



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 20

### 20. A New Room

For a moment they stood, frozen with surprise. Then they all looked up at the ceiling and the panel.

“Dennis,” Marks said. “If you got on my shoulders, could you climb up there?”

Dennis squinted. “Yup.”

No one moved. “Dennis,” Marks said. “If you get up there, do you think you’d be able to pull *me* up after you, if Dee helps?”

Dennis’ squint turned into a frown. “Well ... ” He turned and looked Marks up and down. “Maybe.”

“And leave me *here*?” Dee demanded.

Marks shook his head. “One of us braces the others legs, and he dangles down, grabs your arms, we pull you up.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Not saying anything *specific* about anyone’s level of physical condition here,” Dennis said, “but you feeling confident we can pull off those feats of strength?”

Marks straightened up. “Jesus, I’ve got *rope* in the bag.”

In short order, Marks had produced the rope he’d bought and gotten down on his hands and knees.

Dennis took the rope and used Marks as a human step stool, pulling himself up into the service hatch.

His legs disappeared, kicking and wriggling, and a moment later the rope dropped down, looking like a thin, frail white line that would obviously snap when tested.

Dennis’ face appeared framed in the square of the hatch. “You doin’ all right, baby?”

Dee offered him a sardonic thumb’s up. Marks was amused to see how quickly she’d gone from joy at seeing her father to a sullen sort of exasperation. He assumed this was standard for children.

“You next,” he said.

She eyed the black square for a second. “Where do you think it leads?”

He shrugged. “Back to the lounge?”

She shook her head, her expression uneasy. “Seems too easy, don’t it? Too damn easy to just backtrack. Like you said, this room is a trap. We ain’t *supposed* to be able to get out. So why have an access panel in the damn elevator?”

Marks pursed his lips and looked up at the black square above them. "A trap within a trap," he said thoughtfully.

"Make it worse," Dee said. "That's what I'd do, if I was Agnes, lookin' to keep us in here like bugs in a jar or something."

Marks kept staring at the hole in the ceiling. Presently Dennis' face reappeared.

"I got it secure enough," he said. "You guys coming?"

Marks animated, coming back to the present. "You go," he said to Dee. "I'll follow."

She looked at him dubiously. "You think you be able to climb this rope? When's the last time you had gym class?"

"Go," he said with a grimace, taking hold of the rope and holding it taut for her. She shook her head and grabbed on, easily pulling herself up with four powerful tugs, Dennis grabbing onto her and reeling her up the last few feet. Two faces looked down at Marks.

"Come on, old man," Dee said. "You got me into this mess, you got to get me out."

"You *volunteered*," Marks said, tossing the backpack up. Dennis caught it smartly, and it disappeared into the darkness beyond. He took hold of the rope and tugged on it, took a deep breath, and launched himself upwards, pulling with all his might.

That went well enough. When it came time to move one hand up, he found it no easy task, eventually managing to support himself somewhat by clamping his feet together and letting some of his weight go there. Where it had taken Dee seconds to scramble, it took Marks nearly a minute, and when they pulled him onto the roof of the elevator, he was sweating and breathing hard. He lay on his back staring up at the total darkness of the elevator shaft, catching his breath and waiting for the tell-tale signs of a heart attack while Dennis retrieved the rope and untied it.

There was a strange sense of space all around them, as if the shaft were much larger than it should be and the elevator was in fact swinging freely like a pendulum. The light leaking up and out of the elevator was weak and quickly absorbed, illuminating just a few inches of the elevator's top, the thick metal cables rising up into darkness.

Rolling over, Marks grabbed his bag and extracted a flashlight by feel. He clicked it on and aimed the beam around them, revealing they were, in fact, in a shaft just large enough to hold the elevator cab. There was a maintenance ladder on one wall. He aimed the flashlight up above them, but the beam diffused and dissolved long before revealing anything of note.

"At least there's a Ladder," Dennis said.

Marks snorted. "I was hoping for an exit."

"You sure there *is* one?" Dennis said, then looked sharply at Dee. "Oh, shit, of *course* there's an exit, right?"

