



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 19

### 19. The Waiting Room

“Why do they all just sit there, waiting?”

Marks shrugged. “It’s a Waiting Room, right?”

The three of them were sitting on the floor in front of the elevator, a picnic of sorts spread out in front of them. Marks had pulled everything out of his backpack and taken an inventory and reviewed his map, making more notes. Dennis discovered there was hot water in one of the urns instead of coffee, so they unplugged it to let it cool. Then they had a meal of power bars, donuts, and coffee.

“That was the worst lunch I have literally ever eaten,” Dee said.

“Your Mom would never have allowed it,” Dennis said, grinning. “That woman, she drove me mad, girl, but she knew how to get things *done*.”

Marks was re-packing the bag, trying to lay power bars like bricks to gain the most efficient possible use of space. Every few minutes he glanced up at the doors. He didn’t want to admit it out loud, but he felt alive and energetic, almost happy. He had a clear purpose, no distractions, and for the first time in a very long time he didn’t have any bills to worry about, he didn’t have to figure out how to live on ten dollars a week or where he was going to sleep that night. He didn’t have to spend hours pretending to really, *really* enjoy a cup of cooling coffee just so he could sit inside someplace warm for a while.

And he still had more than four thousand dollars sewn into his jacket. In a strange way he refused to acknowledge consciously, he felt like every day he spent in this awful place, this dark, black house, was a day he didn’t have to spend a dime on survival. It pushed his eventual return to penury further and further out, and that was comforting.

“Maybe we should try to recruit people,” Dee said. “This is messed up. They all got lured here just like us, right Mr. Marks?”

Marks nodded. “That’s probably true, though places like this find its victims in different ways. There are odd little entrances all over the place, hidden. Turn a dark corner, there you are.” He turned to look at them. “The one constant is these places only reveal themselves to people who have nothing to lose, and no one looking for them. People who won’t be missed.”

They all contemplated that for a grim moment. Then Dennis brightened. “Well, then it messed up this time, because I had Dee.”

Marks nodded, turning his attention back to his packing. “Yes. Without Dee you’d just be sitting here, like the rest of them.”

“Who we should at least *try* to talk to, right?” Dee said impatiently. “They’re being messed with, right? That’s why they’re just sitting here. It’s like a spell or something, the same way Agnes made herself look a certain way. A trick. We got, like, a *duty* to try and snap them out of it.”

“Agnes,” Dennis said musingly. “That’s the name she gave me, too.”

Marks shook his head. “Your Dad didn’t just sit around.”

“What?”

“It’s a trick, sure, but it’s not forcing anyone. That would be against the rules. This place wants us all in here because it’s easier to soak up our energy, but if it enchanted us into sitting around or something, it wouldn’t get much out of us. It wants people up and moving: Getting coffee, walking the perimeter, arguing, getting into fights. No, the people here who are just sitting? They’re sitting because they don’t want to do anything else. They’ve given up.”

“Then why don’t this place liven them up?” she asked. “It wants energy, movement, business. Why let them just sit?”

He shrugged. “Best guess? Agnes has her hands full. Whatever she is, she’s just one of it. She has to go greet and fuck over every visitor to this place, guide them here. She doesn’t have time to come in here and make everyone do calisthenics or something.”

“What’s *calisthenics*?”

“Nothing important.”

“Still,” she said firmly. “We should try to snap ‘em out of it.”

“No, we shouldn’t.” Marks finished packing and zipped up the backpack. “Let’s say we get a dozen, two dozen, or just one person to get off their ass. These are people who chose to sit down and wait. Your Dad’s been here for what seems to him like two days, we walk in and he’s still motoring, trying to figure this out. These people are sitting here because they’ve *given up*. If we pry some loose they’ll be dead weights around our necks. We won’t be able to help them, and they’ll *hurt* us, they’ll slow us down, they’ll argue every decision, they’ll complain, and we’ll suffer for it.”

“Baby,” Dennis said slowly after a moment’s silence. “I got to side with Mr. Marks here on this. You maybe ain’t seen the quality of people I have, and I’m glad of that. But most people make bad decisions, then get mad at you over ‘em. We’re better off on our own. These people got eyes and ears. They could come to the same conclusions we did.”

Dee seemed unhappy, but she nodded. “All right.”

They sat for a while. Marks thought about getting another cup of coffee, then imagined himself having to relieve himself against a wall somewhere, as there didn’t seem to be a bathroom anywhere. Then he thought there *would* be a bathroom somewhere in the maze, wouldn’t there, and he decided it was best that he never, ever see it.

“Listen, we don’t—”

Without fanfare, the elevator emitted a dry, sterile *ping*.

Marks could hear her, he could hear Agnes, doing the same schtick. *Sixth floor, unwanted advances, that sinking feeling, model trains.* The voice was dim and muffled, but rising and clarifying.

“Come on!”

