

Chapter 13: The metal plate

Julmargo: The Truth of the Three

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Since we hadn't been short on emotions lately, we fell back asleep as soon as we stepped into the compartment. I woke up just after seven. Marcel and Julia were still sleeping. I looked around the carriage, and my eyes quickly met the gaze of our fellow passenger.

"Good morning," I blurted out, without stopping to think if the lady understood Polish.

"Oh, good morning," I heard in a friendly, almost motherly reply.

"Traveling all by yourselves?"

Of course, what else would she ask? Three kids traveling without parents. On the other hand, Julia looked almost like an adult, but maybe it was just the woman's natural concern.

"It just worked out that way; we travel together as a trio quite often. You could say we're experienced," I babbled, saying whatever came to mind just to avoid raising suspicion or encouraging more questions. Regardless, we ended up talking for

about an hour—literally about everything and nothing. It turned out the lady was traveling to visit her daughter, a doctor who had moved to Austria a few years ago to specialize in fetal medicine. I had never heard of such a thing in my life, but the subject interested me so much that my worries about the conversation vanished, and I found myself asking question after question. It was incredible—nowadays, doctors are able to help children with defects while they are still in their mother's womb! Apparently, in some cases, they can be born almost entirely healthy. I thought to myself that I would definitely tell my parents about this as soon as we met again. Eventually, my siblings woke up, and around ten o'clock, we said goodbye to the kind lady and got off in Innsbruck. We had a quick connection, and a few moments later, we boarded a bus directly to Trento. We were all lost in our own thoughts and traveled in silence. We reached our destination around 3:00 PM. Another stop, another country—Italy. What else lies ahead of us? I wondered.

"Listen, I entered the coordinates into the GPS, and it looks like we can head out along the road. We need to get to the nearby town of Stenico; our goal lies just outside of it. It's a bit of a trek, but since Italians are polite, maybe we'll catch a lift," Marcel said. Julia nodded, and we set off.

It was unbelievable. Just a week ago, the last snow had fallen in Wrocław and we were walking around in jackets; now, it was full-

on summer. I didn't expect to be on vacation in April. Well, our parents always said that in every situation, you have to try to find the positives, and if that's absolutely impossible, then you just have to sit with your sadness for a while. In this situation, I preferred to look for the positives, so I started dreaming of a swim in some crystal-clear sea or a mountain pond. After all, we were in Italy—sunny Italia! I'll never forget how, after many stays at Polish lakes—which are usually not very clear—we went to Croatia for the first time. It was paradise to me, and this place looked very similar!

After about a two-kilometer walk, we realized that it wasn't just summer; it was sweltering. Julia pulled out a piece of paper, wrote "Stenico" on it, and subtly showed it to the passing drivers. Sure enough, after a short while, a white Fiat Ducato pulled up next to us, and an older Italian man shouted from inside:

"Dai, salite!"

"Grazie," we replied in unison and climbed in. The man wouldn't stop talking to us in Italian; none of us understood a word, but since he kept smiling and carrying on, we just returned the smile and nodded our heads. At one point, we heard "Papa Giovanni Paolo Secondo," and it became clear that we had somehow been recognized as Poles. Pope John Paul II died before I was born, but he must have been a great man if people spoke of him so often and in so many places. Another topic to look into, I thought!

A moment later, we thanked him for the transport as politely as we could and got off in the small town of Stenico. Typical narrow Italian streets, mountains on one side, the roofs of small houses on the other, and... that building! The one we had seen on the map panorama a few days earlier. It looked like some kind of medieval castle, I thought. It looked... dignified, if not a bit eerie. Marcel pointed in the opposite direction, and we headed across a clearing, gently uphill. The sun was a bit weaker now, but it was still very hot.

"About five hundred meters left in a straight line and we'll be there. Whatever 'there' is," he added.

Questions were swirling intensely in my head: Is someone waiting for us there? Is it safe? What will we do when we arrive? Could our parents be there? Finally, I asked aloud:

"Listen, there's nothing ahead of us but dense forest, and the path goes even further up. Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"That's what the GPS shows, at least," Julia finally spoke up, glancing at the tablet over Marcel's shoulder.

The forest was truly thick, and to enter it, we had to arm ourselves with sticks to clear a path. And there was that memory again—exactly like entering the thickets when we went mushroom

picking! Only this time, it wasn't Poland, and we weren't looking for mushrooms... we had come here to face our destiny. It sounded quite serious, but that's exactly what I thought at that moment.

"Fifty more meters," a panting Marmar said, hacking away at more dense bushes.

We walked a bit further and stopped.

"This is it. Right in front of us." Marcel pointed at... a patch of ground where branches and some moss lay haphazardly. There was nothing else there. "Yes, it's definitely here. Look, it seems like it's just lying there by accident, but it's actually just some camouflage."

At that moment, Marcel began pushing the branches aside with his foot until he finally reached a metallic surface.

"Look, it's a metal plate!" Julia almost screamed, and we all hurriedly brushed away whatever was still covering it. We saw two rectangular, rusted metal sheets lying on the ground with a narrow gap in the middle. It looked like some kind of hidden entrance.

"Look at the Cube!" Marcel shouted, holding it out in front of him.

"It's starting to transmit! It's zeros and ones again—binary code.

Write this down... 01001011 01001110 01001111 01000011

01001011 00100000 01001111 01001110 01000011 01000101. It

means: KNOCK ONCE."

We looked at each other.

"This could be the entrance. The entrance to the Safe House," Julia concluded slowly and seriously.

As for me, I didn't want to wait a single moment longer. I struck the metal plate with my fist. An echo rang out through the area as if someone had struck a massive cathedral bell. Seconds passed. Then a minute. We waited, staring at the supposed entrance, glancing around every few moments. Silence. Complete silence. Nothing was happening.

Until the moment a light clearly pierced through the narrow slit, and the entrance began to slide open, slowly and majestically...