

MASKING-COLD OPEN

INT. MALIK'S - CLOSE-UP

Blurry. Out of focus. The faint sound of someone breathing heavily.

MALIK (V.O.)

You ever been so sad you started
fakin' happy just to not scare
people.

Focus sharpens on a ring light. A phone sits in it. We're seeing what he sees.

INT. MALIK'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

MALIK STOKES (34), wearing a beat-up hoodie and gray sweatpants, sits in front of his phone like a man preaching to ghosts. His face is blank, but her forces is voice to sound motivational.

MALIK

Peace, peace family. Just a
reminder, it cost zero dollars to
protect your peace today.

He flashes a performative smile. His fingers twitch. His mask is slightly crooked, blinking red. Something's wrong.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Remember, your mind is a garden.
Don't let nobody piss in your soil.

A beat. His eyes twitch. He tries to fight it, but-

MALIK (CONT'D)

Man, what the fuck am I even
sayin'?

He STANDS UP mid-livestream and starts pacing.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Y'all ever just wanna scream? Not
cry. Not breathe. Just-scream?

His voice rises. The mask starts beeping faster. A glitchy robotic voice from the mask AI kicks in.

THE ALGORITHM (V.O.)
Elevated emotion detected. Please
re-center. Repeat affirmation: "I
am calm. I am focused. I am safe

MALIK
I am NOT safe! I am fuckin' tired!

He rips the mask halfway off. Blood trickles from his nose.
He doesn't care. He looks into the camera like it owes him
money.

MALIK (CONT'D)
I told y'all to heal. I told y'all
to breathe. I ain't done none of
that shit. I've been *maskin'* just
like everybody else.

His phone keeps streaming. He sits back down, eyes wild,
noses bleeding, laughing through the pain.

MALIK (CONT'D)
I ain't healed, bruh. I'm just
unemployed and lonely with WiFi.

He lets out a dry, broken laugh. Camera zooms in. He leans in
close.

MALIK (CONT'D)
If you feelin' what I'm feelin'
right now...you not crazy. You
human.

Glitch. Static. The stream cuts. Black screen one line
appears:

TEXT ON SCREEN: RECONNECTING TO EMOTIONAL NETWORK...

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF COLD OPEN.