

## ONE

### Poor Patrick

“You got this, Pao!”

“Take him down!”

“On your left!”

Paola Santiago barely heard the noise of the small crowd as she faced down her opponent. He was already missing an arm, his head was tragically lopsided, and he moved in the jerky, unpredictable way Pao had come to associate with drunk people—or toddlers who really needed a nap.

Despite his erratic movements, Pao tightened her grip on her Arma del Alma, a long, shining staff with a viciously bladed end. *Let your opponent come to you, said her father’s voice in her head. Let them expend their energy circling and crossing the space and striking. Be still water, ready to ripple or wave. Wasting nothing.*

Her opponent had almost reached her, and every part of Pao screamed that she should strike now—leap across the space and finish the job of severing his wobbling head. But instead she waited like still water, until finally, *finally* she was allowed to rush forward and stab through the neck. Then she heard the satisfying *crunch* that meant his head had hit the ground.

Pao felt no remorse, only victory, as she lifted her sweaty face, pushed her bangs back, and waited for her well-deserved accolades.

“Oh no!”

“Poor Patrick!”

“Someone get some tape, stat!”

Three Niños rushed past Pao in a blur as she groaned, sinking onto the concrete floor. Her magical staff was already shrinking of its own accord into a travel-size magnifying glass she could fit in her pocket.

“Well, *I* thought it was impressive,” said a voice from behind her, and Pao turned with a smile to see her best friend Emma Lockwood approaching with a water bottle, her eyes dancing with laughter.

“These milk drinkers wouldn’t know impressive if it cut off *their* heads,” Pao grumbled, taking the water gratefully and chugging half of it before dumping the rest on her sweaty neck.

“If you wanted the Niños to be on your side, you probably shouldn’t have named the sparring dummy,” Emma said as they surveyed the scene.

The ragtag group of kids and teenagers who called themselves Los Niños de la Luz were already on her side, Pao knew. And, as her town's protectors against the monstrous creatures of the void, they were important allies to have.

Not just for their warehouse headquarters, either. Though it was pretty awesome. The rafters in its ceiling were nearly thirty feet above their heads. The glossy concrete floor was painted and taped with complicated diagrams of footwork, advances, and retreats, all color-coded according to types of creature. Best of all, it was in a part of town far from any prying eyes. Ideal for monster-hunting practice.

Of course, at the moment, the only creature in sight was an old dummy on a rolling cart. And he was currently missing a head.

"Patrick," Pao said, rolling her eyes at her own folly. "What kind of a name is *Patrick* for a monster anyway?" "Hey, there are a lot of Patricks in the world," Emma replied. "I'm sure at least *some* of them are monsters."

Pao couldn't argue with that, so she got to her feet and walked over to a section of school gym bleachers that her friend Naomi had "liberated" from Silver Springs High. Then she flopped down, her muscles burning from a long day of training.

"How do you feel?" Emma asked, her eyes x-raying Pao. They looked even bluer than usual against her pumpkin-orange sweatshirt. Despite the fact that it was still over a hundred degrees in Silver Springs, Emma was determined to show her fall spirit.

Pao thought about changing the subject to actual pumpkins, or costumes, or Halloween baking or crafts, all subjects she knew would distract the girl in front of her. But she'd never been able to lie to Emma, or avoid her questions for long, so she told the truth. As much of it as she could bear to say out loud, anyway.

"I'm frustrated," she said, kicking her white sneakers against the bench. "I'm restless. I can take Patrick's head off fifteen times a day, and it's not gonna get us any closer to rescuing Dante."

At the sound of their ex-best friend's name, Emma went quiet for a moment, and Pao knew she was remembering things, too. Things like the trailer laboratory the two of them had found in the middle of the Oregon forest last winter. And the man inside, who'd been Pao's long-lost father and not her father all at once.

Pao had told Emma everything, of course. All the gory details Emma hadn't seen while she waited outside the trailer. About finding out La Llorona was not only the ghost-deity Pao had defeated in the void, she was also Pao's *grandmother*!

That part had taken a little explaining. See, after drowning her three children in the river, La Llorona had found a way to bring them back to life by merging their souls with those of living victims. Her twisted experiment had only worked on her second son, Beto, which, Pao discovered, was her father's true identity.

