

Beneath the Fabrics

Vi looks around. She still cannot fathom why anybody would need a bathroom this big just for a single person. There's enough room for somebody to live in here. There's certainly more empty space than her entire prison cell used to have.

And it's so... warmly colourful. Vi knows white-tiled bathrooms and metal faucets with filth, mould, and chalk as the only decor. She knows bathrooms as a place to spend as little time as possible. But the Kiramman's bathroom is different. Their tiles are a light, creamy brown. Like beach sands. Vi wonders whether they make these them with actual sand. Some of the tiles are painted with lively dark green patterns. Perhaps "painted" isn't the right word here, Vi thinks, they look like the colour has been baked into them. There is a continuous line of these adornments across all four walls just below the height of Vi's shoulders. Other tiles, placed in regular patterns, have small pictures of animals on them. There are birds, there are rabbits, and there are kittens and puppies. The cabinets, hanging above the sink and the wall opposing it, are made of dark, warm-looking wood. The mirrors on them, the faucets, as well as the glass wall encapsulating the shower, all of them are finely ornamented and engraved. They sparkle and shine like stars. They look like something belonging in a museum, not like something to be touched and used daily. To clean yourself, nonetheless.

One by one, Vi lets her clothes drop onto the floor. The tiles under her soles are comfortably cool. A fresh flowery fragrance disperses from a small green bottle by the sink with a handful of wooden sticks in it. As Vi slips out of her trousers, she's interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Vi?" Caitlyn chirps from the other side. "It's me, I forgot to give you a fresh towel."

Vi praises herself for her foresight and for keeping her habit of leaving her bandages

for last. She opens the dark green door with a wide swing to find Caitlyn coiling back in surprise at the swift motion with a quiet “Oh!”.

Cait regains her composure in an instant, but then her eyes wander up and down and she turns visibly flustered at the unexpected sight of Vi facing her in her underwear. Her gaze quickly settles on Vi’s eyes with a hint of stiffness in her neck betraying her intention of keeping her look there. Vi smiles cheekily, pleased to have that effect on her.

“Thanks,” she grabs the towel from Cait’s hands.

“You’re welcome,” Cait mumbles and keeps staring sheepishly into her eyes.

“Anything else?” Vi leans against the wall in a deliberately slow motion.

“No, just the towel.”

“Cool. Then, if you don’t mind...” Vi reaches to close the door.

“Erm, Vi?”

“Yes?”

“Do you... Do you even shower with those on?” Cait points at her bandages, her lips drawn into a half-smirk.

Vi tilts her head and gives her an incredulous look befitting such a stupid question. “Of course not. I was about to take them off.”

“Right, right. Of course. It’s just... I’ve never seen you without them.”

“So?”

“Nothing. I was just curious. And a tad ridiculous, I suppose.”

“A *tad*?” Vi amusedly stares Caitlyn down. But the anxious tension that had stung her as soon as Cait had mentioned her bandages now creeps from underneath her lungs towards her throat. Vi notices her own hand holding the towel sliding behind her back as she shifts her weight.

“For a second, I thought you were planning on fighting the water.” Cait throws playful punches through the air and makes swooshing sounds as she does it.

Vi blinks at her. “Have you completely lost your marbles now?”

“No, I was just kidding.” Cait lets her head hang and rubs her eyes. “Not very well, apparently.” A mere moment later, she perks up again. “Oh! I’ve got it! You’re hiding something underneath, aren’t you?”

Fuck. Vi’s gut crunches into a pulp as a cold shiver runs down her spine. “Like what?”

“Oh, you are! You are so busted. What is it? A tattoo of the name of your past lover?” Her voice has a chirpy teasing tone, there is no malice in it.

“Yes, all ninety-seven of them,” Vi hisses at her. She feels the poison mix in with the words as she speaks. It was intended to come out sarcastic and over-the-top, but the venom oozes out of her before she can help it.

Caitlyn lets her head sink. *Fuck.*

“I’m sorry,” Cait stammers. “I didn’t mean anything by it. And I shouldn’t pry. Sorry. I’ll leave you to it now.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Vi calls after her, but she doubts it’ll undo any damage done. Cait waves back without turning around and disappears into her room.

Vi sighs behind the closed door and then continues undressing, leaving the bandages for last. She unties them underneath her elbow and unrolls them. The texture of the fabric tightly wrapped around her arms is etched on her skin. Released from its textile prison, it yearns for scratches.

