



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# **Black House**

**A Novel**

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## Author's Note

Thanks for reading *Black House*, either weekly at my wee blog or right now, diving into the entire book. The character of Philip K. Marks has long been a favorite creation of mine, and he's appeared in several published short stories (see list at the end) and many more unpublished stories I sure hope see the light of day. *Black House* was my first attempt at a novel-length Marks story, and I really like how it turned out.

The origins of the story go back a long way. I read a puzzle book called *Maze* by Christopher Manson many years ago, and created my own maze just for kicks, eventually coding up a crude HTML version (and later a visual basic version). I used a lot of those ideas in this book, though I twisted and warped them to fit Marks' needs.

Thanks for your interest in my writing and your support, whatever form it takes. I hope you enjoy *Black House* and keep coming back to the blog for a weekly chapter!

Jeff

# 1. The Starlight Motel

Motel life was a step up. Thirty-five precious dollars a day, but he'd come into a windfall and it was wonderful to have hot water on demand and privacy again. If only for a little while. If only until the money ran out.

He was fascinated by the economy of the space. The little kitchenette was old and greasy, but in just four feet of space they'd packed everything one could need: A tiny fridge, a hot plate, a sink, some cabinets. The bathroom was enough space for one person at a time. The sitting area was by the window, a pair of old, stinking armchairs and a battered wooden table. The bed. He thought it best to not think about the bed, since he certainly wouldn't be sleeping in it.

He thought about an entire life played out in the room. Breakfast, dinner, nights in front of the ancient cathode-ray television, the digital converter on top like even more ancient rabbit ears, the slowly shrinking choices of lives in an age when everything was increments and nothing was free. He thought about the question of how small things could get—how small could your whole world be and still support your life. The room was probably three hundred square feet, he thought. It still felt big to him; he'd been stealing time in his communal office, sleeping on the floor, scraping by. Now he had a room to himself. It felt like luxury, even if the sheet on the bed gave him the heroic heebie jeebies, imagining the germ civilizations they contained.

How much smaller could it be? He tried to imagine the smallest possible space that would be livable,

workable. He mentally sectioned off the room and crammed everything into it, imagining a smaller bed, no sitting area. A hundred square feet? Fifty? He thought his life was something of an experiment to discover just how little space was needed to survive in. He saw himself in a box, hunched over, compressed, squeezed down to the essentials. And then the larger question of what the word *essentials* meant, really. What *was* essential? He'd found that things formerly thought of as *essential* could be jettisoned and done without. The longer he lived the more he came to believe that this process could be continued infinitely, in the same way you could cut something in half infinitely, down to the quantum state, and always have something left over, no matter how tiny.

He sat in one of the ancient chairs by the window, just to experience the novelty of having someplace to sit, a place *dedicated* to sitting. He had no use for a television; it had been so long he didn't know what sort of shows were on the air these days. He thought about the little clock radio, finding some music, but didn't want to stand up. Just sitting was entertainment, the stillness, the peace and quiet. A roof over his head.

He took the shoebox from his bag and opened it to look at the currency inside, more than five thousand dollars, a fortune. It had been easy money, really; a job that had left few scars and cost him few sleepless nights for a change. Good fortune felt odd and unreal to him. He kept opening the box and checking to see if the money had dissolved, turned to dust, the ink smeared off.

He sat and considered hiding places. The problem with a rented space was there were no secrets, or if

there were they weren't your secrets. He imagined cleaning crews unscrewing heating grates, flipping mattresses, moving pictures and mirrors from the walls as a matter of course every day.

In the end, the money stayed with him. He spent some studious time picking at the lining of his relatively new, if inexpensive, jacket, and slipped the money inside in discrete stacks, holding back just five hundred to keep on him at all times. Then he sewed the lining back using the tiny little kit he carried with him, doing a terrible job. But he felt better, because he would sleep in the jacket and not have to worry. He wasn't used to good fortune, not that he could remember.

He put the five hundred-dollar bills into his wallet, then pulled out a wrinkled, oft-folded old business card. It had been cheaply printed to begin with on light stock, and much of it had faded and worn away, leaving just his name, PHILIP K. MARKS, and the word PRIVATE. Everything else was just a blur of old ink. Five thousand dollars, he thought. As usual, it wasn't enough, would never be enough, not considering what he'd done to earn it.

He'd started a new ritual of remembering. Things slid so easily into the gray mass that was his past. He tried to pause once a day and remember. He paused now, and remembered how he'd gotten his five thousand dollars.



## 2. The Past

The voice on the phone had said, “Can you come out?”

The voice was distant and scratchy. Marks had gotten good at plucking sounds from the noise that might be words; the cell phone was an old one, and the plan was the cheapest he could find, one that still charged by the minute. The sound quality was always awful. The ambient sounds of Washington Square Park weren’t helping; it was a humid, sunny day and everyone in the universe had come outside, including an elderly man who’d somehow wheeled a concert piano into one of the open spaces.

Marks frowned at the pigeons waddling around his feet. “To *New Jersey*?” he asked.

“It’s not a foreign country, Mr. Marks.”

Marks did some math in his head, speculating on the cost of public transportation to the Garden State. He imagined it to be very expensive when compared to his finances. He also imagined it to be a very lengthy and involved trip, possibly requiring rations, a change of clothes due to crossing through different climates, and a passport.

“I will of course reimburse you for the expense.”

Marks still sat staring at the pigeons, thinking. He compared his poverty and need for money with his desire to not leave the city. There had been a time, he thought, when he’d left the city all the time. When he’d traveled. He couldn’t be sure, but his old apartment, when he’d had an apartment, had been filled with tiny

objects, mementos, things that had the look and feel of souvenirs and keepsakes from various far-away locations. All of it gone, now.

Finally, money won out. “All right,” he said. “Give me the details.”

The voice spoke a name and address, which Marks wrote down on a small pad he’d purchased from the grocery a block away from his communal office space. Sixty-nine cents. He wrote on both sides of the paper in careful, tiny script that gave away his age. Then he closed the phone and stood up, feeling the cardboard inserts in his shoes sliding, sweaty, as he walked.

The office was populated at this time of day. He liked it when it was occupied: All younger people, busy, determined. None of them had money, but there was a difference in definition. For them, not having money meant they had roommates, it meant they went out to dive bars and ate dollar pizza and were impressed with their intestinal fortitude. For him, sloping down the other side of the divide, older, with a head full of gauze and a wobbliness in his balance he wasn’t sure was age-related, it was more literal: He was carrying around his net worth in a thick yellow envelope, one hundred and fourteen dollars and change. He paid his bills with prepaid cards bought at the pharmacy. He slept in the office when he could, when no one was working too late. When he couldn’t, he bought a coffee at the Luxe Diner and nodded off in a booth. The waitresses usually let him be for a few hours.

But in the afternoons, there was energy, all these partnerships and companies that couldn’t afford real offices. The communal space gave them the semblance

of offices: A reception desk, a conference room. Everyone had magnetic badges that granted access. There were a few individuals, like Marks, but for the most part they were these well-dressed kids in tight groups, sitting in front of laptops and texting, texting, texting.

Marks hadn't sprung for a private office, so he was in the bullpen. For his fifteen dollars a week he got Internet access, a beat up old desktop running an old version of everything, a hardline phone, and a chair.

His briefcase was where he'd left it. Inside the briefcase was a change of clothes: He owned two shirts, two pairs of pants, and two sets of underwear. His sports jacket was heavy. In the summer it weighed a ton and made him sweat. In the winter it was the only thing between him and the cold.

It had been like this for a while. He was beginning to think this was how he died: alone in this office, a vessel giving way, and the kids wouldn't notice until he started to stink.

.oOo.

At the train station, he bought a coffee for one dollar and regretted the expense. The train cost two dollars and fifty cents, but he thought he would tell the client that he'd also needed a subway, ask for five dollars in expenses. In the chill air of the new car, he tried to think of another way he could earn a living since he wasn't doing much living being Philip K. Marks.

It wasn't a fruitful rumination. As often happened, his

mind wandered. Fragmented memories: A newspaper office. A glowing computer screen, green text on a black background. Sitting in bars, drinking, compelled to by something outside of himself. T-shirts with messages on them. An empty house and singing.

When he snapped back to himself, he'd gone two stops too far and had to backtrack. At least it didn't cost anything extra to transfer.

.o0o.

"Mrs. Wadell?"

"Mr. Marks," the handsome woman said, smiling and offering her hand. Standing in the doorway, he had an immediate impression of warmth: She was past fifty, but not by much, and looked good. Toned, tanned, healthy. Her hair was salted and her face deeply lined, but she was strong and thin and had a good grip and strong, white teeth. Her eyes were a luscious brown, and her smile was very natural and well-worn, a woman who had smiled a lot in her life. "Please, come in. Thank you so much for coming all this way."

Marks hesitated, suddenly feeling dirty and sweaty, and loathe to ruin what appeared to be an incredibly clean and tidy foyer. Finally, the danger of being perceived as rude came up behind him and pushed him forcefully through the door. Mrs. Wadell stepped aside to let him pass and then pulled the door shut.

"Come in!" she said cheerfully. "Follow me."

He did, and she brought him into a cheerful, sunny

living room. Wood paneling and a dark wall-to-wall carpet dated the space, but it was so clean and neat and obviously cared for he was frightened. Mrs. Wadell was, apparently, one of those incredibly competent women who took men like himself in hand and turned them out much improved, and he didn't want to be improved. He was comfortable being broken.

He pushed a hand through his hair and resisted the urge to push his shirt tails more firmly inside his pants.

"A drink?" Mrs. Wadell asked brightly. "It's early, of course, but I'm trying to train myself to enjoy life while I can."

Marks shook his head. "No, thank you. I don't drink. I don't remember why."

"Oh," Mrs. Wadell said, momentarily nonplussed. She recovered very quickly. "Water, perhaps?"

"No, thank you."

"Well," she said, standing indecisively. Marks had the sense he'd forgotten the rules of polite society, had somehow given offense. Were you supposed to accept something when entering someone's home? Was honor not satisfied?

Finally, she swept a hand at a comfortable-looking chair backed up to the large windows. "Please, sit. You found us okay?"

Marks nodded. "Yes, thank you." The chair was as comfortable as it looked. Mrs. Wadell was, he thought, exactly as feared: A woman who knew how to do things like choose furniture and the precise width the curtains should be opened to allow in the optimal amount of sunlight. "You said you were concerned about your

husband?”

Mrs. Wadell nodded and looked about to launch into an explanation. Marks rushed forward. “Do you mind telling me how you came across my name?”

If Mrs. Wadell was put off by his abrupt manner, she didn’t show it. She smiled. “One of my husband’s former business partners told me he had dealings with you, oh, years ago. When I ... well, Mr. Marks, I’ve been asking anyone I can think of for help with Gerald. His old pal Wayne Hutton gave me your name, but all the information in his Rolodex was outdated.” She cocked her head, seeing an opportunity to finally complete the requirement of small talk. “Did you really once work for the Times?”

Marks shrugged. “I don’t remember, honestly.” He knew that coupled with his refusal of a drink, this comment would make up her mind about him, but he preferred that to continuing the conversation. He searched his fragmented memories for the name Hutton. For a moment he thought perhaps there was something, and then it was gone.

“Well,” Mrs. Wadell said after a moment, “I told him that Gerald had been to many doctors. He’d tried everything they suggested. I don’t know what’s worse: His health continuing to deteriorate without explanation, or his *attitude*.”

“His attitude?”

“Yes, well, Gerald doesn’t seem to believe he *can* get better. Oh, he does whatever’s suggested, by me or the doctor, but he doesn’t really seem to believe in any of it. It’s as if he knows something I don’t. And Mr. Marks,

that isn't how our marriage has been. We went through plenty of rough times. Not ten years ago we weren't sure we would ever be able to retire. I used to joke I would be working at Wal Mart when I was ninety, and we would fight not because I *meant* it, but because he would get upset about the *very idea*." She smiled. "But no matter how bad things got, we always talked it out. Always."

Marks looked around. The room and the house were nice enough. "Money troubles?" he asked. The concept of having enough money to be in trouble about it suddenly seemed exotic and fascinating.

She leaned forward, eyes wide. "Oh! How rude. Mr. Marks, please do not worry over your fees and expenses! This was years ago. Gerald found work. Very good work, very well-paying, and we rebuilt our savings and more."

Marks nodded absently. Words like *savings* and *well-paying* seemed like distant concepts, symbols for things he had no direct experience with. "Mrs. Wadell, perhaps you could walk me through why you asked me here? Your husband is ill, but you obviously have the resources to care for him. Did Mr.—" he searched for the name, already fading "—Hutton tell you what I ... specialize in?"

Mrs. Wadell grew quiet, looking down at her lap and plucking at some invisible piece of fluff. "Gerald has been to every doctor we can think of. We have the money, now, thank goodness, and we've been everywhere. No one can figure it out. Tests come back inconclusive. The symptoms ... shift." She looked up, and her eyes were red. "Mr. Marks, my husband is dying

and no one knows why. He himself seems to have given up.”

Marks swallowed. “This is not really my field, Mrs. Wadell. I’m sorry, but I focus on—”

“Yes, I know.” She held up a hand. “But my husband’s condition *is* strange. Please. Let me introduce you. Look into it. I will pay you for your time—in advance—even if it leads nowhere.”

Marks sighed. It would be nice to buy some new shoes, he thought. And he’d been honest with her. “Fine,” he said.

.oOo.

She led him down a hallway into a small bedroom, much too small for the immense bed that crowded it. No other furniture would fit. In contrast to the bright and cheerful rest of the house, the bedroom was gloomy and dark, and it took Marks a moment to realize that a human figure occupied the bed. He was an older man, dwarfed by the huge bed and sunk deeply into the soft mattress, as if the bed was swallowing him.

“Gerald, this is Mr. Marks. He’s here to ask a few questions, see if he can help us.”

Gerald turned his head slightly and peered at me with yellow eyes. He was a man greatly reduced; his hands and head were large, the rest of him wasted and drained. His skin looked thin and pale, and his hair, white as snow, had fallen out in patches.

When he spoke, Marks wished he hadn’t.



“Thank you, Beatrice,” he rumbled, the voice deep and impossible to ignore. It had once been a powerful boom, Marks suspected, but now it was a ruined bubbling wheeze.

“All right,” she said, hesitating just a moment. “Don’t strain yourself, dear.”

She stepped out of the room soundlessly, closing the door behind her. Marks stood awkwardly for a moment, looking around the dim space. It smelled like cleaning supplies and something sweet and sticky, like cough syrup. There was no place to sit because there was so little floorspace left.

“Your wife is concerned about you, Mr. Wadell.”

He snorted a laugh. “Mr. Marks, I don’t know exactly who you are or what you do, but please don’t be insulted. There is nothing for you here. You are—she is—wasting your time.”

Marks nodded. This was, more or less, what he thought as well, but he’d made it all the way out there, he felt he owed it to the very nice woman to at least ask a few questions. “Your wife said it’s been difficult to diagnose your affliction?”

Wadell laughed, and dissolved into harsh coughs that made the bed shake beneath him. Marks waited them out, standing still, watching.

“Get out, Mr. Marks. There’s no healing me. And you would ruin everything if you could. Go out there and tell Bea that I was congenial and answered all your questions. Tell her you’ll do some digging, ask around. Bill her what you want. We have the scratch.” He barked another laugh. “We’ve got the money, Mr.

Marks! That's for sure. More flooding in all the time. Go on now. Leave me to my dying."

Marks took one last look around the room. Then he stepped closer to the bed, leaning down over the shriveled old man, studying him carefully as the oversize head glared up at him. "Well, Mr. Wadell, here's the thing: You're not my client, your wife is."

He turned and walked out of the room, leaving behind an outraged sputtering that melted into another round of painful-sounding coughs.

Back in the tidy living room, Mrs. Wadell crossed from the windows where she'd been staring out at the street. "What do you think, Mr. Marks? Please don't say anything *comforting*. I've had all the comfort I can suffer."

Marks nodded. "Where does your husband keep his private records, papers and such?"

.o0o.

With a single email printout folded up and slid into his jacket pocket, Marks stepped out into the street and the heat settled down on his shoulders. The house had been cool and pleasant, not overly frigid, but pleasant. He'd gotten used to it. It was amazing, he thought, how it took years to get used to being hot and sweaty, to being always uncomfortable, but mere minutes to get used to luxury. A few hours in the air conditioning and now he was miserable to be without it.

The trip back to New York yawned in front of him like

infinity, an infinity spent on trains and buses, crowded, hot, unhappy. In his pocket were two crisp hundred-dollar bills, a retainer from Mrs. Wadell, more than he should have accepted but when she'd opened her wallet and the green money had bristled like a flower opening he'd lost his mind, momentarily. He told himself she would get value for the money. And now he struggled: A cab back to the city would be forty, fifty dollars. A fortune. But he had so little luxury in his life, and sitting in an air-conditioned back seat for an hour instead of the horrors of the transit system was tempting.

In the end he walked the half mile to the train station. His two-hundred dollar days were few and far between, and as he paid his fare he felt virtuous.

.o0o.

Marks was always surprised how few spouses of either sex knew the complete financial story of their marriage. There were always blind spots. He supposed some of it was willful ignorance—no one wanted to know *everything* about their wife or husband, not really—and some of it was misplaced trust. He'd learned, somewhere along the way, that a huge proportion of mysteries involving marriages could be solved quite easily by acquiring some bank statements. The Wadell's marriage proved to be one of them. Mrs. Wadell sent him bank statements going back to their more impoverished years, and he noted several dozen entries for a company called Passus, Inc. over the years.

He went to work researching the company, and found nothing more than a single address and the most basic paperwork filed with the city. Instinct told him he'd found something at least worth looking into, and that Mrs. Wadell had been wasting her time seeking medical advice.

The address on the printout led him to an office building on Fifth Avenue that was the embodiment of unfriendliness. The moment he walked into its ice-cold lobby, the security staff was in motion, and by the time he arrived at the desk, which seemed to be several miles from the entrance in this massive, open space, they had already done a quick background check and determined there was no possible way he might have any legitimate business.

As he was being politely but firmly walked back to the door, he tried to profit as much as he could. He noted the name of the security firm on their green jackets. He noted there was no corporate logo on the walls. He noted how delightfully cold it was. He noted they knew his name, based on a single use by one of them that was almost certainly a mistake.

Back out in the humid air of the street, he took a moment to compose himself. He had no records any more, no address book or Rolodex, and often found he couldn't remember the name or contact information for someone, even though he could picture them and knew what they could provide to him. It was frustrating, but sometimes, randomly, his brain would serve up a memory that was useful and coherent. This time, it served up the face and name and phone number of Stuart MacKenzie. He couldn't precisely recall who Stuart was, but he knew something about him

immediately: MacKenzie was a rich man who owed him a favor.

.oOo.

MacKenzie met him at a corner deli that was humid and dirty inside. Marks entered hungry and wondering what, precisely, he'd done to be owed a favor from a man who worked on Madison Avenue; his memory was spotty. His appetite became spotty as well as he smelled the heavy vegetable scent of the place and felt the thick, spongy atmosphere, imagining all sorts of pathogens and egg pods floating in the air, hair growing on everything.

His dream of MacKenzie buying him lunch died, and he sat glumly, waiting.

MacKenzie himself was a big, broad red-haired man who seemed perpetually out of breath. He entered bustling and managed to bustle while sitting, fidgeting and blowing breath out of his nose to express various emotions. He sat down with a curt nod at Marks, ordered tea, and didn't offer to get Marks anything, which under the circumstances Marks was happy about. He spent one more moment trying to remember why this man owed him a favor, and then gave up. He decided that the universe had been so hard on him for so long, it was okay to accept blind luck.

"What can I do for you, Phil?" MacKenzie said, looking at his watch. Marks noted it was a cheap model, and that MacKenzie was missing a button on his suit jacket, although it was an expensive piece of fabric.

“I’m really busy.”

Marks hesitated. Then he decided he had no choice but to take some chances: He had no resources, and Mrs. Wadell’s two hundred dollars was weighing on him. “Mac, I need you to make an appointment at a place called *Passus, Inc.*”

MacKenzie leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest, making his suit suddenly seem tight and ill-fitting. “Okay, why would I do that?”

Marks leaned forward, figuring it was his only psychological advantage. “Because they’ve been sending money to my client’s husband, and their building is an unmarked mystery box, and I can’t pass for money.”

MacKenzie blew air out his nose again. “So I make an appointment, and then what?”

“I go in as you. All I need is the credit check.”

MacKenzie accepted his iced tea with ill grace, then sat staring at Marks unhappily. Then he pointed at him. “And after this we’re *square*, right?”

Marks nodded. “After this we’re square.” He wondered if he’d made a good deal.

.oOo.

Whatever financial troubles MacKenzie was experiencing, he encountered no trouble making an appointment with *Passus, Inc.* The girl he spoke to on the phone was courteous and slotted him for the next

day at three in the afternoon. MacKenzie reported they'd asked very basic biographical questions, and it hadn't struck him as anything more ominous than making a doctor's appointment.

Sitting in the empty shared office in the dark, craving a drink and afraid to move for fear that motion would simply result in him sitting at a bar somewhere, a hole he might never climb out of, Marks wondered if he'd miscalculated, if they were onto him. It was too easy. Then he worried that he'd never pass for MacKenzie who, even in apparent decline, had more money on his back and on his fingers than Marks himself typically saw in a year.

The next day he woke up with the searing sun as it invaded the conference room, hot and clear like boiled water, the building's air conditioning fifteen minutes from kicking on. Sweaty and gritty, he washed up in the kitchenette, splashing water and scrubbing down. Then he inspected his suit and feebly tried to improve it, smoothing out the wrinkles and shaking it out, as if the stale humid air of the office would somehow revive it. He went into the restroom out in the hall and dressed, trying to take care and approximate success and a diet that wasn't more or less 90% junk food. He was depressed surveying the results; the man in the mirror was thin and loose-skinned and looked very much like he cut his thinning hair himself. This was the end result no matter what: Dissolution and the Slow Fade. No blaze of glory, no heroics. Just a little less of you every day until there wasn't enough left to get you out of bed in the morning.

After a moment, he reached into his pocket and extracted the cash left from his payday. Grabbing his

briefcase he went and lived a normal life for three hours.

He bought himself breakfast at a diner: Eggs and toast and bacon and coffee and butter and ketchup. It was more food than he'd eaten at one time in years, and afterwards, forcing himself to finish his fourth cup of light, sweet coffee, he felt bloated and stupid.

He bought himself a haircut and a shave at an old-school barbers, a Belorussian man named Boris who kept up a professional stream of small talk and anecdotes as he hovered over Marks, snipping and shaving and measuring.

He bought himself a new dress shirt, hoping it would offset the shabbiness of his suit. The total cost of his splurges was sixty-three dollars, leaving him with a bit more than a hundred left. He felt better, and decided to continue by strolling through the park and having some lunch before heading back downtown to MacKenzie's appointment. He hoped that by larding up on food and grooming he would pass, however briefly, as normal. All he wanted was more information to go on.

When he returned to the Fifth Avenue address, he found a different team of security professionals, and instead of being run off his name was checked against a list and he was issued a visitor badge and instructed to head up to the fifth floor, where he was greeted by an efficient young man dressed in what Marks imagined the phrase "business casual" meant. He was tall and thin and scrubbed, youthful and cheerful.

"Mr. MacKenzie!" he boomed. "I am the Interviewer—we deprecate names here—and I will be conducting our interview today. Please, follow me."



Marks followed the kid through an unmanned reception desk and into a maze of cubicles beyond, ushering him into one of the identical spaces, where Marks sat just inches away from The Interviewer as he settled himself in front of a laptop. There was no decoration in the cube, and as far as Marks could tell, no one else in the office.

“Okay, Mr. MacKenzie, I reviewed your pertinent details earlier and I do believe your current financial difficulties, health, and age make you an ideal candidate!” The Interviewer twisted around awkwardly to grin at Marks. “I’m very glad you were put in touch. I just have a few questions, and then we’ll need to set up the lab appointments and get your banking details.”

Marks kept himself very still. He had not been on a job interview in a very long time, and he felt a creeping paralysis coming over him, a debilitating fear that his face wasn’t obeying his commands, that the words he heard himself saying weren’t the same that everyone else heard.

“Okay, everything looks right, Mr. MacKenzie. Don’t worry, your financial troubles will be going away presently. We’ll just need you to get through the physical exam, the labs, and you can start earning.” He looked at me, smiling. “The whole process takes about two weeks.” He studied Marks’ face and tilted his head, misinterpreting the expression he found. “Don’t worry, just hold out against those creditors a few more weeks and everything comes together!”

Marks nodded and managed a tight, off-kilter smile. He was confused; Mac was apparently not nearly as well-off as Marks had assumed, yet this was apparently

exactly what *Passus* was looking for. He scrambled for a question that might get him more information without giving the game away.

“How—how does it work? Exactly.”

The Interviewer smiled. “Sure, there’ll be an orientation once you sign the NDA and the other contracts. But don’t worry: Once you sign and you’re processed, you don’t have to lift a finger, or do anything.” He shrugged. “Except suffer, of course.”

The Interviewer’s smile was bright and easygoing. Marks blinked at it like it was a sun lamp. He ran the word *suffer* through a few internal algorithms and decided that questioning it would be a tactical error, so he forced a smile on his face and nodded.

“Great! I’ll take you through to our medical team. You did clear your morning, didn’t you?”

.o0o.

Marks walked around, feeling depleted. They’d taken a lot of blood, all very professional. The tubes they’d filled had been marked with odd, esoteric words. *Filament. Limnal. Rotundity.* They wanted urine samples, and after he’d filled a cup they plied him with water until he felt loose and unmoored, eager for more. They insisted he stand inside a circle chalked on the floor, and what he took for humming he was convinced by the end to be chanting, a specific circular invocation each of the men and women were almost constantly reciting.

Somehow, he felt as if they'd taken much more than just a little blood, a little urine, a little saliva carried from his mouth via tasteless, neutral swabbings. He felt unsettled, unbalanced, and he walked despite a leaden sense of exhaustion, carrying his jacket and briefcase like weights around himself, pulling him down. He sat down on a park bench, feeling overheated, and listened to someone playing the sousaphone very, very badly as he tried to figure what he'd gotten himself into. MacKenzie was not as rich as Marks had assumed—he realized that in his current state of financial distress anyone who wasn't living on hot dogs and borrowed air-conditioning would seem like a socialite—yet Passus had been overjoyed to sign him up. And had then exhibited zero interest in his financials, but a deep interest in his physical state and identity.

He couldn't sleep. He wandered all night, missing the window when he could slip back into the office and bunk down for the night, after the cleaning people had left but before the security guards locked everything down. He walked until he was in a trance, and then he sat down on a bench in Washington Square Park, and fell asleep.

Marks was awakened by the insistent squawking of his cheap phone. Bleary, he startled up and almost fell off the bench. For one moment he stared around blindly, uncertain of his whereabouts. Fragments of a dream clung to him, a man dressed in black pursuing him, a bartender asking him if he was all right.

Dumb, he fumbled for the vibrating piece of plastic and put it to his ear.

"Phil?"

It was MacKenzie. His voice had an element of fear and desperation to it that pinged Marks' own alarms, leaving him standing rigid, gripping the phone tightly.

"Phil, what did you *do*? What's happening?"

Marks blinked around the twilight park. A little before sunrise, he thought. "What's happening, Mac?"

"I'm *rich*, for one thing," Mac said, panting. "There's a deposit ... from Passus. It's ... substantial."

"Oh," Marks said, his brain stiff. "Oh."

"And I'm *sick*," Mac said, his voice taking on a rough edge of panic. "I went to bed and I was *fine*, Phil. *Fine*. I woke up not feeling right, and I'm sick. Like, really sick."

Marks shivered and began to pace back and forth. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, shit," Mac said, his voice suddenly going molten and phlegmy. He dissolved into coughs. "Phil, I don't know. I woke up hot and dry and bloated, and my skin is all ... wrong. What happened? What's happening?"

Marks worked his mouth but had no words.

"I gotta go, Phil. I'm heading for the hospital. Call me later, okay?"

Marks nodded, dumb. There was an awkward amount of silence, and then Mac clicked off. Marks stood for a moment, the phone still held to his ear, staring at the brightening park.

“Mr. Marks?”

Marks tried a smile, realized midway that it wasn't working, and nodded, squinting. The result was mysterious to him: He had no idea what his facial expression might be conveying.

“Mrs. Wadell,” he said. “I hope you don't mind.”

She was as neat and tidy and cool as Marks felt wrinkled and hot and unsettled. Her hair was pinned up perfectly, and she wore a simple skirt and blouse with effortless ease. The house behind her, however, smelled of medicine and sickness, uncirculated air that was becoming heavier with microbes and coughed-up mucous molecules, damp and sour.

“Of course not, Mr. Marks,” she said, stepping aside. “You have some news on my ... well, what's the word? Case? Issue?”

I pushed my way past her and didn't answer. I didn't wait for further invitation; I kept walking. The air got denser as I approached the bedroom in the rear of the house. She didn't start to murmur protests until I was through the door.

Mr. Wadell hadn't moved or changed in any perceptible way. He was still just a lump on the bed that was slightly heavier than the sheets and blankets. His eyes, though, yellow and swollen, leaped to Marks the moment he entered the room, alive and clear.

Marks stopped, feeling sweaty and vague. He took a deep breath.

“I think I just killed a man.”

Wadell gave no overt reaction. “You stupid bastard,”

he hissed, his overlarge hands gripping the top of the blanket. "What did you do?"

Marks shifted his weight. "I signed up under an assumed name."

"Fucking *hell*, the name's all that matters," Wadell hissed. The moment of anger seemed to exhaust him, and he sank even more deeply into the bed that was slowly consuming him. "It's all right," he said, weak and soft, as Mrs. Wadell entered the room in a state of constrained, restrained alarm. "Mr. Marks and I just have something to discuss."

She looked at Marks, indecisive, then smiled, patting her chest. "Very well."

"Is this what you do, Mr. Marks? Wander the world making trouble for people? Barging into *voluntary* and *private* situations and make a mess of things?"

Marks shrugged. He felt like he had no way of answering the question. "What can I do? Will he die?"

Wadell didn't answer right away. "No. But depending on what he's taking away from the client, it's going to be ugly. It's a painful way to live, Mr. Marks. You're sick. All the time. Worse some days. It takes a toll, I won't pretend it doesn't. Carrying someone else's cancer, someone else's cirrhosis, someone else's Parkinson's. It wears you down. They switch you out before you die, but ... sometimes I wish they didn't."

Marks closed his eyes. "The ultimate health care plan."

"Fuck you. The compensation's fair."

"Is it?"

“Fuck you again. I made my choices. Whoever you just fucked over didn’t.”

Marks turned to go, then hesitated. Without looking back, he said “And your wife? She’s okay with your choices?”

Wadell didn’t respond right away. When he did his voice was soft and weak. “She’s cashing the checks, ain’t she?”

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Once again, Marks had washed up, brushed his jacket, and wore his new shirt, which hadn’t been laundered but was still in better condition than anything else he owned. He stepped into the office quickly, and ignored the extended hand of the bland, handsome man behind the desk.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr—” Marks said.

“You can simply call me The Broker—we do not like to use names here.” Bland Man said in a booming, hollow voice. “Of course. Our freelancers are our lifeblood. What can I do for you, Mr. MacKenzie?”

Marks looked around. The office was large but generic. The furniture wasn’t special or custom: Just a metal desk and a standard chair, a lamp and a mid-range computer. No phone, no credenza or wet bar or decoration. It smelled neutral. It was as if The Broker and the whole organization was making an effort to leave no mark. Although he assumed the young Interviewer and The Broker could not be the sole

employees, the whole floor was quiet and felt still and unused.

“My name’s not MacKenzie. In fact, I went through your whole process under an assumed name, and now a man is suffering without knowing why.”

The Broker’s smile fell away. His face flushed, and for a second Marks felt his adrenaline dumping, as if he could sense or smell a fight in the air, somehow. “That is ... disappointing. What is your name, then?”

Marks couldn’t resist a smile. “I don’t like to use names, either.”

The Broker sat very still and silent for a moment. Then he leaned back and propped his chin up on one finger. “We must set this right. Your Mr. MacKenzie must be in some distress.”

Marks nodded. “He seemed to be, yes.”

The Broker leaned forward. “Our clients pay us to remove from them pain and suffering. To deliver to them health and happiness. It is impossible—*impossible*—to reverse these actions. The solution is simple: You must take his contract. This deception is your responsibility.”

Marks stiffened. He’d known this. He’d told himself this as recently as moments ago, when he was riding the elevators up, accompanied by two security guards who remained suspicious that The Broker would wish to see him despite Marks’ insistence and the confirming phone call from the desk, the two of them eager to toss him back out on the street like their comrades had.

But he dreaded the idea. Cold and viscous, the dread filled him as the idea was verbalized. He swallowed.



“What ... what will I –”

“The term is twenty years,” The Broker said. “The afflictions will vary.”

Marks closed his eyes. *Afflictions* was a terrible word. It was generic, and when it came to endless suffering, generic was terrible. It was wide-open. He had no choice in the short-term: To allow MacKenzie to suffer was impossible. He had to start by having the contract transferred, and then he would be able to figure out what to do next.

He looked at The Broker. “How do we do this?”

The Broker brightened, opening a drawer. “I have the paperwork here.”

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“Jesus.”

MacKenzie didn’t look at Marks. He was wrapped in a plush-looking terrycloth robe, but was sweaty and gaunt, unshaven and hollow-eyed.

“It’s faded a bit,” he said as Marks stepped into his apartment. “I’m feeling better.”

Marks didn’t say anything. He thought Mac looked awful.

The apartment wasn’t what he expected, until he remembered that Mac had passed the initial screening at Passus because he wasn’t nearly as rich as Marks remembered. The place was nice enough, and felt luxurious to Marks, but was another generic space:

Builder's beige, the smell of fresh paint, fluorescent lighting. They stood awkwardly in the tiny foyer, but Mac made no move to lead Marks further in. In the next room, Marks could see boxes piled up on a card table.

"Listen, Mac, I did something. I didn't mean to, and I'm here to make it right."

Mac nodded, then exploded into a coughing fit, hunching over, red-faced and swollen. He held up one hand to forestall intervention. Marks startled, then settled back on his heels, watching anxiously. When the fit passed, MacKenzie spent a few moments doubled over, gasping, then finally straightened up.

"All right, Phil," he said, his voice wet and ragged. "Tell me."

Marks told him. MacKenzie listened, stone-faced, occasionally biting back more coughing.

"So rich assholes pay me to take their diseases," he finally said, wonderingly. "That's fucking brilliant, in a way."

Marks wrung his hands, shifting his weight. "I'm sorry, Mac. If I'd known—"

Mac laughed, a barking, harsh noise that cut Marks off.

Marks sobered. He reached into his jacket and extracted the papers the Broker had given him. He swallowed. "I'm prepared to make this right, Mac. These are transfer papers. I'll take on your account. Your afflictions." He wondered what it would be like. He appreciated the twist: He would finally have money, but he would suffer for it. But hadn't he been suffering for nothing for a long time already?

Mac stared at the papers, then looked at Marks.  
“Jesus Christ, Phil, no.”

“No?”

Mac swallowed more coughs. “Did you see the zeros? The money? I ride this for a year or two, I’ll be set. All of it, set right.”

Marks thought of Mr. Wadell, faded and shrunken.  
“Mac, I don’t think—”

“You want it?” Mac said, peering owlishly at Marks.  
“Huh? You saw the zeros, you regret not taking the slot. Jesus, Phil I know you’re broke. I know you’re basically on the street. Get your own contract.”

Marks stared. “Mac, I don’t think you understand—”

Mac gestured at the door, weaving on his feet and looking faint. “I gotta lie down, Phil,” he said, sounding distant. “Get out. Take your fucking papers. Get your own contract.”

Marks hesitated, uncertain. Mac’s face took on a bloated red expression of meanness.

“Fine. A payoff, right? You fucking slug. You fucking *grifter*. You realize you fucked up, and here you are trying to stick your head under my skin. Fine, you want a payday.”

Mac stormed off, his breath loud and damp, leaving Marks standing awkwardly in his foyer. A moment later, he returned with a shoebox in his hand. He handed it to Marks.

“Take it,” he snarled. “My emergency fund, which I was just about to tap into. All I had left. Five grand. Take it and call it a fee or whatever, and go get your own

contract, if that isn't enough."

Marks remembered weighing the box in his hands, then lifting the lid and peering inside, stunned at the bills. Real money. *Actual* money. He remembered looking at MacKenzie, who stood there flushed with fever, eyes reddened and weeping, breathing shallowly, mouth open. He looked awful, and after a moment Marks turned and slowly walked to the door. Opening it, he listened to Mac's labored breathing and thought about how the apartment already smelled like disease, like something invisible burning, being depleted.

He turned in time for the door to slam in his face. He stood for a moment, listening to the low, subconscious buzz of ambient noise. Then he became aware of his own body: The lack of pain, the ease of his breathing, the steady beat of his heart. He took a deep breath and turned away from the door, smiling. Five thousand dollars. He remembered thinking he would go sleep indoors for a few days, see what happened.

### 3. The Starlight Motel

The motel had a bar and restaurant, a small round space next to the office. The bar was also round, and the tables were arranged in a circle. Marks was dizzy for a moment, standing just inside the door, letting his old eyes adjust to the gloom. The smell was familiar: Sawdust, grease, stale beer. The sounds were familiar: Old radio rock, the murmur of conversation, the clink of glassware. There were six cars in the restaurant's parking lot, so Marks guessed this was where the old-timers and welfare check folks went to do their drinking. He knew exactly what kind of place it was, even though he knew he'd been sober for at least two years now, maybe longer.

He sat down at the bar. The bartender was an old man with a preposterous belly. It preceded him by at least two feet, Marks thought, somehow entering the future a second before the rest of him. Marks thought this was the situation for which anything accurately described as a *truss* had been created, and could only imagine the lower back pain the poor man lived with.

A coaster was tossed at him. "Huh?"

"A Coke," he said.

The bartender snorted through the white hairs exploding from his nose, expressing his disapproval. He placed a glass in front of Marks and filled it using the hose.

"Thanks."

This elicited another snort.

The place had seven other patrons. Five of them sat

alone; in one corner there was a middle-aged couple, fat and red-faced, cackling and sitting close, drinking shots and beers. Marks thought they looked happy in their delirium, wet-mouthed and insensible but together. He had a feeling the evening would end with them screaming at each other in the parking lot, because something told him he'd seen that couple many times in his life.

Four of the others were old men, slumped in their seats, staring and silent.

The final customer was a young girl. Marks thought she looked like a kid, a teenager. She was dark-skinned, her hair a tangled mass of curls that had been pulled back in a messy, half-hearted arrangement, lopsided and whimsical on her head. She was wearing jeans and a pink halter top, and she was skinny and athletic-looking. Sitting at a booth, she was playing with her phone, a cheap older model. She stood out in the dark, sticky bar, the sort of place that people came to wait for death. She stared back at Marks for a few seconds until he looked away.

“You want a menu?”

The bartender sounded unhappy, as if asking the question somehow broke unspoken rules and treaties dating back to long before Marks had dared to enter the place. He held a menu halfway between them, and Marks reached out to take it.

“And you!” the bartender suddenly shouted, looking at the girl. “Order something or get the fuck out, yeah?”

The girl looked down at the table and bunched her jaw muscles, pretending not to hear. Marks studied her,

the menu in his hand. He thought, good fortune soured if you kept it to himself. And he knew better than most that those old superstitions were usually more real than people thought.

“Hey, you want a burger?”

She looked up at him, surprised. They held each other’s gaze for a second, and then she nodded and looked away.

Marks handed the menu back. “Two burgers,” he said, pointing at the girl. “One for her.” When the bartender stood there looking back at him, menu held in one hand, Marks pulled out his wallet and laid a hundred on the bar and tapped it with his finger until the bartender’s eyes were dragged downward. There was a still moment, tense with inaction, and then the bartender snorted again, his white hairs fluffing in the breeze.

“Comin’ the fuck *up*,” he said.

Marks smiled at his back. Then he turned and offered the girl a thumb’s up. She stared back at him, something almost nearly a smile on her face, and then Marks felt silly, so he shrugged and contemplated his Coke, which offered every sign that it was flat and past its sell-by date. He kept staring at it, though, because otherwise he would stare at the bottles behind the bar, from the dusty top shelf where a single bottle of Glenlivet sat, sad and dejected, to the crowded bottom shelf, where *Early Times* ruled the day. He didn’t see his old brand, and for that he was at least somewhat grateful.

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“Hey, old man.”

Marks paused and turned. The girl leaned against one of the old cars in the parking lot, a station wagon that had seen six-digit miles, its old wood paneling missing, scars of glue and screws left instead.

“If I’m old, what’s the guy behind the bar?”

“Dead.”

He nodded. “Got it.”

“Why’d you do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I had a lucky day. I wanted to spread it.”

She nodded, chewing her lip and staring at him. “I ain’t ... I’m not gonna ... I’m not -”

He held up his hand. “Never thought you were. Just looked hungry.”

“Thanks.”

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The next morning Marks woke up sweating, on the floor, wearing his suit and jacket, the stacks of currency like rocks in the lining. He stared up at the water stains and wondered at the noise until it resolved in his mind as pounding on the door.

He struggled to his feet, feeling like a stiff and



bloated turtle, his back aching, his legs numb. He staggered to the door and opened it to find the girl, wearing the same clothes. She had two paper cups of coffee in her hands.

“Here,” she said, thrusting one towards him. “It’s free in the office every morning. They usually get donuts too, but those go fast.”

He reached out and took one of the cups. It was painfully hot, and he turned and placed it on the table in the sitting area, cursing. When he turned back, the girl was in the room, looking around.

“By the way of thanks for dinner last night,” she said. “And for not requesting a blow job in return.”

He grimaced. “You get that a lot?”

“Jesus *yes*,” she said, moving towards the little kitchenette. “The shit old fat guys think deserves a blow job range from *not raping me* to *being polite to me*. I was afraid a fucking hamburger would take me to a whole new fucking level of rapey grief.”

He blinked. “Jesus.” Then he blinked again, looking down at himself. “Fat?”

She peeled the lid off her coffee. “You know what’s *jesus*, old man? This fucking *room*. How long you stuck here?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” He eyed her warily. Homeless teenagers haunting cheap motels made him worry over his cash. He pushed his hands into his pockets, realized he was barefoot, and felt scratchy and foul-smelling.

She looked back at him, shifting her weight and

smiling a little. “Divorce? She kick your ass out, cut up your cards? Lose your job?”

He smiled back, suddenly, without planning it. “I lost everything, a long time ago. This is a high-water mark for me. This is me on the way *up*.”

She nodded, her face a mask of delighted surprise. “Aw, man, that is some *sad* sad shit right there. *This* is your come up? Talk about *jesus*. You’re havin’ some kind of world-record *jesus* moment.”

“I suppose I am. What’s your name?”

She hesitated. For some reason giving out her name suddenly felt like a step, an advance into intimacy. Then she took a deep breath, deciding that her choices had narrowed down, and the bar had lowered to the point where a man who bought her a meal without creeping on her was the best thing she’d seen in days.

“Dee,” she said. “*Deandra*, but call me Dee. What are you, anyway?” She eyed him, sipping coffee, the sunlight from the open door lighting her up auburn and cocoa. “Salesman? You got a I-didn’t-make-my-quota-oh-shit-I’m-fired thing going on.”

Marks shook his head, crossing over to the table and pulling the lid off his own coffee. It was light with cream. “I’m a ... an investigator.”

“No shit? Like on TV.”

He shrugged, sipping the coffee tentatively. It was terrible, watery and bitter, but it was free. Or, he reminded himself after months and months of that silent math, not *free*, but already paid for. “Kind of, I guess, but I sort of concentrate on ... strange stuff.”

“Ghost hunters?” she said immediately, excited. “Are you a fucking *ghost hunter*?”

Marks smiled, leaning back against one of the chairs and holding the scalding hot coffee in one hand. “Sometimes. Usually it’s not that easy to explain.”

She eyed him again, sipping. “And I can see that business is a-*boomin’*, huh?”

He gestured at her with his coffee. “I got a room. *You* got a room?”

She nodded and compressed her lips, but didn’t say anything, returning her wandering attention to the room. She suppressed a surge of emotion that she knew would have her crying. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t a crier.

“I had a room,” she finally said. She looked back at him. “You really an investigator?”

Marks nodded, tensing.

She looked down into her cup of coffee. “I maybe got something to investigate.”

## 4. The Starlight Motel

“So you never heard back from him?”

Dee shook her head, playing with her phone in the idle way kids did. He’d caught a glimpse of the screen earlier: A chess game, which was surprising to him for no good reason. Marks noticed that her fingernails were bitten down. That her hands were always in motion, fidgeting, wringing, tearing and folding and squeezing. That she looked at him with a surprising directness when she was sure of herself and looked at the floor when she wasn’t.

“Mom always told me he was no good, a junkie. Stole from everybody. Got in these rages, she said, would bust down doors.” Dee shrugged, tearing the cup into smaller and smaller slices. “I guess I was too young to remember. Then he went away, left town, and Mom always said we were better off without. Then, when Mom got sick, I got a letter from him.”

