

A single rowboat carved a symmetrical “V” through the lake’s mirror-still waters. Where the water’s reflection met the gray sky, they two seemed to merge. Over nearby mountains, dark clouds gathered. Before the storm hit, the boat intended to arrive at an island where a lit castle loomed.

Vexed, the businessman practically smacked his oars against the water as he rowed. He and other prestigious figures would meet in that castle this evening. By now, he expected the others had already arrived. However, he had been put through the indignity of rowing across the lake himself. Though he understood fully that the meeting required secrecy, he doubted that its organizer lacked even a *single* ferryman they could hold in confidence.

“Dramatics,” he spat into the water. Sweat dripped from his face, and blisters had begun to pain his palms. His body, softened by luxury, had never known labor of any kind, much less the labor of rowing. Nevertheless, he had to arrive. His indebted trade empire hinged on this evening’s negotiations. In the meantime, he had folded all but the final layer of his ornate outfit on one of the boat’s benches. Crisp clothing and composure upon his arrival would be fitting vengeance for the indignity of rowing.

Then, from the direction of the castle, the businessman spotted something in the sky. At first, he dismissed it as a wisp of cloud. As it neared, however, the shape refined into a large seabird, hardly distinguishable from the gray sky. Once it finally dropped towards businessman’s boat, however, he finally saw it for what it was: a harpy.

In the air, it looked like a beakless bird with legs a little too long. When it landed on the prow of the businessman’s ship, the transformation seemed magical. No more than a change in posture made the creature seem more woman than bird. Its white-feathered wings folded into arms. Crook legs seemed human above their talon-tipped feet. But for a lining of down, the torso could be mistaken for a woman’s. More than the rest, the harpy’s face was strikingly human. And it smiled dumbly in the way only a human face can.

“I help!” she said, panting. “Human too slow, everyone waiting.”

“And what can they expect when they put me in this position!” the businessman huffed. “Fine. If this is what it takes. Here. Get us moving.” Brusquely, he handed the harpy his oars.

For a moment, the harpy held the oars as one might hold a bundle of firewood. “Sticks?” she asked. Then, with a dismissive look, she tossed them into the water.

“Not help like *that*. Dumb human. Not help *you*. Help *them*.” She gestured back at the castle. “You too slow to give up. Should have turned around long time ago.”

“Give those back!” the human shouted, reaching over the side of the boat for the oars. But they quickly floated out of reach.

“Swim,” the harpy suggested in a helpful tone.

"I..." the businessman stuttered, "I cannot."

With a shrug, the harpy turned and spread her wings to fly off.

"Wait!" The businessman shouted. Thinking quickly, he added, "I will make you a deal!"

Instantly, the harpy folded his wings and turned to face him. A bright expression lit her face. "Deal?" She cocked her head. "Love deals! Master is great at them. Teaches much. I learn."

"I am sure," the businessman nodded sagaciously, careful to hide his condescension. What luck! A birdbrain that fancied itself a trader. With any luck he could have it return his oars and row him to shore for a handful of crackers. For now, he had only to play along. "Perhaps ... I could learn, too. What do you know of deals?"

To this, the harpy scratched her head as though trying to remember something. "Master gave a list!" She snapped her fingers. "If I follow, then all deals are good! Ah, fifth rule is: always trade for what other person want. What you want?"

"The oars," the businessman responded quickly. "Return them to me and row me to shore."

Nodding in affirmation, the harpy replied, "Okay, but third rule is: Never trade for nothing. Always take what other will give. What you give?"

"I have plenty," the businessman flourished his arms. "Rare foods. Dazzling jewels. Better roosts than that drab castle. And much more."

Confused, the harpy glanced left and right. Hopping around the boat (rocking it perilously), she checked under both benches and even started rifling through the businessman's folded clothes before he stopped her with a slap on the wrist. "Where?" the harpy asked, rubbing her wrist.

It took a moment for the businessman to register the harpy's confusion. "At my *estates*," he said in disbelief. "Return my oars, escort me to shore, and I will show you."

"Hmm," the harpy considered, "I want all those things." The harpy imagined. "But no."

"No?"

"Rule ten is: Never give before you take. Human needs paddles to give these things. But if I give paddles, then I break rule ten. Must never break rule. Sorry."

"Fine," the businessman suppressed a scowl, "'Then you can have these.'" He held up his ornate clothing.