With the bandages rolled a little further down, the first scar appears. It’s faint, it’s healed up nicely. Now it’s just a light thin streak across her forearm. As she unwraps the bandages further, more and more follow suit. A dozen, two dozen, three, four. Vi had never bothered to keep count. Most are across her arms, and only a few are lengthwise strokes. Some of them are fleshy red, scarred into hills, thick as rain worms. After she frees her hands and fingers from the fabrics, she lets

the bandages drop onto the floor and rubs her wrists. The hardened tissue there gets the most itchy. It feels rubbery under her touch. Vi steps into the shower.

Vi fidgeted with the glass shard in her fingers. Earlier that day, following a bursty noise of glass shattering, it had slid under the prison's kitchen doors and glided in front of her feet. It was small, about the size of her thumbnail, so it was easy to hide. She had picked it up out of boredom and curiosity, wondering whether she could get away with possessing contraband when a chance presented itself. But it could also prove to be a plaything, she figured, something to pass the long nights alone in her cell. Like she was doing now.

Only a single edge was sharp, ending in a pointy tip. She ran her fingers along it. It wasn't sharp enough to cut her with what little pressure she applied. She pushed the tip into her thumb until it hurt. It sent a fiery sting through her arm.

Vi looked at the skin on her thumb. The shard had left a small crease in it, but that wasn't the interesting bit. This pain was *different*. Her fists and knuckles were long desensitised from her daily wall-punching. The vibrations which hitting a brick sent through her bones dissipated quickly into a well-known numbness. This, however, first stung, then lingered on. It was a sharp, clear sensation that kept echoing through her flesh. She pushed her thumb in harder until a piercing sting made her flinch and drop the shard.

Vi looked with piqued curiosity at the single red drop of blood trailing down her hand. She had come to expect herself to have gone completely numb a long time ago. And yet there was a pulsating ache throbbing in her thumb. She had flinched. She had *flinched*! Her heart raced.

She picked the shard back up and carefully poked her palm, then her forearm with it. The sharp edge felt different than it did on her thumb, less pronounced and blunter, but the sting it sent through her skin and flesh was very similar. She pressed it harder against her forearm, tentatively at first, then bolder, until the pain spread all the way into her shoulder. She stared at it intently. Her heart was

beating in her ears. It was the middle of the night, but she was wide awake and focused. Her mind was clear. Crystal clear. She felt alive and present, breathing heavily. Her pulse was drumming in her neck.

She cut. A single brief, swift motion, and she could see drops of red running down her skin. The pain raged, flaring up like an oil fire blaze, and then it soothed as it dissipated.

Vi looked at the cut and saw herself. It oozed her innards outside, where they shouldn't be, where no one should see them. Vi smiled.

Vi *smiled*. The numbness leaked from her with her blood. A trade, she learned that night, a cut, a bit of pain and blood in exchange for taking the dull fog in her heart away from her, if only for a little while. A cut in exchange for a sensation. A fair trade, she felt.

She watched the blood run down her arm and felt a profound relief take hold of her. Her entire body slumped down, relaxed. She saw more than just herself in the red on her skin. It was just. It was right. A failure like her deserved to hurt and to bleed. She was a failure who let her family die and abandoned her sister and did nothing about it. She remained locked up on her own, idle and useless. The least she could do was to bleed for them. She deserved to suffer. She owed them that. This burning ache and crimson streams, dripping on the floor, were a just reward for her sins and failings. It felt right. It felt honest.

A sting of guilt ran through her when she realised how much better the pain had made her feel. She frowned. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. This won't do. A single cut wasn't enough. A bit of pain wasn't enough. She deserved more. She owed more. It's the least a failure like her could do. A quiet voice in her head prayed that the same relief would find her a second time as well, but she shushed it. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. Vi wiped her tears and placed the glass shard on her other arm, preparing for the next cut.

Vi turns around so the shower doesn't splash her face any longer. She wipes strands

of wet pink hair from her eyes and looks down on her left arm, where she knows her first scar to be. She can't remember which one it is. There are way too many of them now.

The stripes on her arms stand out as much as her pink hair. Even the thin faint ones. They are marks of her past, cursing her to carry it on her body into every new day. They're different from the battle scars she proudly displays. Fighting scars are badges of honour. They're a warning and a threat. But these are monuments to her weaknesses and failures. She doesn't like looking at them. She doesn't like remembering. She doesn't like other people knowing.

