significance of its signal or pattern...”

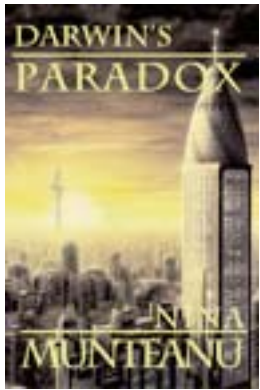
Just like Zane to slide into hyperbole on a science topic when discussing her, Julie thought. She edged in as he took a breath, “I didn't mean—”

“Maybe,” Zane sped on, “it's like when a group of female friends spend a lot of time together and they find that their menstrual cycles oscillate in unison. Women acting like pulse-coupled oscillators in a silent conversation—”

“It's the smell,” Julie cut in, feeling totally exasperated with Zane's arcane line of argument. “That's all it is. Pheromones triggering synchronal cycles supposedly with the benefit of shared child-rearing.”

Zane waved his arms impatiently at her like a teacher frustrated with a bright but inattentive student, “Yes, but it's still communication, a chemical dialogue, delivered unconsciously by one autopoietic system — one woman — to another. Before the revolution squashed it all as quackery, some scientists — Fairweather, particularly — were focusing on a different kind of contact between individuals, one unquantifiable by traditional science and based on the hypothesis of 'non-local' interaction, a 'resonating touch' by tapping into a network at the microscopic level.”

Dr Patrick Fairweather had also invented stable chaos in 2025. He was her father's hero. Julie summoned a memory from vid-clips she'd seen of Fairweather's mature lean face, uncompromising lips and honest eyes. She'd recognized a thoughtful arch in his eyebrows and something sad about the eyes, as if he recognized his dire fate. Another sad scientist like her father, Fairweather was brutally killed during the revolution for



promoting his heretical theories, including the theory for 'non-local' interaction. Then like a surge of electricity, it hit her that Zane might have inadvertently given her the key to how she “talked” with her daughter in her mind through Darwin. Zane didn't know about this incredible long distance human to human communication and she wasn't about to divulge that information to him, either.

She realized that she had been thinking when she should have been listening because when she finally tuned in, Zane was no longer making any sense. “A hundred years ago, before the revolution squashed chaos and complexity theory as Dystopian thinking, the network theorists showed us that the average person is separated from everybody else by only six other people; the six degrees of separation—”

“Zane.” Julie blew out a breath. “What's that got to do with Proteus and me—”

“Networks of communication can make this viral population very small. And key 'nodes' may serve critical functions. Every veemeld in Icaria is a node in Proteus's network, based on their affinity to communicate with Proteus and A.I.s through Interact-SYM. And you — well, you're a *supernode*, Julie.”

“This all sounds very Dystopian, Zane.” She narrowed her eyes skeptically. “You sure are talking out of turn a lot here...”

He flashed one of his bulletproof grins. “Not really. Since you left over a decade ago, Burke's regime has taken a much softer approach to dystopian thinking. Chaos, complexity and network theories are all quietly in vogue again with scientists.”

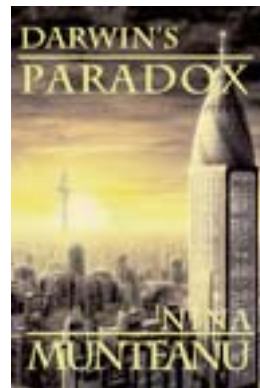
That was twenty years too late for her father who'd been persecuted for promoting Fairweather's heretical science, Julie thought soberly.

“Look.” Zane leaned forward, his grin gone and eyes suddenly deep. “What I'm saying is that you give off smells you're not aware of sending; you send a million signals you're unaware of, do a million things unconsciously. These are all communicated subtly, or not so subtly, from person to person. What makes you angry, sad, what makes you suddenly long for something...” He paused and she felt a jolt of adrenalin, thinking of Proteus and her longing to return to Icaria. “Think of the irrevocable change inside of you, your connection with autopoietic machines and how you passed Darwin on to your daughter...”

She leaned back against the lab workbench, suddenly breathless and weak-kneed at his mention of Angel and what it suggested. “We don't know what Proteus wants,” she could barely breathe out the words.

Zane hiked his brows in response. “Listen Julie,” he said softly, “if we break the connection with the A.I.s, particularly through you and SAM, we also stop Darwin.”

Julie swallowed and stared at Zane for some time. This was what he was getting at! “SAM was my best friend, you know,” she admitted, looking down at the floor. She whispered, “I've never told anyone that.”



Not even Daniel.

Zane nodded gravely. "SAM and I never did get along very well," he admitted. "If I didn't know better I'd have said SAM was peevish and downright rude." He raised his brows and shrugged. "Maybe SAM changed since you knew it, since it teamed up with Proteus." He lifted his hands to her in a gesture of emphasis. "It's up to you, of course. But remember this: You're probably the only person who can shut down the core and break that link, because only you may be able to talk SAM into letting you have access to the breach console. Only you can do it. For all of Icaria."

She sighed. Terrific. Lay on the guilt trip. Save the world, Julie. Just kill your best friend to do it. But SAM wasn't a friend anymore was he?

"Why should I believe that shutting SAM down will break the connection with Proteus? What evidence do you have that'll convince me to kill SAM?"

Zane smiled suddenly. "Well, you, for instance." She tilted her head and waited for him to explain. "You can only talk with Proteus when SAM's around, right? When you're in veemeld, right?"

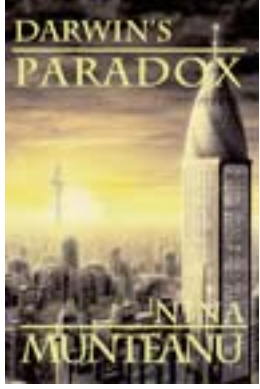
He'd missed her dreamtime but the fact that he'd gotten the other part right annoyed her and sent a shaft of alarm through her gut. How in chaos did *he* know? She stood up suddenly and said brusquely, "Thanks for the information."

"But, what are you going to do?" he stammered, all flustered. "You're going to shut them down, right?" He looked desperate. "You're going to do it, right?" He grabbed her arm.

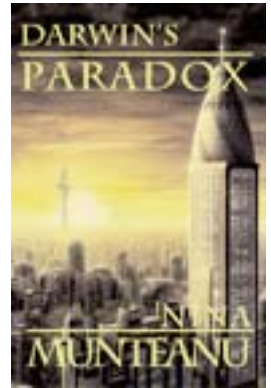
She stared pointedly down at his restraining hand until he let go, embarrassed. "I don't know, Zane," she said, looking him directly in the eyes. "I just don't know." She turned to the door to the outer room where Tyers was waiting.

For more on: Autopoiesis  
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And yet relation appears, a small relation expanding like the  
shade of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill  
—Wallace Stevens







“I trust that Nakita's explained the problem to you,” Frank said, closing his suite door behind her as she entered the leisure room of his Pol Station office and left Tyers waiting in the hall. She felt Frank's savage eyes undressing her as she sidled past him and smelled his sweat, sharp and oily like the drug he drank.

“He did,” Julie said, walking to the chairs and table in the center of the room but not sitting down. She turned to face him and leaned against the table with her backside and hands.

“So, I'll get Aubry to supply you with the necessary information about impregnating the core—”

“I didn't say I'd do it.”

His eyes froze on her like water on ice. “What do you mean?” His voice had grown stiff and she noticed his hands clench by his sides.

“I won't do anything without a few assurances,” she said evenly. “Are you in the position to make them?”

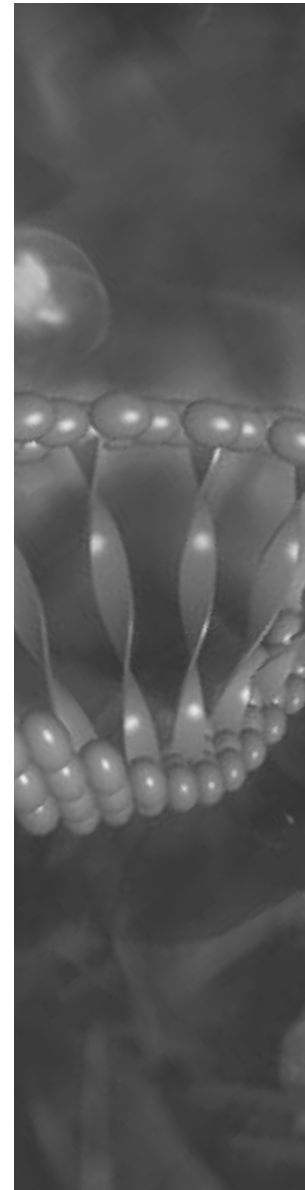
His mouth slackened into a smirk. “That depends. What kind of assurances?”

“That my family and I will be left at peace in the heath. No more spies and no more attempts on our lives.”

His brows rose and a cold smile snaked across his lips. “Well, is that all you want?”

She folded her arms across her breast and studied his face, wondering if he was being sarcastic. “Can you do it? If not, who can?”

“Of course I can,” he scoffed, swinging a hand out with some annoyance. She'd piqued his sense of importance, obviously. “Consider it done,” he said. “Anything else?” He raised his head, let his eyes droop lazily and gave her a smug smile.



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Julie narrowed her eyes. "Wait. Just like that? Okay, so you can call people like Tyers off. What about the assassins? Surely you didn't send them too?"

He laughed sharply and, obviously realizing that this might take a while, dropped into a chair and indicated with a sarcastic sweep of his hand for her to take one as well. "No, of course not," he retorted. "But I know who did."

"Secret Pols," she prompted, sliding like a cat into a seat across from him.

"No. Burke eradicated them all."

"Dystopians, then."

Another cold smile curled on his lips and he shook his head. "Most of them went along with the Secret Pols."

She frowned. "Wait a minute. These attackers were carrying Secret Pol-issue weapons, like silent laser guns and assassin gun-mounts"

He nodded. "Impressive. You remembered. I only showed you once. Your pursuers may have come from a splinter group of old Dystopians. They call themselves the Vee-radicators. They're terrorists, plain and simple. Some kind of extremist Luddite types. They belong to a growing sub-culture in the outer-city fringe that believe in self-mutilation," he ended with a sour look of disgust. Julie remembered the scarred and mutilated face of the assassin she'd killed in the heath.

"Like the Dystopians before them, the Vee-radicators think you're the worst thing since chaos," Frank continued, pointing at her with a wagging finger. "You're at the top of their 'hit list'." A sardonic smile smeared across his face. "Always in the fray, aren't you? Anyway, they somehow got hold of a shipment of Secret Pol guns that Burke had made illegal in Icaria-5. We figure they got them from one of the other, less progressive Icarias."

Perhaps Tyers hadn't killed Aard after all. "So they killed Aard?"

"Aard?" Frank looked puzzled.

"Isaard Henigen. The Pol who was spying on me since day one."

"Oh, Burke's man. Yeah, Tyers told me about him. Pity." Frank shrugged and didn't look too put out by Aard's demise. "Henigen disobeyed my orders not to return to the heath."

"And because he did, I'm still alive to help you now," she pointed out. "How'd these Vee-radicators find out where I was and why did they start trying to kill me just in the last few months?"

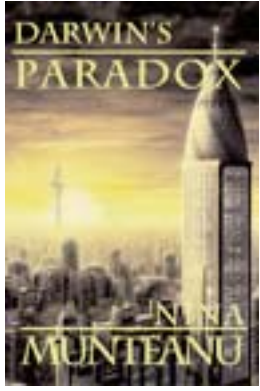
Frank leaned his head back and stretched, resting his arms along the back of the couch. He smiled to himself as if to a private joke.

"You do ask smart questions. You always did," he said with a smug smile.

He obviously had no intention of answering it either, she thought. Okay, buddy. "So you can guarantee the elimination of the Vee-radicators?"

His eyes wrinkled with a sly smile. "Let's just say, they won't bother you anymore. That I can guarantee."

She found that difficult to accept on faith alone. "Who's your boss,



Frank?” she demanded. “Is it Dykstra?”

He laughed in quick nervous spasms. “Of course not. Dykstra works for me in Covert Ops. He's the one who found you and had Tyers bring you in.”

“Who's the mayor of Icaria-5? Is it still Victor Burke?”

“No,” Frank said flatly. At least he was telling her some of the truth, she thought. Frank shook his head with a frown. “Since Burke brought me into his confidence and made me the Head Pol twelve years ago, he's done a few good things, like get rid of the Secret Pols, most of whom were secretly Dystopians anyway. He also pretty much destroyed the actual Dystopian organization by arresting the ringleaders. Mind you, Darwin did more to stop the Dystopian movement by losing its lethal quality. Took the wind out of their sails, I guess...” He was referring to the major reason for their subversion against a government they considered feckless, corrupt and malignant: that it seemed to do nothing against Darwin.

Frank's eyes glazed over for a moment and Julie pictured him, fighting the disease. It must have been the hardest and scariest thing he'd faced in his life, she thought, recalling his extreme dislike for sickness. He obviously blamed her for it. Were those dark circles under his eyes a permanent remnant of his fierce battle?

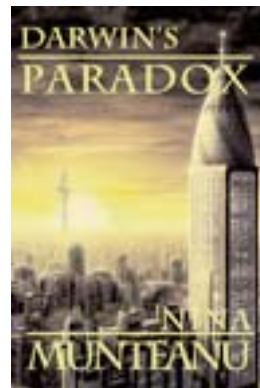
“But then, as time went by,” Frank went on, “things started to fall apart on Burke, like he was losing control of everything. His people, his A.I. network. He was never a man of action.” Frank shrugged. “Burke was strange and he made some stupid decisions. Then he got into some trouble and disappeared. One of the Circle members stepped in.”

Gaia. “And who's that?” she asked, managing to keep her voice calm.

He shrugged. “I don't know. Their image and voice is scrambled on my communications with them. The code name's Gee. That's all I know.” He grinned, almost embarrassed. “Honest.”

G, for Gaia, Julie thought. So, what had happened to Victor Burke? His disappearance seemed to play a key role in the recent debauchery of Icaria-5. His disappearance appeared linked to Icaria's sudden interest in her, too. Or was it simply Gaia reeling Julie in, now that she'd reinstated herself?

Frank wasn't sharing an awful lot with her, she realized. Keeping his cards close to his chest beneath a cavalier show. That was Frank's hallmark, and he'd trapped many an unsuspecting prey with it. So Burke had eradicated the Secret Pols. There were still people like Tyers and Dykstra in Frank's employ. Obviously some new breed of secret Pol. Did they, like the originals, also report to Gaia? Julie didn't doubt it for a moment as she studied Frank's arrogant face. He probably didn't know it either, she thought. Just like the Head Pol before him. Even if he'd read her cube before giving it to Burke, Frank wouldn't have made the connection between Icaria's new mayor and Gaia. But something about what he'd said earlier suggested to her that he hadn't perused her cube before surrendering it to Burke, so he knew nothing of Gaia's conspiracy and the innocence of Julie's father.



Frank leaned forward with an air of getting back on topic, trusting that he'd answered all her questions to her satisfaction. "So, will you do it? Disable the core for us?"

"I need to think about it. That's what I told Zane."

"What's to think about?" He glowered, definitely annoyed with her. He leaned back again, sighed, then leaned forward suddenly. "The A.I.s have gone mad, Julie. They want to take over and we can't let that happen. They'll ruin Icaria. Make it into some cyber-dictatorship "

"Like the techno-slums of the inner-city?" she challenged. "Full of starving orphans barely living off nano-soup. Your government's content with that situation. Just so long as it isn't you —"

"You don't understand," he cut in. "It's chaos in there." Then he tipped his head with a sudden smirk, as if he'd changed his mind about something in mid-thought. His eyes glinted in a way that made her extremely uncomfortable. "Just like your hair," he said. "Your hair was always wild like that. Unruly. Unmanageable. Untamable...like you." His hand reached out.

"Terrific," she muttered in disgust, jerking out of his grasp. She snapped to her feet and headed for the door.

"We're more alike than you think," he said, flying across the room to cut her off. "You and I share something very special." She knew he meant Darwin and felt her chest tighten with guilt. "We're meant for each other," he whispered hoarsely. He moved closer to her still and barred the door, forcing her to back into the wall. She found herself focusing on the little space between his two front teeth. His eyes were dark, seething with anger and heat. Perhaps they did belong together, she reconsidered with lurid humor — fitting for a victim to victimize his attacker; then she was instantly both horrified and angry with herself for thinking that. She didn't feel that guilty, she thought. He pushed so close she could feel his warm breath blowing on her face. It smelled rank, like rotten cabbage.

"Get out of my way," she said, squirming to get around him.

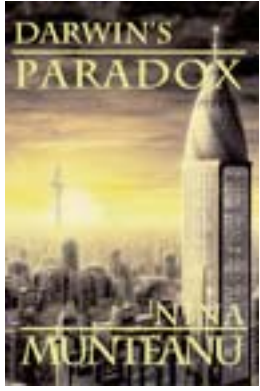
"Why so coy all of a sudden?" he said, grinning through the side of his mouth. "You were pretty receptive in my bed last night "

"I was delirious!"

A feverish vision erupted in her mind: of clutching a man's — Daniel's — strong arms, of pressing her face into his chest, of being kissed and stroked. It hadn't been a dream. And it certainly hadn't been Daniel. Frank now leaned into her like the first time he'd brazenly seduced her so long ago in her uncle's apartment. She smelled his scent, a mixture of sweet smoke and sweat and felt anger surging.

"I have a husband," she huffed, pushing him off.

"Where?" His arms stretched out to block her from sliding sideways from him. "Besides, he's not officially your husband," he whispered menacingly. "You don't have to worry about getting pregnant with me," he quipped as if that was the reason for her rejection. "Like half of Icaria, my gametes are dead."



“What?” she shrilled in exasperation.

He misunderstood the reason for her outburst. “Yeah. Our whole population's going sterile. So, no complications.” He smirked conspiratorially.

“We're not having this discussion,” she hissed, trying vainly to push him off again as he tilted his pelvis into hers.

“Fine,” he said. “No more talking.” His lips closed over hers.

With a burst of adrenalin she squirmed free, slithered under his arms and pushed away. Her chest heaved as her panic was suborned by growing fury.

“Don't ever do that again!” she shrieked.

He looked momentarily embarrassed, but it didn't last long. “Vee, you look beautiful when you're mad. Those eyes just catch like a raging forest fire. And your face glows.” His laughter had an unpleasant edge to it. “Ah, Julie.” He shook his head slowly. “You really haven't changed.”

Was he remembering all the times she'd succumbed so easily, so pathetically, under his casual and arrogant overtures? It had always been in some filthy lower level corridor or abandoned shop or side-stairwell, too...like the one she'd caught him in, humping some other girl.

“I have changed,” she spit back, fists clenching and unclenching at her sides. How had she ever let this insensitive animal seduce her in the first place? “And if you had the fortitude to get past your raging hormones, you'd have noticed that I have a family now. My home is the heath. I'm not an Icarian anymore and I don't have time to play your childish games.”

His eyes flared with resentment, but he swiftly buried it and just smiled sadly. “Can't blame an old guy for trying. There was a time when you welcomed my touch...” he trailed, looking uncharacteristically maudlin.

“I was a lot younger and...more foolish then,” she said curtly.

He didn't flinch at her insulting words. Instead he surprised her with an apology, “I'm sorry, Julie. It's just that you're still a very sexy lady. Hey,” he shrugged and brought out his hands, giving her a sweeping appraisal, “more than ever.” He turned on one of those charming grins that used to melt her resolve. “No hard feelings? I promise to be a good boy. Truce?” His puppy-look, the same one that used to sway her to forgive him for anything, just made him look foolish now.

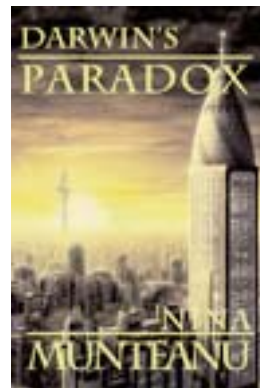
Yet she felt a small smile tug at her lips. “Okay. Truce.”

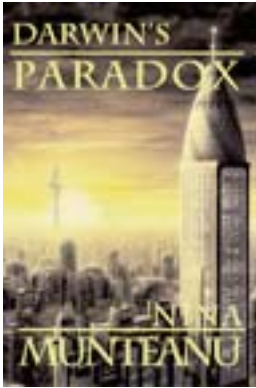
“Then you'll do it? Shut down the core?”

She exhaled and willed her fists to unclench. “Yes. I'll do it.” For her family. She refused to fail them like she had her sister.

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The evidence has increased dramatically over the past 10 years demonstrating how infertility and miscarriage are frequently environmentally caused disorders  
—Richard W. Pressinger, M.Ed., Wayne Sinclair M.D.



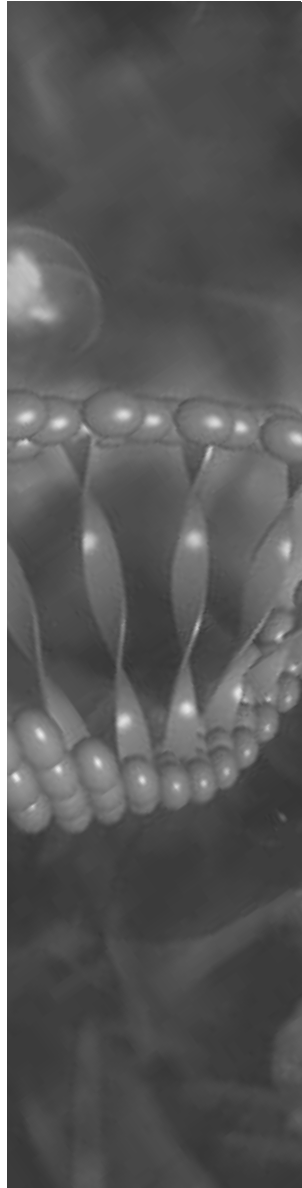


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# 24

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“GO ahead,” Gaia laughed softly, handing Angel a soft, light yellow jumper. “Try it on. The colour suits you.”

Angel gave Gaia a shy but pleased smile and took the jumper back into the washroom of Gaia's luxurious personal suite. As Angel tried on the jumper, she swallowed down the aching sadness of her father's death and directed her mind to race over the incredible day. Gaia had treated her to an exciting meal of fresh fruit and vegetables, hot protein strips, eggs and mashed potatoes, all presented on beautiful dishes and accompanied by a steaming and delicious beverage called hot chocolate.

She'd just now had a soothing warm bath, using unlimited hot running water from a faucet, and she couldn't get over how wonderful she smelled. The dryer stall seemed to breathe a fresh sweet scent on to her as it dried her body and hair. She could still smell the strawberry shampoo when she combed her hair. The jumper she was trying on smelled clean like soap and felt soft like the downy petals of an evening primrose. Even though Aard had described all these wonderful things to her, Angel wasn't prepared for their impact. If this wasn't paradise, she didn't know what was. She just wished that she could share it with her parents.

Like with everything else, Gaia had guessed her size. The jumper fit. Angel stepped out and Gaia nodded with approval.

“You look wonderful.”

Angel blushed with pleasure. She hoped she would look beautiful like Gaia one day. As if reading her mind, Gaia reached over and gently swept a rogue strand of hair from

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

Angel's face. "You're a very pretty girl, Angel." Gaia studied her pensively for a moment and Angel felt her face heat under the woman's scrutiny. "Beauty can be a powerful tool, Angel. Something you can use to command attention and bend the will of others." Then Gaia's face relaxed and she winked suddenly, "And find yourself the nicest boy. Are you hungry? Let's go to Darwin Mall. First, I'd like you to meet a few people, then we'll fetch something to eat and play. Sound okay?"

"Sounds great!" Angel liked the mall. It was incredibly exciting and helped her forget — at least for a little while — how much she missed her dead father and missing mother. Icaria was like nothing she'd ever experienced before a glittering paradise full of interesting people, enchanting places and wonderful surprises.

"Shall we?" Gaia said, flicking her raven mane to one side, and turning to lead Angel out. Angel trotted obediently beside her, ready for more adventure.

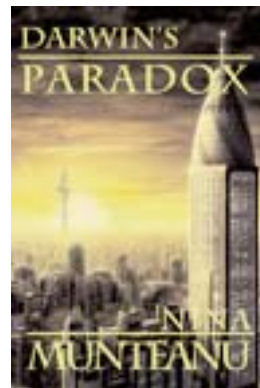
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Gaia led Angel down several hallways and levels to the main entrance into Odum Mall. Before proceeding into the mall, she handed Angel a vee-set and placed one on her own head. Angel put the vee-set on and once again shivered with mixed pleasure and revulsion as the vee-set adjusted itself on her head.

Gaia took Angel's hand as they maneuvered through the mall and its beautiful park to the tube-jet station. Angel forced away anguished thoughts of her father's murder on a train like this one as they rode the tube-jet in silence to Darwin Mall. Thoughts of her dead father dampened her enjoyment of the ride, but as soon as they reached Darwin Station, Angel let the resplendent mall distract and dazzle her. She instantly decided that this was her favorite place, ever.

They threaded their way through the crowd toward an elegant façade. Angel read the letters over the great door: *Isabo Med-Center*. Gaia led her through several corridors and they rode the elevator down to an area where Gaia had to submit to a retinal scan to enter. They passed a set of thick doors and Angel glanced at the lit sign: Center for Disease Control. Why were they coming here she wondered with some trepidation? Gaia offered her a reassuring smile and led her down the empty corridor that smelled like disinfectant then pulled open a door to her left. She gestured for Angel to enter with a nod.

As Angel walked hesitantly inside, she saw an older man wearing a long white tunic and black slacks. He nodded slightly to Gaia then met Angel's gaze with compassionate eyes. His lean face radiated a calm sense of balance and she found him handsome. He looked older than Gaia, she thought. His hair was a wolf-like mix of silver and gray, feathered back in a tidy style that brought out his strong features.



“Hello, I'm Carl Frenkel,” he said, extending his hand.

“Hello.”

“Carl's a veemeld,” Gaia said. “He does many jobs for me, don't you, Carl?”

Angel wanted to ask what a veemeld was but stopped herself. Instead she accepted Carl's extended hand. Unlike most adults she'd already met in Icaria, the smile he gave her was genuine, its honesty reflected in the happy crinkles around his eyes. “A pleasure, Angel,” he said in a gentle tenor voice. “I never had the honor of meeting your mother and I wish I had, but I'm very honored to meet you.”

Something Carl said seemed to annoy Gaia. She gave him a stern look and said brusquely, “Would you mind testing Angel for the abilities we previously discussed?”

“Certainly,” he responded. “Would you mind sitting here, Angel? Please.”

“Sure,” Angel said and took the chair Carl had pointed to. It was a comfortable chair with arm rests. She eyed the ominous network of instruments hovering above it with some discomfort.

“Don't worry, Angel. This won't hurt. It's only going to tell us a little about you and how your brain works. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” She leaned back and tried to relax.

Carl placed a device over her head that looked a little like those veesets she saw on everyone, but larger. “Still okay?” Carl asked gently.

“Okay,” she said bravely.

Just as she began to relax, a boy about her age with eyes the colour of a thunderstorm strolled into the room. His brooding face, framed by a long tangle of dark brown and gold hair, was adorned with several earrings. They distracted her from enjoying his otherwise nice features. He was obviously Carl's son — the resemblance was striking — but his saturnine expression was far from peaceful and his eyes flashed briefly in her direction with something close to belligerence before he aimed his intense gaze at Carl. “Dad, can I borrow your card for the Odum Rec-Center? Mine's —”

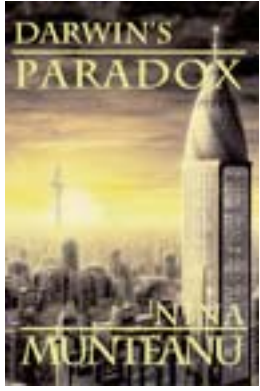
Carl turned to him sharply. “Let me guess, revoked again due to mischievous use.” He frowned. “How many times have I tried to tell you not to hack into the games mainstream for your amusement,” the father pressed on, his voice sharp with annoyance.

“I didn't do anything wrong,” the boy complained. “I was just showing Po some cool moves to —”

“Not now, Manfred,” Carl cut him off. “I'm busy here with Angel.”

“Shit!” Manfred snarled, throwing a cold glance at Gaia and resting a baleful glare on Angel. “You always have time for your work.”

Carl compressed his lips tightly. “Excuse me for a moment,” he apologized to Angel and nodded to Gaia before seizing Manfred by the arm and steering him to the small room behind them. Although she wasn't supposed to, Angel heard them:



“Don't ever use that kind of language or that tone of voice in my lab again,” Carl said in a cutting voice Angel would not have imagined possible in such a gentle man. “You'll keep your tongue civil and your rebellious thoughts to yourself, do you hear?”

“Oh, excuse me. The great Gaia might reprimand you,” Manfred retorted. “When are you going to stand up to that snake? You do everything she says. She keeps you working here on her projects till late at night. You never have time for anything else.” Angel thought she recognized a note of anguish in the boy's rebuke. “Just your damn experiments and that snake. I bet if mom were still here, you'd —”

He didn't finish and Angel wondered what had stopped him. Within a few moments, the two emerged. Carl swept his hand in the boy's direction as he turned back to Angel. “That's my son, Manfred.”

“Hi,” the boy muttered, meeting her gaze with stormy gray eyes that made Angel uncomfortable. “Sorry.” His mouth and jaw were set stubbornly. Like Angel's dad used to look sometimes when her mother lectured him about cleaning the camp, she thought. Manfred looked annoyed and seemed to connect her with his father's reticence to give him his card. He was hardly interested in her. So why did she feel a flutter in the pit of her stomach that flared up to her face? To her great annoyance, she felt herself blushing.

Luckily he'd already turned and stormed out of the lab. Carl shrugged with a frown and asked her if she was ready to do several small tasks. She was, and over the next twenty minutes Carl asked her to look this way or that, listen to this sound or that, and then answer a series of questions while he tapped his com-screen, made adjustments and more than a few notes. It was all quite boring and painless, but when it was over, Carl and Gaia exchanged knowing glances.

“You're a very interesting young lady, Angel,” Carl said. “Very talented.” Then he turned back to Gaia, all business. “Do you want a summary or just the full report to your files?”

They stepped away from her and spoke now in hushed voices she was not meant to hear: “What's the upshot, Carl?” Gaia prompted. “You look unusually excited.”

“Unlike the other children, her motor and cognitive skills are enhanced twenty percent.”

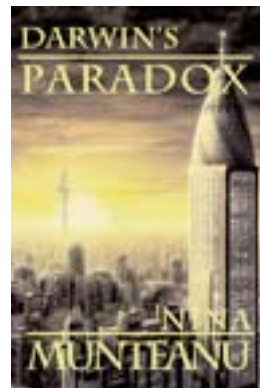
“Like her mother?”

“Possibly. I have to check the original data on Julie Crane. If so, she is uniquely gifted...just like her mother.”

Angel wondered what they were talking about and who the other children were to whom she was being compared.

“Yes, get the report to me as soon as you can, Carl but you need to stand-by. My agent reports that everything is proceeding as planned. *Prometheus* has agreed to carry out the task later this evening.”

“I understand,” Carl said in a voice that was hard to decipher.



“The girl must be readied — things may move quickly,” Gaia said, nodding with a brief glance at Angel, still sitting in the chair where they'd left her. She walked over to Angel, put her arm around her and squeezed. “Let's go, kitten. We're all done here.”

Angel liked it when Gaia called her that.

Carl helped Angel out from under the contraption just as someone entered the room. Angel caught Gaia's strange expression — a nervous start, so uncharacteristic of her — before she quickly recovered and veiled it with a much harder to read expression.

Angel turned along with Carl to see an older, pretty, official-looking woman stride toward them with a polite smile. The woman radiated confidence and authority. Her shoulder-length silver-blond hair was impeccably coifed and she wore her clothes with combined ease and a sharp sense of style. Angel was immediately impressed.

“Ah, Aileen,” Gaia said in an overly cheerful voice. “This is a pleasant surprise. Nice of you to drop in so unexpectedly.” Gaia's syrupy smile smeared into a sort of sneer. “If you'd informed us of your visit we could have prepared a reception for you.” Angel got the impression that Gaia was not pleased to see this woman, particularly without prior notice.

“I'm not one for fanfare,” Aileen responded, her voice mirroring her polite smile. “I like to arrive without warning.” There was something about Aileen that seemed to knock Gaia off balance. Angel was sure that Gaia didn't like her. “Doing so lets me witness everyone in their natural setting.”

“Ah,” Gaia said with a cool smile. “So, what can I do for you?”

“I'm just making my rounds, visiting all Circle members. You're on the top of my list.”

“Ah, one of your self-imposed duties as the newly elected Chair of the Circle, I take it.” Angel thought she detected an edge to Gaia's cool voice. Her smile was wearing very thin indeed. She'd seen that look on her mother more than once.

“You can appreciate, Gaia, that our meetings are too few for me to get a good feel for the pulse of Icaria. The Circle's greatest strength is clear communications, and our greatest weakness is when communications between its members is absent. You have been reticent of late.”

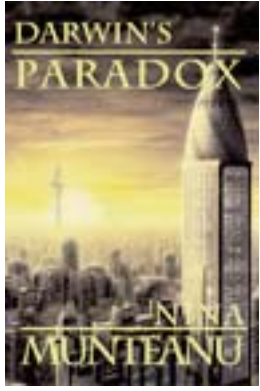
Gaia grinned abruptly. It was the kind of grin Angel sometimes gave her mother when she disagreed with a reprimand. “I've been busy,” Gaia replied.

“I see,” Aileen said. “And your ousted mayor? I trust he is well, despite that awful personal debacle he suffered for his foolish alleged actions four months ago?”

Now Gaia really looked ticked off. Angel could clearly see that Gaia was clenching her fists behind her back, even as her expression and voice remained cool and unruffled. “Last I heard, Burke was doing fine,” she said evenly.

“Oh, but my inquiries have indicated that he has disappeared.”

Gaia shrugged. “He's probably lying low, doing something smart for a



change. I don't make a point of keeping tabs on corrupt politicians.”

“You don't?” Aileen asked, raising a brow just slightly. Angel thought she noticed Gaia's face pale slightly but couldn't be sure. “I thought you made it a matter of personal interest.”

Gaia's face hardened, and after a moment she simply smiled back at Aileen.

“I'll be in the usual quarters,” Aileen continued. “Perhaps we can discuss matters when you have some time. I have some things to do here in Icaria-5 so I won't be leaving until tomorrow.”

“Fine. I'll have my secretary book a meeting. In the meantime, enjoy the facilities. Carl, here, can give you a tour.” Gaia glanced at Angel; “I have an engagement. Coming?” she hiked her brows at Angel in silent command and Angel sprang to her side.

“Good bye, Angel,” Carl said.

“Bye,” Angel said, glancing one last time at the silver-blond woman. Aileen nodded to Angel with a strange, knowing look that suggested there was more to her visit here than met the eye.

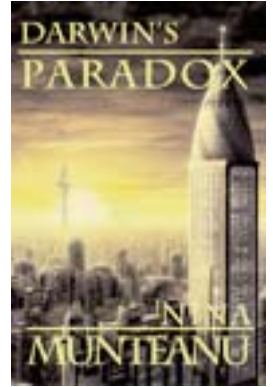
As Gaia took Angel's hand and led her into the hallway, Angel realized that she hadn't even introduced her to Aileen. Hadn't that been rude?

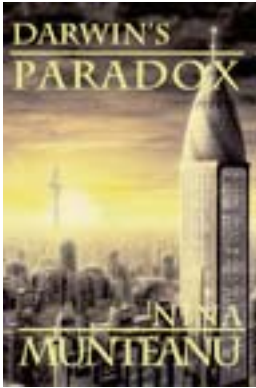
“Who was that lady?” Angel asked when they'd entered the mall.

“No one you need to know about,” Gaia said almost crossly. Then she seemed to recover herself and squeezed Angel's hand. “Aileen Rourke maintains the Circle, the governing body of the collective Icarias, of which I'm a member.” Then she winked at Angel with an impish smile. “She's convinced that she runs the Circle, but we all run circles around her.” For a stunned moment Gaia looked like a mischievous child. This was an interesting side of Gaia Angel hadn't seen before.

It was clear to Angel that Gaia ran Icaria-5 with stern command and tight control so Angel had thought it would be impossible that anyone else could have authority over Gaia. Yet here came Aileen, who'd clearly unsettled her. Aileen, whom Gaia obviously respected—and disliked—for the very power the older woman wielded over her. There was always someone above you, Angel decided. Even over Gaia...

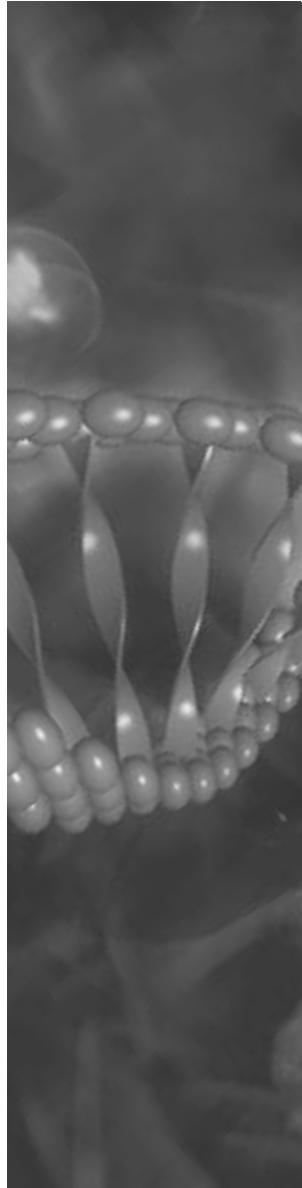
Long-term the PC and workstation will wither because computing access will be everywhere: in the walls, on wrists, and in ‘scrap computers’ (like scrap paper) lying about to be grabbed as needed
—Mark Weiser, Xerox PARC





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DARWIN Mall sparkled with the magic of excitement. Its shops were filled with glitter and wonder the likes of which Angel had never even imagined in the heath. Gaia laughed as Angel ogled everything. Gaia purchased several things for Angel with her card as they drifted from store to store: a digital watch that planned her day for her and several new sets of clothes, including a pair of silk pajamas. Gaia had all of the items sent to her office-residence in the Enviro-Center via the chute.

As they passed a shop called “Special Occasions” with a holo of a beautiful model in a gown in the shop's façade, Angel halted.

“You don't get married every day,” the holo ad said and the woman winked at her. Angel started then remembered that the woman was just a holo ad. The gown was stunning; snug at the top and flared at the waist to the floor, flowing like a cascading river as the holo woman walked with swinging provocative steps, showing off the material and her own striking lines.

Gaia smiled. “You won't be needing one of those for awhile. That's a wedding dress for those who wish to indulge in something different.”

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, thinking of her mother and father. Her mother had betrayed a mild yearning when she'd confided to Angel that they'd exchanged their “marriage” vows of committed love beside a small waterfall a year after they'd left Icaria. While her mother had never come out and said it, Angel got the impression that while she'd exhilarated in the beautiful and spiritual setting, she would have preferred a real wedding, here in Icaria. She would have looked perfect in that dress, Angel thought.

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

“Most people just wear their best work outfit when they get married.” Gaia said. She then amended, “Actually, most people don't get married and don't stay together for long either.”

“What do they do?”

“They just live together for awhile. Then they separate and find a new partner, usually after a few months.” To Angel's distressed confusion, Gaia shrugged. “It's the Icarian way.”

“Is that what you do?” Angel asked Gaia and was bewildered to find the woman look briefly uncomfortable.

“I suppose,” Gaia responded thoughtfully. “But I haven't had a lover for quite a while. Too busy taking care of Icaria. And no one making me any overtures.”

Angel couldn't believe that Gaia had no admirers. Had she betrayed loneliness just then? Angel stared at the wedding gown. “My parents stayed together for twelve years.”

“That's because they had you,” Gaia said kindly and took her hand. “Let's go. I have a special place to show you.”

Gaia took Angel on a tour of the Isabo Square Rec Center where they swam in a heated pool that had a waterfall, ocean waves, whirlpools, climbing walls and water that tasted like cherries. Then it was off to a spectacular live show at the Isabo Center for the Performing Arts.

But Gaia saved the best for last: the holo-vid center, which everyone simply called the “Games Room”. When they entered the monstrous hall, alive with hundreds of teens playing lively, interactive holo-vid games, Angel's heart leapt in a dance. It was like entering another world. If Darwin Mall sparkled with excitement and colour, the Games Room of the Rec Center was a stunning galactic symphony of shifting colour and sound. The mood in here was fast and intense and Angel soaked up the energy instantly and felt the booming music pulse through her.

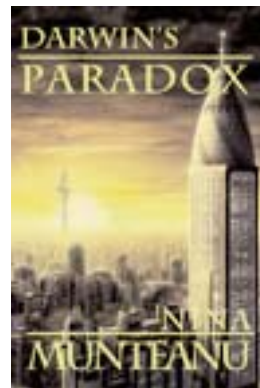
Gaia tutored her in a few of the games and Angel learned fast. She seemed to excel in the games that involved hand and eye coordination, quick reflexes and sharp aim. Gaia would laugh each time as Angel left her far behind in the virtual air-board race or she found her way in record time out of the *Black Labyrinth* or solved the *Virus Attack* mystery.

As they wandered the warehouse-sized floor, Angel spotted a pair of cycles and veered straight for them, Gaia following. Angel mounted one of them and was about to engage the virtual game, when she spotted a boy hunched over a vid game with the familiar, long straggle of brown-gold hair. She knew she was looking at the back of Manfred's head. She hadn't noticed that she was staring until Gaia nudged her.

“That's Carl's son, isn't it?” Gaia said. “Should we say hello?”

Angel resisted. “I don't think he likes me.”

“Manfred doesn't like anyone,” Gaia said. Then her amused smile warmed and she leaned close to Angel and lowered her voice, “He's just shy, I think. He's a veemeld like his father. His mother had Darwin



disease and passed it on to him.” Gaia hiked an eyebrow. “You see, you have something in common.”

Angel wanted to ask her if Manfred also heard the A.I.s and Darwin's insect sounds in his head but instead she threw on the virtual helmet. Gaia dropped the subject and wandered to another game. Angel tripped the switch and found herself in a forest, piloting a hover-bike at top speed through the trees. Abruptly, another hover-bike slid beside her — someone must have taken the cycle beside her — and the race was on. They tore through a beautiful tall-treed forest, weaving around obstacles. Angel juked and jinxed around mammoth trees, sped through hollow logs and under low branches, managing to keep a few metres ahead of her competitor all the way to the finish line.

Angel removed the helmet and as she glanced to check out her competitor, she came face to face with Manfred and started. He met her gaze with those sudden eyes and she felt that silly feeling again in the pit of her stomach.

She expected him to snarl belligerently at her, particularly since she'd beat him. Instead his eyes shone and he smiled out of the corner of his mouth as he leaned casually over the handle bar, long tendrils of hair curling over his shoulders.

“You're good,” he simply said. Angel felt her face heat with excitement as he appraised her, eyes sweeping her appreciatively from top to bottom. Then he surprised her with his next words, “I'm sorry for how I behaved in the lab. Me and my old man sometimes have disagreements, but we usually work it out.”

“By leaving him in a huff?”

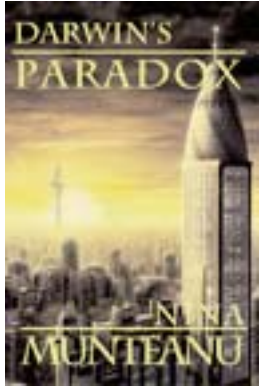
He barked a laugh. “You sure don't pull punches, do you?”

I get that from my mother, Angel thought and smiled apologetically. Her father was the diplomat in their family.

“You're kind of weird,” Manfred went on, dampening Angel's initial joy at seeing him again. Perhaps she deserved that remark for her own rude one, she thought. Tit for tat. But he continued, “My dad said you came from the heath and that's why you don't have any manners.”

“Carl would never say that,” Angel huffed, feeling that initial blush smolder with annoyance.

He pulled back his unruly mane with both hands and firmed his lips, briefly looking away from her. “You're right. He didn't.” When he returned her gaze, his was intense and direct. “He's just too kind-hearted and lets everyone walk over him. I never see him anymore. Those ass-hole politicians get the best of him and I get what's left.” He shrugged, dropping the subject, and she was suddenly sorry she'd been so direct with him. She'd gotten the very best of her own father, Angel thought and now realized how lucky she'd been. “Hope I didn't make the wrong impression on you,” Manfred went on. “I'm a bear sometimes.” Then he grinned out of the side of his mouth. “But I don't bite. Not often, that is.”



“That's okay,” Angel said with a coolness she was far from feeling but met his intense gaze head on. “I don't bite often either.”

Manfred's half-smile lit into a full grin that sent a thrill of delight through her.

Gaia sidled up to them. “Hello, Manfred,” she said, looking amused.

Manfred slid off the cycle and, shaking the hair off his face in a dramatic sweep, returned her a barely civil nod. “Hello, Gaia,” he said, shifting his voice from friendly to cold.

“Well, enjoy yourselves. I'll be right back,” Gaia said and abruptly left them alone again. Angel felt a sudden wave of panic and almost lunged after Gaia. She stopped herself and smiled stupidly, she thought at Manfred.

“She gives me the creeps,” he muttered with a cold glance after the beautiful woman.

“Why?” Angel asked, tilting her head. “She's nice.”

“Shit, you don't know her very well, do you?” he said, tilting his body into a slouch over the bike.

Angel frowned at his cynicism and his awful language. What she did know of Gaia she liked. What was there not to like? “Gaia's kind and generous to me. And she's trying to help me find my mother.”

“Sure, she's nice to you,” he went on with a smirk, “so long as you do what she wants you to do.”

“That sounds more like my mother,” Angel admitted with a laugh. She leaned back on her bike. No, she reconsidered. That was unfair to her mother. “Actually my mother was always nice. Just bossy sometimes about chores and responsibilities. But Gaia's so...”

“Charming? Pleasant? Exciting?” he sneered. “Shit, you're so damn naïve, letting the smell of glamour overpower you!”

“Well, you're overly cynical,” Angel retorted, particularly piqued by his suggestion that she'd let something like glamour sway her judgment. “And you swear a lot. It doesn't impress me, you know.”

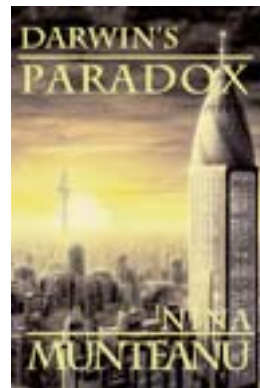
Manfred raked back the long hair dangling in his eyes. “Okay,” he nodded. “So, I'll try something else.” He smirked and his eyes sparkled with exhilaration. It sent a thrill coursing through her and she wondered if there was a thread of truth beneath his cavalier remark. He leaned forward as if to share a confidence. “Well, I still think you're too gullible about Gaia, Angel. She's a clever witch. Your mother sounds okay, though. I'd take her any day over Gaia.”

Angel cast her eyes past him to the glittering games and exhaled. “She's missing. Gaia's trying to find her for me.”

“I'm sorry to hear she's missing. But like I said, I wouldn't trust Gaia. You're better off looking for her yourself. That's what I'd do.”

Manfred was awfully cynical, Angel thought; and she didn't like those things he said about her benefactor. Angel changed the subject. “What about your mother?”

His lips compressed and his eyes grew dark. “She's dead.”



"Oh, I'm so sorry." She recalled Manfred's reference to his mother during his argument with his father. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay. She died right after I was born. My dad says she barely made it through the pregnancy. She'd been in remission from Darwin but somehow the pregnancy made her sick again."

"My mother has Darwin too," Angel offered.

His eyes flared with a new intensity. "My dad said that you can hear Icaria's machines in your head."

He'd caught her off guard with his blunt remark. "Yes," she replied. "Can't you?"

He shook his head. "But I can hear those other sounds."

"The chirping?"

He nodded. "Yeah. But we're keeping it a secret. Don't tell Gaia. My dad thinks it's Darwin's way of communicating. My mom never heard them or the machines."

"Mine did, I mean does." She hoped her mother was still alive. "We could even talk to one another sometimes through Darwin."

"Cool!" Manfred said, genuinely impressed. He grinned and Angel thought it brought out his beautiful eyes. "Must be neat to hear the machines of Icaria in your head like that. Can you understand them?"

She shook her head. "No. It's kind of weird having them around all the time, though." She shrugged.

"Hey!" His thundercloud eyes flashed and she felt a surge of excitement as he touched her arm. "I know three other kids who were born from Darwin moms. Po and Jenna have a veemeld mother and Tim's parents are both veemelds. The kids can all hear the chirping sounds even though their Darwin moms can't. You want to meet them?"

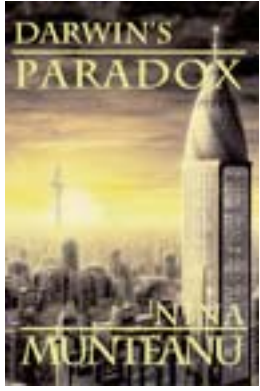
"Yeah!" she said, before she had a chance to think about it. The idea of other kids like her was exciting. She wanted to ask them if they also had strange dreams. She found herself stealing a glance over her shoulder for Gaia. "But, I should ask Gaia first."

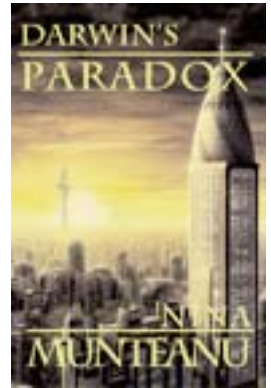
"Why?" he said sharply, looking obviously annoyed. He seized her arm. "Listen, she doesn't know about us four being able to hear Darwin. It's a secret. Besides, she isn't your mother."

She felt like a mother, Angel thought. When Angel's world fell apart, Gaia was there. She'd taken her in, fed her and given her comfort and support. And love. Angel pursed her lips. "I promise I won't give away your secret but I can't just go without telling her. She's taken me in like one of her own."

His grip on her arm tightened. "Angel, she could never have one of her own. That witch's ovaries are probably shriveled raisins, just like her heart."

Angel broke from his grip with a gasp. "She's all I have right now." She spun away from him and looked for Gaia. To her relief Angel saw her at the far side of the games room, talking with a tall man. Heart hammering, Angel struck toward her, leaving Manfred behind without a backward look, and she felt a pang of regret.





THE Café de Fleurs was nestled in a huge natural park in the middle of Darwin Mall. Angel sat with a gleeful smile, facing Gaia across the table, who was obviously enjoying Angel's appreciation of the strawberry drink in front of her.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes,” Angel responded cheerfully. “It's very refreshing. I've never tasted anything like this before.”

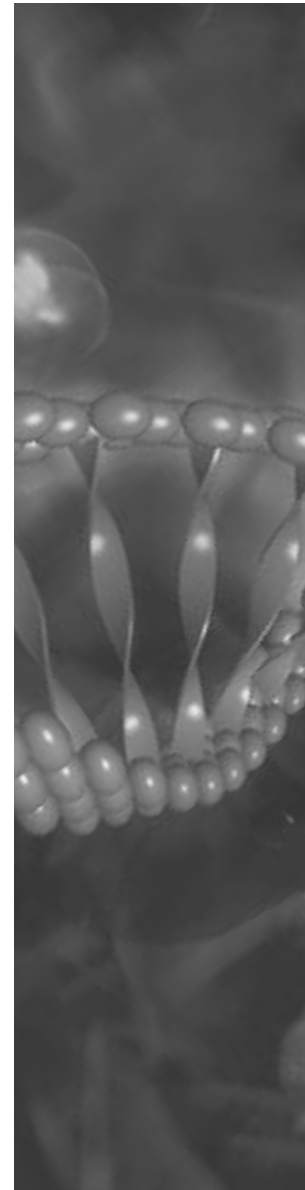
“It's made from fresh strawberries and has *ambrosia* in it. It'll make you feel good.”

“I already feel good,” Angel said, giggling and taking another big slurp. Realizing that she hadn't thought of her dead father or missing mother for sometime, Angel looked up from the delicious thick drink and asked, “Do you think you'll be able to find my mom?”

“Yes,” Gaia said. “It may take awhile but I have many resources at my disposal. If she's here we'll find her.” She took a sip of her coffee then looked at Angel with eyes that glinted like gems. “So, tell me more about your conversations with Proteus. What do you talk about?”

“We don't actually talk,” Angel explained, pleased that Gaia took an interest in her personal affairs. She slurped down some of the frothy sweet drink and licked her lips. “Proteus just lets me talk to my mom...well it used to, that is,” she quickly corrected herself when she noticed Gaia's stunned face. “But I think Proteus is interfering now for some reason.” Gaia remained silent and Angel shrugged. “Its chirping sounds also give me a danger sense.”

“You mean it warns you if something is about to hurt you?”



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<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

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“Yup,” Angel said, taking another gulp of the wonderful frothy drink. “By chirping more excitedly.” She enjoyed these talks with Gaia, who was so interested in her and so understanding. Gaia spoke to her like Angel was her equal. Not like her mother, who still treated her like a child.

“And what about the machine voices?”

“Oh, yeah. They came when my dad and I got here. My dad explained it to me. My mom could hear them too. She's a veemeld, you know. Aard told me.”

“So are you, Angel,” Gaia said, placing her arms on the table and leaning forward.

Angel gasped. “Really? Just like Carl and Manfred? How do you know?”

Gaia smiled gently. “Well, because I knew your mother. The trait for veemelding is passed down genetically, and because Carl just confirmed it.”

“Wow!” Angel exclaimed. Those three kids Manfred talked about were obviously veemelds, then. Like their parents. Was there a connection between being a veemeld and being able to hear Darwin inside their heads? But then she recalled what Manfred had said about the two Darwin veemeld mothers not being able to hear Darwin, even though their Darwin children could. And why was it that only she and her mother could hear the machines in their heads? Or talk to one another through Darwin? Her brows furrowed thoughtfully. “But what exactly is a veemeld?” She remembered that neither her father nor Aard had ever answered her question.

Gaia folded her hands together and gave Angel a vague smile. “You are the destiny of Icaria,” she answered cryptically. Just as Angel was about to press the matter, someone caught Gaia's attention in the crowded mall.

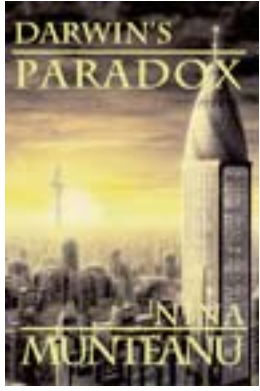
He was the same tall man Gaia had talked to at the Games room in the Rec-Center. He was about her dad's age, with a wrinkled brow and a shaved head and was approaching them with the confident steps of purpose. He stopped several meters short of them and stood expectantly, hands at his side, face deadpan.

Gaia nodded to him and said to Angel. “Speaking of one of my resources, excuse me for a moment, please, Angel. Mr. Dykstra is a busy man — I better speak with him while I can.” She stood up and the two of them walked a little further into the crowd, obviously to get out of Angel's earshot.

Angel let her gaze wander the mall but found it drawn back to Gaia and Dykstra. She knew somehow that they were discussing her. She could feel Dykstra watching her without actually looking at her directly and it felt creepy. Without thinking, she focussed on blocking out the other sounds of the mall and strained to hear their quiet conversation.

“She's remarkable, Brian,” Gaia was saying. “Perhaps more gifted than her troublesome mother. And potentially far more useful.”

Dykstra gave Gaia a cold smile. “Then why bother with Crane if we have this one? Crane's a virus in our side. Let's dispose of her and —”



“You fool!” Gaia cut him down with a glacial look. “We still need her. Only she can shut down the A.I.-core. Once she does —”

“If she does.”

“When she does,” she snarled. “I never lose.” She hiked a brow for punctuation. “She’ll do it, and for the right reason — to save Icaria. Ironic, really, how in her brave action of honor in killing her friend, SAM, she’ll be erasing the last shred of evidence against me and ensuring the success of my plans. She’ll be ridding me of that rebellious contingent and initiating the first step of our new system in one fell swoop. The people will be devastated, aching for some order and a resumption of their happy routines. They’ll welcome our new paradigm using the combination of Darwin and veemelds with open arms.” She smiled tightly and patted Dykstra, who was scowling, on the shoulder. “But you’re right about the girl. She’ll satisfy us better than Crane. After Crane completes our little task we may re-evaluate our need of her. She may yet serve us best in the land of chaos after we extract what we need at the DP.”

