

## Mounds

Fourteen-year-old Joshua was awestruck by the sight of the mounds.

“Why do you think the mounds were built, Papa?” he asked his great-grandfather.

Papa didn’t answer.

Joshua said, “My teachers say the mounds were built thousands of years ago, but no one knows who did it, and if we get too close, we could die. Some say aliens built them. Is that what you think, Papa?”

Papa hesitated before replying.

“For all my life, Joshua, I have not been allowed to discuss the mounds, for fear of...”

“Fear of what, Papa? Do you know why they are here?”

Again, Papa paused.

“I took an oath of silence, Joshua. One I have been bound to.”

Standing next to a giant warning sign, they panned the desert landscape in unison. The mounds, a light grayish color during the day, were distributed randomly as far as they could see against the backdrop of distant mountains. Behind them, a few miles to the west, dusk was settling in on their village. A light easterly breeze, one that never ceased, propagated the nondescript odor of the mounds.

“I’ve heard things, Papa,” Joshua said.

Papa flinched, but said nothing, just stared at the mounds.

“That the mounds were really built because of wars that caused the die-offs during the Extreme Age.”

Tersely, Papa said, “It is true that they were created during the Extreme Age, Joshua. The Engineers constructed millions of them around the planet, each one three stories high, twisting their way for miles through the landscape—just as we see them now, spread across this desert. Those with fanciful imaginations might think of them as the carcasses of mythical serpents.

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“But understand this: there were no wars. What you have been taught is a falsification of history. There was only isolation in that age, and that was far worse than war. Billions of people split off into millions of factions, to each their own. Two distinct entities finally emerged: those living in excess, and those living in deprivation. Consumption and waste; envy and despair. War was not possible, Joshua—the privileged had no minions to fight for them, the destitute had no means, and neither had the will to overcome their greatest mutual enemy: apathy.”

“Please, Papa, tell me about the mounds!”

Papa turned and looked back. A few faint lights flickered in the village. Their horses, tied off at the sign, were restless. The sinking orange sun was now just peaking above the horizon, and the mounds started to glow slightly, a reddish tint with a quivering yellow haze hovering above the surface. An audible component joined in: a low frequency hum, its resonance generating a companion vibration barely noticeable to Joshua and Papa, but to the horses a roar and quake from an unnatural phenomenon, one to be feared.

“What is going on, Papa?” Joshua asked anxiously.

“It is called the Aura,” Papa replied. “A complex combination of solar and geologic conditions that throughout the day creates an energy that excites the mounds and triggers their natural rhythm at dusk. By dawn, it diminishes, except for a thin remaining layer of its yellow atmosphere.” They watched as the mound nearest them seemed to come to life.

“You wonder why I brought you out here, Joshua. Well, it is to learn the truth.”

“Truth?” Joshua said apprehensively.

“Yes, Joshua, truth. Because you are intelligent and wise, I wish to disclose to you secrets that I and others of my generation swore never to divulge. You are one among the few we know we can trust.

“But I warn you, these secrets must never get out. If they did, there would be chaos. As such, carrying them is a burden that no one should endure, much less a child. But I offer them to you unconditionally; should you choose to decline, you have my blessing. That I promise. Take as much time as you need to decide, but know that there is nothing positive to be gained from acquiring this knowledge.” He looked Joshua directly in the eyes. “Do you understand this?”

Joshua shivered, not only from the sudden onset of evening cold, but from the chill of realizing that knowledge, once gained, cannot be purged.

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Tears formed, and he fixated on the glowing mounds. No answer came forth.

“I know, Joshua,” Papa said gently. “Dark secrets are the enemy of humanity; they stifle the emergence of enlightenment and rot the seeds of a better future. My companions and I, those of us left, are in our eighties now. We faced this moment when we were your age, and have debated for decades whether or not to take our secrets to the grave. Now, time is running out, and we choose to present them to you. It is with great shame that we do so. Curse us, and double-curse our forbearers!”

Joshua walked over to the horses. They had settled down, but retained an air of wariness. He saw the spattering of dim lights in the village, the only signs of its meager existence. Overhead, he beheld the raging galaxy.

Returning to Papa, he said, “I want to know.”

Grimly, Papa began: “The mounds are pollution, Joshua. When the breakdown in human conscience occurred centuries ago, the mass consumption and environmental disaster proliferated unchecked. Thus began the Extreme Age, so named later because of the sudden transition from generations of rampant devastation to the furious, panicked containment effort that resulted in the mounds. They were constructed over a period of a hundred years from the output of processing plants designed by the Engineers. Those factories are now rubble.

“By the time my father was an adult, the global population had collapsed, and there were perhaps a few hundred million people left, half of them here in North America. It was then that the Engineers discovered that the planet was dying because of the toxic sludge in the mounds. They had slowly festered, emitting undetected chemical agents that have horrific effects on all life forms.

“So, the truth is that the mounds were the primary contributors to the die-offs. I was very young when the lies—the re-written history of the mounds—were fed to the public. However, some of my generation later stumbled upon the truth, and we were made to swear to secrecy. Now, we violate our oath.”

With moist eyes, Papa gazed over the head of his great-grandson and absorbed the eerie spectacle of the mounds continuing to awaken as twilight deepened.

He cleared his throat and resumed.

“The most devastating discovery, however, was that your parent’s generation would be the last humans to procreate. That is, your generation cannot have children. It’s possible that...”

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“What Papa?” Joshua whispered as Papa struggled to stifle his emotions.

“It’s possible that you, Joshua, could end up being the last human on Earth.” He spun around and walked briskly to the horses.

Joshua looked up at the stars again, and tears returned. How many planets with humans were out there, he wondered? How many of them had at one time thrived, only to somehow manage, as Earth had, to squander everything?

He and Papa mounted their horses and began the slow ride back to the village. The mounds behind them shimmered. Aside from a barren landscape and stagnant oceans, they would be the last definable features left on Earth, and for untold millennia would emit their signature radiation for curious astronomers elsewhere in the galaxy to marvel at and study. And they would all issue the same warning: avoid Earth.