

The Mayors



[Opening theme music with voiceovers]

Poly Verisof

"He's foaming at the mouth with eagerness to attack the Foundation. He scarcely troubles to conceal it."

Sef Sermak

"Great Space, he's going to Anacreon! Going to Anacreon!"

Regent Wienis

"Would you care to step into my private chambers, where we can speak at greater length and with considerably more privacy?"

Theo Aporat

"In the name of the Galactic Spirit, I so curse this ship!"

[Opening theme music with voiceovers]

Joel

Before beginning this episode of Seldon Crisis, please be advised that this is an independently created podcast and is not meant to be a substitute for reading the books, nor is it affiliated with the family or estate of Isaac Asimov.

Welcome back to Seldon Crisis and to one of my very favorite episodes, The Mayors. In our last chapter, the Encyclopedists, we got to meet Mayor Salvor Hardin of Terminus City, who overcame the shortsighted academics of the Board of Trustees by finding a way to nullify the immediate threat of the newly created Kingdom of Anacreon. They had been threatening to establish military bases on Terminus and to exact tribute, but Hardin had used the words of Hari Seldon and his limited understanding of Psychohistory to identify the obvious solution to the problem. The Encyclopedists ends with Hardin cryptically thinking "The Anacreonians were landing their first spaceships tomorrow, but that was all right, too. In six months, they would be giving orders no longer."

Because The Mayors begins not six months, but thirty years later, I originally made the mistake of thinking Asimov had rethought the plot – but not so. The solution to the first Anacreon crisis is revealed in the initial dialog of this chapter. Hardin is in his office with his trusted lieutenant Yohan Lee, the man who had helped him execute his coup so long ago. They are welcoming a delegation of a newly created, but vigorous political movement calling themselves the Actionists, headed by the young firebrand Sef Sermak, with "bristly yellow mustache trimmed precisely, and his sunken eyes of uncertain color."

He gets right to the point.

Sermak

"You've been stripping Terminus defenseless against the inevitable attack from outside."

Joel

We now understand that the Anacreonians have left Terminus since our last episode, but it is clear that they remain an existential threat to the young Foundation. Sermak wants to attack immediately.

Hardin points to a famous saying he has framed on his wall:

Salvor Hardin

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent."

Joel

He reminds Sermak of how the Foundation was saved thirty years before, and here he elaborates on the solution he had found obvious on that occasion.

Hardin

"The temptation was great to muster what force we could and put up a fight. It's the easiest way out, and the most satisfactory to self-respect – but, nearly invariably, the stupidest. You would have done it; you and your talk of "attack first." What I did, instead, was to visit the three other kingdoms, one by one; point out to each that to allow the secret of nuclear power to fall into the hands of Anacreon was the quickest way of cutting their own throats; and suggest gently that they do the obvious thing. That was all. One month after the Anacreonian force had landed on Terminus, their king received a joint ultimatum from his three neighbors. In seven days, the last Anacreonian was off Terminus. Now tell me, where was the need for violence?"

Joel

Sermak complains about the precarious position Hardin has backed them into, and eventually comes around to a curious component of Hardin's strategy, that of turning the knowledge of nuclear science into a quasi-religious enterprise.

Sermak

"You were forced to surround these scientific gifts with the most outrageous mummery. You've made half religion, half balderdash out of it. You've erected a hierarchy of priests and complicated, meaningless ritual."

Joel

Sermak argues that these "priests" are in charge of sophisticated nuclear technology, and that there is a danger that they might one day sell their knowledge to the highest bidder, further imperiling the position of Terminus. Hardin counters that he has arranged so that all training takes place on Terminus and that Sermak is naive to think that nuclear science is an easy thing to deconstruct and re-develop on the worlds of their rivals.

Let's for a moment remember that Asimov was writing in the 1940's, at a time when all nuclear knowledge was held by a single country, the United States. A few short years later, the Soviets had the bomb as well. We now know that Sermak's concern was not so naive at all.

Hardin closes the argument in classic form.

Hardin

"In short, gentlemen, the Government is of the opinion that it knows what it is doing."

Joel

We will see that Hardin, as in the Encyclopedists, believes in advancing his strategies by whatever means necessary (preferably without violence, of course).

After Sermak and his Actionist friends depart, Hardin is left alone with his trusted deputy Yohan Lee, with whom he had orchestrated the coup

against the Encyclopedists in our previous episode. He refers to some news he has just received regarding a new character in our story.

Hardin

"Ambassador Verisof is returning to Terminus. Temporarily, I hope."

Joel

Lee appears horrified by this news.

Yohan Lee

"Are things breaking already?"

Hardin

"Don't know. I can't tell till I hear what Verisof has to say."

Joel

Hardin had another famous saying – one which might also have found a place on his wall.

Hardin

"It pays to be obvious, especially if you have a reputation for subtlety."

