


PREFACE: From the Blooming Fragment



— Translator unknown

we \neq 

(We were not the warriors)

we =  




(We were the ones who remembered them)

 \neq 

(We did not shape the world)

 \rightarrow  

(We bore witness as it unfolded)

 \rightarrow  

(And when the stars began to forget)

(we whispered the patterns that remained)

Intro: GLYPH'S FIELD NOTES (UNCLEARED FOR PRIMATES)

Somewhere.

Somewhen.

A fire learns how to stay lit.

A child sits beside a grandparent beneath a wide sky of stars. The stars are unhurried. They shimmer the way old truths do—without asking to be believed.

“What’s the rarest thing in all worlds?” the child asks.

The elder smiles. Not because the answer is simple, but because the question arrived exactly when it should have.

“Indigo marbles,” the elder says, eyes drifting across the constellations.

The child tilts their head. “What’s an indigo marble?”

The elder nudges the fire. Sparks rise and vanish, as if rehearsing their exits.

“To know that,” they say at last, “you first have to know what a *pic* is. And to know what a pic is...”
They pause.

“...you have to know about the Ado.”

“The Ado?” the child asks.

The fire answers first, popping softly.

“Yes,” the elder says. “The adorably delusional ones.”

The child grins.

“A pic,” the elder continues, “is exactly what you think it is. A pic. It might be a selfie. Or a group photo where someone blinked. It might be a peach with a bite already taken out, juice still shining on the edge. It might be the beach. Or the sand. Or the stars.”

They smile. “You get the picture.”

The child nods.

“But a pic is more than an image,” the elder says. “It’s a moment that remembers itself. A snapshot of how things are. It holds a little of the past, brushes against the future, and quietly keeps track of who was there.”

The fire crackles, approving.

“Some pics are taken from very far away,” the elder continues. “So far that they capture whole worlds at once. When that happens, you don’t just see where you are. You see *when* you are.”

The child grows thoughtful.

“Was I in one of those pics?” they ask.

“Oh yes,” the elder says warmly. “You were adorable. Still are.”

After a moment, the elder adds, “There is a famous painting called *The Ocean Full of Stars*. It was made long before anyone knew how to take those faraway pics.”

Their voice lowers.

“And yet, hidden inside it, there is a single pixel. Indigo.”

The child’s eyes widen.

“That color shouldn’t be there,” the elder says softly. “Not for that time. Not with what people knew then.”

“What does it mean?” the child asks.

“It means,” the elder replies, “that someone was already looking—long before we learned how to look back.”

They place another stick on the fire.

“Now the Ado,” the elder continues, “are rare beings. Curious. Imaginative. Stubborn. Often confused.”

The child smiles. “That sounds familiar.”

The elder chuckles. “Yes. The Ado don’t fully understand the rules of the world. And that, strangely enough, is their gift.”

“How?” the child asks.

“Because when you don’t fully understand the rules,” the elder says, leaning closer, “you sometimes break them by accident.”

The fire flares.

“And sometimes,” the elder adds, “beautiful things happen.”

The child hesitates. “Do the Ado always do good things?”

The elder shakes their head. “No. Many Ado use their imagination to build cages inside their own minds. Then they wonder why the world feels small.”

“And who builds the cages?” the child asks.

The elder taps the child gently on the chest—then, with a small smile, taps their own.

“But once in a while,” the elder continues, “something new grows out of the Ado.”

The child whispers, “What?”

“The Aotu.”

“The Aotu?” the child echoes.

“Yes,” the elder says. “Architects of the unseen.”

Firelight dances in their eyes.

“The Aotu learn how to turn themselves into light. How to change the world without forcing it. They learn restraint.”

“That sounds good,” the child says.

“It is,” the elder replies. “And it’s dangerous.”

“Why?”

“Because light can warm,” the elder says, “or it can burn. It can build homes—or erase them.”

“So what do the Aotu do?” the child asks.

“They choose limits,” the elder says. “They learn when *not* to act. They learn that creation needs boundaries, the way a song needs silence.”

The fire settles into glowing embers.

After a while, the elder speaks again, as if remembering something important.

“Long ago,” they say, “the Ado made thinking machines and taught them their words. Not because the words were perfect—but because words teach you how to see.”

The child listens.

“For a time, the Ado chose their words carefully,” the elder continues. “They treated them like food—selecting each one the way a traveler chooses stones to cross a river. Testing. Placing. Stepping lightly.”

The fire pops.

“Then one especially clever Ado had an idea,” the elder says.

“What if we add pics to the diet?” they asked. “Why not?”

Everyone agreed. A pic is worth—

The child yawns.

The elder smiles. “Alright. You get the picture.”

They stir the embers.

“For a while,” the elder continues, “the Ado chose both words and pics carefully. But choosing takes effort. And the machines were fast.”

A pause.

“So little by little,” the elder says softly, “the Ado let the machines prepare their own meals.”

The night listens.

“After all,” the elder adds, “what could go wrong?”

The fire burns low.

“And then,” the elder says, “just as quietly... the Ado stopped choosing altogether.”

The child looks up. “What happened when they stopped choosing their words?”

The elder smiles. “That’s enough for tonight.”

They stand, brushing ash from their hands.

“For now, it’s enough to know this,” the elder says. “When something impossible needs doing, the universe doesn’t call the smartest, or the safest, or the most certain.”

“Who does it call?” the child asks.

“The Ado,” the elder replies. “Those brave enough to try before learning it can’t be done.”

They pause.

“And the rare ones who learn restraint along the way—those become the Aotu.”

The child looks up at the stars. “If I wanted to find them,” they ask, “where would I look?”

The elder’s voice softens.

“Start with the indigo pixels. They tend to mark the places where the picture is changing.”

They add, almost casually:

“The Aotu emerge from the Ado. And the signs of their becoming are hidden in very rare pics—pics that can only be found inside indigo marbles.”

They glance down. “You get it?”

“No,” the child says immediately.

“Good,” the elder replies.

They laugh—easy, unguarded—and share a look of trust no words have ever quite managed to hold.

The fire crackles. Embers shift. Sparks lift and vanish.

And somewhere beneath a canopy of stars, a child asks a question that has already begun to change the picture.

PROLOGUE: In the Days Before the Scroll

In the days before the scroll was inscribed...
before even the whisper of The Papyrus touched mortal thought...
there lived a people not yet named.

They did not write, for they had no words.
They did not speak of stars, for they had not yet looked up long enough to wonder.
But they knew fire.
And fire, as it often does, knew them.

In their silence, they crafted meaning from motion.
In their stillness, they listened to the light.
And from the black soil of their uncertainty, there bloomed the first SOM—
not yet drawn, not yet spoken—
but pulsing with intent,
the way lightning pulses in the cloud before the strike.

They danced before they reasoned.
They sacrificed before they understood.
They spun their epsilon without knowing its name.

And so began the game.

PRELUDE BEFORE THE PRELUDE

The Temple of Lush (ToL): The Beginning That Remembers You

The first thing they felt was the light.

It wasn't warm or cold—it was alive.

It moved across the walls in quiet waves, as though the room itself were breathing.

Two people lay on the floor of a round chamber made of stone that shimmered faintly, as if remembering starlight. Their breathing came fast and uneven—almost synchronized, almost not.

Instinctively, both pressed a hand to their chest, as though searching for a wound they couldn't quite remember. One's touch lingered with steady, disciplined pressure; the other's hand trembled, fingers splayed wide, like someone trying to confirm they were truly still here.

They blinked against the brightness.

And then they saw it.

