

SUPERMUNDANE

# Adaption



*This pre-human you should never have been made!*

DEBBIE ZAIN



## CHAPTER 1

### THE PSYCHOSIS

To differentiate between delusion and reality, Olivia had to develop what her psychologist called meta-awareness; an inner knowing that her sensory perceptions were mistaken.

As black paint dripped from the box room ceiling onto her pink butterfly sheets... the mound she'd made out thrashed underneath it like a wild beast caught in a net. Her patchy, black hands were the first to break through, punching out at thin air, then her multicoloured mane, wrapped and tangled around her sweat-soaked face.

'Nooooooooooooo!' Olivia screamed as she bolted upright in bed, sticky hands in front of her enormous stomach to stop the maniacal being ripping out her unborn child. 'Don't 'urt my baby!'

She yanked away at the mounds of hair strangling her face and neck and then lifted her pyjama top. Her bump was still intact, no giant hole filled with nothing but blood and guts, no frazzled dead foetus dangling out of her, strangled by her torn bowels like it had exploded from her womb and hanged itself.

The baby was fine.

It was just a nightmare, that's all, no matter how visceral.

She let out the breath she'd been holding. Could she make it full term without a major psychotic episode?

She reached for her bedside lamp, pressed the switch, then grimaced at the black squiggling mess on her formally pastel coloured walls, glistening with the thick tackiness of an impatient artist. She examined her work. It was more abstract than usual, no detailed, delicate, wispy tendrils off-shooting from its jet black core; this looked more like an erratic black hole. Why did they always have the same mass of jet black as their central focus, just like these freshly painted beings? Well, "painted" might be generous; these looked like a five-year-old who'd been let loose with a tin of black paint, had smeared their hands in as much of it as possible, and had a tantrum.

'What the bloody 'eck's goin' on?' Her dad burst through her bedroom door, hairy chest and potbelly first, wearing just his boxers. 'Awww for freak's sake, Liv, not again!'

She lifted her hands and hunched her shoulders. 'Sorry.'

‘Sorry? I’ve ’ad no kip this week ’cause o’ this screamin’ malarkey, not to mention all the paintin’ I’m ’avin’ to do; I’m knackered!’

‘Well, y’ll be glad to see the back o’ me then, won’t ya?’ Olivia cocked one eyebrow and smirked. ‘Rest assured it’ll be the last time ya get the roller out.’

‘Y’re not funny, Liv. Doctor’s said ya can get meds that won’t affect the baby, so why ya puttin’ yerself through all this again?’

Great, he wasn’t in the mood to joke it off. He seemed worried, and she didn’t blame him, her mind was becoming perverse again. There was a time she would trust her nightmares, believe she was suffering them for a reason, that they were a warning given to her by her heightened intuition for things she should avoid. She had evidence to support this notion; after each bout, once she’d analysed the messages inside them, she found they correlated to unfortunate events in Manchester, events she would have been near to or attended if she hadn’t taken notice and changed her plans. But nothing had ever come of these nightmares. Well, nothing apart from her father making her take medication for schizophrenia.

She just needed to keep it together for one more week. She could handle a week. ‘I’m not riskin’ any new drugs, either. “Side effects may include psychotic episodes”... that’s a great antipsychotic drug... I don’t think. I’m not riskin’ the baby bein’ addicted to any pharmaceuticals, simple as that, end of!’

‘End of, my arse, madam! If ya wanna talk about risk, we’ll talk about risk. D’ya not think that’s what y’re puttin’ the baby at by carryin’ on like this?’ He stormed over to the window, yanked at the lever and pushed it until it squealed in rebellion. ‘Ya don’t want drugs but it’s alright ’avin’ the little mite addicted to paint fumes, is it?’

She looked into his eyes. They weren’t angry, just desperate. He stood, barrel-chested, a bulling six foot of an ordinarily dominant man, looking helpless. After what she put her parents through last time she behaved like this, she couldn’t blame him for his persistence, even if he was stooping to low blows. Knowing it was her choice and there was nothing he could do about it must’ve reduced him to such a level in these last futile attempts to change her mind. ‘Dad, please, we’ve exhausted this discussion. I’m goin’ straight back on ’em after the birth.’

‘But—’

‘No, Dad. I’m due in a week. I’ve made it this far, so what’s another week gonna do? Until then, I’ll be sound as a pound! It’s a nightmare, that’s all, okay?’

A drop of black paint, as if some outside force was intent on winding him up, landed on his forehead as she finished her sentence.

He sucked a mass of air in through his nostrils and wiped his forearm across it. 'Just a nightmare?' He sat on the bed, took hold of her sticky hand and lifted it. 'Then what's this, Scotch bleedin' mist?' He turned her hand, his eyes full of sadness as they scanned the length of her forearm. 'Take a closer look at what this nightmare o' yours can do, an' then repeat that with a straight face, if ya can.'

She peered down at her large, oval bruise on her forearm. During the weeks it had taken to develop, it had turned into an interesting mixture of deep purples, blues and reds with notes of burnt orange and mustard yellows around the edges, some were almost shimmering like gold. It was like the abalone shell she'd painted for her A-level. It was fascinating to see skin so pale and bleak crafted into such beauty. A likeness to the wonderfulness found in nature; derived naturally from the pain of punching her skin, her live canvas. She drew her hand back and pulled down the sleeve of her Panama top until her thumb secured it in place.

'Batterin' yerself again, that's totally normal an' sound as a pound, init? Y've been immagin' that frickin' black thing doin' somethin' to the baby, 'aven't ya? The monsters in yer 'ead are now after yer unborn child, I take it?'

A flash of the black beast, ripping open her stomach, snatching her child from her womb and setting it alight, struck her mind's eye. She swallowed to lubricate her throat and stared up at him, eyes wide, trying to replicate the animated pixy look that had wrapped him around her finger for years. Even now, sixteen and pregnant, it still worked. 'No, Dad. Just normal birth worries... I was... err... dreamin' the midwife wasn't 'oldin' the baby properly.'

He stared into her puppy dog eyes for a moment, a longer moment than usual. She waited for his chest to deflate, for the corner of his mouth to rise which always made his eyes squint and sparkle with humour as he melted in front of the emerald green eyes he'd declared frequently he could never refuse, but this time only his jaw moved like he was chewing his frustration.

'Cause we usually scream at people 'elpin' us?'

Great; sarcasm with an accusing tone. What did she expect; she could never lie to him, or anyone; something about her face always gave it away, apparently, not that she was in any usual need to master the art. There was only one thing left; the I'm-totally-fine-and-sane-please-don't-cart-me-off-to-the-loony-bin-again smile she'd perfected over the years. She grabbed his hand and pulled the most convincing one she could muster. 'Sorry, I woke ya, Dad.'

'An' the 'ole neighbourhood. Bit dramatic for a midwifery mishap, don't ya think?'

'Dad, please. It was a nightmare. Yeah, it was a bad one... but I'm fine!'

‘Until the daymares begin,’ he mumbled as if this was an acceptable way to carry on after being told.

