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Terra Supreme

Terra Supreme

By Michael Hart

Violence, or even the threat of violence, is like amnesia; it makes you forget who you really are. Echo realized this as she watched a pair of men tromp through the trees in her direction. They were trespassers in her kingdom. The sensational accounts in the news flyers and the wide-eyed whisper tales among her old classmates about the inundation of marauding trespassers had formed a character in her imagination—a predatory man-beast, frothing at the mouth.

Yet these two at least lacked the stealth of her imagined predator. Each step they took found a way to snap twigs, rustle leaves or waver on unsteady ground. They carried too much equipment—shovels and axes and what sounded like the better part of a kitchen in their packs. They huffed and puffed and cursed the forest as if it were obligated to rearrange itself to open a new trail just for them. And they were oblivious to her presence.

It was Echo's first time so close to the Border Mountains, and the first time she'd ever seen foreigners. Their fair complexions, lighter than her own copper skin, flared red with exertion. Their straw-colored hair, stringier than her wavy black curls, was matted to their heads with sweat.

Echo's guide, Tayo, smoothly descended his lookout tree, hardly causing the twitch of a leaf. His lean muscles coiled in preparation under his forest-patterned clothes.

"These men are not lost," Tayo said quietly of the trespassers, "and it's no accident they are travelling off-trail, where they are harder for us to find." He locked eyes with her and tilted his head forward, a movement she had quickly learned meant he was explaining something she would not want to hear. "Just because they don't carry flaming swords like in those silly drawings doesn't mean they aren't dangerous. They've crossed the Border Mountains, after all. They want to steal the lifeblood from our soil."

Echo brought her posture back to attention and nodded in agreement. In their few days together, her guide had introduced her to the forest as though he was vouching for her and showing her a backdoor into his dear friend's parlor. All the stars in the sky couldn't concoct a question that he could not answer, so of course he knew how dangerous the trespassers were. And why couldn't it be that simple? Even her parents, after all, could not completely hide the fear behind their pride when she showed them the letter confirming her acceptance for the Guideship with a ranger.

Despite everything, ambushing such hapless strangers struck her as contrary to the teachings of the First Book by which her people lived.

#

Before Echo earned her pairing with Tayo at the Border Mountains, she was a pupil of the Library of Protanis Scholars, studying beneath the Great Tower of the Eye.

One day Scholar Xander asked Echo's class, "What is more powerful than *believing* something is true?" Echo and her classmates sat in a circle in the library's courtyard. Xander paced the perimeter of their group, curious for an answer. His hands were clasped behind his back, a mountain of wavy hair rising from his head in all directions like gray flames.

A young boy responded. "Knowing it is true."

Scholar Xander bobbed his head in half satisfaction. "Yes. But what is even more powerful than *knowing* something is true?"

The pupils looked at each other quizzically.

When no response came, Xander said, "Remembering. Remembering it is true. The First Book says there is no higher purpose in life than to remember who we truly are, and to help others remember who they truly are."

Some children looked to each other with confusion, others giggled.

"Did I say something funny?" asked Xander—feigning surprise at the reaction.

A young girl chimed in. “But that’s so easy. Of course I know who I am.” “Is it so easy?” Xander asked with one raised eyebrow.

“But who are we truly then, Scholar?” asked Echo.

“I notice you used the word ‘*we*’ and not ‘*I*, Echo,” he said. He crouched with the ease of someone much younger and scooped a handful of sand. He let it cascade between his fingers for all the students to see.

“Nowadays there are as many opinions on the subject as there are grains of sand at your feet. But our Kingdom once claimed to remember the truth—one truth for all.” He beamed, knowing he had a rapt audience. “Many centuries ago, before the borders were closed, people came here, to Protanis, from all over the world; people with very dark skin, people with very light skin.

“They all believed any kingdom that could build monuments that touched the sky could surely solve the meager problems plaguing their lives.” He pointed up to the Great Tower, and the disk with the painted eye mounted atop it. “As they approached from the sea on their crowded ships, they spotted the tower and said, *Maybe they can help me remember, too.*” As he paced, the students with their backs to him turned their heads so as not to miss any detail. “But then people started forgetting again. Then they said no more could come.” He stroked his beard rhythmically, like he was teasing out a fond memory. “But as my old Sage would say, at least we get to see the legacy of our Golden Age in the golden skin we all now share.”