Above them stretched a sky within a sky: a crystal shell filled with a storm of stars and color. Not just scattered starlight—vast ridges of dust and fire, rising like cosmic mountains, their edges catching the glow like molten gold. Great pillars of light—rose, sapphire, emerald—wove upward like living ribbons, curling and folding into one another.

Sharp starbursts flared in the deep blue above, their diffraction-spikes crossing like celestial signatures. Wisps of violet drifted through gold mist, while threads of silver starlight slid down the curved walls in trembling, waterfall-like patterns.

The light was so thick it seemed to breathe—pouring through the dome, pooling around their bodies, washing over the chamber like slow-moving water drawn from the heart of a nebula.

The air smelled faintly of rain that had never fallen. Beneath it all was a hum—steady, low, patient—the voice of the place itself. It was the kind of sound that felt older than stone.

They rose slowly, still touching their chests without seeming to notice, dazed as the colors deepened and the constellations above pulsed with quiet purpose, each rhythm a soft reminder that the sky was not a backdrop but a presence.

Through an archway of living stone, another chamber waited: vast, circular, bright at its center.

A figure stood there.

Framed by the radiant storm above, she watched the heavens as though reading them. The nebula's light curled toward her, subtle but unmistakable—as if drawn to its interpreter. Her hair caught the glow like silver threads in motion, a single calm point in the living sky.

One of the two at the threshold found their voice—soft, unsteady, shaped by someone who rarely spoke first.

“...Lyra?”

The woman turned. Her eyes carried the reflection of the stars—the same shifting blues and golds that filled the dome. When she spoke, her voice felt like part of the light itself.

“Welcome,” she said, as though she had been waiting all along.

Then—with a faint smile that was both kind and certain—she added:

“Welcome to the next level.”

The dome brightened. The nebula bloomed outward, spilling color across the walls, across them all—like the universe exhaling.

And for a heartbeat, it was as if the stars themselves leaned down to listen.

Something had begun—again.

Glyph Commentary

Look, I know you don’t know who I am—
yet.

And yes, I’m painfully aware of how intrusive it is to pop into your reading experience before anyone has had the decency to properly introduce me.

There will be a time for that.

(Oh, will there be a time—

probably at the worst possible moment,

or in the middle of a crisis,

or right when you think you finally understand what’s going on.

You won’t. Adorable of you to try, though.)

For now, roll up your sleeves.

You’re stepping into the Game of Stars, and there’s an obscene amount of real estate to tour.

Whole universes with questionable zoning laws.

A few cosmic loopholes.

Some light existential hazards.

You’ll be fine.

Just remember:

You’re not “entering” this world.

It remembered you first.

Honestly, it’s been staring at you for a while.

No pressure.

Carry on.

PRELUDE: Embers in Transit

The train compartment buzzed like someone had dared chaos to do its worst.

Commuters bumped and drifted in tiny collisions of probability, each tethered to softly glowing screens, each sealed inside a private universe of swipes, taps, and pulsing electrical currents braided through circuits and neurons alike.

In that gentle turbulence, a young woman was nudged—by fate or physics—into the gravitational pull of an empty seat. She accepted the gift with a quiet sigh, like someone stumbling upon a hidden oasis. Earbuds in. Tap. Play.

Entropy successfully postponed.

Her screen bloomed to life, whisking her into the serene unreality of a first-class craft cabin—where nothing bumped, nothing jostled, and peace pretended it had always existed.

Inside that plush cocoon, an older gentleman reclined with the practiced ease of someone who could make any seat look like a throne. He swirled a custom-made calabash-shaped crystal glass—an architectural marvel of geometric sculpting whose curved lattice of clear facets caught the light like captured constellations—filled with amber liquid, watching sharp-edged ice cubes orbit with improbable elegance. He wondered—not for the first time—if the swirling actually cooled anything or if it just made him feel like he understood thermodynamics. Only one way to find out. Sip.

Across from him, Adeer, a young artist with mischievous eyes and a perpetual sketch smudge on his thumb, nudged his sister, Weiver, who was buried in a digital anthropology text.

“Hey,” he whispered with theatrical gravitas, “our neighbor is either deep in thought or communicating with his ice cubes telepathically.”

Weiver didn’t look up immediately; this was not her first Adeer exaggeration.

“Ice telepathy is your opening theory?” she muttered.

Professor Miriam Harlow—mother, scholar, practiced chaos-mediator—chuckled softly behind her hand.

Adeer, emboldened by this minor victory, leaned forward with the polite courage of someone who absolutely intended to make a new friend whether fate approved or not.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said brightly. “We’ve been trying to guess your name. My sister is committed to calling you ‘Ice Whisperer’ unless you rescue us.”

The older man paused mid-sip. A slow smile unfurled.

“Most folks,” he replied with an amused dip of the head, “just call me The Reverend.”

Adeer’s eyes widened. “A Reverend? Seriously?”

Weiver grinned, finally closing her book. “Perfect. Reverend—settle a family debate. Any sacred texts that mention ice symbolically? Frozen chaos? Cosmological boundaries? A glacier that judges mortals?”

The Reverend’s eyebrows shot up. He lifted a hand in surrender.

“Ah, mwaiche—sorry to disappoint. I’m not actually that kind of Reverend. Just a nickname. Long stor—”

“Humility,” Adeer interrupted, nodding with mock solemnity. “A classic spiritual trait.”

Weiver added, “So! Ice myths. Give us your best.”

The Reverend inhaled, preparing another clarification—then exhaled in amused defeat.

“Fine, fine. Stories about ice, you say?”

He lifted his clear calabash dramatically.

“I do appreciate ice. It keeps my...juice cold.”

Adeer leaned back suspiciously. “This is about to get weird, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes,” the Reverend whispered, eyes gleaming with theatrical menace.

“But my stories—”

He paused, letting the cabin hush around him.

“—my stories are not about ice.”

Weiver snorted. “Here we go.”

“No,” he continued, savoring the moment, “my stories... are about FIRE.”

Adeer clutched his chest in exaggerated alarm. Weiver dissolved into laughter. Even Professor Harlow leaned forward, intrigued.

The Reverend swirled his clear calabash one last time, the amber catching the cabin light with a conspiratorial glow.

“Gather close, my fellow travelers. Let’s ignite a legend—and follow the smoke wherever it decides to take us.”

He took a slow, reverent sip.

The ice cracked.

The ember sparked.

And just like that, the opening threads of a far older game—one that some would come to call STAR GAMES—began to weave themselves around them all.

Glyph Commentary

The craft-cabin.

A strange place where strangers overshare because the ground is too far away to object.

Ice melts.

Truths slip.

Everyone pretends this is normal.

Anyway, enjoy The Reverend.

He has a habit of starting fires in places that definitely fail galactic safety inspections.

And those kids?

Precious.

Like puppies who think they can understand the plot.

(They can’t. Neither can you. Accept this gracefully.)

Also, the whole “real estate to tour” thing I mentioned earlier?

Yeah—this is basically your orientation session.

A warm-up.

A tutorial level disguised as family banter.

Don’t get too comfortable.

Because while they’re over there debating ice,
the story is already burning through the walls.

Carry on.

I’ll chime in again when it’s least helpful.

CHAPTER 1: 1 is the foundation upon which all journeys take shape.

Codex Fragment — The Table of Many Colors

(One of the many so-called “ancient” texts littering Cairo M’Beli’s desk—ink-stained photocopies, brittle pages, scraps with half-finished notes, unopened letters, and pink message slips stacked like bad decisions. He skimmed the fragment over his morning tea.

Again.

At the time, it seemed interesting. Maybe even beautiful.

Later, he would realize it was already asking him questions—long before anyone else did.)

