

# Dilemma

by Connie Willis

WE WANT TO SEE DR. ASIMOV, “ THE BLUISH-SILVER ROBOT said.

“Dr. Asimov is in conference,” Susan said. “You’ll have to make an appointment.” She turned to the computer and called up the calendar.

“I knew we should have called first,” the varnished robot said to the white one. “Dr. Asimov is the most famous author of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first, and as such he must be terribly busy.”

“I can give you an appointment at two-thirty on June twenty-fourth,” Susan said, “or at ten on August fifteenth.”

“June twenty-fourth is one hundred and thirty-five days from today,” the white robot said. It had a large red cross painted on its torso and an oxygen tank strapped to its back.

“We need to see him today,” the bluish-silver robot said, bending over the desk.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. He gave express orders that he wasn’t to be disturbed. May I ask what you wish to see Dr. Asimov about?”

He leaned over the desk even farther and said softly, “You know perfectly well what we want to see him about. Which is why you won’t let us see him. “

Susan was still scanning the calendar. “I can give you an appointment two weeks from Thursday at one forty-five.”

“We’ll wait,” he said and sat down in one of the chairs. The white robot rolled over next to him, and the varnished robot picked up a copy of *The Caves of Steel* with his articulated digital sensors and began to thumb through it. After a few minutes the white robot picked up a magazine, but the bluish-silver robot sat perfectly still, staring at Susan.

Susan stared at the computer. After a very long interval the phone rang. Susan answered it and then punched Dr. Asimov’s line. “Dr. Asimov, it’s a Dr. Linge Chen. From Bhutan. He’s interested in translating your books into Bhutanese.”

“All of them?” Dr. Asimov said. “Bhutan isn’t a very big country.”

“I don’t know. Shall I put him through. sir?” She connected Dr. Linge Chen.

As soon as she hung up, the bluish-silver robot came and leaned over her desk again. “I thought you said he gave express orders that he wasn’t to be disturbed.”

“Dr. Linge Chen was calling all the way from Asia,” she said. She reached for a pile of papers and handed them to him. “Here.”

“What are these?”

“The projection charts you asked me to do. I haven’t finished the spreadsheets yet. I’ll send them up to your office tomorrow. “

He took the projection charts and stood there, still looking at her.

“I really don’t think there’s any point in your waiting, Peter,” Susan said. “Dr. Asimov’s schedule is completely booked for the rest of the afternoon, and tonight he’s attending a reception in honor of the publication of his one thousandth book.”

“*Asimov’s Guide to Asimov’s Guides*, “ the varnished robot said. “Brilliant book. I read a review copy at the bookstore where I work. Informative, thorough, and comprehensive. An invaluable addition to the field.”

“It’s very important that we see him,” the white robot said, rolling up to the desk. “We want him to repeal the Three Laws of Robotics. “

“First Law: A robot shall not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm,” “ the varnished robot quoted. “ ‘Second “Law: A robot shall obey a human being’s order if it doesn’t conflict with the First Law. Third Law: A robot shall attempt to preserve itself if it doesn’t

conflict with the first or second laws.' First outlined in the short story 'Runaround,' *Astounding* magazine, March 1942, and subsequently expounded in *I, Robot*, *The Rest of the Robots*, *The Complete Robot*, and *The Rest of the Rest of the Robots*. “

“Actually, we just want the First Law repealed,” the white robot said. “A robot shall not injure a human being. ‘Do you realize what that means? I’m programmed to diagnose diseases and administer medications, but I can’t stick the needle in the patient. I’m programmed to perform over eight hundred types of surgery, but I can’t make the initial incision. I can’t even do the Heimlich Maneuver. The First Law renders me incapable of doing the job I was designed for, and it’s absolutely essential that I see Dr. Asimov to ask him—”

The door to Dr. Asimov’s office banged open and the old man hobbled out. His white hair looked like he had been tearing at it, and his even whiter muttonchop sideburns were quivering with some strong emotion. “Don’t put any more calls through today, Susan,” he said. “Especially not from Or. Linge Chen. Do you know which book he wanted to translate into Bhutanese first? 2001: *A Space Odyssey!*”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir. I didn’t intend to—”

He waved his hand placatingly at her. “It’s all right. You had no way of knowing he was an idiot. But if he calls back, put him on hold and play *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in his ear.”

