

The General, Part I



[Opening theme music with voiceovers.]

Bel Riose

"Tell me, patrician, who are the magicians? The real ones?"

Ducem Barr

"There are no magicians."

Cleon II

"I need a man out there. One with eyes, brains and loyalty."

Brodrig

"And the ships, sire?"

Cleon II

"Not yet."

Lathan Devers

"So what's the game, boss? Or do I call you General?"

Bel Riose

"My game is war."

[Theme music plays out.]

Joel McKinnon

Welcome back, friends, to the second season of Seldon Crisis, the podcast. It feels like it's been a long time since we've stepped forward, a score of millennia to the time when humans have filled the entire galaxy with inhabited worlds and the great mathematician Hari Seldon rose to prominence on the gleaming city of Trantor to announce its impending destruction.

Joel

I provided a recap of season one in our last episode, so I won't run through it all again. A lot of intricate adventures have transpired, and we've met a lot of characters, from Gaal Dornick to the tech man on Siwenna. You may have forgotten dear old Jord Fara, our quiet friend from the Encyclopedists, for instance, or Louis Bort, or Gaal's chatty but dubious friend Jerril on the platform above Trantor. The question for us now is, how much of this do we really need to know to understand what follows? How many of these individual figures matter? I'm going to try to break that down for you.

Now, arguably, I would say you only need to remember three main ones, plus a couple of others I'll get to in a moment. The big three are, of course, Hari Seldon, Salvor Hardin, and Hober Mallow. Seldon will be remembered as the man who conceived of the Foundation and the author of the so called Seldon Plan and his prediction of a series of existential crises. Give this podcast its name. Salvor Harden was like the George Washington of the young colony, beating the great and threatening nearby powers with brilliant strategy and intelligence, and Hober Mallow set the model for the Foundation to reach out and magnify its influence and power throughout the galactic periphery through trade and economic hegemony.

There is one other very important character to remember, however, who will have a major influence on this episode through the actions of his unnamed son. We only met him briefly in "The Merchant Princes" when Mallow visited the planet of Siwenna, and he told a sad tale of his native planet's downfall. His name was Onum Barr, and we will revisit his story now. Barr was an old and unfortunate man when Mallow met him, but he had once been a powerful figure on the rich and cultured world of Siwenna, which was still firmly under control of the Galactic Empire.

It was harshly ruled by an unpopular viceroy with ambitions to even greater power, and when he launched a coup against the Emperor himself, the people revolted and threw off his authority while he was engaged in battle with the imperial forces of the Emperor's Admiral. He lost the battle and retreated with his remaining forces to become a pirate among the red stars. Barr told Mallow that one of his sons fought under his banner under an assumed name. The great tragedy for the people of Siwenna was still to come. The Emperor's admiral longed for retribution and glory and put Siwenna to the nuclear blast.

Millions of citizens died, including Onum Barr's other five sons. A single daughter remained unaccounted for. This was all we were told of his horrific story in "The Merchant Princes." We are about to learn much more about the principles of that event as the story begins with an encounter upon Siwenna between a young and vigorous soldier of the empire and a notable victim of the planet's tragic past. The stage is fully set, and at last we can begin our storybook. General Bel Riose is a wonderkind, a soldier with unerring instincts and brilliant strategic vision. He is only 34 years old, but has already built a sterling reputation, and he is restless and in search of greater glories.

He has heard tales of a possible future conquest far on the periphery of the galaxy and has arrived on Siwenna to investigate these tales in

greater depth by visiting an elderly patrician by the name of Ducem Barr, none other than Onum Barr's last surviving son. A little aside on Asimov's names. The Latin for one is "unum" and two is "duo," so the resemblance in the two Barr first names is likely not an accident. Looking back to "The Mayors," recall that the high priest ambassador was named Poli Verisof, which translates to "many truths." I thank my guest from the recent special episode, the philosopher Nathaniel Goldberg for pointing out these unlikely coincidences. I suspect we will find others moving forward.

[Hum of ground vehicle with door closing]

Joel

Bel Riose arrives at Ducem Barr's estate in a humble ground car. He is met at the door by Barr, who politely admits him. There are strong allusions to the civilization's decay from its former peak of technical capability. Barr's home has automatic lighting upon entering, but the door, which once opened automatically to admit visitors, is no longer functional. Barr knows enough tech to tinker and keep things running better than most. But things are clearly running downhill. The soldier introduces himself to the patrician with an air of grace and dignity.

Bel Riose

"I am Riose."

