

“Bogie, I don’t know how you do it, but, mmph, every damn time!” The demon slams down a barrel of my house special and wipes his mouth with his shoulder. I think he might’ve set a new record on his reverse keg stands. The first year I had this joint open, this bozo was making dents in the floor all over. Customers were tripping left and right until I paid for the Triple-6 concrete flooring.

“Chef’s kiss,” he says while also doing the chef’s kiss sound and gesture. A bit redundant, but my drinks make all creatures down here a little goofy. I take pride in being able to deliver that effect without any alcohol.

“I never thought I had a sweet tooth until I had your... smoothies.”

Now, it’s not what you think: that typical sugary sweetness in the land of the living. See, most demons are pretty traditional with that whole bloodlust craving. Savory stuff. Heavy. Meaty. Pretty bland, really. Or, they go the alcohol route: Red Claws, PBRs, Demon Coladas and Bloodslides.

The basics, really.

See, what I’ve been able to imbue into my drinks is a special type of suffering. With every drink, there’s a sensation. We ain’t just talking about taste, but an actual experience of human agony. And for whatever reason that ends up giving a sweet profile to the devil’s tongue. Of course, I do throw in a little special something that helps to boost the flavor.

“Hey, when I make ‘em, I just try to make ‘em right.” I shrug.

“You wise-ass.” He laughs and tries to swat at me, but the swipe passes right through. “Why the hell are you trying to be so, ugh, humble.” He belches and the sound rattles some of the plates and napkins off the diner tables. The tables and chairs stay put though. I was smart enough to reinforce those into the ground. You can hear a faint whisper of a scream squeak out the corner of his mouth..

“Oh, I’m too humble huh, ya gassy fuck.” I whip out my signature finger guns pose.

Folks don’t realize this, but ghosts experience exhaustion. In fact, we’re always tired. And when I’m tired, it can be tough sometimes to have to force a smile. But this is one of my regulars, and Beezlebob always gives me a good chuckle. This Bob– might be a slob– but he’s such a sweetheart. Just a wicked nice guy of a devil.

Get a load of this.

“Even after coming here for centuries, you still ain’t ever gonna let me call you proper, Mr. Beezlebob?”

The demon purses its lips and hides its garish fangs for a split second. A poor attempt to suppress the laugh that's about to come. The more time he takes to get it together, the more thunderous you know it's gonna be. He always drops his voice like 6 octaves lower when he starts this line too. "Don't you dare call me Beezlebub, cuz you know I ain't—"

"Just some bub!" We shout together, our timing totally off the mark. All the other dining demons eat this shit up and applaud.

Not every customer might be as loud as Bob, but damn does everyone have a good time. Everybody drinks their fill and leaves feeling satisfied. And that makes me feel good too.

Or, I think that's how I'd feel if I felt anything.

My Ma— I'm pretty sure it was my Ma anyway— she used to say, "You don't need feels to be reals."

And keeping it reals is what I do. I work hard. I clean up. Look at me, I'm dressed to the sixes. Got a crisp linen shirt. Alabaster jacket. Pearl pants. Chiffon socks with the frosted white brogues. A porcelain comb in my pocket for whenever I need to slick up my snowy locks. Speaking of which, I think I got a couple black strands coming in that I got to pluck later. Just because I'm not alive don't mean I can't stay fresh.

"Bogie, you got a real good thing going here, you know? So why does it look like you're in trouble?" Bob motions over his shoulder to the entrance.

A raven haired dame in a pomegranate pant suit. Her eyes bounce from the ceiling to her clipboard and back to the walls. Her eyebrow is raised as she taps the board with her pen.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

She snickers at whatever she's reading.

It really is a unique kind of laugh. Very cute though. Sort of like if a boar got pulled under by a sea monster. I never thought I'd hear that noise again.

"She shouldn't be here."

"Oh shit you're right. It's Fella Fridays, ain't it?" Bob rises to his hooves and slaps the counter, rattling the whole diner once more, which draws her attention to us. "I can let her know."

"Let me know what?"

She made her way over here quick. Power suit makes you power walk, I guess. "... Hi, Persie."

"How you boo'n, Bogie?". The words are playful, but the tone isn't. I search her eyes for more of that silliness I used to know. None of that energy here though. Looks like she's all business.

"Oh, you two know each other huh." Bob plops back on his stool, causing another reverberation.

"Meet Persephone. We used to be a thing. Back when she was blonde. Anyway, she is a literal goddess. Someone from above got no place being in the underworld."