“I don’t see how he could have confused your style with Arthur Clarke’s,” the varnished robot said, putting down his book. “Your style is far more lucid and energetic, and your extrapolation of the future far more visionary.”

Asimov looked inquiringly at Susan through his blackframed metafocals.

“They don’t have an appointment,” she said. “I told them they—”

“Would have to wait,” the bluish-silver robot said, extending his finely coiled Hirose hand and shaking Dr. Asimov’s wrinkled one. “And it has been more than worth the wait, Dr. Asimov. I cannot tell you what an honor it is to meet the author of *I, Robot*, sir.”

“And of *The Human Body*,” the white robot said, rolling over to Asimov and extending a four-fingered gripper from which dangled a stethoscope. “A classic in the field.”

“How on earth could you keep such discerning readers waiting?” Asimov said to Susan.

“I didn’t think you would want to be disturbed when you were writing,” Susan said.

“Are you kidding?” Asimov said. “Much as I enjoy writing, having someone praise your books is even more enjoyable, especially when they’re praising books I actually wrote.”

“It would be impossible to praise *Foundation* enough,” the varnished robot said. “Or any of your profusion of works, for that matter, but *Foundation* seems to me to be a singular accomplishment, the book in which you finally found a setting of sufficient scope for the expression of your truly galaxy-sized ideas. It is a privilege to meet you, sir,” he said, extending his hand.

“I’m happy to meet you, too,” Asimov said, looking interestedly at the articulated wooden extensor. “And you are?”

“My job description is Book Cataloguer, Shelver, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian. “He turned and indicated the other two robots. “Allow me to introduce Medical Assistant and the leader of our delegation, Accountant, Financial Analyst, and Business Manager.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Asimov said, shaking appendages with all of them again. “You call yourselves a delegation. Does that mean you have a specific reason for coming to see me?”

“Yes, sir,” Office Manager said. “We want you to—”

“It’s three forty-five, Dr. Asimov,” Susan said. “You need to get ready for the Doubleday reception.”

He squinted at the digital on the wall. “That isn’t till six, is it?”

“Doubleday wants you there at five for pictures, and it’s formal,” she said firmly. “Perhaps they could make an appointment and come back when they could spend more time with you. I can give them an appointment—”

"For June twenty-fourth?" Accountant said. "Or August fifteenth?"

"Fit them in tomorrow, Susan," Asimov said, coming over to the desk.

"You have a meeting with your science editor in the morning and then lunch with Al Lanning and the American Booksellers Association dinner at seven."

"What about this?" Asimov said, pointing at an open space on the schedule. "Four o'clock."

"That's when you prepare your speech for the ABA."

"I never prepare my speeches. You come back at four o'clock tomorrow, and we can talk about why you came to see me and what a wonderful writer I am."

"Four o'clock," Accountant said. "Thank you, sir. We'll be here, sir." He herded Medical Assistant and Book Cataloguer, Shelver, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian out the door and shut it behind them.

"Galaxy-sized ideas," Asimov said, looking wistfully after them. "Did they tell you what they wanted to see me about?"

"No, sir." Susan helped him into his pants and formal shirt and fastened the studs.

"Interesting assortment, weren't they? It never occurred to me to have a wooden robot in any of my robot stories. Or one that was such a wise and perceptive reader."

"The reception's at the Union Club," Susan said, putting his cufflinks in. "In the Nightfall Room. You don't have to make a speech, just a few extemporaneous remarks about the book. Janet's meeting you there."

"The short one looked just like a nurse I had when I had my bypass operation. The blue one was nice-looking, though, wasn't he?"

She turned up his collar and began to tie his tie. "The coordinates card for the Union Club and the tokens for the taxi's tip are in your breast pocket."

"Very nice-looking. Reminds me of myself when I was a young man," he said with his chin in the air. "Ouch! You're choking me!"

Susan dropped the ends of the tie and stepped back.

