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The Masks

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(unedited script as submitted by the author)

Chapter One

I arrived at the cottage a few minutes after sunset. You know that period where it's not quite light, but neither is it dark. All around were dark outlines of trees, shrubs and other objects around the cottage that I couldn't quite make out as the last remnants of daylight faded away.

I sat down on the makeshift porch not caring if it was clean or not, after all I was covered in a fine film of dust from head to toe a little bit more dust on my bottom was hardly going to make any difference.

Next, I slid my overnight bag off my shoulder and let it fall next to me, it only contains a few scant items, a couple of shirts, a pair of trousers, the usual toiletries and a well-worn paperback book, but my shoulder is relieved to be rid of the small burden.

I sit still for a moment, resting my aching legs as the unfamiliar noises of the night introduce themselves. It's a chorus of night critters squeaking, chirping and calling to one another in the night. I imagine that in whatever language they speak, they are gossiping about the stranger sitting on the dead man's porch.

A smile tugs at my lips as I wonder what the cricket is whistling about and what the distant croaking frog thinks of it. Overheard a sudden flapping of wings draws my gaze to the dark shifting bird as it darts into a gloomy patch of trees on the far side, I wonder if it is rushing home after a long day doing whatever birds do all day.

Thus, I occupy my time, while my feet slowly recover from the exertion of climbing up the hill. Well, to be honest, the hill itself though steep and long is not solely responsible for my exhausted and disheveled state.

My entire journey here was riddled with bad directions, wrong turns and in some instances hostile and suspicious locals. It didn't help matters that I came out here straight from my job as an assistant bookkeeper to a

prominent merchant a town away, wearing my only pair of decent shoes. Although they are not exactly new or fashionable, I have always felt that they are neat and professional, but now I know, to my detriment, that for walking, they are most certainly unsuitable.

But it couldn't have been helped, my boss had refused my three days leave application to attend my uncle's funeral. The best he could do is give me a half day leave on the day of burial so that I could catch the afternoon bus. As fate would have it, the bus could not fill enough passengers late in the afternoon, so the driver abandoned the route and I, determined to reach my destination at all costs, hitched a ride on a truck heading in my general direction.

Alas, I did not make it on time, no doubt that is what the crickets and the frogs are gossiping about.

I take a deep breath and sigh loudly, there is no electricity out here, I'm not sure if there are candles inside, even if there are, it's too dark and unfamiliar for me to go rummaging through the recently deceased's home.

I convince myself that I am okay with sleeping under the open sky on this porch, that no night creature will mistake me for its dinner and that the deceased's restless spirit won't wander back home and castigate me for not attending the burial.

With this last thought I send out a prayer that my uncle's soul rests in peace, that the night creatures stay away, and I thank the heavens for the clear sky and warm night. Stuffing my overnight bag under my head in a makeshift pillow, I stretch out to sleep, ignoring my empty stomach and keeping my shoes on, just in case.

Chapter Two

A wet sensation on my face begins to draw me from the comforting arms of oblivion that only sleep can provide. I know it is not raining so I ignore it and settle back snugly to resume where I had left off in my dream.

The wet sensation on my face returns and with it the awareness of the rough planks beneath me and the cold chill in the air.

I tuck my knees in closer to my chest for extra warmth but this time I raise my hand to explore what the wet sensation on my face is and my hand

encounters what unmistakably feels like fur.

Pulling my hand away with a yelp of horror, my eyes fling open as I jerk to a sitting position, my shoe clad feet poised to run as soon as the dream fog clears, and a route of escape is identified.

Before my eyes were two creatures, they were more comical than threatening, and yet this still leaves one very important unanswered question.

What were they doing on my porch?

“Does he bite?” I ask.

The old man with wrinkled leathered skin, sunken mouth and cheeks and tufts of white hair peers back at me, his eyes distant beads behind the thick glass lenses.

“Who are you?” Is his response, and that too, in perfect English.

Taken aback by the question, which is asked in a friendly tone, I take in more of environment before answering.

The old fellow has on a tattered brown jacket with vents in the sides, a cream button down shirt, (that must have been white in the distant past) with a frayed collar. His grey, well patched trousers are stuffed into a pair of gumboots whose soles had all but disappeared along with a good portion of the tops. I can't make up my mind if someone had deliberately cut them off or if they had just fallen off by themselves mysteriously.