#

Tayo turned away from the trespassers and the mountains. He started back toward the village from which the two of them had embarked only three days before, on a Guideship that was meant to last the summer. He headed back toward Echo’s family home. He paused and turned his head almost imperceptibly, another cue she had learned meant simply, *Come on, then.*

“At their pace,” Tayo said in a dimmed voice, “I should be able to take you home and then intercept them on their return trek.”

Echo did not know what an interruption to her Guideship like this would mean, and whether the doors that would surely open with a recommendation from a ranger like Tayo would ever open for her at all.

“Why can’t we simply chase them away?” she blurted hopefully.

“They might run, sure. Perhaps they would go back across the mountains. Or perhaps they would hide and ambush us tomorrow. Not a situation a student preparing for higher studies should find herself in.”

An ambush didn’t seem likely to Echo as she watched the two men struggle through tangle after tangle of bush and branch, their mouth-breathing growing worse. They appeared to be older than Tayo, though this could have been a consequence of their presumed harsh lives. They moved in a stiff, over-muscled manner, like lumbering boulders compared to Tayo’s steady stream.

“I need to complete my Guideship,” Echo said. “If I don’t, I can’t start at the academy in the fall.”

“We’ll have time to start again,” Tayo said. “Next month I can—well, no, not next month. But—”

“I won’t make a sound,” Echo said. “I can keep up—at least fast enough for you to keep up with these two.”

Echo saw Tayo’s face register surprise for the first time. He held the look, silently challenging her to waver. She forced herself not to flinch.

Tayo then broke into a one-sided smirk that may have held a droplet of pride in his new scholar-in-waiting. He’d guided many of her kind along the forbidden paths, to their first encounter with *terra supreme*, their kingdom’s great natural treasure—once considered limitless but recently subject to perceptions of scarcity. He gave the students hands-on, nostrils-full exposure to terra, before they went on to bury themselves in books to study the theory and management of it.

“Very well. We’ll wait until they reach the Wound,” said Tayo. “They won’t be able to deny their intentions at that point. That’s where we’ll arrest them.” He looked Echo up and down. “Built like a doe and just as harmless, _” he grumbled. “Let’s just say, *I’ll* arrest them. We’ll leave them at Fort Majaro and continue on.”

Echo stuffed her elation and relief down her throat, lest she ruin her second chance.

Again Tayo leaned in, “But if you so much as swat at a fly without my say-so. . . .”

As they travelled over rocks that got mossier and trees that got larger, Echo knew they were getting closer to the Earth Wound, the deep gash across the Protanis landscape. The First Book told of her kingdom

crashing down from heaven—its impact with the earth forming the unbroken ring of mountains that made Protanis' borders, as well as the canyon-like Wound that spanned it from Border Mountains to sea coast.

Tayo hiked and Echo followed. He kept an eye on the trespassers and periodically fired an appraising glance back at her.

“What is so fascinating about the ground?” he asked.

“Well, um, the First Book says our soil comes down from—”

“That was not a rhetorical question. And I am not one of your library scholars. I want to know why you are so fascinated with the ground. You never take your eyes off it when you walk. You're more likely to walk into a tree limb than find any terra.”

“But I don't want to trip,” said Echo.

“Keep your eyes up. At first you will trip. Then you will trip less. And one day you will go barefoot like me, and your feet will learn to see the rocks and the roots for you.”

Echo winced at the thought, but then heard the crunching under the nearby trespassers' boots, making them so easy to follow it was almost leisurely.

“They seek the terra supreme at the base of the Wound,” said Tayo, “the very thing you wish to specialize in.” He gave her a cautionary look. “Are you sure that's the course you want to take?”

“Yes,” Echo replied with what little resolve she could muster against a man so vastly more familiar with the subject matter of her dreams. “I can't think of any field of study that is more important,” she recited for him, as though he were on the admissions board at the academy. What she did not tell him was that she came from a family that suffered from the new scarcity scare first-hand. She did not tell him about the hours she spent as a child digging holes in fields, trying in vain to reach her own secret lode of the special terra soil—trying to spare her parents the humility of continually relying on the charity of others to compensate for their fickle crop fields.

“If you're obsessed with it, then you have something in common with all of them.” He waved his hand in the general direction of the men they followed.

“But if trespassers get caught so often, why do they keep coming back for it?” Echo asked.

“Because they think it will make up for the months without rain in their lands, and the swarms of fire bugs,” he snorted, “and their incompetence.”

Though he wasn't looking at her, Echo turned her cheek away from him in embarrassment—as if slapped by his words. Were she and her family as incompetent as these foreigners he judged so severely? *But that's why it's so important to carry on,* she thought.