Joel

Poly Verisof, Ambassador to Anacreon, has found this strategy useful. For fourteen years he has been serving in his official capacity, but also as the High Priest of the Foundation, the quasi-religious enterprise Sermak had mentioned.

In our next scene, Verisof is awaiting his audience with Hardin and allow me to quote directly from Asimov to get a taste of the quaint mid-twentieth century ambience "The ambassador to Anacreon bought the latest edition of the Terminus City Journal, sauntered casually to City

Hall Park and, sitting down on the first empty bench he came to, read the editorial page, sport section and comic sheet while waiting. At the end of half an hour, he tucked the paper under his arm, entered City Hall and presented himself in the anteroom." You can see here how relatable Asimov wanted to make the people and events of the time and place in which these events occur.

And of course, upon entering Hardin's chambers the ambassador is warmly greeted with an offer of a cigar. Verisof describes a fellow traveler on his homeward journey taking...

Verisof

"a special course in the preparation of radioactive synthetics – for the treatment of cancer"

Joel

...which the ambassador describes as...

Verisof

"Holy Food"

Joel

...in his priestly guise. It's interesting that Asimov anticipated the use of radiation for cancer treatment in the forties.

Verisof remarks upon the success of their religious gimmickry.

Verisof

"It would seem that when the old Empire began to rot at the fringes, it could be considered that science, as science, had failed the outer worlds. To be reaccepted it would have to present itself in another guise and it has done just that. It works out beautifully."

Joel

I wonder if this suggests a creative approach to resolving the scourge of anti-science thinking among the masses in our present day. The Church of Climate Awareness with High Priestess Greta Thunberg, perhaps? But I digress.

Hardin wants to know how bad things are getting on Anacreon and Verisof says he wouldn't have made the trip if things were rosy. He describes a couple of new characters we will be meeting soon. Crown Prince Lepold is a fifteen year-old who inherited the throne after a suspicious hunting death which had killed his father. The boy's uncle and regent by the name of Wienis, is described by Verisof as a...

Verisof

"dark young fellow, black hair and a squint in his right eye, with a funny hook in his nose"

Joel

...is the real power behind the throne, and we can assume likely the author of Lepold's father's unfortunate hunting accident.

Verisof describes the situation.

Verisof

"He plays the game dirty. Luckily, he's the most egregious fool on the planet. Fancies himself as a shrewd devil, too, which makes his folly the more transparent. His notion of cracking an egg is to shoot a nuclear blast at it. He's foaming at the mouth with eagerness to attack the Foundation. He scarcely troubles to conceal it. And he's in a position to do it, too, from the standpoint of armament. The old king built up a magnificent navy, and Wienis hasn't been sleeping the last two years."

Joel

The ambassador describes recent developments. An Anacreonian patrol has encountered an old Imperial battle cruiser drifting in space, but in good condition. It has been sent to the Foundation to be properly restored. Wienis insists it be put into fighting order and turned over to the Anacreonian navy.

Verisof

"Of course, he expects a refusal, and it would be a perfect excuse – in his eyes – for immediate attack."

Joel

Hardin appears to be relatively unconcerned.

Hardin

"I see that, Verisof. Well, we have at least six months to spare, so have the ship fixed up and present it with my compliments. Have it renamed the Wienis as a mark of our esteem and affection."

Joel

Verisof is concerned that this ship will double Anacreon's military capacity overnight, but Hardin says it doesn't matter as they already have enough power to easily defeat the Foundation and calls it superficial.

But what of the domestic unrest facing Hardin from Sermak's party? The ambassador is concerned that yielding the vessel will give them the cause to overthrow Hardin in the next election. Does this suggest that there might be a need to take action while they still have control of the government?

Hardin reminds him of the Seldon Plan, and the importance of waiting until the time is right.

Hardin

"Force the issue now? Before the crisis comes? It's the one thing I mustn't do. It's critical that at each crisis our freedom of action would become circumscribed to the point where only one course of action was possible."

Joel

Hardin is concerned that too many people are aware of the Seldon predictions and that this could impact how psychohistory plays out. He knows that it relies on the ignorance of the prime actors to the workings of psychohistory, and now there are several people with some knowledge of how it is expected to work, and that might be its fatal flaw.

Hardin

"Because even Seldon's advanced psychology was limited. It could not handle too many independent variables. He couldn't work with individuals over any length of time; any more than you could apply kinetic theory of gases to single molecules. He worked with mobs, populations of whole planets, and only blind mobs who do not possess foreknowledge of the results of their own actions."

Joel

Hardin is sure that the Seldon Crisis will arrive when all options are constrained and this must be when Anacreon receives the newly outfitted battle cruiser in about six months. The problem, however, is that the elections are still a year off. He thinks that foreknowledge of Seldon's plan might be throwing things off kilter. He says that, when the crisis does begin to break, he wants to be on the spot in Anacreon.

Brandy is served - the meeting has concluded.