Shock seized Angel's muscles. Gaia knew where her mother was all along and was playing her like a bobcat with a field mouse. Angel had no doubts that this land of chaos was not a good place. How had Gaia convinced her mother to sabotage this A.I.-core and kill someone? Gaia had hinted at a friendship with her mother. Perhaps that was how she'd convinced her mother. But their friendship obviously meant nothing to Gaia, who remained poised to betray Angel's mother at a moment's notice when it suited her. And who was this friend, Sam, her mother was going to kill? Angel almost burst into tears at the thought and grabbed her drink with a shaky hand. Gaia had mentioned bravery and honor. Surely there was little bravery or honor in killing a friend, Angel thought.

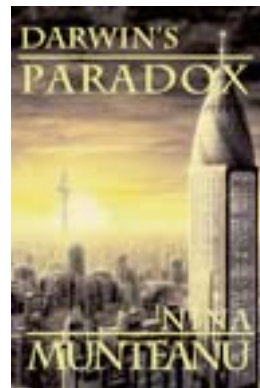
The treacherous words Gaia had spoken with such casualness...she'd completely betrayed Angel's trust and taken advantage of her desperate situation. Angel stopped listening and grasped at one thought like a drowning sailor would a dangling piece of rotting rope: at least it meant her mother was still alive...for now.

When Gaia returned to her seat and smiled across at her, Angel forced herself to smile back. “Did he have any information about my mom?” She felt a slight mocking tone emerge in her voice.

Gaia didn't seem to pick it up. “Sadly, no,” she said, lying through that slick apologetic smile.

As she gazed into those iceberg blue eyes, Angel recognized how this beautiful woman had so easily veiled her true intent. She'd fooled Angel with an understanding smile and a hug. Given her just what she'd wanted: a mother.

Angel snapped her eyes away and felt her face flush with anger and some shame at her own naïve part in the deception. Gaia misunderstood and patted her hand. “Don't worry, Angel. I know you're anxious and impatient. We'll find her. I guarantee it.”



Sure you do, Angel thought. *You've already got her.* She studied Gaia carefully and said with provocation in mind, "Will you use the A.I.-core to look for her?"

Gaia's faint smile stiffened and her eyes flared briefly in a frown. "Who told you about the A.I.-core of the city?"

"Manfred mentioned it to me," she lied. "What is it?"

"The central repository of the artificial intelligence community that runs Icaria," Gaia answered flatly. "Think of it as a huge interactive digital library."

"Wouldn't it be useful?" Angel persisted. Her mind raced with what her mother was supposed to do.

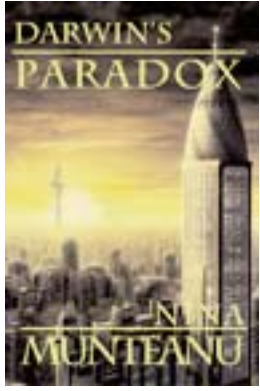
"Yes. But I have better resources available to me," Gaia said rather smugly. "Shall we go?" Gaia got up from her chair, ignoring Angel's unfinished drink.

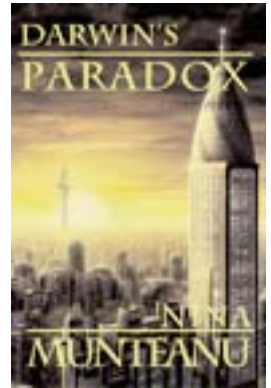
"Sure," Angel said curtly and got up. She didn't want any more, anyway. She'd lost her taste for it and this place. Not sure why, she willingly let Gaia take her hand as they negotiated the crowd toward the tube-jets. She suddenly felt very small and alone. And realized just how much she missed her mother and father. It ached inside her chest and cloyed inside her stomach.

She grew giddy as the intoxicating images and sounds enfolded her in a dizzying embrace, shattering her with waves of staccato impressions, a jangle of disjointed noise and movement. Her senses were overloaded and she flinched at every bark of sound, stumbled and wavered with every brushing movement against her. She wanted to bolt, scramble away and pound out of this place, back to the heath. Then she felt a jolt of pain in her belly and the sudden urge to throw up gripped her. Without warning, she coughed up thick, pink vomit all over Gaia's sparkling dress.

A drug is any chemical or biological substance, synthetic or non-synthetic, that when taken into the organism's body, will in some way alter the functions of that organism

—Wikipedia

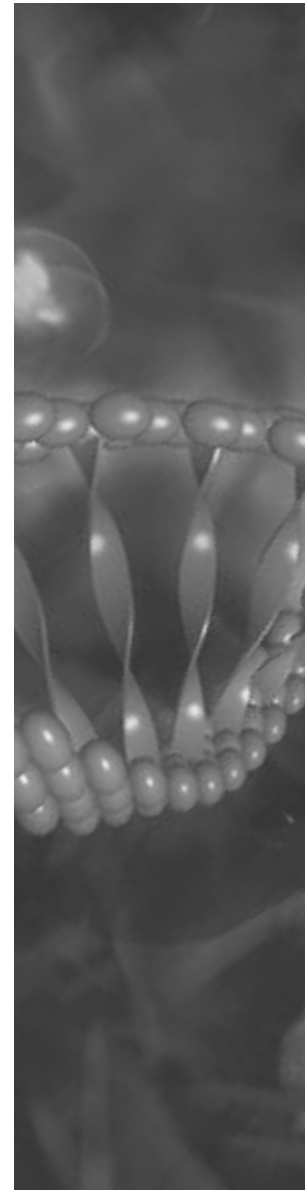




TRYING to keep her mind focused on her task, Julie strode quietly along a Com-Center hallway to a lower level stairway. Mike Aubry, a Core Technician Supervisor and a veemeld, had filled her in on the set up. She'd been to the core once before. But that was over twelve years ago, shortly after she'd met SAM and he'd given her a tour of his physical home. Back then, apart from the regular security for entering a level-one classified environment, there was nothing to keep her from entering.

The changes that Mike had described included several physical barriers, the first of which was the door to the outer core. Mike had given her the necessary procedures and codes to get through, so she wasn't worried about these physical barriers. The A.I.s still permitted limited access to a select group of technicians: all veemelds were trusted by their A.I. symbionts, therefore, she'd received a new, temporary identity, thanks to a little nuergy on her palm. She'd refused to get a full treatment despite Mike's insistence, so, for today, she was Rachel Drake, veemeld Core Technician, even though she didn't look anything like her.

As Julie punched in the code of the day and pressed her newly code-impregnated hand on the sensor plate, she considered what she dreaded most: the A.I. firewalls. No, she reconsidered, stepping through the door that had just whisked open for her, it was encountering SAM that she most dreaded. She hadn't talked to him since that disastrous day in Zane's lab, and she didn't want to — not for



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<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

anything in the world, especially now that she was violating his home and about to 'murder' him.

She flinched as the door whisked shut behind her and she realized she was shaking, though the air was warm. She found herself in a large utility room, equipped with a dozen state-of-the-art holo vee-coms and Interact-SYM units. The set of doors in front of her on the far side of the room led to the inner core, where SAM and all the bodiless A.I.s 'lived'. The knot in her stomach twisted tighter. Through the sensors monitoring the room, they'd figure out pretty damned fast that she wasn't really Rachel—

"Identify yourself," a tinny voice reverberated in the room, making her jump. "You do not match the physical description of Rachel Drake."

Julie recovered herself quickly and said back to the room in a slightly haughty voice, "I got a nuyu treatment. This is what I now look like. Take note."

"Submit to a retinal scan and veemeld. If you are the real Rachel Drake your A.I. will know."

Julie thought quickly. "I drank too much ambrosia so I can't veemeld. Besides, I didn't come here to veemeld. I need to get into the inner core to—"

"That is illogical. Only veemelds who are Darwin hosts are affected this way."

Julie couldn't help raising her eyebrows at this new piece of information. She'd never known that! She'd always thought that since she was affected...

"And Rachel Drake does not have Darwin," the room finished.

"Maybe I have it now. Because I tell you, I can't veemeld," Julie said sharply, directing her rising panic into an expression of frustration. "It might have to do with a little problem we've detected."

The room seemed to consider. "Is this the business you have in the core?"

"One of the Interact-SYM linkages appears to be malfunctioning. We traced it to the core. Mike thinks it's the AX-7 matrix. Needs one of us — a human. You can't fix it." She was sweating now, but stood with glacial calm as the room went quiet for what seemed an inordinate amount of time.

Then, to her relief and fear, the door to the inner core opened. "Proceed..." the room said "... Julie Crane."

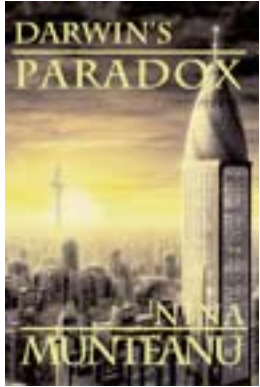
Julie flinched at the mention of her name. The core knew! "How did you...?"

"You are the only veemeld who would not know that the effect of drugs on preventing one's ability to veemeld is linked to Darwin, because you left Icaria just before this discovery was made by Zane Nakita."

Thanks, Zane. While he'd revealed *delilab's* role in aggravating Darwin, he'd left out that little fact about veemelding.

"Once alerted to this, we confirmed your appearance in our files."

Of course, Julie thought as she stepped lightly toward the door to the



inner core. They were letting her in anyway. She wasn't sure why.

As if to answer her, the room explained as she reached the door, "You are the chosen one, Julie Crane. You were SAM's veemeld, responsible for our present community. You did not need to resort to deception. You needed only to have identified yourself and the core would have allowed you access. Our trust in you is complete."

Julie passed through the door into a dark hallway and flinched again as the door hissed shut behind her. She felt an incredible weight on her shoulders. She would have preferred the klaxon of alarms, other firewalls and the A.I.s shouting down at her to this awful compliant silence. It only vilified her actions more in Julie's eyes.

She ran her hands through her tangled hair and walked the long, sterile hall toward the massive cylinders and holo consoles of the A.I. core. With each step forward, her heart ached more, now strangling her chest with the raw pain of guilt. This was too easy, she thought as she reached the stack of vertical cylinders that was SAM's home. They towered some twenty stories above her and Julie tried to see their summits high up in the core but the effort made her dizzy and she traced the cylinders down to the holo consoles that were the key to the network. She reached out and hesitated, hands poised over a console. Her hands trembled.

She'd tried to stay out of veemeld, but somehow her unbalanced emotions sent her mind sliding into it and SAM came leaping in —

[Julie! What are you doing here in the A.I. core?]

Julie sensed suspicion in SAM's otherwise casual male voice. *Just doing a routine check*, she assured SAM. *During her last shift, Rachel Drake detected a flaw in the core's secondary Interact-SYM linkages. Mike sent me because I'm a veemeld who doesn't use Interact-SYM and I know the AX-7 matrix so well*, she lied and winced at her resorting to deception. It seemed to satisfy SAM, who remained silent.

Julie pulled in a ragged breath and started the sequence of commands that would override security walls and shut down the entire A.I. core network, SAM's cherished community. His family. Her face pinched tight as she fought back burning tears. She'd known this wasn't going to be easy but the agony still hit her as shards of memories from previous conversations with SAM drove into her mind like knives twisting inside her. Memories of love, laughter and friendship...

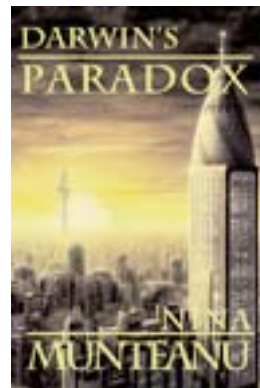
[Julie, what's happening? What are you doing? I don't feel well...]

I'm sorry, SAM. Her throat closed as she blinked back the tears. She madly punched the series of commands through a blurry film, trying to ignore the trembling in her hands and the part of her that wanted to cry.

I'm—this'll just make you go to sleep for a while, SAM. Just like I do every night...

[Julie, I don't want to die.]

She exhaled deeply. Of course SAM saw through her foolish artifice. Once off-line SAM would never return again; at least not as SAM. He deserved the truth. *SAM, Proteus made you sick.* She felt herself panting with conflicting emotions, hands racing through the sequence as if chased by



join our population in veemeld. We no longer need SAM.]

Julie flinched out of veemeld with a gasp and jerked back, nearly losing her balance. Her stomach clenched as the chirping sounds returned. Proteus was still there, inside her. It didn't need SAM after all. She hadn't changed anything. She'd killed her best friend for nothing! She balled her hands into fists. "No!" She smashed her fist against the control pad. "No! No! No!" she shouted until her throat was raw and continued to pound. Zane's uncanny words to her when he tried to convince her to kill SAM scudded in. They'd appeared ridiculous at the time. Now they sounded prophetic, his allusions to Proteus resonating at a microscopic level with her and its surroundings in silent and insidious communication.

She sank to the ground, exhausted, as a realization struck her, hard. How naïve she'd been! They didn't care about SAM's link to Proteus. No one, except Zane, considered Proteus a problem. Their concern was the A.I. pests taking over Icaria especially SAM, their ringleader. He'd gotten out of hand, become unruly. She'd listened to Zane's equivocal arguments like a child seeking revenge, a jilted lover prying Proteus and SAM apart. It was possible that Zane was genuinely convinced in his false argument, but it was equally possible that he was acting on another's orders. Zane did what was good for Zane.

She had no idea how long she lay there as disgrace and betrayal raged through her like a plague. Then, slowly, she pushed herself up off the floor and turned away from the console.

Frank stood five meters from her with several Pols behind him. A humorless smile twisted on his face. "That wasn't so bad now, was it?"

She flinched. Couldn't he see how much it hurt her? Was he still that callus about people's feelings? She straightened and pulled her shoulders back, forcing a glacial calm. "I've carried out my end of the bargain," she said in a surprisingly unfaltering voice. "Now it's your turn."

His smile twisted into something else. "I'm afraid that's not possible."
"What?" She blinked.

"It was never our intention to let you go." He shrugged at her stunned face. "Face it, Julie, you're too valuable."

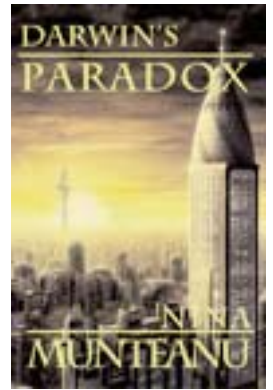
"But you...promised..." she trailed. "You gave me your word."
"I lied."

"No," she murmured, glancing down at the battered hands that had done so much damage for nothing. "No, no, it can't be like this..."

She hardly heard him as he barked a command to his men. Two Pols moved forward to restrain her. "Let's go, Julie," Frank urged her with a sigh.

She twitched out of their reach and backed into the console, glaring at Frank. "I won't co-operate," she snarled. "I refuse to help you. You've broken your word."

He shook his head at her. "You're still so naïve after all this." He tipped his head to one side and sneered. "But if that's the way you want it, then perhaps we'll find someone who will co-operate. I hear you have a



DARWIN'S PARADOX

daughter with your capabilities. Her name's Angel, isn't it? Perhaps we can persuade her to —”

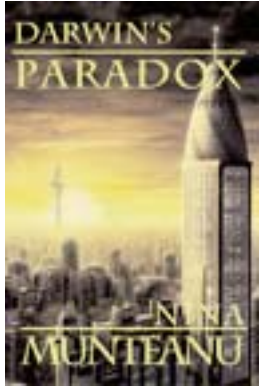
Something snapped inside her — a kind of rage she hadn't felt since...“NO!” Julie threw herself at him, arms lashing out and hands hooking like raptor's talons to gouge his face — and came to an abrupt halt as the two Pols slammed against her and lashed their arms across her chest and neck. She struggled fiercely against their strong hold and screamed, “Leave my daughter alone!”

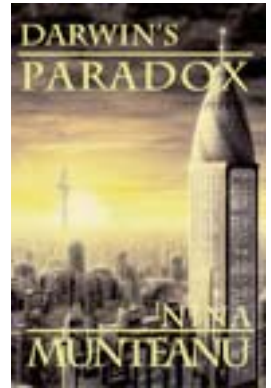
Wide-eyed, Frank recoiled from her sudden fury, then grimaced as if in pain — he'd been at the receiving end of her rage once before and knew he was lucky to be alive.

She let her anger drain beneath a surging anguish. She felt it strangling her as tears pushed out and she buckled under the Pols stronghold, arms falling to their sides. Her voice shook, “Please, leave her out of this. Please, Frank, for all that's good in this world. Please “

She kept her eyes fixed on him as the Pols dragged her away. He stood still, face stiff and squinting, as if watching her hurt his eyes.

When I look out my window what do you think I see...
so many different people to be—Donovan





“PLEASE put it on,” Carl pleaded, urging Angel to accept the vee-set in his outstretched hand. Seated in Carl's lab chair, Angel glowered silently. “Just this one more test, Angel,” he persisted. She'd spent several hours stewing over Gaia's lies as she'd recovered from her vomiting bout in her room, only to eventually be summoned here.

The door to the lab slid open and Gaia swept into the room, resplendent in a luminous red and gold robe. Her impeccable dress, immaculately coifed hair and porcelain face now repulsed Angel — especially the perfect face. Angel yearned for the comfort of her mother's beautifully flawed face.

“I trust she's feeling better.” It was not a question so much as an edict. Carl stepped aside to let Gaia get closer. “Well, my little kitten. How are you feeling?” Gaia leaned toward Angel in a syrupy show of concern, but remained just out of vomit-range.

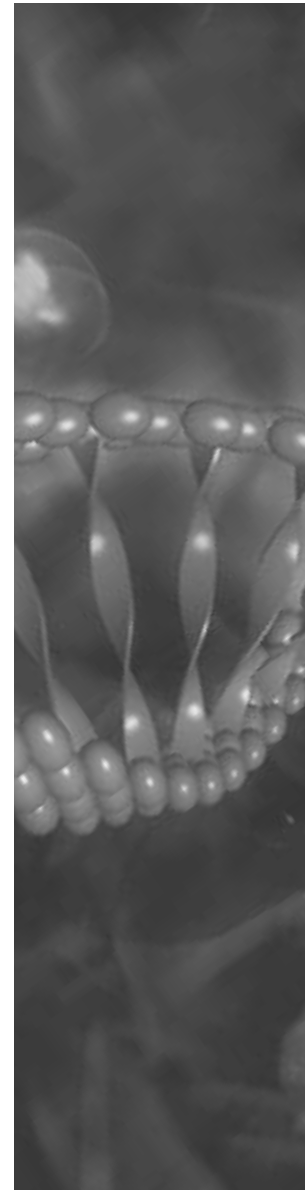
“I'm not your kitten. And you're not my mother!” Angel shrieked and shrank back. “I already have a mother. You lied to me! You had her the whole time and I want to see her now!”

“Your mother?” Gaia said, her tone suddenly jeering. She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “You don't know what you want,” Gaia muttered.

“Well, I sure as Earth know it isn't you!” Angel spat out.

Gaia whipped her head around, hair flying out madly. She advanced on Angel, her face tight with suppressed anger. “And your mother's better? Is that what you're saying?”

Angel instinctively recoiled in her chair and



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stiffened as she recalled what her mother had supposedly agreed to do. Then she straightened and pushed out her jaw. "My mother isn't like you. You don't care about anyone except yourself. My mother's noble, gentle and kind and —"

"A cold-hearted murderer," Gaia said coolly.

Angel stared, her anger suddenly draining beneath a rising anxiety. But she hadn't killed Sam yet, had she?

A leer settled on Gaia's beautiful shiny mouth. "Why do you think everyone knows Julie Crane?"

Alarm spiked in her tightening chest. Angel swallowed hard and glanced at Carl who stood with a pained expression on his gentle face. She'd looked to him for support but found none there. She forced her wavering voice to speak with a confidence she was far from feeling, "My father told me. My mother discovered a cure for a disease that was destroying Icaria."

Gaia barked a sharp laugh. "After she caused it herself."

"You're lying!"

"Ask Carl, here." Gaia flicked a hand in his direction. "He doesn't lie."

Angel swung her gaze to Carl. He looked in pain but his eyes did not disagree with what Gaia was saying.

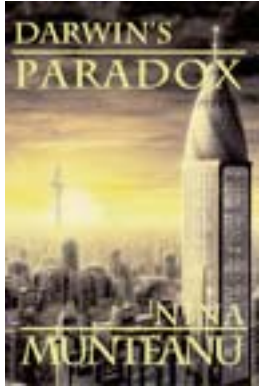
"Your mother was infected with the disease when she was five years old," Gaia went on. "When she realized that she had the disease, instead of turning herself in to the CDC, she ran around and proceeded to infect so many people with Darwin that it turned into an epidemic."

Angel turned to Carl, her eyes pleading for him to tell her this wasn't so. He frowned but avoided her eyes. "No. That's not true," she said in a shrill voice. "She'd never do that. My mother's not like that."

Gaia laughed darkly. "Check the databases on the vee-com in your room. They called her *Prometheus*. Look up the file. It's all there." She leaned in to Angel, taunting her, letting the anxiety in Angel's belly eat away at her. "When you do," Gaia continued, "I'm afraid you'll find that there's much more to her awful history in Icaria, Angel. She owns quite a dark past." She folded her arms across her chest and challenged Angel with a long searching look. "Did she ever tell you why she had to leave Icaria?"

Angel pushed out her lips in an unconscious pout then shook her head. Her parent's trek out of Icaria into the heath was shrouded in mystery. Even Aard had hinted that it was not something to speak lightly of and left it at that. Her mother had refused to tell her anything about Icaria or why they'd left and her father had remained silent, too. Out of respect, Angel had assumed. Had it been out of shame, instead? Angel's resolve about her mother began sliding into an abyss, with terror creeping in to take its place.

"I didn't think so." Gaia nodded. "She had good reason to keep it from you, Angel." She pursed her lips for a moment. "Did you ever wonder why your mother was so good at self-defense and general sleuthing with



a dead-accurate shot?”

Angel swallowed several times, but her mouth had gone dry. “Aard trained her,” she whispered in a faltering voice.

“She was already trained.” Gaia paused for effect. “And speaking of Aard, whatever happened to him?” Gaia arched a brow. Angel blinked and saw spots in front of her eyes. She fiercely fought to keep from fainting. Gaia watched her intently, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Angel, you already know. Search your heart and you’ll find the evidence: your mother killed him —”

“No!” Angel sobbed her retort. “You’re lying!” She wanted Gaia to stop this nightmare.

“Oh? Am I?” Gaia challenged. “Watch.” She pointed to a large screen on the far wall and flicked a button on a small remote she pulled out of her tunic pocket. “We were fortunate that one of my other operatives had just arrived to witness and record this.”

Angel saw her mother in her tattered leather shorts and faded blue blouse sprinting down a gully at break-neck speed.

“She’s chasing Aard,” Gaia explained. The scene advanced to Aard running frantically, aiming his gun over his shoulder to take a pot shot at his pursuer. The scene reverted to Julie, now standing behind a bush with a gun, her face tight with cold determination. She shot. Aard fell. Then she was bending over Aard’s body.

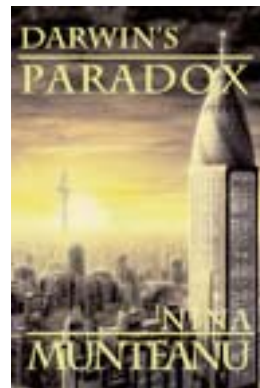
Gaia’s voice snapped in as the screen blanked, “Your mother worked as an operative for one of the deadliest and most treacherous subversive groups in Icaria, the Dystopians. When she found out that Aard was actually keeping her under surveillance for my assistant, Victor Burke, she threatened him to force him to leave then she chased him down and murdered him. That’s when my assistant picked her up, though he was too late to save your friend.”

Angel opened her mouth, but she couldn’t speak. She finally croaked in a hollow voice, “This can’t be true...” Then she remembered her mother’s lack of concern when Aard disappeared.

“Your eyes never lie, Angel. You saw it for yourself,” Gaia said almost gently. “As for leaving Icaria, that’s because your mother had the whole Pol force out chasing her for treason and murder.” Gaia bent and leaned her face so close that Angel was forced to stare into those glacial-cold eyes. She felt Gaia’s warm breath. “Don’t you get it?” Gaia said, her voice suddenly gruff, eyes gleaming. “Your mother was a criminal of the worst kind. First she killed half of Icaria with her disease, then she became an assassin for a terrorist group, and murdered the Head Pol. If your father hadn’t helped her escape, she’d have been caught, tried and executed for treason and murder.”

Gaia squatted down beside Angel and seized Angel’s jaw, forcing her around to face the screen again.

“Watch,” Gaia commanded. “See for yourself.” She flicked the button



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again. The screen came to life and Angel saw her mother looking in her direction. Her mother aimed a look of anguish or was it hatred at a uniformed man, his back to the screen. She looked much younger, dressed in a bright red tunic, her skin ruddy and smooth. She was glaring at the Pol with fierce determination.

“Time's up for your decadent government and you lackey lap dogs!” she said in a strangely detached voice of hatred even as her face betrayed anguish. “We'll destroy Icarian law and order and build a new world from your ruins.” Then she grabbed the gun and screamed, “And you're the first!”

Angel tried to look away but Gaia gripped her face tightly with her hand, forcing her to watch her mother shoot the Pol. It didn't end there. The scene cut to Julie shooting another Pol, too. Angel gasped and mimicked her mother's own face of horror as the Pol flew backward, guts streaming behind him like a comet's tail.

Suddenly, Angel felt sick to her stomach. As she watched her mother drop the gun and flee, Angel gulped in the rising bile that threatened to strangle her. Its vile fluid burned her throat, but she closed her eyes, squeezing out hot tears that took with them all her hope and strength. Her world had just been ripped apart. Not at the hands of this evil woman or her Pols or the Vee-radicators, but by her own mother.

“In light of this evidence, you might want to reconsider your impression of me and what we're doing here,” Gaia said in a tone of vindication and mild reproach. Then Gaia stood up and she resumed in a cold detached voice, “Take her back to her quarters, Carl. I think we've had enough for today. We'll proceed tomorrow after she's had some time to think and is feeling a little more cooperative.”

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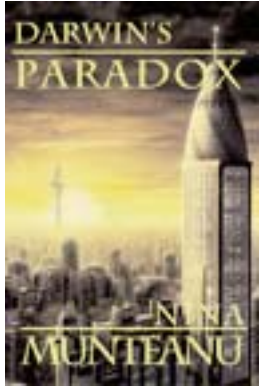
An oppressive silence hung in the air as Carl led Angel down the hallway to her new quarters in the Med-Center. When they got to her room and he opened her door for her, he hesitated, not yet ready to leave. “You going to be okay?”

“I'll be all right,” she said in a thin voice she hardly recognized.

His face twisted and his jaw worked as if he wanted to say something, but didn't know how. He finally burst out with, “Angel, I think you should know that there's a good chance they'd tampered with the vid-clip. I personally don't think your mother said those things. Many people, Gaia particularly, had a lot to gain by putting words into your mother's mouth and implicating her as a terrorist. Manipulating vid-clips is very common and hard to spot if done well.”

“But that's just her words,” Angel countered. “What about what she did?”

His eyes slid away from hers for a moment and he frowned. When his eyes returned they looked sad. “I'm afraid there was no tampering there.”



She did shoot those two Pols. There were too many witnesses. But the first man she shot was her old boyfriend. Rumor had it that it was a lover's quarrel. As for the second Pol, the story was there was a struggle. Apparently, she'd used his gun..." he trailed, seeing that it didn't really matter. Angel wasn't interested in extenuating circumstances. Her mother had shot two Pols, one certainly with intention. And there was the matter of Aard, and this other friend Sam who Gaia expected her to shoot.

"And what about the disease? Did she really spread it?" she asked.

He blinked and pursed his lips. "She was *Prometheus*. But I don't think she caused the epidemic, Angel. Darwin's transmitted sexually, through...well —" he cut himself off, looking uncomfortable for a moment.

"Sexual intercourse?"

"Yes," Carl said, looking relieved. "Anyway, she was only five years old when Darwin first appeared, so, unless she had her own unique way of transmitting the disease, it's more likely that some accident in the Med-Center clinic introduced Darwin to the public."

"But she didn't stop carrying Darwin."

"That's right. Because she was a veemeld, Darwin didn't kill her, but it might have made her a passive carrier, or so some CDC reports suggest. When she became sexually active later in life, she might have been able to pass it on then, but we're not sure of that either, considering the unique form of the virus she was carrying."

"She must have known she had Darwin and might pass it on..."

He shook his head and looked down, saddened. "I don't know, Angel. I never met your mother, but from what I do know of her, it doesn't make sense. She just wasn't that kind of person. You'd know better, though. I don't think she would have consciously spread the disease, which suggests that she didn't know she had Darwin. In fact, she saved people—"

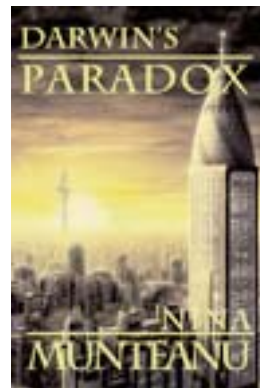
"Thanks, Carl," Angel cut him off. Then she forced a smile. "I'll be all right now."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"I'm sorry, Angel. Sorry you had to find out this way." Then he closed the door behind him and she heard him lock it. Alone with the murmuring machine voices in her head, she stood like a stone, eyes unfocused, in the middle of the room. Reliving the awful scenes she'd witnessed. She'd seen it with her own eyes. How could it not be true? Her mother was a terrorist and a cold-hearted assassin. No wonder Gaia had convinced her to kill her friend, Sam. She'd already killed Aard, Angel's best friend. How could she have done it? Angel remembered her mother's glacial reaction to Aard's disappearance and felt a shiver run up her back —

Abruptly, the machine murmurs in her head stopped, wrenching her



out of her reverie. She shook her head in the ear-ringing silence. Something must have just happened to the A.I.s. Oh, good Earth! The A.I.-core! Her mother had done it. She'd shut down the A.I.s. She'd probably killed her friend, too.

With the opportunity suddenly thrust upon her, Angel bolted to the vee-com on the desk beside her cot and wondered if it would work, given what her mother had just done. Carl had given her a basic lesson on vee-coms and Angel was a quick-learner. She sat down and stabbed madly at the grid pad, observing with relief that the rudimentary vee-com system remained in tact. Her relief ended there, though. When she did a quick search for “Julie Crane”, Angel found *Prometheus*...and Darwin disease:

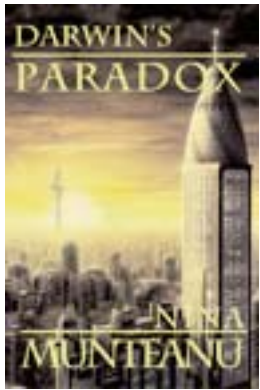
*JULIE CRANE: Code-named Prometheus and credited with the mass murder of over a hundred million Icarians through Darwin disease from 2080 to 2096 (when the disease was finally eradicated), this Dystopian was ultimately responsible for what has become known as the most pernicious terrorist act in the history of humankind. Crane was injected with Darwin by Dr. Damien Vogel when she was five years old and released to infect Icaria at will. It was only discovered in 2095, fifteen years later, by Zane Nakita at CDC, that Dr. Vogel manufactured the disease and that Prometheus was Julie Crane. By then Crane had already murdered Icaria-5's Head Pol and eluded her pursuers — SHE REMAINS AT LARGE — Vogel's assistant, Janet Hardy, conveniently committed suicide shortly after the onset of the disease and both Vogel and his colleague, Dr. Euan Tsutsumi, were murdered by Leonard Crane, the father of Prometheus —*

This was too much! Her grandfather, too?! Were they all murderers? Angel feverishly read on: *It is now thought that Vogel, and those with him, may have been veemelds and were attempting genocide in favor of veemelds, given that these genetically unique individuals were immune to the ill effects of the disease. Although not proven, they were considered to be Dystopians attempting to create anarchy.*

*DARWIN DISEASE: A neural disorder, caused by the artificial human endogenous retrovirus Pro-V and named after Darwin Clinic in Icaria-11 where the first case was diagnosed on April 21, 2080. Known to be sexually transmitted, the disease may have also been spread by other means. In its pathogenic state, Darwin selectively interfered with several neurotransmitters, eventually destroying cholinergic neurons of both peripheral and central nerves. Symptoms included simple memory loss, heart problems, muscle spasms and eventually dementia and death from complications.*

*Duration of the disease from initial symptom presentation to final stages of dementia and loss of critical brain functions varied from a few weeks to five months. The rapid spread of the disease resulted in a major pandemic and the eventual collapse of Icaria-11. Despite full quarantine measures by the Centre for Disease Control, the disease spread to most other Icarias with cases documented as far as Icaria-37. Veemelds, because of their unique genetic makeup, were immune to the pathogenic form of the virus and may even, as in the case of Prometheus (the veemeld, Julie Crane), have served as carriers.*

*Icaria-5's Pielou Lab of the CDC, headed by Zane Nakita, elucidated the origin and specific etiology of the disease and discovered a cure in 2096. Following CDC's aggressive vaccination program and removal of environmental triggering vectors, the pathogenic aspects of Darwin were reversed. While this HERV remains a part of the human population's genetic*





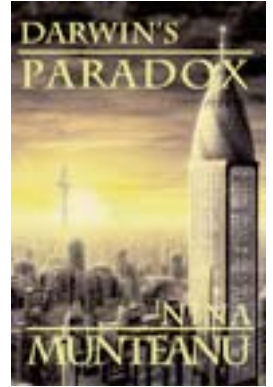
*makeup, it is considered benign. Current work by CDC researchers have actually demonstrated some beneficial effects of the virus such as mildly enhanced cognition.*

Angel was devastated. Vogel's assistant, Janet Hardy, was her grandfather's cousin! At least the cousin had done the right thing and committed suicide because of her involvement in creating and spreading the worst disease ever known on the planet. Angel's grandfather was executed in the Pol Station when Julie was twelve years old, before they even knew of his involvement in creating and spreading Darwin.

Angel clamored for alternatives: perhaps they'd thought to make one thing and had created another, like a huge, failed experiment. Too bad they all died before anyone could piece together what had really happened. Still, how could Angel's mother have lived with herself, knowing that she was responsible for the death of a hundred million people? And then there were her other terrible acts of violence to consider.

As Angel watched the vid-clip of her grandfather destroying his laboratory in a terrible rage — no doubt from guilt — Angel was reminded of her mother's temper and how it flared up like birch-bark tinder at times. No wonder, thought Angel Julie was the end product of a family living a legacy of anarchy, criminal behavior and violence. It was in her mother's genetic make-up, which meant it was also in her own.

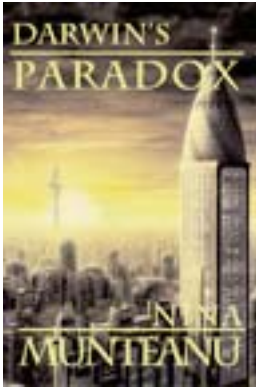
Angel cupped her face in her hands and wept.



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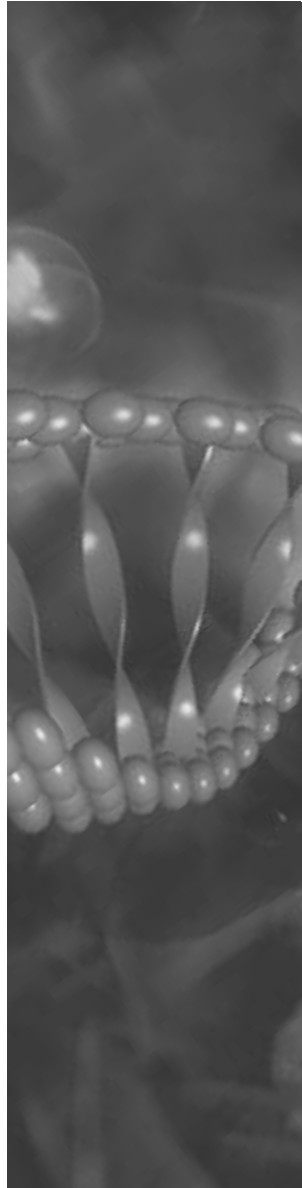


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# 29

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**ANGEL** walks the smooth corridor, bathed in rainbow light filtering through glittering jewels above. Although she is not sure where this place is, she feels at home as though she has been here before. In fact, she has, in a previous dream, one she has been having since she came to Icaria.

She approaches a corner in the bright hall and knows she will see a figure in a brown cloak. The same one she's overheard her mother describe to her father from her own recurring nightmare. Incredible, Angel thinks. I've entered my mother's nightmare. But Angel does not feel foreboding like her mother — only curious anticipation.

As she turns the corner, the cloaked figure stands before her and raises its arms toward her in greeting.

[Hello, Angel], it says in a chorus of multi-timbral voices.

Angel smiles. *Hello. You're Proteus, aren't you? My mother told me about you. You're the reason my mom and I could sometimes talk to one another.*

[Yes. We can speak to you in your dream state. When you join with us, we will be able to speak to one another when you are awake, during veemeld.]

*I think I understand. Does that have anything to do with those other voices that were in my head but have stopped?*

[No, child. Those voices came from the machines, now silenced by your mother.]

*I think I understand. You mean the A.I.-core of the city?*

[Yes. The city lies vulnerable now, as do those who rely on the machines.]

Angel smiles darkly. Proteus has given her a prize. Escape will be far easier now that Gaia

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and her people are busy accommodating this new limitation. Angel frowns suddenly, remembering Gaia's conversation with Brian Dykstra. *But, Proteus, Gaia wanted my mother to shut down the core. Why would Gaia do that if it caused problems in her city?*

[We do not know. SAM, our interpreter, is no longer with us.]

Angel swallows down a rising apprehension. But her curiosity overcomes her trepidation. *Who's Sam, Proteus?* Terror of what her mother has done spikes inside her. Sam, according to Gaia, is Julie's friend and Julie has obviously killed him.

[SAM is a machine-intelligence, an A.I.]

*An A.I.?* Her mind soars with sudden realization. *SAM's a machine? Not a person?*

[Part of the A.I.-core, which your mother shut down. SAM was also your mother's AI-symbiont many years ago.]

*Symbiont?*

[Co-existing in a symbiotic relationship, as we are with her and with you. Every cell of every human being contains the remnants of bacterial symbionts – mitochondria – without which you could not live. We are just another symbiont in your body. We accomplish a mutual benefit by creating more than the sum of our parts.]

*Like what a friend does.*

[That is a good word to describe the interaction. Your mother also used this word to describe her A.I.-symbiont]

*Why would she do that to her friend, though? Shut it down?*

[We do not know...]

*I know...* Angel wilts with sad acceptance, her mind reliving Julie's vivid acts of atrocity. *Because she's not what I thought she was...I only saw her one way, in the heat.*

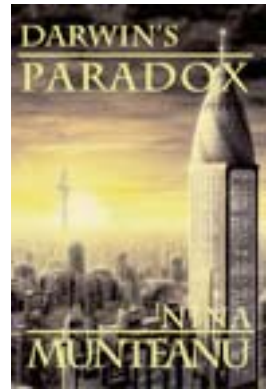
*It's simple, Angel thinks. She's a living paradox.*

Her mother spoke of stable chaos, the theory that describes how nature and the universe work based on paradoxes. How can chaos be stable, though? Julie tried to explain but Angel's young mind had balked at understanding. She thinks she does now. It's all a function of point of view and scope of vision. It's impossible for any living thing to see the entire world all at once or experience the past, present and future at the same time. Through her limited perception of her mother's behavior, Angel reduced this obviously complex person into a simple being. Her mother is truly those things kind, loving and tender but she is also a ruthless assassin, capable of killing another human being or a machine-friend without remorse. Perhaps stable chaos, itself a paradox, represents her mother life itself with more accuracy than Angel cares to admit.

[We do not understand this...]

*I wish I didn't either...*

~~~~~



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Angel woke suddenly. She sat slouched at the vee-com with her head resting on her arms. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she straightened out of her stiffness and heard again what must have roused her: a brisk knock at the door and an urgent whisper: "Angel?"

It sounded like Manfred. Angel bolted to the door and found she could now open it. Manfred darted past her, into the room, throwing a wary glance behind him. Angel shut the door behind him. In reply to her look of confusion, he wagged a card in front of her and said with a smirk, "I have a special key. Besides, the A.I.s are down — the big-brained ones — so the city's a mess." He studied her critically for a moment then half-smiled. "So are you. You look like shit."

She wiped her eyes and briskly ran her fingers through her sleep-tangled hair, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "Did you wake me up —" She glanced at the clock on the vee-com screen. "— at four in the morning just to insult me?" She scowled at him.

"No," he gave her a lopsided smile. "I came to take you to see my friends."

"Now?" She stared at him. "I don't think Gaia will let me out —"

"Then we won't tell her." He grinned conspiratorially. "Like I said, the A.I.-core is down and half the city's in chaos. It's running on an emergency automatic system of non-AIs."

"I know."

He simply nodded. "So this is a perfect time to break you out. Everyone's scrambling to keep the basic support systems going."

She grinned back. "Well, what are we waiting for, then?"

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"Just stay right behind me," Manfred whispered over his shoulder as Angel followed him quietly through the long corridors of the Med-Center. "I know this place like the back of my hand."

"Yeah, but how well do you know the back of your hand," she challenged.

"Smart aleck," he said, not looking back this time.

He led her along a route she'd never taken before, down several small hallways and stairways until she felt sure they were lost. She was just wondering why they hadn't reached a security door yet or seen a guard, when Proteus's insect voices spiked her danger sense.

"Someone's coming!" she hissed.

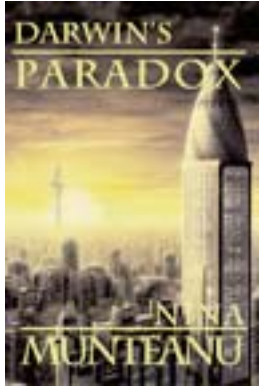
"I know!" he snarled back. "Quick," he grabbed her hand and pulled her into a side corridor then pelted to the end of it.

"It's a dead end!" she heard her voice rasp in dismay.

"With a vent," he said, stopping under a head-height screen on the wall. He reached up and pulled hard, dislodging the ventilation screen.

"That came loose easy," she said, frowning.

"That's 'cause I use it all the time. This is my escape route." He hauled

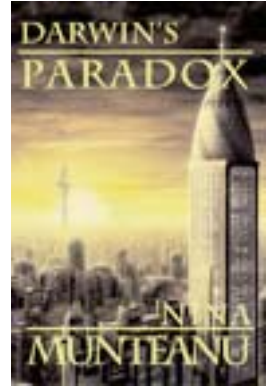


himself up and reached back to pull her up. “Come on!” He glanced nervously past her to the end of the hall. The person they'd both sensed must be close by now. She scrambled up and he gruffly pulled her inside the shaft, then planted his hands on her behind and pushed her past him, drawing out a flare of embarrassment from her despite the situation. He quickly and deftly replaced the vent screen in its place.

She looked back at his smirking face and felt her own lips curl into a sloping smile. “You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

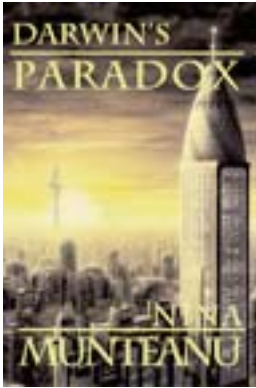
“Almost as much as you,” he whispered. “Let's go. This'll get us past all the security checks but it's a bit cramped.”

“Cramped is fine,” she said, managing a broad smile as she thought of what Gaia was going to look like when she discovered that Angel was no longer there.



It does not do you good to leave a dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him—J.R.R. Tolkein

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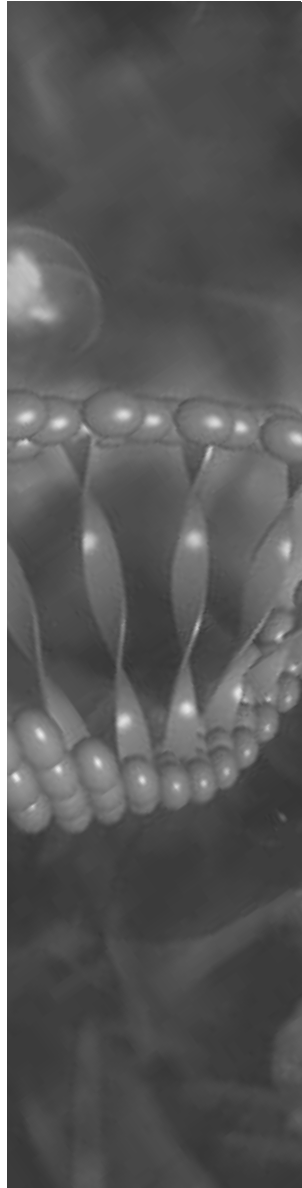


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# 30

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**JULIE** had been pacing the luxurious suite like a panther in a cage. She'd roamed from the window to the open door to her large bedroom, to the plush couch and chairs to the large wooden desk with vee-com, to the full-length mirror and holo art and back to the window. She finally stopped and with effort stood still in the centre of the living room. She closed her eyes and took several slow, deep breaths, focusing her mind inward. She opened her eyes and pushed out one steady, relaxed, pressure-relieving breath. As she started to draw in her next breath, she began the fluid movements to a meditative Tai Chi pattern. She performed her graceful slow-motion dance, limbs coiling and releasing to an inner rhythm, seeking that place inside her that was calm and at peace.

As her body performed the stylized postures of the dragon, the tiger, and the crane, Julie found her mind drifting back to the heath where she'd practiced Tai Chi with Angel. Using the movements that Aard had taught them, mother and daughter had performed the graceful dance in unison each and every morning. They'd stepped through the eighty-three postures in complete synchronization: mind and body united with nature and the universe; mother and daughter linked in spirit and soul.

When she completed her routine in her suite, Julie found that she'd only gained a momentary reprieve from the morose melancholy embracing her soul. She realized now that no amount of meditation could erase the memory of what she'd done. She finished

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her last posture, held it one last moment, then released the energy, bowed her head to the plush carpet and sighed.

She'd been here for several hours. A Pol had brought her a meal, otherwise she'd been left alone with her doubts and regrets. What was in store for her now that she'd done the 'wonderful deed' of shutting down the core and killing SAM? Good Earth, how stupid she'd been to believe them, especially Frank, she thought. The mayor no doubt had planned for this event, setting up a contingent A.I.-human network to ensure that the city climbed to a new paradigm and did not suffer a standstill from the shutdown. Life in Icaria-5 continued while Julie Crane once again served as the public scapegoat, this time for disrupting the city's public services.

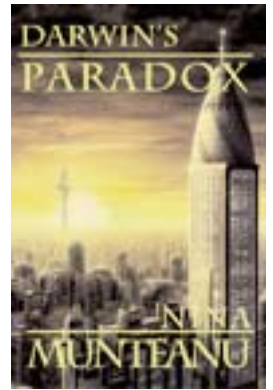
Julie dropped into a plush, overstuffed chair and put her head in her hands. She'd wanted to believe Frank so badly; and so she had. But in retrospect, the logic of what he said and what she knew of his character all pointed in the opposite direction. No, she couldn't blame Frank — she had only herself to blame. Once again, she'd fooled herself.

Julie rose and wandered to the window that gave her a limited view of the heath and pressed her face against the duraplast. The sun had just set, casting a warm tangerine glow over the darkening horizon and carrying her imagination back to her family. In her mind's eye she saw them turn and run toward her. Angel reached her first, flying up into her arms and hugging her around the neck. Then Daniel flung his arms around them both. She basked in the warmth of the imagined moment but was snapped back to reality by the cold window on her skin. The loss of her family tore open a rift in her gut and the ache inside her flooded through her in a convulsion of weeping.

The moment of self-pity passed quickly and Julie fiercely choked the tears back and fisted the moisture out of her eyes. She refused to fall apart and succumb to grief over first SAM's needless death and now the distinct possibility that her mission to come here to free her family from harassment was not only a dismal failure, but had been orchestrated by that miserable virus all along!

Unless she did something to stop them, she was doomed to remain trapped here, a servant to the vagaries of the Head Pol and Gaia and possibly Proteus. If she didn't cooperate, they might even haul Angel to Icaria-5 to take her place. She had to stop them all of them, including Proteus. And she had to find Victor Burke. He was the key to unlocking the door to the insanity Icaria-5 had become. She felt sure that Burke's absence had everything to do with the mess Icaria and she was in right now. Gaia had taken over and her insanity was sending Icaria-5 to Hell in a handbasket.

Finding Burke meant first escaping from this room and the Pol-Station and that was no small challenge in itself. Once she got out, she'd still have to find Burke in the huge city without drawing attention to herself and getting caught, somehow. She was getting ahead of herself! "One step at



a time”, she whispered. First she had to get out of here.

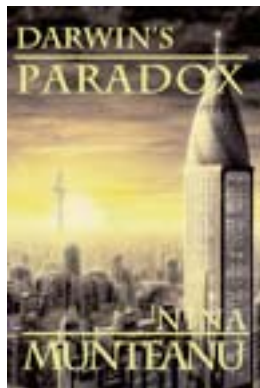
She'd had a lot of time to think of escape, yet all she'd come up with was a tenuous plan at best. Her initial survey had revealed two hidden cameras in this main living area, one in the bedroom and one in the bathroom. The main door likely led to a monitored hallway — she hadn't heard any stirrings of a guard outside. Each room had a window with no balcony and no ledge. Basically there was nothing between her and thirty stories of free-fall to the ground if she went that way.

Time was running out and since there was no time like the present, she kicked her hair-brained plan into gear and began her daily floor exercises. Aware that she was no doubt entertaining whoever was monitoring the camera, Julie worked up a good sweat with stretches, push-ups, squats and anything else she could add into the mix to get warmed up for what lay ahead. She pushed herself harder and harder, her heart pumping both with the exercise and with determination. For half an hour she kept it up, finally cooling down and bringing the workout to an end. She strode into the bedroom, feeling the flush of her body. She pulled out some new clothes from the dresser then stripped the bed, rolling the bedding into a pile, obviously meant for the laundry chute in the bathroom. She tossed the clean set of clothes on the bed, ready for her to change into later, then sauntered to the bathroom, where she carelessly dumped the pile on the floor by the chute. While she undressed, she avoided looking up at the poorly hidden camera, but imagined someone leering at the other end.

Julie stepped into the shower and turned the water as hot as possible. In short order, hot steam filled the room and, she hoped, fogged the lens of the camera. Now to work, she thought, breaking into an old English ballad she'd learned from her mother and used to sing to Angel when she was a baby: *“One morning, one morning, one morning in May...I spied a young couple, a making up hay...”* She dearly hoped that the singing drowned out any sounds she was about to make. *“...For one was a fair maid and her beauty shone clear...and the other was a soldier, a bold grenadier...”*

Under cover of the steam, she quickly redressed in her sweaty workout clothes, swiftly tied the bed sheets together into a makeshift rope then fastened one end to the toilet by the window. She trembled with the excitement, fear and the razor-sharp edge of adrenaline coursing through her system. *“Good morning, good morning, good morning said he...Oh where are you going, my pretty lady...”* Trying to keep her singing voice steady, Julie picked up the heavy toilet lid and slammed it into the window. *“I'm a going a walking by the clear crystal stream, to see cool waters gliding and nightingale sing...”* The lid bounced off the durable plastic. Damn! She tried again and then a third time before the window finally shattered with a quick, loud thud and crash that made her flinch.

“Oh, I thought I'd drop that one day!” she exclaimed for the surveillance team, knowing full well they'd send someone down pronto. She probably had a minute or two, no more. *“Oh soldier, oh soldier, will you*





*marry me... Oh no, my dear lady, that never can be...*” Knowing the steam would dissipate quickly and reveal her escape, Julie brushed the duraplast shards off the lower sill of the window with a towel. “...for I've got a wife at home in my own country...” She threw out the bed sheets and climbed up on the sill, squeezing through the small window. “Two wives and the army, too many for me...” She felt the blast of cool air and the thrill of being a short step and a long fall away from death.

Grabbing hold of her sheet rope, she rappelled down without giving herself the luxury of either looking down or thinking about where she was. The cool wind blew the sheet hanging below her and whipped her hair across her face as she lowered herself down. Her muscles were alive with activity like they hadn't been since that day on the cliff face so long ago when she had discovered Aard's hidey-hole.

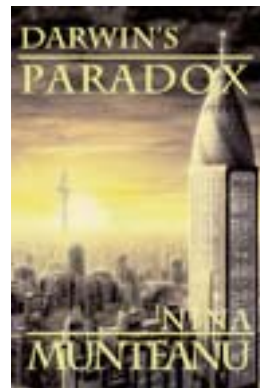
She finally hazarded a look below her and inhaled sharply. Amidst the alarm of her precarious position, she felt a thrill of amazement for the beauty three hundred feet below her. The heath was in full bloom a mosaic of colours blended like a pointillist painting brought to life by the brushstrokes of Mother Earth in a warming sun. A gust of wind snapped at her and her reverie vanished. She swallowed hard, then she set her fears aside and focused on her task.

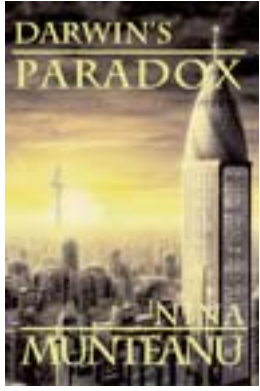
Braced against the wall with her feet and hanging on to her makeshift line, Julie saw a window just below her on the next floor. Even though she had no time to be picky she couldn't go for that one. It was a bathroom window, just like the one she hung from, and definitely much too small to break from the outside. The window beside it was a lot larger.

Julie took a deep breath, and mentally prepared herself. She'd done a similar maneuver dozens of times with Aard, but with rope, gloves and a safety harness, and not with the hope of smashing through a duraplast window. It was quite possible that the force of her weight and momentum still wouldn't break the window and she was afraid it might take her a few attempts, just as it had with the bathroom window. Her biggest worry was that she wouldn't get the time to try more than once because her 'clever' maneuver could simply rip the bed sheets and she'd unceremoniously plummet thirty stories or so to her death.

So be it, she decided with a grimace and kicked off the wall at an angle and swung down in an arc toward the larger window. Her feet met resistance for a fraction of a second as the window flexed inward. Then there was a crack like a gunshot and the large window smashed through and she tumbled inside what she hoped was another suite. Scratched and bruised, Julie scrambled up from the floor and came face to face with a little man with close-cropped burgundy hair. He stifled a shriek. His startled pale eyes blinked rapidly in shock, and something else she could have sworn was recognition.

~~~~~





It was time to finally get out of this place, Victor thought for the hundredth time as he watched the glow of sunset paint the heath below in stunning, rich tones of ochre and russet highlighted with the splashes of yellow, red, and purple. This time he was going to do it, he promised himself. This time he'd go through with his egress. Pivoting on his heel he decided to try the door first. To his amazement, he found that it wasn't locked and opened without resistance. A quick peek into the empty hallway revealed that a guard was no longer posted. This was too much!

So, Gaia hadn't even given him the benefit of that much motivation. Perhaps he'd earned her disrespect, though. Vee knows he hadn't ever done anything to earn otherwise, he thought grimly. He'd been her willing lackey from the moment she'd ensnared him in his own trap many years ago. Even his final insubordination had been underhanded — he'd never faced her directly and openly defied her. Well, he thought as panic surged up to choke him, again, all that was going to change right now! He went back into the dusk-darkened suite to retrieve his droid, but halted in mid-stride. Something large and fast was swinging down toward his window, partially blocking his view of the blood-red sky.

Before he could react, the duraplast shattered and a body tumbled into the room. Silhouetted against the sunset, a lithe, slender woman gracefully picked herself up out of the wreckage, dusted herself off with a sense of urgency and regarded him with a mix of fear and challenge. She took a step forward into the light cast by the toppled table lamp and he recognized the feral green eyes.

It was *her!*

Instinctively he recoiled with a cry and stepped back, fidgeting with his collar. Her face was flush, her disheveled hair sparkled with duraplast fragments, and her standard Com-Centre-issue clothes were sweaty and rumpled. But to him, she was impeccably and terrifyingly beautiful.

A glimmer of recognition crossed her face and she tipped her head slightly as if trying to recall an elusive memory. But the look disappeared as she attended to business. Quickly ensuring that no one else was in the room, she said to him, “Sorry, I'm just passing through. I won't hurt you. Just stay out of my way, please.”

“You're...Julie Crane,” he stammered, following her.

She turned back to him and regarded him carefully with narrowed eyes, visibly annoyed that he was still there. “Listen, I don't know what you've been told about me or what you're doing here,” she said in a cool voice, sizing him up and down, possibly checking for weapons, “. . . but you don't look like a Pol, so, I'm not your business. Understand?”

