

Daniel's uniform is now a heat trap of sweat from the thirty minutes of straight walking he had to do to get to this strange building, miles away from the city. With the way his dress shoes grinded against his toes made them feel like his feet are trapped in liquid magma. They would have reached this place in about half the time, but the army of emergency vehicles had grinded traffic to a half. Public transit is also backed up until a lot of the students can be safely evacuated. Daniel is sitting in a reclining chair while Trent sits in a chair next to his. He's crouching with his elbows propped on his knees.

"Welcome to the Tavern," Trent welcomes with a toothy grin. "We got a game room in the basement, a lounge, the rooms have their own TVs, you're going to love it here."

Daniel impatiently taps his finger on the armrest. "When is that lady coming back?"

"Who, Marika? She'll be out in a minute. Tending Eliza's wounds."

"Is she some sort of doctor?"

"You could say that." Trent grins cryptically. One thing Daniel doesn't like about these people is how vague they are about everything. He can't even get directions to the nearest bathroom without it being told in some sort of riddle.

"Need a drink, man?" Trent offers. "I can see the pit stains from under your blazer."

Daniel lifts his arms and notices the dark stains from under his armpits. Trent snorts.

"Look over there. There's a soda machine." He points behind Daniel. Daniel follows Trent's finger and lays his eyes on a soda machine that most fast food restaurants have. Dozens of different flavors line up the wall, both carbonated and non-carbonated.

"You guys just have that lying around?"

"Yep. Pretty sick, right? And it's free, so have all the soda you want."

Val speaks up, not averting his gaze from his book. “Next week is your turn for cleaning duty, so if the mold grows back, that’s your job.”

“That’s a problem for Future Trent, not Present Trent.” Trent replies, winking at Val. Daniel stands up and grabs a red solo cup from beside the soda machine. He picks a lemon flavor and presses his cup against the lever. A fizzing yellow liquid flows from the machine. He watches the cup fill to the brim. He walks back over to his seat and slowly sips on his drink, silently waiting for time to pass.

After about ten minutes of pure silence, a door opens. Marika comes out with Eliza. Daniel looks at her neck and face. Nothing. Not a healing wound in sight. It’s almost as if she had never been hurt.

“We’ve kept you waiting long enough.” Marika says lightheartedly. She and Eliza sit down across from Daniel and Trent, but adjacent to Val, who’s still engrossed in his book.

“Eliza, where’s Christian? We can’t start the meeting without him.”

“Probably taking his afternoon bath.” Eliza answers.

“I told him this morning that we were having an emergency meeting today.” She sighs. Eliza gains a cheeky smile.

“I’ll remind him.” She chirps. One second passes before a man’s blood curdling scream could be heard from upstairs. It’s a shrill scream that could shatter your eardrum. Aggressive footsteps smash against the wood floor above them, followed by a loud banging noise. Christian, wearing only a towel around his waist, rushes downstairs. His wavy brown hair droops over his face like a wet dog. A puddle is forming from his dripping wet legs.

“Eliza, I swear to all that is holy, stick ONE MORE icicle in the tub, I will launch you into the sun!”

“Shove your naked ass in my face one more time, I’m going to freeze off your fingers!”

Marika angrily slaps the mahogany coffee table in front of her, demanding immediate silence. Eliza and Christian immediately shut up and straighten their postures.

The room suddenly turns tense, and all eyes are on her. She crosses her arms. “Christian, go back upstairs and put your clothes on. I will not have a meeting while you are...exposed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Christian sheepishly obeys. He trudges back upstairs. Eliza giggles at him.

“And Eliza, what did I tell you about misusing your powers?”

“He was in the tub, he knew we had a meeting, he didn’t listen, and I—”

“That doesn’t justify giving him frostbite! You are 14, you know better than to use your powers so frivolously!”

Eliza, ashamed, sits properly with sad eyes. The tension thickens. The only sound that can be heard is Val flipping through the pages of his book. Daniel leans over to whisper in Trent’s ear.

“Who was that guy?”

“Christian? He’s Eliza’s older brother.”

“She has a brother?”

Trent nods. “Yep.”

“Why haven’t I seen him before?”

“He’s 18 and already graduated. He and Eliza live with Marika here.”

“Don’t they have a family?”

“No clue. They don’t tell me and Val jack.”

“So Eliza has an older brother,” Daniel comments to no one in particular. “He gets to be with her every day. Sounds like heaven.”

“Sounds like hell to me.” Trent bites back under his breath. Christian comes back down, fully dressed this time. He sits down in the seat across from Val. Marika clears her throat.

“I apologize you had to witness that. Daniel.” She apologizes to him.

“Don’t worry, it’s all good.”

“I suppose I should start by saying that, thankfully, there were no fatalities in the attack at your school earlier today. About thirty of your classmates were hospitalized, but nothing life-threatening. However, until damage has been repaired and electricity is restored, you won’t be able to attend school in person.”

Trent pumps a fist in the air. “Sweet! I’m glad The Hermit attacked our school!”

“Thirty people got hurt and you’re worried about no school.” Christian chides.

“Marika said they’ll be fine, right? No need to get uptight.”

