



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 9

by Jeff Somers

### 9. The Anteroom

It was, in a way, a relief. The foyer looked exactly the same as when they'd entered, with one crucial change: The front door wasn't there. The wall was solid, and even a careful examination revealed no hidden cavities, no trick switches or anything. They were back in the room they'd started in, and he relaxed a little. It was a good sign.

"The door changed," Dee said.

She was staring at the door they'd come in through. It had snapped shut behind them as if on springs, but they hadn't paid it much attention because a momentary euphoria had swept through them: They were free! They'd found their way back to the entrance! By the time they realized there was no entrance to turn into an exit, the door had shut.

Marks took his notebook over to where the kid was standing. The room was exactly as he remembered it: Three interior doors, marked with a duck, a lion, and a newt. They'd gone through the Lion Door and found the library.

"What do you mean it's changed?"

"The Lion Door? We went through before? It's the one we just walked through. But that can't be, can it?"

"Oh kid," Agnes said, sounding tired. "This place? That's just the tip of the iceberg."

Marks opened the door and peered into the short hall that led to the library. It looked precisely as it had when they'd been in there a short while before. But she was right: This was the door they'd just come through, from the weird spare bedroom.

He shut the door, made some notes. As he wrote, he said "Let's pause for a moment, have a bite and a sip of water, and think."

Agnes said nothing. Dee looked impatient and terrified for one moment, then took a deep breath and nodded. They sat on the floor and Marks shared out a power bar and passed around a bottle of water.

"This is good news, you know," he said.

Agnes smiled, leaning back on the palms of her hands. "I can't wait to hear this."

"It means it's a real maze. A *solvable* maze. If you can find your way predictably back, it's an honest maze, which means it has rules. It has a solution. It means it's a Soul Battery instead of an Insanity Engine."

Dee blinked at him. "What?"

Marks shrugged. “A Soul Battery I told you about: It’s designed to keep us running, so that we bleed all our energy, the energy we’d use up over a lifetime, trying to find the way out. That means there has to be a way out for us to look for. An Insanity Engine is different: Its goal is to drive you insane. Much worse. Because the whole goal is just to drive you insane, so there are no rules, no patterns for you to grab onto. An Insanity Engine would just keep throwing new rooms at us, every door random. There would be no pattern, because patterns are comforting. They tell our brains that there’s a rhyme and a reason—we just need to figure it out.”

Dee shook her head slightly in confusion. “But this isn’t that.”

“This,” Marks said, smiling a little, “is designed to keep us expending energy, seeking the exit. Which means there has to be an exit, although that doesn’t mean the designers of this place are playing fair. It might be hidden, obscured, and time is definitely being warped—every moment we spend in here will be ten minutes, or one hour of time outside. It’s got to be more efficient for absorbing our energy. But the good news is, that means if we pay attention, we can figure it out. We can find our way through the maze.”

Agnes was smirking, staring at him. “*Insanity Engine*. Did you coin these *marvelous* terms yourself, or is there some sort of textbook of mystery mazes out there?”

Marks looked at his hands. “I’m making them up. But it doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

She nodded. “How do you *know* all this, Mr. Marks?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, I’ve forgotten so much of my life, I’m not sure. Except I’m sure of one thing: I’m the one who Pays the Price.” He looked down at his hands. “You know, your toilet backs up, what do you do? You call a plumber and they have to wade through the shit and the piss—they pay the price for you. Some people in this world act as lightning rods. They can see a world no one else can, and so they pay the price no one else wants to.” He nodded. “I think that’s me.”

Agnes was suddenly smiling, familiarly.

“So, even though I only remember half my goddamn life,” he said, waving it away, “I think I’ve absorbed plenty of shit, because I’m the One who Pays the Price. And that means I know stuff that no one else knows.” He sighed. “Even if I don’t always remember it, precisely.”

There was a moment of silence. Dee sat on the dusty floor pulling at her tattered sneakers, which were coming apart and worn almost through on the bottom. “Mr. Marks?” she said, staring intently at her laces. “I don’t want you to pay my price.”

