

Beware Demon Squirrels Bearing Gifts

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Part One: Mara

Mara knew right away she was going to regret it, but despite her better judgment, she knocked on Malex's door.

(Mara knocks and the door immediately opens.)

Linus: (Accusatory.) Mara? What are *you* doing here?!

Mara: (Sarcastically.) Hi Linus, it's good to see you too. Thanks for asking. (Casually.) I'm here to talk to Malex. Is he home?

Linus: Yeah he's here. Good luck getting anything out of him though! He's being even less fun than usual. Come on in.

(The door opens wider.)

Mara: By the way, how did you open the door without any limbs?

Linus: (Scoffs.) Wouldn't **you** like to know!

Mara followed Linus into the house and down the hall to the living room. She immediately saw that Linus had not been exaggerating. Malex did not appear to be doing well.

Snufflefungus: Malex, did that cheer you up?

Malex: Yes Snufflefungus, thank you.

Snufflefungus: Would you like me to play you another song?

Malex: No thank you, Snufflefungus. We've had quite enough marching drum solos for one day.

Snufflefungus: Okay!

(Snufflefungus tosses his drum down the hall.)

Mara: Malex, what's the matter?

Malex: Why do you ask?

Mara: You're lying on the floor.

Malex: Oh, am I?

Linus: Face it, Malex. You've caught the depression-itis! You're down in the mouth! You've got the morbs! Your dumps are the lowest!

Mara: We get it, Linus. Listen, Malex. I know you've had a rough go of it lately. And honestly, finding out that we might be siblings has got me pretty rattled too. But you're resilient! You'll bounce back from this.

(A klaxon sounds.)

Snufflefungus: (Nervous.) Uh oh.

Malex: That's a critical house alarm! Linus, status report!

Part Two: Linus

A familiar sense of dread ran down Linus's spine. Or at least, it *would* have done, if he had anything resembling a spine to begin with.

Being an artificial intelligence, it only took Linus a moment to check the house alarm system.

Linus: It's the squirrel alarm! One of the Nine Riding Squirrels has breached the security perimeter!

Mara: Oh no!

Malex: (On the verge of panic.) Lock it down! Lock the house down *now!*

Linus: I'm on it!

(*Sounds of blast doors closing.*)

Snufflefungus: I'm going to secure all the entrances from the lab! (Heavy breathing as he hops away.)

Linus finished checking the blast doors, then he checked them again.

Linus: (Relieved.) Okay, I think we're secure.

Mara: (Nervous.) Now what?

Malex: We just wait. Hopefully it was just passing by.

Mara: What if it *wants* something from you?

Malex: Well then we just wait longer. It should lose interest eventually.

Linus was experiencing whiplash. First Malex was acting depressed and now he was being optimistic bordering on mania. One of the Nine Riding Squirrels just *losing interest*? That was hardly likely.

He readied a scathing retort, but bit his tongue at the last second. The situation demanded a level head. And of their whole group Linus definitely considered himself the most sensible.

The Riding Squirrels unsettled Linus in a way unlike anything else he had ever experienced. He wasn't sure why, although it wasn't for any lack of unsettling things about the Riding Squirrels.

On the contrary, there were *too many* unsettling things about the Riding Squirrels. No *one* cursed trait stood out from the rest. The net effect was disorienting.

Mara: Well since we're just waiting... Malex, do you want to talk about what's going on with you right now?

Malex: I'm honestly okay. I've just been thinking about all those years I lost. Linus and I were just running a quick errand off-planet, and suddenly blackness. We must have been ambushed, but I still don't know why, how, or by whom. That's all I remember. Over six years of my life, gone!

Mara: (Sympathetically.) Yeah.

Malex: Makes you think about how temporary everything is.

Mara: Well maybe now isn't the time, but I figured we could get some answers about actually being, you know, siblings.

Malex: Is this a DNA sibling test kit?

Mara: Yeah, it's just a cheap mail-in kit with a couple of cheek swabs.

Malex: That's a great idea. Give me one of those swabs. I want answers too.

Mara: Honestly the whole thing has brought back some pretty unpleasant memories of my childhood. And I can't see how I can put the past behind me unless I know the truth.

Snufflefungus: I'm back from securing the lab! Look who helped me finish locking up!

Little Red Riding Squirrel: It's'a me! Little Red Riding Squirrel!

Another shudder ran down Linus's "spine." Curse that demon squirrel.

Part Three: Malex

As Little Red Riding Squirrel pranced around the corner and into Malex's view, a wave of visceral horror mixed with unpleasant memories flooded him.

He screamed internally. He also screamed externally.

Malex: (Screams.)

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Thank you for inviting me into your home!

Linus: You're not invited! Get out!

Snufflefungus: Linus, please. He means us no harm!

