



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 14

14. The Hall of Mirrors

“Holy shit,” Marks said.

It was a large room, with a very high, arched ceiling that had been painted, spectacularly, with a beautiful painting of a naked woman surrounded by a lush junglescape, her hair flowing as if she was underwater. She seemed to reach down to them, Marks thought, a comforting embrace from one of the immortals, welcoming one of her own back into the warmth of her bosom.

“Simplistic in theme,” Agnes said, stepping next to Marks and following his gaze. “Gaia, Mother of the Earth. But the artist had an eye for technique and detail, and the work remains at my insistence. Something about her, regal and grand, powerful. There is a fluid motion to the scene that I like.” She nudged Marks playfully. “In case you think I’m just *an inhuman monster*, trapping souls here for my amusement.”

Marks shook his head. “No,” he said quietly. “Not for your amusement.”

The walls of the room were covered floor to ceiling with mirrors, sending reflections of them bouncing back and forth, making every movement a ripple in time. The facing mirrors created infinite worlds, all seemingly identical. Marks had a sense of movement, subtle and unhappy, as if in the furthest reflections, the tenth or twelfth multiple reflection, seemingly so far away, there was a lot of movement, even though they were all standing quite still.

“Lots of doors in this one,” Dee said, her voice sounding small.

“Yes,” Agnes said. “This has usually been a major intersection of the maze, and so it is now. I don’t like the room, personally. Too *cliché*, don’t you think? Mirrors. Hmph. Everyone wants a creepy room, oh I know, *mirrors*.” She sighed. “But every time I try to get rid of this room, it comes back.”

Marks thought he detected a legitimate tone of unease in her voice, as if the persistence of this room despite her efforts bothered her.

For the first time, Marks had a real sense of being underground, not simply in a windowless space, but buried under rock and dirt. There were six archways with heavy-looking doors set into them, quite wide and ornately decorated. In front of each archway was a plaque. At first Marks expected to find the usual animal engravings, but instead each brass tile had been inscribed with words: *Giuoco Piano*, *Indian in Reverse*, *Polugaevsky Variation*, *Santasiere’s Folly*, *Torre Attack*, and *Foyle’s Double Reverse*.

“No animals,” Marks said. Their voices had a curiously dead tone to them, as if something was absorbing the noise instead of bouncing it.

"I know!" Agnes said, spinning around, arms out. "That's a naughty *twist*, isn't it? Set up certain rules, then suddenly change 'em. It disorients and upsets, you see. Oh!" She theatrically clapped her hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that, now. No doubt I've upset you *even more* which would possibly have been my intent all along. Oh!"

"They're chess openings," Dee said.

Marks turned to look at her. "What?"

Behind him, Agnes tilted her head, eyes locked on the girl.

Dee was flustered. "Chess. I *told* you, Marks. My Mom taught me a little. She liked to play. She said *her* father taught her, that he used to sit in the park and play for ten dollars. Had a little clock, hustled people." She looked down at her feet. "I asked her how in hell you make any money playing chess in a park, and she said you can cheat at anything and make money from it."

"Cheat at *anything!*" Agnes cheered. "Whatever could *that* mean!"

"Chess openings," Marks said musingly, turning to look back at the nearest door, where the plaque read *Giuoco Piano*.

"A chess *master* memorizes them, like, dozens of moves deep," Dee went on. "Two masters can play an opening's first fifty moves in a minute, just slamming through it until someone introduces a change."

"*You* might want to take a little more time with your moves," Agnes said.

"Chess," Marks said. "Random."

"Excuse me?" Agnes sounded outraged, but she was still smiling.

"What do you mean, random?" Dee asked.

Marks sighed. "A place like this ... it's filled with random details. It's part of the scam. Everything *seems* like it should tie together, everything seems like its part of this huge, ever-increasing pattern. You feel like you just have to see a little more, think a little more, and it will all become clear. But it's all bullshit. None of it means anything. This is just pretty details. It's all designed to keep our minds racing, chasing tails, to distract us."

"*Oooooor*," Agnes said, raising one delicate eyebrow, "it's a clue. A big, huge, exciting clue, the key to everything."

For a few moments they all just stood. Marks and Dee turned, running their eyes over the doors and the plaques, Agnes swayed in place, humming to herself.

"We still have to make a choice," Dee said. "We have to pick a door. So how do we pick?"

Marks sighed. "I don't know. I was picking my favorite animals. I don't know much about chess." He turned to look at the girl. "You know chess, what do you see?"

Dee studied the plaques, eyes leaping from one to another. Then she turned and looked at Agnes. After a moment, Agnes looked back at her and smiled.

“You said you would take us to my father,” Dee said. “Which door?”

Agnes cocked her head and tucked her bottom lip out slightly. “I’m sorry, dear. It’s not that simple.”

“Why not? You *promised*.”

“I *didn’t*, actually,” Agnes said. Then she shrugged. “I said I would lead you to him.”

“Same thing,” Dee said.

“No,” Agnes said, her expression suddenly sad. “It’s *not*, actually.”

“Dee,” Marks said softly. “You can’t *trust* her. Think. Think about chess. Pick a door.”

“I don’t *know*,” Dee said.

Marks nodded. “Then nothing’s changed. We just pick a door, like we have been.”

Dee stamped her foot. “*No*,” she said. “She said she would take me to Dad and then she said *Hippopotamus*. We have to pick the *right* door.”

