

SHADOWS AND TALONS

by Mellanie Black

CREATURE: *Harpies* | **LEVEL(S):** 5-6 | **CW:** *Abuse, gaslighting*

SYNOPSIS

In the ancient town of Cragwatch, the first harpy reveals that the legend of her origin is a malicious lie. The story goes that she pined for unrequited love, but in truth she was punished for refusing to submit to a god's will.

The harpy cannot reveal this truth alone. The party has been summoned to stop her tale from spreading. Will they discover the true story, or will they help to silence it? This adventure is designed for level 5 characters.

ADVENTURE HOOK

The party's growing renown leads the Cragwatch Council to contact them. The Council seeks aid in exchange for substantial reward.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Cragwatch's Council is heavily religious, but also influenced by the scholars and merchants of the town. It's relatively quiet and sees little of outsiders save those who come to see the temples and archives of religious relics.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **LYRA VELATHA, THE FIRST HARPY:** An elven bard cursed into this form when she angered Fenmarel Mestarine. She leads the colony accused of attacks by Cragwatch Council. She's proud, fair, and has not become too bitter.
- **ERMIN FARIN:** A half-elf High Priest of Fenmarel Mestarine and senior in the Cragwatch Council. Knows the truth about his god and the harpies and seeks to repress it by any means. Contacted the party as a way to appease the rest of the council and attempt to control a problem he sees as his and his gods' alone.
- **INA BORWAN:** A half-elf farmer. She owns and runs Fairlight Farm with her wife Veena. Hard-working and decent, with short blonde hair and a round stature.
- **TIMAREL FUNT:** A novice human monk assigned to assist the party. Nervous and biddable, but devoted to truth and honesty.

CHAPTER 1 - ARRIVAL AT CRAGWATCH

As you near the town of Cragwatch, you see several large, steep hills begin to dominate the landscape. At the foot of the hills, golden farmland stretches out for miles.

A weather vane teeters on a spire as a slow puff of chimney smoke tells you that this is a town already about its business.

You approach a watch post and a small, thin man in faded robes dashes out from beside the guard and interrupts before she can hail you aside.

This person is Timarel Funt. He's excited but very wary of the adventurers and their incongruous appearance.

WHAT TIMAREL KNOWS

On the walk into Cragwatch, Timarel happily divulges information:

- A few weeks ago, Ivona Detrix, a ranger devoted to Fenmarel Mestarine, met a harpy in the forest. An altercation occurred and she was injured.
- Ivona reported to High Priest Farin and the attacks started at Fairlight Farm a few days later.
- Harpies have previously been an occasional menace to those who stumble across them in the forest. There were never any serious injuries.
- Equipment and the farmer herself were attacked.
- He knows nothing of any ulterior motives.

DEVELOPMENTS

Timarel steers them towards The Blue Heart Inn, suggesting they rest in preparation for their meeting with Ermin Farin.

CHAPTER 2 - FINDING THE FACTS

The Blue Heart is a two-storey inn of grubby sandstone, with brightly-flowered vines creeping over its surface. A bard sits forlornly on the sill of the main window with her large bottle of wine and a flute. A dozen small tables litter the main floor.

Behind the bar a shaven-headed rosy-cheeked elf stacks ale barrels. *"Ah! Timarel. Finally got somebody to come and help with our bird problem, eh?"*

Timarel makes his excuses and leaves, promising to meet the party early the next morning.

The innkeeper is Bordie Nylan. She makes the party welcome but knows little except that:

- Fairlight Farm is where the trouble is. It's the big farmhouse between the hills and the edge of Cragwatch.
- She points to council-badged posters on the wall:

HARPY ATTACKS!

Harpies have breached Cragwatch for the first time in our history. No longer content to remain in the forest, these creatures defy the gods themselves.

DEFEND YOURSELF

The Harpies' unnatural voice will put even the strongest-willed into a stupor. Keep your distance. Keep covered and low.

DEVELOPMENTS

The next morning Timarel takes the party to meet High Priest Farin at the Temple of Fenmarel Mestarine.

CHAPTER 2.1 THE TEMPLE

The temple is an ornate wooden structure, carved with leaves, vines and forest creatures.