“Christian’s right, Trent. More students could’ve been harmed and possibly killed in that attack. We do not make light of such events.” Marika scolds gently, yet sternly.

“We have to do our schoolwork at home now, too.” Eliza retorts.

Trent pauses his celebration. “...What?”

“Mhm. Our teachers are going to hand-deliver our weekly assignments.”

“You’re kidding.”

She shrugs. Trent runs his fingers through his hair.

“Technically, speaking they won’t know whether or not I actually DO the work, right? I can just wing it and they won’t know the difference.”

“To make sure you’re getting your work done both on time and ACCURATELY, I will be checking your work daily. And to confirm you’re retaining the material, I will test you every Friday.” Marika says in a matter-of-fact tone. Trent dramatically slumps to the floor in despair.

“The Hermit would’ve never attacked your school if SOMEONE did what they were supposed to.” Christian sarcastically mentions, giving his little sister the side eye. Eliza rolls her eyes at him.

“What do you mean?” Daniel asks.

“Marika told you four not to come to school today. Since Power Stone users can sense each other, our best bet was to lure him away from a populated area. But Eliza disobeyed orders and went anyway.” Val explains.

“‘Us four’? I didn’t know about that plan.” Daniel defends himself.

“We know. Eliza was also supposed to warn you not to come to school as well,” Christian butts in. “But judging by how confused you are, it’s obvious she didn’t tell you a thing. Not surprised.”

“I was beating Val in an intense Power Punchers match when we had to come to the school to clean up after her mess!” Trent pouts.

“Not a victory if the round didn’t finish.” Val teases in his usual monotone voice.

“I would’ve won if SHE didn’t jeopardize the plan!”

Marika takes two fingers and sharply lets out an ear-piercing whistle. Everyone stops bickering and sits up straight.

“If we can keep the distractions to a minimum, how about we let Daniel ask his questions?”

“What’s the deal with the whole magical powers thing?” Daniel asks.

Marika places one leg on top of the other and straightens her back, preparing for a detailed explanation. “The power you witnessed is what’s called a Power Stone.”

“A Power Stone?”

“Not a physical stone,” Val speaks up, finally setting his book down. “It’s a stone that’s bound to your soul.”

“Precisely,” Marika corroborates. “Only 21 Power Stones exist, and naturally, 21 wielders. Each Power Stone is attributed to a gemstone or mineral and a tarot card of the major arcana. In your case, from what Eliza has described to me, it sounds like you have The Fool’s Ore.”

“You got, like, the best one.” Trent compliments. Daniel scratches his head.

“Basically, anything you imagine, you can manifest physically. It’s a very versatile power, and in the right hands, is our greatest weapon. Consider yourself blessed, Daniel.”

“Awesome,” Daniel brags. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Eliza and Christian are both looking at him. In fact, they were giving him a look ever since Marika began explaining The Fool’s Ore. He can’t tell if it’s curiosity or malice. Daniel tugs at his collar, unsure of how to consider. “So, uh, can I go now? It’s Monday, my mom’s making lasagna. It was great meeting you all, but—”

As Daniel stands up, he slips on something and falls backward. He bangs his head on the chair, making a sharp “BONK” noise. Eliza snickers to herself. Daniel looks at where he slipped. A small patch of ice had formed on the wooden floor.

“Leaving so soon? You didn’t even get to hear the job we have for you~” Eliza teases. Marika silently shoots her a dirty glare. She snaps, and the ice that tripped Daniel shatters. Christian waves his hand and a gentle gust of wind wraps around Daniel and places him back into his seat.

“It’s more of an offer than a job. If you don’t want to do it, you can just say no.” Christian corrects.

“Alright. What do you need me to do?”

Eliza straightens her uniform. “Basically, they all range from The Fool to Judgement. They’re 21 parts to one whole. That one whole is the Gem of The World.”

“We obtain other Power Stones by defeating other users in battle. We have to make them surrender the stones to us.” Marika explains.

“How hard is this going to be?” Daniel asks hesitantly, not very excited to hear the answer.

“Depends,” Christian casually responds. “Could take weeks, could take months. Hell, it could take longer.”

“The level of various Power Stone users depends, but expect some of them to be masters at their craft. You probably won’t die, but with the pain you’re going to experience, you’re going to wish you were.” Val adds.

“And walk too close to another user, prepare to get jumped.” Trent laughs. Daniel’s mild anxiety turns into full-blown panic.

Eliza sighs. “Again, you don’t have to accept our offer. It’d just help us out a lot and it’d make me really happy if you—”

“I accept.” Daniel answers, immediately.

Everyone in the room freezes. Even Val stops turning the pages of his book. Eliza stumbles on her words and an awkward silence follows.

“Seriously?” Christian asks in disbelief.

“Yep.” Daniel says assertively.

“You don’t even know what the Gem of The World does yet.” Val rebuts.

“My answer remains the same.” Daniel confidently announces.

Marika clears her throat, caught off guard by how quickly he accepted their offer. “Well then. We are The Calvary. Together, we will obtain the Gem of The World. There’s an open room upstairs you can sleep in if you ever need it. If there’s nothing else, you can explore the building and get to know your fellow teammates. Welcome to the team, Daniel.”