

## You Will Go On

Jay Lake

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*There are many mansions in this house, and this house is as great as the world, as old as the sky. What would you do with a man who fell to the floor from an empty ceiling? Where would you go if you had every room that ever was to choose from?*

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IT'S LONELY HERE IN GOD'S HOUSE. Though we prey as hard as we can, and eat what we kill, He rarely hears our words. Maybe He's busy out in the world somewhere. Sometimes we hear hammering and saws, the workmen who we never see changing the house. Maybe He's one of them.

Maybe He's one of us.

Whoever, He's not telling. But I'm not asking anymore, either.

There came a day during my seventeenth year when the Hunt Group—that's our tribe—found a man from outside. It happens sometimes. Old Jamie's father's father was from outside. He'd come into God's house wearing steel and linen, carrying a long pole with an axe on the end. We kept the weapon stashed in a closet in the Upper West Red Gallery these days. Though his name was lost to us now, half the Hunt Group has that outsider's brown eyes and dark, bristly hair.

Old Jamie always swore some of our words came in with his granddaddy's steel, but I never believed that. When God made us He gave us words with which to find our purpose. Our words are His. How could they have come from outside?

This new man from outside fell from a high window in the Hall of Kings. The Hunt Group was there looking for the giant rats that slip between the huge, tapering pillars. The pillars were like vases, or urns, sixty feet tall—rough stone painted with ocher and brown, holding up wooden beams bigger around even than Marta Grande when she was pregnant. The stone walls of the Hall of Kings were rough too, with tiny windows up near the top no one could reach without ladders or scaffolds or ropes.

It all looked and felt real old. Like one of His first efforts maybe, before He'd discovered crown molding and lath-and-plaster. We called it the Hall of Kings on account of the huge statue at the east end, a man almost as high as the ceiling sitting on a stool that was little to him, with a square beard and a low cap and a big, curvy

sword, all out of the same rough stone. Two wide copper trays on poles, like braziers but too shallow and high up, always burned with a smelly, flickering flame to each side of the statue. They almost made up for the thin light from the tiny windows.

There wasn't no other furniture or nothing, so we skipped around the pillars, shaking our spears and shouting for the rats until there was this yelp, and a sort of wet thud followed by whimpering.

"That was a rat what am," shouted Bitros, leading our scramble toward the noise.

"Rats don't yelp," I said over the clatter of our running. We didn't have no boots nor shoes, but a lot of the Hunt Group liked to drag our spears when we weren't sneaking. Made us sound fierce and maybe kept the hall tigers away.

Then we were around him, the Hunt Group one big, metal-toothed animal, our spears pointing in like a collar to close around the neck of this stranger's life.

He lay on the ground, groaning a little, one leg folded under in a bad way. He was wearing dark wool, cut tight to his body in pants and some long, round-cornered coat with a cotton shirt underneath and colored ribbon dangling across his chest. His eyes were the gray of a rainy sky, and his hair sandy as the old king on the throne at the end of the Hall.

"You ain't no rat, neither," said Marta Grande to the outsider. She poked his good thigh with her spear, which was tipped with a hammered iron leaf we broke off a rustic chandelier in the Softwood Refectory.

"Keep that thing away from me," the outsider said, angry but quiet. He looked at us, staring at each face around the ring of the twelve of us. Finally his eyes settled on mine. "I need your help."

I didn't much feel like poking this outsider. He might be new blood for us. All three of Marta's last babies were wronged up, though we still gave them to the Sisters to tend. Which is what comes of having not enough parents and grands between us.

This man meant new seed.

"There's not much help to give, friend," I said. "We'll set your leg and feed you best we can, no worse than ourselves, but this here's your new world to live in."

He just stared at me for a moment. "I must return to my life. My work is not yet done."

Old Jamie laughed, then the whole Hunt Group picked it up.

The stranger looked puzzled, irritated, so as we quieted down, I explained. “God’s house is larger than any man’s life.”

“Ah,” he said. “Let’s start with the leg, if you can. It hurts, a lot.”

Funny thing was, he didn’t look very hurt. I’d have been screaming my teeth out if it was me.

We hauled him back to the Lesser Silk Drawing Room, which was the Hunt Group’s nest mostly. It was big enough for all of us to live in, but small enough to feel like our own, as well as close to the Upper West Red Gallery where we hid our treasures.

