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**Into the Calm**

**Book Six of Rise of the Republic**

**By**

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Illustration © Tom Edwards  
TomEdwardsDesign.com

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## Prologue

**2107 AD**

**Eight Months Post Dominion War**

**Jacksonville, Arkansas**

**Earth, Sol System**

“Subject is approaching. Stand by.”

Hosni felt his body tense. He stepped out of the coffee shop, joining the sea of bodies. The morning rush of pedestrians moving in unison on the sidewalk was heavy as usual.

*Ten seconds*, the voice said over their neurolink.

*I'm ready*, Joe replied over the same system, falling in next to Hosni.

Glancing toward Joe's hand, Hosni saw the edge of the autoinjector. He looked up—the van was approaching. Hosni quickened his pace; the subject was just a few feet in front of them now.

*Five seconds*.

An attractive blond-haired woman at the wheel of a BMW i8 steered her hover car out of her parking spot and into traffic, creating an instant opening for their van to slide into.

*We're ready*, the occupants of the van announced. *Take him!*

In a blur of action, Joe surged forward, the autoinjector briefly connecting with the side of the man's neck. Hosni reached up, grabbing the man's arm as his body went limp. Joe and Hosni held the man's body upright as they turned toward the van, its side door now opened. Moments later, the three of them were in the vehicle, the door automatically closing as their driver pulled out of their parking spot and into the morning traffic.

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**Five Hours Later**

**Undisclosed Site**

“You got this, Hosni,” Major Royce assured him. “Assess if he's willing to play ball or if we're going to have to let Tom work on him for a while.”

Hosni nodded. “Got it. He’ll talk...I doubt he’ll want to go a few rounds with Tom. Speaking of Tom, here he is,” Hosni said, motioning to the Synth. “Tom, have you completed your examination of the subject? Are we ready to proceed?”

Tom was the name they had given the Unit’s T200 Human Domain Medical Specialist synthetic. Unlike the C200 combat-variant medical Synths, this civilian version had been crafted specifically for covert intelligence operations. The T200s had been programmed with the psychological knowledge and other skills needed to interview suspects and prisoners. The suspects were questioned softly, yet pointedly. The prisoners, on the other hand, were offered only a short courtesy window to talk before enhanced interrogation techniques were introduced. Use of the T200s was restricted to “Special” units within the Republic Armed Forces.

Tom’s emotionless voice answered, “Major Royce, Lieutenant Hosni, the subject has been stripped and searched. No weapons or false teeth were found. Medical scan did not detect any other foreign objects or materials that pose a danger to Republic personnel. The subject’s vitals read normal; his sedation should wear off soon. He will be ready shortly to commence interrogation.”

“Thank you, Tom. I’ll join you inside in a moment,” Hosni replied. Tom returned to the room where the sedated prisoner was being held.

“I’ll be in the observation room, Hosni. Good luck,” Royce offered, moving to the room adjacent to his.

Standing in the hallway, Hosni watched Tom through the door of the interrogation room and couldn’t help but shudder slightly. The combat Synths were beasts on the battlefield, tearing through Zodark warriors with a fury that matched the Zodarks’ own. The specialist models, the ones like Tom...those gave Hosni goose bumps. Devoid of human emotions, morals, and ethics, they were the perfect interrogators.

Entering the room, Hosni looked the unconscious man over. He glanced at the tablet, reviewing the information available. It wasn’t much; the man had immigrated to Earth from Sumer a few months earlier—his trail of information wasn’t very deep.

Interrupting his thoughts, Tom announced, “When you are ready, we can begin interrogating the subject.” It was a reminder to get the show on the road. They had a lot to discuss, and God only knew if he’d be

cooperative. If Tom had to take over...it could take a while. Extracting information a subject didn't want to reveal required time.

Taking a breath in, Hosni looked at the medical Synth before briefly making eye contact with Royce.

Using their neurolinks, Royce encouraged, *You got this, Hosni. Just like we practiced...*

“OK, Tom. Let's begin.”

Grabbing the frigid glass of water from the counter, Hosni splashed it against the chest of the naked man, who instantly woke from the cold bath. “Aghhh!” the man briefly yelled as his eyes suddenly popped open, the bright light momentarily blinding him.

