

The Universe and all her Children

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The Beginning



13.8 billion years ago, in the void that came before all existence, a stillness reigned, before the drumbeat of the universe began. In the profound silence, undisturbed, lived Wakati, an ancient being of divine essence, creator of all that was, all that is, and all that will be, her power humming faintly.

In a single moment, from Wakati came matter and energy, expanding into light and space, becoming the universe and time itself. From her, stars erupted, galaxies spiralled, and from her breath came Azibo, a planet unlike any other, its landscapes sculpted by gentle breezes and shimmering with an ethereal glow, a reflection of its harmonious nature.

To protect this balance, she summoned four queens, figures not of creation but of revelation, drawn from the land's deep yearning, their presence radiating ancient power and wisdom. Each monarch governed a cardinal direction, their power extending across the lands. Each held an element, its essence resonating with their soul.

Unlike other lands, Azania in Azibo was born from harmony. The memories of its ancestors reverberated in Azania, which was moulded from earth, water, air, and fire and guarded by their elemental queens. In the south, the song of the ocean carried names on the wind, while in the north, the stone temples housed the earth's silent wisdom. The east was characterised by colourful sunrise dances, while the west was a dreamscape of floating feathered cities. Here, ritual and magic coexisted, and love was not just a feeling but the very law that held the universe together. Among Azania's many sacred truths, one truth has always rung true: that love is at the heart of creation.



High in the northern mountains, where they scraped the sky, young prince Zamani knelt before his mother, Queen Zandi. A figure of power and grace, her dark skin, like polished volcanic rock, her dreadlocks, adorned with a circlet of braided vines and sparkling gemstones, cascaded down her back.

Zamani, knelling before his mother, his young shoulders slumped with the weight of his impending departure to the school of creation.

“You are sending me away,” he finally said.

Queen Zandi looked at him, her eyes ancient with grief.

“I am sending you to grow, my son. To learn where even I cannot guide you.” She reached out, brushing his brow. “But you deserve to know the truth about the war that’s already begun.”

Zamani straightened up. “The other queens say he was once kind. Was he?”

Queen Zandi nodded slowly. “Yes. And more than that. Akin was... light itself. Like you, we are twins, though not born together. Our spirits came through the same doorway into this world. He was the sun at dawn, bold and golden.”

“It was in one morning when darkness came to pay him a surprise visit, that day he lost a part of him. And he has never been the same.”

“Did you try to help him?” Zamani is almost scolding his mother.

“I did. Over and over. But it was too late.” Her voice became firm now. “Now he wants to bend the elements of earth, water, fire, and air. He believes that if he holds them all, he will never experience that kind of sadness again.” Queen Zandi.



Queen Zandi “But my son, this is your journey. You carry with you the lessons of the past and those that came before you, they walk with you in every choice. The world you live in tomorrow will be shaped by the choices you make today.”

“And remember that the miracle is within you, life is the miracle.”

From the shadows coiled Tshedza, the winged serpent and Queen Zandi’s guardian and protector of her bloodline.

As Zamani stepped forward, Tshedza unfurled its wings and bowed low, an act of blessing and duty. With the talisman of earth in one hand and the future in the other, the young prince departed the northern cliffs, beneath the unblinking gaze of a queen who had never been moved by war.

Within the school’s walls, children from different galaxies, each with unique magical talents, coexisted alongside creatures from all corners of the universe, all united by their shared pursuit of knowledge imparted by the divine creator gods.

It was in this room, bathed in golden light and ancient truth, that Zamani first saw him.

Imani.

His entrance was powerful and quiet, like that of a comet. His complexion was dark, reminiscent of distant celestial bodies, and his long, white hair trailed behind him like starlight caught in a gravitational field. Rather than walking, he seemed to glide across the room with an inexplicable grace.

Their eyes locked for a moment, the intensity of the connection causing Zamani to go completely blank on the spell he had been rehearsing.

A ripple moved through the air, so subtle most wouldn't notice. But Zamani did. The universe had blinked.

Later that same day, within the cafeteria's unique atmosphere of stained-glass suns and levitating food items, Zamani once more saw him, sitting alone under a fig tree bearing the fruit of all seasons. Imani left his tray untouched, his eyes intently focused on a constellation chart being displayed.

