



Maddie found a haven at Duchess after winters tied in a cramped stall on a Canadian farm that collected pregnant mare urine (PMU) for a hormone replacement drug.

Safe AMONG THE Herd

Once victims of the pharmaceutical industry,
rescued horses now find peace and freedom

text by KAREN E. LANGE ■ photos by KATHY MILANI

The shaggy mustang faced the dark interior of the big metal box at the end of the chute. All around were humans urging him on—"Mama Jen," who cares for him and the rest of the horses at Duchess Sanctuary, as well as familiar farmhands and some strangers who had arrived that day carrying farrier's tools and wearing chaps. The mustang walked forward, balked, walked forward again, then backed up suddenly and slammed into the gate behind, sitting down like a donkey on his rear legs and pressing hard against the metal bars. When the gate did not give, the horse stood up and moved forward once more, stopping abruptly to sniff the ground in front of the box. Men tickled his rear legs with a strip of plastic tied to a long thin pole—a painless method that is sometimes just irritating enough to spur action. Still the horse refused to enter.

"He's just wild," said Jennifer Kunz, whose official title is ranch manager of the sanctuary in southwestern Oregon. A longtime caretaker of scared and once-mistreated horses, Kunz knew this one liked his humans kept at a distance—and she had no problem with him staying that way. "This is the only time he ever gets touched. He would never go up to you in the pasture." A chart gave the mustang's name—Cristobol—and

age—19—along with a warning: "EXTRA CAUTION."

At one time, Cristobol roamed ranges overseen by the Bureau of Land Management. Then he was captured in a government roundup, placed in an online auction, and adopted by Californian Celine Myers, who established the Ark Watch Foundation to care for her growing herd of rescued horses. Celine Myers eventually gave all the horses to The HSUS—with the stipulation that they be kept together—and, in partnership with the Roberts Foundation, provided most of the money to open Duchess, with a vision for how the land could be managed as a sanctuary. When Cristobol arrived at Duchess in 2008, he had been an untrained stallion for most of his life. Though now a gelding, he had never been ridden—never so much as bent his knee for a farrier to trim his hooves. And he was not going to start.

But Cristobol's hooves couldn't be left to grow so thick they made it hard for him to run or walk. So Kunz leaned in behind the mustang and gave him two firm pats on the rear end. Reluctantly, the horse walked toward the box—then pulled up short and let fly with a powerful kick. Kunz was not deterred. She delivered two more firm pats. Finally, Cristobol crossed the threshold.

Rushing to a nearby bank of controls, Kunz shut the door of the box, brought in the padded sides until they held the horse securely, then tipped the box at a 90-degree angle. Cristobol struggled to remain standing, hooves flailing, striking metal. All at once, it was silent. “Once you take a horse’s feet away,” said Kunz, “he’ll usually stop fighting.”

The bottom—now the side—of the box dropped open to reveal Cristobol’s hooves. After a few attempts, four students from the Oregon Farrier School in Salem lassoed them, keeping a respectful distance until Cristobol’s feet were well tied down. Then they clipped through the thick hooves with tools like heavy pliers. It was over in less than four minutes. The farriers finished, the box turned back 90 degrees, and hooves reverberated against metal once again as Cristobol struggled to his feet. The front door opened and the mustang shot out. On to the next horse.

A CHANCE TO START OVER

Trimming hooves at Duchess is hard and a bit hazardous, but that’s what’s required to care for those animals who won’t stand for a traditional farrier session. Of the sanctuary’s 185 horses—most of whom were abused, abandoned, and headed for slaughter before ending up here—89 are mares who were kept pregnant and raised for their urine, which contains a hormone used in a drug given to menopausal women. Getting the horses used to humans wouldn’t have helped the profits of PMU (pregnant mare urine) farms, so owners didn’t bother training them to tolerate common practices like foot trimming.

Among the sanctuary’s other residents are offspring of the PMU mares and animals rescued from neglect and ill treatment, like five skinny, nearly starved quarter horses dumped near an isolated Oregon road in 2008. One of them, Waldo, arrived so traumatized the veterinarian pronounced him “wild as a March hare.”

Safe at Duchess, the horses are cared for without being asked to do anything for humans. This puzzles some visitors. “Do you sell them? Do you use them? Do you ride any of these?” asked Anthony Kessler, one of the student farriers.

Kunz shook her head. “All horses deserve a good life. I kind of think these have earned a peaceful retirement.”

