

The Last Cuentista by Donna Barba Higuera—Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1–4

The novel opens in the summer of 2061, with twelve-year-old **Petra Peña** spending an evening with her beloved grandmother, **Lita**, a traditional storyteller known as a *cuentista*. Lita is in the middle of telling Petra the myth of Halley's Comet—not as a cold astronomical object, but as a **blind fire snake** searching the sky for its mother, Earth. The snake's love for its mother is so overwhelming that when it finally finds her, the collision will destroy the planet. This story is the first of many *cuentos* (folktales/stories) that frame the entire novel, and it is profoundly important: the comet is real, it is coming, and everyone on Earth knows it. The collision is expected that very summer.

Petra is heartbroken because Lita is not among those chosen to board the evacuation spacecraft. Lita is calm and accepting of her fate, and she does what she has always done—she comforts Petra through storytelling. She tells her granddaughter not to worry about losing the stories, reassuring her: *"You can't ruin them. They've traveled hundreds of years, and through many people to find you. Now, go make them your own."* This piece of advice—that stories are living things that must be adapted and passed along—becomes the moral backbone of the entire novel. Lita encourages Petra not only to memorize the *cuentos* but to **embellish them, change them, make them her own**, so that each generation of storytellers leaves its own mark on the material.

The next day, Petra's family makes the journey by car to the **launch site in Colorado**. Petra's mother is a **botanist** and her father is a **geologist**, and it is because of their scientific expertise that the family has been selected to join the evacuation mission. They will travel aboard one of two surviving spacecraft (a third ship was overrun by rioters before it could launch) to a distant planet called **Sagan**, which has an atmosphere capable of supporting human life. The trip will take **380 years**, during which all the passengers will remain in a state of suspended animation called **stasis**.

During the drive, Petra is consumed by conflicting emotions. She feels guilty that her family gets to live while billions of people will perish when the comet strikes. She also recalls a television program her parents watched about an emerging movement called **the Collective**—a group that believes all human differences are the root cause of war, poverty, and suffering. Their solution is radical: **eradicate all diversity** and make everyone the same, thereby eliminating conflict entirely. Petra's father watches the broadcast with clear unease, shaking his head and saying: *"Equality's good. But equality and sameness are two different things. Sometimes those who say things without really contemplating what it truly means... That dogma runs a thin line."*

At this point, the Collective seems fringe and abstract, but Petra's father's warning plants the seed of the novel's central conflict.

As the family nears the launch site, Petra observes the extraordinary secrecy surrounding the operation. The location of the ships has been kept from the general public, but conspiracy theorists have already been trying to locate them, hoping to hijack the vessels and secure a place aboard. The ship itself is enormous and unusual in shape—Petra describes it as looking like **a giant praying mantis**. Each ship carries a small group of scientific specialists and their families, along with **146 Monitors**—a special class of caretakers whose job will be to maintain the cryogenically frozen passengers over the centuries-long voyage. Monitors will live out their entire lives on the ship, and their children and grandchildren will take up the same role in turn, generation after generation, until the vessel reaches Sagan.

Petra recalls a particularly sobering moment from the night before departure, when she overheard her mother speaking quietly to her father. Her mother realized with sudden clarity that *"One hundred and forty-six people, exactly the number of Monitors on each ship, is all it takes for humans to continue with enough genetic diversity in case the rest of us die."* The Monitors were not chosen for sentiment—they were chosen as a genetic insurance policy. It is a chilling detail that reveals just how cold and calculated the entire endeavor truly is.

Chapters 5–8

With the launch approaching rapidly, Petra and her seven-year-old brother **Javier** are separated from their parents and escorted to a **youth pod room** by a young Monitor named **Ben**. Ben is warm, kind, and clearly loves literature—he and Petra bond immediately over their shared enthusiasm for stories. Javier, who is young and frightened, begins to panic when he sees the sleep pods. Petra attempts to calm him by telling him a story, but she only manages to make his anxiety worse. She is frustrated and disheartened by this failure, wondering if she truly has the gift of a *cuentista* at all. She thinks: *"Maybe my parents are right, and I should just study plants and rocks like them. Maybe wanting to tell stories is 'living in a fantasy world.'... What's Lita's secret? I will never be as good as her."* Eventually Javier cries himself to sleep, and Petra prepares to follow him into stasis.

