

Maximin's eyes were closed. Salt sprayed on his face as the wind ruffled his hair and tore at his collar. He'd opened the top two buttons to let the cool wind stroke his chest. It felt good after a night below deck. His quarters were cramped, dark and close to the engine room, so he'd spend as much of his days on the main deck.

He'd been at sea for 25-days, sailing west from Korachan. It was his first time on a ship, and his first time outside of the city. *Throne*, he thought, *it's my first time outside the offices.*

The others had made the journey to the colonies many times before, he'd only been an amanuensis to the surveyors for a few months, so had not been around for any of their previous sojourns.

But this was a unique trip. The surveyors would be going to the island of Irrediviva, over 700-miles west of the colony of Tavadra. It was uninhabited and had been subjected to centuries of Atramental weapons testing in the distant past, making it utterly inhospitable to mortal life. It was a place that many knew of in anecdotal stories. Always the friend of a friend had heard this about it, or a distant relative's acquaintance had heard of tainted monsters wandering the place. Maximin knew little of it, but its infamous reputation had intrigued him, and now they were close to reaching it he was starting to get worried.

*Should I even be outside*, he wondered?

Wouldn't the air have been tainted?

The sailors didn't seem too bothered. But, then again, maybe they didn't know.

He went back below deck, just to be on the safe side.

Eronias, the expedition leader, saw him near one of the storage rooms, where their softsuits were kept. Maximin nodded as the man, a heavy-set self-made man with a well-groomed moustache and the severe clothing of a patrician, made his way towards him.

"Inspecting the equipment, man?" he said, his voice deafening in the silence.

"Not quite, sir," said Maximin. Eronias had a wide lump on his neck, more like a swelling. It had been there as long as he'd known him. Over the months he could swear he'd noticed it growing redder.

Eronias cocked his head, as though to ask why.

"Is it safe? I mean we're approaching the island. Is the air there safe to breathe?"

"Course not son. That what these are for," he said, gesturing to the suits.

There were dozens of them, hanging up one behind the other. Made from layers of heavy leather, they were airtight and crowned by a claustrophobic helmet, with a thick glass visor. Some were more specialised and had strange mechanisms on the back designed to filter Atramental taint from the surrounding air. There were also siphon engines mounted on ambulants, designed to filter the air around where they would eventually make their camp. He knew nothing about how they worked, what technarcane wonders were employed in their use. He wished for a moment that he did know. Perhaps that might make him feel safer.

He doubted it.

Eronias must have seen his face. "These things are safe as can be, son. Been using them most of my life and I've come out well-enough," he said.

Maximin's eyes flitted to the growth on the man's neck for the slightest moment. He hoped Eronias hadn't noticed. If he had he made no sign of it.

"If you get back above deck we should be arriving soon."

Maximin nodded and left the room.

Soon turned out to be a few hours, but he was there when the island first made itself seen through the evening haze.

He'd been expecting a verdant coastline, but instead what he saw was rocky. Not barren, for there was scattered vegetation - mostly eerie century plants and shrubs. Waves lapped at rocks roughly and the air was filled with spray. The smell of salt was even more pronounced here than it had been on the steamer.

"It'll be a while before we make landfall," said Lucean, one of the surveyors. "We need to find a safe harbour."

The surveyors busied themselves, bringing out the softsuits and other provisions in preparation for the landing. Some of them suited up in anticipation. This made Maximin nervous. In the end he asked them about his suit and they got him ready.

It had been awkward getting into the suit and it was more like pulling a layered glove over his hand than putting clothes on. Speaking of which, none of the suits catered to his polydactyly, so he'd had to fit two fingers into a single space. Not to mention, his fingers were longer than the gloves were designed for. He grew more nervous as the suit was tied up and the helmet was lowered over his head. His hearing grew muffled, and his breath steamed at the glass.

As the surveyors were tightening the bolts that sealed his helmet Maximin snapped. He broke free of their grasp, arms flailing at the helmet. "Get this thing off me. Get it off, get it off," he said, fingers struggling at the bolts.

The others quickly unscrewed the helmet. Maximin was panting hard, struggling to breathe. He rested his hand on his knees and he regained his breath. With it came some of his composure. "How do you people do that? You wear these suits for how long?"

One of the surveyors shrugged. "You get used to it."

"Not happening."

"Well it's either no suit, or stay on the ship. And you're not being paid to stay on the ship. You figure it out."

It took the steamer hours to find the old harbour the navigators said would be waiting for them.

The navigators had been right, only the harbour was nowhere near the sea. It was close to a mile inland, its old concrete quays landlocked. A rusted hulk lay not far off, laying destitutely on its side, echoing a distant time.

"We have a problem boss," said one of the navigators.