She took a breath, patience now wearing thin, part of her dying to tell him to stop being a knob. Unlike her nightmares, she’d only ever had one hallucination in her life. Granted, it was a massive one, one that forever made him see her as a delusional delinquent who he couldn’t trust to go outside. She may experience things that didn’t happen like they were as real, but there was no need to bring it up when, in her mind, the delirium could have been because of a lack of sleep. Still, the event was significant enough for her to agree to medication for schizophrenia, which could also be the reason the incident was isolated.

‘Dad, d’ya really want my last day ’ere to end on a downer?’

‘No but... well, what if y’re crossin’ the road while ya ’ave a funny do an’—’

‘Dad, stop worryin’; y’re well stressin’ me out.’

He raised his hand, shook his head and stared at the floor. ‘Fine.’

‘Thank you. Ya do still trust me, don’t ya? Think I’m gonna be a good mum, despite my illness? That I’m gonna do everythin’ in my power to take care o’ this baby, no matter what?’

Repeating his own words back to him, ones he had used to console her whenever she doubted herself, rarely worked to prove her point, but, no doubt because of the desperation in her tone, she could take the risk. If he was the father she’d always known, supportive and intelligent, then surely he would see that there was never a more poignant time for her to hear those words.

‘Dad, ya know I don’t think any o’ this is real anymore, don’t ya?’ She may no longer show she was mentally sound and unaffected by her nightmares, but he had to know that. ‘I know right from wrong, okay? I’m watchin’ myself. I know the triggers. I wouldn’t be keepin’ myself off meds if I thought my baby was at risk, okay? I’m just tryna give it the best start, drug-free.’

He paused, his face softening as though he’d just recieved the reassurance he was after; like he would finally get some kip. ‘I know y’re determined to be a normal, stable, role model for the child, prove ya can be a wonderful mother despite yer age an’ illness—’

‘An’ in spite o’ what my mam thinks, yeah, I am. I ’ope your not startin’ to doubt me too?’

He scowled, but the corner of his mouth curved, giving his eyes the glimmer of hope she was after. 'Not if I know what's good for me, 'ey?'

She punched his arm. 'Exactly!'

His chest deflated. 'Whatma gonna do wi' ya, 'ey? Or without ya? Can't believe ma little girl's leavin'.'

'Well, this little girl's not so little anymore.' Olivia patted her bump.

'I'm sorry, Liv, I'm just—'

'Bein' my dad! Ya care for me an' y're worried, simple as. I'm sorry, too. For bein' the cause o' so much worry.'

'Aww, come 'ere.' He pulled her into his armpit and shook her gently. 'Not long to go, 'ey? That's somewhat of a relief, I s'pose. Not long till we get ya back to normal.'

'Normal? No such thing in Manchester, Dad.'

'Hmmm. Don't set me off again about yer livin' arrangements.'

She smiled. They'd exhausted that discussion, too, and she'd won; it was one of the best council areas in Manchester, and there was no way he could deny it, even after he'd done the crime statistic research! 'Yeah, I may as well get up. Big day today.'

'I 'ope y're not carryin' any furniture?'

'No, Dad. Luke 'n' Jack'll do all that. I just need to finish the mural in the baby's room an' add a few touches to the one in the livin' room.'

He scanned her bedroom walls. 'Yeah, ya should defiantly stick to paintin' yer own walls in ' future, kiddo!'

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ARTISTRY

‘What took ya so long?’ Luke called as Olivia stepped off the bus twenty yards from their maisonette. He placed the coffee table he was unloading from the van on the pavement and came rushing towards her with a wide smile.

‘I was gettin’ paint out o’ my ’air.’

‘That bad, eh?’ He bent forward and pecked her on the lips.

‘Ya could say that. I washed it that much all the colours came out so I ’ad to put a few back in.’

‘I meant the nightmare. Y’re okay, yeah?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ She gave him a warning glance; she’d had one lecture, she didn’t need another. Not that Luke’s lectures were the same as her dad’s, his were more about being concerned her nightmares meant something real, rather than debating her sanity. She couldn’t count how many times he’d told her to trust her visions and intuition, and how many times he’d wanted her to stay indoors after a nightmare like there truly was a demonic beast lurking in the shadows waiting to pounce each time she dreamt of one. Luke believing in her when no one else did, telling her she wasn’t mad when everyone else thought otherwise, was probably the biggest reason she fell for him, but she didn’t need him worrying. ‘Same shit, different day.’

He stood, hair gelled to one side, clean-shaven, skin shining like a pair of smart shoes that had just been polished while she’d left the house with hair that looked like a multicoloured explosion, not the best look when you’re trying to avoid people thinking you’re insane. ‘Well, it keeps yer old man busy, I suppose.’

She gave him an appreciative smile. No matter how paranoid he was about her nightmares, he was always wise enough to change the subject.

‘Moving day. Can ya believe it?’ His brown eyes were larger than ever, sparkling with glee.

She patted his arm. ‘I know.’

‘I’m well excited to move in with ya, we’re proper grown-up.’

‘Ah, but ya ’aven’t ’ad to live with the mess I make yet, ’ave ya?’



‘First house rule then,’ he pulled her towards him, as close as her belly would permit, ‘lockin’ yer paints away at night. Bagsy bein’ key holder.’

She giggled. ‘Sounds like a plan.’ She lent to her left to view the back of the van. ‘Where’s our Jack?’

‘On ’is way, apparently. That was like an hour ago. I’ve nearly finished.’

‘What’s ’e like? I’ll ’elp ya with the rest, then.’

Luke gave her a look of his own, raised eyebrows and an I-don’t-think-so glare. ‘Y’re lucky I’m lettin’ ya lift a paintbrush, Liv. I think there’s some blue leaves waitin’ for ya.’ He jerked his thumb to the maisonette.

‘Fine!’ As Olivia walked towards the open door, the smell of freshly laid carpet and gloss paint hit her nostrils. After crossing the threshold, she ran her hand across the freshly laid carpet on the stairs in front of her, watching the multicoloured glittery flecks of the pile spring from her fingers back into position, and then turned left, through the oblong hallway, with a door to the right leading into the kitchen and a door that lead into the front room. Her paints were in the same place, on a dust sheet facing the massive mural she’d been painting on the main wall. They had pushed the sofa and dining table up against the opposite wall to accommodate them. She gave a thankful smile to the furniture they’d saved so hard for and then turned back to admire her work.

An enchanted forest, made up of twisted, white trees with blue leaves and multi-coloured, bubble-blowing flowers, surrounding a golden lake stared back at her. Little imaginary creatures, dotted here and there, looked up at the multicoloured sun which beamed down upon the land, highlighting the top of the trees. It was great to be getting in the zone again like this; using the rainbow colours and glitters she always used, her stamp, the materials unique to her. Each time she finished something like this, it would feel like pure relief. She needed that feeling today, the feeling that she could release something inside her that was good.

As she continued to gaze into the forest, it looked more and more familiar, like she’d visited such a place not just in her dreams or her imagination.