Zamani displayed a moment of hesitation. He was of royal lineage and had experienced visions of shadow beasts. However, his heart now pounded like a drum before a battle. Despite this, he moved across the room.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked, voice carefully casual.

Imani looked up, surprised. Then he smiled, slowly, shyly.

"No," he said. "But I can use some distraction."

Their conversation felt like it spanned lifetimes, though it lasted only minutes. On the topic of spells. About elemental theory. About how silence can sometimes say more than words. Imani detailed his mastery of techniques involving the deflection of water around sharp corners and the controlled manipulation of flames. Zamani recounted tales of the northern cliffs, of mountain creature, and of Queen Zandi's thunderous laughter.

"I am studying elemental defence," Imani said.

Zamani nodded. "Same here. Though I mostly rely on strength."

"Of course you do," Imani said, almost smiling. "You are a prince."

Zamani raised a brow. "And what does that mean?"

“It means you probably think magic’s about power.”

Zamani leaned in, lips twitching at the corners. “And you don’t?”

Imani thought for a while before answering.

Imani’s eyes sparkled. “No... Magic is a science, it is everywhere, it is in everything.”

“Magic is not just for war or protection. It’s for memory. For healing. For freedom.”

Zamani in a soft tone, “So why do you study elemental defence?”

“Because the elements are the conditions that make all life possible.”

He looked down for a second, then met Zamani’s gaze directly

Rumours, once hushed whispers, now roared through the halls of the school of creation like a gale, rattling windows and carrying whispers of disbelief and fear. Akin, former prince of light, had overthrown Queen Zaria, the ruler of fire, was being held captive. Her downfall marked the commencement of Azania’s decline. The sun’s rising was notably less vigorous than usual. The fiery beings, once celebrated for their dances and songs, have been lost to the ages.

Azania was growing cold.

Within the tranquil depths of the northern palace, Zamani and Imani stood before Queen Zandi, amidst the aged stonework. Nearby, the massive serpent Tshedza lay coiled in her protective stance, her breath gently raising small clouds of dust.



Zamani was the first to speak. "Mother, the balance is breaking. The fire has been stolen, and with it, Azania's warmth. We can't wait for another queendom to fall."

Queen Zandi's gaze was heavy with history. "I know. I have felt the chill in the roots of the mountains. What do you propose?"

Imani stepped forward. His voice was calm, but behind it burned conviction.

"We believe that if Zamani can travel to the three remaining queendoms, gathering the sacred elements of water, air, and fire, he can restore balance. But more than courage, he will need purpose."

Zandi raised a brow. "And what is your purpose, child of stardust?"

Imani met her gaze without flinching. "To be of service to the people of Azania."

"War did not build the world," Imani said. "We have to always remember that we are all the same being in different vessels. That is what Akin has forgotten, lost in the fog of his memory."

Silence descended upon the chamber. Even Tshedza became completely still.

Queen Zandi exhaled slowly. "Your words are filled with a depth of understanding that surpasses your years." "And you, Zamani, do you trust him?"

Zamani doesn't hesitate. "With my life."

Queen Zandi stepped forward, her calloused hand resting gently on each of their shoulders, the weight of her touch felt ancient and wise. "Then go with my blessing. "Tell my sisters I sent you, and that the land we walk on remembers."



Later, they stood at the northern cliff edge, the wind pulling at their cloaks. The mountains stood guard behind them.

From the shadows, the Tshedza appeared, her wings speckled with starlight.

Zamani called to the serpent. "We must fly."

With open palms, Imani whispered an ancient, primal language, standing close to his side. A shimmering spell, woven from light, air, and memory, hovered between his fingers.

The wind answered.

Together, they climbed onto Tshedza, their hearts filled not with fear, but with resolute purpose. With the serpent's rise into the sky, the ground disappeared beneath.

A stolen flame, hidden deep within the belly of the east, pulsed with a faint, unsteady light, waiting.

The wind grew damp as Imani and Zamani approached the southern border of Azania. Below, the shimmering sea stretched wide beneath a grey sky. The cold had crept southward, frosting riverbanks and dimming the once-luminous coral reefs.