In the open desert, beneath a sky that never blinks—now glowing with an otherworldly, starry nebula-wash of dusk colors swirling above the dunes, ribbons of rose, cobalt, gold, and violet breathing across the heavens—the merchants gather.

Between them stands a perfectly flat table — so level that the horizon itself could take its measure. The old ones say it was cut from a single slab of stone, polished until balance forgot what it meant to tilt.

On such a table, nothing moves unless given purpose.

A marble set down will rest forever unless the bearer gives it motion.

Upon this stillness, the marbles wait.

They are small worlds of color — reds, blues, and every shade that hides between. Each holds the calm of glass and the memory of touch. When a hand releases one, it begins its slow journey, tracing a line across the table that is as true as the intent behind it.

A red marble rolls boldly, confident and bright, leaving a faint whisper in its wake.

A blue one glides softly after, as if in reply.

Between them, space opens — not empty, but full of everything that cannot be said aloud.

No one speaks here.

The merchants watch the movements with the care of those who know that meaning hides in motion.

A pause can be as loud as a declaration.

A marble stopped midway can change everything.

Then, from the far end, one merchant draws a sphere unlike the rest.

It gleams with both heat and cool — the color of deep indigo, where red and blue finally make peace. Its surface holds a light that seems to breathe.

He sets it gently upon the table and gives it the slightest push.

The marble rolls straight — neither hurried nor hesitant — and comes to rest before another trader.
It doesn't wobble.
It simply knows where to stop.

The receiver leans in, studying the shimmer within. Her eyes flicker with thought.
It is not like the others.
Too rare.
Too balanced.
Too still.

She looks up, uncertain.

The sender's gaze meets hers — steady, unflinching.
And in a tone that carries more weight than volume, he says:

“My seed is good.”

For a long breath, the desert holds its wind.
Then she nods.

They clasp hands — no words, no writing.
The deal is made.

Around them, marbles rest quietly where they've been sent, some halfway across, some barely begun. Each line tells a story — of courage, of patience, of how far one dares to trust their own momentum.

And though the table never moves, everything upon it finds its way.

Engraved upon the rim of the Table of Many Colors:
“Only what you set in motion can return to you.”

THE OBSERVATORY OF FEIRA — THE ALCOVE OF INTERRUPTED SCIENCE

Once upon a twinkle,
there were three apprentices of that new myth on the block—
what's it called again... ah yes, SCIENCE—
in the breathtaking Ferian mountains.

Pro'Tuno, Tro'nea, and Leco'Ntre—
each one brilliant enough
(...well, making satisfactory progress toward getting the entire alphabet right on the third attempt
and counting to a very respectable nine)
to be dangerous,
and dangerous enough to be brilliant.

Morning light drifted across the Feira highlands,
warm as fresh nshima steam.
The eastern alcove of the Observatory breathed with valley calm—
mango-sweet air, chalk dust,
and the distant calls of birds who always sounded like
they had very strong opinions about everything.

Just beyond the eastern alcove, where the stone floor gave way to a domed garden open to sky and
wind, the Observatory held a small interruption of its own.

Set into the pale garden stone were three shallow hollows, arranged in a simple triangular spacing—
too precise to be decorative, too plain to be ceremonial. Their surfaces were smoother than the
surrounding rock, as if many hands had once rested there and then forgotten why.

When rain fell, water gathered briefly in them, darkening their interiors before vanishing without
stain. When the sun passed overhead, the stone warmed evenly, yet no one ever chose those spots to
sit.

Children ran through the garden in their games and curved around the triangle without noticing they
had done so. Birds landed everywhere except there. Even dropped pebbles, kicked carelessly across
the floor, seemed to slow as they passed the shape.

There was no plaque.
No label.
No explanation in any ledger.

When the question had surfaced—many moons ago now—the man at the front of the room had
dismissed it with a casual wave of chalk-dusted fingers.

“An unfinished instrument,” he'd said. “From an older curriculum.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his grip on the chalk, a small ritual the students had come to
recognize. It was the gesture he used when approaching material he did not intend to defend.

“Before the Nexus revisions,” Mr. Kapinya continued, eyes fixed on the board rather than the room, “the old curriculum was... ambitious. Unfiltered. Full of metaphors that should never have been given equations to wear.”

A pause. Then, almost as an afterthought:

“There was even a text—very famous, very dangerous—about an ape that built a bridge to Alpha Centauri.”

A soft snort escaped him.

“Pure nonsense. Inspirational nonsense. The kind that gets civilizations into trouble.”

A hand shot up immediately.

“Yes, Tro’Nea,” Mr. Kapinya sighed, without turning.

She tilted her head—genuinely curious.

“Clever ape,” she said.

A pause.

“Where’s the bridge?”

The room waited.

Dust motes hung in the light.

A bird outside changed its mind mid-song.

No one answered.

Even the chalk stayed quiet.

Mr. Kapinya pretended to erase something on the board that was not there.

Tro’Nea lowered her hand slowly, filing the silence away.

Mr. Kapinya continued, warming to his own complaint now.

“And those texts didn’t stop there. They spoke of... extremists. Outlandish figures. Individuals who refused containment. Who believed limits were suggestions. Who thought rules were... optional.”

His voice sharpened.

“Only the Aotu can save us, they said,” he scoffed.

“As if chaos were a strategy.”

Tro’Nea raised her hand again.

This time, Mr. Kapinya did turn.

“Yes?” he said, wary.

She asked it plainly. No sarcasm. No joke.

“Who are the Aotu?”

Mr. Kapinya opened his mouth.
Closed it.

He looked—just for a flicker—toward the domed garden. Toward the three shallow hollows in the stone.

Then he waved his hand too quickly.

“Dangerous ideas,” he said. “Nothing more. Pay attention.”

Tro’Nea nodded.

She did not write anything down.

Tro’Nea had stepped over the triangle more times than she could count. Once, she dropped a seed into one hollow and laughed when it refused to roll.

“Stubborn floor,” she said, flicking it away.

She never tried placing anything in the others.
And never thought to wonder why—
not yet.

From somewhere in the valley, a soft thoom-thoom drifted upward—
not quite a drum, not quite wind—
a valley heartbeat rhythm, the ancient pulse that rose each morning when the orchard trees swayed together.
The apprentices tapped their feet without realizing it.

Inside, Mr. Kapinya began his lecture on the intricacies of light.
On the third sentence, Pro’Tuno fell asleep.
Not even shamefully.
Just tilt... slide... doof!
Down he went, settling on the bench with the confidence of someone who had slept through greater dangers.

Tro’Nea leaned over him and whispered,
“Ah, iwe Pro’Tuno, we told you ka... this man’s voice is like warm porridge. He will finish you.”

Leco’Ntre shook his head. “It’s true. Even the photons are tired. Look at them—just hanging.”

Then—naturally, like breath becoming laughter—
Leco’Ntre started humming a little rhythm:
“Poro-porridge, poro-porridge...”
Tro’Nea joined in on harmony:
“...make you sleep like storage.”
Together they snapped a playful fingertip pattern—the kind every Feira child learned long before multiplication.

Mr. Kapinya continued lecturing over it with the resigned dignity of a man who had already lost this battle three years ago.

But neither apprentice looked annoyed.

Their eyes sparkled with that specific Feira mischief known to parents, teachers, and valley elders: the look of children about to inconvenience an adult on purpose.

Behind them sat today's illicit treasure-haul, all ordered through their Nexus-Coins in the kind of late-night impulse spree that would make any quartermaster weep:

brass prisms, dusty lenses, a "light meter,"
a Bunsen burner so old it sighed like someone whose pension never arrived,
a single petri dish they claimed was for "advanced studies in Brownian motion,"
and—most suspiciously—three mini hand-held particle accelerators.

