

Poison

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Seventy-five tons of metal should not be able to hide so easily.

Lukas looked through the shattered window onto the pockmarked street below, first north, then south. Nothing. He took a deep breath, but his pulse kept racing. Grit and oil coated his throat.



A moment earlier, a 'Mech—a *Rakshasa*, judging by the square missile launchers on each shoulder—had torn into the intersection just north of him, lasers firing. It had stopped, swiveled its torso, and scattered laser shots across the street, sending Lukas diving for shelter. A few blasts tore into the walls of the building serving as his bunker, but most flew past, leaving only yellow afterburn patterns in Lukas' eyes.

By the time Lukas realized he was still alive and returned to the window, the 'Mech was gone. He hadn't heard it move. 'Mechs could do many things, but sneaking quietly through city streets was not one of them. Yet this one was gone.

Of course it had moved on, he told himself. It didn't care about him. They weren't after him. They didn't know who he was.

He brushed plaster and glass dust from his pants, streaking the fabric with sweat. He shakily rose to his feet and poked his head through the ruined window. There was nothing—no 'Mechs, no infantry, nothing—on the streets below. At least, nothing he could see through the smoke and darkness.

Since no one was trying to kill him that second, Lukas took a moment to create his eighth survival plan of the day. The goals of his earliest plans had been lofty and, as it turned out, impossible. If they had worked, he'd be on a DropShip now, looking for a more

peaceful place to stay until calm returned to Tikonov. Getting the rest he deserved.

But transport off the planet for a civilian was next to impossible while the battle raged. Transport for a civilian with forged papers (even high-class forgeries) was even more difficult.

He would not be leaving anytime soon.

Trapped on the surface, his goals shifted to trying to stay alive for a week, then to surviving the rest of the day. Now all he wanted was live another hour.

A cluster of missiles whined overhead, close enough to make Lukas flinch. He dropped to the floor again as they smashed into the roof of a building a block away. For the thousandth time that day, the streets of Tukwila shook.

Also for the thousandth time that day, Lukas Azhenov cursed military leaders and their pretended ethics. Put them in a quiet, locked room and they would drone on and on about the duties of a warrior and the Ares Conventions and keeping civilians out of warfare and other tripe, but as soon as they see an opportunity to gain an advantage on their enemy, all their talk flies away. Any civilians standing in the way of a strategically important goal had better get out of the way or get swept aside with the rest of the rubble.

Lukas always appreciated the honesty and directness of his kind of people when compared to the hypocritical nobility of generals and politicians. The underworld code was simple: anyone is fair game. Lukas, and people like him, did what needed doing, no matter whom was involved. Civilians, soldiers, or anyone else were all the same—if they were obstacles, they needed to be removed. One way or another. No nonsense about outside conditions or treaties or duty dictating what you can do or who you can kill. Anyone may become a target. That's the deal going in, clear and transparent, unlike the games and deceptions practiced by politicians.

Another cluster of missiles exploded, farther away than the first. The tremor that followed was barely enough to wobble Lukas' knees. Whatever was firing those missiles was not targeting him or anything nearby. It was time to move.

He stood and leapt toward the staircase he ascended five minutes ago, when he had first seen the *Rakshasa*. Entering the building had been a gamble—if the *Rakshasa* had spotted him, a few blasts at the already shaky structure would have taken it down on top of

Lukas. He wished he could tell himself he had taken a calculated risk, but he hadn't. He had panicked.

He'd gotten lucky, though, and the *Rakshasa* had moved on, either because it didn't know where Lukas was or it didn't care.

On the first floor, he stepped over collapsed steel beams, shattered desks, and large chunks of plaster—but no bodies. Most of the civilians received word of the incoming troops before they arrived and were safely away. The military didn't seem too concerned about the few people left behind who never got the message.

Lukas knew he was partially to blame—the money he took with him from Luthien had allowed him to be indolent and less than watchful while on Tikonov—but he preferred blaming the generals and warriors who were busy reducing Tukwila to rubble.

At the exterior door, he poked his head out and scanned the street in both directions.

To the south, he caught a flutter of movement, ground troops crossing an intersection. They might have been as close as a quarter mile, but dust, smoke, and darkness obscured them. Lukas could barely make out their forms, so he knew he would be just as difficult to see.

He walked out of the door slowly, staying near any walls that still stood. His breathing was rapid, his ears heard only rushing blood. He ducked instinctively as a red laser flashed high overhead, but it was nowhere near him.

