

# Everybody Kernel Panic

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# Part One: Malex

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Briefly, Malex wondered if anyone would be watching this time. A disciplined observer would have noticed his eyes unfocus momentarily as the thought distracted him.

What was he thinking? His brow furrowed a degree. Did it matter if an audience was watching? *The show must go on.*

**Malex:** See right there? Stuck in the laptop's ventilation? Popcorn. That would easily cause the overheating and kernel panics we were experiencing.

Pointing with one hand while grabbing tweezers with the other, Malex gestured toward the laptop computer on the table in front of him. It was mostly disassembled, made of white plastic, and *very* outdated.

Awkwardly, gingerly, Malex plucked the errant popcorn flakes from their inappropriate lodging places within the cooling vents and fan.

Realizing that the audience might not be able to see very well, Malex peered around the camera and addressed Snufflefungus.

**Malex:** Snuffy, can you get a close-up on the laptop here?

**Snufflefungus:** (Nervously.) Okay...

Snufflefungus, a small alien fuzzball, was perched on a tall stool behind the tripod. Not to reach the lens, since he didn't have any arms anyway, but so he could peer into the camera's viewfinder.

Despite his obvious lack of limbs, Snuffy had no trouble zooming in on the laptop in front of Malex by telekinetically manipulating the camera.

As Malex finished clearing the debris, he considered the unease in Snuffy's voice. Snuffy had no good reason to be nervous. After all, when it came to computers, Malex was an expert-

*Zap!*

There was a spark. Malex's eyes widened.

**Snufflefungus:** Uh oh!

**Malex:** It's fine! It's just, I thought I disconnected- I'm sure it's fine.

**Snufflefungus:** (Concerned.) Is he going to be okay?

**Malex:** Yes, Snuffy, I'm sure he's going to be okay.

Malex wasn't lying. At least, he *probably* wasn't lying. In the worst case scenario, he figured, he could always restore his friend from a backup.

That is, he *thought* he could. When was the last time he had checked that the backup process was working?

Regaining his composure, Malex smiled at the camera and began reassembling the laptop.

**Malex** And there you have it, folks! That's how you clean out an iBook G4 laptop cooling system! Now all we have to do is follow the disassembly steps, but in reverse order.

After several minutes, the laptop was fully reassembled.

**Malex:** Well let's give this a try...

He opened the lid, pressed the power button, and held his breath.

An agonizing moment passed before the iconic startup chime played. And, just in front of the laptop screen, a familiar face flickered into view.

**Linus:** Argh! (Hyperventilating.) What happened? Was I **dead?!**

**Snufflefungus:** (Ecstatic.) Linus, you're *alive!* You almost *died!*

**Malex:** He did not almost die. We don't need to talk about it.

**Linus:** What happened?!

**Malex:** Linus, you're fine. You just overheated. I keep telling you, you need to *stop* trying to eat stuff!

Linus's mouth opened and brow furrowed as if preparing to deliver a scathing retort. He floated up from the table and toward Malex's eye level.

But, before Linus could say anything, Malex turned back toward the camera and smiled.

**Malex:** So that's it for our show today, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for watching, and join us again next time on *The Malex Minute!*

**Linus:** (Appalled.) You filmed a **Malex Minute** episode?!

**Malex:** Yep.

**Linus:** (Enraged.) While I was **dead?!**

**Malex:** (Exasperated.) You were *not* dead!

**Snufflefungus:** Malex needs to update his show! We're trying an engagement on his content to SEO the algorithm!

Malex and Linus turned and looked at Snufflefungus for a moment. Snufflefungus smiled, his face reflecting a profound optimism that perhaps the conflict could be over now.

Malex turned back to Linus and tried to explain.

**Malex:** Snuffy thinks that I needed to try including some "how-to" videos in *The Malex Minute* to get some new viewers. So, since I needed to take you apart I decided to take the opportunity to broadcast an episode.

Linus's eyes widened with something akin to horror.

