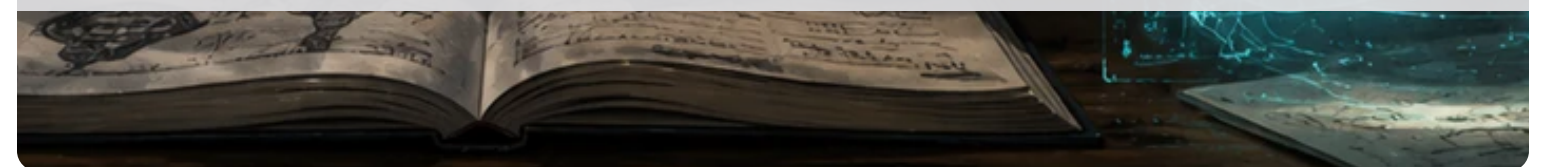
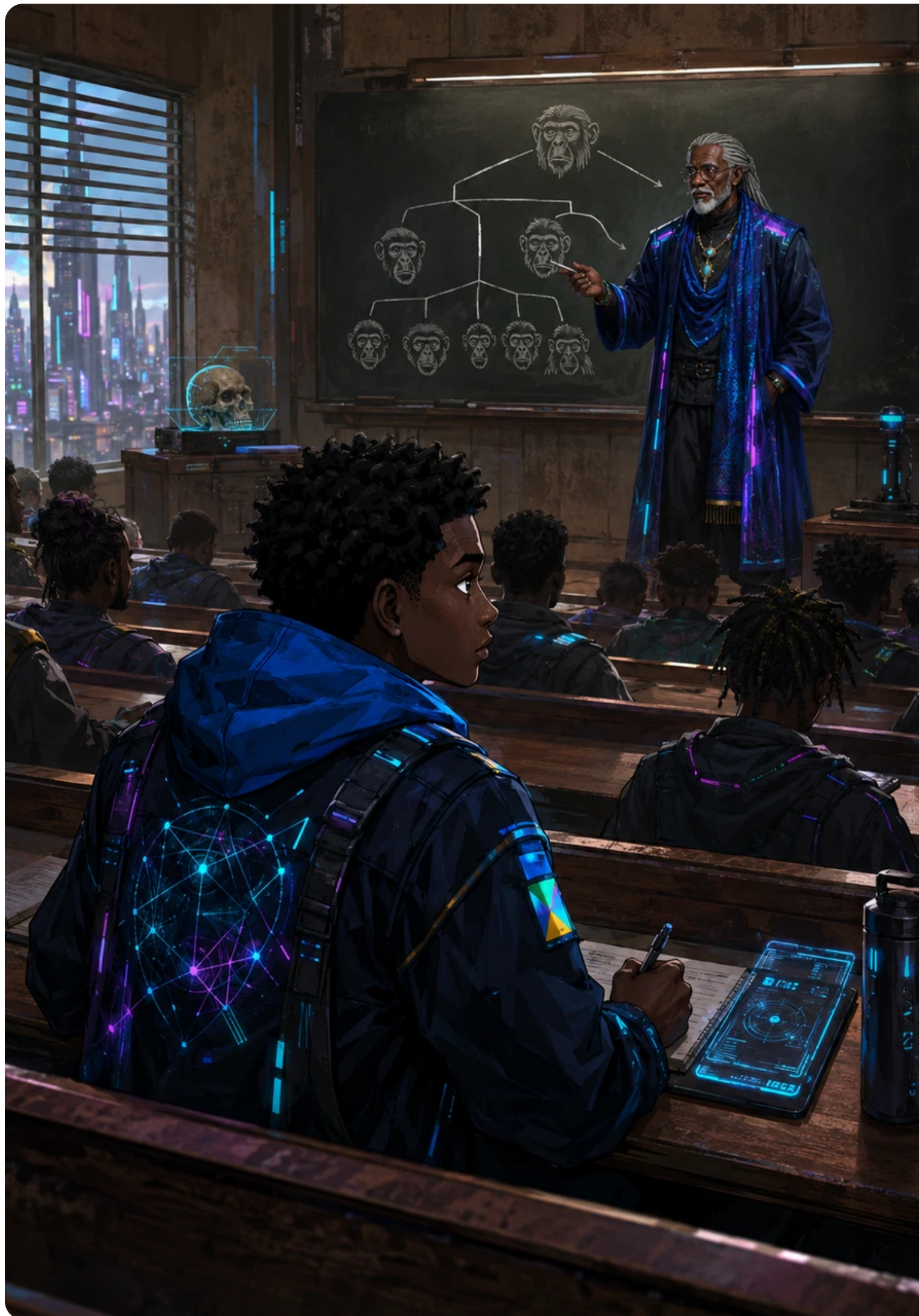




