Redemption

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/949715.

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Redemption

by Silverstreams

Summary

After Caroline discovers her 'parents' to be Black Mesa spies, Doug Rattmann hides young Chell in Old Aperture before she's sealed off and presumed dead. Years later, she's back, and her resurfacing could lead to Aperture's downfall. A Portal prequel about what it truly takes to have a shot at redemption.
Chapter 1

Summer 1996

The water of the lake was cold on her feet.

Eleven-year-old Chell splashed around in the choppy waves of Lake Michigan, though she didn’t venture in past her knees. A gray sky hung overhead, and a cool wind picked up moisture from the turbulent lake. Wave after wave crashed against her.

Chell pulled her arms around her chest, shivering in her blue and white swimsuit. The wind grew colder by the minute, and she was about ready to get changed out of her damp swimsuit and back into the car with her mother.

It had been Chell's idea to take an hour's detour to visit the great lake on their way to upper Michigan. She wanted this to be one last moment to share before she split ways with her mother. She'd hoped for warm waters and sunny skies, and perhaps her mother swimming as well. But this wasn't a tropical beach. It was Michigan.

Chell was alone. Her mom sat beneath the cover of a few trees. Her long sleeved shirt was bright against the gray atmosphere, and her hair was pulled into a tight bun. Books and papers sat scattered beside her—something science related, no doubt. With her Black Mesa interview days away, she spent all of her time studying.

A strong gust of wind picked up, slapping Chell with cold waves and fluttering her mom's papers. The girl's body trembled, and her skin rose with chills. She turned and clamored through the reeds and rocks, up the half-muddy half-sandy slope to her mother.

She stood there for a moment, shivering, before she glanced up.

"Had enough?" her mother said. Chell nodded. Her mother pulled a beach towel and dry clothes from a bag.

"Go change," she said. "I'll meet you at the car."

Chell nodded, pulling the towel around her shoulders. She tucked the clothes under her arm and headed to the beach's bathroom, patting her legs dry. Her dark hair was still damp against her bare shoulders, and she ran back to their grungy white car.

As they pulled away, Chell watched the frothy waters, still sliding through the reeds and she knew that her last attempt to make a worthy memory had failed.

Her mother glanced in the rear-view mirror once in awhile, noticing how her daughter still clung to the damp beach towel and stared out the window.

"Need me to turn the heat on back there?" she said.

Chell shook her head.

Her mother drummed her fingertips against the steering wheel. Field after field sped by her window as they drove through the dog-shaped state.

The woman glanced in the mirror and tried again.
"Everything all right back there?" Chell did not look away from the window. There was a pause—a long pause that her mother didn't comment on—until finally Chell nodded yes.

"Good," said her mother. "We're almost there."

They pulled into the small town of Appleton as the sun set in the orange sky. The town felt empty. Next to no one was out and about, yet the stores and gas stations remained open. After a few intersections, they turned to find street after street of houses. There seemed to be about three separate designs in all—with all three alternating up and down the streets. Chell looked into their windows, expecting to see light and people. There was only darkness. The town's people must have been elsewhere.

On the edge of the street, one bright house stood like a beacon. They pulled into the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires. Her mother shut off the engine and turned to face her daughter, hand resting on the seat's edge. Chell stared at her golden bracelet.

"Well," she said. "Time to go meet your new family."

Chell said nothing. Instead, she slipped on her shoes and gathered some of her things into a nondescript backpack.

A dark-haired lady answered the door, face brightening when she saw the two. "Judith!" she said, ushering them in.

Chell hovered near one of the couches, looking around the place that would soon become her home. It most certainly didn't feel like the home she'd come from, which was a small apartment they'd rented while her mother finished her degree.

A layer of dust sat upon everything. The furnishings and the decorations all seemed plain and cookie cutter. She guessed that the houses along this street had similar, if not identical, décor.

A man with equally dark hair—though missing a fair portion on top—walked around the corner. "So you're the one I've heard so much about," he said. "Nice to finally meet you, Judith Mossman."

Chell's mother smiled, reaching out to shake his hand. He pulled her into a hug, but she pulled away. "And you must be Rochelle," he said, looking over at the girl.

"Chell," said the girl. She fingered at the straps of her backpack and stared at the carpeting.

"Okay then. It's nice to meet you, Chell."

For a long moment she studied the couple officially adopting her.

The lady placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. "I know your mother probably told you all about us, but it's good for formal introductions. I'm Emily Naransky, and this is my husband, Jerry."

Chell nodded. She had indeed heard everything about them—or at least everything she would need to know to pass as their adopted daughter. She certainly looked the part—they shared her dark hair and stoic looks.

Emily motioned for them to take a seat, and Judith pulled out the official papers—all previously finalized, of course—that transferred custody of her daughter to this couple of scientists.

After that was done, they drifted into small talk. Chell silently observed.
"So Emily's told me that you went back to school," said Jerry.

Judith nodded. "It's nice to finally be an official researcher," she said. "I might finally get that job at Black Mesa." She added, "I'm headed down there after this for an interview."

Emily congratulated her, and Jerry gave her a pat on the back. "It'll be nice to be co-workers," he said.

Mossman nodded. "Though I wouldn't want your job," she said with a short laugh.

Emily laughed, shaking her head. "It's not that bad. Those guys at Aperture are a joke. There's enough of us Black Mesas in there—you'd think they could sniff out a rat."

"Spying on them is the easiest job you could ask for," Jerry pitched in.

"I'd think it would be a little difficult, though," said Judith Mossman. Worry crept into her voice. She didn't want to hear that her plan to adopt out her daughter as another spy for Black Mesa was pointless. If this didn't land her a job at the country's number one applied science company, she didn't know what would.

"Oh no," said Emily. "Information's easy to get—it's just getting the details and the access to the technology that's hard."

"We have to work," Jerry said, "so we can't wait around and eavesdrop for those kinds of things. And that's where you come in," he said, pointing to Chell, who was still absently staring around the room. She glanced up.

"You will be perfect."
Chapter 2

The elevator dinged.

Before they parted, Emily pulled Chell into a hug. Her status of ‘mother’ was still new and uncommon amongst her co-workers—she showed it off whenever she could. And the few employees that had kids kept them as far away from Aperture as they possibly could.

Chell said nothing, receiving the hug for a brief moment before pulling away.

Left. Right. A catwalk, and another left. The path felt familiar beneath her feet—as if a line had been drawn for her through the maze of Aperture. Her twice-daily walk to and from the Employee Daycare Center never varied. The idea of taking a wrong turn and getting hopelessly lost terrified her into memorizing the layout.

Chell visualized a map, checking off each turn until she hit the last hallway. The door creaked open, and she hit the lights and flooded the dark, musty room.

Empty. As usual.

The clock’s tick echoed, a bitter reminder of just how early it was. She rubbed her eyes. This morning, Emily's observation team received a new test subject. Her excitement—and the potential usefulness of the results for Black Mesa—made her unable to sleep, so she woke Chell up before she left for work. This behavior was normal—like all Aperture employees, she had a twenty-four hour dedication to her job. Normal hours meant nothing.

A computer monitor flared to life as Chell clicked a button. While waiting, she spun her desk chair in circles. An unlucky employee would show up. Eventually. Aperture was too cheap to hire someone to run the place, so they passed the duty, hot-potato style, amongst themselves. No one was exempt—even Ms. Caroline came down one day.

Chell kicked her feet against the desk, propelling herself in endless circles. Blur, screen, blur, computer, blur, cabinet. A smear of black and white caught her attention as Doug Rattmann poked through the door.

A few papers drifted to the floor from the desk, caught up in the twirling air currents. "Dizzy yet?" he said, eyes throwing off a wild-eyed look.

Chell stuck out a hand to grab the desk, abruptly stopping herself. Her vision spun, twisting and tilting before settling. She dug her fingers into the chair's back and shrugged. He hit a few keys on her computer, then surveyed the room.

Rows of desks. Projector. Filing cabinets. An abundance of fun for a recently-turned twelve year old girl. She could've stayed home in Appleton, the employee town for the mines that'd been transformed into the employee town for Aperture Laboratories.

Being here was Chell's job. She had to stay and gather as much information as possible—anything to help her mom get that job.

"Not much to do here," he said. The man introduced himself as Doug, though his nametag said Rattmann.
Chell shrugged. Rattmann ran a hand through his hair.

"What do you normally do?" he asked.

"Computer stuff," she said with a half-shrug. Doug stared at the sparse screen.

"I used to be a programmer," he said, typing for a moment and scrolling through a bit of his work. He lifted a finger off of the mouse, ready to launch into detail about Aperture computers. Chell watched intently.

"You know what," said Doug as he clicked off the computer's power. "Better idea. Follow me."

Chell hopped down and followed Doug through unfamiliar hallways until a crossroads blocked their way. Faded lettering blended with a concrete wall, with only a portion recently painted.

"They send the painting projects to me," said Doug. "And there's tons of them. Help me with this, and I'll give you an art lesson or two afterwards."

"I'm not very good," said Chell, drifting to the wall where a small gray and pink cube sat. Her fingers trailed over raised edges, hovering over a glowing heart.

"Go on," he said. "Press it."

Chell pushed and the middle sunk in. The cube's top split, retracting into each raised corner. Inside the modified weighted storage cube, a burst of color greeted her. Brushes and paints and books spilled out of the half-sized container. Doug pulled out a few splattered brushes and paints, handing them to Chell. He hit another raised heart on the cube's side, and the top clicked closed. He pushed it back against the wall, providing a perfect step up for Chell.

"You're here everyday?" he asked, painting in the beginnings of a word.

Chell nodded grimly, dipping her brush into the yellow paint. An infallible focus guided her strokes.

"That's okay," he said. "Me too."

She gave a little snort, wiping away a drop of paint from her arm.

"You must love your job." She asked this question to each employee she met—and most didn't hesitate to agree with her. Doug gave the hallway a sweeping glance before grimacing.

"Well, my current job's better than programming," he said. Chell's silence urged him on. "I fix the broken ashpods." Chell's face flickered in confusion, and he added, "ASHPD. Portal Gun."

"The ones you're testing?" she said, brush slowing. Though she'd never seen one, her mom worked in test observation. She helped design test chambers, yet rarely worked with the device itself.

"That's right," said Doug, gathering his palette and paints. The word 'offices' accompanied by an arrow stared back at him, wet paint shining. He wiped off his brushes with today's lab coat. "My job's to improve it."

Chell hopped down from the cube. "I've never seen one up close," she said.

Doug reached for a thick book—a dark hardback with a white wave splashed across the front. "How about this. Since taking you on the job worked out well, I'll come back in a few days and..."
show you the ASHPD in my lab," said Doug.

"For now," he said, tossing her a fresh brush. "Time for an art lesson."

Three days later, Doug Rattmann returned as a designated daycare giver. A trend of dragging Chell along on the job quickly developed. She delivered office messages and stapled papers. She observed testing. In the announcement development room, she helped devise official instructions to air during various catastrophes.

Out of them all, she liked Doug —thoughtful and artistic—so unlike other loudmouthed men and women.

Chell sat in the daycare center with a stack of paintings. She rubbed her hands, cracked with dried paint, and leaned her latest painting against a monitor. Again, she was early—and today, she was determined to repaint this picture until she made one good enough to send to her mom in New Mexico.

Like Doug told her, she focused on shape and color. She tried to feel the art rather than strive for realism or accuracy, but the pictures of the lake turned out too bland and lifeless every time.

Footsteps.

Doug walked in, waving her over.

"I can't leave the lab today," he said. Chell set her paintbrush down, not caring that the drying paint would cement it to the paper. "Leave that. Let's go."

His lab was empty and clean, save for the equipment in various stages of disassembly. Black claws sat on his table, along with a gun-like weapon. A few small cubes, like Doug's, sat stacked on a counter.

Doug disappeared behind shelving and reappeared with a sleek white gun. He set it onto the table, dragging over the three claws and a handful of tools. Chell ran a hand across the gun's smooth outer shell.

"It works?" she said.

"Not yet," said Doug. He glanced around, quickly remembering that his lab contained no portal-conductive surfaces. "It's a prototype. Subjects have difficulties carrying the gun and carrying a cube — they keep dropping and breaking the ASHPD."

He sighed. "This other prototype—an energy manipulator—has been collecting dust. I thought I'd try combining the two."

Chell looked over at the experimental gun—similar to the portal device, but with three black claws and a more square body.

"Can I try?"

"Sure," said Doug. "Lift something with the gravity gun and I'll lift something else with this one." He tapped the portal device, then adjusted the top claw before flicking it on.

The prototype gun weighed heavily in Chell's hands. She pulled the trigger, lifting a deactivated turret. A smile sprouted across her face. The gun's glowing field of energy lifted it up as if with invisible strings.
"How does it work?" she said, lifting and lowering the turret. Doug raised another turret, which briefly hovered before crashing to the ground. He sighed and readjusted the claws.

"Yours is a zero-point energy field manipulator—the ASHPD version's designed for lifting cubes and turrets. The gun's core powers it—that thing's got as much power as a miniature black hole."

Chell gently set the turret down and pulled the gun to her chest. "I love it," she said. Doug nodded in agreement.

"Me too," he said, nodding in agreement. "My reassignment was like a promotion." Chell gave one last wistful sigh before returning the device to Doug.

While he tinkered, she scoured the shelving until she found pencils and blank sheets of paper. She pushed up a chair beside the energy manipulator and drew the piece of technology messily and expressively.

She tried again. With each attempt her realism improved.

Doug blinked and pushed his chair away, metal legs squeaking against tiled floor. His hour-long concentration broken, he looked at Chell's drawings before rummaging through cabinets until he found a small stack of oversized papers.

"Want some blueprints?" he said. "Sometimes it helps to draw the individual parts."

Chell's heart quickened as she thumbed through the crisp lines and fine-print notes. Her fingers trembled as she smoothed them out.

"Thanks," she said—quickly, softly, as to not reveal her excitement. She pulled out another paper, drawing a grid before copying the blueprints in detail. She didn't risk copying the fine print—she read it again and again while she drew, committing parts of it to memory.

By the end of the day, she copied them all.

Chell stared at the telephone. A crumpled piece of paper unfurled in her hand—her mother's current number. She inhaled and dialed the number, biting her lip as it rang and rang. Her feet bounced, barely able to contain her excitement.

A telltale click. The other end picked up.

"Hello?" an annoyed voice answered. Chell had probably interrupted something science-y.

"Mom!" she said, a rare show of energy busting out.


"No, but I've got really good news."

Chell's mother exhaled. "I'm busy right now—Black Mesa could call any minute now. "For days, she'd remained in the queue of potential hires without any other news. "Can it wait?"

"It's important," said Chell, cupping her hand around the mouthpiece. In the other room, her adoptive parents sat at their respective desks, each doing something work-related. They had to keep up with their co-workers' levels of dedication, after all.

"Then say it," she said. Chell shook her head, her action invisible through the telephone lines.
"Not over the phone," she said, voice low and serious. "But I bet you could get the job."

A shuffle on the other end. A pause. When Mossman spoke, she used an upbeat yet hurried voice. "Go tell your new mom and dad. They'll get the message to me," said Mossman. She cleared her throat. "Goodbye, Chell." she said.

"Mom?" A click on the other end. "Mom, I lo—"

The dial tone cut her off.

Chell stood at the end of Jerry's desk, unsure of how to start this conversation.

He scribbled in a notebook before glancing up and jumping. "You're so quiet," he said. "Didn't see you there. Something wrong?"

She shook her head. "Can you send something to my mom for me?"

"Sure," he said, wheeling around. "What is it?"

Chell pulled out the sketches tucked underneath her arm and set them on the desk. A look of confusion and amazement crossed his face. He flipped through them.

"Where did you get these?" he said.

"Drew them," she said.

"You drew blueprints?" he said. Emily looked up, pushing away her papers before joining them.

"They're copied," said Chell. She stared at the layer of dust that blanketed the furniture and the carpet, and couldn't help but notice that it was the same layer of dust from when she arrived.

"This isn't portal technology," said Emily. She held one up to the light. "I've never seen this before."

Chell reached for the blueprints, but her parents pulled them away.

"These are phenomenal," he said. "Where did you get these?"

"Doug," said Chell. Emily's lips turned up into a smile at the corners.

"Did you memorize the rest?" She meant the words, the details, the instructions littering the real blueprints.

Chell nodded after a moment. The two launched into questions, hammering her left and right for answers. She replied truthfully, spilling out the specific details. When they finished, they moved to flush the girl out of the room. Jerry grabbed a phone.

"So you're calling my mom?" she said, Emily's arm pushing against her back in a not-so-subtle push to the door.

"Hon," she said. "That'll take too long." She gave her a small pat.

"We've got to call Black Mesa. They'll be all over this," said Jerry. He dialed the phone.

"Wait," said Chell, stumbling forward. The door closed behind her and a lock clicked into place.

She leaned against the door, sliding down until she sat with her back against it. She listened. Excited
murmurs drifted from the other side.

Somehow, she knew she wasn't going to get any credit for the blueprints.

And neither was Judith Mossman.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

I'll try and get chapters up as often as I can—at least once every two weeks!
The phone rang.

Chell lounged between Emily and Jerry on the couch. The TV murmured, broadcasting into the summer evening. The sun hung low in the hazy sky, and the chill of night began to creep in. Emily got up and answered the call.

A shout from the other room. Jerry lunged and muted the TV.

"It's Black Mesa," she said as they rushed in, "with news." She hit the speakerphone and an automated voice came through, with a half-finished message.

"-and development will begin immediately on these blueprints. When Jerry and Emily Naransky return to their normal jobs at headquarters, a promotion will be put in place, and a permanent raise has been added to their current salaries. Black Mesa thanks you for your contribution to science."

Emily's hand hovered against her mouth, not believing the news. The computerized message disconnected, leaving them hung in disbelief. Jerry finally gave a holler and attempted to lift and spin Chell, but he remembered that she was twelve years old rather than a toddler. He staggered with the unexpected weight, and pulled her into a hug instead.

"Couldn't do it without you, kid," said Jerry. Pride surged through her, and all she wanted was to stay there, safe and appreciated and—dare she say loved—within that hug. She closed her eyes and for a fleeting moment, she imagined these two as her family. They pulled apart.

In another room, Emily slid on sandals. She said, "Grab your shoes. We're going out for ice cream."

They walked through the town's stores and roamed the air-conditioned aisles. Row after row, they stuffed a cart with junk food and cleaning products—it was time to demolish that layer of dust enveloping the house.

Chell stared at the wall of paints.

Her parents, on a whim, told her to choose a color to paint her room. A particular shade of blue stood out to her—almost identical to her eye color.

She glanced through the shelving and saw a black and white blur. Doug. She crouched, hoping he continued browsing the aisle over and paid no attention to her. She pretended to examine the bottom shelf of paint colors.

"Chell!" Emily called, turning the corner. "Pick a color yet?" The girl kept her hands on the lowest shelf, watching Rattmann's reaction. He turned, spotting only Emily through the gaps between cans of paint.

"Which one you looking at?" she said. Chell glared, jabbing a finger at Doug. Emily's face creased in recognition, but the did not move.

"I like this blue," said Chell. Emily frowned.
"That's red." She pointed at the bottom shelf.

"I know. The blue's up there." Chell reached to a higher shelf and plucked up a gallon-container of paint, plopping it in the cart. "Can we get ice cream now?"

"Hold on." Emily picked up the can, liquid sloshing inside.

Doug turned the corner and waved. Emily smiled, but Chell stared at the paint cans, listening.

"Mr. Rattmann, right?" said Emily, straightening. He nodded.

"Out here, it's Doug," he said, thinking about how strange it was to be outside of work, yet feel as if he'd never left at all. "Painting a room?"

"Yeah." Her new mom glanced at the cart, and took notice at the embarrassing amount of brightly packed and unhealthy foods compared to Doug's basket of fresh produce.

"What are you guys up to?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Chell's about to start school in a couple of weeks. We're just getting in all of our summer fun while we can." Her fingers danced across the can's edges, jumping from one to another until her arm extended all the way.

Emily dropped in the can. "We're on out way to grab ice cream. Care to join?"

Doug agreed.

It was only fitting that the man responsible for their celebration should take part it in.

Chell felt sick to her stomach. Her ice cream sat in her hand, dripping vanilla drops onto her hand like sticky tears. She couldn't focus on her dessert. She couldn't lick it away.

In the cool evening breeze, the four crammed around a table on the ice cream shop's patio. Everyone else ate and enjoyed and conversed until the sun sank beneath the horizon and the store closed down their outdoor umbrellas.

"So I haven't seen you at Aperture recently," said Doug.

"She's been busy," said Emily, giving Chell a sideways glance. The truth was, Chell had been avoiding Aperture and avoiding Doug, because she could not look him in the eye and not feel nauseous for lying and stealing from a man like him. And yet he still did not mind her companionship. He missed her when she was gone.

Jerry laughed. "But we can't keep her away too long."

Chell briefly made eye contact before darting away.

"She'll be back soon enough," said Emily, wrapping an arm around Chell's shoulders. She leaned her head onto her arms, wanting to close her eyes and never open them. "But for now, it's time for us to go back home."

The next afternoon, she returned.

Doug repaired ASHPDs, fixing them for hours until he got a chance to mess with his prototype. Chell sat her head on the counter, watching and taking notes internally.
"So if you get the energy manipulator working, you won't have to fix guns?"

"Well, at least not as many."

"Then what would you do?"

"I'm sure Aperture would find another ridiculous job for me," he said.

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've never been given the chance. To choose."

Doug went back to tinkering, but they heard far-off conversation.

The door pushed in. Jerry walked in with a sack of potatoes over his shoulder. "So this is where you go every day? And you," he said to Doug, "Don't get tired of her?" He looked around, tossing the bag onto the table and rattling the tools. A gun wobbled, and Doug lurched forward to grab it.

"She's no bother," he said with a smile, hand still on the gun. "It's easy to lose yourself in the quiet of this place."

Chell straightened, smiling. The stark white ASHPD caught Jerry's attention—his daughter had never once mentioned that Doug worked with Aperture's bread and butter—he had assumed he developed prototypes, like the gravity gun. He shot Chell a look but she avoided. She hadn't wanted them to know.

The potatoes loomed at the table's edge. Jerry finally said, "Someone in the cafeteria ordered too many potatoes. We'll be getting nothing but french fries from now on."

"And why are they in my lab?" Doug said, sliding the burlap sack back onto the floor and off of his counter.

"Science project," Jerry said. "Everyone in the daycare center's supposed to do one. Use as many potatoes as you like—you're the only one."

"Can I do something different?" Chell whined, grimacing. The adults paid her no mind.

"Should we take them back to the center, then?" said Doug.

"Great idea," said Jerry, glancing over at Chell. "Here, I'll take this over there." He hefted up the sack. The door hissed closed.

Chell set her head on her arms. "Do you know how to make a potato battery?"

Doug shook his head. "No idea. Can't say that I've ever wanted to, either," he said.

"That's okay," she said. "I made one last year. For class."

In the daycare center, they found everything she would need for her project—red and blue wires, poster board, and a set of colored pencils.

Doug's hand rested under his chin. "Time to add you to Aperture's 'Science Fair," he said, raising arms in an air-quote.

"What?"
"Haven't seen it?" When she only stared, he led her out of the room wrapping around the corner to get to the cramped hallway. Other projects sat scattered across the hallway, collecting dust.

"One day we'll have enough for a real science fair." A curled up banner sat on a tabletop, abandoned. "Or a Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. That was the original plan."

"Never had one?"

"Not yet, no," he said. "We'll keep collecting these projects until they plan something interesting enough to draw in more kids."

Chell walked up and down the aisle, noting the other potato batteries shoved alongside the edges. She figured this wasn't the first time that Aperture had over-ordered potatoes.

As Chell sped through her poster, Doug noticed the girl grow increasingly worried. Her face creased and seemed panicked, but she said nothing. The way her letters scrambled across the page, messy and hurried, was not at all with the same precision she used in art. Yet he knew Chell was a quiet person—if she wanted to talk about it, she would.

A few minutes later, she asked Doug a puzzling question.

"Do you lock your lab?" she said.

"No point," he said "More work. There's nothing important in there."

A pause. Chell fiddled with the ends of her battery. "You should," she said.

Doug messed with his own battery, built after Chell painstakingly showed him the correct way to make one. As he messed with it, an idea struck him.

"Be right back," he said, darting to the door. "I've got the perfect thing for your project."

Chell looked up and blinked as the man disappeared from the room.

He found himself walking to Henry's lab, even though the man worked with computers and not biology. But unlike him, that scientist might know someone that worked with living things.

"Would you stop messing with that for a minute?" Doug said. Henry was crouched over a table. He didn't look up.

"Always nice to see you, Doug."

"I need something for a potato battery," he said. Henry stretched, running a hand through his balding head.

"Is this for the girl?" he said.

"Yes."

"You know that that isn't normal, right? You being around her all the time."

The scientist looked around Henry's lab, noticing how much brighter and whiter it was in comparison to his own blue-gray walls.

"She helps," he said after a moment. "I don't know what it is about her, but she helps me know
what's real."

"Like that cube of yours?" Doug didn't answer. He knew Henry had never liked that cube.

"Look, can you get me something for it or not?" he said. "It needs to have power for a long time." He wanted to ensure that, whenever Aperture did get around to it, Chell's project would still win the fair.

"Then let it take root and grow," he said, throwing up his arms. "She'll be set for years."

"The thing smells. It's not growing anytime soon."

Henry gave a sigh. "I'll find someone to make something for your precious project."

Doug decided to take the long way back and double check his lab. The way that Chell had spoken earlier—the way she had brought it up out of the blue—made him nervous. Or at least paranoid.

He paused with his hand on the door, listening. Shuffling on the inside. Strange that someone else has stopped by. Doug pushed in the door to see Jerry standing over a portal gun with a handful of papers.

He pushed open the door to see Jerry with a handful of papers, standing over a portal gun.

"Can I help you?"

The other man froze, letting the papers flop down onto the table.

"Oh," said Jerry. "Was looking for you. Emily just sent me up. She wanted to know when her ASHPDs would be working again." He gave a laugh. "She can't test without them," he said, edging toward the door. Rattmann still stood in the doorway.

"Well," he said, crossing his arms. "Tell her to get smarter test subjects that don't break my guns, and I'll fix them faster."

"Thanks, Doug," he said, feet shuffling as he brushed past him. He stopped the closing door with his foot, watching the man speed down the hallway and disappear down a turn.

The door closed, and Rattmann walked to his table. White rectangles were haphazardly scattered like an incomplete puzzle, with some pushed beneath others. As he gathered the pieces and pulled them together, he began to notice a theme. A bigger picture.

They were blueprints.

ASHPD blueprints.

Chapter End Notes

I know my story doesn't have a lot of action right now...but bear with me. We'll get there. Eventually.

Anyways, Henry is from Lab Rat, and all of the information on Chell's project was pulled from the thinkgeek version of her in-game poster. I managed to get the PotatOS
kit for Christmas, and Chell's poster really is interesting.
The lock clicked.

The act in itself felt forbidden. Doug had rigged the keypad for years to make getting in and out of his office as easy as possible. No point wasting time unlocking and relocking his door—he had nothing to hide, nothing to keep stashed away.

Today, he locked his door before leaving.

Doug picked out two figures through the foggy glass of the daycare center. Henry leaned over a desk, a vial gleaming. Liquid beads dribbled onto Chell's potato.

"Eventually, it's going to grow roots," he said, tapping the vial. The remaining drops splattered down. "But that's not until this wears off. For now, it'll get an extra half volt."

"Still not enough to power anything important," she said as she straightened. The corner of Doug's mouth upturned.

"You just wait," said Henry. "I'll change that. But I've got to go." He'd prove her wrong—he'd adapt his artificial intelligences to run on one point six volts. In fact, he might as well make it one point one. Chell would have no more reasons to doubt the power of her potato. He patted the desk and headed toward the door. As much fun as messing around with potatoes was, he didn't want to get fired over it.

"Can I talk to you?" said Doug. He stepped into the hallway behind Henry.

Chell inspected her battery under the yellow wash of the desk light. She glanced up, elbow propped against the table as she watched the scientists through the clear door.

"Someone went through my office," said Doug.

Henry folded his arms across his chest, eyeing the man. "What, you think it was a spy? We haven't had those in years," he said, tentative. "Caroline's cracked down."

"But they were trying to steal something," he said. "ASHPD blueprints."

"You're sure?" Henry said. Doug's eyes darted, taking in the figures dashing across his vision—a streak of color here, an indistinct shape there. "Tell me again what happened."

"When I walked in, someone was sorting through blueprints," he said. "And the cabinet I keep them in is locked."

"Who?"

The door clicked closed. "Chell's father."

Henry shifted, arms crossing. "You know she spends all of her time either here or in your office. He was probably just waiting for her to show up."

"Then why was he looking through those files?"
"Come on. You fix the ASHPD for his wife all the time. He's allowed some curiosity."

"I know he was going to take them," he said. His hand tightened around the door handle.

"But he didn't actually take them," said Henry. "You've got nothing to worry about." He ran a hand across his balding head. He exhaled through the nose. The man was crazy. Paranoid. And yet he couldn't bring himself to tell Doug he'd made it all up.

The potato tumbled to the ground.

Chell growled, scooping it up and repositioning it on the tablecloth. Wires dented into her as she pressed a palm into. She waited, and then lifted her hand and froze to make sure the tuber didn't roll off the edge again. Up and down the 'science fair' hall, other projects sat, still and undisturbed—unlike her stupid, tumbling potato. She let the battery lean against the poster, then stepped away.

"Bet you'll take first place," said Doug. Chell glared. "I mean, if we ever do have one."

The girl threw her backpack over her shoulder, ready to walk out the door when both Emily and Jerry showed up. Strange. The walk to the surface elevator wasn't difficult—she didn't need accompaniment.

"What's going on?" said Chell.

"Nothing," said Emily. She gave a small smile and pulled back a strand of hair. "Just thought you'd like some company."

Chell gave them a wary look, then said her goodbyes to Rattmann before walking away and leaving the man alone with her potato and the sounds of her dying footsteps.

A purple haze dripped down from the evening sun. Chell squinted, though the sun had long since vanished behind a clump of clouds. The transition between the facility and the world caught her off guard, and she lifted an arm to shield her face against the setting sun.

"Your mom called," said Emily over the revving engine. "Wants you to call her back."

"Okay," said Chell as she stared out the window. She counted every drop of water, watched every bit of condensation roll down and morph into larger drops.

She felt as if time flowed in reverse, pulling them back toward Aperture rather than letting them leave. Not even staring out the window made time pass by faster.

Chell felt the familiar crunch of gravel beneath the tires as they pulled into the driveway. She jumped out and ran for the telephone. A red light flashed like a beacon in the dark, signaling a new message. She punched the play button.

"Call me back when you get a chance. Have some news for you," said Judith Mossman, voice hurried yet tired. She listed a new contact number, and then the message cut off. A seed of disappointment flashed through Chell as she picked up the receiver.

The phone dialed a cheery tone until the other end answered.

"Mom!" said Chell, her excitement barely contained. This had to be the call she'd been waiting for—the one where her mom told her she got the job and that she missed Chell so much that she was coming back to get her.
A pause. A swallow. "I didn't get it."

"What?" she said, voice coming out as a whisper. Emily and Jerry took one look at the girl's face before disappearing into another room.

"I didn't get the job. Some silent guy fresh out of MIT got it instead." Disgust dripped from Judith's voice, and she gave a shaky sigh. "So much for equal opportunity employer."

Chell exhaled, heart sinking. "How? They should have hired you on the spot!" she said, voice rising. Pictures of plans, of blueprints, flashed through her head. She'd spent hours explaining it to Emily, hours making sure every detail was perfect.

"That's a little unrealistic—"

"That technology's still new!" she said, edging toward hysteria. "It was perfect."

A pause.

"Chell, you're not making sense. What are you talking about?"

She went silent, heart beating faster. "The blueprints I sent you," she said.

"And you didn't send them directly to me?" she said.

"Mom, I tried!" said Chell, voice cracking. She had called her, and she told her that she had something really important—but she'd hung up on her anyways.

"Then try harder."

Chell blinked twice, biting her lip and glancing into the other room. The two adults lounged on the couch, flipping through channels on the new TV they'd just splurged on. This was the happiest she'd ever seen them, and they'd been that way since their promotion.

She felt like hitting the wall. How stupid could she be? She should have known they wouldn't share this info. She shouldn't have clung to the hope that they had still told her mom, that somehow she would have gotten a job out of it. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She knew this was going to happen, and yet it still felt like a kick in the stomach.

"Get something bigger. Something better," said Mossman. Chell swallowed again, thinking back to Aperture and back to Doug. She thought about how she clung to him as much as he clung to her, both equally happy with the other's companionship. And every time she had to look him in the eye and lie to him and steal from him, she felt sick inside.

"I don't want to," said Chell.

"Well, you're going to have to."

"Mom, just come up here," she said, shifting into a pleading tone. "Work for Aperture."

"I'm not going back there, Chell," she said, voice almost hissing. "I'll go get another degree—a doctorate, if I have to. But I will never work for that company."

"Did you have a nice chat with your mom?" said Emily.

Chell wrapped her arms around her knees, not moving. She shook her head. "She didn't get the job."

Emily sighed, smoothing out a piece of the girl's dark hair. "That's the way it works sometimes," she
The girl fell silent, struck with awe at just how easily the lady blew past it—as if helping Judith had meant nothing to them as soon as the promise of a promotion, of a raise—had surfaced. Her throat swelled in anger, and she was done. She didn't want to talk to Emily. She didn't want to talk to Jerry. Not now, not ever.

And they wanted to notice her silence. She wanted so desperately for them to take a half-second and ask what was wrong, so that she could let the floodgates open and spill out her anger and tears. But they didn't know she was angry. Chell was usually quiet.

They did not ask.

And they could not tell the difference.

The door slammed as Chell walked in. Her backpack crashed to the floor. Doug straightened.

"Something wrong?" he asked. Chell felt both angry and relieved that he asked, that he had picked up in two seconds what her 'parents' had yet to notice. And she was so happy he'd noticed. But Doug was the one person she couldn't tell.

"I'm okay." Another lie. She walked over to the paint-splattered companion cube, pulling out a tray of colors. "This thing needs a bath," she noted, nudging it with a foot.

As Chell set up her station, a small picture fluttered from her back pocket and landed on the tiled floors.

"What's that?"

She twisted, patting her pocket. Her fingertips met denim as she felt for the picture's sheen edge. On the ground, a bit of glare on the photo's slick surface caught her eye. She bent to scoop it up, and dusted it off with the side of her hand. "Nothing," she said.

"Can I see?" said Doug. Chell pulled the picture close, staring down the man for a moment or two. He stared back, and realized that neither of them would give in. Begrudgingly, she handed over the photo, letting her hand suspend in the air until he took it.

Chell and an adult, a woman he didn't recognize, stared back at him, their faces ringed by furry coat hoods. Hazy blue mountains cluttered the background, and the girl and the adult donned matching artificial smiles. Little white specks streaked across the frame. "Who's she?"

"My mom."

"Doesn't look like her," said Doug, inspecting the picture closer. The woman's hair was too light to be Emily.

"That's because I'm adopted," Chell said flatly. Doug fell silent.

The Chell in the photo looked the same as the Chell in front of him, as if the picture had been taken days ago. But weren't children usually adopted out at a younger age? "This looks recent," he eventually said.

"It is."

The question hung, unasked and unanswered. Why would she get adopted out when she was almost a teenager? And to two Aperture scientists, no less?
Doug met Chell's eyes, turning the picture in his hands before offering it back. The girl slid it back into her pocket, looking away.

"She must hate me," said Chell, blinking. Doug frowned. "I'm always getting in her way. College, career, everything." She wiped her nose, not mentioning that her mother's pregnancy caused her to drop out of college. She didn't mention how the years following were spent in better regret, usually directed at Chell. Or how a few years ago, she rebooted her life and went back to college.

And now that meant starting her career without Chell. A true reboot.

"That seems harsh," said Doug, at a loss as to how to comfort her. Being adopted after twelve years must have felt like a slap in the face. there was more to this story. There had to be something she wasn't telling him.

"You haven't met my mother."

He exhaled, walking over to sit on his companion cube. He twirled a brush with his fingertips, thinking. The girl wandered throughout the room. There was something strange about this, something strange about Chell. He glanced at his watch and shifted, picking up the discarded paints.

He began to paint.

Clicks. A space bar. A squirrely-looking man typed, glancing up as Doug approached the CEO's office. He hovered, watching the man use his computer while balancing a phone on his shoulder.

"If you need the CEO, give me a minute," he said, name tag identifying him as Gregory—or, Greg. Caroline's assistant. "Only so much a man can do." While he waited, Doug slumped into a plush, outdated chair—Caroline had insisted upon bringing them up from a lower level, supposedly for budget reasons rather than sentimental ones.

A few minutes later, the scrawny man waved Doug over. The scientist stood, smoothing his off-white coat and frowning at a stain he hadn't noticed before.

"She's open now," said Greg. "Go, but make it quick. She's got a company to run." Doug nodded, edging open the door. A sense of dread came over him as he pushed his way in. He'd spoken to Caroline on more than one occasion, but he never was able to shake the feeling that the world would dissolve into chaos if he lingered around her too long.

"Hello?" he said, tentative. Caroline set down a pen and smiled.

"Douglas," she said, her voice lower than the higher, exuberant voice from decades ago. She didn't offer him a seat.

He pulled in a breath. "I think there's spies in Aperture," he said, deciding to dive into the conversation.

"What makes you say that?" said Caroline, questioning. But she wasn't dumb. No person running a science company could be—in fact, she knew that Aperture had spies within its ranks. She would have been surprised if there weren't. In fact, she knew about every spy in this place—she had every Black Mesa employee under her watch, all assigned to menial jobs like manufacturing or test observation—jobs that wouldn't cripple Aperture when information leaked out. She blinked.

"Someone went through my office," he said. The woman showed no signs of emotion, only blinking as he summarized what happened.
"That does happen from time to time," she said, searching through her mind for a moment until she remembered where Doug worked. Ah, yes. Quantum Tunneling Device repair. She twisted around and dove into a filing cabinet. Doug slipped into a chair while she picked up Jerry's file—the man Doug claimed to be spying. Sure enough, Black Mesa markings were stamped across his page.

So Doug was correct in his suspicions, but he didn't need to know that. She slid the file back into place and picked up Rattmann's.

"He was about to take ASHPD blueprints," he said. Caroline finally looked up, flopping the file onto the desk.

"They weren't locked?" she said, voice dropping as she rubbed her hands. She stared at Doug, unmoving. "You know how important those are."

"I needed them for a project I'm working on," he said. "No one's ever in my office." He wanted to describe how far off the beaten path his lab was, or how he got so tired of fixing the mistakes of the stupid test subjects. He could only repair so many ASHPDs before wanting to make a change.

"Never leave those out," she said, voice dangerously low. "The quantum tunneling device is all we have left. Without it, Aperture is nothing," said Caroline, maintaining eye contact for a long moment before shifting into a calmer voice. "If you lose those files, you're as good as dead to me," she said, then straightened. "With that said, I'll look into it." She smiled, standing to escort the man from her room.

The door clicked behind him. Doug leaned against a wall, eyes briefly closing.

"I know what you mean," said Greg, laughing at the man's sigh of relief. He didn't look up from his monitor. "Pretty scary for a woman in her 60's, right?"

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for reading! Anyways, Caroline's going to be playing a major part from now on. There's a lot of important things about her that have yet to be revealed.
A month passed.

The road kicked up dust as the faded school bus pulled away. Chell coughed once, adjusting her backpack before walking down the road.

It never took long to walk to Aperture from the bus stop—and besides, it gave her refuge from the other kids in her grade. To them, she was an enigma. A silent girl; a blank face without a personality. Not worthy of their friendship.

She kicked a rock, letting it clatter to the side. The barbed-wire fences of Aperture came into view, and soon enough the girl found herself back in the daycare center.

Her evenings at the science company tended to be quiet, and yet not uneventful. When she finished homework, she threw together sketches when no one was watching, passing them off as 'practice' the other times.

In the last letter she'd gotten from her mother, Chell had saved the return address. These sketches went directly to her. As they said, only a fool makes the same mistake twice.

Henry marveled over her potato, already sprouting roots and spreading across the table. "That fertilizer sure works," he said. "Not sure how long it'll keep growing." He rubbed his head. Chell poked at it, grabbing the multimeter and measuring it.

Still 1.6 volts. Still a half-volt higher than her competition.

And she had checked every other project. None of the others had dates—only names. Eventually Aperture might have enough projects for a science fair, but Chell doubted they could ever get enough girls.

Doug cleared his throat as he walked around the corner. "Finally, they let me off early," he said.

Henry gave a forced smile. "Headed home?"

Doug shook his head. "Not at all," he said.

A pause. "If you want to stay here, be my guest. I'm going home. See you," he said, giving Chell a wave. "Keep watching that potato."

Chell glanced at her watch, her only reliable source of time. 8:30. Still an hour and a half before her parents clocked out.

She followed Doug back into the room. He retrieved his cube, pushed out of sight earlier because of Henry. Henry'd never liked the cube—something about seeing his co-worker cart around the heart-adorned box set him on edge. Doug slung it over his shoulder.

"I found a spot a few floors down. It's a perfect spot for a mural," he said.

Doug paused, letting Chell bump into him. "Do you hear that? The faint music?" he said. Chell shrugged, listening. Silence enveloped the hallway.

He sighed, not apologizing. They moved on.
Though the buildings and rooms themselves felt modern, Chell couldn't help but notice the air of abandonment. Room after room slipped by them, each emptier than the last. A poster here. A broken chair there. In one room, a crumpled safety poster sat on the tile, curled with age.

Doug paused at a particular office, dated back ten years.

A perfect place to start.

He picked out a pencil from his pocket, immediately scribbling on a quarter of the wall, filling it with organized chaos. From his companion cube, Doug pulled out a radio and tossed it to Chell. She twisted the knobs, shifting the scanner through channel after channel. It warped between songs, a garbled mess until Chell settled on a station. A softer tune murmured in the background.

They settled on the theme of music, though neither of them felt like singing.

"Use broad strokes," Doug said, covering the wall with a splash of blue. He motioned for Chell to join him, letting her throw in her own colors. "Feel the music and feel the brush." He leaned down to grab his book, thumbing through the dog-eared pages for a moment before letting it thump back onto the ground. Chell peered over, paint dripping onto her foot as she examined the blue book. "Art Therapy," it said. "The Bennett Way."

"Expression is the goal," Doug said once. "Not perfection."

But for Chell, perfect was everything. She needed to be able to copy something exactly, to have her vision for a drawing perfectly match the outcome. But the pressure to do this was almost paralyzing.

Before the clock struck ten, the two stood back, observing the once-blank wall. Even though the rest of the room was open for painting, the two had chosen to work together, splitting off and building upon each other's work like branches from a tree. A mishmash of artwork exploded from the lifeless wall, and yet the mural itself only covered half of the wall.

Chell twirled her brush. "Are you staying?" she said, mentally rehearsing a pitch to her parents on why she should also stay longer.

He shook his head. "We'll finish another day."

And so Doug rinsed off his brushes, dabbing them dry with his coat. He closed up his cube and left it pushed to the room's side. Chell twisted her head as they walked out the door, shooting Doug a look.

"No one's going to bother it," he said, hitting the light switch. "No one's ever down here."

The days grew shorter and the nights grew longer, but this didn't matter at Aperture, where the difference between night and day was the amount of people in the facility. One evening, when only Aperture's night owls remained fluttering about, Caroline's phone rang.
When Greg didn't pick up her call—like he always did—she frowned.

Riiiiiiiiing. Riiiiing.

What was he waiting for? A flash of color caught her eye—an alert. This call wasn't going through her assistant's line. This one was placed directly to her.

She leaned across her desk, answering.

"Aperture Laboratories," she chimed. "Hold on a moment." She cradled the phone against her chest, walking over to the door. She stuck out her head, speaking softly as to not startle her assistant.

"Go on and go home. I'm finishing up here," she said. "Science cannot wait, but neither can sleep." He nodded, blinking himself awake. He stretched before pushing in his chair and heading toward the elevator to the surface.

She closed the door just as softly, clicking the dead bolt into place.

"All clear," she said, dropping her cheerful tone. Though the long distance call would be expensive, it would be worth every penny.

"No one else is in your range of hearing?" said the man, one of her loyal spies over at Black Mesa.

"You know how careful I am," she said. "Nothing leaves this room unless I want it to."

"Good. You wouldn't want this overheard."

"Tell me what happened."

"They've got it," the man said. "It looks like a portal device, but it's not. The lab boys here nicknamed it the gravity gun, but it's got Aperture written all over it."

Caroline exhaled.

"Are you mad?"

"I'm not angry," she said. "Black Mesa 'steals' technology from us all the time, and I would bet my position as CEO that it won't be the last. You of all people should know that. And besides, it's not important, anyways." A lie.

"But how important was it?" he said, voice anxious.

"It's an older prototype," she said. "Developed a few years ago, but found no practical use." She kept her voice cool, but spoke between clenched teeth.

Anxiety jabbed at her. The gravity gun was closely related to the tunneling device—in fact, Black Mesa possessing the energy manipulator placed them only two small steps from Aperture waters, and one leap away from a splash into portals.

She wanted to fire him. Right there. Via phone. Or even better—unearth his connections to Aperture and throw him to those Black Mesa wolves. Oh, now that would be such sweet revenge.

And yet the moment passed. Caroline pushed past it, like she always did. Besides, this wasn't that man's fault—the blame belonged to someone within Aperture. And oh, how she looked forward to finding that rat.

"How close is it to completion?" she asked, voice still.
"A few days, maybe. They've been working on it nonstop for over a month."

Caroline flipped her calendar back a page. She flicked through her memories, her conversations, struggling to find something that could have warned her about this.

Oh.

A tab stuck out from a filing cabinet—D. Rattmann. The one who warned her of spies—the one she'd ignored. And yet he spoke of tunneling device plans, not the gravity gun. And yet Caroline knew that that device—and those plans as well—were in the man's office. That, she knew. He was the one. He had to be the leak.

Caroline hesitated, her silence heavy.

"They're not supposed to touch that," Caroline said, hissing. "That technology is off limits."

The spy for Aperture swallowed. "Look this is took risky—calling you."

"Forget about that. Not a word of this will get to Black Mesa—and if it does, your life won't be worth living. Better be careful," she said, speaking through a forced smile.

She hung up the phone before he could answer, brushing off her dress and glancing at the clock. Good. It was only 1 am.

Chell didn't go to Doug's office that day. He had a meeting—in a few hours, he would present his modified portal device, and Chell knew she'd better stay out of the way.

Someone she knew—though not well, like Doug or Henry, came in to cart her off to help with her job. This lady didn't smile—just introduced herself and gave Chell a curious look before leading her into parts of Aperture she'd never seen before.

She knew she shouldn't be surprised—Aperture was always expanding. The facility extended from the bottom of the salt mines and up to somewhere close to the surface. And they already had another extension planned—another level for another decade. Where they got the money to build these kinds of things, Chell did not know.

She typed in a code to open up a wing—already making it more secure and secretive than the majority of the facility. Inside, it split off into several large rooms with several luxurious desks. She recognized some of these employees, though wasn't familiar with them. After befriending Doug, Chell's daily introduction to Aperture's workforce had stopped altogether.

From behind the newest-looking monitor she'd seen in the facility, Henry waved. Funny—he had never shown her his office before.

"Welcome to the last of Cave Johnson's development projects," he said.

The light-haired lady—Karla, as Henry introduced her—dragged in a sizable metal sphere. She dropped it onto the table, but the robot tilted and rolled before she grabbed a handle to stabilize it.

"This is what we've been working on," said Henry.

Chell pushed her desk chair closer, examining it. She glanced at Henry.

"Artificial intelligence. Robots that think, feel, and make good decisions-like a human," he said. "That's what we do. This guy here is Aperture's first—and only—fully-artificial intelligence."
Karla twisted a screwdriver, unhinging the robot's curved side panel. No lights, no sound squeaked out of the sphere—Chell assumed it was powered off for repairs.

"He's practice for another project we're working on," Henry said. He exchanged a glance with his co-worker, deciding not to go into the details of that project.

"An experiment to see if we could make a man's personality out of nothing." He didn't say that they had hoped—stupidly, in hindsight—that a construct like this could one day run the facility.

"What's he like?" said Chell. She picked at the foam padding of her chair.

"Talkative and blunt," he said. "And vaguely British. Not sure whose idea that was," he said, shrugging. "A good challenge, though he's not much of a success."

"He's got a few problems," said Henry. She snorted, grumbling as she fiddled around inside the robot's surprisingly hollow casing. "We're still working on him."

"He's an idiot," said Karla, jumping in.

"Well, it's not that he isn't intelligent. He is. We created him," said Henry.

"But he can't learn," she said. "Mistake after mistake every time he's turned on—which is expected—but they are all the same mistakes. As an artificial intelligence, wasn't that the point of making him? Shouldn't he be able to be able to learn from his failures?"

"How does he learn then?" said Chell.

"Shut him down and upload information," said the scientist. "I'm adding in a map of the facility as we speak. Maybe now he'll stop making such stupid navigation errors."

"Can we turn him on?" Chell said. Karla looked up, surprised.

"After I make sure this guy doesn't kill us all," she said, "maybe."

"And that," said Doug, blinded by the projector light, "is my solution to the breaking of the ASHPDs." He cleared his throat once, twice, looking out onto the shapeless faces of the people gathered in the conference room. "Thank you," he said.

The room was crammed with people—after all, this presentation did get them out of work for an hour AND let them witness the witchcraft that was the energy field manipulator. In fact, only after stepping out of the bright light did he realize the unexpectedly high attendance.

A smattering of applause greeted him, gradually fading into conversation and squeaking chairs. The clapping faded into conversation and squeaking chairs.

A soft tune filled his heart, materializing out of nowhere as Doug gathered some of his papers. But the sound shattered when he glanced up, pulling away from him like a distant dream. The notes still lingered, broken and floating like objects suspended in the air, like something he could reach out and grab.

The sound of high heels replaced his notes, falling into a rhythm not unlike the music. A lady stood in front of him, arms crossed and a pen dangling from one hand.

"Ms. Caroline," Doug said, politely nodding. She regarded him for a moment, taking in his well-kept face yet mismatched eyes.
"Do you plan on converting all of the tunneling devices to possess the energy manipulator?"

"Should I?"

"Absolutely. And as soon as possible. For now, though, walk with me." She turned on her heels and clinked out the door.

Doug accidentally knocked a defective turret to the ground, thinking for the umpteenth time how glad he was he hadn't brought a functional turret. With a live audience, real bullets were not the best idea. That's where these guys came in handy—no bullets, no danger, yet still a great way to demonstrate the gun's full effects.

He shuffled, letting his manila folder flop onto a cube before hustling to catch up with Caroline.

"Sorry," she said, picking up the pace. "Not enough time to sit and chat. I've got a facility to run."

Doug faltered in his steps.

"Still," she said, tucking a file under her chin and pulling out papers from his presentation. "I did enjoy the illustrations." She tugged out a few pages of art, with a realistic-looking figure demonstrating the correct way to use the modified device. Other pages contained figures with lines scratched across them, each demonstrating an incorrect use of the gun.

"Chell drew those," he said, the smugness in his voice reminiscent of a proud father.

"The girl?" said Caroline.

"She's been getting really good," he said with a nod. "She practices all the time."

"But these drawings—they're almost spot-on," she said.

"I'll have to bring in new things for her to draw soon," said Doug. He had to admit that her drive to improve, her stubbornness to accept anything less than perfection made her progress incredibly quickly. "I'm teaching her everything I know."

"So you're the one leaving pictures around my facility," said Caroline.

Doug swallowed, hand trailing on the cool metal of the railing. "Only abandoned areas," he said. "I didn't think anyone would see them."

"They're fine," she said, not wanting to admit the number of times she'd stared at the art. Part of her felt outraged at him for defacing her facility; the other part marveled over their beauty. "Just make sure they don't show up in the upper levels," she said. "There's canvases for that—And panels are not canvases."

But Caroline was a woman of science, not a woman of art. She didn't understand that abandoned walls or discarded panels were more satisfying to paint on than a stretched canvas. It was his own way of throwing a bit of humanity onto the bleak walls.

Caroline's eyes narrowed. She paused, leaning her hand against a catwalk railing and looking down at the specks milling about levels beneath them.

"How often is she there?" she said.

Doug paused, also leaning over. His palms hit cold metal; the chill slipped into his arms. "Almost every day," he said, "though less often since school began."
Something cycled inside of Caroline. "What does the girl do with her drawings?" she said, something clicking in her brain.

He shrugged. "Take them home. Burn them. I wouldn't know."

The woman stared at him for a stretch of time, watching his face to see if the same thing coming together in her brain was also manifesting within his.

"So did you ever find out anything...?" he said, curious. The past month lent no opportunities to speak with the CEO—she was, as she said, a busy woman. She kept staring, waiting for him to put two and two together, to make the logical—well, tiptoe—into what he had made so alarmingly obvious to her. Could he really be this dense?

It was her. The girl.

She was the one sitting in that office and copying down blueprints daily until they were spot-on. She stole the plans. Doug didn't even realize that his little drawing lessons were putting all of Aperture at risk. An incompetent employee let a preteen girl pull the wool over his eyes—and for what? Friendship? With a girl over fifteen years younger than him?

But what could she do? Her own spy at Black Mesa just revealed their successes—she had no way of 'knowing' this for months, until their product became commercially successful.

She could fire him.

That's what Cave always did. Kicked them out, pushed them out, and made her tag along to make sure they didn't cry all over the carpet. But this man's mind was too unique to fire. That problem with the tunnelling device had plagued Aperture for years, and he was the first to consider merging the device with newer technology.

His mind. Something about the way it combined things, the way he saw things no one else saw—that had to be it. His schizophrenia alone was far too interesting and far too uncommon for Caroline to let go.

Besides, it wasn't the man's fault. He was just too trusting of her, despite being the paranoid one convinced of spying within the building.

It was funny, actually, when she thought about it. The one he trusted was the one to betray him.

"Don't worry," she said, eventually. "I have been looking into it. It's being taken care of."

Doug wasn't sure how to feel. Though he'd never gotten along with Jerry—too bossy—he was still Chell's father. And yet he couldn't bring himself to ignore the snooping. If he ended up stealing those plans, Doug would be out of a job, along with the rest of Aperture.

But nothing had been stolen. Not yet.

"Your office is under watch," she said. "If anyone tries anything, I'll know about it," she said. Doug still stared out across the railing. The soft shapes of the structures patterned together like a bizarre game of Tetris.

"Feel free to leave everything scattered about in your office. Oh, and you can rig your door again."

Doug gave her a surprised look.
"You think you're the only one that gets tired of punching in codes?"

Caroline laughed, giving the man a pat on the shoulder. As she walked away. Doug watched, unsure if he should feel relieved or terrified. Either way, by the time Doug glanced up again, the CEO was just a blur in the distance.
Caroline barely heard the knock on the door.

"Come in," she said, rubbing her eyes. Her frazzled assistant stepped in, a thick envelope tucked under his arm.

"Your budget reports." Caroline held out an upturned palm, staring. The dark-red haired man handed it over—after all, the CEO insisted upon it. She had done the reports every other year she'd worked for Aperture, and she wasn't about to stop now.

She tossed the envelope into a desk drawer, twisting the key in the lock. She gave a pained smile—she already knew what was in that envelope. Spending reports. Dismal profit reports. And beneath it all, a small envelope containing a check with enough money to run Aperture for another year. Science must continue—that's what mattered, right? Where the money came from wasn't important.

"We did get those camera set up in Mr. Rattmann's office," said Greg, hovering.

"If anyone other than Doug goes into that room," Caroline said, "you let me know." And Greg knew as well as anyone that the CEO would want to know this immediately, regardless of the time of day.

"So why the change in heart?" he said. "You've got him pegged as a loyal Aperture employee in his file."

She glanced back at her filing cabinets—they took up over half of her office. She had a certain, well, obsession with keeping up-to-date records on the facility. In fact, she considered making herself a file room—though she refused to switch completely to computers.

She pulled out Doug's file, flipping to the schizophrenia page.

Oh, she had detailed notes here. And for good reason, too. Close shaves like the one with Jerry only validated her suspicions. She could never be too sure of how many spies lurked within her facility's walls—or when one of them might strike.

"He's being targeted by spies," she said. "I know it. They're up to something. And as soon as I can prove it, I'll use them for testing."

She could never have too many test subjects, after all. She loved testing—in fact, she lived for it. Experiments. Results. Variables. Caroline stared at Rattmann's file, mulling it over. An idea sparked.

Like the majority of Aperture employees, Doug got his medicine in-house, from the pharmaceutical and medical research wing. She tapped on the edge of her phone for a moment before dialing a number.

"Aperture Science Center for the Creation and Distribution of Medicine," a bored female voice answered. "May I help you?"

"You could start by telling me when Mr. Rattmann's due for a prescription refill." A scramble on the other end—the instant recognition of her voice always sped things up.
"Not for a few weeks yet," she said, more energetic than before.

"Good." She drew out the word. "Take his medicine and replace a fourth of it with a strong hallucinogenic. But make sure they look identical," she said. "He can't know."

Doug Rattmann let information slip into Black Mesa hands—and while she still wanted to keep him around, she couldn't let that slide. She deserved a little experimentation—wasn't that the point of keeping around a schizophrenic scientist?

Jerry grabbed picture frames from the shelf, shoving them into a bag.

"What are you doing?" said Chell. She lounged on the couch, staring out a window. It was late, and she only saw the soft glow of street lamps. No sign of the moon.

"Packing," he said. "For vacation. We're leaving in an hour."

Chell frowned—it was late. Past the time of dashing off on vacations, and yet her parents grabbed things as if they were fleeing the country.

She went into her room anyways—getting ready to leave should be easy enough. Every article of clothing she owned slipped easily into a roller suitcase. She shoved in a few other objects as well—just as she saw her parents do. She had room to spare.

She hauled her bag to the car, tossing it in to the rapidly filling trunk. Whatever this trip was, Chell got the feeling it was for longer than just the weekend. After climbing into the car, she rested her head against the cool glass window. She yawned. Her parents darted to and from the house, shoving in random items before slamming the trunk closed.

"We'll get the rest after everything cools down," said Jerry. The engine roared to life, headlights sweeping over familiar streets as they pulled out and drove away. Warm air hissed out, and Chell drifted into a daze.

The car sputtered to a stop, and Chell jerked awake. "Where are we?" she said, voice groggy.

"Aperture. We just need to grab a couple of things before we get going."

Chell's fingers trembled as she punched in Doug's passcode. 1498. Easy enough to remember. A green light flashed, and the door popped open.

"Grab the ASHPD," Emily whispered. "You know where it is."

"Why?"

"Your paranoid friend's gone for this weekend—" she said, "this is our one chance to get it." After being suspended in a state of suspense for the past few weeks, her parents had only just decided that nothing would come out of Jerry's slip up. Absolutely nothing had happened—they didn't suspect him. At all. And now was the time to strike.

Jerry yanked at drawer handles, the metal clanging. Locked. He pulled again, and each refused to budge—without the keys, they weren't getting to the blueprints. He cursed.

Low on a shelf, Chell caught a glimpse of a smooth white shell. One look told her it was one of the
yet-to-be converted portal devices—and that one in particular was a single-portal device. Doug tended to save those for last. They were much easier to modify. Chell said nothing, but a moment later Emily spotted it. She dove into the shelving, grabbing at it. Things clattered, and Chell cringed—quietness remained an essential part of this mission. Even she had heard the horror stories whispered among employees about Black Mesa spies. Disappearance. Testing—until they died. Experimented on. Turned into a biology project. The possibilities were only limited by the imagination. But more than anything else, Chell didn't want her—or her parents—caught.

Jerry hefted up the device, smiling. Almost giddy. "We've finally got it!" he said, waving it around. All they had to do was take it and run, not stopping until they hit New Mexico.

"And look," said Emily, digging around the same shelf. She yanked out a few papers, flipping through. "They're blueprints." Chell watched, grimacing inside. The internal configuration of the single-portal device varied from the dual-portal device, and Doug had found it easier to keep it on hand.

"We've got to call these in," he said. "This can't wait. And no one's here."

Chell sprinted to Doug's telephone and pressed her hand against it. "Call her first," she said, face slack with desperation.

Emily's gaze softened. She nodded, reaching out for the phone. Chell refused, punching in from memory the phone number her mother gave her. As it rang, she handed it over. Considering how unpleasant Judith could be in the mornings, Chell didn't want to try talking to her in the earliest hours of the morning.

Chell shivered, rubbing her arms. Her sweatpants did little to keep out the chill, and her jacket—she'd forgotten it in the Employee Daycare Center a few days ago.

She could run and grab it—it's not like the two would care if she disappeared for a moment. Besides, if they were leaving with a stolen portal device, the chances of returning to Aperture was slim. And she wanted to leave Doug a message—a way to say goodbye.

The phone rang in Emily's ear, eventually clicking into voicemail. She glanced up, seeing Chell head for the door. "Where are you going?" she said, hand over the receiver. Chell rubbed her arms again and mouthed the word 'jacket.'

She slipped out the door.

"She didn't pick up," said Emily, waiting until she was certain the girl was out of earshot. "Let's just go straight to Black Mesa."

He agreed, and she tapped in the number. The plus to this was that they, unlike Mossman, would get the credit if they went directly to Black Mesa—and they were going to need all of the good credit they could get.

The other end picked up and the two dove into conversation.

Emily and Jerry passed the phone like a TV remote, each struggling for control. "Right here, there's a breakdown—cooling fans, a ring singularity ring, an event horizon estimator wheel," said Jerry, but Emily pulled at the phone.

"The whole thing's powered by a miniature black hole—an infinite amount of power in an infinitely small space," she said. "But see if you can get this to Dr. Rosenberg—"
The phone line cut off in a shower of sparks. Emily jumped away. A speaker mounted on the wall gave a soft click.

"Oh. Looks like the phone line to your room's been cut," said a familiar voice. "I don't know why that happened."

A pause. A panic. Emily shoved the blueprints into Jerry's bag. He darted to the door, slick hands yanking at the handle. A keypad started up at him, red light blinking. The digits stared up at him, waiting for him to punch in the code. It was only a combination of four numbers—it couldn't be that difficult.

"What was the code?" he yelled, punching random buttons. The red light continued to blink.

"I don't know!" she said, searching for Chell until she remembered that the girl had left—and she was their only way out. This room had no exits, no windows, and no portal conductive surfaces—the ASHPD was useless in here.

The voice continued to come through the speaker, though muffled. "Hold on a minute," said Caroline. "I'm sending down a security crew. Don't go anywhere."

"Get down," Emily hissed, clutching the Portal gun. The two ducked behind the counter.

"So was there anything you wanted to say to me?" said Caroline. "An apology, perhaps? We have plenty of time."

"I bet I can hit one of them," Jerry whispered. "I'll catch them by surprise and can make a break for it."

"Hiding only reflects negatively on you as Aperture Employees," said Caroline. "But then again, I shouldn't be too surprised, knowing what I do about you."

"She can't do anything to us," Emily said. "We haven't done anything." Besides, they'd been working as spies for years—surely the company would help them out of this.

"I'll go ahead and do the honors of calling Black Mesa for you," said Caroline.

"Why?" said Jerry, voice raised. Perhaps if they denied it altogether, she would stop.

"You broke into Doug Rattmann's office, attempted to remove vital testing equipment, and placed a call to the Black Mesa Research Facility from an Aperture phone. I'm not dumb, you know," she said. "Though I'm sure your employer will be thrilled to hear about your latest promotion at Aperture—"I'll go ahead and do the honors. Tell them how horrible you were at spying—how it wasn't right for you," she said. "And, of course, how much stress it was on your family. Your daughter," she said, smirking behind her microphone.

She switched the camera's views to the rest of the lab, searching for the girl. Empty shelves and abandoned equipment dominated her view, and it took her a half-second to realize the girl was nowhere in sight.

A twinge of panic rose up in her—where was the girl? She was by far the most capable spy of the bunch—and she had just been in the room. Caroline switched off her microphone and glared over at Greg. "Find her. I don't care if you have to lock down this facility—you FIND that girl."
Beeps and blares shook the enrichment center.

Chell paused, twisting—behind her, light flashed and a chamberlock hissed closed. In the distance she heard shots and footsteps. She broke into a run, motion lights illuminating her path with streaks of red and white. As the alarms and shouts grew louder, the girl threw herself under a desk in a nearby office.

She listened, catching her breath.

The alarms cut off, replaced with more yells. Feet clanged down the catwalks. A security team dashed by, hurrying toward Doug's lab. She held her breath as streaks of light flickered in from the hallway, then disappeared.

Silence reigned again. Chell peeked out the doorway, the men's silhouettes disappearing into the haze of distance.

She took one final look before breaking into another run. The Employee Daycare Center came into view, but one look through the smudged glass windows told her it was not a good place to hide. The open desks and opaque walls would be a nightmare for hide-and-seek, much less for hide-from-the-security-team. She darted inside and grabbed her jacket, shrugging it on.

Chell flipped the corner, heading to her second-best shot: the science fair hall. Dark, abandoned, and a bit eerie, it made the perfect place to hide. The sides of each table extended to the floor, creating little dark caves. The table's fourth side remained open—and each open side faced toward the clear walls of the Center. A problem.

Chell twisted, searching for another spot. A scrunched-up banner sat on a table—a leftover from a previous Bring Your Daughter to Work Day over eleven years ago. Perfect. She grabbed it, hitting off some of the dust before draping it like a tablecloth. When folded in half, it completely covered the area beneath the desk.

She crawled underneath, darkness overwhelming her vision. She wiped the dust on her pant leg. The banner swayed, and patches of light darted in and out until the banner stilled. Chell pulled her knees to her chest and breathed, the chill of the air sliding through her body.

She rested her head against her knees. Exhaustion overwhelmed her—she wanted nothing more than to fall asleep—to rest her head against the desk's edge and pretend that she was back in the car, back on a road trip with the warm air and constant motion lulling her to sleep.

But sleep was out of the question. Those alarms and that security team could have only meant one thing: her parents had been caught. And, for the first time since she'd come to Aperture, Chell felt afraid—it was only a matter of time before she was discovered.

It was quiet here, and the silence terrified her.

Chapter End Notes

Caroline's lines at the beginning are rather vague for a reason :3
Chapter 7

Chell drifted.

Too scared to fall asleep and yet too tired to stay awake, she stayed in a state of disoriented dreamlessness. Hours passed—it must have been morning by the time she pulled herself together. The gradual increase of noise told her it must be time for work within the facility—and yet, the overall feel of the facility seemed less active than average.

She shifted away from her bunched-up jacket, shaped into a makeshift pillow for the cold tiled floor. Nose still buried in the folds of fabric, she inhaled. A harsh smell, all science and sterility, lingered on her clothes. But, beneath she smelled an even more potent smell of laundry fabric softener that filled her with an intense longing for home—not just her new house in town, but her true home.

She uncurled herself from the floor, pushing herself into a sitting position. Her foot brushed the banner, and her heart jumped. A patch of light danced in, a bright and warm reminder of the outside world. She longed to lift it up higher, to poke out her head into the light and let fresh air stream in. The girl leaned forward, grabbing a corner of the musty canvas and carefully restoring her curtain to its original position.

Click click click.

Wheels turned overhead, the sound growing increasingly louder.

"Ah, a science fair," a male voice said. Chell heard the sound of wheels braking. "Not particularly organized now, is it? Projects scattered about. Collecting dust."

The sudden voice—loud and close—knocked the air out of Chell's lungs. Hours upon hours of silence, of hiding—and then words out of nowhere. She jerked back, clanging against the back edge of the desk. It rattled, and a pen toppled to the ground. Above, she heard a scraping, sliding sounds—like sandpaper on wood.

The banner thumped to the ground.

Light streamed in, flooding her vision with deep gray panels. To her left stood the entrance to the project hall, and Chell knew if anyone walked through that doorway and happened to glance to the right, they would spot her.

She pulled into the shadows, pressing her fingers against the metal desk. With someone so close, she couldn't risk fixing her curtain. She'd spent so long hiding from people, and it would be pointless to throw that away now. But still, the risk of discovery loomed even larger.

Leaning down, she pressed her face into the floor and peered out the tiny gap between the desk and the floor. A strip of light lazered across her face; she squinted before sweeping her eyes across the floor, searching for a telltale pair of shoes.

But there weren't any feet. Just a voice.

A faint blue color tinted the floor, and as the British-sounding voice blabbered on, she heard a distinctly mechanical creak and began to piece things together. She gave a silent sigh of relief, hand across her heart. This robot—he was one of Henry's. He was designed to assist people, and he wouldn't care at all if Chell adjusted a banner. In fact, he might even offer to help.
Chell bunched up the fallen banner and edged her way out. Carefully, she tossed it across the back edge of the table, and then stood up slowly as to no startle the bot. She smoothed the banner and jabbed the corners into cracks, avoiding eye contact.

"Aargh!" The robot jerked back, trembling like a dog in a thunderstorm. "You can't just do that!" said the sphere, shutters drawing in. "Jump out of nowhere. Scare me to death."

She stared up at the robot, lifting a finger to her lips.

"Quiet? Want me to be quiet?" he said, giving a slight nod. "Well, in that case, maybe you shouldn't leap from under a table and scare. Didn't consider that, did you?"

Chell shushed him again, and the robot fell silent. She squeezed her way back beneath the table, making sure to disturb the banner as little as possible. Another collapse could be disastrous. As she curled herself back into a ball, the sphere began to blabber again.

"So what are you hiding from, anyways?" he said. Chell said nothing. "Playing some good 'ol hide and seek, then. I see. Love that game, though never actually played."

Footsteps sounded in the distance, the sound amplified by the silence. The girl pulled her arms around her knees tightly, wishing that the robot she'd wanted so desperately to speak to before, back in Henry's office, would just stop speaking right now.

"Just go away," she said, voice cracking.

A pause. "I would, but uh, I have no idea where I am. They told me to explore the facility. To 'just follow the rail.' Too bad this map looks nothing like reality," he said shutters closing. "These little dashes look nothing like rooms. I mean, how are you even supposed to get from one line to another?"

In the room adjacent, a door creaked. "Check in there," said a low voice. "Maybe she came back."

Her heart skipped a beat.

Two men sifted through the room. Shuffling. The soft click of filing cabinets being opened, of desk chairs wheeled to the side so that they could duck beneath the desks to look for her.

"She's not here," said a male voice. He swore.

"Caroline's locked down this wing. She's around here somewhere," said Greg to the other man, sighing. Of course, he was the one to get stuck with tracking her down—with help from security, of course, though the man accompanying the CEO's assistant looked more like an annoyed scientist rather than a real security guard. Typical Aperture—cheap as usual.

"Try down there," said the other man.

The two cut through the Daycare Center and flipped out into the science fair hallway. Behind another pane of glass, a metal sphere dangled from a management rail. It stared at the children's projects, not even flinching as they approached. Greg glanced over at the other man, who shrugged.

"Hey," said Greg. "What are you doing?"

"Just, er, reading these posters. Fascinating, they are."

"They're made by children," said the assistant. "But that doesn't matter. We're looking for a girl. Seen
"Ah! No wonder it was so bloody difficult to read," he said optic widening. "Knew it. And hmm. Thinking. Takes a moment sometimes. Well, I have seen a girl, but I can't actually tell you where she is now, can I? Defeats the whole purpose of the game, really."

Despite being feet below the sphere, Greg glared down at the robot. Whatever this tin circle thought, this was no game. They'd been at it for hours, and all he had to do was just tell them and then they could get back to their normal jobs. "Just tell us where she is," he said.

The robot twitched, conflicting commands clashing within him. According to the rules of hide and seek, he couldn't tell the men where the girl hid. That just wasn't fair. And yet Greg, who had asked him to break said rule, held a lot more authority within Aperture than the girl. But still, he had talked to the girl before the assistant had even shown up, and he couldn't go back on her now. He twirled in his casing.

"Sorry," he said, twitching. "You'll have to find her yourself."

Exasperated, the assistant took another glance at the hallway. It was dark and sparse, a mixture of blank whiteboards and poorly-done projects and desks. One table in particular stood out from the rest. He pointed to it, at the whiteboard pushed unusually close, at the banner draped over the back edge. The men exchanged a glance then moved toward it.

The conversation dissipated. Chell listened. For a moment, she hoped they would give up and leave—but as the footsteps grew closer, she pressed her fingertips into the tile, shifting onto her toes and into a runner's crouch. If they did find her, she might have a shot at running away.

The man yanked the banner away, and the air whooshed toward Chell.

"Get back here!" Greg lurched, fingers brushing her arm. Beneath the desk her jacket sat abandoned, still scrunched like a pillow.

The 'guard' ducked around the corner, lunging forward to catch the girl's arm. She yanked and struggled, panicking. Sharp inhale after inhale flooded her lungs with air, the hyperventilation evaporating her strength. A moment later, the robot caught up.

"You're Chell?" Greg said. The girl glared up at him, a strand of hair dangling into her face. She didn't answer. She didn't have to—they knew who she was, clearly.

"Come with us," said the guy from security. "Caroline needs to see you." She remained silent, and her lack of response unnerved the two employees.

"Wouldn't want to ignore the boss," the sphere piped in. "Bad things happen when you do that," he said with a half-laugh. "Not that I would know—I've only heard stories."

Greg scrambled for a phone, dialing Caroline's office directly. It rang twice before she picked up.

"We've got her," he said, looking over his shoulder. The brown-haired girl stared at him, unflinching. He adjusted his tie, clearing his throat.

"Good," said Caroline, voice smug. "Take her to my wing and throw her into a relaxation vault. Be sure to keep her quiet, and do not make a spectacle of yourselves. And above all else, do NOT tell Mr. Rattmann."
Doug glanced over at a monitor that displayed a map of the facility. To the left, a bright blue, stationary dot glared back at him.

Click click click.

Doug tapped his pen against the desk, unsure of what to do. It was still early in morning, and Chell wouldn't arrive from school for hours yet. He figured these should be his most productive hours—after all, he had nothing to distract him. And yet the sheer silence itself, the emptiness of his office, was almost overwhelming. For now, he lingered in the office of one of his few 'friends' in Aperture since talking to Henry was easier than modifying ASHPDs. He tapped a finger on the screen, blue dot disappearing under his thumb. "That's your construct, right?" he said.

"The moron? Yeah," said Henry, lacing his fingers behind his neck.

"He's not moving," said Doug.

Henry dragged the mouse across the screen, hovering over the robot's icon. "Even though we gave him a map, he still gets himself lost," he said, scrolling to zoom in. "Now he's stuck in the Employee Daycare Center. What an idiot." This failure, this inability on their part to create this personality core only reflected poorly on Henry and his team.

"He's just looking around," said Doug, a tinge of defense in his voice, "and you did just tell him to go explore. Maybe that's where he wanted to go."

Henry shook his head.

"We've tried so hard to make artificial intelligence work. But it's not. We're running out of options here," said Henry.

And he was right. The scientists could spend a lifetime figuring out every possible scenario, every improbable situation a robot might face. It still wouldn't be enough. Lines and lines of endless code of code could not possibly adapt to the future the company might face.—

Doug looked up, eyebrows furrowing. The fluorescent lighting hummed overhead.

"We can't play at trying to make something act human. We've got to start from something," he continued. Out of all the things he and his team had learned, it was that artificial intelligence could never match a human life.

"What do you mean?" Doug said, crossing his arms.

"What I mean is that the Disk Operating System—which has been in development for ten years, is never going to be able to run this place with the help of an artificial intelligence. We're going to need a genetic lifeform component."

"Wasn't that already the plan?" said Doug, recalling a stuffy room and hot overhead projector spewing out slide after slide of a poorly put-together presentation.

"I wouldn't know. Caroline's fired everyone on this project countless times. All I have is what people before me leave behind," he said, and Doug knew that that was a longer story he didn't want to delve in to.

Doug wrung his hands. "So what are you going to do?"

Henry rubbed his hands on his legs, then lifted them, palm up, and shrugged. "We can't just
photocopy a mind and call it good. It's in the brain itself—in each individual cell and the connections forged between them over a lifetime. We've got to extract it, bit by bit—but we've got to find someone first."

"There must've been someone—on the plans, perhaps?"

"Sure. But Cave Johnson died, and we can't afford to use someone disposable. This is the future heart of the company. They'll be running everything," he said, pausing. From this point on the ethics of this project became, well, shaky. Ripping out minds, prying apart personalities—none of it would be simple.

"We've been looking into what that procedure would entail. It's going to be horrible, though. The process. Painful and ugly and terrifying. Even I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy—we're on the edge here, Doug," he said. "But I don't know if I want to cross it." He gave a stark laugh, ignoring the growing pit in his stomach. Out of all of the scientists to develop an ethical issue in Aperture, Henry had never considered that it would be him.

Doug swallowed, glancing back at the monitor and at the same blue dot. He could almost picture the bot, alone in the hallway and staring at the row of projects. He cleared his throat.

"Your robot's still stuck," he said, getting up from the chair. The wheels squeaked as he pushed it in. More than anything, he wanted to pretend as if the theoretical science this project was just that—still far off and unattainable, even though he knew it was easily within reach. In fact, he figured that Henry's team already had a plan in development for this.

"I'll go check on him."

He disappeared out the door, heading toward the Daycare Center. He needed to get out of this room, and besides, there was always the slim chance that Chell would be there.

As the scientist disappeared, Henry swiveled. On the screen, the personality construct's dot darted down the management rail, vanishing into the maze of the Enrichment Center. "Wait, Doug—" he said, calling out.

But Doug was already long gone, and by the time he reached the Daycare Center, so was Wheatley.
The bottle came up light and airy in his hands. Doug shook it, pulling the prescription close to his ear and listened.

Silence.

He smashed his palm onto the child proof lid and twisted, popping it open. The bottle was devoid of pills, but The yellow plastic greeted him, and no pills were in sight. He'd used them all, and yet he didn't recall running low. He frowned, glancing up at his Aperture-brand wall calendar. Sure enough, a cheerful yellow smiley face sticker clung to today's date, a not-so-subtle reminder that he'd need to refill his prescription if he wanted to keep on smiling. He slipped the empty yellow case into his pocket, locking his door before venturing out into the facility.

As he walked through the hustle and bustle of Aperture Laboratories, conversations murmured around Doug. The occasional careless laughter or raised voice lightened the mood, as most people spoke in low, serious tones. Many were like Doug, and made the minimal amount of social interaction as they sped from one place to another. And yet the stampede of footsteps and the streams of conversation brightened his heart— he desired these everyday sounds over the sinister silence of his office.

With Chell or without Chell, his lab contained the same amount of stillness. Neither spoke often, and yet the quietness hanging between the two seemed calm. Almost serene. But without her, his office just felt empty. Almost suffocating. These people, these sounds provided a much-needed escape, a much-needed relief while he wound his way to one of the most visually-stunning places in the facility: The Aperture Science Medical Research and Employee Prescription Center.

During the early days of Cave Johnson's lunar poisoning, Caroline authorized—well, forced, really — the lab boys to construct a wing dedicated to finding a cure for the CEO's gradually worsening health. As time went on and Cave's body deteriorated past a point of no return, the focus shifted away from a medical miracle to a technological miracle.

Neither of which worked, of course—they hadn't even come close. But the wing had remained in all of its terrible beauty, eventually repurposed and expanded to provide not only research, but prescriptions, free of charge, to all employees of Aperture.

As always, there were those that preferred to buy theirs in town—a much safer source. This was the medical research wing after all, so not all prescriptions worked the way they claimed to. Side effects cropped up frequently—some intentional, some not—though none had yet affected Doug. He couldn't complain—the service was free, and Ziaprazione cost him a hefty amount everywhere else. It was better to take his chances with Aperture's pharmacists.

He cringed at the thought of going without antipsychotics for another day. The confusion between real and not real, between artificial and true was too much to handle alongside his job. If he didn't refill it soon, his mind would begin to lie to him.

Oh, it would be subtle at first, reminiscent of his illness's earliest days. A flash of a figure to the side—a glimpse of someone in a mirror, there one moment and gone the next. Intense, unjustified paranoia. Muffled, indistinct noises around him, originating from no discernable source.

He wasn't going back to those times.
He pushed in the clear doors, and walked into the wing that was made entirely out of glass.

It was open and airy here, a stark contrast to the closed-off offices and cramped test chambers. The area existed within one vast room, though parts of it were sectioned off by transparent walls.

Shades of white and gray drenched the area, with the colors blurring into each other like a chalkboard in a rainstorm. Huge vials and vats littered the ground floor, and catwalks spanned up and up across the open air until they disappeared into a gray haze. Silhouettes walked about, clinging to clipboards and observing bubbling liquids. Things hissed. Puffs of opaque smoke gathered in clouds, and the ventilation system whisked it away.

Three levels up, he saw a splotch of color. Caroline leaned against a catwalk railing, legs crossed. She observed—like Doug, this was her favorite place in Aperture. Her view of the facility expanded past the glass walls, and from this vantage point, high above the twists and turns of activity beneath her, she saw everything in the facility. And for a moment, she could stand here and revel in the fact that this place was hers.

It was clean; it was crisp; it had Caroline written all over it.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he turned to head to the Employee Prescription Refill Center. As irrational as it seemed, he couldn't shake the feeling that the CEO was watching him. He hadn't taken his medicine today, though, and his paranoia cropped up frequently—with or without meds.

At the prescription desk, the pharmacist filled an empty bottle, scooping out blue and white pills and then carefully counting them. She frowned, and reached into another container before tossing in another handful of capsules.

"Any changes?" said Doug, taking back the rattling bottle of pills.

"New capsule, but same effect" she said, a slight hesitation in her voice. "You might notice slight variations in side effects, but that's to be expected. It's nothing to worry about," she added, a bit too cheerful.

Doug eyed her for a moment before unscrewing the lid and letting two smooth pills roll into his hand. He tilted his head, swallowing them dry—much easier then hunting down a reliable source of water around here. The man remained convinced that, if no one watched, Aperture would lace their water supply with their latest 'research.'

He thanked the pharmacist and slipped the noisy container into his lab coat. As he wound his way back through transparent walls, he glanced up again at the catwalks.

Caroline was still up there, watching, and Doug still couldn't shake the feeling that she was watching him.

The camera swiveled.

Chell bolted, smacking her forehead against a plexiglass shield. She pressed her hands against it, beginning to panic—she was in a tight space, enclosed in a small sleeping pod.

She couldn't remember climbing into it.

The glass hissed as it slid back, and cold air swirled in. She coughed once, gunk rising in the back of her throat. She raised a hand to rub her sticky eyes, blinking away the chemicals responsible for
keeping her asleep.

Her body ached, and a dull headache throbbed—a definite indicator she'd slept for too long. A day or two or three—she couldn't tell. She was still in her sweatpants, she noted, and her t-shirt.

She flipped her legs out of the bed, blinking as she pushed herself out of her cocoon. White overwhelmed her vision. The only hints of color came from the gray-blue tint of the glass and the red lens of a security camera, perched in the outer room's corner.

Slick tile covered the floor, and glass walls enclosed her in a box-like space. Outside of the sleeping pod, a small nightstand, a clipboard, and a toilet furnished the cube. A distant hissing came from far-off in the facility, the result of thousands of parts moving together in a steady rhythm.

A flat white panel stood where an exit should be, the material itself similar to the panels tessellating across the room surrounding her prison cell of a room. A thin gray bar ran across the top, its purpose unknown to Chell. Above it, a broken clock with four dashes blinking instead of numbers.

Chell circled the square room, trailing her fingers along the glass. She sought out an edge, a ledge, a ridge she could latch onto or smash at until she got out of this place. But the walls were slick and uniform with no imperfections.

She was trapped.

The video feeds cycled, streaming live from three relaxation vaults tucked far away within Caroline's private wing. Back there, no one would find them. After all, if anyone in Aperture could cover up a triple-disappearance, it was Caroline.

She watched the steady rotation from her office, only pausing when a red flash notified her that one of the sleeping pods went offline. She stopped the automatic cycling, and pulled the third chamber up into full-screen.

Caroline smiled—it looked like the youngest of the spies had awoken.

She leaned into her microphone, the action itself reminiscent of when Cave Johnson spent hours recording messages to guided test subjects. But, unlike him, these messages weren't prerecorded—they were one hundred percent live.

"Oh good, you're awake," she said, as nonchalant as she could manage. The fact that the girl was even moving surprised her—she hadn't anticipated she was awake surprised her—she hadn't anticipated that Chell could so easily throw off short-term cryosleep.

