

The Best - Above or Below

by Angie

William's Winterfest chicken wings were famous in the tunnels – and with anyone else who happened to be an invited guest. No matter how many he made – and there were always a mountain of them – they disappeared quickly.

It was gratifying, of course, but Catherine had asked him for the sauce recipe, for an informal evening she was hosting in the brownstone for some legal aid colleagues. She just had to serve those wings, she told him. It would be before both Winterfest and Christmas.

The sauce was the secret. It wasn't a fancy recipe, but William had to think about amounts when he wrote down a recipe for someone else, because he rarely measured anything. This one had become routine, from condiments he always had on hand, but how much of each? He had to mix a batch to be sure. It would keep until he needed it for Winterfest, so he might as well write it down.

He grabbed one of the large jars he kept for such purposes and stood in front of his condiment cupboard and eyed the row of bottles he needed. He would guesstimate amounts very accurately, as he put them in a jar.

"First there's soy sauce," he muttered, pouring some into the jar, writing down the measurement. "Then there's Worcestershire Sauce, hmmm ... hmmm." He wrote down his estimate for that too. "Sesame oil ... very important ...um .. so is Chinese rice wine vinegar." Since Lin had introduced him to it, it was always in his cupboard. It was, he was sure, the secret ingredient in a lot of Chinese food. He added both with a small pour and a splash.

"Okay, then there's the sweet Thai chili sauce." He took down the large glass bottle. This too had been a gift from Lin, and he was never without it now. It was especially good on chicken. '*A little hot, a little sweet, a little garlic*' ..., he thought with a smile. Perfection!

"What am I missing?" William regarded the cupboard and moved a couple of bottles. "Ah yes, that ... Angostura Bitters." Not essential, but he was rarely without it and it lasted for years, as only a few drops were needed. Father liked it in his gin and tonic celebration for a Victoria Day quaff he allowed himself. Alone, in his chamber, he toasted the plaster bust of that admirable woman he kept high up on a shelf. Everyone made sure he wasn't disturbed.

He regarded the written recipe thoughtfully, added some instructions and the oven temperature. He always served it with rice, since Lin had found him two rice cookers that he could use on his big cast iron stove. Rice was economical and he added some sushi ginger or chopped mushrooms to the cooker too, if he wished.

Then perfect accompaniment was always beer ...

William he stopped and hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Argh, how could I forget that?" He had omitted the first step of all – soaking the wings overnight in beer. He used his own brew, of course, but any beer would work. It prevented the wings from drying out when baked.

Finally, he decided the recipe was done. He folded it in four and put it in an envelope, tput the lid on the jar, then taped the envelope to the jar. He figured there was enough sauce in the jar for a sizable number of chicken wings – at least 40. Catherine wouldn't have to mix her own and she could use the jar to dip them before baking.

Lastly, William tapped on the pipes to get Vincent's attention to pick it up.

That was his good deed for the day, he decided, and speaking of beer, recipe writing and mixing was hard work, so he drew himself a mug from the keg he kept in the kitchen and sat down in the only chair he kept there, for just that purpose.

"Is there another of those"? Vincent asked when he arrived.

"Of course," William replied, pointing to the tray of mugs he had not put away from the previous day, and the small beer barrel next to it

"That's the sauce in the jar - and the recipe, Vincent. Catherine just has to dip the wings in it - and she the recipe will be handy for another time.

Vincent grunted, and sat on the top of the sturdy step stool, the only other place to sit, and sighed deeply as he took a long swig.

"I won't ask how the evening planning is going," William remarked.

"I do not wish to talk about it," Vincent replied curtly,

"My friend, you don't need to worry, Catherine will handle it well, as she does everything else."

That's what worries me," Vincent admitted, breaking his vow of silence immediately. "She'll have the evening scheduled to the last second. I might as well be a coat rack for all the use I am in the kitchen – and this time, I must stay upstairs as soon as the first guest arrives, because none of them know me or this world."

"This is her night, Vincent. Your job is to offer her your support – will she be able to feel that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then don't worry, Vincent."

Vincent tipped the last of the beer into his throat. After all, what could go wrong? William's wing recipe could win accolades from a zombie.

"Have another," William suggested. Vincent obviously needed to mellow out a little. The dinner wasn't for another two days.

Vincent decided to do exactly that and drew himself another mug full, then filled up William's, when the big cook handed him his mug.

"The problem," Vincent revealed at last, when he was seated again, "is that I will be able to smell those chicken wings all evening. And there likely won't be any left for me."

"That's hard," William agreed. He always put a few aside for himself – or he wouldn't have any either. "Perhaps Catherine can save you a few?"

"I dare not ask," Vincent opined. It seemed too trivial a matter to bother his love with, when she was obviously already stressed. For such an 'informal' evening, it was taking a lot of her time.

The two men sat reflecting on food and events, silently, and they were both very mellow when Catherine looked for Vincent some time later and tracked him down to the kitchen. She took in the situation immediately, as both men looked at her guiltily.

"Is there any left for me?" she asked.

"Certainly, Catherine," William rasped and pointed at the keg.

Catherine chose a mug and filled it from the keg, taking a sip immediately. Vincent shifted on the stool so she could sit on the lower step. She sighed as she sat down.

"Ahhhh ... I think I should have some of this available too. Is there more?" she asked.

"Certainly," William said again. "Vincent can carry up a keg with the jar of sauce. The recipe is taped to it."

Catherine thanked him gratefully, and sighed since that task was now done.

"What more would I need?" she asked rhetorically, going over the list in her head.

She was ordering a platter of pastries from a bakery, and even her skills were sufficient for rice. The rest would be sparkling wine and beer. Everyone would be in the downstairs den, where there was a nook for informal buffet dinners. Vincent would stay in the den upstairs and likely read and nap.

Neither man answered her, both now feeling too mellow to care.

"If I need it, I'll deal with it," Catherine said at last, answering her own question, realizing that no one else was going to.

"You will, my love," Vincent agreed. "You are the best."

Catherine said nothing to this, just took a long swallow of her beer. This stuff really did make it all seem easy! She leaned against Vincent's solid thigh above her and closed her eyes. She needed a rest.

"This is the life," she declared after a few more swigs, now quite relaxed.

William and Vincent exchanged glances and a smile, but said nothing.

END

