**A Rose by Any Other Name**

Carnadine is not a normal pony and she never was. Her life began in Trottingam general hospital when she shot out from between the legs of her mother, Cherry Stem. Carnadine’s father came into the room soon after her birth. A pall of cigar smoke drifted behind him as Crumbled Cookie bent his rough, brown head down to look at his daughter. She was a bundle of peace wrapped in an old blanket that had seen thousands like her come and go. Cherry and Cookie basked in that moment for about five minutes before the hospital staff came by to inform Cookie that smoking was prohibited inside the hospital. He broke a nurse’s nose in protest. The parents and their child were thrown out within an hour.

Carnadine did not grow up in a calm household. Cherry Stem and Crumbled Cookie were virtually guaranteed to have a spat about something over the breakfast table, lunch, and dinner table. When they didn’t have anything to argue about both would settle for exuding a malaise of discontent to taint the atmosphere. Carnadine kept quiet during any disagreements and tried to salvage what peace she could before going back to work as a street farrier. Cookie spent most of his time roughing up locals for cash and doing other general extortion. He normally came home with a myriad of cuts and bruises from marks that decided to fight back. Carnadine patched him up. Cookie always winced at the sterile burn of the alcohol. Cherry, being a mare, opted for more delicate forms of crime. She picked pockets, lured young mares and stallions into risqué encounters before forcing them to cough up cash if they didn’t want rape allegations, and other similarly ladylike endeavors. She came home looking fine most evenings, though that is only because she covered up her injuries with strategic makeup application. Whenever Cookie was asleep, or passed out drunk, Cherry would get Carnadine to help her with anything she could not treat herself. Their lives continued this way for a long while until Carnadine’s sixteenth birthday.

“Fuck do you mean I’m not making enough scratch?”

“I mean what I damn well said you fucking iron headed fool. Your ass ain’t pulling near as much weight as it usually does. The hell’s going on?”

“Cherry I wi-”

“You won’t do nothing you old goat.”

“I will lay you out over this table and play your teeth like a piano.”

“You and what goddam Hussar’s army?”

“I suppose I can ask the Hussar’s army you took up your pretty, pink rosebud last night.”

“You should. Fuckers could teach you a thing or two.”

Chairs scraped and something smashed in the dingy dining room below. Carnadine didn’t know what was going on down there. She didn’t care anymore. All she cared about was finishing up her packing and leaving through the window of her bedroom.

The suitcase splayed open on her bed had little in it. Some clothes, mostly utilitarian outfits. There was one dress in the midst of all the ragged jeans and cheap shirts. It was a lovely deep blue dress made of a sensually soft, flowing fabric. Carnadine takes an occasional moment, between cramming whatever possessions she can carry with her into the suitcase, to rest her cheek on the dress. It doesn’t look like it has ever been worn.

In a few more moments Carnadine is packed. She leans down one last time to feel the touch of the dress against her cheek. Her eyes close and her breathing grows fitful. When she pulls back a few traces of moisture linger where she pressed her face to the fabric. Carnadine closes the suitcase. She slips the kitchen knife resting on her nightstand into the hem of her pants. She leaves while her parents are beating the hell out of each other. They won’t know she is gone for another few hours.

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“Give me my suitcase back.”

“Soon as you can make me little girl.” The mare dressed in ragged clothes teased. She was an odd specimen. The only hint of her femininity came with her voice and the shape of her snout. Everything else was so completely covered in hard packed muscle that gender was impossible to discern. The only thing that the muscles communicated was power. Power currently being exercised over a short sixteen-year-old Carnadine. The young mare bristled with anger as the ragged mare taunted her with the suitcase.

“If only you had something to trade. I might be willing to give it back.” The mare leaned down to smile at Carnadine. It was not a smile that promised happiness. “Too bad you haven’t got something like that, sugar.”

Carnadine’s breath hitched in her throat. She walked a few paces closer to the muscled mare. Carnadine could smell the nose tingling stench of rot coming off the mare in front of her. She could smell it even better when one strong hoof began stroking roughly through her mane.

“Good little girl. Nice soft mane too.” The muscled mare inhaled Carnadine’s scent and her smile widened. “Take off your clothes sweet thing.”

Carnadine reached her hooves down to the hem of her pants. She took them off slow and careful. When she finished stripping, she held the trousers to her chest with one foreleg.

“Nice. Now, turn around and let me see what I get to play with for the next couple hours. Best back up and make sure I get a good eyeful.” The muscled mare ran a tongue across her teeth and lips.

Carnadine did as she was told. She turned around so that she could see the dirty bricks and discarded snack wrappers on the other side of the alleyway. She tried to breathe steadily but found her lungs uncooperative. She backed up toward the muscled mare step by step. Carnadine could hear the other mare’s breathing getting hotter, heavier. She could hear hooves scraping on the ground behind her. She held her pants closer to her chest. One step, then another, keep going, just keep going and don’t think about anything. Carnadine’s exposed rump bumped into the thick leg of the muscled mare. She felt a rough snout touch her back. The snout took a long sniff.

