

June 2020

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Recommended Citation

Schabel, C. R. (2020) "A Harpy's Love," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1988 : Iss. 7 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1988/iss7/19>

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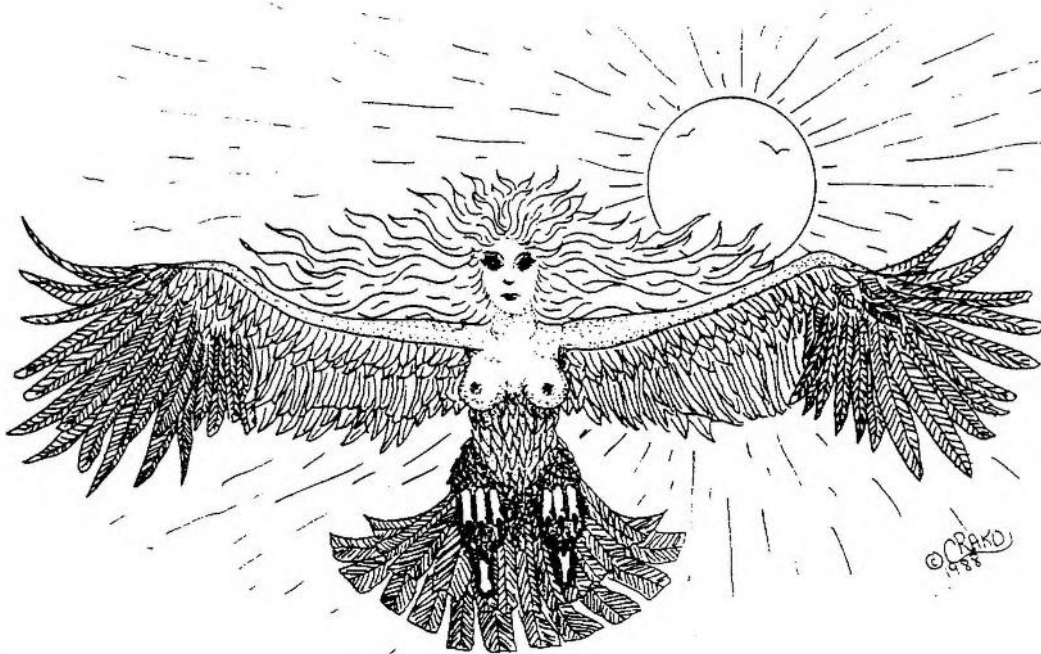
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A HARPY'S LOVE

by C. R. Schabel

In both her human and avian parts, Nardia was the most beautiful harpy. Her golden, sun-streaked hair flowed gracefully back over her white-feathered body as she flew, her twelve foot wing-span silently keeping her ninety pounds aloft. She was also the deadliest hunter. With her ultra-sharp, talon-tipped claws she could break the back of the sturdiest buck-deer and eviscerate the kill in moments. The harpies grew sleek and well-fed because of her skills.

She was journeying from her home in the cliffs to the dark forest where Miranda lived. She was the harpies' elder and sometime advisor. During her flight Nardia rehearsed the questions she wanted answered. Why were there no male harpies? And, subsequently, how were they to reproduce and where did they come from in the first place? Were they born like humans or hatched from eggs like birds? Nardia couldn't remember being a child (or chick). Not having even a personal history bothered Nardia much more than her sisters, who seemed content with plenty of food and an occasional human male to kidnap for their amusement.

Except for Miranda, all the harpies were about the same age, twenty-five or so. The old one stayed alone in the forest, being too weak a flyer to make the high cliffs the other harpies nested in. She managed to ambush

enough rabbits and squirrels and to steal enough food from the local farms to fight off absolute starvation, though she was malnourished. Nardia thought that providing her with some fresh deer meat would be enough to pay for her valuable knowledge. She had no trouble catching an unfortunate fawn that had wandered into an open glade. She tore off a rear quarter to bring to Miranda.

A hillock rose about fifty feet out of the swampy forest. About half way up it was a cave that Miranda lived in. To keep wolves out, the ancient harpy kept a fire burning by its entrance. Because it took two harpies to use a fire-bow, she had to be most careful not to let it go out. Nardia judged by how low the fire was burning that Miranda would have to return soon. She fed the fire herself and waited.

It was nearly dark and a fog was rolling in when Miranda returned. She carried a skinny rabbit. When she saw Nardia, she was annoyed and was about to say there wasn't enough food for a guest. Then she saw the deer-meat.