Joel

Barr responds stiffly.

Ducem Barr

"I recognize you. Your business?"

Bel Riose

"One of peace. You are Ducem Barr. I ask the favor of conversation."

Joel

Barr demonstrates his grace by offering tea, which Riose accepts. The visitor then observes his host's impressive library. Asimov writes, "the general recognized the small black ivory boxes that lined the shelves to be books. Their titles were unfamiliar. He guessed that the large structure at one end of the room was the receiver that transmuted the books into sight and sound on demand. He had never seen one in operation, but he had heard of them."

Riose cuts to the chase. He's come to learn more about some rumors that he finds intriguing and thinks Barr might know more than most. He asks,

Bel Riose

"Tell me, patrician, who are the magicians? The real ones?"

Ducem Barr

"There are no magicians."

Joel

Riose is suspicious. He's heard the stories on Siwenna of these magicians. Cults have sprung up.

Bel Riose

"There are groups among your countrymen who dream and drivel of ancient days and what they call liberty and autonomy."

Joel

He claims to be concerned that these groups might threaten the security of the state.

Bel Riose

"Your father was an exile in his day. You yourself a patriot and a chauvinist in yours. It is indelicate in me as a guest to mention it, but my business here requires it. And yet a conspiracy now? I doubt it. Siwenna has had the spirit beat out of it these three generations."

Ducem Barr

"I shall be as indelicate a host as you, a guest. I shall remind you that once a viceroy thought as you did of the spiritless Siwennans. By the order of that viceroy, my father became a fugitive pauper, my brothers martyrs, and my sister a suicide. Yet that viceroy died a death sufficiently horrible at the hands of these same slavish Siwennans."

Bel Riose

"Ah, yes. And there you touch nearly on something I wish to say. For three years, the mysterious death of that viceroy has been no mystery to me. There was a young soldier of his personal guard whose actions were of interest. You were that soldier, but there is no need of details, I think."

Joel

This exchange is fascinating for what it reveals of some missing information in Onum Barr's sad tale as told to Hober Mallow. We didn't know until now of the eventual fate of the viceroy who had brought such horror and massive casualties to the populace of Siwenna and the identity of his executioner.

Even more fascinating to me is the tidbit about Ducem Barr's sister's suicide. I'll have some comments at the end of how I find the dangling

pieces here, particularly regarding the unfortunate and unnamed sister, to be a missed opportunity by Asimov.

Back to our story. Ducem Barr claims he is old and can't be personally threatened, but Riose reminds him that he has friends and family and implies that he can pressure the patrician through them. Barr grows tired of the cat and mouse game Riose is playing and asks him the purpose of his visit.

Riose goes on a long discourse, which I will summarize because it says much about his character and motivations. He is not the kind of general that fits in well in the Imperial Court. He dislikes the parades and ceremonies, which are the chief duty of most of his military brethren. So he's been sent to this distant outpost, in his words, to molder. He claims to be a failure despite his reputation, because he doesn't fit the times and his expected role. There is no need for a great general when the border viceroys no longer revolt, since the Emperor made an example of the traitorous viceroy who ended up dying at Barr's hands.

Bel Riose

"I am a failure at 34, and I shall stay a failure because, you see, I like to fight."

Joel

I have to make a minor digression here to ponder these attributes of Riose's character and plumb this description to find the author himself lying within. Asimov knew from an early age that he was remarkably intelligent. He stood out from his classmates and began college at only 15 years old. He believed it was his destiny and proper role to become a great scientist, possibly to stand out by winning a Nobel Prize or two instead. By the time he was writing this story, he had become a mediocrity as a scientist. He felt stifled in the academic world and struggled to maintain cordial relationships with his superiors (in his mind, he obviously had none). I get the impression of someone who always had a chip on his shoulder. He knew there was one way to stand out and that was to write, and to write a lot. It became his mission to write more than anyone he was aware of in history. And to a large extent, he achieved this aim in life. Back to our story.

Riose reveals that he knows the rumored magicians are located in the periphery because he has heard the story of Hober Mallow's meeting with Barr's father and believes it to be true.

Ducem Barr responds by introducing Riose to the topic of psychohistory, of which he is yet unaware. This will become a crucial plot point of this episode. The "Great Man" theory of history versus Seldon's predictions, which assume individuals are ultimately not significant in predicting the future. Riose is young and ambitious enough to believe he can defeat the Foundation and therefore wreck Seldon's plan. He believes himself to be a great man capable of defeating the premise of such a theory.

