

THE WANING HORN

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF 7TH TO 9TH LEVEL



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THE WANING HORN IS A FIFTH EDITION adventure for three to six characters of 7th to 9th level, optimized for a party of four 8th-level characters. A wounded unicorn has hauled itself to the trunk of a great tree in anticipation of death, but a local druid refuses to stand idle, and is prepared to conduct a laborious healing ritual in an attempt to convalesce the majestic creature. The dark forces that lurk in the surrounding forest of Ylra, however, will be drawn to the magic emanating from the injured unicorn through the course of the night. Can the party stave off their advances long enough for the druid to complete her work? This adventure takes place within the forest of Ylra within the campaign setting of Cartosia, but can be easily adapted to feature in any campaign setting.

BACKGROUND

Civilisation is scarce in the depths of Ylra Forest. It is all too easy to lose one's way among the towering Valen trees, whose immense scale warps any sense of distance or direction. Even those who know the forest well can find themselves disoriented, for the trees seem to shift and rearrange whenever they are out of sight. The forest is ancient and indifferent to the affairs of mortals; not malevolent in its nature, but home to creatures and forces that make no allowance for the unprepared. Colossal beasts roam the forest floor, and stranger things move between the roots when the light disappears. Yet Ylra is not without its graces, for celestial creatures are drawn to its oldest groves, and fey magic lingers in its clearings.

A relatively safe route runs from the mirror-smooth waters of Lake Myrr to the tent city of Mehdin, though it is poorly marked and constantly changing. For those capable of following it, the only true refuge on the weeks-long journey is Ylragorn, a town suspended high among the treetops beyond the reach of the beasts that roam below. At the heart of Ylragorn stands the Inn of the Final Abode, built into and around the trunk of an enormous Valen tree, its three stories rising from the exposed roots at ground level. It is a favoured resting place for beast hunters, merchants, and the occasional wanderer with no better options.

Among the inn's current guests is a druid named Arisolle, a solitary woman who has spent years studying Ylra's deeper reaches. She arrived several days ago intending only a brief rest, but a growing sense of disturbance in the forest's natural balance kept her from leaving on schedule. The source of that disturbance revealed itself at sunset, when a critically wounded unicorn—injured by an unknown entity of malevolent intent—dragged itself to the base of the great tree, drawn instinctively to the oldest living thing in the area.

Arisolle recognised the danger immediately. A murdered unicorn releases a burst of corrupted celestial energy that blights the surrounding land for years, poisoning soil, water,

and the creatures that depend on them. She can save the creature, but the healing is a slow ritual requiring hours of unbroken focus through the night. She cannot easily defend herself or the unicorn while performing it, and as the unicorn's celestial essence fades, it bleeds outward like a beacon, drawing dark creatures from the forest that seek to feed on it. She needs capable protectors to facilitate her ritual.

GETTING THE QUEST

The party finds themselves at the Inn of the Final Abode for reasons of their own — perhaps they are traveling the route between Lake Myrr and Mehdin, perhaps they have come to Ylragorn seeking work as beast hunters, or perhaps they are simply passing through and in need of shelter. Whatever their reasons, they are present at the inn during the inciting incident: the arrival of the unicorn.

As the sun begins to set, a commotion rises from the ground level. A unicorn, gravely wounded, its coat matted with blood and its horn pulsing with dim, unsteady light, has dragged itself to the base of the great tree around which the inn is built. Most of the inn's occupants are paralysed by the sight, unsure of what to do and afraid to approach the creature. Arisolle (NG she/her elf druid with 50 hitpoints and CON 16) is the exception, pushing through the gathered crowd kneeling beside the unicorn to examine its wounds with steady hands. After a long moment, she rises and addresses whoever will listen:

- The unicorn is dying. Its wounds are severe and beyond the help of conventional medicine. She can, however, save it with a healing ritual—one that draws on the vitality of the ancient tree itself.
- The ritual will take most of the night. It requires unbroken concentration from sunset to dawn. She cannot stop, pause, or defend herself once the working has begun.
- If the unicorn dies, its corrupted celestial essence will rupture outward. The resulting blight will poison the soil, water, and wildlife for miles around Ylragorn. The town's livelihood, and likely its survival, depends on this creature living through the night.
- She does not know what wounded the unicorn, only that it was something of malevolent intent. That question will have to wait.
- As the unicorn weakens, its fading essence will bleed outward into the forest like a beacon. Dark creatures—things that feed on celestial energy—will be drawn to it. They will come in force, and they will not stop until the unicorn is dead or healed.
- She needs the party to defend the inn through the night. She cannot offer gold or treasure, as she is a wandering druid, not a wealthy patron. But if the unicorn survives,

the forest and everyone in it will owe them a debt that is not easily forgotten.

Arisolle does not beg or plead. She presents the situation plainly and leaves the choice to the party. If they agree, she wastes no time. The preparation phase begins immediately (see "Preparing for the Night").

GENERAL FEATURES

The Inn of the Final Abode is built into and around the trunk of an enormous Valen tree at the heart of Ylagorn. Its three stories rise from the exposed root system at ground level to a rooftop platform nestled in the lower canopy. Unless otherwise stated, the inn's features are described as follows:

Ceilings, Walls, and Floors. The inn is constructed primarily of heavy timber, with load-bearing sections reinforced by the tree's own root system and living wood. Exterior walls are roughly one foot thick. Ceilings throughout reach approximately 10 feet. The ground level is packed earth and exposed root; the upper stories are planked hardwood.

Doors. Doors throughout the inn are made of solid timber. They have AC 15 and 18 hit points. They are unlocked.

Light. During the day, natural light filters through the canopy and the inn's many windows. At night, oil lanterns mounted in iron brackets throughout the inn provide dim light on all levels. The fading glow of the unicorn's horn provides an additional source of dim light within 20 feet of the creature for the duration of the night.

The Beacon. The wounded unicorn's celestial essence radiates outward as it fades, acting as a beacon that draws hostile creatures from the surrounding forest. This effect is invisible but can be detected with detect magic, which reveals a pulsing aura of abjuration magic centred on the unicorn that expands slowly throughout the night.

GROUND LEVEL - THE ROOTS

The ground level of the inn sits among the massive exposed roots of the Valen tree, which fan outward from the trunk like the spokes of a wheel, some rising as high as a person's chest. The roots create natural barriers and channels of movement across the area, dividing the ground level into distinct sections. The following areas are keyed to the provided map of the ground level:

1. Crossroads. The main path into Ylagorn passes beneath the inn, splitting to wind between the roots. This is the most likely direction of approach for creatures coming from the forest floor.

2. Innkeeper's House. A modest timber building nestled among the roots south of the trunk, serving as the private residence of the innkeeper. It contains a small living area, a hearth, and personal effects.

3–5. Storage, Bedroom, and Toilet. These smaller rooms adjoin the innkeeper's house. The storage room contains mundane supplies such as rope, nails, lantern oil, and tools. The bedroom and toilet are unremarkable.

6. Suspended Walkway. A raised timber walkway ascends from the stables to wind around the trunk of the tree, climbing toward the third-story patio. It sits several feet above ground level, offering a modest vantage point but little cover.

7. Stable. An open-sided structure east of the trunk used to shelter mounts and pack animals. Any animals present when the adventure begins are agitated by the unicorn's distress and should be secured and calmed before nightfall, or they risk bolting during the assault.

8. Campsite. A small clearing northeast of the trunk where travellers sometimes make camp rather than pay for a room at the inn. A few tents, a firepit, and scattered supplies are present.

The Trunk. The great Valen tree's trunk is the centrepiece of the ground level and the site of Arisolle's ritual. The unicorn lies at its base (marked on the map with an 'X'), and Arisolle works here for the duration of the night. This is the location the party must defend above all others — if hostile creatures reach the unicorn and Arisolle, the ritual is likely to be disrupted (see "The Ritual").