"Mixed stew tonight!" she said enthusiastically. "Now be a good girl and fetch me some lemon-grass, sage, a bit of barley, a few spring potatoes and a turnip or two from the farmer's fields. You'll find a sack inside the cave.

Hurry, girl, before it gets too dark."

Nardia was about to protest, but thought better of it; after a full meal, Miranda would be in a good mood to talk.

Later, after they had prepared and eaten the savory stew, they perched upon tree-limbs Miranda had set in the walls of her cave and snacked on the remains of their meal. Nardia waited for her hostess to be comfortable enough to start the conversation.

"I always cook my food; harpies that don't might as well be vultures," exclaimed the old one as she speared one last piece of meat using a long, sharp stick as a fork. She had to bend almost double to put it in her mouth, her claws being so stiff from arthritis.

"The stew is excellent," said Nardia. "But I didn't come here to discuss how we eat, rather, how we reproduce."

Miranda leaned back on her perch. "You don't want to know about that. It'll only break your heart."

"Well, a broken heart is better than an empty mind. You told me than yourself. You said a full mind can heal a broken heart better than a contented heart can fill and empty head."

"All right, I guess you've made your point. I suppose I should be glad that at least one of you youngsters is interested in what I have to teach you."

She collected her memories and began her tale.

"Long ago, gods fell from the sky. In many ways they were like humans; they could breed with humans and could even die..."

"The Grave of the Lost God?"

"Exactly; please don't interrupt. Anyway, these gods could do things humans couldn't; one of their abilities was to blend the essences of different living things together, something they called Dena. When they returned to the skies, they wanted to take as much of this Dena as they could, so they blended it into creatures like ourselves. We were meant to go into the sky with the gods, then to have our Dena separated back into that of women and birds."

"Why didn't we?"

"Because the gods were destroyed. Humans, who feared and hated them for their superior abilities, massed against them. The sky-gods were only a few hundred. The human hordes were many thousands. The gods had a great flying machine, something that could take them much higher than any harpy could go. But it had been broken when they crashed to earth and the humans overran and destroyed it before the gods could repair it. Then a great war ensued and after many bloody years all but a few of the gods were killed. One god, I never knew his name, was mortally wounded. But before the arrow in his guts made him bleed to death, he brought me out of the deep sleep I was kept in for transport to the skies. He would have done the same for you and the others, but died before he could do so. I wandered the earth, alone for nearly two hundred years until I found a way to bring the rest of their creations, the things they

made by blending Dena, to life. Thus were the harpies, satyrs, mermaids and other such beings brought into the world."

"Why didn't the sky-gods make male harpies?"

"The best I can figure it, the Dena of men won't blend with that of birds. You've noticed that there are no female satyrs? For some reason the Dena of women won't blend with that of goats."

Miranda yawned. "I'm too sleepy to talk anymore. I have a spare nest; you might as well stay the night. I don't think a bat could fly in this fog."

"Miranda was right," mused Nardia. "What she told me hurt."

Nardia had left before Miranda awoke; she couldn't sleep anyway. She was waiting for the early spring sun to warm the ground enough to raise thermals, which made flying to her cliff home much easier. She wondered if her sister harpies would be interested in hearing what she had found out and if it would depress them as much as it did her.

She was soon torn out of her contemplations by a sudden itch. Then another, and soon many others.

Even the most miserably preoccupied being can be brought out of her sorrowful thoughts when over-run with ticks and Nardia had picked up a good dose of them from Miranda's ratty old nest.

Fortunately she was able to find a deep, still pool where she could wash them out. The little pond was fed by a spring and was icy cold.

She carefully checked out the area for wolves or bears before she entered the water, then waded out to the center of the pool. The intense cold caught her breath. It was horribly uncomfortable, almost a case of the cure being worse than the disease.

She was about to get out when she heard horses approaching. Deciding that she couldn't fly well enough with wet feathers to avoid an arrow, she kept low in the pool; that way the intruder might pass without seeing her.

A young man rode up on one horse leading a second pack-horse. With just a quick side-long glance at Nardia, he dismounted and allowed his thirsty animals to drink from her bath water. And likewise refreshing himself.

"Forgive this invasion of your privacy, dear lady, but it's been a long road between here and the last good water," he said.

Humans were generally hostile to harpies. This one had a sword, but kept it sheathed and his bow was packed in his saddle unstrung. Nardia concluded that the young man must think that she's a human woman, too shy to emerge from the water undressed.

