



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 23

### 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.