“What? Where am I?” he stammered, confused.

His eyes darted around the room, taking in the sights. A bright light hovered over him, making the edges of the room dark and out of focus.

Squinting at Hosni, the man demanded, “Who are you?”

Fear shone in the man's eyes, his body shivering as goose bumps rose on his skin. Looking down, he realized he was naked, restrained to a chair.

“You can call me... Smith.”

The man seemed confused at first. Then his facial expression changed. Almost instantaneously, he went from nervous and scared to calm.

Hosni smirked at the change in demeanor, catching the subtlety others might have missed. The man had been trained for interrogations.

“Why don't you tell me your name?”

“Sure, I've done nothing wrong. My name is Tobin Swerve,” the man said evenly, like he was introducing himself at a cocktail party.

Walking to the right side of the man, Hosni bent down close to his ear. “OK, Tobin...why don't you tell me your *real* name so we can move on?”

The man scrunched up his eyebrows at the question before repeating, “I told you my name. It's Tobin Swerve.”

Moving to the man's other ear, Hosni whispered, “We both know that's not true.” He shifted around the man, pulling a nearby chair closer, his legs touching the man's as he leaned in, his face invading the man's private space. “If you'd like to play games instead, we can do that. I promise it's fun. It goes like this. I ask you questions, you answer them truthfully. Each time you lie, though, a consequence is introduced. The

more you lie, well...you get the picture. It's like my mother used to say: 'the truth shall set you free.'"

Staring into Tobin's eyes, Hosni saw a look of confusion, then fear, then abject horror washing over him at the realization of what awaited him. Tobin squirmed in the chair, clearly not liking the direction this conversation was headed. His eyes glanced at the restraints. His arms, legs, and chest were firmly held in place by a series of one-inch straps.

Leaning against the chair's back, Hosni canted his head to the side. "Yes, Tobin, I think we should play this game. That is, unless you want to answer my questions truthfully."

Tobin's eyes narrowed, a determined look replacing the confusion from moments ago. "What do you want...Smith?"

Hosni grinned. The facade was gone, replaced with acceptance of his situation.

"You know what I want. I've already asked you. What's your *name*?" he repeated, tapping the prisoner's chest with his finger.

The man stuck his chin up as he countered, "I'm afraid you have me mixed up with someone else. My name is Tobin Swerve. I'm a logistics specialist for Yale Industrial Goods. I've done nothing wrong. In fact, I demand to speak with a lawyer. I have *rights*." The restraints tightened the more he tugged at them.

Hosni motioned for Tom to bring the medical cart. Beads of sweat formed on the man's forehead as he saw its contents. The contemptuous scowl crumbled at the sight of two clear vials with different-colored lettering, syringes, and other mysterious tools.

"Please!" the man pleaded. "I don't know what you think I know, but you have the wrong person. I'm just a logistics specialist."

Hosni grabbed the vial with red lettering and loaded 10cc of liquid into a syringe. Holding it toward the light, he nudged the plunger, pushing out any air bubbles and causing a very small amount of the liquid to escape as a mist.

"We're going to play a game, you and I."

Sweat now streamed down the sides of Tobin's face.

"At every step in this process, I'll give you a chance to answer my questions honestly. But each time you lie or attempt to deceive, your pain will increase exponentially."

A stream of urine ran down the man's leg, pooling at his feet.

Hosni continued to calmly explain, “No matter how bad the pain gets, I assure you, death will not find you—no matter how loud you scream for it. My assistant, Tom, he’s a medical humanoid, highly trained in this. If your heart gives out, he’ll bring you back. You will find no escape in death. We’ll just keep reviving you until you answer our questions.”

The man’s eyes had drifted, causing Hosni to snap his fingers. “OK, then. You know the rules—it’s time to start the game. This should be fun. Answer my questions readily, and you might even make it home for dinner. So, let’s try this from the beginning, shall we? What is your name?”

The man hesitated for a moment before his resolve stiffened. He barked angrily, “Who do you think I am? Who the hell are you to question me like this?”

