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LADYHOPPERS



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**by Sarah Thérèse Pelletier
and Scott James Taylor**

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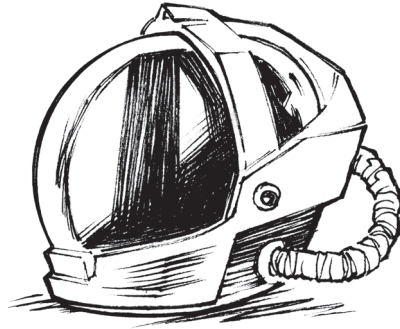
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To TR.



Chapter One

— NO TEARS —

As she jumped into a hole in reality, Charlie's biggest worry was that it might not be her that came out on the other side.

Early on, there had been a theory from one of the many scientists working the problem at Veritech that the only way to survive the trip would be to replicate a person's entire molecular structure from scratch on the other side. Even as they'd moved beyond that—even as it had seemed that someone sufficiently protected by the right materials and the right biological modifications could survive—this theory had worried Charlie. The idea that what arrived on the other side might simply be a copy of her with all of her memories had kept her up at night. She might be simply torn apart and replaced. She had feared, most of all, discontinuity of experience, some point where she passed out, fainted, and reawakened on the other side with no way of knowing if she was still really her.

If nothing else, she was conscious of the whole trip, could trace moment to moment even if she was utterly unable to relate, even to her own self, even to store the experience to memory, what those moments contained. She was compressed to the smallest of points; she was ethereal and adrift. Every sensory nerve fired at once; she was numb and paralyzed, a brain in a jar. There were colors, or maybe they were sounds, or maybe they were her, an experience akin to synesthesia the way a static shock from walking on carpet would to being hit by lightning. She was a speck falling through a universe that she could see in its entirety; she was connected to everything, borderless and on the verge of transcendence.

She slammed into the ground on the other side and immediately threw up in her cowl.

The colors were wrong. If the trip alone—that incomprehensible sensory catastrophe that she couldn't be certain was anything other than a very vivid hallucination brought on by neurons firing wildly and randomly as her body underwent stresses unlike any it could have ever been prepared for—if that hadn't done it, the colors would have. She was, now that she'd crawled several feet from where she'd initially landed, staring at a patch of grass. It was green. The green was wrong. It was too vivid, for one; it seemed brighter than the world could be, as if someone had turned the saturation up. For another, it was wrong in some way she couldn't quite tell beyond the fact that it made her want to throw up. Again. It was just somehow *off*. She knew it was green because grass was green, but if she'd seen it on a wall, on a color swatch... she'd have still said green, because it was green. It was as if it was skewed, the wavelength wrong, but if you changed the wavelength of a color you just got another color, and this was green.

It was just that green was wrong.

She rolled over to look at the sky instead. It wasn't any better. It was blue. Blue was wrong, too. It was that old first-year philosophy saw: how do I know the blue I see is the blue you see? Only

now her brain seemed to be having an argument with itself and actively coming to blows about varying interpretations of the fact of subjective experience.

At least she was alive. Feeling sick was feeling something. The HUD indicated the air was safe, and she retracted the cowl to pull in her first breath from another world. She'd need to clean the cowl. That was secondary to dragging her arm across her face to clear away some of the sick. She was alive, and she was breathing air, and there was a world to be alive and breathing air in. She had traveled through a hole in reality and there had, after all, been another reality on the other side, another world that fortunately seemed enough like her own for her to navigate. Even if she'd only seen some grass, some bushes as she'd hauled herself to a new spot, and now the sky. Even if those seemed somehow out of whack. That seemed to be settling, though. She thought she was in a park, and that was a relief, too, that there was something she could so easily categorize, that fell into the realm of things she had referents for. It was not wholly alien. They had grass, and bushes, and put these things in parks, and...

She sat up and confirmed that the park in which she lay was not surrounded by temporary fences, by any kind of barrier, that it lacked any kind of sense of alarm. She realized what else she hadn't seen, and she turned her head until she found it.