Vi runs her fingers over the ragged lines. The wraps can even manage to hide them from touch. But without them, the hardened tissue may as well be as big as mountains. She rubs her wrists again and sighs.

Vi lay motionlessly on her mattress until the outside noises had died down. It could've been minutes or hours she had spent this way, staring at the grey ceiling whose every nook and crack were already carved into her mind. She didn't know, nor did she care. The dull grey surrounded her incessantly in her cell. Sometimes she felt that she even breathed grey.

It didn't matter.

Once the other prisoners had quieted down for night rest, she slowly lifted herself up with a groan. Quiet hours meant more time between patrols. Vi didn't want to be interrupted.

Just standing up was enough to make her swollen eye throb. She shifted her weight onto her left leg. The fucker had gotten her good with his fucking iron bar on her right thigh and knee the other day. Or was that today? She couldn't even remember how many hits she had taken. Three? Four? Five, maybe?

It didn't matter.

She unwrapped her bandages and threw them onto the mattress, trying not to turn her torso too much to spare her cracked ribs. Old grey scars and fresh dark ones were strewn across her arms.

Vi limped a few steps to the wall. Reaching up, her fingers sought for the small hole in the mortar between two bricks close to the ceiling. They found it quickly. She pulled out what she came for with her nails and let herself slide down the wall onto the ground. As her knee touched the floor, she lost her balance and fell the rest of the way. Her bruised ribs sent waves of dull throbs through her core. The grey cell floor was aggressively cold and hard.

It didn't matter.

She squirmed onto her back and firmly gripped her contraband, lifting it up so she could see it. It was a finger-long, thin piece of grey plastic from a shattered lunch tray. In and of itself, it was unremarkable. But it fit in the tiny hole in the mortar, and the fuckers never managed to stumble upon it during their inspections. And, more importantly, Vi had discovered that she could sharpen it on the brick walls. It never got as sharp as a knife or her first glass shard, but it did the trick. The fuckers had taken her shard in a matter of days.

She ran her finger along the makeshift blade. It felt sharp enough. Vi positioned it on her arm and pressed it firmly into her skin. Then she cut. A quick jerking motion and it was done. The ragged blade tore more than it sliced. It didn't matter. A well-known stinging fire spread through her arm. Vi looked at the dark blood leaving her. It felt wrongly warm on her skin. Failures don't deserve to be warmed.

She had gotten herself beaten for no reason. For getting into a fight with an inmate for no reason. There was no point in beating up that girl. There was no point in beating up annoying little shits. There were plenty of Silco's thugs around who still had too many teeth in their mouths and the audacity to breathe. And yet she was wasting days of recovery on an annoying little shit with her actions. It was a moronic thing to do. She should've known better. She shouldn't have lost control. She shouldn't have been so useless.

The ache of the cut subsided and gave in to the grey throbbing before the drops of

blood had even reached her shoulder. The twisted sense of relief a timid part of her was hoping for never appeared. Good. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. She deserved to suffer, and nothing else.

She placed the grey blade on her other arm, about a hand's width from her elbow, but then reconsidered the position. There was too much scar tissue there already. Scar tissue was harder to cut through. Sometimes the plastic struggled against it. Vi moved it upwards to her wrist. Looking at the blade clawing into her skin, she hesitated. She remembered somebody telling her that slitting your wrist open could kill you. But she had done it before. Several scars already rose above the skin on her wrists, they were proof of that. And she had been fine. So she cut.

There. Nothing happened. She was still there. Alive. Breathing in the grey. Disgustingly warm blood oozed out of her wrist. The burning tingling in her flesh dissipated into the dull throbbing again. Vi looked at her bleeding wrist disappointedly. She had hoped for something else to happen. She had hoped to feel differently this time, somehow. Something, anything, as long as it was different. Even a little bit. This cut supposedly was able to kill you. But it felt just as dull and familiar as the previous one. Vi didn't know what exactly she had hoped for, but it wasn't this, more of the same numb nothingness all over again. It filled her with dull anger. How dare even her body let her down like that? Couldn't she have *anything*? She picked up the grey blade and slit across her other wrist with more force.

Dark blood dripped down her arms and onto the cold floor. Nothing, again, save for the same old dull sensations. Nothing. The air was still grey. Her flesh was still grey. Her bones were still grey. She let her arms slump down. A tired tear of disappointment welled up in the eye which wasn't swollen shut. She couldn't even have this. She couldn't even get this right. Useless.

