

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1:	The Old Manor House.....	1
Chapter 2:	An Odd Proposal.....	9
Chapter 3:	An Odder Feeling.....	19
Chapter 4:	Tea and Crumpets in the Garden.....	29
Chapter 5:	And We Shall Tell the World.....	38
Chapter 6:	Late For a Most Important Engagement.....	46
Chapter 7:	Dark Roads and High Winds.....	58
Chapter 8:	High Society Braggart.....	65
Chapter 9:	Warm Sun has Bleached me Blond.....	78
Chapter 10:	The Cat and the Mouse.....	87

Chapter 10: The Cat and the Mouse

Opening his eyes the next morning Johnathan knew before his vision even focused that *something* was very, very wrong.

Still sitting nude, slumped up against the wall under the open windows, he felt far more at peace than he could ever remember.

And that sensation, of peace, frightened him.

Lifting his hand back to the windowsill to help him to his feet, his eyes were still unfocused. All he saw was two indistinct blond blobs.

“Odd,” the thought ran through his mind, “The hair on my chest has moved to my hands.”

Lifting his head to see the grounds outside, his vision went crystal clear as a rabbit bounded over the grass. Johnathan's head moved instinctively to track it.

Forcing his eyes to focus closer to him, Johnathan glanced down again at his hands.

And fell back with a shout, nearly clobbering his head on the floor to knock himself senseless.

No words formed in his mind. He was no longer looking down at his hands.

The limbs... no, paws, that were held out before him now were alien to him. Golden pelted and looking like what he might expect to see conveying an oversized house cat about, the only way Johnathan knew they were his was by how uncontrollably they shook.

A small sound escaped Johnathan's throat. It wasn't a word, not a human sound at all, but it was universal. A soft shriek of terror.

Laying flat out on the floor, Johnathan frantically began searching the body that now contained him, looking for something, anything, human.

It didn't take long for his faint hope to vanish.

A sandy blond pelt covered him from misshapen toe to inhuman ear, of the same colour that his hair had been yesterday. Like his overactive beard had decided to grow and encompass his entire body. But where his beard had been before was something new.

No longer sandy blond, Johnathan now had a new beard encompassing his neck and head. A deep mahogany brown, far closer to his original hair colour, it wrapped around him like a mane.

The moment the word appeared in his head the world crystallized.

Mane.

Scrambling unsteadily to his feet, it was only then that Johnathan realized he had a tail protruding from his backside, complete with a brown tuft flicking back and forth on the end by its own accord.

Hesitantly raising his eyes to look in the mirror, Johnathan steeled himself to see what was to stare back at him.

No sound escaped his lips now. He couldn't have moved his throat if his life depended upon it. The face of a lion stared back at him, unblinking.

It wasn't *quite* the face of a true lion, but it was obvious enough to see that's what it was.

Blond fur, golden eyes, wide feline nose and a short muzzle. Johnathan didn't dare open his mouth. He didn't want to know what was contained within.

As if moving in a dream Johnathan took account of what he now possessed, what he now was.

He could still stand on two legs, if a touch unsteadily, and he still had five fingers, but there wasn't a single aspect of his body that had not changed.

Much to Johnathan's disgust and horror he watched as his fingers slowly twisted, his thumb pulling back a quarter of an inch and a set of long black claws began to ever so slowly thrust forward. The moments were subtle and inexorable, like the coming of the winter.

Johnathan wasn't sure how long he sat there, cold and alone on the floor of his bedroom, his sheets laying in a pile a foot away and the sun casting a golden square to his left.

"Young master? Are you awake?" Manson's voice came from beyond the closed door to the hallway just a moment before a stiff knock.

Head jerking up fast enough to leave his vision blurring, Johnathan leapt instinctively away to the furthest point from the door, his bed.

Feeling like a frightened child, Johnathan crouched upon his bed and reached down to pull the covers over his inhuman form.

In seconds he began to itch, feeling his temperature rise as the blankets redoubled the warmth that was already captured by his new abomination of a pelt.

"I'm fine," Johnathan managed to grunt out, only too late realizing just how much the change had done to decimate his voice. The words that escaped from him now were deeper, rougher, the pronunciation mangled by the long fangs that were even as he realized it pushing through his gums. "I'm fine. I just feel ill."

