



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 6

by Jeff Somers

6. The Anteroom

They found themselves in a large foyer, a square, silent space with an old, scratched-up wooden floor that creaked dangerously under their feet and thick, peeling yellow wallpaper everywhere. A single hatrack stood in the corner behind the door, and a small secretary hunched against the wall to their right, a dusty lace doily on top.

There were three doors, all imposing wooden portals of dark, nearly black wood, stained and varnished to an incredible shine. They appeared to be larger than standard doors; taller and wider, less rectangular, and each one featured an elaborate carving on the top panel. Directly in front of them the door featured a duck, paddling in a pond. The nearest door on their left was decorated with a lizard of some kind, small and low to the ground. The third door featured a lion, prowling majestically.

It was incredibly quiet. Marks could hear the floor complain and groan as they shifted their weight, and Dee's sudden, sharp breathing. He felt like a fool, allowing her to stowaway. He should have turned her around and sent her back—he should have *brought* her back to the motel himself, and come back again.

He should have contacted her family somehow, let them know where she was.

He stepped over to the secretary, a cheap wooden piece with some drawers and shallow shelves, the sort of place you dropped keys and mail on your way into a house. A small wooden carving sat on the dusty doily. He picked it up and held it up, a roughly humanoid, armless thing polished by a million tense fingers. Green felt had been attached to its underside.

"A pawn," Dee said. "From a chess set."

Marks grunted and put it down where he'd found it.

"Well?" she asked, smiling. "Which door, old man?"

Marks realized she thought this was an adventure. Whether she thought her father might be here, or a clue to his whereabouts might be found, or some other piece of information, she didn't think anything bad could possibly happen. He stepped up to the nearest door and ran his fingers over the intricate carving. A newt, he thought. It was a newt.

He sighed. "Let's go home. Let's do this in the daylight. I don't know why I felt such a need to do this at night, immediately."

"Maybe because my Dad might be in here?" she said, her voice rising a little. "Tied up in the basement. Or ... or worse. Or maybe there's a note. Or a—come on!"

She dashed for the next door, the door with the Lion carved on it, and was through before Marks could intervene. He followed as quickly as he could, pushing the surprisingly light door inward and stepping through. There was a short, barren hallway of rough, unfinished drywall. It made a sharp turn to the right a few feet in, and then there was another door. He pushed the second door and stepped through, then paused, sensing a sudden change in the atmosphere. He looked up. He was in an immense room with an impossibly high ceiling.

Dee had stopped a few steps ahead of him, and was perfectly still.

The room was filled with rows upon rows of books on shelves, terribly high, disappearing into the shadows that collected like clouds at the ceiling. The books all looked ancient, crumbling old leather bindings—in fact some appeared to actually *be* dust, destroyed by time. In the aisles between the shelves were huge reading tables, solid oak, looking like they'd been carved from a single tree each. On each one were three reading lamps, the shades a soothing green color that the place a strange, otherworldly feel.

A rolling ladder rested against one of the shelves.

“Kid,” he said, his voice echoing distantly. “Don’t move. Stay in sight.”

“How—how is this fucking *possible*?”

He thought, *like I said: sideways* but didn’t say it. Instead he held out his hand, his eyes dancing over the impossibility of this huge room. “Take my hand, kid. We’re going back.”

She didn’t complain. She stepped backwards, as if afraid that taking her eyes off the room, and felt behind her until she found his hand. He pulled her gently towards him and then turned, and froze.

“Kid, we got problems.”

Sideways.

The door was gone.

Dee spun and looked up at him. “Shit, Marks, how is *that* possible?”

He sighed and let go of her hand. “Like I was saying: The scariest thing about the universe is that *anything* is possible. Forget *possible*. Possible doesn’t mean anything. Possible will get us both killed. Or trapped in here forever.”

She stared up at him, horrified, her expression implying that she saw, for the first time, that she was with a madman.

“Instead, be practical. We walked through a door.” He glanced sideways at her. “Or, more accurately, you barged through a door after I suggested we not do that thing, and I followed you because I am old and worn down and soft at heart.” He sighed. “So, we came through a door. There must be another door.”

She frowned, breathing hard. “Must? Why *must*?”

“Okay, *must* is too strong. *Should be* is better. Come on. I don’t remember much, but I’m pretty sure we got to find our way, not stand here until the lights go out.”

He turned and surveyed the place again. She stepped forward to stand next to him, looking around.

“The lights are going out? Old man, tell me the frickin’ *lights* are not going to *go out* in here.”

“Come on.”

He started walking, and after a moment she followed. The aisle was wide, and there was plenty of room to slip past the tables. A thick coating of dust was on everything, and was kicked up from the floor as they walked. The floor was of a polished white stone, and every footstep rang out and echoed.

