



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 26

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. “*Is 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 doppelganger.

“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.