Next to the old man is the shabbiest dog I had ever seen. Half of its patch-work fur is missing while the other half stands up on end like it has been electrocuted. It is painfully thin, much like it's owner, and apart from the vacant expression on its face, the two are very much alike.

“My name is Musa.” I finally reply, trying not to give too much away.

“Ah, you must be the nephew.” The old man responds.

Caught unawares by this accurate deduction and show of a sharp mind beneath the unassuming exterior I confirm the accuracy his words with a nod. “My name is Tembo.” He goes on, “and you are most welcome.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tembo.” I reply, wondering if this is the local welcoming committee. I quickly glance at my wristwatch, its four thirty in the morning!

“My son told me you had arrived late last night, if I had known earlier, we would have accommodated you at our house. Mrs. Tembo is very fond of entertaining visitors, but that boy of mine, came back home late and drunk, and my eyes are not what they once used to be so I try not to wonder about after dark.”

“No problem at all, the porch was comfortable.” I reply trying to recall whom, among the many faces of people I had encountered yesterday was his son.

“Well anyway, I came to bring you back home for some breakfast. Mrs. Tembo is waiting to meet you.”

Chapter Three

The Tembo residence is all the way down the hill and although going downhill is easier than going up, my feet still hold a grudge at their mistreatment the previous day. As a result, the frail old man of seventy odd years, at my guesstimate, is more agile than as we descend.

We break our fast on boiled sweet potatoes and weak tea.

Well, I use the term tea loosely here, as I suspect it may be something other than what it is being sold to me as. In truth I have no option but to take the “tea”, the other offering is an opaque porridge-like beverage with a few odd particles and indistinguishable lumps floating about in it.

Preferring to err on the side of caution, I opt to eat only the items I can clearly identify or at least almost identify.

“Don't be shy.” Admonishes Mrs. Tembo, “Eat up, we are as good as family,” she claims.

Strangely enough, I truly feel welcomed and at home amongst the odd bits of furniture comprising of wobbly stools and wooden benches with a few of the family's poultry wondering about us looking for scraps or taking a few pecks at unguarded morsels.

I am victim of these “food-hijackers” several times before I give up altogether and gave away my last piece of sweet potato to the handsome Cockrill who stood beside me head tilted to one side, as if to say, “well aren't you going to share!”

Sheepishly I hand over the “goods” inwardly convincing myself that I am not that hungry after all.

A short time later, I am again walking back up the hill with yet another little bundle wrapped in newspaper gripped in my hands. It is a little take away parcel prepared by the homely Mrs. Tembo comprising of some boiled groundnuts, roasted maize kernels and a couple of mangoes.

Of course, the Tembos had extended an invitation to eat lunch with them but I politely declined, reminding them that I had yet to look into and set straight the affairs of my late uncle. Aside from that I am also increasingly becoming terrified of the mileage accumulating on my best pair of shoes, at the rate I am walking about all over the place I would be lucky if they didn't fall apart like a pair of boots I won't mention.

Chapter Four

Back at the cottage I take the time to look around.

The cottage exterior is made of wood, mud and thatch. The surroundings are very shabby and invaded by woody grass and thick vegetation. I am literally standing on the very last patch of clearing and that too has already begun to surrender.

Across the way I spy the handle of a half-concealed hoe beneath a miserable looking clump of trees, whose wilted branches and leaves seem to be pointing down at it as if to tell me, “Come and see what we have here.”

Curious at this unusual imagery, I go and take a closer look parting the dew-soaked grass and shrubs from my way as I move along while inwardly lamenting as my best pair of shoes are mercilessly soaked.

My trousers are not spared, they are submerged up to the knees in this impromptu wilderness baptism performed by grass and shrubs. I let out a resigned sigh as my mental calculations reveal that a new pair of shoes is still an impossibility, let alone adding a pair of trousers.

Under the trees I find that what I had assumed was the protruding wooden handle of a hoe is in fact a walking stick, a staff to be more precise owing to its length.

I stand with it in my hand, one end planted on the ground in a similar

pose that millions of cow herders have done before whilst wondering at the pointless curiosity that had led me here.

