Artemis Allison – Word Count: 4755

Sharp Pain

**Trigger Warning: Suicidal Thoughts & Major Depression**

“Alright, on three.”

Vivian nodded.

“One…”

Vivian’s arm gripped the chair she was in tightly.f

“Two…”

Vivian took in a deep breath, preemptively wincing as she tried to force herself to smile.

“Three.”

“Fuck,” she muttered softly as she felt the needle jam through her flesh. It’d hurt more than the first one, just moments before, which, as she looked down at her chest, she saw wasn’t bleeding. It still felt weird to be shirtless in what was technically public, in front of a stranger who’d never met her before and who she would never meet again – if she had her ways – but yet, here she was. The tattoo shop – which, of course, did piercings as well – had a name that she’d likely forget as soon as she left; it was likely another generic “Impaled” or something with the store owner’s name in it. At least she wasn’t bleeding that bad; the eyebrow piercing she’d gotten a year ago had left her having to walk down the street to the nearest atm as blood slowly oozed down her face to get cash because the piercer didn’t tell her that they only took cash until *after* he’d put the needle through. Bastard.

“Hurts?” the piercer asked, both confident in the fact that he already new the answer, but in a tone that managed to try to be soothing. It worked.

“No worse than a shot of gin,” Vivian weakly joked.

“Do people do shots of gin? I always heard that it was more of a sipping alcohol.”

“College kids’ll drink anything that gets’m drunk quickly.”

“You’d think they’d just do shots of Everclear, then,” the piercer mumbled.

“They’re sane enough to not be *that* dumb, at least, the ones I’ve met.”

“Kids these days…” the piercer mumbled, even though he didn’t look a hair over thirty-five. “Back in my day, we just drank Four Lokos and called it good.”

“You say ‘good’, but didn’t those things kill a few kids?”

“That’s how you know it’s good shit.”

That got a chuckle out of Vivian. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Letting out a soft chuckle himself, the piercer backed away and looked over his work on Vivian’s chest, before shrugging and smiling. “Well, it looks fine to me, but you better check yourself in the mirror to make sure that they look even.”

With a shrug, Vivian stood up and rounded the corner they were hidden behind to do just that. Even as she stared at her chest, she couldn’t truthfully *tell* if they didn’t look even, and the small dots of blood appearing made it even harder to tell. “Looks good to me, doc.”

That got a more earnest laugh out of the piercer. “Y’know, I *almost* considered going to medical school.”

“Really?” came Vivian’s replied, a moment before she also asked, “Oh, and how much do I owe you? A hundred-twenty, right?”

“Yeah, hundred twenty,” the piercer replied. Reaching into the back pocket of her pants, Vivian pulled out her wallet and, rifling through it, pulled out a hundred and forty dollars. “I just couldn’t handle that much more school, though, and… honestly, this just felt lot more fun.”

“Huh. Oh, and here y’go.”

“Thanks,” he said as he took the money.

“Guess on the bright side of this, you see a lot more tits this way, eh?”

“Eh, that’d be a good thing, if I swung that way.” Vivian could almost hear him rolling his eyes in his tone as she began to readjust her bra and button up the dress shirt she was wearing over it.

“What a shame,” she replied with only a little bit of facetiousness in her voice, “girls really are quite pretty.”

“I *guess*. Anyways, I assume you know what you need to do for aftercare, yeah?”

“Yeah. Been through this before.” Vivian bit her tongue to hold back the fact that there wasn’t going to be a chance in hell that she would be alive for long enough for any infections to even think about beginning to set in.

“I’ll save you the spiel, then, beyond just remembering to clean’m twice daily for a bit here.”

“Alright. Thanks again for the short notice, yeah?”

“No problem. It was good to see you again, Vivi.”

Vivian had her foot in the door to step out, but she stopped and turned back with a glimmer of confusion in her eyes. The bleached-blonde hair, done up in a mohawk, of the piercer didn’t seem even remarkably familiar, nor did the numerous tattoos or piercings he had himself. His brown eyes didn’t burn with any familiarity or passion; they were eyes she’d seen a thousand times in a crowd. She stood there, her mouth open for just a second, before he noticed her confusion and laughed a bit more.

“You don’t recognize me? I’m almost hurt!”

“It’s been a rough six years, and I’ve tried my hardest to forget this place,” Vivian murmured sheepishly, but she was now fully aware of the pain that she was feeling. “Any hints?”

“We had a lot of mutual friends, I was a grade below you, and my name starts with an M.”

“…Michael?”

“Matthew, but close enough.”

