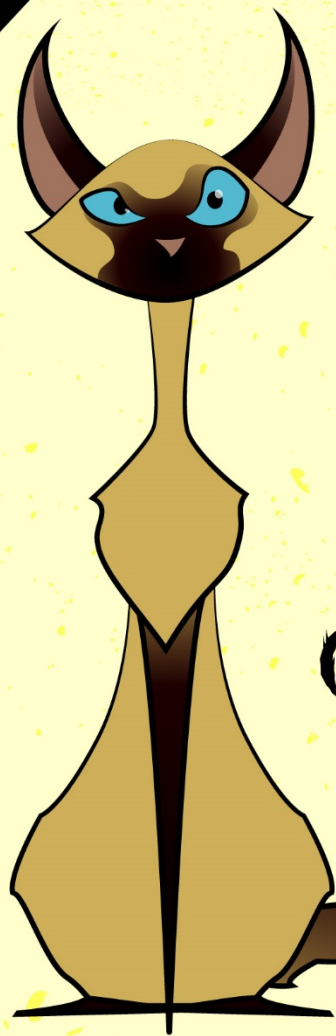


Danielle's Inferno



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When I woke up, I was dead.

At least, it very much appeared that way. When I looked past my kidney-shaped, glass desk and ergonomic office chair, there laid a body that could be only described as me. The dark black hair I had just shampooed that morning was strewn over my face. Plus, the blue pencil skirt I had bought on sale at the Nordstrom's Rack outlet that was bunched around my knees was a dead giveaway.

"Oh God, my first after-life pun," I said aloud.

Of course, no one turned to respond to me. My boss, the oh-so-sweet geeky guy with the desk adjacent to mine, and the first responder paramedics didn't so much as look my way. My blouse was ripped open as they worked on my body, and one of my breasts had popped out of the miracle bra. My nipple looked around like an unblinking, brown eye on too much coffee.

I winced and regretted that no one had shoed the men away yet. Sighing, I covered my eyes in embarrassment.

“Yeah, this might take a while,” said a small voice next to my feet.

I looked down to find a Siamese cat sitting with its tail wrapped around its feet. The cat looked up at me with blue eyes and an expression that seemed a little annoyed. She looked the way all cats looked most of the time, like they were infinitely exacerbated with everyone.

“You can see me?”

“A talking cat just approached the specter of your dying soul, and you ask if I can see you?”

I paused a moment.

“Well, yes.”

“I’m looking at you, aren’t I?”

I nodded, confused.

“Then I can see you, moron.”

My face screwed into a sarcastic frown. Not only did the voice sound like a female, but she sounded like a real bitch.

“Okay, then what are you? Some ghost cat because I’m obviously dead.”

“Yeah, okay, not to get too technical but you’re mostly dead, Danielle.”

“Then what are you, and why are you here?”

The cat yawned and stretched in a fluid motion of disregard. She shut her eyes and scratched the back of one ear with a sudden obsessive need.

“I’m here because I’m like your spirit animal or something.”

“*You* are my spirit animal?”

“Yeah sure, why not?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. After pausing to check in to see how the paramedics were doing with my body, I looked back to the cat. This was all too weird, and I didn’t know how to feel.

“Are you here to take me to Heaven? Is there a Heaven?”

“My Lord, who are you and who are your parents? Were you born in a barn and then raised by Shetland ponies? A talking cat says they are your spirit animal and all manners run out the door? I have a name you know. Care to ask what it is?”

The cat ceased scratching and started gnawing on her toe. She smacked and chewed on each toe in turn. I couldn’t help but wince.

“Sorry. What is your name?”

“G-g-guddin’,” said the cat with her mouth full of toe.

“Pardon?”

The Siamese spit out a bit of toenail and sneezed. She licked her lips and rubbed her nose with her paw.

“Pudding.”

I stared at her for a moment without knowing what to say. My face must have been a mask of disbelief. Hers remained unchanged from general feline scorn.

“You are telling me that my afterlife spirit animal is a bitchy Siamese cat named Pudding?”

Pudding appeared unmoved. The sarcasm rolled off her back.

“Hey, don’t blame me. I am merely the physical manifestation of your own psychic energy. Seems to me that makes you the indifferent bitch.”

I sighed and nodded.

“Okay, psychic manifestation, Pudding the cat, what’s next? Is it Heaven or Hell for me?”

The cat scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“Neither, if it wasn’t obvious. Like I said before, you are only mostly dead. It is up to you to decide what happens afterwards. I am just a guide.”

“We are losing her,” called a paramedic next to us.

A man and a woman began to work more feverishly than before. I frowned at the stillness of my mostly dead body.

“Looks like I don’t have much time.”

