

# Chapter 65: The Tainted Lands

For a supposedly irradiated to hell part of Lutov, the Tainted Lands seemed to be thriving, to my eye at least. The verdantly green and yellow grasses of the Azuwell Plains stretched out all around me, and seeing how much of it there was, I might have worried about the fire that I'd left behind if I hadn't already noted the churned earth on all sides of the strike ship, created by my near crash landing, that would contain it.

In the distance, the occasional animal moved through the grass while signs of their passage could be found closer to me, and if I were so inclined, I could have my array sharpen my vision so I could see more of their details.

But I didn't. What would be the point? They didn't pose a threat, either just passing through this place or too sick to harm me, and my normal sense of curiosity had flown out the window. The only thing keeping me headed toward my goal was a memory of a slack face and the imaginings of what that would look like on Pheniks or Leski or Mother Time forbid, Baely.

Fortunately, every time I tried applying it to Korix, the image scattered while a breath of amusement brushed through me. My life partner could slip through the measly grasp of something like hypoxia, even if I had no clue how such an escape could be possible.

Hours passed me by as I trudged through the grass, building up a layer of sweat in my radiation suit. Already, my surroundings were taxing its ability to protect me, something that would only get worse as I moved deeper into the Tainted Lands, and I dully noted that if this kept up, that protection would fail me before I reached my sample.

I didn't know how I'd get it home. The more time passed, the more I was sure that I should have burned only Damari's body instead of the strike ship as well, risking someone using the vehicle's recorders to learn about my failure, but I hadn't been thinking straight when setting fire to everything.

In fact, if I was remembering those events correctly, I hadn't been thinking at all, but that couldn't be right. Could it? If it was, where had I gone?

So... maybe I was wrong or misremembering what had happened. Maybe I'd just been going through the motions instead.

Even if I'd been clear-headed, though, I would have made only one change to what I'd done: flying the strike ship closer to my destination before setting it ablaze. After my colossal fuck up with

Sanya and the *shukusenth*'s poisoning, I couldn't afford to make more mistakes. So, why leave behind any evidence of one that I could easily hide?

Besides, I might not need the strike ship. If I was lucky, I could use the wreckage around me to escape from this place.

I'd gotten deep enough into the Tainted Lands that the leftovers of the old war had begun littering the ground around me, anything my people hadn't had the time or resources to reach. I'd passed an ancient, human encampment as well as remnants of the aliens' communication link, the tech that Lutov used for our network.

Hell, one of my scientist personas, Rylan, would find this nonsense too fascinating to ignore, like I must. I could almost feel the tug of his curiosity against the numbness that surrounded me, dragging on my feet, and...

When I next blinked, I was moving toward a glint of steel on the horizon instead of my coordinates, and roughly shaking my head, I once more retreated into semi-fog, trying to remember why those old relics had seemed important not two minutes ago.

Oh, right! Some of the wreckage I'd come across had looked like downed aircraft. As I'd moved along, I'd seen ships from both sides of the war, and while some had been wrecked beyond recognition, others had looked like they could work, at least nominally.

Nominal functionality was all I needed. If I could get one temporarily into the air, I'd only need to get it through the Tainted Lands' *galnuka* before I could contact Talira, requesting backup through her. Hopefully, I could find an aircraft that would meet my needs when I reached my destination.

Which was apparently in the mountains. I couldn't see my coordinates leading anywhere else. Their foothills had started rising around me, giving my exhausted body a work-out, and I still had a ways to go.

Unfortunately, I couldn't remember any stories of Founders fighting aliens in the mountains, which made me wonder if Lan had given me the right coordinates. Because of that, I'd be tempted to search the occasional, nearby ruins for a sample if I thought my radiation suit would last long enough to allow it—

Again, my feet started me toward one of those places for a moment, and I frowned, correcting my course.

—but as it was, I was starting to think that bringing a second suit with me, no matter how heavy they were, would have been a good idea.

I hadn't done that, though. I'd have to hope that this suit and—if it failed—my body would last long enough to bring what I needed to a location that my people could access.

As night fell, I took a short break. I'd been falling asleep on my feet, wondering why I'd changed directions every time I jerked back awake, so after setting traps around me, I set an alarm and

started a dream sequence.

The alarm proved unnecessary. After about an hour of sleep, I sat bolt upright with my friend's name on my lips, spending the next few minutes on getting my breathing back under control.

I didn't cry. For some reason, my body wouldn't allow me that.

After it became clear that not even a dream sequence would get me back to sleep, I collected my traps and moved on, climbing deeper into the mountains.

My suit failed as the sun peeked above the horizon. I was at a high elevation, so as I peeled it off, I was short of breath for more than one reason.

Immediately, my array screamed about the radiation that was bombarding my body, but I dismissed the alert without reading its details. What was the point when I couldn't change my situation?

As I finished the last leg of the journey, I did my best to enjoy my surroundings. The air this high in the mountains was chilly but not uncomfortable. In fact, the temperature felt rather pleasant against my exercise-warmed skin. That combined with the untamed nature around me made the hike rather lovely.

At this point, I hadn't reached where snow was clinging to the mountains' peaks. Instead, I waded through sickly grass while the occasional, scraggly tree shaded me from the sun. It was quiet here, a silence that I could appreciate. It perfectly complemented my internal state.

And if I was using my surroundings to amplify the emptiness inside, willfully ignoring what was really going on in my head, I would never admit to that fact.

Within a few hours of removing my suit, however, any peace that I might have gained from these delightful surroundings was nullified by a horrible headache as well as a near-constant need to be sick. Thankfully, I was vomiting only bile soon enough, and along with that change, my heart joined in with everything else complaining about my radiation exposure. In my chest, it was racing like one of Ibis' freight trains.

Fortunately, a period of calm soon came, one that always followed the initial symptoms of radiation sickness, and I could continue without that impediment, even if I was already dreading the next wave.

Hours later, I rounded an outcropping, and when I saw what lay beyond, I stopped short so I could acknowledge the relief pounding through me. For directly in front of me was a dropship belonging to those from beyond the stars, perfectly intact, with its hatch open.

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