The Tshedza hissed, swirling down toward the water near a sharp cliff. When they landed, soldiers crawled out of the mist, scaled arms, webbed fingers, and eyes that glittered.

Zamani stepped forward, saying, "We need to talk to Queen Djadia, we have been sent by Queen Zandi."

The soldier gave a low, echoing grunt before nodding. "Follow." They walked along a path carved into coral-stone, leading them to the water's edge.

And then she emerged.

The water cascaded over Queen Djadia's feet as she stepped forward, each drop cool against her skin. Her hair, all big and curly, looked like a stormy cloud with little water droplets sparkling like stars. Dressed in blue and gold, carrying a trident, she looked peaceful, but you could tell she knew why the boys sought her out.

Zamani bowed. "Your Majesty. Queen Zandi sends her greetings. Darkness rises from the east. The fire has been stolen. We seek your sacred waters to restore balance to Azania."

Queen Djadia silently watched them. Then she spoke, her voice a soft tide rolling over stones.

"Fire keeps the oceans awake. Whales are not singing. The storms are cold. This loss affects us all."

"Come," Djadia said. "Let the ocean judge your hearts."

Turning, she walked barefoot into the tidepool, which opened up like a flower. Following, Zamani and Imani, descended into the underwater temple; glowing algae and pulsing giant shells lit their way.

Djadia was at the centre of a pearl platform, with water swirling all around. She lifted her trident.

"The sacred water must be drawn not with power, but with presence. Imani, you will gather it."

Imani closed his eyes, whispering a spell of gratitude and peace. The water responded, rising into a perfect sphere and floating into their open palms. Djadia smiled.

“You carry more than magic. You carry love, and that is water’s true form flowing, open, deep.”

As they ascended back to the shore, Djadia turned to the two boys.

“I remind you children of Azania; creation is an unending process.” With deep sincerity. “Tell my sisters: Djadia stands with you.”

The sky broke above them, and a rainbow unfurled over the sea.

Later, as they rested in the dark, the sounds of the night enveloped them. Near the coral stones, Tshedza stood guard, curled up like a ribbon.

Zamani gazed at the dark horizon. “The water listened to you,” he whispered. “Like it knew your name,”

At first, Imani didn’t respond. He trailed his fingers across the water.

“I have learned to approach magic with gentleness,” he said, “I have learnt not to let the pain of my past harden me.”

Zamani looked at him surprised. “What do you mean?”

Imani with a sadness on his face. He drew in a breath.

“I am from a world that was destroyed. A magical firestorm consumed my childhood home. My survival was due to a celestial intervention that transported me to this world. I am the last of my kind.”



Zamani was quiet.

"I have told no one that," Imani said. "I guess I thought... if I did, I would have to admit that I am always afraid. But fear can't be the thing that holds me back from living and loving."

Reaching over, Zamani gently touched his hand. "So why come with me?"

Imani looked at him, his eyes held an intense vulnerability.

"Cause to overcome fear, we must live in harmony with the laws of the universe." his voice filled with hope.

Zamani "I am glad that you didn't let the wounds of your past or the labels given to you define you, I can tell that what defines you is your genuine heart."

They set in silence, and watched the gentle ocean waves for what felt like forever.

In the morning, Imani and Zamani soared over rolling dunes and green valleys on their westward journey. With a powerful beat, Tshedza's wings sliced through the misty skies, ascending into a realm where clouds were not simply weather patterns, but sentient beings, and the wind carried the celestial secrets whispered by the stars.

As they approached, a formation of winged guardians soared up to meet Imani and Zamani. Tall, dark-skinned beings, all bearing broad feathered wings that shimmered like the dawn. They wore robes spun from cloud-silk, and their eyes glowed with the clarity of sky after rain.

One guardian hovered close. "State your purpose in the Queendom of air."



“We need to see Queen Makena,” Zamani said. “We come with a warning and a plea.”

The guardians silently nodded and led them to the central spire, it bloomed open like a flower when they landed.

At the heart of the spire stood Queen Makena, radiant and formidable.

Her brown skin was like dark, fertile soil under the moon, and her eyes held the universe. Her robes, like living wind, swirled around her, a colourful doek crowned her head.

She sat not on a throne, but floated gently in meditation, suspended by currents of pure air.

