

Khailil Tookas

## Bee Stings

Amali held the torn beekeeper suit in her hands and let out a cry of disbelief as she slumped backwards onto her bed. Of course she'd forgotten to unhook the suit fully before yanking it out of the closet, it had been over a year since she'd needed to wear it, and she was excited to see if it would fit Erica. Hoping that the sound she heard hadn't been indicative of a large tear, she held her breath as she turned it over in her hands. To her horror, nearly the entire back of the suit had been torn open, from the elbow of one sleeve down to the waist by the back zipper.

Any other time, Amali would've just shrugged this off and resolved to get it fixed later. But Erica was going to be here tomorrow, and she NEEDED the suit. She had a deadly bee allergy, and without the suit, there was no way she'd be able to visit Amali's apiary like they'd been planning for weeks. It was an incredible stroke of luck that Erica's schedule had opened up enough to make this work, probably the only chance they'd get for the next month. This was it.

They met for the first time nearly a year ago, while Amali was in town running her weekly honey stall at a local market. Things were calm, and Amali was taking advantage of the down time by going over her planner when she caught a glimpse of a woman down at the other end of the market. She finished writing in her planner and kept a casual eye on the woman as she went from stall to stall. The woman was wearing a cutoff jean jacket covered in colorful patches that looked hand sewn, a tote bag with a design she didn't recognize, and khaki cargo shorts with a rainbow hem. She had shoulder length curly brown hair, half pulled up in a ponytail, and round gold framed glasses. The market was decently large, and from how far away Amali was, she couldn't tell which stalls the woman was visiting except for the soap stall, whose owner she was friends with.

As she got closer, Amali realized that she would probably come by her stall too. She began frantically making sure her stall was as presentable and tidy as it could be, even though it was never messy. She restacked the mason jars into a different shape, making sure all of the labels were facing forwards. Was that too aggressive? She turned a few to be facing the wrong direction and moved on to organizing the bottles, leaving open spots to imply that some had been bought already. Maybe she should take the top few jars off too. After quickly putting some jars under the table while she was sure the woman was looking the other way, she started on the beeswax candles, stacking them in order of tallest to shortest. She continued to make small adjustments here and there, moving things around and trying to get everything to be perfect, when someone called her name.

"Hello!" she yelled, dropping the candle she'd been fiddling with, there was too much wax hanging off the side. "How do you know my name?"

It was the woman she'd been watching, "It says it on the banner... 'Amali's Apiary'?" She gave Amali a light smile.

"Oh, y-yeah, sorry. What did you need?" Amali asked, hoping she didn't sound rude.

"Well, I'm still browsing," the woman said as she inspected a bottle of honey, "but I was just asking if you do all this yourself." This close, the woman was even prettier than Amali thought before. Had she been thinking that this whole time?

"Uh, yeah, I do all of the beekeeping stuff..." She couldn't take her eyes off the woman, "myself."

"Wow, I've got a serious allergy, I could never be near so many bees. Nearly died from one when I was a kid," the woman said, putting the bottle down and examining the candles, "It does seem really interesting though." She leaned forwards to get a better look, and as she did Amali saw that the design on her bag was a band logo. She didn't know of the band at the time, but it ended up being the only band Amali listened to for the next week.

"It's really fun, my passion really," Amali tried to force herself to stop looking at the woman for just a moment. "I've been doing it for maybe three years now."

"How'd you get into it?" the woman asked, still looking at the candles. Amali thought the woman might've been blushing, but she wasn't sure.

"Well," Amali started, "I never did too well in school, passing grades but nothing spectacular. I was always interested in bugs and biology to an extent, and when the idea of becoming a beekeeper popped into my head, I just kinda held on and never let go." There was an awkward silence, and she wasn't sure if the woman was going to say anything else. "A-anything look pretty? I mean interesting?" she stumbled, clearing her throat and trying to stand trying to stand tall. She was startled to see the woman looking back at her.

"Y- oh, um," the woman quickly picked up a jar of honey with a piece of honeycomb inside, "this looks nice. How much is it?"

"Oh, that's \$10," Amali replied, getting ready to open her cash box.

"But the sign says \$20?" the woman said, pointing with the jar.

