THE TRIGAN EMPIRE

The planet Elekton lies in the galaxy of Yarna, and the greatest power on Elekton is the Trigan Empire, ruled over by its founder, the Emperor Trigo.

In the early days of the second month of the first year of Lemm it seemed that all Elekton was on the move.

. . . heavy congestion at the city gates . . .

By land, sea, and air, a great multitude converged on Trigan City. They came from all across the continent of Victris and from the farthest-flung reaches of the Empire.

The occasion was the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the City and Empire. The city streets were brightly decorated with streamers . . .

The Emperor has put on a grand spectacle, Lord Janno.

Indeed, my uncle has done himself proud !

. . . and the skies were festooned with the vapour trails of numerous airliners bringing wealthy tourists from afar.

There were two among the visitors to Trigan who chose more traditional means of transport, at least for the final legs of their respective journeys.

The arrivals were Zad Krakkar, the Potentate of Tharv . . .

. . . and Keren, the recently crowned King of Daveli.

The two had another reason to be in Trigan City. Together with the Emperor Trigo, the three heads of state were to be the first signatories to the historic Charter of United Victris.

The day of the anniversary arrived and, as ever, the Trigan Air Fleet manifested the military might of the Empire in a thrilling display over the great capital.

Trigan's military supremacy—and, indeed, the Empire's very existence—were born of harsh necessity. This fact the Emperor Trigo alluded to in his address to the people from the steps of the Imperial Palace.

Fifty years ago we were simple tribesfolk wandering the plains of Vorg. We joined together as one people to survive the predations of war . . .

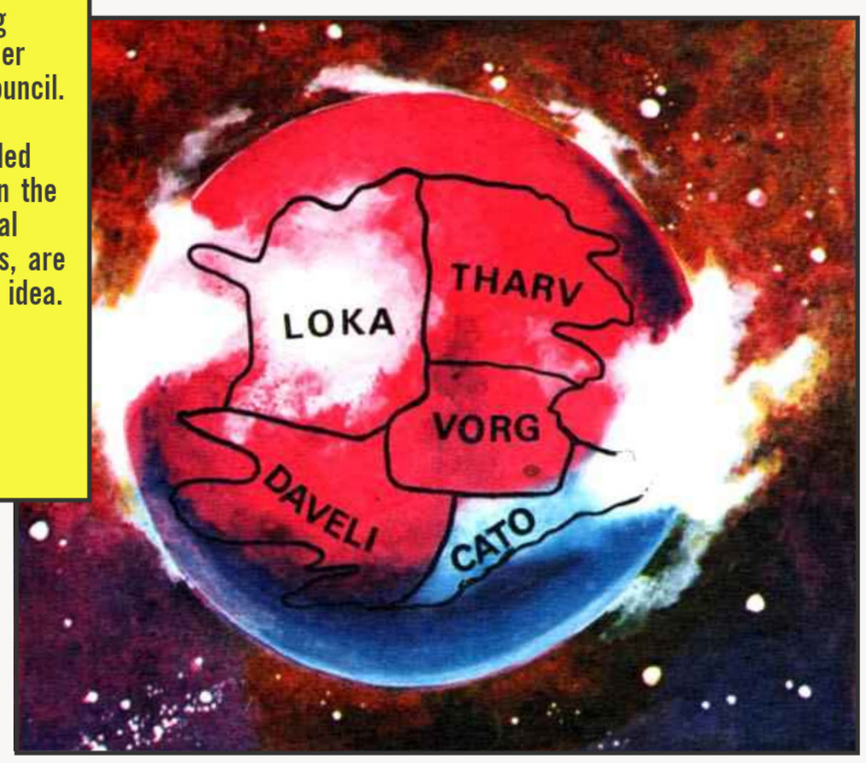
Many of Trigan's older citizens could vividly recall narrowly escaping genocide at the hands of the Lokans.

. . . and today we join together with our friends Tharv and Daveli as United Victris —peace for our time !

After some years of relative peace with the other nations of Elekton, and mindful of his advancing age, the Emperor Trigo—contemplating what his own legacy will be—has turned his attention to, on the one hand, the well-being of Trigan citizens and, on the other hand, the well-being of all the peoples of Elekton.

He has created several new government ministries, including a Ministry of Public Health, under the auspices of the Imperial Council.

And he has founded a body called United Victris, to keep peace on the continent. But Trigan's traditional foes, the Lokans and the Catons, are implacably opposed to the very idea. So far the only signatories are Trigan's traditional friends, the people of Daveli—and the dis-ingenuous Tharvs—from whom trouble is imminent !



Later that day, Janno drove through the city on his way to the official reception at the Imperial Palace. Amidst the general revelry, he noticed that something was amiss.

By all the stars ! At every tavern in the city people are out on the streets *brawling*. What's come over them ?

