



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 36

36. The Concert Hall

For a moment he was frozen and his mind seemed on the verge of some sort of epiphany, some connection. He saw Agnes—not as she'd appeared since his arrival, but somehow different, more real. He saw her in disarray, in a panic, her face stretched in a mask of horror as she stared at him, her hair tangled, her face streaked with dirt, her blouse torn.

And then she was gone and he was in motion, racing forward. “Dee!”

He forced himself to stop and think, and he realized there were only two possible choices. She'd either tried to go back, to retreat, or she'd gone through the one door that led somewhere they hadn't yet been: Camel. They'd seen the Spare Room, the Underground, and the Hall of Mirrors—he didn't think for one moment that she'd purposefully step off the path, purposefully get caught up in the gears of that Black House again. And he didn't think anyone would have the intestinal fortitude to go back into that vast, empty darkness they'd just escaped from. Unless—

Unless they were going to end themselves. Unless they were going to throw themselves over the side of the path and sail into that darkness, become one with it.

He rejected the idea. Dee was in mourning, she was in shock. She wasn't suicidal, she wasn't a quitter. He'd never known someone so young who just kept *going* like she did. He opened the door with the camel carving and stepped through, finding the familiar brief hallway and the second door. He pushed it open, heart pounding, and stepped through, shouting. “Dee!”

His voice echoed hollowly and he was aware he was in another huge, open space. It was a theater, the ceiling soaring above in a gilded dome, each square panel a faded painting, the colors muted. He turned and found a door still behind him, marked with the Ibex carving, and thought acidly that the place was working hard to sow doubt; a closed retreat choked off choice, making the way forward seem certain.

He was standing on a deep pile green carpet, the aisle stretching forward in the dim light towards the stage, where a string quartet's instruments had been set up: Two violins and a viola sitting on simple wooden folding chairs, and a cello propped up by a stand. Music stands stood in front of each spot. A spotlight lit up the instruments, while the rest of the concert hall was bathed in gloom.

He could hear her sobbing. Behind that, muffled as if through very thick walls, the crunching noise of the place collapsing. As he stood very still he could feel the vibrations through his feet. The possibility that the noise and vibration was another trick, another illusion designed to herd them like in the New Rooms was real, but he doubted it. The place collapsing seemed perfectly in line with the rest of his experience.

He crept down the aisle, and realized he was kicking up dust as he walked. The whole place was covered in a thick layer of dry grime, and within a few steps he was choking on it. He walked down to the stage and then turned, shielding his eyes from the spotlight and scanning the seats, searching for her. She was sitting three rows from the very top, under the balcony, bent over with her head in her lap.

He didn't go near her. He stayed down near the stage and gave her some time, looking around. There were four doors he could see: The ibex leading back to the surgery, a fly, a jellyfish, and one at the very back marked with a traditional glowing EXIT sign. He stared at the exit for a moment; it was unusual, but they'd seen the occasional change in the door patterns before and it hadn't meant anything, really. And ultimately, all it meant here was that they had three choices—three *obvious* choices—of rooms they hadn't been to before.

Marks stared at the sign and wondered if it was really that easy, or if they were supposed to think it was that easy, or if they were supposed to ignore it because it was *too* easy. His head swam, and he decided to look for the chess pieces instead. A Queen, if they were on the right path.

He eyed the rows and rows of seats and felt tired. A small wooden carving could be anywhere in a room like this—and it seemed like the Black House, as he'd come to think of it, was cheating more as they got further along the path, hiding the clues more thoroughly, in less obvious ways. With a sigh, he started searching, choosing the seat on the aisle in the first row and checking under it, putting his fingers into the hinges, pressing down on the cushion.

Then he moved on to the next seat in the row.

He was on the fifth row when Dee stood up, scrubbed her face, and began searching her own seat. They worked in silence, then, quietly moving from spot to spot. Every noise they made was captured and augmented by the acoustics of the space, and yet the air had an insulated quality to it, as if they were sealed inside something. As they worked more and more dust filled the air, hanging in it and scratching their throats and making them cough. They could hear each other's breaths and grunts as they worked over the low rumble of the Collapse.