Vivian’s eyes went wide with recognition. “Oh *shit*! Hey Matt!” She could start to see the resemblance. His sister was always cuter. Did he know about that? God, that’d be embarrassing if he did, Vivian realized. “How’s it been? Besides the whole, well, not going to med school thing.”

“If I said it’s been good, would you believe me?”

“Well… you’re back here, and if I had to remember, I think you distinctly said you *never* wanted to come back here, so…”

“Yeah… that’s about right. You… remember my sister, Beth, right?”

“Yeah! How’s she doing?”

“…she died, about a year ago. I came back to help my family with the funeral, and… well, yeah.”

Every part of Vivian froze except for her eyes, which went wide instead. “Oh, god, Matt, I’m so sorry.”

“It, well. It is what it is, y’know?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. It… never really gets better.”

“Here you go sounding far too cynical and wise again, Vivian,” Matt flatly said with a sharp laugh.

“Did I do that a lot?”

“A lot more jaded, if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah… I try to avoid remembering that,” Vivian weakly admitted. It felt weird to just so casually move past Bethany’s death like that, but what else were they supposed to do? It didn’t feel right to spend the time here mourning her, either.

“I don’t think *any* of us willingly remember high school, to be honest.”

“…yeah.”

“What’re you up to now, though?”

“Oh, I… dropped out of college after my first year,” Vivian admitted, awkwardly bringing up her left arm to the back of her neck. “Kinda been… riding around here since.”

“Riding?”

“Yeah, like on a motorcycle.”

“Oh, that’s cool! How’d you afford that?”

“Ah. Y’know my rich grandpa, yeah?”

“The professor?”

“Nah, the other one.”

“You had another rich grandpa?”

“I mean, the professor one spent a lot of his money on weed after retiring.”

“…Not going to lie, Vivi, but that grandpa sounds like the cooler one.”

“Oh, he was. But the richer one gave me most of his money after he died, so… I’ve been living off that for a bit.”

“A bit being the past three years.”

“Yeaaaah…”

Matt stared at her, and he blinked slowly.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just… man, I wish I could’ve lived like that.”

“…yeah. I getcha.” Vivian slowly turned back towards the door.

“Well, I’ll see you around, then?” Matt called behind her.

Once more, Vivian lied. “Yeah, I’ll see you around,” she said when she had no intention of keeping through on that promise. Her sport bike was still where it was – that she expected – and her riding jacket was still atop it, which was a luxury that only a town like her hometown could bear, a town bordering on the line between one where everyone knew everyone and something just a little bit bigger. To some, it was cozy and quaint, a quiet place to live.

It never stopped feeling suffocating to Vivian.

Between being back here and the throb in her chest, she wasn’t sure which was feeling more painful to her. As she was about to bring up the kickstand and start her bike, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket.

**>REMINDER (12 Hours Ago):**  
>Two more days before death.  
>Visit Kroner Park

With a sigh, Vivian shook her head and put her phone back in her pocket after she finally cleared the reminder. Taking her helmet off of her bike’s handlebars, she wormed her head into it, clicked it in place, and flipped its black visor back down. Bringing in the clutch, she started her bike up; tapping the shift lever down, she set out in a manner that was by no means calm, slipping the clutch out to hell and back as she yanked back on the throttle and sent the bike rocketing forward, just barely keeping the front wheel on the ground. If there was one thing that Vivian still lived for, it was the feeling of that sudden acceleration as she crept closer and closer to the fuel tank between her legs, disrespecting every speed limit that her shitty pothole of a town had. Her body ran on autopilot, winding out every gear to the redline before upshifting as sloppily as she could get away with without upsetting the balance of the bike.

Every rock, every piece of gravel out of place, every crack, every hole, all of them threatened to cause Vivian to die then and there as they would almost certainly send her off of her bike, and at the speed she was going, death would likely be the preferable alternative to ending up paralyzed – even all of the armor that she wore wouldn’t save her from her spine being physically wrapped around one of the trees that lined the Midwestern highway she found herself on in just a few seconds of being on the throttle. The one of three red lights in the town, after all, was already behind her.

Slowly, she reclined her grip on the throttle, slowing down for no other reason than that the thrill of the initial acceleration had already died off. Slowly, she sat a little bit more upright, letting the wind buffet her, and she began to glance around. Kroner was about fifteen minutes from town by car at highway speeds, and she was still going about twice that, even as the bike slowed. She knew the route there like the back of her hand by now; when she was a kid, she always needed to rely on some sort of navigation from her phone or one of her friends’ phone.

