



# BEAR WITH ME

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## PICTURE THIS:

*A nice house on a quiet street mere blocks from the elementary school.*

*Inside this lovely house lives a seven-year-old girl who gets to have a bowl of ice cream every night before bed. In fact, she insists on it. Her toy box runneth over with coveted Barbie dolls sporting the G.I. Jane haircut she gave them mere minutes after acquiring them. Books spill off her shelves, and her closet is full of monogrammed sweaters she likes to color coordinate with whale-and-heart-patterned turtle necks. She can watch all the television she wants, even in her bedroom. But noooo, that is not enough. She wants more.*

*"Please may I have a dog?" she inquires.*

Oh okay, enough of this crap. The girl is me, and I certainly never inquired. It was more like pleading, begging, rationalizing, and reasoning. But it was all for naught. Ever since she was chased home by a Boston Terrier when she was three, Judy's sworn off anything with whiskers and fur.

"Absolutely not," she'd say. "Don't ask me again."

"But Mooooooooooooom," I whined. "I'll die if I don't get a dog!"

Mom said I was more than welcome to have a hundred dogs when I was grown up and no longer living in her home. Then she'd send me away to go play with my hermit crab.

But I *really* wanted a dog. Like, cried every time a character on TV called their dog. Like, meandered away from Mom in the grocery store to pull bags of Alpo off the store shelves and drag them to the cashier. Like, take my stuffed animal dogs for walks around the neighborhood, scratching their heads and cooing sweet nothings into their stuffed ears. (I know. Weird.)

And yet fiberfill was so unfulfilling. So I did what any not-quite-normal seven-year-old would do. I gave myself a dog.

Enter Woofie, my ageless, loyal German Shepherd companion. Woofie and I spent all day together playing fetch in the front yard, practicing tricks in

the living room, curling up with a Nancy Drew book under my canopy bed. He walked me to school every morning and I made a big production out of sending him home when I got to the crossing guard outside of school.

“Go home, Woofie,” I commanded. “See you at lunch time! We’re having liverwurst!” (I loved liverwurst, which to me was even weirder than talking to an imaginary dog.)

“Who you talking to, dear?” Miss Eleanor, the crossing guard would ask.

“Duh,” I answered. “My dog.”

“Tell your mom you want to go see a nice man named Dr. Havner, okay? I’ll give you his number.”

I did pass that message on to my mother, who patted me on the head and responded, “Next time you see Miss Eleanor, tell her Woofie peed on her lunch.”

Then she sent Woofie and I to play in the backyard.

Fast forward several years and a few *real* dogs later to my D&D game, where I’m asking New DM for the 19th time that week if Tabitha can have a familiar.

“Please?” I begged. “All the other wizards have familiars.”

*“Tabitha can have a hundred familiars when she’s grown up and no longer living in my campaign.”*

“If all the other wizards had hot tub rash, would you want that too?” New DM would ask.

“If all the other wizards had hot tub rash, it’s very likely she’d already have it,” I would answer.

“Tabitha can have a hundred familiars when she’s grown up and no longer living in my campaign.”

Patience is not one of a tiefling’s virtues, so

Tabitha did what any not-quite-normal wizard would do. She gave herself a familiar anyway.

Enter Oso de la Fez, an ex-burlesque show bear who was enslaved into a life of bicycle riding and balancing on rubber balls for the amusement of drunken spectators and wayward adventurers until Tabitha and her rogue friend, Teemu, busted him out. Yes, Tabitha has some question marks in her past, but she only did it to put herself through Charm School. Tabs promised Oso that when she left, he’d go with her.

Now she and Oso are tighter than a pair of studded leather pants.

Today they are both members of the Wylde Stallions adventuring group. While Oso has helped the Wylde Stallions with apprentice-level tasks, such as carrying heavy equipment looted from the party’s kills, moving logs and boulders to create a safe and comfortable rest spot, and putting his height to good use by scouting out danger in and above the trees, he’s not accepted by all members of the group. With the exception of Teemu, the rest have the nerve to *pretend* they can’t see him! Who do they think Tabitha is talking to?

