

In Search of Amiḥa

MultiMind



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*A*nother night, another night. Keyona was quite tuckered out from her day. She would have loved to have been tired from back-to-back meetings and water cooler chats but instead, it was more “Sorry, another qualified candidate was selected” replies. Three popped up on her phone that day, one via text, the rest through email. Her job-only inbox was cluttered with either “Thank you for applying” or “Thank you for your application but ...” emails. The only things that broke up the monotony were the spam letters she received from the countless mass recruiters she signed up with. She used to trim her inbox but now, she hardly saw any point. Apply here, apply there, remain unemployed no matter where.

Her days were monotone, just like today. Do more resume work, search countless job boards, apply to whatever or wherever barely matched her skill set as a computer science kid with a fresh degree and four years of university debt. *Go into comp sci*, they said. *You’ll always have a job*, they said. Keyona knew her case wasn’t unique; every

other kid that didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer was told the same thing. And now, they were all in the same boat: young, educated and desperately looking.

She had a few little blessings here and there but rarely did they feel that way. Keyona had an apartment with no roommates but it was small, cramped and crowded. She could fry eggs from her bed, walk three paces to the right and stumble out of her "cozy" abode into the drab apartment complex hallway. Paid for by her parents back home in Atlanta, they wanted to make sure no worries distracted her from her studies as a second-generation graduate. It would be a dream, if it were a good thing. Instead, they would check on her constantly: to see how she was doing, see if she had any food in the fridge, see if she was working yet. They figured Delaware had more to provide than Georgia for tech degrees and jobs while far less expensive than New York or Silicon Valley, California. If they couldn't physically swing by, they would call. Every time, her parents, Marissa and Terrance, filled her with encouraging words but they were always salted with the pressure to find *something*.

Keyona knew what would happen if she didn't find something fast, they would let go of the purse-strings and tell her to figure it out herself. Their patience was already worn thin by buying the college apartment in the first place four years ago. They never wasted an opportunity, either. Up

until she was a junior, they reminded her here and there that when they were her age, their parents *never* paid their way for anything, it was *expected* to be out and independent by eighteen.

Beyond the miserable pick-up jobs Keyona had applied for countless times already, the land of employment still laid a bare wasteland. She applied to a couple more and looked out her tape-sealed window. Dull stars and a half-lit moon hung well in the sky. It was time for bed.

Too depressed to shower, Keyona changed into her sleep clothes, an over-sized gray shirt she won during trivia night back in college and a long satin cloth wrapped over her lengthy braids. She was lucky to get her hair done in the past week, a braider needed her laptop fixed and Keyona needed a long-term style. She may or may not have dinked around a bit to make the problem appear more complex than it actually was but it got her the beautiful waist-length microbraids she wanted. It was the closest thing she had to a good job since she graduated. Her satin wrap tied up secure, Keyona climbed into her creaky, twin sized bed. It was stiff and flat, and held the same mattress she had since middle school, but it was still a bed. The coral sheets were comparatively newer, a house warming present from home. Her moon pillow stood out, lumpy and possibly in need of a wash but still soft and comforting. It was the first thing she

bought when she moved in, along with the fuzzy star-covered blanket it came with. She drew the blanket up close and hoped for a restful sleep.



Deep in the middle of the night, the sheets became like quicksand. Curled up and slumbering, Keyona began to sink into her bed. Her blanket slowly deflated under her disappearing silhouette. Her head slid from her pillow.

When her foot kicked brisk space and air, Keyona stirred. When she tried to push away, to get her foot back on the bed, it went nowhere. She jostled awake. Blurred by shock, and blurry tongued by sleep, Keyona yelped fuzzy words for help. She clutched her blanket for grip to sit up but the shift of her weight just made her sink faster. Then, she was gone.

The air shredded past her as the starless night sky slowly turned to dawn. A low sun graced the horizon but the second sun underneath it gave the streaks of mountains and plains a burning glow. Keyona tumbled wildly down, tangled up in her blanket. The drilling rattle of its corners filled Keyona ears. She could hardly make sense of anything, let alone see anything clear enough. The world wouldn't stop swirling about her until she stopped struggling to unfurl the

blanket from around her. What she did see terrified her – land. Far, distant land that grew far less distant by the second. Bewildered and clueless, she tried to unfurl the blanket again. She thought it would make for a suitable parachute but soon stopped, she couldn't come up with any positive examples of that working outside of cartoons. Her heart sank deep into her stomach.

