

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 2: An Odd Proposal

The rest of the day passed uneventfully enough. It wasn't until that evening that Johnathan saw Manson again.

Sitting alone in the echoing dining room of the manor house, it still struck Johnathan as odd to sit at the head of the table. And odder yet to have no one else sit with him.

Manson arrived promptly with the meal. Nothing fancy for the day. It made little sense as Johnathan and the staff were the only ones to feed. For the moment at least Johnathan was eating the same as everyone else.

And that suited him just fine.

There were no too few people that he'd met during his time in London that had digestions so fickle and fine that they couldn't seem to survive on anything but custard and sherry. That wasn't so with him.

Long ago Johnathan had picked up a taste for simpler fare. Anything that could be purchased in a local pub around London was fine with him. And then the meal Manson produced was a good measure above that.

Before Johnathan could even ask the man to sit with him Manson had already disappeared back into the kitchen to oversee the cook.

With a heavy sigh, Johnathan dug into the plate before him, the echoing sounds of the room booming all around.

The food, while simple, was still good. A cut of beef and a few roasted potatoes and carrots. It wasn't a full Sunday evening fry up, but it was more than suitable for a Tuesday.

The only thing missing was a good ale. All Manson had provided was a soft beer. It was refreshing enough, but it left the prospect of a clear head for the rest of the evening, something that was of little use to Johnathan at the moment.

Johnathan was just finishing up his meal and readying to call Manson to see if there was any pudding for tonight when the man came in on his own accord.

There was something in the way Manson walked that caught Johnathan's attention at once. The valet was as smooth as composed as always, but something troubled him. There was a slight

disturbance to the rhythm of his steps, to the arrow straight path of his walk.

"Sir," Manson's voice was as smooth and untroubled as a mountain lake, "you have a caller."

"Oh?" Johnathan wasn't expecting anyone. "Who is it?"

"Their card, sir." He reached forward with a silver platter in his hand. In the centre of the platter sat a small business card.

Dr. Victor Robenson M.D.

"How odd." Johnathan lifted the slightly smudged and stained rectangle of paper from the plate. There was nothing else written on it. "Did he say what he had come regarding? I don't believe anyone has called a doctor."

Manson stiffened. "It appears he is seeking funds, sir. A benefactor. I tried to turn him away, but he was most insistent in meeting you."

Johnathan sat back, twirling the paper between his thumb and forefinger.

"Well then, I suppose I should meet with him."

Manson did say anything for a moment, but his expression was plain enough. "Are you sure, sir? He does not appear to be a most... becoming individual."

Johnathan let out a long breath. "You may be right, but I should start trying to build a legacy of my own, sooner rather than later. And I would think that my father was not that becoming an individual when he first began his work either."

"I..." Manson cut himself short. "Yes, sir. I'll show him in presently."

A few moments later Manson returned with a man in tow.

Dr. Victor Robenson fit the expectations of a man of science. Tall, all but six feet, with a pinched frame, he looked to be little wider than a blade of grass. He was covered in a white long coat that nearly swept down to his ankles, showing only the shadow of the back boots that flashed out when he walked.

His steps, unlike Manson's steady gait, were quick and scurrying. He would take a half dozen paces, ending up ahead of his guide, then stop dead to take in his surroundings before scuttering forward again.

His eyes never stayed still. Reminiscent of a child seeing the world for the first time, he scrambled to take in all around him, as if trying to assess the value of everything he passed, but also keeping an eye out of the available exits.

His eyes were a bright blue and bloodshot, Johnathan could tell as much even from the great distance of the dining room. At first glance his eyes almost looked red, it took a moment to see past the swollen veins to their true colour.

A mop of long, unruly brown-grey hair sat atop his pinched face, hanging out over a long crooked nose.

As they neared, the Doctor's attention suddenly shifted. It was as if he'd just noticed Johnathan in the room.

