

Flaming delights

By DeltaMaleH2O

Um, well, this is awkward...

I walk into the ice-cream parlor, wielding my phone and the tinder app I met my date and what do I see? A screaming child and my date standing behind the counter with a tight smile on her lips. She's wearing a cute, dark navy apron with the typical long-sleeved work shirt. She even has that cute little paper hat the servers wear. I would be smiling, except for the fact that she's being yelled at by the child's mother. The woman is a bit of a Karen, from what I see, despite having an excellent jean to flannel shirt combination. As much as I admire perfect fashion taste, this raven woman has a bit of attitude problem. I cautiously step in line, peeking from behind two people to keep an eye on the argument. From what I can see, my date is trying not to break her composure as the Raven woman makes some...interesting claims. "Oh, for the sake of the Goddess! You're out of PANCAKE-RASPBERRY DOUGH ICECREAM? How?! No one else it's that but my baby and me! How could you possibly be out?! My child NEEDS their ice-cream fixings before soccer practice! The sugar makes them more powerful and in tune with themselves! Do you WANT my child to lose the big game?!" I can hear a few customers snickering and whispering not-so-kind things about the woman in front of us. Even some of the customers by the drink fountains are staring. I feel a twinge of embarrassment for the woman. I can't believe she doesn't realize what she sounds like. My date closes her eyes for a few moments and sighs, reopening them with a very strained look of cheerfulness on her face.

"I apologize ma'am, but you are in fact, not the only one that enjoys that flavor. Many customers eat it all the time. Please pay attention before making those claims." The crow woman looks as though she is ready to throw hands. That was...uh....very not-so-friendly of her. I mean, she's a beautiful piebald reindeer with gorgeous long, white hair often kept in a pony tail, and her fashion on her tinder account is to die for (I saved many pictures from her gallery) , but do I really want to date this woman? The moment that thought crossed my mind, I end up locking eyes with her for a few brief moments. Oh no, I think she recognizes me from Tinder! I flush a light pink and quickly look away. Oh, now you've done it, Chloe! Now you HAVE to go through with the date...wait isn't she working? How- "Hey, Marshie-Marsha! Seems like there's a problem, huh?" my thoughts are dashed by a very cheerful, overly friendly voice that's the embodiment of chiming bells. Light and soothing. My date, Marsha, rolls her eyes and nods at the Raven woman. "This...esteemed customer won't accept any ice-cream but the pancake-raspberry dough flavor. Please deal with this. My break is long overdue and there's someone waiting on me."

She motions to me, the cowardly vixen hiding behind the other customers, hoping she forgot about me. The other employee (possibly the manager), a bright blue hare, smiles wide and waves at me excitedly. I shyly wave back, the Raven woman getting more and more impatient as her child's screams grow louder and louder. The moment she walks up to the counter, trading places with Marsha, she says this; "Hello ma'am, as much as we value your contributions to our little parlor, I have to ask that you take your screaming little demon out of our building before I ask security to do it for you. Understood?" I and everyone else just stand there and stare, dumbfounded. She said all of that with the kindest smile I've ever seen, even her eyes don't have any malice in them. The child immediately stops crying and the

mother, backing away from the counter nervously, silently takes her frightened child by the hand and marches out of the parlor. Everyone just awkwardly returns to whatever they were doing, mumbling nervously to themselves. I let out a breath of relief, quickly followed by almost choking on air as I see the elegant Marsha walking towards me, her hips swaying back and forth with attitude. I feel a hot blush coming on as she stands right next to me, looking me up and down. "Chloe, is it?" I nod speechlessly. She casually looks at her fingernails, looking as if she's contemplating something. She then looks back up at me with a bored look on her face and says "You want to try some of the more "adventurous" flavors we sell in this dump?" I feel my entire body start to buzz with anxiety as she brushes a small strand of hair out of her beautiful Violet-gray eyes. Oh praise the goddess, she's amazing! Despite being intimidating, she really reminds me of a regal snow queen! I open my mouth to say something, but all I get is static in the brain and silence from my lips. So I just nod again instead. Marsha gives me a knowing smirk and cruelly brushes her soft fingers against mine, like touching a velvet blanket. Ah! I just meet this woman and I already love her! Is this love? Oh, I'm being silly! I think- "Hello hello! You two cutie-patooties! You want our extra-special-challenge-of-the-day flavor?" She does an enthusiastic little jump and twirl, pointing to the screen above our heads.