A moment later Johnathan could hear with preternatural clarity the sound of the door handle turning.

"Sir, are you sure you're alright? You sound... unwell."

Bundling himself tightly in the covers Johnathan covered over his face until he couldn't see even the faintest hint of light from the outside world.

Only too late did he realize that his newly grown tail poked out the far side, laying down the side of bed to rest on the floor away from Manson.

Johnathan could hear the long, slow steps of Manson as he walked into the room. Manson had always held certain parts of the manor special. The back parlour, his parent's private chambers, Johnathan's. Manson was the only one he allowed there.

"Sir, it is well past noon. Are you sure you're not ready to get dressed? There is a large amount of work that must be done." Was that a faint note of annoyance in the man's voice? "We must review and settle the bills forwarded by the Talbots. They are most insentient that we settle the accounts right

away, before the wedding.”

Johnathan refused to move. It took all the effort he could muster to hold his damn tail still – it wanted to flick back and forth and the harder he held it the more insistent it became.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Manson. I’m ill. I can’t today.”

“Really, sir?” Manson’s voice was disbelieving. Johnathan could just see the scowl on his face. “You’re a grown man. You needn’t pretend you’re ill. If you’d rather I deal with matters than I will.”

“Manson,” Johnathan fought to hold back a growl, “I am *not* playing. I am truly ill. You’d best leave before I make you ill as well.”

There was no answer for a long moment.

“Sir? Are you truly?” Manson’s words were simple enough, but the tremor that ran through his voice nearly broke Johnathan’s heart.

Manson didn’t say as much, but he saw Johnathan just as much as a son as he saw the man as a kind of father. The fear in Manson’s voice was that of a father. Manson had never raised a family of his own, had never shown the least interest in even attempting such.

“I’ll do it right away, sir.” His voice was little over a whisper but Johnathan could hear it clearly through the sheets. “What shall I tell the doctor?”

Johnathan was at a loss. What could he say? To claim he’d turned into a damned lion would have him sent off to the asylum no matter if it was true or not.

“Tell them I have a fever. Tell them I’m... I’m having trouble thinking straight.” Johnathan let out a sigh. That was true enough. “And, Manson? Ask the maids to leave. Please. I don’t want to have it on my soul that I might get someone else ill.”

“But, sir, I’m certain they’ll be just...”

“Please, Manson, please,” a whimper worked its way into his voice no matter how hard he fought to fight it off, “Please. Ask them to leave. I’ll pay them anyway. They’ll both welcome back as soon as I’m well. That goes for the gardeners and anyone else as well. Even...”

“I will be back in a few hours to see to you, Sir.” The iron in Manson’s voice was obvious. “I will be coming back to tend to you. You’re parents may have--” He cut himself off with a gag.

Johnathan went stiff. What had he done to deserve such a devoted man such as this?

“Thank you, Manson.” Reaching out a hand still covered in blankets Johnathan could feel the man clasp his hand.

“Sir! You feel unbearably warm!”

Johnathan held back a snort. He hadn’t been overheating until he’d been forced to dive into these infernal covers. Once he got back out into the air he’d be fine of at least *that*.

“It’s,” Johnathan forced out a cough, “It’s nothing. Please, just go to the doctor.” He let out a heavy sigh. “I’ll be fine.”

The lie burnt on Johnathan’s lips like he was breathing fire.

“I will, sir. Never you fear. You’ll be right as rain in no time.”

Johnathan heard two steps against the wooden floor before Manson stopped short. There was the sound of him sniffing that air.

“Sir?” Johnathan could almost see Manson’s confused face, “Has there been an animal in here? The air smells... off.”

Johnathan chucked darkly and finally ran the man away.

A short time later Johnathan was able to perk his inhuman ears and hear Manson’s words to the staff. He kept himself upbeat and gay, but it was obvious to them all that the situation was not well.

He told the maids that their master was ill with a fever and he cared more for their health than

his own. They were to be let out on paid vacation, put up at the inn in Hammerwood until Johnathan was better.

Elizabeth asked when that would be. Manson didn't answer.