Eronias was nodding, his face dark. He'd just finished shouting about not being able to unload their larger machinery and equipment without a harbour. They had a schedule to keep and he didn't want to waste too much time looking for somewhere else to lay anchor. Besides, it was unlikely that they'd find anything that would let them drive down their ambulants and siphon engines safely. The island was deserted, that much was for sure, and they would not find any coastal settlements that might bring them in.

"Get what you can off the ship. I'll keep a skeleton crew on the ship who'll continue looking around the coastline for somewhere safe where we can bring the larger equipment down. Kosimos can stay here and communicate progress with Cyra, who'll come with me.

"Maximin, stay on the ship. You can catalogue its progress."

And so he did. For a full day they travelled north east, keeping close to the coast. Though a few natural harbours presented themselves, they were not adequate to allow the heavy ambulant - a tracked steam-powered vehicle that contained most of their surveying equipment and the largest of their siphon engines.

The siphon engines were a necessity when exploring Atramentally-tainted lands and absorbed excess umbra traces from the ambient, and collecting them in a manner that was safe to mortals in the region. The umbra could then be processed and refined into a fuel that would in turn provide power to the ambulant and the siphon engine. The steamer had a rudimentary one built-in to help when navigating tainted waters.

The landing ramp that allowed the larger equipment to be unloaded was useless without a quay. The telepath Kosimos had made contact with the landing party and informed them of their situation. Eronias had advised them to turn round and get back to where the others had landed. They'd just need to work without the ambulant and siphon engines, or find another way of getting them onto shore once they get back.

It was night and Maximin was still above deck as the steamer turned round, bringing the island to its right. The air here was closer than it had been earlier on, even accounting for the movement of the ship. It was dry and still and there was an odd smell, like tilled earth or disturbed dust.

Kosimos was leaning over the edge, the bulky iron mantle that covered his back and shoulders making him look bigger than he actually was. His fingers were idling around the coiling umbilical that

ran from the back of the mantle to the inside of his wrist, where it connected to an occlusion implanted into his flesh. Maximin found himself rubbing his fingers against each other as he watched the shaper.

Kosimos saw the amanuensis on deck and looked away, clearly not wanting to share words.

Maximin kept his distance and returned his attention to the coastline. He couldn't make out many details, though it was beautiful and ghostly under the pale light of the waning Ivory Moon. A scattering of small clouds hung above the island, moving slowly south, casting eerie shadows over the water's surface.

Behind him Kosimos stood, his hands moving to his temples. He was muttering something beneath his breath.

Maximin moved towards him, concerned by the sudden movement. He'd seen the shaper communicate with the landing party on a few occasions, and this looked like it might be just that.

Kosimos's words grew louder and Maximin was starting to make them out. Something had happened to the land party.

"What is it," said Kosimos, his words clearly not directed towards anyone who could physically hear him.

Kosimos began mouthing to his own replies, his eyelids flickering wildly. Beneath them, his eyes had gone completely black.

*Something woke us during the night. Two sentries dead, their bodies crushed. Eronias is crazy, ordering everyone to take up arms.*

Kosimos flinched, as though hearing something loud.

*There's more than one. They've surrounded the camp. Shit!*

The shaper fell to the ground, the buffed metal of his mantle clanging on the ground. His eyes opened and he stared at Maximin. They had returned to their normal colouration.

"She has broken contact. The other group is under attack."

"We must get these as quickly as we can," said one of the expedition members. People were starting to gather round the shaper as he lifted himself up from the deck.

"We are already running on full turbine. It'll be hours before we make shore, let alone find where they're camped.

"So there's nothing we can do?" said Maximin.

Kosimos shook his head curtly. "Unless Cyra makes contact with me again, I'm afraid I won't be of much use to you."

"Can't you talk to someone else, like Eronias?"

"Doesn't work like that kid. Least not for me. Unless a shaper on the other end I need to make physical contact to communicate."

"So we just wait?"

"There isn't much else we can do."

And so they waited.

Kosimos had moved to the prow of the ship and had spent the entirety of the night focussed, his eyes black, his lips mumbling nonsense as he searched the Atramenta for some sort of contract.

Maximin remained close by, in case anything should happen. He wasn't sure the shaper even knew he was there.

He sat watching the sky behind them slowly grow brighter, excising the stars from the sky one at a time. Before long only Ashterath, the dawn star, remained, and as the sun rose over the Erithydean Ocean, it too was banished.

The morning air was clear and crisp, and the coast was hidden beneath a thick mist. Beyond the mist the air looked dark, almost murky. Maximin put it down to the morning air, but as the sun rose and the mist cleared, the dark pall over Irrediviva remained there. Indeed, it only seemed to thicken as the morning drew on.

Maximin risked leaving his post, and spoke to Lucean.