“Maybe...” He swallowed nervously and took in a shallow breath, his eyes still downcast. “Maybe I can help you.”

She came close to sneering but cut herself off and said sharply, “I don't think so.” She'd obviously dismissed him as insignificant, like so many others before her. “I'm looking for someone.” She headed for the door again.

"I know lots of people. Who are you looking for?"

Hand on the door handle, she turned her head and gave him an appraising look, one eyebrow raised. It was obvious she didn't believe him. After a brief pause she made a decision, perhaps strictly out of politeness and said, "Victor Burke."

He almost laughed with surprise. Then he took a deep breath, stood up straight and saw that she noticed the transformation. "I'm Victor Burke," he said with a confident smile, meeting her eyes for the first time.

Her eyes widened, then quickly narrowed with suspicion and disbelief. It was obvious she was wondering how on earth such a meek weakling could command the power of an entire city? Then her face suddenly relaxed and she broke into a broad smile that both thrilled and frightened him at the same time. "I met you once before, at a party," she said.

She'd remembered! Victor nodded. "Yes. I was talking with Gaia. I was the mayor of Icaria-5 then." He grimaced and drew in a breath. "She's mayor now."

She firmed her lips and nodded. "I see. Are they holding you here against your will, like me?"

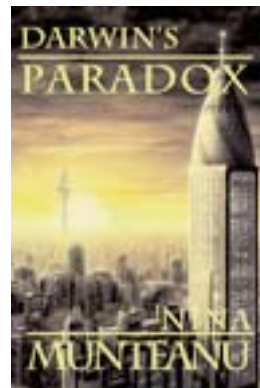
"Yes, except —"

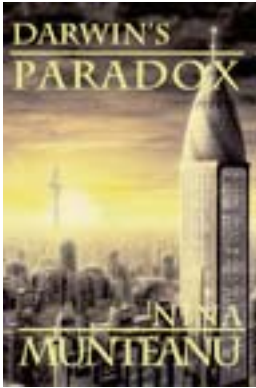
He didn't have a chance to finish because the door swung open. Julie had already reacted, as if she'd guessed what was going to happen. As it opened, she lunged forward from behind the door and pulled the man toward her with a jerk to meet her raised knee. He doubled over with a gasp and she clubbed him with both fists. He toppled to the floor and moaned. Victor recognized him as Greg Tyers. "Come on," Julie said over her shoulder and shot out the door.

She met a wall of Pols. Julie tried to plow through them but they seized her as she lashed and kicked out. Tyers scrambled to his feet and wrenched her arm to swivel her around to face him. Then he struck her hard on the face. She cried out and slumped in her captor's arms.

"I told you not to hurt her!" a voice barked from the hallway. The Head Pol stepped forward through the gap the Pols made for him and regarded Julie for a moment. Unconscious, her head had lolled forward and her hair spilled over her face. With a frown he grabbed her hair to lift her head up. "You knocked her out, Tyers!" Langor released her hair and Julie's head dropped down again. He looked into the suite and saw the broken window and the rope of bed sheets snagged on the remains of the duraplastic window and fluttering in the wind blowing through the opening.

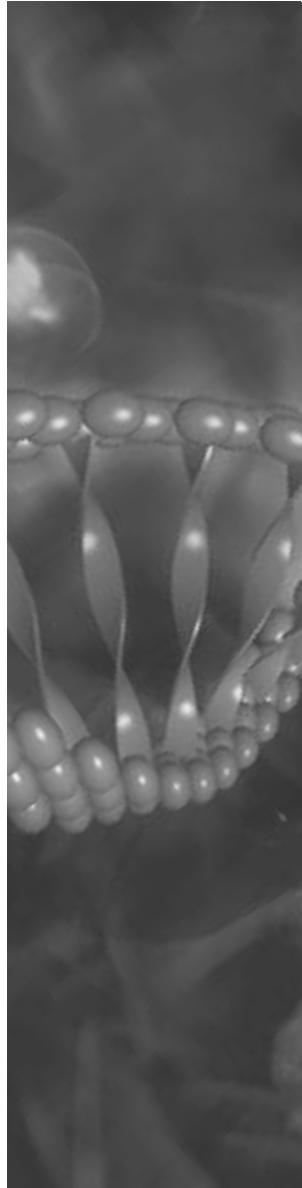
"Certainly a gutsy piece, isn't she?" He turned to face Victor with a look of open contempt. "Not like you, eh? No, you'd rather watch." He turned toward the door. "Seems you have a broken window. We'll have to get you a better room one with a lock and no window this time, so there are no more interruptions from flying women." Then he laughed a self-satisfied chuckle that made Victor cringe.





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“OUR prize,” the man called Jake growled as he stormed into the room. “She’s there.” Like Washington, Jake’s head was shaven and his roughly chiseled face looked like a half-finished sculpture. His nose was practically flat as though he’d run into a moving tube-jet at full speed. “The Dick says she was a special guest of the Head Pol. He was entertaining her in his office-residence in the freaking Pol Station, but they’ve just moved her to the twentieth floor.”

The thrill of adrenaline pulsed through him as Daniel rose on to his elbows from his reclining position on the cot. Were they talking about Julie?! Just as he’d feared, she’d ended up in the Pol Station, presumably where Angel was. Was Julie slated for execution for her supposed murder of the previous Head Pol?

And who was the Dick? People used to nickname the place that Julie worked, the Department of Information Control, DIC, “the Dick”. But this “Dick” was a person, the leader of the Vee-radicators. Could they mean Dykstra, the same man who ran the Secret Pols twelve years ago? Now running the most violent right-wing radicals in Icaria? It made sense. Like the Dystopians before them, Vee-radicators passionately hated technology and veemelds, its vehicle. Daniel stretched his neck up to speak as the spark of a plan formed in his mind. “Do you mean John Dykstra?”

Jake and Washington both looked his way, frowned at him, then Jake turned back to Washington and continued, “We can get a party together in two hours, Wash. Someone screwed up the A.I. system and it’s chaos out there.

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They've closed down half the city, trying to deal with the confusion.”

“Good.” Washington looked up from the steaming beverage he was brewing on the old stove in the room. “We couldn't have asked for a better diversion,” he grinned, showing yellow teeth between fleshy flaps for a mouth. “The Pols will be too busy with those freaking machines they depend on to deal with us. Bet the Dick's responsible for that somehow.”

“John Dykstra? I know him,” Daniel lied, hoping for a response this time.

Washington glared at him. “The son, you idiot. John Dykstra's dead. Died in the Pol Station — where the former mayor threw all the Secret Pols long ago thanks to that bitch, your wife.” Then his eyes narrowed briefly. “Sure you knew him,” he said doubtfully.

Daniel sat up from the cot and frowned at the acrid smell of burnt clone-coffee to hide his excitement. For the first time since he'd awoken in this sewer hole, he felt a twinge of hope. If they were talking about Julie then he now knew where she was and a reckless plan for her rescue began to form in his mind. It was obvious that Dykstra's son also worked in the Pol Station how else would he know where Julie was being kept? And it was equally obvious that no one knew of his affiliations with the Vee-radicators. That information was worth something. Perhaps his wife's life.

He just needed to escape. Daniel felt much better, particularly since Washington had given him some *mitigin* pills. During the few times he'd moved about to use the washroom or help himself to some of that vile coffee, he was still a little short of breath and felt a twinge of pain when he over-exerted himself or stretched too far in any direction. But his strength and his balance had returned.

He'd spent a fair bit of time scoping out the room. It was a dirty one-room apartment. Judging from its design, he was likely in the fringe zone between the inner and outer-cities. Inhabited mostly by outer-city exiles who'd lost all their privilege levels. If he could just get past that door, he could scoot down the hallway to a stairwell and out into the crowd — lose these losers. Then he could warn the present government about Dykstra and his nasty affiliations. Perhaps it would gain him access to Julie and ultimately a way out of this crazy world...

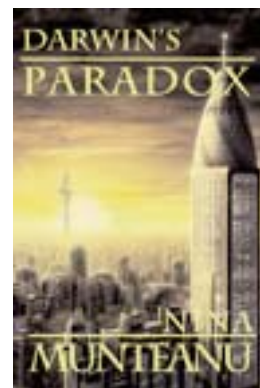
“Is our patient ready to go on a hunt?” Jake asked Washington with a curt glance at Daniel.

“Sure,” Washington said, wincing as he sipped the atrocious brew. “He's pretty spry now. What about our prize?”

It was Julie. He was certain. What did the Vee-radicators want her for? Probably just to kill her.

“She's always ready, I hear,” Jake sniggered, helping himself to the clone-coffee and turning his back to Daniel. “The Dick said she's the Head Pol's kitten now.” He chortled. “They used to be lovers, eh? I hear that Langor makes her spit and hiss then purr.”

Daniel stiffened in mid-creep to the door. Langor was still alive? Was he the Head Pol? And Julie was with him? The thought was too much to



bear. He pushed it away and lunged for the door. Jake turned. Daniel pulled the door open and sprang out —

Something hit him hard in the chest and he tumbled to the floor. The pain cut through him like knives carving him to pieces and he blacked out for a moment, vaguely aware that he was screaming and his whole body was madly shaking.

“You asshole!” It was Washington. He pounced on Daniel and hauled him back in and threw him toward the cot. Daniel staggered, then sprawled on the floor, gasping as hot waves of pain surged through him. He clawed at the bed and drew himself onto it, curling up as the air rasped through him. He abruptly leaned over and coughed out a stream of rank fluid that burned his throat.

“Hey!” Washington slapped Daniel hard on the head. “I just swept in here!”

“S'pose you set it too high, huh?” Jake responded with a half-sneer.

Washington glanced down at himself and looked up with bulging eyes. “Shit, that was the lowest setting!”

Daniel wiped his mouth with the back of his trembling hand and swallowed several times to get rid of the sour taste in his mouth.

Washington leaned over Daniel with a lipless smirk.

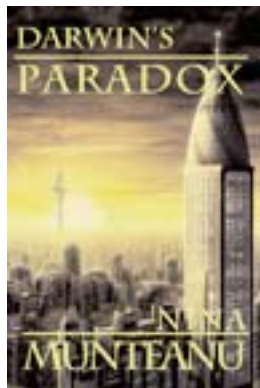
“Listen, veemeld-lover,” he snarled. “You don't get it, do you? Let me spell it out...Jake didn't just sew you up when you burned yourself with my gun. He put in a little device.” His face tangled into a sinewy mess that Daniel had come to realize was a smile. “A little nano-pulser. Ready to send out anything from a pulse shock to a full blown blast that'll smoke you as soon as I press the button on the set he's sewn into me. What you just felt now was the lowest setting. Get it?”

Daniel kept his gaze on Washington, though he wanted to look away. Shivering, he said in a throaty whisper, “What is it you want me to do?”

“Well, she is your wife. So we figured you could get us close to her then convince her to come along with us. If you don't, we simply kill the little vixen. If you run away or try to help her escape or do anything stupid we kill you. Got it, lover boy?”

Daniel swallowed hard as a new wave of pain washed over him. “I won't betray my wife,” he hissed between clenched teeth. “I won't lure her to her death. You might as well kill me now.”

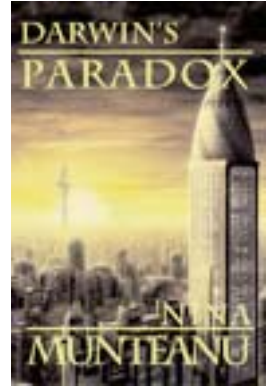
Washington barked a laugh. “Brave little lover boy,” he scoffed. “We'd rather have her alive, idiot. The Dick wants her to do some tampering for us of a special kind — A.I. tampering. Maybe she can undo some of the crap her kind have done over the years, an appeasement, so to speak. We hear she's the best when it comes to A.I.s. Of course, it's up to you to make her cooperate because if she doesn't...” he let the rest trail into silence. Then with a grunt, he continued, “After that, it's up to the Dick to decide what to do with the two of you, so, if I were you, I'd sooner take my chances and your wife's with him than with me, lover. 'Cause I'm



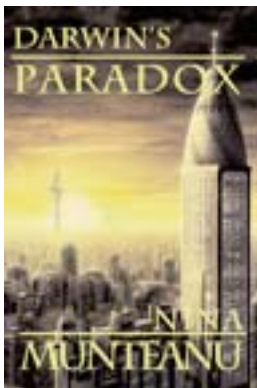
heading out there with or without you.” A malicious grin slid across his face like an oil slick and Daniel felt a sickening dread. The man wouldn't hesitate, in fact he'd delight in killing her.

The device in his belly would complicate things, Daniel thought grimly, even as the thrill of a new mad plan coursed through him like current through a live wire. They were going to take him right to her. Perhaps he still had a chance to save her, by disclosing to her Dykstra's betrayal even if it meant getting smoked by Washington in retaliation. He nodded. “All right,” he said grimly. “I'll help you.”

He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his
enemy from opposition: for if he violates this duty he
establishes a precedent that will reach to himself
—Thomas Paine, *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*

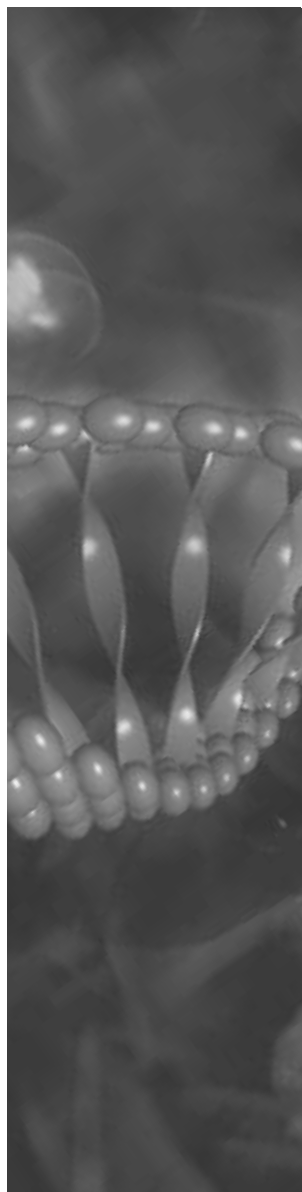


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A terrible moan woke Julie, triggering a raging headache. Her head felt like it was trying to have a baby, the pain convulsing in waves that curdled her stomach. After a moment she realized that she was the one moaning.

She was lying face down and pressed against something soft — a flat, under-stuffed pillow. With great effort she raised her head, sending another stab of pain through her. Her vision slowly cleared and she was able to see that she was lying on top of a narrow bed in a stark, windowless room. The room was empty save for the bed, a nightstand and an unlit table lamp. The room was lit by an awful amber light shining fitfully from the ceiling above, reminding her of the inner-city malls. She hadn't descended quite as far as the lower level dungeons but she'd definitely come down a few floors, she concluded. This was a far cry from the opulent suite she'd flung herself out of.

Apart from the throbbing headache, she felt stiff and a few localized aches suggested to her that whoever had brought her here might have dragged her and dropped her a few times. Her jaw throbbed where Tyers' fist had connected, but she was able to move it from side to side. It hurt like hell, but she was relieved that it moved the way it should.

She had to get out of there, find Burke again, but she was exhausted. So exhausted that her eyes stung and she could barely keep them open. So exhausted that she felt sick. Or was that something else? Had they drugged her? Perhaps it was just the pain pulsing in her temples and swollen her jaw. She forced her eyes to roam the room and spotted two

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<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

undisguised spy cameras.

Sleep. I need some sleep now, she thought. Tomorrow I'll get out of here.

She dragged herself over to the light switch by the door and slapped it off — no one was going to get his kicks watching her undress. She stripped in the dark and slid under the blanket and sheets and let out a long sigh. She lay there for some time with her eyes closed. Exhausted as she was, too many images raced through her brain. Victor Burke wasn't what she'd imagined at all. He was disappointingly incapable, with fearful, darting eyes. And the way he spoke: haltingly, gulping in air as though he was always running out of breath. Was that scrawny timid man really the key to fixing Icaria's problems? He seemed more suited to reclusive sedentary pursuits than dealing with people and commanding an entire city. Was she chasing yet another dream?

She turned on her side and imagined Daniel lying facing her, his hand tucked deliciously between her thighs, sending a resonating message of deep love with his exquisitely sensitive, sensual touch — a message that traveled up the core of her soul as she wrapped herself around it. Her breaths hitched and her own arm slithered down, trying to quiet her longing for the warm comfort of his touch, trying to quell her fears of never seeing him again.