She shook off the weird reminiscence, reached for her palette, and opened her resin and glaze. The blue leaves of her white trees needed to shine. She added a little glitter in with the mix, and a touch of flamingo pink to create the iridescent sheen she was after, and set about the last touches to her masterpiece as Luke brought in and re-arranged the rest of the furniture.

‘Alright.’ Jack popped his head around the door, dreadlocks dangling over his shoulder, box labelled kitchen in his arms.

‘Just in time to get the last box off the van, are ya?’

‘And to make brews!’

‘Of course!’ Olivia rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but smile; his charm always got him out of everything. She placed her brushes in the water pot and followed him into the kitchen.

‘Been sleep paintin’ again, I hear?’ He asked as he unpacked the kettle, toaster, and steriliser.

‘How do you know?’ She took the steriliser from him and placed it on the opposite counter.

‘Your Dad. He’s worried sick.’

‘For fuck’s sake, Jack, why did you ’ave to give ’im your number?’ Olivia pulled the cups from the box and banged three on the counter.

‘Because it was polite to do so. I think it’s only fair for him to want your best mate’s number, especially as he knows how responsible I am!’ Jack blinked slowly and lifted his chin, holding back a smirk. ‘He only wants to know you’re okay.’

‘I’m fine!’

‘You don’t have to tell me that,’ he pressed his glasses to his nose and took out the tea, coffee, and sugar from the box and a packet of ginger nuts from his jacket and then filled the kettle. ‘He was goin’ on about how you paint such darkness in your sleep, yet the rest of your art is so colourful and bright, questionin’ what’s inside your subconscious mind, sayin’ somethin’ about you bein’ possessed.’

She raised her eyebrows and sighed. ‘Well, it’s a good job ’e dunt believe in anythin’ like that then, init?’

‘Pretty much, yeah. Although, maybe we should start chuckin’ holy water at you, just in case.’

Olivia forced her lips together to stop herself giggling. ‘Yeah, I’d like to see ya get some of that. I think if ya walked into a church y’d pretty much melt.’

‘Too true. You just need to tell him you’re fine and you’re not goin’ back on your meds, simple as!’

‘Can’t. I’ve promised I will go back on ‘em.’

‘What?’ Jack threw the spoon of coffee into the cup, frustration blazing in his eyes. ‘Why?’

‘cause I need to get back to—’

‘Don’t say the word normal, Liv, I can’t be doin’ with it! Your mum and dad have had you believin’ you’re not normal for waaaay too long. You’re not a kid anymore, you’re not under their care, you can make your mind up about what’s best for you and what to deem normal. You bein’ stoned out of your mind is not what I class as normal. You’ve told me yourself you feel better.’

‘I feel more energetic an’ that, but I’m still ’avin’ nightmares an’ doin’ shit I’m unaware of. What if I start paintin’ the baby in my sleep?’

‘Thought we’d just sorted that problem out,’ Luke said, walking in behind her. ‘I’ll be ’ere to take care o’ ya at night.’

‘There you go!’ Jack clapped and brushed his hands. ‘So you have to put up with a few nightmares now and again, and? What your parents should have done years ago was tell you that you were just havin’ a few nightmares and reassured you there were no such things as monsters, not have you turned into a zombie.’

‘Look, I don’t need the pair of ya gangin’ up. They dint do it just because of my nightmares.’

‘You had one daytime delusion, big deal. Unless you’re startin’ to see things again?’ Concern rippled behind Jack’s eyes.

‘No, but I’m worried I will. What if I’m out on my own with the baby an’—’

Jack batted his hand. ‘You’re older now and fully aware of what your brain sometimes does. It’s in the past; you need to live a new normal. You wanna be a good mum, then you need to be energetic and in control of yourself.’

She scowled at Jack. ‘That’s exactly why I need them, so I can protect my child.’

‘That’s your dad’s view, not yours.’

‘No, I’m just makin’ sure I’ll be a good role model.’

‘And they’re your mum’s words, aren’t they? You’re brainwashed into thinkin’ you can’t be a good mum without meds through years of them makin’ you feel you’re not a good daughter without them! Well, you’re not there anymore so you can fuck that idea off right now! You need to at least try. If it goes tits up, we can think again.’

She glared at him. Why didn't he understand? He may have made a good argument, had her best interests at heart but she now had someone other than herself to consider; she needed to make sure she was in control, not try to be. She needed to trust that without a doubt she would handle her mind and the only way to make sure of that was to mask all potential delusions. She couldn't deny she wanted to be free of the drugs and to overcome her issues herself, but the only way she knew she would be an excellent mother was to medicate away any underlying issues. The medication gave her normal thoughts, a normal imagination, no day delusions about unexplained magical happenings, no demonic being trying to kill her. A safe environment for her child to be around.

Luke's hands slid over her shoulders. 'Just pour the water, Jack, mate. Let's leave it there for now, yeah.'

Jack turned, finished the brews and then passed them over with a sorrowful smile. 'Come on then, let's go have a brew your new front room.'

She took one cup from him, Luke took the other, and they walked in silence to the living room.

'Gingernut?' Jack pushed a black varnished thumbnail into the first one and bowed.

She sucked her lips together so she wouldn't giggle at his thespian nature and snatched it from the packet.

He sat back on the sofa and then squinted at the mural. 'Since when were leaves iridescent? Photosynthesis surely would not allow.'

'Yeah, whateva, Mr 'orticulturist. It dunt matter what natural sunlight would allow, all that matters is Affleck's Palace finally wants my work.'

'No way! Affleck's bitch has finally succumbed to your charm?'

'Yep! Persistence is the key!'

'Well, you can't deny you've got your old flare back. Your alien planet paintin's have always been your best work.'

'Ah, the only good side of my drug-free mind, my imagination. My new Affleck's bestie said my visions of another world are spectacular.'

'They are,' Luke patted her knee. 'It looks top. It's no wonder she wants a few of your pieces. With or without meds, you're brill either way.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'all the best artists are mad; they have to be to think outside the norm, create new and excitin' things.'

Olivia smiled at Jack. 'So, considerin' y've not 'elped today, can ya 'elp me tomorrow?'

He scowled at her. 'I've just made the brews!'

'I don't really want ya walkin' into town, Liv,' Luke said.

She turned to him with a sigh. 'Don't start thinkin' somethin' bad's gonna 'appen, just 'cause I've 'ad a nightmare, Luke. I need to take my artwork an' you're at work.'

'Yeah, Luke, don't start with the paranoia shit, actin' like it's all real, that's like goin' from one extreme to another. I'll come with you, no worries.'

'It's not paranoia when her nightmares coincide with awful shit 'appenin' like last time when there was a bomb scare in the Arndale.'

Jack rolled his eyes. 'There was a man with a bag who got moved.'

'Could 'ave been a man with a bag who didn't get moved, ever thought about that?' Luke raised his eyebrows and smirked. 'Anyway, it's not paranoia this time, it's 'cause she's too close to the due date to be exertin' 'erself, that's all.'