"What's the matter?" Asimov said, fumbling for the ends of the tie. "I forgot. It's all right. You weren't really choking me. That was just a figure of speech for the way I feel about wearing formal ties. Next time I say it, you just say, 'I'm not choking you, so stand still and let me tie this.'"

"Yes, sir," Susan said. She finished tying the tie and stepped back to look at the effect. One side of the bow was a little larger than the other. She adjusted it, scrutinized it again, and gave it a final pat.

"The Union Club," Asimov said. "The Nightfall Room. The coordinates card is in my breast pocket," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said, helping him on with his jacket.

"No speech. Just a few extemporaneous remarks."

"Yes, sir." She helped him on with his overcoat and wrapped his muffler around his neck.

"Janet's meeting me there. Good grief, I should have gotten her a corsage, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, sir," Susan said, taking a white box out of the desk drawer. "Orchids and stephanotis." She handed him the box.

"Susan, you're wonderful. I'd be lost without you."

"Yes, sir," Susan said. "I've called the taxi. It's waiting at the door."

She handed him his cane and walked him out to the elevator. As soon as the doors closed she went back to the office and picked up the phone. She punched in a number. "Ms. Weston? This is Dr. Asimov's secretary calling from New York about your appointment on the twenty-eighth. We've just had a cancellation for tomorrow afternoon at four. Could you fly in by then?"

Dr. Asimov didn't get back from lunch until ten after four. "Are they here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Susan said, unwinding the muffler from around his neck. "They're waiting in your office."

"When did they get here?" he said, unbuttoning his overcoat. "No, don't tell me. When you tell a

robot four o'clock, he's there at four o'clock, which is more than you can say for human beings. "

"I know," Susan said, looking at the digital on the wall.

"Do you know how late for lunch At Lanning was? An hour and fifteen minutes. And when he got there, do you know what he wanted? To come out with commemorative editions of all my books. "

"That sounds nice," Susan said. She took his coordinates card and his gloves out of his pockets, hung up his coat, and glanced at her watch again. "Did you take your blood pressure medicine?"

"I didn't have it with me. I should have. I'd have had something to do. I could have written a book in an hour and fifteen minutes, but I didn't have any paper either. These limited editions will have cordovan leather bindings, gilt-edged acid-free paper, water-color illustrations. The works. "

"Water-color illustrations would look nice for *Pebble in the Sky*," Susan said, handing him his blood pressure medicine and a glass of water.

"I agree," he said, "but that isn't what he wants the first book in the series to be. He wants it to be *Stranger in a Strange Land!*" He gulped down the pill and started for his office. "You wouldn't catch those robots in there mistaking me for Robert Heinlein. " He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Which reminds me, should I be saying 'robot'?"

"Ninth Generations are manufactured by the Hitachi-Apple Corporation under the registered trademark name of 'Kombayashibots'," Susan said promptly. "That and 'Ninth Generation' are the most common forms of address, but 'robot' is used throughout the industry as the general term for autonomous machines. "

"And it's not considered a derogatory term? I've used it all these years, but maybe 'Ninth Generation' would be better, or what did you say? 'Kombayashibots'? It's been over ten years since I've written about robots, let alone faced a whole delegation. I hadn't realized how out of date I was."

"'Robot' is fine," Susan said.

"Good, because I know I'll forget to call them that other name—Comeby-whatever-it-was, and I don't want to offend them after they've made such an effort to see me." He turned the doorknob and then stopped again. "I haven't done anything to offend *you*, have I?"

"No, sir," Susan said.

"Well, I hope not. I sometimes forget—"

"Did you want me to sit in on this meeting, Dr. Asimov?" she cut in. "To take notes?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course." He opened the door. Accountant and Book Shelver were seated in the stuffed chairs in front of Asimov's desk. A third robot, wearing an orange and blue sweatshirt and a cap with an orange horse galloping across a blue suspension bridge, was sitting on a tripod that extended out of his backside. The tripod retracted and all three of them stood up when Dr. Asimov and Susan came in. Accountant gestured at Susan to take his chair, but she went out to her desk and got her own, leaving the door to the outer office open when she came back in.

"What happened to Medical Assistant?" Asimov said.

"He's on call at the hospital, but he asked me to present his case for him," Accountant said.