You're led to a small chamber to the side of a large hall of open fire pits where offerings of herbs and scrolls burn. Ermin Farin is a thin, white-skinned elf, showing signs of age. Four priests surround him, each wearing a different symbol of the Seldarine.

Ermin welcomes you formally but with genuine warmth: *"Refreshments? Timarel will fetch anything you may need."*

- Ermin and the other priests use the **priest** stat block.
- He rants about the harpies extensively. They are ungodly monsters, a blight on the earth, etc.
- "Our devoted friend" Ivona Detrix's woodland encounter started this. She escaped with news of planned attacks. The farm was hit a few days later.
- Ivona is currently training in secret in the event of more attacks.
- Ermin tells how Fenmarel Mestarine witnessed the creation of harpies. This is the official version and it is a lie. He presents it as truth:

Long ago a young woman in our nearby forest heard birdsong that moved her to tears. Following the sound, she met a handsome elf in a clearing, also paused to appreciate its beauty. This was Fenmarel Mestarine, our reclusive god.

His divine presence stole her heart, but he shortly vanished, as if he were never there. She called for him but he was nowhere to be found and she despaired. The elven sky goddess took pity on the woman and taught her a song as enchanting as birdsong.

When this failed to bring Fenmarel Mestarine back to her side the woman cursed the gods, turning her divine gift into an unholy curse, and her beauty into a caution against willful blasphemy.

A DC 10 Wisdom (Insight) check reveals his zeal to be suspicious. DC 18 reveals that the rant appears learned by rote and that he is lying.

DEVELOPMENTS:

- It takes a DC 25 Charisma (Intimidation) check to make him willingly reveal the lie. The priests attack if it appears that the party is any threat to their secret or their reputation.
- Timarel stays out of any fight and is loyal to the truth, not his superiors. He helps the party.
- If the party goes along with High Priest Farin's tale, he insists on a visit to Fairlight Farm to see Ina Borwan and her wife, even if they have already been.

CHAPTER 3 — FAIRLIGHT FARM

If the party chooses to investigate here before they meet High Priest Farin, lower DC for Intelligence (Investigation) and Wisdom (Perception) checks at the farm by 3.

Fairlight Farm has one large, squat farmhouse with a number of small barns and outbuildings. Chickens and goats are scattered about the yard as you approach the front door.

Ina the farmer welcomes you, although she is clearly wary and shaken by events.

INA HAS TWO LARGE SCRATCHES DOWN THE LEFT SIDE OF HER FACE, EYEBROW TO JAW.

- Any Wisdom (Medicine) or similar check shows that it's unlikely they were made by a harpy's talon, but the bruising shows an attack of some force. DC 15 reveals the work of a straight, sharp blade.
- A DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check reveals Ermin Farin's guilt if he is present as this is revealed.
- If the party accuses Ermin of knowing more than he lets on, Ina's memory breaks and she recalls reporting the attack to Ermin and Ivona. Ivona immediately took out a dagger, slashed her eye, and persuaded Ermin to alter her memory.

INA'S ACCOUNT OF THE ATTACK:

- It was dark as she investigated a strange noise - a thud and a screech - in the nearest field. She had heard several of these for many nights.
- If any part of the truth is revealed, Ina recalls that boxes full of scrolls were left behind, but she never saw anything until the most recent attack.
- If not prompted, Ina's memories after the noise are foggy. She definitely recalls a sharp pain across her face and a female humanoid figure with wings, silhouetted against the moon and lamplight.
- Upon remembering, Ina begins looking for the boxes the harpies left behind.
- She seems to have genuine difficulty recalling more detail and only helps unearth the boxes if her memory is restored.

- The PC with highest passive perception notices disturbed dust as if items have been dragged/moved in haste as they move about the farm.
- A DC10 Intelligence (Investigation) check in the house or grounds reveals boxes of hidden papers.
- They are hundreds of neatly packed identical letters written in charcoal and rudimentary plant-based inks. They read:

The Harpies call to the people of Cragwatch. We are not your enemy. We are not the evil some would have you believe. Ask yourself why we were only rumours and bedtime stories until a ranger found herself with bruised pride. We welcome your questions. We welcome your presence. The curious should come to our clearing. Arm yourselves as you like. You will find no danger.