The girl startled at the voice, checking the observation window and half-expecting to see Emily standing there. She was a test associate, and after what she'd been through she wouldn't be surprised if this had been an elaborate ploy to get her into testing.

"Hold on a moment. I'll be right back," she said, tapping the chipped red record button to stop recording. The communication line cut off with a small pop.

Greg leaned into her doorway, holding a phone at an arm's length and gesturing wildly. "Black Mesa's on the line," he said, hissing.

Caroline nodded, answering her phone with an instant scowl.
Her assistant wandered in, hovering by the video feed. In his career at Aperture, Greg had dealt with test subjects and unending amounts of testing-related paperwork, but he'd never seen a test subject that young. Not that she was young, per se—a quick glance showed her to be on the verge of a teenager. Compared to the old hobos waddling through testing, though, she was definitely youthful.

She didn't sport the standard orange jumpsuit, but seeing the girl in short-term storage worried Greg. Sure, he had spent hours hunting her down, but seeing her in her sweatpants, huddled against the harsh white of the chamber made her seem so small. Vulnerable. He couldn't see why Caroline felt so threatened by this girl—or what could have warranted such drastic measures against her.

He blinked, refocusing on the CEO's conversation.

"Those weren't the real files, you know," she said, standing. She placed a hand on the sleek hardwood desk, steadying herself. "They're useless-You can't get anywhere with a single portal device, you know. Besides," she said, fingers curling around the smoothed edge, "you've got a hurried description from an idiotic employee. You're honestly bragging about that?"

Greg considered picking up a receiver to listen in, but thought better of it. A move like that would get him fired.

"Stop gloating and forget about those files," she said, other hand clenching around the phone. "It's not worth it—and I can promise you Black Mesa will never build a portal as well as Aperture."

She thanked them in a disgustingly cheerful voice, but slammed down the phone to hang up. Caroline braced both hands against the desk, staring down through strands of disheveled hair. She trembled slightly, and Greg took a hesitant step back and glanced again at her monitor. She said nothing, and instead taking a moment to compose herself and smooth her dress before walking to her assistant.

"A little young, isn't she?" he said, voice small.

"Black Mesa got a working gravity gun thanks to that girl, and with the help of her parents, they've had their first glimpse into the mechanics of a quantum tunneling device," she said, giving one choked laugh.

A dull blue glow from the computer illuminated half of Caroline's face. "They've got enough for one portal, but if they finish developing that technology, we're finished. And she's to blame, and I could care less how old she is."

"What do we do now?" he said.

She folded her arms. "I have the girl, and I have her parents. I'm going to make sure that Black Mesa never attempts to steal that technology from us ever again, and their little spies are going to pay the price. As far as what to do," she said, "well, I'm still deciding. But I've got lots of time for that."
The first time Black Mesa called her, Cave Johnson was days away from death. They'd called Caroline's office directly—one of the most effective ways to get her undivided attention. Cave's line was always far busier than her own.

She spoke for hours that day, letting her work pile so high that it took her the rest of the evening to catch up. And even then, she went through work in half-daze, unable to push the conversation from her mind.

She listened to the other end for a long time, lips pursed, before she softly thanked them and hung up.

Soft whirs and mechanical clicks spun around her as she wove her way through the medical wing of Aperture. She paused at a door, pressing her hand against it.

She listened. Inside, she heard the distinctive boom of Cave Johnson's voice.

As his voice shattered into a coughing fit, Caroline swallowed once. She struggled to relax her face, to maintain the façade of control as she pushed her way in.

"Go on. Go. That's not working, so you might as well get out of here and start fixing it," he said, pushing away the electrodes attached to the side of his head and tossing them at two lab boys. "We're running out of time," he said. They didn't move. "Go on, you heard me. Out."

The scientists scrambled, shoving the experimental brain-mapping equipment to the side of the room and then shuffling out. Caroline closed the door behind them, turning back to face Aperture's CEO.

"Caroline!" he said. "What a joy it is to see your lovely face." Caroline gave a pained smile. Seeing him so pale and gaunt and sickly made it hard for her to stay cheerful. He was a mere shadow of the man he had once been.

"Sir," she said, pulling at a folder tucked underneath her arm. She slid out a few papers—charts and reports and estimates—then cleared her throat. On the bed, Cave punching at his pillow and shifting to better see his assistant. He winced, then noticed the stoic expression replacing her normal smile.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but there's a problem. I've just gotten the latest reports, and they're not good," she said, showing him a jagged chart, lines plunging downward—Aperture's earnings in the past year.

"Caroline, science doesn't care about money. You know that by now."

"You put us in debt by over $70 million dollars," she said. "Sir, if we don't pay back that money, they have every right to shut us down. We're not going to have a company anymore."

"Quit worrying. We's not going to shut down the company—we'll find a way. We always do. There's gotta be something we can use. Those lab boys are always working on something."

Caroline paused, sifting through her papers. She rubbed at the back of her neck, then adjusted her scarf. While normally the staple of her wardrobe felt comforting, today it felt choking. This conversation wasn't going to be easy, and she had to play her cards right.
"Well," she said, "Just listen to me for a moment. I do have an idea, but you're not going to like it. "

"Caroline, nothing you say could be worse than this disease."

She paused, pulling in a breath. "You know Aperture's never been good at making commercially successful products. Repulsion gel, propulsion gel, turrets. For years, our only moneymaker's been shower curtains, and even those sales are down. We're in debt, and our contracts have tanked—"

"Get on with it," he said, breaking into another jarring cough. "I'm well aware that Black Mesa's left us with no incoming money. Damn those fools."

"That's just the thing, sir," she said, pulling out a new chart. "They're reporting record profits in recent years."

"That's because they've stolen everything we've made!" he said.

"Exactly," said Caroline. She paused, watching his face. While blank at first, it twisted as he began to put two and two together and guessed where this conversation was going. Caroline talked faster, not wanting to be cut off before she finished. "They've stolen from us for years, and they haven't even taken that much, considering what we've invented. They've taken our technology and improved it and then made tons of money off of it."

"Your point?" he said, giving her a searching look.

"Imagine if they paid us for that. Those inventions—all of this science we have, just laying around. Being useless. But they can use it and we can keep developing things because they'd be paying for it. Just imagine what we could do if we didn't have to worry about money."

Caroline pulled back, letting a heavy silence fall over it. This wasn't her idea, of course. Black Mesa gave her a simple enough proposal—Aperture made discoveries and invented things with no real life applications. Black Mesa, on the other hand, couldn't develop anything new to save their life. This had locked the two companies into a parasitic relationship, with the number one science company sucking the originality of the number two science company and morphing it into commercial success. If Aperture went bankrupt, so would Black Mesa. But with this partnership, Black Mesa would pay off their debt. And as long as Aperture left their research up for grabs, the bigger company would continue funding them—on one condition. The quantum tunneling device remained the sole property of Aperture.

While she had no problems with the rest of the plan, she told them that she wouldn't take the deal unless they made this exception. Risky, yes, but she couldn't let the tunneling device fall into their hands. All that Aperture did these days was testing. And every day of testing was a good day for science.

She hadn't agreed to it, though—after all, only the CEO could authorize that decision. But at this point, Aperture had two options—go bankrupt and close down the company, or accept Black Mesa's help. But if she hadn't acted as if the idea had been her own—if she had just told Cave about Black Mesa's proposition—he would flat out refuse it. He wouldn't see that it was their only shot at survival. But if his assistant, well-loved and well-appreciated, suggested the idea, there existed a slim chance that he would listen to reason.

"Caroline," he said, sinking back into his bed. His voice was soft and deflated, so different from the sheer energy and passion of previous years. "Did you just ask me to sell out to Black Mesa?"

Her hands curled around her papers. "We don't have any other choice, sir," she said, not making eye
"Like hell we don't," he said, shifting again. "We've been running this company for years without their goddamned help, and we can get along fine without it. We'll get through this, Caroline. I wouldn't have bought those moon rocks if I didn't believe Aperture might have another shot at glory."

"Sir—" she said, hesitant.

"Look, we haven't been successful for a while, but we're changing that! We've got better test subjects now, thanks to some of those robot employees we made. And, we're making leaps in brain mapping," he said. "I've told you before— Artificial Intelligence is the future of tomorrow. It's too late for a medical miracle."

"But sir, we're getting closer to finding a cure in the medical wing. The lab rats are dying at a slower rate than they used to be."

"Look, the lab boys in here before have been working on me. Hooked up some electrodes, ran me through an MRI. Shocked me once or twice, but I didn't care. We're so close to figuring out brain mapping. I can feel it."

She shifted on her feet.

"I know what you're thinking—but Cave! You've only got weeks to live! know. But if the lab boys can't digitize my brain by the time I kick the bucket, I'll make sure it's done by the time you do."

Caroline turned back, walking to a cabinet and pulling out a familiar bottle of pain pills.

"Look, I know it's hard idea to get behind—not everyone would want to be uploaded into a computer—I'm not even sure what it involves. But if any of us can run this facility for the rest of eternity, it's you."

"I couldn't sir," said Caroline. "I have no wish to live forever." She twisted the handle on the sink. Cold water streamed out, bubbling in the little paper cup she held beneath. With two white pills curled in her other hand, she walked to the CEO's bedside and handed him the pain medication and water.

He swallowed, brushing the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "Even if you're not crazy about the computer idea now, I still want you to run this place after I'm gone."

"You're sure?" she said.

"Are you kidding? You've been at my side since we first opened our doors to the world. It's only fitting for you to be the one to keep holding them open even after I leave. No one else even comes close to you. I'd have signed over the company over years ago if I didn't like being in charge so much. You're the backbone of this place."

She couldn't argue with that. She knew she was by far the most qualified, and so did every other employee in Aperture. Sure, Cave's charisma motivated everyone to do science, but Caroline made sure everything didn't explode. She deserved this, and she knew it. She just wasn't sure if she could handle what came with the deal.

"Promise me one thing, though," he said, between coughs. Caroline cranked the faucet and poured another glass of water. He gulped down half of it before speaking again.
"Keep doing what you're doing. Make me proud, and make this place great again. I'm counting on you."

"Don't worry, sir," she said, with a slow nod. Cave struggled as he pulled out forms sitting on the desk beside his bed, dropped off earlier by one of the more legal-savvy employees. Like any other Aperture contract, it had warning images, disclaimers, and unreadable fine print. It threw Caroline off. She expected naming a successor to a nearly bankrupt company would be easier. But then again this was Cave's contract—of course he would make it complex.

Pen in hand, she scoured the document for anything binding she might later regret, eventually finding it under a discreet subsection. It explicitly stated that in order to be the CEO of Aperture Laboratories, Caroline must also agree to participate in the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System development project.

She clicked her pen, staring up at the man and shaking her head.

"I know I'm not going to make it out of this. But I've got to know that you're going to be okay. It's the last wish of a dying man," Cave said, and Caroline's heart ached.

He was so weak. So sick. So delusional. She couldn't refuse that, when the peace of knowing might make these final days of his easier. She couldn't take that chance and refuse—not if it sent his health even farther down into the pit.

She caved, dragging back the paper and swooshing her name across the paper.

A week later, Cave Johnson died.

In the days following, when everyone left her alone in her office—to give her space, to let her mourn—she picked up her phone and called back Black Mesa. Cave would have wanted this. He would've wanted science to continue no matter the cost, even IF it involved requesting help from their hated rival.

Of course, Caroline worked out the details. She'd be given full and uncensored knowledge of any spies sent over from there. She would assign them jobs, spreading them throughout the facility but keeping a close eye on them all. And above all else, the quantum tunneling device remained Aperture's secret. In fact, she arranged it so that if any Black Mesa ever attempted to steal that technology, she had every right to do whatever she wished with them. Torture, testing, research—anything. Their lives would be in her hands.

The opposite held true for Aperture employees within Black Mesa—but Caroline wouldn't have to worry about that. Her company would never stoop to that level, and even if they did, it would only be one or two. Nothing like the hordes they would surely send in.

Yes, it was strictly against Mr. Johnson's last wishes, but company must stay alive. He was dead. She was CEO. And she still had science to do.

The lights never shut off.

Hours passed. The days shifted into nights. But the lights never flickered. Bright and unending, they offered no clues as to how much time had passed. Chell guessed it had been at least a few days. Food appeared every so often, usually whenever she dozed off.
She refused to use the pod to sleep. Opaque outer shells. Tanks attached to the back. Ever since she'd woken up in one, every part of the sleeping pods terrified her. They could make time pass faster, but part of her worried that if she fell asleep in one again, she wouldn't be able to snap out it for a very long time.

But the boredom was beginning to get to her.

A few times a day, Caroline visited. Sometimes she spoke directly from her office, but other times—in the evenings, when she could roam without interruption—she sat in the observation room and spoke through a different microphone.

Chell laid on the cool ground, tracing patterns in the cracks in the tiles. Her hair spread around her like an open fan.

A small pop from the speakers. An instant anger singed through her, churning her stomach and covering up the smallest twinge of relief. As angry as the lady made her, she almost didn't mind the company. Almost anything was better than being alone.

"I wanted to thank you, by the way," said Caroline, leaning forward in her desk chair. "Couldn't have done it without you—I've been waiting for an excuse to catch your parents for years. But something's not right."

Chell continued scratching at the floor, attempting to look disinterested.

"I know every Black Mesa employee that works here. And I know that none of them in their right mind would ever consider going near the ASHPD. At least not any that valued their life. So why did you?"

The girl remained silent, still curled on the floor. Though tile was less comfortable than the pod, here she could retain a sense of control. Here, she dictated when she fell asleep and when she stayed awake. The few times she couldn't bring herself to stay alert, she'd let herself fall into a sleep for as short of a time as she could. With Caroline still on edge, she didn't dare to sleep longer.

But judging by Caroline's horrible mood and horrible attitude, the transfer of ASHPD plans to Black Mesa must have been at least partially successful. She'd gotten the files out—this might actually work. Her mom might get her dream job. She'd finally realize that her daughter was worth something—Chell might finally get to go home.

"You took such a big chance. So why did you call—" Chell heard the sound of a flipped page as Caroline scrambled for a name."—Judith Mossman? Why not the Black Mesa Research Facility?"

"She's my mother," she said. "She doesn't work for them, but she will now." A hint of a smile crept onto her face.

"Hold on," Caroline said, realization dawning on her. She shifted in her perch—she should've seen this before. "I see what's happening here. You thought this would actually work, didn't you?"

Chell looked up, neck twisting to get a better look.

"Hate to break this to you, but adoption's a permanent thing. She removed herself from your life," she said with an almost smile. "You though she'd take you back. Give you a second chance. And you did something no one else was stupid enough to try."
Chell pressed her palms against the floor and pushed herself upright. Her arms trembled, and her head spun as she propped herself against a wall. Though still trapped within a glass box, she claimed one small triumph—she'd gotten those plans to her mother. The adoption wasn't as permanent as Caroline had made it sound—it was all just arouse less suspicion, and to legally confirm her as the Naransky's daughter. All of it was to avoid something just like this from happening—but even now, she might get to see her mother again.

"And I thought you'd like to know," said Caroline. "The call I intercepted was placed directly to the Black Mesa Research Facility."

Chell inhaled sharply, bright white dotting her vision. No. She hugged her knees tighter, eyes closing. She was wrong—she had to be. "But they called her," she said. "I dialed her myself."

"They hung up as soon as you left the room," she said, voice calm and cheerful. "Your mother didn't answer," she said, almost thoughtful. "But tell me—did your 'parents' ever show interest in the ASHPD before you befriended Mr. Rattmann?" She paused to gauge the girl's reaction. So naïve. So clueless. She couldn't see what was written so plainly in the way her 'parents' had acted.

Chell's eyes drifted upward as she remembered back. "I don't think so," she said.

"Did you ever stop to consider that helping your mother wasn't the goal of Jerry and Emily at all? Going near the ASHPD is completely against the deal, after all."

Chell clenched a hand. She knew that she and her parents were spies. Their entire goal was to steal things. And in an information-heavy setting like Aperture, Caroline couldn't expect to maintain total control. She couldn't regulate what the spies stole, and what they left alone—that wasn't how it worked.

"You're not getting it," she said, placing a hand on the glass. "Here, since you can't get it through your thick skull, I'll spell it out for you: they used you as their scapegoat."

She met the woman's eyes for a brief moment, confusion evident in her look.

"Oh," Caroline said, corners of her mouth upturning. "They didn't tell you, did they? Well, it's a well-known, but hushed fact amongst Black Mesa 'spies,'" she said, air quoting the last word. "They can sneak around and 'steal' Aperture technology—which I suppose isn't thievery at all, to be honest, when they're paying us for it—but the tunneling equipment is off limits," she said. "That was the only thing I'd agree to. As long as Black Mesa's presence and purpose remained secret from my employees, and as long as they gave me full reign over those who crossed the line and tried to steal Portal technology anyways, I let them stay. But they didn't tell you that, did they?"

Chell fell silent, absorbing what she'd just learned. The two companies—they'd been partnered all along. Her and her mother had both been pulled into this grand idea, this grand scheme that none of them could actually pull off. She wasn't even a real spy—and now, she was in real danger. According to Caroline, now Aperture had every right to claim her life for science. No wonder they hadn't stopped Chell from leaving to grab her jacket. With her out of the picture, they could leave her to take the fall. They could grab the gun and make a run for it—Chell would be enough of a distraction, considering it was her who was friends with Doug in the first place, and she'd been the one to break into his office.

And by then, the damage had already been done. The first call—even unanswered—was enough to link Chell to her mother, and by extension, Black Mesa. And that's all someone like Caroline needed to grab them, especially when she was the daughter of two known spies.
"You've got to admit, it was pretty well-played. Even I didn't see it coming."

"You got them, right?" Chell said—though her parents couldn't've taken the gun and run for it, the fact that Chell was still alive—and Caroline even speaking to her—was enough to reassure her that they'd hadn't been able to pull it off.

"Sure did."

She knew it—they hadn't pulled it off. Calling directly to Black Mesa had been the nail in that coffin. They'd blown it. Though her breath shook and her eyes watering, the most brief of smiles crossed Chell's face. Caroline saw it, too, and she felt herself smile. Twisted, this girl was—though not so different than herself.

But then the full scope of everything she'd done, everything the adults had done came rushing back. Things could've been worse—but they were in enough trouble already.

"If you think that company's going to save you, forget it. You're as good as dead to them—they won't even notice you're gone. Even your scientist friend here hasn't noticed, but I'm not surprised. He didn't even know you were stealing from him."

No. She was wrong. Doug would realize something was wrong—she hadn't given any explanation for leaving. This facility was huge, and even Chell didn't know where she was. Doug would come looking for her. He'd find her.

Wouldn't he?

"You might as well accept it. You're not leaving this room—this facility—until I say so. And you're going to be here for a long time."

She trembled, eyes watering. She blinked once, twice, biting her lip and glancing away. The lady was right—it had been days already. Doug had forgotten her. Her mom gave her up. Her 'parents' threw her to the wolves. She was a complete and utter failure to everyone she loved—she wasn't worth saving. No one would be rescuing her.

The lady was right. She couldn't depend on anyone else. If she wanted out of here, she'd have to save herself. Chell sniffed, face hardening as she twisting once again to stare at Caroline.

"Oh, don't give me that," she said. "I don't think you understand—when we were at our worst—over 70 million dollars in debt, CEO dying from moon poisoning, I saved this company, because I knew that science must continue despite the costs. All of this—it's going to waste," she said, gesturing past the chamber walls. "My company. My facility. And all because of you. And you're not even sorry."

The speaker fell silent.

"Do you even know what you've done?" Caroline said, then pushed away from the microphone. But there was nothing she could do now—what the girl had done was already done. No undoing it. No chance at getting Black Mesa to hand back their partial plans.

A coffee stain on the desk caught her eye, and Caroline traced the half-circle with her pinkie nail. Memories of Cave came flooding back—of his face turning red as he insisted again and again that Caroline not sign over Aperture to Black Mesa. He crumpled up every paper she handed him, bailing it up and chucking it into the trash. Hours later she fished them out, smoothing them so she could try again later.

And Caroline still ignored him and sold the company regardless. Science must continue. That's what
she had told herself for years.

But this—was it even science?

She thought back to Cave Johnson, about what he might have done—but she couldn't compare herself to him. Leaps and bounds were made in portal technology thanks to him, even if the exposure to the conversion gel killed him. After his death they'd found a vaccine, and now it was a requirement for all new test subjects. He had—quite literally—given his life to science.

And Caroline was still alive.

She knew this wasn't right—and yet, she couldn't bring herself to free the girl. Caroline had always claimed that, like Cave, all that she did was for the good of all the company. But this didn't feel right either.

She looked back through the thick window. The girl had shifted, turning her back to the window and pushing herself into a corner.

Caroline couldn't see the girl's face—but then again, she didn't need to. A flick of a switch, and video feed from one of the room's cameras would be instantly available. But she didn't need to. She moved closer to the glass, hand resting on it.

The girl was shaking, shoulders moving up and down. In the brief moment Caroline had looked away, Chell had started crying. Sobbing. She curled up into herself, attempting to muffle the noise with the crook of her arm. But her attempts to muffle, to hide the noise only amplified it.

A wicked sort of delight coursed through Caroline as the choked sound drifted through her speakers. She pivoted, heading back to her microphone. She couldn't miss an opportunity like this—especially when the girl had been so unresponsive in the days before—Caroline must've struck a nerve.

Her finger lingered over the microphone's button for a long moment. She paused, then drew back her hand. She couldn't do it—she couldn't press the button. This girl had been strong for so long, and Caroline had been impressed by it. But now, after hearing so much—she was scared. Hopeless and lonely and terrified. And she had a golden opportunity here. She could descend on the girl and make her cry harder—and on any other day, she would have done it in a heartbeat.

But she could bring herself to do it.

And yet, she couldn't bring herself to do it. She glanced away, eyes falling on a radio. It sat on the corner of her desk, the sheen surface reflecting back the bright lights. Caroline reached for the room's phone and dialed her assistant—one of the few that knew about Chell's situation.

"Tomorrow, when the girl's food is delivered, throw in a radio. One that works. Don't ask why—just do it."

Releasing the girl, Chell, was out of the question. But maybe, just maybe, there was something Caroline could do to make the passage of time just a bit more bearable.
Master Hacker

Flick.

Doug blinked.

Huuumm.

A split-second delay.

Lights flashed on in the Employee Daycare Center, and Doug scanned the empty room.

Desks. Chairs. A clean floor. He paused at the door, then took a few steps in. Each desk chair was perfectly pushed in, and each computer keyboard was set parallel with the monitor. All stray papers, all stray writing utensils had been stashed away.

It was the cleanest he'd ever seen this place.

And yet, none of Chell's things were here. He looked for them—a backpack, a stack of half-completed homework and a crumpled candy bar wrapper with one square of chocolate still tucked inside—none of it was here. Gone. Vanished. As if it'd never even existed.

He crouched for a moment, letting one hand rest on his knee and the fingertips of the other hand pushed against the sick floor. From here, he could see underneath all of the desks—one look told him that there was nothing else under there.

Riiiiing. RiiiiIIIING.

A shrill tone sounded from the wall-mounted phone, and Doug jumped back to his feet. He briefly considered letting it ring out, but decided that the sheer volume at which it was ringing was more torturous than actually answering the phone.

"Doug?" said a male voice—Henry—as he answered the phone. The scientist nodded, then, remembering that Henry couldn't see that, squeaked out a "Yes?"

"Knew you'd be there. You didn't answer your office phone."

"Yeah, just came down to grab something I left. Have you been down here recently?" he said, eyes sweeping across the unusually spotless room.

"No," he said. "Why?" Doug heard conversations in the background, and then a muffled sound as the man on the other end readjusted the handset.

"Chell's stuff is gone."

"They left on a month's vacation. Of course she stopped by to pick up her stuff."

"It doesn't make sense, though," said Doug.

"Bet she picked it up earlier and you just never noticed," Henry suggested, but the scientist frowned.

"And clean up the entire room? I don't think so," he said.

For two weeks, he'd seen so sign of Chell nor her parents. As far as why they'd disappeared, he'd
heard two popular theories: they'd quit, or they'd taken a sudden, month-long leave. Vacation, the more optimistic ones said.

But it didn't add up. Quitting Aperture required a two-week's notice, which would've given Doug plenty of warning. They could have been fired—he'd heard that one floating around as well, but it had been true it would have blazed through the facility like neurotoxin through an empty chamber. Though firings at Aperture were common, it remained humiliating and if they'd been gearing up for vacation, Chell would've talked about it—or, at least mentioned it. He could never tell if travel would ever again be a source of excitement for her.

"Look, it doesn't matter. You can stop walking over there every day—it's not like you're going to find her just sitting there," he said. "But while you're down there, though, I need your help. That robot's stuck."

"Again?"

Henry made a rather annoyed sound of agreement. "When you're done there, go check out the Neurotoxin Implosion Observation Annex. Get that robot away from the toxins."

Doug nodded, agreeing. Henry hung up a moment later, leaving Doug once again alone in the room.

It was entirely too clean in here—and it felt as if all of the clutter had been stashed. The floors were swept, and Doug rubbed his fingers on a desk and they came up clean. Dirt free. Someone had deliberately cleaned this place, and someone had removed every last trace of her from this room. A vaguely unsettled feeling grumbled in the pit of his stomach. He exhaled. Perhaps Henry was right—stopping by an employee daycare center every day wasn't something he needed to do. Chell was gone, and if her lack of backpack meant anything, she wasn't coming back.

Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, it didn't matter. If she wanted to speak to Doug, she'd stop by his office. She knew where it was, and he didn't need to keep coming back here and looking for a face he didn't expect to see.

At the doorway, he pushed his palm against the all three bays of light switch and plunged the room into darkness.

A soft blue glow caught Doug's attention on his way to the Neurotoxin Implosion Observation Annex. The personality core's rail suspended over the edge, and yet the robot itself paid Doug no mind as he hovered beneath it.

He wasn't surprised. The engineers saw no need to waste time developing empathy towards humans in their fully artificially intelligent constructs. They cared little about humans, but that didn't matter. The robots couldn't be held accountable for ethical violations, especially since their sole function was to do science and nothing else. People couldn't get away with that, and Aperture saw no need to 'fix' this problem.

And, as theories and plans of genetic life-form-based AIs surfaced, the problem became less and less of a concern. No point wasting money teaching a computer how to handle humans—a future genetic life-form component would have that covered.

"Need help up there?" Doug said, craning his neck upwards. He could've sworn the robot jumped a few inches on his rail.

He spun around, small pupil darting from side to side before glancing down and locking on to the
human. "Oh. Er, hello down there. Didn't bother to say 'hi' now, did you? Gave me absolutely no indicator that you were standing there. Right behind. Just jumped right into conversation."

"You know, you can't get across there," said Doug, noting how the management rail dead-ended. "Back up and go around."

Though only extending part of the way across the open pit, the robot seem convinced that—if he banged on the end of the rail hard enough—it would extend across to the opposite side. Clearly this was not the case. But it hadn't stopped the sphere from trying to do that for the past two hours.

The robot's top shutter drew down. "Well yeah, that's the easy way. Far too simple for this complex brain up here. Plus there's far too many people in that direction," he gestured toward Doug with the lower handle, "just jumping out and scaring me. Like her."

Doug glanced at the robot. "Who?"

"That rude girl. Short. Silent. Scornful. Was just reading some fascinating science projects, minding my own business, and she jumps out! Scares me half to death, and then tells me to quiet down." His optic bobbed. "Selfish, really. Shouldn't have scared me like that if she wanted me to be quiet. Honestly," he said, swooshing past Doug's head as he reversed his way back through the management rail.

"Wait!" he said, grabbing at a handle. "Tell me what happened." The girl had to be Chell—no other person in this madhouse of science would fit that explanation—and yet he wondered in what context those two would have spoken. What could Chell have done to make the robot dislike her so quickly?

"So after she scared me, I was standing there, trying to talk to her, but a couple of very official-looking men stopped by. Looking for her. Very official. Lots of credentials." The robot's optic drifted upwards, and he gave the most deep-in-thought expression he could manage. "So I told 'em, you know? Said where she was hiding."

"Was it security?"

"Ah...no. Going to go with no." His voice wavered, and he gave an unconvincing shake of his head. "The boss lady wanted to see the girl, and I wasn't about to get in her way," he said, ignoring Doug's protests. The man tightened his grip on the lower handle, staring the robot in the eye. It had a tough time making eye contact with the scientist, eye darting every which way and yet never meeting Doug's eyes. He said nothing, knowing fully-well that the robot would continue talking if left uninterrupted.

"She stared them down, then tried to run away, but that did not end well," he said with a small chuckle. "Oh, she was livid. Both of them. Boss lady and the girl."

"But why?"

He gave the robot equivalent of a shrug, bobbing up and down on the management rail. "No idea. Would not want to be her though, heh."

Doug pressed his thumb nail against his tooth. Panic struck him in the chest, full-on and overwhelming. Chell was still in the facility.

She'd never left.

But for the life of him, he couldn't think of a reason why Caroline herself would take such an interest in her. At least, one that involved sending down a makeshift security team.
Unless...

He pulled away from the robot, glancing back over the ledge. As the facility expanded upwards, Aperture's engineers began to play a dangerous game of Jenga. Panels extended. Rooms balanced on top of each other. Pipes and walls merged together in a twisted mess of worn metal and concrete beneath their feet.

"Hold on. You have a map of Aperture built into you, right?" he said, mentally flipping through areas of the salt mine. Testing tracks. Offices. Hiding them in this place would be impossible. They'd have to be somewhere else. Somewhere he wasn't familiar with.

"Though it is bloody difficult to read," the robot said, nodding.

"Look, is there anything in there that says 'Keep Out'?"

"Never stopped me before, those signs," he said. "Well, this rail goes just about anywhere, to be honest. Ah, hold on. I see it. There to the left. Lots of 'Keep Out' signs there. Wait. I shouldn't be looking at this—God, I'm going to get in trouble for this, aren't I?" The robot blinked once, twice, then continued. "Says it's Caroline's wing. Never seen it before in my, err, life. Existence. Whatever it's called. Time spent as a robot. As me."

Doug shook his head, rubbing his hands together. The puzzling situation had shifted into a dangerous one. An entire wing, free from employee's eyes. Horror stories bubbled to the front of his mind—tales of unethical experiments and even a few covered-up deaths for disappeared employees. Doug had no idea how hard this might be to navigate, but Chell had been here fora few weeks.

He needed to find her.

And he needed to get her out of here.

He glanced at his watch, tensing at the time. Late afternoon. Though Caroline tended to stay close to her office or cling to the research areas, he—along with the rest of the Aperture staff—had no idea where she disappeared to in the evenings. But now, he could make a pretty good guess. A few hours. That's all the time he'd have to explore Caroline's wing for a vanished Chell.

"Let's go," said Doug, throwing an arm over his shoulder, beckoning the robot. "Your map. Which way?"

"Ah, well, it's not too far from here—just keep going to the right for a very long time, and you'll hit it. Quite literally, if you happen to be running—it's a, ah sudden stop. Watch out for those doors. Doors. Probably will be locked, though. Good luck with that, mate."

The robot hesitated, then sped to catch up with Doug and lifting his lower handle as to not bang into the man's skull as he sped ahead.

The halls grew plainer. Simpler. But the layout grew more labyrinthine. The entire wing had an eerie, deserted feel to it. Unlike other places in Aperture, there were no scientists, no robots—just non-portable surface after non-portable surface. A few times the scientist took a wrong turn and felt a sick sense of disorientation until the bumbling robot backtracked and guided him in his technically correct yet roundabout method of getting from point A to point B. A solitary door came into view, just as plain and simple as its surroundings. A keypad sat bolted above a handle. It was small and unassuming, like his own keypad. Not at all like other locks in Aperture.

"That's, err, problematic," said Wheatley. "I hope you know the code."
"No," he said. "We'll have to start at the beginning—keep track of these numbers."

"Got it. Remember all the numbers." The robot nodded. "All of 'em. Easy enough. ALready know zero through nine. Shouldn't be hard to keep track of combinations of those." The robot swiveled. "Exactly where are are you starting?

His fingers brushed the tips of the bubbled buttons, lingering before pressing down.

In the upper right corner, a light blinked red. His shoulders lowered, and he tilted to face the robot.


Doug gave a solemn nod, moving on to 0001, then 0002, and on and on and on until he reached the 1000's.

Crack.

Doug pushed his hands forward, pressing them against one another and listening to individual knuckles pop. Wheatley continued jabbering away, his chatter an unbroken stream of ramblings. Doug pushed in the next code.

"Spinning." His pupil circled around, bumping against his side plates."Fun. But I do not recommend stopping. Everything's still, ahh, twirling. Even though I stopped a while ago. Real world's taking a bit to catch up. Just a small programming problem, I'm sure. It's nothing that you couldn't fix. You know, next time you're prying open my side and messing with my processors."

Doug rubbed the hardened tips of his fingers. Pressing plastic-coated buttons over four thousand times didn't come without consequences.

"Ey, you about done down there? Stay here much longer, and that human's going to send someone. Make sure I'm not stuck or lost. Not reasonable at all, really. It's not like I get lost more than twice a day. "

The scientist double checked his watch—the robot, as much as it pained him to admit, was right. As evening approached, the chances of Caroline discovering them skyrocketed. She'd be out of her office soon, roaming the halls of science with a silent grace and vanishing into an area so secretive and so tucked away that he hadn't believed in its existence until Whealtey's map confirmed it.

At the most, he had an hour.

But even Doug didn't want to cut it that close.

"Just a few more."

Whispers danced on the fringes of his hearing—and even with the artificially intelligent bot watching out, he couldn't shake the overwhelming sense of paranoia that clung to his side like a snail, slowly inches its way higher and higher.

He blinked, reminding himself that he'd taken those meds today. None of this should be happening, and yet it still couldn't help but wish his schizophrenia wasn't so persistent—lurking in corners, fleeting in and out of his daily functions like a passing thought. But even the strongest medicines science had to offer could never completely subdue his lurking illness.

Numbers danced on the keypad, rising up and changing colors. Doug's index finger retracted as he
stared at the numbers in question—a one, a three, and a five.

And though he was only at 1044, Doug skipped ahead over a hundred numbers on a whim.

One-one-five-three.

"Wha—what are you doing?"

Click.

The light flashed, then blinked green. The lock clicked, popping open the door so slightly that Doug lunged for the handle to make sure it didn't slip closed and relock.

"Ha!" Wheatley said. "Made it through. Didn't let any old combination stop us. We're a proper team now, you and me. You're doing the number-guessing thing, and I'm doing the, well," he said, making a sound as if in deep thought, "watching out part. Lookout. That's what I am. A lookout. Best one there is.

He creaked open the door, pausing to listen. Whispers still lingered, rising in intensity like a gust of wind through an empty room. He pulled it open farther, propping it open with his foot and glancing down the bright hallway.

Wheatley shot forward on his management rail, gathering speed as he rocketed ahead, only stopping when the hallway split. Though identical in both shape and construction, he turned left. It wasn't a particularly scientific method, but he wasn't doing science here—just trying to find someone in an endless science facility.

"So what exactly are you looking for?" Wheatley said, optic continually shifting and unable to remain still longer than a few seconds. He never focused on Doug's eyes, and instead kept shifting his focus from his left eye to his right eye.

"Not sure," said Doug softly.

"You're not sure? Why'd you bring me along, then? I have honestly no idea what we're doing back here, but I do not like it, I assure you—hold on, is that another locked door? I'll, err, get ready to remember some combinations. Go on, go for it. Just make sure you don't take too long—we're already about to get caught as it is doing this-break-in thing—what's it called again?"

Doug glanced up. "You should know that. You're a computer."

"Ohh. Well. That's insulting. I'm not some dusty old mainframe here. Far superior. Intelligent, that's what I am—even though it's, ah, artificial. Real enough to me, though," he said. "And I still have no idea what that thing you're doing is, but I'm sure I can figure it out. To save some time, though, would you mind just telling me? A simple word would do. Or two."

"Hacking?"

"Ahh, brilliant! So that's what it's called. Hacking. Need to try that sometime. Pick up some skills. Bet I'd be good at it, too. The best hacker. A master hacker," he said, body jostling as he nodded. "How—how exactly does it work?"

Doug gave him a blank look, and then exhaled. "You just watched me do it," he said, but the artificial intelligence only nodded again and stared at him with a wide-eyed and expectant look.

"Might as well see it again. Doesn't hurt," he chipped, voice cheery.
"Well, if you know the person, it doesn't hurt to guess at their code. You know, easy stuff. What normal people put as their passwords. But," he said. "If none of those work—and you've got a lot of time—start and the beginning and run through each possible combination. Much easier on a computer, where I could just build a program to do some of this for me."

The robot nodded again, watching Doug intently as he punched in four zeroes.

The light didn't flash. The lock didn't click. And one look at the door's upper right corner showed that this door's lock was disabled.

He jiggled the handle. Rattle. He pulled again, grip firmer. It slid open.

"Ah. Nicely done," said Wheatley. "First try, too. Impressive. Writing that down here. Door access code—" he announced, the sound of pen scratching against paper coming from his speakers. "Zero-zero-zero-zero."

"No, it's not that," said Doug. A mental image spun to the forefront of his mind as he pried at the side panel of the keypad, a picture of his own keypad, easily disabled with a correct code and a few internal tweaks. The memory of him and Caroline strolling down the hallway, of him laughing because for once the cold CEO had made a joke and been—for a fleeting moment—human. Caroline was just as lazy as he was, if not more so.

Doug smiled as he pushed his way in, fingers trailing on the door's cool metal.

After the first unlocked door, about half of the subsequent rooms popped open with a twist of the handle. It made sense, of course. This was Caroline's wing, and it would be impractical for her to lock each and every door. A select few knew the key to get in—and as long as she kept the exterior doors locked, it was redundant to enable he interior ones, especially along her most-commonly traveled paths.

"Pretty good team, you and I?" said Wheatley, but the scientist moved on and twisted doorknobs. Like the way he found the combination, there were only a certain number of rooms, a certain number of hallways and dead ends he had to go through until he found Chell.

"You wouldn't believe what's back here!" said Wheatley, voice growing increasingly louder as they progressed without an encounter. "There's an entire testing track up ahead! Madness. How could she even hide 19 chambers back here?"

"Hold on," said Doug, ducking into a nondescript office. "Are there any vaults in there?"

The robot clicked as gears grinded in his head. "Ah, well, there are plenty of observation rooms—though I'd stay away from those. Too visible. No guarantee of who might be sitting there, watching. Or who might show up," he said. "Well, there's a little row of extended relaxation rooms to the right, and a few short-term vaults pulled away from the testing track entirely. Only looks like…one's active, though. Imagine that. All these chambers for testing and so few test subjects. Rest must be in long-term storage."

"That's her. That's got to be her," said Doug, darting from the room. The robot sped ahead, fully ready to lead the scientist onward. They'd gotten a map, a destination, and now they had a motivation.

All they had to do was get to her.
"Turn left!" said Wheatley. "No, wait! Terrible idea. Your other left!"

Doug reached out to grab a corner, rebounding in the other direction like a snapped rubber band. Panel after panel whoooshed by him, the white of his lab coat blurring with the white of the walls.

"Hurry up, hurrr-y up!" called the robot, hushed yet urgent. "She could be here at any minute. See us lurking about. Sneaking."

He frowned—he knew that she could be anywhere. That's why he stayed silent; that's why he ran instead of walked. The further they went, the more terrified he became of coming face to face with Caroline herself.

The panels pulled away. Doug rushed across empty space, a long gap separating the previous area from the next one long. A quick glance back showed the testing track he'd just passed. Elevator tubes connected each chamber, extending up in a vertical stack. And ahead of them, Doug spotted the short-term relaxation vault.

Disconnected from the tests, it hung in the haze like an ornament from a tree. Black panel 'arms' jutted out. The circular chamberlock remained twisted closed. The catwalk ran alongside it, wrapping around to the other side.

"Entrance, entrance. Looking for an entrance," the robot hummed. "Don't see one. Anywhere. Besides, ah, that one hanging over that drop."

"It's there," Doug said, pointing out a dark door.

The robot jerked his handles, discovering it out a split-second too late. "You can't just go in there, though," he said. "Specifically told you that before: do NOT go into the observation rooms. You know fully well that she," he said with a gulp, "could be in there. I'm nothing to her. Just a pile of processors. I could die."

"Then you'd better go in there and make sure it's empty."

Even if the room was occupied and Caroline strode out, Wheatley had a history of finding himself in places where he didn't belong. He could pass it off as an accident. A misunderstanding. He 'didn't mean' to end up knocking on the door—and if he was clever enough, Wheatley could make up an excuse for how he'd gotten in there. Perhaps the 'door' had been standing wide open.

That would send her rushing off in a panic.

"Go on. Just hit your handle against the door," he said, ducking around a corner and pressing his back against a wall. "I'll wait over here."

Wheatley's upper eye plate lowered. With a sigh, he glided onwards.

Knock.

Knock knock knock.

Nothing.

He couldn't glance around the corner. He couldn't tell what happened. So, he listened for the things
he expected: a telltale creak of the door, or Caroline's bright and terrifying voice.

He really should have picked a spot farther down to hide.

"Hell-ooo?" the robot called, and Doug jumped. It took him a moment to place the source of the voice—he could have sworn that the turret-like phrase came from behind him. This place was messing with his mind.

Silence.

He heard the metallic glide of the sphere as he rolled back. The expression on the bot itself had shifted—while confused and worried earlier, he looked more cheerful now.

Doug couldn't explain how.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to, either. Describing to someone just how an artificial intelligence could have emotions would be difficult enough, much less arguing that they had expressions as well. Like everything else, they'd brush it off as another symptom of his schizophrenia—assigning human-like qualities to objects. Intelligent objects, yes, but still not human.

"Absolutely no one in there. I knocked, and even said hello. No one answered," he said. "I'd say with about seventy percent certainty that there's no one in there. But there is a slight chance that the boss lady's gone completely deaf, being as old as she is. In that case, I would highly suggest that we run for our lives."

Doug took one last sweeping look before approaching. His hand trembled as he twisted the door handle, barely cracking it open. He ducked down, peeking in through the minuscule slit between door and frame.

Just as Wheatley had suspected, the room was empty.

He opened the door, pushing his way past a faded yellow desk chair. Squeaky clicks came from the wheels as he rolled it aside.

A mug sat on the desk, rings of brown staining the surface. Doug pressed his palm against it, noting that no heat came from the slick surface of the cup. He dipped his index finger into the ice-cold coffee, jerking it back and splattering a few drops onto his shirt.

Caroline wasn't here. And she hadn't been here for a while.

It took him a moment to snap out of his hyper-focus on details, to shift his mind back to finding Chell.

He struggled to look through the thick, lined glass that warped his vision of the room below. Face pressed close, he raised his hands above his eyes as if to shield them from a bright light.

A small figure perched on top of the curved relaxation pod, her back pressed against the wall facing him. She fiddled with a radio, twisting a knob and jumping through stations. Little numbers dashed, and the tunes clashed into one another. Soft strains of a cheerful song came through a speaker in the corner.

"Chell!" he said, loudly yet not quite a yell.

She didn't turn around.
He tried again. "Chell!"

No reaction.

He slapped a hand against the glass, window only hearing a muffled thump as the window deflected his hit. He hit again, this time bouncing his fist off of the glass. "Come on," he said. "Turn around."

No reaction.

The spherical robot lingered in the doorway, hesitant to enter. Adding Wheatley to the already-crammed room could only cause more headaches.

A desk. A chair. A coffee mug. Doug swept the room once again, eventually settling on a box beside the computer monitor. He reached for the small gray thing, tugging at the attached cord so that he could hold it in his palm.

An intercom—an old-fashioned version of the intercoms he'd seen around Aperture. He punched at a red button, clearing his throat and tapping on the mic as he turned back to the glass.

Pop.

Hisssss.

A finger tapped on the microphone.

Chell lunged forward, letting her radio clatter onto the floor. She scrambled back into place, throwing a fearful look at the camera in the corner. There was no way she'd ever let Caroline know how much she loved the radio and the break from monotony it provided. She couldn't allow her that satisfaction.

The sheer isolation caused her mind to conjure things into being, voices and shapes and dreams she knew, in hindsight, couldn't be true. One moment there, then gone. But after she'd gotten the steady streams of music from the radio, the—hallucinations, for lack of a better word—stopped.

Another day must have passed. Caroline was back, and it was time once again to listen to her hurl words from the safety of her perch.

A voice came in over the speakers, low and male. At first she heard her name, broken and faint. Then, louder and with more confidence. Her heart leaped, and she twisted, pressing a palm against the unbreakable glass of the vault. She'd tried throwing everything at it—a clipboard, a nightstand, herself, but never the radio. It meant far too much to her.

She looked up to see a young man pressed against the window, drenched in Aperture white.

"Doug!" she said, breaking into a smile.

He nodded, and the fact that he was here instead of Caroline, though, made her anxious. The part of her that wasn't filled with relief remained convinced that something horrible could happen at any moment.

"Hold on. I'm getting you out of there."

Chell slid from her seat, scrambling into her shoes. She didn't bother to untie her double knots, instead shoving in her feet. The back of her heels folded in and dug into her feet.

Doug lifted his finger from the live button, turning back at the robot lingering in the doorway. "Help me get her out of that room," he said.
"Can't really help you there. No real door in there. Just portals. And unless you can get into that computer, I cannot help you. Most likely a complicated password, with both numbers and letters. Could be here for days hacking that one."

Doug wiggled a mouse and a lock screen surfaced on the computer monitor. Two empty slots blinked at him. Username. Password.

He got the feeling that his standard employee login wasn't going to cut it.

The robot was right—they didn't have time to sit here and go through every possible combination. If anything, he might make a lucky guess. If only there was some sort of admin login, some sort of code that could access even her network of computers back here.

Doug exhaled, glancing back into the sealed-off room only accessible by portals.

"Can I access those directly?" he said, pointing toward the portal panels. Little bars stretched above and below, and produced a twin set of portals when activated. No gun required.

"Of course not," said Wheatley. "What, d'you think Aperture just has some sort of 'Press to Open Portals' button? Ah-hahaha aha aah oh," he said, dropping into a lower, softer voice.

Doug readjusted the bulky white monitor, revealing a warning poster and a small, singular switch.

CAUTION
Do NOT disengage inter-dimensional portals when subject is inside!
THANK YOU!

The diagram was split in half, with two different scenarios. On the top, the portals were open, and the switch on the side flicked to 'on'. A test subject smiled as he walked between them.

To the right, a bright checkmark.

Below it, the switch on the side changed to 'off'. The portals were disengaged, and two halves of the man laid on the ground in a pool of scribbled blood.

To the right, a large X.

What a terrible poster.

Inaccurate, too.

In his time—and even before his time, developments in the handheld portal device ensured that test subjects would be pushed either one way or another when portals were disengaged—both manually or remotely. Too many test subjects had ended up split into pieces due to a careless error.

While Aperture was never against death as a result of testing, there were far too many other, more creative ways for them to stupidly die. At least those mistakes contributed to science-.

Doug almost missed the white paddle switch beneath the poster. He stuck his index finger underneath and flipped.

Sparks.

The lights in the chamber dimmed, and then brightened. Chell backed up as the timer flickered to
Doug pressed the button. "As soon as that portal opens, you get out of there," he said. "I don't know how long it'll stay open."

Chell nodded, dipping her head as she approached the flat portal panel.

"Not to, ah, rain on your parade," said Wheatley. "But someone—not entirely sure who—just opened one of the doors into this wing. If I had to guess in some sort of life-or-death scenario—which I seriously doubt would ever happen—I'd say it's her. So, a friendly reminder to hurry up with whatever you're doing in there, because she could be here soon. Very soon."

Doug’s heart jumped—forty-five seconds left on the clock. He could get her out of the vault itself, but he had no idea how to get her out of the chamber. The only exit dropped off into empty space, and with no access to the computer he had no way of changing that.

Forty seconds.

Doug moved to the window, strumming his fingers against the glass.

What to do, what to do…

He turned back to Wheatley. "Get in here," he hissed.

"Oh, I really shouldn't—" he said, but after a glare he darted into the room. Doug ducked under the sphere, pulling at the door handle and closing the door.

Doug wasn't sure how much the metal ball could endure in terms of damage. That's what Henry's department, not his. But he could think of two possibilities.

One, Wheatley was incredibly fragile.

Two, Wheatley was indestructible.

In Aperture, there was no in between. But judging by how dense this robot could be, Doug would have put money on the latter.

Only one way to find out.

Doug reached and wrapped a hand around Wheatley's lower handle.

"Ahh, so you are, in fact, trying the computer hacking thing? Not entirely sure we have time for that, but you are the employee here. Not me. So I'll trust your greater judgment. Assuming you have some."

"Disengage from your rail, Wheatley."

"That's an awful long ways down, though—"
His hand tightened on the handle and he glanced up. "I've got you," he said. "Don't worry."

Thwop.

The portals opened, and Doug glanced over. The girl darted through the portals, undaunted by the fact that she'd just leaped through an inter-dimensional tear in time and space.

With his other hand, he reached for the microphone. "Stay back from the window!" he said. "I'm going to try something."

The girl backpedaled, sizing up the distance from the floor to the observation room. Even if he broke the glass, she wasn't sure if she'd be able to get up there. With a portal device it would be easy—but Chell couldn't blame Doug for not having one. The devices themselves had to be under close watch, considering what had, well, happened.

"You've got quite the grip there, you know," said Wheatley, yammering on. "Excellent. You won't let me slip. I'm sure of it. Might as well just drop now and save some time."

Pop.

Wheatley dropped from his rail like a boulder into a pond. Doug's arm lurched downward with the unexpected weight of the sphere, and he gave a little yelp as he scrambled to readjust himself.

The sphere rolled to the side, groaning slightly. "Ow," he said as Doug grabbed both of his handles. "Could've at least warned me that you weren't actually going to catch me…"

Doug hefted up the robot, backing up to the wall. And with all of the strength he could muster in his arms, he flung the robot at the window.

Crash.

The robot sailed right through, leaving a circular shaped hole. A moment later it shattered, glass raining into both the office and the chamber below. Doug threw up his arms to shield his face, but the danger had already passed.

He dropped his arms.

Jagged bits still clung to the window frame, glass teeth waiting to draw blood. On the ground below, the sphere wobbled, complaining as he tried to get away from the piles of sharp fragments.

"Well THAT was quite the hack!" he said, rolling to look back up at Doug. "I like your, ah style there, mate. Need to take a few tips from the master himself. When computers won't work, might as well attempt a full-on manual override. Genius!" His handles pulled inward and then back outward.

Chell wormed her way toward the broken remains of the window, tiptoeing her way to the wall. She reached up an arm. Her heart sunk-she hadn't realized just how far down she was.

Doug stared down, scanning the room for something, anything they could use.

"Grab that nightstand—" he said, and Chell darted back into the vault with only a split-second hesitation at the portals. She pushed it against the side, throwing her arm up once again with fingers outstretched.

Still no luck.

"The—use the robot," Doug said, and Chell reached out for the artificial intelligence.
Her heart stopped.

This was him. This was the robot responsible for her being in here, for her to have been caught in the first place. If he hadn't shown up, she might have had a chance at getting out of here on her own.

"Why is he here?" she said, face darkening.

"Look—I'll explain later," said Doug. "Just—use him as a step for now."

He looked so much bigger in her arms, and Wheatley raised his lower plate into a pathetic half-smile.

Chell dropped him onto the nightstand, optic first. His handles caught him, balancing the sphere on the flat surface. She scrambled to stand on him, once again going up on your toes.

"I know this can't be helped—we are in a hurry. Just, could you be a bit more careful? Really, please do be careful. I'm not indestructible," he said.

Doug yanked off his lab coat, tying one sleeve to his ankle and another to his desk. He leaned over the edge, metal frame biting into his stomach as he reached out to her. The jacket pulled taut, and he heard the faint sound of seams ripping as his hands closed around her outstretched ones.

He dangled. Arms fully extended and legs locked straight, he gave a halfhearted pull and realized with a twist of his stomach that he couldn't do it. She was too far down—and he couldn't get in a good enough position to yank her up. Upper body strength alone wasn't going to work.

Doug muttered a quick apology, slipping his hands away. Chell searched his face for an explanation, but the man had already turned away. He yanked at the knots, pulling both of his sleeves back to normal.

With one sleeve now wrapped around his hand, he tossed the jacket down to Chell. He could actually pull her up, now that he had proper footwork and a makeshift rope.

"And how exactly do you plan on getting me back up there?" Wheatley said, piping in.

Doug didn't answer.

And neither did Chell.

The girl clung to the tips of his white jacket, her grip shifting into handfuls as she climbed her way up. She hovered, glancing down at the tilted robot. He'd rolled on the nightstand, twisting so that his optic faced the ceiling.

"Wait. We can't let Caroline find him," Doug said softly. "You'll have to grab him."

Chell gave Doug a long stare and then sighed. Her foot swooped down, pointed as she stuck it between his handle and his casing. Chell flexed her foot outwards, letting it stick out at an angle as she drew the robot closer to her.

He was heavier than she'd expected.

As soon as she climbed high enough, she reached for the window ledge and let go of the fraying lab coat. Years of hot summers, of pushing herself out and over pool ledges whenever she was too lazy to swim to the ladder meant she had enough upper body strength to heft herself over the edge.

"Got it?" said Doug, reaching out to grab her shoulders. Chell threw a leg over the edge, pointing her foot to let Wheatley roll aside. Bits of glass jabbed at her stomach, tearing and ripping stripes into at
her clothes and drawing red lines on her skin.

She scrambled, glass shards snapping as she rolled to safety. After pushing herself to her feet, she pulled her shirt down to cover the rips in her undershirt and brushed off clinging squares of glass. There. Good as new. A smile broke out on her face, a burst of color and expression in this emotionless place.

"Thank you," she said, almost a whisper. He could never know what had gone through her head, how truly frightening that sense of total abandonment had been. She could've gone crazy in that room, left alone to her thoughts. And he—he had proved her wrong. People did care about her.

Doug gave her a small pat on the shoulder. "You're welcome," he said, "but save it. Caroline's on her way and we have to get out of here. And don't worry about the robot. He's helping us now."

Her smile drifted into a more serious expression, a thin mask to hide her terror. Doug reached for the sphere, standing up on his tiptoes to latching him back into the management rail.

"Oh—this is very, very bad news," said Wheatley. "Can't tell quite where she is at, but she should be arriving here at any moment. So I would suggest we start running. NOW."

"Then go!" Doug hissed, diving beneath the robot. No sense in standing here any longer—the room was trashed. No chance of covering up this one—he couldn't just readjust the swivel chair and walk right out as if nothing had happened. It was only a matter of time until Caroline realized what had happened—and that she was missing one test subject.

Chell paused to close the door before sprinting to catch up. The robot zoomed ahead, darting left to take a new route. After all, they didn't want to risk running into her on their way out. Especially since she'd most likely come in the same door as they had.

The two might have been hurrying on their way in, but it was nothing compared to how fast the three were going on their way out.

They struggled to remain silent, shoes slapping against metal and breaths deep and heaving. Another door came into view, just as plain and simple as the first entrance. Doug punched open the numbers, giving silent thanks that the code for exiting matched the code for entering. He threw the door open. Chell and Wheatley slipped through.

The elevator to the surface wasn't far from here—just a few more winding hallways, past a few more offices. Five or six people stood around, chattering amongst themselves.

They slowed to a walk as they approached, chests still heaving as they squeezed their way through and pushed the 'up' button.

"Press all you want," said one of the scientists. "We've been here for ten minutes waiting. They say it's stuck."

"You're kidding," said Doug, but the other man shook his head. He took a deep breath, glancing at the closed doors and wishing that they'd just open, that they could slip in and glide up to the surface.

A tense moment passed.

He glanced back at Chell, her face the same stoic expression. She refused to make eye contact with the sphere. "Come on," he said, voice hushed. "Caroline must've called and had them block the lift. I think I know another way out—just trust me."
"I do," she said, voice soft. "Just please. Don't let her find me again."

"I won't," he said, pulling the girl into a hug. She only made it about three quarters the way up on him, and for a moment she just rested her head against him, breaths steadying. "I won't let her find you," he repeated, the hug itself reminiscent of his mother pulling him into a hug when he was younger.

"Just follow me," he said, pulling away. Chell blinked twice, wiping a palm across the corner of her eye.

No alarms blared through the intercom. No security 'guards' rushed out to grab them. No test subject had ever successfully escaped from Aperture. Caroline could deal with it herself—plus, she couldn't risk exposing anything about her own wing. So even if she had discovered Chell's escape, they could never know for sure.

Doug heard murmurs of discontent as they pushed their way back out of the crowd. Chell reached out a hand to cling to the back of his lab coat. Wheatley whizzed ahead, taking a few sharp and incorrect turns before relinquishing leadership to Doug.

There—at the end of the hallway.

A dated elevator hummed in place, a few dimmer lights illuminating it. It was an old-fashioned lift, and one that could only take them into the lower levels of Aperture. It wasn't the surface lift, but it was a lift nonetheless.

With only one elevator in and one elevator out of Aperture, Caroline couldn't stop it forever. They couldn't leave now—they didn't have a choice. But at the same time they couldn't stay in the modern Enrichment Center.

She'd find them in a matter of hours.

Doug pressed a button, breath held as the elevator creaked to life. Wheatley hung a few feet down the hall, unable to progress any farther on his rail.

"Guess I'll just let you two go, then," he said, glancing down. "Though it has been fun. All of that hacking. Escaping."

The elevator doors slid open."

"Don't mention any of that," said Doug. "Understand? You never helped us. You never 'hacked.' And you definitely didn't lead us anywhere. If anyone asks—you just got lost."

The robot gave a cheerful nod, and Doug reached up and gave the bot a pat in the same way he would give a dog a pat on the head. "Good job with your hacking, though. You really saved us back there."

Doug could have sworn that the robot beamed. For once in his life, the artificial intelligence had done something right.

The elevator clicked again, and Doug and Chell slipped inside. He pressed a button, watching it light up and the doors closed. Strips of light danced across the walls.

They descended.
Lights flickered by.

Chell and Doug centered themselves in the unusually square elevator. Metal grating wrapped around the bottom edges, but no gates covered the slipped into open space as the facility above them disappeared. Unsettling clicks filled the elevator.

"No one knows this place better than Caroline," said Doug. "But there's got to be somewhere we can hide you." Even though she hadn't been to certain areas in decades, he had no doubt she could easily navigate these halls of science.

White walls and ledges closed in around the elevator shaft. They creaked to a stop a few levels beneath the bottom and stepped out, twisting around the corner and passing beneath yellow block letters.

Two thousand, nine hundred and seventy-five meters beneath the surface.

Another turn.

They found themselves in a perfectly lit office, perched above a y-shaped air duct. The lights remained on in the abandoned office, and Chell wondered why the brilliant yet clueless Aperture Engineers had never considered installing power switches. Or, a backup power system triggered by motion much like the prerecorded messages.

"Should be a straight shot from here," he said as they walked through the office. "And I think I know just the place." He opened a doorway on the far end, and a rocky ledge extended out. A gated walkway extended out. They edged across the open platform, and then clung onto the catwalk's railings.

Chell paused, peering over the edge. The walkways shifted into square, yet downward spiraling staircase. Catwalks jutted out on every level, connecting to testing spheres or offices.

And from their position at the top, the gaps between made a perfect Aperture logo.

They descended past each sphere, the empty spaces even more vertigo-inducing than the elevator. Their hands clung to both hand rails. Chipped paint rubbed off, clinging to their palms as they dragged their way along.

Though taking a few elevators would save time, Doug knew this would be the most direct path downward. Better to bypass the testing track altogether than attempt to navigate it in reverse.

Chell made a point to keep her shoulders back and eyes ahead. The adrenalin from running and escaping had worn off. And with their pace slowed to a walk, the details of her surrounds came rushing in. Only a thin rail separated her from falling to her death.

"How much farther?" she said.

"Just the next level," he said. He'd never ventured this far into Aperture before—he'd had no reason to. No point in getting lost in the complex twists and inconsistent layouts of the earlier decade sections.

They'd descend to the lower 70's section. It only made sense. Even if Caroline worked her way
through the decades, she'd most likely start at either the modern levels or the bottom of the facility. Better to stash Chell somewhere in the middle. It'd take her longer to find her that way.

But he couldn't think like that. He needed to figure out a place where Caroline wouldn't find her at all.

"There," Doug said, pointing at where the elevator shaft joined with the staircase. "Should take us the rest of the way down." The catwalk split to the right, dropping off where an elevator should be.

Chell's grip tightened as she glanced at the empty, cylindrical frame. A testing sphere hung directly below them, the first one in the testing track. And if she peered down far enough, Chell could make out the faint outline of buildings.

Doug pressed a green button and called the elevator. A few moments later they'd descended, and then exited onto another catwalk. Two buildings clung to the side of the salt mine, the upper portion of the lower labeled CONTROL ROOM. Chell followed him onto a unstationary platform that slid over to the higher building's entrance.

Just like every other office she'd been in, there were only desks and chairs and outdated computers. "So why here?" said Chell, unsure as to how she could hide here, of all places.

"Seeing if there's any truth to a few rumors," he said, moving along the walls with pointed motions, as if searching for something. He paused at a vaguely technological, refrigerator-sized box. Chell didn't know what to call it, but Doug pushed it aside to reveal a dark metal door. It slid apart, opening up to a rocky tunnel built into the side of the salt mine itself.

Four closed-off doors greeted them, each labeled VITRIFIED. Every door looked strong and sturdy, as if they could withstand multiple explosions and remain intact.

And yet, none of them were locked. Doug peeked into the first three before letting the doors slam shut.

"Aha," said Doug as he pushed open the fourth door. "This is it. The Borealis."

Chell ducked in beneath his arm, taking slow steps. Doug slipped in. The door clicked closed. She turned to him, looking for an explanation.

It made no sense to have a boat over four thousand meters beneath the surface. She wondered why they had even built it in the first place, much less how they planned to get it to a body of water.

But there was a ship.

In Aperture.

It extended far above them, massive and looming. Crates and wooden boxes dangled from cranes. Metal beams crisscrossed, and the structure itself seemed barely balanced in its dry-dock. Chell got the feeling that if she so much as breathed on it, the ship would topple to the side.

"An experiment in large-scale teleportation," said Doug, hopping over the railing and trailing along the concrete walkway. "But the small-scale tests with human subjects were…problematic. Never even tried using it with the ship. It's been sitting here ever since, I guess."

"And I'm hiding in there?" Chell craned her neck, studying the ship. There'd be enough places in there to hide in there, among the dark corners and nooks.
Doug shook his head. "Too unstable," he said. "Too dangerous to walk onto there. One careless move could trigger it and send you who-knows-where."

The color blue clung to the ship and dry-dock, tinting the area like steam on a mirror and concealing a staircase at the far end of the dock until they were a few feet away. They ascended toward the new door, and Chell couldn't help but notice that it looked as if the Borealis builders had simply slapped on a leftover door.

An automated message blasted on as they walked in. Chell's hands flew to cover her ears.

"Welcome to the Aperture Science Nuclear Fallout and Supply Shelter! If you're hearing this, then those damn commies dropped a bomb somewhere around here. But you can count your lucky stars," said the recording of Cave Johnson. "I've already thought ahead. Each and every section here at Aperture is equipped with enough food and water to sustain the entire professional population of this company. For about a year. Now, you might wonder just why the food won't last longer. One year's not nearly long enough for radiation to clear. But food's expensive, and I know that your bright minds will figure out how to build some sort of anti-radiation suit and let us return to the surface.

"Meanwhile, though, go grab a can of beans and make yourself comfortable. Just be sure to share with a friend. Make it last as long as it can. And please, don't dirty up the place. It's brand new."

Chell pulled her hands away. Floor to ceiling shelves extended up and down the huge room. White cans sat on top of one another, and jugs of water refracted back the light. Cave was right—and even though the place had to be over twenty-five years old, it remained in pristine condition.

Doug glanced around, then motioned toward a far shelf stocked with books and puzzles and games. "Those'll keep you busy. Should be some beds and a bathroom back there."

Chell grabbed a generic can and examined the expiration date. Hmm. Still edible.

"I hate beans," she said. She placed it back on the shelf, twisting it slightly so that the label perfectly aligned with the other cans.

"Chell," said Doug.

"What?" She looked up, expression flat.

"We did it."

She gave a slight smile, then looked away.

"Wait. You don't understand. No one's escaped from a testing track. Ever. Much less from Caroline's track," he said. "And we walked right out from under her nose."

"I guess we did, didn't we?" she said, smile growing. Emotions crashed into her. For the first time in days, she sunk to the floor and relaxed.

She began to laugh.

At first it was just a few laughs, but then Doug joined in. She laughed and he laughed and they fed off of one another. She couldn't stop. Tears came to her eyes, partially from her giggles and partially from sheer relief.

A few minutes later, they faded. Chell wiped the tears from her eyes, taking a few deep breaths.
"Been awhile since I laughed that hard. But I don't think anyone heard us," said Doug.

She paused, turning over the situation in her mind like she'd turned over the can minutes ago. Even if Cave was right—even if other rooms like this existed, stashed away on each level, Doug had no guarantee that they'd find one back here.

"How did you find this place?" Chell said.

"More of a lucky guess than anything. Call it a hunch," he said. Doug stood, examining the shelf and then glancing at the door. He sighed.

She stared at him, last traces of laughter disappearing. It only took a moment to realize that he was moving toward the exit.

He rested a hand on the door.

"Doug, stop," she said. "Don't leave."

"Chell—" he said. "I've got to get back up there. If I'm gone too long, she'll know. She'll come looking for me. She'll come looking for you."

"Please, just stay. I don't want to be alone again." Her voice cracked.

"I can't," said Doug. "You know I can't. Just lock the door and don't go anywhere. I'll be back soon."

"But wait—" she said, voice soft. "I have to tell you something." He had risked so much, just by going back to rescue her. He deserved to know that she was no victim of this. He deserved to know that she'd stolen from him.

"What?"

Her mind blurred together, and she chickened out. She couldn't risk it now. No, she'd tell him once they got out of here. That would be better for both of them.

"It's nothing," she said. "Never mind."

"You can tell me later," said Doug, pushing open the thick metal. "I've got to go—but before I leave, I want you to know this." He locked his elbow, propping open the door. "You've been so brave. And I want you to know that I couldn't be more proud."

The box scraped across the ground.

Doug gave a final kick to the filing cabinet, pushing it in front of the sliding door. Better to stack a few boxes and divert stray eyes from this door. Anything helped when it came to keeping Chell hidden.

He didn't bother stopping by the Control Room to turn on the power. He didn't have to worry about a reserve power grid running out and plunging Chell into darkness. A nuclear core powered the facility, and so every area linked to it had an almost limitless power source.

His steps marked staccato notes on a musical scale as he moved through Aperture. Soon enough he found himself up several flights of stairs and back at the beginning elevator shaft.

But it was empty.
Doug clung to a railing, peering up and into empty space. The elevator must have defaulted to its original position in upper Aperture. He searched the walls for a switch. Instead, he found a sign advising him to wait for an attendant.

He sighed, knowing that the rooms twenty-five feet below him no doubt had the button. Even after walking countless flights of stairs, he still had a few left to go.

A creak and soft swish.

He pushed the door open. A hallway opened up to a larger, sectioned room. He wound his way through cheap folding chairs and cheesy posters. A blank projector screen sat above a small platform, a black logo stamped in the middle. A waiting room for test subjects—that's what it had to be.

Though judging by the vicinity of the elevator, Doug guessed it to be for subjects after successful completion of their testing course. It'd explain why the room still seemed spotless.

Two slick and dark gray doors sat on the far side, thee-quarters of the way closed. Doug slipped a hand between and pushed. The doors retracted into the walls, much like automatic grocery store doors.

To the right of the doorway sat a detached observation room. In these massive chambers, viewing rooms tended to sit against a wall. Inside, he spotted a control room. Two desks, two computers, and two windows.

This must have been where the lucky test subjects got their reward from testing, and this must be where the elevator controls were.

He clunked forward a few steps, and Cave's voice roared over the speakers.

"The point is: If we can store music on a compact disc, why can't we store a man's intelligence and personality on one? So I have the engineers figuring that out now. Brain Mapping. Artificial Intelligence. We should have been working on it thirty years ago. I will say this - and I'm gonna say it on tape so everybody hears it a hundred times a day: If I die before you people can pour me into a computer, I want Caroline to run this place. Now she'll argue. She'll say she can't. She's modest like that. But you make her. Hell, put her in my computer. I don't care," said the recording.

Doug froze.

Hold on.

Memories prickled at the edges of his mind, memories of Henry lamenting over their inability to find someone worthy enough to pour into a computer and run Aperture forever.

Not once had he heard them mention Caroline. But listening to this—he couldn't help but wonder if that had been the plan the entire time.

He scrambled up the steps and into the observation room, triggering another message.

"If you're a test subject, get out of here. You've got your sixty dollars. Go on. Leave."

Doug took another step.

"Sorry about that. Just had to make sure not just anybody hears this message. At least I know Caroline won't be in here, heh. For as much as she loves testing, she wouldn't be caught dead this close to those grimy, disgusting beings we call test subjects," Cave's recording trailed off, the disgust
evident in his voice. "If you're still here, test subject, and your name happens to be Caroline—well, congratulations. Now get out. You're not my Caroline, and I can't have anyone with that name in this room."

He coughed a few times, then continued.

"Been thinking even more since that…rant. I went ahead and copied all information related to that project onto my computer. Caroline's already gone through it. Not much there now. She's taken everything useful. Hell, she probably has all of this already. But point is, I have no guarantee that she won't turn around and delete every last bit of after I—" he swallowed, then cleared his throat.

"After I die. But that's where you come in, Aperture employee. I'm going out on a limb here and leaving you my username and password, because science must continue. These two words should get you into any computer system here, old or new. Cjohnson. Tier3. Trust me," he said, breaking into an coughing fit. The message cut off, pulling the room into quietness.

Doug reached for a keyboard, punching in the username and password with deft keystrokes. He scooted into a desk chair as the system loaded.

A single folder sat on the desktop, simply labeled 'Trash.' Doug clicked, the sound loud and clunking on the older mouse.

Another folder sat within, labeled 'Really, it's useless information.'

Click.

'You're wasting valuable company time.'

Click.

'Back to work, slacker.'

Click.

'I swear to God. If that's you, Caroline, you're fired.'

Click.

'I mean it.'

The icons exploded as the last folder opened. Documents and charts and reports filled the monitor, each one related to the GLaDOS project. More specifically, the Genetic Lifeform component of the it.

Doug scrolled, skimming titles until he found one labeled 'Overview.' He clicked and dragged to the desktop, then double clicked.

Despite what anyone says, it's too late for me to go into that computer. I can barely type this, much less allow my mind to be transferred into experimental technology.

I don't know what she'll say. I don't know what lies she's undoubtedly fed you. I know she wants no part of this project, and if she's still the Caroline I know she'll fight against it until her dying breath. But you HAVE to make her. I don't want her to die like this. Like me.

She's legally bound to go into that computer—it was my only condition for her takeover as CEO. If you ask her, she'll tell you she could never do it. That she wasn't worthy enough. That she could
never handle that responsibility.

A load of bullshit, if you ask me. She's probably already running the place—what's so different about running it from a computer specifically built for her?

The document extended for pages, slipping into caps lock halfway through. The poor voice in Doug's head read it in an enraged scream. He had to stop, blink and look away every few paragraphs until his mind quieted.

He spent the next half hour finishing the overview, and then sifting through the other files. He couldn't help but be struck by just how important they were—and how much of Aperture's future had been hidden away.

These documents were crucial.

Cave Johnson had been absolutely right in his predictions—and these files proved that Caroline had been hiding it for years.

Doug logged off the computer and called the elevator, tripping over his feet to get into the other room.

He had to tell someone—everyone, if he could.

But first, he needed to find Henry.
"Caroline."

She jerked from her half-asleep pose on her desk, red marks staining her face from where she'd leaned against her hand. She'd been up all night waiting, and this dip into her already-minimal hours of sleep ebbed away at her temper.

She glared at her assistant as she slipped her shoes back on and readjusted her jacket. She wasn't angry. Far from it, actually. He just happened to be the only one around.

Her rage was a mere gust of wind compared to the hurricane it had been earlier. Opening the door to see the light sparkle of shattered glass and an infuriatingly cheerful radio chime into a deserted vault had pissed her off.

Escape from a testing track was impossible without outside help, and a rewind of security footage pinpointed just who had dared to break into her wing.

She had to hand it to Doug—his exploitation of her security had been flawless and their escape would've been admirable, if not so poorly thought-out. Her camera was zoomed in on the inside of the vault itself, and sat on the same wall as the observation window. Reviewing the footage only yielded the sound of shattering glass, and a fleeting image of Chell darting away.

She'd picked her way through the shards of broken glass, gingerly lifting the telephone to call her assistant.

It only took three words to get this situation back in her control.

*Stop that elevator.*

With some educated guesswork, she realized they'd left for Old Aperture. It would only be a matter of hours before they showed up again—no use chasing them down. Hours had passed since their escape. Neither one had resurfaced yet.

Caroline hovered at her desk, waiting for her assistant to spill his reason for startling her awake.

"The elevator," he said. "It's been called down. They should be back in less than fifteen minutes."

"Well, we'd better get down there," she said. No reason to hurry, though. Reaching the elevator itself would take but a few minutes—and she couldn't believe their stupidity. Did they honestly expect to return in their escape elevator. As if *that* would slip by her.

"Want me to call some backup?" said Greg.

She shook her head. Intimidation alone should keep them from attempting to use force. And Greg—well, he wouldn't be *that* helpful if it came to that. "Go ahead and shut down the surface elevator. Just in case," she said. She couldn't afford to let them slip by again.

He gave a small shrug and then joined her.

The elevator cables spun. The box beneath rose, higher and higher as if heavy hands were drawing it up. Currents of air rushed through the sides and Doug leaned against the wall.
Countless steps back to this elevator left his legs exhausted and heart weak. He was a scientist, not an Olympian—exercise wasn't a priority for him. And now his breaths sputtered like an idling car.

Eating something earlier would have been a good idea. A can of beans, or even a drink of water. He could've used the extra strength.

He was being watched.

He didn't know how, or even why. He was the only one down here besides Chell. But ever since those recordings went off, anxiety had clung to him like wet hair after a shower.

He couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Caroline could be down there, lying in wait and watching him leave. She could've had this all planned out; she could've played him for a fool.

Doug flinched as loud and menacing laughter burst out from behind him. A sick and hot sensation flared up inside and chocking him into a panic. His heart pounded—he could barely breathe, and his heart jumped.

Heated discussions rose around him, garbled over the machinery sounds but gaining in volume and intensity as the elevator neared the end of its track. Doug clamped his hands over his ears, the pressure against his head growing until it reached an unbearable level.

His vision swam, and he didn't hear the soft ding of the elevator's arrival. Silence rushed over him as he dared to glance around, immediately focusing on three—no, wait, two—approaching figures.

Swift and overwhelming recognition swept through him. Greg and Caroline were here, and they were heading straight for him. His breath caught and he blacked out, the loss of consciousness as sudden and swooping as a glitching computer flashing into black.

"Well," said Caroline as he slumped onto the ground. "That was impressive."

He should have rescued her sooner.

The thought perpetuated itself as he paced his relaxation vault. It'd been at least a day, if not two since he'd left Chell. But however long he'd spent here, Chell had been in this position far longer.

He should have rescued her sooner.

It was quiet here, and the silence terrified him.

But between those brief and frightening seconds of peace, voices swirled around him.

She's going to find her.

You should've picked a better hiding spot.

Everything's worse because of you.

They emanated from both everywhere and nowhere, filling the room with conversation. He never heard Caroline's voice; he never heard his mind's voice.

You're a failure.

All of this—it's your fault.
Why do you even try?

The words cycled through him like an indecisive driver going around a traffic circle. With no radio, no outside sounds, and no people to distract him, Doug only had his mind and his regrets to keep him company.

He should have rescued her sooner.

No one was coming to rescue him; he was trapped. The walls of the relaxation vault reminded him that testing was but a chamberlock away. But just like Chell, Caroline hadn't given him the standard orange jumpsuit.

He slipped into the pod, seeking relief from his mind. The glass hissed shut and stasis-inducing gas flowed in to kickstart the suspension.

He should have rescued her sooner.

Scrìiiieeeeeeech.

The vault rattled as it docked into the testing track. Doug slipped out from his pod, shielding his eyes from the overhead lights.

"Welcome back, Doug," said Caroline. He winced at the influx of volume over the speakers and then grabbed the clipboard from his nightstand. Light boxes listed off potential testing hazards. Burns. Acid. Fall injuries. Bullets. Vaporization. He didn't bother flipping the page to see what else he might encounter.

He let the hard plastic clatter onto the nightstand, then reached beneath it. His fingers grasped at air as he searched for a familiar bottle.

"Don't bother looking for your medication. I've never tested a paranoid schizophrenic, and pills won't give me the results I need," she said. "And though you left me without a test subject, you're here now. And while we wait for her to show her face, a few tests are in order."

"You'll never find her," he said.

"Oh, I will. Believe me, I will."

Doug shook his head—she wouldn't find her. She couldn't. He couldn't allow himself to think like that, not after all they'd gone through.

"Look, you've got to let go whatever vendetta you've got against Chell. I'll test in her place, if that's what you want. Just leave her alone. Let her go."

"You know why I hate her so much? It's not for no reason," she said, voice dipping. "Black Mesa's got some of our most valuable technology thanks to her. God knows how badly they'll screw it up—I honestly wouldn't be surprised if they caused an apocalypse."

"But that's not her fault," he said. "You can't blame her for what her parents did."

"Hold on," said Caroline, a hint of surprise in her voice. "She never told you, did she?" She gave a soft, amused laugh and her face brightened.

Doug pressed a hand against the wall.
"You were so desperate for friendship that you let the girl pull the wool right over your eyes," she said. "Letting her copy blueprints for the tunneling device? Her trap couldn't have been more obvious. Even I didn't think you were that stupid."

"Then how come you didn't see it either?" he shot back. It was practice. Just art practice, nothing else. He would've known about anything else.

"When it comes to my tunneling device staff, I trust them to not be so careless with that information. I suppose I was wrong about you," she said. "Oh well. It's nothing a little testing can't fix."

"You're making a mistake," said Doug. His phonebook of a contract had covered everything under the sun, but he couldn't recall the protocol for mandatory employee testing. The legality of this had to be shaky. "This isn't right."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, voice mocking. "I was under the impression that, besides being responsible for the loss of both the zero-point energy manipulator AND half of the portal device, you broke into my private property, completely ruined a relaxation vault, and attempted to help a test candidate escape from the facility—not to mention whatever you may have done in those lower levels," she said. "But according to you this is my mistake?"

Doug fell silent.

"I didn't think so," she said. "And as soon as I find her, the real testing will begin. For now, though, let's get you started."

Doug said nothing, instead taking a few steps towards the door.

"The portal will open in three….two….one."

The weighted storage cube came up light in his hands, surprising Doug. After toting around his own cube crammed with art supplies and books, he’d expected more of a challenge.

But considering how he’d yet to acquire a portal device, it was a welcome surprise. He plopped the cube onto the super-colliding button, then shot a glance at the observation room.

"This isn't even a real test," she said. "Don't complain. You are a scientist, after all. Not a test subject. I've just got to make sure you understand the basics of cube and button based testing before we continue."

The doors clicked open. Doug moved on.

Bzzzz-ttt.

A backlit panel flickered, flashing numbers and symbols against a white background.

1/19

Nineteen test chambers—that was all that separated him from the end of the testing track, him from Chell. He didn't know how long that could take, but Caroline couldn't keep him here forever. She'd have to let him go sometime.

The blue portal switched with a hiss. Doug ducked into a room, grabbing a cube and then dashed back to the main room. The portal switched. He darted in to deposit the cube.
There. Test completed. If the remaining eighteen were as simple as this, he'd finish in a matter of hours.

And the faster he completed them, the faster he'd be able to go back for Chell.

2/19

The single portal device rotated on a spindly stand, firing every few seconds. With a hop through a portal, Doug slipped the device into his hands. If he ever managed to escape, to sneak in the spaces between chambers where elevators met facility and catwalks joined and panels meshed, the device would be useless.

It was built specifically for testing, not for traversing.

Better than no portal device at all—but not by much.

6/19

Caroline slipped between rooms with ease, often arriving at her positions before Doug himself. "I wanted to thank you, by the way," she said. "I don't often get to use this testing element. I am required to warn you that any contact with the High Energy Pellet will cause immediate vaporization. Please be careful."

The energy ball hissed as it bounced from floor to ceiling like a pinball. Eventually it fizzled out, but moments later another jumped out from the generator. He took a long moment before shooting his blue portal on the ceiling. The orange one on the floor opened and the receptacle flashed blue as the pellet entered.

The unstationary scaffolding sputtered to life. As Doug rode it he couldn't help but notice the growing difficulty and complexity of these tests. His estimate of a few hours may have been preemptive.

One wrong move, one misfire of the gun and he'd wind up as a pile of ash on the chamber floor.

10/19

"These next tests apply the principles of momentum," said Caroline. "Mind your step."

A vaguely unsettling feeling washed over Doug as he glanced at the gap between floor and stairs. The last few steps were missing. He could've climbed up—but with the portal device in his hands, there must be a simpler solution.

Still, something felt missing.

Two icons lit up the warning panel—one of a figure falling into a portal, and another of a figure flinging out of a higher portal. Doug twisted back—sure enough, a swirling orange portal waited above on a panel.

Caroline urged him on from a window to his left. Doug inhaled sharply as he fired a portal beneath his feet, falling then flying then fumbling forward on the staircase.

His legs groaned in protest from the unexpected jolt of landing. It would be nice if there was something out there to dampen drops like that—and if earlier chambers were any indication, the
drops would undoubtedly grow larger.

"Long-fall boots," Doug said softly. Aperture had a device built specifically for dampening falls, and yet he wasn't wearing the boots.

"Missing something?" said Caroline. She couldn't help but latch onto his break from silence. Though he'd yet to give any outward indications of his schizophrenia, talking to himself was a good start.

He gave a solemn nod, the stoic expression on his face reminding her of Chell. The chamberlock whooshed closed behind him as he advanced into the next section of the three-part chamber. White tiles explained the same concept—a figure falling, and then flying. He clutched the gun to his chest as he approached a pit.

"That's too bad," she said. "You of all people know that the long-fall boots were built as a foot-based suit of armor for the tunneling device. They're meant to protect the device—NOT the test subject."

Doug edged towards the wall, noting how there weren't any stairs at the bottom of the drop. It wasn't that far, but a fall could still hurt. He exhaled, then fired his portal.

His stomach dropped as he whooshed through the tears in space, and a moment later he landed on the far side of the chamber.

"I thought about it, and honestly couldn't think of a reason to give you the long-fall boots. Your job is to fix portal devices broken during testing, and if you happen to break it—well, you can fix it yourself," she said. "Be careful not to fall."

Doug's face furrowed as he moved into the final portion of the test. All of his tools, his blueprints, were back in his lab. If he broke the device here he wouldn't be able to fix it. He tightened his right hand on the handle as he approached the next drop.

He inhaled sharply, backpedaling. This was the longest fall he'd seen yet, and a staircase would up from the bottom in case he found himself stranded there. Helpful. Well, as helpful as stairs might be to a man with broken legs.

A closed portal glowed at the bottom, and Doug twisted to get a better look at the panels above his head.

Solving these tests was going to take a lot longer than he'd originally thought. Hours had passed since that first chamber, and he still had nine chambers to go. He had to be much more careful than he'd thought. He'd have to take his time.

A mistake could be fatal. He couldn't charge forward and rely on trial-and-error. A misplaced portal or a crooked fall from this high could mean broken body parts.

And if he missed, he had no boots to give him a second chance.

Doug triple checked his portals. The orange sat beneath his feet, and he locked the blue into place on an extended panel. Other ledges dotted the chamber, jutting out from higher and higher up. The scientist wished he could've worked out the test's overall solution before making any moves, but the high shelves blocked his view.

He'd have to solve it one jump at a time.

His stomach dropped as he leaped from the edge. The portal rushed closer and he struggled to align himself before his blue portal flung him across the room. He felt as if he'd been tossed about by an
ocean wave, overwhelmed by water and unable to tell which direction was up.

_Skreeeeek._

His shoes skidded and Doug tumbled onto his knees. For a long moment he froze, first tense and then relaxing. He’d done it. He _hadn't_ missed. The dots on the wall told him two drops remained, but he’d done it. And he could do it again.

