

HOW I RUN IT'S TROGLODYTE TUESDAY:

HARPY

CONTENT WARNING

This version of the harpy is built around the idea of women accursed and exploited by the patriarchy, and as such is not appropriate for all styles of game or all gaming groups. Consider carefully if their inclusion makes sense for your game but also consider if the inclusion of an unexamined version of the “monstrous feminine” (as presented in 5E and previous editions of D&D) makes sense and might even be more problematic sans context.

And as always, make use of Session Zero and appropriate safety tools with your group to avoid undue discomforting, or worse, re-traumatizing, players at the table.

While harpies are known for their sadistic glee in causing suffering and death and for their monstrous forms that combine the head and torso of a human woman and the body of an enormous vulture, it is less commonly known that each one was once a mortal woman now cursed to assume this form and driven to evil.

Harpies are practically immortal, suffering their accursed existence until they are destroyed or their curse is broken. The curse is usually the result of the twisted expectations of patriarchal forces that exploit these women and transform them into an incarnation of the worse beliefs of what women can be. Many times it is the explicit punishment meted out by people for whom behaving in a way that violates “how women are supposed to act” is an evil in itself or at the very least leveraging those norms for their own gain, thus compounding the evil done. This is not to say the victims of the harpy’s curse are always innocent of any wrongdoing but rather that no one deserves such an awful fate regardless of the reasons behind it.

The origins of these curses are lost to time—though different legends purport to explain the story of the first harpy—and the details of inflicting such a curse vary widely.

Lonely Dwellers. Harpies dwell in desolate places like abandoned mansions, old temples, lonely fishing coves, and inaccessible bluffs. They seek solitude but draw prey—intelligent beings—to destroy, preferring solitary travelers or small groups, driven to cause harm by their curse and growing hatred of all things, including themselves. Harpies have been known to occasionally emerge from their typical hunting grounds to terrorize small villages or caravans passing close to their nests. But prefer easy prey that can be frightened and charmed. Though they are typically solitary, some



Two Different Harpies

legends speak of harpy flocks gathering in forgotten places.

Driven By Hate and Nostalgia. Whether they are driven to isolate themselves because they hate what they’ve become or because the margins of civilization are the only place they can thrive, harpies seek to destroy that which reminds them of their former lives and the societies in which they were raised. Harpies gorge themselves on their victims, but their curse denies them any pleasure or sustenance from food, while cultivating avarice and gluttonous behavior. Harpy nests are festooned with trinkets collected from their victims and often time some relics of their former life—in addition to offal and rotting regurgitated carcasses. Occasionally, their possessions can lead to clues regarding how to break a specific harpy’s curse. The longer a harpy suffers her curse the more likely these items tend to be broken, tattered, tarnished, and uncared for. In time, some not only completely forget their former lives but forget the use of language aside from their song and the foulest expletives imaginable. As such the collecting becomes rote and disconnected from nostalgia.

Harpies will sometimes ally with other creatures if it can offer them opportunity to cause suffering, but this is rare.

Luring Song. Those that are charmed by a harpy’s song and live to tell the tale describe a music so beautiful that

reaching its source becomes the only thing that matters. For those who resist its effects, the song is cacophonous and jarring, a revolting sound that nearly has the opposite effect. Harpies often use the power of their song to lure their victims through dangerous terrain, including over the sides of cliffs, into pits, or through fire. Once they have their claws on a victim, harpies use the song to keep them lulled while they are dismembered and tortured.

Despondent Victims. The women who were cursed to be harpies often have a difficult time adjusting back to a normal life if and when their curse is broken, having to come to terms both with what was done to them, what the curse made them do, and the circumstances that lead to their curse. Depending on how long they were so afflicted, the elements of their previous lives—from friends and family to social norms—may be long gone or changed. Furthermore, they can still be ostracized by communities that are aware of their time as an accursed monster. It is a horrible and traumatic fate.

