

PAOLA SANTIAGO AND THE FOREST OF NIGHTMARES

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ONE

There's *Almost* Nothing Worse Than Meat Medley Pizza

If it hadn't been for the dream she'd had about her estranged father the night before, maybe Pao's bonding time with her mom's new boyfriend wouldn't have been quite so awful.

But her luck never worked like that.

Six months ago, Paola Santiago had walked out of a collapsing magical rift after defeating the legendary ghost turned god, La Llorona, and freeing the spirit of the Weeping Woman's last remaining lost child.

Pao had tamed a chupacabra.

She had even earned the respect of the girl who had tortured her in sixth grade.

And yet, she still didn't have the power to turn this guy into dust? Ideally right now, across the sticky table of this pizza place?

Maybe if she glared at him a little harder . . .

Pizza Pete's was full tonight, with chattering families, screaming kids, and illuminated arcade machines trying to trick dads into digging deeper for quarters. GHOST HUNTER 3! one of the games flashed in acid-green letters.

No way that's realistic, Pao thought, narrowly avoiding a scoff. Like a series of zeroes and ones blinking on a screen could ever

get close to the real thing. Binary code was incredibly versatile, of course, but Pao had learned firsthand that there were some things that math and science couldn't fully capture.

Pao's mom looked at her like she had heard the almost scoff. Pao stared back insolently, tempting fate.

Ever since winter break had started three days ago, Pao had been prohibited from scoffing. Also scowling, smirking, stomping, and swearing (even using mild words like *stupid* or *jerk*). The message was clear: There was no room for sullen Pao when Aaron was around.

To be fair, though, it didn't seem like there was much room for *any* version of Pao. So why couldn't she mope to her heart's (dis)content?

Because moms were unfair, that's why.

In the arcade, three boys a little older than Pao were hurtling full speed toward *Ghost Hunter 3*. "I hear it's, like, actually scary!" one of them squeaked.

"Yeah, Sully said the guys that made it went to *real* haunted houses and, like, *slept* in them and *saw* things."

"So cool! They're like *actual* experts!"

I'm so sure, Pao thought, returning to her scathing inner monologue. Like a bunch of white guys with phone cameras in a tourist trap knew anything about real ghost hunting.

But the truth—and Pao's terrible secret—was that she would have given anything to be fighting real ghosts or monsters right now. She would have been thrilled to see a terrible hairy Mano Pachona, or a full-grown slaving chupacabra. Anything to prove that last summer had been real. That she had actually been through something.

That she wasn't just a freak who no longer belonged in her own life.

Across the table, Aaron shifted uncomfortably in his seat, grinning goofily when he caught Pao looking at him. No one had spoken a word in nine minutes and forty-three seconds. So much for bonding.

Her mom was looking desperate now, and for a second, Pao almost felt sorry for her.

But only for a second.

After Pao's disappearing act last summer, things had improved between her and her mom. For a while. But Pao had quickly realized that accepting her mom's differences, as she had done while trapped in the endless throat of a magical void, was actually a lot easier than getting along with her in real life.

Especially now that her mom was dating Aaron.

Pao tried to ignore him, thinking of her dream the night before instead. Even a nightmare was better than this guy. She'd been walking through a dense pine forest, a weird green light filtering through the trees. The road she'd walked was long and straight, and at the end of it was a silhouette she'd somehow known was her dad.

It made sense, Pao thought, that she hadn't seen his face. She hadn't seen her dad in real life since she was four years old. Her mom never even talked about him. But in the dream, Pao had run toward him anyway, like he was coming home from a long absence and she couldn't wait to throw her arms around him.

Of course, she hadn't made it that far. Just before she'd gotten close enough, the ground had opened at her feet. A massive crack

in the earth took Pao with it as it gave way, leaving her father shouting from the cliff above.

After waking from a nightmare like that, shaking and sweating, was it any wonder Pao didn't want to spend the evening fake-smiling over greasy food with a total imposter?

Across from her, Mom and Aaron chewed in silence, exchanging an awkward look between them.

Pao could have made it easier for her mom, she knew, but right now that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Why would she want to help someone who hadn't even noticed that her daughter was suffering the aftereffects of one of her notorious nightmares? The kind she had experienced ever since she was little and had led her to enter a magical rift to fight a legendary ghost.

Her mom was supposed to be *highly* attuned to this stuff. She always had been before . . . But tonight she'd just told Pao to get a handle on her hair and wear a clean shirt. Like it mattered how Pao looked for this totally inappropriate ordeal.

