

Foundation Fanfic



[Opening theme music.]

Joel McKinnon

Welcome back to Seldon Crisis, and today I'm going to do something I've wanted to try for quite a while, a reading of something neither I nor Asimov wrote. This will be short story posted on a site called Archive of Our Own by someone who goes by the handle Sarita1046. It's fiction inspired not directly by Asimov's Foundation, but by the Apple TV series interpretation of Foundation and centers on a character we haven't yet met. In our story, Demerzel is the humanoid robot played by actress Laura Birn in the series. The original character from Asimov named Demerzel appears only in the last two novels Asimov wrote for the series; the prequels "Prelude to Foundation" and "Forward the Foundation."

Joel

These are set in the decades preceding Hari Seldon's appearance in "The Psychohistorians" and Demerzel appears as Prime Minister for Cleon I, the Emperor in Seldon's time. In the TV series, this character's role is greatly expanded and gender swapped to present as female a humanoid robot who is apparently many thousands of years old. Sarita refers to some other characters who may not be familiar to readers of Foundation or to watchers of the series. There is another series of novels that have a connection to the Foundation universe; "The Caves of Steel," "The Naked Sun," "Robots of Dawn," and "Robots and Empire," featuring a Sherlock Holmes style human detective named Elijah Baley and his humanoid robot sidekick Daniel Olivaw.

These are essentially murder mysteries, but they include some fascinating context on how humans came to leave Earth and spread out through the galaxy predating the Galactic Empire. In the second book, Bailey meets a woman suspected of a murder named Gladia and saves her by identifying the actual killer. In the third book, the same woman is involved in another murder, this time of a robot named Jander. Both Jander and Daneel were specially designed by an inventor named Fastolfe. These characters are all mentioned in the story, so I felt obligated to explain a little bit about where they came from.

I highly encourage everyone to read these stories, as they are a lot of fun and provide some interesting backstory on the character named Demerzel in the TV series and the eventual Galactic Empire she inhabits. Without further ado, here is "When the Stars Were Real by Sarita 1046.

Sarita1046

Nights are often the hardest.

Sarita

Any span of time following her, putting Dawn down for bed once Brothers Day and Dusk have since retired to their rooms along with the rest of the palace staff.

Demerzel keeps to her chambers most nights to avoid any staff witnessing her awake at odd hours.

"If anyone were to learn of your true nature, not even we could promise your safety..." Day likes to murmur close to her ear before departing a particularly tense conversation, typically one in which she has voiced concern over the Empire's latest technological innovation... or lack thereof.

He's full of it, of course. Anyone the Empire doesn't wish retired will not be retired. It's him who wishes her gone, what he views as a daily reminder of his mortality.

The night is warm as she opens the window, as wide as it will go. A humid breeze sifts through her loose locks as she runs her fingers through hair released after yet another day constrained to her head, dons a melon-hued gown to alter the mood from one of duty to relaxation.

Glancing over at her multiple identical blue dresses hanging on the wall beside her vanity, she lets her gaze fall upon the harp, an instrument she idly realizes Dawn has taken more time to inspect than her in recent years.

While she could chalk up her neglect of the beautiful object to her duties, that wouldn't explain her continued failure to play during the quiet nights. The strings were certainly soft enough to not rouse anyone.

No, it's entirely due to her avoiding yet another reminder of Earth. The design on her maintenance kit provides enough nostalgia that she has almost painted over it on several occasions.

She won't, though. She won't erase one of the final reminders of Earth... and of Elijah. Her first organic connection to a human, not controlled like Dr. Fastolfe or expectant like Gladia with Jander. Rather, Elijah had provided true partnership and companionship besides that that had granted Daniel true insight into human nature, the kind that, after a time, actually had the human relaxing around him as if he'd forgotten what his partner was.

With Cleon, it was almost the opposite... he'd always known what she was to the degree that he expected constant companionship and even espionage prior to the Shadow Master role entering the picture. Constant curiosity over the Empire's history, how he could do things better than any previous Emperor... sporadic trysts on the occasions that he decided to return the requested muscle massage following an evening's long-winded report on activities from the Outer Rim.

She was always there - less a point of awkward yet increasingly amiable interest as Daneel had been for Elijah and more like a piece of furniture whom the Emperor sent on diplomatic missions.

Indeed, the harp was one of those "ancient relics" Cleon I had pestered her about, prying her for information on its backstory... on her backstory. On what had inspired the change from Daneel to Demerzel. Though he equally enjoyed the company of both.

She knew that bit of curiosity was feigned. The Emperor wasn't blind to her need to blend in following the Robot Wars - to assume an identity that she hadn't worn since before anyone involved in the Wars had lived.

Shaking her head of such lingering thoughts, she relocates her harp across the vanity to sit just beside the fluttering curtains of the open window.

As her fingers strum ever so softly at the strings, she glances up at the sky. As ever, the moons and stars gaze back at her from the artificial servers that shroud the skies of Trantor.

"Jesse plays the harp."

"The harp?" Daniel repeated to his partner Elijah, as they sat at one of the sparse eateries of Spacetown, the odd off hour from a case. "I understand it's a lovely stringed instrument that requires significant tuning?"

"That sounds about right," Elijah chuckled, setting down his beverage. "It sure hasn't got the popularity of a guitar or such, but... I don't know, I'd say you've got the fingers for it. You know... elegant, I guess. Maybe I don't know what I'm saying."