She is excited about the **En Cognito programs**, called **Cogs**—downloadable knowledge packages that will be implanted into her brain while she sleeps. Her mandatory Cogs include botany and geology, in keeping with her parents' expertise. As an elective, she has requested **world mythology and literature**, hoping to wake up not just a scientist but a storyteller filled with the legends of humanity. However, she is disappointed to learn that her mythology elective has not yet been approved or located. Ben promises faithfully to track it down and upload it before the journey is over.

Just as Petra is about to enter stasis, chaos erupts outside. A mob has found the launch site and is rushing the spacecraft. There is no time to delay—the ship **launches immediately**, and Petra is rushed into her pod in the middle of the commotion, without the proper goodbyes. Then something unexpected happens: instead of falling into deep unconsciousness, Petra realizes with growing alarm that she is still **awake**. Something has malfunctioned with her stasis pod. She is in a kind of semi-conscious limbo—aware of her surroundings but unable to move or speak or make anyone aware of her predicament.

From inside her pod, drifting in and out of awareness, Petra can hear the Monitors speaking to one another. She overhears devastating news: **the third ship**—the one carrying Ben's brother—was overrun by rioters and was unable to launch. Only two ships have escaped Earth's atmosphere. She hears Ben being consoled by the Lead Monitor, who says something that immediately raises Petra's suspicions. Rather than grieving the loss, the Lead Monitor speaks almost with excitement about the opportunity ahead: without politicians or governments, the survivors have a chance to *"start over and create a new history."* Petra, still in her fog, recognizes the language. It sounds exactly like the **Collective** she heard about on television.

That night, Ben arrives at her pod. Since he could not locate her mythology elective program and she is supposedly in full stasis, he begins **reading aloud to her**—choosing the ancient Sumerian epic, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest pieces of literature in human history. Petra, still semi-conscious, is moved and quietly touched. She reflects: *"Maybe he needs to hear it as much as I did. Maybe he's afraid and needs something to help him feel brave."*

On her **thirteenth birthday**, Petra drifts back into a semi-waking state and hears Ben whispering that he has a present for her. Though he was unable to get her mythology elective approved through official channels, he has secretly assembled **a collection of mythology from around the world** as well as contemporary fantasy literature, and he downloads these files into her memory. Petra is overjoyed and drifts back to sleep feeling loved and protected.

When she next surfaces into consciousness, **Ben is an old man**. Many decades have passed. She can hear desperate sounds outside her pod—Ben has barricaded himself inside the pod room and is frantically trying to upload more files into Petra's brain. The Collective has by now taken hold of the ship, and they have discovered what Ben has been doing. They batter at the door, and Petra can hear Ben's heartbroken voice: "*A world without story is lost.*" Ben is eventually overpowered. She hears the Collective members outside declare that Ben will have to be **purged**, and that all records of the information he uploaded will be deleted. They are rewriting history, one mind at a time.

Chapters 9–12

The narrative shifts between Petra's present and her memories of the past. She recalls a beautiful day when she was twelve and her father took her to **Rockhound State Park** to search for special geological specimens. Her father is a gentle, philosophical man, and while they watch two other collectors using a drill to dig aggressively into the rock face, he shakes his head disapprovingly. He tells Petra: *"You need to feel the dirt. Sense when it will give you a gift. And only take a few of what you need."* It is a lesson not just about geology but about restraint, respect, and living in harmony with the world. He holds up a rock with a yellow vein running through red stone and says the differences between the colors make the whole thing more beautiful—a direct counter-argument to everything the Collective stands for.

Petra's mother remarks on Petra's name: *"petra"* is the Greek word for *rock*, and she tells her daughter: *"I don't know what, but you will be the foundation for something amazing one day."* Petra is a little embarrassed by the comment, but the reader can see how apt it turns out to be.

Back in the present—the year **2432**—Petra is fully awakened from stasis. A woman removes her from her pod, and Petra is immediately alarmed by her appearance. The woman *"barely looks human"*—she has blond hair, **violet eyes**, and **translucent skin** through which the veins are clearly visible. Her male attendant, **Crick**, looks almost identical to her. Petra quickly deduces that this engineered race of people has spent centuries erasing all visual differences between individuals. They examine Petra cursorily, noting her **retinitis pigmentosa**—the eye condition that would have barred her from the voyage had it been known—but they decide it doesn't matter. They want the surviving humans for their expertise, not their genes.