Tayo silently swiveled a dead tree limb and its potentially noisy leaves out of their way. “And they've even convinced themselves it can heal injuries to one's body.”

Guided tours of select locales along the great Wound could be arranged at cost, but the cost was always out of reach for Echo's parents. So when she and Tayo at last reached the brim of the Wound, she expected the legendary fissure to announce itself with a degree of majesty, like a goddess storming out of the clouds atop a thunderbolt. She instead had to wonder if the land was a bit self-conscious about its massive disfigurement. It seemed to go to great lengths to disguise it. She knew from her schoolroom maps that the deep rift in the topography was too broad for any bridge to span, yet a bird flying overhead would never notice its existence; rather, it would appear to be just a continuation of the forest. This was due to the Wound's Materran trees which, despite being rooted deep at its bottom, grew to match the tops of their less grandiose children at ground level. The oldest songs about terra supreme soil celebrated it as Protanis' gift to the world. The newest pamphlets they handed out in village squares warned of its diminishing supply and the need to defend it.

The trespassers paused in a clearing atop the Wound, catching their breath before their descent.

Tayo and Echo ducked and weaved closer to their quarry than they had yet been.

“I'll order them to bind their hands so we can escort them to the jailor.” He drew a bow and arrow from his sack. “Don't worry, this is only to make my point clear.”

Like any other pupil of the Eye, Echo was well versed in the annals of the Protanian warrior, from the winged archers of the First Book to the much-later Defenders of the Pass, whose arrows had repulsed the

mammoth-mounted hordes at the Border Mountains. But seeing the tool of their trade in the hands of one who must have killed before froze her in place.

“You’re holding back,” said Tayo. “Always say what bothers you when you’re with me.”

“Forgive me, but these men seem more dangerous to themselves than us. My scholars taught that the victories earned by Protanian warriors of old were due to their restraint as much as the accuracy of their arrows.”

“Your scholars can think their way out of any solution.” He rubbed his thumb and forefinger up and down an arrowhead. “If trespassers return to their homelands with our terra, more will come. And one day they’ll march in with an army. That is the way of it.”

Once again, Echo girded herself and nodded. She followed Tayo until they reached a clear line of sight on the two men. They were speaking a language she did not understand and gesturing to each other with the sharp movements of people under strain. One held an axe, the other a shovel.

Tayo put a hand atop Echo’s shoulder and gently pressed her down, as if locking her in place. “This task is for me now,” he whispered. With an arrow nocked and muscles stretching and easing in preparation, he stepped forward.

#

Tayo did warn the trespasser to drop his weapon, Echo thought, trying to justify her guide’s decision. Whether the man had understood him or not, she would never know. Tayo had insisted that she stay hidden, for that matter, and she hadn’t listened to him either. Perhaps, despite a commanding visual impression, his voice lacked conviction.

She approached the trespasser, laying on his back with Tayo’s perfect shot square in the middle of his chest. The man’s friend had bolted down into the Wound, and Tayo had chased. The wounded man’s breathing made a whistling sound, and each in-and-out seemed to be an all-encompassing feat for him.

When he spotted Echo, his eyes briefly sparked in fear, but then he returned to the more important task of drawing the next breath. Upon closer inspection, the “dagger” he’d drawn when Tayo came up on them, the one he’d been ordered to drop, was more like a large kitchen knife. The axe his companion had dropped before bolting down the Wound was in fact a dull, brown hatchet.

Echo kicked the knife out of arm’s reach anyway. She knelt beside him and gave him some water.

The man pointed to the arrow in him, then pointed down and away, into the Wound—the other wound. His arm plopped onto the ground after the exertion, and he then repeated the gesture.

He wants terra for his wound, of course, she thought.

She envisioned Tayo re-emerging to spot her applying terra to the trespasser’s chest. She envisioned herself returning to her parents’ house in shame—her Guideship cancelled and future uncertain. But what she could not envision was standing over the man and doing nothing as he pleaded with her—in his own way—not to let him die.

Rangers like Tayo regularly reconnoitered the Wound. Scholars were sent down to carefully measure how much terra could be extracted for use in farmlands. Priests and priestesses made trips down as well, to celebrate the physical proof of the long-ago impact their kingdom made, so they might better remember their people’s painful separation from the Creator. Echo hoped to someday possess some of these same credentials. She hoped to be an administrator, in fact, never again depending on others to decide what, if any, terra she would be granted. But on this day, she was not a decider and she had none of these credentials. She grabbed the discarded shovel and climbed down into the Wound anyway.