The tear was smaller on this side, it seemed, a more subdued distortion. But there it was: the hint of texture in intermediary space, a dimming of colors in the stone wall. If she hadn't known what she was looking for, she might have written it off as her eyes playing tricks on her. She had to wonder if that had even been here before she'd tumbled through, because there were none of the destructive results she'd have expected from a tear active as long as this one had been. The wall still looked mostly solid. The park was pristine. There was a bilingual NO LITTERING sign, and next to it, one of the probes the CMC had ordered them to send through

earlier that week, but to Charlie anything that was solid and real and in full wrong-color was pristine. A bird was singing.

Charlie frowned at the bird. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen one in person. Montreal wasn't exactly known for its wildlife, and since the tears had started up, it was an exciting day when she saw a squirrel. Birds were especially sensitive to tears, but this one—a fat blue jay perched high above her head—seemed oblivious. Charlie was determined to keep it that way.

“Time to get to work,” she murmured, and she tested out her legs, slowly pulling herself upright. For a moment her vision grayed around the edges, and she thought she was going to revisit the too-green grass, but soon her vitals leveled out and she managed to straighten fully. Peering through the trees, she could make out a suspiciously familiar metal structure that she could swear was the old Biosphere, but there was no one else around, no gawkers to stare at this interloper from another reality, not another living soul save the blue jay. Charlie entertained the notion that this was some kind of weird world ruled by bird people—*Are they still bird people if they're just birds with people-level smarts?*—before remembering she had more important things to do.

Saving the world was at the top of the list.

Charlie reached behind her and slid the Coupler from her pack. Though Veritech had always been more interested in exploration than war, the device resembled nothing so much as a gun, albeit a very simplistic looking one. It was sleek and well-balanced, fitting comfortably in Charlie's hand. Instead of bullets or lasers, though, it fired a pulse that triggered the second part of the device, an Einstein-Rosen Coupling, which was the size of a small ball and not shot but thrown. She detached the Coupling nested in the grip and lobbed it toward the tear, where it hovered, tenuously, in place. The tear seemed confused, unsure whether to repel or devour the device. The Coupling vibrated, torn apart and sewn together in

an endless loop, and Charlie took in a deep breath, then exhaled, slowly, as she fired in the split instant the Coupling was whole.

A deafening suction sound threatened to split Charlie's eardrums. She resisted the urge to cover her ears. The tear shuddered, and its surface went smooth and still, reflective like a calm lake on a summer morning. It was working—the tear was stabilizing, realities were bending to human ingenuity, and Charlie couldn't help the smile forming at the corners of her mouth.

"Ha!" she crowed. She pumped her fists into the air and did a victory dance so embarrassing even the blue jay had to avert its eyes. With a shrill squawk, the bird flew away, surely off to tell its bird friends of the strange girl from another world who successfully stabilized a hole in reality.

The jay's distress really should've been her first clue that something had gone wrong. Charlie was mid-dance when the tear began to ripple, tendrils of reality unspooling like a ball of yarn. A disconcerting pop reverberated in her chest. The tear was no more. Only unmarred matter remained.

She'd fixed the tear, but by the wrong metric. The tear had been meant to stabilize: no longer shredding the world around it but still there, a link between two universes for her to return home. But it was *gone*. Charlie stared into space, struck dumb by the weight of the realization she was stuck. Only one word came to mind.

"Fuck."

Stumbling forward and swiping at the spot where the tear had been was probably not the most well-thought-out of responses, probably wasn't precisely scientific. But in the immediate moment, she just wanted to put her hands on the fabric of the world and pull it back open so she could transport herself back to her family and friends and the proper color green.

But there was nothing. There was unbroken air. If she'd been standing on the other side, it would have been a delight, a triumph. If this had happened in any of their efforts at home, they

would have broken out the champagne, and considering that the Champagne region was nearly entirely unraveled, that wasn't a small celebratory gesture.

