

DREAM NOVEL

By Zoe Kerr

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the truth

When I woke up in this world, three years ago, I knew everything there was to know and some things no one needed to know. I knew the local flora and fauna, as well as the falsifauna and falsiflora. I knew not to pay any heed to the hooked-in boys and girls writhing in the alleyways in the center of the Mains and to always remain deferential to the Battalion. But I also knew the men that were once artists and poets and where exactly they went when they went missing. I knew the Padlocked Woman and why she refused to speak. I even eventually learned how to court favor with Angelique and all her characters—a markedly difficult task, I can assure you. I was the purveyor of knowledge and a collector of tricks immediately and effortlessly in this world that sprung up around me and wouldn't let go.

Well, I say I knew everything and more. There was one thing I didn't know.

I didn't know why everyone I encountered was frightened of me.

Their fear was not an obvious kind. No one screamed when they saw my approach. I wasn't a leper, run out of town or banished to the alleyways and backwoods. But children were discouraged from looking at me. They would peek through their guardian's fingers and regret it, judging from the loud smacks and sniffing as I walked away. Shopkeepers would hustle me in and out, telling their helpers to give me whatever I wanted so I would leave. I never took advantage of this generosity, oftentimes throwing a charm of good luck over my shoulder to them on my exit, but the damage was done and I was brutally aware of how truly unwelcome I was.

This was the nature of being me. And I accepted it as one accepts a horrific nightmare as fact when they're in it.

CHAPTER ONE

a bad omen

When I trudged up the hill to meet the Mains head-on, I didn't know what to expect. The city had become so overrun with tech, the layout changed according to what the developers deemed was necessary. Between the newer skyscrapers, all chrome and glass, lay some squat buildings made of brick or wood. Everything was either old or new with nothing in between. Free of decay or already dying. It was the same with the city's inhabitants. You either stayed clean of the cerebrians and programmed them instead, or you were on the streets with all your buddies until your last breath.

Throngs of people bounced off each other, but all gave me a wide berth, which I appreciated. I always needed to catch my bearings when I re-entered civilization, and the more space I was given, the easier it was to adapt. I had made it a habit whenever I returned to the Mains to revisit the local haunts and see how haunted they had become in my absence.

At first glance, the pharmacy was still hopping, with faux-bandaged fiends hoping to score withdrawal medication from the more, shall we say, creative distributors inside. Apparently, loading up a cerebrian while hopped up on the pills that are supposed to wean you off the machine leads to a high that rivals being tossed off one of the hundreds of skyscrapers in the city. I once wondered why the Mains would encourage anyone to withdraw when it made so much money, and I realized there was no withdrawing. Not really. The only people that bought the withdrawal medication were those that had no intention of quitting.

I continued walking, noting the corner store that stood proud amongst a quartet of superstructures and the bakery, which had long since abandoned baking and taken up selling cerebrian accessories. Bold stickers and charms to hang off the sides. T-shirts emblazoned with

the words TRUST THE MACHINE and DON'T LOOK BACK. A crudely stuffed lovey in the shape of a happy fiend hooked in and drooling. It made me sick, but I was relieved to see it standing all the same. When that place falls to time, it will truly be the end of the world. I turned the corner and faced the first closure of the day.

The bookkeep that was still hanging on by a thread when I left had fallen, and an alleyway had opened up inside of it, created by some enterprising citizens with sledgehammers. I could see onto the next street in the grid straight through the old front entrance. A few groaning kids were sprawled out on the ground of this makeshift path, all hooked-in. As soon as the roof caved in, whoever was least injured would move on to the next road, ready to demolish the first vacant establishment they saw. This was the way of the Mains. No one would tell them no. No one would investigate the destruction of these cursed places. No one would save the fiends left to suffocate under the rubble. Not as long as there were still kids around to hook-in and ingest whatever the developers fed them.

Whatever still stood of this bookkeep was covered in a thick layer of moss and ivy—thicker than the light dusting at the first few floors of the skyscrapers. It crept in and out of the structure like a guest that couldn't decide if they wanted to stay or leave. Some of it had already begun to flush orange and yellow with rot, but it wouldn't have mattered even if it were fresh as the surrounding Dross landscape. None of the greenery was good for eating or medicine. Everything grown in this wasteland was purely for aesthetics or an accident. When I woke up in this place, the second thing I knew without trying was that attempting to consume any of the verdure was asking to die via poisoning.

Things change rapidly in this world, and as much as I wish it did, magic has nothing to do with it. For example, the bookkeep I just described? It was structurally sound and free of foliage

when I left for the Dross three days ago. I shook my head, disappointed but unsurprised, and kept walking, opting to skip the new shortcut thoughtfully built into the bookkeep. Meanwhile, the stares had already begun, mostly from those without cerebrians to entertain themselves with, all of which I could ignore easily enough. At least their fascination with my existence was honest. I never *caught* them looking at me or talking about me. They just did it without any tact or hesitation. The worst came from the elites. The closer to the center of the Mains I got, the more tactful the staring and whisper became. Desperate to make me feel welcome, they would bump into me the same as they would anyone else. Except I would feel them shudder as soon as we parted, as though they forced themselves to do it.