"Yes, there are records noting the Atramental temper in this region fluctuation, which is why we brought the suits. Were it not for such localised changes, we'd have been relatively safe without them. Come, let me take a look,"

They were back above deck, looking over the starboard side of the ship.

It had only grown thicker, like a small storm, hugging the rocky contours of the land.

The surveyor went back below deck and returned later on with a heliograph. He set it up and took various pictures over a half-hour span, writing copious notes as he did so.

“Is it anything to be worried about,” asked Maximin.

“Who can say, but nothing I’ve read about the island has made indication that the tempers here can grow this bad.”

“Is it our fault?”

Lucean looked at Maximin, his face one of enquiry.

“I mean all the testing, all those years ago. Was this a tainted place before the bombs?”

“I do not believe so. This place was chosen for its remoteness. There was nothing of importance here. It was safe to use.”

“I hope that’s true.”

“It’s almost a thousand years since the testing. The last official survey of Irrediviva was a hundred years ago. Who knows what’s happened since then.”

Maximin was silent.

The steamer was back at the place where the other group had made landfall. The surveyors were in their softsuits, ready to go.

Lucean eyed Maximin, who was lurking below deck, close to his quarters. “You coming?”

“My hands,” he said, lifting his polydactylid hands. “They don’t fit in the suits.”

“Suit yourself. I suppose we need someone to keep an eye on the ship when we leave.”

Maximin hadn’t thought of that. “You were planning on leaving the ship alone?”

“Can’t spare any bodies kid. The other group was attacked. People are injured. Some may even be dead. They need every body we can spare.”

“Even me?”

“Even you.”

Maximin fidgeted with his suit, pulling at the thick leather gloves as he walked.

They had been walking inland for two days. They were walking slowly, trying to follow the trail of the other group. It was not easy-going over the rocky terrain, but they managed.

The meters on their suits indicated that the levels of ambient Atramenta were slowly increasing. Nothing to be worried about in the short term, but to any of the native flora and fauna, continued exposure would undoubtedly have wreaked havoc on their bodies and their offspring.

As they made their way to the interior of the island the terrain slowly changed. Rocks gave way to grasslands and grotesque solitary trees that had reminded Maximin of skeletons stretching towards the sky. Their trunks was covered in bulbous shapes that wept red sap, and their branches twisted awkwardly, ending in foot-long needle-sharp pines. A few had managed to somehow lance birds, and their tumorous bodies crowned those spiny growths.

The ground became smoother and even glass-like in places. Maximin wasn’t sure if this was natural or a result of the Atramental testing centuries ago. Inside the glassy floor he could see objects mummified - flowers, insets, lizards - as though trapped in a magical spell. He avoided stepping on them where possible.

Despite the trees, the terrain was relatively open, with few undulations in the land. They could see ahead into the dark pall that hung over the land. Above, the sky was dull and there seemed to be little difference between standing in direct sun and beneath the shadow passing clouds. It was a tinted world, and they had walked into it so slowly that Maximin was only now realising it.

“We are approaching the point of last contact,” said Kosimon. His eyes were black as he walked, lifting his legs high over the underbrush.

The other were on edge. Many of the surveyors were carrying rifles, though they were held uneasily, unsure of what or who to use them against.

They slowed down and the surveyors spread out, searching the area carefully.

They found signs of a camp - a campfire, long since burnt out, its embers soaked from dew from the morning; tents, undisturbed in the past few days, water dripping down their waxed surfaces; bags and provisions, untouched, waiting to be used.

There were no bodies, or traces of an attack.

Kosimos was crouched besides one of the tents. He'd taken the glove off his softsuit and his palm was touching the waxed burlap of the tent, fingers spread wide. With a furrowed brow he closed his featureless eyes and thought. "There hasn't been anyone here in days. Cyra was not here when I last contacted her. They'd already left by then."

"How far can they be?"

"Hard to say, but I don't feel it was very long after."

"Let's stay spread out and carry on moving."

They did that and not long after they came across a body. It was one of the porters they'd picked up in Maracha. His body was mangled, as though it had been crushed by a heavy object. His face was sunken, his skin pale.

Maximin had never seen a dead body before. His initial reaction was to look away, to let the other handle it, but as the surveyors crowded round the body to investigate the cause of death, he grew curious.

Those who were looking over the body were doing so with a clinical detachment that seemed cold to Maximin. Then again, they hadn't known him. No-one in the group even knew his name. There was little sense of affection or loss for this man, just a sense of urgency in resolving the cause of death in the hopes of aiding their own situation.

Maximin managed to squeeze closer to see the surveyors examining him.

"These ribs are broken, and there's red dots under the surface of the skin."

"The eyes are bulging and blood-shot. And here, the nose, there's blood there too."

"He looks emaciated, and skin has an odd colour. Too pale."

"He's got no blood," blurted Maximin.

"One of the porters looked up at him, "What?"