SECOND LEVEL - THE TAVERN

The second level of the inn is built around and supported by the trunk of the Valen tree, which passes through its centre. A broad timber platform encircles the building, serving as the inn's common area. Staircases connect this level to the ground level below and the bedrooms above. The following areas are keyed to the provided map of the platform level:

9. Suspended Walkway. The walkway ascending from the stables reaches its apex here, adjoining the platform that surrounds the tavern.

10. Platform. The wraparound deck that encircles the tavern building, ringed by a timber railing. Tables and seating are scattered along its length. The platform offers clear sightlines down to the ground level in several directions, making it a useful position for ranged attackers. The railing provides half cover.

11. Tavern. The inn's main common room, built around the trunk of the tree, which rises through its centre. A bar, hearth, and clustered seating fill the space. This is the natural rallying point for the inn's occupants and the most defensible interior position on this level.

12. Kitchen. A modest kitchen adjoining the tavern, stocked with provisions and cooking implements. Lantern oil and alcohol stored here may be useful during the defence.

13. Toilet. Unremarkable.

THIRD LEVEL - THE ROOMS

The third level of the inn sits higher among the branches, built snugly around the trunk with a small balcony offering views of the canopy and the forest floor far below. This level serves as the inn's sleeping quarters and is the most sheltered position in the building, making it the logical place to move non-combatant civilians once the night begins. The following areas are keyed to the provided map of the bedroom level:

14. Snug. A small, enclosed sitting room adjoining the staircase from the tavern below. Furnished with a pair of cushioned chairs and a low table, it serves as a quiet retreat for guests.

15. Balcony. This small balcony provides a high vantage point with sightlines to the ground level, making it an excellent position for ranged attackers. The railing provides half cover.

16. Dorm Rooms. A pair of small shared rooms containing simple bunks, used by guests who can't afford or don't require a private room.

17. Bedrooms. Private guest rooms, modestly furnished with a bed, storage chest, and writing surface.

18. Toilets and Bath. Unremarkable.

INN OCCUPANTS

In addition to Arisolle and the party, the following NPCs are present at the inn when the adventure begins:

Greckom. The inn's proprietor (LN he/him human **veteran**), a broad-shouldered former beast hunter who lost his left hand to something in the forest years ago and has since settled into a quieter life. Greckom is pragmatic and unflappable. He knows the inn's layout better than anyone and can offer tactical advice during the preparation phase. He is willing to fight if needed, though he is past his prime and knows it.

Vehiha. Greckom's assistant and the inn's cook (NG she/her halfling **commoner**). She is terrified but holds herself together. Vehiha is not a combatant but can be directed to useful tasks—tending to any wounded, ferrying supplies, or keeping the other civilians calm.

Guests. Seven other guests are present at the inn: travellers, a merchant, perhaps a hunter nursing an injury. None are capable combatants. They are frightened and will do as the party directs, whether that means barricading themselves in the bedrooms on the third level or assisting with simple tasks during the preparation phase. The GM is free to flesh out these NPCs as desired or leave them as background figures.

PREPARING FOR THE NIGHT

Once the party agrees to defend the inn, Arisolle moves to the base of the trunk to begin her preparations. The party has roughly twenty minutes before sunset, giving them enough time to take a few meaningful preparation actions. The party may choose to complete any of the following tasks before Arisolle begins the ritual as night falls. Additional tasks may be allowed at GM discretion if a player proposes something creative and reasonable within the time limit.

Barricade Arisolle. A character can create a modest, 10-foot-radius barricade surrounding Arisolle and the unicorn using furniture, crates, or timber from the inn's supplies. The obstructed area becomes difficult terrain for hostile creatures, gives Arisolle half-cover from ground-level ranged attacks, and requires a successful DC 13 Strength check to force through. Incorporeal creatures are unaffected.