Pinning the blame on the miserable trees, I give the tree nearest to me a vicious whack with the staff in my hand, telling myself to focus more seriously on why I am in this wilderness in the first place. To settle my late uncle's estate and to pay my respects.

I promptly toss the staff back on the ground only to receive whack on the back of my head as I turn toward the cottage.

Momentarily stunned, I look around for who had hit me.

No one is here except for me.

If it had been any other time, I would have dismissed the whole incident as a fluke but given that a marble sized swelling is rising under the hand rubbing my head, I am driven to discover who or what has assaulted me.

Chapter Five

A searching glance up into the branches of the trees reveals no mischievous individual or creature lurking there, to compound matters the tree possess no fruits of any sort on which to lay the blame.

I look down and at first see nothing but the thick foliage growing underfoot, but soon I spy a small brown sack partially concealed in the brush by my foot.

Lifting it up gingerly and examining it, my bookkeeper mind calculates that it could be the assailant I am seeking, if it had been lodged up on the branches of the tree and my vicious whack had dislodged it resulting in my own assault.

With the mystery happily settled in my mind I exit the spot and carry the small sack to the porch.

After a quick peek into the sack I top it over and three objects clutter onto the porch.

They are masks, three intricately carved masks made of solid wood and decorated with black, white and red paint.

That is to say that each mask is predominantly of one color and the other colors make up minor markings on it.

The masks are distinctive, one male, one female and the last it seems of some unidentifiable creature.

I wonder if my uncle had carved these masks himself, by this time I conclude that having found them on his property, this close to his home, the masks must have belonged to him.

Apparently now they belonged to me, as Mr. Tembo had informed me after our morning meal.

Reaching into the breast pocket of my shirt I retrieve a folded envelope containing a letter and a single key. With the key being turned over absentmindedly in the palm of one hand, I unfold the letter with the other and read once more the message contained in it.

The letter, is two lines scribbled on a piece of paper can be described as such, simply states:

Dear Musa, I leave all that I have to you, I cannot explain all to you but may you be wise in what you choose to do. The letter ends with my uncle's name and a greasy thumbprint mark underneath it.

I had asked Mr. Tembo to shed more light on this letter and its contents, he could not. He stated that beyond writing the letter on my uncle's behalf all he had was a key which he had promised to deliver to me in person, hence the breakfast invitation.

I look at the key now not knowing what it unlocks.

The cottage has no lock on it, but oddly enough there is something within that requires an intricately made shiny key. The fact that the key is shiny makes it all the more intriguing, nothing here has been spared a thin veneer of accumulated grime except for this one key.

I put the key next to the three masks on the porch and ask myself just what sort of a man my uncle had been, these items reveal absolutely no clues to answer this question.

I quick glance at my wristwatch informs me that it's just past ten in the morning, dropping the masks and the takeaway goodies into my overnight bag and putting the key back in my breast pocket, I make my way to the local cemetery to pay my respects.

All things being equal, I would like to be back on my way home by this evening.

Mr. Tembo has promised to look after the place for me while I seek out a permanent caretaker. There is absolutely no question of me living out here in this rural environment, just the thought of the years of schooling invested in me raises several objections, not to mention the lack of social amenities, running water, electricity, well.... a lot!

That having been said, the land out here is beautiful and rich and could make a great side business as a farm this option appeals to me. Carried away on this possibility I trip on a half protruding tree root and quickly correct myself before taking a tumble on the dusty path. In my effort to right myself my decent pair of shoes are scuffed up on some stones on the uneven path.

I sigh regretfully, how can I think of a business when I can't even replace a pair of shoes?

Dusting off my shoes, I turn my mind to the last possibility, an outright sale of the land and property, yes this seems like the best option given my circumstances and I already know who to speak to once I return to town. With my mind made up I locate the humble grave with the assistance of a man Mr. Tembo had asked me to seek out.

Mr. Ulambo's small farm runs adjacent to the local graveyard and when I arrive to seek his assistance, he is hard at work tilling the land like a man possessed. His speed and accuracy were impressive and so focused on his work is he that I can hardly distract him long enough to introduce myself.

He walks with me to the grave pointing it out to me and although I notice that it was the only freshly made grave there, I know that I would never have discovered it on my own.