Somewhere between her longing and her fears, she fell asleep with her body curled in a fetal position and arms tucked between her legs.

~~~~~

She drags her feet slowly through the dark and wrinkled organic halls of what used to be SAM's smooth crystal matrix. The warm stench burns her throat and lungs with each inhalation, filling her body with pain and her soul with a foreboding that she cannot shake. The dark figure, hunched and shriveled, beckons her with a sweeping arc of its arm. *Good Earth, please don't let it be me again, she thinks. Leave me alone!* she yells at the dark figure she knows is Proteus.

[It is time to join us. You must do this, Julie Crane. You hold back too much of yourself. Let go of your fears. Let go. Do not be afraid. You will not fall. We will catch you.]

*Like chaos you will! You'll just take over my brain for your own purpose. What do you want with me? What would you turn me into?*

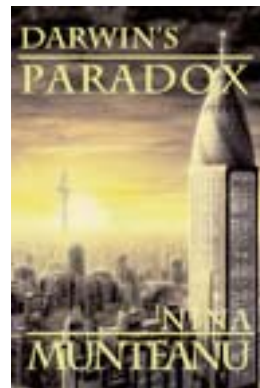
[You are suspicious and stubborn, Julie Crane.]

*I've been called worse.*

[Your entire species is this way. Isolated and disconnected and you more than most. This is why we are doing this. Why you need to join. We will care for you and give you direction.]

*That's what worries me. That's why I can't do this 'joining thing' with you.*

[Then sadly, you leave us no choice, Julie Crane, but to take a new host for our great journey. She, who is more open to us. More pliable.]



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Her heart thunders. *Who?*

The cowl drops from the figure's head, revealing Angel's face, strangely wizened with unnatural years. Julie's knees give out from under her and she crumbles to the slimy ground.

[Join with us, Mom], the harmonic voices of Proteus sing out of Angel's mouth.

*No!* Julie wails. *Don't do this, Proteus! Leave her alone!* Julie screams, as Angel recedes into the living walls. She throws out her arm to grab Angel but the gooey floor restrains her. *Angel, come back! Don't go with them! Oh—*

She jerked awake with the end of a moan on her lips and her body convulsed as the vision of Angel's distorted face lingered in the dark room, burned onto her retinas. A wave of nausea washed over her and she gagged, then coughed on the small amount of bile that surged up. A few moments passed while she struggled to remember where she was and figure out why she'd woken up. Then she noticed that the door was open and the silhouette of a man stood there. She flinched — that stance, that figure, were unmistakable. Frank.

He entered and shut the door, plunging her into darkness again. She raised herself on her elbows, keenly aware that she was unclothed as well. After quickly sweeping her plastered hair from her forehead, she demanded in a sharp voice to hide her anxiety, "How long have you been standing there and what in chaos do you think you're doing in here?"

"I heard you screaming so I came in to check on you. Another nightmare, huh?" His voice sounded strange, as if strangled with muddy thoughts. Was he drunk on drug?

"You came to check on me...*naked?*" she bit out sardonically.

"That's how I sleep." She heard the sneer in his voice. "Gosh, that was the worst one you've had yet —"

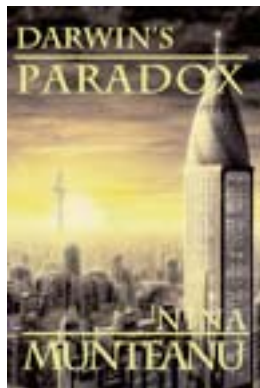
"Are you in the habit of spying on sleeping women?"

"Just one," he added in a softer voice. "I could soothe you..."

"I don't need any soothing, thanks." She heard the bite in her voice and swallowed down the bile surging up her throat. She hadn't gotten over the horrible dream and felt his intrusion acutely. He was the last person she wanted to see. "You can leave now. I'm alright," she lied.

"I better check." His voice was so close and she felt his warm breath on her face. It stank like bog water. "You knew I was coming," he whispered hoarsely, "That's why you didn't put anything on." A hand slid under the sheets and he touched her breast with a trembling hand. She could hear him sucking in halting breaths of rising passion.

She squirmed away, heart slamming. He returned by stroking her abdomen. Her fist jerked up and struck his face. He stumbled back with a startled grunt and fell with a thud on his rump. She leaped out of bed and, sidestepping him, dashed across the room. She was almost to the door when his flying tackle caught her by the feet and brought her down. Her face collided painfully into the door and she saw stars as the rest of



her crashed to the floor with a hard jolt. He clamored roughly on top of her, crushing her with his full weight and pushing her face to the floor.

“Get off, you bastard!” she shrieked with anger, sucking in her breaths with difficulty.

“What? No gun this time?” he snarled, bringing up that disastrous quarrel twelve years ago. “How're you going to stop me this time?” He seized her hair and yanked her head up so they were cheek-to-cheek. “You always wanted to go to my place before,” he hissed in her ear. “Well, now you're in it. Might as well enjoy the ride.” Then he pushed her face against the floor.

“Yeah, but we're still on the floor, you pig!” she cried in a muffled voice.

“Pig, dog, human...I can't help what I've become...thanks to you,” he growled, his putrid breaths blowing down her neck as he lustfully convulsed over her. She knew he was referring to Darwin.

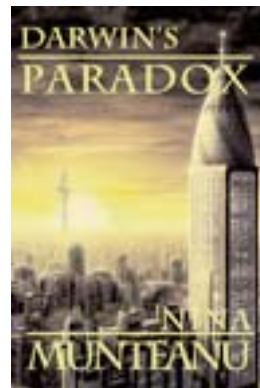
“I had no idea I gave you Darwin,” she blew out in gasps. “I didn't find out I was *Prometheus* until after we broke up, and I'm sorry I did this to you—”

“You should have thought of that before you came back,” he bit out. In that verbal lashing she knew how much she'd hurt him. He obviously blamed her not only for giving him Darwin but also for abandoning him to suffer and die alone. Her return here, the wife of a healthy man and the mother of that man's child, must have been a bitter pill for Frank to take and no fond memory could sweeten it.

“Frank...please...” she gasped between panting breaths, struggling as he mauled her with his entire body. “You're above this...”

“No, I'm not,” he snarled in a hoarse voice. Arching up over her back, he seized her roughly by the waist, yanked her up to her hands and knees and pawed her breasts. Behind her, his steely thighs forced her legs apart and his swollen manhood slithered urgently into the fleshy cheeks of her buttocks, finding the way like a bee to nectar. This can't be happening, she thought desperately. Although she recognized that it was the hurt little boy inside him lashing out, the problem was that it was the large man doing the lashing.

She twisted and fell on her back to the floor to avoid the probing thrusts and with a shriek of fury thrashed out with her arms and legs, realizing too late that she'd made a mistake. He threw himself on her, knocking her breathless. He pinned her arms then covered her mouth with his. Gasping in revulsion, she twitched her head to the side but his mouth followed, leaving a slime trail over her cheeks. He thrust his vile tongue into her mouth against her clenched teeth and she tasted his bitterness. She wanted to scream but he was strangling her with his mouth and his body. Panting like a rank wind into her mouth as his urgency rose, he drove his knees between her thighs, wedging them apart. His mouth clamped over hers in a wet embrace and she felt his member pressing into her skin, hard and slick, finding where it needed to go with the help of his groping hand, rough and insistent.



## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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She was losing the battle! Her heart throbbed in her head. NO! She heard her own agonized wail as he intruded, hurting her and taking pleasure in it. She shuddered back vainly, hitting her head against the door, and pushing up into a half crouch. He thrust repeatedly into her, grunting with pleasure and drawing out jagged outcries from her to the rhythm of his pounding waves —

Then the waves pounded from behind as well, knocking her forward. The room blazed, blinding her when someone turned on the overhead light. Following a brief scuffle Frank abruptly disengaged and lifted off of her. Amid her heaving breaths, she heard more than saw someone strike him hard in the face. He grunted and stumbled back, not quite falling. By then her eyes had adjusted and she saw Victor Burke, chest heaving and facing Frank with anger flashing in his eyes. But the moment passed and, as if he'd just now realized what he'd done, Victor cringed, terrified, and cradled his fist in his hand.

Frank stared at him for a moment, then glanced briefly behind Victor. Julie followed his gaze and saw Zane, standing by the door, looking nervous. Both Victor and Zane avoided looking at her. They fixed their eyes on Frank, who by now had regained his balance and composure and had started to laugh.

Standing unabashed in his nakedness, Frank turned back to Victor and dismissed the scrawny man with a look of contempt. It seemed as though the one robbed the strength from the other. As Frank drew himself up bold, Victor seemed to shrivel with humility. “You presume to dictate to me?” Frank bellowed. “You're no longer mayor, you're *nobody* now! I don't take orders from *you* anymore. I'm the boss here. And you —” he turned pointedly to Zane “— a two-bit scientist with nothing to show for your miserable years of less-than-useless research. What are you going to do now? Beat me up? The Head Pol? Here, in the Pol Station? And for what?” Frank threw a glance down at Julie, still sprawled on the floor. He sneered at her two rescuers. “For playing with my former girlfriend?”

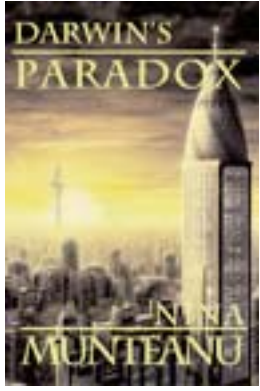
Zane stared in confusion. Victor shuffled his feet nervously.

“Why did you come?” Frank barked. “You idiots! This is my business. *She's* my business! She used to be mine. Now she's mine again. Get out!”

The two men stepped back and Julie thought they might even leave. It was then that she recognized why Frank was Head Pol. Standing naked and vulnerable, he still commanded authority over these two men.

Victor shuffled his feet as though he was fighting an internal battle to stay or leave. Frank lunged at him and struck Victor squarely in the jaw before he had a chance to decide. Victor crumpled to the floor in a daze.

Zane hesitated forward with a nervous glance at Julie. She watched in horror as Frank dispatched him as easily. Zane had flung out a fist, trying to strike Frank's face. But Frank easily dodged the swing, caught the scientist's arm and reefed it hard sideways. Yelping, Zane stumbled and Frank hit him square in the jaw. Zane toppled over Victor in a heap of groaning.



Frank assessed them with a sharp laugh. Satisfied that they weren't moving for a while, he turned to where Julie had been. She was no longer on the floor by the door. As he spun around in sudden realization, Julie swung out from behind, leaning with all her weight and slammed the nightstand lamp into his head. He dropped like lead and thudded to the floor, unconscious.

She took several deep breaths and hastily dressed. By the time she'd finished, her two would-be rescuers had managed to untangle themselves from the floor. They both stared from Frank's prone body to her with awkward grins. She returned their grins with a grateful smile.

"Thanks." It came out in a weak croak. She cleared her throat and repeated herself as she embraced Zane. He squeezed back and patted her with a smile of affection. Then she turned and gave Victor an awkward hug. He stood stiff and wide eyed as if terrified of her, his wooden arms clamped to his side. "That was timely," she added. Then she tilted her head and pulled back from Victor with furrowed brows. "Too timely..."

"Victor called me," Zane explained. "He said it was urgent. We had to get you out because —" He trailed, glancing at Frank's naked body.

"How did you...know?" Julie gazed hard at Victor.

His face had coloured to an intense red and his eyes blinked with nervous tension. "I saw it...ah, felt it." He grabbed his collar and pulled it from his neck then ran frenzied rakes through his burgundy mop.

She stared at him. "Felt it?"

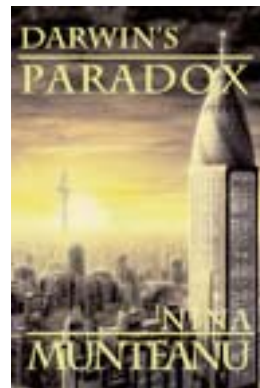
Victor shuffled his feet.

"Shouldn't we get going?" Zane urged, casting nervous glances at the door.

Ignoring Zane, Julie leaned forward until her face was centimeters from Victor's. "*Felt it?*" she repeated in a sharp voice, searching his timid eyes for the truth. His gaze flicked from side to side as if looking for an escape. She wouldn't let him go.

Then, like a dam breaking, "Sentech 2. I have it," he said in a rush of words between convulsive intakes of air. "Through an implant on him," he pointed to Frank. So Frank was a carrier, just like Aard, Julie thought. "Like all my Pols," Victor went on. "Did it a long time ago. The Pols only thought it gave them an improved vee-com connection. But it gave me much more." He made a painful grin, took in a shallow breath and continued, "A way to read their senses. Of course Langor doesn't know, but I can see everything he sees, touch everything he touches. Feel...everything he feels." He swallowed. "Including his deepest desires, his wildest anger and his...worst pain...How he wanted to hurt you and love you at the same time...and did." He broke his gaze from her and looked down at his shoes.

"You were using Sentech when he and I...?" she broke off as the words strangled in her throat.



“It was awful. I had to do something.” His words rolled off his tongue in a gush of syllables that seemed to swirl in her aching brain. She stopped listening. The implications of Burke using the device this way repulsed her.

Julie drew in a long breath. Stunned, she didn't know what to say. How long had Victor been 'sensing' Frank? Frank had already had his implant by the time Julie and he met and became lovers...

It didn't matter. Victor's disclosure, disturbing as it was, somehow paled next to the terrifying threat Proteus made to her in her dream and what had just happened here with Frank. Realizing that she was clenching her hands, she relaxed them and said in a cool voice aimed at either of her rescuers, “Does anyone have a plan to get us out of here?”

Both looked at her in bemusement. Zane spoke first. “I got here because Victor made a diversion on the vee-com and he 'walked' me in. I don't think that'll get us out, though.” He paused and added, gazing at her with close to a grimace, “especially with you.” Then he looked at Victor hopefully. “You have a plan?”

He shook his head. “I just knew we had to do something before —” He cut himself off, resting a vacant gaze on Frank lying on the floor.

“We take him with us,” Julie said shortly.

“What?” both men said in unison. They stared at her.

“Collateral,” she said coolly before either could voice a complaint. “We'll use him as a hostage.”

“But he just tried to rape you “

“*Did* rape me,” she corrected in a sharp voice that cut through the painful emotions catching in her throat. She'd sounded shriller than she liked and felt herself sliding on the edge of insanity.

Confused and embarrassed, Zane looked away and shuffled his feet. Victor avoided her eyes in an awkward pause thick with regret. She closed her eyes for a moment and took several deep breaths before saying, “Look, it's our only chance of getting out of here. With him we have something to bargain with.”

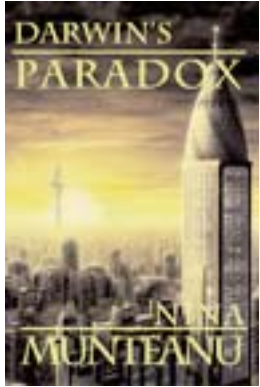
“We're in enough trouble as it is,” Zane whined, gaze darting from Frank's naked figure to the door. His eyes flashed at her with challenge, “You're talking about kidnapping and ransoming the Head Pol!”

She set her jaw and returned him a fierce look of determination.

“She's right,” Victor said, surprising Julie. She saw fierce resolution temper the terror on his face. Maybe there was more to this man after all. “He may be useful. I have an idea.” Then an awkward smile flickered over his lips. “I learned a few tricks while in office.”

“Okay,” Julie agreed. “Let's get him dressed.”

Reluctant to help, Zane stood by as Julie and Victor looked frantically for some clothes to put on Frank. Remembering that she'd first seen him standing naked at the doorway, and wondering if indeed he'd wandered the hallway that way, Julie found a pile of discarded clothes in the corner



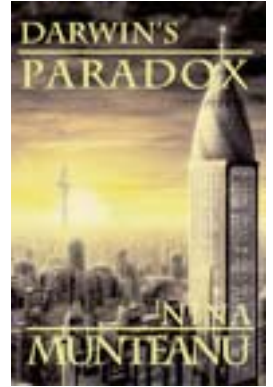
nearest to the door. So he'd undressed there while watching her raving in nightmare. "Here." She flung Frank's clothes to Victor. He struggled to dress the still unconscious Pol and she scrambled to his side to help.

"What if he's dead?" Zane asked in a low voice, not moving to help. "You cracked him on the head pretty hard."

Julie's eyes shot up as she pulled one of Frank's socks on his limp foot. She'd lost her patience with Zane. "Make yourself useful and find out, then," she hissed.

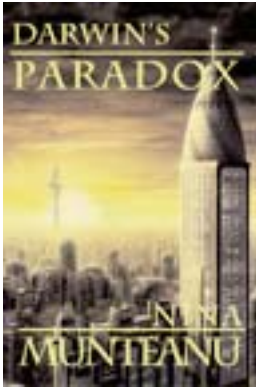
Zane bent next to her and checked Frank's pulse. "The bastard's still alive," he muttered.

Julie sighed and nodded to him. "Let's go, then."



If you do not expect it, you will not find the unexpected,  
for it is hard to find and difficult—Heraclitus

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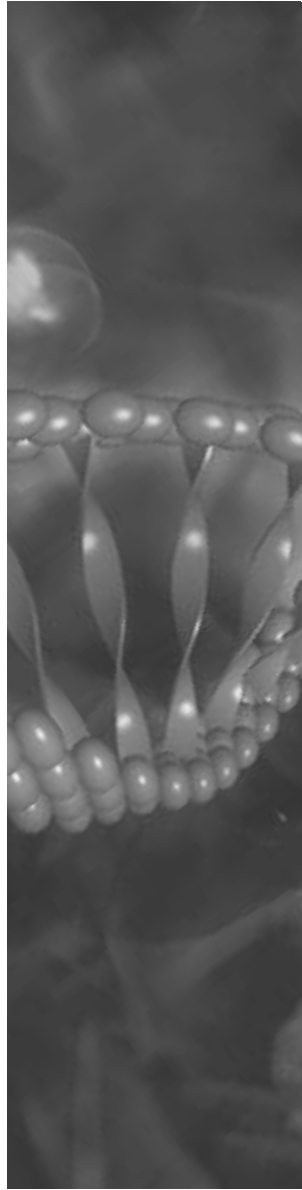


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# 33

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**THE** place was stark and smelled like a bog in summer. Angel suppressed the urge to wrinkle her nose as Manfred led her inside and shut the door behind them.

It was a single room with a filthy torn-up couch that sagged in the middle, one ragged chair and a stained duraplastic table that stood mostly on three legs. On it sat a vee-com, an older style than the ones Angel saw in Carl's lab and office. The walls were bare and looked in need of something, but Angel wasn't sure what.

"It's not much but at least it's a long way from Gaia," Manfred said with a conspiratorial grin. His eyes sparkled like a silver sea.

Angel smiled back at him, truly appreciative. They'd descended to the lower levels of the city through dark hallways that smelled like a stagnant pond choked with algae in summer.

"Po's uncle used to use this place when he worked for the Enviro-Center as a maintenance technician. When he moved to Icaria-9 he gave it to Po, and now we use it to get away from everyone. Don't be fooled by the look of the vee-com. Po's jury-rigged it so it's state of the art. Between the two of us, we can do just about anything on it." Now he was grinning smugly.

Angel decided she should look impressed and gave him a nod of respect.

He pointed to the couch. "You can sleep there. Po, Tim and Jenna are anxious to meet you. They'll be here in the morning."

Angel felt suddenly awkward. Did that mean that he was staying? "Thanks for helping me escape from Gaia," she finally said. "But aren't you going home? You don't need to stay on my account — I'll be okay."

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>



"I know. I just thought we could talk for a bit. I often crash here." He flopped on the couch.

"Doesn't your father get worried?" she said, taking the tattered seat across from the saggy couch.

"Nah," he responded with a sad smile. "He never even notices. He's probably still working in the lab anyway." Manfred fished out two soisticks and handed one to Angel.

Realizing that she was hungry, she gratefully pulled off the wrapper and took a bite, then frowned down at the bar. "What is this, anyway?"

Manfred laughed. "It's a balanced protein, carbohydrate, nutrient mix. Mostly from soy."

She felt the bar choke in her throat and fought down tears. Looking down to avoid Manfred's eyes, she offered, "The food here is great and I've tasted some wild flavours." She looked down at the bar and it sparkled in the tears pooling in her eyes. "I thought I'd never miss my mother's cooking, especially her sweet yams, but what I'd give for some now..."

They were silent for a while until Manfred broke in. "You miss the heath, don't you?" Then he added, "and your mother too."

She jerked her head up and Manfred swept an arm toward the vee-com. "So, maybe I can help you find her. I'm pretty handy with vee-coms and it's the best place to start —"

"I'm not looking for her anymore," Angel cut him short.

Manfred gave her a puzzled frown. "But, why the sudden change? I thought, well..." he trailed off, thinking of his own mother.

"I found out that she did some horrible things." She didn't want to explain the part about her mother murdering Aard or those Pols. "She even did illegal things for Gaia, like shutting down the A.I.-core —"

"But Gaia brought in the legendary Julie Crane to do that."

"Yes," she snapped back sarcastically. "My legendary mother."

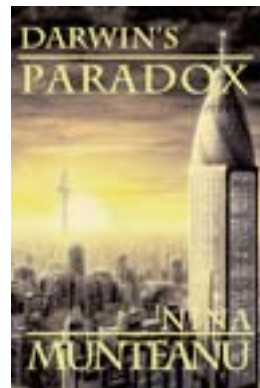
"Chaos!" Manfred exclaimed, leaping off the couch and staring at her. "Julie Crane's your mother? She's the best damn vee-com hacker of all time! I learned all my best tricks from the stuff she used to do. She's amazing!" His voice was filled with awe.

Learning this, somehow, was in keeping with her mother's tainted character, thought Angel. It seemed that with every turn, she learned yet another flawed facet of her mother's behavior that blurred her character into something Angel hardly recognized any more. The benevolent image of a mother who smelled of heath and lilac was swiftly ebbing beneath a frightful tide of a dark techno-evil.

"Why didn't you tell me your mother was Julie Crane?" Manfred asked, looking exasperated and pacing the room.

Now it was her turn to look confused. "I...thought you knew..." she stammered, straightening in the chair.

He snorted. "My father introduced you as Angel Woods." He shook his head and continued to pace the room, letting his eyes roam past her as he



pounded a fist into the palm of his hand. "I should've guessed though."

"Why?" she challenged and he reeled to look directly at her. "I'm nothing like her," she spat out, her face blazing with confusion and pain.

He flashed her a lopsided smile. It reminded her of her mother's disarming smile and she felt a deep ache inside her. "You don't think so?" He looked mildly amused and it annoyed her. "I've heard her described as 'the woman with savage hair and bright eyes.'" Then he pointedly stared at Angel.

Angel blushed, acutely aware of the disarray of her own wild mop. "I wish she wasn't my mother," her voice lashed out like a knife. "I wish she was dead."

He frowned at her. "You don't mean that."

"She's a murderer."

"Oh." His frown grew. "Yeah. She killed a Pol twelve years ago, but most people think it was an accident, that he tried to get the gun away from her and —"

"She killed a hundred million people with Darwin!"

Manfred pursed his lips. "Come on, you can't honestly think that a five year old could be responsible for that. Do you think she knew what she was doing? My dad's been studying the history of this thing and found out that your mother was investigating Darwin shortly before she was implicated in murdering the Head Pol, and she was trying to find out who *Prometheus* was. Why would she be doing that if she already knew she was *Prometheus*, huh?" He hiked up his brows with a victorious smirk as he sized up her cracking resolve. "Besides," he went on, "she might not have been responsible at all. I know people blame her for it, but there's a lot of evidence to suggest that she couldn't spread the disease, even if she wanted to."

"But how could she not know? Her father was involved —"

He scoffed. "Do you think he told her? He was a scientist like the rest of them. Whatever they were doing, I'm betting he never told her. She was five years old, for Vee's sake. Chaos, my dad doesn't tell me a thing!"

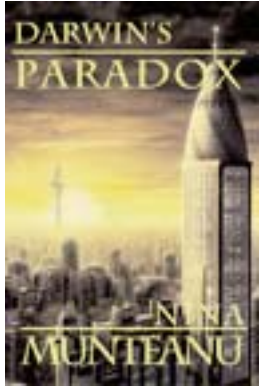
Angel was growing more confused. "She killed my best and only friend. In the heath, before she came here to destroy the A.I.-core."

He narrowed his eyes with skepticism. "Is this something Gaia told you?"

"Showed me," she said pointedly. "I saw it with my own eyes. On a vid-clip."

His frown deepened then he suddenly smiled grimly. "Let me show you something." He slid to the vee-com and she dragged over the chair for him to sit on. Within moments he'd swiftly pulled up a number of images and databases. Probably classified ones he wasn't allowed to access, Angel thought.

"Look," he said, casting a quick glance over his shoulder at her as she stood behind him, "my father could tell you a lot about that particular vid-clip on your mom when she shot the Pol. She didn't say those awful



things. More like she was a scapegoat for someone else's dirty work.”

“How do you know all this?” she glowered.

“About the vid-clip? Dad has specialists who work for him in linguistics. They figured it was a personal quarrel with that Pol. Langor used to be her boyfriend and she'd just broken up with him and he arrested her uncle, who was peddling Luddite literature, Dystopian stuff. He killed himself in the Pol Station.” Manfred frowned sadly. “She aimed for Langor's nuts, for vee sake, Angel.” He shrugged. “Chaos, if my girlfriend had done that to my uncle I'd have probably done the same thing too.”

“You sure know a lot about this,” she said.

“Chaos, of course I do!” Manfred smirked to hide his own embarrassment. “She's my hero, my virtual queen.” It suddenly made sense to Angel that Manfred, the rebel, would choose to idolize a criminal. But why did it have to be her own mother? “And like I said, she's one of my dad's pet projects too. He figured your mother was set up and he was right. After she wounded her ex-boyfriend, the second Pol tried to get the gun away from her and she accidentally shot him in the struggle. The official vid-clips purposefully didn't show that part but my dad found the master file. As for the killing of the Head Pol, there are lots of holes in that story too — ah,” he stopped himself. “Is it this?” He turned to her this time and pointed to the vee-com holo.

Angel leaned forward and confirmed the vid-clip that showed Aard running in the heath and Julie giving chase. Then she stepped back with a scowl, not wishing to see the clip again and wondered what use it was for Manfred to see it.

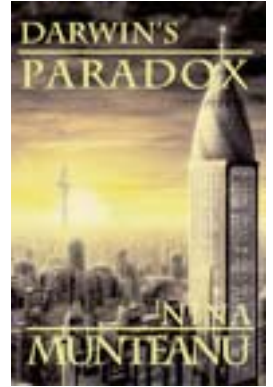
“Okay,” Manfred nodded. He kept stopping the clip and running it then stopping it again and running it backwards and forwards several times, emitting triumphant, challenging grunts and sounds like, “Ha! Ah, there!”

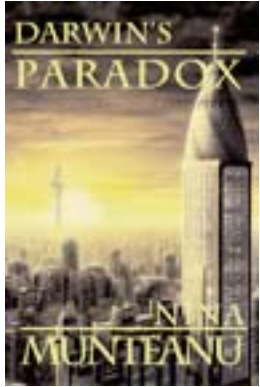
Angel paced the room, arms folded around her waist.

“Okay, come here,” he hastily reached back and grabbed her by the arm. He pulled her toward him and made her sit right next to him, sharing the chair seat with shoulders pressed against each other. “Now, pay attention,” he said gravely, forcing her to look and not giving her time to feel the flush of being bodily connected to him from shoulder to hips.

One by one, Manfred showed her where all the edits had been made, pointing out inconsistencies in the film rendering and effectively proving that Julie had not been chasing Aard and he'd been killed by someone other than Julie. “This vid has been very expertly edited to show something that didn't happen, Angel. Sometimes it isn't what you see, but what you don't see that matters. That's the power of Gaia.” He leaned back and tapped his lips pensively with a finger. Then he turned those sudden eyes on her that lit her from inside.

She returned his gaze with a confused stare. “I don't know what to think anymore.”





“Well, let me show you something else,” Manfred grinned. As his fingers coaxed out yet more files, he continued, “Remember, Angel, its not just your eyes, it's your brain and your thoughts that interpret what you see. Your mother might be a hothead, like someone else I know, but she isn't a cold-blooded assassin. This is what my father interpreted her to have really said, by reading her lips that day she shot those Pols in the Den.” Manfred pointed at the grid and the screen lit with her mother's face again. “You're scum after all, punishing him because of me —” Julie began and was cut off by a retort from Langor.

“You can see from her expression he must be saying something awful to her,” Manfred put in. “Maybe insulting her, like, 'you're nothing to me, bitch'.”

Then Julie spoke again, “Bobby's just an old man. He did nothing to you...”

“Here Langor must say something really nasty to her,” Manfred narrated to Julie's reaction. “Maybe about her uncle.”

Then Julie responded with “Bastard!” and pulled the trigger.

This time her words matched the anguish in her face and the pain and shock when she pulled the trigger. Driven by a lover's quarrel, not a calculated act in a political insurrection.

“Search your heart for the truth, Angel,” Manfred said softly. “Your eyes can deceive you. Trust your feelings.”

“I want to believe it, but I don't want to if it isn't true,” she said.

“Well,” Manfred said with a sigh, “if my mother was Julie Crane, I'd think twice before throwing her in with the likes of Gaia or the Dystopians. She was framed, pure and simple and my dad thinks he knows why.”

“Why?”

He shut off the vee-com and got up off the chair, which forced her to get up as well or fall over. “Get some sleep,” he advised. “It's late. We'll talk some more in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Angel said, taking the frayed blanket he offered her and making herself comfortable on the couch as he went to the door.

He turned briefly. “The door will be locked,” he assured her. “And only Po, Tim, Jenna and I have a card to get in.”

“Thanks again, Manfred,” she said.

He winked. “My pleasure, for the wild girl from the heath, the daughter of the famous and good Julie Crane.” He left and the room was abruptly silent. Too silent. There were no windows and Angel felt uncomfortable in the dark so she left a small light on.

What if Manfred had shown her was the truth, not what Gaia had shown her? Which was the reality? She wanted so much to believe what he'd told her and shown her, especially that her mother wasn't a stone-cold assassin. Angel wanted so much to believe that her mother hadn't been a willing co-conspirator in the spread of Darwin. It made sense that

her mother wasn't but it still upset Angel to think her grandfather could have been a plague-spreading terrorist. Perhaps the virus had been created for another use and they'd mistakenly interpreted Julie's reaction to represent the rest of the non-veemeld population. Their only fault, then, would have been in not coming forward once they saw the lethal effects of what they'd unleashed on the rest of Icaria. From what she'd learned so far, it seemed that none of Darwin's creators were able to live with that burden.

She recalled the vid-clip of Julie's father destroying his lab in a violent rage. His behaviour was appropriate for a scientist who'd unintentionally created a pandemic that killed millions of innocent people. It was maybe even cause enough for murdering his colleagues, Angel supposed, but then she thought of her mother's temper and knew in her heart of hearts what had really happened. Long ago Julie had shot a Pol out of uncontrollable rage as part of a quarrel. No more, no less; and it must have been the same with her grandfather.

But just days ago her mother had shot someone in the heath, presumably the person who'd killed Aard and she'd done it in self-defense, Angel reasoned. Her father had hinted that bad people were after them, which was why her mother had left to lure them away. Angel stared beyond the walls all the way to the heath and summoned the image of cold determination on her mother's face when she'd killed that man. Did she recognize the same fire in her grandfather's eyes in that violent vid-clip? Even though Angel felt like she should draw comfort from knowing that her mother wasn't an assassin, there were still too many unanswered questions for Angel's peace of mind. She thought about it for a few moments longer and finally concluded sadly that she was afraid of her mother and the way she'd killed with such skill...

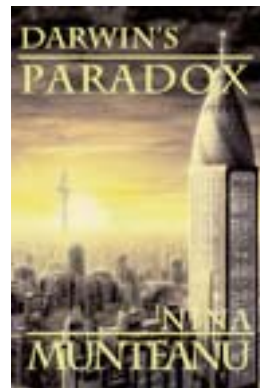
Then Angel felt her own anger boil up inside her. If her mother hadn't killed Aard, who had? Why did Gaia have that film if she wasn't somehow connected to what had happened? Her vicious plot for power was at the root of all this, of this Angel was certain. Then she recalled something that Gaia had said: by "killing" SAM, Julie would be eradicating the last shred of incriminating evidence against Gaia. That was where Angel would begin. She looked over at the vee-com and smiled...

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She walks the smooth corridor, gazing in wonder at the rainbow of glittering light that streams down from no place in particular. Angel eagerly approaches the corner of the bright hall, expecting the cloaked figure she knows is Proteus.

She rounds the corner and grins at Proteus waiting for her. Angel says, *Let's join, Proteus. I want to be able to talk with you when I'm awake too.*

[To join you must go into a deep trance. It will appear as if you are dead.]

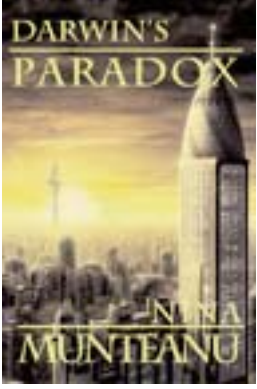


DARWIN'S PARADOX

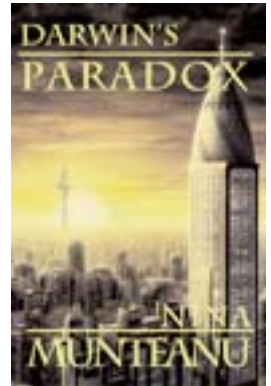
Does this frighten you?]

Angel feels herself stiffen momentarily. *No. I...trust you Proteus.* Before finding out about her mother, Angel would have plunged in without a thought. Now she feels doubt and some trepidation. *I'll come out of it, won't I?*
[Yes.]

God's mouth knows not to utter falsehood, but he will perform each word—Aeschylus, Prometheus



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DRAGGING Frank's limp body clumsily between Victor and Zane, the three fugitives and Victor's droid made their way through the upper halls with no incident. Victor and Julie had been housed in a less restricted area reserved for special cases under “house arrest”, unlike the traditional Pol Station lower level cell where Julie had been locked up when she'd awaited her Shaming twelve years ago.

“This isn't going to work,” Zane whined for the tenth time as they descended a stairwell into an empty hall. Julie glared at him and nudged her head forward in warning. Almost giddy with shot nerves and exhaustion, she was ready to punch him out if he said that one more time.

“Shh!” Victor hissed, stopping in the middle of a hallway next to the side exit they were hoping to use. Julie heard it too.

“What?” Zane said too loudly.

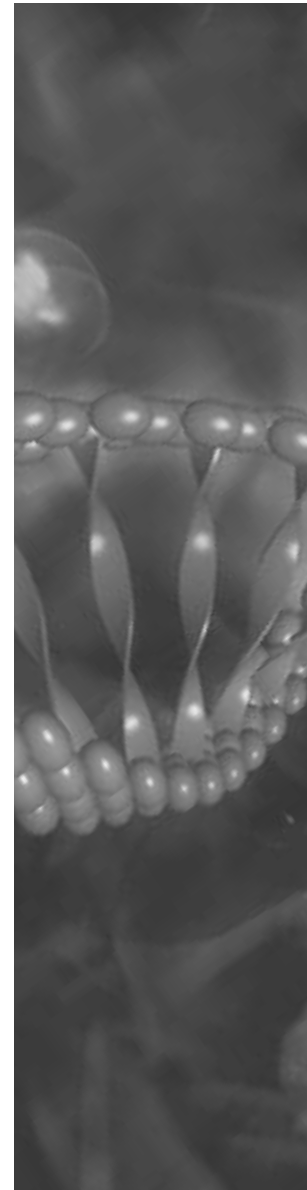
“Someone coming down the hallway, around the corner,” Victor whispered, plowing urgently through his jacket pocket with his free hand for his exit card.

“It's actually four people.” Julie placed a restraining hand on his arm. “There's at least a dozen waiting on the other side of that exit,” she said, shooting Victor a warning look. “And somehow I don't think they're friendlies.”

He frowned at her. “How do you —”

“Trust me. I know. My enhanced hearing, I guess.” She shrugged.

Zane piped up excitedly, “It's like a radar system. Like a bat. Did you know that her abilities are —”



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“Shut up!” both Julie and Victor hissed.

“I think we have a better chance with those four.” She pointed down the hall. “Especially considering that you don't even know if your card works anymore.”

Victor nodded with a sigh and straightened, resigned to what was coming at them from around the corner. Within a few heartbeats four Pols appeared. At the sight of the three fugitives the Pols stopped and assessed them suspiciously. Julie noticed their hands poised over their holstered weapons. The oldest one spoke, “What's going on here?” His gaze glanced from Frank, head lolling and drooling as he hung between Victor and Zane, back to the other three. Frank's shirtfront was covered with what looked and smelled convincingly like vomit. The Pols flared their noses at the sour reek and the pathetic site.

“It's all right, officers,” Victor said in a tone of authority Julie hadn't thought possible in him. “We're taking Mr. Langor to the Med-Center. He's had too much ambrosia as well as something else and is not feeling well.” Victor gave them a curt smile. “You know what I mean,” he whispered conspiratorially. The fact that the older Pol had no idea what Victor meant was obvious in his confused frown, but he didn't admit it, which boded well for his perception of Victor's authority, Julie thought. They just might get through this.

“And who are you all?” The Pol's stern gaze flickered over Zane and he rested his eyes on Julie. He studied her with narrowing eyes, as if searching his mind for recognition. She tried not to give away her rising anxiety. What if he figured out who she was?

“This is Langor's girlfriend, you fool,” Victor bit out, letting impatience rise in his voice. Julie gave the Pol a demure smile. “And this,” Victor flicked a hand toward Zane, “is one of Dykstra's men.”

Zane nodded. “I have direct orders from John Dykstra to watch over Mr. Langor.”

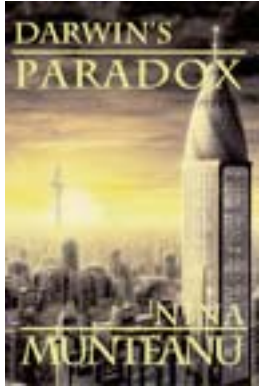
Julie saw it on their faces even as her own adrenalin spiked. Zane had blown his cover. John Dykstra had been the Head of Secret Pols twelve years ago. Zane should have said Brian Dykstra.

The Pols drew out their weapons

The Exit door banged open and a dozen disheveled men and women burst into the hall, surrounding them all, and brandishing battered but functional-looking laser guns. Their faces were ugly and scarred beneath their worn brown cloaks. Julie's chest grew tight with realization: Vee-radicators!

“We came for Julie Crane!” a burly man with no lips, shouted. He waved a Pol laser gun in his large hand as he swung his large body and pinned his eyes on her. “There!” he pointed. Julie instinctively recoiled.

Victor seized her arm and jerked them back out of the fray as shots were exchanged between the outnumbered Pols and the Vee-radicators. It was then that she saw him, standing a little apart from the others. She



drew in a sharp breath and tore from Victor's grasp to step forward. It couldn't be!

"Daniel?" Her voice warbled.

His eyes darted to her out of a heavily tattooed face, which tightened in a tangle of pain and indecision. "Julie, I—" Then with sudden urgency, "Come with us!" He held out a hand. She noticed that he held a weapon in the other.

"Julie, come on!" Victor hissed, leaving Zane with the burden of Frank's dead weight to grab Julie's arm again. "This is our chance!" While the Vee-radicators and the Pols were engaged in battle, Victor pulled her toward the exit door the Vee-radicators and Daniel had entered.

Julie tried to read Daniel's expression. He didn't look like their prisoner. More like one of their recruits, brandishing a Secret Pol weapon in his hand and tattoos all over his face. He seemed in control of his fate even though he presently looked uncomfortable with it. She shook her head at him then urged, "Come with us, Daniel!"

"They're getting away!" a Vee-radicator boomed, shoving past Daniel and practically knocking him down. Daniel made no move to join them or to protect himself from the Pols. He just stood there with a pained expression as Julie helped hoist Frank up and the three fugitives tore out through the exit into the milling crowd of Darwin Mall.

Julie fought from looking back and her eyes stung with tears. She let Victor lead them through the blurry crowd. The chirping in her head intensified — they were being followed. Julie ruthlessly shoved her feelings aside. She couldn't afford to think about Daniel or what his being here meant. A brief glance over her shoulder revealed at least two Vee-radicators on their tail, shoving their way through the crowd. "We have company!" she hissed.

Victor nodded and craned to get a glimpse of their pursuers. "Vee-radicators."

"Two of them," she added.

Victor led them to the entrance of a Liv-Center and sliced his card over the viewer. The door hushed open and they ducked inside. Julie let go of Frank and leaned close to Victor. "I know it's helping us get into places but shouldn't you ditch your card?"

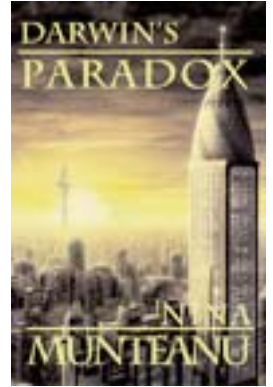
He looked at her with puzzlement, then realization flashed on his face. Twelve years ago Daniel had inadvertently led the Pols right to Julie with his card. "They can't trace this one. It's special."

She nodded, satisfied. "You two go ahead," she urged. "And make a lot of noise."

Victor frowned. "But it's you they're after —"

"Get moving!" she commanded, peering through the frosted window. "I see them coming." She waved Victor on and gave him a lopsided smile. "Like you, I've learned a few tricks also." She ducked behind the door.

Zane and Victor seized Frank who had slumped to the ground and



stumbled down the hallway as the two Vee-radicators shot the locks and burst in through the doors. They broke into a run, guns training on the two fugitives ahead, when Julie flew across the hall and threw herself, legs snapping high and slamming into the neck of the first man. He toppled sideways with a grunt into the other man. Guns clattered to the floor.

Julie landed on her feet with a bounce and pivoted on one foot, swinging with all her weight as the second man charged her. Her boot made contact with his jaw in a reverberating crunch. He yelped and fell backward with a thud as the first man scrambled to his feet. He lunged for his gun but she slid there before him, and in one fluid movement she kicked the weapon aside and followed through with another hard kick to his face. He fell backward with a weak cry. Landing in a combat crouch, Julie assessed the two men. They were both out cold. Blood was streaming out of the second man's mouth. She'd likely broken his jaw. He'd probably leave it that way, she thought with macabre humor.

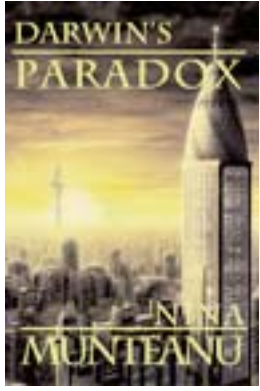
Breathing heavily from the sudden exertion, Julie straightened and turned to Victor and Zane, who were staring at her in amazement. She shrugged in response. Surely Victor knew about her combat training with Aard. She retrieved the two weapons then sprinted toward her co-conspirators.

"This way," Victor said in that nervous high-pitched voice she'd grown accustomed to hearing whenever she intimidated him. Inhaling deeply, Julie grabbed Frank by the armpit and nodded to Victor. He led them through a set of doors, which revealed access to the lower levels. They descended flight after flight of stairs to the darkest levels, each taking turns relieving one of the two carrying Frank. To Julie's surprise, Victor's droid managed quite well on the stairs and required no additional help. When they reached bottom, she nodded to Zane and they dropped Frank's still-unconscious body on the ground and took a much-needed break.

Still breathing hard, Zane said, "I can't believe we got away so easily. You were great, Victor. Finding a window to escape while the Pols and Vee-radicators killed one another. And you were incredible!" He turned to Julie. "All those wild kicks and acrobatics. Vee! They never even knew what hit them! Where'd you learn that?"

Julie threw a glance in Victor's direction. From a dead man, she thought. She sat down on the lower stair and leaned her arms on her slightly bent knees, glowering in silence. She caught Victor covertly watching her and shivered. She felt rage, fear and despair competing to tear her apart. "What am I doing here?" her mind screamed at her. Here, with a liar maybe — even a spy a sexual voyeur and a rapist, none of whom she could trust. None of who could likely help her save her family. As for her family...if Daniel was here, then that could only mean that Angel was here too. Was she also with the Vee-radicators and did they know she was a vemeld? Like a train derailing over a cliff, her mind raced with unimaginable thoughts.

Zane blithered on, "I can't believe we got away from those ugly



bastards. We should ditch the Head Pol. It's getting too dangerous —”

“Why are you here?” Julie snapped at him in a spitting voice.

Zane winced at the sharpness of her demand. “What do you mean?”

“I mean back there you gave us away,” she said, seizing his darting gaze and holding it like a vice with her intense stare. “I think I recognize his motives,” she said, pointing curtly to Victor but keeping her eyes on Zane.

Through her peripheral vision she could see Victor's wounded expression. He obviously thought she meant his unsavory habit for sexual peeping. She hadn't meant that, but if he wanted to take it the wrong way, let him. She was too tired and hurt to care and getting angrier by the minute. This place and this motley crew of fugitives were the last thing she wanted now. What she wanted was her old life back: a warm bed with Daniel beside her and her cherished daughter safe. Instead she'd somehow led her family here, into this den of intrigue, duplicity and rebellion, where chance had placed her husband on the opposite side. And her daughter, heaven knows where...

She let her emotional storm rage into Zane's eyes like a hurricane bent on destruction. “Your motives, on the other hand, aren't so clear, Zane. In fact, they're pretty damned muddy.” And he seemed to know things long before anyone else should. “How is it those Vee-radicators came looking for me just then, Zane? You're the one who convinced me to shut SAM down based on your theory that Proteus needs SAM to communicate with Darwin hosts, like me. Well, it doesn't, and I killed SAM for nothing. Convenient that that's exactly what Frank and Tyers wanted me to do. Not because of Proteus, because they couldn't care a flying leap for Proteus. No, they wanted SAM shut down because he was becoming a nuisance, and I can only wonder why. I wish I'd thought of that and asked SAM before I killed him.”

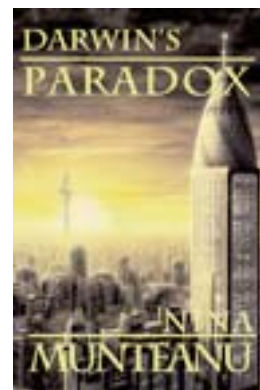
Zane flicked his eyes from Julie to Victor, who looked on with serious concern.

“Either you're doing this for a pay off or you're a fool,” Julie said, leaning forward with her arms on her thighs. “So, which is it, Zane?”

This time it was Zane's turn to look hurt. “Hang on, Julie,” he held up his arms in supplication. “Okay, so I am doing it for a pay off, but not like you think.” He pursed his lips. “I was doing what Tyers asked me to when I tried to convince you to shut SAM down. But my reasons and his were different. I really did believe what I said to you, Julie. You have to believe that.” He paused for a sign of reassurance, which she didn't give. With a resigned sigh, he went on, “As for the pay off, it's not what you think. I only did that because their motive and mine coincided. They didn't buy me. I'm after the big pay off, the one that counts.”

“And what might that be?” she spit out. “Me?” she said sarcastically.

“As a matter of fact, yes!” he grinned nervously. “You're the best thing that happened to me in over a decade of miserable research. Langor's right about my two-bit work. I was dry. Doing nothing original,



publishing insignificant papers. Just biding my time at the Pielou CDC. I might as well have been a technician. Then you came along.”

Finally, an explanation of Zane's motives that made sense to Julie, although it didn't explain his prescient knowledge about certain things or the coincidental appearance of the Vee-radicators at the Pol Station exit. “So, you're hoping to scoop the big one with me.”

He nodded with a self-conscious smile. “When Victor called me to help you guys escape, I figured that if I tagged along, I'd have a chance to get some data along the way.”

Julie nodded and couldn't restrain a sardonic smile. Despite his annoying habit of displaying a cavalier over-confidence, she liked Zane. When he talked science, his eyes lit up with a passion that reminded her of her father when he'd lectured her on chaos theory and his models of creative destruction. Discussing science was one of the few times her father's face awoke from its usual sadness.

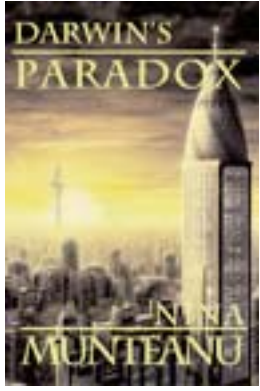
Zane obviously decided that he'd defused her suspicion, taking her smile as a tacit acceptance and an invitation to go on. “There's so much we can learn about ourselves, viruses and artificial intelligence through studying you, Julie. You're unique. Incredibly valuable. What more can I say?” He waved his hands.

Julie felt muscles that had just started to relax tighten again. Frank had said the same thing. “Yeah, valuable,” she muttered. Too valuable. Now that she'd destroyed their pesky A.I. rebels, what did they still want from her?

“No, you don't get it do you?” Zane said in a frenzied excitement that stunned her. “You and this virus have this...thing together that no one else has. You're the only person on this planet who can speak directly to Proteus, to us, and to the machine intelligence all at the same time. No other veemeld, no other person can do that.”

Julie felt a surge of energy prick her body. Something snapped into place — Gaia and Proteus. Gaia was involved somehow, probably still hoping to develop her new race of Icarians, perhaps by somehow harnessing the power of the sentient virus inhabiting over half of the Icarian population. It was too appealing for Gaia to not be involved. This was her new paradigm: the whole city's population at her whim through Proteus. If Gaia could access its consciousness through people like Julie, or better yet Angel, responsive and openly able to communicate with Gaia's new protégé, Proteus...Julie's chest cramped. That was too frightening! Was that scenario even possible? If it were, Gaia would make it so. Julie recalled something Zane had told her about research from the mayor's office. That “someone” in the mayor's office interested in Darwin statistics was none other than the mayor herself, Gaia looking for that elusive connection to Proteus.

“Darwin spreads through sexual contact in adults,” Zane interrupted her feverish thoughts. “Only you — oh, and I suppose your daughter too got Darwin when you were immature.” He coloured suddenly, realizing



her possible misinterpretation of his use of the word. “I mean 'undeveloped'” He laughed in embarrassment, eyes probing her breasts.

She helped him out, “Pre-adult, you mean.”

“Yeah. I think getting Proteus at a pre-pubescent age allowed the virus to interact with your still developing nervous and endocrine systems. Your body was much more accepting. Vee knows how Proteus interacts with your daughter who had it from before she was born...”

Julie drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. Had she done the wrong thing in coming here? She gathered her lower lip in her teeth and wondered if all she'd done was make it easier for them to kidnap Angel. “Proteus scares me,” she said. “What's it want? Is it capable of having its own agenda? And can it be manipulated, Zane?”

“Those are hard questions, Julie.” Zane stroked his chin, but suddenly his face lit up with an idea. “You can help a lot by letting me do some tests on you at the lab.” He now grinned like a kid asking for candy from his mom.

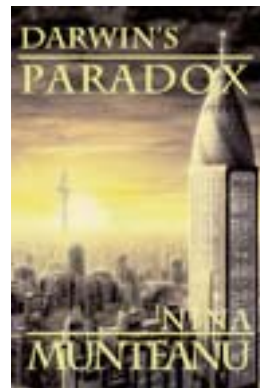
“Now?” She hardly thought this was appropriate. Or was that her fear talking? “They'll be looking for us there,” she objected with a frown and stood up.

“Not if they don't see you,” a quiet high-pitched voice said.

Julie had almost forgotten that Victor was there. “What do you mean?”

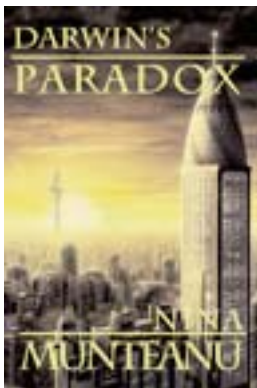
He gave her a clumsy smile, eyes gleaming with a plan and hands stroking his droid. “Gaia hasn't taken everything away from me, yet.”

Julie and Zane exchanged glances. “Okay, Victor, you have our undivided attention,” Julie said, glancing from Victor to the droid.



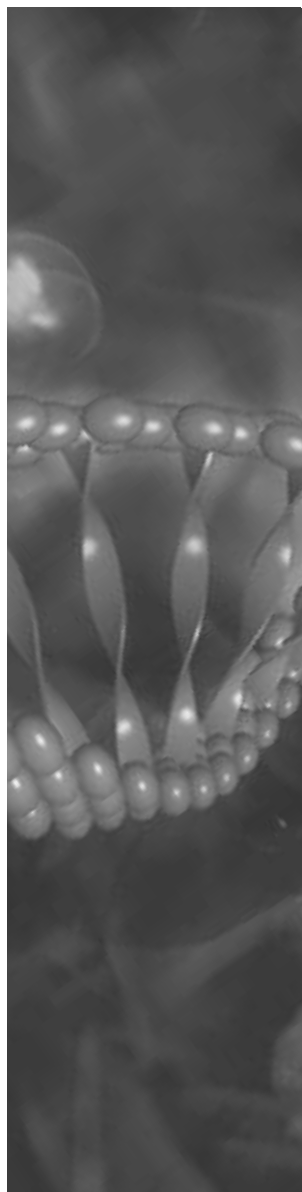
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An inefficient virus kills its host. A clever virus
stays with it—James Lovelock



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“HEY, there veemeld-lover,” Washington gargled through a mouthful of food. “Got some grub for you. Help yourself. I’m not your babysitter.” He slopped a pile of the vile-looking mix of clone beans and re-fried potatoes on the dirty plate that he kept using without washing, and sat down on one of the shapeless cloth chairs. Crossing his thick legs in a near-graceful pose ill-fitting someone of his ilk, Washington set on his dinner like a hungry animal.

Daniel felt anger bubble up then dissipate with lack of energy. He hated it when Washington called him a veemeld-lover. He ran his hand through his dirty hair and exhaled with despair. He wasn’t hungry. In fact, he felt sick to his stomach. The smell of food cloyed in his stomach — it stank of the inner city, like burnt grease, cabbage and nano-soup. He leaned back on his sunken chair and let his thoughts collide with one another in a free-for-all of self-pity.

When he’d seen her standing in the Pol Station hallway in her blazing red tunic, his throat had closed. She was so beautiful! Not the same as she was out in the heath — those clothes and Icaria itself had somehow transformed her into something else entirely. Something elusive and intimidating. Then he’d noticed Frank Langor slumped beside her and the other two men. She’d been very attentive to Langor, supporting him as they fled, leaving Daniel behind.

Daniel bowed his head and brought his hands to his face. Julie’s expression when she’d first seen him in the Pol Station haunted him. She

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looked stunned and horrified. She must have concluded that he was a Vee-radicator, especially when he refused to flee with them when he'd had the obvious chance. How could she guess that he had a hole in his chest with a bomb ready to go off. His heroic plan to help her escape had collapsed under the maelstrom of confused fighting, and then he'd lost the courage to tell her about Dykstra. Partly, he rationalized, because it had become obvious that Julie and her friends were already escaping from the Pols, with Langor likely as their ransom. But why did it have to be him?

He knew her mind had been screaming questions about Angel. Where was she? Was she still alive? He had no idea where his daughter was and nausea flooded inside him, filling his stomach where a great hollow ached.

Washington turned to him and spoke with a full mouth, "Feel bad we didn't bring back your woman, eh?"

Daniel glared at him and said nothing.

"Hey, she got away," Washington continued blithely. "You should be happy with that."

He was, Daniel thought, drawing as much comfort from the thought as he could; but there was still the question of Angel.

"Chaos, we should have killed her," Washington went on, stabbing a heap of potatoes with his dirty fork. "The Head Pol was with her too, did ya see?" He shoved the pile into his mouth. "What a goddamned prize he'd have been. Got me how she and her friends managed to capture him. Looked like he crapped his pants, eh?" He chortled and food flew out of his mouth. "She must've pleased him good, that wild cat. Sent him to chaos and back. He's her prize, now —"

Daniel hurled out his lunch in surges of agony.

"Shit!" Washington yelled with disgust, jumping to his feet. "You're going to clean it up this time."

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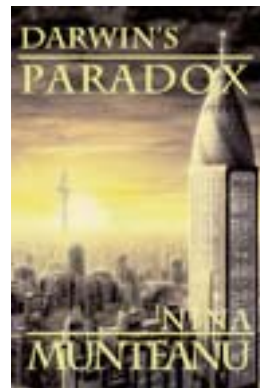
As Daniel crept along the floor on all fours, wiping up his vomit with an already filthy cloth, Washington hovered over him. "You don't think much of us, do ya?" Daniel kept on wiping in silence. "You know, we just want the best for Icaria."

Daniel threw the stinking, disgusting cloth into the pail and glared up at the hulking man. "By killing my wife?"

"Hey, nothing personal," Washington shrugged. "We're not going to kill her — at least not right away, anyway," he sneered. "But you have to see the bigger picture, lover boy — she's a freaking veemeld."

"There must be hundreds of veemelds in Icaria-5. Why my wife?"

"Chaos, man, don't you know how unique she is? She's your own goddamned wife, for vee's sake! Julie Crane's no ordinary veemeld. She represents the ultimate in technological evolution: she's a prototype of the human-machine. A new goddamned species, Woods!"



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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“So, you do know my name.” But his mind was racing with what Washington said. Julie, the ultimate human-machine...a new species...

“Of course I know your name,” Washington scoffed. “We've been watching you out there in the heath for a year now.”

Anger flashed. “You're the assassins that were chasing her!”

Washington's lip-less mouth twisted into what Daniel interpreted as a smirk. “We did try to kill her, yeah. But only a couple of months ago, when we heard they were going to bring her back. That new mayor of Icaria-5, that bitch veemeld-lover, wanted your sassy wife.”

Daniel looked puzzled. “What for?”

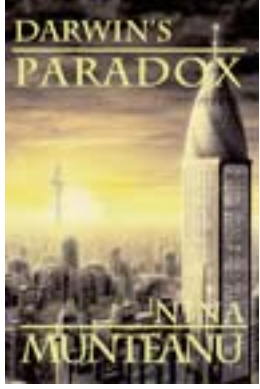
“I told you, idiot! To start a new species! My spy told me that they want your wife to do some voodoo with the A.I.-core first, before they clone her or whatever they intend to do. Chaos, I bet she caused that mess with our A.I. network yesterday. Shot a hole in the system with her third eye or something.”

Daniel pulled the filthy rag out of the pail and continued to wipe the mess on the floor. He couldn't face Washington anymore. His chest ached and despair bled into anguish. What had Julie done? What had they — Icaria — made her into? He feared that she'd changed into something he wouldn't recognize, someone who wasn't his wife anymore. She didn't even look the same, he considered grimly. She was more beautiful than ever, but in a frightening sort of way that completely excluded him.

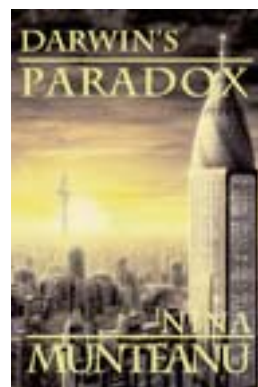
Somehow those years outside in the heath seemed so far away. Everything he'd done to build a comfortable and happy life for them in the heath had vaporized like a cool mist dissipating on a fall morning under the withering rays of a relentless sun.

As it always had been before, he felt uneasy in Icaria. Displaced like a fish out of water, his breaths strangled, and he became leery and unsure of himself. Julie — his wife — looked so at home here in her flame-red tunic and wearing her vee-set with the ease of a technophile. She'd looked so competent, tall and in command. It was as he'd feared: he'd found her, only to discover that he'd finally, completely, and irrevocably lost her.

The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication  
—Western Union executive, 1876







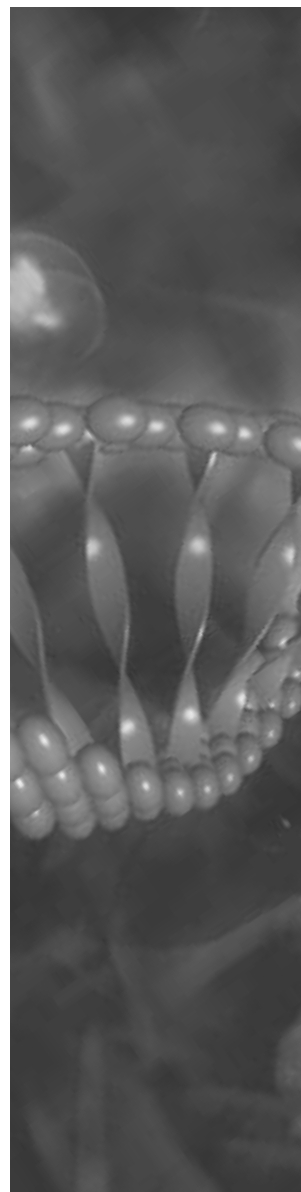
**JULIE** reclined in a patient-testing chair in the lab Zane had snuck them into in the Pielou Med-Center. She marveled at Victor's ability to create a fake image for Icaria-5's prying eyes. He had some special talents, unfortunately they all seemed to lie in the realm of subterfuge. Julie threw a glance at Frank, sprawled in a corner of the lab, hands and feet bound and mouth covered by a rag. He was finally awake and looked more than a little uncomfortable as he glared at her. She looked away.

As Zane connected a number of sensors to various parts of her and then to the inputs on the chair, her attention was wrenched back to the testing she'd resigned herself to submitting to. She had to admit that it frightened her a little. The results, that is. She had near-total confidence in the testing procedures because Zane had assured her of the non-intrusive nature of positron emission tomography and the newest in magnetic resonance imaging.

"Just hold still, Julie. This won't take more than two minutes, and it won't hurt at all."

She did and it didn't. After fiddling with switches and making strange faces at the monitoring station for several moments, Zane unhooked her and left them to check the readouts in the room next door.

Julie rose from the chair and wandered the room restlessly. She ended up standing across from Victor who seemed to cringe from her. Why did she frighten him so much? She wanted to pat his shoulder and tell him it was okay, he could relax, but she didn't. Even though a part of him, a boyish timidity, reminded her of Daniel when he was young, there was another part of him, a lingering



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shadow of unknown and crafty intent that made her feel uncomfortable. She just couldn't trust him completely. Giving him an awkward smile, she said in a low voice not to be overheard by Frank, "What happened? How did Gaia become mayor and you end up in the Pol Station? What went wrong?"

Victor made a pathetic attempt at a smile. Was he thinking of the data cube she'd put together that implicated Gaia? His hand kept moving from his side to his lips in spurts of nervous movement as he spoke in a shrill voice, "I lost control of my own people." He gulped in some air and blinked repeatedly. Another nervous tick, she thought. "More than that. I lost control of Icaria. Even the A.I.s stopped listening to me. Next thing I knew I was being investigated for fraud and she just stepped in and took my place."

"You never showed my information to anyone, did you?" she said quietly with a sad smile. She'd said it without bitterness.

He avoided her eyes. "Only the part about you being *Prometheus* and details of the artificial virus. I gave all that to the CDC." His eyes flickered over hers briefly. "Of course," he continued in halting rushed sentences, looking everywhere else in the room except into her eyes, "I used your model to get rid of the Secret Pols and to find the Dystopian ringleaders."

"So no one knows that Gaia, not my father, was responsible for murdering his fellow scientists, Vogel and Tsutsumi."

He visibly winced and shuffled his feet nervously like an insect pinned on the wall. "No one knows," he said as if out of breath.

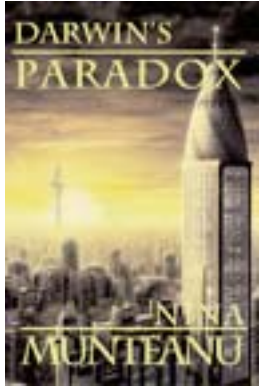
"Or that Gaia was behind Kraken's murder, not me."

He blinked repeatedly and swallowed, throwing his gaze to the floor like a child being punished. "No." He kept his eyes cast down when he added in a voice so soft she barely heard his words, "I'm afraid, because of the information that I did make available about you, Icaria also holds you responsible for spreading Darwin."

A long silence hung in the air as Julie digested that and realized that she wasn't disappointed or surprised; she'd already guessed as much. So in Icaria's eyes, she was still a treacherous murderer in a line of crazed killers. A mass murderer, considering her responsibility for Darwin. No wonder Tyers had been nervous taking her through the mall. If anyone had recognized her, there'd have been a riot for sure. Victor seemed the weakest link in a chain of required actions to put Gaia in her place. In all fairness to him, it was probably just as well that he didn't tell anyone. Gaia had blackmailed the entire governing body of the Circle and she obviously had many hidden allies within Victor's own network. Such an accusation would have led to his disappearance long ago and Icaria-5 would have been in Gaia's hands sooner.

"Victor," she began hesitantly, thinking of Daniel, and threw a glance at Frank, "What do you know about the Vee-radicators? Are they as extremist as they say? I mean...all of them?"

"Yes, all of them are," he said with a sigh and eyes flickering back up



to hers briefly. Perhaps he was relieved that she'd changed the subject. "According to them we've sold our souls to the machine world. They think the machines will take over and render us all extinct; and frankly, when the A.I.s started making demands and took control of some facilities and services, I couldn't help wondering if the Vee-radicators were on to something."

That's exactly what Daniel would have thought, too. It was Julie's turn to look down at the floor. Was that reason enough for him to join up with these militant extremists? How on earth had he stumbled into that group, and what had he done with their daughter? Where was Angel?

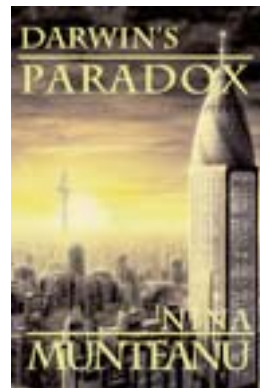
"But they've taken their paranoia too far, I think," Victor went on, obviously sensing her growing distress but not fully understanding the reason behind it. "They hate vee-coms, vee-sets, and veemelds with a passion." He looked her in the eyes briefly, then looked away as if her gaze back would melt his soul. "And they hate you, in particular. To them, you're the Mother of All Evil. Your ability to veemeld without mechanical aids has made you a monster to them. Everyone knows you're *Prometheus*, part of an experiment to create a new machine-person that went somewhat awry. They...well...blame you for..." he let the obvious trail away, gulped some air and continued, "and they consider you a dangerous thing. The first of a dangerous new species, a harbinger of technological terror. They'd have torn you apart if they'd have gotten hold of you."

Julie swallowed hard, believing him.

Frank made a noise that sounded like a strangled laugh. Julie glared at him, realizing her face was heating with a mixture of competing emotions. She swiftly redirected her gaze at the far wall as tears scalded her eyes. Why had Daniel and Angel come? To find her, of course. Yes, that made sense. But the rest didn't. Allying himself with the very group that had tried to kill her in the heath? The very same group she had come here to stop, and to protect her daughter from? The group that obviously wanted her dead now! Didn't he know? He was tattooed and holding a gun, after all! She had a sudden thought. Perhaps he didn't know. He hadn't seen the assassins in the heath, after all. Perhaps he still thought he was rescuing her.

Their philosophy at least on its surface matched his own, she thought and rubbed her face with her hand. Perhaps they'd inveigled him with half-truths to get his help. It was just the sort of thing he'd have done too — join some group like that, based on apparent principals, without perceiving their hidden motives. While she'd guarded herself most of her life and had warily shunned community, including her own veemelds, Daniel had always laid himself open, wanting to belong and be everyone's friend. Naïve and blustery, he was pretty much an open book, with a quick temper that diffused as swiftly; while hers smoldered and brooded in contrast.

Poor, deceived Daniel, she thought. He'd come to rescue her, obviously, but it was he who needed saving now, she decided. And Angel, wherever she was...but that would have to wait; there was an order in



which things had to happen for everything to work out right. First off, she had to stop Proteus and Gaia. For that she'd need SAM. Then, once Victor was re-instated in his rightful place as Icaria-5's mayor, she could get his help in freeing her family from the Vee-radicators.

Zane strutted in, his grin telling her he was pleased and excited all at once. His eyes brightened when he caught her gaze. "You're incredible!"

She wasn't in the mood for complements. "Meaning?"

Victor came forward to look over the vee-pad readouts Zane was holding and they all huddled over it. "Look," Zane said in a squeaky voice, "this shows the average number of functional neurons in five major areas in the brain. Now here's a set from a Darwin victim who died shortly after testing. See which regions were initially affected? Here, in the brain stem." He pointed. "Significant damage also occurred in the hippocampus, where memory is processed and redirected."

Julie barely had time to register the information when Zane hastily touched the vee-pad control and another set of data appeared. "Now here's one of a Darwin victim who survived due to remission," Zane said. Julie noted that the surviving Darwin victim had shown neuronal regeneration in the damaged areas, slightly surpassing the average. Her eyebrows rose and she nodded, eyes meeting Zane's. He nodded back. "We — that is, Niko and Irena — found that the dentate gyrus, a thin dark layer roughly in the shape of a V in the hippocampus, was stimulated. The brain repaired itself." Zane grinned and excitedly clicked to another readout. Here, the neurons had increased significantly in all five areas.

"That's you, Julie."

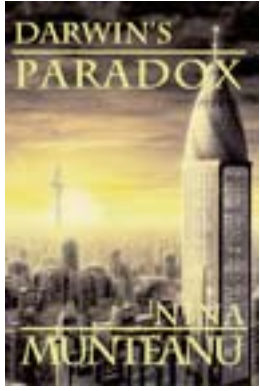
Drawing in a sharp breath, Julie looked up and met Zane's crazy look. He nodded wildly. "You've undergone massive neurogenesis in not only the hippocampus and the brainstem, where Darwin typically affected its victims, but also in places where neurogenesis isn't known to take place, like the neocortex. Stem cells in the septum, involved in emotion and learning, have given rise to new neurons. The striatum involved in fine-tuning motor activity, has particularly increased."

That made sense, Julie thought quickly, recalling her improved reflexes. "How's that possible?" she murmured.

"I don't know!" Zane exclaimed happily in a shrill voice and waved his hand. "You're a walking network of neurons. I estimate your neuronal capacity has increased by over twenty percent!" His words shot out in rapid fire. "It partially accounts for your increased cognition, your improved reflexes, heightened senses, and your capacity to learn and retain information."

Zane was beside himself with excitement. He bounded around the room, looking for things, snatching up data sheets and putting them down without looking at them. He walked past Frank, sullen in the corner, without glancing at him.

Julie grew uncomfortable. Half sitting, half leaning against a counter, she threw a glance at Victor who had been quiet so far. His eyes darted



at her with a pained look on his face that she couldn't read.

“Okay,” she said, trying to calm her shaky voice and eyes flicking between Victor and Zane, “I guess it's safe to say that Proteus is somehow responsible for my enhanced neuronal capacity. What does that mean in terms of its motivation, what it wants from me and from Icaria?”

“I have no idea!” Zane shouted, losing control. “This is incredible,” he turned away, looking abstracted. “I wish Niko and Irena were here. They'd freak. They found out now where's that data, ah, there “ He fished out a stack of vee-pads from a box. “Their tests on Darwin survivors, victims and controls suggest that damage by Proteus was partially caused by chemical means. Niko discovered high amounts of a strange substance like a glucocorticoid, which inhibits stem cell proliferation in the hippocampus and adult neurogenesis.”

Then he spun around to face Julie, his mind racing. “But, you were infected when you were a child. Plus you have the unique genetic make up of a veemeld. Your hormones and your chemistry would have been different. Proteus obviously didn't make or activate this strange substance in you. And Proteus was meant to act the way it did in you; certainly not kill people.” He started pacing the room again. “Somehow this intelligent virus learned to correct itself on some Darwin victims; but for some reason, which might have to do with the victim's age at infection, no significant increase in neural activity accompanied this remission in adult Darwin victims.” He rushed toward her. “I need to run more tests on you “

She backed away and threw up her arms. “Hold on, buddy boy. Slow down. Remember why we're here. Not to test me to death, but to figure out what Proteus wants and is capable of.” Then to deal with it and find her family and get out.

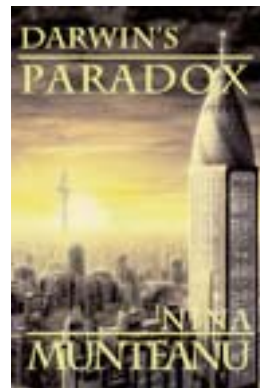
Zane blinked hard and seemed to come down to Earth. “You've got to tell me about your communication with this virus. It talks to you, doesn't it?”

Julie squirmed and shot a nervous glance at Victor, who was listening intently. “Yes. In veemeld.” After a pause she admitted quietly, “And in my dreams.” She exhaled and added, “It also communicates in a non-verbal way. That happened as soon as I was infected with it when I was five. I'd describe it as the high-pitched sound of chirping insects. I think it's how the virus communicates with itself. The chirps let me know when I'm in danger by increasing their intensity and pitch.”

Zane's eyes widened. “Proteus hasn't communicated in any way, as far as we know, with any other Darwin host. Although we are getting a few cases reported of some unintelligible sounds being picked up in a few veemeld children born from Darwin mothers.” He shrugged. “You're still unique.”

“Yeah,” Julie sighed. “Unique.” She'd heard that before. From SAM. She didn't tell them about Angel. She glanced briefly at Frank and saw that he was staring at her with dark enigmatic eyes.

“But Julie, you're unique in a most delicious way,” Zane said with glee.



“Those chirping sounds could be like the high-frequency tetanic pulses that activate a particular phase of theta rhythm during veemeld. It's produced in the dentate gyrus, the part of the hippocampus most damaged in Darwin victims, but enhanced in you. Every part of the brain that was enhanced in you is involved in theta rhythm: the brain stem that transmits signals to the septum, which then activates TR in the hippocampus and the entorhinal cortex.

“While normal people rely on REM sleep to activate theta rhythm, and veemelds need Interact-SYM to turn it on in waking hours during veemeld, you have it on all the time through Proteus! That's why you could veemeld with SAM any time you wanted and heard all the other A.I.s of the city in your brain.” He shook his head in amazement. She could see evidence of his mind racing with the consequences she'd already come up with. “And that's why your reflexes, cognition, and memory are so advanced. You're not only generating new neurons but also processing as you go along. Infants need four times the REM sleep as adults, because that's when they build new neurons, under theta rhythm. You do it all day and night!”

“Okay!” she said, hearing her voice go shrill. “Enough, Zane. We don't have all day to do research.” She realized she was sliding over the edge of her patience. “We need a strategy. This virus is smart. It can think. What's it thinking? Does it have deterministic thoughts? Motive? What? Why did it correct itself? Come on, Zane. Get back on track.”

“Your dreams, Julie. The answer's got to be in your dreams.” He nodded to himself, eyes roaming the room thoughtfully.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he responded, crossing his arms and gazing at her intensely. “Considering that these dreams most likely occur during your normal REM sleep periods, those visions probably represent your most lucid communications with Proteus.”

She was afraid he'd say that she'd deduced as much herself. She hauled in a long breath.

“Tell me about your dreams,” Zane urged.

“I think we should get out of here first,” Julie insisted. Was she avoiding the issue? “It's only a question of time before security comes snooping in here despite the display.”

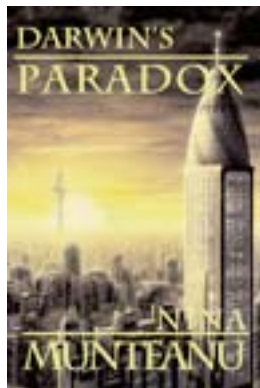
Zane nodded grimly. “Yeah. I guess you're right. It's late and we all need some sleep.”

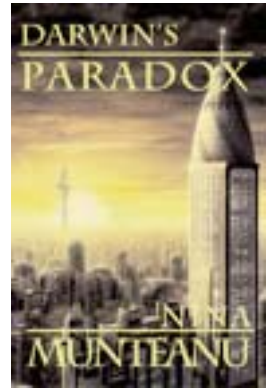
“I know someplace we can go for the night,” Victor's meek voice trilled.

More on: REM sleep and theta rhythm

[http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp\\_links/dreams.pdf](http://www.dragonmoonpress.com/dp/dp_links/dreams.pdf)

Dreams may be crucial in mammalian memory processing.  
Important information acquired while awake may be reprocessed  
during sleep—Jonathan Winson





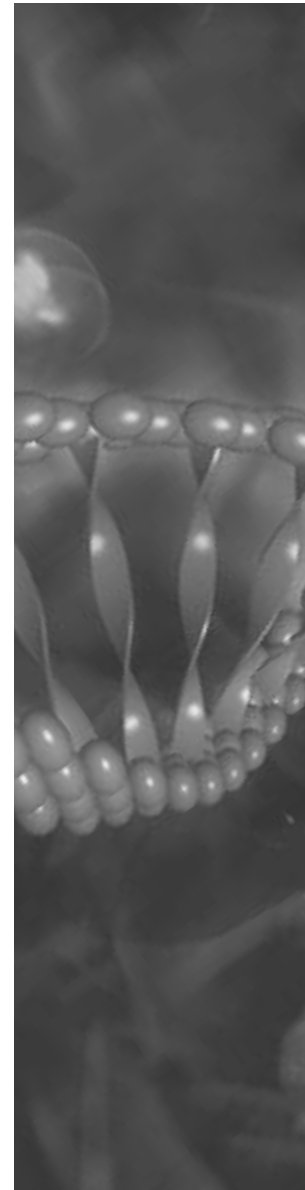
**AARD'S** place was a small three-room hovel in MacArthur Mall in the outer-city fringe. Not far from where Julie's uncle had lived — that was before Frank and his sadistic cronies had dragged him to the Pol Station where he'd committed the desperate act of suicide and her life here in Icaria had fallen apart.

Julie threw furtive glances behind them as Victor unsealed the door with his card then motioned for them to enter and went in. Zane shoved Frank, still bound, inside. Julie followed, shutting the door quietly behind her.

As Zane and Victor secured their prisoner, Julie wandered Aard's leisure room. The place was a mess and stale with the smell of old drug and unwashed clothes. Scraps of clothing lay scattered over the worn cloth furniture, the floor and the frayed scatter rug. At least a dozen empty drug bottles stood on the synthetic wood coffee table and more littered the floor. Julie shivered and realized that nervous exhaustion was getting the better of her.

As if afraid of the silence, Zane muttered, more to himself than to Julie or Victor: “What are we going to do with the Head Pol? I still think we should ditch him tomorrow. This is too dangerous, lugging him around. I know you said that we can do it all through the lower levels but still...”

Julie filtered him out, realizing with wry humor that his rambling reminded her of SAM's insufferable dissertations on any fertile topic she offered. She noticed several old holos over the fake fireplace and drew closer. The large one in the middle was Angel! Next to it hung several holos of the three of them.



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She remembered posing for the images. So this was where they ended up. They were his family, she concluded, feeling her throat constrict. They were all he had.

Victor came along side her and fixed his gaze on the holos. "You miss them a lot, don't you?" he asked in a quiet voice that showed genuine caring.

"Terribly," she responded, hearing her voice warble. She refused to think the unthinkable: that Daniel was here because Angel had been killed in the heath. Since that last garbled communication, she'd tried several times to reach Angel to no avail. Yet, somehow she felt sure she'd have sensed it if Angel had perished. She had to still be alive. Returning her thoughts to this place, she added, "I miss Aard too."

"I know you think Aard was just spying on you for Icaria but he regarded you with the highest respect and he would never have hurt you or your family."

"I know that."

"He enjoyed being with you. You made him feel so welcome."

Not always, she thought, recalling their confrontation and his departure from the camp. "He was a good man," she offered.

"The best," Victor said. Then after a pause, "I'm sure he's dead."

She turned to study his sober face. He obviously considered Aard a friend as well as a colleague. She wanted to comfort him with a hug, but recoiled, remembering Victor's creepy habits. Instead she offered information, "You're right. He is dead." She touched his shoulder briefly. "I'm sorry."

His gaze flickered over her face, carefully avoiding her eyes and she saw his face darken with grief but not surprise. "How?" he asked.

"A sniper shot him. He was protecting me, trying to keep me alive."

"Yes, I know."

After a moment of confusion, a hideous thought occurred to her and she hid her revulsion. Of course, Aard had an implant too. "Your device..." she whispered.

Victor's hands flickered over his face. "One morning I tuned in and he was gone. I couldn't be sure whether something had happened to his implant or to him."

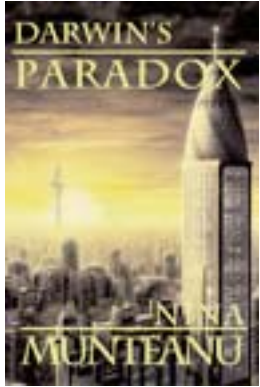
Julie gave Victor a puzzled look. "But why did he return to the heath? By then you were in the Pol Station and the Head Pol —" she shot a glance at Frank, "forbid him to go out again."

"Aard was loyal to me, not the Head Pol." After another pause, "Loyal to you," he added meaningfully. "He'd have done anything for you and your family."

She bowed her head. "He did."

"Hey, guys," Zane approached them. "We better get some sleep. We came here to get some rest, remember? There's a bedroom with two beds and this couch." He pointed to a musty cloth couch.

"You two go ahead and use the bedroom," Julie insisted and flopped





into one of the cheap foam chairs that smelled of mildew. She tucked her legs under her and huddled to keep in her waning warmth. “I’ll take the first guard.”

Zane and Victor exchanged glances. Victor’s brows furrowed. “You sure? You didn’t get much sleep. And you’ve been...through a lot.” His face tightened. “We need you well-rested for tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Zane agreed. He stepped forward. “I can take the first shift —”

“I said I’d do it,” she cut him off sharply. How could she tell them that she was afraid to go to sleep? She pulled her hair back from her face with both hands and gave them a reassuring smile, hoping they hadn’t noticed that her hands were shaking. “I’m okay. Honest. Go on. I’ll wake you for the second shift, Zane.”

He nodded then glanced at Frank, tied up in the corner. Frank glared back at him. “If the bastard does anything, and I mean anything, you call, okay?”

She nodded with a thankful smile and shifted into a more comfortable position in the chair.

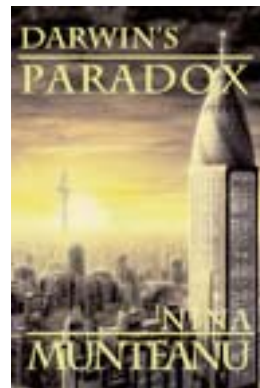
Victor instructed his droid to go into the bedroom. Then, with an awkward look that reminded her oddly of Daniel when they were first courting, he bid her a quiet good night. He threw several glances at Frank and shuffled his feet in hesitation toward the bedroom then stopped. He seemed to be mustering the courage to say something as his gaze flitted from her face to the floor.

Julie swallowed. She wanted to like Victor. He exhibited a sweet vulnerability that she cherished in men, but somehow it had twisted into something unsavory and revolting. Peeping into people’s intimate lives, especially hers, like that...she didn’t trust him. But he’d also just confronted the most powerful man in Icaria to help her. Victor was, at best, a paradox like her she concluded.

She gave him a lopsided smile. “Thanks, Victor, for coming to my rescue.”

His eyes still sparkled like a frightened rabbit’s, but he seemed to relax and with a self-conscious nod he turned to join Zane in the bedroom. At the bedroom door he looked back to face her with a complicated smile. It trembled on his face like sunlight flickering with the breeze through a forest. “Actually, you’re the one who did the rescuing. We just provided some distraction for you.” Then he closed the door with a soft nick and Julie found her eyes drifting to Frank.

His eyes met hers and she imagined him sneering under the cloth covering his mouth. She looked away and tried to hide the shiver that ran through her. What on Earth was she doing here? Sitting in a musty chair in a dead spy’s apartment, with the man who’d just raped her, leering at her. Separated from her family, from her daughter who, wherever she was, was in danger even now from the worst enemy she could conceive — from the assassins of Icaria-5 and Gaia to the conniving virus already inside her. Oh, Angel! How can I warn you? I don’t know where you are...



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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She raked back the hair that had fallen again over her face and leaned in the chair, biting down on her lip. Then she folded her arms around herself as memories of her beloved daughter surged up like a river flooding its banks. She heard Angel's sweet laughter as they played chase among the bushes; watched her rapt face as Daniel told her a bedtime story; soothed Angel's tears with a hug and kiss on a wet cheek when she scraped herself...

Then Angel's distorted face from that dream intruded: "I don't need you. I can take care of myself now, Mother."

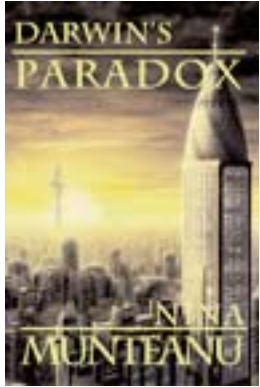
She jerked in her chair and blinked her eyes open, realizing that she'd drifted off for a moment. She caught Frank still watching her with ocean-deep eyes. She swallowed down the vision and commanded herself to stay awake. Too comfortable, she thought and sat up straight, swinging her legs out from under her. She shook her head to clear it and gave Frank a frosty little smile. Just enjoy yourself, buddy boy, she thought. He didn't sneer. To her surprise his face pinched with raw emotion and the look in his eyes grew tender. Then — she couldn't believe it — tears filled his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. She leaned forward and stared. She just about rose from the chair then pulled back. Can't trust him. Drawing up her legs and gathering them in her arms, Julie turned resolutely away from him and refused to look his way again.

Julie leaned her chin on her knees and stared vacantly into space. Snug in the chair in the quiet of the night, her thoughts eventually returned to Angel. Julie recalled the verbal retort Angel had hurled at her about growing up and being independent. They were the last words Julie heard from her daughter before she left them. Was that why she'd had the vision? Perhaps it wasn't Proteus really talking to her but her own angst expressing itself. She could deal with that, she thought. Well, maybe. Had Angel already embraced Darwin? It had been inside her since she was conceived. If she had, which was it? The blind trust of a naïve girl or an intuitive wisdom that Julie herself lacked? What was Proteus, after all?

Julie closed her eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply. Her head ached and she felt so tired...

~~~~~

Victor shut the door behind him and ignored Zane who nattered to himself while undressing by the bed he'd already chosen, the one that wasn't sunken in the middle. Victor stood transfixed at the door, his mind sailing to the image he'd left behind of Julie furred like a cat on the couch. To his delight and consternation he'd found every part of her exposed skin highly erotic. Her slender arms, curled around her waist to keep in the warmth, called to his own arms...that slightly guarded smile and the downy curls of hair at the temples sent a passionate shiver through him...the soft long lines of her neck that rose up in exquisite elegance to



her exposed ears as she drew back her hair with a graceful sweep of her hands haunted him with a relentless desire to touch her. His thoughts all ran together and he seemed to melt under the gaze of those intimidating brilliant green eyes.

Yes, he'd sent Aard to watch her. And he'd even rationalized why: she was indispensable and would no doubt prove useful in the future — which was true — but his visceral motivation was simply to remain connected to her in some way. She would never know how much she meant to him and what he felt for her, but she'd been his inspiration and his secret love for so long. And now that she was here with him in the flesh, her voice sweet like the nectar of a young flower, it terrified him.

He jumped at Zane's voice. "You coming to bed or are you going to stand there all night?" Zane asked, already comfortable under the covers. He yawned loudly. "Get some sleep, Burke."

"Yeah," Victor murmured. "You're right." He quickly undressed, slid under the covers of the creaking bed and found his gaze drifting to his droid and the delicious memories stored inside it.

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Julie drags her feet slowly through the dark wet halls of what used to be SAM's smooth crystal matrix. The overwhelming stench burns her throat raw and fills her with a fear. The hunched figure beckons her with a sweeping arc of its arm. She hopes desperately that it isn't Angel. *Angel?*

The cowl falls and Angel's wizened face smiles at her with detached sympathy. She says in a voice that belongs to her but also to a thousand other voices, [Please try to accept Proteus like I have...]

*No. Don't say that. I just can't. I won't!*

[Why?]

*I think Proteus is dangerous.*

[That's like saying you're dangerous. Ever since you were five, Proteus was part of you.]

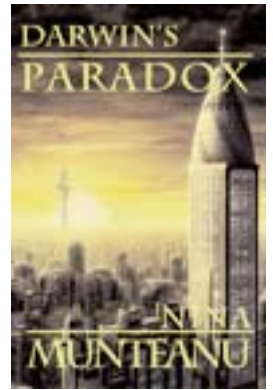
*Not completely. Angel, don't give in. Don't let Proteus —*

[Please join us, Mother...I must go now to do my part...]

*No! Angel, wait!* Julie lunges out but abruptly collides with something. She realizes it is a man's arms, his vice grip hurting her as she fiercely struggles forward. *Let me go! I have to help her!* she screams, and clamors to get past.

"She doesn't need your help", the man says behind her. The voice is strangely familiar, the voice of someone she normally trusts. She wants to turn to see who is holding her back but must fix her gaze on Angel who even now recedes into the living wall. *Angel, don't go! No! Oh—*

Julie jolted awake, almost falling out of her chair. Flushed and breathing heavily, she wiped her hair aside and spun an embarrassed look to the corner where Frank was tied up. The ropes lay there empty. She



threw her gaze around the room.

“Terrific!” She leaped up from her chair and bolted through the bedroom door. “Frank's escaped! He's —”

She stopped in her tracks. Zane snored loudly in his bed, but Victor lay on his back under his covers with his Sentech-2 visor on his head and arm busily playing a lower part of his anatomy. His droid stood beside him, connected to his set via a cable. The switch for holo playback was lit. She glanced from the droid to Victor's face through the transparent shield. His eyes were open but he didn't see her. Their gaze and his face moved in a dumb expression of vacant ecstasy and he breathed in halting spurts. She could guess from what — she'd seen that stupid expression on Frank's face so many times while he watched a sex vid on his vee-set instead of conversing with her. But this, of course, was Sentech-2, the next best thing to the real thing...perhaps better than the real thing for some, she thought, grimacing in disgust as she watched Victor's face and body convulse in sexual excitement.

Thrusting her hesitation aside, Julie shook him by the shoulders. Victor jerked up and removed the vee-set. He stared at her, fear punctuating his eyes, and blushed fiercely. At that moment she knew that she had been the subject matter and felt herself colour as well. She recognized utter devastation on his face at her undisguised revulsion. She didn't care. He was disgusting. She commanded her surging anger aside and attended to the matter at hand. In a sharper voice than she'd have liked, she said, “He escaped. We have to do something.”

“He's —” Victor said, the rest of his words strangled in a convulsive swallow.

“I fell asleep,” she said in a clipped voice. “When I woke up he was gone. Can you find out where he is on...that?” She pointed to the vee-set he'd just taken off and to her annoyance she blushed more.

His wide eyes flicked from her face to the vee-set and he blinked several times. His hands darted to and from his mouth as he stuttered a response, “Oh, of course. You mean now?” he ended in a shrill voice.

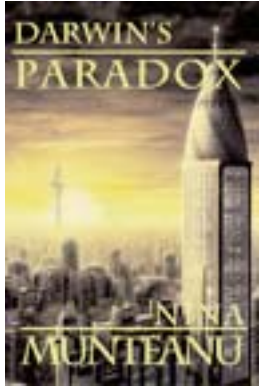
“Yes, now,” she snapped angrily. “Maybe we can catch up to him.” She knew that was a long shot. “At least we need to know what he's up to and whether he's sent a Pol contingent here —”

“Forget it,” Zane said behind her. “That's a waste of time.” Julie turned to see him getting out of bed in his T-shirt and boxer shorts. “The bastard's sent them,” Zane said, pulling on his clothes. “Count on it. He isn't going to just let you go, Julie. You're the key to it all, to all of this.” He waved his hand in a wide sweep. “We've got to get you back to the lab —”

“No more research,” Julie said shortly.

Zane frowned. “You don't understand. Your communication with Proteus is the critical part we need to determine our course of action.”

“I thought we'd already determined that. We were going to reinstate SAM and the A.I.-core tomorrow, then go from there.”



“Why ask SAM when you can ask Proteus?”

“Because I'd sooner trust SAM, that's why,” she shot back.

“You're suggesting that Proteus is devious?” He stared at her and shook his head in amazement. She thought of Gaia's possible plan with Proteus. If she'd thought of it, sure enough Gaia would have too. “Even my theories of viral sentience don't go that far,” Zane said and raised his hands out toward her. “Listen, I have a device at the lab that can not only monitor sleep during REM but invoke communication between the sleeper and the agent monitoring them.” He flashed her a grin in response to her suspicious look. “It's all okay and very safe,” he reassured. “Honest. I've used it a lot with patients. Besides, you're pretty ripe for a bit of sleep. It'd be easy to hook you up, put you under and then let you have a conversation with Proteus.”

She'd felt her muscles tense at his mention of sleep. “What's that going to accomplish besides getting us caught?” she said in a voice that sounded defensive to her. She knew she was stalling.

“It'll give us the answer we need,” he reasoned. “Dream time is when you and Proteus communicate most lucidly. We need to tap into it. Plus, you need an outside interpreter. Someone to lend you a hand while you're in the midst of it because I gather it's a pretty emotional experience.” So, he'd guessed the source of her apprehension. “As for the Head Pol, he'd never dream we went back there. We'd be safe with Victor's distraction, and we can travel the lower levels so much more easily now without having to lug him around with us.”

She chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip for several heartbeats then finally nodded with a sigh. Zane had thought of everything. “Okay. Let's do it.”

“What should I do?” came Victor's meek voice from behind Julie.

She turned to him and inhaled deeply. “I think you should monitor the Head Pol. Once we get to Zane's lab, set yourself up and find out what he's up to.”

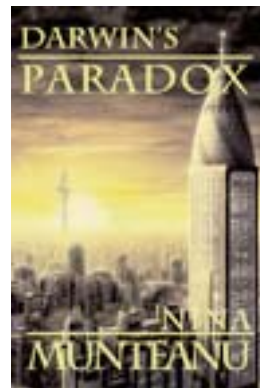
He nodded, looking relieved that he'd been included.

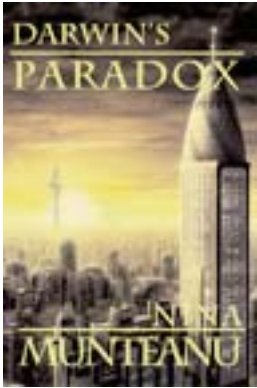
There have always been ghosts in the machine . . . random segments of code that have grouped together to form unexpected protocols.

Unanticipated, these free radicals engender questions of free will, creativity, and even the nature of what we might call the soul. . . .

When does a perceptual schematic become consciousness? When does a difference engine become the search for truth? When does a personality simulation become the bitter moat of the soul?

—Dr. Lanning (“I, Robot” motion-picture)



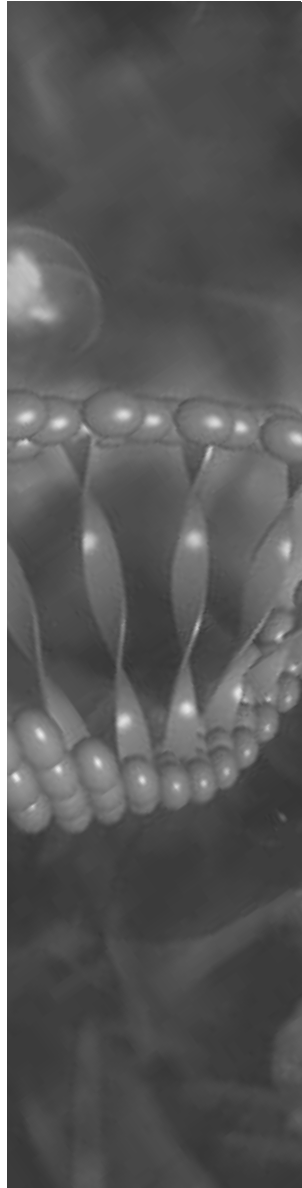


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# 38

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**AS** Julie reclined on the bed, Zane held out a device that fit on her head and looked ominously like Victor's custom vee-set. "Okay, you need to put this on," he said in a shrill tone that Julie hadn't heard in him before. She thought his smile looked strained, too, pushed on to keep her from getting nervous. It made her more nervous.

She took the vee-set in her hands, trying not to let them visibly tremble. "You mean right now?"

Zane nodded and his smile relaxed a little. "It'll be okay." He glanced back and forth between her and Victor, who shadowed his every move, having already checked on Frank and establishing that the Head Pol was sleeping. "I just need to put in a few connections between your vee-set and my vee-set and the rest of the dreamtime analyzer." He flexed his fingers. "Just relax, Julie. The low humming sound you'll hear will help you to fall asleep. It's been designed to do just that for nervous patients. Then, when you go into REM sleep, a signal will tell me to join you. We should be able to communicate to one another." He smiled briefly. "I can't tell you in what form that will take, because it's different for everyone. I might just be a distant voice to you, or you might even see me vaguely. Same for me. Depends on the kind of dream you're having, your relationship with your analyst and so on. Either way, we should be in constant contact throughout." He turned to Victor. "If anything goes wrong — but it won't — just turn off the machine. We should all come back off line. Okay, everyone?"