Hosni slapped the man hard across his face and lurched from his chair, his face right up against his prisoner’s. “Stop playing games! We know you aren’t a logistics specialist for Yale Industrial Goods. Tell me who you really are, who you work for, and what your real job is!”

“I swear, you have the wrong person.”

“Wrong answer. Time for round one.” Hosni motioned for Tom to administer the first dose.

Inches from his prisoner’s face, Hosni stared into his eyes, searching them for the look—the look that said *I’m caught; I’m not getting out of this*. Then he saw it, fractions of a second before the drug took over.

*He’s our guy*, Hosni thought as the drug transformed the man’s eyes and facial features almost instantly.

As the pharmaceuticals attached to the prisoner’s nervous system, they would trick him into believing his body had been set on fire. As the substance spread throughout his body, it caused every pain receptor to flood the brain, initially overwhelming his ability to respond. Once he could, a violent scream roared from within his body. Then he violently convulsed, testing the limits of the restraints as his mind deceived him into believing his very being was on fire.

“What is your real name?” yelled Hosni over the man’s agonizing screams.

“Make it stop! Make it stop!” he begged desperately, the straps tearing into his flesh the more he struggled against them.

“Tell me your name and it’ll stop!”

“Enki! My real name is Enki Enuma,” the man shouted through tears.

Hosni countered with rapid-fire questions. “Who do you work for? What is your mission? How many others are with you?”

Through gritted teeth, he hissed, “The Mukhabarat. I work for the Mukhabarat! Now give me the antidote!”

“You’re still not answering my questions, Enki!” Hosni countered, using his real name for emphasis. “What is your job? What is your mission? How many others are with you?” He wasn’t about to turn the drug off until those questions had been answered.

“Stop this pain and I’ll tell you what you want to know,” Enki railed, the restraints becoming bloody as they tore further into his flesh.

Hosni shook his head. “Wrong answer, Enki. I keep giving you chances to tell the truth, but you keep holding back on me. Now we’re going to move to the next round.”

Hosni motioned for Tom to administer the second dose. This amplified things to an entirely new level as the prisoner’s muscles spasmed and contracted while the fire drug continued to rack his body and brain.

Enki howled and cursed Hosni, shouting in Sumerian and English before pleading for mercy, begging him to make the pain stop.

“What is your job? What is your mission? Who else is working with you?” Hosni repeated the questions a third time.

“My job is logistics. I’m supposed to prepare the way for others. I work alone. My job has me working alone. There, I’ve answered your questions. Now turn it off!” he begged, eyes bloodshot, his face contorted in agonizing pain.

Getting back into Enki’s face, Hosni shouted over his cries, “I still have more questions!”

“Turn off the drug and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Just turn it off. Turn it off and I’ll tell you everything,” Enki pleaded, snot running down his face between sobs and muscle contractions.

Hosni nodded to Tom; it was time to move to the next level.

Tom administered the counteragent, which was not just a designer pain reliever but also functioned as a truth serum when given after the fire medication. The drugs flooded Enki’s body. His facial expression relaxed, and his eyes became glassy.



*Enki has arrived in La-la land. Now he's ready to talk...*

Hosni snapped his fingers to gain his prisoner's attention. "Isn't this better, Enki? If you keep answering my questions, you can stay in this happy place for as long as you want," Hosni explained as he shifted to a softer, mellower tone.

Enki smiled happily. "Water," he stammered. "Can I please have some water?"

"Sure. I'll have some water brought in." Turning to look at the one-way mirror, Hosni used his neurolink. *Juan, can you please bring a glass of water in?*

Hosni smiled at Enki. "There we go, water is on the way. Now, let's try to stay in this happy place and not have to go back to the bad place we just left. How about you tell me about this neat job you have with the Mukhabarat in logistics?"

Enki looked through him for a moment, nodding in compliance. "Yes, my job with them is logistics. When the new people arrive, it's my job to secure the safe house they'll use, provide their new identity, and establish the necessary bank information and credits to get them established. If a front company or legitimate cutout needs to be purchased, then I take care of that as well."

"Enki, you said when people arrive...who are these people? How many people have you settled on Earth?"

