



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 25

### 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.