

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 18: A Question of Succession

And that, quite easily, put an end to the party.

The Smithes were furious, but thankfully little of the heat seemed to be directed at Johnathan. That was likely due to him departing only moments after Steward and Emma.

Standing at the front door of the Smithe's home, Johnathan watched as the Talbot carriage quickly disappeared down the road.

A moment later the stable boy brought Ginny around, but Johnathan didn't bother trying to chase them. There would be no point.

Returning home, Johnathan nodded at Manson who waited at the door. He didn't say anything to the man's discrete question about the party.

Laying in bed, Johnathan could feel the spot that not nights before Emma had laid. It still smelled of her. He could still imagine he could feel his arms about her and her back pressed into his body.

Waking the next morning, Johnathan walked past the clothing in his wardrobe without a thought. They were of no value to him.

Sitting at the dinning table, Manson was there a moment later.

He, rather mindfully, did not bring up mention of the party last night. At least not directly.

"It seems there was quite a disturbance last night, young master." Manson set a plate of food before him. Johnathan looked at with disinterest, his appetite having fled. "It would appear that Miss. Smithe is throwing quite the conniption. She was more than somewhat displeased with the actions of Mr. Talbot. Claimed it ruined her whole party, destroyed her reputation." For a moment Manson shifted, turning away. "I would most hate to be the head of *their* staff this morning. From what I've heard the Smithes are none too subtle on keeping their household in line. Whoever allowed Mr. Talbot in is likely looking for new employment as we speak."

Pushing his chair back, Johnathan left his heaping plate untouched.

"Damn Steward. Damn the man and his aspirations for greatness! I've done nothing but

accommodate him and not he's done *this* to me? Take away the one thing I desire!"

Manson coughed slightly. "Yes, Sir. This may not be the best time to say so, but the expenses brought to us by his household were paid yesterday afternoon. We have supplied him with no mean sum." He paused for a moment. "In fact, the Talbot household is likely more flush with cash today than it had been in many a year. That," he raised a finger to his lip, "May perhaps explain the timing of the disturbance."

Johnathan narrowed his eyes. "He was stringing me along. Playing me for a puppet. Did he *ever* truly plan to give me Emma's hand, or just replace me with the next man in line so he could do the same to him?"

Manson shrugged.

Returning to his chambers for just a moment, Johnathan threw on a pair of pants and a simple shirt. The beast inside him raged, but the civilized mind knew that he would have to at least *appear* civilized to hope for even the slightest chance to speak to the man.

Ginny didn't even make so much as a protest as he leapt upon her. She wouldn't move at a gallop, but the sense of urgency in Johnathan's motions must have impressed upon her, she did make a quick trot.

Passing though town, Johnathan noted just how many people stopped to stare at him, and just how many didn't. It seemed that much of the town had come to accept the sight of a beast riding though.

Pulling Ginny about a bend, for just a moment Johnathan saw a glimpse of blue uniform from the corner of his eyes.

Thomas.

The man began running after him, voice raised. Johnathan ignored him and spurred Ginny on.

Breaking from town, the Talbot estate was dead ahead. Johnathan road Ginny down the rutted gravel drive, flanked on either side by ragged orchard trees that once, long ago had looked majestic. Now they were unattended to and wild.

For just a moment Johnathan wondered if fate had made a mistake. It seemed that it should not be he who wore the face of an unrestrained beast.

Pulling to a stop a good fifty yards from the front of the building so as to frighten them any more than was necessary, Johnathan paused to take a look.

The once grand, formerly white, two story manor house was still an imposing sight. Only now it did not display a grand stable face. The emotion it evoked was one of pity, one of majesty long passed yet still clung to.

Johnathan shivered.

"Steward! Emma!"

Dismounting, Johnathan took ten paces to stand before the front door, still well back.

"Come out, you cad! You have dishonoured me and I *will* speak to you!"

The only sound to return to Johnathan's sensitive ears was that of the wind racing through the trees and the soft creaking of the wooden structure.

