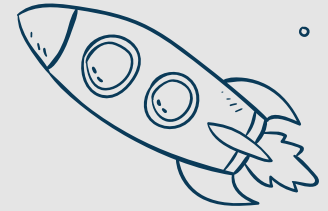
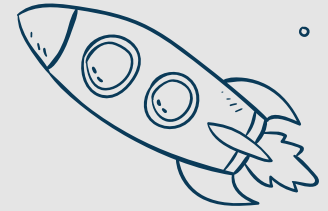


The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 5



I roll my eyes. At least I won't have to actually "listen" to the lectures, since the En Cognito device that puts us to sleep is also programmed to embed those topics directly into our brains. By the time we arrive to Sagan, I'll be as much of an expert as Mom is in botany and Dad in geology. Obviously, though, that isn't the good part. With all the folklore and mythology, along with Lita's stories, I have at least a chance to try and convince Mom and Dad I should be a storyteller instead. But like Lita said, I'll have to make the stories my own.



The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 8

If I can have one final memory before they erase it, it has to be perfect and special. Under a starry desert sky Lita wraps the blanket around our shoulders. She hands me a cup of cacao. “Close your eyes, changuita.”

I close my eyes. The smell of chocolate fills my nose.

“Only a sip,” she says.

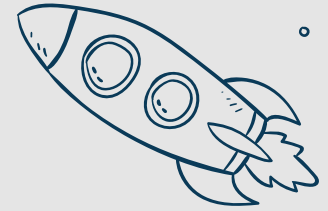
I know the cacao has caffeine or something Mom won’t let me have.

“Set your intention. Proclaim to the universe what you will be,” Lita says.

I take a sip. It’s not as sweet as chocolate, and little pieces of grit cover my teeth.

“What I want to be right now?” I ask.

“Now. Tomorrow.” She rests her hand on my cheek. “Years from now.”

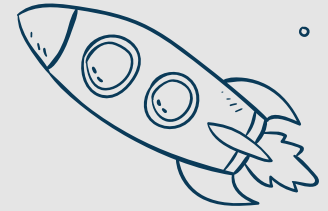


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Excerpt from Chapter 15

She motions to where Earth spun peacefully a few moments earlier. “Today we celebrate our arrival to the new planet. What happened to the former world was not a tragedy. It was an opportunity to leave our past behind. Thanks to the Collective, not a single memory of a world filled with conflict, starvation, or war will find its way into our future.”

My parents wanted a better future too. But Dad said exactly the opposite of how people needed to get there. *“It’ll be our job to remember the parts we got wrong and make it better for our children and grandchildren. Embrace our differences, and still find a way to make peace.”*



The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 16

My voice trembles.

*Arroró mi niño,
arroró mi sol,
arroró pedazo
de mi corazón.*

I hurry to wipe my eyes.

Zeta-4 rolls back over to face me. “What was that, Zeta-1?”

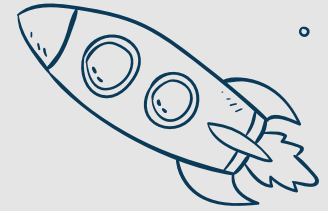
I clear my throat. “It’s called an arrullo, a song to help us sleep. I’m not very good at it.”

“Aluro,” she mispronounces. “I like it.” She rubs the back of her hand over her eyes. “Zeta-1?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you think my dream made me cry? I shouldn’t cry. Should I tell the Chancellor?”

“No!” I put my hand on top of hers.



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Excerpt from Chapter 16

“What would you like to tell me?” she asks.

Rubio turns over in his cell, but his snoring continues.

“It is called ... a cuento,” I say. “It is to serve the Collective. But for now, we must keep it to ourselves.”

“Cuento ...” Zeta-4 says.

I begin just like Lita used to. “Érase que se era ...”

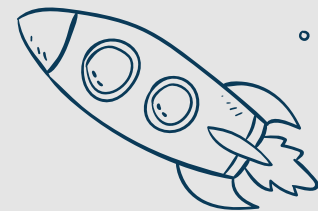
Her brow crinkles. “What do those words mean?”

“They mean, like, the beginning. Once upon a time.”

Her face goes blank. I realize she doesn’t recognize the phrase in Spanish or English.

“All cuentos start with something to set the mood. And they end with a saying to finish it.”

She nods as if she understands, but I don’t think she does.