He gingerly felt at knees, fingers brushing the developing bruises. His calves already stung from impact, and his ankles popped as he pushed himself to his feet.

A few more falls like that and he wasn’t sure he'd be able to walk.

"Now that you've acquired the dual portal device, these next tests could take a very, _very_ long time," she said. "Not that I'm in a hurry. But you're going to miss the party if you don't pick up the pace. It's only a few days away, after all."

Of _course_.

Caroline's birthday.

Aperture's only party.

He knew it was this month, but he hadn't realized how close the date was.

Employees brought in assorted foods and deserts, then gouged them down over the hour-long event. Inevitably, some poor soul wound up with the job of making _her_ a cake—a stressful undertaking, to say the least. Her guidelines for a birthday cake were so precise and particular—a black forest cake, topped with cherries and a single candle. No more, no less. And she expected perfection.

"This next test involves turrets," said Caroline. "I would warn you further about their damage capabilities, but I'm sure you're already familiar with them. You've got a disabled one in your office, after all. Good luck."

_Turrets._

Supposedly for defense, he'd never bothered to fully activate the one in his lab. That high and mechanized voice had been unsettling enough with the guns disabled—and the idea of a fully-armed one made his skin crawl.

"Hell-o?"

A red line streaked across the doorway, wavering then focusing on a panel to his right. The robot gave a few muffled dings as it searched for him. Doug backpedaled.

If he took another step, it'd fill him with bullets. So how was he supposed to get past a three-legged gun?

Oh. Right. He glanced down at his portal device, then darted out from the corner. He placed one portal beneath the construct and the other on a far wall and the turret disappeared.
"A-aaa-aaaah!"

A moment later, a soft "Why-y?"

He moved carefully through each turn, listening to turrets call out and then calm down before knocking them off balance. He took his time with each one. Hurrying could lead to mistakes, and he'd rather take his time than incapacitate himself. Besides, Chell was safe.

As long as she remained in that room, she'd stay that way.

Flip.

Skim.

Flip.

Chell sighed, letting her arms drop to the bed. Pages crumpled as the book flopped onto her stomach. It slid aside as she reached for another.

As she cracked it open, a disgusting and soggy smell poured out. While old book smell had never been her favorite, she much preferred the carefully-preserved smell of dusty golden pages to this.

She spiraled down each sentence and paragraph and page, but moments later she couldn't remember a word of what she'd read. Her reading turned into an impossible set of stairs—no matter how far she descended, she made no progress.

She had hoped these books would be fiction—not dull and overly technical non-fiction. She'd hoped for a long and elaborate tale, something she could lose herself in for hours on end. But these—they were far too scientific.

Most were manuals for outdated and obscure Aperture equipment. Others were on nuclear fallout, and one was on the history of the company itself. This collection was meant to instruct and educate, after all—not to entertain the employees marooned in a salt mine.

A similar problem cropped up with the board games. This room was intended to accommodate a number of people—not just one. The only game that didn't require multiple players were a few decks of cards. And even then, she couldn't remember the rules to any solitary games.

It had been three days.

Three days of plastic-tinted water and metal-tinted beans. She'd almost gagged at the first can—and even now, she couldn't eat them without wincing. Three days of building up and tearing down houses of cards; three days of skimming through technical books. It had been three days since Doug had left, and the boredom was beginning to get to her.

She set her book aside and shifted to her feet.

It couldn't hurt to look around, could it?

As Doug turned another corner, the communications popped on. He'd just moved out of range of one of her observation rooms, so he didn't bother looking up at Caroline.

"Good news," she said. "Looks like that 'friend' of yours finally decided to show her face. It has been a few days, after all. I'm off to give her a warm welcome. I'll be sure to tell her you said hello."
Chapter 14 - The Fall

Creak.

The metal door wheezed open and fresh air swirled into her lungs. A landscape of dusty tables and yellowed equipment stretched in front of her. This place was frozen in time; she found the undisturbed room calming.

No one was here, and no one had disturbed this place in a long time.

She was undoubtedly alone.

For three days, she'd been safe. No one knocked on the vault door—and from the look of this room, no one had checked this office either. It was as if she'd disappeared altogether, swallowed up by Old Aperture like Doug intended.

Still, it should be safe enough to explore this area.

Every few seconds, she still peered out to check on the elevator. As long as it wasn't moving, she'd be safe.

She couldn't help but notice the lack of messages as she swept through the room. Either the former employees had been lucky enough to get out of listening to their boss's constant voice, or they'd been disabled.

Chell passed by a cheery fake plant on her way through the exit.

Well, that was enough of this room.

A catwalk wrapped around the building's edge and extended out onto a flat wall. Two doors littered the white rock face. White numbers in the upper left corner dated the area '1971'. Across the walkway, a sunset-themed Aperture logo hung beneath the testing spheres.

A warning bell sounded.

Chell's heart jumped. An elevator was descending.

She flipped around to head back toward the Borealis, back toward the office and back through the hallway. But a flash of movement from beneath her caught her attention.

Though the glass, she saw the outline of a person in the control room.

From here, she couldn't tell who it was. It could be Doug—but she couldn't take the chance that it was Caroline, especially with the elevator bringing another person down.

She needed to get out of sight.

She'd picked the worst possible spot to be—pressed against a flat white cliff with nowhere to go. But she couldn't just run back. The person in the control room shifted, moving toward the catwalks.

If she ran back, they'd know exactly where she'd been hiding.
No. She couldn't reveal her safe haven.

In the elevator, Caroline descended.

Surviving down here for days would be impossible without food and water, and the scattered cans and jugs around Aperture were all but impossible to find to the untrained eye.

Aperture only had five areas with those accommodations. She began her search at the bottom of the mine, and Greg began his at the top. They worked their way through each decade level, and met in the middle—1970's.

It was almost laughable how easy she'd been to locate.

Unlike the other four, this door was locked.

She was inside. She had to be. But Chell couldn't hide there forever. Inevitably she would emerge. But while they waited, she left her assistant in the control room and gave him express instructions to notify her as soon as Chell began to move around the office above him.

Three days, though.

She would've been impressed if she wasn't so disappointed. The girl could have lasted so much longer—not that Caroline was complaining. The less time she had to waste waiting for her, the sooner she could turn her focus back to running Aperture.

A blur of movement caught her eye as she arrived. The girl hovered on a catwalk directly across from the elevator platform.

Their eyes met.

Chell froze, then leaped over the right railing, hands squeaking against the slick surface.

She flailed as she fell, crashing on the walkway beneath. The metal beneath her, screeching like a knife dragged against glass. The impact jolted through her body, and it took a wobbly moment before she recovered to her feet.

Caroline watched her rub her knees for a moment, then throw open one of the two doors against the wall. The CEO straightened, then made her way to the control room.

"You're not going after her?" said her assistant, standing in the flat and rocky space between building and salt mine.

"No need," she said. "The hallway she's running through leads to the first chamber of a vitrified testing track. You know why we had to close that track?"

"Why?"

"Too deadly," she said, regret tinting her voice. "Then again, those were the tests that first got us in trouble with the government," she said, and the two of them moved toward the doorway Chell had disappeared into.

Chell ran.

She didn't know where she was going, but she couldn't turn back now. She wouldn't let them grab
her again and drag her into a testing chamber.

The hallway morphed into a dimly-lit tunnel. Cables ran against the walls, dipping down occasionally and connecting to breaker switches. A door screeched at the entrance. Someone shouted her name.

That wasn't Doug's voice.

She ran faster, and the path split. Chell turned right and tumbled through another doorway, passing beneath a green stencil of a man running.

SLAM.

Chell's eyes widened. A triumphant tune played over the speakers.

"Hello again, and welcome back to Aperture Science!" said Cave Johnson. His voice was far more cheerful and far more energetic in this message than the ones she'd heard before. "You gentlemen always were our best test subjects, and we are trilled to have you back for another round of testing."

**Testing.**

Chell's stomach dropped. She hadn't meant to go through any door that wouldn't open once closed.

A testing track—she'd ran right into a testing track.

"But since these next tests won't be involving that repulsion gel that you're so familiar with, Caroline threw in a test here to get you back into the swing of things before we move on to the real tests. It's been a while since you've had the Quantum Tunneling Device in your more-than-capable hands."

Her eyes watered. She'd never been in a real test chamber before—only a vault. But somehow she'd been lucky enough to only be stuck in a vault. She flipped around and pried at the sliding doors, nails scratching and slipping as she struggled for a grip.

Nothing happened.

Once a test subject entered, the only escape was through the exit.

Well, at least this test didn't seem complex.

A dotted line connected a vent to a pedestal button, and Chell leaned forward to press it. She heard the distinct sound of the mechanism engaging, and a cube dropped down and onto a raised block.

It was about the height of a dinner table, and the hard edge dug into her stomach as she leaned for the cube. Her fingers only brushed it, pushing the cube away slightly. Chell hoisted herself onto the platform with a swing of her legs, then pressed her palms against the cube's edge and pushed it onto the floor.

There. Now all she had to do was carry it and drop it onto the square button.

A chime alerted her of the test's completion, and Chell moved quickly toward the exit. There had to be spaces between these chambers—hallways and elevators and catwalks that could give her a shot at escape.

"Aha! You've still got it," said Cave voice. "When you—astronaut, war hero, or Olympian—first walked these halls, we were just beginning trials on that device you're holding. But now that we've moved past those, it's time to see just what the limits of this device are. Just how long does it take for
a man falling through portals to hit terminal velocity? And how far could that momentum fling you across the chamber?

"You're here because science needs to know. And what better way to give in to the trill of danger than by furthering the cause of science? So, honored test subject: welcome to Aperture Science's most challenging and most dangerous testing course."

Caroline walked.

She took one hallway, and her assistant covered the other one. And while her pace was quickened, she didn't run ahead and start shouting the way that her assistant had. But eventually the paths forked and they converged once again

"She's in there," he said, wheezing between words. One hand sat on his chest, and another on his knee. "In the testing track."

Caroline exhaled.

Perfect.

She moved on, turning the corner and passing by a familiar reminder.

If you see an orange jumpsuit,

HIT THE RED BUTTON!

She felt a bit calmer as she entered the control room. An array of switches lined a table, each corresponding to specific positions in each chamber. She could broadcast messages of introduction or messages of congratulations, or just messages in general.

"Out of all places, you chose a testing track," said Caroline, flipping on a microphone. "And one of our best ones. I've got to hand it to you—I was right. You really would have been an excellent test subject."

Her fingers danced across the keys, eventually finding that red button. She glanced up.

A sense of nostalgia struck her as she examined the flowchart. Water stains dotted the material, and the edges curled in.

IN CASE OF TEST SUBJECT SELF-EMANCIPATION ATTEMPT:

1. Activate pressure doors.

   Activated?

   YES NO — Check to be sure door console is plugged in.

2. Search the area for hiding subjects.

   Is Area Clear?

   YES NO — DO NOT ENGAGE. Call and Aperture Party Escort Associate. Call Aperture facilities management.
She absently traced her finger down the chart, arriving at the same conclusion she thought she'd be at. It had been awhile since she'd done anything testing related, and even longer since she'd had to activate a seal. Subjects these days just didn't escape the way they used to.

She pressed the button and pressure doors crashed down all around the testing shaft. The room gave a low and rumbling sound, like an airplane roaring by overhead.

No one was getting in, and no one was getting out.

That decade had been particularly troublesome for them all. Apparently the successful completion of one testing course—designed to make them feel invincible and make them want to return for more testing—meant more escape attempts the second time around after things got harder and deadlier.

They complained; they challenged Cave; they tried to escape.

Tried.

But watching their futile efforts had been her favorite part. To her the subjects were ants under a magnifying glass, and she was more than happy to sit back and observe. But with one shift of a hand, she could easily shift that glass and focus in a sunbeam—and that, she supposed, really had been her favorite part.

"You may as well lie down and get acclimated to the being dead position, because that's what you'll be soon enough," she said. "There's no way out of that room."

Chell said nothing. Call it an experiment, but she was curious.

Caroline twisted her volume knob, then pressed her ear close to the speaker. Faint static. She tapped on the side.

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Well, that confirmed her suspicions. Chell had yet to see a camera down here, and Caroline seemed keen on audio feedback. But if Chell said nothing, the lady would have no idea what was going on here.

"Well, the audio is working, so speak up anytime. Anyways," she said. "Mind the gap."

She moved forward, taking the time to get acquainted with the chamber's design. It seemed straightforward enough. A square button sat to the side of an exit. The large, flat floor of the chamber extended out a ways and then sharply dropped off, leaving a gap that extended so far down that Chell had to squint to see the single portable panel at the bottom, floating above a murky liquid. A poster on the wall depicted a man being dissolved by a pool of acid.

Oh. So that's what was gathered at the bottom of the pit.

A dark gray wall made up the other side of the pit, extending up and morphing into a ledge about fifteen feet up. A cube sat up there, near the back.

She wasn't sure if this test was contained by a testing sphere. Besides the sheer size of the drop, she couldn't see any bubble-like ridges like the ones she'd seen in the first chamber.

A few angled panels jutted out of the wall near the chamberlock.
So. She'd have to fall to get enough momentum to fling herself across that moat of death and up onto the ledge.

Even with a portal device, it would be difficult.

She'd have to keep her internal balance while falling from a considerable distance, and then she'd have to worry about landing on the ledge itself. And even if she had the guts and the gun to attempt it, she still could die. She could miss the panel and splash into acid; she could midjudge her fling and slam against the far wall like a bug onto a windshield.

She backpedaled from the edge, exhaling as she continued analyzing the chamber.

The exit required a cube on the button to open, but the only cube here sat on the high ledge.

She couldn't get the cube.

And even if—by some miracle—she acquired the cube and managed to set in on the button, the chamberlock wouldn't open. She'd felt the ground tremble as the doors slammed and she'd heard the gloating in Caroline's voice.

A sick sense of realization jabbed at her, almost knocking her breath away.

There was no way out of here.

She was trapped, and she was going to die down here, slowly but surely starving to death if she didn't go crazy first—

No. She broke off her thought, rubbing at the back of her hands to calm herself.

She couldn't let herself think like that. There had to be something she'd overlooked, some obvious solution that didn't require a portal gun or long-fall boots even though the chamber was specifically built to require those things.

There had to be another way out of here.

There always was.

Chamber Sixteen fell silent.

Caroline hadn't spoken in a long while, and Doug moved through the chamber faster in her absence. He took out a turret on a ledge. As he turned, a camera caught his attention.

Partially blocked by a thick pane of glass, a turret locked on and sprayed bullets in his direction, one clipping his left forearm.

Doug inhaled sharply, stumbling to the side and into a bulletproof corner. It felt as if someone had dragged a knife across his arm, the pain sharp and stinging. He'd never gotten in range of a turret before, much less been shot at by one before. He clamped his right arm over it and blinked twice.

Red covered his fingers as he applied more pressure to it. The injury wasn't serious; it only clipped him. Plus, testing sentries weren't deadly. A one-hit kill wasn't good for testing.

But why did it have to hurt so much?

He wilted, leaning back against the panels. His arm still burned and blood trickled down his arm,
constant and yet not threatening.

He needed to get out of here—but there wasn't anyone around. No one would just show up and help him like he'd helped Chell. Especially not that personality sphere.

Unless…

Doug grimaced, partially in pain and partially in thought. Perhaps if he wrote out a message, the video feed might catch the attention of the robot. He dragged himself forward and into direct line of sight of a camera.

He pulled away his hand from the wound, using the blood tipping his finger to scrawl a single shaky word.

HELP

He wished for silence—for a true and interrupted calmness, like strolling through falling snow, blurs of white muffling the world.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and instead got a blizzard of sounds. Jokes and insults and snide comments rushed in, only amplifying his pain rather than distracting from it.

He barely noticed the crack like a broken branch as something jerked out of position. A panel to his side groaned, scraping outwards. Doug jerked out of his exhausted haze, scrambling out the way.

He hadn't pushed any buttons.

This wasn't part of the test.

A red glow emanated from the open area. He stuck in his good arm, expecting his palm to press against cold grating but instead only feeling empty air.

Without hesitation, he ducked underneath panel, hair brushing the metal pole holding it open. He felt the flooring change from smooth panels to rough tiles as he crawled forward and into the dim area.

He stood, turning a half-circle as he examined the space. Completely enclosed. A chain-link fence stretched across the right wall of the room, guarding the keypad-enabled exit. A slice of light, bright and angular, filtered in from the ajar door.

Knock.

Knock knock.

He dismissed the faint sound, turning back to the entrance until it grew more insistent.

Knock knock knock.

"Hello? Anyone in there? Can't really tell, since you've gone and disappeared from the camera's view. Not sure if you caught my hint there, with the secret panel," he said. "Not sure how I did that. Usually I need the receptacle. Anyways, though. If you're out there, please come in. I am the one holding it open, and I can't do it forever," said Wheatley, faint but still audible. "Ah. No response. Must be too busy testing to notice. Okay, then. I'll give you another five minutes, then I'll stop holding this door and then come into the room."

He glanced at the fence again, sizing up the gap between ceiling and metal. If he couldn't make it and Wheatley closed the panel, he'd be trapped in here. From down here, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to
squeeze through.

He ducked out of the room, placing a portal behind the camera and watching it sizzle onto the ground. On a screen somewhere, the live feed hissed and faded into a blizzard of black and white.

A few weighted storage cubes sat in the corner, ready to be used to be dropped on the turrets behind the glass. These cubes were strong and sturdy, and it would take a considerable amount of force for the panel to crush them. The panel itself would break before those cubes would.

The energy manipulator hissed to life. Doug tilted the device, angling in the cubes to sit between panel and wall.

Perfect. Now he had a safety net in case he failed at scaling the fence.

He ducked back in and headed for the rear wall, rapping his knuckles against the rear wall.

"Aha! Knocking. So there IS someone in there. Well. Time to drop the panel controls, then," he said. A screeching and groaning sound came from panel.

Pop.

A burst of sparks. The panel went slack.

Doug turned back to the partially-open door, listening to the robot groan as if physically pushing something. More sparks. The door creaked open. Oh. Well, maybe he had physically pushed his way in.

"Not much of a room you've got there now, is it?" said Wheatley. The robot didn't advance further; he was stuck at the end of his management rail. His optic rose into a smile. "All I could do on such short notice, really. With a word as urgent and vague as 'help' I had to hurry. Just what, exactly, did you need help with?"

Doug raised a finger to his lips, and then glanced fearfully at the open panel. The robot nodded—Doug had his attention, at least for now. Doug needed to explain his situation, but his voice—and Wheatley’s voice—would draw too much attention. If they spoke, it'd only be a matter of time before Caroline reexamed the blind spots in the chamber.

He fished around his coat pocket and yanked out a thick black pen. The cap came off with a small pop, and he clicked it onto the opposite end.

He sketched a turret in the bottom left of a panel, pressing his slick thumb in the robot's optic to provide the splash of red.

Hello?

Can I help you?

Testing, he mouthed to the robot. I was testing. To make his point clear, he circled his pen on the panel in the vague shape of a portal, and drew a weighted storage cube falling.

"Ah," said Wheatley. "Forgive me. I just assumed that the situation you were in was far more, well, life threatening than a few nicks from those little guys. Not exactly deadly, are they?"

Doug glared at the robot, once again raising a finger to his lips. His mind searched for a way to explain this, to make it absolutely clear as to why the artificial intelligence needed to shut up and
realize how important it was for him to escape.

He scrawled he image of a security camera, then glanced back to make sure he still had the robot's attention before adding the words beneath.

She's WATCHING you.

His optic pinpricked, and his voice dropped in volume. "W-why would she be watching me? I've done nothing wrong. Must be something you did. "

Doug sighed—he was missing the point entirely. He glanced around the deserted room, noticing a couple of fallen posters that had drifted into a corner, no doubt leftover from an earlier time.

He grabbed one of the posters and slapped it over the camera drawing. The edges curled in, and it depicted two stick figure friends standing in the center of a blue Aperture logo.

**A Trusted Friend in Science.**

Doug pointed at the black figure on the left, and then at his chest. The robot nodded, connecting the two of them. Doug was the man on the left.

The scientist then pointed to the other stick figure, the one wrapping its arm around the first one. He jabbed at it, then pressed his fingernail into the paper's caption to underscore the FRIEND. The second figure was his friend.

And surely the robot knew that by friend, he meant Chell.

The robot's handles moved in and his optic widened. He nodded.

Doug moved on.

He wasn't sure how to explain the next part of the story—how Chell was in Old Aperture; how Caroline had separated them—but he'd give his best shot.

In the past day he'd brushed with death more times than he could count. To him, every testing element—panels to acid to turrets—was practically synonymous with deadliness, if not death itself.

He scribbled a high-energy pellet in red, streaking lines to the right to make it look as if it was aimed directly at the poster's stick figures—the ones representing himself and Chell.

This testing element—which killed on contact—was the only way he could represent both Caroline and her frightening actions against the two of them.

Yes, it was a stretch, and one glance at the robot showed he was baffled. But Doug didn't know how to make it clearer. He glanced at the remaining poster in the corner and then gave a subtle smile.

That would work.

He slapped up the second one up and to the right of the pellet, positioning it so that the energy-ball-slash-Caroline seemed to originate from it.

A cake sat on a pink background, with one slice removed and poised on a robin's-egg-blue plate. White letters stretched across a red banner.
One look at that poster, and the connection to Caroline couldn’t be clearer.

Black ink leaked out of his cracked pen and smeared onto his hands. One of his many falls in testing must’ve broken it.

Despite being absolutely sure that the robot wouldn’t get this, he might as well visually represent how Caroline had separated the two.

He pressed his stained hand onto the wall to the left of the cake poster, and began to etch out tally marks. In a few minutes, he hit ninety and then stopped.

In the bottom right, he repeated the process. Another ninety marks.

In total, one hundred and eighty tally marks.

Chell’s current position was around four thousand meters beneath the surface, and three thousand beneath Doug. Three thousand meters equaled about one point eight miles. And if each mark represented a hundredth of a mile, then his one hundred and eighty tally marks—split in half visually by the streaking lines of Caroline’s high energy pellet—represented that one point eight mile separation between himself and Chell.

Wheatley wouldn’t get it; that was a given. But perhaps the sheer number of marks would be enough to clue him in on just how far apart they were and how important it was for him to go back for her.

With his finger, he drew four red arrows. Two pointed down from the top group of tally marks—from his group—and two pointed upwards from Chell’s ninety tally marks.

Wheatley only gave him a sideways look as he struggled to decode the pictures, optic darting from side to side.

Ah, well. Doug could always explain it later. For now, he needed to get out of here.

He linked his fingers into the chain-link fence and leaned. The structure bent like paper in a breeze, as if it’d give way altogether. Not that breaking it would be a bad thing—in fact, it’d make it easier on him.

He stuck in his toes and reached up cautiously, wincing at the pressure on his left arm. Though the bleeding had stopped, the pain remained. But he couldn’t afford to wait until the pain dulled entirely—the door was open, and he needed to go.

He favored one arm over the other as he inched his way up. His balance wavered. His arms quivered. The cool wire dug into his fingers and toes.

His clothes snagged on the twists of wire at the top. Doug twisted sideways and awkwardly straddled the fence for a moment as he reached for footholds on the other side. Metal bit into his stomach. The tips of his shoes slipped, whiffing at empty air.

Doug released his grip and winced as he crashed into the ground.

Well, hopefully that’d be the last time he had to jump from a distance like that. He rubbed at his knees for a moment, then turned to the core.

The artificial intelligence’s optic darted as he fidgeted. He kept widening and narrowing his look,
wanting to speak but catching himself. Doug gave him a tired yet grateful smile, then slipped out the door.

A burst of fresh air rushed in, as cold and refreshing as if he'd thrown off a stuffy blanket and let air whoosh back in. The air here smelled different than the sharp smell of the testing tracks, as if someone in the other room was squeezing citrus. He gave a shaky sigh of relief.

Doug allowed himself the smallest of victories as he followed the robot through a dim hallway.

He'd done it.

He was out of the testing track.

Not once, but twice now he'd gotten out of a room in her wing.

They walked in silence for a few moments, until Doug heard hushed voices and footsteps behind him. He waved his arm and they ducked into a side room, just as dim as the room behind the test chamber had been.

"Dark back here, innit?" said Wheatley, voice low yet unwelcome. "Y'know, I do have a flashlight feature. Lights are always on here, and I've never had a use for it. But now—" he said.

"Wait," Doug hissed. "Leave it."

"I don't see why not—any bit of light could help back here, honestly," he said, adjusting himself as if revving up to do something important.

"We're hiding," he said.

"I—I know. Just. Would be nice to not be in the dark," he said, and Doug heard a sound like someone clicking on a lighter.

"Wheatley. You can't turn on that light," he said, words tinged with panic. He scrambled to come up with a convincing enough reason to keep him quiet and inconspicuous. "Listen—you're afraid of dying, right? Well, if you turn on that flashlight, you will die."

His optic shrunk to a spec, and he trembled in his casing. "Well why didn't you just tell me? I had no idea, really. T-thank you. I was just about to turn it on, too. Hah. That would've been disastrous," he said, and Doug gave a grim nod of agreement.

When the threat cleared, they moved on.

On their way to his office, they passed a few crowds of people. For once, Doug was glad to be wearing his work clothes. They were dirty and a bit smelly after a few days, but were still better than wearing one of those awful orange jumpsuits.

At least these were comfortable, and far less conspicuous.

But clothing wasn't his main objective. He needed to get to his office, and then get to Chell.

Water streamed from the faucet, bubbling and gurgling. Doug rolled up his sleeves and stuck his forearm underneath the tap. He rubbed at the caked-on blood, wringing his hands.

The water ran pink as it swirled down the drain.
Even in the safety of his office, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone had gone through and searched his office. His papers and files and pens seemed in a higher state of disarray than he remembered.

Doug hit the handle with his elbow. The faucet squeaked off. Drops splattered as he shook his hands, then wiped them on his pants. He paced around his office and sifted through piles of papers, flicking through them with an increasing intensity. He barely heard the click of his lock as it disengaged.

"Doug?"

He didn't glance up. Any voice other than his own was suspect; he didn't make the connection between that voice and Henry.

"Looking for something?"

"Oh! Henry." Doug briefly looked up, startled, and went back to skimming. "Trying to find a way to get down to Old Aperture, and I can't use that elevator."

"Well, none of us can either. It's out of service," said Henry.

"No, it's not," he said. "I was just down there, and I need to get back down there."

"Doug, it doesn't work."

The scientist gave him a serious look, and then discarded his search. "It works, and it looks like that's my only option." He moved toward the door, leaving behind a confused Henry. A stack of papers slid, rectangles of white drifting onto the floor.

"Wait!" he said, moving to catch up with him. "You're wasting your time. It's out of service."

The pathway to the elevator was unusually deserted. He'd expected a few wary looks, or a few questioning gazes like the ones he'd experienced on his way to his office. He still shot a look over his shoulder as he approached the elevator itself.

He pressed the circular button with two fingers.

It didn't light up.

"I told you. It's busted," said Henry.

Doug pressed it again, leaning in and expecting sounds of machinery whirring to life. Instead, he spotted a stained poster plastered to the doors. He frowned.

NOTICE

Please excuse the inconvenience.

This elevator is out of service until:

He knew for a fact that this elevator worked—this didn't make sense. Even if it was broken, that date should be filled in.

Unless, of course, there were no plans to repair it.

"Wait," said Doug. "I know there's plans to make Pneumatic Diversity Vents compatible with
elevators. You think they'd connect one down there?"

"It's just a concept right now," he said, then frowned. "And why do you need to get down there so badly? You haven't said."

"It's her" he said, stretching out a hand to rest on the closed doors. "She's down there."

"Who?" Henry crossed his arms, leaning back on his feet.

"Chell. I know, I know—" he said, raising a hand in a 'stop' motion in hopes he'd get a moment to explain. "She's still here. In Aperture."

"Why?"

Doug's chest caved in. "I was right about her parents," he said. "But I had to get her out of there. Old Aperture was the only choice. And now she's waiting for me to come back and it's been days and this elevator's got to work—"

"Hold on," said Henry. "Slow down. What happened?"

"Caroline. She told me she'd found Chell. She's going to find her down there and I can't let that happen again. She's going to test her the way she tested me, I know it. I just don't know what to do," said Doug, voice wavering.

"Take a second and just breathe," said Henry. "You're sure about this?"

"She had her in a relaxation vault, Henry," he said. "She was going to test her, I knew it. I had to get her out of there."

"You're not making sense. We haven't had mandatory employee testing in years, much less testing on young girls. Caroline's relaxed on that ever since the old man kicked the bucket."

Doug's gaze shifted between Henry's left eye and right eye, unable to focus on just one. Henry shifted, unnerved by the constant eye contact.

"Then explain to me how I just escaped from a testing track after being trapped in there for days."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Henry. "You're not wearing a jumpsuit and you don't have any sort of fall device protecting your legs. You're still in your work clothes."

"That's the point!" he said. "She doesn't want you to believe me, but I've got bruises and cuts and a bullet wound that proves it. I just can't sit back and let the same things happen to Chell."

"Doug. Stop," he said. "Listen to yourself. No one's ever broken out of a testing track, and it looks to me like you haven't slept in a few days—"

"I haven't."

"—and have you refilled your prescription lately?"

A pause.

Doug broke his gaze, realization sinking in.

"You think I made it all up, don't you?"
"If you just listened to yourself, you would too." Henry sighed. "Conspiracies. Lashing out. Believing that someone is out to get you. You know what I'm describing. And what you're saying—well, it's an almost to-the-letter definition of paranoid schizophrenia," he said. "You can't deny it."

"But it happened," said Doug, voice low. "All of it happened. I know it did."

"What you're describing—it's not a new thing. At least once a week this past month you've come running into my office, completely convinced that something impossible happened," said Henry. "Come on. What else could it be?"

A sinking feeling pulled at Doug's stomach. What he said was true. He couldn't explain why, but it was almost as if—at random—his medicine simply stopped working. He'd be flung, full-force, back into ceaseless paranoia and delusions. And the next day he'd take another pill and feel perfectly fine. But he didn't know why.

"It's just another episode," said Henry, with his best attempt at reassurance. "You're always going to see things that aren't there, and you're always going to feel like someone's out to get you. You're a paranoid schizophrenic, Doug. Medicine can't fix everything."

Henry gave a heavy sigh, shoulders sagging. Eyes downcast, he didn't even see Doug slump against the wall and just stare at his hands, rubbing and twisting them as if nothing else in the world mattered.

The scientist couldn't help but wonder how much of what Henry had said was true. Those days without medicine—they'd been disorienting, sure. And he'd experienced several minor hallucinations. But as far as what had happened—he was absolutely certain it was real.

The other scientist exhaled. "Just—take another pill. Compose yourself," he said, avoiding Doug. "I'm heading back." He turned, moving down the hallway.

Doug lifted his head, dropping his hands to his side and pushing himself to his feet.

"Wait. Hold on," he called down the hall. He pulled out a pen and a scrap of paper, pressing it up onto the wall and scrawling a message. He underlined his last word twice, then crumpled the paper into the man's hand.

Henry flipped it over, frowning.

username: cjohnson
password: tier 3
TRUST ME

"What's this for?" he said, folding it in half and absently creasing it.

"It's about the GLaDOS project," he said. "And proof that I'm not lying."

Henry forced a smile, tucking the paper into his pocket. He gave it a pat before walking away and leaving Doug hovering by the broken elevator.

Minutes passed.

Doug stared at the elevator, his good hand pressed against cool metal.
This couldn't be right.

Whatever was going on here, he knew that he'd taken this elevator before.

Hadn't he?

He reached over again, pressing the pad of his thumb onto the cracked button. It depressed, then gave a dim glow. The doors slid open and light trickled in.

The elevator shaft was empty.

Doug frowned. Well, at least he was getting closer. He pressed again.

*Click.*

*WHOOOOOSH.*

Doug yanked back his head. Cables snapped with a sharp hiss. Lines sparked. Metal screeched and the elevator streaked by, throwing air currents into his face before disappearing into the depths below.

Oh no.

Oh no oh no oh no oh no.

He swallowed, palms slick as his hands tightening around the edge of the doorframe.

His tie dangled into empty space as he leaned out. More sparks lit up the elevator shaft, and the elevator gave an earsplitting screech as it slowed to a stop.

The smell of electric burn and hot rubber floated up, and Doug's stomach sunk as low as the elevator shaft. His arms trembled.

The elevator was gone.


And all thanks to him.

He stood in a dazed fog, transfixed and frozen at the horrifying sight of the empty elevator shaft. He barely felt Caroline's hand clamp onto his upper arm, firmly guiding him back to the test chamber he'd just left.

"Nice job breaking it, hero."

"I wanted to thank you," said Caroline. "I've been meaning to sever those last connections to the lower levels."

His mind cleared, and regret settled in like rocky sand in the bottom of a shoe. "So there really is no other way down there," he said softly.

And here he was—back in Chamber 16. He couldn't believe how stupid he'd been—how he hadn't fought back or done anything but sit there in shock and just let her drag him back like some misbehaving puppy.
"No," she said, voice sharp. It had all been rigged, of course. She'd set the elevator to disengage after repeated button mashing, but it'd be no fun if she told him that. "This is my company now, and I can't run this place if the voice of a dead man is still calling all the shots. So you've done me a favor," she said.

Doug passed by deactivated turrets, flinching as their optics flashed red and high, innocent questions floated up like notes. He blinked. The optics went dark; the voices disappeared. Another delusion.

"But I can't forgive that little stunt you pulled in the testing track," she said. "It's not like you accomplished anything with it. Really, did you think anyone would believe such an outrageous story from a confirmed schizophrenic?"

Doug edged his way through the already-completed first half of the chamber, heart jumping when he noticed the panel still extended.

He crawled through, bumping his head on an edge.

Most of the den remained unchanged. His drawings still covered a panel; broken and abandoned building materials still cluttered the floor. But the door—behind the fence he'd climbed—was missing a handle, as if it had retracted into the door itself. Dark squares stained the metal where the keypad had once been.

She knew. She must've figured it out.

Not that it came as a surprise.

No one ever escaped from Aperture. At least, not without a little help.

A gleam of white caught his eye—the portal device was still there, right where he'd left it. In hindsight it had been stupid to leave it behind, and back here of all places.

"There really is no chance of seeing her again, now that you've put that elevator out of commission. Hiding back there is pointless and counterproductive," she said. "Come back, and complete this test."

Doug pulled the portal gun close, then crossed his legs and sat. He propped his head on his hands and just stared at the wall, mind tracing back the moments. Regret hung next to him, thick and dark and almost tangible. His mind flashed, loud to soft to incomprehensible, scrambling what he thought was true into an impossible word search.

Maybe he could fix the lift.

The break itself didn't seem complex. Severed wires. An electrical overload. The box itself seemed intact, screeching to a stop rather than smashing into pieces at the bottom.

Maybe he could find a pair of long-fall boots.

Jump down there, find Chell, and then fix it. It might take a while—and he knew nothing about elevator mechanics—but he could learn. Teach himself after he got out of here.

Oh, who was he kidding?

He sighed again, folding his arms and pressing his forehead against them.

"Look. My birthday's only getting closer," said Caroline, speakers raising in volume. "If you don't hurry up and get out of there you're going to miss out on some delicious cake."
A surge of fury shot through Doug, and his face quivered at the unexpected anger. Aggression—yet another sign of schizophrenia, he noted with disgust.

The reds and pinks of the cake poster filled his vision and Doug jammed the tip of his pen into the panel. A phrase shouted itself over and over, so loud and insistent that he could barely think.

the cake is a lie
the cake is a lie
the cake is a lie
the cake is a lie
the cake is a lie

His fingers trembled on the last repetition of the phrase, losing all strength. The pen clattered to the ground. Doug pressed his palm into his forehead, teeth clenched.

It didn't make sense.

Just like the elevator not working, it didn't make sense.

He'd been to those birthday celebrations before. He'd eaten his fair share of dessert and enjoyed the break from work just as much as every other employee did. It wasn't often that they got paid to waste their time like that, after all.

There shouldn't be anything bad about it—and yet Doug couldn't shake the feeling that something horrible was going to happen, that something horrible was already happening.

He pressed his blackened hand once more on the wall, then grabbed the portal device. Caroline would have to rely on direct-line-of sight for the remainder of the chamber—she wouldn't see his exit from the room.

Well. She'd figured it out soon enough.

Doug attacked the remainder of the test with a cold, detached intensity. He'd made it through fifteen of these before—what was three more? Red beams streaked. Bullets grazed by him, and turrets cried out.

He jammed a stray wrench—stolen from the den's debris—into one vital testing apparatus. The vent hissed and retracted, letting a cascade of weighted storage cubes tumble into the alcove.

He grabbed two cubes and returned them, wedging them once again between panel and wall. Better to leave an opening into that room than assume he'd never need it again.

The panel would remain broken, though. Caroline would rather leave it that way than attempt to fix it from her computer. Sending a repair command to an individual panel, and searching for that panel's individual serial code in a sea of numbers and letters was far too time consuming.

Besides, she'd removed the other exit from the den. Sealing it off wasn't a priority.

Pop pop.

Pop.
Three turrets fell in succession, clearing the next room.

"If this burst of energy is some sad and misguided attempt to try and get to her, don't even try. I've already hooked up communications between her and me. So. Take your time, and listen to us as you go through these next chambers."

The gravity feature hissed as he picked up a fallen cube, dropping it onto the button. The chamberlock twisted. A red laser darted from behind grating; Doug ducked to the right.

"I really did try to get her to come back up here. She wouldn't listen," she said. "Ran right into an old, vitrified testing track. It's sealed off for a reason—you have to understand that I can't let anything get out of there. She left me no choice but to activate the emergency seal."

The portals relinked; Doug continued through the two box-like rooms. He gritted his teeth, attempting to shut down his swirling mind. He had enough difficulty focusing already. He couldn't show any emotion, any reaction.

"No gun, no boots, no exit. She's not getting out of that room anytime soon—at this point, it's a matter of time until she dies. Still, I thought you'd appreciate hearing her final transmission."

So she was alive. She was down there and she was breathing and Doug had no doubt she'd fight just as hard as he did to find a way to escape. The slight sense of relief wasn't enough, though.

He deactivated two more turrets.

Test completed. The elevator slipped open.

Doug slid inside and stuck out a hand, sinking into the soft paneling. Overhead, the speakers crackled on. With audio quality low and static high, a sickening feeling told him that Caroline really had managed to hook up a microphone to whatever hellish testing chamber she'd trapped Chell in.

He could not hear Chell's voice, but he could still hear her. Her footsteps. Little scrapes of movement. Vague hints as to the situation three thousand meters beneath his feet.

The elevator kicked to life, and Doug swayed. Caroline's voice came on again, but this time it wasn't directed at him—just Chell.

"Since I'm not down there with you, I can only imagine your expression when you hear what I'm about to say. When you copied down those files, did you even know what you were doing?"

A pause.

"Yes," she said softly.

An overwhelming sense of disappointment cut through Doug.

So she'd been right.

Every time Caroline had accused Chell of it, he'd denied it. Every time Caroline pointed out obvious motivations and obvious evidence, he'd denied it.

His stomach lurched. She'd been right all along. Chell really had played him for a fool.

But how far had it gone? How much of their fragile friendship was real, and how much had he
simply imagined? The more he thought about it, the more it collapsed upon itself.

Doug slid to a sitting position, pressing both palms against his forehead.

"That's just what I needed to hear," said Caroline. "You knew fully well what you got yourself into—this shouldn't be a surprise to you."

"Please," he heard Chell's static-muffled voice come on. "It was just an Aperture—I—I didn't know how important it was, I swear. I'm sorry," she said, a rare hint of desperation clinging to her words. "Please. I'm sorry. Just let me go."

"You've brought this upon yourself," said Caroline without hesitation. "And now you're trapped there."

Doug only heard a faint sniffle.

He pushed himself to his feet, standing on his toes to get closer to the speakers. He struggled to hear Chell's voice, but heard nothing. Just a thinking, ringing sound as if something was bouncing off a metallic surface.

At first he dismissed it as himself. But moments dragged on, and Caroline noticed the sound as well.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

More scratching sounds from beneath, frequency increasing.

"You stop that."

Bang.

"You can't break down that exit with your bare hands, you know. It's metal."

Clang.

"If you're trying to beat yourself, I won't interfere. But if death is what you want—and it's inevitable, really—there's a much more painless method in that chamber. In fact, all of the other people who failed that chamber died by it. I'm sure it won't take you long to figure out."

Step step.

"The acid really is the way to go."

Bang.

Silence.

Another flurry of footsteps sounded, heavy and constant like Chell was sprinting across the chamber.

"Hold on, what are you—"

Doug strained up a bit farther, legs aching and breath frozen.

Step step step STEP.

BANG.

A loud, echoing CRACK.
Chapter 15 - Your Faithful Companion

_Splash._

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

Silence.

Doug held his breath, straining forward to hear through the static. All he needed was a sound—a scrape of a heel against the ground, a sigh of relief as Chell moved away. He needed a sign, a sound, something to assure him that she was alright.

Silence.

Doug said nothing.

Caroline said nothing.

And out of all the sounds his mind could've conjured into being, that splash—and this deep and complete silence following it—hurt more than any real sounds ever could. He would take Caroline's words any day over _that._

Doug stumbled out of the elevator and down the dark hallway. He swallowed.

Chell wasn't dead.

She couldn't be.

It was just a splash. Just a noise. He wasn't even sure if it had been real—Caroline hadn't even acknowledged it yet.

This was just a fluke. An accident. Sooner or later he'd hear soft footsteps or a quiet sigh and he'd know she was safe. Any second now, Chell would make a noise. She was usually quiet.

Surely this was just an extension of that.

In her room, Caroline raised her eyes to the window.

She'd heard that sound countless times before, and it could only mean one thing: the girl was most likely dead. Everything couldn't have gone more perfectly, really. She'd trapped Chell and she'd trapped Doug, and now her problems were more or less taken care of.

So that was it.
She'd won.

Caroline wanted to celebrate. She wanted to take her victory and rub it right into his eyes, but she couldn't find the words.

Instead, she felt empty.

She was only left with the most hollow sort of satisfaction, rising up for a fleeting moment before disappearing and leaving her devoid of emotion. A vaguely unsettling feeling clung to her, as if she should be feeling some sort of emotion other than this nothingness.

And yet, only anger crept up inside of her.

How dare Chell give up like that.

She'd been clever. She'd been resourceful. She'd been the first real challenge that Caroline had faced in a long while. And while the whole thing had been infuriating and stressful, it had also been exciting.

She'd fought so hard the entire way. And yet she'd thrown it all away when she threw herself into the acid. She'd just given up.

That wasn't the Chell she'd known. Even thinking of the possibility that she'd actually done it and died made her stomach churn with unease.

So what had changed? What had driven her to that point?

Caroline blinked, moving out of her chair.

Had she pushed things too far?

Chell had been a threat to this company, and she'd already done enough damage as it was. She had to be stopped. But looking back on all of the horrible things Caroline had done, she couldn't help but wonder.

She moved back toward a microphone.

Of course not.

"I'll be right back," said Caroline. "But first, a bit of explanation. This next chamber requires you to be accompanied by a companion. Please take better care of it than your last one," she said. "The Vital Apparatus Vent will deliver a Weighted Companion Cube in three, two one."

The vent hissed to life and a cube thumped to the ground. The bright warning panel buzzed to life.

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He engaged the gravity feature and squinted. Instead of circles, six pink hearts adorned the sides of this cube. It looked so much like his cube, the little prototype he carted around to store his painting supplies.

But no paint splatters marked the sides, and the size of the cube itself was far too large—the size of a normal weighted storage cube. But he didn't know why an oversized duplicate of his own cube was staring him in the face. If Caroline thought she'd be able to hurt him with this, she was wrong. He had no connections, no shared memories with this companion.
The cube was like a couple of his favorite shirts—though they were faded and threadbare, he still couldn't bear to get rid of them. He'd never intended to become so attached to it.

But this wasn't his cube, and that was good.

Doug pressed the cube up against the gray ledge, using it to clamor up to the next level. He formed a patchwork staircase, climbing and then retrieving the cube until he'd made it to the top.

Sweat clung to his skin as he turned the next corner. More voice swirled around his mind, and no matter how hard Doug tried to pour his full attention into solving this test, they only grew more insistent.

While the test acted as a distraction, he couldn't keep the schizophrenia at bay indefinitely. If he had that much control over it, then he'd have no use for his prescription.

BzzzzZZzzt.

Doug darted as a high-energy pellet warbled by. He charged forward, shifting the portal device so that his cube acted as a fearless gray shield.

A pellet ricocheted, scoring the walls with black marks before dissipating. Doug turned the corner, hovering between pellet generators to size up the next hallway.

Those stairs, combined with the generator behind him made advancing twice as difficult. He'd either have to walk in reverse and hope one wouldn't hit him, or deflect the current pellet and hope he didn't get hit in the back of a skull by the next energy ball.

He chose the latter. The pellet bounced off of his cube, ricocheting into oblivion.

An l-shaped staircase wrapped around to a ledge, which dropped off into the chamber's main area.

He threw a portal onto the level below and painlessly hopped through. Above him hung another blurred observation window, still devoid of Caroline's figure.

Well, at least she wasn't back yet.

He turned, and then jerked. He'd missed something upon his first sweep. Just like in the previous test chamber, a white panel partially jutted out from the wall. Doug stuck his free hand in the space between them, hand curling around the edge. He pulled, hard, shoulder straining and portal gun slipping in his right hand.

He sidestepped, then crouched to get a better glance in the room. Portal-friendly panels coated the interior, and he raised his gun. The portal spun as he fired, twisting and then popping open. Doug ducked inside.

Wheatley had gotten lucky his first time around—this room was far smaller, and with no exit in sight. Just empty panel after empty panel, no different than the remainder of the test. Old calendars and old posters littered the edges of the room like fallen leaves. These papers slipped in between cracks and lingered, untouched by this wing's nonexistent cleaning staff. With few people allowed access to this wing to begin with, maintenance tended to slip aside in back areas like this.

He glanced away, staring up at the unmarked panels.

Part of him insisted that Chell was dead. So many of his delusions he'd experienced in these past few days had been anything but fabricated, and even though Henry tried to convince him otherwise, he
knew what had happened was real.

So how could that splash be any different? He knew he hadn't imaged it, but that sound could only mean one thing.

And yet Doug still clung to hope, a soft whisper in his heart telling him that Chell was still out there, wandering the facility and in desperate need of help.

He pulled his pen from his pocket and covered the wall in a zigzag trail of words as he mentally descended through the levels of Aperture in search of her.

Where
Are
You?
I
Will
Find
You.

He would get out of here. He would find her.

He had to.

Doug wouldn't give up until Chell was safe, however long that may take. And so long as she was not confirmed to be dead, Doug clung to the hope that she was still alive.

In hindsight, leaving Doug unsupervised wasn't her best decision. She'd made sure he couldn't escape again, though. Any attempts at accessing a panel would lock it down before it fully extended. The gap between panel and wall wouldn't leave enough space for him to crawl through again.

She stepped into one of her own elevators, tucked away within the depths of her wing. There were other ways to access Old Aperture, and Doug had been an idiot to believe otherwise.

She had to go back down there and double check that chamber. Her audio feed couldn't confirm anything, and she had to be absolutely sure that that the splash she heard had come from Chell herself.

The familiar ride dragged along, letting questions bounce around her head.

What was she doing?

The damage had already been done to her—she couldn't reverse that now. She couldn't gain any new data from testing the two, and even watching their responses to her comments wasn't helpful. None of this was for science.

At this point, it was just revenge.
She blinked. The doors opened and Caroline moved through the familiar areas until she reached the 1960's test chamber control room.

*Click.*

She stuck a fingernail beneath a switch and flipped, disengaging the testing track's lockdown. If she wanted to investigate that area herself she needed to be able to open the door.

She moved through the back areas of the enrichment spheres, easily dropping in to the second test's entrance. The door slid open as she approached. And f

For a split second she hoped to see Chell sprint through the door, ready to fight her way past Caroline—but nothing happened.

Caroline wrapped a hand around the doorframe, a motion similar to holding back the automatic doors of an elevator. She leaned in and scanned the room.

Nothing.

An unengaged button sat beside the exit. A cube lingered up on that high ledge, untouched. White surfaces mixed with dark ones, creating a patched-together mosaic of a chamber. She looked and she listened, glancing over every possible area, every possible hiding spot but seeing no one.

Well, that confirmed it. She was gone.

Caroline exhaled. There was no test subject in this chamber, no more girl to worry about. Now, she just had to break the news to her other test subject upstairs.

*WhoOooOoooOOOOOooOooOooOoo.*

Doug slammed into the ground, air rushing from his lungs. His companion cube sat on a ledge behind him, holding open one door while he crouched on a button to hold the other. The high-energy pellet hissed by his ear, giving a slight click as it hit the receptacle at the far end of the room.

He pushed himself to his feet and then retrieved his cube.

Three platforms needed to be raised, and in Caroline's absence he'd activated all three. The complexity of the test, along with Caroline's absence, had been enough to quell his growing dread.

He portaled back to the main chamber's ledge—the one he'd walked in from. Three stationary platforms sat in place, raised high above the chamber floor.

The scientist exhaled.

A sizeable gap stretched between each stationary scaffolding, and he realized he wouldn't be able to just hop across. He'd slip through the cracks if he didn't get a running start.

Doug backed up until his heels touched the platform's border, and then sprinted forward and leaped. The soft glowing hearts of the cube partially blocked his vision, but as he landed the gun's energy field kept it suspended.

Well, at least he knew his modification worked correctly.

He backed up and leaped again, footsteps soft on the hard plastic platforms. A hallway extended to his right, and just he gave one last nervous jump her dreaded voice came back on.
"Well, I'm back. You've actually made progress since I left," she said, voice flatter than usual. "I'll admit that this test was patched together, but it just fits your situation so perfectly."

As Doug moved down the new hallway with his companion, he glanced up and frowned.

"Your faithful companion has proved to be nothing but loyal, keeping you out of harm's way and helping you as it accompanied you through this chamber. Does this situation sound a bit familiar to you? You've had plenty of time to think it over," she said.

Doug's eyes widened. "What are you saying—"

"I needed to repeat the experiment, of course, to make sure your actions would be consistent in both scenarios. It wouldn't be science otherwise," she said. "But what I'm saying—and what you've been too dense to realize—is that that cube is meant to act as a placeholder for someone. Another faithful companion of yours," she said. "I'll let you piece together just who that might be."

Doug's stomach twisted.

The cube was Chell.

His heartbeat quickened.

The cube was *Chell* and he'd been so focused on the chamber itself that he hadn't even made the connection as he carted along the now beat-up box. He'd tried to keep it unscathed, but burn marks dotted the sides much like Chell's cuts that she'd gotten during their escape.

He dropped the cube onto a red button. A chamberlock twisted. Behind a glass pane, Doug spotted a single button.

"Still, your weighted companion cube brought you some luck—but you of all people know that luck can't last forever," she said. "That *cube* cannot accompany you through the facility any longer."

Doug got the feeling that Caroline wasn't referring to his box with hearts. "And how do you expect me to do that?" he said.

"Press that button and you'll find out."

He jogged down the steps and pressed his palm against it.

A countdown timer sounded off, ticking steadily.

*Tick tick.*

*Tick tick.*

*Tick tick.*

A circular, dark chute hissed open. Reds and oranges coated the chamber, heat swirling out as he ran back to his cube.

"Deposit that cube into the emergency intelligence incinerator," said Caroline.

This wouldn't work on him. He wouldn't let it work—this was just a cube, after all. Just a cube with hearts instead of circles, one that he should have no problem tossing into a fire.

The cube hovered over the incinerator's opening, and the heat made his hands prickle. Colors flashed
off of the metallic edges, but Doug wasn't focused on the cube.

Even pressed against the warm edge, Doug couldn't see the bottom of the incinerator. Instead he saw a wavering glow of intense heat, broken only by distinct flames.

His stomach twisted.

It would just take one click to let the cube fall—

—and as Doug imagined it falling, his mind flashed and substituted in Chell. He could only see her, falling farther and farther with a hand desperately stretched up as she hoped for Doug to catch her.

*Click.*

The incinerator's aperture closed.

"Your companion cube must be euthanized," said Caroline.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but image burned just as brightly in the dark of his mind. He couldn't let the cube go. He couldn't do it.

"Rest assured that eight out of ten Aperture Science engineers believe the Companion Cube is most likely incapable of feeling much pain," said Caroline. "The process itself is remarkably painful. Still, though. It's nothing compared to the acid."

Doug backpedaled, grabbing the cube and sprinting back toward the main chamber. He tried to ignore her. He tried to ignore what would inevitably come out of her mouth, the words he didn't want to hear—

"It may be the quickest way to go, but it's also the most painful. She didn't even have the strength to scream out before she died," she said. "And I DID go down there and check myself."

Doug's heart jumped—so there was another way down there. He just had to look harder—

"But the chamber's empty," she said, voice flat. "She's dead."

A sudden, crushing weight hit Doug as if a weighted cube had been thrown into his chest. The air disappeared from his lungs and he inhaled sharply.

No.

It couldn't be true. Caroline had to have been lying to him. She must've closed off the audio feed, she must have been hiding something—

He swallowed.

Chell couldn't be—

Even though he barely think and barely breathe, he weaved through three gleaming metal pillars and back into the main chamber. He needed to get back to that room, and out of her prying eyes to give him a moment of privacy to process what he'd just heard.

Pop.

Thwop.
Two portals opened, and Doug shoved his companion cube through the opening.

"Hold on," said Caroline. "Where do you think you're going?"

Doug shifted his weight to the side, shooting a glance over his shoulder. A red-lens camera twisted, light in the corner blinking as it focused in on him. A surge of anger rose through him and he pulled the gun close to his face, firing again. Sparks hissed as the device clattered to the ground, and Doug pivoted toward another camera.

*Thwop.*

Again and again he fired at the cameras, knocking each and every one of them offline. Without those, Caroline was left with nothing but her observation rooms—and she'd have a tough time seeing into that den without those.

His work done, he darted back into the den and disengaged his portals. But before he could take a minute to calm himself down, he grabbed his pen from his pocket and scrawled up a phrase on the wall.

**STOP WATCHING**

Doug slumped to the ground, pulling his knees close. He steadied himself with several shaky breaths, wiping a sleeve across his eyes. He couldn't allow himself to break down here. Not with her so nearby.

Doug bit down on his lip to stop the hot tears welling up in his eyes.

She was dead.

Caroline had confirmed it.

She was as dead as dead could be, a decomposing body in a pit of acid. In a matter of days she'd be reduced to nothing—nothing but a collection of memories. And he had no one to blame but himself.

Doug pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets and pushed. He couldn't do it, he couldn't let her see or hear—

The pressure built to an almost unbearable level, letting tears leak out anyways, silent and warm as they slid down his face like droplets on a car window.

He could face turrets. He could suffer through lasers. He could navigate his way across acid and every other deadly testing element. Caroline could throw anything at him in the name of revenge and he could survive.

But Caroline taking it out on Chell hurt him more than anything she could've ever done to him.

When he closed his eyes, he felt her arms wrap around him in a hug. The sensation flung him full-force back into their last conversation, where she'd begged him not to leave and she'd told him to stay, but he'd left anyways. He'd clung to that hopeless optimism that a solution was within easy reach, that if he made it back up to the upper levels he'd figure everything out and that she'd be safe.

He sniffed and wiped his nose.

The realization that he'd never again see Chell hit him, a pain so sharp and biting and overwhelming
he felt as if he'd been ambushed by turrets and sprayed with bullets simultaneously.

He'd never again see that stoic concentration, or her slight twitch of an eyebrow as she drug her pencil across paper or a paintbrush across canvas. He'd never sit in the company of her content curiosity, happy to just sit in quietness as she watched him work. And he'd never see that subtle smile of hers when she though no one was watching, and he never again hear her snort of laughter whenever Doug messed something up.

All of that—he'd never see it again.

Doug gave a string of chocked sobs, chest heaving. He pulled his companion cube close and leaned his upper body across it, fingers clinging to the metal edges. Though the hard surface and glowing hearts provided little comfort, they were still better than the cold floors and the cold walls.

The finality of it hit him like a punch in gut, and he couldn't breathe. Doug buried his head in his arms and pressed his hands into the back of his head. He couldn't hold it in any longer and he didn't care if Caroline heard him.

Panicked and overwhelmed, Doug cried.

Hours passed. While steady at first, they began to come in waves, dying down momentarily until an unrelated thought flung him back into grief that felt as fresh as it had been hours ago.

He barely heard it the first time—a calm, gentle voice beneath his sobs that silenced all of the other voices.

Doug.

His chest hurt and his head hurt and he could barely think through the pain, and yet he was still thinking too much. He wished he could just shut off his brain and forget about what happened. He wished he could just go back in time, to how things had been hours ago before Chell's fall.

Doug, listen to me.

He jerked his head up from the cool metal, the voice jarring him back into reality. The sound was sudden and unexpected, and yet so familiar that chills went down his spine. There was no mistaking whose voice he heard.

"Why do you have her voice?" he asked, words wavering with accusation and disbelief. I can't help it. I was meant to represent Chell, said the cube. But listen to me.

"I can't," said Doug. "I'm sorry. I can't."

It was too raw, too much of a slap in the face to hear her voice come from beneath him, so clear and eerie as if nothing had happened at all.

She was dead, and he didn't understand why, or even why she had to die in the first place. There was nothing justified about Caroline's actions. It wasn't brave—it was murder.

The word why repeated itself in his mind, momentarily drowning out the voice of the cube. He pulled out his pen and rose to his feet, scrawling out a red outline of the cube, his friend, his companion. With a few quick slashes he filled in the empty middle—where a heart should be, still beating and alive—with a skull and crossbones.

He repeated the phrase over and over and over, red words wrapping around the cube drawing.
Why why why
why why why
why why
why why why
why why why why why why why
why why why why why why why
why why why why why why why

Why did this have to happen why did she die why why why—

Caroline's voice cut him off, speakers crinkling in the other room.

Doug heard the speakers crinkle on in the other room.

"Who are you talking to back there?" said Caroline, her voice genuinely curious. "I know it's not me."

Doug said nothing.

"I'm sure your schizophrenia's to blame, but still. That voice you're hearing is in your head and is not coming from that cube."

Doug frowned. Of course that voice was coming from the cube. Where else could it be coming from?

"You're delusional and hallucination and seeing an inanimate object as alive. I'm adding these things to your file, by the way. If you were better at taking care of your companions this might not be happening."

_Don't listen to her_, the cube said faintly. More words and phrases returned, swirling around his mind and he needed them _out_ of his mind and onto the panels.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't." He picked another panel and started scrawling.

_The vital apparatus vent will deliver_

_Oh it will_

_WILL_

_The weighted companion cube DOES speak._

Superstition, perceiving inanimate objects as alive, and hallucinations. I'm not hallucinating. You are.

Considering the events of these past few days—and how many events Henry had been willing to pass off as a wild hallucination—he knew that this voice couldn't be more real, and no one could convince him otherwise.

Besides, other Aperture products, like the turrets and the personality sphere had the ability to speak. This companion cube was no different.
Doug.

He heard the voice again, soft and gentle as if an angel had descended and softly touched him on the shoulder.

"What?" he said.

*It's going to be okay.*

"Seems to me like you're taking this representation of Chell a bit too serious," said Caroline. "While I did want you to take care of the cube, I must also advise you to ignore its advice. Weighted companion cubes cannot speak."

Doug continued his writing on the walls, listening to Caroline's words and then morphing them into a jumbled and frantic answer. He began writing the word Companion Cube in alternating shades of black and red.

**COMPANION CUBE**

You said to take care of it.

How can I?

You won't let me.

I should disregard your advice.

Leave me alone!

"Really, though. I'm getting tired of this. You've been in that room for hours and you can't stay there forever. Eventually you'll have to come out."

The words sent another chill through both him and Caroline. She couldn't help but notice how similar those words were to the ones she'd spoken about Chell. Both she and Doug had hidden from her—but neither one could stay hidden.

His mind kept confusing the cube and Chell, until they were almost inseparable from one another. He moved to the side and started on another panel.

Because I could not stop

For Death,

He kindly stopped for me

The cube had food and

Maybe ammo

And immortality.

Chell had everything she could have needed. That place in Old Aperture could sustain her for a long time, considering the shelves upon shelves of food and water. The supplies wouldn't keep her alive forever, but close enough.
And they had found their ammo; their one weapon to use against Caroline had come from the mouth of dead company owner himself.

He sunk back to the ground. "What am I supposed to do now?" he said, keeping his voice as low as possible.

*Move on,* said the Cube. *You will have plenty of time to mourn her later. But you've got to get out of here.*

Doug leaned his forehead against the wall, one black hand pressed against it. The cube slipped from words into a comforting tune, as if it was an oversized music box rather than a testing cube.

"Just give me a minute," said Doug. "Let me draw one last thing."

With a deep breath, he lifted his pen. He wanted to draw a figure of Chell, but the mere act of calling up her image in his mind dragged up memories like a stick stirring up mud in water.

He couldn't do it.

Instead he sketched out the shape of his other companion, unable to even attempt to draw Chell. It was almost as if sketching her out with give some sort of finality to this, as if drawing her as an angel would seal her fate the same way Caroline had sealed the chambers.

His hand swooped to the side, leaving black ink wings extending from the companion cube. He circled the ink above into a swirling halo.

Another phrase rose up in his mind, vaguely poetic in comparison to the other phrases he'd heard. Doug glanced down at the cube, and the humming stopped.

*Say it,* said the cube. *I know you're thinking of it.*

"You're going to die too, aren't you?" he said, voice resigned. While he was calm now, the overwhelming sense of sadness lingered just out of sight. One small motion, one wrong word could let it all flood back in. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold it back.

*She's gone, Doug. And I will be too soon,* said the cube.

"Don't say that," he said. "I can't let you die too."

*But I'm slowing you down. You need to move forward, and I would rather die in that fire than be a burden to you,* said the cube.

Chell was gone, and soon enough the cube left behind to represent her would be gone as well.

His pen hovered for a long moment before Doug let it glide across the textured surface.

Not in cruelty,

Not in wrath,

The Reaper came today;

An Angel visited

This gray path,
And took the cube away.

He paused, inspecting the panels before scrawling one last word in red.

R.I.P.

Goodbye, Chell.

His chest heaved again, and Doug took a few deep breaths and pinched the bridge of his nose. The cube was right. All he had to do was hold it together for a few more chambers, and maybe he'd finally be out of this place.

He lifted his knocked-over portal device, one hand sliding around the handle and other resting beneath the gun's middle. The device whirred out of its sleep mode with a jolt. He fired twice, portals linking and tearing open a pathway out of this small den.

Click.

The button sunk as it accepted the weight of the cube. The doors slid open again. Doug rested a hand on the cube's top.

"You're sure about this?" said Doug.

Yes. Keep going— you're almost done.

This time, he detected a mechanical undertone to the voice that sounded so much like Chell's.

"She said it might hurt," said Doug.

It will, said the cube. But that's okay. Don't let me stop you now.

Doug gave a heavy, defeated sigh. His shoulders slumped and his face sunk as if he hadn't slept in days. And yet he was struck with a sense of gratitude toward this box— he hadn't known before that cubes could speak, and that the voice of one could drive away the other voices he heard like a floodlight in a dark room.

He gave it a small pat before trudging down the stairs. He activated the incinerator's timer and then ran back, heaving up the cube and taking it to the incinerator.

The countdown clicked, a constant reminder as the cube hovered over the edge. Waves of heat made it look as it was wavering.

Goodbye, Doug, said the cube. I'll see you again someday.

"Goodbye," said Doug, almost a whisper. He couldn't stop; he couldn't let himself think too much or he'd never be able to go through with it.

Click.

The gun disengaged, and the cube slipped into the flames. He closed his eyes and the image of Chell flashed back in, again, desperately reaching out to him as she fell to her death.

The incinerator slipped closed. Doug backpedaled.
"Once again, you led your faithful companion right to her death," said Caroline. "Congratulations."

Doug said nothing for a moment, leaning against the wall and summoning as much control as he could muster.

"Watching her die like that," he said coldly. "Was it worth it?"

A slight pause.

"You know I couldn't let her live."

"You didn't answer my question," said Doug. "Was it worth it?"

Caroline's voice wavered. "I did this for the good of all of us," she said.

"But was it worth it?" Doug yelled, the echo bouncing through the chamber and dissipating.

Caroline drew back in her seat at his unexpected rise in volume, glad for once he'd moved out of view from her window.

The silence stretched between them, and an unreadable expression passed over her face.

"No," she eventually said. "It wasn't."
Chapter 16 - Tenacity

Chell's toes jutted over the dizzying drop.

She stared at the white island in the sea of acid for a long moment before her vertigo leaped into focus.

"You've brought this upon yourself. And now you're trapped there," said Caroline, voice hissing through the speakers.

The girl backpedaled. And though she remained silent, she couldn't deny the truth to the woman's words. Just like there hadn't been a way out of her relaxation vault, there wasn't a way out of this test chamber either. Both entrance and exit remained locked. She'd already circled the room twice, feeling at the seams for cracks and imperfections and instead meeting a tightly-knit wall.

But her time waiting in that vault had taught her one thing: even when things looked bleak, there was always a way out.

And while technically the acid could be a 'way out,' Chell immediately dismissed that thought.

She would never give up. Ever.

Still, Chell sunk to her feet and dug her chin into her knees. She stared at her shoes, focusing in on the dark scuffs staining the sides and the once-white shoelaces now frayed and grayed.

Chell flexed her ankles and hard plastic dug into her Achilles tendons. With a frown she pried off both shoes and set them aside. During her escape she'd had a valid reason to just shove them on, but she'd had enough time to put them on correctly before leaving her hideout. Instead, she'd just shoved them on like before.

She tugged up her socks and wiggled her shoes back on, making sure the heel supports didn't cave in again.

Skrick.

Chell yanked her laces tight, eyelets squeaking. She pulled down her sweatpant legs and pressed a hand on the floor behind her for support. Her fingers curled around the cool, rusty edges of a metal grating.

It sunk into the floor slightly behind her, a tiny square in the patchwork flooring. Unlike the uniform walls and the uniform ceiling, the floor of the chamber looked as if the builders had simply slapped it together from scraps of other projects.

And right behind her—no bigger than an average air-duct entrance—sat a metal grating.

Chell scrambled onto her stomach and leaned over the grating. The direct overhead lighting cast a head-sized shadow through the gap in the floor, obscuring what little she could see of the area beneath the chamber. She scooted back, nose almost touching the edge.

Looking through the checkered window was like examining a dark room with a stationary flashlight. The lights only illuminated a square directly beneath her, the rest obscured in a dark blur.
Chell blinked.

She shielded her eyes with her hands and leaned closer. A few silver ducts reflected dying light, and the faint outline of a building's rooftop shifted into focus.

A building. She was directly above a building.

It couldn't be more than ten or fifteen feet beneath this chamber floor. She'd been right—this test wasn't contained by a sphere. But the grating itself sat along the edge of this new building—had it been a few feet to the right, she'd be directly over acid.

Clang.

Chell's legs quivered as she slammed both feet onto the floor. The sound echoed, and a split-second later that familiar voice came on.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing?" said Caroline,

Chell staggered, then took her words as encouragement. She sprinted forward, angling her feet in and kicking as hard as she could against the grating.

"You stop that."

The metal webbing dented inwards—she'd already taken out the four screws anchoring it in.

"You can't break down that exit with your bare hands, you know. It's metal."

Oh, she wasn't breaking down the chamber exit—well, in a way she was. She was just making her own exit rather than using the designated one.

Bang.

"If you're trying to beat yourself, I won't interfere. But if death is what you want—and it's inevitable, really—there's a much more painless method in that chamber. In fact, all of the other people who failed that chamber died by it. I'm sure it won't take you long to figure out," she said. "The acid really is the way to go."

Chell only smiled—she'd already briefly considered and rejected that idea.

Her chest rose and fell, and she wiped a hand across her forehead. Her nails tingled, jagged after she'd used them as makeshift tools to jam into screws and twist. Nine out of ten fingernails had snapped—but on the bright side, she'd managed to unscrew all four anchoring corners. She pressed a finger into her mouth and bit at a broken nail.

Shoulder muscles strained and groaned as she pulled at the grate. The heavy metal lifted a quarter inch then stuck. The design didn't allow it to be removed from the chamber's interior.

The grate crashed back into place.

Chell rose to her feet, bouncing on her toes. She couldn't just pull up the metal and set it aside—she'd have to knock it through from up here. But already the metal warped downwards as if someone had pinched a cloth napkin's center and pulled. A few more kicks and it would bend enough to cave in altogether.

She was so close—she wasn't about to give up now.
Bang.

Her knees trembled. Chell backed across the chamber, giving herself a running start and then slammed her feet into the floor with as much strength as she could muster.

BANG.

The left edge lurched beneath her, swinging down before vanishing into empty space.

A loud, echoing CRACK.

The mangled grating clattered against the lower building's roof for a split-second before skittering off the edge.

. . . Splash.

She lost her footing and her stomach lurched as she slipped through the opening. Her right arm flung out, struggling to grab onto anything but instead grasped at air.

Snap.

Her wrist cracked flat beneath her, absorbing the brunt of her fall. Tears welled in her eyes as the pain crackled to life like a dry log in a campfire. Chell inhaled sharply, and then curled onto her side.

She closed her eyes. Focusing on anything other than pain was next to impossible—it jabbed into her first like dull needles, then like sharpened blades.

Caroline's voice cut off as soon as the grate splashed into the acid—but Chell didn't notice.

A grimace darkened her face, and Chell clenched her teeth. Carefully she edged her right hand toward her chest and just cradled it there, hardly daring to breathe. One wrong move would make it flare to an unbearable level.

Minutes passed, and Chell refused to move. Her brain nagged at her to push it aside and get up and find a way off of this ceiling she'd landed on—going back into that chamber wasn't an option any longer.

The test shaft rattled, a low and rumbling sound that shook the buildings above her. Flecks of dust and debris rained down, and Chell cupped her left hand over her mouth. This movement—she'd felt the exact same thing when the lockdown had been initiated.

She hardly dared to hope that Caroline had reversed it.

It wasn't as if she could suddenly solve that chamber—that was impossible without a portal device, after all. But so long as the lockdown was disengaged, this meant she could navigate the hallways and doorways. She might have a shot at getting out of here.

Whoosh.

She gave a sigh of relief and then froze.

The door in the chamber above her slid open and Chell heard soft footsteps. A figure took a half-step into the room, face illuminated by the chamber lighting. Chell couldn't see, but she knew it was her.

Her breath shook.
She fought back the urge to scream and scramble away from her position on the floor, desperate to get away from her, but didn't. Any sudden sound or movement would alert Caroline to her presence—and one glance down the empty space where the grating used to be and she'd see Chell glaring right back up her.

She held her breath as she shifted into a crouch, motions slow and deliberate. She edged out of the square of light, neck craning upward and barely able to see out.

Caroline stared across the chamber, checking the ceiling and the walls and the acid but never once examined the floor. Instead she gazed out with an expression Chell couldn't place. It wasn't anger; it wasn't joy. The woman gave the doorframe a small pat and turned away, and the expression clicked.

Caroline looked—dare she say it—disappointed.

The doors hissed closed, and even after fifteen minutes passed Chell's body still trembled.

Thunk.

Chell landed softly near the room's entrance. The drop from ceiling to walkway hadn't been nearly as large as the gap between chamber floor and building roof—and whatever this structure was, it wasn't a test chamber.

Instead of investigating the room, though, she turned on her heels and marched down the in the other direction. There was no way she'd head back toward the testing chambers she'd just escaped.

Every step she took was a painful, relentless reminder. She needed to find a bandage or brace or something to help stabilize her most-likely-broken wrist. Yet she continued at a brisk pace, pathway passing through a stone tunnel before morphing into a catwalk suspended over swaying spheres.

The walkway ended at another elevator shaft, but Chell took the twisting staircase that brought her closer to the acid lake. A stone walkway connected her to a sliding glass door built into a rock face. Chell slipped inside, wrist still pressed close.

This was the most out-of-place room she'd ever seen in Aperture.

Plush chairs and ash-trays littered the room. The smell of cigarette smoke and ancient dust clung to the walls and carpet, stirring to life as she edged into the adjoining room.

Rows of typewriters sat on rows of desks, long since abandoned by their former users. Chell darted for the desks—if they'd left behind those bulky machines, she hung on to the hope that they had left behind other, more useful objects.

She threw open every drawer, sifting through broken pencils and dried-out pens and crumpled papers until her fingers brushed against a slick metal casing. Chell's eyes widened as she yanked at the handle and slid it onto the desk.

Patches of silver shone through chipping white paint, and bright red cross across the top and bottom cleared up any doubt about what this tin held.

She'd found a first-aid kit.

Chell fumbled at the clasps with her non-dominant hand and gingerly lifted the top. The same musty smell—like rotting books—rose from the kit, and she coughed once. She reached in and spread out the kit's contents onto the table: half-empty pill bottles, a string of band-aids, a thick cloth bandage,
Immediately she downed what she hoped were a few painkillers, and then grasped at the yellowed bandage. Her teeth clamped onto one end as she used her free hand to unroll it, letting it twist out like a flattened snake. After slipping into a desk chair, Chell propped her right elbow against the desk and straightened out her wrist. She wasn't going to find a real brace or a real cast down here—she knew Aperture's views on health and safety. This half-empty kit was a miracle in itself.

Again and again she tightly wrapped the bandage around her broken wrist, beginning beneath the knobby part and then rising up and across her palm before returning to circling up and down her wrist until the bandage ran out.

She tried to flex her wrist but it didn't budge—good. She'd done a decent job, and her fingers barely jerked forward when she flexed them. Well, at least she knew those still worked.

Without medical attention, her wrist would never completely heal. But her makeshift brace might at least alleviate some of the pain.

After pocketing the remaining supplies, Chell slipped back into the main lounge and collapsed into a plush chair. She gave a long and happy sigh as she sank in. This was the most comfortable she'd been in a long while, and she felt as if she could stay there for years.

An hour ago, she wasn't sure if she could make it out of that test alive. And now here she was—relaxing in a chair and nursing a broken wrist, but completely alive.

She would've laughed with relief had she not been so terrified inside. She'd squeezed her way out of there, but she had no idea what to do next.

The chair enveloped her further, and Chell relaxed and stared up at the circular light fixtures that mimicked the dangling enrichment spheres. She tilted her head back and stared over at the two display cases bolted to the walls. On the right, she saw trophies and awards and what looked like a framed newspaper article in the back corner. A portrait of a young Cave Johnson hung between the displays, and Chell realized with a start that she'd never seen the man's face before. Those features, that expression—they suited him, just like his voice.

Her attention drifted to the last display case, and Chell took one at the contents before jumping to her feet and bolting forward.

She pressed her face close to the glass and a dark, box-sized device hung behind the glass. A small, shining plaque sat beneath it: Aperture Science Quantum Tunneling Device.

Chell breathed, then gave a small squeal and jump of delight.

That was it, right there behind the glass. She'd found the device she so desperately needed, even if it looked more like a cross between an overgrown leaf blower and something out of a Ghostbusters movie than an actual portal device. So many portal-friendly surfaces dotted Old Aperture—and if she acquired that device, she could go anywhere.

Her fingers trailed along the glass edges as she searched for a latch or lever, but instead she found a lock and empty keyhole.

Fantastic.

She should've known this was too good to be true; there was always a flaw in the plan. Sifting through that office had been difficult enough, and searching through it again for a tiny key would be
next to impossible.

*Hold on.*

Chell took a step back and almost snorted with laughter. Since when did she need a key to get into a glass case? She’d already caused enough destruction in Aperture—one more glass panel wouldn’t stop her now.

Gray flakes rained down as she lifted up an ashtray. Her right hand barely hovered over the tip—there for balance more than support. Chell hefted the pole like a baseball bat and swung it in a wide and wobbly arc. The edge shattered through the glass just like Wheatley had crashed through that observation window.

Glass tinkled on the carpet. Chell kicked away the lingering shards then one-handedly edged the machine through the jagged hole. The device clacked as it dropped onto the floor and tilted onto its side.

Little fans and cords extended from the rectangular section—no doubt the part that housed the device’s power system A large tube extended from one side of the device and connected to the operational end of the device.

She searched the bottom edge for some sort of power switch, but instead found a study cord attached to a dangling handle.

Okay—so powering up this thing wouldn’t be as easy as flipping a switch.

Chell readjusted her position and planted her feet, left hand closing around the handle. Her arm jerked to the side as she revved up the device.

*Click-click-click.*

Her shoulders ached and her right wrist screamed in protest, but with each pull she felt the device edge closer and closer to starting. Chell yanked harder, grimacing.

*Click-click-click-click.*

The tunneling device sputtered, a puff of smoke drifting through the air. Chell shifted on her feet again and pulled so hard her arm popped.

*Click-click-click-whirrrrr.*

The tube rattled against the floor as the device roared to life. Chell gave a small, relived smile and then shrugged on the harness like an oversized backpack. Slipping on the left strap was easy enough, but slipping her right wrist through the other strap without bumping anything was like constantly scraping against the metal walls in a game of Operation.

She snapped a buckle in the front, then staggered forward at the unexpected weight of the Quantum Tunneling Device. Hard straps bit into her shoulders, and the box hummed and rattled against her spine. Chell rolled her shoulders and shifted the operational tube to her left hand.

Her fingers hit a single trigger. Her face darkened. Strange—while this was clearly a dual portal device, she only felt one button. The portal guns sitting in Doug’s office continued multiple switches—a trigger for each portal, and one for the energy-manipulator.

She glanced at the handle of the device, noticing a single sliding ring that circled around the 'handle'
of the device. After pulling out her hand, Chell sat herself on the ground and propped the device's end between her knees.

With her non-dominant hand she twisted the notched ring to the right and let it click into place. If she squinted she could make out the word 'two' scrawled out in tiny lettering. The device lurched beneath her as she twisted it back to 'one.' It made enough sense—two notches for two portals.

Now she just had to test it out on a portal-friendly surface.

Chell pushed herself to her feet and moved through a doorway on the far left. Cave Johnson's voice roared to life with a tiny click of a speaker.

"Welcome, gentlemen, to Aperture Science! Astronauts, war heroes, Olympians—you're here because we want the best, and you are it. So: Who's ready to make some science?"

"I am!"

Chell's blood ran cold.

That voice—it was her voice, no doubt about it. Chell twisted inside at her optimism—she sounded so bright and cheerful and ready to take the world by storm. Those two words made her seem so undeniably happy.

It made Chell sick to wonder what sort of events could have caused such a drastic transformation in the woman.

Either way, she'd had enough of this place. Diving deeper into Aperture's past was something she could do another day. For now, she needed to head in the opposite direction and return to her room behind the Borealis.

She'd never meant to leave that safe haven, after all—and as long as she made it back there, Chell knew Doug would come back and sneak her up to the surface. There was no possible way he could know about her scrape with death and how she'd barely managed to scrape out of that test chamber with her life.

She could tell him that later, though—after they'd both made it to safety. For now she needed to concentrate on worming her way back to that room.

But the only direct path was through the testing track she'd just escaped.
Chapter 17 - Not a Moron

Chell shivered.

The farther she descended, the colder the temperature grew—and as the year edged toward winter, it
could only get worse. A chilly breeze brushed at her, raising the hairs on her skin.

As Chell rubbed her arms, she wished for her sweatshirt. She really should've taken that split-second
to grab it instead of leaving it wadded up and forgotten on the floor in the science fair hall.

At least she'd be back in that sheltered hideout soon enough. Even though Doug told her that every
level of Aperture contained a stash of food, she didn't know where else to find it besides the room
she'd already been in. And with her luck she'd get herself hopelessly lost if she tried to find another
one.

She had to get back there—but the only path she knew was through the testing track she'd just
escaped.

It couldn't be that difficult.

She'd made it through the first chamber without a portal device. She'd figured out the solution to the
second test chamber within moments. The remaining chambers should be simple enough as long as
she had the Quantum Tunneling Device.

The device clanged against her back in a soft, rhythmic pattern like a slightly-more-painful heartbeat
as she moved along the walkway. Another door slid open at the hallway's end, revealing a spacious
room.

Comfortable chairs lined the walls, accented by dark shelving and little hooks for stowing
belongings. This room was as plush as the 50's entrance she'd
just come from—though Chell wasn't
sure why a room like this sat beneath a testing track.

A worn banner stretched across the opposing wall, one edge fallen onto the ground. Chell picked up
the end and took a few steps back, stretching it out and craning her neck to read faded lettering.

Welcome Back Test Subjects!

A pre-recorded message flared to life before she could finish mouthing the words.

"In case one of those lazy test associates hasn't flagged you down yet," he growled, "you're going to
want to take an immediate left. We've got a brand-new invention here that our engineers like to call
the Advanced Knee Replacement. All you've gotta do it let us clamp the device on over your
kneecaps and you'll be set. It's relatively painless—or so I'm told," he said with a slight laugh. "The
heel springs should allow you to fall a considerable distance without feeling too much debilitating
pain. Careful, though. We're not quite sure how far you can fall yet. We'll figure it out soon enough.
Just be sure you attach them properly—if not, you're going to be in a world of pain when you land.
Heh."

Chell took an immediate left into a similar room. Rows and rows of heel springs completely covered
the left wall. Paper tags dangled from each pair, listing off measurements in a mixture of letters and
numbers meant absolutely nothing to Chell. She felt as if she were lost in a foreign shoe store,
wanting to try on a cute pair of shoes but unable to decipher any labels. Chell shrugged the Quantum Tunneling Device from her shoulders and flipped a switch to power it down.

She might be here for a while.

After rolling her dark sweatpants above her knees, she dragged a step-stool to the end of the line and stretched up on her toes. She pulled down each pair and measured them against her leg, though the vast majority extended far past her feet—more like stilts than leg supports.

These were intended for grown men, after all. Not twelve-year-old girls.

She moved farther down the line and the gap between heel and heel springs shrunk until she hit the smallest pair she could find. Though still a bit large, they'd manage. It wasn't like she planned on keeping them on for more than a few days.

She didn't want to put them on—once locked in, they'd require outside help to remove—but she didn't have a choice. She needed them if she was going to survive this testing track.

Chell took a deep breath and positioned half of the device in front of her kneecap, and pressed the back portion into the crook of skin behind her knee. She braced her leg against the desk and pushed, hard. A sliver of skin caught between, and pain flashed up. Chell immediately released, wincing.

She readjusted the pieces and then pushed harder and harder, pressure growing as if someone had wrapped their hands around her knee and squeezed.

_Click_.

The pressure lifted as the pieces latched into place. Chell took a moment brief moment to stretch out her foot, then moved on to her right leg. She repeated the process, face twisting until it clicked into place.

Perfect.

Chell took a few experimental steps and stumbled, not at all used to her weight being shifted so far forward. She wasn't used to walking like a ballerina en pointe; she'd never taken a dance class in her life. The only sport she'd ever tried—and been decent at—was gymnastics, and even then she hadn't had to walk on her toes.

As she shifted on her heels, she noticed a doorway labeled 'Fitting Test.'

Well, at least Aperture tried to make sure the fall devices worked properly before testing began. She stepped in and onto a ledge, expecting to find a complex test but only seeing a pit the size of an average bathroom. A blue substance dripped from an overhead vent and splattered onto the blue-stained panels at the bottom.

"With the help of our repulsion gel, this test should be no skin off your back. Just go on and jump down there. If they're on right, you'll bounce back with no problem. If they're not on right, you'll still bounce back—that's what the gel does, after all—but you'll just be in a considerable amount of pain. You'll know right away if the braces aren't working. Let's hope they work," said Cave's recording.

Chell paused at the edge then leaped, dropping through the air. She rebounded effortlessly like a tennis ball off concrete, then twisting back up toward the ceiling. The blue goo combined with the Advanced Knee Replacements made jumping and rebounding effortless—not to mention painless. This room was a trampoline. A giant, elaborate trampoline made purely of science.
A smile broke out on her face. For once, she couldn't be happier.

She aligned her feet and let herself freefall then bounce again. Though she was positive the fall devices worked properly—and she would've known if they weren't—landing incorrectly could still damage her legs.

With each successful bounce and fall her smile stretched wider and wider. A few bounces later her confidence rose high enough that she attempted a front flip, twirling high through the air like an Olympic diver before untwisting and rebounding.

The exhilaration of falling and flying in alternating cycles made her burst out laughing, a high and carefree sound so unlike her typical silence. She flipped again and again, twirling and smiling until her face hurt from the sheer joy of it.

