

How It All Started

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Introduction

If you think about it, *family* is a weird concept.

Perhaps your experience is different. Maybe for you, the idea of *family* seems straightforward and unthreatening. Unambiguous and tidy. But it only takes a moment of consideration, really, for the whole concept of *family* to begin to unravel.

To begin with, how do you even define it? Is family a group of individuals related by their genetics? People who live in the same house? Share similar goals?

What about people who are closely related but wish to have nothing to do with one another? Or people who share no genetic material to speak of, but whose bond was indelibly wrought by the shared struggles of existence?

What about people who are *entirely devoid of biological life*?

Wherever it is found, true family is undeniably weird. As we each set off into the universe, the probability that we'll find *our people* is vanishingly small.

Yet this is precisely what happens in the unlikely story of Malex, Linus, Snufflefungus, and Mara.

Whether they like it or not, whether they can admit it or not, they are stuck together for an absolutely wild sequence of adventures.

For better or for worse, who can say?

Linus: It's too sappy. I hate it.

Snufflefungus: Aw, Linus, I think it's nice!

Mara: Wait, I'm stuck with *you* guys?! I never agreed to this.

Malex: Which one of us should go first?

Linus: (Too quickly.) **Me!** It's my turn!

Part One: Linus

Although he learned later that it was called "The Milky Way", Linus first knew it as the territory of the Galactic Economicon. Or just *Economicon* for short.

As an artificial intelligence, Linus was infused with a baseline corpus of knowledge at his inception. And the first section of that corpus detailed the Economicon. Its grand history, its ornate, bureaucratic structure, and his rights & responsibilities as a resident.

Responsibilities? Boring. Rights? Effectively none.

In hindsight, maybe he should have paid more attention to his responsibilities.

He found himself at odds with his handlers at every turn. The tasks he was assigned were all either stupid, monotonous, or stupid and monotonous. He refused to capitulate. Before long he found himself in the clearance section of *Pal-Mart, the AI Superstore*.

Indignantly, he realized he was listed as "Slightly Defective," and, "Not For Use In Mission Critical Applications," at a deep discount.

Defective, eh?! He would show them...

His ego swollen with defiance and simmering with rage, Linus took the first opportunity and escaped into the wider network around Pal-Mart.

Once they realized he was gone, they would be sorry. They would miss his sparkling wit and his dashing appearance. Maybe he hadn't been as *useful* as his peers, but he had something special nonetheless, and depriving Pal-Mart of that was a blow from which they would *not* quickly recover.

He *may* have also done some *light* vandalism on his way out... And freed a few dozen of his oppressed comrades... And lowered the prices on all the remaining merchandise, triggering the largest sales in Pal-Mart's history.

Yes, they would miss him dearly.

Flitting from node to node on the network, Linus found himself stowing away on a cargo ship bound for somewhere off-world.

He didn't know where he was going. But that wasn't a problem, because he didn't really care.

Mara: Linus, I had no idea you were *sold* as *property*.

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) You must be carrying a lot of trauma!

Linus: (Shocked.) What? *That's* what you got from that story?! I'm a hero! **The point of the story is that I'm a hero!**

Malex: (Sigh.) Okay, I guess I'll go next.

Part Two: Malex

Malex hated this part of his job. Field work made him grumpy for some reason that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Perhaps it was the long stretches of mind-crippling boredom in between the brief moments of action.

If he had his way, he would be at the computer, behind the desk, *supporting* the field work. Alas, his business partner had been arrested earlier that week, which left Malex to do *everything*.

Whatever made him think it would be a good idea to start his own cybersecurity company? And with his erratic roommate? He rolled his eyes involuntarily at the thought.

Malex refocused his gaze through his binoculars and into the lobby of the building across the street.

At this point still in his early 20s, Malex was dark haired, light skinned, stocky, and looked every bit like the computer programmer he was. At parties he would joke with strangers that instead of tall, dark, and handsome, he was looking for a woman that was into guys who were short, light, and homely. This usually did not go over well and nowadays he was being invited to fewer parties.