The violence in the city had not gone unnoticed by the Trigan City Police. That morning, the Emperor had received an urgent visit from the Chief of Police.

There has been a growing surge in violence over the past lunar month. Of course, with the huge number of visitors to the city for the anniversary, we were anticipating some trouble, but this is out of all bounds.

And the perpetrators are mainly visitors from where, exactly ? Those animals from Tharv ?

Actually, no, Imperial Majesty. The strange thing is—the majority of the offenders are Trigan citizens.

I would like you to get to get to the bottom of this urgently. And I would like twice daily briefings on the situation until you have . . . I will see you for the next briefing at the reception this evening. Am I understood ?

Yes, Imperial Majesty.

Arriving at the Imperial Palace for the reception, Janno wasted no time in catching up with his old friend and former comrade in the Trigan Air Fleet, Keren, who was now the King of Daveli.

Keren, old friend ! What a joy it is to see you !

Janno ! It's been such a very long time . . .

. . . and longer even since I saw our mutual friend Roffa, what news do you have of him ?

Why, it's been a while since I saw him myself. After he left the Air Fleet, he moved into an old military bunker on a remote part of the Vorg sea coast. These days he is very much a recluse !

We must visit him while I'm here.

Absolutely ! We'll go tomorrow !

As the two friends went to mingle at the reception . . .

What's your private opinion on the document you just signed—the Charter of United Victris ? My uncle has such high hopes . . .

With Zad Krakkar—whom I don't trust—as the only other signatory, save for myself and Trigo . . . I rather regret to say that I think it won't change a thing. In fact . . .

. . . Their conversation was interrupted by the Emperor Trigo.

There are two here whom I would like you to meet . . .

This is Dennu Preed of Tharv, Minister of Wholistic Wellbeing in the new Parliament of United Victris ! And . . .

. . . my own Minister of Public Health, Bobus Zarr, who has been working tirelessly to ensure the safe running of the anniversary celebrations.

The Emperor ushered them into a side room . . .

Minister Preed has been accompanying Minister Zarr for the last while, as he goes about his ministerial duties—an apprenticeship role, as it were.

. . . And now I should like you to sit in on my evening briefing with the Chief of Police. We are discussing the developing situation in Trigan City.

While the banquet meal was being served, the Chief of Police briefed those present. A special unit formed to investigate the plague of deadly violence had so far found nothing.

Between courses, there were speeches, including from the Emperor Trigo.

Long live United Victris !

Long live the Trigan Empire !

The banquet meal over, Bobus Zarr expressed his admiration for the Emperor to his Tharvian counterpart. He would have been surprised to know Dennu Preed's thoughts at that moment.

You poor flattering fool ! Look your last upon your precious Emperor ! Heh, heh.

Elekton has never seen such a mighty ruler. He deserves every success.

Later on that evening, Bobus Zarr slipped away from the reception and returned to his office at the Ministry, where he worked long into the night.

Now I've left myself barely any time to sleep . . . but this report for the Emperor is done, thank the stars !

The first of Elekton's twin suns had risen by the time he left the building the following morning.

Good morning, Minister.

Good morning, driver. Take me straight home, please.

Hidden eyes watched his progress !

Subject leaving the Ministry now . . . proceeding in the direction of his residence . . .

Arriving home, Bobus Zarr opened the door to his luxury penthouse apartment—and received the shock of his life !

Aaaaaaagh !

Moments later, a terrified scream split the morning air above the city.

Eeeeeaaaaghh !

DON LAWRENCE

At that morning's scheduled briefing by the Chief of Police, the Emperor appeared tired and ill. Present were Janno, Keren, and Dennu Preed, the Minister of Wholistic Wellbeing of the new Parliament of United Victris. There was one conspicuous absence.

Imperial Majesty, I regret to report the sudden death of Bobus Zarr. The Minister's body was found on the street beneath his apartment early this morning. It appears that he toppled to his death from the balcony of his penthouse suite.

The news was not well received. The Emperor's malaise disposed him to anger.

Toppled ?!

Yes, Imperial Majesty . . .

. . . as I was hastening to add, a clear pattern has emerged from the recent spate of deaths. Fully half of the deceased have met their end by falling from a great height. And there are no suspicious circumstances in any of the cases we have investigated so far . . . it's quite inexplicable.

Dennu Preed could scarcely believe his good fortune. Not only had the Trigan authorities failed to suspect foul play in the murder of his counterpart, but . . .

Ha ! I'm getting away with murder . . .

. . . and now the fool is going to offer me the job ! Heh ! Heh !

By great good fortune, we have a suitable replacement to take over the late Minister's invaluable role . . . if he should be so good as to accept the job at such short notice.

Trigo's voice softened. His request was terse.

Dennu Preed, would you be so obliging as to step into the position so tragically vacated by the late Bobus Zarr ?