Mom had met Aaron, a firefighter, at the bar where she worked and within *six weeks* had decided that he was meet-the-kid material. But impulsive choices were kind of the norm for Maria Santiago. Even Bruto the chupacabra puppy had given them an *isn't this too soon?* look as they'd left the apartment tonight.

For about a month, Mom and Aaron had lied about him coming over to "fix the TV" or "drop off a book" or "look for a stray neighborhood dog" (Pao's personal favorite excuse). Last week her mom had finally come clean, and now they all had to play nice.

At first, Pao had been offended by the lying—she was almost

thirteen, she could handle the truth!—but an hour into forced bonding, she found herself wishing Aaron really *was* just the guy “redoing the shower grout.”

The boys in the arcade were fully enthralled by *Ghost Hunter 3* at this point. The screen showed one of those cheesy paranormal-activity videos, all shaky camera and blown-out colors and vague, pixelated shapes.

Pao remembered a time when it would have been her and her two best friends, Emma and Dante, crowded around the machine. Dante would have been effortlessly good, Emma hilariously bad, and Pao in the back, refusing to play, mocking people for believing in ghosts.

But she'd barely spoken to Emma in two months. And Pao and Dante were pretending things were normal between them . . . but then why had she told her mom that he was too busy to tag along tonight when he really wasn't?

Not even science held her in the same thrall these days. Her microscope lay unused on the dusty top shelf of her closet. And she hadn't bothered entering the fall science fair at school.

Everything had changed. And Pao didn't know how to change it back.

“Ooh, that game looks scary!” Aaron said, snapping Pao out of her moody thoughts. “I'm not sure I could play it. Probably give me nightmares.”

This time, Pao really, really couldn't help it. The scoff took over. It used her body as an unwilling host, like rabies in the brain of a raccoon, and a *ppfft* sound escaped her lips. All Pao could do was hope no one heard it. But of course, her mom had laser-focused on her the moment Aaron had said *nightmares*.

And in terms of death glares, La Llorona had nothing on Pao's mom.

She smiled at Pao, a kind of snarly smile, all her teeth showing. *A don't screw this up or I'll take away that phone you just got* kind of smile. "Paola, why don't you tell Aaron what you're working on in school?"

"Invisibility," Pao said after a beat, pulling a pepperoni off her pizza and rolling it up into a greasy little tube. Her mom hated when she did that but wouldn't dare say anything in front of "company."

"Sounds pretty advanced for seventh grade!" Aaron said earnestly. His blond hair fell into his eyes, and he pushed it back. His face was that healthy-looking kind of tan that white people get when they go skiing or something. Pao wanted to wipe pepperoni grease on it.

"It's more of a social experiment than a scientific one," Pao clarified, watching her mother's eyes narrow even more. "You know, camouflage, deflection, that sort of thing. Luckily, I'm getting plenty of practice at home."

Pao had always distrusted people who smiled all the time, and Aaron's ski-catalog grin never faltered. She matched it with something akin to a grimace, knowing she'd pay for the comment later but not caring.

"Well, middle school is a tough time," he said, leaning down to look her in the eye. "I'm sure things will get better. Hey, only a year and a half until high school, right!"

"Yeah," Pao said. "Because high school is historically easy on freaks."

"Mija, you're not a freak," her mom said, waving a hand.

"You're just advanced for your age—the other kids are probably jealous."

Pao would definitely had rolled her eyes if her mom hadn't snapped her head to look across the room right at that moment.

"Oh! Isn't that Emma?" She waved, not noticing that her only child was ready to sink into the floor. "Emma! ¡Mija! Over here!"

It was noisy, and Emma was sitting at a crowded table with at least five kids from school. Pao kept her eyes on her plate and hoped that Emma didn't hear her name being called.

"Who are those kids she's hanging out with?" Mom asked, craning her neck. "They sure have . . . interesting hair!"

Emma's new friends dyed their hair in bright colors and wore jean jackets with patches and pins all over them. They kept up with current events and sometimes participated in protests. Across Pizza Pete's, they all laughed loudly at something, and Pao glanced up reflexively, just for a second. Emma didn't look their way.

"The Rainbow Rogues," Pao muttered, trying not to sound sarcastic.

It didn't matter anyway. Her mom was back to talking to Aaron, and Pao was back to being invisible.

Her eyes drifted over to where Emma's blondish-brown hair (complete with a new purple streak) was just visible over the tall back of her seat.

