

The Changing Times



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Chapter 9: Warm Sun has Bleached me Blond

Trying his best to shake away the dread that pooled in the bottom of his heart, Johnathan walked up to the front door.

Yet no matter how hard he tried he couldn't make himself turn the handle.

From just within he could hear muffled voices, both raised in anger.

One was Manson. Manson *never* yelled.

Letting out a long breath Johnathan compromised with the instinct that forced him away from the door. A quick jog around the house and he entered by the back kitchen entrance, frightening the maid.

"Sir!" She nearly dropped the vegetables she'd been chopping.

"Elizabeth," Johnathan nodded his head and worked up a smile. "Sorry about all the confusion this morning."

She raised a hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Nothing to apologize for, sir. It was all our fault. You haven't anything to explain, the constables told us everything."

Johnathan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. That was one less thing for him to deal with.

Johnathan nodded his head towards the front of the house and the raised voices that came from that direction.

"Would you be kind enough to extract Manson from his... ahem, conversation."

Elizabeth looked confused for a moment. "Oh. Is he still talking to that odd man?"

A moment later Johnathan was alone in the kitchen. Reaching down he took a small handful of chopped carrots to nibble on but found them unpalatable and put them back.

It was only a matter of seconds before he heard Manson's voice cut off in mid yell. Elizabeth must have found him.

A moment later Johnathan could hear the soft pad of the man's feet as he came to the kitchen at a quick jog, most unlike Manson.

Door bursting open, Manson was suddenly no more than an arm span from him.

It seemed like such an odd feeling, having been apart for only hours, but Johnathan had missed the old man.

"Young master," Manson's voice was breathless, he didn't even bother to try and disguise the relief in his voice.

It took a few moments for Johnathan to get the full story out of him, but it was more or less as expected. Manson hadn't seen him arrive last night and had as a result sounded the alarm. How he'd managed to miss the lump under the covers of Johnathan's bed neither of them would ever know.

It was when Johnathan asked about the visitor in the front room that Manson's face went red, and not from embarrassment.

"That cad!" Manson's voice was rough with anger, "He was here when we got back, arrived just before us. He was helping himself to the entire house, not a care in the world. When we found him in the library he acted as though *we* were the ones intruding on him! I had to all but drag him from the room. And the scoundrel still won't leave the house. I've a good mind to call the constabulary." Manson looked away for a moment. "I would have already if I hadn't already roused them once this morning."

Johnathan let out a long sigh. "What's the man's reason to be here anyway? Would he at least tell you that?"

Manson straightened and forced his voice back into the smooth monotone that Johnathan was more familiar with. "He *claimed* he was looking for you, sir. Said you and he had business." The tone that slipped through made it obvious that Manson trusted what this man said as much as he trusted the devil himself.

"Fine." Johnathan turned to the nearest door. "Go back in there if you'd be so kind. Tell our *guest* that I'll see him. *In my own good time.*"

"Very good, sir." Manson's lip twitched. "Might I ask where you're going? Back to town, perhaps?"

Johnathan laughed. "No. I wouldn't want to give him an excuse to remain in my home for so long. I'll see him soon enough, once I've had a chance to prepare myself. If you need me, Manson, I'll be in my chambers."

Taking care to avoid the library so as the Doctor couldn't poke his head out at an inopportune time to see him, Johnathan took the long way down the endless halls of the manor to the main staircase.

Despite the great distance he kept Johnathan could still hear Victor's raised voice demanding of Manson that Johnathan see him immediately.

Johnathan smiled.

There was still a lump in the bottom of Johnathan's gut at having the man in his home, but there was little he could do about it just now. At least he'd found his way into the library rather than the back parlour. The library was an important place to Johnathan, but if Victor had found himself in the parlour then he'd have to throw the man out on his ear this very moment.

Back up in his room Johnathan took a moment to change his sweat stained suit. At the rate he was going through clothing lately he wouldn't have to worry about the Talbot's driving him into poverty, he'd do it just fine by himself with nothing more than his wardrobe costs.

Down to nothing more than his undershirt and pants, Johnathan took a look into the mirror and was surprised to find he already had a good quarter inch of beard back on his face, almost as if he hadn't shaved this morning.

"Blast it all! Is my razor faulty or am I?"

He sat down once again in front of the mirror to save away the sandy blond hair until he was

once again presentable.

Once again dressed, clean, and presentable, it took Johnathan nearly as long to steel himself up and prepare his mind to meet the doctor.