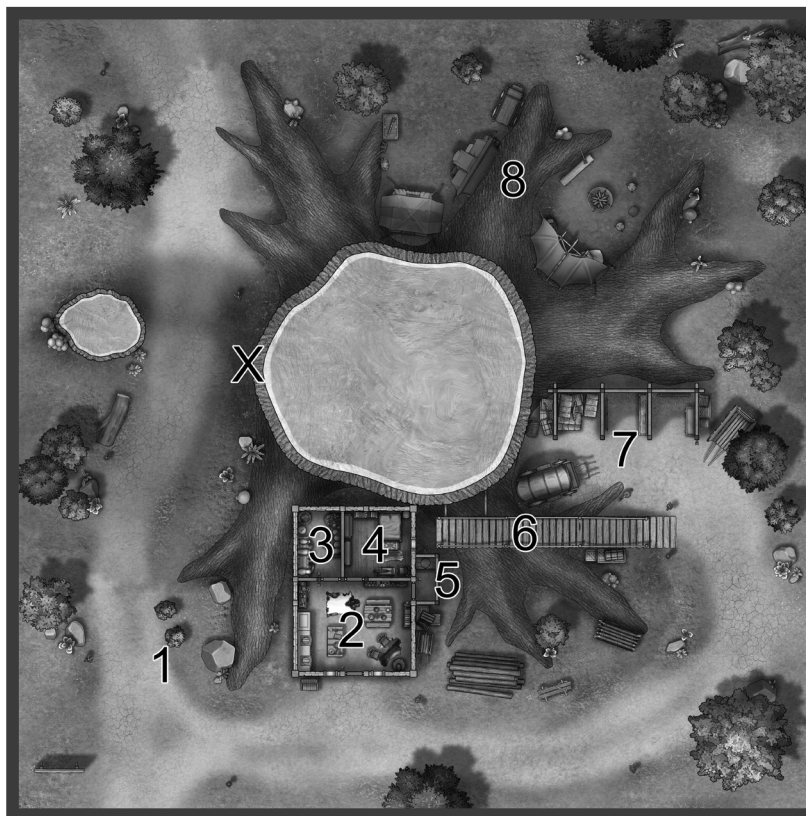
Secure the Animals. A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check can calm and secure the animals in the stable, preventing them from bolting during the assault. If the animals are not secured, they break free during the first wave, potentially drawing creatures away from the inn briefly but creating chaos on the ground level.

Rally the Civilians. A character who succeeds on a DC 11 Charisma (Persuasion) check can organise the inn's non-combatant guests, directing them to shelter on the third level and assigning simple tasks. If the civilians are not rallied, one panicked guest flees downstairs during the second wave, potentially drawing hostile attention.

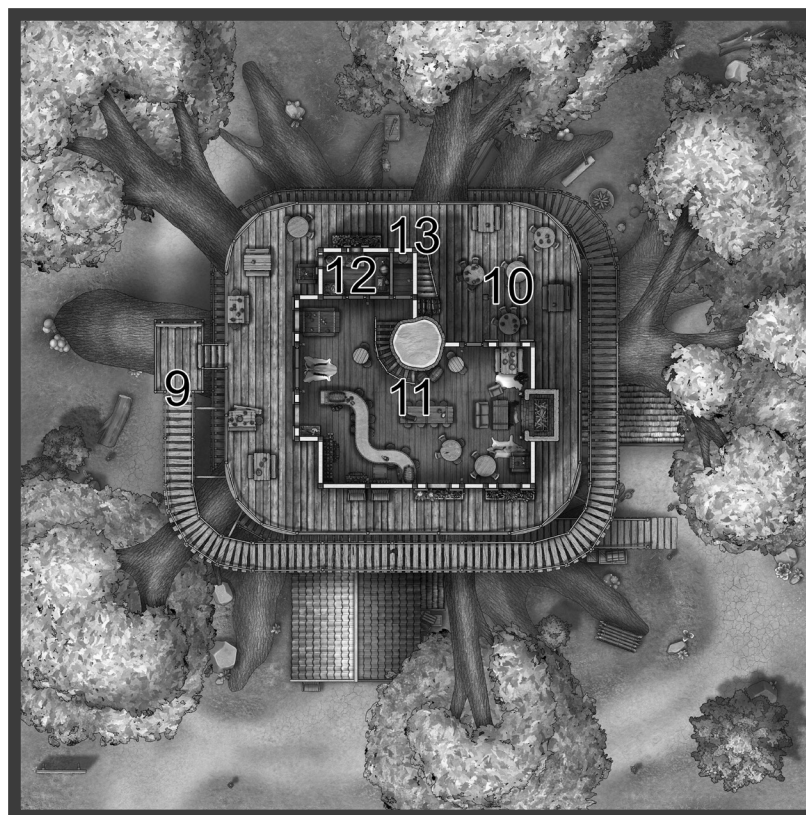
Consult Arisolle. A character can spend time speaking with Arisolle before the ritual begins. She is not an expert on every creature in Ylra, but she has spent years in the forest and can share the following:

- Beasts are common near the forest floor and will likely arrive first. They can be blocked, funnelled, and fought conventionally.
- As the night deepens and the beacon's pull strengthens, it will draw incorporeal entities that no barricade will stop. The party should save their strength and their silver for the later hours.
- The creatures drawn to the beacon are not single-minded. While the unicorn is their primary target, they are hostile by nature and will attack anything living that stands in their path. The inn's occupants are in danger whether they are near the unicorn or not. The party will need to split their positioning accordingly to ensure nobody gets hurt.

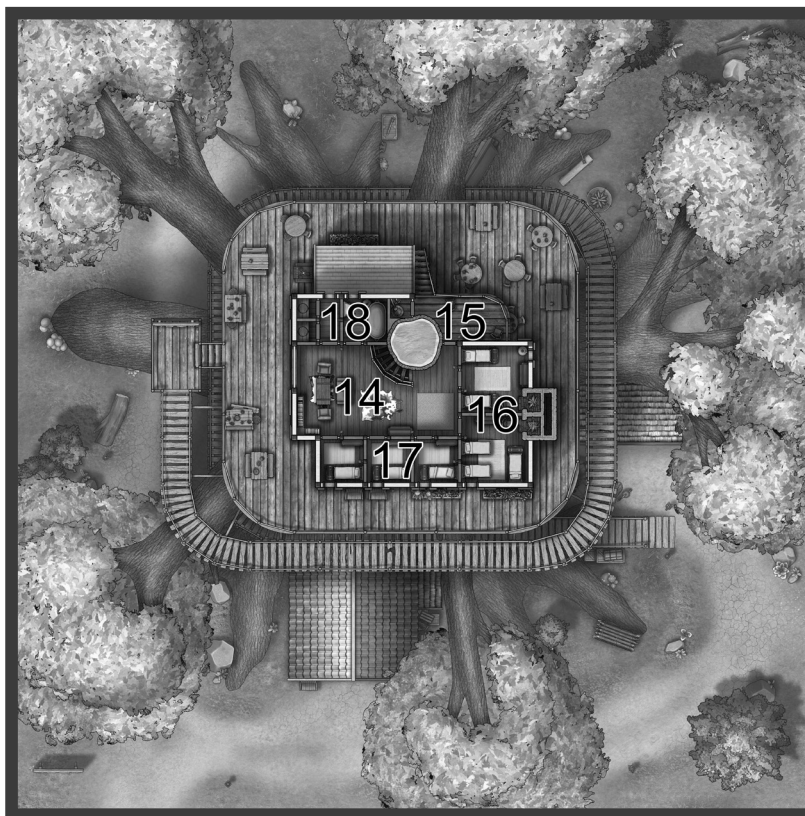
THE ROOTS



THE TAVERN



THE ROOMS



- She does not know how many waves will come, or exactly what form they will take. She knows only that they will not stop until the unicorn is dead or the ritual is complete at dawn.

