

Honey, I Shrunk my Colleagues.

Finch sat upright in his chair, his rigid posture in direct contrast with his colleague's bored slouching. Studying his laptop intently, a feeling of elation began to rise within him, pushing the melancholy out of his lungs. Typing the last few lines of code into his computer, the program's reflection shimmering in his wire rim glasses, he readied himself to make an announcement. Finch looked down at his shaking hands, his almond skin wrinkled and dry from long nights of typing.

Around the lab his coworkers were in various states of grief, Charlie, the team engineer was slouched at his desk. His imposing figure was compressed in a chair, his bright blonde hair signaling his presence despite his best efforts to conceal himself. Always the pragmatist, his desk had been stripped of the knick-knacks that had occupied its surface for years. The absence of the constant clacking of the Newton's cradle left behind a loud silence. Allison, the team's biologist, was rigidly packing her various desk decorations and comfort objects. Maya, the consulting physicist, sat across from Finch in uncharacteristic silence, sipping on a glass of water. Her desk was plain by comparison, packing for her would be easy. All that needed to be stored was last year's Christmas photo of her with her two kids, Milo a boy of ten, and Violet, a fourteen-year-old girl. Maya was the most experienced of the four, and her composure reflected it.

The cause for their melancholy was obvious, their research had been yielding little progress. The suit from management had informed them their contract was terminated this morning. Undeterred by this, Finch had kept plugging away at his keyboard, desperate to prove he and his team hadn't wasted the last three years of their lives.

Finally, his efforts had been rewarded and the program was finalized. "Guys I think I got it," he announced to the room at large.

A gun had gone off, all three of his compatriots perked up, astonished that they had succeeded in the 11th hour. Maya and Allison shared his glee, smiles broad on their faces. Maya whooped and stood, pumping her fist as she rose to her feet. Her tired eyes animated by a new light. Allison let out a small

sob, a single tear running down her face. Charlie alone seemed unaffected by the news, his countenance as stern as ever.

“So what?” intoned Charlie in his baritone voice. “Our contracts are done; we won’t get any credit. They’ll just claim our research, hand it off to the next group of lab monkeys, and we’ll be back where we started.” Charlie continued in his throaty rumble “They won’t just take our word that this works now, we don’t have any proof of concept here. I advise the rest of you start looking for new jobs too.”

Finch shrugged it off, captivated by the breakthrough he had made. “Do you not understand what we might have done here? We’re the forefathers of matter manipulation! Every operative in the CIA is about to be goddamn Ant Man because of us!” Strangely his colleagues didn’t seem reassured. Allison understandably so; this was her first job out of her PHD program, and she needed something to put on her resume other than a termination.

Maya chimed in at this point. “That’s assuming this works, even if we got everything right, we still need to run biological tests, and I don’t know if you got the memo, but we just got fired. I doubt they’ll give us the funding to make sure this is field safe.”

Driven by desperation, Allison put forth an alternative: “Why don’t we just test it ourselves, today?” Charlie and Maya laughed at this, but she continued “No, seriously. The device is right there! They still haven’t taken all my subjects. Why don’t we run Astro through the process?”

Astro was a big gray lab the team kept in the office. The boisterous canine officially resided in a cage in the corner, but Allison couldn’t bear to keep him locked up all the time, so he had free roam whenever it was safe. Usually, white mice would be the first subjects, but the suits in charge of their department had expressed concern that a shrunken mouse would be utterly unobservable, hence they had given Finch and his team Astro. Perhaps a bit unethical, but Raytheon wasn’t exactly hung up on being squeaky clean.

The four deliberated for a moment, but surprisingly it was Charlie who pushed the hardest for the test. “This is our last chance, can you imagine the fortune we’d make if this worked?” he said, practically

salivating at the idea. Charlie had grown up living hand to mouth, and he'd never quite shaken his family's money-grubbing tendencies "I say we do it."

