

Midnight Occurrences

Valkyrie Bradford

Left, right, tug from below.

Right, left, tug from above.

Left, right, knot—

Halcyon huffed out a breath as she yanked the pale thread back through the hole she'd been attempting to patch, muttering a string of harsh cuss words longer than any stretch of time she'd managed to work on this damned chiton. She wasn't unpracticed—not in the slightest. She'd stitched and made several clothes for her family, and this plain, annoying piece her darling fool of a brother Hesperos had torn running about with his friends. It was just difficult to work upon by naught but flickering candlelight in the cool courtyard of her home, all whilst shivering, despite the thick cloak draped across her shoulders.

The sun had set long before she'd set about this project that clearly should've been left for the light of day. Yet there was only so much time Halcyon could spend lying about, staring at the ceiling and pleading for sleep as her thoughts granted her no peace. And so, she'd set about saving this scrap of fabric that should've just been left to the wayside.

Better than thinking about everything—*anything*—else. Better than placing her thoughts back in that vicious whirlpool of torrential confusion and grief that even Poseidon himself would shirk from. Better than letting Neophytos take over her thoughts again and drawing her to his home in the bosom of Athens, better than letting her emotions drag her off her feet yet again.

No, she'd much rather stitch a ridiculous, needless rag back together, thank you very much. And for all her efforts to distract herself,

none were so successful as the wavering footsteps and quiet clack of a cane that drew her eyes up from her sore, pricked fingers and trembling shoulders falling slack as she turned to greet her impossibly late company.

The partial moon and glittering stars above were little help, Halcyon needing to draw her candle higher to better see the figure slowly shuffling through the open archway of the courtyard. Small and hunched, a battered once-white-now-grey cloak the form's only defense from the nipping cold of the eventide wind, hood drawn up to guard their face, yet she could make out an elderly woman beneath.

"I pray you be well, maiden of the morn," the tired, rasping voice offered in greeting. The woman was standing, swaying slightly in the entry of the courtyard. Gods, her voice sounded like gravel grating across stone under metal. "If you not be too enamored with your wicked sewing and hatred of linen, might an old hag beg for but water and a wall to lean upon far from the harsh winds of the west?"

Halcyon had half a mind to say no—she had enough troubles and thoughts and concerns without needing to tend to a visitor's needs, especially one so unannounced. Yet the laws of hospitality were upheld fiercely, under threat by the gods themselves—not to mention father would shout until the well crumbled if she turned someone away so rashly. Besides, anything to think about, act upon, that isn't Neophytos and—

No. Not to be thought of, unless she wanted the rest of her life to be so sleepless and troubled as she was here in the tresses of night.

"Were I a hissing creature of spite, perhaps I should turn you away," Halcyon answered simply, little emotion behind the words as she stood, straightening the folds and now creased edges of her clothes. "However, my bitterness is restricted to the needle that so rudely pierces my fingertips and the cloth that so impolitely avoids its restoration. Step into the home a friend of Halcyon, daughter of Hieronymus, and find yourself in comfort from the cold."

Her stitching left abandoned on the bench, she set her sights upon the kitchens, the sound of the woman's cane and shuffling confirmation

of the woman's accompaniment. Luckily, she was as quiet as Halcyon in entering. No need to wake any others in the home, especially not those who she would like nothing better than to never see again. The counters lay clean and the fire was empty for the eve, so she went about finding the cups and whatever may rest in the cupboards that this guest might eat.

"Maiden of the morn, you've no idea my gratitude for your kindness. So few would aid an old crone who wanders the night. The house paces to the north of your own was so unkind as to turn me away, back into the cold."

Halcyon's eyes tiredly ran across the offerings of the cupboard, settling on the bread and figs tucked in the corner as her offering to this rambling lady, minding little of her words as the feigned interest left her mouth without regard or thought. "How horrific, my lady. Unfortunately, I cannot claim I am so shocked—Cosmas is a wine-seller with little regard for how he lashes his tongue about."

The elderly woman finally made her way all the way into the room, taking time and care as she sat on one of the stools against the wall. "It is my honor then, to have been blessed by you, good maiden of the morn. Were you not so severely punishing that chiton for its impudence at such an hour, I might have fallen ill by the time I found a person in Athens of good tradition and decent faith."

Halcyon didn't dignify the woman's answer with any show of the sting of annoyance that began to prick her thoughts, only drawing a pitcher of watered-down wine out, pouring a cup with a practiced motion. 'Maiden of the morn'—not her name, not even calling her 'daughter of Hieronymus' would give such disrespect to her name. No, only a mocking epithet for her late-night troubles and worries.

"Naught a thing to be worried for, my lady," Halcyon answered with polite kindness, setting the plate of fruit and bread before the woman, clay cup of wine just beside. "Rest easily, for worrying shall not change you found a house of true faith in tradition. Fill your belly and find rest within my father's home, and name yourself as I shall call you, my guest."