She didn’t say that sometimes she thought she *did* remember some of it. That sometimes she woke up terrified, and wanted to go hide in a very small, dark space she remembered and didn’t remember at the same time. She remembered how safe she felt in it, compressed and constricted, but she didn’t remember what the space had been, or where, or why she hid in it.

She glanced up. Marks sat relaxed against the soft booth, one arm outstretched along the back of the seat. If he still smoked he would have had a cigarette burning in his hand. For a fleeting second he missed it.

“An actual *letter*,” she said. “On *paper*. I was going to live with him. He’d gotten help, gotten straight, and

he'd talked about it with Mom. It was all arranged. He didn't come to the funeral because Mom's people, my Aunts and Uncles, don't like him. But he picked me up and drove us here and we took a room in the motel, and he went out the next day to check out this cheap apartment deal he'd heard about. And he never came back."

She said this in a flat, matter-of-fact way that made Marks worry about her. "Was he sober? Your Dad?"

She nodded solemnly. "He showed me this little plastic disc he'd gotten. Six months." She swallowed thickly. "I was proud of him."

Marks nodded. "Sober's the worst and most necessary thing a man can be," he said.

"You sober?"

He nodded again. "I almost died. I had a thirst that wasn't ... entirely natural. And it almost killed me. Took years from me, years I still can't remember. I lived for years and they're just gone." He startled and sat forward, focusing on Dee. "You play chess, huh?"

She blinked and looked at him, suddenly shy. She looked down at the table, setting the phone down as if ashamed. "Yeah," she said. "My mother taught me. We used to play at night. She used to be really good. Chess club in school. She taught me the basics. I don't remember too many openings, though. Queen's Gambit, I always liked. Mom used to say she was a Queen, so all her openings were Queen openings.

Marks smiled. "I never played much. Could never think far enough ahead. Always fell into traps. Your Mom sounds like she was a thinker."

Dee smiled and looked back at him. "I like that. Yeah, she was a thinker."

There was a moment of odd silence. Marks cleared his throat. "You have the address your Dad went to?"

She nodded as their food arrived: Another hamburger for her, a triple-decker sandwich for him. The diner was a few hundred feet down the highway; walking there had been an adventure of cars zooming by, but Marks wanted to avoid the bar at the motel as much as possible. His dreams had been filled with images of people he didn't remember and whiskey, oceans of it cascading over ice cubes, crisp and refreshing. He had a feeling he'd originally started drinking to forget, and it sure had worked.

"You taking my case?"

Marks blinked; the burger was already half gone. She was a skinny, long-legged thing who would be a heartbreaker in a few years, he thought. For the moment she was the hungriest living thing he'd ever seen.

"I'll follow up," he said, arranging his own plate how he liked, removing the toothpick, peeling back the toasted white bread on top and dumping the cole slaw on top of his sandwich. "I'll ask a few questions. But you have to be prepared for bad news, for disappointment." He didn't say that it sounded like a normal missing persons case, without any sort of strange angle, making it outside his specialty. He also didn't say that the odds were very good her Dad had taken the rent deposit money he'd saved and thought he could have just a nip of the hard stuff, to celebrate, and had disappeared down that hole again.

He looked up, and she was nodding gravely, and he felt like an asshole. She already was prepared for disappointment, wasn't she? Had been for a long time, he thought.

They ate in silence for a while.

She felt the awkwardness but didn't understand it. What had just happened? Old people were always like that, always grimacing and saying nothing when they could solve shit just by opening their damn mouths. "What happened to *you*?" she asked. "How'd Mr. Marks end up at the Starlight Motel off of Route One?"

Marks looked out the window, through the parking lot, out to the busy highway and the ugly, chipped and ruined concrete divider between the lanes. "I'm not totally sure," he said. "I was always interested in ... weird shit." He caught himself and glanced at her, but the profanity didn't bother her, and then he felt silly. "I was *attuned* to it. I stumbled across crazy things, things other people didn't believe. So I started writing about what I found. There was an audience—not a big one—and I got a following. For a while I made a living. People would seek me out, ask me to look into things." He looked back out the window. Dee studied him, chewing.

"At some point, I got into ... something. I can't remember. It's like years of my life, stolen, gone. Since then, it's like I can't get any purchase. The world's made of sand. Every time I try to grab onto something—" he made a vague gesture at the window, then looked back at the girl. "So, here I am at the Starlight Motel off of Route One. It's like a sudden rock formation in the desert, and I'm clinging."

She took a sip of her soda. "Shit, Marks, I should

maybe be helping *you*.”

He snorted. “Address?”

She dug into her pockets and produced a scrap of newspaper, which she handed to Marks after a moment of hesitation. He unfolded it and read aloud, holding the paper out from himself.

“Apartments for rent. Very affordable. Special consideration given to those in need, those recovering from tragedy, those rebuilding their lives, and those who have nowhere else to turn. Rents commiserate with ability to pay. Please apply in person at 119 Mulland Street,” he glanced up at her, aware, suddenly, of his scruffy cheeks and stiff hair, the money sewn into his jacket lining making him feel heavy and graceless. “This was in the paper? You know which one?”

She pushed her empty plate away, and Marks glanced down and stared at it in amazement. “Didn’t even know there *was* papers,” she said. “But Dad was old, like you, so.”

Marks smiled, folding the scrap up and pushing it into his pocket. She stared at his sandwich until he grunted and slid it across to her. She picked up half and took an enormous bite and made a face.

“Nasty,” she said, and took another huge bite.

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Marks counted his loose money in the bathroom, sweating, but left the rest of it in his jacket. He had four-hundred and fifteen dollars left not counting the



bills in his jacket lining, which he was pretending didn't exist. Thirty-five was due at the front office in the morning for rent. That left three-eighths, which he figured was plenty of walk-around money. He stuffed it back into his pocket.

"You can stay here," he said, walking back into the room. Dee was on the bed, playing chess on her phone again. "Just don't answer the door, and don't burn the place down."

She didn't look away from the screen. She was contemplating her next move while a tiny hourglass counted down thirty seconds. "Where are you going?"

"Personal business," Marks said. "I was going to lay low here, take a vacation. If I'm going to work for my newest client, I'll need to lay some groundwork."

She frowned at the chess game. Her mind raced through possibilities. He was ditching her, he'd never come back. He was somehow screwing her over, though she had nothing to steal. He'd have a heart attack or something and die out there, and she'd be in his fucking *room* and everyone would think ... things.

She said, "When will you be back?"

"Couple of hours."

She resigned her game but kept staring at the screen until he'd left the room.

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The trip required two bus rides with a transfer and a

bracing walk of about a mile. The storage facility was in a dessicated part of town, empty sidewalks with weeds cracking them open, dusty wind, old warehouse space that had been converted into artist's lofts and rough retail spaces. The storage place was new and shiny, air-conditioned and camera-monitored, and staffed by one bored and disinterested young man who glanced up from his seat behind the desk just long enough to confirm that Marks knew where he was going and didn't need assistance.

He'd rented the unit years before, long ago when everything had been different. His office had been crowded, he remembered, files everywhere. Pre-digital, he'd packed everything into cardboard boxes—photos, reports, notes, directions, letters, invoices, expense reports. He'd even paid for a service that picked up the boxes and took them to his storage unit for him.

He remembered these things the way he remembered a lot of useless trivia from his past life: Isolated facts, unconnected until he put in the mental effort of comparing them, rubbing them up against each other.

The unit was loosely filled with boxes, some of which had been overturned, their paper contents vomited onto the floor, or on top of other boxes. Some of the boxes were clearly marked and well-organized, others had vague, coded labels that made no sense to him. For a moment he stood, feeling cold and exposed in the harsh crank air of the place, defeated already. Then he stepped inside, stooped down, and scooped up a pile of paper, sitting down on top of a box to start paging through it all.

Although his life was a vague soup in his mind, he was certain of one thing: He'd always relied on the random connections of the universe. Everything was spiderwebbed together in complex, quantum ways that were hard if not impossible to comprehend. He'd often pursued problems and cases by sitting and smoking a cigarette, a shot of whiskey in front of him, just staring at the world outside, letting particles collide as they passed through his brain.

Three hours in, there was a collision. He stared down at a single scrap of paper, thin and cheap, the sort of recycled stuff they sold in pads, made from old newspapers and other trash. On it was written an address: 119 Mulland Street. A thrill went through him, and then quickly faded as he realized it was a scrap of paper that had escaped its connections and links, leaving him with the rest of the files to sort through, looking for the case it linked back to.

When he emerged from the storage facility, the sun was low in the sky and the day felt depleted, empty. His back ached as he walked back to the bus stop, uncertain when the next bus was due to arrive. He carried a thin manila folder, clutched tightly in one hand. On the ride home the bus became crowded; earlier he'd missed rush hour and it had been empty, sloshing through its route drunkenly. Now it had ballast, and Marks was pinned into the rear corner, over the engine, hot and fume-y. He flipped through the pages but couldn't concentrate. He was unsure of his stop and kept peering owlishly out the grimy window.

When he pressed the buzzer for a stop, it took him so long to fight his way to the door the bus had started moving, and only a chorus of helpful shouts from his

fellow citizens saved him another four blocks of walking.

.oOo.

“What’s that?”

Dee was on the bed in the same pose; if not for the damp towels and the open food containers he would have believed that she hadn’t moved all day.

He tossed the file onto the table. He wanted to remove his jacket more than he wanted oxygen, but still hesitated. He doubted the girl knew about the money, but it still bothered him, letting four thousand-plus dollars out of his hands. He crossed his arms uncomfortably and leaned against the TV stand, affecting relaxation and comfort. “The address? That your Dad saw in that advertisement? I’ve come across it before.”

She sat up, muting the television. “What? Seriously?”

He nodded. “It’s not much. An old story someone contacted me about. A missing person, just like your Dad.”

She stared at him. “And?”

He shrugged. “I’m ... I’m not sure, to be honest.” He gestured at his head. “I don’t remember things well. There’s a folder, which means I took the case and did something with it. But there’s not much in there. In fact, it looks like I tossed a lot of stuff out into the trash, because there’s cross-references to folders that I don’t have any more.” He sighed. “I *know* I looked into this,

once. But it's gone."

She stared at the folder. "So, like, how does that help us, then?"

"It doesn't, really. But it does mean it might be more up my alley than I thought."

## 5. City Hall

Grissom looked up over his glasses. “You look good, Philly. Old. Shit, fucking *old*, but not as wetbrained as you were. Fit, kind of.”

Marks nodded. “I feel old. And I've been dry for a long time.” He paused, looked at his shoes, then forced himself to look back at Grissom. “Anything ... anything I should apologize for, Gene?”

Grissom grinned. He was one of those men who came into his own when he'd grown old and gray. He was tall and thin, with a prominent nose and weak eyes that he'd compensated for with thick, black-rimmed glasses. As a kid he'd looked like a bird of some kind. As a man of sixty, he looked like a repository of wisdom. “No, Phil. Nothing personal. What can I do you for?”

Marks shifted uncomfortably. He hated missing so much of his life. He hated always groping in the dark, unsure, uncertain of the reception that awaited him.

“I have an address,” he said. “I'm just looking for anything you know about it. Anything unusual.”

Grissom smiled. “Nothing changes, huh, Phil?” He gestured around. “I'm in a cubical now, not an office. You remember my old office? I used to think it was so goddamn small. Now I've got half the space and no fucking ceiling, and I'm grateful for it. Local government ain't what it used to be, huh? What's the address?”

Marks slid a piece of notepaper over the desk. “It's an apartment building. Low-rent, but not controlled. Seems like the landlord keeps the rents low on purpose, voluntarily, trying to attract the unemployed, the

recently paroled, the desperate.”

Grissom glanced at the address. “The desperate, huh? Philly, you never change.”

“Compliment?”

Grissom laughed. “All right. I’ll dig up what I can. You sure got a way of convincing people to do what you want, huh, Philly? Always did. I’ll see what’s out there as far as tax records, all the usual stuff goes. I assume this is on the house as usual?”

Marks’ smile was faint. “I figured we’d look at it as payback for old times sake.”

Grissom’s return smile was stiff. “You look at it any way you like.”

.o0o.

“So what’s all this bullshit mean?”

Marks watched Dee stuff French fries into her mouth. He figured if her goal had been to grift him out of some free meals, mission accomplished. The diner was empty and silent except for the low music playing in the air, so low it was practically a hint of music, a homeopathic suggestion of music stemming from a single dissolved note.

He tapped the manila folder on the table between them. “Well, everything’s legal. The property’s owned and the taxes are paid by an LLC filed outside the country. Taxes get paid every three months. I haven’t been able to get much on the company, but that would

likely take more time and money than we have. But—there isn't supposed to be a building there."

She cocked her head chewing. "What does that mean?"

"There's no record of any permits being pulled on the lot. The taxes are for unimproved property. There's every sign in the world that that address is just empty space. There *can't* be a building there."

"But there is."

He nodded. "And that's where I come in. Like I said, weird shit, it pulls me in, every time."

She took a long swallow of soda. She was impressed. And something was swelling inside her, an emotion she couldn't quite articulate. She'd assumed she was totally doomed; her mother was dead, her father had disappeared, she was hanging around a motel scrounging for scraps. She thought she knew how that story ended; she'd seen enough TV. And this strange man was saving her from it.

Marks thought she still looked skinny, like someone hadn't been taking care of her. And she ate like someone who'd learned, like he had, that there was no guarantee of another meal coming in a few hours. "So what do we do?"

Marks smiled and nodded, glancing down. "I go there. See what's what."

.o0o.



“Why can’t I come?” she said, looking down into the shopping cart as she pushed. “What, I’m just gonna sit out in the parking lot, wait for you to come back?”

Marks sighed, scanning the shelves. “You can’t come because the things I do always go sideways. Always.” She thought he sounded happy. When she’d first seen him in the bar he’d been heavy, leaden, like a guy trapped under water but trying to run. Now he seemed lighter, more fluid, like he’d switched to swimming. “I once looked into a house someone was trying to sell because they couldn’t figure out what the problem was, and found a vampire trapped in the basement. I took a job following some guy’s wife once because he thought she was having an affair, and found out she was a clone, being used as ... as something else.” He grimaced. “Point is, kid, things go sideways all the time, and if the floor’s gonna drop out from under this thing, I want you somewhere else.”

She turned to study him from the side, chewing her lips. After a moment she looked back at the shopping cart. “You sure you need all this stuff?”

“Did you hear the word *vampire*? I’d rather have a folding shovel and not need it than need one and not have it. Like I said: Sideways. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but you can’t get into weird scrapes every single time like I do and then pretend it doesn’t happen.”

She nodded. The cart held the folding shovel, something she hadn’t imagined existed. It also held a roll of strong nylon rope, a battery-powered lantern and a flashlight, a multi-tool, a backpack, some matches, and two bottles of water and a handful of energy bars.

It looked like he was going camping.

For Marks, the act of shopping felt subversive, insane. It had been a long time since he'd been able to just purchase the things he needed. Like the small, enclosed universe of his motel room, it felt luxurious and decadent even as he weighed each purchase in his mind, going over the pros and cons, the necessity of each one.

He pushed his hands into his pockets, contemplating largess, and smiling without realizing it.

.o0o.

“So, I just sit around the parking lot and wait?”

Marks dropped the bags on the table and took the backpack out, began filling it with his purchases. The walk from the bus stop with the bags had been longer than he remembered, and he was tired and grimy and sweaty. “Look, I might be back in a few hours. It might turn out to be a paperwork mistake. I might just find leads that send us somewhere else. I don't know.”

She nodded. When he'd zipped up the backpack, he glanced up. She was standing in the kitchenette with her arms wrapped around herself, staring moodily at the floor. He sighed, and dug into his pocket, pulling out the remaining cash and counting it. He dropped it on the table.

“Hand me a knife.”

She didn't move for a moment, then turned and opened one of the drawers, pulling out a butter knife

and handing it to him. He sat down and worked the loose stitches of the lining with the knife until he was able to pull a slim pile of banknotes from within. He added it to the pile.

“That’s about a grand,” he said, standing up and peeling a few bills from the top. “I’m going to pre-pay a week’s rent. The rest you can use for food or whatever. Stay here and wait for me, you’ll be fine.”

He slung the backpack over his shoulder. He hesitated. She looked unhappy and alone, too-skinny and wearing the same clothes she’d had on when he met her. He didn’t know what else to do; he could either stay there and try to help her directly or he could look for her father. There wasn’t another choice. He didn’t have any experience of the sort of relationships that could be brought to bear on this. He didn’t have *any* relationships, just old grudges and debts he could occasionally parlay into assistance.

“If I’m not back in a week,” he said, slowly, pausing to actually contemplate the possibility. The *strong* possibility, he corrected himself. “Take whatever’s left and go back to your people. An aunt, an uncle. Anyone.”

She looked up suddenly, horrified. She scanned memories of heavysset women in floral dresses, heavysset men in loose-fitting suits, all of them at the hospital and the funeral, strangers. All of them somehow conveying the fact that she was somehow infected by her parents, a worrisome artifact of their shared genetic code. The idea of putting herself in their power was *terrible*. “My *people*?”

He shrugged. “Just a precaution.”

She seemed on the verge of tears. “You’re gonna leave me here alone.”

He swallowed. “You can’t come. Look, I’ll check things out. I’ll probably be back tomorrow, give you the full report. But you can’t come, even so. You see that, right? Look, I’m not sure what being the adult means. I don’t feel old, or wise. But I know on some instinctual level that part of it means you can’t come.” He shrugged the back over one shoulder and picked up his jacket. “So you stay here. Eat three meals a day. Don’t let anyone in. And I’ll be back to let you know what’s inside that house.”

She nodded, her eyes shining, her arms wrapped around herself. He hesitated, then turned and marched out the door. He felt like he was failing, somehow, like he was leaving her to certain doom. But he was the one heading into the unknown. She would spend a few hours eating pizza and watching TV, he told himself. Or he’d come back to a note that boiled down to *thanks for the seven hundred bucks, asshole* and that would be that.

.o0o.

Buses were running on late night schedules, so he waited a long time for one to arrive. He felt dirty as he rode, the backpack occupying the seat next to him, but city buses were the great camouflage of the world. No one noticed him, a middle-aged man with a scum of beard, wearing a suit that hadn’t been fresh in a very long time, his face pale and bloated and shadowed from

poor nutritional choices and lack of sleep, carrying a bulging backpack. He was just one particle of desperation in a quantum system of desperation, indistinguishable.

It looked like a two-story, detached house that hadn't been renovated in a long time. The old siding was dark green and looked mossy, moldy. The roof line was complex, with a lot of dormers and crazy angles. The yard was a jungle of tall, overgrown weeds, and it was surrounded by a low stone wall. It sat on the corner next to an empty lot, and seemed perfectly normal. A prominent FOR RENT sign had been affixed to the wall. It was dark and looked like no one was home, had been home for a long time, had ever been home.

Pushing through the wild growth that obscured the pavers leading from the sidewalk to the front door, Marks heard a scrape and turned to find Dee right behind him. He stared at her in surprise for a moment and then smiled. She smiled back.

"You ain't the only one can ride a bus, Marks."

"All right," he said. Marks found his reaction impossible to describe, even to himself using his own peculiar inner language, but it landed positive. He was relieved, he thought, to have her there, because part of him had worried about her on her own, and even if she truly wasn't safer with him, he'd grown used to having someone to talk to, a presence by his side. Selfish, he thought, but that's how he felt. And there was no chance of getting rid of her now, anyway.

They walked up onto the sagging, rotten porch. It was peeling gray paint and a spongy give that seemed threatening, as if its bounce was a threat, subtle and

grim. He looked at Dee and nodded.

“Remember: Sideways.”

She nodded back.

He examined the door. It was weathered and aged like the rest of the house, except for the fittings: The knob and knocker and hinges were bright, polished brass, as if they'd been installed the day before. He reached for the knocker, then frowned, leaning in. After a second's delay, Dee stepped up and pushed the door inward. It slid silently on its hinges, darkness beckoning.

## 6. The Anteroom

They found themselves in a large foyer, a square, silent space with an old, scratched-up wooden floor that creaked dangerously under their feet and thick, peeling yellow wallpaper everywhere. A single hatrack stood in the corner behind the door, and a small secretary hunched against the wall to their right, a dusty lace doily on top.

There were three doors, all imposing wooden portals of dark, nearly black wood, stained and varnished to an incredible shine. They appeared to be larger than standard doors; taller and wider, less rectangular, and each one featured an elaborate carving on the top panel. Directly in front of them the door featured a duck, paddling in a pond. The nearest door on their left was decorated with a lizard of some kind, small and low to the ground. The third door featured a lion, prowling majestically.

It was incredibly quiet. Marks could hear the floor complain and groan as they shifted their weight, and Dee's sudden, sharp breathing. He felt like a fool, allowing her to stowaway. He should have turned her around and sent her back—he should have *brought* her back to the motel himself, and come back again.

He should have contacted her family somehow, let them know where she was.

He stepped over to the secretary, a cheap wooden piece with some drawers and shallow shelves, the sort of place you dropped keys and mail on your way into a house. A small wooden carving sat on the dusty doily. He picked it up and held it up, a roughly humanoid,

armless thing polished by a million tense fingers. Green felt had been attached to its underside.

“A pawn,” Dee said. “From a chess set.”

Marks grunted and put it down where he’d found it.

“Well?” she asked, smiling. “Which door, old man?”

Marks realized she thought this was an adventure. Whether she thought her father might be here, or a clue to his whereabouts might be found, or some other piece of information, she didn’t think anything bad could possibly happen. He stepped up to the nearest door and ran his fingers over the intricate carving. A newt, he thought. It was a newt.

He sighed. “Let’s go home. Let’s do this in the daylight. I don’t know why I felt such a need to do this at night, immediately.”

“Maybe because my Dad might be in here?” she said, her voice rising a little. “Tied up in the basement. Or ... or worse. Or maybe there’s a note. Or a—come on!”

She dashed for the next door, the door with the Lion carved on it, and was through before Marks could intervene. He followed as quickly as he could, pushing the surprisingly light door inward and stepping through. There was a short, barren hallway of rough, unfinished drywall. It made a sharp turn to the right a few feet in, and then there was another door. He pushed the second door and stepped through, then paused, sensing a sudden change in the atmosphere. He looked up. He was in an immense room with an impossibly high ceiling.

Dee had stopped a few steps ahead of him, and was perfectly still.



The room was filled with rows upon rows of books on shelves, terribly high, disappearing into the shadows that collected like clouds at the ceiling. The books all looked ancient, crumbling old leather bindings—in fact some appeared to actually *be* dust, destroyed by time. In the aisles between the shelves were huge reading tables, solid oak, looking like they'd been carved from a single tree each. On each one were three reading lamps, the shades a soothing green color that the place a strange, otherworldly feel.

A rolling ladder rested against one of the shelves.

“Kid,” he said, his voice echoing distantly. “Don’t move. Stay in sight.”

“How—how is this fucking *possible*?”

He thought, *like I said: sideways* but didn’t say it. Instead he held out his hand, his eyes dancing over the impossibility of this huge room. “Take my hand, kid. We’re going back.”

She didn’t complain. She stepped backwards, as if afraid that taking her eyes off the room, and felt behind her until she found his hand. He pulled her gently towards him and then turned, and froze.

“Kid, we got problems.”

*Sideways.*

The door was gone.

Dee spun and looked up at him. “Shit, Marks, how is *that* possible?”

He sighed and let go of her hand. “Like I was saying: The scariest thing about the universe is that *anything* is possible. Forget *possible*. Possible doesn’t mean

anything. Possible will get us both killed. Or trapped in here forever.”

She stared up at him, horrified, her expression implying that she saw, for the first time, that she was with a madman.

“Instead, be practical. We walked through a door.” He glanced sideways at her. “Or, more accurately, you barged through a door after I suggested we not do that thing, and I followed you because I am old and worn down and soft at heart.” He sighed. “So, we came through a door. There must be another door.”

She frowned, breathing hard. “Must? Why *must*?”

“Okay, *must* is too strong. *Should be* is better. Come on. I don’t remember much, but I’m pretty sure we got to find our way, not stand here until the lights go out.”

He turned and surveyed the place again. She stepped forward to stand next to him, looking around. “The lights are going out? Old man, tell me the frickin’ *lights* are not going to *go out* in here.”

“Come on.”

He started walking, and after a moment she followed. The aisle was wide, and there was plenty of room to slip past the tables. A thick coating of dust was on everything, and was kicked up from the floor as they walked. The floor was of a polished white stone, and every footstep rang out and echoed.

One table had been used more recently; it was still dusty, but there were smeary marks in the dust, handprints, trails of objects that had been pushed along the surface. Marks squinted at two small objects buried in the fine, gray dust: Two more pawns, from the same

chess set, the same green felt bottoms and the same blond wood.

“How do you know this is the way?”

He turned to look at her and kept going, shrugging. “I don’t. When you don’t know the way, any way is just as good. After—”

Dee suddenly put a hand up. “Listen!” she whispered.

Marks went still and listened. Somewhere nearby, a woman was half-humming, half-singing a song. The tune was familiar to him, maddeningly so. Something about adultery, he thought. Something about cocktails.

He looked at Dee and then they started walking, following the sound. The voice was sweet, on-key, and Marks thought he liked it, listening to it. There was a comforting sense of normalcy to hearing someone hum an old hit song.

They turned a corner into another aisle and there she was: Young without being youthful, somehow; smooth-skinned and lithe, attractive in a made-up, brittle way, brunette curls and athletic build encased in an expensive and expensively tailored suit, the skirt stopping just above her shapely knees. She was walking along the shelves, hands clasped behind her back. She turned, suddenly, and froze, staring at them. Her face was unlined, roundly pretty, her eyes distant and humorless.

She rushed towards them. “Thank *god*,” she said, grabbing onto both their arms. “I was beginning to worry no one else was *coming*! That I was in here all *alone*! Thank god for *you* two!”

Marks nodded, eyes watering. She was wearing perfume—gallons of it, from what he could tell, a sweet citrusy scent that enveloped them all like a cloud and clung to them like mist. He imagined the smell had its own weight, pulling at his clothes as it sank into the fibers. Dee looked at him and wrinkled her nose.

“I’m Phil,” he said, his throat tight from trying to choke back coughs. “Philip K. Marks. This is Dee.”

She hugged them both closer. “Mr. Marks! Ms. Dee! I have *never* been happier to see anyone in my *life*. I’m Agnes DeLay. *So* good to meet you. *Tell* me you know how to get out of here!”

Marks blinked. Agnes was more energy than he was used to dealing with. He wanted nothing more than to get her to stop touching him. “How long have you been here?”

She released them both and took a step backwards. “Oh, my, *so* long. I very nearly gave up. I very nearly just climbed to the top of one of these shelves and *jumped*.”

“Has ... has anyone else come through here?”

She turned and looked at him, then at Dee. She softened a little, and stepped closer, kneeling down and looking at the girl. “I’m sorry, dear. I haven’t seen *anyone*.” She stood up. “Until there was you. Mr. Marks, please tell me you know a way out of here? And maybe you have something to *eat*?”

Marks shrugged the backpack off his shoulder and set it down. Crouching, he unzipped it and pulled out one of the energy bars they’d brought, along with a bottle of water. He handed them over. Agnes trilled

suddenly in delight and grabbed them.

“Oh, you are a *god*, Mr. Marks.”

He sighed, glancing at Dee, who regarded Agnes as one might a wild animal. “Your phone work at all?”

Agnes was chewing loudly, the wrapper from the bar on the floor by her feet. For some reason he couldn’t explain, it bothered him, so he leaned forward and picked it up.

“No,” she said. “It *works*, mind you, it’s powered-*on*, but there’s no signal.” She swallowed. “Nada.”

Marks nodded, looking around. “So, how big is this place? How many rooms?”

She shrugged. “I thought *you’d* know.”

“You—how did you end up here?”

“Same way you did, Mr. Marks—I walked through that door, and that door disappeared.” She brightened, waving the uneaten portion of the bar at him. “Maybe if we hang around where the door *was*, we can dash back through when the next person comes!”

Marks pulled the backpack onto his shoulder and stood up, his back protesting. “That could take a long time. I think that time would be better spent looking for another exit.”

She nodded, handing him the bottle of water, unopened. “Very wise, I suppose. At first I thought, there is so much *knowledge* here, don’t you think? All these *books*. Maybe the answers are hidden in here. A map! A guidebook! Architectural plans!” She was smiling brightly. Then she deflated. “Turns out, they’re all *dictionaries*, as far as I can tell.”

He shook his head. "Come on."

"Why *don't* we wait for the door to show up again?" Dee asked, falling into step next to him.

Marks sighed. "Because when a place takes a door away from you, it's on purpose."

She chewed on that and walked in silence for a while. Agnes followed them, looking around, her high heels clicking loudly on the floor.

"Of course, I can't be certain they're *all* dictionaries. The books, I mean. I've only gone through a few shelves worth. Maybe I just happen to be in the dictionary *section*. The dictionary *wing*. If there are other kinds of books here, you *do* have to wonder what might be in them," she said. "All sort of things, I'd assume. Arcane knowledge. Lost arts. That sort of stuff."

"Props," Marks said. "More likely."

"*Props?*" She repeated, sounding incredulous. "Seriously? You're cynical. That's the problem. Don't listen to him, kid. He's cynical."

Dee veered off and marched over to the stacks. Marks opened his mouth to complain, but bit back the words. Agnes glanced from Dee to him and smiled, shrugging in a way Marks thought meant *kids! what can you do*.

"Nope," Dee said. "They're all dictionaries."

Marks frowned. "All of the books?"

"*All* of them—at least, the ones I can *see*."

"Dictionaries!" Agnes said, sounding almost angry. "I'm sorry. I assumed—I *assumed*—that a library would

be full of more interesting things. Things that might ignite the imagination. Not a bunch of ... a bunch of ... dictionaries.”

Marks stared at her as Dee returned. He had a feeling she was about to end her sentence with a different word, but changed at the last moment.

They were approaching the rear wall, and it seemed to Marks like the ceiling was getting lower as they got closer to it, like the room was shrinking. Along the back wall were three doors, all like the first ones they'd encountered: Slightly differently-shaped, dark, varnished wood, a detailed carving in the center panel. The animals featured were all different, though: A stag, a wolf, and a bird of some sort. Dee walked up to the door and peered at it.

“What animal is that, anyway?”

“Quail,” Agnes said, leaning up to inspect the higher shelves of the nearest bookshelf.

Dee shrugged. “All right, Quail.”

Marks dropped the backpack again. “All right, we've seen six doors, each with a distinct picture.” He opened the backpack and rooted around, extracting a small notebook and pen. He opened the book to a fresh page and began writing.

“What's that?” Agnes asked, turning from the shelves.

“Notes,” he said, scribbling. “We opened the door with the Lion. If we see another Lion, I wonder if it will lead us back here.”

“Like a maze,” Dee said.

“Exactly like a maze.” He looked up and grinned at her. “I told you: Sideways.”

He reflected on the strange cheer he felt. He’d been morose for so long, scraping along on spare change and dumpster diving, alone. And then one decent job had given him a few thousand dollars. And now he was strangely enjoying himself, enjoying being with people, enjoying having a puzzle to work out. He knew it was inappropriate—maybe a little crazy—but he thought he might be *happy*.

Dee sat down on the floor next to him. “You’re acting like this shit is *normal*.”

He shook his head. “Normal for me. *Normal for me* is not *normal*.”

She digested that.

“Still no interest in the *infinite* knowledge this place seems to offer?” Agnes said. “Or do we just choose a door at random? In which case, the Wolf door, certainly. Stags are always the symbols of doom, you know, in legends and such, and who in their right mind follows a Quail? A wolf is a noble beast. You can trust a wolf. As long as he isn’t too hungry.”

“How long have you been here, Agnes?” Marks asked. “You read any of the dictionaries?”

She leaned back against the shelf again. “Too intimidating. I was never much for books myself. Plenty of *brains*, but very little *discipline*. Flighty. Brain constantly going and going. You know the type. Luckily I discovered tight sweaters and flirtation in school, or else lord knows where I’d be.” She smiled at Dee. “Don’t listen, puppy. Study hard, become a scientist,



invent a way out of this dreadful place. What *is* this dreadful place, Mr. Marks? I ask since you seem strangely calm and cool about finding yourself trapped here.”

“He came purposefully,” Dee said, sounding grim. “To help me find my father.”

“Nice guy,” Agnes said, closing her eyes and settling back against the shelves as if to take a nap. “But an idiot.”

“Maybe so, Miss DeLay,” Marks said, standing up and stuffing the notebook back into his backpack. “I’m halfway dead, totally broke, and I’ve forgotten most of my life. I drank too much and poked my nose into places I shouldn’t have, and lost everything I assume I once had.” He turned and smiled at her. “But you’re here too, so you must not be very bright either.”

Agnes snorted a laugh, opening her eyes and joining them as they walked closer to the doors. They stood, should to shoulder, and looked from door to door. Aside from the animals carved on them, there was no difference.

“So,” Dee asked. “Which one?”

“Wolf,” Agnes said immediately. “Already solved *that* one for you.”

Marks rubbed his chin. “No,” he said. “Quail.”

Agnes shook her head. “I’m telling you, if you want to get *out* of here, the Wolf.”

Marks stepped forward and pulled the Quail door open, revealing a dark, forbidding space. “We’re not trying to get out, Miss DeLay,” he said. “We’re trying to

find her father.”

## 7. The Queer Lounge

“Oh, *lord*,” Agnes breathed as they stepped through the door. “*This* is disappointing.”

It was like a teacher’s lounge or employee break room. An ancient, hand-cranked Victrola played a tinny, jazzy tune, all clarinets and the hiss and pop of vinyl. There were no windows and no apparent source of light, but it was almost painfully bright, making the trio squint and shield their eyes for a moment.

There was a small kitchenette with a gurgling coffee maker and a large yellow refrigerator that had been chained shut, brightly-colored letter magnets clinging to the doors, a pile of the letters, chewed up and damaged, scattered on the floor. On top of the fridge he noticed with a feeling of dread three pawns had been balanced on the edge.

*This*, he thought, *is starting to feel like a countdown*. And he suspected whatever it was counting down to would not be pleasant.

Next to the kitchen, remarkably, was a dumwaiter. A small card table (where a game had been recently abandoned, cards and plastic chips scattered everywhere) sat in the middle of the room next to a dilapidated old couch. There were ashtrays on the table with cigarettes burning in them. On the floor next to the table was a small trampoline.

Across the room was a door, similar to all the others. Next to it was a shiny metal elevator door, with a single button set in the wall.

As they stood there, looking around, the music

ended. The Victrola automatically lifted the old needle and started playing it again, clarinets and cymbals, tinny and distant. Marks startled: The tune was familiar. In fact, it was the same tune that Agnes had been humming in the library, the song about making love at midnight.

Agnes walked over and nudged the trampoline with one tiny foot. "Okay," she said. "This is ... odd."

"Door stayed this time," Dee said. Marks turned and studied the door they'd just come through. It appeared as solid and permanent as ever. He leaned in to inspect the carving.

"Still a Lion," he said thoughtfully. He leaned forward and opened it, peering through. "Still the library," he added.

Agnes stepped over to the fridge and plucked several of the letter magnets from its surface. As she did so, the appliance suddenly moved, something inside it growling and banging against the door hard enough to make it walk forward a half inch. She leaped back, crying out and tossing the magnets into the air. Dee stepped back towards Marks as he turned back, shutting the library door behind them, and he put a hand on her shoulder.

"All right," Marks said. "Maybe we don't linger here too long."

"Maybe that's why it did that," Dee said. "To hurry us up."

He nodded without looking at her. "You're smart, kid."

Agnes spun, a cloud of her perfume slowly covering

the rotten smell that permeated the air in the lounge, mating with it and producing something entirely worse. “Maybe we should pay attention? Mr. Marks, I don’t know about *you*, but I have been in this place entirely *too long* and wouldn’t mind getting to somewhere else.”

Marks pushed his hands into his pockets and walked around the table. “Someone was just here. It’s like they heard us coming, and fled.”

Agnes folded her arms over her chest and began walking as well, matching his pace as she looked around. “Maybe they work for this place? This looks like an employee lounge.”

“Somewhere we’re not supposed to be?” Dee asked, staring down at the plastic magnets.

Agnes turned and pursed her lips. “You too ... you’re kind of not worried about being here. Or not worried *enough*.”

Marks shrugged. “I’ve seen stranger things,” he said. “I’ve been to stranger places.” He looked up at the ceiling. “So far. This place has plenty of potential for getting much stranger than anything else, I’ll say that.”

Dee walked over to the Victrola and stared down at the spinning record. “I’m just here for my father,” she said. “If I can’t find him, it doesn’t matter.”

Marks glanced up and looked at Agnes, raising his eyebrows and nodding, as if to say *see what I’m dealing with?* Agnes nodded back, but didn’t say anything.

“The dumwaiter has a stag on it,” he said, fishing through his bag and removing the notebook. “One of the doors in the library had a stag.”

“Elevator has a wolf,” Agnes said. Marks and Dee walked over to it. Etched into the metal was the same wolf that had been carved on one of the doors in the library. “We saw a wolf, too.”

“How big is this place?” Dee asked, and she suddenly sounded afraid. Marks hesitated, wondering what the right answer would be. He didn’t know kids. He’d never had any—had he?—and didn’t remember being one. And he wanted to answer before Agnes did.

“Bigger than you think,” he said, pointing. “The door in the back has a bear carved on it. We haven’t seen a bear yet. That’s at least eight rooms already—in how long?”

“Forty minutes,” Dee said, pulling out her phone.

“Thirteen hours,” Agnes said.

Marks glanced at his own phone, cheap and with about five dollars in data left on it. “Three hours,” he said. He smiled. “Well, great. Time doesn’t work right in here either.”

Agnes studied him, walking in a slow circle around him, her heels clicking on the vinyl floor. “You’re an odd duck, Mr. Marks. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you weren’t in the least bit surprised to find yourself here, in this situation.”

He shrugged. “It happens. You poke into the margins, you’ll wind up *in* the margins, sometimes.” He looked not at Agnes, but at Dee, and smiled. He felt more comfortable and more at ease in the margins. He belonged there. “The key is to remember that nothing has really changed: You have to do the work in front of you to keep moving.” He looked at Agnes and held her

eyes. “And I’d say you don’t seem so worried yourself, Miss DeLay.”

There was a moment of silence, quickly broken by another muffled noise from the fridge, which rocked on its footings from some inner violence.

“So, uh,” Dee said slowly, “which door?”

“I still say wolf, kid,” Agnes said. “We’ve seen the library. Stags are always bad ideas, right? And bears ... I dunno. Bears are savage. Don’t think they’re just bumbling about looking for honey and belly-rubs.” She pursed her lips. “Or, if we can get back to the library, I still say it might be worth spending time there. The whole history of this place might be in there. A *map* maybe. It *can’t* be just dictionaries.”

Marks looked around, making notes. “I doubt the animal symbols are that literal. And libraries in places like this are honey traps: Filled with useless knowledge. Designed to tease you with possibilities—endless cross-references that send you hunting down tomes on the top shelves, always feeling like you’re about to crack everything, find the answers, and then you realize you’ve been in there for two weeks and you’re starving to death.”

Agnes smiled. “*Places like this*, huh? Been in a lot of bizarre maze-like houses where doors disappear?”

He waved vaguely in the air. “Not *per se*, no, but I have a general experience in this kind of place. Besides, it doesn’t matter what door we choose. We don’t have enough information to make any sort of informed guess. We need to data, and to get data we have to go through some doors. Establish paths. We know we can go back

and forth between the library and this queer ... lounge.” He paused, chewing his lip. He glanced at Agnes, then at Dee. “I vote for stag.”

Agnes threw her hands up. “Seriously. You want us to crawl into a *dumwaiter*. Which isn’t big enough for all of us, so we’ll have to go down one at a time. Which isn’t designed for our weight, so will probably snap and send us plummeting to our *deaths*. What did you say you did for a living, Mr. Marks? Was it by any chance getting women and children *killed*?”

Marks stood up and slung the backpack over his shoulder. “Sometimes,” he said quietly.

Dee stared at him. “What?”

“Come on.” He walked over to the dumwaiter, which was a door in the wall, about four feet off the floor, perhaps three by three. A wooden lever sprouted from the wall next to it. He pulled open the door, revealing a simple wooden box, a few feet deep. “I’m first.”

“Wait!” Dee ran over to him, grabbing onto his arm. “You’re just going to *leave* me?”

“Gee, thanks, kid,” Agnes said with a snort. “*He’s* the one just admitted he’s gotten people *killed*. I’m a nice person, really, you’ll see.”

Marks looked at Agnes and then down at Dee. “Listen, there aren’t any good choices, right?”

Dee shook her head. “Send *her*. She goes down first.”

“Gee, *thanks*, kid,” Agnes sighed. “You’re a gem, a breath of fresh air. Glad to know that after getting trapped here I’ve been saved by some conch-bearing



Lord of the Flies bitch.”

“Shut up,” Marks snapped. “She’s fucking terrified.” He stood up and climbed into the dumwaiter. “Don’t worry,” he said, reaching awkwardly around to pull the lever. Immediately there was a hollow thud in the wall, and a mechanical noise like chains being rubbed together filled the room with a dull vibration. The box jerked into motion, and Marks sank slowly into the depths. Dee watched, her face blank, eyes wide.

“Come *on*, kid,” Agnes said. “I’m not going to cook you.” She waited a beat. “There’s no oven in here.”

The dumwaiter stopped. For a moment they both stared, frozen. Then, dim and muffled, they could hear Marks.

*“It’s okay! It’s just a room!”*

The dumwaiter lurched back into motion. Dee and Agnes looked at each other, both more disturbed by the silent rise of the contraption than they wanted to admit. When the empty box reappeared, Dee sprang for it.

“No, by all *means*, save yourself,” Agnes said sourly, pulling out a chair and sitting down. As Dee watched her, Agnes picked up a cigar still burning in the ashtray. “I’m sure whoever was here *moments* ago won’t be back *presently* to chop me into pieces.”

Dee just stared, leaning out to pull the lever again. The box shuddered, and started its way down. Agnes stared at her as she sank, slowly swallowed up by the square of the dumwaiter’s cabinet, darkness rushing into the box to close in around her.

## 8. The Spare Room

The box rumbled to a stop and for a moment she panicked, because it was dark and hot and there didn't seem to be any exit. She reached forward and the darkness in front of her was soft and yielding. The interior of the box had an insulated, closed-in feel, her breath sounding absorbed in her ears. She leaned forward and pushed her arm into the fabric, then screamed when something took hold of her wrist and yanked her forward.

For one horrible moment she thought she was being suffocated. The air had turned into heavy, dark fabric, crowding into her and pushing all the air aside. Then she was pulled out of it and Marks had her, holding her close, a finger to his lips.

“Quiet, okay? We got a minute to ourselves. You okay?”

She swallowed and nodded, eyes wide. He let go of her wrist and she took a deep breath. She'd been operating on a steady diet of anxiety and fear for weeks now, but this was the first time in her life, she thought, that she'd believed death to be imminent. She was shaking, but determined to keep her reaction from Marks.

She looked around. Behind her was a closet, filled with heavy fur coats, dusty and sagging. She wondered who put a tiny elevator—or whatever a dumwaiter was—in a *closet*? The rest of the room was just a simple bedroom, sparingly furnished: A bed, a night table, a lamp, and a single hardbacked chair. The bed was a simple cot with a thin, gray mattress, topped by a

rough-looking red blanket, and looked slept in, mussed and sweaty. There was a book on the table, and there were four doors, all the same sort as most of the others, located in each direction, each complete with carved decorations in the upper center.

“Listen, we can’t trust her,” Marks said in a low voice, just above a whisper.

Dee scowled. She didn’t like Agnes either but Marks had scared her and she was angry with him. “Why not? She’s stuck here just like us.”

“Is she?” he looked around the tiny room. “She’s been pushing us pretty hard to do certain things. Stay in the library. Go through the Wolf door.” He looked back at her. “And when we walked into the lounge, there was a message on the fridge. Written in those letter magnets. And she marched right over and knocked them off. She didn’t want us to read it.”

Dee chewed her lip. “Might have been an accident. She might have been startled when whatever ... was in it ... suddenly jumped.”

Marks nodded. “Maybe. I think the message might have been from your Dad. I only saw the first word: *warning.*”

Behind them, she heard the dumwaiter screech back into life, rumbling back up to the lounge. “That could have been from anybody.”

He nodded. “Sure. Either way, I think she hid it from us on purpose. Just be careful with her, okay. She’s got her own agenda.”

She nodded. “Okay, old man.” She chewed her lip again. “You really think it was a message from Dad?”

He turned and looked at her while the dumwaiter rumbled and scraped. Seconds ticked by as he studied her, and she didn't know how to react.

"I don't know, kid," he said. "I kind of hope so."

The dumwaiter stopped. There was a moment of stillness and silence, and then a loud thump and a cry.

"Goodness! Hey! *Hey!* Where is everyone?"

Marks winked at Dee. "In here," he called out. "Just push on through. You're in a closet."