The Wound, or at least the section into which the trespasser and Tayo had gone, had a nearly sheer drop along its side. The sporadic vegetation that was fierce enough to fight through the rock wall gave her landing points as she half-crawled, half-slid toward the bottom.

The limbs of the nearest Materran tree nearly reached the wall, teasing her with the offer of a strong, reliable way down but not being able to deliver. Perhaps that was why so many who snuck into the Wound unlawfully never returned.

The midday sun looked like dusk when she descended below limb level. The great tree’s trunk seemed fit to prop up a whole village. It was powerful enough to withstand all her problems a thousand times over, yet it was indifferent and kept just out of reach.

Roots of the Materran tree that were visible above ground formed a maze of fibrous threads, like a wooden spider's web. The fibers at the top were damp and pliable, those closer to the ground were sturdy. She slid between the levels of threads, each as thick as her body, trying to reach the soil. "The Wound is healing itself," Sage Xander once told her class. "But on an entirely different scale of time than ours."

Echo at last planted her feet on soil. Sage Xander would also say the terra supreme at the base of the Wound was formed by a cataclysmic event—a massive impact that generated unimaginable temperatures and left pockets of energy trapped deep in the soil. "And who knows," he'd say. "Perhaps it was the same event the First Book speaks of, when our Kingdom crashed down from heaven. But which is more important: How it came to be, or what we do with this gift?"

An insect as long as her forearm, with more legs than she cared to count, darted out from behind a root. It took offense to her intrusion with a sizzling hiss, and if she hadn't been so quick to smack its pincer jaws with her shovel it could have easily taken a finger or more. Tales of the oversized insects that matched the oversized foliage in the Wound abounded. Even more popular were the tales of the oversized predators who feasted on them.

She decided to dig, and to dig quickly. The soil around her was so rich, it was almost appetizing. Black and moist—each grain was a miniscule sponge. It was speckled with tiny green emeralds; once much larger rocks, they had been transformed by the ancient heat blast, if Sage Xander's lessons were true.

Despite her accelerating heartbeat, Echo stopped digging. She needed no shovel. *Could it be this abundant*, she thought? She realized what she was looking for was all around her. Terra supreme made up the entire bottom of the Wound, at least from where she stood. There was more of it than she had ever dreamed of uncovering as a young girl racing against the setting sun with her shovel; more than an army could haul off in a hundred years; more than Protanis could ever use, she estimated. She wondered how many people knew this. She wondered if the kingdom needed terra administrators at all. But these were matters for another time. Climbing up would be more difficult than sliding down.

#

When she returned topside, she discovered the second trespasser reunited with his dying friend, hands and feet bound and mouth gagged. Tayo was nowhere to be found—no doubt looking for her. No doubt determined to march her back to her parent's house as soon as he found her.

The wounded trespasser's whistling had wound down to a faint tapping sound. When he saw her open her bag full of emerald-flaked dirt, however, a spark lit in his eyes. Without a clue what she was doing, she opened his shirt and smeared it on his skin around the half-protruding arrow. She put a clump in his mouth and chased it with water. She patted his forehead and face with it. His breathing flickered a couple more times, but then it ended.

She looked at his companion. "It's just fertilizer. Powerful fertilizer made from a freak combination of events." She had no idea if he understood. She glanced down into her bag. There was plenty more for her to study on her own time, now that the Guideship was likely over.

"I'm so sorry, but I never could have helped him," she said.

Echo slumped back with exhaustion. She looked around for signs of Tayo's return and the rage and consequences that would follow. She looked to the deceased trespasser. As the terra supreme dried on his forehead and nose it reminded her of the visage of a golden-helmeted Protanian hero of antiquity she had once seen on a parchment in a museum. The dead trespasser's eyes had glossed over, but the spark she had brought about still lingered—eternally held behind the mortal flesh. That spark of recognition, like a little green emerald that was a glimpse of something so much bigger, suddenly made Guideships and family crops and terra supreme laughable illusions.

Echo embraced the spark for a timeless blink of an eye before the illusions forced their way back into her head, like they always do. But she kept some of the spark, and before she could think too hard, she cut the bound trespasser loose. She handed her sack of terra to him.

"Just keep heading for the mountains," she said, pointing the way. "I hope you make it home. I'm heading the other direction, I'm afraid. I'd like to speak with an old scholar of mine again."

Violence is like amnesia, but in that fleeting spark Echo remembered who she really was.