One table had been used more recently; it was still dusty, but there were smeary marks in the dust, handprints, trails of objects that had been pushed along the surface. Marks squinted at two small objects buried in the fine, gray dust: Two more pawns, from the same chess set, the same green felt bottoms and the same blond wood.

“How do you know this is the way?”

He turned to look at her and kept going, shrugging. “I don’t. When you don’t know the way, any way is just as good. After—”

Dee suddenly put a hand up. “Listen!” she whispered.

Marks went still and listened. Somewhere nearby, a woman was half-humming, half-singing a song. The tune was familiar to him, maddeningly so. Something about adultery, he thought. Something about cocktails.

He looked at Dee and then they started walking, following the sound. The voice was sweet, on-key, and Marks thought he liked it, listening to it. There was a comforting sense of normalcy to hearing someone hum an old hit song.

They turned a corner into another aisle and there she was: Young without being youthful, somehow; smooth-skinned and lithe, attractive in a made-up, brittle way, brunette curls and athletic build encased in an expensive and expensively tailored suit, the skirt stopping just above her shapely knees. She was walking along the shelves, hands clasped behind her back. She turned, suddenly, and froze, staring at them. Her face was unlined, roundly pretty, her eyes distant and humorless.

She rushed towards them. “Thank *god*,” she said, grabbing onto both their arms. “I was beginning to worry no one else was *coming*! That I was in here all *alone*! Thank god for you two!”

Marks nodded, eyes watering. She was wearing perfume—gallons of it, from what he could tell, a sweet citrusy scent that enveloped them all like a cloud and clung to them like mist. He imagined the smell had its own weight, pulling at his clothes as it sank into the fibers. Dee looked at him and wrinkled her nose.

“I’m Phil,” he said, his throat tight from trying to choke back coughs. “Philip K. Marks. This is Dee.”

She hugged them both closer. “Mr. Marks! Ms. Dee! I have *never* been happier to see anyone in my *life*. I’m Agnes DeLay. So good to meet you. *Tell* me you know how to get out of here!”

Marks blinked. Agnes was more energy than he was used to dealing with. He wanted nothing more than to get her to stop touching him. “How long have you been here?”

She released them both and took a step backwards. “Oh, my, so long. I very nearly gave up. I very nearly just climbed to the top of one of these shelves and *jumped*.”

“Has ... has anyone else come through here?”

She turned and looked at him, then at Dee. She softened a little, and stepped closer, kneeling down and looking at the girl. “I’m sorry, dear. I haven’t seen *anyone*.” She stood up. “Until there was you. Mr. Marks, please tell me you know a way out of here? And maybe you have something to *eat*?”

Marks shrugged the backpack off his shoulder and set it down. Crouching, he unzipped it and pulled out one of the energy bars they’d brought, along with a bottle of water. He handed them over. Agnes trilled suddenly in delight and grabbed them.

“Oh, you are a *god*, Mr. Marks.”

He sighed, glancing at Dee, who regarded Agnes as one might a wild animal. “Your phone work at all?”

Agnes was chewing loudly, the wrapper from the bar on the floor by her feet. For some reason he couldn’t explain, it bothered him, so he leaned forward and picked it up.

“No,” she said. “It *works*, mind you, it’s powered-on, but there’s no signal.” She swallowed. “Nada.”

Marks nodded, looking around. “So, how big is this place? How many rooms?”

She shrugged. “I thought *you’d* know.”

“You—how did you end up here?”

“Same way you did, Mr. Marks—I walked through that door, and that door disappeared.” She brightened, waving the uneaten portion of the bar at him. “Maybe if we hang around where the door *was*, we can dash back through when the next person comes!”

Marks pulled the backpack onto his shoulder and stood up, his back protesting. “That could take a long time. I think that time would be better spent looking for another exit.”

She nodded, handing him the bottle of water, unopened. “Very wise, I suppose. At first I thought, there is so much *knowledge* here, don’t you think? All these *books*. Maybe the answers are hidden in here. A map! A guidebook! Architectural plans!” She was smiling brightly. The she deflated. “Turns out, they’re all *dictionaries*, as far as I can tell.”

He shook his head. “Come on.”

“Why *don’t* we wait for the door to show up again?” Dee asked, falling into step next to him.

Marks sighed. “Because when a place takes a door away from you, it’s on purpose.”

She chewed on that and walked in silence for a while. Agnes followed them, looking around, her high heels clicking loudly on the floor.

