

DARE TO BELIEVE ...

A woman with long, flowing brown hair is shown from the waist up, wearing a vibrant red, ruffled, off-the-shoulder dress. She is positioned in a dark, misty forest with bare trees. Her hair and the bottom of her dress are blowing in the wind. Large, white, feathered wings are attached to her back, extending downwards and outwards. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

Dark Angel

Eden Maguire

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...the first 2-3 chapters of Dark Angel set the scene for this pivotal point!

Meantime, I spotted Grace and Ezra moving away from the bar towards Lewis, the god of youth.

It was then, while I was looking in the opposite direction, that the inner door opened and Zoran appeared.

It was as if someone had flicked off the sound switch. Silence fell, and all heads turned towards the costumed figure in the doorway.

Here's my second in-the-flesh impression of Zoran Brancusi, this time from close up: he's even taller than you imagine, maybe six feet five inches, with hair cropped close to his skull and no spare flesh to soften the angles of his face and jaw. The skin is taut over the bones, the eyebrows flat and heavy over dark, glittering, heavily lashed eyes. So it isn't height, the smoothness of his skin, or even the headdress of black feathers rising like a Mohican plume over the smooth dome of his skull that holds your attention, but the strength of his gaze.

We stood transfixed, waiting for him to walk among us.

He worked the moment, looking sharply from one guest to another, unsmiling, eyes darting here and there. Like everything else about him, his costume was

extraordinary – the black feathered headdress, the lithe, bare torso, the angel-wing tattoo on his left arm, the fringed leather trousers and bare feet.

Then low music broke the silence, Zoran took two steps forward and drew us towards him like iron filings to a magnet.

‘Hi,’ he said, still observant, only nodding his head as kids clustered round. ‘Hey, how are you doing? Great to meet you. Hi.’ He spoke but he was constantly on the lookout for members of his team who had organized the party within the party. When he spotted dreamcatcher Ezra, he gestured for him to bring Grace to his side and then he beckoned Daniel the sun god and apparently gave him the order to comb the room until he found someone in particular.

I wasn’t prepared for that someone to be me and so acted pretty dumb when sun god eventually came to fetch me.

‘There must be some mistake,’ I mumbled, with Holly shoving me from behind.

‘You’re Tania Ionescu, right?’ Daniel said.

‘Yeah but Zoran doesn’t know me. Why is he asking to see me?’

The go-between looked me straight in the eye and shrugged.

‘OK, I get it – you’re only the messenger,’ I muttered. My heart was racing, my palms sweating.

‘Just follow, OK?’ As he turned, Daniel’s eagle wings brushed my shoulder and for a split second I had the image of him actually soaring across a pure blue sky. I saw his cruel, curved beak, his huge wingspan, heard the beating of wings. I was his prey, cowering below. ‘Follow,’ he said again.

And sun god took me to meet Zoran.

Dark Angel - Eden Maguire
chapter sample

It was a lonely walk, pulse racing, knees weakening. I felt like a moth metres away from a scorching flame.

'Tania Ionescu,' sun god said as he delivered me to the master then quietly backed out of range.

'Ionescu,' Zoran repeated.

'I-O-N-E—' My gut reaction was to spell my name, like always.

Zoran cut me off with a nod. 'You're from Romania.'

'My dad,' I corrected. 'I was actually born here.'

'A citizen of the United States.' The eyes were fixed on my face, the voice was mostly expressionless though I thought I picked up a small hint of amusement here.

'So where in Romania were your dad's family?'

'In Bucharest.'

'During the Ceaușescu regime?'

I nodded. 'Dad escaped with his family and came here in eighty-six.'

'And remained.' The gaze stayed on me, pinning me to the spot. 'I guess he could go back home now.'

'I guess.' The legend talked banal family stuff like anyone else – how bizarre – while fellow guests jostled for his attention.

A girl held out a pen, bared her arm and begged for an autograph. 'But he married an American?' Zoran asked.

I nodded. 'He says that here feels like home now. He reads American history.' How many gawky, geeky, lame remarks can one girl make in the space of an evening? Keep on counting.