Agnes emerged looking slightly disheveled. "I think that route has been closed. It kind of disappeared as I arrived, spitting me out onto the *floor.*" She patted her hair and smoothed her long skirt. "Whoever designed this place is *rude*, I can say *that* much. Now what do we have ... oh. *This* is a sad little room, isn't it?"

Marks thought *sad* was exactly right for the room they'd found themselves in. "It's like a guest room," Dee said, picking up the book and putting it down again. "Like that spare room you make up for people when they stay over."

"We should search the place," Agnes said, nodding her head. "You never know *what* might be hidden in the drawers." She smiled, her round, pretty face lit up.

"Not a bad idea," Marks conceded.

"Though we should be *careful,*" she added. "There's no evidence this is a *tame* place, filled with *tame* things, after all."

As they shifted everything, searching, Dee grimaced. "What's the point of this place? Who would build a place like this, let people get trapped in it?"

“A madman,” Agnes said, pushing the coats in the closet apart and checking the pockets. “Who else? Someone likes to watch us scuttle about, endlessly, infinitely, tied to a pin and spinning about.” She paused and glanced over her shoulder. “The worst sort: A sadist.”

“Yeah, but *who?* And *why?*”

Marks was lifting the thin mattress, gingerly, like he expected a swarm of bugs to emerge. “Souls,” he said.

“Um ... *what?*”

He shrugged, letting the mattress drop. “Souls. Or energy, you like that better. We all have a spark to us, right? It burns bright for a while and then it dies down, and eventually goes out, or moves on. That’s energy, however else you want to look at it. Wherever you go, kid, you leak energy, you leave it behind. When you work on something, you’re putting your energy into that, you can focus it. And when you’re gone, sometimes there’s an echo. That’s a ghost. That’s you smearing so much of yourself in one place it lingers. A place like this? It’s a machine. It’s got us spinning around, putting our energy into *it*, into the machine. The longer we spin around in here trying to get out, the more of our energy it extracts.”

Dee stopped searching the drawers of the little night stand to stare at him. “That’s *evil* shit right there,” she said. “How do you know that?”

“He doesn’t,” Agnes snapped. “He’s just trying to scare us. And sound *smart*.”

Marks looked at Dee. “You scared?”

“*Yes*.”

“You should be.”

They gave up searching and stood in the middle of the room, looking at the doors.

“Rabbit,” Marks said. “And newt—we’ve seen that one before.”

“Viper,” Agnes said.

“Ape,” Dee added.

Marks was scribbling in his notebook. “This place is big. We’re not seeing a lot of repetition.”

“Or there’s no meaning to any of it,” Agnes said. She gestured back at the closet. “We’ve got doors that disappear, for example.”

“Maybe the rooms move,” Dee said.

Marks paused. “Actually, maybe. But until we have some evidence of that, we can’t include it in the data.”

“He’s quite *formal*,” Agnes said. “*The data*.”

“Wait!” Marks said suddenly. “Quiet!”

They all fell silent. The quiet was immediate and seemed total, monolithic. Then, suddenly, a distant sound.

“Is that a *voice*?” Dee asked.

“Holy *shit*,” Agnes whispered. “It *is*!”

Marks waved them down. “Knowing what I know about bizarre-architecture soul batteries,” he said, “it’s *us*, from like five minutes in the future. Going to lock us in a temporal loop until we die.”

Agnes looked at him and studied him for a moment, pursing her lips. “Well, we can’t stay *here*,” Agnes said,

looking around in distaste. “The library had books—not that you were interested in *learning* anything, and the lounge might have had something to *eat*. This place has a copy of *Lost Horizon* and a bed you couldn’t pay me to sleep on. And we’re *not* sleeping on it together.”

“And fur coats,” Dee said, “even though it’s hot as hell in here.”

“Shut up!” Marks hissed.

They stood for a moment. The voice was muffled.

“Anyone make it out?” Marks asked in a whisper.

“Which door is coming from?” Agnes whispered back.

They couldn’t tell. Dee went and pressed her ear against each door, but shook her head in dismay.

“Well, we can’t go back, so it’s one of these four,” Marks said.

“Newt,” Agnes said. “We’ve seen it twice, so maybe the place is trying to tell us something.”

“That’s a reason to *not* go newt,” Dee complained.

“What do you think, kid?” Marks asked.

Agnes scowled, her pretty face turning dark. “So I don’t get a vote?”

Marks didn’t look at her. “You can go anywhere you want. We’re sticking together. Come along, or go your own way.”

Dee stomped her foot on the ground. “Stop it! We’re all stuck here. She comes with us, old man. Or you can go off on your own.”

He frowned, but after a moment he nodded, looking

down at his worn, thin shoes. "All right, boss. All right."  
He sighed. "I vote ape. I like apes."

Agnes and Marks looked at each other. Agnes smiled and turned away. "Apes it is."



## 9. The Anteroom

It was, in a way, a relief. The foyer looked exactly the same as when they'd entered, with one crucial change: The front door wasn't there. The wall was solid, and even a careful examination revealed no hidden cavities, no trick switches or anything. They were back in the room they'd started in, and he relaxed a little. It was a good sign.

"The door changed," Dee said.

She was staring at the door they'd come in through. It had snapped shut behind them as if on springs, but they hadn't paid it much attention because a momentary euphoria had swept through them: They were free! They'd found their way back to the entrance! By the time they realized there was no entrance to turn into an exit, the door had shut.

Marks took his notebook over to where the kid was standing. The room was exactly as he remembered it: Three interior doors, marked with a duck, a lion, and a newt. They'd gone through the Lion Door and found the library.

"What do you mean it's changed?"

"The Lion Door? We went through before? It's the one we just walked through. But that can't be, can it?"

"Oh kid," Agnes said, sounding tired. "This place? That's just the tip of the iceberg."

Marks opened the door and peered into the short hall that led to the library. It looked precisely as it had when they'd been in there a short while before. But she was right: This was the door they'd just come through, from

the weird spare bedroom.

He shut the door, made some notes. As he wrote, he said “Let’s pause for a moment, have a bite and a sip of water, and think.”

Agnes said nothing. Dee looked impatient and terrified for one moment, then took a deep breath and nodded. They sat on the floor and Marks shared out a power bar and passed around a bottle of water.

“This is good news, you know,” he said.

Agnes smiled, leaning back on the palms of her hands. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“It means it’s a real maze. A *solvable* maze. If you can find your way predictably back, it’s an honest maze, which means it has rules. It has a solution. It means it’s a Soul Battery instead of an Insanity Engine.”

Dee blinked at him. “What?”

Marks shrugged. “A Soul Battery I told you about: It’s designed to keep us running, so that we bleed all our energy, the energy we’d use up over a lifetime, trying to find the way out. That means there has to be a *way* out for us to look for. An Insanity Engine is different: It’s goal is to drive you insane. Much worse. Because the whole goal is just to drive you insane, so there are no rules, no patterns for you to grab onto. An Insanity Engine would just keep throwing new rooms at us, every door random. There would be no pattern, because patterns are comforting. They tell our brains that there’s a rhyme and a reason—we just need to figure it out.”

Dee shook her head slightly in confusion. “But this

isn't that."

"This," Marks said, smiling a little, "is designed to keep us expending energy, seeking the exit. Which means there has to be an exit, although that doesn't mean the designers of this place are playing fair. It might be hidden, obscured, and time is definitely being warped—every moment we spend in here will be ten minutes, or one hour of time outside. It's got to be more efficient for absorbing our energy. But the good news is, that means if we pay attention, we can figure it out. We can find our way through the maze."

Agnes was smirking, staring at him. "*Insanity Engine*. Did you coin these *marvelous* terms yourself, or is there some sort of textbook of mystery mazes out there?"

Marks looked at his hands. "I'm making them up. But it doesn't mean I'm wrong."

She nodded. "How do you *know* all this, Mr. Marks?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I've forgotten so much of my life, I'm not sure. Except I'm sure of one thing: I'm the one who Pays the Price." He looked down at his hands. "You know, your toilet backs up, what do you do? You call a plumber and they have to wade through the shit and the piss—they pay the price for you. Some people in this world act as lightning rods. They can see a world no one else can, and so they pay the price no one else wants to." He nodded. "I think that's me."

Agnes was suddenly smiling, familiarly.

"So, even though I only remember half my goddamn life," he said, waving it away, "I think I've absorbed plenty of shit, because I'm the One who Pays the Price. And that means I know stuff that no one else knows."

He sighed. "Even if I don't always remember it, precisely."

There was a moment of silence. Dee sat on the dusty floor pulling at her tattered sneakers, which were coming apart and worn almost through on the bottom. "Mr. Marks?" she said, staring intently at her laces. "I don't want you to pay my price."

"Ah, hell," Marks stood up and crossed over to her and knelt down. "Listen, I'm not here paying a price for you. I'm here to find your Dad. This is just the right thing to do. I get very few chances to do something right instead of just, you know, surviving. Hanging on. I get caught up in currents, and I just swim like mad until I find the shore. This time I dived in."

She kept picking at her shoes. "Okay."

He looked over at Agnes. "What do you think?"

She was sitting with her back against the wall where the front door had been, her legs stretched out in front of her. She smoothed down her narrow skirt. "Back to the library," she said. "See what we might learn in those books."

"You're consistent."

She shrugged. "It makes sense to me." She smiled at her lap. "But I guess you'll say that's the, what did you call it, the 'soul battery' thing. Keeping us busy, spinning wheels instead of finding our way." She looked up, and Marks was struck by the flat beauty of her eyes: Grey, unblinking. "Although running from room to room without knowing anything about where we are sounds like a worse waste of time and energy."

He sat down next to Dee, who was still morosely

tugging at her shoes. "It's *all* a waste of energy, that's the point. Me and Dee have been here maybe a few hours, and I'll bet a few days have gone by outside. Everything about this place is designed to keep us here as long as possible. *That's* why I don't trust the library. It's so *obviously* a place we could spend weeks in, chasing clues."

She threw her hands up as if exasperated. "All right. Duck or Newt."

"Dee votes."

He didn't know why, but he thought it should be up to her. It was her father they were chasing. And he felt that tiny grit of doubt, that shard in your thoughts that maybe you were wrong, maybe you were missing something. And maybe someone else would subconsciously know it.

The girl sighed heavily and got to her feet. "Why don't we open each door and see what's what?" she said. "Like you said, old man, information. The more we have, the better decisions we can make."

Marks smiled and looked at Agnes. For a split second he thought he saw something awful on her beautiful face: Anger, rage, hatred. Then she was smiling back, cheerful as she climbed to her feet, slender and somehow looking to him like she smelled nice. "She's sharp as a tack, that one," she said. "We gotta watch her."

They walked over to the door with the lizard carved on it. For a moment they hesitated, until Marks leaned forward, took hold of the handle, and pulled it open. The three of them leaned back, as if expecting

something to hit them in the face.

A cool breeze that smelled stale and damp drifted in. Marks stepped forward slowly and leaned into the doorway, thinking he didn't know all the rules—if it was a door that would disappear after they stepped through, when did that happen? Would he be cut in half?

He saw a short hallway, just wide enough for someone to walk down. It went a few feet and then turned left. He smirked. They would have to commit. He couldn't see where the hall led unless he walked down far enough, which would allow the door to either disappear, close and lock behind him, or remain.

They let the door close, turning to the one with the duck carving. Again, Marks stepped over and pulled the door open. For a moment they stood, staring.

“I can't believe we just ate *power bars*,” Agnes said.

The room beyond the door was a small dining room. The floor and ceiling were of dark brown, highly-polished wood. The walls were smooth white plaster, broken by wood panels along the bottom crowned by a simple chair rail. The table filled most of the room, making it impossible to actually pull the chairs out far enough to sit in them. An ornate chandelier of pearls and gold and brass hung too low, nearly scraping the dishes on the table.

The table was set elaborately, with candles giving the room a warm, familiar feel. Marks thought the shadows on the wall could not possibly be thrown by the flames, that another light source entirely was responsible, and the warm, cozy feeling turned sour and oppressive in his eyes. The feast was fantastic; a heap

of steaming roasts and delicacies. Marks felt like he was creating the dishes, as everything he thought of seemed to be the next plate, plates on plates, dishes on dishes.

At one end of the table, far across the room from the door, a plate was piled with food, steaming. A glass of wine had been poured. A fork, a piece of food (fish, scarlet with pepper sauce) speared upon its end, rested on the edge of the plate at a jaunty angle.

Marks noted a window behind thick, yellow drapes, and a standard-issue door, slightly ajar, on the opposite end, moving slightly as if a slight breeze was pushing against it.

“Everyone votes duck, right?” Marks said, and stepped through the door.

## 10. The Dining Room

Marks stared at the wine glass. It was half-filled with dark red liquid, the carafe sitting on the crowded table right behind it. He'd been forced to walk on the table to get into the room, climbing into the chair facing the window. He felt trapped, his belly pushed up against the edge of the table, the room warm and filled with battling smells of food and booze, all of it somehow slightly off, as if it had just that moment tipped over from fresh to stale, on its way to rotten.

Music—softly muffled, as if being played in the next room—could be heard. It was a string quartet playing a slow, mournful tune, every note dragged out until there was almost no rhythm to it, no form. Yet he was certain, somehow, that it was the same song he'd been hearing, the same maddening cheesy pop song, just slowed down to an unrecognizable tempo.

The wine—he assumed it was wine—looked awful. Thick. Dry. The sort of wine that puckered your mouth and made you thirstier and thirstier the more you drank. He wanted to drink a glass fast, then refill it from the carafe and take his time with the second, enjoying the slow burn, the looseness, the warmth. He wanted to drink. He didn't know why.

He looked at Dee, who was staring dubiously at a carved ham, glistening with glaze. He shouldn't have allowed her to follow him. He'd known, on some level, what would happen—because it was what always happened with him. He knew things would go sideways. He *wanted* them to go sideways, to get lost. He was tired of the constant struggle, his damaged memory,



his lack of funds. He was so tired. Walking into a buzzsaw was a quick and easy way to just let the hungry maw of the universe take him.

He should have told her to turn around. He should have *turned* her around. Kids don't know any better.

And now he had to keep her safe and find their way. And for that he thought he could use a drink, and a drink would be the end of him.

He looked at Agnes. She was staring at the messy, laden table with what looked like genuine horror.

"It's warm," Dee said. Marks looked at her; she was touching the baked ham with one finger. She looked at him. "Someone cooked this, like, *recently*."

Marks glanced down at his plate. The fish was bony, and looked only half-cooked. "Well, someone was eating here not too long ago," he said.

"That is *literally* the worst thing you could have told me," Agnes complained.

They sat with that for a moment in silence. The air felt hot, and Marks had an image of breathing gravy, thick and brown and hot, filling his lungs, choking him.

"If *this* disturbs you," Marks said, "wait until we find the fucking *kitchen*. Whatever you do, don't eat anything."

"Don't *worry*," Dee said emphatically. Then she sobered. "Does this mean someone else is in here with us? Maybe my father?"

Marks scanned the table, trying to figure out how the food could appear simultaneously so delicious and so horrifying. Something about the greasy way everything

*shined*, he decided. "Maybe. But places like this like to tease you, get you to chase things. They leave trails, breadcrumbs, red herrings. You pick one up, and it always seems just out of reach, tantalizing."

"You," Agnes said with a bright smile, "are the most depressing man I have ever met."

Marks shrugged, thinking it certainly wasn't the first time someone had expressed that thought, or similar thoughts. There had been a time when people thought of him as interesting, as amusing. When people *had* thought of him. But he couldn't be sure; everything beyond a few days before was grainy, unreliable, corrupted.

"And anyway," she continued, leaning back in her chair, "there's only one door. The one behind us isn't there any more."

Marks didn't look, but Dee twisted around in her seat to stare back at the way they'd come, which was now unbroken plaster and chair rail.

"Makes our next move easy, don't you think? Unless you want to wait here and see if any servants arrive to clear the table and bring out the next course, which I'm *sure* will be delightful."

"No," Dee said, turning back and shaking her head. "Let's not wait."

"Snakes it is, then," Marks declared, pulling the bag into his lap and digging through it for his notebook.

"A very specific type of snake," Agnes said with a sniff. "Don't you know your snakes?"

"I hate snakes," Dee declared. "They slither and they

hiss and they bite.”

Agnes smiled. “Sorry, dearie, no choice: No going back, only way is through the Viper room.”

Dee shook her head. “Uh, are you two blind? There's a *window*.”

For a moment, everything was silent. Marks pushed the notebook back into the backpack and struggled up out of his chair and onto the table, knocking a gravy boat over and almost slipping and falling from the greasy deluge. He staggered over to the window, knocking plates and cutlery aside, and regarded the yellow drapes.

“They've got an animal printed on them,” he said. “Stags.”

“Stags are majestic animals,” Agnes said. “Stags—wait, we've *seen* a Stag carving.”

“The weird little bedroom,” Dee said. “With the closet full of coats.”

Marks knelt down, his pants getting soaked in a variety of sauces, and pushed the drapes aside, revealing a wide but normal-looking window. “The panes are smoked,” he said. “I can't see through them.”

“There wasn't a window in that room,” Dee said. “And Windows lead *outside*. It might be the way out.”

Marks grunted doubtfully. Shrugging the backpack into a more comfortable position, he put the heels of his hands against the top of the sash and pushed. At first it refused to move, then slowly, groaningly it rose upward, screeching in protest. A bright, white light burst into the room, making them all cover their eyes and look away.

“Can't see a thing,” Marks said, squinting.

“That other room wasn't so bright,” Dee said excitedly. “Maybe it leads somewhere else? Or outside! Maybe we're wrong about the animal codes.”

“Maybe,” Marks said, still ducking and squinting. “One way to find out.”

“What if we can't get back?”

Marks hesitated, then turned to look at them. “Listen, there's one other thing I haven't mentioned about places like this, these mazes.”

“Oh, *dear*,” Agnes said. “The Unmentionables. No one likes the Unmentionables.”

“There's almost always a Trap Room.”

Dee's eyes were wide. He hated scaring her, hated piling on even more for the kid to worry about, but he felt he had a duty. If he was going to be leading her into each room, choosing their path, he had to be honest.

For her part, she hated being scared, and so her reaction seemed almost like anger. “What,” she said slowly, “is a *trap room*?”

His back didn't like him crouching there on the table, and the smell of the rich food was making him sick. “It's room you can't get out of. A room without an exit. No doors, no windows. Or, no doors or windows that will *open*.”

“Jeez,” Agnes complained, climbing out of her seat. “How does *that* knowledge help in *any* way, Mr. Marks?”

He shrugged. “Just full disclosure. I'm pretty sure the internal mechanics will be straight—if there's an animal

code for the rooms, it will be consistent. But I *might* be wrong. And if I'm wrong, I just thought—”

“You thought you'd make sure we couldn't say you hadn't warned us,” Agnes muttered. “Real goddamn heroic, Marks. You're a true gem.”

“Anyway. There's a door, too. Snake, or Stag?”

“Viper,” Agnes said.

“Window,” Dee said. “Stag, whatever. Just in case. We got to try, in case that leads outside.”

Marks nodded. “Sure, okay, but ... that's not *sunlight*.”

“Stag,” she repeated.

He nodded. “Let's go. Agnes first.”

He turned and waddled over to the window, and waited for her to walk over to him. He held out his hand. “Watch out, it's slippery.”

“Because you made a mess,” she said crossly, then brightened. “But a gentleman!” She took his hand and let him help her swing a leg over the sill. She sat there for a moment, looking at him. “Let me do some scouting,” she said, and leaned out into the space beyond. A moment later she seemed to fall forward, disappearing into the light.

“Did she fall?” Dee asked. “Was she *grabbed*?”

Marks leaned forward. “Agnes!” he shouted. “Hey, Agnes! You okay?”

There was no response. It seemed to him that his voice didn't echo or reverberate the way it should have; it was like it died in the room with them. He looked at

Dee. "All for one and one for all, huh? We can't leave her in there alone."

Dee hesitated, remembering Marks' words about the relative trustworthiness of Agnes and all the Agneses of the world, then nodded. She stood on the table and walked over, and he helped her swing herself over the sill. Instead of sitting she hung on the sill with both hands, looking at him. He realized she was terrified.

"Listen, Mister—"

She dropped, as if she'd lost her grip ... or been snatched by something on the other side.

Awkwardly, hands getting slick with gravy, he levered one leg through the opening and then pulled himself through.

## 11. The Spare Room

He fell, the light vanished, and then he was sprawled on the floor in near-total darkness, the air muffled and insulated. He'd barely managed to sit up straight when Dee crashed down onto him, knocking the wind out of him.

"Mr. Marks! *Mr. Marks!*"

"It's ... okay ..." he managed to wheeze. "I'm ... here."

"Oh ... it's the closet again."

Marks sat up and felt the soft furs against his face. He stood up, breathing hard, and allowed himself a moment to get his breath back. Then he fumbled his way forward, emerging into the disappointing bedroom they'd been in before. Agnes was seated on the bed, leaning back slightly, looking, Marks thought, beautiful. Had she redone her makeup? He stared for a moment, uncertain, but she seemed ... more put together. Prettier, somehow.

"Took you long enough," she said. "I was *almost* about to start reading that book. Looks dreadful. *Then* I wondered if you maybe ditched me, which was kind of a depressing thought. That maybe you'd let me go through the window and then you'd taken the door."

Marks shook his head. "Like I just said to Dee: All for one, and one for all."

"That's *sweet*," Agnes said, looking down at her hands. "But *also* not at *all* what you said before."

Marks nodded. "Deandra's a better person than me."

Agnes raised one manicured eyebrow. “*Anyway*, here we are again. It *is* the same room, isn’t it? Or is it maybe a different room that just *looks* the same?”

“Same room,” Dee said promptly, pointing at the night table. “See where the dust is messed up? I picked up that book and put it down, just like that.”

Agnes looked at the table for a moment, pursing her lips. Then she looked up at them and smiled. “Well then! Same room. Very simple.” She looked over at the doors. “Mr. Marks, I believe you made a record of the doors last time—any differences?”

Marks dropped the backpack and knelt to rummage in it. “That’s a great suggestion,” he said. “We need to stay on top of things like that. Only way we’ll figure a way out.”

“Mr. Marks, you’re far too relaxed about this, you know,” Agnes said. “And you accepted this place *far* too quickly, you ask me. Almost as if you knew all about it. As if this place was familiar to you.”

Marks nodded absently, studying his notes. “Maybe it is!”

Agnes looked at Dee. Dee looked from her to Marks and back.

He looked over at the doors. “Nothing’s changed. Ape, lizard, some sort of bird, and the snake.”

“Viper,” Agnes corrected.

“Viper. We know the Ape Door takes you to the foyer,” he said thoughtfully, pacing slowly in front of the doors.

“I can hear voices again,” Dee said quietly.



They all froze. Sure enough, they could hear the muffled voices through one of the doors. Marks gestured for quiet and crept from door to door, listening with his ear against each one. Finally he turned and shook his head. "I can't tell. Look, in the foyer there are only three choices: The library, the dining room, and the Newt Door we haven't tried yet." He spread out his notebook on the bed and gestured at it. "The library offers up the Wolf Door—the others we've been to. The Dining Room offers the Viper, but we can go through that one here."

"What's your point?"

"No point yet. Just talking out loud. We can go back over old routes, or strike out in a new direction. Either might be profitable."

"Anyone ever tell you you talk like a lawyer?"

"Maybe."

Agnes sighed and rolled her eyes, dangling one shoe from her foot. Marks thought she looked adorable, as if she'd been carefully posed for maximum attractiveness. Something about her suddenly tugged at his soft, glassy memories, but he couldn't put his finger on it. "Jeebs," she said, waving at the doors. "Whatever you think, oh fearless leader."

"Dee?"

The girl frowned, studying the doors. "I hate going back where we been, you know? I say the bird."

"That's right kid," Agnes said with a laugh like musical notes. "Give 'em the bird!"

Marks gathered up his backpack and notebook. "Let's

go.”

Agnes slid off the bed and they gathered in front of the door with the ominous bird carved on it. Marks leaned forward, turned the knob, and pushed it open. Again, a short hallway led to another doorway—but they could suddenly hear the voices much more clearly.

“Come on!” Agnes shouted, pushing forward. “Before they make a run for it!”

“Wait!”

Marks reached for her but she was already running down the hall. Dee took off after her, spinning around halfway down the hall. “It might be Dad!” she shouted with a shrug.

“Dammit,” Marks said, following.

## 12. The Myna Bird Room

He turned the corner and stepped through the open door at the other end. It was a simple room with plaster walls that had been painted a garish shade of red, a hardwood floor, and a caged bird in one corner. There was no other furniture, and Dee and Agnes stood uncertainly in the middle of the space.

Marks leaned back and looked back the way they'd come. The door remained open, and he could see the bed in the other room.

*"Mawk, good to see you awk!"*

Marks turned back, startled. The voice had been high-pitched and thin. "Was that ... was that the *bird*?"

"Yep," Agnes said, stepping over to the cage and kneeling down to peer at the creature. It was large and snowy white with a black face like a mask. It shifted on the branch it was perched on nervously, moving from side to side. "Myna Bird," she said. She turned to look over her shoulder at Marks and Dee. "They talk."

Marks looked around, counting four doors including the one they'd just entered through, which remained comfortingly there, and still open.

*"Mawk, set me free, set me free, awk!"*

Marks stepped over to lean down next to Agnes, smelling her peppermint scent up close.

"Sorry, fella," she said.

The cage was made of gold, with yellowed newspaper lining the bottom. A sullied water bowl looked unhealthy and stagnant. Marks watched the

bird's intelligent face; the tiny black eyes flickered from him to Agnes and back again. He thought they looked knowing.

"You see us, huh little guy?"

"*Mawk*, way out, I know, set me free!"

They all froze for a moment. Marks leaned forward slightly, and found the bird looking directly at him, fluffing its feathers. He had the strangest sense that it *knew* what it was saying.

"It's not crazy, is it?" Agnes asked. "Mr. Marks, what does your expertise say about talking birds offering escape routes from a freaky soul battery maze or whatever?"

Marks shook his head. "If I had to guess, I'd say this was a trap."

Agnes stood up. "Ah, jeez, you're *killing* me, Mr. Marks. Absolutely *killing* me."

Marks pondered the peppermint scent he hadn't noticed before, and continued to stare at the bird. The bird, for its part, continued to stare back.

"Give me something, buddy," he said. "I need something more to trust you."

"*Mawk!* I know, set me free! *Awk!*"

"I *want* to," Marks whispered. "I really do. But I need a reason."

"Where would it *go*?" Dee asked. "One time we had a mangy old cat in the backyard comin' round for food and I wanted to let it in and make it our cat but Mom said it wouldn't like bein' cooped up and would be

afraid, she said sometimes you do more harm than good when trying to be kind. Maybe we let that bird out it just gets lost in this place and starves.”

“It doesn’t know what it’s saying,” Agnes suggested. “Birds like that they just repeat the noises they’ve heard.” She turned her attention to the doors. “So we can go back and choose the Viper, or we got a Tiger, a Hippo, and a ... and a whatever that is.”

Marks stood up and walked over to stand next to her. “Ibex,” he said.

“Ibex? Seriously?”

Marks shrugged. The contents of his memory were unpredictable. He often struggled to remember recent events, but weird facts would bubble up with a certainty and concreteness that was startling. “Ibex,” he said.

*“Mawk! Ibex! Awk!”*

“Let’s go back,” Agnes said suddenly. “Let’s try the Viper.”

Marks looked at her sideways. She seemed younger, he thought. It was subtle. Had her makeup been thicker before? Were there fewer lines around her eyes? Her hair seemed darker, and he thought perhaps she stood a little taller. Had she changed her shoes? Being near her felt increasingly confusing. It made him want to be bloody-minded and contrarian just to see her reaction.

“You don’t want to go through the Ibex door, do you?”

Agnes shrugged, glancing at him. “I don’t want to go through *any* of these doors, Mr. Marks. I want to leave this place. So yes, *all* of these *mysterious* doors marked

with some sort of *animal code* I do not wish to go through.”

Marks nodded. “Okay, okay, I understand.” He pushed his hands into his pockets and turned away from the doors. “Let’s take a moment. We don’t want to stay here longer than necessary, but we don’t have to go rushing through every door. Let’s take a moment, catch our breath.”

Dee shook her head. “There’s nothing in here except a *bird*,” she said. “We can’t even sit *down* on anything.”

Agnes shook her head. “As Dee said, going *backwards* seems wrong. One of these doors might be the way out!”

Marks sat down on the floor. “Five minutes. That’s all I’m suggesting. Come on, sit down, let’s *think* a little.” He looked at Agnes, who suddenly seemed like a slip of a girl, eighteen, nineteen years old. A kid. Beautiful. “We’re trapped in here together and I never asked: What’s your life like? What are you trying to get back to?”

Agnes blinked. “You’re asking me what my life is like?”

He nodded, pulling one of the water bottles from the bag and holding it out towards Dee, who took it. “Sure. We’re stuck in here. We’re working together to get out. What do you do? For a living?”

Agnes rolled her eyes. “I would say you’re the weirdest guy I’ve ever met, Mr. Marks, but I guess I have to wait and see who *else* I might meet in this *lovely* place until I make final awards. I’m ... well, I’m *boring*, Mr. Marks. There’s nothing much to tell.” She sat

down across from him in a cloud of mint, gracefully folding her legs under her in a way Marks found old-fashioned and charming.

“So what do you do?”

She sighed. “Things, Mr. Marks, I do *things*. As do we all, right? What do *you* do?”

“I used to write,” Marks said. “I wrote about strange stuff. Black magic, monsters, curses, genetic experiments—insane stuff. Insane stuff that *really* happened. It ... it got me into trouble. I lost ... *me*. I lost memories, I lost weeks and months.” He shrugged. “These days I investigate. I investigate insane things that *really* happen. People find me, they pay me to look into things other people think are crazy. For example, a young girl tells me her father went to an address, disappeared. An address where an old house that was never actually built stands. An old house that *can't* be there.”

Agnes nodded. “What’re you paying him, kid? Because you might be in line for a refund, the way his investigation is going.”

“So what is it you *do*, Agnes?” Marks said, smiling. “When you’re not here.”

She looked back at him. They stared at each other for a long time. Then she stood up.

“You’re mean,” she said, striding over to the doors. “You’re a mean person, Mr. Marks. I’m going through the Tiger Door. You do what you want. Kid, you’re with a mean man and you should be careful.”

Dee shifted her weight, but Marks held up a hand and shook his head at her. Agnes stood in front of the

door with the tiger carving for a moment, then whirled.

“This is really unfair,” she wailed. “I have been *nothing* but nice to you! I have *helped!* I am *scared* just like you!”

Dee’s elbow jammed into his ribs. He was suddenly and forcibly reminded of the money sewn into the lining of his coat. He wondered when it would become obviously useless to continue carrying it around.

“Mr. *Marks,*” she hissed.

Marks nodded. “You tired of playing this bullshit, or you want to go another round? Who is she?”

Agnes threw her hands up. “Who is *who?*”

“The woman you’re trying so hard to resemble.” He smiled. “It’s not your fault. You can probably see my past better than *I* can. My memory is for shit. So whoever this girl, this pretty young girl in the pencil skirt, whoever you’ve been working so hard to look like in tiny increments so we won’t notice the change, it *isn’t working* because I can’t remember her.” He waved at her. “So let’s put the bullshit aside, okay?”

Agnes looked at Dee, eyes wide, then back at Marks. Slowly, her posture relaxed, and her face sobered and seemed to harden. When she smiled, it was uneven, a smirk.

“Very well,” she said, her voice flatter. “You *are* interesting, Mr. Marks.”

“*Mawk!*” the bird chirped. “*Mister Mawk!*”



## 13. The Myna Bird Room

“What,” Dee said slowly, hugging herself, “is going on?”

“Poor, stupid, dumb, idiot Dee-Dee,” Agnes said, spinning lazily and breaking into a fluid sort of dance around them. “Poor, poor, imbecilic, moronic Dee. You see, my dear, your friend Mr. Marks is damaged goods, and only half-smart. So he sees some things you perhaps did not, and he distrusts the evidence of his senses, which is *bright*. Terribly, terribly bright, and yet his diminished capacity means he mistakes *cleverness* for *insight*. In short, he’s like a man in the audience who sees the sleight of hand and thinks that means he knows how the trick is done.”

Dee blinked, following Agnes as she danced around the room in a haze of peppermint. “What?”

“Oh!” Agnes exclaimed. “Darling, *dumb* Dee!”

“Dee,” Marks said, scrubbing his face. “Agnes isn’t one of us. She’s not trapped here, she’s not trying to find a way out. She’s—”

“Your *guide*,” Agnes said, stopping and entering a ballet first position.

“—the enemy. She’s here to confuse us, to stop us from figuring things out, to influence us to choose the wrong paths.” He pushed his hands into his pockets. “She’s been trying to keep us from finding our way.”

“If that were true, Mr. Marks,” Agnes said, lifting herself up *en pointe* on her toes, “you would be in a much worse place than this awful room.” She smiled beatifically at the bird in the cage. “I *despise* that

creature. I've been trying to hide it away so deep inside this place that no one will ever find it. But it keeps finding its way back here." Her face suddenly sobered and she looked at Dee and Marks. "Or someone keeps moving it back. I'm not alone in here, you know. I have enemies."

Dee took a few steps closer to Marks. "So you've been lying to us?"

"Delightful dimwitted Dee! Not *exactly*. I never *lie*. At least, not the way you mean." She suddenly relaxed and took three swift steps forward, clasping her hands together in supplication as Dee crowded into Marks, hugging him in sudden terror. "Please *understand*, adorable dense Dee, I am your *guide* here. I am here to help. To assist. But there are *rules*. I can't just say, this door, then this door, then *that* door. You may not realize it, as you are clearly challenged in your thought processes, but I have been offering you clues. Hints." Her face took on an expression of sorrow. "I wish I could be more explicit, dear, I do. But I am forced to follow the rules too, you see."

"All that means, kid," Marks said, "is that it's up to you and me to find our way. She's just going to confuse everything, if she can." He looked at the woman. "Tell me: Who are you trying to resemble? I know I'm supposed to be affected by the way you look."

Agnes smiled and laughed, and began dancing again, leaping and spinning around the perimeter of the room, making the bird squawk and flutter its wings in alarm. "You don't remember? For *shame*, Mr. Marks! Ah, I hate this room I hate this room I hate this room I hate this room!"

“So,” Dee said, stepping slightly away from Marks.  
“So ... you, like, *work* here?”

Agnes stopped again and drew herself up, standing elegantly with one slender leg extended in front of her. She seemed to grow taller, her face more beautiful. “I am the designer and sole owner of this place, delicious dull Dee. This is my home. I offer guided tours and amusements.”

Marks snorted. “She’s being self-important,” he said. “She’s an employee. Or a prisoner. She didn’t make this place.”

“How do you know?” Dee asked.

Marks shrugged. “I’m guessing—”

Agnes barked a laugh and entered first position again.

“—but she’s been genuinely confused a few times, I think,” he continued. “A few things have been moved or changed that she wasn’t ready for. If she owned this place, that wouldn’t happen.”

“*Unless*, my dear weird uncle, you had *minions* who often played *pranks* and *practical jokes* on you.” She relaxed again and began to pace furiously. Every time she came close to the cage, the bird spread its wings and squawked. “Oh, they think they’re so *amusing*, sweet slow Mr. Marks, always shifting things an *inch* this way, a centimeter *that* way—the different systems part of the *joke* you see. They’re always leaving bits and pieces for you to stumble on, to *help* you.” She snorted. “Thankfully, usually you’re all too slow-witted to notice. I mean, the route out of this place was pretty clear from the first room, if you were paying attention. But of

course, you *weren't*.”

Dee stepped forward, and Agnes stopped moving to lean down and smile at her.

“Is my father here?”

Agnes nodded enthusiastically. “Yes!”

Marks had turned and was studying the four doors again. The one leading back to the bedroom was still open, the still, dim hallway somehow unsettling. “Don’t trust her, Dee.”

Agnes rolled her eyes. “Go on, darling dumb Dee. Ask me! Ask me!”

Dee swallowed, staring up at her. “Can you take me to him?”

Agnes nodded. “Yes!”

“*Will* you?”

“Yes!”

Marks turned. “What?”

Agnes straightened up. “Well, *of course* I will help a poor, frightened, obviously brain-damaged child find her father, who trembled in here a week ago looking *quite* sketchy—so undesirable, I must admit, that I hid from him and was derelict in my *duties* by letting him wander almost *totally* unguided—I do apologize, my delectable dolt, but your father resembled nothing more than a *criminal element*. I did offer him some *clues* that he failed to follow almost entirely. I know precisely where he is, and I will lead you to him!”

Dee smiled. “Really?”

Agnes reached down and patted her on her head,

three times, slowly. "Yes," she said slowly, stretching the word out, nodding her head elaborately. She straightened up and flounced over to where Marks stood. She stood next to him for a moment, hands clasped behind her, taking sidelong glances at him.

"I say," she said, "I *do* smell nice, don't I? The perfume? The *scent*? Still not coming back to you, my miserable morbid Marks?"

"Dee," marks said as if Agnes were not there. "We can't *trust* her."

"And yet, there *are* two possibilities!" Agnes said excitedly, turning to regard the doors. "Either I will lie to you, and the path I suggest will lead you to further confusion and possibly *eternal imprisonment*, or I will assume you will doubt me and tell you the *true* and *correct* path assuming you will doubt me and do *the opposite*." She slapped her hands. "So *exciting!* I do so love this part, when I am unmasked, and you, Mr. Morbid Marks, are by *far* the fastest anyone has ever arrived at this realization. But," she leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. "I will also tell you this: I do not *lie*. I may *deceive*, but my statements are always true. And I say this: I will lead you to him, to dear dumb Dee's father."

For a moment, they appeared to be a romantic pair, Agnes strikingly pretty, her head on Marks' shoulder, the two of them standing silent, shoulder to shoulder.

"Marks?" Dee said. "If she knows where my father is?"

Marks nodded. "All right," he said. "All right. Which way?"

Agnes animated, skipping away and clapping her hands. “Oh, lovely! *Lovely!* This is going to be ever so much fun. Mr. Marks—not *you*, dour dotting Dee, but our wonderful *Mr. Marks*—you are the *most* fun. The funnest. The mostest fun person I have had here in *such* a long time!” She paused and made a face. “Do you know how many people simply *give up*? Sit down and wait? Wander aimlessly, weeping? *Kill themselves?*” She shook her head. “*Too* many, Mr. Marks. Too too many. But not you, lovely you! *You* are determined to figure everything out and escape! I *adore* you!”

Marks nodded, still not looking at her. He knew she’d purposefully resembled someone, someone she assumed would have an affect on him. A memory. Probably a tragic one, someone from his past that would affect his judgment, unbalance his emotions. Only his ruined memories, the lost years, saved him, and he didn’t want to look at her unnecessarily for fear of dredging up the memory.

“Which door, then?” he asked. “To find her father. Which way?”

Agnes stopped and turned to face him. Somberly, she gave a little half-bow, pushing her hands together. “Hippopotamus,” she said.

Marks glanced at Dee, who nodded fiercely at him. He took out his notebook and made a few scratches in it, then closed it and stuffed it back into his backpack. He took a deep breath. “All right, kid. Let’s go find your old man.”

As Agnes mimed clapping, grinning, he stepped forward and took hold of the handle of the door with the Hippo engraving. It revealed what was becoming a

familiar, simple hallway. He stepped into it, followed quickly by Dee and Agnes, who continued to mime clapping as she followed them to the other end. Marks opened that door and stepped through.

## 14. The Hall of Mirrors

“Holy shit,” Marks said.

It was a large room, with a very high, arched ceiling that had been painted, spectacularly, with a beautiful painting of a naked woman surrounded by a lush junglescape, her hair flowing as if she was underwater. She seemed to reach down to them, Marks thought, a comforting embrace from one of the immortals, welcoming one of her own back into the warmth of her bosom.

“Simplistic in theme,” Agnes said, stepping next to Marks and following his gaze. “Gaia, Mother of the Earth. But the artist had an eye for technique and detail, and the work remains at my insistence. Something about her, regal and grand, powerful. There is a fluid motion to the scene that I like.” She nudged Marks playfully. “In case you think I’m just *an inhuman monster*, trapping souls here for my amusement.”

Marks shook his head. “No,” he said quietly. “Not for your amusement.”

The walls of the room were covered floor to ceiling with mirrors, sending reflections of them bouncing back and forth, making every movement a ripple in time. The facing mirrors created infinite worlds, all seemingly identical. Marks had a sense of movement, subtle and unhappy, as if in the furthest reflections, the tenth or twelfth multiple reflection, seemingly so far away, there was a lot of movement, even though they were all standing quite still.

“Lots of doors in this one,” Dee said, her voice sounding small.



“Yes,” Agnes said. “This has usually been a major intersection of the maze, and so it is now. I don’t like the room, personally. Too *cliché*, don’t you think? Mirrors. Hmph. Everyone wants a creepy room, oh I know, *mirrors*.” She sighed. “But every time I try to get rid of this room, it comes back.”

Marks thought he detected a legitimate tone of unease in her voice, as if the persistence of this room despite her efforts bothered her.

For the first time, Marks had a real sense of being underground, not simply in a windowless space, but buried under rock and dirt. There were six archways with heavy-looking doors set into them, quite wide and ornately decorated. In front of each archway was a plaque. At first Marks expected to find the usual animal engravings, but instead each brass tile had been inscribed with words: *Giucoco Piano*, *Indian in Reverse*, *Polugaevsky Variation*, *Santasiere's Folly*, *Torre Attack*, and *Foyle's Double Reverse*.

“No animals,” Marks said. Their voices had a curiously dead tone to them, as if something was absorbing the noise instead of bouncing it.

“I know!” Agnes said, spinning around, arms out. “That’s a naughty *twist*, isn’t it? Set up certain rules, then suddenly change ‘em. It disorients and upsets, you see. Oh!” She theatrically clapped her hand over her mouth. “I shouldn’t have said that, now. No doubt I’ve upset you *even more* which would possibly have been my intent all along. Oh!”

“They’re chess openings,” Dee said.

Marks turned to look at her. “What?”

Behind him, Agnes tilted her head, eyes locked on the girl.

Dee was flustered. “Chess. I *told* you, Marks. My Mom taught me a little. She liked to play. She said *her* father taught her, that he used to sit in the park and play for ten dollars. Had a little clock, hustled people.” She looked down at her feet. “I asked her how in hell you make any money playing chess in a park, and she said you can cheat at anything and make money from it.”

“Cheat at *anything!*” Agnes cheered. “Whatever could *that* mean!”

“Chess openings,” Marks said musingly, turning to look back at the nearest door, where the plaque read *Giuoco Piano*.

“A chess *master* memorizes them, like, dozens of moves deep,” Dee went on. “Two masters can play an opening’s first fifty moves in a minute, just slamming through it until someone introduces a change.”

“*You* might want to take a little more time with your moves,” Agnes said.

“Chess,” Marks said. “Random.”

“Excuse me?” Agnes sounded outraged, but she was still smiling.

“What do you mean, random?” Dee asked.

Marks sighed. “A place like this ... it's filled with random details. It's part of the scam. Everything *seems* like it should tie together, everything seems like its part of this huge, ever-increasing pattern. You feel like you just have to see a little more, think a little more, and it will all become clear. But it's all bullshit. None of it

means anything. This is just pretty details. It's all designed to keep our minds racing, chasing tails, to distract us."

"Ooooo," Agnes said, raising one delicate eyebrow, "it's a clue. A big, huge, exciting clue, the key to everything."

For a few moments they all just stood. Marks and Dee turned, running their eyes over the doors and the plaques, Agnes swayed in place, humming to herself.

"We still have to make a choice," Dee said. "We have to pick a door. So how do we pick?"

Marks sighed. "I don't know. I was picking my favorite animals. I don't know much about chess." He turned to look at the girl. "You know chess, what do you see?"

Dee studied the plaques, eyes leaping from one to another. Then she turned and looked at Agnes. After a moment, Agnes looked back at her and smiled.

"You said you would take us to my father," Dee said. "Which door?"

Agnes cocked her head and tucked her bottom lip out slightly. "I'm sorry, dear. It's not that simple."

"Why not? You *promised*."

"I *didn't*, actually," Agnes said. Then she shrugged. "I said I would lead you to him."

"Same thing," Dee said.

"No," Agnes said, her expression suddenly sad. "It's *not*, actually."

"Dee," Marks said softly. "You can't *trust* her. Think. Think about chess. Pick a door."

“I don't *know*,” Dee said.

Marks nodded. “Then nothing's changed. We just pick a door, like we have been.”

Dee stamped her foot. “*No*,” she said. “She said she would take me to Dad and then she said *Hippopatomus*. We have to pick the *right* door.”

“Oh, darling, dumb Dee, there is no such thing as a *right* door. There are doors. They all lead somewhere. You can spend *years* opening all the doors in this place! And then, when you've opened them all—they *change*! Sometimes they change without my permission, which is annoying.”

Marks took off the backpack and set it down on the floor. Then he sat down next to it and pulled out the notebook and began making notes.

