



Nimby and the Dimension Hoppers
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Don't get me wrong — I like unspoiled wilderness. I like my sky clear and blue and my city free of the thunder of cars and jackhammers. I'm no technocrat. But goddamit, who wouldn't want a fully automatic, laser-guided, armor-piercing, self-replenishing personal sidearm?

Nice turn of phrase, huh? I finally memorized it one night, from one of the hoppers, as he stood in my bedroom, pointing his hand-cannon at another hopper, enumerating its many charms: "This is a laser-guided blah blah blah. Throw down your arms and lace your fingers behind your head, blah blah blah." I'd heard the same dialog nearly every day that month, whenever the dimension-hoppers catapulted into my home, shot it up, smashed my window, dived into the street, and chased one another through my poor little shtetl, wreaking havoc, maiming bystanders, and then gateing out to another poor dimension to carry on there.

Assholes.

It was all I could do to keep my house well-fed on sand to replace the windows. Much more hopper invasion and I was going to have to extrude its legs and babayaga to the beach. Why the hell was it always my house, anyway?

I wasn't going to get back to sleep, that much was sure. The autumn wind blowing through the shattered window was fragrant with maple and rich decay and crisp hay, but it was also cold enough to steam my breath and turn me out in all-over gooseflesh. Besides, the racket they were making out in the plaza was deafening, all supersonic thunderclaps and screams from wounded houses. The househusbands would have their work cut out for them come morning.

So I found a robe and slippers and stumbled down to the kitchen, got some coffee from one of the nipples and milk from another, waited for the noise to recede into the bicycle fields and went outside and knocked on Sally's door.

Her bedroom window flew open and she hung her head out. "Barry?" she called down.

"Yeah," I called back up, clouds of condensed breath obscuring her sleep-gummed face. "Let me in — I'm freezing to death."

The window closed and a moment later the door swung open. Sally had wrapped a heavy duvet around her broad shoulders

like a shawl, and underneath, she wore a loose robe that hung to her long, bare toes. Sally and I had a thing, once. It was serious enough that we attached our houses and joined the beds. She curled her toes when I tickled her. We're still friends — hell, our houses are still next door to one another — but I haven't curled her toes in a couple years.

"Jesus, it can't be three in the morning, can it?" she said as I slipped past her and into the warmth of her house.

"It can and is. Transdimensional crimefighters hew to no human schedule." I collapsed onto her sofa and tucked my feet under my haunches. "I have had more than enough of this shit," I said, massaging my temples.

Sally sank down next to me and threw her comforter over my lap, then gave my shoulder a squeeze. "It's taking a toll on all of us. The Jeffersons are going to relocate. They've been writing to their cousins in Niagara Falls, and they say that there're hardly any hoppers down there. But how long is that gonna last, I wonder?"

"Oh, I don't know. The hoppers could go away tomorrow. We don't know that they're going to be here forever."

"Of course I know it. You can't put the genie back in the bottle. They've got d-hoppers now — they're not going to just stop using them."

I didn't say anything, just stared pointedly at the abstract mosaic covering her parlor wall: closely fitted pieces of scrap aluminum, plastics too abstruse to feed to even the crudest house, rare beach-glass and bunched vinyl.

"That's different," she said. "We ditched the technocracy because we found something that worked better. No one decided it was too dangerous and had to be set aside for our own good. It just got... obsolete. Nothing's going to make d-hoppers obsolete for those guys." Out in the plaza, the booms continued, punctuated by the peristaltic noises of houses hurrying away. Sally's house gave a shudder in sympathy, and the mosaic rippled.

I held my cup away from the comforter as coffee sloshed over the edge and to the floor, where the house drank it greedily.

"No caffeine!" Sally said as she sopped up the coffee with her stockinged foot. "The house gets all jumpy."

I opened my mouth to say something about Sally's crackpot house-husbandry theories, and then the door was blown off its hinges. A hopper in outlandish technocrat armor rolled into the parlor, sat up, snapped off three rounds in the general direction of the door (one passed through it, the other two left curdled houseflesh and scorchmarks on the wall around it).