The Tharvian's reply was immediate and glibly reassuring.

Imperial Majesty, this is so unexpected . . . but . . . it would be a great honour and a great pleasure to be of service to the Trigan Empire—and by extension, to United Victris—in its hour of need.

After the meeting, Janno and Keren set off to visit their friend Roffa. Janno drove them in his new convertible, which was the very latest in technological gimmickry—it changed colour at the push of a button !

And how's that going ?

Roffa is obsessed with the idea of growing food crops and medicinal plants on other planets—or on this planet, should Elekton one day become inhospitable to life.

They sped towards their destination—a decommissioned military bunker on an isolated stretch of the Vorg sea coast—now home to Roffa, their mutual friend and former comrade in the Trigan Air Fleet.

When I last visited, he was attempting to grow our hallowed herb, the rallis plant, indoors and completely under artificial light.

Impossible ! Even old Peric never managed to accomplish that !

We'll park here. We must walk the rest of the way.

This is the place. He's sure to let us in, Keren. We've just got to hope he's at home ! There is simply no way to contact him, except by banging on the door !

Roffa was home. He was overjoyed to see his two old friends. But he gave them no chance to rest after their journey. He spoke with pride.

I have something to show you. Something that you have never seen before and that you no doubt thought was impossible. Something that even the late, great scientist Peric never achieved. I promise you, you will be amazed !

Roffa led them through the labyrinthine passages of the bunker, and down a rough hewn tunnel at the end of which a strange light glowed.

It was a world within a world ! In a hermetically sealed chamber, under bright artificial lights, was growing . . .

. . . a burgeoning forest of healthy rallis plants !

The rallis plant was a medicinal herb, rightly esteemed by the Trigans as a veritable panacea. It grew wild in the foothills of the Vorg mountains . . .

. . . And was cultivated in yards and allotments and in pots on window sills all across Trigan City.

The leaves and stems of the rallis plant were boiled up to produce a revitalising broth, effective as treatment for many of the most common ailments.

Here, my brother. Take a little rallis. You'll feel better !

The flowering heads of the rallis plant were brewed into a relaxing and mildly intoxicating beverage, consumed in quantity at the end of each working day.

Another round, Simmo ?

Indubitably !

Many years before, the old scientist Peric had studied the rallis plant and had ascertained its composition.

By all the stars ! What an incredible cornu-copia of com-pounds !

His curiosity sated, Peric duly published his findings in a scientific journal. But, as the scientist said to himself at the time . . .

While of great scientific interest, these results are of no practical use to us Trigans. Why would we make synthetic compounds when we have the whole plant ? Perhaps they will benefit others on Elekton who cannot freely obtain the rallis.

Indeed, Peric's results were picked up by Tharv Pharmaceuticals, a mega corporation in the neighbouring country of Tharv, who immediately went into mass production of a range of synthetic pills and potions at their newest factory.

The rallis plant would not grow outside of Trigan City and the surrounding Vorg region. The scientific reason for this was a mystery. Nor would it grow except under natural daylight, until . . .

Roffa . . . this is a most incredible advance. How did you achieve this result ?

Roffa was happy to explain.

The rallis is a very particular plant. The key to growing it under lights is to reproduce exactly the frequencies of the light emitted by Elekton's twin suns.

Janno, I know that you do not partake. Keren, my friend . . .

I would offer you some of the rallis but I cannot bring myself to harvest even one of my plants before the time is due. I will be harvesting the plants in two days' time . . . I would very much like you to make a return visit !

Now, we have much else to talk about . . .

At that same hour, in Trigan City, the Emperor was meeting with his advisors, including the newly appointed Acting Minister of Public Health, Dennu Preed, and the Chief of Police, who had news to report.

Imperial Majesty, we were able to interview two individuals who survived falls from great height. They both report that, immediately before their respective accidents, they were indulging in the vapours of the rallis. Uncharacteristically, the effect of the herb was to give them the delusion that they could fly . . . with tragic results.

Furthermore, it seems that the brawls occurring across the city have nearly all been at taverns that serve rallis-based beverages. We surmise that consumption of the rallis plant is somehow at the bottom of all this. Perhaps there is contamination in the supply chain . . .

Then, as Trigo was leaving the meeting with his brother Brag . . .

Brag, I thank the stars that we might soon resolve this crisis. I wish that the news made me feel better, but I cannot seem to shake this feeling of exhaustion. I must soon take a few days break, leaving the Empire in the hands of Janno and yourself.

. . . It happened ! The Emperor suffered a sudden turn.

Nnnn-uuugh !

Soon thereafter, Janno received a message on his personal contact-set.

This is an urgent Imperial summons. Lord Janno will return to Trigan City at once and report to the palace.

Trigo had only just come to when Janno and Keren arrived at the Imperial chambers. Salvia, the Emperor's personal physician, met them.