“Nice and fresh. I’m going to enjoy thi-” The muscled mare stopped short. Carnadine had twisted in place and brought one of her forelegs up to the bulging neck of the other mare. Pain pulsed a signal of alarm. The other mare tried to scream but gurgled instead. More pain. Carnadine was backing away but not fast enough to avoid the hoof that grabbed her leg. The hoof pulled hard and Carnadine’s leg popped out of socket. Carnadine screamed high and loud. She stopped trying to run and leg the hoof pull her closer. She scrambled wild for a moment before she could coordinate herself. Carnadine threw her head at the muscled mare’s neck. The sound of metal sliding against meat, furious burbling, and the screams of a little girl filled the alleyway. Then there was silence.

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Carnadine awoke later in a bed that she didn’t know in a place that was unfamiliar with a zebra looking down at her. Only, when Carnadine pushed herself up on her hooves and got a better look in the dim light, it was not a zebra. It was a pony that had similar markings to the zebra tattooed on her body.

“Hold child. Your leg be not healed yet.” The zebra marked pony held up a hoof. “Rest. Ask the many questions I know ye must have.”

Carnadine looked at the strange pony for a minute. She took in the jewelry, the shape of the body, the detail of the markings, the dusty brown of the coat, the curious braids of green hair that hung down past the mare’s ears, and the tight folded wings. Once Carnadine satisfied herself with looking, she stopped holding herself up and let her head drop back against the pillow. It was quiet. Quiet was something that Carnadine had little experience of.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“I and I will do nothing except watch over you and help you heal for now. After that, you need make a decision.”

“Okay, where am I?”

“This place is a room in Trottingham slums. Territory of the Tribals. The Tribals watch for old things and keep the traditions that modern folk want to forget about alive.”

“Right, sounds good.” Carnadine paused to think for a moment about which question she wanted answer to first. “When you found me, did you pick up my suitcase?”

“I and I did get yer case girl. There be no need to worry. I and I laid it under yer bed for safekeeps.”

“Thanks.” Carnadine relaxed a bit more knowing that her fight against the muscled mare had not been for nothing. “Who are you?”

The pony with the zebra tattoos sat up a little straighter before replying. “I and I be called Oriole Oak. When the Tribals need a leader. I be the leader.”

“Right.” Carnadine rustled the sheets of the bed as she rearranged herself. “What was that decision you mentioned?”

“When ye heal ye will have to decide to go through the trial and become a Tribal or decide to be cast out.”

“What’s the trial?”

“Something that will try to kill ye. Something that likely will succeed.”

Carnadine decided that more sleep was necessary.

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A few years later Carnadine was happy.

“ON THE FUCKING GROUND BEFORE I SLICE OFF YOUR GHOULIES, PRICK.”

Very happy.

Carnadine went through the trials of the Tribals and came out the other end alive, for the most part. Some of her died in the midst of the burning, the beating, and the celebratory marking. The last lingering vestiges of innocence. The last parts of her that thought the world was a place that could be salvaged with only good nature and friendship. The Tribals confronted Carnadine with the unpleasant history of the world. Harmony works for some. Blood and struggle is necessary to correct most ills. It is a terrible lesson, but not an untrue one.

“Please I’m just doing what I was told Miss Thorn.” The pimp tried to crawl away with his ass scraping the dirt off the pavement. “I was told to bring my girls here an…”

Carnadine’s knife rested against the hollow at the base of the pimp’s neck as she leaned in.

“Listen to me you blood sausage.” The knife pressed in a little harder. “They are not your girls. No one is yours.” She put particular emphasis on the last sentence with a press of the knife. The tip came back red. “Ponies are not property. They belong to themselves. Not to you. Your boss. The guy that tells your boss what to do. No one.” The tip came away from the hollow of the pimp’s throat. He took a few shuddering breaths to put air into his straining lungs. “Now unless you want me to carve that into you and take your cock as payment, fuck off back to the hole you crawled out of.”

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A few months passed since Carnadine’s threats to the pimp. Everything was as it normally is in the slums around Tribal land. Silent for the most part with some scattered festivities honoring things that the city ponies did not conceive of. They honored the harvest, they honored the old, and most of all, they honored the warriors. Carnadine was drinking with a passel of her Tribal brothers and sisters to celebrate a new addition to the fighting fold, Scrub Suds. Oak told her to be careful not to get too drunk tonight. There were, according to him, bad tidings and ill omens for the coming days. Oak was usually right, so Carnadine would stop. Stop right after this last bottle of Zubukov Clear. Carnadine drank deep and decided to take a walk outside to clear her head.

The walk was a wonderful idea. Carnadine could make a game of trying to step onto her own hooves and trip herself up. Whenever she did manage to trip herself up she fell into a pile of giggles and happy burbles. The alcohol sloshed around in her stomach like molten gold. It numbed her senses. It numbed her so much that she didn’t even see that she had walked too far. Carnadine had no idea where she had ended up. It must have been way outside of Tribal territory to be this unfamiliar to her. She need not worry though. A nice pony was coming down the street to help her. The nice pony reached into his coat and waved at the sky. Carnadine felt a prickle at the back of her neck. The floor suddenly became an incredibly attractive spot for a nap. Carnadine decided to tumble over and lay down. That last things she saw was that nice pony trotting all the way up to her. He had so many scars. He looked familiar though. The other pony stopped when he got close to Carnadine. He threw back his hood and looked at her with disbelieving eyes. Then Carnadine fell into a dreamless, black slumber.