Sally and I levitated out of our seats and dived behind the sofa as another hopper rolled through the door and returned fire, missing his opponent but blowing away the mosaic. My heart hammered in my chest, and all my other clichés hackneyed in my chestnuts.

"You OK?" I hollered over the din.

"I think so," Sally said. A piece of jagged plastic was embedded in the wall inches over her head, and the house was keening.

A stray blast of electric thunder set the sofa ablaze, and we scrambled away. The second gunman was retreating under a volley of fire from the first, who was performing machine-assisted gymnastics around the parlor, avoiding the shots aimed at him. The second man made good his escape, and the first holstered his weapon and turned to face us.

"Sorry about the mess, folks," he said, through his faceplate.

I was speechless. Sally, though, cupped her ear and hollered "What?"

"Sorry," the gunman said.

"What?" Sally said again. She turned and said, "Can you make out what he's saying?" She winked at me with the eye that faced away from him.

"No," I said, slowly. "Can't make out a word."

"Sorry," he said again, more loudly.

"We! Can't! Understand! You!" Sally said.

The man raised his visor with an air of exasperation and said, "I'm sorry, all right?"

"Not as sorry as you're gonna be," Sally said, and jammed her thumb into his eye. He hollered and his gauntlets went to his face just as Sally snatched away his gun. She rapped the butt against his helmet to get his attention, then scampered back, keeping the muzzle aimed at him. The gunman looked at her with dawning comprehension, raising his arms, lacing his fingers behind his head and blah blah blah.

"Asshole," she said.

His name was Larry Roman, which explained the word "ROMAN" stenciled onto each piece of his armor. Getting it off of him was trickier than shelling a lobster, and he cursed us blue the whole way. Sally kept the gun trained on him, impassive, as I peeled off the sweaty carapace and bound his wrists and ankles.

Her house was badly injured, and I didn't think it would make it. Certainly, the walls' fading to a brittle, unhealthy white boded ill. The d-hopper itself was a curious and complex device, a forearm-sized lozenge seemingly cast of a single piece of metal — titanium? — and covered with a welter of confusing imprinted controls. I set it down carefully, not wanting to find myself inadvertently whisked away to a parallel universe.

Roman watched me from his good eye — the one that Sally poked was swollen shut — with a mixture of resentment and concern. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm not going to play with it."

"Why are you doing this?" he said.

I cocked my head at Sally. "It's her show," I said.

Sally kicked her smoldering sofa. "You killed my house," she said. "You assholes keep coming here and shooting up the place, without a single thought to the people who live here —"

"What do you mean, 'keep coming here?' This is the first time anyone's ever used the trans-d device."

Sally snorted. "Sure, in your dimension. You're a little behind schedule, pal. We've had hoppers blasting through here for months now."

"You're lying," he said. Sally looked coolly at him. I could have told him that that was no way to win an argument with Sally. I'd never found any way of winning an argument with her, but blank refusal didn't work for sure. "Look, I'm a police officer. The man I'm chasing is a dangerous criminal. If I don't catch him, you're all in danger."

"Really?" she drawled. "Greater danger than you assholes put us in when you shoot us?"

He swallowed. Stripped of his armor, wearing nothing but high-tech underwear, and he was finally getting scared. "I'm just doing my duty. Upholding the law. You two are going to

end up in a lot of trouble. I want to speak to someone in charge."

I cleared my throat. "That would be me, this year. I'm the Mayor."

"You're kidding."

"It's an administrative position," I apologized. I'd read up on civics of old, and I knew that Mayoring wasn't what it once was. Still, I'm a fine negotiator, and that's what it takes nowadays.

"So what are you going to do with me?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll think of something," Sally said.

Sally's house was dead by sunrise. It heaved a terrible sigh, and the nipples started running with black gore. The stink was overpowering, so we led our prisoner shivering next door to my place.