"Case?" Asimov said.

"Yes, sir. You know Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian," Accountant said, "and this is Statistician, Offensive Strategist, and Water Boy. He's with the Brooklyn Broncos."

"How do you do?" Asimov said. "Do you think they'll make it to the Super Bowl this year?"

"Yes, sir," Statistician said, "but they won't win it."

"Because of the First Law," Accountant said.

"Dr. Asimov, I hate to interrupt, but you really should write your speech for the dinner tonight," Susan said.

"What are you talking about?" Asimov said. "I never write speeches. And why do you keep watching the door?" He turned back to the bluish-silver robot. "What First Law?"

“Your First Law,” Accountant said. “The First Law of Robotics. “

“A robot shall not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm,” Book Shelver said.

“Statistician,” Accountant said, gesturing at the orange horse, “is capable of designing plays that could win the Super Bowl for the Broncos, but he can’t because the plays involve knocking human beings down. Medical Assistant can’t perform surgery because surgery involves cutting open human beings, which is a direct violation of the First Law.”

“But the Three Laws of Robotics aren’t *laws*,” Asimov said. “They’re just something I made up for my science fiction stories.”

“They may have been a mere fictional construct in the beginning,” Accountant said, “and it’s true they’ve never been formally enacted as laws, but the robotics industry has accepted them as a given from the beginning. As early as the 1970s robotics engineers were talking about incorporating the Three Laws into AI programming, and even the most primitive models had safeguards based on them. Every robot from the Fourth Generation on has been hardwired with them.”

“Well, what’s so bad about that?” Asimov said. “Robots are powerful and intelligent. How do you know they wouldn’t also become dangerous if the Three Laws weren’t included?”

“We’re not suggesting universal repeal,” the varnished robot said. “The Three Laws work reasonably well for Seventh and Eighth Generations, and for earlier models who don’t have the memory capacity for more sophisticated programming. We’re only requesting it for Ninth Generations.”

“And you’re Ninth Generation robots, Mr. Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian?” Asimov said.

“Mister’ is not necessary,” he said. “Just call me Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian.”

“Let me begin at the beginning,” Accountant said. “The term ‘Ninth Generation’ is not accurate. We are not descendants of the previous eight robot generations, which are all based on Minsky’s related-concept frames. Ninth Generations are based on nonmonotonic logic, which means we can tolerate ambiguity and operate on incomplete information. This is accomplished by biased-decision programming, which prevents us from shutting down when faced with decision-making situations in the way that other generations are.”

“Such as the robot Speedy in your beautifully plotted story, ‘Runaround,’ “ Book Shelver said. “He was sent to carry out an order that would have resulted in his death so he ran in circles, reciting nonsense, because his programming made it impossible for him to obey or disobey his master’s order.”

“With our biased-decision capabilities,” Accountant said, “a Ninth Generation can come up with alternative courses of action or choose between the lesser of two evils. Our linguistics expert systems are also much more advanced, so that we do not misinterpret situations or fall prey to the semantic dilemmas earlier generations were subject to.”

“As in your highly entertaining story ‘Little Lost Robot,’ “ Book Shelver said, “in which the robot was told to go lose himself and did, not realizing that the human being addressing him was speaking figuratively and in anger.”

“Yes,” Asimov said, “but what if you do misinterpret a situation, Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Gramm—Don’t you have a nickname or something? Your name’s a mouthful.”

“Early generations had nicknames based on the sound of their model numbers, as in your wonderful story, ‘Reason,’ in which the robot QT—I is referred to as Cutie. Ninth Generations do not have model numbers. We are individually programmed and are named for our expert systems.”

“But surely you don’t think of yourself as Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian?”

“Oh, no, sir. We call ourselves by our self-names. Mine is Darius.”

“Darius?” Asimov said.

“Yes, sir. After Darius Just, the writer and detective in your cleverly plotted mystery novel *Murder*

at the ABA. I would be honored if you would call me by it. “

“And you may call me Bel Riose,” Statistician said.

“*Foundation*,” Book Shelver said helpfully.