'I'll do all the liftin'.' Jack waved a soggy ginger nut in the air. 'You can depend on me.'

## CHAPTER 3

### THE DAYMARE

Olivia pulled the bag from Jack's shoulder as they turned down Market Street. 'Ya need to 'old the bag straight.'

'They're dry, aren't they?'

'Yeah, but—'

'Well then, I'm not goin' to ruin them, am I?'

'Ya could put a big shoulder mark in 'em, smudge some o' the glitter.'

Jack lifted the duffle bag up and away from his skinny jeans. 'There. I shall carry it as such for the rest of the duration, anythin' else, ma lady?'

She slapped his backside as they turned into Affleck's Palace. 'Yeah, less o' the cheek. Ohh, I need more 'air dye while I'm 'ere, remind me before we leave.'

'Liv, you need hair dye.'

'Funny.' Olivia stopped after the first flight of stairs to the second floor, her hand on the rail, and took in a breath.

Jack rushed back and placed his hand on her back. 'What's up? Not in labour, are you?'

'I'm just catchin' my breath. Try strappin' two stone o' bricks to yer waste an' then try an' walk as fast as ya used to.'

'We can get a coffee in Gingers while we're here?'

'Nah, I need to get back, still got the mural in the baby's room to finish. I want it done by next week.'

'Even though the baby won't be in its own room for about a year, probably.'

'That's why I did the one in my room first.'

'It survived the night, then?'

'Yeah. Luke wasn't jokin' about the paints, they were well an' truly locked away.'

‘So, overall, how was the first night in your new pad with Mr Paranoia?’

‘e’s not paranoid, ’e’s supportive an’ carin’ an’ that’s why I’m with ’im.’

‘Mr Dependable then?’

‘That’s an improvement, I s’pose. An’ great. I appreciate my Mr Dependable, thank you.’

‘I know. I’m only yankin’ your chain.’

As they reached the second floor, Olivia poked her head around the corner, peering into the shop that Olivia loved, full of incense and trinkets and colourful, hippy clothes.

‘Hi.’ The dark-haired, gothic-looking lady who’d she’d bought many clothes from greeted her.

‘There’s no hair dye in there,’ Jack pulled on her sleeve. ‘She’ll be back to see you in her own time. As for today, there are more pressin’ matters!’

The lady nodded and smiled at his charm as he lead Olivia to the foot of the third set of steps. ‘Come on, Crofty, get your fat arse up them steps.’

Olivia looked back at the bead shop, longing to buy more crystals to stick on the living room wall, but knew not to push it; she’d already got him to do one thing. She daren’t ask for a full must-have list.

As they reached the art shop on the top floor, Jack placed the bag on the ground.

Her Affleck’s bestie, a woman in her forties who looked more manly than womanly, was waiting at the counter with a steaming cup in her hand. ‘Orr... right?’

‘Hi, Issie.’ Olivia shook her hand. ‘This is my bag carrier, Jack.’

The lady’s gaze slid down him once, and then she turned back to Olivia. ‘Y’ve only brought four, ant ya?’

‘Well, I brought six but only so ya could choose which four out o’ the six you want.’

She turned to the bag and Jack opened it so she could peer inside. ‘But now I’m spoilt for choice. I like ’em all.’

A young couple with matching face piercings stopped by the opening. ‘What are them?’ The girl said with an uninterested glare.

Jack took out her 20 x 20 geometric flower painting and held it up. ‘These are the best original art canvases in Manchester. All one-off, unique pieces by the very talented Olivia Croft. And it’s your lucky day as the artist is here willin’ to sign.’

‘What else ya got?’ The girl lifted her nose and stepped closer.

Olivia, Issie, and Jack pulled out the rest and rested them against the counter. After five minutes’ deliberation, she bought two for the full asking price, and Olivia signed them like she’d done it a thousand times before. As the couple walked away, Olivia held in a scream. ‘I can’t believe that. I’m well chuffed.’

‘An’ I’m impressed,’ Issie said. ‘That was ma first sale o’ the day.’ She handed Olivia seventy percent and pocketed the rest. ‘I’ll give ya a call when I sell the rest.’

‘Thank you so much.’ Olivia shook her hand once more. ‘I really appreciate this opportunity.’

She nodded and slipped her a tiny grin as they left.

‘Won’t be refusin’ you again in a hurry, will she?’ Jack whispered as they walked around the other stalls, elbowing her.

‘oefully not. If I can do that a few times a month—’

‘Err, you’re not leavin’ me at the café alone. You can’t leave till I leave!’

Olivia giggled. ‘I wunt dream of it.’

‘Can we talk to the tat guy while we’re here?’

‘Only if I look in the crystal shop while y’re there.’

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. ‘Fine.’ As they turned the corner, icy fingers clawed the back of Olivia’s neck. She stopped and pulled on Jack’s cardigan.

‘What’s up?’

The claws pounced from the shadows whenever something ominous was approaching, prompting her to run. ‘I don’t know. I just know we can’t go that way!’

‘Are you jokin’?’



She looked down at her feet glued to the spot, unable to move another inch.

‘No.’ Luke may have been a worrier regarding her delusional nightmares but there was a reason for this; he fully trusted her intuition.

Jack trusted it, too. It didn’t matter how weird her mind was, causing her untrustworthy nightmares, making her see things that made her doubt her own eyes, she always noted her gut; this had never let her down. If her stomach was churning, the hairs on her arms stood on end, icy fingers attacking her neck, she wouldn’t question herself. No amount of logic at this point could make her step forward, continue on her path. He grabbed her hand. ‘Okay, let’s go.’

As they turned to leave, a gang of rowdy youths echoed up the stairs. As five of them came hurling through the side entrance where they would have been if she hadn’t stopped, they threw smoke bombs at the stalls. Time seemed to slow as a long-haired youth hurled one towards her.

Jack’s hand came out in front of her, knocking it out of her way just before impact, his eyes blazing with anger as it cut the side of his hand. ‘Idiot. Pregnant girl here when you’ve finished dickin’ about.’

‘Oh yeah, do A give a toss what the likes o’ you fink?’ The lad shrugged and then flipped open a penknife, a sneer spreading across his face as he pointed the blade.

As the lad lunged forward, a blast of white light warped out of Olivia’s stomach, sending the lad soaring over two stalls worth of clothing. He landed on the glass jewellery cover behind, smashing it.

Olivia’s eyelids quivered in the dead silence that followed.

Her knees turned to jelly and she buckled. Jack caught her before she hit the floor, but she pushed herself down and covered her eyes, unable to bear anymore. ‘It’s ‘appenin’ again. I’m seein’ things!’

Jack shook her hands from her face. ‘Then why the fuck did I see it, too?’

She peered up at him. His eyes held a mixture of interest and fear, like he was waiting for her to explain herself, but there was no way he saw light project from her stomach. ‘What did ya—’ A pop down below, then wet running down her legs, stopped her mid-sentence. ‘My waters’—’

‘Ew... I mean right.’ He patted her back and then jumped up. ‘Aww fuck. Phone an ambulance, someone, anyone.’