This cut supposedly was able to kill you. And now she had two of them. Maybe this time they would kill her. They probably wouldn't. She was quite certain they wouldn't. The cuts were shallow. And they hadn't killed her in the past. But maybe this time, they would, somehow. Maybe this time, she wouldn't wake up again. And if she didn't wake up again, then maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the

world. Maybe it would be something that wasn't grey and dull. Maybe it would be different, somehow. Maybe something would change. Even a little bit. Maybe it would even be something where being useless and tired was okay, if only for a minute. And Vi was tired. So tired.

It didn't matter.

Vi lay motionlessly on the aggressively cold cell floor for ages, bleeding silently into the grey.

When footsteps of the fucker on night duty resounded through the corridors, Vi was still awake. She recognized his gait and the sound of his heavy leather boots on the stone floor. This fucker sometimes whistled while making the rounds. Fucking *whistled*. Like he was having a nice, sunny day at the zoo, watching animals sleep in their cages.

She crawled back quietly onto her mattress with heavy limbs, the achings in her right leg and her ribs reminding her of her failings again without a trace of mercy. Cursing them wordlessly for their weakness, she pretended to be asleep, trying to avoid attracting any attention. Most of the blood on her arms had dried already or was on the floor. Only small dark patches seeped into the grey linens.

She was too exhausted to deal with any fuckers at the moment. Her limbs were too heavy. And it was her own damn fault. That's what you got for being a useless failure. She had to resort to hiding, fleeing, pretending to be asleep because she had been so useless. A quiet rage welled up inside of her as she lay on her mattress. She wished she had her grey makeshift blade in her fingers to tear into her flesh again.

The fucker strolled past her cell without making a halt. The sound of his boots on the grey stones echoed through the corridor as he passed her cage.

After his steps disappeared in the distance, Vi slowly lifted herself up with a groan, silently cursing her throbbing ribs and leg again. And herself. Embers of rage simmered in her stomach, but she was tired. She looked down at her arms. They were covered with crusty patches where her blood had dried. She scratched the stains off with her nails like dirt, leaving her fresh wounds alone to heal in peace. The gashes in her skin hadn't wronged her. They deserved to be left alone. Deeming her skin

clean enough, she rubbed some warmth into her arms and began bandaging them up again.

Each loop she drew with the fabric around her shivering arm felt like a small, undeserved kindness. The wraps hugged her firmly. They concealed what never should see the light of day – the weak her, the marks of her failures. They held her. They reassured her. Yes, she had been useless, she knew, but she wouldn't stay that way for long. She'll do better. She'll be better. She'll be someone deserving of the warmth in which the fabrics enveloped her forearms. She promised. She swore. Vi nodded and a single tear dropped onto her scarred and tortured skin, where it got buried under the carefully wrapped bandages moments later.

She'll do better. She'll be better. She promised.

Annealing embers of rage simmered on quietly in her stomach. She stoked the fire with each breath of ashen grey and nurtured the flames back into a blaze. Oh yes, she'll do better. So much better. After all, there were plenty of fuckers around who needed their teeth bashed in. Vi let the flames consume her. Her knuckles were itching.

Vi turns the temperature up and lets the hot water run over her head. Her eyes are closed, her arms hang loosely beside her. If only the water could get hot enough, it could wash away the memory of the aggressively cold cell floor on her back, splattered in her blood. The water isn't hot enough. It never is. The memories are there to stay, just like the scars. The scars are marks of the past, just like the memories.

It's been years since she had given herself the last ones.

She turns around and opens her eyes. The green bathroom door is in her field of vision, surrounded by sandy brown tiles with green motifs painted on. She'll have to open that door and step outside eventually. She'll have to open that door and face Cait eventually.

Cait. She's already aware that Vi's covering something with the wraps, that much is obvious. She's polite and will likely not ask again, but keeping the secret will erect a wall between them. Vi doesn't want that. She doesn't like other people knowing. She doesn't even like looking or remembering herself. But she doesn't want to keep Cait at a distance either. No, in fact, she *wants* her to know. She wants *her* to know. And she wants her to stay once she knows. Or at least to not run away. At least not that. Please. Not that.

Staying is not what usually happens, though. Usually, once they know, they raise a wall. A different wall. A wall that separates the disgusting and pitiful from the normal and the slightly and the pretty. A wall pretending not to see what's before their eyes. A wall of silence and blindness. And usually, Vi is just fine with that.