Verity had had some standing by. It was probably still standing by, along with Verity, Josie, Nate, and, god, her parents. They were last on the list because she'd tried to divert her mind from the fact, but now it was here. Now she was just imagining them standing there, in a waiting room, waiting, until eventually, someone remembered to tell them, so, uh, your daughter's way home kind of erased itself, which is great for us but bad for you.

It wasn't even that great for her team. Fixing tears was great, was world-saving, but if every tear required leaving someone on the other side...

There were a lot of tears, back home.

Turning in a slow circle, she put her hands to her temples and tried to think about something other than her parents sitting endlessly. Maybe there was something in the fact that there were a lot of tears. Her team had never known what was on the other side, and maybe all the tears went here, in which case she just had to find another one.

That was easy enough. She had gear for that. She could scan for that. After giving the cowl a quick wipedown, she slid it back into place. Wincing a little as she took an experimental sniff to see if she'd gotten all the smell out, she fired up the HUD and set it to scan for tears.

It scanned. And scanned. And scanned. And returned nothing. It returned so resolutely nothing that she wondered if it was working properly. Maybe going through the tear had busted her equipment, or the different vibrational frequencies on this side were mucking with the signs it was designed to detect. Maybe tears just presented differently on this side. They might be unidirectional, one-way sluices dumping disaster onto her world from another that remained entirely unaffected.

Not enough information. Before she went wandering, she had to try and see if she could salvage a way home out of the tear she knew had been there. Maybe it was still extant, under the surface of the world. She scooped up the lost probe and hurried back to the backpack, popping open the side of the Coupler as she went. Crouching and rummaging through the tools, Charlie began plucking them out and jamming them into the device before heedlessly tossing them back in and grabbing another, switching wires, circuits, trying to reconfigure it into something that could widen a tear, pull it back into being.

When she had something workable, she turned and tossed the Einstein-Rosen Coupling back through the air where she estimated the tear had been. It sailed through the air and landed with a *thwack* against the wall. She ran over, grabbed it, and threw again, this time firing once she estimated its arc was taking it through the spot the tear had been.

Again, *thwack*.

She went and retrieved it, again, and then simply planted it in the appropriate spot, backed up, pointed the Coupler at it, and activated it.

Reality remained firmly undisturbed. From a tree farther into the park, birdsong started up again. Word of the idiot who got herself stuck here was spreading.

It's fine. It's okay. That was plan A. There's a whole alphabet left.

There was still her other idea. See if there were any other tears. Usually, that wouldn't have been hard. Follow the sounds of a crisis. It was just... there were none. Maybe she couldn't expect there to be vehicles with sirens rushing past to conveniently follow to her way home, but there should have been something rushing here.

She tossed her equipment and the cannibalized probe back into the backpack, ignoring the carefully devised custom pouches and

simply stuffing things in as quickly as she could, then swung it on. She wasn't going to do any good sitting here staring.

Unless...

She took a moment to consider the possibility Verity and the others would be working the same problem. What were the chances they'd get it back open from their side? What were the chances they'd try? It wasn't that she expected them to just abandon her to her fate, but Charlie had just eliminated one very destructive force from the world. (Well, their world. Here it hadn't seemed to be a danger.) Rushing to get it back, to inflict more damage to a reality that had been wearing pretty thin...

If I get back, I am absolutely not looking up who argued for what, there. I don't want to know.

But before she could valiantly try not to think about who'd voted to abandon her, she'd have to actually get back. So. She had to find... well, frankly, anything that wasn't a park and some birds. Find out where she was, what kind of world it was, and whether they had any tears that she could hitch a ride home on.

Find a tear. Stabilize the tear. Go home.

Simple enough.

