Chapter 194

Zald ar Gwoadeg

Humming a pleasant tune, Zald led his new party to one of his favorite late-night restaurants, though it was more of a bar. Of the pair of idiots who'd roused every green dragon spawned on floor twenty-four at the time, only one remained alive. The survivor, a rather shell-shocked werewolf that he faintly recognized as being part of the Modi familia, had been handed over to the guild, who would, no doubt, throw a great many fines and other legal punishments at the cretin.

As for the other one… Well, it was quite difficult to survive being bitten in half by a dragon, especially when the half that was swallowed included one's entire upper body. Poor woman. It was a nasty way to go, even if the pair had brought it on themselves.

Still, all of that nastiness aside, Zald couldn't be happier with how Anwen and Njal had performed, and at how well the three of them had worked together. The elf's stamina had been a concern, considering Zald's own pace, but she had kept up admirably, despite her less-developed status. In fact, if he wasn't too far off the mark, he'd say that she wasn't far off of a rank-up. Admirable progress for someone who'd been blessed well into adulthood, and only been an adventurer for around a year or so.

The bar he led the Njal and the elf into was a rather quiet place, with extremely late opening hours, likely because the owner was one hell of a night owl, even by werewolf standards. He only ever saw the woman up between late evening and early morning, but Katell's little hole-in-the-wall restaurant served the best kouignettes that he'd ever had in his life.

The pastry he'd had earlier in the day, before going into the dungeon, had given him something of a hankering for a taste of home, and people from Breizh and Arvorig didn't tend to travel very much, at least not to Orario. Katell Poezh a Vara was one of the few that he'd found, and he took whatever opportunity he had to both enjoy her food, and offer her his patronage.

As the three of them walked into the odd mix of a bar and a restaurant, the entrance to which was quite well-hidden in an alleyway just off to the right of the northern avenue, the proprietor's pleasant voice greeted them.

"How's my favorite customer doing? You bringin' me some extra business?" Katell asked, a nice smile on her aged, but pretty face.

"Of course! Couldn't let your place remain as obscure as it is," he laughed, returning the smile easily as he removed his helmet and set it on the counter. He'd had the chance to give it a preliminary clean before entering, so he wasn't getting monster gore on the counter.

“Your usual?” the werewolf asked, turning towards the shelf where some rather nice jugs of wine and other assorted liquors, spirits and alcoholic beverages were.

“And a few kouign-amanns, please. For these two as well, please,” he added, as the werewolf reached up to the barrel of chouchen and poured him a mug, before going into the back and retrieving a cloth-lined basket full of incredibly rich pastries. His mouth watered just at the sight of them, and his stomach rumbled slightly, earning him an odd look from Anwen, who’d ordered a nice cider for herself and some water for Njal.

It was a fair sentiment, considering that she’d seen him eat most of the last few green dragons’ ribs, bone and all. Admittedly, that had sated most of his appetite, but most wasn’t all, and he was still feeling a bit peckish. As was Njal, judging by the way he was fixated on the basketful of kouign-amann that was set on the counter.

“So, how’d your day in the dungeon go?” Katell asked, leaning against her side of the bar. As was common amongst unblessed mortals, the older woman tended to be quite curious about his adventures, and enjoyed hearing his stories, as did her husband, at least whenever the other werewolf was around.

“Well,” he began, “Today was a bit of a test, to see if we three could work well together. I’d say it was quite a success,” Zald said, to noises of agreement from both Anwen and Njal, who were both too busy eating to speak. Judging by their haste in doing so, Katell’s Corner had a pair of new regulars. Excellent.

He continued. “We had to deal with a few complications, though, including…”

Njal

Like his purse, Njal was utterly stuffed. After finishing off the pastry that Zald had ordered, he’d gotten himself a few more, as well as snuck a sip of Anwen’s cider, which was disgusting, and sampled a bit of Zald’s drink, which was better, despite the similar tastes. Both drinks tasted faintly of apples, but the chouchen was also quite sweet, with a flavor of honey.

In any case, Katell’s Corner, as he thought the sign outside the door said, was definitely going to be a place he’d be returning to in the future, if only for those pastries, Njal decided, yawning. It was quite late, well past sunset. Mia seemed a bit annoyed by how late he and Anwen had returned, but the news that them partying up with Zald would be a more permanent thing had cheered her up some, but the older boy would probably have to deal with Mia, for ‘keeping him up past his bedtime’, or something like that.

At least Freya wasn’t here to see the hour at which they’d returned, and the exhaustion from the denatus meant that Mia probably wouldn’t bother her with that information for at least a day.

More than enough time for this sort of thing to be forgotten. Njal nodded to himself, satisfied. Yep, he'd be fine. Juuust fine.