Let's take a look at what is transpiring on Anacreon about this same time. The young Crown Prince Lepold has just returned from his favorite

pastime, hunting the "feathered flying fortress they call the Nyakbird with speedster and needle gun." He'd inherited his love for this sport from his father and was returning from the taking of his forty-sixth trophy. He'd brought down his first of the fearsome creatures at age 13 and aimed to get his fiftieth before his approaching sixteenth birthday.

The aforementioned squinty-eyed regent, Wienis, interrupts the festivities and demands the young King's attention. He is the only one at court who dares to dress down the young man.

Wienis

"You'll have more important things to tend to than Nyak hunting soon enough."

Joel

The Regent had grown too old for the thrill of the hunt - for birds anyway - and had soured on the sport. He tells the young prince to pay attention as he has important matters to discuss.

Crown Prince Lepold

"But you should have been with us today, uncle. We flushed one in the wilds of Sarnia that was a monster. And game as they come. We had it out for two hours over at least seventy square miles of ground. And then I got to Sunwards and dived torque-wise. Caught him on the rise just under the left wing at quarters. It maddened him and he canted athwart. I took his dare and veered a-left, waiting for the plummet. Sure enough, down he came. He was within a wing-beat before I moved and then -"

Wienis

"Lepold!"

Lepold

"Well! I got him."

Wienis

"I'm sure you did. Now will you attend?"

Joel

They discuss the urgent matter at hand, the Imperial battle cruiser being repaired by the Foundation and to be returned to the Anacreonian fleet. The young man has been taken in entirely by the appearance of suppliance by Terminus and sees no reason for concern.

In the ensuing discussion it is clearly established that Lepold is a naive and foolish youth with no concept of the intricacies of statecraft and is convinced of the Foundation's good intentions. It seems he is fine with the status quo, in which Terminus provides the technology that powers the Anacreonian state, to the obvious benefit of the people.

Wienis, however, wants power, and is determined to seize it. He knows that the opportunity has arrived to force the Foundation to submit to the power of Anacreon and believes the occasion to do so is at hand. With a little more effort he is able to persuade the boy that they must seize the initiative before a rival kingdom such as Smyrno were to do so and put Anacreon in the position of being a vassal to the combined might of their military power and the Foundation's technology. He convinces Lepold that to strike first is only self-defense.

Wienis

"Furthermore, once, at the very beginning of the reign of your grandfather, Anacreon actually established a military base on the Foundation's planet, Terminus – a base vitally needed for national defense. We were forced to abandon that base as a result of the machinations of the leader of that Foundation, a sly cur, a scholar, with not a drop of noble blood in his veins. You understand, Lepold? Your grandfather was humiliated by this commoner. I remember him! He was scarcely older than myself when he came to Anacreon with his devil's smile and devil's brain – and the power of the other three kingdoms behind him, combined in cowardly union against the greatness of Anacreon."

Joel

Wienis succeeds in arousing Lepold's martial ardor in full fury. The young King now can't wait for the day to strike, but Wienis reminds him that...

Hardin

"we must wait for Salvor Hardin to arrive.... Yes, Lepold, the leader of the Foundation himself is coming to Anacreon on your birthday – probably to soothe us with buttered words. But it won't help him."

Joel

Lepold betrays his fears of attacking the Foundation due to his concerns about the Galactic Spirit that resides upon Terminus. He's been listening to the faux preaching of Ambassador Verisof.

Lepold

"He's explained a great deal–"

Wienis

"About the Galactic Spirit?"

Lepold

"Yes."

Wienis

"Why, you unweaned cub, he believes in that mummary a good deal less than I do, and I don't believe in it at all. How many times have you been told that all this talk is nonsense?"

Lepold

"Well, I know that. But Verisof says—"

Wienis

"Pay no heed to Verisof. It's nonsense."

Joel

Lepold protests that the people believe it – how Prophet Hari Seldon appointed the Foundation to carry out his wishes that there might one day be a return of the Galactic Paradise and how anyone who disobeys his commandments will be destroyed for eternity.

Wienis clamps down hard on this and makes sure Lepold is aware that this is all just a way of controlling the people. There is no Galactic Paradise awaiting, just the holding of raw power. In closing his audience with the young prince, he conveys a note of caution.

Wienis

"Be careful on these Nyak hunts, my boy. Since the unfortunate accident to your father, I have had the strangest presentiments concerning you, at times. In the confusion, with needle guns thickening the air with darts, one can never tell. You will be careful, I hope. And you'll do as I say about the Foundation, won't you?"

Lepold

"Yes – certainly."

Joel

After Wienis leaves, Lepold muses on the message he's heard. He is not at all trustful of his uncle, and is also concerned about the regent's two arrogant sons. Perhaps he suspects something nefarious about his father's unfortunate accident and takes his words of caution as the implied threat it was intended to be.