In September, when Emma had decided to come out to her parents, Pao had been with her—via speaker phone—for moral support. Emma had been nervous, but after all the worry and wondering, her parents had been nothing but supportive. Mrs. Lockwood had even bought a LOVE IS LOVE sticker for their SUV.

Emma had confessed her secret to Pao just a week after they'd returned from the rift, and together they'd plotted the best way to tell her parents. After Emma did it, Pao was so proud of her best friend she'd thought her heart might burst. The next day, they'd eaten every flavor of frozen yogurt in one giant cup to celebrate.

Pao had known this meant Emma could finally stop hiding. At last she'd get to be her whole, shiny self for the world to see. Pao had even convinced her to go the first yearly meeting of the aforementioned Rainbow Rogues, Silver Springs Middle School's LGBTQIA+ club.

They'd both been surprised by how many openly queer kids went to their school, and Emma had walked out bubbling with excitement and plans to go back.

But the more time they'd spent with the Rogues, the more out of place Pao had felt.

There were plenty of kids in the club who weren't ready to decide how they identified yet, and even kids who just called themselves "allies," so it wasn't her lack of specified queerness that made Pao feel left out.

It just seemed like most of the kids who were comfortable enough to be out at school were, for the lack of a better phrase, rich and white. Their parents drove them to and from the meetings in their fancy cars and sent them to school with organic lunches. They bought their kids unlimited poster board and, like, the *nice* markers in every color whenever they wanted to make protest signs.

Pao, with her bus pass and her subsidized lunch, couldn't have the Rogues over to her small apartment or chip in for supplies. They never made her feel bad about those things, of course,

but the way they were *overly* nice about them somehow made Pao feel even worse.

And then there was Emma, who was *so* focused on making sure Pao had a good time that sometimes Pao felt she was holding her back. There was no reason for Emma to be the odd one out. She fit in perfectly, and Pao wanted that for her.

So the next time Emma asked Pao to join in—they were protesting a new Starbucks going in across from a locally owned coffee shop—Pao had made up an excuse. After she did it enough times, Emma had stopped asking.

Pao knew it was normal, people growing apart. But that didn't make it any less sad.

She pushed her plate away, her appetite suddenly gone. "I have homework. Can we go home now?"

Aaron had just taken another slice of "meat medley." The worst pizza variety ever. Sausage, ham, *and* pepperoni? What was it trying to prove?

Her mom opened her mouth, undoubtedly to chastise Pao for being rude, but before she could form the words, Pao's drinking glass exploded in front of her, soaking her space-cat shirt in all thirteen types of soda she'd combined from the fountain. It left them a whole different kind of speechless than before, which Pao couldn't help but enjoy just a little.

There were glass shards on her lap and all over Aaron's slice of meat medley. Next to the glass, a quarter was spinning like a top. It must have come from one of the kids playing in the arcade.

After taking a second to recover from her shock (and to make sure Emma and her cool friends hadn't seen), Pao glanced at her mother, who looked murderous.

"Come on!" Pao said. "You can't possibly think this is my fault!"

It was a freak accident! Look!" She held up the quarter, which had just stopped spinning and fallen onto its side.

Tails, Pao noticed, then shook herself before she went down a probability and statistics hole.

Her mom, thankfully, had turned her withering glare onto the kids shrieking in front of *Ghost Hunter 3*. "Honestly, where are their parents?" she asked, looking at Aaron to check his reaction. When he nodded, she continued. "Throwing quarters around, breaking glasses? So irresponsible."

Pao bit her tongue. Her mom had left her unsupervised (or in the care of their elderly neighbor, Señora Mata) for the greater part of her childhood. Now that Aaron was around, she was suddenly Suburban Susie of the PTA?

Not that she was judging her mom for how she'd raised Pao. It was hard to juggle a kid and a more-than-full-time job on your own. But why did her mom have to pretend to be someone else just to impress this guy?

Wasn't that, like, the opposite of what she always told Pao to do?

As the two adults chattered about bad parenting, Pao tried to soak up the soda on her shirt with two paper napkins, only to end up leaving little bits of wet pulp all over it. She was almost too lost in thought to notice.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Pao said, standing up abruptly.

No one stopped her.

At least this nightmare is nearly over, she thought.

She should have known better by now than to think things like that.



TWO

The Bad Kind of Boy-Girl Weirdness

In the ladies' room (*gendered bathrooms, how archaic*), Pao skulked against the wall waiting for a frazzled woman to herd three sauce-smearred little kids into the handicapped stall. The other stall was out of order.