Finch grinned, heartened by the pair's support, but he could sense Maya's reluctance. "Maya think what this tech could do! Surgeons shrinking to the size of fleas and excising cancer cells, starving children fed for a whole day with just a bite of an apple, people living in luxury for pennies on the dollar! We could solve climate change for god's sakes!" Finch could sense her weakening "Think the legacy you'd leave your children. A world without scarcity, all thanks to their mother. You'd be a giant to them."

Maya swallowed and nodded. "Fine but we do this completely right. If there's even a hair out of place, they'll see it as a violation of contract. We don't have a margin for error."

Without further dissent, the group began to "suit Astro for his great journey. Allison applied the oxygen mask to the dog's long snout, while Finch draped a thick sweater over his limbs. Charlie merely looked mildly confused, while Maya scratched behind Astro's ears.

"Remind me again why we need to dress him up? He's just shrinking right, it's not like he's getting colder." Charlie towered over the assemblage, his white coat on his wide frame practically acting as a backdrop for the odd group.

Allison rolled her eyes at this and looked up at the hulking man, putting her authoritative "biologist voice" on as she responded. "Because when a mammal gets that small, they can't generate heat nearly as efficiently. "We have way too much surface area and not enough blood, relatively speaking" Charlie began to speak, but Allison swiftly cut him off. "And for the millionth time, the mask is to keep oxygen out. At that size we take in way too much oxygen. The mask prevents oxygen poisoning" The two made a ridiculous pair. Allison was a wisp of a woman, a full foot shorter than Charlie and about 100 pounds lighter. Despite this, she spoke with complete confidence, a skill she had quickly learned in business meetings with the unreceptive executives in R&D.

With all preparations completed, they positioned Astro beneath the device, that looked for all the world like Goldfinger's torture device. Completely oblivious to what he was about to undergo, Astro wagged his shaggy tail happily, basking in all the attention. Finch began the launch sequence, and the

machine began to whirl, humming with power like the rumblings of some great beast. The hair on Finch's arms stood as he looked on with trepidation. All around the device, the group waited with bated breath. In a flash of light, Astro disappeared, leaving the small pen of the testing area seemingly deserted.

The four leaned in, their heads nearly touching as they inspected the area. Finch's bald spot briefly brushed against Maya's raven hair, but the pair never noticed, too absorbed by their observation. Sure enough, in the middle of where Astro's right paw had once been a small speck, its legs barely discernible in its size. The bright orange of the doggy sweater acted like a flare, keeping him clearly visible.

For the first time in what seemed like months, a smile cracked across Charlie's face. "Holy shit it worked!" he exclaimed, his deep voice booming across the sterile lab.

"Not yet," responded Maya, barely holding back the excitement in her voice. "We need to make sure he's not stuck the size of one of his fleas."

"He doesn't have fleas!" responded Allison "Do you know how often I give him baths?!"

"Okay enough, I'm gonna bring him back" said Finch, snapping his colleagues from their banter. "Clear the area, firing in 3, 2, 1!" His partners hastily withdrew as the machine came back to life.

Another bright flash, and there stood Astro. The dog shivered in place, his once wagging tail drooping between his legs dejectedly. The formerly elated dog whimpered in terror, transformed by what he had undergone. To everyone's shock, he backed himself into his cage, hair standing on end as he eyed his surroundings.

Only Allison was perturbed by his reaction as the four sat in stunned silence. Overcome by their achievement, they seemed to melt into their chairs in relief as Allison went over to Astro to ensure he was in good condition. "Its okay boy, you're back" she whispered to the dog, stroking his fur as she spoke. "God he's shaking, are we sure we want to do this too? We might react the same way."

Charlie, Maya, and Finch waited with bated breath for the verdict. Some minutes went by in absolute silence, only interrupted by the occasional whimper from Astro. A pin could be heard in the lab. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Allison stood and turned back to the group, her face

unreadable. Bringing her hand upwards with the finality of an executioner's ax, she gave a shaky thumbs up. Astro was in perfect health. "God he's shaking, are we sure we want to do this too? We might react the same way."