Lepold anticipates the new powers he will soon have... including the power to have people executed. Even uncles and cousins.

We return to Terminus and the scene of a meeting of Sef Sermak's Actionists. The occasion is marked by the return of one of their number, Lewis Bort, who has been stationed on Anacreon to observe the situation there. His report is grim. He believes that their cause is lost, or nearly so. They had hoped to provoke an internal revolt within the court which could result in a new king who would be more favorable to Terminus. Unfortunately, it is the faux religion introduced by Hardin's policies that thwart them.

Bort describes how it works.

Lewis Bort

"The religion – which the Foundation has fostered and encouraged, mind you – is built on strictly authoritarian lines. The priesthood has sole control of the instruments of science we have given Anacreon, but they've learned to handle these tools only empirically. They believe in this religion entirely, and in the ... uh ... spiritual value of the power they handle. For instance, two months ago some fool tampered with the power plant in the Thessalekian Temple – one of the large ones. He contaminated the city, of course. It was considered divine vengeance by everyone, including the priests."

Joel

During this discussion Asimov provides some perspective on his views on religion, which he generally presents in the story as purely a tool to control the ignorant masses. He has Bort comment upon how the teachings of the religion promote good ethical behavior and high moral standards. He adds that religion has been one of the great civilizing influences of history.

Asimov was well known to be a secular humanist, but had a fascination with the history of religion, particularly that of the events behind the Christian Bible. He wrote lengthy but highly accessible commentaries on both the Old and New Testament, and as a student of the decline of the Roman Empire would have been highly informed on the early history of Christianity through the dark ages. He'd have known well both the good and the bad elements of a popular religion. His comments show that he wasn't an all-out opponent of religious thought, even as he was clearly a non-believer.

But let's return to our story. Bort complains of how much power the high priest has and how it has elevated the monarchy to the point where the people consider the king a god, and therefore someone that can't be overthrown for their purposes. He notes that Hardin is the mastermind

behind all of this, using the Foundation's knowledge of science and nuclear radiation to invent gimmicks like the mystical and protective aura that surrounds the king and serves as a protective shield and the ability to move "from place to place through the air at crucial moment, supposedly by inspiration of divine spirit."

The Actionists are confused about why Hardin would be aiding the enemy by these tricks, and providing them with technologies that can only doom Terminus eventually. Some are convinced that Hardin is just a treasonous fool, but Sermak suspects something is not right.

Sermak

"There's something wrong. To cut our own throats so thoroughly and so hopelessly would require colossal stupidity. More than Hardin could possibly have even if he were a fool, which I deny. On the one hand, to establish a religion that would wipe out all chance of internal troubles. On the other hand, to arm Anacreon with all weapons of warfare. I don't see it."

Joel

They discuss what they've heard in regard to the restoration of the battle cruiser, and this adds to their suspicions that Hardin is playing a dangerous game and must be deposed. They ask Bort how much time they have to prepare for the inevitable Anacreonian attack, and he mentions that they are busy with the coming of age celebrations for Lepold in only a week. Bort warns that Anacreon could strike at any moment.

Bort

"The king's a god, I tell you. Do you suppose he has to carry on a campaign of propaganda to get his people into fighting spirit? Do you suppose he has to accuse us of aggression and pull out all stops on cheap emotionalism? When the time comes to strike, Lepold gives the order and the people fight. Just like that. That's the damnedness of the system. You don't question a god. He may give the order tomorrow for all I know; and you can wrap tobacco round that and smoke it."

Joel

I don't know why I find all these tobacco references so delightful. Perhaps because it provides a window into how ingrained the practice was at the time of his writing. Again, Asimov is projecting elements of his own culture many thousands of years into the future, but making it as relatable as the current events of his time. Silly, but somehow charming.

A newspaper is brought in and the conspirators are aghast at the headline. Sermak is horrified.

Sermak

"Great Space, he's going to Anacreon! Going to Anacreon!"

Joel

There are cries of treason and how Hardin has sold them out and is now going to collect his payment. Sermak concludes the meeting.

Sermak

"We've no choice now. I'm going to ask the Council tomorrow that Hardin be impeached. And if that fails—"

Joel

The scene switches to a heated groundcar in a wintry cityscape. Hardin and Lee are conferring as they are transported through the frigid winter streets of Terminus. The bleak setting conveys the tension and politically hazardous situation they are navigating. Hardin's right hand man is characteristically concerned.

Lee

"It's going to look bad, Hardin. They're going to say you sneaked away."

Hardin

"Let them say it if they wish. I've got to get to Anacreon and I want to do it without trouble. Now that's enough, Lee."

Joel

Hardin muses about weather-conditioning Terminus and says that it could be done. Lee jokes about putting Sermak in...

Lee

"a nice, dry cell fitted for twenty-five centigrade all year round."