My place wasn't much better. The cold wind had been blowing through my bedroom window all night, leaving a rime of frost over the house's delicate, thin-barked internal walls. But I've got a southern exposure, and as the sun rose, buttery light pierced the remaining windows and warmed the interior, and I heard the house's sap sluicing up inside the walls. We got ourselves coffees and resumed the argument.

"I tell you, Osborne's out there, and he's got the morals of a jackal. If I don't get to him, we're all in trouble." Roman was still trying to convince us to give him back his gear and let him get after his perp.

"What did he do, anyway?" I asked. Some sense of civic responsibility was nagging at me — what if the guy really was dangerous?

"Does it matter?" Sally asked. She was playing with Roman's gear, crushing my ornamental pebbles to powder with the power-assisted gauntlets. "They're all bastards. Technocrats." She spat out the word and powdered another pebble.

"He's a monopolist," Roman said, as though that explained everything. We must have looked confused, because he continued. "He's the Senior Strategist for a company that makes networked relevance filters. They've been planting malware online that breaks any standards-defined competing products. If he

isn't brought to justice, he'll own the whole goddamn media ecology. He must be stopped!" His eyes flashed.

Sally and I traded looks, then Sally burst out laughing. "He did what?"

"He's engaged in unfair business practices!"

"Well, I think we'll be able to survive, then," she said. She hefted the pistol again. "So, Roman, you say that you folks just invented the d-hopper, huh?"

He looked puzzled. "The trans-d device," I said, remembering what he'd called it.

"Yes," he said. "It was developed by a researcher at the University of Waterloo and stolen by Osborne so he could flee justice. We had that one fabbed up just so we could chase him."

Aha. The whole shtetl was built over the bones of the University of Waterloo — my house must be right where the physics labs once stood; still stood, in the technocratic dimensions. That explained my popularity with the transdimensional set.

"How do you work it?" Sally asked, casually.

I wasn't fooled and neither was Roman. Sally's version of casual put my most intense vibe to shame.

"I can't disclose that," Roman said, setting his face in an expression of grim dutifulness.

"Aw, c'mon," Sally said, fondling the d-hopper. "What's the harm?"

Roman stared silently at the floor.

"Trial and error it is, then," Sally said, and poised a finger over one of the many inset controls.

Roman groaned.

"Don't do that. Please," he said. "I'm in enough trouble as it is."

Sally pretended she hadn't heard him. "How hard can it be, after all? Barry, we've both studied technocracy — let's figure it out together. Does this look like the on-switch to you?"

"No, no," I said, catching on. "You can't just go pushing buttons at random — you could end up whisked away to another dimension!" Roman appeared relieved. "We have to take it apart to see how it works first. I've got some tools out in the shed." Roman groaned.

"And if those don't work," Sally continued, "I'm sure these gloves would peel it open real quick. After all, if we break this one, there's always the other guy — Osborne? He's got one, too."

"I'll show you," Roman said. "I'll show you."

Roman escaped as we were finishing breakfast. It was my fault. I figured that once he'd taken us through the d-hopper's workings, he was cowed. Sally and I had a mini-spat over it that left me feeling all nostalgic and fuzzy for our romantic past, and maybe that's why I wasn't on my guard. It also felt less antisocial once my houseguest was untied and spooning up muesli at my homey old kitchen table.

He was more cunning than I'd guessed. Square-jawed, blue-eyed (well, black-and-blue-eyed, thanks to Sally), and exhausted, he'd lulled me into a false sense of security. When I turned to squeeze another cup of coffee from the kitchen wall, he kicked the table over and scrambled away. Sally fired a bolt after him, which hit my already overwrought house and caused my toilet to flush and all my tchtotchkes to rain down from my shelves as it jerked. In an instant, he was scurrying away down the street.

"Sally!" I shouted, exasperated. "You could've killed him!"

She was ashen, staring at the pistol. "I didn't mean to! It was a reflex."

We both struggled into our shoes and took off after him. By the time I caught sight of him, he was off in the bicycle fields, uprooting a ripe mountain bike and pedaling away towards Guelph.