“Speak,” she said, without opening her eyes.

Zamani bowed. “Your Majesty. Queen Zandi sends greetings. Queen Zaria of the east has been imprisoned. The Fire has been stolen by Akin. Azania trembles, and we seek your sacred air to restore balance.”

Makena opened her eyes sharp and luminous.

“I have felt it,” she said. “The sky cries. My dreams are full of broken wings.”

“You come to gather the winds,” Makena said, “but to do so is not simply to ask. The air must trust you.”

She floated to the floor and extended her hand to Zamani. “Come with me.”

They followed her to the summit, where a gusting vortex of wind spiralled upward into the sky. There, Makeda chanted an ancient song of the skies, in a language older than the stars.

The wind formed into a massive serpent with wings of vapor and a breath of lightning.

“To take the air,” she said, “you must release your breath, all of it. Only when you surrender can you truly fly.”

Zamani stepped forward, took a deep breath, and exhaled with intention, releasing fear, grief, longing. The serpent shimmered, dissolved into mist, and gathered itself into a single breath held in a clear orb.

Makeda handed the orb to Zamani. “Guard it well. The breath of life is sacred.”

Zamani bowed deeply, touched. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Makeda turned to Imani and Zamani, “Send my love to my sisters. The skies are with them.”

The air shifted. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“I remind you; don’t stare too long at the darkness children of Azania. Fly now, the world awaits your courage.”

They flew in silence, leaving the mountainous sky behind and facing the fiery, scorched earth ahead.

Beneath Zamani’s calm gaze, a storm churned.

“I should feel stronger than this.”

“We have gathered the elements. Water in Imani’s hands. Wind in mine. The earth lives in my blood. But inside... I still feel unfinished. Still afraid.”



He looked over at Imani, riding beside him, his white hair streaming behind him like comet-trail silk. Imani's focus was ahead, but Zamani could feel his presence like warmth against his skin.

"I keep waiting for the moment when I will finally feel worthy of all this of carrying Azania, of facing Akin, of loving someone like him. But what if that moment never comes? What if I am not the hero this story needs?"

His fingers tightened around the orb.

"Makeda said to surrender. And I did. But now I feel hollow. Empty, like the air that surrounds me. Maybe that's the lesson. Maybe this isn't about being full of power... but being open enough to let it flow through me"

"The old Zamani would have gripped control like a weapon. But now... I just want to hold on to what matters. To Imani. To truth... And remember the secret of the universe: that we are all the same being."

He took a breath.

"Let the fire test me. Akin cannot destroy what he did not create. I will face him, not as a prince with something to prove, but as a son of Azania with something to protect."

Ahead, the blackened peak of Queen Zaria's volcano came into view, ash swirling like sorrow above it.

Zamani reached for Imani's hand, and this time, he held it tightly.

The eastern lands of Azania had turned cold and shadowed since Queen Zaria's imprisonment. Once a realm of golden deserts, sun-drenched mountains, and



dancing flame-creatures, it now lay still, its warmth drained. The plants no longer flowered. The animals no longer sang.

Deep in a dormant volcano, Queen Zaria was magically imprisoned. The air hung thick with ash and betrayal.

Imani whispered in the dark: "She's near."

They neared the prison's centre, where a great chamber carved from amber glowed faintly with trapped sunlight, the silence broken only by the drip, drip, drip of water echoing through the cave. At its centre sat Queen Zaria, regal even in confinement, her crown catching the dim light.

Her youthful beauty was magnetic.

The sun seemed to kiss her skin, turning it to shimmering bronze, and despite her tiredness, her eyes burned with an intense inner light. The air crackled with heat from the glowing, scorched runes that surrounded her, their faint light illuminating the golden shield holding her captive.

Her smile was a subtle curve of her lips as they entered, but her voice, though controlled, held the resonance of barely suppressed power.

"You've come... my light bearers."

Zamani knelt. "Queen Zaria. We've come to free you and restore the fire to Azania."

Zaria's gaze settled on Zamani. "I know your face. Wakati whispered your name to me in my dreams. Zamani, the flame heart of memory and Sasa, the light of the living heart."