The woman, gnarled and leathered hands reaching out, pulled at the bread and shakily lifted the cup to her withered lips. "Ah, a kindness unseen in these days. My thanks to you, maiden of the morn, though placing a name upon me would do it a disservice."

A hum of affirmation her only answer, Halcyon stepped away, seating herself on another stool nearby with wine of her own in hand. This woman was strange in every sense of the word, it seemed, including praising good hospitality, and not bothering to return it in kind. By now, she was split between hoping the woman would speak if only to distract her and praying she'd eat and leave her in peace with her clamorous silence and harried sewing again.

The woman, whether by the will of the gods or of a cosmic spite to Halcyon's frustrations, gave an answer to her hopes and prayers.

"Maiden of the morn, you've a face at least fourteen years of life having lived, and still hold to the home of your father. Might an old crone be so coarse as to ask why a beautiful girl such as yourself is not held within the high regards of a wealthy husband?"

Neophy whole, her marriage in two weeks—

"Naught a thing to worry about, my lady," Halcyon simply excused, pointedly connecting gaze with the woman's beady dark eyes to convey her barring of the topic. "I live well as I am and will live well as I grow old."

"I find myself only further confused, maiden of the morn. Your beauty alone could have spurred a dowry equal to a temple's offerings, yet you only further display a clever wit and bright mind that a king would envy for the throne at his left side. I can only imagine you await here for your husband to arrive and sweep you away to your waiting palace. Is this why you stand awake amongst the stars of the morning, waiting for your kingly escort?"

Halcyon's faint sensation of stinging frustration had shifted from a lost bumblebee to an angered wasp. This woman either had lost her vision and hearing, or simply sought to test the boundaries of her kindness. "No palace awaits me, my lady, but a husband of good name and home. I've yet to find a man who'd not turn up his nose at the

slightest hint of wisdom in a woman's eye."

A sharp, crude snort of laughter had Halcyon jolting as the woman rattled with the intensity of the perceived hilarity. At this point, she was really struggling to keep the distaste from showing in her face. This woman offered no name, not but a poor nickname her only gift, and now, she went so far as to sneer at her words.

"No, to find a man who sees beyond those jade eyes and obsidian hair to the mind, sharp as the icy cold tonight, would be quite a feat. For that, you are well and true, maiden of the morn."

Halcyon's frown was only growing as her confusion compounded when the sound of bare feet upon the floor alerted her to a new presence, only praying it wasn't—

"Milady Halcyon, is everything alright?"

Every inch of her body restrained the curses and sorrow that wanted to burst free as she turned to the doorway, the manifestation of her grief and misery stood tall and at attention, her dark hair braided back with precision and elegance as always, despite the late hour, dress hanging loose about her still sleep-ridden form.

Halcyon's eyes tore away with furious intensity, eyes locking onto the wall rather than be anywhere near the pale green eyes that she could feel locked on her face. "Everything is quite fine, Roxana. We've a guest, but I've cared for her thus far without issue. Return to sleep."

It took every ounce of self-control she contained not to look over amongst the deafening silence before Roxana's lilting voice returned. "Of course, milady. Good evening, then."

Steps receding, Halcyon released her held breath with care, tilting her drink back to drown the roiling feelings beneath wine and rest she prayed would come soon.

"Ah. No man, then. Not for the maiden of the morn."

With that, Halcyon spat wine across the floor, unable to even process the stains upon her skirts as she whipped her head about to her guest.

How? How did she know? Roxana had stood there for perhaps a minute. Was it so obvious, had others seen before? The panic holding in

her throat, no words would rise as she could only helplessly stare at her guest with a plea for an answer.

"Not a worry, dear maiden of the morn, I've no mind to tell anyone a thing beyond the quality of your wine." The woman set her cup upon a stool beside her, casual as she'd been before, Halcyon unable to so much as blink. Prying a fig apart, the woman continued as normal.

"So, I presume from her poor dress that she's the family slave."

"Her name's Roxana." The defense left her mouth without her permission or consideration.

"Well, I doubt were her name Helen of Troy you'd be allowed to walk your own way home beside her."

Halcyon felt her heart pang, the too true words, while not unfamiliar to her, were like a knife to her chest in their brutality. The woman was right, of course. She'd held Roxana in her heart long before she knew what it meant to love. Yet her father, mother, brothers—none of them knew, for Halcyon already knew what they would say. What the world would say.

Crackling hands like rough-dried clay pressed to her cheek, wiping away tears Halcyon hadn't felt fall loosely down her cheeks. The relief of another knowing, listening to her as she said nothing... it was a weight she hadn't known she'd carried.

"No need for tears, sweet maiden of the morn. 'Shall they harm you, body or mind, you shall strike them down threefold in-kind.'"

