

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 17: Yellow Eyes are the New Powdered Noses

The next morning came bright and clear. Johnathan woke early, but not as early as Manson and the maids. They already had breakfast prepared and ready when he stepped into the dinning room.

He got a double glance from Manson as he walked by. This morning Johnathan was clad in nothing but a pair of his good trousers, being without shoes, shirt or even jacket.

"I see you are feeling... casual, Sir." Manson said.

Johnathan shrugged as he sat at the head of the table. "I just realized this is my damn house. There's no reason I should need to wear a shirt when I'm in my own home. I have a pelt now, for god's sake. It's hardly as though I'm running about showing naked skin."

Manson sniffed slightly. "As you say, Sir. I was not judging you. Simply noting the point."

Johnathan laughed. The idea that he may have wondered all the way down here without realizing he was shirtless was ridiculous.

He'd only gotten as far as the bottom of the stairs before noticing. After that point it changed from a mistake to a fashion statement.

It was only a matter of moments before the maids arrived with breakfast.

They seemed to be enjoying themselves a little more now, experimenting with the menu. A rash of bacon, slice of ham, and a fried steak. Johnathan grinned. Manson must have noticed his tastes had changed.

One thing that didn't change, however, was the cup of tea.

Elizabeth appeared a moment later with the pot to fill his cup. Johnathan smiled at her and she didn't shy away in the slightest, only timidly smiling back.

Pausing for a moment, she leaned forward and checked quickly at one of his bandages before leaving.

Conversation took a touch of a lull as Johnathan tucked into his meal. Manson was wisely silent as he ate. Some things in this world were simply more important than mere chatter.

Sitting back with an empty plate in front of him, Johnathan lifted the tea cup to his lips for a dignified lap.

A slight cough and Manson stepped forward.

"Today's mail, Sir." He paused for a moment, glancing to the side, "I took the liberty of reading it first and... separating the letters that would be of less interest to you."

Johnathan cocked his head. "Any death threats?"

One of Manson's lips twitched. "Just one, sir." His face suddenly grew red. "And two marriage proposals."

"What?" Johnathan nearly dropped his cup.

Sadly, Johnathan noted, Manson had also removed *those* from the letters that now rested on the table.

What remained were relatively mundane. A civil notice here, a thank you for his donation to the police force there, and an invitation to a social party at the Smithe's, one of the greater houses.

Johnathan paused for a moment to read the invitation. It was nothing out of the ordinary, but he hadn't been expecting to receive such things anymore.

Unfolding the invitation, Johnathan paused for a moment to read between the lines.

The paper was thick and expensive, an obvious sign that this was to be a grand gala. They'd spared no expense in ensuring the invitation was well presented.

If Johnathan didn't miss his mark he would bet the letter had been written by Mrs. Marry Smithe herself. Odd. The Smithes were well enough off that they could more than afford to hire someone to perform such mundane tasks as writing invitations.

The letter was dated in the top left corner. Curious again. It had been sent only yesterday. There was no doubt that the Smithes had already been well aware of Johnathan's... condition by the time they'd invited him.

The letter itself was plain enough, nothing hinting that they were inviting a lion into their midst. All it said was that Johnathan was cordially invited to join them at their manor this evening with approximately a hundred others and that he may bring a guest.

With a huff Johnathan set the letter back down.

"I think not." He turned back to his tea.

"If I may intrude, Sir," Manson took a step closer, "This may be a useful opportunity for you."

Johnathan rolled his eyes. "And how would you see that? My last few attempts to mingle with society haven't exactly ended well."

Manson didn't even bother with a twitch of his lip. "While you may be right, Sir, they were not *formal* engagements as this one promises to be. I would think that you would have an easier time reintegrating into society when there are stricter rules to follow. It would make it less likely for someone to cause a scene."

Johnathan laughed. Well, Manson was right on that account. He'd met Miss. Smithe on more than one occasion. *That* was one lady you did not want to cross. She'd just as likely make it her lifelong duty to make your life hell if she felt you'd embarrassed her. No one would dare make a scene under her roof.

"And she did invite you personally, Sir," Manson continued. "It would be more than likely she wishes to... ahem... show you off to the social circles. Take credit for your continued civility as it were."