A group of rubberneckers congregated around us, most of the town, dressed in woolens and mitts against the frosty air. Sally and I were still in our pyjamas, and I saw the town gossips taking mental notes. By supper, the housenet would be burning up with news of our reconciliation.

"Who was that?" Lemuel asked me. He'd been Mayor before me, and still liked to take a proprietary interest in the comings and goings around town.

"D-hopper," Sally said. "Technocrat. He killed my house."

Lemuel clucked his tongue and scrunched up his round, ruddy face. "That's bad. The Beckers' house, too. Barry, you'd

better send someone off to Toronto to parley for some more seed."

"Thank you, Lemuel," I said, straining to keep the irritation out of my voice. "I'll do that."

He held his hands up. "I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job," he said. "Just trying to help you out. Times like this, we all need to pull together."

"I just want to catch that son-of-a-bitch," Sally said.

"Oh, I expect he'll be off to his home dimension shortly," Lemuel said.

"Nuh-uh," I said. "We got — oomph." Sally trod on my foot.

"Yeah, I expect so," she said. "How about the other one — did anyone see where he went?"

"Oh, he took off east," Hezekiah said. He was Lemuel's son, and you could've nested them like Russian dolls: ruddy, paunchy, round-faced and earnest. Hezekiah had a fine touch with the cigarette trees, and his grove was a local tourist stop. "Headed for Toronto, maybe."

"All right, then," Sally said. "I'll send word ahead. He won't get far. We'll head out and meet him."

"What about your house?" Lemuel asked.

"What about it?"

"Well, you've got to get your stuff moved out soon — the househusbands will be wanting to take it away for mulch."

"Tell them they can put my stuff in Barry's place," she said. I watched the gossipy looks flying.

Sally worked the housenet furiously as the househusbands trekked in and out of my place with armloads of her stuff. They kept giving me hey-big-fella looks, but I knew that any congratulations were premature. Sally wasn't moving in to get romantic — she was doing it out of expedience, her primary motivation in nearly every circumstance. She scribed with the housenet stylus, back rigid, waiting impatiently for her distant correspondents to work their own stylii, until every wall in my house was covered in temporary pigment. No one had seen Osborne.

"Maybe he went back to his dimension," I said.

"No, he's here. I saw his d-hopper before he ran out last night — it was a wreck."

"Maybe he fixed it," I said.

"And maybe he hasn't. This has got to stop, Barry. If you don't want to help, just say so. But stop trying to dissuade me." She slammed the stylus down. "Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," I said. "I'm in."

"Then get dressed," she said.

I was already dressed. I said so.

"Put on Roman's armor. We need to be on even footing with Osborne if we're going to catch him, and that stuff won't fit me."

"What about Roman?"

"He'll be back," she said. "We have his d-hopper."

What did I call it? "Outlandish technocrat armor?" Maybe from the outside. But once I was inside, man, I was a god. I walked on seven-league boots, boots that would let me jump as high as the treetops. My vision extended down to the infrared and up into the ultraviolet and further up into the electromagnetic, so that I could see the chemically-encoded houseset signals traversing the root-systems that the houses all tied into, the fingers of polarized light lengthening as the sun dipped to the west. My hearing was acute as a rabbit's, the wind's soughing and the crackle of forest-creatures and the whoosh-whoosh of sap all clearly delineated and perfectly triangulated. We set out after Roman, and I quickly evolved a search-strategy: I would leap as high as I could, then spin around quickly as I fell back to earth, surveying the countryside in infrared for anything human-shaped. Once back on terra firma, I scooped up Sally and took a great leap forward — no waiting for her slow, unassisted legs to keep up with my gigantic strides — set her down and repeated the process.

We kept after it for an hour or two, falling into a kind of pleasant reverie, lulled by the fiery crazyquilt of the autumn leaves seen from great height. I'd seen color plates in old technocrat books, the earth seen from great heights, from space, and of all the things we'd given up with technocracy, I think that flight was the thing that I wished for most fervently.

