

The Changing Times



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Chapter 7: Dark Roads and High Winds

Riding back down the unkept drive from the Talbot's home, it was only then Johnathan realized how much he'd had to drink at dinner.

Unaccustomed to alcohol at the evening meal, Johnathan had drunk with unknown abandon, not even thinking of what was in his glass. He'd be raised to only drink *after* a meal and the change set him off balance.

Fighting on, Johnathan kept his back straight and his balance centred as the winds howled around him. The storm had returned while he'd been with the Talbots. Any if the sky was any indication it would only grow worse as the night wore on.

Not yet quite as bad as the storm last night, it was still enough to toss both he and Ginny back and forth as the reliable mare made her own way home without Johnathan urging.

Passing back through Hammerwood, the town was once again closed for the night. It wasn't that late, only perhaps nine or ten, but the streets were empty due to the unseasonable wind. What few people Johnathan saw were quick on their feet to get away from the elements.

Through his blurry eyes Johnathan could count each and every building in town that his parents had been involved in constructing.

When they'd first arrived forty years ago here Hammerwood had been little more than a hamlet, a tiny collection of a half dozen buildings, little more than a meeting point into two roads that serviced the nearby manor houses.

Johnathan's parents had helped change that. Buying the land they could, they'd helped people set up shops and homes, then encouraged them – much to the richer land owner's contention – to purchase their homes for themselves.

That had been the source of much of the Pennyfare's fortune. Johnathan's parents had been wealthy when they'd arrived here, wealthy enough to purchase the manor he now lived in, but it was act of building Hammerwood that had aided in generating the fortune that was now being used to gain Emma's hand.

The Talbots had been one of the only other families that had been here before the Pennyfares. They'd been, years ago, one of the voices raised in outrage at the creation of the town.

Johnathan woke from his dreamlike stupor for a moment just long enough to see the inn and pub at the side of the street. The Wolf and the Lion.

Heh, Johnathan thought to himself. He'd almost grown up in that pub. He'd spent almost as much time in there as he had schooling when he was young.

A half a mile away was the sawmill, and a mile in the other direction was the butcher's shop. Between them lay houses. And to the north lay the warehouse that he'd been dragged to only what, twenty-four hours ago?

Taking a deep breath of the chill air that swirled around him like an invisible devil, Johnathan fought to clear his head. It did little good.

Right now the idea of his soft bed and familiar room was sounding better and better.

Lifting Ginny's rains, he softly urged her on. She just glanced back at him and continued her steady plod.

Breaking from the edge of town, they left the last of the houses behind as they headed for the river and the estate beyond.

Oh dear, this would never do.

Ginny came to a halt as they neared the river.

The waters were still swollen from last night's rain, and now they were whipped to a near froth by the wind.

They looked to be almost twice as wild as they had been only hours ago. It had been difficult enough for Ginny to pass them then. It would be impossible now.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Johnathan turned them north, along a small patch on the bank.

There was only one thing for it, they would have to head downriver until they made the bridge. It was a stout, ancient iron and wood structure. And now it seemed it was the only way across the River Reading.

And it was a good hour's ride away.

Wrapping his dinner jacket around him, Johnathan shivered. He hadn't had time to find a proper overcoat for the trip, and in any event he hadn't expected these dastardly winds that consistently threatened to unseat him and deposit him soundly into the river below.

Running a hand over his forehead, he realized he was sweating.

Alcohol had never hit Johnathan like this before. The suggestion of Manson that he see a doctor rang loud in his ears now.

Swaying, it took everything he had to keep his perch on Ginny's back.

"Just a few more miles..."

Johnathan could almost see the lights of the estate glimmering through the trees on the other side of the river.

It was so close... yet there were miles to go to make it home safely.

Screwing his brow, Johnathan could feel sweat gathering on his face as the winds howled.

A few hundred more yards and the fever that had grown within him was becoming unbearable. What had been nothing but moments before but now threatened to burn him up.

Ginny's gait underneath him began to grow rough and agitated. Johnathan wanted to say something, to sooth her, but he couldn't spare the breath. All that came from him now was grunts.

The bridge was just coming into sight around the next bend.

They would make it. That was all Johnathan could think about. The bridge was the halfway point...

Still a good hundred yards away, Johnathan felt something move within him.

