



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 35

### 35. The Incision Room

The hallway ended, as always, at a door, which appeared to be similar in every way to all the other doors: Dark wood, the ibex carved into it, a brass handle polished from frequent use. He pulled it open.

The coppery-fish smell of blood stopped him in his tracks.

It was a surgery. At one time the tiles might have been a shining white and a clinical blue, but they had faded into a uniform sort of yellow, the color of pus and infection. The carts of instruments had been overturned and bent. The operating table in the center of the room was an explosion of blood, soaked through with little rivers of it dripping onto the floor. Several instruments were scattered directly around it, as if dropped in surprise.

“Stay behind me a moment,” he whispered, putting out his hand protectively.

Bloodied instruments were scattered everywhere, and pools of blood jellied on the floor. The single bulb lighting the room was flickering, obviously on its last reserves of filament. Its weak light made the blood appear darker than it really was, almost ruby.

A shining trail of blood lead from the table to one of four exits, swinging, glass-paned hospital doors, each bearing a typical carving: Stag, hippo, unicorn, and camel. Marks examined the swath of red liquid leading to the Hippo door that he knew led to the Hall of Mirrors, noting the sheer amount of it and thinking that something that could bleed so much and still walk must be huge, monstrous.

The doors marked giraffe and stag had once featured small signs that had been torn off, leaving ragged corners as evidence. The camel door's remnant showed a clear letter “S.” Marks wondered if it had once read “surgery.”

“Bishop,” Dee said in a quiet, unhappy voice. “If this is the path, we should find a bishop in here.”

Marks contemplated searching through the gore unhappily. He had a strong sense that the blood, were he to touch it, would be warm. Fresh. And it would bring up the obvious question—obvious to him, at least—of whose blood it was, and whether either Dee or himself might be scheduled for a visit with whatever horrific doctor had created this mess.

The noise of the place's slow collapse buzzed all around them, vibrating in the floor, in their bones. He'd forgotten about it during their long, silent trek through the wall. For a moment Marks expected Agnes and Dennis to come dancing in, to continue their program of torment and hilarity. But nothing happened. The growing buzzsaw of destruction remained a steady distraction, the blood dripped, and their time got shorter and shorter.

They searched. Gingerly, at first, trying not to touch the gore, trying to keep their clothes clear of it. Then more desperately, smearing the blood, sliding in it, splashing it around. Marks wondered if this was an elaborate trap: They were shrunken down, now, and even if they turned back the dark place they'd just barely made it through would be an impossibility without a new source of light. And a source of water. Even if they could still make their way back to the pantry and the kitchen, would they remain microscopic in size?

There was no avoiding it: Before long they were both filthy. The smell of blood and the sensation of it made them both wretch, and Marks became convinced this was part of the plan, to make them both as miserable as possible. Which meant they might be getting close to the way out, which meant things were going to be heading downhill *fast* from this new low point.

He was sweating again, and aside from being very aware of what he must smell like, he could feel the itchy presence of the cash still sewn into his jacket. It suddenly felt heavy and useless, and he wondered why he hadn't thought to just toss it away.

"Fuck," Dee said, for a moment sounding just like the distrustful, moody kid he'd met in a motel bar ... was it just a few days ago? It felt like they'd been in the Black House for months. "If we both starting puking, Marks, shit's going to get *real*."

Marks swallowed back bile as he investigated the horrifying contents of a small trash bin in a shadowed corner of the surgery. It was filled with soiled sponges, rags, and viscera, and his own stomach kept threatening to rise up through his throat and strangle him as he sifted the contents. The urge to just assume they were still on the right trail and move on was growing, but he fought against it. Cutting corners would just risk being trapped in the place even longer.

"Marks!"

He leaped up and turned. Dee was standing in front of the wall opposite the four exits. He quickly crossed over to her, trying to wipe his bloody hands off on anything he could find. She pointed at the wall and Marks realized for the first time that there was a small door there, about three feet wide and three feet tall. It was made of metal that had been painted the same color as the wall, making it hard to see, and had a punch-out for a tag or small sign towards the top. There had once been a handle, evidenced by two screw holes, but someone had removed it.

"Is that a damn *morgue* whatever you call it?"

Marks nodded. "Cold chamber. Looks like it."

They both stared at it in silence for a moment.

"Okay, so it's *obvious*, right, that there's a dead body in there in some sort of *horrifying* state of rot," Dee said slowly, "and that the Bishop piece is *inside* said body, right?"

Marks sighed. "Yep."

She looked sideways up at him. "I will choose you for it."

Marks smiled. "Odds and evens?"

She nodded, grim.

“Forget it,” he said. “I got us into this, I’ll carve it out of whatever we find in there.”