Ah, thought Johnathan, now *that* sounded like the Smithe family.

They were good enough people, but they did tend to be somewhat flighty, concerned more with their image than anything else. It would be just like them to be drooling over having Johnathan attend their party *first*.

Letting out a sigh, Johnathan accepted he was beaten. He had a sneaking suspicion Manson may have been behind him receiving an invitation to begin with, but Johnathan knew better than to ask.

"But I simply can't go without a guest," he mumbled.

"Then may I suggest you send a letter to Mis. Talbot right away?"

Johnathan snorted. "I did not exactly part on good terms with her father last we spoke, or don't you remember?"

Manson simply shrugged. "I'm confident that that Talbot's received invitations as you did. They would be just as hard pressed not to attend. All one would need to do is contact Mis. Talbot and ensure that you meet before arriving."

Johnathan grinned. "And you just might have a plan for that?"

The man's face was stoic, as he simply repeating the weather. "A letter sent from the post office in town would be sure to reach their estate by the evening. And there is no particular need to include one's own address."

"Are you sure it was the army you were a part of, Manson? You seem to know a fair bit more of this scallywaging than I'd ever given you credit for."

The man sniffed and turned his nose up. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

Pulling a sheet of paper from a desk in the library, Johnathan looked down at his misshapen hands. The sheer act of holding a pen was still alien to him, but it came easier now than it did just a few days ago.

Jotting a quick letter to Emma, Johnathan signed it with a flourish. A smile creeping across his face, he scratched a quick doodle at the bottom, a makeshift cartoon lion.

Folding it into an envelope, Johnathan handed it to Manson who stood outside the door.

"Very good, Sir. I can make sure this arrives at the Talbot household well in time."

"I would bet my left shoe that you do." Grinning, Johnathan propped his bare feet up on the table as Manson departed. The act was undignified in the extreme, but he damn well felt like it.

Letting the rest of the morning slip by, Johnathan did little more than sit back and watch everyone else hurry back and forth.

He hadn't the slightest what Manson had the maids up to, but the three of them seemed fully occupied. Johnathan's ears twitched every now and then as they spoke amongst themselves, but he never put in the effort to listen in.

Standing and stretching, Johnathan finally took his leave of the dining room near noon, stepping through the kitchen of his way out back to snag a morsel of cold sausage as he stepped into the garden.

Wandering about, Johnathan had no real destination in mind, only to stretch his legs.

That found him, soon enough, at his mother's little patch of dirt.

"Here we are again."

Falling back on his haunches, Johnathan decided to forgo the bench to squat down right next to the soil. The same scraggly plants clung to life here as last time he'd stopped to look at them.

Running a finger through the soil, Johnathan looked down at the small line his claw made.

Oddly, lifting the nail to his face, Johnathan could no longer smell the blood on it, only the fresh earthy scent of the soil.

He let out a long sigh.

Returning to the manor an hour or so later, Manson was waiting for him.

"We'd best be getting you ready, Sir." The man said briskly as he hustled him towards his chambers.

"Already?" Johnathan didn't bother fighting. "It can't be past two in the afternoon. The party won't be for hours."

Manson chuckled softly under his breath as though Johnathan had told a joke.

"As you say, Sir. It is simply that your new... wardrobe will take somewhat longer to prepare than your old one."

Stepping into his dressing chamber, Johnathan rolled his eyes when he saw the two maids in attendance.

"*They'll* be dressing me?" Johnathan fought to keep the exasperation from his voice.

"Of course, Sir."

Pausing for a moment, Johnathan turned to look at the man. "They can't dress *me*." Manson cocked his head. "They're *women*!"

This was one of the few times Johnathan could recall seeing a full smile grow on the man's lips.

"You are, as always, correct, Sir." He paused for just a moment, "But you are no longer a *man*. Not in the strictest sense anyway. I have spoken to the ladies and they have no compunction against aiding me in ensuring you are properly attired." He nodded his head towards one of them, "Good Jane here has informed me that she has some knowledge of stitching, having learned under her father. She, along with Elizabeth, will help me in fitting your good suit."

"Oh," was about all Johnathan could respond with.