The cat sniffed and with the ease and agility of its species, she rubbed herself along the arms of the paramedics while stepping over my body. Everything began to hum. Every being that Pudding touched slowed to a crawl. Vibrations infected the scene and everyone and everything slowed to stop. Pudding worked her way to the others, and they too seemed to freeze in time. Nothing stirred but us. Not even the clocks continued to tick. The world as I had known it wobbled in stillness.

“There. Now we have plenty of time.”

“How did you do that?”

“It’s just the way things are. Now, come on. We have to get going.”

Pudding walked over to me and nudged me to turn.

“What do you mean? Where are we going?”

“You have to decide. We have to go now.”

I turned to see a bright, swirling light at my feet. It was blinding and inviting at the same time. I felt like I ought to turn away from it for fear of the damage it might do to my retinas, but there was no looking away. There was a sudden sense of dropping, like when you’re at an amusement park and the roller coasters dips. We were falling in a bright tunnel. Just when I felt my stomach lurched into my throat, the sensation ended and a floor was again beneath my feet.

The first thing I noticed was a deep sense of nothing. There were no smells, no real sounds, no wind. Everything was still the way a vacuum would be still. I opened my eyes to the world around me. It was no longer the interior of my office building. No paramedics worked tirelessly on my body nearby. No coworkers were around to ogle my tits. This place was barren, desolate and grey.

Pudding sidled up to me, tail curling around her paws.

“Looks fun, huh?”

There were a few rocks, but nothing more in the way of landscape. Yet, things moved here. They were slow, but they moved soundlessly about us. People moved about us. At least, these used to be people. They shuffled around aimlessly, looking for something they could never find.

“Where are we?”

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“Limbo.”

“Limbo? I thought Limbo would be less...I don't know...sad.”

“Limbo is where you go when you are undecided. People that were never great or terrible in life. They roam this place infinitely searching for the love that might send them up. If you never inspired much love or hate, you are here.”

“I thought you said I was undecided.”

“No, I said you were mostly dead. Pay attention, Danny.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Don't call me that.”

“What? Danny?”

“Yes, I hate that name.”

Pudding shifted and stretched. She blinked up at me several times.

“Alright Danny, let's get going.”

I huffed and looked at her angrily.

“Where are we going?”

“To look for the next portal, duh.”

“Portal?”

Pudding turned and glared at me.

“Look, I get you aren’t used to this afterlife stuff, but please try to keep up. I don’t have time to babysit.”

She started walking across the wasteland of Limbo, and I followed her. We passed hopeless looking people who stared at us for mere moments before they wandered further. They all wore grey clothes, torn and desperate looking.

“Oh really,” I shouted to her. “What else do you have to do that’s so important?”

She made for an empty area of dirt with a hurried pace.

“Let’s just say I don’t want to spend any more time in Hell than I have to,” she said as she circled a barren piece of dirt, digging and pawing a dent in it.

“Hell? Who said anything about Hell? I thought this was Limbo.”

She dug and clawed at the ground until there was a crude, little hole.

“You didn’t think you’d find enlightenment in Limbo, did you? Honestly Danny, I worry about your brain cells.”

The Siamese cat then proceeded to squat in the hole and produce a steamy pile feces right in front of my eyes. I made a disgusted face and looked away.

“Oh God, do you have to do that this second?”

Then, the smell hit me. The stink was rancid and foul. Putrid was a good word. It felt like just the odor alone was burning my nostrils to inhale it. It hit me like a wall. I coughed and gagged.

“That’s disgusting! What did you eat?”

“I’m sure yours don’t smell like Belgian chocolate, princess. Besides, how else am I going to get us to Hell?”

I paused for a second and gave her a level look.

“You’re telling me that the way to get to Hell is through cat shit?”

Pudding kicked a little dirt on her pile and made her way back to me. She looked up to me with a face full of annoyance.

“Are you really that surprised?” she said exacerbated.

Before I could answer, the pile in front of us began to glow and the ground around it began to vibrate. Within seconds we were bathed in blue and white light, and there before us, where the poop had been only seconds ago, was a swirly portal to Hell.

With her head, Pudding nudged me toward the portal, and the damned thing sucked us both into it before I could resist. Again, the sense of falling overcame me, but only for an instant. As soon as my feet touched ground again, the wind nearly blew me off of them. I opened my eyes to see a bleak and gray wasteland speckled with sharp boulders.

There were people here too, but not the silent wanderers of Limbo. These people were naked, or mostly naked, and they were being blown about so violently, no one could stand still for very long. Those who were clothed were dressed in sadomasochistic attire; a sight that was very visibly shocking to say the least. If that wasn’t bad enough, it seemed one bothered to get anyone their appropriate size. Everything was too small, pinching in all the places that made billowy overflows of skin and fat.