No other weapons fired. No one noticed him walking.

At the next intersection he turned west, away from battle, away from the Prince's Men. He couldn't risk running into their ground troops. If they knew who he was—they probably didn't, but if they did—Davion's troops would shoot Lukas on sight. If he was lucky.

After two blocks, he turned south again, walking slowly, swiveling to look north, then south, then north again so quickly that he started to feel dizzy. He slowed even more.

Patience, he told himself, patience, even though his heart and mind and muscles were straining to run until he collapsed.

He covered a mile in twenty minutes. Acrid smoke stung tears out of his eyes, washing clear trails through the grime on his face. He blinked, then rubbed his eyes, trying to get them clear.

When he opened them, it stood in front of him. He knew this humanoid shape well—a *Wyvern*, smaller than a *Rakshasa*, but, like any 'Mech, plenty big enough to take care of a single unarmored human. Smoke curved around its torso as it trotted through the streets, heading, like all of Davion's army, east. Lukas jumped backward, his back flattening against a cool metal wall. He let the haze settle around him.

The *Wyvern* kept moving, a single beam of light from its head pointing forward, sweeping back and forth, illuminating the smoke and little else. The beam stayed ten meters above ground level, and Lukas exhaled a sigh. The *Wyvern* was looking for something taller than a single human. It was not looking for him.

The impact of the metal feet shook the road as the 'Mech drew near Lukas' position, then moved past. He watched the armored shins walk by, and the *Wyvern* didn't slow, didn't even look down. Then it was gone.

Lukas re-emerged from the shadows and continued south, still glancing over his shoulder every other step. But the explosions seemed to be getting farther and farther away, the battle moving east with the Prince's Men.

His pace slowed as adrenaline drained away. This wasn't the first time in his life he'd been on the run. He vowed it would not be the last.

Running from the military, he reflected as he tripped over a damaged piece of street that jutted upward, was quite different from evading the usual team of assassins, vigilantes, bounty hunters, or mobsters. Small groups could be tenacious, but much easier to evade than an entire army.

Maybe he should have stayed on Luthien, taken his chances with any agents the Combine sent against him. For all he knew, they never would have connected him to the assassination and he could have retired with the money from the sale. There were plenty of places to hide on Luthien.

But then he remembered Celia, eight years ago. All she had done was sold a few secrets, troop movements, to Sandoval in the Draconis March. She'd barely made enough to pay for a few weeks of vacation. Minor league stuff, really.

But she'd disappeared. For months after she vanished, small pieces of her kept showing up across Luthien.

To the Combine, no treachery was minor.

If they had done that to a low-level spy like Celia, what would they do to him? They probably didn't have proof—Lukas himself couldn't be completely certain he'd even done it. But he trusted his gut, and it told him that he had played a part in one of the greatest crimes ever committed against the Draconis Combine. If some Combine agent had the same feeling, proof or no proof, they'd come after him.

He felt the heat approaching, received word through backdoor channels that investigations were growing more active, so he left Luthien, fleeing the Draconis Combine. He'd gone to the home he'd run away from decades earlier, only to have the Steiner-Davion civil war find him there. Now he was in the sights of Victor Davion's men, the only people who might want him dead more than House Kurita. If they knew.

There had to be somewhere he could go, a safe haven, a place to hide, anything to get away from the armies rushing toward him.

A rush of air followed by a series of clatters, like stones skipping across ferrocrete, made him jerk his head right. Where there had been nothing, half a dozen infantry troops, two clad in battle armor, walked down the street as fumes rose from their recently extinguished jump jets. A streetlight, its pole bent but its bulb still functioning, bounced light off their scratched armor.

They were a block and a half away and Lukas' lower half was still enshrouded in smoke. They probably did not see him. He squinted, trying to make out their markings. Narrow blue, wide white. Lyrán.

But were they rebels or loyalists? In a civil war, even the generals had trouble keeping track of which regiments were on whose side. For a civilian, it was impossible. He wished he knew; if the troopers were loyalists, maybe he could go to them for protection. Let them know who he was, who he had killed, and he'd be fine. He'd just have to portray what he'd done as an act of war, the kind of thing they did every day. He wasn't a criminal, he was a hero. They'd understand.

He shook his head. They wouldn't. People like him were never heroes. If discovered and caught, they wound up in deep, dark holes. They were the dirty secrets of the universe, and most people wanted them to stay hidden.

Best to assume they'd be hostile. Staying near the ruined buildings on the south side of the street, picking his way through the rubble, Lukas moved east, away from the infantry.