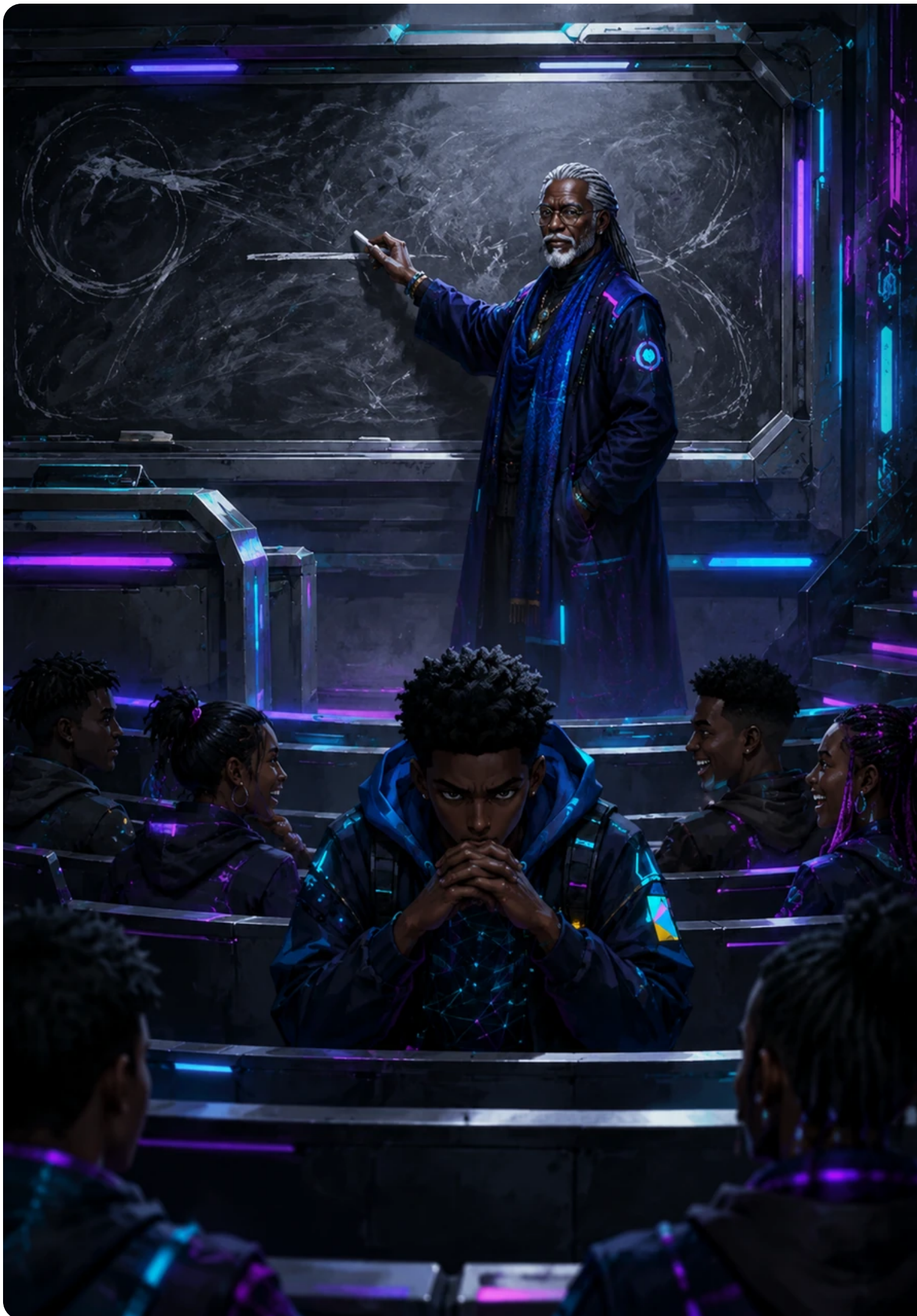
# The Weight of the Chalk Outline

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Mulingi sat in the middle row of the sweltering Meru University lecture hall, his pen resting motionless in the fold of his hand. At the front of the room, Dr. Kaimenyi sketched a neat diagram of primate hierarchies on the chalkboard, his voice echoing with practiced academic calm.



The professor underlined a word on the board with a sharp squeak of chalk, noting that humans often show less reproductive discipline than other primates. While a few students chuckled around him, the words lodged deeply in Mulingi's mind like a sharp stone in a shoe.



Staring at the teacher's chalk-dusted fingers, Mulingi was suddenly flooded with memories of his childhood village, where elders lowered their voices to sharp whispers whenever he walked past. He recalled the heavy, suffocating weight of those unspoken words that settled on him much longer than childhood ever could.



His thoughts drifted to his late mother, who had always treated the question of his father's identity like a clay pot too hot to touch. He remembered his grandmother rocking in her wooden chair, sighing deeply and veering away from the truth whenever he gathered the courage to ask.



As the lecture ended and students filed out into the bright afternoon sun, Mulingi walked across the campus courtyard alone, feeling like a ghost among crowds. The vibrant green jacaranda trees bloomed above him, but his mind remained trapped in the dusty shadows of his family's long-held secrets.