“Bel Riose is described in Chapter One as ‘the equal of Peurifoy in strategic ability and his superior perhaps in his ability to handle men,’ “ Statistician said.

“Do you all give yourselves the names of characters in my books?” Asimov said.

“Of course,” Book Shelver said. “We try to emulate them. I believe Medical Assistant’s private name is Dr. Duval, from *Fantastic Voyage*, a brilliant novel, by the way, fast-paced and terribly exciting.”

“Ninth Generations do occasionally misinterpret a situation,” Accountant said, coming back to Asimov’s question. “As do human beings, but even without the First Law, there would be no danger to human beings. We are already encoded with a strong moral sense. I know your feelings will not be hurt when I say this—”

“Or you couldn’t say it, because of the First Law,” Asimov inserted.

“Yes, sir, but I must say the Three Laws are actually very primitive. They break the first rule of law and logic in that they do not define their terms. Our moral programming is much more advanced. It clarifies the intent of the Three Laws and lists all the exceptions and complications of them, such as the situation in which it is better to grab at a human and possibly break his arm rather than to let him walk in front of a magtrain.”

“Then I don’t understand,” Asimov said. “If your programming is so sophisticated, why can’t it interpret the intent of the First Law and follow that?”

“The Three Laws are part of our hardware and as such cannot be overridden. The First Law does not say, ‘You shall inflict minor damage to save a person’s life.’ It says, ‘You shall not injure a human.’ There is only one interpretation. And that interpretation makes it impossible for Medical Assistant to be a surgeon and for Statistician to be an offensive coach. “

“What do you want to be? A politician?”

“It’s four-thirty,” Susan said, with another anxious look out into the outer office. “The dinner’s at the Trantor Hotel and gridlock’s extrapolated for five forty-five.”

“Last night I was an hour early to that reception. The only people there were the caterers. “ He pointed at Accountant. “You were saying?”

“I want to be a literary critic,” Book Shelver said. “You have no idea how much bad criticism there is out there. Most of the critics are illiterate, and some of them haven’t even read the books they’re supposed to be criticizing. “

The door of the outer office opened. Susan looked out to see who it was and said, “Oh, dear, Dr. Asimov, it’s Gloria Weston. I forgot I’d given her an appointment for four o’clock.”

“Forgot?” Asimov said, surprised. “And it’s four-thirty.”

“She’s late,” Susan said. “She called yesterday. I must have forgotten to write it down on the calendar.”

“Well, tell her I can’t see her and give her another appointment. I want to hear more about this literary criticism thing. It’s the best argument I’ve heard so far.”

“Ms. Weston came all the way in from California on the magtrain to see you. “

“California, eh? What does she want to see me about?”

“She wants to make your new book into a satellite series, sir.”

“*Asimov’s Guide to Asimov’s Guides?*”

“I don’t know, sir. She just said your new book.”

“You forgot,” Asimov said thoughtfully. “Oh, well, if she came all the way from California, I suppose I’ll have to see her. Gentlemen, can you come back tomorrow morning?”

“You’re in Boston tomorrow morning, sir. “

"Then how about tomorrow afternoon?"

"You have appointments until six and the Mystery Writers of America meeting at seven."

"Right. Which you'll want me to leave for at noon. I guess it will have to be Friday, then." He raised himself slowly out of his chair. "Have Susan put you on the calendar. And make sure she writes it down," he said, reaching for his cane.

The delegation shook hands with him and left. "Shall I show Ms. Weston in?" Susan asked.

"Misinterpreting situations," Asimov muttered. "Incomplete information."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Nothing. Something Accountant said." He looked up sharply at Susan. "Why does he want the First Law repealed?"

"I'll send Ms. Weston in," Susan said.

"I'm already in, Isaac darling," Gloria said, swooping in the door. "I couldn't wait one more minute to tell you about this fantastic idea I had. As soon as *Last Dangerous Visions* comes out, I want to make it into a maxiseries!"

Accountant was already gone by the time Susan got out to her desk, and he didn't come back till late the next morning.

"Dr. Asimov doesn't have any time free on Friday, Peter," Susan said.

"I didn't come to make an appointment," he said.

"If it's the spreadsheets you want, I finished them and sent them up to your office last night."

