

## The Traders



[Opening theme music with voiceovers.]

### **Limmar Ponyets**

"With this machine, I can turn the iron you discard into gold of the finest quality."

### **Grand Master**

"Men have been fools who have claimed the ability. They have paid for their prying sacrilege."

### **Counselor Pherl**

"Your Veneration, the gold is from a poisoned source."

### **Salvor Hardin**

"Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right!"

### **Hardin**

[Theme music plays out.]

### **Joel McKinnon**

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.

## Joel

Welcome back, friends of Foundation, as we enter a new phase in Hari Seldon's long predicted arc of the old Imperium's fall and the recovery to a new Galactic Empire. Many years have passed, and again we must say goodbye to old friends. Salvor Hardin and Yohan Lee are long dead, along with everyone else mentioned in *The Mayors*. We never find out if the Actionists recover from their humiliation at the hands of Hardin, or of how Ambassador Verisof fares in the new era after the fall of Anacreon's wicked regent, Wienis. The legends, however, of Seldon and Hardin live on, and we now meet the latest players on the stage of this great saga.

Limmar Ponyets is a trader for the Foundation, far out in the Periphery and suffering a bad run of trading of his various new-fangled gadgets to distant outposts, as he is way behind quota. He gets interrupted in mid-shower by a communication from a fellow trader asking to come aboard with a special encoded message from the homeworld. Hours later he welcomes the trader onto his ship and is given the dispatch, which self-destructs after reading. Ponyets reveals to his friend a limited version of the message's contents. Another trader named Eskel Gorov has been imprisoned on a backward world named Askone and Ponyets is instructed to retrieve him. This isn't a happy prospect, because Askone is a no-trade zone and it means Ponyets will fall even further behind quota due to the time wasted on this mission.

Ponyets mumbles some religious gibberish about the Galactic Spirit – it seems he was trained as a priest but gave up on it long ago – and informs his fellow trader that he'll have to go and save Gorov – who happens to be an old friend. What he doesn't tell his messenger is that Gorov is not just a trader, but a Foundation special agent. He's not agreeing just out of friendship, the rescue is of high urgency, and likely to be quite dangerous.

After three long weeks of approach and carefully suspicious monitoring by the Askonian vessels protecting the central planet of their system, Ponyets finally gains entry and is granted an audience with the old and wizened Grand Master of Askone. The conversation does not initially go well at all. The Master informs Ponyets that Gorov, the apparent trader, has broken sacred laws of Askone by attempting to sell his "infernal gadgetry" and is to be put to death. Ponyets asks for permission to speak to the prisoner and is coldly denied.

Ponyets has one remaining gambit. He recalls his religious training and employs it in desperation.

### **Ponyets**

"Your Veneration, I ask you to be merciful towards a man's soul, in the hour when his body stands forfeit. He has been separated from spiritual consolation in all the time that his life has been in danger. Even now, he faces the prospect of going unprepared to the bosom of the Spirit that rules all."

### **Joel**

The Grand Master casts a suspicious eye at Ponyets.

### **Grand Master**

"You are a Tender of the Soul?"

### **Joel**

Ponyets explains that there is a need for spiritual assistance to the lonely traders far from the source of their spiritual sustenance in the homeworld. The pious ruler is suspicious, but ultimately swayed by his appeal and reluctantly grants access for Ponyets to speak with Gorov.

Some time later, Ponyets is granted access to see the prisoner alone. Eskel Gorov is surprised to see the person sent to extricate him is his old friend. The first order of business is to see if they have any privacy to talk. It turns out that Ponyets is wearing a field distorter disguised as an ornamented bracelet. These authoritarians on Askone are not the smartest folks in the galaxy it would seem. A trader from the known center of infernal gadgetry is allowed to wear his jewelry while going in to speak with their prize prisoner?

Gorov is surprised that Ponyets could even gain admittance as he's been in strict solitary confinement for two weeks. Ponyets explains that "the old bird who's boss here has a weakness for pious speeches" and that he is here in his capacity of spiritual advisor.