Now we get another wonderful little throwback to another element of Hober Mallow's side adventure to Siwenna, when he met the odious tech man and gifted him with a personal force field which lasted only a couple of

days. At the time, this seemed like just a humorous aside, but it apparently had consequences. Barr gestures and says,

Ducem Barr

"The generator hangs on the wall behind you, sir. It does not work. It never worked but for the first two days. But if you'll look at it, you will see that no one in the Empire ever designed it. The secret of its workings are beyond discovery now. Subelectronic investigations have shown it to be fused into a single lump of metal. And not all the most careful study of the diffraction patterns have sufficed to distinguish the discrete parts that had existed before fusion."

Joel

I find this fascinating for what it suggests about Asimov's writing style. Did he always intend this incident to have such significance that it would reappear in a later story? Or did he come up with this connection on the fly? I suspect the latter, as it was his tendency to write by the seat of his pants rather than from a carefully prepared outline. Perhaps he made this connection as he was typing and threw it in to fit the moment. It serves to create a sense of almost magical continuity over the generations that pass between these stories. Barr goes on to tell Riose of Hari Seldon and throws in an interesting tidbit... that Seldon had once visited Siwenna when it was a great commercial center rich in the arts and sciences.

Ducem Barr

"The days I speak of are the days of two centuries ago when the emperor yet ruled to the outermost star, when Siwenna was a world of the interior and not a semi-barbarian border province. In those days, Harry Seldon foresaw the decline of imperial power and the eventual barbarization of the entire galaxy."

Bel Riose

"He foresaw that? Then he foresaw wrong, my good scientist. Why, the Empire is more powerful now than it has been in a millennium. Your old eyes are blinded by the cold bleakness of the border. Come to the inner world someday. Come to the warmth and the wealth of the center."

Ducem Barr

"Circulation ceases first at the outer edges. It will take a while yet for the decay to reach the heart."

Joel

Barr tells Riose of the two Foundations set up by Seldon and that one is relatively close to Siwenna while the other is at the opposite end of the galaxy.

Bel Riose

"Then we'll visit the near one."

Ducem Barr

"You know where to go?"

Bel Riose

"In a way. In the records of the last viceroy but one, he whom you murdered so effectively there are suspicious tales of outer barbarians. In fact, one of his daughters was given in marriage to a barbarian prince. I'll find my way."

Joel

Another fascinating tidbit. The daughter married to a barbarian prince could be none other than Comdor Asper's nagging wife, Licia, and her father, heretofore unidentified, was clearly the viceroy responsible for the tragedy on Siwenna. It all fits together beautifully. We've spent a lot of time on this first scene but it reveals and sets up so much of what is to follow.

Time to move on, however, to see what is happening in Foundation space.

[theme music excerpt marking a change of scene]

Joel

Somewhere on the planet Terminus. Four men sit in a meeting room and the air is thick with tension. Only one of the four men is named, the one who clearly dominates the discussion and apparently summons the others. His name is Senett Forell and he is none other than the son of Hober Mallow. Illegitimate, so it is said. I guess that kind of stuff still matters 20,000 years from now. There is a large man, clearly antagonistic to Forell sitting opposite a third man who likes to complain about the current idiotic mayor of Terminus and a fourth man who is stealthy and suspicious. The topic of discussion appears to be their growing awareness of the threat from the Empire in the form of the activities of General Bel Riose who they only refer to as "this young man."

He has apparently been discovered in the Foundation's sphere of influence, perhaps even upon Terminus itself. Forell speaks.

Senett Forell

"Then let's forget what we should have done earlier and continue with what we should do now in any case. What if we had imprisoned him or killed him? What then? We are not certain of his intentions even yet, and at the worst, we could not destroy an empire by snipping short one man's life. There might be navies upon navies waiting just the other side of his non-return."

Joel

The large man opposite puts his faith in the Seldon plan.

Large man

"The Empire can't win, can it? There is Seldon's assurance that we will form the Second Empire in the end. This is only another crisis. There have been three before this."

Joel

Note that we've heard a version of this argument before from the Board of Trustees in the person of the quiet Jord Fara, way back in "The Encyclopedists." Now it has become a popular opinion to be voiced forcefully in times of crisis. Forell disagrees with this view.

