
The Gum Baby Files

KWAME MBALIA



ALKE IS A STORY.

Each of us carries parts of it—chapters, scenes, even just a few words. And when we come together? That magical world is brought to life. And as long as we continue to pass on the story of its existence to others, it can never be completely destroyed. Maybe, just maybe, word by word and line by line, we can rebuild that special place we call our own.

So . . . keep your eyes peeled.

And if you're Alkean—from MidPass, the Golden Crescent, the Grasslands, wherever—remember this:

I'm coming to find you and bring you home.

“Gum Baby, would you stop playing with that? You’re going to get us in trouble!”

Gum N. B. Baby—former Alkean pilot with the self-described “fastest hands in any realm”—looked up to see

Ayanna frowning at her. The girl held out her hand, making a *let's have it* motion, and Gum Baby shook her head and scooted farther back behind the giant yellow school bus with the words JACKSON MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS on its side.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Gum Baby just got her turn with the shouty stick, she gets her full five minutes.”

“You’re supposed to use it to try calling anyone from Alke! Not to listen to that message over and over. And it’s not a ‘shouty stick’—it’s a staff.”

The third member of their group, also hiding behind the school bus, and providing shoulders for Gum Baby to sit on, said, “Actually, you’re both wrong—it’s now a baseball bat.” Junior, also known as Stone Thrower, the fifth son of Anansi, looked back and forth between Ayanna and Gum Baby and cleared his throat. “Never mind.”

Gum Baby patted his head. Junior used to whine that she got sap in his hair twists, but where else was she supposed to sit? Eventually he stopped complaining. Gum Baby sighed. It was nice when people performed their roles without fussing.

Unlike that walking disasterix, Tristan Strong. Boy stayed hogging all the credit. Getting in the way of Gum Baby’s glory. Well, he wasn’t here now, was he? Nope. And did Gum Baby miss him? Not one bit. Not his big head, not his silly-comfortable hoodie, and especially not the wild, ridiculous mishaps that followed him everywhere. No, Gum Baby was just fine with her replacement Bumbletongue. But maybe she’d better check Tristan’s last words one more time, just in case. And not because the two of them worked well together. Gum Baby

didn't want him getting any funny ideas about having adventures without her, that was all.

Just as she took a deep breath to shout at the shouty stick—or staff, baseball bat, whatever—to replay the message, a loud rumble shook the ground, and a thick cloud of exhaust smoke rolled over them. The large yellow bus pulled off and, just like that, their hiding spot had disappeared.

The stranded trio stood near the back of a wide black parking lot, faded white lines dividing the surface into small blacktop islands that shimmered in the heat. Three more buses followed theirs and pulled in front of a large building on the other side of the lot. A sign out front read MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM. A flood of children who appeared to be around Junior and Ayanna's age poured out of the buses and onto the well-kept grass lawn that stretched around the modern brick-and-glass structure. They gathered in groups, two to three adults moving around each, calling out names and wrapping bright orange bands around their wrists. One adult, a Black woman with a yellow bandanna over her hair, counted every child and made notes on the clipboard she carried.

"All right, campers!" she called out. Her voice carried far in the still air, and Gum Baby winced at the loudness. Even Keelboat Annie, the giant ferrywoman from Alke, could learn a thing or two about shouting from this lady. "Follow your group leaders and head inside! Remember: This is a museum. And what are our three rules for the day?"

The kids and chaperones answered in unison. "Listen, learn, and be respectful!"