



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 30

30. A New Room

Like Agnes, Marks thought, Dennis had changed. Molted. Warped. He was still the same man they'd encountered in the Waiting Room, still recognizable as the man Dee had asserted was her father. But he was a *rougher* version of that man. He was taller, thinner, and his clothes fit poorly, as if they hadn't shifted with his body and were now too small. His hair was longer and unkempt. Like Agnes, he stood in the doorway behind Dee, smiling.

Dee suddenly pulled back and hit him on the shoulder. "You *left* me," she said, her voice dull and flat.

He nodded, swallowing thickly. "I know. I'm sorry. I thought ... I thought you were okay."

She hit him again, and then again. "You *left me!*" she said again, her voice hitching, and then she was crying, tears streaming down her face. "You were supposed to *know!* All about this place!"

He didn't try to stop her or defend himself. "I know, kid, I know, I'm sorry. But I *found* you."

She stopped hitting him, and stood there for a moment looking exhausted and impossibly young. Behind her, Dennis' smile was disturbing: His eyes fixed on them, wide and leering, his smile vacant.

"How'd you find me?"

He shrugged. "I thought like this demented place for a moment. I asked myself, what's it been trying to do to us? Get us lost, keep us spinning. This maze," he looked around, "kept us spinning for a long time."

She nodded, and he leaned forward and put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen, I think I've figured something out."

She dragged an arm across her face, nodding. "Okay."

"This place, it's *personalized*, you know? It's supposed to pick up details from your life, from your mind, and use them. All the stuff we see here, all the weird rooms, somehow it comes from *us*."

She frowned.

"But because it's *two* of us," he went on, "because it's two people instead of one, and because my mind is so fucked up and weird, it got all screwy. It picked up random things from both of us, and mine are all warped beyond recognition. But some of it just from you. Like the chess pieces."

She nodded. "The pawns," she said. "The Queen. We've seen those."

“And *her* and *him*,” he added. “Supposed to confuse us. But some it—like the chess pieces—can guide us. I think. There’s a pattern to them.”

Somewhere distant, he became aware of the buzzing, cracking noise again, a storm of violence slowly heading their way. Even though he knew it was an illusion, designed to spook them, to keep them moving in the wrong direction, it still sizzled on his nerves and made it difficult to stay calm, to stay still. *Move move move* it seemed to communicate directly to his underbrain, that primitive part of him that connected him to his most ancient single-celled ancestors.

“I think if we follow the pattern the right way, it’ll lead us out of here.”

She sniffled and nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. A pattern. Chess from me. What about you?” Her eyes flickered over his shoulder to Agnes. “What’s it taking from you?”

He sighed. “I have an idea, but I can’t remember what it means,” he said. “I’m still working on that part.”

She nodded again. “Okay.” She turned to look over her shoulder, then looked past Marks at Agnes again. “So, they’re like, not *real people*, right?”

Marks nodded. “Figments. Fakers.”

“Can we tie them up and leave them here? Or knock them out so they stop following us?”

Marks smiled. The noise of the approaching storm was loud enough to feel in the floor joists.

“Probably not, actually, but we can always try, sure.” He turned to look at Agnes, who was leaning against the doorway with her hands folded in front of her, looking young and fresh and innocent, smiling slightly. A flicker of recognition went through his thoughts, but was gone almost immediately. “I wouldn’t mind getting rid of her for a little while.”

He looked back at Dee and they both smiled. It was surprising, he thought, how much better he felt having her back, having another real, actual person to bounce off of. The thought made him sober. Dee frowned a moment later.

“You’re thinking, how do we know *we’re* real?”

He nodded, then pulled a hand over his face. “New rule,” he said. “Don’t split up again.” He turned to look at Agnes again. She winked at him.

“Well,” he said, raising his voice over the sizzling noise. “I’m not sure, kid,” he admitted. “The best I can come up with is to pay attention. Both our people appear to have ... drifted from their original physical appearance. If I start looking weird to you, don’t shrug it off.”

Dee cocked one eyebrow. “But if you’re a Figment, Marks, then you’d be lying to me right now!”

“Not necessarily!” Agnes shouted over the buzzsaw noise brightly. “The *fun* of it, Dear Dim Dee, is to *sometimes* tell the truth, *sometimes* point you in the right direction. Then I can be all hurt and sad when you don’t take my advice.”

“Who are you supposed to be?” Marks said quietly, not looking at her. He felt like the memory was right there. Right under the surface, tantalizing. He wondered if Agnes had been changing because the

memory was coming closer, getting sharper. But then he couldn't believe he'd ever known anyone as breathtakingly beautiful as this woman.

Memory, he thought, sometimes warped how people looked. Cleaned up the negative, put a little movie magic on the lens.

Dee shook herself. "Trust," she said, holding out her hand as if sealing a business deal. "I'm *already* lost, right? Shit, can't go much further wrong. So, we trust each other until we got reason not to."

Marks took her hand. He was surprised at how small and delicate it felt in his, and a wave of agonizing self-loathing swept through him again. He'd brought her here. And then he'd left her.

"Trust," he said.

"Okay," she said, pushing her hair, which had become a mess that resisted any efforts to control it. "So, what do we do?"

Marks dropped the backpack to the floor and fished out the notebook. "All right, we saw chess pieces in six rooms so far," he said. "The Anteroom—one pawn, the Library—two pawns, the Queer Lounge—three pawns, the Ballroom—"

"There's a *ballroom*?"

"Yes!" Agnes cheered. "It's *marvelous*!"

"—one pawn, and Underground—Queen. So what's missing?"

Dee thought for a moment. "They're all white, right?"

Marks nodded.

"One pawn—there should be eight. Then the Rook, the Knight, and the King."

Marks pointed at her. "Got a feeling the King might be where we want to end up."

Dee smiled. "All right, so we go up the ladder, right, like it's a board? Pawns first, then we look for the Rook. But if we already know where the Queen is, why not just try to cut back there?"

"I can't say for certain, but this place kind of has a clockwork feel to me. Like we need to go through rooms in a certain order," he said, looking down at the map he'd drawn and re-drawn several times. "So if I'm right about that, we'd go Anteroom, Library, Lounge, Ballroom, and then—" he pointed at the little square he'd marked with a large capital O. "The Octopus room, whatever that is. It's the only room leading from the Ballroom we haven't been in."

"Then what?"

He shrugged, closing the notebook. "If there's a pawn in that room, we know we're on the right track. Then we look for, what, the Rook?"

Dee nodded. "What if we go through a door, no Rook, but we can't go back?"

"Then we circle around and try again," he said. He paused for a moment, studying her face. "Look, I know, it's exhausting. It's *meant* to be exhausting. But the key is, we have to just keep working the

puzzle until we make it out. It's the only way. There are rules, but it's *their* rules, and we have to follow them."

She took a deep breath. "Okay." She looked down at her shoes. "Listen ... thanks. For coming after me."

He nodded and looked away, but said nothing.

"What now?"

He took a deep breath, looking around. The buzzing, crunching noise and shouting voices seemed like it was in the next room, but Marks was determined to prove it couldn't scare him any more, couldn't force him to make a mistake. "First things first: We have to figure out how to get out of here *again!*"

"Shit, I'm sorry!" Dee shouted. "*He* tricked me!"

Marks looked past her at Dennis, who smiled, his gums blood red, his teeth somehow yellowed.

"Don't worry about them," Marks yelled. "They're just *figments*, right!"

Dee nodded. Marks turned to grin back at Agnes, and was startled to find her glaring at him, her beautiful face folded into a mask of rage.