

Forester and Fancy

Someday, he would be a hero hailed throughout the kingdom. Someday, he would be renowned as a knight of unmatched bravery. Someday, people would whisper he was a legend reincarnated.

But today he was just Forester from Oakenhelm, celebrating his tenth birthday with his first pony.

Forester leaned over the top of the Dutch door at the mare munching on a pile of hay at the back of the stall. He had been pretty sure he was getting a pony today. His father had forbidden him to come to the barn for a week, which meant no chores and endless anticipation. The pony in his mind had been shaped like a small horse, and coal black. He already imagined racing this black pony through the fields and forests of home, taking adventure as they found it, friends forever.

The pony in the stall was short legged, with a slightly dwarfy head, a long back and a round belly. She was a bay roan, which would have been okay had she not been that shade that looks pink in sunlight. To add to her sins, she had a garish blanket of white with black spots over her broad rear.

And her name was Fancy. *Fancy.*

The black pony of his imagination was named Storm. Or Saber. No. Storm.

Forester wanted to groan about this fat pink pony, but she was still a gift.

“I hope you enjoy your birthday present,” there was a slight warning tone in his father’s voice.

“I do, sir.” Forester squirmed.

“She is all settled in, why don’t you take her for a ride?”

Fancy raised her head and whickered. She had a blue eye, too, noted Forester. Storm would have had two brown eyes, like a sensible horse.

“Look, Forest, she’s calling you,” he felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. “You’ll find tack for her in the tack room, I’ll see you in the ring in a half hour?”

It wasn’t really a question, but Forester nodded.

The fat, pink pony was also disappointingly docile. Storm would have been tricky to catch, and he would have to build a bond of trust with him. Fancy simply let herself be led and tied. She stood quietly as he curried and brushed. She picked her feet up willingly so he could pick out the dirt around her frogs. She nickered at him, looking for a treat.

He had none for her.

After dinner that evening, Forester laid on his back in his bed, staring at the ceiling and telling himself that a test ride in a ring really didn't say much about how a horse (*pony*) might really be. Fancy had been quiet and diligent. She shifted easily from a walk to the choppy trot her body suggested she had. Her canter was a little better. A little. She seemed very responsive to his legs and seat and hands though, unlike the last small horse his father had to teach him on. That horse had finally thrown him by stopping hard at a small jump and dipping its shoulder enough to unseat him. Fancy tried no such tricks.

His father seemed pleased with the match he had made, and had them trot over some poles on the ground, but said they should save trying to jump for another time.

Forester doubted the pink pony could jump, with her short legs and long body, but he kept that to himself. His father could be stormy sometimes. He didn't want to invite his thunder.

He still wished for that spirited, coal black pony, with the fine legs but maybe it was nice to have a mount that just did what he asked of it.

For a week, Forester did his chores dutifully before heading to the barn in the afternoon to ride Fancy. He counted this as a chore, too, and he made sure she was well groomed and his tack was clean. He put her through all her paces, in both directions and did whatever exercises his father laid out for him, but he didn't do any more.

The pony tried. She pushed her muzzle into his hands every chance she had. She greeted him with an eager nicker when he entered the barn. She was ready to be his partner and he wished he felt the same.

One afternoon, Forester was finishing up his duties with his pink pony before moving onto other chores when his older brother, Logan, walked in leading a sturdy bay gelding. Logan was five years older than Forester and Forester desperately wished he could be everything his brother was. Logan was tall and slim. Horses liked him. *Girls* liked him. Logan was always there to comfort him when their father was loud or worse.

Forester hoped one day he could make Logan proud of him.

"Forest! How is that birthday pony working out?"

Forester grimaced and gave one final rub with the curry comb. Logan would see through him. "She's okay."

"Just okay?" Logan cross tied his gelding and leaned over the Dutch door.

Forester shrugged. "She's pink. And she has spots."

"She is also marked Betune. Didn't you see?"

Forester met Logan's eyes. He seemed completely serious. Forester reached up to Fancy's thick black forelock and pushed it aside. He knew there was a little white marking, the kind called a star no matter what it was shaped like. Fancy's star was a rough triangle, short at the top, with two long sides tapering to a point aimed at her muzzle. A long, thin triangle, like the tip of a lance, a spear, an arrowhead.

Betune's Signpost. Betune gave courage to those who needed it, and horses favored by her with this mark were said to be bold and looked out for their riders. They were prized by knights.

Why had she marked this fat pink mare?

Forester rested two fingers on the mark.

"She's special," said Logan, turning his attention back to the gelding. "She'll look out for you. She might be pink, and she might have spots, but she isn't ordinary."

Forester furrowed his brow. Maybe he had been too quick to dismiss her for not being what he thought he wanted.

The next morning, he was out of bed at dawn, with a pocket knife, carving off slices of an apple to give her. She greeted him with an eager whicker and crunched up his offering. She pushed her muzzle, sloppy with foam and apple chunks into his shirt, searching him for more. He reached out to ruffle her thick forelock.