My uncle Trigo . . . what ails him, Salvia ? Will he . . .

He just needs to rest—and recuperate.

The stricken Emperor stammered a few short instructions . . .

I have made provision for Ministers to take decisions that affect their respective Ministries . . .

. . . before he lapsed back into unconsciousness !

Dominating one of the six hills of Trigan City was a vast domed edifice. Originally built to be used as a laboratory by the great scientist, Peric, the building now doubled as a high-security prison.

Only two men held a key to the prison. One, the Emperor Trigo . . .

He's sure to be at home, Janno. We've just got to hope he lets us in !

. . . And two, the inmate himself !

Door unlocked ! Please enter and come up to the observatory on the upper level. Door locking in five—four—

They found the old scientist at his microscope.

Very strange. This is very strange.

Peric explained.

It is a fine dust that has been settling on exposed surfaces after entering through the open skylight of my observatory. Presumably, it is everywhere over Trigan City and the whole of the Vorg region. The particles are of a wholly novel organic compound, possibly viral in nature. I have never seen the likes of it before.

What happened ?

That's very interesting, I'm sure, Peric. The Emperor has been taken ill.

Brag's concern for his brother's welfare, and the fate of the Empire, showed on his loyal countenance.

The day after Empire Day . . . he collapsed. Now he sleeps most of the day, and when he is awake . . . he babbles in delirium.

Quite frankly, he's seemed tired and ill all year . . .

Peric reassured.

It sounds like a typical case of nervous exhaustion. Simply put, Trigo is burnt out.

Is he still under the care of Salvia, the palace physician ?

Why, yes, of course !

Then he is receiving the best possible care ! An infusion of the new season's rallis should see him come right.

As Peric spoke of his daughter, Salvia, Brag observed a pall of sadness fall on the face of the old scientist.

And you, Peric ?

Peric replied.

Since the day of my funeral, I have had all the time in the world —uninterrupted time—to devote to that which I love most. Science ! And I have never been happier . . .

. . . except for one small thing . . .

I lament that I may never meet my new grand-daughter. But she must never realise the fact of my post-mortem existence ! For paramount reasons of national security, the secret must be kept . . .

Peric continued . . .

Only Salvia and the Emperor and his immediate family—yourself and Janno here—know of my whereabouts. And there is one other, a body-guard, whose identity I am sworn not to reveal, hand-picked by the Emperor himself. But even that much I should not have told you . . .

The upper level of Peric's domain commanded a panoramic view over the city and its harbour to the Great Ocean beyond.

Have you been enjoying the audivision coverage of the anniversary celebrations, Peric ? And what do you make of the recent violence and unrest ?

Audivision ? I don't watch it. I was unaware of the violence. I wonder what's behind that ?

As for Trigo's United Victris —it is an ill-conceived vanity project !

For a while, Peric savoured the company of his occasional visitors. And then . . .

We must return to the palace to be at Trigo's bedside . . .

Arriving back at the Imperial Palace, Brag and Janno were met by an ashen-faced Salvia, and a team of physicians.

The Emperor's condition has worsened . . .

We think he has experienced a complete mental shutdown.

They found the Chief of Police and Dennu Preed, the Minister of Public Health, at the Emperor's bedside. A difficult conversation ensued.

Is there nothing further that can be done, Salvia ? What remedy have you already given ?

Why, I gave his Imperial Majesty an infusion of the new season's rallis. Normally . . .

You did WHAT ?! The rallis is poisoned ! As you have just unwittingly confirmed . . .

This is going even better than planned !

I did not know that. No one told me.

It's what Peric would have done, I'm sure.

As the full extent of the fiasco dawned on the others, Dennu Preed could barely stifle a chuckle.

We must tell the people !

We must do more than that ! To minimise harm, we must enact an immediate legislative ban !

The Chief of Police was in full agreement. It did not take much to persuade Brag of the necessity of an immediate prohibition.

This menacing herb has already killed numerous Trigan citizens, and imperils the Emperor himself, even as we speak !

An emergency late night session of the Imperial Council was called. It was with a barely concealed snarl of glee that Dennu Preed read out the fateful decree.

I hereby declare, by decree of the Imperial Council, that the rallis plant is from this moment hence —*a forbidden plant !*

The stunning proclamation was relayed to early morning passers-by in the main square of Trigan City.

The Acting Minister of Public Health, Dennu Preed, has determined that contamination of the rallis plant is of unknown extent, but widespread. Accordingly, in the interest of the greater good, it is now a criminal offence to ingest, imbibe, possess, cultivate, sell, or otherwise supply or administer the rallis plant or any of its derivatives.

The shock edict caused resentment and confusion among the general populace. By late morning, an angry mob had amassed outside the Imperial Palace.

Give us our medicine !

Down with Public Health !

