

UNANSWERED RITES

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF 4TH TO 6TH LEVEL



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UNANSWERED RITES IS A FIFTH EDITION adventure for three to six characters of 4th to 6th level, optimized for a party of four 5th-level characters. Decades ago, the high priestess of a seaside temple was cursed by her deity for driving out her fellow clergy and attempting to steal a portion of the god's divine power. Transfigured into a medusa, the priestess has remained at the temple, wracked by guilt and habitual in her daily rites for penance as the structure has fallen to ruins around her. Those foolish or unlucky enough to approach the temple in the years that have passed have been petrified by her gaze. Can the party venture into this coastal lair and put the monstrosity out of its misery? This adventure takes place in Cartosia, but can be easily adapted to feature in any campaign setting featuring coastal temple ruins.

BACKGROUND

At the edge of a rocky, wind-battered coast, a temple dedicated to Nandrisa, lesser deity of storms and sea-winds, still stands centuries after its construction, though it has seen much better days. Never a major pilgrimage site, it served a small but devoted community of coastal fisherfolk who sought Nandrisa's blessings for safe passage and a bountiful catch, kept maintained by a small circle of acolytes. An aspiring woman named Zylane served as its high priestess for several years, but was never satisfied with her station. She became increasingly convinced she was destined for greater things than tending a minor shrine, simmering an increasing resentment of Nandrisa's relative obscurity and the lack of recognition she would receive for her faithful toil. Assured in her own ambitions, she drove out her fellow servants through cruelty, manipulation, and false accusations, whatever it took for her to be alone within the temple's inner sanctum. There, she attempted a forbidden ritual to siphon divine power for herself, believing she could elevate herself to something more than mortal—demi-godhood.

Nandrisa's response was swift and absolute. Zylane was transformed into a medusa as punishment for her hubris and vanity. The priestess, though, rather than shamefully turning away from the divine in her moment of punishment, repented—humbled by her transformation and re-committed to an unassuming, selfless faith. Nandrisa, however, has remained distant and disinterested, unresponsive to Zylane's prayers. As the years have turned to decades, Zylane remains steadfast, convinced that the obsessive precision of her daily rites will one day earn her forgiveness. No blessing has yet come. What small community formerly surrounded the temple has been dispersed by the monstrosity in its proximity. Many of those who have stumbled upon the temple have been petrified and arranged as a "congregation," offerings Zylane believes that Nandrisa will one day accept. Her mind has frayed; she is defensive, delusional, and

dangerous, her presence a localized affliction upon the coast that would be better remedied.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

There are various reasons the party may be motivated to venture into the lair of the medusa and eliminate the threat that lurks there. A few of these reasons are provided below:

The Petrified Merchant. A trade consortium's senior courier vanished several weeks ago while traveling a coastal road that passes near the old temple; investigations traced her last known location to the temple's vicinity. The courier carried documents of significant importance—the consortium offers 250 gp for the documents' recovery, with a 25 gp bonus if the courier can be brought back alive.

Lost Sailor. A pair of young sailors went missing a week ago, after being overheard boisterously discussing their planned approach to the temple. Their families offer a pair of prized heirlooms worth a cumulative 100 gp for closure—recovery of the bodies or confirmation of death is sufficient. Restoration would be a miracle.

Reconsecration. A priest devoted to a deity adjacent to Nandrisa seeks the party's help in cleansing the defiled temple. They want the medusa that lurks within destroyed so that they can reclaim and restore the site. They offer 150 gp in exchange for the medusa's head, as well as the promise that the party should receive the first blessings offered by the reconstructed temple.

GENERAL FEATURES

The single-story temple and its outbuildings are built upon a rocky headland located along a remote stretch of coastline. Decades of neglect have left its paint peeling and sun-faded, its walls crumbling and water-logged. The site is accessible either by the winding coastal path that connects a smattering of small settlements well-distanced from the ruins, or by boat via the tidal cavern below.

Ceilings, Walls, and Floors. The temple is constructed of weathered limestone blocks, salt-stained and eroded by years of sea air. Temple interior ceilings reach 15 feet; the tidal cavern ceiling below varies from 10 to 20 feet in height. Exterior walls are two feet thick; interior walls are one foot thick.

Doors. What few doors remain in place throughout the temple are constructed of heavy oak, reinforced with bronze bands, swollen and corroded by moisture. They are unlocked, and have AC 15 and 18 hit points.

Light. Above-ground areas of the temple receive ample natural light through the various breaches in the walls and

ceilings. The tidal cavern is dark save for what little light filters through its entrances during the day.

