ON THESE CURSED WINGS

by Megan Irving

Creature: *Harpies* | **Level:** *5*

SYNOPSIS

When a wizard is captured by an unusually dangerous clan of harpies, it's up to the characters to rescue him. They'll need to track down the harpy lair, find out why he was captured, and help some unexpected victims.

This is an adventure for two players with 4th-5th level characters.

ADVENTURE HOOK

While walking through a forest, the party hears sudden noises from somewhere close: human screams, magical explosions, and birds shrieking.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Harpies are filthy, dangerous, and fuelled by an eternal, berserk hunger. They believe that their current nature is due to an ancient curse, which they long to remove. In moments of lucidity, they kidnap magic-users to try to force them to remove the curse. Before long, however, their inhuman hunger rears its head and the wizard in question is eaten.

This particular harpy clan is led by a harpy with unusual focus, who'll stop at nothing to remove the curse. However, the latest wizard has let himself be captured on purpose: he plans to kill the harpies and steal their eggs. Harpy eggs are extremely rare and rumored to have magical properties, and therefore fetch a high price on black markets.

CHAPTER 1 – TAKEN

The party is walking through a forest. They may be en route to a new town, using a shortcut, or they may be lost. The forest is very old and full of life, though the signs are subtle. If the characters are quiet and attentive, they can see small animals and new growth, and hear the birds and insects all around them. The forest has a peaceful feeling to it.

A CRY FOR HELP

While walking through the forest, the characters hear sudden noises from somewhere close: human screams, magical explosions, and birds shrieking.

When they investigate, they come across a wizard's tower in a small clearing. A man and a woman are using magic to fend off ten **harpies**. Before the characters can intervene, two harpies (one wearing a tiara and the other wearing bracers) manage to grab the man and take off.

Five harpies follow them, but three harpies are still left attacking the woman. In the first round of combat, or if the characters are unsure about helping, a harpy knocks the woman unconscious. She can be easily revived after the fight. When only one harpy remains alive, it tries to escape to warn the clan.

After the fight, the woman begs them to follow the harpies and rescue Landon, her wizard teacher. She believes the harpy's lair is on the top of a tall cliff just visible over the trees that she points out to the party.

Talia, the Wizard's Assistant:

A young, asexual human woman. Nervous in nature, weak in magic, greedy for gold and power. In cahoots with Landon, but also worried about his ability to survive the harpy clan.

Knowledge:

- During the fight, the harpies spoke to her and Landon, saying they needed him. She thinks the harpies live deeper in the forest, on top of the cliffs.
- The harpies seem to live deeper in the forest, on top of the cliffs.

Reward:

If the characters resist helping, she offers a reward: two *potions of healing* and 50 gp.

Items:

- She has the key to the wizard's tower, a quarterstaff, and a *dagger of venom*.

Into the Forest

The characters easily follow Talia's instructions to track the harpies through the forest without needing skill checks. As the characters head further into the forest, it changes. The peaceful feeling turns tense. The trees grow taller until they're almost blocking out the sun, and the forest becomes dimly lit. The birds get quiet, and it smells strongly of leaf rot. Use any or all of the following encounters as the characters travel through the forest.

The Animal

In the distance, the party hears a large animal crashing through the undergrowth. If they investigate, they'll encounter an enraged **giant boar**.

The Plant

The character last in the marching order is tripped by a moving vine. If they fail a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw, they take 2d4 bludgeoning damage. This is an old forest, full of ambient magic that's given the plants some semblance of life.

The Harpies

The characters hear the sounds of talking and discover two harpies squabbling over a dead boar. The characters can choose to either attack the **harpies** (gaining a surprise round as the harpies are distracted), or keep silent and let the harpies lead them back to the lair.

If they attack the harpies, they can collect a *luckstone* from the harpies.

Development

Once the characters have gone through each forest encounter, they have successfully tracked the harpies to their lair.

Chapter 2 – Cursed

After tracking the harpies, the characters come to a clearing at the base of the cliff they could see from the wizard's tower. According to Talia's guidance, the harpy lair is at the top of this cliff.

Onwards and Upwards

The party can easily see a way to climb up the cliffs, and a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check discovers a crevasse in the cliffs that leads into a cave.

