

Chapter 39

The coach rolled to a gentle stop beneath a weathered wooden sign that read:

Camelot Heritage Village Home of the Knights of the Round Table Experience

Rocky stared through the windshield.

“This is fake.”

Antonio leaned across the aisle.

“Of course it’s fake.”

“So why are we here?”

William folded the Mission Master envelope and slipped it back into his pocket.

“Because Mission Master told us to come.”

Claire smiled.

“Which usually means we’re about to learn something we weren’t expecting.”

Antonio pointed triumphantly.

“Or spend thirty pounds on fake medieval souvenirs.”

The village had been built with remarkable commitment.

Half-timbered buildings lined narrow cobblestone paths.

Actors wandered the grounds dressed as knights, merchants, monks, and blacksmiths.

Children chased one another carrying wooden swords while parents photographed everything.

Somewhere nearby, a trumpet announced the beginning of a jousting demonstration.

Rocky folded his arms.

“I like this place.”

“You just called it fake.”

“I can like fake.”

Antonio nodded.

“I respect that.”

William unfolded the Mission Master card.

Today’s task was unusually short.

Mission Master

Camelot reminds us that legends often survive because people continue telling them.

Complete today’s challenge together.

Do not leave until each of you has made an honest attempt.

That was it.

No riddles.

No map.

No clues.

Claire looked around.

“There has to be something else.”

An employee in chainmail waved from the far side of the courtyard.

“If you’re here for Excalibur,” he called cheerfully, “the line starts over there!”

Antonio looked at Rocky.

“...Well.”

Rocky grinned.

“Well.”

The sword stood embedded in an enormous block of artificial stone beneath a timber pavilion.

A sign beside it read:

EXCALIBUR

Only the true heir may draw the sword.

Please limit your attempt to thirty seconds.

Children strained heroically.

Parents laughed.

Teenagers posed dramatically for photographs.

Not a single sword moved.

Rocky cracked his knuckles.

“My turn.”

William hadn’t even finished reading the informational plaque before Rocky wrapped both hands around the hilt.

He planted his boots.

Bent his knees.

And pulled with everything he had.

Nothing.

He adjusted his grip.

Pulled again.

His face reddened.

Nothing.

One final effort.

Still nothing.

He stepped away breathing heavily.

“Huh.”

Antonio smirked.

“You know what your problem is?”

Rocky glared.

“You assumed strength.”

“I assumed sword.”

Antonio stepped confidently into position.

“This...”

He pointed toward the base.

“...is a mechanics problem.”

Claire looked at William.

“Oh no.”

Antonio crouched beside the stone.

He changed hand positions three times.

Braced one foot against the pedestal.

Changed angles.

Pulled sideways.

Twisted.

Stopped.

Squinted.

Adjusted again.

“There.”

Rocky frowned.

“There what?”

“It moved.”

“It didn’t.”

Antonio ignored him.

“You have to create rotational force.”

“There is no rotational force.”

“There absolutely is.”

Antonio tried again, this time narrating the process as though hosting an engineering seminar.

“You see, everyone pulls vertically.”

Rocky folded his arms.

“Because it’s a sword.”

Antonio continued.

“I’m introducing torque.”

Nothing happened.

He tried again.

Still nothing.

Finally he stepped back, brushing imaginary dust from his hands.

“It definitely moved.”

“It definitely didn’t.”

“It absolutely did.”

“It absolutely didn’t.”

William looked at Claire.

“I think we’re witnessing confidence detached entirely from evidence.”

Claire smiled.

“I believe you are.”

Claire stepped forward.

She rested one hand lightly on the hilt.

Closed her eyes for a second.

Then quietly said,

“Hello.”

Antonio blinked.

Rocky looked confused.

William smiled.

Claire continued.

“I imagine quite a few people have tried to pull you today.”

A little girl waiting in line nearby watched curiously.

“I don’t know whether you’re enchanted...”

“...or bolted to a steel frame...”

“...but if there is any chance you’re listening...”

“...I’d be honored.”

She gave the sword one gentle pull.

Nothing.

She smiled anyway.

“Thank you for considering my request.”

Then she stepped aside.

Rocky whispered,

“Did you just...”

“Yes.”

“...talk to the sword?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Claire shrugged.

“It seemed more polite than yelling at it.”

William was last.

He never reached for the sword.

Instead he wandered around the pavilion reading every display.

The evolution of the Arthur legends.

The earliest Welsh traditions.

Medieval romances.

Victorian revival.

Modern archaeology.

He examined the stone.

The hilt.

The craftsmanship.

The weathering.

The hidden bolts beneath the decorative pedestal.

Antonio frowned.

“Aren’t you going to pull it?”

William finally rested one hand on the hilt.

“I don’t think that’s really today’s lesson.”

“You still have to try.”

“I know.”

He gave the sword one quiet, respectful tug.

Predictably...

Nothing.

He smiled.

“I thought so.”

Rocky sighed.

“Well...”

“We’re all failures.”

William laughed.

“I don’t think that’s the conclusion.”

