

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 14: All Out of Makeup at the Fancy Dress Store

She came swimming into his vision like an angel through the tears that still streaked his eyes. Emma.

"My dear," Johnathan had to pause for a moment as a fit of coughing overtook him. He didn't try to hold it back. "Why?"

She cocked her head. It was only now Johnathan noticed she was just as drenched as he. He couldn't even imagine how she'd managed to swim in her dress.

"I don't plan to allow my future *husband* to meet his fate so early." Her voice suddenly turned hard. "You *are* still the man I agreed to marry, no? *He* would never commit suicide, no matter the problems that might dog him. I know that. He came from stronger stock."

Wiping the back of a hand over his brow, Johnathan quickly found that no matter what he did he couldn't seem to clear away the water that dripped into his face.

Pausing for just a moment, he looked deep into Emma's eyes. She didn't flinch.

"Do you still love me?" His voice was no more than a whisper.

She responded by slapping him hard across the nose.

"Oi!" Reeling back, Johnathan's hands flung up to his bruised face. The fire that burnt though his tender nose was worse than the soft agony of his near death.

"What the hell do you think?" She stepped forward, towering over Johnathan who still sat on the riverbank. "You've hid *everything* from me since this all started. I've done nothing but support you through it all. And what do you do to me? You try to leave me alone in the world. You... you selfish git!"

A smile slid quickly across Johnathan's face. A moment later he lunged forward with a growl to grab hold of the still ranting Emma. He had her flat on her back in the grass a moment later, his jaws only inches from her throat.

He saw the sudden flash of terror in her eyes.

Tilting forward that last inch, he let his growl grow as his lips parted.

He kissed her.

It was difficult to hold, the water in his lungs still plaguing him, but he felt no need to rush the

moment as he pulled her closer to him, deep into his damp fur. Wrapping his arms around her, neither of them moved for a long moment.

"I still love you." Her voice was breathless when they finally broke apart.

Johnathan took the moment to pull her yet closer as he rolled onto his back.

A moment later he surprised them both when he began to purr.

Together, they laid on the grass, looking up at the empty blue sky above them. Neither were in any rush to go anywhere.

Returning to the manor some time later, it was already late afternoon.

Manson looked up from his work, but no more than raised an eyebrow at their dishevelled states.

"Dearest," Johnathan raised Emma's hand to his lips, "Would you care to stay with me for dinner tonight?"

She smiled. "Dinner?"

Parting from her for the moment, Johnathan retired to his chambers to get cleaned up. Manson followed close by.

Stepping into the room, Johnathan could hardly remember the fear that had pulled at him not a day ago, keeping him here.

He let out a sigh. There were still countless problems to be dealt with, but as long as he had Emma on his side he would take them on head first with a toothy smile.

Manson cleared his throat as Johnathan prepared to get himself cleaned up.

"If you'll pardon the forwardness, Sir, I took the initiative to make some alterations to one of your suits." He glanced away for a moment. "Actually, two. I've stitched them together."

"Pardon?"

A moment later Manson stepped up to one of the wardrobes and pulled out a suit to lay across the bed.

At first Johnathan could see nothing unusual about it. Then he realized he was looking at it though his new eyes.

The suit was near completely changed. A perfect midnight black, the two former suits that formed it had been roughly stitched together, making a new one much larger and of completely different proportions.

Johnathan looked over to Manson. He simply shrugged.

"I'm sorry to say that it will likely be a rough fit. You were in no state this morning to allow me to take proper measurements."

Reaching out for the jacket, Johnathan slipped it slowly on. Manson was right. Johnathan could hear the seams popping as he slipped it over his shoulders, but yet it fit. More than he could ever have expected.

The trousers were much the same, including an opening for his tail. Pity there was no solution for his misshapen feet.

Drawing a deep breath, Johnathan turned to look in the mirror. He cut none to poor a figure.

The remainder of the evening passed far quicker than Johnathan would ever have expected. Next he saw Emma she was dressed in a fresh gown as she met him for dinner.

Manson saw double duty as cook. The meal was good enough that Johnathan didn't even notice it. He had far better things to look at.

The night, sadly, was not quite as perfect.