After he drank, he walked over to the edge of the pool nearest Nardia. "Where are your clothes? You must be cold by now. I'll wait for you to dress behind the brush where I can't see you."

"How do I know you won't run off with my gown. It's quite an expensive one. You might be a thief, or just a lecherous wan who wished to amuse his eyes with my nakedness."

"I have no such intentions, dear lady."

Nardia was freezing, but she kept every feather out of sight.

"If you wish to speak to me sir, then stay where you are. However, you must promise to ride away and not look back the moment I request it of you."

Nardia was almost as surprised as he was by her invitation. She wanted to look at him and hear his voice more, even if it meant sitting in cold water much longer than was tolerable.

"Friendly conversation would be nice; I've been weeks without it," he said. "What's your name?"

"Nardia," she said; then quickly directed the topic to him.

He was Byron Cortney, a Baron's son and heir to the title. His uncle, however, disputed his father's claim to the Baronage and openly made war on both of them. Byron had just returned from an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a settlement when he met Nardia.

"It's not as if my uncle's poor; he's done well as a merchant. Unfortunately that gives him enough money to pay for a small army and to place a large bounty on me and my father! I had a little skirmish with two of his assassins just twenty miles back." He drew his sword and looked sadly at the blade. "I had to kill them both."

"Destroying your enemies gives you no joy?" she asked.

"No," he sighed and sheathed his weapon. "And it seems that I'll have to do more killing unless I can convince my uncle to stop this family war he's got going. That's particularly hard to do since he has more men and arms than we have. But, if I can convince a cousin of mine, on my mother's side of the family, to help us with his warriors, then I can bargain from a position of strength and perhaps my uncle will give in without further bloodshed. I've sent word to Lord Visny, that's my cousin, and I'm awaiting his reply."

"But that's enough about my troubles. What of you? Besides your name, your love of cold water and the fact that you're most beautiful, I know nothing about you."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave now," she said, her teeth starting to chatter. "I must hold you to your promise."

He protested a bit, but left when she insisted (by then her body was almost numb). After he had gone, it was all she could do to crawl out of the water; nearly an hour passed before she could fly.

Atop their cliff home, overlooking the patchwork of hills, woods, wheatfields and small towns below, six harpies of different sizes and color-combinations listened raptly to Nardia's narration.

"And then we talked until I couldn't stand the cold water anymore and I told him to leave," said Nardia.

"Didn't you make arrangements to see him again?" asked Lota, a small, dark-haired, dark-eyed harpy with silver-gray feathers.

"No," Nardia sighed. "I guess I'll just have to wait at the pool until he comes again."

"If he's as handsome as you say, I'd not wait for him!" Lota purred; she'd been making provocative statements all through the story, which annoyed Nardia a lot. "A Baron's son, too. My entrance into nobility."

Lota curtsied and twirled as if dancing. The other harpies giggled like school-girls. Nardia grew grimly silent.

"I know where Baron Cortney lives, too," continued Lota, oblivious to her friend's stormy expression. "Your little tale has got me into the mood for a man-raid. Perhaps by this time tomorrow I'll have a story to tell you. We'll see how really good this Byron is and..."

"Stop!"

"Be silent!" yelled Nardia. She stood before the surprised Lota and spread her wings fully. "Is your wingspan as great as mine?!"

"Nardia, I..."

"IS YOUR WING-SPAN AS GREAT AS MINE!!?"

"No, Nardia, it is not."

"Are your claws as strong, your talons as sharp?"

"None of it."

"Do you wish to share my kills, nest on my cliffs?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then do as I say. You will leave Byron Cortney alone!"

Then Nardia turned her back on them all, facing out



over the cliffs, signaling them that she wished to be left to herself. All the other Harpies flocked around Lota, shocked that Nardia would use the 'Ritual of Domination' on her, something she had never done before (and none had dared do to her), and to her closest friend at that.

Lota was shaken and angered by her friend's humiliating treatment of her. "What did I do to her? Did I steal anything of hers or lie about her, or even call her a bad name?" she sobbed. "I just wanted a little fun with a human male, the way we always have. What has she got to be so high-flying about?"

Nardia, angered so much that she feared she'd lose control if she turned and looked at Lota, stood firm, gnashed her teeth and gripped the cliff so tightly that she dug her claws right into the solid rock! Then, because the muscles that close her claws were many times stronger than the ones that open them, she found that she couldn't pull her talons out, not without help.

"I'd think her droppings don't stink, the way she's acting," taunted Lota. "Does she fancy herself a lovely human maid that this precious Byron will take home for a wife? What sort of sleeping arrangements would they have; him in a bed and her on a perch!?"