But Vi wants to be seen. By *her*.

Vi enters Cait's brightly lit room and closes the door behind her. She is fully dressed, including her red jacket and heavy boots. There's a chance she'll be asked to leave any minute now, she figures, through words or otherwise. Her fists clench tightly around the loose bandages in her pockets. She is fully dressed but feels naked. Better sooner than later, she keeps telling herself. Might as well get it over with.

Caitlyn is in her big blue chair by her desk. The pen in her hand hastily scribbles a stream of words into a black notebook. "Are you done?" she asks softly without looking up from the pages in front of her, still writing.

Vi approaches her, forcing her own feet to take steps forward on the gold-green patterned carpet. Both her hands are in her pockets, her arms pressed closely into herself. It barely conceals it. Caitlyn isn't looking at her right now anyway. But she will see. Any second now. Better sooner than later. Might as well get it over with.

"Yes." Vi is two steps away from her. This should be close enough. Closer is weird. And awkward. A step back is fleeing. We don't do that. Vi still thinks about what

words to choose to break this barrel open. She had been thinking about that ever since she turned off the water in the shower. She had come up with nothing.

Caitlyn twirls around in her chair to face Vi. “Great, then I’ll-”

Her gaze immediately finds Vi’s bare arms. Cait’s still sitting, they are at her eye level. They are impossible to miss. Vi pressing her forearms into herself can’t hide it. It isn’t supposed to, but it also is. The hesitant part of her is now loudly screaming to keep it buried and hidden, but the whole point of the exercise is to get it over with. Vi can feel Cait’s stare sticking to the scars. It’s all or nothing now, let’s get it over with. She pulls her hands from her pockets and turns her palms towards Cait.

“Yeah. That’s me without the bandages.”

She sees the shock on her face as plain as day, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, ringing for words that would be appropriate. Vi knows exactly how this spectacle goes. She’s had the pleasure of this dance before. In the prison showers, in the yearly medical check-ups, whenever her bandages slipped up. She knows this dance intimately. First comes the horror, when the realisation sets in. Then a split second of disgust, only to be clumsily masked by feigned worry. Then the empty words and, finally, the change of subject, inflating an elephant into the room and erecting the wall of silence over the matter. The dancefloor is open, the music is playing.

“Oh, Vi...” Caitlyn reaches for her hands. She gently places her palms on the torn and bruised skin on Vi’s knuckles and carefully lifts them, bringing them mere inches away from her face. Her gaze wanders across the dozens of fleshy mounds on Vi’s forearms, from mark to mark.

Here it comes, Vi rolls her eyes.

Caitlyn stays quiet.

Looming above the seated Cait, Vi studies the subtle contortions in her expression. She’s masking it well, Vi thinks.

But the horror Vi is waiting for doesn’t make an appearance on Caitlyn. Nor the disgust, to her surprise. Yet they soon find their way into Vi’s heart instead. About

as soon as she realises that all she sees on Cait is hurt.

It's not supposed to go that way. It's not supposed to hurt *her*. It's supposed to tear a rift between them. To erect an invisible stone wall in a single breath, followed by a twinge of shame, disappointment, and anger that lingers in Vi for hours and makes her want to pick a fistfight the first chance she gets. Not making *her* eyes well up with tears.

Caitlyn guides her hand towards the barrage of strokes on Vi's wrists. She halts just before her fingertips reach her and looks up to Vi.

Vi notices her clenched jaw. She's trying to keep herself composed. They both are. Vi nods, and Cait runs her fingers across her tortured skin. Her touch is feather-light. Vi only feels light pressure when they cross the hardened marks, none of the tenderness in the exploring caress.

Vi swallows and clears her throat.

"That's all from a long time ago," she mumbles with a cracking voice. "From Still-water." She watches Cait's fingers slowly trail upwards along her arm.

"I'm so sorry," Cait whispers and places her hand on Vi's palm. She envelops Vi's hand with both of hers.

"It's not your fault."

Caitlyn looks up at her. She draws Vi closer by her hand and leans forward, resting her head on Vi's stomach.

"I'm glad you're still here," she whispers into Vi. "I'm glad I got to meet you." Her thumb strokes over the scars on Vi's wrist.

"Me too," Vi wraps her arm around Cait's shoulders. "Me too."