Senett Forell

Seldon's rules of psychohistory, on which it is so comforting to rely, probably have as one of the contributing variables a certain normal initiative on the part of the people of the Foundation themselves. Seldon's laws help those who help themselves. Now the way it seems to me is this if this is the fourth crisis, then Seldon has foreseen it. If he has, then it can be beaten, and there should be a way of doing it now. The Empire is stronger than we. It always has been. But this is the first time we are in danger of its direct attack, so that strength becomes terribly menacing. If it can be beaten, it must be once again, as in all past crises, by a method other than pure force. We must find the weak side of our enemy and attack it there.

Joel

The stealthy and suspicious man speaks up.

Suspicious man

"We need spies."

Senett Forell

"None of us are precisely youthful, and all of us are rusty with red tape and administrative detail. We need young men that are in the field now.

Large man

"The Independent Traders?"

Senett Forell

"If there is yet time."

[rumble of engines noting another change of scene]

Senett Forell

Three months have passed, and General Bel Riose paces in his temporary command quarters within a hollowed out asteroid with an ornamented holographic model of the galaxy projected above him. One of his ships has recently vanished without a trace and is presumed to have been captured or destroyed by the Foundation. He is obviously not pleased, but has decided to forego retaliation for now.

Joel

He has sent for Ducem Barr to be brought before him. The air of respect and gentility in their previous meeting has vanished. In response to Riose's now threatening tone, Barr responds,

Ducem Barr

"Save your verbal cudgels for your subordinates. A simple statement of your needs and wants will suffice me here."

Joel

He asks if Riose has found the Foundation, and the general explodes in frustration.

Bel Riose

"Find them? That I did. Patrician. They are not magicians. They are devils. It is as far from belief as the outer galaxies. From here, conceive it. It is a world the size of a handkerchief! Of a fingernail! With resources so petty, power so minute, a population so microscopic as would never suffice the most backward worlds of the dusty prefects of the dark stars. Yet with that, a people so proud and ambitious as to dream quietly and methodically of galactic rule."

Joel

Riose is peeved at Barr's obvious indifference and goes into a curious defense of the Empire itself.

Bel Riose

"You don't understand, patrician, and I doubt my ability to make you. I can't argue on your ground. You're the scholar, not I. But this I can tell you. Whatever you think of the Empire, you will admit its great services. Its armed forces have committed isolated crimes, but in the main they have been a force for peace and civilization. It was the Imperial Navy that created the Pax Imperium that ruled over all the galaxy for thousands of years. Contrast the millennia of space under the sun and spaceship of the Empire with the millennia of interstellar anarchy that preceded it. Consider the wars and devastations of those old days and tell me if, with all its faults, the Empire is not worth preserving."

Joel

This reminds me of the humorous riff in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* when one of the members of the People's Front of Judea asks, "what have the Romans ever done for us?" The answer is, of course, a lot. Roads, aqueducts, medicine, peace, etc. Recall that Asimov had twice read Gibbon's *"Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,"* so this comparison seems apropos. Riose demands, even pleads, for Barr to help him by assessing the strengths and likely strategy and tactics of the Foundation. But Barr insists he knows nothing of value.

Ducem Barr

"Such help as I could give you means nothing. So I will make you free of it. In the face of your strenuous demand."

Bel Riose

"I will be the judge of its meaning."

Ducem Barr

"No, I am serious. Not all the might of the Empire could avail to crush this pygmy world."

Bel Riose

"Why do you say the Empire cannot defeat this small enemy?"

Joel

Barr's answer is, of course, psychohistory. Seldon had predicted, based on solid mathematical calculations, that the Empire would fall and the Foundation would one day stand in its place. Barr is a true believer, despite the appearances that the "puny" Foundation has no chance whatsoever against the still powerful Empire. Wounded as it may appear to be upon close inspection, Riose is indignant.

Bel Riose

"You mean that this art of his predicts that I would attack the Foundation and lose such and such a battle for such and such a reason? You are trying to say that I am a silly robot following a predetermined course into destruction?"

Ducem Barr

"No, I have already said that the science had nothing to do with individual actions. It is the vaster background that has been foreseen."

Bel Riose

"Then we stand clasped tightly in the forcing hand of the goddess of historical necessity..."

Ducem Barr

"Of psychohistorical necessity."

Bel Riose

"And if I exercise my prerogative of free will, if I choose to attack next year or not to attack at all. How pliable is the goddess? How resourceful?"

Ducem Barr

"Attack now or never with a single ship or all the force in the Empire, by military force or economic pressure, by candid declaration of war or by treacherous ambush. Do whatever you wish in your fullest exercise of free will. You will still lose."

Bel Riose

"Because of Hari Seldon's dead hand?"