Mr. Ulambo also hands me an old wooden snuff box no bigger than the size of my palm, engraved with a vaguely familiar pattern. He briefly tells me that this item was amongst the effects found on my uncle's person on his passing. Being the undertaker, Mr. Ulambo had held onto it for me, the next of kin. Having discharged his duty he promptly departed, no doubt returning to his farming chores.

I put the battered snuff box into my overnight bag, say a prayer and thank my uncle posthumously for bequeathing me with his humble legacy. I tell him I will heed his words to be wise and live a worthy life, that said, I make my way back to the cottage for one last look around before

departure.

Chapter Six

A short way before the cottage, I see an elderly woman seated under the shade of a tree thick with leaves. She looks tired and haggard, her white hair is thick and knotted under the partially pushed back head scarf, it's clear that no comb has been introduced to it in a long while. Her clothes are tattered and dirty and a strong stench is emanating from her general

direction making me want to gag. I avoid looking at her face as I make the proper noises and gestures of greeting and respect, after all I can't just walk by like she isn't there.

"Do you have anything that I can eat in your bag young man?" She asks weakly, stopping me in my tracks where I have already bypassed her.

I reach into my bag withdraw the bundle wrapped in newspaper while walking back to her, I squat close by and place the bundle next to her. Just as I am about to rise to my feet, she grabs a hold of my wrist with a surprisingly strong grip. Startled I look down into her old wrinkled face and faded blue-ish eyes.

"What else do you have in your bag?" She asks never once looking at the parcel of food I have placed next to her.

There is a desperation in the depths of her eyes and I become increasingly uncomfortable being this close to her.

The papery dry claw of her hand clamps on my wrist like a manacle,

"Nothing but my clothes." I reply alarmed as a dizzy sensation invades me with every breath of the strong stench that surrounds her. She smiles knowingly at me and her mangled brown teeth greet me against my will,

"I know that you have my mask in there, he promised me that I could have it back once he died. Give it to me." She demands.

Fear grips me and I tug my arm out of her grip. Who is this old woman, where is she from and why does she seem to know so much about me?

"I don't know what you are talking about." I reply straightening up and backing away as an unknown urge to reveal nothing about the masks seals my mouth shut.

“You are not telling the truth boy.” The deep male voice croaks from behind me striking fear within me at both the hate and anger emanating from it.

I turn slowly to see a dark man standing right behind me, he is short and stout, covered in wet grimy rags and his skin in slimy scales.

“Who, who are you?” I strummer.

“We are the prisoners of the masks you carry.” A third shrieking voice answers me from the branches of the tree above my head.

I cannot make out any features on the hunched figure except for the sharp beady eyes that are piercing at me from the dark cloak under which it is huddled.

At this moment the fear within me is palpable as thoughts of my recent trip to the graveyard make me wonder how I have attracted these beings to follow me from their final resting places.

There is no doubt in my mind that they belong to the dust but have somehow reanimated and are now stalking me, the living. Also, not in doubt is the fact that they knew my uncle and knew of his collection of odd masks.

Giving them the masks seems like a good way for me to escape their presence but instinctively I know that this is not the right thing to do. The message in my uncle's letter to me echoes in my mind, I must be wise, I must choose wisely.

This becomes a chant as I look from one to the other of these odd individuals, although they outnumber me, and clearly terrify me, beyond that they make no move to attack me and take what they want.

A thought occurs to me. “Why did my uncle hold you prisoners, and what do the masks have to do with it?”

“Don't waste our time boy, just hand over the masks and we will let you live.” I look up at the speaker in the tree and swallow hard. Well that was definitely not the response I was expecting.

“I just want to help you.” I lie trying to buy some time.

“Don't try and help anybody boy, just help yourself.” Croaks the stout man behind me as he grabs onto the strap of my overnight bag. “If you

won't give the masks to us of your own will

then I will just have to take them by force."

"Wait!" shrieked the old lady on the ground, "You don't know if he has the chest and the key yet, this is not what we agreed." I struggle to retain possession of my bag while they talk back and forth amongst themselves.

The stout slimy man is very strong and as he pulls on my bag the force bends me over and the contents of my breast pocket spill out over the ground at the same time as the wrenching sound of my bag tearing fills the air.