It was familiar enough that she was there before she had time for her mind to drift from the road and into thought, the familiar gravel road rough as hell against the hard suspension of her sport bike; after all, no sane person would waste their time riding a bike like hers on a road like this often. The only blessing in her favor was the fact that it wasn’t a long ride until she parked, kicking her kickstand down and tugging off her helmet in one fell move. Just as smoothly she stood up and set the helmet on the seat she just got out of, arching her back slightly – until she realized that pressed her two new piercings rather uncomfortably against the cloth separating them from the road armor she was wearing and flinched out of it.

Gently, she put her hands in the pockets of her jacket, and she began to just walk. The main highlight of the park, the waterfall within, soon produced a soft roar inside of her ears as the water crashed down and down, the spring thaw producing enough water to raise the level up by several feet past the last time she remembered being here. It was just a small hike to get down to the waterfront, between some trees and down a well-walked path of visitors thousands of times before, and because it was 1PM on a Wednesday, she was the only one here. With a thud, she flopped down right at the water line, threatening to fall in if the waterfall somehow started to flood the basin with more water; as Vivian’s knees dangled just inches away from the water, the scream of the waterfall now made it impossible for anything to exist in her mind as the white noise it provided left no room for any other thought.

There was a sense of nostalgia that was rising deep within Vivian’s chest, but it wasn’t as strong as she had expected it to feel. She had expected it to be overwhelming, for it to make her yearn for something bigger once more, to make her want something, for her to remember something that gave her a reason to keep taking the steps that she’d been taking for month after month and day after day in the years leading up to this moment.

And Vivian, at this shore, found exactly none of that. All she found were the faintest suggestion of memories that had long since become irrelevant, names of the people who she’d forgotten over the years but had come here with in the past.

All it did was remind her that the loneliness she felt was truly omnipresent at her core.

She wasn’t sure still what she’d done. Maybe that was it; she’d done nothing to keep anyone around and so her and her friends naturally drifted apart while her family members died. Her family had always been small, and during her life, it had only ever grown smaller. Now it was just her, alone.

As her hand gently fell into the cold water, she tried to hope that the feeling would make her think of anything else, of anything outside of her.

It didn’t.

Weakly, she stood back up and made her way back up the well-walked back, back to her bike. She’d been there for only a few minutes, but she didn’t have the energy to hike around and laugh and have a good time like she’d done so many times before they’d gone their separate ways after graduation. Shutting the door on these memories felt wrong, but Vivian realized there was nothing else for her to do. She had her bike, and she had herself, and she had a hotel room to return to and to rest in.

“Fuck, this hurts,” she mumbled, resisting the urge to clutch her aching chest.

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She woke up at 1am, and she only knew that because the blinking diodes of the hotel alarm clock were flashing that at her. The tank top she’d worn to bed was soiled with sweat, as were her pajama pants, and Vivian had a throbbing headache too.

**>REMINDER (1 Minute Ago):**>Last day before death.  
>Get Denny’s.

Was that really what she had planned for today? Her last day on Earth.

And she wanted to get Denny’s.

…Denny’s, as much as she hated to admit it, sounded good right now. Holding her head in her right hand, she groggily made her way to the bathroom, stripped herself of her clothes, ignored the two spots of blood on her chest, and stepped into the shower before it had a chance to warm up to shock herself further awake.

She was only in there for ten minutes at most, which was all the time she needed to get herself cleaned up and ready for the day. What little clothes she had were strewn about the room, a duffel bag lazily emptied and tossed about, and from it, Vivian randomly chose a mixed bag of clothes to wear. Most of what she wore was black, and her choice in jeans was limited by the fact that, no matter what, they had to be prepared to take a fall off of her bike, leaving her with the ones she had worn just yesterday or the pair she’d signed up for the day prior.

What thoughts she could process outside of the ringing between her ears were numb and tired, but she was hoping that food would at least dull one of those two out. Wouldn’t have to think about food if she could eat it; wouldn’t be going through hunger pains and caffeine withdrawal with those in her system.

She’d planned this all months before, thankfully; she knew the Denny’s would already be open. The memories of heading there with all of the other theater kids after the Friday or Saturday showing of whatever play they were premiering was just as nostalgic to her. Over the years, the number of people she’d gone to Denny’s in the year afterwards dwindled bit by bit, but she never really noticed. Maybe she was just still clinging onto one of the few traditions that she’d truly enjoyed, but at the very least, Vivian truly enjoyed their pancakes.

Clutch in, key turned, gear down, clutch and throttle. This time, Vivian took it slower. She still knew how heavily the cops patrolled to make sure that kids weren’t out drinking and driving at night, and a few minutes saved wouldn’t matter now. She was somehow more sore this morning than she was when she passed out eleven hours ago, but as her speed picked up, she was able to ignore it.