In the blink of an eye the man's whole appearance changed. He no longer stooped forward, but rather stood straight, he no longer scuttled about but rather walked forward confidently, matching Manson's stride for stride. And he no longer glanced about. Johnathan was now the only thing of interest for him.

They had just come to a stop beside the table when Manson opened his mouth to introduce him. The Doctor cut him off.

"Mr. Pennyfare! How good to finally meet you! I've heard so much about you these long months." Without even being asked, the man took a seat next to Johnathan at the dining table and set the bag he'd been carrying next to him. "Yes, I've heard such marvellous things about you, *and your*

generosity!" His voice seemed mismatched to the person it came from. It was smooth and cultured, coming easily to his lips and never seeming to slur or fail.

A moment later the Doctor glanced over his shoulder to Manson, as if to ask *is he still here?*

"This," Manson broke in, with a slow, deep candour, "Is Johnathan Pennyfare, son of the late Thomas and Rebecca Pennyfare. May I introduce *Doctor* Victor Robenson."

Manson put just enough stress on the word *doctor* to suggest that he didn't quite fully believe the title was deserved.

"Yes, yes," the Doctor broke in, "let us dispense with the formalities, I am simply Victor and you are simply Johnathan, yes?" He laughed as if telling a joke. "Yes, yes, of course you are. Now, shall we get down to business?" He glanced over his shoulder at Manson again, scowling.

Leaning forward on his elbows, Johnathan tried to get a better look at Victor, but it seemed the man was always in motion, hard to pin down. One moment he was brushing at his lapels, the next he was shoeing the indigent Manson away again.

"I'm sorry, Victor, but you have me at a disadvantage," Johnathan said. "I'm not quite sure what our 'business' is."

The man laughed again. "My dear Johnathan, don't ever be so concerned." He paused for a moment, as if just having remembered something. "But pray, may I have my card back?"

"Hmm? Of course." Johnathan picked up the card from where it sat on the table between them.

Odd... he was surprised to note that the white paper of the card had gone a stained blue where he'd held it earlier.

Victor took it from his hands. It was only now that Johnathan noticed the doctor wore a pair of leather gloves.

The man's smile grew even wider as he took the card.

"Yes, yes!" Victor's face became more animated now as he carefully placed the card in a pocket of his long coat. "We have much to talk about!" Once again he glanced sourly at Manson who continued to hover only a few steps away. "Johnathan, my dear friend, could you ask your *servant* here to fetch me a pen and paper? I am a man of science and must be able to write notes of our conversation."

With a shrug, Johnathan nodded. It was only with great reluctance that Manson retreated from the dining room in search of writing implements.

Not a heartbeat passed before Victor reached into the bag he had brought with him and pulled out a bottle of whisky and two rough glasses.

"Come, my friend, drink with me and we will discuss business!"

Before Johnathan could even work up an argument Victor had pulled the cork from the bottle and poured two glasses. A generous one that he pushed Johnathan's way and a much milder one he kept for himself.

"Yes, yes! Let us talk business! I am seeking a patron to aid me, fund my research! That very man could be you, my friend!"

Johnathan took a cautious sip of his drink. It burned all the way down.

"And what exactly would this research be, Victor?"

The man simply threw his head and laughed. "Be? I study *everything*, my dear friend! The world, those men and beasts who walk upon it, *everything*. It would be unfitting to limit my study to a single thing – unfeasible! The whole of creation is interconnected, all a single thing. There is no more difference between a man and a plant than there is between a rose and a daisy! You can not call yourself a modern man and dispute that fact!"

"I, well..."

"Of course you agree," Victor cut him off, "You are a learned man, obviously!"

"Uh, yes. Obviously." Johnathan echoed, sipping his overfilled drink again.

Victor began speaking at length, and at great volume, of his work. Little of it made any sense to Jonathan, and even less when he began rambling on in Latin and German. It seemed to make little difference to Victor, the man continued on, going ever deeper into his explanations, sketching them out on the tablecloth with a pen that appeared from one of the many folds of his coat.