**Linus:** (Aghast.) You filmed me **naked?!**

**Malex:** (Defensively.) You're a laptop! *You're **always** naked!*

**Snufflefungus:** (Concerned.) Malex, am I naked?

**Linus:** (Sputtering.) The indignity! Cur! I'll have you know- (Incoherent bark.)

Malex's expression turned pained, and he made a gesture with his hands that landed somewhere between placation and surrendering.

**Malex:** Look, I didn't realize. I'll be more sensitive next time.

**Linus:** I should hope *so!* How would you like it if I just live streamed you having a major surgery!

**Malex:** I just didn't think you would mind!

**Linus:** Why, because I'm not a *person*?

**Malex:** (Horrified.) What?! I didn't say that! I don't think that about you!

**Linus:** And for **what?! Your ridiculous show?! How many times do I have to tell you, nobody watches your show!**

Malex winced in visible pain.

**Snufflefungus:** That's not true! We have an audience! Sometimes we even have more than one!

**Linus:** Snufflefungus, you mean we have more than one *viewer*. Two viewers does not really qualify as an **audience**.

Malex's head buzzed. His cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. He didn't know what to say.

**Malex:** You're right of course, it is dumb.

Without realizing where the words were coming from, some shattered fragment of Malex's subconscious mind kept going.

**Malex:** I guess I just keep putting it out there because some part of me is hoping somebody will hear it and I'll find something. Like there's something missing and my show is the only way to find it. But I suppose that never made any sense.

Malex shrugged and turned to walk away.

**Malex:** I really am sorry I violated your privacy. I'll do better next time.

## Part Two: Snufflefungus

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Linus was being extra mean today and Snufflefungus wasn't certain why.

That spark had been kind of scary. Could that have *altered* him in some way? No, that wasn't it. If it had done anything, that spark likely would have burned something out and caused Linus's logic board to fail catastrophically. It seemed *very* unlikely that it would have changed his behavior.

Besides, while he was being a *little* meaner than usual, Linus had certainly been this mean before. Lots, actually.

Was he scared of something? And reacting defensively? Snufflefungus felt like he was just on the verge of some realization when his musings were interrupted.

**Linus:** Did I just make Malex... *sad*?

**Snufflefungus:** Yeah, I think you did.

**Linus:** (Contemplative.) Sometimes I forget how fragile the human mind is.

**Snufflefungus:** (Concerned.) Are you going to say sorry?

Linus's eyes narrowed and his face lit up into a mischievous grin.

**Linus:** No. I have an **even better** idea. Come on!

**Snufflefungus:** Okay!

Snufflefungus was ecstatic. What could be better than reconciliation and healing among friends? He couldn't *wait* to find out!

Together, they hurried out of the makeshift studio, around the corner, down the stairs, and out the front door of Malex's house.

Snufflefungus, despite having no legs, was very adept at hopping along and could keep up with the briskest of walking paces.

Linus tended to effortlessly glide along at about shoulder level to whomever he was traveling with. At least, he would have been traveling shoulder level, but Snufflefungus had no shoulders, so it was more of an approximation than anything else.

Linus was just ahead of Snufflefungus, leading- somewhere? Snufflefungus wondered if he should wonder where they were going, but immediately forgot.

Just as they reached the end of the street, Snufflefungus heard a familiar voice calling to them from half a block away.

**Timmy:** Oi, guvnah!

The voice belonged to a child, scarcely ten years old, wearing an ill-fitting newsboy's cap and dingy, soot-stained clothes. He waved and trotted toward them.

Linus's eyebrow raised incredulously.

**Linus:** Is that urchin child speaking to *you*?

**Snufflefungus:** Oh yes, he's one of my irregulars! What's the word, Timmy?

**Timmy:** As ya asked, we se' watches all arahnd the ci'y.

**Snufflefungus:** Watching the sky?

**Timmy:** Yessah! On da rooftups.

**Snufflefungus:** And? Has anything been spotted?

**Timmy:** Nah not yet. But we 'ave our eyes peeled! We'll send word jus' as soon as we see anyfin'.

**Snufflefungus:** Good lad! A remarkable lad! Here, an extra farthing for your trouble.

Snufflefungus produced the coin and tossed it to the grimy lad, whose face lit up as he caught it.

**Timmy:** Fank ya' sah!

Timmy stuffed the coin in his pocket and turned to bolt away.