### **Ponyets**

"There's something about a pious man such as he. He will cheerfully cut your throat if it suits him, but he will hesitate to endanger the welfare of your immaterial and problematical soul. It's just a piece of empirical psychology. A trader has to know a little of everything."

### **Joel**

Gorov thinks that this particular pious man also wants something material and asks Ponyets if he's heard mention of a ransom. When asked what his captors might want in exchange for his release, he tells the Ponyets what they're after – the tried and true object of lust of tyrants throughout the ages; Gold. Things have fallen so far here in this particular sector that a shiny metal is once again the prime medium of exchange. Ponyets has no idea where he's going to come up with gold.

Gorov is insistent. He thinks the Grand Master is so desirous of gold that he'll wait for it. He tells Ponyets to promise it to him and go back to

Foundation to secure it and return. Even if it takes a while, he thinks the gold will spring him.

### **Eskel Gorov**

"Listen Limmar. The only way we can increase the security of the Foundation here in the Periphery is to form a religion-controlled commercial empire. We're still too weak to be able to force political control. It's all we can do to hold the Four Kingdoms."

### **Ponyets**

"Sure Eskel – this I realize. And any system that doesn't accept nuclear gadgets can never be placed under our religious control–"

### **Gorov**

"And can therefore become a focal point for independence and hostility. Yes."

### **Joel**

Ponyets wants to know what their resistance to nucleics is, and is told it's because they have a rigid taboo dating back to the fairly recent period of instability and anarchy when the old Empire collapsed in this sector. Those who drove them out and established a new order without nuclear technology came to be considered heroes. The use of sophisticated gadgetry was now considered sacrilegious to their memory. Gorov's mission was to break down this resistance by selling simple, useful devices that would gradually bring them back under the power of the Foundation, but he'd underestimated their determination to remain backward.

Ponyets swears he's not here out of patriotic sentiment. He's a trader and has to make a profit. Right now he's behind quota and has a lot of goods rotting in his ship. He's intrigued, though, by the challenge of making a sale. Gorov doesn't see how it will be possible.

**Gorov**

"What are you going to do?"

**Ponyets**

"I don't know – not yet. But if the crux of the matter is to make a sale, then I'm your man. I'm not a boaster as a general thing, but there's one thing I'll always back up. I've never ended up below quota yet."

**Joel**

Ponyets determines that his first mission is to make a little sales demo that will be intriguing enough to keep the Grand Master's interests. He spends a week building a special device to show off and the time arrives for the show and tell.

The Grand Master is suspicious.

**Grand Master**

"What is it?"

**Ponyets**

"This is a small device I have constructed myself."

**Grand Master**

"That is obvious, but it is not the information I want. Is it one of the black-magic abominations of your world?"

**Ponyets**

"It is nuclear in nature, but none of you need touch it, or have anything to do with it. It is for myself alone, and if it contains abominations, I take the foulness of it upon myself."

## **Joel**

The Grand Master is near the breaking point already - shaking his cane and muttering invocations, but a red mustached counsellor whispers in his ear and Ponyets is allowed to continue.

## **Grand Master**

"And what is the connection of this instrument of evil and the gold that you seem to think may save your countryman's life?"

## **Ponyets**

"With this machine, I can turn the iron you discard into gold of the finest quality. It is the only device known to man that will take iron - the ugly iron, your Veneration, that props up the chair you sit in and the walls of this building - and change it to shining, heavy, yellow gold."

## **Joel**

The old man warns Ponyets that this capability has been promised before and the failure always proves fatal.

## **Grand Master**

"Men have been fools who have claimed the ability. They have paid for their prying sacrilege."

## **Joel**

Ponyets asks for an object small enough to fit in the chamber and one of the guards supplies some iron buckles from his uniform. The trader places them carefully into the device and closes the lid. Ten minutes of malevolent crackling and the smell of ozone pass, and Ponyets opens the chamber. The buckles are gold!

