CHERRY BLOSSOMS AND BLACK FEATHERS

by Andrew Engelbrite

Creature: *Dryad & Harpy* | **Level:** *2*

SYNOPSIS

A dryad named Nilal attempts to escape her wooden shackles using dark fey magic, luring passersby to their deaths. She has enslaved two harpies, Bharya and Kamu, to do the worst of her dark deeds. The adventurers discover Nilal's deception and the harpy couple's innocence after a clifftop battle. The adventurers must form a tentative alliance with the typically shunned harpies to undo Nilal's wicked magic.

ADVENTURE HOOK

While traveling through the woods, the party spots a body lying at the foot of a tall cliff next to a flowering cherry tree. Upon investigation, the party meets the dryad, Nilal, who tells them of a pair of fearsome harpies that live atop the cliff occasionally dropping unfortunate travelers at her feet. Nilal implores the party and promises magical favors should they travel up the harrowing cliffs and remove these monsters from her forest.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Cherry Blossoms and Black Feathers is a low-level adventure intended for 4-6 2nd level characters. It can be easily placed in most campaigns when the party travels through a wooded area. The adventure is primarily comprised of two encounters, each containing options to decrease or increase the difficulty of combat for groups with fewer or greater levels or numbers.

For this adventure, the common perception of dryads' stereotypes them as beautiful and wise spirits of the forest and sighting one on a journey through the woods is a sign of good luck. The common perception of harpies' stereotypes them as wicked and vicious monsters —cackling demons wearing human faces that endanger the unwary traveler.

CHAPTER 1 – SOLEMN PETALS

To begin this adventure while the party travels through a wooded area, tell the character with the highest passive Wisdom (Perception) that they notice something and read or paraphrase the following:

> Out of the corner of your eye, you spot a flash of bright color through the dull earthy tones of the surrounding foliage. Peeking through, you find a clearing. You see a single towering cherry tree in full bloom standing unchallenged at the top of a low hill, with bright pink petals gently showering down in the breeze. Beyond the tree, a jagged and steep cliff face juts hundreds of feet up, the rocky edifice visible as you investigate the clearing. You spot something atop the hill near the cherry tree, partially obscured by the fallen petals: a humanoid body lies motionless on the hill.

INVESTIGATING THE SCENE

Unless the characters remain particularly stealthy, Nilal becomes aware of them once they begin their investigation of the area. Once aware, Nilal quickly assesses the party, emerges from her tree, and addresses the characters. Read or paraphrase the following:

> *"Hello? Please, did you know him? The beasts had their way with him. I don't suppose you know how he'd want to be buried?"*

Nilal attempts to convince the characters of her own innocence and implores the party to scale the cliff to destroy the harpies that have killed the man at her feet and so many others before him.

During their investigation, characters find the following:

- The body is a human male in his mid-thirties and horribly mutilated to the point that he is difficult to identify.
- The man's possessions are still present, including a bedroll, hunting trap, five small animal furs, and a coin purse containing 4 gp and 8 cp. If the party decides to take these items, Nilal has no objections if she can give the body a proper burial.
- A successful DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) or DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check on the body reveals that it sustained numerous impact injuries, likely battered while falling from a great height.
- A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Medicine) check or DC 12 Intelligence (Nature) check on the body also reveals numerous cuts caused by some sort of claws or talons.
- The cherry tree stands 20 feet tall atop a grassy hill roughly 30 feet in diameter.
- A successful DC 16 Intelligence (Investigation) or DC 16 Wisdom (Survival) check of the area reveals dozens of areas of displaced dirt. If the graves are discovered and Nilal is questioned about them, she maintains her façade and informs the party that she's had to solemnly bury countless unfortunates who have been cast down by the harpies.

In speaking to Nilal, characters who succeed on a DC 20 Wisdom (Insight) check sense deception in her story. If pressed, Nilal attempts to play this off as latent nervousness, as she rarely talks to humans.