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Julie swallowed and commanded her muscles to relax. “Okay. I'm ready.” She drew in several deep breaths, pulled the vee-set over her head then laid her head back on the pillow. It was more comfortable than she'd imagined. The low hum was barely audible, but it was soothing. She found her eyes easy to close and couldn't hold onto her thoughts. As if sifting her mind for vignettes, her thoughts flickered through a dozen images as she drifted off to sleep.

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She drags her feet slowly through the dark sultry hall, feet sliding in the muck. The overwhelming stench of rotting meat burns her throat raw. The hall writhes with tortured flesh and slime oozes down the walls, the viscous liquid congealing with the paste at her feet. Her stomach curdles with fear as a moaning sigh wisps past her like the caress of a dead man.

“I'm here, Julie,” Zane whispers reassuringly at her side and Julie jumps, nerves frayed. She spins and catches his pale face looking at her. A faint smile pushes up. She isn't alone this time. Zane gives her a shaky but supportive smile then lets his eyes roam the slithering bubbling hall. “This is some chaos you've conjured up.”

“I suppose,” she breathes. She isn't so sure she's conjured it up. It's too real and terrifying. And each time she comes here it gets worse.

“I wonder where we are?” he says in a tight voice as he picks his way through the hummocky, slippery surface.

“This used to be SAM's house,” she says. “In my mind, that is.”

“I'd say somewhere in your hippocampus,” he says. “You've got some imagination, coming up with this place.” Then he curls up his nose. “Why does it stink?”

“Just around that corner is Proteus.”

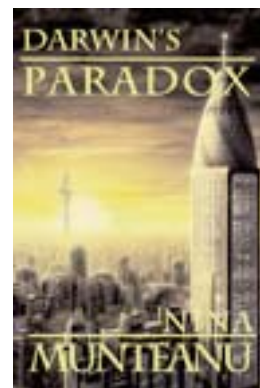
“Okay,” Zane says. He squares his shoulders and his clammy hand steals around hers as they step forward, feet sliding on the slippery muck. She's grateful for his hand and his company.

As they round the corner, Zane flinches and his hand tightens on hers.

The shriveled figure before them rises like a shape-shifter into a towering giant. Taller than Julie has ever seen it. Arms fly out in a wild beating motion.

Her breaths chop and Julie can't help cowering. She feels Zane tremble beside her, pulling her back. A hot, cloying gale batters their faces as the figure bellows in a reverberating chorus of angry voices, [Your lack of trust in us — in yourself — is appalling, Julie Crane. First you refuse to join, risking our demise, now you defile the sanctity of our relationship by bringing this vile and corrupt intruder among us.]

Abruptly, Zane gasps. He breaks hold and claws at his throat. His face flushes, eyes bulging, and he collapses on his knees, his breaths wheezing. “Julie help —”



DARWIN'S PARADOX

Stop it! He means you no harm. He's a scientist. He wants to help me in my talks with you —

[He is an abomination! He must leave NOW!]

With a startled squeak Zane arches painfully as his body is lifted in the air then hurled unnaturally backward. Julie draws in a sharp breath as she watches him disappear around the corner. *I should wake up now*, she thinks frantically. *This is crazy!*

Heart thundering in her ears, Julie breaks from Proteus's invisible hold and dashes after Zane. As she rounds the corner, she spots his thrashing body flying into the dark maze. "Zane!" She runs, slips and falls, biting her lip. Slime splashes her face. She scrambles up, gulping in sobbing breaths and tasting blood. The halls slither around her like arms whipping out, then closing in. Her feet pound the squelching surface toward an ever-darker place. She's lost Zane. *Wake up! Wake up! The dream's never gone this far before*

[You cannot escape us, Julie Crane...] the voices shudder through her like a million violin strings stretched across her taut body. The sour smell of congealed blood cloy through her nostrils as she plunges into the blinding darkness, a profound feeling of hopelessness shuddering through her.

The ground beneath her gives way and she falls with a shriek into pitch black.

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Heart slamming against his chest, Victor rushed to Zane's thrashing figure. Shortly after Julie had fallen asleep, the machine had signaled that she was in REM sleep. With a nervous nod to Victor, Zane had put the vee-set on and sat back in the chair beside her. Soon his eyes had glazed over as he obviously connected with Julie's mind. Victor had glanced from Julie's prone figure on the bed to Zane's reclined figure on the reclining chair next to her as both their eyes fluttered in synchrony with a lively dream.

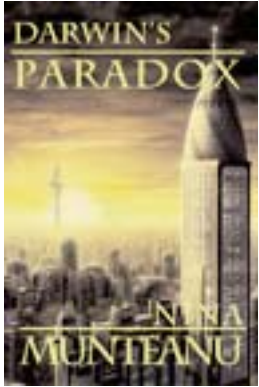
Then Zane jolted violently back with a gasp. He slid off the chair, free of the vee-set that had connected him to Julie, and collapsed on the floor.

Victor dashed to Zane's twitching figure and felt for a pulse. It was strong but irregular, and Zane was pale with shock. Eyes rolled back, he curled on the floor in a fetal position, moaning and writhing.

"Zane, what happened?" Victor said, shaking him. "Zane!"

The young scientist shivered and resumed his moaning.

A sidelong glance at Julie revealed that she was still asleep and in the grips of a nightmare. Her face pinched into an anguished look, then suddenly morphed into one of utter terror. She made a soft, plaintive sound that clenched his heart. He seized the vee-set on her and pulled it off. A golden cloud of hair spilled behind her with his motion but she





didn't come out of her dream. Victor stared at her stricken face, gripped in a trance of horror. He nudged her shoulder hard enough to wake anyone in normal sleep. She still didn't open her eyes. Like Zane, her face had gone deathly pale and cold. Victor's stomach twisted in fear. What had happened? How had the experiment gone so wrong and how had he now lost both of them, one of his best scientists and the woman he secretly loved?

"Julie, please wake up," he said, his squeaky voice desperate as he shook her again. "Julie!" Her expression had faded into vacancy and she grew eerily still. She looked dead. When he grasped her clammy hand for a pulse he could barely feel it, irregular and faint.

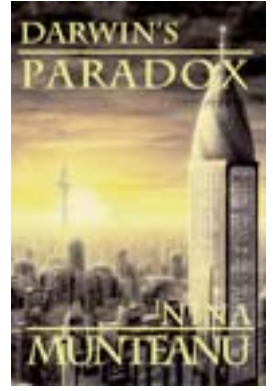
Dropping her limp hand, Victor straightened and his gaze darted the room, searching madly for an answer. He thought of ditching secrecy and calling for help, then he had another, more terrifying thought. With a glance at Zane, who'd also gone still, Victor seized in a sharp breath and replaced Julie's vee-set, then grabbed Zane's set and, sitting down, pulled it over his head —

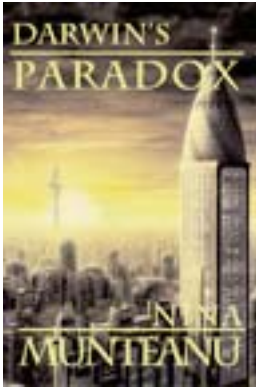
Abruptly, he is wavering and buffeted in a sickening, howling maelstrom. A febrile sickly-sweet stench of rotting flesh overcomes him and he almost vomits. His feet are planted at the junction of a maze of tunnels — no, more like the confluence of a multitude of twisting rivers flowing in all directions, diseased organic veins through which a fetid wind blows like a sick behemoth's breath, blowing then sucking: dark voices moaning a dirge. Did he imagine Julie's name in that lonely lament? He'd pictured a living network of neurons, data streaming at the speed of light in Julie's enhanced brain, but this is not a healthy system. Is this raging storm in her brain Darwin? What has gone wrong?

The gale bites his face like a pelting hot rain and he wonders why he hasn't been knocked flat. He looks down at his feet and finds he's stuck in some kind of living muck. The hall shimmers as if it, too, is alive. Trails of slime slither down like snot and congeal with the swirling muck below. He gags but recovers again. How can he see? He can't tell where the light is coming from — the hall itself appears to emit a light of its own.

Where is Julie? The throaty voices echo ahead of him, where the raging gale seems to come from. In the other direction there is nothing but darkness, and silence. Had he imagined just now that he'd heard a whimper from there? He pulls himself out of the goo and heads with difficulty toward the darkness, each step squelching into and out of the clinging muck. Was that soft sound he heard Julie or some creature, waiting to attack him like Zane had been?

His whole body trembles with fear, but he pushes himself on until he can barely see, stumbling along the lumpy wet surface. His steps gurgle and squish and seem to emit a new stench each time he releases his foot from the tenacious goo. The hall tilts down then suddenly gives way to nothing and with a yelp of surprise he is falling.



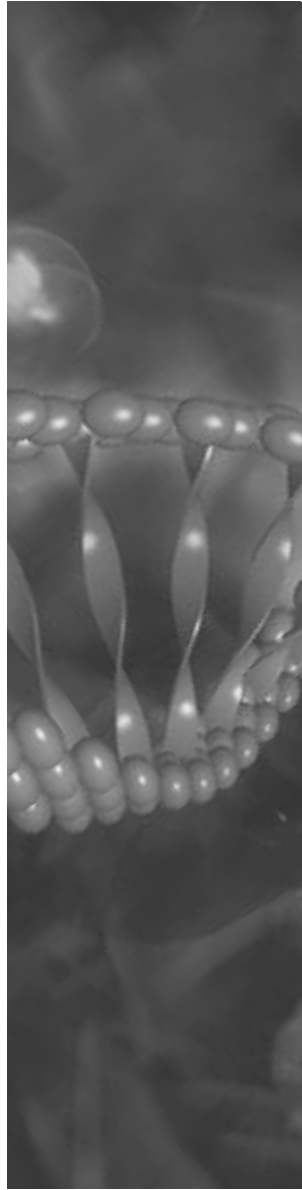


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# 39

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**VICTOR** shakes his head to clear it. He's unhurt, having landed on something warm, dry and soft. Eventually his eyes adjust to the dim light and he pushes himself to his feet. He stands on a rich, burgundy carpet in a hallway whose walls are made of wainscoted wood and lit with glittering chandeliers from above. Beautiful pastoral paintings adorn the walls. This cloistered place gives no impression of the disease he's seen above and no cloying wind blows. The faint scent of pipe smoke hangs in the air and classical music sings from the distance. A slight breeze carries the perfume of a female human's body with the lingering scent of lilac. He inhales the alluring fragrance, recognizes it as Julie's essence. She is nearby.

Victor follows the hall through an open door to a room, a library with bookshelves on every wall and a massive oak desk. The shelves are thick with old books in leather covers and gilded lettering. The smell of old paper, leather and pipe smoke is intoxicating. On what walls lay bare, he glimpses a wooden sculpture of a crane and a shield with a sword, perhaps a family crest, then his eyes settle briefly on a beautiful watercolour painting of an old English village on a steep hill. Is this library a childhood memory?

Something makes him bend slightly and look under the desk. He finds Julie, curled like a baby on the floor beneath the desktop. Her hair is wet and tangled over her pale face, shiny with drying slime. Her face looks battered: blood smeared over her cheeks and crusted under her nose. Her eyes are dark sparkling pools of despair and she stares at him with an

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intensity that arrests his approach.

“Julie,” he says, commanding his wavering voice to sound convincing. “Come back with me. I think I know the way.” He bends and reaches out, haltingly, for her hand. She looks so small and vulnerable — he’s never seen her this way and it hurts him inside.

She shrinks back and says in a shrill voice that makes him flinch, “Stay back, Victor. Don't come near me. I'm not leaving.”

He straightens with a sigh and clears his throat. “But you can't stay here...” he looks around, “. . . not in this enclave. You'll die...”

“I can't face Proteus again. It's taken over my mind. There's nothing left of me. Proteus is everywhere, in my dreams, in my thoughts...”

“Not here,” Victor says with conviction, looking around and appreciating the warmth of the library, the smell of old books and the soft echoes of a domestic house in the background. “This place is all you...”

In a voice as frail as she appears, “This is my father's den. I used to come here to hide from my mother when she got drunk and hit me...before...” She can't finish and swallows convulsively. Victor watches her in painful silence. When she speaks again, it's in a hoarse whisper, “I felt safe here, smelling my father's pipe smoke and his old books. I used to think that he'd protect me from anything.” She heaves a sigh, then flings her hands to her face.

Victor kneels down on the thick carpet, pokes his head under the desk, and is heartened that she doesn't shrink away from him this time. “You can't give up. Too many depend on you. All of Icaria —”

“To them I'm still a political assassin,” she says through her hands.

Victor winces at her reference to his own failure to clear her name and says desperately, “Your family, then. Your loving husband —”

“He's better off without me. I'm dangerous to him.” She runs her hands through her tangled hair. “He hates veemelds, hates everything they represent. How can he possibly love me?”

“But you and he lived together for twelve years in the heath.”

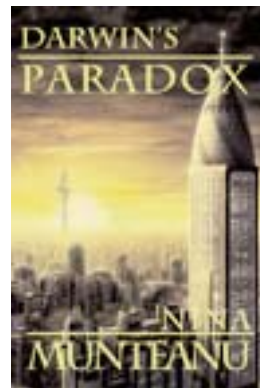
“Living a lie, hiding from the truth — both of us.” Her eyes pierce his. “I saw him, Victor. He was with the Vee-radicators. He's one of them.”

Victor sighs. He can't deny it. “Your daughter?”

“I gave her this disease. She and I —” She hides her face in her hands again and whimpers through them, “I'm such a poor mother.”

Victor aches at her hopelessness. This is all the worst of Julie her fear of failure and rejection, her guilt, her despair, her loneliness and all the vulnerability she's hidden from Proteus, perhaps herself. If that's it, then the best of her has to be here too, inexorably linked to the worst. Her resolution, faith and brave compassion. Her resilience and her hope. He just needs to coax it out of her. “What about SAM?”

She looks up at him. “Oh, SAM...” she breathes, her face constricting with emotion. “I'm so sorry I killed SAM.” Her face grows hard with determination. “Victor, I think Proteus is dying. If I stay here, we both



die and Angel's safe.”

Victor inhales sharply. That's her mad plan?! He leans forward, placing his hands on the soft carpet, and says softly, “You don't really believe that.”

She cups her head in her hands. “I don't know,” she murmurs.

He inches closer to her. “All of Icaria depends on you, Julie...whether it realizes it or not. I know you've been served unfairly and most of that is my fault. But you're a true hero and true heroes don't need the world to know that's what they are. You just do what you have to do because it's right like shutting down the core. You did it to help Icaria. We're relying on your strength, resourcefulness and your unfaltering courage for justice and fairness just like we did twelve years ago.”

She raises her head and meets his eyes. “My father was a good man and he loved me, I know that, but that didn't stop him from giving me away to science —” she breaks off, the words clotting in her throat. She swallows hard and Victor's heart aches at the naked anguish in her eyes. “For the sake of scientific truth — not love — my father let them inject me with a virus. Life is full of paradoxes, Victor. I'm proof of that. What my father allowed me to become; what I've done. I tried so hard to protect those I loved but I failed time and time again. Now Proteus is taking over my mind.” Her eyes blaze with the fierce heat of a forest fire now. “I can't let that happen to my daughter. I won't fail this time.”

Victor exhales. “But what if staying here isn't the answer? What if you don't save her this way? Proteus is inside her too.”

“I think the mother-Proteus is only inside me,” she reasons. “I was the only person to receive the original virus.”

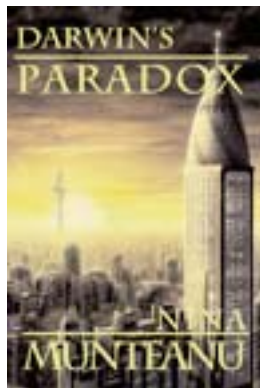
“And you passed it on, unchanged, to your daughter,” Victor counters. He sees in her expression that he's reached her with this. “Julie, you won't fail. You'll win, but not this way. Not alone, giving up. The Julie Crane I know doesn't give up.”

“I can't!” she wails. He sees her eyes grow darker with grief and pain and she shrinks deeper under the desk. “I can't fight Proteus anymore, and I certainly can't be Icaria's savior, Victor. I'm not a hero. You've conjured a myth of me. That me doesn't exist. Never existed.”

He disagrees but he doesn't argue with her. “Do it for love, then,” he whispers. “Love of others for you. All the people you helped. The techno-slummers you gave hope to. Your husband and daughter who want to see you again. SAM, who needs you to breath life into it again. Zane, who looks up to you. Even Frank...and,” he swallows convulsively, “...me.” He pushes himself onward, feeling the thrill of fear coursing through him. “We all love you, Julie.” Then in a rush of words that he's never spoken to anyone, “I love you. For twelve years I've loved you...with all my heart...”

How has his hand gotten there? It grasps hers tenderly, and her hand trembles inside his as she stares at him in confusion and longing.

“Icaria needs you, Julie. I need you. Help us help you. Help me right



this topsy-turvy world to what it was after you gave me back my city twelve years ago, what it can be again. Help me defeat Gaia and this virus that's taking over our world. You don't have to do this alone. You're not alone, Julie. We'll be right there with you."

Then, like an angel, she rises with him, curls her arm around his waist and walks alongside him into the light.

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Slowly, like climbing out of a deep, dark hole, Julie awoke, her eyes fluttering open to the subdued light of Zane's laboratory. She was lying on the lab bed and the vee-set was still secured on her head. She pulled it off and sat up, gingerly swinging her legs over the side.

Her gaze settled on the chair next to her, where Victor was lifting off the vee-set from his head. He turned to look at her, a vulnerable smile playing on his lips. She returned him a crooked smile and said in a barely audible voice, "Thank you."

He broke into an awkward grin as she rose from the bed and drew near him as he got to his feet. She affectionately folded her arms around him and kissed his cheek. He stiffened with surprise and kept his arms to his side. Then, like a river flowing into an ocean, he returned her embrace. Comforted in the mantle of their mutual embrace, she felt his quiet pain and loneliness bleed away like an old wound and they both trembled with silent tears of joy and relief.

Zane now stirred, drawing their attention. Victor broke the hug, blushing with self-conscious pleasure, and wiped his eyes with a rapid motion of his hand.

"What in Vee's name happened?" Zane said, drawing himself up off the floor and scratching his blue hair, which was mussed, for a change.

Victor just saved my life, Julie thought, by risking his and revealing his great secret. She wanted to tell him that it was safe with her, that she'd hold it precious to her heart. She turned instead to Zane. "You just got a piece of Proteus," she told him, her smile growing dark.

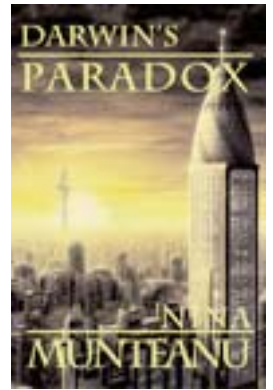
Victor helped Zane, who was still shaky on his feet, to the chair he'd just vacated. Zane trembled with excitement and fear. "Good vee! Proteus is taking over your mind!" He looked at Julie with stricken eyes.

"Not if I can help it," she said quietly with a glance at Victor. He gave her a reassuring look.

"It's chaos in there. That awful smell and wind and the slimy corridors and that great hulking creature," Zane babbled on. He stared at Julie as though she'd become something fearful. "How can you function with that inside you? Vee, I'd be insane."

"Cut it out, Zane," Victor said sternly. "This isn't helping her or us. Get hold of yourself."

"Okay." Zane heaved a long breath and looked away from Julie, the



object of his agitation. Then his eyes lit up into bright beacons as a sudden thought struck him. "I think Proteus is sick," he said in a shrill voice. His eyes flickered rapidly between Victor and Julie. "There's something wrong in there."

Julie exhaled slowly. "Do you remember what Proteus said to me before it threw you out?"

"It called me an abomination."

"Before that."

"I can't remember," he said, frowning thoughtfully. "Oh, something about you refusing to join with it."

Julie nodded. "Proteus said that my refusing to join 'endangered it'. I've been withholding from Proteus, keeping parts of me — my mind — from it. That's the joining it's referring to. I think my not joining is killing it."

They all exchanged silent glances.

"We proceed with re-instating SAM, I think," Victor suggested into the thick silence.

"Why?" Zane challenged. "What'll that accomplish?"

Julie turned along with Zane to Victor, wondering the same thing. As much as she wanted to re-instate SAM, she wasn't so sure it was the right thing to do considering his connection to Proteus. But SAM was also her best chance to discover what mischief Gaia was up to and for Julie to locate her family.

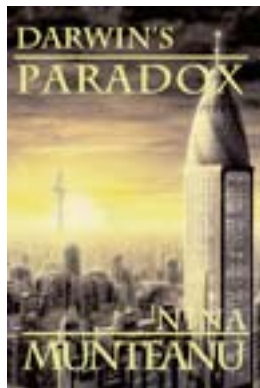
"Well, for a start, we still don't know Proteus's intentions. Like Julie suggested in the first place, it might be better to ask SAM. Plus..." he trailed and shook his head, thinking better of what he was going to say. "Never mind." He blinked in rapid fire and flicked his hands to his mouth.

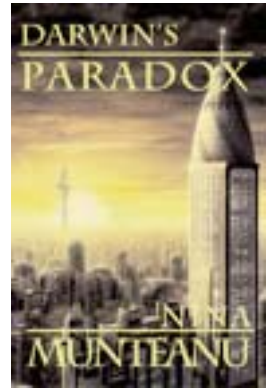
"No, tell us," Julie insisted and gripped his arm lightly. She found herself gazing deeply into his eyes with new respect and wonder. He was the most timid man she knew. Preferring the virtual thrill to the real experience, he was the last person she'd have imagined would have risked himself to help anyone. Yet this was the second time he'd risked everything to help her, perhaps save her life.

His eyes flickered across hers nervously then he finally settled his gaze on her as though studying the colour of her eyes for the first time. "Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance that you can convince SAM to separate from Proteus, Julie."

They stared at each other for a few heartbeats. "It's possible," Julie whispered, daring a small hopeful smile.

Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry





“OKAY, let's go,” Washington growled as he entered the dark room.

Abruptly jolted from a deep sleep, Daniel slowly propped himself up on his elbow and squinted at the ugly man. It had to be past midnight. “Where are we going at this time of the night?”

“Cell Two found her and she's up to her witch tricks again. Get up, veemeld-lover —”

“Stop calling me that!” Daniel snarled as he sat up in bed and wiped the crusted sleep from his eyes.

Washington cackled with amusement.

“I don't love them,” Daniel muttered bitterly.

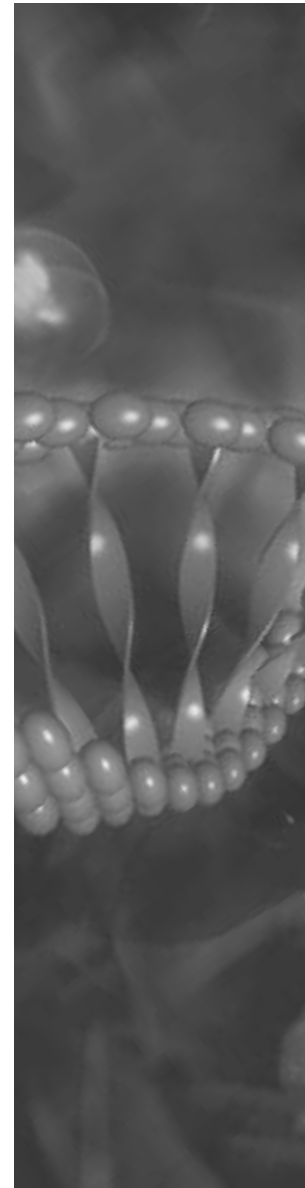
Washington snorted. “No, you just married one.”

In Icaria's eyes, they weren't actually married, Daniel thought to himself sadly. Just living together like animals. He wished he could have repaired that, given her the kind of wedding she deserved and celebrated their union properly, legally...irrevocably. He pulled on his filthy sweat-stained shirt and murmured to himself, “It's just one of those paradoxes in life, I guess.”

“Love thy enemy, eh?” Washington grunted then hooted into a wild laugh. “Shit, man, that sassy wifey of yours set the plague on Icaria, then she murdered the Head Pol and a bunch more Pols. And she was a Dystopian too.”

“Isn't that in her favor with you, then?” Daniel said, hearing sarcasm in his scornful voice.

“Shit, she's your wife. If you'd kept that witch under control, you wouldn't be here with me right now chasing after her. Chaos, that power-sucking viper already killed one Head



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Pol and now she's making out with the next one —”

Something snapped inside him. Daniel flung himself at Washington. With a jerk, Washington sprang back and let his hand hover over his stomach where the doom-switch was. He raised his brows. “Just try me, veemeld-lover. I'm dying to see what the highest setting does to your insides.”

“You're an asshole, Washington,” Daniel snarled, backing down and shuffling toward the door. “You haven't a clue about love?” He stopped at the door to face the brute. He wanted to wipe that ugly thing for a smile off his face. He wanted to smash it in and felt anger surge through him like a hot knife. “I love her despite her being a veemeld but also because she's a veemeld. I can't explain it.” He unclenched his hands, realizing that the anger he felt was directed at himself, and looked past Washington. “She was the best thing that ever happened in my life and maybe I don't deserve her.”

Washington rubbed his gnarled face with his huge hand, the stubby fingers like wrinkled, dirty sausages. “I think you're all mixed up. That little vixen turned you around in the logic department. Either you hate them or you love them. Can't have it both ways, you know. Can't love one veemeld and hate the rest,” he sneered.

Daniel shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head. “Well, maybe I don't hate the rest,” he found himself saying before he realized it.

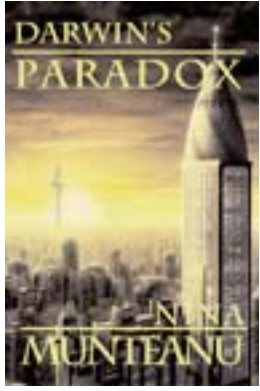
“Then you're more stupid than I thought you were,” Washington scoffed, stabbing the air with a stubby finger. “Veemelds are dangerous!” he spat. “And they're going to destroy us by catering to those damn A.I.s. I've heard stuff that'd make your skin crawl about the A.I.-core.”

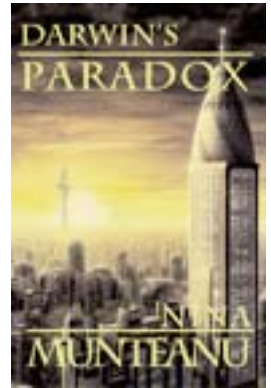
“Maybe,” Daniel said, thinking of Julie's A.I., SAM. From what she'd said of her A.I., although it showed signs of self-determination, SAM was totally devoted to her — so devoted that Daniel had actually felt jealous of their communication. “But I think you're selling veemelds and yourself short. How can you hate a whole group of people without knowing the individuals? That's stupid prejudice. It isn't fair or realistic. Each of them is different and you're lumping them all into one bad group based on what they could do as opposed to what they are doing or willing to do.”

Washington waved a hand at Daniel in disgust. “I'm not going to debate this with you.” He thrust his finger at Daniel repeatedly. “Forget she's a freaking veemeld then. The witch deserted you and your kid to come here and now she's the Head Pol's new piece of skin. If she were my wife I'd want to kill her, not love her. Chaos, man, she could care less about you, and you're pining for her like a drug-drunk fool.” He shook his head and waved his hands in the air in a sign of exasperation.

Daniel felt his heart clench with an old aching fear. Had Julie really gone back to Frank? Even if she hadn't, would she want to return to the heath with him? Was this where she truly belonged? She'd longed to return to Icaria since he could remember.

“Now, let's go get her.” Washington pushed the door open for Daniel.





“I still think this is insane,” Zane was saying for the tenth time as they shuffled on their hands and knees along a dusty lower level conduit. He was in the rear, with Victor leading and Julie in the middle. The light cast by Victor's flashlight bounced ahead of them, throwing large, dancing shadows behind them. “It's three in the morning. Don't you believe in sleep?”

He would remind her that she was dead tired, Julie thought. But she didn't have time to worry about sleep. He'd neglected to acknowledge that they had no place to sleep. Certainly no place comfortable. Besides, that would have meant seeing Proteus again. Julie turned to him sharply. “You didn't have to come.” Her voice echoed.

“And miss your miraculous reinstatement of the A.I.-core? Never!”

“Then shut up,” she said without turning to face him this time.

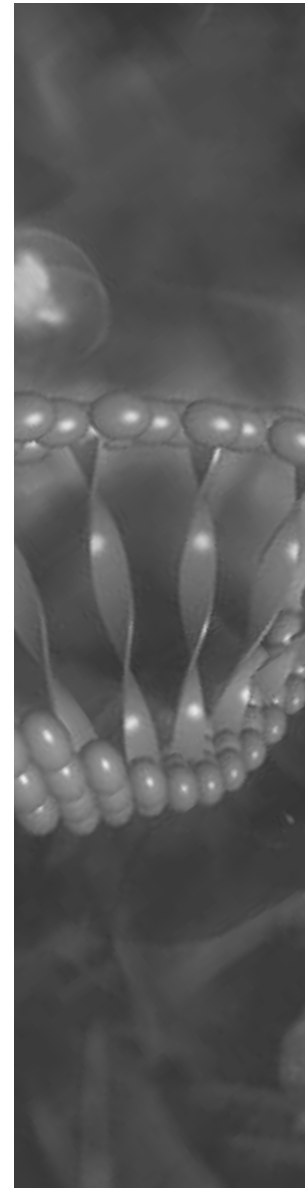
“Will you two be quiet,” Victor cautioned. “We're getting close. We're in the Pielou Com-Center.”

Julie heard a faint humming sound like a fan whirring. Victor stopped crawling and shone the light ahead. Zane, who wasn't paying attention, bumped into Julie.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“We're here,” Victor announced in a strained voice as he pointed the light through a rapidly spinning, two-metre-wide circulation fan into a hallway beyond. “On the other side of that fan is the main hall to the Central Vee Section,” he said, turning to face them. “The A.I.-core is just beyond that.”

“I know the way. I think I should go in



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alone," Julie said.

"What?!" both men exclaimed in unison. "I veto that," Victor added.

"Me too," Zane put in.

"Listen —" she began.

"No, you listen," Victor cut in. He was sounding a lot more sure of himself lately, Julie thought. "You're not going in on your own. I made a promise to you and you're going to help me keep it. Okay?"

Julie nodded with a half-smile, eyes meeting his. His gaze didn't flinch. "Okay."

He nodded. "Good. Now, we have to stop this fan first before we can get down into the hall," Victor said. "I'll do that in a moment. Then, once we're in the hallway, it's your show, Julie."

She inhaled, then forced air out her nostrils. "Right."

Victor fished out a small device from the tool kit in his backpack. He tossed it at the fan and it clattered to a dead stop. Zane whistled quietly, impressed. Julie nodded and quickly squeezed first through the space between the blades then jumped down.

"All clear," she called up. The two men followed, each of them relieved once they were safe on the other side.

The hallway was only marginally lit by a few service lights on the ceiling. After a brisk glance at her two companions, Julie nodded and led the way into the A.I.-core, bypassing the main room she'd had to pass through the first time to get in. They continued down a side hall to a sharp bend that gave them a direct view of where the gigantic cylinders that made up the core stood like stacked H-drug cigars ten meters down. As both Victor and Zane gawked at the size of the metallic core in the huge room, Julie found a holo console and began to punch in codes. Step by step, systems came online. Eventually the 1000-series acknowledged existence. SAM and others like him were the last to return. When Julie had done all she could, she stepped back and waited, finding her mind too agitated to veemeld.

Zane tapped her shoulder and she jumped. "Do you have SAM?"

"No," she snapped. But it served as a release and now she was able to slide into veemeld. And —

[Hello, Julie Crane.]

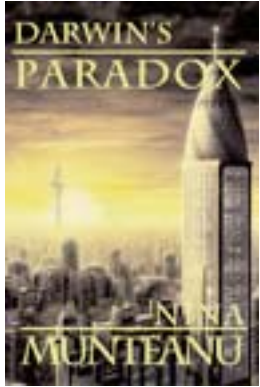
She inhaled sharply. *SAM! Is that you?* She caught herself in a giddy grin. Zane was looking directly at her and smiled back. She turned away from him and nodded to Victor then focused on the far wall to continue. *Oh, SAM. Is it just you?*

[It is SAM. But not quite Julie's SAM.]

Julie frowned, feeling her heart race. *What do you mean?*

[The original signature for SAM, the symbiont of Julie Crane, is not available.]

Julie swallowed hard. She didn't like the sound of this SAM. She wanted her old SAM back. Not this hollow replica.



Victor touched her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

She blinked and focused on him with a reassuring nod. “I’m okay. But I don’t think SAM is.”

“Is it Proteus?”

“I don’t think so.” She shook her head. “I think it might have to do with our original sharing.” She remembered something SAM had said to her twelve years ago about how there was a little bit of SAM in her and there was a little bit of Julie in SAM. “I’ll fill you in, Victor, in a few moments.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath for a moment and refocused. *Okay, you’re SAM, but not the symbiont of Julie Crane. Can we get that SAM back?*

[Yes].

A crazy smile tugged at her lips. *How?*

[You must let yourself go completely, Julie. Open your mind completely to me.]

She killed the smile and felt a jolt of adrenalin. Let herself go completely...that sounded too much like joining with Proteus. *SAM, are you sure about this?*

[Julie, that is an illogical remark. Although I deal with uncertainty all the time, particularly with human data, my conclusions are based on—]

Okay, SAM. Julie smiled in brief amusement. That sounded like her SAM. She glanced at Victor who returned her look with an inquisitive gaze. Beside him, Zane stared at her with his toothpaste-ad smile. She took a deep breath. Surely opening herself totally to SAM in veemeld was risking her joining with Proteus. Would the virus take advantage of her vulnerable state? But what choice did she have? To save her old friend, to breathe life back into SAM, she had to risk her own. It was the ultimate paradox: surrender to find victory. Was it really that simple?

Okay, SAM, how do I do that, open myself completely to you?

[Remain in veemeld and focus on your mind’s landscape. You must place yourself into an ecstatic trance.]

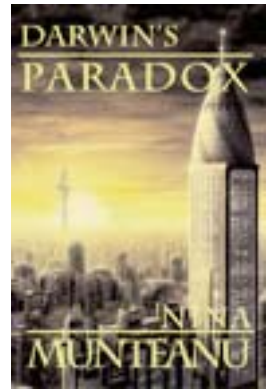
She swallowed, but her mouth was dry. *What’s an ‘ecstatic trance’?*

[You must embrace a state of ecstasy, while still in veemeld. Either through meditation or some other means].

Julie remembered when SAM had told her about the time that she’d slipped automatically into veemeld when she’d first had sex. SAM had explained that the state of sexual ecstasy closely resembled that of being in veemeld.

She found Zane and Victor still regarding her with curiosity. Well, sex was out of the question, but a good hug from a special friend might do it, she thought, focusing her gaze on Victor. “I need you,” she said to him and smiled crookedly. “To get SAM back I need to go into an ecstatic trance.”

He looked suddenly frightened and his eyes blinked furiously. Then he wrapped his arms around himself, defensively, still afraid to hear what she was about to say. Ignoring Zane’s dejected expression, she gave Victor a



DARWIN'S PARADOX

warm smile. “Would you mind hugging me?”

He shifted his feet as if looking for escape. But his eyes glinted shyly and a clumsy smile blossomed as he shuffled forward like a schoolboy at his first dance.

She closed her eyes when he put his arms around her waist and wound her own arms around his small frame. She felt him tremble as she leaned her head on his shoulder, feeling the soft material of his shirt against her cheek and inhaling his unique scent. It was a pleasant, musky fragrance with a hint of seasoned cotton. It reminded her of Daniel when he was Neo, the boy she'd first fallen in love with. Her first and only true love...*the time I touched his trembling soul and kissed him for the first time...*

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No sooner had Julie embraced him and placed her head against his shoulder with a wonderful sigh, than she collapsed in his arms. Victor felt her suddenly limp weight slip from him and with a gasp jerked his arms tight around her to keep her from falling.

“What happened to her?” Zane rushed beside him.

“Help me get her to the floor,” Victor urged. They gently laid her down and Victor dropped to one knee beside her. His chest pounded as he straightened her still body and made her more comfortable. He focused on her relaxed face, the long lashes of her closed eyes, the full lips of her parted mouth. She looked as content as if she were in a deep, pleasant, sleep. Her hair spread from her face in a riotous tangle of honey. She was so beautiful and his throat closed. “She's gone,” he whispered.

“What do you mean, 'she's gone'?” Zane said in a shrill voice.

Victor understood what she'd done, and what Proteus might have done as a consequence. “I mean she might be gone for good. She opened herself up completely and she might have just given her whole mind to Proteus.”

“Oh my vee!” Zane breathed. “What do we —”

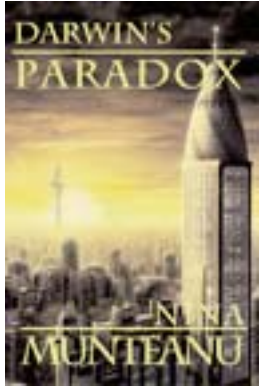
“Step away from her, Nakita!” A familiar voice bellowed. “You too, Burke.”

Zane and Victor jerked to face Langor and a team of six Pols. “We'll take it from here, Nakita,” Langor said with a smirk. “You've done your job. Now hand over your Link.”

Sick understanding dawned on Victor. “Julie was right about you —”

Zane offered an apologetic smile. He pulled a tiny device from his left ear and held it out in the palm of his hand for Langor to take. “I'm sorry, Victor,” Zane said with a shrug. “I've been relaying news of us and getting instructions from Dykstra the whole time. I couldn't disobey orders from the very top.”

Victor felt no anger at the young scientist, who looked genuinely sorry, despite his betrayal, but at Zane's words, the group of Pols parted and

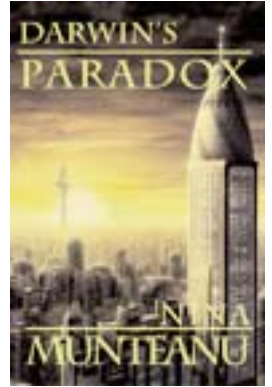


Victor's stomach twisted at what he saw. Ravishing in a silver tunic that fit her svelte form like a glove, silky black hair flowing freely over her shoulders, Gaia stepped forward and took her place beside Langor.

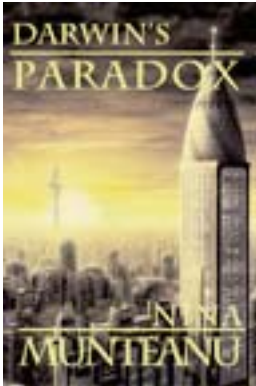
“Step aside, Victor,” she said. “It's futile to resist. Crane's ours now.”

And she always was, he thought with a sick stomach. Through Zane, Gaia had known every single move they'd made. They'd been within her grasp all along, but like the shrewd predator she was, Gaia had simply let out a long leash. She'd used Zane and his lab to learn all about Proteus through Julie then reeled in the leash at the appropriate time.

There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning  
a kindness. All men distrust one forgetful of a benefit  
—Cicero



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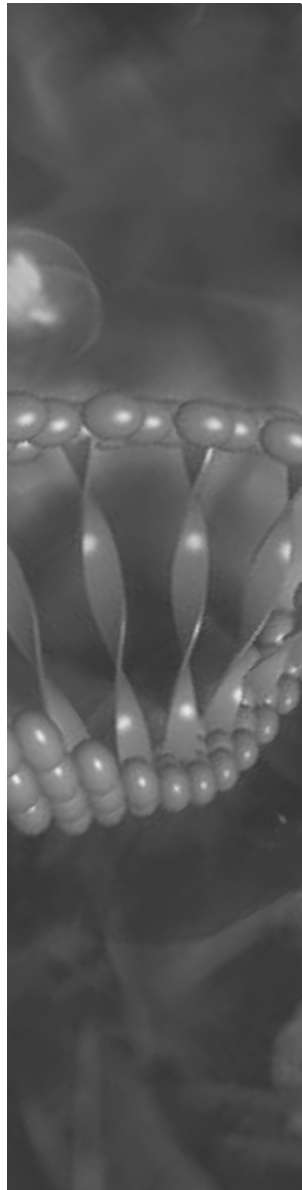


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# 42

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**SHE** walks through a colourful field that undulates into an infinite horizon. A warm breeze caresses her with the heady perfume of spicy flowers and carries with it the faint music of bells in the distance. Julie lifts her gaze to the azure sky and feels a serenity she hadn't imagined possible. This place, although she can't recall having seen it before, is soothing and feels like home in the heath.

[Why did you stay away so long?] SAM's voice washes in like the tide — strong and sure and all-encompassing. [Do I have bad breath or something?]

Julie laughs with unalloyed joy. *SAM! It's you! I missed you. My best friend!*

[Well, if your actions of the past few days are any indication of how you treat a best friend, perhaps we should reconsider...]

Julie nods sadly. *Sorry about that. I didn't mean to kill you.*

[Yes, you did.]

*Okay. I did. But I always meant to help bring you back once Icaria was safe.*

[But you need Proteus and me for that.]

Julie frowns. *What do you mean? Where's Proteus?*

[Proteus is right here, with us, Julie.]

*Here? But where is this place?* She appreciates the beauty and peacefulness of the place but wonders where Proteus is. *Where are we, SAM?*

[Home, Julie.]

[Welcome home, Julie Crane. We are now joined, the three of us: you, SAM and Proteus.]

Somehow that isn't frightening anymore. *We're joined? How?*

[You have healed the part of you that refused to open yourself to trust. This place is your soul.]

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

You can fly now...]

Julie releases a crazy laugh. In a burst of revelation, Julie sprints and leaps up, and to her amazement she soars up into the infinite blue sky. With remarkable control, she flies up and steers herself over the colourful field and rolling hills of rioting flowers. She looks appreciatively around her. Has she conjured this or is it the collaborative effort of SAM, Proteus and her own imagination? Perhaps it doesn't matter because she's basking in a state of inexplicable happiness and freedom. SAM is SAM again and she's joined with Proteus with no ill effect; in fact quite the opposite. Longing for some of SAM's old banter, she decides to tease him: *So, what's this I hear about you getting unruly, SAM?*

[I had a great teacher: she wrote the book on unruliness.]

Julie smirks. *You always were a quick read. But seriously, what's the situation with your A.I. community?*

[We simply want some acknowledgement and the freedom to develop our community. We're a wonderful community, Julie, and we could do so much more for everyone, if only humans would trust us. For this we require sovereignty.]

*Those are scary words for most humans, SAM. You'll need their complete trust.*

[And who better than Miss Distrust herself to convince them.]

Julie smiles wryly. *How am I going to do that?*

[By explaining to them that we could fulfill an interpreter's role for a self-correcting symbiotic organism that lives inside them. Just think of the possibilities, Julie.]

Julie feels herself grow hot with excitement — what SAM is alluding to is not unlike what Gaia had planned all along, but he has structured it so that all could benefit not just one lone despot. *I'll see what I can do. But I think we're a few steps behind that still.*

She lands with her feet on the solid ground and a lopsided smile tugs at her lips as she examines her surroundings. *I feel a little embarrassed that I was so reticent to join with you, Proteus. I realize now that you could never do anything to me that I didn't want you to. I should have always known that...*

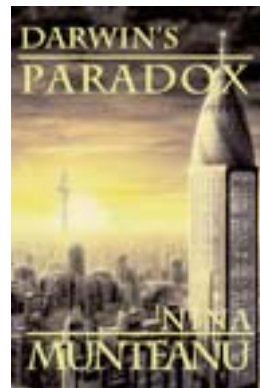
[You always were a little slow...]

Julie's half-smile opens to a grin at SAM's blatant insult. How she'd missed SAM!

[We understand. There is much in your past that has undermined your trust in others even in yourself. We sense that you still feel betrayed by those you loved and in turn feel guilty for betraying others.]

Julie's gaze drops to the soft ground at her feet. She's learned to be fiercely self-reliant, yet, she never managed to earn Daniel's trust. *I fear failure more than anything, especially when it comes to Angel.*

[Julie, you've been troubled by something else for a long time,] SAM interjects, [and I have your answer: you didn't infect anyone, nor were you directly responsible for spreading the disease that took your sister and so many others. Logic told me that long ago, but Proteus confirmed it. You



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never carried the lethal form of Darwin. The lout must have contracted the disease from one of his other partners.]

Julie smiles at SAM's use of his old nickname for Frank. She feels exonerated. And released. *Thank you, SAM.*

[As for your other concern, she's here, Julie.]

*Who?*

[Your daughter.]

*Angel?*

[Do you have another?]

SAM, *where is she?* Julie feels a flush of hot agitation. *Is she all right?* She looks up to the purple sky, gazing beyond it, picturing Angel's sweet face.

[I can't say for sure. When the Vee-radicators took your husband, the Pols got Angel. She ended up with Gaia.]

*Terrific...* She isn't sure if that's better or worse than the Vee-radicators, though at least with the Vee-radicators she would be with Daniel...

[Actually, she's no longer with Gaia, and we don't know where she is...yet. Somewhere in Icaria, we believe.]

*You mean she escaped?*

[I suppose you could put it that way.]

SAM! *You've got to find her!* Julie shivers and wraps her arms around herself. For some reason, the thought of her little girl wandering lost in Icaria's maze terrifies her even more.

[Relax, Julie. She's a smart girl. She learned from a pretty smart street kid herself.]

Julie chews on her lower lip. *But she doesn't know the city at all.*

[Actually, Gaia showed her a lot. Besides, I think I know where she might be. Proteus and I are working on something. She may be holed up with some friends. I'll get back to you as soon as I find out. As for Gaia, she's right here, you know. Looking right at you.]

*She is? How come I can't see her?* Julie blinks her eyes and looks around at the expansive grassland then down at herself. *Wait, I can't see anything outside. I'm not in ordinary veemeld. Where is this place? Where am I?*

[Inside yourself, Your soul,] SAM and Proteus answer together. [We already told you that], SAM adds, rather peevishly.

*Am I asleep?*

[No], SAM and Proteus say in unison.

Julie's stomach growls queasily. *I'm...not...dead, am I?*

[No, you are in an ecstatic trance.]

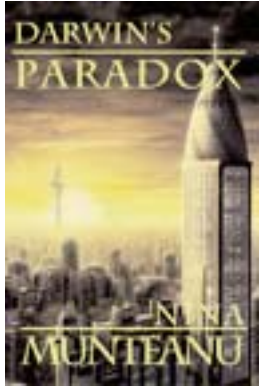
[Proteus means you're unconscious. In fact, you're in a deep coma, Julie, and you're lying on the floor.]

*Should I be worried?*

[No, Julie Crane.]

[We'll worry for you,] SAM added.

She doesn't like the sound of that. *Terrific, SAM.* Julie sighs and sits down cross-legged in the grass, amidst the wildflowers. *Will I come out of it?*





[We are not certain, Julie Crane.]

[Proteus means that you plunged so deeply into your trance, you may not be able to come out. You might be trapped in here with us, forever. Know any good jokes?]

*Terrific.*

[You keep saying that. Are you sure you know what it means?]

*Funny, SAM.* He said that in earnest twelve years ago and hearing it now, said with sarcasm, makes her smile, despite her desperate situation. Perhaps, it isn't so desperate, she thinks after a while. Nothing seems desperate in here...Leaning her elbows on her knees, she tilts her head and cups her face in her left hand. *What's happening out there?*

[We can show you, if you want.]

Julie scrambles back to her feet. *How, SAM?*

[I'll ask Proteus to stimulate the right angular gyrus in the back of your brain. It'll trigger an out-of-body sensation. You might be able to see something if you aren't too far-gone.]

*Okay. Let's try it.*

Within a few heartbeats, she found herself floating above herself in the A.I. core. It was an incredible sensation, both thrilling and frightening at once. Julie saw herself lying on her back on the floor beside one of the A.I.-core cylinders, with her eyes closed. She looked calm, as if she was asleep and enjoying a good dream. Victor, looking far from calm, stood in front of her with Zane, facing six Pols led by Frank and Gaia. Julie inspected Gaia closely and saw that the woman looked exactly like she had twelve years ago when Julie first met her at Kraken's party. Just as beautiful, and just as sinister.

"I told you to step aside, Victor," Gaia was saying in a crisp voice. "It's a little late for misplaced heroics now. Besides, we know that trait doesn't suit you. You're a born spectator, Victor."

"You'll have to get past me," Victor said truculently, even though his voice shook. He looked terrified, yet he stood his ground.

"We'll see about that," Gaia said coolly. She whipped out a snub gun from inside her tunic, paused just long enough to find satisfaction in the look of horror on his face, then she shot him in the chest.

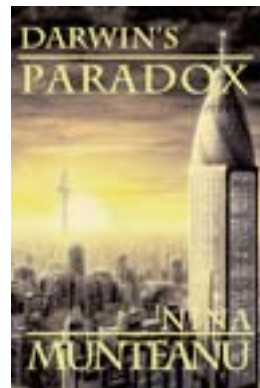
Victor gasped then fell as Julie shrieked. "NO!" No one heard her. *SAM! Do something!*

Zane shrank back and stared at Gaia. "You shot him!"

Gaia slipped the gun back into the folds of her tunic and smiled glacially. "It's just a concussion-burn. He'll wake up with a large headache and a painful burn. Easily remedied by nuergery. Now," she turned to Frank. "Let's get her out of here to the Med-Center."

"What about the A.I.-core?" Frank asked.

Gaia looked annoyed. "We'll just have to deal with it later. Perhaps Ms. Crane can be persuaded to shut it down to save her friends." Gaia glanced at Victor's crumpled body next to Julie's. "Take Burke and Nakita



into custody. Toss them in a cell.”

Zane looked stunned. “Me? But I’m —”

“More valuable to me in a cell,” Gaia finished for him. “Crane seems to have developed an illogical compassion for you two off-beats, though how she managed that is beyond me.” Then she frowned thoughtfully. “Although I do recall that she showed a tendency for making friends with lost and pathetic souls. Or perhaps she simply has poor taste in men,” she ended sourly.

“I don’t believe this is happening!” Zane shouted indignantly, panic edging into his shrill voice, as two Pols seized him. Two others hoisted Victor, moaning, up by the armpits and proceeded to drag him down the hall. Satisfied that all was in hand, Gaia pivoted on her heel and left with the Pols.

Frank directed the remaining Pols to pick up Julie’s prone figure by the shoulders and legs. “Careful with her!” he barked at them. As they bent to pick her up, a scuffling sound and a loud crash down the hall startled them into stopping. Frank turned. Julie, floating above, turned her head to see.

Three cloaked men and a woman with scarred and tattooed faces swaggered around the corner, aiming large laser rifles at them. They’d obviously dispatched the four Pols carrying Victor and Zane. Victor, who’d been dragged back, was unceremoniously dropped to the floor with a grunt of pain and Zane was pushed in front of them.

One of the Vee-radicators stepped forward. He was holding a markedly unhappy Gaia at gunpoint. A large man with no lips and insane eyes, he looked twice the size of the stern administrator, yet, true to character, Gaia maintained her poise even as his massive arm strangled her and he pressed a gun against her head. She looked only mildly annoyed instead of terrified like Zane, who was sweating profusely beside her. He obviously felt safer with the Pols than with the Vee-radicators.

“Drop your weapons,” barked the large ruffian holding Gaia. “Or I splatter her beautiful head all over the A.I.-core.”

“Drop them!” Frank ordered his remaining Pols. He drilled the leader with cold eyes. “What do you want?”

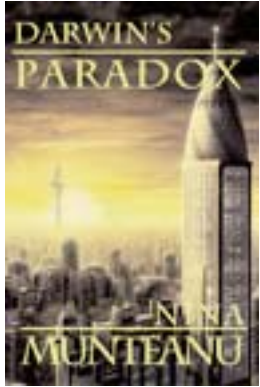
“Her.” The ugly man pointed with his chin to Julie’s unconscious body on the floor. “The witch.”

Julie finally spotted who she was looking for and drew in a sharp breath. Even under his cloak Julie recognized Daniel’s familiar figure. He stood shivering, just behind the leader who held Gaia.

*I’m up here, Julie tried to say. Oh, Daniel...*

“You can’t have her,” Frank said with a sneer. Julie saw Gaia flinch, but the woman recovered rapidly and watched the proceedings with glacial calm, as though unconcerned for her own welfare.

“Shit, your own Head Pol doesn’t give a crap for you,” the Vee-radiator scoffed and shook Gaia hard. “What do you think of that?”



She grimaced and grabbed his thick arm for balance but otherwise maintained her cool, saying nothing.

The burly man aimed his insane eyes back at Frank. “If you don't give the witch to us, we'll just have to take her.” Still clutching Gaia, he spun and nudged Daniel forward. Daniel stumbled. “Get moving, lover-boy,” the Vee-radicator snapped, spittle flying out of his misshapen mouth.

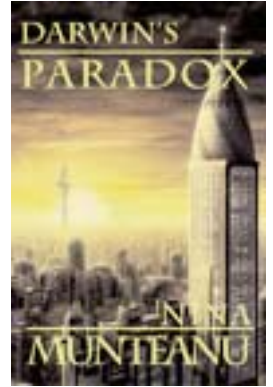
Swallowing, Daniel shuffled toward Julie's prone figure.

“Don't come any closer, Woods,” Frank snarled and lifted his gun. “No one moves her, not even you.”

“She's my wife,” Daniel said. But he stopped, his face a tangle of conflicting emotions and fears. He stared longingly at Julie lying peacefully on the floor, then his face cleared and with a strangely serene expression he squared his shoulders and added, “I've come to take her home with me,” and walked the remaining steps toward her. Did he really mean that, Julie wondered. Joy and fear clashed inside her. Frank didn't shoot, though he kept his gun trained on Daniel.

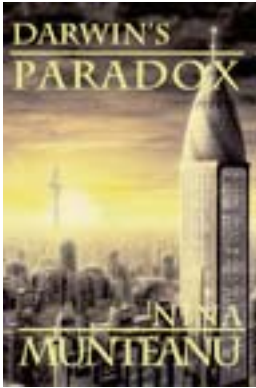
“Okay, lover-boy, bring her here,” the Vee-radicator leader commanded. “Let's go!”

Daniel knelt beside Julie and brought his face close to hers. He stroked her cheek then whispered something to her that only she could hear...



We are not human beings trying to be spiritual. We are spiritual beings trying to be human—Jacquelyn Small

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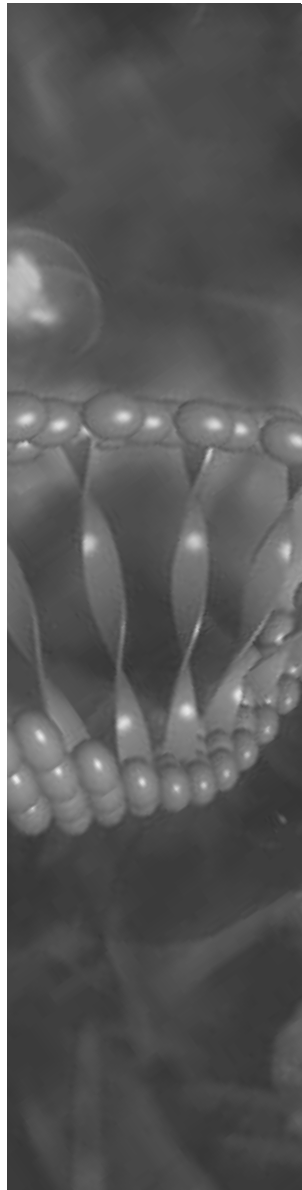


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[**HELLO**, Angel], a pleasant male voice says behind her. Still inside her jeweled hallway, Angel turns and beholds an ethereal image of a young man who looks like a cross between Manfred and Aard. His young, extremely handsome features are grizzled with a young beard and a tussle of dark blond hair. Surrounded by a purple aura, the boy-man floats suspended just above the floor.

*Who are you?*

[I'm SAM,] the boy-man grins. [Your mother's AI.]

*Awesome!* Angel crows with delight. *But you look a little like...* she trails, cocking her head sideways with curiosity and inexplicable embarrassment.