Petra has been conditioned in her sleep to say: *"I am Zeta-1, Expert in botany and geology. I am here to serve the Collective."* She recites it dutifully aloud when required. But internally, she is fully herself, and she silently asserts: *"My name is Petra Peña. We left Earth July 28, 2061. It's now 2432, and we've arrived at Sagan. I'll do whatever I have to do to find my family."* This internal resistance—saying one thing and thinking another—will define much of her existence on the ship.

She searches the pod room for Javier, but he is nowhere to be found. When she attempts to wander the halls in search of him, she is caught by Crick and returned to her chamber. He gives her a sedative pill to calm her. She does not swallow it. Alone in her pod, she calms herself by imagining she is lying beside Lita, listening to one of her stories. She recalls a cuento Lita told her about two star-crossed lovers in ancient Mexico who were kept apart by warring tribes and eventually transformed into **mountains**—waiting eternally for humanity's strife to end. Petra thinks ruefully that thousands of years later, people are still at each other's throats.

Chapters 13–16

The next morning, Petra meets her two **pod mates** for the first time in the present day. She privately names one of them **Rubio** (for his strawberry-blond hair; his official designation is Zeta-3) and the other, a small blond girl, she will later call **Feathers** (officially Zeta-4). She also encounters **Voxy**, a tiny boy—perhaps six years old—who is a member of the Collective. He is immediately fascinated by Petra's **freckles**, having never seen such a physical irregularity before. His innocent curiosity hints that something in him is not quite as fully programmed as the rest.

Chancellor Nyla arrives to escort the Zetas to the ship's central dining room, and Petra gets her first long look at the world the Collective has built aboard the ship over the past four centuries. Everything that once mimicked Earth's atmosphere—the plants, the simulated sky, the holographic landscapes—has been removed. In its place is a sterile, metallic, cold environment that feels like the interior of a laboratory. The food is a brownish-green lump called a **bioloaf** that expands in the stomach—nutritionally complete but utterly joyless.

Nyla announces that the Zeta team has been selected for the first **exploratory mission to Sagan's surface**, where they will collect water and plant samples. A test subject from the Collective named **Len** will accompany them, though the purpose of sending him is not immediately explained.

That evening, the Collective holds a **celebration** to mark their arrival at Sagan. Colorful tonics are distributed, sending people into a state of mild euphoria. Holographic entertainment fills the room. At one point, the show projects an image of **Earth being struck by Halley's Comet**—not as a tragedy to be mourned, but as a triumph. Nyla addresses the gathered Collective and says: *"Thanks to the Collective, not a single memory of a world filled with conflict, starvation, or war will find its way into our future."* She frames the destruction of Earth—and of all human history—as a gift.

Petra slips away from the celebration and makes her way to the section of the ship where her parents' stasis pods are kept. What she finds is devastating: both pods are **empty**. The ship's log reads that her mother and father were *"purged"* after the Collective attempted and failed to erase and reprogram their memories. She finds a pod with Javier's name as well. It, too, is **empty**. She has no way of knowing whether her brother is alive or dead.

Petra returns to the pod room, where Rubio and Feathers are already in their beds. She sits in the dark with her grief, weighing her options: *"If I tell the Chancellor I remember everything, she'll either purge me or try reprogramming me again. Either one is better than spending a life imagining what happened to Mom, Dad, and Javier."* She is on the edge of despair when Feathers begins **whimpering in her sleep**, apparently reliving a memory of a childhood visit to the doctor—a memory that should, according to the Collective's programming, no longer exist. Petra watches, astonished that reprogramming can erase conscious memory but cannot reach whatever is stored deeper in the body and heart.

She wakes Feathers gently and, to comfort her, **tells her a cuento**—a story about an oppressive king and a clever princess who outwits him and saves everyone around her. It is the first time Petra has acted as a cuentista on the ship, and it is a spontaneous act of kindness and survival. Feathers listens, wide-eyed, and says she loved it, promising never to tell the Collective. Rubio, who was also awake and listening from his pod, makes the same promise. A small, fragile alliance has been born.

Chapters 17–19

The Zeta team—Petra, Rubio, and Feathers—boards a shuttle, accompanied by Len, who is being monitored from the ship by the Collective via **corpomonitors** that track their vital signs and **comm units** that allow two-way communication. As the shuttle descends toward Sagan, Petra is struck speechless by the planet's **beauty**. Only one hemisphere faces the twin suns; the other side is in permanent shadow. The landscape of the sunlit side is breathtaking—mountains, lakes, rivers, and thick, lush foliage that in many ways resembles Earth. Petra is the first to remove her oxygen helmet, finding the atmosphere safe and sweet.