- A simple map shows a direct path to the Harpies' Clearing.
- The party is offered rations and some basic tools by Ina. She wants them well provisioned to make things right.

DEVELOPMENTS

- If confronted with evidence, Ermin Farin reluctantly confesses. If alone, he goes quietly to call four other priests and attacks the party. If the priests are with him they attack immediately.
- Two priests and Ermin Farin remain at range while the others engage in melee using Divine Eminence on all possible melee attacks.
- If defeated and left alive, he tells the truth about the harpies' creation. Priests of Fenmarel Mestarine in this area are told the truth upon initiation in order to control the lie.

A young bard practiced in our forest, overheard by Fenmarel Mestarine. He admired her talent and voice, and demanded a song in his honour. She refused. Her work, and her pride, were more pressing. She did not appreciate demands.

In his rage Fenmarel Mestarine took her delicate musician's hands and made them into claws. He turned her voice into her curse, doomed to bring pain and confusion, not pleasure.

We lie. We protect our god's secrets. We couldn't have his envy of mortal talents be known. The tale is more sympathetic if her curse is a punishment, not torture. The result is the same — Harpies blight the world — what should we care for the method?

- If the party seems uncertain who to believe, High Priest Farin insists on taking four priests and confronting the Harpies with the party.
- If Timarel is given evidence, he is horrified and will help the party get to the truth, even if it means sneaking around behind the priests' back.
- If Ina reads or hears the truth, she is confused, as if she does not understand the words, even as she hears or reads them. It becomes clear that her memories have been amended.
- Remove Curse or similarly powerful spell/item will restore them, as will many hours of talking/prompting.
- She remembers that her cuts were caused by Ivona Detrix in an attempt to frame the harpies.
- Ina and her wife Veena assist in any way they can.

OBSTACLES

6 **giant spiders** descend from the trees

3 **faerie dragons** (violet) tug at any shiny objects the party hold

A huge pit trap takes up most of the path near the Harpies' Clearing. It's automatically avoided if they have the map.

CHECK

DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check to negate their surprise round

DC 14 Animal Handling (Wisdom) check should make the dragons cooperate in most circumstances. Advantage if food is offered.

DC13 Wisdom (Perception) check to avoid it.

CHAPTER 4 – THE HARPIES' CLEARING

As the party leaves Cragwatch and heads to the Harpies' Clearing, read this:

The ascent into the forest is harsh; pine needles scatter and make your footing uncertain. Large boulders line the ascent as the route slowly takes you off the well trodden pathways of rangers and into the wilds of the forest.

The party encounters obstacles on their journey. If they follow the Harpies' map, reduce the number. A route given by anybody else leads to more obstacles and a longer journey.

One or two obstacles should keep the adventure to around its advised length.

The walk takes around half a day by the Harpies' route. As they near the clearing, they are on softer mossy earth, with tree roots cluttering the path underfoot. Until they reach the Harpies they are on difficult terrain.

REWARD

DC 13 Wisdom (Survival) check means the party can collect 2 vials of viable venom to be used as poison.

An amicable encounter leads one of the dragons to leave a tiny gem worth 5gp with their favourite party member.

2d10 damage taken if they fall

MEETING THE HARPIES

When the party arrives at the Harpies' Clearing, read this:

The forest opens into a cavernous cylinder of rocks and branches. Harpy nests are hitched onto almost every surface on the cliff-face, and look more homey than you expected. An ancient tree stands in the centre. You see the sky through an opening hundreds of feet up. Bodies of forest beasts — a sabre-tooth tiger, an ettercap - are covered in talon scratches and strung up. A prominent platform balances about 100ft up.

A harpy descends. Five or six others watch you. As she lands you see she is tall and lithe, and her deep brown skin is covered with a criss-crossing of scars. Wings of tawny feathers tuck into her back and she retains some elven beauty. Her eyes are deep orange, surrounded by black sclera. Her teeth are sharp points and where you'd expect the deep brown of human lips, you see blueish black.