Dee stared. “What are you doing?”

“Rushing won't get us anywhere,” Marks said. “Let's take a breath and think.”

Dee stamped her foot again, then relaxed. With three quick steps she was next to him, dropping to the floor. “Mr. Marks,” she whispered. “*Please*.”

He turned to her and leaned in close. “You know I used to drink,” he said. “A lot.”

Dee blinked. “What?”

He nodded. “Bourbon, mostly. I never used to—that is, I did, but just once in a while, like regular folks. Then something ... happened. I don't quite ... I don't quite remember what, and my mind,” he brought his hand up to his temple and made a circular motion. “My mind would *race*. Thoughts ping-ponging back and fourth. I

couldn't stop them. I couldn't make sense. So, I drank. I slowed myself down by drinking. I would sit in a bar and let the darkness wash over me and the booze would slow me down., one drink at a time, like I was filling myself with gelatin, until finally I passed out.”

Dee frowned. “Why are you telling me this?”

Marks sighed. “It worked. It took a long time, but all those lost afternoons, they slowed me down. They stopped my brain from spinning, and I was able to pull out of it, crawl back.” He snorted, half smiling. “I'm still crawling.” He looked distant for a moment, then snapped back. “Sometimes you have to slow yourself down, give yourself a chance to settle. So, sit here for a moment, kid. Settle.”

Dee's face scrunched up and for a moment she seemed almost about to cry. She struggled with a fierce sense of impatience. She kept picturing her father receding from her, getting smaller as he moved further away, and sitting still made it feel even worse, even more real. Then she shook herself and slumped down a little. “Okay.”

Marks nodded and returned his attention to the notebook, making marks. “Tell me about your Dad.”

“You *guys*,” Agnes said, sitting gracefully on the other side of Marks, folding her long legs under herself as if it was a standard move she did quite often despite the narrow skirt. “You’re making me *cry*.”

“He’s fat,” Dee said, dragging one arm across her nose. “Or, he isn’t, but he will be. He eats a lot, he gains weight, then he gets worried and drops it. He makes jokes. *Bad* jokes. Dumb jokes, but they make him

laugh and when he laughs you can't help it, you laugh too."

"I *do* hope we find him," Agnes said wistfully. "He sounds *delightful*."

"Hush," Marks said gently.

"Anyway, he has a temper. Or used to. He promised me he was *working* on that." She snorted. "Shit, I don't even care any more. Just want to find him. I mean, if he'd come back, found an apartment, gotten a job, and he turned out to be a prick, at least I'd *know*. Three years, I'd walk out. But now it's like he never even got a chance."

Marks nodded, still making notes. "But he didn't teach you chess."

She shook her head, leaning back, her palms flat against the floor. "No, was my Mom. She had this old set her dad gave her, nice wooden pieces, green felt on the bottom, a board that folded up into a box to hold them. She said kids at school teased her when she joined the chess club, but she didn't care; it was like the first time in her life she'd found something she just *enjoyed*, you know, something that wasn't work or grades or because her parents had made her, but because she just *liked* it. So she didn't care what people said." She sighed. "It was fun. I *like* chess. We would sit with a book she got from the library, *1000 Chess Openings*, and just play through them, recreate the famous games, stuff like—" She paused. "Hey!"

Agnes, who had been dozing prettily, suddenly snapped awake. "*Hey!*"

"What is it?" Marks asked.

Dee stood up and walked from plaque to plaque, lips moving as she studied them in turn. She turned and looked at Marks. “*Foyle’s Double Reverse* isn’t a real opening.”

Marks sat forward. “Are you sure?”

She shrugged, looking back down at the plaques. “No. I don’t know *every* fucking opening—sorry. I don’t though. But I know all these others, or I read about them, saw the name. Except that one. I *never* heard that one before.”

Marks smiled. “See? You slowed down.” He pushed the notebook back into the backpack and stood up, moving stiffly. “All right, Foyle’s it is.”

Agnes made a tsking sound. “I can’t say much—really, I *can’t*—but I wouldn’t go that way. If they haven’t moved things around—which they *do*, all the time, and it is *incredibly* annoying—then that door leads to a dreary, nasty room I prefer to avoid.”

Marks shut his eyes. “You know, trying to decide whether you’re actively deceiving us or telling us the truth or a version of it in hopes that we’ll *assume* you’re lying to us is exhausting, so maybe you could stop telling us things and just, I don’t know, do some interpretive dancing over in the corner until we make our decision.”

Agnes pointed at him. “*Rude*. Here I share my wonderful, amazing home with you, and not only have you *completely* failed to see the truth of this place, but you’re rude to me on top of everything.”

Marks looked at Dee. “You ready, kid?”

She offered him a thumb’s up. He strode over to the

archway and took hold of the door, which was different than all the others: It seemed older, and was heavier, the metal hardware blackened and rusted. It moved slowly, silently, revealing another short hallway that turned at a right angle a few feet in, obviously intended to prevent people from seeing what lay beyond just by opening doors. Marks considered scouting ahead, but didn't want to leave Dee alone with Agnes, or send Dee alone into the unknown. He shifted the backpack onto his shoulder and started walking.

Behind him, he heard Agnes: "*Rude.*"



## 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.

## 16. The Queer Lounge

The slide melted away and he was free-falling, crashing down through a drop ceiling suspended by thin wires and an aluminum frame. He landed on something with a lot of give and bounced off, crashing down onto the floor and rolling over. He looked around.

“Ah, *shit*,” he said. “Not again.”

A moment later, screaming, Dee rocketed from the slide that was hidden up above in the shadows gathered near the ceiling. She hit what Marks could see now was the trampoline and bounced off too, landing on top of him and knocking him over. He heard Agnes follow, cheering as she hit the air and laughing uproariously as she bounced and crashed into them in a cloud of peppermint.

“Oh, *lovely!*” she said, sitting up with her legs stretched out in front of her. “Lovely! Sorry, I would have warned you but I didn’t put in the slide. Someone has been *very* naughty!”

Dee sat up and stared around. “No!”

Marks pushed himself back until he was resting against the door of the closet. “It *is* a maze, after all,” he said.

They all jumped as the refrigerator suddenly tipped violently as something inside it threw itself against the door. It fell back into place after coming very close to tipping over, and Agnes burst into laughter.

They were back in the oppressive, queer employee lounge. The Victrola was playing the same jazzy music, and the place still had the deflated air of a room

recently abandoned. Marks indulged himself for a moment, wondering if the sensation of someone having *just* been there was actually *them*, if they were somehow displaced and out of sync with time, following themselves.

“Wonderful!” Agnes said breathily.

Dee stood up and brushed herself off. “Doors are the same,” she said. Then she scowled. “*Everything’s* the same. We just looped back on ourselves. We’re *wasting time.*”

“Calm down,” Marks said, grunting as he pushed himself to his feet. “We’re not wasting time. It’s a *maze*. This has to happen.” He shrugged off the backpack and took out the notebook, which was getting a wrinkled and tattered look to it. “We know where that dumwaiter leads to,” he said. “So we choose something else.” He looked up over the notebook at Agnes, who remained on the floor smiling. “Any suggestions for finding her Dad faster?”

Agnes sighed. “All *business*, you are, Miserable Moody Mr. Marks. All business and fussing. It’s why you’re so *unhappy*. We just rode a *slide* from the Underground to the Lounge! It was *delightful!* And all you can do is get out your grimy notebook.” She sprang up and made a stuffy, angry face. “*Let us see, turn to page nine, class, and let us examine the Incident of the Dum Waiter.*” She grinned and looked at him. “See?” she said, pointing. “Fussy.”

Marks nodded. “I’m making a note: *Don’t be so fussy.*”

Agnes grinned. “Was that a joke? A terrible, weak,

unfunny *joke*? Progress!” She spun and took Dee by the shoulders. “Now, dismal, despairing Dee, let me go *on record* and state that I have been trying to steer you in the right direction since the *start*, because my official advice is to follow the wolf and take the elevator.”

Dee and Marks both turned to look at the door. It was the familiar door they’d seen in almost every room, and the wolf carved on it looked intimidating, feral. Dee looked at Marks, and he shrugged.

“Dee’s Dad is at the other end of that ride?”

“It’s your best bet, Mr. Mopey Marks. As I just discovered, someone is not only tearing down barricades I set in place, someone is installing slides! So I have no idea if my memories are accurate.” She grinned. “Which, I hear, is something *you* of all people should understand and sympathize with! But you won’t, because you’re a nasty sort of person. But if you’re looking for dear dopey Dee’s Dad, the Wolf Door is the door *I* would try.”

Dee looked at Marks. “We got to.”

Marks nodded. “I know.” He turned and studied Agnes. “But there’s a trick. We should spend a moment trying to see it.”

Agnes drew herself up, and Marks was suddenly aware of just how *attractive* she’d become. When they’d first encountered her she’d been pretty enough, certainly, but she had slowly and subtly changed, becoming taller, thinner, rounder, her skin clearer, her eyes brighter, her hair somehow shinier and bouncier. She was a goddess, almost too beautiful to look at. “I am insulted. And also no longer interested in your



*cruelty. That door, as you might recall from your ridiculous map, takes you back to the library. That dumwaiter, as you know, takes you to the odd little bedroom—or it did. That door,” she continued, pointing at the door with a bear carved onto it, “leads to the saddest room in this place. The elevator is the one you want.”*

“Fine,” Marks said. “Let’s go, Dee.”

Dee nodded, walked over to the elevator and stood right in front of it. Up close the doors were battered and dented, with at least two very deep scratches in the metal. Like something had attacked the doors. There was just one button. It looked like it was made of pearl, a milky white that shined like plastic. The Wolf was scratched into the metal, etched somehow, as if with acid. Up close it seemed terrifying. Up close it was like the wolf was looking directly at her, and it seemed *hungry*.

She reached up and pressed the button. It was warm, and she was rewarded with a soft *ding*. A second later, the doors split open.

The interior of the elevator was all plush red. The floor was a deep, polished black. The music was the same tune being played on the Victrola but in a muted, tinkly version that was all treble, perfectly synced. The same tune Agnes had been humming when they first arrived.

Dee took a step back and twisted around to look at Agnes. “I want to go a different way?”

“There’s a *party* behind the Bear Door,” Agnes said. “Or *was*, a long time ago. It’s a *sad* party, but since you

don't seem to want to find your father, I suppose that would actually be appropriate.”

Dee clenched her jaw and turned back to the elevator. Marks stepped up behind her. “Come on, kid. He's either in the next room, or he's not. Let's go see what's what.”

Dee took a deep breath. “All right,” she said. She stepped into the elevator, paused, then turned. Marks hurried after her, suddenly terrified the doors would snap shut.

Nothing happened. He turned to peer back into the room at Agnes.

“Coming?”

She smiled. “No.”

The doors snapped shut.

## 17. The Waiting Room

For a moment, Marks had the sensation of being sealed off, the air going still and the pressure climbing. Then the cab lurched, sending him stumbling into Dee. They righted themselves, and the elevator shuddered into motion.

“Why isn't she coming?” Dee asked. “Why didn't she come?”

He sighed. “Because it's a trap, kid. Because we messed up and fell for a trap.”

She looked ready to cry. “I'm *sorry*,” she said quietly. “I'm *sorry*.”

He reached out one hand awkwardly and put it on her shoulder. “Shut up, kid. We were fucking doomed from the moment we walked in here.”

She started crying. “Also my damn fault,” she sobbed. “Ah, shit, I'm sorry. You didn't have much going on, Mr. Marks, but you looked like you were on the upswing, huh? Cash, and you looked like a man hadn't had a roof over his head for a while. And I dragged you here, and now we're gonna *die*, aren't we?”

“No,” he said quietly, looking around. “This place wants us alive. That's the point. It wants to steal our time.”

The elevator cab was oppressively red. The music seemed to be on an endless loop without structure, just a motif repeating endlessly. He looked up; there was a maintenance panel in the middle of the ceiling.

The ride went on longer than should have been

possible, the cab just shaking and screeching on and on. They stood in silence, him with his hand on her shoulder, her with tears streaming down her face. The music playing.

Suddenly, the music was interrupted by a burst of static, and then Agnes' voice came over the air, tinny and cheerful.

“Fifth floor: Knickers, moonbeams, and carcinogens,” she announced. “I wanted to thank you for a truly entertaining time! You totally broke records. You lasted *long time*. I will never forget you, dour poor man and black moppet.”

“Is she going to just keep *talking* to us forever?” Dee asked. “Is that how this goes?”

“Sixth floor: Seashells, seashells, by the seesaw,” Agnes continued, her voice somehow seeming to fill the entirety of the cab, a pulsing vibration using every molecule of the elevator as an amplifier. “To be clear, while, yes, it’s true I pushed you towards this option from the very beginning, I also offered some better choices. For example, there *is* actually a map in the library! Really there is! It would take you *ever* so long to find it, but I was not, actually, lying.”

“Seems like it,” Marks said, leaning back against the rear of the elevator and wishing fervently for a cigarette for the first time in a long time.

“Seventh floor: Kittens, barbells, feral children. Nasty place, the seventh floor, do not go there. Mr. Marks, you wished to know who I made myself resemble. I shan’t tell you, but I am sure you will figure it out in time. And then, my manly, miserable Marks, you will *wish* you *had*

*not.*”

Marks nodded to himself as if this made perfect sense. He glanced down at Dee, who was staring up at him apprehensively, and winked.

“Eighth floor: Blood diamonds, blood money, blood donations,” Agnes snapped off. “Ninth floor: Beetles, earworms, human centipedes. Tenth floor ... tenth floor, end of the line.”

Her voice cut off, the shaking stopped, and with a neutral-sounding *ding* the doors split open again.

It revealed a pleasant room, quite large and filled with people. There were hundreds of multi-colored plastic seats arranged either in rows or little groups. A long table along the wall nearest the elevator held urns of coffee and plates of donuts. Many of the people had paper cups in their hands. A Muzak version of a sad, melancholy song was playing softly—but Marks was momentarily relieved to hear it was a different song than the one he’d been hearing everywhere else.

“Tenth floor,” Agnes said softly all around them. “Old friends.”

They stepped into the room, and the elevator doors closed behind them softly. The smell of coffee was strong, and the music seemed to recede to an almost subliminal level of volume. Marks squinted and leaned forward, then straightened up.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered. “There’s a *horizon*.”

A few people seated nearest them glanced over. One elderly gentleman, wearing a suit of tattered and oversized clothes, looked Marks up and down and sniffed audibly.

“There’s a five year wait for a chair,” he said. “*I’m* not moving.”

“Is my Dad here?” Dee asked, straining up onto her toes. “I mean, this is where she wanted us to go. This was her trick. He has to be here, right?”

“Maybe, kid,” he said. “Stay close, though—this place is huge!”

“Dad!” she shouted, setting off between the rows of chairs. “Dad!”

Marks noted how many of the people in the chairs were elderly. A few scowled at Dee as she raced by.

“Keep it down!”

“I’m *sleeping* here, sweetheart.”

“Shut up, you fucking brat!”

Marks waved them away as he hustled after her, trying to keep up. He noted that the people near the elevator were all uniformly older, often decrepit. A few he noticed had dust on their shoulders as they dozed, and the air, he realized, had a thick, earthy smell that definitely implied a lack of bathrooms. He glanced down and saw that the floor was covered in a soft pelt of dirt that wasn’t dirt—too light, too springy. It hit him a moment later and he stumbled, gagging, and almost losing his balance: It was skin flakes and hair, dirt and fingernails from the people who’d been sitting here, waiting, for years, possibly decades—so long it had all mulched into some sort of soil, complete with tiny sprouts, their delicate green leaves reaching up for ...what? Tears? Sweat? Saliva?

For the first time, the fear that maybe they *were*

trapped got a hand on him. He wondered at the odds: All of these people, he had little doubt, had entered this room just as he had—a little stunned, possibly already exhausted by a lengthy journey through the maze, but essentially certain there was always another door, another option. Even if you looped back to the beginning or found yourself in some terrible room again, there would always be another way.

And now here they were, sitting down, letting their lives slip away.

“Dee! Slow down!”

She ignored him, racing forward and shouting. The room, Marks noted, went on and on, impossibly large. Their voices, rather than echoing off the high ceiling and distant walls, just fell flat. The effort to shout was a strain, as if the air was thicker than usual and it required more energy just to be heard. The sheer scale of the place started to eat away at his equanimity, and he was suddenly afraid he’d lose track of her and not be able to locate her again.

“Dee!”

For a moment, Marks thought there was a faint echo, then he realized he was hearing someone *else* shout her name.

“Dad!”

Dee swerved, cutting down a new aisle between a whole new island of seats. Marks hurried after her, backpack bouncing. Through the sweat that started to fog his vision he could see a tall, lanky man wearing a denim jacket, wearing blue work pants and a pair of battered old boots. He was running easily through the

narrow lanes between the chairs, and scooped Dee up into his arms when they met, swinging her in a half-circle before setting her down on the floor.

Several of those seated scowled and grumbled.

“Baby, what are you *doing* here?” he asked. Marks slowed down and walked the last few feet towards them, breathing hard. He halted and leaned over, putting his hands on his knees, sucking in air. The backpack slid forward and rested on the back of his head.

“I came after you,” she said. “When you didn’t come back I *knew* somethin’ had happened to you.”

Kneeling in front of her, he put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her face. Marks liked him: He was middle-aged, fortyish, and had the skinny frame of someone used to being hungry, but with a paunch that hinted at a slow down, more time spent sitting around than he was used to. His face was deeply lined, the sort of face, Marks thought, that was used to a lot of expression.

“You shouldn’t have come, baby,” he said seriously, eyes shining. “You shouldn’t have *come*.”

Dee was crying. “I wanted to find you,” she said softly.

As murmurs of disapproval swept the crowd, Dee’s father’s eyes drifted over her shoulder to where Marks stood.

“Who’s this?”

Dee turned and dragged an arm across her nose. “Mr. Marks. He’s helping me.”



Her father eyed Marks up and down, his face set. "You *brought* her here, man?"

"I followed him! He didn't know!" Dee added quickly. "He was comin' here to look for you, and I snuck after him."

Marks looked at his shoes. "I had a chance to turn back when I knew she was here, and I didn't," he admitted. He forced himself to look up. "I'm sorry."

The man stared for another few moments, then stood up. Patting Dee's shoulder, he stepped around her and approached Marks, who steadied himself. He'd been punched in the nose more than once and while he didn't enjoy it, he'd found that he came back from it admirably.

"All right, what's done is done and we can talk about it later," the man said. He held out a hand. "Dennis," he said.

Marks took his hand. It was warm and dry and rough, the hands of someone used to working with them. His grip was powerful, his shake efficient. "Phil," Marks said.

"He's been keepin' an eye on me, Dad," Dee said from behind them. Dennis studied Marks for another moment, then sighed.

"All right," he said. "All right. I know how willful this one is. And I know I sure didn't expect *this* bullshit when I showed up here, so ... all right. You're here now."

Marks nodded. "You have a look around? Any doors? Any way out?"

Dennis nodded. "Yeah, I been lookin'. All we got in

here is chairs. And people. And if you walk a real *long* way in that direction—” He turned to indicate an area of the room behind him. “You find some real *old* chairs with some real *dead* people sittin’ in them.” He looked back at Marks. “So, as far as I can tell, no, no way out.”

Marks smiled slightly. “That’s what she wants us to think, isn’t it?”

## 18. The Waiting Room

“It occurs to me,” Dennis said slowly, “that you might be a dirty trick.”

Marks sipped the coffee. It was terrible, watery and gritty, with only a vaguely coffee-like flavor. “Like maybe we’re not what we seem to be.”

Dennis nodded. “I met a woman when I arrived. Nice older black lady, said she’d been here for days, suggested we team up. Full of opinions about where to go.”

Marks nodded, blowing on the steaming cup. “She changed. Looked different by the end.”

Dennis nodded, studying Marks, then leaning forward a little to study Dee.

“And now you’re wondering if we’re part of the Welcome Wagon, here to mess with you.”

Dennis leaned back and pursed his lips. “It had crossed my mind, yeah. Shit, man, I dealt with the prison yard, basically didn’t sleep for four years because I was convinced I was getting killed or ... or something if I did. And I still felt more secure than I do right at this moment.”

“Smart man.” Marks toasted him with his coffee cup. “You’ve been living on donuts and coffee for two weeks now?”

They were seated on the floor near the urns, Dee to one side of her father and Marks on the other. People sometimes approached the tables and sniffed in irritation before getting their own cups or plates of

pastries, but no one said anything. Marks watched them curiously, wondering how in the world they could possibly just *sit there*.

Dennis nodded. "I got *experience* with terrible coffee, man, and stale donuts. Meetings, AA." He blinked. "Wait. You say two *weeks*? I count two *days*."

"Time's different in here. The whole point is to drain you, keep you spinning." He sipped the coffee again and winced. "The donuts as bad as this?"

"Worse," Dennis said. "There's a definite *sawdust* vibe going on."

"You walk the perimeter?"

Dennis nodded, and Marks found himself impressed. There was something of himself in Dennis, he thought, even though they looked quite different: Marks white, wearing a cheap suit, somehow inert and heavy; Dennis black and wearing denim, his hair cut short (but slowly growing wild), his hands calloused. But Marks could sense that despair, that knowledge that you'd lost more time than you had left, that opportunities were running out. He smelled familiar desperation on Dennis and it made him feel like they were on the same team. A losing team, perhaps, but at least familiar.

"I started at the elevator," he said. "And walked right. Hit the wall, turned left. Kept walking. And walking. And *walking*. This room is god-damn *huge*."

"You find the edge?"

Dennis shook his head, sipping his own coffee. "Not yet. I decided I would get some sleep, stuff my pockets with donuts, and carry two cups of coffee with me, make an attempt at finding the other side of this room."

He looked around. "This place is *crazy*."

Marks nodded. "Who fills the coffee urns? Puts out the donuts?"

"Never saw no one."

Marks sipped the coffee with a straightfaced sense of resignation and looked over the crowd of people sitting around them. Some stood, in small groups. Marks ran his eyes over them, reminding himself that they might be plants, figments, or even Agnes herself, who had demonstrated an ability to change her form to some extent, and who certainly wasn't human.

"Hey!"

A doughy-looking woman with hair that had been dyed bright red, but which had grown out into a dull silver, giving her a two-toned look, turned and looked at them with dulled, blank eyes. "What?"

"How long you been here?"

She shrugged. "Dunno."

"Guess!"

"Dunno."

He got to his feet and carried his coffee over to one of the knots of people: Three young men wearing casual office clothes: Button-down shirts, jackets. They looked at him politely as he approached.

"How long you been here, guys?"

They looked at him, then at each other, smiling secretly. They shook their heads and turned away, leaning in close to have a private conversation. Marks nodded and returned to where Dennis and Dee were

sitting.

“Not too friendly, huh?” Dennis asked.

“The Waiting Room part is genius,” Marks said. “For a lot of people, they can’t process what’s happening to them. It’s so far outside their experience and expectations, they don’t know what to do. Their brains shut down, become paralyzed. And then you give them a *waiting room*, and instinct takes over. They sit. They *wait*. Anyone trying to upset that is ignored, or attacked.”

“Okay,” Dennis said. “So what do you do for a living, Mr. Marks? Because it sounds like you *build* places like this. Or, like we touched on, maybe you’re my old black lady friend fucking with me.” His eyes flashed in Dee’s direction. “*Messing* with me.”

“I know the word, Dad.”

“No,” Marks said. “Just been to a few places in this general category. That’s how I came to look for you, in a building that shouldn’t exist.”

“All right. All right. So, we walk the perimeter. You really think there's a way out of here?”

“You tried the elevator?”

Dennis shook his head. “No button. Tried pulling the doors open, even tore apart one of the chairs and tried prying them with one of the legs. All it got me was bloody fingers.” He held up his hands. The fingers were scabbed and raw.

Marks nodded, looking over at the shiny metal doors. “Hey, Dee, remember the slide into that weird lounge? We had no idea it was there.” He nodded again. “I’ll

make a bet, we walk the perimeter we'll walk for a long time, and find nothing." He looked at Dennis. "This whole place is designed to waste our time. Chances are, if you see an obvious way, you're being screwed."

Dennis sighed. "All right, so we can't wait, we can't walk, so what do we do?"

Marks gestured. "The *elevator*. Look, this place is trying hard to convince us the elevator's a dead end. But it *can't* be. If we couldn't go back, it wouldn't be here—the doors usually disappear when you can't go backwards."

"Yeah," Dennis said, leaning forward. "*Yeah*. That's right, when you can't go back, the door just ain't there. I remember that."

"So if the elevator is still here, there has to be a way to get back in it. Ride it back up. Or ride it *somewhere*."

Dennis smiled. "Mr. Marks, you just saved us a lot of walking. So how do we get the elevator doors open?"

Marks shrugged. "I don't know."

Dennis studied him for a moment, then smiled broadly. "My man!"

"*Dad*," Dee said.

Marks smiled. He'd forgotten how good it could be to just have voices around you, people paying attention to you, interacting and reacting. He stared at the elevator doors and basked, for a moment, in having another adult just sharing his company.

"We could just wait for the next bunch of stupid people," Dee said.

Marks turned to look at her, his dreamy half-smile still in place. "What?"

Dee shrugged. "We came down the elevator, and the doors opened and stayed open until we stepped off. Why not wait for the next group of dummies who get trapped in here, and just step back on?"

Dennis and Marks looked at each other.

"Would that work?" Dennis asked.

"I have no idea." Marks looked back at the elevator doors. "But unless we come up with something better, we're going to find out."



## 19. The Waiting Room

“Why do they all just sit there, waiting?”

Marks shrugged. “It’s a Waiting Room, right?”

The three of them were sitting on the floor in front of the elevator, a picnic of sorts spread out in front of them. Marks had pulled everything out of his backpack and taken an inventory and reviewed his map, making more notes. Dennis discovered there was hot water in one of the urns instead of coffee, so they unplugged it to let it cool. Then they had a meal of power bars, donuts, and coffee.

“That was the worst lunch I have literally ever eaten,” Dee said.

“Your Mom would never have allowed it,” Dennis said, grinning. “That woman, she drove me mad, girl, but she knew how to get things *done*.”

Marks was re-packing the bag, trying to lay power bars like bricks to gain the most efficient possible use of space. Every few minutes he glanced up at the doors. He didn’t want to admit it out loud, but he felt alive and energetic, almost happy. He had a clear purpose, no distractions, and for the first time in a very long time he didn't have any bills to worry about, he didn't have to figure out how to live on ten dollars a week or where he was going to sleep that night. He didn't have to spend hours pretending to really, *really* enjoy a cup of cooling coffee just so he could sit inside someplace warm for a while.

And he still had more than four thousand dollars sewn into his jacket. In a strange way he refused to

acknowledge consciously, he felt like every day he spent in this awful place, this dark, black house, was a day he didn't have to spend a dime on survival. It pushed his eventual return to penury further and further out, and that was comforting.

“Maybe we should try to recruit people,” Dee said. “This is messed up. They all got lured here just like us, right Mr. Marks?”

Marks nodded. “That's probably true, though places like this find its victims in different ways. There are odd little entrances all over the place, hidden. Turn a dark corner, there you are.” He turned to look at them. “The one constant is these places only reveal themselves to people who have nothing to lose, and no one looking for them. People who won't be missed.”

They all contemplated that for a grim moment. Then Dennis brightened. “Well, then it messed up this time, because I had Dee.”

Marks nodded, turning his attention back to his packing. “Yes. Without Dee you'd just be sitting here, like the rest of them.”

“Who we should at least *try* to talk to, right?” Dee said impatiently. “They're being messed with, right? That's why they're just sitting here. It's like a spell or something, the same way Agnes made herself look a certain way. A trick. We got, like, a *duty* to try and snap them out of it.”

“Agnes,” Dennis said musingly. “That's the name she gave me, too.”

Marks shook his head. “Your Dad didn't just sit around.”

“What?”

“It's a trick, sure, but it's not forcing anyone. That would be against the rules. This place wants us all in here because it's easier to soak up our energy, but if it enchanted us into sitting around or something, it wouldn't get much out of us. It wants people up and moving: Getting coffee, walking the perimeter, arguing, getting into fights. No, the people here who are just sitting? They're sitting because they don't want to do anything else. They've given up.”

“Then why don't this place liven them up?” she asked. “It wants energy, movement, business. Why let them just sit?”

He shrugged. “Best guess? Agnes has her hands full. Whatever she is, she's just one of it. She has to go greet and fuck over every visitor to this place, guide them here. She doesn't have time to come in here and make everyone do calisthenics or something.”

“What's *calisthenics*?”

“Nothing important.”

“Still,” she said firmly. “We should try to snap 'em out of it.”

“No, we shouldn't.” Marks finished packing and zipped up the backpack. “Let's say we get a dozen, two dozen, or just one person to get off their ass. These are people who chose to sit down and wait. Your Dad's been here for what seems to him like two days, we walk in and he's still motoring, trying to figure this out. These people are sitting here because they've *given up*. If we pry some loose they'll be dead weights around our necks. We won't be able to help them, and they'll *hurt*

us, they'll slow us down, they'll argue every decision, they'll complain, and we'll suffer for it.”

“Baby,” Dennis said slowly after a moment's silence. “I got to side with Mr. Marks here on this. You maybe ain't seen the quality of people I have, and I'm glad of that. But most people make bad decisions, then get mad at you over 'em. We're better off on our own. These people got eyes and ears. They could come to the same conclusions we did.”

Dee seemed unhappy, but she nodded. “All right.”

They sat for a while. Marks thought about getting another cup of coffee, then imagined himself having to relieve himself against a wall somewhere, as there didn't seem to be a bathroom anywhere. Then he thought there *would* be a bathroom somewhere in the maze, wouldn't there, and he decided it was best that he never, ever see it.

“Listen, we don't—”

Without fanfare, the elevator emitted a dry, sterile *ping*.

Marks could hear her, he could hear Agnes, doing the same schtick. *Sixth floor, unwanted advances, that sinking feeling, model trains*. The voice was dim and muffled, but rising and clarifying.

“Come on!”

They scrambled to their feet. Marks swung the backpack over his shoulder, then turned to glance at the urn of cooling water. He was down to his last few bottles of water, and the gallon or three in the urn would be more than useful. But there was no time. If they paused to gather it, figure out how to carry it with

them, there was a very good chance the elevator would leave, and they had no way of knowing if it would ever come back. They had to take the opportunity.

“When the doors open, we go in *immediately*,” he said, poised. “Don't hesitate!”

Dennis and Dee both nodded. They all stood, poised, ready.

Agnes' voice, rising in volume: *Eighth floor, bloomers, pantaloons, lederhosen.*

The doors split open.

They ran forward, silent, and crowded into the cab, spinning to face the doors, breathing hard from pure excitement. They waited.

“Excuse me?”

They all froze.

“Is this the way out or not?”

They all three turned almost as one, and stared back at the pleasant-looking, washed-out young man in the mid-range suit. He looked a little worse for the wear; rough around the edges. His blond hair was out of place, his jacket was torn, and he had a shallow gash just under his hairline.

Marks smiled and stepped to one side, pushing Dee gently against then wall of the cab. “We don't know,” he said, feeling honest and upright.

“Dammit,” the man said. “I was *really* hoping you knew more than I did.”

“Life is disappointment,” Marks said brightly. He looked up at then ceiling. “Dee, if your Dad holds you

up, think you can pry open that panel?"

Dee squinted up at the square. "Maybe. With what?"

"It should just push up, like a ceiling tile." Marks looked at Dennis. "Okay?"

The man in the suit frowned. "What's going on?"

"Sir, we're inspecting elevators today," Marks said. "You go on in and have a cup of coffee."

"*Marks,*" Dee hissed.

Marks looked at her, then at Dennis. They both stared back at him. He slumped a little, and turned to face the man in the suit. "I don't think this is the way out," he said quietly. "We came down here too. It's a Trap Room. You should stick with us."

The man in the suit blinked. "What's a Trap Room? Do you know Agnes?"

"Everyone here," Marks said, "knows Agnes. Dee?"

She looked at Dennis. "Dad?"

Dennis peered up at the panel. "Okay. No harm in trying. I'll lift you up, see if you can push the panel up."

"Uh," the man in the suit said. "I'm still standing here."

Dennis scooped up Dee and lifted her up by her waist. She pushed her hands up against the panel until it lifted.

"Higher!" she said.

Dennis boosted her up.

"Why are we going up through the ceiling?" The man in the suit said, frowning. "Is this room so terrible?"

“It's the worst room of them all.” Marks said.

Dee pushed the panel up a few inches, then slid it back until she'd revealed the opening, which was about two by two. It was a square of inky black.

Suit Man leaned forward and peered up at it. “So ... let me get this right. You'd rather go up into the pitch-black shaft than stay in that room. Jesus, I've seen some frightening shit these last three days, but I can't even imagine what would make me climb into that.”

“Coffee,” Marks said.

“And donuts,” Dennis added, letting letting Dee drop down to the floor.

The four of them stared up at the dark square. “How do we get up there?” Dee asked.

“We've got lots of chairs,” Dennis said.

No one moved. One by one they turned to stare at the doors.

“Chances the doors shut if any one of us step outside?” Marks asked.

“What?” Suit Man said, smiling nervously.

Dennis looked at Marks. “Pretty good.”

One by one, they turned and looked at Suit Man. He continued to stare up at the panel for a few moments, then turned and looked around. “What?”

Marks stepped over and took him by the arm and began walking him in a tight circle inside the elevator. “What say you dash out there and grab us a chair or two?”

Suit Man frowned. “Why—you don't want to—what's

going to happen to me if I go out there?"

"Our experience is limited," Marks said, turning him in a tight circle. "But probably nothing."

"You were going in there anyway, right?" Dennis said.

"Sure, but that was before you *freaked me out*."

"You weren't freaked out *before* this?" Dee asked.

Suit Man pulled away from Marks and stood in front of the doors. "What happens if I step out there and the doors close behind me?"

"All the coffee and donuts you can consume," Marks said.

"And we're fucked," Dennis added. Then he glanced at Dee. "We're *in trouble*."

"*Dad*," she grouched.

Suit Man turned. "All right," he said, looking from face to face. "Tell me why you're going up the elevator shaft. Why aren't you just picking a door?"

Marks looked at Dee, then at Dennis. He looked back at Suit Guy. "It's a trap," he said. "There are no doors."

"I see." Suit Man said. He looked back through the doors and set his jaw. "All right, I'll grab a chair. But then I'm coming with you."

Marks, Dennis, and Dee exchanged looks, and nodded at each other.

"All right," Marks said. "Deal."

"Appreciated," Dennis added.

Suit Man turned, squared his shoulders, and stepped briskly out of the elevator. He stopped and turned,



smiling.

“Well!” he said.

The elevator doors snapped shut.

## 20. A New Room

For a moment they stood, frozen with surprise. Then they all looked up at the ceiling and the panel.

“Dennis,” Marks said. “If you got on my shoulders, could you climb up there?”

Dennis squinted. “Yup.”

No one moved. “Dennis,” Marks said. “If you get up there, do you think you’d be able to pull *me* up after you, if Dee helps?”

Dennis’ squint turned into a frown. “Well ... ” He turned and looked Marks up and down. “Maybe.”

“And leave me *here*?” Dee demanded.

Marks shook his head. “One of us braces the others legs, and he dangles down, grabs your arms, we pull you up.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Not saying anything *specific* about anyone’s level of physical condition here,” Dennis said, “but you feeling confident we can pull off those feats of strength?”

Marks straightened up. “Jesus, I’ve got *rope* in the bag.”

In short order, Marks had produced the rope he’d bought and gotten down on his hands and knees. Dennis took the rope and used Marks as a human step stool, pulling himself up into the service hatch. His legs disappeared, kicking and wriggling, and a moment later the rope dropped down, looking like a thin, frail white line that would obviously snap when tested.

Dennis' face appeared framed in the square of the hatch. "You doin' all right, baby?"

Dee offered him a sardonic thumb's up. Marks was amused to see how quickly she'd gone from joy at seeing her father to a sullen sort of exasperation. He assumed this was standard for children.

"You next," he said.

She eyed the black square for a second. "Where do you think it leads?"

He shrugged. "Back to the lounge?"

She shook her head, her expression uneasy. "Seems too easy, don't it? Too damn easy to just backtrack. Like you said, this room is a trap. We ain't *supposed* to be able to get out. So why have an access panel in the damn elevator?"

Marks pursed his lips and looked up at the black square above them. "A trap within a trap," he said thoughtfully.

"Make it worse," Dee said. "That's what I'd do, if I was Agnes, lookin' to keep us in here like bugs in a jar or something."

Marks kept staring at the hole in the ceiling. Presently Dennis' face reappeared.

"I got it secure enough," he said. "You guys coming?"

Marks animated, coming back to the present. "You go," he said to Dee. "I'll follow."

She looked at him dubiously. "You think you be able to climb this rope? When's the last time you had gym class?"

“Go,” he said with a grimace, taking hold of the rope and holding it taut for her. She shook her head and grabbed on, easily pulling herself up with four powerful tugs, Dennis grabbing onto her and reeling her up the last few feet. Two faces looked down at Marks.

“Come on, old man,” Dee said. “You got me into this mess, you got to get me out.”

“You *volunteered*,” Marks said, tossing the backpack up. Dennis caught it smartly, and it disappeared into the darkness beyond. He took hold of the rope and tugged on it, took a deep breath, and launched himself upwards, pulling with all his might.

That went well enough. When it came time to move one hand up, he found it no easy task, eventually managing to support himself somewhat by clamping his feet together and letting some of his weight go there. Where it had taken Dee seconds to scramble, it took Marks nearly a minute, and when they pulled him onto the roof of the elevator, he was sweating and breathing hard. He lay on his back staring up at the total darkness of the elevator shaft, catching his breath and waiting for the tell-tale signs of a heart attack while Dennis retrieved the rope and untied it.

There was a strange sense of space all around them, as if the shaft were much larger than it should be and the elevator was in fact swinging freely like a pendulum. The light leaking up and out of the elevator was weak and quickly absorbed, illuminating just a few inches of the elevator’s top, the thick metal cables rising up into darkness.

Rolling over, Marks grabbed his bag and extracted a flashlight by feel. He clicked it on and aimed the beam

around them, revealing they were, in fact, in a shaft just large enough to hold the elevator cab. There was a maintenance ladder on one wall. He aimed the flashlight up above them, but the beam diffused and dissolved long before revealing anything of note.

“At least there’s a Ladder,” Dennis said.

Marks snorted. “I was hoping for an exit.”

“You sure there *is* one?” Dennis said, then looked sharply at Dee. “Oh, shit, of *course* there’s an exit, right?”

Marks nodded. “There is. There has to be. It’s hard to explain why, but if there wasn’t an exit we’d know. We’d feel it, and give up. But we can sense there is one, so we keep moving, and that’s what this place wants.”

“If that’s what this place wants, then why have a room where everyone’s just sitting around waiting?”

Marks puffed out his cheeks for a moment. “I don’t know. Come on. Let’s climb.”

The ladder was easier than the rope, but it was still difficult. Hand over hand, feet slipping on the rusted, lubricated rungs, he felt the sweat pour from him, his breathing labored and his jaw aching as he clenched the flashlight between his teeth. The darkness above didn’t seem to change, and it didn’t take long to become mesmerized by the steady scroll of the ladder and metal piping along the wall. He knew it didn’t have to make sense, an endless elevator shaft in the midst of this place. His brain still rebelled against the implied infinity of it.

He’d lost the bubbling cheer he’d been feeling earlier. Now it all seemed too neat, too simple, and he

worried there really was no choice, no possibility of making their own path. That Agnes was truly in charge, tugging them this way and that.

And yet she'd seemed, at times, as surprised as they'd been, as if she didn't know everything about this place, as if she'd inherited it, not built it. She'd hinted that changes were made she had nothing to do with, frustration with things that happened without her. It was heartening to think that even Agnes had so little control over her existence, that maybe she wasn't so different from them, scurrying around like ants fleeing the magnifying glass.

He climbed. His arms burned and his back ached. He climbed long after he thought they should have found the doors leading back to the queer lounge. He felt doubt creeping in, but kept climbing. The idea that it was all a complex trick that had been set up was too much to bear. But as he climbed it seemed increasingly likely that they'd gone much further than they should have, that they'd either missed the doors leading back to the lounge, or those doors had vanished. And maybe that meant *this* was the trap, the real trap, that they were now in a pitch-dark shaft clinging to a ladder until they were exhausted. Until they headed back down only to discover the elevator had vanished, until they realized they were trapped in this endless, dark space forever, and just let go, to fall endlessly.

He shook his head. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his eyes, but was afraid to let go of the ladder.

He swept the area ahead of him awkwardly with the flashlight, twisting his head this way and that, then paused and swung the light back. Carefully, he stopped

climbing and hooked his elbow through on the rungs, taking the light from his mouth and holding it steady. There it was, on the opposite side of the shaft.

“Door,” he shouted. “A door!”

“The Lounge?” Dee shouted back.

He leaned forward as far as he dared, clinging to the metal ladder. “No, it’s one of the other doors, the usual doors,” he said slowly. “It has a carving of ... a newt. A lizard, but I think it’s a newt.”

“We’ve seen newt!” Dee shouted.

“Sure,” Marks said, breathing hard in between the words. “But we had a *choice* before. Doesn’t mean it’s *safe*.”

“Mr. Marks,” Dennis said, his voice strained. “We’re hanging on a rusty ladder in an elevator shaft. *This ain’t safe*.”

Marks nodded to himself. “The real question is how do we get over there?”

For a moment he let the light dance on the door. It looked exactly like the doors had looked in the earlier rooms—heavy, wooden, dark.

“Jump?” Dee suggested.

Marks choked as a wave of giddy, hysterical laughter seized him. “No,” he managed to say. “We don’t jump.” He looked up into the darkness above. “We swing,” he said, not believing the words as they came out of his mouth. “We tie the rope to a rung of the ladder up above, then we Tarzan swing over there.”

“Did he just say *Tarzan swing*?” Dennis wanted to

know.

Marks turned the flashlight onto the ladder and estimated the width between the rungs. "I'll go first. You both stay below."

He climbed, counting rungs and doing manic math in his head. They needed to get high enough so they'd have the length of rope necessary to swing over. He overcompensated, hooked his arm through a rung again while leaving the flashlight in his mouth, and fished out the rope one-handed. Awkwardly, he lopped the rope around the rung and formed a hitch that he thought would be sufficient. Then he fished up the other end of the rope and repeated the process so he had a long loop of rope knotted twice to the ladder. The loop was long enough, and he hoped having two knots would be insurance against someone plummeting down to their death.

"All right!" he said. "I'm going to try it."

He ignored the anxious murmur of voices below and trained the flashlight on the door. There was a sliver of landing jutting out from the threshold; he thought it entirely possible to swing over, grab onto the doorknob with one hand while getting his feet on the landing. Then he could see if the door opened inward or outward.

He took a deep breath, tugged on the rope, and put the flashlight in his mouth again. Then he started climbing back down, counting rungs. When he judged he was in the right position, he took hold of the rope with one hand and slowly let it take his weight as he took his other hand from the rung and grabbed onto the rope. For a moment he was suspended with his feet on



the rungs, then he leaned back, gathered himself, and launched himself into the air, hanging onto the rope.

He started swinging. The first leap only took him halfway to the door, but he could see he had the positioning right. Like a kid on a tire swing, he began working up momentum, forward, then back, forward, back. Each time the door came closer and closer, but as his arms burned and trembled he suddenly wasn't confident he'd be able to let go with one hand. He thought it entirely possible if he tried he would lose his grip on the rope entirely.

Sweating, breathing hard, he kept swinging. The door drew closer and closer, and finally something in his brain clicked and he took his right hand from the rope and reached out as he swung towards the door. He closed his fingers around the ornate handle, his feet hitting on the stub of landing and skidding off and on as his momentum tried to pull him back. When he finally settled he was stuck leaning out over the darkness, struggling to breathe around the flashlight and uncertain if he could release the rope and not be pulled backwards by gravity. He teetered out over the emptiness, then slowly pulled himself forward until he was leaning against the door. He pressed his cheek against the wood and breathed for a few seconds, trembling.

“Marks!” Dennis called up. “You okay?”

Marks nodded. Then he realized they couldn't see him, and forced his muddy brain to consider the problem of letting go of one of the two things keeping him from falling. He moved his hand on the door's handle and depressed the thumbpiece, became

unbalanced and pitched forward as the door slid inward. He lost his grip on the rope and fell, almost sliding back out and down but managing to catch hold of the threshold. Grunting, he pulled himself up and into a brightly-lit room.

“Marks!” Dennis called. “We can see the doorway! You okay? We’re comin’!”

“Fine!” Marks shouted, spitting the flashlight onto the floor and lying back, breathing hard. He considered how inadequate the word *fine* was in context. He had never been physically built for adventure, and this was turning into more work than he’d done in a long time.

He sat up and looked around. The room looked brand new—it was just a box of recent drywall, taped and mudded. The floor was plywood subfloor. The light was just a bare bulb hanging down from the ceiling. Instead of another door, there were three open doorways leading to similarly bright spaces.