The cave is dimly lit, huge, and empty, with a tunnel at the back leading upwards. It's slightly slippery and narrow, but easy enough to scale that they don't need to roll. The tunnels are a stealthier way to the top, but the characters don't know what could be living in them.

The cliff has a clear path to the top, but the characters are exposed to any harpies or other flying creatures like giant birds that could pass by.

The characters can choose to brave either the dark tunnels or the exposed cliff to get to the harpies.

The Caves

The tunnels are dark. They occasionally open into larger caverns, and there are spots of dim light here and there from holes in the cliff.

In the darkest corners of the big caverns, there are mushrooms. A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check makes it clear they are poisonous. If a character touches a mushroom or gets within 5 feet of one, it releases poisonous spores.

About halfway up, the characters are ambushed by two **darkmantles** (they have advantage on Stealth checks, as they are indistinguishable from stalactites until they move). After the first round, a **giant spider** attacks.

Eventually, the tunnel becomes dimly lit, then well lit, and the characters can feel a fresh breeze and hear voices. This tunnel leads up and into the main cavern. The characters can hide near the entrance and listen.

THE CLIFFS

The cliffs are tough to scale, requiring two successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) checks to get to the top. After the first successful check, the characters reach a ledge. On the ledge is a large, empty bird's nest and a collection of bones.

A character on the ledge can help characters on the ground, giving them advantage on their check.

When a character is helping another climb, or when all characters reach the ledge unaided, three **giant vultures** attack the characters on the ledge. If a character is helping another, they are surprised by this attack.

The second successful Strength (Athletics) check gets the characters to the top of the cliff. Characters on the top of the cliff can again help characters stuck on the ledge.

The top of the cliff is a windswept plateau, with rocky outcrops and tufts of plants. The characters can see over the top of the forest, including the top of the wizard tower, and potentially any nearby towns. A huge cavern opening rises up in front of the characters. They hear voices from the cavern and sneak up and listen. Any stealth checks are made with advantage, as the harpies are distracted.

THE MAIN CAVERN

Inside the lair of the harpies, the characters find a surprising situation: Landon, the wizard, is tied up, and the harpy with the tiara (clearly their leader) is talking to him. The harpy with the bracers is next to her, looking angry. The rest of the clan is loosely ringed around them, weapons down. The atmosphere is tense, but not violent.

If the characters are listening, they hear the following:

> You hear a cacophony of female voices arguing, with one lone male voice. Then, a commanding female voice rings out: *"Be quiet, all of you!"*
>
> The male voice then says, *"I don't know if I can break the curse."*
>
> The harpy says, *"I believe you can, Landon. And if you can't, then I'll eat you."*
>
> There's a pause, then the male voice says, *"Okay... I'll try. I know a ritual that might work. However, there are some things I'll need for it."*
>
> The harpy says, *"Here, write them down. My scouts will fetch whatever you need."*

A group of harpies fly out of the cave. If the characters are on the cliff, they'll have to succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity (Stealth) check to quickly hide. If they were listening, they have advantage on this roll. If they fail, one scout returns to the cave to warn the chieftain.

If the characters burst in ready to fight, the harpies are ready to attack, but Landon calls out, trying to stop the fight. He says, "They can help me break your curse!" and the harpies calm down, waiting for him to explain. He tells the harpies that he needs non-harpy assistants for performing the ritual, so the characters can help him.

If the characters approach diplomatically, the harpies won't attack. Aelina, the harpy chieftain, asks the characters to explain themselves. Landon suggests they can help him break the curse, as described above.

If the characters don't ask about the curse, Aelina explains it anyway in an attempt to gain their help, leading to the following conversation:

> The harpy chieftain explains to you that all harpies were cursed long ago. They used to be a proud race, intelligent and powerful, worshipped by ancient civilisations as goddesses. They raided, pillaged, and ruled cities, until one day, a powerful magic user cursed them.
>
> Now they are shadows of their former selves, forced into an endless cycle of being smart and aware, and being rabid and feral.
>
> She wants to break this curse and is sure that this wizard can do it.

