



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 24

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.*”