“Marks! I’m sending Dee over to you!”

Marks wiped a hand over his face and flicked sweat onto the floor. He shrugged the backpack off and settled the jacket on his shoulders. Then he picked up the flashlight went and stood in the doorway. He trained the light upwards until he found them; Dee was clinging to the ladder with one hand, the other looped into the rope. She stared right at him, her face a mask of terror.

“Come on!” he said, trying to appear jovial. “I’ll catch you!”

She didn’t appear to be comforted by this announcement. She closed her eyes and let go of the ladder, swinging in a gentle arc towards him. As she

came close he reached out with unexpected grace and grabbed hold of her shirt, pulling her in. She let go of the rope and they tumbled to the floor with a bounce.

“I’m okay, Dad!” Dee shouted across the void.

“All right,” Dennis shouted back uncertainly. “Here goes nothing!”

From the darkness, Dennis seemed to materialize from nothing, zooming in close. Marks pushed Dee behind him and reached for her father, but mis-timed it, and Dennis swung back, swallowed by the darkness. Dennis unleashed a stream of invective and reappeared with a determined look on his face, kicking forward with a yelp. Marks reached and grabbed him by the ankles, pulling with all his might. They both landed on the rough subfloor, and Marks felt splinters digging into his legs.

For a moment they lay there, panting. Then Dennis sat up and looked around.

“Well *this* is kind of disappointing.”

## 21. A New Room

Marks regretted the rope. It dangled from the ladder and there was no way to retrieve it, and now that it had proved its usefulness he worried about it. There might come a room up ahead where they would wish fervently for a rope, and there would be none.

He looked around. "Seems like they're expanding," he said. "Building new rooms."

"Great," Dennis said. "That's what we need. *More* of this."

"Where are the workers?" Dee asked. "If they're building, where are they?"

Marks looked around. "Maybe if we make our way through this section, we'll find them."

This was met with silence. He looked around. "Three doorways," he said. "Who wants to pick?"

Dee pointed at a doorway in the far corner. "It's the opposite direction of the elevator shaft," she said. "So maybe it takes us away from the Waiting Room."

"I'm all for *that*," Dennis said.

Marks led the way. The doorway led to a short hallway that was also rough, new drywall and unfinished flooring. At the other end was another unfinished doorway, which led them into another room of taped, sanded drywall. This one had eight doorway openings.

"Whatever they intend this to be," Dennis said, "it's going to be huge."

Marks nodded thoughtfully. "Any guesses on the next move?"

No one said anything. After a moment he nodded and headed for the doorway directly opposite the one they'd just come through.

.o0o.

"It's the same."

Marks nodded, looking around at the newly-installed drywall, the thick white lines of the taped and sanded seams, the rough subfloor, the bare bulb. They'd tried four doorways so far, and all led to a similar room, with the sole difference being the number and positioning of the doorways. None of the rooms had actual doors, just openings that led to short, identically drywalled halls and then to a room that appeared to be just as recently created.

"It's a maze," Marks said resignedly. "A maze within the maze."

.o0o.

"How long have we been in here?" Dee asked.

"A few hours," Marks said.

"Anyone know where the first room is any more?"

A moment of silence as they contemplated the walls and floor that looked exactly like every other room

they'd been through. Marks swung the backpack around on his shoulder, reached in, took out the notebook, and turned it to a new page.

.o0o.

"How big can the maze be?"

Marks looked at Dennis and shrugged.

"Theoretically? Infinite. But there has to be a way through."

"Doesn't do us any good if it takes infinity," Dee said.

They were sprawled on the rough floor of one of the rooms, eating a desultory meal of water, donuts, and power bars. Supplies were getting low, but Marks decided not to make that a topic of conversation at that moment.

Dee yawned.

"Let's get some sleep," Marks said after a moment of depressed silence. "Gotta sleep some time."

"All right," Dennis said. "I'm done in, sure enough."

They fell silent. Marks took off his jacket and balled it up to make a pillow, but the stacks of money he still had sewn into the lining made it the worst pillow ever made. He slid the backpack over to Dee, and she struggled similarly to make it resemble something comfortable.

For a few minutes they all tried to relax, to close their eyes. Finally, Dennis sat up.

"Anyone see a light switch?" he said, his voice

ragged. "I'll never sleep with that light in my face."

"Part of the torture," Dee said.

Marks climbed to his feet and walked over to the bulb hanging down. He squinted up at it, examining the fixture, then pulled the flashlight from his pocket and with one efficient tap smashed the bulb.

For a moment, there was silence. The room wasn't entirely in darkness; light from the four doorways bled into it, giving it a twilit, spooky cast.

"Do you ... hear something?" Dee asked.

They sat and listened. Dennis lay back down again. "Try to sleep, baby."

.oOo.

Marks was bent over his notebook when Dee and Dennis woke up, stiff and aching from a night on the hard floor.

"Damn, I think I've got splinters in my butt," Dee said, scowling.

"I've got a plan," Marks said.

.oOo.

They walked into the room, the same room as usual: Drywall, mudded seams, bare bulb. This one had three doorways, including the one they'd just walked through. Marks walked briskly up to the bare bulb and smashed

it, then made a note in his notebook.

“How many rooms so far?” Dennis asked, stretching.

“One hundred fifty four,” Marks said.

“Jesus.”

They stood for a moment in the darkness. Both of the other doorways were lit up, meaning they hadn't been in those rooms yet. Marks thought surely they would start encountering some repeated rooms soon.

“Marks.”

He stepped over to where Dennis was standing in the middle of the room, looking down at the floor.

“You *must* hear that!” Dee suddenly said.

Something crunched under Marks' feet. he knelt down and picked up a shard of glass. “Sons of bitches,” he said, face reddening.

“They been replacing the bulbs,” Dennis said flatly, his voice low and spiritless. “They been followin' us and *replacing the bulbs*. We maybe already been through half the rooms we've seen.”

“Can you *hear* that?!”

Ignoring Dee, Marks dropped the shard. He looked up at Dennis, whose face had taken on a tight, still look. “How? How could someone be following us and doing that and us not notice?”

“*Guys!*”

They turned to look at Dee. For a moment they stood in perfect silence. Distant, they could hear what sounded like voices, deep and random, and a sort of scraping sound, like someone was dragging something



across the rough flooring. Dee backed away from the direction of the sound. After a few beats the men joined her, all three backing away.

“What does that sound like to you?” Marks asked.

“Nothing *good*.”

“Come on, come *on!*” Dee shouted, and turned to run through the opposite doorway. Dennis cursed and spun to follow. Marks hesitated for one moment, then ran after them.

.oOo.

They no longer looked around as they entered a room. They were all the same: Apparently newly-built, sometimes even smelling faintly of the joint compound used to seal the seams, damp and earthy.

And behind them, always seemingly closer, the voices and the incessant scraping noise. Marks thought he could feel it inside his head, like an angry insect had gotten trapped inside his skull and was chewing its way out.

They stopped, breathing hard, and he realized they’d been moving through the rooms faster and faster, almost running, without any conscious thought. The noise kept creeping closer no matter how quickly they moved, and the voices had resolved into ominous shouts and screams, the scraping noises sounding like something sharp being dragged along the walls.

But they never saw any signs of anyone else in the maze, and unless by sheer luck they were continuously

advancing deeper into it instead of walking back over their own trail, which seemed much more likely, Marks couldn't understand how that was possible.

"Stop," Dennis said, breathing hard and staggering over to one wall, leaning against it. "Stop. It's been hours. I can't go any more."

Marks nodded, stopping and putting his hands on his hips and bending over, breathing in air in greedy gulps. Dennis slid down to the floor and sat desolately, his legs spread in front of him. Dee just sat on the floor, sweaty, and lay back, closing her eyes. To Marks, it felt like they'd just given up. Without a discussion of any kind, they'd simply decided to sit down and let whatever it was overtake them.

He had to admit, it felt good to stop. He wasn't certain how long—subjectively—they'd been in this place. Two days? Three? Less? More? And he had no idea how long they'd *actually* been inside. It felt like infinity, and all he knew was that after so much time spent running and thinking and deciding, he was ready to be done. And if all he'd accomplished was reuniting Dee and her father, he thought maybe that was an okay legacy. He'd fixed one thing. A lot time when he'd gotten involved in situations, investigations, he'd accomplished nothing. And sometimes, he knew, he'd only made things worse.

He stumbled over and sat down next to Dennis, and closed his eyes. He listened to the storm of sound inching closer to them, and it suddenly seemed comforting.

## 22. A New Room

Marks opened his eyes. Had he actually fallen asleep? He startled forward, adrenaline pouring into his blood, and then froze, because it was completely silent. There wasn't a hint of noise. After a moment he leaned back against the wall, feeling stiff. He smiled grimly and looked up at the ceiling.

"Dirty pool," he whispered.

He didn't know if Agnes was the owner of this awful place, the proprietor, or if she was an employee, but he'd taken to picturing her in the former capacity. In his memory, her beauty had taken on a brittle, theatrical tone, like a stage performer her looked beautiful and ethereal from a distance but was revealed as an illusion of thick makeup, shadows, and lighting when you got up close.

He let Dennis and Dee sleep. Dennis was propped up against the wall like Marks, and Dee lay sprawled on the hard floor. They both looked peaceful, and he knew the moment they woke up it would be back to the exhausting attempt to find their way out of this place. He told himself again that there *had* to be a way out. There had to be. It simply wasn't possible that they'd been trapped in some hellish, otherworldly place that had no rules, no chance.

He nodded to himself, firmly.

"It's so quiet."

He turned and looked at Dennis, who still looked like a man who needed plenty of rest. "We got played. It was just making us run."

“Son of a bitch,” Dennis said, sounding tired and not at all angry. “Anything left to eat?”

Marks rummaged in the backpack. “Two stale donuts, a power bar.” He pulled them out. “Might as well divide them up. Won’t do us any good unless we eat them.”

Dee woke up and they sat for a while eating what Marks comfortably considered the worst breakfast he’d ever had, passing around a bottle of water. When it was gone he shouldered the backpack and stood up. Dee looked up at him. “You got any ideas, Mr. Marks? Because it seems to me, we don’t get out of this place soon, we gonna fucking starve to death. And if we don’t get out of this maze of shitty rooms, we can’t get out of the larger *place*, right?”

He nodded. “There’s a way into this maze, so there’s a way out. All mazes are arranged in specific ways. This isn’t some hedge maze or corn maze—you know, the squiggly-line kind of mazes you find in puzzle books. This is a *homogeneous room* maze, where every room looks the same. Disorienting. So we have to stop looking at the rooms. The rooms are designed to be confusing, so stop looking at them and use an algorithm to choose your path.” He knelt down again, pulling the notebook from the backpack.

“You go to *school* for this, Marks?” Dennis asked tiredly.

“Look.” Marks quickly sketched four boxes on a page, then linked the boxes with lines stemming from their corners and sides. “There has to be an edge. If we keep heading in one direction, then switch to a ninety-degree angle when we can’t go in that direction any more, then switch to the far corner when we can’t go *that way* any

more, and go around counter-clockwise or clockwise from there, eventually we make it to the perimeter. And the exit has to be on the perimeter somewhere. Or should be.”

Dennis and Dee both sighed. “All right,” Dee said, standing up. She couldn’t summon any actual enthusiasm for the idea. She suspected, strongly, that Marks was wrong and there were no rules. But she wasn’t ready to just sit down and give up, and so she was willing to try it.

Marks stood in the center of the room and chose the diagonal leading away to his right. In the next room he did the same, and so they followed what seemed like a straight line, cutting diagonally through room after room, each one exactly like the others. It remained incredibly quiet. They could hear their own heavy breathing and the scrape of their shoes on the rough plywood floors.

“What’s that, fifty?” Dennis asked after a while, wiping sweat from his face. “Sixty rooms?”

Marks nodded. “Seventy-three,” he said.

They walked on.

Marks wasn’t sure what was worse—the terror of the day before, fleeing from something unseen and monstrous, exhausted and horrified, or this silent plodding. They had nothing to say to each other and nothing to do but walk on and on. They didn’t even have any refreshments of any kind, aside from a half bottle of water. If they didn’t find their way out of the maze very soon, Marks knew they would simply die of thirst sitting on the floor of one of these maddening,

identical rooms.

He wasn't sure he remembered what he'd thought about his own demise prior to his ... derangement, his tragedy, his brain injury, whatever it would be classified, but he doubted he'd ever expected to die sitting on the floor of a maze of unfinished new construction.

They walked on.

It was getting hotter. This became obvious as they walked, the air becoming jellied and heavy, sweat streaming from them. He called a break and passed the bottle around, and they all took tentative, unsatisfying sips. Then they walked on.

By the time they entered the room that no longer had an exit in the corner diagonally across from them, they'd all removed whatever layers they could, stuffing them into Marks' bag. They were all soaked with sweat, and the rooms were like ovens, sizzling with a wet, damp heat. Marks imagined mold growing all over himself.

They stood and stared at the corner for a moment.

"All right," Marks said. "Ninety degrees left." He turned and walked towards the doorway.

They walked on.

No one spoke. Marks had lost count of the hours and the rooms; his last note, smeared by a sweaty hand, had over three hundred rooms. He couldn't be certain that tricks weren't involved, that Agnes might have found a way of switching around the rooms, or removing doors, or other pranks. He suspected, still, that this wouldn't be allowed, but he was less and less

confident of his muddled memories of the past, of the things about this strange, violent world he found himself in that he'd assumed he'd once found so familiar. He worried, silently, that in his arrogant assumption that his broken brain was serving up reliable information he'd gotten them all killed.

They walked on.

It became a sort of trance, just watching his own feet go one in front of the other, glancing up to spot the door on the opposite side of the new room and advancing on it. When they entered a room with no door on the opposite wall, Marks shuffled to a stop and stared dumbly for a moment.

"We're at the far corner."

There was no doorway in the corner, or ahead of them, or to their right. Marks' thoughts felt thick and cloudy, but he imagined such a room and thought it must be in the northeast corner, which meant if they now turned to their left and kept going in a straight line, they would remain on the perimeter. Which would either lead them to the exit, or trap them even more firmly.

"If I'm right," he said slowly, his mouth dry, "when we enter a room and there's a doorway to our right, that's the way out."

Dennis and Dee said nothing. After a moment, Marks staggered for the doorway to their left, and didn't turn to ensure they followed.

They walked on.

Marks stopped thinking. It hadn't been that long, he didn't think, but these new rooms had become his

whole universe. At regular, drum-like intervals they crossed a threshold and the room beyond was the same as the room they'd just left, and it was easy to imagine that the rooms were gliding on casters or rails, moving the moment they stepped through the portal and gliding soundlessly around to become the next room in the progression.

And then they stepped into a room and there was a doorway leading diagonally off to their right.

He almost walked right past it, his eyes locked on the wall directly in front of him, even though there was no doorway. He stared dully and walked shamblingly until Dee's voice stopped him.

"Hey!"

He turned back to tell her nothing mattered except getting to the next room, and the next room, and saw what she was looking at. Relief flooded him. He'd been right, and more than simply being right it proved this place, this black, terrible place, had *rules*. And he could perceive them. Or interpret them. Or *make* them, for all he knew, but for the moment he didn't care. He started walking towards the doorway, and he knew that if he stepped through and found another newly built room smelling of damp joint compound, he would start laughing and he wouldn't be able to stop, ever, and if this *was* an Insanity Engine it would be mission accomplished, well done.

He walked briskly. He stepped through, and felt the air change: He was in a hallway, and his heart started to pound. It was different. The hallway began with the same new construction palette, but slowly morphed into a finished space with rich wooden walls and flooring,



leading to one of the heavy doors he'd gotten used to seeing. There was a carving in the center, but he didn't even look at it, charging forward in desperate hope and crashing through, stopping in shock.

“Welcome!” Agnes said. Then she frowned, prettily. “Oh. You again.”

## 23. The Anteroom

For a moment Marks was confused; after what seemed like infinity in the endlessly similar rooms, his nose filled with dust and gypsum, his eyes filled with an unending field of gray and white, the familiar anteroom seemed incredibly alien and lush, giving him a headache. The scratched floor, the hatrack, the buzzing silence, the yellow wallpaper; it was all exactly the same.

Agnes also appeared to be the same pretty, tall girl with dark curly hair and a long, narrow skirt. She stood frowning in the middle of the small space, her arms wrapped around herself.

“This,” she said for the third or fourth time, “is *quite* unusual.”

Marks ignored her. This was his immediate decision regarding Agnes: Ignore her. He knew her role, now. To trick. To confuse. To lead them invariably to traps and mistakes. He wished he’d made note of her suggestions when they’d been together earlier, so he could cross each and everyone one of them off their future route.

They’d all been standing in silence, and Marks cleared his throat tentatively. They’d made their way out of the maze of newly-built rooms and seemed to be basking in the achievement.

“Listen,” he said. “We have to get moving. We’re still trapped in the larger maze, the longer we stay here the harder it will be to escape.”

Dee and Dennis turned and looked at him. Dee nodded tiredly. Dennis just looked around, dreamily.

“We know where these three doors go,” Marks said.

“Do you?” Agnes asked, smiling.

“The newt is the maze we just escaped,” he went on. “The lion is the library. The duck is the dining room.” He rummaged in the bag and pulled out the notebook, which had become a tattered disaster. “There’s actually only one room we haven’t gone through yet. In the Dining Room, there was a door with a snake on it.”

“A Viper, specifically,” Agnes added. When they all turned to look at her, she smiled brightly and curtsied. “Here to help!”

“There’s one more!” Dee said excitedly. “In the weird lounge, the break room, there was a door with a bear on it.”

Marks smiled. “Right! Two doors we haven’t tried.”

“No,” Dennis said.

“No what?”

“No, we don’t go back *in*. Mr. Marks, I know you mean well. And you been a real help and comfort, but you don’t know nearly as much as you think you do, right?” He spread his arms and turned around. “We’re here. In the entryway. I know the door ... vanished, whatever. But this is where we came in. It’s the closest we’ll be to getting back *out*. We stay here and concentrate on fighting our way back out. The door’s gone, but that don’t mean the exit’s not just through the wall or something.”

Marks shook his head. “It won’t work.”

Dennis smiled. “Man, you’ve been talking like you have some sort of advanced degree in Crazy Places, but

as far as I can tell your ideas ain't gotten us very far."

"Dad!"

"Deandra, quiet. I know Mr. Marks helped you. He's a good man. I ain't sayin' otherwise. Two people can disagree on strategy. Right, Mr. Marks?"

Marks nodded. "They can. But do you really think this place would make a door just vanish but leave the connection to the outside world?"

"It's a *maze* after all," Agnes said brightly. A tub of movie theater popcorn had appeared in her hands. "If you can just go back out the way you came, kind of defeats the point."

Marks shut his eyes. "Don't help," he snapped.

"Don't help, don't talk to me, don't follow us around," Agnes sighed, scooping up popcorn and tossing it into her mouth. "You are all so *rude*. Every one of you."

"Marks, you want to go right back into that place. Different doors? Different rooms? Man, I'm grateful—truly, I am, though maybe a little irritated you brought my daughter here—but you're *wrong*. You said it yourself, man. This place is all about gettin' us to Hamster. Spin the wheel. Chase ourselves around. I think the smart play here is to ignore all the bullshit and think outside the box."

Marks shook his head. "You're wrong. It's not that easy."

Agnes nodded, grinning. "Really, it's *not*."

"Don't *help*."

Dennis shrugged. “We’re staying here and we’re going to try to find our way out. You do what you gotta do. You did what you said you would. You found me for Dee. Let me take care of her from here.”

Marks hesitated and looked at Dee. She was looking at the floor, and he reminded himself that for all her tough talk and confidence, she was just a kid, and here was her father she thought she’d lost. They were wrong—he *knew* it in a way that was impossible to explain or justify. Dennis would still be in this room a day from now, a week, a month, a year. But he couldn’t prove it, and there was always the slightest possibility *he* was wrong, because he knew places like this, they cheated.

He looked at Agnes. She smiled back at him, bright, beautiful. He thought her ongoing transformation into the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen had reached the edge of the Uncanny Valley; soon she would be so otherworldly beautiful she wouldn’t seem human any more. She would be hard to look at. And if it continued long enough she would cross through and become something totally alien. The place cheated. Even if he didn’t have this vague, half-remembered experience, she was evidence of that.

If they stayed to follow Dennis’ plan, it would be just like being trapped in the Waiting Room or the new rooms—they would waste time. The longer they stayed, the harder it was going to be to escape, the easier it would be to just sit and wait. Staying was death. But he couldn’t force Dennis to follow him, and he couldn’t force Dee away from her father.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll go on.”

Dee looked up. The expression on her face resembled

terror.

“Look,” he said, talking to both of them but looking at Dee. “I’ll find my way. I’ll make notes. And when I find the route, the way out, when I solve the puzzle, I’ll come back here and get you both.”

Agnes clapped her hands in delight.

“What if we break out?” Dennis asked.

“Then when I come back here I’ll just follow you.”

“Marks,” Dee said. “Don’t ... we should ... we should stay together. You might get lost in there and never find your way back here.”

He saw fear in her face, tamped down but pushing its way to the surface. But he didn’t have any choice. If he stayed to help them it was doom. They would lose track of how long they’d been in the room. Any work they did to tear out the walls or floors would be repaired, subtly, an inch here and there, so that they never made any real progress. The place would play tricks on them, as ever.

He smiled. “I’ll be okay. I’ll find the way out and come back for you both. I promise.”

The smile felt tight and false on his face. She looked back down at the floor. Dennis nodded. “Man, I think you’re making a mistake, but good luck. And when we break out, we’ll send help. We’ll keep watch. We won’t just abandon you.” He held out his hand.

Marks took it and shook. Then he turned hurriedly, still indecisive, worried about the kid. He didn’t think Dennis would hurt her on purpose, but nothing was on purpose in a place like this. As he turned and looked up,

Agnes was standing there, a vision.

“I’ll come with *you*,” she said. “You’re *so* much more interesting.”

He sighed. He didn’t want her company, but he didn’t think he’d be able to stop her. He shrugged the backpack, now filled with just a flashlight, the notebook, and quarter-full bottle of water, and reached for the door marked with the lion carving on it.

“Marks!”

He turned to look at Dee, who had taken a half-step towards him. She hesitated, then seemed to reach a point of resolve, straightening up.

“Thanks, man,” she said. “For helping me.” She frowned. “Something’s been bugging me. Why the animals? Why do the doors have the animals carved on them? A different one? Duck for the dining room, lizard for those new rooms. Lion for the library. Is it just random shit?”

Marks shook his head. “It means something. We just haven’t figured it out.”

“Does everything mean something? Like all the dictionaries in the library—is everything a clue?”

“Everything!” Agnes said cheerily. “Except the things that aren’t.”

For a moment they all stood there. Then Marks nodded, turning again. “We’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.”

“Sure.”

The word sounded like a curse. He looked at Agnes, who had an expression of excitement, her eyes shining.

She still smelled like sandalwood, clean and fresh. He turned and opened the door, thinking about the dictionaries in the library.



## 24. The Library

“Well, you’re certainly less exciting the second time around.”

Marks didn’t look up at her. He could smell her perfume—it was almost supernaturally appealing, a smell that might have been engineered on the atomic level to appeal to him. The smell made him think of young women he could no longer remember accurately lying in freshly-cut grass, a little drunk from cheap wine and looking at him with that peculiar mixture of lust and innocence only the very young can manage. Agnes was an excruciating distraction, because he kept expecting her to be a good, friendly person simply because she was pretty. Gorgeous, now. It was a personal flaw of his, the expectation that a pretty girl would be a good person.

No doubt, the place knew this about him.

Marks sat at one of the wooden tables in the Library. The door back to the Anteroom wasn’t there, just as it hadn’t been there before, disappearing the moment he’d stepped through. It should have been disturbing, but he found it oddly comforting. The behavior of the rooms, at least, was consistent. He had his notebook and several of the various dictionaries open. He was conscious of hunger and thirst; he still had a little water left in the bottle, but the possibility of dying in this place was now very real, and it filled him with a strange excitement that urged him to work fast, to keep moving.

“What are you *doing*, anyway?”

He looked up at her. His memory of Agnes when

they'd first arrived was muddy, but he was certain she hadn't had such a perfectly round face, with such an ideal complexion, or so much silky, curly hair. That her legs hadn't been so long, her waist so small, her curves so pronounced.

"Checking a theory," he said.

"Which is?"

He sighed. He didn't think there was any reason not to just go ahead and tell her. "There's always clues in places like this, I think." He tried for a moment to dredge up the specific memory he had that made him so certain, but it squirmed out of his mental grasp. "I've been in such a rush I haven't been thinking about them. The animals on the doors. The dictionaries in here."

She smiled brightly, and he felt a rush of warmth flow through him, a sympathetic reaction. "Red herrings!"

He nodded, forcing himself to look back down at his notes. "Maybe," he conceded, and it was certainly possible. But the dictionaries stuck in his thoughts. The animal carvings. He'd searched the dictionaries and found all of the animal names they'd encountered in them, and they all seemed to be normal dictionaries, with nothing unusual about them aside from the age of a few. Most were the sort of dictionaries you'd find in any bookstore or online, in any normal classroom or actual library.

He pushed the books aside and studied his map. He'd re-copied it in a neat grid, and he studied the two doors he knew of but hadn't passed through—the Viper and the Bear—represented by two thick lines that led to white space. He had three choices—reviewing the map

had reminded him of the Rabbit in the odd spare bedroom. Nothing he'd found in the library had clarified the issues in any way.

He picked up the notebook and shoved it into the backpack, standing up. Immediately, Agnes was next to him, filling his senses with the warm, Autumn smell of her and an implied intimacy that raised the hairs on his arms. "Oooh," she said breathily. "Finally! Where? You head into the Queer Lounge, of course you do—then what? Bear, or do you go to the Spare Room and try the Rabbit?"

Marks heard the capital letters in her speech. He didn't respond, heading down the middle aisle towards the doors at the back of the room. He found he couldn't quite quantify how long it had been since he and Dee had walked down this way, when they'd first encountered Agnes. It felt like decades, couldn't be more than a few days, based on the food and water consumed.

He should have brought a second bag filled with supplies. He should have brought walkie talkies, a gun, a blowtorch—he should have brought everything. He thought of Dee and her father. He wondered if he might be wrong, if he might fight his way back to the Anteroom and find they'd escaped, found a way out and through. He shouldn't have left her. But if he hadn't he'd still be sitting there when they all starved to death, listening to Agnes as she evolved beyond human comprehension.

He should have stayed. He couldn't have stayed.

The doors resolved into the three he remembered: Wolf, Quail, Stag.

Something Agnes had just said made him slow down. He could feel her looking at him, her lovely eyes dancing over his skin.

*Queer Lounge.*

It was an odd way of describing the room. He'd used the phrase too, but somehow hearing it back had crystallized something. He looked up at the doors again. The Quail carving was exquisite, the detail was incredible, and it was suddenly absolutely obvious that the first letter of the animal depicted was related to the room beyond. He closed his eyes.

*Ape for Anteroom. Duck for Dining Room. Lion for Library. Hippo for the Hall of Mirrors.*

He remembered the underground area, damp and earthy, and how the tunnels leading from it hadn't been marked the same way.

*Still: Stag for the Spare Room. Newt for the New Rooms.*

He opened his eyes. It didn't mean much. Maybe it meant there were twenty-six rooms in all, but the Underground argued against that—that might have been a wholly separate system of rooms, with the Underground as an intersection between the two. He stepped forward and opened the Quail door.

The odd, empty employee lounge of sorts hadn't changed. At all. The refrigerator was still chained closed, and something still made it jump and shimmy. The food on the tables was still there, the music was still playing.

He walked to the rear of the room and studied the Bear door. He turned and glanced back; the door to the

library was still open, to his surprise. Agnes stood in it, a vision, smiling at him in a warm and gentle way that seemed affectionate, as if she truly wished him well. He considered the books behind her, the endless rows of dictionaries, and wondered if the solution to the maze, the way out, was that simple: Spelling a word. Answering a question. A riddle.

It might be, he thought. If he could figure out what the question was. Again, without being able to put his finger on *why*, exactly, he knew it might work that way.

“You’ve thought of something,” Agnes said as he turned away. “Clever boy.”

He turned back to regard her. “Did you build this place?”

She smiled, crossing her arms over her chest. “No.” She sighed, stepping into the lounge and letting the door close behind her. “No, it’s just that I’ve been here for so long, I’m the god *of* this place.” She snorted, tracing a delicate finger over the small table as she walked past it. “I don’t control anything, actually. I try. But any changes I make are ... undone, eventually.” She shrugged. “Sometimes things I do last for a while.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A very, very long time. I came here just like you, you know. I stumbled in. I became trapped. I spent some time trying to find my way out—I got out of the Waiting Room a different way, incidentally—and then I started to feel at home here. And I thought, so much time had passed, everyone I knew was long gone, why not stay, be a Queen?”

Marks smiled. “That’s what you are, a queen?”

“Queen of the Damned,” she said, leaning back against the table. “Queen of this place, anyway.”

Her charisma was exceptional. Marks wanted to just stand there and discuss the Maze with her, forever, just chatting and smelling her and waiting to see if she would reach out and touch him, maybe, on the arm or the shoulder. The feeling reminded him of being a teenager and trying to act cool around his first girls, trying to imagine a world where he might actually touch such creatures and feel their warmth against his skin.

He took a step forward. “Must be lonely.”

Her face rippled through several sudden emotions. “It ... it is. It *is*.” She smiled again. “But I do get to meet some lovely people. Like you.”

He smiled back. “And lead them to the Waiting Room, the New Room Maze, other traps.”

She looked down at her shoes, which Marks would swear had become shinier, almost like mirrors. “Well, we all have work to do, Mr. Marks. You are apparently all about saving young ladies and reuniting them with their useless fathers. And failing, I’m sorry to say.”

As he stepped closer he imagined an invisible line between them, warm and humming with energy. How long had it been since he’d known a woman? Talked to a woman? He focused on that feeling of sinking into someone else’s space, the smell of sandalwood and musk wrapping itself around him. “Yes,” he said slowly, thickly. “We all have work to do.”

She leaned her weight forward as he drew close, her lips parting. He reached out and touched her hair, tracing one dark curl with his fingers. It felt like silk, a

delightful sensation. He leaned in and breathed her in, imagining he could feel her heart beating, feel the heat evaporating from her perfect, flawless skin.

“What’s the question?” he whispered.

She swallowed thickly. “What?”

“The riddle. The question I have to answer to plot the route out,” he said softly, touching her perfect little ear. “What is it?”

She froze, and Marks felt the temperature in the room suddenly drop, the light growing dim. As the darkness crept in, she seemed to grow, stretching up towards the dropped ceiling, color bleeding from her, leaving her a photocopy of herself, all bright white skin and pitch black hair and eyes. An invisible force pushed against him roughly, and he had to lean in to hold his ground.

And then, a second later, everything snapped back to normal and he was in the Queer Lounge and the music was playing on a loop and Agnes was there, normal-sized, fully-fleshed, her face stoic and expressionless.

“Rude,” she said softly.

Marks smiled and shrugged. He thought he’d been too concerned with the rules. With playing along, with gingerly making his way around the edges. He walked over to the refrigerator. The brightly color letter magnets didn’t spell out any secret messages this time. The chain was rusted and old.

As he stood there, the appliance lurched as something inside it slammed itself against the side, like some sort of horrific, manufactured jumping bean. Marks nodded and shrugged the backpack to the floor.

He knelt and opened it up, extracting the folding shovel. He stood up and began unfolding it.

“What *are* you doing?” Agnes asked, sounding bored.

He weighed the shovel in his hands, judging the balance. He held the handle in both hands like a baseball bat. “I’m getting the feeling,” he said, “that I’ve been letting you guide me a little too much. That maybe when you *clearly* want one reaction from me, I should give you the opposite.” He reared back and swung the shovel at the chain; the impact sent a lance of pain up one arm into his back.

“Mr. Marks!” she shouted, and he thought there was a legitimate note of tension in her voice.

“So, for example,” he continued, hitting the fridge again. “When you chain up a major appliance and something in it makes a lot of noise, reason states we should stay far away from it. So now I’m thinking maybe I should do—”

He hit the chain.

“—the—”

Again.

“Mr. Marks, don’t—”

“—exact—”

He swung the shovel and connected the blade cleanly, and the chain snapped with a metallic *ping*, sliding to the floor like a metal snake.

There was a moment of silence. A moment before the refrigerator door burst open, he heard Agnes whisper



*"Oh, no."*

## 25. The Queer Lounge

The refrigerator door almost tore off its hinges, and for a brief moment Marks caught a glimpse of something dark with what looked like glowing red eyes. A blast of fetid air hit him, warm and damp and heavy with some kind of animal scent.

Someone grabbed his hand. He turned and found Agnes, pulling him towards the door that led back to the library.

“Come *on*, morbid myopic Marks!”

There was a grumbling growl from inside the fridge, and Marks nodded, turning and letting her pull him towards the door. She pulled it open and as they ran down the short hallway he could hear something roaring behind them, an awful, bloodthirsty sound. And the thud of something heavy galloping behind them.

They burst back into the library, the sudden sense of space as the ceiling soared above them making Marks feel dizzy. Agnes continued to pull him along, dashing into the stacks without hesitation.

“Why are *you* running?” he gasped. “You *are* this place!”

“Not everything here is *tame*, mopey moronic Marks,” she hissed, pulling him deeper and deeper into the maze of bookshelves. Without warning, she dashed into a little alcove formed against one wall by the intersection of two shelves, dropping down and pulling him into a crouch next to her. Her scent seemed to surround him, and he was conscious of the warmth of her next to him. He knew she wasn’t a pretty girl, she

was something else entirely, something inhuman, and yet he found himself forgetting.

Over the wheeze of his labored breathing, he could hear it: Something heavy moving through the library nearby, slow and deliberate. Its breathing was ragged and heavy, punctuated by grunts and wet swallowing noises.

“What is it?”

Agnes made an impatient noise. He realized she was gripping his hand tightly. “Something that *predates* me, Mr. Marks. Something that was here when I *arrived*,” she whispered. “Others who came before you had to contend with it, which of course was the intent. The design. But then, so did *I* and I did *not* enjoy it. Someone contrived to trick it into that appliance and secure it within, and I have left it there ever since.” She pursed her lips. “That was a long time ago, Mr. Marks. A *long* time. It must be *quite* hungry by now. And *irritated*.”

As if in agreement, the thing snarled suddenly, and there was the sound of it running off, claws of some kind clicking against the floor.

Marks looked up. The bookshelves stretched up much higher than he remembered, the spines of the books neat and appealing. They varied inconsistently from ancient leather with ridges and gold-leaf titles to cheap paperbacks that simply read DICTIONARY in bold red letters. Some were worn and well-thumbed, some seemed brand new. A few were even in plastic dustcovers, perfectly preserved. Most were in English, but a few were in other languages.

He turned his head and noted that someone had obviously found the alcove before them—or been led to it, as he had. There were hash marks carved into the side of the bookshelf that formed one shallow wall of the alcove, the sort of lines and cross-outs people made when marking the passage of time. He counted them and they added up to thirty-four.

A shiver went through him. The scratches held his gaze, and for a few seconds he felt like he couldn't look away. There was something about them that tugged at his brain. The number of them, maybe. Thirty-four. What did that mean to him? Had he seen something else in the maze—what had Agnes called it, a black house? Had he seen something else in the Black House that made him think of thirty-four?

“Rumor is,” Agnes whispered in his ear, her breath warm and sweet, “that it’s the original visitor to this place. The *first* guest. He never fell for a trap, and so he simply grew older and older, leveraging the curious magic of the Black House to stay alive. Over time, because of the strange temporal properties of this place, he *evolved*. He changed. He became what all humans will, eventually, but in the process of course he left humanity behind.”

He could almost believe it. Time worked differently in a place like this, he knew that. Being here for so long, trapped, circling around yourself forever—it would change someone. And maybe being stuck in this place would cause a transfer of ... magic? Power? He didn't know the right word. He just thought it possible that someone trapped in this maze for a very long time might start to take on some of its attributes, to become part of the maze.

He looked at Agnes. "Is that what happened to you?" he whispered. "Did you come here as a ... did you come here like I did, and you've been here so long you've ... gone over?"

She didn't turn her head. She moved her eyes to look at him sideways. "Why, Mr. Marks. Always thinking. The answer is, my morose man, that I have always been here and I am *also* a recent arrival."

The words chilled him. He kept staring at her even as she looked away. Something was scratching at the edges of his thoughts, something he thought terribly important. Something *vital*. But it slipped away from him, turning to dust and smoke as he grabbed at it.

A growl pulled him back into the moment. It was deep and disturbing, a sound that made every muscle tense, kicking his heart into high gear.

"It's on the far side," he whispered. "We can make it back to the Lounge. We can lose it in the spare bedroom, through the closet."

"Unless it *follows us*," Agnes offered, smiling. "Mr. Marks I know we are not *friends* but please do not lead me directly into that creature's *maw*."

"We can't just sit here."

"Oh, but we *can*, can't we? Stay quiet, like little mice, and hidden, like shadows. The beast will wander off." She made a gentle *tsking* sound. "Of course, that means it will be *wandering* and we might encounter it again. You have no idea how *hard* I worked to imprison it, Mr. Marks! A lot of effort. A *lot*. Which you have undone." She pursed her lips for a moment. "Of course, it may be that my little trick has *worsened* its mood a

bit, for which I supposed I apologize in advance of our dismemberment and consumption.”

The beast suddenly howled and began to run, claws scraping the floor. They both stiffened, and Agnes grabbed onto Marks’ arm in a way he was certain was calculated to trigger some sort of a protective masculine instinct in him, but which felt incredibly good anyway. Everything about her was in perfect sync with what he wanted, and he could feel resistance waning. He was tired. he was hungry. He was exhausted, mentally and physically. And she felt *good*, an inch away, touching him. He knew it wouldn’t be that long before giving in was inevitable.

The creature suddenly howled, a raw, primitive sound that made him shiver.

“You’re *thinking* again,” Agnes said. “You’re about to do something. Something incredibly *stupid*, if prior behavior is any indicator.”

He nodded, slowly. He stood up, shrugging her arm off. “It’s a little too perfect,” he said. Being hunted, the protective instinct, pretty, good-smelling Agnes clinging to him as they hid from certain death. Certain death he was suddenly certain he’d been tricked into releasing by the simple twist of making it seem like something he wasn’t *supposed* to do. And this, this being chased, being hunted—it was the ideal way to ensure he wasted time, wasted energy.

He started walking towards the center aisle.

“*Marks!*” Agnes hissed, springing to his side. “I don’t think this is a good idea!”

He shrugged. “Duly noted.”

“I may not have your *best interests* at heart,” she continued, whispering urgently as they moved out of the protecting shadows of the stacks, “but that’s *not* the same as wishing you *torn apart* by beasties and *ghouls!*”

Marks nodded. “I’ll be honest,” he said. “I’m almost half hoping I’m wrong. I’m almost half hoping I get torn to pieces. It would almost be a relief.”

He stepped out into the aisle and looked around. The library seemed unchanged; nothing seemed out of place, nothing disturbed by the passage of some monster. He could hear the thing breathing nearby, short, damp breaths that made the floor shake and vibrate under his feet. Designed, he thought, to get him up and running, sweating, terrified. Racing through doors without a plan or pause for thought.

“*Marks!*” Agnes hissed from the stacks, leaning out and looking, Marks had to admit, pretty authentically terrified. “Mr. Marks I *swear* to you this is not a ruse. Don’t get yourself *massacred* and leave me all *alone* here just after I’ve found someone halfway *decent* to talk to!”

She sounded sincere. There was a slight quaver in her voice, but he also detected an insistent attempt to cover it up, to force bravado, which made it seem even more realistic. And it was appealing to think that something—and she was a *thing*, he thought, and not a person, not a real person with a real person’s feelings—as beautiful as her wanted him, desired his company, found him interesting. Decent.

He nodded. All of it just made him even more certain.

“Come on!” he shouted, throwing out his arms. “Let’s get it over with!”

*“Marks!”*

The howl again, visceral, wild, terrifying. The beast burst into the aisle from his right, loping into view. It was vaguely lupine, walking on all fours with the rolling, semi-upright gait of a gorilla, its snout short and its lips peeled back to reveal dripping, sharp teeth, far too many to reasonably fit in its mouth. A carrion smell, rotten meat, carried to him, and sweat popped out all over.

The thing’s glowing eyes locked on him. It pawed the floor and snorted.

He glanced at Agnes. Her face was terrified, eyes wide, one hand half stretch out towards him.

“Let’s go,” he said, and turned his back on it. He started walking back towards the doors. It roared, rattling everything around him, and then he heard and felt it gallop after him, its claws hitting the floor in a shuffled rhythm, *click-click-click ... click-click*. His heart pounded and sweat ran into his eyes, but he forced himself to keep his shaky, uncertain gait slow. If he was wrong, if there really *was* a horrible monster about to tackle him and tear him to shreds, he was going to be as wrong as humanly possible.

He felt its gravity behind him, felt its hot breath, the splash of sizzling spittle on him. He stopped. He closed his eyes.

Nothing happened. After a moment he opened his eyes and turned. Agnes was standing right behind him. Her face was cold and angry.



*"Rude,"* she said.

## 26. The Ballroom

“I suppose you’re cross with me, now,” Agnes said, following him back into the Queer Lounge. “I suppose you’ll say you’ll never trust me again.”

Marks ignored her. It. He reminded himself that Agnes wasn’t human. She was ... she was this *place*, he thought. She was the personification of the Black House. It’s Id.

Wordlessly, he retrieved the folding shovel he’d dropped, snapping it closed and stuffing it back into his backpack. He walked back to the door with the Bear carving on it and opened it up. Without waiting for her to follow, he stepped into the short hallway. At the other end he pushed open the door and stumbled a bit as he entered an immense space, his footsteps echoing hollowly.

It was a huge ballroom, the floor polished marble, blood red and perfectly cut. Chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling like liquid diamonds, threatening to rain onto the floor. Dozens of round tables, set for dinner, were decked out in silverware and perfectly folded napkins. A bandstand at one end of the room held instruments, ready and waiting.

As he moved deeper into the space, he realized the shiny glamor was an illusion; the tablecloths were moth-eaten, the silverware dulled and tarnished, the instruments cobwebby and dust-covered. Instead of glittering and tinkling, the chandeliers hung limply, unused. The air smelled dusty and stale, and Marks felt his throat closing up as if he might not be able to get enough air.

The room was very large, and all around the edges columns supported balconies. The central stairway leading up to them was collapsed. Behind the columns were frescoes—dancers in a silvery paint that seemed to shine with an endless reflected twilight. The eyes seemed to follow Marks, and he kept imagining he heard music, a fading note, sweet and careful.

After a moment he was startled to realize the music was, again, the same terrible song, the song about fruity drinks and getting caught in the rain. It was off-rhythm, the notes scattering into each other, but unfortunately recognizable.

“I do hate this song,” he said.

Across the huge, empty dance floor were the exits, two sets of elegantly ruined French doors, their animal carvings split between each side—one the familiar Duck that, he assumed, led to the Dining Room, and one a floating Octopus, tentacles seeming to float lazily in unseen water. Between the doors, leading down into a darkness where a light flickered on and off rapidly, was a staircase. Marks walked over to it and noted the floor tile, where a familiar-looking Stag had been carved.

“Some truly mythical parties were thrown here,” Agnes said, launching into a graceful series of dance moves. “The ballroom is dark these days, and it has been a long time since anyone's entertained here, besides me, of course. And my entertainments rarely involve dancing and feasting. But I remember when it was once a grand place ... a part of me yearns for its past glories, the laughter, the light, the music.” She stopped and spun to face him, skirt suddenly full and flowing instead of tight and tapered. “But really I'm glad

it has died. I have darker interests now, and like these muted places.”

Marks noted the cloud of dust her dancing had kicked up into the air, and he controlled his panic response with effort, forcing himself to keep breathing. He wondered if the Black House reflected her moods, her mindset, if it changed with her, growing brighter when she cheered and darker when she soured.

“You’re saying there were permanent residents here?”

Agnes nodded. “The purpose of this place has changed, you know. It wasn’t always designed for *you*. Or me. It was once a glorious place, filled with light and noise.” She kicked at the dust again with an elegant move of her leg. “It has been allowed to fall into disrepair.”

“By you.”

She scowled. “Rude.”

He walked over to the ruined stairway and examined it, squinting up through the gloom at the balconies above. He went back over his memories and asked himself if it was the first blocked exit he’d seen, the first time there was a space he couldn’t get to. No, he thought; in the Underground area there had been collapsed tunnels. He thought it interesting that all the blocked tunnels lacked identifying carvings, as if, perhaps, they’d been *designed* blocked. He wondered if there was another route to the balcony, if that mattered. If it was part of the trick.

“Only one choice,” Agnes said primly, once again launching into some solo dancing. “Unless you want to

go back to rooms you've already been in."

He considered. In the Spare Room, the Viper and the Rabbit. In the Dining Room, the Viper again. Three choices, actually, with the Octopus; her vague attempts to confuse him were more amusing than anything else.