After the ladies were seen from the house with their luggage, Manson returned to knock on Johnathan's door, far more softly this time.

"Are you alright, young master? Is there anything I can do for you?"

A sad smile tugged at Johnathan's lips as he leaned heavily on the other side of the door, making sure it couldn't be opened.

"I'll be fine, Manson." Johnathan's eyes widened slightly. Even as he said the words he began to wonder if they might be true. His voice was less hoarse than it had been when they had last spoken only minutes ago. "I simply feel unwell." After a long pause Johnathan added, "You can stay with the ladies if you want. You've more than earned a holiday after how well you've stood by me."

Manson didn't even dignify Johnathan's words with a snort.

"I will return shortly, Sir, with the medication. I'll make sure to have your dinner ready and prepared at its normal time. Would you like it brought to your room?"

Johnathan rolled his eyes. He'd turned into a damned *lion* and Manson was more concerned with ensuring that he got his dinner on time.

"Yes, that will be fine, thank you."

It was another hour before Manson finally left him in peace.

Scrambling to a window in the front of the manor house, Johnathan watched the lonely form of Manson, still dressed in his black suit, as the man walked a brisk pace into town.

Johnathan breathed a sigh of relief. Manson hadn't decided to saddle Ginny. That would buy him a few more hours. At the rate Manson walked it would be evening before the man made it back – later if he was forced to wait at the doctor or chemist's.

A quick circuit of the house and Johnathan confirmed what already knew, he was alone. It was obvious to both his ears and his nose the house was empty, but he couldn't trust it until he saw it with his eyes.

The mere fact he was able to tell he was alone by *scent* reminded him of the predicament he was now in.

Feeling ill at ease in his chambers, the very place he'd undergone his transformation, Johnathan walked slowly to the back parlour.

The room was close, soft, and inviting, but the trek to get there was arduous.

The simple act of walking upright was at points seemingly insurmountable. Not only were his legs shorter now and his trunk longer, but his feet had shifted to the point that the only thing that seemed comfortable was to walk on his toes.

Not to mention that the blasted tail that sprouted from his backside whipped back and forth at its own violation, sending him swaying and bobbing seemingly at random.

And every time he was near to getting the hang of it something more would change in his body. A muscle would bulge or shrink here, a bone would bend there. It was all painless and at point went all but unnoticed, but it was like trying to learn to ride a bicycle with the number of tiers constantly changing.

The hundred yard walk to the back parlour hadn't seemed this long since he'd been two and just finding his feet.

At long last he made it and collapsed on the welcoming chesterfield. It was lumpy under him and not built for his new weight, but he relished the familiarity of the furniture, despite how different it

felt through his fur.

It was only at this point Johnathan realized he was still nude.

Rolling over until he was in a rough sitting position, or at least as close to one as he was now able to manage, he looked down over his new body.

Covered in a uniform coat of gold save for the mahogany mane, it was quickly obvious why he hadn't noticed his nakedness before – he couldn't see a patch of skin. For a moment, out of sheer curiosity he parted the fur on his upper arm with two fingers. Sure enough, there was flesh under there. It was paler than he remembered, but at least he was still under that coat *somewhere*. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make Johnathan smile.

Closing his eyes for a moment Johnathan pondered whether this was nothing more than a vivid dream. He'd dreamt of lions before, back the night after he'd spoken to Doctor Robenson...

A long grown escaped his lips.

Robenson. How could he have been so blind. The very man had been here yesterday threatening dire consequences should Johnathan not fund his research. Now Johnathan knew exactly what those consequences were.

He'd been turned into a beast.

But how? Was such the purview not of God alone? How had such a man as that managed to change the very fabric of what Johnathan was?

Opening his eyes, Johnathan was caught by a small portrait that sat on the end table next to him. Lifting it with his clumsy fingers, he looked down into the stern faces of his parents.

"Is this what I receive for trying to emulate you?" He asked, "For trying to match your generosity and foresight I've been punished by being transformed into an animal? Why? What have I ever done so wrong as to deserve such a hellish treatment?"

The portrait had no answer for him.

Setting it back on the end table, Johnathan turned it so that his parent's eyes would not have to look upon his new form.