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Carnadine woke up to a very good view of a dingy concrete floor covered in stains. The stains were of the color and variety that it is best not to speculate about.

“Mmmmmmph.”

“Sounds like my little rose is awake.” Came a crooning voice from somewhere behind her. “I was beginnin’ to wonder if they managed to do you in. Woulda had to tan their hides for that. Ain’t supposed to waste a pretty little creature like you.”

Carnadine tried to move and found it impossible. She was strapped down onto a table so tight that the straps were already cutting into her.

“STICH, SHAKE A TAILFEATHER BOY SHE’S COME TO.” The crooning voice yelled.

Carnadine heard shuffling somewhere in another room and some clinking metallic sounds. Hoofsteps approached from behind her. Something stroked her back. Carnadine bristled at the touch.

“Hey, hey calm down sweetie. I ain’t gonna do nothing to you.” The crooning voice said. “I just wanna get a feel of you before Stich starts tearing you up is all.” The stroking stopped. Carnadine did not relax. “I’ll go put on some music for you. That’ll help take the edge off.”

The hooves walked a little way away to somewhere else in the room. Carnadine heard a needle scratch. There was some light crackling and then the promised music started to play. It was old, very old.

*“You ain’t nothing but a hound dog, crying all the time.”*

The music filled the room with the sound of drums, guitar, bass, and an interesting voice.

“That’s one of my favorites sugar. Sink your teeth into that while Stichy get his tush in here and in gear. Won’t be too long darl’ I promise.”

The song went on. The shuffling of hooves and equipment formed the background noise to the peculiar performance.

*“They said you was high class, well that was just a lie. They said you was hi-*SKRRRT.”

“That’s enough of that darl’ we’re movin’ onto the main course now. Time to change it up a little. Might need somethin’ a lil’ more calmin’ and collectifying after that one. Try this on.”

Without the music to cover it up she realized that the other pair of hooves and the clanking pile of equipment had moved right next to her. The needle scratched against something while Carnadine felt hooves on the back of her head. Then the hooves were gone and the music was back.

*“Life is dull, it’s nothing but one big lull.”*

Something roared to life next to her head. It started to come closer.

*“Then presto you do a skull.”*

“MMMMMMMMPPPPHHHHHHHH!” Carnadine screamed through the gag as she felt something biting into the back of her skull. Tearing at fur, flesh, and then bone.

*“And find that you’re reeling.”*

The saw tore for a while at the back of Carnadine’s head. She lost track of the song amidst the eardrum busting roar of the saw and the pain that threatened to wash her conscious mind away. She kept screaming. The gag in her mouth kept her from biting her tongue or her cheek. The saw lifted out of the last cut and abruptly cut off.

“*She takes your hand, this captivating creature, and like it’s planned you’re in the phone book. Hunting for the nearest preacher.”*

Carnadine felt the faint sensation of something digging around inside of her head. She opened her eyes for the first time since the saw started. The floor was covered in blood and strips of flesh. Some dripping hunks of meat still hung off of her head, swaying pendulously as red dripped off her face and plipped onto the puddles forming on the floor.

*“Life is swell, you’re off to that small hotel, and somewhere a village bell will sound in the steeple…”*

Something clapped against the back of her head and sent more pain tunneling through Carnadine’s wracked nerves.

*“Announcing to people love’s the loveliest thing.”*

Something hissing, hot, and almost as painful as the saw pressed against Carnadine’s head. It sounded like it was joining something back together. Carnadine couldn’t think of what it might be. Thinking was hard. Staying awake was hard. Breathing was getting hard. There was something in her head. Something with her in her head and it felt wrong. It felt so wrong and it hurt.

*“And the bell goes ring a ding ding, ring a ding ding…”*

Something stabbed into Carnadine’s arm. She recognized an IV stand as it was wheeled in next to her head.

“She should be fine with continued treatment. Back to looking and operating normally within a week.”

“Wonderful Stitchy. Thas all I needed you for. I can bring her back up right? Wanna get a good look at ‘er. Let ‘er get a good looky loo at me too.”

“Of course, just not too quickly.”

*“Ring a ding ding, ring a ding ding…”*

Carnadine felt herself moving up. She heard hooves moving around to the front of whatever she was confined to.

*“Ring a ding ding, ring a ding ding, ring a ding ding.”*

Carnadine found herself looking into the milky white eyes of a stallion with a white coat and a fiery red mane. His smile was filthy and lecherous. He reached out to touch Carnadine’s blood soaked face.

“You can call me Daddy, Sugar Daddy.” The wandering hoof stroked her blood matted fur tenderly. “Me and you are gonna have a lotta fun girly girl. My lil’ Thorny Rose.”