“Where are we?”

“Lust. It’s the Second circle of Hell.”

People ran toward each other, trying desperately to grope one another or embrace, only to be blown away and smashed against a boulder. Limbs flew everywhere along with bondage leather and blood. However, within seconds, their limbs would mend and their blood seeped back into their veins just in time for them to come to and do it all over again.

“Why doesn’t the wind blow us around?”

“Because you don’t belong here. You can experience things, but nothing here can hurt you.”

“Then why...” I started but was cut off by the sight of an older man, wrinkled and saggy, wearing a pink nighty and argyle trouser socks.

“Hello,” he said in a way that made my skin crawl.

He looked me up and down like a piece of candy he wanted to lick. I shuddered and wrapped my arms around myself.

“Bugger off, Senator. She isn’t for you,” said a voice behind me.

I turned to see what I could only describe as a red and busty demon in a Playboy bunny costume. Her hair was spun up into a bun with little bunny ears poking out. Her skirt was so short most of her ass peaked out the bottom and her blouse cut so low, I think only her pointy nipples held it up. In her hand she held up a silver tray with several bottles of Pooors Light.

She took one off, handed it to the man, and blew him a kiss. The kiss sent him flying backwards until he landed hard against a rock with a smile on his face. The beer bottle and his skull splatted against the stone in a spray of amber and blood.

I winced and then marveled as his body began to regenerate itself.

“Sorry about that, love,” said the busty demon holding the tray of beer. “The ones who bring their own costumes are always the worst. Sneaky things.”

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“That’s alright,” I said carefully.

She looked down at Pudding, and they nodded at each other.

“Hey Pudding. Out of body experience? Mostly dead is she?”

“Yep. Full tour.”

“Too bad,” said the demon wiggling her hips. “She looks like she’d be fun.”

“Not hardly,” retorted Pudding.

“Full tour?” I repeated as I looked down at Pudding.

“We’ve gotta get going. See you, Bettie,” said Pudding as she pushed me along.

We said our farewells and Pudding and I made our way through the landscape. I kept quiet until we were out of earshot from everyone.

“Spiritual bitch animal, huh?”

“What do you mean?” asked Pudding innocently.

“If you are a psychic manifestation, why did she know your name?”

“Ah, the wiz kid catches up.”

“You lied to me,” I accused.

Pudding didn’t even break stride. She just kept walking along.

“Yeah, so. Cat from Hell doesn’t normally inspire a sense of trust.”

“So, you brought me here under false pretenses.”

She stopped and looked up at me again as though she couldn't be more annoyed with me.

“Does it matter?”

I opened my mouth and almost said yes, but nothing came out. She had a point. I would be here anyway. I shut my mouth again without a word and moved on in silence.

Everywhere we saw beautiful demons, male and female, dressed provocatively and enticing the poor people around them. Men and women ran to them only to be blown into the nearest rock. All of the demons had trays of Poores Light.

“What's with the beer?”

“Poores Light is one of the official sponsors of Hell.”

“Hell has sponsors?”

“Girl, everyone has sponsors these days.”

“But why...”

“Look, say you're in Hell, thirsty and desperate. Then, you are handed a cold bottle of something. Wonderful! Thank God! You are elated until you take a swig and realize its Poores Light. Think of the disappointment. Imagine the horror of a mouthful of piss water beer. Going thirsty would be better. How could Lucifer say no to something like that?”

I thought about it for a second, and remember a few regrettable parties in college. Eventually, I nodded in agreement. Cat had a point.

“This looks like a good spot.”

Pudding began circling an area and digging another hole.

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“Oh no, not again.”

“Relax,” she said.

She squatted and peed in the little hole, much to my relief. The portal opened much like it had the last time, and we fell down into it.

When the light cleared, we seemed to be in a vast snowy tundra. Freezing rain, hail, and snow bombarded the people here. The snow wasn't real snow though. It was black like falling flakes of oil. Most of the people were grossly overweight and immobile in large drifts of black snow. Demons walked about in chef's aprons carrying trays of donuts, ice cream, and large vats of processed cheese. They randomly selected an immobilized person and forced food down their throats. The tortured soul screamed under the smothering muffler of sugar and liquid cheese.

“Where are we?”

“Gluttony.”

“How many of these do I have to see? I don't belong here either.”

“Right you are, but like I said before, you are signed up for the full tour.”

We walked in silence for a while, passing a section of people not immobilized by food but by drunkenness. The demons poured bottle after bottle into them with no escape in sight. They laid about unable to ever get their footing to run away.

“I'm not a bad person. I never did really bad things. Why are we here?”