She was able to ignore a lot of things like this. She rather enjoyed the speed. Despite the inherent risk her motorcycle posed, knowing that, no matter what, she’d be dead by days end. It helped, too, that she already knew how it would happen.

That left enough of a smile on Vivian’s face that, when she pulled into the Denny’s parking lot, she managed to seem normal. The parking lot was surprisingly empty, but it was only a Thursday. It made sense, Vivian guessed. A hostess guided her to an empty booth – of which there were many – and told her that the sole server would be with her shortly; for a drink before the hostess left, Vivian simply ordered a Cherry Coke.

It felt beyond cliched as she turned to stare out the window, but there wasn’t much for her to do, really. She knew what she was going to get – a make your own slam with two chocolate chip pancakes, two sausages, two bacon strips, hash browns, and a piece of toast – so she didn’t touch the menu; the chain diner, being as baren as it was, meant there were no people to watch, nothing to pay attention to inside. While the outside wasn’t much better, she could at least pretend to be looking at the stars that were hidden behind the clouds outside, and that gave her something to do.

The thud of someone sitting across from her drew her back into reality, just to stare face to face with her waitress.

If Vivian was being honest with herself, she was kinda cute.

For a second, Vivian just blinked at her, before a smile rose onto her face. The waitress seemed to mirror her smile. Dirty-blonde hair, in comparison to Vivian’s brown hair that bore the stains of faded hair dye, with green eyes that seemed genuinely interested in her brown ones. “Did I do something wrong?” was all Vivian was able to manage to joke, and it earned her a laugh from her waitress.

“Sue me, I’m bored,” the waitress replied, “and you’re the first customer – and likely the only customer – I’ll have for this shift.” Her genuine interest, or at least what seemed like it, struck Vivian, if ever so slightly, in a way that she wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to; instead, Vivian just buried that emotion and she just wore a faint beginning of a smile instead as she responded.

“I’m special, then?”

“Eh, sue me. More interesting than Instagram.” It was a joke, and one that earned Vivian’s eyeroll, but she took mild pride in being more interesting than social media. If for right now, at the very least.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment,” Vivian said with a small smirk. There was a part of her, a small part of her, but a part of her that was growing, that felt guilty for even returning the joke. It was bordering on flirting, she knew, but she knew what was going to happen at the end of this day, she knew how her story was going to be written. She knew what was going to happen. She knew right now that there’d be no one to hurt. She didn’t want that to change. Even the guilt, though, couldn’t wipe the growing smirk off of her face.

“I’d like to think it was,” she said with another laugh. Vivian couldn’t make out her nametag, but she kind of wanted to, for once. She’d spent plenty of time in diners as she drove around America, living a nomad’s dream.

Not many people ever seemed to take interest in her, and to be fair, it wasn’t much of a thing she ever reciprocated either. She always preferred the sights to the people; at least, that’s what she told herself when the loneliness had crept in in the past. Still, she knew it was better to be lonely, she couldn’t hurt others if she was alone, she couldn’t be hurt if she was alone, but her words came out without her control. “Would it be rude for me to order for two, then?”

“Are you paying?”

“Should I be?”

“I wouldn’t be offended if you didn’t,” the waitress answered, “but I’d feel weird doing so. Ordering food while on the clock with a customer, that is.”

“I’ll save you the weirdness, then,” Vivian replied with a laugh herself. “Mind if I just get you what I’m getting, though, to keep it simple? I’ll likely have leftovers, as well.”

“Is that a way to tell me your order?”

“I mean, I am a bit hungry, but I’m always willing to keep talking.”

The waitress rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling.

She was still smiling. Vivian was too, she realized.

She hadn’t smiled like this in a while, she realized too. That felt guilty as well. Was she leading this poor woman on? She knew that this woman couldn’t fix her – wouldn’t be able to fix her. People had thought about attempting in the past, and Vivian was pretty sure she’d hurt them all.

“Alright, well, what can I get for you then?”

“In as not-flirtatious way as possible, hopefully your name, but besides that, would two – well, four now – chocolate chip pancakes, two orders of sausage links, two orders of bacon, two hash browns, and two pieces of toast be okay?”

The waitress’s eyes went open. “I forgot that, didn’t I.”

“Yeah,” Vivian admitted softly. She felt her chest throb a bit, and she wasn’t entirely sure if it was pain or anxiety. “To be fair, I didn’t either. Vivian.”