ROLEPLAYING NILAL

Nilal acts in the way she thinks would best convince the party to trust her. If the characters seem noble or chivalrous, she takes the role of damsel in distress. If the party seems debonair or easily manipulated by a pretty face, she is a seductress. For an overly cautious or skeptical party, she seems to be a wizened forest sage. Have Nilal target whomever she perceives as the leader of the group and allow her to change tact if an angle fails.

If the characters seem unreceptive, have her offer to guide them magically through the rest of the woods. If that fails, Nilal offers them a magic ring she discovered on one of the harpy's victims (which doesn't exist), should they agree to fight the harpies for her.

NILAL

Nilal is a dryad—a lesser fey bound into a tree as punishment for falling in love with a mortal man. She has taken badly to her punishment and for decades has been consulting with dark fey spirits to escape from her wooden prison. She wants vengeance on the high fey who imprisoned her—and on humanity, which she blames for tempting her with forbidden love.

Nilal has been manipulating and enslaving passersby for years, siphoning their life energy into her tree's roots. She believes with enough life energy she can undo the fey magic that bound her as a dryad. She closely resembles her bonded tree, with dark brown bark skin and small branches along her head and back that constantly sprout and shed cherry blossoms.

In conversation, Nilal is manipulative, flirtatious, and highly persuasive.

Nilal uses the statistics for a dryad with the following changes:

- Repetition of her deceitful routine has trained her well and she gains a +5 bonus to her Charisma (Deception) and Charisma (Persuasion) checks for a total +9 bonus to both.
- Nilal replaces the fey charm ability with *Dark Fey's Gift*.

Dark Fey's Gift. As a bonus action, the dryad can attempt to charm any creature who currently possesses a part of her tree, such as a branch, blossom, or petal. If the dryad attempts to charm a creature who possesses part of her tree, it must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be magically charmed. The charmed creature is under the dryad's control and takes the dryad's requests or actions in the most favorable way it can, even endangering themselves or their allies to carry out the dryad's wishes. This effect remains as long as the creature retains a part of her tree and instantly ends if the part is removed. If a target's saving throw is successful, the target is immune to the dryad's *Dark Fey's Gift* for the next 24 hours. On successful saves, the creature is unaware of the attempted charm effect, regarding the enchantment as a passing infatuation with the dryad.

DEVELOPMENT

If Nilal's manipulations work, the party ascends the cliffs. If the characters abjectly refuse Nilal, progress straight to *Chapter 3* for a confrontation with Nilal, choosing the options without the harpies involved.

CHAPTER 2 – MONSTERS WITH HUMAN FACES

To reach the harpies, the party must first contend with the cliff face.

SCALING THE CLIFF

The harpies' nest is set upon a lowland mountain - one of many that dot this forest. It is jagged, rocky, and lush with lichens and mosses. Any spot of soil on the mount is overgrown with scrubby thorn bushes and gnarled, hardy pine trees. The mount's peak is 800 feet above the forest, though the party only has to scale 400 feet before reaching the encounter with Bharya and Kamu.

As the party ascends, choose one or both of the following encounters:

- A gap in the ledge necessitates at least one character jumping the gap. Any character who attempts this makes a DC 14 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, taking 2d6 bludgeoning damage on a failed check as they roll back along the cliff.
- The character in front reaches a shelf of loose scree —have them make a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. If they fail, have the rest of the party make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw as loose stone sprays down the cliff face. Any character who fails suffers 2d4 bludgeoning damage.

ECHOING DUET

The party reaches a mesa below the main peak after 400 feet of climbing, a relatively flat area of short pines and scrub roughly 60 feet across with the continuing cliff ascent on one side and a sheer drop on the other. Once they reach this area, read or paraphrase the following:

> You arrive in a respite of stubborn, stunted pines and scattered rocks, with a stretch of easy going ahead before resuming the arduous climb. Looking over the edge, Nilal's tree is a speck of bright pink sitting alone down below among a sea of green. From above, a single sung note starts low and ranges higher and purer than any of humankind is capable of, then another joins it, starting high and delving lower than the deepest baritones. Two harpies are descending upon you. Their duet, sung towards each other, is more beautiful than words and you can feel your reason slipping away.