“Hell isn't all about totally bad people. It's about people who let some vice keep them from living a good life. Be good to others, love your kids, be nice to animals...stuff like that. Very few people here are all bad. Most just lost a bit of themselves for some reason and filled it with something else until their scale tipped against their favor.”

“What about people like Hitler?”

“Oh, he’s here. People like him are different, they get special punishments. Hitler is doomed to tour several of these levels and experience different tortures every time. We might see him around today. Last time I saw him, he was swimming in the sea of boiling blood with a pineapple stuck up his ass.”

“There’s a sea of...”

“Ah, here we are,” said Pudding as we turned a corner.

I stopped in my tracks as fear trickled down my body like a constantly running faucet. There was a huge, furry mass in front of us up curled up in the snow. The thing smelled like wet dog, and the mass heaved up and down with every deep breath the creature took. It was a mountain of fur. I wanted to run but was immobile with terror.

“Hey! Wake up, you lazy, mange-covered, glorified Chihuahua,” shouted tiny Pudding to the giant thing.

It snuffled and twitched. Two giant paws stretched forth as not one, but three heads rose out from underneath them. The creature was definitely a dog, but unlike any dog I had ever seen. He was huge and each one of his heads resembled the largest Rottweiler I’d ever known. When one of his heads yawned, his breath smelled like an old carcass and his eyes opened with flames behind them.

The beast looked us over, and I waited to be eaten. My body braced for the violence.

Instead, two heads looked lazily at us while the other turned around to gnaw at his hind leg. The flames behind his eyes seemed to simmer to only embers when he recognized Pudding.

“Oh, hey.”

“Hey yourself.”

“That one yours?”

One giant dog head tilted toward me and sniffed.

“Yeah. Full tour.”

“That’s a pity. She smells all scared and warm.”

I resisted the urge to urinate down my leg.

“You’re not exactly a pleasant site, Cerberus. Can we use your portal? I’m all tapped out.”

The massive beast huffed and slumped to the ground heavily, causing the floor beneath them to tremble. Pudding didn’t seem to flinch.

“I suppose. It’s a slow day. But don’t say I never did anything for you.”

We walked past the enormous thing and into his den. I shivered as adrenaline told me to run, but my better judgment had me walk slowly in pace with Pudding. It smelled like an entire slaughter house worth of waste in the there. Blood splattered the walls and bits of bones and flesh piled up in heaps. And of course, in the middle of a pile of dung sat a massive portal. I held my breath, and we passed into the next level.

The next level was for Greed. Spenders, hoarders and tight wads moved about a barren desert pushing boulders for no discernable reason. Those unwilling to spend limped around in nude, emaciated bodies while the hoarders and spenders were loaded down with too much clothing and bags upon bags of worthless junk. They had oversized bodies that kept them from moving without a lot of panting and sweating. I thought of every shopping binge I ever had and shuddered.

Demons here roamed in couture and fine white robes that blew perfectly in some disembodied breeze. They took pleasure in either adding to or taking away things from the people pushing the boulders. Of course, beer was everywhere and in good supply.

A quick cat fart dropped us in a giant lake which seemed to have no end. I treaded water while Pudding balanced precariously on my head. Her claws dug into my scalp as she shifted her balanced, trying to not get wet.

“I fucking hate Anger.”

“This is Anger?”

She raised a paw, and a large wooden boat piloted by a cloaked gondolier came to our aid. Pudding leaped to the boat and began immediately licking her fur while I struggled to haul myself in under my own steam. When I looked back into the water, I saw the others that I hadn't seen before. Scores of people with faces in a constant state of fury swam around us like sharks. If any of them got near another one, they would attack each other with a brutality that was jarring.

I looked back to my companions on the boat and noticed that Pudding was completely dry.

“How did you do that?”

“Check yourself,” she said dismissively.

I did and found out that I too was dry. Patting my clothes for extra assurance, I discovered that everything on me was dry as well.

“How is that possible?”

“I told you. You don't belong on these levels. They can't affect you. That's why they didn't attack you and why you don't stay wet.”

“How far are you going?”

This came as a shock to me as the voice that said it was smooth and kind and from no direction in particular. I looked around us and realized that I hadn't noticed or acknowledged the gondolier until that moment. The gondolier, of course, was a fully cloaked skeleton. He was looking down at Pudding. I only knew because his skull was pointed at her.

“A full tour,” she said.

The skull looked back up at me and opened his mouth.

“That's rough,” said the disembodied voice.

“Okay, I've had enough. Why am I here? What is this full tour business? If I'm dead or mostly dead, why am I in Hell? I mean, I'm no saint, but I'm a good person. Whatever epiphany I'm supposed to have here is lost, okay.”