Joel

I guess he just wants him out of the way as that would be 77°F so not exactly torture. I think Asimov is showing that, though they might occasionally pull some questionable political tricks, these are still the good guys - with real humanity.

Sermak had gone ahead with his plan and raised a vote to impeach, which had lost, but only narrowly. Hardin admits it was closer than he'd wished. The meeting had ended with Sermak's party storming out, accusing all those who had voted against impeachment as participating in treason and threatening immediate action.

Lee expresses his concerns.

And now you're chasing off at daybreak, like a criminal. You ought to face them, Hardin – and if you have to, declare martial law, by space!

Hardin

"Violence is the last refuge –"

Lee

"– of the incompetent. Bah!"

Joel

He's apparently had enough of Hardin's famous euphemisms by this point in their careers. Hardin brings up the famous Time Vault, in which Hari Seldon had last appeared thirty long years ago. He's been to the chamber every anniversary since, and nothing has happened. He suspects that this might be yet another Seldon crisis, and the master psychohistorian may appear again.

He instructs Lee to announce to the Council, upon his departure for Anacreon, that there will be another Hari Seldon recording at the next anniversary in a few days, and that it will contain a message of...

Seldon

"utmost importance regarding the recently concluded crisis."

Joel

He is to take no questions. Hardin says he is sure it will confuse the Council and they will take no action until after that date, when he has returned from his trip to Anacreon.

After leaving Terminus, Hardin makes quick stops at eight star systems of the Anacreon Kingdom – to confer with local representatives of the Foundation – before arriving on the capital world on the verge of the coronation ceremony for the new king. He muses about the vast size of the Kingdom – tiny compared to the old Empire – but comprising twenty-five stellar systems, six of which had more than one populated world, with a total population of 19 billion. He is momentarily overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task facing the tiny world he governs.

On Anacreon, he finds that the coronation celebrations have brought normal business to a standstill, as not a person but took feverish part in the hectic religious pageantry that heralded the coming-of-age of their god-king, Lepold.

Hardin has only a half an hour to spend with Verisof, before the ambassador has to frantically rush off to another occasion to perform his duties as High Priest. He makes the most of his time, however, and leaves in satisfied anticipation of the night's fireworks.

Upon arriving at the royal palace, Hardin is introduced to Lepold "from a safe distance, for the young king stood apart in lonely and impressive grandeur, surrounded by his deadly blaze of radioactive aura. And in less than an hour this same king would take his seat upon the massive throne of rhodium-iridium alloy with jewel-set gold chasings, and then, throne and all would rise majestically into the air, skim the ground slowly to hover before the great window from which the great crowds of common folk could see their king and shout themselves into near apoplexy. The throne would not have been so massive, of course, if it had not had a shielded nuclear motor built into it."

The Regent Wienis arrives and finds Hardin, asking him why he appears unimpressed.

Hardin

"I am not bored, your highness. This is all extremely interesting. We have no comparable spectacles on Terminus, you know."

Wienis

"No doubt. But would you care to step into my private chambers, where we can speak at greater length and with considerably more privacy?"

Hardin

"Certainly."

Joel

In Wienis' chambers, he offers his honored guest a glass of Locris wine, a precious libation aged for two centuries since before the Zeonian Rebellion. Hardin accepts and proposes a toast

Hardin

"To Lepold I, King of Anacreon!"

Wienis

"...soon to be Emperor of the Periphery, and further, who knows? The Galaxy may someday be reunited."

Hardin

"Undoubtedly. By Anacreon?"

Wienis

"Why not? With the help of the Foundation, our scientific superiority over the rest of the Periphery would be undisputable."

Hardin

"I must remind you that the Foundation is bound to help any nation that requests scientific aid, and due to the high idealism of our government and the great moral purpose of our founder, Hari Seldon, we are unable to play favorites."

Wienis

"The Galactic Spirit, to use the popular cant, helps those who help themselves. I quite understand that, left to itself, the Foundation would never cooperate."

Joel

Hardin reminds his host that the Foundation had recently restored a great battle cruiser for the kingdom, had they not? Wienis notes that this gesture may have been initiated due to the fear of Anacreon's great military power and the open threat of war had Terminus not been so accommodating.

Now we reach the crux of this faux-diplomatic dance. Wienis illustrates their differences. Hardin is a man of peace, while he is a man of direct action. He mocks Hardin's famous platitude, saying that violence, in this case, is not the final refuge of one who is quite competent and prepared to employ it for his own ends.

To demonstrate who is the competent one, Wienis reveals that it is Hardin who has made mistakes in evaluating the situation, that the chamber they are now in is guarded by five of his men instructed to shoot to kill if he were to attempt to leave. He is a captive.

Hardin

"I have no immediate desire to leave. Do you then fear me so much?"

Wienis

"I don't fear you at all. But this may serve to impress you with my determination. Shall we call it a gesture?"

