

The Night Bird

by David Borcharding

She must come to me tonight.

Rasmus stares out the window as his apprentice shaves his chest. The wide russet disk of the late-day sun has begun to dip below the edge of the Island, rippling the air above the city. Soon the shadows will lengthen and stretch, twisting the tall spires of the palace as the sun sets on the world below. The night birds emerge to feed, chasing unseen insects across the sky as the village windows begin to glow from within.

She must come tonight, or...

He sways, his legs suddenly weak as if the marble tub beneath him has wobbled. Rasmus has never been on the clockwork aeronauticals that fly to and from the Island, but he has listened intently to the tales of those who have, and this feels like the way they describe being aboard for the first time.

His pupil lifts the razor and looks at him, concern in his eyes.

"I am fine, Amon," he says, steadying himself against the smooth, warm edge of the basin in which he stands. "You may continue."

Amon pauses a breath longer, then returns to his work and says nothing. Lathering Rasmus's stomach, he deftly scrapes away the offending stubble. The Lady prefers her lovers completely hairless, and so every night initiates like Amon tend to their mentors, preparing them should they be called to her chambers. To her bed.

"You have learned well," Rasmus says.

"Thank you, master." Amon speaks distantly, his entire focus on the delicate task at hand.

"You are eighteen years this month, correct? Almost of age to become part of the Lady's harem."

"If she selects me."

"She will, I am sure of it. You are the kind of handsome the Lady prefers, and you have sculpted your body well. The women say you are quite skilled in the arts of pleasure."

"If I possess any skills at all, it is only because you have taught me so well."

Rasmus smiles. "Nonsense. You have a great well of natural talent. Everyone says so."

Amon makes no reply, intent on his work or perhaps not trusting his voice to conceal his pride.

"I will be sent down soon, Amon. Perhaps even tonight." The words stick in his throat, like dry bread eaten too quickly.

"If I may be bold, it is you who speak nonsense now, master."

"It is kind of you to say so, but it is not nonsense. My thirtieth year approaches, and the Lady has never kept one of that age in her harem."

"I know of several women that age or older." Amon's razor glides over curve of Rasmus' skin as a breeze from the open window cools the damp flesh.

"Women are different. They are just reaching the height of their sexual prowess at that age. Have you been with an older woman yet?"

"Yes. Calila, of the Third Corridor."

"I can tell from your tone that you noticed a difference." Rasmus sighs, the reality of his situation weighing heavy upon him. "Women age like wine. Men, unfortunately, age like the grape, and it is almost my time to drop from the vine. She no longer comes to me. I no longer excite her. That is the simple truth of it."

Amon says nothing. Rasmus does not fault him for this; he knew not what to say when his own mentor spoke similarly.

"Do you remember our first session? What I taught you?"

"Of course. 'Do not fall in love with the Lady. You are a plaything for her only, and shall never be more.' I thought it a rather cold thing to say to a frightened boy of ten years."

Rasmus starts to chide his protege over the criticism, but he knows Amon means no disrespect. Of all of the initiates assigned to Rasmus, Amon has been by far the brightest. They can converse almost as equals, which is why Rasmus allows his pupil more latitude than the others.

"Do you know why I chose that lesson as the first?"

"You said it was because it is the most important lesson of them all."

"That is true. It is also the lesson I failed to heed."

Amon dips the brush in the bowl of lather, preparing to shave the thighs. His intense focus on such a simple task betrays his discomfort at Rasmus's admission of love for the Lady.

"I am surely not the first, nor do I doubt I will be the last. In the century since the Lady descended from the heavens to be with us, there have probably been dozens, hundreds of fools like me. Perhaps all men and women of the harem love her in their own way." He looks down as Amon begins to apply the lather. "But I convinced myself that mine was a deeper love, an all-consuming love. I found myself hoping she would return it in kind and looked for an indication of it in her eyes every time we were together. At my last summons, I convinced myself that I had seen it."

"Perhaps you had, master. Perhaps that is why she has not come to you."

Rasmus laughs, and the cold, brittle sound echoes throughout the bath chamber.

"I saw what I wanted to see. In reality, there is nothing but darkness in her gaze."