Pudding and the gondolier looked each other for a moment and then back at me.

“She really is a full tour, huh?”

“Yep,” said Pudding sadly. “Think you can give us a hand with the next portal?”

“Sure. Why not?”

The skeleton bent over the boat and farted loudly. A swirling portal appeared just off the side. I tried really hard not to wonder how a skeleton managed to fart. Enough had happened to me already, and that one would just give me a headache.

Pudding said a quick thanks and leaped into the portal.

I made a motion to follow her with a loud sigh when the gondolier stopped me. He looked into my eyes like he knew something I didn't. Rather his empty skull sockets looked like they knew something I didn't.

"I am very sorry about all this. You know, it's easier than you think to end up here. But, you have a chance. Remember that."

Oddly enough, his disembodied voice sounded very sincere. I softened and smiled at him. This skeleton man was somehow strangely sweet. He reached inside his robes.

"Can I offer you a room temperature Poors Light?"

"Uh, no thank you."

He nodded.

I smiled again before I jumped into the portal.

The next level was Heresy. The ground was solid stone and people were being burned alive in their own personal open graves of fire. Snake haired, winged demons walked among the tombs, occasionally stabbing one of the burning people. A few bored looking demons roasted marshmallows over a couple of writhing sinners.

"I think the screams give the marshmallows the best flavor. That's why I always pick the screamers," said one demon to the other as she rotated her snack over the open flame.

The other demon shrugged. Apparently, he hadn't noticed a difference.

Oddly enough, the Heresy level was not as populated as I thought it might be, and I mentioned as much to Pudding.

“Yeah, that’s because no one religion is right and others wrong. If you are a good person and believe in whatever, you’re fine. This place is for people claiming to be God or God’s best buddy to make a buck or steal your virginity. TV evangelists and cult leaders. You know the kind, douchebags.”

I looked around and saw a man in a three piece suit and perfectly shellacked hair. He burned over and over again, but his perfect hair helmet and eye liner never singed. The apathetic demon was roasting his marshmallows over that one.

The next level was Violence. I had to cover my eyes for that one. Tyrants and robbers were forced to swim in a sea of boiling blood. People were chased over burning sand by dogs. Unspeakable acts of violence happened all around us while Pudding led me through the carnage. I wanted to cover my ears so as to not have to hear the acts as well, but Pudding wouldn’t let me. She allowed me to have my eyes covered up until we reached a forest and the sounds of violence had dissipated.

“Oh Danny, open your eyes. You have to see this one.”

I did so and saw a tree in front of us. The tree seemed to have a face, a sad face. There were other trees around us with faces.

“What’s this?”

“It’s Hitler.”

“What?”

“Look at it closely.”

I did even though the tree tried to not make eye contact with me. After a little while of staring, I could see the resemblance. It did look like Hitler, little mustache made of moss and everything.

“I don’t understand.”

“This is the suicide forest.”

“The suicide forest?”

“Yeah, if you’re a suicide, you get to be a tree here. Looks like that’s where he is on his misery tour today.”

I looked around at the forest. Each tree had a face of some sort. You could hear some of the violence in the distance, but overall, it was peaceful. The trees swayed back and forth with downcast glances and stares to a rhythm no one but they could hear.

“It doesn’t seem so bad.”

“It’s not unless you were a shitty suicide like him. If you just killed yourself, you’re a tree here, kind of sad but serene. However, if you killed millions of others too...”

“Then what happens?”

Just then, we heard squawking and three huge, big busted harpies swooped in from the sky and landed on the Hitler tree. He started screaming something in German while they clawed and ripped at his limbs and bark mercilessly. They pecked and scratched and gouged his eyes and he wailed, helpless and with no hope of rescue.

“Ha! Get ‘em, girls!”

Pudding laughed and egged the harpies on. I winced and tried to look away, but by the time I started to move, Pudding had peed on the base of the Hitler tree and a swirling portal was now there for us to exit that horrific place. We jumped in without a moment of caution. Anywhere had to be better than that place.

Fraud was our next stop. It was an endless desert where people sat buried up to their chests in scorching sand. The blazing heat all around them baked them relentlessly. These were dirty politicians, false diviners, prophets, thieves, pimps and seducers. They all roasted together. Some seemed to burn like wild hot fires, while other singed slowly. I imagined that their level of heat was directly connected with how bad their crimes were.

I didn't ask Pudding. Even though I could feel no heat, just being there made me exhausted and thirsty. I knew I could speak, but the idea of opening my mouth made me wince. This place was painful even to look at as a visitor. Before we moved on, a burned black, spindly demon offered me a Poors Light, and I politely declined with a shake of my head.