Marks nodded. "There is. There has to be. It's hard to explain why, but if there wasn't an exit we'd know. We'd feel it, and give up. But we can sense there is one, so we keep moving, and that's what this place wants."

"If that's what this place wants, then why have a room where everyone's just sitting around waiting?"

Marks puffed out his cheeks for a moment. "I don't know. Come on. Let's climb."

The ladder was easier than the rope, but it was still difficult. Hand over hand, feet slipping on the rusted, lubricated rungs, he felt the sweat pour from him, his breathing labored and his jaw aching as he clenched the flashlight between his teeth. The darkness above didn't seem to change, and it didn't take long to become mesmerized by the steady scroll of the ladder and metal piping along the wall. He knew it didn't have to make sense, an endless elevator shaft in the midst of this place. His brain still rebelled against the implied infinity of it.

He'd lost the bubbling cheer he'd been feeling earlier. Now it all seemed too neat, too simple, and he worried there really was no choice, no possibility of making their own path. That Agnes was truly in charge, tugging them this way and that.

And yet she'd seemed, at times, as surprised as they'd been, as if she didn't know everything about this place, as if she'd inherited it, not built it. She'd hinted that changes were made she had nothing to do with, frustration with things that happened without her. It was heartening to think that even Agnes had so little control over her existence, that maybe she wasn't so different from them, scurrying around like ants fleeing the magnifying glass.

He climbed. His arms burned and his back ached. He climbed long after he thought they should have found the doors leading back to the queer lounge. He felt doubt creeping in, but kept climbing. The idea that it was all a complex trick that had been set up was too much to bear. But as he climbed it seemed increasingly likely that they'd gone much further than they should have, that they'd either missed the doors leading back to the lounge, or those doors had vanished. And maybe that meant *this* was the trap, the real trap, that they were now in a pitch-dark shaft clinging to a ladder until they were exhausted. Until they headed back down only to discover the elevator had vanished, until they realized they were trapped in this endless, dark space forever, and just let go, to fall endlessly.

He shook his head. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his eyes, but was afraid to let go of the ladder.

He swept the area ahead of him awkwardly with the flashlight, twisting his head this way and that, then paused and swung the light back. Carefully, he stopped climbing and hooked his elbow through on the rungs, taking the light from his mouth and holding it steady. There it was, on the opposite side of the shaft.

"Door," he shouted. "A door!"

"The Lounge?" Dee shouted back.

He leaned forward as far as he dared, clinging to the metal ladder. "No, it's one of the other doors, the usual doors," he said slowly. "It has a carving of ... a newt. A lizard, but I think it's a newt."

"We've seen newt!" Dee shouted.

“Sure,” Marks said, breathing hard in between the words. “But we had a *choice* before. Doesn’t mean it’s *safe*.”

“Mr. Marks,” Dennis said, his voice strained. “We’re hanging on a rusty ladder in an elevator shaft. *This ain’t safe*.”

Marks nodded to himself. “The real question is how do we get over there?”

For a moment he let the light dance on the door. It looked exactly like the doors had looked in the earlier rooms—heavy, wooden, dark.

“Jump?” Dee suggested.

Marks choked as a wave of giddy, hysterical laughter seized him. “No,” he managed to say. “We don’t jump.” He looked up into the darkness above. “We swing,” he said, not believing the words as they came out of his mouth. “We tie the rope to a rung of the ladder up above, then we Tarzan swing over there.”

“Did he just say *Tarzan swing*?” Dennis wanted to know.

Marks turned the flashlight onto the ladder and estimated the width between the rungs. “I’ll go first. You both stay below.”

He climbed, counting rungs and doing manic math in his head. They needed to get high enough so they’d have the length of rope necessary to swing over. He overcompensated, hooked his arm through a rung again while leaving the flashlight in his mouth, and fished out the rope one-handed. Awkwardly, he lopped the rope around the rung and formed a hitch that he thought would be sufficient. Then he fished up the other end of the rope and repeated the process so he had a long loop of rope knotted twice to the ladder. The loop was long enough, and he hoped having two knots would be insurance against someone plummeting down to their death.