A night bird lands on the windowsill with a struggling copper moth in its beak. The bird cocks its head at Rasmus, then swallows the clockwork insect in a gulp before flying away. It all happens in a single stroke of Amon's razor. By morning the bird will be dead with a whole in its chest where the moth will have chewed its way out. Rasmus has witnessed it a few times, and has found dead birds on his windowsill on many mornings. He'd never felt sorry for the bird until tonight.

"I have been in the Lady's service nearly twenty years, and in her harem for half that time. She has tired of me." As soon as he gives the thought voice, he knows it to be true. "Yes, she will send me down tomorrow. I am sure of it now."

"Only the Lady knows that." Amon's blade travels the length of Rasmus' thigh. The stubble-specked lather spatters the floor of the basin in which Rasmus stands, and is carried to the drain by a trickle of water.

"Are you disagreeing with your master?" Rasmus gives Amon a wry smile.

"I am respectfully pointing out the logical flaw in your statement," Amon says, smiling in return. "Only the Lady can know the Lady's thoughts and intentions."

Rasmus opens his mouth to reply, but the low, somber sound of the gong in the courtyard interrupts him.

"There, you see? The Lady has made her selection for the evening, and she has not chosen me. It has been a month now since she last came to me. I will surely be sent down in the morning."

"I will say a prayer tonight against that, master." Amon begins to lather Rasmus' calf, but Rasmus stops him.

"I thank you, Amon, for your service and your prayers. The Lady has made her selection, however, so there is no need to finish."

"It will only take a moment." Amon keeps working. "If tonight is truly to be your last night, at least allow me to complete my tasks a final time."

Rasmus cannot argue the point, and so merely nods. Amon takes up more lather, working slowly.

"What will you do if you are sent down?"

"I do not know. Should I look for work in the village? I have no marketable skills, and most of the unskilled labor is done by the Lady's clockwork mechanisms." Across the city, an aeronautical approaches the west mooring tower. Rasmus watches the slow dance of it as he considers his reply. "I could emigrate to the world below, but again, what would I do there? No amount of distance from the Lady would ease the ache in my heart. There will always be reminders of her wherever I go; her clockwork creations, the temples dedicated to her -- and, of course, this." He sweeps his arm to encompass everything around them. "The omnipresent Island in the Sky."

"Perhaps you shall fall in love with a village woman, one the Lady has sent down."

"A girl with warm, pink skin and pale green eyes, perhaps? No, Amon. The Lady has filled my heart to its eaves. That is why I caution you not to fall in love with her; she will leave no room for anyone else."

Both master and apprentice fall silent until Amon finishes. When the apprentice reaches for the warmed mint oil, Rasmus lays a hand on his arm.

"Prepare a hot bath for me. I have no need of oil tonight."

"Yes, master."

Rasmus steps from the tub to allow his protégé to fill it. He strolls to the window to watch the last light fade from the purple sky. Already, the night breeze has grown cooler. His gaze wanders over the palace windows, wondering whom the Lady chose this night.

"The bath is ready," Amon says after a while. He gathers his things as he prepares to leave.

"You have been a good student, Amon. You will serve the Lady well."

"Thank you." Amon bows low. "If I may say so, you have been an excellent instructor. I have learned much, and will always treasure our time together."

"Now it is my turn to thank you." Rasmus bows in return, then straightens. Then, as an afterthought, "Please leave the razor. I may need it in the morning."

"But I --"

Rasmus interrupts him with a gesture. "I will see it is returned to you."

The young man hesitates, but takes the razor from his kit and places it on the table near the bath. He bows again, then quickly leaves.

Rasmus turns to the window and watches for a moment longer. The shadows are quickly deepening to night, and the silhouette of the aeronautical haunts the darkened sky. He turns his back to it, to the night birds, to the entirety of the outside world.

He had not flattered Amon; the young man would most likely have become the Lady's favored lover, as Rasmus himself once had been.

Settling into the steaming bath, he opens the razor and draws the blade from the base of his left palm to the inside of the elbow. Amon has kept the razor so sharp, Rasmus feels only a whisper of pain -- nothing compared to the heart-crushing misery of being spurned by the Lady night after night.

As the blood begins to flow, he does the same to his right arm. He then submerges to his chin, closes his eyes and lets his fingertips drift across the bowed marble walls of the tub. He pretends he is caressing her slick gray skin, and that the scented water is the sweet taste of her narrow lips. He dives into the inky depths of her large, lovely eyes -- eyes as black as onyx, as black as a starless night, as black as eternity.