An emergency meeting of the Imperial Council was hastily convened. In the Emperor's absence, his brother, Brag, presided.

Minister Dennu Preed, while you may have mitigated one crisis, you have seemingly instigated another. What do you propose to do to quell the fears of the citizenry and meet their legitimate medical needs ?

Indeed, Lord Brag, something must be done. By great good fortune, a Tharv corporation, Tharv Pharmaceuticals, has large stockpiles of synthetic alternatives to rallis-based medicines in its warehouses. Sufficient to meet the needs of the Trigan people. At my call, these can be delivered within a day . . .

. . . There will be no upfront costs, Trigan can pay later in easy lunar monthly payments.

Meanwhile, the rallis plant must be stamped out !

That fateful morning, a fleet of Trigan City Police heli-jets outfitted with herbicide tanks flew over the plain of Vorg and the surrounding foothills, spraying the wild-growing rallis plants, which withered to the touch of the poison.

Not until Elekton's twin suns were setting did they cease their orgy of indiscriminate destruction and set their return course to Trigan City. They would return the next day, and the next, and the day after that . . .

Meanwhile, in Trigan City, lines of people began to form outside the nominated dispensaries, waiting to receive their substitute medicines from Tharv Pharmaceuticals, as had been promised.

They did not have to wait long. Round the clock, massive transporter craft laden with pharmaceuticals took off from Tharv City Air Terminal.

An amnesty was granted, whereby those in possession of the rallis plant could relinquish their supplies at a deposit point in the great square of the city. At sundown, the Trigan City Police set the giant heap ablaze.

Not much later, the riot squad dispersed the crowds gathered downwind of the conflagration.

As midnight approached, overzealous Trigan City Police officers went door-to-door, frightening children and the elderly and infirm.

What do you want at this time of night ?

Got rallis ? Hand it over immediately, or it will be the worse for you.

That same night, all across the city . . .

I've taken the pills and the nausea's gone —but so has my appetite ! So now what am I to do ?

. . . a multitude of sufferers were learning the bitter truth about the substitute pills and potions from Tharv.

The pills don't work ! Must I now suffer these awful headaches ? If only I had a little rallis !

Tarkas was the owner of Trigan City's largest brewery, which supplied half of the populace's demand for rallis-based beverages. He was very rich. He was also proud and stubborn.

No unctuous bureaucrat from Tharv is going to tell me what I can and cannot brew in my own brewery !

And so the giant machinery hummed and clanked noisily as production at the great ale factory continued at full tilt.

The ale continued to flow, until . . .

Master ! I think we have trouble !

. . . the unwelcome arrival of the Trigan City Police !

Tarkas was taken before the city magistrate . . . but it was not merely a matter of paying a fine !

The penalty is imprisonment for life and your beverage factory will be requisitioned by Tharv Pharmaceuticals.

Wha-a-a-at ?

They dragged him away, protesting . . .

Turncoats ! Traitors ! Thieves ! This is TYRANNY !

A thriving black market in rallis sprang up—literally overnight.

Some exchanges were hidden in plain sight.

Other exchanges were more furtive—transacted under cover of darkness.

Most transactions were to the mutual benefit of the parties concerned . . .

You have the rallis—and it is last season's ?

Yes. And it is the best ! Satisfaction or your money back—guaranteed !

. . . but there were occasional unfortunate exceptions !

Aaaaaaaghhh !

Ten thousand curses !

That afternoon, Janno and Keren visited Janno's father Brag, the Emperor's brother, in his private rooms at the Palace. Keren had brought along a flask of the new synthetic "rallis"-based beverage. Brag tasted it.

By all the stars ! This is horrible !

As Janno and Keren looked on, bemused, an audivision screen behind them came on with the news headlines. The leading item . . .

It is now two days since the health authorities determined that the poisoned rallis is behind the deadly wave of violence and ill health that has blighted the recent anniversary . . .

Suddenly, Janno remembered.

Two days ?! That's when Roffa said he was going to harvest his crop of rallis ! And he won't know of the deadly contamination ! We must go and tell him before it's too late !

Janno and Keren set off immediately along the treacherous Vorg sea coast road . . .

But would they be in time to save their friend Roffa from his impending doom ?

From the look on Roffa's face it was immediately apparent to Janno and Keren that they had arrived too late—Roffa had already partaken of his crop.

Hello, friends. What's happening ?

Roffa ! Are you all right ? . . . Are you sure you're all right ?

Now it was Roffa's turn to look worried.

Janno, I'm perfectly fine—as you can see. Why wouldn't I be ?

Roffa, new information has come to light.

Quickly, Janno explained how the deadly violence in Trigan City and the Emperor's health crisis had both been linked to presumed contamination in the new season's rallis crop.