It was growing chilly by the time we reached Hamilton. Hamilton! In two hours! I was used to thinking of Hamilton as being a hard day's bike-ride from home, but here I was, not

even out of breath, and there already. I gathered Sally into my arms and leapt towards the city-limits, enchanted by the sunset's torchy light over the hills, and something fast and hard smashed into me from the side. Instinctively, I tightened my grip on Sally, but she wasn't there — good thing, since with the armor's power-assist, squeezing Sally that hard might've broken her spine.

I slammed into the dirt, the armor's suspension whining. I righted myself and heard Sally hollering. I looked up and there she was, squirming in Osborne's arms as he leapt away with her.

They headed west, back towards the shtetl, and I chased as best I could, but Osborne worked the armor like he'd been born in it. How must his dimension be, where people leap through the air on tireless, infinitely strong legs, enhanced vision and reflexes making light work of the banal realities of geography, time and space.

I lost them by Flamborough. Panic scratched at my guts as I sought them through the entire electromagnetic spectrum, as I strained my ears to make out Sally's outraged bellows. A moment's reflection told me I was panicking needlessly: there was only one place they could be going: to the shtetl, to my house, to the d-hopper.

Except that I had the d-hopper with me, neatly clipped to the armor's left thigh-guard, in a small cargo-space. The right thigh-guard was full of miniature, telescoping survival bits of various description and a collection of pills that Roman had identified as nutritional supplements. Osborne wouldn't be getting out of my dimension any time soon.

I set off for home as fast as I could in the now near-total darkness. A bloody harvest moon rose behind me as I made my leaping dash, and then I got lost twice in the odd shadows it cast from my unfamiliar aerial vantage-points. Still, it took less than an hour traveling alone, not bothering to search anymore.

My house's own biosystems cast a welter of infrared shadows, making it impossible for me to tell if Sally and Osborne were inside, so I scrambled up the insulating ivy on the north side and then spidered along the walls, peering in the windows.

I found them in the Florida room at the back of the house. Osborne had his helmet off — he had a surprisingly boyish, good-natured face that took me off my guard for a moment — and was eating a slice of pumpkin pie from my fridge, his sidearm trained on Sally, who was glaring at him from her seat in the rickety twig-chair she'd given me for my birthday half a decade before.

The bioluminescent porch-lamp glowed brightly inside the Florida room, and I knew that it would be throwing up glare on the inside of the windows. Emboldened, I crouched down and duck-walked the length of the windowsill, getting the lay of the land before deciding on my next course of action. Osborne's helmet was propped atop the fridge, staring blindly at me. The pistol was in his left hand, the pie in his right, and his finger was on the trigger. I couldn't think of any way to disarm him before he fired on Sally. I would have to parley. It's my strong-suit, anyway. That's why they made me Mayor: I could bargain with those arrogant pricks in Toronto for house-seeds; with the fools of Hamilton for cold-temp citrusfruit; with the traveling circuses that demanded bicycle after bicycle in exchange for a night's entertainment. In Lemuel's day, the shtetl had hardly a bike to its name by March, the whole harvest traded away for our necessities. After my first year as Mayor, we'd had to grow an extra barn with hooks along all the rafters to hang our spare bicycles from. I would parley with Osborne for Sally, extract a promise to steer clear of our dimension forever in exchange for his damned technocrat gadget.

I was raising a gauntleted hand to tap on the window when I was tackled from behind.

I had the presence of mind to stifle my grunt of surprise as the armor's gyros whined to keep me erect under the weight of the stranger on my back.

I reached behind me and grabbed my assailant by the shoulder, flipping him over my head and to the earth. He, too, stifled his groan, and as I peered at him in the false-light of my visor's display, I saw that it was Roman.

"You can't give him the trans-d device," he hissed. His hand was massaging his shoulder. I felt a pang of guilt — that must've really hurt. I hadn't so much as slapped someone in ten years. Who had?

"Why not?" I asked.

"I have to bring him to justice. He's the only one with the key to his malware agents. If he gets away now, we'll never catch him — the whole world will be at his mercy."