A sudden rumbling in his gut reminded Johnathan that it was mid day and he hadn't had a thing to eat since dinner yesterday.

Lurching unsteadily back to his feet Johnathan made his way slowly towards the kitchen.

Only yesterday the newly empty halls of the manor had upset him greatly, now they were far more peaceful. Johnathan was quickly becoming accustomed to being on his own. Though the thought of having to prepare his own meal did grate on him slightly.

In the kitchen, Johnathan was still reduced to having to lean on the wall to maintain his balance. It was a long, slow trek around the room, poking his new nose into cupboard after cupboard to try and find something worth eating.

Johnathan was no chef, but he could recognize many of the spices and boxed products he found. None however appealed.

Even poking his head into the icebox to find frozen fish and chicken did little to attract them. Somehow their scents were all off, wrong.

And that was the crux of it. Everything in this room *smelled* wrong. From his intellectual mind he knew there was food here, but yet nothing *smelled* like food to his new nose. And, much to Johnathan's dismay, it was his nose that seemed to hold the balance of power on moving his feet.

Walking round and round the room Johnathan kept coming to the same conclusion, there was nothing here. It wasn't until he came, completely by accident, to lean against the door to the back garden that his nose twitched.

The smell of blossoms in the full bloom of summer was enough to turn his head. And there was

something more than that... a scent that underlay the flowers and trees.

It smelt like food.

Fingers scratching numbly at the door, Johnathan nearly fell flat upon his face when it suddenly swung free.

The heady scent of the English countryside nearly caused him to black out.

Staring with new eyes out into the blinding sunlight Johnathan could hardly make out the colours that were arrayed before him, but rather he saw *motion*. Every sway of a branch, every flick of a fly, every spastic twitch of a bird in a tree, it all came to him in crystal clarity.

Stepping out into the world, Johnathan had to keep a firm hand on the door frame behind him to remain upright. It wasn't until he let go that he realized just how precarious his upright posture was.

He got no more than two steps before he started swaying on his feet, no more than three before he was forced to turn tail and lurch back to the safety of the door.

"Damn it all, can I not even walk like a man?" Johnathan's voice as rough as he whispered.

Turning again to the garden and the woods beyond, there were simply too inviting to be left unexplored. The harder he tried to push the urge away the greater it became. He couldn't remain here when there was the promise of so much... so much *world* out there.

Letting go once again of the door frame Johnathan began walking slowly down the cobblestones, carefully placing one clawed foot in front of the other with utmost care, like a baby first learning to walk.

It lasted only a short distance. A dozen steps from the manor he began to waver, sway on his feet like a tree in a storm.

Not even having a moment to think about it Johnathan found himself falling forwards only to be caught on his hands that were now bent before him like feet, holding him steady.

The thought to scramble back upright raced through his mind, but it was swiftly wiped clean as soon as he took a step in his new posture.

It was smooth, elegant, and *right*.

Without even realizing Johnathan began forward again, moving faster and faster until he broke into a run, seeming to fly smooth and graceful not a foot above the ground.

In seconds the grand spread of the garden was left behind him, the lawns soon after. Diving into the trees Johnathan welcomed their cool shadows upon him.

Far behind the kitchen door sat open and forgotten. A small bird flew by to investigate, poking its head inside for just a moment before moving on.

There was nothing in here to interest it. It flew on, back into the forest.

The next two hours were little more than a blur to Johnathan. He prowled through the thick trees unseen to any human, even himself.

Low to the ground and fast moving, Johnathan burred himself in the scents of those creatures around him. He pushed deeper into the trees than he ever had as a human, possibly deeper than any human had ever gone. The light was dim here, the canopy closely knit and shady.

The perfect ground for hunting.

The occasional image of open plains flashed into Johnathan's mind, grass dried and dyed to the colour of gold, but there was none of that here.

How he found the deer he would never know.

Thankfully, Johnathan's mind had blacked that part out, but only in sight.

He could remember finding the doe, stalking her silently through the trees, closing upon her.

Then all he could remember was the sound of her cry as he set upon her and the feeling of his

teeth – his own, inhuman teeth – plunging like knives into her unprotected body.