“Of course, I can’t be certain they’re *all* dictionaries. The books, I mean. I’ve only gone through a few shelves worth. Maybe I just happen to be in the dictionary *section*. The dictionary *wing*. If there are other kinds of books here, you *do* have to wonder what might be in them,” she said. “All sort of things, I’d assume. Arcane knowledge. Lost arts. That sort of stuff.”

“Props,” Marks said. “More likely.”

“*Props?*” She repeated, sounding incredulous. “Seriously? You’re cynical. That’s the problem. Don’t listen to him, kid. He’s cynical.”

Dee veered off and marched over to the stacks. Marks opened his mouth to complain, but bit back the words. Agnes glanced from Dee to him and smiled, shrugging in a way Marks thought meant *kids! what can you do*.

“Nope,” Dee said. “They’re all dictionaries.”

Marks frowned. “All of the books?”

“*All* of them—at least, the ones I can *see*.”

“Dictionaries!” Agnes said, sounding almost angry. “I’m sorry. I assumed—I *assumed*—that a library would be full of more interesting things. Things that might ignite the imagination. Not a bunch of ... a bunch of ... dictionaries.”

Marks stared at her as Dee returned. He had a feeling she was about to end her sentence with a different word, but changed at the last moment.

They were approaching the rear wall, and it seemed to Marks like the ceiling was getting lower as they got closer to it, like the room was shrinking. Along the back wall were three doors, all like the first ones they’d encountered: Slightly differently-shaped, dark, varnished wood, a detailed carving in the center panel. The animals featured were all different, though: A stag, a wolf, and a bird of some sort. Dee walked up to the door and peered at it.

“What animal is that, anyway?”

“Quail,” Agnes said, leaning up to inspect the higher shelves of the nearest bookshelf.

Dee shrugged. “All right, Quail.”

Marks dropped the backpack again. “All right, we’ve seen six doors, each with a distinct picture.” He opened the backpack and rooted around, extracting a small notebook and pen. He opened the book to a fresh page and began writing.

“What’s that?” Agnes asked, turning from the shelves.

“Notes,” he said, scribbling. “We opened the door with the Lion. If we see another Lion, I wonder if it will lead us back here.”

“Like a maze,” Dee said.

“Exactly like a maze.” He looked up and grinned at her. “I told you: Sideways.”

He reflected on the strange cheer he felt. He'd been morose for so long, scraping along on spare change and dumpster diving, alone. And then one decent job had given him a few thousand dollars. And now he was strangely enjoying himself, enjoying being with people, enjoying having a puzzle to work out. He knew it was inappropriate—maybe a little crazy—but he thought he might be *happy*.

Dee sat down on the floor next to him. "You're acting like this shit is *normal*."

He shook his head. "Normal for me. *Normal for me* is not *normal*."

She digested that.

"Still no interest in the *infinite* knowledge this place seems to offer?" Agnes said. "Or do we just choose a door at random? In which case, the Wolf door, certainly. Stags are always the symbols of doom, you know, in legends and such, and who in their right mind follows a Quail? A wolf is a noble beast. You can trust a wolf. As long as he isn't too hungry."

"How long have you been here, Agnes?" Marks asked. "You read any of the dictionaries?"

She leaned back against the shelf again. "Too intimidating. I was never much for books myself. Plenty of *brains*, but very little *discipline*. Flighty. Brain constantly going and going. You know the type. Luckily I discovered tight sweaters and flirtation in school, or else lord knows where I'd be." She smiled at Dee. "Don't listen, puppy. Study hard, become a scientist, invent a way out of this dreadful place. What is this dreadful place, Mr. Marks? I ask since you seem strangely calm and cool about finding yourself trapped here."

"He came purposefully," Dee said, sounding grim. "To help me find my father."

"Nice guy," Agnes said, closing her eyes and settling back against the shelves as if to take a nap. "But an idiot."

"Maybe so, Miss DeLay," Marks said, standing up and stuffing the notebook back into his backpack. "I'm halfway dead, totally broke, and I've forgotten most of my life. I drank too much and poked my nose into places I shouldn't have, and lost everything I assume I once had." He turned and smiled at her. "But you're here too, so you must not be very bright either."

Agnes snorted a laugh, opening her eyes and joining them as they walked closer to the doors. They stood, should to shoulder, and looked from door to door. Aside from the animals carved on them, there was no difference.

"So," Dee asked. "Which one?"

"Wolf," Agnes said immediately. "Already solved *that* one for you."

Marks rubbed his chin. "No," he said. "Quail."

Agnes shook her head. "I'm telling you, if you want to get *out* of here, the Wolf."

Marks stepped forward and pulled the Quail door open, revealing a dark, forbidding space. "We're not trying to get out, Miss DeLay," he said. "We're trying to find her father."