“Maybe we can be friends. Would you like that?”

The pink pony tipped her brown head up and wiggled her upper lip on his fingers, making Forester smile. Maybe this would work out.

Spring rolled on and Forester rode Fancy every day. They trotted and cantered and even jumped very small fences his father set up. Fancy did not balk at puddles or shadows and boldly jumped everything in front of her. Forester appreciated that he did not need to be on guard every moment on a jump approach, waiting for his mount to stop, or duck to the side. Fancy just did everything he asked.

Weeks of ring work turned into being allowed to ride with Logan. Logan took them into the fields and the woods and made training fun. He had Forester and Fancy trot up and down hills to build muscle and stamina in both of them. They splashed through water

and galloped-really galloped! Logan even let them jump fallen logs, but made Forester promise to keep that secret.

On Midsummer Day, the longest day of the year, Forester's father finally allowed him to take Fancy out and start riding in the fields and forests of Oakenhelm alone.

"I think you both know each other well enough. I'm trusting you to take care of her, Forester. Stay within sight of the farm if you're not with Logan."

Forester found plenty to do within sight of the farmhouse. There were places to explore with Fancy. As the summer stretched out, he got up before dawn to get his chores done and then spent the day on Fancy. He felt braver, taller, stronger on her back when they roamed the fields. Some days, when it's particularly warm, he stripped to his waist to let the sun tan his skin and bleach his blonde hair. On those days, it's just him and Fancy and nothing else matters.

He only goes home when the sky begins to darken on those days, reluctant to end their adventures for the day.

It was one of these days when Forester is getting ready to go out for the day that his father spots him. Forester has already taken off his shirt because he planned on trying to take Fancy swimming. When he saw his father, he quickly pulled his shirt back on, unsure of why he suddenly felt uncomfortable and hot. His father waved him off.

“Go work off some of that baby fat while you’re out there, Forest.”

Forester ducked his head as he put his heels into Fancy’s side, embarrassed and wanting to vanish as quickly as possible. Fancy picks up her bouncy trot, and then her springy canter. Forester sits deep in his saddle, the flush running across his face, to his ears. He trusts Fancy to choose the way today, allowing himself to shuffle through his thoughts.

Baby fat. What did that mean, anyway? He wondered if his father ever saw anything he did well.

Did he do anything well? *Anything?*

He eventually skittered his mind away from that. Fancy was still moving and he had been along for the ride. He sat up and pulled back on the reins. Fancy obediently came to a halt, allowing Forester to gather his bearings.

He had no idea exactly where he was. The sun was high in the sky, higher than he expected. How long had they been out already? They were out of sight of the farmhouse. Fancy cantered on past the places they’ve explored before. Well. That’s okay, really, he told himself. He could just turn Fancy around and point her home, and

she will get there. Horses know the way all the time, Logan has told him so, and Logan knows horses.

Something rustled in the grass before him and Fancy swung her head toward it, ears flipped forward. She snorted and tensed under Forester. He reached out to her withers.

“It’s okay, Fancy, it’s nothing.”

Fancy stretched her head out, snorting again.

Nothing exploded out from behind a tree stump. Forester saw a blur of green and Fancy was in motion under him, suddenly lurching to the left, nearly unseating him. He grabbed a handful of mane and pulled himself back into the saddle. He tried to gather his reins to bring her back under control. Fancy slid to a stop on her own, the green blur in front of her and Forester had his first good look at what worried his pony so deeply.

The creature was half the size of Fancy, reptilian with a long, whip like tail. It’s broad head seemed to split open, revealing dozens of small sharp teeth. Fancy backed up frantically, raising her head. Forester saw the whites of her eyes as his brain tried to piece together what he saw.

Fancy spun and bolted. This time Forester parted ways with her and landed heavily on his chest. He groaned on impact, air knocked from his body. Then he remembered

there was a monster in the woods with them. He pushed himself up on his hands and knees, raising his head. The lizardy creature tilted its head, focusing a yellow eye with a slit for a pupil on him.

A forest drake, thought Forester. He had never seen one before, but he knew the stories. He just thought they were only stories.

The drake raised its body and took a few careful steps toward Forester, never dropping eye contact. It opened its mouth slowly. Forester pushed himself up to stand and stepped back, hoping for a branch or something he could use to scare the creature off. It didn't seem particularly intimidated by him, though, and took a bolder step toward him.

And then Fancy was back, putting herself between him and the drake with a brassy roar. She planted her front legs, ears flat against her neck, mouth open for a bite. The drake darted back and whipped its tail, striking her shoulder and drawing blood. Fancy screamed again and charged, snapping her teeth. The drake decided this is too much trouble and lowered its body to the ground, vanishing into the undergrowth where it came from.

Fancy stood, blowing and agitated, shaking her head.

“Fancy?”