It was only after that, after the deed was done, that his sight had returned.

And for that small blessing Johnathan thanked God. Thanked him a million times.

What came next however he was not thankful for.

The deer's carcass smelled. It smelled of reeking flesh, of fresh entrails exposed to the air, of blood and death.

It smelled of food.

Johnathan wanted to vomit, to cast out the raw meat he'd pulled from the still bleeding corpse of the deer with his very teeth, but he couldn't. The weight was warm and heavy in his belly. Despite the frantic cries from his brain his body simply wouldn't respond. It was sated.

Laying in the warm summer sun for an hour or more, it was only with a heavy groan that Johnathan was once again able to force himself up, walking on all fours to the nearby stream.

It was the same one he'd only days ago been at with his beloved Emma.

The flash of her face through his mind did more to shock him than killing a hundred deer would. With a gasp he was once again in control of his body. As inhuman and bestial as it was, it was once again *his*.

Shuddering and shivering as he made the last few steps to the river, he reached down a trembling hand to the crystal clear water. In an instant the current began washing away the dried black blood that caked his fingers and claws.

Watching the blood dissolve and swirl away, its thread like patterns in the water held his eyes.

Only once the last of the foul blood had been wicked away did Johnathan turn to wash the taste from his lips.

He stopped dead as soon as he saw his reflection.

He'd seen his new face before, back in the mirror, but there was something different about it now, both literally and figuratively.

The changes, mutations, had continued. They hadn't made things *worse*, only different. Some parts of his visage had grown more bestial, others had regained a hint of their humanity. It was as if his body was fighting a battle against the invader, but it was a stalemate.

To see the reflection in the gently swirling water put a weight to it that no man made mirror could ever match. This was no trick of the light, this was no dream.

Lifting his hands to his face, Johnathan felt the jutting, boxlike muzzle, the fur, the teeth.

Drops fell into the fast flowing stream but the sky above was unbroken blue, not a rain cloud to be seen.

Washing away the last of the blood with the obsession of a... well, a cat, Johnathan took pains to remove all traces of the deer from his body. He was a beast, but he needn't show it any more than strictly necessary.

There was only one clear thought in Johnathan's mind now. Doctor Victor Robenson.

He was the one who had done this to him. He was the one who would reverse it. Johnathan didn't care how much it cost, what it took. He would have the man undo this or...

Blanching back in horror, Johnathan looked at his claws.

Or he would kill him. The whisper was firm in the back of his mind. He'd be returned to his proper state or the good doctor would learn just how dangerous it was to meddle with nature.

But first he had to get to him.

Looking out over the river Reading, Johnathan gauged at its width, its speed. Could lions

swim?

Could *he*?

Johnathan had been no prize swimmer as a human, but what could this new body do?

Edging up to the river, Johnathan leaned forward to dip one of his front paws... no, his hands, definitely his hands, into the water. The action didn't feel unnatural... but neither did it feel welcoming.

He let out a long sigh. If only he had Emma with him. They'd always gone swimming together as children and she was far more accomplished than he.

It was that thought of Emma that forced him onwards. Without giving himself time for a second thought Johnathan lunged with his powerful back legs, clearing a good half of the distance between the shores before he was taken by the embrace of the water.

The cold was enough to make him gasp. A poor choice of action when one's head was a foot beneath the surface. The rain of the previous days must have caused the water to swell and run cold.

Pawing frantically at the water Johnathan fought to break the surface with his head. It was to no avail. The harder he tried the further he sank.

He'd only just been able to tread water as a human, and that was in a calm stream, not the over swollen torrent the river now was. And to make it only worse his new body would not move in any of the ways he commanded it. The dark edges of his mind, the new animal parts that would not listen to reason, fought and moved in bursts.

Opening his eyes Johnathan could see the clear water around him. The bottom of the river was no more than a foot beneath his flailing feet and the surface no more than a hand's breadth from his fingers but it might have well been in the next county over.

One of his thrashing paws caught an outstretched root a moment later. A thick bulbous thing, it hung from a tree that overhung the edge of the river. Part of the tree's perch had been washed away, that was why it now fell into his reach.

