



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 29

29. The Broker's Office

The office was just as he remembered it: Simple, bland, beige. The Broker, still handsome in a generic way that made Marks think of computer algorithms designed to generate *handsome*, was sitting behind the simple metal desk, hands steepled in front of him, suit respectable but not expensive or flashy. The carpet was nice but not luxurious. The air felt cool but smelled neutral.

Marks twisted around. The door he'd stepped through a few days before was open, and through it he could see the empty offices of Passus, Inc.

He looked back at The Broker and opened his mouth, but then couldn't find any words.

"Surely," The Broker said in a bluff, cheerful way, raising his light brown eyebrows, "you are used to unexpected topographies and impossible architectures by *now*, Mr. Marks?"

The Broker of Health and Happiness seemed amused, and that sparked a small flame of resentment in Marks' belly. "You ... The Black House, it's *yours*?"

"Passus operates the facility, actually," The Broker said. "We are a collective. I am merely a cog in the bureaucracy, you understand. *I* don't own, operate, or benefit from any of our work here. I merely facilitate."

Marks realized he was still kneeling with his palms on the floor. He climbed to his feet, momentarily feeling every ache and every pulled muscle. There were a lot of them.

"Listen," Marks said, stepping closer to the desk. "There's a girl. She's—"

"Deandra," The Broker said. "Deandra Dennings, yes." He nodded, a muted smile on his face, encouraging Marks.

"You *know* she's in there," Marks said, something short-circuiting in his brain.

"Why, of course," The Broker said, the slightest hint of a frown drooping over his features. "That is why you are *here*. We accept her!"

Marks swallowed something huge and made of broken glass. "*Accept* her?"

The Broker's expression came perilously close to being an actual frown. "In lieu of *yourself*, yes, we accept her. This operation," he stood, suddenly, revealing himself to be of average height and build, "we are in the business of bringing our clients health and happiness. Success. But everything comes at a price, Mr. Marks—yes, we know your name now. Our freelancers provide vessels for other people's miseries, yes, and we provide them with financial incentives—that is one aspect of our business. There

are other costs, other overhead, other infrastructure. The transference of misery from one human being to another is an *immensely expensive* business, and not solely in terms of money.”

He pointed at Marks. “You cost us quite a bit of trouble and *expense* with your deception, Mr. Marks. You were to be *processed* at the—what did you call it? The *Black House*—I quite like that!—as a consequence. Instead, we will process Ms. Dennings, who is, after all, a legacy!” He paused to cock his head slightly. “As we *assumed* you intended?”

Marks just stared.

The Broker’s expression became alarmed. “Oh my. This is a *disaster*.”

Marks put his hands down on the desk and leaned forward. “*Yes*. Get her out of there. She’s innocent. Blameless. She shouldn’t be in there at all.”

She should be back at the Starlight, he thought, waiting forever for me to return, slowly realizing that yet another adult had let her down and abandoned her. And yet that was a better fate than being trapped forever in a metaphysical meat grinder, being transformed into someone else’s health and happiness.

“I’m afraid,” The Broker said, then paused to spin and reclaim his seat. He settled himself and rolled his head on his shoulders before looking Marks in the eye. “I’m afraid it isn’t that simple. As you might imagine, the, er, Black House is a complex machine. Many moving parts. We cannot simply *stop* its operation, or simply pull someone *out*. The consequences of such an action would be dire. All we can do is what we did with *you*: Create and offer a way out. You had to find that exit, we couldn’t interfere or place it in your path.”

Marks felt his heart beating a desperate, unhappily heavy rhythm in his chest. “Then you can do the same for Dee.”

The Broker’s expression was one that Marks had seen on many faces when he’d attempted to beg extensions on debts, advances on payments, or other extraordinary kindnesses: Pained lack of interest. “I am afraid that is *impossible*, Mr. Marks. The Black House has been calibrated for a guest. It must process a guest.”

Marks nodded. He felt like he’d always known this would be the response, as if this was some epic, scripted event he’d been rehearsing for years. “Then swap me for her. Take her out, put me in.”

“As I said, we cannot simply remove someone.” He looked down at his hands. “I can offer only one possible solution, Mr. Marks. We can send you *back*, and you can search for the exit again. When you find it—if you find it—you can send Ms. Dennings through, and remain behind to satisfy your debt to Passus.”

Marks thought furiously. “Can you send me directly back to her? To the spot she’s in right now?”

The Broker brightened, sensing agreement. “Yes, I believe we could. Or very close.”

“Can you give me the path to the exit?”

The Broker’s broadly handsome face fell again. “I’m afraid not; the processing requires the *effort* you see, the—”

Marks cut him off with a gesture. “Fucking *hell*,” he hissed.

The Broker stiffened and sat back. “Might I remind you, Mr. Marks, that we are in this *terrible* situation because you sought to *defraud* the company. You posed as a candidate for a freelance position. You assigned miseries to another man without his consent. The fact that he accepted this voluntarily later does not remove the stain of dishonor from you.”

Marks felt the tiny flame of anger growing inside him, and his grip on the desk became white-knuckled. “You lure people into a Soul Engine that consumes and destroys them so you can make rich people’s lives better by making poor people’s lives *worse* and you’re *lecturing* me on morals?”

The Broker spread his hands. “Mr. Marks, I am uninterested in your feeble grasp of the laws of the universe. Since educating you on the true meaning of *morality* is impossible, let us concentrate on what *is* possible: Re-inserting you into the Black House so you can help Ms. Dennings escape. Are we agreed, then? I cannot guarantee you will find the way—but if you do successfully find the exit, you may set Ms. Dennings free and we will accept your processing alone.”

Marks closed his eyes and nodded. Knowing more didn’t make him feel better. Knowing that people like him and Dee—and Dee’s father—were *processed* in order to provide the raw materials for a place like Passus made him want to shoot himself in the head rather than live in a universe that allowed such things.

Or made him want to return and burn Passus to the ground. The anger was still there, but for the moment he had to ignore it and save Dee, who had done nothing to deserve any of it. He had at least done *something*.

“Okay,” he said. “I agree.”

The Broker smiled. “Very good! I will process the paperwork. In the mean time, be my guest.”

He gestured over Marks’ shoulder. The door behind him no longer led to the empty offices of Passus, but showed the familiar new drywall of the New Rooms. Without looking back at the Broker, Marks turned and walked over to it. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath of the air-conditioned, scentless air of the Passus offices, and stepped through.

“Marks!”

He opened his eyes. Agnes stood in front of him, smiling. He turned slightly. Dee was a few feet away, staring at him, wide-eyed. She looked skinny and rough, exhausted, her hair a mess, her face blotchy and tearstained. They stared at each other for a moment, and marks was amazed to find a surge of relief so powerful he had to swallow back a cry.

She took a hesitant step forward, then launched herself at him, crashing into him and hugging him hard.

“You came for me,” she said, quiet. “I can’t believe you came back for me.”

Marks nodded, hugging her back. Then he glanced up, and froze.

Dee felt it. “He’s always there,” she said without letting go.

Marks stared at Dennis, who lurked in the far doorway.