Enki looked confused by the question. He began to speak like he was talking in his mind, not realizing he was vocalizing his thoughts. "I said people? Did I tell them about the assets? Did I mention the watchers? Oh, Lindow, I didn't mention the Ani, did I? Only a few have come so far...it's not their time yet..."

*Damn it. He's having a much stronger reaction to the drug than we want to see.*

Hosni spoke to Royce and Juan over the neurolink. *The drugs are hitting him harder than expected.* He'd seen something like this before—the fire drugs caused prisoners to perspire heavily, and it affected some more than others. *We need to get some fluids in him, or we'll lose our ability to guide his mind to the answer we want.*

Royce responded, *Good call. Get in there with the water, Juan. Hosni, come out here and let's talk for a moment.*

Hosni stood as Juan walked in with a pitcher of water and a plastic glass.

“I’ve got it from here. See what the boss wants,” Juan said softly, out of Enki’s earshot.

Hosni turned to his prisoner. “We’ve brought you some water, Enki. I need you to drink as much as you can. We’ll talk some more in a few minutes.”

As Hosni left the room, the electronic noise scrambler in the hallway kicked back on, and the door sealed the room up tight, the harmonic vibrations of what was happening inside now fully blocked off from the outside world.

Royce approached him with a grin of satisfaction. “Good job in there. That’s some good intel you’re getting out of him. Press him more on what he meant by those three groups he mentioned: asset, watcher, and Ani. We also need to find out how they’re creating these new identities. That last piece is critical if we’re going to figure out how to find the others.”

Hosni felt elated at the praise—this was his first human intelligence operation, and he’d already found some blockbuster intelligence.

“Hey, Hosni. I know you feel like you just hit the jackpot with this guy, but it’s not over yet,” Royce said, apparently reading his mind. “You have a lot more to ask him. He’s pliable right now, but that’s not to say he won’t figure out what the drugs are doing and find another way to resist. Stay focused; keep your head in the game. Now get back in there and get us answers to those questions,” Royce explained, his tone reminding Hosni who was the boss.

“Sorry about that—you’re right. We have a lot more to press him on. I’ll get it out of him.”

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*What kind of drugs have they given me? I didn’t just tell them how many have arrived, did I?* Enki questioned himself, finding it nearly impossible to focus. Then his eyes saw the water.

*Oh, Lindow. I can’t focus...this won’t work. I must make this work...I’ve said too much.*

“Water. Water, please,” Enki rasped to the soldier who’d looked away.

“All right, give me a second,” the man replied, waiting for the door to fully close.

As the overwhelming sensation of thirst swept over him, Enki reminded himself, *OK, now hold some back*. He fought through the drugs clouding his mind, melting his ability to resist despite his training. If he couldn't focus, this wouldn't work.

The soldier approached, glass in hand. Enki held his mouth open, waiting for his moment.

*Too bad Smith isn't in here with me...*

Taking the water in, Enki gulped some down, then turned his head to the side, indicating he needed a moment. The soldier picked up on the cue, stepping back, waiting to see if he'd ask for more.

*This is it; it's now or never...*

He gave a slight nod to the soldier that he was done. When he turned away, Enki closed his eyes, pushing through the chemical haze and focusing on a single thought, a single word. He thought of the word *mya*, and then an image appeared. He focused on the image until it disappeared. He thought of the word *troya*. A new image appeared. Moments later, it was replaced with a final image containing two words: *yes* and *no*.

When the moment arrived, Enki didn't hold back. He focused on the word *yes*. It blinked three times, then disappeared. For a moment, there was nothing—no reaction, no big reveal like he'd thought there would be.

Then Enki felt something along the roof of his mouth. The water he'd held in his mouth began a radical transformation as the substance reacted to its presence. He'd been told it would react the same with saliva, but a mouth full of water would make you a greater vessel of death to anything nearby.

As the reaction reached critical mass, the water transformed rapidly into a gas that filled his mouth and lungs until the pressure was too much. Like a kettle releasing pent-up steam, the gas shot out his mouth and nose in a rapid gush of aerated poison that filled the room.