Claw snagging and holding fast, Johnathan thrashed with all the energy left in his waterlogged body. The edges of Johnathan's vision was growing dim and the more he moved the faster it advanced.

Closing the fingers of his free hand around the root Johnathan quickly came to curse his new body. The fingers that tipped his new hands may have sharp claws but their flexibility was limited. It was all he could do to find a precarious grasp on the root.

Pressing on, Johnathan heaved with all his might, fighting against the current that carried him along, threatening to wash him away. Inch by inch he pulled closer to the root, but no closer to the precious air.

With the suddenness of of a lightning strike the root snapped.

Feeling the full weight of the water bear down on his and begin to drag him away Johnathan reached out with both hands, thrusting forward to close them around the soft loam edge of the bank.

The ground crumbled in seconds beneath his hands but not before he was able to shift his grip up an inch and bury his claws into the grass.

Sputtering and coughing Johnathan pulled his head above the water. Weighed down with a soaking mane it felt as though he'd gained a hundred pounds.

Laying like that for a moment, half in and half out of the water, Johnathan looked up at the cloudless sky before pulling himself to safety. It wasn't until he'd fully escaped the water's grasp that he glanced back to it with a snarl.

The river was hardly twenty feet wide but yet it had almost been his death.

No, Johnathan decided that day, no, lions do not swim.

Carefully and meticulously cleaning the mud from his fur, Johnathan had to hold back the

impulse to lick at himself.

He was a beast, but there were some things a civilized animal simply did not do.

Pressing on again once he'd dried under the kind summer sun, Johnathan drew quickly nearer to the outskirts of Hammerwood.

He wasn't quite sure what to do here. His main goal was to find the damned Doctor and wring his scrawny neck until he changed him back, but things were never quite that simple.

The Doctor's warehouse was on the far side of town, and as things were situated skirting the edges was not as simple as he would have hoped.

Hammerwood was bordered on two sides by rivers and the third by a busy road. Johnathan had no desire to go swimming again and even less to expose himself to anyone who might be on the road. That left him with the option of skulking through the woods, just out of sight of the town in an effort to circle around and confront the Doctor.

If only it was that easy.

Travelling through the woods had been peaceful, almost exuberant, his new scenes picking out details he'd never seen before, never dreamed of. Stalking through the trees had been an adventure. Even something so mundane as a seabird was a wonder to his eyes as it arched across the sky.

And that was what made the proximity to Hammerwood such physical agony.

The sound of so many humans, so many horses and dogs, it filled Johnathan's sensitive ears with useless sounds, white noise in the background that washed everything else out.

The smell of habitation, of industry, stuffed his nose, washed away the scents and made him feel numb as the strong smell of human effluence floated on the wind.

Even his sight was pulled astray. Hidden as he was among the trees Johnathan could still see flashes of people and animals going about their daily work in the city. Their sudden spastic motions attracted his eyes like moths to a flame. It became too simple to see where he was going when his sight was so often hijacked to stare intently at someone moving a distance off.

And that was how he came upon her completely unawares.

Neither of them had the least idea they were so close until Johnathan rounded a thicket of bushes to quite literally run head first into her.

The moment she came into sight Johnathan could see nothing else. As if he'd just crossed a sudden barrier separating them he could smell her scent, hear her heart.

The little girl could be little older than six.

She ran smack into Johnathan's face, bent forward on four legs as he was, and fell backwards on her rear in the dirt.

For a moment they both sat there, held still in shock. It was to the count of three before the girl's eyes went wide.

For just a heartbeat Johnathan thought nothing of it. He began to reach forward with a hand to help her to her feet before he remembered he no longer had hands but forepaws.

The back of his hand twitched and Johnathan realized it not simply a little girl that sat before him, but a little *human* girl.

Human. Something he no longer was.

Whether paralysed in surprise or fear the girl said nothing. Johnathan began to back away.

Then, like an invisible block had been removed from her mind the girl lifted up a hand.

"Kitty." The word escaped her lips in a high squeak. It hurt Johnathan's ears.

Pulling back, Johnathan didn't move fast enough. The girl's fingers brushed his coat.

