

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 15: Warm Sun, Lazy Days

The walk home was easy enough. People watched his every step, but they kept their distance well enough that Johnathan felt no need to glare at them. They followed him to the edge of town and beyond, to the turn at the river ford.

For just a moment Johnathan entertained the idea of walking the ford himself, the water was no higher than his knees. But no, that would never do. Not only did he have the eyes of the town upon him in which he wanted to show not a single bestial trait, but it would also ruin the trousers of his newly altered suit.

Taking the long way one again, Johnathan was able for the first time to, at some measure, enjoy the scenes his new body had provided him with. He could hear the song of every bird, see the sway of every branch and leaf. In some way he felt as if he belonged here.

The next few days passed more quickly than he ever would have expected. Not only did Manson keep him busy with multiple fittings but he had a seemingly endless stream of visitors.

At first Johnathan debated simply turning any and all who came to see him away, but that quickly became impossible. The police still seemed to keep the worst of the lot at a distance, but there was little they could do about such men as the town mayor.

Mayor Allan Abortsford was a short and chubby man. He'd been helping lead the town of Hammerwood since Johnathan could first remember. He'd never seen deeper lines on the man's face than sat engraved upon him when he was shown in by Manson.

"I wish I could have come to see you under happier circumstances, Mr. Pennyfare," the man began, his generous dewlap flapping as he spoke, "But I'm sure you know why I'm here."

Johnathan, clad now in another suit, one Manson had sent into town to be properly tailored to his new form, sat on a seat across the man, making a show of sipping a cup of tea.

"Yes," he kept his face perfectly neutral. "Few people have come by to simply say hello, and even fewer to play a game of cards."

Abortsford chuckled slightly, a minor nervous tick pulling at the side of his mouth as he kept a firm eye of Johnathan's claw tipped hands. "Very droll, Sir."

"Frankly, Mr. Pennyfare, I'm less concerned with your new... appearance as I am what you plan to do now." Johnathan cocked his head as the man spoke. "You well know that you, and your parents before you, had substantial investments in many of the business of Hammerwood. I'm simply here to put to rest any fears that you might be entertaining any drastic changes."

Johnathan couldn't help it, he laughed out loud. The sound came out as more of a huff-huff-huff. For just a moment Abortsford turned pale, not knowing what was going on.

"My good Sir," Johnathan began, "As to this date I've received little but good reception from the men and woman of the town. Why would I be so foolish as to move to anywhere else where I am not so well known and will hardly be so gracelessly received?"

The man chuckled slightly and looked away. "Yes, yes, of course. We've all had great faith in you. The Pennyfare name had been well regarded here for decades and that is hardly about to change." He took a deep breath and looked Johnathan in the eye. "You're parents were some of the town's biggest supporters, they made Hammerwood what it is today. I'm sure you'll be at least as good a person as they were."

Johnathan took a deep breath and fought to keep from blanching. Abortsford couldn't seem to go more than two minutes without bringing up the elder Pennyfares. He knew the mayor had been good friends with his parents, but it was wearing to be constantly compared to them. Not even this... *thing* that had befallen him could claw its way out from the shadow his parents cast over him.

"Yes. Very good." Johnathan fought to continue on, changing the topic. "I can guess that the town would like a... contribution to show my good faith. I'm sure it would help lay people's minds to rest if I were to show I am still the same man I was before."

Abortsford pulled back as if in shock, but Johnathan could see the glint of avarice in his eyes. Johnathan may not enjoy jousting with those who played with power but he none the less knew how the world kept spinning.

"Oh, my good Mr. Pennyfare, that simply is *not* required." The man's words were humble, but the tone he fought so hard to hide more than suggested this was *exactly* the reason he'd come. The was not a social visit. Nor, Johnathan knew, what this visit to tell if he was a beast. Thomas had come previously to decide that. The one and only reason the mayor had made the journey out to the estate was to press Johnathan for funds. That was the way the engines of power worked. If you did something *wrong*, or something was done to you, the only way to nullify it was to make a proper donation.