They scrambled to their feet. Marks swung the backpack over his shoulder, then turned to glance at the urn of cooling water. He was down to his last few bottles of water, and the gallon or three in the urn would be more than useful. But there was no time. If they paused to gather it, figure out how to carry it with them, there was a very good chance the elevator would leave, and they had no way of knowing if it would ever come back. They had to take the opportunity.

“When the doors open, we go in *immediately*,” he said, poised. “Don't hesitate!”

Dennis and Dee both nodded. They all stood, poised, ready.

Agnes' voice, rising in volume: *Eighth floor, bloomers, pantaloons, lederhosen.*

The doors split open.

They ran forward, silent, and crowded into the cab, spinning to face the doors, breathing hard from pure excitement. They waited.

“Excuse me?”

They all froze.

“Is this the way out or not?”

They all three turned almost as one, and stared back at the pleasant-looking, washed-out young man in the mid-range suit. He looked a little worse for the wear; rough around the edges. His blond hair was out of place, his jacket was torn, and he had a shallow gash just under his hairline.

Marks smiled and stepped to one side, pushing Dee gently against then wall of the cab. “We don't know,” he said, feeling honest and upright.

“Dammit,” the man said. “I was *really* hoping you knew more than I did.”

“Life is disappointment,” Marks said brightly. He looked up at then ceiling. “Dee, if your Dad holds you up, think you can pry open that panel?”

Dee squinted up at the square. “Maybe. With what?”

“It should just push up, like a ceiling tile.” Marks looked at Dennis. “Okay?”

The man in the suit frowned. “What's going on?”

“Sir, we're inspecting elevators today,” Marks said. “You go on in and have a cup of coffee.”

“*Marks*,” Dee hissed.

Marks looked at her, then at Dennis. They both stared back at him. He slumped a little, and turned to face the man in the suit. “I don't think this is the way out,” he said quietly. “We came down here too. It's a Trap Room. You should stick with us.”

The man in the suit blinked. “What’s a Trap Room? Do you know Agnes?”

“Everyone here,” Marks said, “knows Agnes. Dee?”

She looked at Dennis. “Dad?”

Dennis peered up at the panel. “Okay. No harm in trying. I’ll lift you up, see if you can push the panel up.”

“Uh,” the man in the suit said. “I’m still standing here.”

Dennis scooped up Dee and lifted her up by her waist. She pushed her hands up against the panel until it lifted.

“Higher!” she said.

Dennis boosted her up.

“Why are we going up through the ceiling?” The man in the suit said, frowning. “Is this room so terrible?”

“It’s the worst room of them all.” Marks said.

Dee pushed the panel up a few inches, then slid it back until she’d revealed the opening, which was about two by two. It was a square of inky black.

Suit Man leaned forward and peered up at it. “So ... let me get this right. You’d rather go up into the pitch-black shaft than stay in that room. Jesus, I’ve seen some frightening shit these last three days, but I can’t even imagine what would make me climb into that.”

“Coffee,” Marks said.

“And donuts,” Dennis added, letting Dee drop down to the floor.

The four of them stared up at the dark square. “How do we get up there?” Dee asked.

“We’ve got lots of chairs,” Dennis said.

No one moved. One by one they turned to stare at the doors.

“Chances the doors shut if any one of us step outside?” Marks asked.

“What?” Suit Man said, smiling nervously.

Dennis looked at Marks. “Pretty good.”

One by one, they turned and looked at Suit Man. He continued to stare up at the panel for a few moments, then turned and looked around. “What?”

Marks stepped over and took him by the arm and began walking him in a tight circle inside the elevator. “What say you dash out there and grab us a chair or two?”

Suit Man frowned. “Why—you don’t want to—what’s going to happen to me if I go out there?”

“Our experience is limited,” Marks said, turning him in a tight circle. “But probably nothing.”

“You were going in there anyway, right?” Dennis said.

“Sure, but that was before you *freaked me out*.”

“You weren't freaked out *before* this?” Dee asked.

Suit Man pulled away from Marks and stood in front of the doors. “What happens if I step out there and the doors close behind me?”

“All the coffee and donuts you can consume,” Marks said.

“And we're fucked,” Dennis added. Then he glanced at Dee. “We're *in trouble*.”

“*Dad*,” she groused.

Suit Man turned. “All right,” he said, looking from face to face. “Tell me why you're going up the elevator shaft. Why aren't you just picking a door?”

Marks looked at Dee, then at Dennis. He looked back at Suit Guy. “It's a trap,” he said. “There are no doors.”

“I see.” Suit Man said. He looked back through the doors and set his jaw. “All right, I'll grab a chair. But then I'm coming with you.”

Marks, Dennis, and Dee exchanged looks, and nodded at each other.

“All right,” Marks said. “Deal.”

“Appreciated,” Dennis added.

Suit Man turned, squared his shoulders, and stepped briskly out of the elevator. He stopped and turned, smiling.

“Well!” he said.

The elevator doors snapped shut.