

# 2

I awaken with a jolt.

It takes me a moment to register that I've been out for three days. I can tell by the well-rested feeling in my bones—I don't sleep this well any other time of the month.

The first thing I'm aware of as I sit up is an urgent need to use the bathroom. My muscles are heavy from lack of use, and it takes some concentration to keep my steps light so I won't wake Ma or Perla. I leave the lights off to avoid meeting my gaze in the mirror, and after tossing out my heavy-duty period pad and replacing it with a tampon, I tiptoe back to Ma's and my room.

I'm always disoriented after lunaritis, so I feel separate from my waking life as I survey my teetering stacks of journals and used books, Ma's yoga mat and collection of weights, and the posters on the wall of the planets and constellations I hope to visit one day.

After a moment, my shoulders slump in disappointment. This month has officially peaked.

I yank the bleach-stained blue sheets off the mattress and slide out the pillows from their cases, balling up the bedding to wash later. My body feels like a crumpled piece of paper that needs to be stretched, so I plant my feet together in the tiny area between the bed and the door, and I raise my hands and arch my back, lengthening my spine disc by disc. The pull on my tendons releases stored tension, and I exhale in relief.

Something tugs at my consciousness, an unresolved riddle that must have timed out when I surfaced . . . but the harder I focus, the quicker I forget. Swinging my head forward, I reach down to touch my toes and stretch my spine the other way—

My ears pop so hard, I gasp.

I stumble back to the mattress, and I cradle my head in my hands as a rush of noise invades my mind. The buzzing of a fly in the window blinds, the gunning of a car engine on the street below, the groaning of our building's prehistoric elevator. Each sound is so crisp, it's like a filter was just peeled back from my hearing.

My pulse picks up as I slide my hands away from my temples to trace the outlines of my ears. I think the top parts feel a little . . . *pointier*.

I ignore the tingling in my eardrums as I cut through the living room to the kitchen, and I fill a stained green bowl with cold water. Ma's asleep on the turquoise couch because we don't share our bed this time of the month. She says I thrash around too much in my drugged dreams.

I carefully shut the apartment door behind me as I step out into the building's hallway, and I crack open our neighbor's window to slide the bowl through. A black cat leaps over to lap up the drink.

“Hola, Mimitos,” I say, stroking his velvety head. Since we’re both confined to this building, I hear him meowing any time his owner, Fanny, forgets to feed him. I think she’s going senile.

“I’ll take you up with me later, after lunch. And I’ll bring you some turkey,” I add, shutting the window again quickly. I usually let him come with me, but I prefer to spend the mornings after lunaritis alone. Even if I’m no longer dreaming, I’m not awake either.

My heart is still beating unusually fast as I clamber up six flights of stairs. But I savor the burn of my sedentary muscles, and when at last I reach the highest point, I swing open the door to the rooftop.

It’s not quite morning yet, and the sky looks like blue-tinted steel. Surrounding me are balconies festooned with colorful clotheslines, broken-down properties with boarded-up windows, fuzzy-leaved palm trees reaching up from the pitted streets . . . and in the distance, the ground and sky blur where the Atlantic swallows the horizon.

El Retiro is a rundown apartment complex with all elderly residents—mostly Cuban, Colombian, Venezuelan, Nicaraguan, and Argentine immigrants. There’s just one slow, loud elevator in the building, and since I’m the youngest person here, I never use it in case someone else needs it.

I came up here hoping for a breath of fresh air, but since it’s summertime, there’s no caress of a breeze to greet me. Just the suffocating embrace of Miami’s humidity.

Smothering me.

I close my eyes and take in deep gulps of musty oxygen, trying to push the dread down to where it can’t touch me. The way Perla taught me to do whenever I get anxious.

My metamorphosis started this year. I first felt something

was different four full moons ago, when I no longer needed to squint to study the ground from up here. I simply opened my eyes to perfect vision.

The following month, my hair thickened so much that I had to buy bigger clips to pin it back. Next menstrual cycle came the growth spurt that left my jeans three inches too short, and last lunaritis I awoke with such a heightened sense of smell that I could sniff out what Ma and Perla had for dinner all three nights I was out.

It's bad enough to feel the outside world pressing in on me, but now even my insides are spinning out of my control.

As Perla's breathing exercises relax my thoughts, I begin to feel the stirrings of my dreamworld calling me back. I slide onto the rooftop's ledge and lie back along the warm cement, my body as stagnant as the stale air. A dragon-shaped cloud comes apart like cotton, and I let my gaze drift with Miami's hypnotic sky, trying to call up the dream's details before they fade . . .

What Ma and Perla don't know about the Septis is they don't simply sedate me for sixty hours—*they transport me*.

