



THE EXPERIMENT

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CHAPTER 1

NOT THE FACTORY

“You okay, Asher?”

I am obviously not okay. Even if I wasn’t hyperventilating, it would be a ridiculous question, under the circumstances.

Vi—it *is* Vi, an adult version of Vi—is sitting next to me on the sofa. She puts a hand on my arm. Glossy fingernails. That pink jacket. This can’t be real. It can’t be.

“Will you excuse us?” she murmurs to the two people who brought me here. “And send in ViToo, please.”

I’m distantly aware of the door closing and then opening again.

I nearly gag on the words, but I get them out: “How . . . long?”

“Twenty years.”

My vision starts tunneling.

Her voice sounds far away as she says, “On second

thought, a sedative might be a good idea. ViToo, do you mind?”

“Sure! I just love second thoughts!” replies . . . Vi?

Now there is another Vi in the room. She’s wearing a black tracksuit, and she has a bright purple streak in her hair. Even through my panic, I feel a flicker of relief: Double Vi *definitely* can’t be real, so this must be a bad dream or a hallucination. I watch the other Vi remove a yellow tube from the desk and approach us, tapping a pill into her hand from the tube. The longer the moment lasts, the less it feels like a dream. Does Vi have a twin she never mentioned?

“What . . .” I rasp, but I can’t get any further.

“My assistant,” says Vi matter-of-factly. “This’ll calm your nerves.”

I watch my fingers take the pill from the other Vi’s palm. I put it in my mouth. It dissolves on my tongue and I feel better almost immediately. Not *great*, but it’s the mental equivalent of a raging tornado being reduced to a stiff wind. I can walk through it and survive.

“Better?” asks Vi.

I draw in a breath, release it. Okay. I can breathe. That’s good.

I look around the room. A ginger cat sits on the desk, licking one paw. The cat seems strangely familiar, but I can’t place it. Floor-to-ceiling windows at the back look out over the unchanged and unchanging desert. There’s a

punching bag at one side of the room. The domed ceiling is a cheerful sky blue. Adult Vi's double leans on the desk, arms folded, watching us with an affectionate smile.

"Twenty years?" I say faintly.

"I know it's a shock," says Vi. She says something else, but my mind is buzzing and I don't hear it.

We were trying to escape. Vi was thirteen, same as me. I was on the roof, holding the Time Bomb, at night, in that forest of solar panels. Director Mach was threatening to have Vi drained of all her futures if I didn't hand over the cylinder. I knew we were all disposable to her, that she was totally capable of murdering Vi. All I had was the ability to make her *stop*—by stopping time. I pulled the pin. The cylinder exploded. All of that *just happened*. I was so scared. And now I'm here, wherever this is, and Vi is grown up, her once-pink hair smooth and black. Why is she the director of . . . whatever this place is? Why does she have an assistant who looks exactly like her? All the questions swarming in my brain at once make it almost impossible to land on one of them, and the violence of my confusion is making me queasy, like motion sickness.

"The mice—"

I don't know how to finish my sentence, but Vi picks up on what I'm saying. In the Factory, Vance and Avery froze some mice in time, but it only lasted a few days, not *two decades*.

“That was just a test, with the mice. A few threads of time to see if it would do what they thought,” Vi explains. “The Time Bomb they used wasn’t a real prototype. The prototype was still highly experimental, and then you went ahead and tested it on yourself. They thought it might be months, but nobody imagined . . . I mean, we’d started to think it must be permanent. Turns out it’s hard to predict the time frame for a technology that stops time.”

I close my eyes.

“Nan?” I croak. I’m terrified of the answer. Twenty years.

“She can’t wait to see you,” says Vi gently, and I feel like I can breathe again.

“She’s *eighty*?” I’m struggling to make this real. My brain can’t make the leap, can’t really accept it.

“I guess so,” says Vi. “I’ll message her and Lizzy right away. They never gave up hope. But before you can go home, we’ll need to run some tests on you, to make sure you’re healthy, make sure everything is fine. Nobody’s ever been frozen in time for twenty years. This is new territory.”