“Oh, darling, dumb Dee, there is no such thing as a *right* door. There are doors. They all lead somewhere. You can spend *years* opening all the doors in this place! And then, when you’ve opened them all—they *change*! Sometimes they change without my permission, which is annoying.”

Marks took off the backpack and set it down on the floor. Then he sat down next to it and pulled out the notebook and began making notes.

Dee stared. “What are you doing?”

“Rushing won’t get us anywhere,” Marks said. “Let’s take a breath and think.”

Dee stamped her foot again, then relaxed. With three quick steps she was next to him, dropping to the floor. “Mr. Marks,” she whispered. “*Please*.”

He turned to her and leaned in close. “You know I used to drink,” he said. “A lot.”

Dee blinked. “What?”

He nodded. “Bourbon, mostly. I never used to—that is, I did, but just once in a while, like regular folks. Then something ... happened. I don’t quite ... I don’t quite remember what, and my mind,” he brought his hand up to his temple and made a circular motion. “My mind would *race*. Thoughts ping-ponging back and fourth. I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t make sense. So, I drank. I slowed myself down by drinking. I would sit in a bar and let the darkness wash over me and the booze would slow me down., one drink at a time, like I was filling myself with gelatin, until finally I passed out.”

Dee frowned. “Why are you telling me this?”

Marks sighed. “It worked. It took a long time, but all those lost afternoons, they slowed me down. They stopped my brain from spinning, and I was able to pull out of it, crawl back.” He snorted, half smiling. “I’m still crawling.” He looked distant for a moment, then snapped back. “Sometimes you have to slow yourself down, give yourself a chance to settle. So, sit here for a moment, kid. Settle.”

Dee's face scrunched up and for a moment she seemed almost about to cry. She struggled with a fierce sense of impatience. She kept picturing her father receding from her, getting smaller as he moved further away, and sitting still made it feel even worse, even more real. Then she shook herself and slumped down a little. "Okay."

Marks nodded and returned his attention to the notebook, making marks. "Tell me about your Dad."

"You *guys*," Agnes said, sitting gracefully on the other side of Marks, folding her long legs under herself as if it was a standard move she did quite often despite the narrow skirt. "You're making me cry."

"He's fat," Dee said, dragging one arm across her nose. "Or, he isn't, but he will be. He eats a lot, he gains weight, then he gets worried and drops it. He makes jokes. *Bad* jokes. Dumb jokes, but they make him laugh and when he laughs you can't help it, you laugh too."

"I *do* hope we find him," Agnes said wistfully. "He sounds *delightful*."

"Hush," Marks said gently.

"Anyway, he has a temper. Or used to. He promised me he was *working* on that." She snorted. "Shit, I don't even care any more. Just want to find him. I mean, if he'd come back, found an apartment, gotten a job, and he turned out to be a prick, at least I'd *know*. Three years, I'd walk out. But now it's like he never even got a chance."

Marks nodded, still making notes. "But he didn't teach you chess."

She shook her head, leaning back, her palms flat against the floor. "No, was my Mom. She had this old set her dad gave her, nice wooden pieces, green felt on the bottom, a board that folded up into a box to hold them. She said kids at school teased her when she joined the chess club, but she didn't care; it was like the first time in her life she'd found something she just *enjoyed*, you know, something that wasn't work or grades or because her parents had made her, but because she just *liked* it. So she didn't care what people said." She sighed. "It was fun. I *like* chess. We would sit with a book she got from the library, *1000 Chess Openings*, and just play through them, recreate the famous games, stuff like—" She paused. "Hey!"

Agnes, who had been dozing prettily, suddenly snapped awake. "Hey!"

"What is it?" Marks asked.

Dee stood up and walked from plaque to plaque, lips moving as she studied them in turn. She turned and looked at Marks. "*Foyle's Double Reverse* isn't a real opening."

Marks sat forward. "Are you sure?"

She shrugged, looking back down at the plaques. "No. I don't know *every* fucking opening—sorry. I don't though. But I know all these others, or I read about them, saw the name. Except that one. I *never* heard that one before."

Marks smiled. "See? You slowed down." He pushed the notebook back into the backpack and stood up, moving stiffly. "All right, Foyle's it is."

Agnes made a tsking sound. “I can't say much—really, I *can't*—but I wouldn't go that way. If they haven't moved things around—which they *do*, all the time, and it is *incredibly* annoying—then that door leads to a dreary, nasty room I prefer to avoid.”

Marks shut his eyes. “You know, trying to decide whether you're actively deceiving us or telling us the truth or a version of it in hopes that we'll *assume* you're lying to us is exhausting, so maybe you could stop telling us things and just, I don't know, do some interpretive dancing over in the corner until we make our decision.”

Agnes pointed at him. “*Rude*. Here I share my wonderful, amazing home with you, and not only have you *completely* failed to see the truth of this place, but you're rude to me on top of everything.”

Marks looked at Dee. “You ready, kid?”

She offered him a thumb's up. He strode over to the archway and took hold of the door, which was different than all the others: It seemed older, and was heavier, the metal hardware blackened and rusted. It moved slowly, silently, revealing another short hallway that turned at a right angle a few feet in, obviously intended to prevent people from seeing what lay beyond just by opening doors. Marks considered scouting ahead, but didn't want to leave Dee alone with Agnes, or send Dee alone into the unknown. He shifted the backpack onto his shoulder and started walking.

Behind him, he heard Agnes: “*Rude*.”