"He's got Sally," I said. "If I need to give him the d-hopper to get her back, that's what I'm gonna do." Thinking: What the hell do I care about your world, pal?

He grimaced and flushed. He'd stolen a wooly coat and a pair of unripened gumboots from somewhere but he was still wearing nothing but his high-tech underwear underneath, and his lips were cyanotic blue. I was nice and toasty in the heated armor. Muffled voices came from my Florida room. I risked a peek. Sally was haranguing Osborne fiercely, though nothing but her baleful tone was discernable through the pane. Osborne was grinning.

I could have told him that that wasn't much of a strategy. He seemed to be chuckling, and I watched in horrified fascination as Sally stood abruptly, unmindful of the gun, and heaved her chair at his head. He raised his forearms to defend himself and his gun wasn't pointing at Sally anymore. No thinking at all, just action, and I jumped through the window, a technocrat action-hero snap-rolling into his shins, grappling with his gun hand, and my enhanced hearing brought me Sally's shouts, Osborne's grunts of surprise, Roman's bellowing passage through the sharp splinters of the window. I kept trying for Osborne's unprotected head, but he was fast, fast as a world where time is sliced into fractions of a second, fast as a person raised in that world, and I — who never measured time in a unit smaller than a morning — was hardly a match for him.

He fired the pistol wildly, setting the house to screaming. Before I knew it, Osborne had me pinned on my stomach, my arms trapped beneath me. He leveled the pistol at Sally again. "What a waste," he sighed, and took aim. I wriggled fiercely, trying to free my arms, and the d-hopper dropped into my gauntlet. Without thinking, I jammed as many controls as I could find and the universe stood on its head.

There was an oozy moment of panic as the world slurred and snapped back into focus, the thing taking less time than the description of it, so fast that I only assimilated it post-facto, days

later. Osborne was still atop me, and I had the presence of mind to roll him off and get to my feet, snatch free my gun, and point it at his unprotected face.

He stood slowly, hands laced behind his head, and looked at me with a faint sneer.

"What is your problem?" a voice said from behind me. I kept the gun on Osborne and scuttled left so that I could see the speaker.

It was me.

Me, in a coarsely woven housecoat and slippers, eyes gummed with sleep, thin to gauntness, livid, shaking with rage. Osborne took advantage of my confusion and made a jump for the whole-again Florida room window. I squeezed off two rounds at his back and hit the house instead, which screamed. I heard knick-knacks rattling off their shelves.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" I heard myself shout from behind me, and then I was reeling with the weight of myself on my own back. Hands tugged at my helmet. Gently, I holstered my gun, shucked my gauntlets, and caught the hands.

"Barry," I said.

"How'd you know my name?"

"Get down from there, Barry, OK?"

He climbed down and I turned to face him. With slow, deliberate motions, I unsnapped the helmet and pulled it off. "Hey, Barry," I said.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he repeated, more exasperated than confused. "I should've known."

"Sorry," I said, sheepish now. "I was trying to save Sally's life."

"God, why?"

"What's your problem with Sally?"

"She sold us out! To Toronto! The whole shtetl hasn't got two bikes to rub together."

"Toronto? How many houses could we possibly need?"

He barked a humorless laugh. "Houses? Toronto doesn't make houses anymore. Wait there," he said and stomped off into the house's depths. He emerged a moment later holding a massive, unwieldy rifle. It had a technocratic feel, toolmarks and straight lines, and I knew that it had been manufactured, not grown. The barrel was as big around as my fist. "Civil

defense," he said. "Sally's idea. We're all supposed to be ready to repel the raiders at a moment's notice. Can't you smell it?"

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was an ammonia-and-sulfur reek in the air, a sharp contrast to the autumnal crispness I was accustomed to. "What's that?"

"Factories. Ammo, guns, armor. It's all anyone does anymore. We're all on short rations." He gestured at the broken window. "Your friend's gonna get quite a surprise."

As if on cue, I heard a volley of distant thunder. The other Barry smiled grimly. "Scratch one d-hopper," he said. "If I were you, I'd ditch that getup before someone takes a shot at you."

