

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 awoke to a thump. Though sturdy, entire nest jumped like a trampoline. Lind flailed her limbs, searching for the edge. She was safe. Sitting up, she investigated.

A distant orange glow behind the crest of a mountain promised sunrise. Below, the mountain's shadow enveloped the valley in a dim morning haze, like twilight. Most creatures had not stirred. A few ambitious birds issued their morning calls to anyone willing to listen.

At the center of the nest, facing away, sat Tawny. The harpy had just landed, and he was still in the process of cozying into the nest's layers. Apparently, his landing had made a small crater in the nest's loose layers of twigs, down, and miscellaneous cloth. Lind had never seen him land so gracelessly. Usually, the harpy touched down faintly and silently as a snowflake. This time, he had crashed.

At first, Lind thought he might be hurt. The big owl hunched as though doubled over. On second glance, Lind realized that the harpy was cradling something. How large, she could not tell. At least large enough to force the harpy to sit awkwardly with its legs wide. It kept its wings unfolded and had spread them over and around like a mantle to hide whatever occupied its middle.

More curious than afraid, and perhaps a little delirious from her sudden awakening, Lind crawled closer. In only a few feet, she came closer to the harpy than she could remember. Not since it had carried her unconscious to its nest. Only an arm's length away. Without thinking, she reached forward. "Tawny? Are you okay?" she asked, surprised by the genuineness of her concern.

The harpy's head snapped around to face her. His eyes held surprise, as though he had forgotten that she was there, along with most everything else. For that moment, the harpy's eyes were vacant and primal. More the glassy stare of an owl than the open eyes of a person.

On seeing Lind, the harpy's expression changed. Subtly, his features turned soft and calm, not tense and predatory. In a voice both soft and deep, like slow wind through tall grass, Tawny spoke his first word to Lind:

"Yes."

Surprise swept through Lind like an anesthetic, and she sat silently down. The sight was bewildering enough: bird man staring back-first as it guarded some mystery beneath it like a hen guarding an egg. Now, on top of this, she had to process the fact that he could talk.

"Sleep," it continued. "Please."

"It's morning," Lind stated casually. At some point, the mind can only take so much weirdness at one time, and it resets everything to default settings. When nothing is normal, everything is normal. Talking bird man captures you, nurses you back to health, and arrives at dawn with a mystery it doesn't want to share? Just another day at the office.

“You should not see. Did not want to come back. Nowhere else to go.” Tawny spoke in single breaths. He exhaled his sentences rather than saying them. And always at a whisper. Either he had no experience talking in a human language, or he was just not built for it. Maybe both.

“I’m glad that you’re back,” Lind said. To her surprise, she meant it. Though she still intended to escape today, given the chance, she could not deny over the past days she had somehow acclimated to Tawny’s presence. She was almost comforted. Alone in the woods in the boughs of a tall tree, she would have been terrified. With Tawny there, she felt that she only had to be afraid of him. And, somehow, she was not.

“What are you hiding in there?” she asked. In retrospect, a bizarre question to lead with. For days, Lind had wanted to ask: ‘Who are you? What do you want with me? When can I leave? Where are we? Why have you taken me? How can you talk?’ Amongst these matters, the harpy’s mystery object seemed the least pressing.

“A bad thing. Do not look.” The harpy commanded.

“How bad can it be?” Lind asked, inching closer. Part of her worried that the harpy would attack. But frankly, if the harpy wanted to hurt her, it could do so any time. It was much bigger than her, and she could not go anywhere. What should it matter if she was two meters away or two centimeters?

Before she knew it, Lind was even closer than two centimeters. First, she touched the harpy’s back. He felt soft, like a silk pillow. She ran her fingers down the long feathers lining his back. He shuddered. For a moment, Lind worried that the harpy would lash out. But he remained still. Something had made him lethargic, docile.

Feeling ambitious, Lind reached up and pet the back of the harpy’s neck as one might pet a giant cat. The harpy even purred. But it was not a cat’s purr. Not even a tiger’s. It was dry, rattily, like someone about to cough. Yet somehow still comforting.

The harpy looked away. “Lind,” he begged. “Please stay away. You will fear me. If you see.”

Lind draped herself over the harpy’s back. Tawny’s size and anatomy made the embrace awkward, but Lind managed. “I’ll fear you either way,” she said truthfully. “Just show me.”

Staring at the dawning horizon, the harpy nodded. Folding back his wings, he slid Lind gently off his back and guided her around with his arm. He held her close, partly from affection and partly to keep her steady. Whatever else Lind was, she was still a human, and Tawny remained beholden to his instincts. If she tried to run, he would catch her. After that, he could make no guarantees.