Aelina, the Harpy Chieftain:
The ruler of this harpy clan. Aelina is determined to break the curse and desperate to do it before returning to her feral state. She trusts anyone willing to help, but will eat them the second they falter. She is in a relationship with Naedith.

Knowledge:
She knows nothing about who originally cursed the harpies and doesn't care. She believes any powerful magic user could break it if they tried hard enough.

Items:
She is wearing a golden tiara, a relic from an ancient queen.

Naedith, the Harpy Enforcer:
The chieftain's bodyguard, girlfriend, and second in command, Naedith is fiercely protective of her leader and the rest of the clan.

Knowledge:
She doesn't believe in the curse. She thinks it is just in their nature to swing between lucid and feral states.

Items:
She is wearing a pair of *bracers of protection* (these have the same benefits as the *cloak of protection*).

If the characters fight the harpies here, it is likely they'll lose. There are ten harpies (plus any extras who have returned from the previous encounters) in the chamber. It should be clear to them that they're better off using diplomacy now, and (potentially) violence later.

After this conversation, Aelina orders the harpies to return to their duties and she heads into a dark corner of the cave with one harpy—this is where the eggs are. Two harpies remain with Naedith, guarding Landon. The others spread out around the cave and on the cliff top. If the characters entered through the tunnels, one harpy starts investigating that area.

Landon asks to speak to the characters in private, but Naedith steps in to speak to them first.

DEVELOPMENT

The characters have tracked down the harpies and discovered why the wizard was kidnapped. Now they can speak to the enforcer and the wizard, and other harpies if they so choose.

CHAPTER 3 – BETRAYED

The characters must speak to Naedith first, and can then speak to Landon and the other harpies in any order they choose.

THE HARPY'S WORRY

Naedith is suspicious of the wizard but can't kill him without causing a split in the clan. She asks the characters to talk to Landon and stall until they find out the truth and make a plan with her.

If the characters ask for repayment, she promises to give them something good but is vague on the details.

The character with the highest passive Wisdom (Insight) can tell she's hiding something. A successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) or Charisma (Intimidation) check forces her to reveal her worry about the delicate harpy eggs that are hidden in the lair. She explains that Aelina is currently looking after them, and she doesn't want anyone to compromise their safety.

THE WIZARD'S PLOT

Landon reveals there's no way he can reverse the curse; further, he's not sure if it even exists. He tells the party that they'll all be eaten unless they do something drastic: kill all the harpies. A few of them have left, so the fight should be a little easier now. He asks the characters to cut his ropes and attack the harpies with him.

The character with the highest passive Wisdom (Insight) can tell he's hiding something. A successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) or Charisma (Intimidation) check, made with advantage if the characters reference the eggs, forces him to reveal his real plan: he let himself be captured on purpose. This clan of harpies has eggs, and harpy eggs are extremely rare and valuable. He promises the characters an egg of their own if they help him kill the harpies. If the characters seem conflicted or concerned, he says that harpies are monsters and eat people and that selling the egg will make them rich beyond their wildest dreams.

THE EGGS

If the characters attempt to follow Aelina, a harpy guard blocks their passage. Aelina comes to talk to them if they ask or make a fuss.

If the characters already know about the eggs, she confirms their existence and location. If they don't, it takes a successful DC 20 Charisma (Persuasion) or Charisma (Intimidation) check for her to reveal their presence.

THE OTHER HARPIES

The other harpies talk to the characters if approached. They tend to be suspicious and gruff, and not happy about the presence of the characters or the wizard—they don't trust outsiders, especially ones with magical powers. They trust Aelina and Naedith to protect them. Some believe in the curse, others do not. None of them know anything further about it—it's a rumor amongst all harpies, one without any actual proof.

DECISION TIME

Once the characters have spoken to Naedith and Landon, and optionally to the other harpies, make it clear to them that they have a choice: they can help Landon attack the harpies and steal the eggs for profit (or to potentially make the area safer), they can tell the harpies his plan and let them eat him, or they can negotiate with the harpies for his release.

A PEACEFUL RESOLUTION

This can only be achieved if the characters do not tell the harpies about the wizard's real plan. If the harpies know about his plan to steal their eggs, they won't let him leave alive. If they only know that he can't break the curse, they can be convinced to let him leave.