"I insist, my good man." The words came tired and strained from Johnathan's lips. Reaching out, he pulled close the cheque book he'd brought for just this reason. "What would be a reasonable amount?" Johnathan listed off a number. Abortsford's face went white. Johnathan doubled it and the man nearly fell of his chair.

With a sigh Johnathan turned back to the cheque book. An amount of that size would be a strain at the best of times. Today? After the spending spree of the Talbots, it would be a substantial hit. Johnathan wrote the number out anyway. It wasn't as though he was planing to take a holiday to the continent any time soon.

Pausing for a moment, Johnathan scrawled out 'to the Hammerwood police force' in the recipient field of the cheque. It wasn't that he didn't trust the man who sat before him... he just wanted to make sure the mayor didn't get any grand ideas.

The last thing Johnathan wanted to see when he next walked into town was a statue in his likeness gracing the main square.

Johnathan shivered. No, that would never do. He didn't want to be celebrated, only left alone.

Ushering Abortsford from the room a short time later, Johnathan hefted a sigh of relief as soon as he was alone again. His day would be much improved if he could get by without paying out any more sums like that for sometime.

Heading off down the hallway, Johnathan found Manson in one of the back rooms, going over some papers in what years ago had become the man's de facto office.

"Young master." Manson put down his papers as soon as Johnathan stepped through the door. For the life of him Johnathan couldn't tell how he'd known he was here. The new lion feet hardly made a whisper as he walked.

"Do you have a moment, Manson?"

"For you, Sir, of course." The man's voice was grave. He likely expected bad news.

Finding a seat across from him, Johnathan spared a moment to look about the room.

This one space was Manson's domain alone. Out of the dozens of rooms in the house this one did not belong to Johnathan. At least not in any real sense.

The walls were the same wood panelling that the rest of the house saw, but they were not quite kept up to the same standard as the other spaces. Crowded tight with boxes and files, Manson's office looked like something that would be more at home in a business in London, not a country estate.

Johnathan had to hold back a laugh. That was perhaps the best way to think about this room. *This* was where the business of running the estate happened, far from Johnathan's sight. The parallel to a busy office in London was not that far off. All the great machines of the city had to be run from somewhere, *someone* had to support all the great works that were undertaken. It was Manson who supported Johnathan and the estate.

"I've only just realized that I never spoke to you about the Talbots. I sent you off to them when I was..." Johnathan coughed, "confined to my room. Were you able to curb their spending?"

The man pulled a face. "I should suppose I managed to help somewhat, Sir." Manson paused for a moment to peer about his desk. Finding the piece of paper in question, he held it up. It was a copy of the letter he'd sent to Johnathan.

"As you can see, Sir," he continued, "This is what the two of you agreed to. It states that you will finance the wedding, and in return you have his daughter's hand in marriage. It is rather unambiguous."

"And I'm assuming they're interpreting 'the wedding' as to include whatever it is they want it to?"

"It would seem so, Sir. I was able to place some restrictions on them, but much of the damage has already been done. While not insurmountable, the Talbots will cost no small sum."

Johnathan told him about the cheque he'd just handed over to the mayor. Manson's skin paled slightly, but all he said was, "I'll make sure to factor that in, Sir. We may be forced to make some economies."

Returning to the back parlour, Johnathan sat back with a cup of tea and tried to clear his thoughts. Where was Emma? Everything always seemed so much simpler when she was here.

It seemed like only moments before Manson came to knock on his door again. He had another visitor.

"Father Atkinson to see you, sir."

Johnathan cocked his head. Odd. He'd not been expecting this. "Please see him in."

Johnathan took a moment to straighten his suit and comb his mane before the man of the cloth appeared.

Father Atkinson was a slightly older man, only just the faintest touch of grey on the edge of his

brown hair. Unlike the stereotype, he wore a full head of hair but no beard.