I started to shuck Roman's armor when we both heard the sound of return fire, the crash of the technocrat pistol almost civilized next to the flatulence of Sally's homebrew blunderbusses. "He's tricky," I said.

But the other Barry had gone pale and still and it occurred to me that Osborne was almost certainly firing on someone that this Barry counted as a friend. Sensitivity was never one of my strong suits.

I stripped off the rest of the armor and stood shivering in the frosty November air. "Let's go," I said, brandishing Roman's gun.

"You'll need a coat," said the other Barry. "Hang on." He disappeared into the house and came back with my second-best coat, the one with the big stain from years before on the right breast, remnants of a sloppily eaten breakfast of late blackberries right off the bush.

"Thanks," I said, feeling a tremor of dangerous weirdness as our hands touched.

The other Barry carried a bioluminescent lamp at shoulder-height, leading the way, while I followed, noticing that his walk was splay-footed and lurching, then noticing that mine was, too, and growing intensely self-conscious about the whole matter. I nearly tripped myself a dozen times trying to correct it before we found the scene of Osborne's stand.

It was a small clearing where I'd often gone to picnic on summer days. The lantern lit up the ancient tree-trunks, scarred with gunshot, pits with coals glowing in them like malevolent eyes. Hazy wisps of woodsmoke danced in the light.

At the edge of the clearing, we found Hezekiah on his back, his left arm a wreck of molten flesh and toothy splinters of bone. His breathing was shallow and fast, and his eyes were wide and staring. He rubbed at them with his good hand when he caught sight of us. "Seeing double. Goddamn gun blew up in my arms. Goddamn gun. Goddamn it."

Neither of us knew squat about first aid, but I left the other Barry crouched beside Hezekiah while I went for help, crashing through the dark but familiar woods.

Somewhere out there, Osborne was looking for the d-hopper, for a way home. I had it in the pocket of the stained, second-best coat. If he found it and used it, I'd be stranded here, where guns explode in your arms and Barry wishes that Sally was dead.

The streets of the shtetl, normally a friendly grin of neat little houses, had been turned snaggle-toothed and gappy by the exodus of villagers under the onslaught of d-hoppers. Merry's clinic was still there, though, and I approached it cautiously, my neck prickly with imagined, observing eyes.

I was barely there when I was tackled from the side by Osborne, who gathered me roughly in his arms and jumped back into the woods. We sailed through the night sky, the d-hopper crushed to my side by his tight, metallic embrace, and when he set down and dropped me, I scrambled backwards on my ass, trying to put some distance between me and him.

"Hand it over," he said, pointing his gun at me. His voice was cold, and brooked no argument. But I'm a negotiator by trade. I thought fast.

"My fingers're on it now," I said, holding it through my pocket. "Just one squeeze and poof, off I go and you're stuck here forever. Why don't you put the gun away and we'll talk about this?"

He sneered the same sneer he'd given me in the Florida room. "Off you go with a slug in you, dead or dying. Take off the coat."

"I'll be dead, you'll be stranded. If I hand it over, I'll be dead and you won't be stranded. Put the gun away."

"No arguments. Coat." He casually fired into the ground before me, showering me with hot clots of soft earth. Broken roots from the housenet squirmed as they attempted to route

around the damage. I was so rattled I very nearly hit the button, but I kept my fingers still with an act of will.

"Gun," I said, as levelly as I could. My voice sounded squeaky to me. "Look," I said, "Look. If we keep arguing here, someone else will come along, and chances are, they'll be armed. Not every gun in this world blows up when you fire it," I hope, "and then you're going to be sorry. So will I, since you'll probably end up shooting me at the same time. Put it away, we'll talk it out. Come up with a solution we can both live with, you should excuse the expression."

Slowly, he holstered the gun.

"Toss it away, why don't you? Not far, just a couple meters. You're fast."

He shook his head. "Nervy bastard," he said, but he tossed the gun a few meters to the side.

