



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 31

### 31. The Ballroom

“You *sure* we ain’t gonna die?”

Marks shook his head. “No. But we had to eat something. You notice it was all our favorites? Sort of mashed together? Having two people here at once is seriously messing with this place’s wiring.”

“I don’t know,” Dee said. “How’s that food stay *fresh*? I kind of feel sick. I think we got poisoned. Why would we *trust* the food this place sets out in that creepy Dining Room?”

“If the end goal was to poison us,” Marks said, “there would be easier ways.”

Dee considered that, looking around. “Looking at *this* room, I figure we’re going to be strangled in the dark, maybe, and not poisoned.”

Marks nodded, watching Agnes and Dennis carefully as the pair seemed to wander randomly among the dusty, rotting tables. He didn’t think either one was a direct threat to them, in the sense of attacking them in some way, but he also didn’t doubt the place had more surprises in store for them. Dennis climbed up onto the bandstand, and then turned and gallantly helped Agnes up as well. A cloud of dust kicked up into the air where they walked.

“Pawn over the doorway,” Marks said, pointing. “So, one in the Anteroom, two in the Library, three in the Lounge, and one here. Makes seven.”

Dee nodded. “That looks like a chessboard, too,” she said, pointing at the dancefloor. “You think they *actually* had parties in this creepy place?”

Marks shrugged. “Agnes said yes, and that it wasn’t always like this. Who knows. Who knows how much she and Dennis are even real beings, with independent thought and action, instead of puppets set here to distract and annoy.”

Agnes had seated herself at the grand piano, its polished black surface dulled by dust and scratches. She cracked her knuckled theatrically, looked over at them, and smiled. Then she began playing. The piano was horribly out of tune, each note somehow positioned perfectly between keys, resulting in a discordant and horrifying noise that felt like fishing line being pulled through his eardum ... and yet the tune was recognizable.

“Shit,” Dee said, pulling a face. “I know that song. I mean, it’s the Halloween, horror-movie oh-shit-we-took-a-wrong-turn-into-Insanity-Cove-population-one version, but I’ve heard this song. Old, right? About married people stepping out and boning?”

Marks matched her expression. “Close enough.”

Dee pointed at him. “They are pulling that 100% from *you*, old man. No *way* they found that song rummaging around in *my* karma.”

Dennis, or the slightly stretched, inaccurate simulation of Dennis that the apparition had become, started an off-beat clapping that somehow made the song even more horrible, which Marks would not have believed to be possible.

“Uh, that’s our cue to get the hell out of this room, like, pronto.”

Marks nodded. “In here, the room we haven’t been to yet is the Octopus, which is also where the pawn was positioned, so the choice seems obvious.”

They both stood for a moment, not moving. The music curdled around them and thickened the air.

“Too easy?” Dee asked.

“Too easy.”

He chewed his lip for a moment. When he looked over at Agnes and Dennis on the bandstand, she raised one hand from the keyboard and waved at him while tinkling out a sour arpeggio that fell like tiny lead pellets at her feet. The pair just followed them now, not making any attempt to interfere or speak to them. It was somehow worse.

“Come on,” he said. “At least maybe there won’t be *music*.”

Dee sighed, following him towards the door. “Dude, there isn’t any music *here*.”

They opened the Octopus door, walked down the brief hall, and found themselves in a dim, aged-looking room where the air seemed to be made of dust, everything faded and worn smooth with age. The room had the weight of time hanging everywhere, a dense feeling of uncounted days.

It was a simple room, but filled with debris. The walls were cluttered with paintings, etches, portraits, and mirrors. Not an inch of wall space was bare. There were no windows, but something warm and delicious was being cooked somewhere; amidst the dust and age the room smelled wonderful. Several large free-standing wardrobes crowded in from the edges, some with more paintings and mirrors hung on their sides and doors.

The floor was just as crowded as the walls with tables, chairs, trunks, and boxes. In one corner stood a stuffed bear, posed with one claw raised, its jaws stretched wide. A huge model sailing ship resides on one of several coffee tables, resplendent with bright white sails and carefully applied paint. A bearskin rug was rolled up in another corner, and an Iron Maiden leaned against a scratched and scuffed Hope Chest, lost in shadow.