Maybe if Pao stayed in here long enough, her mom and Aaron would forget about her. She could live here, in the Pizza Pete's bathroom. Get all fifteen top scores on *Ghost Hunter 3* at night when no one was around.

She took an environmentally irresponsible amount of paper towels from the dispenser and began to daub her shirt again. It was already tie-dyed, so maybe the weird splotches would just blend right in? Old Mom never would have noticed. New Mom probably had opinions about children with stained shirts.

The woman finally emerged from the stall, looking much worse for wear as she took out sanitary wipes and cleaned the squirming kids from head to toe.

Pao knew her mom was probably getting impatient, but she just wanted some time alone. To steel herself for the last few minutes with Aaron. And to get rid of the feeling inside her that something weird was about to go down.

"Sorry," the mom said when one of the kids blew a raspberry at Pao.

"It's fine." Pao smiled. A more genuine one than she'd managed for Aaron.

"Never have kids if you prefer going to the bathroom alone," the mom said, but she tucked in the little boy's shirt and smoothed down the baby's hair, kissing the oldest one on the cheek before ushering them back outside.

Moms have it rough, Pao thought. And given that she'd seen (in the crazed eyes of La Llorona) arguably the *worst* one in history, Pao was reminded that she should be more patient with her own.

That is, if she could get her away from Aaron long enough to try.

Now walk out of here with a smile, Pao told herself. She would try harder with her mom, even after this awful bonding experience. She would not, no matter *how* funny it might be, crack a joke about how sometimes, in chemistry, a bond between three elements was so unstable it caused an explosion, or a deadly poison . . .

Seriously, she wouldn't.

Despite Pao's resolution, the long walk home with her mother was uncomfortably silent.

Aaron had ridden his bike back to wherever he lived after the world's most awkward good-bye. Pao knew her mom hadn't forgotten her subpar performance at the pizza place. She was probably brewing a lecture like a strong cup of tea.

The Riverside Palace loomed ahead. The moment they walked through the apartment door, their tense silence would blow up

into something too big to control. Pao stopped her mom under the broken streetlamp and looked up at her.

"If it's another snarky comment, Paola, I just don't know if I can—"

Pao cut her off by hugging her tight. They were almost the same height now, and Pao's forehead rested against her mom's cheek.

"I'm sorry, Mom," she said, humiliated to feel tears pricking her eyes. "It just feels like everything's different since I got . . . lost." To Maria, Pao's life-changing ghost hunt last summer had been a simple case of getting lost in the wilderness around the Gila River while looking for her friend. Dante's grandma Señora Mata was the one who'd advised Pao not to tell her mom the whole truth.

Pao stepped out of the hug and noticed that the lines around her mom's eyes looked softer than before.

Pao sighed, stretching for something genuine she could say to her mom in this moment. "I just . . . don't want things to change so fast," she said finally. And despite its lack of ghosts or void beasts, that really *was* the truth.

"Mi amor." Her mom sighed and pushed the too-long bangs off Pao's forehead. "We can't stop the world from changing. But this?" She gestured between the two of them. "This is forever. No matter what else is different, this will always be the same."

Pao nodded, not trusting her voice, not knowing if she could even trust the sentiment, but vowing to try. Yes, her adventure last summer had been amazing, and maybe she was having a hard time fitting back in to this life, but it was the only life she had. She would have to make the best of it. She remembered what she'd learned in the throat of the rift about forgiveness.

"I love you, Mom," Pao said.

"I love you, too, mija."

They walked the rest of the way home with their arms around each other's shoulders, tripping and laughing through the parking lot. At the base of the stairs, they ran into Dante, who was just getting home.

"Hey, Dante!" said her mom. "We missed you at pizza tonight!"

Dante's eyes darted to Pao's, and she raised her eyebrows in the universal signal for *please lie to this adult*.

"Uh, yeah, Ms. Santiago. Sorry. Soccer practice, you know."

Pao looked at her shoes, avoiding his eyes.

"Well, I'll give you two a minute, hmm?"

"Uh, I have a lot of . . . homework," Pao said, but her mom had already slipped through the door of apartment C and closed it behind her.

"You know I hate to miss a pizza party," Dante said, not quite meeting her eyes and not sounding sorry to have missed it at all.

Pao felt her face heating up. "Just sparing you," she said. "Bonding time with mom's new *boyfriend*." She said the word like it was something gross before she remembered who she was standing in front of.