The next level was frozen. When we landed, I felt cold all over. Chilled to bone as the saying goes. What a difference this place was from the last one. When I breathed out, it hung visible in front of me for a long time.

"Where are we now?"

"This is the ninth circle, Treachery."

"Wow, it's so different."

"Yeah," said Pudding, sounding sullen.

We passed people as we walked, all were frozen in ice. Some were completely frozen, while others only partially. A few people were even frozen upside down. One of those wore old clothes and had a beard.

"That's Judas."

I nodded. It felt like I was looking at a display in a museum.

We walked a little further until we came to a man in a toga, partially frozen in place. His face, shoulders, and one arm was free, but the rest of him was encased in ice. His trapped hand held a knife and it was covered in blood. He waived at us with his free one.

“Hey, Pudding.”

“Hey, Brutus.”

“Full tour?”

“Yeah,” she said again, hanging her head.

She seemed so suddenly somber.

We came upon a beautiful man. I say man because he looked like a man, but he was colossal, like Michelangelo’s David. He was frozen to his waist, and his large chest rose and fell as he slept against the rock behind him. His curly blond hair fell over his handsome face, and even though I couldn’t see his eyes, I was certain they were lovely. This guy could’ve been on a romance novel cover.

“Who’s that?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I looked at the cat puzzled. She seemed so solemn all of the sudden. The snarky, wise-cracking cat seemed to be gone. I shivered a little and hugged myself for warmth.

“Is it time to go on? It’s getting chilly.”

Pudding looked up at me with a face full of sorrow. Her eyes pleaded with me for something I could not understand.

“This is it. End of the line.”

“There’s only nine levels?”

“Yes, only nine,” she said as she looked down at her feet.

I shivered again and hugged myself tighter. My feet suddenly began to freeze. No, they weren’t just cold, they were frozen solid. They were freezing to the floor.

I looked down to see that ice had completely frozen over my feet, sending little spines of pain into my toes. Looking at Pudding’s face, it hit me. Treachery. I could feel the cold. This place could affect me. This place was for me.

“No! Pudding, help me!”

“There isn’t much I can do, Danielle.”

“But Treachery? That’s not me. Who on Earth did I betray?”

Panic filled my chest and my teeth began to chatter as I felt the frozen ice start to climb up my legs. I scrambled to escape, but I couldn’t move.

“That I can show you,” said Pudding as she looked over her shoulder.

A young girl suddenly appeared then next to the cat. She had a dark brown ponytail on her head and held a spiral notebook over her chest. She looked familiar, but it took me a long minute to recognize the girl to be me. It was me when I was about thirteen.

“We were supposed to be a singer. We wrote lots of songs, and we promised that we would be a big star when we grew up,” said the young me, all innocence and youthful.

My face screwed under my disgust. The ice was crawling up my shins now, freezing every pore of my bare legs. My stomach lurched and flopped with anger. I used to be so very naïve, and now, that naivety was what put me in Hell.

“Why Danielle? We were supposed to be more.”

Anger flooded my face, and I could almost hear the rush of blood.

“Because, you little moron, life doesn’t work that way. You write some songs, you get a gig or two at a coffee house, but no one comes. No one cares. Thousands of dollars in college debt and rejection, that’s what our little dream got us. No screaming fans. No concerts posters with our face on it. Just a whole lot of nothing. Nobody cares about your stupid songs you wrote in that damn journal.”

The young, stupid version of me looked heart-broken as her mouth fell open. Water filled her eyes and her lip quivered.

“Y-y-you...you still shouldn’t have given up,” she said stammering.

The anger exploded from me without hesitation. Years of my struggle bubbled up inside me. After all, it was me I was yelling at. There was no reason to hold back. I might as well tell her what we were in for. Life wasn’t like it was in the movies.

“Are you kidding? You have no idea and won’t until you are me. A dream is a beautiful thing until no one wants it but you. Then, you have a fucking choice. Either you keep trying, keep putting your bleeding heart out there with no money, or you grow up and get a real job. My job and my office may not be anything special, but it pays the bills and feeds me. I can’t believe I’m in the bottom of Hell because of *you!*”

She burst into tears, and I looked down at my legs to see that the freeze had made it up past my knees. I strained my calves trying to move. The tingle numbness of cold was leaking in and telling

my feet they weren't going anywhere. With a frustrated grunt, I reached down to try to pull my legs free with my hands. Still, they wouldn't budge.

Suddenly, Pudding was there at my feet, looking very solemn. She motioned with her head for me to look back up to where the young Danielle was standing. I was still standing there weeping, but I was weeping into the chest of a woman. She had raven hair, like mine, and the look on her face was accusatory. That face I knew all too well.