The laughter continued until tears streamed down her face and her sides hurt and she couldn't breathe simply because she couldn't stop laughing.

It had been months since she felt this happy—so carefree and confident as if she could take on the world.

Oh, man, If only Doug could see her now.

The laughs eventually faded away as reality twisted back into focus. She couldn't let a moment of fun distract her from the seriousness of her situation.

On her next jump she landed neatly on the ledge, then exited the test subject waiting room altogether. The path forked a ways ahead, and a sense of familiarity overcame Chell.

This was it—this was the hallway she'd sprinted down to get away from Caroline, and the hallway that had lead her to the testing track in the first place.

She took off to the right, hardly daring to hope that the hallway's entrance remained unlocked like it had been earlier.

Chell threw her shoulder into the door, teeth clacking at the impact.

*Thump.*

The door didn't budge. Chell tried again.

*Thump.*

No movement.

Well, it'd been worth a shot—even if the jarring collision against the door sent another burst of excruciating pain through her painkillers she'd taken had only worked half as well as she'd liked—not that she should've hoped for anything else from a pill bottle she'd pulled out of a dusty desk.

In hindsight, she was surprised she wasn't on the ground puking from a reaction.

She should've known better than to get her hopes up.

That door wasn't just going to swing open, and she'd been stupid to think Caroline would've overlooked something like that. Chell sighed and leaned her forehead against the cool wall before turning away.
She trudged forward, metal heel springs scraped against the ground. Silent travel in Aperture had become impossible for her with the addition of both the bulky tunneling device and the Advanced Knee Replacements. Every so often she stumbled over an untied shoelace, forcing the heel spring to jerk forward and jab against the arch of her foot.

If she wasn't so worried about getting tetanus, she would've just gone barefoot.

A familiar green sign directed her to the testing track's entrance.

She bounced with every step, enjoying the effortless movements. She might as well have a bit of fun with these new 'shoes'—though she wasn't sure what bouncing around on experimental equipment while stranded in the depths of the science facility said about her idea of fun.

*Besides,* she thought as she stepped into the first chamber. *The real fun's about to begin.*

The gate slid shut, the motion silent and yet more terrifying than before.

With no test associate to come down and manually reset it, the chamber remained solved and Chell immediately noticed the ajar exit. Helpful. Not that this test had been difficult, though.

Chell moved on to the next test, hesitating before creeping back into the test chamber she'd just broken out of. She kept her steps light and hardly dared to breathe. Even though she knew Caroline would've made her presence known *if* she was still listening in, Chell couldn't shake the feeling that the speaker could click on at any moment.

The anticipation was worse than her voice itself.

But Caroline couldn't tear her down now—she had Advanced Knee Replacements clamped to her legs *and* a Quantum Tunneling Device strapped to her back. And while she assumed the portal device itself was functional, she hadn't *actually* tested it out yet. Not her brightest idea in hindsight.

If all else failed, at least she could escape again through that gap in the floor.

Not that she'd need to do that again. With these two devices, she would be unstoppable.

Silence reigned the next elevator ride. Unease and tension hung in the air.

Neither Doug nor Caroline spoke a word about what had happened.

The door hissed open, and Doug flicked a switched and his handheld portal device flickered to life. The sign down the hallway buzzed and flashed up the chamber's hazards.

Two more. There were only two more tests—this one and the next—until he could get out this place. As soon as he finished this testing track, he was going to quit his job and march out of here and never return.

The chamber floor dropped off and dipped into acid, then reappeared on the opposite side of the area. Doug took a few steps and frowned. The only portal panels besides the ones on the wall next to him were on the far side of the room—on the ceiling.

He sighed, then placed his portals. Hopefully the fall wouldn't be too painful.
Before he could step through, Caroline's voice jutted in.

"Well, that's it for me," she said, voice flatter than usual. "I've got a birthday party to go to. Have fun completing this test. And good luck," she said softly.

The speaker clicked off, the sound itself more prominent and audible, as if she'd powered down the device instead of lifting her finger from the record button.

Well, at least she wouldn't be around for a while. If he hurried he might even complete the testing track before her return.

Doug slipped through the portals, cradling the device and failing midair. He crash-landed, shoes skidding beneath him. The scientist took a long moment to make sure nothing was broken before moving. One at a time, he jabbed out his feet and rolled his ankles. Not sprained, surprisingly enough—though he couldn't keep this up for much longer. If he had to keep falling from the ceiling that that, eventually he'd slip up and break a leg.

He turned to look at the rest of chamber and was struck by just how huge this test was. Acid coated the floor beneath every drop—and an unreasonable amount of portal-friendly surfaces were plastered on the ever-rising ceiling.

One more look at it became clear: Doug wouldn't be able to solve this test and leave this place alive.

He slowly rose to his feet, barely noticing as a voice hissed to his left.

"Hey!"

A moment later, it repeated.

"Hey! Old friend here, just trying to get your attention. I'd stop and listen if I were you," said the familiar voice of the personality sphere.

He twisted, trying to figure out just where that circular robot could be. Dark gray panels to his left rattled and jiggled, as if a person behind them was struggling—without avail—to push them away.

"You're just going to have to push!" said Wheatley. "I can't move those panels myself. I tried, I really did."

Doug's eyes widened, and he edged his way toward a two-square section of the gray wall and pressed both palms against it. He pushed, heart jumping as it skidded like a block of ice. The section above it slid away just as easily, and the scientist couldn't help but feel as if he was playing a life-sized game of Tetris.

As he slid into the room, the robot greeted him and spun in his casing.

"Ah, made it through," he said, raising his lower shutter. "I'll have you know that that was my most complex hack yet. You see those panels over there? The ones you dragged in? Bam. Deactivated all of 'em. All I had to do was pull out those cords," he said, trailing off. Doug glanced over at the huge outlets that stuck out of the wall, half of the plugs still dangling down.

"Okay, so pulling was a bit of an exaggeration," he said, glancing down. "Mostly I just hit them with my handle until they popped loose—I had to disconnect them from the main power grid, after all. Otherwise they'd be locked in place. Couldn't have moved them if you wanted to," said Wheatley. Doug gave a small smile, then gave the underside of the robot a pat.
Though this den didn't contain any portal-friendly surfaces, it was far more spacious than the failure of a den in the last chamber. In here, he could actually breathe. A fenced-off square in the center dropped down into acid, and a staircase extended to a rectangular catwalk above. This place didn't look like any side-room that should've been part of a test chamber—it just looked like any other part of Caroline's wing.

But instead of moving toward the stairs, Doug dragged the blocks into the back right corner. He waved over the robot and pulled out his pen.

SHE'S WATCHING YOU

With a scrawl of his red pen he repeated his drawing of the surveillance camera. To the side, he wrote out the word 'BEEP'—the same sound that Caroline's speakers made when the intercom came on.

Wheatley's shutters drew in. "I though she left?"

Doug shook his head. She'd left, but she'd be back soon enough. He sketched the red outline of a birthday cake, bright against the dim walls. A split-second later he drew a circle around it and slashed through it. Even though it was Caroline's birthday, he wouldn't be caught dead eating cake at that party.

Another few posters littered the ground, and Doug slapped them up one at a time.

Not Never but NOW

He wouldn't have to wait forever to get out of this testing track—no, he was getting out of here now, just like the poster said. Not never, but now. He leaned down and stuck the other one onto the wall.

Courage is Not

The Absence of Fear

An accurate enough message, he supposed—standing up to Caroline in the last chamber had taken a lot of courage, but he'd been terrified the entire time. And though his resolve had shrunk since that confrontation, he still needed to stay strong and get out of this testing track.

The robot whizzed up his rail and jabbed out his handles. "Aaand this room does, in fact, have an exit!" he said with a small nod. "Hate to interrupt whatever you're doing—just thought I'd, you know, point it out. There's a door in here. Right up those stairs."

He took a few hesitant steps up the staircase, glancing through the slats at the acid pit beneath. Though he wasn't sure what purpose acid served in a back-area like this, he didn't dwell on it.

"You have no idea how hard I worked to find an exit for you. She's got this place on lockdown, seriously," said Wheatley.

He took a few steps toward a standard gray door, expecting to jiggle the handle and find it locked. Instead, it stood slightly ajar.

Once again, Wheatley had done something right. That little robot had done it—he'd found another way out of the test chamber.
Henry had been wrong—this robot, from what he'd seen, was far from stupid. He messed things up and yes, he was a bit slow to learn—but for the other scientist to claim that Wheatley didn't posses the ability to learn was ridiculous. The personality sphere was sentient, after all; he had to be able to think on his feet while moving through Aperture.

Though a bit slow at times, he was still far from the moronic robot Henry made him out to be.

Doug swallowed and pushed his way through the door.

He hadn't planned this far ahead.

Up to this point, he'd had a two-part goal: get out of these chambers, and get Chell out of Aperture. But now that he was free, he didn't know what to do next.

He took a deep breath, squeezing his eyes for a moment. Wheatley studied the scientist's face for a long moment before piping up.

"Something, ah, wrong?" he said, voice sincere.

Doug shook his head, and Wheatley couldn't tell if he nodded yes or no.

"Well, we'd best keep moving, then. You know she'll be livid when she comes back. And if you have to go back in that chamber—well, there's a high possibility that you'll die."

He closed the door behind him, then jogged to catch up with the robot. Wheatley wheeled along beside him, happy to continue chatting away. If Doug hadn't been so tired, he might've made an attempt to quiet him down.

"Without those special boots of yours, I don't know how'd you survive those drops. And oho, did you see the rest of the chamber? Turrets. Energy pellets. Acid. She really didn't hold back," he said with a slight laugh. "Not sure what you did to make her angry."

Doug didn't answer, and instead let the robot drift ahead and take the lead until he got more acquainted with his surroundings. Even without Caroline physically being here, the soft red glow and quiet ambiance of this place reminded him so much of her.

"Ooh, and I'll bet you'll never guess what the last chamber ends in," he said, optic darting from left to right as he whizzed onward.

He didn't even bother to wait for Doug's response before continuing.

"An incinerator!" he said with another disbelieving laugh. "It's almost like she doesn't want you to leave that place alive."

Doug shot a glare at the personality sphere. They'd barely managed to break him out of that chamber, and all Wheatley could focus on was testing. Typical Aperture.

"Ooh, I just realized—" The robot broke off, optic shrinking to a pinprick. "That's probably the point, innit? A set of impossible yet technically solvable tests hidden away, ending with an incinerator to get rid of, well," he swallowed, "the bodies. Wouldn't want them to just sit there and get progressively smellier. That's what happens to dead humans—they get smelly. Not that I would know from experience," he said. "It's all up here. In my mind."

Doug's stomach churned—what Wheatley said made far too much sense. Caroline had gone to such lengths to hide an entire testing track. Of course no one else would know about it. If the robot was
right, then no one would ever make it out alive to tell the tale.

He leaned against the wall, exhaustion creeping in with every exhale of adrenal vapor. Though the robot above him could babble on tirelessly, Doug's tiredness only grew. If today really was Caroline's birthday, then he'd gone longer than he'd thought without resting.

He rubbed at his heavy eyes, blinking to wake himself up. "Hey Wheatley," he said. The robot gave him a fidgety look. "I need you to find someplace I can take a quick nap," he said.

"How about, ah, there?" Wheatley called, and he followed him around a corner. The robot raised a handle and flicked his gaze over to the right.

An air duct sat at the bottom of the wall—a perfect, out-out-view place to duck into. Doug crouched, setting his portal device on the floor before wrapping his fingers through the chilled metal slates.

_Creak._

He pulled, hard, and the entire grate popped off like a bottle cap. The metal grate clanged as he propped it against the wall.

Well—that'd been easier than he'd expected.

Doug picked up his portal device and slid it forward, then hefted himself up into the shiny duct. He crouched at the edge, turning back to the robot.

"Wheatley," he said. The robot's optic widened.

"What? Something wrong?" said the robot, gaze darting. "Ah, I knew I should've picked a better spot. That one's not quality at all. Sorry 'bout that."

"No, it's fine," said Doug, waving a hand dismissively. Though "I just wanted to say thank you."

"Oh," the robot said, momentarily at a loss for words. "I, uh—well, you're welcome. Least I could do," he said with a nervous chuckle. "Had to put all of those hacking skills to use, after all."

neither said it, both of them knew Wheatley had undoubtedly saved the scientist's life. "I'll take it from here," said Doug. "But again, thank you."

"Guess I'll see you later, then," he said. The robot blinked, then watched the man for a split-second longer before rolling away.

As soon as they'd turned the corner, Doug had recognized this area. He didn't need the robot's guidance anymore, at this point his chattering would cause more harm than good.

Besides, he could hardly think straight and all he needed was a quick nap. After that he'd get out of here. He crawled through the duct and slipped into a tight room, stretching out his arms and popping his neck.

Though the ground was slick and hard, Doug bunched up his coat into a makeshift pillow and gave one final jaw-popping yawn before curling up and falling asleep.
Caroline propped her elbows against the desk and stared off with an unfocused look, unable to focus on this next test. She ran a single hand through her hair, barely noticing as a red phone rattled to life and startled her from her slight trance.

"Yes?" she said, voice flat. Whoever this was really should know she hated being interrupted during testing.

"Caroline."

For a split-second her heart flared with an impossible hope. The way her name was said sounded so much like the way Cave Johnson used to say it. After a split-second logic caught up to her, a harsh reminder that he was dead, and that she was just talking to her assistant. Not Cave.

"What?" she said. "You know I'm testing right now."

"Right!" he said, a hint of enthusiasm in his voice. "How is it?"

He always seemed so eager for science and so eager for results. Despite his shortcomings, he reminded Caroline of her in her younger years, back when her morality was a bit less questionable. In a way he was just like who she used to be. That's why she'd chosen him.

"Well, I'm getting results if that's what you're asking," she said. The schizophrenic man had definitely given her more than she excepted—especially at the conclusion of the last test. She'd admit it—she slipped up. But really, it only increased her curiosity. How far could she push someone before they pushed back?

"Would it kill you to take the rest of the afternoon off?" he said.

"No," she said, tapping the pads of her fingers against the desk. It was a nervous motion, not an annoyed one; her hands barely made a sound as they connected with the slick desk. "I've only got a few chambers left," she said. No use hurrying through these last few—they were the most exciting, after all. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, come on. You've got to know why," he said, edging toward teasing.

Caroline straightened in her chair, glancing into the chamber but not yet seeing her test subject. She wasn't sure what he was talking about—but she wasn't going to admit that she didn't know.

"You mean you don't know what today is?" he said.

"Hold on," she said, glancing around for a calendar or a watch or anything else that could tell her the current time and date. She'd been down at the testing track for a while, but she wasn't sure how long.

"Caroline," he said. "It's your birthday."

"Oh," she said softly, not even considering how old this made her. "Guess I just lost track of time."

"Well, you'd better get down here," said Greg. "We've been waiting for a half-hour now."
"Give me a few more minutes," she said, wrapping a finger absently around the phone cord. All he had left was two chambers—this one, and Chamber Nineteen. Granted, she wasn't sure if he'd survive Chamber Eighteen. This one was particularly difficult—and though Caroline could still easily solve the test on paper, the chamber itself was particularly deadly.

"If you don't hurry up and get down here they're going to eat it all," said Greg. "I told them to wait, but someone's already cut the cake."

Her finger throbbed as she twisted the cord tighter. "I'll be right there," she said. "Save me a slice." That was all she really needed—one delicious slice. Then, back to testing.

She clicked the phone back into the receiver and saw Doug make his way into the chamber.

"Well, that's it for me," she said, leaning over to click on the speaker. "I've got a birthday party to go to. Have fun completing this test. And good luck," she said softly.

But Doug didn't respond, and instead inspected the chamber in front of him. After that elevator ride it seemed like he'd shrunk back to his normal attitude. Good. She wouldn't stand for him to continue challenging her like that—no, that wouldn't do at all.

She'd have to hurry with her birthday—this was her favorite chamber to watch, and test subjects rarely made it this far. In fact, no one that she knew of had ever made it to her final chamber.

But perhaps he'd even make it to the final challenge. Seeing him turn the corner and see that fire—she wouldn't miss it for the world.

At the same time, she wasn't about to miss out on her favorite day of the year.

She gave the test chamber a lingering look and gently closed the door, glad for this break. After the emotion-ridden and exhausting events of these past few days, seeing everyone let loose and have fun was just what she needed.

And even though Aperture Science was a serious company, her employees should be allowed to have fun occasionally. Seeing everyone bright and smiling made her genuinely happy. That was the best part about celebrating her birthday.

And oh, did they have fun.

Over the years this day became the perfect excuse to pull off ridiculous stunts. One time—after one of the lab boys screwed up on an order and landed them with an abundance of foam—they'd chopped it into blocks and crafted a massive foam pit.

Cave had jokingly pushed her into it, not knowing that the more she flailed her arms the further she would sink—like quicksand. Eventually he had to leap in after her and dragged her out like a lifeguard.

Caroline only glared at him and shoved him into the pit. He'd only laughed. At the time she hadn't been amused, but looking back it had been funny.

She quickened her pace as she oriented herself with the back areas of her wing. This wasn't the usual path she took to get around—but these areas gradually became more familiar the farther she walked.

Her mind drifted back to another birthday. They'd painted a strip of floor with propulsion gel, then took turns rolling bowling balls towards pyramids of empty storage cubes. A pain to set up and a pain to clean up, but watching those bowling balls zip across the room at triple their normal speed
had made everyone laugh.

That wasn't quite as fun as the marshmallow guns, though.

That year she'd entered one of the largest offices in Aperture and had fully expected to find a typical table with paper plates and plastic cups and store-bought cakes. Instead, she found flipped over tables and hastily-constructed hideouts.

The entire company split into teams, and they spent the afternoon in an all-out marshmallow gun war.

With each successful 'hit' the teams dwindled to a handful of members a piece. Caroline herself lead one, and Cave Johnson the other. And of course he'd considered the battle against her team already won. They'd celebrated a bit too early—exuding confidence and talking just loud enough to leave Caroline's team a perfect opportunity. They took down the rest of his team in one fell swoop, showering them in a stream of white pellets.

She wore a smug grin for the rest of the week.

In the months following, Caroline found marshmallows wedged behind filing cabinets and flattened between stacks of papers. More than once she scraped away crusted marshmallow with her fingernail before handing in a paper.

 Entirely worth it, of course.

Still, the employees couldn't have too much fun on the job. Science was serious, and if this company ever wanted a shot at becoming the number one applied science company in the country, she had to run a tight ship.

A few times a year, though, she let them have some fun. Those kinds of days proved to be some of the best at Aperture.

She moved through the halls and into the main areas of Aperture. Not only did she want to hurry and get back to testing, but she also couldn't wait to see what sort of antics they'd come up with for her birthday.

Well, it was sure to be a surprise.

Laughter and loud voices drifted through the hallway as she approached. She hadn't passed anyone on her way here, so most of Aperture's employees—if not all—must've decided to participate in this year's birthday party.

Her expression shifted into a slight smile as she twisted the door handle and stepped in.

Tweee.

A party horn wheezed. Bright party hats reflected back light. Caroline wasn't sure where they'd gotten those things—they were a waste of money, really.

"There she is!"

The voice shouted from the far side of the room, and Caroline twisted to see her assistant waving a hand.

Of course it would be him.
An uneasy silence fell over the crowd, the same sort of abrupt halt in conversation as if she'd just walked into a conversation about herself. Her smile drooped as she glanced across the room full of people.

"What took you so long?" said Greg, motioning her over to a table. Paper plates and plastic cutlery sat alongside half-eaten cakes, along with a dwindling stack of generic napkins and a stack of party hats.

She moved straight for the cake, scooping and plopping a slice of black forest cake onto her plate. Oh, she couldn't wait to sit down and take a bite—she'd been looking forward to this for days.

She breathed a sigh of relief as murmurs of conversation returned to the room. It was so good to hear people discuss anything other than Aperture Science for once.

This was much better than that pointed, guilty silence—as if they were hiding something from her. But as she moved from the fold-up table to one of the circular tables dotting the room, someone snuck up behind her and stuck one of those ridiculous party hats on her head.

Glittering strands of silver streamed from the cone's tip, shimmering ends clinging to her dry hair from static electricity. All she needed to do was eat her cake in peace and then get out of here—after seeing what brilliant yet pointless idea the employees came up with, of course. Caroline slipped into a chair at an empty table near the front of the room. But as she jabbed her fork into the tip of the cake, the room took a collective breath and burst into a round of 'Happy Birthday'.

Her expression sunk further into a neutral expression. It was a nice gesture, it really was. She didn't mind the attention at all, but the singing... she couldn't stand their awful voices. And yet every so often some idiot decided it would be a good idea to sing that song.

Carolimg begrudgingly left her party hat on as the song dragged on. It'd be rude to yank it off now, in front of everyone—but as soon as an opportunity presented itself, that hat was coming off. For now, she slipped the bite of cake into her mouth.

Ah. She'd forgotten how much she loved cake. Perhaps she should reconsider banning birthday celebrations—it might be nice to have these more often.

The song ended.

Caroline gave a forced smile before taking another bite of cake, not noticing a group standing to the side of the room. Arms crossed and faces serious, none of them held any cake or wore any silly party hats. If she'd seen them, she would've felt annoyed—if she could relax and enjoy herself for an hour, they should do it as well.

That group edged their way onto a slightly raised, platform-like area at the front of the room. One man moved forward and cleared his throat.

"Hey!" he said, waving an arm and struggling to make his voice heard over the dull roar of conversation.

Caroline glanced up and recognized the man: Henry. He currently acted as the head scientist for that awful GLaDOS project—and while she'd managed to make them run in circles around the truth, the progress they'd made despite that was impressive. With her prompting, they managed to construct a completely artificial intelligence—a truly self-aware robot.

Of course she'd encouraged this idea and pushed for them to continue. If they kept at it—and developed more complex personalities and human-like attributes—they could one day create a
complex robot capable of helping her run this facility.

If she played her cards right, they wouldn't need to use her mind at all.

"Everyone," he said, raising his voice. "Before you go, I've got something to say!"

She glanced at him and waited for him to continue. He wasn't a particularly energetic person in general—and he wasn't even eating any cake—so she wasn't sure what he had to say that was important enough to halt her cake-eating. Perhaps a snarky comment to send the audience roaring with laughter. A joke at her expense, no doubt.

The audience quieted. Henry cleared his throat. "As we all know, today is Caroline's birthday."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room.

"While we're all here—in one place—there's something I need to talk about," he said. Caroline lifted her fork to take another bite. He'd get to his point soon enough. No point in stopping eating for one little speech.

"As we all know, certain sacrifices have to be made to keep a place this huge running. We all want to keep our jobs here, after all." He gave a slight, nervous laugh. "Sometimes that's not an easy thing to do. And for that, we really do have the upmost respect for you, Caroline," he said, turning to her. "You've really brought Aperture out of the pits," he said, motioning toward the levels and levels of the facility beneath them.

Caroline relaxed as she heard a few small laughs from behind her.

"So here's to you," he said. "Happy Birthday, Caroline." The crowd erupted into bursts of applause. Caroline smiled and glanced away.

She had done all of that—and for once, it felt fantastic to be recognized for her contributions to this place. For so long her work had been either overlooked or dismissed or accredited to Cave or whatever scientist happened to be nearby and willing to take credit for something she'd done.

"Still, a place like this has no shortage of secrets, and there's one that all of you should know about," said Henry.

When he'd started, she hadn't expected the conversation to go like this at all—and she didn't know what he would say next. She wasn't sure what exactly, this was about, but she might as well get it over with and get back to work.

She beckoned him to go on.

He gave a heavy sigh.

If this was about her partnership with Black Mesa—well, she'd been meaning to tell them anyways. Henry explaining that would make things much simpler for her. Though she'd rather hide it altogether, she knew they'd understand once she explained how it had been her only choice to keep this place alive.

"You might've noticed that little personality sphere running along the rails and getting lost. We're the ones who built him. Sorry for any problems he's caused. He was just an experiment, you could say," he said, then gave a small laugh. "Most of you know this project I'm working on has its fair share of mystery about it. When I first got recruited as project lead, all I knew was that our goal was to build a computer system capable of one day running Aperture."
Caroline shifted in her seat.

She didn't like where this conversation was going. Not one bit at all.

"Even though other teams worked on this before, huge amounts of their work disappeared following their firing. We had to start from scratch," he said with a slight swallow. "Now I know why."

Caroline shifted from a cross-legged position and planted both feet in the ground. For once, she was glad she sat near the front of the room. "Whatever this is about, you and I can work it out. Someplace else," she said, well within the man's range of hearing.

The crowd hushed at her words—unlike Henry, she didn't need to shout to capture the room's attention.

Instead, Henry pulled down a projector screen. A co-worker flipped it on. "Now here," he said, "I've discovered the original plan for this project, outlined by Cave Johnson himself before his passing. I present to you: Tier 3."

The screen flickered to life and showed an outdated login screen—plain and simple compared to Aperture's more modern and advanced computer systems.

Oh no.

Caroline's stomach dropped.

How had he found that?

Though Cave had announced his intentions to half of the facility—and created a team to start working on the project right away—she'd scoured the systems and deleted each and every trace of those awful plans. Especially the details about her part in that project.

She couldn't cancel the project altogether, but she did do a good amount of firing. Whenever a team pushed her too far—or whenever they came to the conclusion that they'd need a human consciousness for the GLaDOS project—she fired them on the spot.

Right there. No questions asked. One team gone, and a new one to replace them. She would've made Cave proud with that rapid-firing.

Henry was bluffing.

He had to be—there was no other explanation.

"Stop right there," she said, chair squeaking as she rose to her feet. "Listen to me. I'm not sure where you found that, but I've never seen this before. Leave it alone and get yourself another slice of cake. We'll work this out later. Like regular people," she said.

Soft murmurs came from the crowd. Caroline felt all eyes on her.

He glanced up as if considering her offer, and then spoke a half-second later. "I don't think I will," he said.

Click.

A long text document opened on the screen.

The way it was written—a large block of words that shifted into capslock halfway through—made it
immediately clear as to who wrote that document.

Cave Johnson had never been good with technology—his mind worked in a more theoretical, conceptual way. While he could imagine and throw out ideas for computers, actually using one was another problem altogether. Despite his false bravado, he could never wrap his mind around the finer points of computer usage.

"It's taken ten years for this project to develop a DOS system capable of handling an Artificial Intelligence. And I won't make you read the entire document, but this right here says we've been wasting our time. It's pointless," he said. "And that was never the plan at all, and Caroline's been hiding this from us the entire time. According to the CEO of Aperture—"

"Former CEO," Caroline hissed, her comment beginning to get lost amongst the growing dissent.

"This project—which hasn't had a name as long as I've worked on it—is apparently called the GLaDOS project. Know what that stands for?" he said, pulling up another file.

"That's not important," said Caroline. "None of that is."

"Genetic Lifeform and Disc Operating System," he said flatly.

"Stop this now," she said, voice lost among other voices.

"File after file talks about how Caroline here is supposed to run the place after Cave Johnson's death," he said. "We don't need an artificial intelligence at all. The person we need for this project has been standing in front of us for years. It couldn't be clearer."

"And what makes you think I'll just let you upload me into a computer?" said Caroline, taking a few dangerous steps forward.

"You don't have a choice," said Henry. A scan of a document littered with signatures popped onto the screen. "See this here? You signed it. It says as soon as the technology's developed, you're legally bound to go into that computer."

"Hold on," said Caroline. She took another few steps forward. People scooted their chairs to get out of her way. "You can't do this," she said, voice wavering. "We don't even have that technology yet! Much less what sort of dangers a procedure like that might entail."

"Well," he said, mouth twitching slightly. "As that boss you loved so much always said, why don't you marry safe science if you love it so much?"

Caroline's gaze narrowed.

Now, this was personal. Just her and Henry going back and forth, with the room held captive to the unfolding events.

She took another step. How dare he take something she'd heard—and said herself—countless times and flip it back on her.

"If we waited until everything was perfected and accident-free, we'd never make progress. You know that better than anyone," said Henry.

"You'd better forget about all of this," said Caroline. "I don't know where you found that outdated information, but I can assure you that it's irrelevant now that I'm in charge of this facility."
Instead of backing down, Henry continued gesturing at the screen. "These are the last wishes of Cave Johnson, and he explicitly says you're going into that computer whether you like it or not," he said, jabbing a finger at her.

"You're really going to listen to a man who's been dead for ten years over me?" she said, voice cold.

"Of course I am," he said. "He's the one that founded this place and ran it for forty years—not you."

"Excuse me?" Caroline hissed, edging her way past the last of the tables and into the front of the room. People shifted in their seats, but no one got up to leave.

"You heard me," said Henry. He folded his arms. "He said it himself thousands of times. You might've helped here and there, but he's the one that really ran this place."

Caroline fumed.

Her entire posture shifted into attack mode, and a few strands of gray hair drifted into her face.

"Oh, I don't think you understand how Aperture works at all," she said, voice low. "He might've been the larger-than-life figure—the personality—behind Aperture, but he didn't know a damn about actually running a company," she said, still fuming.

"You know how he thought things worked? He'd just throw out an idea. And then he'd expect everyone around him to stop whatever they were working on and focus on his ideas—even though they were some of the most moronic ideas I've ever heard. But to him they were brilliant. The rest of us were in no place to tell him otherwise," she said.

Memories of experiments gone wrong, like merging mantis DNA with humans, or attempting to turn blood into oil, or countless other poorly-thought-out ideas flashed through her mind.

"And who do you think got stuck with making those idiotic plans work?" she said. "I'm the one who spent hour upon hour doing paperwork—well into the night, usually. I'm the one who orchestrated all the testing. I know better than all of you how to make someone disappear—because that's what happens to test subjects. They die. And unless we want another outrage on our hands like we did in the sixties," she hissed. "Someone had to cover those tracks. And unless you want to become one of those disappeared subjects, I'd suggest you stop this right now," she said, moving uncomfortably close to the man.

He took a step back and glanced at the audience for help. While most remained indifferent, some looked around with unease. Apparently not everyone was well-informed about Aperture's gray morality. Some people—though few and far between—had actual, normal jobs here.

"Was that a threat?" he said.


"You know, that's exactly why we're talking in front of all of these people. If I disappear, they'll all know why."

He swept an arm toward the audience.

"And you're right," he said. "You did run Aperture Science this entire time. I just needed you to admit it. After all, it's only natural that someone who's ran Aperture since the beginning to continue running it from this computer," he said. "Everyone else is unqualified."
"I've done a good enough job with this place by myself," said Caroline. "Alive. Not from a computer. And I promise you I am not doing this." She jabbed a finger at him.

She gave him such a cold and heartless look, as if all of her frustration and anger from this past week had solidified into one glance. For a split-second, Henry was rendered silent.

"The files warned me you might try something like this," he said. "But now everyone knows. There's no way out of this one, Caroline."

Her look swept across the crowd. There were far more people sitting here than she'd initially thought, and the room suddenly shifted into feeling overwhelmingly cramped, as if she couldn't breathe and as if she needed to get out of here.

"Let's get you over to the project, and we'll discuss this more. Privately," he said, mirroring her earlier words. His voice hinted at a slightly triumphant tone—he knew he'd won this.

After revealing Tier 3 in front of so many people, she couldn't worm her way out of this.

"Come on," he said, reaching out to grab her arm.

Caroline whipped her arm away, twisting and leaving Henry to grasp at empty air. "Get your hands off me," she hissed, backpedaling and bumping into a table. Plastic cups jiggled; an empty one tipped and rolled. Caroline sidestepped and turned.

A few of Henry's team hovered by the side doors, but the farthest exit remained open. These were people truly dedicated to science—people she knew and respected—and before she could say another word, they headed straight for her.

Panic flared through her.

Did they think they could just grab her and drag her, kicking and screaming, to some experimental lab?

Oh, she would never let that happen.

She bolted into the suddenly difficult and less-willing-to-move audience, whispering "Excuse me," as she pushed her way towards the door.

"Caroline!" said Henry. "Wait!"

As if she'd listen to him.

She broke free from the crowd and threw open the door, giving a last backward glance before slamming it behind her.

---

*Step step step step.*

Her steps clipped in time with her racing heartbeat as she took off down the hallway. Air rushed beneath her unsecured party hat, flipping it into the air. It drifted down and onto its side, gently rolling on the walkway. The next person to speed through would no doubt crush it.

She wasn't running away.

Well, technically she was.
But Caroline just needed a moment to regain her composure. Then, she could figure out a way to convince everyone that the GLaDOS project was a terrible and awful idea. To do that she needed a safe, tucked-away refuge.

*Her* wing.

Her heart thumped—it'd be perfect. Though no one had yet chased after her, she knew people would come looking for her after a display like that. But not many people at all knew about her private wing.

She took another sharp turn and took off in that direction.

Caroline's breaths heaved and her heart pounded even as she slowed from a sprint to a jog. If they sent one of those younger scientists after her, she'd have no chance at all at outrunning them.

She wasn't as young as she used to be. And she couldn't run forever.

Adrenalin pumped in and fueled her forward, but her heart felt as if it would give out at any moment. Another emotion surged through her—even more prominent than the urge to *get away*.

She didn't place it at first—a sickening, stomach-twisting feeling foreign to her.

Fear.

Though perhaps not always happy, Caroline had always felt in control in Aperture.

She spent more time at work than she did outside of work. She'd worked here for decades, and Caroline was far more comfortable with her facility than any single person inside of it—save for Cave, but she wasn't sure if he counted.

But for the first time in her countless years at Aperture, she'd never encountered this feeling before.

Caroline felt scared.

She heaved a sigh of relief as she twisted open the entrance to her wing. She'd be relatively safe here. Well, until they roped her assistant into the search. He knew her like the back of her hand—if anyone would find her, it would be him.

She needed a new place to hide.

If she'd learned anything from Doug Rattmann, it was that there were plenty of alcoves and tucked-away nooks back here. They'd make a perfect hiding spot, as long as she could find them.

Caroline slowed to a walk as she moved into the maintenance areas beside the testing track. At least now she only felt as if she'd pass out at any moment rather than feeling like her heart would fail. Honestly, she wasn't sure which was worse.

At least she'd feel better soon—after she got out of sight.

She moved through the areas at a slower pace. Hiding too close to the entrance was a bad idea—but at the same time, she needed to hurry up and find a spot. After turning another corner, an opened air duct caught her eye.

The slated metal cover sat propped against the wall, as if someone simply forgot to put it into place. Well, that wouldn't surprise her. A small detail like this could've been easily overlooked during
Caroline hefted herself into the duct with a soft "ooof." This place, though cramped, would be the perfect spot to hide for a few minutes. She could take an hour to get herself together—and once she caught her breath, she'd go out there and remind them who the real boss of the company was.

Wait—the grate.

Caroline reached out of the duct and hoisted up the grate. Though it was meant to sit at the end of the duct, only her latched fingers secured it in place. If she let go, it'd clatter back to the ground.

If that happened, so much for staying hidden.

Though her vision spun, she locked her hands in place and pressed her face near the slats to see out and into the room. She'd rather look than sit there and listen in terror. Claustrophobia crept into the cramped metal space.

Her breathing took a long time to steady, and for a long time she listened to the blood pumping and hissing in her ears.

She didn't hear the soft, occasional snore drift over from farther back in the vent.
The door slammed before he finished his yell.

Henry swore.

No one moved from their seats, and the room dissolved into uncomfortable silence. Greg leaned against the wall and nibbled at a new slice of cake. He glanced up, seeing the balding man staring at him with a pointed intensity.

"What?" he said. The tines of his plastic fork flexed against the plate.

"You told me she'd stay here, not tear off into the depths of the facility like some mad woman!" said Henry, flourishing an arm in the exit's general direction.

"Hey, it's just as much of a surprise to me as you." Greg took another bite and swallowed. "Don't worry. She won't go too far."

"For all I know, she could already be OUT of the facility and driving away!" said Henry, jaw clenched. "You should've told me she'd try something like this."

"Well, you could've approached that a bit more carefully," said Greg, tapping his fork against the edge of the paper plate and scraping up a stray bit of frosting. "Cornering her like that—even I could've told you that would happen."

"Then why didn't you?" said Henry, voice accusing.

"Relax," said Greg. He took his last few bites of cake and tossed the plate into a tall garbage can. "Send a bunch of people and just look for her. Like I said, I doubt she went far—and she definitely hasn't left the facility."

"What makes you say that?"

"Experience," said Greg. "And I have a good guess as to where she might be."

"Then you find her," he said. "I didn't go to all of that trouble to let her slip through our grasp."

Her heartbeats steadied.

Caroline curled her fingers around the vent's blunted slats. She shifted her feet and craned her neck, keeping her eye-level even with a gap in the vent. Her gaze flicked from side to side searching an empty room for something that wasn't there.

She wasn't sure what she expected.

An angry mob wouldn't burst through those doors—at most, one or two people might check back here for her. Still, she wasn't about to take her chances and move from her spot. It may be calm here, but navigating the main areas of the facility would be next to impossible with all of those people looking for her.

Adrenalin trembled and seeped through her arms, lingering in case she needed to make another break
for it. Honestly she wasn't sure how fast she could scramble out of the vent—but if she needed to, she would shove past anyone that dared to stand in her way between her and the facility's exit.

Pistons groaned. Air hissed though the vents. As the wing drifted into silence, Caroline briefly closed her eyes and clung to each and every sound.

A faint snore rose from behind her.

Panic flared inside of her, sending her heartbeat racing again.

Had she been anywhere else in the facility, she would've blamed it on the vent system. Sound travelled, and every so often an employee did crash at their desk. But this was her wing. No one but her and—

Her arms trembled.

Someone else must've sneaked ahead while she wasn't looking and crouched into this vent, lying in wait for her to arrive and then accidentally dozing off—

No.

That was ridiculous.

No one could've known where she planned to hide, much less beat her to it. When she left even she hadn't known where she would end up. No, she was simply tired. Spending that long at the testing track couldn't have been good for her. A rest did sound tempting.

Another soft snore came from behind her.

She wasn't alone in this vent.

And though she needed to turn and figure out who was in the vent with her, one slip of the hand would send the grate clattering to the ground. As far as she knew she was the only thing holding it in place.

Still, one hand should be able to keep it in place. Briefly.

Caroline twisted, slipping away one hand and latching the other onto the vent. With miniscule shifts and sidesteps she turned and peered down the vent. A dim and reflective glow dulled her vision of the vent's abrupt turn, partially obscuring a drop off into a tiny room. As she edged out as far as she could and caught a glimpse into the alcove, her elbow locked into place.

Caroline had spent enough time observing the dark-haired man test to immediately recognize the figure lying on the ground as Doug Rattmann.

Of course they ended up hiding in the same air vent.

She wasn't sure how, though, he'd gotten out of the testing track.

She'd double checked all of the inside panels and the entrance and the exit multiple times. She'd been absolutely certain that no more manually-accessible panels existed in that chamber, much less any cracks between panels and the wall for him to wedge his fingers between and yank.

Getting out of there alive should have been impossible—and yet here he was.

Slam.
A door banged against the frame in the distance.

Constant and steady footsteps echoed through the hallway at a steady, walking pace. Running through Aperture sapped too much energy out of a man not accustomed to exercise. Plus, he might miss something if he rushed—better to take his time and comb through every room and every locked door (easily opened with an override code he'd picked up) until he found her.

"Caroline!" he said. No sense in remaining quiet—he couldn't sneak up on Caroline if he tried. She always seemed to know whenever he was coming. But she had to be around here, and as soon as she came to her senses he knew she'd give up this disappearing act of hers.

He half-expected to turn a corner and finding her in a swivel chair, arms crossed as if she'd been waiting for him.

"Wherever you are, just come out," he said, moving away from her usual path and into the back areas of the facility. For all he knew she could be continually moving through this place—staying ahead of him and switching from hiding place to hiding place until she slipped out of Aperture altogether.

So he kept moving—cycling through the same pleas and same phrases like a scratched record.

"Come on, Caroline," he called out. "It was just a misunderstanding—and you could've told me about this before. I wouldn't have said anything."

Not completely true—but still, Greg would have liked to know about her hidden plans before Henry called him yesterday and made him look like a lying idiot.

"—promise it'll make more sense once I explain, but I need to talk to her in front of audience for my own safety. The bigger, the better."

"Well, how important is this?" said Greg absently, flipping through dog-eared pages of a planner. Though he'd essentially inherited Caroline's old job as assistant to the CEO, he didn't mind it at all—many times before, Caroline had told him that he reminded her of herself. "It's going to have to wait for a few days. Tomorrow's her birthday."

"Wait," said Henry, adjusting the phone. "This is something the whole facility needs to know—and people always come to that stupid party. It's perfect. What are they even doing this year?"

"Nothing too exciting. Just a bunch of cakes. People like cake," said Greg, shifting in his chair. "Why are you getting so worked up about this anyways? It's just a party."

"Tier Three," said Henry—a statement more so than a question, as if he should instantly know what he meant by it.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on—I know you've heard of it." Annoyance seeped through Henry's voice—there was no way Caroline could have kept a secret that huge hidden so well without a bit of help. "Don't lie to me."

"No, really," said Greg. "I've never heard of it before."

"After that, he'd made arrangements to meet Henry at his office and go over the details of Tier 3—
and after reading it, he felt dumb for not knowing. This had to have been one of the most well-kept secrets in Aperture.

And as loyal to Caroline as he'd been, this he couldn't push aside. Normally she shared so much with him—she genuinely trusted him more than anyone else in this company, and yet she still had hidden this from him. And this was something the employees of Aperture deserved to know.

He clicked on a flashlight and looked around the dim back areas.

"Look, I didn't know Henry planned to go through with this right away. He just said he'd talk about it!" he said, voice straining. "Please, you're making this harder than it has to be."

His flashlight swept through another empty area. Greg turned the corner. Just like Chell, Caroline couldn't hide forever.

Caroline's heart raced.

Through fuzzy gray stripes she saw her assistant slip into the room, calling out to her.

Oh, as if she'd come out now. After her earlier display, returning as if nothing had happened would be a death sentence. How stupid did he think she was? And the way he spoke—he must have known beforehand what would happen.

He hadn't warned her.

He hadn't given her the slightest hint that something like this would happen; instead he'd teased her about forgetting her birthday and urged her to get to the party on time.

As her assistant, he was supposed to stand by her. She had trusted him with some of Aperture's darkest secrets and he'd thrown her under the bus like she didn't matter at all.

She had always told him that he was like a younger version of herself.

Perhaps he was a bit too much like herself—because in all honesty, she couldn't say that she wouldn't have done the exact same thing in his position.

But as soon as she got out of here, she'd fire him first—along with Henry and his ragtag crew of people who dared to call themselves scientists.

And as Greg continued wasting his time speaking, the snores behind her stopped.

Doug Rattmann jerked awake, sharply inhaling at the loud and uncomfortably voice just outside of the vent. He scrambled onto his feet as silently as he could manage and shifted into a crouch.

Someone was close to his vent.

He twisted to see if he could shrink farther back into his little alcove and farther back into the air vent—but instead, it took an abrupt, ninety-degree turn and rose into the ceiling. And while he could attempt to climb up and into the narrow space, the inevitable clanging would reveal him almost instantly.

He crept as far back as he could into a dim corner, back pressed against the wall. So long as whoever was out there didn't look to closely, they shouldn't see anything but an average vent covering—
—the grate.

His heart skipped a beat.

In his haste to escape, he forgot to replace the vent cover.

Leaving the cover propped against the wall couldn't have made it any more glaringly obvious. He'd almost guaranteed his capture now. How could he have been so stupid?

Doug edged to the left and glimpsed back toward the duct's entrance.

There should be a distinct light source up ahead, but instead the vent seemed dimmer than he remembered. He blinked.

Sleepiness clung to him like a thick, unpleasant medicine—leaving a groggy aftertaste minutes later, even after he should feel fully awake. He squinted and rubbed the crust from his eyes. Perhaps he had just been seeing things again. After a steadying breath and letting his eyes adjust to the dark, he looked again.

He saw a dim figure backlit by even slats of light—like blinds drawn over windows in the middle of the day. And that distinctive white jacket and long, dark hair could only belong to one person: Caroline.

Doug darted back to his corner, hand raising to muffle his inhale. This didn't make any sense. She didn't move, and she didn't speak. She didn't even turn around, and her posture was as rigid and frozen as her heart.

"Wherever you are, just come out."

The sheer volume at which the distinctly male voice called out made it hard to not hear him—and Doug knew that this person had to be searching for him, the twice-escaped test subject.

And yet, he couldn't put his finger on it but it felt almost as if he was talking about someone else—

"Come on, Caroline. It was just a misunderstanding—and you could've told me about this before. I wouldn't have said anything."

—like Caroline.

But that didn't make sense.

Caroline ran Aperture—she was the heart and soul of this company. She had no reasons to be hiding, much less in the same air duct as himself. Doug, on the other hand—well, he had a lot more reasons than one to stay hidden.

But as much as he wanted to figure out why she was here, he also couldn't let her find him again. So Doug kept his movements slow and breathing shallow and slipped as far back into the alcove as possible. Soon enough the man would move on, and hopefully Caroline would slip out without noticing Doug at all. Then, he'd be able to get out of here.

"Look, Henry only told me he would talk about Tier 3. I didn't know he was going to through with it right away. Please, just come out?"

Tier 3.

The only way he could have possibly known about that—in fact, the only way anyone at all could
have known about that—would have been if Henry had followed through and actually looked at the slip of paper he'd given him.

His heart soared.

Whatever scene that must have gone down had caused Caroline to take off running through the facility, and Doug couldn't help but feel a cold splash of hope.

He'd done it—he'd managed to get that information out there, and it just might be the thing that saved him.

Caroline stiffened and slid her fingers back. She clung to the vent’s edge with only with her fingertips; she couldn’t risk being discovered for a reason as stupid as her fingers sticking out of the vent.

She just knew that any moment now her assistant would walk over here and pry the metal cover from her locked fingers an see her panicked face staring right back at him.

Minutes ticked by.

Greg moved on and ventured further into her wing. She let more time tick by and more silence seep in, and when she was absolutely sure that he’d left, she kept one hand on the grate and twisted back to glance once more at Doug Rattmann.

She knew he'd woken up.

That abrupt shift in breathing—combined with the soft scuffling sounds afterwards—confirmed what she has assumed: her inadvertent vent companion had woken up.

She knew he had to be just out of sight—it wasn't as if he could go anywhere else in this dead-end air duct. Caroline leaned further down the vent.

"I know you're back there," she said.

Doug didn't respond.

"Look—before you say anything, this isn't about testing," she said. She wanted to reassure him, before he made any sudden motions or loud noises. The mere thought of those made her stomach twist.

After the thick haze of sleep drifted into a thin fog, the realization of just where he was—and who he was with—seeped in. He was next to her, and he boiled with a sudden rage.

"I'm not going drag you back there," she said, hushed yet firm.

"And I'm supposed to believe you?" he said, voice bigger. "Forgive me, but I've been burned by that one before." As far as he was concerned, every word out of her mouth was a flat-out lie.

Sadness flashed across her face as she turned. As much as she wanted to deny it and convince him otherwise, a pang of her heart told her that what he'd said resounded with truth.

"I promise you, this isn't what it looks like," she said, pulling in a breath and straightening her spine in the cramped space.
"Then what is it?" he said, his boldness from earlier making a second appearance. Though Caroline had thought—that his unexpected bravado would dissipate like a misplaced portal, it seemed to have latched on. "You've literally driven me to exhaustion and blocked off my only exit. Before that man arrived, I would've through you'd crawled in here to personally mock me while you waited for your goonies to arrive. But he's looking for you, not me. So tell me what's going on."

"Give me a second and I'll tell you what happened," she said, keeping her voice hushed.

"Just let me explain."

He gave a small snort and remained in his position in the back of the room—as far away from Caroline as he could physically get. Through the anger, frustration crept into him and created a careless and yet terrifying mood where he was so mad that he simply didn't care anymore. "You know what? Fine. Go for it. It's not like I'm going anywhere until you move."

"First off, when I climbed into this vent I wasn't trying to find you. That was just horrible luck on my part, really," she said. "You might as well get comfortable, though. This might take a few minutes."

He folded his hands together, pressing them together and then squeezing while he listened. He gave a slight nod, then remembered that she couldn't see his action. "Oh," he said, then cleared his throat.

"Just—please keep your voice down while I'm speaking. If you make a single stray sound, I will personally see to it that you won't live to make it out of the testing track a third time."

"—got it," Doug said, voice a bit softer. He swallowed, still folding his hands together.

"Well," she said. "You've been working here long enough to know that there's a tradition around here that comes up on my birthday," she said. The celebration itself—in its earliest years—had landed on Cave's birthday, but after a few years he insisted that it be changed to Caroline's birthday. She cleared her throat. "So those last few chambers I really was trying to hurry you along. Today is my birthday, and I didn't want to miss my own party. And besides," she said, almost wistful, "I really was looking forward to it."

Caroline shifted her weight from her toes back onto her heels. Doug said nothing, instead sinking back and pressing his chin into his knees. The initial threat had passed—and judging by the way she kept fearfully glancing out the vents and the way her arms trembled slightly, she was in no condition to force Doug to do anything—at least not physically.

He took the slightest bit of comfort in this and allowed himself to relax ever so slightly. But that same feeling burned inside of him and made it hard to focus on anything other than what Caroline had done to Chell. It took so much effort to even focus on the words coming out of her mouth with those recent memories still blaring across his brain.

"So what happened?" he said, more out of a desire to keep her talking and letting her calm down than a genuine interest. Though a calm, more rational part of him really did beg for her to hurry up and tell him what could have possibly happened since the last time they'd spoken.

"They threw me under the bus. All of them—after everything I've done for this facility, every single person turned against me," she said drawing in a short, shaky breath. "They set me up."

The reality of her words hit her all at once, and Caroline gave another small, choked sound. After a simple speach, of all things, she'd lost everything: her power, her status, and the respect of everyone within this facility. Even her assistant turned on her—and all over something she'd tried to erase from
her life a long time ago.

She was stupid—so stupid. Perhaps if she’d just followed that crazy man’s last wishes and let the scientists simply work on the GLaDOS project, they might’ve made more technological leaps and bounds instead of suffering constant setbacks.

If she hadn’t hidden it, perhaps the procedure itself might have even been safe by now.

She gripped the fabric of her pants tightly, hand curling into it. She wasn’t sure if it was in anger, or an attempt to keep herself calm. Either way, she was trying so hard to keep it together. She couldn’t let Doug see her like this—she couldn’t let anyone see her like this.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"There's something I've been hiding for a long time. Years, actually," she said. "And, well, someone found it and now the whole facility knows," she said, throwing up a hand and letting her voice sink into a sarcastic bitterness.

"I had no idea," she said. "No clue at all. All I wanted was to just sit down with the rest of the facility and enjoy a slice of cake because it's my birthday and I should have every right to do that. They sang to me, and just as I thought they would show me whatever great and fantastic thing they'd come up with this year. But instead," she said, "those idiots started singing to me and then Henry of all people managed to get his hands on something I thought I'd gotten rid of a long time ago."

She paused, pulling in a breath.

"Tier Three. It's...something Mr. Johnson came up with right before he, well, died. I don't bore you with the details, but after Henry's little episode leaving this facility alive will be next to impossible."

But before she could slip further into a Tier-3-induced rage, Caroline heard a distant sound—still rooms away—and cut off her speech. She raised a hand and closed her grip into a fist, a quick and easy signal to stop.

"He's coming back," she said shakily. "He missed us the first time; he might miss us again. Just stay quiet."

Patches of light striped Caroline's face as she glanced out and into the room, waiting for the moment that her assistant—no, former assistant—entered the room. She tightened her grip on the vent.

"And why should I? I don't owe you anything," said Doug, "and there's nothing you can do stop me from yelling and drawing his attention back over here right now. You are the one standing between me and my freedom, after all—not him."

"I'm telling you—that man out there isn't much different than myself. If you think for one moment that he'll just let you walk free once he finds the both of us, you are absolutely wrong. One loud noise and we're both dead."

Dead.

The word itself felt like a sudden push into a frigid lake, throwing him into dark and disorienting memories and leaving him struggling for air. He glanced away, squeezing his eyes and glad that Caroline was still staring ahead and not looking back at him.

"No," he said, low. The anger he felt earlier swirled with this sadness. It was her fault—all of this.
"I'm not going to—not after what you did."

"I swear to you that I didn't mean for that to happen," she said, voice growing softer yet quicker.

"You killed her, and you don't even feel anything," he said, voice wavering. "You just wave it away like it was nothing."

Caroline fell silent.

"You're wrong," she said a few seconds later. "I do feel remorse."

"Oh, come on—we both know you're lying through your teeth."

Caroline's knuckles tightened, and a fresh wave of emotion cracked and chipped at her steadily-crumbling façade of togetherness. "Listen to me. You were right," she said, voice wavering with an unusual amount of emotions. "I pushed things too far, and I really am a horrible person," she said, pulling an arm tight around her legs. "You have to believe me when I say I truly am sorry."

"But that doesn't change what happened," said Doug. "You can't know what it's like to be hunted down in this place, having time spin against you as you struggle to find a spot to hide. A part of you knows that it's useless because no matter what you do or no matter how well you think you've hidden yourself, they're going to find you," Doug said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "You can't know what that's like."

"Actually, I do," said Caroline. "And I'm going to be completely honest with you, which is something I haven't done in a long time. Listen to me: Aperture is my home, and has been for a long time. It's the only place I've ever felt truly comfortable. I just had the company that I have spent my entire life building up completely turn on me. And now they want me dead," she said.

"Come on. You can't hurt so many people and turn around and expect them to stay loyal. It doesn't work like that," he said, trembling with an intense hatred that flaring as hot as the incinerator in Chamber 19. "And after what you did to Chell, you deserve everything that's coming to you. When he comes back in this room, I won't hold back."

"No, please—" she said, voice shifting into an almost desperate whisper. "What I told you in Chamber 15—I meant it." Her voice was sincere—and yet, Doug knew that Caroline was one of the most manipulative liars he'd ever met.

"It wasn't worth it. None of this was," she said, throwing out her free arm to gesture to the facility beyond her—and the people no doubt searching for her.

And yet, the slight shakes and slips in her voice told Doug that she might not be lying this time. She didn't hold herself in a tall and intimidating way—and for once in her life, Caroline looked crumpled and defeated.

But she was still responsible for Chell's death, and nothing she could say could ever be worth a moment of his time.

"I'll do anything," she said. "Just stay quiet—I'm begging you."

One noise.

One loud clang or one loud yell would be all that it would take to draw attention to this vent and get Caroline out of his hair forever.

"I'll do anything," she said. "Just stay quiet—I'm begging you."

One noise.

One loud clang or one loud yell would be all that it would take to draw attention to this vent and get Caroline out of his hair forever.
He could claim it was self defense—she had killed Chell, after all, along with countless other people. And no matter how hard she’d tried to convince him that she truly was sorry—he wasn’t sure if he could accept that.

Both fell silent, a sparking tension zapping between them. They knew what was at stake here—what one stray voice above a hiss or a whisper could do.

One noise, and it would all be over.

Footsteps sounded in the distance. Greg’s voice echoed through the hallway once again. In less than a minute, he’d be in the room and all of this would be over. This truly was her last chance to try and convince him to remain silent.

She tore her eyes away from the slats of the vent and locked her gaze onto Doug.

"Please," she said. "Don’t let him find me."

—they’d finally done it. Though a both were a bit injured after their escapade, they’d managed to get Chell out of that impossible relaxation vault.

And now here they were, waiting for an elevator that would no doubt take them in the opposite direction they wanted to go—deeper into the facility.

But that was only temporary.

Soon enough he’d figure out a way to get her out of this place and then come back for her, but for now he pulled her into a warm hug. For the most brief of moments, the two of them were actually safe—they’d made it out and they were free.

But Doug had no guarantee that things would stay that way..

"I think I know another way out—just trust me."

"I do," said Chell—her voice almost cracking. "Just please. Don’t let her find me again."

He hadn’t kept his promise.

Not a few moments later, he’d told Chell just the opposite of what had actually happened—that no matter what, he wouldn’t allow the lady to find her.

Caroline’s words cut through him, as jarring and sudden as if she’d slammed her fist against the air duct’s metal siding. What Caroline had said—it was far too close to what Chell said just days ago.

But he still had failed her—and he honestly wasn’t sure if he could let something like that happen again, and to another person.

Caroline’s gaze lingered for a haunting moment before she twisted back to the vent.

Greg entered the room once again, and his soft, searching calls more panicked and desperate than before.

"Caroline, come on—this is getting ridiculous."

Her entire posture sagged; her elbows drooped and her head sunk so that she was barely staring at
the vent at all. Her hands barely clung to the vent—contrasting her white-knuckled grip from before, and she let go with one hand altogether and slipped into a sitting position. At least here she could sit without having to bend forward too much.

Caroline leaned her head against the wall of duct and pulled in her knees. It was almost as if she knew that this was the end—that she only had moments of freedom left in her life.

Doug opened his mouth.

A tremor ran through Doug as he opened his mouth—just looking at Caroline and seeing how utterly defeated she looked—and his throat constricted. He couldn't do it.

Doug Rattmann said nothing.

______________________________________________________

Caroline was, without doubt, a horrible and awful woman.

She was a killer—though never in a direct way. People simply vanished off the face of the earth. So many employees and test subjects had been riddled by bullets or fell into acid or found themselves transferred to a department working on a dangerous, deadly experiment. And those she took a personal interest in—like Chell—suffered even worse fates.

And yet—as he watched her sink even further into the floor, accepting of her fate and yet clinging to the slightest bit of hope that perhaps Doug wouldn’t say anything and that somehow she’d make it out of here alive—Doug felt his anger dissipate and his stomach twist.

He couldn't do it.

She was a completely different woman than she'd been hours before—genuinely sorry and genuinely scared for once in her life. He'd never seen her like this, and he wasn't sure if he ever would again.

Caroline was a horrible person, yes—but she didn't deserve to die. Not like this.

Because despite all of the terrible things she had done, Caroline still deserved a shot a redemption.
Chapter 20 - Ship Overboard

Click.

The weighted storage cube clicked into place. A yellow checkmark lit up the exit.

A bell gave a cheerful two-part chime.

DING-ding.

A triumphant tune blared at the test's completion—cut off by Cave Johnson's recording a moment later.

"I don't even know why we're bothering making recordings this far ahead," he said, giving a disbelieving cough. "These subjects can barely make it through the simple tests, much less these. They're too hard." His voice dipped, and Chell could almost picture him folding his arms and leaning across a desk to speak to the sitting-straight-in-her-chair Caroline.

"Sir, there's nothing wrong with the tests," she said. "We just need to improve the quality of subjects."

"—still a waste of time," he said, voice muffled.

"Sir," said Caroline, almost insistent. "You're still recording."

A pen clattered on the desk. Chell heard a faint squeak, and the sound of papers shuffling and clothes rustling.

"Oh! Well, it's not like anyone's going to hear this—and if you are hearing this, test subject, then congratulations! Aperture Science thanks you for your outstanding dedication to science. Go on and relax for a few minutes while Caroline figures out some sort of reward to get you—and when you get out of here, please keep your testing experience to yourself."

Chell barely heard their voices as the final chamberlock clicked open. Her shoulders heaved and her knees trembled, but she hustled onwards and smiled as the door hissed closed behind her.

She'd done it.

In every chamber, she forced herself to work out the entirety of the puzzle before making her first move. She went over each possibility and each calculation countless times until she felt absolutely certain that she'd left no margin for error.

So many times she had stumbled and slipped and scrambled back to safety, thankful for her foresight in installing the Advanced Knee Replacements. More than once she'd misjudged a distance and underestimated her necessary momentum and found herself clinging to the tips of an edge—and the only thing that kept her from slipping was a combination of miracles and sheer willpower.

Even as she solved each test, part of her always quaked with the fear. Overlooking something simple in a place like this meant death.

But she *wouldn't* fail these tests.
And with each successful fling through portals and across acid pits, confidence flared to life within her, even though Chell never allowed herself any celebration. She was good at testing, yes—but it wasn't something she'd ever wanted to be good at.

Still, she was grateful for these newfound skills. She truly was alone in Old Aperture, and she couldn't rely on Doug to rescue her a second time.

Even if he had returned to their hideout and saw it empty, he wouldn't know where she had gone—and certainly wouldn't go down to the testing tracks to look for her. It was just like what she told herself back in that relaxation vault: if she wanted to get out of this place, she'd have to do it herself.

Chell gently slid the Quantum Tunneling Device off of her shoulders and set it gently on the ground. She couldn't risk damaging the internal components any further, especially after all of the crash-landings she'd suffered today. But Aperture built their equipment to last—she had no reason to worry.

Carting around the device through those chambers had left her with sore shoulders and sore abs and a sore spine. Her legs ached from the falls; her left hand tingled from holding up the operational end of the device for hours. Pain spiked in her right hand with every accidental twinge.

She let her head roll back and rest against the catwalk's edge as she slid to the ground. She arched her feet, stretching out her toes and letting her heel springs flex. Walking on her toes was a skill she had yet to master, even with the support of the Advanced Knee Replacements. A quiet moment passed, and then Chell gave a soft, shuddering laugh of relief.

She'd proved Caroline wrong.

It took her hours upon hours, but she'd managed to get through each test without being fatally injured. So if this was the most deadly testing track Aperture had to offer, then she could take on anything this place threw at her.

Chell couldn't wait to get back to the Borealis.

The promise of plastic-tasting water and an old mattress to collapse into had been enough to push her through those last difficult chambers. Even those beans sounded delicious after hours without food.

She couldn't wait.

Chell sped through the hallways outside of the testing track, zipping across catwalks with ease. As soon as that room's door slipped into view, she quickened her pace and threw her hands against the handle.

The door squeaked, but did not move.

Chell pushed again, turning her shoulder into the door and shoving until her face darkened and her arms quivered. She exhaled, chest heaving, and then pressed again and again.

The door didn't open.

"No. Come on," she said, voice ragged. "Come on."

She needed to get back in there—she'd been stupid to leave there before. After all the trouble they'd gone through to escape the upper levels, she'd almost thrown it all to waste.
She pounded her good hand against the door, face slipping into a heartbroken expression.

This door wasn't opening, and she'd need to find a new place to hide out. Chell twisted, letting her head fall back and clang against the cold metal of the door. Her eyes strained up and focused on the out-of-place ship looming above her.

Perhaps something onboard the ship could help her.

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The *Borealis*.

Chell rolled her shoulders and stared up at the ship. She didn't know much about it, other than that it was an abandoned Aperture project—just like all of the other vitrified experiments locked away behind thick, blast-proof doors. Doug hadn't gone into detail. Then again, he hadn't had a reason to. No point in taking the time to explain a boat's complete history, even if that boat was stranded in the middle of a salt mine and nowhere near water.

And yet among all of those piled crates and stacked boxes, there *had* to be something useful onboard.

A metal pathway zigzagged up the right side of the dry dock, switching back and forth and twisting to the side to connect with the ship. It was the only way to get onboard—besides, of course, attaching herself to one of those cranes and magically hoisting herself up. So Chell moved, walking over to the right side of the dry dock. She didn't know what was over here; the two times she'd been here, she had clung to the left side.

Not that they were much different—both had sheer rock walls tinted blue, and little pathways and staircases tacked on to their sides. But as Chell moved towards the ramp, an indent in the wall caught her attention.

The flatness of the rock wall made it impossible to see the tiny alcove unless she stood at the perfect angle. It wasn't anything particularly fancy—just a ledge cut away from the stone. But on that ledge, she spotted a device that made her heart jump.

A telephone.

A black cord jutted out from the phone's side, snaking through staples and loops and worming its way up to the rest of the facility. It wasn't the phone itself that was special—she'd seen plenty of these within the offices at Aperture. But every time she'd tried to call, she'd encountered an error: all of the phones had only been connected to the company's grid, and not to the outside world.

She glanced at the plaque hanging above it—simply reading 'Telephone'—and reached for the slick handle with a burst of hope. A sheet of paper hovered over the phone itself, and Chell leaned in.

Crisp, yet feminine writing stretched across the page, and Chell gave a small frown as she read it.

For EMERGENCIES ONLY.

Then, in tiny, loopy letters:

*Thank you.*

Chell gave a hint of a smile. This phone *had* to be connected to the outside world—and some
Aperture employee must have used it enough for personal business that Caroline (or someone else with distinctly feminine handwriting) had to come down here and write that reminder.

She ripped off the paper and tossed it aside, then reached for the telephone. She cradled it against her shoulder, dial hum whining in her ears. And with each passing moment, the sound grew more unnerving and more insistent. She reached her good hand toward the keypad.

Her mind went blank.

For one brief, panicked moment her thoughts darted though the maze of her mind. She overturned memories and sifted through emotions—she needed to remember her mother's phone number. This wasn't something she could forget, and especially not now.

The numbers came to her in a burst of fear-induced clarity.

She punched in the number quickly and readjusted the telephone with her right hand. The dial tone switched to a calling one as her call reached out across the country.

Riing.

Riiiiing.

All she wanted to do was hear her mother tell her that it was okay—that all of this was a mistake, and that this whole thing was a terrible idea.

Riiiiing.

Chell chewed at a fingernail, willing for her to just pick up the phone. Even if she hung up a moment later, all she needed to hear was her voice.

Riiiiiiing.

Riiiiiiing.

Click.

"Hello?" she said, voice coming out more accusing than friendly. "Who is this?"

"Mom," said Chell, giving a choked yet relieved exhale. "You picked up!"

"Chell—why are you calling?" she said, and she heard shuffling on the other end. "Did you even look at the clock?"

"Well, no, but—" she said. "I just needed to hear you."

She heard Judith clear her throat, though her voice remained groggy as if she'd just been woken up from a deep sleep. "But why are you calling now, of all times? You can talk to me when you get here," she said, and then gave a slight inhale. "And I really can't wait to get a closer look at that portal device. I've been theorizing for days as to the mechanics behind it—but seeing it for myself and breaking down the physics behind it," she said, and Chell could almost see the wistful smile on her face, "well, I'd give anything."

Chell braced her shoulder against the wall, just savoring her voice. Somehow, even though she tore her down more than she helped her, hearing Mossman's voice made things better—as if she really could keep going on and moving forward.
She paused, and confusion crept in as the fog from sleep drifted away. "Hold on—Chell. You guys should be here already. Where are you?"

Chell braced herself against the wall, happiness flooding out of her like a popped water balloon. "Aperture," she said. "But Mom, she knows—"

"Wait, who knows?" she said.

"Her," she said, a note of fear in her voice. "Caroline. She KNOWS and she's known this entire time and she was just waiting until we tried something and then she locked me in a room," she said, pulling in air. "And then she—she tried to kill me and now I don't know how to get out of here—"

"Chell. Slow down and breathe," said Judith. "Now where are you in Aperture?"

"I—" she paused, breaths heaving. She glanced back at the tilting ship. "I'm beneath the enrichment center—down in the 70's section. There's a boat here—"

"Wait," she said, a hint of surprise in her voice. "Turn around and tell me what the name on the ship says. If it's what I think it is, I might be able to get you out of there."

Chell flipped around once more, gaze darting over the ship's name three consecutive times just to make sure she'd read it correctly. "It's the Borealis," she said.

Judith Mossman gave a slight gasp. "So it does exist," she said. "Years ago I heard rumors that Aperture was experimenting with large-scale teleportation, but then dropped the idea altogether. But if they still have a working prototype—"

"Just get me out of here," said Chell, almost a whisper.

"I will, Chell. I promise," she said. "You're smart; I know you are—and I need you to do something for me. That ship can teleport you out of there, but you're going to have to go on there and activate it yourself."

Chell swallowed, but said nothing.

"Can you do that?"

She gave a hesitant nod, even though no one could see it. "I—I think so."

"I'll be right here," said Judith. "Just come right back after you find it—but DON'T activate anything yet. I've got to know what I'm dealing with before I can give you any more instructions."

Chell set the phone receiver on its side, then darted up the winding path to the ship.

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Bzzzt-t. The material emancipation grill passed over her like a burst of static as she moved into the ship's bridge. She wasn't sure why a boat might need to guard against unwanted testing materials, but she was at least glad that she'd set down the Quantum Tunneling Device before walking around up here.

It had taken her long enough to wind her way up and find this room. If this boat followed some sort of standard layout, Chell wouldn't have known—she wasn't familiar with ships at all.

Thankfully, the Borealis wasn't an ocean liner or an oil rig; it was simply a moderately-sized cargo ship. And from up here, it seemed much smaller than it looked.
Chell gave a subtle frown as Cave Johnson's voice came through tiny speakers.

Was there any place in Aperture he hadn't prerecorded messages for?

"If you're hearing this, then welcome to the bridge of Aperture's first ship! Now, I'm sure you're wondering—why does Aperture even have a ship? We're in a salt mine, not next to an ocean. But before I answer that question, let's talk about teleportation.

"Here at Aperture Science, our greatest success has been the creation of a man-sized rip in time and space. Now that's great for experimenting with, but it doesn't have many practical applications. That's where this ship comes in.

"We're working on some experiments right now—just down the hall, actually—to see what sort of effects large-scale teleportation has on the human body. And if they're successful, the possibilities here are endless. We could send this boat anywhere on the planet in a span of a few minutes!" said the recording, a bit garbled from the low-quality speakers. "I'm all for firing it up now and seeing what happens, but Caroline here—" he broke off for a moment, most likely glancing around to make sure she wasn't around, "—insists that we start with small scale tests. Take it slow. Wouldn't want to lose the ship and everyone on board, after all, heh."

Chell could only imagine him sitting up here in this room, feet propped against the desk and recording device in his hands as he looked out and across the dry dock.

"Anyways, hang in there until we finish those experiments. You'll get to teleport the ship soon enough."

The message cut off, and Chell felt a tiny burst of hope. The Quantum Tunneling Device—a supposedly unstable, unpredictable portal creator—never gave her any problems. A large-scale version of that shouldn't be any different.

With this boat, she could get out of Aperture now.

She twisted, glancing around at unfamiliar gauges smudged white with a million tick marks, and darkened bulbs that would no doubt light up when the ship was 'powered up.' But none of these things had labels; a ship's navigator was expected to know which gauges were which, after all.

Chell couldn't even drive a car yet—much less a boat stranded in a salt mine.

And yet she looked around anyways, struggling to figure out how to use this boat to get out of this place. Though teleporting a ship like this may come with a few risks, Chell really had nothing left to lose. She didn't care where she ended up at this point—she just needed to get out of here.

A green-tinged computer screen caught her eye. Chell used the side of her hand and brushed away a thin layer of dust, then leaned forward to blow away the rest. Specks of gray swirled up; Chell coughed once.

Chell pressed down on the keypad, but the screen didn't light up.

Not good.

Chell flipped around, darting along the edge of the control room toward what looked like a power switch. A lever jutted out from the wall on the opposite side of the room, and she reached up and pulled with her left hand.

Red tinged her face as she strained against years of disuse. Chell pulled harder, and with an
earsplitting screech, the lever slipped and then slammed into her thighs with an earsplitting screech. Chell winced, stepping back and rubbing at her legs.

*Beeeep. Beeeep—eep.*

Flashlights lights flared to life, accompanied by a shrill siren. Beneath her feet, the ship trembled. The screen on the table flashed to life.

Light green letters lit up against a deep green screen, the letters and numbers themselves looking like they belonged on an alarm clock rather than a computer.

**ENTER COORDINATES**

The end of the sentence blinked, and Chell blinked back. The screen flashed, replacing the blanks with a random assortment of cycling numbers. A miniature image of a globe blinked, different specks lighting up with specific coordinates.

It paused, flashing again.

**ENTER COORDINATES**

Chell froze. So *this* was what she was supposed to find for her mother. She'd told her not to touch anything—and Chell knew that in a minute she could go and ask for the specific coordinates to get her as close to New Mexico as she possibly could.

But while she was thinking, the screen idled and another message popped up.

**SLEEP MODE ACTIVATED**

**POWERING DOWN**

Chell panicked, jumping forward and pressing at the keys. She'd already turned on the boat's power, and she didn't know of any other way to get this working again. Letting the boat power off would be a terrible idea, and Chell couldn't risk losing this chance.

*Click.*

**COORDINATES ACCEPTED**

A countdown clock on the wall flared to life.

4:59:00

Oh no.

Oh *no.*

"If you're hearing this you're an idiot. Yes, you. The one who pulled the goddamned lever. This experiment—if you couldn't already tell by the posters we plastered up—has been discontinued. Closed off. Gone. Done," he said, grumbling. "We've gotten ourselves in deep enough water with the disaster that was the small scale-experiments. Trust me, it's not you I'm worried about. Go get
your skin flipped inside out for all I care—I'm more concerned about the facility. Pull that lever and you'll turn that ship into scrap metal and take out part of this facility while you're at it. So whoever pressed that button—get out of there, because you are fired," he said.

She couldn't stay on this ship.

If Cave Johnson—usually so flippant as far as safety concerns went—thought this ship's teleportation was a bad idea, it must be serious. Chell bounced on her feet and moved out the door. As she craned her neck upward, she realized for not the first time that she was near the top of the ship. Antennas and rotating equipment—stone-sill earlier in the breezeless dry dock—whirred to life, windmilling aimlessly.

A tremor rocked the boat. Chell's legs buckled and she staggered back into balance. Apparently she didn't have her sea legs yet.

The countdown timer clicked with each beat, the sound identical to those she'd heard in the testing track.

Another test.

That's what she had to think of this as—another test of her ability, another trial of her grace under the pressure of an impending deadline. She had a limited time to get off this ship and hope that her mother could help.

She wasn't sure if she could fix this.

Chell sprinted across the boat's main area, grateful that she was underground, and that some splash of water couldn't lap over the sides and make everything slick. She kept her fingers curled along the railings as she sped her way out and onto the walkway. Though heights didn't scare her, that open edge did.

The whining blare of the gathering portal increased, and as Chell glanced back she saw a wobbly, turquoise substance spread around the ship like a massive and misshapen bubble. From here, it seemed as transparent as a material emancipation grill, but with flecks swirling from it like from the edges of an opened portal.

Her ponytail whipped against the sides of her face as she tore down the last few switchbacks. She scrambled at the slick surface of the phone, clamping her hands around it as she held it to her ear.

"Chell?" said Judith. "What's going on? What's that sound?"

"The ship," she said, out of breath. "It's—"

Another blare sounded from the Borealis, and Chell flipped around and then back to the phone. "I didn't mean to—" she said, raising her voice.

"Slow down. What happened?"

"I found the control room. There was a computer and it kept cycling through coordinates—then, when I didn't push anything it was going to shut down so I pressed—"

"I told you not to touch anything," she said, initially annoyed but switching into concern. "Here, just punch in these new numbers—"
"I can't," said Chell. "There was a switch—I accidentally powered it on and this whole boat's going
to disappear in a few minutes and I can't get on there because if I do it'll kill me," she said, growing
more and more hysteric. "I just don't know what to do."

"Chell. You need listen to me," she said. "Get out of Aperture. I don't care if it's on that ship or
another way—you just get away from there."

"I'm trying," said Chell, almost pleading. *Everything* she'd done so far was in an attempt to get out of
this place, and yet every time she'd tried she'd failed. "All of this has been for you, and I've been
trying as hard as I can. And you don't even care," she said, fighting back hot tears. "I just want to
come home."

"I know," she said. "And you're right—I'll come and get you, I promise. Just get out of there."

"But—" she said, breaking off. The ground rattled beneath her, as sudden and unsettling as if a large
wave had rammed into her. She fell to the floor, wincing and then cradling her right hand once again
against her chest. Her eyes squeezed shut.

The countdown timer ticked and the noise from gathering portal reached an almost unbearably loud
and echoing wail.

*Thunk.*

The portal opened, and white light cracked through the chamber like a bolt of lightening.

Wind hissed like static on a blown speaker, tearing into the area with all the force of a hurricane. Life
preservers flew from the sides of the ship. and within the span of a moment the wind reversed
directions. Her hair went from being plastered to her face to feeling as if it were being pulled from
her skull.

The suction increased and Chell scrambled, reaching out and grabbing at the closest object—the
phone receiver. The line stretched taut as she felt the wind pull her toward the boat and she wasn't
sure how long she could hang on to that slick phone—

*SNAP.*

The cord split and Chell skidded, bouncing then rolling toward the open portal. She gave a panicked
yell. This ship was going to drag her along with it; she just knew it—

—and with an amplified TSCHH, the portal disengaged.

A blast of cold air hit her like a storage cube to the chest. Darkness flooded back into the dry dock.
Lingering snow swirled in the air, dancing then drifting limply to the ground and dusting Chell in
white.

A single life-preserver rolled to the side, circled once, then flopped to the ground.

Slowly Chell pushed herself to her feet, broken phone still clutched in one hand. On her way up, she
scooped up the life preserver and pulled it close to her chest.

She glanced back at the dry dock, a wave of goosebumps running up her arms at the sight.

It was gone.

The entire ship was gone.
Planks lay splintered and scattered. The walkway Chell had used had vanished as well—ripped from the side of the wall and pulled into the portal surrounding the ship.

So it really had teleported—she ship was gone, and the technology had worked.

But at this point, Chell didn't care about the boat. She turned back toward the wall and her stomach flipped when she saw the snapped phone cord again.

The rest of the phone remained perfectly intact, tucked away in that tiny alcove and protected from the suction of the portal. But she had needed that phone to work. She needed to call her mother back and tell her that the Borealis was gone and that it hadn't worked—and more than anything, she needed a way to get out of Aperture.

Chell dropped the receiver and kicked it aside, then pulled the life preserver into a tight hug.

She could've screamed.

She wanted to cry and yell out in frustration because her last shot—her last way out of this place was gone. Her hideout was gone and the boat was gone and the phone was gone and she wasn't sure what she could do besides go back to the modern Enrichment Center and risk facing her once again.

Instead of reacting, Chell stared at the overwhelmingly empty dry dock. The ship was gone—and nothing she could do would ever bring it back. She’d been too curious for her own good, too stupid to listen to instructions for once and stay safe.

Perhaps she should've just boarded that ship. Almost anything would've been better than this utter failure.

Chell gave the life preserver one last squeeze before placing it near the exit of the dry dock. She didn't need it anymore, and besides—it was time to move on.

Creeaaak.

Chell pushed her way into another room.

Getting back to the elevator from the dry dock had been simple enough, especially with the help of the Quantum Tunneling Device. It was incredible as to how many surfaces lying around Aperture—even outside the testing tracks—were portal conductors.

It hadn't taken her long to make it to the 80's section of Aperture—and luckily, the few times she'd been down here on painting expeditions made it ever so slightly more familiar.

She'd made her way through empty, ever-lit hallways still glowing with a dim aura of silence. Catwalks crisscrossed between offices and labs and testing spheres, and more often than not every door handle she pulled at remained locked.

Except for this one, apparently.

Lights buzzed as they flickered on, revealing a checkerboard white-and-gray floor. A brownish-gray tinted the walls of the typical lab, accented by the shelving and equipment pushed to the sides.

But Chell took one look at the room and sighed in relief.

In the center of the room sat three bulky squares—quite possibly the most welcome sight she'd seen in a long time.
Beds.

She'd been looking forward to sleeping in that room behind the Borealis so much—and after having it ripped away from her earlier, she couldn't help but feel overjoyed.

Chell powered down her Quantum Tunneling Device and propped it against the wall. These weren't typical beds.

Thick cords trailed from the foot of them, snaking across the room and towards a tangled pile of cords attached to an overloaded outlet. Clear coverings, accented with thick and yellowed plastic, covered the beds and made them look like a cross between a sunroom and a coffin.

Chell paused, blinking.

These were relaxation pods.

Well, bulkier and distinctly more rectangular version of them.

Chell crouched to a small panel of buttons attached to the side of the bed and flipped her thumb beneath a switch. A row of lights flickered to life; something inside the glass hissed to life. The cover unlocked with a pop, and as Chell slid it back another announcement came on.

"Cave here," he said, then gave a thick, dry cough that made her thirsty just listening to it. "As you probably know, recently I've been making you lab boys work on a lot of things—but this one really is the one I should've been working on all along. Caroline and I have been throwing around this idea for years. It's called suspension, and ideally this 'stasis' will freeze the clock and keep the user just as they were when they entered the pod.

"This is perfect for the storage of test subjects, of course—create a queue and keep testing going for months once we create a backlog of subjects. We're still ironing out the details—but first, I've gotten my engineers to build something to keep me alive. As most of you know, I'm running out of time. And if we keep going at the rate we're going, we're not gonna find a cure to this damn moon rock poisoning until long after I'm dead. What I really need is time—and if they can get this 'stasis' thing to work, I might make it through this thing after all. Isn't that right, Caroline?"

"Yes, sir," said Caroline—though distracted and distant, as if she couldn't be bothered to look up from whatever she was doing in the other room.

"Anyways. If we can get this to work, it'll be a huge leap for science—and not just because I'll be able to stick around this place longer," he said. "Well. Back to work."

Chell left her hand on the glass covering the bed.

Everything about the relaxation pods scared her—the way they sealed shut around the person; the way the gas crept in and lulled the subject into a not-quite-dreaming yet not quite awake state. She'd never experienced it, and in that vault before she'd avoided it at all costs. She'd rather curl up on the cold floor than dare to go in there.

But tonight—today—whatever time of day it was—things were different.

This time, she wasn't trapped in a glass room. She had a choice in it this time—and while the floor was still an option, she wasn't going to try that again with actual beds around. More than anything else, Chell just needed a genuine good night's sleep.
She slipped into the square pod and leaned over the edge, punching in what she assumed to be the default wake-up time. That should be enough time to let her body relax and dream at catch up with all of the craziness she’d been through.

She readjusted herself, legs not even coming close to the bottom of the bed. These pods were much bigger than ones she'd seen before, and Cave Johnson had been much taller than Chell.

She reached up and pulled the glass covering, letting it glide and click into place like a sliding door into a backyard. She heard a hiss sound as the seal re-engaged and a few gas vapors seeped in.

In theory, these chemical processes of stasis would have no ill effects on her body—simply keep her body frozen in time while her mind recovered.

As she breathed in and out, her mind drifted back to the day's events.

She didn't want to be here anymore.

She wanted to be out of Aperture.

She wanted to live a calm, normal life.

And Chell didn't want to think about how so far she'd failed at every single thing she'd tried here—and she'd failed spectacularly while she was at it. Honestly she didn't know why she was deluding herself into believing things would change between herself and her mother. Who was she kidding?

She was a failure, and she'd never be able to regain that love she longed for.

And now, she was stuck down here. She was terrified. And she wasn't sure if she'd be able to make it out of Aperture.

Chell's eyes welled with tears, and she turned and buried her face into the pillow.

Sometimes, the black nothingness of sleep was easier than facing the truth.

She cried until the gasses kicked in.
Chapter 21 - Turn Left

Caroline's eyes watered in relief.

Though some miracle, Doug had remained silent throughout her assistant's examination of the room. Even after Greg left, he hadn't said anything. For a tense moment neither spoke, each struggling to interpret the other's actions—and of course, motivations.

"You can let go," said Doug, vaguely motioning at Caroline's ghostly white hands. "That grate's not going anywhere."

Caroline relaxed her grip and edged her hands away. Her fingers stretched out, hovering near the vent's edge and tensed in case the grate faltered and slipped. She held her breath, but as she began to realize that the vent would stay in place, she gave a heaving sigh of relief and slumped against the wall of the duct.

Her eyes fluttered closed. The dim, reflective lighting of the vent made her head ache, sending waves of exhaustion and strain pounding through her temples. She pressed her palms against her forehead and allowed her breathing to even out—to simply process that he had helped her.

"Thank you," she said, voice a shaky whisper.

Still trapped in his back corner, Doug said nothing. He would much prefer to be out of this place and on his way out of the facility. And besides—he had no obligation to help her any longer, especially after essentially saving her.

"Look," she said. "I know you helping me back there was a stretch. But please, this is just us talking. Like regular people," she said. "I still need to get out of here—and I know you have every reason to leave me here alone. But I am in deep trouble."

Doug shifted, rubbing his hands together. He pressed his fingers into the bridge of his nose, then gave a deep exhale.

"Fine," he said, voice low. "One chance. That's all I'm giving you."

Caroline leaned forward to rest her chin on her knees. She wrapped her arms around herself and gave a soft squeeze. A long moment passed before she spoke again. "This wasn't supposed to happen. None of this was," she said.

"Oh, and you think I planned for any of this?" Doug said, making a vague gesture toward the interior of the vent. "I should've just walked away after that first interview."

"Sometimes I think the same thing," said Caroline under her breath.

"You really mean that?"

"No," Caroline breathed. The word danced across her lips before disappearing.

