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Intasimi Warriors Book One

MWIKALI AND THE FORBIDDEN MASK

SHIKO NGURU

The ~~Freak~~ Chameleon

You can hide a lot behind a smile. And as Mwikali stood in front of the mirror that morning, she practised all the different types of smiles she could think of.

The first smile made her look overly excited and far too eager, like a puppy panting for a frisbee. The next was impossibly sweet and wide-eyed in a way that made her look half-crazy. And the last smile was so tight and forced that she might as well have been holding a neon sign above her head letting everyone know she was hiding something.

None of the smiles were believable. So, Mwikali dropped the corners of her mouth and took in a deep breath. *Plan B: no smile.* Instead, she would try not to be seen at all. Her new plan was to be the unsmiling, plain, ordinary girl who nobody noticed. She was going to fade into the background. Be invisible. Disappear. It was the only way to make sure nobody discovered the truth about her.

"Mwikali!" Her mum's voice rang out from outside her bedroom. "Hurry up or you'll miss the minibus!"

Mwikali scooped up the backpack resting at her feet. "I'll be right there!" she yelled, before turning back to the mirror.

Scanning her reflection, she smoothed down her school uniform for the umpteenth time. The girl in the mirror looked as normal as could be. She had the height of a normal twelve year old. Wore a normal uniform — white blouse, red tie, blue skirt with a matching jumper. And even though her almond-shaped eyes were larger than most, they were perfectly suited to her deep brown face.

Mwikali grabbed a hair band and tied her thick, jet-black Afro into a ponytail, making sure she rounded out and tucked in all the loose ends, forming a tight bun on top of her head. Her scalp ached in protest but Mwikali pushed through the discomfort. As much as she loved her loose, fluffy hair, it had to remain hidden away. The plan was to be as unnoticeable as possible.

She clenched and unclenched her hands, worry clouding her face. Everything about the girl in the mirror looked normal, but deep down she knew that she wasn't normal at all.

I'm a freak. A dangerous, very not-normal freak.

The memory of names others had called her brought a familiar tightness to Mwikali's chest. She crumpled

handfuls of skirt in her clammy hands as her heart began to thump.

Stop this! she commanded herself. She couldn't lose it. Not today. She wanted today to go well. *Needed* it to go well. Today was her first day at a new school. It was a chance to start afresh. A chance to leave behind all the horrible things that had happened at her last school. For that to happen, she needed to act normal. Boring even. She had to hide who she really was.

"Haraka, haraka, Mwikali!" Mum called out, more urgently than before. "Hurry up or you'll be late!"

With one last glance at the mirror, Mwikali exhaled sharply and then swung her bedroom door open. "Coming!"

The sweet scent of freshly fried dough wafted out of the kitchen and into her nose as soon as she stepped outside.

"Mandazis!" she cheered, bounding down the stairs of the three-bedroom townhouse she lived in with her mum and auntie.

Mandazis were Mwikali's favourite pastries in the whole world. They were an extra special treat with a mouth-watering smell, powerful enough to push out her worries and put a real smile on her face. She loved mandazis even more than she loved doughnuts. And *that*

was no small deal.

Mum claimed that mandazis and doughnuts were more or less the same thing, but Mwikali — a pastry fanatic — knew better. Mandazis were shaped like triangles, not circles. They didn't have gaping holes in the middle and they always had a little bit of spice added to their sweetness. They were both delicious, but totally different. At least to Mwikali.

First days of school didn't usually count as mandazi-type days, but then again, this wasn't an ordinary first day of school. Today was her first day at a new school, in their new *permanent* home town. For the first time ever, Mwikali would be joining a school and staying there.

Thanks to Mum's job at an airline company, they had never lived anywhere for longer than a couple of years. Mum had scored a big promotion a few months earlier and had been offered the opportunity to move back to the city where she had been raised, the city where Mwikali had been born — Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. The airline had moved them into their new home and even secured Mwikali a spot at Savanna Academy, one of the most prestigious schools in East Africa.

Now, after a life spent bouncing around from country to country — the United Kingdom, United States, United Arab Emirates, China — she was finally going to

be able to settle in one place for long enough to get used to it.

"Morning!" Auntie said brightly, when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Morning, Auntie!" Mwikali replied, her wide grin taking up most of the space on her face. "Mum's making mandazis!"

Auntie laughed and continued sweeping the carpet. "I knew that smell would bring you downstairs fasta, fasta."

Mwikali giggled as she skipped across the living room and through to the kitchen. Although Auntie had only been living with them for two months, she already knew Mwikali better than most.

Auntie wasn't her *real* auntie. That is, she wasn't related to Mwikali by blood. Auntie was what everyone called nannies in Kenya. And even though it had taken Mwikali some time to get used to the idea of having a full-time nanny, she had come to love having Auntie around. Unlike the babysitters she'd had in the past, Auntie treated her more like a friend than just some kid she'd been hired to look after.

"Morning, Mwikali!" Mum trilled.

The air inside the kitchen was hot, steamy and inviting. Mwikali licked her lips as she eyed the big bowl of mandazis already sitting on the counter. "Mum, I'm

going to eat like ten of those," she warned.

Mum chuckled as she took the last batch out of the fryer. Kenyan pop music was playing from a Bluetooth speaker in the corner and Mum was wiggling her hips to the beats like she always did. She was listening to her favourite music group — Sauti Sol. She loved them almost as much as Mwikali loved mandazis.