"But as you can see, my dear friend," he concluded, "It is my greatest fortune that you, a young and open minded gentleman who has so recently come into money, is so close at hand to help fund my great work."

"Yes, about that..."

"It would be of great value to you!" He cut in, "I've just moved into town a few months ago. Think of it, my dear friend! For nothing more than a few thousand pounds you will forever have your name attached to my work, it will be part of your legacy!"

Setting down his glass, Johnathan was surprised to find it nearly empty. Victor reached out to refill it, but Johnathan waved him away.

"I... am looking to make investment..." Johnathan began slowly.

"Yes! Yes, investment! What a perfect way to think of it! You *invest* in my work and we can share the returns. What a marvellous way to think of it. But," with a sudden jolting motion the man stood up from the table, "You must see my laboratory." He looked at Johnathan with something more than simple avarice, "Yes, yes, you simply *must* see my lab!"

Reaching forward, he grabbed Johnathan by the wrist.

"I say!" With a wrench, Johnathan pulled back out of the man's grasp.

For just a moment Victor stood perfectly still, like a painted statue. Not even his eyes blinked. It lasted for only a heartbeat before he returned to his frantic motion.

"Apologies! I am not of the British lifestyle... as you can well guess. Things are different where I come from. Apologies."

"Yes," Johnathan straightened himself and stood from his chair. Despite the man's eccentricities he was becoming intrigued to learn exactly what it was that Victor was looking into. "Where was it you said you were from again, Victor?"

The words that came from the Doctor's mouth were deep and guttural, sounding something like a curse. He followed it up with English.

"The Continent." He waved a hand to the outside world. "A far distance from here. The men there are not as cultured as they are here in England." A slight shudder ran through the man's thin body. "No, the men back there are foolish, not seeing the bright light that hangs only a hand span from their noses. They..." He cut himself short with a cough, glancing Johnathan's way. "It does not matter. I am here, in glorious England, where men embrace progress. And what progress we can make, my dearest friend!"

A moment later they were walking side by side from the dining room, only to meet Manson coming their way, a pen and pad of paper in his hands.

"Alaesta!" Victor shoved Manson roughly out of the way, nearly bashing him against the wall.

"Well I *never*!" Came Manson's gasped reply.

Reaching out a steadying hand, Johnathan helped Manson regain his balance before continuing. The Doctor never even slowed as he continued on.

"We'll just be popping our for a moment," Johnathan said. "Victor want to give me a tour of his laboratory."

The expression on Manson's face couldn't have been any more sour if one had fed him a lemon.

“With *him*, sir? Are you quite sure?”

Johnathan shrugged. “I don't see why not. He an eccentric, no doubt, but many of the finest minds of time were. Sir Issac Newton, one of England's best, was certainly one. What's to say he's not the next to reach that great pillar?”

Manson lowered his voice, “But I don't trust him, sir. He strikes me as more than funny...” He glanced over his shoulder at the still retreating form of the Doctor. “He has the air about him of some of the people who I've had the misfortune to deal with in the past. He...” Manson fought for words, “He doesn't see people as *people*, he sees them as *tools*, to be used.”

Johnathan frowned. “But I should suppose that is the way of great geniuses.”

The slightest growl escaped Manson's lips. “I simply *do not trust him*, sir.”

Johnathan patted the man on the shoulder, making him flinch. “You needn't worry. He must be sixty if he's a day. And half my size at that. I'm sure I haven't anything to fear from him. I'll just pop into town with him and take a gander at his laboratory.” Now Johnathan lowered his own voice, “To be frank, I'm not so sure about funding him, but I am curious to see his work none the less. He's either a genius or a madman. Either one he be, it should make for an entertaining evening. And weren't you the one telling me I need to get my mind off my problems?”

“Yes, but...”