"Be silent!" Nardia yelled. Forgetting she was trapped, she turned towards her tormentor, twisting her body around. She tried desperately to pull herself free, flapping her wings wildly, but she only succeeded in revealing to them all that she was caught.

Lota hobbled over to her, Nardia couldn't stretch around far enough to see her ex-friend's face.

"It seems you have me at an advantage now, Lota," hissed Nardia.

"You really did it to yourself this time, Nardia," Lota said in a serious tone of voice. "You ought to do something about that temper of yours."

Then her little friend encircled her leg just above the claw and together they levered her foot free. They repeated the process with the other foot. Two talons from her right claw and one from her left had to be ripped out and left in the stone. Nardia bled for some time before the wounds clotted over. Lota and another harpy tended her cuts with a balm made from hawthorn root to help avoid infection.

"Thanks."

"I don't think you'll be able to hunt much until you heal," observed Lota.

"I'll hunt, and you'll have first choice of my kills. I'm sorry I spoke to you that way. But I've had feelings lately, about this Byron Cortney, that I've never had before. You know I never went on man raids with you and never saw a human male so close before. Something stirred inside me that even the cold water couldn't numb. And now it even effects my hunting; I missed a deer this morning because I couldn't concentrate properly."

"You'd better get over this love-sickness of yours before we all go hungry," advised Lota. "Look, believe it or not, I know what you're going through. We're some sort of monsters --you found that out when you went to

see Miranda-- yet we have all the feelings of fully human women.

"When I see a majestic eagle sailing mightily on the air, his great wings spread, I feel admiration, maybe even a little pride that I, too, can fly as he does. But when I see a handsome human male, a young man who couldn't possibly be interested in me as a woman, I feel a longing, a fire within that just leads me to vast frustration and a kind of sad-anger. Then I just want to humiliate him as much as his sheer existence humiliates me! That's why I lead so many man raids; it's my way of dealing with the problem. You deal with it by simply ignoring it. And I don't think I get any more satisfaction out of my method than you do out of yours."

Lota's large, dark eyes grew moist with tears, she dropped her pretty face and turned her back, weeping quietly. Nardia limped over to her and the two friends embraced each other as best as winged beings could.

As the days grew warmer, Nardia's pool grew more comfortable and her visits with Byron grew longer.

"When are you going to visit your cousin, Lord Visny?" she asked, steering the conversation away from any personal facts about herself.

"Later this month, after the jousting tournaments; Visny loves to bet on such things," answered Byron. "Then he's agreed to meet me in Bryerwood, near the famous tar-pits there. I only hope he'll help, not only for my sake and my father's but my uncle's as well. This war of envy he's waging is costing him dearly, in lives and money; and even his wealth is not boundless.

"And there's some local business I'd like to take care of before I go. Some farmers are complaining that a harpy, a bird-like creature with an old woman's head and breasts (Byron blushed) is tearing up their root-crops and stealing chickens. Paltry stuff, but serious to them. Also, some young men are telling tales about being abducted by gangs of these bird women, younger ones, who fly them off to some secluded area and force them to appease these harpies." His blush deepened.

"Do you believe them?" asked Nardia?

"The farmers perhaps. But these young bucks, well, you know how they can get with a belly full of cheap mead."

"No, I don't really."

"Oh? Have you led such a sheltered life?"

"No, not sheltered. But you might say that I'm above such things."

"Above or beneath them? I don't mean that to be insulting. It's just that I've never seen you except up to your neck in water. You might be a mermaid, for all I know."

'If only I was a mermaid,' Nardia thought. 'With their graceful arms. Even their fish-halves are maiden shaped, not like this hideous feathered body

"Why don't you come with me? We could dine together at my castle. We'll be proper-

ly chaperoned. I assure you. This talking by the pool is ridiculous."

"No, it's impossible. Now leave me!"

