



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 17

### 17. The Waiting Room

For a moment, Marks had the sensation of being sealed off, the air going still and the pressure climbing. Then the cab lurched, sending him stumbling into Dee. They righted themselves, and the elevator shuddered into motion.

“Why isn't she coming?” Dee asked. “Why didn't she come?”

He sighed. “Because it's a trap, kid. Because we messed up and fell for a trap.”

She looked ready to cry. “I'm *sorry*,” she said quietly. “I'm *sorry*.”

He reached out one hand awkwardly and put it on her shoulder. “Shut up, kid. We were fucking doomed from the moment we walked in here.”

She started crying. “Also my damn fault,” she sobbed. “Ah, shit, I'm sorry. You didn't have much going on, Mr. Marks, but you looked like you were on the upswing, huh? Cash, and you looked like a man hadn't had a roof over his head for a while. And I dragged you here, and now we're gonna *die*, aren't we?”

“No,” he said quietly, looking around. “This place wants us alive. That's the point. It wants to steal our time.”

The elevator cab was oppressively red. The music seemed to be on an endless loop without structure, just a motif repeating endlessly. He looked up; there was a maintenance panel in the middle of the ceiling.

The ride went on longer than should have been possible, the cab just shaking and screeching on and on. They stood in silence, him with his hand on her shoulder, her with tears streaming down her face. The music playing.

Suddenly, the music was interrupted by a burst of static, and then Agnes' voice came over the air, tinny and cheerful.

“Fifth floor: Knickers, moonbeams, and carcinogens,” she announced. “I wanted to thank you for a truly entertaining time! You totally broke records. You lasted *long time*. I will never forget you, dour poor man and black moppet.”

“Is she going to just keep *talking* to us forever?” Dee asked. “Is that how this goes?”

“Sixth floor: Seashells, seashells, by the seesaw,” Agnes continued, her voice somehow seeming to fill the entirety of the cab, a pulsing vibration using every molecule of the elevator as an amplifier. “To be

clear, while, yes, it's true I pushed you towards this option from the very beginning, I also offered some better choices. For example, there *is* actually a map in the library! Really there is! It would take you *ever* so long to find it, but I was not, actually, lying."

"Seems like it," Marks said, leaning back against the rear of the elevator and wishing fervently for a cigarette for the first time in a long time.

"Seventh floor: Kittens, barbells, feral children. Nasty place, the seventh floor, do not go there. Mr. Marks, you wished to know who I made myself resemble. I shan't tell you, but I am sure you will figure it out in time. And then, my manly, miserable Marks, you will *wish you had not.*"

Marks nodded to himself as if this made perfect sense. He glanced down at Dee, who was staring up at him apprehensively, and winked.

"Eighth floor: Blood diamonds, blood money, blood donations," Agnes snapped off. "Ninth floor: Beetles, earworms, human centipedes. Tenth floor ... tenth floor, end of the line."

Her voice cut off, the shaking stopped, and with a neutral-sounding *ding* the doors split open again.

It revealed a pleasant room, quite large and filled with people. There were hundreds of multi-colored plastic seats arranged either in rows or little groups. A long table along the wall nearest the elevator held urns of coffee and plates of donuts. Many of the people had paper cups in their hands. A Muzak version of a sad, melancholy song was playing softly—but Marks was momentarily relieved to hear it was a different song than the one he'd been hearing everywhere else.

"Tenth floor," Agnes said softly all around them. "Old friends."

They stepped into the room, and the elevator doors closed behind them softly. The smell of coffee was strong, and the music seemed to recede to an almost subliminal level of volume. Marks squinted and leaned forward, then straightened up.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "There's a *horizon.*"

A few people seated nearest them glanced over. One elderly gentleman, wearing a suit of tattered and oversized clothes, looked Marks up and down and sniffed audibly.

"There's a five year wait for a chair," he said. "*I'm* not moving."

"Is my Dad here?" Dee asked, straining up onto her toes. "I mean, this is where she wanted us to go. This was her trick. He has to be here, right?"

"Maybe, kid," he said. "Stay close, though—this place is huge!"

"Dad!" she shouted, setting off between the rows of chairs. "Dad!"

Marks noted how many of the people in the chairs were elderly. A few scowled at Dee as she raced by.

"Keep it down!"

"I'm *sleeping* here, sweetheart."

"Shut up, you fucking brat!"