## **Ponyets**

"Gentlemen, this is pure gold. Gold through and through. You may subject it to every known physical and chemical test, if you wish to prove the point. It cannot be identified from naturally-occurring gold in any way. Any iron can be so treated. Rust will not interfere, nor will a moderate amount of alloying metals."

## **Joel**

The red mustached counselor speaks.

## **Pherl**

"Your Veneration, the gold is from a poisoned source."

## **Joel**

Ponyets ignores the counselor and speaks directly to the Grand Master.

## **Ponyets**

"A rose can grow from the mud, your Veneration. In your dealings with your neighbors, you buy material of all imaginable variety, without inquiring as to where they get it, whether from an orthodox machine blessed by your benign ancestors or from some space-spawned outrage. Come, I don't offer the machine. I offer the gold."

## **Joel**

The counselor continues to object, but the gold is winning the argument. The old man is seduced with the idea of trading away one man for all the gold he could possibly want. But what if it doesn't turn out to be the real thing? Ponyets has an answer. He will wait for thirty days while the gold is placed on the tombs of the ancestors. If no ill fortune falls upon the kingdom as a result, he will have proved its value and he and Gorof will be freed. The Grand Master agrees.



A week passes before a meeting is arranged – not with the Grand Master, but with his counselor, who we now know goes by the name of Pherl. Other than his red mustache, all we are told is that he was taller and younger than Ponyets expected when seen outside the circle of Elders. He immediately suspects another "clumsy presentation." Why did Ponyets not produce the gold on his ship and bring it alone to the Grand Master rather than annoy him with this ridiculous device?

**Pherl**

"The show you offered us and the antagonism you aroused would have been dispensed with."

**Ponyets**

"True, I accepted the antagonism for the sake of attracting your attention."

**Joel**

Pherl is contemptuously amused.

**Pherl**

"Is that it? Simply that? And I imagine you suggested the thirty-day purification period that you might assure yourself time to turn the attraction into something a bit more substantial. But what if the gold turns out to be impure?"

**Ponyets**

"When the judgement of that impurity depends upon those who are most interested in finding it pure?"

## **Joel**

It has become clear that Ponyets is playing a dangerous game, but knows the psychology of his audience. They are interested less in their sacraments and taboos as they are in sheer power. They know the appearance of gold is sufficient for that purpose. Ponyets has also had time to do more research on the potential customer he is now pitching a sale to. Pherl is young and ambitious enough to want the throne, but he is not sufficiently noble. He is not a descendent of one of the "sacred five tribes," so will not find an easy ascension to the office he aspires to other than as the designated heir of the elderly Grand Master. He will need some help with that ambition, and Ponyets is sure that he will see him and his gold as the route to his goal.

Pherl gets right to the point.

## **Pherl**

"Let me anticipate. You're going to offer me wealth and power in terms of those evil little machines you carry in your ship. Well?"

## **Ponyets**

"Suppose it so. What would be your objection? Simply your standard of good and evil?"

## **Pherl**

"Not at all. Look, outlander, your opinion of us in your heathen agnosticism is what it is – but I am not the entire slave of our mythology, though I may appear so. I am an educated man, sir, and, I hope, an enlightened one. The full depth of our religious customs, in the ritualistic rather than the ethical sense, is for the masses."

## **Joel**

Ponyets has done his homework well. He inquires what objection Pherl could have, and is informed it is all about the public and their firm rejection of such infernal technology. For him to acquire such devices and to use them publicly would be suicide. He would be tossed in a gas chamber if ever caught with such technology. Ponyets agrees it would be nearly impossible to convince the people to overcome their religious objections, but he isn't offering any gadgets or devices. He explains what he is offering.

## **Ponyets**

"Gold itself. Directly. You may have the machine I demonstrated last week. Your supply of gold will equal your supply of iron. That, I imagine, is sufficient for all needs. Sufficient for the Grand Mastership itself, despite youth and enemies. And it is safe."