'Not for that scrote, I'm not,' a man behind the piercings counter beside them called.

'It's not for him; she's goin' into labour.'

Olivia grabbed Jack's hand. 'Call Luke, tell 'im to meet me there!'

He pulled out his mobile. 'Us there!'

'Me there; y're not comin'!' She'd argued throughout her pregnancy with him about him wanting to be her birthing partner as well as Luke. 'We may share everythin', but I 'ave to draw the line at ya seein' my unshaven bush!'

'Jokin' while pissin' yourself; gotta give you credit for that.' Jack squeezed her arm. 'I'll call your mum, as well then.'

'Now you're jokin', aren't ya? Olivia scowled at him. 'Do not call my mam, d'ya 'ere me?'

'Loud and clear. Don't know what I was thinkin'. Why would you want anythin' from someone who's never supported you? You should also not take her advice. You're obviously not deluded.'

'Not now, Jack, for f—'

'Liv, I mean it. Don't go back on your meds. What if Luke's right; there could be a connection to your nightmares and awful shit happenin', after all'

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NIGHT OF LIGHT

The moment Olivia stepped onto the delivery suite, the muscles in her calves twitched. It wasn't the midwives rushing past, their eyes on full alert, or the unlit corridor. It was more than that. A cold air that had nothing to do with temperature swarmed around her, tightening her cheeks, and it left her rooted to the spot.

As icy fingers clawed their way from the nape of her neck to her lower back, the bones in her knees seemed to melt, making them buckle. If those icy fingers were here, then she shouldn't be!

But her waters had broken over twenty minutes ago and she'd started having contractions in the taxi; intuitive warning or not, there was no way she could make it to another hospital. Fighting her urge to leave, and swallowing down the sickening sensation of her gut churning, she lifted her hand to catch the attention of one midwife, but she rushed past.

Great, she was invisible!

She let out a frustrated sigh. This was definitely a first. Her waist-length, rainbow coloured hair made her all but inconspicuous. Strangers had stared at her all her life, some smiling at her for embracing creativity, some scowling at her for having the gall to be weird; no one ever overlooked her. It was ironic for it to happen now, the one time she wanted attention.

She should have let Jack come with her, just until Luke took over.

A static noise emanating from the ceiling brought the next midwife to a halt, but she merely held onto the opposite door handle, bracing herself. As lights cracked and sparked and a deep rumble shook the ground, she held her stomach tight, preparing for the worst. The vibrations through her cheap, slip-on shoes tickled her feet and made her want to scream. She held it in. Thankfully, after one long, drawn-out fizzle, the whole outburst ceased.

As if she carried no duty of care, the midwife rushed away, leaving Olivia with the desolate, morbid corridor as her only company.

Her twitchy muscles returned. She must run! She gazed toward the midwife long after she'd disappeared, wondering how to walk unaided, let alone run. She'd never felt so vulnerable in all her life. She must have looked like a timid kitten with her slim frame, barely capable of carrying her large, round bump, which made it hard just to put one foot in front of the other. That she was only five foot four inches with per-

manently pink cheeks that made her look far too young to be having a baby didn't help, either.

She was still too young according to her mother though; her dad was just thankful she waited until she'd left school at sixteen, unlike some today. "Have an abortion," her mum suggested, "the baby will only leave you in a mess!" Like she could've considered it—all she'd ever wanted was a baby. This was just one reason she hadn't phoned her mother.

Pain surged through her stomach, and she lowered herself to the icy floor. Taking a deep breath, she rocked back and forth on all fours, trying to ease into the tightening bouts. She pressed her lips together, cutting off the flow of blood to shift the focus of pain, and let her hair mop the tiles, gathering particles of who knows what.

How dirty was this floor? If this was where she would give birth, she needed to know. How on earth was she even going to pull it off? Pull down her leggings and just... go for it? The baby would land on the cold, hard floor, and bang its head.

A bright doorway at the opposite end of the corridor opened and a midwife with radiant, mocha skin stepped out, the light in the room behind creating a vivid aura around her.

Olivia squinted, straining to see through the darkness. Was she real?

The woman sauntered towards her and held out her hand. "That was a slight tremor compared da the earthquake we had a few hours ago," she said in a serene, American accent, and cast her eyes to the ceiling. "These lights haven't worked since." The lights in the corridor popped on in succession.

Olivia looked up at the lights. How had they come on like that? Or were they always on and she was seeing things? Another delusion, maybe? "An earthquake? This is still Manchester, init?"

"It sure is." The woman moved closer, extending her hand. "They're rare but not unheard of."

She looked back at the woman, whose persona seemed kind, and took her hand.

"Contractions stopped?" She asked as she pulled Olivia's hand and supported her back.

Olivia scrambled to her feet and looked down at her stomach. "Yeah."

With a slow nod to her left, the woman showed for her to follow.

A strange feeling of giddiness replaced her icy message to run and, transfixed by the midwife's shoulder-length dreadlocks swaying from side to side as she glided, Olivia followed her into the bright, private suite.

To the left was an open door, leading into a bathroom. A television was mounted on the wall; underneath a cabinet. A double window facing her revealed the sun descending behind the city's buildings as a twilight evening drew in. To her right was a bed.

The midwife pulled a CD player from the cabinet and fiddled with until it glowed neon blue. As ambient music played, she turned and produced a mischievous-looking smile that brightened her entire face, her high cheekbones acting like an extension of it. 'Adaeze's the name. I'll look after you, beaudiful girrl.' Adaeze's eyes sparkled intently as she spoke.

Olivia blinked. Had the newly restored light affected her vision? And fancy thinking about music before making her comfortable. 'My waters 'ave broke.'

Adaeze smiled and pointed to the bed. 'Let's get you set up then.'

'To them things?' She raised her eyebrows and pointed to two machines flashing and beeping on a table at the side of the bed. 'I don't think so!'

'They're just the backup generators doing their job. They'll be fine in a liddle while.' Adaeze picked up a gown that lay neatly on the bed and passed it to her. 'Just saddle in for now.'

Olivia pulled the gown over her vest top and removed her leggings.

Adaeze poured a glass of ice water from a jug on the table beside the bed and walked towards Olivia and held it out. 'Here you go, beaudiful.'

Olivia took the water and placed it on the table. 'I'm gettin' contractions every five minutes.'

'I know.' Adaeze rubbed Olivia's arm. 'Don' you worry yourself. You're both fine.'

She let out an exhale. The random, crazed squawks emanating from the CD player may have been a statement of Adaeze's peculiarity, but the woman acted sanely. The lack of protocol at least showed she had experience, and someone who knew what they were doing was welcome after the reception she'd received. She also seemed calm; calmness from an experienced midwife meant her baby must be okay. That's all that mattered!

'You've done so well da get this far on your own, you know. So well, indeed.' Adaeze stroked her arm like she genuinely cared.

