

Dangers of Science

It was supposed to be a normal Friday, albeit one a bit lazier than others. The professor in charge of observing Soren's discussion group on weapons of mass destruction had called in sick. Not a rarity, especially in spring. Diseases were about as common as throngs of young children rushing around the university grounds on Friday afternoons. Children of every age and species rushed around, following teachers, climbing on things they weren't supposed to be climbing on, terrorizing furs sensitive to loud noises, usual kid things.

The event that set this Friday apart was an accident, one that an undergraduate at the Theoretical Physics department had rated a .0002% chance of happening. Many government grants had gone into this project, and, just as with many other government projects, it was given a long, official-sounding title. "Project To Mitigate Continued Growth of Refuse Through Reduction In Atomic Empty Space..." Yadda yadda yadda. It was something that seemed interesting to most, though the tremendous piles of garbage in front of the student union used for testing purposes coerced many back onto their busy schedules. If it worked, they'd read about it in the papers.

The only problem was that the device worked a little too well. Within seconds of the device spooling up and firing, the realization was made that garbage wasn't the only thing this device could shrink.

Soren looked around, shivering a little in the morning cold. It was spring, why didn't Seattle get the memo already? Even in a hooded sweatshirt and cargo pants he was still freezing his ass off. Life in some podunk town in the Cascade foothills should have prepared him for the cold, but not the situation he was stuck in now. He looked in awe at the new, but familiar landscape. Students he was once standing shoulder to shoulder with were now presenting with differing levels of consciousness, scattered all over the brick walkway. The police officers manning the barricades around the test site were absent, as well as the metal bars preventing entry onto the main entry path to the student union building. Soren could hear shouts, screams as students oriented to time, place, and event had realized their lives had dramatically changed for the worse. Some made their way toward where the barricades once stood, a tremendous feat for people now a half an inch tall.

"HEY!" Soren looked behind himself; a student he hadn't ever met before came sprinting toward him with the intensity of a lost child upon finding their parent. He took a few seconds to exhale before turning his head to the sky. "What the hell happened, man? I mean, wasn't that thing supposed to only zap garbage or something?"

"I'm not even sure what happened." Soren replied, equally as perplexed. "What are you looking at?"

“Just wondering... I heard seagulls before I came... here... came here...” The blood drained from the student’s face, leaving him as pale as a ghost. “Oh damn... No... We’ve gotta get to cover NOW man!” He turned around, headed towards the safety of the awning of the student union. A few yards had now become a much longer distance. Summoning all the strength he could, despite a few pounds of medical textbooks in his backpack, Soren and his new comrade began sprinting towards safety.

The sounds of squawks and gunshots could be heard. A bird, about the same size as a plane to many of the individuals, thrust itself back into the sky. Damn, if only he was closer to those police officers, Soren mused. He had nothing to defend himself with, and no shelter between the student union and his current location. His phone was dead, product of an unforeseen electromagnetic pulse from the test. As the awning’s shadow came into view, Soren and his partner slowed down, exhaling heavily.

“Mother...” The other student sighed, significantly reducing his speed to a slow walk. “That... wow... So this is what ants must feel like.” He peered over at Soren, who was equally as exhausted. “I don’t think I’ve run so fast in my life. You?”

“Me neither. Making me wish I packed a water bottle for just such an occasion.” Soren joked. The student reached into his shoulder bag, pulling out a half-empty bottle of water. “Here, have some of mine. The rest if you want.”

“Are you sure?”

“I drank the other half already. Plus I’m used to the exertion, I did a forest fighting job last summer... By the way, since we might be together for a while, mind if I ask your name?”

“Soren. Yours?” Soren extended his hand, ever the diplomat.

“Nikolai.” Nikolai grasped Soren’s hand, giving it a firm shake before resuming his movement toward shelter. The two students looked back at the distance they travelled, and the sky, now swarming with birds. “Those poor bastards... I hope the people near the cops are going to make it out okay.”

“If anyone realizes what happened to us. My phone’s dead.” Nikolai pulled out his phone to check, shaking his head once the \$500 device refused to turn on. “Yours too? I think the best thing we can do is wait for help to come to us. Or something like that, unless you have a better plan, Nikolai.”

“All I want to do is rest.” Nikolai sighed, coming off of his adrenaline high. Resting against a giant pillar, he looked up at the awning, the thin piece of canvas protecting them from being

spotted by their new avian predators. "How about we rest in shifts? I'll be out for an hour, you watch and wake me if things get bad. I'm regretting not sleeping last night now."