## **Pherl**

"In what way?"

## **Ponyets**

"In that secrecy is the essence of its use; that same secrecy you described as the only safety with regard to nucleics. You may bury the transmuter in the deepest dungeon of the strongest fortress on your furthest estate, and it will still bring you instant wealth. It is the gold you buy, not the machine."

## **Joel**

Ponyets describes how Pherl can be trained in five minutes to use the machine. In return, he demands a high price – the equivalent of a cubic foot of gold in wrought iron. Pherl laughs, but Ponyets reminds him that he can regain the price in two hours operating the machine.

Pherl continues to bluster and act with general hostility towards the trader, but the deal is done. Ponyets has made the sale.

Thirty days later, Gorov and Ponyets have both been released and are being escorted out of the Askonian system. They make private contact through a distortion-bounded ether-beam.

Gorov is perplexed.

**Gorov**

"But it isn't what's wanted, Ponyets. A transmuter won't do. Where did you get one, anyway?"

**Ponyets**

"I didn't. I juiced it up out of a food irradiation chamber. It isn't any good, really. The power consumption is prohibitive on any large scale or the Foundation would use transmutation instead of chasing all over the Galaxy for heavy metals. It's one of the standard tricks every trader uses, except that I never saw an iron-to-gold one before. But it's impressive, and it works – very temporarily."

**Joel**

He explains that Pherl will make enough gold to buy his way into power before the machine breaks down and it has allowed both of them to escape with their lives. Gorov, however, is a man of integrity, and is dissatisfied with only escaping with his skin. His mission is to break down the Askonian aversion to Foundation technologies, and believes Ponyets' gambit has doomed his mission.

**Gorov**

"We want to sell them a machine of value in itself, something they would want to use openly; something that would tend to force them to come out in favor of nuclear techniques as a matter of self-interest."

**Joel**

Ponyets reveals the truth. There are other gadgets involved in the sale after all. The ships are not just escorting them away from Askone, but to a mining colony where their holds will be loaded with tin that is in urgent demand on Terminus.

**Gorov**

"For the transmuter?"

**Ponyets**

"For my entire cargo of nucleics. At double price, plus a bonus. I admit I gouged him, but I've got to make quota, don't I?"

**Gorov**

"Do you mind explaining?"

**Ponyets**

"What's there to explain? It's obvious, Gorov. Look, the clever dog thought he had me in a foolproof trap, because his word was worth more than mine to the Grand Master. He took the transmuter. That was a capital crime in Askone. But at any time he could say that he had lured me on into a trap with the purest of patriotic motives, and denounce me as a seller of forbidden things. You see, Pherl had never heard nor conceived of a microfilm-recorder."

**Joel**

Ponyets had recorded – in beautiful holovision – Pherl using the infernal technology to produce his gold and then shown him the recording afterward. He'd then claimed that he had also implanted a playback device in the city square which would go off at midday the following day and provide

## **Ponyets**

"a beautiful show to a million fanatical Askonians showing them what devilry their high prince was up to, and that he would subsequently be torn to pieces by the mob. He was gibbering at my knees in half a second – ready to make any deal I wanted."

## **Joel**

What Ponyets had done was somewhat like a modern ransomware scam. He was bluffing, like most scammers are, but he achieved his effect. Gorov asks Ponyets if Pherl would actually use the gadgets he'd been forced to buy? Won't his ego be damaged from being swindled?

## **Ponyets**

"Why not? It's his only way of recouping his losses, and if he makes money out of it, he'll salve his pride. And he will be the next Grand Master – and the best man we could have in our favor."

## **Gorov**

"Yes, it was a good sale. Yet you've certainly got an uncomfortable sales technique. No wonder you were kicked out of a seminary. Have you no sense of morals?"

## **Joel**

Ponyets closes with a nod to the great Salvor Hardin, by referring to another of his famous euphemisms.