Ducem Barr

"Because of the dead hand of the mathematics of human behavior that can neither be stopped, swerved, nor delayed."

Joel

Riose pauses for a moment, staring into the implacable face of the old patrician, then announces his course."

Bel Riose

"I'll take that challenge. It's a dead hand against a living will!"

[engine rumble indicating end of scene]

Joel

Let's pause here before resuming our story. This might be a good time to take a break before plunging into the second half of this episode. First, I'd like to comment for a moment on this crucial exchange and Riose's elegant summation of his challenge. He's clearly not a stupid man, but he is a determined one. His refusal to accept a lack of free will to affect the eventual fate of the Empire reminds me of Hober Mallow's final, somewhat resentful assessment of his role in the Seldon plan. Mallow had grudgingly accepted that he was playing a role in a greater story not written by him. In comparison, I get the feeling that Riose will never accept that he is just a character in a book written on a forgotten world 20,000 years in his past. He believes that his is a living will, and he is out to prove it. We are witnessing a test of the Great Man theory of history in Asimovian technicolor.

Now we zoom far across the galaxy to the imperial court of Cleon II on the great gleaming capital planet of Trantor. The emperor has ruled relatively well in what appears to be a respite in the decline foretold by Seldon, an indian summer for the Empire, in that there have been no major revolts in the past 25 years. There are numerous indications, however, that the pace of innovation has slowed to a crawl, and the Empire is running on fumes. Cleon is also personally unhappy in that he suffers from a painful ailment from which none of his doctors can relieve him.

He despises the fawning solicitations of his courtiers, including the one closest to him, whom he tolerates only for his competence, the lowborn sycophant. Brodrig, in Asimov's words quote Cleon II touched the smooth knob on the arm of his great Devon, and the huge door at the end of the room dissolved to transparency. Brodrig advanced along the crimson carpet and knelt to kiss the emperor's limp hand. It appears the Empire has a few high tech gizmos still working. The topic of discussion today is

the activities of a young general assigned to the periphery, one who we know already as the determined Bel Riose.

Brodrig explains how Riose has risen to prominence at such a young age. He began his career as a cadet in the Guards. Ten years back. He had a part in that affair off the LeMule Cluster. Cleon says,

Cleon II

"The LeMule Cluster? You know, my memory isn't quite was that the time a young soldier saved two ships of the line from a head on collision by something or other. I don't remember the details. It was something heroic."

Brodrig

"Riose was that soldier. He received a promotion for it and an appointment to field duty as captain of a ship. And now military governor of a border system."

Joel

"And still young. Capable man, Brodrig."

Brodrig

"Unsafe, sire. He lives in the past. He is a dreamer of ancient times, or rather, of the myths of what ancient times used to be. Such men are harmless in themselves, but their queer lack of realism makes them fools for others. His men, I understand, are completely under his control."

Cleon II

"He is one of your popular generals, is he? Well, come Brodrig. I would not wish to be served entirely by incompetence. They certainly set no enviable standard for faithfulness themselves."

Brodrig

"An incompetent traitor is no danger. It is rather the capable men who must be watched."

Cleon II

"You among them, Brodrig?"

Joel

We see here the essence of the Emperor's dilemma in these fraught times, for he must keep a careful balance of control over his most effective generals, lest they become too powerful and threaten to wrest control from him, as we know was attempted by that infamous viceroy of Siwenna. Brodrig raises his concern that Riose has discovered a distant threat to the Empire and wishes to be granted authority to mount an expedition against it, requesting ten ships of the line. Interestingly, these ten ships include only two with fully functional power systems, and only one of these has functional artillery.

The others are new ones of the last 50 years and are assumed to be inferior in quality. Brodrig gives the Emperor a short history lesson of the time long past, when his predecessor exiled a group of scientists to this sector to prepare a great encyclopedia. Nothing has been heard of this venture for some time, and Brodrig feels sure that these encyclopedists, if they still exist, must have reverted to barbarism by now. Cleon is immediately suspicious.

Cleon II

"And so he wants reinforcements... This is most peculiar. To propose to fight savages with ten ships and to ask for more before a blow is struck. And yet I begin to remember this Riose. He was a handsome boy of loyal family. Brodrig, there are complications in this that I don't penetrate. There may be more importance in it than would seem. I need a man out there, one with eyes, brains and loyalty."

Brodrig

"And the ship's, sire?"

Cleon II

"Not yet."