The harpies, Bharya and Kamu, attack the party as they have done with every other traveler that Nilal has sent up their mountain.

Start the encounter by having the characters each make two DC 11 Wisdom saving throws, one for each of the harpy's luring songs, which Bharya and Kamu start singing once within 100 feet of the party. If any character has preemptively tried to plug up their ears, give them an advantage on these saves.

If either Bharya or Kamu successfully charm a character, they fly over the cliff's edge and attempt to lure the charmed character over the edge. Otherwise, they make flying attack runs with their claws on whichever character seems to have the most ranged capacity. After the 2nd round of combat, have any character with a passive perception of 12 or higher notice the rotten cherry blossom wreaths stuck on their heads—read them the following:

> Amid the black feathers and shining claws, you notice a glint of bright pink color along the harpy's head. They're molded and rotten, stuck fast with decay atop both of their heads, but beneath the grime you detect the unmistakable bright pinks of cherry blossom wreaths.

If a character targets the wreath, have them make their attacks at disadvantage, destroying the wreath on a successful hit.

The wreaths are automatically destroyed on any successful attack that would bring either harpy to 10 hit points or fewer, breaking Nilal's hold on them.

If Bharya's wreath is broken first, read or paraphrase the following:

> *"Kamu! Get away from her, wait, we can... The wreath! Get the witch's flowers off her head!"*

If Kamu's wreath is broken first, read or paraphrase the following:

> *"Bharya! Please no, it's all my fault... The flowers are evil, please leave her be!"*

Bharya and Kamu attempt to get the wreaths off one another and defend each other to the best of their abilities. Assuming the wreaths are removed, both Bharya and Kamu cease their hostilities and try to reason with the party. If either Bharya or Kamu are dropped to 0 hit points, have them make death saving throws like player characters.

BHARYA AND KAMU

This harpy couple assumed they would find a refuge here, far away from the treacherous shorelines of their birth and the bloodlust that grips the harpy race. They intended to live here alone, surviving off deer and other game, singing only to each other as they grew old together.

One day Kamu found Nilal's cherry tree and made lovely wreaths for her and her love, unwittingly entrapping them with the dark fey's gift for years to come. The wreaths have long since decayed, stuck fast with the grease of rot to the harpies' heads.

In appearance, both harpies seem every bit as evil and savage as rumors would tell, but with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Insight) check, characters can see the kind innocence in Kamu's eyes and the desperate love and desire to protect within Bharya.

In conversation, Bharya is defensive but forthright, motivated to protect Kamu to the point of self-sacrifice. Kamu is shy and easily startled, often hiding behind Bharya. She speaks kindly and softly. Both Bharya and Kamu use the normal statistics for a harpy, except both have the alignment Chaotic Good.

ADJUSTING THE ENCOUNTER

For an easier encounter, have the party notice the flower wreaths at the beginning, rather than as the 2nd round ends. Also, the wreaths are automatically destroyed when a harpy reaches half health (19 hit points), rather than 10 hit points.

For a more difficult encounter, remove any damage thresholds from the wreaths, and only have them destroyed when specifically targeted and hit by a character.

DEVELOPMENT

If either Bharya or Kamu are killed, the remaining harpy curses and spits obscenities at the party and Nilal before attempting to retrieve their love's body and retreating to their nest.

Assuming Bharya and Kamu survive the encounter, they explain Nilal's deceit together. They tell the party about a secret safe way down the mountain and show them the way if they agree to destroy Nilal. Both Bharya and Kamu want to bring an end to Nilal, but won't fight if the other is wounded. If the characters heal both harpies to at least half health (19 hit points) they agree to fight Nilal alongside the party. If the characters are unable or unwilling to heal them, they thank the party after leading them down the mountain and then return to their nest.

