

IT HIPS! IT HOPS! IT DIPS!

The Las Cuentista | Chapter 1 *by Donna Barba Higuera*

LITA TOSSES ANOTHER PIÑON LOG ONTO the fire. Sweet smoke drifts past us into the starry sky. Her knees crack as she sits back down on the blanket next to me. The cup of hot chocolate with cinnamon she's made me sits untouched this time.

"I have something I want you to take with you on your trip, Petra." Lita reaches into her sweater pocket. "Since I won't be there for your thirteenth birthday ..." She holds out a silver pendant in the shape of a sun. Its center is filled with a flat black stone. "If you hold it up to the sun, its light glows through the obsidian."

I take it from her hand and hold it up, but there's no sun. Only the moon. Sometimes I try to imagine I can see things I really can't. But I'm sure a faint glow filters through the middle of the stone. I move the pendant back and forth. It disappears completely when I move it too far from the center of my vision.

When I look back, Lita is motioning to an identical pendant around her neck. "You know," she says, "Yucatecos believe obsidian holds magic. A doorway to bring lost ones together." She purses her lips. Her brown skin wrinkles toward her nose like cracked bark on a tree.

"They shouldn't force me to go," I say.

"You have to, Petra." Lita looks away for a long time before speaking again. "Children are not meant to be separated from their parents."

"You're Dad's parent. He should stay with you then. We all should." Even as I say it, I know I sound like a little kid.

She laughs a deep, soft chuckle. "I'm too old to travel so far. But for you ... Dios mío, a new planet! How exciting."

My chin trembles and I bury my head into her side, squeezing her around the waist. "I don't want to leave you."

Her stomach lowers with a deep sigh. Somewhere off in the desert behind Lita's house, a coyote howls, calling for its friends. As if on cue, the chickens cluck, and one of her fainting goats bleats.

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“You need a cuento,” she says, referring to one of her tall tales.

We lie back looking up at the night sky. The warm desert wind blows over us as Lita pulls me into the tightest hug ever. I never want to leave this spot.

She points up at Halley’s Comet. From here, it doesn’t look so dangerous.

“Había una vez,” she begins her story, “a young fire snake nagual. His mother was Earth, his father the sun.”

“A nagual snake?” I ask. “But how can the sun and Earth be parents to something part human, part animal—”

“Sssh. This is my story.” She clears her throat and takes one of my hands in hers. “Fire Snake was angry. His mother, Earth, fed and nurtured him, but his father, the sun, stayed away. His father would bring crops, but he also brought great drought and death. One very hot day as Sun loomed over the nagual,” Lita waves her arm toward the heavens, “he challenged his father. Even though his mother begged him to stay with her forever, the young Fire Snake sped off toward his father.”

Lita remains silent for a moment. I know the stall is part of her strategy to keep me in suspense. It works.

“Then what?”

She smiles and continues. “With his tail flaming behind him, Fire Snake gained speed until he could not slow himself. But as he approached his father, Sun, he realized his mistake. His father’s flames were far more powerful and stronger than anything else in this universe. The nagual looped around his father, speeding back toward his home, but it was all too late. His father’s fire had burned his eyes, so he could no longer see.” Lita clicks her tongue. “Pobrecito, blinded and moving so fast he could never slow down. Never able to find his mother.” She sighs. Now comes the part in all her stories where her voice becomes lighter, like she’s casually giving directions to the corner panadería. “So, every seventy-five years, he retraces the journey, hoping to reunite with her.” She points again at the fire snake. “Close enough to sense his mother, but never to embrace.”

“Except this time,” I say, heat running up my back.

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“Yes,” she answers, pulling me closer. “In a few days, the fire snake will finally find his mother. Y colorín Colorado, este cuento se ha acabado,” she says, ending her cuento.

I rub her hand over and over, memorizing her wrinkles. “Who told you that story? Your grandma?”

Lita shrugs. “She told me bits. I might have made most of it up.”

“I’m scared, Lita,” I whisper.

She pats my arm. “But for a moment, did you forget your troubles?”

I don’t answer out of shame. Her story had made me forget. Forget about what could happen to her and everyone else.

“Don’t you be afraid,” she says. “I’m not. It’s only the nagual coming home.”

I glance up at Fire Snake in silence. “I’m going to be just like you, Lita. A storyteller.”

She sits up, legs crossed, facing me. “A storyteller, yes. It’s in your blood.” She leans in. “But just like me? No, mija. You need to discover who you are and be that.”

“What if I ruin your stories?” I ask.

Lita cups my chin in her soft, brown hand. “You can’t ruin them. They’ve traveled hundreds of years, and through many people to find you. Now, go make them your own.” I think of Lita and her mother, and her mother’s mother. How much they knew. Who am I to follow them?

I clutch the pendant in my hand. “I’ll never lose your stories, Lita.”

“You know, the planet you are going to will have a sun or two also.” She taps her pendant with her fingernail. “Look for me when you arrive?”

My lower lip quivers, and tears fall down my face. “I can’t believe we’re leaving you.”

She wipes a tear from my cheek. “It’s impossible for you to leave me. I’m part of you. You’re taking me and my stories to a new planet and hundreds of years into the future. How lucky I am.”

I kiss her cheek. “I promise to make you proud.”

Gripping my obsidian pendant, I wonder if Lita will watch the fire snake through the smoky glass, when he finally reunites with his mother.”