While the Zetas explore with a kind of joyful curiosity that the Collective's programming cannot entirely suppress, **Len is clearly suffering**. Something about the planet's atmosphere—or perhaps its light—is affecting him in ways it does not affect the human Zetas. Petra notes his discomfort but can do little about it in the moment.

Petra uses this first mission to begin **planning her escape**. She mentally catalogs resources: there are small animals on the planet (rodents and bat-like creatures) but no large predators. She identifies a **toxic plant species** that could be dangerous. She also notices **butterfly-like creatures** submerged in the lake—an image of strange and delicate beauty that sticks with her. She thinks of Lita's story of the brave princess—who was heroic not just because she crossed the ocean herself, but because she **took others with her**. Petra makes a quiet decision: she cannot leave Rubio and Feathers behind when she escapes. They are, in whatever fragile way, her family now.

When the group returns to the shuttle, Len's condition has dramatically worsened—his **skin is covered in boils**. Petra uses their remaining water supply to try to alleviate his pain, and she notices a flicker of compassion in the eyes of her fellow Zetas. Back on the ship, Len is taken away for medical treatment. Nyla reprimands Petra for helping him: he has been exposed as useless, and in the Collective's worldview, useless individuals are not deserving of care.

That night, Petra dreams of a cuento Lita used to tell about the Aztec god **Quetzalcoatl** and **el Conejo**—the rabbit. In the dream, the rabbit beckons to Petra, urging her to follow. Petra protests that this is not how the story goes. Lita's voice tells her: "*Change the story as you wish.*" When Petra wakes suddenly, she is convinced that **someone has just left the sleeping chamber**.

Chapters 20–21

The following morning, Petra overhears a girl named **Glish** quietly questioning some of the Collective's rules. It is a small rebellion, barely a whisper—but Nyla and Crick overhear it. Without hesitation, they summon a huge Collective member Petra privately calls "**the Prawn**," who escorts Glish away. She is never seen again. The message is crystal clear: **dissent, even in the mildest form, means death.**

Before the day's shuttle mission, Petra secretly slips some extra **food loaves** into her collection pack—provisions she plans to cache on the planet for the escape. **Voxy** sees her do it but promises not to tell. On Sagan, while the others collect samples, Petra slips away to explore a **deep cave** and hides her stash of food inside. She is building the infrastructure of her escape, piece by piece.

Back on the ship, the team learns that a **second Zeta**, a girl named **Suma** (officially Zeta-2), has been released from a second round of stasis reprogramming. She joins the pod group. That night, Rubio presses Petra to tell another cuento. She is deeply conflicted: *"My stomach twists in a nervous knot. Now, I need them to hear the stories. Hopefully, these stories from Earth will remind them of who they are and who their families were. But if they do remember, I pray they don't decide to share with someone outside."*

She tells a story about a poor old couple who gives food to a beggar. The beggar rewards their generosity by directing them to a cave containing a **treasure jar**. But an evil neighbor steals the jar first, only to find it full of poisonous insects that bite her. In fury, she throws the jar through the old couple's window—and by morning, the insects have **turned to diamonds**. It is a story about the circular nature of goodness and cruelty, and it resonates deeply even with listeners whose explicit memories have been erased.

After everyone falls asleep, Petra sneaks to the **supply room**, hoping to find additional provisions. She finds it nearly empty. While there, she meets **Epsilon-5**, an old human man who has been fully reprogrammed by the Collective. He believes he is simply a botanist serving the Collective and is not suspicious of Petra's excuse for being in the supply room. He leads her to the **lab**, where Nyla soon arrives to inspect. Petra assures Nyla that she can synthesize a **defoliant**—a substance to clear the vegetation on Sagan's surface—within a few days, buying herself time.

Later, **Voxy** wakes her from a nightmare. He confesses that he has been sneaking into the youth pod room to listen to her cuentos—he was the mysterious figure she sensed leaving the chamber on the previous night. He makes a remarkable offer: he has seen an **actual book** somewhere on the ship—a physical book, a rarity in a world that has systematically destroyed all records of the past. He will show Petra where it is hidden if she lets him keep listening to her stories. She agrees immediately.

Chapters 22–23

Voxy leads Petra through the ship to the quarters he shares with Chancellor Nyla—a significant detail that suggests Nyla is **grooming Voxy as a successor**. While Nyla is absent, Voxy shows Petra a hidden catch at the back of his sleeping cell. Behind it is a **secret room** containing a holographic representation of Earth's solar system and, more importantly, the ship's long-forgotten **seed vault**—the repository where the original human travelers stored everything they brought from Earth.