Marks waved them away as he hustled after her, trying to keep up. He noted that the people near the elevator were all uniformly older, often decrepit. A few he noticed had dust on their shoulders as they dozed, and the air, he realized, had a thick, earthy smell that definitely implied a lack of bathrooms. He glanced down and saw that the floor was covered in a soft pelt of dirt that wasn't dirt—too light, too springy. It hit him a moment later and he stumbled, gagging, and almost losing his balance: It was skin flakes and hair, dirt and fingernails from the people who'd been sitting here, waiting, for years, possibly decades—so long it had all mulched into some sort of soil, complete with tiny sprouts, their delicate green leaves reaching up for ...what? Tears? Sweat? Saliva?

For the first time, the fear that maybe they *were* trapped got a hand on him. He wondered at the odds: All of these people, he had little doubt, had entered this room just as he had—a little stunned, possibly already exhausted by a lengthy journey through the maze, but essentially certain there was always another door, another option. Even if you looped back to the beginning or found yourself in some terrible room again, there would always be another way.

And now here they were, sitting down, letting their lives slip away.

“Dee! Slow down!”

She ignored him, racing forward and shouting. The room, Marks noted, went on and on, impossibly large. Their voices, rather than echoing off the high ceiling and distant walls, just fell flat. The effort to shout was a strain, as if the air was thicker than usual and it required more energy just to be heard. The sheer scale of the place started to eat away at his equanimity, and he was suddenly afraid he'd lose track of her and not be able to locate her again.

“Dee!”

For a moment, Marks thought there was a faint echo, then he realized he was hearing someone *else* shout her name.

“Dad!”

Dee swerved, cutting down a new aisle between a whole new island of seats. Marks hurried after her, backpack bouncing. Through the sweat that started to fog his vision he could see a tall, lanky man wearing a denim jacket, wearing blue work pants and a pair of battered old boots. He was running easily through the narrow lanes between the chairs, and scooped Dee up into his arms when they met, swinging her in a half-circle before setting her down on the floor.

Several of those seated scowled and grumbled.

“Baby, what are you *doing* here?” he asked. Marks slowed down and walked the last few feet towards them, breathing hard. He halted and leaned over, putting his hands on his knees, sucking in air. The backpack slid forward and rested on the back of his head.

“I came after you,” she said. “When you didn't come back I *knew* somethin' had happened to you.”

Kneeling in front of her, he put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her face. Marks liked him: He was middle-aged, fortyish, and had the skinny frame of someone used to being hungry, but with a

paunch that hinted at a slow down, more time spent sitting around than he was used to. His face was deeply lined, the sort of face, Marks thought, that was used to a lot of expression.

“You shouldn’t have come, baby,” he said seriously, eyes shining. “You shouldn’t have *come*.”

Dee was crying. “I wanted to find you,” she said softly.

As murmurs of disapproval swept the crowd, Dee’s father’s eyes drifted over her shoulder to where Marks stood.

“Who’s this?”

Dee turned and dragged an arm across her nose. “Mr. Marks. He’s helping me.”

Her father eyed Marks up and down, his face set. “You *brought* her here, man?”

“I followed him! He didn’t know!” Dee added quickly. “He was comin’ here to look for you, and I snuck after him.”

Marks looked at his shoes. “I had a chance to turn back when I knew she was here, and I didn’t,” he admitted. He forced himself to look up. “I’m sorry.”

The man stared for another few moments, then stood up. Patting Dee’s shoulder, he stepped around her and approached Marks, who steadied himself. He’d been punched in the nose more than once and while he didn’t enjoy it, he’d found that he came back from it admirably.

“All right, what’s done is done and we can talk about it later,” the man said. He held out a hand. “Dennis,” he said.

Marks took his hand. It was warm and dry and rough, the hands of someone used to working with them. His grip was powerful, his shake efficient. “Phil,” Marks said.

“He’s been keepin’ an eye on me, Dad,” Dee said from behind them. Dennis studied Marks for another moment, then sighed.

“All right,” he said. “All right. I know how willful this one is. And I know I sure didn’t expect *this* bullshit when I showed up here, so ... all right. You’re here now.”

Marks nodded. “You have a look around? Any doors? Any way out?”

Dennis nodded. “Yeah, I been lookin’. All we got in here is chairs. And people. And if you walk a real *long* way in that direction—” He turned to indicate an area of the room behind him. “You find some real *old* chairs with some real *dead* people sittin’ in them.” He looked back at Marks. “So, as far as I can tell, no, no way out.”

Marks smiled slightly. “That’s what she wants us to think, isn’t it?”