

Laser Tag & Thuggery

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Part One: Malex

Malex had spent the better part of an hour setting up all the equipment in his studio. And now, he was ready to record the next episode of *The Malex Minute*.

It didn't matter if he couldn't *remember* why he had to do it. All he knew for sure was that it was his duty to keep broadcasting. He felt it deep in his bones. So his transmissions would keep coming.

With everything ready, he headed downstairs to fetch his co-hosts.

Malex: (Calling.) Snuffy, Linus are you ready?

As he rounded the corner to the dining room, Malex encountered Snufflefungus.

Snufflefungus: I'm almost ready to go!

Malex: (Dismissive.) Great, great. Where's Linus?

Snufflefungus: Oh, he's in the kitchen.

Malex: (Calling) Linus? Are you about ready to record?

Linus: (From the other room.) I'm busy!

As Malex headed into the kitchen, he became aware of a sound he couldn't quite place. Were those-?

Malex: What are you doing with **so many** wasps?

Linus: (Imperiously.) I'm teaching them to hunt ghosts.

Malex: Oh? Pray tell, why would you do this thing?

Linus: To sting them, *obviously*.

Malex: How do you come up with these ideas?

Linus: (Scoffs.) I haven't had the shriveled vestiges of my childlike wonder and imagination slough off and clatter to the dust at the bottom of my cranium like you have.

Malex: My childlike imagination is fine! It's *better* than fine! I have the imagination of *two* children!

Linus: Do their parents know about this?

Malex: (Frustrated.) That is it! I am walking away.

Frustrated, Malex headed back into the dining room to find Snuffy. He noticed that Snuffy was wearing a jacket, and saw Mara walking in.

Malex: Oh, hi Mara!

Mara: Hello! I'm just here to pick up Snuffy. Also, this just showed up in my mailbox yesterday.

Mara held an envelope out to Malex, who took it.

Malex: What's this?

Snufflefungus: According to my keen powers of observation, it is... (Dramatic.) *An envelope!*

Mara: It's the result from the DNA test. I already looked at it. Do you want me to tell you?

Malex: Uh-

Mara: I won't tell you. (Awkward laugh.) No spoilers!

Malex pulled the letter out of the torn envelope and skimmed it quickly.

Malex: So it's true. We're brother and sister.

Mara: I guess we knew that already.

Malex: Yeah. It's good to know, but... I just don't know what to do with this information. Anyway, I don't have time to think about this right now. Snuffy, you ready to record? Let's go.

Snufflefungus: Oh, I'm hanging out with Mara today!

Mara: Yeah, we had plans.

Malex: Oh, you did? I was planning on recording a Malex Minute episode.

Snufflefungus: (Drawn out.) Oh yeah! (Cheerful.) I forgot!

Mara: We can make it up to you! Next time I'll join and help with the show.

Malex: Okay, uh, have fun!

Snufflefungus: We will!

Mara: Bye!

Malex watched them go, then sighed. Alrighty then.

Part Two: Mara

One of Mara's favorite things to do was to take Snufflefungus to the arcade. They played laser tag, and they played to *win*.

(Sounds of intense laser tag match.)

Mara: (Intense.) Snuffy, get out of there! You're going to get pinned down!

Snufflefungus: Cover me! (Heavy breathing as he hops to safety.)

Mara couldn't see the rest of her team right now. It was dark, with flashing lights and blacklight effects everywhere. But that wasn't the problem. She couldn't see her team because, in all likelihood, they had been picked off by now. Being children, they were disorganized, slow, and vulnerable.

It was down to just her and Snufflefungus now. Them and, of course, most of the opposing team.

Their team had some new hotshot teenager on it. Unfortunately he was *good*. Good enough, in fact, that he had emerged as a captain and was organizing the assault on Mara's and Snuffy's position.

Mara: We're running out of options here, Snuffy! **We need to try an alley-ooop!**

Snufflefungus: (Nervous.) Are you *sure*?!

Mara: Yes! *Throw me!*

Snufflefungus didn't have any arms or legs, but what he *did* have was incredible telekinetic power. So, using only his mind, he picked Mara up and *hurled* her over the heads of their shocked opposition.

