



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 16

16. The Queer Lounge

The slide melted away and he was free-falling, crashing down through a drop ceiling suspended by thin wires and an aluminum frame. He landed on something with a lot of give and bounced off, crashing down onto the floor and rolling over. He looked around.

“Ah, *shit*,” he said. “Not again.”

A moment later, screaming, Dee rocketed from the slide that was hidden up above in the shadows gathered near the ceiling. She hit what Marks could see now was the trampoline and bounced off too, landing on top of him and knocking him over. He heard Agnes follow, cheering as she hit the air and laughing uproariously as she bounced and crashed into them in a cloud of peppermint.

“Oh, *lovely!*” she said, sitting up with her legs stretched out in front of her. “Lovely! Sorry, I would have warned you but I didn’t put in the slide. Someone has been *very* naughty!”

Dee sat up and stared around. “No!”

Marks pushed himself back until he was resting against the door of the closet. “It *is* a maze, after all,” he said.

They all jumped as the refrigerator suddenly tipped violently as something inside it threw itself against the door. It fell back into place after coming very close to tipping over, and Agnes burst into laughter.

They were back in the oppressive, queer employee lounge. The Victrola was playing the same jazzy music, and the place still had the deflated air of a room recently abandoned. Marks indulged himself for a moment, wondering if the sensation of someone having *just* been there was actually *them*, if they were somehow displaced and out of sync with time, following themselves.

“Wonderful!” Agnes said breathily.

Dee stood up and brushed herself off. “Doors are the same,” she said. Then she scowled. “*Everything’s* the same. We just looped back on ourselves. We’re *wasting time.*”

“Calm down,” Marks said, grunting as he pushed himself to his feet. “We’re not wasting time. It’s a *maze*. This has to happen.” He shrugged off the backpack and took out the notebook, which was getting a wrinkled and tattered look to it. “We know where that dumwaiter leads to,” he said. “So we choose something else.” He looked up over the notebook at Agnes, who remained on the floor smiling. “Any suggestions for finding her Dad faster?”

Agnes sighed. “All *business*, you are, Miserable Moody Mr. Marks. All business and fussing. It’s why you’re so *unhappy*. We just rode a *slide* from the Underground to the Lounge! It was *delightful!* And all you can do is get out your grimy notebook.” She sprang up and made a stuffy, angry face. “*Let us see,*

turn to page nine, class, and let us examine the Incident of the Dum Waiter.” She grinned and looked at him. “See?” she said, pointing. “Fussy.”

Marks nodded. “I’m making a note: *Don’t be so fussy.*”

Agnes grinned. “Was that a joke? A terrible, weak, unfunny *joke*? Progress!” She spun and took Dee by the shoulders. “Now, dismal, despairing Dee, let me go *on record* and state that I have been trying to steer you in the right direction since the *start*, because my official advice is to follow the wolf and take the elevator.”

Dee and Marks both turned to look at the door. It was the familiar door they’d seen in almost every room, and the wolf carved on it looked intimidating, feral. Dee looked at Marks, and he shrugged.

“Dee’s Dad is at the other end of that ride?”

“It’s your best bet, Mr. Mopey Marks. As I just discovered, someone is not only tearing down barricades I set in place, someone is installing slides! So I have no idea if my memories are accurate.” She grinned. “Which, I hear, is something *you* of all people should understand and sympathize with! But you won’t, because you’re a nasty sort of person. But if you’re looking for dear dopey Dee’s Dad, the Wolf Door is the door *I* would try.”

Dee looked at Marks. “We got to.”

Marks nodded. “I know.” He turned and studied Agnes. “But there’s a trick. We should spend a moment trying to see it.”

Agnes drew herself up, and Marks was suddenly aware of just how *attractive* she’d become. When they’d first encountered her she’d been pretty enough, certainly, but she had slowly and subtly changed, becoming taller, thinner, rounder, her skin clearer, her eyes brighter, her hair somehow shinier and bouncier. She was a goddess, almost too beautiful to look at. “I am insulted. And also no longer interested in your *cruelty*. *That* door, as you might recall from your ridiculous map, takes you back to the library. *That* dumwaiter, as you know, takes you to the odd little bedroom—or it did. *That* door,” she continued, pointing at the door with a bear carved onto it, “leads to the *saddest* room in this place. The *elevator* is the one you want.”

“Fine,” Marks said. “Let’s go, Dee.”

Dee nodded, walked over to the elevator and stood right in front of it. Up close the doors were battered and dented, with at least two very deep scratches in the metal. Like something had attacked the doors. There was just one button. It looked like it was made of pearl, a milky white that shined like plastic. The Wolf was scratched into the metal, etched somehow, as if with acid. Up close it seemed terrifying. Up close it was like the wolf was looking directly at her, and it seemed *hungry*.

She reached up and pressed the button. It was warm, and she was rewarded with a soft *ding*. A second later, the doors split open.

The interior of the elevator was all plush red. The floor was a deep, polished black. The music was the same tune being played on the Victrola but in a muted, tinkly version that was all treble, perfectly synced. The same tune Agnes had been humming when they first arrived.

Dee took a step back and twisted around to look at Agnes. "I want to go a different way?"

"There's a *party* behind the Bear Door," Agnes said. "Or *was*, a long time ago. It's a *sad* party, but since you don't seem to want to find your father, I suppose that would actually be appropriate."

Dee clenched her jaw and turned back to the elevator. Marks stepped up behind her. "Come on, kid. He's either in the next room, or he's not. Let's go see what's what."

Dee took a deep breath. "All right," she said. She stepped into the elevator, paused, then turned. Marks hurried after her, suddenly terrified the doors would snap shut.

Nothing happened. He turned to peer back into the room at Agnes.

"Coming?"

She smiled. "No."

The doors snapped shut.