Hidden amongst all the paintings and bric-a-brac are four exits: A pair of swinging doors marked with a familiar stag, a stairway leading downward with a floor tile marked with the bear, and two more doors on the east and north walls, marked with a viper and a kangaroo.

“Not the first room,” Agnes suddenly sang out from behind them. “But certainly one of the earliest! Now it’s become a sort of storage room, sadly—past follies and failures shunted aside, out of the

way ... at least until someone plays some mischief. Sometimes, I'd swear the paths to this room get changed, making it difficult to find even if you know the way."

"Uh huh," Marks said. "Shut up."

"Rude." She grinned. "Still trying to place me, Poor Myopoic Marks?"

Marks felt a cold shiver pass through him, something buried deep in his memories reaching up and massaging his brain. He closed his eyes for a moment and wished fervently for a bourbon, neat, with a water back and some bar nuts.

"Come on," Marks said, opening his eyes and fighting back a wave of exhaustion. "If we're on the right track there's one last pawn in here."

They checked the doors. When the Kangaroo didn't immediately offer up the pawn, they were disappointed.

"Might be lost in all this junk," Dee offered.

Marks nodded. Then didn't move. "Christ, there's a lot of shit in here."

They started searching. Dennis and Agnes mimicked them, picking up various things and tossing them aside randomly, sometimes snatching things right out of their hands and playing Keep Away. Marks and Dee exchanged exasperated looks, but said nothing, and continued to search.

After nearly an hour, Marks stopped and stretched, arching his back and trying to work a sizzling pain out of it. He looked around, dismayed at the sheer amount of stuff to search through, and then paused, listening. There was a new noise, a rhythmic thumping. It was low volume and easy to miss, but he could feel it in the floor boards as well.

He thought it might be another trick, another illusion designed to spook them and keep them running instead of thinking. But Agnes and Dennis weren't drawing attention to it, and it seemed odd in this place where every room was different, where every room represented its own little puzzle, to see a trick repeated—especially a trick that he'd clearly already seen through and dismissed.

Tricks on tricks, he thought.

He didn't say anything, and bent back to sorting through the piles of stuff, opening boxes and searching through their bizarre contents. Comic books he remembered, somehow, having as a child—he couldn't remember someone he'd met a year ago, but he could somehow remember comic books. shoes, never in pairs, always oddballs, seeming new. Dolls without heads. One box was filled with tiny, bleached-white bones, from a rodent of some sort.

Through all his searching, he was aware of the vibrations under his feet, buzzing up through his legs. After another long moment of standing still and contemplating it, he lay down on the floor with a grunt and pressed his ears against the floor, listening. It sounded like a construction site piledriver in the distance, a steady beat of impact.

"Found it!"

Marks sat up and looked around. Dee had climbed up on top of one of the wardrobes, somehow, and triumphantly held up a small white carving, similar to the other seven they'd found so far.

"That's a relief," he said as she climbed down. "If we didn't find it, I wasn't sure what our next move was going to be."

"Yaaayyy!" Agnes trilled, clapping her hands. "I am so *happy* for you, Dear Dour Dee!"

Dee scowled at her, then beamed at Marks. A moment later she looked down at her feet. "What's that?"

Marks nodded. "I know, I noticed it too."

"*That*," Agnes said, spinning as if being twirled by an invisible dance partner, "is the House shutting down."

Dee looked at Marks. "Shutting down?"

He shook his head, pursing his lips as if to dismiss whatever Agnes was saying.

"You've been here too long," Agnes said. "You're almost done. So the place is resetting."

A shot of panic went through Marks. On some deep level he realized this made sense, somehow he knew it made sense. The Black House shaped itself around those it lured in. It had shaped itself around Dee and him, taking pieces of them for decoration and function. And now they were close to being stranded there, close to having their entire lives absorbed by this dark, beating heart, and so it was destroying itself to reset for the next victim.

It was destroying itself.

"Marks," Dee said softly. "What is it? What does it mean?"

He looked at her, and forced a thin, weak smile onto his face, shifting his gaze to the Kangaroo door, which he thought was obviously their next step. "It just means we have to move a little faster, kid."