"Emma!" Johnathan's voice was rough.

"Go away, *beast*. She will have nothing to do with you."

For a moment Johnathan couldn't tell where the voice came from, but there was no question of its owner.

Steward.

Scanning the windows, at long last Johnathan's keen eyes were able to pick out one that stood open on the second floor. And behind it a man cloaked in shadow.

"Steward." Johnathan did everything in his power to sooth his voice. It came out as little more than a rough growl.

The man stepped back from the window, as frightened now that he's hiding spot had been discovered.

"Go away, beast." He paused and took a deep breath. "Go away, Mr. Pennyfare. You are not wanted here."

Hands by his side, Johnathan was only glad the man could not see how his claws cut into the flesh of his palms.

"Why? Why, Steward? You loved me not three days ago! Why can you not see that I am the same man I was then? I have not changed! I have still stayed good to my word and provided you with everything you could ask for!"

The man was silent for a long moment. When he did speak again his voice was reed thin and hoarse.

"What are you, Mr. Pennyfare? You are no longer a man. Are you a beast? That's not for me to decide. God can make his ruling on that. All I know is that you are no longer one of us. You will not see my daughter. The Talbot name is to great, to important and powerful to every be allowed to fade away. My ancestors were rulers, famous. I shall be too. I swear it. I can not allow my name to be brought low by one such as you. Begone beast. I will find one to do what you can never hope to with my daughter."

"What?" Johnathan narrowed his eyes.

Steward didn't even bother to laugh. "Provide me with a legacy."

Lunging forward, Johnathan crashed into the front door of the house, pounding upon it like a golden tide.

There was a hollow echo, but nothing else.

"Emma!" His voice was rough, sounding inhuman.

White tinging the corners of his eyes, Johnathan clawed at the heavy wood, leaving long scratches in the door but accomplishing nothing else.

"Let me in, you monster!" he screamed. "Let me to my Emma!" With every word the civility flowed from his voice, draining away until they were little more than snarls.

Yet no matter how hard he fought the door never opened.

The walk home was long and silent.

Johnathan remembered little of it. He didn't ride Ginny, but the horse walked along behind him step for step.

The skirted the edge of town. People stopped to look at him, but he ignored them.

At one point a man in a blue uniform walked his way. A growl low in his chest quickly make his turn directions and hurry off.

Walking the ford back to the manor, Johnathan never bothered to break stride or slow. The current came up well past his knees, he had to hold on to Ginny's strong form to keep from being washed away.

Stumbling into the manor, Johnathan left Ginny behind him, standing confused at the door. A few moments later she wandered off in the direction of the stable.

“Sir?” Manson was there a moment later. Johnathan was dripping water across the floor from his waterlogged pants and fur but the man made no effort to stop him.

Johnathan simply looked up at him wordlessly.

Taking Johnathan's paw in hand, Manson led him upstairs to get dried off.

Johnathan wasn't quite sure how it happened, but next his mind cleared he found himself sitting alone in the library.

What was he to do now? Emma... Emma was gone.

The idea of wallowing in self pity didn't appeal to him – he'd already been doing far too much of that, but it had been Emma who had pulled him through his change. Now it was that very change that was to drive them apart.

Damn that Steward and damn his insentient drive to push his family name back to where he *thought* it belonged.

Glancing about, Johnathan noted that even more post had arrived while he'd been gone. Idly, casting for anything to draw his attention, he slit open the first envelope with his claw.

And nearly threw it across the room.

It was a marriage proposal from some woman a county over. They'd never met, yet she was all put throwing herself at him. Not only for the money it would bring her, but the fame for being married to *that thing*.

It didn't say as much, but he could read between the lines well enough.

The next two letters were just the same. They all ended up as little more than confetti, nothing more than shreds laying unread on the floor.

The forth letter, however, was different.

At first Johnathan nearly tossed it aside off hand. A moment later it almost brought him to tears.

It was a bill from the local bakery.

For a wedding cake.