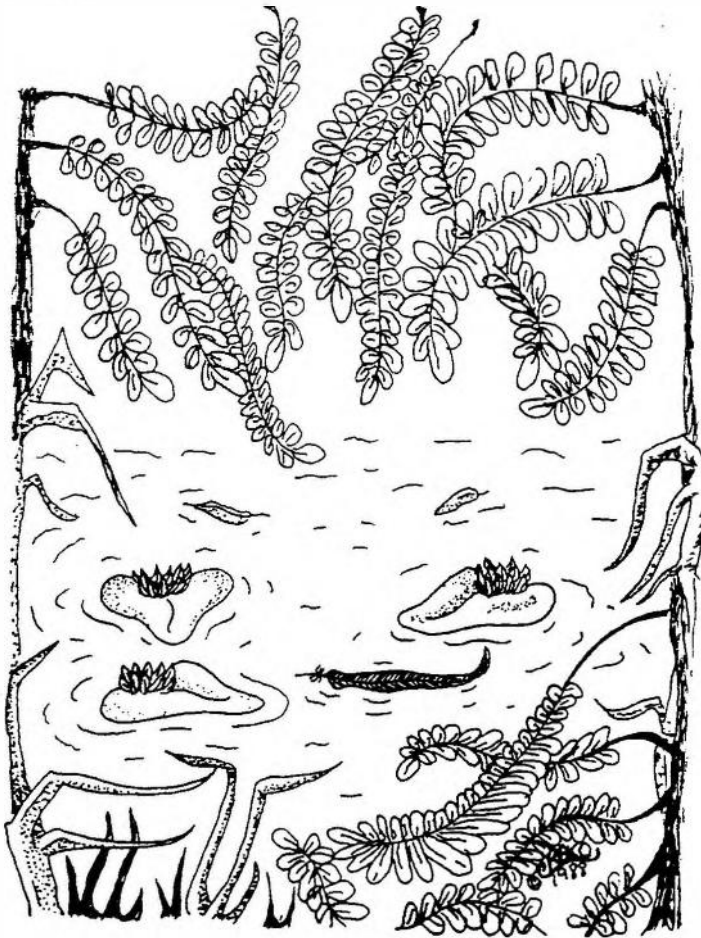
"I see you're going to be stubborn about this." Byron began to undress. "So I'll just have to wade in there and carry you out!"

"If you come into this pool, you'll never see me again!" Nardia looked fiercely at him. "Unless you do exactly as I say and leave now, our friendship will be destroyed!"

Byron froze for a moment, then relented. He refastened his tunic, then mounted his horse. "Can I see you again?"

"I'll be here tomorrow; now please go."

About an hour after Nardia flew back to her cliffs, Byron returned to the pool. He waded out to the middle where Nardia always waited for him and there found, floating in the water, a large white feather. He carefully picked it up and gently put it in a pouch and carried it away.



Nardia looked out over her territory, musing on her relationship with Byron, exploring the strange maze of feelings it forced from her.

Then she saw something; a harpy crawling along the ground with an arrow in her wing. And though she was

almost three miles away, she could see that it was Lota!

She called out for two others to follow her, then sped to her friend's aid.

Lota's wing had been shot through, but fortunately the arrow had missed the bone. She had lost a lot of blood through the wound and was too weak to fly, or even walk. Nardia broke the arrow and carefully pulled it out so as not to break the clots that had formed around its shaft. The other two harpies rigged a net out of creeper vines. They gently put Lota into it and together flew her to their nest. Luckily, the thermals were strong that day.

Lota was semi-conscious and almost choked when they fed her some animal blood mixed with water. In a few minutes the drink strengthened her enough to talk.

"Nardia, I saw Byron. I didn't touch him, though, I just saw him," she stammered.

"I know you didn't, dear; don't let it trouble you." Nardia paused, dreading her next question. "Was he the one who shot you?"

"No, it was those other men," she gasped. "I saw them about ten miles ahead of Byron, apparently waiting for him. Two of them were gruff looking, heavily-armed men, the third a nobleman, I guessed by his clothes. They seemed suspicious, considering all you told me about assassins being sent after Byron by his uncle. So, I swooped in low and landed noiselessly in a clump of bushes close enough to hear them. The nobly dressed one turned out to be that Lord Visny, who you said was going to help Byron; well he isn't! He instructed the other two to capture Byron and hold him for his uncle! Though he specifically forbade them from killing Byron: 'You can't unkill the man if payment is withheld,' he told them, 'but you can always let him go.' I got so excited at that point that I tried to fly immediately back, but the bush was too confining for a full wing-span and they heard my awkward take-off and got a good shot at me. I had just enough use of my wings to get back to the cliff's base, but was too weak to reach the top. Fortunately you saw me before any wolves did."

Nardia leaned over and kissed Lota. "You're the best friend anyone could hope to have."

Then she left instructions for Lota's care, asked directions to Bryerwood and flew off as quickly as possible. Being the fastest flier among the harpies, none of the others could have kept up with her, even if she had asked for their help.