[theme snippet indicating scene change]

Joel

We are back with Riose now on his command outpost, and his mood has changed visibly. He has begun the process of creating a web of Imperial garrisons from which he can encircle and enclose Foundation and tighten the vice to ensure victory. He feels confident he will secure his objective and calls Ducem Barr in again to consult and perhaps to gloat. Riose speaks confidently of the war's conclusion and feels magnanimous.

Bel Riose

"Later, when this is over, you will go back to your books and to more. I'll see to it that the estates of your family are restored to you and to your children for the rest of time."

Ducem Barr

"Thank you. But I lack your faith in the happy outcome of all this."

Bel Riose

"Don't start your prophetic croakings again. This map speaks louder than all of your woeful theories."

Joel

Riose gestures to the holographic map demonstrating the superior position the empire is in vis-a-vis the Foundation with the evidently tightening grip of imperial forces and the isolated and contained Foundation's meager defenses. He brags about how his distribution of forces is calculated to ensure that the Foundation can make no successful rear or flanking attack and their lesser firepower ensures their defeat in frontal combat. Barr asks if Riose has received the extra ships he requested from the emperor and is told there has been no answer. The general grumbles about the shortage of quality vessels but insists he has sufficient resources to easily attain victory. Barr is clearly unimpressed and insists that this only proves that Seldon's predictions are on course. He dryly informs Riose that the dead hand has won the opening round.

Riose responds by saying that if the reinforcements are truly needed he will be able to make the case of mortal danger and receive any resources he currently lacks. Barr finds this amusing.

Ducem Barr

"You mean that telling the emperor his august throne is in danger of subversion by a parcel of ragged barbarians from the end of the universe is not a warning to be believed or appreciated? Then you expect nothing from him."

Bel Riose

"Unless you count a special envoy as something."

Joel

He is referring to the unwelcome news that Brodrig will be sent to observe his activities. He would prefer to operate without the interference from a powerful representative of the emperor on hand to witness and possibly question his tactics but sees the visit as a demonstration of the emperor's understanding of the significance of his mission.

Riose's verbal joust with Barr is interrupted by a new message which he reads and exclaims triumphantly that a Trader ship has been captured intact and its pilot is being brought to him for questioning. Shortly thereafter, the prisoner arrives, which I will let Asimov describe. "The door signal sounded and a touch of the general's toe swung the door wide. The man who stood on the threshold was tall and bearded, wore a short coat of a soft leathery plastic with an attached hood shoved back on his neck. His hands were free, and if he noticed the men about him were armed, he did not trouble to indicate it. He stepped in casually and looked about with calculating eyes. He favored the general with a rudimentary wave of the hand and a half nod."

Bel Riose

"Your name?"

Lathan Devers

"Lathan Devers."

Joel

Devers' physical pose and first question for the general is described in a line here that says a lot about his personality. The trader hooked his thumbs into his wide and gaudy belt.

Lathan Devers

"Are you the boss here?"

Bel Riose

"I'll ask the questions. You are a trader of the Foundation."

Lathan Devers

"That's right. Listen, if you're the boss, you better tell your hired men here to lay off my cargo."

Joel

It seems one of Riose's men had ignored Diver's warning to avoid touching his cargo and had ended up with a large hole blown out of his chest from an unknown explosive force. Does your ship carry nuclear explosives, Galaxy? No. What for? That fool grabbed a nuclear puncher. Wrong and forward and set at maximum dispersion. You're not supposed to do that. Might as well point a newt gun at your head. I'd have stopped him if five men weren't sitting on my chest. Riose instructed his men to take care to avoid further mishaps by leaving Divers' cargo untouched, then introduces himself as a general of the empire.

Devers is impressed. He explains that he thought the empire was long gone. Riose gestures to look around him and see that this is far from the case.

Lathan Devers

"Might have known it, though. That was a mighty polished looking set of craft that took my tub. No kingdom of the periphery could have turned them out. So what's the game, boss? Or do I call you General?"

Bel Riose

"My game is war."

Lathan Devers

"Empire versus Foundation. That it?"

Bel Riose

"Right."

Lathan Devers

"Why? I think you know why."

Joel

Devers professes ignorance. He informs Riose that he'd momentarily pondered an attempt to leap up and try to kill him, but that he knows he would be swiftly killed, or worse, slowly, and it would accomplish little because there are more generals where he came from. Riose smiles shrewdly and agrees that he is being sensible.

Lathan Devers

"But there's one thing I would like, boss. I'd like you to tell me what you mean when you say I know why you're jumping us. I don't, and guessing games bother me to no end."