'I left the country when I was five years old,' Zoran told me. 'My family spent time in the former Czechoslovakia. After my dad was assassinated, my mom and I kept on moving west – Switzerland, Spain, eventually Mexico.'

Assassinated is not a word you expect to be dropped into casual party conversation. It throws you off balance and begs a thousand questions, which I somehow couldn't shape up into proper sentences. 'Jeez, I'm sorry,' I breathed inadequately.

He shook his head. 'It happened a long time ago. I don't really remember my father. And that kind of

childhood – always moving on – it gives you an independence, a strength. I guess what I'm saying is that I learned early on not to need people.'

'I guess.' A few gossip-mag details flitted through my head – the fact that Zoran had a zillion rock chick girlfriends through the years but had never married or had children, that he owns homes in New York, Italy and the Bahamas.

'I'm a wanderer, born and bred. But the counter side of that is that I've developed a strong nostalgia for my homeland.' Zoran steered me through the crowd, ignoring the bustle and clamour around us, making sure his stewards kept the autograph hunters at bay.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Ezra and Grace were following in our wake.

'It's highly romantic and completely illogical,' Zoran continued. 'Here am I, living this rootless, privileged existence, achieving what everyone would recognize as the impossible American dream, but still yearning to be in contact with little old Romania, to be part of a big family, to know the language, the culture of my forefathers.'

I nodded, flattered by the confession, by his assumption that I was on the same wavelength, that I was even worth talking to. I mean, he was way up there: I was nobody.

By the way, unlike my dad's, Zoran's English was perfect. Maybe a little formal and quaint for a rock star, but grammatically right on.

'Which is why, the moment I saw your name on the guest list, I said, "Find that girl."' He stopped now, glancing over his shoulder to check that Ezra and Grace were close by. 'They tell me you almost didn't come.'

'To the party?' I stammered. How the hell did he know that? 'The fire – I guess it spooked me.'

'I'm glad you made it. And you know it wasn't an easy decision. I had my office contact Tony West's family – the firefighter who died – and they said to go ahead, Tony died doing what he loved and anyway that's what he would have wanted. I'm making a donation to the forest service so they can upgrade their equipment.'

I nodded, though I wasn't sure that a donation, however generous and well meant, balanced out the family grief quite the way Zoran implied.

'Not that one thing cancels out the other,' he added, looking me directly in the eye and making me feel as though he'd read my mind. A security guy opened a door for us and I found myself out of the main party gathering and in the cinema room I mentioned earlier. 'Do you believe in miracles, Tania?'

I assumed I was alone with him until I saw that Ezra

had brought Grace along too. 'I never thought much about it,' I confessed.

'But you're a sensitive person – I can tell that.'

How? How can you tell? Do I have the word "sensitive" tattooed on my forehead? Up went my defences and I turned to Grace for help.

'Tania's real creative,' she told Zoran unhelpfully. 'She's hoping to travel to Europe to study the history of art. But her big thing is painting. She's actually a great artist.'

'I see that. It comes through in your costume – you have a strong visual sense, an eye for colour. You're used to looking beneath the surface; you try to work out reasons.'

'That's still not the same as believing in miracles,' I argued.

'Watch this,' Zoran told me, turning towards the giant screen on the wall at the same time as someone, presumably Ezra, pressed the button for a video to play.

It was a home-shot sequence, filmed the previous day when the fire on Black Rock was at its height.

'It was shot on a mobile phone so these are not high-quality images. Also it was filmed from the helicopter and the pilot had trouble navigating through the smoke, which is why it's unsteady,' Zoran told us. 'See Turner

Lake in the distance? And that's the old burnout area, and the dirt track you just drove along. The summit of Black Rock is hidden behind the main smoke column.'

I held my breath as the video played out, hearing the chopper blades churn, seeing the images blur as they flew through smoke clouds.

'So now the pilot is steering upwind of the blaze – you can see the flames sweeping through the trees. That's Black Eagle Canyon, that's the house – see!'