The Tidal Cavern. The lower caverns below the temple flood partially at high tide, with water levels rising from a low-tide depth of three feet to a high-tide depth of approximately eight feet.

Unsafe Stonework. The structural integrity of the foundation walls and archways supporting the ceilings has been compromised in some areas throughout the temple. As a result, some spells or activities may have consequential effects. Beyond the subsurface tidal caverns, a spell such as fireball or thunderwave has a 10 percent chance to cause a ceiling collapse twice the size of the spell's area, dealing 16 (3d10) bludgeoning damage to all creatures in the area. This collapse might block or bury objects or exits.

APPROACHING THE TEMPLE

Four gargoyles are perched upon the temple's main rooftop, blending near seamlessly with its architecture. They maintain a constant active watch in all directions, particularly the coastal path and the sea approach, making a stealthy advance upon the temple exceedingly difficult. If the party is spotted, one gargoyle shifts subtly and takes flight, slipping into the temple through the collapsed roof to alert Zylane, and then returning to assume position on the rooftop. The remaining gargoyles continue their disguise, hoping to maintain their facade of inanimation. Approaching at night grants the party advantage on all related Dexterity (Stealth) checks.

Approaching by Land. The coastal path offers occasional cover in the form of scrub brush and rocky outcroppings, but otherwise features long stretches of open ground. Reaching the temple undetected requires a series of successful group Dexterity (Stealth) checks: DC 12 at distance, DC 14 at medium range, and DC 16 as the party crosses the temple perimeter. Failure on any check means at least one gargoyle spots the party and initiates their alert protocol.

Approaching by Sea. If the party is bold enough to board a boat, the gargoyles automatically spot any vessel approaching the tidal cavern. Swimming offers the chance at concealment if the party remains mostly submerged for the approach, requiring a similar series of successful Dexterity (Stealth) checks as the land approach: DC 10 at distance, DC 12 at medium range, and DC 14 as the party nears the cavern mouth.

If the party arrives undetected, Zylane is occupied with her rites in the main temple chamber, unaware of intruders. The gargoyles remain frozen in place until combat breaks out or if they spot movement on the temple grounds immediately outside the main building's perimeter. The party will have a brief window to scout, position, or ambush, however continued Dexterity (Stealth) checks will be necessary as

applicable if the party moves throughout the temple grounds to avoid being spotted by the gargoyles.

The following areas are keyed to the provided map of the temple:

I. COLLAPSING DOCK

A salt-crusted wooden dock extends from a natural stone ledge into the dark waters surrounding the cavern. A small rowboat is moored to one its posts, its hull scraped and weathered. Stone steps, fuzzed with algae, ascend from the ledge toward a tunnel above.

The rowboat belonged to a victim petrified long ago; it has remained here unused for years, slowly deteriorating. The dock is unusable—any Medium or larger creature that moves across it at more than half speed must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or fall through the rotted planks into the water.

Treasure: Waterlogged Satchel. A character who searches the boat and succeeds on a DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check finds a waterlogged satchel beneath the seat containing 10 gp in corroded coins and a rusted, worthless fishing knife.

2. TUNNEL

This natural stone tunnel extends from dock to staircase, with a slight westerly bend in its shape. Barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast, its walls are slick with moisture and crusted with barnacles.

The tunnel stretches approximately 60 feet, ascending to the temple grounds at its north end via a roughly-hewn staircase. Approximately halfway through the tunnel, a ladder descends from its edge where it gives way to a larger cavern beyond (area 3).

Encounter: Snake Swarms. Characters who make a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check when entering the tunnel from either end can hear a faint hissing sound carried on the air. Two **swarms of poisonous snakes** occupy this tunnel, nestled into the various seams and crevices within the walls and ceiling. The snakes emerge and attack when any creature



reaches the tunnel's midpoint, though a swarm disperses when reduced to half its hit points or fewer. The swarms are averse to open flame—the snakes will not attack any creature within 5 feet of a torch or magical equivalent, and will instead remain within their alcoves.

3. ABANDONED CARGO

A natural alcove opens off of a larger flooded cavern beyond, its floor littered with salt-crusted barrels and weathered wooden crates. Three stone figures are slumped against the walls, seemingly without careful arrangement.

This alcove once served as storage for temple supplies brought in by boat, such as lamp oil, incense, and ceremonial wine. Zylane has not visited this area in years, considering it beneath her attention. The statues here are victims deemed unworthy of joining her “congregation” arranged on the grounds above—a trio of poorly dressed sailors. The gargoyles dragged their bodies here after Zylane dismissed them.