Retiring back to Johnathan's quarters, the two of them would have been nervous enough if situations had been ideal. Becoming so intimate before marriage was rather strictly looked down upon.

In this case, however, they both decided that the courtship had been odd enough to set that particular rule aside.

When the final moment came, however, Johnathan simply... couldn't.

It wasn't that he wasn't willing, Emma was everything he could ever desire. He simply couldn't accept the idea of using his new body in such a way. She may be able to see him as a man, but yet in the back of Johnathan's mind he was still a beast.

Descending the stairs the next morning, arm and arm with Emma, Johnathan almost felt human again.

The simple act of a night's sleep with a warm body beside him had done more than he ever could have hoped for. And having Emma with him to help him into his new suit, the same from last night, made him feel more like a man than he'd been in days.

Manson stood awaiting them at the bottom of the stairs, his face calm and expressionless.

"Sir, Ma'am." He nodded to Johnathan and Emma without comment. For just a moment Johnathan felt a pang of embarrassment for having spent the night with Emma, but it was quickly quashed.

Stepping into the dining room, Johnathan was surprised to see a full breakfast spread before them. Everything from smoked kippers to bacon and clotted creme. He raised an eyebrow upon noticing that there balance of the meat of presented before one of the two chairs that had been set, the other chair waited before a somewhat lighter meal.

"Your drinks will be here presently." Manson disappeared a heartbeat later into the kitchen.

Much to his surprise it was Elizabeth who appeared a moment later. Johnathan couldn't remember giving the order to have the maids brought back. Manson must have done it on his own accord.

Stepping forward tentatively, Elizabeth kept her eyes firmly on the ground, avoiding eye contact with Johnathan as she came forward with a pot of tea.

"Ma'am." Stepping up before Emma, she poured a cup. For just a moment she looked up into the woman's face. Johnathan couldn't catch what passed between them, but they both seemed to relax a shade.

Coming up next to Johnathan, Elizabeth slowed again. Her hand was shaking ever so slightly as she poured the cup of tea.

She'd just about finished when a few drops splattered on the white linen tablecloth.

"Oh!" Elizabeth's voice was a strangled cough. A moment later she pulled a rag from one of the pockets of her uniform to mop up the spill. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Reaching out, Johnathan laid his hand upon her. He could feel her jump as they touched. A moment later the soft shaking of her hand grew worse.

"Elizabeth," Johnathan kept his voice soft, "Don't worry about it. Have I ever been concerned about a little spill on the tablecloth before?"

Raising her head slightly, she finally looked up to meet Johnathan's golden eyes.

"No... no, Sir."

The slightest smile tugged at the edge of Johnathan's lips. He fought to keep his teeth covered. "Then why would I now?"

Swallowing heavily, Elizabeth was quiet for a moment before speaking. "You're... are you..."

Johnathan sighed, lifting his hand from hers. "I'm still the same person I was a week ago, I can promise you that. If I was some beast, would I still take my morning tea?"

She smiled. A moment later Elizabeth was gone, but there was less worry to her motions now.

"You seem to be taking to your new life well," said Emma between dainty bites of toast.

Johnathan grunted in return as he ripped free another mouthful of meat from the side of beef Manson had laid before him. It had only been shortly after the meal began that Johnathan had done away with any attempt of maintain proper manners. His new teeth were far more accustomed to ripping and tearing at food, and his hands had far more difficulty properly grasping the silverware.

Not so long ago the act of eating like a man had been of great importance to him. It no longer held that position. As long as his lady granted it, Johnathan was more than happy to indulge his body in its own habits.

"Pardon?" Johnathan cleared his throat. "What was it I did so well?"

"Elizabeth." Emma took a sip of her tea. "If you can do so well for every person we come across you should be able to win over the whole town in short order."

Johnathan let out a huff of breath. "It may come to that." Closing his eyes for a moment, he continued, "I saw Thomas yesterday."

"Oh?" Emma's voice was chipper. "That's what Manson told me. What happened?"

"It would seem that not everyone in the town is quite so open minded as you, dearest. He came loaded with with firearms like he was hunting dragons. Perhaps in his mind he was. He'd been sent by the police to *test* me. They wanted to make sure I was no threat."

She laughed slightly, holding a napkin to her lips. "A threat? Well, you can't blame them. You look down right abominable at first glance. They just needed to be sure you were on their side."