All too clearly I saw the black pall of smoke, the flames racing across grassland and brush, travelling so fast it left trees only scorched but not consumed. And I spotted the one-storey modernist buildings set against the bare rock of the canyon, standing right in the path of the raging fire.

'Watch!' Zoran said.

A wave of flame approached the canyon. It ate up scrub and young aspen trees, reached the edge of the gorge and seemed to pause.

'Look at the direction of the wind, see how the flames leap clean over the house,' he murmured.

He didn't need to tell me; I was already hypnotized. Firebrands jumped skywards ahead of the inferno, streaking red and gold through the black smoke, clearing the gorge and landing on the far side, igniting the land

beyond. Then the flames themselves leapt and arched, carried by a mighty wind. They left one side of the gorge and landed on the other, danced and raged on as before. Zoran's house was spared.

'Now do you believe in miracles?' he said.

'Tania hates fire. She has a kind of phobia,' Grace explained.

I must have passed out for a few seconds, gone blank, sunk to my knees, because Ezra was offering me his hand, my head whirled and I had trouble recalling exactly where I was.

I was so weak that the dreamcatcher had to hold me upright and lead me to a chair. Though the screen was blank, I could still hear the chopper blades churning above the whoosh and blast of furious flames.

Zoran was nowhere to be seen.

'Do you need water?' Ezra asked, leaning over me.

I nodded and he went away, leaving me and Grace alone.

'Don't do that to me, OK!' she murmured, taking the seat next to mine.

'What did I do?'

'You just dropped to the floor – I thought you'd had a brain seizure or something. One minute you're standing

watching the screen, the next you're flat out. I thought you'd never open your eyes ever again and wondered how I was gonna go back and tell your folks!

'Sorry.'

'It's OK, I understand. I told Ezra how it started – how you most likely connected it with the old fire on Becker Hill. He said Zoran had no idea you would get so spooked.'

'He seemed to know everything else about my life,' I muttered, remembering our back-to-roots conversation. 'If anyone else calls me sensitive without really understanding the first thing about me . . .'

'Zoran didn't plan for you to pass out,' Grace advised as Ezra came back with a glass of water. 'Actually, he went to look for a medic to check you out.'

'I don't need one,' I said, taking sips from the glass and waiting for my head to stop spinning. 'I'll be fine.'

'Seriously, he was worried for you. He'd really been jazzed about meeting you – isn't that right, Ezra?'

'You were top of his list,' the dreamcatcher confirmed. 'People don't realize, a guy in Zoran's situation rarely makes a connection with the man in the street. It can be pretty lonely. So when he saw your name he grabbed the chance to have a conversation because he knew you two would have things in common.'

‘He should talk to my dad,’ I sighed. Then again, Dad wasn’t into Zoran’s music and I figured he would disapprove of the luxury lifestyle. My dad camps out and fishes in ice cold creeks, remember. ‘Actually, meeting him was an amazing experience,’ I admitted.

To sum up, now that my head was clearing, Zoran the rock god was everything you would expect – vain, arrogant, in love with himself, all those things. But he had an unexpected side too – a willingness to share family experiences, plus the sheer, close-up charisma: the sculpted face with no sign of age lines, the tall, lithe body with the angel tattoo from shoulder to elbow, and above all the glittering sharpness of his gaze.

‘Wasn’t it though!’ Grace was totally caught up in the whole experience and especially in Ezra. She hovered around him the way a bee is drawn to a flower. ‘And the night isn’t over yet. Zoran plans to sing again.’

‘Cool.’ I was standing unaided and definitely didn’t need the doctor who showed up in Zoran’s team colour of black from head to toe. Black T, black jeans, thick-soled black boots with zippers up the side. ‘I can find a driver to take you home,’ he offered, once he’d checked my pulse and shone a small flashlight into my pupils.

‘No need, honestly. I want to see Zoran’s second set.’

‘Are you sure? It can get pretty wild.’