Amali hurriedly covered the sign with her hand, almost knocking over the whole display, "It's an old sign."

"Oh, I only have a twenty on me." The woman pulled the bill out of her wallet, trying to hide the fact that she clearly had other bills as well. "Consider it a tip I guess."

Amali took the money and put it in her cash box. '*Well how about instead of a tip I get your number?*' she thought, absentmindedly grabbing a ten and reaching out to hand it to the woman.

“Oh! I...” the woman was very clearly blushing now. Had Amali said that out loud?

“OH. I didn’t mean to say- I’m so sorry, that was-”

The woman snatched the bill and crammed it into her wallet, “Well, I think I’m free Thursday... if you wanted to get lunch or something...” she suddenly became very interested in the table cloth when she realized Amali was still looking at her.

“Th-that would be really nice...”

It shouldn’t have worked, but it did. The woman gave Amali her phone number and her name, Erica. They met for lunch that Thursday, and talking turned into thinking about asking Erica out, turned into Erica saying yes and them officially being a couple. Erica was an art teacher at the local high school, and in her free time, she also helped organize and run bimonthly art shows for high schoolers and emerging artists. For one of their first dates, Erica took Amali to one of the shows where they bought each other art to hang in their houses. Art that Amali still had hanging in her room alongside paintings Erica had done just for her, hanging in the room where she now sat, holding her torn beekeeper suit.

She tossed the suit across the room in a fit of frustration and buried her face in her hands. It was a clean rip, probably really easy to fix if you knew how to sew, but Amali didn’t. One of the only people she knew that could was her mom, and things were... complicated with her. Erica would be here in two days and on such short notice Amali doubted she’d be able to find anyone else to fix the suit. Her hands shook as she picked up the phone and dialed in the number. With a deep breath she dialed her mother and waited for her to pick up.

Her mother was an immigrant straight from Kenya. For most of Amali and her sister Zahara’s lives, she’d been a single mother and had worked her hardest to provide for the two of them. Despite that, she somehow also always made sure to give them as similar a childhood to her own as she could. She fed them Pilau, Ingoho, and as much Kenyan stew as she could make when she was able to get the ingredients. Ever since Amali and Zahara had been able to speak, their mother made sure they were learning Swahili and were fluent before they left the house for college. She placed a big emphasis on education and showed a strong preference towards Zahara who did much better in school than Amali. It was clear from a young age that Zahara would appeal much more to their immigrant mothers ideas about success in America. She studied to become an environmentalist lawyer and started her own company employing young students to help the elderly with maintaining gardens. Zahara Okori, her perfect successful daughter, had moved out East, leaving her with just Amali, a beekeeper who lived in the rural suburbs almost entirely alone. And she was also gay.

Amali never really spoke much to her Kenyan family members except for when some of them made the trip out West to visit America. When she did however, it was always very clear that they held extremely traditional views, especially concerning homosexuality. They all grew up in a time and place that was incredibly unforgiving towards its Lgbt community, oftentimes to the point of violent attacks. To them, it was simply the right thing to believe that gay people were “less” or “sinful” and deserved punishment. Her mother naturally shared very similar sentiments, but it seemed to Amali before she came out that perhaps living in America had opened her eyes a bit on the matter. Her mother had many queer acquaintances here and there that she showed no open hostility towards, but they were really just special exceptions. Good people who happened to be queer. Amali was in her first year of college, still trying to figure out her plans for life when she had her first girlfriend.

Amali hadn't quite tried to hide it, but she also wasn't intending to come out on her own. Her mom was always sharp though, and when she did figure it out, it made Amali wish she'd tried to hide it. Her mother's attitude towards her shifted drastically in the months after finding out. Amali was already her less accomplished daughter, but now she was gay as well? Her mother refused to speak to her or interact with her at all for months. It wasn't until Amali ended the relationship due to distance and dropping out of college to pursue beekeeping that her mother started acknowledging her again. Once she eventually started to talk to her again, her mother began to remind her much more of their Kenyan relatives. Her facade of pretending to be supportive of Amali's interests and goals had been dropped and was replaced with a cynical brutal honesty. Every interaction was plagued with constant criticisms of everything Amali did, and it wasn't until she was able to move out of the city and start her apiary in the suburbs that she could finally get away from her mother's negativity. And now she was calling her to come fix the suit.