Mara: What do you want from us?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: I'm just here to have a conversation with Malex! But Mara, since you're here, I have gifts for you both as well!

Malex: (Weakly.) I don't want to talk and we don't want your gifts. Please, I'm just not up for these shenanigans today.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Oh what is this I see? Are you holding a *DNA sibling test kit*?!

Malex: Yes.

Mara: It's none of your business!

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Why are you testing your DNA? (Sniffs.) It's obvious from your *fragrant odor* that you are brother and sister.

Snufflefungus: (Protests.) **That's what I said!**

Malex: And *when* were you going to mention this?!

Little Red Riding Squirrel: It never came up!

Linus: I've also known the whole time. In case anyone is keeping track.

Malex: Okay, you've talked to us. And you've given us the gift of nausea. Now can you leave?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Not yet! Malex, you must go... *on a quest*.

Malex: What?! No! I'm not doing *anything* for you!

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Just one *little* quest? Barely an errand! For old time's sake?

Malex: No, no, a thousand times no! I'm *tired* and I *refuse* to be a pawn in your deranged schemes ever again!

Little Red Riding Squirrel: (Offended.) Rude!

Snufflefungus: It's not your fault, Little Red Riding Squirrel. Malex hasn't been feeling himself lately.

Linus: Also it's definitely your fault because you're horrible. No offense.

Mara: We've all been through a lot, Little Red Riding Squirrel. Can you please just leave us alone?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: (Sighs.) If only you understood what you were asking. (Sorrowfully.) I've seen more ages and witnessed more suffering than you can possibly imagine.

For a moment, Malex saw an unfathomable depth and uncountable millennia in the creature's eyes. It was uncanny.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Malex, I will not force your hand. But I will *warn* you. A storm is coming for you, and you will rise to meet it because you have no choice. You cannot deny who you are.

Mara: It's a shame your voice is so high-pitched. Honestly that could have come off as pretty dramatic if you didn't sound so silly.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: And now it's time for the gifts!

Little Red Riding Squirrel opened his basket and pulled a very small package from it. The package was gift wrapped with silver paper and tied with a little bow. It was a very small cube, less than two inches wide.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: This one is for you, Malex.

Malex took the package.

Malex: (Uncertain.) Thanks...

Little Red Riding Squirrel: You're welcome! Just don't open it yet.

Malex: Oh? What is it?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: (Cheerfully.) That is a box of physical and emotional pain. When you open it your body and soul will be immersed in overwhelming agony for five hours.

Malex: (Sardonic.) Oh gee. You shouldn't have.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: It really is quite exquisite. I had it handcrafted just for you.

Malex eyed the tiny box warily.

Malex: I'll just set this over here and maybe never touch it ever again.

Little Red Riding Squirrel turned his beady eyes to Mara and pulled another package out of his basket.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: And now, my dear. A gift for you.

Mara: (Horrified.) Oh no, please no.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Don't you want to know why you're the only human with telepathic powers?

Little Red Riding Squirrel held the package out to Mara. Mara hesitated, then tentatively took it.

Mara: I do, actually. I do want answers.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: When the time is right, if you decide to open that package, you will receive *none of the answers you seek!*

Mara: (Confused.) What?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Inside that box is the silence you've yearned for! If you open that box, you will lose your telepathic powers forever and be just like any other human.

Mara stared at the package in her hands, which had begun to subtly quiver.

Mara: Wow. I don't know what to think.

Malex: Don't do it! It's a monkey's paw!

Mara: (Contemplative.) But he's right. Telepathy is such a curse.

Malex: You don't know this demon squirrel like I do. Even if he offers something that *seems* desirable, the cost is always too high!

Little Red Riding Squirrel beamed up at them.

Snufflefungus: Mister Riding Squirrel, do Linus and I get presents too?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Dearest fluff ball, I have nothing for you or for your laptop friend. My gifts are reserved for those who need a transformation to become complete.

Snufflefungus: Don't I need a transformation?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: No, child. You are perfect.

Snufflefungus: And what about Linus?

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Linus is beyond hope.

Linus: (Offended.) Hey!

Malex: Okay Little Red Riding Squirrel, this has been quite a visit. I'm sure you have lots of other cursed errands to run, so we won't keep you.

Little Red Riding Squirrel: Oh my, look at the time! I must go. Keep an eye out for that storm, Malex. And tell it I said hi! (Disappearing sound.)

Mara: Did he just disappear into thin air?

Malex: Yeah, he does that occasionally.

Mara: Why did you think the blast doors would keep him out?

Snufflefungus: Wait, the lockdown was supposed to keep *Little Red Riding Squirrel* out?! That was *never* going to work!

Linus: (Grumpy.) I'm perfect! That stupid squirrel doesn't know anything!

The End