"His skin is so pale because there's no blood. Slit his wrist and I bet nothing will come out."

"He's been dead over a day kid. Blood isn't going to flow one way or another."

Maximin slinked away and took no further part on the examining of the body.

A while later the surveyors stood from the body, "The kid was right. It looks like his blood was taken, but there's no lacerations, other than where bones have broken the skin from whatever pressure was applied to them."

"Perhaps I can learn more of the situation," said Kosimos, lifting a hand.

Maximin could see that the extremities were beginning to darken from exposure to the pall.

"I didn't think telepathy worked with the dead," said Lucean.

"It does not. But I am not limited in my shaping to merely telepathy."

Lucean nodded, and gestured for the others to give way

Kosimos stood above the porter, his head at his feet. He crouched and places his hands on his temples.

The shaper's face began twitching and though his eyes were closed, Maximin could tell that his eyes were flitting wildly. He wondered what the man was seeing, what information contact with the body was giving him.

Suddenly he stood, breaking contact with the head. The corpse's head was painted in a pattern of dark veins, concentrated around the temple. Already Maximin was seeing the darkness subside.

"We need to be on our guard. At this point we can assume that the rest of the landing party is either scattered or," the shaper stood, turning back to the body, "dead."

"What happened?"

"The decomposition has already begun to break the string memories, making them difficult to unravel, but... the darkness that hangs over this land is more than just a pall. It... *knows*. It feels. It feeds."

There was a mixture of gasps and low murmurs and people began to question the shaper's words. Some there made the sign of the sword across their chest, invoking the Undying Machine.

"The air itself is tainted. I know not what it is exactly but, this place is dangerous. I propose we Head back to the ship and leave."

"We have a job to do."

The murmurs increased as people began speaking amongst themselves.

"If the shaper says we should leave, then I say we listen to him."

Maximin was inclined to agree.

They went on at length, deciding finally that they should search for the others. Any notion of continuing the survey was forgotten. Their mission was now a rescue, before leaving Irrediviva with their tails between their legs.

They buried the man, though made no prayer for this spirit for they did not know if he was a follower of the Undying Machine. He carried no icons or religious symbols on his person. Maybe he was a pagan, in which case burying him might not have been the best idea.

Maximin offered a silent prayer to the Machine to claim his soul, if no other deity wanted him.

Over the next hours they came across two other bodies. One was of a fellow surveyor. The other was the other shaper, Cyra.

The discovery of these bodies brought with it more mourning than the unnamed porters had. Kosimos spent a long time next to Cyra, hand on her forehead, mumbling words. They had known each other for a long time, and they had established a mental link over the years that few others could understand.

After a while Kosimos stood, wiping away a tear. "Her thoughts are more intact than the others. She saw the pall coalesce and attack them, more than once. It drains their blood, their essence, making it stronger."

"We need to leave this place."

"There are still five people unaccounted for, including Eronias."

"We need to -"

Maximin turned round to see what happened, and saw it.

The black pall had coalesced, just as the shaper had told them. It was hanging over them, like a black blanked through which light did not pass. Beneath it, suspended in the air was Lucean. He was writing, struggling to get down, but how could he? There was nothing to push or pull against.

His body was being crushed, like a paper being crumpled into a ball. His limbs ned in awkward places, pushed against his body which was doubled over, curling into a ball.

Then Maximin heard the snap of bones - an arm twisted grotesquely. Then another snap, and another. Soom there were no limbs left - the surveyor was just a ball of flesh and bone.

He was mouthing something, but all Maximin could hear was a gurgling noise. Them na made no noise other than that, not when he was lifted, not when his legs snapped like twigs.

Some of the surveyors lifted their rifles, aimed and shot. The bullets flew through the pall as though it were not there.

Lucean fell to the floor in a lifeless heap, and the pall moved closer the them.

The group scattered in all directions, all though of recovering the other members forgotten, replaced with a base survival instinct.

Maximin did not know what to do. He saw Kosimos, who stood his ground, eyes black. His blackened hands were raised against the pall, which was floating in his direction. Maximion did not know what he was doing.

The pall floated towards the shaper lowering, until Kosimos was engulfed in a ball of darkness that Maximin could not see through.

"Get away Maximin," screamed the shaper, but the amanuensis was rooted to the spot, unable to tear his eyes away. The darkness seemed to thicken, and grew smaller, taking on a vaguely humanoid form.

And then, from inside it came a heart wrenching scream. He'd never heard a sound so full of pain before, and prayed to the Machine that he wouldn't, ever again.

Maximin fled.

As he ran, he looked back, seeing for the last time the pall covering the shaper like a skin-tight black glove that took on the shape of Kosimos perfectly. The screaming ended abruptly.

Maximin saw nothing else, and ran as far as this tired legs would carry him away from that darkness, away from the island.