ASIMOV

THE ROBOT SERIES

THE CAVES OF STEEL

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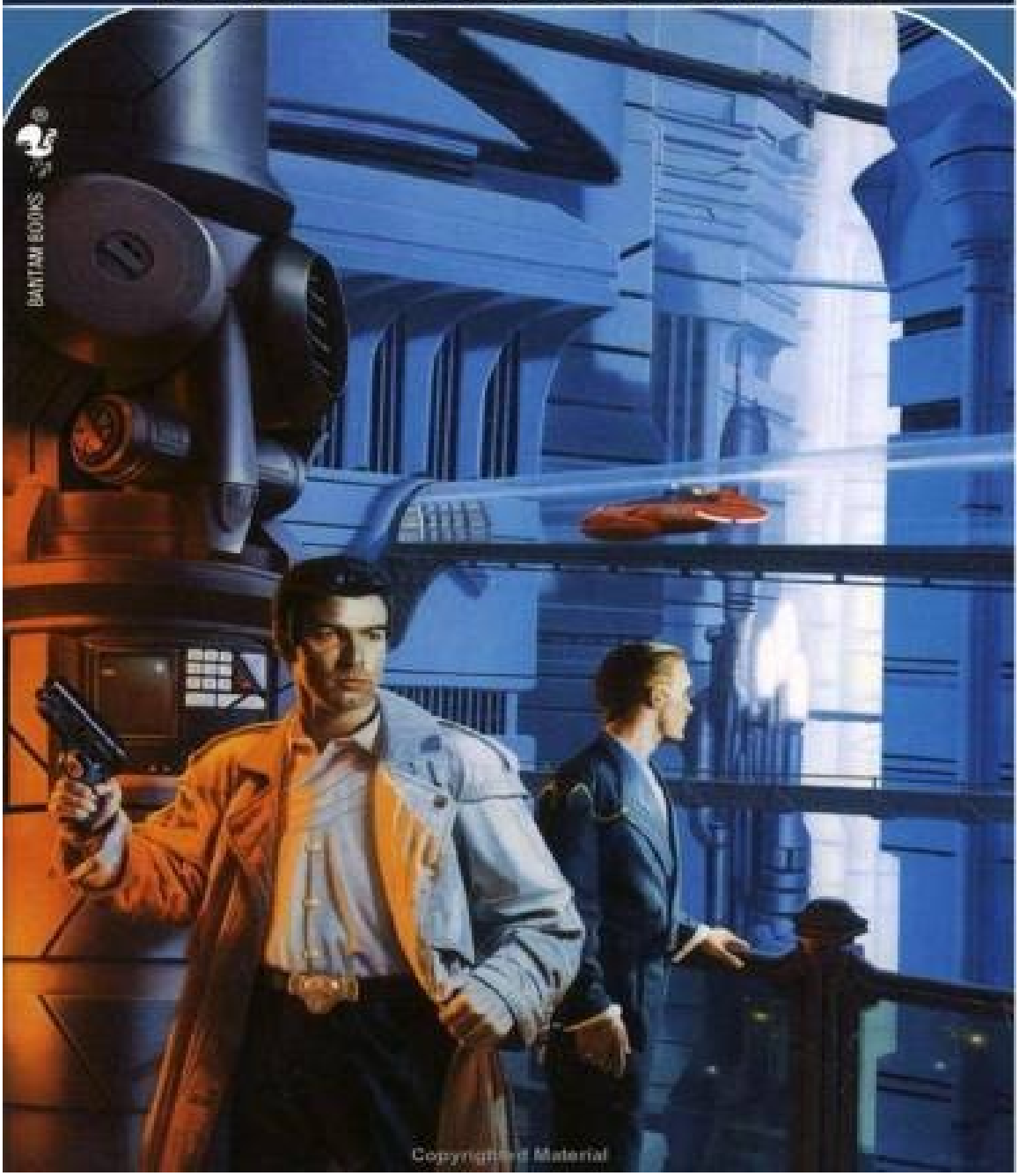

Isaac Asimov

The Caves of Steel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Asimov is regarded as one of the greatest science-fiction writers of our time, as well as a valued contributor to the world of science. He holds a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Columbia University (1948) and, though he no longer lives in the Boston area, is an Associate Professor of Biochemistry at Boston University. He has received numerous awards for his inspiring scientific articles covering a wide range of subjects.

In this novel Dr. Asimov's probing imagination has created fascinating adventures set in the not-too-distant future--adventures that could change from fiction to fact any day now.

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1: Conversation With A Commissioner

Lije Baley had just reached his desk when he became aware of R. Sammy watching him expectantly.

The dour lines of his long face hardened. “What do you want?”

“The boss wants you, Lije. Right away. Soon as you come in.”

“All right.”

R. Sammy stood there blankly.

Baley said, “I said, all right. Go away!”

R. Sammy turned on his heel and left to go about his duties. Baley wondered irritably why those same duties couldn’t be done by a man.

He paused to examine the contents of his tobacco pouch and make a mental calculation. At two pipefuls a day, he could stretch it to next quota day.

Then he stepped out from behind his railing (he’d rated a railed corner two years ago) and walked the length of the common room.

Simpson looked up from a merc-pool file as he passed. “Boss wants you, Lije.”

“I know. R. Sammy told me.”

A closely coded tape reeled out of the merc-pool’s vitals as the small instrument searched and analyzed its “memory” for the desired information stored in the tiny vibration patterns of the gleaming mercury surface within.