Marta Grande sat on the outsider’s chest while me and Porter straightened the leg at Old Jamie’s directing. He didn’t scream, but his body tightened and twisted surely as if we’d wired him to a socket. After it was straight I splinted him with two legs off a Louis XIV chair Marta Grande had broke up in the White Wool Drawing Room a couple of weeks back. We wrapped his leg in upholstery from the chair, too, then I wiped the sweat and blood from his bit lips with one of Filippa’s moon rags dipped damp in the bathroom sink.

“Thank you,” gasped the outsider. “Blessings on you all.”

“Get him some water now that he won’t throw it up,” growled Old Jamie. Though I figured our stranger wasn’t the type to spew from pain anyway.

I hunkered down next to him, letting my knees burn like they had since I’d got big. “Welcome to God’s house, stranger, and my name is Johnnie.”

His lips flickered through a weak smile. “I’m Ben, I guess.”

“Ben Eye-gas,” shouted Marta Grande. “Ben Eye-gas!” The Hunt Group took it up until they were dancing around Old Jamie, Ben and me.

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The next day the Hunt Group woke to the sound of workmen nearby. Little Bitros had had the watch, but strange things could happen to time and wakefulness when the workmen were about.

We all knew this was sign that we should go prey in earnest, leaving God’s invisible servants to their work. This showed respect, and sometimes gifts were granted us, too.

But Ben Eye-gas was sprawled on the floor, his leg wrapped in polished maple and white silk.

I squatted down with him and gathered my hall tiger pelt around my shoulders. “Listen, you can’t really move right now. I got to tell you something important. Don’t leave the room.”

“Why?”

“Hear that hammering and those power saws?”

He nodded.

“That’s the workmen. We don’t never see them, and we try to give them plenty of room. You never know when things will be better, once they’ve come and gone. It’s time for us to go prey, and you need to stay here and stay quiet.”

His hand shot out, quick as spark, to grab mine. His fingers were smoother than my own, and more slim, but strong. “Thank you, Johnnie,” Ben said. “I’ll be careful.”

Then we ate up the last of that gazelle we’d run down in the Third Orangery, giving a few strips of meat to Ben, and were off to prey. Spears ready, whooping, we ran as fast and far as we could from where the workmen seemed to be.

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It was an ugly business that day, honoring God and feeding ourselves. We were down in the Green-Tile Cisterns, walking the sandy shores by torchlight, when a water snake longer than four of us laid end-to-end thrashed out of the dark waters. It almost laid us all end-to-end too, though with some close work and a very good jab by Marta Grande, we bested it.

Then it was time to blood the floor, talk to God, cut what meat we could carry and go home.

Near to the Lesser Silk Drawing Room, we heard no more hammers and saws, so Old Jamie told off six of ours to place the hunks of slaughtered snake on the smoky fire in the Littlest Big Kitchen. I followed Old Jamie back to our camp to see what Ben Eye-gas had made of his day.

He had worked his way onto the little vine-carved settee, the one we found in the hall one night, upholstery not matching the colors of the room, but it was good for baby-making on, and baby-delivering, too.

“Hello,” I said as we trooped in, dipping our spears to the hearth for the

honor of God and to the settee for the honor of our guest.

He grinned at us, as if the pain of his leg was nothing. “Look.” Ben brandished a carpenter’s hammer.

We all stopped, horrified. “Where did you get that?” Old Jamie demanded, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I spoke to some of the workmen. They were quite polite.”

“We’re doomed,” shrieked Little Bitros.

“It’s poorly done to bother the workmen,” said Old Jamie. “They’re at God’s business.”

I tried to draw Ben’s gaze. “I told you not to.”

Ben stared us all down, still smiling, until the silence had spread like a stain in the hall carpet. “They came to me. And spoke a while, brought me food and water. They built the corner closet into a lavatory as well, so I could relieve myself in comfort.”

Little Bitros darted over and threw open the door to the little broom closet we rarely used. True to Ben’s words, there was a lavatory there, rather larger than the closet had been, with shining blue and white tiles and chrome fixtures and a pretty ceiling light of a sort I’d never before seen just visible from where I stood.

“You treated with the workmen.” I shook my head.

“They are at God’s business, as you said,” Ben answered, “but so are you. Did you not go prey today?”

Old Jamie spat. “And a bloody business it was.”

