

Lind rolled in her sleep, and it nearly killed her. She braced herself against the tree branch and waited for the adrenaline to wear off. Her left leg dangled over the edge. Below, the dark canopy blocked all sight past a few meters. Beyond that, Lind did not know how far she would have fallen. Four to five stories at least, judging by the forest's average. The shorter the better. She would need to climb down soon. Or else the harpy might eat her.

An arm's length away, the harpy rustled awake. Silhouetted in the night sky, it could have been mistaken for an oversized bird. Its hunched posture, folded wings, and bent legs gave it an avian shape. But Lind knew better. Human hands hid halfway up its wings. Its coat of soft, gray feathers coated a human torso. And in the dim starlight, its face would have passed as handsome human but for its wide, gleaming eyes.

Those same eyes shot Lind a glance.

"It's fine, Tawny," Lind whispered. Deliberately, she pulled herself back into the nest. She trusted the structure even less than the branch, but the ramshackle nest had held both their weight for almost a week. A hodgepodge mix of sticks, vines, tent poles, canvasses, and other miscellaneous scraps, the nest spanned the gap between two branches of a smooth-barked tree. It rattled in the wind, and it shook whenever Lind stepped, but it had never shown signs of breaking.

"Really, I'm fine," Lind reassured as she settled back into the nest. She did not know if the harpy understood her. If it did, it never spoke back. They were supposed to be smart, but Lind had never heard of one learning human speech.

She had also never heard of a harpy rescuing injured hikers and keeping them in its nest while they healed. But there is a first time for everything. Last week, a bad spill sent Lind tumbling off a well-marked trail down a steep slope. Something hit her foot on the way down, a rock or a trunk. It left a minor fracture. Nothing serious, but enough to keep her from climbing back up. She did not expect help, so she tried to find her way around the slope back to camp. It frightened her to think how quickly she lost her way. It rained the first night, and so she did not sleep. The second night, she passed out from fever and exhaustion. After that, she woke up in the nest.

Since then, Lind had lived on her remaining rations as well as various berries and roots that the harpy occasionally brought her. So far, the giant bird had mostly left her alone. The nest was not large, but the harpy always gave her personal space. It also helped that the harpy spent most of its time away from the nest. It only returned to sleep, and it left for most of the day. Part of Lind hoped that it really did just want to help. When she was a child, she had nursed a hatching robin back to health in a shoebox. Maybe this was karma? After her foot healed, maybe it would fly her back to camp, or at least back to the ground. It had not hurt her yet. But every now and then, when the harpy thought she was asleep, Lind caught it staring at her. She knew it was wrong to impose human emotions on animals, but if she were to name one for the harpy's face, it would have been hunger.

"Goodnight, Tawny," Lind murmured as she curled atop a bed of tent canvas. As she settled, she flexed her injured foot. It hurt less today. That was close enough. Tomorrow, she would try to climb down. One way or the other, she needed to leave.

Lind's second sudden awakening startled her more than the first. At first, she thought she had wormed her way into a gap in the nest and become trapped in the tangle. She could not separate her legs past the knees, and something pinned her right arm to the nest bed. Trapped face-down, she wormed around gently to investigate.

She did not need to wait long. A rough force flipped her over and pinned her back onto the nest. Still a shadow in the predawn light, the harpy stood atop Lind. One of its taloned feet gripped her legs together, and the other stood atop her arm at the wrist. Squatting down, the creature loomed over her as though floating above her.

"Hey!" Lind half-coughed, her voice still asleep. "Tawny, what the hell?" She forced herself to laugh, but she could not keep the fear from her voice.

In response, the harpy reached forward with its human hands and grasped the collar of Lind's shirt. If they had been level, he would have looked like a cartoon bully shaking her down for lunch money. When he started tugging, though, his intentions became clear. He wanted her shirt. Unfortunately, he did not seem to know how to get it stuck to her. Rather than slide it off, he tore at the fabric like wrapping paper.

"H-hold up!" Lind yelled as the harpy's claws brushed against her skin. Fortunately, it seemed to take care not to cut her. Ignoring Lind's cry, the harpy continued to peel away her shirt in uneven strips. He worked slowly and deliberately, as one would when peeling an orange. Lind considered intervening with her free arm, but the last thing she wanted to do was startle the human-sized predator perched atop her.