The ginger cat stops licking its paw and stares at me with those familiar green-gold eyes—and then I remember: I saw this cat in the ECs. They locked us in Extraction Containers and pulled out threads of our future to create the Time Bombs, and we would see these flashes of all the things being extracted. I saw this cat, just like I saw Vi

in her pink jacket, except I didn't realize it was her. *Don't you recognize me, Ash?*

"Why . . ." I gesture weakly at the other Vi, still beaming at us like she's watching old friends reunite at the airport.

"ViToo is a brand new, top-of-the-line Assistant," says Vi, with an edge to her voice that I don't understand. "I know, only wealthy people had robot assistants last time you were, uh, aware. Actually, that's still true, but there have been *major* breakthroughs with robotics in the last two decades, so there's going to be a lot for you to get used to. ViToo is supposed to be learning to act like me so she can take over some of my media obligations, interact with the kids here as my proxy, that kind of thing. Super generous of the Board."

"She's . . . a robot?"

"Sort of?" says ViToo. Her voice is exactly like Vi's. "Physically, I'm part mechanical, part synthetic biologics. And with all of human and machine knowledge available to me and the ability to process and analyze vast amounts of data instantly, I'm *a lot* smarter than your friend here."

"Her personality is a work in progress," says Vi, with a pinched little smile. "She's been trained on vidstreams of me so far, which is making me rethink my public persona. We've decided she needs to spend more time with the *actual* me."

“So thrilling,” deadpans ViToo. She beams again and explains: “I’m practicing *sarcasm*!”

I feel my breath going in and out. Twenty years. *Twenty years*. Vi must be thirty-three. Nan is eighty years old. Lizzy is fifty-two.

And I am still thirteen. All my friends have grown up without me . . .

“What about Troy?” I ask. “And Faith?”

“Troy is my childhood best friend!” says ViToo with great enthusiasm. “And Faith is a backstabbing snake!”

Vi makes a dismissive face. “We’re not really in touch anymore. People drift apart. It happens.”

I stare at her. Vi and Troy “drifting apart” is hard to imagine, but all this is impossible, and anyway, that wasn’t my question. When I pulled the pin on the roof—moments ago, decades ago—I didn’t even know if Troy was alive. He’d had too many key future threads extracted, and he’d been in a coma in a hospital somewhere. Vi was devastated. We all were.

“So . . . Troy is okay?”

“More or less,” she says. “Last I heard.”

I look around the strange, circular room. Even with the sedative, my heart is stuttering in my chest. None of this makes sense. What has happened in the past twenty years?

“But . . . you’re the *director* of . . . of the Factory? Is this—”

“Not the *Factory* anymore,” she says, jumping up and clapping her hands, so much like her old self for a moment that I feel as if I have mental whiplash. “I’ll give you a tour and explain everything. ViToo?”

ViToo hands me a zippered bag.

“Clothes, wig, press badge, livecam goggles,” says Vi. “You can’t be Asher Doyle. At least, not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Trust me, you don’t want the attention. While we figure out next steps, you’re going to be Joey Palata, school news reporter granted an exclusive look inside TimeLabs. Put this stuff on.”

A part of the wall slides open onto the small, mirrored space that brought me here. I stand up and step inside, distantly amazed at my own ability to follow directions when what I really want to do is crawl under the desk and start screaming. The door slides shut, and I’m surrounded by endless reflections of myself, pale and wide-eyed, wearing pajamas. I wonder, but only for a moment, why I woke up inside instead of on the roof, but the question gets washed aside by a thousand other questions, my mind a churning, dark sea.

Twenty years. I clench my teeth around the scream that keeps rising up my throat.

I change into the pants and the T-shirt that says LIVE! FROM MARSHALL SECONDARY SCHOOL. There’s a smudge

on the inside of my elbow. I'm about to rub it off when I realize it's writing. Small letters in fine black marker. Somebody has written *on the roof* on my skin. There's some more writing just above it that's too smudged to read, maybe numbers. I stare at it, confused, and then lick my thumb and rub it off. Weird, but really, so far from the weirdest thing I have to deal with right now that I don't give it another thought. I put on the heat-repelling jacket and the blue wig, then fasten the goggles over it. I look completely ridiculous. I knock on the mirrored door and it slides open.

Vi laughs when she sees me.

"Pretty good," she says, stepping inside the room.

ViToo waves at us cheerfully.

"I would never wave like that," Vi snaps at her AI robot twin.

"Oh!" says ViToo, crestfallen. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, either," says Vi as the door closes. "I never apologize."