In those final moments, Enki saw the face of the soldier he'd just sprayed. The man's expression changed from anger at being spat on to horror as his throat began to constrict. The glass hit the floor, spilling its contents as the soldier fell below his line of sight.

Before his brain shut down from lack of oxygen, Enki faced the mirror and forced a smile. The blackness enveloped him, leaving him with a final thought before it vanished.

*I win.*

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By the time Hosni and the others knew something had happened in the room, the building's AI had sealed the room and quarantined its HVAC system from the building. Nothing was getting in or out until a hazmat team determined it was safe.

Hosni raced into the observation room. Juan's body lay still on the floor, and a crooked smile was frozen on the face of the prisoner he'd spoken to just moments ago.

Major Royce shouted commands at the building's AI and the synthetic humanoid Tom, who remained devoid of any type of emotional reaction.

"Damn it!" Hosni shouted as he pounded a fist on the mirror, anger boiling over at the sight of his friend lying dead just a few feet away. They'd survived years of war, only for him to die while questioning a prisoner.

Major Royce placed a hand on his shoulder. "This isn't your fault, Hosni. It's mine. I'm the commander. I'm the one who failed to detect whatever killed them. Once the bodies are rendered safe, we'll figure out what the hell that was and make sure this can't happen again."

Hosni stared at his friend's body, then glanced at the prisoner before commenting, "They'd rather die at their own hands than talk." He shook his head and turned away. "If that doesn't convince you we have a serious Zodark problem on our hands, I don't know what will. That last comment, though...assets, watchers, Ani...I think we're in for some serious trouble soon. Let's hope the brass figures out what to do next."

Royce grimaced at the comment. They could only hope the Senate and these new agencies they'd created would let them do their jobs before things got out of control.

"Juan was a damn good soldier, Hosni. Like that prisoner said, more are on the way. This war isn't over. They've just changed how it'll be fought. Let's go brief the boss and round up the rest of the team. We've got a new enemy to hunt, and it's time we get ready for what's coming next."

## Chapter 1 Supply Run

### Magnussen Orbital Station Above Planet Alfheim, Sirius System

Dakkuri entered the cantina, keeping his head low as he made his way to the bar.

“What’ll you have?” asked a man with a dirty towel draped over his shoulder. Bottles of alcohol and assorted drinks lined the glass wall behind him.

“Whiskey, neat,” was all Dakkuri said, turning slightly away from the bar, surveilling the scene around him.

Dakkuri caught some movement to his right before a glass appeared from beneath the bar, a bottle of brown liquid filling it to the halfway point.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” the man said before turning to walk toward another patron.

Lifting the glass to his lips, Dakkuri sipped, almost wincing as the liquid ran down his throat. *Damn. How do these people tolerate such strong drinks?* he wondered.

His eyes continued scanning for the man he knew only as TJ. When Dakkuri didn’t see him, he sighed. A song played in the background, the lyrics and their meaning unfamiliar to him—something about whiskey and reaching the bottom of the barrel, only to be rescued by love.

*This is what they call music?* he marveled.

A man in coveralls with a forgettable face walked in, standing at the entrance for a moment. When he spotted Dakkuri, he made his way toward him.

Sliding into the open seat next to Dakkuri, the man caught the bartender’s attention and ordered a drink of his own. When the barkeep left, the man pulled his Qpad out and proceeded to watch some sort of video clip, adding to the noise happening around them.

Dakkuri turned to face toward the bar and away from the man as he pulled his own Qpad out. He composed a short message using the holographic keypad, hit send, and waited.

A voice spoke, intermixed with the noise and chatter of whatever show the man behind him was watching. “You have the money?”

TJ was late—something that made Dakkuri nervous. Still, he needed the goods.

He held the Qpad up like he was sending a video message. “If you still have the product... I do.” If this guy didn’t have it, he’d walk and find another dealer who did.

“I got it. It’s still on our ship, ready to transfer to yours.” TJ drained half his glass. “You know, I love this song. It’s an old one—came out damn near a hundred years ago. Guy’s got a voice, and those lyrics...they speak to a simpler time.”

Dakkuri snorted. *This whiny crap is making my ears bleed*, he thought privately. “What do they call this kind of...what music is this?”

“Country music.”

