



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 37

37. An Eerie Room

They both stumbled with a shout as they entered; the door was a few feet above the floor. Dee managed a semi-graceful roll but Marks landed hard and twisted an ankle. He cried out in pain and then lay on the floor, breathing and rubbing his foot. He was in no rush to move, because they'd entered an eerie room that was almost blinding, made from a clean white stone with no visible source of light. Marks felt immediately uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't quite articulate.

There was a slight hum in the air, an almost-imperceptible noise separate and distinct from the distant sound of collapse that still hunted them. It got under his skin and made him want to leave as quickly as possible. The walls and floor were of the same stone, a rough limestone-type rock that was dusty and crumbling, white and dry. The floor was partially covered by a white rug which was embroidered with various scenes of battle, all in shades of off-white, white on white—difficult to make out. The walls were hung with similar tapestries, although it was hard to notice at first.

There were three doors leading out of the room, but all three were several feet above the floor. Marks got to his feet with a wince and limped over to the north side and stood in front of the door there, sporting a difficult-to-see relief of a fly, and the threshold of the door was level with his neck. He turned to look at the door to the East they'd just come through; it was set even higher, and sported the camel that indicated it led back to the concert hall. He twisted around; in the corner between them was the third door, even further off the floor, with a carving of a goat. There were dark smudges along the threshold, as if something had been dragged over it. Getting up and through any of the doors would take effort.

His eyes hurt from all the white, and the small hairs along his body were raised as the humming got louder and deeper. As he turned to look at Dee, the hum suddenly increased in pitch, turning into an alarming whine, and with a rumble of hidden machinery, the floor lurched, slowly beginning to rise in jerky increments.

"Marks!" Dee shouted.

He spun, judging the nearest door while reaching blindly behind him for her hand. A trap, then—he'd been wrong, and the Black House had used his sunken memories against him. When he felt her hand slip into his he started for the door that would lead them back to the hall. Thinking of the crunching, collapsing noise underneath the mechanical whine of the room, he hoped there was still a hall to return to.

Suddenly, the noise stopped.

They froze, looking around. The floor, he realized, had risen several feet, bringing the fly door to the proper level, while the other two remained too high off the floor for them to reach.

“Well,” he said, but before he could speak another word, the noise began again, the floor lurched and began rising again, quickly snapping up so that the first door was cut in half by the floor and the second door was at the proper level.

“Don’t move,” Dee whispered. A few seconds later, the floor adjusted upwards again, bringing the final door to the proper height, and then almost immediately churned downward again, returning to the initial position when all three doors were too high off the floor.

A moment later, the cycle began again.

“I really, really, *fucking* hate this place,” Dee said in a dull, defeated tone.

“Wait,” Marks said, looking around, counting. When he hit a count of eight, the process began again and went through the same pattern while he and Dee stood in the middle of the room fighting for balance. The floor lurched to bring the first door into sync, pause for a few seconds, and then rose up again, and again, and then reset.

“We’ll have to be fast,” he said in the brief pause before it started over. “If we’re slow we could be caught when the floor rises and ...”

“Snapped in half?” Dee asked with a tired smile.

Marks smiled back just as faintly. “Yes,” he said. Then he thought of Dennis and sobered: Dying here was no longer a remote possibility. “Yes,” he repeated. He studied the doors as the floor started upwards again. “We’ll have to be fast.”

“First we have to pick a door.”

He nodded. “Only one choice: Goat.”

“Why *goat*?”

“The song,” he said. “It’s from my memories. I used to play it on guitar, as a joke—it’s a *fucking terrible* song. But I remember the chords. The first chord of the song is an E chord. We followed the *exit* sign to get here. The next chord is a G. So, goat.” He shook his head. “This place plays by rules, in its way. It used your chess stuff to mark the route here, and it’s using my song to mark the route *out*. It’s literally been whispering the route to me since I got here.”

The floor settled into its brief moment at the top. “All right, goat it is.”

Marks nodded as they headed back down again. “But *fast*.”

Dee nodded. “So, we time it. When we hit bottom, start counting. Then when it stops at the goat door, *I’ll* start counting. Then we’ll know how fast we gotta move.”

“Unless the house cheats.”

That shut them up while the floor settled, paused, and then began shuddering upwards again. Marks started counting.

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi ...”

At five, the floor was level with the door and stopped moving. Dee started counting, and got to two before the floor started moving up.

“Two seconds,” Marks said glumly. “That’s plenty of time, right?”

“We going together or one by one?”

“Together,” he said. “I’d be worried about being separated. I’d be worried one of us goes through and the floor stops moving. Or, you know, that you go through and the whole goddamn place ceases to exist behind you. Or you go through and the next room is filled with bees, or fire.”

“Fire,” Dee said solemnly. “Burn me before bees.”

“Now you let the place know you hate bees, so it’s gonna be bees.”

“Shit.”

They looked at each other and started laughing as they were headed back down; Marks wasn’t certain if this was cathartic or simple insanity, if they were done being horrified and intimidated or if they’d simply lost all sense, if he really thought there was a way out or not. All he knew was that he didn’t want to stay in this eerie, white room any longer, and whatever they found behind the Goat Door, he would welcome it as a step towards something, even if that something was whatever was causing the crunching noise that had been following them.

As the floor settled into its lowest position, they stepped over to stand just below the door with the carving of a placid goat and faced the wall. As the floor began to rise, they braced themselves, ready to move.

“What’s the song?” Dee suddenly shouted.

“What?”

“The song! What song are we following?”

Marks didn’t answer. He didn’t know the name of it, couldn’t really remember the lyrics. He only had the chords, and even those were rudimentary, simplified.

He saw Agnes again. She was staring at him, and as he imagined her he could hear the song and he could smell her perfume, but nothing else came to him, aside from a shivering feeling of dread.

The floor settled to a stop, and the Goat Door was right in front of them. Dee surged forward, turning the knob and pushing the door in, and as she dived forward a memory bloomed inside him. Froze him in place. Agnes’ face, but bloated, somehow, and pale, drained. Lying, he realized, on the same slab that they’d found Dennis on, dead, bled dry.

And he’d been there. In the Surgery, looking down at her.

“*Marks!*”

He snapped back to reality just as the floor began to shudder back into motion. Covered in a sudden cold sweat, he dived forward, throwing himself through the door. His feet cleared the opening just as

the floor shot upwards, closing off the doorway and leaving him rolling on the floor, covered in the gritty dust of the white stones.

“Marks!” Dee knelt down next to him. She put her hands on his shoulders and he stopped moving, staring up at her without any sign that he saw her. “Are you crying? What is it?”

For a moment he just stared at her. Then he sat up, dragged the sleeve of his jacket across his eyes, and shook himself. “Come on,” he said gruffly, climbing unsteadily to his feet. Dee watched him walk down the usual unfinished hallway and thought he looked suddenly frail, somehow less than he’d been just a few moments before.

“Marks?” she said, following. But he said nothing. Just kept walking.