"Mom?" I squeaked.

"I never knew you to be cruel, Danielle," she said sternly.

"Mom?"

Tears forced themselves to the surface. My mother comforted the young me by stroking her hair. The younger version of me buried her face in our mom's shoulder. Her chest heaved up and down with the sobs.

"Where were you, Danielle? I waited for you, you know," Mom said evenly.

Everything she needed to say was in her eyes. She was always good at that, conveying the unsayable with a look. I remembered how long she was sick. The length of time she took to wither away had exhausted me at the time. That fact stung me now as I stared into her watery eyes. I hadn't been there when she passed. There was a deadline I had to meet, one more important than hers at the time. Shame consumed me like it did every time I remembered her.

"Mom, I...I'm so sorry. I meant to be there. There was this deadline...I thought...I thought I had time," I managed to spit out but the words fell short.

They always did fall short, even when they were only said to the shower every morning, even when they were only thoughts in my mind every night.

I tried to steady myself, but I started crying uncontrollably. The ice was freezing over my thighs now, yet my face was hot with tears.

“It was nice you came for the funeral, honey.”

“Mom, I’m so sorry. I’m so so so…”

I was cut off by the sudden appearance of a man next to my mother. He had sandy blond hair that was shaggy around his ears. The man dressed in flannel and denim and had blue grey eyes that pierced me from afar. His presence made me gasp.

“Daddy?”

“Hi, Bug.”

“Daddy, but why?”

He looked down at his shoes as if ashamed.

“I miss you, you know. You promised to come see me, but you never do, Bug. I don’t mean to be a pest and all, but I’m all alone out there at the lake house. Every summer I get out our fishing gear. I clean the rods and oil the reels. I think, ‘this is the year she’s going to come.’ But you never do, Bug. I miss you.”

“Daddy, I have...I’m...busy. My job it’s so stressful. I just don’t have time. I call.”

“You do call, Bug. You do. I just miss your face.”

I looked at the group of people in front of me and felt ashamed. My father hung his head and shifted from foot to foot, trying not to show his disappointment. My mother held my younger self, comforting her the way I never comforted her in her last days. The young me wept like a baby at

my cruelty. I couldn't help but wonder when I had become so callused and cold. When had this happened? When had I lost myself?

"Daddy, I'm sorry. I always meant to."

"I know. You have your big job and all."

He looked so heart-broken trying to be understanding. The tears started again and they just wouldn't stop. It was like an avalanche of water poured out of my eyes. My face, which was hot with the sorrow of it all, started freezing as the hot tears began to crystalize on my cheeks. The ice had crept up to my stomach, and my very organs felt cold.

That's when I noticed him. Not my dad or Brutus, but the colossally beautiful, frozen man just behind my family. He was smiling. Slowly, his eyes opened and he sat up straight. His smile ended my tears because the maliciousness in it was so frightening. He laughed then, and it rumbled the very walls around us. The golden locks fell around his shoulders.

The freeze covered my breasts, and I felt the chill around my heart.

"Who is that, Pudding?"

"Who do you think?"

"No," I said, only glimpsing the idea of what was next.

Lucifer raised his enormous hands over my family, and with one giant motion, he crushed them beneath his palms. Once second they were there, and the next, only the demon stood before me.

"No!"

Before I could react anymore, there I stood before me. By that, I mean the exact mirror image of me was standing face to face with me, looking very sad and serious. Then, a terrible grin spread

across my mirror image's face. Her mouth, my mouth, spread ghoulishly like a cracked mirror from ear to ear. Had I ever looked at anyone that way? Had I ever shown someone a side of me so evil?

"Are you happy, Danielle?" asked the demon me.

"Give me my family back!"

"Are you happy, Danielle? Answer."

There was no relenting. She was a statue of mocking.

"No! No, I'm not. I hate my life. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I don't *want* to hear anything."

"I hate everything about my life. Nothing has worked out like it was supposed to. Please, don't let me die this way. I just do what everyone does. I survive."

"But others smile. Others laugh. Others live."

"Please don't let me die!"

"You are already dead. You have been for years."

The frozen ice was closing around my neck. Breathing became hard and real panic started settling into my body. I knew panic attacks, and this was one of the worst I'd ever felt. Something seemed to kick me in the chest, tightening my heart in a vice. My whole body twitched and revolted against the ice. I screeched like an animal and clawed at my frozen prison like a mad woman. Nothing did any good. The ice just crept higher and higher. I shut my eyes and could hear nothing but the banging of my heart in my head. That's all there was until I heard her voice.

“Danielle?”

It was Pudding. The Hell Cat’s voice wasn’t sarcastic. It was sad and pleading.

