**An Experiment in Persistence**

1500 words

*All excerpts taken from the journal of Max Jones, laboratory assistant.*

**May 15.**

The problem with scientists is that they never finish what they start. Who knows how many marvelous breakthroughs might have been attained if only research had not been abandoned in favor of a newer, shinier hypothesis?

For a case study, take those two scientists over there, the venerable Arnold and the venomous Herzevagger. I suppose they are brilliant in their own way, the kind of people that would build a penguin-powered substation in the Arctic circle and then dedicate the rest of their lives to figuring out where all the penguins went. Their academic record is littered with half-completed projects and unproven theories. Take that perpetual motion machine sitting in the corner, or that gerbil with the super-enhanced cerebrum—no one thinks about him anymore, I daresay. Disappeared behind the counter one day and *poof!*—out of sight, out of mind.

That is why scientists need lab assistants like me, Max Jones, to keep track of their pens and papers, progress, pills, and parietal lobes. Without us, scientists would be totally lost.

**May 15, cont.**

You might say I sort of adopted Arnold and Herzevagger. I saw them floundering in their research like drowning puppies and came to their rescue, my trusty memo pad in hand. I smelled potential. And they *had* potential—cluttered, scattered, bumbling, and unfocused potential—but potential nonetheless.

…I tell you they are brilliant, but here is Herzevagger pouring the iron filings into the coffee maker—ye gods! what a noise!—ignore him.

**May 16.**

As far as scientists go, A&H are fairly persistent. They have been trying for six months to create a superhuman serum—strength, X-ray vision, flying, the works—that will primarily allow Herzevagger to revenge himself upon the jocks that flushed his calculator down the toilet in high school, and secondarily cure all the maladies and illnesses of the human race. Arnold just thinks a Nobel prize would *excellently* complement his coin collection.

Testing on gerbils, they have had several minor successes so far—a gerbil that stands heroically on its hind legs, paws on hips, when a slight breeze wafts his way; the missing brainiac gerbil that “disappeared” behind the counter; a gerbil that could turn invisible from the neck up—what fun Herzevagger had releasing that one during the faculty Halloween party last year: “The Headless Hamster! The Headless Hamster! Run for your lives!”

But I digress—this diary ought to be about the scientists and their *serious* work:

First, Herzevagger, that middle-aged badger with a bearish temper and the raging inferiority complex of a man with the praenomens Merriweather Willoughby. It’s right there on his nametag, too, but he’s covered it up with a sticker that says, “It’s an ekpyrotic universe stupid”. Whatever that means.

His research partner, Arnold, is a man older than Saturn and comparable in age to Sagittarius, with owly white eyes and wispy white hair and glasses like the James Hubble telescope, revolving, revolving, revolving, trying for years to pull their focus in enough to see the equipment in front of him, and only getting about as close as Betelguese, 600 light years away. Which is to say that he is blind as a bat.

**May 17.**

Major breakthroughs! Arnold and Herzevagger have finally produced a specimen that they believe is severely allergic to kryptonite. That is, they believe that *if* the planet Krypton were located, and the specimen sent there, the specimen would *most* *likely* have a severe allergic reaction causing temporary suspension of the power of flight. Of course, the specimen cannot currently fly anyway.

A&H contacted NASA about the extreme importance of locating Krypton posthaste, but of course NASA was very uncooperative, &c, &c. Arnold says that they are not going to waste time giving the specimen the power of flight if NASA is not even going to locate Krypton. Lack of cooperation between the scientific branches continues to thwart progress.

**May 25.**

Progress continues encouragingly:

Still on a quest to create a rodent with laser-vision, Herzevagger has at least managed to create a gerbil with microwave-vision. He immediately contacted the military about the exciting possibilities of weaponizing such a specimen for covert missions and offered to demonstrate its effectiveness at completely liquidating the human brain after fifteen hours of unbroken eye contact.

The military sent back a rather sardonic reply stating that if they ever managed to bait a terrorist warlord into a staring contest with a weaponized gerbil, they would certainly call upon our valuable services, &c, &c. I don’t think poor old Herzevagger even caught the sarcasm. He tucked the letter lovingly into the breast pocket of his lab coat, eyes shimmering with dreams of future Purple Hearts and Nobel Prizes.