THE RITUAL

Arisolle begins the ritual at sunset and must maintain unbroken concentration until dawn, a period of approximately eight hours. For the duration, she remains stationary at the base of the trunk beside the unicorn, chanting and channelling restorative magic through the roots of the great tree. Though she can cease her chanting for a few moments at a time to communicate with the party, she cannot move, attack, cast other spells, or take any actions while sustaining the ritual.

If Arisolle takes damage, she must succeed on a Constitution saving throw to maintain concentration, as if concentrating on a spell (DC 10 or half the damage taken, whichever is higher). Arisolle has a +3 bonus to Constitution saving throws. If she fails saving throws in this manner, the ritual ends immediately and cannot be restarted. The unicorn continues to weaken and dies within the hour.

THE FIRST WAVE

The first wave arrives approximately thirty minutes after sunset. Characters on watch hear the sounds before they see the source—the cracking of undergrowth, low growling from

multiple directions, and the leathery flutter of wings high in the canopy. A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check identifies the direction of the primary approach before the creatures reach the inn.

Round 1. Four **hell hounds** emerge from the forest floor, arriving at the crossroads (area 1) and attempting to reach the unicorn by the most direct route available. They are aggressive but not suicidal; if a barricade forces them into a disadvantageous position, they circle and probe for a less-defended approach. They fight until destroyed.

Round 3. Three **swarms of bats** (each with 15 AC, 50 hit points, and a two-Bites multiattack) descend from the canopy, attempting to force their way into upper levels of the inn through windows, gaps in the timber, and any other opening large enough to admit them. If the upper levels are entirely sealed or defended, the swarms descend to the ground level and converge on Arisolle and the unicorn instead. They fight until destroyed.

Round 4. An additional two **hell hounds** arrive from a different direction than the original hounds, attempting to flank the party. They fight until destroyed.

THE SECOND WAVE

The second wave arrives approximately an hour and a half after the first, giving the party time to take a short rest or make additional preparations. The tense peace is broken by a sudden, chilling fog that rolls across the ground level. Lanterns throughout the inn flicker and dim. Characters who succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check notice faint shapes drifting between the roots before the attack begins.

Round 1. Four **specters** and two **will-o-wisps** approach the inn. The specters rise through the floor of the ground level, drawn like moths to a flame by the life-force clustered within the inn. The will-o-wisps emerge from the trees, moving directly toward the unicorn, attacking any creature that stands in their way. They all fight until destroyed.

Round 3. A **wraith** materializes near the base of the trunk, approximately 30 feet from Arisolle. It prioritises Arisolle above all other targets, attempting to strike her and force a concentration check. If driven away from Arisolle, it turns its attention to the nearest living creature, draining life force indiscriminately. It fights until destroyed.

Round 4. Two more **specters** manifest near the inn's top level, quickly phasing through the walls to attack the patrons inside.

THE STRAIN

The fog from the second wave recedes slowly. In its aftermath, the ritual takes a visible turn for the worse. The roots of the great tree groan and shift beneath Arisolle, and the unicorn's horn dims almost to nothing. Arisolle's voice is hoarse and her hands are trembling. She breaks her chant just long enough to speak: "The ritual falters. The unicorn's wounds are deeper than I've anticipated...the tree's vitality alone is not enough to sustain the work through dawn. I require your aid."

Stabilisation. To successfully stabilize the ritual via a skill challenge, the party must accumulate five successes before three failures. Potential skill checks and their DCs are listed below. The GM is encouraged to consider any suggestions from the players, assigning an appropriate DC at their discretion.

Arcana (DC 15): Channelling raw magical energy into the ritual alongside Arisolle's work.

Medicine (DC 14): Steadying the flow of restorative magic by treating the unicorn's wounds directly.

Nature (DC 14): Coaxing untapped vitality from the ancient tree's vast root system.

Persuasion (DC 14): Steadying Arisolle through the crisis, helping her refocus her concentration.