‘Sure,’ I insisted. Ezra spotted my intention to head out into the corridor and was there at the door before me. ‘Thanks,’ I murmured, resisting a strong urge to whisper Jude’s name into Grace’s ear as I passed by. Who was I to stand in her way? Plus, beneath the red and white streaks of war paint, Ezra was drop-dead gorgeous, there was no denying.

He led us to the main party room and soon we were back among the whirling lights and drumming, driving beat, shoulder to shoulder with costumed kids whose tunics were now creased and wrinkled, wings drooping and masks beginning to slip. It was hot – way above thirty degrees in the packed room, I guessed.

‘Missed you!’ Holly exclaimed, eyes wide under her tilted helmet. Before I knew it she’d rushed up to me and grabbed both my hands, dragged me along the corridors into the elevator then out of the building back into the huge amphitheatre. ‘Where did you go? Never mind, don’t tell me. You have a bad case of bed head and I don’t want to know why. You gotta dance, Tania. Don’t just stand there.’

‘Where’s Aaron?’ He should stand out in his male version of the Mercury outfit – bare to the waist except for the straps criss-crossing his chest and in his helmet

standing head and shoulders taller than most of the guests.

'He already left.' Holly shrugged then dragged me into the middle of the crowd.

For which I read, We had another fight, he made an involuntary exit. Poor Aaron.

'Dance!' she ordered.

The band broke into a new number and a shout went up as Zoran strode back onstage, dressed once more in the black-plumed headdress and dark leather trousers, with silver cuffs around his wrists and this time wearing an unbelievable pair of glittering, gossamer wings more impressive and convincing than anything you ever saw as a special effect at the movies. These wings had a span of two metres or more and they reflected light from a million tiny silver discs. He came into the spotlight and dazzled us, standing there, waiting to open his mouth and sing.

'You spoke my name, I came.'

We all yelled and clapped. It was Zoran's first ever number one from way back.

'I stand by your side . . . your side . . . your side.'

He threw back his head to sing the words we'd had in our heads seemingly for ever.

'My love for you cannot be denied.'

'You spoke my name!' We joined in the chorus, our

voices loud enough to reach the stars. I was dancing with Holly, thinking about Orlando and remembering the moment by Turner Lake when we went swimming at midnight and I fell in love with him, missing him so much it almost felt like a knife plunged into my chest. I gazed at Zoran and for a moment he seemed to beat his iridescent wings and actually rise from the stage.

‘On the ocean shore/ In the mountain shadow/ Search for me.’ Once more that soaring voice, the speaking from the heart to you and only you. ‘In the dark, dark valley/ You call my name.’

Someone came between me and Holly – Zoran’s guy with the gold collar and feathered cloak, Lewis the loincloth-clad god of youth. He grasped her around the waist and slow danced her out of sight. I danced on alone among the sweating bodies. Bare shoulders glistened around me, face paints melted and lip gloss smudged, dark eyes went blank.

The stage lights seemed to make Zoran float; a girl beside me covered her face with both hands, somewhere between agony and ecstasy, and when she dragged them clear, mascara smeared her cheeks. I glimpsed Grace again, still dancing with Ezra, arms wrapped around his neck, and now my own heavenly creature came and swept me off my feet, turned me

slowly, dreamily towards the edge of darkness.

I felt strong arms around me, looked into eyes shadowed by a dark beaked helmet, stumbled as the music faded and died.

‘Daniel.’ My partner formally introduced himself without loosening his hold.

‘Tania,’ I told him.

‘I know – I remember. How was your talk with the boss?’

The bird headdress, the black wings – I was talking to Zoran’s young sun god, stunned by his perfect features, limp in his grasp. ‘Interesting,’ I murmured. ‘Except I made a fool of myself by fainting at his feet.’

‘He has that effect,’ Daniel grinned. ‘And your girlfriend – is she doing OK?’

‘Which one?’

‘Aphrodite in the white robe.’

‘Grace. She’s more than OK, thanks.’ I looked for her but didn’t see her in the mass of bodies, only Holly near the stage, alone now and waiting impatiently for the next song.