CHAPTER 3 – THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Once Nilal knows her façade has fallen, she resolves to feed these newcomers to her tree, one way or another.

CONFRONTING NILAL

Unless the party tries to descend the mountain through some other means, both the main climb and the secret pathway lead directly back to Nilal's grove. Nilal has been awaiting the fall of the characters' bodies and has been suspecting that something has gone wrong. Nilal casts *barkskin* on herself and *shillelagh* on her club before the party arrives.

Assuming Bharya and Kamu are with the party, start the conflict with the harpies flying towards Nilal and by reading or paraphrasing the following:

> Bharya and Kamu scream and howl in melodious tones as they rush towards Nilal and the dryad's kind visage is replaced by a disgusted scowl. "*Fine then! You've let the beasts go free. I'll make sure you go back to your proper place — on the leash or back into the dirt.*" Nilal's tree rears up out of the hill. Nilal rides high upon its branches, and the blanched and drained corpses of dozens of unfortunate travelers are enwrapped amongst its roots.

Nilal's tree uses the statistics of an **awakened tree** and acts on its own initiative, prioritizing attacks against creatures that target Nilal or any creature wielding fire attacks. Any creature that gets within 15 feet of Nilal's tree becomes covered in flower petals.

Nilal makes use of her *dark fey's gift* feature on any characters who have petals on them. Characters can attempt to prevent this by spending an action and checking their own gear to remove any errant petals.

She otherwise hides atop her tree's branches and uses the *entangle* spell on the party or attacks creatures that reach her in melee using her *shillelagh*.

Bharya and Kamu target Nilal with their claw attacks. If either of them reaches 0 hit points, the other comes to their aid and attempt to stabilize them away from the fight. Nilal is irrevocably linked to her tree—if either die, the other instantly drops dead.

Adjusting the Encounter

For an easier encounter, have Nilal more caught off-guard, using up her first two actions casting *barkskin* and *shillelagh* rather than casting them beforehand.

For a more difficult encounter, give Nilal the benefit of half-cover while she sits within her tree's branches; with *barkskin* active, this makes her AC 18.

Conclusion

With Nilal dead, Bharya and Kamu are free to live their lives together, assuming they both survived the encounter. If they did not participate in the final fight, they greet the party after it ends. However the harpies rejoin the group, read or paraphrase the following:

> Bharya sinks a talon into the rapidly moldering form of Nilal, "*Hah, finally.*" She looks to you, conflicted and says, "*Look, I... We... I'm not sure how...*" Kamu jumps in with, "*Thank you! She means to say thank you. We'd still be living for this monster if it weren't for all of you. Now we can finally live for each other again.*"

Rewards

Before the characters continue along their way, Bharya stops them and asks them to wait for her to bring them something. She hands the party a clear spindle, claiming that it kept them going, but now they can keep each other going again.

The clear spindle is an *ioun stone of sustenance*, which removes the need to eat or drink from the bearer. If using XP advancement, award the characters 200 XP for defeating Nilal, 450 XP for her tree, and 200 XP each for Bharya and Kamu as if they were defeated in combat.

Author's Notes

Writing for this anthology, I struggled quite a bit deciding what feminist issue to address and why. I decided to go with something simple: female characters who have been typecast and whose stereotypes don't truly reflect who they are. A lot of fantasy females are directly pigeonholed by their race or body type and even just from a writer's perspective, I feel that it's important to broaden these perceptions. I hope you enjoy this little adventure and more than that—I hope you enjoyed its characters, who didn't match what a simple physical description and stereotype would make you believe.

About the Author

Andrew Engelbrite is a disabled Texan and all-around turbo nerd. I've been creating TTRPG content for a couple years and I've been GM'ing for almost a decade. Find more of my content at LootTheBoss.com and you can find more of our books at DriveThruRPG and DMs Guild, just search for loottheboss or find me on Twitter with @AEngelbrite.