The three of them wasted no time in forcing Johnathan to disrobe and stand naked before them.

No matter what he may have said before about feeling comfortable in his pelt alone, Johnathan was distinctly unnerved to be so close to the two maids while completely as nature had made him.

He stopped to chuckle softly to himself. Perhaps 'as nature made him' was not so good a choice of words.

In due time the three of them pulled out Johnathan's good suit.

To use such simple words to describe it was to not do it justice.

Purchased on his twenty-fifth birthday as a gift from his parents, it had been tailored by some of the finest men in London, and had cost more than a fair penny.

The result, however, was unquestionable.

Jet black with tails, the suit, trousers, shirt, waist cost, and hat were something to behold.

Looking more like they belonged on royalty than a country man like him, Johnathan had only had occasion to wear it precious few times.

A simple party like the one the Smithes were likely to throw most certainly did not qualify.

"Are you quite sure about this, Manson?"

The man had a score of pins and needles held between his lips. He didn't bother to dignify Johnathan with an answer, only gave him a firm and fatherly glare.

Johnathan just about fainted when the man first took a pair of scissors to the suit, cutting open its inner lining.

"We need to get all the space we can, gov," Jane explained. "It's such a pity to do to such a pretty thing, but the only one who'll know it's been butchered so will be us. It'll still look good and right for the party, and it'll help disguise your..." she paused for a moment, a slight eep coming from her lips, "Bulk."

With some effort and more than a little time they had finally torn out every thread the suit did not truly need. The fine tailoring was little more than a shadow of its former self, but it looked exactly as it had to start with from out outside.

One obvious change that they'd been unable to hide, however, was as round hole mended into the rear of the trousers. Johnathan needed somewhere to slide through his tail.

Slipping into the suit was an adventure all of its own. Unlike the suits he'd worn the last few days, they feared to make too many obvious changes to this one to better match his body. That meant Johnathan nearly had to bend his limbs double to slide within. And even when he did he was far more restricted than he would have cared to be.

Even then the proceeding hadn't come to an end.

Manson and the maids bustled about him like he was a prize horse about to be shown off for the first time. They'd switched out their sewing needles and pins now for brushes and creams.

Johnathan was confident they'd weighed him down with five pounds of oil in his fur by the time they were done.

The problem was, however, that he simply couldn't work up the annoyance to be mad at them once he saw his reflection in the mirror.

"My..." was about all he could say.

The only thing spoiling the moment was Jane toiling tirelessly away at yet one last thread dangling from the hem of his cuff.

"I should say we did a respectable job, Sir." Manson stood a step behind him, smile still proud on his face. "You may not look human, but you are most certainly *not* a beast."

Elizabeth laughed. "I should think not. We all knew you weren't some animal the moment you spoke. The only difference is now folk can tell by *looking* at you."

Johnathan smiled. Looking in the mirror, his teeth were too white, but there was nothing to be done for that just now.

"Only one more thing," he glanced over to Manson, "Would you happen to have something I could put on my lapel?"

Manson bit his lip for a moment. "I think I may have just the thing, sir"

Disappearing for a moment in the direction of the master bedroom, Manson returned with a small wooden box in his hands.

"Your father picked this up some time ago, Sir. On a business visit to London I do believe. It was given to him by one of the branches of the royal bureaucracy when he stopped to make a donation."

Taking the box in his hands, Johnathan lifted the lid. Within was a small golden lapel pin.

It was in the shape of a roaring lion.

Johnathan laughed.

Falling back onto the seat behind him, Johnathan laughed until tears came to his eyes.

"Sir... are you alright?" Manson sounded like he was just an inch from panicking.

Forcing himself still, Johnathan had to wipe the tears that streamed down his face.

"Yes, yes, quite alright." Reaching in, he pulled the tiny pin out to rest on the pad of his finger.

It took only a second for him to affix it to himself.

Glancing in the mirror, he couldn't help but start chuckling again.

Saddling Ginny and riding her across the ford, Johnathan skirted the edge of Hammerwood. Unlike last time he'd travelled through the trees, this time he was not trying to hide. Rather this was the location he'd enclosed in his letter to meet Emma.