He had no idea why he felt such a sense of foreboding. Last time he'd sat with the man he'd been pleasant enough... in his most odd way. Johnathan simply could not put his finger on it but yet he no longer liked the man, no longer trusted him.

Letting out a sigh, Johnathan descended the stairs.

At the bottom he was surprised to find Elizabeth waiting for him.

"Are you ready, sir?"

Johnathan looked at her. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "The... guest has begun to cause an uproar. Mr. Manson is doing all he can to contain him to the library. I was asked to make sure you came to deal with him as soon as you were ready."

A slight growl escaped Johnathan's throat. How dare the man cause such an uproar in *his* home! He was not invited here, he had no right to set foot in the house.

Stalking down the hall quick enough that Elizabeth had to jog to keep up, Johnathan made his way to the library.

He could already hear raised voices.

Pushing the door roughly open before him Johnathan stepped into the room. The midday sun slanted in through the windows, banishing any need for gas lights, but it left the room in alternating swatch of bright light and faded shadow.

In the middle of one of the rectangles of light stood Manson and Doctor Robenson, nearly chest to chest, both yelling at the top of their lungs.

Manson was going on about laws and regulations, *proper* actions and etiquette.

Victor, on the other hand, Johnathan had little idea was he was screaming. Two words out of three seemed to be in another language. Or perhaps more than one other language for all Johnathan knew. What little he did say in English seemed to be nothing more than disconnected concepts and words. Every so often Johnathan could hear his screech out 'property' and 'evolution'. Even the word 'experiment' came up now and then.

Neither even turned their heads at Johnathan's grand entrance. Johnathan was a touch put out by that.

Striding firm and brisk towards the two men, Johnathan noticed that Elizabeth didn't follow him into the room. She hung back, closing the door softly behind him.

"Gentlemen," Johnathan fought to keep his voice level as he stepped up. Neither of them even noticed him.

Letting loose a growl that shook his very bones, Johnathan reached out and closed his hands over the Doctor's narrow shoulders, lifting him clear from the ground and twisting him mid air to look at him.

"Silence!"

Like a Christmas pantomime the two men cut off mid word to turn and look wide eyes at Johnathan, like he was their father come down to discipline two naughty children.

The scene only lasted a moment. Manson was the first to react, pulling down his mask of calm. In less than three seconds the man had gone from red faced screaming at the top of his lungs to a picture of perfect serenity.

It was damn near unnerving to Johnathan.

The doctor on the other hand had a far different reaction. The moment he'd heard Johnathan's voice he'd pulled back as if the back of his neck had been held to a hot poker. There was a flash of something in his eyes for just a moment before he'd gotten a good look at Johnathan.

Fear.

Pure, unbridled fear.

A heartbeat later his own mask slammed down over his face, but it was far removed from the one Manson wore.

"Johnathan! It is good to see you, yeah?" He shot Manson a glare that could have killed. "This *servant* tried to impose himself in my way. He is incompetent, yeah? I knew you would want to see me. I knew you would be thinking about what I showed you." There was just the slightest narrowing of the doctor's eyes.

Johnathan fought to keep his own face neutral.

"Doctor Robenson. I'm sorry, I don't recall having invited you back to my home. I thought I made it understood that I wasn't interested in funding your work last we met."

The smile on the man's face never faltered.

"Yeah, you said that, but I knew people *always* have questions a few days later. Come, let us speak." His grin grew wider, looking more mad than merry. "I will tell you a bit more, and then if you want me to go I'll never come back."

The tone of the man's voice suggested that he had no doubt he'd get his way.

Manson cleared his throat a moment later, catching Victor's attention.

"Bah! But cast your *servant* out! He has no place here among us *civilized* men."

It took every particle of will Johnathan possessed not to lift the doctor up and throw him from the room on his ear.

Turning to Manson, Johnathan nodded almost imperceptibly, his eyes hard. There had already been enough of a confrontation here today, Johnathan was more interested in getting Victor out without having to involve the police force.

It was clear from the set of Manson's jaw that he didn't wish to leave, but he turned stiffly on his heel none the less and walked from the room.

His steps stopped dead the moment he closed the door behind him.

Turning back to Victor, Johnathan was in no mood to be pleasant. The sharp edge to his voice made that apparent, even across the cultural boundaries.

"Why are you here?" Johnathan didn't bother to sit down, "Say your piece and be gone. I've had quite enough to deal with today without you forcing yourself onto my plate."

If anything the man's smile grew wider with Johnathan words until it seemed he could just as well swallow the moon.

