

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 11: An Animal Passion

Waking the next morning, Johnathan stretched and let out a yawn that would have dislocated the jaw of a lesser being.

Rolling from bed, he stood firmly on two feet and turned to look in the mirror.

My, his thought were still clouded in sleep, he was looking well today.

Coat a lustrous gold, mane – while a little tangled from sleep – full and deep brown. Every muscle stood out on his body like he was a vagrant standing as a model for an anatomical drawing.

It was a fine day. He would get his morning breakfast from Manson and head out into the forest, perhaps catch a rabbit...

With the rush like having his head pressed under a cold stream, reality came back to Johnathan.

The fact he'd somehow forgotten, so quickly, who he was terrified him.

About to turn and skulk back into bed and feel miserable for himself, Johnathan stopped as soon as he took a step.

He was firmly back upon two legs again.

He could very well have whooped in joy that very moment. Never in his life had Johnathan ever thought he'd be so happy to be able to simply walk.

Turning back towards the mirror, Johnathan began search the reflection to see if there were other signs of his humanity returning.

He looked much like he had yesterday, in broad strokes. Still a lion, he now looked more like a mixture of cat and man than a true feline. The thought that came to Johnathan's mind was that of a man going to a fancy dress party – one that had a truly astounding budget for costumes that would make God jealous.

Taking a deep breath, Johnathan sat back at his desk and picked up the pen that lay before him. It didn't fit in his fingers as well as it had a week ago, but it was none the less miles ahead of where he had been only hours ago. Scrawling across a piece of scrap paper laying before him, Johnathan wrote his signature.

It didn't look half bad.

It wasn't *his* per se, but it was at least recognizable.

Johnathan let out a sigh. He nearly laughed when he realized it sounded more like a purr.

"Sir? Young master, are you alright?"

"Gah!" Hearing Manson's voice from beyond the door caused Johnathan's body to go stiff. A moment later he was tipping backwards as he overset the chair he was perched upon.

The sound the chair crashing to the ground was near enough to deafen him as he twisted in the air, coming down to land silently upon four feet.

It seemed that his continued evolution to walk upright again hadn't robbed him of the ability to stand like a cat.

"Sir?" Manson's voice took on a note of panic, "Is everything alright?"

Diving for the bed, Johnathan buried himself under the blankets. The note in Manson's voice told him plain as day that the man was about to enter whether Johnathan wanted him to or not.

A moment later the distinct click of a key in the lock of Johnathan's door announced Manson's presence.

Johnathan could hear him snort.

"Sir, are you quite sure you're alright? It smells... most peculiar in here."

Wrapping himself yet tighter in the thick bed covers, Johnathan shifted about until he could see Manson through the sheets without being seen in return.

"I'm fine, Manson. Really. I just need bed rest." Johnathan coughed as he spoke, sputtering as he stretched his throat and tried to pull the roar from his voice.

Manson bent down in front of the bed, trying to spy though the shadows that Johnathan threw across his face.

"Sir, I really must insist. If you don't feel well..."

Johnathan snorted and rolled his eyes. "You'd what? Pray for me? I doubt that would do much. You've already gone to see the town doctor upon my behalf. I'm sure that will be enough."

Johnathan had to keep the quake from his voice as he said the final words. For all he knew there was nothing that could be done for him.

"But, sir, the questions are beginning to pile up. People are asking what's happened to you. The Talbots had become most insistent that they speak to you and have their purchases covered."

Johnathan groaned. He was turning into a *beast* and the Talbots were worrying about such mundane matters as *cash*.

"Fine." Johnathan huffed out a breath but refused to let Manson any closer to him. "I need you to see to the Talbots. Go meet with that charlatan Steward and bring him under control. I vest my powers in you, my old friend." Johnathan raised his voice in a mock dramatic whisper, "You are in control of my fortune. Do as you see fit."

Manson was less than amused, but the edge of one lip did twitch up. "As you say, Sir. So it's just another day then is it?"

Johnathan laughed. It hurt his chest. "Yes, something like that. Just get over to the Talbot's residence and stop them from bleeding me dry!"

"But, sir..."