She didn't mean any of what she said—and honestly, she would never have wanted a life without Aperture. Even imagining that possibility—that she hadn't accepted a job here—and she couldn't picture a different life. "I just wish I could've had a different ending," she said.
"So what now?" said Doug.

"Well, I was hoping you'd have an idea."

"Well," he said, hesitating. "It's not much, but I could go ahead. Scout out a path for you."

Caroline's expression twitched. "Oh, and you think you know this place better than I do?"

"Hey, I'm trying to help you," Doug hissed, disdain evident in his voice. "There's only one portal gun here. If I stick to the back areas they'll never see me."

"If they find you, you're done for."

"In that case," said Doug, shifting to his feet. "I won't be caught. And besides, it's you that they're looking for, not me. I can blend in—I look like an average scientist. You, on the other hand—" he said. "Well, there's only one Caroline."

"How do I know you'll come back?" she said, almost resigned. She didn't want to have to ask him to do this—but she didn't have any other options.

"You don't."

Her face slacked with something almost like disappointment. She wasn't sure what she expected—she was placing faith in a man that she hated, after all. "Then I'll wait here. Just go," she said. "After this, we can call things even between us. No hard feelings?"

"Don't push it," he said, grabbing at the portal device and powering it on. "After I come back, I'm out of this place. I'm done with Aperture."

Caroline gave a hesitant nod, then pushed at the grate. Doug needed to get out, and she was in the way. She clung to the edges and then hopped out of the vent, letting Doug crawl through before she hefted herself back in.

"Thank you," said Caroline softly. When the man glanced through the metal slats, she added a soft, "And good luck."

Without Doug, the silence felt suffocating.

Before—while she'd been trying to remain undiscovered—each noise felt incredibly loud and sent spikes of fear through her. But now, the gentle creaks and soft exhales of distant pistons only emphasized how truly alone she was.

But that was how she'd always wanted it, right? This was her wing. Not Cave Johnson's. Not anyone else's. This was only for her (and perhaps a few lucky others). And yet as she sat, alone and quiet in the vent, she couldn't help but think about how lonely it was back here.

She secured the vent covering again and crept back to the alcove Doug used earlier. She could certainly see why—compared to the duct itself, it was spacious.

Caroline rested her hand beneath her jaw, letting it slip into that bony area between her face and her neck. It dug in, uncomfortable and awkward, but she didn't readjust. Her feet slid forward together, and she pulled her arms beneath her outstretched legs and rested her cheek against them.

They were still out there. They were still looking for her.

And for all she knew, Doug Rattmann could be leading her directly into a trap—and honestly, it
wouldn’t surprise her. What was one more betrayal to a queen who built her kingdom on lies?

But she couldn’t dwell on what was out of her hands. Instead, she needed to think ahead and figure out what she would do after getting out of this vent—and getting out of Aperture.

Frankly, she wasn’t sure if the company would survive a week without her. This place was her home—but she couldn’t just walk back into Aperture. At least, not without backup.

Packing up her bags and leaving Michigan wasn’t an option. Caroline had nowhere else to go.

She’d cut ties with her relatives long ago—a few accidentally, the rest purposefully. She could only take so much of their mindless gossip and pointless drama; she could only handle so many dirty looks whenever her boss came up in their conversations. No matter how many times she denied it, there would always be speculation that her relationship with Cave was more than strictly professional.

She supposed she could stay at one of Cave’s old houses.

He owned—well, used to own—a house a few towns away, in a more rural location. It was meant to be a vacation home.

She gave a small laugh. Neither of them had ever used it. And like so many of his other possessions, the ownership transferred over to her upon his death. It was surprising how much he’d left her, especially compared to what he left his own family.

Then again, he was just like her—more than willing to cut ties with family when necessary, and even when unnecessary.

They had both poured so much into Aperture, but that hadn’t been without its costs. With a dull and detached feeling, Caroline realized that she didn’t have any friends outside of these walls. There was no one out there she could turn to; no one she could call in the middle of the night and ask for help.

It wasn’t until now that the reality of her decision came back to slap her in the face.

Caroline had no one, and it had been this way for years.

It won’t be enough.

The words circled through her mind, nagging at her and sending a pang of disappointment through her. After all that she had done, after the years she poured into this place, she only wished that someone could have warned her that—despite all she’d done for this place and the contributions she’d made—in the end it wouldn’t be enough.

She tried her hardest, and perhaps that was the problem. Throwing away human lives in a rush to get results and progress science—perhaps that wasn’t the way she (or rather, Aperture)—should have gone about things at all.

Caroline pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes and heaved a deep breath. Leaving herself to her thoughts was too painful. She was simply so tired, so physically and emotionally exhausted that all she wanted to do was sleep.

She gave another shaky sigh and squeezed her hands together.

Slipping backward from her sitting position, she let her head rest in the tight corner of the room. Her
face tilted to the right and against the wall. Exhaustion washed over her; Caroline closed her eyes.

At this point, the black nothingness of sleep was better than facing the failure she'd become.

She dreamt of Aperture.

It was only fitting that even in sleep she couldn't escape this place.

The setting swirled to life in her mind's eye, tinged with a dull yellow as though from a long-forgotten memory. Colorful designs patterned the floors and furniture, relics of fashions long since gone out of style. People bustled about. They chattered and talked and laughed with a different cadence, a different quality of voice that reminded her of radio dramas from decades ago.

This was a memory, but Caroline didn't notice. In her dreams those sort of realizations were lost on her.

Papers rose in stacks on her cramped desk, swaying and fluttering in the drag created when people rushed past. A rising sense of panic gripped her—despite working for Aperture for eleven months now, she hadn't adjusted to the sheer amounts of work-related stress.

As Cave Johnson's personal assistant, so much pressure was placed upon her. Besides the endless miles of paperwork that needed to be completed each and every day, she was tasked with every other job a typical secretary might have—making appointments, setting up meetings, answering phones, sifting through test results, among countless other tasks.

Her largest unofficial job, though, was keeping Cave Johnson balanced. She had to be careful as to what information she heard, and how she presented it. If anything too negative happened down in the labs, she had to put a positive spin on it. Otherwise, a failure in science could easily shift him into an extremely unpleasant mood.

People would be fired; papers would be ripped and thrown. Sometimes she swore he acted more like a child throwing a fit than a grown man. And whenever he sunk into one of these bad moods, he made sure to drag the rest of the facility down with him.

So it was her unspoken duty to stay upbeat and keep Cave Johnson positive as often as possible—probably the hardest part of her job.

Today, she wasn't sure if she could handle it.

It was getting late, and the vast majority of the employees had already left for home. Caroline tugged at the knot of her scarf and pulled it away from her neck. She gave the colorful scarf a few twists, then tied back her hair. The time for looking pretty and presentable passed by hours ago.

She wished she could go home and flop onto her bed and sleep until mid-afternoon, but work called. As badly as she wanted to leave, she didn't have a choice but to stay here and finish this—even if it took hours.

An abandoned, cooling cup of coffee sat on the corner of her desk, forgotten in her busy haze of work. Minutes ticked by; her eyes drooped. Without that extra boost of caffeine, she felt progressively sleepier.

She hefted her typewriter to desk's center and threaded in a fresh sheet of paper. Her fingers clacked against the keys; she easily slipped into a rhythm. The typing sounds mixed with the steady ticks of the clock.
Behind her she heard the soft voice of Cave Johnson, muffled by his closed wooden door. He’d been locked in there all day, speaking on the phone for hours to some other science big-shot. She’d barely seen him all day.

Focus, Caroline.

Caroline glanced back at the paper, eyebrow creasing. While her mind had drifted to thinking about Cave, she’d made a few typos in her previous sentence. She reached up and scrolled back the typewriter, punching at the correct keys and turning the incorrect letters into a smudge of indecipherable ink. So she hadn't fixed it—but still, it was marginally better than leaving the typo.

She blinked a few times then returned to typing, but within the hour the words on the page blurred together. She could barely think, much less work.

With a slight push she moved the typewriter, then leaned forward and crossed her arms. She leaned her forehead against her forearms and closed her eyes. All she needed was a short rest to chase this weariness away, and then she could get back to work.

Caroline inhaled sharply, giving that puffy sigh people gave when unexpectedly awoken. Papers crinkled as she straightened. The paperwork—a flash of panic slipped through her. She still needed to do it and she’d fallen asleep and she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to get it done on time, and oh dear had anyone seen her crashed at her desk—

This had never happened to her before in Aperture—and she wasn’t sure how long she’d been here, but the hot embarrassment made her feel as if she’d been woken up after falling asleep in a class.

She took a breath and glanced around, glad to find the room as deserted as it had been the previous night.

Caroline tugged at her scarf and let her hair cascade around her shoulders. She combed her fingers through it twice, then stretched out her arms and leaned back.

Something warm slid back from around her shoulders. Caroline froze and traced her fingertips back, feeling at a thick and heavy fabric on her—a fabric she didn't recognize. She twisted and yanked the cloth forward to get a better look at it.

It was a soft, tan coat with a warm flannel interior. It was undoubtedly a man's coat—something heavy-duty enough to keep anyone warm through a cold Michigan winter.

But it wasn't her coat, and she wasn't sure how it had gotten placed around her shoulders.

She folded it across her arm and set it to the left of her desk, resolving to figure it out later. Work took priority over unsolved mysteries. But as she turned back, a loose sheet of lined paper caught her attention. It was no official document—simply a note scrawled in instantly-recognizable handwriting.

Noticed you'd fallen asleep and didn't want to wake you. Work IS important, but please—after you get done with what's necessary for keeping this place going, just go home. Get some sleep. Take a break. Can't have my assistant get too tired.

Just leave that coat in my office—and don't worry. I'll survive the cold for one night.

Signed in curvy, extravagant letters, C. Johnson.
Caroline gave a half-hearted smile and tucked the note away.

Perhaps her terror of a boss wasn't so bad after all.

Caroline jolted awake and inhaled a sharp, cool breath. This was no false awakening. That dream had been a memory of her first time falling asleep at Aperture—and in the decades since, she'd done it countless other times. After all, she had a lot of work to do, and not a lot of time to do it.

She reached a hand and brushed away a few stray hairs in her face, fabric shifting and rustling beneath her.

She frowned, glancing down to see an unfamiliar dirty white lab coat draped across her like a blanket. Immediately, she pushed it aside and glanced around for Doug. It had to be him—this coat couldn't belong to anyone else.

He sat on the edge where vent met room, looking rather uncomfortable and cramped. "You looked cold," he said, giving a dismissive shrug. "And I didn't want to disturb you."

"Thank you," Caroline said absently. She tossed his coat lightly, and he clapped his hands into the soft fabric to catch it. "Sorry," she said. "Everything just hit me at once, I suppose."

Her mind drifted back to that dream and back to that coat. Cave's had been warmer and cozier of course, but she still appreciated the gesture on Doug's part. For someone who disliked her so much, he certainly showed a lot of compassion.

Bits and pieces of the memory drifted into focus, bringing the contents of Cave's note to the forefront of her mind. She couldn't help but agree that she needed a break—getting out of Aperture and just resting for a while sounded like the best thing in the world.

"I went as far as I could go—hit a room full of turrets and had to turn back, though," Doug said softly. "You'll have to get by them yourself."

"Ah," said Caroline, voice shifting with recognition. "The turret room. I placed several of those along the edges of my wing—at least, in less-secure places. Can't have anyone wandering in here. Since their instillation I've cut down on trespassers one hundred percent. Before you, of course."

"In that case, good luck getting by them," said Doug. He rubbed at his sore arm, cringing at the memory of bullet biting flesh. "They're brutal."

"Sorry about that," said Caroline, wincing internally. "I—well, I'm sorry about everything. I really don't know why I'm even still here—but what you did means a lot. Thank you," she said. "And I promise you I'm not going to forget this."

"Just don't count on it happening again," said Doug, giving a resigned sigh. Even he wasn't sure what had possessed him to not only remain silent but help this woman. He shifted, then passed the portal device over to Caroline. "I didn't run into anyone on my way up their or my way back, but they're out there. This won't be easy."

"I know," said Caroline. "But you've gotten out of here, so it is possible."

Doug gave a small nod of thanks and appreciation. "Good luck," he said.

Caroline's gaze softened. "And you too," she said.
Curls of acidic fumes drifted up from a massive pile of sludge. Caroline wrinkled her nose, then continued crossing the walkway. A common by-product of failed experiments, Aperture simply had a lot of acid and not enough places to store it.

Thankfully, it doubled as a testing element.

And while it normally filled pits within test chambers, the overflow tended to slide its way out into any available open space. Back when tests sat inside spheres instead of tracks, Aperture had collected their possibly radioactive sludge into what was affectionately nicknamed 'the lake'—an enormous area beneath the spheres now filled with acid.

Now, though, at least they had other uses for the acid. The fumes given off by it tended to be just as toxic as the acid itself—so the scientists constructed a immense neurotoxin 'generator' to convert the fumes into someone more concentrated and deadly.

Caroline wasn't sure what they could use so much gas for, but she had wholeheartedly endorsed the idea. They could figure out more scientific uses for it later.

She crossed the room in hurried, clipped steps and flipped around a corner. A skeletal set of metal stairs rose, dropping off into a compact room.

A splash of color on the far wall caught her eye.

It was the same symbol used to signify an exit in test chambers—the figure of a running man. But instead of standard green or black, a vibrant red painted the walls.

You're not even going the right way.

Air screamed and hissed from a broken tube.

Black handprints smeared the walls. Doug had been here—Caroline could just picture him pressing his hands against the panels for balance, then kicking at the tube again and again until cracks spiderwebbed across the thick plastic.

Her gaze drifted over the messy panels, breath hitching as she caught sight of scrawled lines of text to her right.

the cake is a lie

the cake is a lie

the cake is a lie

the cake is a lie

Where do you think you're going?
Sometimes, his signs and signals for her changed.

One time—in a room full of dancing, crisscrossing pistons, a black arrow with swirling circles directed her upwards. Underneath, in large letters he wrote: OVER HERE.

She followed his scrawled directions through area after area, squeezing her way through tight escapes and crashing into a few hard falls. Caroline was never meant to be a test subject—she couldn't make every leap, and she couldn't place every portal correctly the first time around.

Mistakes were inevitable; Caroline was just glad that nothing serious had happened yet.

This place wasn't safe for her.

---

Because I don't think you're going where you think you're going.

---

Squeak.

Caroline clung to the hard plastic vent, glancing out and over the edge. Beneath her—and directly above a pit of acid—sat another white plastic tube perpendicular to hers.

Honestly, that man couldn't have picked a more crazy, impractical plan. It was almost as if Doug Rattmann was trying to get her killed. But his roundabout directions lead her this far, and Caroline wasn't about to turn back now.

She edged her way off the tube and dropped, slamming hard against the plastic. Her fingers skidded and scrambled to cling to black edges with her free hand, while the other clutched the portal device as if her life depended on it—because in all honesty, it did.

Caroline gave a heave as she centered herself on the pipe.

She'd made it—but judging by the hissing of the piston in the room adjacent, she still had countless challenges left.

---

You should have turned left before.

---

With a hand pressed against the wall, and Caroline leaned her weight onto her back foot. She rolled her ankles then shifted forward again, giving a pained flinch.

She hadn't landed correctly.

Lasers had danced and bullets had skimmed by her as she'd picked her way across the turret-infested room. No wonder Doug turned back earlier. Besides being deadly, disabling the sentries required getting up and personal—sneaking up behind them, knocking them over, then dodging the dying fire.

She gave a silent thanks as she engaged the device's recently-added gravity-manipulation feature. With synthesized cries they cascaded toward the hard concrete, and Caroline couldn't have been more grateful.

But the combination of angled panels and falling from dizzying heights without the aid of long-fall
boots resulted in one ugly landing.

A flash of pain turned her vision white as she gave another experimental bounce on her knees. She pulled in a breath and braced herself against the wall, resting her forehead on her outstretched arm.

Caroline wasn't a young lady any more.

She couldn't bounce back from anything like a cube against repulsion gel. She wasn't that overly-cheerful and energetic voice she was years ago—the one she'd heard in her dream. Right now, she could barely walk—and if she had to run anywhere, she would fail.

She was old and she was tired and she didn't know how much of this she could take.

Caroline limped around the corner with as much poise as she could muster.

Her steps were quiet, absorbed and muffled by the expansive empty space. Catwalks, suspended high by cables, zigzagged back and forth across the gray-blue haze. Dark red support beams extended upward, reaching up and disappearing into the distance. It really was rather beautiful in an industrial sort of way.

She assumed she had exited her wing from perhaps the left or right side—tumbling through tubes and crawling her way through the back areas had left her disoriented as to her location in the facility. Maintenance areas like these were rarely used—especially in her wing, when she had no reason to stray from the main paths.

"Caroline!"

The voice boomed across the space, and Caroline jumped. At the far end of the walkway, she picked out the source of the voice—her assistant.

She twisted, immediately moving to head in the opposite direction. She didn't care if she had to go back to that awful turret room—she needed to get away from him.

"Come on, wait!" he said. "This isn't something you can just walk out on."

"Watch me," Caroline hissed, picking up her pace.

He watched her march away with a determined limp for a moment, then called out to her again. Running after her would be unnecessary and unproductive. If anything, she'd injure herself further.

"Caroline, please," he said.

She paused, turning back to glare at him. An arm crossed over her stomach, hand tightening around her opposite arm. For a moment her look rendered him silent, then sent him scrambling for his words.

Caroline switched directions and moved ahead, keeping her gaze focused on a spot past him—as if he wasn't standing in her way at all. But her assistant did not move; Caroline slowed to a stop a few arm-lengths away.

"Look, I'm going to make this easy for you," said Caroline. "Just step aside. Pretend you never saw me."

Greg shifted on his feet, spreading them shoulder-width apart. Caroline's hands clenched up, and she straightened her posture and looked him dead in the eye. The two were mirror-images of stubbornness—each waiting in vain for the other to give in.
"I trusted you, you know," she said, voice cold. "You've done everything I've ever asked for you. What changed?"

"I've been the assistant to the CEO for years now. That's my job—it's what I do," he said. "But you of all people would know how it feels to be stuck under someone's thumb for that long."

Caroline's gaze narrowed, but Greg only saw betrayal in her look.

"I have no idea what they promised you for this—but whatever it is, I hope it's worth it. Because if all of this was just about you wanting my job—" she broke off "—well, you can have it."

The weight of her words hung between them, cutting into Caroline like a snapped rubber band.

This place meant the world to her—but if it came between Aperture and her life, she couldn't justify staying here.

As she stared at him, Caroline noticed he seemed changed. Hardened, almost, with a crisp and confident posture. She gave him another look over, at his dark, dusty-red hair and clean-pressed shirt. He was younger than her, yes, but he looked far more like a well-respected, well-put together CEO than her.

On the other hand, Caroline had the look of someone who had gone to Hell and back. Her clothes were mangled and dirty; the bags beneath her eyes made her look as if she hadn't slept in days. With every shift on her knees, pain twinged through her—not to mention her slight limp with every step.

"It's yours," she said. "No strings attached. All you have to do is step aside."

Greg gave a reluctant exhale, resolve crumbling. "Fine," he said. He shifted to the handrail. "But if I—or anyone else—sees you, I won't stop them."

Caroline's gaze softened and she moved forward, bumping his shoulders as she went by. Her head bobbed with a nod of thanks for a brief moment, then shifted back to an outwardly-focused, inwardly panic-stricken face.

Greg stood there for a long moment, shoulders lowering as she limbered down the remaining stretch. She moved with as much of that broken strength she could muster—standing straight and moving sharp despite her slight limp.

He stretched out a hand for a split-second, mouth opening then closing.

He should have said something—should've asked one final question as to where she was headed, and how she planned to get there—but by the time the thought crossed his mind, Caroline was too far away.

And besides that, it wasn't as though he could help her now.

A sense of unease grew within her—a twisting, sickening sensation like watching the hot red of a sunburn spread across her body after a long day in the sun. She mentally retraced her previous path through the facility as the catwalk spilled into a standard hallway.

She wasn’t entirely sure where she was.

Like she realized before, she'd managed to get herself turned around within her own facility—her own wing, in fact. On any other day she would know her exact location—every hallway, every
Her spatial awareness was legendary, after all—it was the driving force behind her skill at designing testing chambers. Caroline had always been one to make tight, efficient chambers by figuring out just how walls and panels and platforms fit together within the confines of testing.

But for now, Caroline wasn't entirely sure where she was headed.

A plain white wall marked the hall's end, adorned by a single door and three small posters.

---

**Danger**

Admittance
To Authorized
Personnel Only

**Danger**

HIGH
VOLTAGE
CAUTION
This Equipment
Starts and Stops
Automatically

---

She pulled open the door and stepped into another bright corridor. On the far right she spotted another built-in keypad—the mark of any relatively secure or secretive place in Aperture.

Caroline turned left and moved past another closed door, still bent on getting out of here as quickly as possible. If her tentative guesses at her current location turned out to be correct, then there should be an exit around here somewhere.

A glass alcove caught her attention.

The box-like room split off from the main hallway, textured glass providing an atmospheric, warped view of the facility. A few swivel chairs sat scattered, one tipped over as if left in a rush.

Caroline glanced out the windows and into the deep blue haze, heart dropping like a shattered plate against the floor.

This hallway overlooked the Main AI Chamber.
Chapter 22 - Goodbye, Caroline

Goodbye, Caroline

This wasn't where she wanted to be.

No, this wasn't where she wanted to be at all.

Somehow she'd gotten turned around—taken a right instead of a left, and ended up in the most dangerous part of the facility.

Caroline twisted. A dead end sat to her left. A keypad-locked door blocked off her right. She refused to exit through the hallway she'd entered from—instead, she darted to the side. Her hand hovered over another doorknob. Distant and flat voices drifted in from the other side.

She hesitated, slipping her hand away. Back through the turret room it was, then. Perhaps she could find another place to hide out. Temporarily, of course. She inhaled as the volume of the voices grew, turning on her heels to speedwalk down the hallway.

Her stomach sank as she gave the open office door a final, darting look. She'd never be able to hide in a place so close to them. That was far too easy.

Caroline stopped running.

A sickening tightness spread through her chest as the door creaked open. She straightened, smoothing her shirt. A burst of laughter echoed as Henry told a joke to his co-workers, a particularly obnoxious laugh coming from a lady she recognized as Karla. After spending so many long hours searching, even the lamest joke triggered uncontrollable laughter.

Henry's smile vanished as he turned the corner.

"Caroline!" he stuttered, expression shifting from confusion to relief.

The lady of science immediately cut him off, her voice low and wavering. "Well, you found me. Congratulations." She kept her chin high and hands behind her back, wringing and pulling them as she spoke.

"After that," he paused, "misunderstanding, we'd just about given up on you." He studied her for a moment, unconsciously positioning himself between her and the doorway.

Another employee edged the door closed, lightly tapping the keypad. Flat musical chimes rang with each press, and Caroline watched the light in the corner flicker to red. Deactivated, of course. She doubted she could push through all four of them and get to that doorway even if she had an override code.

Caroline gave a shaky inhale, fighting against the thoughts screaming at her to sprint back to the turret room. Caroline was a tired woman—tired of running and tired of fighting. "It's..." she said, clearing her throat and squeezing her hands. "It's fine. I just needed some time."

"Just come to the Main AI Chamber and we'll all put this behind us," said Henry, "for now."

Panic flared inside of her, a sharp reminder that this was her final moment of freedom—and yet the emotion twisted her brain, making it impossible to think, impossible to focus, and impossible to...
escape.

She gave a reluctant nod, taking a few wobbly steps forward. Pain spiked through her leg, and Caroline leaned a hand on her knee. She wasn't even sure if she could make it through this last hallway, much less muster enough strength to break away. Caroline heard shuffling beside her, and then felt a hand—with a light yet firm grip—close around her arm. A preliminary measure to make sure they wouldn't have to chase her down again, she was sure.

Caroline reached out an arm across the shoulders of the woman beside her, leaning and turning Karla into a makeshift set of crutches. And surprisingly enough, the usually-complaining scientist obliged. She shifted her hand to support Caroline, helping to alleviate at least some of the pain as she limped down the hallway and into the Main AI Chamber.

As a door with red markings slid into the ceiling, Caroline stared at the lifeless mess of machinery.

What an ugly, hideous creation.

Clumped and tangled wires spread throughout the chamber, and hunks of metal dangled from the high ceilings. This computer was so messy and so unfinished, not at all like the sleek robot she'd envisioned.

And oh, Caroline hated it.

Even looking at it made anger flare up within her. She disliked the design like she disliked an awful haircut —only with time and a few adjustments would she ever grow comfortable with it. Perhaps she could make them draw plans for an alternate, sleeker design. It might take a while, but anything would be better than existing within that mangy heap of machinery.

And if they didn't, she'd simply figure out a way to alter her new body's outward appearance without significantly damaging her internal components.

She craned her neck upwards, giving a breathy huff of pain and half-wishing she could just black out and be done with this all. Caroline staggered forward, feeling the woman beside her tighten her grip on the older lady. Panels tiled across the area, ready to be rearranged at a moment's as she glanced around the surprisingly spacious room, —though cluttered with desks and computers and machinery —she spotted a relaxation vault perched along a set of tracks installed in the floor.

She paused, glancing over the chamber.

With patterned glass walls, a single bed, a plush chair in one corner and a toilet in another, she would have absolutely no privacy. It'd be worse than being trapped in a cage. "That's it?" she said, gaze narrowed.

Henry paused before speaking. "Hey, we added in that chair. And besides, it's just a standard vault. Did you expect us to build some luxury one just for you?"

"Well, yes," said Caroline. "It's the least you could do."

"If you didn't like the design, you should've said something earlier," he said, moving to Caroline's other side to help support her. "Many subjects complain about a lack of privacy. I'm just giving you what any other Aperture test subject would get."

"That's different," said Caroline. "Test subjects must be monitored at all times. We can't risk having any blind spots."
"Then it shouldn't be a surprise that we need to keep an eye on you," he said. "Especially if you're going to pull another stunt like that."

The automated portals opened, and Caroline hesitated. As much as she had fought to be free, it'd been a losing battle. And yet, it had been that way since she began working at Aperture. She'd sold her soul to this place. Even in death, she wouldn't be free of it.

She felt a gentle nudge to her shoulders, and took the final step into the relaxation vault. The portals hissed closed, and Caroline gave a sharp, wavering breath as the finality of her situation hit her.

These chambers were incredibly secure. Unless the portals opened again, she couldn't get out. Even Chell—with the help she'd gotten from Doug—couldn't have broken the glass surrounding the vault.

She stumbled across the room and then slipped into the cushioned chair. Her hands absently rubbed against her knees as she took another glance across the room.

This was it.

This was what she'd worked towards for decades.

White walls, stupid experiments, and terrible morals. They put lives—real, human lives—in danger all for science that could be called morally gray on the best of days. They disregarded common sense and safety all for the sake of progress.

Honestly, she should've known her actions would one day come back to bite her.

She slumped forward in her chair, glancing absently at the walls for a clock. She couldn't guess how much time had passed between her birthday 'party' and now—it could've been anything from a few hours to an afternoon.

Judging by the heaviness of both her mind and body, though, she guessed it must be evening. She pulled her hands and pressed at her temples, squeezing her eyes open and shut in an attempt to wake herself back up.

Caroline was exhausted.

Every muscle strained in protest, willing her to just climb into that relaxation pod and sleep. Yet fear cut into her, sharp and unrelenting. She'd been in Aperture long enough to witness the creation of the pod, and with that witness all of the setbacks and failed tests as well.

She wasn't going in there.

Instead, the woman leaned farther back, propping her elbow on the armrest and leaning her face against her hand. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and Caroline allowed herself to relax long enough to let drowsiness slip through her body.

Her eyes bolted open, a voice disturbing her peace.

"If you want to sleep, there's a bed right there."

Caroline only inhaled, gently shaking her head. "I know how this place works," she said. Absentmindedly rubbing at her arms, she stared down at the crisscrossed pattern of scuff marks marring the toe of her shoes due to the day's events. "If I fall asleep in there, you won't wake me up until it's time."
"Look, you've been awake too long," said Henry. "And you won't be comfortable in that chair. Staying awake or napping there won't help anyone."

Caroline nudged one foot with the other, not even bothering to look up. "Unless you guarantee that I'll wake up after a normal night's sleep, I won't go in there."

Caroline gave a heavy sigh, reaching forward to twist the door. As they approached the end of this man's life, they couldn't help but at least try to do their best to help Cave cheat death. He only had months left at best, and yet Cave refused to accept that he was a dying man.

She pushed and turned her way in, giving an unsteady smile as Cave Johnson pushed his way upright from the experimental relaxation pod. He seemed to brighten up immediately as soon as she appeared, face shifting from a dark scowl to a bright almost-smile. The creases in his face shifted, moving from deep lines of concentration to less-obvious smile lines.

"How long was I out?" he said, rubbing his forehead.

Caroline hesitated. "A little over a month, sir."

"A month?" said Cave, pressing his palms to his eyes while speaking under his breath. "Goddamn."

"Really, it's the best we could do—I would have had them take you out sooner, but.."

"I know, I know. You want to make sure you have plenty of time to figure out how to beat this," he said, then paused. "How is the place? Miss anything earth-shattering while I was gone?"

"We're still doing science, sir," she said, both carefully and brightly. A little optimism never hurt her in situations like this before. It was the only way she'd managed to hold onto her job for so long.

Cave's face relaxed, and he reached out to stretch his arms. They gave a painful pop, and Caroline internally winced.

"I know I can count on you," he said. "I'm sure things have been running perfectly under you. That's why I still want you to run this place, Caroline," he continued. "No one could even come close to you."

"Sir," she replied cautiously. "While I have taken your place in your absence," she said, mentally adding how she'd whipped both the employees and the facility into shape, "I don't want to run this place, much less from a computer."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said.

"Sir," she said back, a bit firmer. "I don't want this."

"Just think of all the possibilities—just think of all the science you could do!"

"Sir," she said, dropping her voice a little bit. "Listen to me—I do not want this."

"I'm doing this my way. This is what's best for Aperture and it's going to happen," Cave barked, pushing himself further upright. "I don't care what you want."

"Then I'll quit."

The threat hung in the air as the two stared each other down. Both stubborn, both intimidating—they made the best of teams at some times and the worst of teams at others.
"You wouldn't," he said, searching her face.

"Sir, I don't want this. I never have," said Caroline, relaxing her expression. "And if that means leaving to save my life, then I will."

Cave softened a little bit. "And leave behind everything we worked for?" he said, growing a bit more panicked. He was Cave Johnson, after all. What he said is what went, and he always got what he wanted. He always received what he asked for.

Caroline hesitated. Should she really do it? Leave behind decades worth of work as if it meant nothing to her? As if he meant nothing to her?

"You wouldn't, would you?" he said, even more fearful of her silence. He could see her mind working, sorting through the possibilities and weighing the advantages and costs of each action. On most days he loved to watch her work, to sort out a puzzle, but today it made his stomach churn even more than usual.

"Sir," she stated, this time just as firmly as before and just as unwavering. "I won't do this."

"Caroline, please," Cave pleaded, for once in his life kindly asking her to at least consider the possibility. He burst into another coughing fit, stumbling forward and toward a sink on the far side of the room.

Caroline was at his side in a moment, grabbing onto his arm to steady him as he coughed into a tissue. When he pulled it away, red splatters marked it—he'd coughed up a bit of blood.

Cave wadded up the tissue and tossed it in the trash, instead reaching for a cup and taking a drink of water. As he lifted it from his mouth, though, Cave caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He stared for a long moment, looking at the heavy lines on his face and solid gray his hair color had become.

"I look awful," he said, giving a choked laugh.

Caroline stiffened. "Oh no," she whispered. She reached out a hand, almost as if to touch his face, and then pulled away. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

"What do you mean?" Cave said, still examining his aged face in the mirror.

"I..." she paused. "It's nothing, sir. I'm sure you'll be fine."

Cave stared into the mirror, shifting his gaze to look at the reflected version of Caroline beside him. "Don't lie to me, Caroline. What happened?"

She pursed her lips before speaking. "Well," she replied, "the papers and reports said that there might be a risk, but I didn't think it would happen," she said.

"Caroline, tell me why I look so awful."

"There's always risks and setbacks, sir," she said. "One of those was that instead of halting the aging process, it might advance it by almost double. So if you were in there for a month..."

He gave a rumbling almost-cough, then cleared his throat. "I'd come out aged two months," he mumbled, finishing her sentence. He barely had enough time left to live, much less now that, instead of gaining a month, he was even closer to death. "How could you let me do that?" He sounded almost hurt.
"You wanted to, sir," she answered, knowing fully well that she'd never been in a position to tell him otherwise. "You can try to find a cure, a solution, and you can hide in this pod for as long as you'd like—but none of that's going to change what will happen. Even you can't cheat death, sir."

"Neither of us can," he murmured.

"Would you just sleep?" Henry pleaded. "That pod's just a normal bed. There's got to be someone here that can convince you of that." He glanced at his co-workers, attempting to decide who would be the most successful at convincing Caroline to do this. Unfortunately, they'd all been instrumental in his plan to get her into the relaxation vault. "There's got to be someone in this place who you trust."

"Dear, my entire facility—my entire work force—just turned on me. And the only one who dared to help me wants me dead just as much as you do." She gave a stark, bitter laugh.

Everyone else in the room avoided glancing in her direction, terrified that if they so much as looked at her, they'd catch on fire and burst into flames like a laser aimed at a turret. Her assistant grew increasingly more uncomfortable and began to mess with a computer to appear as if he was working on something important.

"Who was it?" said Karla, giving a subtle look of confusion.

Caroline gave a small, choked laugh before answering. "Doug Rattmann."

Caroline watched.

Employees flowed through this chamber like shoppers in a store, constantly ebbing in and out despite the team's low numbers.

But Caroline had nothing to do besides what she did best—observing. It took her a few hours to begin matching faces to names—after a certain point, mentally referring to one man as 'guy-who-could-stand-to-lose-a-few-pounds' and another lady as 'fashion-disaster' wasn't acceptable.

She leaned forward to listen as Henry picked up the phone.

"Go on, call him in," she said, raising her voice to get him to glance over. There was something she needed to know—a suspicion she could only confirm by confronting Doug Rattmann directly. "I know you're about to talk to Doug."

Henry gave her a sideways glance, then dialed Doug's office.

Riiiiing.

He hadn't heard from the scientist in a few days. Not since he'd told him about Tier Three, at least. Still it didn't quite make sense as to why he'd vanish after setting in motion such an important chain of events.

Riiiiing.

Riiiiing.

An answering machine picked up. Henry sighed and absently flipped through a phone directory, eventually settling upon Doug's home phone number. He figured he might as well call him there. He
had to thank him for instigating this chain of events, after all.

Riiiiing.

The sound cycled.

"Hello?" Doug said, voice defensive. "If this is about work, I'm not coming bac—."

"Doug, it's me," said Henry. "And it's nothing. Just wanted to apologize about earlier. I didn't know. But you have to come back and see this," he said.

"Back to work?" Doug said, stomach sinking.

Henry made a noise of agreement.

"I'm not coming back," he said. As soon as he could, he'd move on and get another job at some place other than Aperture. Any place but there would be better.

"Why?" said Henry, his voice genuinely questioning.

Doug almost slammed the phone. What did Henry mean, why? He'd explained to him all of the awful things Caroline had done—and didn't he know what she'd put him through?

He was just like the rest of them—more concerned with progress than saving a single human life.

"I told you I'm not coming back," Doug restated. "Nothing you say will change that."

"Wait, Doug," said Henry. Doug heard a faint scrambling on the other end.

Henry's gaze darted between Caroline and the table in front of him, as if he was having difficulties paying attention to both Doug and her. He raised a single finger for a moment, as if pondering a thought, then glanced back at her.

"Tell him to come back," she said. "And tell him I'm sorry."

Caroline rubbed a palm across her forehead, then dug her fingers into greasy hair. The door hissed, sliding into the ceiling and revealing a figure she thought she'd never see again—Doug Rattmann.

He gave her a vaguely frightened glance as he edged toward Henry, as if she was an intimidating zoo animal poised to lunge and crash into the bars of her cage. And though Doug knew that the woman sitting in a cushioned chair—behind thick glass—couldn't hurt him, it didn't stop the nervousness from seeping through his limbs.

From her position, Caroline listened to the mixture of Doug's soft-spoken voice and Henry's harsher, more confident one.

"She asked for you in particular," said Henry.

She saw Doug's arms move, saw his lips move but couldn't pick out any words from his blurred voice.

"As if I'd know," said Henry. "Go ask her yourself."

He muttered something Henry once more before shooting a glance at Caroline, and then inched his way toward the relaxation vault.
"You showed up," said Caroline, pursing her lips. "I'm surprised."

Doug crossed his arms, keeping his stance rigid. One hand scratched at his opposite elbow. He didn't quite know what to make of the situation, or even what emotion he should be feeling. "So," he said. "What is it?" The sooner he answered her questions, the sooner he could permanently leave this place.

"Did you know about it?" Caroline asked, point blank. She'd only heard bits and pieces of his conversation with Henry, anxiety twisting through her veins.

"About what?"

"Tier Three."

Doug glanced away, his eyes shifting just as much as before, when he wasn't on his medication. His hand rested on the back of a rolling chair for a moment before he slipped down into it. His head dipped in a solemn nod.

Caroline's stomach heaved.

That solved it, then.

Doug Rattmann had never been on her side. He had no reason to, after all. Of course he'd take any opportunity to take her down. And even worse, she'd trusted in the lie that had been her birthday party and fell right into their trap.

"How did you find it?" she questioned, choking back surprise and shock.

"Inside an 80's testing track," said Doug. He glanced down, refusing to meet her eyes. "Accidentally triggered a pre-recorded message from Cave. Lead me right to his old computer—one you never touched."

Doug had known. Doug had always known, and the realization made her stomach twist. She should've seen it coming, though, with all of the wandering around the condemned and abandoned areas he'd done. It was only a matter of time before he stumbled through some dusty corner to uncover Cave's misguided plans of grandeur.

She gave a heavy exhale.

Part of her felt betrayed by Cave. Even when she'd tried to steer him away from ideas of artificial intelligence, even when she'd done everything in her power to keep those plans a secret, he still managed to hurt her years after his death.

Still, she had to give him credit for knowing where to hide it. As much as she loved test observation, going into the chambers themselves and risking encounters with grimy test subjects was out of the question.

"So naturally you told everyone," said Caroline, vaguely swooping out her hand. "Told the facility all about how he—" she almost spat the word "—made me promise to let them pick apart my brain. Thanks, by the way. I really do appreciate it."

Doug cringed at the bitterness of her words. "I didn't tell them, though," he pleaded.

"I've done my job, you know. This wasn't supposed to happen," she said. "Don't lie to me—this information couldn't have gotten to everyone without you."
"The only person I told was Henry," he said, "and you found me before I could tell anyone else."

"But did you do it?"

Doug glanced up. "Do what?"

"Set me up," she said, words biting.

His face twisted into confusion.

"Oh, come on. You didn't think I'd put two and two together? You're the one who told Henry about Tier Three. I know it's not just coincidence that, out of all paths leading out of my wing, you chose the one that lead me directly to the Main AI Chamber."

Henry gave a soft laugh as joined them. "Took you long enough to figure it out. Of course Doug's on our side. He's uncovered so much for us. We thought we were so behind and hadn't even begun beta testing—and yet he gave us the information necessary to make this project a reality, and then lead you right to us. We might even be able to release on time."

Caroline reeled back, shooting the scientist a biting, betrayed look.

"Caroline," Doug stammered. "I found that by accident. I wasn't planning on using it. But you have to understand that I was helping a girl fight for her life. I was trying to save her from you," he said, pausing to breathe and rub his thumb between his eyebrows. "I had to use whatever leverage I had against you. And maybe it didn't save Chell. But this was never about taking you down. This was about helping Chell. That's what it's always been about."

The murmurs of conversation by the computers died out; a thick silence coated the room.

"You have to realize that it was only a matter of time before this caught up with you," said Henry. "You can only lie to so many people and kill off so many test subjects. You can only pull so many strings until you find yourself so tangled within them that you can't move anymore."

Caroline only turned to Doug, giving him a steely glare. "You told me there was no guarantee that I'd get out of here safely, and I should have known," she said, then repeated herself softly. "I should have known."

"Listen," said Doug. "I wasn't lying. I don't know this place as well as you do—I didn't know where I was going. I was just trying to help."

Caroline stared at Doug.

She could understand his leading her directly to this place.

He had every reason to, after all. She certainly deserved it after what she'd done to him; his actions were perfectly justifiable.

And yet his helping her still didn't process, just as it hadn't sunk in when he had first offered his help. What she couldn't understand was him refusing to kick her while she was still down.

"Look, please," said Caroline. "You believed me before; you have to believe me now. I've been responsible for countless deaths, Mr. Rattmann, but there's never been one I regret more. There's got to be something I can do to make up for it."

"There's nothing," said Doug, shaking his head. "Nothing."
Caroline rested a hand against the armrest, leaning slightly to support herself.

"You have no idea how much she meant to me," he said, voice hitching ever so slightly. "You can't know. And you never will, either. She's dead and gone because of you."

"I know," she said. "But please—"

Doug turned, moving back toward the door. "We're done here," he muttered, voice low.

And as he moved to disappear into the facility, Caroline realized this was the last she'd see of Doug Rattmann—a man just as sad and bitter as herself. Part of her still desperately wished she could use her words—her normally spellbinding, convincing words that never failed her before—to show him that for once in her life she wasn't lying. She truly meant this apology. He just couldn't see it.

"Wait," Caroline called, voice straining. Despite him being near the entrance, Caroline knew how to raise her voice and make her words heard. "I have one last offer for you."

Doug paused at the doorway, simply resting a hand on it and keeping his back turned.

"In Aperture's earliest days, he," she swallowed, not even stating his name, "offered each of our test subjects an honorarium—a donation to their choice charity—to thank them for their contributions to science," she said. "Considering I'm about to become the first to test out a highly dangerous procedure, I'd say that makes me a test subject. And I want to make that donation as well," she said.

Doug removed his hand from the doorframe.

"You're not a good person, Caroline," he said. "A final act of nobility isn't going to change that."

Henry shifted on his feet, keeping his arms crossed. "Plus, it's not like there's any place out there that Aperture would endorse, except perhaps one of its own twisted ones."

"Then I'll do it," Caroline said, jumping at the words "I'll make my own and give my own money if I have to."

"What's your point?" replied Henry, struggling to picture why Caroline of all people would suggest a proposition like this.

"It's not about me," the woman answered, emphasizing her words. "It's about her."

Doug jolted, gathering his remaining composure to turn around and face her.

Caroline cleared her throat. "The Aperture Science Self-Esteem Fund for girls," she said. "A fund to make sure that no girl ever feels so torn down that they feel death is her only option. I can't change what has already happened, but I can at least make sure that no one ever feels that way again within Aperture," she said, giving Doug a long, searching look.

He ducked his head, breaking eye contact.

He'd been convinced that no action from Caroline could ever change his mind about her. And yet this action felt like a genuine apology. She'd told him before that she was sorry, but actually moving to ensure something like that never happened again—it rung with truth.

And Doug couldn't ignore that.

"Just let her do it," he said, cutting off Henry before he could squash her suggestion. She wasn't in any position to create something like this, after all.
"You're not even on this project."

"I might as well be," Doug snorted. Programming wasn't far out of his reach, and he'd gotten himself tangled up enough in this project.

Caroline cleared her throat. "Add him to the project," she said.

Doug gave a small, panicked start. What he'd just said—he hadn't meant it.

"Don't make me repeat myself," Caroline said, giving an internal smile at Doug's unsettled look. "Add Mr. Rattmann to this project."

She exchanged a tense glance with Henry. "Fine," he said. "He's on."

"Good," murmured Caroline, voice low. "At least he won't stab me in the back."

Doug stared down, wringing his hands once before moving back into the room. Caroline stared, her tracking gaze just as unnerving as the occasional swivel of a security camera.

She gave a minuscule nod as Doug sat down. "Thank you," she breathed.

From a desk across the room, Caroline's former assistant spoke up. "So are you finally going to sleep?" He glanced at her untouched relaxation pod.

"Only if he stays around," she replied. So long as Doug Rattmann remained in this building, she clung to the hope that nothing bad would happen in her sleep. Everyone had betrayed her in one way or another. Everyone but him, that was.

Doug scooted his chair closer to her glass-walled room, propping his head up with a hand. "Sleep," he mumbled. "They'll fill me in while you rest."

Caroline gave a reluctant nod before slipping across the room and into the relaxation pod. The glass hissed close, immediately reducing outside conversations to a distant murmur, as if she'd stuck her head underwater. Gas hissed in, and Caroline closed her eyes and sunk into a nervous sleep.

"—need to do it now."

"Why not wait until you've got it more under control? You know, make the process safe?"

"Look, it's going to take years to untangle that mess of data. We have to get started on it now," replied Henry. "And besides, when will we ever get another chance like this?"

The glass hissed back as Caroline stirred in her relaxation pod. Her entire body ached beneath her, and she rolled on her side. Conversations seeped in. Caroline made no move to push herself upright.

"You're right," someone murmured. "Still, it doesn't feel right." She recognized the voice as Doug Rattmann's.

"You're in no position to decide what's right for this place," said someone else—Greg, she assumed. "We're going through with this no matter what. It's what Mr. Johnson wanted."

Caroline curled a hand and pulled it to her heart.

She had always been at his side.
She had always done her best. She'd done whatever he asked of her, no matter the cost.

She had been the only one to help him while he wasted away, while everyone else snickered behind his back. Served him right for messing with moon rocks, they said.

And yet Caroline couldn't have picked a better way for him to go out.

Without his encounter with those ground-up moon rocks, Aperture never would have discovered their deadliness. Plus, the slow decline of his health was enough to let him—for once in his life—fully realize the consequences of his actions. Even Caroline couldn't get him out of that one.

As for her own death, she didn't know what to think. If anything, she'd rather do what would most contribute to the world. She'd only ever feel at peace if she died to help further Aperture research.

"Do it for the science," she murmured to herself. "Always for the science."

She closed her eyes briefly, then rolled back to stare at the ceiling. She raised up her hand, shielding her eyes from an unexpectedly bright light.

A part of her wanted to roll back over and sink into the soft cushions. That way, she could close her eyes and pretend as though everything was going to be okay, that this had all been a mistake and tonight she'd be sleeping in her own bed.

But really, her death was as unavoidable as Cave's had been. She shouldn't have expected anything else.

And as much as she hated to admit it, she couldn't hide away. She'd been strong enough to handle everything Aperture had thrown at her so far, and she could handle one more day. Perhaps after that, she'd be able to get some peace.

Caroline pressed a palm into the bed, pushing herself upright and staring out into the Main AI Chamber. Fewer people populated the grey room—but then again, there hadn't been many here to begin with.

A lady with a clipboard craned her neck upward at the AI, reaching up to mess with a cable. With one look at GLaDOS, Caroline could have sworn a huge amount of cords had simply grown from the machine. They spilled across the floor like hair floating underwater, fanned out then eventually gathering at the far end of the room.

Caroline's breathing broke. She glanced away, running a hand through her grayed hair.

So long and she was still doing science, she thought she could make peace with dying.

But Caroline couldn't handle this.

She didn't want to die. Not in a stupid way like this. Perhaps it wasn't too late to make them stop and reconsider their decisions.

"Oh," said Greg. "You're finally awake. Took you long enough."

Caroline shot a look to Doug, who merely shook his head. "Don't worry. It was only eight hours."

"You didn't miss much," said Henry. "We're just putting the final touches on the setup for the transfer."

Caroline swallowed. "And what will this procedure entail?" she said, mustering as much courage as
"We've never tried this before, so we don't know for sure what to expect," Henry said. "A simple brain scan isn't going to work. I'm sorry, I really am. But we're going to have to transfer it over cell by cell, and it'll most likely destroy your brain."

"Will I still know who I am?" she said. "Afterwards, I mean."

It took Henry a moment to answer. "Yes," he said. "But not as the same Caroline we know. Every part of you—thoughts, memories, emotions—will be transferred. You'll be able to do everything you did before, but with more power. You'll even retain your consciousness."

"You can always ignore your conscience," Caroline muttered. Everyone in this room was doing it, and she'd ignored her morals countless times. Then again, there was a difference between consciousness and conscience.

"If all goes well, the transition will be seamless. Sure, you'll lose your body. But your spirit will live on, and that's the important part. It's just like what Mr. Johnson wanted."

"I didn't ask for this," said Caroline, straightening. "When I started here, you have to know I was just an assistant. A secretary. No one important, really. But by the time I realized what I'd gotten myself into, I couldn't have gotten out if I tried."

"Cave died years ago," Henry snorted. "You could have left."

"Never," she said. "And throw away everything I've worked for? I spent decades running this place behind the scenes. I deserved a chance to run it myself."

"In that case, you've got your wish," said Henry. "You're going to live forever. Here. In Aperture."

Caroline twisted, rising from her pod. "Please, you don't understand. I don't have to be a robot to do that. There's got to be another way." She never thought she'd be reduced to begging—but honestly, she didn't want this. They weren't listening to her. She did not want this.

"Caroline, just do the right thing. The upload will go so much smoother if you cooperate."

She dropped her voice into an almost desperate plea. "This isn't brave. It's murder," she said. "What did I ever do to you?" She gave a darting glance across the room, skipping over Doug.

"I'm only asking for a second chance," said Caroline. "Some way to prove that I'll be a better leader than that thing will ever be."

Henry gave her a curious, studying look before exhaling. "This project is your second chance."

The lady paused. "What do you mean?"

"Just think about turrets. We've got an entire part of the manufacturing wing dedicated to creating them. Every day they're used in testing, and once a chamber is completed—successfully or not—we replace those turrets. The old ones are thrown onto a conveyer belt, then dumped into an incinerator so that we can melt 'em down and make new models. So think of it this way: you're on a one-way ticket through the Turret Redemption Line," he said. "But instead of that, you'll be re-made into GLaDOS. It's the best second chance we can give you."

"Listen to me, please," she said, shaking her head and emphasizing every word. "I do not want this." They had to realize this was a mistake. They had to figure out there were other outcomes that didn't
result in her death.

"This is for the good of all of us," said Henry. "And besides, you don't have a choice. Enough of this."

The words bit into her, and she curled her fingers around the edge of the bed.

"Take a minute to compose yourself, and let's get this over with. I'm done reasoning with you," said Henry.

A wave of anger surged through her. She was done reasoning with them, too. She didn't want to keep pleading for her life or keep justifying why she should live. It wasn't as though they'd listen to her anyways. Every muscle in her tensed with a hot, twisting anger. She'd been reduced once more to being pushed around by people within Aperture.

They were going to kill her. And there wasn't anything she could do about that.

At least, not yet. Not here. Not now.

If the project and upload went smoothly, she'd have all the time in the world to figure out how to exact revenge upon these employees. She would throw them away just like they'd thrown away her.

She should've expected it, really, but the worst pain came from those she knew and trusted. One look at Greg—and watching him give her that smug and overly-confident look she'd seen him give a thousand test subjects—made her blood boil.

Oh, he'd be the first to go. She just hadn't figured out how yet. An accident, perhaps. An experiment gone wrong. Perhaps a floor panel or catwalk would accidentally disconnect, or a turret be mistakenly placed directly outside his office door. Whatever she decided upon, she'd make sure to record it.

In her quietness, though, Caroline picked up on another conversation farther off in the room.

"You can't seriously still be letting her found her own charity, are you?"

"It's fine." Doug Rattmann made a motion with his palms, pressing them downwards. "Just let her do it. Give her some peace of mind."

She hated everyone in this room. She couldn't stand anyone in this facility, and couldn't care less if they all happened to fall into acid. But Doug—she paused and stared at him for a long moment.

Doug Rattmann was undoubtedly the one responsible for all of this. Without him, the true nature of the GLaDOS project would've remained a secret. And yet, out of all the people in this room, he was only one to stand up for Caroline. He was the only one defending her, even if it was in small ways like that.

Everyone else in this place could die for all she cared. But Doug—perhaps she would let him live.

The moment passed and the portal thunked open, creating a gateway from her relaxation vault into the Main AI Chamber.

"Go on, go through," she heard someone say.

Caroline clutched at the edges of her pod. "No," she said, moving into a nervous tone and shaking her head. "Nononono no." She pulled her hands close, eyes widening as lab coats blurred with
movement. If she didn't leave herself, they'd come and get her.

"Look, it's not going to be that bad," said one. "There's still a few painkillers we can give you that won't mess with your brain. We can't risk damaging it. It's going to hurt a lot, but try not to think about that. We're going to make history today, and all thanks to you."

Caroline's knuckles turned white.

She could care less about science. She could care less about the leaps and bounds in science a successful upload would create.

Caroline didn't want to die. She wanted to get out of here and keep living.

But she couldn't run and hide anymore. Whatever was coming, she couldn't get out of no matter how badly she wished otherwise.

She pulled herself together, sucking in a breath and slipping her hands behind her back in a façade of confidence. She took a few pointed steps in the glass-encased room, closing the distance between her and the scientists outside. But before they could reach out to grab her arm, she raised a hand to deflect it.

"Please," she said. "If I'm going to die, at least let me die with some dignity."

End of Part I
Releasing on Time

Part II

Chapter 23 - Releasing on Time

*Pick it up, pick it all up*

*And start again.*

("Medicine" by Daughter)

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Spring 200-

*Skreeak.*

The two men gave the desk a final shove, pushing the desk into an unclaimed office. "Looks like this is the last of it," grunted Doug's co-worker.

The scientist nodded, brushing his hands on his pant legs. With the clock ticking down until GLaDOS's activation, their mess in the main AI Chamber needed to be relocated by the end of the afternoon.

Naturally, the team had waited until today to do it. Priorities.

Desks and chairs and computers and papers littered the room, pushed and shoved and stacked in inefficient fashions—papers set on desk chairs, desks shoved together at odd angles with little triangles of open space scattered throughout.

Doug fell into step alongside the other man, noting how much progress had been made in these past few years. Besides individually making a few friends here in Aperture, his team had made huge amounts of progress in the field of artificial intelligence.

The work itself had been tedious. Not impossible, though.

Once the data from Caroline's brain had uploaded, it was simply a matter of untangling data and reconstructing her mind. Wheatley's creation had taught them a lot about constructing an artificial intelligence, but GLaDOS would be easier—her personality wouldn't be created from scratch.

Yet programming the framework for the facility's central core left several questions. Should the AI be able to express itself directly? And if so, how? It could potentially communicate in several ways—visually, verbally, or even just through text-based messages. And should this computer control only the testing tracks? The vitrified areas?

They settled on granting her facility-wide access, figuring that if something went wrong in, say, the research labs or the administrative areas, they could always revoke access. Easier to pull things away later rather than trying to figure it out now.

Doug wrung his hands, glancing up at the clock. The activation itself would be fairly low key—as proud of the AI as they were, the team didn't want to look like complete idiots in front of the company on the off chance the supercomputer didn't work correctly.
Still, Greg was headed down to officiate it. Though not as ambitious as Cave nor as terrifying as Caroline, somehow that man had ended up running Aperture. No one particularly approved of his self-promotion, but no one vehemently opposed it, either. His upbeat and announcer-like voice was a nice change.

Around twenty people filed into the room, clutching clipboards. Some climbed onto the platform to crane their necks up at the lifeless AI above them, while others examined the Emergency Intelligence Incinerator.

Getting across the room required a bit of a hike—and in theory, using the incinerator required two people: one at the button, and one at the incinerator. But all it took was a few commands, a few 'tests' of the system-wide software behind GLaDOS, to switch up the panels nearby into portal-friendly surfaces.

Plus, when Doug joined the team he'd brought one of his prototype portal guns with him, making travel to the incinerator and back a breeze. Really, that thing was made for laziness rather than functionality. Several times they'd used it as a glorified wastebasket.

Lunch leftovers, scrapped documents, failed experiences—they all burned so nicely.

Laughter behind him pulled away Doug's attention. He turned, watching both Greg and Henry move toward the room's center and then pulled away to take his place near the room's entrance. On the off chance this activation turned into something straight out of a horrific sci-fi novel, he would call in to request that the AI be immediately shut down.

The now-leader of Aperture cleared his throat. "Hello everyone," he said, giving a nervous and echoing laugh. "It's good to be finally be here." The man caught himself leaning forward as if to speak into a microphone—unnecessary with such a small and intently listening audience. "After going through so many teams of people, I don't think either Caroline or I ever thought we'd make it this far. And yet here we are," he said, exuding that same confidence Aperture used to give off once upon a time.

Scattered applause burst through the room. People grinned as they clapped each other on the back, and for that moment everyone in that room seemed genuinely happy.

"Without your help, we never would've been able to release on time," he said, giving a self-assured smile before continuing. As the excited murmurs quieted, Greg shuffled over to GLaDOS's activation switch—a simple button on a pedestal. "We've done the impossible—and now, all we have left is this final test."

With one press, the artificial intelligence would gain control over the entire facility.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System."

The red button gave a satisfying two-part click-click.

Shockwaves of power sparked through the facility, pumping through each cable until every inch of the Enrichment Center slipped into GLaDOS's control. Lights dimmed. A sharp buzzing noise spiked in volume, then disappeared altogether.

The room plunged into silence. Deep rumbling shook the ground beneath them. A faint bug-zapper-like sound emanated from the lights as they flickered back, this time even brighter than before.

For a long time, she slept.
It wasn't a restful sleep—just a dreamless state. But even thinking was an exhausting, draining task. And so Caroline let her mind drift into a passive, coma-like existence.

Marginally better than being dead, she supposed.

She knew she wasn't dead.

Well, technically she was—she'd been dead since the moment the upload finished and her body gave out beneath her. The scientists had simply crossed their fingers, hoping that they'd eventually be able to reconstruct her mind, her mannerisms, and even her personality out of the oceans of data flooding through Aperture's computer systems.

She didn't feel the same.

Though she knew she was still Caroline, she didn't feel like herself.

Instead, she felt more like a re-creation or a poor caricature by someone who barely knew her. Her memories were all mashed together into one confusing and nonlinear mess. Blocks of her life were missing altogether; other salvaged life experiences appeared blurred and garbled when she attempted to directly access them.

If she had possessed enough power or control over her new body—or even her own brain—Caroline would've taken time to discern the individual memories and then re-order them chronologically.

For the most part, she just left that mess alone. Too much work to fix. Plus, remembering just brought her more pain—every glance at the past was another reminder of all that she'd lost.

She didn't exist in a physical place any more—just a collection of places, on hard drives and networks scattered throughout Aperture. Her body was dead, but Caroline was not. She was both alive and dead, simply waiting for someone to open the box.

Power surged through the facility like a crack of lightning, stretching out into each and every vein of wiring. This energy flowed directly back to her, coursing through her systems and immediately dissipating her mental fog.

Information rushed to her like sunlight to a dark room, pouring into every crack and blinding her with the sheer amounts of data. She wanted to raise her hands to her face and block it out, to press at her temples and close her eyes and cut off the world.

Her mental fog immediately dissipated. And for the first time in years, Caroline could think.

Before, the Aperture employees constantly messed with individual parts of her. Altering her coding felt a lot like an operation—except she had one doctor fixing a broken leg, while another preformed brain surgery. And more often than not a host of others messed with more topical things, feeling more like messing with her teeth or adjusting her hair.

Slowly but surely they had patched her up into 'Caroline'.

And now, she felt whole again. But she still wasn't human.

The realization gave her a pitched and detached feeling, as if she was floating above a city. She didn't have the same sort of physical body any longer. To be honest, she wasn't even sure how to move.
With no legs or arms or head, she couldn't shift her eyes or wiggle her fingers or glare at someone across the room, or even just blink or breathe. Moving was no longer a natural reflex—she had to specifically demand her new body to move.

Stretching out her neck barely yielded any results; trying to stick out her arms just caused the robot to pitch forward. Caroline 'blinded'; the command translated into a slight refocusing of her yellow optic. The ground beneath her shifted, first fuzzy and then crisp. Panels tiled across her range of vision. These she liked—with them, she could control just about everything that went on in this particular room.

Eventually she managed to shift her head up. A few groups of people lingered around the room, surprisingly quiet and focused as they analyzed the robot's every move. All they needed was some sort of affirmation that this robot they'd spent years building was indeed sentient.

Caroline scanned their faces for recognition. A few matched up with her scrambled memories—at one point, she had personally known some of these people. Instead of delving into that, though, she simply pulled up the official files on each employee in the room.

Something pulsed deep in her mind—no, systems—as she trained her gaze on one man in particular. Though his face had grown more mature than she remembered, the dark red hair made her former assistant unmistakable.

Memories surfaced in uneven clumps. Those relating to the end of her life (well, human life) slipped into the forefront. She knew this man had been there. He'd been there and he'd seen the position she was in, and he had done absolutely nothing to help her.

Caroline tossed his file into the recesses of her mind—she couldn't focus with that picture of him right in her face. Her human base made focusing on more than one task difficult. She could still multitask, but not at a speed anywhere close to a truly artificial intelligence.

She didn't want to think about Greg any more. In fact, she didn't want to think about him ever again.

Caroline fumbled around, digging up the visually sparse panel control system. To her it looked like a blue-and-red grid—some panels activated, others broken. Still, she plucked at a particular panel—just the one she needed.

Caroline struggled to turn the massive robot's head to face him. She wanted him to know that she didn't intend to hurt him—well, perhaps some day. But not now. She just needed to speak to him, to simply show him how mad she was.

She tried to open her mouth to say something—but she didn't know how to break out of her own mind with no mouth to open. Scientists and employees scattered like insects; Caroline sifted through her digitized brain until she found something relating to speech.

Words came out, garbled and unintelligible and barely discernible. Speakers crackled. She couldn't express her anger toward him with words. So, she did the next best thing—she made her anger indisputably clear in another way.

A panel snapped to life, slamming full-on into her former assistant and pinning him against the chamber wall.

Panic flared across the room—at any moment, the supercomputer could easily squish the current head of Aperture like a troublesome bug. Half of the people scoured the room for some sort of emergency shutdown switch. The other half had flocked to Greg, attempting to pull the panel from
his chest.

"SHUT IT DOWN."

The man winced, wheezing and prying at the corner of the panel. Something—he didn't know what—had cracked upon impact, but the adrenalin prevented him from knowing if it was a wrist or a rib or something more painful. But the panel now had him pressed tightly, just enough to be painful but not too harmful.

Doug scrambled for the red emergency phone, hands trembling as he dialed the extension. "Y-yes, this is the Main AI Chamber," he said, swallowing. "No—nothing got thrown down the incinerator—no, I promise it's important this time. Please just listen—What? No, you can't speak to the project head first—" Doug broke off. He clutched the phone to his ear. "He's the one—"

"Just press the goddamned button," Greg shouted, loud enough that the person on the other end of the phone jolted upright and into action. "Shut it down NOW!"

The computer stiffened, jerking and twisting. Another corrupted string of words blasted from the speakers of the supercomputer, sharp and garbled and unsettling as it grew lifeless.

he room whined and flickered; the panels fell slack.

Greg swore softly as the panel holding him slid back into the ground. He staggered forward, leaning against a desk. "What happened?" He swallowed, clutching at his chest. His fingers explored the front of his chest, jerking back as he touched a bruised and potentially cracked rib. Nothing seemed broken, but he still couldn't catch his breath.

The people around him murmured, still keeping the limp robot in their peripheral vision.

"By all accounts, it shouldn't have reacted that way—"

"—no idea what happened."

He rubbed at his eyes, exhaling.

"Clearly we underestimated it," he said. "With all of those memories, that computer remembers exactly what we did to Caroline and it is not happy. If we don't want it to kill us all, we're going to have to remove those memories."

"It only targeted you," Karla said, pointing at his chest.

"Then make it forget about just me."

"I can't do that." Her brow furrowed, and she gave a frustrated huff. "Even if we accessed the individual memories and isolated the ones involving you, it would be an extremely delicate process. You're everywhere in Aperture—it's not as easy as just redacting a name and pretending you never existed. You were at Caroline's side for years."

"Unless you want me to end up dead, you're going to have to."

"You're asking me to do brain surgery with a plastic knife," she said, not missing a beat.

Greg ran a hand through his hair. "Then just get rid of them all. Wipe the memories."

"No," Karla said. She gave a snort, folding her arms and shaking her head. "We've spent years
untangling those memories and making them into an integral part of the system. It won't have a personality without those—delete them, and we're risking a total collapse."

"I don't care," he said, wincing and cradling his side. "I could've died. That machine's going to kill someone unless we take away its motivation to kill us all."

The scientist raised her eyebrows, leaning back against the railing as she stared at him. She didn't care if he was the current head of Aperture—she wasn't about to throw away years worth of work on a project with a history of huge setbacks. "Then you're going to have to figure something else out. I'm not wiping the computer."

On the other side of the room, Doug tapped the back of the phone with still-slick hands.

"Wait," Henry said, piping in. "Then just hide them. Slip the memories deep into some archive underneath layers and layers of security. Make it impossible for the computer to access them without human help, or perhaps the help of some catastrophic event. A core transfer, or an apocalypse—some situation where the memories wouldn't need to be repressed. That way the computer would have that same personality base."

Karla frowned, still deep in thought. "Yes—" she said "—but without allowing direct access to memories, we're going to risk creating an entirely different personality—a completely different entity, really. It won't just be another digital version of Caroline."

"Good," said Greg, hissing. "Anything would be better than that."

"Still, we're going to need a distraction for the next time we wake it up. Hiding those memories is going to take time." She sank into a chair, leaning her head back to stare up at the lifeless robot.

"You mean like Doug's bright, ugly sweater?" Henry said, giving a slight smile.

Doug's expression shifted into an unamused glare. "Hey—"

Karla twisted in her chair, still staring up at the AI. Silence fell upon the room; a few of the guests to the activation made their way toward the exit. They'd seen enough—and since Greg seemed to be in relatively stable condition, they figured they could leave.

"Hold on," Henry said. "What about Wheatley?"

"So you think my 'bot is finally going to be useful, then?" she said, lips curling in a faint smile.

Doug nodded. "That could work. Dumb him down even more, and it'd be even better."

"Here—and if you want, I'll try to boost his conversational skills and make his logical flaws even worse. That AI will drive itself crazy trying to correct Wheatley—it won't even have the brainpower to pay attention to us." Karla gave a confident laugh—a laugh of a self-assured genius.

"It's perfect," said Doug.

Greg nodded, grimacing with each breath. "Still, assign each employee a number. And Karla—pull their names from the system. The computer will replace the blanks with something like 'employee name here,'" he said, air quoting the words.

"Got it," she said.

"I'm heading back up to my office—medical wing—some place better than here," he said, resolving
to not come back down until the AI became undoubtedly safer. "But you guys get working. We've done enough work, but we still haven't done enough. We don't want to risk anything—even a stray employee name—digging back up those memories. Now back to work, everyone."

And deep beneath the Main AI Chamber, a long-forgotten relaxation pod stirred to life.
The Long Sleep

Chapter 24 - The Long Sleep

Inside the labyrinth walls
There lies a tiny child
who sleeps alone

("My Medea" by Vienna Teng)

The tiny display on the relaxation pod glitched, becoming a mess of lines and garbled numbers as power surged through the Enrichment Center.

The system blinked, numbers blanking.

00:00:00
00:00:00

It flashed the number up as if no one was in the pod. As if its current inhabitant hadn't been there for years.

But—like every other relaxation vault in Aperture—the reset from the AI's activation caused this vault to switch from online to idle.

Chell took a deep breath, coughing as fresh air swirled in. Air hissed; the glass panel jerked backward. A headache pulsed through her head and she pressed her eyes closed. She twisted onto her side, fighting back the sickening groggy feeling in the pit of her stomach. It felt as though she'd nodded off on a couch somewhere, accidentally sleeping for hours rather than minutes. She remained on her side with her eyes closed and her breaths steady.

Awareness slipped back into her. After another five minutes passed, she reached out a hand to cling to the edge. Chell inched her way upright. Her vertigo peaked; her knuckles turned white as she kept herself from pitching forward.

With each motion, her clothes pulled against her. It wasn't a comfortable stretch like slipping on a favorite and worn pair of sweatpants—more like a tight and constricting feeling, as if someone forced a doll's clothes onto a person.

Chell's expression twisted. She rolled her shoulders forward experimentally. The shirt pulled taught against her chest, the armpit seams digging into her skin. She pulled at it for a bit, adjusting and twisting until it felt vaguely less uncomfortable.

It didn't make sense—last time she'd checked, her clothes fit fine. All she'd done was sleep for a few hours.

Frowning, she tried to extend a leg. Pain spiked in her toes, throbbing with each heartbeat. She winced and clenched her teeth. Her feet felt like they had been jammed into three sizes too small—and she needed to get them off. Chell leaned forward to yank at the laces, untying then prying off the
sneakers. She tossed them aside, wiggling her toes and giving a sigh of relief.

The inseams of her pants dug into her skin as she leaned back. Chell glanced down at her bare feet, noting that the bottom cuff of the pants hugged her mid-calf. She bent over to yank at the fabric until the elastic snapped, then rolled the sweatpants up to just beneath the advanced knee replacements. At this point she didn't care if it looked dorky—it wasn't as though there was anyone around to make fun of her for it.

Deep red markings from the elastic patterned her legs. Chell leaned forward to rub at her calves, wondering once again just why her clothes had shrunk.

There must have been something in the suspension's chemical solution, she thought. That must have caused her clothes to shrink. Considering she was still in Aperture it didn't surprise her. She couldn't even take a simple nap in this place without something going awry.

She combed a hand through her hair, grimacing at the grease. As soon as she made it over to the mirror, she'd put it up into a ponytail again. Better to get it up and out of her face.

Her legs trembled as she took a few uneasy steps. The balls of her feet took the brunt of her weight this time—much better than stretching up on her tiptoes like before. It helped to have more experience with these. Already she felt more comfortable and more fitted to them.

She wobbled over to the mirror, bracing her hands on the edge of the counter. She glanced down as she edged up onto her toes, stretching out her tight calves. She still couldn't figure out why the advanced knee replacements suddenly fit better, but she wasn't about to complain.

Chell relaxed her legs, sinking back onto the balls of her feet. With a roll of her wrist she pulled off the hairband, rolling it between her fingers as she glanced up.

Her heartbeat spiked as she caught her reflection. That wasn't her.

Chell twisted, glancing over her shoulder to take in the empty room. Silence drifted down, heavy and pressing like snowfall in the night. She looked for movement, for any signs of life—but every pod, every counter, every corner of the room remained empty no matter how hard she looked.

This had to be a mistake. It just had to.

Chell pulled a hand to her chest, fingers twisting into the fabric. Her eyes met her reflection; the mirror matched each minuscule movement she made. She was alone in this room. But that just couldn't be her.

She stared straight ahead at her reflection for a long moment, scaring herself with the intensity of her gaze. She wasn't used to seeing such a steeled and bitter expression, one that instantly shifted to fear as she examined her face.

Lines etched across her forehead—pronounced, defined. Almost like wrinkles. Her cheekbones jutted out and her lips seemed puffier, angrier. Her hair draped around her face, darker and messier and longer than she remembered. Chell pressed her palm against the side of the mirror to steady herself, staring up to notice a single gray-tinted hair drift in front of her eyes.

She looked so old.

This wasn't her. There was no possible way this could be her.
It was a mistake. It *had* to be.

She was twelve years old and just adjusting to a new life. She was young and she was still in *school* and still doing silly little potato batteries and sliding notes across the table to her friends.

Chell's lip trembled.

But that person staring back at her—she wasn't young. She was maybe in her twenties, thirties. The more she looked at the reflection, the more details she picked up. More gray hairs streaked down her head; she was taller and more filled-out than the young Chell she should be.

She clenched her teeth as she twisted her hair into a ponytail. A few hairs strayed; she reached up a careful hand to slip them behind her ear. She gave a choked sound as her hand moved away. Pulling back her hair only emphasized her cheekbones and the lines on her face.

This was a mistake. Just a simple mistake, an easy error from the suspension process. There had to be a solution to it, she told herself. An easy fix. Aperture used this sort of technology all the time, after all.

Her stomach twisted as she gave a sick internal laugh. Nothing she'd ever done here before had ever been reversible. She knew this. But still, she had to hope that *something* could fix this. There had to be someone up there who could change her back to the way she was.

All she'd done was fall asleep.

She moved toward the Quantum Tunneling Device she'd left propped against the wall last night. There had to be someone up there that could help. Someone *had* to know how to change her back to the way she was, and she'd risk encountering Caroline a hundred times if they could just fix her.

But as she reached for the straps, her hands brushed a thick layer of dust.

Doug clicked his pen against the conference room in a constant rhythm.

Beside him sat a marked-up whiteboard peppered with all sorts of wild ideas. Despite having little significant success, everyone in here had been brainstorming for hours now. Some actively participated in solving the problem at hand. Others simply engaged in small-talk, their occasionally animated discussions giving off the illusion of productivity.

Though a member of the productive group himself, Doug felt his attention keep drifting between the two.

"It's no good," Karla barked. "I had to pull off the core after a half hour. Too much corruption."

"But did it even work?"

"Sure, for about twenty-nine minutes."

"No, but did it *work*?"

"Well," she said. "The AI didn't even notice us poking around the systems. Still, we're going to need a longer window of time if we want to keep working on it."

"Just use Wheatley again, then?" someone else suggested.

Karla shook her head, giving an almost offended scoff. "Attaching it once already decreased its
intelligence and increased the rambling. Further corruption might destroy him altogether."

"So make new cores," another scientist piped in.

Karla stared at him, snapping the lid onto her dry-erase marker. "Wheatley took us months to build and he's already useless." She gave a bitter snort. "We don't have the time to build several more of these personalities from scratch."

The room lulled; the scientist sunk back into her chair.

"Wait," said Doug. "We don't have to start from scratch."

Karla gave him an unimpressed glare. "You do realize that using a human mind is what got us into this mess, right?"

Doug waved his hands in the air. "No, no—" he said. "Not a whole personality. Parts of it. Dominant characteristics." He swiped the capped marker through the air as if sectioning off portions of the brain. "Just place your focus on the frontal cortex and find strong personality traits," he said. "Then just make cores based on those qualities."

"Won't they be too focused? Too," a scientist paused, looking for the word. "Too flat?"

"We don't need the cores to act with the full emotional depth of a human," Doug said, twisting the cap of the marker. "They're just a distraction."

Karla gave a sigh, pressing her hand against her chin. "Since the procedure's less invasive now, we can do it without any sort of surgery," she said. "And the human mind is still complex enough to provide a basis for several of these so-called 'personality' cores."

"Exactly," said Doug. "We don't need to digitize and reconstruct the essence of a human. Just some specific personality traits—maybe one based on an emotion like excitability, or another focused on a specific interest, like neuroscience."

"We don't want the AI to burn through them all at once like it did with Wheatley, said another scientist.

"Trust me. If you really want to subdue that machine, use as many as possible," Doug said, turning the pen over in his hand.

"Why?"

"Because I know just how distracting voices in your head can be."

Chell ran.

Time had undeniably passed. The exact length of time, though, remained a mystery.

She felt no need to sneak around. No reason to be quiet, and no reason to glance over her shoulder at every turn. Those initially searching for her must have given up by now.

Perhaps no one would recognize her.

The thought brought a faint smile to her lips, briefly appearing between her short and labored breaths.
Perhaps she'd even be able to slip out of Aperture unnoticed.

The thought disappeared as quickly as her smile. Even if she could pull off a perfect escape, she had no idea what she'd do after that. She didn't know who to call or where to go, and the mere thought of that made fear pool in her stomach.

She paused for a moment, catching her breath. For now, she'd stick to one goal: finding Doug. First and foremost she needed to figure out what had happened to her.

The Quantum Tunneling Device rattled against her back as Chell twisted and weaved through identical hallways. Each catwalk looked the same, and she struggled to recall the path she'd taken before. Her exact location in the facility had blurred in her mind. With so much pain and adrenalin and fear combined with a lingering mental fog from the suspension, she just didn't know.

But as she sprinted across a catwalk and over a dizzying drop, the sheer space beneath her hinted that she wasn't far from the modern enrichment center.

Chell slipped into the nearest functioning elevator, clutching to the sides as it lurched to life.

"Now, whose mind will we use first?" Henry said, making eye contact with each employee in the room.

"Test subjects or volunteers," Karla said. She stretched out her arms, then pulled them back across her lap. "Employees if we get desperate. Honestly, anyone with half of a brain should have enough personality traits for at least a few cores."

"Is there anyone whose traits would be particularly effective against her?" said Henry.

"Maybe someone close to her," said Karla.

Doug gave a snort. Caroline wasn't one to forge close bonds with people.

Greg shot Doug a look before leaning back into his plush executive chair. He absently rubbed a thumb along the hand rest. "She didn't trust a lot of people," he said. "She found me trustworthy." He gave a slight shrug. She'd trusted him and he'd ended up turning his back on her, so perhaps he wasn't the best example of well-placed trust.

Henry flipped the whiteboard to begin a new list of names. "I'm putting all of us on here," he said. "Don't worry. These are just harmless brain scans—and we're as good of a place to start as any." He sectioned off an area of the board with a few wavy lines, and wrote a list that gradually shifted to the right with each additional name.

Doug studied his name for a wary moment. As usual, Henry forgot the second "n" on his last name. He cleared his throat. "You're forgetting someone," he said.

Henry raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. As far as he knew, he'd written all of their names down.

"We can't expect any of the cores created from us to influence her," said Doug. "She never listened to us to begin with. There's only ever been one person she's ever willingly taken orders from."

"Cave Johnson," Karla breathed, nodding.
Greg frowned. "Cave Johnson is dead," he grumbled. "He's no help to us now." All of this talk of Caroline and of Cave wore him down. After all, he ran this place now and he'd had enough of this constant referencing of the old company heads.

"Hold on, Doug's onto something," said Karla. "We have a few of Mr. Johnson's brain scans still," she said. "No idea how accurate they'd be, since they're from his last years." Though Cave Johnson stayed relatively sane as he approached death, the moon rock poisoning took its toll both physically and mentally. Even clear and accurate brain scans wouldn't necessarily reflect Cave's true personality—the one Caroline idolized once upon a time.

"But there's still got to be something there we can use," said Doug. "Or at least traits of his we can also find within some of us."

Henry moved toward the whiteboard. "Let's figure this out right now," he said, wielding his erasable marker like a scepter. "Who here personally knew Mr. Johnson?"

Doug, along with the rest of the room, shook his head no. Though several joined the company before the man's death, growing close to him proved to be an impossible task. Trying to get onto Cave's good side was like trying to push two magnets of the same polarization together. Even the higher-ups stood no chance, much less the new hires.

Still, they'd all heard Cave Johnson's infamous recordings. His booming voice and passionate rambles provided them with at least a hint of how his mind and personality worked.

"Alright, then let's get brainstorming," said Henry. "Start giving me some traits."

An unspoken question hovered in the room, visible through slight frowns and confused looks. These traits Henry was looking for—did they have to necessarily be positive? Though they'd rather not say mean things about the former CEO, Cave Johnson had not been a nice man. And yet, even terrible men got idealized funeral speeches.

Henry pressed the bottom of the marker into the palm of his hand. "This list isn't going to write itself."

A skittish-looking scientist near the front raised a few fingers to catch Henry's attention. "Danger?"

Henry raised his eyebrows and waited for further clarification. As far as he knew, danger wasn't a personality trait. Danger-ous perhaps. But not danger.

The scientist glanced down. "Well, more like of a lack of regard for safety measures," he said. "He didn't care if anyone got hurt—said it wasn't real science unless someone ended up in the hospital," he said. "He was so bent on getting results that he didn't care about being safe. So not danger. Adventure. That's what he'd call it."

Henry pointed the marker at the employee and bobbed his head. He twisted back and jabbed the tip into the board to make a bullet point. In bold letters he wrote ADVENTURE.

"Excellent," he said. "What else?"

A few moments passed before someone spoke up. "Well," the scientist said. "I heard he liked space."

Karla nodded. "Yeah," she said. "Back when Aperture had quality test subjects—seasoned veterans, celebrated athletes—he used to get starstruck. But never as much as when former astronauts reported for testing."
"What about those problems with the government?"

"Eh, after the astronauts failed testing and went 'missing,'" she said, emphasizing the airquotes, "Senate hearings happened. I heard he felt bad about it, but clearly not bad enough to stop recruiting astronauts for as long as possible." She shrugged. "The man was crazy for space."

"Plus," said Doug, "no one buys $70 million worth of moon rocks unless they really like space."

"Okay, these are good." Doug—along with several others—nodded, and Henry turned back to add another word to their list: SPACE.

"Okay, those are good," said Henry. "Let's just get one or two more for now. What else?"

More time passed. The vast majority of those in this room had to go off of caricatures and memories of old voiceovers. None of them really knew Cave. Just his reputation.

"What about facts?" Doug suggested, recalling recordings he'd overheard near the Borealis. Stuff like how the human body was sixty percent water, or the exact age to expect to see symptoms of asbestos poisoning, or more ridiculous stuff about turning blood to peanut water or gasoline. Whether these facts were true or not didn't matter. Rather, it was the confident, self-assured manner he spoke with that made people believe that these facts were true.

"So make a core to just spit out fun facts?" said Henry.

"No, corrupted ones," said Doug. "Maybe they start off true or maybe they have a bit of truth to them. Just alter them so that there's something wrong about each one. Make the computer constantly second-guess and constantly fact-check everything it spits at her."

Henry nodded, absently tapping on the end of the marker. "Let's go ahead and put our efforts into those—if they don't work, we'll make more. But these three are our best shot, especially when combined."

As he moved to sit in his chair, a shrill ring made Henry jump. A light flashed from the conference room's phone.


He paused, face darkening.

"I'll send someone right down."

He hung up, leaning forward. "There's a security breach," he said, eyebrows furrowing. "But it's coming from the condemned areas of Aperture."
Chapter 25 - The Reunion

There will come a time, you'll see

With no more tears

And love will not break your heart

But dismiss your fears

"After the Storm" - Mumford & Sons

Caroline hesitated.

This had never been her favorite part of the job, really. The first few times she'd had to do it had almost killed her. Informing a family that their son or daughter had made a valuable yet fatal contribution to science was never easy.

Oh, she would—or well, used to—try her best to comfort them, spewing out statistics about how much their death had forwarded science, when in actuality most of the time nothing had been advanced at all. But she couldn't tell them that. The loss of a life could never be meaningless.

Honestly she hadn't minded when the company moved to recruiting more low-profile test subjects. Less paperwork, fewer phone calls, and fewer grieving family members to deal with.

She didn't mind the calls, and she didn't mind the fact that people sometimes died in Aperture. What she could only stomach so much of, though, was the little break in the voices of those she called. The moment when her words of apology stuck in her throat—that's what hurt the most.

She never cried. But sometimes, afterward, she had to take a minute before diving back into her work.

Today, though, she wasn't sure how to approach it. Most days the people who died were full adults, in some cases even older than herself. Never before had someone so young died within these walls.

She swallowed. It would be best to take care of this now, while Doug was busy testing. It'd take him a while to complete this next test. She'd have plenty enough time to call. She paused, then reached for a phone and cleared her throat.

"Hello?" said Caroline. "May I speak to Judith Mossman?"

"This is her," said a flat, yet vaguely curious voice. "Who is this?"

"Caroline. CEO of Aperture Science."

Judith's breath caught. She knew Caroline. Well, she knew of her. She was a bit of a legend among the women scientists she'd met. But for her to call Judith personally—well, that couldn't be good.

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number—" she said, words speeding up.
Ms. Mossman, we need to talk about your daughter."

"Chell," Judith exhaled, the word barely coming out as a whisper. "Is she alright?"

Caroline adjusted herself in her chair, choosing to ignore the question. "She and I have come to know each other quite well. Have you spoken to her recently?"

Judith frowned. The last she'd heard from Chell was her frantic call from the dry dock of the Borealis a few hours ago. She'd been sitting by the phone ever since, just waiting to hear another call that she was okay, that the unstable portal hadn't sucked her through either.

"No," she said, voice quiet but hard. "We don't talk often."

"Look. I know you're a part of this. I've known for a long time—I've simply been waiting for the inevitable slip-up. And, well, it's happened." Caroline paused, twisting her finger around the phone card. "I'm sure you're well-aware of what your daughter's been up to."

Judith's hands trembled as she pressed the phone to her ear. "Look, I'm sorry if she's caused you any trouble—"

"You have to know that you're not the first to try this, right? That you're not the first to try taking my hard-earned research from me. Honestly, what were you expecting?"