Victor didn't bother responding, not right away. Turning calmly, the man surveyed the room and selected a deeply padded chair that sat before a low table.

Opening a small satchel he carried looped over one arm, Victor pulled out a stack of papers and a pen to set upon the desk.

It was only then that the man sat down, and with a long, slow, relaxed motion that suggested he had all the time in the world and was in perfect control of all around him.

"How are you, Johnathan, my friend? Feeling well, yeah?" His voice was soft, easy, like a vicar speaking to a member of the flock who had come to him with a concern. It was obvious from his words that he expected Johnathan to bare his soul to him.

Johnathan never moved from where he stood, forcing Victor to kink his neck to keep eye

contact.

"I am *fine*, Victor. You have still yet to tell me why you are here." Despite his best efforts Johnathan's composure was slipping.

"That is interesting, most interesting, yeah?" He reached down to scrawl across the papers spread before him. "Most subjects have already begun to show signs of ewolucja bu now. Odd, yeah?"

"Did... did you just call me a *subject*?" Still held in check, Johnathan couldn't stop himself from moving forward a step. Victor was still out of reach, but it made Johnathan feel better none the less.

"Subject, sponsor, patient. All the same, yeah? You sit down and I tell you about what you *should* be feeling and you tell me what you *are* feeling. We make a good study that way." He glanced back up. Johnathan had yet to move.

Victor frowned. Setting down his pen, he looked Johnathan in the eye. "Sit!" His nasal voice was loud and commanding, sharp in the quiet on the library.

Johnathan stood where he was and crossed his arms.

"You are in my house, Victor. I will not do as you *command*. You will tell me what is going on or I will have it interrogated from you by the local police force."

The doctor cocked his head for a moment, as if trying to understand the words that came from Johnathan's lips. Then his eyes grew wide.

"No! You will do no such thing! You will do what I have told you, yeah? You are my subject. You want to live? You want to have nice fancy wedding with that pretty girl that everyone is talking about? You will do as I say or you will not have!"

The mere mention of Emma was enough to send Johnathan lunging forward. Wrapping his hand around Victor's collar he dragged the smaller man to his feet. Fear was alight in the doctor's eyes... but there was something more. He was calculating, analyzing, like Johnathan was nothing more than a lab animal in a cage being readied for vivisection.

"What... is... going... on?" Was all Johnathan could push past his clenched teeth.

A watery smile returned to Victor's lips.

"You feel differences, yeah? You not know what is happening, yeah? You are my subject. You came to my lab, you joined my experiment. You drink my tea and become part of the experiment. Now," he reached up as if to brush Johnathan's hands from his collar, "you will stop all this silliness and tell me what has happened to you. I will record it and maybe I'll be able to help. Maybe I won't. All we know for sure is that for you to be able to survive, to return to what you were, will take money. Much, much, money for the research."

Throwing the man bodily back into his chair Johnathan stepped forward to tower over him.

"What have you done to me, you monster?" Johnathan's voice cracked as he bellowed. All the changes over the last two days... the dreams and impulses... was it all because of this little man who sat before him.

Johnathan had intended to intimidate the man, put the fear of god into him. If anything the doctor hardly seemed to notice.

"Undo it. Now!" Johnathan fought to keep control of his voice.

Victor looked up at him. There was no smile on his face. It was like Johnathan was looking down at a blank, a tailor's mannequin.

From the corner of his eye Johnathan saw the man scrawling away furiously at his notes.

"I told you, good friend Johnathan, I need money for research. I will turn you back, as I have done others, but I need money. What I gave you isn't the same as I gave them. You are different." He paused for a moment, smile creeping back onto his face. "You not dead yet. That good. Already you're beyond where many of the others made it to. My latest changes have done well."

Feeling suddenly lightheaded, Johnathan fell back into the seat across from the doctor. The other man seemed to take this as a positive sign.

"So, we must talk about funding, yeah? The more you give the sooner you be free of the serum. If you give me everything you have," he glanced about the room as if deciding how much everything would go for in an estate sale, "you could be free in a year. You likely live. Two out of three you live if you give me everything you have." He laughed, eyes lighting up. "Yeah, yeah, much money for research. Be able to try things never thought of before!"

Johnathan could believe what he was hearing. This man had poisoned him and now he expected Johnathan to fund his research into find a cure.

In the blink of an eye Johnathan lashed out across the table, striking the man square in the nose.

There was the sound of cracking bone and nothing else.