"I can survive well enough for one day, even in my sicked state. Go see to the Talbots and take the rest of the day off. That's an order."

Manson pursed his lips, unwilling to ignore a direct request.

Turning a moment later, he began to leave before seeing something on the corner of Johnathan's desk.

"Sir," Reaching out, Manson lifted the bottle of medicine he brought from town last night, that Johnathan had completely forgot. "You will not get any better unless you take what the doctor has

given you.”

Turning, Manson waved the bottle of blue liquid in front of Johnathan's face. Johnathan reached out and snatched it from his fingers with one bed cloth covered hand.

“Out, Out! Out with you!” Johnathan had to keep the snarl from his voice.

“Good to hear you sounding more lively already, Sir.” With that the man was gone.

Creeping from bed a few minutes later, Johnathan closed and locked the door.

Taking a look at the still full bottle he held in his hand, Johnathan uncorked it just long enough to take a whiff.

“Gah.” Sealing the bottle back up, Johnathan stepped up to the still open window.

Winding up, Johnathan threw the bottle from the room. Only now did he discover the strength in his new arms. The offending concoction flew a good two hundred feet to disappear behind the trees of the garden.

In the distance he could heard the sound of breaking glass. A few moments later it was followed by the foul scent of the medication.

Johnathan closed the window and went back to bed.

Waking late in the morning, Johnathan once more yawned, stretched, and looked at himself in the mirror.

This time, however, he was able to remember who *and what* he was.

Sadly, no attentional aspects of humanity had returned to him.

Poking his nose from his chambers, Johnathan smelled for Manson. The man was gone. The only scent of his was hours old.

Taking the steps slow and steady, Johnathan descended the staircase to the main floor, one hand firmly clutching the railing. He could only marvel at how far he had come in a single day. The last time he'd taken these steps he'd been crawling on his belly to get down and on four feet to return back up.

This time he walked as a civilized man.

Belly grumbling, Johnathan followed his nose to the kitchen and the delicious scents that emanated from there.

Sitting, likely in the same serving dome as last night, was a meal waiting for him.

Once again the practised hand of Manson was more than apparent. The same cut of roast as yesterday sat on the pate, but it looked no worse for wear for having sat though the night.

Once again eyeing the attendant vegetables with distrust, Johnathan found them just as foul as last night. He let them sit this time as he ate the chop.

Sitting back with a full belly, Johnathan looked out the back window of the kitchen to the finely manicured laws that stretched beyond. His legs twitched every now and then as the thought of running across it flashed before him.

He held the urges in check. Last time he'd let himself run free in the forest he'd torn apart a deer with his bare fangs.

Johnathan raised the back of a hand to his lips to wipe away the phantom taste of blood. He jumped slightly when he felt the fur of his arm.

Letting out a sigh, Johnathan stood and walked deeper into the house.

Stalking the hall, he roamed around and around, no particular destination in mind. It wasn't that he wanted to go anywhere, but to simply feel *free*.

A growl came to Johnathan's lips. The only way he would be free again would be to find the

wretched Doctor Robeson and force the man to turn him back. The only problem was *how*.

He couldn't simply walk there, he'd learned that much yesterday. Nor could he send a letter to bring the man here without arising suspicion. Manson would be the only one he could trust to carry a letter to the doctor, and he wouldn't do it unless he knew the full extent of the situation.

Feeling a weakness in his legs after prowling the halls for hours on end, Johnathan slowly lowered himself to the chesterfield in the back parlour. The lumpy seat let him breathe more easily.

The gentle mists of sleep were just beginning to pull at the corners of his eyes when a knock came at the front door.

Sitting bolt upright, Johnathan nearly overbalanced to fall on all fours.

A moment later the knock came again, soft and polite. He'd never have been able to hear it without his new ears.

It was only a matter of seconds before the door swung smoothly open.

Scrambling away, Johnathan's heart raced. Could it be Manson? Preposterous. The man would have no reason to knock.

Racing as quickly as he could, Johnathan silently made a roundabout journey to the front door, keeping at all times out of sight.

Arriving, the door was closed now. For just a moment Johnathan entertained the notion that he may have just been hearing things, or perhaps whoever it was had simply turned and left.