Joel

Hardin remains unperturbed, and Wienis seems determined to get a reaction from him. He tells him that Terminus is now wholly undefended. Hardin reminds him they have nothing to fear and they serve all alike. Wienis mocks his pacifism and the fact that he gave away a great warship. He explains, evidently expecting a horrified reaction, that the fleet is already enroute to Terminus and that he, Hardin, is now a prisoner of war.

Hardin tells his captor that he is disappointed. That he had expected the moment of coronation to be the proper time to set the fleet in motion.

Seldon

"Evidently, you wanted to start the war while you were still regent. It would have been more dramatic the other way."

Wienis

"What in Space are you talking about?"

Hardin

"Don't you understand? I had set my counterstroke for midnight."

Joel

Wienis accuses Hardin of bluffing, but is informed that at midnight, the planet Anacreon goes under the interdict.

Wienis

"The interdict?"

Hardin

"Yes. If you don't understand, I might explain that every priest in Anacreon is going on strike, unless I countermand the order. But I can't while I'm being held incommunicado; nor do I wish to even if I weren't! Do you realize, your highness, that an attack on the Foundation is nothing short of sacrilege of the highest order?"

Joel

He informs Wienis that the priests all over Anacreon have been exhorting their followers that the sacred Foundation is under attack and that they must rise up in their defense. He tells Wienis it is now only four minutes to midnight, so he should go to watch the events unfold while he pours himself another glass of Locris wine and sits back, perfectly indifferent. Wienis rushes out of the room in fury.

In the great ballroom, Lepold sits upon his nuclear-powered throne with the dazzling royal aura surrounding him. It raises a few inches from the floor and glides silently toward the window where he is to be crowned before the adoring masses – or so he expects. At the stroke of midnight the aura vanishes and the throne crashes to the floor. All the lights go out!

Wienis shrieks over the din and confusion and screams for the guards to get the flares intended to be used later for the royal procession through the streets of the city. As the great hall becomes illuminated he urges calm and proclaims that power will swiftly be restored. Seconds later he is informed that the palace has been surrounded by an angry mob led by High Priest Verisof, demanding the cessation of hostilities against the Foundation and the release of Mayor Hardin from his captivity.

Wienis rushes to the throne and grabs the confused King and drags him back to the private chamber where Hardin awaits calmly, reading by the "pearly light of the pocket nucleo-bulb at his side."

Hardin greets the new King with a gentle smile.

Seldon

"Good morning, your majesty. I congratulate you on your coronation."

Wienis

"Hardin, order your priests back to their jobs!"

Joel

But the tables have now turned and it is Hardin who holds all the cards. He has arranged for power across the planet to be cut, and Wienis is now incapable of sending orders of any kind. The only power available is in the temples, and the only televisor working is the one in this very chamber, and it is set only to receive.

Wienis has become unhinged and desperate, but he still is sure of victory because...

Wienis

"you can stop the power on Anacreon but you can't stop my fleet. They're on their way, Hardin, with the great cruiser you yourself ordered repaired, at the head."

Hardin

"Yes, the cruiser I myself ordered repaired – but in my own way. Tell me, Wienis, have you ever heard of a hyperwave relay? No, I see you haven't. Well, in about two minutes you'll find out what one can do."

Joel

The televisor in the room flashes to life.

Hardin

"No, in two seconds. Sit down Wienis, and listen.

Aporat

"Soldiers of the royal flagship Wienis, attend! It is your priest-attendant that speaks! Your ship is engaged in sacrilege."

Joel

He informs the pious soldiers on board that the secret mission they are engaged upon is to bombard their beloved Foundation and that completion of this monstrous mission led by their commander will doom their souls to the eternal frigidity of space.

Aporat

"And since that is his intention, I, in the name of the Galactic Spirit, remove him from his command, for there is no command where the blessing of the Galactic Spirit has been withdrawn. The divine king himself may not maintain his kingship without the consent of the Spirit."

Joel

Lifting his arms he cries.

Aporat

"In the name of the Galactic Spirit and of his prophet, Hari Seldon, and of his interpreters, the holy men of the Foundation, I curse this ship. Let the televisors of this ship, which are its eyes, become blind. Let its grapples, which are its arms, be paralyzed. Let the nuclear blasts, which are its fists, lose their function. Let the motors, which are its heart, cease to beat. Let the communications, which are its voice, become dumb. Let its ventilations, which are its breath, fade. Let its lights, which are its soul, shrivel into nothing. In the name of the Galactic Spirit, I so curse this ship!"

Joel

And with his last word, at the stroke of midnight, the ship dies! A command had been issued from a sacred temple upon Anacreon via hyperwave relay. Asimov explains in a poetic statement which I must quote directly "For it is the chief characteristic of the religion of science that it works, and that such curses as that of Aporat's are really deadly."