At the sound of her name, she swung her head to him, ears at a more friendly angle. She nickered. When she turned to him, she took short, lame steps. Forester saw the swelling at her fetlock and added that to the deep, bloody line opened up on her shoulder. His eyes widen with panic. She was hurt. It looked bad. He ran his hand down her leg and the puffy fetlock felt warm to him, though she willingly stood on it.

What would Logan do?

“I’m sorry, Fancy.” Tears filled his eyes. He loosed the girth on his saddle and lifted the reins over her head. They would have to walk home. Slowly. He started and realized he still didn’t know where he was going.

“Come on, girl, let’s go home.” He hoped she would understand what he was asking.

Fancy wuffed a soft sound at him and took a lurching step. Forester winced for her, pulling his mouth into a frown. Her next step was a little better, and she seemed to settle into a rhythm, even if it wasn’t a normal one. He started after her, falling into step at her wither.

“I’m sorry you got hurt. I should have paid attention.”

The pony didn’t answer and just continued to hobble toward home.

Maybe he could get home before evening feed and get her in her stall before anyone was the wiser. Maybe.

It was dark when Forester and Fancy finally got home. There were lanterns in the barn, lighting it up. Any hope Forester had of slipping the pony in her stall unnoticed vanished.

“*Forest?*” his father’s voice boomed from inside the barn, and Forester shivered a little.

“Yes, dad,” he called back, as his father jogged out of the barn.

“Where have you been, your mother is...” his father stopped as he noted Fancy’s gait. Forester watched him take in the wound and the limp and knew any relief his father had for him was gone. His father drew himself up, and Forester saw the thunderhead building. When his father spoke again, his voice was cold, the temperature dropping before the storm.

“Get yourself in the house and show your mother you are in one piece. Then you are to come back out here to nurse your pony back to health.”

“Yessir,” Forester kept the tears out of his voice, but only barely.

His father finally left, leaving Forester to put a poultice on Fancy's swollen fetlock.

Forester was silent, forcing his tears back as he placed the wrap and his father let him know exactly how worthless he was, and how bad the mess he made was.

"Hey," it's Logan, voice soft and sure. "They don't know I'm out here, I'm not supposed to leave my room. What happened?"

"He said. He said something mean. He said I had baby fat." Forester felt his ears get hot. "I don't even know what that means and I just rode and I didn't know where we were and there was a monster."

"A monster?"

"A drake. It whipped her with its tail."

"I'm sorry he was mean. You're not fat." Logan opened the stall door and stood next to him.

"I don't want her to die," Forester sniffled as he touched her muzzle. Fancy answered with a low nicker.

"She won't die," Logan said softly. "Not from this. This will just leave a scar."

Forester sat, swallowing a sob. Logan meant well. He wasn't sure he wanted a scar on her, either. "Scars are ugly."

"No, scars are scars. They tell stories," Logan settled himself in the straw next to Forester. "This pony is a warrior and what warrior doesn't have scars? She got that scar protecting you. Doubly marked by the goddess."

Forester looked up at Fancy as she searched the straw for hay. He stared at the tie over bandage on her shoulder. His chest hitched again, and he looked down at Fancy's feet, so Logan wouldn't see the tears.

Logan slid his arm around his shoulders and leaned close. "Its ok, Forester. It will be okay. She'll be okay. You'll be okay."

Forester broke then and let the cry he had been holding loose. He buried his face in Logan's chest and his brother tucked him under his chin and just said it would be okay, over and over.

He wasn't sure that would ever be true.

He cried himself out on Logan and then fell asleep slumped up against him. Logan leaned against the wall and ruffled his fingers in Forest's hair.

“You’ll be okay,” he whispered. “I know it. You’re a good kid.”

Fancy nickered in seeming agreement.

The next morning, Fancy’s leg was cool and the swelling was down. Forester spent the rest of his summer caring for the wound on her shoulder and it healed, though there is a long, hairless line that marked her as the days cool down and shorten. Forester ran his fingers over it when he groomed her and reminded himself that it’s a medal of honor bestowed on her by Betune. For bravery.

Thirty years later, he found himself in the service of the crown, tasked with protecting the queen herself. He has struck up a friendship with Her Majesty’s most trusted advisor, a white haired younger woman called Nadine. He enjoyed regaling her with horse stories. Horses shaped him. Nadine didn’t learn to ride until she was an adult and Forester found this fascinating.

“I tried to get my pony to swim when I was a kid. I didn’t want to ruin leather tack in the water, because of my dad, so I spent so much time trying to get a bit on a rope halter. And then she just dumped me as soon as it got deep and ran back to the barn anyway.” He shook his head. “Fancy was a humbling experience at times.”

“It must have been humbling to have a pony named Fancy.” Laughed Nadine.

“What!? It suited her. She was fancy. Her coloring was outrageous. Roan on bay with appaloosa spots on her bum. I have no idea where she came from to look like that. Oh, she was a good pony.”

It’s been decades, but he still missed her. A good pony indeed, he thought. A pony worthy of a knight, a warrior, a hero.