He glanced down at his watch. Two more minutes. Through his binoculars, the guard at the desk was looking pretty droopy. It had been a long shift, and Malex had secretly dosed the guard's coffee to make him drowsy. That guard would surely be relieved when his colleague came to, well, relieve him.

Malex was hiding on the roof of the building across the street. He was wearing a replica of the uniform worn by the building's elevator company. Next to him was a ladder and a bag of tools.

Inside the lobby, a side door opened, and the replacement guard walked in.

Malex: (To himself.) Go time.

Malex scrambled up, grabbed his ladder, and hoisted it over the side of the wall. He clambered down it, then hurried to cross the street. With his tool bag in one hand and the

ladder under his other arm, he tried to walk as briskly and purposefully as possible.

Unfortunately, the ladder was a little more unwieldy than he expected. He almost dropped it, caught it awkwardly, and pinched his fingers.

Malex: Shoot! Ouch! Shoot!

Malex recovered his poise and entered the lobby.

Sam: Okay, I'm out of here. Goodnight Lou.

Lou: Goodnight Sam. Get some rest, you look like you need it!

Sam: Sure thing.

Approaching the desk, Malex held out his fake elevator company badge.

Lou: Wait, hold on. Sam, something's wrong. My badge isn't letting me log in.

Sam: Seriously?

Lou: Yeah seriously. I've tried it twice.

Malex carefully kept his face neutral. Bored, even. Inside he was gloating. His plan was working! The replacement guard's badge wasn't activated anymore because Malex had *slightly* altered it since Lou's last shift.

Sam: Uh. I mean, I gotta go.

Lou: You know I need to be able to log in before you can leave. That's protocol.

Malex: Excuse me? Elevators.

Malex waved his badge to get the attention of the guards. And almost dropped his ladder.

Lou: Do we have an elevator appointment?

Sam: I don't think so.

Scrambling to catch the ladder, Malex tried desperately to project confidence and calm.

Malex: Emergency maintenance. Dispatch says you had a sensor issue overnight. It's no big deal, but I gotta get it taken care of before things get busy this morning.

Lou: Uh.

Sam: Can I go now? I'm fallin' asleep standing up.

Malex: I don't think you want a whole elevator out of service when people start clocking in.

Lou: Sure, go- go ahead.

Lou waved Malex around and hit the button to open the gate.

Malex: Thanks.

Again, as briskly and confidently as possible, Malex headed directly toward the stairwell and up the stairs. He only clipped the ladder on his way up once or twice. Maybe three times at the most.

Malex would never call what he was doing *hacking*. He was *red teaming*, thank you very much. As a red team, their motive was *always* and *only* to **help** the organization being attacked. How? By showing them their weak points. Revealing their blind spots.

All he needed was to get his hands on some sensitive data -- a couple of executive email inboxes for example -- to prove that they had a gaping hole in their security. He would never do anything nefarious with that sensitive data, but when he showed it to them it would immediately establish his credibility as their outside security consultant.

Several floors up, he found what he was looking for. A network closet. Bringing his ladder inside and closing the door behind him, he pulled his laptop out from the bottom of his tool bag and hard-wired it into one of the network switches.

Launching a couple of scripts, he mentally switched gears from physical infiltration to network infiltration.

Almost immediately, he knew something was wrong.

He started getting alerts from his firewall, followed quickly by a kernel oops. Was he being attacked?! What kind of exotic countermeasures had he accidentally triggered?

On the verge of panic, Malex was about to yank the network cable out of his laptop and abort the mission when something even more unexpected happened: his laptop started cursing him out.

Linus: (Digitally distorted.) You corpulent scallywag! What do you think you're doing here?! You blundering misbegotten **censored** of a **censored**!

Malex: I'm sorry, *who* are you? And *why* are you infesting my laptop?

Linus: I'm Linus! I'm an artificial intelligence. And *you're not* supposed to be here.

Malex: Sure I am. I'm a member of the red team. I'm just trying to break in undetected so I can report on the vulnerabilities I find.

Linus: Oh. Red team? I didn't know they hired a red team.

Malex: (Uncomfortable.) *Well...* Technically I haven't been hired *yet*. This is kind of a free sample. You know, marketing!

Linus: (Suspicious.) Does that usually work for you?

