



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 15

15. Underground

The hall terminated in a dark space that felt simultaneously wide open and constricted. It was hard to see, but the place was clearly an intersection of dirt tunnels supported by rotted beams. All of the entrances appeared to have been boarded up at one time, the shattered remnants of the lumber scattered on the floor, bent nails rusting in the damp.

“Not *this* again,” Agnes said despairingly as she flounced in,

A single feeble oil lantern hung on one of the walls, emitting a sickly pale glow that made the tunnels leading away look even darker. Their tunnel entrances are posts and lintels of wood; some were collapsed, making it impossible to enter. A chill wind blew through the intersection. Marks tried but couldn’t determine which direction the wind came from.

Next to the lamp, something had been tied to a string and hung from the ceiling. He stepped up close to it and blinked. It was a small carving, another chess piece like the pawns they’d seen in other rooms. But this one was a queen. Marks pulled the notebook from his bag and made notes: That made four rooms with chess pieces. Plus the Hall of Mirror with all the chess openings. He didn’t know what it meant. Maybe it was just another set of random details designed to confuse, to seem meaningful, just to send them spinning off in other directions. Or maybe it was the key.

Single sheets of paper, like fliers, had been nailed to the beams in places, and rustled gently in the breeze. Six of the tunnels remained open, each with a simple, crude wooden sign nailed to their crossbeams. Each sign had a single word carved onto it: LIMBO, NARNIA, MORDOR, XANADU (a thin stream of water marked the floor of that tunnel, fed by a persistent drip from the ceiling), VIDESSOS, and finally MULVAN.

The air was humid and smelled earthy.

“This place,” Dee said tiredly, “makes no damn sense.”

Marks reached over and tore one of the papers from the framework. “Attention,” he read. “Beware of man eating rats.”

Dee looked around in sudden terror, but Agnes leaned in to her. “Nonsense,” she said. “I haven’t seen him for ages. Though, to be fair,” she added, looking around, “there *do* seem to be fewer rats down here.”

“Why are some of these closed off?” Dee asked, looking at Agnes. “What if the right way is blocked, and we can’t get out because of it?”

Agnes pursed her lips and looked contemplative. “I hadn’t *thought* of that, darling dim Dee,” she said. “It is possible. Let’s see, they keep changing things—”

“Who’s *they*?” Dee demanded, eyes wide.

“I don’t *know*,” Agnes said, laughing. “I really *don’t*. But they keep changing everything on me, all the time, the little scamps.”

“Oh my *god*.”

Marks swung the backpack around and consulted his notebook. “Don’t listen to her, Dee,” he said. “This is a maze. There’s a way in and a way out. We just pick our next move, like we have been.” he looked up. “We’ve only been to maybe ten, twelve rooms so far,” he said. “This place is almost certainly much larger than that. We need a *lot* more data before we can draw any conclusions.”

Dee’s distress seemed to grow. “How *big* do you think this place is?”

“I certainly *don’t* know,” Agnes said with a laugh, “and I’ve been here *forever*.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Marks said.

“What about my father?”

Marks glanced up at her. “Go on and ask her, if you want. Just be prepared for bullshit.”

“Tosh,” Agnes said, smiling. “Dear, dimwitted Dee, if I were *you*—not the nasty and quite *rude* Mr. Marks—I would look to the Abyssinian maid with a dulcimer, singing of Mount Abora!”

Dee frowned. “What? Say *anything* that makes sense!”

“She means Xanadu, kid,” Marks said. “It’s from a poem.”

Dee turned, scanning the tunnel entrances. “It’s one of the choices!” she said excitedly.

“Sure it is,” Marks said. “Hey Agnes, is Xanadu the tunnel we should take because it will lead us to Dee’s Dad, or is the tunnel we should take because it will keep us spinning through your little pleasure palace longer?”

“Well, gee, Mr. Grumps,” Agnes said, spinning in place. “Why can’t it be *both*?”

Marks looked up and met Dee’s gaze. “Sorry kid. I know you want a short cut. There might be one, but *she*’s not going to tell us about it, okay?”

“But,” Agnes said, pausing in her spin to hold up one finger. “I *never* lie.”

“You can mislead without lying,” he said, glancing back down at his notebook and making a mark. “Or, fuck, you’re lying about never lying.”

Dee stood looking from Agnes to Marks, wringing her hands. She stared at Marks for a few moments, eyes wide and glassy.

“Xanadu,” she said, stamping her foot. “We take the Xanadu tunnel.”

Marks glanced up, then down again. Agnes clapped her hands. “Oh, well *done*, Dee!” she chirped. “Well *done*!”

Marks nodded. “Okay.”

Dee stamped her foot again. “Okay?”

He nodded, stuffing the notebook back into his backpack. He looked around. “This is pretty incredible,” he said to Agnes. “Congratulations.”

“I didn’t build it.”

Marks nodded briskly and glanced back at Dee. “Ready?”

“That’s it? We just go?”

Marks shrugged. “We don’t have enough information, kid. We can’t scout ahead, so all we can do is pick a path right now. Your Dad might be down this tunnel—or that might be the exit, or it might be a trap, or might be a room filled with man-sized Venus Flytrap plants.”

“Oooh!” Agnes chirped, clapping her hands.

“Look at this place!” Marks said, waving his arms around. “Five minutes ago we were in a hall of mirrors. Now we’re a mile underground. We’re going to walk through a door and be underwater, or a mile in the air, or in a room made of tinfoil. This is a *Soul Battery*. It’s all insane architecture and nonsensical topography. Nothing makes sense until you map it out and find the path.” He grinned. “So, let’s go. You’re either right and for some reason Cruella here is telling us the truth, or you’re wrong and she’s leading us deeper into the maze. Either way, we’ll have one more data point.”

Agnes emitted an outraged snort. “*Cruella?*”

Dee smiled. “All right.”

Marks turned and faced the tunnel with XANADU on the sign. The tunnel was pitch black, and he suspected there would be some design component to ensure they couldn’t peek ahead even if he wasn’t worried about leaving Dee alone. He took one second to marvel at the verisimilitude: The damp smell, the sound of dripping water, the sense of immense weight above them. It was amazing. Then he checked to make sure Dee was right behind him, turned, and started walking down the tunnel. After a moment, light bloomed, and he twisted around to see Dee had taken out her phone, and was using the flashlight feature. He winked, and turned back just in time to feel the floor skid away, and then he was on a metal slide, free-falling downwards.