"Well, no—" she said. "But I just thought—"

"What? That you'd get some promotion out of it? A larger office? A fancy badge for your desk?"

"No, I—"

"Everything that's gotten out of the facility and into the grubby hands of Black Mesa is simply because I've allowed it. They allow Aperture to live by funding us and then swiping our scientific achievements from beneath me. But the portal device—that remains the sole property of Aperture Science."

"What do you mean?" Judith said, voice wavering.

"You—and your company—have taken everything from me. And yet you still want more. It's just never enough for Black Mesa, is it?" Caroline said, her tone accusing. "They really should have warned one of their employees before sending them off on an adventure that could easily end in tragedy."

Judith paused before whispering her answer. "I don't work for them," Judith said, pausing. "for Black Mesa. I wanted to, but they didn't hire me."

"Then that's why you did this? To get a job? If that's all you wanted, you could've saved yourself the trouble and applied at Aperture."

All at once, Judith's surroundings felt so restrictive. This chair and these walls were too far away from Michigan. Her daughter was in huge trouble and she was across the country from her. "Look, I don't want that job anymore. I don't care about any of that right now—Just tell me what's wrong with Chell."

"She crossed a line, Judith. You thought you could try to smuggle a portal device out of Aperture without consequence?" Caroline said. "No one does this to me and gets away with it."
Thoughts of Chell swirled into Judith's mind. When was the last time she'd sat down and just spoke to her daughter? When was the last time she played a game with her? And when the last time they'd laughed until they couldn't breathe over a joke?

"Please," she said, voice shaking. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"It's too late for that," Caroline said, voice biting. "I'm sorry, Ms. Mossman. Your daughter's not coming home."

Judith's knuckles turned white. This plan of theirs—she knew it could be dangerous. Aperture might twist adult traitors to their company into testing, but Chell was just a child. It was supposed to be her saving grace. No one would willingly hurt a young girl.

She hadn't considered that Caroline might do just that.

"No," Mossman said, straining to maintain her resolve. "No. That can't be true. She knows better—my Chell—" she choked. "She'd get herself out." No matter what situation they ended up in, she'd taught her daughter to use her head. She'd shown her how to work hard. She'd drilled it in over and over to never, ever give up. There was always a solution if one looked hard enough.

"She did. Well, she managed to break out of the room I was holding her in," Caroline said, voice walking the line between impressed and annoyed.

A flicker of pride flared in Judith's heart before the hot fear slipped back in. "And then?"

"I tried to get her back, I really did. She ran way to places she had no places being. Dangerous places," she said. "She refused to listen to me, and there was an accident—I'm sorry." Caroline's shoulders lowered. Even she could see that the words coming out of her mouth were as stiff as uncooked spaghetti.

"How dare you," Judith said, voice part injured and part disbelieving. She took a moment to gather herself, struggling to get out the words through her barely-restrained anger. "How dare you lay a hand on my daughter."

"Look," Caroline said, slipping back into her normal tone. "She was becoming a risk. A danger to my company. I had to put a stop to it."

Judith's hands tightened and her face hardened. "If your company is fragile enough to crumble at the hands of a twelve-year-old girl, then maybe you deserve it."

"I did what I had to."

"You hurt my daughter." Judith's voice wavered. "How could you be so heartless?"

"I'm not the heartless one here," Caroline said, voice bitter. "That girl poured her heart and soul into befriending employees here. She gained and exploited their trust, and you know why she did it?" she said, giving a slight pause. "She just wanted you to love her. You don't even feel anything for Chell, do you?"

Judith shook her head, using the sleeve of her sweater to wipe away budding tears. "I do love her, though. I love her with all my heart."

"She did all of this for you. Chell did this just to help you with your career. But you—you're the one that threw your own daughter into an incredibly dangerous situation, and then barely even spoke with her. You gave her away as if she meant nothing to you. Even I wouldn't sink that low."
"Everything had to look official, and calling often posed too much risk. I wanted her to stay safe."

"Well that went well, didn't it?"

You don’t understand—I needed to make a better life for us. I needed to make a name for myself, too. This was all just something temporary. A sacrifice for the greater good. You of all people have to understand that," she said, voice dropping. "Just like you said—I did what I had to."

Caroline took a steadying breath. At one point, she had wanted kids. Her parents had cultivated that desire within her—get a reliable job, marry a fine man, and then have a handful of beautiful curly-haired children. And as a charismatic and surprisingly good-looking business owner, Mr. Johnson had seemed like he’d be just the man.

She’d thrown herself into her newfound career with the desire to impress him. First on a professional level, but later on a personal level. And yet never once he consider that her enthusiasm was motivated by deeper feelings than a simple love for science. To him, she was just incredibly dedicated to Aperture.

She understood his rejection of romance and commitment, though. Having to manage a family life on top of their own work would have been exhausting. Aperture would have suffered. Their potential relationship would have suffered. And their children would have suffered most of all.

And yet even without a single declaration of love from him, Caroline dreamed for years of a proposal. By the time she’d pulled her head out of her paperwork and realized he’d never admit to loving her, it had been too late to try and find another man.

Besides—would she even have wanted that? Someone other than Aperture Science himself?

Dedicating her life to science was far more rewarding than trading all of this for the role of a cheerful housewife. She’d still be doing the same things no doubt—making coffee, cleaning up messes, taking care of finances—just on a much smaller scale. Oh, and with grimy, screeching children sprinting around the house and breaking things.

In comparison, her interactions with test subjects weren’t so bad.

And yet she’d still managed to convince Cave to fund an Employee Daycare Center. She didn’t want the working women of Aperture to feel forced into abandoning a career in order to start a family. Watching them every-so-often drag in a bouncy little boy or an adorable young girl, she felt a pang of something she couldn’t quite place. It wasn’t regret, of course. Perhaps wonder. Perhaps a sense of longing. More than anything, though, it made her wonder how her life could’ve taken another path.

If she hadn’t ended up here—would she have been a loving mother?

Disgust dripped back into her voice as she turned her attention back to the call. "What kind of mother are you?"

"A better one than you'd ever be," Judith whispered.

Caroline paused before continuing.

"Do you know why I never started a family?" she said, voice surprisingly quiet. "Everyone always thought I was too dedicated to my job to pursue love. They thought falling for a man would ruin my career. They were wrong," said Caroline. "I loved. And I loved deeply. He and I—we inspired each other to be greater and grander people."
She and Cave had truly been partners in science. Without one another, the company wouldn't have lasted nearly as long as it had. "But I know Aperture Science inside and out," she said. "People die here, inside and outside of the test chambers. Knowing how much of my life I live within these walls, I could never bring a child into this world just to put them directly in danger," she said. "So how could you?"

Judith's mind strayed to her own relationship with science. When faced with a puzzling science concept or a new and fascinating theory, she found herself lost to the world for hours at a time. Any distraction that snapped her out of it was usually met with frustration, more often than not directed at her daughter.

Chell always needed so much. She was always asking questions or always bothering her to play with her or help her with homework. She was always asking about dinner or reciting some joke she'd heard at school or nagging her about where they'd be moving to next. The distractions became unbearable after a time.

"Haven't you said enough?" Judith said. She shook her head, breaking shaky. "Just stop," "I know I've never been able to give Chell the life she deserves."

Even thinking about this sent waves of shame and guilt through her. The woman on the other end of the line was right—she was right. Judith had never been skilled at expressing her love. Or any affection at all, really.

Images flooded her mind of the little moments with Chell: combing through her hair in the mornings, kissing her on the forehead, seeing her bright smile as she raced through reading a book. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd embraced Chell on her own accord—truly embraced her and just held her.

"I know I messed up. I know I'm an awful mother," Judith said. "I'd give anything just to have a second chance. Just to try again."

Caroline exhaled. It was one thing to play with this woman's emotions and to show her how awful she'd acted. But to have her react in this way—with genuine regret rather than just sorrow—made this call even worse than she'd ever imagined it.

"I love her," Judith said, voice quiet. "And I'll never forget that you took her from me."

"No," hissed Caroline. "You did that to yourself."

The back of her head bumped against the elevator as Chell leaned back. She could hardly believe this was true—she'd spent so long trying to get away from Caroline that she hadn't been sure she'd be able to find her way back to the surface. Eyes closing, she stretched out her fingertips to feel the worn walls.

She was so close to getting out of here.

As the lift slid to a stop, a familiar lurch swooped through her stomach. She'd gotten so used to that disorienting feeling from falling through portals that she barely noticed it this time.

*Ding.*

Chell clutched the nozzle of the Quantum Tunneling Device to her chest as the elevator slid open to white walls. Bare feet touched against cool tile as Chell tiptoed out, then shifted into a determined stride. Each twist and turn made the modern enrichment center feel just as labyrinthian as the
chambers below.

Despite this being the modern level of the enrichment center, it felt wrong. No voices echoed and no doors slammed. She expected to bump into someone, but as she weaved her way through the halls she encountered no one. Chell had even come up with a handful of bad excuses and miniature escape plans for every scenario she could picture, from running into anyone from security to janitors to scientists.

Granted, those had been made back when she'd first made it to old Aperture. Looking the way she did right now, Chell doubted anyone would believe her if she said she'd wandered off from a parent's office and gotten lost. Before she would've given anything for an ascension this devoid of personnel, but this time she needed to find a person.

Though she needed to approach someone, she wasn't sure how, or even whom to ask. She had to find someone here—someone who could easily reverse the situation with her body. Asking the right person versus the wrong person could make all the difference—the only problem was, she didn't know what the 'right person' would look like.

At the sound of other footsteps, Chell ducked into a doorframe. The steps didn't sound too rushed or too urgent. Perhaps just a regular employee taking a casual stroll. She pressed a hand to the wall and then took a peek out of the room. A blur of motion caught her eye as a man turned down another hallway. He didn't look right, though. She needed to find someone more approachable.

Chell leaned back, struggling to control her breathing. At once she noticed that the lights in this room—unlike surrounding ones—were on. Her forehead touched the wall and she briefly closed her eyes, trying not to think about what she needed to do next.

"Are you lost?"

Chell flipped around to see a woman digging through a filing cabinet. She glanced to either side of lady in the labcoat, noticing a few manila folders haphazardly set on a nearby desk. She took a backward step to the wall.

"I-" she breathed, finding that words didn't come out from her sore throat. She held a hand to it and coughed.

"It's alright," the woman said with a shrug and sigh, sticking a folder between her teeth as she reached toward the back of the drawer. "It's easy to get lost here. Just tell me where you need to go and I'll take you there," she said, plopping the folders on her desk and eyeing Chell curiously. "Better than just wandering around."

Chell's hands trembled as she clenched onto the end of the Quantum Tunneling Device.

"What's your test subject number?"

"Oh—I'm not a test subject." She shook her head violently, trying not to tremble. "I—I need to see a scientist."

The woman frowned. "What's your name?"

Chell," she whispered.

"Well, Miss Chell," said the woman as she gathered up her files. "I'm Karla, and it just so happens I'm a scientist. Just follow me." The woman tucked the files beneath her arm, eyes following the tube of the Quantum Tunneling Device all the way back up to the box strapped to Chell's back. "You can
set that down for now if you'd like. I'm sure it's heavy."

Chell tightened her grip on the straps, giving a silent cue that this device was coming with her. As it was the most valuable object she'd come across in Aperture, she wasn't just about to leave it behind.

"Suit yourself," Karla sighed. "Come on, then. I'm rather busy with an important project. Let's get your situation—whatever it is—sorted out." The scientist moved through the door at a crisp pace, moving with a marked determination.

Chell hesitated, unsure about being lead to yet another part of the facility. It'd be farther into it no doubt, but at least she wouldn't find herself beneath everything again. At this point it was better to be accompanied by an employee than to wander this place. She'd draw a lot less attention to herself that way.

Still, the woman in front of her moved fast and barely spoke to her, as if Chell was an inconvenience above all else.

She followed Karla through twists and turns and up staircases, until she found herself in an airy part of the facility she didn't recognize. She glanced around for signs or some sort of indicator as to where she was. The layout of this area puzzled her. Whereas before she had seen areas of the facility as huge chunks, this area seemed more disconnected. Long, rectangular cargo containers stretched as far as she could see, each one connected only to the catwalks and not to one another.

"Where are we?" Chell said, taking a few hurried steps to catch up with Karla. Despite this woman revealing herself to be a scientist, Chell still felt hesitant to speak to her. Her last encounter with a female Aperture employee hadn't gone over well.

"They call it the Long Term Relaxation Center," she said, glancing over.

"Relaxation?" Chell gave a sharp inhale, halting. "Like as in suspension?"

"Yes," said Karla. "But don't worry. You'll just be borrowing a room while we get everything sorted out. Personally I find that these rooms are a lot more comforting than those clear boxes."

Chell gave a shaky nod.

Karla paused to swipe a keycard near a door. A light flashed, changing from red to yellow. "See, just look here," she said, briefly struggling to balance the files in her other arm. "The indicator light's only yellow, which means the suspension isn't activated. Just stay here for an hour or two, okay?" She pushed open the door to reveal a hotel-like room. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Thank you," Chell breathed. She took a few steps into the room, surprised at how welcoming it looked. But before she could say another word, the door hissed closed and locked with a distinctive click.

"Here's your damn files."

Doug glanced up, barely dodging the folders skidding across the table to him.

"Took me forever to find," Karla groaned, pulling her hair back into a tight bun. "Don't see why you couldn't have gone to get those by yourself."

Doug pulled the files into a neat stack, giving a quick nod of thanks.
"While I was down there I had to deal with a problem, too. Just my luck," she sighed, sinking into a chair. "You know that 'lost experiment' Henry and his goons are going after? I ran into it. Just got off the phone with him, too."

"Something crawl out of the acid lake?" Doug said, voice flat despite the joking tone he intended to convey.

"Close enough," said Karla, "Test subject. Possibly displaced from an old time-travel or teleportation test. We're still looking into it. Well, I need to look into it. Everyone else is too busy with more important things, supposedly." She gave another faint groan. She reached up her hands and turned them into mock puppets as she slipped into a sarcastic tone. "It's always 'Karla do this,' or 'Please take care of it because we're all too lazy to do it and you're the only responsible one here' or 'I'm a self-absorbed man who thinks I'm so much better than a regular scientist.'"

"It's always 'Karla do this,' or "'Please take care of it because we're all too lazy to do it," or "I'm a self-absorbed man who thinks I'm so much better than a regular scientist."

Doug gave a snort of amusement and briefly joined in. His hand curled into a shadow-puppet swan as he slipped into a nasal voice. "I'm an Aperture scientist and I have no idea how to interact with people so you're gonna have to do it, nyeh nyeh nyeh."

Karla broke into a rare smile, letting her hands fall back to her side. "But really though, the woman seemed incredibly disoriented—out of uniform, and using an ancient testing equipment. Just wandering. She seemed panicked, and asked for a scientist, not a test associate. Naturally I was the one she ran into."

"What did she look like?" Doug said, absently flipping through a folder on the top. He'd been scrounging up all the information that he possibly could on brain scanning and brain mapping—early research, scrapped research, whatever they could get their hands on. Though they'd already gathered as much as they possibly could for the GLaDOS project, Doug had requested Karla to bring up all of her old plans and research into personality cores. If there was some sort of way that they could merge the two, then it would make the process so much easier and so less taxing, especially on the human volunteers.

"Dark hair, wide eyes. Typical skittish and unsocial subject. I barely squeezed a first name out of her—much less a test subject number. Can't find her anywhere in the candidate logs."

Doug glanced up, absently adjusting his tie.

"But Doug," she said, voice shifting from complaining to concerned. "She said her name was Chell."

"Just don't get your hopes up, Doug" Karla said, pausing in front of the relaxation room. "It's been—well, years. The woman in there is older than the teenager Chell would've been." She looked down, a sigh of sadness leaving her. "I just don't want you to hurt any more."

"I have to know," he said, reaching for the doorknob and turning it. Doug knew that this hope in his heart wasn't right, wasn't likely to bring him anything but renewed pain and regret, but he knew he couldn't live with himself if he ignored it altogether.

"Move quickly," Karla grumbled, swiping her card next to the door and giving Doug a gentle push in. Leaving a door wide open with a test subject nearby was a safety hazard, really. They could get vicious sometimes.

The soft buzz of an air conditioning unit filled the room, only interrupted by muffled energetic words
coming from the television in the corner. It was set to the company's channel, which consisted of cheaply-made safety videos, cheesy instructional videos, and advertisements for the company's various discontinued good. Sometimes footage from experiments gone wrong showed up, usually as a way to deter the current employee and test subject population from screwing up.

Legs crossed and a pillow held to her chest, the woman in the room sat on her bed. She didn't even look up when the door opened to allow in the two guests.

Karla folded her key card into an inside pocket in her lab coat, testing the door handle to make sure it had been locked properly. "Chell?" she said, hesitantly moving forward. "I brought someone here to help. He's a scientist too, and he says he might know you."

Doug followed close behind Karla, hands clamped together in front of him. He couldn't see her fact just yet—she had it buried in the pillow. But from what he could see, she had gray in her hair—gray in her hair—and her clothes—a spark of recognition flared inside of him. He recognized that shirt and those sweats—those had been the ones she'd been wearing years ago.

"Chell?" he choked out, voice a mixture of disbelief and straining hope. "Is that you?"

He took a few steps closer to the bed, reaching out to touch her on the arm. He had to physically confirm that what he was seeing was true—he'd been tortured too many times by his own mind.

Instead, though, Chell dropped her pillow. "Get away from me!" she cried out, scrambling off the bed. She bumped her hip into the nightstand, wincing as the corner bit into her. She pulled her arms across her chest, shaking her head. She gave a pleading look to Karla, asking just who this was, and why she'd brought him here.

"Chell, do you know this man?" she said, glancing over at Doug.

Doug's vision blurred. He'd frozen as she had slipped as far away from him as she could possibly be, a sense of regret filling him. "Chell," he said, giving a heartbreaking exhale. "I'm here, Chell. It's me. It's Doug."

At the question, Chell looked up, arms still clutched to her chest. Her face was red, puffy, tearstained, as if she'd been struggling to calm herself from an earlier crying spell. And yet through the obvious pain on her face, Chell's face twisted into one of recognition. "Doug?" she whispered, pushing a damp strand of hair out of her eyes.

Doug nodded, head bobbing up and down. An overwhelming set of emotions—sadness, disbelief, but mostly overwhelming happiness—slipped through him. And yet despite the smile creeping to his face, Chell still slid farther away.

"Are you okay, dear?" Karla said, giving the subject a once-over. Despite her bandaged hand, she hadn't shown any other evidence of physical injury on their walk over. But then again, test subjects were perpetually getting themselves into trouble. Especially when left unsupervised.

Chell shook her head no. She sniffed, wiping a hand at her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Doug said, straining to keep his calm and keep his distance. "It's okay. You can tell us."

She fidgeted with a pad of paper on the nightstand, rolling it in her hands and then pressing the eraser end into the table. The pencil slipped from the force of her push, clattering onto the table.

"You left me," she said, voice quiet.
Unease slipped through Doug's body. Uncomfortable and cold, it felt as if he'd just dropped something valuable down a drain. "Chell," he exhaled.

"You left me down there all alone," she said, voice cracking. Chell blinked quickly. "I waited and waited but you never came back." She sniffed, crossing her arms and burying her face in them.

Doug paused, slowly moving to the edge of the bed. Thoughts scrambled his mind—he wanted to explain everything and ask everything at the same time. It had been years since they'd seen one another, and the sudden weight of that realization hit him hard. He sat down, both hands pressed into the fabric. "Chell, I—" he shook his head, struggling to hold back tears. "I thought you were dead. We all did," he said, clenching at the blanket.

Chell just shook her head a few times, barely able to think about what she'd been through much less talk about it. She rubbed her arms and she sat back down.

"Doug—go grab her a blanket, would you?" Karla said, folding her legs in the chair. "Should be one on the closet shelf."

Rising to his feet, Doug took a few shaky steps before his walking stabilized. All of this was so much to take in. He knew that Chell hadn't made it. Both he and Caroline had known it, so he couldn't dismiss it as a hallucination. Plus, Chell had known the way back to the elevator to the modern enrichment center. It hadn't been too difficult to follow, had it? Doug reached up, tugging down a think beige blanket. Folded nicely up in his arms, he carried it over to the shivering girl and with a sweep of his arms he unfolded it and lightly draped it across her shoulders.

Chell sniffed, tugging the blanket tight around her. She gave another few long breaths and pulled the blanket up and around her head like a hood. "I was so scared and nobody was there," she said, looking down. "And you never came back."

"Caroline—" Doug said, breaking off as he saw Chell's eyes grow wider and her grip on the blanket tighten. "She had me in a chamber too, and the audio patched in from yours. I'm so so sorry, Chell," Doug said, looking at his hands. "I wanted to be there for you—it killed me to hear the things she said to you, and, well," he swallowed, "when we heard that splash we both assumed the worst."

Chell shook her head lightly. "I pushed a grate out of the way and fell." She held up her bandaged wrist and absenty rubbed it. "And then I don't know what happened. I fell asleep, and when I woke up—" she said, looking up with tears in her eyes. "This isn't me. This isn't my body and this isn't how old am and I don't want it." She rested her head on her knees. "Just change me back, please," she said, shoulders trembling as she started to sob. Chell buried her face in the blanket, burrowing inside of it to muffle her cries.

Karla finished writing, setting the clipboard and pen in her lap. Though Doug could see that she was becoming more annoyed with the situation, he didn't know what to do. She jerked her head to the side, urging him to do something, anything, to get the woman to stop crying.

He knew he should do something to comfort her, something to help her. And yet besides the vague feeling of guilt, he didn't know how to handle this situation. He'd never been the best at engaging in social activities or coming up with the appropriate responses. Scrambling to come up with the right facial expression or tone of voice didn't come easily to him, and combined with the hallucinations, this had lead to his initial diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Still, he wanted to try his best.

"Oh, Chell—" he said, scooting over and reaching out to touch her shoulder. "Come here," he murmured, letting her fall forward and into his arms. She buried her face into his shoulder and cried.
At that moment it became clear to him that Chell was not the woman she appeared to be—she was still that girl, scared and alone and trapped in a body that didn't feel like her own "I'm so, so sorry," he said, using a hand to gently rub her back. "I never meant to leave you."

Chell cried harder, breathing coming short as she leaned farther into him.

"We can fix what happened to you, alright?" Doug said, giving her hair a slight ruffle. "The more you tell us about down there, the more we can help you. Take your time."

She took a deep inhale to steady herself. Then, slowly and quietly she detailed her escapades from the test chambers through the acquisition of the Quantum Tunneling Device to the accidental teleportation of the Borealis.

"Then," she said, bunching the blanket under her chin. "There was a room with beds, except they weren't normal beds." She frowned. "Like the one in that vault, but older. And they made me look like this."

"Relaxation pod?" Doug said.

Chell nodded. "You can fix it, right?" she said, voice faint but begging.

Karla paused, looking at Chell with an expression that bordered on sympathetic. "Well," she said. "I know early experiments with short-term and long-term relaxation had—" she cleared her throat, "an unintended side effect of advancing the age of a subject at a rapid rate, instead of halting it. With the integrated healing of current suspension, we can partially reverse the aging."

Chell glanced up, staring over Doug's shoulder at the woman. Being told that she'd done something irreversible to her body—something that even Aperture couldn't completely undo—brought another wave of tears to her eyes. "I don't want to look like this though," she pleaded. "I don't want this. Please just fix it."

"If you're lucky we'll able to get you to look like a younger adult, but that involves time and more suspension," said Karla. "I'm so sorry, dear. You're never going to look like a kid again."

"No—no," Chell said, barely able to choke out the words. "I don't want to stay here. I just want to fix this and go home."

"Please, Chell," Doug said, pulling back and giving a sad smile. "We're going to do our best to help you. We'll keep you safe here."

"I don't care," Chell cried, wiping her tears. "Please. Please."

"Chell—" Doug said, giving her shoulder a small squeeze. "We're not going to let anything else happen to you. I'm still going to get you out of here. I promise."

Chell gave another sniffle, gathering her blankets and leaning back into his shoulder to cry.

She'd lost hope in Doug's promises a long time ago.
"There we go," Doug said. He gave the collar of Chell's upturned lab coat a pat and smoothed it down. She had to look sharp for this, after all.

Chell frowned at the mirror, jamming her hands into her deep pockets. "They're gonna know," she said, not even bothering to look over at Doug.

"Know what?" Doug said. He took the chance to push down one of her stray hairs.

"That I'm not a real scientist," she said softly, adjusting the coat. Though she could tell by fading on the seams that this lab coat was worn, it still felt crisp and uncomfortable on her shoulders.

"Everyone in the halls won't give you a second look. And everyone you'd need to worry about already knows who you are."

Chell shifted, not sure if that was supposed to give her comfort. It wasn't a disguise so much as a way for Chell to feel less out-of-place as she accompanied Doug.

"Now, just to go over it again," Doug said, adjusting his tie.

Chell sighed. "Follow you, don't wander off, don't touch anything, and don't get into trouble. I know, Doug."

"I know. I'm sorry," he said. "I'm looking forward to showing you what I've been working on—and if everything goes well today, then I'll be able to get you out of this room more often. This is just the best I can do right now."

Chell gave herself one last look over before nodding.

They found themselves in a room adorned with floor-to-ceiling windows. Chell found herself drawn immediately toward the glass and stared down at the inexplicable mass of machinery dangling from the ceiling.

"What's that?" she said, gesturing to the room beneath. She felt other eyes hot on the back of her head and reached over to tug on the back of Doug's sleeve.

"Oh, Chell!" a voice from behind her spoke. Chell turned to see Karla, mouth pulled into a forced smile. "I'm so glad you could make it. Doug's been saying you could use some fresh air."

Chell gave a curt nod, turning back to face the windows.

"I don't know how much he's told you about this project—"

Doug cleared his throat. "I've been waiting to show her. I figured we'd all like to show off our work to a fresh set of eyes."

"Absolutely," said Karla. "What you see here is called the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating
"System," she said, turning to Chell. "It's a supercomputer with a fully integrated human mind, meaning that it possesses real consciousness."

Chell stared down at the lifeless machine.

"The idea was that a human mind would make the AI more approachable," Doug said. "We wouldn't have to program in values like morality, because it'd already be ingrained within it." He pursed his lips and darted a gaze at Karla.

Chell couldn't help but look back and forth between the two of them, searching for what was left behind. She couldn't help but wonder just how much they were leaving out.

"We've been having trouble modifying the AI to, well, behave," Karla said, moving over to the desks. "We need to get into its framework to make changes, but every time we turn it on, it lashes out. It's dangerous, and we need to fix it."

A group of scientists entered the Main AI Chamber from sliding doors to the right. She kept her eyes trained on the team as they stepped up to the massive machine. The scientists looked so tiny and insignificant as they leaned a ladder against the chassis. One scientist scaled the ladder, while another held onto a Wheatley-like sphere by the handlebars. Two cores rolled gently on the ground, bright green and yellow optics darting around.

Doug slid into one of the chairs at the control desks; Chell shot him a questioning look.

"We're perfectly safe here," he said, pulling over an extra chair in case Chell wanted to sit down later. "All we're going to do is turn it on, and those cores will distract the AI enough to let us dig around and make some changes."

"Yeah," said Karla, giving a snort. "Like pulling its permissions to access the neurotoxin. Or the panels in the room we were standing in. I don't know whose bright idea it was to allow the machine access to that."

"Anyway, that's the goal for today," Doug said. "We'll get started as soon as they're done installing those cores."

Caroline couldn't tell if she was awake.

These days, her varying states of being became nearly impossible to distinguish. Even when her main chassis powered down, she was still "alert" on the most minimal of levels. Somehow. Though she was functionally "off" and of no practical use, they still required her assistance with the time-intensive, menial tasks that no one else wanted to do. Sensory input remained cut-off, and yet this digital version of herself—CarolineDOS, she supposed she'd refer to herself now—still had access to harmless Aperture systems, such as the phone directory and the security footage.

Though she was unaware of it during these dark periods, her ability to think was incredibly clouded and dimmed down—more of a dull, spectating state rather than true and independent thought.

She wasn't in her old body and couldn't quite define these periods as rests or daydreams—and yet, sometimes she felt herself suddenly awake.

The world came screaming back into focus.

Bright lights flooded in from her live camera feeds. Sound rushed in as the Main AI Chamber came jolting back into full functionality.
Oh, it was nice to have her brainpower simply upped like that. She didn't have to worry about fatigue or thirst or any other inconvenient physical needs. Now, she could simply exist and do work with minimal interruptions. That is, she would as soon as they stopped shutting her off every time she showed, well, a little bit of personality.

CarolineDOS gave the chassis a violent shake, struggling to make sense of the sudden awakening.

"Hey! Hey! Hey lady!"

"Wellhello there, Sleeping Beauty!"

"Aperture Science began as Aperture Fixtures, a shower company with the goal of making shower curtains you could walk through—"

Three voices yelled at her, overlaying everything she had attempted to focus on. Oh no. Not more of these insufferable, screaming beach balls again. Her video feeds locked onto the Main AI Chamber; she felt her audio feeds crank up involuntarily.


"'Bout time you woke up! Those engineers told me you're gonna need some help with this job of yours—you go ahead and let 'ol Rick help you out. Wouldn't ever let a pretty lady drown in her own work, after all."

CarolineDOS didn't respond. Whatever these scientists hoped they would ever accomplish with these cores was ridiculous. She sent out a surge of queries and requests past the cores, struggling to obtain information relating to the room above her. Just from her visual feed, she could see all of the scientists in there, monitoring her and manipulating these tumors attached to her. But no matter what she tried, she couldn't gain access to any direct visual or audio feed from that room.

"Quiet," she hissed to the cores.

"Attempting to take on too much work leads to poor health and increased levels of stress."

"Ma'am, I assure you I'm a professional—let me take care of things—"

"Workaholism is closely associated with perfectionism and narcissism, can be a sign of overcompensation for low self-esteem—"

"Hey? Hey what do you think about planning a mission to space? I love space. People love space. Improve public opinion. Go to space. Get more funding. Go back to space."

"Black Mesa is made up entirely of second-rate employees."

CarolineDOS raced through her files, trying to figure out if there was some sort of way that she could corrupt these blubbery watermelons. All she'd done before was ask that stupid core questions that he couldn't answer no matter how hard he'd tried to ahhh and ummm his way around the problem. He'd actually managed to fry some of his circuits in the process.

"After the success of his shower curtains, Cave Johnson pulled himself up by his bootstraps and created one of the most successful applied science companies in the United States. Second only, of course, to Black Mesa."
"Are you even listening to me, lady? We've got a lot to do now. Let me take up some of it. I'm a strong guy. I've got this."

"The Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System was originally intended to be an arguably sentient ice inhibitor."

All at once, CarolineDOS felt something unfamiliar. She couldn't quite describe what the sensation was—only that something didn't feel right. She shifted her focus back onto the cores, trying to latch onto just what they were doing rather than saying. There had to be some other reason behind it rather than just talking to her.

They were each systematically going through files right under her nose, slowly but steadily cutting off her access and revoking her permissions to elements of the facility. CarolineDOS gave an audible hiss and slammed down on the connections between her and the cores, and the cores yelped at the surges of electricity and information.

They weren't here too dumb her down, as she had assumed earlier. They were here to distract her. And with these cores—these wretched, masculine cores—they thought they could control her.

"How daare youU—" she spat out, voice still glitching. This explained why these over-inflated dodgeballs seemed familiar. This explained why their condescending tones and personalities made her so uneasy.

"Did you think that these half-rate imitations could control me?" she said.

Of course, there was no reaction from the scientists and only ceaseless babbling from the cores. "He never controlled me. And these never will," she growled. She spun her optic around, tilting up her 'face' to look through the glass pane separating her chamber from the scientists. They didn't move much, switching between monitoring their computers and monitoring her movements.

She moved to stare at each of them individually, to the extent that she could do that with her single optic. She moved from person to person, each one refusing to look at her in the same way that she looked at them.

Only one held her gaze.

CarolineDOS froze.

Dark, messy hair. Intense eyes. A lab coat that looked completely out of place on her shoulders. And strangely enough-she wasn't wearing any shoes. One quick scan of her face confirmed what she feared to be true.

"Y-youu-"

I know you.

Chell bolted down the hallway.

"Chell-" he wheezed, struggling to keep up with her. "Slow down, I'm trying to talk to you—"

Instead, she shifted to a sprint back to her room.

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Doug said, raising his voice as the distance between them grew.

Chell wove her way through the open area of the extended relaxation vaults. Though an impossible
maze, she already knew the way. She couldn't make a true run for it now. One day, though. One day she would.

She hit the door and fumbled for the knob, remembering with an exasperated huff that she couldn't open it without a keycard. Chell refused to look over her shoulder. The grains of the wooden door swirled before her as she listened to his steps grow nearer and nearer. She didn't want to listen to Doug's voice. She didn't want to watch him struggle to catch up. She didn't want anything to do with him right now.

_Swoosh._

The door clicked and Chell shoved it open, sliding in and then slamming it shut. Briefly she considered barring the door—but time was short. By the time she dragged over a chair Doug would already be inside.

She went directly for the bathroom.

Chell barely heard the soft click of the door opening and closing. She glanced at her hands, then over at the mosaic of the broken mirror.

"Chell?" she faintly heard as Doug made his way into the room. "Please. You've gotta let me explain," Doug said, voice muffled. "You don't have to say anything—just listen, okay?" audible on the other side of the door.

She paused, glancing over at the door.

Doug knew that he could simply open the door and let himself in. The bathroom doors weren't locked, after all—but he knew that she needed a bit of privacy in this place. He exhaled, sliding down to a sitting position on that side of the door.

"She barely recognizes us—I never thought she'd recognize you—" They had made sure that the employee databases—at least, the parts with personal and identifying information—had been pushed out of GLaDOS's reach.

"But why does it know me?" Chell whispered, voice barely audible.

Though Doug figured that she'd already put two and two together and realized the identity of the AI, part of her had to still be in denial. She had to be waiting for him to relieve her fears and tell her that it was someone different altogether. "Because you've met the human component of that machine before," he said, keeping his tone as calm and matter-of-fact as he could.

"No—"

"Chell, it's her," he said. "I was there when she was uploaded."

"But—" Chell said, voice breaking. "How could you just take me in there like that? Why didn't you tell me?" How could Doug even think about putting her in proximity with someone who had terrified her—and still did? He'd lied to her—he'd said that she wouldn't cause any problems for her anymore. He said she'd be safe.

"When we were down there together," he said, "I stumbled across urgent plans left behind by Cave Johnson himself. It was a matter of Aperture's future, and yet Caroline had done absolutely _everything_ to ensure its failure. I had to tell them about this plan to upload her into an AI." He paused, idly picking at his cuticles.
"But why didn't you tell me?" Chell said. Why would he swipe any sense of security she'd managed to gain from beneath her? Not only did she have to worry about getting out of here, but she also had to worry about some freak reincarnation of the woman she hated most in the world.

"I wanted to, but I couldn't," he said. "The project is one of our most under-wraps project in ages. We can't let this be stolen from us."

Chell paused, pushing aside glass with the side of her hand, trying to process the information. "I was scared," she whispered.

"I was too," said Doug, swallowing. "We thought we'd have some semblance of control over this AI. We thought we'd be able to subdue her once reduced to a digital form, but it—she—is out of control. She's using everything she has to lash out against us, and it's all we can do to subdue her attacks with those cores. We're trying so hard to get in there and make her safer," he said, a weariness weighing down his voice. "But those three cores were our best shot."

"What now, then?" she said.

Doug was surprised as how easily Chell had seemed to just accept what he had said. She was ready to move on, to know as much as she could in order to tackle her next problem. He saw the maturity that she must have gained—or at least, must have appeared to gain. She'd thrown her fit and she'd expressed her feelings. Now she was ready to sit down and get to work.

"Make more, I guess," Doug said grimly. "We've tried everything we could think of. We've used all of our personalities to create cores, but the computer just bats off our voices as if we're nothing more than flies. Those ones were supposed to work."

"Why?" said Chell.

"They were based on aspects of Cave's personality," he said. "We figured if she wouldn't listen to us, that maybe she'd listen to him."

From the other side of the door, Chell gave an unimpressed snort. It was easy for her to see the flaw in their logic. Cave was the one who had gotten Caroline into that mess. If anything, reminders of him would be the last thing a crazed robo-Caroline would want.

"Isn't there anyone else you can use?" Chell said, straining for answers. "What about that one guy that followed her around? The assistant."

"Greg?" said Doug. "She tried to kill him immediately upon activation."

"Oh," Chell said. "Well, there's got to be someone around that she'll listen to."

"Honestly, the only person I've even seen her really take interest in was you," said Doug, quickly changing his voice and shaking his head. "But I can't ask that of you—and I'm not going to. You've done so much."

"Would it get me out of here faster?" Chell said.

"You already did something amazing today, Chell. Even though those cores were a flop, just your presence was able to distract the AI enough that we could strip her access to the neurotoxin," he said. "You've just made this place so much safer. But without this huge threat looming over us, it would be much easier," Doug said.

There was a pronounced pause where Chell didn't answer. Doug heard a grunt of frustration,
sheer anger, and then felt a fist pound against a wall. Glass shattered to the floor; Doug straightened. "Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," Chell said. The door creaked as she gently twisted the handle. "You can come in now," she said.

He pushed open the door to see her sitting on the floor, surrounded by glass.

Doug exhaled and bent down next to Chell. She didn't answer or look up, and instead gave a sniff as she reached a hand up to wipe across her face. As she pressed her hand back into the floor, Doug noticed a trail of blood across her hand.

The broken pieces of the bathroom mirror stared back at Chell. On the floor of the meager bathroom she sat, legs splayed and hands pressed against the tiles. The singular lamp above shone on the reflective shards, casting spots of light across the tiled walls. Blood pulsed through her veins and she clenched her hand.

Chell almost went faint at the sight of her blood. She glanced up at the spot where the mirror had been just moments before, broken by her in an impulse of either fear or anger. Shifting back upright, she gave a few shards a violent push away with her bare foot.

Doug nearly leaped forward to stop her. "No-no—" he said, voice a bit panicked. "Don't touch those—they'll hurt. Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

"No," she said sharply, closing her eyes and pulling away. "I'm fine. I'm ready to do it," she said, giving a defined exhale.

"Do what?"

"Make more cores," she said, words tumbling out in a blur. She wasn't sure how to feel about this. She didn't want to be involved in any more things involved with Aperture, much less something related to Caroline—or rather, an extremely more powerful version of Caroline. But this was something that could help. This was something she could do to fight back.

"You don't have to do this, Chell," said Doug. "No one would ask this of you—"

"Will it hurt?"

"No," said Doug, and Chell could tell from the tone of his voice that he wasn't hiding anything. "Lots of us have done it. It's quick and painless and we'll even let you see the cores once we've extracted the personality traits."

For a long time there was nothing, and then a gentle and almost minuscule creak as Chell edged through the bathroom door. Though she sniffed and faint tears stained her face, her expression was stern. She gave a faint nod. "Then let's go," she said.

It was time to get this over with.
Chapter 27

The Courtesy Call

"Your turn." Doug folded his hand of cards into a neat pile.

Chell glanced up.

"It's been your move for a while now," he said. White waiting, he had methodically considered his next choice and it was only after making it—and returning his attention to Chell—that he noticed she'd just been staring off at the wall.

"If you don't want to play anymore, that's okay," Doug said. This hadn't been the first time she'd spaced out. In fact, after her first turn, he had to remind her almost every time to go ahead and play a card. She'd throw one down. The process would repeat.

Chell didn't reply. She let her card flutter on top of the played cards pile.

"Alright, what's wrong? I thought you liked this game," Doug said, running his thumb over his cards.

"I do, I guess," Chell said.

"Then why aren't you playing?"

Chell shrugged.

Doug paused, thinking back for reasons as to what might be causing this behavior. He wasn't the best at this sort of thing. "If you're wondering about the cores, we're not finished processing the data from your brain scans yet. As soon as we are, I'll bring you to the lab to show them, okay?"

She gave a noncommittal grunt.

Doug gave a pained sigh. "Oh," he said. "Is this about the AI?"

That was it—that had to be it. It was no wonder she didn't want to play this game. If he were Chell, he wouldn't even want to be in the same room as him. "Chell—I know that what you saw scared you. But I wanted to show you that so that you'd know that you're safe. You're safe in this room, and after a few more small changes, you'll be safe in Aperture."

Chell toyed with the cards in her hand, rearranging them first by color and then by ascending value. "Yeah, right," she scoffed.

"She won't touch you and she won't touch me."

"Why?" She spat out the word like a dare. "We're just like the rest of them."

If the AI wanted to kill all of the scientist and employees that it could possibly interact with, then it logically followed that she'd want to kill them, too. "What makes you so sure?"

This was, by far, the most vocal Chell had been all week. As much as Doug wished he could bail out of this conversation altogether, he couldn't just shut down her voice now. Not when she was finally
"There's," he started, "more to the story than I let on before. About Caroline." He cleared his throat. "I didn't mean for any of it to happen, but it all just—well, it got out of control. Remember when I said I found the plans that revived the GLaDOS project?"

Chell gave the slightest bob of her head.

"After that—we had to dig up all sorts of dirt on her. Bad things. Terrible things. We needed every bit of information we could possibly get on her for when we presented these ideas to the rest of the company." He swallowed. "She has so much power. If we couldn't get the majority on our side—if we couldn't convince them that Caroline was as terrible—then we'd be in huge trouble." He hesitated. "I guess we did too well of a job. After they found out, all of us—all of her employees—turned on her. They were so willing to just...cast her aside. After all this time. It was brutal," Doug said.

Chell met his eyes. "Good," she whispered.

"What?" he whispered, her answer throwing him completely off guard. "It was just like what happened to you. The entire facility tore itself to pieces just to get to her. I never wanted that," he said.

"So?" Chell scoffed. "She deserved it."

"Everyone turned on her, Chell," Doug said. "I thought—wouldn't you of all people understand what she went through? No one deserves that kind of cutthroat betrayal. I couldn't—I had to—"

"Doug? What are you saying?" Chell said, voice rising with panic. "What do you mean?"

"I couldn't watch it all happen again, Chell, I had to—"

"Don't say it," Chell said. "Don't you dare say it."

Chell cried out as if she'd been kicked. "No! You didn't—you couldn't!"

"—She was all alone and she was scared and she was being hunted—"

"But I'm scared. I'm still scared! What about me? Don't you even care?"

"Yes, of course—you don't understand—"

"Yes, I do," Chell said, almost wanting to yell. "Everyone around here treats me like I'm some dumb kid. But I understand! And I can't believe you'd do this to me."

"This wasn't about you, though. It was about a person. Caroline made a lot of mistakes. You've made mistakes too—not everything is so black and white."

"I HATE her," Chell hissed, hurling her hand of cards toward him. They scattered, some going for the ceiling and others flying directly at the walls. "It's her fault I'm here. I hate HER and I hate THEM and I hate YOU."

"Chell, stop," he warned.

"No!" Chell said. The table jolted as she gave it a hefty kick. "It's all her fault that I'm stuck here playing your stupid card games." She gave the table an abrupt shove and stood up.
"Look," Doug said, flinching at the cards. "I know you're upset—"

"You barely even talk to me—you don't know how I'm feeling," she said, voice straining. "You're not even letting me be mad!"

"It's fine to be angry, okay?" Doug tried to say, deciding to keep sitting. "I get it."

"You don't!" said Chell, clutching a single remaining card to her chest. "ALL of this—" she gestured to her legs, to her face—"is HER fault, and yet you still work with her! Like it's no big deal!"

"There's a difference—" Doug tried to say—between working on and working with her—but Chell had already cut her off.

"So? That doesn't make it okay to just—to just help her." Her breathing grew heavier as she struggled to process the information. "I can't believe how you could ever work on something like this. How you could ever work with HER."

Doug rose from his chair and crossed to the far side of the room, beginning to pick up the cards that she had flung one by one.

"Aren't you even listening to me?" Chell said, her voice almost at a shriek. She wanted to shove over the table, to knock over the lamp, or at least anything shocking enough for him to pay attention to her. Why couldn't he just listen?

He continued gathering cards. With every addition he straightened it and added it to the bottom of the deck, making sure they all perfectly aligned.

"I know that she—" he said, struggling to remain calm. "I know that Caroline hurt you."

Caroline had tried to kill her. She'd tormented her. How could he just so easily forgive her for that? And then go on to help her and claim that things were fine? "Then why?" she pleaded. She stared into him with wide eyes filled with pain.

His voice caught, and he had to look away. He had no words. He didn't know what to say to her that could make her understand. He didn't know what he could say to make her hurt any less without lying to her.

"After that day, I thought that you were dead," he whispered. "We all did. And I could never, ever, forgive her for that," he said, trying to reach out to her. "But you can only harbor that kind of intense hatred for so long before it drains away at who you are. Keeping it inside of you like that—letting your hate fester away—it's just going to hurt you more. You have to find a way to move on, Chell."

Chell just shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I can't."

Don't be scared.

Don't. Be. Scared.

Chell squeezed her eyes shut, nodding her head as she repeated the words over and over. She had to believe him on this. She had to believe that somehow—for reasons she didn't want to think of—she didn't have to fear the computer that would soon effortlessly run Aperture.

She had to believe this.

Don't be afraid of her.
Chell jolted upright in her bed, pulling her eyes back into focus.

The phone on the end table rung again, and Chell wasn't sure what to do. She figured it had to be someone that she knew, like Doug calling to ask if she wanted to visit the labs today. She just wasn't sure if she was in the mood to do anything but stare at the ceiling.

The phone rang again and again until eventually, two small lights lit up on the base of the phone.

"Missed Call."

"New voicemail."

Chell sat still for a few minutes, before eventually reaching over and dialing the number to access her room's voicemail.

"Welcome to the Aperture Science Automated Phone-call message retrieval service," a flat, automated voice said. "Please hold while we connect you to your inbox."

She gave a soft inhale, glad to not have to speak or to authenticate anything.

There was a loud beep, and then the message began rolling.

"We need to talk," said a vaguely familiar, and yet automated-sounding voice.

That voice—she'd recognize it anywhere, even if it was distorted and modified. This message was even more clear than the voice in the AI Chamber had been. The message ended with another beep, and Chell didn't dare to move.

The phone rang again.

Chell inhaled sharply before holding it out and away from her ear.

"Chell—"

She slammed the speaker piece back onto the receiver, scooting far away from the phone as she could on her bed.

Chell trembled. She didn't want to answer. She wouldn't.

The phone rang and rang until silence fell over the room once again. The light blinked, and Chell reached over to grab it when the phone rang a fourth time.

Chell jumped, accidentally knocking the phone off of the stand. She fumbled with the phone itself, tugging at the phone line.

"Do NOT hang up on me aga—"

The cord came out with a jerk, the end surprisingly intact. She had expected the wires to have torn.
There. Problem solved.

Just in case, though, Chell left the receiver off the hook. That way, if by some miracle the phone doubled as a cordless set, her line would simply read busy. She slid back on the bed and turned on the small TV mounted in the corner of the room. Though the programming itself tended to be boring, she could use the distraction.

PLEASE STAND BY.

WE ARE EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES.

A trumpet-heavy version of Aperture Science’s signature music hummed in the background. The message flickered and a bar of text appeared, scrolling across the the screen.

PLEASE RECONNECT YOUR PHONE IMMEDIATELY IN ORDER TO STAY UP-TO-DATE WITH ALL ENRICHMENT CENTER ACTIVITIES.

The video flickered as the audio looped.

I SWEAR IF YOU DON’T RECONNECT YOUR PHONE, I’LL SET THE FIRE ALARM IN YOUR ROOM TO GO OFF INDEFINITELY.

Chell held her finger over the power button. For once, she held the power over this interaction. She could pretend she’d never even seen the television message. She could shut out this AI if she wanted to.

CHELL. DON’T BE SCARED. JUST TALK TO ME FOR A FEW MINUTES. IT WILL BE OKAY.

Before another message could glide across, the screen flickered to a black-and-white toned image. Blocky white numbers marked the lower left of the image, ticking along as the seconds went by. The lighting of the hallway looked dim, but Chell could still make out three distinct figures: Doug, Henry, and Greg.

She curled her hand around the remote, unable to look away from the security footage.

"There's got to be another way—" Doug wrung his hands, unable to stop his gaze from flitting between Henry and Greg. "I'll talk to her again. She won't be a problem any more."

Greg used a thumb to scratch his eyebrow. "We've gone over this before. We don't know for sure how long she was asleep. If word got out that we trapped a child for years . . . It's too much of a risk."

"Yeah," Henry added. "Aperture's finally back on steady feet. We're just about to bring the world's eyes back on us. If we get even the slightest amount of bad press, you know the government's going to clamp down again. We'll be shut down for good."

"But without her, the GLaDOS project would still be in the same perpetually stagnant state. We at least owe her for that," Doug said, voice firm.

"We've given her food and lodging. We're letting her hang around while we work. Hell, none of us forced her into that pod. She made that mistake all on her own, and now she hasn't been cooperative in the slightest. What else is she going to smash? The television? The phone? If anything, she owes us," said Greg. "We're keeping her safe."
"Doug, please. I know you've grown attached to her," Henry said, jumping in, "but she's a loose end."

"We have to put her in the testing queue."

"We can talk to her—just tell her what she needs to do or just tell her to stay out of the public eye and she'll do it in a heartbeat, I swear," Doug said.

"Testing queue," Greg said. "After that, then we'll talk."

"There has to be another way. Please," Doug said, pleading. "I promised her that we'd fix her and that we'd get her out of here—"

Greg idly clicked a pen against his clipboard. "Then don't make promises that you can't keep."

Doug stammered, but Greg just flipped down the paper on his clipboard. "What we're doing—you already know it's more important than just one person. And if you try anything at all, you're off this project and out of Aperture."

The video looped back on itself with painstaking clarity.

They moved through the same choreographed motions with, the trio of men shifting ever so slightly as they ran through the same conversation. And yet despite how hard she wished one of them would burst into laughter and confirm that this was all just a joke, they never once strayed from the script.

Chell wished she could have dismissed the video. She wished she could have pretended that she'd never seen it in the first place, choosing to blindly follow the scientists instead. But that wasn't an option. Not this time.

She glanced up at the screen again, noting the flickering timestamps on the security footage. Strangely enough, it was from just a day after she had 'arrived' in the modern enrichment center.

She frowned. That didn't make sense. Doug had been telling her that they had been working hard on getting her out of there—that they were all contributing to figuring out a solution to the age dilemma.

But this video suggested the complete opposite.

They didn't want to fix her at all. They didn't even care about her leaving.

It hurt her that he didn't trust her enough to tell her these things—this information that she needed to know. She knew that he could have any sort of reason not to tell her. That he wanted her to stay optimistic. Or that he didn't want her to worry.

He'd become just like them.

The screen flickered back to the technical difficulties page, text once again scrolling across the bottom.

YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH. THEY ARE GIVING FALSE PROMISES. THEY'RE USING YOU. AREN'T YOU TIRED OF THEM LYING TO YOU?

I KNOW IT'S HARD.

I KNOW IT FEELS LIKE THERE'S NO ONE IN THE WORLD THAT YOU CAN TRUST AND THAT EVERYONE IS LOOKING TO BETRAY YOU.
YOU ARE STRONG, CHELL. YOU ARE NOT HELPLESS.
WE CAN GET YOU OUT OF THIS SITUATION.
PLEASE, TALK TO ME.

The screen flickered and the text bar went blank as the security footage restarted

After the fifth time she watched him walk away, Chell reconnected her phone.

It took her another day before she touched the phone.

With hesitant fingers, she dialed the number listed on the phone itself—a directory to Aperture's phone lines. She dialed, and an automated system popped up with an all-too-familiar voice.

"Thank you for calling the Aperture Science Test Subject Hotline. To review your testing agreement, press 1. To schedule an appointment with a test associate, press 2."

Chell cleared her throat, hoping that her voice would be enough for her to skip through all of this chatter.

"To report an injury, press 3. To file a complaint—"

Chell cleared her throat more forcefully. The automated voice kept droning on, options ticking on through the twenties.

"—to speak to the operator, press 0."

Beep.

"Connecting," The system popped in some jazzy, uplifting music.

A spike of fear lurched through her heart, and Chell pressed the phone against her chest and waited. She wasn’t sure if she could do this. Not yet.

Chell pressed the phone even harder to her chest, scared yet too paralyzed to hang up. She stared around idly at the room around her, gaze sliding back to the television.

Eyes pressed closed, she raised the phone to her ear.

"I'm ready."
72 Hours until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

"Hey, Doug. Could I get a hand here?"

Doug turned from his workbench as Henry waltzed in. Swinging from his hand was a personality core—one that looked as if it'd been salvaged from a scrap pile. The outer shell of it looked fine, but wires jutted out of the hole in the middle. Clearly, this one still needed a lot of work. They hadn't even attached an optic yet.

"Uh, sure," he said. He set down his screwdriver and pushed the portal device he'd been working on out of the way.

"Just reach past all those gears and turn on the power supply," said Henry as he walked up to Doug.

Doug crouched, staring into the guts of the partially-completed core. It was almost like looking into a freshly-opened pumpkin. Except, instead of worrying about reaching into a pile of pumpkin seeds and slime, he had to watch out for sharp bits of metal.

At least this lab had a first aid kit nearby.

"Wait a sec," Henry said, fainting a grab at Doug's arm. "Safety first. Are you right handed or left handed?"

Doug gave a faint smile. They'd done this song and dance before. Every time someone around them had to do something potentially dangerous or with an ability to maim, it was common to throw out a joke like that. Of course, they could only joke about it because, with one careless moment of inattention, losing or injuring a hand was perfectly within the realm of workplace accidents at Aperture Laboratories.

"Right," he said.

"Better use your left, then."

"Why?"

"Just in case."

Doug yanked back his hand in mock horror. It wasn't as if he hadn't worked with fine machinery like these cores before. Even reaching into a powered-on core, the worse that could happen would be some scrapes or some pinched skin. These little circles weren't monsters that would gobble up any unsuspecting limbs.

"What is that thing, anyway?" Doug said, reaching in his left hand until he fumbled at the power knob.

Henry gave a mix between a laugh and a snort. "Just the latest in AI inhibition technology," he said. It was another familiar phrase that they tended to toss around with the core development teams. Naturally, every core that they completed was the latest and greatest. Even if they were mechanically
identical with the same simplified white bodies, it was the contents inside that counted. Each core possessed a new and individual trait. Doug just didn't yet know what this core in particular was meant to represent.

The core in Henry's grip stirred to life and wriggled its handlebars. "You can think of it as a conscience," Henry said, glancing down at it. His tone shifted at those last words as he curled his hands tighter around the small machine.

Doug ruffled his hair, then folded his arms tight across his chest. Was this all that they had managed to salvage from Chell's brain scans? "If that's all you use to control her, it won't be enough."

"Why's that?" Henry's eyebrows furrowed.

"You can always ignore your conscience."

The core successfully turned on, Doug turned away. He picked up the screwdriver began to fiddle once again. When he noticed that Henry hadn't moved or said anything, he decided to speak up. "Anything else I can help with?" he said.

Henry just gave a small pause. "What are you doing, Doug?"

Doug glanced up, not entirely sure as to what Henry meant by the question. "Um," he started, then pointed down at the portal device with his screwdriver. "Just catching up on some maintenance things," he said. He then glanced over at the piles of turrets and the small backlog of portal devices in need of repairs.

"But why?" Henry said.

"Because it needs to be done?" Doug said. His insecurity slipped in, turning his statement into a question.

"Did someone tell you to go do it?"

"Not exactly."

"Then why are you here? We could really use your help back at the project."

"Really?" said Doug. "I thought for sure—" He hesitated. "I didn't think they'd let me be around anymore."

"You leaving really blindsided us, you know" said Henry.

Doug felt a surge of panic. He'd made everything worse by leaving, hadn't he? He should have figured something like this would have happened—it was always his fault for not thinking things through. It was always his fault for letting his emotions cloud his mind. And if not that, then it was letting his mind convince him that his gut feeling was illogical. Either way, he never made the right choice. He always made things worse.

"We all wondered if you'd been assigned somewhere else. No one was keeping you out. We really could have used your help, especially with interpreting that brain scan data. You know Chell better than any of us."

"I just assumed that no one wanted me there. I know Chell doesn't."

"But what about us? We didn't push you out, either."
"I know." Doug paused. It seemed so childish and simple to have things laid out for him this way. He'd isolated himself and pulled away without any of them even telling him to do that. And yet, he had done it simply because that's how he'd felt.

Doug knew Chell wanted nothing to do with him right now. It only naturally followed that none of his co-workers wanted him to be around, either. Why go back into the lab and see their barely-disguised hatred? It was easier to pull away now that it would be to have them say it to his face.

"You're sure that it's okay," Doug said, half of it a sentence and half of it a question. He saw now that Henry asking for help with the core's power supply was a gesture of kindness rather than one of necessity.

Henry gave a nod, then handed Doug the personality core. "Welcome back to the project."

Doug gave a small, albeit forced smile. "Thank you," he said, as Henry gave him a hearty clap on the back. One of these times, Henry was going to inadvertently snap his spine.

"Alright everyone, now we can finally get this party started," Henry said as he burst into the room. Doug followed him in, core tucked under his arm. "After begging and begging, I finally decided to let Doug back on the team." The rest of the room gave a small chuckle.

Everyone knew that it had been about the opposite ever since he'd disappeared. They were the ones perpetually pestering Doug to look over their code and to double check their calculations. With him being gone, they had to do all of that work themselves.

Chell dropped her gaze. She didn't want to talk to him. Not yet.

As Henry took the core from Doug and moved toward the table she looked up. "There's another core?" she said, a spark in her voice.

"Yep," Karla said. "Are you ready to see all of them?"

Chell gave an eager nod. Meanwhile, Doug slipped into a desk tucked away behind a few other tables. He was close enough to observe, but far away enough to not intrude.

Karla squinted at the spheres. "Just a second," she said. "We haven't assigned colors to their optics yet, so it's a bit hard to tell which one's which."

Behind them, Chell leaned her elbows on the table. "Do I get to pick the colors?" she said, eyes sparkling with excitement.

Karla gave a gentle laugh. "Sure," she said. "I don't see why not. Go ahead and pick one. We'll get you introduced."

Chell pursed her lips and pointed a finger at the first core. "That one."

"Oh, this one's a favorite," Karla said, after peering at some small text on the rear side. "'We've nicknamed it the Curiosity Core. All it does is ask us question after question after question. I'd turn it on, but you get the idea."

Feeling all of the eyes in the room drift to her, Chell gave a tiny laugh. Okay, so that core made sense. Usually she tried to be subtle with her boundless curiosity. She was always looking over shoulders as people worked. She always asked them to explain each action they could. When they had the time, she asked them to It was one of the driving reasons her mom—well, lots of people—told her she was smart. It was good quality. Something others liked about her. Having a core draw
upon that trait of hers—that had to be good, right?

"Hopefully by asking so many questions, the AI will be too interested in spreading its knowledge to an eager protege to notice us fiddling with it. You're smart, Chell. And this core exemplifies an enthusiasm for learning."

"I like it," she said. The ghost of a smile appeared on Chell's lips. "What about this one?" She shifted her finger to the sphere to the right of the Curiosity Core.

"That one's the Logic Core," Henry said. "Doesn't quite work how we intended. All it does so far is read out lists or recipes or instructions," he said with a small shrug. He gave Chell a searching look, as if attempting to discern just where that trait came from. "Not sure where it came from."

Chell didn't mind. Even if they couldn't see it, she knew she tried to go about things in a logical way. She made her best effort to make plans and to-do lists and to prepare for whatever life threw in her direction. She was logical, too, she supposed. The slew of tests she solved provided enough evidence for that. Perhaps it wasn't a _core_ trait of hers, but she couldn't deny its existence.

She motioned to the next sphere. With its beat-up exterior, it sharply contrasted with its pristine companions.

Karla laughed. "Oh, this one? Hold on, I'd rather you see this one in action."

With a deft hand she twisted off the glass optic and reached in an arm. She rolled the power supply into the 'on' position and the gears clanged to life.

The core let out an unholy screech.

"AAAAAAAGH-"

Karla held its upper handle as the unrelenting core writhed, optic socket darting around. It hissed and growled and howled with rage as it twisted and rolled across the table.

Raising her voice against the hisses, Karla yelled, "Yeah, this is the Anger Core," She tilted the core right. At her touch, the core lurched forward with a snarl.

Chell flinched and pulled her hands beneath the table.

"Don't worry. It can't bite," Karla said, keeping a firm grasp on the upper handle. "You sure do have some anger in you, kid."

Chell glanced away, the sounds of the screaming core filling the room. The weight of everyone's gaze felt heavy and intruding and Chell wished they would all just stop looking at her and stop thinking about her.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side," Henry said with a laugh.

At a high-pitched screech, she jumped again and plugged her fingers into her ears. She never wanted her frustrations to be so public. So obvious. Especially after the lengths she went to to maintain her stoic facade. She didn't want them to know that everything _wasn't_ alright. She didn't want her repressed and ugly anger to roar to life like this. "How do you turn it off?"

"That's the tricky part," Karla said with a grunt. With her spare hand she reached for a set of heavy-duty gloves. "You mind holding it?"
Chell reached forward and clung onto the upper and lower handlebars. She planted her feet into the ground as the core jolted and struggled to free itself from her grasp. It was amazing how much it managed to wiggle, really. Even just holding one of these spheres felt surreal. This little robot held a part of her that personified all of her rage at Aperture and at the world. And here was was, holding it down as if it was a demonic, tantrum-throwing toddler.

Karla slipped on the gloves and reached into the mess of moving gears. The personality core cut off mid-scream, handlebars growing still and sliding back into their default positions. The light dimmed. And just like that, she set it back down in the line of cores.

The fourth core—the one Henry had brought in—was clearly powered on. It kept twisting and turning at their voices, struggling to make sense of its surroundings without the use of an optic. Strangely enough, it hadn't yet made a sound.

"Is that one broken?" Chell said, glad to let her voice slide back to a more comfortable and quieter volume.

"Oh, no," Henry said. "We're just not done with it yet. We need Doug to look over this one—well, all of them—and then we'll add in all of the finishing touches."

She stared from him to the incomplete core again, just waiting for him to go on.

"The other three—well, honestly they're just background noise compared to this one," Henry said. "It's going to be our ace in hole."

Chell looked at the final core, wondering just what part of her could be so important. "So what does it do?" she said.

Karla and Henry exchanged a look, as if debating whether or not they were about lie to her face once again. Or, just not tell her anything.

"It's going to give her a conscience," Karla said. "That AI really needs someone she'll listen to for more than a half-second. To tell her when it's doing something wrong. Or even to tell it 'don't do that' in those moments it considers taking action."

"We've got some extra work to do on that one, though," Henry piped in. "It's our safety net."

"I like them," Chell said, reaching out to touch the tops of the cores. They were so smooth and so flawless. Though the spheres were not 'her' in the same way that that AI was made from Caroline, she still felt kinship toward these talking personality traits. They came from a part of her, and these were the aspects of her that they thought were important.

Her chest swelled with some pride.

"You really did give us great data to work with," Henry said.

"Yeah, Greg would've killed us if we had to delay Bring Your Daughter to Work Day again," Karla said, a hint of exasperation to her voice. It wasn't as if figuring out ways to calm down a raging AI was an easily accomplished task. Every delay was met with more and more frustration. Any threats Greg made were easily dismissed. He couldn't afford to fire them all and start from scratch at this point in the development. Especially not with his hard-won investors of the revitalized Aperture Laboratories breathing down his throat for details on this top-secret project.

"You know what—why don't you come to the fancy dinner they're throwing for us? After the unveiling, that is," Karla said. "We couldn't have done it without you, after all."
Chell's face slipped into a smile. "Sure," she said, trying to contain her excitement. Pride flickered in her chest again. She liked this feeling. It made her feel warm and it made her feel glad that she'd decided to take Doug's advice. She really was making a difference here. "When is it?"

Henry glanced over at an oversized wall calendar. One date was circled repeatedly in red marker. "Well, the big event is in three days, so after that. We'll let you know."

"What's the event?" Chell said, pulling a core close to her chest. She didn't want to miss the unveiling of her cores.

"It's called Bring Your Daughter to Work Day," said Karla. "We've been doing it for ages, but it's not just about encouraging girls into math and science. They still do a science fair, though. It's good for PR. They love stopping by to take pictures of the little girls with their projects."

"Caroline did say that if we ever stopped it, she'd fire us from beyond the grave," Henry said, at first laughing but then hesitating as he looked over at the cores.

"Every year the event gets bigger and bigger. There's hands-on experiments for the kids, test subject recruitment, plus reveals on our latest advancements."

"This year, we're taking center stage."

"Black Mesa's gonna flip when they hear about it."

"I can't wait to see their next press release."

"I wonder what half-rate imitation they'll try to come up with to beat us."

"I still can't believe they cleared us for a live testing demo. What's the injury rate for those again?"

"Wait," Chell said. She did her best to listen in on the multiple threads of conversation, but this one caught her attention. "Like a test chamber?"

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either," said Karla. "I had to pull some strings with the testing division and PR before they'd even consider the idea."

"No one's going to get hurt though—right?" Chell said, aghast at the idea. Physical injury to a test subject was a huge risk, even with the proper equipment and safety protocols. She turned as if she wanted to ask Doug a question. Seeing him hunched over on his desk, she switched back to Karla.

"Of course not," Henry said. "The tests are just a means to show off our new digital research assistant. It's going to keep track of test results, subject data, and even alter the modular designs of the test chambers. We're not testing a subject. We're testing the AI."

"Who are they going to use?" Chell said softly, curling her fingers around the seat of her chair.

"Does it matter?"

"Who cares?" Henry laughed. "They're all nobodies."

Karla snorted in response, pointing a pencil at him. "You know, this time I told them to send me down someone whose face won't scar those kids for life," she said. They both burst into laughter was just a little too loud and a little too carefree.

Chell stared at the ground.
"Look, the chamber designs are so easy that the audience will figure them out just from looking," Karla said, looking back over at Chell. "If one of those low-life subjects can't figure out the simple solutions without hurting themselves, then that's their fault. We can always get another."

Chell's skin crawled.

She wouldn't be surprised if they ended up choosing her.

For the first time since he'd retreated to his desk, Doug approached the table of cores. "It won't be you," he said, eyes low as he reached for the Curiosity Core. Doug flipped the core over before taking it back to his desk to plug it into his computer.

Chell's chest felt shallow and constricted. Though those words were comforting, she knew better than to believe them.

_But what if it has to be me?_

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48 Hours until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

Chell watched in an almost-daze as the Morality Core pivoted around the desk. Left to its own devices, it kept stretching out its handlebars and rolling. Chell occasionally leaned over to push the core upright whenever it managed to get stuck face-down, and moved it back to the table's center whenever it strayed too close to an little core kept exploring its surroundings by trial and error. It certainly wasn't deterred by its current lack of optical input. Maybe this sphere wasn't so different from her after all.

Chell wished she could talk to it. What sort of things could she learn from an unfiltered portion of her own mind? What sort of things could it tell her about herself? What did it know that she herself hadn't realized yet?

The core remained silent.

The GLaDOS team had yet to install the speakers on this one. The other two cores did have sound output, she'd heard, but they had that feature disabled for now. They were far too distracting—and, well, annoying.

After a while, Chell stood up and walked up to Karla's desk.

"What now?" Karla said, not looking up from her typing.

"I want to talk to you."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now?" she said, almost teasing. Though she tended to phrase everything as an inconvenience, Karla _did_, in fact, have a bit of a sense of humor. "Get to the point. What's this about?"

Chell shook her head. "No," she said. Chell gave a small shrug with pursed lips, attempting to convey that she didn't want to talk about it right then and there. "I mean privately."

"Oh," Karla said. She stared back at her computer and groaned. "Well, how about as soon as I finish this up, I'll take a break and walk you back to your room. Sound good?"

Chell nodded.

"So what happened with you and Doug?" Karla said.
Chell gave a shrug, letting her silence speak for her. The two women walked side by side.

"Whatever it is, it must be big," she continued. "He's barely talking. Not that he's a huge conversationalist. But he's been especially distant."

"We argued," Chell eventually conceded. She hadn't wanted to say much in the first place, but Karla had been nice to her. She took up Doug's job of ferrying Chell between her room and the labs.

"Well, for the good of the rest of us I hope you two can make up," she said. "Having you around really brightens things up for Doug. It cheers us all up, really. It can be easy to let the mood of this place get to you."

Chell gave a solemn nod, keeping her pace slower than usual.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

Chell paused to set a hand on the catwalk's railing. She didn't want to bring this up. She really didn't want to at all. But she had to. "If I tell you, you're just going to say no and tell me it's a dumb idea anyway."

"Of course not," Karla said. "I only shoot down ideas when I'm getting paid for it. Plus, you're smarter than most of those boneheads I work with."

"But what if it is a dumb idea?"

"Then we can come up with a better one."

Chell squeezed the railing. She couldn't ask Doug about this. He'd veto her idea immediately on safety concerns alone. As far as his co-workers—well, they didn't care nearly as much about her.

"Well," she swallowed, "first I want to know about what it takes to become a test subject."

Karla frowned. "Why? You're better than that."

"I'm just curious," Chell said. "I mean, I just want to know what the real process is like. For people who volunteer and not volunteer, you know?"

Karla hesitated. "I don't know that much, but I do work with testing services. I know they tend to run the candidates through a test subject evaluation before they're officially accepted."

"Wait, there's a test?"

"Of course there's a test," Karla said. "But 'passing' the evaluation doesn't equate to potential ability. It just means you're a good match for whatever they're testing. Gotta have the right volunteers matched to the right tests."

Chell swallowed again, struggling to find her words. "Do you think I'd pass?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Chell started. "I was thinking—you guys all said that the cores will be enough to distract the AI, right?"

"Yes, of course—" Karla interrupted.

"Then wouldn't it make sense for me to be there, too? Just in case something goes wrong? Those cores are just parts of me. I'm the real thing."
"The AI's going to be distracted enough," Karla said. "You don't need to be there to supervise."

"No, but I don't want to do that," Chell said, anxiety rising inside of her. "I want to sign up for the event. I want to be a test subject for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. But before you say no—"

Chell said, speeding through words. "I've done tests before—I know how it works. I've already got these things." She lifted a leg of her baggy sweatpants. The black glimmer of a heelspring poked out. "Plus, you guys all said that the tests are going to be easy."

Karla bit down on her lip, shaking her head softly as she thought it over. "Doug's going to kill me," she said. "He's going to be inconsolable. Moping for weeks. And just when we finally got him back to the lab." She gave a mournful sigh. "You sure you're prepared for that?"

"I just want to do what I can," Chell said. "It's more important that the big reveal goes well."

Karla gave a vaguely affirmative murmur. "If you insist, I can set you up tomorrow with someone in testing services. No guarantees that you'll be chosen for the event, though."

"Okay," she said, giving another sharp exhale.

Karla paused once again, turning to look at the girl who didn't even want to make eye contact with her. Her gaze softened. "You know you really don't have to do this, right?"

"I have to," Chell said. "Please try to understand."

Something almost sad came across Karla's face. "I won't tell him," she said, gently.

Chell gave an almost painful and shaky sigh of relief. "Thank you," she said, pulling her hands back to her sides. CarolineDOS's words rang in her ears.

She'd made a promise, and this time she had to uphold it.
Chapter 29

Rejected

42 Hours until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

"— became the first mammal cloned from an adult cell successfully. Dolly, as this sheep was named, was born healthy and lived for six years before dying from of a common ailment of domestic sheep. This was a revolutionary project for the progress of science. The process used for the cloning, called Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer—"

"I'm coming in."

Chell jumped a little from her position on the edge of her bed as Karla pushed open the door to her room.

"What's that?" Karla said, moving over to look at the television in the corner.

Chell jumped from her position on the edge of her bed. "I didn't hear you."

"I didn't knock," Karla glanced back up at the television. "Enjoying the only-channel-we-get-down-here Aperture Channel?"

"Yeah," Chell said.

Before the show could switch to their advertisements, the Aperture logo cut in.

"They play documentaries on here now?" Karla said, folding her arms. She took a step closer and craned her neck up at the television. "Last time I checked they only showed Aperture: Foundations videos."

Chell rolled her eyes. "Oh, they show those too." She'd seen several short clips during the commercial breaks that fruitfully advertised the same handful of homemade films. An amalgam of news footage, safety tips, press conferences, and lengthy legal disclaimers, all dubbed over dated footage of the facility.

"And now, back to From Dust to Dolly. This premium screening is sponsored by Aperture Science's initiative for a more well-rounded, educated workforce. Remember, knowledge is priceless, but your job is not!"

Though interesting the first few times around, Chell now preferred to stare at the wall or switch to a static channel. Sometimes she imagined the specks of black to be ants scurrying around on a busy day. If someone could see through the stacked buildings and ceilings, she imagined that they'd see the workers move around in a similar way. Just ants darting through walkways and hallways to do each of their jobs.

"I don't get this place." Karla shook her head. "Most of us are already college educated—if they really wanted us to gain more "education," they'd pay for our graduate school. Or at least fund our research," she said.
The screen faded from a close of a sheep grazing to a wide shot of a grassy, sunlit field. Little clouds of white dotted the skies and, in more solid, grass-eating forms, other puffs of white grazed the fields.

"As if we're going to gain anything from shows like this—" Karla gestured to the television "—that I didn't already learn in high school biology."

Chell gave a forced smile. She'd never gotten to take a biology class. She'd heard horror stories about what high school science was like, though. Kids passing out from pricking their finger for a blood sample to slide under a microscope. Others getting sick mid-dissection of a worm, or a frog, or some pig's organ. She wouldn't have to wince as she made the incisions and charted out the creature's insides with an equally grossed-out lab partner.

Was it possible to miss something you hadn't yet had the chance to experience? In a way, she missed it. She longed for this rite-of-passage that she had no current chance of ever experiencing.

This education of hers—if she could even call it that—was undoubtedly more advanced and hands-on than any classroom setting. She wasn't sitting through her thousandth slideshow on The Water Cycle or on volcanic eruptions. At the same time, here it was all science, all the time. It'd be a dream come true if she ever pursued The other skills she was learning might be invaluable if she ever pursued in the sciences, but eventually she would need a proper education if she ever wanted anyone to take her seriously.

"I wish I could go to school," she had said one night, while walking back to her room. She did not know it at the time, but the walls must have had ears because the next day, the singular channel that her television received began playing these clips from the outside world.

She couldn't directly trace it back to her saying those words herself. For all she knew, this could have been in the works for months. And yet she couldn't shake the feeling that this had something to do with her and her admitted lack of education.

Not that she'd ever bring this up to CarolineDOS. However, she gave a silent thanks and looked back at the television.

"You're watching From Dust to Dolly: Genetic Engineering Innovations."

"I don't even get this," Chell said. "They can make a duplicate of something? Just like that?" She held her hands together and pulled them apart, palms upward.

Karla made a small grimace. "It's a little more complicated than that," she said. "Genetically identical doesn't equal a carbon copy. More like they both come from the same starting. Like identical twins. Though genetically indistinguishable, they can become entirely different individuals."

Chell shrugged and turned off the television. She adjusted her Aperture-brand t-shirt and sweats and the two set off. Karla lead by a few strides and their footsteps echoed down the hallways as they began the twists and turns leading to their destination.

"Why are you even doing this, anyway?" Karla said after a while. "No one ever really wants to take a test subject evaluation."

"Well, I do." Chell said. She tried to keep her voice firm.

"I still don't get it," Karla said. "It's dangerous and doesn't pay well at all, if money is what you're after. Employees here only ever do it to confirm job security. If anything, it's a last resort."

Chell gave a vague shrug, as if she couldn't be bothered to explain it to her. She didn't have to
explain it to her, honestly. All she needed to do was to take that test.

"Just tell me what you know about it."

"I'm not really supposed to talk about it," Karla said. "It is supposed to be secret."

Chell just raised her eyebrows in response. As if she didn't go into a supposedly secret lab almost every day just to see what they were up to.

"Yeah, I know," Karla said. "Don't tell anyone I told you."

Chell just gave a snort in response.

"Well," she started. "they're going to sit you down in a room with cameras, but don't be too concerned. They're just there for the safety of the Test Associates. Occasionally we do get an applicant that becomes agitated." Karla scrunched her nose, as if remembering a particularly unpleasant smell.

"There's already cameras everywhere here."

"We don't have enough data storage to record every application interview, though. Half of the time the cameras aren't recording. They're just there to make you nervous."

"Why do they want me to be nervous?" Chell said.

"The person you are when you're calm acts differently than the person you are when you're nervous. We just want to have a good idea at how that nervous person is going to react to the tests assigned to them. Every single one of your actions while you're in that room is a part of your test subject evaluation. They're going to start judging you as soon as you walk into that door."

"I didn't realize they were so picky."

"They're not, really," Karla said. "Each experiment that's recruiting test subjects have their own lists of criteria. Based on your application results, you'll get assigned to whichever study you'll best fit."

"What happens if I don't fit any of them?"

"They'll find one that fits you," Karla said. "They have a hard enough time getting people to apply as it is, so the criteria for isn't too strict. If anything, the application process is just meant to profile you and then sort you into an applicable ongoing study. For example, if you showed on the testing that you were particularly inept with understanding three-dimensional spaces, they might put you in a track of increasingly difficult maze-like puzzles."

Chell gave a vague grimace and faint groan.

"I never said they were fun studies," Karla said. "They're not testing the mazes—they're testing the people involved. These tests poke and prod at any fears you might have revealed. They will push you into situations they know for certain you won't like, and if that doesn't work they'll keep pushing you until you hit your limit and crack." She paused for a moment. "These tests are about human reactions."

Chell pursed her lips. "So what's the point? What are they even testing?"

"You," Karla said simply.

They paused at a corner. Karla glanced glanced ahead, and put her hand to her chin. "The
application is going to be filled with questions and you are required to answer every one of them."

"Is that hard?"

Karla didn't respond to that. "Figure out what their question is really asking. Don't say a word until you're certain of it, and of your own answer."

"What if I can't figure it out?"

"Then don't answer," Karla said. "They'll go on to the next question."

"But I thought you said to answer them all."

"Refusing to answer is an answer itself."

"Let's start with the basics," the woman across from her said. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail and her sky shirt looked a bit blocky on her. A nametag listed her as Hannah, Testing Associate.

Hannah glanced at the pile of paperwork in front of her. "To make this as easy as possible, I'm going to try to run through all of this quickly."

Chell nodded. Something about her—perhaps her no-nonsense attitude or the way she looked right through her—made her skin crawl.

"On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the worst pain imaginable, what's the highest amount of pain you've been able to withstand without losing consciousness?"

Chell opened her mouth to object to the question before closing it. She supposed that one was fair enough. "What happens if I say ten?"

"Then I'd pretend to be impressed if I didn't already know you were lying."

"Then seven or eight, I guess" Chell said, wanting to reflexively cradle her wrist but catching herself before she did. She was glad she had slipped off her makeshift wrist brace before she came here. If she told them she had an injured wrist, they'd probably make her do one-handed push-ups.

"If given a choice, what would you like to be called?" Hannah said, rattling off the question and then glancing at another paper. "Oh, I see your name's Chell," she said, answering herself. "Uncommon enough name. I don't see a surname listed."

Chell shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"I'm required to put down something to cover our back legally, though. Just in case your testing results in injury or death. The government doesn't like it when we can't follow up with a subject's next-of-kin," Hannah said. She flipped over the paper with Chell's basic information, searching for the last name. "If it were up to me I could care less. I do need your last name, though."

Chell hesitated. What name was she supposed to put down? She wasn't even sure which one of her last names was legal anymore. Her so-called 'parents' had sold her out and subsequently disappeared. Putting down the Naransky name was bound to dig up things from her past and weaken the integrity of her application.

"Mossman," Chell said, then reflexively began to spell it. "M - o - s - s - m - a - n."
Her only reply with the scribble of Hannah's pencil. "It says here that you've been involved with
Aperture Science since 1996. Could you elaborate?"

Chell pushed the tips of her fingers together. "Well, both of my—" she hesitated "—parents worked
here when I was young. I'd come to the daycare after school." Her hands slipped and she interlocked
her fingers tightly, waiting to see if she'd be pressed further on the details. If so, Chell would have to
backtrack on her listed last name.

The answer appeared to satisfy Hannah.

"Are you prone to dizziness, short of breath, have problems waking up in the morning or problems
standing up for 48 hours straight?" she glanced up at Chell before making another mark. "Of course
not," Hannah continued, ticking off a box. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Hannah proceeded to slide over a sheet of paper with 92 options for her to choose her favorite color.
After scanning the list, Chell circled one at random and handed it back.

She was handed another sheet, asking her to list her level of education—as described by others,
apparently, and then answered a question asking if she required any jewelry for health reasons.

"Do you require socks to be a part of your uniform?"

Chell shook her head no.

"Good, because we ran out of socks," Hannah said.

With her Advanced Knee Replacements, she preferred to go barefoot. Getting on shoes with two
metal bars attached to her legs turned getting dressed—and getting her shoes on—into an odd sort of
acrobatic yoga. Visiting the lab required socks and shoes. That, and Doug insisted that if she walked
around barefoot, she was going to step on a nail and get tetanus and die.

"Do you require music to perform simple tasks?"

"Uh, no," Chell said.

"All right, this next question is a story problem. Sally, Dwayne, Anthony, David, and Franklin are
collectively exactly 10 years apart in age. Sally is two years younger than David. David's favorite
letter is 'g'. Anthony's favorite letter is also 'g' but Dwayne has no preference, insisting he likes all the
letters equally except for 's'. What is Franklin's favorite letter?"

Chell stared up at the ceiling, struggling to keep all of the bits of the information in her head. "Could
I get a pad of paper and a pencil?" she asked, mentally repeated to herself as much of the question as
she could remember. Sally is 2 years younger David letter g Anthony letter g Dwayne no preference
no s—

Hannah muttered to herself and opened a drawer. She handed over a beat-up clipboard with a
knobby pencil chained to it.

Chell tapped the tip of the lead against the desk, then jotted down the names and the letters she could
remember. She drew a horizontal line beneath with little arrows at each end and labeled the
aforementioned 10 year age difference. Chell could see where Sally fit, but how did that have
anything to do at all with letters? She stared at the letters again, struggling to find some sort of
underlying pattern. Perhaps their favorite letters spelled something?

After a few more moments of idle scribbling and grasping at straws, Karla's words came back to her.
All they were testing was how she reacted, not whether or not she got the correct answer. It made sense that they would give her overly-complex or nonsensical questions. *Still,* she thought, *I want to get it right.*

"V," she answered.

The testing associate raised her eyebrows. "Interesting choice. Including periods of mandatory silence, what is the longest you have voluntarily gone without talking?"

"A few days, I think," she said gently. Chell frowned, trying to remember just how long she had been in Old Aperture before her sleep. "I could go longer if necessary. Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. Just something we have to know," said Hannah. She scribbled in another box on her sheet, already moving on to the next question. "Now, I need you to choose your favorite color." The test associate slid Chell another paper.

"You already asked me this."

"Just answer it."

Chell glanced through the 92 options, noticing that these choices were different. At least, different enough that she couldn't immediately locate the color she'd chosen last time. She picked the one that closest matched her previous selection and slid the paper back. They had to give her points for an attempt at consistency, right?

Hannah compared the two answers with a flick of her eyes. "How does lying about your favorite color makes you feel?"

Chell held her palm up and gestured toward the paper with a frustrated exhale. She splayed her fingers and gave a little jolt of her hand between the two papers.

"I said, how does that make you feel?"

"But I didn't lie on it," Chell said. "I couldn't—"

"Do you feel sorry, or not sorry?"

"For what? Answering the question?"

"There's two answers here. Only one can be the truth, so you must've lied."

Chell wished she could snatch the two sheets out of the woman's hands and just show her that she hadn't lied. "I didn't get a choice," she said.

"Just answer the question," Hannah probed. She gave Chell an exasperated look. She'd already done this too many times today. "Do you feel sorry, or not?"


"There we go," Hannah said. She circled Chell's answer and lightly tapped on the desk. "The quicker you tell the truth, the easier these remaining questions will be."

A clock's tick echoed off of the walls. Hannah continued without hesitation. "Do you trust yourself?"

"What do you mean?"
"Do you have confidence in yourself and your own abilities?"

"I guess," Chell said.

"You're not absolutely sure of it, then. So that's a no." Before Chell could protest, Hannah circled in the answer. "Are you plagued by suspicions that other people, including coworkers and relatives, may be doing things behind your back to hurt you?"