“Very good,” Johnathan cut in, “I shouldn't be more than an hour or two. I'll see you before the house gets locked up for the night then.”

Jogging to catch up to Victor, Johnathan fell in beside him just as he was reaching the front door. For all the world it seemed as if the man hadn't even noticed he'd been gone.

The Doctor had been rambling on about the phases of the ether or some such thing when Manson had appeared in his way, and for all Johnathan could tell now he seemed to be doing more of the same.

Stepping out into the cool night of the country, there wasn't a whisp of fog to be seen.

Tied up a few feet away, an old nag of a horse waited, standing so still Johnathan would almost have mistaken her for dead or asleep.

Leaving the Doctor for a moment, Johnathan walked around the manor to saddle Ginny.

Ginny couldn't be any older than the horse Victor rode upon, but she was easily twice as lively. Oddly, Ginny being a calm and easy going soul, she didn't seem to care for the other horse. She took one whif of the animal and backed a step away, leaving as much of the path between them as possible.

“So, Victor, where is your laboratory?” asked Johnathan to try and rekindle the conversation. The Doctor had gone as silent as his mount once they'd entered the night.

“Yeah, yeah, not far. Not far at all, my friend. Just in town, across the river. Not far. Please, friend, I need quiet. Must think. New problem as come to me. Need to find answer, yeah?”

The only sound the came from around them was the clomp of the horse's hooves and the occasional mutter from the Doctor. Johnathan couldn't make out what he was saying, but it had to span at least a half dozen languages.

Letting his mind wander, Johnathan tied to listen for the other sounds around them, the life of the forest.

He'd been able to do it well enough when he was young, growing up out here, but they seemed to escape him now. He *knew* there was life out there, the forests of Hammerwood were some of the most abundant in the British Empire, but he couldn't seem to make out a sound.

A few minutes later they made it to the River Reading. Ginny tromped through it without a second thought. The night might be dark, but the moon was out, casting enough light to see where they

were going. And beyond that, the riverbed was hard and well packed, an easy walking surface.

Glancing back, Johnathan noticed that Victor's mount had balked at the river, pulling up short. Without saying a word Johnathan turned Ginny around and waited.

Once more Victor pulled at the reins of his horse, but the animal steadfastly refused to move forward.

Johnathan was just about ready to dismount and walk back across the stream to render assistance when he saw the flash of metal in the night. A moment later the old nag whinnied and bolted across the stream, nearly knocking the Doctor from her back in the process.

The action was so abrupt that even Ginny startled. Pitching backwards in the night and raising her front hooves from the ground, Johnathan had to lean forward and wrap his arms around her neck and whisper in her ear to calm her.

"Come on now, girl, nothing to worry about. Just the old silly nag over there getting scared by her own shadow. Nothing to worry about..."

Much to his relief Ginny calmed quickly. Johnathan smiled. That's why he kept her. She was a near perfect mount for a relatively unseasoned rider such as him.

Pulling Ginny around and trotting her up to where Victor's horse had come to a stop on the road a few dozen yards ahead, he glanced over to the man.

"Are you alright, Victor?"

The man hardly even seemed to notice what had happened. "What? Yeah, yeah. Am fine. We keep going, yeah?" A moment later he'd put Johnathan from his mind.

Glancing down the the nag, Johnathan noticed she was breathing heavy, far heavier than she should for the short burst of speed she'd put on.

And more than that, the whites of her eyes were showing as she continuously tossed her head back and forth.

Now it was not only Ginny who put as much space as she could between them and the nag. Johnathan was more than happy to help.

Entering into the town of Hamerwood a quarter mile later, there was little to see. The town was relatively small to begin with, only a couple thousand souls, and there was no night life to speak of. This was not London.

The sun was down, and the only light to be seen save the moon was that of candles flickering behind the windows of a handful of houses.

Johnathan had been surprised to learn that Victor's laboratory was in Hammerwood. While Johnathan had been more than a little withdrawn, he did still know almost every building and resident in the town.