The warmth of her touch seemed to seep deep under her skin and travel up into her shoulder and across her neck, easing the tension she'd been holding. Adaeze looked at her like she was proud of her and hooked her to the monitor. It was a look she wasn't used to. People usually pitied her for being young and pregnant. This was the first time anyone looked at her like they admired her for what she was doing. Her heart warmed. How did Adaeze possess such a distinctly alluring nature? As Olivia looked into her wondrous, hazel eyes, which glistened all the more as she smiled, she became more comfortable. What was this strange affinity?

'I'm not on my own though.' Olivia looked at the door. 'My boyfriend should be 'ere any minute.'

'That's great.' Adaeze lifted her gown and placed rubber circles on her stomach. 'But I meant this far as in I think you may not have long da go.'

'Really?' She found it difficult to swallow, took a sip of her water, and turned to the window. It was already going dark which meant Luke should have finished work. What was keeping him? 'I 'ope 'e makes it.'

Adaeze began mopping her brow. 'I'm sure he will, beaudiful. Until then, I'll look after you.'

She stared at the door. Luke told Jack he'd be right behind her. Where was he? 'e's never let me down before.' She bit the dry skin on her lip. 'e's a top boyfriend. If 'e says 'e's on 'is way, 'e's on 'is way!'

'Then don' you worry yourself.' Adaeze face lit as she smiled.

She couldn't help worrying. This had nothing to do with intuition; something was wrong! Luke would never do this to her. What if something had happened in his rush to get there? Hit by a car, anything. What if her dark dreams really showed dark things happening?

Adaeze placed on some surgical gloves. 'I'm gonna need da do a liddle examination.' Adaeze patted Olivia's knees. 'Just a quick look da see how well we're doing.'

'What part of America a'ya from, Adaeze?' she asked to distract herself as she relaxed them for her.

'Sedona, Arizona.' Adaeze gave a sad smile, but her eyes still gleamed. 'I've been here seventeen years now.'

'That's just longer than I've been alive!'

‘It sure is.’ Adaeze looked at her with a mixture of pity and pride. ‘Just relax a liddle more for me.’

‘I dint plan to get pregnant, ya know.’ She glanced sidelong at the door again. ‘I wanted to wait ’til after college. I’m just takin’ a gap year before I return.’

‘Yeah? What is it you plan da do?’

‘My dad wants me to be a nurse. ’e thinks—’ She grimaced at the slight pressure on her cervix. ‘e thinks I’ll be a natural. I’d rather be an artist though.’ She turned to a whoosh, whoosh coming from the monitor. ‘Is that the baby’s ’eart?’

‘It sure is.’ Adaeze stood back and pulled off her gloves. ‘All looks well. An artist, huh?’

‘Yep.’ She pulled her gown over her knees. ‘My dad says I’m a natural at that, too, but it won’t pay the bills; can’t wait to tell ’im I sold some today.’

‘It’s a great feeling da prove your parent’s wrong!’ Adaeze raised her eyebrows. ‘It teaches ’em not da question your dreams, you know?’ Her tone changed, like she was trying to drive the message home. ‘Makes ’em understand you’re a very capable young lady!’

Olivia stared at Adaeze. How strange it was that she should mention something so relevant to the topic surrounding her home life, and with so much emphasis. She shook off the mystique before her paranoia kicked back in.

‘We’ll, I’ve got a job for now, anyway. Just like Luke. ’e left college as soon as ’e found out I was pregnant an’ saved every penny ’e earned for our new place.’ She smiled, thinking of him. ‘We’ve decorated an’ furnished the ’ole lot, even got carpets an’ all. An’ my mum thought we’d be livin’ in squalor. It was nice to prove ’er wrong on that one.’

‘He sure sounds like a good boy. An’ I’m glad da hear it.’

Olivia’s eyes shot to the door as a silhouette passed by. ‘e normally is.’ She smiled away the sting of tears. Why didn’t she let Jack come with her? He was right; they shared everything together; unshaven or not, she needed him!

Her stomach hardened. She braced herself for another wave of pain and took in deep breaths like her classes taught her. The monitor on the IV machine reached its highest peak, but nothing! She turned to Adaeze. ‘Is that machine makin’ my belly tight-en?’

‘No. That’s just your contraction.’

‘Can’t be. There’s no pain!’

‘There’s no need for pain now I’m here.’ Adaeze stroked her arm again.

More relaxing waves seeped into her arm, turning it into jelly. What was it about Adaeze that put her at such ease? Why did she trust her when she was acting so mysterious? ‘You weren’t at any of my antenatal appointments?’

Adaeze’s eyebrows rose. ‘No, but I’m the best person for this birth.’

She stared at Adaeze, scanning every inch of her face. There was something to this woman she couldn’t figure out. Something in that glint in her eye, something in her slight, heavy nod, but mostly in her tone.

Olivia’s stomach hardened once more, and she turned to the monitor. ‘This isn’t normal!’

Sadness crept into Adaeze’s eyes. ‘It’s normal for you!’

What was she on? ‘Shunt I ’ave two midwives?’ Olivia’s head felt light. She pushed her forefingers into her eyes, blinked hard to force her eyes open and craned her neck, trying to locate anyone passing by the door. Surely there was another midwife available now they had restored the lights? She needed Luke to burst through the door right now and save her from this captivating nutter.

‘It’s time da push, beaudiful.’ Adaeze’s gaze bounced to and from the clock. ‘We need him out before midnight!’

‘Why before—’ An overwhelming sensation to bear down consumed her. A surge of adrenaline shot through Olivia’s body. Luke really was going to miss the birth.

‘Doing great,’ Adaeze said, positioning her hands to support the head.

Masking the burn that her mother warned her would come when the baby’s head went through the birthing canal was a soothing warmth, followed by a drawing sensation as if Adaeze’s hands were now some kind of hot plunger, aiding her efforts. As she felt the crown pass through, she held her breath and pushed harder. Still not one particle of pain. The feeling was akin to the relief felt when one defecated; just an everyday occurrence for the human body. A natural expansion.

As the baby’s head appeared, a burst of white light illuminated the entire room and soared through the tiny window in the door and the large window to her right, piercing the inky darkness. In accompaniment to the light, the pipes under the radiator rattled like they were about to explode.



Adaeze ducked, her dreadlocks spinning in both directions, but her expression remained creepily serene.

Olivia wanted to scream at Adaeze to protect her baby, but could only wheeze something incoherent.

An immense flash shot back in from outside, rattling the window frame, and the surge of light and noise intensified.

Supporting the baby's head, Adaeze huddled herself over Olivia's legs.

Olivia's whole body tightened. She squeezed her eyes closed. Now aching with the noise, she covered her eardrums, preparing for some kind of explosion. Her life and her child's life were about to end.

Under Adaeze's huddle, the baby slithered all the way out. As the lights faded, the noise ceased, and electricity restored, she heard a soft intake of breath. Was it the baby's first, or was Adaeze shocked?

Olivia howled and scanned the room.

'Look here!' Adaeze cut the cord, pulled a blanket from her shoulder, and wrapped the baby inside it. 'Look at your boy!' Adaeze wiped his hair with a damp cloth from the sink and then passed him to her.