## **Hardin**

"Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right!"

## Joel

And so this chapter comes to a close. I've wondered about this story and what makes it less memorable – for me at least – compared to those introducing Seldon, and those following which tracked Salvor Hardin's audacious exploits as Mayor, and the many fascinating chapters to come. I have to say that Limmar Ponyets is a difficult name to remember and when I came upon him in re-reading the chapter for the second time in the same calendar year, I had almost zero recollection of having met him before.

I don't think it's just the name, though, or the brevity of Ponyets' appearance in the epic, that makes him so unmemorable. He is clearly introduced to present a pattern in the Foundation's history, when mercenary traders advanced Seldon's plan through their own self-interest, and pushed the sphere of influence wider than just the Four Kingdoms they'd learned to dominate with their faux-religion based on the ingenious Galactic Spirit, which was in turn based on the monopoly of science and technology as the Periphery fell into barbarism.

What I think is the real reason I couldn't remember him, is that ultimately, I didn't like him that much. He's Asimov's first real anti-hero in the epic. He is motivated purely by the desire for profit, and doesn't mind doing some pretty nasty and underhanded things to achieve his aims. I wanted to see him as a Han Solo type figure, finding redemption for his shallowness by some heroic turn in the end, like when the Millennium Falcon swoops in to blast the X-wing fighters closing in on Luke and enabling his destruction of the Death Star. A morsel of nobility emerges in the rogue and makes him all the more charming and memorable, even if he is still at heart a profiteer.

But, alas, nothing of the sort happens here. Yes, Ponyets frees the Foundation agent from apparently certain death, and takes extraordinary

risks in the process, but only for the end goal of meeting his quota. I'd have to think that when Asimov was writing, the existence of snake oil salesmen was well known and something his audience would be all too familiar with, but that the perilous state of the Foundation at this early stage would enable them to accept the nefarious tricks of the protagonist as justified for the greater good. Maybe it was received differently in the mid-twentieth century. In our time, however, scammers and spam merchants are such a constant annoyance and threat to our well-being as we navigate the exploding and vital cultural phenomenon that is the internet that, for me at least, I am glad to move on from Limmar Ponyets and his ilk.

This has been a fairly short episode, so before wrapping up I want to talk a little bit about a character who wasn't in this episode. In fact, this particular type of character has not been in a single episode thus far. To put it simply... where the women at? Aside from one brief mention by Hari Seldon at his trial in which he implied women and children weren't important enough to be counted as part of his project, there have been not only no female characters, but no indication they even exist in this universe. I don't want to shock you, but in our next episode there is not just a woman but two of them! To be fair, one is pretty much a prop whose job is to try on a dress, and the other is a stereotype of a nagging shrew who despises her husband. I may be going out on a limb here, but I suspect Asimov had some issues in this department. His first marriage, to a lady with the lovely name of Gertrude Blugerman who he met on a blind date, did last for 28 years which sounds pretty good, but that doesn't guarantee they were happy. Maybe they did have an intimate and respectful marriage and it's just awful of me to judge them.

On the other hand, we have other evidence for a questionable attitude towards women from Mr. Asimov. He was, in later years, notorious for his treatment of women at various public events such as book tours and



lectures. He had the nickname of the man with 100 hands and thought it entirely appropriate to pinch bottoms affectionately upon meeting female fans for the first time.

He even wrote a book entitled *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man*, as if being a pervert was a point of pride. That tells me he probably had some unresolved issues around the subject of women. In fairness, he seemed to eventually get an inkling of understanding of what a creep he was being. He described a fellow author who had a similar zest for goosing fans and colleagues of both genders and found to his surprise that he didn't enjoy being on the goosed side of the equation. He would find himself avoiding this charming fellow at gatherings and it occurred to him why some of those young ladies he would have liked to meet in the past had tended to steer clear of him. They'd been warned about the hundred-handed one.