The characters need to succeed on a DC 25 Charisma (Persuasion) or Charisma (Intimidation) check. They have advantage on this roll if they promise to investigate the curse or try to break it themselves.

SIDE WITH THE HARPIES

The characters can let Aelina or Naedith know about Landon's plans. If they tell Aelina, she immediately confronts Landon, which alerts Naedith. If they only tell Naedith, she confronts Landon alone unless the characters ask about Aelina.

When confronted, Landon calls out to the characters, saying he'll kill them for their betrayal. An **imp** appears on his shoulder and breaks his ropes, and he immediately opens up a small gilded flask that was on his belt. Thick black smoke pours out of it and resolves itself into five **shadow demons**. The demons and Landon immediately attack.

The harpies and the demons fight each other, leaving Landon and his imp for the characters. The harpies outside the cave come inside on the third round of combat. When Landon dies, the demons and imp vanish.

SIDE WITH THE WIZARD

If the characters approach Landon and say they're with him, he tells them to cut his ropes and get ready to attack immediately. If they have another battle plan in mind, he accepts it. Aelina and one harpy are with the eggs, and Naedith and two harpies are nearby. The rest of the harpies (five, plus potentially four more) are scattered equally in the cave and on the clifftop.

For this fight, Landon uses the stat block below, without spell slots above third level. He has the imp, but his flask only releases two **shadow demons**.

If a harpy gets the chance, she raises an alarm by screaming or singing, which alerts the rest of the harpies to the fight. It takes one round for harpies to get to the combat, plus an extra round if they have to come inside or outside to get to the fight.

DEVELOPMENT

Whether the characters have sided with the harpies, the wizard, or tried to remain neutral, if they survive the fight, they are free to leave the lair.

CONCLUSION – CONSEQUENCES

If Landon died and the characters return to Talia, she has questions and may be hostile to the characters. If they fight her, she uses the cult fanatic stat block. Did they need to fight her? Was she evil or simply greedy?

If the harpies died, Landon is open to giving the characters a harpy egg. Do the characters agree with his actions? Do they regret their own? Can they find a buyer for the egg, or will they try to hatch it?

If the characters sympathise with the harpies, they may try to investigate and break the curse. How do they feel knowing the harpies have no remorse for killing and eating people?

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This adventure is an exploration of morality. I wanted to create a "regular" adventure with some hard questions for the characters. The harpies are evil—and they're okay with that—but there are vulnerable eggs at stake. The wizard and his apprentice are greedy, but in the end, their goal is to kill "monsters." It's not always easy to know what the heroic course of action is.

Thank you to my regular *D&D* group for playtesting this and cheering me on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan is an Australian software developer who writes and plays *D&D* adventures in her spare time.

Landon the Conjurer

Medium human, chaotic neutral

Armor Class **12 (15 with *mage armor*)**
Hit points **40 (9d8)**
Speed **30 ft.**

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
9 (-1)	14 (+2)	11 (+0)	17 (+3)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)

Saving Throws Int +6, Wis +4
Skills Arcana +6, History +6
Senses passive Perception 11
Languages Common, Dwarvish, Elvish, Abyssal
Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Spellcasting. Landon is a 9th-level spellcaster. His spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks). Landon has the following wizard spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *acid splash, mage hand, poison spray, prestidigitation*
1st level (4 slots): *mage armor, magic missile, unseen servant**
2nd level (3 slots): *cloud of daggers**, *misty step**, *web**
3rd level (3 slots): *fireball, stinking cloud**
4th level (3 slots): *Evard's black tentacles**, *stoneskin*
5th level (2 slots): *cloudkill**, *conjure elemental**
**Conjuration spell of 1st level or higher*

Benign Transportation (Recharges after Landon Casts a Conjuration Spell of 1st Level or Higher). As a bonus action, Landon teleports up to 30 feet to an unoccupied space that he can see. If he instead chooses a space within range that is occupied by a willing Small or Medium creature, they both teleport, swapping places.

Actions

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one creature. *Hit*: 4 (1d4 +2) piercing damage.