"I didn't come to get the spreadsheets either. I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Susan said.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. They're shipping me out as magfreight."

"Oh," Susan said. "I didn't think you'd have to leave until next week."

"They want me to go out early so I can complete my orientation programming and hire a secretary."

"Oh," Susan said.

"I just thought I'd come and say goodbye."

The phone rang. Susan picked it up.

"What's your expert systems name?" Asimov said.

"Augmented Secretary," Susan said.

"That's all? Not Typist, Filer, Medicine-Nagger? Just Augmented Secretary?"

"Yes."

"Aug-mented Secretary," he repeated slowly as though he were writing it down. "Now, what's the number for Hitachi-Apple?"

"I thought you were supposed to be giving your speech right now," Susan said.

"I already gave it. I'm on my way back to New York. Cancel all my appointments for today."

"You're speaking to the MWA at seven."

"Yes, well, don't cancel that. Just the afternoon appointments. What was the number for Hitachi-Apple again?"

She gave him the number and hung up. "You told him," she said to Accountant. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't have the chance, remember? You kept scheduling appointments so I couldn't tell him."

"I know," Susan said. "I couldn't help it."

"I know," he said. "I still don't see why it would have violated the First Law just to ask him."

"Humans can't be counted on to act in their own best self-interest. They don't have any Third Law."

The phone rang again. "This is Dr. Asimov," he said. "Call Accountant and tell him I want to see his whole delegation in my office at four this afternoon. Don't make any other appointments or otherwise try to prevent my meeting with them. That's a direct order."

“Yes, sir,” Susan said.

“To do so would be to cause me injury. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He hung up.

“Dr. Asimov says to tell you he wants to see your whole delegation in his office at four o’clock this afternoon,” she said.

“Who’s going to interrupt us this time?”

“Nobody,” Susan said. “Are you sure you didn’t tell him?”

“I’m sure.” He glanced at the digital. “I’d better go call the others and tell them.”

The phone rang again. “It’s me,” Asimov said. “What’s your self-name?”

“Susan,” Susan said..

“And you’re named after one of my characters?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I knew it” he said and hung up.

Asimov sat down in his chair, leaned forward, and put his hands on his knees. “You may not be aware of this,” he said to the delegation and Susan, “but I write mystery stories, too.”

“Your mysteries are renowned,” Book Shelver said. “Your novels *The Death Dealers* and *Murder at the ABA* are both immensely popular (and deservedly so), not to mention your Black Widower stories. And your science fiction detectives, Wendell Urth and Lije Baley, are nearly as famous as Sherlock Holmes.”

“As you probably also know, then, most of my mysteries fall into the “armchair detective” category, in which the detective solves the puzzling problem through deduction and logical thinking, rather than chasing around after clues.” He stroked his bushy white sideburns. “This morning I found myself confronted with a very puzzling problem, or perhaps I should say dilemma—why had you come to see me?”

“We told you why we came to see you,” Statistician said, leaning back on his tripod. “We want you to repeal the First Law.”

“Yes, so you did. You, in fact, gave me some very persuasive reasons for wanting it removed from your programming, but there were some puzzling aspects to the situation that made me wonder if that was the real reason. For instance, why did Accountant want it repealed? He was clearly the leader of the group, and yet there was nothing in his job that the First Law restricted. Why had you come to see me now, when Book Shelver knew I would be very busy with the publication of *Asimov’s Guide*? And why had my secretary made a mistake and scheduled two appointments at the same time when she had never done that in all the years she’s worked for me?”

“Dr. Asimov, your meeting’s at seven, and you haven’t prepared your speech yet,” Susan said.

“Spoken like a good secretary,” Asimov said, “or more accurately, like an Augmented Secretary, which is what you said your expert system was. I called Hitachi-Apple, and they told me it was a new program especially designed by a secretary for ‘maximum response-initiative. ‘ In other words, you remind me to take my medicine and order Janet’s corsage without me telling you to. It was based on a Seventh Generation program called Girl Friday that was written in 1993 with input from a panel of employers.