“That’s a pretty name,” the waitress murmured. “I’m Kelly.”

“Kelly. I’ll try to remember that.”

“Bad with names?”

“Bad with a lot of things,” Vivian replied earnestly, if nervously, and with a weak chuckle.

“You’re talking to a college drop out working at a Denny’s at 2 in the morning, Vivian.” Kelly paused. “Do you mind if I call you Vi?”

Vivian just shrugged and nodded.

“Vi. I’ll get your order in, but you must be new in town, because I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Oh, I’m just… visiting, I suppose.”

“Here to see someone, or…?”

“You… could say that.”

“Ah,” Kelly replied, pausing. Vivian’s response seemed to have thrown her slightly off kilter, a new wave of uncertainty maybe, if Vivian had to guess. “How long will you be here?”

“I’ve got about a day left.”

“Just a day?”

“Somethin’ like that. Hoping I’d be in town for longer?”

“Would it change your answer if I said maybe?”

“Maybe,” Vivian smugly replied.

“Then maybe.”

Vivian paused for a second, then, she managed to smile just a little bit wider, a little bit brighter. “Then maybe I’ll be here for a bit longer.”

In her pocket, Vivian felt her phone buzz. Without even pulling it out, she deleted the reminder that she knew had popped up.

“That sounds wonderful,” Kelly stated as she finally turned to go put the order in.

The conflict in Vivian hadn’t settled, and so to hide the changing emotions from her face, she turned back to the window. “Yeah. It does sound wonderful,” she muttered weakly. She tried to make herself believe it.

Turning back away from the window, to Kelly, to the empty Denny’s, she started to doubt it. At best, she’d hurt Kelly. At worst, Kelly would hurt her, and she’d hurt Kelly.

Vivian turned back to the window, and she wondered if she deserved to be alone. Did anyone deserve to be alone, she pondered; she knew that there were plenty of people who would wind up dying alone, and she’d, for so long, categorized herself with them. Control over her fate afforded her that luxury. She could see Kelly returning in the reflection, a smile still on her face, and Vivian thought one more thing.

“What are you up to, after work?” she asked, turning back.

“Nothing interesting, if you’re asking that.”

“Can I try to make it a bit more interesting, then?”

“You can offer,” Kelly replied with a smirk.

With an open mouth, Vivian paused for a second, and then a soft smirk rose on her own face too. “Have you ever been to Kroner Park?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“Would you like to go there?”

“Mm… if I said maybe, what would you say.”

Vivian paused. This was her last chance to pull out. She knew what the reminder she deleted had said, she knew how to fill it back in, she already had memorized the details of it months ago. “I would say that it’s beautiful out there, and hope that’d convince you, I think?”

“And if I said that sounds wonderful?”

“I’d ask if you’re trying to flirt with me and say that it does sound wonderful right back.”

“And if I am?”

“…I think that’d be wonderful.” Vivian felt a sharp pain once more in her chest, the dull throb of the headache in her head, the numbness in her cold fingers. She didn’t have any right to say those words.

“Then I am.”

Vivian took in a deep breath, and she tried to maintain a smile.

“Then that sounds wonderful.”

Vivian was pretty sure she meant it. The pain didn’t go away. Her eyes had fallen closed at some point, she realized, but when she reopened them, Kelly was still there, still smiling.

“Everything okay?” Kelly softly asked.

It was easy enough for Vivian to lie as she replied, “Yeah. I think.”

“You look a bit tired, y’know.”

“…Yeah, I am,” Vivian admitted.

“Maybe we should put it off for another day?”

It had to be today, Vivian tried to say. “I… think tomorrow would be wonderful, if that’s okay.”

“It most certainly is.”

A ding in the background shot Kelly upright, likely meaning their food was ready. When she was gone, Vivian pulled back out her phone, and she set a new reminder.

**//Create Reminder**  
//Two days before death.

There was a small pain from guilt as she wrote those words. Tapping the delete key, she changed it.

**//Create Reminder**//Two more days to live.

Somehow, that felt a little bit better to write. As she sipped on her Cherry Coke, which she realized Kelly must have brought and set down without her noticing, she noticed how sweet it was, and she wasn’t entirely sure if she liked that.

Vivian turned back to the window, and it seemed the clouds had parted, because she could now make out the outline of the moon, ever-so-slightly shining in the sky in the first steps out of a new moon. Would she ever tell Kelly?

Most likely not, she admitted. She found herself missing the certainty a bit, even if she’d only just lost it.

But as Vivian took another sip of her soda, she realized that, at least for now, she wasn’t forcing herself to smile.

With a deep breath, she chuckled.