"So good of you to see me, Johnathan." Thin man's voice was soft. He didn't seemed to react at all to Johnathan's appearance when he stepped into the room. Johnathan tried to rack his brain to recall if the man had been among the crowd to come view him.

"Not a problem at all, Father. I always have time for a man of the faith." Johnathan had to be careful to couch his words. He, like his parents, had never been one to ascribe too closely to religion. He'd seen the inside of the man's church enough times, but hardly every Sunday.

"I'm sure you can guess why I'm here, my son." The priest kept his voice low and calm, as if not quite sure how Johnathan would react.

Johnathan shrugged and raised his hand as inoffensively as he could in the air. "Father, I've had a storm of the last few days." He hefted a sigh, "Yet another man come to see me is hardly a major inconvenience." For just a moment he had to bite back a chuckle. "Would you like me to roar?"

A smile touched the man's lips. "No, my son, that will be quite all right. I'm simply here on the request of one of my flock to..." He paused, searching for words, "Ensure you have not been touched by the lower forces. Your appearance is such that a small number of the town have been understandably frightened."

Johnathan didn't bother to move. "Do as you must, Father."

Stepping forward, the man took a close look at Johnathan, from the tip of his upstanding ears to the claws that scratched at the floor under his feet. He paused, however, for a long moment to stare Johnathan straight in the eyes.

Neither of them flinched.

Nodding slightly, the man reached into one of the pockets of his robe and pulled out a small, unadorned wooden cross.

"This, my son," he gestured down to the cross, "Was formed by Brother William, a demon hunter of some note two centuries back." Father Atkinson paused for a moment, glancing about before he continued. "I had it brought in at some expense last night from London. I didn't select it simply because Brother William could find demons, but rather because he was remembered for never having made a mistake. Not a man or woman was brought low by him who did not later confess."

Johnathan shivered when the word *confess* was used. Neither man had any illusion exactly what such truly meant. When held before hot blades there was little a man would not confess to in order to make the pain stop, whether true or false.

Closing his eyes for a moment, the man held it out before Johnathan. "Take it, my son. Let us put away any question here and now. A demon would not be able to touch its holy surface. A good man who has simple been enthralled by... whatever it might be, will."

Without pause Johnathan reached out and snatched the simple cross from his hand. Despite his actions Johnathan did have a grain of fear in his heart. He would be damned, however, if he'd let it show.

The texture of the cross was smooth and time worn beneath the rough pads of his fingers.

Drawing a breath, they both waited for it to grow unbearably hot. It did not do so.

Raising the cross to touch the bridge of his nose, Johnathan whispered a soft thanks to whoever may be listening.

"In that case, my son, I, for one, am satisfied."

A moment later Johnathan handed the cross back. It disappeared into one of the priest's pockets.

A heartbeat passed and then a wide smile broke his face. "It is good to know you are still among us, my son. You never know, your new form may be a blessing handed down to you by God.

Stranger things have been known to happen.”

Johnathan fought back a snort, but it still slipped out. Thankfully, the priest seemed not to take offence.

“Frankly, father, I doubt it. Anyone thinking this is a blessing is welcome to have it. I'd trade this body for no more than a hay-penny if I could.”

Atkinson shook his head as he stood. “As you say, my son. But,” he paused for a moment as he turned towards the door, “It is nice to know that I can focus back on the more important things. I assume you and the dear Miss Talbot will still be marrying in my church?”

For just a moment Johnathan smiled. “I should hope so, Father. If I am not bankrupted first.”

For a short time at least it seemed that Johnathan had at last beat back the tide of people who continuously came to see him.

A quick glance out the front window confirmed his assumption. There was a member of the police force, though not Thomas, standing just out view down the road. He turned away man after man who tried to push past him.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Johnathan returned to the back parlour. Stretching out across the chesterfield, his eyelids quickly felt heavy.

Fighting off the sleep that dragged him down, he began to think about what he must do next. His appearance seemed to have sorted itself out with few enough problems. The next question was of finances.