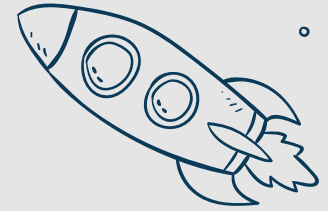


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Excerpt from Chapter 16

“Once, there was a princess named Blancaflor,” I begin. It’s not a standard fairy tale. Parts of it I’m not even sure how to tell in English. Lita said there was a time, when she was a little girl, she didn’t dare speak Spanish in public, or share her stories where others could hear. A time when her language and the color of her skin could mean trouble. So, under a blanket of starry skies and piñon smoke, out of habit, she whispered her stories to me in Spanglish. Her own version, passed from her grandmother, and her grandmother’s grandmother—each of them a slightly different version depending on what was happening in their world at the time.

I remember what Lita said about my stories. *“Never be ashamed of where you come from, or the stories your ancestors bring to you. Make them your own.”*



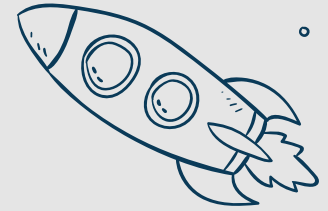
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Excerpt from Chapter 17

“Sagan’s dwarf sun is much smaller, but so close to the planet it creates a tidal lock,” Dad says. “Not too hot for us, but warm enough to melt water from its colder side.” He laughs like it’s some joke only nerds understand. “Of course, we won’t be taking trips to the dark side of Sagan, but the zone where we’ll live will be just right for us.”

“Like the story of the three bears,” Javier chimes in.

Dad smiles and pinches Javier’s nose. “Exactly why they call it a Goldilocks planet.”



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Excerpt from Chapter 17

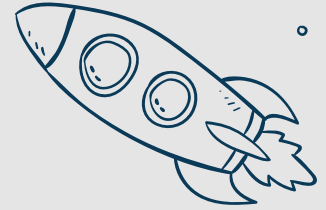
And high above them all, looking down, is the red dwarf, just like Dad said. It's not as bright as Earth's sun, but the jungle and lake bask in its golden glow. Compared to my eyes, the others must be seeing something even brighter. But I can't imagine it being any more magical than it already is. I think of my lost obsidian pendant Lita gave me four centuries ago. This is the moment I would have held the pendant up to the sun. I would have whispered into the wind, "We're okay, Lita. We made it."

Would her voice have called back?

Oh, mija! I have waited so long to hear your sweet voice. I am with your ancestors. You see? Millions of stars apart and I am still here with you.

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Excerpt from Chapter 18

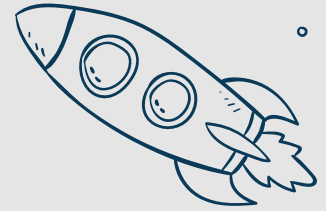


I close my eyes and imagine myself back in Lita's arms. *"Can you imagine the fear Blancaflor must have felt?"* She clicks her tongue. *"Still she mounted the flying horse and trusted it to deliver her and the prince across a vast ocean. All the while the king on an even faster horse, flying at their heels. La que no se arriesga no cruza la mar."* Then, she makes one long sigh.

Lita said about Blancaflor: *"If you don't take a risk, you cannot cross the ocean."*

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Excerpt from Chapter 19

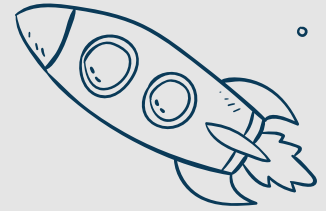


I don't mean to yell. "It's not an ocean, Lita!" I point at the endless desert. "I'll die if I follow. You even said once there are many tricksters—that Rabbit can be a trickster." I motion to Quetzalcoatl's lifeless form. "Look what happened to him. He followed el Conejo, and he is dead." My stomach churns as the Great One's body turns to dust, spiraling upward and away. "This is not how this is supposed to happen at all. Lita, why are you changing the stories?"

Lita laughs. "I am not changing them. You are." She nods her head toward el Conejo. "But if you take the risk and trust where the story is leading you, you might find the ocean you must cross."