There was something deeply displeasing about the contact. It wasn't the girl herself, nor her touch directly – as it had been nothing but fleeting – it was the fact he'd been touched at all.

The fact that he, now a beast, had been touched by a human.

A snarl worked its way up from Johnathan's throat, rough, deep, and unbidden.

The girl may not know what the creature was that stood before her, but she knew enough to recognize that sound.

It was danger.

Freezing solid, the girl stopped.

Johnathan turned and ran.

Plunging back between the trees, Johnathan ran as far and as fast as he could from the girl who's light blue eyes had looked at him so.

There was little space for him in the tiny strip of forest between the town and the river but Johnathan use it for all it was worth.

It had taken him the better part of an hour to stalk from where he had crossed the river to find the girl. It only took him moments to return.

From behind him he could hear the excited yipping and barking of dog as he passed as well as the frightened scream of horses.

The animals knew he was here, but he didn't hear a single human voice.

Pulling up short at the river bank Johnathan looked out over the water.

It was as still and placed as last time but his shoulders shook at the thought of having to cross it again.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Johnathan tried to remember how far it was lion's could leap, but the memory escaped him. He didn't care how far he *should* be able to jump, *he* couldn't jump that.

Having to pause for a moment to catch his breath, Johnathan raised a hand to rest over his inhuman heart. The beat was fast and frantic, the blood surging through his ears made his head feel light headed. Johnathan wasn't sure how far he'd run but he knew for a fact he'd be unable to sprint any further.

Mouth falling open in a heavy pant, Johnathan turned and began walking down the riverbank, towards the bridge so far away.

It wasn't until he came to the ford that he'd taken with Ginny seemingly so long ago that he encountered another soul.

The sound of a pair of good Oxford shoes crunching through the gravel of the road was unmistakable. The stride was smooth and steady, never skipping a beat.

Johnathan had heard that very stride every day of his life as he'd been growing up. Manson.

Belly low to the ground, Johnathan crept forward until he could only just see the road ahead. He had to keep from letting out a low moan.

It was. Manson walked the road before him, turning at the ford to take the same path Johnathan had walked two nights ago to the bridge.

And he was right in Johnathan's way.

A soft growl of annoyance escaped Johnathan's lips. In a heartbeat Manson had stopped dead, hearing the sound.

The man turned slowly about to try and find the source of the noise, but it was in vain. Johnathan had already pulled back into the underbrush and fallen as still as stone. Not even the twitch of a tail exposed his existence.

A long, heart wrenching moment later Manson turned and began walking again. More slowly this time. Johnathan let out a long breath.

Raising again to his feet Johnathan turned and thrust back out into the forest, away from the path.

Loping through the trees at a fair pace Johnathan pushed to move faster than Manson, to loop around his in as wide a circle as he could and reach the bridge first.

The breath caught in Johnathan's throat when he thought of what would happen if Manson were to see him crossing the bridge ahead of him.

Johnathan had to get home. It was the only place that offered even a token for protection, of normality. And he had to reach it before Manson lest the man realize he was missing and call another search.

Breath coming hot in his lungs, Johnathan was at the edge of collapse when the heavy weathered wood of the bridge came into view.

Casting his eyes about as best he could Johnathan made sure there was no one in sight before he took a deep breath and sprinting across the exposed bridge.

The wood made the oddest tap-tap-tap under his claws, so unlike the soft clomping of his shoes or Ginny's hooves.

Diving into the trees on the other side, Johnathan turned and caught his breath. A moment later Manson broke from the trees around the edge of the river and walked calmly to the bridge.

His eyes were set forward. There was something about his stride. It was slower than before, more cautious.

Johnathan didn't have time to watch him too closely. He still had to make it back to the manor ahead of him and lock himself back in his room.

Turning tail – quite literally – Johnathan made at all speed he could back home. The breath was coming so hot in his lungs by the time he stepped into the safety of his chambers that it was all he could do to lock the door behind him before collapsing on the floor, no mattress under him.

And even then, on the cusp of sleep, Johnathan still could not escape the hell of his new body. While the changes had slowed to a trickle, he could still feel his body moving about him, shifting and changing. He felt like a clay sculpture in the hands of a mad god.