The Talbots had ordered it days ago. It had just been readied and the bill sent. Somewhere in town there was a wedding cake that would never serve its purpose.

And the bill for it was no mean number of pounds. God, the Talbots certainly knew how to spend when it wasn't there money.

Setting the bill aside, Johnathan when about to put it from his mind when Manson stepped into the room. He was carrying a tea service.

“I thought you might care for a spot, young master.” His voice was soft. “Your father seemed to always enjoy a cup when things went sideways.”

Despite everything that was happening Johnathan smiled.

“Yes, thank you.” Reaching out, he lifted a cup from the tray. It was only then he noticed there were two. “Am I expecting company?”

Manson paused for a moment as he set the tray down.

“Not as such, sir. I simply thought I might sit with you for a moment.” His face pulled, as if the words were difficult to force out. “Spend a moment to... ensure you are alright.”

A stiff laugh worked its way from Johnathan's throat as he poured himself a cup. “Please, be my guest.” He poured a cup for Manson as well. “You needn't worry this time. I've had my brush with melancholy. I haven't the slightest what I'll do now, but it won't be to leap into the river again. I

know for a fact that I won't have Emma to drag me to safety this time, and I can tell you that I'm not looking to have the cold fingers of death clutch so closely about me again so soon."

Manson nodded as he took a sip. "Very good, Sir." Glancing about at the letters spread on the table before them, the man spared a moment to look at the tattered shreds of the proposals.

Wisely, he ignored them.

Taking a sip of his tea, Manson glanced about to the other papers and bills.

"You should know, Sir, that your father was in a situation much like this thirty some years ago."

Johnathan had been staring down into his tea cup, watching the clouds of milk when he looked up.

"Pardon?"

"A situation not so unlike this, Sir." A slight grin tugged at his lips. "I don't believe you ever knew your grandparents on your mother's side." The smile widened. "They were... how shall we say, not so taken by their daughter's decision to join your father in his crusading efforts."

"What happened?"

"Well," the man paused for a moment, choosing his words, "It would be inappropriate for me to say too much, but suffice it that there is a reason that your parents moved here and never returned back to Northumberland. They would not be... welcomed by your mother's family."

Johnathan grinned. "Really? Fancy that. They never told me."

Manson shrugged. "They had to reason to. You were raised to be good and proper, all the things that your father feared he wasn't. It would appear, however, that one can only ingrain so much civility in a man before it... backfires." He smiled. "But I digress. I really should be returned to my work."

Running a hand over the papers spread across the desk, Manson paused for a moment upon the bill for the wedding cake.

"Pity," he continued, "That will come from the Pennyfare purse sure as sin. And after all we did for the Talbots too." He coughed. "There ought to be a law."

Pushing back his chair, Manson collected the tea service and was gone a moment later. He did however leave Johnathan his cup and kettle.

Taking a sip, Johnathan sat back to think.

There was something that nagged at the back of Johnathan's mind, but the harder he reached for it the more often Emma's face would appear in his mind, throwing him from the scent.

More than once he looked over all the bills that had been submitted on behalf of the Talbot's spending spree. They did little more than discourage him. Most of the bills had already been paid. He couldn't get his money back even if he wanted to.

It wasn't until Johnathan began walking his way backwards thought the bills to give himself a sum total of what had been spent that he eventually happened back upon the original letter that Steward had sent.

It was late in the night now and Johnathan had been forced to go about the library and light all the gas lamps. They left the room in a shadowed half darkness that wavered in the golden light of the lamps.

Carefully unfolding the letter, Johnathan read it again. This time, however, it was more than just a curiosity.

While he'd never finished, Johnathan *had* been training in London to become a barrister. Much of the education had been frightfully dull, but it had left him imparted with some understanding of the legal system.

And the letter that sat before him was a legal contract.

Johnathan's hands began to shake.

Steward had likely made it that way himself. The crafty old man had written the letter that now sat before him up not as a letter of intent, but as a contract.

It swore, with a signature, at the bottom, that the Talbots would offer their daughter Emma up for marriage to the Pennyfare's in return for Johnathan pay rolling the event.