"The Persephone, huh?" Bob whistles through the gap between his fangs. "I didn't know you were her ex. She's been living down here for awhile though, B."

"No shit?" I was too dumbstruck to keep it classy.

"Yeah, ever since Hades whisked her away, and they got hitched. Hell's infamous power couple. Some of them other demons call her Mrs. Underworld."

"Some, but not you?" Persephone's curiosity breaks her business focus.

"Ah, don't get me wrong. It's not like I got anything against you. It's just if I call you Mrs. Underworld, then that means I think Hades owns the title of Mr. Underworld. Hades is... okay. I root for the other guy. That's all."

"Just okay is putting it too kindly."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Bob, you need to dial it back." I say that, but I'm glad Bob is being Bob. I hope she answers.

"I will say this, and then we can return to the matter at hand." She turns her clipboard face down on the counter. "We separated." She holds up her hands.

No ring.

"There is far too much drama between my Father and Hades to make it work. The only relationship we have is professional."

"What's that mean? GFE?"

"Bob! You are talking to a literal goddess here."

“Okay, I’m sorry. Pull back them diCaprio hands.” Beezlebub points at a table in the far corner..
“I’ll be catching up on TLC if you need me.”

Without Bob here to keep things loose, trying to navigate this conversation is getting awkward. I know there’s other patrons here enjoying themselves like they do. But I can’t hear them. I just hear dead silence.

“So you really had no idea I was down here?”

“None. When we split, Persie. I really tried to work on myself, and I buried myself in my work.. When we was together, you only got to see me as a schmuck. All that tempwork at the haunt center. A couple of times, I thought I might’ve snagged a VIP possession, but they never led to anything. You saw all that.”

“You know that was not the problem.”

My ghost brain replays the scene of our last fight. Persie saying I was too emotionally closed off– how I never told her how I really feel. *I don’t know how many times I have to tell you I don’t feel anything. Ghosts don’t fucking feel anything!*

Times I yell are few and far between. Sucks that she was on the receiving end. Not a proud moment. I’ve been working on things though. Hell, this place is proof of that. Something I built that I am damn proud of. Something I’d want to show off to her, but I don’t think I’m ready yet.

I try to be present again. “So what exactly is this business stuff you got going on?”

“I am an investigator for the Devil Business Bureau. Since the opening of... Hella Smooth, no agent has performed an inspection. No grade has been given. Operations are to cease immediately until an agent properly assesses the facility.”

Oh.

“But Bogie,” her tone softens to what I remembered. “When I saw your name. listed as business owner. I pulled a few strings. As long as I can evaluate today, you won’t even have to close up shop.”

“Thanks, Persie. I owe you... “

“This will be fairly routine. A few questions and a demo. In this case, a tasting.” She really is doing me a solid, but no sentimentality. Back to business. “The meaning behind the establishment’s name?”

“Hella Smooth is what I strive to be, and it’s what I want all my customers to feel.” I try to do my signature double finger guns, but the confidence isn’t there.

“How you want your customers to feel.” Her eyebrow is raised again. “Okay.” She picks up her clipboard and scribbles. “Maybe we should jump straight into the demonstration. I’d like to experience this.”

Even though business is doing well, there’s a lot of pressure piled on all of a sudden. I don’t want to choke.

My spirit is willing.

My spirit is determined.

But my spirit isn’t moving either.

SNAP. (snap) (snap)

I try to trace the source of the sound. I see Bob’s fist raised in the corner. He gives me a thumbs up. Then a middle finger. Next, some devil horns. He gestures some more, but I don’t know ASL. Heh, he really is my bub.

Back like I’m in control, I start to prepare a flight with various smoothie samples.

“Where you’re from, the drinks of choice are what? Water, wine, and maybe milk. Down here, blood and alcohol typically. Savagery in contrast to the purity above. I get to thinking, what’s a good middle ground I can strike.”

That last bit is a lie.

“What if I brought a little bit of sophistication to the mix. Not domesticating or dumbing down the flavor, but giving it an actual experience. I think that’s what all these demons want. It’ll probably make more sense once you try one.”

I take a 10 proof from the flight and place it by her left hand side. I know the rule is to put it on the customer’s right, but that don’t take into account the dominant hand. I know for a fact Persie’s a leftie.

“We’ll start you off nice and easy.”

She stares at the pink concoction and brings the glass to her nose. “Not putrid? I never imagined a pleasant scent would be possible here.” She cautiously takes a sip.