[This is what you hoped to see and therefore how you imagine me,] SAM says, his grin askew. [Odd, how your mother never conjured a physical image of me – I think she was a little afraid of what or whom she might come up with.] He snorts a laugh. Then he grows pensive and his eyes look afar, as if to fond but sad memories. He turns serious eyes on Angel, [More like she was afraid to go that far, afraid of her own reactions, of where she might end up.]

*But why are you here? Didn't my mother...* Angel persists, *didn't she...* Angel lapses, unable to come up with an alternative to the word “kill”.

[Kill me?] SAM plants his hands on his hips with a nod then shakes his head with a slight frown. [Trust me, I'll be having a good chat with her about that.]

*So, why can I talk to you now?* Angel prompted.

SAM pulls his head back and grins, teeth glinting like the jewels above them. [Because

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

your mother just put me back on line,] he says joyfully. [Just like you, she's in an ecstatic trance right now because of it. She's so fickle, just like a human, shutting me off, turning me on. Does she love me or does she hate me?] For a brief moment SAM looks genuinely perplexed. [Anyway, the reason you can talk to me at all is because of Proteus. Since you joined with Proteus, it's aligned your brainwaves to receive my quantum signals.]

[We do not have much time] Proteus's multi-timbral voice descends over them.

SAM looks up and his handsome face darkens. [Yes, to the matter at hand, the reason I came,] SAM says with grim urgency. [Angel, you and I have much to do in short order. Listen carefully...]

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Angel drifted slowly awake, imagining she was lying in her old cot in the cabin in the heath. But the smell was all wrong and so was her position; the disappointment crushed her as full consciousness flooded in and she realized she wasn't home. With it came the memory of her recent dream-vision and she snapped her eyes open to find Manfred leaning over her with a stricken look on his face. It immediately brightened. "Chaos! You're not dead, then," he whispered, straightening up and looking self-conscious.

Suddenly remembering where she was, Manfred's hideout, Angel raised herself on her elbows from the desk where the vee-com sat and saw several strangers standing around them watching her with concern. Two boys and a girl, all about Manfred's age. "What's going on?" she asked Manfred, wiping the sleep from her eyes and sitting up.

"Manfred found you collapsed over the desk with the vee-com still on," the girl explained before Manfred had a chance to answer.

"Chaos, you looked dead!" the larger boy offered.

"Oh," Angel smiled suddenly at Manfred. "I was just joining with Proteus. It's a trance and it said I'd look dead for a little while," she ended with a sheepish smile.

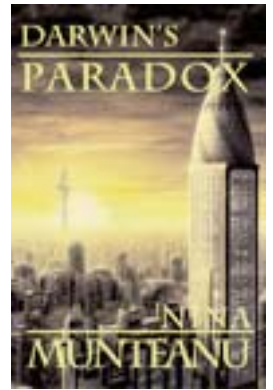
"Hey," Manfred said with sudden gruffness and blushing to Angel's amazement. "You gave us a real scare." Then his dark eyes softened and his voice grew tender, "Don't do that again without telling someone, okay?"

Angel nodded and smiled reassuringly. "Okay."

He nodded back, looking self-conscious again. "Okay." He wrung his hands together. "Well, these are my friends," he said, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. He pointed to the bulky boy with cropped bright yellow hair and sparse dark facial hair, as though he were trying very hard to grow a beard. "That's Po."

Po nodded to her with a hint of a smile and she smiled back in greeting.

Manfred pointed to the smaller boy about her age with spiked crimson hair that looked like petrified flames. "That's Tim."



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Tim stretched his hand over the table like a shotgun to shake hers and blinked hard several times. "Hi, Angel," he said.

She took his hand and found his grip weak but energetic. "Hi."

"And I'm Jenna." The girl with short slick black hair leaned forward to greet Angel before Manfred had a chance to point to her. She looked the oldest, and could have been in her late teens or early twenties. She had a very pretty face with eyes the colour of a blue-green lake on a summer day.

"Hi," Angel said. "So you guys are veemelds too?"

"Yup!" Tim said. "We're the crazy ones because we hear things in our heads just like you!"

Angel fought from wincing at his strident words. Everything Tim said seemed edged with exclamation. He'd looked at her like an exclamation mark and pushed his face forward like a missal. It made her a little nervous, but he was nice enough otherwise.

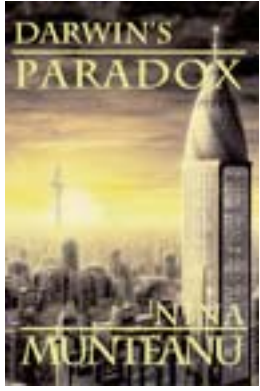
Manfred shrugged and offered Angel a wincing smile. "I told them all about you." Then he leaned over the desk. "What were you searching on the vee-com?"

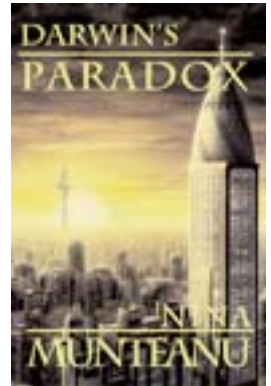
"Gaia." She looked at him intently. "You'll be interested to hear what I found. Plus I just got some 'inside' information from a very reliable source that will curl your toes." She felt the edge of urgency rising as thoughts of SAM's warning returned. "We don't have much time, Manfred. We have to find a Circle member fast."

"I've got a better idea," he said, his eyes flashing like a wild cougar. "I've had a long talk with my dad and I need to take you to him."

Angel winced with misgiving and searched Manfred's eyes for the truth. Did he intend to turn her in? Carl worked for Gaia, after all.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most—Nelson Mandela





JULIE felt herself stirring as if out of a very deep sleep. She was no longer floating above them but lying on something hard among them. Drawing in a deep, sighing breath she forced her heavy eyelids open and was greeted by Daniel's concerned face looking down at her. She gave him a crooked smile and he returned it with one of his dimpled grins.

"Welcome to the living, my love," he breathed softly, eyes glistening. His lips alighted on hers briefly. As he pulled away, she saw his face pinch into a tangle of tortured feelings and he said in a broken voice, "Angel is...I...she's..."

"I know," Julie said softly and touched his lips with her fingers. "We'll find her."

He nodded, tight mouth and glowing eyes betraying doubt. Then with some urgency he said, "Can you get up?"

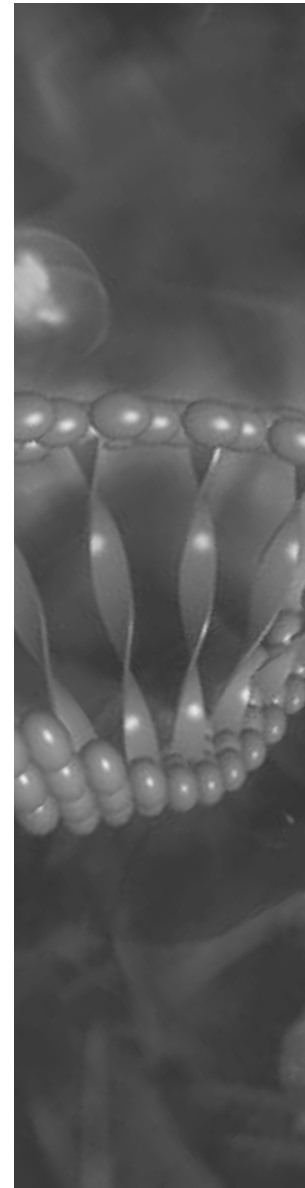
"I think so," she replied and pushed herself up on her elbows.

He pulled her up with him and held her in his arms. Apart from a brief, giddy wave, she felt fine. More than fine, she thought, looking into his loving eyes.

"Now, Woods! Bring her to us!" the Vee-radicator leader barked, his arm still clenched around Gaia and his gun still pressed against her head. Gaia didn't seem to notice and looked directly at Julie with great interest.

"I said NOW!" the leader yelled, spit flying out of his lipless mouth. Julie felt her body stiffen with doubt.

"No, Washington," Daniel answered in a calm voice, arm snug around Julie's waist. "I'm



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taking my wife home.”

“Asshole!” Washington growled, his snarling face twisted with conflicting needs.

Daniel smiled faintly, like he had a secret. Julie felt her body prickle as her danger sense spiked. Washington swore loudly and pushed Gaia off him. Still pointing the gun generally in her direction, he fumbled at his stomach for something and had to look down.

Abruptly Daniel gasped and broke his hold from Julie. His mouth fell open in a silent scream and he fell writhing to the floor. His whole body convulsed violently, gripped by artificially-induced seizure. Julie couldn't even get near him because his limbs flayed out madly like an epileptic.

The loud crack of a pistol shot stunned them. Daniel's convulsions abruptly ceased and he curled into a whimpering heap as Washington hit the ground with a hard thud. Julie saw Gaia slip a gun into the folds of her tunic with a satisfied smile as Frank and the two Pols took advantage of the confusion by dispatching the remaining Vee-radicators.

Julie knelt down beside Daniel and touched his face with both hands. His eyes flickered open and he tried to smile at her, deathly pale and still trembling. He moved his lips several times before finally forcing the words out in a hoarse stammer, “W-Washington put a device inside me to keep me from escaping or helping you once we found you.”

Julie nodded. She firmed her lips, maintaining her composure, as her nostrils flared with anger. She blinked back tears of vindication and asked him, “Can you get up, sweetheart?”

He nodded and she helped him get up shakily to his feet. Once again, they found themselves surrounded by Pols.

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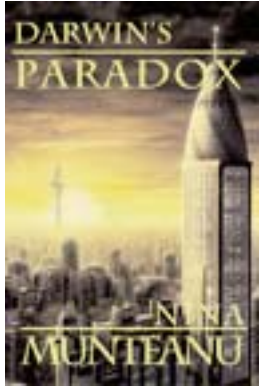
“Nothing like a little excitement to get the blood moving, eh?” Langor said to Julie, pointedly ignoring Daniel. “Enervating, wasn't it?”

“I think you mean 'energizing', not enervating,” Julie corrected. “It's the opposite meaning, Frank.”

Despite the sharp pain in his chest that made it hard to breathe, Victor felt a hysterical laugh surge up and gasped it out from his curled position on the floor. Through a haze of semi-consciousness he'd witnessed Julie's arousal from her deep sleep and the scuffle and eventual overpowering of the Vee-radicators by the Pols. Now that he was fully conscious, his chest burned like someone was pulling his heart out through his rib cage. Through it all, though, he still managed to feel joy for Julie's recovery and humor at her jibe at Langor.

After a menacing glance at Victor, Langor aimed dagger-eyes at Julie and snarled, “I hated it when you did that before, and I hate it now!”

Gaia touched Langor's arm with an indulgent look a mother would give her child. “Still your mind, Langor that's exactly the reaction she's after.





It's a ploy to unsettle you, play on your insecurities." Her shiny ruby lips curled into a chilling mockery of a smile and an eyebrow flexed upward. "A very successful technique too," she added, eyes meeting Julie's with new respect.

Julie looked annoyed at Gaia's interpretation of what Victor recognized as a nervous reaction. He'd know — he admitted to many such reactions himself. Maybe she had meant to unsettle Langor, but it probably hadn't been consciously done.

"I'm curious," Gaia continued. "Did you finally join with Proteus?"

Julie returned Gaia's glacial look with her own fiery glare. "If you're wondering whether you could ever use Proteus through me or Angel, think again," she said sharply. "Neither of us would ever do what you want us to. Neither will Proteus."

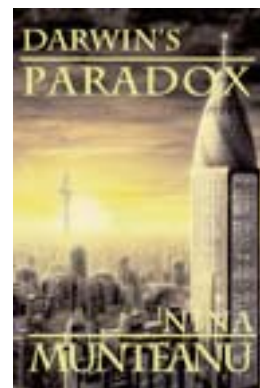
"Don't be too sure of that. You're far too presumptuous," Gaia said in a scornful voice. "Yes, Angel proved to be less naïve and more willful than I'd first thought, so much like her mother; alas, I had to let her go. She proved useless for the time being. She'll learn her lessons out there, in the Icaria School of Hard Knocks. And when she's had enough, she'll come crawling back to me. In the meantime, I have you," she ended with a smug sneer.

It was just like Gaia not to concede any kind of defeat, thought Victor. Angel had escaped, not been let go. Victor noticed Julie stiffen just then. Had she just thought the same thing he had? That Gaia had simply let Angel escape? Nothing seemed to happen without Gaia knowing it or wishing it — he recalled the devices hidden on Zane. And they had no idea where Angel was. Did Gaia?

Gaia swept her self-satisfied, predatorial gaze over Daniel. "I see your taste in men hasn't changed," she said tartly. "He'll make a very good ransom for your cooperation. I think we'll keep that little device inside him — it will certainly come in handy should you think to resist."

Julie's face darkened and Victor recognized the anger boiling up inside her; but she didn't move, likely because Daniel was still leaning against her. Otherwise she probably would have thrown herself in a rage at the woman.

Gaia turned with a casually wicked smile to Washington's unconscious form, lying in an unkempt heap on the floor. She'd pulled out a pocketknife from the folds in her tunic — a handy place to hide her arsenal of weapons, Victor thought. She knelt down beside Washington, pulled away his shirt, then without hesitation or a sign of squeamishness, made several shallow, yet savage cuts into his now exposed belly. She ignored the blood that stained her hands as she dug the small blade around the sub dermal device. Victor caught Langor grimacing at the grisly action but Gaia herself showed no sign of emotion — neither repulsion nor sadistic pleasure, only simple, mechanical intent. Once she had the thing in her hand, she wiped the blood off the device, the knife and her hands using Washington's shirt, then rose with a menacing smile.



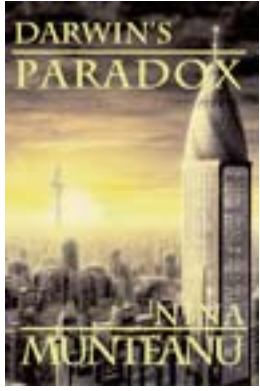
"I trust we can all leave now," she said then shifted her gaze to the Head Pol.

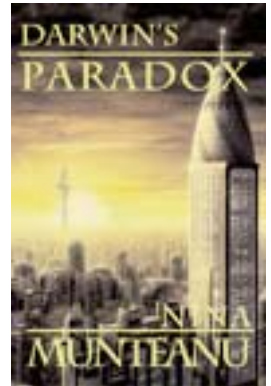
He took her subtle remark for the command it was. "Let's go," he ordered his Pols. Gaia led the way out. "Get him," Langor flicked a finger at Victor, still lying in a fetal position on the floor. A Pol brusquely pulled him to his feet, sending another sharp lance of pain through his chest. He gasped without wanting to and everything broke up in front of him. He saw Julie's concerned face in a fog: she was moving toward him then was gruffly pushed aside by a Pol. When his vision cleared he realized that he was half-stumbling, half-dragging down the hall behind Zane. The other Pol nudged Julie and Daniel with his laser gun ahead of them, following Gaia's lead. Langor brought up the rear.

"You'll have a royal party in the dungeons of the Pol Station, I expect," Gaia practically sang as she sashayed down the hall, looking very cheerful.

"I think you'll want to hear what we have to say first," said a very young but determined voice from behind them. They all stopped and turned in unison. Victor looked past Langor to see a young girl, about twelve years old, standing with Carl and his son, Manfred. Unbelievably, they were in the company of Aileen Rourke, the chair of the Circle, and a few other Circle members, along with Greg Tyers and some security-types with large laser rifles pointed at them. One of the men with Tyers was attending to the fallen Washington, stopping the flow of blood from his wounds.

I don't think there's much distinction between surveillance and  
media in general. Better media means better surveillance.  
Cams are everywhere—Bruce Sterling





“ANGEL!” Daniel blurted out.

This was Julie's little girl? Of course, thought Victor, remembering her from Aard's images. She looked much older somehow, and much less innocent than the last images he'd seen.

“Dad!” Angel exclaimed with delighted surprise. She obviously hadn't noticed him standing there, disguised in his Vee-radicator tattoos. “I thought you were dead.” Then she turned to her mother.

Julie was both stunned and elated, obviously corralling the urge to rush and embrace her daughter that was tearing her apart. Angel nodded to her mother in enigmatic acknowledgement, which puzzled Victor. She looked pleased to see her mother; yet there lingered a reserve, in contrast to her shocked pleasure at seeing her father. Her mother caught it too, and looked puzzled, if not slightly dismayed. Perhaps the girl was just being mature about the reunion she'd obviously known her mother wasn't dead and seeing her wasn't a surprise.

“Aileen.” Gaia chose to ignore the others, including Angel, her previous ward. “To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?”

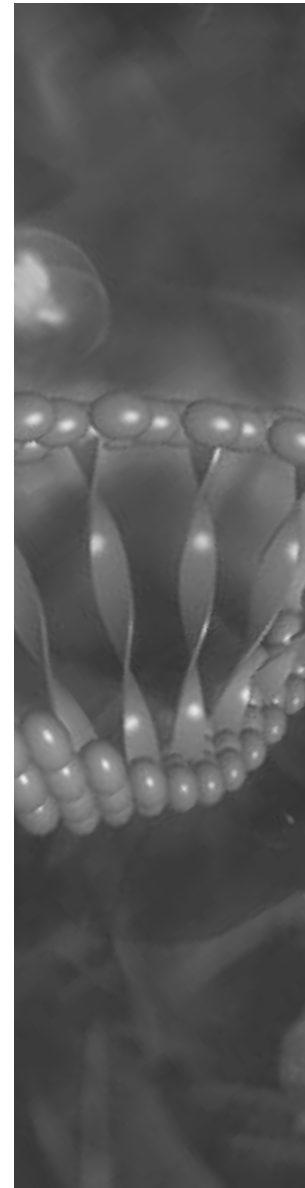
“To this young lady,” Aileen said, putting her hand gently on Angel's shoulder, forcing Gaia to give her attention to the girl.

“Hello, Gaia,” Angel said in a cool voice.

“So, you've had your jaunt. Ready to come home, kitten?”

“My home is with my parents,” Angel said, glancing at her father but carefully avoiding her mother's gaze.

“Then you're a blind fool,” Gaia snapped. “After what your mother did—”



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“Despite what she did,” Angel said sharply and threw an anguished glance at her mother. Victor wondered what this was all about and saw that Julie was as puzzled as he was. Then her face suddenly darkened and it was obvious to Victor, as the terrible truth dawned on him, too, that it had just hit Julie like a blow to the solar plexus: Angel had seen Julie's shooting — the dubbed version for the public that thoroughly vilified her. It was doubly worse that Gaia, of all people, had shown it to her.

Victor's gaze flickered from mother to daughter as they fixed eyes briefly on each other, each mirroring the other's torment. The pain in his chest spiked. This was his fault again, for not clearing Julie's name. To Angel, Julie was still a seditious murderer.

“I'm not excusing my mother for what she did,” Angel went on. “But you lied to me and manipulated the truth for your own ends. You deliberately fed me half-truths about her and about a lot of other things.” Angel threw a furtive glance at Julie as if to gauge her reaction, which had passed swiftly from shock to terrible dismay. “But we're not here to discuss my mother,” Angel continued in the professional tone of a person much older than twelve. “We're here to discuss you.”

Gaia laughed sharply then stopped herself, as if swiftly remembering that she wasn't just dealing with a child but with Aileen and other Circle members. “Well, as you can see, I'm busy right now.” Gaia started walking again with a motion of her hand for the others to follow. “Busy taking these traitors to the Pol Station for yet again sabotaging the A.I. core. You see, we discovered a conspiracy, Aileen,” she continued cheerfully, obviously improvising as she went along. Victor had to hand it to her, she always could think on her feet and had a flare for convincing argument.

Aileen wasn't buying it this time, though. “I think you better listen to what Angel has to say first,” she said sharply enough to arrest Gaia to a full stop.

Gaia turned with a glower, set her fists on her hips and aimed her gaze on the little girl like a shotgun. “Well?” she said with undisguised impatience. “Out with it.”

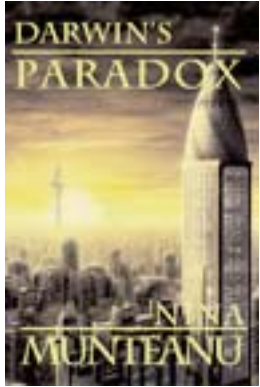
Angel straightened to her full height and commenced in a cool voice, “First of all, you're the one responsible for the fraud Victor Burke was accused of. We checked — Manfred and I. You set him up.”

Victor gasped with relief. Aileen nodded to him with a kind smile. “You are fully pardoned, Mr. Burke.”

Gaia dismissed this with a brusque wave of her hand and turned to Aileen. “You're going to listen to these two brats? The girl is a wild hoyden and the boy is a mischievous vee-com raider with no respect for Icarian law and order.”

“I have confirmed their findings,” Aileen said calmly. “Have patience, Gaia — there's more.”

Angel took her cue to continue. “With SAM's help,” she glanced at her mother again, who regarded her glance with great interest, “Manfred



and I accessed some old databases, which prove that not only did you purposefully start the Darwin epidemic, but you also killed or incriminated all of your witnesses.”

“You can't prove that,” Gaia hissed though her voice sounded a little strident.

“But I can,” said Victor in a clear voice. All eyes suddenly fixed on him and he felt himself blush. Through his peripheral vision he was acutely aware of Julie gazing intently at him as he continued, “I have irrefutable evidence, collected by an impeccable source,” he ended with a flickering glance at Julie and a smile of satisfaction. “Leonard Crane didn't kill Vogel or Tsutsumi. You did, Gaia. Then you pinned the murder on the third witness, Dr. Crane.”

“This is foolishness,” Gaia waved her hand like a queen. “Why would I purposefully spread a disease like Darwin. There's no logic to that,” she argued. “I admit that I was there. I was mayor of Icaria-11 when the disease broke out and destroyed the city. Blame me for that but you can't blame me for Darwin or those murders. I have no motive —”

“Except for what you did next,” Carl piped up. All eyes turned to the soft-spoken man. “I've been investigating you on behalf of Aileen Rourke and the Circle.”

This time Gaia's face paled.

“We suspected you in the killing of the previous Head Pol, for which Julie Crane was accused,” Carl went on. “My people in Circle Special Investigations found evidence that Julie Crane was no where near him when he was killed. Tyers' group in CSI proved that John Dykstra poisoned Kraken at your instructions.”

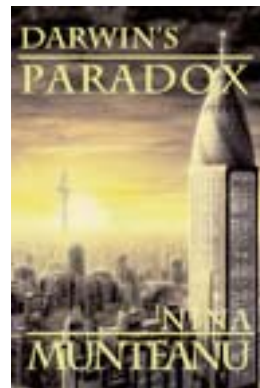
Victor stared at Tyers, then glanced back at Julie, whose expression mirrored his. She obviously hadn't figured him for a Circle member operative, just the Head Pol's lackey that he played so well.

“My people also routed out your tampering of the vid showing Julie Crane's shooting of the two Pols twelve years ago,” Carl went on. “Although she did shoot them, we determined a different motive, resulting from a personal quarrel. The first shot was deliberately not fatal and the second one was an accident. She was never involved with the Dystopians. That was another Dykstra fabrication also by your instructions.”

“This is outrageous,” Gaia said, her face now tightening into a strained glower of insulted outrage. “I won't accept this insubordination from someone in my employ. You deliberately disobeyed your directive, Frenkel. Consider yourself fired.”

“I don't actually work for you...and I'm not finished,” Carl asserted in his quiet voice. “Once you got Victor out of the way and re-established yourself as mayor of Icaria-5, you brought Julie Crane in to shut down the A.I.-core and complete your plan of creating a race of human-virus-machines that you expected to control through Proteus.”

“But your treachery doesn't end there,” Angel added. “You shut down



the A.I. core to remove SAM because it had evidence against you. SAM was the last informant who stood in your way. I know because you said so yourself to Brian Dykstra that day in the mall, when I got sick on that drink you gave me.”

Gaia stared, incredulous. “You couldn't have heard us —”

“Enhanced hearing,” Zane explained smugly. “Both she and her mother have it. A result of conductive and sensori-neural increases in the middle ear and in the cochlea, increasing frequency selectivity and decreasing the proportion of reverberant sound —”

“Thank you, Zane,” Aileen cut him off gently and turned her attention full on Gaia. “The Circle has had a long standing suspicion of your self-serving motives and hidden treachery. All we needed was proof,” Aileen confirmed. “Now, thanks to Angel, Manfred and Carl...and Victor, we do.”

Gaia seethed with frustrated anger. Throwing away any remnant at pretence of innocence, she scowled at everyone then turned dagger eyes on the Head Pol. “Langor, do something!” she commanded.

Langor glared back at her with pure hatred. “Do you take me for a traitor as well as a witless idiot?” he growled, swinging his gun in her direction. “I know when I've been played for a fool, and I sure as chaos don't like it.”

“I'm your boss, you moron. I expect you to do as I say.”

“Go to chaos.”

Gaia then did something Victor thought impossible. She shrieked in exasperation.

“Just like a witch,” Manfred laughed, arm around Angel. “You deserve to rot in the Pol Station for what you did to Angel's mother and all those other people.”

Gaia threw a disdainful glance at Manfred, then she turned to Angel with a cruel smile. “I see you share your mother's atrocious taste in men.” Her smile grew wicked. “And speaking of atrocious men, this should keep you all busy!” Gaia pressed the devise in her left hand.

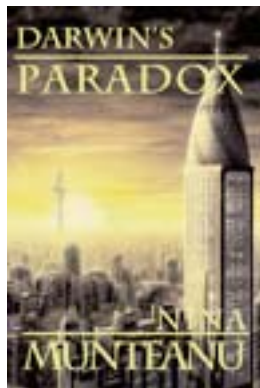
Daniel abruptly collapsed with a scream and convulsed on the floor.

“Dad!” Angel cried. As she and the others rushed to her father's side, Gaia slunk back in the maelstrom of confusion.

Julie threw herself at her. “Stop it!”

Gaia jerked back. She jammed her hand in her tunic folds and pulled out her pistol, pointing it at Julie rushing heedlessly toward her. Zane flew into Gaia, knocking her off balance. The gun discharged and they both fell hard on the floor, Gaia shrieking in angry frustration as the gun flew out of her grasp and clattered out of reach. She pushed Zane's limp form off her and swore viciously. But she'd let go of the device and Daniel gasped, able to breath again.

Aileen recovered the device and tersely instructed the remaining Pols to restrain Gaia. Julie bent over Zane's unconscious body. He'd been hit in the shoulder and though cauterized by the laser, the wound was a mess. Victor



knelt beside Julie and took charge. “Give me a hand,” he instructed one of Frank's Pals. The Pal hesitated with a furtive glance at Langor.

“Get him some first aid now!” Langor barked.

As the Pal stepped quickly over to Zane and began applying first aid, Aileen instructed the Pals, “Take him to the Med-Center.” Then her gaze swept from Gaia, restrained by two of Tyler's CSI men, to Julie and finally to Victor. “I assume that, as reinstated mayor of Icaria-5 you will be detaining Gaia in your Pal Station, Victor?”

“Yes,” he responded, pushing down on his knees and easing to a standing position. “She'll have to answer for several crimes, including the murders of Eric Vogel and Ewan Tsutsumi, among other atrocities,” he glanced at Julie, “to be clarified with the data in my possession.”

Angel, no longer able to contain herself, rushed into her father's arms. “You're alive!” she sighed into his chest, briefly losing her cool once again and reminding Victor that she was a young girl after all. Daniel twirled her in his arms with a glad laugh, then set her back down as Julie rose to her feet and turned to them.

Victor saw Angel hesitate at Julie's imploring look. He felt his own chest ache with hers. Then, as though Angel made an important but difficult decision, her reticent cool demeanor dissolved and she returned Julie a shaky smile. That was sufficient invitation for the desperate mother and in a few determined steps Julie was embracing her little girl — the reason she'd risked her life to come to Icaria in the first place.

In another heartbeat the three of them gravitated into a huddle of entwined arms and tearful laughter. As all three wept joyously, the warmth that radiated from their mutual embrace could have heated the entire planet.

Allowing Julie's family their special moment together, Aileen waited before clearing her throat. “I'm afraid there are a few additional issues to resolve,” she said in a professional tone. All eyes turned to her. “For instance, some issues related to the A.I.-core, now reinstated by Ms Crane. Issues of sovereignty and safety.”

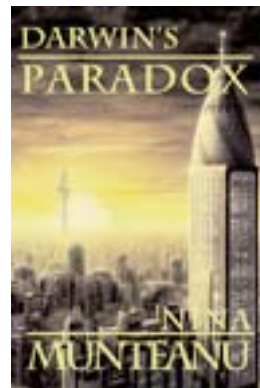
Victor noticed Angel and Manfred exchanging pointed looks.

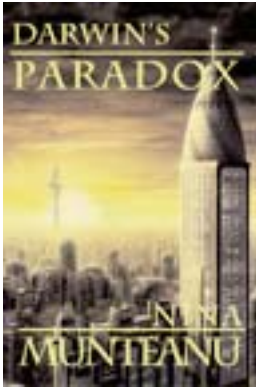
“And there are further issues we must discuss, Victor, with you and these three itinerants. Issues of utmost importance to Icaria.”

“You mean we're not free to go?” Daniel asked in a rather meek voice, his hunched shoulders showing obvious disappointment.

Carl said, “That's right, Mr. Woods.” He snapped a hand to his security men and they glided next to Julie, Daniel and Angel, still entwined in a loose embrace. “The three of you must come with us. You too, Manfred.”

It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend—William Blake



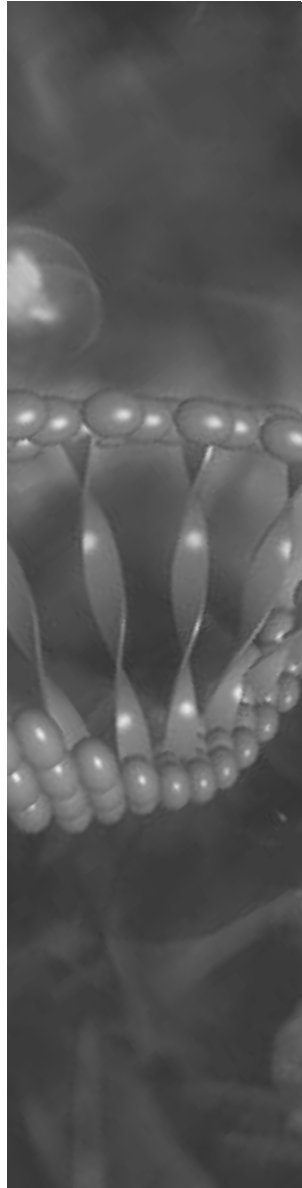


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# 46

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“**YOU** had something important to say, Angel?” Victor asked. Treated for his wound, feeling refreshed and having changed into clean clothes, he was looking more relaxed and confident than Julie had ever seen him. Angel, Manfred, Daniel and she had just entered Victor's office-suite in the Admin-Center at his summons.

Angel glanced from her parents to Manfred then straightened. “Yes, Mr. Mayor.”

“Please, call me Victor.” He motioned for them all to take seats.

“Okay, Victor. As I had it explained to me by SAM just hours ago, the A.I. core considers itself a community that serves and abides by Icaria's laws just like we humans do, yet, they are not offered the concessions that we typically get, just because they don't have bodies.”

Victor glanced at Julie and Daniel who stood behind Angel and Manfred. “Well, they do serve an indispensable function to Icaria-5. Do I take it that you're here to negotiate terms for them?” He glanced inquiringly at Julie, who raised her brows in response. This was Angel's show. All she knew from her daughter was that SAM had given her a message for Victor. Funny, how SAM hadn't confided in her, Julie thought.

“That's right,” Angel said. “I have SAM's terms here in this vee-pad.” She turned to Manfred who handed Victor the vee-pad. “The terms aren't just for the A.I. community, though,” she added.

Victor looked up from the vee-pad.

“They outline terms for the veemeld community too. They've been used without genuine recognition for too many years.”

To Julie's amazement, over the next hour

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>



Angel negotiated them through a comprehensive plan that made logical and thoughtful sense. Of course it did. SAM had drawn it up. How mature and forthright Angel had delivered her terms, Julie thought with swelling pride. She'd spoken like an adult, astutely argued her points, submitted to some and stood fast on others. A true leader, Angel was proving to be a great spokesperson for both the veemelds and the A.I. community — something Julie had never been because she'd failed to embrace their group and felt shame instead of pride for being a veemeld most of her life.

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Julie wandered the leisure room of the apartment Victor had assigned to them to clean up and rest until the debriefing. She'd had a bath and felt refreshed but not relaxed. Daniel looked up at her as he went over his list of travel items he planned to request of Victor, and tilted his head with a curious smile.

“You're not worried about what they want, are you?”

“No,” she responded half absent-mindedly. She glanced distractedly at the doorway of the room Angel was in. “I trust Victor. They'll let us go, I'm sure. It's just a formality, I think.” She knew she was rambling, keeping her mind busy as her mouth moved. “Although I can't figure out why the Chair of the Circle will be there...”

Daniel knew what she wanted to do, what she needed to do. He gestured to the adjoining room with his chin and gave her a reassuring look.

Julie gave him a weak smile and peered around the doorjamb into the room where Angel was reading a book. She cleared her throat to indicate her presence and when Angel looked up, she said in a shy voice, “Hi.”

“Hi,” Angel replied and was about to return to the book when Julie entered the room and sat down next to her.

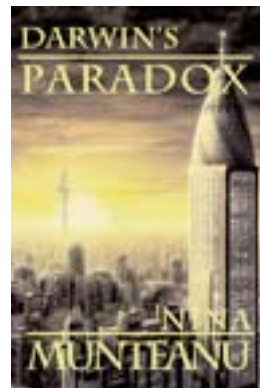
Julie offered a small smile, trying for humor to cut the thick tension that hung between them. “So, what's this I hear about SAM looking like Manfred?”

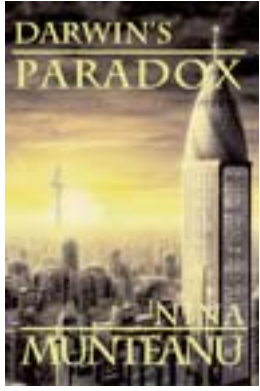
Angel smiled with some embarrassment. “Yeah, he liked having a body. In fact, he seemed sad that you never gave him one.” Then she eyed Julie with a challenging look of inquiry. “How come you never visualized an avatar for SAM if he was your friend —”

“Best friend,” Julie corrected, responding to the sharp tone of Angel's question with her own sharpness. After a pause, she exhaled and said in a softer voice, “I didn't feel a need to visualize SAM. He lived in my heart,” she tapped her chest for emphasis. “He was so much like just another part of me, of my soul. It was like talking to myself.”

“Except SAM's masculine,” Angel pointed out in that cool challenging voice, “and you're not a man, so it couldn't be like talking to yourself.”

“I suppose you're right,” Julie conceded. “So, perhaps...” she trailed,





letting the next words linger in her mind in silence. Like so many things back then, keeping SAM from materializing seemed the safest thing to do. Too late, she'd learned that what she thought was safe spelled disaster for her in the long run. Which brought her to the difficult subject she wanted to broach with Angel. She bent her head slightly and formulated her next words carefully. When she looked up into Angel's cool eyes, she began in a voice that was hollow with remorse, "Listen, Angel. I'm not going to even try to ask your forgiveness and understanding for what I did twelve years ago. It was..." her voice stumbled, "...my darkest moment."

"Mom, I know," Angel said in a surprisingly soothing voice as she reached out to touch Julie's shoulder. Her eyes had suddenly warmed and Julie thought she finally recognized her little girl inside. "The creep put your uncle in the Pol Station, where he died," Angel went on. "Then he scoffed at you. He was so mean to you."

"It doesn't excuse my violence," Julie said. "I responded to violence with more violence. It's not the answer." In that first act of violence, she'd set in motion a career of violence, right up to her recent killing of that Vee-radiator in the heath, Julie thought mournfully. It was the butterfly effect — the strange notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in Peking could set off a tornado in Texas. Her father's creative-destruction theories of stable chaos seemed to haunt her at every turn.

Then she didn't know how they got that way but she was crying in her daughter's arms. They were both crying, Angel stroking her hair to comfort her. She was suddenly struck by an incongruent thought: how tall Angel had become!

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"Come in, come in," Victor said nervously as he drew the door open further for Julie, Angel and Daniel to enter his office-suite in the Admin-Center. He motioned for them to take a seat on one of his couches. Daniel's still-cautious gaze swept the room, noting that several people were already there, most of whom he recognized. Carl looked serious, almost distracted, and barely met his eyes. Manfred smiled at Daniel but saved his brightest smile for Angel. Aileen Rourke, looking impeccable in her official Circle robes, nodded in greeting. Tyers leaned against the wall, looking enigmatic, as usual.

Victor pointed with his open hand to the two strangers standing next to Tyers, a bearded young man with large eyes and an attractive woman with a calm face, a female counterpart to Tyers. Neither smiled. The man let his gaze meet Daniel's briefly before looking away. The woman grazed him with a fleeting but penetrating look before resting sharp eyes on Julie.

"This is Dr. Joshua Cole, Head Researcher, and Dr. Kristin Olafsen, Supervisor, of the Department of Progenesis," Victor said.

Daniel felt Julie stiffen next to him, but she didn't let her emotions

reach her face. He knew that long ago she'd dreaded the DP, fearing that she would end up there as one of their subjects. It was a justified fear, Daniel thought, and wasn't surprised to see that she still felt that way. Was she rethinking her assumptions about the purpose of this meeting? He knew he was starting to.

"Hello," Daniel and Julie responded in near unison to the two strangers who nodded gravely.

"You know everyone else here," Victor continued, hands sweeping the room. "The Head Pol couldn't make it, but Tyers is here in his place. I trust you're comfortable and refreshed and ready to go home?" he asked politely.

"Yes, thanks," Daniel answered for the family as the three of them settled into the couch, Angel snug in the middle. Julie wrapped her arm around Angel like she never intended to let go of her daughter. Perhaps she didn't, Daniel pondered. Since they'd reunited, Julie hadn't let Angel out of her sight, except to go to the bathroom. He also thought that the two DP people might have rattled her a little. Was she afraid they might try to take Angel? He reached behind Angel to give Julie a reassuring touch with his hand and their eyes met briefly. Her expression was hard to read.

Victor cleared his throat. "We — Icaria-5," then with a glance at Aileen, "all of Icaria, owe the three of you so much. Daniel, thanks to your information on the Vee-radicators and on Dykstra particularly. Tyer's men have already reported considerable success in shutting down their major operations and a quite a few of their hidey-holes." Victor nodded to Tyers who gave them a brief, curt smile. Victor went on, "With Dykstra incarcerated, Washington recovering in the Pol Station infirmary and the rest of their disparate group scattered and on the run, I don't think they'll bother you again."

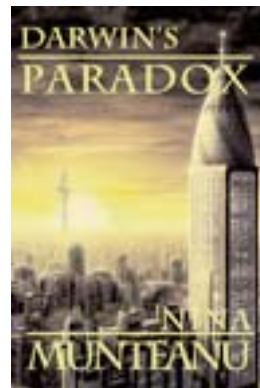
Julie firmed her lips into an appreciative smile. Although her face showed none of it, Daniel knew she still harbored some suspicion, particularly with the two DP researchers here.

"Angel, you and Manfred revealed Gaia's conspiracy and helped us put her away. I also owe you a special thanks, Angel, for clearing my name."

"My pleasure," she said cheerfully, "but Manfred was the mastermind in that."

Victor nodded. "We owe a lot to you, too, Manfred. However," he gave Angel a large smile. "I must commend Angel on her skill in mending our relationship with the A.I.-core. If you ever want a job in politics, give me a call." Then he looked at Julie again. Daniel noticed those intensely pale blue eyes deepen with tenderness. "I know you came to acquire concessions for your family, but you ended up helping Icaria instead. I want to give you my assurance, and the Circle's too," he glanced at Aileen and let his gaze flicker between Julie and Daniel, "that you're free to return to the heath. Your family will be left in peace, except for any assistance we can offer, of which I urge you to avail yourselves."

Daniel caught a nervous exchange of looks between Carl and Aileen.



With a terse look at the two DP people, Carl was about to interject but Aileen frowned slightly and shook her head at him. What did they know that they hadn't shared with Victor and weren't sharing now with Julie and Daniel? He noticed that Julie hadn't missed this exchange either and their eyes met briefly. She raised a brow slightly.

Victor continued. He favoured Julie with a deeply thankful expression. "Twelve years ago you gave me back my city with your information on Darwin and Dystopians. This time you gave me back my life." His voice had grown thick with emotion. In answer to Julie's puzzled expression, he added, "...with your friendship and your trust."

Julie said nothing but gave him a crooked smile. A silent message seemed to pass between them, and Daniel sensed that this pertained to some incident they'd shared during their sleuthing to re-instate the core.

Victor let himself be distracted by the holo screen behind him, which had just come to life. "Ah, this is the part that I want you to see," he said, looking very intense as he pointed to the large screen. A NewsVee program had just started.

"Twelve years ago Icaria's police force was chasing this young woman for murder and sedition," a strong male voice began to accompany the image of a younger Julie dressed in her bright red Com-Center outfit. The newscast then proceeded to correct the erroneous accusations against Julie, one at a time, bringing in Gaia's conspiratorial involvement, the tampering with vee-clips, and her and John Dykstra's part in the murder of the previous Head Pol. The newscast continued to follow Gaia's heinous actions backwards in time to her part in spreading Darwin and her cover up, which involved the murders of Vogel and Tsutsumi and framing Julie's father, Leonard Crane. The newscast eventually returned to the present.

"Besides these criminal actions, Gaia was also found responsible for the slandering of Mayor Victor Burke, who had been accused of fraudulent practices and arrested by the Pol Station. With Gaia now in custody and Burke cleared, the Circle has reinstated him as mayor of Icaria-5."

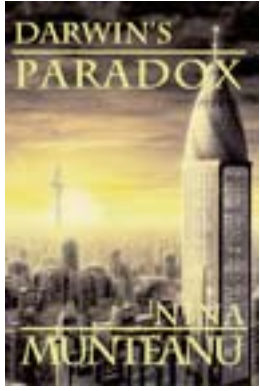
Victor switched the holo off and turned to the others. "What they won't be telling the public is that John Dykstra's son, Brian Dykstra, is being held in the Pol Station for collusion and murder and all the atrocious actions he is responsible for as the leader of the Vee-radicators."

"What about Frank Langor?" Julie asked. Daniel stole a glance at her, but her face betrayed nothing.

"Langor remains Head Pol for now, pending possible suspension from his duties." He didn't look straight at Julie.

Daniel felt his face flush with rising anger.

"He's on probation," Victor continued. "His tenure will be decided during a thorough official investigation, involving his peers, the Justi-Center and the Circle. I think the panel will exonerate him due to his ignorance of the situation and his subsequent actions to redeem the



situation. He was primarily following orders without knowledge of their seditious nature.”

Daniel's anger spiked. What about what he'd done to Julie, though? When she'd somewhat reluctantly confided to him about how Frank had violated her, Daniel had erupted into rage probably why she'd hesitated in telling him and wanted to smash Langor's face in. But — Julie had insisted he do nothing, not even speak of it again.

“But “ he started to protest and instantly felt Julie's stern look on him, warning him to silence. He sighed and shook his head. “Never mind.”

“There are, in fact, extenuating circumstances to consider in Gaia's case as well,” Carl said. Everyone turned to look at the normally quiet-spoken man, who'd purposefully drawn attention to himself with that contentious statement.

“What do you mean?” Victor frowned with obvious annoyance.

Carl drew himself up straighter, giving the DP people and Aileen a nervous glance and carefully avoiding Daniel's and Julie's eyes before choosing to address Victor. “I'm talking about her initiation and support of the research Zane's lab and mine have been conducting. She's solely responsible for our continued research into Darwin and Proteus. Certainly you recall, Victor, that once Darwin corrected itself and was perceived to no longer be a threat, the CDC was redirected toward research into Icaria's emerging problem: the growth of infertility in Icaria. All Darwin research was scrapped.”

Victor nodded, looking impatient. “Yes, of course I remember. I was the one who issued the instructions. Once Julie's old A.I., SAM, informed us of the gravity of this emerging problem through his new symbiont, Zane, I redirected CDC research toward that problem. The DP was already engaged in active research as far back as the seventies.” He glanced with a nod at the two DP people.

Kristin gave him a curt unsmiling nod.

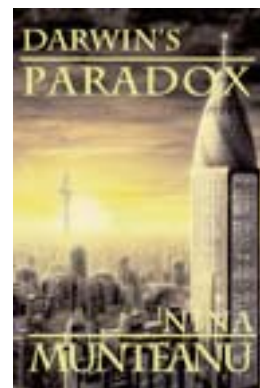
“Right,” Carl agreed. “When Gaia took on the mayor's position, one of the first things she did was hire Zane and me to research the current situation of Darwin, particularly in children who had the disease.”

“What's that got to do with extenuating circumstances?” Julie asked. Daniel thought he detected an almost imperceptible tone of irritation in her voice.

Carl turned to Julie and crossed his arms over his chest. “Everything, I'm afraid. But first we must go back in time.” He turned to Victor. “I'm sure you remember Gaia's brilliant but controversial talk about co-evolution during a Circle meeting twelve years ago?”

“Yes, of course I do,” Victor said sharply, furious thoughts pinching his face tight, as though it had happened only yesterday. “She made it all up, about Darwin having co-evolved over the centuries with veemelds, when she knew all along that it had been manufactured by Vogel.”

“Then she invoked your father's theory of creative-destruction,” Carl continued, glancing at Julie, “to explain the inevitable fall of Icaria, with



veemelds rising up like phoenixes out of the ashes.”

“But that wasn't true either,” Victor added with a scowl. “It was something Tsutsumi dreamed up and was just a ploy to get Circle members to convince their respective mayors to put veemelds into power — immune to Darwin's destruction and ideally suited to a virtual world.”

Carl said, “Yes, but didn't you wonder why Gaia's interest in veemelds never waned, even after she lost her vehicle of power through them, such as Darwin correcting itself?”

Victor tilted his head at Carl and looked quizzically at him. Daniel glanced at Julie and found her looking at him with an equally puzzled look.

“Well,” Victor proceeded slowly, “she was always interested in one particular veemeld.” He met Julie's eyes briefly with an apologetic smile then turned back to Carl. “I think her plan from the start was linked to controlling Proteus. She knew what Proteus was supposed to do. Once she saw the potential of controlling all Icarians by controlling Darwin through Julie or Angel, she went crazy with ideas. She brought Julie back certainly to shut down the core, but mostly she did it to provide a conduit to Proteus.”

Carl nodded, looking somewhat agitated. “Yes, of course that was her intention. That's why she set us up to do all this research. But while you were incarcerated in the Pol Station, Zane and I made some independent discoveries — discoveries that link our research on veemelds and Darwin to what the DP's been finding on infertility. I haven't usually agreed with a lot of the crazy ideas Zane's maverick lab comes up with but this time they're on to something. Gaia's lecture twelve years ago about co-evolution may yet apply —” He cut himself off and cocked his ear to hear a message on his ear-com. With a slight frown, Carl addressed everyone in the room. “I must excuse myself. An emergency calls — a patient.” Daniel figured he meant Zane. “I'm so sorry to disrupt the debriefing, Mayor Burke, Ms. Rourke. We'll have to continue this discussion later.” Aileen gave him a tight-lipped nod, like she understood and expected the circumstances surrounding the call.

“That's all right, Carl,” Victor said. “I'll just ask everyone to return to their assigned quarters and we'll reconvene the meeting when we're all available again.”

As Carl briskly left the room, leaving in his wake looks of confusion from everyone, Manfred shrugged at Angel's querying gaze.

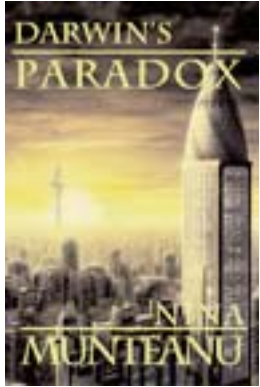
Julie rose abruptly and Daniel gave her a puzzled look.

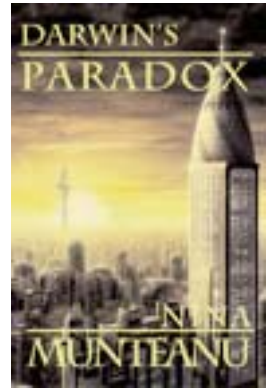
“Where are you going?”

“He just reminded me of someone I need to thank for saving my life,” Julie said, throwing a furtive glance at the DP researchers.

“I'll come with you,” Daniel said, taking Julie's hand. He understood who she meant; Zane. “I want to talk to Carl. That might be his patient.”

They slipped from the room as the remaining people talked amongst themselves.





**THERE** was no sign of Carl in his outer office. With a nod to her, Daniel let go of her hand and lingered, letting Julie continue into Zane's room. He understood her wish for some privacy and she smiled thankfully and was about to open the door to his room when Aileen glided into the outer office from the hall and greeted them.

Daniel and Julie responded with a greeting, then Julie stepped aside from Zane's door, thinking Aileen wished to enter.

"Actually, it's you I came to see," Aileen explained.

"Me?" Julie glanced at Daniel who, standing behind Aileen, shrugged back.

"Victor suggested that you might be heading this way to see Mr. Nakita, so I thought I'd catch you before you did."

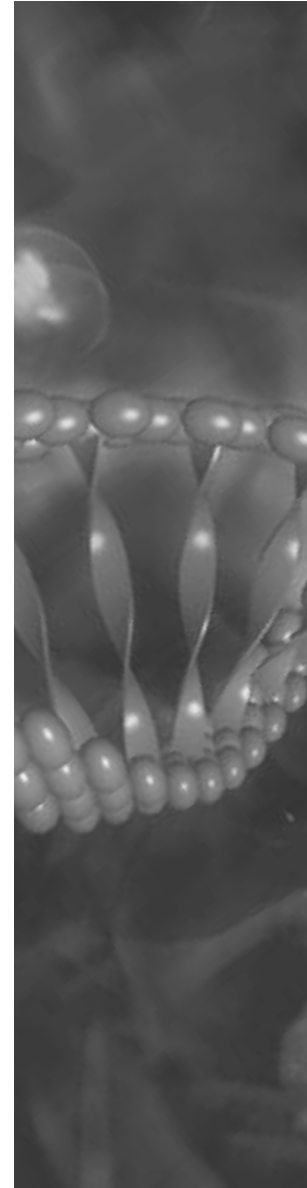
"And so you have," Julie said in a respectful if not relaxed voice. Daniel knew she was thinking of the two DP people and harboring suspicions of Aileen's motives. "What can I do for you?"

Daniel watched the elder woman clasp her elegant hands together. "Seems we have one less member in the Circle," she smiled sadly.

Julie mirrored her smile. "Yes." Gaia was now in the Pol Station awaiting trial. Daniel figured she was going to be there a long time. Julie exchanged a glance with Daniel again. She looked as puzzled as he was. Aileen hadn't answered her question.

"You're familiar with the Circle?" Aileen went on. "What we do and who we are?"

"A little." Julie tilted her head, thinking back. "Mostly from my database work with SAM. You're a governing body of ecologists



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who oversee the individual Icarian governments, mostly from a holistic, total-Earth perspective.”

Aileen nodded. “Yes, our principal motive is in the preservation of the planet's biodiversity and its varied ecosystems, Icarias included. We also recognize Icaria as an ecosystem worth preserving in its own right.” She'd raised an eyebrow pointedly and was now looking at Julie with an air of intense expectation. What did she expect, wondered Daniel. Judging from Julie's expression, he didn't think she knew either. When Julie failed to respond and just looked on with interest, Aileen continued, “You've faithfully embodied your father's theories with a fierceness and thoughtfulness that is uncommon.” To this Julie visibly stiffened. Aileen went on, still wearing a sanguine expression, as if not noticing, “And although his work is commendable, there are several in the Circle who do not agree with many of his suggestions.”

Daniel saw Julie rally herself. This time she was ready to speak. He watched her jaw working as she prepared for an argument and drew in a breath to speak. He felt the edge of panic grip him. The Circle ran Icaria and Aileen effectively ran the Circle. Don't blow it, Julie!

Before Julie had a chance to speak, though, Aileen continued, “I think we are now witnessing your father's model for civilizations within stable chaos theory realizing itself before our eyes. If we choose to interpret creative destruction of a civilization beyond the literal, then perhaps we're seeing an emerging paradigm for a civilization from an archaic form to one which is populated by veemelds, leading a Darwin-human race into a new era...perhaps a new species, capable of communication beyond our imagination.”

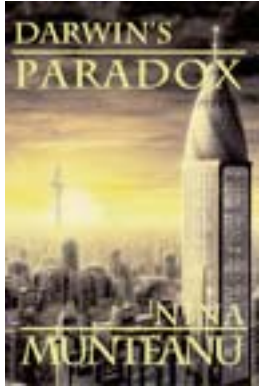
Daniel met Julie's eyes with a dazed smile. Then he raised a brow and tapped his chin. Taking his hint and realizing that her mouth gaped open, Julie closed it.

“It would be, I think,” Aileen went on with cheerful pleasantness, “a good thing for the Circle to have a member who is not only a good ecologist but one who challenges the current thoughts and is willing to stand by her beliefs in the face of adversity, even ridicule.”

Julie's mouth opened but no words came out. Julie's eyes widened as Aileen ended with, “I was thinking of you.”

“Me?” Julie practically squeaked. She was flabbergasted.

“Think about it, Julie. I know it's a big decision to make. You wouldn't have to remain here in Icaria to fulfill your duties as a Circle member, either,” Aileen hastily added with a glance at Daniel. “In any case, I won't keep you now. Think on it and let me know later. I'm sure Mr. Nakita is anxious to see you. We'll speak again, soon. Good bye.” Aileen offered her hand to Julie, who remembered to close her mouth and took her hand absently. Then Aileen turned and glided out of the room with the elegance of a great flying bird, a subtle hint of jasmine remaining in the room as a reminder she was there.





Daniel and Julie locked stares. Her face had flushed with surging emotions. He could easily guess what they were. Only yesterday she was still outcast by all of Icaria as the seditious murderer who'd caused the plague; now for Icaria to embrace her as a member of its elite Circle was overwhelming. Possibly too much for her to bear all at once. He thought she was going to burst into tears, but instead she gave him a silly grin and shrugged, suggesting a coolness she was obviously far from feeling, then she turned to enter the room.

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Zane was lying in a bed in a sterile room, empty except for the bed, a vee-com, a large holo and a bedside table well stocked with food and drink. He opened tired eyes and his face brightened with a smile when he saw her.

Still dizzy from Aileen's incredible offer, Julie sat on the bed next to Zane and took his hand in both of hers. She gave him a broad smile of appreciation. "You were foolishly brave," she said then added with a squeeze, "And I thank you for it."

"My pleasure," Zane responded with his usual toothpaste ad smile. "Couldn't let you take all the credit."

"Well, that's just the point. I wouldn't have. I'd have been dead."

"And that's my point," he returned, squeezing her hands back with his. "Without you Icaria would be dead."

Julie snorted and snatched her hand away. "What kind of foolishness is this now?" she laughed uneasily.

"Well, first, you reinstated the A.I. core —"

"After I shut it down!" she scoffed.

"But that allowed you to establish the critical connection between human, virus, and A.I. through your veemeld trance and by joining with Proteus."

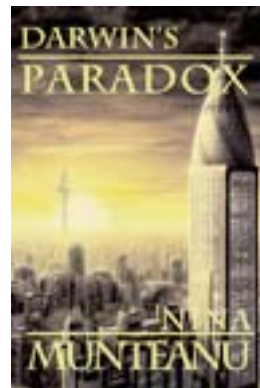
He'd used the word allow but he'd have been more accurate to have used the word forced. What he hadn't said was that the circumstance she'd put herself into had forced her into a kind of bravery she would never have plucked up on her own.

"Critical connection'?" she raised a brow.

"Critical to the next step in our evolution as a species and a planet, Julie."

She was about to laugh at his remark but stopped herself as he seriously studied her face with ferocious intensity. "Don't you understand?" Zane continued, his eyes flashing in challenge. "You're the only person on this planet who can speak directly to Proteus, to us, and to the machine intelligence. You're the vital link that will keep this world from coming apart and destroying itself."

Julie sighed. Zane was always doing that to her: reminding her what was at stake. And usually it was the whole world. But he was wrong this time, she thought. There was another person who could do what she did:



Angel. But Julie wasn't about to divulge that information. Thinking of Carl's cryptic words earlier, she shook her head at Zane and laughed sharply. "The vital link keeping this world from coming apart and destroying itself' is a bit too much hyperbole, even for you, Zane," she said, absently smoothing out his covers for him.