They wandered into the gift shop.

Shelves overflowed with dragons, crowns, shields, mugs, books, and toy armor.

Antonio disappeared for exactly forty-three seconds.

When he returned, he held a gleaming plastic broadsword over his shoulder.

The blade shimmered silver.

The hilt was bright gold.

A tiny sticker near the guard still read:

£9.99

Rocky stared.

“You bought it.”

Antonio nodded proudly.

“I earned it.”

“You absolutely did not.”

“I pulled the sword farther than anyone.”

“It didn’t move.”

Antonio pointed the plastic sword dramatically toward the ceiling.

“It moved.”

William rubbed his forehead.

“No, Antonio.”

“It absolutely moved.”

“You are remembering the experience emotionally.”

“I am remembering it accurately.”

“Emotionally.”

“Accurately.”

Claire tried very hard not to laugh.

Rocky stepped beside Antonio.

“I pulled harder.”

“You pulled louder.”

“I pulled harder.”

“You lacked technique.”

“You lacked reality.”

A family walking past slowed just enough to hear the argument.

The father smiled knowingly at his wife.

“Boys.”

Antonio overheard him.

“We’re men.”

Rocky nodded.

“That’s true.”

Antonio looked back at William.

“Tell him.”

William considered both of them carefully.

“I can say with complete confidence...”

Antonio smiled.

“...that neither of you pulled the sword.”

Antonio looked genuinely disappointed.

Then he shrugged.

“I still got a sword.”

He slung the plastic blade across his shoulder like a victorious knight.

“You know...”

he said.

“I think this really completes the outfit.”

Claire laughed.

“It certainly completes...something.”

That evening, as the four of them walked back through London’s fading light, Antonio’s plastic sword occasionally bumped into passing benches, signposts, and once very nearly a mailbox.

He never seemed to notice.

Rocky rolled his eyes each time.

William found himself smiling despite himself.

Claire slipped her arm through William’s.

“What are you thinking?”

William looked back toward the lights of the village disappearing behind them.

“I think every one of us approached the same impossible thing differently.”

“And?”

“And none of us succeeded.”

Claire looked at Antonio happily marching ahead with his ridiculous souvenir.

“It didn’t seem to ruin anyone’s day.”

William smiled.

“No.”

“It actually made it better.”

For the first time since arriving in England, there was nothing left to solve that evening.

No clues.

No riddles.

No hidden destinations.

Just four friends walking through London, laughing at a plastic sword that had somehow become the day’s greatest treasure.

Mission Master, William realized, had quietly done it again.

It hadn’t taught them how to pull a sword from a stone.

It had simply reminded them that sometimes the best stories begin with everyone failing together.

Later that evening, after dinner and one final argument over whether Antonio had “almost become King of England,” the four friends returned to the hotel.

Antonio carefully leaned his plastic sword against the wall beside his bed.

Rocky looked at it.

“You know that’s going to fall over in the middle of the night.”

“It’ll be guarding the room.”

“It’ll be startling me at three in the morning.”

“It serves two purposes.”

Rocky shook his head.

“I miss when you didn’t own a sword.”

Antonio grinned.

“I don’t.”

Within minutes Rocky and Antonio had wandered down the hall in search of ice, still debating whether the sword had moved.

William closed the hotel room door behind them.

Claire smiled.

“I think they’re going to be arguing about that when they’re eighty.”

“I think you’re right.”

She sat beside him on the edge of the bed.

“You’ve been awfully quiet.”

William reached into his backpack and pulled out the Camelot brochure.

He flipped to the page showing Excalibur.

Then he leaned closer.

“I didn’t tell the others something.”

Claire raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“At the base of the sword...”

He traced a finger across the photograph.

“...there was a small retaining latch.”

Claire looked more closely.

“I didn’t even notice that.”

“Neither did they.”

He smiled.

“It was held in place with a simple lynchpin.”

Claire looked at him.

“You think you could have taken it out?”

William nodded.

“I’m pretty sure.”

“And then?”

“I probably could have lifted the sword out.”

Claire stared at him for a moment.

“William...”

“...why didn’t you?”

He looked toward the window where the lights of London shimmered beyond the glass.

Then he shrugged.

“I liked that no one in particular won.”

Claire waited.

“It made us even.”

Silence settled between them.

Not awkward.

Just full.

She slipped her hand into his.

“That’s a very William answer.”

He smiled sheepishly.

“I suppose it is.”

At that exact moment his phone vibrated.

Mission Master.

He unlocked the screen.

The message contained only a few lines.

Mission Master

Excalibur has never been about drawing a sword.

It has always been about revealing character.

Today each of you approached the same impossible task differently.

Each of you revealed exactly who you are.

Mission Complete.

William read the message twice before quietly locking the phone.

Claire leaned against his shoulder.

“So...”

“So?”

“I guess nobody won after all.”

William smiled.

“I think that’s why everybody did.”

Outside, London carried on as though nothing remarkable had happened.

Tomorrow would simply be their last free day in England.