Arnold and I were of course too decent to shatter his dreams, although I think Arnold was a bit concerned that it was perhaps *his* brain that Herzevagger intended to liquidate in his demonstration.

**May 27.**

The lab is rather chaotic today. A&H finally managed to suspend the gravity of five specimens, although it appears they cannot control their own direction, leading to five gerbils that bump along the ceiling like deflated little balloons. The whole sight is somewhat depressing, even for Herzevagger. Arnold is busy sewing them little weighted vests.

**May 30.**

I ought to have expected this. Disaster has come upon us, in much the most predictable way: overbearing bureaucracy.

It seems one of the floating gerbils floated its way out the door, down the hall, and into the office of Mr. Munson, the chief executive of the research facility, where it proceeded to—ahem—*divebomb* him and his assistants from its unassailable position near the ceiling. By the time they eventually caught it with Mr. Munson’s daughter’s pink butterfly net, Mr. Munson was ready to roast A&H over their own Bunsen burners.

He stomped into the office, slung the levitating gerbil at Herzevagger like a lacrosse ball, and demanded an immediate audit of their progress.

Arnold only made it three words before Mr. Munson cut him off. “*No* success? Nothing? Didn’t I tell you this project was useless? People don’t want a superhuman serum. They want tastier cereals and faster cars and squeakless chalk.”

I tried to imagine Herzevagger miserably testing chalks on a whiteboard, the squeals of failure gradually driving him deaf. I imagined Arnold gargling different cereals around his toothless mouth for the rest of a short eternity.

And I saw very quickly that nothing of the sort would do, not even in an ekpyrotic universe, stupid.

Scientists by necessity have a terrible job. They must first describe, and then create for humanity, a reality that has never before been seen or known. The result is that they look ridiculous. They might even look like they just got sucker-punched by a floating gerbil slingshot.

And it doesn’t help that they hardly ever *finish anything*. Perhaps that’s the superpower of lab assistants: while scientists have imagination, we have persistence. We can see the end goal. Especially when we are a part of the end goal.

I believe in A&H. They have potential. They even have, dare I say it, pizzazz! And so I will not let them give up. Not yet.

“We have had a few minor successes—” Herzevagger began, but Mr. Munson interrupted.

“Where are they? Show me something other than a bloated floating gerbil, and maybe I’ll reconsider slashing your funding.”

A&H looked at each other. They did not mention the microwave-gerbil, like I hoped they would, or even the infamous Headless Hamster. They simply crumpled in their lab coats.

But I, a lab assistant, did not crumple. I stood up quite tall.

I tucked my pencil behind my ear.

I tucked my notebook under my arm.

I said, “Good evening.”

And then louder, because no one heard me the first time: “GOOD EVENING!”

Herzevagger lifted his head. “Do you hear that?”

“Ye-es,” said Arnold slowly. “I do hear something. A squeaking voice—Good heavens! Is that—”

“I do believe—”

“Can it really be?”

They stared at me, as though seeing me for the first time.

The crisp sparkling wonder of the moment was rudely interrupted by Mr. Munson’s singularly unintelligent comment: “Is that *a gerbil?*”

“Max!’ Arnold gasped. “The one with the super-enhanced cerebrum!”

“I’d completely forgotten about *him*!” said Herzevagger. “Is that a notebook he’s carrying?”

And both of their eyes came very close to mine, four giant oculi wondering and goggling and generally looking ridiculous.

I ignored them.

I held my paw out to Mr. Munson.

“My name is Max Jones, and I am a laboratory assistant to the excellent Messrs. Herzevagger and Arnold. It’s very nice to meet you.”

Mr. Munson glared at A&H. “Is this one at least toilet-trained?”

**May 30, cont.**

I think that Mr. Munson doesn’t understand science very well. Lots of people don’t. But I do: imagination and persistence. I wrote it down at the top of my notebook.

After all, what are lab assistants for?