There was no ripping sensation, no feeling of pain... it was like a straining muscle had just let

go.

A long sigh escaped his lips. A moment later he felt something else shift.

Ginny raised her head and screamed.

Johnathan was thrust back into the moment as Ginny bucked under him.

Unaccustomed to such actions from her Johnathan clung for dear life to the saddle, trying to do nothing more than keep himself upright.

He held on for just a moment, feeling proud of himself, he wasn't ready for when Ginny lifted her hindquarters into the air and slammed down.

In a quarter of a second Johnathan was airborne, arching through the dark night sky.

He had only just enough time to realize his misfortune and tuck into a ball before coming crashing down into the bushes that lined the path.

Laying dazed for a moment, he could hear the distinctive clomp-clomp-clomp sound of Ginny's hooves retreat into the distance as she fled onward without him. A moment later their sound changed as she crossed the bridge.

Frightened she might be, but the horse was no fool. She'd headed back to the manor.

Leaving Johnathan bruised and bloodied, laying the the brambles.

A long slow breath and Johnathan began straightening out on the hard ground. The sound of twigs and branches snapping under him were loud, even competing against the drone of the raging wind.

Nothing was broken. That was a miracle.

Trying to sit upright, Johnathan quickly learned he didn't have the power. Every muscle felt bruised, every joint heavy. The effort of lifting his now swollen and heavy head seemed too much for him.

Reaching out in the darkness, Johnathan felt about until he found the trunk of a sapling. It served as a handhold to get him on his feet.

"Damn."

Looking down, Johnathan could easily see by the wan starlight that his fine dinner jacket and trousers were as good as destroyed.

Manson would have a fit.

Staggering forward a step, Johnathan regained his balance. He tried to shake his head to clear his thoughts but quickly learned how foolish a thought *that* was. A simple shake was nearly enough to send him collapsing back into the bushes. Not only was he lightheaded but he also felt top heavy.

Stepping out of the trees and back onto the path, Johnathan wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or despaired that there was no one in sight.

There were no witness to his foolishness, but then again there was no one to help him.

Heaving a long sigh, he did the only thing that came to mind.

Johnathan began walking, slowly, home.

Only a hundred yards to the bridge, it felt as though it took him an hour. No less than twice on the short walk did he feel the same peculiar *shifting* sensation in his gut. Each time it took him to his knees until it passed, but each time he struggled back up a little stronger, a little faster.

Finally laying a hand on the rainswept ancient wood and iron bridge, Johnathan closed his eyes for just a moment. He still had a long way to go from here.

The urge to simply crawl into the undergrowth and sleep away the night was near unbearable. It would be such an easy thing to do, to let the night pass him by.

"No." The word fell from his lips like a stone. "I am a man. Beast sleep in the forest, not I."

Pressing on again, he leaned heavily against the rail of the bridge as he staggered across.

Glancing down into the fast running water not more than a few feet below, there wasn't quite enough starlight for Johnathan to make out his reflection.

The silhouette that floated just out of reach was disjointed and inhuman, broken and shifting on the water as it was. Johnathan could just make out his unruly long hair and beard. He looked more like a monster that one might hear about in a bedtime story than a man.

Turning his eyes firmly forward and away from the reflection, Johnathan forced his mind to a more favourable image. Emma.

He would get home, he would get cleaned up, and he would free her from her family. She would be his and the world would be right.

But first he had to get home.

His footsteps on the bridge had echoed, but back on the gravel of the road they once again returned to a more familiar crunch.

Johnathan let out a sigh of relief.

Walking upright without the aid of the rail now, every motion still pained him, but Johnathan could nearly hold a normal walking pace.

A dozen paces onward and Johnathan's ears twitched. Something moved in the trees to his left.

A piercing scream broke the night. It was higher than a human's, more primal.

Turning as quick as he was able, Johnathan raised his hands before him in defence. A heartbeat later a rabbit broke for the bushes to dart across the road. It ran like its tail was on fire, like a fox was not a stride behind, yet there was nothing chasing it.

Falling flat on his rear, a laugh croaked its way from Johnathan's lips. A rabbit. That was all it was. A rabbit had scared him.

He laughed until his gut hurt.

He almost didn't feel things shifting in there.