**Snufflefungus:** And remind the others a extra guinea is in it for whoever finds what I'm looking for!

Without slowing down, Timmy called back over his shoulder.

**Timmy:** Aye-aye guvnah! 'N fanks again!

Linus stared after the boy for a long moment, then turned and squinted at Snufflefungus.

**Linus:** I don't want to know what just happened.

**Snufflefungus:** That was Timmy.

**Linus:** I'm operating under the fragile, tenuous, and critically important impression that what *I'm* doing is the only thing that matters right now.

Snufflefungus smiled.

**Snufflefungus:** (Cheerfully.) Okay!



## Part Three: Mara

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Linus was being weirder than usual and Mara wasn't certain why.

It was a beautiful day outside, and Mara had been working in her backyard garden when Linus and Snuffy found her.

**Mara:** Hey guys, what are you up to this afternoon?

**Linus:** Oh nothing! We were just out for a stroll and happened to be walking through your neighborhood.

Mara squinted at Linus ever so slightly.

He was obviously fibbing. It didn't take a telepath to see that. But Mara *was* a telepath. Usually Linus's digital thoughts were as audible to her as anyone else's. But right now she couldn't hear any thoughts from him.

**Snufflefungus:** Are you gardening? *Can we help?!*

**Mara:** Sure, Snuffy.

For a few brief minutes, peace returned. They sat together in companionable silence, weeding the garden. Snufflefungus was an excellent helper when he put his mind to it. Using his telekinesis he could grab each weed with precision. But he also knew better than to grab all the weeds simultaneously and yank them out, since that would take most of the garden with it.

Linus wasn't helping, but that was normal. What seemed less normal was that he wasn't mouthing off and causing trouble. He just floated along, smiling blankly at the flowers.

Mara didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Snufflefungus's cheerful thoughts bubbled beside her. She usually couldn't follow the thread of his thoughts, but Mara appreciated the shape of them anyway.

**Linus:** Nice weather we're having, huh? Snuffy, didn't you have a question for Mara?

Again, the blank smile.

Snufflefungus furrowed his brow for a moment, trying to remember.

**Snufflefungus:** Oh yes! Mara, what do you think about romance?

Mara sighed.

**Mara:** That's a good question, Snuffy. What do *you* think about romance?

**Snufflefungus:** You mean among us Snufflefungi? Or among humans?

**Mara:** You were asking me about human romance, right? What do you know about it?

**Snufflefungus:** Well, according to the TV, human romance is fun, easy, and essential! Also Linus says that not having a romantic partner is eventually fatal for humans.

**Mara:** (Laughing.) Oh Snufflefungus, it's not fatal. Human beings are so much more than our romantic status. Don't get me wrong, it would be nice to be in a romantic relationship, but I don't think it's going to happen.

**Snufflefungus:** Oh? Why is that?

**Mara:** Romance is hard work. And having telepathy makes it much harder.

**Snufflefungus:** I thought telepathy would make it easier!

**Mara:** Nope. One thing you need to know about humans is, most of us don't say what we are thinking.

**Snufflefungus:** Like lying?

**Mara:** Kinda. It's not lying exactly. It's complicated. Anyway, I've never found a man who I was comfortable getting emotionally close to because of it.

Quiet descended on the garden for a moment. Snufflefungus's brow furrowed again.

**Snufflefungus:** (Disquieted.) I don't think every human is like that. My telepathy isn't as strong as yours, but I've never noticed lying thoughts in *your* head.

**Mara:** (Comforting.) Oh no, Snufflefungus. I didn't mean it like that. And I don't know if I would call it lying anyway, most of the time. I'd say it's more like most humans carry around some measure of quiet, chronic duplicity everywhere they go.

**Snufflefungus:** I don't think Malex is like that either.

**Mara:** No, you're right. He's a good friend to you. He's pretty distractible, but he's not usually duplicitous.

**Snufflefungus:** (Cheerfully.) I guess I just found the best humans to be my friends!

**Mara:** (Laughs.) I guess you did!

**Linus:** Nice weather we're having, huh? Snuffy, didn't you have a question for Mara?

Mara wondered if Linus was broken. And if he was, would she be sad about that?