“I’d kick R. Sammy’s behind if I weren’t afraid I’d break a leg,” said Simpson. “I saw Vince Barrett the other day.”

“Oh?”

“He was looking for his job back. Or any job in the Department. The poor kid’s desperate, but what could I tell him. R. Sammy’s doing his job and that’s all. The kid has to work a delivery tread on the yeast farms now. He was a bright boy, too.

Everyone liked him."

Baley shrugged and said in a manner stiffer than he intended or felt, "It's a thing we're all living through."

The boss rated a private office. It said JULIUS ENDERBY on the clouded glass. Nice letters. Carefully etched into the fabric of the glass. Underneath, it said COMMISSIONER OF POLICE, CITY OF NEW YORR.

Baley stepped in and said, "You want to see me, Commissioner?"

Enderby looked up. He wore spectacles because his eyes were sensitive and couldn't take the usual contact lenses. It was only after one got used to the sight of them that one could take in the rest of the face, which was quite undistinguished. Baley had a strong notion that the Commissioner valued his glasses for the personality they lent him and suspected that his eyeballs weren't as sensitive as all that.

The Commissioner looked definitely nervous. He straightened his cuffs, leaned back, and said, too heartily, "Sit down, Lije. Sit down,"

Baley sat down stiffly and waited.

Enderby said, "How's Jessie? And the boy?"

"Fine," Said Baley, hollowly, "Just fine. And your family?"

"Fine," echoed Enderby. "Just fine."

It had been a false start.

Baley thought: Something's wrong with his face.

Aloud, he said, "Commissioner, I wish you wouldn't send R. Sammy out after me."

"Well, you know how I feel about those things, Lije. But he's been put here and I've got to use him for something."

"It's uncomfortable, Commissioner. He tells me you want me and then he stands there. You know what I mean. I have to tell him to go or he just keeps on standing there."

"Oh, that's my fault, Lije. I gave him the message to deliver and forgot to tell him specifically to get back to his job when he was through."

Baley sighed. The fine wrinkles about his intensely brown eyes grew more pronounced. "Anyway, you wanted to see me."

“Yes, Lije,” said the Commissioner, “but not for anything easy.”

He stood up, turned away, and walked to the wall behind his desk. He touched an inconspicuous contact switch and a section of the wall grew transparent.

Baley blinked at the unexpected insurge of grayish light.

The Commissioner smiled. “I had this arranged specially last year, Lije. I don’t think I’ve showed it to you before. Come over here and take a look. In the old days, all rooms had things like this. They were called ‘windows.’ Did you know that?”

Baley knew that very well, having viewed many historical novels.

“I’ve heard of them,” he said.

“Come here.”

Baley squirmed a bit, but did as he was told. There was something indecent about the exposure of the privacy of a room to the outside world. Sometimes the Commissioner carried his affectation of Medievalism to a rather foolish extreme.

Like his glasses, Baley thought.

That was it! That was what made him look wrong!

Baley said, “Pardon me, Commissioner, but you’re wearing new glasses, aren’t you?”

The Commissioner stared at him in mild surprise, took off his glasses, looked at them and then at Baler. Without his glasses, his round face seemed rounder and his chin a trifle more pronounced. He looked vaguer, too, as his eyes failed to focus properly.

He said, “Yes.”

He put his glasses back on his nose, then added with real anger, “I broke my old ones three days ago. What with one thing or another I wasn’t able to replace them till this morning. Lije, those three days were hell.”

“On account of the glasses?”

“And other things, too. I’m getting to that.”

He turned to the window and so did Baley. With mild shock, Baley realized it was raining. For a minute, he was lost in the spectacle of water dropping from the sky, while the

Commissioner exuded a kind of pride as though the phenomenon were a matter of his own arranging.

"This is the third time this month I've watched it rain. Quite a sight, don't you think?"

Against his will, Baley had to admit to himself that it was Impressive. In his forty-two years he had rarely seen rain, or any of the phenomena at nature, for that matter.

He said, "It always seems a waste for all that water to come down on the city. It should restrict itself to the reservoirs."

"Lije," said the Commissioner, "you're a modernist. That's your trouble. In Medieval times, people lived in the open. I don't mean on the farms only. I mean in the cities, too. Even in New York. When it rained, they didn't think of it as waste. They gloried in it. They lived close to nature. It's healthier, better. The troubles of modem life come from being divorced from nature. Read up on the Coal Century, sometimes."

Baley had. He had heard many people moaning about the invention of the atomic pile. He moaned about it himself when things went wrong, or when he got tired. Moaning like that was a built-in facet of human nature. Back in the Coal Century, people moaned about the invention of the steam engine. In one of Shakespeare's plays, a character moaned about the invention of gunpowder. A thousand years in the future, they'd be moaning about the invention of the positronic brain.

The hell with it.

He said, grimly, "Look, Julius." (It wasn't his habit to get friendly with the Commissioner during office hours, however many 'Lijes' the Commissioner threw at him, but something special seemed called for here.) "Look, Julius, you're talking about everything except what I came in here for, and it's worrying me. What is it?"

The Commissioner said, "I'll get to it, Lije. Let me do it my way. It's--it's trouble."

"Sure. What isn't on this planet? More trouble with the R's?"

"In a way, yes, Lije. I stand here and wonder how much more trouble the old world can take. 'When I put in this window, I wasn't just letting in the sky once in a while. I let in the City. I