It started low and slow but soon building and picking up tempo, driving a wave of people towards the stage where they danced mostly solo, limbs jerking and jumping, heads rolling on shoulders, eyes closed. My sun

god stayed on the fringe and kept hold of my hand.

Pretty wild, the medic had warned and I got what he meant – some of the dancers were completely out of their heads, others grabbed water bottles from a table by the giant sound system, tipped their heads back and poured it over their faces. There was a lot of swaying and stumbling, falling into the person next to you, and some body-surfing as the wave of dancers pressed towards the stage. A girl in a cherub costume was lifted on to the platform, her wings broken. She sat huddled, with her head sunk on to her knees until a guy in black came out of the wings and carried her out of sight.

Zoran sang on: ‘You don’t know me, you have no clue/ Who I am, what I do to you.’ He wailed the words above a racing whine of lead and bass guitar, gliding across the stage, twisting and turning, seeming to gloat as he mouthed the lyrics. ‘You don’t know me, you never will/ Shadows fall, voices kill . . .’

Another girl among the dancers passed and out and was lifted over people’s heads, her body limp. She was carried offstage – Zoran’s medic was having a busy night.

‘And how about you, Tania – are you doing OK now?’ Daniel murmured in my ear.

The top of my head felt as if it was lifting off, the drumbeat thudded through my whole body but I managed

to nod. I noticed that he'd lowered the visor on his headdress and that the bird mask looked eerily real.

'You don't want to dance?'

I shook my head. What was happening out there was less of a dance, more mass hysteria – a mess of gyrating bodies and flailing arms that looked scary enough from the outside so God only knew what it felt like when you were actually in the middle of it. My anxiety level rose as I looked for Holly and saw her at the front of the surge of bodies that pressed against the stage. But I shouldn't have worried – jammed against the platform, Holly simply put both hands on the stage and hoisted herself up like a swimmer slithering out of a pool. Next thing I knew, she was up there beside the lead guitarist, dancing on.

Bird man next to me slid his arm around my shoulder, his black wings fluttering against my skin. I didn't like that – the creepy feel of it or the fact that Daniel was in my space without being invited. I stepped away; saw his eagle eyes glitter behind the mask.

'I have to find Grace.' I gave a feeble excuse and plunged into the crowd, pushed my way forward until I reached the stage and waved wildly at Mercury girl to draw her attention. 'Where's Grace?' I mouthed.

Holly shrugged without breaking rhythm. By now there were half a dozen guests dancing onstage with the

musicians and it felt to me like the whole thing was out of control. I was being pressed against the edge of the platform, struggling against the forward thrust and suddenly finding it hard to breathe. Holly must have seen me being crushed and about to go under because she crouched down and extended her hand. I grabbed it and she hauled me up beside her.

‘You don’t know me/ Though you see my face.’ Zoran swept across the stage towards us, wheeling away at the last second so that I caught his features in blurred close-up – teeth bared and eyes flashing, driven on by some wild, untamed energy, seemingly fuelled by the control he’d gained over his audience. He swooped on smoothly. ‘My name is lost in time and space.’

‘Dance,’ Holly gasped, dragging me to my feet.

I looked at her face. Her forehead glistened with sweat and her eyes were unfocused; wet strands of blonde hair stuck to her cheeks. ‘Let’s go!’ I pleaded.

She looked at me like I was the crazy one. ‘Go?’

‘Leave! Let’s find Grace and get out of here.’ This was too much. I was feeling weird, crossing that line between what was real and unreal, falling into disorientation and chaos.

The music drove on, drums rolled, a cymbal clashed.

Holly pushed me back with both hands and carried

on dancing. She'd given up on party-pooper me.

I turned and saw two Zoran heavies standing guard in the wings. I spun back to find Daniel onstage next to me, arms and wings spread wide, seeming to hover as Zoran did, to levitate above the boards, his upper body captured in a vivid slash of green light.

He is airborne, hovering over me, his cruel curved beak is real, his eyes have me in their sights. Man becomes beast, human features melt and transform, I'm living a nightmare.

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