New DM lets Oso follow the group from one strife-ridden town to another, but when combat

ensues, he moves to the sidelines. I like to think of him as a high school mascot, riding his bicycle up and down the field, chanting words of inspiration: *Be aggressive! B-E aggressive!*

Afterward, he lumbers over to the group to make sure everyone is okay. Tabitha scratches his nose and assures him the Wylde Stallions will be right as rain

after a good long rest. Meanwhile, Aaeon, Maya, and Anwar roll their eyes and twirl their index fingers by their temples. Good thing Tabitha has ridicule resistance 15.

All of this was about to change.

“What’s this?” I asked Marty, pointing to a book on his desk. “*Arcane Power*. Hmm...”

“That is the answer to your prayers,” he answered. “Tabitha can finally have a familiar.”

“She has one,” I said. “Giant black bear, red fez. Kind of hard to miss.”

“A *real* familiar,” he corrected. “One we can all see.”

“You could if you tried,” I sighed. “You could if you tried...”

Marty may be closed-minded, but he gave me an idea. So, I went in search of New DM.

He wasn’t surprised to see me standing at his desk with Marty’s advance copy of *Arcane Power*.

“Which one did you choose?” he asked.

“Oso wants to be a real bear.”

“Who do I look like? Geppetto?” he responded.

“Come on, New DM, he doesn’t ask for much. Just a chance to prove himself to the group.”

“Just swap out one of your feats for Arcane Familiar and pick a familiar. From *the book*. Or the *Dragon* article.”

I knew he was going to say that, and I was ready to plead Oso’s case. “All that time trapped in a steel cage, only let out once a day for a humiliating trot around a stage wearing a red fez. The only thing keeping him going was the dream of one day becoming a familiar.”

New DM ignored me and pointed to the pages listing familiar choices. “You could have a cat. Or a cute, little dragonling! How about a book imp? You like books!”

I had no choice but to pull out the big guns:

*“His name is Oso  
He was a show bear  
Trapped in a cage covered in poop,  
He dreamed of adventure in a group!”*

New DM looked traumatized, so I stopped. Singing isn't my strong suit. Maybe songwriting isn't either.

“He still wears the red fez, you know,” New DM pointed out. “No one is forcing him to dress like a bellhop.”

With all the time I spend around puppies, you'd think I'd have mastered their beseeching look, but usually I look like a cross between a barn owl and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. I give it a shot anyway.

New DM sighs, partially because this expression is almost as painful as my singing and partially because he knows this is his fault for asking us to create character back stories.

“I'll tell you what. If you can stat out Oso like a real familiar, he's all yours,” he said. “Real stats. Not your fake ones like *Oso gives the party +35 to attacks* or *acknowledging Oso's presence grants an eternal shield*.”

I should be thrilled. This is like Judy saying, *If you can find a dog that needs a home, you can have it*. Only I know this is New DM's creative way of saying no.

“How do I do that?” I asked.

He shrugs. “In the meantime, might I interest you in a falcon?”

I had a good mind to tell New DM where to put his falcon.

“Or how about a bound demon?” New DM called after me. “Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

I walked back to my desk with the weight of a thousand enslaved show bears pressing down on me. I let Oso down. Tabitha would kill me.

“Psst,” I heard coming from the direction of a darkened conference room ironically named The

Shadowfell. “You looking for a familiar?”

“Uh . . . who's asking?” I said to the darkness.

“Come here,” the voice said.

“Nu uh! I'm not going into The Shadowfell alone! Never split the party, dude!”

Fluorescent lights illuminated the conference room revealing . . . Rob Heinsoo.

“I heard you talking to New DM,” he said. “Sad story about your bear. But I think I can help.”

Interesting. New DM didn't say I couldn't ask for help.

“You can stat out my bear?” I asked. I mean, Rob's a nice guy and all, but I'm pretty sure making your coworkers imaginary friends real isn't part of his job description. “What's in it for you?”

“I'll think of something,” he said, and that's good enough for me.

We settle into the conference room to discuss Oso's transformation.

