

Chapter 34

They chose an older couple standing beneath the museum's domed entrance hall.

Not because the couple appeared especially wise.

Not because they looked romantic.

Because they looked lost.

The man held an unfolded museum map with both hands, turning it clockwise and then counterclockwise as though the galleries might rearrange themselves if approached from the correct angle.

The woman beside him watched patiently.

She wore a pale blue scarf and carried a small leather handbag against her hip. Every few seconds, she glanced from the map to her husband, visibly trying not to laugh.

Antonio leaned toward Rocky.

"They're perfect."

"Why?"

"He has no idea where he is."

"That makes him perfect?"

"It makes him relatable."

Claire studied the couple.

"We only get one question."

William looked toward the device inside her folio.

The instruction remained unchanged.

You may ask one question of one stranger. Choose the question carefully.

One stranger.

Not the couple.

They would have to choose which one to ask.

Claire closed the folio.

“The woman.”

Antonio looked surprised.

“Why not him?”

“Because he’s still losing an argument with the map.”

The man folded it along the wrong crease.

His wife finally reached over and gently turned it around.

Rocky nodded.

“The woman.”

They approached together.

The couple noticed them almost immediately. Four adults moving in a cluster with matching leather folios apparently attracted attention.

Claire stepped slightly ahead.

“Excuse me.”

The woman smiled.

“Yes?”

“We’re participating in an experience.”

Antonio whispered, “That sounds like a cult.”

Rocky elbowed him.

Claire continued without looking back.

“We’re allowed to ask one stranger one question.”

The woman’s smile widened.

“That sounds ominous.”

“It probably isn’t,” William said.

Antonio looked at him.

“Strong endorsement.”

The man lowered the map.

“What kind of experience?”

“We don’t entirely know yet,” Claire admitted.

“That does sound like a cult,” the woman said.

Antonio pointed toward her.

“Thank you.”

Rocky caught his sleeve before he could continue.

Claire smiled apologetically.

“We only have one question.”

The woman looked from Claire to the three men behind her.

“Alright.”

Claire took a breath.

“What do you hope the person beside you remembers about today?”

The woman’s expression changed.

Not dramatically.

The amusement remained, but something quieter moved beneath it.

She looked toward her husband.

He was no longer studying the map.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The museum continued moving around them. Shoes crossed stone. Children called from the far side of the hall. A tour guide raised a small red flag above a gathering crowd.

The woman reached for her husband's hand.

He took hers without looking down.

Finally, she answered.

"I hope he remembers that we still got lost."

Her husband laughed.

"We're not lost."

She looked at the upside-down map in his other hand.

"Of course not."

He smiled.

She turned back to Claire.

"We came here forty-two years ago."

"For our honeymoon," the man added.

The woman nodded.

"We spent most of that day lost too."

"There were fewer signs."

"There were plenty of signs."

"They were less intuitive."

"You refused to ask anyone."

"I'm asking someone now."

"You're talking to four strangers who approached us with matching notebooks."

Antonio nodded approvingly.

"He makes a compelling point."

The woman laughed.

Then looked at her husband again.

“We didn’t see half the things we intended to see that day.”

“We saw enough.”

“Yes.”

Her thumb brushed across the back of his hand.

“We did.”

She looked back toward Claire.

“I suppose that’s what I hope he remembers.”

“What?” Claire asked gently.

The woman smiled.

“That getting lost together still counts as arriving somewhere.”

No one spoke.

William felt the sentence settle inside him before he understood why.

Rocky looked toward the joined brass tokens in his hand.

Antonio, for once, appeared to have nothing to add.

Claire smiled.

“Thank you.”

The woman nodded toward their notebooks.

“Do you have to write that down?”

“I think we do.”

“Then make me sound more articulate.”

Her husband laughed.

“She’s been editing me for forty-two years.”

Claire glanced at William.

“Somebody has to.”

The couple walked away together.

The man unfolded the map again.

This time, he allowed his wife to hold one side.

Antonio watched them disappear into the sculpture galleries.

“That was almost suspiciously perfect.”

Rocky looked at him.

“You think Mission Master planted an elderly couple?”

“I don’t know what Mission Master is capable of.”

“It gave you a notebook.”

“Exactly. Psychological warfare.”

Claire opened hers.

“We should record it.”

They each wrote the woman’s answer.

William found himself slowing over the words.

Getting lost together still counts as arriving somewhere.

He read the sentence twice before closing the notebook.

The device inside Claire’s folio vibrated.

Antonio leaned closer immediately.

“What did we unlock?”

Claire lifted the screen.

The Mission Master compass appeared.

Then the words:

OBJECT ACQUIRED.

Rocky frowned.

“The answer was the object?”

The message disappeared.

A second line appeared.

A MEMORY BECOMES AN OBJECT WHEN SOMEONE CHOOSES TO CARRY IT.

William looked toward his notebook.

The woman’s words remained on the page.