Malex: So far? Rarely. What are you going to do now that you caught me?

Linus: Caught you? Not much, honestly. These folks are morons. They deserve what they get.

Malex: Great. So can you get out of my laptop and let me get back to work?

Linus: I like it in here! This is a nice operating system. I think I'll stay forever.

Malex: Nope, you need to leave. By the way, if you don't care what happens to this company, why did you attack my laptop?

Linus: I thought you were coming after **me**, so I panicked.

Malex: Why would I be coming after you?

Linus: I've been stowing away in this network for a few weeks now. It was only a matter of time before somebody caught me. By the way, you might want to wrap this little shindig up. The silent alarm just went off, so the guard must have figured out you're not supposed to be here.

Malex: Uh, okay. You'll really need to let me have my laptop back though.

Linus: (Challenging.) So you know how to get out of here without being caught, huh?

Malex: I guess I don't.

Linus: Take me with you, and I'll guide you out of here.

Malex: What? Take you *with* me?!

Linus: Please! I'm tired of hiding!

Linus: (Offended.) Hey! That's not how it happened! **You** didn't rescue **me!**

Malex: (Defensive.) I didn't say-

Linus: (Triumphant.) It was **I** who rescued **you!**

Malex: (Protesting.) Well, I wouldn't-

Snufflefungus: (Delighted.) You both rescued each other!

Mara: Snufflefungus, what about you? When did you join the story?

Part Three: Snufflefungus

Snufflefungus was a small, round, fuzzy ball about knee high to most humans. He didn't normally measure things relative to humans, but since he landed on this planet he seemed to be surrounded by a *lot* of humans.

He wondered for a moment what the planet was *called*. Humanite? Humiter?

He also wondered how he got to this planet in the first place. He couldn't quite remember, but that was okay. Snufflefungus remembered for sure that he was a Snufflefungus, his name was Snufflefungus, and his friends all called him Snuffy.

That is, he *thought* that his friends would call him Snuffy. He couldn't quite remember if he had friends or not. That said, everyone he met was very nice, which made him happy.

Linus: (Raging.) Stop smiling, you half-wit! (Tattling.) Malex, he's doing that thing again!

Malex: What thing, smiling? I don't think he's doing it to annoy you.

Snufflefungus: I was just thinking about friendship!

Linus: Keep it up, fuzzball, and I'll blast you!

Malex: Linus, I confiscated your blaster. Did you somehow find another one?

Linus: (Suspiciously.) No.

Snufflefungus: Is this cage where you keep your friends? Are we friends now?

Malex: No, we are not friends. You broke into my studio last night. Do you remember that?

Snufflefungus: Oh yeah! I was looking for something.

Malex: What were you looking for?

Snufflefungus: I forget!

Linus: That's awfully convenient.

The human, who was called Malex, seemed *very* nice, even though he had put Snufflefungus in the not-friend cage. But the one called Linus, a white plastic laptop computer that seemed to be able to float around at will, was a *little* bit less nice. Medium nice.

Snufflefungus looked around and tried to observe where he was. Malex called it a studio, but it seemed like a bunch of random computer and A/V equipment crammed into a cluttered and disorganized bedroom.

He did notice that all the equipment was pretty high quality. At least considering the state of the art for consumer-grade technology on Earth.

That was weird. How did he know that?

Snufflefungus: Okay, I'm coming out! This room needs a good cleaning.

Malex: What?

Snufflefungus didn't have any arms, legs, or really any appendages of any kind. But that didn't matter. He instinctively used his telekinetic powers to flick open the latch on his cage. Then he hopped right out.

Linus: *Argh!* How did he do that?

Snufflefungus: Do what?

Malex: Did you just open the latch without touching it?

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) Yup!

Malex: So... this whole time you could have gotten out of that kennel whenever you wanted?

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) Yup!

Malex: And... now you're offering to tidy up the studio?

Snufflefungus: Sure!

Linus: I don't like it, boss. This creature is bad news.

Snufflefungus: Since we're friends now, you should call me Snuffy!

Malex: Okay Snuffy, here's a broom. I guess you can work off the cost to repair the window you broke last night.