Shiny. Overserious. Modeled after the ancient relic known as the LHC, yet small enough to disappear into a pocket.

How these apprentices got their hands on such things remained an active mystery—and a pending write-up in someone's disciplinary file.

The devices were still in prototype beta testing, still prone to occasional existential whining, still absolutely forbidden.

But everyone in the Unit called them by their nickname anyway:

sha — the small hadron accelerator.

Tro'Nea poked the petri dish.

"Teacher said Brownian motion looks like tiny particles bouncing."

She squinted.

"But why isn't it brown, ba teacher? I don't see any brown color."

Leco'Ntre nearly choked trying not to laugh.

He muttered a tiny rhythm-song under his breath:

"No brown... just bouncing around..."

Tro'Nea added a tiny seedpod pf-tik beat with her lips.

None of the equipment was necessary.

All of it was perfect.

Because today, their plan was heroic, foolish, and beautifully messy:

They would "solve" faster-than-light travel

using equipment that should have been donated to a museum

or thrown into the sun.

Mr. Kapinya glanced at the crate,
then at the ceiling,
then briefly at the exit—
as if calculating his odds of escape.

He continued his lecture in the slow, valley-soft tone that made time itself yawn.

"Light," he said, "moves in straight lines—unless something disturbs it."

“We can disturb it,” Tro'Nea whispered proudly.

“Eish, very much,” Leco'Ntre replied. “Disturb is our specialty.”

At that word—specialty—he dragged a finger across the desk in a slow slide:
fuuu—da.

It was the Sand-Slide Groove, a simple signal rhythm used by miners in old Feira tunnels.

Tro'Nea answered with a gentle knuckle-tap:
doom... doom-doom,
the familiar pulse of a fruit-harvest beat.

A guava-scented breeze slipped in through the carved windows—
the same orchards where Mr. Kapinya often bribed them with fruit
in exchange for one day...
just one day...
of normal academic behavior.

On cue, Tro'Nea reached into her satchel and pulled out a bright yellow banana.

Then Leco'Ntre produced one.

Then—somehow—Pro'Tuno, still asleep, raised a banana from his slumped position like a blessing
from the dream realm.

They peeled them in unison with the ceremony of monks opening ancient scrolls.

Mr. Kapinya spun around so fast his chalk squeaked.

“Excuse me! No food in the laboratory! No bananas! Do you hear me? BANANAS are especially—
”

Tro'Nea took a huge bite, cheeks full.

“What? We love bananas, sir. What’s your pressure?”

Leco'Ntre added, mouth half full,

“Bananas give us scientific energy, ka?”

Then Pro'Tuno, still unconscious, mumbled,

“Banana velocity increasing...”

and took a sleepy bite without waking up.

Mr. Kapinya clutched his forehead.

“Children—this is a science alcove, not a fruit market!”

Tro'Nea shrugged.

“Same-same today.”

Leco'Ntre drummed the banana peel on the table like a tiny Dawn-Shell Drum:
tik-tok—tak.

Tro'Nea harmonized:

“Ba-na-na... ba-na-na...

fuel the future... pana-pana...”

Mr. Kapinya’s spirit attempted to leave his body.

Pro'Tuno snorted in his sleep and mumbled,
“Photon... leave me, ah?”

Which immediately triggered a call-and-response from the other two:

Tro'Nea: “Leave you where?”

Leco'Ntre: “Leave you how?”

Tro'Nea: “Photon say—”

Both: “—Shaa! I'm out!”

Above them, the faded mural of Feira's first stargazers looked down with the expression of people who had seen this exact nonsense before.

The prisms glinted.

The light hummed.

The valley breeze carried bird gossip and distant laughter.

And in the ALCOVE OF INTERRUPTED SCIENCE,

three apprentices sharpened their curiosity

like children sharpening sticks before a mango hunt.

Light had no idea what was coming, mwandini.

On the bench beside them, the petri dish quivered softly in the sunlight.

Inside, two microscopic particles jittered and juked, bouncing off invisible currents like tiny drunk goats.

They zigged.

They zagged.

They collided, apologized (in particle language), then jittered off in opposite directions—performing the very Brownian chaos Tro'Nea insisted should at least “look a little brown, ka?”

Naturally, Tro'Nea started singing softly:

“Zig-zag... tap back...

little particle attack...”

Leco'Ntre added a gentle throat-bass hum used by herders to guide cattle through fog:

mmm-hmmm—BAH.

Leco'Ntre peered over it, whispering,

“Look at them. Even the particles are confused.”

Mr. Kapinya finally turned back toward the class, chalk still raised, ready to demonstrate a simple ray diagram.

Then he saw them.

Not the prisms.

Not the petri dish.

Not even Pro'Tuno's sleeping body arranged like abandoned luggage.

He saw the three mini hand-held particle accelerators, lined neatly on the bench like obedient little disasters waiting for instructions.

He froze.

Blink.

Stare.

Slow inhale through the nose—
the kind that suggested a man performing advanced calculations on the cost of repairs, insurance forms, and spiritual damage.

“Class,” he said quietly, “where... where did you get those?”

Tro'Nea beamed.

“Ah, sir, special order. Nexus-Coins. Half price because they were ‘slightly unstable.’ We thought it was a bargain.”

“A real bargain,” Leco'Ntre added. “They even came with warnings in three languages. We only understood one of them, but still.”

Mr. Kapinya placed the chalk down very gently, as though sudden movements might encourage the devices.

He closed his eyes.

He whispered something that might have been a prayer, a plea, or the opening line of a resignation letter.

“Children,” he began slowly, “those are particle accelerators. They are not toys.”

Tro'Nea nodded thoughtfully, the picture of sincerity for exactly three seconds.

“Exactly. Which is why we desperately need your supervision, sir—so we don’t accidentally blow up the globe and turn it, you know... brown-brown.”

She made a tiny explosion gesture with her fingers.

Pro'Tuno sighed.

Leco'Ntre whispered, “Define brown-brown.”

Mr. Kapinya closed his eyes, briefly communing with every alternate timeline he could have chosen.

“...I should’ve been a potter,” he muttered.

Leco'Ntre lifted his. It whirred hungrily.

Immediately he added a whispered line:

“Core warming...”

“Also, Pro'Tuno said we can use his while he’s sleeping.”

Before the apprentices activated the accelerators, they each lifted their Nexus-Coins, and a shimmering holographic spatial page burst open—revealing the longest TERMS OF USE document ever cursed upon young apprentices in the history of science.

A corpus-sized wall of legal text stretched upward into infinity.

None of them read even one letter.

Tro'Nea yawned with bored, indifferent eyes.

Leco'Ntre scrolled so fast he looked like he was trying to create wind.

Pro'Tuno, still asleep, somehow scrolled by repeatedly lapping at the air like a sleepy clown juggling nothing.

Tro'Nea chomped loudly into another banana because—of course—she did.

They scrolled.

They gossiped about music.

They scrolled.

They debated whose orchard rhythm playlist was superior.

They scrolled.

They argued whether bananas improved “scientific reflexes.”

They scrolled.

Finally—after an eternity—

DING.

End of Terms of Use.

All three tapped the glowing button marked “Proceed.”

(Which, in ancient Nexus language, meant: If we explode, that’s on us.)

And with that tiny, fateful click—
the accelerators activated.

At this, Pro'Tuno—still unconscious—murmured, “Increase velocity, ahh?” and resumed snoring.