Having to place the letter back down on the table lest he be unable to reread it for his shaking hands, Johnathan fought to keep his claws from ripping the paper.

This was... this was astounding.

The design of the contract was archaic, but it was, as far as Johnathan could tell, legally binding none the less.

All Johnathan had to do was pledge to fund that Talbots to the best of his ability and they in turn would offer him their daughter.

Turning frantically back to the mountains of paper upon the table, Johnathan looked for even a single bill the Talbots had submitted that Manson had failed to pay.

There wasn't one.

Chest growing tight, it took everything Johnathan had not to roar.

The next morning came bright and clear, but not nearly early enough for Johnathan. He'd been awake all night, checking and rechecking against what books he had in the library. There were few resources in law, many of those were still sitting in his rented flat back in London, but there was enough.

He could not find a single reference that suggested the contract that sat before him was anything but enforceable.

Manson was more than surprised when he found Johnathan waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. It was no later than six in the morning, not even the maids were awake.

"Manson," Johnathan fought to keep his voice level, "I will be returning to the Talbot residence this morning."

The man didn't look surprised, but he didn't say anything either. He simply nodded his head.

"I want you to ensure that the upstairs chambers are prepared. I plan to be returning with my wife-to-be and wish to be certain she will be comfortable."

"Very good, Sir." The man paused and cocked his head. "Would it also be appropriate for me to contact the local surgeon. Bring him here. Just in case."

"Perhaps." Johnathan turned and began walking away. "Though I hope that such won't be necessary. We are civilized. And I hope that we will be able to handle this like the men we are. Not beasts."

Saddling Ginny once more, Johnathan began the ride to the Talbot estate. Forging the river, he could feel the cool water rushing past his toes in the stirrups.

In his left hand he made sure to clutch the letter he'd received from Steward.

Johnathan had been hoping to ride through town quickly. He was disappointed.

Pulling around the final turn that would take him onto the road straight to the Talbot estate, there were half a dozen police officers, dressed in their dark blue, standing across the road.

In the centre stood Thomas, clutching his baton.

"Johnathan!" The man called out, "Halt!"

For just a moment Johnathan considered turning and running, trying to dash around them on a side street. Then, for even a more fleeting intent, the image of leaping from Ginny's back and *tearing* his way through the men came to the surface.

He pushed both of them away and guided the horse to a stop.

"Good morning, Thomas," Johnathan kept his voice mild. "What can I do for you?"

Thomas stepped forward, expression dower. "Johnathan," he lowered his voice, "We've been requested by the Talbots to keep you from their property. They lodged a formal complaint about you last night."

Not a hair moved on Johnathan's head.

"Oh? Well, that's too bad. I was simply going to stop by to retrieve my property and leave them be."

"Your *property*?" Thomas' voice was sceptical.

"Of course." Leaning forward on Ginny, Johnathan reached down and unfolded the contract.

"Good Mr. Talbot decided to treat his daughter as property, I'm just heading over to collect."

Thomas had looked worn and brow beaten before, but now his face turned bright red.

"What are you paying at, Johnathan? The man I knew would never treat Emma in such a way. She is not a thing."

Johnathan couldn't keep the smile that grew to his face, despite the fact it held no joy.

"I am not. It is her father who insisted on the transaction. You know I would never treat her as *anything* but a lady. But, if her father will debase her to such a degree, then what can I do but play along to free her from the bonds."

"Johnathan," Thomas took a deep breath, "I can't let you through. I have my orders. Alexander doesn't care for them either, but we have to treat all *men* as equal. Even you." He stress the one word hard enough to make it clear.

"And where was Emma when this order was given? Was she there? What did *she* have to say? Thomas," Johnathan lowered his voice but fought to keep the growl from it, "Let me through. You know we are in love. You *know* we will be married."

"I... I can't."

Johnathan lowered his head. "Then so be it."

Lunging forward, Johnathan cuffed the man. Not hard. He was almost out of reach as it was mounted, but it was enough to knock him from his feet.

