

*There was a time where sanity felt like an actual skill I could write off on my list of character traits. Went through hell and back, but still sane. Gradually, I wondered whether my definition of insanity just changed over time. Plenty of things you had to just accept and move on if you wanted to survive in this world. Some of it was beyond my understanding, but you couldn't let that shape you. Allow yourself a little ignorance if you hoped to be even a little happy.*

I had never seen a bear in person before. Well, no, I had seen one in a zoo once. A dejected and bored looking beast. This one was almost twice that size and looked full of ambition. Mostly to make a meal out of us - but for a wild animal that was as good a reason as any, no matter if I had disagreements about it.

"That's a bear," Ren whispered. Her eyes were focused on it as her hand slowly went for her bow.

Perhaps she thought my world didn't have bears, or maybe assumed I had made scrambled eggs of my brain on my greatest hits tour of the tree branches. There was another quip in there somewhere, but I was too preoccupied with the hulking creature slowly approaching us to really draw it out through my mouth.

"I can fight," I weakly muttered. I'm not sure how the System divided up healing between my broken parts. The nicest assumption would be that it prioritized the life-saving stuff rather than share around equally. Ribs were still tender, but my left hand could now move - even if it hated the process.

"Might need to entangle and run," her voice was calm despite the clear danger.

I stood to my feet slowly, rising with her. Somehow, my hat was still on my head. True magic. My legs could probably run, given the alternative. Where to wouldn't really matter, System-created must have some kind of agro drop at a certain distance.

"Ugly packaging for a boring meal," the bear growled at me, drool running from his open jaws.

"What?" I wrinkled my face up. "You can talk?" Also, my suit wasn't ugly, but that seemed like a point to make when so many teeth weren't being bared.

"Irrelevant." He stepped another large paw forward.

Ren had an arrow at the ready, but hadn't nocked it yet. Thoughts clattered down through my brain like I had through the tree.

"Are you a Player?" I asked, slowly removing my hat.

He paused. "That sounds like something the boxes said. Do you control the boxes?"

I shook my head and grinned. With my good hand, I reached into the awkwardly held top hat and brought out a slab of meat. I could also audibly hear Ren's eyes roll. "No, but I'll trade food for conversation."

"Give me the hat." The bear licked his lips, but his body language relaxed slightly.

“No,” I repeated. “But as a show of good faith...” I lobbed the meat across the clearing, which the bear grabbed and devoured.

“I feel as though this is a dangerous game you are playing, trickster.” The elf had now lowered her weapon and was prepared to cross her arms for added effect. Lecturing me clearly worth risking being a second slowler if we were attacked.

“What? You never wanted a pet familiar? Seems cliché, I know, but-“

“I would much prefer a wolf.” She shrugged and stared at the bear impassively.

The large creature licked the last of the meal from his lips and sat down, his amber eyes no less full of fury. “I will talk, food-giver.”

“My name is Max, and this is Ren. What’s yours?”

His nose twitched, looking between my held hat and the elf. “...*Wolf*,” he eventually decided.

Ren’s brow lowered further. “Your name is *Wolf*. As a bear.”

“I like it.” My eyes dazzled. A stage show set in my mind, the magnificent magician and the talking bear that could do tricks. The elf assistant in a shimmering blue dress with a wide smile on her- oh. No, that broke the illusion.

“Could you think any louder?” She glared at me as I refocused. “One track mind, Max.”

“I wasn’t thinking of a- of whatever you’re saying I was thinking.” I ran the risk of becoming too predictable. That or I had spoken some of my daydream out loud but didn’t realise it due to my head injury.

She rolled her eyes. “Red is not my color. Plus, I don’t wear dresses.”

I clucked my tongue. “It was blue, actually.”

“See! I knew it.” She shook her head, exasperated. “One track mind.”

Plus, I didn’t really work with animals as much as I could help it. If Wolf could consent and was intelligent enough to understand, then that was different. I turned to give him a resigned shrug, and he looked mostly perplexed.

“Are you going to attack me or give me more food?” He tilted his head, looking as though those were the only two options he was used to.

I tapped the rim of my hat. “Answer me three questions and you can have three more pieces of meat.”

“I’ll answer ten questions,” he licked his lips.

A smile crossed my lips, but faltered slightly in seeing that he was injured. His flank on one side, mostly obscured by his thick foreleg, was matted with dark crimson. I turned to Ren and raised an eyebrow, and she gave a nod.

“My friend here is going to heal your wounds, too. Is that okay?”

Wolf looked at the slowly approaching elf and sniffed at the air. “I accept.”

“First question then. Do you remember coming from a world prior to this one?”

He tilted his head in thought, then turned to sniff at his wound as it closed up. The radiant warmth of the Oathwarden seemed to comfort, if confuse him - but he allowed the elf to place her hand on his broad shoulder.

“Yes. It was different to here, like a dream where I couldn’t talk. There was something new near my home... I remember something pink?” He chewed at the air as if continuing to process the words after the sentence had finished.

Ren continued to brush at his fur. It was hard to tell if she was secretly enamored with the animal, or was just plying a bit of kindness to keep it calm. The bear dwarfed her and could easily bite her head clean off if given half the chance. He had already answered my intended second question in regards to the potential portal...