"I'm not on *anyone's* side," he grumbled. "They thought I was a beast, that I was going to leap out and maul them like a man-eater."

Reaching over, Emma set her hand lightly upon his shoulder. Johnathan could feel the warmth of her skin through his suit.

"It's all you can do to win over one person at a time, dearest. Not everyone will be so easy to convince."

Ending the meal, Johnathan could hardly walk his belly was so full. Leaving Emma to prepare herself for the rest of the day, Johnathan was surprised to find Manson waiting for him in the hall.

"Young master, if you have a moment?"

Johnathan glanced over to him. "Yes?"

"I think there is something we could do about your appearance."

Johnathan hadn't realized just what he had gotten himself into when he'd revealed his new form to Manson. It seemed the man had been spending every waking moment pouring over books and illustrations of lions, gaining insight into their makeup.

And he was planing to use what he'd learned now.

Drawing Johnathan into one of the lower sun rooms, Manson had set up a chair under the bright daylight that streamed in. Beside it lay a dizzying array of combs and scissors.

"Manson, are you quite sure of this?" Johnathan tried to take a step back, but found the man's hand there.

"Sir," there was the slightest chuckle in Manson's voice, "I may not be the town barber, but I doubt there is anyone better to help you look presentable."

Finding a seat on the chair, Johnathan closed his eyes and let the warmth of the sun soak into him. Before he knew it, and before Manson ever touched him, he was already falling asleep.

As if looking down from above, Johnathan could see Manson moving about, trimming with the scissors and pulling his fur and mane straight with a comb. Every so often the pain of a knot pulling would jolt Johnathan back to awareness but never so much as to be more than a momentary inconvenience.

He felt himself purring again.

Waking some point hours later, Johnathan could immediately tell the sun had shifted. It was closer to midday.

"I see you're awake, Sir." Manson was just soothing away the last of the stray hairs in Johnathan's mane where it merged with his chest. The space would normally be covered by a waistcoat on any other man. Johnathan had none.

Stretching and yawning deeply enough that he for a moment feared dislocation of his jaw, Johnathan stood slowly up.

"If you'd give me your opinion, Sir?" A moment later Manson had stepped him before a mirror. What he saw nearly took Johnathan's breath away.

The creature that stared back at him was hardly the beast he'd looked at in the river in these past days. The golden eyed feline was... *regal*.

Fur brushed out into a near perfect shine, the gold of Johnathan's pelt looked like a dieing sun just touching the horizon. The mahogany of his mane floated like a cloud at the base of his neck, like a ruff that they used to wear hundreds of years ago.

"My..." Johnathan had to raise a hand to his forehead to ensure it was he that he saw.

"Shall I take that as you find my work acceptable?" Manson stepped up behind him, the old man's silver hair a marked contrast to Johnathan's gold. "I will admit I was somewhat unsure. I've never helped prepare quite a *lion* like you, Sir, but I did have some experience with the real thing."

"Yes, yes, its more than enough..." Johnathan was at a loss for words.

Looking down now, he could see Manson had also made alterations to his suit, though how he'd done it with Johnathan still *wearing* it was anyone's guess.

Turning, Johnathan reached out to take the man's hand.

"Thank you," was all he could say, "you've made me look..." he laughed, "Well, not quite like a man, but civilized none the less."

Manson gave him an appraising stare. "Frankly, sir, I think there are no too few men in town who would sell all they have to look like you. You were popular enough before, I think the changes have done little to make you less appealing to the fairer sex."

Johnathan chuckled politely and turned away, glad no one could see him blush through his fur. Manson couldn't know what had happened, or more to the case didn't happen, last night.

Stepping back into the hallway, Johnathan found Emma waiting for him. She raised a hand to her breast and stepped back.

"Oh my!" Johnathan wasn't sure if the gasp in her voice was in jest or serious.

"You like it?" He asked.

In reply she stepped forward and ran a hand through his mane. A soft kiss to his lips and she didn't need say anything more.

Taking her by the hand, Johnathan stepped out the front door of the manor. Manson watched

them leave.

"Fancy a walk about town?" He asked. "I suppose it must be done at some point."