"Now," I said, trying to disguise my sigh of relief. "Now, let's work it out."

Slowly, he flipped up his visor and looked at me like a turd.

"The way I see it," I said, "We don't need to be at each other's throats. You want a dimension you can move freely in to avoid capture. We need a way to stop people from showing up and blowing the hell out of our homes. If we do this right, we can build a long-term relationship that'll benefit both of us."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Nothing you can't afford," I said, and started to parley in earnest. "First of all, you need to take me back to where you fetched me from. I need to get a doctor for Hezekiah."

He shook his head in disbelief. "What a frigging waste."

"First Hezekiah, then the rest. Complaining is just going to slow us down. Let's go." Without ceremony, I leapt into his arms. I rapped twice on his helmet. "Up, up and away," I said. He crushed me to his chest and leapt moonward.

"All right," I said as the moon dipped on the horizon. We'd been at it for hours, but were making some good headway. "You get safe passage — a place to hide, a change of clothes — in our shtetl whenever you want it. In exchange, we both return there now, then I turn over the d-hopper. You take Roman back with you — I don't care what you do with him once you're in your dimension, but no harm comes to him in mine."

"Fine," Osborne said, sullenly. That was a major step forward — it had taken two hours to get him as far as not shooting Roman on sight. I figured that in his own dimension, clad in his armor, armed with his pistol, Roman would have a fighting chance.

"Just one more thing," I said. Osborne swore and spat in the soft earth of the clearing where Hezekiah had blown his arm off. "Just a trifle. The next time you visit the shtetl, you bring us a spare trans-d device."

"Why?" he asked.

"Never you mind," I said. "Think of it as good faith. If you want to come back to our shtetl and get our cooperation, you'll need to bring us a trans-d device, otherwise the deal's off."

The agreement wasn't immediate, but it came by and by. Negotiation is always at least partly a war of attrition, and I'm a patient man.

"Civil defense, huh?" I said to Sally. She was poring over a wall of her new house, where she and someone in Toronto were jointly scribing plans for a familiar-looking blunderbuss.

"Yes," she said, in a tone that said, Piss off, I'm busy.

"Good idea," I said.

That brought her up short. I didn't often manage to surprise her, and I savored a moment's gratification. "You think so?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "Let me show you." I held out my hand, and as she took it, I fingered the d-hopper in my pocket, and the universe stood on its head.

No matter how often I visit the technocratic dimensions, I'm always struck by the grace of the armored passers-by, their amazing leaps high over the shining buildings and elevated roadways. Try as I might, I can't figure out how they avoid crashing into one another.

In this version of the technocracy, the gun-shop was called "Eddy's." The last one I'd hit was called "Ed's." Small variations, but the basic routine was the same. We strolled into the shop boldly, and I waved pleasantly at Ed/Eddy. "Hi there," I said.

"Hey," he said. "Can I show you folks something?"

Sally's grip on my hand was vise-tight and painful. I thought she was freaking out over our jaunt into the transverse, but

when I followed her gaze and looked out the window, I realized that there was something amiss about this place. Down the street, amid the shining lozenge-shaped buildings, stood a house that would've fit in back in the shtetl, housenet roots writhing into the concrete. In front of it were two people in well-manicured woolens and beautifully ripened gumboots. Familiar people. Sally and I. And there, on the street, was another couple — Sally and I — headed for Ed/Eddy's gun shop. I managed to smile and gasp out, "How about that fully automatic, laser-guided, armor-piercing, self-replenishing personal sidearm?"

Ed/Eddy passed it over, and as soon as the butt was securely in my hand, I looped my arm through Sally's and nailed the d-hopper. The universe stood on its head again, and we were back home, in the clearing where, a hairsbreadth away and a week ago, one version of Hezekiah had lost his arm.

I handed the gun to Sally. "More where this came from," I said.

She was shaking, and for a moment, I thought she was going to shout at me, but then she was laughing, and so was I.

"Hey," I said, "you feel like lunch? There's usually a great Italian joint just on the other side of the bicycle fields."

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