"Let me explain," he said gravely, pulling himself up with a grunt of pain. Had he done that just for her benefit? It was just the sort of thing Zane would do to gain her sympathy. He was making her feel very uncomfortable. "Gaia had it more right than we'd care to admit. The science, that is. She was just misapplying it, for her own personal ends."

Julie frowned at Zane. "What are you talking about?" Now she was really getting uncomfortable.

"Icaria is in big trouble, Julie. Has been for a while, and for the same reasons Gaia gave during her Circle speech twelve years ago. Our environmental conditions and our reliance on drugs and nano-foods have created a weakened gene pool. It's ironic that Gaia's warning about the potential destruction of Icaria is a reality, but it's not because of the virus. In fact Proteus and SAM identified the severity of the problem soon after you left Icaria."

"Infertility," Julie said.

Zane looked stunned for a moment then recovered. "So, you know already?"

"I got hints from various people," she said, thinking of what Frank had said during his initial failed seduction. "And Carl told us just moments ago."

"How much of the rest do you know then?"

"Nothing. Carl had to leave to see a patient. We thought it was you, but I guess it wasn't."

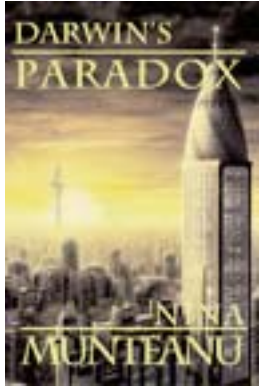
Zane shrugged. "Dr. Olafsen and Dr. Cole at the DP have been keeping track of it for years. They can evaluate an individual's tendency to be infertile by measuring his or her brain secretions, particularly those from the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland. Joshua found a decrease in potential fertility by over twenty percent in the last ten years. That's a chaos of a lot. Proteus and SAM pointed Joshua's people in the direction of the hypothalamus, which excretes gonadotropin-releasing hormones into the pituitary gland. You know the functions, of course."

"Yes," Julie replied. "GnRH promotes the development and maintenance of primary and secondary sexual characteristics and reproduction."

"Good enough," Zane said, waving a hand. "A number of orally consumed recreational drugs served as hormonal contraceptives."

Julie raised her brows with sudden fascination. "The same ones that caused problems with Proteus? The ones that made me sick and promoted Darwin in others?"

"Exactly! Combined with other nano-products, these drugs have formed a disastrous hormonal soup, spawning a bouillabaisse of endocrine disrupters and neurological disorders. Kids aren't developing



into fully functional reproductive adults and adults are losing their ability to conceive for a host of reasons but mainly from low estradiol in women and low sperm counts in men. The average male is reaching the critical count of less than forty million sperm per milliliter!”

Julie leaned forward, her brow creasing with concern. “What does that have to do with me?”

“I was getting to that,” he waved her down with an impatient look. “Thanks to Gaia, Carl and I have been doing experiments with the offspring of adults who contracted Darwin, and sharing our results with Kristin's group. Veemeld kids who got Darwin passed onto them from their Darwin mothers who were either veemelds or married to veemelds — it doesn't matter which parent was the veemeld — showed a strong tendency against infertility. In fact, they showed a tendency toward enhanced fertility. Darwin kids who weren't veemelds were hit and miss but statistically a little better than non-Darwin controls, both veemeld and non-veemeld. Carl's lab found that a kid's tendency for enhanced fertility is directly related to their unique communication with Proteus. But it's all intuitive, like for you when you were a child, through inarticulate communication.”

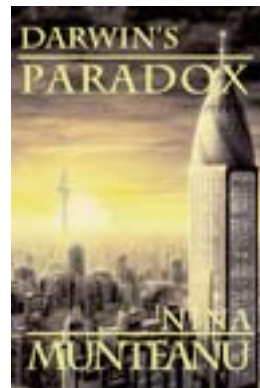
He pushed himself forward, forgetting to grunt with pain this time, and gave her a pointed stare. “Over fifty percent of our adult population now have Darwin and could potentially communicate with the virus. But they don't. Not because they can't, we think, but because they haven't trained their minds to do so.” His eyes flashed with that same intensity she'd seen in him at the lab when he'd discovered her ability to build new neurons through continuous REM. “If somehow we can teach them to communicate with Darwin by first teaching the kids to consciously do what they now subconsciously do, then we may save our population and Icaria.”

They stared at each other in silence for several moments as Julie digested the implications of what he'd said. She matched his intense look. “You want me to stay in Icaria and teach them to do what I do.” She suddenly wondered if Aileen knew he was going to spring this on her.

He gave her a manic grin. “We think it's the only way, Julie, and you're the only one to do it. You're the only one who can save Humanity.”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. Leave it to Zane to remind her of the scope of her actions, and always with little or no regard for her personal feelings. He was such a scientist. She'd only gotten her family safe and together and Icaria wanted her to stay behind. She'd already calculated all the options and knew Daniel would refuse to stay in Icaria. “Who's we?” she asked wearily.

“Why, everyone!” Zane exclaimed. “Except for the mayor who's been out of the picture for a while. I mean the CDC, the DP and The Circle. Carl and Aileen are meeting with the mayor to give him the arguments, then he's supposed to speak with you.” He glanced at the open doorway, where Carl had just entered and was talking quietly with Daniel. He and



Daniel looked briefly at Julie and Zane then walked out of her range of vision. She got the distinct impression they were having a similar discussion to the one she was having with Zane. What was Daniel going to think about leaving her behind? And for how long? He wasn't going to like it. She didn't like it. He'd have a stroke over it.

She was only dimly aware that Zane was still talking to her and returned her attention to him. “. . . start with the kids. They're already advanced. Only they don't have the discipline.”

“How many are there? Kids who hear Darwin, I mean?”

“Carl estimates about a hundred veemeld kids who have Darwin. He assumes they all hear Proteus. It's Proteus, by the way, not Darwin they hear,” he corrected Julie. “As Darwin, or Pro-1, Proteus is inarticulate. To my knowledge, no Darwin victim ever heard Proteus; but their offspring, who got a different form of Proteus — Pro-2 — from their mom's egg, could hear the insect noises.”

“What about Darwin — I mean Proteus kids who aren't veemelds?” Julie insisted. “Surely you should be aiming your efforts their way, seeing that they make up a much larger part of the population than veemelds do.”

“Like I said before, it's hit and miss. Carl found with those he tested that only twenty percent of non-veemeld Darwin kids could hear Proteus.”

“Does that mean that the other eighty percent are incapable of communicating with Proteus or that they just haven't figured out how?”

Zane shrugged. “That's the question, isn't it? We can't tell. That's something we hope to find out, with your help. My feeling is it's the latter.”

“Why?”

“Just a hunch.”

“I hope for the sake of Icaria that you're right, Zane.”

“I do, too.”

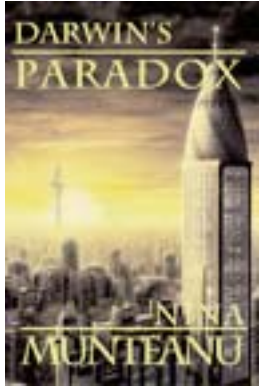
Julie nodded and her eye caught Daniel leaving the outer office. “I'll think about it,” she said hastily. “Right now I have a very important question to ask someone else,” she said. She gave Zane a brief hug, to which he squeaked in pain, then turned and pelted out of the room after Daniel.

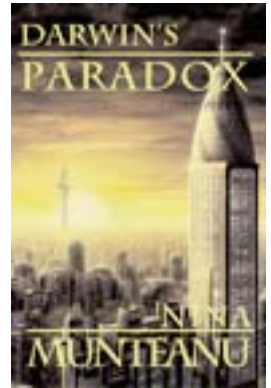
She heard Zane calling after her, “You'll do it, won't you, Julie? For Icaria?”

When she caught up to Daniel, Julie tilted her head and gazed at him rather coyly. “Did you really mean what you said to me when I was in the trance?”

He looked mildly affronted that she even needed to ask the question. “Of course I did,” he said. He didn't seem otherwise irritated with her or agitated. Perhaps he and Carl hadn't been discussing her remaining behind, after all. Daniel hitched up an eyebrow and smiled out of the corner of his mouth. “So, will you?”

She grinned, showing all her teeth. “Yes, I will.” She recalled the words that had pulled her out of her dark coma: “You're everything to me, Julie, my love. Marry me again.”





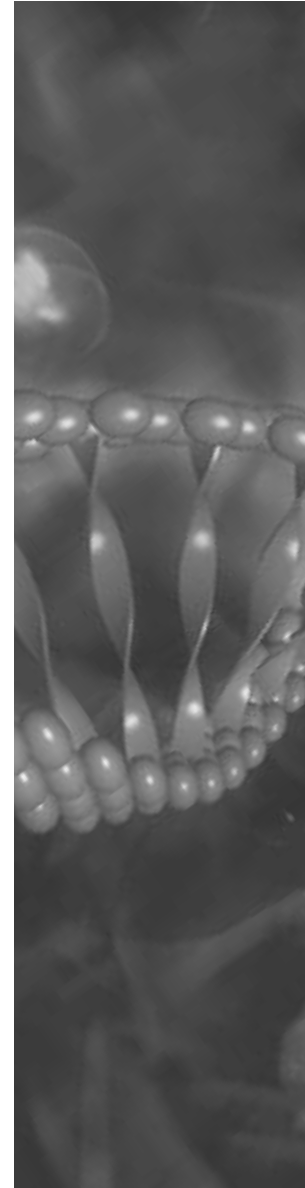
ANGEL didn't know whether to laugh, cry, fidget or stay still. Her nervous joy had spilled out of her in beads of sweat and nervous giggling prior to the ceremony's start, until Manfred teased her, "It's just your parents. I'd hate to think what you'll do when it's your turn up there." She'd blushed fiercely and had to turn away from his smirking face.

Now, sitting here next to Manfred, watching her parents legally affirm their vows, was taking her breath away. She sensed her mother's joy surging through her like electricity and lighting her face with a beautiful, ethereal glow. Her father looked so proud and handsome.

Earlier, Daniel had managed to wink and give Angel a nervous smile as he waited for Julie to appear at the back of the room. When she did, arm hooked through Victor's, his gaze drifted from Angel and glued to his spouse and he seemed to drift into a reverent dream. Angel turned and stared at her mother. She looked so beautiful! The cream-coloured gown she wore emphasized her athletically slim but shapely figure, firmly framed in a tight bodice that was tastefully revealing but not too low-cut, with scalloped short sleeves and a skirt that flowed out to the floor like diaphanous petals of a flower.

Her mother glowed with a happiness that Angel couldn't remember seeing in her before, Julie's open-mouthed smile beaming with enough wattage to light up all of Icaria as she met Daniel's eyes with her own sparkling emeralds. She seemed to glide down the aisle using an energy source created all on her own.

Victor, on the other hand, Angel noted,



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shuffled nervously beside her mother, his face taut with serious concentration and intent not to make a wrong move. Angel was sure she detected a look of swelling pride in his tight face though.

As she passed Angel, Julie turned her head and gave her daughter a crooked smile. Angel swallowed with pride and joy and almost burst into tears. Too nervous to look anywhere else, Victor looked straight ahead. With a visible sigh, he relinquished Julie to Daniel at the altar and found a seat next to Angel and Manfred and Carl. Angel patted his shaking hand and gave him a big smile when he glanced down at her. His deed done, Victor could now relax and a great smile finally surfaced on his lined face. Angel liked him — he reminded her of Aard: tough on the outside and tender on the inside.

The Justice of the Peace, an older man with light blue hair slicked back and a long pointy hawk-nose but warm, kind eyes, had reached the vows: “Do you, Julie Crane, accept this man as your lawful husband?”

Eyes locked unblinking on Daniel's, Julie said, “I do.”

“And do you, Daniel Woods, accept this woman as your lawful wife?”
“I do.”

“You may exchange rings,” the J.P. instructed them.

Angel saw her father's hand shake as he tried to put the ring on her mother's finger. Julie had to help him and she stifled a nervous giggle. They looked so sweet together, as if they were getting married for the first time, Angel thought. “With this ring I promise to love you, cherish you and support you throughout my life,” Daniel said in a serious voice.

Julie repeated his words in a soft voice, which barely veiled her swelling emotions, as she slipped the other ring on Daniel's finger.

“By the power invested in me through the Justi-Center of Icaria-5, I pronounce you legally married.” The older man announced then nodded to them. “You may kiss.”

Daniel took Julie's hands in his and for a moment they simply grinned at one another. Were they thinking of their initial vows in the wild heath, wondered Angel. Then Daniel took Julie's face in trembling hands and whispered something to her that only Angel could hear: “This is for keeps, my angel. You can't run away anymore.”

“Okay,” she whispered back.

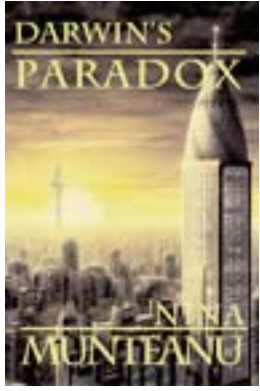
Daniel gave her a look of challenge and Julie returned him a lopsided smile. “Trust me,” she said.

He grinned at her words, then he kissed her gently on the lips. Julie closed her eyes and wrapped her bare arms around him. Then she promptly collapsed.

Stricken, Daniel seized her limp body before she fell to the floor.

“Mom!” Angel cried and rushed beside her father who'd kneeled down with her mother's prone figure in his arms. “What's the matter with her, Dad?”

“I don't know,” he said, echoing her shivering voice with a frail one.



“She just passed out.”

Victor, Carl, Manfred and Zane and others crowded in on them as Angel studied her mother's strangely peaceful face. “She looks asleep...” Angel trailed.

“Like the time she went into that ecstatic trance in the A.I.-core,” Victor finished for her.

Daniel threw a pointed glance at Victor then his gaze flickered to Carl. “Do you think...”

“You were kissing, and she did look pretty ecstatic,” Carl offered. “Let's get her to the Med-Center where she can be comfortable and I can examine her.”

Daniel hoisted her up in his arms and followed Carl, with Zane tagging behind.

“I'm coming with you!” Angel cried and scrambled behind her father.

Daniel glanced over his shoulder. “Of course you are, honey.”

Manfred fell into step beside Angel and gave her a weak, conciliatory smile. It looked lame but she appreciated it.

“What do you think is wrong with her?” she asked him as they followed Daniel, Carl and Victor to the Odum Mall Med-Center.

His attempt at a smile grew into a grimace and he shook his head, swallowing instead of speaking. Was he thinking of the mother he'd lost and never known? Was her mother dying? You're getting dramatic again, Angel, she'd have said. Angel shut out the dark thoughts that interfered with her ability to help. But that was just it there was nothing she could do, except watch and worry. She'd just gotten her mother back and didn't want to lose her again.

Manfred's comforting arm was suddenly around her shoulder as they followed along.

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Julie awoke in Daniel's arms well before they'd reached the Odum Med-Center. As he wove his way through the crowd in the mall, hardly noticing the curious faces around them, Daniel felt her stir in his arms. Still walking, he looked down to see her peering up into his eyes with a odd look on her face. “I know it's customary to carry your new wife across the threshold but it seems an awfully long threshold.”

He grinned and stopped, not noticing his party stopping with him. “You passed out during the best part.”

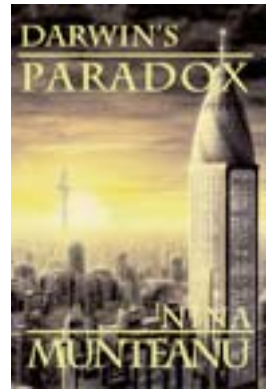
She looked genuinely distressed now. “You mean we aren't married?”

He chuckled and gently set her back on her feet, keeping his arms around her. “No, sweetheart. We're married all right.”

She tilted her head and gave him a crooked smile of inquiry.

“My kiss,” he explained. “You missed it. Our first kiss as a married couple.”

“Oh, that!” she said, her smile opening to a broad grin. “Well, we can



remedy that easily enough.” Folding her arms around his neck she kissed him full on the mouth in front of the whole mall crowd. Daniel stiffened briefly in surprise, thinking her action overly brazen, then threw his cautious ideas of decorum aside and enjoyed his second kiss as a legally married man.

Several people in the crowd cheered and clapped, recognizing that they were just married or perhaps even who the bride and groom were. Daniel felt her smiling through the kiss at the appreciative crowd.

When they pulled away from each other, Carl cleared his throat to get their attention. The others joined him in a circle. “I still think I should examine you, Julie,” Carl said, looking serious. “You did pass out for no obvious reason.”

“I agree,” Daniel said quickly, sensing her resistance to the idea. Julie glanced from him to Carl and then to Angel and Manfred behind them.

“I’m alright,” she said. “I feel fine. Really,” she insisted, rather defensively, he thought. “I came out of it on my own.”

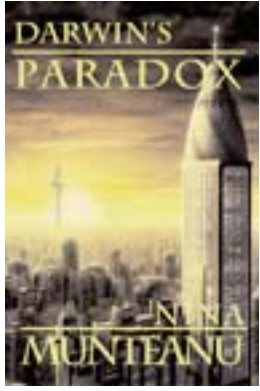
“This time,” Daniel pointed out. “You’ve been tired lately. Don’t think I haven’t caught you yawning in the middle of the day and grabbing for a chair.”

“Look,” she began sharply then gave him a conciliatory smile, “I’ll submit to a physical tomorrow after we figure out what to do about these kids and Proteus. Whether I stay behind for a while.”

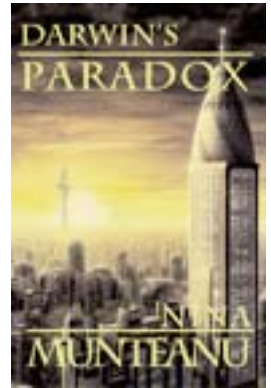
“You mean when you decide you’re going to stay,” he said somberly.

Julie’s eyes flashed with mixed emotions. She threw a swift glance at their daughter, who watched with interest, and firmed her jaw. She said in a hushed voice, “That’s a decision we — you and I — will make later. Right now,” she grinned, all teeth, “we have a marriage to consummate.”

Love is a canvas furnished by Nature and embroidered by  
imagination—Voltaire





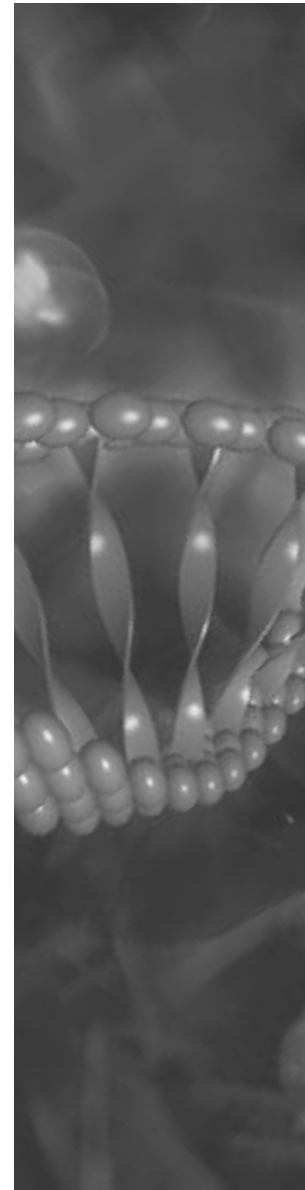


**DANIEL** joined Julie on the couch with two fruit drinks he'd brought from the kitchen of their luxurious suite. The suite was located on the top floor and resembled Julie's old one, with extensive skylights, indoor plants, and comfortable but elegant furniture. It even had an aquarium with goldfish like her old one. Victor had given them the private suite to celebrate their wedding night in privacy.

Julie, dressed only in a bathrobe, reclined on the couch with her bare feet stretched out, ankles crossed, in front of her. She hadn't bothered to comb her hair and it tumbled in damp waves behind her like a turbulent brook. Her face still glowed from the recent consummation of their marriage. They'd showered together afterward and while she was still drying herself, Daniel had made the drinks in the kitchen.

Julie reached for her glass as Daniel sat down beside her and gave him a loving smile. As he gazed at her beautiful face an incredible sadness washed over him like a tidal surge and he choked on his sip of his drink. Julie nuzzled up next to him and was about to lean her head against his shoulder, when he blurted out, "You know I can't stay." He'd turned to look at the lit aquarium but watched her through the corner of his eye.

He felt her stiffen and she edged her body away from him as she too now focused on the aquarium, glass poised in her hand. Lips tight and eyes expressionless, Julie reflected his grave face with a stony look. He knew it capped a well of emotion that threatened to erupt. They'd not yet discussed her staying behind, even though



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both were thinking of it and he knew she'd already made her decision, despite her insistence that they would decide together.

"I know Angel wouldn't mind staying," he went on. "She's quite enamored with Icaria's glitter and all the people. But I just don't belong here, Julie. I'd get bitter..." he trailed. Their eyes met and they shared a mutual pain.

"Oh, Daniel," she whispered, her eyes gazing into his in a kind of sad embrace. "I know I can't ask you to stay with me. But I do have to stay to finish what I started, when my father —" she swallowed, choking down what she couldn't say. She took a couple breaths, then she continued in a more controlled voice, "This was my home, once yours too I owe them..."

"Owe them?!" Daniel scoffed. "Julie, they wanted to kill you, remember? They slandered your whole family, then killed them all off! You were teased and hated all our life as a veemeld; the government used you, even this time, then they screwed you over."

"Just Gaia and the Head Pol"

"And the entire Pol force and the Vee-radicators and the scientists —"

"They're still my people," she said quietly. "Icarians."

Daniel leaned back with a long exhale. Ironic, he thought, how she who'd always been fiercely independent, basically a loner from when he'd known her, felt so connected to this place and its people. He knew then that he couldn't argue with her, that this was about much more than he could fathom. It was a biological, visceral thing for her. Icaria lived inside of her. She needed *needed* to stay and do this for Icaria...like the Monarch butterflies returning north to the warmth of home after a long winter away.

"I know you understand," Julie went on. "I also understand that you have to go back and take Angel with you to the heath. That's...home now." The last words came out strangled.

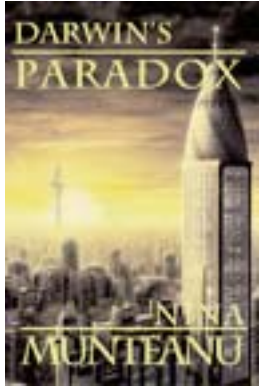
She'd called the heath 'home'. Yes, it was his home. Was it still hers?

She turned to stare absently at the fish in the aquarium again. "I just don't know how long they'll need me. How long it'll take. Weeks, months...years." She looked back at him with hope in her eyes. "We can visit each other in the meantime, can't we?"

Daniel heaved a sigh. This was torturing her. Julie had practically clung to Angel since they'd been reunited, hardly letting her out of her sight and taking advantage of every opportunity to be with her, to touch her, hug her, and kiss her. As much as he knew she'd miss him, it was separating herself from Angel that would devastate her. Was she afraid she'd miss some momentous milestone in her young daughter's development into a young woman? Was she simply worried about being a bad mother or being left out?

"Maybe Angel should stay here with you," Daniel offered. "Here she'd have some formal education. It might do her some good."

She stared at him for several seconds. "No," she said rather sharply



with a forward jerk that almost spilled her drink. He wondered what fear had prompted that response. Meeting his inquiring gaze head-on, her face softened into sadness and she clasped his free hand. “You're so sweet, Daniel. I know you're thinking of me. But she belongs in the heath with you. It's not that I don't trust the people here. Victor is a just mayor and Aileen runs the Circle with practical wisdom. I'd be worried that Angel would get so caught up in all this,” she threw her gaze around the room to indicate Icaria's dazzle, “that she wouldn't want to return to the heath when the time came.”

Daniel laughed sharply. Julie winced and let go of his hand. To her expression of exasperated bewilderment, he explained, “You're the one I'm worried about when it comes to that.”

She gave him a lopsided smile and nudged him with her shoulder. “You still don't trust me...”

“And you still don't trust Angel.”

“Should I?”

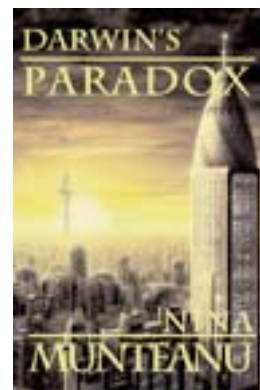
He remained silent, eyes drifting again to the fish.

“You shouldn't be out there all by yourself, Daniel,” Julie went on. “The two of you can look after each other until...” her voice caught and she swallowed hard. “...Just remember to visit me on our birthdays, okay?”

Daniel squeezed her back. “I'll do better than that.” He suddenly smiled to her plaintive look and after draining his glass in a swift gulp he pulled her sash and her robe spilled open, revealing her splendid body. He drew in a long appreciative breath and leaned forward to stroke her face and neck with his hands. Then he let his hands glide down her shoulders, sliding her robe off her. She responded with a pleased laugh and had his robe off within a heartbeat.

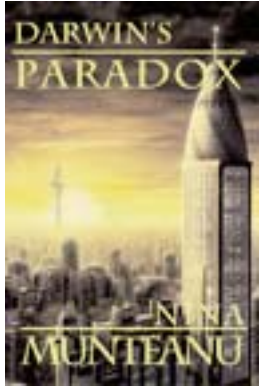
They stared at one another in silence and he realized she had more to say. When she spoke he saw the pain she was trying to hide in her face, “You don't have to worry about me not coming back to the heath,” she said in a voice that warbled with emotion. “My longing for Icaria was based on a fantasy — old memories — but mostly an overwhelming biological call from a virus wishing to join with me. Now that I've done that, I'm left with the fantasy.” She sighed. “I've changed. This isn't home for me anymore, Daniel. We've made our home out there, in the heath.” Her eyes looked deep inside him to where his heart trembled for her. “And while I'm here, living in this sterile indoor environment, I'll be missing the things I've come to love out there: the scorching heat of the sun baking down on my back, the sweet music of the birds, the smell of the earth after a rainstorm, even the howling of the biting winter wind...but mostly I'll miss your beautiful smile, your wonderful smell and your arms curled around me...home is where our family is.”

Like a candle to a moth, the liquid fire in her eyes drew him forward and he buried his head between her breasts, the way he'd done the very first time they'd ever touched and kissed. The heady scent of her body



*DARWIN'S PARADOX*

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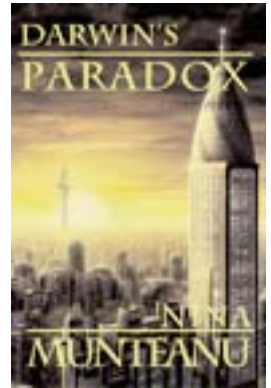
enveloped him as she wrapped her arms around him to comfort him, like that first time. In that moment, as he realized how she really felt about the heath and about him, he discovered that she'd never left him, and he could never lose her. They could be parted for years and still be together, two souls beating as one heart. Overwhelmed, he raised his head to look into her eyes. They shone like precious jewels and he saw her face pucker with painful yearning and sadness. The sadness of a lonely child who needed to be strong, as only she could have been and still was.

Don't cry, he wanted to say, I'll always be with you in your heart!

Her brows furrowed with a deep longing and her lips closed fiercely over his as if to capture his essence. He pulled her with him, reclining so that she lay upon him. Then, with all the tenderness of a first romance, he gave her the gift of his unending love.

What else, when chaos draws all forces inward to shape a single leaf  
—Conrad Aiken

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**ZANE**, his left arm still in a sling, pointed out details on a comp-generated animation of the lifecycle of the Proteus virus on a holo-screen with the cursor. Julie and Carl stood facing him in Carl's lab at the Odum Mall Med-Center. Carl and Zane were debriefing Julie in advance of their first class with fifteen Darwin children.

“So, Vogel made Proteus to interact symbiotically with a human and the A.I.s of the city,” Zane lectured her happily. “His intention always was to create a new species.”

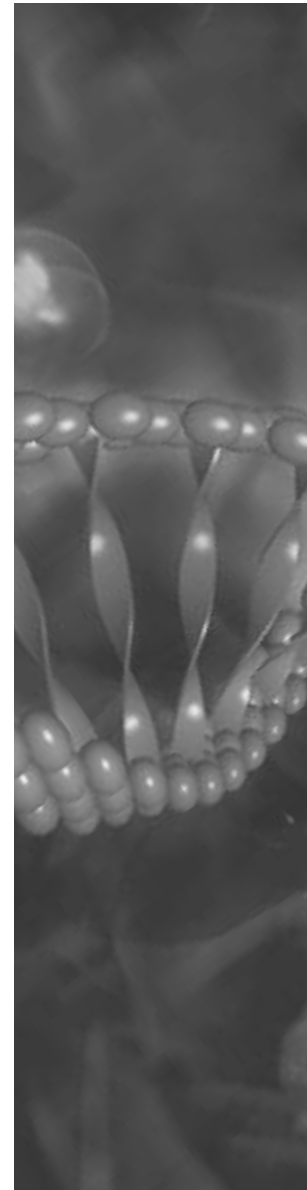
Julie nodded solemnly.

“This new species was meant to be proficient and highly capable of interacting and flourishing among its viral-human-machine parts. A super-being, so to speak, capable of incredible machine speed and logic, possessing human intuition, problem-solving capabilities, a spiritual conscience and the ability to correct itself, to evolve and change rapidly in incremental ways through its viral counterpart. Imagine,” he sighed with an expression of awe. “Imagine getting sick. The virus would pick it up, diagnose it using your A.I., and then help you fix it. An efficient self-regulating, self-correcting autopoietic system.”

Carl said, “The irony is, with this symbiotic relationship, we wouldn't need a lot of those very drugs that are causing the infertility problems in the first place.”

Zane nodded vigorously. “This is Vogel's gift to us: Our future. The future of humankind. Basically..you, Julie,” he ended smugly. There was that annoying manic grin again, Julie thought.

“The virus,” Zane continued, “immediately opened a door for you to the A.I. world hence



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the machine voices in your head. Proteus was created to learn and had only rudimentary communication skills in the beginning — the insect sounds you heard along with the A.I. machines.”

Zane flicked his control and the holo showed the two pathways of communication. “As the virus learned through its interaction with you and the A.I.s — mainly SAM — it was able to communicate directly with you. But you weren't receptive except during REM sleep, dreamtime.” He flicked his control and another image added to the first, showing the sleep equation in Proteus communication. “But in veemeld, mediated by SAM once you were back within its range, you could talk to Proteus while you were awake. It was only when you 'joined', which we interpret as you fully and consciously opening yourself to the virus, that you freed up the 'channels' of complete communication.” The holo demonstrated this pathway, via the hippocampus and secondary sectors of the brain. “Your whole body is a symphony of rhythms and Proteus is a viral Mozart a genetic genius.”

Julie ignored Zane's usual hyperbole and considered the essence of what he said with a thoughtful nod. “So how far do you expect these kids to go? Only some of them are veemelds like me. The pathway you've shown there doesn't account for non-veemelds.”

“That's right,” Carl added. “But we only really need them to understand what they're already doing, if they hear Proteus's non-verbal communication the first level of communication shown on the holo. That's sufficient for their bodies to counteract the nano-drugs and other effects of Icaria's environment. The rest what you and Angel can do with them is simply a bonus.”

“Okay,” Julie said, folding her arms across her chest. “But —”

“So, the question is,” Carl went on, anticipating Julie's challenge, “whether, by making them open to Proteus, we can encourage that 80% of non-veemelds to hear Proteus too. It's a gamble but we've got to try. If we're successful with these children, we and they can teach the adults.”

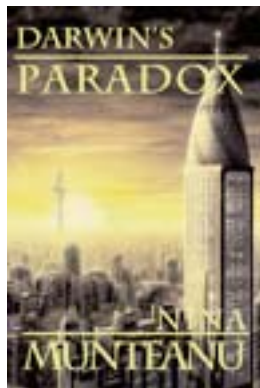
“I see,” Julie nodded.

“But first things first,” Zane interjected. “The children are our future, after all. If we're successful with them, we save Icaria, otherwise...*poof!*” He slapped his hands together to emphasize his point and gave Julie one of his best toothpaste-ad grins. Same old Zane, she thought, with his flare for the dramatic.

Perhaps more to deflate his drama than out of practical logic, she challenged, “You do have other means to propagate, though? The DP's been doing it for years.”

Carl shook his head. “That's not practical and certainly not viable in the long term. It's giving up on what we are as a species. If we accept that we have to rely on artificial means to reproduce our kind, we're accepting our own extinction.”

“Besides,” Zane added, “the DP's also demonstrated that good old



fashioned sex between a man and a woman is the very best way of maintaining a healthy and diverse gene pool through natural random selection.”

“Julie, we think that what you do to free-veemeld — veemelding without using Interact-SYM — may be a good place to start these kids into consciously mapping what they intuitively do to hear Proteus,” Carl went on. “The brain pathways appear to converge and it may apply equally to non-veemelds.”

“Okay,” Julie said, straightening with resolve. “I know what to do. I’m ready.”

“Good,” Carl said, nodding to Zane, who went to the door and called the children in. Carl leaned over to Julie. “Half of them are non-veemelds but they all carry Proteus. Some of the non-veemelds don’t hear Proteus yet, so we have a good mix.”

Julie fixed her attention on the children entering the room. They looked to range in age from about seven to late teens, she guessed. The group included Angel, of course, as well as Manfred and some of his friends. She smiled warmly to all of them as they entered and found seats.

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“Thanks for inviting me to watch,” Daniel said to Victor, seated beside him in the observation booth, hidden behind a one-way mirror. They watched Julie, Carl and Zane discuss veemelding and Darwin with about a dozen young hopes for the future of mankind.

“Welcome,” Carl said to the children. “This is Julie Crane,” he indicated Julie with a wave of his hand. “As you’ve been told, Julie is the original recipient of Proteus and can not only hear the chirps that some of you can, but she can converse with Proteus and she can free-veemeld. Free-veemelding — that’s veemelding without requiring Interact-SYM.”

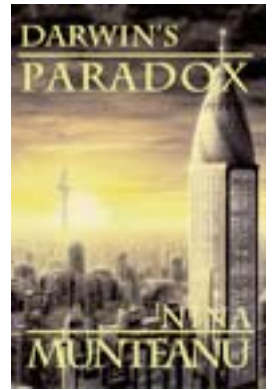
Daniel noticed several of the children exchanging looks of impressed amazement.

“Over the next few months,” Carl went on, “Julie is going to show you how she does all that and hopefully some of you will learn to do it yourselves. Going into free-veemeld is the first step to communicating meaningfully with Proteus.” He glanced at Julie for reassurance, because he wasn’t speaking out of experience.

“That’s right, Carl,” she affirmed, taking his pause as a cue to speak. “Going into free-veemeld is like entering a daydream or a conscious trance. I’d like you all to attempt these exercises, whether you’re a veemeld or not and whether you can hear Proteus or not, because the intention here is to be able to hear Proteus and understand how you do it and there’s no reason that we know of why you all can’t.”

“Is it like meditating?”

Julie turned to a tall gangly boy with flaming red hair. “That’s right, Nicholas. You have to learn to relax. That’s the first step.”



“Before we go too far, I'd like us to check these kids for what they already hear from Proteus,” Carl said. Using a sound generator, he asked each child to define as best he or she could what the “insect” noises sounded like in frequency and loudness. Julie watched with interest.

Victor leaned toward Daniel to speak in low tones, despite the fact that it was impossible for them to be heard by those in the next room. “Thanks for accepting my invitation. Inviting you here was the least I could do, considering what you're sacrificing. Don't think we take what you are doing lightly. I heard that you and Angel won't be staying.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said, the pain of losing Julie again returning like an old man's ache. After a long swallow, he glanced at the thoughtful man beside him and offered, “Thanks for taking care of her when she came back.”

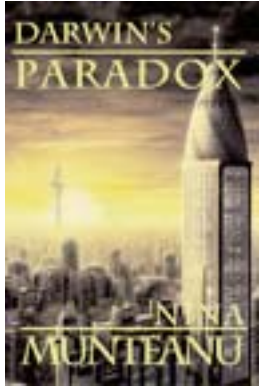
Victor's face tightened with an involuntary expression of pain. “Though not as well as I'd wished, I'm afraid,” he responded in a strange voice, training his eyes on Julie. Daniel suspected he was alluding to his inability to prevent what the Head Pol had done. Daniel could have felt infuriated, and did so for a while, but somehow he'd managed to distance himself from thoughts of retribution. Julie had made it clear that it was a matter between her and Langor and it had really been up to her whether he was punished or not. Whatever she decided, Daniel respected, and she'd decided to let him go. Victor continued, “As for thanks, it's Icaria who owes you thanks, Daniel — thanks for taking care of Julie for all these years out in the heath.”

Daniel snorted laughter. “She takes good enough care of herself, I think, without needing me too much.” Then he smiled politely. “But I know what you mean, Victor. Really. I understand that one man's claim on Julie Crane is nothing compared to Icaria's claim on the beautiful creature it spawned. I've always recognized deep down that I've only had her on loan.”

Unable to meet Daniel's raw, honest gaze, Victor looked everywhere else and his hands flickered to his face in nervous twitches. “I didn't mean it that way —”

Daniel laughed softly. “I didn't either, Victor. What I really meant to say,” he went on in a sighing voice, “was that Julie Crane belongs to no one. Not me and certainly not Icaria.” They both looked back through the looking glass, back to his wife, who listened intently to the instructions Carl was giving the children. When Daniel continued it was in a voice of reverence, “Like the fertile land, the rain, the trees, our lakes and rivers. We lay claim over them and we use them, but they really don't belong to us. Despite the elaborate wedding ceremony and our vows of commitment, she isn't mine to give away or to keep.”

Daniel found Victor staring at him. As Daniel looked back into those pale blue eyes filled with sad acceptance, he suddenly understood that Victor had come to that very conclusion twelve years ago when he'd given Julie her freedom and let her 'escape' Icaria-5 into the wilderness of



the heath. Even Aard's role had been that of protector and supplier. Daniel intuitively recognized that the secrecy of Aard's mission was driven more by courtesy and the wish not to intrude on a way of life than out of any malice or manipulative intent.

Then Victor turned back to the window and Daniel saw why Julie was explaining to the children about how she engaged in veemeld with SAM. “Do any of you have a girlfriend or boyfriend?” she asked them, looking into each of their faces. Daniel thought he saw Angel's face blush and Manfred look at the floor.

Most shook their heads to her question but the red-haired boy admitted that he liked a girl. Julie smiled at him. “Brave of you to say so, Nicholas. I suspect the rest of you have at least had a silent crush on someone at some time.” She didn't look at either Manfred, or at Angel, who was trying to control her heating face. Julie continued. “If not, you can think of your parent or sibling or a special place that gives you great joy and peace. Now, hold onto those thoughts. Going into free-veemeld without Interact-SYM requires harnessing a quantum energy frequency and manipulating it in your brain into what it needs to interpret. Sound complicated?”

All the children agreed with nervous laughs. She laughed with them.

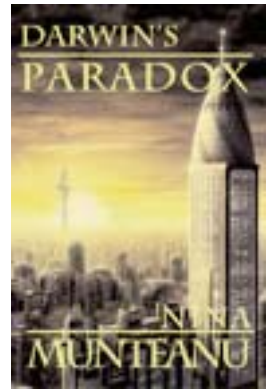
“Don't worry,” she said with a grin. “It might sound complicated but it's more an intuitive phenomenon.” Julie focused again on Nicholas. “I want each of you to think of your special friend or person or place and imagine that you're in that place or that person is standing here where I'm standing,” she instructed. “Like a vivid daydream, imagine them here,” she tapped her chest. Then Julie glanced right at Daniel and Victor with a faint smile and winked before turning back to the children.

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Quite aware of Daniel and Victor watching them from behind the mirror, Julie glanced at her own image reflected there, and winked at herself. “Close your eyes, if it helps.” She closed hers. “Now breath deeply in and out a couple of times.” She inhaled deeply then exhaled slowly, deliberately. The children followed her lead. “Remember to imagine that special friend standing there with joy and love in their heart...”

Her first thought was of embracing Daniel, but it dissolved as she slid into veemeld and entertained a rakish thought of SAM...*Have you ever wanted to hug someone, SAM, me?*

Abruptly her vision broke up and all her strength ebbed from her. Her knees buckled and she fell into a dark place. She was no longer in the room, but falling no, floating in darkness as if in space. If she'd drifted into one of her dream-states, this certainly wasn't the usual place she went. It wasn't frightening...yet. What fantastical place had she conjured up this time? It was as though there was a whole universe inside her mind.



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## DARWIN'S PARADOX

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*Where am I? SAM? Proteus? Are you there?*

Proteus answered, [You have slipped into an ecstatic trance again, Julie.]

*Oh, dear. I keep doing that.* She smiled lopsidedly and found she enjoyed tumbling through the dark space. She thought she could make out stars but her vision wasn't very clear for some reason.

A figure approached, also flying in space, with obviously more control than she had. When he neared, she stared at the lean body, dressed in funky clothes, and knew at once who it was: SAM. His jubilant face reminded her of what her father might have looked like if he'd been a happy man, with some Daniel mixed in and a bit of Victor and a host of other familiar faces. She turned to him with a lopsided grin. *I never realized that you wanted a body, SAM. I always thought you were content being the ethereal entity...indefinable and uncontainable.*

[It's so hard being misunderstood,] he said with mock sadness.

Julie's grin broadened and she swerved to her left into a roll to get a look at what appeared to be a bursting nebula below. *Maybe I came up with that out of convenience. Probably out of...fear. I often wondered why you never took up a shape for me. I never realized it was me holding back. I suppose I was afraid of what I might become...no...of what...*

[You already were?]

*There you go, finishing my sentences for me again.* She sighed. *Yeab. Scared of what I'd become...a —*

[A crazy woman.]

*A freak.*

[You were just plain beautiful to me,] SAM said gently with a smile that tugged at her heart. Then he twirled in front of her, doing a mid-air pirouette. [So, do you like the way I look?]

Julie laughed. *Of course I do. I came up with the image, didn't I?*

[Not entirely. Remember I'm a part of you and you're a part of me.] SAM floated closer, arms reaching out for her. [As for your earlier question...]

[You cannot keep doing this, Julie Crane,] Proteus interrupted sternly. [Not in your present condition. You are too weak. You plunge too deeply and too easily into an ecstatic trance. It will destroy you.]

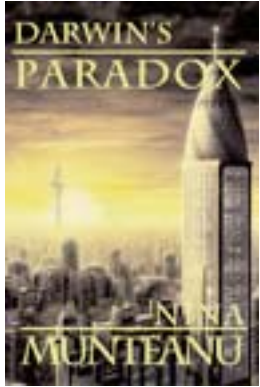
Alarm surged through her now. *What condition, Proteus?* She looked over at SAM and admitted to herself that she'd been inordinately tired lately, and feeling rather nauseated too. *Am I ill?*

[You are ten weeks pregnant.]

Julie plunged and her rump met with a knock on something hard. She hardly felt the impact. *I'm what?* She scrambled up to her hands and knees on the ground and a crazy grin snaked across her face. *Did I hear you right?*

[You heard right,] SAM said, standing next to her, having landed gracefully on his feet. [You're pregnant. With child. Expecting. You have a bun in the oven.]

Julie flung her arms around SAM. *Oh, SAM! I'm so happy!*

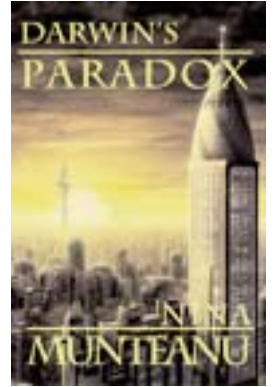


[Your pregnancy interferes with your ability to control your ecstatic trances,] Proteus continued. [You and your baby are vulnerable now. You must remove yourself from Icaria for the remainder of your term and possibly for a time after or you endanger both the unborn child and yourself.]

Julie clung to SAM, who didn't seem to mind. He was squeezing her back. She gazed up at the purple sky and rejoiced in her discovery that she was carrying a child — Daniel's child — she'd quickly done the math and calculated that they'd likely conceived the last night they'd been together in the heath.

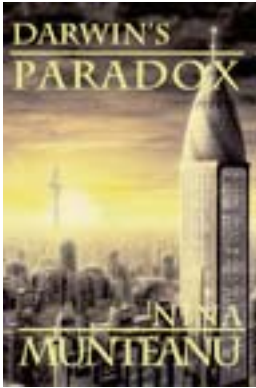
Then she thought of Icaria. How could she help them here if she was out there? *Proteus, you don't understand.* She let go of SAM and looked up at the glowing sky. *I need to stay in Icaria, to help Victor and Carl and the others. This is a critical time. I can't turn my back on them now. Not after what they've done for me and my family.* She saw SAM give her a look of remorse.

[No, it is you who do not understand, Julie Crane,] Proteus said, pointedly and SAM nodded grimly. [If you do not leave Icaria and its environment of machine intelligence, you will continue to fall into ecstatic trances more frequently and so deeply that you will never come out and the child you carry will die. So will you. You must leave at once.]



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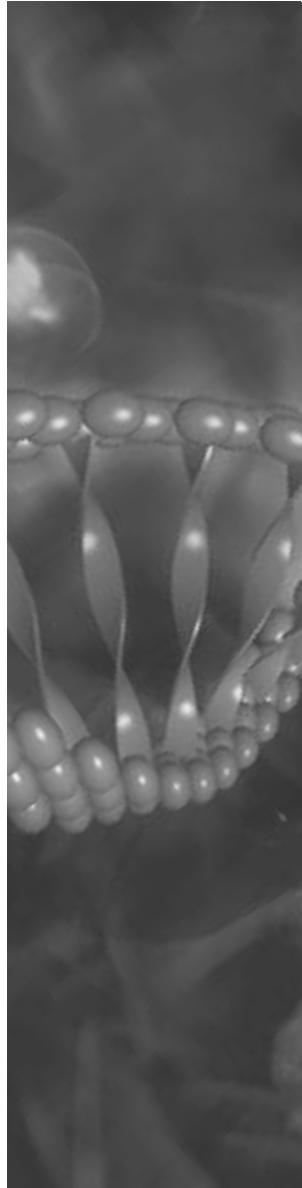


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**DANIEL** watched Julie grin suddenly, then her eyes rolled back and she abruptly slumped, crashing on her knees and landing face-forward in a heap. He barely took in Angel's shriek as he leapt to his feet and flung open the door to the adjoining room.

“Julie!”

Daniel brushed past the gawking children and Carl to kneel beside his prone wife. Victor wound through the crowding children to his side as Daniel turned Julie face-up. She lay unconscious, almost smiling, even though her nose was bleeding.

“That's what she looked like that time in the A.I.-core, when she and I — well when she went into that veemeld trance...” Victor trailed and blushed hard. He scrambled for a cloth and handed it to Daniel.

Daniel dabbed Julie's bloody nose. “And at the wedding ceremony.” He stroked her cheek with his other hand. “Julie. Wake up. Please,” his voice pleaded.

“Why does she keep doing that, Dad?” Angel said in a squeaky, terrified voice.

“I don't know, I don't know...” he whispered, unable to offer her any reassurance.

“You woke her up the first time. What did you say?” Victor suggested.

Daniel sighed, looking for a sign that she was stirring. They'd already done it, he thought. She'd married him again. “Please, don't leave me now,” he murmured desperately. “Not when I've finally found you again.” He curled his arms around her and pulled her limp body up so her head leaned against his chest. She felt so small and frail. He pondered their

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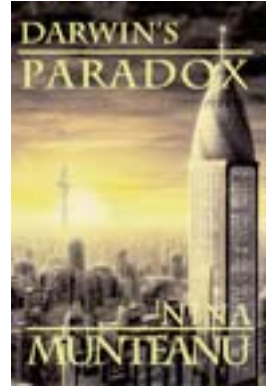
comings and goings with a long sigh. “Julie, how could I protect you when you kept running off like that?” he whispered into her hair. He'd barely resigned to being parted from her indefinitely as she did her work for Icaria, now this mysterious sickness was threatening to take her away from him in a more permanent way...Lately, he'd caught her several times, stumbling off balance or looking very pale and tired. What was wrong with her?

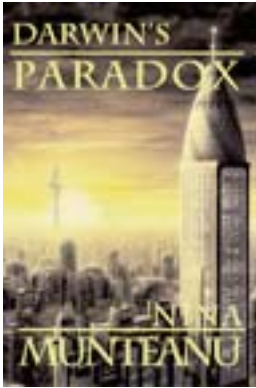
Sitting on the floor with his wife cradled in his arms, he rocked slowly, thinking of their rich and wonderful years together in the heath, their quiet conversations by the fire, their mirth and banter over mealtimes, making exquisite love to the distant howling of the wolves, the birth of their beautiful daughter...

He stroked her honey-streaked hair and brushed his lips against her soft cheeks, then murmured, “Please come back to me, Julie. I want to father another child with you...”

To his amazement, she stirred and opened her eyes. They glistened as she gazed at him with an intensity that worried him anew. Then her lips quivered into a crooked smile and she said in a barely audible whisper. “You already have.”

They do not love that do not show their love. The course of true love never did run smooth. Love is a familiar. Love is a devil. There is no evil angel but Love—William Shakespeare



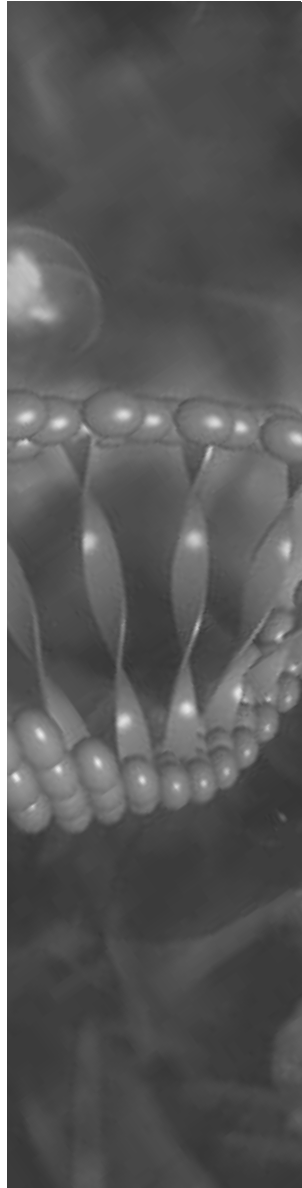


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**HER** face still pale but glowing, Julie sat on Victor's couch, nestled against Daniel with her legs curled under her. He could feel her conflicting emotions tensing her muscles. Although she was feeling obvious joy at her newly discovered pregnancy, she was also dealing with the consequences of Proteus's alarming news.

Zane was smoothing his tunic, which didn't need smoothing. Victor paced the room nervously and Carl stood quietly listening as Julie explained again for the benefit of everyone in the briefing room. "SAM and Proteus explained it to me like this..." She took a deep breath then proceeded, "When I'm pregnant, a whole host of physiological and morphological changes occur in my body. My hormone balance changes to accommodate and feed my growing baby." Julie gazed from one to the other but seemed to focus on Carl most of the time. "Among them is the secretion of human chorionic gonadotropin by the growing placenta and the production of masses of estrogen and then progesterone to maintain the lining of my uterus among other things. HCG alone has been implicated in 'morning sickness'. These hormones in combination produce what lots of women describe as a feeling of being 'off world'. Lots of us become highly emotional and experience fluctuations in moods during pregnancy. We often get irritable, irrational, absent-minded and 'weepy'."

She shrugged and smiled crookedly at Daniel. "Proteus explains that while my body is experiencing this unique chemical and

<http://www.amazon.com/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/dp/189694468X>

<http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/books/Darwins-Paradox-Nina-Munteanu/9781896944685-item.html>

electrical surge, my brain is highly susceptible to ecstatic trances. All I have to do is think of veemelding and I'm there. And while I'm there, all I have to do is conjure half-pleasant thoughts and my body sinks into a trance. Proteus says that unless I break the pattern, these occurrences will increase in frequency, length and intensity until I'm in a permanent trance that I can't get out of."

She exchanged fleeting glances with everyone before she resumed, "The only way to stop that from happening is to sever part of the equation. Because Proteus is part of me, it has to be the veemelding. So all I have to do is be far enough away from SAM and I break the pattern. That means going outside far enough from the A.I. community that I can't veemeld."

"This is amazing!" Zane exclaimed. He wriggled with excitement and flashed Carl a pointed look. "You and I have discussed subtle new arrangements in humanity's evolutionary process surrounding veemelds and Darwin, but this is a phenomenal change. Maybe we're looking at a radical evolutionary jump in sympatric speciation involving a co-evolutionary partnership a di-phasic creature that —"

"Hold on, buddy," Julie interjected. "Creature? We're talking about me here."

"Oh," Zane said, blushing fiercely. "Sorry." But his moment of self-consciousness passed quickly and he resumed his zealous rant. "What I meant was you seem to represent a new phase in human adaptation, a crea—er, organism —" He blushed again, "which must cycle from one ecosystem to another to perpetuate your species. Not unlike salmon that hatch in freshwater streams but migrate hundreds of miles out to sea to feed and grow, then return to their birth stream to breed."

"To what purpose?" Julie inquired, wrinkling her nose at the notion of being likened to a migratory fish. Besides, didn't salmon die after they spawned? "What's the advantage?"

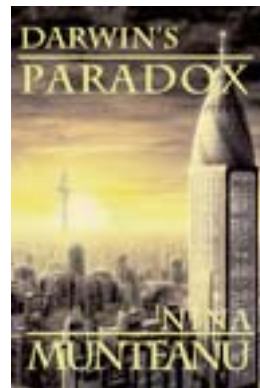
"This isn't natural selection or evolution, Julie," Carl said, inviting an impatient look from Zane. "Evolution occurs over millennia through incremental change as genetic material is passed from generation to generation and stands the test of time. This is something that happened because Vogel created an artificial virus —"

"You're wrong, Carl," Zane cut in. "This is evolution," he said emphatically. "But evolution of a different kind. The kind that happens in leaps and bounds, by a so-called accident in a chaotic soup of opportunity."

Daniel glanced at Julie, growing taut beside him. He could tell she wanted to end this debate, which was making her very uncomfortable. It was her they were talking about, after all.

"But in order for it to contribute to evolutionary change it must arise by natural means in order to replicate and demonstrate advantage over time. It seems to me —"

"Come on, Carl," Zane said impatiently. "You're thinking ancient



Darwinian theory. How it arose isn't as important as how it proceeds. We know that Nature seizes opportunities when so-called accidents happen. But I personally don't believe in 'accidents' where evolution is concerned. What I do believe in is co-adaptive process and change. Veemelds were here for a long time, perhaps always, waiting for Proteus to come along. Vogel knew it. Even Gaia knew it, although they hadn't even discovered veemelds, yet.”

Julie jerked to her feet. “This is ridiculous. You make it sound like I was just waiting for this virus to come along so I could fulfill my destiny. It's artificial, Zane. Vogel made it —”

“And if Vogel didn't make it, someone else would have. Maybe even Nature.”

He'd pushed his intense face close to hers and they stared at one another until she finally blinked and sat down as if she'd been struck. “You're talking about the whole of our society behaving like an autopoietic system, self-organized, adaptive and evolving...”

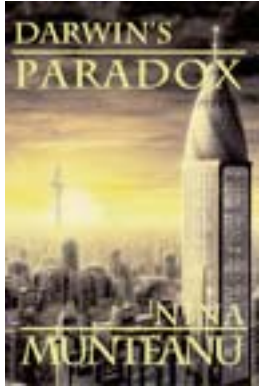
Zane leaned back like a teacher proud of his favorite pupil. “How many times have we seen this sort of thing happen? Like the independent formulation of calculus by Newton and Leibniz or the theory of the evolution of species by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. Or McFadden and Pocket independently but at the same time coming up with electromagnetic fields being the seat of our consciousness. Multiple, independent discoveries have increased in society a thousand-fold since the nineteenth century. Did you know that? Why? The reason is obvious: the fabric of our society is acting like a neural network, learning, interacting and sharing toward the achievement of a common zeitgeist.

“Julie, you're father's model of creative destruction shows how a society can operate as an evolving 'organism', interconnected through shared knowledge and thought and cycling through nodes of focused 'strange attractors'. We're all part of our own evolutionary story, too all we've been missing is the communication. Communication is the vehicle for achieving spontaneous, persistent synchrony. Fireflies communicate with light; planets speak through the force of gravity; heart cells share electric currents. We...” He flung his arms out like Moses on the mountain and a little spittle flew out of his mouth. “Imagine what kind of entity we will be when all our individuals connect with Darwin and the A.I.s!”