Then, bringing in a breath though his nose, he knew that wasn't the case.

Emma.

Her scent hit him like a bare knuckled fist to the face. She was here. Her scent was familiar, so well known, but yet now he could pick up far more from it, like having looked at a great masterpiece of art from only one angle. The portrait hadn't changed, but now he could cast a whole new light upon its magnificence.

Stalking forward, it was all Johnathan could do to keep from falling to all fours. He knew it was silly, knew it was dangerous, but he had to see her.

No matter how keen his hearing he couldn't pick up the fall of her feet on the floorboards. She walked like a wrath, like a breeze through the moors.

Following completely by scent, he closed his eyes and traced the vibrant trail of her moments up the stairs and towards her chambers.

And nearly ran face first into her coming the other way.

"Johnathan?" She called, her voice perfect, sweet and clear.

Leaping to the side, it was only by a fraction of a second that he was able to duck into a doorway to avoid being seen. Even then he almost forgot to pull in his wayward tail.

"Johnathan, are you here? Where are you, dearest?"

It took every ounce of control he had to keep from simply stepping forward and pulling her into his arms as she passed by not a foot away.

She was lovely, dressed in a pale blue walking gown. It was obvious she'd walked all the way from the Talbot's residence to here, the mud still stained her white calfskin boots. The clothing, however, was not what he expected her to wear. Unlike what he'd last seen her in, this was not freshly bought and expensive. The clothing she now wore was of simple make and well used – likely what she'd had to live off of while her father's fortunes failed.

A kernel of anger burned in Johnathan's gut. That cad, Stuart. He would spend Johnathan's money on cakes and suits, likely all manner of useless fancy trinkets, but he wouldn't buy his own daughter a new gown. Even the one that had brought him so much money.

A hiss escaped Johnathan's lips. It was enough to cause Emma to stop dead at the top of the

stairs not five feet away.

Johnathan shied back, pulling further into the shadows of the doorway in which he hid.

She came closer, and Johnathan turned and ran. He couldn't let her see him like this.

He loved her. It would simply be too much for him to allow her to see him in such a state.

She'd rightfully think him an animal, a beast. He'd break her heart, ruin her.

Johnathan ran.

Through the storage rooms, he fled in and out to a cross hallway. Johnathan fought to hide the sound of his footfalls but they seemed as loud as Zulu drums in his ears.

Emma must have heard them too. She followed unwaveringly. Only once did she call out to him, when Johnathan hadn't quite been quick enough to pull his tail around a corner.

Her voice had been hoarse as she cried his name.

The upstairs of the manor was not as large as the main floor, and running away from the main staircase as he had limited his options.

There were dozens of ways Johnathan could have escaped her. He knew this house, he'd grown up in it, yet they only ever occurred to him after it was too late. Slowly Emma forced him to back into a corner.

In only minutes Johnathan found himself backed into one of the upstairs bathing rooms. He pawed at the door for a lock, but alas there was none. The original owners of the house had constructed the room like a Roman pool. Public.

Scrambling to the back of the room, Johnathan looked out the windows. They were all too tall and narrow for him to fit through, and even if he could he was unsure about the drop. He may be a cat, but he was loath to test his new found abilities by leaping headfirst from a second story window.

Hearing Emma's approach, Johnathan reached out for the only thing he could find, a thick terrycloth bathing robe. Johnathan had always found these things comically oversized before, but now he was grateful for their encompassing folds.

Reaching down to tug away his exposed tail, Johnathan knelt down on the cold tiles to hide his feet and pulled up the hood. He had to laugh for just a moment. For all intents and purposed he looked like a monk deep in prayer.

A soft knock came at the door to the room a moment later.

"Johnathan?" Emma's voice was soft. "I know you're in there."

"Please," Johnathan coughed and tried to make his voice lighter, less bestial, "Please, my dear, leave me. I am ill and don't wish to bring you low as well."

A most unladylike snort came from the other side of the door.

"Since when has anyone been worried about *me*? You've been gone too long, Johnathan. I'm not some dainty flower. I was the same girl that ran with you over those rough hills and dragged you more than once from the stream after you'd swam out too far."