Waiting until his second wind had returned, Johnathan slowly climbed back to his feet. Right now all he wanted was a warm bed and clean sheets.

Rubbing the back of a hand across his sweat stained forehead, Johnathan paused mid stride.

That was odd... he felt hair. Not the overly long hair on his head, but hair on the *back of his hand*.

Try and he might he couldn't make out anything but the vague form of his limb in the darkness. There wasn't even the reflection of the stars of the water now to aid him.

No other options, he lifted the back of hand to his face. Brushing it over his lips, he could feel small bristly hairs poking through the skin. They hadn't been there an hour ago.

Fighting for a calm breath, Johnathan began moving forward again. He had a long way to go, and the only place he'd be able to make sense of this was back home.

But home was still miles away.

The forest seemed to close around Johnathan as he pressed on. This was his home, where he'd spent his life growing up, but yet he had the oppressive feeling that *he didn't belong here*.

A game hen scuffed in the dirt to his left, a couple dozen meters off. Johnathan wasn't sure how he knew, the sound was far below his hearing, but he *knew*.

A moment later a fox brayed to his right. It leapt near silent through the bushes, crossing the road a dozen yards ahead. Johnathan's eyes picked out its motion perfectly in the darkness.

"A fever dream. It must be..."

He began running.

It was only seconds before he teetered on his feet.

His balance was all off, shot to hell and back. He joints didn't want to bend and his muscles wouldn't pull as they should.

Tipping forward, he hit the ground with a snarl, smearing mud over what remained of his shirt and cutting his face of the gravel.

The sound of the creatures among the trees behind him spurred him on, lit his vision in flashes of red as he imagined the horrors that crept ever closer.

Scrambling back up, Johnathan quickly found he couldn't seem to return to his feet. Whether the result of the wine or the fever, he couldn't hold his balance once he rose.

On all fours he began rushing forward. The feeling was too easy, too smooth. He wasn't crawling, he was all but flying.

He body still wasn't quite as it should be, even for this. His joints were still off, but it felt for the moment more natural and easy than walking on two feet.

It was only too late that Johnathan realized the trees around him looked unfamiliar.

There was but a single fork in the path on this side of the river, and he'd taken the wrong leg. Or had he? Everything looked so alien from this vantage point. He'd walked the road a hundred times, taken it a thousand more by horse, but he'd never had to look at the trees in the dark while on his knees. And never had he moved this fast, he was faster than a galloping horse. It threw of his sense of direction.

Had he passed the fork, or was it just ahead? He should know where he was even if he'd taken the wrong leg...

Eyes spinning, Johnathan began running again, headlong down the road, not caring if it lead it home or to the heart of the forest. He just had to be *away*.

It seemed like only moments before the road turned, too quickly for him. Feet and hands sliding in the dirt, Johnathan went head over the edge of the road and into the deep ditch beyond.

It was a good twenty feet to the bottom of the ravine that crouched in the trees here.

Opening his eyes again, there was a bump growing on the back of Johnathan's head. Despite everything that had happened so far he had to laugh.

This was the second time he'd ended up in the ditch in as many hours. And he didn't even have Ginny to blame for putting him here this time.

Struggling to his feet – two of them, not four – Johnathan looked out over where he'd landed. The road was a sheer climb behind him.

Letting out a huff, he was about to turn and begin scrambling up the rocks, but something tugged at him.

There was an itch in the back of his mind, he couldn't quite place his finger on it for a moment.

It was a smell, or more to the point a scent.

It didn't *feel* like a smell. It was nothing like the sensation Johnathan normally associated with the idea of smell. It was too nuanced, too sharp. It didn't simply weave about him like a perfume, it laid spread out, almost as if dissected, waiting for him to review it.

A deep breath through his nose and Johnathan began to recognize what it was.

It was no simple matter to untangle the sensations that came to him. Like looking at a familiar object through a microscope, what he breathed in now was far more finely displayed than he ever imagined.

It was the scent of tea and wood smoke. And not just any tea, the particular mixture that Manson bought.

It was far in the distance, but it was there.

Stumbling forward in the dark, the road forgotten behind him, Johnathan ventured deeper into

the thick trees.

There was something subtly different here. The trees were still an alien force pressing in on him, but they were softer, quieter.