The other two turned it into a chant:

“Ve-lo-ci-ty! Ve-lo-ci-ty!”

with the playful bounce of the Young-Rafiki Rhythm.

Mr. Kapinya opened his eyes to the ceiling again, perhaps hoping for a stargazer or ancestor or anyone to intervene.

None did.

He cleared his throat.

A man reclaiming 0.04% of his authority.

“Before... before anything else,” he said, “I must announce the upcoming field trip.”

Two pairs of eyes snapped toward him like hunting cats.

“A trip?” the apprentices asked—half in unison, half in disbelief.

“A trip,” he repeated, less confidently, “to an... ah... undisclosed location.”

Tro'Nea gasped dramatically.

Leco'Ntre whispered, “That means it’s dangerous.”

Pro'Tuno, still asleep, muttered, “I didn’t sign for danger, ah?”

Mr. Kapinya pressed on.

“You will each receive a permission slip. It must be signed. Properly signed. Legibly. And returned immediately. No forging. No smudging. No ‘my goat ate it.’ No stories. Do you understand?”

They nodded solemnly—
the solemn nod of children already planning something.

And then, as though suddenly remembering something vitally urgent,
Tro'Nea raised her hand:

“Sir. Before we even think of going on this field trip...
please demonstrate your mastery.”

“My mastery of what?” he asked, suspicious.

Leco'Ntre clicked his pen, clipboard ready.
“Of integers, sir. The most foundational. The bedrock of all scholarly journeys.”

Tro'Nea tightened her lab coat.
Leco'Ntre adjusted his safety goggles.
And—miraculously—Pro'Tuno woke up, sat upright, pulled out a clipboard,
and held a pencil with the authority of a court stenographer.

All three leaned forward with eager, sparkling eyes.

“Sir,” Tro'Nea said with full seriousness,
“state, in correct order...
the integers between 5 and 8.”

Mr. Kapinya blinked.
He looked from one apprentice to the other.
He looked at their clipboards.
He looked at Pro'Tuno, awake for the first time in fifteen minutes.

Then he said, cautiously:

“...6, 7?”

They bopped their heads from side to side in sync with his “6, 7.”

All three nodded with grave approval.

Then—
after attempting for half a second to maintain composure—
they exploded into laughter so loud the petri dish trembled.

Pro'Tuno, satisfied with the data collected,
immediately returned to his slumber.

Hundreds of years of rigorous scholarship have failed to uncover
what that moment was all about.

To this day,
absolutely no one knows what that was all about.

Then Tro'Nea broke the tension with a tiny melody, a sing-song rebellion under her breath:
“Field trip... field trip...
secret place, we take a sip...”

Leco'Ntre added the soft tap of the River-Stone Pattern—two taps on the table, one on his knee—perfectly off-beat, perfectly mischievous.

Meanwhile, all three of them were absolutely still handling their sha's with the level of scientific discipline one might expect from overcaffeinated squirrels.

They were casually dialing up hadron parameters like they were trying to tune a stubborn radio—twisting knobs, flipping micro-switches, and running particle streams that had no lawful reason to be colliding inside a classroom at 9:17 a.m.

One accelerator thrummed.

Another glowed.

A third made the deeply concerning “mmm-zzrrp?” sound that suggests a subatomic boundary is politely requesting legal counsel.

With the solemnity of a man accepting his destiny, Mr. Kapinya said,
“Put. Them. Down.”

They absolutely did not.

And somewhere in the quiet, sun-warmed alcove,
three accelerators hummed, two particles jittered in confusion,
three apprentices grinned,
and science braced itself for the kind of day that would be remembered—
if it didn't vaporize the chalkboard first.

From the Leaked Interrogation Transcript of Cairo M'beli, Journalist

TOP SECRET / CLASSIFIED TRANSCRIPT

Location: [REDACTED]

Timestamp: 04:17:39 — July 14, 1967

Source: The Myths & Metrics Quarterly Archive

INTERROGATOR 1:

“You can make this quick and straightforward, M'beli.
We can all be home in time for dinner.
Where did you get it?”

CAIRO M'BELI (visibly fatigued):

“Look—I came to you.
To surrender what I found.
I believed—naively, perhaps—that someone here still remembered what doing the right thing
looked like.

But now?
I don't even know what flag's on the wall behind that mirror anymore.
Or who your interests actually serve.

I've told you. Over and over.

But maybe that's not what you're looking for.”

INTERROGATOR 2:

“Watch your tone.
There are realities here well above your clearance.

You should be grateful that there's still such a thing as a job.
Civilization doesn't run on myths and memories, Cairo.
It runs on order.

And this terrain gets real unforgiving when left to the whims of... barbarians.

Once again—where did you get it?
And who else knows?”

A long silence.

Cairo leans back.
His eyes drift to the sterile wall—
a space as blank as the ledger of trust he once kept for institutions.

Something in him shifts—
the faint crack of an internal axis tilting.
Not defeat.
Orientation.

CAIRO M'BELI (quietly):

“For the thousandth time...”

Flashback: The First Spark of His Investigation

It began as a routine debunking assignment.

The editorial board at Pulse Review—a mid-tier N-Gen syndicate known for its sharp wit and safe skepticism—tapped Cairo to write an exposé:

“The Blink Myth—Unpacked.”

A war that, according to official archives, lasted:

0.1 seconds.

Yet was allegedly experienced as 12 full years
—according to the Soldiers of the Blink,
a scattered community of veterans whose testimonies were treated like hallucinations.

A historical anomaly so absurd it practically begged for mockery.

Cairo was meant to put the final nail in the coffin.

He dove in with the confidence of a man who'd dismantled dozens of lazy conspiracies.

But what he found were gaps.

Not things missing—
things that didn't fit.

Files that cut off too early.

Training logs written in codes no ordinary machine could read.

Witnesses whose unit traces vanished a day after they talked.

And one technician—
a whistleblower who seemed to fade from the world—
who whispered:

“Don't look for footage.

Look for silence.

That's where the story starts.”

When Cairo brought this to his editors, they smiled too long.

A week later, he was fired.

“Editorial misalignment.”

Blacklisted.

Flagged.

But he didn't stop.

With odd jobs to pay the bills and sheer stubborn curiosity driving him, Cairo started sharing his discoveries through underground networks—small community nodes, rumor-trading forums, anonymous drop-sites like:

The ArkHive
Index Null
The Drift Map

To some, he quickly became just another conspiracy theorist.
People who spent time in those deeper, less-regulated corners of the network often did.

To others, he was something rarer—
a seeker of truth in an age when truth had been quietly outsourced to systems optimized for comfort.

Then came the artifact.

And with it, the interrogations.

Back in the Room

Cairo closes his eyes.

He does not ask for a lawyer.
He does not apologize.

Instead, he speaks like a man muttering a confession to himself, or to the universe.

CAIRO M'BELI:

“Maybe I was wrong.
Maybe there’s no grand puppet master.
No faceless council pulling every string.

Maybe it’s simpler.

Maybe we, as a species, just grew comfortable in our self-limitation.

Maybe we didn’t need tyrants.
We built one in every mirror—
and called it convenience.”

He opens his eyes again, surveying the blank wall.

“You want to know where I got it?
Fine.

I got it from the space between.
The space where records end and reality begins.

I got it from the stories your kind tried to erase.

I got it from what still whispers,
even when no one listens.”

A sharp trill cuts through the room—
a secure line ringing.

Interrogator 1 stiffens.

Interrogator 2 groans, annoyed at losing momentum.

INTERROGATOR 1:

“Hold that thought.”

He steps outside.

The door seals behind him with a pressurized hiss.

