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Assignment 4

The Cairn is Silent No More

-Environmental Short Story-

The canopy of the great forest stretched out across the horizon, only distant hills hung with low clouds stood above the sea of green leaves. Beneath those dense leaves and branches lay the wet forest floor, where bushes and moss dripped with moisture from the fog lazily rolling across the ground. Through the fog and bushes the slightest sign of humanity was visible among the ancient foliage. A large boulder, sitting quite naturally on the ground displayed the slightest hint of toolwork on its edges, tapering into a broad point almost going straight up.

Another similar boulder stood nearby, nearly hidden under a blanket of moss and rotten leaves. Between these two stones lay an almost imperceptible path, where the shrubbery was only slightly thinner than the surrounding area and the endless rows of trees seemed to line up more than they normally would. A few branches are snapped at knee height along the path. Here was the entrance to an old site of Deiscea, a monument to a forgotten king and a deep secret.

The overgrown path travels into the woods as the trees begin to thin out ever so slightly until the first wall of the old compound is reached, a thick line of rough stone cutting through the green, with moss filling the cracks. Here and there are holes in the walls, some with rubble and others more purposeful in their design.

Inside these walls, past old shrines and small squat stone buildings lying half in ruin, is an even greater pile of stones. A cairn, constructed with only loose stones by hundreds of hands, stretches across the compound both huge and yet hanging low beneath the trees. This great cairn covers most of the compound, with its flat top covered in vines and small bushes pushing out through the cracks. The wind whistles through the loose spaces between the individual rocks.

Gaping like the maw of a predator, an arch of stone sits in the centre of the cairn, leading inside the stone monolith, the remains of a rusted metal gate lying crumpled before it. The only signs of recent human life are a cluster of colourful tents by the entrance, abandoned and already full of leaves blown in by the wind.

Inside the stone arch, the cairn becomes a series of winding paths, with small circular rooms at the ends. Most of these contain religious objects such as rotted wood carvings and stone altars, small alcoves for offerings sit empty.

One winding pathway through the cairn that looks just like the others leads to a different room, a square space with a staircase cut out of the stone floor leading downwards. Apart from this the room is dark with only a little light shining through the spaces in the cairns stones.

Down these cold stone steps lies a floor unlike the one above it, with straight square hallways leading to the remains of bedrooms and studies, cut out of the stone. Religious symbols of trees and forest animals are carved throughout this floor as well

as a large shrine in the centre. The remains of old furniture and moth-eaten cloth fill every room.

Dust covers the ground across the cairn, but footprints are barely visible where they have displaced the centuries of grime recently. A rotted door, violently kicked in, leaving splinters across the floor, leads down another set of stairs.

The next floor is similar, with living spaces and a separate area where there are ovens, workbenches and of a large copper still, all caked in dust. The designs are slightly different, with carvings of spears and swords instead of animals.

The third floor, which has a couple of large bedrooms and storerooms throughout also contains a large chamber. In the centre is what remains of a throne, broken mouldy wood still attached to the stone base. Pillars and benches throughout all face this throne, with a large doorway behind the throne leading further downwards. The wide doorway is decorated with skull and bone motifs.

A land of the dead exists below, bedrooms replaced by cutouts in the rock, filled with skulls and bones all carefully placed and stacked. Deeper down, large stone coffins with faded names carved on them lie in neat rows. A large, central cavern sits at the bottom of these crypts and holds only a single large sarcophagus, made of fossilised wood attached to carved stone, raised up on a stepped platform. The name Beirheart is lettered along the side in gold, still shining through the dust. The last letter shows signs of scratches along its edge, a broken chisel on the floor below.

Almost hidden in the wall is a back passage, leading to a small laboratory full of deformed and broken glass objects as well as a bookshelf now containing only dust and scraps of paper. A door in the back opens to a massive storeroom, stone shelves full of glass jars and various tools, most rusted or otherwise damaged by time. Strange objects made of stranger materials lie at the back of the shelves. At the back of the room is a second doorway, where the rock has been roughly cut through to make a shaft, like in a mine.

This passage winds and turns deeper into the earth, occasionally connecting to shafts going directly downwards with ropeless pulleys still bolted into the walls. Through countless tunnels and dead ends lies the final chamber of the cairn, a space with a very different architecture to the floors above. Here the winding passage has broken through a wall into a strange domed cavern with a central platform and no other exit except for the tunnel which was dug into here.

The black stonework of the room is barely illuminated by the dim magical crystals sitting in short stone pillars surrounding the final and deepest tomb. The space is mostly empty and unadorned save for a small stone altar in the corner with a carving of a grinning skull on it. The grave in the centre is on a foot high stone platform, with the dark stone base supporting a thick slab of obsidian that functions as the tomb's lid.

The lid has no decoration, and no words are carved anywhere in this space, but small particles of darkness, like barely perceptible smoke seem to emanate from the obsidian coffin. A thin crack runs along the top, and from here small drops of black liquid roll down the side of the coffin and disappear as they hit the ground. Sitting at the base of the sarcophagus is the skeletal figure of a person, clutching a hammer in their dead grip, their skin seemingly burned and dried. Small chips of obsidian are still attached to the blunt end of the hammer. A few other bodies are located in the various corners of the room, also burnt and blackened as if they were set on fire.

In this dark place the dead silence of the cairn, its rooms full of rotted furniture and old bones, is broken. A low hum and ebb, like the sound of waves washing up against rocks on the shore, comes from the tomb. It slowly fills the space and the sound echoes down the empty passages, fading as they make their way up to the surface.