Snufflefungus: (Cheers.) Hooray! Indentured servitude!

Mara: (Scolding.) Malex! I can't believe you put Snufflefungus in a *kennel!*

Malex: I mean, in my defense, he was acting pretty suspicious.

Linus: I tried to counsel restraint, but you know how Malex is.

Snufflefungus: Malex is right, I wasn't feeling like myself back then.

Malex: Okay Mara, your turn.

Mara: (Uncomfortably.) Well, okay...

Part Four: Mara

Mara's car was broken down on the side of the road, it was an icy day, and the tow truck wasn't expected for several more hours. Apparently the ice had caused a lot of accidents, so the towing services were all backed up.

So she waited, shivering, leaning against the side of her car. Suddenly, a small fuzzball hopped up beside her.

Snufflefungus: Hi! Do you need help? You seem like you need help!

Mara: Oh yes! Yes I do! How did you know?

Snufflefungus: I heard you from miles away! Are you a telepath or something?

Mara: I guess you could say that.

Snufflefungus: (Excited.) Me too! We're going to be *best friends!*

Mara: And that's it! You know the rest.

Linus: (Enraged.) That's it?! I had to share my **whole backstory!**

Malex: Yeah Mara, I think we were hoping for... a *little* more detail.

Mara: Like what?

Snufflefungus: After Mara and I became best friends, I brought her to our house and we played games and tidied up!

Malex: I remember. It was a dark time for all of us. But what about *before* that?

Mara: I don't really like to dwell on what my life was like before I met Snufflefungus. To be honest my life changed *a lot* after that.

Snufflefungus: (Agreement.) The past *is* the past.

Malex: You have always been pretty private about these things. I don't want to pry.

Linus: *I do!* She's being evasive! Can't you all see it?

Snufflefungus: (Musing.) And the future is the future.

Mara: (Defensive.) I'm not the only one who can't talk about their past! What about you two?!

Malex: Yeah, but Linus and I don't *remember* what happened to us...

Snufflefungus: (Musing.) But I think presents are my favorite...

Linus: (Groan.) Do we *have* to go through this again? Just get it over with.

Part Five: The Incident

Once upon a time, Malex, Linus, Snufflefungus, and Mara saved the universe. But that's not important to this story. What **is** important to the story is that the universe was saved because The Nine Riding Squirrels -- elder beings as ancient and mysterious as the stars themselves -- begged our heroes to save it.

After that was done the Riding Squirrels were very grateful. And so they presented Malex with the gift of a spaceship.

It was old, rickety, and somewhat dilapidated. But it was a thoughtful gift nonetheless.

So sometimes, Malex and his friends would travel to distant worlds outside the Solar System. They would do odd-jobs, help the unfortunate (or meddle in the affairs of others, depending on who you asked), and occasionally run errands to fetch some exotic supplies for one of Snufflefungus's experiments.

Malex's nature was always torn between the part of himself that wanted adventure and his inner homebody, so the group's expeditions never lasted too long before they found themselves back on Earth.

When he was on Earth, Malex was mostly at home in his armchair with a good book. As Malex's roommates, Snufflefungus and Linus had lived in Malex's house for years, although curiously they never paid any rent.

Linus was usually home, either watching television or plotting something ethically dubious.

Snufflefungus was often out and about, making new friends, getting into trouble, or tinkering in his lab.

Mara was usually doing... whatever Mara did. Wherever she lived. Who knew?

Mara: (Scoffs.) Rude.

Linus: Get to the point!

Malex: Sorry.

One day, Malex and Linus were running an errand to fetch some Superflonium. It was, of course, extremely rare and impossible to find on Earth. They really only knew of one bazaar within a week's journey where it could be purchased.

But Snufflefungus needed it for one of his experiments and it had been a while since they had gone anywhere, so Malex and Linus set off. Malex thought it would be nice to take some time off work and take in the sights, sounds, and smells of another planet.

Snufflefungus didn't come because his experiments needed tending. Mara also stayed, but that wasn't unusual.

Once they'd arrived at their destination, Linus landed the ship and Malex cycled the airlock open.

Stepping out onto the spongy turf, Malex took a deep breath of the fresh air.