The priest pulls a self-powered nucleo-bulb (I want one of those things) from his long robe and lights the darkness. He leads two pious soldiers in fear for their immortal souls through the darkness to the bridge, where he finds Prince Lefkin, one of the sons of the Regent Wienis and the ship's commander, cursing loudly for lights. He stares at the priest with hate.

Prince Lefkin

"What is the meaning of your treasonable actions? Return the power to the ship. I am commander here."

Aporat

"No longer."

Joel

Lefkin goes off on a mad tirade against the true believers who serve him.

Lefkin

"Are you allowing yourselves to be fooled by this mountebank, this harlequin? Do you cringe before a religion compounded of clouds and moonbeams? This man is an imposter and the Galactic Spirit he speaks of a fraud of the imagination devised to—"

Aporat

"Seize the blasphemer!"

Joel

The admiral goes down under the clutching hands of a score of soldiers. Aporat orders them to drag him behind him to the communications room. He orders Lefkin to the one televisor still operational and opens a channel to Anacreon via the hyperwave beam, to the very chamber in which Wienis and Harden await the words dictated by Aporat for the deposed commander to speak.

Aporat

"Begin: The Anacreonian navy—"

Joel

We return to what has now become Wienis's private chamber of horrors, but he has yet to receive the crucial blow. He watches as the screen of the televisor flashes to life to reveal the haggard and unkempt appearance of his son, Prince Lefkin, aboard the cruiser that was to be delivering the downfall of Terminus.

Lefkin speaks with pauses, as he is prodded offscreen.

Lefkin

"The Anacreonian navy ... aware of the nature of its mission ... and refusing to be a party ... to abominable sacrilege ... is returning to Anacreon ... with the following ultimatum issued ... to those blaspheming sinners ... who would dare to use profane force ... against the Foundation ... source of all blessings ... and against the Galactic Spirit. Cease at once all war against ... the true faith ... and guarantee in a manner suiting us of the navy ... as represented by our ... priest-attendant, Theo Aporat ... that such war will never in the future ... be resumed, and that ... the one-time prince regent, Wienis ... be imprisoned ... and tried before an ecclesiastical court ... for his crimes. Otherwise the royal navy... upon returning to Anacreon ... will blast the palace to the ground ... and take whatever other measures ... are necessary ... to destroy the nest of sinners ... and the den of destroyers ... of men's souls that now prevail."

Joel

The screen goes blank, and Hardin douses the nucleo-bulb that had been the soul light in the chamber. The others see that an aura now encompasses him. Not the dazzling aura that had been surrounding Lepold on his throne, but one less spectacular, less impressive, and yet one more effective in its own way, and more useful.

Hardin turns to Wienis and relates an old fable about a horse and a wolf from whom he feared for his life. The horse approached a man and offered an alliance, since the wolf was also the man's enemy. The man asked only for the horse's speed in exchange for killing the wolf, so was allowed to place a saddle and bridle upon him. The man mounted the horse and hunted down the wolf and killed him.

Hardin

"The horse, joyful and relieved, thanked the man, and said: "Now that our enemy is dead, remove your bridle and saddle and restore my freedom." Whereupon the man laughed loudly and replied, "Never!" and applied the spurs with a will."

Joel

(Incidentally, the original title of this chapter when it was serialized in Astounding Science Fiction magazine was Saddle and Bridle, referring to one of Aesop's fables.)

Hardin explains to Wienis that the analogy describes how the rulers of the four kingdoms accepted the religion of science as their bridle and saddle. They had killed the wolf, but –

Wienis

"You won't escape. You'll rot. Let them blow us up. Let them blow everything up. You'll rot! I'll get you! Soldiers! Shoot me down that devil. Blast him! Blast him!"

Joel

Hardin turns to the stunned soldiers and simply smiles. One aims his blaster momentarily but cannot pull the trigger. Wienis shouts incoherently and staggers to the soldier and seizes the weapon. Aiming it at Hardin, who hasn't stirred, he shoves the lever and holds the contact. The continuous beam impinges harmlessly upon Hardin's force field and is neutralized.

With a yell of despair, Wienis changes his aim and shoots again – and topples to the floor with his head blown to nothingness.

Hardin winces at the gory sight.

Hardin

"A man of "direct action" to the end. The last refuge!"

Joel

A few days later, we are back on Terminus and the time has arrived for the opening of the Time Vault. The room, unlike thirty years prior, is now filled to standing room only. Hardin's political standing is now impregnable. Since the rout of Anacreon he is all-powerful and all-popular. Treaties have been signed with all of the leaders of the Four Kingdoms. "Not even Hari Seldon's name had been more loudly cheered."

Across the room, Sef Sermak and Lewis Bort are engaged in animated discussion. The Actionists had been forced to apologize, but remain unchastened. Now they are agitating to take military action against the Four Kingdoms while the Foundation has the upper hand so as to never be placed in a position of subservience again.

Yohan Lee frets about this, and about whether Seldon will appear. Without further guidance he fears that the insurgents will eventually win out. Hardin tries to settle his anxieties.

