

Chapter 38

The train slipped quietly out of London, exchanging rows of brick buildings for green fields stitched together by ancient stone walls. Morning sunlight spilled across the carriage as England drifted lazily past the windows.

Rocky was asleep before they reached the second station.

Antonio balanced an Oxford guidebook across his knees, enthusiastically planning a route through a city he had never visited.

“We’ll start at the university, cut through the market, hit the bookstores, and end wherever Mission Master tells us.”

William looked over.

“You’ve been here before?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know that’s the best route?”

Antonio shrugged.

“I don’t.”

He turned another page.

“But it feels efficient.”

Claire smiled.

“I’ve noticed that’s usually enough for you.”

William unfolded the familiar cream-colored envelope.

The others leaned in.

Inside was a single card.

Mission Master

Every great story begins with a conversation.

Today...

Find the Eagle and Child.

Listen carefully.

Antonio frowned.

“That’s it?”

William turned the card over.

Nothing.

“No puzzle?”

“No riddle?”

“No map?”

William shook his head.

“I don’t think so.”

Rocky opened one eye.

“So...”

“...we’re looking for a pub?”

William smiled.

“I believe we are.”

Rocky closed his eyes again.

“Finally.”

“A mission I understand.”

Oxford felt different from London almost immediately.

Not quieter.

More thoughtful.

Stone colleges stood shoulder to shoulder with centuries-old churches. Ivy climbed walls older than entire countries. Bicycles outnumbered cars. Students hurried across courtyards carrying books beneath their arms while professors wandered at a pace suggesting they had nowhere urgent to be.

The city seemed less interested in impressing visitors than continuing a conversation it had been having for hundreds of years.

Mission Master offered no additional clues.

For once, no one minded.

They wandered.

Claire disappeared briefly into a tiny used bookstore whose shelves leaned ever so slightly beneath the weight of decades.

Rocky watched an elderly groundskeeper carefully trimming roses inside one of the college gardens.

Antonio somehow managed to purchase an Oxford sweatshirt despite having been in the city less than twenty minutes.

“You don’t even go here,” Rocky observed.

“I can still support education.”

William laughed.

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“I believe so.”

By early afternoon they found the Eagle and Child tucked quietly along a narrow street.

It wasn’t particularly grand.

Dark timber.

Low ceilings.

Polished wood worn smooth by generations of elbows.

The sort of place that seemed to have collected conversations instead of decorations.

Near the entrance hung a modest plaque.

William stopped to read it.

Claire joined him.

“Tolkien...”

She smiled.

“And C. S. Lewis.”

William nodded.

“They used to meet here.”

“The Inklings.”

Antonio looked around.

“They were a club?”

William shook his head.

“Not really.”

“They were friends.”

Rocky opened the door.

“Good.”

“Because friends can eat lunch.”

A hostess greeted them warmly.

“Mission Master reservation?”

William blinked.

“...Yes.”

She smiled knowingly.

“Right this way.”

Antonio whispered,

“I swear Mission Master has contacts everywhere.”

They were shown to a small round table in the back corner.

Waiting there was another cream-colored envelope.

William opened it.

Stay awhile.

Order something.

Talk.

The lesson will arrive.

Antonio stared.

“Seriously?”

Claire smiled.

“I rather like this assignment.”

Lunch arrived.

Conversation wandered naturally.

No one seemed interested in solving anything.

William eventually returned to the framed photographs near the wall.

When he came back, he carried a small booklet the pub kept for visitors.

“I think I understand why we’re here.”

Rocky took a bite of his sandwich.

“Enlighten us.”

William opened the booklet.

“The Inklings weren’t famous because they formed a club.”

“They met here almost every week.”

“They read unfinished chapters to one another.”

Antonio nearly choked on his drink.

“Unfinished?”

William nodded.

“Tolkien read parts of *The Lord of the Rings* here.”

“Lewis read early chapters of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.”

“They criticized each other’s work.”

Antonio looked horrified.

“Voluntarily?”

“Yes.”

“They wanted honest opinions.”

Rocky leaned back.

“That sounds terrifying.”

Claire smiled over the rim of her glass.

“It also sounds like trust.”

Silence settled around the table.

Not uncomfortable.

Thoughtful.

Antonio finally spoke.

“I don’t know if I’d let someone read something before I thought it was finished.”

William looked at him.

“Why?”

Antonio shrugged.

“What if they hated it?”

William smiled gently.

“Then it probably wasn’t finished.”

Claire watched William for a moment.

“Or maybe...”

“...it was never about whether they liked it.”

The others looked at her.

“Maybe it was about whether they wanted it to become better.”

The conversation drifted.

Not because Mission Master demanded it.

Because Oxford somehow encouraged it.

Rocky admitted the stories he loved most weren’t about kings or superheroes.

“They’re usually about ordinary people.”

Antonio looked surprised.

“Really?”

Rocky nodded.

“People who just keep showing up.”

Claire smiled.

“I think readers recognize themselves in those people.”

Antonio stared thoughtfully into his glass.

“I’ve always rooted for the underdog.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone else has already decided how the story ends.”

William had been listening more than speaking.

Finally Claire looked at him.

“What about you?”

He considered the question carefully.

“I don’t think the Inklings became great writers because they wrote great books.”

The table fell quiet.

“I think they wrote great books because they had people who loved them enough to tell them when a chapter wasn’t working.”

No one answered immediately.

Outside, bicycles rolled past the windows.

Somewhere deeper inside the pub someone laughed.

Claire looked around the table.

“I think that’s true of more than books.”

As they stood to leave, the waitress approached carrying one final envelope.

“I almost forgot.”

William accepted it.

Inside was another card.

Mission Master

Some stories are written alone.

The best ones are discovered together.

One person writes.

Another questions.

Another encourages.

Another simply listens.

Every role matters.

Mission Complete.

They stepped back onto the streets of Oxford.

For several minutes no one spoke.

The city seemed content to let silence finish the conversation.

Finally Antonio adjusted the Oxford sweatshirt draped over his arm.

“So...”

Rocky looked over.

“So?”

Antonio smiled.

“Do you think Tolkien would’ve liked me?”

Rocky didn’t hesitate.

“He would’ve asked you to stop talking halfway through lunch.”

Antonio looked offended.

“I think he’d appreciate my enthusiasm.”

William laughed.

“I think Lewis would’ve defended you.”

Claire slipped her arm gently through William’s.

“And I think,” she said, looking back toward the old pub, “they would’ve been happy to know that nearly a century later, four friends spent an afternoon talking about stories in their favorite place.”

No one tried to improve the sentence.

They simply continued walking through Oxford together, each carrying away something different.

Mission Master had never asked them to solve a mystery.

Only to discover that the best stories—and perhaps the best friendships—are rarely built by one person alone.