



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 40

40. The Myna Bird Room

Marks and Dee each threw themselves out of the way. The suddenly giant bird's beak crashed down on the floor, sending spidery cracks in every direction.

"Dee!" Marks shouted, grabbing hold of her arm and pulling her close.

"Watch out!" she shouted.

"*Mawk! Show you the way!*" the bird bellowed, fluffing its suddenly immense wings and puffing out its chest. Marks thought it didn't look like a bird any more. It looked like something else entirely, a demon, a devil. The feathers on the back of its head had stiffened and bristled, giving it a dark crown. It loomed over them, its face more expressive than Marks thought possible, collapsing into a mask of anger and disapproval.

"Here it comes!" Dee screamed.

The bird lunged at them. Marks picked Dee up bodily and twisted away. He was knocked off his feet as the beak slammed into the floor where she'd been. They both fell into a heap on the floor. He turned his head. The bird was struggling, making a choking noise as it tried to extract its beak from the floor, where it had become securely wedged.

He looked at Dee.

"We gotta make a run for it!" she shouted, pointing at the doors.

He nodded. "Tiger!"

They ran. Marks twisted around every few steps to ensure Dee was right behind him, which offered him an unfortunate view of the giant bird, wings spread, beak open, and eyes blazing as it chased after them, enormous beak open.

Must go faster, he thought stupidly. Just as they reached the door with the tiger carving, he turned to check on Dee and saw the bird lunging forward. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun them away, stumbling to his knees and pushing her roughly as he fell. The bird smacked into the door and shattered it with a noise like an explosion.

He grabbed at Dee and pulled her up. She felt light, like she didn't weigh anything. Her face was wide and frightened—a direct reflection, he was certain, of his own. After seeing her father in the Incision Room, he thought, things had changed: Now he knew they could—both—die in this place. The idea of being impaled by a giant bird suddenly didn't seem impossible. The idea of *Dee* dying in this place

didn't seem impossible, and a cold vein of fear had set up permanently in his belly. *He'd* done this. He'd brought her into this.

The bird was stuck again, though, flapping its giant wings as it tried to extricate itself from the ruined door. Marks grabbed Dee's hand again.

"Viper!" he hissed. "Hurry!"

They ran for it as the bird tore the Tiger door off its hinges, the door still embedded over its beak. It thrashed this way and that, trying to shake it off, strangled, choked-on squawking noises bubbling from its chest. As they reached the Viper door, it brought its beak down hard on the floor, making the boards jump and knocking them off balance as the Tiger door shattered and fell away. Marks stumbled backwards and landed on his ass, dragging Dee down with him.

"*Fuck!*" he shouted in frustration, a sharp lance of pain driving up through his back. Dee sprang back off him, staring and backing towards the Viper door.

"Come on!" she shouted. "*Come on!*"

He lumbered up, back snarling in protest, and staggered after her. Dee scurried nimbly forward and pulled the door open. Marks could feel the floor shaking as the bird chased him, could see the terror in Dee's eyes. He waved at her.

"Go!" he shouted. "I'm right behind you!"

She darted inside. He was just a step behind, breathing hard and sweating freely. He ducked in through the doorway, into the familiar rough hallway, and was just beyond reach when the bird slammed its head into the doorway, making the framing groan and crack. It screeched, beak open far wider than should have been possible, and he backed away from it as rapidly as he could, eyes locked on it, certain it would tear itself loose, shrink down, pass through the wall—something. That it would just keep coming and coming.

It didn't. It screeched again, but the sound grew muffled as he turned the usual corner in the hallway. He spun and chased after Dee, who was just opening the next door. She turned and watched him urgently as he limped after her. She slammed the door shut as he passed through, and the door vanished, as if absorbed by the wall.

For a moment they both stood there, panting, staring at the unbroken plaster.

Marks turned and blinked in the sudden silence, shivered in the sudden cold of crank air. They were in a small, modern room with a movie screen at one end and a few folding chairs behind a simple table in the middle. The blasting air conditioning was loud, and he could feel the breeze of it. He thought it must be about thirty degrees. He wrapped his arms around himself and walked over to the table.

There was a box of half-eaten donuts on it, which he picked up and sniffed at, then handed over to Dee. She stared dully at the donuts, knowing they needed some kind of food but sick with adrenaline and terror. There were also several congealed cups of coffee on the table, mold growing on them. There was also a film canister, labeled *Psycho, Hitchcock, 100 mins.*

He looked up. There was just one door in the room. It had a small blue and white sign on it, showing a simple icon of a woman on one side of a dividing line, and an icon of a man on the other.

“Restrooms,” he murmured softly.

“Sure,” he heard Dee say. “Why not.”

In the crisp silence—the sort of silence that hinted at insulation in the walls, muffled and damped—he strained to hear the bird’s tortured squawking, but couldn’t. Slowly, he let the tension drain out of him. The door had disappeared behind them, so while the bird might still be out there, searching, for the moment he thought they were safe.

He shrugged off his backpack and sat down in one of the folding chairs, half expecting it to dissolve beneath him and dump him onto the floor. He pulled out the notebook, which looked like it was decades old, torn and stained. He opened it to his most recent map and made further notes, adding the new room, and sketching a tiny danger sign next to the Myna Bird’s room. Then he stood up, put the notebook back, and held the bag open for Dee to stuff the box of stale pastries into it. He looked around one more time, hopefully, looking for water, but there was none.

“All right,” he said, tiredly. “Only one door, so we might as well.”

“Are we still on track?” Dee said. “I feel like doubling back on the bird room was a mistake, and now we sort of panic-chose this one.”

Marks sighed. He thought of the bird. *Mawk, way out, I know, set me free!* He thought of how it had destroyed the Tiger door. He pictured the crown of feathers over its head. “We can’t know,” he said. “Until we make a few more moves. We need to see where this leads. Nothing for it.”

She nodded. “I’m fucking *tired*, Mr. Marks.”

He put his hand on her shoulder, feeling awkward. “I know. Me too. Come—”

The lights went down and a hidden projector revved up, filling the screen with a test pattern, grays and whites and nonsensical images followed by an old-fashioned countdown, starting from five. They turned and stared at the screen, each of them thinking the exact same thing in the exact same words: *what fresh piece of bullshit is this?*

The countdown made it to two before the film jammed and melted. A moment later the lights came back up. They stood for a moment, waiting, but the room had returned to its static, still state. Wordlessly, they both walked to the restroom door. It had no lock or handle, but swung inward. Marks held it open and Dee slipped past.