They didn't follow. The troopers stood in the street, not in any sort of formation, talking with each other. A full day under fire is enough to scatter any platoon, and these soldiers were probably disoriented, confused, and weary. All that worked to Lukas' advantage.

He picked his way a block and a half ahead before the troopers moved. One of them issued an order. Lukas was too far away to hear what he said, but the commanding tone was unmistakable, and they quickly fell in behind him, walking ahead, drawing closer to Lukas.

He cursed. Normally he'd have no difficulty finding shelter in this city. He'd only been back for a year, but he had dozens of places to hide. The few good contacts he'd made in that time, though, were now either dead or fled and his safe havens buried under rubble. The rebels sweeping through Tukwila had destroyed the webs he'd woven—another reason not to feel bad for what he had done to their cause on Luthien.

The infantry was rapidly drawing close, their speed leaving him few options. He didn't want to be seen, certainly didn't want to be questioned by troopers. He had to stay ahead of them. He picked up his pace, made it to the end of the block, and turned south.

That was a mistake. After only half a block, Lukas saw a looming silhouette, well over ten meters tall—a *Zeus*—walk into the street about half a kilometer away. It turned and headed north, toward him, scanning the ground with a searchlight. Looking for infantry.

He turned, but only briefly. The infantry had arrived behind him, walking right toward the lumbering, heavy-shouldered 'Mech. Panic spiked through Lukas' head.

Insanity. Six troops didn't stand a chance against a 'Mech, especially one this size. The infantry should have turned back as soon as they saw it, unless the stress of battle had made them suicidal. But the troopers and the *Zeus* closed on each other, with Lukas squeezed between.

He didn't understand the troopers' decision to walk forward until he reached the next cross street and saw a smaller 'Mech to the west, crouched in the shadows of one of Tukwila's taller buildings. It was

completely still, weapons poised and ready, aimed at the intersection where Lukas stood. He had seen this model before, with its bulbous legs and round shoulder turrets, but its name escaped his mind.

The *Zeus* was being lured forward so the other 'Mech could pounce. The trap was going to be sprung in the intersection where Lukas stood.

He had only one way to go—east, toward the front lines. Toward the explosions, the mortar whistles, and the screams. He'd endured that for ten hours today. He couldn't, wouldn't be able to endure any more.

The first shots fired by the infantry told him he didn't have a choice. Their SRMs worked as intended, doing no serious damage but angering the *Zeus*. It stomped forward.

Lukas ran.

He'd made it only a block before the intersection behind him exploded. A roar nearly shattered his eardrums and the ground heaved beneath his feet. He flew five meters, then rolled sideways across the ferrocrete. His legs and arms never stopped moving, and soon he was up again, running. Someone was dead in the intersection behind him, he was sure. But it wasn't him.

He was only conscious of smoke swirling around him, of his feet pounding the battered street. He thought of nothing but motion.

Two blocks later, his luck almost ran out. He heard the crackle of gunfire just as he entered another intersection—*look both ways before crossing*, some detached part of his brain told him—and he jumped backward and rolled behind the corner, out of harm's way. He didn't notice the crease of blood across the back of his left hand until he wiped sweat from his brow.

He looked curiously at the wound for a moment. He'd never been shot. Been a shooter, but never been shot. It stung.

He shook his attention back to the present, poking his head around the corner. It was bad. Infantry to the north. A 'Mech to the east, another south. And the survivors of the skirmish to the west would undoubtedly be closing in soon.

On top of that, he had no shelter. The buildings that used to stand on this block were no use. No doorways remained clear, no roofs were intact. The crumbling interior might kill him faster than the warring armies.

He felt his right hand fluttering. He looked at it, tried to will it to be still, but it kept twitching. He grabbed it with his left, held it tight, but it still twitched.

The temptation that had nagged at him since the rumors of Davion's flight from Tukwila rose again. All he'd need to do was find some loyalists. If they knew who he was, if he could tell them the role he played in getting Davion to abandon his troops, he'd be a hero. It was just an act of war, he'd tell them. They'd listen. They'd understand what he'd done for them. The need for his secret contacts, for hiding places, for skulking through ruins, would disappear. Maybe, just maybe, they'd get him to a military DropShip. Get him off planet. Get him the rest he deserved. Hope, which had been pronounced dead as recently as half an hour ago, stirred lightly in his chest.