Petra moves through the vault with a mix of wonder and grief. She finds **unused En Cognito Cog programs** she cannot yet identify. She finds the **personal belongings** of all the humans who originally boarded the ship—items the Collective has stashed here, too small and seemingly insignificant to bother destroying, yet too revealing to display. Among them, Petra finds **Javier's copy of the children's book *Dreamers*** by Yuyi Morales—a story about a mother and child who immigrate to a new country and find survival through resilience, language, and hope. Voxy recognizes it as the book he once secretly read. Most crucially, Petra finds the **obsidian necklace** Lita pressed into her hand the night before departure, telling her it was “a doorway to *bring lost ones together*.” Finding it feels like recovering a piece of her soul.

Before they can linger, Petra hears Nyla's voice. Voxy slips back to his cell to answer her, while Petra hides and waits. Once the two leave for a Collective meeting, Petra makes her way back through the main hall. As she passes through, she overhears Nyla address the Collective about “**hostiles**” on the surface of Sagan. Petra immediately connects this to the **First Arrivers**—a human colony sent to Sagan on an earlier mission, generations before Petra's ship arrived. If they are still alive, they could be a sanctuary.

Chapters 23–25

The next morning, all the Zetas are escorted to their respective labs. Petra notices immediately that **all of the toxic plant specimens she collected have disappeared**. With Crick watching, she sets to work on legitimate tasks—purifying water, converting plants into digestible food. When Crick eventually leaves, **Epsilon-5 arrives** to assist her. The two work well together, and in the course of their conversation, Petra asks about the missing toxic plants. He tells her that Nyla had him working on a **special project** to extract toxins from them.

The meaning lands like a blow. Nyla is not trying to understand the plants. She is **creating a weapon**. She intends to use the toxin to exterminate the First Arrivers—the human colonists already living on Sagan. As Petra absorbs this horror, she studies Epsilon-5 more carefully. He is old, clearly a long-term servant of the Collective. She listens to him talk about his years of service. And then she sees it: a **birthmark on his thumb**. She knows that birthmark. She has known it her entire life.

Epsilon-5 is Javier.

He was revived from stasis decades before Petra and has spent his entire adult life serving the Collective, his real memories completely erased. He is an old man now, and he has no idea who Petra is. The weight of this discovery—that her little brother has lived and aged and lost himself entirely—is almost unbearable.

When Nyla enters the lab unexpectedly, Petra thinks quickly. She suggests she can **improve the toxin formula** to make it more efficient and shorter-lived—a lie designed to give her access to all the samples so she can neutralize them. Nyla, believing Javier may have made errors in his old age, agrees and sends him away. Alone, Petra works frantically to render the toxin inert, thinking: *"Once I finish what I need to do, I can spend the rest of his life making it up to him."*

She gathers supplies and slips back to the seed vault, collecting Javier's book and clothing, Suma's **unicorn sweatshirt**, and other mementos she believes can unlock her shipmates' buried memories. She finds Voxy again, who insists on hearing another cuento. She tells him one and slips away. Then she finds **Javier** and reads him his childhood copy of *Dreamers* aloud. As she reads, she watches his face. She reaches a page with a monarch butterfly printed on it—and something miraculous happens. Javier reaches out and touches it, just as he always did as a child. *"Javier touches it like he always has. Every. Single. Time. Suddenly the old man before me is my little brother again."* His memories come flooding back.

Petra tells him they must escape with the Zetas immediately. Javier says he knows exactly what to do—he will go collect the Zetas while Petra waits. But at that moment, Voxy emerges from hiding—he has heard everything. He begs Petra to read *Dreamers* to him before she leaves. She is about to begin when the door opens and **Nyla enters, accompanied by Javier**. He has apparently told her everything. He has, it seems, betrayed his sister.

Chapters 26–28

Nyla and Crick escort Petra to a reprogramming pod. As she walks, Petra speaks directly and defiantly to Nyla: *"The Collective won't succeed in the end. You all numb yourselves to erase who we really are. The tonics. The Cogs. But you can't program out love and caring for one another."* Nyla, curious about this last original human, listens but does not respond. Javier and Voxy stand silently by as Petra is hooked up to the reprogramming machine.