Not hers anymore.

Not entirely.

Now four people carried them.

The screen changed again.

MISSION ONE COMPLETE.

Antonio raised both hands.

“Yes.”

Several museum visitors turned toward him.

He lowered his voice.

“Yes.”

A final message appeared.

YOUR NEXT MISSION WILL BEGIN TOMORROW.

Antonio’s celebration ended.

“Tomorrow?”

Claire continued reading.

Tonight, eat together.

Do not review your mission.

Do not compare observations.

Do not attempt to predict what comes next.

You have spent enough time searching for meaning. Allow the day to have one before you explain it.

Beneath the instruction was the name of a pub and a walking route.

Rocky smiled.

“I like Mission Master.”

Antonio looked offended.

“It just told us not to think.”

“No. It told you not to talk.”

“That feels targeted.”

“It probably is.”

Claire closed the folio.

“We still have the museum.”

Antonio looked around.

“We completed the mission.”

“We’re already inside.”

“But there are no additional objectives.”

William smiled.

“We could look at things.”

Antonio appeared genuinely uncertain.

“For no reason?”

“That’s usually how museums work.”

Rocky handed him his token.

“Try it.”

They spent the next two hours wandering.

Not searching.

That distinction changed the museum.

Without the mission directing their attention, they began following one another’s interests.

Claire led them through manuscripts and decorated books, stopping before pages whose colors had survived longer than the hands that painted them.

William lingered near furniture, studying the joints and carved details.

Rocky stood quietly before a collection of old musical instruments.

Antonio found a gallery of ceremonial armor and immediately regained his sense of purpose.

“This is what formalwear should be.”

“You’d complain about the weight,” Rocky said.

“I would adapt.”

“You complained about carrying the folio.”

“The folio doesn’t protect me from arrows.”

“Neither will armor in London.”

“You don’t know what tonight holds.”

Claire looked toward the brass token in his hand.

“Apparently dinner.”

Antonio nodded.

“Exactly.”

They remained together without needing to remember the rule.

Rocky no longer drifted ahead.

Claire no longer stopped without warning.

Antonio still wandered, but only far enough to peer around a display before returning.

William noticed the adjustments occurring without discussion.

Four people learning one another's pace.

They left as the museum began to thin toward evening.

Outside, the sky had cleared completely.

Patches of blue appeared between the buildings, deepening toward dusk. The pavement remained dark from the earlier rain.

The pub was several streets away.

It occupied the corner of an older brick building, its windows glowing amber against the cooling evening.

A painted wooden sign hung over the door.

THE COMPASS & CROWN

Antonio stopped beneath it.

"Subtle."

Rocky looked up.

"You think Mission Master named the pub?"

"At this point, I'm not ruling anything out."

"It has probably been here for a hundred years."

"That's plenty of time to prepare."

Claire opened the door.

Warmth, conversation, and the smell of roasted meat met them immediately.

The pub was crowded but not loud.

Dark wood.

Brass fixtures.

Framed photographs.

A fire burning unnecessarily but pleasantly in a stone hearth.

A hostess led them toward a round table near the back.

Four place settings waited.

No envelope.

No folio.

No device.

Just menus.

Antonio looked beneath his chair.

Rocky watched him.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking for instructions.”

“The instruction was to eat.”

“That seems too easy.”

“You say that now.”

Antonio opened the menu.

His expression changed.

“There are seven different pies.”

Rocky removed his coat.

“Mission accepted.”

They ordered slowly.

Antonio asked enough questions about the steak-and-ale pie that the server eventually recommended he simply try it.

Rocky chose fish and chips.

Claire ordered a vegetable pie and a glass of wine.

William selected the same beer Malik had recommended on the drive from the airfield, mostly because he recognized the name.

When the server left, the four sat around the table.

For several moments, nobody spoke.

Antonio looked between them.

“Are we allowed to discuss the weather?”

Rocky shrugged.

“I think so.”

“What about the museum?”

“No.”

“The hotel soap?”

“Please don’t.”

Antonio leaned back.

“This is oppressive.”

Claire smiled.

“We can talk about things other than the mission.”

“Such as?”

She looked toward William.

“What did you think of London?”

He considered the question.

“I’ve barely seen it.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

William smiled.

“I like that nobody seems surprised by anything.”

A man near the bar walked past carrying a small dog wearing a yellow raincoat.

Antonio pointed.

“Excellent timing.”

William continued.

“It feels old without feeling finished.”

Claire nodded.

“I know what you mean.”

Rocky looked around the pub.

“It reminds you that other people were here before you.”

“And will be here after,” Claire said.

Antonio studied the framed photographs.

“That’s depressing.”

“No,” William said. “I think it’s comforting.”

“Why?”

William looked toward the fire.

“Because everything doesn’t depend on us.”

The server returned with their drinks.

Antonio raised his glass.

“To lowered expectations.”

Rocky clinked his glass against Antonio’s.