Snatching the clothing from the man's hand, the harpy tried to put them on. Pant legs tore to ribbons against her talons, and scrambling arms split the suit as the harpy tried to pull it over her larger frame. In seconds, the scraps fell to the boat's floor.

"Nope," the harpy concluded, "Rule twelve is: only take what you can use." The harpy threw down the last of the cloth. "Cannot use."

"Then what!?" the businessman finally snapped. "There is nothing else to give."

Staring directly into the human's eyes, a predatory look spread across the harpy's face. "Not true."

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"You will give..." the harpy stalked forward, licking her lips. The human tried to step back, but he tripped over a bench and fell to the floor. As the harpy loomed over him, she suddenly flashed a cute smile, "Tummy rubs!"

"Th-that is all?" the human asked.

"All?" The harpy cocked her head. "Tummy rubs are best thing ever!"

The human panted, his fear subsiding. "Very well," he said quickly. "The oars in exchange for an, err, 'tummy rub.'" He extended his hand for a shake.

Nodding profusely, the harpy returned the shake (a little too vigorously), and then she pulled the human up to a sitting position on the bench.

With a look of mild disgust, the human began to lightly pet the harpy's underbelly. It was pleasantly soft. Like a silk cushion, until he touched the harpy's firm muscles below. Even those were not entirely unpleasant. Like a horse's flank, only warmer.

"Not like *that*," the harpy laughed, brushing away the human's hand. "But nice of you," she smiled.

"Then how?" the human asked, puzzled.

"Inside," the harpy clarified, patting the place where the human had rubbed.

"Explain," the man demanded. To him, the harpy made no sense. What could she mean by, 'inside?' Was he to cut her open?

"Down here," the harpy opened her mouth abnormally wide, revealing a row of pointed teeth, a narrow tongue, and a pink tunnel in the back that flexed excitedly. Leaning in, she pointed down the gaping opening with a single clawed hand. A strand of drool escaped before the harpy clacked her jaws shut.

“Absolutely not,” the human stated. Fear had not yet set in. If the harpy wanted to attack him, it could have done so by now. His best bet was to take a firm stance and negotiate for better terms. “Do you take me for a fool? Recall your own twelfth rule, dull creature. If you eat me, then I can neither rub your ‘tummy’ nor use my oars. A deal is a deal, so uphold it.”

“Human *is* fool,” the harpy said. “True, deal is deal. Rule thirteen. But rest is wrong. Human goes down all at once. Like wiggly fish. Cannot give tummy rub if I chew. Then, human comes out. Cannot use sticks if in tummy. Stupid human.”

“You cannot mean,” the man gagged. But then he reconsidered. He needed those oars. Stranded on this lake, he would surely die. No one would save him. Some chance was better than none. “Fine,” the human concluded with a sigh.

The harpy practically squealed in delight. “Best deal ever! Okay, off, off, off.” The harpy tore at the human’s remaining clothes. Though the man protested, there was nothing he could do, and the scraps of his last clothing soon floated over the lake’s placid waters.

Without hesitation, the harpy pushed the human back over the bench. He fell to the boat floor with an \*oof\*. His legs stuck into the air, and the harpy caught them by the ankles.

“Now be easy treat,” the harpy explained, wagging her finger. “Or you make me bite.” *Namph*, she clacked her teeth theatrically. “So excited for tummy rubs,” the harpy mused.

As the human looked up in amazement, the harpy opened her mouth until it was taller than wide, and she stuffed both of the human’s feet inside at once. Slurping and gulping, she descended quickly over the man’s legs. Her throat widened as the human’s calves passed through, and even her chest pushed out to accommodate the soft meat.

Disgusted, the human wrinkled his nose. Moist heat enveloped his legs as the harpy chomped and slurped. Strands of saliva drooled rivulets down his thighs. Inside, peristalsis mashed his legs sorely together. Nevertheless, he remained silent. For now, there was nothing he could do.

By the time the harpy reached the man’s hips, the human had slumped back to his shoulders on the boat’s floor. Though the harpy chewed happily with her gums, it was clear she could go no further. At first, the human hoped the harpy would choke. But she seemed to breathe through her nose. On review, the human was glad. He still needed the harpy to fetch his oars so he could get out this mess.

“The sooner the better,” the human muttered. Bracing himself against the floor, he pushed himself deeper into the harpy’s throat. The bird’s eyes rolled back as she spread around his hips.