Treasure: Salvageable Supplies. Most containers here hold nothing but mold and congealed residue. However, a character who spends five minutes searching and makes a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check finds a sealed clay jar wrapped in cloth at the bottom of one of the crates. It holds two *potions of water breathing*, stored here decades ago.

4. TIDAL CAVERN

A vast sea cavern stretches before you, its ceiling lost in shadow above the dark water that dominates the space, connected to the open ocean beyond. Rocky outcroppings occasionally break its surface, slimed with algae. A landing is visible across the pool to the east, where a rowboat has been pulled onto the stone beside a motionless figure.

This cavern floods significantly at high tide. The eastern landing features another one of Zylane's petrified victims deemed unworthy of display above. The rowboat is sagging and empty.

Encounter: Saltwater Crocodile. A **giant crocodile** lurks in the waters of this chamber, having laired here for years, feeding on the scant fish and occasional seal that venture near the caverns. It is territorial but not ravenous—a character who throws a day's rations or similar amount of food into the water can attempt a DC 12 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check; on a success, the crocodile occupies itself with the meal and ignores the party for the next ten minutes. Otherwise, any creatures attempting to enter the waters are attacked by the crocodile, which will pursue its prey throughout the confines of the cavern. It fights until reduced to half its hit points, then attempts to retreat into the deeper waters of the surrounding ocean. A character who casts *Speak with Animals* can communicate with the crocodile to

learn that the “stone-maker” (the medusa) dwells above, and that “stone ones” (gargoyle servants) sometimes drag “fake meat” (petrified victims) through the cavern.

5. RELIQUARY

Rubble and broken stonework litter the floor of this small outbuilding. A stone reliquary carved with wave motifs rests against the southern wall, sealed with tarnished bronze clasps that seem to emanate a faint azure glow.

This structure served as secure storage for the temple's most valued ceremonial objects and offerings of significance. Over the years, much of its contents have been stolen by the few lucky enough to avoid Zylane's attention, leaving mostly clay vessels and bronze containers holding nothing but dust and verdigris. A casting of detect magic reveals an aura of abjuration magic emanating from the reliquary against the south wall.

Treasure: The Reliquary. The reliquary here remains untouched, courtesy of the protective magic it has been shrouded with. It is sealed with an *arcane lock* spell (DC 15), requiring a successful DC 25 Strength check or a DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves' tools to open. Furthermore, a *glyph of warding* (DC 15) marks the reliquary, triggering Explosive Runes when the reliquary is touched. The reliquary holds a *pearl of power* that regains two expended spell slots instead of one.

6. SHRINE OF THE DROWNED

Four hooded figures are carved in relief along the southern wall of this small shrine, their heads bowed as if in mourning or meditation. Inside, a statue of a feminine figure dominates the chamber's center, surrounded by the remains of scattered candles and small offerings. The interior walls are inscribed floor-to-ceiling with faded text—prayers and tenets rendered in flowing script.

This shrine honored Nandrisa's aspect as a guardian of the drowned—the statue depicts Nandrisa herself. The inscriptions on the walls detail the tenets of Nandrisa's faith: humility before the storm, gratitude for the sea's bounty, and service to one's community. Zylane avoids this place, finding the scripture on the walls overwhelming in the aftermath of her transgression.

A character who spends at least ten minutes studying the inscriptions and succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Religion) check comprehends the core tenets of Nandrisa's worship and familiarizes themselves with the conventions and language of the faith, making them able to recognize how Zylane's obsessive, solitary rites violate them. This character gains advantage on any Wisdom (Religion) check made during conversation with Zylane to demonstrate that her devotion is malformed.

TIDAL CAVERN



MAIN LEVEL



ROOFTOP



7. MAIN STRUCTURE

Petrified figures are interspersed with the supporting columns that line the outer perimeter of the main structure. Men, women, a dwarf, an elf—arranged deliberately, their stone faces turned outward to face those who approach, all frozen in various shades of apprehension or fear. A crumbling interior wall gives way to a central aisle occupied by two bronze ritual basins, one cracked and dry, the other filled with stagnant water. A collapsed statue lying in several pieces dominates the eastern end of the aisle. A pair of staircases ascend to the temple's roof.

The petrified victims span decades, as characters who examine them find that their clothing styles and weathering vary considerably. The ritual basins were used for blessings and purifications; Zylane still fills one with rain and ocean water for her daily rites.