'A boy, wow.' She lifted her shaking arms. 'Is 'e...okay?'

Adaeze passed him to her. 'Perrfect!'

Her trembling ceased. As she stared at the marvel in front of her, time seemed to hone in and wait. A baby boy. She had created life, and here it lay, helpless in her arms. As she stroked his smooth and luminous complexion, a wave of euphoria sent chaotic flutters to her stomach.

He furrowed his eyebrows and gently batted his long lashes over his large, round eyes, looking all around with a confused expression. His lips pursed, and he made an "ooh" noise. As tight, ice white curls dried on top of his perfectly round head, her knees seemed to melt into the bed. An expansion occurred inside her heart. She'd fallen in love, and it was the most powerful and profound thing she'd experienced in her entire life.

'Y're right, 'e is perfect.'

The sound of her voice seemed to startle him, but after squeezing his eyes closed for a moment, his brows relaxed. Then, like they had woken him with fright, his eyes

snapped open with an intense green. He held her gaze so dramatically it almost looked like he was trying to peer into the very depths of her soul.

‘He looks just like his beautiful mom.’ Adaeze smiled like nothing had happened.

No matter what had occurred with the electricity of this rundown building and its unorthodox staff, she couldn’t help but smile back. He looked like her, yet she didn’t consider herself beautiful. Her eyes were the same stunning colour as the ones staring back at her, studying her, her natural hair the same platinum blond that allowed her to use multi-coloured pastels so effectively, but she looked more pixyish. Although she didn’t mind this, probably because it wasn’t really an admiration or insult, just an observation, she shied away from usual compliments.

‘What you gonna call this wonderful boy?’

She stroked his forehead. ‘Tom, after my dad.’

Tom’s dazzling eyes sparkled astoundingly, a huge, beaming smile spreading across his face.

Olivia gasped. Her hands trembled once more. How on earth was he pulling such an expression? ‘Is this... normal?’

‘Hmm, Tom.’ A slow smile spread across Adaeze’s face. ‘I think he likes that.’

She gazed back at Tom. He looked... pleased. It didn’t look like a fluke. He was still smiling, still holding her gaze, alert and wide with wonder.

‘Adaeze, stop with the enigmatic. Is it normal?’

‘It’s normal for him!’ Adaeze placed her warm hand on Olivia’s arm as if to reassure her, but her smile had faded. ‘An’ this ain’t all he can do!’

Coldness emitted from Adaeze’s palm and a prickling sensation, like tiny icicles, penetrated her skin and travelled up her arm. As the cold stabs crossed the top of her shoulders, every muscle in her body turned to mush. The power continued to sink deeper into her organs, slowing her heart rate.

‘What’s ’appenin’—’ Olivia caught the breath in her throat. Hundreds of tiny lights, like bright stars in the night sky, glittered and rotated inside Adaeze’s irises and dilating pupils. Deeper and deeper they sank until she saw what looked like an entire galaxy through a narrow vortex of space. In the back of her mind, amongst her natural responses and thoughts, her intuition must’ve been screaming at her to run... but this beautiful warmth had nullified them. Such warmth and peace melted those icy fingers.

‘Don’ worry, Olivia.’ Adaeze’s tone was non threatening. ‘Just listen carefully. What I’m gonna tell you will come as a shock... but please try da stay calm an’ focused.’

Olivia drew Tom towards her. She made to speak, but the speckles of light in Adaeze’s eyes gave a vivid flash, and a sense of drowsiness washed over her.

‘I’m an Illuminator.’ Adaeze’s eyes widened with glee as she waited for a reaction. ‘I have magical abilities that aren’t of this world that help dispel dark beings on Earth.’

Olivia forced her wide eyes to blink as they had become dry. Was this happening?

‘The place I come from is called Omnipion. It’s your home, too, and Tom’s.’

Olivia’s heartbeat slugged. ‘Omnipion?’ Why did the word seem familiar?

‘Yeah!’ Adaeze gave her an appreciative smile, like she knew Olivia remembered something of this made-up world. ‘It’s a beautiful, spherical enclosure in the centre of the universe where our true, nonbiological beings live. The powers of Omnipion enable us da transport our consciousnesses inda physical anatomies across the cosmos; humans being just one of ‘em.’ Adaeze ran her hands down her body as if it was a suit she’d just made.

‘Yeeeeeah. So, like ya really need to leave now.’

‘The reason our beings live in these forms is da test our true natures,’ Adaeze continued as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘The Test helps us find out what realm of Omnipion we belong to once we’ve passed.’

So this was what crazy looked like! Adaeze was a lunatic from the street who captured babies from hospitals, one who had some curious way of placing their mothers in a catatonic state before legging it. No, it wasn’t real; this was another one of her delusions. They must have progressed, become more corporeal.

‘For you and six other sages, The Test has never been mandatory. You’re known in Omnipion as the Adapter! You have a magnificent gift of converting newborn, iridescent beings into formats that allow the biological constructs we use da successfully assimilate ‘em.’

‘Ya need to get back to the institute you escaped from, don’t ya?’ Olivia spoke slowly. ‘That’s where they keep ya nice an’ safe from the public, isn’t it?’

Adaeze looked at her with an amused but disapproving scowl. ‘All beings agree before entering that, if they become so immoral that they fail The Test, they will get transformed into fuel,’ Adaeze continued, her voice turning morose. ‘Until one being

turned into a Corrupter, that is. He earned the title due da him becoming so dark he was able da hack into our mainframe, an' steal abilities, ones he professes to destroy our eternal home with, once he's got 'em all.'

Olivia stared into Adaeze's eyes, watching the hazel glisten as she gazed upon Tom, caught up in the delusion, wondering how her mind could make this up.

'Illuminators have travelled to planets, stopping dark beings from doing harm, for eons, but his power is unlike anything we've had da face. A darkness our light can't fully eradicate.' Adaeze paused and smiled at Tom lovingly, her eyebrows raised. 'That's when a brighter light was born. A new, precious Illuminator.'

Olivia pulled Tom closer. How could she talk this much nonsense in such a composed manner?

'This here boy is that precious Illuminator, Olivia. You named him the Restorer and discovered his potential to counterbalance the Corrupter, one we hope will be able da stop him from stealing the last ability he needs da destroy us all.'

Olivia didn't know if she or Adaeze was making this stuff up. All she knew was, the more Adaeze spoke, the more she wanted to hear, like Adaeze had lulled her mind into some hypnotic stupor with some curious substance. Either that, or it was sheer, morbid curiosity about how far the constructs of her own psychosis could go.

'Tom agreed da come here, da try his best da save Omnipion but da do so, he needed your help. You agreed da be this magnificent child's mother, teacher and guide. You knew your adaptive talents would be necessary. The power you have da encourage delicate beings da take The Test will prove useful for his success too. He's so pure that he may need a little persuasion to fight, you see.'