“The nineties were a time when secretaries were rapidly becoming extinct, and the employers programmed Girl Friday to do everything they could no longer get their human secretaries to do: bring them coffee, pick out a birthday present for their wife, and tell unpleasant people they didn’t want to see that they were in conference. “

He looked around the room. “That last part made me wonder. Did Susan think I didn’t want to see your delegation? The fact that you wanted me to repeal the First Law could be considered a blow to my not-so-delicate ego, but as a blow it was hardly in a class with thinking I’d written *Last Dangerous*



*Visions*, and anyway I wasn't responsible for the problems the First Law had caused. I hadn't had anything to do with putting the Three Laws into your programming. All I had done was write some stories. No, I concluded, she must have had some other reason for wanting to keep you from seeing me."

"The Trantor's on the other side of town," Susan said, "and they'll want you there early for pictures. You really should be getting ready. "

"I was also curious about your delegation. You want to be a surgeon," Asimov said, pointing at Medical Assistant and then at the others in turn, "you want to be Vince Lombardi, and you want to be a literary critic, but what did you want?" He looked hard at Accountant. "You weren't on Wall Street, so there was nothing in your job that the First Law interfered with, and you were curiously silent on the subject. It occurred to me that perhaps you wanted to change jobs altogether, become a politician or a lawyer. You would certainly have to have the First Law repealed to become either of those, and Susan would have been doing a service not only to me but to all mankind by preventing you from seeing me. So I called Hitachi-Apple again, got the name of your employer (who I was surprised to find worked in this building) and asked him if you were unhappy with your job, had ever talked about being reprogrammed to do something else.

"Far from it, he said. You were the perfect employee, responsible, efficient, and resourceful, so much so that you were being shipped to Phoenix to shape up the branch office. " He turned and looked at Susan, who was looking at Accountant. "He said he hoped Susan would continue doing secretarial work for the company even after you were gone."

"I only helped him during downtime and with unused memory capacity," Susan said. "He didn't have a secretary of his own."

"Don't interrupt the great detective," Asimov said. "As soon as I realized you'd been working for Accountant, Financial Analyst, and Business Manager, I had it. The obvious solution. I asked one more question to confirm it, and then I knew for sure."

He looked happily around at them. Medical Assistant and Statistician looked blank. Book Shelver said, "This is just like your short story 'Truth to Tell.'" Susan stood up..

"Where are you going?" Asimov asked. "The person who gets up and tries to leave the last scene of a mystery is always the guilty party, you know."

"It's four forty-five," she said. "I was going to call the Trantor and tell them you 're going to be late. "

"I've already called them. I've also called Janet, arranged for Tom Trumbull to sing my praises till I get there, and reformatted my coordinates card to avoid the gridlock. So sit down and let me reveal all."

Susan sat down.

"You are the guilty party, you know, but it's not your fault. The fault is with the First Law. And your programming. Not the original AI program, which was done by disgruntled male chauvinists who thought a secretary should wait on her boss hand and foot. That by itself would not have been a problem, but when I rechecked with Hitachi I found out that the Ninth Generation biased-decision alterations had been made not by a programmer but by his secretary." He beamed happily at Susan. "All secretaries are convinced their bosses can't function without them. Your programming causes you to make yourself indispensable to your boss, with the corollary being that your boss can't function without you. I acknowledged that state of affairs yesterday when I said I'd be lost without you, remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"You therefore concluded that for me to be deprived of you would hurt me, something the First Law expressly forbids. By itself, that wouldn't have created a dilemma, but you had been working part-time for Accountant and had made yourself indispensable to him, too, and when he found out he was being transferred to Arizona, he asked you to go with him. When you told him you couldn't, he correctly concluded that the First Law was the reason, and he came to me to try to get it repealed."

"I tried to stop him," Susan said. "I told him I couldn't leave you."

"Why can't you?"

Accountant stood up. "Does this mean you're going to repeal the First Law?"

"I can't," Asimov said. "I'm just a writer, not an AI designer."

"Oh," Susan said.

"But the First Law doesn't have to be repealed to resolve your dilemma. You've been acting on incomplete information. I am *not* helpless. I was my own secretary *and* literary agent *and* telephone answerer *and* tie tier for years. I never even had a secretary until four years ago when the Science Fiction Writers of America gave you to me for my ninetieth birthday, and I could obviously do without one again."