Halcyon vaguely recalled the words, amongst the confusion and rapid turn of her sharp emotions. In the temple of Artemis... some priestess had spoken those words, proclaiming them in her sermons.

"Why?"

The woman chuckled, wrinkled and worn face curved in amusement and pitiful sympathy.

"Old words from an old woman, dear maiden of the morn. No need to heed me and my tales. Only a bit of wisdom from one worn from more than my lifetime's worth of experience."

Halcyon sniffed and rubbed at her face like a child, trying to draw her composure again as the woman's hands rested upon her shoulders.

"To exist is to feel pain, my beautiful maiden of the morn. To truly live, though...that takes a fight. To hold tight to your truths and to strike at those who struck you first, even to strike first at times. And so, my sorrowful maid of morning and dawn, what truth do you hold dear?"

What possessed her to speak? To give words so honest and true, she had never known how deep it ran within her veins and held to her heart.

"I love her. I—I don't want to marry some rich bastard; I just want to—to be with her."

"Then you've all the answers you need, Halcyon." The woman shifted back as Halcyon froze, shocked at the use of her name for the first time.

"Now, I do believe I should keep going. The winds await someone to push along the streets—though I thank you deeply for the food and good company."

Halcyon scrubbed harder at her eyes, stemming the tears as she let a small, strained laugh out, her awe and confusion raw in her reddened eyes. "Who are you, my lady? You've kindness and wisdom I've not seen the likes of in all my life."

The woman, straightening her himation and tucking her messy, gray hair back into her hood, chuckled in response. "One you've met before, my maiden, and one you'll meet again someday. But for now, witty maiden of the morn, you need only know your own name."

Halcyon let out a stressed chuckle of her own, shaking her head. "I know my name well, though you'd hardly know, for all you use it."

"Perhaps that is the point, then." The woman smiled, bowing her head before starting to hobble her way out the door, Halcyon standing to follow, questions still whirling about her mind as they crossed the courtyard.

"Wait, my lady—"

"No need to beg that I stay, maiden of the morn, you've held good hospitality well. The gods smile on the good-hearted and... well, you'll know what displeasure looks like soon."

"No, that isn't what—"

The words died in her throat as her eyes were blinded by a stunning flash of light on her left, stumbling and blinking in panic as she tried to track the source.

The wall between her home and their neighbors hid most of the sight, but she could see what was going on well enough without. Fire licking and snapping about, the air still seemed thick, crackling with intensity as the sky rumbled and hiss with the aftereffects of lightning: Cosmas' house was swiftly raising ash to the starry sky and blackening, after only seconds.

"Halcyon!"

Roxana's voice reached her only moments before her hands wrapped around Halcyon's waist, and instinct took over, pressing a kiss to Roxana's forehead. "I-It's okay, I'm fine, we—"

Her eyes tore about the courtyard, now lit by ravenous flames of the next-door home. Her mysterious guest was gone, just gone. How does an old woman slip away so fast?

"Halcyon, what's happening?"

Roxana's eyes connected with hers, and suddenly, Halcyon understood. The woman's every word, her coarse voice, and fierce words slipping into place within her heart in an instant.

Shall they harm you, body or mind, you shall strike them down threefold in kind.

Words of the lady Artemis, patron of the hunt, of the night and the Amazons of the eastern mountains.

Maiden of the morn. The City of Dawn, far to the east, the home of the whispered-to-be-free warrior women.

But for now, witty maiden of the morn, you need only know your own name.

Her hands locked about Roxana's, a grin spreading across her face as she began to step further, pulling her companion with her. "We're going."

Roxana's eyes widened, glancing about with harried confusion. "What?! Hal, where—"

"Do you want to be with me?"

She didn't need an answer, and she didn't get one, truly. Only eyes dark as soil and irises green as the sprouts of spring, who knew the answer long before either had dared to ask.

Roxana nodded, hand tightening about Halcyon's. The two shared a smile, taking a hesitant, trusting step forward. "We're going, then."

To the east, Halcyon tugged and led Roxana farther with her, past dirtied and useless stitching that'd long since fallen to the dirt and courtyard walls that couldn't hold them any longer.

To the east, through streets of people staring and rushing about in panic for the home that burned so bright and fast, though seemed to only burn the home it struck.

To the east, to find freedom and a home where they could be safe, to a people of women and power that Halcyon could feel drawing closer with every step.

To the east, following the wise words and curved smirk of the lady of the starry sky and the moon that lit their way across the town and beyond.

To the east, to follow the dawn and the morn as its every ray led them closer to their home.

To the east, away from slavery and marriage and misery.

To the east, and to the future.

Valkyrie Bradford is a second-year English graduate student, passionate about cheesy literature, bad humor, and her dog and cat that constantly distract her from actually writing.