Roffa insisted that his own crop remained uncontaminated because it had been grown under controlled conditions. Keren was keen to confirm Roffa's hypothesis. He took several deep inhalations from Roffa's ornate table-top vaporising device.

Well, Keren ?

It's very good . . . very good indeed . . .

A wave of relaxation had come over Keren. It was soon followed by a wave of tiredness.

. . . But, you know what ? It's been an exhausting few days. I feel an overwhelming urge to take a short nap.

In less time than it takes to tell, Keren was gently snoring. Immediately, Roffa began scrawling a note.

Janno, this is for our friend here. So that when he awakes he doesn't worry that we're gone. We must go now. We may be some time . . .

Roffa turned and faced his friend intently.

I regret that I have not been fully frank with you. There is something of the utmost importance that I must now divulge . . .

Roffa . . . I don't understand.

You soon will ! Follow me.

Roffa led his friend through the maze of the bunker's dimly lit corridors . . .

. . . to a door. He turned a key in the lock and opened it.

By all the stars ! It's a secret underground railway !

Yes ! And I called ahead. Here comes the train now.

They boarded the compartment. The doors closed and quickly they were whisked away.

Where are we going ?

To see an old friend . . . a very old friend . . .

In a flash, Janno's puzzlement turned to astonishment.

. . . Peric ! We're going to to see Peric !

Yes ! I am Peric's bodyguard. I was sworn to secrecy, but the present circumstances are such that you must now know. Look, we've arrived . . .

Peric was waiting to meet them. He had news.

I have made an alarming discovery. The strange dust that has been falling from the sky for the past lunar month is a plant toxin with an affinity for—the rallis plant ! Furthermore, its molecular structure shows signs of deliberate design. It appears to be some sort of bioweapon.

Yes ! You have stumbled upon the cause of the poisoned rallis. But where has the dust come from ?

Well, what else has been in the sky this past lunar month ? See . . .

Even as they gazed from the window, an atmosphere craft coming from the direction of Tharv was leaving behind a thick plume of vapour.

Somehow, someone from Tharv has contrived to disperse this bioweapon in the exhaust trails of Tharvian atmosphere craft.

And you say that the Acting Minister of Public Health, who has just enacted a ban on the rallis, is a Tharvian ? I think he may be behind all this !

Dennu Preed must be stopped !

There was no time to waste. Janno and Roffa departed for the city.

At the Ministry of Public Health, they spoke to Dennu Preed's secretary.

We need to speak to Minister Preed on an urgent matter !

He left for the airport a short while ago. He has a meeting with Tharv Pharmaceuticals this afternoon. If you hurry to the airport, there's a chance you might catch him.

But when they arrived at Trigan City Air Terminal they saw Dennu Preed's craft streaking skywards.

He's getting away !

All is not lost—my private jet is on the adjacent runway. We can outrun him. Let's go !

As Dennu Preed approached the landing pad on the roof of the Tharv Pharmaceuticals factory, he noticed Janno's sleek private jet parked to one side—but failed to recognise it.

Strange. I haven't seen that craft before. It's rather stylish !

Perhaps it is a gift from the Potentate—to thank me for a job well done ! Heh ! Heh !

He alighted from his craft and was greeted, as per usual, by a member of the company's security unit.

Welcome back, Master.

I see that you thought ahead to call the elevator. Good. If anyone wants to see me, I shall be in the basement research laboratory, and am not to be disturbed —unless they're important.

As soon as Dennu Preed's elevator compartment had descended out of sight . . .

Congratulations ! You made the right choice—the choice to live. Now, hands behind your back !

Quickly, Janno and Roffa bound and gagged the terrified sentry, and hid him out of sight in a storage room.

Janno and Roffa followed their quarry. Down, down, down . . .

They seemed to descend to the very bowels of the planet !

OLIVER FREY

The two comrades bid the elevator compartment stop at one level above the basement.

We must maintain the element of surprise. We'll look for stairs going down the rest of the way.

Sure enough, they found a flight of steps that took them down behind rows of tanks.

. . . in a bold stroke of genius, we have captured the entire market for the rallis plant. Millions of thullars are about to flow into the coffers of Tharv Pharmaceuticals. And every lunar month we will steadily ramp up the price !

Creeping forwards, they recognised the voice of Dennu Preed.

. . . and this, my friends, is just the beginning ! Next, we will revisit the molecular composition of our synthetic substitutes, with a view to making certain further—adjustments !

He was bragging to his coterie of assistants.

Soon, we will control not merely Trigan's pharmaceutical supply but the minds of its masses !

The fiend !