They moved on to the next bank of seats. Marks took off his jacket, sweat pouring, the dust getting caked onto him. His mouth was dry and he felt giddy and lightheaded. When his hand brushed something on the floor under a seat in the fifteenth row, he almost moved on to the next seat mechanically before his sluggish brain kicked in and stopped him.

He knelt on the dusty floor and leaned down, pushing his hand under the seat. Just as his hand closed around the small carving, he heard Dee gasp.

"Found it!" she shouted.

He stared at the tiny wooden carving, vaguely feminine, the tiny crown just a few pointed ridges on the head. He stood up and turned to look over at Dee, who stood holding something aloft in her hand. He raised his own in response, and for a moment they just stared at each other. Slowly, they walked down the aisles and met in front of the stage again, holding up the carvings they'd found.

"King," Marks said.

"Queen."

They traded the pieces, fondling them in their hands, and then handed them back again.

“What’s *that* mean?” Dee asked. She sounded exhausted.

Marks shook his head. “Hell if I know.” He pushed his damp hair out of his face. “This place is messing with us again, right? Trying to stick with its own rules, but in a way that makes us doubt what we’re doing. So, following that, we’re on the right track and this is just the last room on it. This is where we’re supposed to be.”

Dee looked around. “Shit, of course it would be some creepy empty theater. I feel like there’s ghosts in all those seats, watchin’ us.”

Marks turned and set the Queen on the edge of the stage. “So I guess we still have to figure out what our next move is.”

Dee nodded, setting the King next to the Queen with careful attention, an almost gentle movement of her hand. She stared at the pair. “So, where do we go?”

Marks looked back at the doors. “Jellyfish. Exit. Fly. One of these things is not like the others.”

“Maybe on purpose,” Dee said. “What about backstage?”

Marks blinked, then turned to look at the stage again. A tattered red curtain hung along the back, and there were, of course, left and right exits that led behind it. “Well, shit,” he said. “Let’s take a look.”

They walked to the side of the stage and found a set of sagging old plywood steps that creaked and groaned under them as they climbed them. The grinding, snapping noise of the Collapse was louder, Marks, thought, and the constant vibration under his feet was palpable even when he wasn’t concentrating on it. Whether it was an illusion or not, whether it was designed to instill panic in them and keep them moving or if it was the real end of everything that was and had been their world, it was becoming too loud to ignore.

On stage they kicked up huge new clouds of dust, walking directly to the right side of the stage and ducking behind the curtain. To their disappointment, however, all they found was a blank wall, with just a narrow channel between the curtain and the wall to walk down to the other side. When they emerged back onto the stage, Marks mused on the essentially dramatic nature of the Black House: It was all sets, all props, all bullshit. It had taken pieces of their subconscious and fashioned them into a place that seemed real but was all just fakery.

They wandered over to the instruments, covered in a thick line of dust. Dee reached out and touched one of the violins, and a string snapped with a loud snap. She snatched her hand away and thrust it into her mouth, stepping back with a grunt.

Marks didn’t try to touch anything, but he walked over to the music stands and leaned in to examine the sheet music. He paused, then leaned closer and blew the layer of dust off, squinting. He stared at the music for a long time; it was actually not musical notation. It was something called tablature, and he was suddenly aware that he understood this because he once played guitar, as a hobby. Tablature was a simplified system of notation, and he could read it perfectly well.

After a moment he straightened up, and studied the hall around them.

“Come on,” he said. “I know which way to go.”

He leaned forward and slid the first sheet from the nearest stand and held it in his hand, studying it.

Dee frowned. “What door? How do you know?”

He continued to stare at the music for a few moments, and when he turned to look at her, she was startled to see his eyes shining with sudden tears.

“The Exit,” he said with a horrible, warped smile. “Of course. So obvious you doubt yourself.”

“How do you know?” she repeated.

He shrugged, gesturing at the sheet music and turning towards the steps. “Because I know this song.”