Seldon

"I know. A fire eater must eat fire even if he has to kindle it himself. And you, Lee, have got to worry even if you must kill yourself to invent something to worry about."

Joel

Suddenly the lights dim and the center of the room is no longer empty. A figure in a wheelchair sits with a book in his lap.

Hari Seldon

"I am Hari Seldon."

Joel

He mentions how this is his second visit, and he doesn't know if anyone is here, but if they are, it means they have overcome the second crisis successfully.

Seldon

"If you are not here, then the second crisis has been too much for you. I doubt that, however, for my figures show a ninety-eight point four percent probability there is to be no significant deviation from the Plan in the first eighty years."

Joel

He describes how they have now attained domination of the barbarian kingdoms surrounding them through their use of spiritual power to ward off the temporal powers. He warns them starkly, however, against overconfidence. The spiritual power is not sufficient to attack the temporal. It can only hold it at bay.

Seldon

"In this case, the Foundation is only at the start of the path that leads to the Second Galactic Empire. The neighboring kingdoms, in manpower and resources are still overwhelmingly powerful as compared to yourselves. Outside them lies the vast tangled jungle of barbarism that extends around the entire breadth of the Galaxy. Within that rim there is still what is left of the Galactic Empire – and that, weakened and decaying though it is, is still incomparably mighty."

Joel

In closing he reminds them that they must never forget the other Foundation at the far end of the Galaxy, at Star's End. His image vanishes and the lights come up.

Lee turns to Hardin.

Lee

"He didn't say when he'd be back."

Hardin

"I know – but I trust he won't return until you and I are safely and cozily dead!"

Joel

And so ends The Mayors. This has been a long and fairly complicated chapter to recap, so I won't burden you with a lengthy analysis. There are a couple of points I've made in passing that could use some elaboration however. This is the first episode in which religion is used as a political tool. Hardin seems to always know what tricks to play to achieve the politically impossible. At the time I am writing this, I had just finished reading a book by one of my favorite modern science fiction novelists, Kim Stanley Robinson, entitled The Ministry for the Future. If you haven't yet, I urge you all to read it. Set on Earth in the very near future – beginning in the mid-twenties, civilization is imperiled by the heating of the atmosphere to the point that severe consequences are manifesting. The point is driven home by a horrific first twelve pages recounting an eyewitness account of a heat wave in India that results in twenty million deaths in a single week. Entire villages roasted alive. A small, pan-national committee is charged with solving the crisis on behalf of the citizens in the future who might face similar horrific consequences.

Robinson describes many policy changes that can and do make a difference, but ultimately violence – what would be called eco-terrorism today – plays a crucial role as well. I ask myself, what would Salvor Hardin do in such a situation? This, not being a carefully constructed reality by a 1940s science fiction writer, he might not have a nifty nucleics-based solution in his pocket. We're probably, at least to some extent, bound for terrible suffering by many. Still, like the unavoidable menace of the power of the Four Kingdoms, there may be creative solutions to avoid the worst of what is inevitably to come.

Interestingly, Hardin didn't solve his conundrum solely with the advanced technology at his disposal. If he had attempted to do so, his enemies would have found a way to take it from him. Instead, he used knowledge itself. Might we somehow use the knowledge we have, not just of physical sciences, but of human behavior, to find a means of directing the world's attention more directly to the problem. Something a little more ambitious than energy-efficient lightbulbs and electric cars? Perhaps we should create a new religion! James Lovelock wrote a book back in the seventies called the Gaia Hypothesis, in which the Earth was posited to be an entity in itself with a sort of proto-consciousness. Perhaps that is the equivalent of the Foundation's Galactic Spirit that we could cultivate in the masses as a new object of worship. Just throwing out one idea in my best attempt at thinking like the great Salvor Hardin – in other words, Isaac Asimov.

Our next episode takes us beyond the time of Hardin, Lee, and Verisof, and we will see that their actions and policies have become well established, but not universally effective. On a particularly curmudgeonly system, their new-fangled gadgets are rejected and banned by the ruling party, and a Foundation representative who has attempted to introduce them has been imprisoned and faces a likely death sentence. A new breed of Foundationer, bound more by the desire for profits than for adherence to the home planet's political aspirations, becomes a reluctant recruit in a

daring mission to save his comrade. He will need to use all his talents and the resources at his disposal to attempt to pull off what appears to be an impossible task.

Please join me for Episode 4 of Seldon Crisis: The Traders, as we continue along the great course marked out by the Seldon Plan. And I'd like to ask one more favor of you beyond sharing the link for this podcast with a friend. The algorithm that helps this show get attention and hopefully a few more listeners is driven by ratings on the largest podcast provider. If you can find a moment, please go to the link to Apple Podcasts in the show notes and rate and subscribe to the show. It will help to draw attention to it and to this great set of novels and nothing would please me more.