Johnathan pulled back his fist for another strike. For a moment no one moved.

Then like a stone falling into a pool and destroying its serenity, Victor screamed.

Hands flying up to his now off angle nose, the doctor let out a high pitched note of pain that could just have well shattered the glass chandelier.

A spot of red dripped down to the man's dingy grey shirt. It attracted Johnathan eye like a shooting star.

"How dare you! How dare you, you ungrateful..." Victor's muffled words failed him as he tried to struggle to his feet. "I come to help you and you *strike* me. You beast!"

Lashing out again, uncontrolled, Johnathan scored against the doctor's forearm that he'd raised in the defence of his face.

Rather than a punch this time Johnathan scored a glancing blow, his fingernails ripping across the man's shirt and down to the flesh beneath. When Johnathan looked again there were four long gashes oozing blood.

More words escaped the doctor's lips but Johnathan couldn't make out any of them. He doubted they were English and doubted even more any of them were worth listening to.

Johnathan didn't have to urge the man on. In seconds he'd made it to the library door by his own power. It conveniently opened by its own accord just before he got there.

Out in the hall, Johnathan stalked after the retreating man, making sure he didn't take any detours before he left.

Out the front door, Elizabeth opened it for him, Doctor Robenson leapt upon his mount like a man with the devil nipping at his heels. He was down the road and around the bend in moments.

Johnathan stood there and waited until he was out of sight.

"It would sound as though you had a productive meeting, young master." Manson had stepped up to Johnathan side.

Leaning against the door frame, Johnathan let out a breath. "Let us both hope we never had reason to seek that cad's company again."

Manson raised a eyebrow. "Amen, sir."

Back in the manor, Johnathan chose to retire to the back parlour to let his heart rest. He'd had far too much excitement today.

Bringing in a service of tea, Manson hovered by his side as Johnathan stretched out on the old chesterfield. Looking down, Johnathan studied his hands.

"Are you quite alright, sir?" Manson's voice was grave. "You seemed to be disturbed. Was there a problem with that man?" Manson's lip twitched.

Feeling ill at ease, Johnathan didn't know how much to tell Manson. He had been feeling ill

lately, but had it truly been as a result of the doctor? Had the man, as he'd said, truly done something to him or was he simply a cad, preying in a sign of weakness and doing nothing more than theatrics?

"It's alright, Manson." Johnathan covered over his grimace with a sip from his tea. "I have been feeling somewhat under the weather these last few days, but I'm certain it's simply the stress of coming home, proposing to Emma, and dealing with *him*."

"Of which 'him' do you speak, sir? The so called doctor or the elder Talbot?"

Johnathan raised a hand to his forehead. "Well played. But speaking of Stewart..."

"Ah, young master," Manson took a step away and lifted a sheet of paper from a nearby table, "this came in the post this morning. Pity neither of us were here when it arrived. I took the liberty of opening it for you."

Taking a read down the paper Johnathan was both elated and horrified. It was the official blessing that he'd asked the Talbots for, written out in ink. However, under it was a list of expenses.

A line at the bottom stated clear as day that they would give Emma over to him for marriage as long as he paid off their expenses.

The wide, looping signature beneath could be none other than Stewart's.

Johnathan handed the paper back to Manson.

"Will we be able to afford this without being ruined?"

Manson's expression was grave, but his eyes twinkled. "Your parents, young master, had greater forethought than many people. It has been obvious for years that you would marry Emma. While the Talbot's exact demands were unknown to them they did set aside a reasonable amount of money for just this situation. I'll make it available."

Johnathan sighed. No matter how hard he fought to escape his parent's shadow he simply couldn't seem to manage it. This time, however, he was more than happy to feel their presence looking down on him.

The rest of the day passed relatively uneventfully. That afternoon a representative from the police force paid them a visit, just to make sure he was alright. Johnathan thanked him for his time and apologized for the uproar.

The officer's carefully expressionless face broke into a smile when Johnathan promised to make a donation to the service in an effort to make it up to them.

As far as Johnathan saw it was as good a place to start as any. His last attempt to form a legacy had gone over poorly to say the least. A donation to the local constabulary would be hard to go wrong. At least he wouldn't have to worry about them coming back and trying to extort him for money.

Seeing the officer off with a reasonably padded cheque, Johnathan sat down to review the rest of the day's post.

There were the normal bills and accounts to settle – Johnathan would pass those on to Manson – and more interestingly a dozen or more requests from different people and organizations for donations – Johnathan put them in a different pile for later. One thing that did catch his eye though was a letter from the local church.

