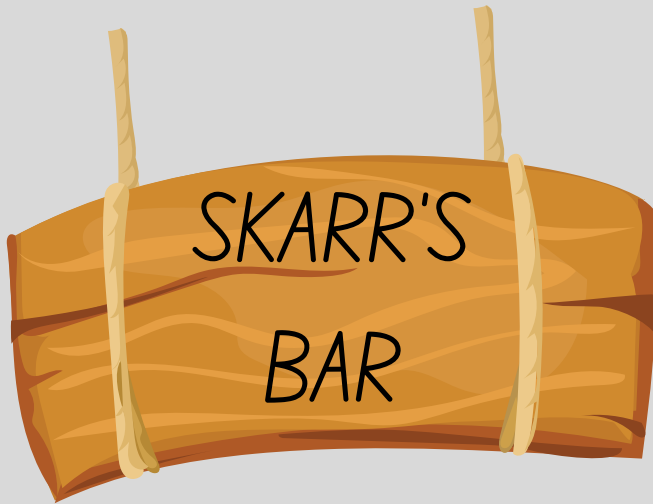




"Either of you seen Quin? She's never this late." Skarr checks the clock on the wall, watching as the hands strike half past four. "Colette, can you start working on dinner? Any later and we'll be behind for the evening rush."

"You got it, boss." Colette -- Quin's sous chef -- leaps to action, heading for the kitchen.

"Tomas," Skarr booms at the young man who normally served tables, "Why don't you help Colette, hmm? I trust you can stir whatever she tells you to stir."

"Y-yes sir!" Tomas salutes awkwardly, then makes his way to the kitchen as well.

"Quin, where in all the realms are you?" Skarr sits down at the bar as he mutters to himself. After wiping down the bar for a few minutes, the bell over the door rings. "There you are. I was beginning to-." Skarr stops as he turns to the door.

"No, no, don't stop on my account, Hadrach." Ozymandias enters the bar with a bundle under his arm. "Expecting someone? I'm assuming I am not them."

Skarr stands, crossing the bar to loom over Ozy. He extends a hand to his old friend. "Yeah, I'm waiting on my chef to show up. Quin should have been here an hour ago. But I'm sure everything's fine. What brings you by, old man?"

"Ha! Speak for yourself, you wrinkled old goat! The Positive energy that runs in my veins keeps me nice and spry." Ozy sets his bundle on the bar. "Wanted to bring you this. Found it in some donations while I was sorting things for the shop. Thought you might like it, old friend."

Skarr quirks an eyebrow but remains silent. He carefully unwraps the present from its cloth packaging. Inside is a book titled 'Yuletides of Jotunyr: Adventurer's Guide to the Realms.'

"That's. Someone donated this?" Skarr holds the tome in his hand, running a thumb over the cover. "Wow."

"Yeah, I figured Summerton's local Titan would enjoy a book about his homeland, hehe. And besides, you've fed me a handful of times since I settled down here. I thought I'd return the favor, sort of." Ozy pats the bar. "Well, I best be getting back. See you tonight for dinner?"

Skarr sets the book down and shakes Ozy's hand. "We'll have something ready. Not sure what yet, but it'll be something. And hey, if you see Quin out there on your way home, tell her to pick up the pace. We've got the bus boy in the kitchen helping, which tells you how bad things are, heh."



Ozy raises a finger playfully. "You just laughed. Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. See you around, Hadrach!" And with that, Ozymandias leaves Skarr's Bar.

"Mr. Maelstrom?" Tomas calls from the kitchen. "We, uh, might need a hand in here!"

Skarr sighs, patting the book Ozy delivered. "We'll talk soon," he mumbles to the book. "Coming, coming!"

As Skarr enters the kitchen, both Tomas and Colette are fighting with a jar of sauce from Quin's supply. The lid, seemingly welded on, holds tight, despite their best efforts to open it.

Colette sets the jar down, wiping sweat from her brow with a towel. "Any chance you can open this for us, please? I have no idea how Quin gets them so darn tight."

Skarr cracks a slight smile, though his speckled beard hides it. He picks up the jar, and with barely a twist, the lid pops off. "You loosened it for me."

Just then, the door slams open, followed by a chorus of hooting and hollering. "Skarr, ya big lug, ya gotta come see this! Hurry it up now, ole feller! Where'n tarnation're ya at?!"

Skarr blinks a couple times, surprised by Quin's outburst. He heads back to the front. "There you are. We were getting wor-."

"Lookit!" Quin slaps a torn open letter on the bar after scrambling onto a stool. "Are ya seein' what I'm seein'?!"

"I don't know. What am I looking at?" Skarr picks up the letter, where the words 'YOU'RE INVITED' are in big, bold letters on the front. "What is this?"

Quin is vibrating with excitement as she can barely sit still. Her eyes dart around wildly, between the letter and Skarr. "It's tha first annual bakin' comp'tition fer tha best bakers in all tha land! Sum feller named Timothy Bucktooth is holdin' it here in the 'ton! An' I done been invited! We gots ta start baking right quick like ta be ready fer the judgin' cer'mony next month! Are ya wit me?!"

Skarr pauses, then nods. "You got it, partner."