Zamani flushed, then nodded. “We need your fire. We have gathered the wind and the water. The earth is with us. But without you...”

Zaria lifted her hand slowly. “Akin holds the Orb of Flame. He turned my fire against me. And yet...” her voice deepened, power rising beneath it, “you can never imprison the sun.”

A sudden tremor shook the ground. Tshedza hissed, slithering closer to the edge of the chamber.

“Prepare yourselves,” Zaria warned. “He comes.”

From the shadows behind her throne, Akin appeared. His cloak trailed embers. The Orb of Flame hovered above his palm. His eyes locked on Zamani with disdain.

“You trying to be brave, nephew.”

Zamani stepped forward, staff in hand. “You stole from your sisters, and from Azania. You will return the fire.”

Akin to Zamani “I gave everything, every spark of joy, every breath of love, to build a world that could hold... I asked the gods to return what they took. I begged. I screamed. And the gods were silent.”

“So I became louder than their silence. I became fire without warmth. Light without mercy.”

Zamani looking directly at Akin “You have to let things go... Time is always trying to remind us that endings are the birth place of new beginnings, even a happy story needs to come to an end.”

Akin almost unmoved. “My happiness was taken from me.”



Behind the barrier, Zaria stood tall now, fire glowing beneath her skin. “Light cannot exist without darkness.”

Zaria pressed her palms against the barrier. The golden shield cracked. At the same moment, Imani cast a gust of sacred wind across the room, while Zamani’s staff struck the ground with a pulse of earth-magic.

The chamber shook.

Tshedza launched at Akin, who raised his hand, fire surging. But this time, Zaria’s light exploded outward, shattering the barrier. Freed, she rose into the air, her entire body blazing with golden light.

She launched a burst of solar flame at Akin. He fell to one knee, struggling to contain the power. Zamani rushed in, striking his staff against the Orb and Imani chanted a binding spell.

The Orb trembled... cracked... and shattered.

Akin collapsed, drained and powerless. The fire rushed from him, and it surged toward Queen Zaria, whose arms opened wide to receive it.

She blazed, fully restored, her form radiant, crowned in fire.

Queen Zaria stepped forward, gaze softened by firelight. “You cannot possess the sun, Akin. But you can still choose how to rise.”

“I don’t deserve another chance,” he said.

Zaria tilted her head. “The universe rarely gives what is deserved. It gives what is needed.”



Then, behind her, a glow pulsed from the sacred flame vial that hung at Zamani's waist. It lifted into the air on its own, hovering between them all and then floated gently toward Akin.

The flame kissed Akin's head, and he gasped. His body arched backward not in pain, but in release, and fire burst from his back, rising into phoenix-like wings made of golden flame.

His eyes no longer burned, they were shining.

The room filled with wind. Zaria's fire bowed to it. Tshedza hissed and lowered its head. Even the earth stilled.

Akin hovered above the stone floor.

With a final, blinding flare, Akin's form dissolved and in his place rose a phoenix of starlight and ash, its wings wide enough to span the chamber.

The creature circled once, singing a soft note a sound of grief, and hope, and rebirth. Then it soared upward through the cave ceiling, vanishing into the skies above Azania.

A long silence followed.

As Imani and Zamani prepared to return home, Queen Zaria placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "You have shown courage and wisdom beyond your years. Azania will always remember its young heroes."

With their mission complete, the two journeyed back to the North, knowing fire, wind, water, and earth had forged their bond a bond as eternal as the universe itself.



That night, beneath a sky full of stars, Zamani and Imani sat together, the cool breeze carrying the scent of blooming flowers. They spoke in hushed voices about their journey, their fears, and their dreams.

Imani turned to Zamani, his white hair glowing softly under the moonlight. "I couldn't have done this without you."

Zamani smiled, his captivating brown eyes full of warmth. "Neither could I. We make a good team."

For a moment, there was only silence between them. Then, as if guided by the universe itself, Zamani leaned in, and Imani met him halfway. Their lips met in a soft, lingering kiss, sealing not just their love for Azania but for each other.

As the universe and all her children watched, two hearts found their true home in one another.

The End

Glossary

Akin - The name Akin, which has Yoruba origins signifying bravery or a warrior-like nature, is a versatile and meaningful name with multiple origins.

