

Eos City was the kind of hell Eiko might have created before his absence. It was duracrete and clean lines, lights that never went out, surveillance that never rested. For all the troubles faced by the Empire across the galaxy, a moment at the heart of Arx tried to prove those imperial ambitions weren't dying. Soldiers on street corners and the leering threat of the Dark Ascent could crush one's imagination back into a small box. And that box would be the totality of the experience for all but the most privileged here.

Each cold block had seen the threat and reality of war in a city that was still unreasonably young. For all the comparisons drawn to ecumenopolises like Nar Shaddaa or Coruscant, Eos City was infinitely smaller, cleaner, and more efficient.

Eiko cleared his datapad screen with resignation before looking out the window of the office suite at the thin haze that draped over the city.

*Why are you back?* He asked himself silently. *Haven't you lost enough?*

At least in a place, scarred from perpetual wars of the Brotherhood, no one wondered when he took off his mask. No one questioned the emblem embossed into the lining of his cloak or the service pins decorating the black wool of his half-stand collar. Here on Arx, it didn't matter where in Aliso's castes he stood -- even if it were at the top.

*You made a whole life. Twice. And you threw it away. Three times. Isn't there a saying about a nek coming back to its own vomit?*

The datapad filled with transaction data again, accounts that Eiko knew just as numbers. Thinking about why the coffers filled and drained was exhausting. It was spice. It was slaves. It was murder-for-hire and all the invisible things that had always been there and always would.

And it was credits, filthy only for the time being before they were rinsed a hundred times in a thousand parts to reduce them back into simple numbers.

And every Ravager and Wraith that served under the Dread Lord was just a number.

And every citizen living under the eyes of Arx was just a number.

And every journeyman that had died chasing dreams of glory on Salas V, those who had fought alongside him and become ghosts before they could become knights -- they were numbers, as long as Eiko pressed his mind shut to the memories of faces, voices, and names.

Eiko chided himself for getting off-task.

Hyperdyne Systems was just the same as Arx Capital, Falger Mining, or any engine that the Brotherhood reined and straddled to manufacture power.

The transaction history Eiko peeled out from the Holonet to be decrypted was sold to big fish who wanted easy pickings, sure bets where their credits would grow and their power would accrue. New expenditures in a rimward system with mining prospects meant that a small fish had found a deposit. Liquidated assets followed by a series of increasing withdrawals meant a rival organization had just been visited by an unlucky workplace accident, payable to an assassin.

*Why did you throw this away? You're good at it. You make the engine glow.*

*Because it hurts when it's not numbers,* Eiko finally answered, rubbing his temples. He could make due anywhere, live on his own wits and scrape another life out of nothing. He'd done it before -- on Kabaira, on Lone, on distant rock with no name. He'd done it for years.

*Why did you come back if it hurts?*

Eiko grimaced. *Because this is the only thing that I can't reduce back to numbers.*