Giving Ginny a good kick in the ribs, she took off, sensing the danger. She couldn't run far, but she could still easily outdistance any man.

The other cops scattered as Ginny bolted forward. In seconds he was gone.

Sparing a quick glance back, Johnathan could see Thomas picking himself off the ground. The man looked no worse for wear, but didn't none the less seemed suspiciously unwilling to give chase.

Johnathan was at the Talbot estate in a matter of minutes.

Leaving Ginny behind, he walked the last quarter mile on his own two feet, feeling the gravel crunch under his toes. Save for the letter in his hand he was completely by naked.

Just as the world had made him.

The dilapidated manor house stood before him as he walked up the last hundred yards of the drive. The scratches he had left in the front door were still there.

Johnathan suddenly felt silly, having come all the way here with nothing more than a piece of paper in his hand. It had been obvious yesterday that Steward had not been interested in civilized

discussion.

Why should something as flimsy as a contract make any difference now?

Johnathan's nose twitched as he walked. There was someone else here. He couldn't place the scent, but it was familiar. He knew it, but he simply couldn't place it.

Putting the thought behind him, Johnathan stepped up to the heavy front door and pounded on the scarred wood.

"Steward!" his voice boomed, "Come out and talk to me like a man!"

There was no response.

"He doesn't wish to talk to you, beast."

The voice came from behind him, soft and smooth.

Turing, Johnathan saw Richard stepping from the trees. The man was dressed from head to foot in black. A moment later Johnathan realized it was a light duelling suit. The only time he'd ever seen such a thing before had at the clubs back in London.

"Be gone, beast. You are not welcome here." His voice was calm, but Johnathan could hear the adrenaline boiling just beneath the surface.

"I am here for my wife-to-be." Johnathan's voice was just as smooth. The only difference was that he felt a measure of the calm he tried to present.

"Beasts do not have *wives*. Such a blessed thing as marriage is reserved the civilized man alone."

In a single smooth action Richard drew a sword from his belt.

Johnathan was no expert on such things, but this was no fencing trainer, nor was it a stage prop. The blade Richard held before him was a good four feet long and looked to be sharp enough to take free a limb.

Its point didn't waver in the slightest as he held it before his chest with both hands.

"Ah," Johnathan didn't bother to choke back his laugh, "So *this* is culture and civility. A sword fight? *I* was here to argue law. I see that is far below and more base than what you had planned. Murder. Yes, that is how to prove your righteousness."

"Only a man is murdered. A beast is slain."

Lunging forward, Richard stabbed with the sword.

It was little more than for show, they was still a good two feet between them, even with the blade extended. It did it work through, forcing Johnathan to pull back and away from the front door to the manor.

A swipe of the sword from left to right and Johnathan could feel the wind passing in its wake.

It was only a moment later he noticed some of his whiskers falling to the ground.

"So this is it?" He asked, scrambling backwards until his back was against the manor wall, "No fair fight, no duel for honour?"

Richard snorted. "Beasts have no honour. The lady is mine. You left her, walked away. I came in and claimed her. Now I'll take what is mine."

Pulling back, he stabbed his sword towards Johnathan's face.

Dropping down at the last moment, the tip of the blade passed between Johnathan upstanding ears to lodge in the wood siding of the building.

With a grunt Richard pulled it free, but not before Johnathan reached up a leg to kick him savagely in the gut.

The wind exploded from the man's lips as he stumbled back. Johnathan cursed himself, he still had his sword.

Crouching low to the ground, Johnathan fought the growl that grew within him. He *would not*

give in to the beast.

A quick glance over his shoulder and he saw Steward standing behind one of the second floor windows. Another glance and... there was the shadow of a figure behind another one.

That was all the time Johnathan had. The next moment Richard came hurtling towards him again, slicing his sword down in a two handed over-the-head blow.

He didn't even come close.