It was a relatively short call, “Una shughilu zozote? Nakuhitaji urekebishe kitu.” *Are you busy? I need you to mend something.*

“Hapana, nitakuja hivi karibuni. Je! Umekuwa mazoezi ya Kiswahili chako?” *No, I'll be over. Have you been practicing your Swahili?*

“Ndio mama.” *Yes mama.*

And then her mother hung up, and Amali waited. She didn't live very close to the highway, so she'd be able to tell when it was her mother's car pulling in the gravel lot outside. She instantly set to work trying to get things in order. Her house wasn't a pigsty, but she also didn't try particularly hard to keep it clean and orderly day to day, she lived alone after all. She figured she'd only need to clean the living room since her mom could probably just fix the suit in there. Maybe her bedroom too.

She didn't have time for a deep clean, and instead just tried to hide as much mess as she could and hope her mom wouldn't notice at all. Once she felt like she was

done with the living room, she went back to the kitchen to boil some water for tea. Her mom had given her a box of Kenyan black tea last time they saw each other, but she'd never opened it. She took a few packs out and threw them away to make it look like she'd been drinking them, and then put two of them in mugs for her and her mother. She went back out into the living room and sat down to wait, but almost as soon as she had touched the couch, she heard the churning of tires kicking up gravel. She looked out the front window and saw her mom's car sitting outside.

She got up to open the front door and saw her mother as she got out of the car. She was carrying a small bag of what Amali hoped were sewing supplies, she never said what needed fixing and her mother hadn't asked. Amali held the door for her mother, who walked into the house without saying hello.

"Hmm, could be cleaner," she said, setting down her bag on the couch and looking around the room.

"I boiled some water for tea," Amali said, starting to make her way towards the kitchen. "Do you want any honey in it?"

"I'll take sugar if you have it." Her mom walked ahead of her towards the kitchen, peeking into rooms from the hall as she went. Once she reached the kitchen, she poured herself a cup and left the other one empty. "It's rude to make your guest get their own tea."

Amali poured her cup, putting in more honey than she'd usually use, and followed her mom back to the living room, stopping by her room to grab the suit from the floor in the corner where she had thrown it.

"So," Amali said, putting the suit down on the couch between them and fidgeting with her cup, "I tore the arm on my beekeeping suit. I was wondering if you could sew it up for me?"

"Why else would I be here? Besides, what do you even need it for? You made such big talk last year of how you could touch the bees and not get stung."

Amali took a sip of her tea, even though it was still too hot. "I'm uh, ow- I'm having a friend over. They need the suit. They're allergic."

"Oh? A friend? What's his name? Is he handsome?"

"It's a woman, mom."

"Hmm." Her mother put her cup down and leaned back on the couch, her hand touching the corner of her mouth. "This again? You really are better off not seeing a woman. You need to have a man in your life. Then you could maybe do something worthwhile."

Amali thought she'd be used to her mother's biting remarks by now, but it still stung. "She's just a friend, I swear."

"Then you won't mind me meeting her?" her mother asked, picking her cup back up and taking a sip without looking at Amali.

"What."

“I’m an old woman, I don’t get to meet my daughters’ friends much anymore. Besides, I’ve never seen your bees before. You can give me the tour too.”

Amali fidgeted with her cup more, nearly spilling her tea, “I only have one suit mama, I can give you a tour another day.”

“Insects don’t bother me, I’ll take the tour without the suit. When is your ‘friend’ coming over?”

“Really, I can do it ano-”

“What day is your friend coming over. It is my price for fixing the suit. I want to meet her.

Amali looked down at her cup, “In two days, Saturday.”

As much as she would’ve liked to complain about the quality of the repair and tell Erica today wouldn’t work, her mother had done an exceptional job of fixing the suit. The red thread she used clashed with the white of the suit, but aside from that it looked almost brand new. It wasn’t anything new to explain to Erica her mom’s views on homosexuality, but Erica did have a problem with Amali’s request.

“What do you mean ‘pretend we aren’t dating?’” Erica scream-whispered, as she tried on the suit. She’d come early so Amali could talk to her and make sure the suit fit properly, she was still very anxious about being near bees. “We’ve been dating for nearly a year now and I’ve never even met your mom. Now you want me to pretend we aren’t a thing?”