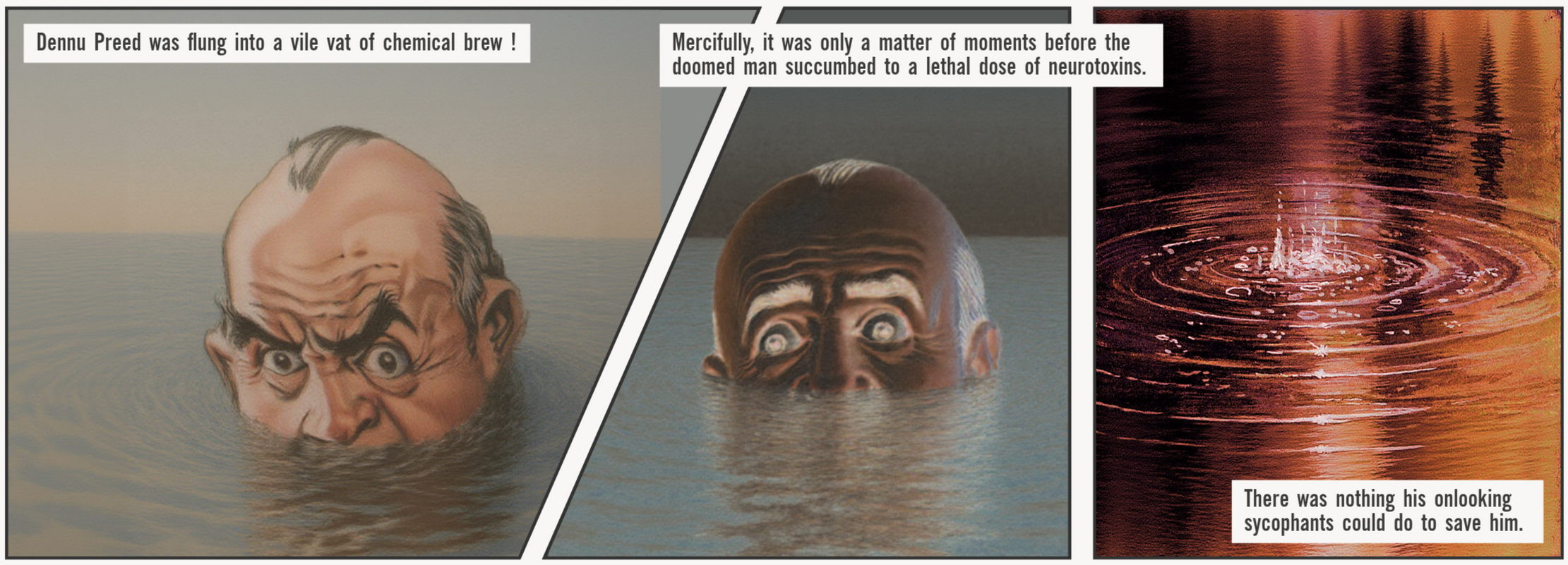
Janno—the fellow with the hat is armed. Looks like a bodyguard. We'll get him first.

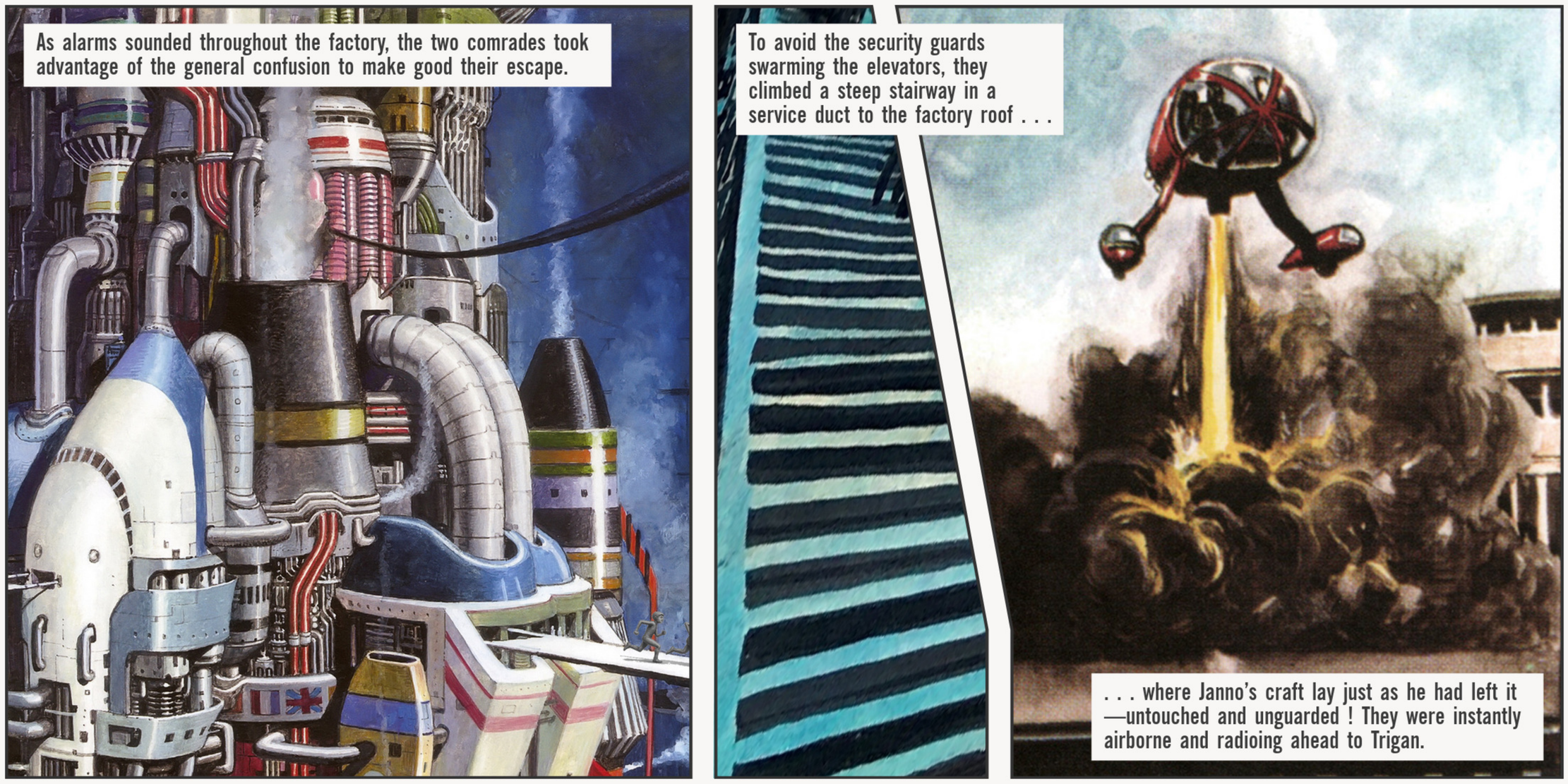
And then—Janno gave an uncontrollable sneeze !