Olivia focused on her muscles, willing them to work. Nothing! Maybe Adaeze was no ordinary kidnapper, one that was going to just snatch and run and was, instead, concocting an elaborate story before she did. A story she told convincingly. The verdict was definite; she was a full roasted nut, one of those maniacs who believed their own lies. She tried to sit up. All she could do was pull Tom in tighter.

'Now then, beaudiful girrl.' Adaeze lifted her hand from her arm. 'I'm retracting my power over you, but you've godda try da stay relaxed.'

A faint indigo light withdrew into Adaeze's palm.

Olivia blinked hard. Her warped imagination was improving! How else could she have a power to keep her subdued? A surge of adrenaline shot through Olivia's muscles, but she remained still. She couldn't show any sign that her senses were returning. Heart thundering in her ears, a tight coil churned inside her stomach.

Adaeze raised her eyebrows. ‘Are ya relaxed enough da still hear me?’

White noise buzzing through her ears, unable to know if her thoughts were actually her own, Olivia blinked in response. If only Luke could walk through that door now.

Adaeze only followed her gaze and smiled. ‘Tom won’t be able da fight the Corrupter ’til he’s aged seven, when deemed he can make an informed decision, but the Corrupter will try to kill you before that time. It will pain and disfigure the Corrupter da use his abilities before then, but he will still do so from the moment he’s born.’

She now had full control of all her faculties. But how could she escape this horror? The woman may be insane, but she apparently had some intriguing way of detaining her. Olivia looked to the door and back to Adaeze’s hand. Damn it. She’d given her thoughts away!

‘You will need da protect Tom—and yourself—from the Corrupter and his dark army. You have the capability da use your adaptation gift, which will help you defend yourself if he uses his abilities, but you will also need da stay close da Illuminators for their power of light, just in case he uses dark powers...’

Her ears were only half listening to Adaeze now, the other half honed in to note any sounds from the corridor. Could she shout for help? She’d forgive Luke for missing the labour and the birth if he walked through the door right now. ‘Ya need to leave right now! I’m either ’avin’ a major psychotic breakdown, in which case y’re in danger of me lashin’ out, or this conversation is real... in which case y’re in danger of me lashin’ out!’

Adaeze looked at her pitifully for a moment. ‘You’re not having a psychotic breakdown; this is real! You’ve never been psychotic! Tom’s gonna need a mother who understands him, one that won’ convince him he’s deluded when his supermundane reality ensues.’

‘You want me to believe Tom ’as to stop some evil being from destroyin’ some made up world? That I’ve got some twisted power to coax him into a fight?’

‘You don’ have da believe, just trust.’ Adaeze clicked her fingers and an iridescent leaf popped into them. She held it up to the light and turned it. A blue shimmer catching the light transfixed Olivia. ‘You knew leaves like this existed, even before seeing ’em in the flesh. You trusted the images in your mind enough da draw from it what they presented da ya, just like the dark being you’ve been painting all these years.’

She’d been stalking her? This wasn’t some random lunatic; she had specifically targeted her. Olivia willed her thumping heart to slow so she could concentrate. ‘ow did ya—?’ She shook her head. That wasn’t logical. Adaeze was nothing more than a practiced cold-reader!

‘The Corrupter was reborn this evening... well last night now given the time... at seven p.m. There were four earthquakes in different parts o’ the world at that time. An earthquake happens each time he’s born. Out o’ the four children born at those exact moments, only one was female, which we can rule out ‘cause he always chooses a male embryo da operate in. That leaves three male, one o’ which was born right here!’

‘Plea—’ Her mouth was too dry to talk.

‘We have Illuminators following the three suspects until we know which one is the Corrupter. If it is this child,’ Adaeze jerked her head to the door as if such a thing lurked behind it, ‘which is more than likely due da the commotion his mother keeps causing down the hall. It means he knew you were here. It means his abilities are much stronger than before!’ Adaeze placed her warm hand on Olivia’s arm and lent forward. ‘It means you’re both in grave danger.’

‘Adaeze!’ The coil now wound so tight it pulled at her organs, her fear crystallising into rage. ‘I’ll scream if ya don’t leave right now!’

Adaeze’s eyes filled with sympathy. ‘I know this is hard ‘cause you don’ remember any o’ this but... your heightened intuition isn’t tellin’ you otherwise, is it?’

How dare she touch her arm so lovingly, talk to her as though they were the best of friends? She tensed her muscles and sat bolt upright. ‘Fuck off!’

Olivia clutched Tom, ready to run, but Adaeze raised her palm, which emanated a dazzling, indigo light, and warmth stronger than sunlight covered the surface of her skin. Instantly numb, her tension drifted into another world. Void of motion, her rapid heart rate slowing into a steady pace, she could only stare deep into the marvel of Adaeze’s starry eyes.

Adaeze leant in and spoke in soft, dulcet tones. ‘There there, beautiful girrl. You’ve got so much da learn about Omnipion and your agreement. I can see you’ll only be able da absorb it once the years o’ neurological conditioning have broken. I can explain more then. For now, I think it’s best if I show you who you are, that way you can see where you’re from, and *feel* the truth.’

The light grew dense and descended upon her, washing away her surroundings, and she spun through a multi-coloured vortex.

Ultra-awake and rejuvenated, Olivia twirled through a mass of green, blue, indigo and violet, her body becoming lighter and lighter until it became nothing at all. She headed to somewhere familiar, warm and safe.

She floated into an array of stars, scattered amongst a backdrop of deep space, the stunning, dark glory visible through a transparent, gigantic dome, and glided onto a silky, white-opal floor. The swirling lights reached the height of the dome and shimmered down, illuminating the arch like a rainbow of auroras, showing where the dome ended and the universe began.

In the distance, coming from a vast expanse of white light, a sonorous, male voice called. So smooth, calm, and persuasive, it beckoned her forward until the light consumed her.

As her vision adjusted, the white light shrank into a star, and flowed towards her as though she had a gravitational pull, its essence welcoming. Its trailing body of wispy smoke flashed different colours as it reflected the opal beneath. As though it had magnetism, she sped towards it at high speed along the sparkling, opalescent floor. As she gained proximity, a charge of electricity rushed through her.

The glowing apparition danced around her. As she twirled with the oscillation, wispy green arms followed her as if she was a fragile octopus, spinning under water.

Corrupter... stopped... hope... Restorer. Olivia didn't speak the broken words, but they came from her somehow, came from this green light she'd become. I'll be... mother... train him for mission. Only chance... his unique power.

They flew in a straight line past thousands of other pure-white stars, and balanced over the top of a glass-like matrix structure, filled with billions of bright wispy-looking beings plugged into what looked like electrical, mirrored circuit boards which shone in beautiful harmony against darkness beyond the chamber.

With a hiss, a disc materialised in the centre of an unoccupied board.

Your human form awaits you. The white light beamed. You... ready... enter the assimila... grrrr... id?

She couldn't move. She didn't want to get into that thing.

A buzzing light overcame her and then fell into a state of unconsciousness.

Thank you for reading my excerpt!  
I appreciate it x

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