Perception (DC 20): Reading the rhythm of the ritual and anticipating surges that threaten to destabilise it.

Religion (DC 15): Drawing on knowledge of celestial creatures to guide the healing energy more effectively.

Spell Slot Sacrifice (automatic success): Expending a spell slot of 3rd level or higher to feed raw magical energy directly into the ritual.

Success. If the party accumulates five successes, the ritual stabilises. Arisolle exhales sharply and her chanting steadies. The unicorn's horn brightens. The tree's roots settle, and warmth returns to the air around the stump.

Failure. If the party accumulates three failures, the ritual does not collapse entirely, but Arisolle is badly weakened by the strain. She has disadvantage on all Constitution saving throws to maintain concentration for the remainder of the night.

THE FINAL WAVE

The party has time for another short rest before the final wave arrives shortly before dawn. The wave announces itself long before it arrives. The ground trembles. Trees at the forest's edge crack and splinter as something massive forces its way through the undergrowth. The sound of wood groaning against wood and the slow drag of roots pulled free from soil builds steadily until the canopy itself begins to shake.

Round 1. Three **awakened trees** emerge from the forest on opposite sides of the inn, tearing through the undergrowth and closing on the ground level. They smash through any barricades in their path without slowing, destroying them automatically. The trees attempt to reach the stump by the most direct route, attacking any creature or structure that stands between them and the unicorn. They fight until destroyed.

Round 2. A shambling mound heaves itself over the roots at the edge of the ground level—a massive, reeking mass of rotting vegetation, fouled soil, and grasping vines, easily twice the size of any the party may have encountered before. Its body pulses with veins of sickly luminescence. It moves with terrible, deliberate purpose toward Arisolle, dragging itself forward through obstacles rather than around them. The shambling mound ignores other targets entirely unless physically blocked. If a character interposes themselves, it attempts to Engulf them and continue pressing forward, hauling its prey along with it as it advances on the unicorn. It fights until destroyed. The shambling mound uses standard **shambling mound** statistics with the following modifications:

- It has 170 hit points.
- It has a +9 bonus to hit with its Slam attacks.
- Its Engulf DC is 16.

Round 3. Two **specters** again manifest near the inn's top level, moving to target its patrons within.

AFTERMATH

If the party successfully defends the inn through the night, the ritual reaches its conclusion. Arisolle's chanting rises to a crescendo as dawn breaks over the horizon. The unicorn stirs, rising unsteadily to its feet. Its coat is still matted and scarred, and its horn glows only faintly, but the creature is alive. It regards the party in silence for a long moment before it turns and walks into the forest without a sound.

Arisolle is exhausted but deeply relieved. She thanks the party plainly and reiterates that she has no material reward to offer. She does, however, present each character with a small charm carved from the bark of the great tree during the ritual, imbued with residual celestial energy. Each charm functions as a single-use item that can be crushed to cast *lesser restoration* on the creature holding it. If pressed about the unicorn's wounds, Arisolle admits that whatever inflicted them was wicked and deliberate; a force of darkness. She suspects the answer lies deeper in Ylra, in places she has not yet dared to venture, and suggests the party may wish to investigate if they have the stomach for it.

Greckom and the inn's surviving occupants are profoundly grateful. Future visits to the Inn of the Final Abode see them welcomed as honoured guests, with free lodging and meals for life.

If the ritual fails, whether because Arisolle lost concentration or the unicorn was slain directly, the creature's death releases a burst of corrupted celestial energy. Every creature within 30 feet of the unicorn must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or take 14 (4d6) necrotic damage, or half as much on a success. Arisolle is knocked unconscious automatically. Over the following days, the blight spreads outward from the great tree in a slowly expanding radius, poisoning soil, water, and wildlife. The future of Ylragorn becomes uncertain, its residents forced to consider abandoning the settlement entirely.

REFERENCES

This work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 (“SRD 5.1”) by Wizards of the Coast LLC and available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>. The SRD 5.1 is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

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