He looked at the dance floor where Agnes was performing her own private ballet, spinning and gliding, arms held poised as if around an unseen partner. The floor was tiled black and white. He counted: Eight on each side. He thought of the chess pieces in the other rooms and counted the tiles again.

Heart pounding, he ran over to the French doors and began examining them. Suddenly he knew exactly what he was looking for, and found it quickly: Two wooden pawns, carved and polished from a blonde wood, green felt underneath, set on top of the lintel of the Octopus Doors. A part of a set along with the others they had found.

Carefully, he put them back and nodded to himself. Wondered why two; the pattern was unclear.

"This song," he said. "You seem very fond of it."

"This song," she said with a smile, dipping herself awkwardly. "I *hate* this song. But those things can be deceiving. For example, I thought you liked the girl, Dee. Deandra. Darling Dee. And yet, you left her behind, where she will very likely starve to death, getting weaker and weaker."

Marks felt himself flush. It hit home. He *did* feel guilty about it, but it remained the only choice that made any sense. "She's with her father," he said quietly. "It wasn't my place."

Agnes paused to smile at him. “/s she?”

Marks went cold. “What?”

Agnes shrugged and went back to dancing.

“Remarkable, isn’t it? Am I here? Am I real? Am I a *person* with desires and motivations or a manifestation of this place, a mirage, an illusion? An illusion so real you think of me as a person, a person you can almost —”

She paused again, studying Marks. “No, you *can’t*, can you?” She laughed. “Oh my that is a relief. Here I went to so much trouble to look like her, and you can’t even remember her! I thought I was losing my touch.”

This was revenge, he thought. This was a fit of pique. He hadn’t fallen for her monster, and she was angry about it. She was seeking to punish him. But was she lying, or was she revealing something in order to hurt him?

Marks ran over the last few days. Dennis—he’d seemed real enough. Dee had accepted him, immediately. Without reservation. And yet, maybe he’d only resisted Agnes because she—this place—hadn’t realized how damaged he was, how lost most of his prior life was. Whoever Agnes was supposed to be, maybe that was why she’d been morphing, changing. It couldn’t lock in on his memories, because *he* couldn’t lock in on his memories. Maybe Dee’s memory of her father was crystal clear, and it was able to produce a perfect doppleganger.

“Is he dead?” he asked quietly.

Agnes nodded. “Of *course* he is.”

He closed his eyes. Everything was his fault. He

shouldn't have brought her. He should have gone back and called the police, family services, then come back. Then come in alone. He shouldn't have left her alone, either.

He opened his eyes and started walking towards the staircase heading down into the depths. The flickering light and its crazy, random rhythm was foreboding, and his sense of balance and direction was offended—but he knew the architecture of this place made no sense. Why shouldn't it be possible to find yourself in the Spare Room by going down these stairs?

The stairs led him to an unmarked door, which led to a short corridor of damp stone and dirt floor. A right turn and another unmarked door, and he found himself in the closet again, pushing his way through hanging fur coats. When he fought his way into the spare room, he didn't hesitate, he strode directly to the door marked with an Ape carving, pulled it open, and stepped through into the short hall beyond. A moment later he was back in the Anteroom. Everything was as it had been. The secretary, the doily, the pawn.

Dee was nowhere to be seen.

He stood, frozen. His brain seemed locked up, paralyzed. He ran through the possibilities: This was a different room altogether, magically re-created down to the precise placement of the pawn where he'd put it down days ago. This was an illusion, he and Dee were both there but out of phase, unable to hear or see each other. Least likely: Dee and her father had truly escaped, and were on the outside working to rescue him.

Most likely: Dee had been lured away and was lost.

He heard the click of Agnes' shoes as she entered the room. He wanted to turn and strike her down, do violence to her, make her afraid and unhappy. Instead, he did not turn to look at her. He did not run around and try to tear the room down around him. Instead, he sat down, swung the backpack off his shoulder, and pulled out the battered notebook and his pen, and started reviewing all his notes. She was somewhere. Somewhere in the maze. All he had to do was figure out where, figure out how to get to her, then go find her, figure out the escape route, and avoid other traps. Before he starved to death. Before he died of thirst. Before they'd both been in the Black House too long.

Behind him, Agnes started to hum her song again. Something about health food, a neighborhood bar. he shut his eyes and pushed it from his mind.



## 27. The Anteroom

“Are you hungry, doll? *I’m* hungry.”

Marks closed his eyes and pinched his nose, but didn’t say anything. He’d mentally established a policy of not responding to Agnes, and this had inspired her to become more annoying and distracting than before. She sat perched on the secretary, tossing the wooden pawn into the air and catching it, kicking her impossibly shapely legs.

“You *must* be hungry. You ate all your little snacks such a *long* time ago.”

Marks opened his eyes and stared blearily around the small room. His notes were everywhere, scribbled in haste and torn from the notebook. It had only been hours. had it been hours? Or days? Weeks? No, he thought, days or weeks and he would be dead, of dehydration or starvation or some creative combination of both.

He was afraid to move.

He was afraid to make the wrong decision. He was afraid to get mired and lost, to waste time following cold leads and falling into traps, and losing Dee, who he’d brought here, who he’d smugly lectured on the nature of places like this. He should have known better. His brain wasn’t right. He’d lost so much, his memory like smoke in his hands, and yet he’d just assumed he would know what to do, how to solve everything. And now he was in this room for the third—fourth?—time and she was lost and he had to solve two puzzles: He had to find her, and quickly, and he had to find the way out.

He wondered if she knew she was lost, or if she was still bedazzled by Dennis, the image of her father. If she knew she'd been fooled, she might leave a trail, make a mark in each room for him to find. He'd searched through the Anteroom and found nothing, and he knew this place, this Black House, was untrustworthy. It shifted, it changed—even Agnes had complained about it. If she was leaving a trail, it might be erased and deleted before he got there.

He was frozen. Every possible route seemed fraught with the certainty of disaster, of moving further away from Dee, of leaving her even more deeply buried.

“You only have *three* choices,” Agnes said in a sing-song voice. Marks reflected that at least she'd stopped humming that damn song for a little while.

Marks closed his eyes again. He wondered who Agnes had been to him, who it was this place had so carefully tried to replicate in hopes of manipulating him. It had chosen Dennis for Dee, and it had worked. She'd embraced him, followed him and—

He froze. The details, he realized, were personalized. Agnes, someone he'd forgotten, someone lost to the mists of his downfall—that had been an oversight. She was *meant* to be someone he would fall for, someone he wouldn't be able to resist. He even wondered if her troubling morphing, her constant blurring and subtle revisions were a result of his own messy memories. Dennis was obvious. Dee had come here hoping to find her father—it made sense that the place, this black, endless house, would use that against her.

There were other details, he realized. The chess stuff. Dee played, knew an awful lot about the game. The

food in the dining room had been their favorites, and the song she kept humming, it was maddeningly familiar even if he couldn't recall it. There likely had been other things he hadn't noticed—or things he would notice when he got there. The whole place had been set up to fool them, to trick them, to *mislead* them.

Three choices. He knew which rooms were available from the Anteroom: The Library, the Dining Room, and the maze of New Rooms.

He started gathering up his stuff. Dennis was a phantom, a trick. He would naturally seek to lead Dee in the worst possible direction. He would, like Agnes had, try to leverage her connection to him to fool her.

He left his notebook to last, and opened it to a fresh page. He looked at the pawn in Agnes' delicate, nimble hands. He flipped through pages and made notes:

*Anteroom: One pawn*

*Library: Two pawns*

*Queer Lounge: Three pawns*

*Ballroom: Two pawns*

*Underground: Queen*

He studied the list. There was a chess set hidden in this place, and while he didn't know yet how it worked, he was suddenly certain this was a clue. The Black House took bits and pieces of you and fed them back—sometimes to cheat you, sometimes to guide you. The trick was figuring out which was which, and Marks thought the rule was actually very simple: The people you met cheated you. The things you found guided you.

He pushed the notebook back into his bag and turned to regard the three doors.

“We’re leaving?” Agnes asked, her voice like music, the sound of her slipping off the secretary to her feet sensual and suggestive. “Thank *god*. It’s been so *boring* in here waiting for you to wake up. Where to? Research in the Library? I’ll bet there’s at least *one* actual book in there. In fact, I tell you what: I’m so bored I’ll just be honest and tell you there *is*. One book that’s not a dictionary, and it will be *very* useful. But that’s all I’ll say!”

Marks wondered if he’d let other people down like this, how many people he’d left to terrible fates because he’d made assumptions, arrogant assumptions. How many people had he killed? Trapped? Worse? And then forgot.

And then *forgot*. The gravity of that hit him, staggering him, and he stood unable to move under the weight of it.

“No?” Agnes chirped, suddenly right behind him, leaning up to place her chin on his shoulder, her perfume enveloping him. “The Dining Room then. Good choice. A bite to eat, for sustenance. And they likely went that way, yes? A hungry little girl—because you brought no supplies and left her starving—she remembered that table! Oh, yes she did.”

Marks took a deep breath. “Jesus Christ, *shut up*,” he muttered, and strode forward. Taking hold of the handle on the door with the Newt carving, the door to the maze of New Rooms, he hesitated just one moment, then pulled it open.

“Mr. *Marks!*” Agnes gasped, but her voice sounded delighted.

He stepped through into the usual brief hallway. She believed she was with her father. He would convince her to go the worst possible way. And that would be back into the maze—offering some bit of doggerel reasoning, insisting on some brilliant insight. She would go with him because doing otherwise would mean he wasn’t her father.

And Marks thought if he was wrong, he might find his way back out—he’d done it once—but he might also waste too much time, with Dee getting deeper and deeper with each passing moment. But he wasn’t wrong, he told himself. Not because he was certain, but because he had no choice. He started walking towards the other end, eyes moving around as he tried to catch the trick, the moment when the architecture and the space shifted and changed so it became a one-way tunnel, spitting him into the maze and barring any retreat. He didn’t catch it. When he came to the door at the other end of the hall, he turned and looked back, but the bend in the hallway made it impossible to see where he’d come from.

Agnes was right behind him, fragrant and warm, everything about her tactile, inviting touch. She smiled brightly.

In the moment of silence, he could hear the terrible scraping noise, the murmuring voices. Like a monster dragging itself across the floor, some awful beast grunting and flailing, leaving a trail of slime behind it. Terror spiked in his chest and he stood, frozen, for a moment, fighting the primitive instinct to run as he had

before. The monster in the library had been an illusion, yes, but would *all* the monsters they encountered be tricks?

He closed his eyes. *It is just a trick*, he said to himself. *It's always a trick.*

Keeping his eyes closed, he opened the door. The noise instantly became unbearably loud, climbing into him and shaking him, his bones, his organs, every cell of his body. It felt like a hot, dry wind was pouring over him, and he could feel the vibrations in the floor, through his shoes.

He opened his eyes, and everything went quiet.

## 28. A New Room

She was always there.

Agnes had, mercifully, stopped speaking to him. But that had been replaced with a silent following. She was always just in the room, always in the doorway he'd just passed through. Always watching, a hint of a smile. Her perfume was always in the air. It didn't matter how fast or slow he walked. If he turned around just before walking through a door, she was in the other doorway. The moment he passed into the next room smelling of damp joint compound and drywall dust, she was right behind him, watching. A hint of a smile. Perfume.

Sometimes she hummed the same damn song she'd been humming, seemingly since he'd arrived.

The rooms themselves didn't appear to have changed. He found broken glass in several, and score marks on the walls, evidence of their attempts to mark their route and avoid doubling back on their own path—or evidence of *someone's* attempts to do so. He didn't know if the rooms he passed through maintained their state after he left, though they seemed to. Or if they did, how long they did, or if other people were also trapped in the Black House.

He wondered if Dee had figured this out, if she knew Dennis was her own personal Agnes, her own personal figment designed to distract her and steer her wrong. If so, she might leave Marks clues as to her route, or be on her own, trying to find her way back. He had to think like Dee. He paused for a second, contemplating the command from on high to think like a young black girl who'd lost her parents and who was now trapped in a

strange, maze-like hell.

Figment. Distraction. He stopped moving. He turned to regard Agnes, who hovered in the doorway he'd just come through, a wraith smelling of Peppermint again. He wondered if her shifting scent meant anything, or if it was just more evidence of his ruined memory.

The House wanted him to move. Everything so far—aside from the Waiting Room—had been designed to keep him moving. Move, move, move—and when they'd slowed down or showed any signs of hesitation, there had been noises or events that had kept them moving. He'd *known* this and still fallen for it.

If he wanted to find Dee, he thought, his best bet was to sit down and let *her* find *him*.

He shrugged off his backpack, much lighter now than it had been, and sat down in the middle of the floor. He was tired anyway. He was hungry and thirsty and his feet ached. He was an old man, older perhaps than he realized, what with all those years missing. He closed his eyes and immediately was aware of the buzzing, crunching noise, low and distant, but suddenly *there*. There to spook him, to make him surge up in panic and start running blind again.

He kept his eyes closed. He shifted his weight.

For a long while she left him alone. The urge to open his eyes just to see what Agnes was up to was powerful, and he had to keep distracting himself, distracting himself from the distraction. He could smell her. He knew when she had wandered close, because her scent became stronger, and he knew when she moved away. He forced himself to examine his gray, murky



memories, the vast wasteland of the last few years, seeking clues, bits and pieces of lost moments. He concentrated on Agnes, ironically, to *distract* himself from Agnes: Who did she resemble? Had there actually been an Agnes, a pretty brunette with a penchant for peppermint? Had he lost her? Hurt her? Had she hurt him? There was a reason the House had dressed itself as her for him. She was supposed to have had the same effect on him as Dennis had on Dee.

“Are you sleeping?”

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter. She would, he thought, try to get him up again, try to prompt him into moving, running blind.

“Meditating? Oh, goodness, tell me you’re not about to burst into tears. I cannot *bear* weeping men.”

He said nothing.

“You’re not ... *giving up*? Oh, moronic Mr. Marks, I should hope *not*. You are so close.” He could hear her creeping closer, her scent growing stronger, filling his head like a pink and white mist, somehow alluring, erotic, compelling. Then she was whispering in his ear and her breath was surprisingly hot against his ear. “*So close*. You have been indefatigable, really. Your commitment to that disappointing Dee is laudable—certainly she did nothing to deserve your affection, and let’s face it, my many-faceted Marks, you’re a doll to put so much energy into her salvation. She doesn’t deserve you, dearie.”

Her voice was silk. He felt a bead of sweat roll down his forehead.

“But you *can’t* give up now. Is she selfish? Yes. Silly?”

Yes. But she's just a *girl*, Moral, Well-Meaning Marks. Just a *child*. And you sent her on her way, alone, unprotected. All you had to do was stay with her. Now she's lost, and it is, I'm afraid, *your fault*."

He squeezed his eyes tighter. After a moment he heard a feminine sniff of frustration, and sensed her sitting down next to him. He could imagine her skirts, which had bloomed outward over time, settling around her, like a cloud.

"People *have* died in here," she said softly, sounding sad, pained. "I am sorry to say it. I *do* try to avoid that, I really do, though you won't believe it. Oh, I know your opinion of me. It's not a fair opinion, of course, although I understand why you feel that way. We all have our roles to play—yours is to protect and defend the innocent, those who lack your knowledge and experience. Mine is to protect this *place*. But I do not wish harm on anyone, truly. But it *has* happened. People give up. They sit down, they stop moving. I've seen it before, My Mournful Marks."

Her attempts to get him moving were proof, he thought, that he should not do so.

Dimly, he became aware of another sound: The now-familiar sizzle of the distant grinding noise, the shouting voices. It was distant and dim, but still caused a sudden flame of anxiety bordering on fear in his belly. Something about the noise was ominous, tickling some ancient fight-or-flight instinct.

"That sounds *scary*," Agnes cooed.

He parsed his options furiously while his primitive underbrain demanded he run, *run* immediately. Heart

pounding, he forced himself to remain sitting there as the noise grew in volume, seemingly just a room or two away, some horrible thing come to devour him.

“At this point,” Agnes shouted, “you’re wondering—because you people are always wondering this at this stage of the game—if *that’s* the real danger of this place, something come to consume you in some terrible way. That maybe I’ve been trying to help you all this time, trying to keep you safe in my own way by guiding you away from *this*, this doom coming.”

With effort, he kept his eyes closed. The noise seemed to worm into his brain and massage the precise nerve endings that inspired terror and panic.

Then his eyes popped open. He caught Agnes smiling, a wide, crazy grin she immediately turned off—but he’d seen it. And he knew, or thought he did, another piece of the puzzle: This noise, this awful implied violence wasn’t there simply to keep him moving, was it? It was there to *herd* him. To keep him moving, yes, but in a specific direction. *Away* from something.

He climbed to his feet. His legs felt prickly and asleep, and he wondered how long he’d been sitting—surely not for long? Staggering on numb legs, he steered himself around Agnes, who’d adopted a tense, concerned expression, and started moving towards the noise.

“I wouldn’t—”

He ignored her and barreled through the door, dragging the backpack behind him as he crashed into the next room, the grinding, tearing noise louder, like a

machine ripping down walls and crunching the plywood subfloor into mulch as it rolled. He didn't slow down. He oriented himself as best he could and chose the doorway that appeared to lead closer to the noise, and crashed through it. Then he did it again.

In the fifth room, the noise was so loud he could feel it vibrating inside him, shifting his organs. The voices had resolved into screams of agony and horror. The room shook with the force of it, and crossing to the next doorway took physical effort, as if an invisible force was pushing against him. He pushed himself through, stumbling with his eyes half closed as he struggled against the unseen wind. He almost fell forward through into the next room, into near-silence. He crashed to his knees and knelt there for a moment, gasping for breath and staring at the floor, ears ringing, body buzzing.

He looked up and froze in shock.

"Hello again, Mr. Marks," said The Broker.

## 29. The Broker's Office

The office was just as he remembered it: Simple, bland, beige. The Broker, still handsome in a generic way that made Marks think of computer algorithms designed to generate *handsome*, was sitting behind the simple metal desk, hands steeped in front of him, suit respectable but not expensive or flashy. The carpet was nice but not luxurious. The air felt cool but smelled neutral.

Marks twisted around. The door he'd stepped through a few days before was open, and through it he could see the empty offices of Passus, Inc.

He looked back at The Broker and opened his mouth, but then couldn't find any words.

"Surely," The Broker said in a bluff, cheerful way, raising his light brown eyebrows, "you are used to unexpected topographies and impossible architectures by *now*, Mr. Marks?"

The Broker of Health and Happiness seemed amused, and that sparked a small flame of resentment in Marks' belly. "You ... The Black House, it's *yours*?"

"Passus operates the facility, actually," The Broker said. "We are a collective. I am merely a cog in the bureaucracy, you understand. / don't own, operate, or benefit from any of our work here. I merely facilitate."

Marks realized he was still kneeling with his palms on the floor. He climbed to his feet, momentarily feeling every ache and every pulled muscle. There were a lot of them.

"Listen," Marks said, stepping closer to the desk.

“There’s a girl. She’s—”

“Deandra,” The Broker said. “Deandra Dennings, yes.” He nodded, a muted smile on his face, encouraging Marks.

“You *know* she’s in there,” Marks said, something short-circuiting in his brain.

“Why, of course,” The Broker said, the slightest hint of a frown drooping over his features. “That is why you are *here*. We accept her!”

Marks swallowed something huge and made of broken glass. “*Accept* her?”

The Broker’s expression came perilously close to being an actual frown. “In lieu of *yourself*, yes, we accept her. This operation,” he stood, suddenly, revealing himself to be of average height and build, “we are in the business of bringing our clients health and happiness. Success. But everything comes at a price, Mr. Marks—yes, we know your name now. Our freelancers provide vessels for other people’s miseries, yes, and we provide them with financial incentives—that is one aspect of our business. There are other costs, other overhead, other infrastructure. The transference of misery from one human being to another is an *immensely expensive* business, and not solely in terms of money.”

He pointed at Marks. “You cost us quite a bit of trouble and *expense* with your deception, Mr. Marks. You were to be *processed* at the—what did you call it? The *Black House*—I quite like that!—as a consequence. Instead, we will process Ms. Dennings, who is, after all, a legacy!” He paused to cock his head slightly. “As we

*assumed* you intended?"

Marks just stared.

The Broker's expression became alarmed. "Oh my. This is a *disaster*."

Marks put his hands down on the desk and leaned forward. "Yes. Get her out of there. She's innocent. Blameless. She shouldn't be in there at all."

She should be back at the Starlight, he thought, waiting forever for me to return, slowly realizing that yet another adult had let her down and abandoned her. And yet that was a better fate than being trapped forever in a metaphysical meat grinder, being transformed into someone else's health and happiness.

"I'm afraid," The Broker said, then paused to spin and reclaim his seat. He settled himself and rolled his head on his shoulders before looking Marks in the eye. "I'm afraid it isn't that simple. As you might imagine, the, er, Black House is a complex machine. Many moving parts. We cannot simply *stop* its operation, or simply pull someone *out*. The consequences of such an action would be dire. All we can do is what we did with *you*: Create and offer a way out. You had to find that exit, we couldn't interfere or place it in your path."

Marks felt his heart beating a desperate, unhappily heavy rhythm in his chest. "Then you can do the same for Dee."

The Broker's expression was one that Marks had seen on many faces when he'd attempted to beg extensions on debts, advances on payments, or other extraordinary kindnesses: Pained lack of interest. "I am afraid that is *impossible*, Mr. Marks. The Black House

has been calibrated for a guest. It must process a guest.”

Marks nodded. He felt like he’d always known this would be the response, as if this was some epic, scripted event he’d been rehearsing for years. “Then swap me for her. Take her out, put me in.”

“As I said, we cannot simply remove someone.” He looked down at his hands. “I can offer only one possible solution, Mr. Marks. We can send you *back*, and you can search for the exit again. When you find it—if you find it—you can send Ms. Dennings through, and remain behind to satisfy your debt to Passus.”

Marks thought furiously. “Can you send me directly back to her? To the spot she’s in right now?”

The Broker brightened, sensing agreement. “Yes, I believe we could. Or very close.”

“Can you give me the path to the exit?”

The Broker’s broadly handsome face fell again. “I’m afraid not; the processing requires the *effort* you see, the—”

Marks cut him off with a gesture. “Fucking *hell*,” he hissed.

The Broker stiffened and sat back. “Might I remind you, Mr. Marks, that we are in this *terrible* situation because you sought to *defraud* the company. You posed as a candidate for a freelance position. You assigned miseries to another man without his consent. The fact that he accepted this voluntarily later does not remove the stain of dishonor from you.”

Marks felt the tiny flame of anger growing inside him,



and his grip on the desk became white-knuckled. “You lure people into a Soul Engine that consumes and destroys them so you can make rich people’s lives better by making poor people’s lives *worse* and you’re *lecturing* me on morals?”

The Broker spread his hands. “Mr. Marks, I am uninterested in your feeble grasp of the laws of the universe. Since educating you on the true meaning of *morality* is impossible, let us concentrate on what *is* possible: Re-inserting you into the Black House so you can help Ms. Dennings escape. Are we agreed, then? I cannot guarantee you will find the way—but if you do successfully find the exit, you may set Ms. Dennings free and we will accept your processing alone.”

Marks closed his eyes and nodded. Knowing more didn’t make him feel better. Knowing that people like him and Dee—and Dee’s father—were *processed* in order to provide the raw materials for a place like Passus made him want to shoot himself in the head rather than live in a universe that allowed such things.

Or made him want to return and burn Passus to the ground. The anger was still there, but for the moment he had to ignore it and save Dee, who had done nothing to deserve any of it. He had at least done *something*.

“Okay,” he said. “I agree.”

The Broker smiled. “Very good! I will process the paperwork. In the mean time, be my guest.”

He gestured over Marks’ shoulder. The door behind him no longer led to the empty offices of Passus, but showed the familiar new drywall of the New Rooms. Without looking back at the Broker, Marks turned and

walked over to it. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath of the air-conditioned, scentless air of the Passus offices, and stepped through.

“Marks!”

He opened his eyes. Agnes stood in front of him, smiling. He turned slightly. Dee was a few feet away, staring at him, wide-eyed. She looked skinny and rough, exhausted, her hair a mess, her face blotchy and tearstained. They stared at each other for a moment, and Marks was amazed to find a surge of relief so powerful he had to swallow back a cry.

She took a hesitant step forward, then launched herself at him, crashing into him and hugging him hard.

“You came for me,” she said, quiet. “I can’t believe you came back for me.”

Marks nodded, hugging her back. Then he glanced up, and froze.

Dee felt it. “He’s always there,” she said without letting go.

Marks stared at Dennis, who lurked in the far doorway.

## 30. A New Room

Like Agnes, Marks thought, Dennis had changed. Molted. Warped. He was still the same man they'd encountered in the Waiting Room, still recognizable as the man Dee had asserted was her father. But he was a *rougher* version of that man. He was taller, thinner, and his clothes fit poorly, as if they hadn't shifted with his body and were now too small. His hair was longer and unkempt. Like Agnes, he stood in the doorway behind Dee, smiling.

Dee suddenly pulled back and hit him on the shoulder. "You *left* me," she said, her voice dull and flat.

He nodded, swallowing thickly. "I know. I'm sorry. I thought ... I thought you were okay."

She hit him again, and then again. "You *left me!*" she said again, her voice hitching, and then she was crying, tears streaming down her face. "You were supposed to *know!* All about this place!"

He didn't try to stop her or defend himself. "I know, kid, I know, I'm sorry. But I *found* you."

She stopped hitting him, and stood there for a moment looking exhausted and impossibly young. Behind her, Dennis' smile was disturbing: His eyes fixed on them, wide and leering, his smile vacant.

"How'd you find me?"

He shrugged. "I thought like this demented place for a moment. I asked myself, what's it been trying to do to us? Get us lost, keep us spinning. This maze," he looked around, "kept us spinning for a long time."

She nodded, and he leaned forward and put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen, I think I've figured something out."

She dragged an arm across her face, nodding. "Okay."

"This place, it's *personalized*, you know? It's supposed to pick up details from your life, from your mind, and use them. All the stuff we see here, all the weird rooms, somehow it comes from *us*."

She frowned.

"But because it's *two* of us," he went on, "because it's two people instead of one, and because my mind is so fucked up and weird, it got all screwy. It picked up random things from both of us, and mine are all warped beyond recognition. But some of it just from you. Like the chess pieces."

She nodded. "The pawns," she said. "The Queen. We've seen those."

"And *her* and *him*," he added. "Supposed to confuse us. But some it—like the chess pieces—can guide us. I think. There's a pattern to them."

Somewhere distant, he became aware of the buzzing, cracking noise again, a storm of violence slowly heading their way. Even though he knew it was an illusion, designed to spook them, to keep them moving in the wrong direction, it still sizzled on his nerves and made it difficult to stay calm, to stay still. *Move move move* it seemed to communicated directly to his underbrain, that primitive part of him that connected him to his most ancient single-celled ancestors.

“I think if we follow the pattern the right way, it’ll lead us out of here.”

She sniffled and nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. A pattern. Chess from me. What about you?” Her eyes flickered over his shoulder to Agnes. “What’s it taking from you?”

He sighed. “I have an idea, but I can’t remember what it means,” he said. “I’m still working on that part.”

She nodded again. “Okay.” She turned to look over her shoulder, then looked past Marks at Agnes again. “So, they’re like, not *real people*, right?”

Marks nodded. “Figments. Fakers.”

“Can we tie them up and leave them here? Or knock them out so they stop following us?”

Marks smiled. The noise of the approaching storm was loud enough to feel in the floor joists. “Probably not, actually, but we can always try, sure.” He turned to look at Agnes, who was leaning against the doorway with her hands folded in front of her, looking young and fresh and innocent, smiling slightly. A flicker of recognition went through his thoughts, but was gone almost immediately. “I wouldn’t mind getting rid of her for a little while.”

He looked back at Dee and they both smiled. It was surprising, he thought, how much better he felt having her back, having another real, actual person to bounce off of. The thought made him sober. Dee frowned a moment later.

“You’re thinking, how do we know *we’re* real?”

He nodded, then pulled a hand over his face. “New

rule,” he said. “Don’t split up again.” He turned to look at Agnes again. She winked at him.

“Well,” he said, raising his voice over the sizzling noise. “I’m not sure, kid,” he admitted. “The best I can come up with is to pay attention. Both our people appear to have ... drifted from their original physical appearance. If I start looking weird to you, don’t shrug it off.”

Dee cocked one eyebrow. “But if you’re a Figment, Marks, then you’d be lying to me right now!”

“Not necessarily!” Agnes shouted over the buzzsaw noise brightly. “The *fun* of it, Dear Dim Dee, is to *sometimes* tell the truth, *sometimes* point you in the right direction. Then I can be all hurt and sad when you don’t take my advice.”

“Who are you supposed to be?” Marks said quietly, not looking at her. He felt like the memory was right there. Right under the surface, tantalizing. He wondered if Agnes had been changing because the memory was coming closer, getting sharper. But then he couldn’t believe he’d ever known anyone as breathtakingly beautiful as this woman.

Memory, he thought, sometimes warped how people looked. Cleaned up the negative, put a little movie magic on the lens.

Dee shook herself. “Trust,” she said, holding out her hand as if sealing a business deal. “I’m *already* lost, right? Shit, can’t go much further wrong. So, we trust each other until we got reason not to.”

Marks took her hand. He was surprised at how small and delicate it felt in his, and a wave of agonizing self-

loathing swept through him again. He'd brought her here. And then he'd left her.

"Trust," he said.

"Okay," she said, pushing her hair, which had become a mess that resisted any efforts to control it. "So, what do we do?"

Marks dropped the backpack to the floor and fished out the notebook. "All right, we saw chess pieces in six rooms so far," he said. "The Anteroom—one pawn, the Library—two pawns, the Queer Lounge—three pawns, the Ballroom—"

"There's a *ballroom*?"

"Yes!" Agnes cheered. "It's *marvelous*!"

"—one pawn, and Underground—Queen. So what's missing?"

Dee thought for a moment. "They're all white, right?"

Marks nodded.

"One pawn—there should be eight. Then the Rook, the Knight, and the King."

Marks pointed at her. "Got a feeling the King might be where we want to end up."

Dee smiled. "All right, so we go up the ladder, right, like it's a board? Pawns first, then we look for the Rook. But if we already know where the Queen is, why not just try to cut back there?"

"I can't say for certain, but this place kind of has a clockwork feel to me. Like we need to go through rooms in a certain order," he said, looking down at the map he'd drawn and re-drawn several times. "So if I'm right

about that, we'd go Anteroom, Library, Lounge, Ballroom, and then—" he pointed at the little square he'd marked with a large capital *O*. "The Octopus room, whatever that is. It's the only room leading from the Ballroom we haven't been in."

"Then what?"

He shrugged, closing the notebook. "If there's a pawn in that room, we know we're on the right track. Then we look for, what, the Rook?"

Dee nodded. "What if we go through a door, no Rook, but we can't go back?"

"Then we circle around and try again," he said. He paused for a moment, studying her face. "Look, I know, it's exhausting. It's *meant* to be exhausting. But the key is, we have to just keep working the puzzle until we make it out. It's the only way. There are rules, but it's *their* rules, and we have to follow them."

She took a deep breath. "Okay." She looked down at her shoes. "Listen ... thanks. For coming after me."

He nodded and looked away, but said nothing.

"What now?"

He took a deep breath, looking around. The buzzing, crunching noise and shouting voices seemed like it was in the next room, but Marks was determined to prove it couldn't scare him any more, couldn't force him to make a mistake. "First things first: We have to figure out how to get out of here *again!*"

"Shit, I'm sorry!" Dee shouted. "*He* tricked me!"

Marks looked past her at Dennis, who smiled, his gums blood red, his teeth somehow yellowed.



“Don’t worry about them,” Marks yelled. “They’re just *figments*, right!”

Dee nodded. Marks turned to grin back at Agnes, and was startled to find her glaring at him, her beautiful face folded into a mask of rage.

## 31. The Ballroom

“You *sure* we ain’t gonna die?”

Marks shook his head. “No. But we had to eat something. You notice it was all our favorites? Sort of mashed together? Having two people here at once is seriously messing with this place’s wiring.”

“I don’t know,” Dee said. “How’s that food stay *fresh*? I kind of feel sick. I think we got poisoned. Why would we *trust* the food this place sets out in that creepy Dining Room?”

“If the end goal was to poison us,” Marks said, “there would be easier ways.”

Dee considered that, looking around. “Looking at *this* room, I figure we’re going to be strangled in the dark, maybe, and not poisoned.”

Marks nodded, watching Agnes and Dennis carefully as the pair seemed to wander randomly among the dusty, rotting tables. He didn’t think either one was a direct threat to them, in the sense of attacking them in some way, but he also didn’t doubt the place had more surprises in store for them. Dennis climbed up onto the bandstand, and then turned and gallantly helped Agnes up as well. A cloud of dust kicked up into the air where they walked.

“Pawn over the doorway,” Marks said, pointing. “So, one in the Anteroom, two in the Library, three in the Lounge, and one here. Makes seven.”

Dee nodded. “That looks like a chessboard, too,” she said, pointing at the dancefloor. “You think they *actually* had parties in this creepy place?”

Marks shrugged. “Agnes said yes, and that it wasn’t always like this. Who knows. Who knows how much she and Dennis are even real beings, with independent thought and action, instead of puppets set here to distract and annoy.”

Agnes had seated herself at the grand piano, its polished black surface dulled by dust and scratches. She cracked her knuckles theatrically, looked over at them, and smiled. Then she began playing. The piano was horribly out of tune, each note somehow positioned perfectly between keys, resulting in a discordant and horrifying noise that felt like fishing line being pulled through his eardrum ... and yet the tune was recognizable.

“Shit,” Dee said, pulling a face. “I know that song. I mean, it’s the Halloween, horror-movie oh-shit-we-took-a-wrong-turn-into-Insanity-Cove-population-one version, but I’ve heard this song. Old, right? About married people stepping out and boning?”

Marks matched her expression. “Close enough.”

Dee pointed at him. “They are pulling that 100% from *you*, old man. No *way* they found that song rummaging around in *my* karma.”

Dennis, or the slightly stretched, inaccurate simulation of Dennis that the apparition had become, started an off-beat clapping that somehow made the song even more horrible, which Marks would not have believed to be possible.

“Uh, that’s our cue to get the hell out of this room, like, pronto.”

Marks nodded. “In here, the room we haven’t been to

yet is the Octopus, which is also where the pawn was positioned, so the choice seems obvious.”

They both stood for a moment, not moving. The music curdled around them and thickened the air.

“Too easy?” Dee asked.

“Too easy.”

He chewed his lip for a moment. When he looked over at Agnes and Dennis on the bandstand, she raised one hand from the keyboard and waved at him while tinkling out a sour arpeggio that fell like tiny lead pellets at her feet. The pair just followed them now, not making any attempt to interfere or speak to them. It was somehow worse.

“Come on,” he said. “At least maybe there won’t be *music*.”

Dee sighed, following him towards the door. “Dude, there isn’t any music *here*.”

They opened the Octopus door, walked down the brief hall, and found themselves in a dim, aged-looking room where the air seemed to be made of dust, everything faded and worn smooth with age. The room had the weight of time hanging everywhere, a dense feeling of uncounted days.

It was a simple room, but filled with debris. The walls were cluttered with paintings, etches, portraits, and mirrors. Not an inch of wall space was bare. There were no windows, but something warm and delicious was being cooked somewhere; amidst the dust and age the room smelled wonderful. Several large free-standing wardrobes crowded in from the edges, some with more paintings and mirrors hung on their sides and doors.

The floor was just as crowded as the walls with tables, chairs, trunks, and boxes. In one corner stood a stuffed bear, posed with one claw raised, its jaws stretched wide. A huge model sailing ship resides on one of several coffee tables, resplendent with bright white sails and carefully applied paint. A bearskin rug was rolled up in another corner, and an Iron Maiden leaned against a scratched and scuffed Hope Chest, lost in shadow.

Hidden amongst all the paintings and bric-a-brac are four exits: A pair of swinging doors marked with a familiar stag, a stairway leading downward with a floor tile marked with the bear, and two more doors on the east and north walls, marked with a viper and a kangaroo.

“Not the first room,” Agnes suddenly sang out from behind them. “But certainly one of the earliest! Now it’s become a sort of storage room, sadly—past follies and failures shunted aside, out of the way ... at least until someone plays some mischief. Sometimes, I’d swear the paths to this room get changed, making it difficult to find even if you know the way.”

“Uh huh,” Marks said. “Shut up.”

“Rude.” She grinned. “Still trying to place me, Poor Myopoic Marks?”

Marks felt a cold shiver pass through him, something buried deep in his memories reaching up and massaging his brain. He closed his eyes for a moment and wished fervently for a bourbon, neat, with a water back and some bar nuts.

“Come on,” Marks said, opening his eyes and fighting

back a wave of exhaustion. “If we’re on the right track there’s one last pawn in here.”

They checked the doors. When the Kangaroo didn’t immediately offer up the pawn, they were disappointed.

“Might be lost in all this junk,” Dee offered.

Marks nodded. Then didn’t move. “Christ, there’s a lot of shit in here.”

They started searching. Dennis and Agnes mimicked them, picking up various things and tossing them aside randomly, sometimes snatching things right out of their hands and playing Keep Away. Marks and Dee exchanged exasperated looks, but said nothing, and continued to search.

After nearly an hour, Marks stopped and stretched, arching his back and trying to work a sizzling pain out of it. He looked around, dismayed at the sheer amount of stuff to search through, and then paused, listening. There was a new noise, a rhythmic thumping. It was low volume and easy to miss, but he could feel it in the floor boards as well.

He thought it might be another trick, another illusion designed to spook them and keep them running instead of thinking. But Agnes and Dennis weren’t drawing attention to it, and it seemed odd in this place where every room was different, where every room represented its own little puzzle, to see a trick repeated—especially a trick that he’d clearly already seen through and dismissed.

Tricks on tricks, he thought.

He didn’t say anything, and bent back to sorting through the piles of stuff, opening boxes and searching

through their bizarre contents. Comic books he remembered, somehow, having as a child—he couldn't remember someone he'd met a year ago, but he could somehow remember comic books. shoes, never in pairs, always oddballs, seeming new. Dolls without heads. One box was filled with tiny, bleached-white bones, from a rodent of some sort.

Through all his searching, he was aware of the vibrations under his feet, buzzing up through his legs. After another long moment of standing still and contemplating it, he lay down on the floor with a grunt and pressed his ears against the floor, listening. It sounded like a construction site piledriver in the distance, a steady beat of impact.

“Found it!”

Marks sat up and looked around. Dee had climbed up on top of one of the wardrobes, somehow, and triumphantly held up a small white carving, similar to the other seven they'd found so far.

“That's a relief,” he said as she climbed down. “If we didn't find it, I wasn't sure what our next move was going to be.”

“Yaaayyy!” Agnes trilled, clapping her hands. “I am so *happy* for you, Dear Dour Dee!”

Dee scowled at her, then beamed at Marks. A moment later she looked down at her feet. “What's that?”

Marks nodded. “I know, I noticed it too.”

“*That,*” Agnes said, spinning as if being twirled by an invisible dance partner, “is the House shutting down.”

Dee looked at Marks. "Shutting down?"

He shook his head, pursing his lips as if to dismiss whatever Agnes was saying.

"You've been here too long," Agnes said. "You're almost done. So the place is resetting."

A shot of panic went through Marks. On some deep level he realized this made sense, somehow he knew it made sense. The Black House shaped itself around those it lured in. It had shaped itself around Dee and him, taking pieces of them for decoration and function. And now they were close to being stranded there, close to having their entire lives absorbed by this dark, beating heart, and so it was destroying itself to reset for the next victim.

It was destroying itself.

"Marks," Dee said softly. "What is it? What does it mean?"

He looked at her, and forced a thin, weak smile onto his face, shifting his gaze to the Kangaroo door, which he thought was obviously their next step. "It just means we have to move a little faster, kid."



## 32. The Kitchen

“Someone's been busy here,” Agnes said.

It was a big room, filled with rows and rows of shelves, several large stoves, and a large wooden country-style table. It looked like a food-fight had been fought recently; egg yolks dripped off the walls, bags of flour had burst open and been scattered all over the place, all the blenders were running, and the table was covered with chopped vegetables, various liquids, pots, pans and other instruments of culinary delight. The floor was blue and white tile, and was covered in flour, milk, and, apparently, chocolate syrup.

Marks noted that along one wall was a rack of knives, some of which looked just a little too....long to have any use in the kitchen. Several had wickedly curved blades that were serrated.

“Something's gone pretty damn rotten in here,” Dee said, making a face. Behind her. Dennis, now taller than he'd originally been, his skin stretched taut over his face as if it hadn't kept pace with the rest of him, made the same face.

Marks also thought it was very warm, owing to the ovens, which were uniformly turned to about 400 degrees. There was a coat rack along the back wall that offered a selection of chef's hats, including one that resembled nothing more than the pointed headgear of a Catholic bishop. Next to that was a narrow door marked PANTRY. There were three other doors he could see: a swinging in/out door next to the pantry featuring the octopus he knew led to the Old Room, a wooden door with the familiar carving of a stag, and a window.

Marks froze, suddenly realizing he was looking at a window. Outside, it looked like a beautiful day, tree limbs swaying in sunshine. He stared at it, suddenly excited and nervous. Could it be? Was it possible that it was that simple, just open the window and climb down a tree, hitch a ride home? He crossed to the window as if in a dream, knowing it was impossible that escape would be so simple, so straightforward, but unable to let go of the possibility.

When he was close, however, he saw it: one pane of glass, thicker at the bottom than the top from age, had been etched with a portrait of a wolf, similar to the carving on the elevator doors that had brought them to the Waiting Room trap. The glass vibrated slightly as the crashing, crunching noise of the maze collapsing around them continued to buzz, a little louder, he thought, than before.

Deflated, he turned and looked around the kitchen again.

“All I see are places we’ve been,” Dee said. “Wolf, Stag, Octopus. It’s a dead end.”

“Look for a ... what’s next? If you’re setting a chessboard?”

“A rook,” Dee said. “A castle. But—”

“If it’s here, we’re on the right track,” Marks said. “Let’s start there.”

“Or we’re wrong about the chess pieces,” Dee said, looking around.

They searched. Everything in the kitchen was rancid, rotten, and well past its sell date, making the search a disgusting adventure. Dee attempted to keep herself

relatively clean, picking through ingredients and utensils carefully, sometimes picking up a wooden spoon or other implement to help her shift the mess around. Marks didn't let such niceties slow him down; he rolled up his sleeves and swept his hands through the gooey, room-temperature stuff, shoving mounds of flour and sugar and puddles of gravy aside energetically, eager to get on with it.

The activity seemed to crank up the stench of food gone over, choking the warm air with the damp smell of rot and decay. Dee breathed through her mouth. Marks pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it up to his face, filtering the foul air.

Dennis and Agnes stood together, bored, their arms wrapped around themselves as they watched with barely-concealed disdain.

Finally, Dee and Marks, sweating and covered, despite Dee's efforts, in nearly equal amounts of food, stood and contemplated the ovens.

"It makes perfect sense," Marks said, wiping his face. "This place loves to torture you in big ways and small."

He reached forward and touched the handle on the door of one oven, then snatched his hand back, hissing through his teeth. For a moment he was seized with an incoherent fury, angry that every single step along the way was made as difficult as possible, each subsequent room worse in small ways than the ones before, and now the pressure to keep moving, to be quick, to not think and just run as the whole tiny little universe destroyed itself in order to reset for the next guests who would arrive, confused, to be tortured and tricked, their lives sucked away from them.

He'd been through a lot, and seen incredible—and horrible—things, much of which was lost to him. But he resented this place more than any other. He resented everything about it, and for one moment he allowed all of that rage to fill him.

Then he took a deep breath, wrapped his handkerchief around his hand, and opened the ovens, one by one, moving quickly. The rook was in the third one, apparently made of some sort of dough and baked to a shiny, buttery shellac-like finish.

"All right," Dee said. "So we might still be on the right track, but we still have just three choices that all lead places we've been and *don't* want to go back to."

Marks nodded, looking around.

"I used to love to cook," Agnes said suddenly. "Do you remember, Phil?"

*Phil.* Marks froze again. She'd never called him by his first name before. It was always *Muddled Marks* or *Myopic Marks*. Something about her voice, the sound of his name, filled him with ice and horror.

"Do you remember me yet, Phil?"

Did he want to? He could feel her on the tip of his brain, just beyond the places where his memory illuminated things, just beyond his reach. Like a dark curtain between him and everything that had gone before. But he also had a sense that if he put effort into it, real effort, he might be able to reach through the curtain, just a little bit, a tiny bit, and pull her through into the light.

But he didn't want to. As much as his lost memory frustrated him, he knew one thing about it: Most of it

should stay lost.

Agnes began to hum again. The same song, the same melody, somehow pegged to the rhythm of the distant noise of destruction and chaos, the rumbling churning noise of the place collapsing onto itself. The notes stabbed into Marks and he knew the song, Agnes, they were linked with him. Behind that distant curtain, they waited for him, and he was terrified.