"I am Lyra Velatha," she says.

Your party's approach makes all the difference in how Lyra treats them. If they approach peaceably she graciously does likewise. She attacks at the first sign of aggression, but makes every attempt to tell her story first. She uses the **harpy** stat block.

- At the first opportunity Lyra tells the true version of her story from *Chapter 3*.
- As the first harpy, she is the leader of this colony. She was cursed in this forest, and wishes to remain as a reminder to Fenmarel Mestarine and his priests of the gods' pride and folly.
- She is glad that her words brought the truth to wider notice, whether people believe it or not.
- She is angry that her colony needs to speak out. They'd be happy to continue in isolation.
- Lyra reveals that Ivona believed widespread misconceptions about her kind, and she threatened to have their colony attacked and erased. This forced them to speak out.
- Observation of Ina showed that she was kind and intelligent — the perfect person to receive their letters. The damage to the farm was not caused by harpies.
- "If Cragwatch will not love us, at least have them respect all we do for the village."

- Dangerous beasts are routinely kept from the town by their hunt.

Deputy leaders of the clan, and two **swarms of ravens** help her in battle. Scale between 8-10 **harpies** (including Lyra Velatha) depending upon your party. If they are defeated, the harpy clan scatters, fearful of meeting the same fate.

CONCLUSION — CRAGWATCH'S LEGACY

CONCLUSION A

If the party helped the Council rid the town of Harpies as requested, read the following from Ermin Farin and give two *Medallions of Seldarine* as reward.

"The gods in their wisdom perform miracles beyond our understanding. You have demonstrated exceptional faith and devotion. Your denial of doubts does you credit. Accept these Medallions of the Seldarine as thanks. They mark you as kindred to our cause."

The town sets up a Harpy Hunters Guild, trained by Ivona Detrix. Ina Borwan does not join.

The adventurers are free to enjoy their renown in Cragwatch or to move on as they like.

CONCLUSION B

If the Harpies come peacefully, they join at a feast organised by Ina Borwan in the town square. Ina has convinced many sheepish looking members of the Cragwatch Council — you notice a scholar and a merchant among their number — to celebrate this new chapter. Read the following from Lyra Velatha:

"I did not expect telling my story to bring unity and peace. I thank Ina Borwan, this brave band of adventurers, and everybody here. You looked beyond the truths you were told to seek the truth as it really is. This is a testament to the good still to be found in our world. May we continue to fight for it. Cheers!"

- All religious leaders are expunged from Cragwatch Council until it's established who among them has been involved in this deceit.
- If Lyra has not yet told her story, she will do so now.

CONCLUSION C:

If somehow the priests and the harpies are vanquished, the party deals instead with Ina Borwan.

"We're grateful to you for exposing this... strange happening. Whatever the gods intended, it's clear that we should be thankful that they don't intervene more often. We're hopeful we can create something great in Cragwatch."

REWARDS

Characters who complete this adventure may receive the following rewards:

TREASURE:

At the conclusion of the adventure roll four times on Magic Item Table F in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and award:

TREASURE	VALUE
10 precious gems	50gp each (500gp total)

MEDALLION OF THE SELDARINE

Item, common

Use an action once a day to gain advantage when making Persuasion (Charisma), Performance (Charisma) or Intimidation (Charisma) checks while interacting with Clerics, Paladins or High Priests of any religious order of any good/neutral aligned elven deity.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Harpies are among many female NPCs and monsters in fantasy RPGs whose stories are moulded by misogynistic stereotypes that as a gaming community we're moving past. In the Harpy's case, it's the story of a woman motivated primarily by her need for romantic attention from a man. The Harpy is never named in the *Monster Manual*, but we know the name of the man who spurned her. This robs the Harpy of her agency, and her identity outside of her relationship to a man; two wrongs I seek to put right in this alternate telling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mellanie Black lives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in England. She believes in *D&D* inclusivity and homebrews a special place in The Nine Hells for gatekeepers. She's a feminist, fantasy writer, *D&D* enthusiast, warlock, and aspiring elf. You can find her over on Twitter @MissBox.