"Emma, please..."

He didn't get a chance to finish. A moment later she'd opened the door slowly and easily. Stepping into the room, she looked far too calm for Johnathan's rattled nerves.

"There, was that so hard?" She smiled at him and Johnathan felt as though he would faint from the simple trust she put in him. Would she be this willing to be in his presence if she knew what he now was?

"You do sound ill though." She stepped forward and Johnathan leaned back on his knees.

"Your voice is rough. Have you..." She paused for a moment, eyes widening, "Have you been screaming? You hardly sound like yourself. Deeper."

The slightest chuckle escaped him. "My dear, I've been doing many things, but screaming my

head off has not been one of them. I can assure you that I'm in no pain."

"Then what is it, dearest?" She moved to step forward again but stopped when Johnathan cringed. Without a word she stopped where she was. "Is it truly that bad? You've never hid from me before. And sending away Manson. That was a low blow. The man in just short of devastated."

Johnathan didn't say anything, only let out a long breath.

"Have you been..." the voice caught in her throat, "Disfigured? What has happened to you that you hide from everyone?"

Johnathan cocked his head. It took him only a moment to decide. It was, after all, close enough to the truth not to be a lie.

"Yes," his voice was heavy, "I've been disfigured. I... I don't know how to say it. I'm not the man you once knew."

She waved a hand in front of her face like she was swatting away a persistent fly. "You think *that's* why I love you? You think I've consented to be your bride because of your *looks*?" She laughed. "You're no hard sight for the eyes, dearest, but your looks are hardly the best thing about you. If it came down to that I could have courted one of the labourers in town while you were gone if that was all I wanted."

Johnathan's mouth nearly fell open.

"Then why?" For just a moment the bottom of his gut fell out. She wanted him for his money, just like her father.

"Johnathan," Reaching out, she took one of his terrycloth covered hands. Thankfully, she didn't squeeze hard enough to feel the malformed fingers beneath. "I fell in love with you because you're the boy I ran all over Hammerwood with when we were young. You're the young man who sat with me in the branches of an oak tree and told me how you wanted to change the world, just like your parents. You're the man who never forgot me, even when you were surrounded by the lights of London and all the pleasures that come along with it."

"I love you," she continued, "because you're the man I choose to grow old with. What you look like has no weight with me." A slight grin crossed her face, "Though, the idea of a hansom scar cutting across your cheek would hardly harm your appearance. Come, dearest, you can still walk and you can still speak as eloquently. How bad could your disfigurement be to still allow you to do that?"

"Emma," The words caught in Johnathan's throat, "it's more than that. I'm... not what I was before."

She narrowed her eyes. "Stop speaking like that. You're still the man I fell in love with. You're still the man I plan to marry. Now," her voice turned commanding, "pull down that silly hood and let me see you again."

"No." He turned away.

With an annoyed huff she reached forward and grabbed a hold of Johnathan's robe. She likely thought of herself as cute, playful even when she pulled it away.

The laughter on her lips froze solid as Johnathan's bestial face came into view.

Casting his eyes down, Johnathan tried to work a tiered grin to his face. Only too late did he realize a grin caused him to expose his teeth.

The blood drained from Emma face to the point she looked like a corpse. The smile was still etched into her lips as if she were a marble statue.

She didn't say a word.

"Emma? Dearest?" Johnathan could have slapped himself when he heard the growl in his voice. He'd wanted to be smooth, calm, prove to her he was still the man she loved. Instead his voice came out a rough growl.

He raised one hand slowly towards her imploringly, wanting to brush her cheek, feel her skin after so long apart.

She didn't say a word, but the shriek that came from her was nearly enough to burst Johnathan's eardrums.

Hands clamping over his upstanding ears, Johnathan fell back in pain as Emma screamed. When at last he was able to look up again she was gone.

Though this time she didn't bother trying to mask her footsteps. He could hear her running.

Scrambling out of the bathing room after her, Johnathan had to lean on the wall to stay upright. Her cry had been so powerful that his ears were still ringing, leaving him off balance.