That evening, Mulingi returned to his small rented room and opened an old wooden trunk containing his mother's remaining belongings. He picked up a beautifully woven traditional cloth, holding it to his face to catch the faint, lingering scent of earth and dried lavender.



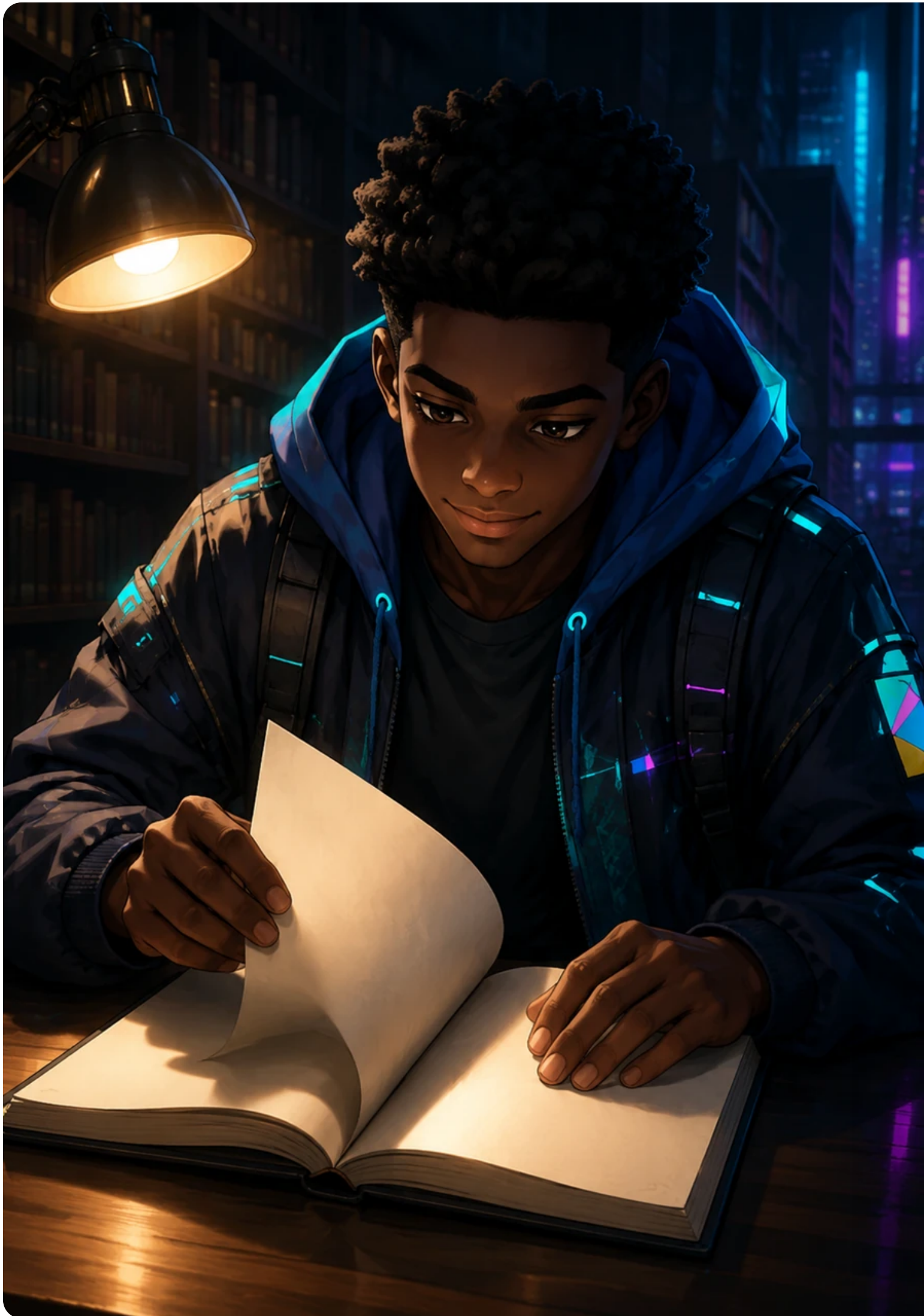
Determined to find answers, Mulingi traveled back to his rural home village the following weekend, walking down the long red-dirt road lined with banana trees. The golden sunset cast elongated shadows on the ground, mirroring the long journey he was taking into his own past.



He sat across from his elderly grandmother on the porch of her mud-walled kitchen, the smoke from the cooking fire rising gently between them. With a trembling voice, he asked her to finally break the silence, refusing to let the old taboos dictate his sense of self any longer.



His grandmother closed her eyes, her wrinkled hands resting on her lap, and finally spoke the name of the man who had left before Mulingi was born. Tears welled in Mulingi's eyes, not from sorrow, but from the sudden, overwhelming relief of a lifetime of mystery dissolving into the evening air.



Back at the university library days later, Mulingi opened a fresh page in his notebook beneath the warm glow of a desk lamp. He smiled gently, realizing that while his origin began with a question mark, his future belonged entirely to the words he chose to write next.