"If you wanted my shirt, you should have asked," Lind joked. She avoided any sudden moves. After all, there was still a chance that the harpy only wanted her shirt. Maybe he would add it to his nest. Maybe he was just curious. Lind could not tell. The fact that he avoided hurting her seemed promising.

This time, the harpy paused at Lind's words, dropping a half-torn strip of shirt. Most of the article was shreds by now. Only the sleeves and back remained intact. Lind's torso was bare save for her sports bra and a twine necklace with a gray stone. In a quick motion, the harpy grabbed the strap of Lind's bra and yanked roughly. The strap held for the first few tugs, cutting painfully into Lind's back and she was jerked up and down. Finally, it snapped. The loose ends fell to either side.

Before she could think it through, Lind swatted at the harpy with her free arm, trying to push him away. He barely budged. With such a thick layer of feathers in the way, Lind had never noticed how muscular the harpy actually was. Though far from heavyset, the bird's fluffy down hid a sinewy frame. Lind paused, wide-eyed. Standing atop her was a feathery cross between a magazine model and an apex predator. And she had just smacked it.

"Sorry!" Lind blurted, retracting her hand. Before she could, the harpy snatched her by the wrist. Its claws dug into her arm, but they did not draw blood. Lind knew better than to fight back. Not yet. The harpy's talons still held her legs and shoulder.

Before Lind could formulate a plan, the harpy's scowl turned to a smile. His jaws popped, and his mouth opened wider than Lind thought possible. The bird's eyes rolled back, his tongue lolled, and Lind could see the back of his throat even in the moonlight. Restrained, Lind could only struggle against the harpy's grip as his maw dropped closer to her face. He moved with deliberate slowness, savoring the woman's mounting panic as his breath washed over her face.

"Tawny, I—" before Lind could finish, the harpy lunged forward and swallowed her head in a single gulp. Her body went haywire, rocking the entire nest as she struggled to escape. But the harpy's iron grip held her in place as he suckled her head like a candy. His tongue danced across her collar, and his teeth pressed dangerously close to her neck. The harpy's bulging throat rumbled as he purred in delight. Lind started to scream, but a mighty swallow sent her head into the harpy's chest, muffling her.

Twisting his jaws, the harpy passed over the woman's shoulders and began swallowing her torso. This raised her to a sitting position. The harpy's talons still held her legs in place, and he pinned her arms to her sides. Her hands balled into white-knuckled fists, and her toes curled in discomfort.

Once the harpy passed her bellybutton, he deliberately slowed. His throat now pinned the woman's arms, and he held each of her legs by the ankle. Steadily, he crept forward, licking eagerly as he went. He paused at her hips to lap against her womanhood, but he did not linger for long. After a few offended screams rumbled up from his guts, the harpy turned his head skyward and finished off the woman's legs in a few powerful swallows.

With an entire woman packed in his guts, the harpy belched mightily. Scraps of his prey's tattered clothing spewed out. Settling down, he began picking the remaining ribbons from his teeth.

Inside, Lind struggled fiercely against the harpy's stomach. Cursing and grunting, she kicked and elbowed against her fleshy prison. With each strike, however, the harpy let out a cute belch, and the stomach constricted a little more. Realizing the futility, Lind tried to calm down and formulate a plan.

But any hope of a plan went out the window when the harpy began humping its bulging belly. Furious, Lind struck with renewed vigor. However, the harpy continued undeterred. Each hump mashed more stinging juices into the woman's skin, and even her best-timed strikes produced no more than a grunt of discomfort. After a few minutes, Lind had all but given up. The stomach curled her into a ball where she huddled against the churning thrusts as though waiting out a storm in a raft. At last, the harpy's gust constricted with bone-straining tightness as it finished.

In the aftermath, Lind shuffled to stay above the slurry forming around her. As a desperate appeal, she pressed a palm flat against the harpy's belly, making a visible impression against the outside. "Tawny..." she started to say.

"That's not my name," the harpy cut her off in a deep voice.

“You can *talk!*?” Lind exclaimed. Before she could say anything else, the harpy pressed against his belly and pushed her head below the juices. Lind’s burbled remark only came up as a belch. As the harpy settled into its nest, she finally blacked out.