“Danielle, reach up. It’s not too late. Don’t listen to it. Danielle, all you have to do is reach up. Try. Please, dear God, try.”

I tried to open my mouth to say something, but the ice had frozen over my face. Frosty ice cycles entered into my nostrils and spilled down my throat, choking me with the muffled scream I couldn’t let out. There was nothing but ice. I was in Hell, and all I could feel was cold.

“It isn’t over, Danielle. Reach up. Try.”

My ears were frozen over. How could I hear her?

“Reach up, Danielle. Reach up. There is still a chance. You can do it.”

The world darkened bit by bit. A terrible tremor moved about all of us like something was angry, furious enough to quake the earth and Hell below. My energy drained away from me. Everything inside me told me to give up, to sleep. Falling was everything right in the world. What was the point? Nothing was up there to reach for.

“Don’t sleep. Try, Danielle. Please try. Please don’t give up.”

Her voice sounded like it was crying. A cat crying? Did cats cry?

Everything went black, but I tried. I tried to reach up. My frozen fingers rose to touch something I wasn’t sure was there. Would anything touch me back? Would it matter at this point? Who knew, but I tried. At least I could say I tried. Even if it was the last thing I did, I would try.

I awoke to a beeping rhythm and a very dry mouth. Something was stuck in my nose and a tube made cool air leak into my nostrils. It took several blinks a few seconds before I could focus on

anything. I was in a warm bed, and there were machines all around me. Judging by the wallpaper with a floral pattern and the generic landscape painting under the television, I was in a hospital room. An IV was plugged into my arm along with a number of other tubes coming from various areas of my body. No ice, no Hell, no demons. I was alive, tits and all.

Relief flooded my body in a warm, crashing wave.

A light snore came from a recliner next to me, and I looked over to see my Dad sleeping. He looked a little wrecked with a few extra lines on his face than I remembered. His body was folded in an odd way as he snoozed away next to me. He let out a sudden snort, and I laughed out loud. My vision blurred with tears as I suppressed a hysterical giggle behind bandaged palms.

Never had I been so glad to see anyone in my life. Never had I been so happy to breathe. I laid there a while, breathing and watching him sleep for an unknown amount of time. The tears eventually stopped flowing, and I let them dry warm on my face.

I'd wake him soon, but not yet. Not just yet.

Weeks later, they let me go.

I had countless interviews with bloggers, news reporters, and people who actually knew me. Doctors said that I had been clinically dead for three minutes and twenty four seconds, but my tour through Hell had seemed so much longer. They all got the same story. I saw a bright light, and I started for it but decided to turn back. Unfinished business and all that. It wasn't my time or some such nonsense. Most of it I pulled from every ghost flick I'd ever seen.

There was no way anyone would believe a bitchy, Siamese cat named Pudding took me through the nine circles of Hell.

I only told Dad about my real experience. I figured that he was one of the reasons I made it back, so he deserved to know the truth. Whether he believed me or not, I didn't know, nor did I

really care. No matter what he believed, he was ecstatic to hear I wanted to move home with him for a while.

One thing was for sure though, he was just as taken aback as I was when a tiny Siamese kitten approached us while he was wheeling me out of the hospital. She had waited until our car had been brought around and the orderly was taking the wheelchair from me. I stood like a trembling fawn, hanging onto the car for support, when I spotted that familiar, fuzzy face in the nearby shrubs. It was her, no doubt. A much younger version, but it was her. The notion wasn't a sane one, but those things didn't really seem to matter anymore.

With little more than a gallop, the tiny thing ran from the landscaped bushes to my feet. She stopped there, looked up at me, and mewed. I smiled down at her, and with a little stiffness, I bent down to pick up the kitten. She didn't flinch at being lifted and butted my mouth with her head gently in greeting.

“Hi there, Pudding. I didn't think I'd get to see you again.”

I held her to my face, and she rubbed my cheek with her head. Her tiny nose daubed wet triangles against my skin. Dad smiled in awe as he helped me into the passenger seat. He rounded the old car and settled into the driver's seat after scratching the kitten behind the ear.

“Do you think you have room for me and Pudding at the lake house, Daddy?”

“I don't see why not,” he said as he petted her little forehead.

The kitten circled in my lap a few times before curling up and settling into a warm ball. Daddy smiled as he put the car into gear and followed the paved driveway out onto the freeway. It guided us on a long journey through piney forests, the grey road like a knife slicing through the endless trees. We were about ten minutes from the hospital when a sudden realization hit me.

Olivia Rivard

“Pudding, I hope you will understand that your litter box is going to go in the basement, as far away from us as possible.”

The kitten took a deep breath in, sighed with a long purr, and promptly farted in my lap.

Olivia Rivard

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