

WATERMIGHT

My throat rasped, sucking down dry air. I hadn't had a drink in what felt like aeons but was closer to two days, and my body resisted every step. But still I pressed on. I would die otherwise.

This place was not built for me. It had been abundantly clear from the beginning of my voyage but only now did I understand. Human instinct does not make itself known only to be ignored. My party slowly dropped off until the last few of us split up in the hope that at least one of us could survive. But the chances of that seemed slim now.

In the distance I saw them loom, high above the red sand and golden bushes. They shimmered in the heat but gave me hope and I marched on, trusting they were not a trick of my mind. Footstep after footstep they solidified until at last I was lying in the shade of one of the giant mounds of heaped clay. Spires reached towards the sky, while a thick base supported the structure and at the top, out of pseudo-parapets the inhabitants crawled around. The termites held mud in their mandibles and constructed as I watched, first a lump that grew and sprouted smaller protrusions then that was carved away to create a face. It had its eyes closed and in my delirious state I could swear it was asleep. In its presence I too, quickly felt my head grow heavy and I couldn't help but let it drop, collapsing into a deep slumber.

When I awoke my throat had constricted and I could scarcely breathe. My feet, which were outside the protective shadow, were burned. Dragging myself up I saw that the face had its eyes open. I was overcome with a sudden sense of gratitude and I threw myself at the mound thanking it for its generosity and kindness. I felt as if I should repay the gift of shade it had provided me and so very painfully I stripped off my shirt and immediately pulled it over the mound, in the aim of protecting it from the overbearing sun.

This one act sapped me of all my energy and I fell into the dust again. I knew my time was near. Unable to vocalise a prayer, I silently moved my lips repeating something I was taught in my childhood light-years away. Lying there I promised myself I would not die hiding from the world. I forced open my crusted eyes and looked upon my surroundings.

I was in the centre of a ring of similar structures, all radiating from the one that had helped me. Though they were all quite large, mine towered over them and was a different shade of gold to the others. There were even spiderwebs criss-crossing on the surface that moved in the wind, giving the illusion that the mound was sparkling. Perhaps this was the queen's residence.

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Content that I knew my final resting place I lowered my head back down to the ground and kept my gaze on the mound's face, my vision beginning to blur. Too weak to be astonished I could only stare helplessly as the clay began to shift, swimming across the structure, floating up and down in clumps held by the termites. The face now appeared in full, no longer just in relief on the surface but wholly incorporated into the very essence of the being. For I had been mistaken. This was no ordinary termite mound. This was something else. This was alive.

It spoke to me but I could not hear. Flies had realised I was close to death and were swarming my to-be corpse. The buzzing was deafening and my view was blackened. I tried to cry out, I could not bear to miss its message but the face kept speaking and the flies still accumulated. I closed my eyes in fear but then one word amongst the cacophony made its way to me, clear in my mind, though not heard by my ears. Instead, this single word had been sent across through some ancient language and interpreted by a primal part of my brain. 'Wish?' it questioned. And I opened my mouth. 'Water,' flowed clearly out of my previously mute lips.

The flies became magnetised to the being and fought desperately to chew their way inside it. Then in an instant they were vaporised by steam that shot explosively out of pores on the surface. Only some husks fell out of the air onto my skin, but these were quickly swept away by a deluge of cool blue water that soothed my cracked skin and brought me back to life. As it collected around me I lapped it up then gained the strength to sit and drink and drink as the spring gushed into my open mouth. I felt my cells become soaked through and my stomach engorged and still I drank.

The water came from the mouth of the mound and the more it poured the wider the mouth grew as the wet clay collapsed inwards. There were no termites in the puddle growing on the ground, instead it was as if there had never been any termites in the structure at all. The inner layers were peeled away and revealed; iridescent and more brilliant the closer to the core they came. Spires fell and the castle disintegrated but still I selfishly drank.

Eventually I raised myself out of the sea of mud I was in and looked for my shirt. It was nowhere to be found. The sun was setting and I was reinvigorated. I took a step forward, then another and another until I was striding like a man reborn, fast towards the horizon, leaving behind an experience I knew I would carry with me for the rest of my life.

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When I finally came to a settlement I dared not speak of the face. The people there questioned how I had not perished but I knew mystery would be better received than the truth.

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And yet I cannot stop thinking of the being without whom I would not be alive today. I have led many expeditions in attempts to find the mound but I always knew deep down it was gone. How could it not be gone of course for here I am, fully material, in its place. Still I search, not yet ready to accept that something out there sacrificed itself me for no reason whatsoever and expected nothing at all in return. I don't know if I can accept that I was worth it.