Lind did not know what she would see. Given a pen and paper, she could have made a list of guesses: Something new and shiny for the nest. A slain deer. Someone’s backpack. A beachball. Another lost traveler in need to help. That last guess was closest to the truth. But Lind was not sure if anything could help the lost traveler at this point. After all, it was already in the harpy’s stomach.

The harpy's gut swelled to fit the form of an entire woman, whole, intact, and alive. Muffled whimpers and exhausted struggles accompanied a muted chorus of gurgling and squelches as the occupant shifted inside. From the woman's size, Lind guessed they had similar builds. More than that, she could not tell. Flesh and feathers masked most details and sounds. Only the woman's vague outline—the bulge of a skull here, the lump of a kneecap there—made her shape known.

This could have been her, Lind realized. An immediate question followed: Why hadn't it been her?

"Wha—" Lind began, but she could not form words. Tawny stared down at her, and he looked more human than ever before. Now that she was close, she could see how muscular he really was beneath those feathers. Even his legs remained human until they tapered into talons. In the morning light, she could even call him handsome.

If it weren't for the gut drooping between his legs with a crying woman inside. Maybe "droop" was unfair. The gut was not fat. The harpy's skin remained taught, though elastic. Lind imagined that the harpy could clench its muscles and nearly crush the woman inside.

Then, an even stranger thought crossed her mind. The harpy man, Tawny, looked better *with* the bulging, girl-filled stomach. Lind knew she should be horrified, but something seemed perplexingly right. Like watching a cat catch a mouse. Some people feel bad for the mouse. But Lind always felt good for the cat. Even, she realized, when the mouse could have been her.

In fact, that she could fit in the harpy's belly as easily as its current occupant scratched an itch that Lind did not even know she had. Obviously, she did not *actually* want the harpy to eat her. The thought of sliding into that acrid sack and thrashing as she melted made Lind shiver uncomfortably. But seeing it happen to someone else, knowing that it could have easily been her, lightened Lind's heart and sent warm flutters through her body.

Without waiting for permission, Lind touched the harpy's belly with her palm. It was warm. Not just as warm as the harpy's feathers. The unfortunate woman's struggles inside and the stomach's messy work together radiated heat. Lind knew she should feel sorry for the poor girl on the other side of the harpy's flesh, but it would have been dishonest. Primal emotions superseded and overwhelmed a pesky modern nag like pity. Lind knew only excitement as she pressed her whole body against the harpy's belly in an enthusiastic hug.

Tawny flinched at first. He had expected the human to run or fight or cower. Actually, those were the only three reactions he had ever seen out of a human. Lind's embrace was entirely new. To his surprise, Tawny liked it. Until now, he had thought the only way a human could make him feel good was as a toy or as food. The woman in his gut had been both. But Lind's embrace stirred a new feeling altogether, and Tawny liked it.

Unfolding his wings, the harpy man embraced Lind warmly and pressed her against his belly. In return, she pushed and massaged enthusiastically. Lifting Lind by her arms, the harpy began to kiss her up and

down. At first, each kiss carried the impulse to open his jaws and swallow her whole. But Tawny resisted. Eventually, he became accustomed to Lind's body as something entirely other than food.

Lind could not account for her lost clothing. Some she had slipped off herself. Others added to the nest as crude tatters. The more of her body the harpy found to kiss and lick, the more clothing she lost. Eventually, the harpy had explored every inch of her with his mouth, some places more thoroughly than others.

Frustrated by the harpy's intervening belly, Lind squeezed against it with her legs. "Hurry up!" she demanded to the woman inside. A new bout of struggling erupted from within. The harpy's body cushioned the blows, and by the time they reached Lind, they felt sort of nice.

Equally frustrated, the harpy found a solution. Grabbing Lind by the hair, he leaned forward until he half lay atop her. His still-squirming gut almost smothered her, but she did not complain. Lind's legs poked out from beneath the harpy's tailfeathers, and they both found something to occupy themselves.

By the time they finished, the sun was high in the air, the harpy's gut had gone still and round, and they both lay in a breathless pile.

Lind patted the harpy's gut. It finally had some give, like an overfull water balloon. "Good Tawny," she muttered. "I bet you worked so hard to catch her. Now she's all yours."

"All mine," the harpy whispered, hugging Lind tighter.

"Not what I meant," Lind chuckled.

"Mine," the harpy reaffirmed, half-burying Lind into his happily burbling belly.

"Oh," Lind said. "Actually," she began, embracing the harpy so suddenly and forcefully that he let out a nest-rocking belch, "Mine," she finished with a whisper.

If harpies could blush, this one would.