



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 18

18. The Waiting Room

“It occurs to me,” Dennis said slowly, “that you might be a dirty trick.”

Marks sipped the coffee. It was terrible, watery and gritty, with only a vaguely coffee-like flavor. “Like maybe we’re not what we seem to be.”

Dennis nodded. “I met a woman when I arrived. Nice older black lady, said she’d been here for days, suggested we team up. Full of opinions about where to go.”

Marks nodded, blowing on the steaming cup. “She changed. Looked different by the end.”

Dennis nodded, studying Marks, then leaning forward a little to study Dee.

“And now you’re wondering if we’re part of the Welcome Wagon, here to mess with you.”

Dennis leaned back and pursed his lips. “It had crossed my mind, yeah. Shit, man, I dealt with the prison yard, basically didn’t sleep for four years because I was convinced I was getting killed or ... or something if I did. And I still felt more secure than I do right at this moment.”

“Smart man.” Marks toasted him with his coffee cup. “You’ve been living on donuts and coffee for two weeks now?”

They were seated on the floor near the urns, Dee to one side of her father and Marks on the other. People sometimes approached the tables and sniffed in irritation before getting their own cups or plates of pastries, but no one said anything. Marks watched them curiously, wondering how in the world they could possibly just *sit there*.

Dennis nodded. “I got *experience* with terrible coffee, man, and stale donuts. Meetings, AA.” He blinked. “Wait. You say two *weeks*? I count two *days*.”

“Time’s different in here. The whole point is to drain you, keep you spinning.” He sipped the coffee again and winced. “The donuts as bad as this?”

“Worse,” Dennis said. “There’s a definite *sawdust* vibe going on.”

“You walk the perimeter?”

Dennis nodded, and Marks found himself impressed. There was something of himself in Dennis, he thought, even though they looked quite different: Marks white, wearing a cheap suit, somehow inert and heavy; Dennis black and wearing denim, his hair cut short (but slowly growing wild), his hands calloused. But Marks could sense that despair, that knowledge that you’d lost more time than you had left, that opportunities were running out. He smelled familiar desperation on Dennis and it made him feel like they were on the same team. A losing team, perhaps, but at least familiar.

"I started at the elevator," he said. "And walked right. Hit the wall, turned left. Kept walking. And walking. And *walking*. This room is god-damn *huge*."

"You find the edge?"

Dennis shook his head, sipping his own coffee. "Not yet. I decided I would get some sleep, stuff my pockets with donuts, and carry two cups of coffee with me, make an attempt at finding the other side of this room." He looked around. "This place is *crazy*."

Marks nodded. "Who fills the coffee urns? Puts out the donuts?"

"Never saw no one."

Marks sipped the coffee with a straightfaced sense of resignation and looked over the crowd of people sitting around them. Some stood, in small groups. Marks ran his eyes over them, reminding himself that they might be plants, figments, or even Agnes herself, who had demonstrated an ability to change her form to some extent, and who certainly wasn't human.

"Hey!"

A doughy-looking woman with hair that had been dyed bright red, but which had grown out into a dull silver, giving her a two-toned look, turned and looked at them with dulled, blank eyes. "What?"

"How long you been here?"

She shrugged. "Dunno."

"Guess!"

"Dunno."

He got to his feet and carried his coffee over to one of the knots of people: Three young men wearing casual office clothes: Button-down shirts, jackets. They looked at him politely as he approached.

"How long you been here, guys?"

They looked at him, then at each other, smiling secretly. They shook their heads and turned away, leaning in close to have a private conversation. Marks nodded and returned to where Dennis and Dee were sitting.

"Not too friendly, huh?" Dennis asked.

"The Waiting Room part is genius," Marks said. "For a lot of people, they can't process what's happening to them. It's so far outside their experience and expectations, they don't know what to do. Their brains shut down, become paralyzed. And then you give them a *waiting room*, and instinct takes over. They sit. They *wait*. Anyone trying to upset that is ignored, or attacked."

"Okay," Dennis said. "So what do you do for a living, Mr. Marks? Because it sounds like you *build* places like this. Or, like we touched on, maybe you're my old black lady friend fucking with me." His eyes flashed in Dee's direction. "*Messing* with me."

"I know the word, Dad."

“No,” Marks said. “Just been to a few places in this general category. That’s how I came to look for you, in a building that shouldn’t exist.”

“All right. All right. So, we walk the perimeter. You really think there's a way out of here?”

“You tried the elevator?”

Dennis shook his head. “No button. Tried pulling the doors open, even tore apart one of the chairs and tried prying them with one of the legs. All it got me was bloody fingers.” He held up his hands. The fingers were scabbed and raw.

Marks nodded, looking over at the shiny metal doors. “Hey, Dee, remember the slide into that weird lounge? We had no idea it was there.” He nodded again. “I’ll make a bet, we walk the perimeter we’ll walk for a long time, and find nothing.” He looked at Dennis. “This whole place is designed to waste our time. Chances are, if you see an obvious way, you're being screwed.”

Dennis sighed. “All right, so we can't wait, we can't walk, so what do we do?”

Marks gestured. “The *elevator*. Look, this place is trying hard to convince us the elevator's a dead end. But it *can't* be. If we couldn't go back, it wouldn't be here—the doors usually disappear when you can't go backwards.”

“Yeah,” Dennis said, leaning forward. “*Yeah*. That's right, when you can't go back, the door just ain't there. I remember that.”

“So if the elevator is still here, there has to be a way to get back in it. Ride it back up. Or ride it *somewhere*.”

Dennis smiled. “Mr. Marks, you just saved us a lot of walking. So how do we get the elevator doors open?”

Marks shrugged. “I don't know.”

Dennis studied him for a moment, then smiled broadly. “My man!”

“*Dad*,” Dee said.

Marks smiled. He'd forgotten how good it could be to just have voices around you, people paying attention to you, interacting and reacting. He stared at the elevator doors and basked, for a moment, in having another adult just sharing his company.

“We could just wait for the next bunch of stupid people,” Dee said.

Marks turned to look at her, his dreamy half-smile still in place. “What?”

Dee shrugged. “We came down the elevator, and the doors opened and stayed open until we stepped off. Why not wait for the next group of dummies who get trapped in here, and just step back on?”

Dennis and Marks looked at each other.

“Would that work?” Dennis asked.

“I have no idea.” Marks looked back at the elevator doors. “But unless we come up with something better, we're going to find out.”