"It's extra, extra special for couples! The strawberry-jam, Orange Marmalade ice-cream with a pinch of ghost pepper as the kicker! Perfect for couples to try together!" I balk at the satanic combination of flavors listed right in front of my ears. Marsha simply sniffs in disgust, rolling her eyes. "Sure, that's fine. Are you okay with this, Chloe?" I look at the bright expression of the hares, Vivian's (judging by her name tag) face, remember what she said to that raven woman before, and swallow hard. "Y-yes, please. That'll do..." She smiles even wider and types in our order into the register. "Excellent, EXCELLENT! You won't regret your choice! No, no you won't!" ...Why does that sound like a kindly threat? Is that even a thing? Well, regardless, Marsha just pays for the two servings of ice-cream without asking and we head off to our table. A small round one. Near the back window. I sigh in relief as we pull our chairs out and sit facing each other.

"So..." After a minute of not speaking to each other, Marsha cuts through the silence with her cool-as-ice voice. The kind that commands respect. "Hipster style, hm?" She motions to my outfit, my labeled "Divas of the horizon" band tee, my stylish Jean jacket, and, of course, my all time favorite, emo glitter ripped jeans. Topped off with a soft cotton bucket hat, I look like a real bad girl! Despite that not being who I am at all! I don't know, I just thought if I wore something like this it attract more cool women to me, I guess... and apparently it worked...hopefully. I nod at her shyly and fidget with my hands, glancing up at her occasionally, trying to work up the nerve to speak. "U-um, yes! I really enjoy hippy-emo fashion! I-I actually got this shirt for my nineteenth birthday last year! I-it's from my favorite band! H-have you..you..um..." I slowly lose my will to speak as I wither under her intense gaze, intently listening to every word I say. She blinks slowly and nods her head majestically. "Yes, I listen to them, occasionally. They have catchy hooks and good rhythm for grunge." She twirls a strand of hair from her ponytail around her finger, thinking, I believe. "Tell me, have you ever heard of "The Silent saints?" I shake my head. She tilts her head, looking at me curiously. "I see. Well, you need to learn then." She pulls out her fancy golden cased I-phone and deftly navigates to her Spotify with seconds. She quickly produces a pair of wireless earphones from her apron pocket and hands me one. I tentatively take it out of her hand, placing it in my left ear, to be immediately greeted with the sound of orchestral/rock music.

"O-oh, I know this song!" I get a sudden flash of Déjà vu, traveling all the way back to my young teen years. Being a thirteen year old girl, sitting in her room with her at the time girlfriend, playing ye old

animal crossing and listening to this song on full blast. I smile as I remember that memory, my anxiety slowly melting away. I look to the side of Marsha's head, still fidgeting with my fingers. "Nightmare Sun, right? I use to listen to this song all the time when I was a kid! Such a melodic yet gritty tune that can go from slow paced and solemn, to fast and angry flawlessly!" I talk about the intricacies of the song for I'm not sure how long, gushing over the main female vocalist and how amazing (and attractive) she is. Marsha occasionally interjects with her own opinions on the group and their songs, but she mostly listens. Despite the intensity in her stare, I feel oddly at ease with her. She may be a bit sassy, but overall she seems like a good person. I- "Hello hello, you two precious pineapples! Here's what you cuties ordered! The "strawberry-jam, orange Marmalade with a hint of ghost pepper ice-cream"! Does it look delicious?" our conversation is abruptly halted as Vanessa, our waitress (and the parlors possible manager) gleefully places our "dessert of certain doom" as I'm calling it, down in front of us. "Alrighty! Let me explain the rules real quick-like!"

'R-rules? I-is this a contest?" I ask meekly. I've never been great with contests, especially not food-eating contests. I do vaguely remember her mentioning a challenge of the day, but... "U-um. Im not great with food eating contests, actually-" I stop mid-sentence when I feel a velvety pair of slender fingers interrupt my fidgeting. I look up to see Marsha giving me a very slight, mischievous smirk. I feel my entire body heat up from her competitive stare. She really wants to do this! I-I cant just tell her no! I instinctively intertwine my fingers with hers, stuttering. "I-I, I....oh, never mind! W-we can t-try..." Marsha nods her head in approval, sadly pulling her hands away from mine to listen to Vanessa's rules. "Alright alright, that's more like it! Now, the rules are simple; you have twenty minutes to finish your ice-cream, you cant drink anything until you're finished with your lovely dessert, aaaaand..." She pauses dramatically before continuing. "You must enjoy yourselves! No sour faces, kapeesh?" I nod quickly. Why does she feel more threatening than Marsha did previously? She's done nothing but smile and kindly wait on us! She gives me a bright, toothy smile and courtesies with an invisible dress. "bon appetite, sweeties! Let me know when you're finished!"