It was a shot time later than Johnathan was roused from his fitful slumber. A soft knock at the door announced Manson's return.

The man said something, but Johnathan's fogged mind was too heavy to make it out. It was the most Johnathan could do to greet the man in guttural tones and refuse him entrance.

Some time after than Manson was back. He didn't knock on the door this time. The only sound now was the soft clink of a tray coming to rest of the floor outside the door.

Waiting until he was sure Manson had left, Johnathan covered himself in bedsheets and cautiously peered into the hallway.

There was a serving tray with a silver dome waiting for him. Next to the food service was a bottle of God knew what.

Taking the food back in with him, Johnathan had difficulty moving the tray. It was easier for him to stand upright than it had been before, but his body still protested. Worse yet it seemed near impossible to properly close his fingers around the tray and lift it into the air.

It was only with great effort and concentration that he was able to convey his meal and rest it upon the small desk that sat in the corner of his room.

Lifting the dome that sat over the still warm food, Johnathan forced his now misshapen body to sit in the chair that stood before the desk.

His legs were too short and bent the wrong way, his chest too long, but he did it anyway. The sense of simple dignity to be able to do nothing more than sit on a chair like a civilized man put at least some small part of his soul to rest.

The steam that came off the food was enough to make his mouth water.

Manson had outdone himself. The man must have taken pity on Johnathan's illness. Heaped upon the plate was a cut of beef aged and cooked to perfection. It was still red and moist, not overcooked at all.

Having to suppress the urge to simply pick up the meat and bolt it, Johnathan worked slowly and painfully to hold the proper cutlery. The act of bringing a single sliver of food to his lips took over ten minutes.

It seemed like forever, but Johnathan would not give up the show, despite the fact there was no one here to watch his act of civility.

He was here. He would know that he was still a man.

And the thought of bolting down the fine beef like he'd done the deer out in the forest made him stomach turn. It was nearly enough to set him off his food, but not quite.

The main course finally done, Johnathan turned to the sides that accompanied it.

Mushy peas and mashed potatoes. Manson must think him truly weak if he was including such soft food. It made no difference to him, he lifted a spoonful of peas to his lips with the same energy he'd directed to the meat.

And nearly spat it out across the desk.

"What in the world is wrong with this?" Switching to the potatoes, Johnathan tied again to the same result. The taste of the vegetables was off, seeming like nothing so much as chalk.

Taking a sniff, Johnathan tried to understand what had gone wrong. Manson would never send food up to him without testing it first himself. The thought of the vegetables being spoiled was near inconceivable.

It smelled right. It even felt right when Johnathan pressed down on it. It simply didn't taste as it should.

Letting out a long breath, Johnathan turned to look at the mirror a few feet away. Opening his mouth, Johnathan forced his eyes to focus at the inhuman maw that reflected back at him.

Long teeth, nearly the size of his fingers framed the blackness. Sticking his tongue out, Johnathan looked at the pink thing. It, like all the rest of his body, was most obviously not human. Not only was it longer and narrower than it should be, it was also covered with bristle like spikes.

Turning back to his food, Johnathan lifted his spoon for a sniff once more. The food was as it should be.

It wasn't the food that had gone bad.

Bringing the spoon to his lips again, Johnathan forced down every last spoonful.

Sitting stooped over his desk, Johnathan slowly ate the vegetables that had been brought to him, grunting and gowning at every bite like he was a three year old child.

The night came soon after. Johnathan only heard Manson come by once more, to pick up the service Johnathan had laid back outside the door.

Johnathan had made one addition to the tray.

Sitting tucked under the dome was a letter. Johnathan had taken a long time to write it out, fighting hard against his thick fingers to approximate his old looping handwriting.

He hadn't known what to say to the man who served him so fatefully. All he had to say was a heartfelt thank-you.

Even those few words had left Johnathan exhausted. His new body it seemed was not a scribe.

Laying in bed, staring up at the gathering darkness, Johnathan could still feel his body moving about him. The changes were gentle now, almost familiar. It was like being in a warm winter coat and feeling the snow shift under you on a winter's day.

He fell asleep laying on his back like a man, no matter how much it may hurt his spine.