Finch dismissed this quickly "He's a dog, he had no idea what was happening. We'll be a little more aware. Besides he's perfectly healthy, I would be freaked out too if I was surrounded by four giants."

For a moment, the four were as quiet as the eye of a storm. Finch laughed; a sound more unsettling than all of Astro's complaints. Maya and Allison joined in soon after, the weight of three years of hard work lifting off their shoulders simultaneously.

"Does anybody have any champagne?" asked Maya.

"I can't believe we finally did it." mumbled Allison "we need titles, I cant just be credited as Dr. Allison Jackson on this we need something with more flair."

"I should be Hank Pym" cut in Finch "the interesting one though. From the comic books not the movies. You should be the modern Merie Curie Maya." Finch continued.

"Excuse me?" she replied indignantly 'Curie's work gave her cancer; I don't want that baggage.'

Allison snorted "Yeah but she won two Nobel prizes. You should be proud of the comparison. Besides you're a physicist, it works."

"She also had an affair with a married man. I'm happy with my family." Maya retorted "But fine, as long as you get to be Frankenstein, ya know since you're a biologist and all."

Charlie alone did not join the celebration, already his mind had turned to logistics "I hate to be the bearer of bad news-" he began.

"No, you don't," laughed Allison. "That's basically your whole job at this point" she remarked, determined not to be brought down by his pessimism.

"Only because I finished my part months ago, I've been waiting on Finch to catch up" Charlie snapped back. "Anyway, as great as this is, we're not seeing a dime until we can prove this is safe for human testing. We're still in the same position but we just made it easier for the next group of eggheads."

Finch hand waved his concerns. “This is an insane breakthrough, who cares about the money!” Allison and Charlie both balked at this, they needed this more than Finch clearly. He continued hurriedly “Anyway we can test this ourselves, we still have that obstacle course for the first human subjects.”

The group had built the obstacle course as one of their first orders of business, back when they’d been convinced that they would finish their work quickly. Consisting of a few small platforms and the equivalent of about a mile of track, the course was relatively mild. It was purely designed to see if humans could function in miniature and was expected to be concluded in about 20 minutes.

Maya quickly voiced her objections: “We’re not exactly field agents. This could be dangerous.” Her tone was light, but she raised valid concerns.

“We designed this with safety in mind,” Finch responded. “We just need to walk a mile in extremely small shoes.”

Maya shook her head at this. “This isn’t exactly a walk in the park Finchy. This is uncharted territory.”

“Don’t call me Finchy,” snapped Finchy, eliciting a chuckle from Allison. “Come on Maya, I thought you were the Modern Curie. Don’t you want your name on this? We could be the first humans to shrink!” He turned to Charlie and Allison for support. “What do you guys think? Consider the royalties Charlie! And Allison, imagine how this would look on your resume!”

With that, Finch had won out. Maya’s concerns were immaterial to the trio in the face of their ambitions. Maya sighed. “Fine, but you should at least stay big Finch, you’re the only one who can actually run the machine.”

Finch stared at her in horror. “That wasn’t one of your funnier jokes. I’m not going to miss being one of the first humans to shrink.”

“You’re gonna have plenty of chances, it's not going anywhere. But if we’re gonna do this we should take every precaution. Leaving you behind to pull the plug is the bare minimum.”

“You’re not going to Buzz Aldrin me here. Besides, what could go wrong? It's literally a walk in the park. I’ll set the machine to resize everything in the extraction point after about 30 minutes. We’ll be

in and out before you know it.” Maya’s apprehension was visible, but Finch carried on “All we have to do is walk to the target area in those 30 minutes. It’s just a mile long walk. I’ll set the machine to go off every 10 minutes afterwards, so even if we’re late we’ll be fine.”

With that, Finch went to retrieve the course, washing his hands first to ensure no contamination occurred. Grabbing the uneven green tile from its storage unit, he began to fit it into its receptacle beneath the machine, exchanging it for the pen Astro had previously occupied. While fixing it in place, he got a good look at it for the first time in months. With its uneven surface, green paint, and long winding Olympic track, it looked for all the world like a tiny park.