Only, the experiment (like most things La Llorona did) had gone pretty horribly wrong. Beto had run away in horror from his mother, changed his name, and tried to bury his past. But over time the soul he was bound to—a boy victim of La Llorona's named Joaquin—started to become more dominant . . . and resentful.

Eventually, Joaquin had hatched a plan to use Pao's connection to the void to tear open its fabric and let out every loathsome creature inside to feed on the living. Luring her to the forest by using Dante as bait . . .

Working with Beto, Pao had managed to free Joaquin's soul, put an end to his awful plot, and get her friends back to safety. All except Dante, who, fed by his own jealousy and anger, had gone willingly into the void and remained there.

Even with the Niños' centuries of knowledge about the void and its inhabitants, her father's memories of Joaquin's machinations, and Pao's own growing desperation to smash her way into that terrible place by whatever means necessary, they still hadn't managed to rescue him. It had already been eight months. "We're going to find him," Emma said at last, putting a hand on Pao's shoulder. "You said yourself that whoever is keeping Dante wouldn't want to give up the leverage they have over you by killing him, so it's just a matter of—"

"Of finding a way in," Pao said, almost to herself. She had fallen asleep repeating that truth to herself over and over every night since January. But the months kept going by, and Pao's faith in her own understanding of the situation was flagging by the day.

Joaquin had told her, while tied to a chair in his trailer lab, that the void wanted her, La Llorona's granddaughter, who had twice defied its soldiers, who had snatched three living souls from its depths and was determined to take a fourth. But if the void wanted her so bad, why hadn't it shown her how to enter it again? Why wasn't it using Dante to lure her back?

She hadn't had a single vision of its ghost-riddled depths since she'd returned from Oregon. Not one. And she couldn't help but wonder why her dreams, the connection that had allowed her to save her friends and family before, had deserted her now, at this crucial juncture.

Though Pao didn't exactly *want* to be the descendent of an evil ghost woman who had drowned countless children, or to belong, in part, to the spooky, monster-ridden place that had given her power, she couldn't help feeling a little abandoned.

Not that she could ever admit that to Emma. Or anyone else. "It's my dad, mostly," Pao said when the silence had stretched out a beat longer than she could stand. "He wants to act like I'm just this normal kid, like I shouldn't be getting involved with paranormal stuff, even though I *saved his life* by getting involved with it. I wish he would just let me be who I am."

Before Emma could get to one of the fourteen solutions to this problem she had undoubtedly brainstormed in the past ten seconds, Pao's stomach grumbled, and they both laughed.

“Come on,” Emma said, getting to her feet, the bleachers groaning under her bright green sneakers with the rainbow laces. “Let’s get out of here. Ice cream? Pizza?”

As much as Pao wanted to hold on to her frustration, to sit here and stew, the appeal of a pizza was pretty undeniable. “Okay,” she relented. “But first I have to talk to the biggest jerk in Arizona. Wait for me outside?”

“I’ll be the one with the sparkly purple bike.”

When Pao opened the door to the warehouse’s attached office, Franco was sitting in front of what appeared to be a super-old computer, but Pao knew it was an invention of her father’s—a machine that could read magical signatures and measure the intensity of the energy they gave off.

Hopefully the computer couldn’t measure the waves of irritation coming off Pao, because she thought the strength of them would probably break it.

“Franco,” she said when it became clear he wasn’t going to acknowledge her presence beyond a wary glance. “Find anything new?”

“I’m sure Beto would have told you if we had,” he said curtly. “I . . . He’s not really . . . I’m asking you,” Pao stammered, feeling her face heat up. You’d think that living with a man who’d been studying the paranormal for *both* of his lives would have put her at the forefront of the Niños’ activities, but Pao had been relegated to perpetual trainee. Which meant fighting dummies and having her questions constantly brushed aside.

Franco didn’t answer at first, just stabbed the buttons on the field unit in his hand a little harder than Pao felt was necessary. But she’d learned from months in this grumpy boy’s company that he could never resist the urge to talk about his work for long, so she waited, counting down from ten in her head.

When she got to six, he pushed back from the desk with a huff. “The whole map’s a blank! I thought the thing in B.C. was an anomaly, but *every* known entrance to the void that we’ve mapped in the past fifty years is gone. Just disappeared.”