"Bit late for you to still be up, isn't it?" he heard. Oh.

Slowly turning around and looking up, Njal found himself looking at a spectacularly unamused Cal, who then sniffed the air slightly, causing her expression to sour even further.

Shit.

Freya

It was something of a struggle to stop herself from happily humming as she walked up the path to Folkvangr, with Brand trotting along beside her, the massive hellhound happily panting with his tongue lolling out. The denatus had gone well, even with Zeus' request and poor attempt at humor. She'd been able to catch up on a bit of reading, and had gotten most of the way through an ancient explorer's account of the southwestern continent's strange, and often barbaric, peoples. It was an amusing book, because the author was rakian, and his bewilderment was quite funny.

The naming had also gone quite well, and it had lasted a blessedly short amount of time. After barely a half-hour of mudslinging, Freya had been able to leave, secure in the knowledge that Cal's alias hadn't changed. 'Thrud' was a good name, after all, and she didn't see much point in changing it, not when Calliphone was quite happy with it, insofar as the woman cared about aliases, which wasn't much at all.

…In truth, Cal didn't seem to care about much of the prestige that usually drew mortals to adventuring. She seemed more motivated by the process of adventuring, of exploring the hostile environment within the dungeon, as well as the marvels that could be found in its depths. Why, the second-hand memory of the first sight that Cal had had of what came to be called the wildwood…

Of course, it also helped that the woman was good at killing. Incredibly good at it, really, and that was still something of an understatement. One didn't become so good at anything without enjoying it to some degree, and adventuring was undeniably the best way to both hone a talent for combat, as well as experiencing the best fights possible.

…Really, Freya had thought that Ais was bad about not having many hobbies, but Cal was even worse. Aside from her 'not-dates' with Maxim, the only thing the woman did that wasn't in service to her job as a deep-delver (or, more accurately,THE deep-delver) was sunbathing, and that was hardly a hobby. …Perhaps she should get Anwen to try and get Cal into sewing or

knitting? Both were productive hobbies, after all, and that seemed to be something that the giantess preferred.

Thoughts for the next morning, Freya decided. Or perhaps the next afternoon. It was quite late, after all, late enough that the only person who might be awake was Mia. Both Cal and Anwen tended to sleep early, and Mia likely would as well, if not for the late-evening reading that the dwarf liked to do. Still, it was around midnight, and even her captain would likely be asleep. Best to keep quiet, and head right to bed.

Aleya Tara

Breakfast was always the easiest meal to make, because, for most of the members of the Freya familia, they didn't particularly care what was put on their table in the morning, only that they had something to eat at all. So, Aleya tended to stick to simple things. Some fresh bread with fried eggs and meat of some sort, usually. It gave her more time to prepare lunch, which was always a good thing.

Ais' preference for sweets tended to rear its head around midday, and, to satisfy the girl, the amazoness tended to start working on some manner of sweet around mid-morning. For today, the plan was to make marzipan, which was one of her go-to recipes, on account of its simplicity. Admittedly, the ingredients were quite expensive, but that wasn't much of a concern for an exploration familia.

At around ninety-five valis per pound of almond flour, the price was substantial, but, considering that a single dungeon-dive by Anwen and Njal brought in tens of thousands of valis at minimum, Aleya felt justified in not caring too much about cost.

"Can I help?" she heard someone ask from right behind her, nearly scaring Aleya out of her skin.

Turning, the cook found that it was just Ais. Breathing a sigh of relief, she chided the girl.

"Don't sneak up on me like that! You nearly startled me to death. And I'd be happy to have some help. Could you go and fetch… Two eggs from the cold room, please?" she asked, and the girl hurried off.

The cold room, not to be confused with the ice-room, was one of two rooms in Folkvangr's basement that Mia occasionally used for practicing her magic, and also for storing perishable ingredients. The cold room was the one that she used for testing how long her ice could last. So far, it had lasted just shy of four years without melting. The ice-room, on the other hand, was a result of Mia testing just how cold she could make her ice. The answer was: incredibly cold.

So cold, in fact, that Njal, Anwen, Aleya and Freya couldn't even set foot inside the room without running the risk of frostbite. Laurent said that it reminded him of home, the crazy northerner.

As for her plan for the sweets… The recipe would have to be doubled, considering just who her assistant would be. Simply making the usual portions would be a foolish thing to do, when Ais wasn't at all shy about 'sampling' or 'taste-testing' while cooking. So, the recipe would have to be doubled. That meant… Two cups of almond flour and two cups of powdered sugar, eight eggs, and a significant amount of honey.

…Well, it wasn't like anyone especially minded the confection. Having extra wasn't a bad thing, in this case, Aleya decided.