Bel Riose

"Yes, ever hear of Hari Seldon?"

Lathan Devers

"No, and I said, I don't like guessing games."

Joel

Riose sternly rebukes him for his pretense of ignorance. He informs his captor of his knowledge of so called psychohistory and the rumored Seldon plan and wants to know what Devers knows of it. Devers laughs.

Lathan Devers

"I'll give it to you straight. You know all I know about it. It's silly stuff, half baked. Every world has its yarns. You can't keep it away from them. Yes, I've heard that sort of talk. Seldon, Second Empire, and so on. They put kids to sleep at night with stuff. The young squirts curl up in the spare rooms with their pocket projectors and suck up Seldon thrillers. But it's strictly non adult. Non intelligent adult, anyway. But go ahead with your war if it's fables you're after."

Riose doubts Devers' appearance of unconcern. Ducem Barr, listening silently until now, interjects.

Ducem Barr

"You are so confident then, that the Foundation will win?"

Lathan Devers

"Hmm. The silent partner. How'd you squeeze that out of what I said, Doc?"

Ducem Barr

"Because the notion would bother you if you thought your world might lose this war and suffer the bitter reappings of defeat. I know my world once did and still does."

Joel

Devers uses the moment to express his political philosophy, which seems pretty much right on the nose for any era and locale.

Lathan Devers

"Get this. There are five or six fat slobs who usually run an average planet. They get the rabbit punch, but I'm not losing peace of mind over them. See, the people, the ordinary run of guys... sure, some get killed, and the rest pay extra taxes for a while, but it settles itself out. It runs itself down, and then it's the old situation again with a different five or six."

Joel

They are interrupted by another communique. Foundation forces have been sighted and seem to be readying for battle. Devers is placed in Barr's charge with orders to get information from him helpful to the Empire's cause with severe repercussions in the event of failure. They are led to Barr's room and continue their conversation. Once inside and the two men are alone, Devers takes an ornamented bracelet from his wrist and shows it to Barr, who puts it on and feels a little tingle.

It is, of course, an old Foundation trick going back to the earliest days, one that was used by Seldon's lawyer, Lors Avakim in our very first episode, and again by Limmar Ponyets when meeting with Eskel Gorov in "The Traders."

Lathan Devers

"Right, Doc, you've got the action now. Just speak quietly. If this room is wired, they won't get a thing. That's a field disorder you've got there. Genuine Mallow design. Sells for 25 credits on any world from here to the Outer Rim. You get it free. Hold your lips still when you talk and take it easy. You've got to get the trick of it."

Joel

Barr spoke quietly through unmoving lips.

Ducem Barr

"What do you want?"

Lathan Devers

"I've told you. You make mouth noises like what we call a patriot. Yet your own world has been mashed up by the Empire, and here you are playing ball with the Empire's fair haired general. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

Ducem Barr

"I have done my part. A conquering Imperial viceroy is dead because of me. You want the Empire to win? Barr leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie. May the Empire and all its works perish in universal catastrophe. All Siwenna praise that daily. I had brothers once. A sister, a father. But I have children now, grandchildren. The General knows where to find them, but that would not stop me if the results in view warranted the risk, they would know how to die."

Joel

Devers tells the patrician of the tales he has been told of how Hober Mallow once visited an old man on Siwenna, named Onum Barr.

Ducem Barr

"What do you know of this?"

Lathan Devers

"What every Trader on the Foundation knows. You might be a smart old fellow put in here to get on my right side. Sure, they'd point guns at you, and you'd hate the Empire and be all out for its smashing. Then I'd fall all over you and pour out my heart to you. And wouldn't the general be pleased? There's not much chance of that, Doc. But just the same, I'd like to have you prove that you're the son of Onum Barr of Siwenna, the sixth and youngest who escaped the massacre."

Joel

Barr presses a button on the wall and a hidden recess appears from which he pulls a small metal object the swollen central link of a chain.

"That's Mallow's monogram or I'm a space struck rookie, and the design is 50 years old if it's a day. Shake, Doc. A man sized nuclear shield is all the proof I need."

[suspenseful music]

"The tiny ships had appeared out of the vacant depths and darted into the midst of the armada. Without a shot or a burst of energy, they weaved through the ship's swollen area, then blasted on and out while the Imperial wagons turned after them like lumbering beasts. There were two noiseless flares that pinpointed space as two of the tiny gnats shriveled in atomic disintegration, and the rest were gone. The great ships searched, then returned to their original task, and world by world, the great web of the enclosure continued."