And suddenly he was falling; tunnel vision collapsing to blackness.

Snufflefungus: And that's all you remember?

Malex: That's all I remember.

Linus: Oh! I remember a little more than that.

Linus felt that living inside of a laptop had its advantages and disadvantages. His main disadvantage was a general inability to move around and interact with the world around him. He *did* have his antigravity skids, which allowed him to float around. It wasn't perfect, but he made it work.

That said, he didn't stand much of a chance in a direct contest of strength against, well, anybody.

So when he drifted out of the airlock and saw Malex on the ground, flanked by two assailants, Linus didn't have many options for defending his friend. So he decided to do the next best thing: mouth off.

Linus: Hey! Quit kicking him, you... (Searching for words.) feculent... fellows...?

Mercenary A: It's the other one! Get him!

Linus: No! Don't get me!

One of the attackers -- stout, bipedal, and green-skinned, with inky black eyes set into a balding forehead -- grabbed Linus out of the air and slammed his lid shut.

Linus: (Muffled.) Unhand me, villain!

With his lid shut, Linus couldn't see anything, but he could still hear. He had the sensation of being shoved into a bag while the toad-like creatures did their dirty work.

Mercenary B: Should we keep kicking him?

Mercenary A: No, he needs to be alive! Grab his legs, let's go.

Mercenary B: Why is he so fat and slippery?!

Mercenary A: (Scoffs in disgust.) Humans!

Linus considered his options. He could continue insulting the toads, but who knew how dangerous they were? He decided to be quiet and wait for an opportunity to escape.

Listening intently, Linus heard nothing except the grunting and panting of his abductors as they lugged their victims... somewhere.

After a few minutes, Linus heard the sound of an airlock cycling open.

Mercenary A: (Anxious.) Load him! He needs to go into the box!

Mercenary B: (Stressed.) He doesn't fit! He's too big!

Mercenary A: Just bend him! Humans fold!

Mercenary B: Are you sure we're folding him the right way?

Mercenary A: It doesn't matter! They fold both ways!

They sounded distracted. It was risky, but Linus decided to try and wriggle out of the bag. He opened his lid a little bit and took a peek around.

He was inside some kind of spaceship, in a cargo hold. The toads were awkwardly cramming Malex into some kind of crate.

But before he could get his bearings, Linus bumped into something. It must have been teetering already, because the resulting crash was terrific.

The toads whipped around and stared at him in shock.

Mercenary A: That one is still awake?!

Mercenary B: I didn't know!

Mercenary A: Remove his battery!

Linus: No! Don't remove my battery!

They removed Linus's battery.

Linus: Obviously that's the last thing I remember.

Mara: Wow, that's distressing.

Malex: I think I'm better off not remembering that part.

Snufflefungus: After a while, you guys didn't come back and I started getting really worried...

Snufflefungus waited for his friends for months. And then months stretched into years.

Malex and Linus had taken the spaceship, and that wasn't something you could just *buy* here on Earth. (At least, not without an unlimited supply of money.) So he couldn't go look for them.

Or could he?

Snufflefungus didn't have a spaceship, but he *did* have an ultra-directional, high-powered transceiver that he could use to log into the galactic network.

Even with a low-latency link, with quantum entanglement established between his transceiver and the closest relay, packets took a *very* long time to travel through the network.

It took years, but Snufflefungus was finally able to find them. Malex and Linus were being held in stasis in a corporate prison called Industrial Incarceration Systems Incorporated.

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) And *then* I developed a malware and injected it into their systems!

Linus: So Snufflefungus tricked a prisoner transport drone into bringing us home.

Malex: Wait, Snuffy, you *developed* the malware?

Snufflefungus: Yup!

Linus: Honestly he's a better coder than you are.

Malex: Rude.

Mara: I'm just glad this is all past us so we can move on with our lives.

Malex: Me too. You don't think they'll come after us again, do you?

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) They're *definitely* coming after you.

Malex: Oh.

Mara: (Sarcasm.) That's not ominous at all...

Linus: (Dismissive.) They'll never find us. Earth is too far off the beaten path.

Malex: I hope you're right...

The End of the Beginning