



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 43

### 43. The Zelkova Room

“Mr. Marks, I swear to god you are *unkillable!*”

Marks opened his eyes. He was covered in white dust. He was on the floor. He was holding Dee’s hand; she lay next to him, pancaked in dust. She was facedown, turned towards him, and their eyes met for a second. She squeezed his hand, and then they let go and sat up.

They were in the empty shell of a building. The floor was wide-plank, old-school subflooring, the walls were stripped to the ancient red brick and furring strips. The dust was everywhere, swimming through the air, settling in infinite waves. Wires hung limply from the rafters above, furred with spider webs. It was dark, and cold. There was no sign of the stairs or the opening they’d pulled themselves up through.

In the center of the room was a large, dilapidated chair; an ornate wooden throne, the arms carved into incredibly detailed designs, the headrest an explosion of fine woodwork that had once been painted. The remnants of red cushions clung to the back and the seat. At one point, freshly stained and rubbed with oil, it must have been quite a sight.

Agnes was seated in it, slumped down, her long legs crossed under her skirt.

Marks thought she looked beautiful and *finished*, as if whatever transformation she’d been undergoing was finally complete. She only resembled the woman he remembered in the vaguest of ways, like a copy of a copy of a copy, each successive run through the cosmic copy machine rendering her lines less distinct, her edges softer, her legs longer.

Dee started coughing. The moment she did, he wanted to join in; his throat was suddenly dry and scratchy, filled with deep grooves and sand. He swallowed and struggled to his feet.

Standing, he could see there was something behind the chair: A small leafy tree, a miniature tree like a bonsai, growing out of the floorboards. It looked like a model of a tree: The thick, gnarled trunk, the delicate branches, the tiny leaves.

“Bravo, Mr. Marks,” Agnes said, miming applause. “It only took you two rounds, but you have succeeded at long last!” She leaned forward. “In the sense that you didn’t kill her this time.”

He looked around. A tiny flame of excitement bloomed; the place had the right dimensions, and looked normal, looked *real*, like an actual building. He pictured the place he’d stepped into with Dee. It matched up with a mental image of what it would look like gutted, torn out. “Why are you here?”

Agnes affected shock. “Why, to *congratulate* you, of course, Mr. Marks! And it is also only polite for your host and guide to see you out.” She lifted one elegant arm and indicated the door behind her.

“There it is, the exit. Dearest Damnable Dee, please *do* go; there is much to do here and there is nothing worse than a lingering guest.”

He turned and looked at Dee, who stepped closer to him. After a moment he held out his hand, and she took it. “Worth a try, right?” he said, offering her a careful smile.

“Worth a try,” she said quietly. Then she frowned and turned to look at Agnes. “Marks, too, right?”

Agnes pouted, her face transforming into a mask of false sadness. “I’m injured,” she said. “This experience has hardened you, Delightful Dee, and made you cruel. *You* are free to go. You escaped the Black House before it collapsed, but now it must bloom again, it must be made ready for the next guest. You have my word, whatever that is worth, that you are *free to go*. Merrily Moribund Marks, however, has an *obligation* to remain.”

Marks looked down at his feet and his ruined shoes.

Dee reached up and grabbed his collar, trying to drag him down to her height. “Why? What does she mean?”

Agnes shrugged. “There are *rules*. That is the structure of the universe. Everything must obey rules, and this place is no exception.” She smiled, gorgeous, too many teeth, too white, too wide. “If it is any consolation, Mr. Marks, if you had been just a second or two *slower*, you *both* would have been crushed and trapped forever, as have thousands before you. So, *bravo* to you! BRAVO!”

“How many get out?” he asked, stalling for time. He looked at Dee. She peered up at him intensely, still clinging to his jacket.

“Not many. A few.” Agnes gestured again. “Go on, now, Dee. Don’t be like a beaten dog who refuses to leave out of pathetic loyalty.” She cocked her head at Marks and slowly settled again, smiling. “Ah, I see. You still do not fully remember her.”

He swallowed dust and stale air. “I remember enough.”

She winked. “But not *all* of it.” She sighed, prettily, and made a show of arranging her dress. “Did you love her? Did she love you? Did she trust you, as Dear Darling Dee does? You were a drunk, then, were you incompetent? Did you save yourself and let her rot?”

“Is she still in there?”

Agnes paused and looked at her lap. “You wish to know?” She looked up, impish. “Really? You will have the time to find out. Unencumbered by silly, empty-headed little girls like Delightful Dee. You will have nothing but *time* to seek the truth.”

He stared back at her for a few moments, then dropped his gaze. He pulled gently on Dee’s arm. “Go on,” he said.

She didn’t move for a moment, then let go of his jacket and took his hand in hers. “Don’t let go,” she whispered, and turned, pulling him after her.

The door looked right, too. He was surprised at how faded his memory of arriving at the place had become, but that was the way his memory worked, ever since his Lost Years, years spent in bars,

drinking compulsively, obliterating days and weeks and months, all of it a blur. Nothing stuck, nothing stayed clear for long.

He turned and looked back at Agnes as Dee led him forward. “What happens to you?”

She smiled. He thought it was almost a sad smile. Almost.

“I will be here, of course, in a sense. I am *your* guide, Mr. Marks. You will leave and the Black House will reset, and I will still be here—but I will be different, in every way.”

“Do you remember?”

Her smile faded. “Some.”

“So we have something in common.”

For a moment she looked disturbed by this, the slight downturn of her perfect features implying a frown. Then she recovered, laughing, throwing her head back. Her laugh was musical.

“Do not fret, Mild Mannered Marks. Do not worry for *me*. We shall see each other again. You will forget. You will *forget*. We will try again.”

Dee dragged him towards the door.

He swallowing hard, still looking at Agnes. “How many times have I been here?”

Agnes shook her head and looked away, as if preoccupied with something on the far wall. Marks stood his ground for a few moments, then allowed himself to be pulled towards the door, turning, his face ashen.

The door opened. Easily, naturally, and the street was beyond it, as it had been. It was raining, and cold.

Dee paused and for a moment they stood framed in it, holding hands.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ve got a debt to pay.”

Dee nodded. “Don’t let go,” she said again, and stepped forward.

Marks didn’t move, but he found himself dragged forward as if greased. As Dee marched through the doorway, he slid behind her, pulled along in her gravity well.

Behind them, he heard the rustle of skirts. “What? *Mr. Marks! Mr. Marks you have an obligation! You have agreed to terms!*”

As Dee pulled him through the doorway, he could feel heat and hear noise building up behind him, and he closed his eyes as they were replaced by the cold and the damp and the feeling of open space, infinite and exploding outwards in every direction at once, the smell of the city and the real world he’d thought he’d lost.