Out spill the masks onto the ground, the battered snuff box and all my meager possessions are strewn about in a circle of litter amongst the dust and grass.

I fall to my knees wrenched down by the momentum of the stout man pulling on my overnight bag. Flinging my limbs out to break my fall my hands each land squarely over an object.

The shiny key under one hand the snuff box in the other.

In this prone position I expect to be pounced upon by this trio of unlikely robbers, but surprisingly when I look up at them, they are all in various states of extreme fear.

They look at me with terror and I am at a loss as to what terrifies them.

Positioned as I am on my hands and knees in the dirt, I cannot present any threat to them whatsoever, but they are unmistakably afraid, so much so that they are not even reaching out for the masks that are within their reach.

I realize that I have the upper hand here, although I don't know how or why.

Picking up the shiny key I unconsciously rub it clean on my trouser leg I shift into a squatting position my other hand curling around the snuff box since it is the nearest object that I can use as a weapon.

For some reason this makes the trio shrink back even further in terror and it dawns on me why they are afraid, they now know that I already possess the chest and the key.

I also now know that I possess something that they fear but I have no

idea why these seemingly innocent items are so fearsome.

Rising to my feet I weakly command the trio to stand together, trying my best to disguise the shaking in my voice.

There is a shuffling in the grass as the stout man goes to stand next to the woman and a flutter of branches as the beady eyed creature jumps down next to them.

The bookkeeper in me knows that my calculations are correct, the two items in my hands are the ones striking fear into their hearts but try as I might, I cannot figure out just how these two things can harm them.

Then it hits me!

The masks are equally important.

I must gather them up and then my leverage over them will be complete.

With a swift gesture I swoop down, transferring the key into the same hand as the snuff box and with a single swipe of my free hand I gather the masks all at once and straighten, feeling almost as amazing as their stares seem to say they find me.

“No, no, no, no, no!” They scream all at once. “Don't banish us, we made a mistake, let us leave and you will never see us again!”

I go along with this narrative afraid to expose my ignorance and a possible weakness for them to exploit.

“I don't trust you; how do I know you won't go back on your word?”

“We won't, we can't, the frog was stupid and careless to attack you, but the bird and I can be trusted. If you want please banish the frog alone, he is the one who offended you, young master.”

I take note of how the old lady addresses me and the others, frog...., bird...., master!?

Things are getting stranger and stranger. What was she, I wondered.

The stout man throws himself on the ground pleading not to be punished, his slimy skin getting matted with dust and debris, I see why he is called frog.

In all the excitement my palms have gotten sweaty and the key, which

was hastily switched into the hand gripping the snuff box begins to slip. Afraid to let it drop and possibly lose the advantage, I slam the key and the snuff box against my chest so that I can grip them more firmly.

The key is closest to my body, and the snuff box lands on top of it a quiet clicking sound. I curiously look down at my chest and watch in awe as the shiny key slots perfectly into an engraving on the surface of the snuff box.

A luminescent white light shines from between the covers of the snuff box as the key and the box merge into one.

Startled I let go of the snuff box and as it hits the ground it bounces open emitting a bright light that foreshadows the noon day.

The frog and his friends scream, and beg me not to banish them, their eyes are focused on the masks in my hand and the light beaming out of the snuff box on the ground.

“Please let us stay.” They beg. “We won't harm anyone anymore, we promise.”

Before I can make up my mind on what to do something hard hits me on the back of the head, on the same spot as the sack of masks had assaulted me, and as I jerk in pain, the masks tumble down into the light and are banished from my sight as the white light momentarily grows bigger before vanishing completely and bringing down the lip of the snuff box in its wake.

When the light blindness clears from my eyes, I am all alone under the tree, with a key and a snuff box at my feet and a lump swelling under my fingers on my head.

In a distance I hear a cow moo, a boy sings an off-pitch song in vernacular and a cricket chirping wildly as if it's telling the other critters some hot gossip.

Putting the snuff box and shiny key in my pocket, I pick up my belongings and stuff them into the torn overnight bag, not bothering with the zip.

I look down at my no longer decent pair of shoes and sign, I just know they won't survive the long walk to the nearest station at the bottom of the hill and frankly after the experiences of the last few moments, I no longer care.