Emma reached up to loop her arm in his. "I'd love to." She cast him a sidelong glance, "You seem far more at ease than you did yesterday."

Johnathan laughed. The sound came out as more of a huff-huff-huff.

"It's no wonder," reaching over, he ran his fingers down the back of her hand, "Now that I know I have such a woman as you behind me."

She pulled a face as they began walking. "Now?" Her voice was pained, "You talk as if there was any doubt."

Reaching down, Johnathan kissed her. "Not anymore, dearest. Not anymore."

Reaching the bridge the marked the half way point to town, they were both hot and sweaty when they paused for a moment in the cool river breeze.

"Why didn't you bother to set the cart?" Emma asked.

Johnathan looked down into the swiftly flowing waters, watching his own reflection. It didn't frighten him anymore.

"Ginny seemed less than at east last time I was within arm's reach of her. She's been a good mare, I have no reason to put her though stress that she doesn't need." He let out a sigh. "I'd best be selling her one of these days. Either that or put her out to pasture for her remaining time. No one is likely to want a horse of her age, no matter how well tempered she may be."

Emma stepped up beside him, leaning over the railing so her reflection appeared next to his. "I'm sure you won't need to do that. All she needs is time. Like everyone else. All it takes is time to readjust."

Johnathan raised his hand to set in the small of her back. "Some people can, dearest, some can't. Men can adapt to near anything, that's what makes us what we are. Beast are what they are because they can't adapt. Or at least not as quickly. Beasts fear change, men profit from it."

Turning, they began walking the final leg of the journey to Hammerwood.

Johnathan could just see the tops of the buildings through the trees. The sound of men working and children playing came to him on the light breeze.

Emma walked forward without so much as a pause, but it took Johnathan everything he had to keep with her. If her arms hadn't been locked around his he might just have soon turned and skulked back into the underbrush.

Johnathan's heart caught in his throat when the first of the townspeople came into sight, a man working in his garden.

He hardly even glanced up.

Johnathan couldn't tell if the man simply didn't notice his bestial features past the suit he wore or if simply didn't care, but there was no reaction.

Walking on, more people quickly came into view.

There must have been no small amount of news circulating. The two of them passed crews of men working and crowds of children playing, none of them screamed and ran.

They did however stop dead and turn to watch him as they walked past. The expressions on their faces were of surprise, but not, as far as Johnathan could tell, horror.

The people grew yet closer as they walked deeper into town. By the time the buildings crowded close the people were even closer. The road was far busier than it had any right to be this time of the day, Johnathan had no doubt that was hardly by accident. Every step he took more and more people

crowded nearer.

No one had yet dared come close enough to brush against him.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Johnathan could see a member of the local constabulary nearby. A moment later he looked again and the man was following them at a respectful distance.

A growl beginning to grow in his throat, Johnathan was only a heartbeat from turning on the man, accusing him of... he didn't know what.

It wasn't until he noticed that the officer's eyes were more on the crowd than him that Johnathan reevaluated his stance.

The man seemed more interested in keeping an eye on the men, women, and children that pressed so close rather than who they came to see. Another look around and Johnathan's keen eyes picked out two more policemen. They were similarly occupied.

"Dearest," Johnathan turned his head to whisper in Emma's ear, "Do you know anything of what the force has planned?"

"Pardon?" She looked up at him, "I haven't spoken to them since you first went missing."

Johnathan was about to grab the elbow of the nearest officer when a familiar voice sent his ears twitched.

"Oi, mate!"

Thomas?

The man, dressed in his police uniform, came towards them, cutting a wave through the people like a warship. Thankfully, the expression on his face was far from grim.

"It's good to see you again, mate." Thomas reached down to grab Johnathan's hand in a firm shake. Only from this close distance could Johnathan catch the slight hesitation in the man before he made contact. "Glad to see you back amongst us." There was something in the man's words that made Johnathan think they had been rehearsed. But that didn't change the fact they were obviously heartfelt.

Had this been the man who had so coldly come to review Johnathan not a day prior?

Throwing an arm around Johnathan's shoulders, Thomas nearly overbalanced when he sunk into to Johnathan's mane. The mass of hair looked far larger and more substantial than it in fact was.