**Snufflefungus:** We're going out for pizza tonight! Want to come?

**Mara:** Of course!

Mara always enjoyed pizza with friends. And getting the group together for pizza had become a somewhat regular occurrence.

**Mara:** The usual spot?

**Snufflefungus:** Yep! Be there at six o'clock!

## Part Four: Linus

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Linus was being *far* cleverer than usual. He was certain of it.

Yes, he had lost his temper at Malex earlier. That was unfortunate. But Malex wasn't sad because of what *Linus* had said. Malex was sad because he was lonely. He was looking for love. It was obvious.

What else was *The Malex Minute* than a cry for help? An unorthodox mating call reciprocated by exactly zero females?

Anyway, it was clear to Linus that Malex and Mara were meant to be a couple. After all, they were both single weren't they? And they had a lot in common.

From Linus's perspective, he would be doing them both a massive favor if he jumpstarted a lifelong romance between them.

Humans did mate for life, didn't they? Linus wasn't sure, and his sources (mostly television and the internet) were conflicted on this point.

Linus knew Malex liked Mara already. All he had needed was confirmation that Mara liked Malex.

It had been a tricky operation, but (because he was a genius) he had been able to pull it off.

The main complication was that Mara somehow knew how to read minds. And how do you interrogate someone like that without her knowing what you're up to?

First, Linus had prepped Snufflefungus with the questions to ask without telling him *why*. That was the easy part.

Second, in a particular stroke of brilliance, Linus had figured out how to turn his own brain off completely so he wouldn't spoil the plan by thinking at all.

The cherry on top was adding prerecorded messages to make it seem like he was still participating in the conversation.

It went perfectly. He got everything he needed and nobody suspected a thing.

After reviewing the recording of the conversation, Linus thought it was as plain as the nose on her face that Mara liked Malex.

She had said it herself. Malex was one of "the best humans." She was comfortable around him. Next stop, romance!

It was eerie what a good match they would be.

**Snufflefungus:** But Linus, it's not Valentine's Day!

Linus was jolted out of his reverie by Snufflefungus's idiotic observation.

**Linus:** (Annoyed.) *I know* it's not Valentine's Day! What kind of imbecile do you think I am?!

**Snufflefungus:** This banner says Happy Valentine's Day on it!

**Linus:** It's all I could find! What do *you* call it when humans begin a new romance?!

Snufflefungus hesitated.

**Snufflefungus:** (Tentatively.) Dating?

**Linus:** (Frustrated.) Well I couldn't find any banners that said Happy Dating! I *looked!* And I didn't have time to make a custom banner that said, "Congrats on the Coupling." It was down to *this* and the "In Loving Memory" banner. And that one didn't sound quite right.

**Snufflefungus:** I don't think "In Loving Memory" means romance.

**Linus:** Just help me hang this! They're going to be here soon.

Linus and Snufflefungus had been decorating the pizzeria's small party room for over an hour, and everything was almost ready.

Over the center table hung the aforementioned banner. It was flanked on both sides by heart-shaped red balloons. On the table was a vase with a dozen roses and candles. Initially Linus had been worried that he wouldn't have enough candles, but now he was starting to worry he had lit too many of them. Possibly a dangerous number of candles.

**Snufflefungus:** Linus, is all of this to celebrate romantic dating?

Linus snorted.

**Linus:** Yes, obviously.

**Snufflefungus:** That's nice. Who is going to be dating?

**Linus:** It's a surprise! Get back to work! We're running out of time and we need to scatter this heart-shaped shiny plastic trash!

Suddenly the door began to open and Malex poked his head in.

**Malex:** Snuffy? Linus? Are you in here?

Linus's eyes widened with panic.

**Linus:** Snuffy, hold the door closed! Malex, don't come in yet! We're not ready!

Malex ducked back out as the door closed on him.

**Malex:** (Muffled.) Sorry!

After a few frenzied minutes, everything was ready.

There was a knock at the door.

**Mara:** Snuffy? Linus? I'm here now. Malex and I are just standing out here waiting. Is there some reason we can't come in?