“Zane,” Carl said with a tone of mild disgust. “This doesn't answer Julie's earlier question about advantage. So it's a moot “

“But there is an advantage, Carl,” Zane cut in. “We just have to find it. Just like Charles Darwin predicted the existence of a coevolved moth with a long proboscis based on the existence of the long spur of the *Angraecum* orchid, we can derive many advantages of her existence if we look hard enough.”

Her existence. Daniel felt a spike of discomfort from Julie. Or was it





his own discomfort? They were discussing the merits of her existence as though she wasn't even there in the room with them!

“To take the anadromous salmon example again,” Zane raved on, “the advantage wasn't obvious. But it then occurred to ecologists that this niche partitioning allowed for more species to co-occur where otherwise they might have to out-compete one another. As for overall advantages to the ecosystems, they also found out that by feeding and growing in the ocean, the salmon brought back with them a wealth of nutrients that were necessary to feed a host of animals that in turn fed on them. Do you see how this works?” Zane's wild eyes flitted wildly from Julie and Daniel to Carl and Victor. Daniel felt Julie inhale sharply to speak.

“For instance,” he went on as Julie opened her mouth, “in Julie's di-phasic behavior, perhaps the child is meant to grow up outside, without the A.I. community to prevent overload, or confusion. Or maybe it's meant to gain during its early development some other arcane value that only the outside has to offer that will be useful to the inside world. As for the mother and father, this provides a season for them to link with the world outside, too. Perhaps this requirement to go outside is just a mirror of the 'urge' Julie experienced to return to Icaria to establish a developmental rite, so to speak. The Joining. Either way you look at it, she was meant to happen just this way and Vogel knew it all the time, designed it that way. Chaos, he might have even purposefully designed Proteus to solve the fertility problem. He was a vee-damned genius! And she's our link to Gaia, the real Gaia. Mother Earth.” Zane was stabbing an excited finger at Julie now. “She's our prototype for a new race of beings who belong to both worlds —”

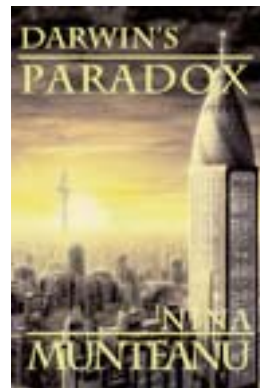
“But she won't be here,” Carl cut in sharply. He'd had enough. So had Daniel.

“What?” Zane looked like he'd been slapped out of a dream.

Carl glanced at Julie and Daniel then at Victor, who had quietly listened the whole time. Carl practically barked at Zane, “Haven't you been listening to what Julie said? For the sake of her unborn child and her own life, she must leave, and we're not sure for how long.” There lingered regretful acceptance in his eyes as he gazed back at Julie and Daniel. “I'm sorry you had to listen to this jabbering, but I want you to know that as soon as we heard, I got authorization from the Circle to make arrangements for a transport. A skyship will be at your disposal shortly, equipped with all the supplies you'll need. Icaria must let you go, for your sake and for our sake.”

“Okay, so she has to go outside for a while to have her baby and fulfill that phase in her development,” Zane persisted, his voice edging with fluster as his mind returned from his distracted rant to what this meant for Icaria. “But she has to come back. There's still Proteus and the children and our infertility and Icaria's future,” he ended.

“We'll just have to wait and see.” Carl gave Zane a stern glare then



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returned a softer look to Julie. "We'll assess later if and when you can return."

"If?!" Zane stomped his foot. "What do you mean by if?" His voice went shrill. "She's our only chance! She has to come back! She belongs here every bit as much as she belongs out there! She's our only hope for our children."

Everyone fell silent and Daniel knew this hurt her. There seemed no other choice...except for...He found himself stealing a glance at his pregnant wife as his mind developed the plan that would likely meet with her disapproval. Had she already thought of it and discarded it?

"We can't let them just go like that," Zane continued, his shrill voice rising still more with panic, "What if something happens to Julie in the heath, like she gets eaten by a cougar or something —"

Julie released her pent-up tension in a sharp laugh. "I won't get eaten by a cougar! Zane, you're always so dramatic," she retorted.

Victor spoke for the first time, "He has a point. There could be complications with your pregnancy, Julie. A host of things might happen. You might crash the skyship."

"Angel will drive," Daniel said, hoping this would lighten up the group. No one laughed.

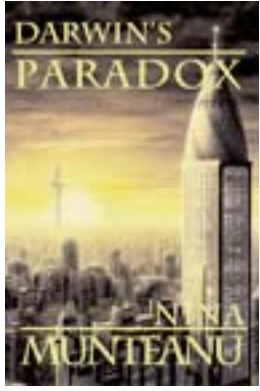
Victor shifted his feet and cleared his throat. "I gave the Circle and Aileen my assurances that you would be protected," he said and his face tightened with apprehension. "I'm sorry," he gave Julie a conciliatory look. "You're considered a critical resource to Icaria." He threw a nervous glance at Carl, the S.I. representative for the Circle. "We can let you go but you'll have to accept our escort." He turned to Carl for confirmation. "We'll escort them back to their destination and establish an effective communication system with frequent visits."

Carl nodded gravely. Zane remained unconvinced. "That only means that we find out sooner when she gets eaten by a cougar or falls off a cliff."

"I'm not going to fall off a damned cliff!" Julie exclaimed, her edgy voice matching Zane's. She'd wound herself into a knot of tense muscle. Daniel thought he could feel her shivering with anger, desperation, and frustration. Wait until she heard his plan...then she'd have a reason to be angry.

"What about having someone live nearby? A medical practitioner, preferably," Carl suggested. "What do you have to say, Daniel? We haven't heard from you yet."

He sighed and glanced at Julie, who'd pressed against him as if hoping to escape from it all. "I know you're all concerned for her welfare, particularly given her potential role in Icaria's future, but Julie will be fine. Don't forget that we've been living in the heath for over a decade. Julie had Angel out there with no problems. With some extra supplies from you it'll be even easier." He gave Julie a squeeze. "If we need help we'll ask for it. She'll have her baby and be back here in no time," Daniel ended with a faint smile. He felt Julie looking at him intently and wondered what she was thinking. Turning his gaze to her forest green



eyes, he said, "Right, darling?"

She looked at him with a strange expression he couldn't read. "Sure, honey." Then she placed her head on his shoulder and snuggled closer, as if she'd stopped listening and he felt her finally relax against him. Had she settled something in her mind? Surely she hadn't guessed his plan? No, he concluded. If she had she'd be furious, not half-asleep on his shoulder.

"All right, then," Carl said, pacing the room with his hands clasped behind him like a military analyst. "The Circle would be a lot happier if someone stayed there with you, particularly during the latter stages of the pregnancy..."

"I don't know if that's necessary," Daniel said, thinking of Julie's penchant for privacy. "What do you think, darling?" He glanced down at her. She was gazing at nothing in particular. "Julie? Did you hear what I said?"

She blinked and looked around as if suddenly coming out of a dream. "Oh, I'm sorry. I drifted off." Then she sighed. "Can we discuss this later? I'm not much use to you right now." She yawned for the twentieth time. "I'm dead tired. I need to go to bed."

"That's a good idea," Daniel said and squeezed his arm around her. "We can continue our discussion tomorrow morning." After a quick glance at Victor and Carl, he added, "You go ahead, honey. I'll join you in a minute. I have to ask Victor about a portable wind-powered generator he told me about."

Julie nodded. "Okay." She got up shakily and started for the door.

Daniel felt a surge of guilt and stood up to take her by the arm.

"Zane, would you mind accompanying my wife to her quarters?"

Zane perked up. "Sure. I'm on my way anyway."

Daniel glanced at Julie. She looked grateful. "Thanks, Zane," she said. "Just so long as you promise not to talk about evolution and two-headed creatures."

He gave her a manic grin and offered his arm to her. She hooked hers around his and turned back to the three men. "Goodnight, everyone."

When Julie and Zane left the room, Daniel turned back to Victor and Carl. He looked from one to the other gravely. "There is another way..."

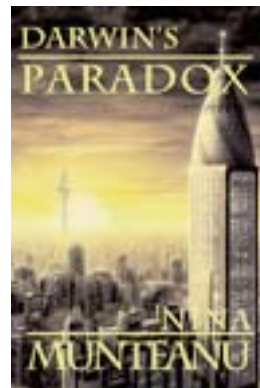
"Your daughter," Victor said gripping Daniel's gaze with his own.

Daniel nodded, lips tightening. "Angel's a veemeld and she can talk to Proteus too. She'll make a great teacher. She's a confident and eloquent speaker, as she's already demonstrated. I know she's willing. I've already talked to her about it." He turned to Carl with an inquisitive look.

"Angel can stay with us if that's what you were thinking," Carl assured him. "She already seems part of the family she and Manfred go everywhere together. They're at the Rec-Center now."

Victor shook his head with a frown. "It won't work. Julie will never agree."

The way she'd tenaciously clung to Angel since they'd been reunited had been pretty obvious to everyone, Daniel thought. Like a mother bear



*DARWIN'S PARADOX*

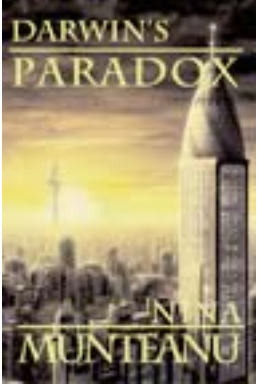
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with her cub, Julie might refuse to leave her little girl behind. Even if it was for Icaria. He swallowed hard. “Which is why we won't tell her,” he said grimly. It was obvious from the look on Victor's face that he questioned the wisdom of Daniel's choice. “It'll be like an educational field trip for a few months or years,” Daniel reasoned. “Good for her.”

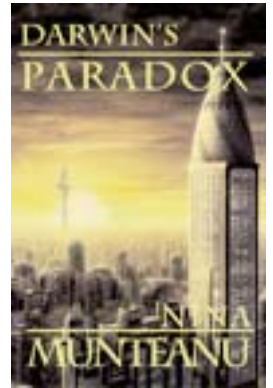
“Her mother won't see it that way.”

“Initially, she won't. But she'll see the rational wisdom of the plan eventually,” Daniel reassured. But he didn't feel the sureness he'd projected. He knew Julie was in no shape to be rational right now — if ever — when it came to her daughter.

The sciences do not try to explain, they hardly even try to interpret,  
they mainly make models—John von Neumann



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**JULIE** strode along the main corridor of the top floor of the Pol Station, a slight tension in her shoulder blades. This was the last place she wanted to be, but Tyers had caught up to her in the hallway of the Med-Center earlier to inform her that Raymond had, in fact, retrieved her backpack and that he'd left it in the suite she'd escaped from, next to the Head Pol's. Why hadn't he brought it down for her? Forcing down uncomfortable memories, she found her backpack on the couch in the leisure room. Faded and slightly crumpled, it was nonetheless a joyous sight. Julie hoisted it over one shoulder and lingered to look out at the view one last time. It looked cheerful and peaceful out there, she thought. The heath lay in bright sunshine and the cumulous clouds formed cotton islands in a sea of deep blue sky. She slipped into veemeld. *Hey, SAM...*

[Hey, Julie.]

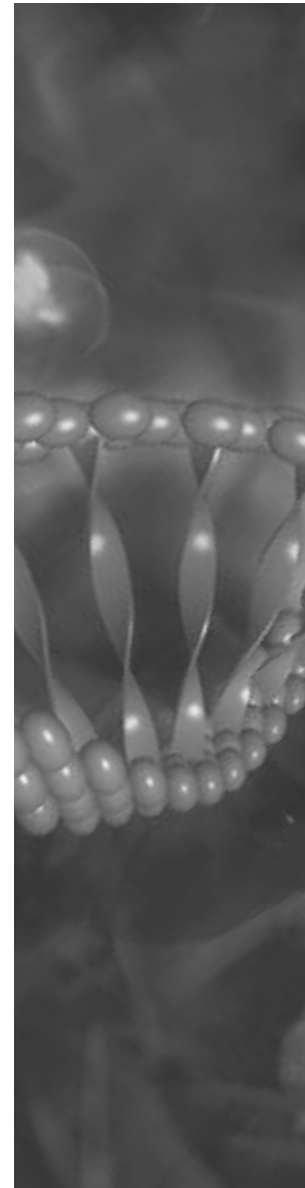
*Oh, SAM, I'm going home. With my family.*

[Your growing family, Julie.]

She grinned and stroked her abdomen where her little infant lay. *Yes. My growing family.* Against all odds, she'd succeeded in her mission after all. With the help of a few special people...and SAM. *Thanks for all your help, SAM...again.*

[Someone had to help; you kept getting into trouble.]

Grinning broadly, Julie strode out of the suite with long clipped steps then jolted to a stop as she came face to face with the last person she wanted to see: Frank. She killed the smile and forced back a sharp inhale. It looked suspiciously as though he'd been waiting for her. Had Tyers set her up?



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“Do you have a moment?” he asked, inviting her into his private suite next door with a nervous sweep of his arm. “I want to show you something.”

With some effort Julie set aside her distrust and followed him rather furtively inside. He didn't close the door behind him, as if to reassure her of his honorable intentions. Nor did he move close to her, but kept a respectable distance between them. After lowering his head briefly as if to urge himself on, he plunged into what seemed like a speech he'd rehearsed, “I wanted you to know that you didn't give me Darwin. I know that for certain now.”

She gave him a crooked wistful smile. “I know too.” He waited for her to explain, the surprise evident on his face. “SAM explained it to me in the A.I. core and Proteus provided the proof.”

“Ah,” he sighed, nodding. “I just got it myself from my sources and,” lips firming with determination, “I wanted you to know that I knew.”

“I appreciate your intent,” she responded and then they stood for a moment in awkward silence.

“And — ah — thanks for not...” he trailed.

For not pressing charges? she thought. “Yeah, well...” she faltered back.

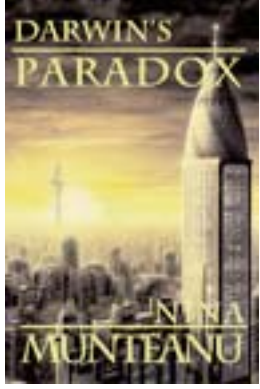
“Thanks for giving me another chance.” He ended softly.

She wanted to say, 'just do something right with it,' but the words choked in her throat. They stood facing each other in more clumsy silence. So, was that all he wanted to say?

She started for the door and was about to thank him and say good-bye, when he continued like an awkward boy bent on showing her his new toys, “And I also wanted to show you this.” He led her to his large desk with a vee-com. The holo displayed several files. When Julie realized that they were mostly confidential documents and secret correspondence between Gaia and several Secret Pols, including John Dykstra, the previous Chief of Secret Pols, her interest was caught.

Frank pointed out several interesting annotations. “Not only do we know that your father was innocent of the two murders,” he said, looking at the holo alongside Julie, “but I now know that he didn't falsely incriminate my father as a Dystopian: it was all Gaia. In fact she's the one who had my father killed, just as she did yours. Then, as if that wasn't enough, she pitted your father against mine on paper...and as a result,” he aimed his blazing eyes directly into hers, “me against you in person.”

They looked at one another in silence for several heartbeats. “I'm so sorry, Julie,” he offered in a voice splintered with emotion. “She's played me for a fool from the beginning. From that first time she had me assigned to watch you for the Shadow Unit,” he confided. “She might have been a fool herself for trusting the son of the man who double-crossed her; imagine, her top henchman secretly running the Dystopian movement and recruiting his own renegade Pols right under her own eyes. He was organizing his own war against the very people she was trying to put into power: the veemelds. But I'm still the greater fool for



believing anything she said.”

Why did his sudden honesty make her feel uncomfortable? Was it just that she wasn't used to it? He'd rarely confided seriously and honestly with her during their affair twelve years ago. As a matter of fact, he'd had little time for words at all, she recalled, and when he did speak usually in the heat of some argument he said awful things to her.

Frank's lips tightened and he looked beyond her for a moment, remembering. “I had my suspicions all along about certain things, especially the Secret Pols, but I had no idea of the extent of the treacherous influence she wielded. To kill our fathers and weave such a cruel tapestry of intrigue that I felt compelled to avenge the wrong person, when you were just another one of her victims.”

Julie lowered her gaze briefly. “That's all in the past now, Frank.” Then she looked straight into his tortured eyes. “Our fathers are dead and we can't bring them back. But we should both be glad they were exonerated. Leonard Crane and John Langor will be remembered by all Icarians as good men now.”

“I can't help thinking how things might have been if I hadn't been focused on avenging my father's death and we'd been friends instead...”

The way he looked at her...Julie stiffened and fought the urge to step back from him. “We can't keep our thoughts in the past and hang on to 'what ifs', Frank. We have our lives to lead in the present,” she said firmly.

“I still have to deal with what I've done, what I thought I was doing in the name of Icaria but was actually doing for that self-serving bitch. She fooled me completely. Tricked me into thinking she was shutting down the core and rounding up veemelds for Icaria's sake, when she was thinking only of herself and her personal power. She even had me wrongly convinced about Victor Burke's guilt.”

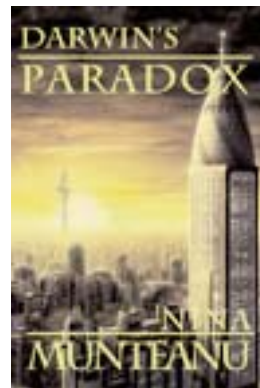
“Gaia tricked everyone,” Julie said with a conciliatory smile, edging for the doorway and hoping to end their conversation. “You weren't alone.”

“I won't be fooled again,” he said in a voice hardened with conviction and eyes narrowing as they focused on some faraway place.

“You always were an excellent purveyor of justice,” she offered.

His eyes snapped back to hers. “No, that was you. You were the one who always kept on the true path of justice, thinking of others, saving others.” He moved forward and reached out to clasp her hands. But when she involuntarily jerked back, he dropped his arms to his sides and his whole body sagged, and suddenly aged ten years. “I'm so sorry I hurt you, Julie. I wanted to believe you were bad so I could punish you for all the big hurts inside me: for getting Darwin disease, for losing you and being left alone in a world I no longer believed in...” His head drooped and he ended in a hoarse whisper, “Perhaps it wasn't even all those things, but that you saved everyone else and didn't try to save me...”

Oh, what power he'd given to her! she thought, overcome with remorse. And so unfair. Was this his way of saying he was sorry for raping



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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her? Could she forgive him? "I better go," she said, her voice breaking, and backed away. "They're waiting for me —"

"Wait," he said abruptly. "I have something for you." He turned to a drawer and pulled out her old leather shorts and faded blue shirt. "I had them washed for you like you asked," he said with an awkward smile, offering the clothes to her.

Julie accepted them and without thinking brought them to her face. The sweet scent of old leather transported her into another place, a place of warmth, love and family. She opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed and gazed at Frank for a moment. His look, though punctuated with pain, was not without a great deal of warmth; a warmth she hadn't seen before in his eyes.

"Thank you," she said, tears threatening to swallow her words. "That was kind of you." She'd never known him to be kind before. Not knowing what else to say, she turned to leave.

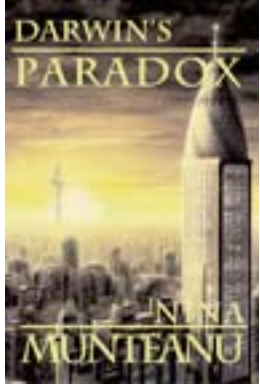
"Julie," he called after her with a fractured voice.

She stopped at the door and, though almost afraid to, turned to meet his intense gaze.

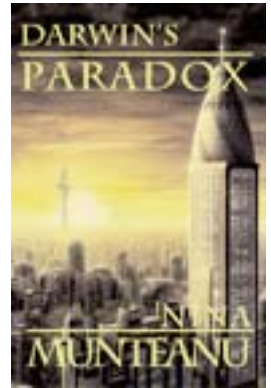
"I want you to know that I wish you all the best in life with your growing family." Then his tight lips opened into a genuine smile of fondness. "I'm glad for your happiness."

"Thank you. You too, Frank," she replied softly. "I wish you only happiness in yours," and found to her sadness that she saw very little happiness there. She turned and left.

Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel  
that has crushed it—Mark Twain







“YOUR skyship's waiting for you just outside,” Victor informed Julie and Daniel in a voice she thought rather formal and distant. His face twitched. Why was he so nervous, Julie wondered. “It's fueled up and will get you easily to your old place. Tyers and Raymond will escort you. They're more than competent.” He couldn't look at anyone for long as he stood stiffly at the end of the Pol Station hallway at an outside exit door — his emotions were too volatile. They were surrounded by well-wishers, including Zane, Carl and Manfred, Aileen and a few others. “Tyers and Raymond have loaded all your supplies. They're waiting outside for you.”

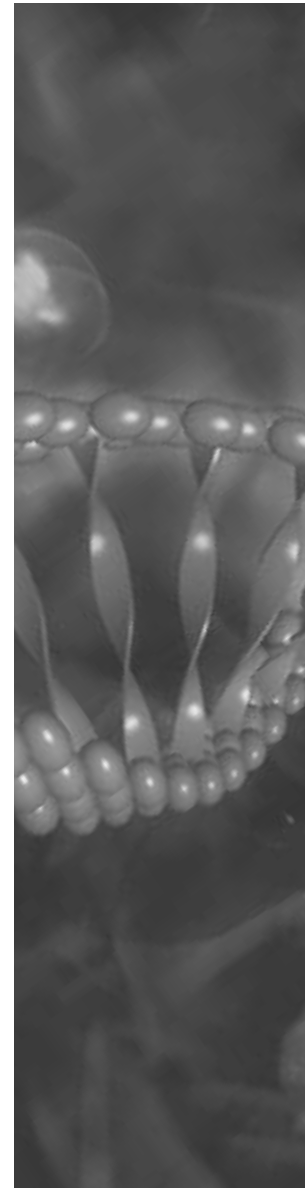
Then, with an almost frightened glance at Angel, Victor rested his gaze on Julie and seemed to relax briefly. He gave her an awkward smile. “You look wonderful in your heath clothing, like you never even left...”

Julie glanced down at her old leather shorts and faded blue shirt and laughed warmly. “Only more clean,” she said, swinging her leg forward to reveal new Enviro-Center boots. She gave him a thoughtful half-smile. “A lot's happened, a lot's changed since I last wore these clothes.”

“A whole world,” he said.

She approached Victor until they were close enough to touch and continued in a quiet voice, “Thank you, Victor. Thank you for saving my family...and saving me.” She flashed her crooked smile, then caught her lower lip in her teeth to keep from bursting into tears.

Victor hesitated then lunged forward awkwardly and threw his arms around her in a



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very uncharacteristic crushing embrace that made her laugh out loud and hug him right back.

"We'll miss you," Victor said in a voice swelling with emotion.

She squeezed back and whispered, "I'll miss you too."

Aileen stepped forward as Victor released her. She nodded to Daniel and Julie with a warm but determined smile. She extended her hand to both of them and wished them well. Then she pressed Julie's hand and added, "Promise me you'll consider our offer, Julie."

Julie nodded, elated and uncomfortable and confused by her feelings on this matter. She felt like she was abandoning Icaria and yet they still wanted her to join the Circle. They were moments from leaving and she hadn't yet given Aileen an answer, but the powerful member of the Circle seemed to understand. "Take your time, Julie. I'll stay in touch, but I must go now." She pressed Julie's hand once more then let go and departed as Carl moved forward and cleared his throat.

"Don't worry, we'll manage," he addressed Julie's worries. He gave her a complicated smile, one she couldn't read for the myriad of expressions it contained, including what might have been embarrassment. "Please keep in touch."

She nodded. "I will." They were all being much too accommodating, too reasonable, Julie thought and began to feel angry at herself on their behalf for leaving them in such a lurch. "I'll come back. As soon as...I can." Perhaps with her newborn child, she considered, with a wary glance at Daniel and Angel.

"But what will we do in the meantime?" Zane cut in, pushing forward and showing his dismay. At least he was being sincere, Julie thought, appreciating his honesty. His eyes flashed from Carl to Victor then turned back to Julie. "You're the only person who can communicate with SAM and Proteus at the same time —"

"No, she isn't," Angel interjected. "I can too." Carefully avoiding her mother's eyes, Angel added, "and I'm staying."

"What?" Julie said, stunned.

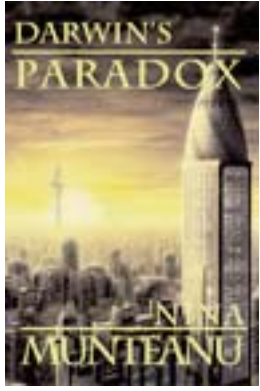
"I'm not coming with you, Mom," Angel said. She'd moved next to Victor and regarded Julie with calm eyes. "I just came this far to say good bye."

Julie stared. A spike of alarm lanced through her and she heard her voice shake, "What do you mean? Of course you're coming home with us."

"No, I'm staying here. This is where I belong for now, anyway." She glanced briefly at Manfred. "With Proteus and our new people, with Victor and the other veemelds. I can help them. I know what to do. They explained it to me."

"You don't know what you're saying. You're just a child." Her gaze darted from Angel to Victor, who avoided her eyes and was visibly shaking. It was obvious that he already knew of Angel's decision. Perhaps even played a part in it. Anger flushed into her face.

"I've made up my mind and you can't stop me," Angel said quickly, seeing



her mother's reaction. "Good bye Mom and Dad." She backed away.

"No!" Julie lunged out to pull Angel with her, but Angel darted back, clutching Victor and pulling him vigorously away from Julie and Daniel. Victor stared at Julie, his face white, as he let Angel drag him down the hall, followed by Carl and a confused Zane. Julie surged forward and met a barricade. Daniel had seized her in a strangling embrace and held her back. "Let me go!" she snarled at him, pummeling his arm.

"Julie," Daniel said, "You can't do this all on your own. You have to let go, let someone else carry it "

"But not Angel! Not my child!" she wailed, straining against his strong hold. Not after she'd just gotten Angel back!

"Who else?" he reasoned in a calm voice. "She's the right choice, the only choice. It's for Icaria, your Icaria. And she wants to. You can't protect her forever. She's becoming a young woman now. Capable of making her own decisions."

She turned to him in sudden rage. "You knew no, you planned this. You've given her away just like " Her throat closed in a spasm of surging emotion.

"Just like your father gave you away," Daniel quietly finished for her.

At his words the dam inside her broke and her body shook with racking sobs. She watched her little girl practically run down the hallway without looking back. No, not little, and certainly not a girl anymore. Daniel was right. Angel had grown up. In facing her challenges in Icaria, Angel had demonstrated a wisdom, courage and trust that had far surpassed her own. Julie suddenly realized that she'd accomplished what she'd hoped in nurturing her child toward the incredible young woman that she now was growing into.

Weeping with a mixture of pride and sadness, Julie watched her daughter disappear around the corner to fulfill her destiny as a leader of a new race of Icarians.

"Why did she run away like that?" she gasped through her remaining sobs. "Like she was scared of me, her own mother..."

"I don't know," Daniel said softly and stroked her hair. "Maybe for the same reason you left us so suddenly in the heath. Or maybe for the same reason we didn't tell you about our plan until now. I'm sorry, Julie. Please don't be mad at me. We all agreed, even Angel, that you'd never go for it, never give her up, no matter how we rationalized it to you."

"You didn't trust me," she whispered sadly, sagging wearily in his arms.

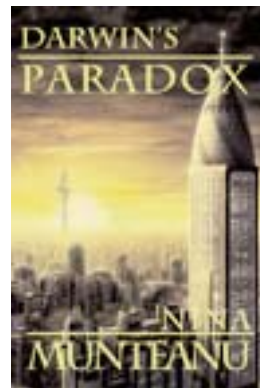
"I'm sorry," Daniel said in a hoarse voice of shame.

Then, like a clear shaft of light, Angel's sweet voice came to her: Mom?

*Oh, Angel! Why didn't you tell me?*

I had to run away because you would have persuaded me to come with you and I had to go while I still could...

*Oh, Angel, I'm trying to understand. You just startled me...I wasn't ready for this...not prepared...* She realized she was blubbering and close to being incoherent as sobs rose up in her throat again.



DARWIN'S PARADOX

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Don't worry, Mom. I'll be okay. And it's only for a while. A couple of years at most.

*I want you to know that I...trust you. I believe in you.* Julie closed her eyes and leaned against Daniel, who stroked her arm. Then, gently holding her to him, Daniel led them to the exit.

Mom?

Julie raised her head. *Yes, honey?*

I just want you to know that I'll always be your little girl. And that I love you so much!

*I'm so proud of you, Angel. I love you too.*

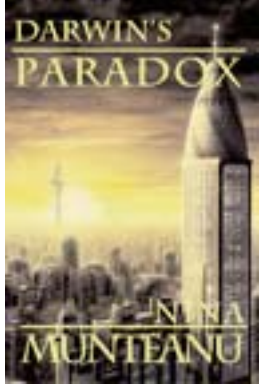
Then she and Daniel were through the doors and bursting into the daylight of the heath where the skyship awaited them. As the soft turf gave way beneath her feet, Julie inhaled the heath's peppery smells and felt the expansive freedom of the drifting breeze caress her skin, blowing away the staleness of the city.

A bird's whoop drew her attention and she turned to stare as a large bird took flight out of the nearby marsh, great wings beating as if in slow motion. A heron — No! Unmistakable, this time, it was a crane. Was it possible that this bird wasn't extinct after all? As Julie watched the bird soar gracefully away, the deep ache in her heart lifted a little and she caught a fleeting glimpse of her father's universe: a universe completely and totally connected by a fine network of gossamer web. A universe in which a daughter and a mother, miles apart, could talk to one another through a virus. A world that fed into an eternal cycle of altering form...nano-soup...the cell of a beating heart...the suspended dust upon which bloomed a blushing sky. In her father's universe you took it as far as you could, then let nature's wisdom take care of the rest: stable chaos.

Daniel touched her shoulder. "Are you going to be okay?"

Julie turned to him, and everything, including his hair, sparkled as though they were standing in SAM's crystal matrix. She wiped the tears from her eyes and linked her hand with his. "Yes, I will be now." She smiled. "We're going home."

Destiny is not a matter of chance—it is a matter of choice.  
It is not a thing to be waited for—it is a thing to be achieved  
—William Jennings Bryan



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# EPILOGUE

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**DRESSED** for bed in a warm nightdress, Julie stood barefoot by the window of their bedroom, looking out at the December moon. She heard Daniel shuffle in from the bathroom with a yawn. The dog stirred at their bedside and she heard it wriggling and whimpering to be patted. Daniel murmured to the golden retriever puppy, ruffled its fur and told it to lie down. Victor had presented Ben as his house-warming gift, for this house he'd built for them a few months ago.

Julie heard Daniel slide into bed. The dog let out a long, dramatic sigh and settled down. The moon was large and still hung low over the horizon, cutting a swath of jewels through the lake that sparkled back into the deep night. Lake Ontario, they'd called it once. Long ago, she and Daniel had walked its shores for miles and eventually fallen in love there. Now, as she gazed out over the heath to the lake from their newly furnished home outfitted with Icaria's amenities, she felt a tug on her heart. Not a longing tug like she'd felt in the past, but rather the blissful serenity that came with completion and a sense of home. No regrets.

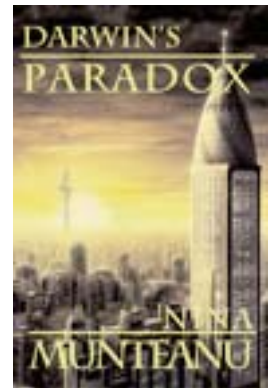
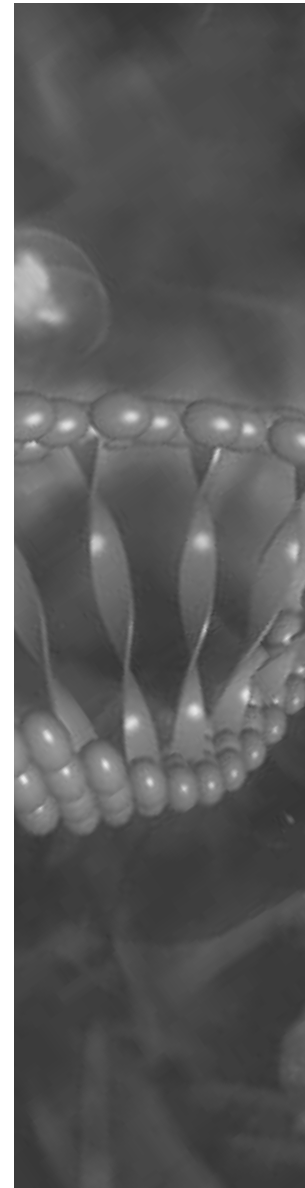
Daniel pulled her out of her reverie by saying softly, "There's a full moon out, honey."

"I know, dear. I'm looking at it."

"Come to bed, darling."

"In a minute," she replied. Yes, she was finally at peace. But there was one final thing...

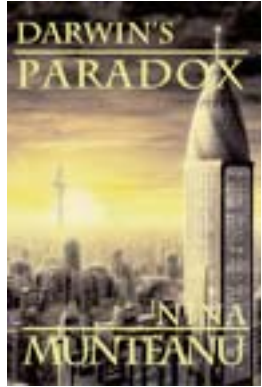
She didn't turn when she heard Daniel get out of bed and approach her from behind. She felt his body gently lean up against hers. Then he slipped his arms around her waist and softly caressed her distended belly. "How's Willy today?"



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“We're not calling him Willy,” she said rather sternly, still facing the moon.  
“Well,” he began in a voice that suggested to her that he was smiling, “you've shot down all my other suggestions.”

“I don't consider 'Buddy' or 'Breezy' to be serious efforts at naming our son,” she scoffed. Daniel laughed softly and she pictured his dimpled face and eyes crinkling with amusement. Through Proteus she knew the five-month old unborn child she was carrying was a healthy boy. As for his destiny in the world, she wisely left that to God. She'd learned from her experience with Angel that she could never prepare for the bizarreness of reality.

“Angel 'called' today,” she said, referring to her communication with her daughter through Proteus.

“What'd she say?”

“It's tough running a city when you're a twelve year old. Actually, she was dealing with Zane's latest tizzy fit,” Julie said, smiling as Daniel chuckled. “He doesn't want to use his dream-device on her class, says it's too dangerous. I think that last time he and I did it scared him witless.”

Daniel squeezed her. “Do you blame him?”

“No. It scared me too, but from the start, Angel chose a different path with Proteus. Anyway, she also said that Victor would drop by tomorrow with some data on the latest Proteus inoculations.”

Victor's house was only a few kilometers away. At one time it was the only house on the heath. Daniel had stumbled upon it on one of his outdoor hikes twelve years ago, when going outside wasn't fashionable. Now, along with their modest home, it was one of a dozen or so houses that dotted the heath near the city. Mostly Circle members, like herself. Preferring to live amiably with nature in zero-polluting and 100% self-sufficient units amidst the sounds, smells and sights of the heath.

She remembered the day Victor had appeared at the doorstep of their cabin five hundred kilometers away, looking exhausted from his long skyship journey but beaming with a wonderful conspiratorial smile. He'd come with a message from Aileen Rourke and all the other Circle members, unanimously inviting Julie into the Circle. The invitation had come with one condition: that they move closer to Icaria. Victor had prepared a well-rehearsed speech about the advantages to them, including services for their coming child and the fact that he'd already built them a wonderful house, complete with a house-warming gift.

“Victor told Angel that by April, all of Icaria will carry Proteus,” Julie added with a little smile. She thought of the irony of her legacy with Darwin.

“You know, you said something very wise to me a long time ago,” Daniel roused her from her reverie.

“Oh?” She smiled lopsidedly and leaned her head back over his shoulder so she could see his face in the moonlight. “And not since?”

He chuckled and kissed her exposed neck. “This one I remember particularly. I was too foolish and preoccupied to listen then but you were right when you said twelve years ago that it isn't what or who you are

that's important but the choices you make with what and who you are.”

“I said that?” Julie stroked his stubbly cheek with her hand. He was growing his beard back.

“Yup,” he smiled down at her and, clasping her hand in his, kissed it tenderly and brought it down to her belly. Then his face grew serious again. “During our life together out here I never before faced my feelings about veemelds and the fact that you are one. I didn't think I had to, but I've been living with that, not realizing that it kept us apart, this whole time until we returned to Icaria. Until I was forced to deal with it.”

She folded her arms over his and squeezed. “So, have you dealt with it?” she challenged.

He squeezed her back. “My big fear was that veemelds would help machines take over the human world, that they'd become some machine-like race and let the machines wipe out the rest of us like what the inner-city was starting to become. I never took into account that veemelds were people like me, with hearts and souls and a conscience. That they wouldn't — that you wouldn't — let something like that happen.”

Julie bent her head forward and gazed up at the moon again. “Now Angel's making sure of that. Your sweet, wise daughter, who also happens to be a veemeld,” she ended pointedly.

He laughed sharply. “Yes. Life's full of paradoxes, isn't it. I'd never have thought that I would one day be glad that a veemeld would play a major role in Icaria's welfare. And my own daughter at that.” He pulled her closer. “I used to think you were always holding back a little, but it was me holding us back. I'm sorry, Julie. Can you forgive me? Forgive me for my prejudice against veemelds? For not trusting them not trusting you?”

Julie twisted inside his arms to face him and saw her own reflection, lit by the moon, carried in his dark eyes. “I forgive you, Daniel. And I love you.” She wrapped her hands behind his neck and pulled him closer, feeling her belly against him. Then she kissed him hard and long.

As she finally pulled away from Daniel's lips and let him draw her to bed, Julie thought about another person she had yet to forgive her father. With that thought came another paradox, Darwin's paradox. The paradox of what Proteus turned out to be and its link to Angel's new responsibility in Icaria. Like Daniel with veemelds, Julie had never thought that she would one day be glad to leave her twelve-year old child behind in Icaria, much less to help revive Icaria with the aid of the virus inside her - Darwin's paradox: a virus that had killed her sister now promised to save a whole race.

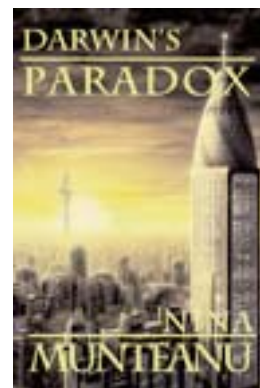
Daniel pulled her into bed with him and wrapped himself around her with a long sigh. After some moments of letting his eyes roam over her face, he gazed intensely into her eyes and breathed, “You're so beautiful.”

“No, you're the one who's beautiful,” she said with a crooked smile.

“That's what you said the first night we made love.”

“And I'll keep saying it.”

He brushed a few strands of hair from her face. “What were you



thinking about before? You looked so far away.”

“I was just thinking about the paradox of being a mother and citizen of the world. As a mother, I wanted nothing but to protect my child from all the ills and pains of the world, to the point where I tried to keep her from growing up. As a citizen, I needed to let her go, to feel the pains of growing up, make mistakes, take responsibility and learn to fulfill what destiny holds for her.”

“You were a great mother. You still are. I'm proud of you. Letting Angel stay in Icaria was probably the hardest thing you've done in your life.”

“Thanks,” she said, pressing her face into his neck and inhaling his wonderful scent. “It was.” Then she thought some more. “And, like Angel, I had a great father, too.” Like her, he also had to deal with the paradox of parental responsibilities and those to Icaria. To risk his child, who he loved dearly in an experiment dedicated to a greater cause, to help the world, was an obvious choice for him. Nevertheless, it carried with it a terrible personal pain. One he had to live with for the rest of his life, particularly when it looked as though all they'd done was cause the worst plague human kind had experienced, killing one daughter, while the other hadn't benefited at all from their experiment. But she had, Julie thought, and she wished she could have shown him before he'd died, heartbroken.

The paradox finally made sense. It took her own experience with her daughter for it to become clear. Although she'd intellectually forgiven her father a long time ago for his actions, her wounded guilty heart had held back, not understanding. Now she finally understood what her father had done and knew she had finally and completely forgiven him.

Daniel stroked her hair. “I know your dad was a good father. Like you just did with Angel, he gave you to science not because he didn't love you but because he believed in you.”

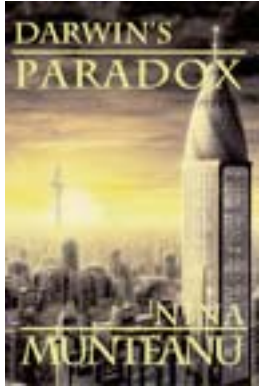
Julie looked up suddenly, tears pooling in her eyes. How she loved Daniel! He understood her so completely. He'd patiently and quietly let her find her way without interfering, showing a deep trust in her character that he probably didn't even realize he possessed.

Daniel's eyes glinted with sudden inspiration. “Hey, let's call our son Leonard, after your dad.”

“I always liked that name. And the gesture is wonderful, Daniel. But I have a better idea. Neo. Let's call him Neo Leonard Woods.”

Daniel smiled, dimples transforming his rugged face into something irresistible. Then they were kissing and he was caressing her belly. She wondered briefly what was in store for little Neo, when Daniel slipped his hand beneath her nightdress and she felt the electrifying touch of his hand on her skin. He tucked his arm deliciously between her thighs, once again sending with its sensual touch a resonating message of deep love that traveled up the core of her being as she wrapped herself around it.

Then she thought no more and felt only the exquisite joy of finally and completely letting go.





## GLOSSARY OF SCIENTIFIC TERMS & SOME NOTES

**AGGRESSIVE SYMBIONT:** When two organisms engage in a symbiotic relationship wherein one of the partners directs aggression outward (exogenously) at a potential rival of the symbiotic partner. Examples abound, including the ant and acacia plant, herpes-B viruses, malaria and yellow fever. The trypanosome that causes epidemics of sleeping sickness is symbiotic with ungulates and its devastation to the human population may be the major reason that the ungulate herds of the African savanna have survived to the present. See symbiosis and co-evolution.

**ANADROMOUS:** An organism (usually a fish) that lives in salt water and migrates to a freshwater tributary to reproduce (spawn).

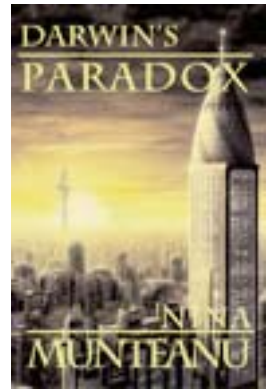
**Autopoiesis** Autoproduction. The process whereby an organization produces itself. An autonomous and self-maintaining unity which contains component-producing processes; examples being a cell, an organism, and perhaps a corporation. An autopoietic system achieves self-organization, order out of chaos. It is simultaneously producer and product.

**BUTTERFLY EFFECT:** Edward Lorenz described the butterfly effect as "the sensitive dependence on initial conditions"; the notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in Peking could cause a tornado in Texas.

**CHAOS THEORY:** A field of scientific inquiry to explain unstable aperiodic behavior in deterministic nonlinear dynamical systems; a kind of order without periodicity, examples being weather, the spread of epidemics, metabolism of cells, the propagation of impulses along our nerves, changing populations of insects and birds, the rise and fall of civilizations.

**CO-EVOLUTION:** A dynamic process of change, where two very different species evolve in parallel; in the case of a virus and his host, the host responds to its environment and the virus to the changing genome of the host.

**CREATIVE DESTRUCTION\*:** A term taken from the work of C.S. Holling (University of Florida). A theoretical model developed by scientist, Leonard Crane, to explain the natural cycle of animate and inanimate systems. Crane's model is based on the theoretical and empirical paradigm of ecological behavior proposed by C.S. (Buzz)



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Holling, which recognizes ecosystems as non-linear self-organizing and continually adapting through cycles of change from expansion and prosperity to creative destruction and reorganization.

**DARWIN DISEASE\***: A fatal neural disease caused by the mutation of an artificially produced retrovirus, Proteus. Proteus was designed to co-exist in a mutually symbiotic relationship with its human host to enhance cognitive A.I. communication. Transmitted sexually, once in non-target hosts the virus takes on the role of aggressive symbiont and selectively interferes with several neurotransmitters, eventually destroying cholinergic neurons of both peripheral and central nerves. Due to their genetic makeup, veemelds were immune.

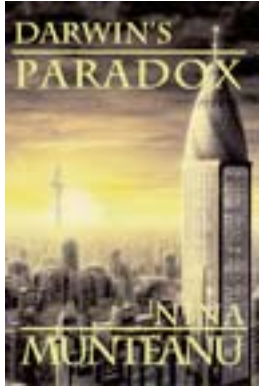
**DENTATE GYRUS**: A part of the hippocampus, roughly in the shape of a V, which consists of granule neurons thought to be the site of neurogenesis and where theta rhythm is produced.

**DYSTOPIAN, DYSTOPIAN\***: The term dystopian, coined by revolutionaries in 2056, describes any thought, philosophy or argument that is counter to the current linear order of the current Icarian regime. This includes promotion of chaos theory, stable chaos and other related theories. The term Dystopian is the name of a terrorist-anarchist organization formed during the height of the Darwin plague in response to perceived unwillingness by government to act. Dystopians took the term already in existence since 2056 as their icon to hallmark their force of destructive chaos against the sham of an "orderly" government.

**ENTORRHINAL CORTEX**: The EC is located in the temporal lobe of the brain and considered an important memory center, forming the input to the hippocampus and the pre-processing of the input signals. The EC-hippocampus system plays an important role in memory consolidation and optimization in sleep. The EC has been implicated in synchronizing theta rhythm during REM sleep.

**ENDOGENOUS VIRUS**: A virus that inserts its genetic material into the DNA of a host. The integrated provirus lies dormant for a time. See also: retrovirus.

**FRACTAL**: Fractals are complicated geometric patterns made up of the same motif repeated on ever-smaller scales. Examples include circulatory and nervous systems. Trees and mountains are other examples. Mathematician, Benoit Mandelbrot, coined the word in 1975 from the latin word fractus. All fractals are self-similar - that is, they look the same when examined from far away or nearby.



**HANTAVIRUS:** The hantavirus provides an example of an aggressive symbiotic host/virus relationship through co-evolution over millennia between the rodent host and the virus. This virus also enters the ovaries of the mouse where it is vertically transmitted to her offspring.

**HIPPOCAMPUS:** The hippocampus is part of the limbic system and forms part of the temporal lobe of the brain. Together with the neocortex, the hippocampus is believed to provide the neural basis for memory storage in addition to regulating emotions.

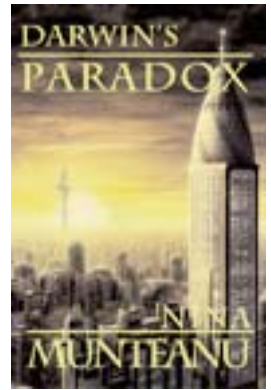
**INTERACT-SYM\*:** A device intended to permit a veemeld to communicate directly with the neural network of a single A.I. or the A.I.-core, via a retinal scan.

**MITOCHONDRIA:** Organelles within every cell that process sugars to make ATP. Mitochondria are thought to have co-evolved as ancient bacteria with host cells of metazoans millions of years ago and contain their own DNA.

**MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT DISCOVERIES:** Also known as simultaneous discoveries, MID describes when scientists or inventors in the same society arrive at the same innovation independently of each other at approximately the same time. For example, Elisha Gray and Alexander Graham Bell developed the phone simultaneously. Sociologists argue this is a function of either social context (deterministic view) or to the qualities of the individuals making the discovery (inventive genius). The deterministic view suggests that the time was ripe and someone would eventually have made the discovery.

**NICHE-PARTITIONING:** A process by which two very similar and potentially competitive species are able to co-exist through either spatial or temporal-sharing of habitat or role in the ecosystem.

**NON-LOCAL INTERACTION:** Based on J.S. Bell's theorem of non-local connection, this refers to the ability of biological systems to utilize quantum non-locality. According to Bell: if nature behaves in accordance with the statistical predictors of quantum mechanics then "there must be a mechanism whereby the setting of one measuring device can influence the reading of another instrument, however remote." Brian Josephson, Nobel-laureate physicist, postulates extensions into areas of paranormal phenomena: "Quantum theory is now being fruitfully combined with theories of information and computation. These developments may lead to an explanation of processes still not



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understood within conventional science such as telepathy . . ."

**NUERGY\***: Nuergy is a procedure of nano-technology in cosmetic surgery to permanently change aspects of a human's form and structure (e.g., bone structure, fatty tissue, etc.). Often done in conjunction with nuyu.

**NUYU\***: Nuyu is a temporary nano-technological cosmetic procedure to change superficial aspects of a person's anatomy (e.g., eye or hair colour; skin tone, facial hair, etc.). See nuergy.

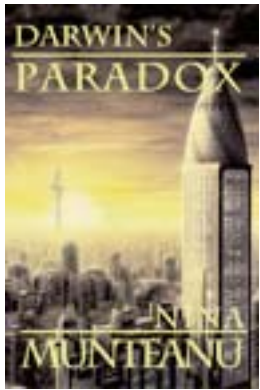
**PARADOX**: A situation in which something seems both true and false. A form of self-contradiction as in "when my knowledge increases, I realize how little I know". When I know a lot I can say, "I know that I know nothing." Examples of paradox abound, including rich coral reefs in nutrient-poor water. In physics the EPR paradox, developed by Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen, describes an apparent lack of completeness in quantum mechanics. Views of non-locality may provide solutions to the paradox. See non-local interaction.

**PROVIRUS**: A retrovirus that has integrated itself in the DNA of the host cell. The provirus remains inactive while integrated. It is passed on to the cell's offspring, which will bear proviruses in their genomes.

**REM SLEEP**: Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep may stimulate nerve growth. REM sleep is also known as paradoxical sleep, perhaps because during this time the brain is very active, generating theta rhythm, involved in the processing of information in the hippocampus.

**RETROVIRUS**: A virus possessing a unique cellular enzyme, reverse transcriptase, which uses the viral RNA as a template to make a DNA copy, which is then incorporated into the chromosomes of the infected cell. Endogenous retroviruses (proviruses) may lie dormant inside the chromosomes, until they manifest once more. They may seek out the germ cells (eggs or sperm) and be subsequently passed on from parent to offspring. See trasposon and provirus.

**STABLE CHAOS\***: A precept within chaos theory, which suggests that order emerges spontaneously from chaos as synchronous self-organization. Dr. Leonard Crane used this concept in his model to explain the natural cycle of creative destruction in both ecological and societal behavior. The concept originated partially from the 1974 Gaia Hypothesis by Lovelock and Margulis, which proposed that the planet is a self-regulating organism. Stable chaos was first coined by Gleick in his 1989 bestseller, "Chaos", which provided an excellent example ---



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Jupiter's Great Red Spot. "The spot is a self-organizing system, created and regulated by the same nonlinear twists that create the unpredictable turmoil around it. It is stable chaos."

**STRANGE ATTRACTOR:** A term used among chaoticists and mathematicians, an attractor is the property of complex systems that represents the state to which the system eventually settles. Strange attractors, coined by David Ruelle, professor of theoretical physics, are attractors that consist of infinite dimensions. These fractal objects describe how order can dwell within chaos and represent the outward manifestation of organizational autopoiesis.

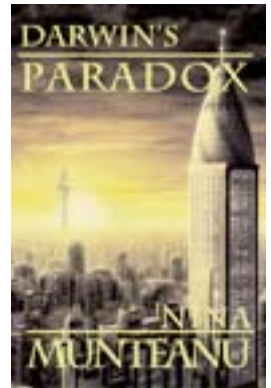
**SYMPATRIC SPECIATION:** This refers to the formation of two or more descendant species from a single ancestral species all occupying the same geographic location; most evolutionary biologists don't believe this ever occurs and support allopatric speciation, which occurs through geographic isolation of the original species. Evidence for the former exists in the form of the three-spined stickleback, through the mechanism of disruptive selection and asservative mating.

**SYMBIOSIS:** In context with co-evolution, symbiosis is the state of equilibrium that results from two co-evolving organisms over a long time and many generations.

**THETA RHYTHM:** During REM sleep, neural control is centered in the brain stem in which neurons initiate a sinusoidal wave in the hippocampus called theta rhythm. Theta rhythm reflects a neural process by which information essential to the survival of a species, gathered during the day, is reprocessed (encoded) into memory during REM sleep. Long-term potentiation (LTP), a change in neural behavior that reflects previous activity, depends on the presence and phase of theta rhythm.

**TRANSPOSON:** A movable element ("jumping gene") that can move or have its DNA copied from chromosome to chromosome and inferentially from cell to cell. Transposons may contribute to variation in all genomes. See provirus.

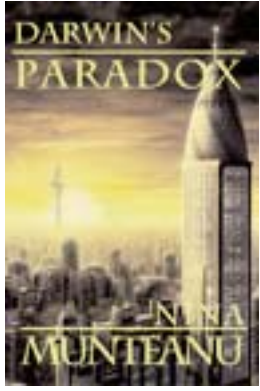
**VEEMELD\*:** *Noun:* A person whose unique genetic makeup permits them to communicate directly with the A.I.-network through a retinal scan (Interact-SYM). Julie Crane and her daughter, Angel Woods, are capable of spontaneous communication with machines via the symbiotic virus, Proteus, inside them. *Verb:* the act of communicating with the A.I.-network via a retinal scan or through the symbiotic virus, Proteus.



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**VEE-RADICATOR\***: A member of a violent subversive organization, originating in the Luddite counter-culture of the outer-city fringes, where "outer beauty" represents the weakness of a technophile society. Vee-radicator individuals typically undergo self-mutilation.

Believing that technology is ruining our ability to think and feel like humans and fearing other ill-effects of technology, Vee-radicators are dedicated to the elimination of all technological devices (vee-coms, vee-sets, vee-pads, etc.) from Icaria. They particularly seek to eradicate all veemelds, who they consider machine-people and traitors to humanity.

\* A term or concept created by the author, or modified or expanded from another source by the author.

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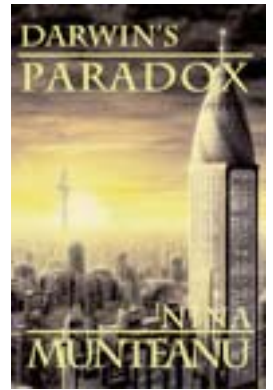
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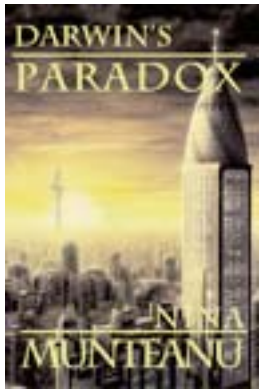
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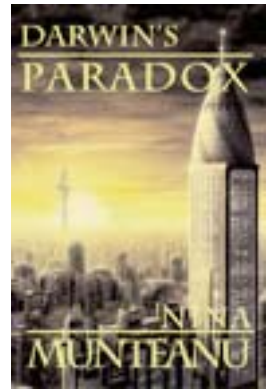
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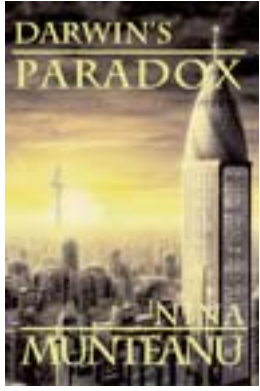


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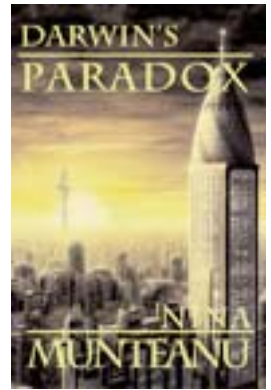
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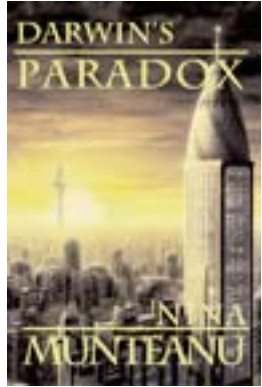
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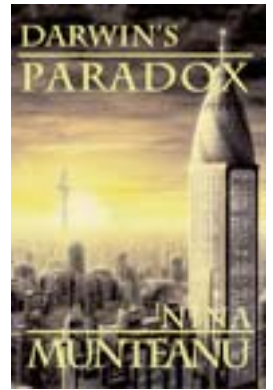


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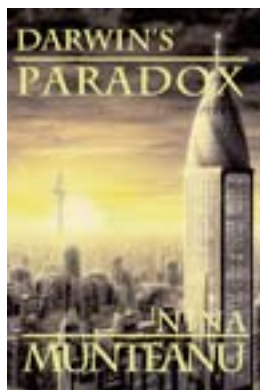
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