

Chapter 8: Tico

Julmargo: The Truth of the Three

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"It's pulsing, but I can't see anything else yet," I said, my eyes locked on the cube.

We sat in the heavy silence of the room as the object blinked delicately, as if it were trying to establish a handshake with my brain.

"Let me see," Gogo grunted, snatching it from me. He began turning it over in his rough, calloused fingers, but the light died instantly. It turned back into a featureless block of black void.

"Here, take it. In my hands, it's just a regular game piece," he said, sliding it back to me.

For a moment, the cube remained "silent." Then, out of nowhere, glowing blue zeros and ones began to crawl across the surface: 1 0 1 1 1 0... and then more. Over and over. Binary code. Again.

"Quick, write this down!" I shouted into the air.

"Write what? What are you seeing?" Julia asked urgently, leaning in.

"It's a sequence of numbers that, in hexadecimal, looks like... GPS coordinates!" I deduced. I could see Julia was already poised with a pen, her eyes sharp and focused.

I loved this about the three of us—we worked like a well-oiled machine. Each of us knew our role. We completed each other. And it wasn't just now; it had always been this way. For years, Dad had told us to be observant, sensitive, and foresightful. Sometimes we were sick of hearing it, but it actually worked! If the bread box was empty in the evening, we didn't wait for our parents to get home; one of us always refilled it... and usually the gummy bear stash, too! In the winter, while Mom was still bundling up little Ignás and the car was buried in white, Julia and I would race to see who could clear the snow first. We were always a team. We were a family.

"Jula, write... 4... 6... °... 0... 3... '... 3... 5..." I continued until the code began to loop. "Got it?" I looked at my sister. She nodded and read the whole string back to me.

"46°03'35.8"N 10°51'11.6"E"

"Those are coordinates for somewhere in the Northern

Hemisphere—N for North—and the East," I explained.

"And what are you going to do with that? It's just a complicated string of numbers," Ignacy asked, his voice sounding small and uncertain. "Can you even put that into... a compass?"

"Heh, no. A compass only shows you direction. Now we need something much more precise." I stood up and switched on Grandma's tablet—or "the laptop," as she sometimes called it.

Despite her confusing tablets with laptops, Tereska was definitely a twenty-first-century grandma. Mom used to tell us that back in the year 2000, when mobile phones first started appearing at the Świebodzki Market, Grandma was the first in line. Ignoring the sky-high prices, she bought the "hit" of the era: a silver Nokia 3210. She claimed she needed it for when she went... mushroom picking! It didn't matter how much our parents explained that there was no signal in the woods—especially back then. Grandma just told them she'd manage; she'd find a signal even if she had to walk ten kilometers.

I opened the maps on the tablet and typed in the coordinates. The screen turned a deep, lush green. I switched to satellite view, and we saw a hilly terrain covered in dense forest. The pin dropped right in the middle of a blurry, distorted rectangle. You couldn't see anything else—just green and grey smudges. At the bottom of the

screen, the label "Sunny Place" appeared. When I clicked it, the caption "Garden" popped up, showing a panoramic view: bushes on one side, low-hanging clouds on the other, and the faint outline of a structure.

I started zooming out. I could feel my heart accelerating.

"This place is in Italy, near Trento... it's the Alps," I said slowly, my voice trembling. "Nothing here is a coincidence. Remember? It wasn't this clear yesterday, but I saw mountains too. I felt it was the Alps. Dad asked us to look for the 'Safe House.' This has to be the lead. And it's a direct one."

"Marcel, there's nothing there but trees! And they look weirdly blurred. There's no house," Ignacy said, his shoulders slumping in resignation. "Besides, look—that's 1,097 kilometers from here by the shortest CAR route! You're not seriously thinking..."

"Gogo, we might not have a choice," Julia said soothingly, wrapping her arm around him the way only an older sister can.

"But how do you want to get there? And with what money? We have, what, fifty zlotys left? None of us has a driver's license, not to mention we don't even have a car!" Ignacy continued, his face reddening. Julia had to calm him down first; if he lost his temper now, we couldn't afford a display of his "strength."

"I'll drive you."

Grandma Tereska waved the keys to her burgundy Tico. We stared at her in pure terror. Tereska was eighty-three years old, but she still drove once a week to the occupational medicine clinic in Święta Katarzyna to see patients. Recently, she'd managed to come home missing a side mirror, but you couldn't deny her experience. A few years ago, she even helped Dad drive our Citroën Grand Picasso all the way to Croatia for vacation. Dad was a workaholic and would sometimes stay up until 2:00 AM—which Mom always scolded him for—but cars acted like a sleeping pill on him. He'd get behind the wheel and start yawning instantly! That's when Mom would step in and pinch his neck, but when even that failed, someone had to swap with him. That time, it was Tereska. Once she sat behind the wheel, she drove 350 kilometers straight from the Czech Republic to Graz, Austria.

"Grandma, are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked.

"My dears, I'm not sure of anything, but like I said before—I believe we have to trust your parents," Grandma replied. Despite everything, she sounded convincing.

"And did you fix the mirror yet?" Gogo threw in. Grandma nodded slowly.

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Believe me, it's holding. I had to manage," Grandma said, pointing a finger out the window.

Grandma Tereska's legendary Tico sat in the yard. As usual, it was spotless—as if it had just rolled out of a car wash. And the mirror? It was indeed holding.

Fastened tight with bright yellow electrical tape.

From author: did you check coordinates on your own?!