Without further ado, Allison began the briefing for the test. They were all familiar with the experiment, but such a formality helped keep them calm. “Remember, once you shrink down, you need to enter the shelter and flip the light switch to let us know you’re all set.” Allison gestured at a small building with a miniscule lamp on top, shaped like a public urinal on a microcosm. “And make sure to never take off the oxygen masks or the coats, they’re the only things keeping us alive.”

On that somber note, the group began to suit up, donning their regalia with a grim determination. Unprompted, Finch began humming *Flight of the Valkyries* as Charlie stepped into the designated area. If everything went as planned, he would land directly next to the door of the shelter. “Alright let’s get it over with,” Charlie griped, “I’m cooking in this thing.” The jackets were similarly colored to Astro’s own: bright, orange, and puffy.

“Initiating shrinking sequence, firing in 3 seconds,” announced Finch, fingers coaxing the machine to life as he spoke.

“Maybe make him a little smaller than us,” joked Allison. “Let that gorilla see how it feels being the shortest in the room.”

Charlie’s indignant retort was cut off by a flash of light. The machine fired and Charlie vanished with little ceremony. The three remaining scientists waited in trepidation, staring intently at the light on top of the shelter. After a brief moment, it flickered, and the trio released a collective sigh of relief.

Next, Allison stepped into the ring, careful to avoid crushing the shelter Charlie occupied. Once again Finch initiated the launch, announcing “Initiating shrinking sequence, firing in 3 seconds.” Another flash of light and another vanished scientist.

Maya and Finch looked on slightly less apprehensively. within 5 seconds the light flickered again. This time the duo’s exhalation was inaudible. Maya stepped up next, her misgivings apparent in her face. “Make sure we get out of this safely, Finchy. We’re trusting you here” said Maya, looking directly into Finch’s eyes as she spoke.

Finch’s glasses glinted, obscuring his irises as he began his announcement for a third time. “Initiating shrinking sequence, firing in 3 seconds.” Sure enough, within 3 seconds, Maya had disappeared.

Finch began tapping away at his keyboard, setting the machine to automatically shrink him down once he was in position. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the light flicker, indicating Maya’s safety. Finch zipped up his comically large jacket and stepped into the park, his breathing shallow and rapid behind his mask. It was finally happening; he was participating in possibly the greatest scientific breakthrough of his generation. The machine whirred and the light flashed.

It felt as if every extremity in his body had gone numb all at once. pins and needles shot up his toes and spread to the rest of his body. As he shrank, the room quickly became colder, leaving him thankful for his oversized coat. Most disconcertingly, the once brightly lit lab had seemingly gone dark. Finch could only reliably see five feet (or its equivalent) ahead of him, just far enough to see the outline of the shelter. The building was now indistinguishable to him from any other he might find at a park.

Finch pulled the door open and stepped through. The interior of the shelter was similarly dark to the lab at large. Finch could just barely make out the outlines of his compatriots in the gloom. The momentousness of their accomplishment once again threatened to overwhelm Finch. He was unable to see the details of his partners’ faces behind their oxygen masks, but he was certain they were just as ecstatic.

“We’re finally here,” Maya intoned in wonder.

As always, Charlie was focused on the practical. “We have 30 minutes, let's get a move on.” Allison nodded at this.

Finch was a little disconcerted by the pair's lack of reverence, but turned to open the door, nonetheless. “Remember, we just need to follow the path. It's roughly ovular and should spit us out right at the target destination.”

The ceremony concluded, and the group exited onto the path. “One tiny step for man,” muttered Maya.

The group made their way down the path, keeping their eyes peeled for anything unusual, determined to document every little detail once they returned to the world above. They cast their eyes to the heavens. Oddly the lab had become shrouded in darkness, the ceiling utterly imperceptible to them. It was as if they were staring into the vacuum of space.

“Why is it so dark down here?” asked Charlie. “The lab’s super well lit.”