Encounter: Zylane. If the party has managed to arrive undetected, Zylane the **medusa** kneels before the filled basin, mid-ritual, her back facing the western approach. If the gargoyles have alerted her, she positions herself among the exterior columns and petrified victims, using them as cover to prepare an ambush. Her gargoyle servants join her in combat if they have not already been destroyed. She fights defensively among the ruins of the temple, using her

petrifying gaze while attempting to maintain some distance, fighting until destroyed.

Zylane, however, is not likely to immediately attack the party if they approach openly and without obvious hostility. She is defensive and paranoid, but starved for contact, and in her loneliness, prefers to converse for a while with those who wander into her lair before she ultimately petrifies them or otherwise disposes of them; demanding to know who they are and why they've come. Characters who engage her in conversation can attempt to shatter her delusion through a series of skill checks in the following sequence:

Historical Context (Optional). A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (History) check recalls fragments of the temple's history, granting advantage on the "Theological Insight" check.

Theological Insight. A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Religion) check can articulate to Zylane how her rites are inappropriate—performed in isolation and without true humility. They are hollow repetition rather than genuine acts of devotion. A character who studied the inscriptions in Area 6 has advantage on this check.

Reading Her Pain. A character who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Insight) check recognizes the desperation beneath Zylane's defensiveness. She already suspects the truth, but has tremendous difficulty admitting it to herself.

The Final Truth. A character who succeeds on a DC 16 Charisma (Persuasion) check delivers the truth with enough

compassion that Zylane accepts it: Nandrisa is not testing her or waiting for sufficient penance; the deity has simply turned away, a fact that no amount of ritual will change.

Failing any of these checks means that Zylane grows agitated but does not necessarily attack. She can be engaged again, though subsequent Persuasion checks are made with disadvantage. On any single failure by 5 or more, however, Zylane can no longer bear the face the argument presented to her and attacks immediately.

On success, Zylane falls silent for several moments. She then asks the party to leave, indicating that she has accepted their rationale and now needs space to carry out what she must. Once they have gone, she gazes upon her own reflection in the filled basin, turning herself to stone and ending her existence.

Particularly compassionate or persuasive parties may attempt to convince Zylane that exile, rather than self-destruction, is the appropriate path forward. This is a remote possibility requiring multiple additional successful Charisma (Persuasion) checks at the GM's discretion, as Zylane's guilt runs deep and she sees little purpose in a life spent hiding from the world she has harmed. Should the party somehow succeed, Zylane departs the temple for parts unknown, and any petrified victims restored to life by greater restoration or similar magic make full recoveries—a true happy ending, if an unlikely one.

8. ROOFTOP

The temple rooftop is crowded with over a dozen petrified figures. Rubble and debris are scattered across the flagstones, and the low perimeter wall has crumbled in several places. A faded serpentine mural dominates the floor—a coiling seaserpent rendered in hundreds of weathered tesserae in faded blues and greens. An open space in the roof, suggestive of a former skylight, exposes the temple interior below.

The serpentine mural depicts one of Nandrisa's sacred creatures — a sea-serpent said to guide the drowned to peaceful rest. The rooftop served as a gathering place for festivals and ceremonies during the temple's active years. The hole in the roof provides a direct line of sight into the temple interior—and an access point for the gargoyles when alerted.

Encounter: Gargoyle Sentinels. Unless alerted or engaged elsewhere (see “Approaching the Temple”), four **gargoyles** perch among the statues on the rooftop, indistinguishable from stonework unless a character succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. In combat, the gargoyles fight until destroyed, unless Zylane is slain first, in which case they flee.

AFTERMATH

If Zylane is destroyed in combat, the gargoyles, if any remain, flee the site in search of a new personality to pledge their allegiance to. The temple falls silent, leaving the party free to claim whatever valuables they find among its remains. If the party convinces Zylane of the truth, any characters who return after having left her alone find her frozen mid-kneel, her expression unreadable as she gazes into the basin. In either case, whether Zylane is dealt with or left alone, the temple continues its slow collapse into the sea.

The party, should they have the means, may wish to rescue those who have been petrified with access to greater restoration or similar magic. While a few more recent victims may have friends or family to ultimately return to, the majority have been prisoners for years, and may remain anxious and disoriented for some time as they find themselves unmoored from the lives they once lived.



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>.

CREDITS

Written by: Alexander LeFort of Tavern Tales
Map by: Tom Cartos
Cover Background Art: Shutterstock
Other Art: Publisher's Choice Stock Art
InDesign Base Template: Nathaniel Roux