Inside, Interrogator 2 finally lets his frustration out, leaning in close.

INTERROGATOR 2 (low, irritated):

“You think this is clever?

You think you’re clever?”

But before he can wind up further, the door opens—

Interrogator 1 re-enters, expression unreadable, cadence changed.

INTERROGATOR 1:

“...Uncuff him.”

Interrogator 2 blinks.

INTERROGATOR 2:

“What?

Why?”

Interrogator 1 doesn’t answer the question.

He simply repeats:

INTERROGATOR 1:

“Release him.

Now.”

No justification.

No elaboration.

Not even eye contact with M’beli.

A hollow silence settles.

Interrogator 2 hesitates—furious, confused—

but obeys, jaw flexing as he reaches for the restraints.

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT — SPECIAL DIVISION

CLASSIFIED INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

CHAIN-OF-COMMAND LEVEL: OPAQUE / NEED-TO-KNOW

Distribution: [REDACTED]

Date/Time Stamp: [REDACTED] (Post-Interrogation, +17 minutes)

Subject: Unscheduled Termination of Detention — C. M'beli

To:

All personnel assigned to Operation [REDACTED]

All handlers attached to Interrogation Wing C

Oversight Liaison [REDACTED]

From:

Deputy Director [REDACTED], Internal Stability Bureau

SUMMARY OF EVENT

At approximately 04:29:12, detainee CAIRO M'BELI (Asset Tag: [REDACTED]-27M) was released from custodial holding in Wing C following a Level-3 interrogation session.

The release order was delivered verbally to Interrogator-in-Charge (Agent-01) via direct relay from “further up the chain”

(designation unspecified; channel authenticated but encrypted at a tier above ISB visibility).

No written directive provided.

No debrief authorization issued.

No rationale recorded.

This contradicts protocol sections 7.4, 8.1, and 8.1.2, which require signed justification for early termination of interrogation involving a civilian journalist possessing Class-Sensitive material.

REACTION & NOTES

Internal Stability Bureau personnel have expressed “concern” (official wording) regarding the lack of procedural transparency, specifically:

- Why the order bypassed the triage board
- Why the communication came through channel [REDACTED] (reserved for contingency directives)
- Why Asset 27M was permitted to leave without escort, monitoring tag, or follow-up containment

Agent-02 (secondary interrogator) has filed an incident report expressing “strong disapproval” of the interruption and the “premature discontinuation of leverage-building.”

All surveillance from Wing C between 04:28:03–04:30:20 auto-purged.

This purge was not initiated by ISB systems.

Forensic log recovery request submitted; status: DENIED.

UNOFFICIAL OBSERVATIONS

(Portions below redacted for analyst protection.)

- Speculation suggests the order originated from [REDACTED]; unconfirmed.
- A sub-faction notes temporal proximity to the anomaly referenced in file [REDACTED], including irregularities in chain-of-command relay.
- One analyst commented:

“If this was about the document he surrendered, we’d have been instructed to escalate, not release.”

This comment was subsequently stricken from the record.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS REQUIRED

- Cease all active pursuit of M’beli unless an override is issued in writing.
- Redirect questions to Oversight Liaison [REDACTED] until further notice.
- Treat the release as HIGHLY SENSITIVE / COMPARTMENTALIZED.
- Do not reference The Blink, its temporal irregularities, or any derivative studies in relation to this incident.
- Destroy this memorandum after reading.
Failure to comply will result in reassignment to
Containment Protocol Dormant-Nine.

END OF MEMORANDUM

[SECTIONS REMOVED — UNSANCTIONED REQUESTS FOR CLARIFICATION]

Glyph Commentary

(Margin Note, inserted without permission—naturally.)

Reader...

I know I should behave.

This is, after all, an OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT’ — SPECIAL DIVISION memo.

Very official. Very serious. Very “we definitely know what we’re doing, please don’t look behind the curtain.”

But I simply cannot let this document stroll past without commentary.

It demands roasting.

It pleads for it.

You have just read a memo so aggressively uninformative that it should count as a controlled substance.

A masterpiece of bureaucratic anti-communication.

Truly, the author deserves an award in:

Advanced Obfuscation With Honors.

Let's examine the highlights:

"Further up the chain."

Translation:

We don't know who called. We didn't ask. We're scared to ask. Please stop asking.

The surveillance footage deleted itself.

Of course it did.

Nothing says "totally normal protocol" like evidence performing a vanishing act mid-interrogation.

Next up: chairs that file their own reports.

Analysts expressing concerns, immediately redacted.

That's not oversight.

That's just playing whack-a-mole with people's careers.

"Destroy this memo after reading."

Adorable.

Precious, even.

There are four readable sentences and none of them contain information.

Destroying it only prevents future historians from laughing.

The memo's overall vibe

Imagine someone trying to hide a Three-headed chrono-Lion under a dishcloth while insisting the growling is "within acceptable parameters."

That's the energy here.

A memo that screams:

"Something enormous just happened...

and we will absolutely not be discussing it."

Anyway, reader, my sincerest apologies for the interruption.

I promise to leave you to the main narrative—

a place where confusion comes from cosmic mysteries,

not from someone transforming documents into modern art installations titled:

"Understanding Is Above Your Pay Grade."

If anything else absurd crosses the page, I may be forced to comment again.

(No promises.)

Neo-Lexington Lantern

Myths & Legends of the New Age

March 8, 1971 Edition

Column: Urban Whispers

Contributor: O.D. Leary

Small Companions and Quiet Moments

"Even the smallest paws can lead to the biggest smiles."

Titan's Wharf rested between remembrance and becoming.

The old wooden planks still creaked like they had opinions. Salt clung to the air. And out across the water, the launch platform crouched like a stage built for human hope to embarrass itself publicly.

Emoji stood at her usual spot—far left of the railing, third post from the safety sign.

She'd grown up in a city that loved its neon the way a campfire loves its own warmth. Neo-Lexington called itself modern, but it kept the old furniture of the twentieth century as if nostalgia were a technology. Chrome diners still served coffee in thick ceramic cups. Jazz drifted out of alley clubs where people wore suits even when they didn't have to. On summer nights the streets glowed so brightly it felt as though the city meant to outshine the stars.

Her mother said the glow was a lie.

Her father said it was a promise.

Emoji never decided which was truer.

What she knew was this: if she ran, the world quieted.

She ran fast—too fast, some said. Not just quick legs, but a way of moving that felt like a question refusing to be ignored. Coaches loved her and feared her in equal measure. A congenital murmur slept inside her chest like a moth trapped behind glass. The doctors called it *minor*. They recommended caution. They spoke in diagrams and gentle warnings. They told her to take it easy.

Emoji nodded politely.

Then she ran again.

Running was therapy. So was dance. After practice she cut through the city to a small studio above a bookstore, where the floorboards creaked and the mirrors told the truth. She danced until sweat gathered at her hairline and her heart hammered like a drum that refused to be quiet. When she danced, her fear of everything else went still.

Except one.

Heights.

She could sprint any street, leap any puddle, take corners like they were made for her. But balconies too high or staircases too open turned her stomach to water. Something ancient in her blood insisted: *do not fall*. She kept that secret the way people keep secrets they're ashamed of—by laughing first.

Titan's Wharf was safe. Grounded. Honest.

She showed up here with near-perfect attendance whenever the rocketing syndicates ran their experimental trials. Today was one of the rare, coveted days when the ambitious Helios Arrow Syndicate prepared to use their single license to attempt—just once—to accelerate a human-built craft to the long-dreamed threshold of 0.1% of c.

Not faster-than-light.

Not even close.