It had been a long time since Mwikali had seen her mother looking so happy. Mum had always talked about having a "forever home" in her birth country someday. And now that she had completed her management training and they were finally there, she couldn't wait to introduce Mwikali to every single aspect of Kenyan life — loud Sauti Sol music included. Being home and knowing that Mwikali would grow up around Kenyan family and traditions made her happier than ever.

Since the move, Mwikali had already met a bunch of cousins she didn't even know existed. They had all been really friendly and had tried to make Mwikali feel like she belonged. But Mwikali had never really felt like she belonged anywhere. For as long as she could remember, she had always been different. She had always been the new kid. The outsider. And at her last school, she had even acquired a new title — the freak.

Things would be different here, though. She was

going to make sure of it. Her plan was already in place: avoid attention, blend into the background, disappear. Just like a chameleon.

"*Ayyyyeeeee*," Mum hollered, waving her hands around in the air. She was really going at it with the dancing, even doing that cringey dance move adults love to do where they pucker their lips and twirl their bum all the way down to the floor.

"Oh my gosh, Mum, *stopppp*," Mwikali moaned, slapping her hand over her eyes. She didn't need to see that. Nobody did.

Mum threw her head back and laughed before standing back up and serving her a plate of piping hot mandazis. "Happy first day of school!" she sang. "Sorry I have to leave for this work trip. I can't believe I'll miss your first few days!"

"Ohhh, you're feeling guilty about abandoning me on my first week of school. *That's* why you're making mandazis!" Mwikali said, with a cheeky smile.

"No, that isn't true, although I *am* sorry about that," Mum said, poking her daughter's nose. "It's because today marks a new beginning for you. You'll be a lot happier here. I just know it!"

A new beginning for you? You'll be a lot happier here? Mwikali's stomach did a flip. She knew exactly what her

mum meant and immediately realised what all this was about. The mandazis, the sing-songy voice, the fact that Mum was being so *extra* — all of it. It wasn't just about the first day of school or settling down in Kenya or the fact that she was leaving for a three-day trip. *This*? This was about what happened to her last year.

Mwikali felt her hands start to get sweaty again. The last thing she wanted was to get into this conversation with her mum. But it was too late.

"Mwikali, I know that last year was hard for you," Mum began, her eyes creased with concern. "Amanda was your best friend and I know that when she had her medical emergency, things got really tough for you at school. Although, I'm still not sure I know why..."

Mum's voice trailed off as she studied Mwikali's face, searching for answers like she always did. Answers that never came.

How could Mwikali tell her mum that she was the reason Amanda had had a medical emergency in the first place? That, without knowing it, she had almost killed her best friend? How could she explain to her that there was something freakish and evil inside her — something she didn't fully understand — that hurt people?

She couldn't. The best thing she could do was bury that part of her and try not to talk or even think about it

again. Maybe then it would disappear.

Mwikali stuffed her face full of mandazis to avoid having to give her mum the answers she was looking for. Then, holding a napkin over her mouth, she started to back out of the kitchen. "I'm really late. Don't wanna miss the bus," she said, in a muffled voice.

"Ai! But you've hardly eaten," Mum complained. "And you haven't even had a cup of tea!"

Mwikali was already outside the kitchen door. "See you when you get back from your trip! Love you!"

Without waiting for a response, Mwikali whirled around on her heels and sprinted to the door. She managed to squeeze in a "Bye, Auntie!" before slamming it shut behind her.

Her escape didn't feel complete until she had jogged down the driveway and exited their compound entirely. Only then, while leaning against the cool metal gate on the outside of their property, did she breathe out a sigh of relief.

She walked to the curb, thinking that Mum was definitely right about one thing. Today marked a new beginning for her. Amanda, everything that happened at her old school...all of that was in the past. And she was going to do everything she could to keep it there.

A steady queue of school minibuses soon began to

roll past her. They all looked the same: mustard yellow on the outside with twelve seats on the inside. The only difference between them was the school logos painted on their sides. Mwikali shifted impatiently from foot to foot as she kept an eye out for the Savanna Academy bus.

And she wasn't alone. Other kids from the twenty or so houses that made up their neighbourhood estate were waiting outside for their buses, too. Although she recognised most of them, they had no idea who she was. She had only ever seen them from her bedroom window where she would watch them as they played in the street. She had yet to work up the courage to introduce herself.

Though she looked like a Kenyan and had a Kenyan name, Mwikali was painfully aware that she didn't talk or act like one. She didn't talk or act like she was from anywhere in particular, really. Even her accent was a mishmash of all the different countries she had lived in.

Mum insisted that she would have an easy time making friends at Savanna Academy because of its "richly diverse population of international students". She probably just hoped that Mwikali's not-quite-Kenyan-ness wouldn't stand out as much among a bunch of actual not-Kenyans.

A slight drizzle started to fall, making Mwikali wonder if she had made a mistake by leaving the house

so early. Just as she turned around to go back inside, she heard the sound of slippers clapping towards her.

"Mwikali, wait! I have something for you!" Mum wheezed as she ran down the driveway and threw open the front gate.

Her hand was stretched out towards Mwikali, holding something that looked vaguely familiar. By the time Mwikali had made sense of what it was, her mum had already thrust it into her hands.

It was a weapon. *The* weapon.

The one Mwikali had nearly killed her best friend with.