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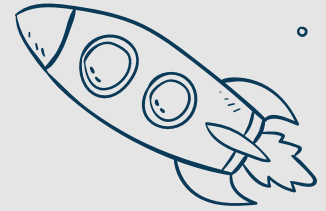
Excerpt from Chapter 22



He paces back and forth in the doorway of his closet. “I read it right here.” He points toward the front of his cell. “It was magical,” he whispers, looking up to meet my eyes. “Like your cuentos. The people and places in each one are all so different from one another. They decide who they will be or what they will do or where they will go without being told by the Collective. And the people in your cuentos don’t live in a world without”—he pauses—“cuentos.”

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Excerpt from Chapter 25

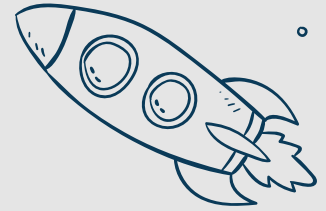


My vision fogs over with tears. I'd been so worried when we left about what I got to bring with me, I didn't even know or care what my parents brought. I reach to Dad's bag in and pull out his rosary. Each jasper bead of red, yellow, or a combination of the two he'd chiseled down, polished, and drilled himself. Just like he said—all so different, but complementing one another into the most beautiful rosary ever created. And the bead I'd found, golden yellow with a red vein that I thought wasn't good enough, just above the cross. I can't swallow.

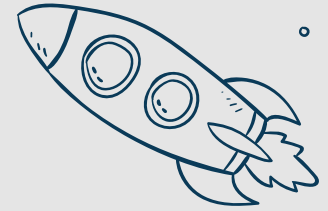
Like Dad used to do in church, I place a bead between my pointer finger and thumb and rub my fingers over its surface. I move on to the next and realize Dad's patience is in every last one of these beads. His love and kindness flows over its smooth surface into my fingers.

The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 26



My eyes shift to Voxy. His mouth is turned down, and I swear I see color in his face. I know what's truly within him, and I want to tell him not to be afraid. That not all cuentos have happy endings. The panic on his face is there for the same reason he wanted the stories so badly. Each story, each person is different. Messy sometimes. But colorful, mismatched, and beautiful.



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Excerpt from Chapter 26

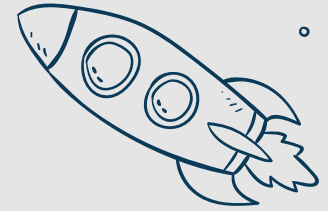
“You have no clue about what sacrifice or bravery mean.” My breathing catches. “We weren’t perfect, but we still had hope we’d make it across the universe and make our ancestors proud.”

“Ancestors?” Nyla laughs and shakes her head. “Remarkable. Misguided, but remarkable.”

I realize all of them, created in a lab to be homogenous, can’t feel a connection to any ancestors. So many of us on Earth had them not just from one culture, but many.

Crick clears his throat. “Not being tethered to tradition allows us to be logical,” he says, and I wonder if he truly believes it.

What the Collective doesn’t understand is by honoring the past, our ancestors, our cultures—and remembering our mistakes—we become better.



The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 27

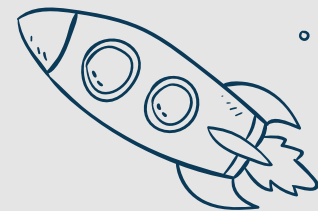
Even here, in this dream world, I trust my ears more than my eyes. I close my eyes and follow the ballad's words, the story of a sparrow who freed a lark from her cage, only to be betrayed by the lark who flew away. The sparrow remained behind, singing his mournful song of lost love.

*Hasta que un gorrioncillo
a su jaula llegó:
"Si usted puede sacarme,
con usted yo me voy."*

The twang of the guitar grows louder, and the echo lessens. The music is so loud I feel the vibration in my body.

When I open my eyes, the music and singing are gone.

Instead, flowered cacti not there a moment ago line a path into a ravine, just like a cuento I know.



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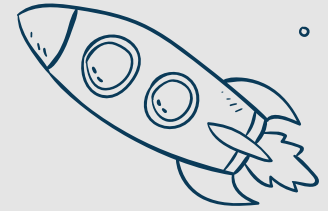
Excerpt from Chapter 27

“They’re reprogramming me, Ben.”

He ignores me. “With these”—he rushes to slide a book back on the shelf, but again, he glitches and his hand passes right through it—“you are bringing stories to a new world.” He sounds exactly like Ben. “Priceless.”

He’s programmed—preservation and hopefulness on repeat. But even if he’s just a program, he’s right. I could’ve taken what’s here and created new, better stories for our new world. Just the fleeting thought makes my heart soar for what will no longer happen.