He tore his eyes away from her. She'd become almost inhuman, her features and the lines of her body and face longer and more graceful than was possible. It hurt to look at her. She was like some example of human evolution from centuries in the future. He looked around the room desperately, from the eggs hardening on the walls to the globs of curdled cream on the floor. And he realized, with a flood of relieved excitement, that there was a *fourth* door.

"The pantry," he said, his voice a croak.

Dee frowned, turning to look at the door. "The damn pantry, now? This place makes no damn sense." She walked over to the small wooden door and examined it. "No carving," she said. "No animal."

Marks stepped close to the door, eyes dancing over its surface. Between Agnes' humming and the distant noise, he wanted to just move, just get out in front of everything and stay in motion. But she was right. Every door so far had been marked. The animal carvings had served as guideposts, and the only reason he had any sense of where they'd been or where they might be going, the only reason his hand-drawn map made any sense, was because of those signposts. He wanted to just crash through the door and keep *moving*, but he

knew she was right to be dubious. They might easily find themselves in another Trap Room.

“Come on,” he said, his voice tight, taking hold of the pantry door handle. He turned to look back at Dee. Behind her, Agnes and Dennis stepped forward together, their faces eager with anticipation, as if they were excited to see what happened next. He focused on Dee.

“This is part of it. The trick. This place, it establishes rules and patterns, then breaks them. Just to increase your sense of disorientation. So that the obvious route lies open for you but you *hesitate*, because it doesn't match the pattern exactly.”

“Or,” Agnes said softly, “it really *is* a trick.”

He shook his head. “It can't be.” He let go of the handle and knelt down before her. “Listen, kid, I'm responsible for you. I've got to get you out of this place, and we're running out of time. Come on and trust me.”

She didn't seem persuaded, but after a moment she shrugged. “I don't have any better ideas.”

He nodded, taking hold of the handle again. He'd take it.

## 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 is 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.”

## 34. The Mousehole

“So,” Dee said after a long period of silence, “why does she—Agnes—keep asking you if you remember her?”

Marks didn’t answer right away. They were ... he wasn’t sure where they were. It felt different from everything else they’d encountered, less defined somehow. They’d stepped into the dark maw of the mousehole, he’d fished his flashlight from the backpack, and they’d started walking. At first they’d been in a tunnel, rough-hewn, like something had chewed it into existence. He’d been aware of the ceiling and walls of the tunnel.

Slowly, though, the space had widened out, and now he had a sense of being in an immense cavern, pitch black. The path was illuminated for a few feet in front of them and few feet behind, but the light of the flashlight, which turned into a small lantern when slid into the open position, didn’t reach very far. The path might be just a narrow lane elevated over a bottomless chasm.

The moment he thought it, he was convinced that was exactly what was happening.

“Stay in the center,” he said quietly. “Don’t wander to the edge.”

“Gee, *that’s* encouraging,” Dee said.

Their voices echoed distantly, and the air, which had been almost unbearably hot in the pantry, had turned cold.

“So,” Dee said. “Agnes?”

Marks nodded. “She’s like your Dad—this place made her in the image of someone I used to know.”

“Who?”

He shook his head. “I can’t remember. I can tell it’s someone ... important. Someone that should be messing with me, making me really sad and upset. But I can’t quite see her.”

“And you ain’t trying too hard, huh?”

He smiled thinly in the darkness. “No. I’m not sure I see the upside of remembering her. Not while I’m in here.”

They walked on in silence. Somewhere, very far away, there was a screeching cry, like a bird of prey’s call. But incredibly distant. They both stopped and looked up and around. But the light of the flashlight was too feeble; all they could see was darkness.

.o0o.

“Water’s gone,” Marks said.

They’d rested, sitting in the dim glow of the small lantern, feasting on the crumbs and dregs left in his bag. Around them the sound of wind was hollow and constant, a soft reminder of the huge space all around them. He looked around at the darkness and considered tossing the empty plastic bottle into it to see if there were any audible clues as to what might be found out there, but reconsidered, thinking that they might come across another water supply and want the bottle.

They'd been walking for a long time, though he wasn't sure how long. Dee's phone battery had died, and he didn't have a watch. They were stuck in a formless, timeless void, shrunk down to—what? Atomic scale? Quantum? Were they getting smaller and smaller with each step? All of those possibilities seemed perfectly valid.

"It's *cold*," Dee complained, hugging herself.

Marks shrugged off his jacket and held it out to her. The girl hesitated, then nodded, taking it and pulling it on. He thought briefly of the money sewn into the lining, and then dismissed it. He wasn't sure money would ever matter again.

"Come on," he said. "We should get moving before the batteries in the flashlight start to go."

"Jesus hell," Dee said, getting to her feet. "Don't say *that*."

They walked.

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They made a shelter of sorts; Mark unfolded the shovel and jammed the blade into the soft dirt of the path, and they hung his jacket on the handle, stretched it out and anchored it on the other end with the backpack. It wasn't much, but it felt better than sleeping out in the open, surrounded by darkness. When they were settled, Marks turned off the flashlight.

The darkness was immediate and complete. The world, small as it had become, vanished completely.

Marks clutched the flashlight tightly and pushed it deep into his pocket. There would be no morning, no sunrise, no other light source. If they lost the flashlight, they were doomed.

He closed his eyes and opened them and there was no difference.

“Marks?” Dee said softly. “You there? You still there?”

“I’m here.”

There was at least the sound of the wind, some kind of proof that the world still existed, that there was something out there. Marks lay quietly, trying to feign sleep for Dee’s sake, trying to project a calm acceptance, a confidence maybe that there would be light again, that this was just temporary. Dee had grown quiet, plodding along without any of the chatter or energy he’d grown used to. He was worried they wouldn’t get through this fast enough to save her.

He lay there and listened to the black wind.

.o0o.

“Mr. Marks.”

He nodded. “Might as well call me Phil,” he said. “Seems kind of silly to call me *mister* like I’m your teacher.”

“Never gonna happen.”

“All right. What?”

They walked a few more steps before she responded. “What if we never get out of here? What if this is a Trap



Room?”

He nodded again. The thought had occurred to him. They'd camped out twice now, the rest of their lives just walking in the tiny pool of light afforded by the flashlight. He didn't know how long they'd slept, or how long they'd walked. He decided to call it two days.

“Then we die here, kid.”

They walked.

“There's no bishop,” Dee said after a while. “If we're on the right path, there should be a bishop.”

Marks nodded. He thought the flashlight was dimmer. It definitely was. When they'd started their trek in the total pitch blackness it had been bright enough to see a few feet ahead of them. Now it was barely more than a foot, just enough to take a step. He thought it wouldn't be long before it faded completely, leaving them alone in the most intense blackness he'd ever experienced. He realized it had never even occurred to him to buy extra batteries.

“I don't think we're in a room, technically,” he said. “I think we're ... *in-between* rooms. In-between all the actual spaces. I think when we shrunk down, we kept shrinking, and we're in the wall. Like, literally, in the wall.”

“Well, it ain't crazier than anything else that's happened,” Dee said. There were a few moments of silence. “But we've been here a *long* time.”

*And it's getting dark*, he thought.

“Tell me about your Dad,” he said, wanting to distract them both. “What he's *really* like.”

She didn't respond right away. When she did, she spoke in a low, dense voice. "He's really like he was *here*, actually. Kind of serious all the time. Restless. Always moving. He's got this sadness in him, like he knows he's wasted time, made mistakes, and can't ever forget it. But he's silly sometimes. Has this really, *really* lame sense of humor." She sighed, and Marks thought it was the most relaxed sound she'd made since arriving at the Black House. "A *lot* of fart jokes."

"I think I'd like him."

"You *will*," she said pointedly. "Hey, Marks—how'd you get into all this shit, anyway? All this weird stuff?"

He squinted in the dimming light, which was going much faster than he'd expected. Was there some faint outline ahead? Something resolving out of the darkness? It might be an artifact, a trick of the light. "You know what? I remember this. I never forgot it. Or I *did*, but only for a really short time. Maybe it's because it was so far in the past, it was burned in better. Or maybe it's because it's so fundamental to who I became."

As he spoke, the light grew steadily weaker, the path in front of them harder to make out.

"It was an email. Or a bunch of emails. There was a kid in school, high school, who died. Some bizarre disease, something super rare. He was sixteen and he just died, and it was a shock. All of us in school went to his funeral. We didn't know how to dress, how to act. And the worst part was, the kid? Who died? Total asshole. Everyone fucking hated him."

"Why?"

Marks grimaced. There *was* something up ahead, but he couldn't make it out. He decided not to call attention to it until he knew what it was.

"He was one of those guys who was just mean. Nothing nice to say to or about anyone. Everyone was dumb. Everyone was lame. He'd heard your music before, long ago when it was still fresh and exciting. He'd read all the books and heard all the jokes and anything you did was just tired and boring. And he had money."

Dee snorted. "*Money*. Marks, you coulda just said *that*."

"So he dies, and everyone pretends to be broken up about it, but we're all just kind of okay with this guy being dead. And then my friend calls me one day and says he saw him. At the mall. Eating a cheeseburger in the food court by himself. He says he looked right at him, and the dead kid winked and got up and walked away."

A few more steps, a little darker. "So?" Dee finally asked. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I never found out. *That's* what drove me to this. I never did the legwork, I never investigated, and to this day I don't know if my friend was crazy, or if that kid didn't die, or if it was a ghost. And it bothered me. Still does. And I slowly became incapable of letting anything like that slide."

"Marks, that's a real crap origin story. You ever get famous, I advise you to dirty that up a little." He could see her, dimly, turn to look back at him. "We're going dark, ain't we?"

"Afraid so."

"Shit."

"There's something up ahead, though," he said, slowly, hesitant. "I can't exactly make it out. Might be a door."

"*Might* be?"

He shrugged. He could barely make out the faint outlines of the path, much less something looming up a few dozen feet ahead of them. "All right, it's absolutely a door. Feel better?"

"*No.*"

The flashlight went out.

It was a slow, majestic fade, a sudden decline from bare illumination into total blackness. Marks froze where he was. He widened his eyes.

"Dee?"

"Here."

"Don't move for a moment."

"You think you gotta *tell* me that?"

"Let's see if our eyes adjust at all. Maybe there's a *tiny* amount of light that might help."

"Okay."

He stood. He could hear the faint whine and wheeze of the wind, he could hear Dee breathing and swallowing. He could hear himself doing the same. But there was nothing visual. After a few minutes, he held his hand up near his face. Touched his nose. And couldn't see it at all.

“Not working,” Dee said, her voice shaky.

He shut his eyes. “Then we walk.”

“But we can't *see*. We might wander off course. Fall off an edge. Be lost—”

“Listen,” he said, kneeling down and sweeping his hand around. He found a small pebble and picked it up. He stood, took a deep breath, and threw the pebble as hard as he could in the direction he was still fairly certain was in front of them. There was a distinct *plink* of impact.

“That's the door,” he said. He saw no reason to be careful in his language. If it wasn't a door there would be plenty of time for them to come to terms with the fact later. “We take a few steps, we throw a rock, we orient. It's like Sonar.”

“Okay,” Dee said. She sounded doubtful. He knelt and found another pebble. “Listen for it, then walk towards the sound. Just take a few steps. The fewer steps you take, the more likely you won't get off track. I'm right behind you.”

He threw the stone. He took three steps and heard Dee doing the same. He wasn't going to let something like twenty feet be the end of them. Not now.

They repeated the process nine or ten times, and then Dee grunted. “Just walked into a wall.”

Marks stepped forward until he bumped into it as well. “All right,” he said. “If it's a door it's not very wide. Don't move to your left or right. *Lean*, but don't *step*, yes? Try to find the door handle. Or anything. But don't move your feet.”

They searched. The sound of their hands against the stone in the perfect pitch blackness was horrifying, a dry, itchy sound accented by their desperate, unhappy breathing.

*"Found it!"* Dee shouted. Before he could react, he heard the click of a latch, and then light, white and blinding, flooded into the space. He stumbled back to let her open the door all the way, shielding his tender eyes. The doorway framed the usual drywalled hallway, with the usual bend after a few dozen feet. The familiarity of it was so welcome he almost laughed.

She stepped into it without hesitation, turning to smile back at him. "Come on!" she said, looking dirty and thin. "Things are gonna start going our way now. I can feel it."

He nodded, following her. He stepped into the hallway, eyes stinging from the light, and then turned to look behind them. The path, as he'd suspected, was just wide enough for two people, and dropped off to a deadly edge, nothing but blackness on either side. He paused for a moment, contemplating, and then turned to follow, pulling the door shut behind him.

## 35. The Incision Room

The hallway ended, as always, at a door, which appeared to be similar in every way to all the other doors: Dark wood, the ibex carved into it, a brass handle polished from frequent use. He pulled it open.

The coppery-fish smell of blood stopped him in his tracks.

It was a surgery. At one time the tiles might have been a shining white and a clinical blue, but they had faded into a uniform sort of yellow, the color of pus and infection. The carts of instruments had been overturned and bent. The operating table in the center of the room was an explosion of blood, soaked through with little rivers of it dripping onto the floor. Several instruments were scattered directly around it, as if dropped in surprise.

“Stay behind me a moment,” he whispered, putting out his hand protectively.

Bloodied instruments were scattered everywhere, and pools of blood jellied on the floor. The single bulb lighting the room was flickering, obviously on its last reserves of filament. Its weak light made the blood appear darker than it really was, almost ruby.

A shining trail of blood lead from the table to one of four exits, swinging, glass-paned hospital doors, each bearing a typical carving: Stag, hippo, unicorn, and camel. Marks examined the swath of red liquid leading to the Hippo door that he knew led to the Hall of Mirrors, noting the sheer amount of it and thinking that something that could bleed so much and still walk must be huge, monstrous.

The doors marked giraffe and stag had once featured small signs that had been torn off, leaving ragged corners as evidence. The camel door's remnant showed a clear letter "S." Marks wondered if it had once read "surgery."

"Bishop," Dee said in a quiet, unhappy voice. "If this is the path, we should find a bishop in here."

Marks contemplated searching through the gore unhappily. He had a strong sense that the blood, were he to touch it, would be warm. Fresh. And it would bring up the obvious question—obvious to him, at least—of whose blood it was, and whether either Dee or himself might be scheduled for a visit with whatever horrific doctor had created this mess.

The noise of the place's slow collapse buzzed all around them, vibrating in the floor, in their bones. He'd forgotten about it during their long, silent trek through the wall. For a moment Marks expected Agnes and Dennis to come dancing in, to continue their program of torment and hilarity. But nothing happened. The growing buzzsaw of destruction remained a steady distraction, the blood dripped, and their time got shorter and shorter.

They searched. Gingerly, at first, trying not to touch the gore, trying to keep their clothes clear of it. Then more desperately, smearing the blood, sliding in it, splashing it around. Marks wondered if this was an elaborate trap: They were shrunken down, now, and even if they turned back the dark place they'd just barely made it through would be an impossibility without a new source of light. And a source of water. Even if they could still make their way back to the



pantry and the kitchen, would they remain microscopic in size?

There was no avoiding it: Before long they were both filthy. The smell of blood and the sensation of it made them both wretch, and Marks became convinced this was part of the plan, to make them both as miserable as possible. Which meant they might be getting close to the way out, which meant things were going to be heading downhill *fast* from this new low point.

He was sweating again, and aside from being very aware of what he must smell like, he could feel the itchy presence of the cash still sewn into his jacket. It suddenly felt heavy and useless, and he wondered why he hadn't thought to just toss it away.

"Fuck," Dee said, for a moment sounding just like the distrustful, moody kid he'd met in a motel bar ... was it just a few days ago? It felt like they'd been in the Black House for months. "If we both starting puking, Marks, shit's going to get *real*."

Marks swallowed back bile as he investigated the horrifying contents of a small trash bin in a shadowed corner of the surgery. It was filled with soiled sponges, rags, and viscera, and his own stomach kept threatening to rise up through his throat and strangle him as he sifted the contents. The urge to just assume they were still on the right trail and move on was growing, but he fought against it. Cutting corners would just risk being trapped in the place even longer.

"Marks!"

He leaped up and turned. Dee was standing in front of the wall opposite the four exits. He quickly crossed

over to her, trying to wipe his bloody hands off on anything he could find. She pointed at the wall and Marks realized for the first time that there was a small door there, about three feet wide and three feet tall. It was made of metal that had been painted the same color as the wall, making it hard to see, and had a punch-out for a tag or small sign towards the top. There had once been a handle, evidenced by two screw holes, but someone had removed it.

“Is that a damn *morgue* whatever you call it?”

Marks nodded. “Cold chamber. Looks like it.”

They both stared at it in silence for a moment.

“Okay, so it’s *obvious*, right, that there’s a dead body in there in some sort of *horrifying* state of rot,” Dee said slowly, “and that the Bishop piece is *inside* said body, right?”

Marks sighed. “Yep.”

She looked sideways up at him. “I will choose you for it.”

Marks smiled. “Odds and evens?”

She nodded, grim.

“Forget it,” he said. “I got us into this, I’ll carve it out of whatever we find in there.”

He looked around and located a bone chisel. Wiping it off on his trousers, he took it to the chamber and ran his chapped, painful fingers around the seam until he found a spot he thought he might get some purchase. Working patiently he set the edge of the chisel into place and worked it under the lip, coaxing the drawer out millimeter by millimeter until he could worm fingers

between the drawer and the slot. Grabbing hold, he pulled the heavy drawer out, backing up as he did so.

The figure on the slab was human, covered with a white sheet that had soaked up blood from the various incisions inflicted on it. One hand had slipped from under the sheet, and Marks stared at the dark skin for a moment before turning suddenly.

“Listen,” he said, licking his lips and wishing fervently for booze, any sort. He could taste it, the sharp, chemical wash of cheap whiskey, the antiseptic, nauseous flavor of vodka, the fizzy stale bread of beer. It flooded his mouth as if the recipe was locked inside his saliva, ready to produce alcohol when he was under stress. “Listen—”

He paused, uncertain what to say. His mind raced through the possibilities, but he knew Dee was too smart. He watched her expression go from expectant to irritated to worried, and then watched it collapse, her face hollowing out, her eyes suddenly wet.

“Oh *fuck*,” she said, softly.

He leaned forward and put his hands on her shoulders. Was it the first time he’d touched her? He wasn’t certain, but it felt like it. He pushed down on her gently, as if to hold her in place, stop her from moving.

“Listen,” he said. “I want you to go to the other side of the room—”

Her eyes widened and she raised her arms, looking at the blood on her hands. Then she spun around, looking at the mess everywhere. “Oh my god,” she said in a strangled voice. “Oh my *fucking god!*”

“Hey!”

He spun her back around forcefully and shook her. “*Listen to me!* I want you to go to the other side of the room. I want you to turn around. I want you to stay that way until I say otherwise. Do you hear me? *Dee!* Do you *hear me?*”

She was shaking her head, tears running down her face. “No, no, no, no, *no,*” she wailed softly. Her eyes flicked over his shoulder to the slab. “*Daddy!*”

He shook her again, then took her by the chin and moved her head, forcing her to look back at him. His fingers left smears of blood on her face. “Dee,” he said softly, breathing hard. “Dee, listen. Go. Turn around. Don’t look until I tell you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know—”

“Dee,” he said, and she stopped speaking. “Of course we know. This place ... it’s obvious.”

She was breathing in painful little gasps. “You don’t have—”

“Yes,” he said. “I do. You know I do. We have to know, or else we’ll get lost. We have to be sure we’re on the path.”

For a moment they stared at each other, him leaning down, hands on her shoulders, her looking up, chin quivering, tears dropping from her eyes. The noise of destruction seemed louder than ever, like a million termites consuming a house, amplified a thousand times.

Slowly, she nodded.

He almost fell as the tension drained from him. “Good,” he said, trying to catch his breath, trying to

slow his heart. “Good girl. Go on. Don’t turn until I say.”

Slowly, still nodding, she turned and walked away. He waited until she was on the other side of the operating table, facing the wall. Shaking, he turned back to the body on the slab. He reached out and picked up the crisp white corner of the sheet, holding it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced over to be sure she wasn’t looking, and lifted the sheet.

He recognized Dennis instantly. His face was splattered in his own blood, but was otherwise untouched, and he looked exactly like the entity that had fooled Dee earlier. The eyes were open, and stared blankly at the ceiling.

“This fucking place,” Marks whispered.

A wave of dizziness swept through him, and he imagined he could hear the song Agnes kept humming.

*And she said, “Aw, it's you.”*

He shook the words and notes out of his head and peeled the sheet back, revealing Dennis’ naked body. Marks quickly glanced at Dee; she was still turned away.

Dennis had been cut open with a standard autopsy Y-incision. The flesh had been put back in place, but not stitched up.

“Goddamn you,” Marks whispered, heart pounding. “I am going to spend the rest of my life learning how to burn this place. Whatever it is. *Wherever* it is.”

He hadn’t taken it seriously. At first he’d assumed it was a place of chaos, a prank, a place designed to keep him running. Even when he’d lost Dee and spent—weeks?—in the maze searching for her, he hadn’t quite

realized where they were. It wasn't a puzzle box. Or a Soul Engine. Or an Insanity Box. It was a meat grinder that enjoyed playing with its food.

"I'm sorry," he said to the dead man he'd never met, not really. "I'm so sorry. But I'm going to get her out of here."

He reached out and took hold of a flap of flesh and began to peel.

The bishop carving was where the heart had once been. It sat, pristine, in the chest cavity, a small piece of wood that had only the most surreal and basic resemblance to a bishop. He didn't reach for it, or touch it. He stared at it for several pounding heartbeats and then gently replaced the flap, then the sheet. Slowly, so as not to jostle the body, he pushed the slab back into the chamber.

For a few moments he stood leaning with his forehead pressed against the wall, just breathing.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, you can turn around now. We're still on the path."

When she made no reply, he turned his head, then froze. Dee was gone.

## 36. The Concert Hall

For a moment he was frozen and his mind seemed on the verge of some sort of epiphany, some connection. He saw Agnes—not as she'd appeared since his arrival, but somehow different, more real. He saw her in disarray, in a panic, her face stretched in a mask of horror as she stared at him, her hair tangled, her face streaked with dirt, her blouse torn.

And then she was gone and he was in motion, racing forward. “Dee!”

He forced himself to stop and think, and he realized there were only two possible choices. She'd either tried to go back, to retreat, or she'd gone through the one door that led somewhere they hadn't yet been: Camel. They'd seen the Spare Room, the Underground, and the Hall of Mirrors—he didn't think for one moment that she'd purposefully step off the path, purposefully get caught up in the gears of that Black House again. And he didn't think anyone would have the intestinal fortitude to go back into that vast, empty darkness they'd just escaped from. Unless—

Unless they were going to end themselves. Unless they were going to throw themselves over the side of the path and sail into that darkness, become one with it.

He rejected the idea. Dee was in mourning, she was in shock. She wasn't suicidal, she wasn't a quitter. He'd never known someone so young who just kept *going* like she did. He opened the door with the camel carving and stepped through, finding the familiar brief hallway and the second door. He pushed it open, heart

pounding, and stepped through, shouting. “Dee!”

His voice echoed hollowly and he was aware he was in another huge, open space. It was a theater, the ceiling soaring above in a gilded dome, each square panel a faded painting, the colors muted. He turned and found a door still behind him, marked with the Ibex carving, and thought acidly that the place was working hard to sow doubt; a closed retreat choked off choice, making the way forward seem certain.

He was standing on a deep pile green carpet, the aisle stretching forward in the dim light towards the stage, where a string quartet’s instruments had been set up: Two violins and a viola sitting on simple wooden folding chairs, and a cello propped up by a stand. Music stands stood in front of each spot. A spotlight lit up the instruments, while the rest of the concert hall was bathed in gloom.

He could hear her sobbing. Behind that, muffled as if through very thick walls, the crunching noise of the place collapsing. As he stood very still he could feel the vibrations through his feet. The possibility that the noise and vibration was another trick, another illusion designed to herd them like in the New Rooms was real, but he doubted it. The place collapsing seemed perfectly in line with the rest of his experience.

He crept down the aisle, and realized he was kicking up dust as he walked. The whole place was covered in a thick layer of dry grime, and within a few steps he was choking on it. He walked down to the stage and then turned, shielding his eyes from the spotlight and scanning the seats, searching for her. She was sitting three rows from the very top, under the balcony, bent



over with her head in her lap.

He didn't go near her. He stayed down near the stage and gave her some time, looking around. There were four doors he could see: The ibex leading back to the surgery, a fly, a jellyfish, and one at the very back marked with a traditional glowing EXIT sign. He stared at the exit for a moment; it was unusual, but they'd seen the occasional change in the door patterns before and it hadn't meant anything, really. And ultimately, all it meant here was that they had three choices—three *obvious* choices—of rooms they hadn't been to before.

Marks stared at the sign and wondered if it was really that easy, or if they were supposed to think it was that easy, or if they were supposed to ignore it because it was *too* easy. His head swam, and he decided to look for the chess pieces instead. A Queen, if they were on the right path.

He eyed the rows and rows of seats and felt tired. A small wooden carving could be anywhere in a room like this—and it seemed like the Black House, as he'd come to think of it, was cheating more as they got further along the path, hiding the clues more thoroughly, in less obvious ways. With a sigh, he started searching, choosing the seat on the aisle in the first row and checking under it, putting his fingers into the hinges, pressing down on the cushion.

Then he moved on to the next seat in the row.

He was on the fifth row when Dee stood up, scrubbed her face, and began searching her own seat. They worked in silence, then, quietly moving from spot to spot. Every noise they made was captured and augmented by the acoustics of the space, and yet the

air had an insulated quality to it, as if they were sealed inside something. As they worked more and more dust filled the air, hanging in it and scratching their throats and making them cough. They could hear each other's breaths and grunts as they worked over the low rumble of the Collapse.

They moved on to the next bank of seats. Marks took off his jacket, sweat pouring, the dust getting caked onto him. His mouth was dry and he felt giddy and lightheaded. When his hand brushed something on the floor under a seat in the fifteenth row, he almost moved on to the next seat mechanically before his sluggish brain kicked in and stopped him.

He knelt on the dusty floor and leaned down, pushing his hand under the seat. Just as his hand closed around the small carving, he heard Dee gasp.

"Found it!" she shouted.

He stared at the tiny wooden carving, vaguely feminine, the tiny crown just a few pointed ridges on the head. He stood up and turned to look over at Dee, who stood holding something aloft in her hand. He raised his own in response, and for a moment they just stared at each other. Slowly, they walked down the aisles and met in front of the stage again, holding up the carvings they'd found.

"King," Marks said.

"Queen."

They traded the pieces, fondling them in their hands, and then handed them back again.

"What's *that* mean?" Dee asked. She sounded exhausted.

Marks shook his head. "Hell if I know." He pushed his damp hair out of his face. "This place is messing with us again, right? Trying to stick with its own rules, but in a way that makes us doubt what we're doing. So, following that, we're on the right track and this is just the last room on it. This is where we're supposed to be."

Dee looked around. "Shit, of course it would be some creepy empty theater. I feel like there's ghosts in all those seats, watchin' us."

Marks turned and set the Queen on the edge of the stage. "So I guess we still have to figure out what our next move is."

Dee nodded, setting the King next to the Queen with careful attention, an almost gentle movement of her hand. She stared at the pair. "So, where do we go?"

Marks looked back at the doors. "Jellyfish. Exit. Fly. One of these things is not like the others."

"Maybe on purpose," Dee said. "What about backstage?"

Marks blinked, then turned to look at the stage again. A tattered red curtain hung along the back, and there were, of course, left and right exits that led behind it. "Well, shit," he said. "Let's take a look."

They walked to the side of the stage and found a set of sagging old plywood steps that creaked and groaned under them as they climbed them. The grinding, snapping noise of the Collapse was louder, Marks, thought, and the constant vibration under his feet was palpable even when he wasn't concentrating on it. Whether it was an illusion or not, whether it was

designed to instill panic in them and keep them moving or if it was the real end of everything that was and had been their world, it was becoming too loud to ignore.

On stage they kicked up huge new clouds of dust, walking directly to the right side of the stage and ducking behind the curtain. To their disappointment, however, all they found was a blank wall, with just a narrow channel between the curtain and the wall to walk down to the other side. When they emerged back onto the stage, Marks mused on the essentially dramatic nature of the Black House: It was all sets, all props, all bullshit. It had taken pieces of their subconscious and fashioned them into a place that seemed real but was all just fakery.

They wandered over to the instruments, covered in a thick line of dust. Dee reached out and touched one of the violins, and a string snapped with a loud snap. She snatched her hand away and thrust it into her mouth, stepping back with a grunt.

Marks didn't try to touch anything, but he walked over to the music stands and leaned in to examine the sheet music. He paused, then leaned closer and blew the layer of dust off, squinting. He stared at the music for a long time; it was actually not musical notation. It was something called tablature, and he was suddenly aware that he understood this because he once played guitar, as a hobby. Tablature was a simplified system of notation, and he could read it perfectly well.

After a moment he straightened up, and studied the hall around them.

"Come on," he said. "I know which way to go."

He leaned forward and slid the first sheet from the nearest stand and held it in his hand, studying it.

Dee frowned. "What door? How do you know?"

He continued to stare at the music for a few moments, and when he turned to look at her, she was startled to see his eyes shining with sudden tears.

"The Exit," he said with a horrible, warped smile. "Of course. So obvious you doubt yourself."

"How do you know?" she repeated.

He shrugged, gesturing at the sheet music and turning towards the steps. "Because I know this song."

## 37. An Eerie Room

They both stumbled with a shout as they entered; the door was a few feet above the floor. Dee managed a semi-graceful roll but Marks landed hard and twisted an ankle. He cried out in pain and then lay on the floor, breathing and rubbing his foot. He was in no rush to move, because they'd entered an eerie room that was almost blinding, made from a clean white stone with no visible source of light. Marks felt immediately uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't quite articulate.

There was a slight hum in the air, an almost-imperceptible noise separate and distinct from the distant sound of collapse that still hunted them. It got under his skin and made him want to leave as quickly as possible. The walls and floor were of the same stone, a rough limestone-type rock that was dusty and crumbling, white and dry. The floor was partially covered by a white rug which was embroidered with various scenes of battle, all in shades of off-white, white on white—difficult to make out. The walls were hung with similar tapestries, although it was hard to notice at first.

There were three doors leading out of the room, but all three were several feet above the floor. Marks got to his feet with a wince and limped over to the north side and stood in front of the door there, sporting a difficult-to-see relief of a fly, and the threshold of the door was level with his neck. He turned to look at the door to the East they'd just come through; it was set even higher, and sported the camel that indicated it led back to the concert hall. He twisted around; in the corner between them was the third door, even further off the floor, with

a carving of a goat. There were dark smudges along the threshold, as if something had been dragged over it. Getting up and through any of the doors would take effort.

His eyes hurt from all the white, and the small hairs along his body were raised as the humming got louder and deeper. As he turned to look at Dee, the hum suddenly increased in pitch, turning into an alarming whine, and with a rumble of hidden machinery, the floor lurched, slowly beginning to rise in jerky increments.

“Marks!” Dee shouted.

He spun, judging the nearest door while reaching blindly behind him for her hand. A trap, then—he’d been wrong, and the Black House had used his sunken memories against him. When he felt her hand slip into his he started for the door that would lead them back to the hall. Thinking of the crunching, collapsing noise underneath the mechanical whine of the room, he hoped there was still a hall to return to.

Suddenly, the noise stopped.

They froze, looking around. The floor, he realized, had risen several feet, bringing the fly door to the proper level, while the other two remained too high off the floor for them to reach.

“Well,” he said, but before he could speak another word, the noise began again, the floor lurched and began rising again, quickly snapping up so that the first door was cut in half by the floor and the second door was at the proper level.

“Don’t move,” Dee whispered. A few seconds later, the floor adjusted upwards again, bringing the final door

to the proper height, and then almost immediately churned downward again, returning to the initial position when all three doors were too high off the floor.

A moment later, the cycle began again.

“I really, really, *fucking* hate this place,” Dee said in a dull, defeated tone.

“Wait,” Marks said, looking around, counting. When he hit a count of eight, the process began again and went through the same pattern while he and Dee stood in the middle of the room fighting for balance. The floor lurched to bring the first door into sync, pause for a few seconds, and then rose up again, and again, and then reset.

“We’ll have to be fast,” he said in the brief pause before it started over. “If we’re slow we could be caught when the floor rises and ... ”

“Snapped in half?” Dee asked with a tired smile.

Marks smiled back just as faintly. “Yes,” he said. Then he thought of Dennis and sobered: Dying here was no longer a remote possibility. “Yes,” he repeated. He studied the doors as the floor started upwards again. “We’ll have to be fast.”

“First we have to pick a door.”

He nodded. “Only one choice: Goat.”

“Why *goat*?”

“The song,” he said. “It’s from my memories. I used to play it on guitar, as a joke—it’s a fucking *terrible* song. But I remember the chords. The first chord of the song is an E chord. We followed the *exit* sign to get here. The next chord is a G. So, goat.” He shook his



head. "This place plays by rules, in its way. It used your chess stuff to mark the route here, and it's using my song to mark the route *out*. It's literally been whispering the route to me since I got here."

The floor settled into its brief moment at the top. "All right, goat it is."

Marks nodded as they headed back down again. "But *fast*."

Dee nodded. "So, we time it. When we hit bottom, start counting. Then when it stops at the goat door, *I'll* start counting. Then we'll know how fast we gotta move."

"Unless the house cheats."

That shut them up while the floor settled, paused, and then began shuddering upwards again. Marks started counting.

"One Mississippi, two Mississippi ..."

At five, the floor was level with the door and stopped moving. Dee started counting, and got to two before the floor started moving up.

"Two seconds," Marks said glumly. "That's plenty of time, right?"

"We going together or one by one?"

"Together," he said. "I'd be worried about being separated. I'd be worried one of us goes through and the floor stops moving. Or, you know, that you go through and the whole goddamn place ceases to exist behind you. Or you go through and the next room is filled with bees, or fire."

“Fire,” Dee said solemnly. “Burn me before bees.”

“Now you let the place know you hate bees, so it’s gonna be bees.”

“Shit.”

They looked at each other and started laughing as they were headed back down; Marks wasn’t certain if this was cathartic or simple insanity, if they were done being horrified and intimidated or if they’d simply lost all sense, if he really thought there *was* a way out or not. All he knew was that he didn’t want to stay in this eerie, white room any longer, and whatever they found behind the Goat Door, he would welcome it as a step towards something, even if that something was whatever was causing the crunching noise that had been following them.

As the floor settled into its lowest position, they stepped over to stand just below the door with the carving of a placid goat and faced the wall. As the floor began to rise, they braced themselves, ready to move.

“What’s the song?” Dee suddenly shouted.

“What?”

“The song! What song are we following?”

Marks didn’t answer. He didn’t know the name of it, couldn’t really remember the lyrics. he only had the chords, and even those were rudimentary, simplified.

He saw Agnes again. She was staring at him, and as he imagined her he could hear the song and he could smell her perfume, but nothing else came to him, aside from a shivering feeling of dread.

The floor settled to a stop, and the Goat Door was

right in front of them. Dee surged forward, turning the knob and pushing the door in, and as she dived forward a memory bloomed inside him. Froze him in place. Agnes' face, but bloated, somehow, and pale, drained. Lying, he realized, on the same slab that they'd found Dennis on, dead, bled dry.

And he'd been there. In the Surgery, looking down at her.

*"Marks!"*

He snapped back to reality just as the floor began to shudder back into motion. Covered in a sudden cold sweat, he dived forward, throwing himself through the door. His feet cleared the opening just as the floor shot upwards, closing off the doorway and leaving him rolling on the floor, covered in the gritty dust of the white stones.

"Marks!" Dee knelt down next to him. She put her hands on his shoulders and he stopped moving, staring up at her without any sign that he saw her. "Are you crying? What is it?"

For a moment he just stared at her. Then he sat up, dragged the sleeve of his jacket across his eyes, and shook himself. "Come on," he said gruffly, climbing unsteadily to his feet. Dee watched him walk down the usual unfinished hallway and thought he looked suddenly frail, somehow less than he'd been just a few moments before.

"Marks?" she said, following. But he said nothing. Just kept walking.

## 38. The Garden

He stood in the midst of the garden, staring at the noose tied to the large oak tree, and remembered.

It came to him as a series of images, at first, disconnected, random. He saw her: Agnes. He saw her sitting in a coffee shop, a diner, sipping coffee, worried and unhappy. He saw her staring at him, studying, her hands wrapped in a paper napkin which she twisted and tore. She was both prettier and more haggard than the Agnes he'd met in the Black House.

He remembered her now: A client, long ago. Unhappy and frightened, plagued with a series of mysterious messages from her deceased husband. She'd found Marks the usual way, he realized: Asking around, desperate, until someone took her story seriously and suggested a name, a man who was known to look into the strange, the mysterious.

She'd gone missing herself, he recalled, but she'd left word for him: An address, a note saying she'd been told this was where her David was to be found. And he'd traveled there, dutiful, and he'd entered, and he'd found himself here, in the Black House. Except everything had been different. The foyer had been filled with hunting trophies. There had been no library that he recalled. And the doors had been marked with patterns of dots. But it was the same place. He listened to the approaching noise of collapse and realized it was also the approaching noise of reconstruction, the Black House unmaking itself and reconfiguring everything, choosing new puzzles, new decorations, new traps.

"I've been here before," he said out loud, hearing

Dee behind him.

He remembered her, Agnes, the real Agnes, asking him for a dollar, sitting at the diner. He remembered having just three dollars to his name, but he'd given her one. She was so sad, so pretty, he couldn't resist. And she'd gone to the jukebox and played the same song, over and over again. And he'd sat there and he'd thought she was beautiful.

"Marks?"

He stared at the noose. They were in a formal garden, surrounded by an incredibly high stone wall. It was a peaceful place filled with plants, but hadn't been tended for a long while. The stone benches were overgrown with mold, as if the ground were slowly reclaiming them. The walls were engulfed in ivy, making them seem part of the landscape instead of merely a container. The fountains were dry, and the little frescoes of fish diving in and out of the water were faded and dulled, their crimson paint washed away by time. Here and there a path traced a faint way through the overgrown grass and the exotic plants that thrived with less attention.

The tree was massive and ancient. The rope was old and didn't look like it would hold anyone's weight.

There were four vine-covered wooden gates in the walls; the vegetation was so thick on them the carvings were hard to make out, and on one the carving had been deliberately destroyed, blackened and chopped away. The remaining three displayed the familiar Newt and Octopus, and a Moth.

"Marks?" Dee repeated, stepping carefully forward.

“You okay?”

“I was here,” he repeated. “I forgot. I forget a lot of things. Something happened to me, and I forget a lot of things, now. I was here, though. So was she.”

Dee frowned. “Agnes?”

Marks nodded. “Just like your Dad. And I came here to find her, to rescue her. And I failed.”

He remembered her by the jukebox. Bright daylight, the diner half-full, the smell of coffee, the feeling of energy buzzing in the air. She played that same terrible, awful song four times in a row and just stood there, swaying slightly, beautiful. Sad. Terrified. And he knew he would try to help.

He remembered the phone message from her, the next day: An address, a lead, something she’d stumbled on in her husband’s effects.

Dee swallowed. “Did you find her like ... like we found Dad?”

Marks nodded again. He half-turned, and she was shocked at the look on his face: Bleak, desolate. “Yes,” he said. “Just like that. And the place has been trying to torture me with her, but my fucking *broken* brain screwed that up, and I didn’t see.” He hit himself in the temple, hard, and Dee took a step back in shock. He hit himself again, and she stepped forward.

“Mr. Marks!” she shouted. “Stop it!”

“I’m useless, kid,” he said slowly, breathing hard. “I’ve been kidding myself. I went up against something and it beat me down, it beat me down hard, and I’ve been scraping along and I thought I could survive and

maybe even help someone. Help you. But I can't even tell when I'm being tortured any more."

He dropped the backpack into the overgrown vegetation and began pulling off his jacket. he was staring up at the noose again.

"Take this," he said, holding the jacket back towards her without turning around. "There's money sewn into the lining. A lot of it. Well, not so much these days, but enough for you for a while, get your bearings, figure something out. Take it."

Dee stepped back again, wrapping her arms around herself. "No."

He shook the jacket. "If I'm right, the next chord is minor, so you take the Moth door. Then the next chord is an F, so look for the Fly again—I think it's important you do the rooms in the right order. No shortcuts. After that I'm not sure, to be honest. The next chord would be a D minor, but we've been to the Dining Room already. So it has to be something different. I think it's the end, the exit, but I can't be certain in this fucking place."

She shook her head again. "If you're not sure, come with me. Or I'll get lost. *You* know the song, I don't. *You've* been here before, right? I need you."

He shook his head. "I'm no good to anyone. I can't even remember when I get you killed."

He saw Agnes laid out on the slab, naked, with the same incisions as they'd found on Dennis. There'd been a different clue inside her; not a chess piece but a shot glass, an old school one with a stylized silhouette of a woman on it, heavy and substantial. He remembered

the sense of shame, the anger. he remembered shaking with it, his hands in fists as he stood there.

Dee stepped forward slowly. ignoring the jacket held out behind him, she reached up and took one of his hands in hers. It was rough, calloused, and cold. Hers was smooth and warm.

"Marks," she said, voice shaking. "Come on. You see, right? You *were* here. That means you got out, once. That means you can get *me* out."

He continued to stare at the noose. He knew it had been put there for him. One more twisted joke, one more blade in the ribs from a place that had been playing a series of black jokes against both him and Dee, toying with them like a spider spinning its meal into a cocoon.

Dee tightened her hand on his. "If you make me go on without you, I'll die in here."

He startled. "No—"

"I *will*," she said earnestly, not raising her voice. "You left me once and I was almost lost for good. If you bail on me now, I'll be in that room with ... with my Dad."

He closed his eyes. "All right. I'll get you out."

She hesitated, willing him to say something else, to promise something more. He didn't move or open his eyes or speak, so she dragged her arm across her nose and nodded. "Okay. Show me. Why the Moth?"

He sighed heavily. As she released his hand he twisted around and put his jacket back on. He knelt down and opened the backpack, extracting his battered notebook from it. As he flipped through the pages Dee



circled around him, placing herself between him and the tree, and crouched down.

“Newt heads to the maze,” Marks said. “Octopus goes to that old, dusty room with all the crap in it. The other door’s mark has been erased, so we don’t know where it goes. The next chord in the song is a G minor, but we’ve already been through the Goat door—that’s here. So I figure M for *minor*, which means Moth.”

Dee frowned. “But we don’t know where the unmarked door goes to. Maybe it’s the right way, and the Moth is a trick.”

Marks sighed and pushed his hand through his hair. He nodded. “Okay, that’s possible. But do we take that chance? We go through an unmarked door we don’t know where it sends us. Maybe back to the Waiting Room. Or someplace worse, someplace we can’t get out of no matter what we do. Or the maze of unfinished rooms. Honestly, Dee, if we get lost in that maze again we might die in there. We don’t have any food or water left. We need to get out of here *quick* or you’re going to die of dehydration.”

“*We* might die of dehydration.”

He nodded absently.

She turned and studied the doors. “We got to *know*, Marks. We’re so close. I can feel that shit, how close we are. Like this place is pissed off that we’re on the verge, you know? We can’t do something stupid now, pass up an opportunity. The way the mood of this place feels right now, it’s *dying* for us to screw up, and it’s gonna punish us if we do.” She looked back at him. “So I’m going to go and scout ahead.”

“No,” he said sharply. “That’s—”

“Look,” she said, putting her hands up. “Tie a rope around my waist. I go in, I see what’s up, and if I can’t get back, you pull me back.”

He shook his head again. “Sometimes there’s no physical connection between the rooms—you know that. For all we know you go through and the rope cuts in half. Besides,” he said heavily. “We don’t have any rope. Lost it a long time ago, in the elevator shaft.”

“I’ll go slow. And we got rope, don’t we?”

They both turned and looked up at the noose.

Marks’ smile was faint and awful. “Right. We got rope, all right.” He nodded. “Fine. But I go in with the rope, and you promise me if I can’t make it back, you keep on, go through the Moth.”

“Don’t work. I can’t pull you back, you’re too fucking heavy, old man. *You* can pull *me*, though, so if I’m in the middle of the air or something, you can drag me back.”

Marks studied her, then slowly smiled, shaking his head. “Goddamn smart-assed kid,” he said with a laugh. “All right, you’re so skinny and light, you climb on up and get the rope down.”

She snapped off a salute. “Yessir!”

## 39. The Xeric Room

“Come on!” he heard Dee shout, distant. “There’s a way back!”

Marks stepped into the hallway, gathering up rope as he walked. As he turned the sharp corner that all the connecting hallways between the places in the Black House had, he could feel heat building, like he was walking towards a huge furnace. When he turned the corner and stepped through the doorway, blistering heat almost knocked him down as he stepped into an impossible, wide-open space.

Sand, unbelievably, crunched under his feet. It was too large to be a room. It was a ... place? An environment? A *world*? None of the terms seemed to fit. Squinting and holding his hand over his eyes to shield them from the bright light that was almost exactly like sunlight, he could actually see a horizon in the distance. In each direction all he could see was blue sky and sand. Despite the glare of the light, there was no sun in the sky.