Pao stilled at the mention of Canada. It had been their first trip after they returned from saving Beto. An expedition to the only known void entrance on the West Coast—besides the Gila River one Pao and her friends had destroyed the summer before. Based on Pao’s dreams, Beto and Franco had been sure the machines were misreading things, that the void entrance would be there even though no evidence of it could be seen.

They’d all been so hopeful, she remembered. So sure they would get through. That they’d bring Dante back, and this whole nightmare would be over. They’d prepared for months, and Pao had brandished her Arma del Alma without a doubt in her mind, the still-chilly March winds cutting through her sad excuse for a winter coat.

Most of the Niños had been forced to stay behind, their status as lost, escaped, forgotten, or otherwise fugitive children making it difficult for them to travel, so Pao, her father, and Franco (who'd been a smug teenager for a hundred years now) had made their way through the snowy woods outside British Columbia to find . . .

Nothing.

No liminal space. No monsters. No evidence—besides a black scorch mark on the ground—that there'd ever been a portal to the malevolent underworld there.

To cover his disappointment, Franco had tried asking the locals living near the void entrance about what had happened, but everyone they'd approached had, frustratingly, clammed up instantly at the sight of them. They all categorically denied that they'd ever seen, heard, or experienced anything strange.

That was when, Pao remembered, Franco had started looking at her differently.

And maybe it was also when her dad had started his all training/no-telling-Pao-anything protocol.

Now Pao wanted to growl like a feral animal, or at least hit something that wasn't headless Patrick. Instead she waited as Franco looked at her with that distrustful, suspicious expression. She tried to avoid it by studying the walls covered in maps, notes, and theories that had been crossed out one by one.

"Any chance it's the instruments malfunctioning?" she asked, just to break the horrible silence between them that seemed to be growing fangs by the second.

"It's not the *instruments* that can't be trusted," he said coldly, turning his back in clear dismissal, and Pao left the office feeling like she always did after an interaction with Franco—like she was somehow contaminated. Like she'd failed to live up to even his low expectations of her.

"Pipsqueak?" The voice drifted across the massive parking lot before Pao could turn the corner that would lead her to Emma. The sky beyond the warehouse was almost dark, the days getting shorter now that winter was on its way again. "Hey, Naomi," Pao said, not bothering to disguise her bad mood. Naomi, the queen of bad moods, could hardly hold it against her.

"Isn't it past your bedtime? Papi Precioso must be waiting." Pao rolled her eyes as she approached. Naomi was sitting on the concrete steps out front, smirking down at her. "What? Trouble behind the white picket fence?" Naomi's tone was teasing, but after the two of them had traveled hundreds of miles together, traversed a haunted forest, and fought more than one warped fantasma together, Pao could tell there was a grudging respect beneath her casual mocking. "It's fine," Pao said, shaking her head. "Just sick of being treated like a baby all the time."

“I’ve been saying it since the beginning, tourist,” Naomi said, eyeing Pao with that surprisingly adept intuition of hers. “Once you cross over, it’s hard to go back to normal life.”

Pao was quiet for a long minute, appreciating the fact that Naomi did not insist on filling every moment with chatter. Emma, as much as Pao loved her, had never met a problem she couldn’t immediately offer *several* solutions for, and sometimes Pao just needed to stew.

“It’s just . . .” Pao said at last. “Dad expects me to be so grateful he’s here. He says I don’t need to worry anymore, that he and Franco can take care of everything. But where would either of them be if I hadn’t taken charge? Why does he want to force me back into a life I don’t fit into anymore?”

Naomi got to her feet, offering Pao a high five as she turned toward the warehouse door.

“Look, Beto’s not a bad guy, from what I’ve seen. But you know how I feel about Franco, and about men and their *I’ve got this under control, little girl* crap in general.

If you want to go after hero boy yourself, you know I’m on your right.”

“Thanks,” Pao said, not trusting herself to say more. The fact that Naomi would be willing to follow her out into the fray again, even after all that had befallen them on their last attempt to join forces, meant more than Pao was willing to admit at the moment.

And Pao would have taken her up on the offer, she realized. In a heartbeat. If only she had any idea where to begin.