“Our retinas are about 10,000 times smaller at the moment. We’re not exactly taking in light efficiently.” Allison paused for a minute before continuing. “It's a miracle we can even see this well, I thought we might be blind.”

Silenced by this sobering thought, the group continued in silence for a while, taking in the gloomy alien landscape as they went. None of them wanted to consider what the journey would have been like in abject darkness.

“Whoa, everybody stop!” shouted Charlie from the front of the line. “We’re at the first obstacle.”

Sure enough, in front of them loomed a wall riddled with imperfections and footholds. The top of the wall was out of view, obscured by darkness. Similarly, the width of the wall was invisible. “This thing could be 100 feet tall or 8,” said Charlie. “Think we should go around, or go over top?”

Finch gulped at this. “The ridge is made to be climbed. It's probably at most 10 feet tall. We should just go over and be done with it.”

“Do we have to worry about a mosquito swooping in and eating us?” asked Maya, only half joking. “I don't think we can defend ourselves at the moment.” Despite her light tone her voice shook a little, the prospect of meeting a murderous insect the size of a helicopter clearly did not sit well with her.

Allison's face was imperceptible in the shadows, but it was easy to tell she was rolling her eyes. “This whole lab is a biological clean room. The only living things here are Astro and us. There's nothing here that can hurt us.”

With all fears assuaged, Charlie began scaling the wall, his long limbs quickly boosting him out of sight. After a few seconds passed, his voice could be faintly heard through the wall. “It's pretty easy guys, come on over.”

Allison went next, moving just as quickly as Charlie had prior, her athleticism compensating for her shorter arms. Next went Maya, boosting herself in measured increments at a significantly slower pace. Soon enough, she disappeared as well, and it was Finch's turn.

Stepping up to the wall, Finch found a hand hold just above head height and began his ascent. After a few feet of climbing, Finch became acutely aware of the pain in his fingers and the burning of his arms. Determined not to be the weak link, Finch drew a breath and focused on finding the next foothold. After a minute or so, Finch found the top of the wall and boosted his left leg over it, pivoting his body over it. Finch took another breath and began his descent, the burning in his arms near unbearable now. After descending about 5 feet, it became apparent that he could not hold on any longer. Beneath him the ground was invisible.

“I'm gonna drop,” he yelled frantically. “Move out the way.” Finch dangled listlessly for a minute, and then fell into the abyss. Thankfully the ground was only 6 feet beneath him. It had been just out of view. The impact jarred him, but nothing seemed truly damaged.

“Gracefully done, Antman.” chuckled Allison. Her words were lighthearted, but they stung, nonetheless.

“Let's just keep going, we've probably got about three quarters of a mile left” interjected Maya, deliberately keeping the mirth out of her voice. She continued, this time looking at Finch with a perfect

poker face “Though I’m surprised, we’re a lot stronger relatively speaking at this size. It’s half the reason the suits wanted this tech so badly.” She finally broke and let out a laugh “The upshot is you could have fallen forever. That looked like your terminal velocity here and you survived. We should keep you falling in the report.”

Finch cleared his throat abashedly and looked away. It had been a while since he’d exerted himself. “Remind me again why we had to add an obstacle course? It wasn’t good enough to shrink?”

“Raytheon wanted proof that this would actual present some kind of tactical advantage for operatives.” Charlie responded “They didn’t design this with lab nerds in mind. We weren’t supposed to be here.”

With that, the group lined up into their pre-established order; Charlie first, Allison second, Maya third, and Finch bringing up the rear.

After another minute or so of walking, Charlie abruptly halted. “Guys check this out, there's a big ass water droplet here.”

Sure enough, in front of them loomed a dome of water, flecked with indeterminate brown and pink debris. Maybe 10 feet wide and 8 feet tall, the droplet was a bizarre sight.

“I think it’s Astro’s drool,” giggled Allison as the group gawked at it.

“It smells like it,” mumbled Maya.

The pungent scent hung heavy in the air. Unlike their sight, the group's olfaction seemed to be working well, too well even. It was as if everyone had been given a bath by Astro’s long sandpaper tongue.