My mind wandered as my feet pounded the jutting pavement back into place. I knew where I was going, mostly. My thoughts turned to where I had just come from and how eager I was to return, as well as the client for this particular contract. He was thin (as they all were in the Dross) with a widow's peak and a craggy forehead. His clothes were clean, he seemed well-rested, and he had a quick wit. He appeared much older than his supposed twenty-seven years, but he had what I needed in terms of payment, so I allowed this apparent lie to slip through. He said he needed information from the city and that I was the only one he trusted to follow through. He listed these tasks as such:

1. Ascertain how many characters Angelique the Storyteller has accumulated in total.
2. Find the Pest and tell him a debt is owed to the man in Higher-Tower. If he runs, bring him by force.
3. Deliver a package from the Dross to the Battalion quick-town.
4. Accompany the client to Utolsó.

It would require some footwork on my end, and I'd have to track down characters that weren't exactly known for being available to the public, but I was used to finding my way in through the cracks. He offered triple my usual fee if I finished by the week's end.

This seemed like a decent deal, but even at the time, I wondered why he needed *me*. He posed the offer from ten feet away while I was cooking my breakfast and listened impatiently as I asked him for what purpose did he need this information? And why ask the one person that could be recognized anywhere by anyone? Why can't you do it? He waved me off with a nervous smile that didn't reach his eyes. Before I left, my client offered me a gift for safe travels, a sort of peace offering.

A palm reading.

I was under the impression that fortune-telling was usually only achieved by women, but he explained that his mother had taught him how to do it before she passed. Skeptical of how skilled he could be but not wanting to offend, I obliged by sitting next to him in his temporary residence—a molded-over autogyro outfitted with rugs and netting to keep the bugs out. He was hesitant to touch me directly, so he used a pen to trace the lines in my hand while I held them steady under a light. After a few minutes in silence, he looked up, excited.

“You have diverging paths in your story, and many forks in your life line! The most I've ever seen! A very bad omen, just terrible!”

I was confused at his apparent joy at this development, but he quickly smothered my fears with the reassurance that this bad omen would only affect me after I finished this job. I tried to remind myself that he was not a woman. Surely, he had no power beyond what little he could learn from his dying mother. Surely.

Feeling somewhat dampened by this memory as I hurtled through the city, I tried to recall the place I would return to after I was finished for the night. Not the tiny camps where men proclaimed to have knowledge passed down from ghosts, or the quick-towns erected by the Battalion so they could spy on the Dross. I had only seen glimpses of the latter, and that was more than enough. No, I resolved myself to forget all of that and instead remember the others.

This train of thought held me over until I reached my destination: One of the oldest establishments left in the city, a dark place that was lit exclusively with neon, an element that was considered passé sixty years ago. I was told it was also Angelique's favorite place to unwind after a performance. Or rather, one of her favorites, depending on what her characters were in the mood for. When I arrived, a large sign hung on the door proclaiming it CLOSED FOR BUSINESS. I knew that was untrue, judging from the lack of visible decay on the exterior, so I pressed on, pushing the door open.

Unlocked.

Amateurs.

Inside, I spotted my target.

Angelique was a Storyteller of the highest caliber. She had a glow to her, something that couldn't be taught or magicked. It was an innate brightness that contrasted with the grim nature of our reality. I'm told she took up space, even before her characters began to appear beside her, even before she began to hook in for money. She occupied two booths and was close to spilling into a third, had her and her characters not all squeezed in tight together. The first thing you'll hear about Angelique is that she is smaller than she seems when you're hooked-in. I wouldn't know, as I've never been one to play cerebrarians, but even glancing at her as I entered, I could believe it. Before the hunched-over server could politely ask me to leave, I gave him my order

and promised not to be here long. He hurriedly limped away. I tipped my head to the booth closest to me by way of greeting.

My arrival rippled through the room like a wave, and I felt a surge of apprehension as several of the crowd glared in my direction. It was easier to win over one person, especially if I kept my visit brief, but it was another thing entirely to try to convince a room that I did not intend any harm. A character with a black cap and soot-smudged cheeks choked on her drink before addressing me with wide eyes.

“You! You’re the Wanderer. You poor, poor thing,” She tilted her chin down and stared at me through her eyelashes, lower lip quivering. Another character, wizened and frowning, smacked the sooty one’s arm and shook her head as though to discourage any interaction. From the other booth, I heard a few whispered words.

Stealing souls...don't look at it...dangerous creature...

“I’m fine, thank you. No need for pity here,” I murmured as the hunched-over server handed me my food (if you could call it that), shoddily wrapped in onion-skin paper and tied off with some twine. He retreated before I could thank or pay him, so I tossed a spell of good health at his body. He instantly stood up straighter and glanced back at me, gratitude intruding on his brow.

“Where have you come from, Wanderer dear? And how long do you intend to stay?” Another character, with long blonde hair and slender pale legs, leaned closer and purred. She was mere inches from my left arm, and I looked to Angelique for a hint as to what I should do. I was not accustomed to this sort of positive attention, and was frankly uncertain if it was positive at all. Unfortunately, Angelique was preoccupied with shuffling her food along the plate with a finger.

