

Background [any child 10 years prior]

10 years ago, you were playing on a muddy street of Diamond Lake when Aleandri, a rambunctious girl, dared you to come with her and step foot into one of the cairns outside town. Known as "mud sorcerer" tombs, these places used to attract adventurers, and older folk speak of magic traps and monsters inside. Still, a dare is a dare, and no self-respecting kid refuses the dare to step foot in one of the tombs.

Aleandri led you into the hills and you soon became lost. She seemed to know where she was going and took you a spot overgrown with brambles and boulders. She crawled through the brush into a cold stone archway, and you vaguely recall some sigil over the arch. A wind blew through the arch, from inside the cairn, carrying with it a life-like sigh. You almost turned and ran but then Aleandri mocked your courage. You dared her, if she was so tough, to spend the night alone. Aleandri huffed and said she would. She led you to a stocked shack nearby where she had stashed a bedroll and some odds and ends, calling it her "secret base." She told you to stay there and she'd be back in the morning.

Morning came and Aleandri didn't return. Then noon came and you got hungry and thirsty. You went outside and tried looking for the tomb but became lost. You wandered for hours, into the night, and fortunately the next morning were rescued by a delegation from Diamond Lake.

Aleandri, however, was never found.

To this day, you have never forgotten Aleandri nor the dare. Despite talking to adventurers who pass through, you have never heard of anyone who has found a cairn like the one Aleandri led you to with its life-like sighing wind, sigil, and overgrown entrance.

Background [any race adult 10 years prior]

10 years ago a group of children foolishly set out on a dare to explore a mud sorcerer's tomb. The area is full of cairns, some actual mud sorcerer tombs that were stocked with ancient magical traps but most just harmless imitations. Adventurers a century ago plundered most of the tombs, and local empty cairns serve as locales for teenagers to hang out. Still, children like the lad Alastor Land (30 years ago) have vanished in the hills looking for treasure or to prove their courage. After this group was missing for over a day, you helped form a search party that went looking. You found the children, dehydrated and hungry, babbling about a tomb with whispering winds and a strange sigil, and about Aleandri, the 12-year old who was never found. Apparently on a dare she spent the night in this cairn. Despite your best efforts, you never found Aleandri or the tomb.

Years later these children grew into adults, and you have remained good friends. You have not forgotten the look on their faces, though, when you had to tell them Aleandri wasn't coming back. To this day, despite all your attention to adventurers who pass through, you have never come across anyone who has found such a tomb with its whispering winds, strange sigil, and by an old shack.

Character 1 [any]

Dietrik Cicaeda (human), the garrison Cartographer, is your father (by birth or adoption). You both came to the garrison after a falling out with the Cartographer's Guild in the city of Kristophan and have lived here for much of your life. He never speaks about the affair, and has discouraged you from ever visiting the metropolis of minotaurs and thieves for as long as you can remember.

Although he is a civilian, his offices are housed within the garrison because the scheming, manipulative mining managers are extremely territorial; outright conflicts between them over who owns which parcels of local land have exploded in number over the last decade, and it's all your father can do to stay on top of the issue. He is a well-respected man in town, for to cross Cicaeda the Cartographer is to bring down the wrath of Garrison Commander Tolliver Trask, Governor-Mayor Lanod Neff, and possibly even more powerful allies in the city of Kristophan.

Rumors around Diamond Lake speak of a trio of adventurers from Kristophan. They've been spending a lot of time in the village's watering holes, proclaiming to all their intention to explore tombs, starting with an ancient tomb on the lake's northeast shore called the Stirgenest Cairn. You know their plan will fail, since your friend _____ [**Character 2**] has been to the Stirgenest Cairn and found it raped of its treasures years ago, just like all of the other empty tombs in the Cairn Hills.

But, your friend was insistent there had to be a cairn someone missed and came up with the name Ulavant. You looked (with or without permission) through your father's maps and found a 70-year old map, drawn in the shaky hand of your father's predecessor and with the note "for Ulavant", marking a tomb labeled "**Whispering Cairn**" on a map of a small parcel of land about an hour from the village.

According to some other records found in your father's office, the mine about a mile from the cairn ran dry some 50 years ago, and the land was abandoned by its owner, a mine manager named Ulgo Fant who died a pauper some 10 years ago, leaving no heirs. As far as you can tell, that means the area is a sort of no-man's land with no claims on it.