Still laughing, Allison reached her hand out to the bubble.

“WAIT ALLISON DON’T TOUCH IT!” yelled Maya in a panic. But it was already too late. Allison made contact with the bubble and pierced its outer layer.

With a sound like water fleeing down a drain the droplet sucked Allison into its innards. Allison flailed with all her might, but the water may as well have been molasses. Her pale face was wreathed by

her hazelnut hair, a soundless scream etched into her face. Her mute thrashing pathetically ineffective in her liquid tomb.

“It’s the goddamn surface tension,” shouted Maya, “She can’t get out on her own, we need a pole or something to extract her!” Within the bubble Allison’s face began turning a deep blue. Her eyes were pleading as she looked out at the observing trio. Her struggles were barely perceptible as she pushed with all her might against the liquid.

“What fucking pole are we gonna use?!” retorted Charlie. “We don’t exactly have one on hand.” The pair cast about desperately for some appendage to rescue their colleague with. They had done too good of a job sterilizing the course.

Finch stood there silently, watching the commotion with a slack expression on his face. Stunned by what had transpired, Finch couldn’t take his eyes off his friend. Inside the bubble of saliva, Allison seemed to be staring directly at him. Her expression seemed to be equal parts appeal and blame. Finch could hear her accusations ringing in his ears.

The landscape was suddenly as quiet as it was gloomy. Allison’s purple tinted face was horrifically visible in the droplet, frozen in a rictus of a scream. Her eyes were pried open, the panic and fear forever etched onto her features. It occurred to Finch that her Allison was the first person to die in miniature. The scientist began numbly envisioning tiny coffins. “Now there’s a business idea.” He thought to himself.

Finch fell to his knees, still making eye contact with the minute corpse. Her eyes were still open, frozen in a rictus of fear and regret. Her life had ended unceremoniously in this shaded landscape. She would be consigned to this fate until some unknown scavenger happened upon her.

Charlie rounded on the distraught man, his hulking figure obscuring what little light had made its way down to them. “We should never have listened to you” bellowed Charlie, his face a mask of rage and despair. Finch didn’t even spare him a glance as Charlie stepped forward, his intentions written on his face.

Finch could only sit there helplessly, utterly paralyzed by what had transpired. Seeing his inability to defend himself, Maya inserted herself between the pair. “He’s clearly in shock Charlie, he didn’t mean it.” She turned to the smaller man. Despite her interference it was clear she didn’t mean to let Finch off the hook. “I told you this was a bad idea, now Allison’s dead and we’re stuck the size of goddamn ticks!”

Finch barely seemed to register the scathing words of his colleagues. “What are we gonna tell her family,” He mumbled. “Sorry your daughter died, don’t worry though I’m sure a spider got a good meal out of her? We can’t even bring her body back.”

Maya and Charlie stared at him, utterly dumbfounded. “This is when you develop a sense of humor?” Maya asked incredulously. Taking a deep breath, she gathered herself and placed a hand on Finch’s shoulder, forcing her voice into some semblance of calm “First thing’s first Finchy, we gotta get back to normal. Let’s get moving.” Charlie shook his head in disgust at this and turned back down the path. With nothing left to say, the trio continued on their way.

As they walked, Finch’s thoughts lingered on his younger, departed colleague. Instead of filling out her resume, it seemed likely that this job would fill out her obituary. She would never reap the rewards of the brilliant work she had done here, but humanity would benefit all the same. This was small comfort to Finch, her final moments still burned into his retinas.

Time was strangely mercurial in the dusky lab. Finch felt as if they may have walked for an hour, or a year. The lack of a tangible light cycle made it difficult to determine how long they had been walking. Oddly, his legs weren’t burning “This is the longest walk I’ve taken in years” Finch noted in some muted corner of his mind “Why am I not breathing heavy?” The scientist in him had already begun drafting the notes in his report. Finch grimaced and continued walking.