Every lunaritis, I visit the same nameless land of magic and mist and monsters. There's the golden grass that ticks off time by turning silver as the day ages; the black-leaved trees that can cry up storms, their dewdrop tears rolling down their bark to form rivers; the colorful waterfalls that warn onlookers of oncoming danger; the hope-sucking Sombras that dwell in darkness and attach like parasitic shadows . . .

And the Citadel.

It's a place I instinctively know I'm not allowed to go, yet I'm always trying to get to. Whenever I think I'm going to make it inside, I wake up with a start.

Picturing the black stone wall, I see the thorny ivy that

twines across its surface like a nest of guardian snakes, slithering and bunching up wherever it senses a threat.

The sharper the image, the sleepier I feel, like I'm slowly sliding back into my dream, until I reach my hand out tentatively. If I could just move faster than the ivy, I could finally grip the opal doorknob before the thorns—

Howling breaks my reverie.

I blink, and the dream disappears as I spring to sitting and scour the battered buildings. For a moment, I'm sure I heard a wolf.

My spine locks at the sight of a far more dangerous threat: A cop car is careening in the distance, its lights flashing and siren wailing. Even though the black-and-white is still too far away to see me, I leap down from the ledge and take cover behind it, the old mantra running through my mind.

*Don't come here, don't come here, don't come here.*

A familiar claustrophobia claws at my skin, an affliction forged of rage and shame and powerlessness that's been my companion as long as I've been in this country. Ma tells me I should let *her* worry about this stuff and only concern myself with studying, so when our papers come through, I can take my GED and one day make it to NASA—but it's impossible not to worry when I'm constantly having to hide.

My muscles don't uncoil until the siren's howling fades and the police are gone, but the morning's spell of stillness has broken. A door slams, and I instinctively turn toward the pink building across the street that's tattooed with territorial graffiti. Where the alternate version of me lives.

I call her *Other Manu*.

The first thing I ever noticed about her was her Argentine fútbol jersey: #10 *Lionel Messi*. Then I saw her face and realized we look a lot alike. I was reading Borges at the time, and

it occurred to me that she and I could be the same person in overlapping parallel universes.

But it's an older man and not Other Manu who lopes down the street. She wouldn't be up this early on a Sunday anyway. I arch my back again, and thankfully this time, the only pop I hear is in my joints.

The sun's golden glare is strong enough that I almost wish I had my sunglasses. But this rooftop is sacred to me because it's the only place where Ma doesn't make me wear them, since no one else comes up here.

I'm reaching for the stairwell door when I hear it.

Faint footsteps are growing louder, like someone's racing up. My heart shoots into my throat, and I leap around the corner right as the door swings open.

The person who steps out is too light on their feet to be someone who lives here. No El Retiro resident could make it up the stairs that fast. I flatten myself against the wall.

"Creo que encontré algo, pero por ahora no quiero decir nada."

Whenever Ma is upset with me, I have a habit of translating her words into English without processing them. I asked Perla about it to see if it's a common bilingual thing, and she said it's probably my way of keeping Ma's anger at a distance; if I can deconstruct her words into language—something detached that can be studied and dissected—I can strip them of their charge.

As my anxiety kicks in, my mind goes into automatic translation mode: *I think I found something, but I don't want to say anything yet.*

The woman or girl (it's hard to tell her age) has a deep, throaty voice that's sultry and soulful, yet her singsongy accent is unquestionably Argentine. Or Uruguayan. They sound similar.

My cheek is pressed to the wall as I make myself as flat as possible, in case she crosses my line of vision.

“Si tengo razón, me harán la capitana más joven en la historia de los Cazadores.”

*If I'm right, they'll make me the youngest captain in the history of the . . . Cazadores? That means hunters.*

In my eight years living here, I've never seen another person on this rooftop. Curious, I edge closer, but I don't dare peek around the corner. I want to see this stranger's face, but not badly enough to let her see mine.

“¿El encuentro es ahora? Che, Nacho, ¿vos no me podrías cubrir?”

*Is the meeting right now? Couldn't you cover for me, Nacho?*

The *che* and *vos* sound like Argentinespeak. What if it's Other Manu?

The exciting possibility brings me a half step closer, and now my nose is inches from rounding the corner. Maybe I can sneak a peek without her noticing.

“Okay,” I hear her say, and her voice sounds like she's just a few paces away.

I suck in a quick inhale, and before I can overthink it, I pop my head out—

And see the door swinging shut.

I scramble over and tug it open, desperate to spot even a hint of her hair, any clue at all to confirm it was Other Manu—but she's already gone.

All that remains is a wisp of red smoke that vanishes with the swiftness of a morning cloud.