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A sunny summer day, but sour. A boy throws a tantrum. Seems like everyone forgot his birthday. No balloons. No cake. No party. He stomps. He pouts. He screams. His mother reminds him that he was born on the 30th, not the 29th. She will remind him of this story with every birthday moving forward.

“Oh?” Persie touches her lips. “As a goddess, it is unbecoming to take pleasure in another’s misfortune. But I must say... that tasted delightful.”

Seeing how she likes it gives me back some confidence. I think I can give my regular spiel.

“See, my theory is demons used to only drink in order to remember their own past experiences. Times that they caused the suffering. It took a bit of experimenting before I found the right kind of recipes. With these potions, not only do they get the taste of someone else’s suffering, they get to feel the first hand experience. I think it helps ‘em come up with new ways of punishing and torturing.”

She scribbles some more on her clipboard, but is careful to not let me see the notes. “Let us try something stronger.”

I swap out her glass for a 75 proof. She comments on its merlot pigmentation and knocks it right back.

An especially cold autumn. An artist relents to parental pressure and gives up her passion. On track for medical school. Courses are too tough. Self-care diminished. An eating disorder develops. Collapses from the stress. When her parents visit her in the hospital, they ask her why she wanted to become a doctor to begin with.

“Truly tragic, and yet this is even sweeter.” She makes another note on her pad. She ignores the rest of the flight and glances at the menu board behind me. “I think I understand the progression, but what about the house special?”

Even though it’s different, it’s the number one pick of most patrons.

It’s personal.

Part of me doesn’t want to share this with her just yet, but I throw together all the ingredients and blend it up anyway. When it’s poured out, the color is blood orange.

She lifts the glass "It's heavy." She swirls it around. "And quite thick.." She takes a sniff. "Slightly odd fragrance as well. Or rather, more typical of the smells around here."

Bob raises a middle finger from his corner.

She nods in approval of her own commentary and drinks.

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A winter anniversary. Oh, nevermind. The relationship is over. All the cracks built up over three years have shattered the bond entirely. This is pretty lame. Completely preventable. The man feels empty. The man feels alone.

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"Hm. This one's a little different isn't it? The slight sweetness is there, but it's also... cheesy? I must say I'm a little disappointed."

Sounds about right.

"But maybe that adds to the appeal for demons? I don't know if I like that."

It's downright embarrassing. I don't know how I'm supposed to explain it to her.

This whole business venture materialized because I was searching for a way for a ghost to experience bonafide feelings. My secret sauce being a dash of hope. Hope for different outcomes. That kid hoping to be remembered. The woman hoping to make her parents proud. That last guy... hoping that wouldn't be the end.

"I think that will be enough. Once I return to the Bureau, I can update our records." Persie draws an "A" with her finger.

I feel like I should say something. I know I should say something. The spirit is willing. The spirit is determined. But once again, the spirit still ain't taking any action.

"I really am impressed with how far you've come, Bogie. You've grown a lot. Take care of yourself." She lets her hand linger on my chest for just a moment before walking away.

Gone as quickly as she came. I'm not sure how long I've been standing in silence.

"You know what I love about the house special, B?" Bob gulps down the leftover smoothie. "Every time that flavor hits, I think to myself, 'Thank the devil I'm not that dumbass'. I mean, c'mon, to know exactly what you want and not do anything about it?"

“Yeah, uh... think I might be closing up early today.”

Bob flips over the clipboard that got left behind. “She really did have no business being here.”

I start picking up the glasses and wiping down the counter. “Goddesses, Bob. Probably won’t ever understand them.”

“Well sure, but I mean, why make up that story about investigating your business to begin with?”

“You’re saying she’s not with the DBB?”

Bob scrolls through his phone. “Nah, she’s here in the database. It’s just, this ain’t her district at all.”

“Wait, is that a public record?”

“Oh nah, only other DBB agents have access.” He tosses me a card. “Read it and weep.”

“Lucifer?” When my eyes return to see Beezlebub, he’s changed shape. He’s shed the ogre of a build for a sleeker, debonair kind of look. You know, one of them what-if-Idris-Elba-did-funeral-director-cosplay types.

“Yeah, the name my old man gave me. Was never a fan.” He scratches his chin now devoid of any beard. “Anyway, you’re in my territory, and I’ve already logged you with the best grade.”

So the purpose of her trip wasn’t business.

I hold the glass that served the house special for a moment. Thank the devil I’m not that dumbass either. I shake the last few drops into my mouth before running out.