“Then rejoice in my lavatory.” Ben waved toward the gleaming room. “Go. Take advantage.”

It was good to wash, though no one really wanted to talk more with Ben about the workmen. Somehow, he had treated with them and bettered our lives, with a hammer and a lavatory as a token for his hubris. Perhaps our preying helped, too.

God only knew.

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A week later, Ben was walking unsteadily, hopping on his good foot and stick

we'd made from an ugly Victorian floor lamp. His colored neck-ribbon, cotton shirt and wool clothes had been carefully washed and folded by Bitros, who had made a cloak out of some cloth from a stock of old sheers.

Ben seemed more comfortable dressed like us, though he insisted on carrying the blasphemous hammer on a little sling at his waist.

"What's outside the house?" he asked as we made our slow way down the Funerary Arches. I had wanted to show him the Silverthorne Conservatory.

"You came from outside," I said. "You'd know better than I what's there."

"I'm not sure it works that way in this house," he said mildly.

"Well, there's a bank of windows in the Porphyry Gallery two floors above us." Though we usually avoided windows whenever possible.

"Can you show them to me?"

I scuffed along the black-and-gray carpet of the Funerary Arches, ignoring the urns and pedestals surrounding me and pretending I hadn't heard the question. Finally I glanced over at him.

"We'll come to some maids' stairs soon, on our right in an alcove. Those will take us up."

He actually pushed ahead of me in his excitement, walking stick and all.

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The Porphyry Gallery was a baroque arrangement of narrow pillars rising in fours from marble plinths relieved with seahorses. The plinths in turn supported a long series of small groined arches with frosted glass fixtures depending from them, each fixture engraved to match its plinth. Tall, thin vases stood in little bays within each arch, between the sets of the pillars. They were backed by heavy velvet curtains, except that every fourth one had a mullioned window instead, tall and thin as the vase which stood before it.

I lead Ben to the first of those windows, took down the vase, and stepped aside.

He hopped up on to the little platform where the vase had stood, laid his hands to each side of the window, and stared out for a while without comment.

Finally, Ben turned and stepped down, taking up his stick. "You say there are more windows."

I nodded as I replaced the vase, not trusting myself to speak, and led him to the next bay containing a window. After I moved that vase, Ben hopped up again. This time he only looked for a moment.

“I would appreciate it if you could tell me what you see there, Johnnie.”

“I don’t like windows,” I said. Outside had high skies and strange animals and stranger things.

“Please.” His request was simple. The way he asked, without pleading or pushing, was even honorable.

I looked. Trees towered just beyond the window, recognizable from a hundred different paintings scattered around God’s house. Green-clad hills rose above the trees’ pointed tops, and gray mountains mantled in snow rose in turn behind the hills.

My gut lurched, and I stepped away. “A great forest,” I said.

“Now come.” This time he led me to the next window, and even on his unsteady legs shifted the vase. “Look again.”

*It is only a forest, I told myself. I will not look at the sky.*

This time there were brown fields, massive machines like enormous roaches trundling over them spouting fire. The very glass of the window seemed to vibrate with their noise, though I did not hear a sound. Men and women ran screaming, tried to put out the flames ignited by the machines, died before them, struck down by invisible spears.

I jumped back into the hallway, nearly knocking Ben over. “That is why I hate the windows!” I shouted. “They show miserable lies.”

“They show God’s world,” he said quietly, then hopped up to look, just for a moment. He hopped down again. “Let us move these last two vases back and go home. I would rather see the Conservatory another day.”

Grumbling and hard-hearted, I shifted the vases without his help. On the way back down the maids’ stair, he touched my shoulder. “Johnnie, I’m sorry. I did not mean to alarm you.”

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That night as we chewed on snake, Old Jamie finally asked Ben Eye-gas about his plans. “You going to stay on a while, Mr. Ben, or wander them halls for

something else?"

"Neither," said Ben. "I'm returning outside, back where I came from. My work there is not done."

Old Jamie cackled. "No one leave's God's house."

"There are the windows," Ben said politely. "Or I might ask the workmen for a door."

"Well, and you're welcome here for a while, and welcome back after your quest fails." Old Jamie glanced at Marta Grande and the Hunt Group's other three women, Maryam, Filippa and Pale Shandy. "There's no denying we need good seed here. Could stay and make some babies, you could."

Ben nodded at the women. "That is not my purpose, but thank you for the offer."