Not that they'd ever used words like that, which were too embarrassing even to utter.

Cheek kissing and hand holding were one thing when your life was on the line, but in the hallways of middle school, physical displays of affection were something infinitely different. And Pao wasn't at all sure she hadn't liked things better before, when they were just friends.

But she couldn't say that to Dante.

"I didn't know your mom got a boyfriend," he said, his gaze falling to the ground.

"Yeah, sorry. She just kind of . . . dropped it on me. I figured dinner would be awkward enough without turning it into some kind of—" Pao stopped herself before she could say *double date*, but Dante's face turned red like he had heard it anyway.

Pao knew she should talk to him. Tell him about Aaron the Awful and her dream about her dad. The old Pao-and-Dante would have discussed it all. But things weren't the same between them these days.

As if to illustrate the point, the now Pao-and-Dante shuffled their feet, looking anywhere but at each other. Did he know things were different, too? Pao wondered. He had to.

When they'd started school again, Pao was sure their friendship was unshakable. It had survived for years, after all, and gotten them through their confusing, terrifying, out-of-this-world shared experience. Pao was convinced they'd always fit into each other's lives as effortlessly as they had in the cactus field.

It was just seventh grade. There was no way it could be harder to navigate than a magical rift filled with supernatural monsters and a bloodthirsty all-powerful ghost, Pao figured.

She'd figured wrong. It wasn't just hard—it was impossible.

One day, just after her mom had started letting her out of the house again, Pao had asked Dante if she could come over to his place after school like she had a thousand times before. Dante had turned red and said, "Not today," in a totally uncharacteristic way. Pao had let it slide. Maybe he was feeling weird about things being different, too, she figured. Eventually they'd talk about it. They always did.

But then she couldn't help bringing up that she wanted to ask his abuela about being a Niña de la Luz (a shocking confession Señora Mata made after Pao and Dante had returned victorious from the rift). He'd shut her down swiftly, saying the last thing his abuela needed was a million questions about something that had happened to her a long time ago.

He'd left Pao out front, totally bewildered, and slammed the door.

They didn't talk for three days after that. A new record.

And even when they'd started walking to school together again, the tension was still there. Dante rolled his eyes and glanced around furtively whenever Pao mentioned the Niños, or the rift, or anything about last summer. It was like he wanted to just forget about it. Like he was embarrassed about the whole thing. Embarrassed about being with *her*.

He hadn't invited her inside since, and the few times she had seen him coming home or going out with his abuela, he'd rushed his grandmother through the door to avoid Pao.

So tonight, in front of apartment C, aware of just how long this awkward pause had been, Pao asked, "How was soccer?" in a falsely bright voice instead of telling him what was really going on, because she couldn't stand to put any more distance between them.

Unfortunately, she said it at the same time Señora Mata opened the door.

"Alberto?" she asked, her voice a little shaky. "Where have you been? I thought you were coming home with the milk hours ago!"

Alberto? Pao wondered. Dante whispered something to his abuela and sent her inside, closing the door behind her. Who was Alberto? And hadn't Dante just said he was coming home from soccer practice?

"Pao, I gotta go," Dante said, his face flushing just as it had when she'd asked to come inside a few months ago. That sent the gears in Pao's brain whirring and spinning—a welcome distraction from all the moping she'd been doing lately.

"Dante," Pao said as he looked sullenly at the ground, "are you okay? Is she . . . ?"

"She's fine," he snapped. "We're both fine. I'm just busy, and I don't have time to examine all of Bruto's paranormal features with you or whatever, okay?"

Pao suddenly went from being curious to feeling like she was about to cry. She'd known that she and Dante weren't on the same page right now, but he'd never insulted her before. Not in a serious way, at least.

"Sorry," he said when she didn't reply. But he didn't really sound sorry. "I just have a lot going on, okay?"

"Yeah," Pao said, getting angry now that the near-tears feeling had passed. "Fine. Me too. I'm gonna go home and do something horribly embarrassing like take pictures of Bruto's toenails. Don't worry, I won't tell your cool friends about it."

"Pao . . ." Dante said, rubbing a hand over his face. "It isn't like that."

But it was. Pao had known it for a long time. And if he didn't want her help, she wasn't going to keep trying to be his friend. Or his . . . girl-you-kissed-once-on-the-cheek-and-sometimes-held-hands-with-when-you-were-scared, either.

"Good night, Dante," she said in as dignified a way as she could muster and went inside before he could reply.

There was only so much becoming a better person she could be expected to accomplish in one night.