As she sailed through air in the dark above the laser tag course, time almost seemed to slow down for Mara. She was wearing all black and was illuminated only sporadically by scattered lighting effects. As silent and visible as a bat, Mara aimed her blaster straight down and took out several of the astonished teens before curling into a perfect tuck-and-roll land.

In the moment it took her to spin around and leap to her feet, she considered what sort of nightmares they would have now? Who should ever expect a shadowy woman to swoop out of the night raining down equal parts death and disdain?

Losers. That's who.

She jumped to her feet just in time to see Snufflefungus finishing his surprise assault. Just like they had practiced, he had taken advantage of the element of surprise to hop up to the ringleader and shoot him right in his smug little chest.

And with that, the game was over. The lights kicked on.

Mara: (Elated.) We won!

Snufflefungus: Yay!

Gohnathan: (Extremely whiny.) Hey, no fair! You cheated!

Mara was surprised. She didn't expect the ringleader to be so whiny. She wasn't sure how old he was, but he seemed taller and scrappier than his peers.

Gohnathan: I'm telling my dad on you! (Wailing.)

Since their ringleader had just run away weeping, his team sheepishly dispersed. Mara shrugged at Snufflefungus.

Mara: What can you do? Some people are just sore losers.

Snufflefungus: That was so much fun! Can we play *air hockey* next?

Part Three: Snufflefungus

Snufflefungus always enjoyed air hockey. But the way *he* played it, it was *exhausting*.

Snufflefungus: (Panting.) Whew! That was fun!

Mara: (Laughing.) You know, playing air hockey with you is a unique experience. I almost wonder if it should be called something else.

Snufflefungus: Yeah, like maybe *Jump Run Dive Scream Hockey*?

Mara: (Still laughing.) Exactly! Okay, I'm going to go get us some sodas. I'll be right back!

Snufflefungus: Okay!

Just as Mara walked away, Snufflefungus heard a familiar voice behind him.

Gohnathan: There you are! You cheater!

Snufflefungus: Who, me?

It was the teenager from laser tag! He seemed even taller somehow than he did in the laser tag course. And he loomed menacingly over Snufflefungus.

Gohnathan: Yeah, you! You embarrassed me in front of my friends! Now you have to *pay*!

Snufflefungus: (Nervous.) Pay? What would you like me to pay? I only have a couple of farthings on me right now...

Gohnathan: I don't want your *stupid* cash! *I want an Xbox Series X!*

Snufflefungus: (Nervous.) Please, be reasonable, uh...

Snufflefungus glanced at the boy's name tag.

Snufflefungus: (Tentatively.) ...Gohnathan?

Gohnathan: (Horried gasp.) *What* did you just call me?!

Snufflefungus: (Even more tentatively.) Gohnathan?

Gohnathan: (Wails.) Dad, he made fun of my name!

A large man, presumably Gohnathan's dad, lumbered over yelling.

Dad: What's the matter Johnathan?

Gohnathan: (Still wailing.) He embarrassed me and now he's making fun of my *Name!*

Dad: Hey, *freak!* What gives?!

Snufflefungus: (Panic.) Nothing!

Just then, Mara ran over and stepped up beside Snufflefungus. She didn't have any soda, so she must have heard the commotion and ducked out of line.

Mara: (Calming.) Hey, hey, what seems to be the trouble over here?

Dad: Your freak pet over here is makin' fun of my boy!

Gohnathan: (Still sniffing.) He made me cry in front of my friends!

Snufflefungus: I didn't mean to!

Mara: Oh, wow. (Sighs.) I'm sure it's all a big misunderstanding. Snuffy, why don't you just apologize to...

Snufflefungus saw it happening. He saw Mara's eyes glance down to the name tag, but it was too late.

Mara: Why don't you just apologize to Gohnathan here, and we can move on-

Gohnathan: (Primal scream.)

Dad: You too!? It's *Johnathan! Johnathan!* G makes a "juh" sound!

Gohnathan: Yeah! A "juh" sound!

Snufflefungus noticed a vein pulsing at Mara's temple.