Kunz, 34, has spent much of her adulthood with the horses and expects to pass the rest of her working life caring for them. Face ruddy from hours outdoors, hair swept back into a single, practical ponytail, at a little over 5 feet she fits neatly under the jaws of some of the largest horses. She’s as tough as any of them, though, and, unlike her charges, who delight in drama and exhibit a warm, wild curiosity, she’s imperturbable.

On the grassy slopes of the 1,120-acre farm, most of the horses spend their days in two groups—a big herd of draft horses, including the PMU mares and their offspring, and a light herd of smaller horses. Surrounded by distant foothills with cloud-shrouded peaks, the herds graze between stands of oak bearing gnarled arms draped in stubby green lichen and mossy tendrils that sway in the breeze. Streams gutter down the slopes, channeling soaking winter and spring rains.

Managing the land to feed 185 is a challenge, though. “This is a picture postcard—green grass, the mountains,” said David Pauli, HSUS senior director for wildlife response, who visited when the horses’ hooves were trimmed in late April. “But it doesn’t grow enough grass.”

About half the farm’s acreage is used for the sanctuary, with 628 acres fenced for pasture: on bluegrass, bent grass, fescue, rye, bluestem. Duchess also hosts rare Columbian whitetail deer, plus blacktail deer, black bears, foxes, California quail, wild turkeys, and elk who leave tracks like barefoot ponies. “There are some great areas here—wetlands, riparian areas. And two whole hillsides that are too steep and wooded for horses,” said Pauli. “So you just let those be.”

In 2002, Kunz met the first of the horses now at Duchess while visiting a typical PMU farm in Canada. During the summer, the mares roamed free in pastures. But in the fall, once pregnant, they were rounded up like cattle, their manes were roached off, and they were hooked to urine collection receptacles in tiny stalls. Mares stood tethered in long lines of 3- to 4-foot-wide stalls, 70 percent of their weight pressing continuously down on their front legs. This went on for five to six months without a break. They could not walk or run. Heads tied to the front of their stalls, they could not even turn around. They could barely lie down on the concrete. “If they do, it’s hard for them to get up because they’ll get their feet stuck,” explained Kunz. Slowly, painfully, the mares’ legs swelled up, their hooves broke down, and their joints deteriorated.

The mares were allowed to live only as long as they could get pregnant. If they could not produce hormone-laden urine, they were sold by the pound for slaughter. Every fall at weaning time, their male foals and many of their female foals were also sold—auctioned off, taken to feedlots to be fattened up, and butchered. At the PMU farm she visited, Kunz was working with volunteers from across Canada and the U.S. to rescue some of those foals when she met one of their mothers: Marie, a black mare with a white star on her forehead. After more than two decades in the tie stalls, there were knobs around her knees. Kunz and the other volunteers took



Diva, daughter of a PMU horse, greets David Pauli of The HSUS.



Spurred into motion by offers of food and calls of encouragement, the “light herd” of Duchess’s smaller horses crosses into greener pasture.

as many foals as they could but had to leave Marie behind.

Then, in 2002, the Women’s Health Initiative released findings that Premarin—the drug produced from the mares’ urine by Wyeth pharmaceutical company—substantially increased women’s risk of cancer and heart disease. Demand plummeted. One after another, PMU farms lost their contracts and closed, sending their horses to slaughter. Myers entered into negotiations with two brothers who owned a pair of PMU farms in the Canadian province of Manitoba. In February 2005, they reached an agreement just as double-decker trucks arrived to take 89 out-of-work PMU mares, many pregnant, to a meat sale.

Instead, the mares were transported to Knightsbridge Farm Draft Horse Sanctuary in Alberta, where Kunz was working and soon became manager. Over the next several months, she helped deliver 60 foals, sometimes as many as three a day. She spent her nights checking on mares by flashlight, getting chased out of pastures by mothers accustomed to foaling alone.

In spring 2006, the Ark Watch Foundation took in two more PMU foals, from an Alberta ranch. One of those foals was Marie’s, and since the farm had lost its PMU contract and the mares were no longer needed, Marie came also, much to Kunz’s delight. “This mare I saw year after year, standing in that PMU barn, was now free to live the rest of her days in sanctuary, with her foal by her side,” she said. “Marie is a big part of why I’m here.”

LANDING PLACE

At Duchess, Kunz still takes constant inventory, every day tracking down and counting all 185 to make sure they’re fine: the horses with special needs, like knobby-kneed old Marie, kept in corrals at the center of the sanctuary; the horses in the light herd on one hill; the horses in the big herd on another.