"I could probably stay awake for a day, I drank enough coffee this morning to last me a good while." Soren chuckled, resting against the same pillar and taking out his Economics textbook. In minutes, Nikolai was out and Soren was deep into analyzing economic graphs. Aggregate demand and supply, marginal and total utility... the monotony soon put him to sleep.

A shrill whistle woke both Nikolai and Soren from their slumber. Soren's first instinct was to treat it like a fire alarm, and distance himself and his new friend from it. Instead, he took a few seconds after waking to analyze his surroundings. Nikolai rolled onto his feet. "Marching band already?" He replied sarcastically, earning a piercing gaze in return. "Apologies, just trying to keep our spirits up somehow. You were supposed to wake me up. What happened to all that caffeine you drank?"

"Economics make a decent sedative." Soren chuckled, looking in the direction of another sharp whistle. "Please don't tell me this is a bad sign... Please let this be rescue."

Instead, another sight greeted them. The students of South Shore Elementary were being led up through campus on a college exposure trip. "Kids. Please don't tell me they're going to get free time out here, I'm not even sure how many people are left out here, or if they'll be noticed... And even then, what if they're noticed and mistaken for bugs?"

"Occupational hazard, Soren." Nikolai joked again, this time earning a slap on the back. "Well pardon me if I don't want to go all 'GAME OVER MAN, GAME OVER!' on you. Worrying about the situation is only going to make it worse. Maybe we can go up to the adult leading them for help. The birds aren't around, and besides, the kids will scare any of them off."

"Well I'm sorry I'm concerned about ending up as a stain on some kid's sole, or worse." Soren shot back. "But you have a point, worrying isn't going to get us anywhere but nowhere. Since you put out an idea, how about you lead on ahead, so if you get squished by something or someone ahead, I can still run for my life."

Within a few moments, the kids were moving single-file toward them, headed for the grass and circling up. The species diversity was intriguing: Humans, canids, vulpines, a couple equines, and felines. One of the felines broke away from the formation, heading right for the pillar where Nikolai and Soren were hiding. "Don't... Move... A... Muscle..." Nikolai whispered. "If it works for feral animals, it probably works for anthropomor-whatever ones too." Both tiny humans stayed stationary, as the giant jaguar cub leaned against the pillar, moving his shoe within feet of the tiny folk. Loose laces were like bridge cables, stopping within mere inches of the two.

"A couple inches closer and that would have been bad-"

"SHHHH." Nikolai looked up, swearing he saw the ear of the feline twitch. "I think he heard us, nice going, Soren, now we're dead." Nikolai's voice went back to a normal volume. The jaguar's ear twitched again. His head swiveled around, orienting itself so his blue eyes looked down onto the humans.

"Wooooaaah..." He whispered, crouching down onto his knees. "I've never seen buggies like this before..." He looked down, analyzing the two humans. "You're like big kids, but littler... How'd you get so tiny? Do you need help?"

Soren and Nikolai breathed a sigh of relief. They were certain the next thing they would have seen were the charcoal-black soles of the cub's shoes. "You... You can hear us? You can understand us?" Soren spoke up. The cub nodded his head, extending a hand down to the two 'bugs.'

"Climb on- I'll put you in my pocket." He pointed to the pouch on his purple hooded sweatshirt, emblazoned with the logo of the university. "My name's Rainier, I can give you to my teacher and maybe she'll know what to do." He tipped his hand a little so that Soren and Nikolai could safely navigate into his grip. Upon feeling the two in his hand, Rainier slowly lifted his hand up, moving it into his pocket before yanking his hand back out to tie his shoes, albeit in a lopsided fashion.

"Rainier! We're circling up!" A loud, older female voice broke through the air.

"Just tyin' my shoe!" He sighed, shoving his laces into his shoe before walking over to the circle of cubs and taking his spot next to his friend. The teacher smiled, rolling her eyes and starting a lecture about the open space, the large connected libraries nearby, and the student union, where they would be eating lunch. Soren and Nikolai chuckled. It was like being an incoming freshman all over again. It took a minute for Rainier to stand up, and lean over into his friend's ear. The two felines giggled as they followed their teacher to the doors, then down a staircase to the food court. The smell of sub-par cafeteria food reached the tiny humans' noses, and concern already began to grow.