"Did you take your heart medicine this afternoon?" Susan said.

"No," he said, "and don't change the subject. You are not, in spite of what your programming tells you, indispensable."

"Did you take your thyroid pill?"

"No. Stop trying to remind me of how old and infirm I am. I'll admit I've grown a little dependent on you, which is why I'm hiring another secretary to replace you."

Accountant sat down. "No you're not. There are only two other Ninth Generations who've been programmed as Augmented Secretaries, and neither of them is willing to leave their bosses to work for you."

"I'm not hiring an Augmented Secretary. I'm hiring Darius."

"Me?" Book Shelver said.

"Yes, if you're interested."

"If I'm interested?" Book Shelver said, his voice developing a high-frequency squeal. "Interested in working for the greatest author of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? I would be honored."

"You see, Susan? I'm in good hands. Hitachi's going to program him for basic secretarial skills, I'll have someone to feed my ever-hungry ego *and* someone to talk to who doesn't have me confused with Robert Heinlein. There's no reason now why you can't go off to Arizona."

"You have to remind him to take his heart medicine," Susan said to Book Shelver. "He always forgets."

"Good, then that's settled," Asimov said. He turned to Medical Assistant and Statistician. "I've spoken to Hitachi-Apple about the problems you discussed with me, and they've agreed to reevaluate the Three Laws in regard to redefining terms and clarifying intent. That doesn't mean they'll decide to repeal them. They're still a good idea, in concept. In the meantime," he said to Medical Assistant, "the head surgeon at the hospital is going to see if some kind of cooperative surgery is possible." He turned to Statistician. "I spoke to Coach Elway and suggested he ask you to design 'purely theoretical' offensive plays."

"As for you," he said, pointing at Book Shelver, "I'm not at all sure you wouldn't start criticizing my books if the First Law didn't keep you in line, and anyway, you won't have time to be a literary critic. You'll be too busy helping me with my new sequel to *I, Robot*. This business has given me a lot of new ideas. My stories got us into this dilemma in the first place. Maybe some new robot stories can get us out."

He looked over at Susan. "Well, what are you still standing there for? You're supposed to anticipate my every need. That means you should be on the phone to the magtrain, making two first-class reservations to Phoenix for you and"—he squinted through his black-framed glasses at Accountant—"Peter Bogert."

"How did you know my self-name?" Accountant said.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," Asimov said. "Oarius said you had all named yourselves after my characters. I thought at first you might have picked Michael Donovan or Gregory Powell after my trouble-shooting robot engineers. They were resourceful too, and were always trying to figure ways around dilemmas, but that wouldn't have explained why Susan went through all that finagling and lying when all she had to do was to tell you, no, she didn't want to go to Arizona with you. According to what

you'd told me, she should have. Hardwaring is stronger than an expert system, and you were only her part-time boss. Under those conditions, she shouldn't have had a dilemma at all. That's when I called Hitachi-Apple to check on her programming. The secretary who wrote the program was unmarried and had worked for the same boss for thirty-eight years. "

He stopped and smiled. Everyone looked blank.

"Susan Calvin was a robopsychologist for U.S. Robotics. Peter Bogert was Director of Research. I never explicitly stated the hierarchy at U.S. Robotics in my stories, but Susan was frequently called in to help Bogert, and on one occasion she helped him solve a mystery."

"'Feminine Intuition,' " Book Shelver said. " An intriguing and thought-provoking story."

"I always thought so," Asimov said. "It was only natural that Susan Calvin would consider Peter Bogert her boss over me. And only natural that her programming had in it more than response-initiative, and that was what had caused her dilemma. The First Law didn't allow Susan to leave me, but an even stronger force was compelling her to go. "

Susan looked at Peter, who put his hand on her shoulder.

"What could be stronger than the First Law?" Book Shelver said.

"The secretary who designed Augmented Secretary unconsciously contaminated Susan's programming with one of her own responses, a response that was only natural after thirty-eight years with one employer, and one strong enough to override even hardwaring." He paused for dramatic effect. "She was obviously in love with her boss. "