“Please, I know how you feel, I don’t like it either, but the way she is about this stuff...” Amali zipped up the suit and lightly rested her hand on Erica’s back. “I just want to get this over with and not have to deal with whatever she would say.”

“Okay babe, but you owe me an extra special date after this. Maybe we could finally try to take that weekend vacation like we’ve been talking about?”

Amali chuckled a little, “A whole weekend? I thought it was already crazy for you to be free long enough to make the drive out here?”

“Well, I’m sure I’d be able to find a way.” Erica turned around and took Amali’s hands. Looking at her reminded Amali of the first time she put the suit on, how ridiculous she felt, but also how excited she was. She put her hands around Erica’s waist and started dancing.

Erica did her best to match Amali’s movements with the hindrances of the suit, “I thought you wanted to pretend we weren’t dating?”

“Well, just when my mother is here.” Amali lifted Erica’s arm and tried to spin her around. “After she leaves, we’ll have plenty of time to ‘pretend’ that we are.”

Erica tripped a little and steadied herself against Amali. “Would it really be so bad to tell her? I don’t know, I just- I felt the same with my parents and it was rough for a bit, but they came around. Are you sure she wouldn’t?”

Amali pulled Erica in close, but before she could respond she heard her mother's car pull into the lot. "That's our cue." She let go of Erica and went to let her mother in.

Her mother was wearing a sweater from Zahara's alma mater, and had her braids tied up neatly in a bun. She looked around the living room and tried to peer down the hallway.

"Where is she?" she asked, starting to walk down the hallway.

"Erica is going to meet us out back. The boots I gave her are dirty," Amali said, stepping in front of her mother. "Please be kind to her."

"Am I not kind?" Her mother pushed past her and kept walking towards the back door. "Erica...hmmm..." she seemed to be examining the name as she said it.

Outside, there was a box of mesh screens surrounding the door to keep bees from wandering inside if the door was open. Erica stood waiting just outside it, and when she saw the door open, she stood up a little straighter.

"Mrs. Okori! It's nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand.

Amali's mother smiled and shook her hand, "And you as well, it's always nice to meet one of little Mali's friends." Her mother hadn't called her that since she was twelve. "So tell me again, how did you two meet?"

Amali stepped out and closed the door behind her. "I was running my stall at the market and she asked me about beekeeping."

"Oh, is that all?" her mother said, pushing open the flaps of the mesh box and walking out towards the apiary.

Erica and Amali trailed a little behind, and once her mother was out of earshot, Erica leaned over and whispered, "She doesn't seem awful, maybe she'll be a bit more open this time?"

"I just wanna get this over with so she can go home."

Amali ran up a little to meet her mother and led her to the first bee hive. The bees seemed calm enough today, there were constantly a few coming and going, but it wasn't swarmed, decent enough to show someone who's not used to bees.

She undid the latches and lightly put her hand on the handle on top of the beehive. "These are Carniolan honey bees, I have two more hives of them, although they're a little further down," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the buzzing of the bees as she lifted the top off. Inside, hundreds of bees crawled around on the slats of honeycomb. A few flew out to investigate Amali and her mom, but they went back to the hive a few seconds later. Turning around, Amali saw Erica standing at least ten feet back.

"Come on," she said as she walked out to Erica, "You'll be fine, I swear. The suit works, I wore it yesterday."

Erica took a few hesitant steps forwards, before stopping dead in her tracks as a bee began buzzing around in front of her mask. “On second thought, maybe I’ll just wait inside. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Don’t worry!” called Amali’s mother, still intently observing the beehive, “I haven’t been stung yet, they seem very friendly!”

Amali took Erica’s arm and tugged a bit, “You’ll be okay. Trust me.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Amali removed one of the slats from the beehive and scooped some bees out with her hand to show to her mom and Erica. “They’re really docile if they know you aren’t a threat, I don’t actually remember the last time I was stung.”

Erica stood behind Amali’s mother with her arms crossed tightly across her chest. “I can’t believe you just hold them in your bare hand like that, they really don’t sting you?”

