



Love is a beautiful thing.

Love is connection. It's unity. Love is finding somepony you can truly reach out and touch in a meaningful way. It's what Deady and I have, and have had ever since we met -- She's been in my life as long as I can remember, and she always will be.

"Do you see those two at 210, 300 meters out?" An old couple. Travelling alone? How adorable.

She cooed, zeroing her scope. "I see them, dear."

"Do you want the first go, or, if you'd be so kind, may I?"

"Go ahead, sweet thing. You've earned it." Her generosity is so refreshing in a wasteland that always takes.

*Cra-crack!* Her shot sounded like an echo to mine, filling the canyon and rippling through it.

“Wonderful shot as always, Deady.” I cycled my bolt, hearing Deadeye do the same in tandem.

“You, too, Honey. You need any supplies?”

“Nah. I think we ought let the scavengers have at them.” She brushed a lock of her golden mane out of her eye.

“Want to bait them?”

“Not this time. I’m a merciful goddess today.” She let out a soft giggle.

Our territory was ripe with looters, eager to pick clean our marks. So willing to throw themselves in front of our rifles in the hopes that we’ll miss. Deady never did of course, not on purpose, but sometimes we’d let them have a few of our spoils to keep them coming back. And they always did.

Love is learning. It’s something you can practice, every moment of the day. Love is knowing you’re doing the best you can possibly do, or at least you’re always striving to get better.

“Mmm... Runner at 270. About 200 meters away.”

*Crack!*

“Jittery little bastard...” I *should* have hit her. She was out of cover for so long.

Deadeye tutted softly. “Honeycrisp, dear, you have to adjust for windage.”

I had been impatient. I hadn’t looked for the wind. It wasn’t usually a factor in this particular slice of the wastes. But there was a tattered flag on a wrecked wagon, flapping strong northeast.

“Mmhh...”

The runner peeks her head out from the wreckage of her caravan for too long. But I’m patient. I want to show Deady that I’m listening to her advice. She doesn’t take the shot, so I know she’s waiting to see me take the chance.

The mare decides to take her chance, too. She starts galloping again. To where? Our vantage point gives us such a clear view...

*Crack!* Her forelegs disappear in a gorgeous red spray. She skids for a good few feet before coming to a rest, eliciting a giggle from Deady.

“Theeere you go. You had your lead down, just weren’t watchful enough of the winds.” Her voice is lovely to listen to, even be chided by. She should’ve been a singer if she wasn’t such a beautiful marksmare. I once saw her make a shot straight center of mass from two kilometers away.

“Mmm... I’ll get the next one.”

*Crack.* But Deady got the tally this time.

Love is passion. It's spirit. It's ending your day knowing the job is done, and done perfectly.

"F-fuck... Y-you're getting better at this..." She flopped back on the mattress, her fur glistening with sweat. She gave me a pleased grin as her flowing mane covered the bed's pillow.

"Mhh... I've got a good teacher..." I curled up beside her, nuzzling under her chin. Her pink fur is soft, like her voice and demeanor. She's a joy to behold. A real treat.

"That was a gorgeous shot, earlier, by the way," She's kind. Encouraging. "I'll make a sniper out of you yet..."

It had been another productive day. An Enclave scout had flown too close to the metaphorical sun. I hit her through a cloud, expertly predicting the little birdy's path as she tried to run away. No pony could have made that shot, not without Deady's guidance.

"I'll be as good as you one day." I gingerly kissed her lips. She's so warm. "I'm getting real damn good..."

"And cocky, too, it seems... Come on... Let's go for another round." She ran her hoof through my sweat-matted mane, nudging me down again. I didn't mind giving so often, not when she gave me so much.

Love is patience. It's waiting for the perfect moment. Love is knowing that if it's the not that perfect moment now, you'll get there soon.

*Ping!* A bullet pinged off the low cover of my perch.

"He's getting closer, Deady..." I couldn't get an angle on him. The angle was too steep -- To get a shot at one another, one of us would have to peek out first. And he knew about us before we knew about him.

"Not close enough..." *Ping!* Another shot bounced, this time above my head. Deady didn't have an angle on him either. We were far away, for this post, but we kept close via radio. I could even still see her through the scope of my rifle, resting on her exposed perch. She lived dangerously. She could afford to! She was a master.

She wasn't taking the shot for a reason, though. She was testing me. "You can do this, Honey... Come on, you don't need me..."

But I did, just like she needed me.

He was hidden, under one of the many carriage husks on the roadway. There was quite a bit of cover from us, but that was the way we liked it -- With a bit of challenge. Not that we were ever in much danger from our nest.

I knew what she wanted me to do: I waited. Stayed perfectly still. I was patient. I'd been trained by the best, and he hadn't.

"How are you doing on ammunition, dear?"

"Mhhh... I might need to loot this mark once I tally him..."

"Tut tut. You've got to ration yourself better. When will you learn?" I was always learning. Just... Some things are easier than others.

"I'm sorry, Deady..." Hearing that disappointment in her voice hurt so much.

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

That made five. I took a chance and nosed out of cover at the perfect moment -- He was reloading, and I'd lulled him into a false sense of security.

*Crack!* And just like that, he was gone.

"Took you long enough, Honey. He was an easy mark." Another tut of disappointment. It stung, but I knew she did it because she wanted me to be better. Because she knew I could be.

Love is trying. It's perseverance, even when you know you're facing impossible odds. It's putting yourself up to the test every day, and coming out stronger.