“Ah, hell,” Marks stood up and crossed over to her and knelt down. “Listen, I’m not here paying a price for you. I’m here to find your Dad. This is just the right thing to do. I get very few chances to do something right instead of just, you know, surviving. Hanging on. I get caught up in currents, and I just swim like mad until I find the shore. This time I dived in.”

She kept picking at her shoes. “Okay.”

He looked over at Agnes. “What do you think?”

She was sitting with her back against the wall where the front door had been, her legs stretched out in front of her. She smoothed down her narrow skirt. “Back to the library,” she said. “See what we might learn in those books.”

“You’re consistent.”

She shrugged. “It makes sense to me.” She smiled at her lap. “But I guess you’ll say that’s the, what did you call it, the ‘soul battery’ thing. Keeping us busy, spinning wheels instead of finding our way.” She looked up, and Marks was struck by the flat beauty of her eyes: Grey, unblinking. “Although running from room to room without knowing anything about where we are sounds like a worse waste of time and energy.”

He sat down next to Dee, who was still morosely tugging at her shoes. “It’s *all* a waste of energy, that’s the point. Me and Dee have been here maybe a few hours, and I’ll bet a few days have gone by outside. Everything about this place is designed to keep us here as long as possible. *That’s* why I don’t trust the library. It’s so *obviously* a place we could spend weeks in, chasing clues.”

She threw her hands up as if exasperated. “All right. Duck or Newt.”

“Dee votes.”

He didn’t know why, but he thought it should be up to her. It was her father they were chasing. And he felt that tiny grit of doubt, that shard in your thoughts that maybe you were wrong, maybe you were missing something. And maybe someone else would subconsciously know it.

The girl sighed heavily and got to her feet. “Why don’t we open each door and see what’s what?” she said. “Like you said, old man, information. The more we have, the better decisions we can make.”

Marks smiled and looked at Agnes. For a split second he thought he saw something awful on her beautiful face: Anger, rage, hatred. Then she was smiling back, cheerful as she climbed to her feet, slender and somehow looking to him like she smelled nice. “She’s sharp as a tack, that one,” she said. “We gotta watch her.”

They walked over to the door with the lizard carved on it. For a moment they hesitated, until Marks leaned forward, took hold of the handle, and pulled it open. The three of them leaned back, as if expecting something to hit them in the face.

A cool breeze that smelled stale and damp drifted in. Marks stepped forward slowly and leaned into the doorway, thinking he didn’t know all the rules—if it was a door that would disappear after they stepped through, when did that happen? Would he be cut in half?

He saw a short hallway, just wide enough for someone to walk down. It went a few feet and then turned left. He smirked. They would have to commit. He couldn’t see where the hall led unless he walked down far enough, which would allow the door to either disappear, close and lock behind him, or remain.

They let the door close, turning to the one with the duck carving. Again, Marks stepped over and pulled the door open. For a moment they stood, staring.

“I can’t believe we just ate *power bars*,” Agnes said.

The room beyond the door was a small dining room. The floor and ceiling were of dark brown, highly-polished wood. The walls were smooth white plaster, broken by wood panels along the bottom crowned by a simple chair rail. The table filled most of the room, making it impossible to actually pull the chairs out far enough to sit in them. An ornate chandelier of pearls and gold and brass hung too low, nearly scraping the dishes on the table.

The table was set elaborately, with candles giving the room a warm, familiar feel. Marks thought the shadows on the wall could not possibly be thrown by the flames, that another light source entirely was responsible, and the warm, cozy feeling turned sour and oppressive in his eyes. The feast was fantastic; a heap of steaming roasts and delicacies. Marks felt like he was creating the dishes, as everything he thought of seemed to be the next plate, plates on plates, dishes on dishes.

At one end of the table, far across the room from the door, a plate was piled with food, steaming. A glass of wine had been poured. A fork, a piece of food (fish, scarlet with pepper sauce) speared upon its end, rested on the edge of the plate at a jaunty angle.

Marks noted a window behind thick, yellow drapes, and a standard-issue door, slightly ajar, on the opposite end, moving slightly as if a slight breeze was pushing against it.

“Everyone votes duck, right?” Marks said, and stepped through the door.