She smiles now at the memory. While Daneel was only just learning to detect these subtle human cues and she suspects much of Elijah's intrigue stemmed from the perceived safety of such naiveté, she occasionally wishes she could have stepped into Daneel's shoes back then, knowing all she has learned since. To act upon those subtleties in a manner that extended beyond Daneel's natural positive response to Elijah's good mood in his presence.

They'd admired the stars that evening as the sun set over the pristine scape. Real stars in a real atmosphere that glittered. These false ones she regards now are immobile - a stagnant farce.

Just like the Empire she serves. As much as she wants to believe - to hope for anything to the contrary, she once again finds herself positing that the human lifespan is simply too brief for them to exist long enough to observe the dangers of history repeating itself.

Which is why her imperial masters have come to fear Hari Seldon.

They all remain petrified by their limited period of existence - and she has the memories of positronic distress to show for her presence during their tearful departures. Such desperation just barely quelled by her promise to continue on without them, to keep their memory alive.

In Elijah's case, her role as the sole bearer of his memory into the ensuing generations went unspoken, and yet, she has come to figure his final soft words to Daneel over Gladia likely bore a connection to the fact that a robot would always have a naturally longer existence than a human... even despite any genetic engineering.

As for her first Cleon, well... his greatest regret at the end centered on how the unfinished Star Bridge would remain his only unique contribution as Emperor.

"I will see to its completion," she assured him, stroking a soothing thumb over the back of his weathered hands, anxious dark eyes surveying her face that just managed to conceal the positronic distress of his imminent passing."

Not for the first time she had wondered at the objective behind programming the stress response to a human that was dying of age rather than act of harm... before concluding that the roboticists must have intended for their immortal creations to vicariously experience the fear and tragedy of a death which robots themselves would never have to naturally endure. A vendetta which had likely sown the seeds for the wars.

And while she had fulfilled that final promise to Cleon I in exchange for her safety and his employ, the unspoken pledge to safeguard his legacy is quickly failing under the growing corruption of the clone dynasty. Indeed,

she has to wonder if Cleon I himself would have come to view his plan in a less positive light, had his existence continued alongside hers.

Fingers playing upon the fine metal strings, Demerzel blinks away the tears that threaten to blur her view of the darkness above.

This is surely why she tends to avoid the harp - it often hurts less to let a centuries old instrument gather dust than to get lost in the soft music that makes her very consciousness ache for a time when the stars were real.

Joel

I hope you enjoyed that. It was a pleasure for me to read Sarita's work, and I'll link to the post in the show notes.

You can leave comments there to let her know what you thought of her piece. Now I would like to briefly talk about a new feature of the podcast you can find online, our new website - created by Podpage at SeldonCrisis.net. It's a service that auto generates a complete website from the RSS feed. This includes full information about each episode, reviews, transcripts, and show notes. It also includes blogging capability, something I've been looking forward to for some time. I've put up my first couple of posts and will be adding to it whenever I feel the urge to write.

My first post there is about a wonderful talk by Kim Stanley Robinson, which I attended in person at the Long Now Foundation in San Francisco. Long Now is dedicated to fostering long term thinking and has some interesting projects, including a 10,000 year clock buried beneath a mountain in Nevada, and a project to document a huge number of human languages, many of which are rapidly disappearing. They also have something called the Manual for Civilization, a library of selected books that form the core knowledge that would be required to rebuild civilization should catastrophe strike and humans were returned to a state of barbarism. Does that sound familiar? Encyclopedia Galactica, maybe?

I encourage you to check out their website, which is linked in the show notes along with the blog post. You've heard about Kim Stanley Robinson a few times on this podcast. I've known him since my early Mars Society days over twenty years ago, and he's my favorite modern Sci-Fi writer. He wrote the classic Mars trilogy, as well as a number of great novels describing humanity's adventures in the solar system over the next several centuries, such as *Galileo's Dream 2312*, *New York 2140*, and many others. In recent years, he's been focused on climate fiction, and his most recent book, *The Ministry for the Future*, is a masterpiece on this topic.

It begins just a few years in the future with a horrific heatwave in India that kills millions and imagines the collective human response to this tragedy ultimately becoming a rather optimistic vision of human capability under extreme duress. In his talk at Long Now, he addresses this topic at length, including personal anecdotes about the recent Cop26 climate conference and other ruminations on modern geopolitics related to the attempt to avoid the Earth's sixth mass extinction event. The entire talk is available on video, and I've included a link in the blog post and will also put it in the show notes. Please check it out and let me know what you think.

I almost forgot the best news of all Kim Stanley Robinson has agreed to be a guest on the podcast later this year or early next year. He's a busy guy, so I'll take him when I can get him. It should be a fabulous conversation whenever it occurs. There's one more feature of the new website I want to call your attention to. In the lower right corner, you'll see a red microphone icon. If you click on it, you can record a quick voice message, which will get emailed to me. I would love to hear from some of my listeners. Seriously, you people hear me blathering all the time. Please let me hear some of your voices. A quick hello and maybe a few thoughts on the podcast would be wonderful. Please give it a try.

Next episode, we'll be starting into the final chapter of the Foundation core trilogy. This will introduce a wonderful character in the 14 year old Arkady Darell, granddaughter of Bayta, and her adventures in the continuing quest to locate the Second Foundation. There are also a lot of other interesting characters, including Lady Callia, consort of yet another megalomaniac on the rise on Kalgan, and several intriguing members of The Search. I intend to feature some new voices besides my own on these next few episodes, including Amanda Kreidler, of course, but also some new ones I'm sure you'll enjoy. See you soon, for "Search by the Foundation," here on Seldon Crisis!

[Closing theme music]