This, to be honest, was one of the first times Johnathan had ever to think about his financial well-being as anything but 'what shall I invest in today'. It was a rather troubling thought to realize he would soon be in a position that he would have to begin liquidating the shares his family owned in many of the business of Hammerwood.

Raising the back of a hand to his forehead, Johnathan realized that he'd have to sell his share in the town's business – likely to the detriment of the business in question – *to make up his donation to the police force.*

Stifling a growl, he forced himself back up into a sitting position to look out the window across to the back gardens and the forest beyond.

“Borrow from Paul to pay Peter,” he mumbled. Only too late did Johnathan realize that his formerly carefully combed out mane was not in disarray about him.

Every time he took a step forward, Johnathan mused, he slid back two. His immediate survival seemed relatively secure, but now he had to concern himself with his long term life with Emma.

The hint of a growl began to grow in his throat when he heard the muffled sound of a scuffle out in the hallway.

On his feet in the blink of an eye, Johnathan was at the door to the room before anything further could happen.

“Sir! I must insist! Mr. Pennyfare is not ready to receive you!”

The response to Manson's words were muffled, but Johnathan could make out their gist well enough.

Opening the door on silent hinges, Johnathan stepped out to stand behind Manson and the man he struggled to hold back.

Idly, Johnathan noticed that Manson still had his revolver tucked safely under his jacket, held well away from the red nosed Steward Talbot.

The moment Steward saw him she stopped dead, going a deathly shade of white.

“It's true...” His voice was little more than a whispered prayer.

"Mr. Talbot," Johnathan's voice was as cold as ice, "I'm sorry, I'd don't remember inviting you."
The man seemed incapable of answering.

Narrowing his eyes, Johnathan glanced over to Manson. "If you would be so kind, please take our guest to the *front* parlour. I will be with you in a moment."

Manson nodded with a sharp bob of his head. In short order he was all but carrying the unresisting Steward off down the hallway.

Pulling in a deep breath, Johnathan had to fight not to gag. The scent of booze was strong in the air. From what he could tell the eldest Talbot was piss drunk.

And he'd come to speak to him.

Looking down at his hands, Johnathan cold see them shaking.

He couldn't be here for *that*. God help him, Steward couldn't be here for *that*. He had to have come over to demand more money. Yes. Yes, that had to be it.

Fighting to regain a measure of calm, Johnathan stepped back to escape the stench of booze.

A moment later he began walking down the hall, starting after Manson and Steward.

Stepping into the front parlour, Johnathan could see immediately that Steward, while still drunk, was somewhat recovered. The tonic water in one of Johnathan's best glasses was more than likely to thank for that.

"Mr. Talbot," Johnathan came forward, but stopped a safe distance away so as not to intimidate the man, "I wasn't aware that you were coming to see me today."

The man had already been frowning, but now that his gaze locked on Johnathan his lips pulled down so far that they might just run off the bottom of his chin.

"So the rumours are true." His voice was rough. He took another pull of his drink. That action alone would have been enough to get him drunk if it had been anything but water.

Finding a chair, Johnathan sat down. Even then their eyes were still level.

"I've made no secret of my... condition, Steward."

The man looked like he was about ready to throw his glass. "Secret? Then when the hell were you going to tell me? I was about to hand my daughter to you! In the name of God, this will ruin me, ruin the family's whole name!"

Johnathan simply blinked, trying to hold back the emotion the welled up within him.

"Pardon, Sir? How this affects *you*? I'm sorry, but I would think any effect this condition would have on your family's name would be minimal as to what I must endure."

The glass came down with a heavy thunk on the table.

"Damn it! Everything was worked out! We were just getting back on our feet. With your money and my brains we could have had the Talbot name back to the majesty it once held. Now... now... just *look* at you. Why did you have to go and do such a damn thing?"

Looking closely, Johnathan was just able to pick up the slightest crack in the glass from when Steward had slammed it back on the table.