She Skips away from us, leaving only the blood-orange colored amalgamation to be dealt with. Oh praise the goddess, this is going to take effort. I pick up my spoon and cautiously dip out a small spoon-full, eyeing it suspiciously. My eyes dart over to Marsha who is currently making the most adorable face I've seen. Her face is scrunched up I'm a strange mixture of determination and disappointment, reminding me of a spoiled heir. I smile to myself as I take a tiny taste of the ice-cream. I immediately regret my decision. Directly after taking a bite, my mouth is overrun with the flavor of spicy fruit, the straw berry battling the orange for dominance. The supposed "hint" of ghost pepper is setting fire to my taste buds. I look up at Marsh again through teary eyes. She's...not even flinching?! People like that exist?! I swallow the first bite and wipe the tears from my stinging eyes. I can't do it, there's no way o can possibly push through this! "...Yes you can." I freeze. Did I say that out loud? I'm positive that was I'm my mind. "...You don't have to be a mind reader to see what you're thinking." Marsha quips. "It's all over your face. " Marsha points to my ice-cream and states; "You can finish it if you don't let the taste linger in your mouth. It's ice-cream, treat it like a frozen drink. But don't rush or inhale it, you'll kill your stomach more than you already are."

I listen to her advice intently, nodding. She's truly into this...the way her small yet refined features look when she's focused makes me...well, want to try. That's it. I rub my hands together and start working on the ice-cream. I make sure to follow her instructions carefully. Not eating to fast, but not too slow either. I don't let the taste linger, and I let myself rest for a moment to not let the spice overpower my

senses. And then finally, after ten long minutes of slogging through the nightmare ice-cream. I've done it, five minutes after Marsha had finished, no less! As soon as we had finished our Ice-cream, we immediately ordered a tall glass of untainted milk. I feel the trails left by my tears on my fur, my eyes hot from the constant tears. We did it! We beat this hellacious challenge! I smile proudly at Marsha, who looks a tad bored. The spice not only didn't get to her, but she also looks as radiant as ever. Not even a hair out of place. She nods in my general direction and sighs. "Well, Vanessa, that was disappointing. You really couldn't come up with anything actually worth my time?"

"Oh come on now! You gotta admit that it was a worthwhile contender for best challenge! Right, Chloe?"

I nearly fall out of my chair at her just suddenly appearing at my shoulder. She lets out a hearty laugh and curtsies again. "Well well, since you've both completed the wonderful challenge, you both get a 20 dollar gift card for you little parlor! Isn't that exciting?" I blink several times, trying to process what she said as I'm handed a card. A...oh a gift card! That's what she was talking about! And it's 20 dollars! Considering I should be spending what little money I have on groceries, this will be a great treat after I get my usual adult life out of the way. Marsha...Marsha gives me her card? What? "H-Hey, don't you want this? You earned it! You-um!" Marsha walks over to where I'm sitting and gives me a gentle kiss on the cheek. I just stare at her, mouth agape as she gives me a coy wink and walks towards the counter, throwing behind her the words; "I'm part of a multimillion corporation, sweets. I don't need hand outs." I blink several times deputed it hurting my eyes and blurt out, "You're r-rich? W-why do you work here then?" I feel the pit of embarrassment deep in my stomach. It should've been obvious, given all the expensive outfits she wears in her photos. And the expensive equipment. And the stylish sports car...am I blind?! But...but that still doesn't answer the question of-

"Why do I work I'm a dump like this?" She pauses for a brief moment before continuing. "My mothers want me to learn "responsibility ", and what better way to do that then to force their daughter into menial labor?" I can practically hear the venom oozing from her voice when she says that. Yikes. Time to change the subject. But before I can say anything, Marsha tuts and lets out a dainty sigh. "Don't worry about it. I have to get back to my "wonderful" job, but I'll see you again tomorrow, yes?" she turns and gives me as close to a genuine smile as I think she can manage. I nod eagerly. It would be great to spend time with her again! Satisfied, she Turns on her heel and gets back to work. I smile inwardly.

I can't wait for tomorrow to come.