

Chapter 6: The shack

Julmargo: The Truth of the Three

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"We're here," I said, pointing to the entrance of the shack.

Grandma didn't actually live in a typical shack, of course—that was just what we called her house. She had moved there after WWII, having been displaced from what is now Ukraine. Although the light was on, the door was locked. We didn't know what to expect; I'm ashamed to admit it, but we didn't visit Grandma very often. The last time we saw her was Christmas Eve, three years ago.

Gogo jammed his fingers into the crack between the doorframe and the wall where Grandma "prudently" hid the key—as usual, it was in its spot. We headed inside.

In the middle of the main room stood a trociniak—an old sawdust stove. It was cold, which wasn't surprising since the last two nights had been quite warm. But something else caught my eye: there was a general mess, a total state of clutter, and that wasn't like Grandma at all.

"Grandma!" Gogo shouted. "Where are you? It's me, Ignacy."

We went through the whole house—Grandma was nowhere to be found, and the chaos was everywhere. It looked as if someone had grabbed whatever they could in a desperate hurry...

We sat on the sofa with our heads down, staying silent for a long moment.

"What's happening to us?" Gogo blurted out. "What even are these 'powers'?! It's all so unreal, and yet it's actually happening... I felt something changing in me after New Year's. On one hand, I felt heavier, but on the other, everything felt light to me. I thought it was just from more PE classes with Mr. Górecki and training for the championships... BUT YESTERDAY I WAS TAKING DOWN SOME GUYS IN BLACK!" Ignacy's hands were shaking; he was clearly terrified.

I walked over and hugged him. I could literally feel his heart thumping against me. We stood like that for a while. He began to calm down.

"Listen, I don't know what's going on either. I don't recognize myself, and I don't know where... or if... Mom and Dad are still with us. But this isn't an accident—they sensed something."

"The Triad is activating; we didn't have time to hide them," I quoted our parents. "Gogo, you are the shield.' They knew..."

"And Dad gave me this," Marcel said, pulling a black cube from his pocket. "He said I was supposed to 'read' it. Our parents were at least partially prepared."

"Oh yeah? Prepared? Then where are they and why didn't they run with us? Why didn't they protect us?" Ignacy started getting worked up again. As much as the last few days had shown his strength, he was still the youngest.

"This is the key..." that's what Dad said," Marcel spoke up. "I don't know, but it's probably the only certain thing right now."

Marcel looked at the cube, but it remained silent this time—maybe that was a good thing? Maybe it means we were in the right place? he thought.

"Are you guys hungry?" I asked. They both nodded. I opened the fridge. There wasn't much: dried-out, partly moldy white cheese, a carton of milk, and a sliced-up old tomato. "I'll run to Dino to buy something; this definitely won't fill us up," I said.

"Wait, just in case, don't use your card. We don't know what other methods they're using to track us. I've got 50 zlotys, here," Marmar said, handing me the bill. Every move we made reminded me that we could be being followed. It was terrifying and felt surreal. Just yesterday we were in school, and now... we don't even

know exactly what's going on.

I came back with warm kajzerka rolls, butter, cheese, and strawberry jam—we always went through that stuff at a crazy pace, so I grabbed two jars right away. Marcel was sitting over Grandma's old tablet.

"Are you being careful?" I asked.

"Yeah, I logged into my anonymous cloud account—I want to see on the locator where and when Mom and Dad (or at least their phones) were last seen. I also sent them each a random message, but they weren't delivered," Marmar replied and continued, "The last time they logged in was yesterday from their lab at 10:13 PM, which was after the incident in Nadodrze."

"So they survived!" Gogo practically jumped off the sofa.

"Yes, Ignas, it's likely. Let's stick with that... but we can't be sure, because they could have just taken their phones. Let's think positive though, okay, kiddo?"

At that moment, the door creaked, and Grandma Tereska walked in. She stood in the doorway, looking like she'd seen a ghost.

"Children?! Good Heavens, you're alive!" Grandma rushed toward

us and began hugging us one by one. She was shaking all over. She was crying. "My whole and healthy Julmargo!"

That's what our parents and Grandma called the three of us: "Jul" for Julia, "Mar" for Marcel, and "Go" for Gogo.

We stood there, the four of us hugged together for a few seconds, but the questions couldn't wait.

"Grandma, what do you know? Why are you surprised that we're alive? Tell us what's happening!" I asked, almost shouting.

"Julia, stop," Marcel grabbed me. "The air is starting to ripple. You can't do that, or we'll give ourselves away."

Grandma stood motionless, looking at each of us in turn. After a moment, she spoke.

"Your parents called."