And here was just the smallest cut on the man's had where the broken glass had sliced him. It was starting to ooze blood.

"And... and... what will this do to my legacy?"

In a voice that was as natural as he could manage, Johnathan replied, "You have sons to carry on your name." The hint of a growl slipped into his voice, "And Emma would take *mine* upon our marriage. I, Steward, am more concerned with what will happen to *my* family name. You may be effected by the outcome of my illness, *but I am committed*."

"And furthermore," Johnathan continued, "I've been getting most troublesome reports of the

expenditures that you've been sending back to my estate. Did we not agree, Steward, that it would be Manson who would be in charge of planning the wedding.”

In the blink of an eye the man's whole demeanour changed. Half the alcohol seeming to drop from him, the mere mention of money having brought him fully awake.

“I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, *Mr. Pennyfare*.” He nearly spat Johnathan's name. “I've simply been making the necessary purchases that must be done before the wedding.” He narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn't want to break our agreement, would you, Mr. Pennyfare?”

A snarl pulled at Johnathan lips, but he kept it contained with some effort. “No, Mr. Talbot. If we came to an agreement you can be sure you have my word on it.”

“The word of a lion?” He began to turn. “Up until today I wasn't even aware your kind could speak, let alone hold your word.”

He was out of the room a few moments later. Johnathan was glad to see Manson waiting a step away out in the hallway, ensuring the man left promptly.

Waiting until he heard the front door click closed behind Steward's heels, Johnathan turned with a snarl.

Four perfect lines appeared in the back of the chesterfield before him. They began to leak stuffing a few moments later.

Johnathan hadn't even felt the least resistance when his claws cut through the heavy fabric.

Prowling back and forth along the halls for the rest of the day, Johnathan couldn't seem to get his heart back under control.

The threat had been there, clear as day even if he'd never spelled it out. Steward would revoke his agreement to Johnathan's and Emma's marriage if he didn't get everything he wanted.

And right now it seemed the man wanted everything Johnathan owned.

The maids were smart enough to keep away from Johnathan's prowls. They were in no danger, but *no one* wanted to get in the path of an enraged lion, whether he wore a refined suit or not.

There were only so many times he could circle around the halls. Johnathan hardly even bothered to stop for dinner. He only paused long enough in the dining room to bolt the chop Manson had prepared for him, hardly even tasting it.

Thankful at least for small mercies, Johnathan was happy to note that no more visitors came to call on him that day.

The sun was just starting to set, casting the world in a dim golden glow as Johnathan finally burst from the manor and into the back garden.

He'd tried to avoid coming out here for as long as he could. Every time he went outside by himself *something* seemed to happen that brought his new more bestial nature to the surface.

He most certainly was not in the mood to black out and discover the corpse of a deer between his jaws... or something worse.

Stalking between the hedges, Johnathan mused for just a moment on whether it would be worth the expense of having a hedge maze commissioned. The thought of having a maze of deep green to lose himself in was oddly enticing. His own personal labyrinth of Minos. Only this one would be made of living plants rather than dead stone. And the beast who sulked within would be no minotaur.

And, thought Johnathan with a gallows smile, it would not be the creature's *father* who'd had it constructed.

Hefting a sigh, Johnathan put the fantasy out of his mind. It would be an odd thought at the best of times, but painfully out of reach not that he was now suddenly forced to economize.

Circling the manor, Johnathan noticed the blue uniform of a police officer standing up the road.

It still wasn't Thomas, but neither was it the same man who'd been there before. It seemed like they planned to have someone there all night.

A handful more steps and Johnathan found himself standing before that stable. The scent of horses left his nose twitching.

Creeping forward, Johnathan was careful to poke his head about the door frame. As always, there was only a single animal living here any more.

Ginny.

Johnathan huffed a breath. Last time he'd tried to approach her things had not gone so well.

Taking a deep breath, Johnathan straightened to the closest approximation of his old human stance and slowly began forward.