Victor led them through the town, down the main central road and right out the other side. Johnathan was just about to interrupt the man's mutterings when the Doctor turned and began down a small side street on the edge of the outskirts.

A few moments later he pulled up at the front door of a disused warehouse. There was little here. The building had once, long ago, belonged to a logging company, but now was only a few years short of falling down. The place had been abandoned two decades ago, Johnathan was surprised it hadn't been demolished for the public safety yet.

"Yeah, yeah, we are here." The Doctor snapped out of his musing the moment they came to a stop, a wide grin coming to his lips again as he returned to animation, like a puppet returned to the show.

Victor nearly fell from his horse, ignoring the animal as soon as he was off it. The nag

wondered away, unrestrained. He didn't seem to care.

Johnathan was a little more practical. It was unlikely that Ginny would wonder off, but it was impolite to say the least to leave one's horse untied in town.

There had been a hitching post here once, but it was long gone. Johnathan had to suit himself with tying Ginny off to the frame of the building that had come exposed, with the hope it would neither come free nor bring the structure down on their heads.

Stepping up behind Victor, Johnathan had to help the scrawny man pull open the front door of the building. The door was stuck, catching on the edge of the frame as a result of the building shifting as it decomposed.

A good yank and the sound of splintering wood, Johnathan stepped back, fearing the whole structure was about to come down upon them in a hail of timber and jagged splinters. His fears were thankfully unfounded. The wall swayed alarmingly, but remained upright.

"Yeah, yeah, come in, please!" Victor grabbed Johnathan by the cuff and pulled him forward.

Johnathan didn't even have the presence of mind to protest, he was too busy searching for a handkerchief to raise to his nose, the smell was beyond foul.

For someone who had spent the last few years in London to call a location as foul was an insult beyond the norm. London was not a pleasant place at the best of times, the scent of horses and humanity and raw sewage mingling together in far too small an area, but it was better that *this*.

Johnathan couldn't even identify a tenth of the stench that assaulted his nose. There was sulphur, that much he knew, and chlorine, and rotted meat.

It was nearly enough to make him bend over right there and deposit his recently consumed meal onto the ground in front of him.

For all the world the Doctor didn't even seem to notice. He breathed normally as he pulled Johnathan deeper.

Forcing tears from his eyes, Johnathan got his first clear glimpse of the laboratory around him, lit as it was by a few weak lanterns.

It looked like a cross between a taxidermy shop and a witch's coven.

There was at least a hundred square yards of space inside the building, at it was packed from one end to the other with all manner of things. Copper pipes and bronze and silver dishes were in one corner, jars of fluids and powders, many unlabelled, were pressed in another. There was a machine in an advanced state of disrepair sitting in the centre of the room. Johnathan hadn't the slightest what it was to do, but the pair of antennas that sprouted from its crown were devilishly sharp and covered in black scorings.

All of these things, however, were only window dressing for what lay in a circle about the machine.

Johnathan had been to some of the finest museums and zoos in London, seen beautiful taxidermy work of creatures from one end of the earth to the other. This was not of that class.

Spread in haphazard piles across the floor were the skins, and occasional organs, of dozens of animals. They ranged the gambit from foxes and dogs to more exotic creatures such as a rhino, lion, and even a muskox.

How the Doctor had managed to get his hands upon these creatures – and transport them here – was beyond Johnathan.

It was, however, apparent that the creatures were spent, of no further use. For all the pungent scents set off by the chemicals they were dwarfed a dozen times over by the rotting corruption of the animal corpses.

And Victor didn't even seem to notice. He walked between the piles of flesh and fur, his boots

occasionally squishing in the viscera.

"Yeah, yeah, you need to forgive. My ether transmutation machine has broken, yeah? Is of no difference. Already have what we need from it. Already fed it the samples and it produced the results. Is good, don't need it anymore."

"What is all this, Victor?" Asked Johnathan between gasps.

