

"Darwin's Paradox" Excerpt:

Chapter One

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.

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.

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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 mantel 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 carabineer 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...

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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. "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 carabineer 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.

As if reading her mind, Aard reassured her, "It's not broken; you'll heal from your leg injury." Then he added in a hoarse whisper, "But I don't know about the wrath of your mother..."