"Hello, Ginny." He fought to keep his voice soft, but no matter what he did it simply didn't sound like *him*.

She started slightly and turned her head to face him. Having been sleeping, it took her eyes a moment to focus.

When she did she froze motionless.

The only thing betraying life in her form was her tail that spatially twitched back and forth every so often as if swatting at flies.

"Oh dear." Johnathan stopped himself, not daring to take another step forward. A reaction like this was far from ideal.

Backing away, Johnathan didn't stop until he'd retreated all the way to the stable wall. It seemed to just be enough to give Ginny some measure of confidence. She unfroze from her agitated stance and began to eye him wearily.

"I'm sorry, girl," Johnathan said, more to fill up the quiet of the evening than to truly communicate anything. "You must have no idea what's going on. Your master's gone, and in his place is this... thing."

Taking a good look at her, Johnathan could see she'd been tended to, my Manson most likely. She was just fine, but it was obvious that Manson was not a horseman.

Reaching out, Johnathan pulled a bag of oats from the table at his elbow. Stepping forward again, slowly, he held the feed out before him.

Ginny may be frightened of his new form, but she was, as all horses, always interested in food.

Her tail whipped again, but her ears twitched. Her eyes were focused on the food, not Johnathan's inhuman face.

"Poor Ginny," Johnathan whispered, "Manson just doesn't know how to properly take care of you does he?"

Another step forward, she could just about reach the bag of oats with her outstretched lips.

Johnathan stood there for a long moment. It was mean, he knew it in his heart, but he had to make sure she was more interested in the food than she was him.

Another second and a slight whine came from Ginny's lips. Johnathan grinned and took that final step forward.

Ginny hardly even seemed to glance up at as she lowered her head into the bag. Johnathan's arms were quickly getting tired of holding the feed. Not that he had much to complain about soon after, Ginny made short work of the oats.

All but licking the burlap bag clean, Ginny seemed to at least realize who stood so close to her.

Rocking back a step, she no longer strained against the front of her stall. Ears turned forward to catch any sound, she snorted in a breath.

She didn't, it seemed, care much for the scent that came to her.

Pulling back another step, she was quickly pressed up against the back of the stall. She wasn't as agitated as she'd been just a short time ago, but neither was she at rest.

Pulling back himself, Johnathan made sure to give her all the room she wanted. Placing the oat sack back on the table, he looked about for something else to win her over with.

Much to his surprise he found it.

Sitting just under the table was a small box, it was half filled with carrots. Johnathan had to bite back a laugh. If he hadn't known better he would have just as well assumed Manson had planned all this... or Emma.

Pushing the thought from his mind, he pulled a handful of carrots from the box. They were a touch withered and wrinkled, but just fine for any horse.

Stepping forward again, Johnathan held the carrots out like a peace offering, hoping their scent would cover his own, predatory, smell.

Ginny eyed him warily for a moment from the back of her stall. For just a moment it almost looked like she was going to rear up before her hunger got the better of her.

Stopping well back from the edge of her stall, Johnathan waited, letting her take the final steps.

Straining forward with her lips, Ginny tried to reach the carrots. She was too far away. A soft huff and she finally seemed to make up her mind and step forward.

The crunch of teeth closing around the carrot from Johnathan's hand was loud in the stable.

Reaching up a tentative hand as he fed her another carrot, Johnathan softly stroked the bridge of her nose.

She didn't shy away.

Working their way through the whole box of carrots, Johnathan was eventually able to stand next to her without her startling. There seemed to be, as Emma had guessed, enough *him* left in his scent to all her to accept him once she got over the changes.

Johnathan smiled, his canines glinting sharply in the gas lights.

The sun was already mostly below the horizon, but Johnathan simply had to know how much Ginny trusted him.

Pulling the saddle and tackle from its nearby hooks, Johnathan quickly pulled them snug about her. The actions were smooth and quick. If anything they were easier now that his body seemed more powerful.