For just a moment Johnathan paused to watch the man. It was obvious he was no inexperienced swordsman, but yet he duelled in a slapdash, unthinking way that suggested he'd never truly had to fight before. And it almost guaranteed he'd never killed.

Johnathan paused in contemplation for just a moment too long.

He'd thought the next blow would go wide by a good few inches. He was wrong.

A glancing blow hit him in the ribcage, causing Johnathan to cry out and pull back. Thankfully, the hit had been more by the flat of the blade than the edge, but it had still been more than enough to slice his hide and leave him bleeding across the ground.

The growl in Johnathan's throat came full force now.

"You bastard."

His body stepping forward of its own violation, Johnathan swiped his claws at the man's face. Now it was his turn to pull away.

Johnathan may have the better control, but the advantage of range was with Richard. Slowly, the man pushed Johnathan back towards the edge of the estate and the thick trees that waited there.

A sudden smile coming to Johnathan's lips, he turned and dashed the last few steps to the dense forest, finding a nice place to stand between the trunks that crowded close around him.

Richard charged after him unthinking.

Pulling back for another swipe, the man hit the heavy trunk of an oak with his sword.

A muttered curse escaped the man's lips as he adjusted his grip and swung another way only to meet the same. Even an overhead strike was denied him by the low hanging branches.

In desperation Richard drew his arms close for a quick stab forward, but by then Johnathan had already stepped forward until the two of them were face to face.

Looking down at Richard's hairless face, Johnathan could see a spark of fear in the man's eyes.

"Give me the sword, Mr. Bragsten." Johnathan voice was calm and still, perfectly cultured and eloquent, as though he sat for tea with the royal family.

Richard's mouth was open, but no words escaped.

One last flailing strike of the sword and Richard did what he could to stab at the lion.

Johnathan caught it between the rough pads of his fingers, holding it by the flat as his claws curved about the blade. With a soft pull it came free of the man's fingers.

"Go home, Richard," Johnathan's voice was soft, "You are neither wanted or required here."

Turning, Johnathan strode past the man and returned to stand before the manor house.

"Steward!" His voice was loud and firm, only the faintest taint of a growl in it, "Come out here so we may speak like men!"

Stooping to pick up the contract that he'd dropped to the ground in the fight, Johnathan was somewhat nonplussed to notice this his now bloody hands stained the paper a bright crimson.

And still no one came from the home.

Turning back to the house once more, Johnathan raised his voice. "Steward! Come out and..."

Johnathan words were cut off by a crack of thunder. An instant later the lightning struck.

High and in the meat of his shoulder, the world exploded.

Spinning and falling to the ground, Johnathan could see Richard emerging from the woods, holding a smoking revolver.

“Why won't you just die, you beast?” The fear that danced in Richard's eyes was clear, but yet he continued to walk forward. “Just... die.” He pulled back the hammer as he took another step.

At this range there was no chance he could miss.

A cry came from the building behind him and there was the sound of something breaking. A moment later Emma's voice came clear as day.

“Johnathan!”

That was enough to cause Richard's head to snap up, and his gun hand followed.

Roaring against the pain the pulling at his gut and shoulder, Johnathan lunged towards the man.

He was a good five yards distant but Johnathan covered the space in less than the blink of an eye.

Crashing together, Johnathan's hands scrambled at the gun. Yet no matter what he did it still went off.

Johnathan could smell blood.

Pulling back for just a moment, Johnathan could see a neat hold drilled in the side of Richard's leg. It was quickly filling with blood.

And the gun was still firmly wrapped in the man's hand.

It took Richard a moment to realize what had happened, but a moment later he screamed and the gun was long forgotten.

Raising a single finger before the man's eyes, Johnathan let the sun glint off his claw.

With the sound like ripping silk, Johnathan slashed that single claw across the man's face, leaving a deep scar across from the top of his forehead down to the bottom of his opposite cheek. He only just narrowly missed slicing the man's eye.

Johnathan's voice was only just legible when he spoke.

“You rode here. Ride home. If I ever see you again I will give you more than a single scar to remember me by. My *wife* and I will be leaving now.”