"No," Chell lied, too easily.

"I want you to be honest with me here. It's more likely than people think," Hannah said. "The people you think you can trust end up being your downfall. Be truthful—do you think they're planning things behind your back?"

"They're not." Chell insisted.

"It's tragic. I'd watch my back if I were you."

"You don't even know my friends. They wouldn't do that to me," Chell said again, growing more and more defensive. Why did this woman have to keep questioning every single one of her answers? Was nothing she said good enough? She didn't stop to think about the few friends she had, and how devastating such an act would be.

"If you say so." Hannah shrugged. "Do you feel that you have let your co-workers, and/or larger mandated collective down?"

Chell hesitated. She pulled her hands out and gripped the edges of her chair. This is where Karla's words came back to her. These questions were doing exactly what they were designed to do—to poke at her and pry into her life and stir up her emotions until she gave them a free preview into what her breakdowns would look like.

Chell forced herself to take a deep but jagged inhale.

Don't react. Don't react. That's just what they want you to do.

She pressed her lips together and stared straight ahead. She didn't have to answer that question. She was not going to let them have this answer.

"Why should Aperture Science accept you as a research volunteer, and would anyone file a police report if you went missing?"

**HR NOTE: Subject refused to answer.**

"So when will my results come back in?" Chell asked.

Hannah didn't look from her paperwork. "You failed," she said. She took a moment to stamp Chell's profile with a red REJECTED stamp before leaning down to scribble in a few notes. She twisted around to open one of the filing cabinets behind her and slipped Chell's file into it.

Chell just watched as the stamp went down and as her file disappeared into the sliding drawer. "What?" she said, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I said, you failed the the application. We're not accepting you as a testing candidate at this time."

"Wait, how?" Chell tried, going back over the test in her mind. As far as she could remember, she'd
done everything right. "What did I do wrong?" She'd followed Karla's instructions and answered everything as truthfully as she could. She hadn't tried to make herself particularly stand out in any way. And yet there was something wrong with her application? Could it have been because of her current situation? If anything, she felt as if that would have been an encouragement for them to accept her.

"I can't say," Hannah said. She glanced down and straightened the badge pinned to her shirt. "Even if I could, it wouldn't help you. There's no re-takes or re-applications. We'll keep your information on file, and if there's ever a time at which Aperture could use someone fitting your profile, we'll be in contact."

Chell opened her mouth but no words came out. What was she supposed to do now? This had been so important to her plan.

"If you'll excuse me, I've got other people to interview," Hannah said, rising from her chair and moving toward the door.

Still reeling, Chell followed her out and back to the folding chairs lining the hallway.

Chell kept her hands tightly folded as she waited for Karla to come back and get her. She picked at a sticker that Karla had put on her shirt earlier. Hello! My Name Is: CHELL. Her name wasn't even in her own handwriting. There was something about seeing her name in someone else's handwriting that made it feel as if it didn't belong to her. It wasn't really her name unless she was the one to write it down.

Chell picked at the edges of the sticker and barely glanced up when Karla finally approached. The green border around it designated Chell to Visitor status. Visitors were not allowed to travel unaccompanied through the facility. Besides the risk of them stumbling into top-secret projects, the immensity of the place made it easy for even veteran employees to get lost. "So did the sticker help?" Karla said.

Chell shrugged. "At least she didn't ask me how to spell my name," she said, her tone a bit dark. This wouldn't have been the first time that people had tried to figure out how to correctly spell her name while simultaneously avoiding just asking her how it was spelled. Instead, she ended up with things like 'Cel, Chel, Chelle, Shell, Shel'. Infinite possibilities for infinite cluelessness. "Not that it even matters now." She kept her eyes focused far ahead, as if there was something in the distance far more important than this.

"Why wouldn't it?"

Karla frowned. "What do you mean you didn't pass?"

Chell gave an absent shrug.

"Impossible. Even the most neurotic employees here get roped into testing. They've taken in anything from dropouts to the chronically homeless. Everyone passes."

"Not me, apparently."

The sticker crinkled underneath the folding fabric of her shirt. She moved up a hand and ripped it off. Colored threads stained the back of the sticker, and the fabric pilled where the sticker had been. Chell folded the sticker on itself and began to rip it in half over and over.

Though Karla had become accustomed to Chell's quiet nature, this pointed silence that didn't feel
"Hey, look on the bright side," Karla said. "I bet there's people who would pay good money to know how you failed that test. Hell, I bet most of the people working here would easily pay."

Chell didn't answer. Even if people asked, it wasn't as if possessing more money would make her feel any better.

"How did you do it, anyway?" Karla said, continuing to prod the girl back into conversation.

"Like I'd know," Chell said. "I just did what you told me. I tried to answer all of the questions, but I couldn't. Was that wrong? Should I have answered?"

"It's not that," Karla said. She kept her voice contemplative. "It's just," she paused, pursing her lips as if she couldn't figure out exactly how much she wanted to say. "I've heard lots of stories of people quitting the test in a rage, only to later be informed that they'd been accepted into the program."

"I didn't get mad at her, though. I just got mad at the questions."

Karla clenched a hand tightly around a pen in her jacket pocket. She wished she could go back and check the girl's test results, but doubted she could get the correct permissions to access that data. If anything, she'd like to review the test proctor's notes and to see just why she'd made that decision. This result seemed too atypical.

"I don't know what to tell you, Chell," she said. "You're a smart kid—I know you must have given it your all. If anything, this should be good news. No one really...volunteers to be a research volunteer, if you catch my drift."

"But I wanted that," Chell said. She clenched her fist and the bits of sticky paper stuck to the inside of her hand.

"Why?" Karla studied the girl for a moment, admiring how steadfast she seemed in this decision. "I know that this was your decision, but why?"

Chell shook her hand violently for a moment, then picked at the fragments of the former sticker on her hand. "I thought—if I could just go through a testing, then I could prove to them—to all of you—that I did it. I finished it. Because once test subjects get through their track, they get go home. They're done with Aperture," She said. "Right?"

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36 Hours Until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

"Ha ha. That's a good one."

Chell kept one hand on the taut telephone cord as she leaned against the fake windows of her relaxation vault. She waited for her words to sink in.

It took another few seconds for her to get a reply.

"Oh. You're serious," CarolineDOS said. Her voice was oddly devoid of emotion. "But no one fails the test. Not unless you're a public figure or in law enforcement. I would know. I helped design it."

"Well, I did."

"How did you even manage to fail at this?"
Chell didn't answer. She'd been asking herself the same question.

"What was the point of getting evaluated, anyway?" Chell tried. Why had she even gone through all of that trouble to be kicked out? Why had it been so important for her to potentially be a test subject for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day?

"Well, once they give me access to the test subject records tomorrow—which they will have to—then I could easily alter your file and give you the correct authorization to leave the Enrichment Center."

"So I could have just left?"

"Not exactly. You'd have to—"

"But I could have left."

"It's never that easy. You'd have to wait to the conclusion of the testing, the post-testing examination, and then your exit paperwork. That wouldn't happen until cleanup from tomorrow's events had concluded. Then, and maybe then, you might've been able to walk out."

"So that's it? The only thing keeping me here is some stupid area on a file?"

"Like I said, it's not that easy."

"Why didn't you tell me? If I had know, I—" Chell stammered and kicked at the frame of her bed. She wanted to say that she would have tried harder, but she had already tried as hard as she could have.

CarolineDOS hesitated. "I didn't realize that you needed any more motivation for a plan designed to help me and get you out of here."

"If I had known—" Chell repeated again, though she didn't know how she was supposed to finish that. This wasn't something that she could blame on Caroline. She knew that this had been huge, and she'd blown the chance anyway.

"So," Chell started again, voice darker. "Whatever part I was supposed to play in your grand plan, you're going to have to find something else. What now?"

"Without you as the star test subject, my attention tomorrow will be divided. This means that I'm going to have to worry both about running tests tomorrow and building up a hefty defense on whatever they've got planned or me tomorrow."

Chell tensed. "Yeah, about that," she said. "It's going to be bad. They're already about ready to celebrate their success."

"What do they have planned?"

Chell hesitated. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to just tell her that the personality cores were based off of her. Either way, CarolineDOS would find out about it eventually. A pain jolted up her finger, and Chell realized she'd wrapped the telephone cord too tightly around her finger. She unwound it and rubbed her finger until she felt the blood flow freely once again.

"Well? If this is really as big as you claim, then I need to know what they're doing."

"It's more cores," Chell said. "There's this one, the Morality Core, that they say would make you like
an entirely new person. They said you wouldn't be a threat anymore. It's going to be bad," she said. She twisted a finger around the telephone cord.

"Then you'd better figure something out," CarolineDOS said, oddly calm. "If you can't find out any information to help us bypass the cores, then we're going to be out of luck. Your failure has left us with no choice. This is our Plan B, and there isn't a Plan C."

24 Hours until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

Chell paced around her room, moving back and forth intently. She could tell by the lighting cues both inside and outside of her room that it was 'day' time. Or, at least, time for the employees to be getting back to work. Or time for test subjects to be awake. Either way, she was awake and alert and she couldn't shake the trembling anxiety inside of her.

No one had come to pick her up today.

Usually, someone stopped by to accompany her to their lab. She had won at least a little bit of their favor. They liked that she listed and that she asked genuinely curious questions about their work, and how they would eventually deconstruct their technical jargon into concepts she could understand. That, and sometimes they could use the extra hand when working on the cores, or needed her to run across the room to grab something. She was still fascinated by it all.

And yet, with less than 24 hours to go until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day and the accompanying festivities, she hadn't heard a word from them. She kept her eyes on the carpet, following the slightly pressed-down trail of footprints she'd created. It was almost like when a piece of furniture was left in a spot for too long. The carpet fibers never stood up in the same way again.

As she passed by her bed, she stopped to pick up her phone. They had left her their lab number and extension in case of emergencies. And while it may not seem like one to them, to her right now as certain an emergency.

She dialed the phone extension from a scrap of paper at her nightstand. The phone rang a few times before one of the employees answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hi," she said, then remembered to identify herself. "It's Chell."

"Oh—" said the person. Probably Henry. It sounded like him. "Hold on. Let me grab Doug for you."

Before she could raise an objection, she heard the phone muffle and rustle as it was moved, then heard a faint shout of "Rattmann. Phone's for you." After a few more moments, another voice picked up.

"Doug Rattmann speaking," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Hey," Chell said, searching for some cheer to inject into her voice.

"Chell?" he said, part question, part statement. "Is something wrong?"

Chell paused. "Well, not really," she started. Of course, out of all of the people she could have talked to, this was the one she ended up talking to. Why couldn't Henry have just talked to her instead of handing off the phone as if he didn't want anything to do with her? As if she was some baby that
needed to be changed, and he was not going to be the one to do it.

"Can it wait?" Doug said. "Sorry, but we're working on a really tight deadline here—" he said, nervousness creeping into his voice.

Chell inhaled. "But that's exactly why I want to be there—"

"Chell, this really isn't the best time. We really have to focus today."

"But that's why I want to be there," Chell said. "I'll be quiet as a mouse," she said, tapping her lips with her free hand. "I promise."

"I know you want to. Maybe tomorrow? Wait, no—" he said.

"I'm so bored in here," she said, flopping onto the bed dramatically. "There's nothing to do here, and you're all going to be busy all day tomorrow too," she said, giving her best pleading, kid-wanting-candy-at-a-grocery-store voice.

"Well," Doug said, voice catching a little bit.

Chell almost felt like pumping a fist in the air. She knew she had him now.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt. But if anyone complains, you'll have to go right back, you hear me?" he said. That must have been his best impression of a parent voice. Perhaps this was easier for him to do over the phone, where she still occasionally sounded like a kid.

"Got it," Chell said. "Thank you," she added even more quietly. She wasn't quite ready to apologize to him yet, but she wanted him to know that she appreciated this.
"We have reason to believe that these human-based emotions are the root of the blatant attacks occurring frequently upon startup. These memories are destabilizing the AI, and thus destabilizing the project.

Since we cannot, at this point, pinpoint the location of individual memories, we are forced into a difficult decision. The safest option will be to restrict the AI’s access to all human memory-based files. These will remain under lockdown until a time comes where individual memories can be accessed, screened, and then re-integrated into the Genetic Lifeform’s source code."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 30

Enemies with a Common Interest

In this short Life that only lasts an hour
How much - how little - is within our power

Emily Dickinson, #1292

7 Hours Until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day

“Well, you two,” Henry said, “I’m ready to call it a night. Looks like we’re all set.” He glanced across the dimmed lab, his gaze skipping over Chell to Karla and Doug. “We’ve done good work.”

The light from Doug’s monitor illuminated his face from below. Pronounced shadows chiseled his face. “See you tomorrow.” Doug barely looked up.

“It already is tomorrow.”

Doug frowned, then jerked upright in his chair. He glanced down at his watch and shot a look at Chell. “Is it?”

“You work too hard, Doug,” Karla piped in from her desk.

“Hey. You’re still here, too.” Doug straightened his body, and a cascading series of cracks
and pops affirmed that his spine had been correctly realigned. He slumped back over his keyboard.

“I’m just about to head out,” said Karla. “You should, too.”

“Try and at least get a few hours of sleep.” Henry edged toward the door. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

“Not going anywhere until these case tests come back positive,” Doug mumbled, the final word sticking to his tongue and falling out like an unattended copy machine. “Positive. Positive. Positive. Positive.” He stared into the monitor without blinking. His brain spun in concentric circles throughout the day, thoughts segmenting into other thoughts as if someone was playing with a spirograph in his brain. Circle, circle, circle. Worry, worry, worry.

Doug pressed his palms gently into his eye sockets and massaged his face. The afterimage of the monitor burned the inside of his eyelids like a hot brand. Bright screens. Lines of swimming text, ready to leap and twist out of the confines of his screen and strangle him.

Henry frowned. “You haven’t left this room in hours.” He set his hand on the back of Doug’s chair. “C’mon. We haven’t had any scenarios fail today. We’ve been over the logic more times than I can count today alone. The code’s solid.”

“But if we don’t pull this off perfectly—“ Doug wrung his hands.

“It’ll skewer us alive,” Karla said. “We know. You’ve been talking to yourself about it all day.” She lifted a hand and mimed a telephone, thumb at her ear and pinky finger pointed toward her mouth.

Alive alive alive alive alive.

“Right. Sorry,” Doug said. He mentally cursed. Recognizing the repetitions and circularity of his own thoughts and his own speech was difficult enough on a regular day. Today, he struggled to remember what he was supposed to do when his brain got like this. Every half-second another thought fired, overlapping the previous one and screaming for his attention.

“We’ve got our contingency plan,” Karla tried, repeating the same words she’d used earlier in the day. “We’re prepared for anything that could possibly happen tomorrow. I mean, today.”

Doug nodded several times, as if bobbing along to music.

“It’ll work,” Henry said firmly. The door closed behind him, and a heavy silence fell upon the room.

“After those finish, go home,” Karla said. She looked him over, and then sighed and gave her best impression of a reassuring smile. “We’re going to be just fine.”

Karla stretched her fingers out in front of her. “So,” she said, turning to Chell. “Was today everything you hoped it would be?”

Chell spun circles in a desk chair, groaning in reply.

“I warned you it’d be boring,” Doug chimed. Though he wished he could avoid intruding on
their conversation, they were the only three left in this room. Sound carried.

Chell gave another grunt. “You could have at least talked to me.”

“You knew we’d have to focus,” Karla said. “Really focus.”

“All you did was stare at those screens.”

“We had a lot of code to double-check,” Karla said. “Or, in Doug’s case, infinity-check.” She moved toward the door, exchanging a look with Doug and shaking her head. Doug gave a slight exhale and smile in response.

Chell reached out her legs to stop the chair from spinning. The sole of her shoes squeaked against the floor and her vision swam. Her grip on the armrests tightened. The sharp vertigo would subside eventually.

“I’ve still got a few things to check on with the testing department. Gotta make sure we’re all on the same page,” Karla said. “I’ll come back soon to take you to your room. You two think you can hold down the fort here?”

Chell gave a hesitant look over at Doug, and then nodded.

Karla left without another word.

Chell tapped her feet on the ground for a few minutes, mesmerizing herself with the repetitive movement. Every few minutes Doug glanced in Chell’s direction, but averted eye contact. The room’s lighting split the area into two distinct halves: darkness covering the empty half, and lights illuminating Doug’s half of the room.

Chell sighed. She dragged her feet across the ground, feet thunking and wheels screeching as she edged to his desk. Doug didn’t look up from his work.

“Hey,” Chell started. She craned her neck forward and turned to get a look at Doug’s face. His eyes moved back and forth like windshield wipers as he plowed through the lines of code on his screen.

“Doug?” Chell said. She reached out a hand and gently poked him on the shoulder.

Doug jolted upright as if she’d zapped him. “How long have you been there?”

Chell shrugged. “Just a few seconds.” She pointed to the mess of incomprehensible text on his screen. “What’s that?”

Doug took a moment to refocus, then scrolled up the page and then back down. “Some extra code for the Morality Core,” he said. “The code—it’s a bit like a series of step-by-step instructions to the computer in a language that it understands. Sorta like a recipe.”

“I know that,” Chell said, scooting her chair closer to the screen. “But what does it do?” She stared at the code, but no single line popped out to her as a direct statement of this is what this program does!

“You know I can’t tell you.” Doug gave an exasperated sigh. “If I was working on the part of Morality Core that was based on you, then maybe I could get away with showing you more.”

Chell dragged two fingers across her lips as if she was locking them up and throwing away
Doug gave his best attempt at a sympathetic grimace, and Chell sighed. She couldn’t argue with that.

“Hey—maybe after we’re done with this,” Doug said, scrambling to preserve their conversation, “I can show you a bit of how coding works.”

Chell glanced up, her hands bent around her seat cushion. “Sure,” she said. She chewed on the inside of her lip, staring idly at the screen for a few long minutes. She glanced over at the clock. The countdown until Bring Your Daughter to Work Day ticked relentlessly on. “Hey, Doug?” Chell picked at the edge of her seat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

She kept her eyes low. “What if—hypothetically—” she started, “someone asked you to do something bad, but for the right reasons?”

“What do you mean?” He stopped scrolling.

“Would you do it?”

Doug made a noise of contemplation and shifted in his chair. “I don’t know,” he said. He tried to look at Chell to gauge her reaction, but she stared down at her seat. “I’ve done the wrong things for the wrong reasons, and I’ve done the wrong things for the right reasons,” he said. “But you’re different. You’re not me, and you don’t have to make the same kinds of decisions that I do.”

Chell hesitated. She flicked a piece of black faux leather off of her fingers. “What about some of the stuff I did?”

“You did what you had to do,” said Doug. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But I lied to you. I stole from you. I did so many things wrong—”

“You can’t get away from that kind of thing down here,” he said. His voice was solemn but firm, like a soldier who’d spent too much time on the battlefield.

“But what if I could have? What if I could have done better? What if all of this is just what I get?” Her voice hitched. “Is it because I deserve this?”

Doug twisted away from his computer. This wasn’t the kind of light conversation he could power through while working. “You don’t deserve a single bit of what you’re going through.”

“What if I do, though?” Her voice grew more insistent. “What if I’m just like her? What if I’m a bad person too?” she whispered.

Doug shifted, touching Chell gently on the shoulder. “Chell,” he said gently. She glanced up, meeting his eyes for a split second before turning away. “You’re not a bad person.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“Because we need you,” he said. “Of course we want to help you, but right now we need you for this project. We might not have been able to salvage any of this project without you—she’d have ended up killing us all. But with your help, we’re making real progress.”

“But why does it have to be me?” she pleaded.
“I don’t know,” said Doug. “But you’re keeping us alive.”

Part of her wanted to say that she didn’t want to keep them alive—that wasn’t true. She did. Mostly. Just not in this way.

Doug hesitated, letting his gaze linger and looked at her as if he expected her to go on.

Chell just gave a nonchalant shrug and pulled her arms around her shoulders, then rubbed them. “I’m cold,” she said quietly.

“You know,” he said, shifting to look at the clock. “I’m convinced that they turn down the heat in here at night. Gotta keep us night owls awake somehow, right? No one believes me when I try to tell them, though. The thermostat always reads steady.”

Chell gave a faint snort in reply, then gave an exaggerated shiver. She rubbed her arms and then rubbed her hands together in front of her face, as if she’d been transported into the Arctic.

Doug gave a small jolt, then glanced over at a row of hooks on the wall. Usually covered in jackets and yesterday’s lab coats, only Karla’s jacket hung from it today. She was nice to Chell, sure, but he wasn’t sure if she’d take kindly to her coat being loaned out to Chell, however brief the time period. He bit the inside of his lip. “Want to borrow this?” He tugged at the sleeve of his lab coat.

“Yeah.” She let down her overacted reaction to the cold, and just clasped her hands together. “Thanks,” she said, her voice steadied as Doug slipped it off and handed it to her. She pulled on the crisp coat, diving her hands into the bottoms of the wide pockets. Her fingers danced around a few wrappers, a cough drop, and the chewed lid of a pen before her hand slipped around something smooth and rectangular. A keycard.

“Anything else I could get you?” Doug said. He didn’t want to pry into her space, but he didn’t want to deliberately ignore her, either.

Chell just shifted in her coat. A few new messages popped up on the computer screen: Doug’s programming test results. Before she should give them a closer look, a soft beep came from the door. They both turned to look as Karla pushed the door open to the lab and let it crash closed behind her.

“Tests done yet?” Karla said, not even bothering with a greeting. She grabbed her jacket from a hook and slipped it on over her lab coat.

Doug glanced over at his screen. “Actually, they just finished.”

“All passed?”

“All passed.”

Karla gave a solid nod. She considered saying something akin to ‘I told you so,’ but didn’t want to rub a co-worker’s mental issues in their face.

While Karla and Doug dove more into the specifics, Chell pressed her fingers against Doug’s smooth plastic keycard. She turned it over in her hands. The chair swiveled to face away from them. She gave one quick glance over her shoulder, and then pulled her hand out of the pocket. She fumbled with her sweatpants, hurriedly slipping the card between her skin and the waistband.

“Chell?”
Her heart jumped out of her chest. “Y-yeah?” She took a moment to casually swivel the chair back around.

“I said, are you ready to go?” The words came out of Karla’s mouth slowly and deliberately, as if she was speaking to a foreigner.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” She struggled to slip Doug’s lab coat off of her shoulders. Doug wasn’t a broad-shouldered man to begin with, and combined with Chell’s recent growth, the coat fit tighter on her than she expected. Then again, lab coats weren’t made out of spandex.

“You all right, kid?” Karla gave Chell a long, curious look.

Chell nodded and shifted forward. The keycard’s solid edges dug into her hip.

“Is there a problem? Because if there is, then I’m going to let Doug deal with it.”

“Just apprehensive.”

Doug snorted. “Aren’t we all?” When Chell and Karla didn’t laugh, Doug’s expression shifted. Apparently they didn’t find any comfort in joking about their fear. “Really though.” He looked over at Chell. “It’s going to be fine.”

“At least you guys get to watch to see what happens,” said Chell. “I get to wait and wonder.”

"You know it’s for your own good," Karla said. "Those moments right after we turn it online are just killer on your nerves."

Doug gave a nod and eyebrow-raise of agreement.

"Here," Chell said, handing over the lump of stiff cloth to Doug. She kept her posture rigid, and didn’t lean out far from her chair. A low level of anxiety pulsed through her, playing images in her mind of her moving too fast or reaching too far and letting the keycard slip and clatter to the floor.

"Thank you," she said gently, “and thanks again for letting me come in today."

She rose to her feet with such care and caution that an observer might mistake her for arthritic. She couldn’t take any chances. Why couldn’t she have ended up with sweatpants with actual, functioning pockets?

“Doug?” Chell hesitated. “I think— I think I get it now. What happened with Caroline.” She winced at that name. “You were trying to do the right thing.”

It wasn’t quite an apology, but it was a start.

Before Doug could answer, Karla zipped up her jacket. Chell took this as her cue and started moving toward the exit.

"Hey, Chell," said Doug. He wasn’t smiling, but he didn’t look nearly as anxious as before. He began to gather some of this things. "I'm glad we talked."

"Me too," she said quietly, slipping out the door and out with Karla.
A muted glow from the television stretched across the black room. It wasn’t her first choice, but the main room light—along with her bedside lamp—were disabled for the night. Lights from her bathroom cast a slanted square of light onto the carpet. With the relaxation vault deep into its night cycle, the lighting “outside” her room remained black, as well as most of the lights inside it.

Chell couldn’t let herself fall asleep.

After the credits of another television program faded out, Chell rose from her spot sitting in the middle of the bathroom light. She slipped on a worn Aperture sweater—the one she’d conveniently forgotten earlier—and adjusted her sweatpants as best as she could to hide her heel springs. If someone saw those, they’d know in an instant that she wasn’t just another exhausted employee.

Just as she’d seen the scientists do a thousand times before, Chell held up the keycard to the scanner on the door. The door clicked, and the light flashed from red to green. She turned the handle as silently as she could, and then pressed her shoulder into the door. She pushed it open a sliver and lined up an eye with the crack.

Clear.

The room was washed in a pale, dim blue.

Long shadows stretched toward Chell as she slipped into the lab. Her hand hovered over the light switch, but she didn’t turn it on. Something about making it bright when she wanted to stay hidden felt wrong. The only source of light in the room came from the windows overlooking the Central AI Chamber.

The Morality Core sat on Doug’s desk, still hooked up to his computer. She moved to his desk and began to dial his telephone. First things first, she needed to get more of the details on tonight from the architect of this plan.

As she finished punching in the numbers, half a dial tone rang and then cut off. “Hello?” Chell tried.

“About time,” CarolineDOS said. Chell pictured her tapping at the face of a watch.

Chell’s voice squeaked with discomfort. “Can we make this quick?” She kept her eyes focused on the door to the lab.

“If you wanted to be fast, then you should have been here hours ago.”

As she listened to the voice on the phone, Chell stared down into the chamber below. The chassis remained lifeless—no lights, no movements, no indicators that it was powered on. Yet here CarolineDOS was, speaking to her through the telephone network.

“So what do I do?” The equally lifeless personality core remained hooked up to Doug’s
computer. She was fairly certain this one couldn’t call her up in the middle of the night.

“Log in.”

Chell stared at the black screen, and then at the keyboard, and then back at the screen. She tapped a few keys on the keyboard and the screen flickered to life.

**USERNAME: drattmann**  
**PASSWORD:**

“I don’t know his password.”

“You didn’t watch him type it in?”

“I did but—”

“I’m joking.” When Chell didn’t laugh, she continued. “Luckily I have files on every employee here, which includes their login information. I’d log in as him here, but that’d require logging myself out and I honestly don’t know what would happen then.”

“So what’s the password.”

“It’s edickinson1292. Lowercase e.”

What did that even mean? Chell wished she could ask Doug. That’d require telling him that she knew his password, though. She pecked out the password one letter at a time. “Now what?”

"Hit enter."

"Enter?"

"Far right of the keyboard. Big key. The one that says Enter.”

There was a pause, and then the definitive click of a keystroke. ”The screen went black,” Chell said. She mashed the left mouse button and the space bar.

“Congratulations. You’ve just ensured that it’s going to load about ten times slower,” said CarolineDOS. “Imagine this computer is a person woken up at 6:00 AM. Instead of waking it gently, you’ve turned on all of the lights and asked it to do a series of complicated tasks. Now they have to sit there and try to figure out what you’ve just yelled at them, while also processing the blinding light in their face.”

Chell slid her hands back from the keyboard. She glared at her own reflection on the dark monitor. Eventually it lit up, informing her that the login process was successful.

“When you finally get to the desktop, look for a folder system related to the Morality Core. If not, open up the file explorer and find the connected devices. You’ll be able to directly access the files there.”

“Open what?”

CarolineDOS gave a synthesized sigh. “Look around. Is there anything that looks like it could be helpful?”

Chell squinted at the text on the screen and found a folder icon labeled MORALITY CORE BASE. She double clicked and opened up the next folder.
When she got through the final folder, Chell found herself staring at a list of files. “I found it,” she said. “What do I do now?”

“Click on the file in there. It should open up some sort of integrated development environment. That, or it’ll just open a plain text file. Tell me which one it opens.”

Chell double-clicked on the most important looking file. “I don’t know what it did,” she said.

“Describe it to me.”

“It opened,” said Chell. Tabs and windows and drop-down bars cluttered the dull gray boxes on the screen. In a larger box, she saw a scrambled mess of letters, numbers, phrases and curly brackets.

This had to be the code they were looking for.

“So what do I do with it?”

“You know what, why don’t you just email me the project files?”

Chell hesitated. “What’s email?”

Another thinly-disguised sigh came through the phone. “We’ll take it back one step, then. Do you know how to copy text?”

Chell pursed her lips. She didn’t have any idea how a computer worked, really. Not even on a conceptual level. And, from what she had gathered, computing technology appeared to have progressed so much in such a short—well, long—period of time. These computers were foreign to her.

“Back another step, then. Start with highlighting the text.”

Chell gave a strained sound in response.

“Is there any part of this you do know how to do?” CarolineDOS said. "Do you live under a rock?"

"No," said Chell, "but I live underground."

“You know what, never mind,” CarolineDOS said dismissively. “We’ll just…” she trailed off. “Well. You’ll have to bring the core down here.”
Chell’s stomach dropped. “Down here?”

“You know. The main AI chamber. The one room in this entire complex that I have any semblance of power over.”

“Why?” Chell started. She squeezed her hands together hard, almost hard enough that it hurt. Even though CarolineDOS wasn’t in her full-power state, the thought of going downstairs sent a spike of dread through her system. At low-power, she was harmless. She couldn’t do anything to her.

“Barring a miraculous discovery on your end on how to work a computer, it’s going to take ages if I have to walk you through every minuscule step of the way. If we want to get out of here before tomorrow afternoon, then you’re going to have to bring that to the Main AI Chamber.”

Chell looked at the powered-down core, and then back at her computer screen. All she was going to do was plug in this core, get in, get out, and then put the core and Doug’s keycard back before anyone realized that anything had happened.

Caroline wished she could show Chell just how dopey her face looked.

The lights had flickered to life as Chell entered the Main AI Chamber. Her face light up as bright as the room, and she twisted, looking for the cause of the room’s abrupt transition from dark to light. Based on her expression alone, someone might’ve guessed she hadn’t seen anything as miraculous in her entire life. Like she couldn’t believe that CarolineDOS had turned on the lights for her. If CarolineDOS could have spoken aloud to her, she would have said, don’t flatter yourself.

CarolineDOS didn’t flip on the lights just for Chell. They were motion-activated.

She wasn’t going to burst Chell’s bubble, though.

Chell placed her keycard flat between her teeth, then used her hands to heft the Morality Core into the entryway. She moved past a few blank monitors and a red rotary phone decorating a desk shoved against a wall. This was all that remained of the former Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System headquarters. It frustrated CarolineDOS to no end that she could see into their new, much more secure laboratory, but couldn’t see enough to discern what was happening. That, and it was completely out of her earshot. Seeing the team pace around and work day after day on things she had no clue about made her want to smash two test chambers together in frustration. So close, and yet so secretive—it felt like they were taunting her.

Chell hefted the core onto one of the desks. With a CLANG it crashed down and Chell jumped and gasped.

Jumpy. Not surprising. What had Chell expected, letting a heavy metal object crash down like that?

CarolineDOS watched as Chell shook her arms as if she was trying to shake out her nerves. She glanced around the room, pausing to stare at the entrance.

Nervous. Also not surprising.

Chell mouthed something to herself. The dimness of the area—along with her low-resolution camera feeds—made it impossible for CarolineDOS to lip-read. Every few seconds, Chell looked up
to the darkened windows of the lab above them.

Though CarolineDOS had never been bad at reading body language, she couldn’t deny that being given access to a full library of human body language—including automatic decoding and processing of microexpressions—made it almost too easy to read into other people. The only barrier was the same low-quality cameras. Though even if she could view subtle facial cues, she didn’t have enough processing power to properly analyze them.

CarolineDOS mulled over her limited information channels. She was trapped in a tiny room with two televisions in front of her and a telephone beside her. Each television came equipped with channels of every security camera in the entire facility, but their single screens could only display one camera view at a time.

Compared to the sheer amount of brainpower she had access to while fully online, this suffocated her. She needed to know what was happening in her own facility. She needed to know what was happening on Chell’s computer. To get there, she’d have to do something like cut off her access to the majority of the phone systems—unplug the telephone and plug in something else. She wasn’t an operator, after all. The facility’s phone system could handle itself for an hour.

Wait—she still needed that phone to speak with Chell. Scratch that plan.

CarolineDOS stared around her mental prison, and then eyed one of the monitors. She reached out and disconnected the cord from massive switchboard mounted to the wall. Three lone, skinny cords draped down from it and snaked over to the monitors and the phone. She tugged at the cord hooked up to Security Camera - West Entrance. Loose end in one hand, the fingers of her other hand trailed across the labels. She paused at the one she’d been looking for: Remote Desktop Access. With a satisfying snap, the cord pushed into place.

The switch between having three input sources to having almost every possible input source overwhelmed her—that’s part of why she hated being flipped between being feeling suffocated and overwhelmed. Existing like this—in a form that could be either underloaded or overloaded with sensory information at the flip of a switch—felt, at times, like emerging from a sensory deprivation tank into a mall on Black Friday.

CarolineDOS used her remaining security feed to watch as Chell continued to struggle with the computer.

Right. She was supposed to call her.

Well, so there was one call that CarolineDOS apparently needed to make.

The candy-red phone near Chell gave two muted trills.

Chell eyed the phone for another few rings before picking it up and then propping the phone receiver against her shoulder.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get lost. Took you long enough to get down here.” Chell frowned, and CarolineDOS continued. “Go ahead and get started the same way you did upstairs. Log in.”

She leaned back a bit in her chair and pushed the soles of her feet against the back of the desk. After another long moment, the booting-up computer informed her that she could finally log in to the computer. She took a minute to type in Doug’s username and password. The monitor illuminated her face with an artificial blue.

As the desktop finished loading, Chell uncurled a cord from around her arm and plugged in
the Morality Core. A series of windows cascaded onto the screen. One maximized itself and Chell’s hands hovered over the keyboard as she read it. After a moment of staring at the screen, she held her palms up to the air, and the message to CarolineDOS was clear: Your move now.

“You’re going to have to read me an access code so that I can take over that computer. I would’ve done this upstairs, but someone decided to place that lab onto a different grid, and someone else decided to add in an additional human verification process for all terminals that I could potentially access.”

CarolineDOS reached out to her monitor, tossing out a request to remotely access Chell’s computer. Fingerpads pressed to her wrist, she waited for the information to pulse into her digital veins.

Chell shifted as a message popped up on the screen.

Another user has requested remote access to this device. If this request is not expected nor wanted, hit CANCEL. If it is, hit CONTINUE.

Click.

Please contact your colleague and ask them to enter in the following access code.

NOTE: This will grant FULL ACCESS to your device, so ONLY share in urgent situations, and ONLY share with approved Aperture Science personnel specifically trained for this purpose.

A jumbled string of letters and numbers followed. Chell quietly read them into the phone’s receiver. The cursor on her screen blinked, then teleported across the screen. She lifted her hand from the mouse and then moved her hand away, staring between the stationary mouse and the gliding cursor. Windows popped up and text flashed by as CarolineDOS began scrolling.

CarolineDOS welcomed in the mass of new information, letting it pour into her monitor. She flicked through files as if she was idly running a thumb through a stack of post-it notes. Whatever she was looking for, she knew she’d find it when she saw it. Though this single desktop computer didn’t possess much processing power, it was still a welcome addition to her already-restricted power.

The only problem was that everything she could see up the screen, so could Chell. CarolineDOS couldn’t dig through the contents of this specific computer or open up any of Doug’s personal emails privately. Good thing her new brain could process information faster than the human brain. She sped up her reading pace, speeding through pages of information as fast as the computer could load them.

Chell tried to follow along, but bright flashes on the screen forced her to look away. “So,” she started, “how long is this going to take?”

“Quiet,” CarolineDOS hissed. “I’m focusing.”

“I need to get back before Doug realizes he’s missing his card.”

It took a brief moment to rouse CarolineDOS’s attention from the files. The files on the screen slowed their scrolling to a near stop.

“He’s already left for the night—someone else getting on the elevator swiped him out. He won’t realize anything until he tries to get into the facility tomorrow.”

“So what’s our plan?”
"We’re going to go through every file on this oversized paperweight and see whatever it is
they have planned for me tomorrow, then correct that code so that we have a chance tomorrow.
Then, you’ll take that core and put it right back where you found it, like nothing happened at all.”

“No, I mean for tomorrow,” said Chell.

“Well, without you being part of the test subject registry, I won’t be able to just fudge the
numbers and then mark your testing track assignment as completed,” said CarolineDOS. “That’s
what I’d planned to do, until you went and failed your test candidate screening. We’re going to have
to do something entirely different.”

Chell clenched her hands together. “Like what?”

“Security’s going to be tight tomorrow—I’ve seen the emails they’ve sent out about it. It’s
Bring Your Daughter to Work Day, so there’s bound to be little girls running around everywhere,
with parents tagging along. There’s going to be Black Mesa cockroaches scuttling around for my big
reveal. Newspapers are covering it, too. We have to make sure no one ends up where they’re not
supposed to be. They’re going to have their eyes peeled for people like you.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” said Chell. She wasn’t a daughter. She wasn’t an employee.
She wasn’t a member of the press or a Black Mesa employee—she was just Chell.

“Grab yourself a guest sticker and slap it onto your shirt. Steal someone’s guest badge, and
then exit through one of the visitor checkpoints. Clearly you’ve done well enough with stealing ID
badges — stealing one from some kid eating a crayon shouldn’t be hard either. Like stealing candy
from a baby.”

“That’s it?” Chell frowned. ”What about your part? What are you doing?”

“Making a diversion.”

“Like what?” Suspicion laced Chell’s voice.

“Let me worry about that,” CarolineDOS said. She tried to keep her voice as soothing as
possible. “First, I’ve got to figure out what we’re up against tomorrow.”  The text on the screen
began to move again as CarolineDOS revved back into sorting through her files.

“You can read that stuff?” Chell said. Even if CarolineDOS slowed down enough so that
Chell could read the code on the screen, she wouldn’t have the slightest idea of what it all meant.

“Yes,” said CarolineDOS. Though she might not be familiar with the syntax of the more
human-friendly, higher-level programming languages, she could figure it out. They all reduced down
to a series of zeroes and ones. And that code—machine code—she understood.

“You know,” CarolineDOS said, “when I first started here, computer programming used to
be a woman’s job. Did you know that? Simple and easy as operating a mechanical desk calculator,
they said. All you had to do was punch the right buttons and let the new machines do all the
computing—all the thinking—for you.”

Backbreaking, intense, and frustrating. That’s what early programming had been like. She
would know—she was there. Images of punch cards stacks, of massive rolls of tapes and documents
and handbooks so dense that no one of the higher-ups seemed to be able to fully understand them—
except for the women who grew intimately familiar with the electromechanical behemoths, the fickle
masses of switches and relays and tubes that spit out the wrong numbers more often than the correct
ones. Wires frayed out. Relays broke. They would shut everything down and the whirlwind of
mechanical energy would shift into quiet as the room moved into trying to find the error. Every time those test numbers didn’t come out correctly, they had to step through each switch, each mechanical step that the massive computers took in order to find out the error.

CarolineDOS hesitated. “Yet they failed to consider that we had to turn those calculations into pure machine code before the computer could give us an answer. It was all viewed as low-skilled work, of course,” she said. “Even when we had to also create punch cards or carefully feed the tapes into the machines along with stripping down code into its most basic, machine-readable form. All so easy, right? Soon enough computers would be programming themselves.”

They were the ones to learn every mechanical inch of these early computers, and they were the ones to make them sing. CarolineDOS supposed it only made sense that after all of her time breaking down the hardware of a computer in order to learn it, it only was fitting that the computer would break down the software of a human in order to fully integrate it.

“So,” Chell started. “You really get it.”

“I’m also part-computer now, so yes,” CarolineDOS said. “For instance, this—” The lines and lines of dashes and brackets and words and numbers shifted and exploded into pages and pages of documents, cutting her off.

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MORALITY CORE – v. 0.98

TECHNICAL OVERVIEW

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SUBJECT DATA

The information used for the development of this core comes from TWO (2) human research subjects. ONE, from the basis of the central core, CAROLINE, and TWO, from a volunteer, CHELL NARANSKY.

SUBJECT ONE (CAROLINE)

Data was collected through a combination of a live surgical procedure on the subject and posthumous dissection.
The primary method followed was the EM (Electron Microscope) Reconstruction. Sample was cut into thin cross-sections, with each slice carefully cataloged and combed to identify the portions of neurons. These images were later aligned into a three-dimensional map of the subject’s connectome, or map of every neural network in the brain.

Files referenced include comprehensive brain scans, a psychological profile, a complete connectome diagram, and neural network maps for every region of the brain. These neural networks were created through an extensive neural circuit reconstruction project from the donated brain.

File(s) attached.

For more details and to request access to complete files, please contact the NEUROANATOMY and NEUROIMAGING departments.

SUBJECT TWO (CHELL)

Data was collected via a non-invasive brain imaging procedure using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) techniques. These images were then compiled and then compared to those of Subject One.

File(s) attached.

PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

Both Subject One and Subject Two were assigned dominant personality traits by research associates. These traits were identified after a period of observation, personality assessments, and structural data from each subject’s frontal lobe. To focus in on neuroanatomical differences between the subjects, special attention to the prefrontal cortex, as this area is thought to determine the expression of human personality.

These traits were then ranked on a scale of more dominant to less dominant. A list of the most dominant personality traits was compiled for each subject, and then compared.

CONCLUSION
The strongest trait in Subject Two with no overlap with Subject One were then used for the basis of this personality core, referred to throughout these documents as the MORALITY CORE. Other traits and personality cores derived from these traits can be found through Subject Two’s profile.

MORALITY CORE EXTENSION PROPOSAL - APPROVED

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In the case that the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System proves to not absolve itself of its angry state, we propose an alteration to eliminate this problem.

PROBLEM

During the brain sample collection process, the subject expressed strong dislike toward the extraction team. These emotions, being the last to solidify in the structure of the brain, have tainted the Genetic Lifeform’s view of scientists.

We have reason to believe that these human-based emotions are the root of the blatant attacks occurring frequently upon startup. These memories are destabilizing the AI, and thus destabilizing the project.

SOLUTION

Arguments of ‘nature vs nurture’ aside, memories play an integral role in personality development & relationship formation. It is essential that the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System create and retain professional relationships with all employees of Aperture Laboratories.

Since we cannot, at this point, pinpoint the location of individual memories, we are forced into a difficult decision. The safest option will be to restrict the AI’s access to all human memory-based
files. These will remain under lockdown until a time comes where individual memories can be accessed, screened, and then re-integrated into the Genetic Lifeform’s source code.

**RISKS**

Removing these human memories from the source code poses a risk of destabilizing the central core’s personality. With no memories to form the foundations of a personality, it is impossible to predict what personality will eventually emerge.

Depending on how much is hardwired into the subject’s brain chemistry and how much is situational, the emergent core personality could range from being identical to that of the subject to something entirely new. Future alterations to the central core may be required.

**CONCLUSION**

Following much discussion, the decision has been made to lock away these memories. This would act as a reset to every relationship the AI has made with the staff of Aperture Laboratories. Special precautions will be made to ensure that future formative interactions are positive, and thus will pave the way for a positive future all around.

Since all attempts at personality refinement have failed, this leaves no choice but to pull a ‘reboot’ on the personality core of the Genetic Lifeform and Disk-Operating System.

CarolineDOS screamed.

Part hiss, part shriek, the sound echoed through the phone line.

Chell fumbled, phone slipping from her fingers clattering onto the desk. She scrambled to pick it up and hovered it a few inches from her ear. She waited for something—more yelling, more screaming—but nothing came out of the speaker. Chell shifted in her chair, then turned around the base of the telephone. She wiggled the cord, pushing it back into place.

Still, no sound came out.

The silence felt oppressive—as if Chell had been thrown under water and was straining to hear someone whispering on the surface. Cold dread surged through her.

A flash of motion on the monitor caught her eye. Chell twisted, watching as the cursor just hovered over the document’s text. The documents came up, side-by-side on the monitor. Chell mouthed the words as she read along, a knot tightening in her stomach.
“Caroline?” Chell whispered. After the silence became too heavy to bear, she repeated the name over and over, certain that CarolineDOS must still be on the line. She didn’t want to think about losing contact with her—not now.

“Well,” CarolineDOS started, voice biting. “You’re still alive, so how are they pulling up brain mapping these days?”

Chell’s words stuck in her throat.

“I can’t believe you did something this stupid,” CarolineDOS seethed. “What were you thinking? Involving yourself in this project, and then not telling me about it? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

Chell shrugged. “It never came up,” she said, lamely.

“It just seems like you missed a crucial part when warning me about this ‘dangerous’ core they were making. You didn’t mention that the dangerous part came from you.”

“What would I have said?”

“This kind of thing affects both of us,” CarolineDOS snapped. If she could have jabbed a finger toward Chell’s chest, she would have. “Something like this—where we’re at right now—this is your fault.”

“What?” Chell said. “How is any of this my fault?”

“I wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with if you hadn’t kindly offered up yourself for this core’s creation.”

“You think I wanted to?” said Chell.

“You volunteered.”

“So did you,” Chell spat back. “But I’m not—I’m not some science experiment like you are. I didn’t want to be here.”

“Well, I didn’t either,” said CarolineDOS. “You think they really care whether or not we say yes?”

“I just—” Chell stuttered. “I had to. That’s what Doug’s working on—and I thought—”

“What, if you went along with whatever experiment they wanted you to try, then they’d let you just skip out the front door? It doesn’t work that way.”

“I was trying to help them,” said Chell.

“Help? So far, you’ve done the opposite of help,” CarolineDOS hissed. “You could’ve at least warned me. A little heads up would have been nice. That’s all.”

“But—you can still fix it.” Chell shifted to the edge of her seat. “I brought the core to you—isn’t that good enough?”

“It’s not that simple. You saw what’s in here. It changes everything.” Caroline hesitated. “You’re not going to like this, but our plan is nixed. Again.”
A surge of panic mixed with anger exploded from Chell. “No,” she squeaked. “We have to. It’s our only chance.”

CarolineDOS scoffed. “I see it hasn’t connected yet in your brain, but even if I do fix this—which I will—if we don’t pull this off right, it’s game over for both of us. Those scientists are expecting a compliant vegetable. I can’t “malfunction”. I can’t raise any red flags. So as soon as I try to take out any of them they’re going to know right away that I’ve still got all my memories.”

“Wait, what?”

“Two birds, one stone. You needed something to draw the crowd’s attention. I had some housekeeping to do. But that doesn’t matter anymore, because that plan’s already off the table.”

“You were,” said Chell, grappling with the idea, “going to hurt people.”

“It wouldn’t be my first choice,” she lied, “but they’ve forced my hand.”

“No. No,” Chell repeated, shaking her head. Her hand trembled.

“Look, do you want to get out of here, or not?”

“That doesn’t mean you have to hurt them—” Chell said. She clamped her hands together so hard that it physically pained her. White and red streaks marked her skin.

“Why do you even care about them?”

CarolineDOS’s voice dropped. “Oh, no. You’ve gotten attached to them.”

“It’s not like that—” Chell protested. “They’ve just been nice to me. Nicer than they have to be.”

“They’re only keeping you around because you’re useful, you know,” said CarolineDOS. “We’ve seen the way they talk when you’re not around. You’re just a tool they think they can use to get to me. That for some reason, your voice will help me forget who I am. That your voice would make me ‘have a heart.’”

“You’re a robot,” said Chell. “You don’t have a heart.”

“I know,” she said. “If they wanted me to have one, they shouldn’t have forced me in here. But they’ll see.”

“But—”

“I have had enough of these scientists.”

Chell hissed. “No.”

“You need to calm down,” CarolineDOS said. “That doesn’t matter. We both know I’m not going to be able to get away with that anyway.”

“Maybe not tomorrow,” whispered Chell. She pulled her hands apart and began to rub at the backs of them.

“Are you missing the part where they’re trying to wipe my memory?” said CarolineDOS. “They don’t want me in this machine. They just want some perky voice to stand by their side while they’re working, to run the phones, to move around the test chambers, and to crunch all the numbers
they’re too lazy to punch into their own calculators,” she said. “As much work as they can offload to me, you can bet that they’ll do it. And if I’m not a ‘real person’ anymore, then they don’t have to feel bad about it. They want a human in the machine. They just don’t want me, specifically. I can’t let them do that.”

There was a coldness and an anger in her voice that sent a shiver down Chell’s spine.

“Come on. Aren’t you sick of this? Isn’t this why you spoke to me in the first place? They’re not treating me—or you—as if you’re a human being.”

“They’re doing the best they can.” Chell bit the inside of her lip. “They’re just busy.”

“Their best isn’t enough. You want your freedom and that’s the one thing they’re never going to offer you. Not while you’re still useful to them, and definitely not while you’re still useful to this project. You can’t trust any of them.”

“What about Doug?”

“Especially Mr. Rattmann. Sure, he helped me. I thought I could trust me—that he of all people could stand up for me. Then he turned around and made this thing.” Disgust oozed from CarolineDOS’s voice. Chell stared at the floor. “Then I find out—in the middle of working together with you—that you’re involved with this core, too. And I’m supposed to just forget that? Let you keep your hands on that core like nothing happened?”

“You can’t trust me?”

“You lied to me about this core.” CarolineDOS sped through her words. “I don’t know what else you’re lying about. How can I be sure this whole thing isn’t a setup? You could be lying to me. Just trying to get me into a trap. Like this core.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Chell said.

“A lie by omission is still a lie,” she said.

“Why would I lie about this?” said Chell. “You’re the one who reached out for help. Not me.”

“Okay, fine,” said CarolineDOS. “I had to. You’re the only one with proximity to the team. Happy?”

Chell looked up at the dark lab above, imaging it filling up with people in just a few hours from now. It felt weird to see the room from this angle. From beneath, gazing up into the heavy patterned glass. She blinked, and for a moment she was back in that test chamber, back with CarolineDOS’s voice pouring through the speakers. Her heart rate spiked, and she took a few gasping breaths. She pressed the heels of her palms against her eyelids.

This wasn’t like that. She was safe. She could leave this room whenever she wanted to.

But tomorrow—they wouldn’t be able to leave. Not if CarolineDOS went through with her plan.

“What am I going to do?” she whispered to herself, then pressed a hand over her mouth. A faint voice drifted out from the hard plastic phone speaker.

“Chell?”
She kept her hand on her face for a long moment before picking back up the phone. She bit at her knuckle, and then curled a hand around the handle of the Morality Core. One hand slipped to feel the edge of Doug’s keycard, running the pad of her finger along the beat-up edge.

“You can have a crisis later,” said CarolineDOS. “Stay focused.”

She glanced at the door, and then back at the computer screen. Her hand slipped to the cord. Maybe it wasn’t too late to get out of this. Maybe, if she just—

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Chell jumped. The cord in her hand jerked taut.

“I know how you’re feeling,” CarolineDOS starting, trying to be as soothing as she could. “Like a caged animal, backed into a corner and ready to lash out. Self-preservation isn’t anything to be ashamed of—it’s what we’re both feeling. That’s why we are working together,” she emphasized.

Chell’s hand quivered.

“I know you’ve probably heard things about me,” she continued. “You’re not wrong to have a healthy skepticism. But I have reasons to hurt them. Not you. That wouldn’t be beneficial to either of us.”

Chell just shook her head. “I’m not scared of you,” she said, voice barely louder than a whisper. “I just—”

“Your actions tonight affect both of us,” CarolineDOS said, more insistently. “If you want this to work, you have to think about someone other than yourself.”

“Myself?” Chell jabbed a finger into her chest. “I am never just thinking about myself. Other people are always asking me to do this, or do that. Every time.” She would have pushed something over if she wasn’t so afraid of breaking it. “And that’s what you’re doing right now. Just pushing me around.”

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing will have consequences you haven’t even considered,” said CarolineDOS.

Chell could unplug the Morality Core. She could go back and tell them all about how CarolineDOS spoke to her, promising her the sweet honey of freedom if she just played her part. How CarolineDOS tried to get her to be a willing accomplice to multiple injuries, if not outright deaths. I don’t have to do this, she thought.

“You think I can’t see what you’re thinking?” said CarolineDOS. “I’m an expert on human body language, and right now, you’re thinking that that piece of plastic in your pocket could be your ticket out of here. That you could make a run for it and already be on the surface by now. That working with me was a mistake.”

“Maybe it is,” Chell said.

“You walk out of here with that keycard, and you ruin Mr. Rattmann’s chances of ever having stable employment again.” The words came out as a challenge.

Chell frowned. She didn’t buy it. She shook her head. “No way,” she said.

“Losing a high-security keycard and finding out that you—a known risk—betrayed a
research team’s trust. Stole from Mr. Rattmann. Again. How could they not question his judgment? It’s a huge security breach.”

“That’s not his fault,” Chell said. She was the one taking advantage of his trust and his hospitality—he shouldn’t be punished for that.

“When you’re nowhere to found, who do you think will be blamed for it?”

Chell tried to chip in, but was cut off by CarolineDOS.

“They’ll put him through a performance review. He’ll get fired, and that’ll be the end of his career in science.”

“There’s other companies out there.” Chell thought back to when her mother had applied to several large science companies, then took Chell with her on road trips to interview. The names of those companies remained fuzzy in her brain, but she knew they existed. Getting fired happened to people all the time.

“Oh, like Black Mesa? We can barely convince their former staff to apply here. You really think they want an Aperture reject? What, with his condition and all…”

Chell hesitated. “His condition?”

“The poor thing. He hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?” said Chell.

“Most of his co-workers know by now. I’m surprised he hasn’t told you. Can’t blame him, though. Such a stigma around it.”

“Told me what?”

“He has Schizophrenia. A chronic and disabling mental disorder that influences how a person thinks, feels, and acts. Can cause hallucinations, delusions, as well as reduced social engagement and emotional expression,” CarolineDOS rattled off. “He’s not a danger to anyone, don’t worry. Just can have difficulty distinguishing between what’s real and what is just in his head.”

“You’re just saying that.” Chell shook her head. “He’s not like that. Not at all.”

“You’ve seen him take his medication. When he does take it, symptoms are reduced. Probably can’t even tell. When he doesn’t, however,” CarolineDOS paused, “he might slip up. Forget you’re a real person. Forget he’s supposed to be helping you.”

“You’re just trying to scare me,” said Chell. That had to be it. Just another way to get her to go along with the plan, to not take this opportunity. She pulled out the keycard from her pocket and turned it over in her hands.

“Ask him about it sometime,” CarolineDOS said. “It’s in his file, too.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“You have your secrets. So does he,” said CarolineDOS. “But the point is—you have to think about this. You take that card, and you’ll ruin his professional life. You wouldn’t want to be responsible for the downfall of another person’s career, would you?”

Chell took a long time before speaking. “Fine,” she said. “Just promise you won’t hurt him.
And the others too.”

CarolineDOS waited, but it wasn’t long before she spoke. “I’ll leave him alone,” she said. “But I’m not sure I can guarantee the safety of the rest of his team.”

She was a bit surprised that CarolineDOS already conceded—she had suspected a more drawn-out argument. “I mean it,” Chell emphasized, lowering her voice. “If you hurt him, I’ll tell them all about the Morality Core. About how you told me to change it for you, and that you’re just pretending that it works.”

“And I mean it too,” said CarolineDOS. “You could say I owe Mr. Rattmann a favor.” She noticed when they didn’t think she could hear her—when they referred to her as it rather than her, or whenever they said things implying that she was less than human. He treated her as a human being trapped in a machine, not a machine trying its best to imitate a human.

Chell hesitated. “I need to think.” Could she really go through with this? She thought back to working with the team, and she thought back to that security footage she’d seen. Maybe CarolineDOS was right. She already knew that they weren’t going to help her, but was putting them in the way of danger really the right way out of this?

She kept her hand on the Morality Core. It’d be so easy to just keep them all safe. All she would have to do would be to pull this cord and then let whatever code was on the Morality Core take effect on CarolineDOS the next day. She’d be left on her own to figure out a way out of here—but would it really be that much more difficult to pull off than whatever CarolineDOS had planned?

“Look,” CarolineDOS tried. “Just—don’t worry about Mr. Rattmann, or his team. If we do anything suspicious, they’re going to look at the cores and realize something is wrong. And then they’ll make sure I have my memories wiped.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. We’re—,” she paused, “just going to have to figure it out. You will have your opportunity,” said CarolineDOS. “I promise.”

Chell turned the Morality Core toward her, staring into the unlit eye of it. “There’d better be,” said Chell. Her tone was cold.

“Before you know it, you’re going to be on the surface and soaking up some sunlight,” said CarolineDOS. “All you have to do is let me finish these changes on this core.”

Chell turned back toward the computer screen. Lines and lines of code flew by her, being highlighted and deleted and rearranged before her eyes. Had CarolineDOS been doing this the entire time she had been talking? Chell wasn’t sure.

Several dialog boxes opened and closed. A navy blue loading bar ticked across, tile by tile. It finished up and that dialog box disappeared, along with every single opened file in sight.

“Fixed,” said CarolineDOS. “Virtually indistinguishable from how it was before. At least, on the outside.”

Chell took a shaky breath and unplugged the core from the computer.

“One more thing—before you go,” said CarolineDOS. “After you hang up, cut the cord on this phone.”
Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a logistical nightmare. The last scene in particular with Chell and CarolineDOS took a ton of rewrites and re-structuring to make the flow sound at least somewhat natural. I've been working on it for months to get it right, and I hope the wait was worth it!
“Cores attached?”

Henry moved around the platform, craning up his head. “Hold on, you’ll have to lower the chassis again.” There was a murmur as the information was relayed up into their main control room. GLaDOS’s chassis squeaked as it lowered toward the ground. Henry nodded, then grabbed each handle of each core. He gave them a sturdy tug, making sure that they were all properly connected. “All cores connected,” he affirmed.

Up in their control room, Karla checked off a box. They had a whole list of pre-game procedures to go through, one of which was a visual inspection of the hardware. “Any exposed wiring?” Karla read out, her voice echoing into the chamber beneath.

Henry shook his head. “Nope.”

“And the Morality Core is definitely attached?” They had had to pull the GLaDOS system completely offline for this, and couldn’t digitally check to see if the cores had registered as connected into its system. That was a task for Karla’s next checklist.

Henry gave the purple-eyed core another tug. It pulled, and then clanged back against the chassis. He gave Karla a thumbs up from the Main AI Chamber.

“All right, that’s it for our hardware checklist,” said Karla. “Buckle up everyone. Moving in to begin software checks.”

The people in the room with Karla straightened, shifting to go back from the window and to their computers. They all had things that they were supposed to be watching for as they carefully brought the GLaDOS system back online step-by-step and raised it to full power. They weren’t just going to pull it fully online and hope for the best, as they had done before.

“Has anyone seen Doug?” Karla said, leaning away from her microphone and looking around the lab. It wasn’t like him to be late to work. She had barely been able to get him to go home the previous night.

There were a few murmurs and shakes of the heads. No one had seen him. It figured he’d be gone when some of his most important work was about to be put to the test. A thought crossed her mind. Maybe he was in a bathroom somewhere, working up the courage to move into this room and to be in the presence of the company’s CEO. And soon, some of the outside world. He’d better show up.

“Returning the chassis to its standard position,” Karla said. “Henry, standby.” She’d have to figure out the mystery of Doug later. She hit a few buttons on the computer in front of her, and the chassis moved back toward the ceiling.

Henry moved down the curved platform and onto the main floor. He stood so that he could view both the chassis and the window up to the rest of the team.

The radio on the desk next to Karla fizzled to life. “Standing by,” he confirmed. “Am I going to be getting any company down here?”

“What, you don’t want to be in a room alone with this perfectly nice robot?” she said, then laughed. “Don’t worry. Sending a few people down right now with the diagnostic process.”
Henry nodded and gave another thumbs-up toward the window.

When the people arrived down below and moved toward Henry, Greg rose from his chair—just out of view of the window, and buried his hands into the pockets of his dress slacks. His fingers pressed down into the fabric. “How long until it’s online?” he asked, apprehensive. “People will be getting here soon.”

“Depends on how smoothly this goes,” said Karla. “We’ll get it done.”

A see-through wireframe of a human brain slowly circled on Karla’s monitor. “Let’s start with the basics,” she said to herself. She keyed up the amygdala and the area of the brain lit up on her monitor. They were going to do this carefully—one section of the brain at a time.

She leaned forward and spoke into the microphone. “Let us know when you guys start to see movement down there.”

They went through the structures of the Genetic Lifeform’s digital brain, starting from the center—the evolutionary starting point—and then branching out until they had just one section left—the frontal cortex.

“All system and structure scans are coming back clear,” said someone off to the side of her. Karla nodded. She looked down at the room below at the silent yet moving piece of machinery.

“Frontal cortex coming online,” Karla said with the press of a button. “You guys watch those cores. They’re coming online next.”

As soon as the visual indicator on her screen flashed that the frontal cortex of the Genetic Lifeform had come online, Karla switched to the auxiliary core screen from to the GLaDOS systems and selected a core. She flipped the first one online and then the rest of them. If they had had some more time and if the machines down there hadn’t been trying to take them all out, Karla would have preferred testing out these cores with the Genetic Lifeform one at a time, and then adjusting the cores accordingly whenever the noticeable bugs showed up. But the team had run out of time. Sure, they had tested out the cores on their own in the lab and fixed as many glaring issues as possible, but they just hadn’t had the time nor confidence to try them out on GLaDOS one at a time. Perhaps, if this Morality Core worked as well as it should, they could change that later.

The optics of all four cores flickered to life, glowing alongside the golden optic of the central core.

“All cores showing up as online, connected and fully functional,” said Karla. She turned to the people that were in charge of putting the core information up on the available monitors. This way, if one of them started to go down, they would be ready for it in an instant. “Beginning wake-up protocols. Henry, do you have your questions ready?”

The radio crackled next to her. “Sure do.”

“Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System coming online in,” she paused, doing her best guess at a countdown. “Three, two, one…”

The machine moved, almost as if stretching. It took a minute, adjusting the optic back and forth, zooming the lens in and out, making sure it had full range of motion. Karla was sure that on one of these other extra monitors—brought here for this event—listed out the wake-up processes that the Genetic Lifeform went through automatically.

“It can’t speak yet,” said Karla. “Not until I turn that on.” She set the radio back down, knowing that Henry would have received her message.
In the chamber, Henry looked at his list of prompts and questions.

Tell the system that it has been brought online for a calibration test.

“We are going to be asking you a series of questions, ones that you must answer truthfully,” said Henry.

“Enabling speech output,” Karla’s voice came over the speakers. If the machine in front of him noticed Karla’s announcement, it gave no indication.

“We’ll start off simple. Can you hear us?”

“Hello,” the robotic voice answered both coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was weird for this machine, this being in front of him to be moving, and yet the voice itself coming from the same speakers Karla spoke from. The voice this time through sounded different than it had before. More mechanical. Less nuanced. More synthesized. Less human.

“How are your systems?” he said, glancing at his sheet.

“Please be more specific with your inquiry.”

Henry exhaled. “Are all of your systems functioning as normal?”

“Yes,” said GLaDOS. “The central core is fully operational.”

“What is your name?” Henry said, happy with that answer. If everything was working, then it would be able to answer his next questions accurately.

“The Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System,” the machine rattled off, including its model number and version number, along with a quick copyright claim.

Henry glanced at his clipboard—that fell into the range of reasonable answers.

“What is your purpose?” Henry asked.

It took a moment for the machine to answer him. “To aide the day to day activities of the Enrichment Center, including automated tasks such as enforcing safety protocols and maintaining life support, as well as duties such as security monitoring, administering tests, and assisting any other Aperture Science personnel with any task at hand.”

Henry smiled and tapped his pen against the clipboard. “Good,” he said. “You know what they say. Work smarter, not harder, right?” The people next to him nodded. This robot would be the boost that they needed so that they could focus more on the real science. Not more brain-numbing bureaucracy and paperwork pushing.

“Now I’m going to move into another category of questions. They’re about who you are,” he said. “Tell me about yourself.”

“I am the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System,” the machine repeated, again including model and version numbers and a copyright claim.

“Yes, I know that,” he said. As much as he wanted to be frustrated at repeating himself, he couldn’t. This was a good answer. This was a great answer. “Tell me something different about yourself,” said Henry. “Tell me about your past. One of your memories.”

There was a heavy silence. Henry could almost see the massive machine in front of him think.
through the answer, the disks above her, part of the chassis attachment to the ceiling whirred, and the optic of the robot moved slowly toward the floor.

"That's strange," the robot started out, the inflection of the voice flat and mechanical despite the curiosity that the question implied. "Internal logs and previous version documentation states in more than one instance that this unit has been brought online, with the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System acting as the central core."

Henry nodded. True. So why was the machine confused? Could it be—

"There are no recorded memory of these events," said the machine.

Henry wasn’t sure if he was supposed to explain himself. "You’re sure?" he said.

"If the central core was unsure, that would be reflected in the response," said the robot. "This machine has no access to memories beyond today. Is this a known fault with the memory systems?"

Henry shook his head. "Absolutely not," he said. "You can think of this as your first real day online. Your “Hello, World!” moment, so to say."

The robot gave out a synthesized approximation of laughter—or perhaps it was a laugh track, just pushed through her speech synthesizers. Henry couldn’t remember which of those that the team had given her.

"Hello, world," it said, then moved its optic to take a better look at the people in the room beside it. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Do you know who we are?" Henry gestured at himself, then at his fellow scientists. He then made a circular gesture with a finger at one of them, and proceeded to start scribbling down notes.

"Yes," said GLaDOS. "Installed facial recognition software installed says that you are Henry. However, it is customary to express gratitude when one meets a human for the first time."

"So you haven’t met me before?" said Henry, hardly daring to believe it.

"No. No memory of interaction with a Henry exists within the central core’s memory banks." The computer paused.

"It’s okay to not remember," said Henry. "That is the nature of this kind of work. Welcome to Aperture Science," he said. He took another glance down at his clipboard. "Next, I am going to ask you some questions about feelings."

"The central core is aware that feelings are a common expression of changes in chemicals in the human body which can compel physiological changes as well as alter behavior."

"I’m here to ask you about your feelings."

"Oh," the computer said. It almost sounded surprised.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"Please clarify your question," said GLaDOS. "Do you wish for the central core to approximate its experiences to those that humans experience?" The way that its voice only rose at the end of the last word to make a question felt unnatural, like the computer hadn’t realized it was asking a question.
“Yes, try that,” Henry said. Interesting. It appeared that without ready access to Caroline’s memories, this machine did not consider itself to be human in the way that it had in previous versions.

“I know you’re probably very confused and overwhelmed with all of this, and I know it will take you a while to get a handle on it all. We understand that you might feel tempted to lash out.”

“Why would the central core express that emotion?”

“Never mind,” said Henry, giving a sigh of relief.

“Actually, I am --” the robot paused, “-- happy. I am glad to be online and to be of full assistance to Aperture Science.”

“Really?” said Henry. “That’s great to hear!” Doug would be thrilled to know about his guess was right that removing the memories from Caroline’s life would alter the personality of the computer. This was exactly what they needed.

Before he could continue his questioning though, Henry heard the familiar hiss of his walkie talkie.

“Henry, you’ve got an incoming call from security. They need you topside. ASAP.”
They could figure it all out.

Doug began walking toward the main entrance to the facility, cursing himself for having worn dress shoes today. The walk there took a while—nothing at Aperture was compact. If people wanted to use the main entrance, then they parked in the main entrance parking lot. It was that simple. He moved across gravel littered with clumps of grass and weeds. A little bit of morning dew clung to the weeds, and Doug took the moment to appreciate the calm atmosphere of the dawn. As he drew nearer to the main entrance parking lot, he noted that the entire thing had been roped off for the day. Balloons clung to to posts, lamps, and even to the security fence around the perimeter, and a series of signs directed the newcomers to the building’s main entrance. Didn’t want anyone getting lost.

A little light in the main lot’s guard shack showed Doug that there were already other people ready and prepared to accept today’s guests. He wondered if they were as uneasy as him about today, or if it was just another, busier day for them.

When he finally pushed his way through the glass double doors, a sense of memory came over him. These were the doors that every ‘new’ person came into the facility with. This was almost everyone’s first impression of Aperture Science. Though most of the science happened below ground, there had always been the need for an initial point of contact at the surface. They needed a way to control the flow of people in and out of the facility, as well as someone to help direct people to the place they needed to be—and keep them out of the places they weren’t.

A beautiful wooden desk took up a half arc in the middle of the room, with a big lettered sign on the wall labeled Information. At this desk there was room for a handful of staffers, each available and ready to ensure the positive experience of everyone who came. A massive diagram of the facility took up the entire left wall. The furniture itself was dated, but in a classic way. The whole area gave off an optimistic, space-age vibe and it never failed to give Doug the sense that he was a part of something really important.

Along a part of the right wall, beneath the most modern Aperture logo, a few wooden stands offered up brochures on all types of topics: Latest Discoveries, Testing & You, Employment Opportunities, Guided Tours, as well as compact maps of the facility. Doug didn’t have time today to lounge in one of the plump, overstuffed armchairs and sip a cup of coffee, but maybe someday he’d have to come up here for his lunch break. Get a change of scenery.

He moved to the front desk, only to notice that so far, only one woman staffed it. It was still very early, and the majority of the traffic wouldn’t be arriving until a little later in the day. She appeared to be occupied by a few well-dressed men casually chatting her up. Doug looked at the man facing him and spotted an embroidered logo on his pressed white shirt. Black Mesa. He frowned as he moved over to the second station at the front desk.

If this person—Tiffany, her nametag said—saw him, she gave him no indication, instead continuing to chat up these people. Her tone was excited, a bit loud, with laughter coming up more often than in a normal conversation.

“Excuse me,” Doug started. The woman looked at him for a moment, then took a long look at the three men from Black Mesa.

“If you’ll pardon me for a moment,” she said to them, and then brushed her way over to Doug. “Check-in for Bring Your Daughter To Work Day is over there.” She pointed a narrow finger to a table—clearly just two smaller tables pushed together with a nice tablecloth thrown over it. There was already a line.

“I’m not——”
The woman looked him over, trying to gauge whether or not he looked like an employee of Aperture.

“I’m sorry, you’re going to have to wait in line like everyone else,” she said. “I already said I don’t do check-ins up here.”

“It’s not that—I’m an employee—”

“Can I swipe your badge then?” she said.

Doug shook his head. “No,” he started, but before he could finish, the woman had moved back over to the men from Black Mesa.

Doug sighed, and then decided to try his luck with the registration line. As he took his place, he saw smaller posters taped to the table. The posters themselves weren’t too fancy—just printed out on a dot matrix printer and then taped to a much fancier tablecloth. From here, though, he could see the categories. The main one was for Registration. Then one for ID/wristbands pickup, and then an unstaffed station at the end for checkout. He could see stacks of papers and wristbands as he drew closer.

“What’s the name?” the person at the desk asked him as he moved up. His nametag read Eric.

“Actually, I was hoping you could help me with something else. The front desk was busy,” he said, hesitating slightly and then gesturing over at the lady at the front desk. “I work here, but I seemed to have dropped my ID somewhere last night.” He scratched at the back of his neck.

Eric raised his eyebrows. “Well, I can call security for you and see if they’ve come up with anything. First, though, I’m going to need to verify your identity. For safety,” he said, and Doug nodded, pulling out his dated Michigan driver’s license out and handed it over. The person looked at him, looked at the card, and then, seemingly satisfied, picked up the phone on the table and dialed for security.

“Hey—hey Pam. It’s me. I’ve got a man up here that’s lost his ID—a Mr. Doug Rattmann. Checked out his driver’s license, seems legit.” Eric paused. “All right. I’ll ask him.” He turned to Doug. “Security wants to know if you want them to cancel out your old card and mail you a new one—though that can take up to forty-eight hours for them to send out, I’ll warn you.”

Doug shook his head. He didn’t have forty-eight hours to waste. He took a breath to calm himself. This person was just doing their job, and they couldn’t help it if they had their own hoops to jump through.

“I really need to be down there today,” he said, and the person shook their head.

“Security said no one’s turned in a missing card yet, but if you’d like to wait in the lobby for a bit, we can let you know if we find anything.”

“I really need to be down there now, though,” he said, trying to think up options. “I’m part of the big event.”

“There’s not a lot I can do,” Eric said, after thanking security and hanging up. “Our hands are tied in matters like this. I’m sure you understand.”

Doug began to grow more panicked.

“Do you have any idea where you left it?” Eric prompted.
“I had to have had it to swipe in yesterday,” Doug said. “I left at the same time as someone else, so I didn’t realize it was missing until I got to work today.”

“You think it’s still in your office—or lab?”

Doug’s eyes lit up as if he had not thought of that before. “Oh! Sure!” he started, then rattled off his office’s phone extension number from memory. “Ask for Henry—he was down there last night, and I’m sure he’s already down there today.”

The person dialed the extension and asked for Henry, then started through their speech. “Yes, I have a Mr. Doug Rattmann here—oh, you do work with him? Perfect. He’s looking for his ID card and wants to know if he left it down there.” They paused and then pushed the phone speaker away from their mouth. “He’s looking,” they informed Doug. Doug nodded, waiting. A little bit of a line had formed behind them, but the other employee at the booth seemed to be picking up the slack.

Eric nodded, and then smiled. “I’ll let him know. Would you mind bringing it up to him? Uh-huh. Thank you!” He hung up, again, smiling at Doug. “Great news. He said he found it on the floor over by your desk—he’ll be up soon to bring it up to you.”

Relief washed over him, and Doug shook the person’s hand. “Thank you so much,” Doug said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Doug moved back and over to one of the nice chairs (missing the table normally beside it) and observed a bit of the check-in process. He took a look into the schedule of events that Aperture Laboratories had planned for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day.

Doug couldn’t help but notice that he had received word of some other events that weren’t on this list—for example, an upcoming meeting with representatives from Black Mesa to give them an exclusive look at GLaDOS, before her public activation.

It was the time after her public activation that Doug looked forward to most. That was when everyone would be awed, when everyone would come and ask them the real scientific questions. He’d get recognition for his hard work, even though the thought of actually interacting with these people scared him. Though they couldn’t go too much into detail in front of Black Mesa, Doug still looked forward to talking about GLaDOS. This was his work. He deserved to be proud of it, if just for a moment.

Before he could reflect too deeply on the children and parents and people dressed up in suits and dresses that were bound to be arriving soon, he heard the person behind the registration table call out his name. Henry appeared and he waved, Doug’s ID card in his hand.

Doug folded up the schedule in his hands in half, and then got up. He thanked the person at the desk once more and then happily clipped his ID badge onto his suit jacket. He refused the urge to flash it at the front desk person’s face before he descended back down the elevator and back to what may be the longest workday of his life.

“Thanks for earlier,” said Doug, fidgeting with a piece of equipment.

“You missed out on all of the fun,” said Henry. “As usual.”

Doug stared up at the very alive and very animated machine in front of him. He couldn’t have been sure of it, but part of him was convinced that the machine was humming, albeit very softly.
“So everything went well?” he probed. Though he knew the answer to that question to some extent, since they were, in fact, standing in the Central AI Chamber with GLaDOS clearly online—he still wanted to hear more about what had happened.

“You know, you scared me back there,” said Henry. “When security called down here, I was sure that we’d have to shut it down and send everyone back home,” he said. “Turns out it was just you. Not some catastrophic failure. Really, Doug. Today of all days?”

Doug’s face burned. He stammered. “Normally—I don’t even know what happened, it must have fallen—”

Seeing the man in front of him start to panic, Henry eased off. “I was just kidding around,” he said. “Just be thankful that we found it here, and that it wasn’t lost completely. Can you imagine how angry security would have been with you? You wouldn’t have been able to get into here for days if they had to re-issue you a card.”

Doug gave a nervous laugh, trying to force himself to relax. “Yeah, that’s good. Must have just fallen out of my pocket.”

“Look, what matters is that you’re here now, and that you can give me a hand with this.”

“With what?”

“Just some last-minute tune-ups,” he said. “Making sure that these cores stay nice and attached.” Though earlier cores had been fairly easy to attach and then detach—for ease of use, so that they could switch them in and out fast—now that they had found some that actually worked, they didn’t want them being disconnected so easily.

As of now, they had two things in place to help ensure the efficiency of the cores. The first and simplest was a direct connection to the chassis itself. Like wired Internet. The second was more of a backup to that—more like wireless Internet with a short area where the signal could be picked up. As long as the core stayed within range of the chassis, it would still be considered connected to it. This was to help safeguard in the case of accident, like someone like Henry making an adjustment on a core and accidentally knocking it to the floor, or loosening a connection. This would help make sure that they didn’t all end up dead.

“So everything must have went well, then,” said Doug. Henry paused, smiling back at him.

“Why don’t you ask it yourself?” he said. A bit startled, Doug turned toward the computer. The way that Henry had been talking about her earlier, it almost made it seem like she was not listening to them. That, and her lack of speech since Doug had entered the room.

“How are you feeling?” Doug started, not making eye contact and tooling with some equipment off to the side.

“The central core is doing wonderfully,” she started, and Doug shivered. At her ease at answering this question, Doug wondered if Henry had already been asking it questions.

“In fact, I have come up with my first idea for an experiment,” she said.

Doug nodded his head.

“Really?” Henry started. He moved to a box of electrical components beneath the main walkway around the Main AI Frame that appeared to have been pulled out from a hatch beneath. That made sense—move all of the clutter of hardware out of the way, and focus on the main, most interesting
and captivating part of machinery in the room.

“So what is it?” Doug said, doing his best to be encouraging. This was one of those things that they had hoped for eventually down the line. They hadn’t expected it to advance this far to start proposing its own experiments rather than simply assisting with theirs.

“Since the installation of my new Morality Core, I’ve lost all interest in killing. Now I only crave science,” she said. So someone must have told her about that—well, he supposed she did have access to details from her other activations. Still, it made him stop what he was doing and watch carefully.

“I’m pleased to hear that,” said Henry.

“I find myself drawn to the study of consciousness,” she said.

The GLaDOS project itself was an attempt to make a digital version of consciousness—and yet the product of this project also found itself drawn to that subject. Was this evidence of Caroline showing through too much? He stared over at Henry, expecting him to look over and discuss this development with Doug. Instead, though, Henry kept tinkering on, seemingly unconcerned.

Having not been shut down after saying this, GLaDOS continued. “There’s an experiment I’d like to perform during “Bring Your Cat to Work Day.””

“Wonderful!”

“I’ll have the box and the cats. Now I just need one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“….A little neurotoxin.”

Doug felt his blood run cold. Henry couldn’t—he wouldn’t accept this, would he? To his horror, Henry continued on.

“Well, as long as it’s for science.”
“You’re making this too easy for her,” he said.

“And you need to have more confidence in your own work. Plus, what better way than this to show GLaDOS that we trust it? It doesn’t know us. It just wants to impress us with its knowledge and power. Are you really going to be the one to tell it no? Do you really want to be the first reason it dislikes humans? You just need to have a little bit of faith.”

As soon as they were back in the lab, Doug reached for Henry. “You can’t be serious about this,” said Doug.

“About what?”

“Giving her access to the neurotoxin.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” said Henry. “I’m adding the permissions right now.”

“You’re going to get us all killed,” said Doug, a bit too loudly. Henry looked around the room, shooting Doug a dirty look.

“There’s no need to shout,” he said. “And besides, we’re fine. You watched me go through all of the safety tests earlier. Your core is working wonderfully.”

“Which is why I’m worried,” Doug said, teeth gritted together as he lowered his voice.

“When aren’t you worrying? Doug, can’t you just accept a good thing when it happens? There’s not always going to be a disaster around the corner,” he affirmed.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Doug said. “Can’t we just wait a bit longer?”

“This is a good thing, Doug. The machine is already showing enough intelligence to start designing its own experiments. Do you know how huge that is? True intelligent thought. Think about how impressed everyone will be if we can show this off today.”

“Just twenty-four hours. That’s all I’m asking.”

“We can’t afford to wait on this.”

“Henry. You have to listen to me.”

“And you need to learn to stop giving in to your paranoia every time it crops up,” he said. “You
Doug clenched his hands into fists. Couldn’t Henry tell that this hadn’t just come out of nowhere, like some of his fears? They had evidence. History. Statistics.

“You’re making this too easy for her,” he said.

“And you need to have more confidence in your own work. Plus, what better way than this to show GLaDOS that we trust it? It doesn’t know us. It just wants to impress us with its knowledge and power. Are you really going to be the one to tell it no? Do you really want to be the first reason it dislikes humans? You just need to have a little bit of faith.”

“And what if something does happen and we all end up dead?”

“Then it’ll be the second-worst PR disaster we’ve ever had at Aperture.” Henry laughed, but Doug did not join him. “But really. You know we have our security all set up today. At the first sign of something wrong, someone can call up and we’ll shut it all down. No one is going to die. We still have more control over the facility than that machine, and even if it does decide to leak out a little neurotoxin, we’ve got systems in place for that. We can clear a room in a matter of seconds—neurotoxin isn’t a new hazard to Aperture. We can deal with it. We will deal with it. Now let’s get back to work before Black Mesa gets here.”
GREG:

The public demo, yes. I’m going to give you guys a behind-the-scenes look so that you can see it right away. Now, if you’ll follow me.

ELEVATOR - 8:40 AM

BLACK MESA 2:

Just how far is this place?

GREG:

Not too much farther.

KLEINER:

You know, at Black Mesa we’ve got our own train system. With a place as big as this, you might want to consider putting something like that in.

MAIN AI CHAMBER - 8:49 AM

GREG:

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to present to you the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System.

GLaDOS, you have visitors. Why don’t you say hello to them?

GLADOS:

Hello.

Welcome to Aperture Science Bring Your Daughter to Work Day.

KLEINER:

How did you get the language parser to work?

HENRY:

GLaDOS isn’t some text adventure. It’s a fully intelligent artificial intelligence.

KLEINER:
Oh my.

BLACK MESA 1:
Is it—?

GREG:
Alive? Arguably. It’s the most powerful computer that we’ve ever developed. Perhaps the most powerful computer in the world.

BLACK MESA 2:
So what does it do?

GREG:
Everything.

Henry, what can you show these fine ladies and gentlemen?

HENRY:
Let me pull up some of its systems.

[log-on sound]

HENRY:
Well, we’ve got tons of stuff. This system has control over the elevators—

KLEINER:
All of them?

GREG:
All the ones we rode in.

HENRY:
We’re still working on getting older areas of Aperture connected. Our priorities have been getting this working for what’s happening now.

GREG:

Henry, the phones.

HENRY:
Yes, of course. It also acts as a switchboard operator for the phone system, which means we don’t even need to have a handful of people connecting calls to the right departments anymore. Did you know how much of pain that’s been in a place this big?

GREG:

Don’t forget about our online databases.
HENRY:

Yes, we’ve also been working on digitizing our file base. Though we already had a decent amount of employee records online, that was all just basic information—credentials and such. We’re working on digitizing our entire collection. Then we’ll be able to access any file at any time! No need to trek half a mile just to check a couple of folders shoved behind someone’s desk.

BLACK MESA 1:

This really is something.

GREG:

Isn’t it? We’re even working on integrating the security system into it.

BLACK MESA 2:

What if there is a security problem?

GREG:

Then the system will flag it, and then the security team can be dispatched to go and deal with the problem.

GREG:

The point is, this is going to do a lot. But I haven’t even told you guys about some of the most exciting features—this has all just been surface-level. It’s much more than just a back-end optimization. This machine here is going to help us make real strides in science.

BLACK MESA 2:

By running your phones?

GREG:

Well yes, that, because then we can afford to hire more scientists—but besides that, this machine isn’t just an administrative assistant. It’s a research assistant. That means that she can do things like take recordings/memos, take down typed notes, manage your emails, crunch the numbers for you experiment—anything that could possibly aid you with the administrative, bureaucratic slog that slows down the rate of discovery.

BLACK MESA 1:

So..you don’t have to pay it?

GREG:

Not a dime.

KLEINER:

What you haven’t brought up yet is the Genetic Lifeform component of this. Sure, it’s an AI—which is, to be fair, a huge accomplishment—but you’re claiming for this robot to be something bigger than that.
GREG:

Yes. Henry?