After two hours of hard flying, Nardia saw her quarry, about twenty miles ahead. They were riding toward a cluster of different sized pools. She redoubled her efforts and closed the gap enough for her keen eyes to make positive identification. She recognized Byron. He was blindfolded and had his hands tied behind him. Three armed men escorted him. Six more waited by the pool who, she feared, were his uncle's men.

About eight miles back, twelve of Byron's men were riding after him. She judged, however, that they would never overtake him before Byron was delivered, helpless, to his uncle's men and most likely quickly murdered. Therefore, it was up to her.

Though her flight muscles were pained with fatigue, she pumped her wings harder to get still higher and moving faster. Her efforts soaked her hair and feathers with sweat. When she was still more than four miles from Byron and two miles straight up, she began her dive. She folded her wings back and fell, using their tips to direct her plunge. Still more than a high, she had gained enough speed to break the back of the strongest stag. But then (because air friction balanced the force of gravity) she ceased to accelerate. Feeling that she needed to hit these men as hard as she could, Nardia used her wings to power her fall. Half a mile up she was going faster than she ever had before. The air became thicker. Her flapping became more effective. The wind was so intense that she felt if she tilted her head back it would break her neck. She squinted her eyes so that she was looking through mere slits, yet tears were ripped from them and her eyeballs felt painfully dry. Four-hundred yards up she lost control and tumbled over twice; she regained stability by using her wings like air-brakes and leveled off just ten feet from the ground; with half her momentum gone, she still attacked.

The lead man held Byron's horse. He was a huge warrior armed with a battle-ax. The man on his right had a long pike, the third held a cross-bow which was strung and loaded. Military logic dictated that she attack the man with the cross-bow first; he presented the greatest danger to her. But she wanted to get Byron from the ax-man's grip and galloping towards safety.

A deadly mistake in two ways.

She struck the large man square between the shoulder blades; his back-plate saved his spine from being shattered. The blow tumbled him head-long over his horse. He hit the ground stunned. Nardia, slowed further by the impact, banked sharply to try and outflank the other two. Byron's horse galloped away wildly; she hoped he was safe.

Because two talons from her right claw were gone, its bones and tendons were almost unprotected. It felt broken. Ignoring the pain, she continued her deadly work. The Bowman took aim, she watched his trigger finger intently, when she saw it tighten, she dipped her wing and banked sharply. The arrow shooshed past her ear. While the Bowman desperately tried to reload, she circled around to get behind him. His partner drew up along side to give him cover with his pike. Nardia tried to confuse them by coming at them in a spiraling course but had to back off from the pikeman's jabs, which were expertly adjusted to her maneuverings. Hovering in the air like a huge humming bird, she parried his thrusts with her one good claw, watching the bow-man reload. When the cross-bow was ready and brought up to shoot, she dropped to the ground and hobbled right under their hor-

ses, then dug her talons into the forelock of the Bowman's stallion, causing the horse to rear up so hard that he fell over backwards, crushing his rider beneath him. The pikeman, enraged at the fate of his friends, stabbed furiously at the downed harpy. Nardia ducked and dodged as best she could; several times the pike split through her feathers and nicked her hard enough to draw blood. Miscalculating one thrust, the pikeman dug the tip of his weapon deep into the earth. This gave Nardia enough time to jump on the staff and break the point off by squeezing it with her claw. The warrior tried to draw his short-sword, but Nardia was on him too quickly and, with a powerful thrust of her wings, drove the point of his own weapon deep into his lungs and heart. Her white feathers soaked with blood—some of it her own—Nardia sank down on the ground, exhausted.

The ax-wielder, the first warrior she struck, had not been killed by her blow as she had thought. He sat recovering his strength while she was killing the pikeman. When he saw her fall to earth, he rose slowly and stealthily approached her, his weapon raised. Nardia saw him a halved-second before he struck and she had just enough time to fall on her back and catch the handle of the ax with her claw. The blow, however, had enough momentum to drive the blade into the muscles of her breast, opening a large slash. The huge man saw that she was not fatally wounded and tried to free his weapon by shaking it from side to side. Failing that, he pushed down on it with all his considerable weight and strength. The fight became a wrestling match between a wounded, half crippled, ninety-pound harpy and a nearly fully-functioning two-hundred- and-forty-pound man.

It was uneven.