*Whap!* A small round dug into the dirt beside me while I picked my most recent mark clean. Deady did this every now and then. It kept me on my hooves, made me cautious like I ought be. The first shot was always a warning shot, except when it wasn't. It was clever of her, it kept me paranoid.

I dragged my mark behind a burnt out wagon. His rifle was clean, but wasn't immaculate like mine or Deady's. It would still suffice, of course, for what I needed it for at least.

It was also loaded. I suppose he wasn't reloading! Just stupid. Untrained.

*Crack!* I fired a shot back at her perch. Wide, of course! I didn't want to hit her, not that she'd let me if I were ungrateful enough to try.

*Whap!* Another slug ricocheted off the wagon and skittered into the road. She used .22s to test me. She used to use rubber bullets, but I'd graduated past those long ago! She was so proud.

After picking my mark clean of all his spare rounds and supplies, I edged out and fired another shot before starting my escape back to the perch. From car to car I dashed, every now and then spiralling a round down toward her nest. I was small, so there was even more cover for me than for my usual mark.

She still hit me, of course. I felt the slug bite my left hind and that was enough to floor me, mid-sprint.

She always hit her mark; she was just so much better than I. Another scar on my hindleg and another bruise on my chin, but I'd made it further than I had before! I'd gotten a good haul, too, but as the winner of our little bout, Deady still got the lioness' share of my picks. I didn't mind, though. She'd earned it, fair and square.

Love is happiness. It's joy. Love is having a great time with what you're doing, and who you're doing it with.

This was my favorite post. We were right beside each other. I could hear her soft, controlled breaths, and she could hear mine. We were in tune with each other.

A caravan had decided to walk our little slice of the wasteland. Eight marks, just waiting to be picked. They must not have had any idea what kind of place they'd trotted themselves into -- Not a single weapon they were carrying could deal with us.

*Cra-crack!* Another two marks down.

*Cra-crack!* The band of targets scattered for cover, their number now halved and terror coursing through them. Made them panic, which made it even easier to pick them.

One of them made a break for it at just the wrong time, exposing that wonderfully meaty side to our rifles.

*Crack!* I left her writhing in the middle of the freeway with a cap-sized hole in her belly.

Two of her compatriots tried to be brave. One tried to run to her, revealing himself to us. The other layed down some rather pitiful covering fire. *Crack!* Not that she posed much risk to us from a kilometer away. We let the hero make it halfway, before - *Crack!* - Deady popped his skull like a cherry. His headless body slid almost to our bait, stopping just short of her face.

"Mmm, bet she's not having a very good day!" Deady said in a singsong voice.

The last one seemed to realise the futility of our bait's situation. He ran, and ran fast. "Should we?" I asked, tracking the cowardly buck as he retreated down the road.

I could practically hear the smile on Deady's face. "Let him run."

Deady and I peppered the dirt around his hooves for fun as he disappeared into the horizon, and we let the buzzards have their way with the bait now that we were done with her. I still added her to the tallies; after all it was still my pick. Our pick.

Love is triumph. It's victory. Love is coming out above the rest, with that special somepony leading you.

34 and 22. Deady and I, respectively. At this nest, at least. We always move out after enough tallies, before things get too hot and the locals get too antsy, and it seemed it was about time to find a new place.

"Another two travelers, eh? Where y'goin'?" I recognized the guard as we walked into town. I'd shot at him before.

"We're heading out East! We're going to find a new life for ourselves out there." She gave my cheek a little kiss.

"Oohf. Might not wanna head out that way, not from here. That'll take ya right through Death Valley."

"Death Valley?" Deady asked the guard innocently.

"Yeah. 'Sa highway in the middle of a canyon 'couple kilometers out that way with some snipers perched somewhere on it. No idea where, they keep changin' it up. It's like a fuckin' massacre every time a caravan comes through." This was my favorite part. Hearing them talk about us. We'd go through the nearest town just to hear this, even if it took us out of our way.

She gave him a pout, full of faux worry. "Oh... Well... I think we'll manage. We've been through a lot worse than a couple of snipers, haven't we, Honey?"

"Mmmhmm..." I nuzzled under her chin, with affection much more genuine, though just as rehearsed as the look on Deady's face. She smelled wonderful... Like gunpowder and sweat. Much of the wasteland had a similar scent, but nothing smelled quite as lovely as she did.

"Eh. S'yer funeral, ma'am. Just sayin', you two won't be the first when they get ya in their sights. It'll take longer, but it'll be a hell of a lot safer goin' around."

“We’ll be careful.” She tugged me closer, her warm fur soft against me. “We’ve got each other, after all.”

“Always will, too.” I smiled as we trotted together down the road, side by side. “Where do you want to set up next, Deady?”

“I’ll know when we find it, Honey... But for now... Let’s find a place to stay for a little. I wanna have a little bit more fun before we go.” She winked, and nudged her flank against mine. And I was ever so happy to oblige her. We had the time for a victory lap.

Love is dependable. It’s familiar. It’s something you know you can rely on, something that stays the same even through change around it.

The general store we restocked at the next morning was delightfully barren, and the shopkeeper was very keen to complain about how those snipers were quite literally killing her supply lines. If only she’d known who was standing in front of her!

We waved to the guard as we trotted past, Deady leading the way out the gate. I don’t know what I’d do without her. We’ve been through nest after nest, scored mark after mark, and I couldn’t have done it, or continue to do it without Deady’s guidance. We have something good together.

A beautiful thing called love.