The land was wide and rustic, webs of villas and cities sprawled out between the lush forests. Rippling mountains were everywhere, stark and with long shadows over a third of the land. The calm ocean glittered with gentle waves. What a lovely sight Keyona would have adored, if she wasn't plummeting to her certain death. One minute, she was sound asleep, dreamless and snoring. Now, she was soon to be splattered upon strange plains and meadows.

Or at least she would have, until she dropped into a cyan blue sandpit. All that poked out was a corner tuft of her blanket and nothing else. The soft grit of the sand wasn't invasive; she could breathe but she still kept her blanket clamped shut over her nose and mouth, her eyes winched shut. Outside, there was a voice, a single voice but cacophonous. It chimed and clattered over a helium pitch, fussing and babbling.

Dread rattled through Keyona as her mind raced, *Am I dead? Did I die in my sleep? I'm dead, aren't I? I am dead. I died*

in my sleep and I am dead. This just happened. I died from misery in my sleep. She took a deep breath and sighed. *Wait. Do dead people breathe in the afterlife?*

Around her, the sand shifted and moved until it lifted her up to the surface. Flecks of sand were stuck against the dark brown of her skin, a couple bits tumbled away. The blanket had bits of flecks as it draped down her front. Keyona kept her face buried, afraid of what she would see.

It was cool and quiet, still and pleasant. She wasn't falling anymore but she wasn't sure she was somewhere better. Sounds carried light echoes; she was indoors. And around her shuffled about an anxious, odd ... someone.

"I didn't think! I didn't think! I thought you could fly! Or that you'd land here! Where are your orbs? Why didn't you hover?" The jingle in their tone rang like strangled bells. They were beyond flustered. "Amika, what were you *doing* being aimless in the sky? I thought you knew where I was?" The voice paused and the shuffling stopped. "Amika?"

Keyona felt a small poke in her fleshy side. She tensed up and tried to scoot away on the sand but only sifted it about instead. She remained silent.

The voice asked again, a slower drawl but the jingle just as tight, "Amika?" After another soft poke, they apologized with a looser jingle, "I didn't mean to make you fall. You've been missing for a while and I've been trying to find you

since Rulo became ridden with hunters-”

“Who is ‘Amika’?!” Keyona demanded, her face sprung upright. Her deep Southern accent was irritated and annoyed. “My name is *Keyona*. Who are y-Why am- WHAT IS HAPPENING?! *Am I dead?! I’m dead, ain’t I?*” She stared helpless and lost at the figure before her. They had medium brown skin, double pointed ears and a sharp, angular face. Their eyes were as light as snow, only a faded line marked out their irises. Their lashes and brows were the same, light and soft as snow. Their hair was thin strands of clear blue glass beads folded into a neat, long braid. They wore puffy, grey pantaloons and a stitched plum tunic banded at the waist with several ropes and satchels. Their face wore a befuddled, silent stare.

“You’re not Amika,” the stranger’s voice jangled low. “Who are you?” Above, the light orbs illuminating the moss-covered cottage home brightened a little more.

“Not ‘Amika’!” Keyona lanced. Her anger slipped into desperate sorrow as she spoke, “I’m *not!* My name is *Keyona!* Look, if I’m not dead, please send me *home*. I ‘on’t mean *no* harm, I just wanna get *home-*”

“I made a mistake,” the stranger mumbled to themselves as Keyona continued on. “How? I did everything right. Who is this strange person? Why-” The stranger talked louder over Keyona’s pleading, “Why do you have Amika’s spirit

scribe? How did you get-”

“What ‘spirit scribe?’” Keyona clapped her legs on the sand, annoyed once more. “What are you talkin’ about? I ain’t got no ‘spirit scribe’! I just graduated university a few months ago-”

“Wait, you’re a Scholar but don’t have *any* scribes?” The stranger was even more confused than before.