Notes for the DM: The harpy Calaeno, which can be encountered in my remix of N1 – Against the Cult of the Reptile God, had a back story and curse connection to the player characters' very first adventure, when they investigated the exploded tower of the late necromancer lothario named Elzid Natholin (See "A Wizard's Fate" by Chris Perkins from *Dungeon Magazine* #37 - 1992). Natholin was known for using his good looks and charm to manipulate young women and then blackmail them and their families for the money he needed to fund his evil experiments. Calaeno was his first wife, who went along with his plan to leech gold from her wealthy family. When she realized his plans and their consequences for her loved ones, she tried to leave him. What she did not know was that their marriage ceremony was also a ritual that bound her to him and once she "betrayed" their bond she was transformed into a harpy and retreated to a sunken temple in the Black Fens swamp (see areas 16 & 17 of the "Swamp Lair of the LOAF Cult" in *HOW I RUN IT* #3).

Later, the player characters discovered the couple's marriage certificate in the Temple of Cidaria and a note about potentially using her as an ally of the cult (see area 9 in "Into the Temple of the LOAF" in *HOW I RUN IT* #2). Through research, they found out that in order to break the curse (since Natholin was dead), they needed to present her with the certificate for her to destroy and were eventually able to do just that.

However you decide to include harpies in your game, it makes most sense to be prepared to make repairing the harm done to them and by them a part of the campaign narrative, as to not transform their pain into just another encounter. For example, in using Calaeno in my Ghosts of Saltmarsh+ campaign, she was not only already connected to a previous adventure's backstory

giving her fate gravity, but the PCs made sure she had the money and means to find her family, who had moved on to another city, leaving behind the site of her unwilling transgressions. The harpy encounter becomes a site both for building backstory and driving future player character action (as all good encounters potentially do). Furthermore, the challenge of a harpy encounter is heightened when player characters are aware of a harpy's accursed fate and seek to overcome it rather than simply kill the harpy.

HARPY

Medium monstrosity, chaotic evil

Armor Class 14 (natural)

Hit Points 80 (9d8+36)

Speed 20ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)	7 (-2)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Dexterity +4, Wisdom +2

Condition Immunities None

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Understands Common and other languages spoken in life, but speaks only in fragments.

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Accursed. Harpies were once mortal women but are now under a powerful curse that can only be broken by a *Wish* spell or through a specific ritual or course of events that is unique to each harpy.

Plague-Bearer. Any creature who takes damage from a harpy's claw attack is at risk of contracting a wasting disease. After their next long rest, the creature must make a Constitution check (DC 14) or come down with a wasting disease, suffering a level of exhaustion immediately. Creatures who were reduced to 0 hit points or suffered a critical hit from harpy's claws makes this initial save at disadvantage. While suffering from the disease, the infected creature only gains back half the hit points from rolled hit dice and long rests. Furthermore, they regain no hit dice from a long rest. At the end of each subsequent long rest the victim must save again or suffer another level of exhaustion. A successful save means the victim recovers from one level of exhaustion. If a successful saving throw reduces the infected creature's level of Exhaustion below 1, the creature recovers from the disease.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The harpy makes two attacks: one with its claws and one with its club.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit. *Hit* 2d6+2

Club. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit. *Hit* 1d6+2

BONUS ACTIONS

Cunning Action. On each of its turns, the Harpy can use a bonus action to take the Dash, Disengage, or Hide action.

Luring Song. The harpy sings a magical melody. Every humanoid and giant within 300 ft. of the harpy that can hear the song must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be charmed until the song ends. The harpy must take a bonus action on its subsequent turns to continue singing. It can stop singing at any time. The song ends if the harpy is incapacitated.

While charmed by the harpy, a target is incapacitated and ignores the songs of other harpies. If the charmed target is more than 5 ft. away from the harpy, they must move on their turn toward the harpy by the most direct route. It doesn't avoid opportunity attacks but before moving into damaging terrain, such as lava or a pit, and whenever it takes damage from a source other than the harpy, a target can repeat the saving throw.

A target that successfully saves is immune to this harpy's song for the next 24 hours.

REACTIONS

Vomitous Cascade (recharge 5-6). As a reaction to a creature moving within 20 feet of her, the harpy may fly up to half her movement and spit up a torrent of rotting food and foul bile down on the creature (range 10 feet). The creature takes 2d6 acid damage and is Incapacitated until the end of their next turn, as they retch and heave. Non-charmed creatures are allowed a Dexterity saving throw (DC 12) for half-damage and avoid enough of the vomit to not retch. Any creatures within five feet of the vomitous cascade are hit with splatter and must also make a Constitution save (DC 12) or be Incapacitated until the end of their next turn. Using this ability does not interrupt the harpy's song, as they can vomit in time to it.