



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 33

33. The Pantry

“If *I* were the author of this journey,” Agnes said as she squeezed into the space, “this would *not* have been my next move.”

It was a small closet filled with nonperishables—boxes of pasta of all kinds, from fancifully curled to plain old straight spaghetti, boxes of cereals, sugary and shaped like desserts with capering cartoon characters neither Dee or Marks could remember on their fronts, and bags of flour, some of which appear ravaged by mice. The door back to the kitchen didn’t disappear; it remained and the kitchen could be glimpsed whenever it opened. The four of them filled the space neatly, making movement difficult.

On the shelf at Marks’ eye level were a pair of cans, shaped like a tuna can. One had a red label displaying a fanciful bicycle, the other a blue label displaying an ibex, striped antlers extended far beyond what was typically found in nature. Each had a small white envelope taped to it with the words EAT ME written on it in black marker.

He turned slowly, forcing Agnes, Dennis, and Dee to rearrange themselves to stay out of his way. After a moment, he lunged forward and plucked something off the shelf. He held it up to Dee.

She smiled. “Knight,” she said.

“On the path. Except one thing. No exit.”

She stared back, then pointed silently. Marks followed her arm and saw a prominent mouse hole. He looked back at her. “You’re serious?”

Dee shrugged. “It make less sense than anything else we’ve seen? And you read that book, right? *Eat me, drink me*, all that jazz. Alice.”

Marks sighed and reached out, picking up the red can. It was heavier than he’d expected. He tore the envelope off and opened it, discovering an old fashioned can opener inside. He picked up the blue can, which felt light, like it had nothing inside it at all, and found the same. He looked at Agnes and Dennis, who stared back at him, grinning.

“We’re seriously supposed to eat one of these?”

Agnes shrugged. “Or both?”

Marks rolled his eyes and turned to Dee. “Which one?”

She pondered. “We could each eat a different one.”

Marks shook his head. “That could be disaster. Whatever happens, we need to stick together and have the same experience.”

She pursed her lips. “Blue. It’s got an animal on it.”

“An ibex.”

“Whatever *that* is.” Dee hesitated. “That a real animal?”

Marks nodded. “And we’ve seen it on a door before. In that room with the creepy black bird.”

She nodded back once, firmly. “That’s it then.”

Marks took a deep breath. “All right. Same time. Whatever happens, happens to both of us.”

Agnes jumped a little, clapping her hands together in delight. Marks took one of the can openers and awkwardly worked the blue can.

“Jesus, I hope this isn’t deviled *ibex* or something even *worse*,” Dee said. She thought if the place was taking details from their brains, it might have rummaged around for her *least* favorite foods, or things that made her gag just thinking about them, and put *that* in there.

When he had the top of the can sliced through, he peeled it back using the slot on the can opener, thinking that he hadn’t seen an old-school opener like this in a very long time. The can contained a pinkish paste, and the pantry, already hot and crowded, filled with an awful smell.

“That’s ... sweaty socks,” Dee said, her face collapsing into a mask of disgust.

Marks shook his head. “Old puke and sawdust,” he said.

Agnes elbowed Dennis in the side. “They’re actually going to *eat* it!”

Marks scooped some of the goop out of the can with his fingers, then extended the can towards Dee. She leaned away from it, then steadied herself and scooped some out into her hand. Eyes watering, she looked at Marks. He nodded, and they simultaneously jammed the stuff into their mouths.

Dee’s face instantly collapsed even further. “Oh, *god*,” she moaned.

Marks smiled as he swallowed, finding dark humor in the horror of the situation, and then froze. Simultaneously, Dee jerked and stiffened, her expression transforming into one of intense alarm.

“Mr. Marks!”

He opened his mouth to reply, and the world tilted and shifted in a way he’d never experienced before. Air seemed to rush past him, and the can became rapidly heavier and heavier, as if its mass was somehow increasing. Gravity pulled him one way and then another, and everything blurred as if he was moving very quickly, rocketing through the air. The noise became a roar in his ears, and for a few seconds he couldn’t reliably tell where *down* was.

Then, suddenly, everything went still.

Breathing hard, he stumbled and fell backwards onto his ass. He looked around and spotted Dee immediately; she was standing far away, but seemed fine. For a moment he thought they’d been

transported, somehow, to a completely different room; it was a huge space, cold and soaring, with no ceiling in sight. The floor was rough and pitted, with deep chasms forming a complex pattern around him.

He climbed to his feet and Dee came running over to him. “Marks!” she shouted, her voice sounding thin. “Marks, what happened?”

He turned and looked around. In the distance, he could see a doorway of a sort. It was rounded and rough, the edges unfinished. There was no door, just an opening in the wall. As Dee caught up with him, instinctively taking his hand, he leaned forward slightly.

“Look!”

Marks turned and followed Dee’s outstretched hand. In the distance was an odd structure, a cylindrical tank or building, clad in fraying blue paper. The roof appeared to be bent upwards. After a moment, he looked at Dee.

“We’ve shrunk,” he said. She nodded.

“We’ve shrunk. Like Alice.”

For a moment he indulged in a mental exercise wondering what would have happened if they’d eaten the red can. Nothing good, he assumed. He turned to look at the mousehole, now a perfectly accessible portal to whatever lay beyond. He looked back at Dee.

“You feel okay?” he said, kneeling down and unslinging his backpack. For one second his brain stuttered over the mechanics of not just himself but everything he was wearing and carrying shrinking proportionally, then he had the notebook out and updated the map to reflect the new reality, adding some tiny, spidery notes to explain the mechanics of their current situation.

“Fine,” Dee said. “Freaked out. But fine.”

Marks nodded, re-packing everything. “Agnes tried to make us think twice about eating that ... stuff, so I figure we’re on the right track.”

“Where’d Agnes and ... him go?”

Marks looked around again. “I don’t know. I’m afraid we’re not done with them, though. They keep disappearing and coming back.”

“So,” Dee said, nodding. “We go through the mousehole?”

“We go through the mousehole,” Marks agreed, standing up. “And we hope.”

“Hope what?”

He settled the backpack into a more comfortable position. “That there’s no mouse.”