



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 27

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.