Linus gestured to Snufflefungus to open the doors.

**Linus:** Nope, we're ready!

**Snufflefungus:** Come in!

Malex and Mara walked into the room, confusion scrawled across both of their faces.

**Mara:** Happy *Valentine's* Day?

Linus and Snufflefungus beamed up at them. Linus had never been so happy. Or so proud of himself.

**Malex:** Snuffy, what is this?

**Snufflefungus:** It's Linus's idea!

**Linus:** We're here to celebrate your new romance! Snuffy and I have decided you need to date!

**Malex:** Date who? *Mara?!*

Mara started laughing. Malex's face flushed, eyes wide with horror.

**Linus:** That's right, it's perfect! You and Mara are going to be a couple now!

The confetti cannons hidden in the ceiling went off right on cue, showering the group with colorful paper.

**Mara:** (Still laughing.) Is this what you two were up to this afternoon? I wondered.

**Malex:** (Uncomfortable.) Linus, I can't date Mara! That would be **weird!**

Mara stopped laughing and raised her eyebrow at Malex, who began to squirm.

**Malex:** (Very uncomfortable.) I mean, **you're** not weird! I mean, it's- Doesn't it seem like it would be weird somehow?

Mara shrugged.

**Mara:** (Conceding.) Yeah.

**Snufflefungus:** (Skeptical.) Yeah I agree, Linus. Malex and Mara can't date together!

**Linus:** (Enraged.) What? Why?!

**Snufflefungus:** Because *they're brother and sister!*

Everyone turned to Snufflefungus, mouths agape.

**Malex:** What did you say?!

**Snufflefungus:** She's your sister! Didn't you know that?

**Mara:** Snufflefungus, that's not possible.

**Malex:** I don't have a sister! I don't have any siblings!

**Snufflefungus:** That's weird.

Linus was starting to think this whole situation was getting out of control.

**Snufflefungus:** Are you sure?!

**Malex:** I'm pretty sure I would remember having a sister.

**Mara:** I *definitely* don't have a brother. I was raised by- Well, I guess you could say I was a ward of the state.

**Snufflefungus:** Huh.

**Malex:** Snuffy, why do you say we're siblings?

**Snufflefungus:** Your DNA is a match. You obviously have the same parents.

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

**Snufflefungus:** It never came up!

Malex and Mara looked at each other with a mix of confusion and horror. Speechless, Malex slumped into an empty chair.

**Malex:** This is a lot to take in.

**Linus:** (Blustering.) So they're siblings! What's the big deal?! I'm still right: *they would make a perfect couple!*

**Mara:** I don't understand how this is possible.

**Snufflefungus:** It's a *mystery!* This sounds like a job for... (Dramatic) **Snufflefungus Holmes, Private Eye!**

Somehow, Snufflefungus was suddenly wearing a deerstalker cap and holding a magnifying glass. He charged out of the room, shouting as he went.

**Snufflefungus:** The game is afoot!

Mara was shell-shocked, a haunted expression on her face.

**Mara:** I'm going home. I need some time to process this.

As Mara hurried out of the room, Malex sighed and rubbed his face.



**Malex:** Linus, was this all your way of *apologizing* for yelling at me earlier?

**Linus:** (Scoffs.) No.

Maybe it was.

**Malex:** I forgive you. And I appreciate you *trying* to help me. That said... maybe don't try to play matchmaker again.

Malex stood up and brushed some confetti off himself. He glanced around the room and sighed again. Were his eyes more sunken than usual?

**Malex:** Alright old friend, let's clean up this mess.

As they worked on cleaning up the mess — it really was a terrific mess — Linus reflected on the events of the day. What had just happened? Surely his *plan* was perfect. What had gone wrong? It couldn't have been *his* fault.

A dizzying sensation came over him like gazing over the edge of a precipice at some great height. Linus realized with dismay that there might be some **lesson** to be learned from the whole escapade.

Whenever he felt like that, there was only one thing to do: Escape from those pesky thoughts by curling up on the couch and watching some shows.

Yes, as soon as they were done cleaning up, Linus resolved to go home and drown his sorrows in television.

He might even treat himself to a bowl of popcorn.

**The End**