"It's... uh, nice to see you to, my friend." Johnathan had to push back a sense of unease as they walked on. He had the distinct feeling he was being used as a set piece and every action he made was being graded and judged by those who watched him so closely.

Thomas smiled. "And Emma, my dear, I should think I have you to thank for seeing him here today."

For just an instant Johnathan had to claw back a flame of jealousy that tried to catch light within him. Even the mere action of Thomas, a man he'd known all his life, talking to his wife-to-be made him agitated.

Emma simply smiled. "Why, Thomas, I would almost think you laid in wait for us here, just to be the first to welcome us back."

The man smiled slyly. "Who, me? Perish the thought, my lady. I'm simply a good friend who couldn't help but welcome you back as soon as I heard you were coming my way."

Another glance into the faces milling about them and Johnathan picked out another two officers, these one out of uniform but none the less on duty. It seemed that the whole force to a man was out to welcome him today.

Pressing on, the tide of people that washed past them never seemed to ebb. It was only a matter of time before Johnathan was forced to put them from his mind and seek out some port in this storm.

The small café he'd sat at a few days prior seemed a decent enough place.

Back in the old town, streets here were narrow and winding, it helped reduce the number of people who could come to see him at a time.

Sitting at a table on the patio, Johnathan briefly concerted taking a seat inside but thought better of it. Not only did the late morning sun feel good on his fur but he was afraid that people might start forcing their way in if he tried to hide himself.

The cafe had been quiet when he sat down, nearly all the tables will filled with curious onlookers my the time the waitress came to take their order.

The waitress, Johnathan had to give her credit, hardly seemed to notice his new appearance.

"What can I get for you good people?" Her voice was loud to Johnathan's sensitive ears, but she had to speak up to be heard over all those who crowded around.

Emma and Thomas made their orders quickly enough, but Johnathan stared down at the menu before him, undecided.

Frankly, nothing sounded appraising.

Raising a finger, he opened his mouth only to fall silent.

"How about a chop, mate?" Thomas leaned in and pulled the menu from his hand, passing it to the waitress. "That and a good beer. I have a feeling you'll be having a long day."

Johnathan nodded wordlessly.

It took him a few moments to collect himself, when he finally did he turned to his friend, trying to keep his voice level.

"Are you the same person that came to me yesterday?" Despite his best efforts the acid was obvious in his voice.

Thomas toyed with the tablecloth before him, keeping his eyes down.

"Well? You... what the *hell* were you trying to do to me?"

Thomas' face a measured natural mask when he looked up.

"I'm sorry," his voice was soft. "I didn't want to, mate. You have to believe me. You should have heard the storm that raged through town when people first found out what happened to you. God." He paused for a moment and turned towards the crowd that still milled past, raising a hand to shade his eyes from the sun. "Don't get me wrong, most people were surprised, nothing more, but there were enough folks frightened for their lives to be a danger. You know the force was out about your estate yesterday." He laughed. "It wasn't to keep you in. It was to keep others out. We had to turn away a dozen or more people. Most were peaceful enough but a couple wouldn't have been men you'd have liked to meet. They're both locked up in the station today."

Johnathan sat back. "Truly?" He let out a long breath.

Thomas shrugged. "Why would you think anything different? You may no longer look it, but you're still a man in the eyes of the force. One we've always been able to count upon in the past." He completely missed Johnathan's true question.

None of them said much more until the meal came.

Johnathan hadn't realized how hungry he'd become since breakfast. He'd missed enough meals over the last few days he was happy to have this one before him. It took everything he had to use a knife and fork to cut up the massive slice of beef that had been brought before him. Emma may have the patience to put up with his new table manners but he doubted the rest of the town did.

They were half way though the meal when a shadow fell upon them. One of the passersby had broken from the crowd to step up to the railing of the patio they sat upon.

Johnathan saw Thomas' hand twitch towards his sidearm, but it stilled as soon as he saw the form belonged to an old woman, withered by age.

Her hair was grey and weathered by many winters, pulled back into a severe bun. It bobbed

above her head. Even sitting, it didn't reach past Johnathan's chest.

Stepping up as close as she could come to them, she leaned against the railing, eyeing Johnathan.

She didn't say anything.

Johnathan cleared his throat as he tried to find words. "Uh... hello. Can I help you?"