You haven't (yet) shared your suspicions that this may be the tomb Aleandri vanished into...

Character 2 [any]

Rumors around Diamond Lake speak of a trio of adventurers from the nearby city of Kristophan, metropolis of minotaurs and thieves. They've been spending a lot of time in the village's watering holes, proclaiming to all their intention to explore ancient tombs starting with one on the lake's northeast shore called the Stirgenest Cairn. You know that their plan will fail, since you've actually been to the Stirgenest Cairn and found it raped of its treasures years ago, just like all of the other empty tombs in the Cairn Hills.

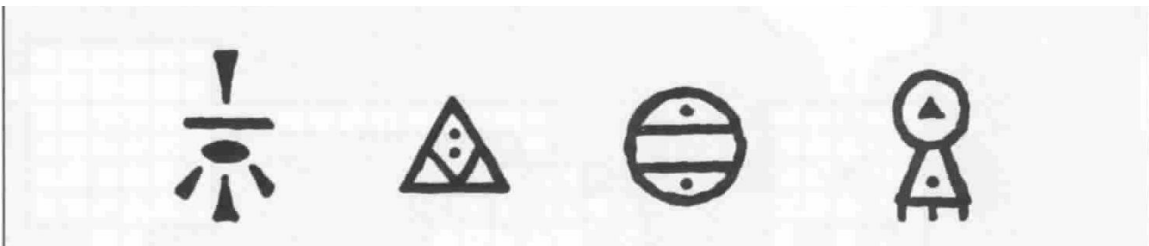
You've been out to several empty tombs ever since your grandfather told you about the mud sorcerer's tombs, marked with symbols **[see below]**. Sorcerers with power over the elements, especially water and earth, hence the nickname, tried to cheat fate by hiding their treasures in enchanted tombs, or so the stories go from those adventurers who found one. You've been thinking that maybe the hills outside Diamond Lake still hold unexplored cairns, maybe even a real mud sorcerer's tomb and not some native's imitation.

You've been talking with _____ **[Character 3]** and s/he told you about some rash archaeologist named Ulavant who came in 60 years ago saying he was going to plunder a mud sorcerer's tomb, much like the current trio is bragging. You got to thinking...this guy never came back, so maybe the ruin he sought was never unearthed.

[Describe how you are friends with Character 1, the cartographer's son/daughter], You contacted _____ **[Character 1]** recently with your idea, and asked him/her to look through the garrison's old maps for reference to any cairns that aren't well known (and hence well explored) by the local populace, and any reference to the name Ulavant. S/he hit paydirt almost immediately, and claims to have a map that reveals just such a location near a mine that went dry several decades ago. S/he doesn't even think any of the powerful mine managers in town lay claim to the spot, so it's been mostly forgotten.

You've taken it upon yourself to organize an expedition into the cairn, and the old mine looks like a good place to meet before heading out. Now it remains to gather some like-minded fellows...

[You may have recruited others, if so, discuss who and how.]



Character 3 [any]

One of your good friends is Mélinde, a fiery red-haired young woman from the Garrison who is driven to one day run the chapel and maybe the garrison itself—but she's in no hurry. She spends most of her time at a dragonchess parlor called Lazare's in town. She seems to like you well enough, but she clearly views you as one of the "little people," since she's been at the holy warrior business for several years, now. She is one of Valkus Dun's most trusted advisors, which means Mason (another holy warrior) doesn't care for her at all and views her as a political threat, which she probably is.

Mélinde gets you into Lazare's where you've had a chance to watch Allustan, the retired wizard, pit his Dragonchess skills against "Prince" Moonmeadow, the elven mine manager. You have yet to see the "Prince" lose. One time you overheard Allustan asking Moonmeadow if he'd heard of some undead creatures with tiny green worms in them stalking the hills. Moonmeadow laughed but Allustan didn't.

One night, you mentioned to _____ **[Character 2]** an old tale passed down jokingly in your family about Ulavant, the archaeologist who got greedy. A generation or two ago Ulavant came in from Kristophan bragging he had tracked down a legitimate mud sorcerer's tomb and was going to be rich. He was never heard from again. Your family has used the story since you can remember as an excuse to discourage you or anyone from venturing out too far from Diamond Lake. You think the story might be real. One or two of the old-timers in town recall a man who bragged he would get rich from the artifacts of some unknown tomb, and the name Ulavant seemed familiar to them, dating 50-60 years back.