He turned and smiled, like a proud father showing off his child. "Is my life's work, yeah? This is the result of decades of research. Finally proving we are off all things interconnected. A man is of a stone what a cloud is of a mouse, yeah?"

"Of course, Victor." Johnathan had come here with an open mind, happy and willing to see what it was the man was working on. He was nearly ready to state he'd seen enough.

This *was not* a respectable thing to be involved in. Johnathan wanted to find something *good* to attach his name, his parent's money, to. This was not likely to be it.

"Come, come, dearest friend." Victor pulled at Johnathan's cuff again, dragging him deeper into the building. Thankfully, they began to pass away from the worst of the corpses and the stench that clung to them like a black fog. "You will help me, yeah?"

Back towards the far end of the room a workbench sat pushed up against a cabinet. Victor pulled a key from his coat and opened a drawer, pulling forth a box. He set the box on the bench and began rifling through the paper squares that were arranged neatly within, his long, gloved fingers making them click together softly.

"You will help me, yeah? You will take these papers and put them on the desk?" Victor's voice had moved to someplace beyond his excited, breathless ramblings. Now it was calm, precise.

Johnathan was just beginning to look for an reason to excuse himself for the night.

"Yes, of course, Victor." Was all he could say.

The doctor took the first of the paper squares from the box, stained a pale blue, reading the illegible scrawl across it.

Passing it gravely to Johnathan, he watched closely as Johnathan took it and set it on the workbench.

After a moment Victor turned back towards his box with a huff to pull out another paper. This one stained a deep green.

And it continued for the better part of ten minutes and thirty papers. Every so often one of the squares would seem to change colour ever so slightly under Johnathan's fingers, but he simply put it off to a trick of the light.

They were almost half way through the box when Victor handed him a pale tan square. Upon touching it the paper turned a bright red in Johnathan's fingers.

Nearly dropping the papers, Victor scrambled forward to catch it in his gloved hands. The Doctor's face was pulled and expressionless, but his eyes danced.

"Silly me, Mr. Pennyfare, so clumsy." Before Johnathan could say a thing the Doctor had whisked the paper away, now a blood red, and sealed it away in the cabinet. Noticeably, not back in the box it had come from.

"Come, come," He took Johnathan by the shoulder, more gently now, and led him away, towards the back of the room.

The papers that hadn't changed colour sat forgotten on the bench, fluttering away in the slight breeze.

There was a small room next to the main one, behind a tight fitting door. The air back here still stank of the rot from the main room, but not nearly so unbearable. Like being beside a rubbish dump

rather than within it.

"Come, sit with me for a moment, my friend." Victor pressed Johnathan down into a roughly made chair beside a simple table. There were scraps of food here. This must be where the doctor lived. There was a range off in the corner and a mattress pushed up in another. And, oddly enough, no exit but back to the main chamber, not even a window.

Beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable, Johnathan began to brush at his fingers where he'd touched the papers. There was nothing apparent on them, but yet they still seemed to itch ever so slightly.

Victor occupied himself for a few moments, bustling back and forth in the small room, lighting lamps and shoving coal into the range.

"Yes, my friend," The manic energy had returned to Victor's motions, like he could no longer stand still, "Now you have seen but a small fraction of my work, you are interested, yeah?"

Johnathan cleared his throat. He had yet to see *anything* of note but what looked like the remains of a poorly run butcher's shop and a few pieces of paper.

But he was rapidly becoming convinced that he had seen enough.

"Yes, about that, Victor..."

"Is exciting, yeah?" the man broke in as he worked with his range, back to Johnathan. "You have seen, but you have questions, yeah? So does Victor. Let us talk of you. How much can you offer to me? How soon?" He paused for a moment as the sounds of clinking jars and the rustle of water came from before him, "How much are you worth, Mr. Pennyfare? In total?"

Johnathan sat up straight.