“Second question. How did you get to this forest? Did you not start on a smaller island?”

He raised a large paw to scratch at his chin. “No, I’ve been here for a few weeks. Sometimes people attack me, sometimes I attack them. Nothing else.”

How interesting. I was starting to put some of the puzzle pieces together, even if the picture didn’t make any sort of sense. These portals could appear over different worlds or... realities - that part wasn’t clear. Anyone unlucky enough to enter was transported this world. Even if they were an animal, it seemed.

“Do you know how to work with the boxes?” Ren asked softly. “See what they say?”

“I...” Wolf looked down at her. “They were overwhelming, so I try to pretend they don’t exist.”

“Could you, though? For me?”

I almost opened up mine by instinct. Partially I wondered if the bear was keeping track of all the questions the elf was also asking and would expect payment. Part of me hoped that he did, if only to show his Intelligence was up to snuff.

The grizzly furrowed his brow in focus. “What did you need to know?”

“Class. Highest Stats. Level.” Despite her softer tone with the animal, she hadn’t been able to shift her default expression - a testament, if anything, to the times that she did.

“Forest Guardian, Rare. Constitution and Strength are highest, then Intelligence. I am level five.”

She nodded at each of the nuggets of information. “And, how are you doing emotionally?”

The bear looked down at the floor, no longer having to read from his System interface. “I miss the simplicity of my home. Everything here seems to drive me into conflict.”

The elf tilted her head toward me and gestured with her hand.

I shrugged, not sure what she was getting at. Animals had feelings. I already knew this. It was part of why I began a discourse with the large and threatening bear. Did System-created have feelings? Perhaps best to unravel that morality question another time.

Another Rare Class though, that was something. The System must have filled out his Stats as best as it could imagine, putting him here amongst other bears, maybe in confusion, before layering on the Player parts of whatever ran this world.

“I realize you just said you didn’t like conflict...” I stepped toward him now, and suddenly remembered how much pain my body was still in once it had to do more than exist. “But would you like to join up with us?”

“If you can handle a little fighting.” Ren added. “There is a lot of food in it for you.”

Wolf looked between my hat, me, Ren, and then back at the hat. “I’ll help you kill food and I get a portion of it?”

“Probably most of it.” I rubbed my chin. “I imagine our diets are different enough where we all had plenty?”

Ren nodded and stood next to me, turning to face the bear. “Max is annoying, but he is strong.”

I held a poker face, which was difficult due to how bruised it felt. “Ren is also very strong, and *pleasant*.” Her glare burned into the side of my head. *Pleasantly*.

Wolf looked back out to the forest. A totally different animal than the feral beast that was previously stalking us. He now looked pensive and thoughtful. I wondered if we had judged him too simply to consider that he would be swayed onto our path of destruction just with the prospect of eating the spoils.

“Alright, I will join you,” he said as he nodded. “You still owe me the question-meat, though.”

“Of course,” I bowed before him, only a tiny part of my brain considering he might crush it. What was left still unbroken after my fall, anyway. “There are some ground rules, though. First, we share all loot equally. Second, do not eat us - ever. That’s probably the most important rule, really.” I withdrew some meat from my hat and placed it on his open paws. “Thirdly, do not flirt with Ren.”

She glared at me and looked as though she was considering escalating to physically admonishing me, before she saw the amount of damage gravity had wrought upon me. “And I was hoping the tree knocked some sense into you.” She shook her head. “Really, Max. How did you even fall out? You could have died. And then I would, of second-hand embarrassment.”

“I suppose a bad dream doesn’t make it any better.” I handed more meat to the bear, feeling a little lightheaded.

“Bad dream as in a premonition of things that may come, or a shadow of the trauma and emotions you have been suppressing?”

“Hopefully the former,” I replied, watching Wolf and not looking at her. “How far are we from the bandits?”

[Wolf has joined the Party]

“About two hours,” she sighed and rubbed at her eyes. “It looks like we slept for about three hours, before you decided to leave the nest like a baby bird.”

Wolf nodded, his tongue lapping around his lips as he finished off the meat. I intended to give him the ten pieces, which seemed reasonable considering he could easily eat us if he wanted to. “You do look tenderized under that offensive wrapper.”

I handed him more. “It’s a *suit*.” Sure, it was garish. It was part of the act - I had to stand out and be larger than life. There was a plan in the back of my mind to swap to the gear that I had equipped for stats. Just as soon as it wouldn’t make me look like a wizard at a renaissance rave rooting through lost property for a costume.

“It makes my eyes sad,” the bear added, his paws out to receive more of his reward.

“He even sleeps in it.” Ren crossed her arms.

It turned out that I missed being surrounded by fans. While criticism was valid, being under constant scrutiny just made me want to... double down. I grinned and gave them both a short bow. “A true showman never quits.”

The elf exhaled through her nose, clearly not having slept enough for more of my bullshit. “Do you need any more healing, showman? You look like you’re about to throw up your own brain.”

“Dibs,” Wolf interjected.

“I’m fi-,” I stopped myself. “I’ll use a couple of bandages. You should save your power. I may need another Charm, though.”

Her brow furrowed further. “You used it already? When?”

I pointed back up to the tree about a third of the way up. “About there, when my skull split open.”