Johnathan had severe doubts about Steward allowing his daughter to accompany him to the party, so he'd decided it prudent to select a meeting place where they'd not be disturbed.

Swinging from Ginny's saddle, Johnathan turned her loose to graze about the long grass

between the trees. He wasn't worried about her wandering off. That wasn't her way.

Finding a seat atop a fallen log, Johnathan set a small scrap of cloth down to keep his trousers clean. The last thing he wanted now, after having endured so many hours under Manson and the maid's fingers, was to put up a rip.

Johnathan knew she was coming long before she pressed into sight.

Emma likely thought she was moving silently, and she was. But only by human standards.

Turning his ears, Johnathan heard her soft footfalls coming behind him through the trees. It could be no one but her.

"Evening, dearest." He kept his voice low.

Stepping up behind him, she put her arms around his broad shoulders. "I liked it better when I could surprise you," she whispered.

Turing slightly, Johnathan pressed the side of his head into hers.

"So sorry. It's just something you'll have to get used to."

Pulling her arms from him, she stepped over the log. It was only now Johnathan saw the dress she wore.

A plain, grey-green walking dressing. It was well used and thinning in places, but still clean and free of darns.

"Dearest," Johnathan reached out to take the frayed fabric between his fingers, "What happened? Aren't you coming to the party?"

She frowned, but did her best to hide it.

"I'm sorry." She self consciously reached down to straighten her dress. "Father did not exactly approve of me coming out to meet you. He heard of the party and forbid anyone of the family from attending, knowing you'd be there."

Johnathan smirked. "Really? Then how did you convince him to let you go?"

She looked away. "I didn't. Mother and father think I'm locked away in my room. We fought and I made a show of storming away and locking the door behind me." Her frown deepened. "I'm only sorry to say that I wasn't quick enough in losing my temper. They'd already gone through my wardrobe and taken all my nicest dresses to try and make sure I wouldn't disobey them."

"Ah." Johnathan reached out to take her hand, "But it seems you have anyway." Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed it. "And how shortsighted they are. You, my dearest, haven't any need for such things as dresses. You would show up dressed in nothing more than a paper bag and still look like a princess. You, my dear, are all I need."

He pulled her towards him as she giggled.

"Oh? And what about you?" she retorted, running a hand down his chest, "You seem to have gone quite to opposite way. Dressed up in such a fine suit," she paused for a moment looking him openly in the eyes, "And with such a fine face. If I'm not careful you might just be stolen away from me by one of the other ladies at the ball."

A soft mock growl worked its way from Johnathan's chest. "I should think not. Any woman who might be so foolish as to place them self between you and I will need fear for their lives."

She laughed as Johnathan rose to his feet, towering over her.

"Oh, my hero."

Placing Emma in the saddle behind him, Ginny was less than enthusiastic in carrying their combined weight to the Smite's estate. Thankfully for her it wasn't far.

They were late, but no more than fashionably so. A stable boy stepped up to take Ginny from them as they neared the front doors.

He stared openly at Johnathan as he handed over the reins but didn't say a word.

Climbing the front steps to knock on the door, Johnathan looked over to Emma as he took her arm.

"Thank you, my dear," he whispered.

"For what?"

"Everything." He was about to lean over to kiss her when the door was pulled open by a footman.

As sure as if someone had let off a gunshot, all action stopped as soon as they caught sight of Johnathan. Even the small band on the corner of the room fell silent.

Stepping forward, Johnathan pushed it all from his mind and nodded humbly at Mr. and Miss Smithe as they hurried quickly over to welcome him.

His composure very nearly broke when he saw they both wore amber makeup around their eyes and had dyed their hair a tawny blonde.

If not for Emma holding him upright Johnathan would very well have fallen to the floor right then and there. Another glance around him and he saw that no small portion of the people attending the party were dressed in much the same way, some even to the point of dragging rope tails behind them.

Johnathan had never minded small talk before, but it felt like it was killing him now.

A line of people, almost as long as the room itself, stretched away from them. *Everyone* seemed to want to talk to him, stand next to him and ask how his day was. It didn't take long for Johnathan's throat to go dry.