“All right!” he said. “I’m going to try it.”

He ignored the anxious murmur of voices below and trained the flashlight on the door. There was a sliver of landing jutting out from the threshold; he thought it entirely possible to swing over, grab onto the doorknob with one hand while getting his feet on the landing. Then he could see if the door opened inward or outward.

He took a deep breath, tugged on the rope, and put the flashlight in his mouth again. Then he started climbing back down, counting rungs. When he judged he was in the right position, he took hold of the rope with one hand and slowly let it take his weight as he took his other hand from the rung and grabbed onto the rope. For a moment he was suspended with his feet on the rungs, then he leaned back, gathered himself, and launched himself into the air, hanging onto the rope.

He started swinging. The first leap only took him halfway to the door, but he could see he had the positioning right. Like a kid on a tire swing, he began working up momentum, forward, then back, forward, back. Each time the door came closer and closer, but as his arms burned and trembled he suddenly wasn’t confident he’d be able to let go with one hand. He thought it entirely possible if he tried he would lose his grip on the rope entirely.

Sweating, breathing hard, he kept swinging. The door drew closer and closer, and finally something in his brain clicked and he took his right hand from the rope and reached out as he swung towards the door. He closed his fingers around the ornate handle, his feet hitting on the stub of landing and skidding off and on as his momentum tried to pull him back. When he finally settled he was stuck leaning out over the darkness, struggling to breathe around the flashlight and uncertain if he could release the rope and not be pulled backwards by gravity. He teetered out over the emptiness, then slowly pulled himself forward until he was leaning against the door. He pressed his cheek against the wood and breathed for a few seconds, trembling.

“Marks!” Dennis called up. “You okay?”

Marks nodded. Then he realized they couldn't see him, and forced his muddy brain to consider the problem of letting go of one of the two things keeping him from falling. He moved his hand on the door's handle and depressed the thumbpiece, became unbalanced and pitched forward as the door slid inward. He lost his grip on the rope and fell, almost sliding back out and down but managing to catch hold of the threshold. Grunting, he pulled himself up and into a brightly-lit room.

“Marks!” Dennis called. “We can see the doorway! You okay? We're comin'!”

“Fine!” Marks shouted, spitting the flashlight onto the floor and lying back, breathing hard. He considered how inadequate the word *fine* was in context. He had never been physically built for adventure, and this was turning into more work than he'd done in a long time.

He sat up and looked around. The room looked brand new—it was just a box of recent drywall, taped and mudded. The floor was plywood subfloor. The light was just a bare bulb hanging down from the ceiling. Instead of another door, there were three open doorways leading to similarly bright spaces.

“Marks! I'm sending Dee over to you!”

Marks wiped a hand over his face and flicked sweat onto the floor. He shrugged the backpack off and settled the jacket on his shoulders. Then he picked up the flashlight and stood in the doorway. He trained the light upwards until he found them; Dee was clinging to the ladder with one hand, the other looped into the rope. She stared right at him, her face a mask of terror.

“Come on!” he said, trying to appear jovial. “I'll catch you!”

She didn't appear to be comforted by this announcement. She closed her eyes and let go of the ladder, swinging in a gentle arc towards him. As she came close he reached out with unexpected grace and grabbed hold of her shirt, pulling her in. She let go of the rope and they tumbled to the floor with a bounce.

“I'm okay, Dad!” Dee shouted across the void.

“All right,” Dennis shouted back uncertainly. “Here goes nothing!”

From the darkness, Dennis seemed to materialize from nothing, zooming in close. Marks pushed Dee behind him and reached for her father, but mis-timed it, and Dennis swung back, swallowed by the darkness. Dennis unleashed a stream of invective and reappeared with a determined look on his face,

kicking forward with a yelp. Marks reached and grabbed him by the ankles, pulling with all his might. They both landed on the rough subfloor, and Marks felt splinters digging into his legs.

For a moment they lay there, panting. Then Dennis sat up and looked around.

“Well *this* is kind of disappointing.”