Recently, _____ **[Character 1]** came to you with a map and an intriguing offer. _____ **[Character 2]** plans to lead an excursion into a local cairn, which s/he believes to be laden with treasure, partially based on your lead! There are many such tombs in the region, but most are assumed to have been emptied centuries ago, their wealth accounting for much of Kristophan's early splendor. No one truly knows who built the ancient cairns. You're certainly interested in finding out.

Character 4 [any outdoor type]

You've lived your whole life in the Bronzewood Lodge, a small community of woodsfolk, druids, and rangers about two hours from the village of Diamond Lake. Life in the lodge was great until about a year ago, when your mother died while hunting in the forest. The other rangers with her claim she died when a tree fell on her out of nowhere, but they're very quiet about the whole incident, leading you to believe that there's something more to the story that they aren't telling you.

You've never really had a relationship with your father, a civilized _____ **[insert race]** named _____ **[see DM if you want a local NPC, or invent your own]**. According to your mother, your father never wanted anything to do with you, and you've never met him.

When she died, a friend of hers and a fellow ranger, a human man named Merris Sandoval, took you under his wing. A few years ago, he left the Bronzewood Lodge to work for an old friend in Diamond Lake's garrison, but he still visits about twice a month, and he's invited you to visit him in the garrison on a handful of occasions.

From time to time you venture into Diamond Lake to have drinks with your friends at a dragonchess parlor known as Lazare's. A few days ago, _____ **[Character 1 & 2]** invited you to join them and **[others you know]** to explore an abandoned tomb a few miles from Diamond Lake. S/he says that the place should be loaded with treasure, but that it's in wild country where your skills could definitely come in handy. The group plans to meet at an abandoned building on the grounds of a tapped mine a few miles from the tomb, and from there they plan to investigate a true mud sorcerer's tomb. You were pleased to be invited, and are eager to see what the day will hold in store.

Character 5 [apprenticed to Allustan]

You once paid Chezabet, the fortune teller at the Emporium, for a reading. She said that some day you'll hear crowds in Kristophan chant your name, mingle at the party of a prince, and even save Diamond Lake from catastrophe. You weren't sure what to make of her words. After all, she predicted your friend Ariello Klint would someday dance with snakes, and now he does "magic" by making ropes move like snakes at the Emporium.

Recently, you heard about a trio of adventurers from Kristophan who have come in, flashing coin and preparing to raid some cairn. The kids run after them, hoping for a glimpse, and rumors fly about the muscle man's belt with the face on it, or the mysterious wizard who never talks, or the lovely elf who just took out Paggett as the reigning knife-throwing champion at The Feral Dog.

It all sounds great, but you fear you'll be apprenticed to Allustan, the "smartest man in town," for the rest of your life. He's a nice enough man, limping after taking the "Test" (a test for wizards that he never speaks directly about), but a life of documenting texts on ancient cairns isn't as exciting as exploring them.

While drinking at a local dragonchess parlor called Lazare's and thinking about your future, you met with your friend, _____ **[Character 2]**. After a half-dozen meads, s/he confided in you that the near future held great promise, for s/he had persuaded _____ **[Character 1]** to look for maps of unexplored, likely treasure-laden tombs, in the treacherous Cairn Hills. Your money situation is getting close to desperate and the idea of ancient treasure certainly appeals to you, if the maps prove fruitful.

Character 6 [any]

Work has started to get boring, of late, and you're far more interested in your nightly visits to Lazare's, a dragonchess parlor and drinking establishment along the Vein, Diamond Lake's notorious main strip. You haven't figured out a way to improve your lot in life, other than planning on perhaps collecting on the reward for the capture of "Demon Boy," an Emporium attraction that escaped from his cage. He's described as a crazy little bugger with red skin and obsessed with fire. Shag Solomon was offering a big reward last you heard.