Each step took an eternity. Finch couldn’t stop picturing Allison’s demise, the little bubbles of air rippling upwards through the globule of astro’s saliva. It seemed a cruel irony that Allison had spent so much time caring for the dog, treating it as if it were her own, only for Astro to inadvertently slaughter her in the night. Finch noted that his cheeks were damp. He wiped the tears away mechanically and let out

a snuffle. He wondered if Allison would be remembered when this technology was widely used. Would she be a footnote or some tragic figure? Would Finch himself be cast as a villain? The thought of his legacy being marred hurt almost as much as the long moments of helplessness during Allison's death. Finch silently resolved to find Allison's family and tell them himself.

Finally, they came upon another climbing wall. This time, there was little discussion. Charlie launched himself up the wall, not even sparing a glance to make sure Maya and Finch were following. His long limbs soon pulled him out of view. A dull thud echoed from the other side of the wall as the big man landed, reverberating through the uneven surface of the wall.

Following this sound, Maya began her own ascent, traversing the wall at a slightly slower clip. A thud quickly followed as she landed. Finch stepped forward and tentatively laid a hand in a crevice, slowly hoisting himself up. This time the climb went smoother; Finch almost welcomed the exertion as a distraction. As he reached the summit of the wall, he vaulted himself over it. Rather than trying to climb down, Finch dangled from his fingertips for a moment and dropped. His landing was jarring, and for a moment Finch nearly lost his balance as his knees buckled.

A rattling wheeze echoed in Finch's ears, jolting him to alertness. A mountainous figure was sprawled out on the ground before him, the wheeze echoing from its midsection. Focusing on Charlie's head, Finch immediately recognized what was wrong. Beneath Charlie's shock of straight blonde hair, the mask had dislodged itself from his face, presumably from the drop. Maya was kneeling next to him, a hand on his chest.

"He's ice cold, I don't know why!" shouted Maya frantically "I don't think he's breathing!" She placed her hands upon Charlie's chest and began compressions. Upon the first cycle of compression, a sickening crunch echoed from his supine body. Horrified, Finch pressed himself against the wall, creating what little distance he could between himself and the grizzly scene before him.

Maya was as frozen as the soon to be corpse next to her. There was a small trail of maroon blood trickling out of Charlie's bluing lips, leaking onto her pants. Maya's breathing soon became as ragged as

Charlie's had been merely a moment ago. The pair remained there, frozen for what felt like a decade.

Sobbing filled the air, but whether it was his own or Maya's was a mystery to Finch.

"I-I didn't realize, god why didn't I realize." Maya looked horrified, staring at the flecks of skin flash frozen to her hands "The air flash froze him when he breathed it. He's so brittle he'd shatter." She struggled to find her feet trembling as she stood "Allison... Allison would have known, she's the biologist." Maya finally broke hearing herself utter Allison's name "What are we gonna do Finchy?" The pair sat there crying for what felt like years.

Maya, shaking herself from her stupor planted her hands and pushed off the ground. Rising unsteadily to her feet, Maya turned to Finch, barely suppressed rage in her eyes. Finch stared at her, terrified of the rebuke that was budding on her lips. Maya pursed her lips, choked back the inevitable retort, and with it a sob. "We need to get the hell out of here now." The hollow intonation to her voice did little to mask the vitriol in her words. Maya took one step, then another, not looking back to see if Finch was following.

Desperate to avoid solitude, Finch followed onto the path staring down at the track as he went. "One foot in front of the other" he thought to himself, entering an odd state of meditation as he went. Every crunch of his work shoes on the pseudo-gravel was deafeningly loud, filling the cavernous space of the lab, echoing upwards to the unimaginably distant ceiling. Finch tilted his head upwards and was struck by a horrific image of a gaping maw. As if the incomparably vast room was the hollow stomach of some incomprehensible cosmic beast.

After an indeterminate length of time, a structure soon jutted out of the darkness. They had finally made it to the shelter. They were going to make it.

Maya turned to Finch, all traces of derision or blame absent. "You go first Finchy, then you bring me right back up." Finch mumbled his assent mutely.