When the warrior lifted her from the ground, both still holding on to the ax, Nardia beat him viciously with her wings. She knocked his helmet off and staggered him with blows enough to tear the battle-ax from him and fling it out of reach. The large man backed off from her and drew his dagger. He grabbed it by the blade and threw it at her. But Nardia, who could dodge arrows, had little trouble avoiding a hand thrown knife. Without weapons, the warrior felt helpless against the harpy who had just killed his two companions, so he ran for his ax. She managed to fly up a few feet and came down hard on him as he bent to retrieve his weapon. Her two remaining talons dug deep into the back of his neck, crushing his vertebra and puncturing his carotid arteries.

Exhausted, bleeding, caked with the blood of the three men she had slain, Nardia forced her bone-sore body again into the air to search for Byron. When she was high enough to see over the slight rise of the land, she spotted him: hands tied, blindfolded, his horse galloping wildly out of control, Byron was heading straight toward the six men who were waiting for his delivery. Time being too scarce for planning, Nardia impulsively picked up the still loaded cross-bow and a dagger then took off after Byron.

Since the land provided little cover, she flew only a few feet off the ground, her great wings brushing against the tall grasses into which she planned to dive if the assassins spotted her. As she drew closer, she contemplated shooting Byron's horse from under him; perhaps she could cut him loose before the warriors noticed him. But she abandoned the plan: if the horse fell on him he'd be killed like the Bowman she fought. She looked up to see if the assassins had seen her or Byron and noticed that the six men seemed to be quarreling among themselves; too much so for them to be aware of her or Byron. The way Byron was galloping towards them, however, they soon would be. Nardia changed her angle of approach slightly and cut across the galloping horse's path, just enough to cause it to veer off in another direction; next she lightly landed in a clump of thorny shrubs near to where the six warriors were quarreling and braced the cross-bow so she could aim it at them. They were moving around, shouting at each other in several languages.

Nardia waited until one of the bowmen had his back to her, then shot her only arrow. It went over the Bowman's shoulder and grazed the man opposite him, just nicking his ear. Infuriated, the slightly wounded man attacked the Bowman, whom he thought had just shot him and therefore had an unloaded bow. He took an arrow through the neck before he came within sword reach of him. At first there was dead silence, the remaining five looking alternately at the fallen mercenary and the Bowman that had killed him. Nardia feared her plan would fail and they would soon discover Byron, who was still riding uncontrollably in their direction. A moment later, however, one warrior -- a friend of the slain one -- roared a war-cry and attacked the Bowman. Soon all five were shooting, slashing and pounding each other viciously. When the melee ended, all but two had been killed and both of them were so weary and wounded that they were no threat to Nardia or Byron and simply rode away to have their cuts tended.

While the fight went on, Byron's horse had stopped by a small stream, created by a heavy storm the night before, that fed into one of the dark pools in the area. Byron's feet had been tied to the stirrups but, by pulling them out of his boots, he managed to free himself from his mount. Barefoot, blindfolded, his hands tied behind him, Byron could do little but wander around, trying to find a place to conceal himself. He was unaware that all his immediate pursuers had been dispatched.

Warily, Nardia landed a few dozen yards behind Byron. Almost too sore to enjoy the victory and rescue she had accomplished, she rested a moment, watching Byron stumble about before she hobbled painfully over to him on her wounded claws to cut him free.

Then she reconsidered.

She didn't want him to see her.

She knew Byron's men were coming and forced herself into the air once more to see how close they were. She estimated that they would reach him in about ten

minutes.

Byron, still thinking he was in danger, desperately sought a place to hide. In doing so, he tripped over a log and nearly broke his nose. Nardia, seeing this, went over to talk to him.

"Who's there?" Byron asked.

"A friend," Nardia answered.

"Nardia? Thank God. What happened? Where did you come from?"

"I'll explain all that later," she needed time to concoct a good story. "You're no longer in danger and your men are coming, so just be still and wait for them."

"Where are you going? Don't leave me like this!"

Because he wore a blindfold so long, his hearing had grown highly acute. He distinctly heard the whoosh of her wings as she took off.

A second before he heard the sickening splash and Nardia's desperate screaming, it dawned on him what she meant to do.

The recent rainfall had covered the tar-pit with a few inches of water making it look like a pool in which she could conceal herself.

Byron staggered to his feet and ran towards the sound of her screaming, only to mire himself in the tar when it reached mid-thigh.

Nardia tried to flap her wings and climb out of the sticky tar, but she had plunged in too deeply and was well in the grip of the hot, glue-like liquid. Her powerful claws, well immersed, pawed at the asphalt which only worked to pull her more quickly towards oblivion.

Wordless panic clutched her heart, her lungs pumped and emptied frantically, as if they knew they'd soon have no air.