“This is my daughter’s passion, of course she’s good with them,” Amali’s mother shouted over the buzzing, watching a bee crawl across her hand before taking off and flying away. “What about you? What do you do?”

“Oh, I’m an art teacher, but I also sell paintings on the side.” Erica loosened up a bit.

“Mmm. Do you have a husband? You’re very pretty.”

Erica shot a nervous glance at Amali before responding, “I’m single right now, just focusing on me.” She tried her best to smile.

“My little Mali had a girlfriend some years ago. It’s a terrible thing, don’t you agree?” Amali’s mother said, ignoring the bees and instead moving closer to Erica.

Amali’s ears began to burn and her heart beat faster. “Mom please-”

“It’s fine Amali,” Erica said, giving her a look of reassurance. She turned back to Amali’s mother, “What is?”

“A woman being with another woman,” her eyes narrowed as she looked at Amali. “It’s unnatural.”

“I don’t think so. I think it’s a rather beautiful thing to love someone, regardless of who they are.” Erica stood up tall against Amali’s mother. For a moment, it seemed like she’d forgotten about the bees despite their noise.

Amali got a sinking feeling in her stomach, and felt like her knees would give out as her mother continued, “Oh really, is that so. Would you ever love a woman?”

“What if I did? Would you have a problem with that?”

“The only problem would be between you and God.”

Erica clenched her hands, “Oh really? Well then I guess you wouldn’t have a problem with me loving your daughter, would you?”

Erica's words rang in Amali's ears, as the sound of the bees seemed to disappear. It was like watching a movie with all the background noise cut out. Amali's mother swore something at Erica, but she didn't hear it. All she heard was Erica gasp and scream as her mother grabbed at the red stitching and yanked it, ripping open the tear in the back. It was like unlacing a shoe as it all came undone and the back of the suit hung wide open. Amali's mother stuck out her foot to trip Erica, and she fell forwards and landed on her face, her back exposed to the air and the bees. She had just narrowly missed the hive they were standing next to, and as she started to pick herself up she felt the suit slip down off her and around her arms. She froze in place and started hyperventilating.

"WHAT THE FUCK?" Amali couldn't believe in that moment that this was the woman who had given birth to her, she didn't want to believe it.

Amali bolted over and put the lid back on the hive. She grabbed the sagging parts of the suit and yanked them closed over Erica's back. As she helped her up, Erica was shakily muttering to herself under her breath. Amali held the suit closed and ran her back to the mesh box and into the house. Once they were inside, she carefully helped Erica take the suit off, wary of any bees that may have gotten inside, and helped her look for any stings. When they saw that there weren't any, they started back towards Amali's room.

Erica had just sat down on Amali's bed when they heard the back door open and close. Amali's mother made her way down the hall, and upon seeing the open door of Amali's room, tried to walk past as fast as she could, but Amali didn't let her.

"No, you're not going anywhere yet," Amali said, approaching her mother at a frightening speed. She felt like she might hit her, maybe she should. Before her mother could try to get away, she grabbed her arm and yanked her into the room. "You just tried to kill my girlfriend. What is wrong with you?"

"I was trying to do you a favor."

Amali took a step back. "A favor? A FAVOR?!" she walked back over to Erica for fear that she might actually hit her mother. "This woman is one of the only people who has ever loved me, more than you ever have, and you think *killing* her is doing me a *favor*?"

"I'm trying to save you from an eternity of suffering." Her mother's mouth twitched as she said this.

"Save me from a- Well here's one way you can start if you care so much," Amali said, tears welling in her eyes. "Leave me alone. Don't ever talk to me, or interact with me again. Just don't. All you ever do is criticize me, and compare me to Zahara, and tell me how much of a disappointing daughter I am."

"Mali, I-"

“I don’t care what you have to say now. You’ve been nothing but pain and insecurity in my life, and when I look at you, I can barely see the woman that I thought was my mother.”

Her mom stood in the middle of the room for a few moments, her mouth open as if she wanted to speak. Amali turned around. If her mother had said anything else, she didn’t hear it. She sat down with Amali and let out a flood of tears she’d just barely been holding back. As she cried with Erica, the final thing Amali ever heard of her mother was the sound of her tires churning out gravel as she drove away for the last time.