

## BEHIND THE MASK

### FREE CHAPTER.

# PROLOGUE.

*House 2, Oyègbàmi Avenue.*

The peace and quiet of the hot Sunday afternoon were ripped apart when our house head, Wálé, passed down his judgement to those who didn't attend the Sunday service and made things worse by adding *'your opinion really doesn't matter, I was made the head for a reason'*. High pitched voices screaming *"that's rubbish"* could be heard at the street junction close by. Everyone had just returned from the church except a few others and me who didn't go. Standing trial, we were all given a chance to defend ourselves- *more like give excuses if you ask me-*. Japheth didn't have clean clothes. Tóbi woke up late. Andrew could not iron his shirt before the power was taken. Chidi actually left for church but had to come back because he was hungry, and I didn't just want to go.

One look at Wálé's eyes and I could tell he was infuriated by my guts, to have the courage to look at him straight in the face, shrug my shoulders and say *"I just chose not to go"* while having a scornful smirk on. Probably because he was irritated by how unbothered I was, he passed a rule that *'as from now on, everyone leaves the house*

*thirty minutes to church time, failure to do so, you'll be evicted from the house'. With one disdainful look towards where I sat in my blue checker shorts an over-sized white singlet, Wálé stormed off to his room which we called "The Oasis".*

Immediately there was an uproar; about thirty young men in shorts, some still in their Sunday wear, wear all arguing about the verdict of the house head; as expected, those in support of the decision were booed by those against. However, despite the arguments, they agreed on one thing, we were the cause of the problem. If only we had washed our clothes, woken up early, straightened our outfits before the power was taken, had the ability to control our huge appetite and finally had decided to go to church, we wouldn't be in such a situation. They all booed and jeered, while I sat in my corner watching everyone have a go at each other without uttering a single word since I gave my reason for missing the service.

For the past few weeks, I've been a strange person around the house- *at least that's how Chidi sees it.* The other day, he found me sitting all alone outside staring into the sky like I was looking for something; two nights back, he saw me sitting at my bedside with my face between my palms muttering something I later said to be nothing, and just last night, both of us were talking when suddenly tears began to roll down my cheeks, to which I laughed over and said it was nothing. To him, I wasn't myself, my persona seemed different from the person he had taken a liking to when he first moved into the house, I hardly made corny jokes around the house anymore and I rarely sat around laughing and having a good time with the boys. *Well, maybe I grew up.*

As far as I was concerned, my decision as regards missing service that Sunday was right, I had come to realise that I saw the church-going exercise as an extra-curricular activity. *'okay, I have to go to church on Sundays because we are required to do so; Also, Mondays and Thursdays are church days too, not forgetting the vigil on Friday. Alright then, I'll go and show my face'.*

Frankly, this time around, I was not intrigued or in the mood for any extra-curricular activity. *I went to the gym the previous day-* so it was best for ushers that I stayed away; that's one less number in the congregation they would have to keep awake throughout the service. I didn't like the idea of being forced to do things I didn't want to do; I was upset with the stringent rules I had to follow without questions, I was tired of everything.

As a kid, my aspirations were simple; I wanted to be a Superman; the strong one, the one who blocks out pain, protects others from getting hurt, lift everyone including the world whenever and however I can, always see others smile, spreads an aura of peace, love and joy. And I grew up being this person. However, while being the hero, I'd been exposed to my kryptonite; myself. Others experienced happiness and fought for what they believed in. I, on the other hand, had waned into internal despair. I fought for nothing, I no longer knew what to believe in, more like I'd given up before the battle began. I suddenly evolved into what I feared the most; I was my own nightmare.

This was the point I had gotten to- I was scared of being alone, I always wanted my friends around me. Most times, after I closed from the office I ended up accompanying a friend home in the guise of seeing where they stay or keeping them company when in the actual sense I was running away from being alone. I was scared of what I would do to myself. I'd perfected this skill of running from my problems so well that I began to believe that one way or another, the problem will eventually evaporate. Unfortunately, that was never the case. Going home was accompanied with fighting a never-ending war within myself, a war of regret, emptiness and bitterness- *why are you so bitter?* - which I had no reasons for. Despite all these, I still had the strength to crack a smile or sometimes be generous to give a laugh to a friend's joke like all was perfect with the world; I was a genius, so I thought.

Now and then, I always found a quick fix to my problems, one of which was my ability to find a safe haven within the pages of a black leather diary with a fancy latch holding its pages together; this was the only place I felt free to let out my emotions. It was the only place I felt I would not be judged or misunderstood. My true feelings

were within the pages of that book; my safe haven. I scribbled down things I promised myself no one, not my best friend, nor siblings and even my parents would have the privilege of seeing. That is the only memory I have by which every line and paragraph paint a perfect picture of what was once my world.

Turning its cover for the umpteenth time ready to scribble down memories that would soon be lost, the first black prints written on the white sheets revealed itself:

*“I’m strong, I’m smart, I’m enough.”*

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