The Smithes on the other hand, Johnathan glanced over to them... They seemed to taking this with great aplomb. Sitting at a table not too far away, they were on hand to chit-chat with everyone after they spoke with him. For all of the world they seemed to treat him like a visiting dignitary, like one would treat a baron or earl if he were to come to your party.

Glancing up again as yet another person stepped up to him, Johnathan was surprised to find Captain Alexander standing before him, arm in arm with a lady he couldn't quite put a name to.

"Johnathan," the man nodded to him, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

Johnathan bowed his head to the man. "Nice to see you again, Captain. I'm most indebted to you and the service for your great generosity to me."

For a moment the man didn't say anything. He simply leaned forward and studied Johnathan's face closely. At his side the lady chatted idly with Emma. If he didn't know better Johnathan would just have well said that she had her voice ever so slightly raised on purpose, as if to cover theirs.

"So it is as old Thomas said." Alexander's voice was soft, "You are still in there, aren't you, Johnathan."

Rolling his eyes slightly, Johnathan fought to keep a straight face.

"I should certainly hope so, Captain. I would be most disappointed if it were anyone *but* me."

Stepping back, Alexander smiled and put out his hand. "It's just nice to know that for sure. I'm glad to see the staunchest supporter of the department is still with us."

For just a moment Johnathan looked down at the man's hand. No one else who has passed before him this evening had dared to shake his hand.

Johnathan took the man's warmly.

For a short time it looked like the party was going to be a great success. Johnathan was reacquainted with many a business partner that he'd last seen years ago. They all seemed to want to speak to him, even some do business. At this rate the Pennyfare finances may just be saved from ruin.

Stopping for a quick breather as the line of people wanting to speak to him petered away, Johnathan and Emma strolled to the far side of the great ballroom to stand before a two story set of windows that looked out over Smithe's grounds.

"It's a beautiful moon out tonight," remarked Emma as they stood hand in hand.

"Hmm." Johnathan tried to find the words to reply but his throat was raw and sore from having to speak to so many in such a short time.

"It seems that town has come together to welcome you back," Emma continued. One of her hands worked slowly up the front of Johnathan's shirt until it reached his throat, gently massaging it through the fur. "There seem to only be a select few who..."

Silencing her, Johnathan bent down to pull her into a kiss.

It was only when they came up for air long moments later that Johnathan's ears pricked up hearing the commotion at the front door.

"Let me in!" The man's voice was muffled but unmistakable. "Let me in! You have no right to keep me out when my daughter is in here!"

Unconsciously pulling Emma closer to him, Johnathan could feel a rumble start in his throat as he turned to see Steward forcing his way past the footmen in a most undignified manner.

"You!" The man stopped dead in his tracks when he laid eyes upon Johnathan. There was a good twenty yards between them, but all the guests pulled away to leave an empty corridor. "Beast! Get your hands off my daughter!"

Refusing to do any such thing, Johnathan held Emma tight to his chest as the man stalked forward, murder in his eyes.

"Mr. Talbert," Johnathan didn't even need to keep his voice calm, it came out as smooth as ice, "I see you have decided to join the party."

"Be silent, you beast! Men speak. Beasts obey. Take your hands off my daughter."

Emma opened her mouth, skin flush and a look on her face that suggested her barbed tongue was about to strike, but he was too slow.

"And you as well, daughter! Be silent. For once in your life you will listen to your father and be something other than a burden!"

"How dare you." The words were clear, but they could not have been any more inhuman if they had come from the lips of a statue. Johnathan's voice put silent all the sounds in the room until each and every one of Steward's advancing footsteps could be heard echoing off the walls. "Do not speak to your daughter, my future wife, in such a way."

Steward's face was so flushed it looked nearly purple, his muscles so clenched that he could just have well been a demon from some Sunday school drawing.

"My daughter is *not* your wife. Unhand her this moment or I'll put you down in the way one kills any other wild animal."

The growl in Johnathan's chest grew.

With a single quick motion Steward pulled a revolver from his shirt and pointed it at Johnathan's chest.

There was only one problem. Emma was in the way.

No longer held tight by Johnathan, Emma had stepped before him as quickly as her father could pull his weapon.

"Come, daughter. We are leaving."

Turning a quick glance back to Johnathan, her eyes said everything, even if not a word passed between them.