Mara: Yeah, okay. Let's go, Snufflefungus.

Dad: Not until you pay for ruining my Johnathan's birthday!

Snufflefungus: Wait, is it your *birthday party* today?

Snufflefungus glanced over at the party table. There were indeed a bunch of kids sitting around the table. They were staring at the confrontation, facial expressions ranging from amused to mortified.

Gohnathan: (Confrontational.) Yeah, it is my birthday party today! What about it?!

Snufflefungus: (Excited.) **Happy Birthday!**

Mara: (Confused.) Why are you wearing a name tag to your own birthday party?

Gohnathan: (Still confrontational.) That's because *I* don't have any *friends!* My dad gave me this party and he bribed all those kids to come celebrate with me!

Dad: Aren't I the greatest?

Gohnathan: You sure are, dad!

Dad: So how about it?! (Threatening.) Does your freak have a present for my son? Or are we going to have to beat it out of him?

Gohnathan: Yeah, we'll beat it out of you!

Mara: I just have a question.

Snufflefungus had seen that glint of rage in Mara's eyes before. It sent a shiver down his spine.

Mara: Does *Gohnathan* know how his dad *paid* for this party?

Gohnathan: My dad is a hard worker! That's how.

Dad: (Nervously.) Yeah, what he said!

Mara: Does *Gohnathan* know that his dad *pilfered* the money out of a woman's purse to pay for this party?

Dad: Uh-

Gohnathan: (Laughing.) Now I **know** you're lying! My *Mom doesn't have any money!*

Mara: Oh sweet child. It wasn't your *mom's* purse he was stealing from.

Gohnathan: (Nervous.) Dad? What is she talking about?

Dad: (Scared.) You stop talking now!

Mara: Does *Gohnathan* know that his dad can't help spending all the grocery money on lottery tickets? And *that's* why there's never any food in the house?

Dad: (Panicking.) She's a witch! Let's get out of here!

Gohnathan: (Panicked.) Dad?! *What is she talking about?!*

Snufflefungus: Bye Gohnathan!

Mara: (Darkly.) Bye Gohn-a-dad.

Snufflefungus watched the pair run away. He was sorry the boy hadn't enjoyed the laser tag match. But Snuffy was certain he would have a fantastic day. After all, it was his birthday! *Everybody* had a great day on their *birthday*.

Mara: (Sighs.) Okay Snuffy, are you ready to go home?

Snufflefungus: Yep! Let's go!

Part Four: Some Years Ago

Mara stepped out of the house and waved goodbye.

Mara: Goodbye Snuffy! It was nice meeting you today!

Snufflefungus: It was nice meeting you too! Let's play again soon!

Mara: Yes! I'm sure we will!

Snufflefungus closed the door and Mara turned away from the house.

Cinching her jacket more tightly around herself, Mara walked briskly into the wind. It was an icy day and her car was several miles away. She had a long, frigid walk ahead of her.

She should have been elated. Her mission had been a resounding success. But Mara's heart constricted in her chest. She had never felt anything like this before. It was shame, it was guilt, but most of all it was a sick sense of betrayal.

Once she was a few blocks away from Snuffy's house, Mara pulled a cell phone out of her pocket.

(Sounds of cell phone ringing.)

Handler: Hello?

Mara: This is Mara.

Handler: Oh good. We've been anxiously awaiting your report.

Mara: Yes, I'm all wrapped up over here.

Handler: And the psychic energy you had detected earlier?

Mara: My mission...

Mara's stomach knotted. There was a lump in her throat.

Handler: Come again?

Mara: My mission was a failure.

Handler: Were you unable to intercept the source of the psychic energy?

Mara: The psychic energy disappeared. I was unable to intercept it. I believe it was a false positive.

Handler: Hmm, that's disturbing. Come to the lab at once. We will need to run more tests on you.

Mara: Yes sir.

Dazed, Mara hung up the phone and kept walking. What had she done? How could she explain herself? There was going to be trouble for this.

The only thing she knew for certain was that she couldn't turn Snufflefungus in. She mustn't. No matter what it cost her.

The End