Aaaaa-shooooooo !

Disaster was immediate. Dennu Preed's bodyguard turned and . . .


Janno and Roffa ducked under the hail of projectiles . . .
. . . which ricocheted harmlessly, except for one—which severed a high pressure hose !
Propelled by the escaping pressurised liquid, the hose snaked like a whip, wrapping itself around the hapless Minister of Wholistic Wellbeing and plucking him up like a helpless ragdoll . . .


Dennu Preed was flung into a vile vat of chemical brew !
Mercifully, it was only a matter of moments before the doomed man succumbed to a lethal dose of neurotoxins.
There was nothing his onlooking sycophants could do to save him.


As alarms sounded throughout the factory, the two comrades took advantage of the general confusion to make good their escape.
To avoid the security guards swarming the elevators, they climbed a steep stairway in a service duct to the factory roof . . .
. . . where Janno's craft lay just as he had left it —untouched and unguarded ! They were instantly airborne and radioing ahead to Trigan.

They arrived back at the Imperial Palace to find the Emperor Trigo already on the road to recovery. Keren had followed the instructions in the note that Roffa had left him, and delivered a parcel of the uncontaminated rallis plant.

Subsequent investigations by the Trigan authorities revealed the story of the poisoned rallis from beginning to end.

A special research division of Tharv Pharmaceuticals headed by one of Tharv's top scientists had developed a virus to target the rallis plant and alter its bio-chemical composition.

Some years before, the Board of Directors of Tharv Pharmaceuticals had convened a secret meeting. They were presided over by the mega corporation's turpitudinous CEO—none other than Dennu Preed !

The domestic market is saturated with our products. But there is vast untapped potential in Trigan !

But the Trigans have the rallis plant. Why would they want our pharmaceuticals ?

I have a plan to take care of that obstacle. Listen closely . . .

The occasion of the Trigan Empire's fiftieth anniversary had provided the perfect opportunity to deliver the viral load—in the exhaust trails of atmosphere craft coming from Tharv.

All those whose health had been affected soon recovered from the toxic effects of the poisoned rallis. And all those who had been convicted and imprisoned were pardoned and released. One among them was Tarkas, the wealthy brewer. His confiscated brewery was returned, and he was pardoned by the Emperor himself—and generously compensated !

The Tharv Pharmaceuticals factory no longer has an owner. Should you wish to convert it into a beverage factory, it's all yours !

I thank you, Imperial Majesty.

United Victris was now in tatters. Members of the Parliament of United Victris were thoroughly vetted and provided new employment in a governing body set up to rule over Tharv —the Potentate and his ruling elite had vanished !

The conclusion of this strange saga was a short speech by the Emperor, at the next session of the Imperial Council. A change of heart and a change of plan !

Since a guarantee of peace on this planet cannot be given by mutual trust and cooperation, instead the peace will be enforced at my decree and by the abiding might of the Trigan Empire.