Your regular drinking partners at Lazare's include _____ **[Character 1]**, the son/daughter of the village cartographer and _____ **[possibly other characters]**. Recently, _____ **[Character 1]** came to you with a map and an intriguing offer. _____ **[Character 2]** plans to lead an excursion into a local cairn, which s/he believes to be laden with treasure. There are many such tombs in the region, but most are assumed to have been emptied centuries ago, their wealth accounting for much of Kristophan's splendor.

The group plans to meet in an abandoned building not far from the tomb. Your friend even has a map, taken from his/her cartographer father. You've overheard dwarves speak longingly into their cups of the wealth of the Cairn Hills dating before even Greysmere (dwarven outpost) was built. This tomb will probably turn out to be empty, like all the others. But you can't stop thinking about it. What if it isn't empty at all?

Dream Sequence #1

You stand atop a cliff in the field of battle, tainted winds carrying decay to your nostrils under a grey and red, cloud-filled sky. Cacophonous moans echo in the vale below as monstrosities from nightmares writhe and crawl forth: men with maggots roiling across decayed flesh, giant segmented worms as large as a ship formed of pure bones, and overhead a dragon of mythic proportions with tears in its wings and hide. You look to the men and women before you, humans, elves, and a handful of other races, crowded around a container decorated with draconic visages. They are ready to give their lives to ensure the item within is secured. A gaunt man with robes covered in blood addresses your small band. You already know the plan: you hold off the forces below. You succeed, the world lives. You fail, and everyone and everything you know dies. You've had this dream before. You also know there's one figure out of place: a small boy who lurks in the crowd. He's always there, and when you lay eyes on him, when you see his head twisted inhumanely to the side as if his neck were broken, you awaken.

Dream Sequence #2

You have a great feeling of sadness. Before you lays a harshly beautiful woman, flushed with life but not breathing or moving in her tomb. She will awaken, so she said before she crawled onto that cold dark slab of stone, before the uncaring minions of earth with their gemstone eyes began shifting walls of an elaborate resting place together. She told your group that you must survive to awaken her, that she knew how to combat the rising evil, and that without her knowledge the world would lapse into a greater darkness than the one coming. She is a cruel mistress, but you have heard of the rumors from your home – thousands culled into herds and sacrificed to some dark god. You cannot imagine worse. You and others scatter from the tomb as the final wards are laid and it settles into the ground. When the time comes, you and others will return and liberate your mistress. But in this dream, that time never comes. You never receive the calling. You flee your homeland, far from the jungles and the screams that don't stop. You raise a family and watch in horror as your children one by one march to a dark cave and vanish. The last child to go is always out of place, a human boy with a broken neck. He is always there and not yours, but with his limping gait, he heads for that same cave. Every time he enters, he looks back and you awaken.

Dream Sequence #3

Outside your window the city burns, the light of the orange and yellow flames light the black clouds. The lad with the broken neck floating next to you looks as if he is intently watching the fires below. It won't be long until the inn is another casualty; somehow it hasn't caught fire yet. You scan the room and find it odd that your party isn't doing anything, as if the raging inferno is somehow to be doused by being ignored. They sit cheerfully around a table drinking ale and playing games of chance, coins jingling as they bet on the next round or as the winner collects his take. _____ continues to fill everyone's mugs with ale from a flask - intricately carved silver encasing a green glass - you see the worms spill forth in the ale. _____ repeats, "Taint me!" as he is dealt another card, his skin turning grey with each deal. _____ seems paler dressed in all black, skulls and sickles stitched into her cloak, she smiles wickedly as she picks each of the worms out of her drink tossing them in the air and catching them in her mouth. _____ sits with his arms crossed obviously angry with the losing streak he is on, "Can't I catch a break?!" "That's ironic" the lad next to you quips, his broken neck lolling, "I caught a break a long time ago."

"Good to see you could make it old friend!" cries out a female of indeterminable age with shaven head as she puts her arms around the lad's shoulders. "It seems we will miss the ascension, but not to worry, I have carefully hidden my artifacts with my apprentice. Come look at my map." The two lean over a table with a large bird stretched across it, carved into its naked featherless flesh is a map of chaotic design. As you approach to get a closer look the dead bird, lad with the broken neck, and bald woman all sing a funeral dirge. "Spread the word all over town, you can't keep the worm god down, no use in trying to get up and dance, the powers that be haven't got a chance, the whole world's gonna burn with the herald's return!"