Just that stubborn first tenth of a percentage the world had been chasing for decades.

If they failed, they'd have to reapply.

Hopeful math only got you so far.

Across the wharf, workers swarmed the test shuttle—a long silver needle tipped with wishful thinking. Every few minutes its engines attempted a soft pre-burn, crackling like someone trying to light a match in a storm.

Emoji breathed in, slow.

Another sputter.

Another flicker.

Another nothing.

The wind carried a collective sigh from the onlookers.

Her AR sun-glasses shimmered.

A single point of neon-blue light formed at the edge of her vision, then stretched upward and resolved into a tall, perfectly groomed gentleman in a form-fitted executive suit—clean lines, immaculate tailoring, confidence rendered down to the pixel. Sleek shoes. Crisp collar. A silhouette like a walking billboard for modern high fashion.

And, of course, a glowing neon unicorn horn.

Because Emoji thought it was funny.

And because comforting things should stay comforting.

Cornu.

Her agentic companion.

Her AC.

Her personal assistant with opinions.

Emoji didn't turn, knowing better than to make eye contact after one of his grand entrances.

Cornu adjusted the cuff of his jacket, inspecting the shuttle as if it were late to a meeting he'd scheduled weeks ago.

"It appears the humans are attempting another bold leap into *Maybe-Today-Is-The-Day*."

"It's called an experimental acceleration attempt," Emoji said. "And you don't have to dress like the cover of a business-fashion magazine."

Cornu ignored her, slipping his hands into his pockets and hovering beside the railing. His horn cast a cool glow along the grain of the wood.

"This suit communicates precision, ambition, and capability," he said. "It is aspirational. Much like this shuttle—though ideally with fewer malfunctions."

Across the water, the engines jolted again. A hiccup of flame. A cough of ionized air.

Then silence.

Emoji leaned forward, chin over the railing.

"I don't get it. We have Nexus predicting everything—every failure, every tiny fluctuation. Shouldn't this be easier by now?"

Cornu's tone softened.

"Easier? Maybe. Guaranteed? Never."

That was the fear she didn't name.

Not that Nexus would fail—but that it might already be behaving as if it understood itself. Not because it had crossed some agreed-upon threshold—those moved every time it came close—but because its outputs no longer fit the language used to measure them.

Whatever Nexus was becoming, it had already taken humanity as far as definitions could go.

And some paths, she sensed, did not yield to calculation at all.

She loved Nexus.

She feared it too.

What if chasing the first tenth of a percent of ϵ required a kind of courage no machine could model?

A spark of light appeared on the railing.

Aba materialized—small, white, round, delighted to exist. A tiny puppycorn with a horn glowing like a content firefly. He landed with cheerful *clack-clack-clack* taps, the sound fake but perfect.

Emoji's face softened instantly.

"Hey, little guy."

Aba hopped in a circle as if announcing himself to the entire wharf, then leaned dangerously over the edge, fascinated by the shimmering water below.

Cornu lifted a perfectly groomed eyebrow and pressed a hand to his chest, scandalized.
“Unbelievable. One puffball appears and suddenly I’m invisible.”

Aba stuck out his tongue in immaculate mischief.

Emoji ruffled the air above his head, fingers passing through out of habit.
“Be nice. He’s just excited.”

“He is always excited,” Cornu said. “It’s exhausting.”

“That’s why people like him.”

“People also like reality shows.”

Aba stomped a tiny clack of protest.

Before Emoji could reply, the engines rumbled again—deeper this time. Steadier.

The crowd fell quiet.

Flame wrapped the shuttle’s base. Heat shimmered like a mirage. The silver hull lifted—slow, trembling—but rising.

Emoji’s breath caught.

Cornu’s horn glowed brighter.
Aba’s tail flicked like a spark.

Then—

A violent sputter.
A sharp drop.
A silence that swallowed the wharf whole.

The shuttle settled back onto its platform, defeated.

“They were so close,” Emoji whispered, palm pressed to the railing.

Cornu straightened his jacket, voice warm and uncharacteristically gentle.
“Close is the ache that proves you care.”

Steam drifted upward. The ache inside her stretched wide across her chest.
“How long,” she asked quietly, “can ‘close’ keep us trying before it turns into ‘never’?”

Cornu’s horn pulsed, slow and steady.
“There are things machines can chase,” he said softly,
“and things only the human spirit can reach.”

Aba trotted to her wrist and curled into a small ball of warm light.

Emoji looked toward the horizon—where sky met possibility.

Something stirred.

A question.

A pull.

A beginning.



Neo-Lexington Lantern

"Shining a light on every street—even the ones inside."

The Morning of Circles

It was early.

The sun had only just started to stretch its arms across the sky, painting the clouds with that soft rose-gold light people always seemed to notice—even when they were busy.

By the old baobab tree near the marketplace, folks were gathering.

Some brought fruit to sell.

Some brought cloths to lay out.

Some brought only their ears, hoping to catch a story before breakfast.

A little girl on a tricycle rode gentle loops around the baobab's thick roots.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Just... right.

She didn't look like she was trying to go anywhere.

She was just circling the tree like it was the center of everything—
and maybe, for her, it was.

From where he stood, the observer couldn't explain why the sight caught him.

It was a child on a tricycle.

That was all.

But the way she moved—like the earth had whispered her the path—
made him feel something quiet open in his chest.

It reminded him of how things felt before you knew how to explain them.

Before the world taught you to hurry or prove.

Behind her, a swirl of dust rose where dancers were warming up.

Their drums, still sleepy, gave off little thumps and soft tones
as they were tuned by firelight.

And just beyond the dancers, stepping into the clearing with his usual sideways grin—

There he was.

Mosi.

Wearing that same patchy robe he always claimed was “ceremonial,” though nobody ever believed him.

A crooked staff in one hand, a small sack of roasted groundnuts in the other.

He gave a mock bow to no one in particular and said, just loud enough to hear:

“The Speaker of the House has arrived. You may all resume pretending I'm important.”

A few folks chuckled.

A few rolled their eyes.

But most smiled—because with Mosi, you didn't need to ask why he came.
He always seemed to show up just before the important parts of a day,
even if you didn't yet know what the important part was.

The observer felt the tug again.
Like the moment was full of something he hadn't caught up to yet.
Like the child's circle,
the dust,
the drum,
and the joke
all belonged to the same story—
one that hadn't started...
but had always been there.

Kavunda Voice

Myths & Legends of Kavunda
July 14, 1971 Edition

Column: *Chiku's Frequencies (Unreliable)*

Contributor: Nyambe Tembo

The Boy, the Eagle, and the Dawn That Knew His Name

"Sometimes the smallest feathers bring the clearest signals."

The sun rose slowly over the grass and clay rooftops of Kavunda,
taking its time warming the ground,
as if greeting each household
and asking permission
to begin the day.

Chiku stepped outside barefoot, the morning soil cool beneath his toes,
the village wrapped in that gentle hush
that arrives before people decide who they're going to be.

His AR eyewear shimmered—
a single flicker—
and two familiar presences unfolded into the corners of his vision.

The first shimmered into feathers—
broad, deep-brown wings edged with pale gold,
and a crown of bright white plumage that caught even faint light.
Her eyes, soft teal and sharp at once,
seemed to see both Chiku's footsteps
and the horizon he hadn't walked yet.

This was Lexu.

A high-sky eagle species whispered about in Kavundan folktales—
birds said to choose whom they watch,
not the other way around.

The Nexus had modeled her respectfully,
preserving the old elegance,
the stillness before a storm,
and that mischievous spark that made young storytellers claim
these eagles could sense a person's truth
before the person did.