Finch stood hunched in the doorway for a minute, trying to piece together a plan. Through the fog of his mind, Finch recalled that the device was on a timer. If he simply waited at the extraction point, he

would be raptured from this hellscape. Recalling this, he waved Maya away from the shelter. “Step back a bit, it’ll beam me up first if I’m the only target in the extraction zone.”

“Just get me out of here” Maya responded brusquely, stepping back onto the path and fading into the darkness as she went.

After a minute or so, a bright neon green light flashed, centered around Finch like a halo. As he rose from his miniscule size, the light gradually reentered his eyes. The transformation seemed slower the second time, and Finch savored every minute of his ascension. The lab popped back into focus around him as he soon stood at his full size. Beneath him the track that had seemed so gargantuan was a mere children’s toy, with no observable evidence of the horror that had transpired.

In a frenetic joy, Finch stripped off his mask and comically large winter coat and hurried to the side of his prized device. As he went, something crunched underfoot but the sound barely registered in his delirious state.

Finch steadied himself and began inputting the codes to bring Maya back with him. The machine whirred to life. The once blinding green light seemed much more tolerable to his fully adjusted retinas.

Beneath the eye of the device, Maya began to rise out of the artificial park, but something was off. She was lying flat on her back, and blood coating her pant legs. “That’s odd,” Finch thought to himself. “Charlie wasn’t bleeding this much” As his gaze traveled further up her figure the truth laid itself bare to him. Her head and chest were a horror of blood and bone, crushed flat by some immense weight. Brain matter intermingled with the fabric of her clothes, discoloring the white lab coat like a ghoulish tie dye.

A thought struck Finch, and he ripped off his shoes in a panic inspecting their soles as they were removed. The bottom of his left shoe was unmarred, but the right held a miniscule red dot, in the middle of its heel.

Finch staggered away from the remains of his last friend, and hunched over in the corner, retching up his dinner from what felt like a lifetime ago. As the last of the bile trickled out past his lips, a scream tore itself from his lungs, mingling with the horrified whining of Astro in the corner.

The commotion drew the attention of other scientists in the building, but Finch barely registered their presence. He felt a pair of firm hands press down on his arms, followed by a jabbing pain in his shoulder, and everything went dark.

Finch sat in his new spacious office a few months later, three lamps in various locations aiding the ceiling light. After his ordeal, Finch made it a point to maintain a bright living space. He would even sleep with the lights on to avoid being transported back to that horrid plane. In the weeks following their ill-advised experiment, Finch had debriefed his employers on what had transpired. The executives at Raytheon had labeled it a resounding success and deemed the technology viable for field use. The cost of the experiment was regrettable, but ultimately acceptable in pursuit of progress.

Their words should've enraged Finch, but he felt nothing at their assessment. He had received a huge promotion and bonus, filling out both his resume and bank account quite extensively, but what was he to spend it on? All his colleagues were gone, and he didn't exactly have a thriving social life outside his work.

The real kicker was that he received no credit. Sure, they had given him some nondescript awards for excellence, but the clandestine nature of his work meant that he would garner no recognition for what he had accomplished. The records of this technology would remain sealed for God knows how long. Worse, he never got to explain to his fallen colleagues' families. They hadn't received any explanation beyond "A horrible workplace accident". Maya's kids had buried an empty casket at a funeral Finch was forbidden from attending. If he ever reached out to them, to apologize, to console, his contract ensured he would be sued for everything he had.

Finch swirled the whiskey in his crystal tumbler, staring at it as he reflected on his legacy. This technology would have enormous potential in combating famine, aiding in medical procedures, and so much more. The possibilities were endless, but it was seeming more and more likely that none of it would be recognized. To preserve its tactical advantage, his employer would keep it strictly under wraps.

Finch would never be seen as a pioneer or visionary. If anyone knew what had happened in that lab he'd be cast as a monster, a fool dabbling in forces far beyond his comprehension. Finch sighed deeply and finished his drink.