The lyrics continued on, talking about alcohol and romance. “Country music? What is it? Why do they call it that?” There was so much Dakkuri didn’t understand about the humans from the Republic—they were still so...*alien*.

The man laughed briefly before finishing off the rest of his drink. “It’s about life, my man: the happy and sad moments and everything in between. That’s life in its truest form.”

“Huh, OK. Maybe it’ll grow on me in time,” Dakkuri replied with a slight smile. TJ seemed to relax a bit as they both faced the bottles staring back at them from behind the wall.

“Before I show you the product, let me see that you have the money.”

Dakkuri tapped a couple of keys, pulling a recent picture up. There were four crates, their tops held open to reveal their contents. He angled the screen slightly for TJ, who caught the glimpse he needed and let out a soft whistle at the sight.

TJ got up, and Dakkuri waited an appropriate amount of time before exiting the bar and walking toward the station’s warehouses and docking ports. Dakkuri closed the distance between him and TJ as he walked through the promenade. In his peripheral vision, Dakkuri noticed that two figures casually followed them.

When they approached docking slip 31B, Dakkuri entered a pass code used to secure the warehouse and docking port. The door opened, revealing a cavernous warehouse filled with palletized cargo. When a freighter docked, it transferred cargo to and from these docking warehouse slips along the edges of the station.

Dakkuri called to his enforcer, “Orchamus, bring the crates. He wants to visually inspect them.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the man replied as he turned to grab them from just inside the ship.

TJ grinned as they approached the cargo entrance to the *Wawat*. “That’s an interesting ship. Would love to see the inside of a Sumerian ship one day. Don’t think I’ve ever seen one before now.”

Dakkuri shrugged at the comment. The only human to have seen the insides of their ship was a station cargo inspector, and he’d been watched like a hawk. “A ship is a ship. It ain’t a fancy passenger ship, but it can haul cargo and we’re able to scratch a living from it. What more can you ask for?”

“Amen to that. With the war over, you civilian haulers are bound to stay busy now.”

Orchamus reappeared, pushing the crates toward them on a hover cart. Stopping in front of them, he opened the top one. “It’s all here. Go ahead, pick one up if you’d like.”

TJ looked down and smiled at what he saw.

“Wow, you really do have the money,” he exclaimed, picking a brick up to examine it. Each brick bore the seal of the former Sumerian government. Below the seal, the weight was listed in Sumerian, reading 12.4 kilograms, or 400 ounces of 99.99 percent pure gold.

“It’s all there—five million Republic credits in physical gold. That’s one hundred bars to be exact,” Dakkuri explained as TJ marveled at the feeling of holding physical currency, not a digital credit.

“Now it’s your turn. Let’s see the product and make the exchange.”

TJ placed the gold bar in the crate. “Yes, sir. We need to bring the crates to 48A—it’ll show as being closed for maintenance. We do that to keep the inspectors and the lookie-loos away. Come on, I’ll show you.”

They made for the exit with Orchamus pushing the hover cart behind them. Dakkuri saw him nod; he was ready if this went south.

As they left the warehouse, walking down the transfer corridors, TJ tapped the side of his smart glasses, telling his people they were on the way.

As they approached 48A, Dakkuri saw figures materialize from the shadows nearby. The three men looked tough, like they had seen a few bar fights in their time. After they’d been ushered inside, the lead figure motioned for Dakkuri to check the packages.

A figure from further in the warehouse moved toward them, pushing a hover cart with four large rectangular crates evenly stacked on it. Dakkuri unsealed the first one, and a hissing sound escaped from within. He lifted up the top, revealing a single warhead for a Havoc II high-explosive missile.

TJ spoke from behind him. "I've got four of them, just like you asked for." Then he ordered his friend, "Show him the rest of it. Let's get the transaction complete; then we can talk."

Another guy pushed a hover cart toward them and opened it to reveal its contents. The crate was packed with blasters and two hundred Republic Army pistols, still fresh from the factory. A second crate was opened, revealing fifty M1 battle rifles. The third crate had one hundred neatly packed fragmentation grenades. When Dakkuri saw the fourth crate, his heart skipped a beat. Staring back at him were twenty M-12 multipurpose launchers or MPLs.