As the process begins and Petra's consciousness starts to blur, she finds herself in a **dream**—but this one is different from the others. Lita is there, and so is the **rabbit from the Quetzalcoatl myth**, beckoning again. This time, Petra follows him. He leads her to what appears to be a **vast holographic library**, staffed by a librarian who looks exactly like **Ben**. This Ben—a digital echo of the kind old Monitor—explains everything: while he was alive, Ben uploaded as much of humanity's literary and mythological legacy into Petra's memory as he possibly could. He then **created a virtual librarian in his own image** so that Petra would know she could trust the voice guiding her through it. The books in the library are beginning to disintegrate, suggesting that Petra's memory is under assault from the reprogramming. But before the process can complete, she hears voices calling her back.

Petra wakes up in the **shuttle cockpit**. Javier is standing over her, alive and calm. He explains: when Nyla caught him searching for the Zetas, he had no choice but to pretend he was bringing Petra in willingly. It was all a **ruse**. All the Zetas are already in the shuttle. Javier tells them that Petra has received new orders and they are all being sent to the planet—no one will question a directive from the Collective hierarchy.

As Petra prepares to fly the shuttle, Javier tells her quietly that he is **not coming with them**. *"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."* Petra is distraught. She cannot accept this. But Javier has already **sealed the shuttle door** and will remotely pilot it to safety. He has also **destroyed the landing rails**, making it physically impossible for Petra to return to the mothership. She has no choice. She watches her brother disappear through the closed door as the shuttle descends.

Chapters 29–30

The shuttle lands in a **fierce windstorm** on Sagan's surface. Petra leads the group toward the cave where she hid supplies—and discovers, to her dismay, that **animals have eaten all the food**. The group begins to fracture. The others question her authority, having no real sense of identity or purpose. Petra pulls **Suma** aside and shows her the **unicorn sweatshirt** and a **photo album** of Suma with her family. The moment Suma sees them, the memories return instantly. She is fully herself again and immediately becomes Petra's ally.

Petra reveals that she must remove Suma's **tracking device**—the Collective can still locate them through it. She also spots a sign that the mothership has already repaired the shuttle bay controls—their escape shuttle is **gone**. The Collective is coming. The group must move on foot toward the **waterfalls** on the far shore of the lake, where the First Arrivers' settlement is supposed to be.

As they trudge along the lakeshore, they hear a **swarm of drones** approaching overhead. Petra realizes with horror that this is the toxin deployment—the drones are releasing the poison over the waterfall area where the First Arrivers live. She did not forget that Nyla had already loaded drones with the toxin before Petra neutralized the lab samples. She says nothing to alarm the others but orders everyone into the **lake**, submerging themselves as the drones pass overhead, releasing a **green mist** over the land near the waterfalls. When they surface, Petra is privately devastated—she is certain the First Arrivers are dead.

The **mothership** descends into view, hovering over Sagan as if witnessing the outcome of its extermination mission. Then, slowly, it **rises and departs**—the Collective has concluded that the planet is uninhabitable for them, since Sagan's sunlight causes their skin to blister and die. They are heading off to search for another planet. Petra believes the Collective will never return to Sagan.

Shivering and grieving, the group shelters while Petra gathers herself. She gives **Feathers** the clothes she took from Javier's old belongings in the seed vault—and simply putting on the old Earth clothing triggers something in Feathers. Her memories begin to stir.

Petra tells the group a **new cuento**—one she has invented herself, just as Lita always urged her to do. She takes the old story of the blind fire snake and transforms it: in her version, after destroying Earth, the snake **traveled to Sagan** to act as its guardian and protector, breathing a warm wind over the humans who came to make a new home there. It is a cuento born of this exact moment, for these exact people—the first original story Petra has told entirely in her own words.

When she finishes, **Suma raises a spyglass** and scans the far shore of the lake. She sees what appears to be a **human settlement**. Then the group smells **smoke**. Then Petra hears the distant, unmistakable sound of **someone playing a guitar**. And then **laughter**—real, warm, human laughter drifting across the water.

Javier must have found a way to neutralize the toxin already loaded on the drones—his **final act of self-sacrifice** was not just to help them escape, but to **save the First Arrivers**. He laid down his life so that humanity, in all its messy, beautiful, story-filled diversity, could survive.

Petra stands at the edge of the lake on the planet Sagan, 380 years and countless stories from the world she was born into, and makes a vow: *"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 soaks into Sagan's soil. And I will speak the best parts of my mind's magical library into our new world."* She is the last cuentista—and she is also the first. She leads her small band of survivors toward the firelight and the music and the beginning of everything.