Drawing a deep breath, Johnathan let lose the catch at the front of Ginny's stall. For a moment she didn't even move.

It had likely been some time since she'd been able to leave her stall. The last time she'd done anything of note was when she'd pulled Emma and Johnathan into town.

That had not ended well.

Taking a hesitant step forward, Ginny kept a firm eye on Johnathan as she moved into the main section of the stable. A moment later she continued at a slow walk out the door.

Now came the true test. Johnathan could feel the sweat growing between his toes. He needed to see how she reacted to him out in the field.

It was wonderful, more than he could ever expect, for Ginny to stay calm around him in the stable, but it was a whole different game when they were out in the world, when she had room to bolt.

Following Ginny out a few moments later, Johnathan found her in the field just outside the door, sniffing at the wind and nibbling the taller tufts of grass. She looked near totally at ease.

"Ginny?" Johnathan called her name to draw her attention. The last thing he wanted to do was come up on her unawares, especially from behind. That could earn him a bolt at best and a kick in

the face at worse.

Turning, she eyed him for a moment. Then turned back to watching the evening sky.

Walking a long circle around her, Johnathan approached her from the front, forcing his bootless feet to crunch the soil beneath him.

The final step and she raised her head to him as he reached forward to stroke her mussel.

In a flash of courage Johnathan stepped up to the saddle and pulled himself over her back. She shifted slightly under his greater than previous weight but didn't seem to notice much as he held her reins.

A laugh escaped Johnathan's lips when he realized he had no boots with stirrups, not that he'd ever much used them before. He in fact had no boots at all.

Guiding Ginny out on a wide circle around the manor, Johnathan felt her kick into an unexpected canter under him. He smiled. Ginny may be getting old, but she still had some energy left in her and being cooped up in the stable had left her pent up.

Johnathan normally made a point of keeping horses off the soft turf behind the garden, but just this once he made an exception.

Passing by the kitchen door, he caught just a flash of Manson standing there, watching him. The man smiled.

Coming up quickly to the river, Johnathan pulled Ginny up to travel parallel to it until the came to the place where, not days ago, he'd leapt to very near his demise.

Circling Ginny around until they were a good hundred feet from the bank, he leaned forward until his lips were just an inch from her ear.

"You feel up to it, old girl?"

She snorted and scuffed the grass in response.

Looking out at the river that had caused him so much trouble these last few days, Johnathan bent low in the stirrups and give Ginny a kick in the side. She was happy to respond.

In only moments they were flying over the verdant green grass faster than they had any right to.

Ginny was giving the run everything she had, Johnathan doubted she'd run this fast in years.

Flying towards them, the edge of the river loomed close. Not a inch from it Ginny kicked up into the air, Johnathan hugging her back.

For a handful of seconds they hung there, suspended in the air, making a clean arc over the troubled waters.

With a bone jarring jolt they came back to earth.

And then Ginny back legs faltered.

She hadn't made it. Not quite far enough, Johnathan crained his neck to see Ginny's hooves scratching long streaks in the dirt as she was pulled backwards.

"Damn it!" Leaping from the stirrups faster than any man could, Johnathan was on the ground next to flailing horse. "Come on, girl. I'm not losing you now."

Pressing a hand under her chest, Johnathan searched for a hand hold to help her in any way he could before she was dragged backwards by her own weight.

No mortal man could lift a horse, and Johnathan was nowhere near, even with such a beast's muscles, able to do so either, but he *was* able to take some small measure of her weight.

A growl escaped his lips as he pressed up and forward, his own feet sliding in the soft earth.

A high pitched, almost screaming whinny from Ginny and the horse made one more frantic lunge forward, scrambling to safety with Johnathan's help.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Johnathan walked up to stand next to her.

"Well, girl, how about we take the long way back?"

Ginny threw her head back and forth before slowly beginning off by herself. Towards town.

“Fine then, suit yourself! We can always head through town on the way back.” He laughed as he ran to catch up, “I’ll buy you some apples.”