“I bet this is how Snuffy felt the day the producers of *Sesame Street* determined the concept of imaginary friends wasn't healthy for kids.”

Rob looked at me for a long moment. “I bet it's

*“I bet this is how Snuffy felt the day the producers of Sesame Street determined the concept of imaginary friends wasn't healthy for kids.”*

exactly how he felt.”

I gave Rob some history on Tabitha and Oso and the research I did on bears. Personally, I think R&D has overlooked an optimal familiar option. For instance, bears have a great sense of smell. That would come in handy when sniffing out an opponent who has concealment. Those giant paws are surprisingly nimble, and they're expert climbers. I'm

seeing a buff in Perception and Athletics.

“Did you know that some bears have been clocked running 35 mph?” I asked. “That could do wonders for a PC's speed.”

“Of course I did!” Rob answered. Apparently his wife is a park ranger, so he knows all sorts of interesting facts about bears.

It goes without saying that Astrid had a rat named Aloysius who was handy when it came to stalking and spying and would probably have done more if Astrid weren't so scared of killing him.

“Familiars in 4th Edition don't die,” Rob explains. “They can be targeted, but if they get hit they just go away and come back after an extended rest.”

For someone who thinks the only thing that sucks about having a dog is that whole seven to one year ratio, that was about the greatest thing I've ever heard. Where can I get a 4th Edition shepherd lab mix?

“So it's like *Pet Cemetery*?” I asked. “Except they don't come back evil.”

“Well,” Rob said slowly, “they could.”

“Oh no,” I countered. “Oso doesn't have an evil

bone in his body.”

“Look,” Rob said, “part of your job as a player is to make things interesting. To add interesting elements to the story and move the plot forward.”

“Actually, my job is to second guess New DM and silently judge my group's snack choices.”

“How bad does Tabitha want her bear to be real?”

“Real bad.”

“Like bad enough she’d give part of her soul for it?”

Seven-year old Shelly would have sold her bike, Hippy Hop, and her Buck Rogers Paint-By-Number kit, let alone her soul for a dog. But this was Tabitha, the careless, hostile, apathetic tiefling with a master-work chip on her shoulder.

“Probably,” I said. She’s multiclassed as a warlock, so making pacts with dubious types is all in a day’s work. “Make that definitely.”

“Good, good,” he nodded. “But you know you can’t just show up with a bear made of awesome and not expect consequences, right?”

I don’t, but I nod and pretend I do.

“Tell me again why you’re doing this for me?” I asked.

Rob smiled. “Oh you know, just helping out a friend in need. Besides, you never know when I might need a favor.”

I think of Oso romping around the playmat, making small talk, taking up space. *An actual space!*

“I’m okay with consequences,” I told Rob. “And paying back favors.”

“Excellent,” Rob said, laughing like a cartoon villain and rubbing his palms together.

For some reason that gave me the shivers. “You’re just doing that to be funny, right? I mean, that’s not your real laugh, is it?”

Rob laughed again.

I began to wonder if maybe New DM was right. I do like books. And a falcon could be bad ass. Maybe Oso wouldn’t be happy in the real world. Or maybe Tabitha underestimated the commitment and attention that goes into caring for a real bear. I’m sure there are all sorts of fines associated with not cleaning up after your pet.

“You know,” I told Rob, “You’re probably really busy. You don’t have to do this. I’m sure Tabitha will

understand. “No worries,” Rob said, twirling his invisible mustache. “It will be fun.” He laughed that villainous laugh again.

Yikes! What the heck is going on here? What had I gotten myself into? Oso de la Fez better be grateful, because I think I may have just done a bad thing.

As if reading my mind Rob added, “I think you’ll both be pleased with Tabitha’s new and improved companion.”

This put my mind slightly more at ease. But what choice did I have? I had already given up a piece of Tabitha’s soul. She might as well get something out of it.

And there in The Shadowfell we got to work, making Oso de la Fez a real bear.

#### *About the Author*

**Shelly Mazzanoble** still isn’t sure what the going rate is to create an illegal familiar, but she’ll be sure to let you know.