And though I’ll be gone in any moment, I know in this instant who I am. I am not a scientist. I am not what my parents hoped I’d be. I am what Lita knew I was. I am a storyteller. Just as I let the idea fill me, in the glass of one of the bookcases, I see my reflection.



The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 30

Suma calls softly from behind me. “Her name is Petra.”

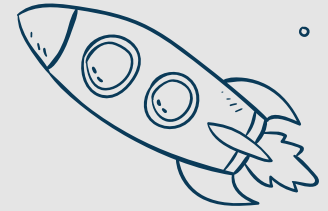
Feathers faces Suma, hands on her hips. “Zeta-1 is an Expert in all things geo—”

Suma speaks over Feathers, her voice suddenly commanding. “*Petra* is a Storyteller.”

A wave of warmth cocoons around me like a hug in Lita’s arms.

I close my eyes and suddenly I’m behind Lita’s house in the desert. The chirp of the flying lizards here, singing to their friends high above us in the trees, sounds like the coyotes singing back home. I even imagine sweet elephant-ear wood smoke drifting into Sagan’s starry sky.

Lita’s voice fills my head. “*Set your intention.*” Tears well in my eyes. I let my memories fill me. I am bringing all of them: Mom, Dad, Lita, Javier, and our home. Ben and my crumbling library, deep in my mind. The stories of Lita and my ancestors. I’m bringing them all to this world.



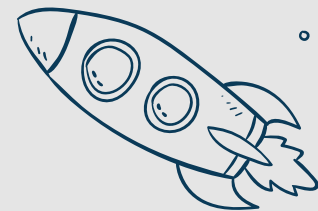
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Excerpt from Chapter 30

...I swallow, and know if I'm able to grow old like Lita, this is the spot where I'll ask the others to share stories of the loved ones they lost, when the fire snake flew too close to Earth. I will share stories of my own grandmother. I will share how she put love and life in her food, her home, her tall tales.

“Oh no,” Voxy says.

Suma's eyes are still closed, and I can't tell if she's trying to forget, or to remember. Maybe stories are there to help us do both. I know stories can't always have happy endings. But if there are chances for us to do better, we have to say out loud the parts that hurt the most.



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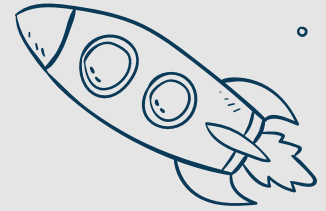
Excerpt from Chapter 30

A stronger gust of wind whistles through the trees. Not a single sky lizard chirps. I bite on my trembling lip. We have to find shelter now. We've come so far. I won't let our story end here. Even if it's just the five of us, I'll share the stories I know from Lita's mother and her mother's mother ... I will make sure the folklore of my ancestors soak into Sagan's soil. And I will speak the best parts of my mind's magical library into our new world.

As I look at Suma, Rubio, Feathers, and Voxy too, I realize I did find some sort of family in the end. We're lucky. A handful who get to live on two planets. And I know they all deserve to hear the truth now about what's gone wrong. That it's just us left. That all our parents are gone, and hard work lies ahead so that so we can live. I take a deep breath.

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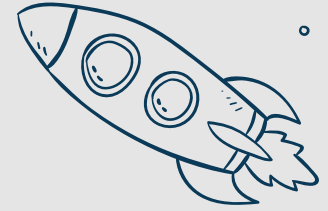
Excerpt from Chapter 30



The twilight is calm but for another gust. I grip my obsidian pendant in my hand—and then I hear it. Lita’s voice calling on the wind.

“You will be a great cuentista, Petra.”

I look up at the moons to keep tears from pouring down my face. The smallest moon peeks over the shoulder of the larger one. I swear I see the outline of el Conejo on its surface.



The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera

Excerpt from Chapter 30

And suddenly I understand exactly what his last words meant.

“If this small part of my journey is to give everyone else a chance, then that is what will make our parents and ancestors proud.” He wasn’t just talking about getting us off the ship. He was talking about saving *all* of those who survived the journey from Earth.

The music grows louder.

“What is that?” Rubio asks.

I blink, and the tears spill down my cheeks.

“That, is home.”

“... se acabó el cuento,
se lo llevó el viento
y se fue ... por las estrellas adentro.

... this is the end of the story for me,
the wind carried it off far away into the stars.