

Chapter 22

Mario stepped off the Myrtle Beach boardwalk and into the small storefront. He had walked past it nearly every day, he didn't exactly know what it was and never once had he imagined walking inside.

Yet here he was.

Nothing remotely close to his plans.

Or dreams.

Or expectations.

Or whatever the hell he thought his future was supposed to be.

The anger came back.

The stupid mask made it hard to breathe.

He wore it anyway.

Dumb ass mandate. Lots of good it had done him.

A bell jingled overhead.

The kid behind the counter couldn't have been more than twenty-one.

Young enough to think life lasted forever.

"Welcome to Mission Master."

Mario looked around.

"So...this is the place?"

"It is a place, yes. Not sure if it's the place." The kid smiled behind his mask. "Do you have an appointment?"

Mario pulled his mask down just long enough to answer.

"Saltine."

A cough interrupted him.

"Mario."

The kid tapped at a tablet.

"Yes, here it is."

Another pause.

"Final Wishes package."

Apparently.

The phrase rattled around inside Mario's head.

Final wishes. The words still didn't feel like they belonged to him. His final wish was that someone else contract a deadly virus and leave his body the hell alone.

He pulled the mask back into place and coughed again.

"So what exactly do I do?"

The kid came around the counter.

"Mission Master gives people an opportunity to leave one final adventure for the people they love."

Mario frowned.

"...Seriously?"

"Absolutely."

"My sister told me about this. I figured she was screwing with me."

The kid laughed.

"We hear that a lot."

He gestured toward a display wall.

Mounted beneath fake stone arches hung several framed posters.

PRINCE OF EGYPT

VALHALLA THRONE ROOM

MT. OLYMPUS

KING ARTHUR

Mario studied them.

"They all sound pretty awesome."

"They're our most popular packages."

Mario pointed.

"King Arthur."

The employee smiled.

"Excellent choice."

Mario narrowed his eyes.

"Does it include swords?"

The kid blinked.

"...I think so. I know there's Stonehenge. Jousting. The English countryside."

Mario sighed dramatically.

"Wonderful. I'm dying and they get to go on a grand adventure without me."

The employee shifted awkwardly.

"...In your honor. Its a trip they'll remember forever, which kind of makes you immortal."

Mario looked at him.

That...

actually landed.

Immortal.

He liked that word.

He reached for his wallet.

"Alright."

"King Arthur it is."

He tapped his credit card against the reader.

The terminal chirped.

"Right this way."

The recording room turned out to be disappointingly small.

One chair.

One ring light.

One iPad.

That was it.

Mario looked around.

"...This is the whole operation?"

The kid shrugged.

"The adventure isn't in here."

"I gathered."

Mario sat down.

"I'll need you to remove your mask."

Mario did and immediately coughing into his elbow.

"You okay?"

"I'm fantastic." Another cough. "...Mostly."

"You want some water?"

Mario reached into his jacket.

"No thanks." He pulled out a half empty bottle of Jack Daniel's. "This'll do."

The employee wisely decided not to argue.

"The screen will count you down. It'll give you prompts. You can follow them if you'd like."

Mario nodded.

The kid stepped outside.

The ring light came alive.

Three.

Two.

One.

The iPad displayed:

Please introduce yourself...

Mario ignored it completely.

He looked straight into the camera.

"Hey, fuckers."

He took a long drink.

"If you're watching this...well that means I'm dead. Which obviously sucks."

"But...it also means these people didn't steal my credit card, So...that's a bonus."

Another drink.

"Look. I know things didn't exactly turn out the way any of us thought they would. We said stuff we didn't mean, we didn't say stuff that we did mean, and in the end, things sure as shit didn't turn out the way we planned."

He scratched his beard.

"I know that I can't completely make up the lost time and everything. But I want to try and make it up some how. You know that I spent a completely unreasonable amount of my life playing video games. Final Fantasy. Grand Theft Auto. Gran Turismo. If there was a video game adventure to be had, I probably wasted a weekend on it."

He grinned.

"So...consider this my last quest. For you." Mario paused. " You know, you guys spent your whole adult lives sacrificing for Vinnie. I figure it's my turn to ask for something."

"Anyway, yeah, you're fucking welcome. I honestly don't remember where I sent you. I think England.

"If it's somewhere else..." Mario paused, "then adapt."

He took another drink.

His expression softened.

For just a moment.

"Someone once said, 'It's not the things we do in life that bring us joy...it's the joy of life that brings us to do what we do.'"

He looked away for a second.

Then back into the camera.

"I've had over fifteen years to think about that. I still don't know what it means. Maybe is profound, maybe its total shit."

A grin spread across his face.

"But no matter what it is, go find some joy."

"And if there's a sword....pull it."

He laughed at his own joke.

"Oh...one last thing. Give William my love."

He reached toward the screen.

Stopped.

Looked back one last time.

"I love you, assholes."

Click.

The recording ended.

The employee stepped back into the room.

"So...How was that?" asked Mario, screwing the cap back onto the whiskey bottle.

The kid stared at the frozen frame on the iPad for several long seconds.

Then looked back at Mario.

"Honestly? That was probably the best one we've ever recorded."

Mario smirked.

For the first time in a very long while...he believed someone had told him the truth.

Neither man spoke for several long moments.

The laptop screen had gone black.

The room remained silent.

Finally...

Antonio exhaled.

"...That son of a bitch."

Rocky nodded slowly.

"...Yeah."

Neither of them smiled.

Neither of them cried.

They simply sat there.

The silence was interrupted by two nearly simultaneous notification chimes.

Antonio reached for his phone.

Rocky reached for his.

Both screens displayed the same message.

MISSION MASTER

Congratulations!

Your quest has officially begun.

The image is a vertical banner for the Mission Master website. At the top, there is a small logo and the text "MISSION MASTER". Below this, a dark rectangular box contains a gold compass rose with a large "M" in the center, the text "MISSION MASTER", and the tagline "THE LAST ADVENTURE YOU'LL EVER GIVE." in smaller letters. Underneath this box, the text "LEGACY EXPERIENCE DIVISION" is visible. The main part of the banner features a large, white serif font title "The Last Adventure You'll Ever Give" overlaid on a background image of a winding road through a mountainous landscape. Below the title, a paragraph of text reads: "Mission Master creates unforgettable posthumous legacy experiences for the people you love. Every itinerary is professionally curated using your memories, personality, and wishes." At the bottom of the banner, there are two buttons: a green one labeled "BEGIN QUEST" and a white one with a black border labeled "LEARN MORE".

MISSION MASTER

MISSION MASTER
THE LAST ADVENTURE YOU'LL EVER GIVE.

LEGACY EXPERIENCE DIVISION

The Last Adventure You'll Ever Give

Mission Master creates unforgettable posthumous legacy experiences for the people you love. Every itinerary is professionally curated using your memories, personality, and wishes.

BEGIN QUEST LEARN MORE