Her exhausted muscles were granted maximum power. She expended more energy than she had killing the assassins, yet it only served to speed her towards extinction.

Nardia saw Byron's feeble attempt to save her and knew he could do nothing. The last thing she heard before her ears went below the thin layer of water was the hoof beats of Byron's horse-men approaching. With that slim hope of rescue, she was unable to resign herself to death. Her face, her all too human face turned upwards, looking like an animate lily pad. She saw the sky, blue and beautiful, and wondered if she would ever fly again.

Byron screamed as loud as he could when he heard his men ride up.

"Don't worry sir, we'll have you out of there," said the captain.

"Get her, get her!" he commanded. "I'm all right; she'll drown!"

The captain took a rope from his saddle and threw it to Nardia. It floated just in front of her face. "Grab it, girl, before you go under."

Her face disappeared below the surface before she had a chance to tell him she hadn't a hand to grab it with.

Two of Byron's men pulled him from the tar and

quickly untied him. He yanked his blindfold off and squinted his eyes and shaded them to see before they grew accustomed to the bright daylight. He saw the rope floating above the spot where ripples in the water betrayed Nardia's location. He reeled the rope in quickly, tied a fist-sized rock to the end and, bolo-style, threw it back out to her, hoping the stone didn't hit her.

Nardia, conscious but in total darkness, her lungs paining for air, felt something rough and hard scrape past her nose and heard it plop through the tar. When it sank down low enough she was able to grab it with her claws. Had she not lost her talons, she may have unintentionally cut the rope entwined around the stone.

The rope grew taut and began to pull her upwards towards the surface, back to the bright world of the living. Her head re-emerged and she gasped the air. It was putrid and smelled of the hideous fluid she was still in, but it was the sweetest thing she had ever experienced. Tar smeared her comely face, yet she risked opening her eyes and saw Byron frantically shouting orders and pulling the rope. She smiled to see how desperately he looked, how much he must care for her.

Then she remembered that he was about to see her fully.

"Byron," she called. "There's something I must tell you."

"Don't worry about anything, Nardia, just hold on. For God's sake, don't let go."

She fell silent and prayed that he wouldn't kill her once her feathered body was revealed and showed him she truly was a monster.

When she was a few yards from solid ground and it became obvious what she was, Byron's men stopped pulling on the rope and stood gaping at her. One drew his sword.

"Fools, idiots!" Byron roared at his men. "She fought nine armed men to save me; didn't you see their bodies? Now pull her out or you'll stand for ten dozen lashes each!"

His men responded too slowly, so Byron waded back out into the tar, picked Nardia up and carried her to solid ground.

She snuggled against his chest and wrapped a wing around his back. Despite the wounds of her battle, exhaustion, and the tar that still clung to her, she felt wonderfully alive. She stared into his face, which was much too close for her far-sighted eyes to see in any detail, but he looked unbearably handsome.

He stared down at her as he placed her gently on the ground.

"One good thing about your plunge in the tar, Nardia. It stanchd your wounds better than any bandaging could. That's a fairly serious gash on your chest."

Nardia wasn't thinking about the tar or her wounds. "You don't seem surprised that I'm a harpy."

"No, I knew it the first time we met."

Nardia was speechless for a moment. She thought she had been so careful. "How?"



"I saw your foot-prints leading to the pool. You must have walked into the water the first day, rather than dove-in like you did in the tar pit."

"Would it were the other way 'round," she giggled. "Why did you lead me on like that? I was nearly water-logged from spending so much time in that blasted pool."

"I was afraid that if you knew that I knew, you'd lose interest in me and our friendship."

"You like me then?"

"Yes, very much."

"But you couldn't love me, not as a man loves a woman?"

He sighed, gently hugged her and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "No, I couldn't. I'm to be married. But believe me in this, your friendship is as precious to me as my betrothed's love."

Nardia told him that it made her happy to have him feel that way about her but, inwardly, she wept.

Nardia needed much care before she could resume her life. Byron brought her to his castle to recover. Eight hot baths it took to get all the tar off of her, which left her flight feathers so badly damaged that she was land-bound for six months. In that time she lived in Byron's home and spent many happy hours talking with him, sharing meals and playing little games. She even met Byron's fiancée: though Nardia didn't like her, she was polite; the girl was fascinated with the harpy. And though she missed Lota and her other friends, she almost dreaded the day when she could fly again and had to leave. During her good-byes, Byron invited her to his wedding, but she couldn't bring herself to attend. She did come for the birth of his first child, however. A girl-baby, whom they named Nardia.