There *was* some sort of landmark: A cactus stood proudly not too far away. He was already sweating freely, and thinking about water again. He turned and found a door frame freestanding in the middle of the air, the door opened outward, a goat carved onto it. He leaned around and peered behind it, finding only sand, no evidence of the hallway that led to a garden just a few subjective feet away.

Dee was standing by the cactus, the rope still knotted tightly around her waist. She grinned at Marks and looked around. He walked over to her; the sand was

loose and fine and difficult to find purchase in, and he was breathing hard by the time he reached her.

“Look,” she said, pointing at the ground.

Drawn in the sand around the plant at the four corners of the compass were four symbols; the stick used to scratch them was discarded nearby. The symbols were a fish, a crown, a cross, and a key, each with an arrow pointing away into the distance—the fish pointed back at the freestanding, impossible door that led to the garden.

“Hmmp,” Marks said. The thin, dry air seemed to snatch his voice away with the constant, steady hot breeze.

A sound from above made him look up; small dark shapes were circling around them, high in the air.

“Vultures,” he said softly. “Come to see how long we can stand the baking.”

“Shit,” Dee said in a low voice, following his gaze.

“No footprints,” he added.

She looked down and around. “Shit,” she repeated.

“My guess,” he said after a moment, “is that we start walking, we die in here. Or are lost forever. Same thing, really.”

She nodded. “Moth, then.”

“Moth.”

Back in the garden, Marks looped the rope around his elbow and hand and then shoved it into the backpack. He pulled out the notebook and made some notes in it, bringing his messy map up to date with the new information, including some cryptic notes about the drawings in the sand he hoped would make sense someday. He wondered if everything there connected somehow to him or Dee, if only they thought about it. The stuff everywhere, the dictionaries, the carvings and drawings. He looked around, wondering if every single detail had been plucked from their brains, their memories.

He was thirsty. As he stuffed the notebook back into the backpack, he knew that if he was wrong about the song being the key, if he was wrong about the insane logic of the place, they would both die in here, absorbed by it. He could hear and feel the collapse of the place, the grinding up of rooms behind them as if by enormous teeth, and corrected himself: It sounded very much as if they would die some sort of horrible, painful death if they stayed there. There was little choice but to keep moving. He had the idea that as long as they were on the right path, as long as they were heading towards the exit, the path couldn't collapse. Couldn't be ground up to be remade into the next version.

He didn't have any proof, or reason why this had to be. It was all faith. He believed he understood the Black House, its rules, its purpose. If he didn't, it didn't matter.

"What's the next chord again?" Dee asked. "After the minor one, I mean."

"F," he said, slinging the backpack onto his shoulder

and standing up.

She nodded. “Shit, Marks, there was a fish in that desert!”

Marks nodded. “True. But it pointed back here. I think it was making sure we went in the right direction. And there was a Fly in the concert hall.”

“Yeah, if this place plays by *rules*, which we’ve seen, like, *zero* evidence for,” she said. When she looked back at him, he thought she looked tired and dirty. She pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. “We gotta be close,” she said, nodding firmly. “We’re almost through.”

He nodded back without enthusiasm, his mouth dry and thick, his stomach rumbling. “Ready?”

“Ready eddy.”

He smiled faintly, and they walked over to the door with the moth carved on it. The old door was soft and rotten, the iron hinges rusted, and it was difficult to open. He managed to get it open far enough for them to slip through—her, easily, him with a panic moment when he appeared to be wedged. Then the usual twisting hallway, the usual second door. He pushed it open and found darkness; the noise of collapse, the tearing, grinding noise, was much louder, as if it was right there in the room.

He hesitated a moment. He wondered if that was what the grinding noise left behind: Darkness, nothingness, void. Thinking there was no other choice, he stepped through, and fell a short distance, landing awkwardly. A moment later he heard Dee land next to him with more grace, and suddenly there was light, soft

and yellow.

There was still the slightest scent of peppermint perfume in the air.

He looked around. “Fuck me.”

It was a simple room with plaster walls that had been painted a garish shade of red. The floor was worn and scratched hardwood. There was no furniture.

Except for the birdcage in one corner, the large black bird staring at them, eyes shining.

“*Mawk*, good to see you *awk!*”

Dee sat down on the floor. “Oh my god,” she said dully. “We got fucked.”

“*Mawk*, set me free, set me free, *awk!*”

Marks felt tears in the back of his throat. He was exhausted. So tired, and here they were in a room they’d already been to, meaning he was either totally wrong about the path out, or they’d simply made a wrong turn, chosen the wrong door. He remembered the door that had led them here before; it had a bird carving on it—a Myna Bird, he now realized. It had been *literal*. He didn’t know what it meant. He didn’t *care* any more. Maybe they should have stayed in the desert. Maybe *that* had been the trick, making them afraid to wander the searing sands, scaring them off the correct trail.

“What do we do now?”

Marks closed his eyes. The doors were tiger, hippo, and ibex. The way back to the garden had vanished. They’d gone through the hippo door and into the Hall of Mirrors. They’d been through the Ibex door from

another route and been in the surgery. That left the tiger door, but he stared at it glumly. He had no faith that it meant anything. It was just another door. And they were never getting out.

The noise was getting louder, slowly approaching. He wondered if there was even a maze left to backtrack through. He thought, with the notebook, that he could retrace their steps, but he wondered if the rooms they'd been in were still there, or if most of the maze had been destroyed behind them. He wondered if it even mattered, if he'd even been correct in thinking there were patterns to perceive.

*"Mawk! Set me free! Set me free! Way out!"*

"Shut up, bird," Dee whispered.

Marks stood up and walked over to the cage. It looked like someone had recently changed out the newspapers lining the bottom and the water; it seemed clearer and less spoiled than before. He remembered Agnes saying something about minions; perhaps that hadn't been a lie. Perhaps there *were* hidden beings, re-shaping the place, cleaning it, maintaining it—tearing it apart.

He looked up, listening to the noise, picturing giants destroying everything, re-building, re-arranging.

*"Awk!"* the bird screeched. *"Way out! Set me free!"*

Marks bent down again and looked at the bird. It stared back at him steadily, shifting its weight subtly on the wooden dowl it perched on.

"Set you free," he said quietly.

The bird ducked its head, as if nodding assent.



“I guess we go Tiger?” Dee said, standing up. She sounded defeated, too. Tired. She sounded like she was making the suggestion for no particular reason. As if she had no expectation, but had decided she couldn’t just sit there and do nothing. “Nothing else to do, right? At least it’s a new room. Maybe we’ll get a hint as to where we went wrong.”

Marks continued to stare at the bird. “Did we?”

Dee snorted. “We doubled back on ourselves. You said M for *minor* but we got M for *myna* and we’re back in this stupid, useless room.”

Mark nodded. “Maybe we set the bird free.”

Dee stepped over to him and leaned in to peer at the bird as well. It looked at her, then back at Marks. “You serious?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Why not? It keeps saying it knows the way out. It wants to be set free. The next chord would be an F. Maybe it’s F for *free*.”

Dee shook her head. “That means we could of gotten out way back when we were here with ... with *her*. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure it does. It’s a trick. It’s a game. The place messing with us.” He looked at her. “Or it needs to happen in a specific order, like opening a safe—a combination. What’s to lose? We set it free. See what happens.” He looked at the bird again. “Doesn’t it look *smart*? Like it understands?”

The bird ducked its head.

Dee frowned. “That *did* almost look like a nod.”

The bird ducked again. She cocked her head. “We set

you free, you show us the way, huh, Little Man?”

The bird ducked. “*Awk!* Way out!”

Marks nodded. He reached out and took hold of the tiny door to the cage, a door that seemed far too small for the bird—too small for it to have even gotten *into* the cage in the first place. He took a breath and looked at the Bird; it was staring at him intently, its wings moving in subtle rolling motions, as if it was preparing itself for exertion.

He pulled the door open.

For a moment, the bird just stared at the opening. Marks and Dee held their breath. The shattering noise went on, crunching and groaning.

And then the bird moved. It fluttered its wings. And started to grow. It swelled up, quickly filling the cage and then bursting out of it, sending Marks and Dee scampering to escape an explosion of shrapnel. The bird took flight, making one circuit of the room as it grew and grew. When it returned to hover over them, flapping its wings, it was as large as Dee. At its new size, it was much more frightening. Even worse was the intelligent way it peered down at them.

“Well, fuck me,” Marks whispered in the sudden, ominous silence.

“Fuck us *both*,” Dee added.

The bird ducked its head. Then it reared up and pecked at Marks.

## 40. The Myna Bird Room

Marks and Dee each threw themselves out of the way. The suddenly giant bird's beak crashed down on the floor, sending spidery cracks in every direction.

"Dee!" Marks shouted, grabbing hold of her arm and pulling her close.

"Watch out!" she shouted.

*"Mawk! Show you the way!"* the bird bellowed, fluffing its suddenly immense wings and puffing out its chest. Marks thought it didn't look like a bird any more. It looked like something else entirely, a demon, a devil. The feathers on the back of its head had stiffened and bristled, giving it a dark crown. It loomed over them, its face more expressive than Marks thought possible, collapsing into a mask of anger and disapproval.

"Here it comes!" Dee screamed.

The bird lunged at them. Marks picked Dee up bodily and twisted away. He was knocked off his feet as the beak slammed into the floor where she'd been. They both fell into a heap on the floor. He turned his head. The bird was struggling, making a choking noise as it tried to extract its beak from the floor, where it had become securely wedged.

He looked at Dee.

"We gotta make a run for it!" she shouted, pointing at the doors.

He nodded. "Tiger!"

They ran. Marks twisted around every few steps to ensure Dee was right behind him, which offered him an

unfortunate view of the giant bird, wings spread, beak open, and eyes blazing as it chased after them, enormous beak open.

*Must go faster*, he thought stupidly. Just as they reached the door with the tiger carving, he turned to check on Dee and saw the bird lunging forward. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun them away, stumbling to his knees and pushing her roughly as he fell. The bird smacked into the door and shattered it with a noise like an explosion.

He grabbed at Dee and pulled her up. She felt light, like she didn't weigh anything. Her face was wide and frightened—a direct reflection, he was certain, of his own. After seeing her father in the Incision Room, he thought, things had changed: Now he knew they could—both—die in this place. The idea of being impaled by a giant bird suddenly didn't seem impossible. The idea of *Dee* dying in this place didn't seem impossible, and a cold vein of fear had set up permanently in his belly. *He'd* done this. *He'd* brought her into this.

The bird was stuck again, though, flapping its giant wings as it tried to extricate itself from the ruined door. Marks grabbed Dee's hand again.

"Viper!" he hissed. "Hurry!"

They ran for it as the bird tore the Tiger door off its hinges, the door still embedded over its beak. It thrashed this way and that, trying to shake it off, strangled, choked-on squawking noises bubbling from its chest. As they reached the Viper door, it brought its beak down hard on the floor, making the boards jump and knocking them off balance as the Tiger door shattered and fell away. Marks stumbled backwards and

landed on his ass, dragging Dee down with him.

*"Fuck!"* he shouted in frustration, a sharp lance of pain driving up through his back. Dee sprang back off him, staring and backing towards the Viper door.

*"Come on!"* she shouted. *"Come on!"*

He lumbered up, back snarling in protest, and staggered after her. Dee scurried nimbly forward and pulled the door open. Marks could feel the floor shaking as the bird chased him, could see the terror in Dee's eyes. He waved at her.

*"Go!"* he shouted. *"I'm right behind you!"*

She darted inside. He was just a step behind, breathing hard and sweating freely. He ducked in through the doorway, into the familiar rough hallway, and was just beyond reach when the bird slammed its head into the doorway, making the framing groan and crack. It screeched, beak open far wider than should have been possible, and he backed away from it as rapidly as he could, eyes locked on it, certain it would tear itself loose, shrink down, pass through the wall—something. That it would just keep coming and coming.

It didn't. It screeched again, but the sound grew muffled as he turned the usual corner in the hallway. He spun and chased after Dee, who was just opening the next door. She turned and watched him urgently as he limped after her. She slammed the door shut as he passed through, and the door vanished, as if absorbed by the wall.

For a moment they both stood there, panting, staring at the unbroken plaster.

Marks turned and blinked in the sudden silence,

shivered in the sudden cold of crank air. They were in a small, modern room with a movie screen at one end and a few folding chairs behind a simple table in the middle. The blasting air conditioning was loud, and he could feel the breeze of it. He thought it must be about thirty degrees. He wrapped his arms around himself and walked over to the table.

There was a box of half-eaten donuts on it, which he picked up and sniffed at, then handed over to Dee. She stared dully at the donuts, knowing they needed some kind of food but sick with adrenaline and terror. There were also several congealed cups of coffee on the table, mold growing on them. There was also a film canister, labeled *Psycho, Hitchcock, 100 mins.*

He looked up. There was just one door in the room. It had a small blue and white sign on it, showing a simple icon of a woman on one side of a dividing line, and an icon of a man on the other.

“Restrooms,” he murmured softly.

“Sure,” he heard Dee say. “Why not.”

In the crisp silence—the sort of silence that hinted at insulation in the walls, muffled and damped—he strained to hear the bird’s tortured squawking, but couldn’t. Slowly, he let the tension drain out of him. The door had disappeared behind them, so while the bird might still be out there, searching, for the moment he thought they were safe.

He shrugged off his backpack and sat down in one of the folding chairs, half expecting it to dissolve beneath him and dump him onto the floor. He pulled out the notebook, which looked like it was decades old, torn

and stained. He opened it to his most recent map and made further notes, adding the new room, and sketching a tiny danger sign next to the Myna Bird's room. Then he stood up, put the notebook back, and held the bag open for Dee to stuff the box of stale pastries into it. He looked around one more time, hopefully, looking for water, but there was none.

"All right," he said, tiredly. "Only one door, so we might as well."

"Are we still on track?" Dee said. "I feel like doubling back on the bird room was a mistake, and now we sort of panic-chose this one."

Marks sighed. He thought of the bird. *Mawk, way out, I know, set me free!* He thought of how it had destroyed the Tiger door. He pictured the crown of feathers over its head. "We can't know," he said. "Until we make a few more moves. We need to see where this leads. Nothing for it."

She nodded. "I'm fucking *tired*, Mr. Marks."

He put his hand on her shoulder, feeling awkward. "I know. Me too. Come—"

The lights went down and a hidden projector revved up, filling the screen with a test pattern, grays and whites and nonsensical images followed by an old-fashioned countdown, starting from five. They turned and stared at the screen, each of them thinking the exact same thing in the exact same words: *what fresh piece of bullshit is this?*

The countdown made it to two before the film jammed and melted. A moment later the lights came back up. They stood for a moment, waiting, but the

room had returned to its static, still state. Wordlessly, they both walked to the restroom door. It had no lock or handle, but swung inward. Marks held it open and Dee slipped past.



## 41. The Restroom

The linking hallway, unfinished and twisting, went on far longer than the others. Marks slowly realized it was shrinking as they advanced, getting smaller and smaller. After about a hundred feet, he was on all fours, crawling along what had become an air duct, the drywall giving way to thin galvanized steel that burped and warped under them, giving every impression that they were suspended in the air over a large space.

Just when he wondered if he would be able to continue forward or if the duct was going to narrow too much for his shoulders, he came across a ventilation grate. He stopped so suddenly Dee bumped into him from behind.

“Ack,” she whispered. “Old man butt.”

He peered down through the slats of the vent. There was a space below, lit by a flickering white light that buzzed and clicked. He could see what looked like tile work.

He twisted around painfully and looked at her. “We can go down, or we can go on.”

She took a deep breath and wiped sweat from her face, leaving behind a dark blur of dirt. “No clues, huh? No more music, no more chess?”

He shook his head. “If there are, I’m missing them. It’s down, or forward.”

She nodded, then froze. “Wait—do you hear that?”

Marks shook his head. She held up a hand and they both sat frozen for a moment in the humid darkness.

The roar of the maze tearing itself apart was back—muffled, although the duct shivered and shook with it, a bass line running under their hands and knees, driving them forward. Slowly, he became aware of a familiar tinkling noise, and he smiled.

“Water,” he said.

She scrambled back a foot or two as he stretched out and began kicking at the vent with the heel of one foot. He found himself struggling for breath, the duct seeming intolerable hot, and he worked as hard as he could. The fourth impact sent the vent tumbling down to the floor below, and he grinned, holding out his arms. Dee crawled forward and lowered her legs through the hole, and Marks steadied her and slowly lowered her down through it. When he had extended himself as far as possible, he took a deep, ragged breath.

“Gonna drop you!”

“Okay!”

He let go, and heard her land effortlessly on the floor below. He scrambled to follow as quickly as possible, dropping down in a rush and landing awkwardly, turning his ankle slightly, making him wince and dance for balance. His ankle and back both joined in a symphony of pain for a moment.

It was a bathroom all right, a public restroom, done in gleaming white tile. It smelled strongly of cleaning products. The lights were bright white fluorescents that buzzed and hummed ominously. They could hear water dripping, somewhere. He could feel the collapse in the floor. The lights flickered in time with the enormous noise, making it that much harder to think.

There were three white urinals against the wall to their left, a row of four sinks with bright chrome fixtures set under a large, smudged mirror to their left, and two wastepaper baskets. One of the faucets was running, filling the room with a distinctly damp sound.

There were four stalls across from the sinks, doors closed. Each stall door had a Roman Numeral written on it in what appeared to be black marker: X, V, III, C.

The whole room was painfully white, even the grout between the tiles. It hurt his eyes. The whole place looked like it had been recently scrubbed clean by a team of desperate professionals. He imagined he could eat out of the urinals, but decided not to say so.

“Marks,” Dee said.

He turned and followed her arm to a section of the mirror where someone had written several sentences in the same black marker:

*I wonder at a holy mystery*

*I ponder the terror of ghosts*

*I am fonder by far of agony*

*the room floods and you are lost*

The phrases were each in wildly different handwriting, as if written by different people.

Marks nodded. “Well, that’s goddamn disturbing. Water first,” he said, and Dee nodded back. They crossed to the sinks and opened up a second faucet. Clear water came rushing out, and they each thrust their heads into the basins to drink. For a few moments it was just the sound of water, and then Marks straightened up, shrugged off his backpack, extracted a

plastic bottle and held it under the stream while Dee straightened up and wiped her mouth.

“It was getting a little dry, huh?” he asked.

“A little dry,” she said, smiling a little.

He capped the bottle, took another long drink at the faucet, and then turned to look around, water dripping from the whiskers on his chin. He reached up and scratched at them, surprised; he didn't think they'd been inside for so long.

Dee twisted the faucet handle, but the stream of water wouldn't stop. The sink wasn't draining, either, and was rapidly filling up. She glanced at Marks and saw him having the same struggle. As she did so, the other two sinks suddenly switched on, water pouring and filling their basins.

The noise of the collapse seemed suddenly louder, and the whole room shook as if an earthquake was going on.

Marks looked at her. Then he pointed at the poem written on the mirror. “The room floods and you are lost!” he shouted. “I guess that's to be taken literally. No exit doors,” he said, looking around. “And the vent's too high to get back up to!”

Dee nodded. Marks thought she was sadly calm, inured to the constant betrayals and struggle of this place, and he felt an enormous weight of blame. “How much you wanna bet that vent is closed somehow, we float up there? But we got four doors.”

Marks nodded, dropping the bottle back into the backpack. He considered the niceness of the trap: They'd been thirsty, in fact dying of thirst, and now they

had water—too much of it.

He strolled towards the stalls. He walked up to each and put his hand on them, palm flat, and then dropped down to look under the doors. He paused; each stall was horrifying in a different way. X was blood-splattered, gore dripping down the interior walls; the floor in V was covered in a thick pelt of ash, ghostly bones peeking through; III's floor undulated, a million insectoid bodies crawling over each other; C looked clean, but a foul smell drifted under the door, rot and char and something else that burned his nose.

He sat back. "Huh," he said out loud.

"Marks."

Dee was standing over one of the wastepaper baskets. He stood up and joined her. Sitting at the bottom of the basket was a single sheet of paper, with text written on it in the same marker.

ALERT

YOU ONLY

GET TO

OPEN

ONE

"Well," Dee said, sounding tired. "That's fucking ominous."

Marks nodded. He knew how she felt, he thought; it was numbing, the endlessness of the Black House. Every room seemed so promising, every revelation, every new door. And then you found yourself once again pondering a riddle and wondering if you weren't

really just spinning wheels. It was entirely possible, he reminded himself, that all of these tantalizing clues that seemed to indicate a route, a purpose, might have been part of the trap, part of the torture.

As he thought the word *torture*, water began overspilling the sinks and running onto the floor. The room shook again, a distant explosion spiking the noise level.

He looked at the stalls and considered what he'd seen through the gaps. He nodded. "I believe it," he said, imagining Agnes sweeping through here and tearing the sign down in anger, another prank by her "minions," and tossing it into the garbage. "I actually think if we open the wrong one, we're in for a world of pain."

Dee stepped over to stand next to him, crossing her arms and wearily studying the stall doors.

"Ten, five, three, and ... what's 'C' stand for?"

"Hundred," Marks said.

"Ten, five, three, hundred. Mean shit to you?"

Marks shook his head. "Not right off. Can't spell anything with them. Why Roman numerals? Why numbers at all?" He turned and leaned down for a drink, the water pooling in a shallow layer on the floor.

Dee bent down and retrieved the paper from the wastepaper basket, smoothing it out and studying it. "I keep thinking there's a hint here, right? Look how it's written, like a poem." She stared down at the page. "Maybe there's something about the letters. Letters on the doors, letters in the note ... there are no Cs, Is, Vs or Xs."

Marks straightened up, wiping his chin and staring at the mirror. “You know what? No Xs or Vs in the poem, either.” He leaned forward and squinted. “No Cs, either.”

Dee turned and looked. “Three Is, though.”

They both turned to look at the stalls.

“Seems too easy,” Dee said.

“Who says it has to be hard? Takes brains to make a good puzzle. Not everyone has brains.”

“*We* got brains?”

“Definitely fucking *not*,” Marks said, “considering we got trapped in *here*.” He walked over to the stall with the numeral III on it. He put his hand on it and closed his eyes. “Had to be bugs. *Had* to be, huh?”

“You don’t like bugs?”

Marks nodded. “I was in a shithole apartment. This was a few years ago, still sliding, still a part of the world. Not yet at bottom. At night I could hear some critter in the walls—a rat, a squirrel, who knows. Scratch scratch scratch, all night. Drove me crazy. Then one day, no more scratching, I won the lottery. I got really lit that night, celebrating. And then the flies came. The fucking *flies*. A few at first, barely noticed them. Then more, and more. One morning I woke up, the room was thick with flies, a black wave of them. The damn animal had died in my wall.” He swallowed. “I had nowhere else to go. So I stayed. I stayed until the flies finally died off.”

“Jesus, Marks,” Dee said. “That’s *awful*.”

He nodded. “Just one of the many merry stops I

made on my way to the bottom.” He turned. “Look at those lines,” he said. “I think *that’s* our clue. Three Is. Roman numeral three. Bugs.”

She nodded again, and he felt it again: That weariness, that defeat. The girl had been abandoned, left to fend for herself, then lost inside this insanity engine. And she’d chased after her father only to be tortured with his death, finding him carved up and used as a prop—for what?

“All right,” she said, and they walked forward together, sloshing through a surprisingly deep pool of water; Marks suspected more was being pumped in from hidden places. Marks took a deep breath and angled his body to shield Dee as he pulled the stall door open.

The whole tiny space was crawling with insects, but they were all harmless. Revolting, perhaps, but nothing that stung or bit or infested the body—just thousands of legs and squirming, shiny bodies, gleaming dumb eyes. Instead of a toilet, there was a tunnel. It looked like it had been torn out of the wall, the edges rough and wriggling with bugs. He could see a rough-hewn tunnel heading into the wall for a few feet, then making what he now regarded as the usual right-hand turn that prevented him from seeing anything else.

“*Gross,*” Dee said emphatically, and Marks smiled.

“Come on,” he said. “Before we drown.”



## 42. The Yellow Room

The tunnel was damp, dark, and hot; it went on longer than most of the hallways so far, and Marks began to fear they'd made a terrible mistake. The noise got steadily louder, the vibration under their hands got more and more powerful, and it occurred to him they might be moving *towards* the approaching destruction of the place. When the door finally swam up from the darkness, he smiled in relief and pushed it forward eagerly, and they emerged into blinding light that made them both reflexively squint and shield their eyes.

It was a small room decorated entirely in yellow.

Monstrous sunflowers towered above them in yellow ceramic vases everywhere throughout the room, all of them vibrating and walking this way and that as the whole space shook; the sound of destruction was almost too loud to be shouted over. The flowers seemed freshly-cut. The air was thick with fragrance, making him cough, but he'd never actually smelled a sunflower before. He didn't know if they were really this overpoweringly sweet, or if the scent was being pumped in somehow, which wouldn't surprise him.

Aside from the vases, the room was filled with yellow cardboard boxes, all marked with a black stencil reading PHONE BOOKS. As they stood there, a handful of bugs that had attached themselves to them wriggled free, dropping to the floor and making their way to the vases, seeking new homes. Marks wondered briefly if they'd just introduced a destructive species to the room, if the next set of victims wouldn't find it decimated, all the plants eaten, the yellow turned brown and green from

rot. Assuming anything of the current maze survived.

A phone started ringing. It was distant, almost lost in the noise, but they could both just pick it out.

They both froze, looking at each other. Marks held up a hand for silence, unnecessarily, and began spinning around, trying to locate the source of the ringing. It was an old-fashioned ring, like an ancient landline. The only exit from the room seemed to be a winding staircase, disappearing into the floor and the ceiling. He stepped over to it and stood very still for a few moments, listening, but he couldn't tell where the ringing was coming from.

Just as suddenly, the ringing stopped. The noise of collapse seemed to get louder, and Marks could feel the floor shifting under his feet from the vibration. Dust sifted down from the ceiling onto them.

Dee walked over to a stack of the boxes. She noticed more stenciling on some of the boxes, reading THIS END UP. A quick survey showed that not every box had the extra instructions. She looked at Marks, and they shrugged at each other again, not needing to talk. She looked down and tore at one of the double-stenciled boxes, ripping the flaps up and digging down into it. She reached in and pulled out a stack of checkbooks. She recognized the blue safety paper. She squinted at them; there was no address or bank information.

She tossed one to Marks and bent to one of the boxes with just one stencil. She tore it open, but inside was only foam packing peanuts—yellow. She dumped out the box to show Marks, and thought they looked like fat, the fat that got sucked out of people on medical documentaries.

The distant phone began to ring again.

“This shit,” Dee shouted tiredly. “Is gettin’ weird!”

Marks nodded, eyes roaming the painfully yellow room. “Up or down, though, at least it’s not complicated.”

She pursed her lips. “Which makes me think it *is* complicated. And that we’re never getting out of here.”

Marks shook his head. “This goddamn place. It’s *perfect*, Dee, don’t you see? One way out. The other way, shit, I don’t know—but it won’t be good. And it all comes down to *chance*. We made it this far. Let’s say—for shits and giggles!—we’ve made the right choices, we’re on the path like I said. It *doesn’t* matter, because the path brings us to a fucking *roll of the dice*.” He laughed. “There are no clues. There’s no *puzzle*. We just flip the coin, up or down.” He kicked a box, hard, sending it flying, check books scattering everywhere. “This *goddamn* place.” He dragged a hand down his face. “I need a fucking *drink*.”

Dee studied him. “Dude, don’t fall apart on me *now*.”

He barked a laugh. “Why not? This seems like the *perfect* time to fall apart.”

She stared at him. “You promised you’d get me out. You *promised*.”

“Yeah, well—”

She stamped her foot, and for some reason the tiny gesture stopped him. “Okay,” she said, “the whole place is screwing with us. Falling apart behind us, driving us forward. Herding us. Sending people who look like ... who look like ... to fool us, to mess us up.

And now here we are and you know one way will trap us again and we can't know which one. But you *promised*."

Marks stared at her and was ashamed of himself. He'd seen things like this. His own life was ruined. Dee had a chance, still. She was an orphan and if her father's death couldn't be pinned on him, hers could, if he left her in the Black House. If he let it claim her the way it had claimed Agnes.

He looked down at his shoes. "All right, kid. You're right. Might as well see it all the way through."

She smiled falteringly. "Besides, Marks, maybe it *isn't* random. Maybe there's a clue, like the chess pieces, or something. Maybe we just haven't seen it."

He nodded without looking up. "Maybe."

She toed one of the boxes. "Like, why do some of these boxes say *this end up*? The ones that do say *phone books*, but they got *checkbooks* in 'em instead."

As she spoke, the phone stopped ringing again.

"I still can't tell if that's above us or below us," Marks said, slowly seeming to inflate, to animate.

"Probably just Agnes calling to call us names."

A ghostly smile flitted across his face. "Probably," he agreed.

"Checkbooks. Check books," Dee said, wandering around. "Check the books." She looked up at Marks. "Where else we see books in this dump?"

"The Library," Marks said. "Dictionaries!"

"Huh," she said. "That bedroom, the spare room—*Lost Horizon!*"

With a ear-splitting crack, one of the walls began to split, a chasm in the stone blinking into existence and immediately spidering into a complex pattern of slowly spreading lines. The floor seemed to tilt under them, the whole room shaking violently.

Above them, the spiral staircase suddenly jerked, as if twisting free from its moorings.

“Marks!” Dee screamed over the noise, shielding her eyes from the bright reflected light that seemed to have suddenly jumped from *intense* to *blinding*. She couldn’t see him—she couldn’t see anything, everything had become a bright yellow blur, the world shaking as if someone had taken hold of the room like a child holding a toy block, shaking it violently in their pudgy fist.

She felt his hand on her arm and she allowed him to pull her in. Vaguely, as if he were a mile away instead of right next to her, she heard him shout *time to go! Up or down!*

They were just barely ahead of the collapse, he thought. A few seconds, it felt like, and the whole place was coming down around them, crushing them, leaving them in a formless void, or being crunched up as it was all broken down to atoms and rebuilt—whatever it was, it meant they wouldn’t be around any more. And the thought of somehow becoming permanently part of this place, of his atoms being ground up and mixed in with the mortar and the fabric of the rooms created for the next unlucky person to wander into the Black House—it was intolerable.

*Up or down!* he shouted again, pulling at her. They had seconds. Chunks of the walls and ceiling were falling, and the floor was undulating in waves as if it

was made of liquid.

*Up!* she screamed, and he barely caught the word under the weight of the din. *We. Go. Up!*

He nodded and turned. Holding her close, he made his way to the stairs, staggering and rolling, trying to match his weight distribution to the new gravity he encountered with each step. A section of ceiling crashed into the floor directly in front of him, and he barely had time to consider how dead they would both be if he'd been moving just a little bit faster.

Kicking phone books out of the way, he pulled them up onto the stairs and began climbing.

It shook violently, trying to buck them off. After four steps upward, twisting around, the bottom of the stairs tore free from the floor, treads flying, and Marks doubled his efforts, trying to run up with just one hand to brace himself as the stairs swung this way and that. Dee threw her arms around his waist and squeezed, giving him back his second arm, and he began half-running, half-pulling himself up as the stairs dissolved behind and beneath him.

As the ceiling, ragged and pocked with missing chunks, drew near, the light began to fail.

*This is it*, Marks thought, sweating and breathing hard but, oddly, at peace. They'd given it their best shot, he thought. he could see the bolts holding the stairs in place jiggling and popping, and then he was up past the line of the ceiling. The stairs melted away beneath him, and with one final leap he threw himself up and to the side, praying there was a floor to land on.

## 43. The Zelkova Room

“Mr. Marks, I swear to god you are *unkillable!*”

Marks opened his eyes. He was covered in white dust. He was on the floor. He was holding Dee’s hand; she lay next to him, pancaked in dust. She was facedown, turned towards him, and their eyes met for a second. She squeezed his hand, and then they let go and sat up.

They were in the empty shell of a building. The floor was wide-plank, old-school subflooring, the walls were stripped to the ancient red brick and furring strips. The dust was everywhere, swimming through the air, settling in infinite waves. Wires hung limply from the rafters above, furred with spider webs. It was dark, and cold. There was no sign of the stairs or the opening they’d pulled themselves up through.

In the center of the room was a large, dilapidated chair; an ornate wooden throne, the arms carved into incredibly detailed designs, the headrest an explosion of fine woodwork that had once been painted. The remnants of red cushions clung to the back and the seat. At one point, freshly stained and rubbed with oil, it must have been quite a sight.

Agnes was seated in it, slumped down, her long legs crossed under her skirt.

Marks thought she looked beautiful and *finished*, as if whatever transformation she’d been undergoing was finally complete. She only resembled the woman he remembered in the vaguest of ways, like a copy of a copy, each successive run through the cosmic copy machine rendering her lines less distinct, her

edges softer, her legs longer.

Dee started coughing. The moment she did, he wanted to join in; his throat was suddenly dry and scratchy, filled with deep grooves and sand. He swallowed and struggled to his feet.

Standing, he could see there was something behind the chair: A small leafy tree, a miniature tree like a bonsai, growing out of the floorboards. It looked like a model of a tree: The thick, gnarled trunk, the delicate branches, the tiny leaves.

“Bravo, Mr. Marks,” Agnes said, miming applause. “It only took you two rounds, but you have succeeded at long last!” She leaned forward. “In the sense that you didn’t kill her this time.”

He looked around. A tiny flame of excitement bloomed; the place had the right dimensions, and looked normal, looked *real*, like an actual building. He pictured the place he’d stepped into with Dee. It matched up with a mental image of what it would look like gutted, torn out. “Why are you here?”

Agnes affected shock. “Why, to *congratulate* you, of course, Mr. Marks! And it is also only polite for your host and guide to see you out.” She lifted one elegant arm and indicated the door behind her. “There it is, the exit. Dearest Damnable Dee, please *do* go; there is much to do here and there is nothing worse than a lingering guest.”

He turned and looked at Dee, who stepped closer to him. After a moment he held out his hand, and she took it. “Worth a try, right?” he said, offering her a careful smile.



“Worth a try,” she said quietly. Then she frowned and turned to look at Agnes. “Marks, too, right?”

Agnes pouted, her face transforming into a mask of false sadness. “I’m injured,” she said. “This experience has hardened you, Delightful Dee, and made you cruel. *You* are free to go. You escaped the Black House before it collapsed, but now it must bloom again, it must be made ready for the next guest. You have my word, whatever that is worth, that you are *free to go*. Merrily Moribund Marks, however, has an *obligation* to remain.”

Marks looked down at his feet and his ruined shoes.

Dee reached up and grabbed his collar, trying to drag him down to her height. “Why? What does she mean?”

Agnes shrugged. “There are *rules*. That is the structure of the universe. Everything must obey rules, and this place is no exception.” She smiled, gorgeous, too many teeth, too white, too wide. “If it is any consolation, Mr. Marks, if you had been just a second or two *slower*, you *both* would have been crushed and trapped forever, as have thousands before you. So, *bravo* to you! BRAVO!”

“How many get out?” he asked, stalling for time. He looked at Dee. She peered up at him intensely, still clinging to his jacket.

“Not many. A few.” Agnes gestured again. “Go on, now, Dee. Don’t be like a beaten dog who refuses to leave out of pathetic loyalty.” She cocked her head at Marks and slowly settled again, smiling. “Ah, I see. You still do not fully remember her.”

He swallowed dust and stale air. “I remember enough.”

She winked. “But not *all* of it.” She sighed, prettily, and made a show of arranging her dress. “Did you love her? Did she love you? Did she trust you, as Dear Darling Dee does? You were a drunk, then, were you incompetent? Did you save yourself and let her rot?”

“Is she still in there?”

Agnes paused and looked at her lap. “You wish to know?” She looked up, impish. “Really? You will have the time to find out. Unencumbered by silly, empty-headed little girls like Delightful Dee. You will have nothing but *time* to seek the truth.”

He stared back at her for a few moments, then dropped his gaze. He pulled gently on Dee’s arm. “Go on,” he said.

She didn’t move for a moment, then let go of his jacket and took his hand in hers. “Don’t let go,” she whispered, and turned, pulling him after her.

The door looked right, too. He was surprised at how faded his memory of arriving at the place had become, but that was the way his memory worked, ever since his Lost Years, years spent in bars, drinking compulsively, obliterating days and weeks and months, all of it a blur. Nothing stuck, nothing stayed clear for long.

He turned and looked back at Agnes as Dee led him forward. “What happens to you?”

She smiled. He thought it was almost a sad smile. Almost.

“I will be here, of course, in a sense. I am *your* guide, Mr. Marks. You will leave and the Black House will reset, and I will still be here—but I will be different, in every way.”

“Do you remember?”

Her smile faded. “Some.”

“So we have something in common.”

For a moment she looked disturbed by this, the slight downturn of her perfect features implying a frown. Then she recovered, laughing, throwing her head back. Her laugh was musical.

“Do not fret, Mild Mannered Marks. Do not worry for *me*. We shall see each other again. You will forget. You will *forget*. We will try again.”

Dee dragged him towards the door.

He swallowed hard, still looking at Agnes. “How many times have I been here?”

Agnes shook her head and looked away, as if preoccupied with something on the far wall. Marks stood his ground for a few moments, then allowed himself to be pulled towards the door, turning, his face ashen.

The door opened. Easily, naturally, and the street was beyond it, as it had been. It was raining, and cold.

Dee paused and for a moment they stood framed in it, holding hands.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ve got a debt to pay.”

Dee nodded. “Don’t let go,” she said again, and stepped forward.

Marks didn’t move, but he found himself dragged forward as if greased. As Dee marched through the doorway, he slid behind her, pulled along in her gravity well.

Behind them, he heard the rustle of skirts. "What? *Mr. Marks! Mr. Marks you have an obligation! You have agreed to terms!*"

As Dee pulled him through the doorway, he could feel heat and hear noise building up behind him, and he closed his eyes as they were replaced by the cold and the damp and the feeling of open space, infinite and exploding outwards in every direction at once, the smell of the city and the real world he'd thought he'd lost.

## 44. The Starlight Motel

Motel life had become routine. Picking up his mail at the front desk, Marks waved at Dolores, who worked days behind the front desk. She was a stupid, elderly woman who required three repetitions to answer any question and who had exactly none of the physical skills required for any sort of property management job, but he'd come to regard her with affection because she had never once attempted to lure him into an endless maze of infinite identical rooms, or toyed with him about past sins he only half-remembered.

The motel grounds had become familiar, and he was dreading the day he would have to leave them. The money sewn into his jacket, miraculously still there when he'd checked after escaping the Black House with Dee, had funded a vacation, and he'd used it to rest. To truly *rest*, to sleep late and eat well (or as well as the bar's limited menu offered) and not think about survival. He firmed up, his energy skyrocketed, and he no longer resembled a cadaver when he looked in the mirror.

He was down to his final few hundred dollars, though, and it had been months since he'd walked out of the Black House with Dee. He was finally sleeping through the night. It was time to get back to work, find a client, or a job, and re-enter the world. He was oddly at peace with this. As he sorted through his mail, he smiled, catching sight of Dee's address. She'd written him a few times after discovering to her wide-eyed horror that he didn't have a cell phone or even an email address. Her handwriting was huge and pressed deeply into the paper, as if writing things out longhand required

immense effort.

He pushed his door open, reading how she was enjoying school (not very much) and life with her very distant cousins (not very much either). He could tell, though, that she was happy, or as happy as teen girls ever got, and he felt a sense of pride, and relief. There had been a moment when he feared he'd damned her, killed her—lost her. Several moments, he corrected himself, setting the mail down on the coffee table and kicking his door shut.

He didn't fool himself that he'd managed to escape with Dee because he was smart. He'd been lucky. The Black House hadn't really followed any coherent rules, but there had been just enough structure there to make some educated guesses. He wondered if it was normally much more organized, if it was his own muddled brain that had made the House muddled. Maybe people with clear memories and burning regrets experienced a much more tightly focused hell than he had. The only praise he allowed himself was that he'd simply kept at it, doggedly moving from room to room, refusing to just collapse and give up.

He'd rewarded himself by not thinking about Agnes. He hadn't investigated his own past and identified her, or placed himself missing for several days or weeks at some point in the past. He refused to think about her. However he'd failed the woman who Agnes had been modeled on, he'd let her go, because he knew chasing after her would only result in suffering.

He undressed and ran the shower, shaving and luxuriating in the hot water. For the first time in years, he didn't feel limited by his lost memories, his lost time.

He felt like his brain was working again, firing on all cylinders. The Black House hadn't been a victory—they'd failed to save Dee's father, and that made two people Marks had failed to save from that place—but he hadn't lost Dee, and that was the first thing that felt like a victory in a very, very long time.

He wrapped himself in the thin, itchy cheap robe the motel provided and sat down on the bed. Extracting the last bills from the lining of his coat, he emptied his pockets and did an accounting, down to the scattered pennies. Enough, he thought, for some new clothes, and then he was in the open again, but he'd been living about a sliver above homeless for so long he knew how to work that game. And he felt optimistic. He was sober, for one, and ready to work.

He got dressed. The thin, scratchy feel of his old, worn-out clothes was depressing.

He picked up the mail and extracted Dee's letter, opening a drawer and placing it in with the others he'd saved. He wasn't sure why he was keeping them, or what he planned to do with them when he didn't have a permanent place to live or store anything. He just found he couldn't simply toss them. He hadn't read any of them more than once and Dee hadn't said anything brilliant or notable in any of them, but he liked the fact that someone else in the world knew he existed and thought about him. And he felt like he needed physical evidence of the fact, too.

He knew that very soon she would stop writing. It was inevitable. She meant well, but the letters would start to space out, would become just a few lines saying nothing at all, and would then degenerate into annuals,

and finally stop coming at all. He'd made an arrangement with Dolores to have the motel hold any mail that came for him, and he would dutifully take the bus once a month or so and collect any correspondence that came for him. But the fact was Dee was already part of his past, and he of hers, and time erased everything, rubbing its thumb against every line that linked you to someone else until it was gone.

He scanned the rest of the mail, amazed at how quickly you got onto junk mail—

He froze, holding a plain white envelope. The return address read PASSUS, INC., ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE. His hand trembled as he opened it, tearing it roughly. Inside was a standard invoice. It was blank except for a red stamp across the center of the page: OVERDUE. Attached by a single staple was a white business card:

**THE BROKER**

**PASSUS, INC.**

Marks closed his eyes and crumpled up the bill. The Black House had invited him again.



## About the Author

Jeff Somers began writing by court order as an attempt to steer his creative impulses away from engineering genetic grotesqueries. His feeble memory makes every day a joyous adventure of discovery and adventure even as it destroys personal relationships, and his weakness for adorable furry creatures leaves him with many cats. He has published nine novels, including the Avery Cates Series of noir-science fiction novels from Orbit Books, the darkly hilarious crime novel *Chum* from Tyrus Books, and most recently tales of blood magic and short cons in the Ustari Cycle, including the novel *We Are Not Good People* and the novellas *Fixer*, *The Stringer*, *Last Best Day*, and *The Boom Bands* from Pocket Gallery. He has published over forty short stories, including “Ringing the Changes,” which was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery Stories 2006*, “Sift, Almost Invisible, Through,” which appeared in the anthology *Crimes by Moonlight* edited by Charlaine Harris, “Three Cups of Tea,” which appeared in the anthology *Hanzai Japan*, “The Company I Keep,” which appeared in the anthology *Life is Short and Then You Die* edited by Kelley Armstrong, “Zilla, 2015,” published in 2019 by the Lascaux Review, and “The Little Birds,” published in 2023 by Alfred Hitchcock’s *Mystery Magazine*. He also writes about books for BookBub, everything and anything for Lifehacker, and the craft of writing for *Writer’s Digest*, which published his book on the craft of writing *Writing Without Rules* in 2018. He lives in Hoboken with his wife, The Duchess, and their cats. He considers pants to always be optional.

## **Also by Jeff Somers**

### **The Avery Cates Series:**

***The Electric Church***  
***The Digital Plague***  
***The Eternal Prison***  
***The Terminal State***  
***The Final Evolution***  
***The Shattered Gears***  
***The Burning City***  
***The Machines of War***

### **The Ustari Cycle**

***Fixer***  
***We Are Not Good People***  
***The Stringer***  
***Last Best Day***  
***The Boom Bands***  
***Idolator***  
***The Bleeder***  
***The Red Line***  
***Magic is Violence: Three Ustari Cycle Short Stories***

### **Other novels:**

***Lifers***  
***Chum***

### **Novellas:**

***The Ruiner***

### **Nonfiction**

***Writing Without Rules***

## Published Stories Featuring Philip K. Marks

***Sift, Almost Invisible, Through*** (*Crimes by Moonlight*, edited by Charlaine Harris, 2010)

***A Meek and Thankful Heart*** (Buzzy Magazine, 2013)

***Three Cups of Tea*** (*Hanzai Japan*, edited by Haikasoru, 2015)

***Howling on for More*** (Black Denim Lit, 2016)

***Supply and Demand*** (*No Bars and a Dead Battery*, 2018)