"Great. What if he's planning to eat us? I remember babysitting a little cousin and maaaaan he loved to put tiny things, like bugs, in his mouth"

"What makes you think Rainier's going to do that?" Nikolai interjected. "He said he would give us to his teacher."

"Well I certainly hope it isn't on a piece of pizza." Soren complained, rolling his eyes. Nikolai chuckled in response.

“Just imagine all that you could eat though.”

“Not when I’m probably going to be nutrients to help him grow just a little bit bigger and stronger.”

“Quit griping.”

“I like griping.” Soren chuckled. Nikolai shook his head. Rainier could be heard above, asking for a slice of cheese pizza. One transaction later, and he was on his way over to his seat. As he sat, a curious sound reached the ears of the two humans, like a rustling shopping bag. The two shrugged their shoulders, and soon found themselves once more in Rainier’s grip.. It took their eyes a couple of seconds to adjust to the light conditions, and for their brains to realize they weren’t alone. Two other feline children, a clouded leopard and snow leopard, looked down at the humans after they were placed on the table.

“Cool bugs...” The clouded leopard purred. “Surprised you didn’t smoosh them yet.”

“Want me to smoosh them?” The snow leopard giggled. “I loooove doin’ that. ‘specially to new bugs I haven’t seen.”

“Not gonna.” He looked down at the two. “They’re kinda special-ish And talk too! I told them my name n’ stuff.”

“Rainier, right?” Nikolai smiled. The other two kids looked slightly shocked.

“WOAH.” The two leopards recoiled back into their seats, their young minds blown. “They talk? How...”

“They’re tiny grownups. I don’t know their names yet, but somehow they got little. Um... This is Raleigh” Rainier pointed at the snow leopard, looking curiously down at his burger and the two humans. “And that’s Kai.” He pointed at the clouded leopard, fishing around inside his bagged lunch. Raleigh and Kai giggled shyly in response. “Now, what are your names?”

“I’m Soren.”

“I’m Nikolai. Call me Niko if you want. Doesn’t matter to me.”

“Soren and Niko-lai.” Kai mused, opening his bag and retrieving an apple, biting into it. The remaining two kids began eating as well. “So, Rainy, are you gonna bring them to Ms. Kelly?”

“I think I might.” Rainier swallowed. “But... I don’t know. I don’t want em’ to get smooshed or something else to happen to them. What did Ms. Kelly do to your toy car when ya’ brought it to class, Raleigh?”

"I think I saw her throw it away. Eww..." The snow leopard continued chomping away at his food, crumbs falling to the table, well away from the two shrunken humans. Rainier retrieved them, moving the crumbs into his pocket.

"Well I don't wanna put two grownups in the trash... yucky place. Old food n' stuff? Yuck." He shook his head. "I'll probably just keep em' in my pocket, and take them home with me. Maybe my mom knows what to do."

"Can I have one?" Kai's half-eaten apple slipped from his hand and landed on a plate, making the two humans quiver in fear at the loud noise. "Sorry... Maybe I can have one if they're gonna be like this forever?"

Forever? That thought haunted Soren and Nikolai. They hadn't bothered to bring it up. What would happen? Where would they stay? What would they eat? Would someone be willing to protect them from the dangers of both the outside and inside world? Too many questions came to mind, ones that likely didn't have easy answers.

"Maybe." Rainier smiled, devouring his pizza bit by bit. "I'll keep them at my house. I have an old ter... terrar..."

"Terrarium?" Raleigh finished.

"Yeah, one of those. I don't know why, but it's right on my dresser. It's got water and stuff. Everything they'd need, I think."

"Better clear all the buggies out" Kai joked. "Don't want em' to be caught in a spider web or something." A worried look returned to Soren's face. "I'm being serious."

"Guess I'll help momma clean it out then" Rainier smiled, moving the two humans back into his pocket and finishing up his meal, crust and all before getting up to throw away his plate.

Soren and Nikolai sighed in relief. This day had started out relatively dull, and now, they were in some six-year-old's hoodie pocket, likely bound for a new home in a terrarium after the field trip ended. Perhaps some folks would discover what caused the accident in the near future. Maybe some survivors got lucky and escaped with valuable data. Maybe there could be some way to reverse the shrinking.

If it didn't, at least they could try to help teach Rainier a few things and make a positive difference in the kid's life. In the meantime, life would have to take on a whole new meaning.