It took ten minutes of purposeful wandering for Charlie to definitively conclude she was not only still in a version of Montreal, but that birds were not, in fact, the dominant life form. A cyclist in eye-searing orange nearly clipped her as she crossed her first street, a narrow winding road that looped around what Charlie knew as Île Sainte-Hélène back home. After hurling a few colorful epithets at the cyclist's back, she decided following him was more useful. People seemed to come out of the woodwork the farther she walked: gaggles of schoolchildren in neon day camp shirts and their harried chaperones; tourists engrossed by oversized laminated maps; young families with shrieking toddlers; teenagers stretching the bounds of their independence; construction workers taking their first coffee break of the morning; the dull

roar of lawnmowers firing up in the distance. Even familiar sights seemed foreign. A group of men wearing shirts emblazoned with STAGEHAND on the back was putting up chain link fences, not to cordon off a tear, but to set up for a concert. Posters advertising for CHUPACABRA: THE GOAT TOUR papered trees and the windshields of parked, boxy-looking cars that seemed decades behind the times.

Or, at least, to Charlie the cars were behind the times. She had no idea what the day was, let alone the year. It was a whole new universe. Did they even use the same calendar?

Charlie shook her head. Thinking about calendars would just open a Pandora's box of other questions, like what were the odds she'd even land in another universe that had invented cars? Or the odds she had a home to go back to? Math for math's sake had always been more Josie's thing, anyway.

A ferry docked in the distance, and Charlie watched as more boxy cars, directed by a tanned police officer wearing white gloves, rolled off the ramps and onto the road. There was a placard instructing pedestrians to follow the signs for boarding, and Charlie found three of them before realizing she would likely need to pay. Who the hell knew what passed for currency in the Land of Wrong Green?

But there were easier ways off the island. While the metro in her world had been shut down years ago, Charlie still knew all the stations by heart. The Yellow Line ran through Île Sainte-Hélène, and skipping a turnstile was less complicated than stowing away on a boat.

The metro was more or less how she remembered it, which was an unsettling feeling to have about a place you'd never been, in a universe you didn't know existed—like she imagined déjà vu on LSD. The walls of the station were stark white, and the ceilings were low. It was warmer underground, and stuffy despite the occasional gushes of wind catching passengers unaware on the

platform. When the next train pulled in a few short minutes later, she waited for a gaggle of young families and workmen to exit before boarding. The fashions in the metro were no more garish than those outside, but somehow the flat fluorescent lighting made everything worse. Maybe it was just the sheer volume of it—Charlie couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen so many people in one place. The sights, the sounds, the smells... it was dizzying. The Velo, R&D's affectionate nickname for her jumpsuit, might've stuck out like a sore thumb if anyone paid attention to her, but as it was, Charlie was relieved to discover an interuniversal truth: no one makes eye contact on public transit.

Arms wrapped around her backpack like it was a favored plush toy, Charlie was studiously upholding her side of this social contract when an ad caught her attention: VERITECH: THE FUTURE IS NOW / L'AVENIR C'EST MAINTENANT.

"What." The word escaped Charlie's mouth, incredulity winning out over not looking like a crazy person. The ad itself was as shocking as how it was displayed: on matte paper protected behind scratched plexiglass. *This* was the future? She got to her feet before the metro came to a complete stop and steadied herself against one of the poles, her grip tight as she stared at the familiar blue and white logo in the ad. Her thoughts raced through implications and equations, stumbling over probabilities like Josie at the company Christmas party two years ago—the last time they'd had champagne—and what were the odds, what were the odds, what were the odds?

The doors opened at Station Berri, and the insistent press of bodies carried Charlie out onto the platform. She was greeted by a succession of posters plastered on the wall. All bore the same picture: a woman about Charlie's age staring directly into the camera, her lips curved in a daring smirk, her arms held loosely out to the sides, palms up, an inviting gesture. Her dark hair was cut short, and she wore a metallic blue suit with a black, deep-v

shirt. The same slogan as before, VERITECH: THE FUTURE IS NOW / L'AVENIR C'EST MAINTENANT, was written in block letters across the bottom, obscuring a pair of frankly fabulous leather ankle boots.

“What.”

Charlie swung her backpack over her shoulder and took a step closer. Underneath the slogan, in smaller font, was an address in the Old Port. Another universe with cars was one thing, but another Verity?

Charlie didn't need to find a tear. All she needed to find was Dr. Verity Baum.