Purpose or no, Marta Grande went to him on the settee later that night and groaned her way to a long, happy laugh with Ben's aid. I just watched the fire and wondered what would happen when our outsider opened a window somewhere, or worse, actually did get the workmen to build a door.

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A week later, splints cut loose, Ben announced he was ready to leave. "My time with you has been a joy and pleasure."

Marta Grande, Maryam, Filippa and Pale Shandy all giggled, whispering together. If it weren't for new babies that we might have, I would have been jealous. Old Jamie answered for the Hunt Group. "You are always welcome here, Ben Eye-gas. We wish you well, but believe you will return. Johnnie will go with you, to see you safely off or guide you back as needed."

I was not surprised, though by now I wished Ben would go off on his own. Which he almost did, standing to circle around the room and embrace every member of the Hunt Group one by one, save me, then walking toward the door.

I watched until Ben started to pull the door shut behind him. Then I sprinted after, grabbing the knob with one hand before joining him in the hall.

"I'm glad you came, Johnnie," he said.

"I guess we're returning to the Porphyry Gallery," I answered glumly, not acknowledging his compliment. If that's what it was.



“No, I have another place in mind. Show me to the Hall of Kings, where first I entered this house.”

So we went to the Hall of Kings, a journey of perhaps two hours to that strange, stony part of God’s house with its sense of great age. I paid little attention to the hallways and corridors through which we passed, for my feet knew the route almost of their own accord. I kept my spear ready for rats or hall tigers, but nothing showed itself.

There was not even the distant sound of the workmen today.

When we came to the stone room, there was a pile of lumber and tools beneath one of the high, narrow windows, though it was not the same one through which Ben had originally come.

“Ah,” he said, taking his hammer from its little sling. “They made ready for me.”

A cold fear stole into my heart. “What will you do?”

“Outside, I was a carpenter,” he replied. “I shall build me a door and go home. I have been wandering far too long, and my work awaits me.”

Though I was afraid of the workmen, I helped him frame the lumber and build a door, flush against the stone. He cut no passageway, did not even seem concerned about it, but busied himself with the details of the construction.

After a matter of several hours, it was done. Simpler than our sitting room door, without the relieved panels or brass hinges, it was nonetheless a solid door, well-made. Had I found it here, I might have thought it led somewhere important, instead of opening onto coarse, ancient stone.

“What do you think?” Ben asked.

“A waste,” I said. “It is nicely done, but leads nowhere.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “There you are wrong. This door leads everywhere.”

“Like the windows?”

“Like the windows.”

I glanced up at the narrow windows high above, daylight streaming through them to stab the stone floors with dusty, brilliant blades.

“Where will you go?”

“Where the way has been prepared for me.”

I touched the wood, close-grained and silvery gray. It was like the finest of leather. “Good luck,” I said. I realized I would miss him. Ben had given us a lavatory, and probably new children, and been pleasant and kind and never complained, though I knew we must have seemed to him like animals in an upholstered den.

“Would you have me go?”

For a moment it seemed odd, then I realized that his question was serious. “You are your own man,” I said.

“Nonetheless, would you have me go?” He was gentle, insistent, one hand stroking his hammer back in its sling, the other on his chin.

And I knew right then I could keep him here in God’s house. He had ceded me his power. “Why is it for me to say?”

“You prepare the mansions in God’s house,” he told me. “You prepared my way, and you will go on to prepare the way of those who will follow me.”

I felt that little swirl of jealousy again, but I took his hand in mine. “Go.”

He smiled, handed me his hammer, and opened the door. I saw a dusty land under a bright sun, a city on a hill with gray-green trees growing along its streets, then with the click of the door against the frame, Ben was gone.

Hammer in my hand, I returned to the Hunt Group, thinking on what had happened.

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Sometimes we find things in front of that door in the Hall of Kings, as if someone had opened it from the other side. A cripple’s crutch, a girl’s doll, bottles of sharp water that warm the gut and loosen the tongue. Coins, books, little colored cards with pictures on them—pictures that almost resemble Ben. One time, three rusted nails big as spikes.

So when we prey, we leave a piece at the door, burnt in the old ways. God was in His house once in our lifetimes, and He might pass this way again some day.

Every so often I go to the Porphyry Gallery alone and shift the vases one by one. No matter how many windows I look out of, I never see Ben. I still have his

hammer, in case he ever returns.