Of course, he hadn't really acted as a patriot, and he'd not given a thought to the Archon-Princess—or anyone else—when he'd made the sale that eventually drove him off Luthien. But no one needed to know that. He really didn't care about either side in this war, or how it ended, as long as it ended with him alive. Right now, his sympathies lay with the loyalists only because of his actions taken more than a year ago.

Someone had given Lukas a tremendous sum of money to buy two doses of fulmitoxin. The tremendous price had aroused Lukas' curiosity, but he had been in business long enough to not ask questions.

It was only much later, when the news broke, that he understood why so much money had been paid, and why he had been forced to flee Luthien soon after the sale.

Seven months after he sold the fulmitoxin to a grubby courier whose headless body was discovered a week after the transaction, Omi Kurita was dead. Poisoned by fulmitoxin, reliable sources told him.

Lukas was willing to bet his life that it was his carefully crafted poison in her blood. He had not been present to deliver the blow, but that distinction mattered little. He made the fatal poison. He, in essence, murdered Omi Kurita.

He pressed himself deep into a pile of rubble for shelter as lasers flashed overhead. Autocannon fire immediately followed, a few rounds smashing into the wall above Lukas. A large piece of stone fell, shattering on the pavement and sending shards into

Lukas' exposed skin. Nearly a dozen pinheads of blood sprang up on his face.

That was enough. This was insanity. This was not what he deserved. He was as heroic as any man in this field—he'd taken out a bigger target than anyone, because his actions had taken Davion off the field. He needed to find someone. He'd make them understand. He'd make them remove him from the hell of battle. They'd have to. He was a hero. An unconventional one, maybe—he knew that people like him usually were rewarded with torture and death, not protection and acclaim. But this was different. It would have to be. He had helped this army, crushing the opposition's morale. They'd have to recognize what he'd done. Have to. It was what he had earned, and it was the only way he might survive the day. He just needed to find someone to talk to.



The 'Mech towered above Lukas, as if pondering what Lukas had said. He'd somehow found an officer loyal to the Archon-Princess, screamed himself hoarse getting the MechWarrior to see him, to listen what he had to say. And he had. He had listened. Lukas spilled the whole story. Now he just had to wait for the order to come down, the order that would finally get him the rest he deserved.

Lukas waited. How complicated could this be? The order was simple: "Take this man to safety." Five simple words, and Lukas would escape.

The 'Mech turned, pointed itself north, and walked away without so much as a gesture to Lukas. He watched in disbelief.

There had to be a mistake. He was a *hero*.

Gauss rounds sped overhead, flying into buildings with punishing blows. Smaller rounds flew lower to the ground, surrounding Lukas like a swarm of bees. And the 'Mech walked farther away.

Anger and fear rose together in Lukas' chest. How dare this pilot simply ignore someone of his stature? Who was he to leave him behind?

Lukas ran after him, a two-meter human futilely chasing a fighting machine five times his height.

After a quarter mile of Lukas somehow avoiding the bullets and flying shrapnel, the 'Mech stopped. It stopped. The pilot must have heard.

Lukas shouted gratitude with his ruined voice, waving at the 'Mech as it twisted its torso. Salvation.

The side of the 'Mech exploded. Metal and white heat collapsed on Lukas.

He was on the ground. He couldn't feel his legs. The 'Mech he had pursued lay on its side, motionless, fifteen meters away. Another 'Mech—a *Wyvern*, maybe the same *Wyvern* Lukas had seen earlier—walked toward the metal corpse.

Lukas tried to scramble to his feet, but they didn't respond. All he could do was creep backwards, pushing himself with his arms. The rebel *Wyvern* drew closer.

He had one last desperate idea. He still had something, something the rebels wanted. Information. They needed to know what he knew, he needed to tell them, that was worth keeping him alive, wasn't it? They'd listen. They'd want him alive. He could tell Davion's men whom he sold the poison to. They could use that to track the assassin. That would be enough. They would save him. He was worth more alive than dead. They may kill him eventually for what he'd done. But not today.

He raised one arm, propping his torso up with the other.

"Wait!" he screamed, but his voice was buried by the noise of battle. "Wait!" he screamed again. The *Wyvern* continued forward.

"I can help you!" Lukas screamed. "I can tell you things! Things you need to know!" The pace of the *Wyvern* remained steady.

Lukas was right in its path. The pilot probably couldn't see him, probably didn't care about anything lying on the ground. Lukas only had seconds.

"You don't know who I am!" he screamed. "*You don't know who I am!*"

The 'Mech, uncaring, lowered its foot.