The best evidence, for me, is right in his writing. First – as we've seen – he avoided the subject entirely. When he does start involving women in the storyline, he does so fairly awkwardly and with a tendency to stereotype them as we'll see in the next episode. Later on in the novels, he starts to write more fully developed characterizations, but like his male characters, they are mostly developed for their ability to think and eventually outwit their antagonists. He doesn't attempt to describe truly romantic or sexual encounters until much later, and there is a tendency for those scenes to come off rather awkwardly at best, and are sometimes truly cringeworthy affairs.

Obviously, new works in science fiction for popular consumption could never get away with just writing women out completely, and this is one reason that the new Apple TV series on *Foundation* swaps a few genders; making Gaal Dornick and even Salvor Hardin female. I had thought about maybe doing that for this podcast, but decided for better or worse, this is Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. We have to accept the occasional personal flaws along with his overflowing genius as a storyteller and futurist. I

believe he cared deeply about humanity in general and this includes both genders, despite his well-deserved reputation.

In our next episode, we will meet those first double X chromosomes as well as a giant figure in the early history of the Foundation in a much more sprawling and complex storyline than this one. Hober Mallow will be another of those names that will ring through the decades and even centuries to come, sharing space in the pantheon with Seldon and Hardin. At first glance he appears to be an opportunist and a profiteer not too much unlike Limmar Ponyets, but we will see there is a more enduring genius in his approach to problem solving. He will be faced with a crisis that far transcends this little episode, as another kingdom closer to the galactic core threatens to overwhelm the comparatively small Foundation, and there are hints that the Empire itself, wounded but still dangerous, may be involved and ready to wreak havoc on the plans of Hari Seldon and his followers.

Join us soon for our next episode of Seldon Crisis, The Merchant Princes. And, until then, I urge you all to read some Asimov!

One of the best things about doing a podcast like this – maybe the best thing – is hearing from total strangers out of the blue who discover it and provide some feedback. Before the first episode had even dropped I got an email from a guy by the name of Nathaniel Goldberg which read:

Congratulations on the launch! I just subscribed to your channel and podcast. And I thought I'd send a preemptive fan email. I can't wait for your first full episode to drop. Hoping that you don't find it too presumptuous, I also thought that I'd introduce myself. I'm an academic who, besides academic work, has published on philosophy and pop culture, including The Foundation Trilogy. I also teach a special-topics course, Philosophy and Science Fiction, involving reading Asimov in parallel with Plato.

If there's anything that I can do to help with the podcast—including never to bother you again!—then please don't hesitate to ask. We all have our passions and fandoms, and I've many more than Asimov. But, as you know, there's nothing like *The Foundation Trilogy*.

I've exchanged quite a few emails with Nathaniel since, and they've been a genuine pleasure. As it happens, I've been considering making a special episode at some point, likely between the first two novels when I was thinking of taking a break for a few weeks, and had thought about possibly having a guest come on and discuss some of the deeper aspects of the novels than is possible while maintaining a good narrative thread. It turns out that Professor Goldberg might be a great choice, and we've been discussing this possibility in our emails.

I urge all my listeners to consider getting in touch and letting me know how you like the show - or even if you don't and would like to suggest ways I might make it better. You can reach me by email at [joel@seldoncrisis.net](mailto:joel@seldoncrisis.net) or on Twitter at the handle [@joelgmckinnon](https://twitter.com/joelgmckinnon).

With the new AppleTV show coming out later this year we're starting to see a lot more interest in Asimov among the public as evidenced by a growing list of posts on Reddit in the subthread [r/asimov](https://www.reddit.com/r/asimov). That's a great place to engage with fans and I've been doing some posting myself there. Recently a user linked to a new Discord channel called Galactic Empire. I'm still pretty new to that platform, but it seems to be another great place to chat with the growing legion of 21st century fans of the works of Isaac Asimov. Please check it out if you find the time.

That does it for this episode, so see you in a couple of weeks for the adventures of Hober Mallow!