Slicing open the envelope with the edge of a fingernail, Johnathan unfolded the letter. It was from Reverend Benson, the local priest.

Johnathan had little court with the man, not being much of a church goer himself, but he had met the fellow enough times to say he knew him.

The Reverend's handwriting was small, straight, and severe. Easily readable, it was obvious the man spent no small part of his life writing correspondence.

The letter itself was little more than a formality. He had become aware of Johnathan's and

Emma's engagement and offered the services of the church to them for the ceremony whenever they required it. Attached was a list of dates the church had already been booked. If they'd be so kind he would appreciate it if they could let him know their desired date as soon as possible.

Down at the end of the letter, below the signature, was an extra line that Johnathan wondered if all the other new couples got. It read, 'I've noticed the town has become quite engaged in the preparations for this wedding. This should be quite an event.'

Johnathan folded the letter and placed it back in its envelope. This really was little more than a formality, the reverend's church being the only one in town was the sole place for weddings, but it was a comfort to know that he and Emma were so quickly acknowledged by a man of God.

Afternoon wore into evening. Dinner was served and Johnathan was relieved that his world was beginning to return to normal. There were no sudden appearances of mad doctors, no apocalyptic storms raging outside his window. The world was calm and relaxed, sending off another warm and quiet summer's day.

Johnathan spent the evening wandering the gardens. Unlike the previous few days he made a point of staying close to the manor. He had no desire of tempting fate today by wandering off into the forest only to brew up yet another storm.

He did however wander out to the stream that bordered the estate, the one he'd plunged into not so long ago in a vain effort to save Emma's beloved hat.

Looking down into its deep, swift waters, Johnathan wondered just for a moment what he would have been like without Emma. She had been a part of his childhood since nearly the day he could walk. He'd loved her before he even knew the word. And soon she was to be his.

A slight chuckle escaped his lips. If he had to exchange a dunking and much of his family's fortune to be with her then so be it. He'd make the trade gladly and be more than confident he'd come out the better for it.

The red blaze of the setting sun streamed in through Johnathan's bedroom window as he retired to his chambers that night. It was still relatively early, but this had been a long day.

Pulling off his shirt and trousers, Johnathan was surprised to see a soft mat of blond hair covering his chest. *That* had most certainly not been there this morning.

The back of his mind wanted to scream, to jump off the bed and find a razor, or better yet to track down that cad Victor and demand an answer, but the larger part simply ran a hand down the hair and marvelled at how soft it was.

Head hitting the down filled pillow, Johnathan lay awake for some time, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. The familiar aged white paint looked back at him wordlessly. For a moment he thought back to the nights he'd spent in the old oak tree out in the forest, surrounded by softly rustling green leaves that swayed in the gentle summer breeze.

Those nights he'd been able to look up and watch the powerful blue of the sky as it slowly bled to the dark violet of the night, letting the stars shine through.

It was only then that Johnathan realized one of the many things he'd missed during his years in London. The stars. He'd seen them so rarely, even here in Hammerwood, that he'd never realized just how their absence had weighed upon him.

Sitting up suddenly, Johnathan had to fight back the lightheartedness that clawed at him.

Off balance, Johnathan groped blindly for the edge of the bed to support him. The room around him was pitch black now, he couldn't even see his hands in front of his face.

Leaning on the wall Johnathan stumbled slowly towards the window. There was a flash of light

from the mirror above the washbasin but he ignored it. It reflected the stars, not him.

Up against the windowsill now, Johnathan leaned heavenly against it, pressing forwards until his forehead, now slick with cold sweat, was pressed up against the cool glass.

He could see out to the carefully maintained garden that spread out beyond. His breath fogged on the glass until in only moments it was all obscured.

Scrambling at the windows, Johnathan's fingers scraped against the catch until his numb didgets caught and pulled it free.

Pushing the window out in a frantic motion Johnathan gasped for the cool night air like a drowning man coming up for air.

But yet it did nothing.

He could see the world around him clearly now, but yet it did nothing. The breath came easily to him now, but yet Johnathan still felt like he was drowning in himself.

There was no sense of *movement* within him like he'd felt the night before. If anything his body was calm, his heart even and still. It was within Johnathan's mind now that the waves roared, threatening to capsize him.

Falling slowly to his knees, hands still clutching uselessly to the windowsill that he'd fled to in the vain hope of saving himself, Johnathan's eyes rolled up until he could see the quarter moon that hung motionless in the sky above.