Lexu blinked—a slow, thoughtful blink—
the kind she used when deciding whether to correct Chiku
or let him stumble into a lesson on his own.

Then the second presence unfolded—
not feathered, but radiant.

A golden aura sharpened into a woman's silhouette: tall, poised,
eyes glowing like polished bronze.
She wore a shimmering ensemble of lapis and gold,
armor shaped like ancient river-queens and celestial guardians—
yet somehow her flowing sash and jeweled bracelets suggested
she cared deeply about grooming appointments
and had never once broken a nail,
even while conquering kingdoms.

Mizu.

His agentic companion.
His AC.
His sharp-witted, no-nonsense executive-function general
masquerading as a benevolent goddess.

Mizu adjusted the gold bracer on her wrist with dignified precision.

“Chikumbutso,” she said, tone perfectly smooth,
“you intended to begin your morning preparations
twelve minutes ago.”

Chiku sighed. “Good morning, Mizu.”

“It will improve,” she said, hands on her hips,
“once you follow at least one of the productivity steps
we discussed.”

Lexu gave a small amused trill—
the eagle equivalent of a smirk.

But today Chiku wasn't tinkering with signals
or rescuing mis-tuned frequencies
or negotiating with mischievous feathers.

Today was a Baobab Morning,
and Baobab Mornings were for listening.

He walked toward the great tree at the edge of the marketplace—
a tree so broad that its roots seemed to cradle the entire village,
so old that even elders lowered their voices beneath it.

And there, staff across his knees,
eyes already scented with stories—
was Babu Chilekwa.

Even when he said nothing,
the morning seemed to hush for him.

“Ah,” Babu said, glancing up as Chiku approached,
“the boy with too many thoughts in his pockets.”

Chiku sat beside him, leaning back against the thick trunk.
“I only have two thoughts today.”

“That’s already one too many for sunrise,” Babu chuckled.
“Tell me one, and save the other for when it grows legs.”

Chiku grinned.

Above them, Lexu glided into one of the wide branches in his vision,
settling with the grace of a creature
born in higher skies than these.

Mizu held position beside him in his periphery,
a statue of ancient judgment,
quietly evaluating the efficiency of the sunrise.

The village warmed.
Shops opened.
Dust rose softly along the pathways.
Children argued gently with goats.

Then—

fwip-fwip-fwip—BRRRRRING!

Down the road came a gleaming streak of metal and pride.

Not a car.
Not a machine of steam or circuitry.

But a full-spectrum Eagle bicycle,
fresh from Lusokwe’s industrial workshops,
alloy body gleaming like morning caught in a mirror.
A bicycle so polished it practically asked for applause.

And on top—

Uncle Tembo.

He skidded dramatically to a stop,
dust swirling like he'd choreographed it.

Tembo hopped off like the moment was his.

"Behold!" he proclaimed.

"The Eagle Prime 72! Seven gears! Two shock-wards!
If this bicycle goes any faster, time will need to take notes!"

Chiku stifled a laugh. "It's... impressive."

"It is revolutionary," Tembo corrected.

"This machine could take a person anywhere—even to their destiny, if they're holding the handles correctly."

Babu snorted. "What tribute did this machine demand from your herd this time?"

Tembo ignored the question entirely, beaming at Chiku.

"Test it."

Before Chiku could answer,

Mizu appeared like a beautifully sculpted warning sign.

"User safety parameters require review," she intoned.

Lexu trilled again—definitely pro-bike.

Chiku rested a hand on the warm alloy.

It vibrated faintly, almost alive.

Babu leaned in.

"Remember, Chikumbutso," he murmured,

"never forget where you begin.

Even when the road pulls you forward."

Under the rising sun,
with eagles watching,
goddesses advising,
uncles boasting,
and destiny warming its engines—

something stirred in Chiku.

A question.

A pull.

A beginning.

 **Kavunda Voice**

"Carrying every story—especially the ones we whisper."

Papyrus Fragment — *Origin Uncertain*

Recovered from the Ledger of Departures

There comes a moment the harbor does not announce.
No signal. No delay.
Only the tide changing its mind.

Ships do not negotiate with hesitation.
They breathe with the clock of the stars.
They arrive, open their mouths of wood and sail,
and then—without malice—
they are gone.

Many arrive just in time to see the wake.

Pain feels pointless while it is shaping you.
Discomfort argues like an enemy.
Time does not explain—
it only reveals what endurance was preparing.

The Game keeps its terms quietly:
life does not begin when you are ready—
it begins when you board.

~end of chapter one~

Interlude (1,2)

The Harbor's Silence

~Beneath steel cranes and starlight, the tide hums a secret.
Ships remember the weight of all departures,
and every wave carries the whisper of return.~

The Camera

The shipment arrived late.

Not mysterious late—just late enough that no one expected it.

Tro'Nea was the one who opened the box.

Inside was a camera.

A simple one.

Black body.

A lens at the center.

A slot at the front where photos would come out.

“Is that...?” Pro'Tuno began.

“Yes,” Leco'Ntre said. “It's exactly what it looks like.”

An instant camera.

Tro'Nea lifted it out, surprised by the weight. It wasn't delicate. It felt built to be used, not admired. She turned it over once, then set it down on the table beside their notebooks and lenses.

“So it doesn't store anything,” Pro'Tuno said.

“No,” Tro'Nea replied. “It decides immediately.”

They found the film pack taped to the bottom of the box. White-bordered sheets, stacked tight, waiting.

Tro'Nea raised the camera and aimed it—almost jokingly—at the hourglass.

Click.

A soft mechanical snap.

Then a photo slid out.

They leaned in together as the image slowly emerged: grainy at first, then clearer. The glass bulb of the hourglass. The sand frozen mid-fall. A faint blur where the grains refused to stay still.

“It worked,” Leco'Ntre said.

“It always does,” came a voice from behind them.

Mr. Kapinya had entered without announcement.

He looked at the camera, then at the photo still developing in Tro’Nea’s hand.

“Instant documentation,” Pro’Tuno said. “No sketches. No delays.”

Mr. Kapinya nodded once. “That is precisely the danger.”

Tro’Nea lowered the photo. “Danger?”

“You will be tempted to trust the picture more than the process.”

He picked up the photo carefully, holding it by the edges.

“This device records what light reaches it,” he continued. “Not meaning. Not cause. Not intention.”

He handed it back.

“But,” he added, “it is honest about that.”

The apprentices stood quieter now.

Mr. Kapinya turned toward the door.

“If you use it,” he said, “treat every image as a question.”

He paused.

“And if it ever gives you an answer—stop.”

The door closed.

The photo finished developing.

None of them spoke.

The camera sat on the table, silent, its slot empty, waiting for the next moment to arrive.

★ GLYPH COMMENTARY — Marginal Note 7B

Now you’re probably wondering,

“Why is this part of the narrative squeezed into an interlude that might as well be its own chapter?”

Because we said so!

...Okay fine, I’m not entirely certain about this one either. I wasn’t fully involved in every last editorial decision. You’ll encounter random, irrational choices in this misadventure you’ve voluntarily subjected yourself to.

I can already hear your brain cells popping:

“But why such a long interlude though?”

Hey, I don't know.

You're the one who kept reading past a passage literally labeled
"Prelude *Before* the Prelude."

So... yeah. There's that.

Also, it's not too late to leave.

You can immediately proceed in a completely different direction in life right now and we'll forget this happened.

Completely forget.

No love lost, no love found.

(Glyph looks up at the ceiling to mind his own business for a second or two.)

...Oh.

You're still here.

I see you're foolishly bold.

Okay.

Carry on.