The human yelped as the harpy reared up and held him straight in the air. Relaxing her jaws and flexing her throat, the harpy let gravity guide the human the rest of the way down. The human winced as the harpy’s warm breath washed over his face, followed by her lapping tongue, followed by her slick throat that submerged him in slick tightness with a heavy *gluck*.

With the harpy's heartbeat thundering in his ears, the last of the human plopped into the harpy's stomach. A *brap* echoed around him. Trembling, the stomach's walls clamped tighter. He bent uncomfortably, but not painfully. Though the stomach pressed from all sides and curled him into a ball, it was elastic enough to at least let him shift his limbs. He could bear it, for now. But the ochre fluids coating his skin and pooling at her feet worried him. Keen on escaping as soon as possible, he got to work rubbing against her prison.

"Eager human," the harpy exclaimed with another belch. "But more like this," the harpy gestured with her hands. The human paused, confused.

"Oh, you not see," the harpy tapped her forehead. "Like crawling, but up." The man tried. "Yes! That!" the harpy purred. Like a kitten juggling a yarn ball, the human had rolled on his back in the harpy's guts and dragged his hands and knees across the stomach's surface. Happily, the harpy sloshed her belly up and down, nearly knocking the human out of place. "Urp. Oops. But that *is* nice. Stay there."

Eager to escape, the human did as he was told. The faster he satisfied this bird's inane desires, the faster he would splat out of this prison and make his way to shore. As he worked, the human admired his own composure. This was a low point in his day. His life, really. Lower than the time he had his cousins killed to secure his inheritance. That had been sad, but necessary. Just like petting this harpy's stomach was sad, but necessary. No work too low. He only wished that the stomach juices did not irritate his skin so much.

Despite his newfound determination, the human's resolve nearly broke when he noticed the harpy pleasuring itself through the layer of flesh between them. Fanning its legs out and positioning the bulge between them, the harpy had begun to grind against its own gut as the human worked. The man nearly vomited. No work too low, he reminded himself. Gritting his teeth, he continued.

"Tummy is mean to humans," the harpy warned. "You take too long, and it will keep you." Taking the hint, the man sped up. So did the harpy. Before long, they both panted and squirmed as they pursued their own goals. "Human rubs as slow as human rows! Faster!"

Suddenly, the harpy's legs collapsed, and her stomach walls tightened considerably. The harpy's throes nearly knocked the human unconscious as he tumbled like clothes in an overstuffed washer. Finally, the harpy went limp, spent. "Best deal ever," it chirped, patting its still-shifting belly.

"Yes, great deal," the human rasped. "Now, spit me up and fetch my oars."

"Nope!" harpy proudly belched. "No sticks for human. Human stays."

"A deal is a deal!" The human cried. His scorched voice could not carry far, but he raised it as loud as he could. "Your rules, remember? Your master would be disappointed if you broke them."

“True. Cannot break rules.” The harpy admitted. “But human is stupid. Doesn’t even know most important rule. Rule one is: never trade when you can *take*.”

Yelling muffled insults, the human thrashed in protest. “Free tummy rubs,” the harpy giggled. “Human so generous. Bad business. Rule three. I help.” She sloshed her gut up and down, tumbling the human around. “See? \*Urp\* Human gets tummy bath. Warm and tight. Now it a trade.”

As the human’s cries faded into a fit of coughing, the harpy arranged the scraps of the human’s clothes into a neat cushion. Reclining against the boat bow like the lip of a tub, the harpy swayed as the human’s weakening thrashes rocked the rowboat. Loud grumbling carried far across the windless lake. Soft snoring joined as the harpy drifted asleep.

Hours later, the harpy woke with an echoing belch. Her belly had fallen still, but it had hardly shrunk. She smacked her lips. As the harpy stood and stretched its limbs, the jumble of meat and bones in its belly sloshed and burbled. Leaning over the side of the boat, the harpy coughed a wad of hair into the now-choppy water. When she looked up, she noticed storm clouds bearing down from across the lake.

Time to leave, she thought. Spreading her wings, she tried to take flight. But the first flap found her face-down in the rowboat. Her belly was still *much* too heavy to fly. Fine. Her arms were strong. She could probably row back in time. When she reached for the oars, however, she found nothing. Looking around frantically, she finally spotted the sticks bobbing in the distance.

Thunder boomed nearby.

“Oh...” the harpy whispered.