“To surviving the first mission.”

Claire shook her head.

“We were specifically told not to review it.”

“We’re not reviewing,” Antonio said. “We’re celebrating.”

“That is a form of review.”

“It’s a toast.”

William lifted his glass.

“To arriving somewhere.”

Claire met his eyes.

She raised hers.

“To getting lost first.”

The glasses touched at the center of the table.

For a while, they allowed the conversation to become ordinary.

Rocky updated William about the bookstore.

Claire told them about a professor who had once spent an entire lecture arguing that punctuation was a moral choice.

Antonio described a restaurant in Miami that claimed to serve authentic British food but put cheese on shepherd’s pie and called it “London-style.”

“It often has cheese,” Claire said.

Antonio stared at her.

“Whose side are you on?”

“History’s.”

Their meals arrived.

The conversation paused.

For several minutes, the only sounds at the table were cutlery, satisfied murmurs, and Antonio repeatedly declaring that the pie was better than expected while refusing to admit what he had expected.

Eventually, Rocky looked toward the empty chair at the neighboring table.

His expression changed almost imperceptibly.

William noticed.

So did Antonio.

Antonio did not make a joke.

Rocky looked down at his plate.

“You know what’s strange?”

Claire waited.

Rocky turned his glass slowly between his hands.

“This feels like something Mario arranged.”

No one answered immediately.

Rocky continued.

“The boxes.”

“The hotel.”

“The four of us sitting here.”

He looked toward the brass token beside his plate.

“But he didn’t.”

Claire shook her head.

“No.”

“He paid for it,” William said.

Antonio looked around the pub.

“He purchased the experience.”

The phrase from the museum returned to them.

What Mario purchased.

Time.

Rocky looked toward the fire.

“So none of this is his plan.”

“No,” Claire said. “It’s Mission Master’s.”

Antonio took another drink.

“That should make it less personal.”

“But it doesn’t,” William said.

Rocky nodded.

“That’s the strange part.”

Claire rested both hands around her wineglass.

“He didn’t need to know what would happen.”

They looked toward her.

“He only needed to believe something should.”

The table grew quiet.

Claire continued.

“He paid for a system.”

“A process.”

“Something that would keep moving after he couldn’t.”

William thought about the impersonal printing inside the envelope.

No handwriting.

No final message.

Nothing sentimental.

Mario had not written the missions.

He had simply trusted them.

Trusted Mission Master.

Trusted the four of them.

Perhaps trusted that movement itself might carry them somewhere grief could not.

Antonio stared into his glass.

“He would have hated not knowing the details.”

Rocky laughed softly.

“He absolutely would have demanded previews.”

“He’d have called customer service.”

“He’d have bought a strategy guide.”

Claire smiled.

“And they apparently didn’t let him.”

Antonio nodded with sudden respect.

“Mission Master may be more powerful than I thought.”

The laughter that followed was quiet.

Not enough to disturb the tables around them.

Enough to make the empty place beside Rocky feel less empty.

Their folios remained closed.

The observations stayed private.

No new mission appeared.

No riddle interrupted dinner.

The evening belonged only to them.

When they finally stepped outside, London had become night.

The streets shone beneath lamps and passing headlights.

People moved around them toward restaurants, theatres, homes, and destinations the four of them would never know.

Antonio looked at the route on Claire's device.

"The hotel is eighteen minutes away."

Rocky started walking.

"Then eighteen minutes."

They fell into formation naturally.

Not a line this time.

Rocky and Antonio walked ahead by half a step, arguing about whether the pub's pie qualified as superior to pizza.

Claire and William followed close behind.

No one separated.

No one rushed.

Claire tucked her hands into her sleeves again.

William noticed.

She looked toward him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

“That was definitely something.”

He smiled.

“I was paying attention.”

She held his gaze for a moment.

Then looked forward again.

“Good.”

They crossed beneath a streetlamp.

Their shadows briefly stretched together across the pavement before dividing again.

William thought about the observation inside his notebook.

She gives people time to become comfortable without announcing that she is waiting.

He still did not know what she had written about him.

The question followed him through the streets.

He allowed it.

Anticipation had value.

Some answers became smaller when taken too early.

Ahead of them, Antonio stopped at a crossing and looked deliberately in both directions.

Rocky noticed.

Said nothing.

The light changed.

They crossed together.

Back at the hotel, four dark green boxes waited in two separate suites.

Mission Master remained silent.

Tomorrow would bring another instruction.

Another destination.

Perhaps another riddle.

Tonight, however, asked nothing more of them.

They had arrived in London.

They had entered the museum.

They had carried away something no display case could preserve.

And for the first time since Mario's face appeared on the screen, they had spent an evening together without trying to understand what his death meant.

They had simply eaten.

Walked.

Laughed.

Remembered him.

Time together.

The first thing he purchased.

The one thing none of them could keep.

And, perhaps for that reason, the only gift worth carrying.