He looked around and located a bone chisel. Wiping it off on his trousers, he took it to the chamber and ran his chapped, painful fingers around the seam until he found a spot he thought he might get some purchase. Working patiently he set the edge of the chisel into place and worked it under the lip, coaxing the drawer out millimeter by millimeter until he could worm fingers between the drawer and the slot. Grabbing hold, he pulled the heavy drawer out, backing up as he did so.

The figure on the slab was human, covered with a white sheet that had soaked up blood from the various incisions inflicted on it. One hand had slipped from under the sheet, and Marks stared at the dark skin for a moment before turning suddenly.

“Listen,” he said, licking his lips and wishing fervently for booze, any sort. He could taste it, the sharp, chemical wash of cheap whiskey, the antiseptic, nauseous flavor of vodka, the fizzy stale bread of beer. It flooded his mouth as if the recipe was locked inside his saliva, ready to produce alcohol when he was under stress. “Listen—”

He paused, uncertain what to say. His mind raced through the possibilities, but he knew Dee was too smart. He watched her expression go from expectant to irritated to worried, and then watched it collapse, her face hollowing out, her eyes suddenly wet.

“Oh *fuck*,” she said, softly.

He leaned forward and put his hands on her shoulders. Was it the first time he’d touched her? He wasn’t certain, but it felt like it. He pushed down on her gently, as if to hold her in place, stop her from moving.

“Listen,” he said. “I want you to go to the other side of the room—”

Her eyes widened and she raised her arms, looking at the blood on her hands. Then she spun around, looking at the mess everywhere. “Oh my god,” she said in a strangled voice. “Oh my *fuckin’ god!*”

“Hey!”

He spun her back around forcefully and shook her. “*Listen to me!* I want you to go to the other side of the room. I want you to turn around. I want you to stay that way until I say otherwise. Do you hear me? *Dee!* Do you *hear* me?”

She was shaking her head, tears running down her face. “No, no, no, no, *no*,” she wailed softly. Her eyes flicked over his shoulder to the slab. “*Daddy!*”

He shook her again, then took her by the chin and moved her head, forcing her to look back at him. His fingers left smears of blood on her face. “Dee,” he said softly, breathing hard. “Dee, listen. Go. Turn around. Don’t look until I tell you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know—”

“Dee,” he said, and she stopped speaking. “Of course we know. This place ... it’s obvious.”

She was breathing in painful little gasps. “You don’t have—”

“Yes,” he said. “I do. You know I do. We have to know, or else we’ll get lost. We have to be sure we’re on the path.”

For a moment they stared at each other, him leaning down, hands on her shoulders, her looking up, chin quivering, tears dropping from her eyes. The noise of destruction seemed louder than ever, like a million termites consuming a house, amplified a thousand times.

Slowly, she nodded.

He almost fell as the tension drained from him. “Good,” he said, trying to catch his breath, trying to slow his heart. “Good girl. Go on. Don’t turn until I say.”

Slowly, still nodding, she turned and walked away. He waited until she was on the other side of the operating table, facing the wall. Shaking, he turned back to the body on the slab. He reached out and picked up the crisp white corner of the sheet, holding it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced over to be sure she wasn’t looking, and lifted the sheet.

He recognized Dennis instantly. His face was splattered in his own blood, but was otherwise untouched, and he looked exactly like the entity that had fooled Dee earlier. The eyes were open, and stared blankly at the ceiling.

“This fucking place,” Marks whispered.

A wave of dizziness swept through him, and he imagined he could hear the song Agnes kept humming.

*And she said, “Aw, it’s you.”*

He shook the words and notes out of his head and peeled the sheet back, revealing Dennis’ naked body. Marks quickly glanced at Dee; she was still turned away.

Dennis had been cut open with a standard autopsy Y-incision. The flesh had been put back in place, but not stitched up.

“Goddamn you,” Marks whispered, heart pounding. “I am going to spend the rest of my life learning how to burn this place. Whatever it is. *Wherever* it is.”

He hadn’t taken it seriously. At first he’d assumed it was a place of chaos, a prank, a place designed to keep him running. Even when he’d lost Dee and spent—weeks?—in the maze searching for her, he hadn’t quite realized where they were. It wasn’t a puzzle box. Or a Soul Engine. Or an Insanity Box. It was a meat grinder that enjoyed playing with its food.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the dead man he’d never met, not really. “I’m so sorry. But I’m going to get her out of here.”

He reached out and took hold of a flap of flesh and began to peel.

The bishop carving was where the heart had once been. It sat, pristine, in the chest cavity, a small piece of wood that had only the most surreal and basic resemblance to a bishop. He didn’t reach for it, or

touch it. He stared at it for several pounding heartbeats and then gently replaced the flap, then the sheet. Slowly, so as not to jostle the body, he pushed the slab back into the chamber.

For a few moments he stood leaning with his forehead pressed against the wall, just breathing.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, you can turn around now. We’re still on the path.”

When she made no reply, he turned his head, then froze. Dee was gone.