"Emma?" Johnathan's voice was weak. The one woman he loved, the one he'd trusted to *still* love him was running away in blind terror. "Emma! Please! Come back!"

Having to fall back to four feet in order to walk again, Johnathan's tail swayed out behind him to keep him upright.

Moving as quick as he could to catch her, he could tell right away there was something wrong in her movements.

She knew this house almost as well as he did, yet her turns and twists made no sense. It was like she was running at random, not even realizing where she was going. Rather than simply making a beeline for the front stairs and escaping she turned and twisted through the rooms and hallways until she encountered a small back stairway.

Why couldn't she have simply fainted? That was what all good damsels did in books. They encountered a beast and fell conveniently into his arms to later be saved by the hero.

Johnathan snorted at that idea. *He* was the beast, but he also fancied himself as the hero. The only thing he'd ever ravish her with would be kisses. She had nothing to fear from him. No matter how far he may far he still loved her.

Stifling a growl, Johnathan descended that stairs after her. There was, however, one problem with tracking her by scent. The soft traces of her body kept causing his mind to wander. The thoughts were inappropriate to say the least, but he couldn't seem to keep them from his mind. Not only did he want to catch her, he wanted *her*.

He banished the thought with an effort. They were of no use to him now.

Down on the main floor, Johnathan caught just the faintest glimpse of her as she sprinted as fast as her dress would allow. She was headed towards the kitchen.

Taking a deep breath, Johnathan paused for a moment. Why was he even chasing her? What could he possibly do when he caught her?

He was doing nothing but cementing his position as a monster. She was running from him and she was chasing after her. From her point of view she just as likely as not feared she was going to be eaten.

Johnathan rolled his eyes. She had more to fear from a pet dog than she did from him.

Stepping into the kitchen, Johnathan cast about for her. She was gone, trail clear through the open back door.

There was one thing of note though. One of the knives was missing from the cutting board. Not one of the big flashy carving knives, but the small and sharper utility blades.

Johnathan laughed. Smart girl. Her senses must be returning. Too bad she still thought of him as a threat.

Returning to two feet now that the ringing in his ears had died, Johnathan stepped out of the door after her.

He'd forgotten just how fast she could run. She was nowhere in sight.

Huffing out a breath, Johnathan searched for her scent. She'd fled almost straight out, into the garden and forest.

Setting off at an easy jog, he followed her tail. There was no way she could escape him. Her scent was as clear as day in the grass. He'd find her one way or another. She'd come to the manor seeking him. Now he entered, the forest seeking her.

He didn't have far to go in the end. Her walking dress may be fine for its purpose, but it had never been designed to aid her in the rougher ground of the woods.

It was with a slight shock that Johnathan discovered she'd followed their old path straight as an arrow to the oak tree.

Even from a distance he could see her. Most oaks didn't have specks of blue fabric poking out from their green foliage.

Pausing at the edge of the small clearing around the oak, Johnathan fell to his haunches. He knew she'd already seen him, the tension in her actions was obvious.

"Emma?" His voice was hoarse as he called to her. He hadn't meant it to be intimidating, but the word boomed out in a roar that sounded even to him like he was calling her out for execution.

With a slight gag Johnathan tried to get his voice under control. "Emma?" Now he sounded meeker than he wanted, like a bleating lamb, "Emma, may I come closer?"

There was no response from the tree, but Johnathan could see her shift slightly. Between the branches was a flash of light. The knife.

Moving slowly, making sure to remain to two feet, Johnathan approached.

"Why here?" He had to ask. "Of all places, my dearest, why did you flee to the old oak tree?"

She looked down at him, as if for the first time realizing that I could still speak, that some glimmer of humanity was still left in this mortal shell.

"Where else would I go?" Her voice was weak. She wasn't on the verge of tears, but they were there, hiding under the surface, fighting their way closer. "Home? Father would think me insane. He'll push the wedding through no matter the consequences. He'd marry me to a corpse if that's what it took to reunite him with the wealth he feels he so richly deserves. To town? What would I do there? Not a soul would believe me when I tell them my betrothed has been turned into a... a..."

"Lion?" Johnathan suggested.