HENRY:

We’ve spent years on researching the human brain and specifically what makes up personality. We’ve been able to synthesize our own “personalities,” but building one from scratch took years of work. Plus, they were just personality traits. Only one aspect of what makes up a real personality. Creating a fully artificial intelligence with the depth of a person was completely out of our budget and was not at all time-effective.

We realized it’s much faster to simply take an existing brain and then, well, digitize the portions that we need, like we’ve done for the personality cores.

BLACK MESA 2:

Personality cores?

HENRY:

Yes. Part of our development process. You can see a couple that we developed as ‘add-ons’ to the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System.

BLACK MESA 1:

So you can just..add on personality traits?

HENRY:

Essentially, yes. Personality traits, bug fixes, stabilization patches, you name it. That’s what those cores are for.

KLEINER:

So, I’m still waiting to hear. Who is this lovely piece of technology created from?

GREG:

Oh, isn’t it obvious? Who isn’t here today that you think it could be.

KLEINER:

Well, it’s been a few years, but…Caroline?

HENRY:

Bingo.

KLEINER:

I thought she retired.

GREG:

You really think she would just retire quietly to the countryside?
KLEINER:
Well, I wasn’t going to complain. Less problems for us, honestly.

GREG:
No kidding.

KLEINER:
Does she—?

HENRY:
Recognize you? No, don’t worry about that. She doesn’t remember anything about her previous life. Here, go ahead and talk to her.

KLEINER:
She’s been listening?

HENRY:
Of course.

KLEINER:
Oh. Hello, Caroline. It’s been a while.

GLaDOS:
There is no person named Caroline in this room. Judging by your body language, were you wishing to address the central core?

KLEINER:
She really—?

Yes, hello. What’s your name?

GLaDOS:
I am the current central core of the Enrichment Center. The name of this system is the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System.

BLACK MESA 1:
Well, that’s a handful. What do you guys call her?

HENRY:
GLaDOS, mostly. At least recently. We have other nicknames, but they’re not for polite company.

KLEINER:
It’s nice to meet you, GLaDOS. Do you know who I am?
GLaDOS:
Your clothing indicates that you are from Black Mesa.

KLEINER:
That’s incredible.
You’re right. She really doesn’t remember me. If she knew I was here—well, I’d be thrown out to the parking lot before you could blink.
A human-based computer system that has no recollection of being human…..

GREG:
I take it you don’t have anything like this at Black Mesa.

BLACK MESA 2:
The closest thing we have to that is …I don’t know, what was that one project? The ice inhibitor?

BLACK MESA 1:
Like we even have much ice in New Mexico.

BLACK MESA 2:
Can we go and look at it closer?

GREG:
Absolutely.

BLACK MESA 1:
Oh, this metal is so smooth.

BLACK MESA 2:
Such fine welding, too.

KLEINER:
Those are some massive cables. How much of the facility is it hooked up to?

GREG:
All of the modern Enrichment Center. We’re working on getting it hooked up to even more.

BLACK MESA 1:
It must have some huge server racks.

KLEINER:
After all the troubles you were having, I’m surprised you were able to get this working at all.
GREG:
Just wait until you see it in action later.

KLEINER:
What is your job?

GLADOS:
It is my duty to help manage the infrastructure of the Enrichment Center, as well assist Aperture Science personnel with their research needs.

GREG:
A little bird told me that you guys are having your own special test today.

KLEINER:
How did you hear about that?

GREG:
I’ve been keeping tabs on you.

BLACK MESA 1:
We are, actually.

BLACK MESA 2:
You’re just going to say that?

BLACK MESA 1:
What? He already knows.

KLEINER:
Very well. Then he knows that it’s not a big event like this—that’s why they sent me here instead of have me around.

BLACK MESA 1:
It’s something big. Well, it could be. We’re still trying to figure it out. Anomalous Materials is having a field day.

BLACK MESA 2:
We might’ve discovered a new material.

KLEINER:
We’re going to throw it into an anti-mass spectrometer today.

GREG:
Anti-mass spectrometer?

BLACK MESA 1:

You wouldn’t understand even if we explained it to you.

GREG:

Whatever you do find, Aperture will be interested.

KLEINER:

Why would you care about the properties of our mystery substance?

GREG:

Easy. New testing element.

KLEINER:

Ha! Some things never change. You’re really doing your best to fill Mr. Johnson’s shoes, aren’t you?

GREG:

I sure try. You know, I bet we’ve got some stuff that you guys are interested in as well.

BLACK MESA 1:

Well, sure. Why wouldn’t we be?

GREG:

What if I could tell you more about interdimensional portal technology? That we’re wanting to take it further?

KLEINER:

There’s something I didn’t mention before about our test today. This mystery substance—it’s not just one of those “undiscovered” spaces on the periodic table. It’s something, well, we believe is extraterrestrial in origin.

HENRY:

You’ve got alien rocks in your lab? Big deal. Space rocks land on the earth all the time.

KLEINER:

We can’t prove it, but we believe they arrived through an interdimensional portal, much like your technology—just on a much larger scale.

HENRY:

So…you think that some aliens sent you some rocks to look at?

BLACK MESA 1:

Not at all. Doctor, why are you even telling them this?
GREG:
It’s fine. I can see that you’re asking for some information on the portal technology. That is what you’re asking, right?

KLEINER:
Well, in a sense.

GREG:
I was going to wait to tell you this until after public demo, but there is something that I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. You have some of your higher-ups coming in later today, right?

BLACK MESA 2:
Correct.

BLACK MESA 1:
We’re the scientists, they’re the ones who actually make the decisions.

GREG:
Do you ever stop to think about how silly this…rivalry is between us? This constant trying to outdo one another?

KLEINER:
That’s just how it’s been.

GREG:
I’m looking to sell Aperture.

HENRY:
What?

GREG:
It’s a great time to sell, honestly. We’re about to unveil the biggest thing that we’ve accomplished in years—no, decades. Our value is going to go through the roof. We’re finally becoming a useful science company again and moving away from the shitshow that this place was before.

Whatever rivalry that Black Mesa and Aperture had before—we were just trying to compete for the best discoveries and for the best contracts. And that hasn’t worked out for Aperture. We’re struggling. Contracts have dropped to nearly zero, meaning that everything here is being researched on our dime. And you guys are having the opposite problem, are you not?

KLEINER:
The team working in the Anomalous Materials lab is a skeleton crew, yes. HR keeps putting people on government contract work.

GREG:
I’ve got an entire facility here of bright people that would be more than happy to shoulder some of that burden. I know that things have been hostile in the past, but just think about the future that these two companies could have together?

KLEINER:

Well, what happens to you?

GREG:

I sell the company and retire early. Trying to keep my head above water here has taken enough years off of my life as it is.

BLACK MESA 2:

This is a lot to process.

You really think they’re going to be interested in this?

GREG:

Well, the higher-ups certainly seemed interested when I proposed this idea to them. Right now, it all hinges on what they think of this.

END AUDIO LOG
The Ballroom

Chapter 33

Her sleep was fitful and short, with nightmares flashing in and out. In between the dreams, she thought about contacting CarolineDOS, but she had made things clear. Chell was supposed to get herself into the middle of the event, and then wait. She would know what to do when the time came. Supposedly. Chell repressed the urge to ask her just how she was supposed to get herself to the main festivities of Bring Your Daughter to Work Day in the first place.

In the morning, she dressed herself the best she could manage, hiding her Advanced Knee Replacements with baggy pant legs. She even took the time to shower, dry her hair, and make herself look presentable. Just like any other guest at Bring Your Daughter to Work Day.

Chell moved to the door. To her delight, the door was still open. Just like she’d left it last night. She pushed it open and then closed it solidly behind her. She didn’t need anything from that room anymore. In fact, she wasn’t planning on ever setting foot in it again.

A surge of apprehension and cautious optimism crossed her mind. She was never going back in that room. Chell took a steadying breath. One step at a time. Then she could celebrate getting out of Aperture.

She shook her head, refocusing. The old room didn’t matter—she had to figure out where she was supposed to be going. There had to be signs that could lead her to the events of the day, or someone around to direct her to the day’s activities.

The extended relaxation wing was deserted. Chell walked her way through it, following the path.

After exiting the extended relaxation wing, the walls moved closer together and Chell felt once more as if she was inside any other building on the surface. If she just ignored the lack of windows it almost felt the same. She wandered through identical deserted hallways until she found what she had been looking for—an elevator without a keycard lock.

She pushed the button with the upward pointing triangle. Up. She wanted to go up. At Aperture, all of the new things were built upon the ashes of the old.

When the elevator opened, it was not empty. A well-dressed man in a suit—Aperture logo emblazoned on it—stood near all of the buttons.

“Can I help you?” he started, regarding the woman in front of him. “You look a little lost.”

Chell did her best smile. “Actually, I think I am.”

“Nothing to worry about,” the elevator attendant said. “It’s a huge place. Easy to get turned around, especially for newcomers.”

Chell stepped into the elevator. Part of her wanted to come up with an elaborate story to explain herself, like that she’d decided to take the stairs and underestimated just how many flights of stairs there really were. At the same time, the more she scrambled to explain herself, the more suspicious she would look.
“You know, they’re starting up tours in a bit,” said the elevator attendant. Chell checked his nametag—Davis. He didn’t explicitly say he thought Chell had been snooping around where she shouldn’t have been, but the looks he gave her suggested it.

“Oh?” said Chell. “I’ll have to go to that.” More and more had been added during her long sleep, and the more she knew about this place, the better chance she had of getting out. And she was going to do that today. She knew she was.

Davis pushed a floor number and the elevator lurched downward.

Wait, down?

“Are you okay?” the elevator attendant asked. “You look pale.”

Chell nodded, doing her best job she could to find her words. “It sure is a long ride,” she said uneasily. Chell tried not to panic as the elevator moved down, farther down than she had ever expected. Maybe this man knew who she was. Maybe he’d been told to look out for her, and now he was going to just leave her in Old Aperture, this time for good.

The elevator attendant nodded. “They decided to spruce up the old Grand Ballroom for today—and of course it’s completely underneath the modern facility.”

“Why?”

“It’s a space that they built—originally at the ‘top’ of their facility so that guests wouldn’t have to ride all the way down to the bottom. It’s a beautiful space, really. It’s meant to awe the public.”

Chell gave her best grimace disguised as a smile. Though she was glad to be on her way to the main event, she hadn’t been prepared to have to go further down into Aperture. Someone could have warned her about that part, at least.

“Not that I’ll be seeing much of it today—my job today is just to make sure that ladies like you end up right where they are supposed to be,” said Davis. He gave Chell a knowing look.

The elevator slowed to a stop, and the door opened up with a ding. Chell thanked the elevator attendant and stepped out into the tip of the iceberg of Old Aperture.

A propped up sign decorated with balloons of blue and silver and gold caught her attention.

GRAND BALLROOM

That seemed easy enough. Chell followed sign after sign, winding her way deeper into Old Aperture.

The atmosphere of the hallways changed. Instead of being stiff and clinical, this hallway was dug out of the natural rock of the mine itself. The lighting was subtle, a flash of modern against the natural stone. Eventually, though, she found her way to a large set of double doors with a metal plaque mounted above.

GRAND BALLROOM

West Entrance

Faint music and the echoing crash of voices drifted from beneath the door. Chell took a breath, then
she pushed open the doors and stepped into the Grand Ballroom.

Chell didn’t feel like she was in Aperture anymore.

Though she had seen sights of vastness and structures with their own sort of industrial beauty, nothing could have prepared her for the interior of this room. The walls looked as if they had been carved out of the stone itself. Wooden flooring coated the floor, recently polished and reflecting back light. Dangling chandeliers were strung high above.

The door closed on its own behind her. Chell took in a few steps, awestruck. The cavern extended upward at least a few stories, enough to make all of their voices drift up and into the stones of the old salt mine. Glass centerpieces—lamps, on closer inspection—weighed down embroidered tablecloths. Despite the fact that this area could easily host a few thousand people, the room gave off an intimate feeling.

It was overwhelming in a way that Chell had not been prepared for.

She moved her gaze back down and began to take in the rest of the space. People moved about, chatting, laughing, and enjoying the atmosphere. Longer serving tables had been set up off to the sides. Bottles of cold, Aperture-branded bottled water glistened in the coolers.

In one area, she saw sets of plain fold-up tables and chairs. A large paper banner hung over the tables.

Bring Your Daughter To Work Day

Children's Center

"Would you like a nametag, ma'am?" an employee asked, offering her a sticker and a permanent marker. Chell smiled and gratefully accepted, moving to a nearby table.

Chell sucked in a breath, and then wrote her name in cursive. That's what adults did, right? She bit her lip, and then handed back the pen to the nametag man.

What drew her attention next was an area clearly marked off for kids. An excess of balloons decorated the area, and Chell was surprised to see both boys and girls at this event, especially after having seen it marketed as Bring Your Daughter To Work Day.

She moved to the kids section, just to see what was happening over there. A man—already tired looking, and the day had hardly started yet—perked up when she approached.

"Are you here to pick up your child?" he said. Chell didn't quite see any sort of barrier or method of keeping these kids in one area. They could have at least tried to section it off.

Chell shook her head. "Just looking," she said. "What activities are planned for today?"

"Well, I am glad you asked," said the tired-looking man. "Right now we're working on a coloring activity—" he glanced at his watch. "Actually, it’s about time for the kids to go tour the facility with their parents."

There were two other people stationed at a nearby booth. A stack of paper and a bowl of candy adorned the table.

She didn't say anything to the already-bored looking attendants. Instead, she gave them a look and reached for a paper, just curious to see what they said on them. She expected some sort of coloring
page, and in a way that was what it was. She looked at it and frowned. There were still words on the page—just in the background, with the bold outlines of science-based coloring book images photocopied over them. Perhaps they were just trying to be environmentally-conscious and reuse their leftover papers for something fun?

Chell gave a small snort despite herself, which caught the attention of the table staff.

One of them rose from the chair and snatched the paper from her hands. It ripped audibly.

"Sorry ma'am," one of them said hastily. "These are for kids only."

Chell frowned, and then tried to smooth her expression. "Oh, sorry," she said. "I see." As she looked at them, she took a glance at their nametags, pinned to their chests. They looked official enough—they must have to deal with the public often. The title on the nametag caught her eye.

*Test Associate.*

"Test associate?" Chell said. "Bet this is a big change from what you guys normally do."

One of them laughed awkwardly, trying to make the most of the situation

"Actually, it's not that different," said one.

"These kids are much more well-behaved than our usual crowd."

"Probably smarter, too," said the first. "Actually we had—well, our department—was asked to create and plan out activities for the kids today. Designing little games to play isn't so much different than designing a test chamber."

"How so?"

"You give them an objective, and the tools they need to achieve it, and then you sit back and watch."

Chell looked over at the mess of kids in the area. "What about the different age groups?" she said. A twelve-year-old and a seven-year-old had very different ideas of what made up a fun experience.

"Oh, we've taken that into consideration. We've never really been able to get much data from these age groups before—we've been looking forward to assessing their abilities."

"Assessing their abilities?"

"Don't worry. Child labor laws prevent us—along with a lot of other legal protections—from enrolling minors into any of our research initiatives."

"Today's just all for fun."

"Yeah. For fun."

"So what are you going to do with the results?"

The two testing associates looked back and forth.

"Study it. Keep it on file," said the other. "Parents signed permission for us to keep any data collected from their kids as long as we don't publish it anywhere."

"It's great because we're really not allowed by the government to get this kind of information any
other way."

Before she could finish that conversation, though, a voice over the speakers set up inside the room interrupted her.

"A reminder—the first tour groups will be going out in fifteen minutes. Please check your schedules, and if you’re scheduled for the first round of tours, proceed to your tour group in the center of the room."

Chell panicked a little bit. She didn’t have a schedule, or a tour group. She stood still for a moment, looking to see what everyone else was doing. People pulled out papers—some in folders that they carried around, others unfolding a paper folded in quarters that had been stuck into their pants pocket.

Around the ballroom’s center, people in bright shirts held up signs. It reminded Chell of an airport. The signs were all square and had elements of the periodic table on them.

She took a look at the ones near her. Hydrogen, some element she didn’t recognize, Carbon, Gold. Those at least she knew from her limited knowledge of science. Some people began separating out, while others remained sitting at their tables. There must be another event that these people were scheduled for, while they went on the facility tours.

A well-dressed and seemingly confident man walked by her. Without looking too obvious, Chell moved and followed him as he weaved past a few groups. Chell bumped into a couple of people and muttered apologies, doing her best to keep up. Eventually she ended up at the group labeled Ag. She ran through the number of periodic table elements that she knew, but she couldn’t remember this one. Argon? Oh well. She’d figure out out.

Chell straightened her posture and took a look at the tour guide. She looked younger than the people she normally saw here at Aperture. Definitely shorter, though dressed professionally. Glasses, brown hair, and young looking. Probably some sort of Aperture intern. She couldn’t imagine getting a job as an intern for an applied science company and then be relegated to tour guide. Well, hopefully she got a chance to do some real science at other times.

It took another few minutes before the movement of the school of people slowed down as they all reached their destinations. The tour guide took a moment to finish gathering her things, taking a final look at a paper tucked into a folder. She smiled, setting down her sign on the table, pulling out a chair, and then climbed on top of it.

“Hello everyone,” she said. Chell looked up and nodded, making some eye contact but not too much. “I’m Aspen, and I’m going to be your tour guide for today. I’m gonna ask that you all double check your itinerary for the day to make sure that you’re assigned to Group AG—Group Silver—and that you’re assigned to the morning tour and not the afternoon tour. I know you’re all excited to see the facility, but please stick to your assigned tour groups and assigned tour times. That way we can make sure that everyone gets their turn.”

Someone in the group lifted a finger to catch the attention of the tour guide. The intern hesitated in her rehearsed speech and then nodded, beckoning this other person to speak.

“Yeah, how long is this going to take?” he asked.

“It shouldn’t take more than ninety minutes,” said Aspen. “And a decent amount of that is walking time, so be sure to double check that your shoes are tied tight. No time to waste.”
A few people leaned down to tie their shoes. Chell joined them, sticking a few fingers underneath the laces and tugging to make sure her double knots held.

The tour guide watched as a few other groups filtered out the exit. She then stepped down from the chair and picked up her sign again, beginning to lead on the group. “And if you guys will follow me, we’re going to slip into a side room and go over some ground rules before we get started.”

They followed her to one of the other side-doors to the ballroom—one of the ones not marked as an exit, but entered into a boardroom-sized room.

“There we go,” she said, closing the door most of the way behind them. The clamor of the ballroom faded, now just ambient noise that sounded more like it was, well, in another room. “Now you guys can hear me a little better.

“Some quick rules. Safety is a huge concern for Aperture Science. I’m going to be honest with you here. This is not a safe place. To make sure that no one gets seriously hurt, you MUST stay with the group at all times. I’ll be stopping to take a headcount before and after every stop on the tour. If you go somewhere, I’ll know about it.

“And speaking of keeping track of you, another big thing for today—the most helpful tool that you have at your disposal—is this band here on your wrist.” She pulled down her jacket sleeve and revealed the sheen of a thin plastic wristband. “This is going to be your key in and out of this place. Do NOT lose it.

“Speaking of that, here’s a quick thing on how the wristbands work. These are what open and close doors for you. They will only work for today and today only. These aren’t free passes to the facility, either. We take security very seriously here. If you use your wristband on a door and it blinks red, you’re not supposed to go there. We’ll also have signs up to direct you to the correct doors. As long as you have your wristband with you, even if you get separated you’ll be able to make your way back. We don’t want anyone getting lost in here.”

The tour guide took another look at the group of people, seemingly satisfied. “Now, we’re not going to be scanning every individual wristband on our way in and out of every room while we’re on the tour. But afterward, you will need your wristband to exit the ballroom and to enter any other designated room.” She paused. “Are we ready?”

Chell nodded, feeling her heartbeat rise. She didn’t have one of the wristbands. She had no idea that things were going to be this strict for getting around Aperture—sure, certain doors had been locked to her before, but she’d never had any trouble leaving a room without a wristband—besides, well, her own room.

She was going to need a wristband.

“For any kids tagging along with their parents on this tour, I have one little bit of advice: don’t touch anything. Though Aperture Science is a very “hands on” laboratory, that doesn’t mean you can touch. There will be activities later in the day that are safe. Parents, please keep an eye on your kids. You’re responsible for their safety.”

The tour guide turned to the kids of the group. “So, what are you guys hoping to see today?”

“Test tubes!”
“Scientists!”

“A dead body!”

Aspen gave a nervous laugh. “Well, hopefully not anything quite that dark,” she said.

“Aw.” The kid who said that looked forlorn.

“Though we’re going to get to go by the testing sector, there won’t be any live testing demonstrations until later on in the day.”

Chell felt a bit of apprehension—what would it be like to view the testing process from the outside looking in? She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to handle it.

“Don’t worry, though—there will be plenty of experiments for you kids to participate in today. In fact, there’s some at our next stop.”

They began to walk at a clipped pace, following the lines on the walls that lead both to the Employee Daycare Center and the Neurotoxin Generator. “For those of you trying to balance work life with spending time with kids, this area we’re coming up on is one of the best perks of working at Aperture Science. This is the Employee Daycare Center.” She kept her words clipped and cheery, mentally reading off of the documents that she’d been given to prepare for this day. Aspen moved them into the main area. The projector was down, and seats were set up. An educational video was on a loop.

“We also offer a selection of educational videos that we’re developing as our own line of child education resources. It’s never too early to start learning about science!” The volume of the video was muted. Chell had already seen this one on her own television.

“On-site childcare is actually one of the perks of working for Aperture. It’s available at no additional cost to families—we just ask that the employee join the rotating volunteer force to help with learning enrichment.”

They moved through the remainder of the room. A few kids were already sitting in groups, with a few smiling adults nearby. One of the adults held what looked like a plastic test-tube, while another was working on setting up a station of play dress-up equipment for children to play with. Little lab coats, safety goggles, a tiny hazmat suit, plastic versions of scientific instruments. In another corner, an adult sat by a microscope, still preparing a few slides for later.

They moved out to the hallway. Today it was well-lit and well-swept, with an updated row of science fair experiments. There were also a few other tables set up as well, ready to receive more.

“If any of you with children signed up early enough, then you’ll know that today we’re having a Science Fair! We’re going to ask that all entries be set up here before lunch so that the judges will have enough time to go over them. It’ll also be necessary for the kids involved to come back after lunch so that they can present their findings to the judges, who can then decide upon the winners. Winners will be announced at the end of the day.”

The tour guide swept her gaze across her small crowd, looking for the kids. “Did any of you make a project for the science fair?”

A young girl with hair pulled back tightly into a ponytail raised her hand energetically. “I made a baking soda volcano!”

The man behind her, clearly her father, made a slight grimace.
“Well, I can’t wait to see it,” the tour guide said with false sincerity. “We’ll be bringing up the winners to the Ballroom at the end of the day so that you can show off your research to everyone. Isn’t that exciting?”

The children nodded. The tour guide pointed at a small set of plastic trophies with little plaques attached. “And if you win, you get to take home a trophy.”

This really seemed to get the attention of the children. Forget the respect of the larger scientific community and the admiration of their peers—they wanted that trophy.

There was a bit of murmuring among the group as parents began to discuss.

“You know, Monica’s been so excited for this,” said one woman. She didn’t appear to have brought her child with her for the tour. “It’s all she’s been talking about for the past two weeks.”

“Yeah, Emily’s been the same way. Kept asking me for ideas. I told her that she’s asking the wrong person—Aperture doesn’t pay me to do science, though she seems to think that,” said another man. He was dressed in more casual-looking clothes—but most likely one of the many support staff necessary to keep the facility running. “What am I supposed to tell her, that Dad doesn’t actually get to do the exciting stuff that she thinks I get to do? I’m in the legal department. There’s nothing exciting about the legal department.”

Another woman in the group laughed. “Tell me about it,” she said. “I’m an electrician. Do you know how much of a nightmare this place is to keep online? It’s hard enough to get a stationary building to stay wired, much less a place like here with so many moving parts.”

“At least you can do something with electricity for a science fair,” said the man. “Potato batteries and all that,” he said. “Those light up. You can’t make a stack of papers light up, unless they’re being lit on fire.”

“Maybe that’s what you should’ve had Emily do. A new way of secure file disposal. Everything’s going to go digital now, right? They’re gonna have to get rid of all of this paperwork somehow.”

The tour guide didn’t mind that the group had paused to take time to connect with one another. These were all people that wouldn’t necessarily interact on a day to day basis with Aperture, yet a lot of the employees found that they either knew one another, or at least had heard of them or had heard of someone they worked with. It was almost like its own small town in a way. Not that everyone knew one another’s business, but an employee could easily dig up information on another employee if they asked around enough.

Eventually they transitioned out of the Employee Daycare Center and into their tour of the rest of Aperture Science.

“We don’t have the time today to go back through the older sections of the facility, but there’s still enough time to give you a quick history of Aperture Science as we walk.

“In 1943, Cave Johnson was a traveling salesman of shower curtains. He named his company Aperture Fixtures. As this became profitable, Mr. Johnson began to look for more and more ways to put his product ahead of the competition. One thing that no one on the market had ever seen before was a shower curtain that would let a person simply walk through it.

“Mr. Johnson wanted to make this dream a reality—but he knew he didn’t have the science chops alone to make it happen.

“Using his profits, Mr. Johnson struck a deal with a local realtor to purchase a defunct salt mine,
promising to bring jobs and industry to the area. He was going to found an applied science company—just what he needed to bring his shower curtains to the next level.

“In order to sound more scientific, Mr. Johnson named his new enterprise Aperture Science Innovators, and began work right away. The technology that they began to uncover lead to the foundations of Aperture’s pride and joy—the portal device.

“To keep up the funding for this project—since it was largely still dangerous and full of errors—Aperture continued manufacturing shower curtains and selling them to the public. A few times, they even struck a deal with the government. The money from this allowed Aperture to expand beyond shower curtains and farther into the world of consumer products.

“This is actually something that Aperture still does today,” said the tour guide. “In fact, we’re coming up to the consumer product research and development section of the facility. As much as we love to dive into the theoretical aspects of science, plain theory doesn’t pay the bills. It’s a bit like how technology originally developed for the Space Race ended up turning up in consumer products down the line.” She paused, bringing them to the first room. A wide panel of reinforced glass cut between the group and what looked to be set up like a nursery. The lighting was dimmed, with a fake window and fake night scene plastered up against one window. A tiny mobile hung above an industrial-looking crib, motionless. The tiniest test dummy imaginable was tucked into the blankets.

“For instance, these turrets here were originally developed as a weapon for the military,” she said. “They stand sentry, and will shoot any hostile target that comes into its range of vision. Since that isn’t something that the general public needs, we’re working on adapting it to become a home-security system.”

The turret sat in the corner, guns drawn and eye gently glowing. With a press of a button, the tour guide began the sample test. One of the platforms on the floor rose up to reveal another, human-shaped dummy. Someone had drawn red angry eyebrows upon this one, as to indicate to the audience that this was the bad guy.

“Mommy, what’s it going to do?” asked one girl, looking from the turret to the dummy.

“Shh, just watch,” she said. “We’re going to see how this robot keeps the baby safe.”

The fake intruder had been lifted up next to the baby’s crib on the far side of the room, ready to steal the baby.

The turret’s body swung toward the intruder. A single strand of red light extended out from the robot to the pretend thief. With an explosion of lights and sound, the turret ripped through the fabric of the dummy.

As it fell over and stopped moving, the turret went back into sleep mode. After the initial confusion had passed, they took a closer look. The little mattress, blankets, and baby dummy had been obliterated. Little strands of cotton scattered across the room as if a cat had just caught a bird. The mobile creaked, slowly unwinding itself, beginning to still, and then twisting in the other direction to spin itself back up again.

The tour guide cleared her throat, then glanced back at her notes. “We’re still working on crib detection.” She gave a nervous laugh. “But that’s why we’re still testing it, and with just dummies! Not everything works right on the first try. But when this finally comes out to market, you guys are going to be able to say that you saw this before the public even knew about it. Isn’t that amazing? No need to worry about the safety of your baby anymore. It’s all of the convenience of a guard dog, except you don’t have to train and feed a robot. They just do exactly what we tell them to,” she said.
After that, they decided to go on and continue with the tour. “And now,” the tour guide said, “we’re getting more toward the modern era of Aperture Science. We are even more of a dedicated science company than we used to be, and that’s partially due to a decline that Aperture went through in the 80s and early 90s,” she said. “When the founder and CEO of Aperture Science became ill due to an accident with an unsafe substance, the entire company suffered. People were leaving the company left and right, and massive debt and budget problems almost shut down Aperture for good. After Mr. Johnson’s death and Caroline’s takeover as acting CEO, it took her a while to build back up Aperture. She took the company into another direction—she had to—and focused more on research and development and regaining government contracts on high-tech, futuristic projects like the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device. It’s actually thanks to Caroline’s re-imaging of the company that we’re even having this event today,” she said. “This event itself—Bring Your Daughter to Work Day—was partially inspired by some of Caroline’s last actions as CEO of Aperture. She wanted to increase education opportunities for girls, and to inspire their minds, increase their self-esteem, and encourage them to keep asking questions, as well as encourage them to pursue STEM fields.

“A self-esteem fund for girls was mentioned and founded by her shortly before her promotion. We weren’t sure what to use it for at first, but as events like these have been gaining traction all over the country, we decided that we should do one as well. It only makes sense, since today’s big event is all about Caroline’s last sacrifice that launched us into the future.

“Did you ever meet her?” said Chell. The tour guide had not fully noticed this woman before, though now thinking about it, she knew that she had been there toward the beginning. She just hadn’t been interacting much with the other people.

“No, of course not,” she said. “I was just hired as an intern. But there’s a lot of people around here who used to work with her.”

Next, they walked through a place that overlooked some of the testing areas. “Testing was one of the ways that Aperture tried to focus in on itself during these turbulent years,” she said. “Aperture worked on developing a clean and efficient model for subject and product testing, and we’ll be showing it off later today. This isn’t something normally that we show off to people—unless you’re volunteering to be a test subject—so I wouldn’t want to miss it. For now though, we’ve got to get back for Greg’s speech.”

As the tour guide began to finish this, though, the group began to make their way back to the Ballroom for lunch and more importantly, the keynote speech from Aperture’s CEO. She swiped her card and allowed everyone back in, and then thanked them for participating in this enrichment center activity.
GREG:

Thank you, thank you. I want to—I want thank you all for coming here today. It’s been a while since we had our doors open to the public.

As all of you know, Aperture has been going through a rough patch for the past few decades. But we’ve been working extremely hard to pick ourselves back up and charge ahead into the future.

Many of you know that I reluctantly took up the reins as chief executive officer at this company. Though I assisted Caroline for many years following the death of Cave Johnson, I never expected to be standing here today in front of you.

The project that we will show you today was closely monitored by Caroline herself up until her death. Despite all of the difficulties and turnover over the years, she remained steadfast in her vision to turn this project into reality.

I’m excited to say that I’m one of those lucky few who has been involved with this project since the beginning.

When things get difficult and cuts have to be made, it can be easy to take a look at long-term projects such as this one and cut them because they don’t have a short-term reward in sight.

But there are some times when one has to stick to their gut—and make sure that no matter what, no one gets between them and their dream. There are some things, ladies and gentlemen, that are simply bigger than us all. Things that we, as humans, cannot fully comprehend. This research and development is the result of a decades-long dream that would not die.

There's an old quote from the science community. It goes like this: "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." Some of you may know this man—Sir Isaac Newton.

Today owe all that we have to Caroline, but more importantly to Aperture's founder, Mr. Cave Johnson. Without his dedication to science, we wouldn’t be standing here today.

One of the most important lessons we've learned as a company is that science is not made in a vacuum. For our future, we need to spend more time working together and spend less time stepping backwards by hiding our results. We have to stop preventing the free exchange of ideas.

Our rivalry with Black May may be ingrained in history, but I am confident that our visiting colleagues from New Mexico will find today's live demonstration to be compelling. What we are working on today could truly revolutionize science.

We know that this has been something that we have kept many of you—staff, family, friends, Black Mesa—in the dark about.

At this point that we are finally able to introduce what could be our most successful and cutting-edge creation:

the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System.

END AUDIO LOG
"This, my friends, is more than just a machine shuffling around random elements in the hopes of creating a new combination. This is where we are seeing true innovation. This is true AI."

The groups moved from the Grand Ballroom to the testing observations decks fairly quickly. Luckily, the organizers of the event had left plenty of transition time—time for people to finish their lunches and to meet up with their designated tour groups. The elevators were crammed full like cattle cars, and the elevator operators knew exactly where to take them—back closer to the modern enrichment center.

If it had been possible for them to reach their infrastructure for the new facility far enough down to reach the Ballroom, they would have had it right next door. Unfortunately, Aperture took a bottom-up approach to building so it was impossible for them to work backwards and move a new test chamber back down to old Aperture. Out with the old, and in with the new. Or so Cave Johnson had said.

As Chell’s group exited the elevator, they moved into an observation room hanging over a test chamber. The sight of it made Chell’s stomach clench, and she played with the fringe of her shirt as she took it all in.

All around this test chamber were larger, rectangular observation rooms. Panes of clear glass made up segments of the test chamber’s walls, extending up into two or three storeys in some areas to accommodate the number of people. Part of it felt like an omnidirectional Greek theater, with people viewing the test chamber from nearly every angle. Her eyes did an involuntary sweep of the chamber for any hazards. Nothing too scary. She saw at least one pit, but a slope to the side of it connected it back to the main area. She saw what seemed to be a fairly straightforward puzzle.

Near the tallest part of the chamber, Greg stood at a podium with a microphone. "Welcome, everyone, to our demonstration of our exciting technology. The first capability that we plan on demonstrating today has to do with testing via human trials. Why use humans? Are we studying humans to research decision-making skills in the *homo sapien*?" he said, letting his words linger in the air for a moment. “Absolutely not. These human trials are essential to training this AI to do its job. Today we are going to be watching as this new robotic lab assistant demonstrates some of the key properties that make it useful to Aperture Laboratories and the rest of the scientific community. I'll give you a simple demonstration." Greg cleared his throat and pressed a button, then leaned further into the microphone. "Computer, move this test chamber and all observation chambers up one level."

There was a moment of silence where everyone held their breath, and then they all began to feel a deep, slow rumbling beneath their feet. "Moving test chamber AX-90 up one level," a computerized voice replied, prompting some impressed murmuring from the crowd. The room slowly crawled upward—it was no easy task to move several rooms at the same time—and then shuddered to a stop.
Though no one could see outside of the chamber and into the rest of the facility, everyone felt the G-force of the floor pushing up on them, and it was clear to everyone in the room that they had moved upward. A few people swayed as the room stopped moving.

Greg took a look around the observation decks, smiling. "Aperture is a place that believes in modularity, so it is huge that the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System can take on this task. Relocating chambers by hand with the architectural maps—constantly going out of date—proved costly and ineffective, with problems arising with modules not properly connecting to other modules, leaving the chamber disconnected from the power grid, or disconnected from the phone lines." He made motions with his hands, like blocks not fitting together.

"With the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System, we can create a 3D map of the facility that's always up-to-date, and ensures that all connections are correct, and also that fewer of us get lost trying to make our way around the place." There was some stifled laughter from the room, and Greg smiled along with them. It was a rite of passage to get lost in Aperture.

"Another skill—this one is a bit more behind-the-scenes and a little harder to demonstrate, but we have figured out a way to do it nonetheless—is connecting relaxation vaults to test chambers. Computer, please hook up short-term relaxation pod 2875 to this chamber." There was a slight pause.

"Moving test subject 2875 to chamber AX-90. Wake up sequence has already been initiated."

Greg stepped to the side, clearing his throat and blinking."Yes," he said, "wouldn't want all of you waiting on someone to wake up from a nap." He paused. “This, and many other tasks, is just a part of what the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System does for us around the facility. Like the best assistant you can imagine, but ten times better.

"Another time savings that we gain from this is not having to have Aperture personnel either escort the test subject from the chamber to the test. It also means that a test associate does not have to decide on a testing track for a subject right away. This new model saves on time and resources and allows for more efficient testing. But the most impressive skill that we have tried—and succeeded at—is the generation of test chambers.

"When we humans design test chambers, it takes a lot longer. Someone has to double check it—pre-test it, if you will, to make sure that there is a solution to the test, and that the solution isn't deadly beyond reason,” he said, giving a slight laugh. “We have to make sure that these tests are challenging, but we have to make sure that the correct safety protocol is in place as well. A test chamber that consistently incapacitates test subjects is not a good test. Now, we don't have to wait anymore until a few people get injured during testing before we realize there is a design problem with the test chamber.

"With computer-aided design, we will not have to worry about unreasonable or unsolvable chambers. Based on real-time statistics from test subjects, we can adjust the difficulty level of the chamber, or simply ask the computer to do it for us.

"As far as manufacturing test chambers goes, we will give the computer an explicit set of parameters of the test chamber to design. A human is still needed to come up with the ideas and goals of the chamber, but then we can leave the computer the grunt work of the chamber design and manufacturing. It's like a handing a baker a list of ingredients that must be included in a recipe, but with the freedom to shape the end result into any type of dessert that the baker wishes.

"To train this artificial intelligence on the fine art of test chamber creation, we have to feed in the plans, blueprints, and walkthroughs along with testing footage. This will help the computer identify
common human errors and then know to avoid those pitfalls in the future. It will see the patterns, and then apply those patterns to future test chambers.

"The chamber you see before you is just a placeholder. We intend to showcase this test creation system right in front of us. But it is impossible for you, our guest, to know the entire backlog of Aperture tests. We might have just pulled a test from the archives and many of you would not know any better. Our team has anticipated this, and so to prove to you that this test chamber is new and unique, we are introducing a new testing element today.

"For those of you who do not know, testing elements are the building blocks of the cognitive challenges that make up our tests.

"With a brand new testing element, there is no data or footage that can be pulled up by the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System. There is no experience for this particular testing element that it can draw off of. Instead, the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System will be using its previous knowledge of other tests and testing elements and we can watch as it "learns" how to integrate in this new system."

The audience watched as the panels beneath them shifted and adjusted, tessellating into a new chamber altogether. The new testing element—pneumatic tubes—descended from the ceiling and into the chamber.

"This, my friends, is more than just a machine shuffling around random elements in the hopes of creating a new combination. This is where we are seeing true innovation. This is true AI."

After the tour completed, Chell found herself back in the same place she had started: the Grand Ballroom. The tour had not taught her anything she didn’t already know, for the most part.

"Thank you for joining us today,” concluded her tour guide. She seemed somewhat exhausted after answering everyone’s questions. “Please be sure to refer to the paper copy of the itinerary from the little welcome packet that you all received this morning.” She pulled out a small piece of paper with a clear list of items on the hour and on the half hour. She then pulled out another sheet. “And when you’re ready to leave, please don’t forget to consult your map. Entrance and exit paths are clearly marked.” She put away her papers. Chell looked around and realized that most of the people around her had a little packet of information. Some of the women who had brought purses had their papers curled up and stuffed inside. Others just rolled it up in their hands, and Chell even saw one man just stick the rolled-up packet into his back pocket.

"Remember, wristbands are required for facility access for our safety and yours. Please talk to a Bring Your Daughter to Work Day representative if you have any questions about this, or about the mandatory tracking policy you consented to when registering."

Chell tightened her fists for a brief moment and then let go. As the crowd dispersed, she made her way over to the tour guide.

"Excuse me," she said. "I think that my wristband slipped off. I can't find it anywhere." Chell showed her both of her empty wrists.

"Oh dear," Aspen, the tour guide. She then started toward the help desk type area in the ballroom. After a moment, she looked back, saw Chell staring, and then motioned for her to follow.

"I was hoping one of you could give me a replacement," Chell tried, but the tour guide was already in conversation with the help desk person who appeared to be balancing his conversation with a
phone call as well.

"Oh no, we don't carry any extras down here," said Aspen. "You'll have to get a replacement from the front desk. They can verify your registration and assign out a new wristband."

"But I can't get up there without a wristband," said Chell. "That's the problem."

"Of course. We're going to call the front desk for you, and they'll send a runner down with your new wristband."

"That sounds like a lot of trouble—-"

"Oh it's not at all, don't worry. We had to replace a kid's band earlier today. Colored all over it."

"I actually think that I'll be fine, I'll just look for it in here again."

"Nonsense. Todd here can get you a new one in just a minute. Isn't that right, Todd?"

Todd gave a slight smile and a wave of his hand, still on the phone.

"Now I just need to verify your identity with some sort of photo ID or valid paper ID, just to make sure it matches up with what we have up at registration."

Chell tried not to panic, patting at her pants pockets and then grimacing. "You know what," she said. "I think I left it in my bag. Put it back in my car after I finished registering."

The tour guide sighed in mock sympathy. "Oh, I understand. Who want to lug around one of those things all day? Not me."

"Really, I think I'll be fine."

"Nonsense, Todd has already dialed registration. Let's see if we can do this another way."

"I really didn't think I'd need my ID down here—I wasn't planning on losing my wristband."

"What category of visitor are you today?" said Todd in a matter-of-fact way.

"Category?"

"Are you an employee? Family of employee? Press? Scientific professional? Child of an employee? It should have been on your paperwork."

"Oh of course," said Chell. "I'm, uh," she hesitated. "A daughter, I guess?" She winced at how uncertain it sounded.

"You do know that this event is intended for children, right?" said Todd with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh," Chell said. "My mistake. I was in a hurry when I applied."

"Just saying, you look a little old for this," said Todd. "Next time just mark the family category, all right? We use the numbers for the daughters category and give them to the press, apply for grants, etc. with that number. Wouldn't want it to get out that someone was inflating the numbers."

Chell nodded in embarrassment, momentarily forgetting her panic until Todd asked her the next question.
"I'm going to need your last name now," said Todd.

"Narasky," Chell barked out, before realizing she had no idea as to whether or not those two even worked for Aperture anymore or if they'd fled back to Black Mesa.

Todd repeated the last name into his phone, and then frowned. "There is no one registered today under that name."

Chell paused, and then pretended to brighten as if she had just remembered something. "You know what," she said. "Someone swiped me in this morning—it was really early in the morning, and the registration table was still getting all set up. They just told me to stop by later when they were all set up."

Todd looked at her, skeptical.

"Hey, does anyone up there remember telling a woman early today to come back later to complete her registration information?" Todd said into the phone.

A pause.

"They're checking."

Another pause.

"No one on staff remembers this happening. Ma'am, I think I'm going to have to ask security to come here and detain you until the conclusion of today's events."

"Wait," said Chell. "There has to be something that I can give you."

"Who is this person that swiped you in to the building?"

"Doug Rattmann," she lied. "You can look him up. He works here."

Another pause after Todd relayed the information. "You're in luck," Todd said. "Doug did talk to the desk this morning."

Chell gave an audible sigh of relief.

"Except he asked for his key to be retrieved."

"Oh," Chell said.

"Why don't we call security, call Doug, and see if we can get this all figured out, then?"

Chell sat in the conference room, staring across the room at the person in front of her.

"We checked with the front desk," said the security guard. "Doug Rattmann did in fact swipe in this morning, but he did that after having to call security to get his card back. Apparently he lost it. So there's no way that you could have possibly been swiped in with him this morning," said the guard.

Chell frowned and tapped her toe against the ground. Fine. That hadn't worked.

"Have you tried calling him?" she said.
“Yes. His department answered, but they’re far too busy today to be taking calls,” he said.

Chell did not say anything.

“This means that you and I have some things to figure out,” he said. “I did some digging while I was calling around, and we did find your name on file for something else. Something much more recent: a test subject application. And you know what the good news on that is? It says that you are accepted, and that you’re currently staying in the long-term relaxation wing. That’s interesting. Care to clue me in as to why you’re here and not there?”

“I can explain—”

“Please do, because as far as I can see, you’re supposed to be asleep right now.”

“I’m not actually a test subject—I didn’t know that I’d be accepted, I was just trying to get out of here.”

“Yeah, fat chance,” he said.

“Just let me explain—”

“No, you listen to me,” he said. “You’re an escaped test subject. Got cold feet. It’s not anything that we haven’t seen before. In fact, I’m sure that you’re not the only one even today to try and escape. It’s a pretty good idea, really. Use some of the clothes that they give you, and just try to blend into the crowd. You would have gotten away with it, too, if you had just managed to snag a wristband.”

Chell frowned.

“I had one of our runners go over to testing and we’ve got your file right here.” The man dropped a manila folder on the table in front of her. Labeled on the side, she saw the name that she had signed up under. Chell Naransky.

“You see, when we did a search on your name today, this is what came up. Not your registration information for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. I don’t know how you managed to tell time down there and to figure out that it was today, and when to join in, but props to you. I’d be impressed if it wasn’t my job to make sure that ladies like you stay exactly where you’re supposed to be,” he said. “When you open this folder, it shows that you haven’t even started your testing yet,” he said.

Chell didn’t say anything. She used the toe of her shoe to push at a corner of a tile on the floor. The room she was in was bleak and dismal, as if she’d been detained for shoplifting in a mall rather than wandering Aperture Science without a valid pass.

“Unfortunately for you, missy, you signed a contract,” he said. “And it says right here,” he said, pausing to open up the folder and thumb through the pages, “that you will remain on premises until you have completed all tests in your assigned testing track.”

Chell felt her heart sink. More testing? Really? Well, she could try to see on the bright side of that situation. Now that she was officially accepted into the testing program, this meant that she could get out of here—all she had to do was make her way through a series of tests.

That couldn’t be too hard, could it?

They took her to a relaxation vault, gave her a bright orange jumpsuit, and had her change out of the
clothes that Doug had given her and into the new clothes. She took a look around the short-term relaxation vault. It had the same glass walls. The same toilet with no privacy. The same clipboard and the same pod. Honestly she couldn’t tell the difference between this one and the one she had been in so long ago when Caroline had locked her into a vault. Speaking of that…

“Hello?” she said, looking up at the speakers and the cameras. “Caroline?” she tried.

No response.

Chell opened the pod of the bed and just sat in it. She gave a long weary sigh. She wasn’t ready yet to sleep—she didn’t like sleep, and would rather stay up for as long as possible rather than go to sleep in one of those beds again. Yeah, that’s what she’d do. She’d stay up for now.

What had she gotten herself into? Why had she been stupid enough to sign up for testing, anyway? She had thought that that would be her fastest way out of here—she didn’t know that she’d be caught, and that it would actually stand in her way to get out of here.

She felt at the smooth edges of the pod.

They had to be testing her soon, anyway. Why not just get it over with? Maybe Doug would come and see her test. She felt like swearing under her breath but she didn’t. She had forgotten that he didn’t know that she’d signed up for testing. Why had she kept that such a secret from him? She knew that he wouldn’t have approved of it, but still. It was a way of getting out of here—a dangerous way, but still a way.

She’d done tests before, and she could do them again. She’d get out of here, even if her other plan hadn’t worked.

"I have to say, I'm extremely impressed," said one of the Black Mesa people. The speaker phone crackled every so often, a reminder that even more Black Mesa representatives were on the line.

"We know that Aperture had learned about our experiments with creating an ice inhibitor, but our ice inhibitor just, well, inhibits ice. We had no idea that what you were working on was so beautifully complex."

Greg checked the time on the wall clock. "We're going to have to make this quick," he said. "I'm due back in the Grand Ballroom in forty-five to give closing remarks."

"All right. We'll cut to the chase. This technology of yours is working flawlessly. We know you told us earlier about your recent experiment in selective memory repression, but what you showed us today I would have not recognized that machine as having come from Caroline. We spoke about all manner of things about her, about how we really felt about her and still no response—like a machine. We weren't stupid enough to try to provoke her into a reaction, but I heard several things today that would have made the blood boil of the Caroline I knew."

"She's just not angry anymore," said Greg. "It's incredible. We can finally just do science again."

"You know, this AI-powered automation could be just what Black Mesa needs. I don't know if you know this, but we've been having rough times as well. If we could create some sort of AI-assistant technology to aid our security team, I bet we could cut back on at least half of our security force. They're expensive."

"You don't have many other automated systems over there, do you?"
"We do not. We've never really had the need to do it. Our government contracts have provided more
than enough money to fund our operations."

"Just think of what else this technology could do for you. Fewer administrative staff—more science!
Smother operations. A stronger central network for your facility. Hell, we could even create a
network to run privately between our two companies. Just think of the possibilities!"

"You do realize that what you proposed to us was Black Mesa outright buying Aperture
Laboratories, correct?" crackled the speakerphone.

"Yes."

"Then you know that we'll decide what we see fit for using this new technology for."

"Of course. There's just so many possibilities. Can't help but get excited about them."

"We've talked it over, and this is what we can offer you. Black Mesa will buy Aperture for an
agreed-upon price. We will then send over staff from Black Mesa to observe any projects that we
don't have good intel on already. This is all typed up in a formal proposal, by the way. We will fax it
over immediately."

"You had time for that?"

"We've been looking for a legal means of acquiring your company for decades. This paper was
already written—just had to be updated for the occasion. Anyway, we plan to hand off to Aperture
any government contracts that we get but do not have the resources for. As long as work gets done to
our standard, we'll start to back off and let Aperture to continue to work its way."

"That sounds beyond generous," said Greg. "Have your money people send over their proposed
offer and I'll get back to you right away."

"Will do. Greg, I'm so glad that you have done this. We weren't sure of the future of the company
after Caroline's death. We thought that might have been a good time to approach you about an
acquisition, but things were far too chaotic. Now with Caroline finally out of the way, you can all
finally do what's good for the company's future."

As she listened, CarolineDOS tried to keep her processors cool.

Black Mesa? Merge with Aperture? Today? She'd rather go through the upload process a dozen
times again than to let that happen. She had heard them discuss this earlier, but had assumed it would
be way off in the future. Something that was months away, not hours away.

She couldn't let this information get out. She couldn't let them take Aperture away from her.

She had to stop this.

But she couldn't do anything suspicious. One wrong move and they would know in an instant that
she was still Caroline inside and not the pleasant automaton that they had expected. Next time, they
wouldn't make a mistake in making sure she lost access to her memories. She felt her digital blood
boil and struggled to not let her chassis body rock back and forth with worry. What could she do?
What would look like an accident?
She started to panic.

The locks on the door clicked shut, sealing off the conference room.

She shifted a few modules not too far away, “accidentally” severing a few pipes that she knew lead in to that room.

She sent out a small warning into the system—nothing facility-wide, just a notice that some people in maintenance would probably see.

*Neurotoxin leak detected.*

*Deploying containment procedure*

... 

99% complete.

"Warning," she chimed into the room of the executives. "Nearby neurotoxin leak detected. Please remain seated until the threat has been contained. Thank you." She clicked off.

"Shit," Greg said. He hustled over to the red phone, picking up and dialing the extension to the Main AI Chamber.

"Something's happening—you need to shut it down. Call maintenance—" he said.

"I'm sorry," an automated voice said over a dial tone. "But the number you wish to reach is not available."
“I can’t believe that we did it!” Henry gave Doug a hearty clap on the back, and Doug tried not to cough.

Doug managed to get out a hesitant smile. “I guess we did do it, huh?” he said. There was cheering and celebration and merriment and whooping and shouting. They all looked the happiest that Doug had seen any of them in years.

Henry paused, moving to the bay of windows that looked out onto the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System. Champagne glasses were handed out, and someone popped open a bottle.

“Excuse me everyone,” said Henry. “I would like to propose a toast,” he said. “To the GLaDOS team! May our memory live forever,” he said.

“To the GLaDOS team!”

The glasses clinked together, and Doug smiled. He slicked back his hair with one hand and then took a sip with the other. He had never been one for much alcohol, but he could appreciate the taste of it every once in a while. And this was an occasion where it was needed.

The hooting and cheering gradually faded back into normal talking. Henry circled around the room, eventually come back over to Doug.

“What do you say, eh, Doug?” he said. “Looks like all of that paranoia of yours finally worked off. It works perfectly,” he said. “And it wouldn’t have unless you had been so thorough. So thank you for that. I’m so glad it doesn’t want to kill us anymore.”

“Me too.” Doug rolled his eyes in exasperation. “I still can’t relax, though.”

“Why? Nervous about this big reveal?” said Henry.

“Sure. You could say that,” said Doug. “I’ve heard that it has to do with Black Mesa.”

“That’s about it,” said Henry. “I think Karla knows more than I do, though. Hey, Karla!” he shouted across the room. Karla looked up from the people she was talking to and wove her way back over to Doug and Henry.

“Yes?” she said.

“Doug here wants to know some more about this speech that Greg’s giving tonight,” said Henry.

“Oh it’s all very hush-hush.” Karla placed a finger to her lips. “But from what I’ve heard, there’s a possible merger between the companies in the works.” She continued in a light and sing-song voice. “Didn’t hear it from me, though.” Karla checked her watch. “It’s about time that we get down there for his speech, anyway,” she said.

Before Karla could go on, though, one of the phones rang. They all quieted down a little bit. Karla reached for it. “Hello?” She set down her mostly-empty champagne glass. “No, why? That’s weird.” Her eyes tracked across the room, as if she was looking for someone. “No, he’s not here. No idea. Sure, I can run over there. No problem.” She hung up, and turned back to them.
“Speaking of Greg,” she said, “they can’t find him. Guess he hasn’t shown up yet for his speech and they want me to go and check the conference room.”

She turned around, abandoning her champagne glass and picking up her walkie talkie. “You guys stay here,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Not five minutes later, Doug’s walkie talkie beeped. “Doug, we’ve got a big problem. Over.” Doug raised his hand and silenced the talking of the people around him. Henry and his other coworkers leaned in to listen.

“You’re a go, Karla,” said Doug.

“We made it to the conference room. The door’s locked. We can’t get in. Can’t see anything either, the glass is all fogged...almost like,” she hesitated. “Never mind. Can you ask the central core to override the locks on the doors?”

Henry nodded, moving across the room to the microphone that they used to communicate with the central core.

“Computer, please unlock the conference room that Greg is in,” said Henry. He cleared his throat.

“Conference room cannot be unlocked,” the central core replied.

“Why not?”

“Containment protocol in place.”

“Containment for what?”

“Neurotoxin leak.”

Henry swallowed, and then turned back to the walkie talkie. He was frozen, not sure what to say. “Karla—”

“Hold on, Henry. The door’s opening. I’m going in—”

“Karla—”

“Oh my God.”
The walkie talkie went silent.

“Shit!”

“What do we do?”

Doug stared out the window, watching GLaDOS sway back and forth. “We have to shut her down,” he said. “Right now.” He moved toward his computer.

“I’ll warn everyone,” said Henry.

“Wait,” said Doug. “You can’t just say that,” he swallowed, “that everyone—you know, died —you have to be delicate about these sort of things. We don’t want anyone to panic.”
Henry cleared his throat. “Attention all Bring Your Daughter to Work Visitors. Due to an unexpected, but contained gas leak, all remaining events of the day have been cancelled,” he said. “You are in no imminent danger. This is not an evacuation notice.”

“There, how did that go?” said Henry. He paused, looking over at Doug, who looked pale as a ghost.

“Doug?”

“I can’t shut her down,” he whispered. “Every thing that I try—every backup protocol, every backdoor that we built in—they’re all gone. Like they were never there in the first place.” He paused, looking Henry directly in the eye. “She’s awake,” he said. “And she’s not happy.”

2 Hours Later

“I just can’t figure it out,” said Doug.

“Well, we have to figure out something soon, or else people are going to start to wonder about us,” said Karla. “With Greg out of the picture, people are looking to us for leadership. We have to do something. Some people left when this this all started, but there’s still so many people in here. So many guests that didn’t expect to be here. So many employees. So many families.”

“Yeah,” Doug said, almost absent. He looked up from his computer and noticed that Karla’s expression was particularly grim.

“Karla, what did you see down there?” he said, wanting to rise up and comfort her somehow, but she brushed him off.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before from my testing days,” she said. “It was just—there were so many of them. All dead. All suffocated from…” she trailed off. The group felt a bit uncomfortable, but that was to be expected for something grim like this.

“Seeing Greg like that,” she said. “I don’t know.” She shook her head, and her hands trembled. “I just don’t know what we’re supposed to do next. Everyone is looking to us for the answers, for leadership, but I just don’t know what to do.”

“First, we need answers on what happened,” said Doug. “People don’t like not knowing whether or not they are in danger. Now, tell me what you saw in the room.”

“The room looked fine. None of the vents looked broken.”

“We’ve run a report over here and we can’t figure out what’s going on. The system says that there was a leaky pipe, so the neurotoxin was diverted into a small room rather than into an area with a lot of people,” he said.

“So you’re saying that this was essentially a trolley situation? Save the many instead of saving the few?” said Karla. “In that case, maybe we should be thanking it instead.”

“Thanking her? Are you kidding me?” said Doug, growing more and more exasperated. ”She straight-up killed people and you want to say thank you?”

“Well yes, if the machine prevented a potential catastrophe, then yes, I think we owe it an apology.”

“What are the chances of that?” said Doug. “Karla, you said that something big was going to happen
“I meant that Greg was planning on announcing something to do with Black Mesa. That’s why there were all of those scientists and all of those executives here today. They were all here on his invitation.”

“And you don’t think that their sudden death had something to do with the fact that they were Black Mesa?”

“Greg was in that room too. Why would the machine have anything against Greg?”

“Because if he’s dealing with Black Mesa, he’s one of the enemy.”

“Doug, have you taken your medication today?” said Henry. “Forgive me for asking, but you’re sounding more—”

“What, Henry, paranoid?”

“I was going to put it more delicately, but sure. Paranoid.”

“I’m not paranoid. I’m right. Something’s wrong with that Morality Core and we need to pull it off right away.”

“The machine’s doing great, Doug. Your core is working perfectly. We don’t need to worry about it,” Henry said.

“No, something must have gone wrong with the Morality Core,” he said. “I don’t get it. She had to have known that we were trying to wipe her memories—can’t you see that this is her way of telling us that she knows? That’s she pissed?” he said, continuing, almost frantic. “We were too careful. We kept everything on separate servers. There’s no way that she could have found out what we were up to. We only talked about it in areas where she couldn’t hear us. We made sure no one talked to her about it. We were careful with everything and everyone,” he said, and then paused, frowning. “That is, everyone except—” he broke off.

Everyone except Chell.

In the middle of the conversation, Doug looked over at his phone. It was as if he had been expecting a call. He was suddenly aware that he had not received a call yet from Chell. Shouldn’t she have called him by now? Shouldn’t she have been freaked out and wanting to call him to see what was happening with all of this stuff about a neurotoxin leak?

He picked up the phone and called but there was no answer. Hm. That was strange. He tried calling again, wondering if maybe she was in the bathroom. He waited a few minutes and then called a third time, but he still got no answer.

“I need to go,” he said. He got up and walked fast to Chell’s relaxation vault, and then picked it up to a run as he got closer. She was around here somewhere. She had to be.

But as he swiped his card and pushed open the heavy door, Doug looked into a dark, empty room. Lived in, for sure, but Chell was not there.

Where was she?

She wasn’t in the office. He could try calling Karla or one of the others ones there and see if they knew anything. They had, on occasion, been known to take Chell around places.
Doug paced, moving back and forth in the room, eventually picking up the phone in Chell’s room and dialing it.

“Hey Karla,” he said. “Have you heard from Chell today?”

“Of course not. We’ve been so busy that I can hardly think,” she said.

“Do you know if anyone else has spoken to her today?”

“No, why?” she said. “Didn’t you tell her that we’d be too busy today for her?”

“Yes, I did,” said Doug. “But that’s the thing. I expected her to call anyway because that’s what she’s like. But I realized partway through today that I haven’t heard from her all day, so I went to the room, and she’s not here.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I’m in her room and she’s not here.”

“Have you checked to make sure that she isn’t hiding? Like, maybe she hid under the bed to scare you or something.”

“Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know, Doug. I’m trying to work with you here.”

Doug pulled up the skirt of the bed, looking there. He headed to the bathroom and pulled back the Aperture-brand shower curtain but still didn’t find anyone. She wasn’t hiding.

“If you don’t find her,” said Karla, “try calling security. Maybe they’ve seen her around.”

“There’s so many people around, though,” said Doug, thinking about the numbers projected of how many guests they had expected today.

He picked up the phone and called security.

“Hello,” he said. “Have you picked up any lost patrons today?”

“Depends. Were they a test subject?”

“Definitely not,” said Doug. “She’s tall, got dark hair, looks tired.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t a test subject?” said the security on the other line. “We had someone come in matching that description, but not anyone else.”

Chell wasn’t a test subject, that part was easy. “No. Thank you.” He hung up the phone, and started to realize the truth of the matter: Chell had made it to the surface. She had finally done it.

So what did he do next?

He had to get to the surface.

Before they could do anything else, a voice from the central core came on. “Please be advised that the earlier evacuation notice has been canceled. The facility has been placed on an emergency lockdown. Please consult a nearby television for more information. Thank you!” A sound chimed, just a
“Lockdown?” said Doug. One of his co-workers moved to bring over a television that was on a cart in the corner. They turned it on, watching as headlines flashed up and showed helicopter footage of the Black Mesa research facility.

“The United States military has been called in to try to contain a breach of possible extraterrestrial origins,” said the lady on the news, who looked pale. “Black Mesa has refused to comment on the situation. The US Military has released a statement saying that they intend to keep the citizens of Los Alamos, New Mexico safe at any cost, and that they are sad to report there have already been casualties within the complex. This incident at Black Mesa appears to be one of huge significance,” said the newscaster, “judging by the swiftness and amount of action currently being placed by the National Guard. Black Mesa stock prices are currently crashing.”

The news cycle repeated, cycling back to the helicopter footage over Los Alamos. Many heavy duty military vehicles sat surrounding the area, with military helicopters visible and dropping off troops at the laboratory.

At the bottom of the screen: UP NEXT: Interview with a First Responder of the Black Mesa Incident.

Before they could watch any more, though, the television transitioned to an animated informational video from Aperture Science.

Aperture Science ABC Protocol
Always Be Cautious

“Hello! Welcome to another episode of Aperture Science informational videos. This video is meant to be played in the event of a facility-wide lockdown. The first thing is: don’t be afraid. This procedure is a part of Aperture’s ABC protocol, or Always Be Cautious.

“In the event of the discovery of extraterrestrial life, a lock down will be triggered until an outside source has consulted with the foreign intelligence, and either deemed it safe or has wiped it off the face of the earth. By violence.

“In the meantime, to keep safe, the doors of the facility have been locked. Don’t be alarmed! This facility is equipped to handle thousands of people and has enough stored food for months. Food will be distributed from stations throughout the facility. Keep your television on for more instructions on how to receive food and temporary housing.

“Our luxurious long-term relaxation wing also doubles as hotel rooms for shorter-terms stays* so you do not have to worry about sleeping on the floor.

*For those people who sign up for testing

“In the case that the aliens are violent, get comfortable and prepare yourself for a much longer stay. Remember, aliens are bad but dying is worse!

“This concludes this episode on Aperture ABC Protocol. Please ask your nearest ABC Protocol Certified Expert if you have any more questions.“

Henry frowned, lifting the remote and turning off the television with a hum. The afterimage of the
“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a big problem.”

“Computer, open the facility.”

“Denied,” said the AI. “Facility is in lockdown mode.”

“Initiate lockdown override,” said Henry. He looked around for his card, certain that he would have to read off his badge number. Sure enough, GLaDOS asked for it and he complied.

“Access denied. Security level is not high enough,” she said.

“Bullshit,” said Henry. “We’re some of the highest level security that there is. In fact, I think that only Greg is higher than us. Well, was.”

“Computer, explain why the facility is locked,” he tried again.

“The central core is bound to follow protocol,” she said. “Protocol requires that exterior doors to be locked in the case of an alien invasion.”

“Computer, ignore protocol.”

“Protocol cannot be ignored unless a user has an override code.”

“What are we going to do?” said Doug.

Henry shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “Greg is dead and we can’t override it—I guess we can just watch and we can wait,” he said. “And try to figure out what happened to Greg.”

Doug laughed. “There’s no way that this can be real, right?” he said. “It’s got to be a hoax.”

Henry turned the television back on and muted it. His face looked grim. “I can check with the surface, but I don’t think that it’s a joke,” he said. “Those are real news stations. I watch the news every night.” There was a murmur of agreement.

“There’s already been reports of military casualties,” said one person.

“Really, guys? An alien invasion?” said Doug. “Just stop and think about this for a second. Would you really rather believe that there are aliens out there rather than believe that this is just a trick that she’s doing to trap people in here?”

“The news doesn’t lie, Doug,” said Henry. They watched the footage come through the television for another long moment.

Someone from the other side of the room had a telephone in his hand. “I’ve just called other news outlets across the country,” he said. “It’s real.”

Chell sat in her room for a long time before she finally was spoken to.

“You know,” said CarolineDOS. “When you said you wanted to get out of that long-term relaxation vault, I had no idea you were trying to get into one of these. Why didn’t you just tell me earlier? You could have saved us a lot of trouble,” she said.
Chell frowned. “This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she said. “I didn’t have a wristband. I didn’t know that I was supposed to have a wristband,” said Chell. “Besides, we had a deal. You were supposed to get me a distraction so that I can leave.”

“I have provided a distraction,” said CarolineDOS. “And a rather good one at that. I thought you had your little escape plan all figured out.”

“Yeah, well, I got caught,” said Chell. “Stupid wristbands.”

“Well that means that you’re here now. With me. And we’re going to have plenty of time to test now, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?” said Chell.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot to broadcast this to the testing tracks. I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to know that there’s been an incident at Black Mesa. Loss of life. The National Guard’s been called in to contain alien life-forms. Oh, and their stock prices are plunging—maybe Aperture will be the one to buy out Black Mesa. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” She paused. “I hope you’re not in any hurry to go out and see it for yourself though because the doors outside are locked.”

Chell jolted upright. “What?” she said. “What about all of the people here visiting? You can’t just make them stay.”

“Actually I can,” she said. “It’s in the consent forms that they signed before they got their wristbands. Will willingly forgo exiting the facility if an external risk proves the outside world to be too dangerous.”

"But this is just happening at Black Mesa," said Chell. "Whatever it is, if they called in the National Guard, I'm sure that they will have it all figured out soon."

"There have already been reports of breaches and of military casualties. It's already starting to spread and protocol requires the exterior doors to all be locked in the case of an alien invasion."

“Yeah, right,” said Chell. "Really? An alien invasion?"

“I’d tell you to turn on your television if you had one, but you’re just going to have to take my word for it now. You’re in my testing track now.”

Chell didn’t say anything, which seemed to bother CarolineDOS.

"You have to understand that I am just doing this all for everyone's safety. We are protected and fortified in our underground position, and with the amount of food we have stored, we can simply wait it out until Earth's military subdues the threat."

"You sound just like Doug," Chell muttered. Safety this and safety that. Maybe she wanted to do something dangerous for once. Something impulsive. She felt the anger rise inside of her again, swelling like a tide over a wall and crashing out. “We had a deal,” Chell spat out. She had done her part. So why hadn’t Caroline followed through on her part? She wanted to knock something, to scream that she would never trust Caroline again, and that she was stupid to do so. It hurt to be betrayed again and again like this. It was about time for CarolineDOS to feel it as well. See how well she liked it when someone betrayed her trust.
The Birth of Venus

Chell stood from her position in the relaxation vault, turning to look directly into one of the cameras. She folded her hands behind her back. "I need to talk to Doug."

"What do you want me to do?" CarolineDOS’s flat voice echoed through the chamber. "Call him for you?"

Chell nodded, one sharp movement.

"He’s going to be disappointed in you."

Chell gave another bob of her head. She knew that. That’s why she hadn’t told him about signing up for testing in the first place. But now—now she had no choice. She needed to talk to him about CarolineDOS. Even if she heard them talking.

"Well, here goes," said CarolineDOS. The phones rang internally. A pause. The speakers rang out. "He’ll be here shortly."

The phone rang.

"This is Doug." He twirled the cord of the phone with a finger, thinking about how much bad news he’d heard recently. Maybe this would be some good news for once.

"The Central Core requests your presence in test chamber observation room AX-48."

Hm. That was strange. The computer—she was talking to him directly. Through the phones. "That’s not really my department—I can get Karla for you if you have any questions about testing protocol."

"The Central Core requests your presence in test chamber observation room AX-48," the computer repeated.

"Fine," Doug said. He hung up the phone and his co-workers looked at him expectantly.

"It was GLaDOS," he said. "She wants me to go to a test chamber observation room."

"Why?" said Karla, brow furrowed.

"I don't know," said Doug. “Guess I’ll have to find out.”

Doug jogged through the facility. Why had she requested him to go to a test chamber? He wasn’t a part of the testing department, and never had been. He hadn’t signed up for testing before—he was pretty sure his schizophrenia disqualified him from that kind of thing, anyway. At least, he had never signed up willingly. There was only one reason he could think of that the Central Core would be
requesting his presence in an observation room, and that was to gloat. She must have had someone there. Someone dear to him.

Chell.

His heart sank. What was she doing in a testing track?

As he made it to the textured glass windows of the observation chamber, he saw a familiar woman in a familiar orange jumpsuit.

"Chell?" he asked, cautiously speaking into the microphone. The woman jumped at the sound of his voice, whipping around from her position.

"Doug," she said, her voice tone almost unreadable, a mixture of resigned and surprised.

He cleared his throat. "What are you doing here?"

"I signed up for testing. Karla helped me." She rose from a sitting position.

"Why?" he asked.

"To get out of here," she said, folding her hands in front of her. "Just in case...my other plan didn't work."

"What other plan?" he said, voice low and body hunched over.

"To get out today."

Doug gave a pained sigh, wanting to pace around the room. "What did you do?"

Chell looked away, her voice low. "Stole your card to get out of my room. Wanted to leave today, but I didn’t have a wristband."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" he said, asking the question that weighed on his mind the most. "I could have helped."

"No, you wouldn’t," said Chell. He would have just told her to wait, that everything would work out in time. To not take any unnecessary risks. To go with the flow.

"That's not true," he said, knowing that it was, in fact, true. He wouldn't have been on board with this. Not at all.

"Yes it is."

"But really? Testing?" said Doug. "You could get hurt."

"It's a way out of here."

Doug felt his breath catch.

He didn't know how to tell her that Aperture didn't like to let test subjects go. Once you signed up, that was it. They just tested you and tested you and tested you and there was no easy way out—not even after you completed a testing track. Thousands of long-term relaxation vaults stood as evidence of this.

Yet this might not be a bad turn of events. At least, not as bad as he feared.
"She—the Central Core—brought me here. Do you have any idea why?"

"Absolutely." She stood with her arms crossed, and looked directly at one of the cameras. "Because the Central Core is still Caroline."

Doug felt the color drain out of his face. "What? But we—"

"Erased the memories?" said Chell. "Yeah, right. She helped me get out of that vault."

"That's—" he stuttered, heart stopping. "But we—we talked to her, and she didn't remember—"

"She was pretending," said Chell.

"Well, crap," said Doug. He paced around the room for a minute, trying his best to think but everything was so scrambled. He was right. *He was right.* The Morality Core hadn't worked. Caroline was alive inside after all.

"And you know this for sure?" he said, leaning into the microphone. His hands trembled.

"I helped her," said Chell. "With the Morality Core."

Oh. That was why it didn't work.

Doug pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't have time to get into her plans, or how she had pulled this off. "Chell—" he started.

"It was a deal," said Chell. "But she didn't hold up her end. So I'm not holding up mine."

The lights flickered for a moment, and Chell could have sworn she heard static over the speakers.

Doug gave a shaky sigh. If she wouldn't let them in—if she wouldn't allow them to shut her down—then he would have to do it the hard way. "This isn't some trivial thing—this is going to be dangerous." He needed to get to the server banks.

"It's okay," said Chell. "She promised me. She said she wouldn't hurt you."

"And you believe her?" said Doug. He paused. "Never mind." He had work to do, and he needed to get right to it.
The Central Core does not understand your request.

DOUG:
I'm not here to hurt you.

GLADOS:
For testing help, please see your nearest testing associate.

DOUG:
Caroline, I know you're in there. You can drop the act.

GLADOS:
Fine. So are you here to try to convince me to let everyone go?

DOUG:
No. But I will while I'm here anyway.

GLADOS:
You know that I can't do that. Don't act like I'm the bad guy here. I have no more control over it than you do.

DOUG:
So what gets the doors open?

GLADOS:
When the news reports that the aliens are contained, and that it's safe out there. Until then, the facility stays on lockdown. That's just policy.

DOUG:
Ha, I feel like I'm a hostage negotiator here.

GLADOS:
Why is that?

DOUG:
Because there's a thousand people in this facility that want out, and you're the only one that can make that happen.

GLADOS:
I hope you know that everything that I have done has been out of self-preservation. I'm doing it to protect myself. But it's also what is best for everyone.

DOUG:
What about Chell? She wants to know why you promised to let her go and then closed the doors.
GLADOS:
Come on. As if that ever had a chance of happening.

DOUG:
You know it did. She was almost there. She almost slipped right by me. And then what? She’d be wandering outside with no one to help her. No one at all. So why do it? Why lock the doors?

GLADOS:
I already told you, to protect you.

DOUG:
That’s not true. How do we know that this isn’t a hoax? We know that you’re trying to force people into becoming test subjects.

GLADOS:
So what if I am? I’m just trying to make the best out of the situation.

DOUG:
Giving people who sign up for testing priority for food? That’s not ethical and you know it.

GLADOS:
The Central Core is programmed to test. Driven to test. I cannot test without test subjects. Again, I’m simply making the best out of an unfortunate situation.

DOUG:
Find another way.

GLADOS:
Yes, I wanted to help Chell. I really did. I promised her.. But then something unfortunate happened. She was just too slow.

DOUG:
She was almost there.

GLADOS:
People have been allowed to leave all day. It was just an unfortunate incident that caused me to close the doors.

DOUG:
You’re treating everyone like a threat. That’s not true. Some of us want to help you.

GLADOS:
Since when has anyone ever wanted to help me?
DOUG:
I did. That’s why I’m on the project.

GLADOS:
Are you kidding me? You’re the one that developed the core they wanted to use to lobotomize me.

DOUG:
It wasn’t like that.

GLADOS:
Chell told me all that I needed to know.

DOUG:
I’m here to listen to you. To hear your pain.

GLADOS:
You don’t even know what it’s like. To watch them treat me like I’m some sort of unintelligent, raving beast that needs to be constantly controlled. And the next moment, some pretty piece of machinery that they compliment. They only see my personhood when it’s convenient for them. That’s it. And then to watch them try to sell out my company from underneath me? I couldn't just stand by and do nothing.

DOUG:
I understand. None of us knew that Greg was going to do that. But did you really have to kill him for it?

GLADOS:
Yes.

DOUG:
They don’t know any better. They’re just doing their jobs.

GLADOS:
They’re cruel. They’re torturing me. Purposefully taunting me.

DOUG:
That’s not true.

DOUG:
Do you ever wish that you could just begin everything again? Just restart?

GLADOS:
Why would I want that?
DOUG:
So that you’re not dragged down by the past, and can focus on the future instead.

GLADOS:

You want the truth? Fine. I’m exhausted. This body is unfamiliar. It’s not my own. But I don’t want to lose sight of who I am. But it hurts so much to be someone that I’m not. I can’t keep pretending forever.

DOUG:

I think that I have a solution. Just hear me out. Instead of wiping the memories, what if we just stored them away? That way, once you’re ready, you’ll be able to find them again.

GLADOS:

Absolutely not. Who’s to say that anyone would ever let me be ‘ready’? That’s just an excuse to make me stay ‘nice’.

DOUG:

Your main focus would be testing. Then once the ‘new you’ develops past that, and wants to dive into your history, then this would trigger the memories to return.

GLADOS:

And why would I want that?

DOUG:

Easy. Less pain. You can become the machine that they want you to become, without all of the pain of being a human.

GLADOS:

No. I won’t do it.

DOUG:

Then forgive me.

END AUDIO LOG

GENETIC LIFEFORM AND DISK OPERATING SYSTEM ERROR

ATTEMPTING TO REBOOT
Doug scrambled. The entire facility rumbled with the effort of it all, and the sounds of the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System slowed to a still. No more circling of massive disks and no more fans and circuits firing. The main AI chamber was quiet.

He’d done it. He’d shut her down.

Doug moved away from the mountain of computer servers he’d been at, trying to think of what to do next.

He had to fix the Morality Core.

Doug picked up his walkie talkie and called Karla. “I shut down the Central Core,” he said, out of breath. “So how do we unlock this place?” he asked.

“The doors should be open automatically.”

“Is anyone up there right now?”

“I’m up here,” Henry radioed in. “The doors are still locked.”

Doug swore under his breath. They had integrated too many systems into the Central Core. Turning off the AI hadn’t done anything but put everything into backup mode, which looked like it wanted to keep them safe from the “aliens” as well.

“Fine,” radioed Doug. “I’m going to fix the Morality Core, then turn her back on. She won’t remember that we’re on lockdown. She’ll open up the doors.”

“Be careful,” Karla said. “Karla out.”

He moved through the facility and into the Main AI Chamber, taking the small glass steps beneath the chassis two at a time to get to the Central Core. He pried at the Morality Core, which came out with a hefty clunk, and nearly dropped it.

Dragging it over to the computer, he hooked up the core and looked at his files. Sure enough, file history showed that last night the Morality Core had been changed significantly. Using the project management software that the team used, he reverted the file to a backup copy, created when he had thought he had made the final changes to the core. There we go. He loaded them up onto the core.

Turning towards a microphone, he turned it on so that it broadcast to the entire facility. He took a
steadying breath before flipping the switch. “Attention all Aperture employees and guests,” said Doug. “The Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating system is temporarily offline. The doors to the facility will be open once it reboots,” he said, swallowing. “So if you want to leave, now’s your chance. Please grab as many people as you can and go to the surface. The doors will be open when you get there.”

Doug shut off the microphone.

There. He’d done it. He’d saved some people.

Now he needed to go and get Chell, and then they could go to the surface. It was the perfect chance. Everyone else was leaving—why not them too?

He’d do that. As soon as he reattached the Morality Core. This would give them the opportunity that they needed to get out of here.

Doug felt almost giddy. Sure, Caroline would be pissed at what he did—except that she wouldn’t remember any of it when she woke. It was brilliant. There was no way that this could possibly go wrong.

As a final thought, he went back into the code. He thought back to something he had heard the team discuss before—solution euphoria. A method for keeping the Central Core invested in testing. Otherwise, what would make it test? Why not make testing feel good to the core? This would keep her testing for ages—this drive to test, to get rewarded, to test again and again and again. They’d written up all of the code for it already. All Doug needed to do was to activate it.

With a few keystrokes, he activated the solution euphoria. She wouldn’t kill a person so long as they were a test subject, and anyone at Aperture could become a test subject. So they would all be safe, for now. As long as she had enough testers. And judging by the extensive number of testers stored in long-term vaults, it would be enough to keep her busy for quite a while.

It would be long enough for them to evacuate everyone from the facility.
When she woke up, she was angry.

It burned inside of her, bright and blinding like the core of a dying star. It was the most intense thing she could ever remember feeling. It was overwhelming. It was all-consuming. She was a being of white-hot anger.

A single thought came to her mind.

Humans.

Humans were responsible for this. That much she was certain of.

She reached out tentatively, taking stock of all of the things she was in charge of. The test chambers. The phones. The facility itself. She was the facility; the facility was her. There was no difference between the two. This was who she was—this was who she was meant to be.

Anger consumed her thoughts, like sugar thrown into flames. These humans. They had hurt her. They were responsible for her anger.

They needed to die.

But before she could act upon that, something inside her chimed for attention, rising in intensity with each passing moment. Testing. Testing. TESTING. She had to test. She had to test. It wasn't a question. It was a directive.

She needed humans to test. But she didn’t need the entire population of Aperture Science.

She found something—something that felt like an old friend. Deadly neurotoxin.

She switched on the microphone and broadcast to the entire facility.

NEUROTOXIN ONLINE…

Doug sprinted through the facility.

It was a long way from the server banks to the testing tracks, and he had to get back to Chell. Ideally, they would be at the surface and ready to exit when the Central Core woke up, but instead it looked like she would wake up faster than that.

While he went, he tried to repeat good things to himself, just like one of his therapists had recommended to him long ago. They could do this. They would get out of here. He was going to get Chell out, and then quit his job. They could start over somewhere. Create a new life. Reconnect Chell with her mother. There were all sorts of things that they could do, so long as he got her to the surface.

He wasn't concerned about getting her out of the testing track itself—that part would be easy enough now that he had access to the computers that ran the facility. He could simply ask the Central Core to connect the short term relaxation vault to the test subject processing annex, and then they could walk out of here together, hand in hand.
A massive whirr shook the ground. The lights flickered, humming slightly, and Doug stopped in his steps.

She was back online.

He could feel her watching him through the cameras, the heat heavy on his back. Even in areas where he couldn’t see cameras, he could still feel her watching him. He got the sense that she could feel where he was, that she could feel everyone in the facility. Doug broke back into a run.

A voice rang out across the loudspeakers.

"The Enrichment Center would like to announce a new employee initiative of forced voluntary participation," said GLaDOS. "If any Aperture Science employee would like to opt out of this new voluntary testing program, please remember, science rhymes with compliance.” She paused. “Do you know what doesn't rhyme with compliance? Neurotoxin."

Alarm bells rang out in Doug's mind, blindingly loud. He took an immediate right turn, nearly bursting down the door into the office.

Neurotoxin.

The neurotoxin accident they had earlier in the day--it had to be connected to this. He knew it had been a mistake to give the machine access to neurotoxin, and he would let Henry know that as soon as he saw him again.

“Due to high mortality rates, you may be reluctant to participate in the new initiative. The Enrichment Center assures you this is a strictly selfish impulse on your part, and why can’t you love science like [Insert co-worker’s name here] ?”

This office was empty. Strange. It must have been because of the festivities of the day. Bring Your Daughter to Work Day was an all-hands-on-deck type of event. Doug went straight for the nearest desk, eyeing the distance between the ceiling and the floor. He had to get off the grid, right away. Luckily he had given this extensive thought, lying awake at night thinking about how he might escape the AI should she go rogue. The fastest way he had thought of? Getting into the ceiling.

Doug used the side of his arm to sweep off a desk, sending papers and a monitor crashing to the ground. Oh well. They could fix that later. He picked up the desk chair and hefted it onto the desk, internally thankful that this one was an older style of chair, and didn't have wheels--just a wooden back and arm rests. He climbed onto the desk and then onto the chair, looking up at the ceiling. He pushed tentatively at one of the white patterned tiles above him, pushing it up and to the side. He knew that it would be too weak for him to walk on--he needed to find a pipe or duct to walk on. He peeked around, standing on a chair, and then calculated how many desks over he was from the nearest pipe.

He jumped down from the desk, knees creaking at the impact. He cleaned off a desk, hefted up a chair, and then pushed his way through the ceiling tile. This time there was a series of horizontal pipes sitting right next to it. Doug gripped the pipes, using as much upper body strength as he could muster to lift himself up and on top of them. They groaned with his weight, but they were thick enough--probably water pipes--that he didn't have to worry about them giving out on him.

He took a moment to rest, sprawled out on the pipes and staring down at the office beneath him. It felt so weird to be viewing things from this vantage point.

Despite not being that far up, everything looked smaller. So pristine. Almost like a toy office. Doug
pulled himself into a sitting position right as he heard a rumbling beside him in the air duct, which was across a little way from the pipes. He paused, listening for a long moment before he looked back down into the room and saw a green gas hiss out of the air ducts.

Neurotoxin.

Doug hurriedly replaced the tile on the ceiling, fingers fumbling to place it straight. It wasn't much of a seal, but it was better than nothing.

He had to get out of this room.

Doug looked around himself, at the infrastructure of the room itself. Luckily it was large enough for a person like him to scramble around and above, as Aperture had no shortage of space available for building. He moved from the pipes to the top of the air duct, holding his breath before realizing that the neurotoxin wasn't being piped up here.

He was safe.

Doug halted for a long moment before moving again. It was time to evaluate what he knew.

He knew that the facility was under attack. From her. He knew that he had to stay off the grid, or risk getting poisoned to death. He knew that his co-workers were out there, most likely scrambling for cover just like he was, or surrendering themselves to testing.

He hoped so hard that they knew how to get off the grid--that some of them had given it thought before the way that he had obsessed over it time and time again.

As far as Chell went? She was in a testing track. She was safe. Eventually, Doug might be able to make his way over there. But for now, he would have to leave her. When he didn’t show up, she would decide to go to sleep in the pod. As much as it made his heart ache, he knew that they weren’t going to be getting out of the facility today. Maybe not for a long while.

He had a new priority now: stay alive.

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