Duchess has been a permanent home for most of them since The HSUS and The Fund for Animals bought the property in 2008. The sanctuary was named for Myers’ first horse, who in turn was named for the mother of the title character in the novel *Black Beauty*. The property had ideal access to a major highway and population centers, and an expert on Oregon range management informed The HSUS that with proper fencing and rotation through pastures, the horses could be sustained on the land if also fed hay for part of the year. Beckstead hurried to prepare the sanctuary for the arrival of the horses just two weeks after purchase. He replaced the perimeter fencing and erected cross-fencing to create pastures for rotating the horses.

In 2010, The HSUS bought the mechanized chute needed to properly care for the horses’ feet. A lifetime of care remains ahead. The majority of the horses can be expected to live another 12 to 18 years (Kunz’s “babies” from 2005 can be expected to live another 22).

Late one afternoon this spring, as Kunz approached for the

daily count, the big herd she had left her native country for grazed on the crest of its hill. The former PMU mares and their offspring clustered on the ridge like sentinels, orienting their bodies to face her as she walked up the slope.

“Come on, come on, come on, girls,” Kunz called to them. They started to move down, then suddenly turned around and headed back up to resume grazing, tearing into their favorite patch of grass.

When Kunz reached the top, though, the horses surrounded her like old friends, some approaching from the front with long strides, some sneaking up from behind. Big horses, draft horses—the maximum size to produce the maximum amount of urine—with massive chests, huge heads, and thick legs. They towered over Kunz, chewing on her hair and attempting to search her pockets.

She knew all their names: blue-eyed Luna, who approached so close, Kunz had to push her away. Princess Leia, a first-time mom in 2005 whose foal was stolen a half dozen times by other horses before she learned to defend him. Mathilda, a PMU mare who had so many babies that her prepubic tendon ruptured and her belly now hangs down. Ladyhawke and her daughter, Penny, who wasn’t originally supposed to go to Duchess but didn’t want to part from her mom. “She loaded herself on the trailer,” said Kunz. “They chased her off, but she loaded herself back on.”

Kunz was still looking for Lightning, the last of the horses in the big herd, when she came upon Alberta, a quiet mare with a dollar sign and number from the PMU farm freeze-branded onto her hip, and her son, Nino, a big gray who tops 18 hands and weighs a ton or more. “He should be done getting taller,” said Kunz. “I hope he fills out some, though he’s already enormous. We call him the Great Dane puppy.” Like most of the mothers and the 2005 foals, the two horses stood side by side in silent satisfaction. Kunz had kept some of the mares and their offspring apart until after the move to Duchess. Once at the sanctuary, however, “it only took about three weeks and every single one of them was back with their mom.”

Above, in the sky, light and darkness were in continual motion:

Dark clouds loomed in the distance, then moved abruptly in to block the sun and cast the hills in gloom. Sweet light broke through to play on the green grass. Rain cascaded gently, then halted, then poured, as wind gusted across the farm.

On the big hill, the large herd was also in continual motion: the draft horses shifting and milling in a loose group strung along the top of the ridge. Rivalries playing out with bites and kicks, and individuals suddenly whirling around and cantering off, sending the whole herd into eddies of movement.

Kunz still had another day’s feeding to finish—a year-round activity that compensates for the tough conditions inherent to the geography of the place. In the next month, the rain would stop and endless weeks of sun would brown the pastures, drying some to dust.

But for now, the horses tore the last fresh shoots from the hilltop, soon to be released into a knee-high meadow just across the fence. They stood on the hill like it belonged to them and they to it. As though this was the place intended for them, as though the once-forested slope had been waiting centuries to be cleared and crowned with grass for this: a group of horses, not being ridden or raced or worked. Just animals in their freedom. Mothers with their sons and daughters. At rest.

“It makes me sad for the ones that aren’t here,” said Kunz. “And grateful for the ones that are.”

The rain tapered off and an improbably large rainbow formed, stretching from one side of the farm to the other like a blessing. Every once in a while, one of the horses on the hilltop launched into an easy gallop, hooves thudding heavily into the damp ground. Between footfalls, the horse’s body miraculously broke free from the earth. And so it continued, whether or not anyone watched, despite the years of suffering the mares had endured—or maybe because of them: horses being horses. Marvelous in their joy. Marvelous in their beauty. Marvelous in their gravity-defying power. ■

▶ WATCH THE VIDEO at humansociety.org/allanimals.



Ranch manager Jennifer Kunz has cared for Lightning, a former PMU horse, since 2005.



Born to rescued PMU mares, Lancelot and Arturius have known only freedom.

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