It took only moments for something to trigger in the back of Johnathan's mind. He knew where he was. He'd been lost on the road, half blinded by the dark, but now he knew where he was.

The scents, the earth under his feet...

Without a thought Johnathan turned into a near invisible side path. It would have been hard to find in the day, by night it seemed so obvious.

And he was once again standing in front of his great oak.

Looking like nothing more than a monstrous black pincushion, blocking out the sky, Johnathan could still tell with perfect certainty that it was *his* oak. He could smell the scent of the tree, of the forest surrounding it.

He could smell his own scent. The frolicking winds tried to rinse it away, but he could still pickup his own scent from where he'd lay not hours before.

Somehow it smelt different. Almost as if it hadn't been him.

Stepping up to the tree, Johnathan stretched his back and forced himself upright, off all fours. His body didn't want to comply but he made it none the less.

Running a finger down the rough bark of the tree the impulse hit him for a moment to climb it and spend the night up there.

He smiled, for just a moment. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd spent a warm summer's night deep in the tree's embrace. Only this time his father wouldn't be on hand to come and find him at god knows what hour of the night and carry him home.

Turning his head, Johnathan forced himself away from the oak. He made it all of two steps before teetering on his feet and falling back to all fours.

The landing wasn't so hard this time. It almost felt natural.

One last, long glance back, and he slowly made his way out of the sheltered glen, once again towards the manor.

The slight feeling of peace that had come to Johnathan as he'd found his oak slowly bled away the closer he came to the finely manicured estate grounds.

The change from forest to garden wasn't immediate. First one encountered the cleared underbrush, then the cared for trees, then the open lawns, than the hedges, then finally the perfectly civilized flower gardens. Only after that did one step up to the manor.

Johnathan was still standing before the flower beds, hesitantly looking back and forth, trying to get his bearings.

It had been so simple to know where he'd been out in the forest. Now the scents of the hundreds of flowers in bloom confused him, crawled inside his now hyper-alert mind and clouded him over.

There was too much here. The scent of roses, lilies, hibiscus. And beyond them the scent of the stable and manor itself weaved back and forth confusingly, like a mirage. There was nothing for him to focus on, nothing to follow like the scent of the oak.

But there was the scent of Emma.

Johnathan had no idea how he could smell it, or if indeed he truly could. For all he knew it was simply nothing more than his addled mind playing tricks on him. But yet he turned his head in the darkness and began walking.

A straight line. It took him stomping through the flowers and stepping over short hedges. Yet in time a new form slowly materialized from the darkness.

Letting out a sigh that was not fully of relief, Johnathan forced himself the last hundred yards to

the manor.

Looping around the side, he found himself at the front door.

The gas lights here flickered anaemically. Manson had undoubtedly left them on, but the wind was doing its best to put them out. They hardly cast any more light than the stars.

Two more paces and Johnathan was at the front door.

Laying a hand upon the dark stained wood, he had to hold back a shudder. He never before realized the door was of oak.

A moment later he was sadly inside, he howling cry of the high winds muted behind him.

A snort came from the darkness, somewhere nearby. Johnathan froze.

Cocking his head, a moment later Johnathan picked up the soft sound of breathing.

Stalking forward in the darkness, Johnathan didn't make even the slightest of sounds as he moved. Not even the sound of his shoes on the floor interrupted the night.

Around the next corner he found Manson, asleep in a chair with a burnt out candle on the table by his side.

A smile crept to Johnathan's lips. It was the first happy emotion to pass his way since he'd left the Talbot's home.

Manson, and he alone, had waited up for him. He hadn't lasted the night, but he'd waited strong and faithful for his master to return home through the great windstorm that whirled outside.

About to continue on, Johnathan heard Manson snort again and shift in his sleep. The old front hall was large and drafty, no place for a good man to sleep.

Stealing away into the next room Johnathan pulled a thick wool blanket from a cupboard.

Returning to Manson in the hall he gently spread it over the man.

A moment later Manson's fitful sleep calmed.

Johnathan smiled again.

It took no more than moments for Johnathan to climb the stairs and return to his chambers.

Letting out a long sigh, Johnathan tore off what little remained of his clothes and fell into the soft, neat bed.

Stealing a quick glance out the window before he did, Johnathan could see the dark, indistinct shapes of the forest out his window.