She ignored him.

Narrowing her eyes for a moment, she suddenly turned from Johnathan to look at Emma who sat closer to her.

She spat straight in Emma's face.

For a moment no one moved, not even the crowd behind her.

Thomas shifted his weight, preparing to stand from his seat, but he was nowhere as fast as Johnathan. With a roar the deafened all those around him Johnathan leapt over the table. It was only by the grace of God he was able to collect his senses enough to avoid landing upon the hag.

Landing atop the railing in a crouch, Johnathan glared down at the woman, his golden eyes aflame.

"How dare you insult my fiancé!"

The woman looked back at him without the slightest hint of fear in her face.

"You're a dirty best." Her voice was weak and cracked, worn with age. "I've heard of your kind before. You're Satan's tools. You should be ashamed." Turning, she glared at Emma who was still wiping the drool of spit from her face with a handkerchief. "And you!" Her voice lowered. "You are even worse! Laying with such a creature! You are nothing but his plaything. You were a respectable woman, a teacher of our children. Now look at what you're lowered to, a prostitute laying willingly at the feet of such a monster as this!"

All the time the old woman had ranted Emma hand remained still. She didn't even blush, as if the worlds were rolling from her like the wind before a mountain.

"Ma'am," it was Thomas who next spoke. His words were touched with frost as he slowly stood, keeping an eye on both Johnathan and the hag. "I don't believe you were invited to join us. It would be in your best interests to leave." The accent that normally touched Thomas' lips was gone, replaced with perfect enunciation.

For just a moment it looked as though the woman was about to continue, to reach out and strike Johnathan who perched not a foot in front of her on the railing. That was until another uniformed officer pressed through the crowd to appear behind her.

Forcing his heart to calm, Johnathan stepped down from here he looked over the crowd. It was only with a sudden moment of embarrassment that he didn't even know how he'd gotten up there.

A moment to pat his mane back to lay flat and Johnathan returned to his seat, now keeping a firm eye on the crowds that once again continued to move. The people tended to stay a step further back now.

"I suppose I do owe you an apology though," Thomas said as he finished his meal, "My actions yesterday were less than welcoming."

Johnathan growled softly as he moped up the last of the food from his plate.

"It was all worth it though," Thomas continued, "You have no idea how hard I had to fight to be the one the force sent over to investigate." He paused for a moment, glancing up at the sun. "Well, perhaps I didn't have to fight *that* hard. No one quite knew what was going on. For all we knew you truly could have turned into a monster." He chuckled softly. "Though I doubted it. Emma was speaking on your side and that was enough for me."

"Anyway, I managed to get Alexander to send me to see you, but we had enough people edgy

and frightened that I got loaded up for bear. And beyond that I had to swear up and down that I'd follow a strict script and return every word you said to town." He turned slightly red. "I didn't even get to pick what I was to say, but that was probably for the best." He let out a breath. "You have no idea how frightened I was when I first stepped in the room to see you. By God you looked like a beast, laying there on the chesterfield nude as you were."

Emma cleared her throat. "You might want to think about that statement of us now knowing the fear of seeing his face for the first time."

Now Thomas turned bright red. "Ah, yes. My apologies."

Johnathan forced a smile to his lips, "So I assume your report was positive?"

Thomas nodded. "Glowing."

"Very good." Johnathan stood up from the table. "We really should be going. I think I've provided the crowd with enough of a sight for one day."

Turning, he walked into the café to pay the owner. The man simply raised his hands and refused the money.

"My good Sir," the owner said, "Can you not see? My establishment is filled full. This simply doesn't happen this time of week. Please, keep your money."

Johnathan knew the show was in good faith, but it made him frown none the less. The town may not be chasing him down with rifles but they were still putting him on display.

Returning to the table, Thomas was already gone. Johnathan could see him a few dozen feet away in the crowd, trying to disperse it.

Putting out a hand to help Emma to her feet, she thanked him before taking a step back.

"I should be going too, dearest. I haven't been home for some time. Mother and father are undoubtedly worried about me."

Of all things Johnathan's could feel a faint high pitched whine in his throat. "As you wish, my dear," was all he could force out.

Sharing one last kiss before the crowds, they parted to walk their separate ways.