“I’ll be in the Mains just for today. I came from the Dross. Spent three nights there, visiting a friend.” This seemed to disturb the character with the long hair, as she grimaced and turned her head away to whisper to one of her many companions. I continued. “Angelique. I feel I’m at a disadvantage. I know of you, and you clearly know of me, but I’ve never spoken with you directly. May I ask how you are? I’ve heard your work is well-regarded,” I said, teasing her. Well-regarded was an understatement. She was the talk of the town and several towns over.

She looked up from the food as if she was just coming up for air after a long swim. Her eyes met mine, and I was struck by how empty they seemed. The woman once known as the Face of Her Generation appeared to be in need of a thousand-year nap. This was what I came all the way from the camps for?

“When did you arrive?” She asked, blinking slowly. Her companions all watched her with poorly-disguised concern. My understanding was that when Angelique dies, they’ll die too. It would be in their best interest to be taking much better care of her, perhaps suggest that she stop fracturing herself for a crowd as simple as the hooked-in, but that was also how they came to exist in the first place, so such an endeavor may seem hypocritical. I don’t pretend to understand the politics of these beings, though I am somewhat jealous of Angelique and her brood. At least they’re never alone.

“No more than ten minutes ago,” I answered. “Did you just finish a performance? You seem tired.”

She paused and looked around, her mouth moving silently. I realized after a moment that she was counting her characters. To their credit, they all stopped their chatter and allowed her to count them. Some even double-checked, attempting to count for her.

“No, I didn’t. I still have ten. Just ten,” She finished, sounding relieved.

One of the characters cleared her throat politely, a younger lass with red hair and rosy cheeks.

“Baptiste just went to the restroom. We had a performance this morning. That’s how we got Clareen,” She elaborated with a nervous giggle. The soot-smudged one from before shot her a look and shook her head disapprovingly.

Angelique’s face fell, and she rubbed her eyes, somehow making the dark circles seem worse as they reddened from the pressure. She really needed to stop performing. The curse wasn’t slowing in any way—quite the opposite. She put up a valiant fight in the beginning, insisting her gifts could only be sold to the highest bidders, but now that the money had run out, she was stuck taking any roles she could and as such, was collecting characters like her fans collected cerebrians. Take, take, take. That’s all those Mains children did.

“So you’re up to ten? That’s a lot of pieces to keep track of. It must be exhausting.” I tried to keep up the appearance of being a harmless stranger with this line of questioning, but I was becoming more and more aware of how many eyeballs were on me as I spoke, all growing even more suspicious of my objective.

Before I could smooth things over, I noticed a heavier-set figure with cropped hair and tan skin slide into the next booth over. That must be Baptiste. If my count was correct, she and her characters were off by one. There were actually eleven of them crushed into these two booths. My contact in the camps would be very intrigued by this, especially since it seemed there was no slowing down for Angelique. Last time I had heard about her one month prior, she was only up to five characters.

When I first found myself in this world, there was a Storyteller named Daveed. He was cursed in the same way as Angelique. He had fractured himself into six characters before dying of exhaustion in the middle of a performance of an old tragedy. He had a simple heart attack,

though everyone said it was because he was so entrenched in the story that he couldn't convince his body that the performance wasn't real. Everyone thought he was the pinnacle of endurance and strength, but then Angelique came along and destroyed his legacy nearly twice over. Now no one mentions Daveed.

“What's exhausting is this conversation, Wanderer. Don't you have some contract to fulfill that doesn't involve bothering us?” This was tossed at me by yet another character, this one with black hair and a scowl etched into her face. I considered answering sincerely, but I knew nothing I said would be satisfactory and that I'd already overstayed my welcome. The characters' disdain grew evermore apparent. Apparently asking outright how many times Angelique had nearly destroyed herself was a step too far. Never mind, I had the information I needed.

Before I could offer my sympathies and head out, a commotion arose in the kitchen. Some yelling, followed by a portly man I could only assume was the cook clomping toward me, his jowls jiggling with the momentum. He stuck out one greasy finger and almost poked me in the eye with it. I noticed it shook and suddenly felt sorry for him and myself.

“You! You need to get out of here! We don't want none of your—of your kind. I was nice before with giving you food, but now you're bothering my best customer and I—I won't stand for it!” A gob of his spittle hit me in the face and I sighed.

I raised my hands in surrender, still clutching my meal, and turned to leave. A small voice called out my name, and I stopped.

“Wanderer. Next time you're in the Mains...stay away from me,” Angelique said, sounding more and more fragile by the second. “I don't associate with killers.”

I waited a moment to see if she had anything else to add. Nothing. Well, since we're no longer playing nice.

"Which one of you should I stay away from?" I asked, pausing for emphasis. "Oh, silly me, you'll be dead by the time I return anyway." I shrugged, not bothering to look at her or her characters' reactions, though I heard a sharp intake of breath from several of them.

The satisfaction in having the last word was short-lived, as I tried to ignore the second gob of spit nailing the back of my head.

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