"That," He cleared his throat, "Is not a question to ask a polite man. Really!" Johnathan did his best to pitch the note of indignation in his voice tight enough that it would carry across whatever cultural boundaries Victor found himself behind.

For just a moment the man stilled, back still turned to Johnathan.

"My apologies." His voice was mild, "I forget sometimes that this is not my homeland. I meant no offence, none at all, yeah." He turned towards Johnathan with a smile on his face. "Let me make it up to you, yeah?"

In the Doctor's hands were two crude clay cups, from the smell of them Johnathan could tell they held tea, but the blend was unknown to him.

Setting the cups on the table, Victor placed the larger of the two before Johnathan. Steam still rose from both.

"Please, drink, my friend." Victor raised his cup to his lips and took a long sip. He paused when Johnathan didn't mirror the action. "Come, my friend, do not insult me as I have you. Take your drink." The last part came out as more of a command than a request.

With a scowl on his face, Johnathan lifted the cup and carefully sniffed the rising steam.

It was hard to make out the scent over the still overpowering stench from the other room, but it didn't seem all together unpleasant. More than anything else it seemed to be one of the conventional blends that one could buy at the town grocer, though not the one that Manson seemed to prefer. There was more to it, however.

Under the traditional smooth scent of the tea was something else. Chemical? Johnathan couldn't tell, but it seemed more likely to come from his odd surroundings than the tea itself.

Victor took another long sip from his cup and Johnathan found himself following out of curtesy before he could even think.

Victor smiled.

"Again, I do not mean to offend you, my dearest friend. But let us speak more of my work here.

You have questions, yeah?”

Johnathan took another sip of his tea and washed it around in his mouth for a moment. There was definitely something more to it, but not unpleasant. He put it out of his mind.

“I should suppose I do, Victor. I still don't see what it is you do here. What are you trying to accomplish?”

The man cocked his head. “Have I not said time and time again? I work to prove that all things are interconnected. That all things are the same, that one is the other.”

Johnathan sighed. “Yes, but *what does that mean?* Like a sparrow is a cloud? What can you do with that? How does it work? And why do you have all the animal carcasses out there?”

Victor simply shook his head. “You do not understand, yes? It is fine. You can still fund me, then you will learn. It takes only time now.”

Finding himself at the bottom of his cup, Johnathan set it back on the table.

“I'm not sure that's a possibility, Victor. I'm not sure how rich you think I am, but not I'm not wealthy enough to go off funding projects that I don't even understand. I'm sorry,” Johnathan stood up, his chair squeaking as he pushed it back, “But I simply can't fund you at this time.”

Johnathan had expected the Doctor's smile to break, perhaps even for him to become angry, but neither occurred. He simply sat serenely, his hyperactive manner never changing.

“How unfortunate, my dear friend. It is bad you feel that way, yeah? Perhaps your outlook will change in a few days. I will not be going anywhere, I'm sure you can find me again when things change.”

Johnathan had a few choice words for the likelihood of such a thing happening, but he kept his words to himself as he stood up.

Suddenly light headed, Johnathan had to reached out a hand to steady himself on the table. In a heartbeat Victor was at his side, holding his shoulder.

“You are alright, yeah?” His voice held more concern than Johnathan expected. “You feel alright? Need I help you back?”

“No, No.” Johnathan brushed him away and forced himself to stand straight. A moment later the nausea passed. “I'll be fine. It's simply the late hour. I must be going.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Victor followed him closely as they walked back through the main room. Johnathan had to hold the handkerchief back to his nose to stand the stench. Victor didn't seem to notice.

A moment later Johnathan was outside, Victor pulling the door closed behind him.

Taking a deep breath of the clear night air, Johnathan had to hold back the impulse to vomit, just to clear the reek from him.

A moment later he had Ginny unhitched from where he'd left her and the two of them were once again back on the road, both glad to be away from the odd establishment.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Johnathan could just see a pair of eyes watching him from behind one of the shuttered windows.