TJ responded to his look of surprise. "You didn't think we could find 'em, did ya?"

"Honestly, no. You got the missiles? 'Cause launchers won't do me any good without them."

"Every one of 'em. It's all there, mate, just as you asked. We good to make our swap now?"

"Yeah, TJ. We're good," Dakkuri replied happily. "Hey, TJ, before we leave, how are you guys acquiring this stuff, and could we acquire more if we want?"

TJ gave him a sideways look, sizing him up before answering, "Let's just say there's more than a few Republic freighter wrecks floating around out there. And there's plenty of other places with leftovers from the war. But as to acquiring more from us...that all depends."

"Oh? On what exactly?"

"On what it is you're looking for and whether you can afford it, my friend. Good stuff ain't cheap, and hard untraceable currency like that gold...that's hard to come by."

"Ah, well, I don't think that'll be a problem on our end," Dakkuri assured.

TJ snorted. "The war's over, man. What exactly are you needing all this stuff for?"



Dakkuri scratched the stubble on his chin. “We’re Sumerians. The war may be over for some...but we have long memories of the Zodarks. Who’s to say they won’t return one day?”

TJ grunted. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Zodarks, though...that’s the Republic’s problem, not mine. As to buying more, that all depends on when you purchase. In our business, we like to move around—maybe we’ll be here, maybe we’ll be back in the Belt. If you do place an order, once we’ve gotten what we want, we’ll let you know where to meet.”

Orchamus walked up to TJ, leaning in so only he could hear. Seeing TJ’s facial expressions told Dakkuri all he needed to know.

*Time to go*, he thought as Orchamus traded hover carts with them.

Dakkuri extended his hand to TJ. As he took it, he told him, “We’ll send you another order when we’re ready. Good working with you, TJ. Oh, and don’t forget, like that sad song said, life is about the ups and downs, the good and the bad. Let’s try to keep things good. I see a lot of hard currency headed your way soon. I like this arrangement—don’t mess it up.”

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## **Eighteen Days Later**

### **Free Trader *Wawat***

Dakkuri silently observed Sadat as he finished packing the explosives in the cylindrical device. Chryssoula took the cylinder next and went to work. She attached the detonator cap and the top of the cylinder together before doing a quick systems check. Once the device was assembled, they placed it in the suitcase.

Dakkuri felt good about their progress. Things were moving along as they got closer to Earth. It had been nearly a year since his teams had dispersed from Sumer. They’d nearly completed phase zero—Republic integration.

With the minions working on their tasks, he had responsibilities he could only complete in his quarters, away from his people. When he entered the room, he locked it, ensuring no interruptions.

Reviewing the special data pad only he could use, Dakkuri brought up the set of reports they’d downloaded prior to FTL jump. It wouldn’t be long before they reached Earth, and he had plenty to catch up on. Alfheim truly was located at the end of nowhere.

Before Dakkuri had left Sumer, NOS Heltet had given him and a few others the same P2 devices used by the Zodark NOSs and others within the Groff, the security service within the Zodark Empire, and the Malvari, the command element within the Zodark military. This would allow Dakkuri to receive and send secured communications with the Groff.

The first report Dakkuri checked was from his logistics team on New Eden. They'd been busy, and things looked productive. They'd established a series of front companies or cutouts based out of the Emerald City. The cutouts would allow them to establish a series of apartments and safe houses across New Eden, Earth, Mars, Sumer, and Alpha Centauri. He opened another file labeled "Watcher Reports." He skimmed the reports—since he didn't spot anything unusual, he moved on.

Dakkuri thought about Sol as they neared it. He'd be handing this logistics team a challenging task. They'd be the ones to distribute the packages they'd just acquired to the safe houses for the Ani. He already felt uncomfortable having one of them on his ship—the last thing he wanted was for them to find fault with his operation. He'd seen the way Orchamus looked at him, assessing him.

*They may be Ani, but I'm still the one in charge of this operation,* Dakkuri thought, pushing any doubts out of his mind. He saw the clock on the wall...it was time to sleep. Tomorrow was a big day. Time to begin phase one.