“No! I got a degree from Delaware University but that’s it! Can I go *home*, please? *Please?*” Keyona wanted to cry but she wasn’t sure if that would help or harm her situation. The stranger looked odd, and their home was even odder, a stone cottage covered in spates of moss. Bottles and jars with unusual writing lined the walls in neat rows. Colorful, spindling plants floated next to closed wooden windows. A couple hovered low over a table or two across the cobblestone floor. A weathered, leather tome laid on the ground next to the pit, pages sprawled. Floating candles and glowing spheres lit the space close to the thatched, dome ceiling. She decided to hold it in.

The stranger approached slow and cautious. There was little they could believe the unusual person before them was saying. With a serious jingle in their deepening tone, they asked, “How do you have Amika’s spirit scribe-”

“I *on’t know!*” Keyona blustered. “What it look like? I *swear* I ain’t got it! All I got on is a sleep shirt and this here

blanket! No pockets!” Keyona sorted herself atop the sand best she could for maximum modesty and flapped out her blanket. A slight plume of sand fluttered from the blanket’s snap. “See? Nothin’! Look, ma’am - or sir! - I’m just tryin’ to get *home*. I’m real sorry that I’m not who you thought I was but I never met Amika and-”

“You have her *scribe*. It’s in you!” The stranger accused. Their lashes and eyes drifted from snow to a faint violet. Keyona fell silent upon the change. The stranger’s voice rang a deeper chime, akin to a grandfather’s clock, “I did *everything* right. *Everything*. That ring Amika wore was *not* easy to find after those people took her house and *torched* her belongings. Either you’re *lying* and took it or you’re *her* somehow. And I knew her well, so *talk*.” The light spheres above the pit began to dim and descend. Keyona hugged her blanket tighter. “I will forgive *no* lies -”

“Wait, WAIT! I’m not lyin’! What does it look like?!” Chill fled through Keyona’s veins. For a fleeting moment, she thought falling would be better.

“A sea blue gem with writing in it.” The stranger stood at the rim of the pit, anger and disdain painted all over their face. They stuck out a slender hand and looked down their wide nose at Keyona, “Give it to me. Now.”

Keyona was at a loss for words. All she had was the truth. Or what she thought was the truth. She tried to eke out the

words that broke through her fearful silence, “I...I don’t have... it? I never ... never seen anything like that in my life. I’m from ‘Lanta. Please ... *please* don’t hurt me, I ain’t - I ain’t a thief. Never stole nothin’ in my *life*. I’ll – I’ll help you find Amika somehow, can ... can that work?”

The stranger looked over Keyona with a suspicious gaze but their eyes and lashes returned to snow and the spheres lifted again. With a silent incantation from the stranger, Keyona rose from the pit with a delicate float and was placed on the ground. Rattled, Keyona clutched her blanket. Standing there, her quivering legs gave out and she collapsed onto her rear.

“You *still* have Amika’s spirit scribe. I can sense it,” the figure explained, their voice ascending to a medium jingle and a dull tone. “*You’re* going to be my compass. Once we find Amika, she will explain everything. Then, you can go home. I spent too much of my soul and my time to happen upon a mistake now. Get up and let’s go.”

Keyona pulled herself to her feet. Her legs still shook, she willed them to not give out again. Whoever this person was, she didn’t want to cross them further. Blanket drawn close to her chin, she softly quaked, “Can I ... can I ask a question?”

“Go ahead,” the stranger obliged, bemused.

“Am I dead?”

Silence engulfed the cottage. Keyona's eyes were wide and still, affixed on the stranger and their flat stare.

The stranger broke out into fitful laughter. "You better not be!" Their voice carried a light tinkle in their pitch, like a shaken bell. "The ritual wouldn't have worked, otherwise."

"Huh?" Keyona asked through the stranger's laughter, "Then where am I? And who are you?"

Winding down, the stranger answered, "You're in Rulo, on the Northern seas of Hesult. I'm Ipkuni. This is *definitely* not the Otherlands. Amika is my close friend and I'm determined to find her."