The slightest smile parted her lips. "I was going to say beast, maybe even monster. But I suppose lion works just as well."

Johnathan took a single step towards the tree. He could see Emma tense, but she didn't try to pull away.

"And that's why you're here? A million places you could have run and you scampered off to *my* tree?"

She looked about ready to roll her eyes before thinking better of it and keeping her gaze locked on him.

"I thought this was *our* tree. At least that's what you told me before you headed off to London all those years ago."

Taking another step forward, Johnathan stopped at the base of the trunk, falling back to sit on his haunches and gaze up at her.

"I guess you're right. Pardon me. *Our* tree." He laughed. It came out as more of a huf-huf-huf sound. "Didn't I carve our names in here somewhere?"

The mask of fear on Emma's face softened a touch, but she still held the knife surly between them. "Around the back. We were just kids then. You stole Manson's good kitchen knife to do it."

Johnathan grinned. "You're right. He wouldn't speak to me for hours after I returned it all twisted and dull. And," he glanced up at her as he walked around the tree. Her eyes followed him, "you've done just about the same thing. Though," he paused for a moment to raise a finger to his lips, "you did make a better choice of blade. I picked one that was too sharp, too thin. Yours is better, won't go dull so quickly."

For just a split second she glanced down at the blade still clutched in her hands. It didn't shake in even the slightest.

Another step and Johnathan found the all but healed over scar in the tree where he had carved their names.

The cuts were shallow and sloppy. He'd hardly known how to hold a blade. He laughed slightly, not that he was any better now.

"John plus Emma." His voice was heavy as he read the words. "Too bad I didn't have more time before leaving. I never even had the chance to write out full names."

She snorted. "That would have taken all day. And who's ever heard of someone carving the whole word 'Johnathan'?"

He bristled slightly, fur puffing out. He took a moment to sooth it back down with a hand. "No one calls me 'John', I'll have you known. It's undignified. My name is Johnathan. Anyone calling me different is flat out wrong."

"But 'dearest' is alright?" A slight, nervous chuckle escaped her lips.

"Yes," Johnathan smiled, making sure to keep his lips closed. "from your lips, 'dearest' is more than acceptable."

Circling back to the front of the tree, Johnathan looked up at her, placing a hand on the trunk.

"Is it truly you?" Emma's voice was weak and far away.

Johnathan paused for a long moment before answering. To her of all people he could not lie.

"I... I don't know. What's *me*?" Raising his hands before him, Johnathan looked down at the thick fur covered digits and the rough pads that covered this palm. "I still feel like me. I still remember *you*. Is there anything else that matters?"

Shifting slightly, Emma moved a fraction closer. She was still well out of Johnathan's reach, but she no longer held the knife as tightly.

"What happened to you?" She paused for a moment, laughing. "And if you tell me that you met some witches I swear to God I'll punch you in the nose."

"Well, if you really want to know you'll just have to trust me then." Johnathan stepped forward again, laying both hands on the tree trunk.

She was quiet for a long moment. "I trust the man I fell in loved with. If you're him..."

In the blink of an eye Johnathan leapt from the ground, pulling himself into the tree to come to a rest on the branch next to Emma.

A slight squeak escaped her lips as he suddenly appeared so close to her.

Reaching forward, Johnathan cupped a hand around the back of Emma's head and held her firm as he leaned forward to kiss her.

There were no further complaints.

Johnathan's new lips were ill-suited to the task, but he made them work well enough anyway. Holding the embrace so long that he thought his lungs would burst, he pulled back only long enough to shift about and pull Emma into the soft fur of his chest.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment as they watched the wind slowly rustle the branches around them.

At long last Emma spoke. Her voice was rough and breathless. "Your whiskers tickle."

Johnathan leaned forward, burying his broad, flat nose in her hair. “You'll have to pardon them. I am hoping to have them removed before too long. Until then just imagine you're kissing me after I've grown out that beard you used to talk about.”

She giggled. “I wanted you to grow a beard, it would look manly. I didn't want you to grow a whole fur coat. What happened? You were fine not two nights ago.”

Johnathan let out a long breath and retold the story of the less than respectable Doctor Robenson.