Today's cinematic blockbusters are full of sound and fury, with climactic showdowns and tense exchanges of fireworks and thunder, culminating in dazzling explosions with shattered bits of spacecraft drifting away. The reality, at least from the winning side, would be much more like

what Asimov describes. Images of small dots on a holographic projection winking out silently. On board those vessels there might indeed be agonizing dread as the projectiles approach and the crew frantically takes evasive action. And the end might be searing, loud, and horrific, but it would also, in most cases, be mercifully quick.

We conclude our story for now, then, with a genuine cliffhanger. There is no appearance in the vault by Hari Seldon telling the plucky Foundation that the solution is obvious, or a celebratory validation of a sweet political solution to a thorny local monarch's clumsy attempts at tyranny and annexation. This time the Foundation is up against a true military master... a Napoleon of the nebulae, so to speak, and they are vastly outgunned. We will have to wait to see if Seldon's dead hand holds the crucial card that is needed against Riose's living and oh so powerful will.

Before we wrap up, I want to talk a bit about the side story that truly fascinates me. You'll recall that in "The Merchant Princes" we got tantalizing hints of the terrible misfortune that had struck Onum Barr's homeworld of Siwenna and impacted his immediate family. So tragically, we were told of an Imperial viceroy overseeing the planet who had brutally subjected the people to his will and who had ambitions of ruling the galaxy and then followed through by attempting to overthrow the Emperor, but had been driven off to the Red Stars where he became a pirate along with the remnants of his forces.

The Imperial Admiral who had defeated him, craving pillage, had subjected the people of Siwenna to the nuclear blast. Five sons of Onum Bar died in the deadly barrage, and only he and his youngest son had survived - the latter because he had been serving in the viceroy's forces that had escaped. An especially tantalizing tidbit in the elder Barr's recounting was that he also had had a daughter and that her fate was unknown. I couldn't stop thinking about this daughter, perhaps because there are so few women mentioned to this point in Foundation, and it stuck out to me.

Were we never to hear of her fate? Unfortunately, as it turns out we were, here in this episode, in the initial conversation between Riose and Barr that she had committed suicide. No reason was given. We were also informed of a quite dramatic revelation regarding the sixth son that he was none other than Ducem Barr himself, and that he had personally dispatched the viceroy to oblivion. I still can't stop thinking about the daughter, though. Asimov desperately needed a real heroine in his story, and it seems to me that he passed up a golden opportunity. Maybe he thought that dwelling too much on the events of the revolt of Siwenna would detract from the plot of the core epic, but it seems to me that a more complete story could be made of these events, possibly even an entire novel.

In itself, the events as described are exciting and rich enough as is, but what of the parts we are not informed of? Do we know for certain that young Ducem was the assassin as he claims? Could the unnamed daughter have played a role in some way? It brings to mind an apocryphal story of the death of the great Mongol leader Genghis Khan, which claimed he had succumbed to blood loss after being stabbed in his tent while sleeping with a captured princess. Surely Asimov the great student of history might have heard of such a tale. You would think he would have loved to insert something similar into his grand future history.

Perhaps some fan with sufficient literary skills will take this up as a work of fan fiction. Or perhaps it already exists and I am just unaware of it. Maybe Apple TV will throw it in among their 80 episodes of the upcoming TV show. There's certainly room for a lot of great variations and embellishments upon this immortal story.

That will do it for this episode. Next time we meet, we'll pick up the story where we left off. With Foundation vessels sadly disappearing from Bel Riose's fancy holographic projection. What can the plucky trader Lathan Devers and the sad patrician Ducem Barr do from within their captivity,

under the control of one of the Empire's greatest generals, to arrest this perilous state of affairs?

[exit music begins]

Joel

Stay tuned to the next episode of Seldon Crisis to see what card, if any, Hari Seldon's dead hand has to play. I'd like to thank Tom Barnes for the theme music, as always, and Jeremy McKinnon for additional sound design on this episode, and Transistor FM for being such a great podcast platform. If you would like to support my efforts in the making of this podcast, please visit my Patreon page for the link in the show notes. Every little bit helps, and I do love hearing from all of you, even if it's just to say hi and tell me what you think of the show.

Please drop me a line and email at joel@seldoncrisis.net or at my Twitter handle of [@joelgmckinnon](https://twitter.com/joelgmckinnon). Help me out, if you can, by using the hashtag SeldonCrisis for any tweets related to the podcast. And don't forget to read Asimov yourself!

[theme music plays out]