Azibo - The name Azibo, which is of African origin, is primarily used as a first name among the Chewa and Zulu tribes. Originating from the Chewa language, it translates to and signifies the concept of “Earth”.

Azania - In Pan-Africanist and anti-apartheid discourse, the name Azania served as a poetic and political alternative to South Africa, signifying a revived sense of identity and nationhood. References to the area that is now South-East Africa, possibly encompassing modern-day Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique.

Imani - The name Imani, which has roots in both Arabic and Swahili traditions, carries the meaning of “belief” or “faith”.

Queen Djadia of the South and water - Inspired by the South African Queen Modjadji, the rain queen is a powerful figure in the Balobedu culture. The title Queen Modjadji signifies the hereditary female ruler, a position passed down through generations within the royal family.

Queen Makena of the West and air - The name “Makena,” meaning “the happy one,” is of African-Swahili origin, inspired by the legendary Queen Makeda of Sheba, whose queendom was likely located in either modern-day Ethiopia or Yemen.

Queen Zandi of the North and earth - Inspired by the Queen Nzinga, who was the monarch of the Mbundu people in present-day Angola, this protector of warriors was a powerful leader who courageously battled against the

encroaching Portuguese and their relentless expansion of the slave-trade in Central Africa.

Queen Zaria of the East and fire – Inspired by the legacy of Queen Amina, a notable Hausa historical figure, who reigned in the city-state of Zazzau, located within the present-day north-western region of Nigeria. Zaria, the city, is a tribute that honours the legacy of the great Queen Amina.

Wakati – The word wakati in Swahili means “time” or a moment or era. It echoes the African conception of time as cyclical, relational, and remembered through ancestors, not just measured by clocks.

Tshedza – The name Tshedza means “light” in Tshivenda. It is a nod to Tshedza Pictures, owned by co-founders Phathu Makwarela and Gwydion Beynon. They are renowned for developing and producing award-winning South African television shows.

Zamani – The name Zamani, from the Swahili tradition it refers to the “past”, ancient times or long ago, it can also refer to a feeling of nostalgia. This is a nod to Kenyan theologian and philosopher John Mbiti to describe the deep, ontological past in traditional African time perception.

“For those who came before, who survived so that we can thrive.”

Obakeng Pholo

Love is the quiet force shaping creation.

Zamani, a young prince of the northern mountains, is sent to the School of Creation to discover his purpose, only to find himself drawn into a war already unfolding. A fallen guardian seeks to control the elements and reshape reality through grief. Zamani must rise beyond royal inheritance and into his own becoming. Along the way, he meets Imani, a brilliant and gentle soul whose understanding of magic challenges everything Zamani believes about power, courage, and worthiness.

Together, they journey across fire-scorched deserts, floating cities, and ancient temples, gathering the elements to restore balance to a world on the brink of collapse. But the greatest transformation does not come from earth, wind, water, or flame; it comes from choosing vulnerability over fear, connection over control, and love over loss.

Inspired by African philosophies of time, where the past walks beside the living and memory shapes the future, Zamani echoes the idea that we are formed by what came before us, even as we create what comes next. *The Universe and All Her Children* is a sweeping African-inspired fantasy about creation, queerness, healing, and destiny, a coming-of-age story where gods walk beside mortals, boys become heroes, and the truest magic is learning that you already carry the miracle within you.



Obakeng Pholo is a media practitioner, writer, and human rights advocate currently pursuing his honours in journalism and media studies. With over a decade of experience spanning journalism, content strategy, and grantmaking, his work resides at the intersection of storytelling, equity, and social change across Africa. He has led editorial teams, built cross-sector partnerships, and supported media and advocacy initiatives that advance the human rights of LGBTI people and promote inclusive narratives. He is deeply committed to advancing African-centred storytelling that honours lived experience, imagination, and cultural memory. Obakeng brings a grounded, people-centred sensibility to both his leadership and creative practice. His short story “The Brotherhood” appears in *Being Gay Is Not All Fabulous*, edited by Katlego Vincent Scheepers. *The Universe and All Her Children* is his debut novel, an African LGBTI teen graphic fiction novel that explores identity, belonging, and becoming through a tender lens of imagination and courage.



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