

# 2249 AD

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## CHAIRMAN MALCOLM STANNIS

Alien ships filled the skies of Earth, like snowflakes in a menacing blizzard. With extended solar sails, weapons antennae, sparkling windowports, and anodized hull plates, the warliners looked like a school of fearsome fighting fish.

“We always knew the Ildiran Solar Navy would come,” muttered Malcolm Stannis, Chairman of the Terran Hanseatic League. He stared up into the sky from a high balcony in the Whisper Palace. “But I never expected anything like this.”

Beside him, his adviser, Liam Hector, spoke in a scratchy voice. Hector was middle-aged, with hair so short it was only a bristle of brownish-gray, and he had no charisma whatsoever. Hector would never be Hansa Chairman—very few people had the skill for that—but he was reliable. “From what we know of the Ildiran Empire, Mr. Chairman, the aliens are obsessive about pomp and showmanship. This is intended to impress us.”

“Or intimidate us.”

“That too, sir.” The two men continued to watch, but further words failed them.

The Terran Hanseatic League, or Hansa, was so widespread and influential in the solar system that it had become the de facto government of Earth, the Moon, industrial outposts in the asteroid belt, settlements on several moons of Jupiter, and the military base on Mars. Since his election as Chairman six years earlier, Stannis had come up with so many plans for the future of human civilization that he kept a journal, jotting down his thoughts so as not to forget his best ideas. Now, if only he could implement them all.

The arrival of a dramatic and alien military force had not figured in even his wildest plans.

Malcolm Stannis was in his early thirties, only recently elected to the post of Chairman, the youngest person ever to fill that position. He was a handsome man with dark hair, olive skin, deep brown eyes. He had trained his lips to remain in a firm, unreadable line at all times. He frowned no more often than he smiled, since either expression revealed too much information about his inner thoughts. Though not vain, he dressed with care in impeccable dark suits that fit him like a glove and were as comfortable as any other man’s casual clothing.

The people had applauded the unanimous vote that made him Chairman of the Hanseatic League. With all the politics, arranging that vote had been no small feat for Stannis, considering the others who vied for the position, the squabbling power brokers, the shifting alliances. Stannis had convinced many voting members to select him on the basis of his own merits; when that didn’t work, he bribed the ones he could and blackmailed the remaining ones when he had to. Whatever the means, he currently led the Hansa, with all the power, prestige, and opportunities the position entailed.

The Ildiran fleet’s arrival, however changed everything. For the good of the Hansa, Stannis was glad the job had not fallen into the hands of one of his less-competent rivals.

Despite the fact that he was Chairman, Stannis rarely appeared in public. King Ben existed to serve in that capacity. And today, the

figurehead King would certainly earn the high stipend the Hansa secretly paid him—if he did what he was told. . . .

From the Whisper Palace balcony, Stannis watched the ships in the air. Damn, this made him nervous. The Ildirans claimed to be friendly and had already helped some of Earth's far-flung generation ships, although the Chairman couldn't understand why. He disliked not understanding motivations, especially in such a dangerous and complex situation.

Per his orders, the Earth Defense Forces were on high alert, an entire "escort" fleet transferred here from the Mars base in anticipation of the Ildiran representative's arrival, but the ships were under strict orders to take no aggressive action unless definitively fired upon. The last thing Stannis wanted was an interstellar war started by some fool with an itchy trigger finger.

But they also had to be ready to defend Earth, to stand against a major sneak attack if the warliners should prove to be an invasion force. These Ildirans were aliens; *anything* could happen.

Hector pointed to the chaos of colorful warliners overhead, identifying one in particular. "There, sir. That will be the flagship bringing their military commander."

Stannis fixed his gaze on the vessel as it detached itself from the rest of the grouping and dropped toward the designated landing area in the Palace District. "His title is *Adar*," he corrected the aide, though he didn't know what the term meant in their language.

As it approached, the flagship warliner appeared to dwarf the Whisper Palace, though it was only a matter of perspective—he hoped.

The King's residence, the lavish seat of power from which the Hansa monarch issued the statements and rulings that were carefully written for him, had been designed to inspire awe. The cost of the Palace had been historic, nearly incalculable by any traditional economic formula, but the Terran Hanseatic League had experienced record profits. To demonstrate the Hansa's continued success, Stannis's predecessor had broken ground on another wing,

expanding the gigantic structure; for the past decade, the Palace District had been a constant bustle of construction.

Even with its tall towers, gold-plated cupolas, multilayered fountains, fairy-work bridges, and banners flapping from every spire, the Whisper Palace did not seem as impressive as those exotic alien ships. . . .

Crowds had gathered to stare in terror or elation at the Ildiran fleet. Wearing crisp, bright blue uniforms, the Royal Guard fanned out to impose order, herding the public into a designated safety zone as the flagship warliner came down. Though the Royal Guard put on regular parades for King Ben's benefit and had drilled for the arrival of the Solar Navy, many of the soldiers' faces were turned up to the sky, eyes wide, mouths open, gawking at the giant warliners just like any other civilian. The Chairman made a mental note to pass along his criticisms to the Guard Administrator . . . but only after all this blew over.

Stannis touched the bug-mic in his ear as the Royal Guard Captain transmitted on his private channel, "Mr. Chairman, the plaza landing area is cleared and secure. Royal Guard in position and ready to receive the Ildiran Adar."

Stannis acknowledged. "Nothing sloppy, Captain. This is going to be the most important hour in your life."

"I understand that, sir." Muffled in the voice pickup, the captain snapped to his troops, running them through their paces.

Smaller Ildiran ships flurried around the descending warliner, while the rest of the ornate battleships remained overhead, like peacocks loaded with exotic weaponry. Malcolm Stannis reserved judgment, for the time being. He still didn't know what to make of the benevolent Ildiran "rescue" of the Earth generation ships, or what the aliens wanted from the human race.

Almost a century-and-a-half before, a tired and crowded Earth had dispatched eleven massive, slow-moving ships out into the starry emptiness—more emptiness than stars—like arks for the human race, searching the Spiral Arm for new habitable planets. When Malcolm Stannis reviewed the old history and understood the

ships' vanishingly small chances for success, he was amazed that investors and governments had been convinced to fund the project at all. Carrying optimistic (or perhaps naïve and reckless) colonists, those eleven ships had plodded off in different directions like messages in bottles tossed out into a vast, empty sea.

The generation ships flew out on a one-way trip, and Earth had never expected to hear from them again. For 144 years, they were all but forgotten. And then five years ago, one of those wandering generation ships had blundered into a scout from the Ildiran Solar Navy—humanity's first contact with any intelligent alien race. Taking pity on the tired and bedraggled colonists-without-a-colony, the Ildirans rescued them, delivering that first ship, the *Caillié*, to a habitable planet.

After settling the colonists, the Solar Navy dispatched search parties to follow the last known courses of the human generation ships, and sent a contact mission to inform an astonished Earth what they were doing. In short order, they found ten of the eleven lost vessels, and now, finally, the Ildirans had sent a formal delegation to Earth.

Chairman Stannis realized that such a world-shaking event could cause economic and political upheaval across the Hansa, but he preferred not to panic. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity. And there could be many more to come.

But what did the Ildirans *want*?

"I'd better give King Ben a refresher briefing," he said to Hector, "make sure he is clear on how to act and what to say. He's never had to do anything like this before—I bet he's about to wet himself." Stannis drew a deep breath and turned away from the view of the alien ships. Good thing he was there to make the decisions. The Hansa needed a strong leader right now.

He hurried down the steps.

King Ben paced nervously in his opulent dressing room, a huge chamber with polished stone floors and veined marble columns